

COMMENTS ON THE DESIRABILITY AND FEASIBILITY OF A BIOGRAPHY OF SIR ROBERT PINSENT

Sir Robert Pinsent, while not one of the dominating figures of Newfoundland history, was a prominent man of his day, in the fields of Newfoundland Law and Politics.

Basic Biography as we understand it:

Born Port De Grave 1834
Educated Harbor Grace Grammar School
Articled to the firm of Bryan Robinson in St. John's
Solicitor, 1855
Barrister, 1856
Member of the Legislative Council, 1859-1865
Prominent Confederate
Member of the House of Assembly for Port De Grave (as a Conservative-
Confederate), 1865-1869
Defeated in the Election Campaign fought on the question of Confederation,
1869
Re-appointed as Member of the Legislative Council, 1870-1873
Ran as a conservative and defeated in the election of 1873
Throughout the 1870s active in Conservative party politics
1879 appointed to the Supreme Court of Newfoundland
Honorary D.C.L.
1890 K.C.M.G.
Died Norfolk, England, 1893
Wrote a pamphlet arguing the merits of Confederation with Canada, 1867

Although we know of no "Pinsent Papers" in Newfoundland, his position in society and politics means that there are many, if scattered, references to Pinsent to be found in Newfoundland sources. We feel that, given the lack of biographies of Newfoundland inhabitants, a biography would be most helpful. Thus such a study is feasible and desirable.

Dr. K. Matthews

In 1802, William (which one cannot be clearly ascertained) came out to Port De Grave as the resident partner. He was the man who in 1797 had married Amy Richards. In 1804 their property holdings in the community were increased when her father left him another fishing room, together with more property in the nearby community of Ochre Pit Cove. He remained in Newfoundland at least until 1814 when the company is styled as William Pinsent of Port De Grave Nfld., and John Pinsent of Edward Street, Portman Square, London.

William Pinsent retired to Devon at some time after 1812 and died in Teignmouth in 1835, age 78.

In the 1820s he was the senior partner in the Company and described himself as of EBFORD AND WOOLBOROUGH (Newton Abbott) merchant. His brother? John of London had died by 1826. John's administratrix was Mary Spears Pinsent of Cullompton (spinster).

However, during the 1820s another William (son of whom?) came out to Port De Grave as the Newfoundland partner. He was presumably the father of Robert John Pinsent.

In 1828 the Newfoundland firm was styled as William and Robert (R.J.) Pinsent.

Dr. K. Matthews of the Maritime History Group possesses a mass of more detailed information on this family and Company, but this is an outline of the foundation of the Company.

P.S. The descendents of the Newman family, who first employed William Pinsent in the 1770s, have until the last decade or so owned and lived in MAMHEAD PARK, Mamhead, and Widdecombe House, Stokenham parish.

Dr. Matthews and the Maritime History Group would be very interested in comparing notes with Dr. Pinsent and exchanging notes and documentation.

ORIGINS OF THE FIRM OF PINSENT in NEWFOUNDLAND

The firm was founded by William Pinsent who as a young man obtained employment with the Dartmouth Company of Messrs Newman and Roope who amongst other things, had a mercantile trade at Port De Grave, Conception Bay. William Pinsent was by 1775 acting as their agent in Port De Grave, and continued in this capacity until at least 1781. However, in 1775, his uncle, a Devonshire planter named William Carnell left him a "plantation" in Port De Grave, and in the same year he leased more ground from another Devonshire fisherman Isaac Richards. In 1787 he purchased another plantation from Philip Voekey and in 1789 bought more ground from John Hussey.

Simultaneously a relative (brother? father?) JOHN had commenced life as a common seaman who in the early 1770s served on Dartmouth vessels involved in the Newfoundland Trade. After the end of the American Revolutionary wars John became the Master (and probably owner) of a PLYMOUTH (Devon) vessel which was not involved in the Newfoundland trade, but made most of its voyages to the Iberian Peninsula and Mediterranean as a general trader.

In 1788, like many others who sought to take advantage of a short term post-war boom in the Newfoundland trade, William and John appear to have combined together to purchase the MARY JEMIMA, a brig which was built for them in that year in Plymouth. The vessel was registered in London under the joint ownership of John and William. She was engaged solely in the Newfoundland trade as a carrier for the goods and produce of what now becomes the firm of John and William Pinsent of Port De Grave.

William continued to spend, at least the summers, in Newfoundland until 1792. He obviously spent many of the winters (as was the fashion) back in Devonshire for the firm used "winter agents" such as Peter Ezekiel during this period. In 1793, the resident family member in Port De Grave was a JOHN (son of John or William). Between 1793 and 1801, none of the family were resident permanently in Newfoundland, the business there being run by a succession of agents, of whom the longest employed was a Port De Grave man Bartholomew Corban. However, one William (the same or a son or nephew) was in Port De Grave in 1797 when (described as being of Newton Abbott) he married Amy Richards of Port De Grave, who was a relative of that Devonshire fisherman Isaac Roberts who had started off the Company by leasing land in 1775 to William Pinsent.

MEANWHILE: In England John Pinsent had been developing not just the UK end of the Newfoundland trade, but pursuing his own interests in general shipping. By 1790 he is clearly established in London (all his vessels are registered there, although the masters and crew are invariably from South Devon).

This general shipowning concern developed very rapidly. In 1800 John and William Pinsent of London are recorded as owning 9 vessels (one of which is commanded by a relative Thomas Pinsent) engaged in government transport services, the Mediterranean, Jamaica, and Oporto trades. Only two of these vessels are involved in their Newfoundland trade. All vessels were registered in London, 3 had been built in Teignmouth, 2 in Newfoundland, 1 in Hull, and the rest were prize vessels taken by the British from foreign owners.