

# **The Signal and Commercial Flags of St. John's, Newfoundland c. 1500–c. 1900**

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## **Introduction**

Flags are often called the “shorthand of history”. To the avid vexillologist, flags can be appreciated not only as the shorthand of that social science, but also of politics, geography, and economics (to name but a few). This point is well illustrated during the four centuries from c. 1500 to c. 1900 in and around the port city of St. John's, Newfoundland. The signalling and commercial flags of the city began their history reflecting the needs of an early colonial settlement and culminated in turn by having an effect themselves upon the social-status consciousness of a late-Victorian city. The broad period of history that this paper takes into account will show the context of these flags in the life of St. John's, and in doing so, the great importance and central role flags played in the affairs of men.

This story of flags encompasses a period when St. John's was not the capital of Canada's youngest province—with secondary economic influence and importance—but rather the capital of Britain's oldest colony and its eastern-most gateway to North America. The city's affair with flags began around the early 1500s, when St. John's was not only a seasonal fishing settlement but already a vital place in the race for colonization and conquest in the New World. And so our vexillological journey begins.

## **The Era of Colonization and Conquest: c.1500 to c.1800**

Strategically located at the most eastern point of North America, almost midway between the untapped riches of the New World to the west and the crowded and hungry masses of Europe to the east, St. John's was destined to become first a port of military importance. As such, it was to become a pawn of

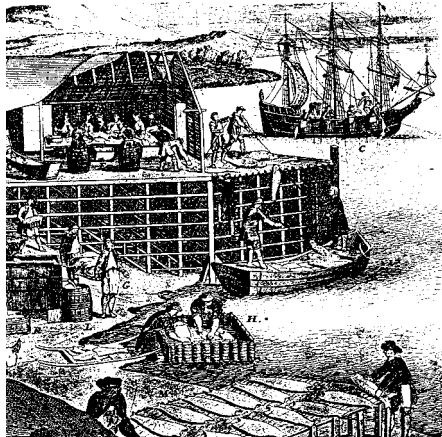


*Sir Humphrey Gilbert.*

*Newfoundland Historic Trust.*

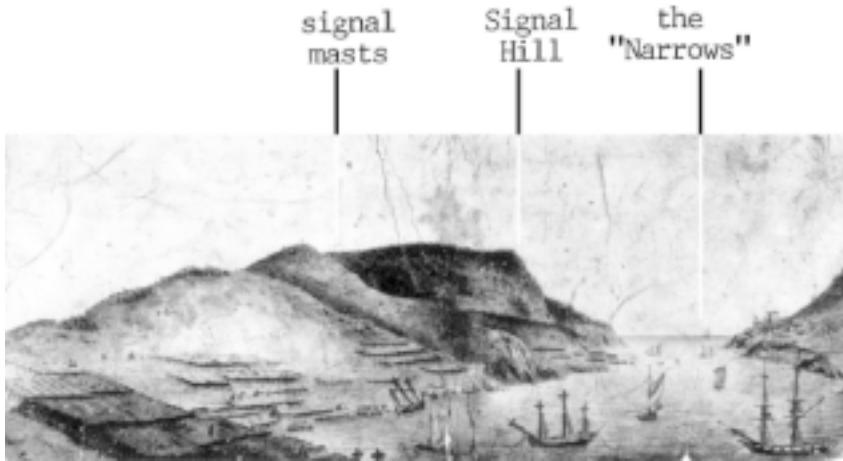
English and French ambitions. But while the early years of the port were to be dominated by a military rule-of-law, the very beginnings of a settlement in the area had a different rule-of-law—or lack of it! When Sir Humphrey Gilbert, a court favorite of Queen Elizabeth I, approached the harbour on 3 August 1583, it was a place dominated by the amateur (and usually rough) justice of “fishing admirals”—those of highest rank who made first landfall in the spring at the beginning of the lucrative and seasonal fishing on the nearby Grand Banks. The importance of this still only temporarily settled place was not lost to Sir Gilbert and his entourage: “We made ready our fights and prepared to enter the harbour, and resistance to the contrary notwithstanding, there being within [the harbour] all nations to the number of 36 sail.” Stepping ashore on a narrow strip of beach in the harbour, he planted the standard of St. George firmly into the sand and claimed (it was hoped) the more-established rule of English law. With that gesture the first flag of importance found its place in the history of the settlement—signalling an era of colonization and conquest that was to culminate in the British Empire. Ironically, Sir Gilbert’s flag was to leave a more lasting impression upon the village’s inhabitants than he did, for only 17 days later (after much carousing and feasting over the great event!) he set sail for England only to be lost with his ship and all hands during a storm at sea.

Now that England’s first colony had been formally declared, it stood, like Sir Gilbert’s flag of St. George, as a mark in the sand that England had to ensure no enemy crossed. Thus began the military-dominated era of development in St. John’s. The soldiers and their ordnance came, as did all things then, by sea; and brought with them a naval appreciation of flags as a means of long-distance communication. The geography of the harbour itself



*Early scene of St. John's harbour.*

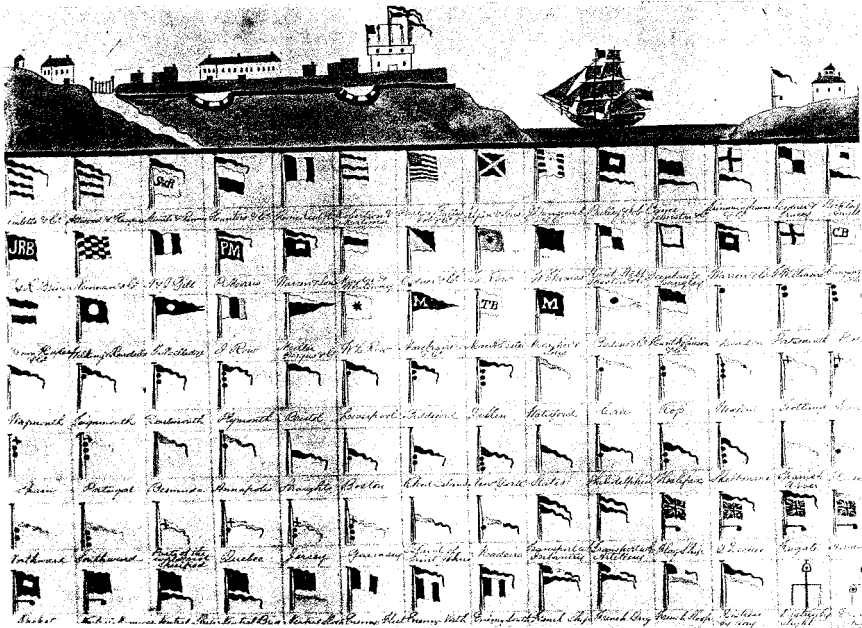
*Newfoundland Historic Trust.*



*View of harbour looking east c. 1798 (note depiction of signal masts, flying pennants, to the right behind "Gibbet Hill"). Newfoundland Historic Trust.*

played a crucial role: St. John's harbour was one of the most naturally protected in the world, being virtually invisible to ships at sea. Bounded against the stormy north Atlantic Ocean to the southeast by the Southside Hills, and to the northeast by the mount of Signal Hill, the only approach into the harbour was by the very aptly named "Narrows". Otherwise, the harbour was land-locked—the Narrows being such that only one ship at a time could pass through its treacherous rocks and shoals. Rapidly, this sole entrance was studded above from both sides with battlements and forts; the cannons of the Queen's Battery to the north, and the palisades of Fort Amherst to the south. Maps of the time showed the emerging town defined by such names as Military Road, the Garrison Church, the Commissariat, Fort William—and more ominous names like "Dead Man's Pond" and the decidedly punitive "Gibbet Hill".

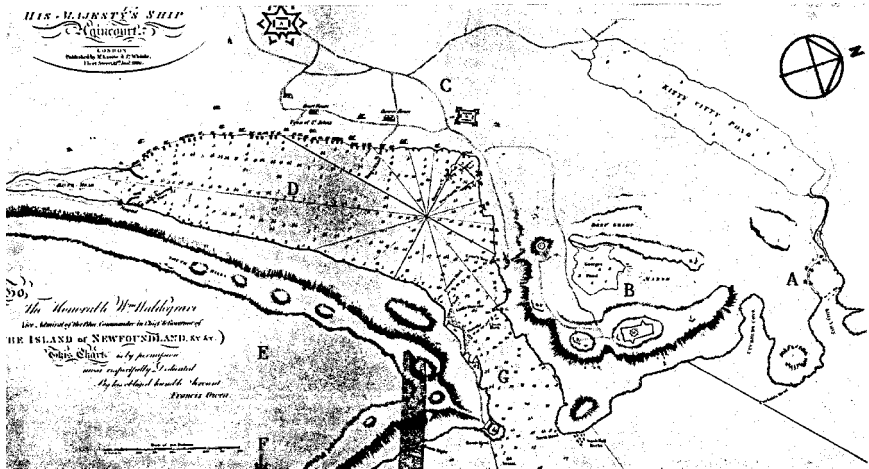
Signal Hill, over 500 feet high, commanded the most strategic place in an area of strategic places. Having a clear view over the entire harbour to the west, inland, and out over many miles to the east over the Atlantic, it was a natural venue for signalling flags. While appropriately called Signal Hill, it had been informally known before as simply "the Lookout"—as indeed it was. The system of signalling was simple, as all effective and utilitarian codes are, and it borrowed much from maritime usage, including the ship mast design of the signalling masts themselves. The purpose of the system was simple too: to advise the populace in the town below whether to prepare for the arrival and victualling of a packet ship with its anticipated cargoes, or warn them of an approaching enemy "man o' war". The first permanent structure erected on the Hill was, no wonder, a military blockhouse devoted solely to flag signalling, in 1796.



*Early flag chart (partial image shown)—author unknown—compare with next chart.  
Newfoundland Historic Trust.*

The flag charts of this period were hand-drawn and pigmented with watercolour, and were continually updated and copied liberally from each other with varying degrees of accuracy. Their appearance, as was their purpose, was utilitarian. Most space was devoted to depicting and explaining the system of pennants and canvas balls used to communicate most signals. All signals flew from a single mast fitted with a broad yardarm which was oriented on a north-south axis. Combinations of these solid-coloured pennants (usually either red, white, or blue) and the balls, hoisted at various heights on the halyards, denoted the origin, number, size, and intent of approaching ships. The harbour below, protected yet blinded by its encircling hills, was thus informed of goings-on on the open sea. The main mast halyard was usually for the primary or more important signal, with the lower north and south yard-arm halyards reserved for signals describing oncoming ships from either the north or south respectively. The military nature of the port's affairs was readily betrayed on the charts to the viewer by such signal designations as "Transport with Infantry" (a red over a blue pennant); "Armed Vessel" (Union Flag under a yellow pennant); "Enemy Fleet" (appropriately, a French Tricolour!); and still others, such as "Frigate", "2-decker", "Enemy North", and "Enemy South". The only allowance for pictorials or decoration on the otherwise gridded and regimented layout of the flag charts was usually a scene of flag-signalling in action from a heavily-fortified signal station on Signal Hill, relaying a military signal to a warship in the Narrows below. In all, an impression of a siege





*Map of St. John's harbour and approaches – 1790. Newfoundland Historic Trust.*

A - Quidi Vidi ("Kitty Vitty") fort & village  
 B - Signal Hill  
 C - various fortifications around St. John's  
 (note finger piers along harbour's edge)  
 D - the harbour

E - Southside Hills  
 F - Cape Spear  
 (to the east of this view -  
 not shown)  
 G - "The Narrows"

flag charts as early as 1700. Others exist too, but indirectly—J. Dunscombe & Co. (a white flag with square of red and blue to the sides) and Bulley & Job (a blue flag with a white square centred, over a red pennant), later became the firms of Harvey & Co. and Job Brothers—different names, but they could be traced back by their same flags. Corporate merger and acquisition activity was just as common in the 1780s and 1880s as it is today!

The military flavour of life persisted though, right up to the early 1800s with Europe embroiled in the Napoleonic Wars. Yet despite St. John's geographically strategic position, it was just to the north of the town, on the north side of Signal Hill away from the harbour, that the fate of English/French rivalry in North America may have been decided. The place was the fort and small village of Quidi Vidi, and on September 13th, 1762, without much resistance or bloodshed, the fort fell to the English under the command of Lt. Col. William Amhearst. Both Quidi Vidi and St. John's (along with all of the island of Newfoundland) were then under French control. The French hoped that they could hold Newfoundland for ransom to the English in exchange for increased—and permanent—status in much of the rest of northern North America. Indeed, Newfoundland, with its vast fishing grounds and geographic locale, was where most of England's economic interests lay. But

with the fall of Quidi Vidi back into the hands of the English, and their planned advance upon the rear of the fortifications of St. John's, the end of French ambitions in the New World had begun.

So too was heralded the beginning of the end of St. John's as primarily a military outpost. As the port evolved from mainly military to commercial interests, the number of commercial and signalling flags increased rapidly, ushering in a golden age of flags in St. John's.



*Lt. Col. William  
Amhearst.  
Newfoundland  
Historic Trust.*

## **The Golden Age of Flag Signals: c. 1800—c. 1900**

By around 1800, with the flag masts of Signal Hill and the city of St. John's securely in British hands, the ensured peace and stability meant that the port could now focus on things economic rather than military. The expanding wealth and industry of the British Empire followed, linked together by overseas trade to her now-numerous colonies around the globe. Once again the geographic position of St. John's on the highway of the Atlantic was exploited; but this time by the merchant families and ship owners of the city, not soldiers and sailors. Large and slow "men o' war" were being replaced on the high seas by the smaller and speedier schooners and clipper ships in a growing quest for trade and fortune on a global scale. The salt-cod currency of the St. John's merchant class found its way to the hot climes of the Caribbean in exchange for tropical fruits, spices, and sugar which, once again by way of St. John's, found their way to many English tables (as did a certain Jamaican rum—still infamously known today as "Newfie Screech"! ). The merchants of the city, with their owned or leased fleets of "fish boxes"—a less-than-fond term for ships saturated with the pungent odour of their many salt-cod cargoes—grew in wealth and influence in step with the quickening pace of the Industrial Revolution. Many surviving Victorian mansions and buildings of old St. John's attest to the commercial energy of the late 19th century in the city, not to mention the rest of the world. The signal and commercial flags vividly depict this as well. During this last period of St. John's economic importance the role of these flags reached its height.

Appropriately, in the previous years, the actual signalling system expanded to the task ahead. St. John's was the most easterly *inhabitable* point of North America. However, the actual geographic honour belonged to a shoal-infested, barren windswept promontory known as Cape Spear. The Cape was

several more kilometers to the east from the mouth of the Narrows, and had a clear view of both the Narrows and Signal Hill to the west across Freshwater Bay. By the 1800s, it had already been the site of several successive lighthouses. The oldest surviving one today dates from 1834—restored to its former glory—complete with a tall flag-signalling mast.

With Cape Spear fitted with its own signalling mast, the entire flag signalling system reached even further out to sea. Upon sighting ships distant in the east through his telescope, the lighthouse keeper, now drafted into the role of signalman, would hoist the appropriate signal(s) to relay, via Signal Hill's own mast to the west, his information to the city along the harbour below. Still hidden from the seas it depended on for its livelihood, St. John's life revolved around the sightings of flags above on Signal Hill. With the mast at Cape Spear added into the signalling system, the advance notice of approaching ships increased greatly, adding much valuable preparation time for the individual merchant to muster his workers to receive his ships for unloading and reloading. A point adjacent to the mast on Signal Hill, known still today as "Ladies' Lookout", suggested that the flags announced not only cargoes, but the arrival of long-absent loved ones as well!



*Upper left: Cape Spear as seen from Signal Hill.*

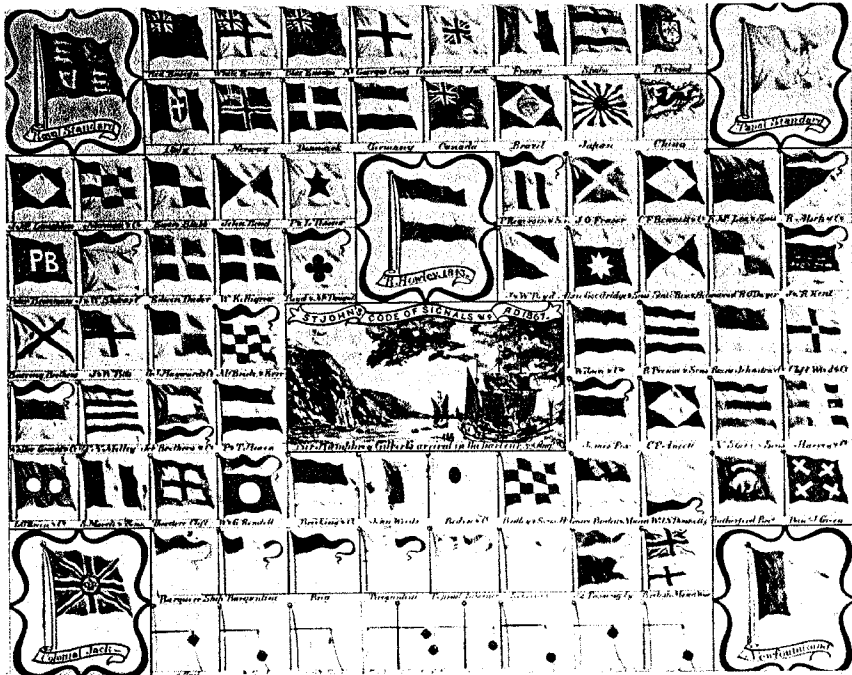
*Lower left: The author on the windy Cape (note flag mast).*

*Upper right: Lighthouse interior (note chart framed on wall, above flag locker).*

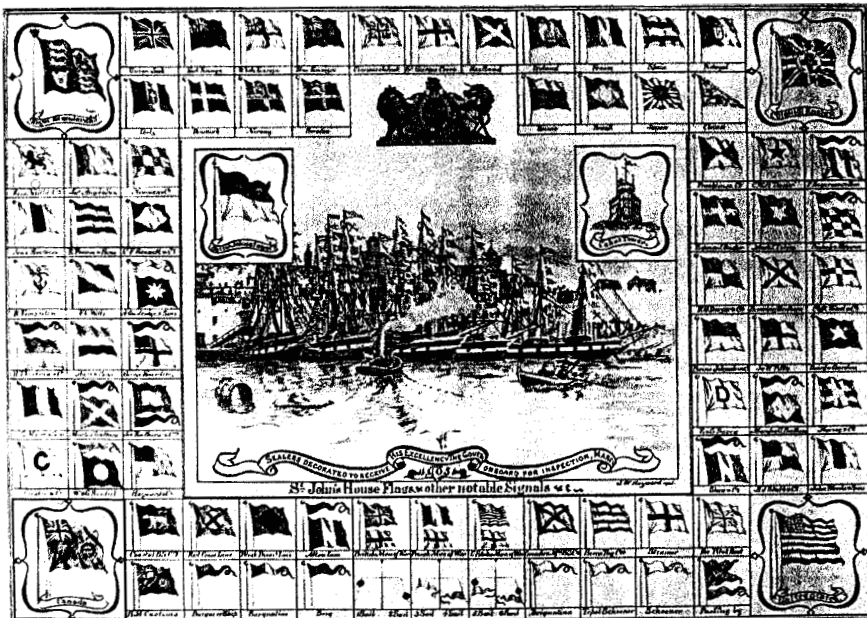
*Lower right: Interior view showing flag locker.*

*Center: Lighthouse on Signal Hill. All five from author's collection.*





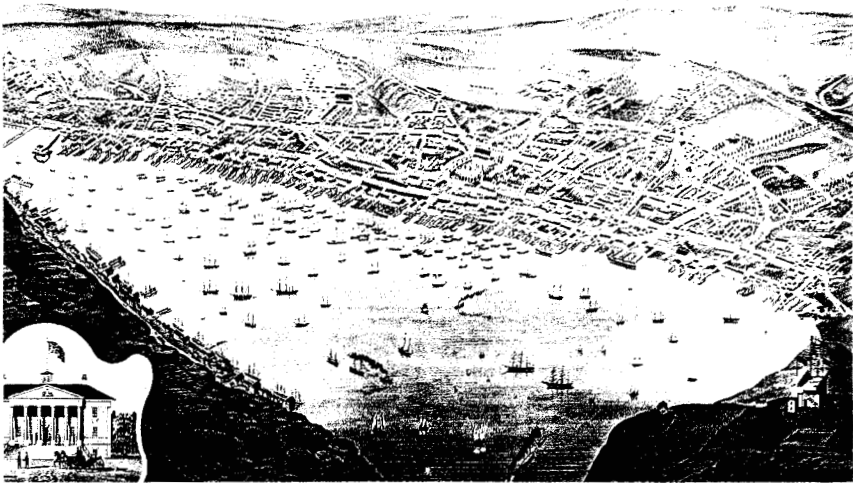
Early Hayward Flag Chart of 1867(?) Probably commissioned by firm of R. Howley. Brunswick Press.



Hayward Flag Chart 1905. Commissioned by firm of Baine Johnson & Co., it illustrates the departure of ships from St. John's harbour to the annual spring seal hunt north to Labrador. Cabot Tower (shown as inset at upper right corner of central picture) is now the main existing building on top of Signal Hill today. It was built in 1887–1900 to replace the old wooden blockhouse. Brunswick Press.

"Signals Hoist at The Hill" Flag chart by John Wm. Hayward 1894. Parks Canada.





















The pennant/ball code of signals remained mostly unchanged during this time, however, many of the military designations shifted to the more civilian and more innocent terms such as “Sail #” and “Schooner”. But where the commercial can be seen to overtake and replace the military considerations of the port is in the sheer number and variety of the company flags depicted in flag charts of this period. Flag charts of the 1800s are much more numerous than those of the centuries before. However, and almost without exception, they were the province of one man, John William Hayward (1843-1913), a self-taught artist and son of a wealthy merchant family of the city. Along with landscape paintings and engraved vignettes of contemporary St. John's life, Hayward produced many signal flag charts, many in watercolour, and some as mass-produced lithographed broadsheets complete with advertisements of prominent city businesses. Hayward's charts showed many new businesses and families joining the ranks of prominence by acquiring their own house flags, and prominent they were. Families such as the Ayres, Bowrings, Bairds, and Harveys of St. John's were perhaps more important to the commercial and social life of the city then than were the Eatons, Simpsons, or Gooderhams to Toronto, or the Rockefellers and Vanderbilts to New York. While “Hayward's Flags” (as this aspect of his work is often called), may lose some accuracy to the researcher by their decorative Victorian exuberance, it is that same exuberance and his decorative depiction of the signal and commercial flags of St. John's that gives important clues to the prominent place these flags played in the city's life. Hayward's charts bustle with the life of a busy day along the docks in the harbour. Depictions of the many house flags are interspersed with vignettes of banks, refitted ships, dry goods stores, and even a brewery (E. W.



*St. John's in 1879 (note signal mast on Signal Hill's blockhouse in the lower right corner). Author's collection.*

Bennett, shown on one chart with its premises complete with house flag flying above). Hayward provides us with the literal context in which the flags were seen, and used, by his contemporaries.






The flags became more than means of signalling and identification, they

merchant / commercial flags of St. Johns, 1862	page two	merchant / commercial flags of St. Johns, 1862	page three
Thosoe Cliff:	 tripartite, blue over white over red; 2:3.	N. Stubb's & Sons:	 white over blue over white over blue over white; 2:3.
John O'Mara:	 white with red diamond centered; 2:3.	Job Brothers:	 international signal flag "P", 2:3, (blue field); over red pennant 1:5.
L. O'Brien:	 blue with two white bells horizontally centered; 2:3.	J.B. Barnes & Co.:	 red pennant 1:5; over 2:3 quartered white, red, red, white.
Harveys:	 white with 3 horizontal striped bars in blue at hoist; 3 in red at fly; 2:3.	W.H. Thomas & Co.:	 hoisted; white hoist; red fly; 2:3.
Hunter & Co.:	 red pennant 1:5; over 2:3 white over red.	CHH Wood & Co.:	 white with red cross; center of which is square white; 2:3.
	... 3		... 4
merchant / commercial flags of St. Johns, 1862	page four	merchant / commercial flags of St. Johns, 1862	page five
Bowen, Junstone & Co.:	 hoisted; blue over white; 2:3.	Bowring Bros.:	 white with red saltire; 2:3. (flag "V" international signal)
K. Bower & Sons:	 red over white over red over white over red; 2:3.	S. & W. Pitts:	 white with red cross (old English flag); 1:3 and 4:4 contains blue; 2:3.
F. J. Hayward:	 quartered; red, yellow, white, blue; 2:3.	G. O'Dwyer:	 quartered; blue, white, white, blue; 2:3.
Wilson & Co. (now Ayres):	 tripartite; red over white over blue; 2:3.	Muir & Dwyer:	 blue with white cross; 2:3.
M <sup>rs</sup> Brock & Kerr:	 red pennant 1:5; over quartered (hoist) starting red, white, etc.; 2:3.	John Hogsett:	 red with yellow "H" centered; 2:3.
	... 5		... 6

*"Corrected Code of Merchant's Signals" draft document by the author, taken from observations of a hand-illustrated watercolour chart by John B. Ayre 1862. Author's collection.*




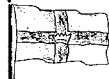
represented corporate establishment and stability, and created a cachet of permanence for the company concerned. Depiction on Hayward's charts of the pennant/ball codes is, by contrast, relegated to a few representative hoists—certainly of no practical help to a signaller. Indeed, these charts were meant more for the parlour wall than the ship's bridge or signalhouse! To St. John's,

merchant/commercial flags of St. John's, 1862. page nine

- u) S.H. Mully:  horizontally divided (1:2); blue over white over red over white over red over white over blue; 2:3.
- j) S.F.R. Kent:  red pennant 1:5; over: striped; red over green over white; 2:3.
- i) L. Macessy:  white 2:3; on which centered green square; on which centered Irish harp in yellow.
- i) S. March:  vertically divided: from hoist: red, white, red; 2:3.
- u) Grieve & Co.:  red pennant 1:5; over: halved; blue over white; 2:3.

...10


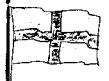



additional flags - appendix #1 - national flags. page eleven

- i) "Man o' war":  British Union Flag (Jack) here designated for warships; 2:3.
- j) Spain:  yellow with 2 narrow red horizontal stripes, dividing the field 1/4, 1/2, 1/4; 2:3.
- j) Holland:  red with devices as depicted; 2:3. (represented as seen in the 1862 chart).
- i) Government House St. John's:  old English flag with yellow crown centered; 2:3.

\* see also flags designated for types of ships - page thirteen.











...12

additional flags - appendix #3 - flags/balls types of ships. page thirteen

- i) Anchor ship:  horizontally top/bottom: blue over white over blue over white over blue over white; 2:3.
- j) Steamer ship:  white with red cross; (ie. old English flag); 2:3.
- j) Ship:  the pennant; 1:5.
- j) Brig:  red pennant; 1:5.
- j) Brigantine:  pennant divided vertically: red-white; top-red; 1:5.

...14

Ball-Pennant signals "sail-off's". page fifteen

- i) sail-off #1:  j) sail-off #2: 
- i) sail-off #3:  j) sail-off #4: 
- i) sail-off #5:  j) sail-off #6: 
- i) sail-off #7:  j) sail-off #8: 
- i) sail-off #9:  j) sail-off #10: 

"Corrected Code of Merchant's Signals" continued. Note the various positions used on the halyards for the pennant/ball codes. Author's collection.

the flags had made the transition to commercial usage as a logo or brand name. Everyone recognized the Bowring line of ships as those with the red saltire on white (a shrewd choice of design; having a flag the same as that of St. Patrick—in a city composed mostly of Irish Roman Catholics!), the Job Brothers logo was, right up to the company's demise in the early 1980s, that of the "Blue Peter" over the red pennant, and so on. No doubt Hayward, an artist born of a well-connected merchant family himself, hoped to flatter promising patrons of his work by the inclusion of their flag in his latest chart. As such, Hayward's charts showed signals of sorts that never were as obvious as those fluttering on a mast but no less important—those advising those "below" on the social ladder of those in the "top-100" of St. John's life.

### **"The Corrected Code of Signals" 1862**

With all the flag charts seemingly authored by John William Hayward (and his intent being less-than-accurate documentation on flags of this period), the vexillologist must strike out at tangents to find new sources of information. The author of this paper was very fortunate to discover the existence, in December 1982, of a chart *not* by Hayward, and to this day, not published nor reviewed by any source (the present owner, Mrs. Olga Ayre, has yet to give the author permission to photograph the chart, as it is in a delicate condition). "The Corrected Code of Merchants Signals of St. John's" was made by John B. Ayre in 1862. The author of this paper was able to document the chart during a visit with the owner in December 1982, and portions of this "draft document" appear here. The chart is a pencil and watercolour sketch approximately 24" x 36" on paper. The colour is still good, although verdi-gris (an acid deterioration brought on by use of green pigments) has rendered some colours hard to distinguish. In design and content, it effectively bridges the gap between the early military years of the City and the later, more commercial era. It is very similar in layout to the early charts, the flags being laid out in a grid pattern with little decoration, and much space given over to listing the pennant/ball codes of the time. It also shows a large number of company flags that list many of the names familiar to the Hayward charts—indeed, this chart may have been one that inspired and informed Hayward. Ayre's chart provides a much-needed further source of direct documentation on these flags. Unlike the early charts, which were anonymous works with little background information, the Ayre chart has a specific author who can be placed historically as a prominent merchant of the time, one who had easy access to first-hand information on the flags of his business colleagues. Also, in his title itself, the word "corrected" suggests that his main intent in documentation was to remove previous errors perpetuated by other charts of the period. The date stated by the title means that we can date his chart as coming (c. 1860)

before any of Hayward's efforts on the subject, thus providing a good cross-reference to his accuracy.

## The “Fish Boxes”

Besides the existing flag charts, the persistent researcher has another avenue to pursue—ship paintings. It became a great tradition to document, in watercolour or oil, the individual ships of a merchant's or ship company's trading fleet. Along with documenting the size and type of the ship in question, it was natural that the appropriate signal or commercial flags for that ship be depicted as well. The period of the clipper ship, the schooner, and the various “fish boxes” was one of great pride on the part of the ship owners and merchants. Their reputations and business success were directly attributable to the size and speed of their

respective fleets. Add to that the legal considerations of maritime insurance and ownership, these ship paintings are as reliable as photographs in the detail they depict. With the technical rather than the artistic being these paintings' intent we see the actual use of the commercial and signal flags. A ship such as the “Flirt” of 1832 shows ownership by the firm of Ewen Stabb (a



*“Flirt” owned by Ewen Stalb, 1832. Firm's name also listed as E. Stalb & Sons, and H. J. Stabb, but the flag remains constant. Brunswick Press.*

red & white quartered flag) and yet the flag is noted on both the Ayre & Hayward charts as belonging to “E. Stalb & Sons [sic], and “H. J. Stabb”, respectively. Thus the ship paintings also provide research alternatives to confirm the accuracy of the charts. The ships the “Antoinette” and the “James O'Neill” (both of 1905), as another example, were owned by William A. Munn (a blue over white bicolour flag). But that design shows up in the charts as that of Baine Johnston & Co.—a much older and still existing company. Since the Munn firm also exists today as an insurance concern, there is obvious confusion as to whose flag it is. Several other firms, however, used this flag (for example W. Grieve & Co. in the Ayre chart, and Thorburn & Tessier on a Hayward chart), but they augmented it by flying it under a red pennant, something which may have been omitted during use at sea. Thus cross-referencing various sources can glean additional insight for the vexillologist—but can also just make him cross-eyed!



*"Antoinette" owned by Wm. A. Munn, 1905.  
Brunswick Press.*



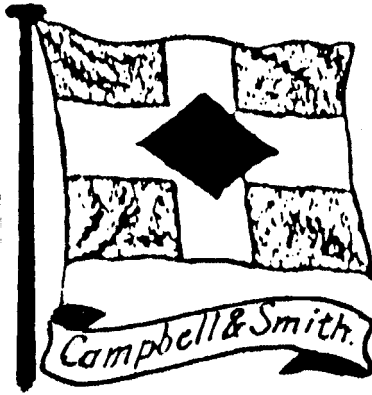
*"James O'Neill" owned by Wm. A. Munn, 1905.  
(Note that flag also appears as that of Baine Johnstone/  
Jonstone, among others). Brunswick Press.*

## Signal and Commercial Flag Design—Conclusions

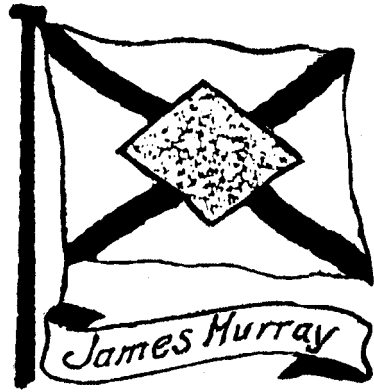
All accuracy about the individual flag histories aside, what the various sources show the vexillologist are trends in the general design of these flags. While earlier charts expounded on the simple and straightforward plain pennant/ball codes, they showed commercial flags of simple practical design. Though some flags used lettering they were, in later charts, replaced by graphic geometrical designs. The flags of firms such as Campbell & Smith and James Murray use simple crosses and diamonds, but each in a different and yet very distinctive way. No doubt this was the result of economic concerns: simple flags meant simple construction which meant less expense in outfitting several ships and premises with what may have been dozens of flags (remember, this was before the era of the printed flag! ).

Also, just by glancing at any chart of flags, the viewer can see that without much exception, all the flags were in either red, white, or blue. Since the majority of major sea-faring nations had flags of those colours, it was a matter





Red flag, white cross with blue diamond.



White flag, blue cross with red diamond.

*Design semantics: Practical considerations of manufacturing and supply, in the past, resulted in designs of both high sophistication and simplicity. Here illustrated are two flags with similar graphic elements (cross and diamond lozenge), but resulting in distinctively different flags. Author's collection.*

of odds that most ship chandlers (or suppliers) stocked fabrics for flag use only in these popular shades. It was inevitable that the individual merchant would settle for a design that was most easy to make in a hurry, and flags featuring less-used colours such as yellow or green may have meant a long wait for the needed fabrics. Thus we can see the role manufacturers had in design. Above all, functional and practical were watchwords. Fortunately for the student of flags, the result was worth the frugality!

## The City of St. John's Today

The last signalling mast came down, through disuse, around 1958. This was almost 10 years after Newfoundland transitioned from the oldest colony of Britain to the youngest province of Canada (in April of 1949). During the next 25 years or so, when Newfoundland deemed the past to be a thing discarded in the onward rush to the future as a modern province, the history of St. John's signal flags was relegated to dusty attics and archives—almost forgotten. Fortunately, since the restoration and preservation efforts in the city dating from the mid-1970s—especially those efforts of the Newfoundland Historic Trust, in association with Parks Canada Historic Sites—the saga of this colourful part of the city's past has come to light. The visitor to the city can obtain various publications and posters of the charts from both the National Historic Sites of Signal Hill, and Cape Spear. Also, the gift shops of the Newfoundland Historic Trust, located in the Newfoundland Museum's locations on Duckworth Street, and at the historic Murray Premises on the

harbourfront (one of the few remaining merchants premises, now restored as a shopping centre / museum complex).

The many individual finger piers of the city's harbour, along with the merchants who ran them, are long gone (replaced by a concrete apron wharf along the whole waterfront, and modern steel & glass office buildings). However, a few enterprising families, among them the Ayres and Bowrings, have survived to open stores across Canada (including the Canadiana and Bowring gift shops, and Holly's and J. Michaels clothing stores). The logo of Bowring's still is today one of its old sealing ships, and sometimes, if one looks closely, the house flag of the firm (a white flag with a red saltire) is just visible. At the family home and cottage of the Ayre clan can be seen hoisted the flag of that old St. John's company, which incidentally is the same as the Netherlands flag. Companies such as Munn's Insurance in St. John's are rediscovering their own vexillologic past and their logo design has incorporated the old flag of the firm (a bicolour divided blue over white). Harvey's, now located far away from the city's harbour on the suburban Kenmount Road (dealing now in heavy construction equipment) still fly their ancient flag (dating on charts from 1700!) in front of their building. It is indeed a scavenger hunt for the visitor to the city to find these echoes of St. John's colourful past in flags, but well worth the effort in the fascinating history they reveal.

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