

Agriculture

Newfoundland and Labrador's climate and soil have not been very good for agriculture, but outport isolation and poor incomes in the fishery have made supplementary farming crucial. Fishing families raised root crops, some hay and oats, and livestock for their own use, but traded marginal surpluses locally. In the early part of the nineteenth century, severe potato blight combined with bad weather and failures in the fishery, forced the government to provide poor relief to prevent famine.

Struggling with poor relief, the government embraced a commercial agriculture by the 1840s, believing that the colony of Newfoundland had great interior agricultural resources. Many of Newfoundland's first roads were the result of able-bodied relief programmes designed to look for such resources. Pockets of good land were occasionally found and farmed, but without lessening overall dependence on the fishery for employment. Persistent poor fish catches throughout the 1860s led government to pass new Crown Lands legislation that facilitated land grants and clearing for agricultural purposes. When catches improved from 1869 to 1874, government did little to cultivate agriculture further, but a bad fishery in 1875 led to a renewed policy commitment to farming.

Early commercial farming was most successful close to St. John's, which, as the colonial capital and military centre, provided a good local market for farmers. Farming concentrated in the Waterford and Freshwater Valleys, as well as in Kilbride, the Goulds, Logy Bay, Outer Cove, Middle Cove and Torbay. Military officers and professionals invested in country estates to be considered respectable. Sir James Pearl's farm to the west of St. John's, "Mount Pearl," was one such estate. More typical were the smaller farms built by labourers such as William Ruby in the Goulds. Through the 1850s and 1860s Ruby's thriving farm supplied the St. John's market with vegetables, hay and livestock products. Over time, farmers close to St. John's began to specialize in the production of fresh milk, eggs, and meat for the local market.

Commercial farming otherwise faced enduring problems. There were few local markets, and marine transport facilitated the import of cheaper farm goods. Local farms generated little employment relative to the massive government funding spent to encourage them. Between 1886 and 1898 governments succeeded best in encouraging supplementary rather than commercial farming independent of the fishery.

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