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## Behind the button Artifact indicates Newfoundland's worth to British Empire

Steve Bartlett  
The Telegram

While exploring in the Signal Hill area last month, Philip Wangersky and Liam Delaney spied a round, pewter object in a crevice on Gibbet Hill.

Sized somewhere between a nickel and a quarter, the 13-year-olds thought it was money, perhaps a valuable old coin.

But the historian who examined the piece suggests its worth is not monetary - it turned out to be a button off an 18th-century soldier's uniform.

Dr. Bernard Ransom is curator of military history at The Rooms.

He thinks the significance is that it represents the value Britain once placed on Newfoundland.

The button, he explains, belonged to a soldier in the highly specialized Royal Regiment of Artillery. The British only had five or six of these units. That one was stationed here from 1746 and 1871 shows the worth of island - and its cod.

"This is a very small corps, and it only goes to important places," Ransom says.

"I'd like to emphasize that, because it shows how important the Newfoundland station was in terms of deploying troops throughout what was the Empire."

Because of the button's hollowed back, the historian thinks it was worn in the earlier part of the period 1785-1802.

On it are three cannons and three cannon balls displayed on a Norman-pattern shield.

Ransom says it likely came off a sentry or lookout's uniform.

They would patrol Signal Hill during daylight for five or six hours before being relieved.

"He's up there on lookout," Ransom says, "looking out for anything that indicates an approach of a hostile fleet or ships in trouble or other military emergencies. It was a very tense situation and they were always on watch."

It isn't likely the soldier engaged in warfare here.

He just missed big battles though.

There was no theatre of war in Newfoundland after 1762, the year the French captured St. John's in June and lost it again to the British Sept. 15 during the Battle of Signal Hill.

And if the soldier was here around 1795 he came close to fighting.

A French fleet spent two days outside The Narrows and retreated after seeing a massive show of British force on Signal Hill.

"It was touch and go," Ransom says. "If they come ashore in numbers, it would have been another thing like

1762."

The historian says the soldier was in St. John's at a crossroads, between the city being contested by great powers and it being a place that produced soldiers itself.

"Not only in its self-defence," he continues, "but in providing manpower for Imperial and Commonwealth war efforts in North America and theatres overseas."

As for lifestyle, because he was a gunner, Ransom says the soldier was better off than many of his colleagues, "but not that much."

His diet consisted of foods that were preserved (and some - hard tack and salt beef - remain common in Newfoundland today). There were no vegetables and scurvy was a problem. Still, the food was regular. So was clothing and shelter.

And it was better than freezing to death or dying of starvation. According to an early colonel's diary, Ransom points out, some locals joined the British garrison for basic sustenance.

When the soldier who lost the **button** served here, the city was heavily fortified.

Fort Townshend and Fort Amherst operated in combo, plus there were smaller batteries on the outskirts. (Fort Townshend, Ransom says, was the second biggest fort built by the British. Only Fort Pitt - now Pittsburgh - was larger.) Ransom says the amount of fortification also shows the importance of Newfoundland to Britain.

'Vital economic asset'

"(In the 1800s) it is a defended and very vital economic asset for the Empire, and the cod resource is treated like bullion ... The garrison is here to nail down and defend the business assets of the place and ensure it isn't seized by anybody else."

"Newfoundland was a bit of a jewel of the Crown."

The **button** is now property of The Rooms.

Ransom says there are three or four in the collection and various museums around the world have them.

"It's not a rare item in that it is something important on the world antiques market. But, of course, it is nice for us because it is an item that is well-known (and) it is definitely part of our history."

He emphasizes rarity is not what makes it precious.

"It's valuable because it is ours. It represents a very real person, a very real branch of that service or unit actually serving here."

"It's not like some abstract thing ... It was dropped here by a serving member of that regiment while on detachment in Newfoundland doing his job."

### **Artifacts must be handed over**

Ransom says if people find such artifacts, they have to pass them to the province.

"It's as binding as the law on anyone not to steal cars or shoot moose out of season or anything else."

If the boys who found the **button** have it their way, Ransom could be looking at more artifacts in the near future.

After learning some details about its origin, Philip and Liam say they'll be looking for other items - perhaps as early as this weekend.

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