
In Search of Speaker Thomas Bennett

by Trine Schioldan

Most legislative chambers have complete collections of paintings or photographs of individuals who have held the office of Speaker. In 2004 the author learned that the collection of Speakers' portraits which encircle the floor of the House of Assembly of Newfoundland and Labrador was incomplete. There was no existing likeness of Thomas Bennett, who held the office of Speaker from 1834-1837. With the blessing of the Clerk, a comprehensive search was started by the Legislative Library for a likeness of Speaker Bennett. This article outlines the steps that led to the completion of the Speakers' portrait collection, thereby filling a longstanding gap in that province's Legislative history.

The Speakers' portrait collection is proud testimony to the history and governance of Newfoundland and Labrador. John G. Higgins, Leader of the Opposition, while speaking about the hanging of portraits of pre-Confederation Speakers in the House of Assembly said in 1951:

...we are reminded of the men who played a big part in the pages of Newfoundland history...they should serve us as an example of modesty, to be modest in our own ideas, not to think too much of ourselves, not to feel we are the only statesmen in the world, the only ones that God created in this country. I think I heard someone say one time: 'The men here are the finest body of men who ever sat in this House.'¹

One of the first actions of any elected Assembly has always been the selection of a Speaker. This activity must take place before any other business can be brought before the House. This practice dates back to when the House of Assembly first met in St. John's on January 1, 1833. The initial order of business was the selection of John Bingley Garland for the position of Speaker. Gar-

land held the post until he was appointed to the Legislative Council shortly thereafter. This vacancy meant that a new Speaker had to be chosen. On January 29, 1834, on the first day of the third session of the first General Assembly, Thomas Bennett was chosen as the second Speaker of the House of Assembly, after a close contest and vote. Over the next hundred years, until the arrival of Commission of Government in 1934 and up to Confederation with Canada, twenty-five Speakers, referred to above as "the finest body of men who ever sat in this House," held office after Thomas Bennett.

In 1949, shortly after Newfoundland joined Canada, Premier Joseph Smallwood commissioned Frederick Steiger to paint portraits of all of the pre-Confederation Speakers of the House of Assembly. Steiger was paid a lump sum of \$6000.00 to deliver 26 framed portraits to the House.² At that time, no likeness of Bennett was found, thereby preventing his portrait from being painted.

Who was Thomas Bennett?

Thomas Bennett was born in Shaftesbury, England in 1788. He held a position in the British Commissariat Department prior to the end of the Napoleonic wars. He moved to St. John's, likely in the early 1820s, to join his brother and business partner, Charles Fox Bennett, who later became Newfoundland's fifth Prime Minister. The Bennett brothers had financial interests in the Riverhead

Trine Schioldan works in the Legislative Library of the Newfoundland and Labrador House of Assembly. She is grateful to her colleagues at the Legislative Library, especially Cameron McKay, for their encouragement in the search for the missing portrait. She is also grateful to the former Clerk of the House of Assembly, John Noel, for his continuing faith in the project.



Speaker Thomas Bennett 1834-1837
(Portrait by Gerald Squires)

Brewery (only later called the Bennett Brewery when taken over by the unrelated Edward W. Bennett). They also had a stake in the copper mine at Tilt Cove, which brought miners from Cornwall to mine its pockets of ore.

Thomas Bennett married Hannah Hutchings on January 9, 1828. He was elected to the House of Assembly in the first General Election in 1832 as the first Member for the District of Twillingate and Fogo. He held the position of Speaker from 1834-1837. When he was chosen as Speaker, Thomas Bennett spoke to the House of Assembly, saying:

Gentlemen, I beg to offer you my most sincere thanks for the honor you have conferred upon me by placing me in the highest elective situation in this Colony; and I assure you it shall be my unceasing duty to merit the confidence you have reposed in me, by a strict attention to the many duties of the important Office with which you have been pleased to invest me. I shall most anxiously guard the privileges of the House on all occasions, and I trust, by your assistance and support, those privileges will be at all times exercised, consistent with the prerogatives of the Crown, and the rights of the other Branches of the Legislature.³

Thomas Bennett must have had a lively role to play during his tenure as Speaker, given that in 1836, the Speaker cast the deciding vote on no less than fourteen occasions.⁴ Thomas Bennett resided at Mount Dorset, a home on Waterford Bridge Road. In 1848 he was appointed as magistrate in St. John's. He was a member of the Church of England, and served as a director of both the St. John's Hospital and the St. John's Academy. He was appointed to investigate the election disturbances in Harbour Grace in 1859, which involved a crowd carrying off the polling book on the first day of polling, complaints that one of two members had been improperly elected, and that a third candidate had been intimidated into withdrawing by various threats. In August 1870, Thomas Bennett retired to Shaftesbury, England. He died there at the rectory of the parish of Shaftesbury St. James in 1872.⁵

The Search

Local resources were consulted in the early stages of research for a photo of Bennett. Unfortunately, neither the *Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador* nor the *Book of Newfoundland* contained a picture. Searches of several additional print sources were equally unsuccessful. As the search continued, one could only hope that in the fifty-five years since the original Speakers' portrait collection had been completed, a photograph or line drawing of Thomas Bennett might have surfaced, particularly within archival collections within the Province. Many collections had been catalogued or digitized in the interim. Unfortunately searches in the Legislative Library, the Centre for Newfoundland Studies at Memorial University, and The Rooms Provincial Archives produced no images. The Newfoundland Collection at the A.C. Hunter Public Library was also consulted where an obituary was found for Thomas Bennett, who died on February 12, 1872. At that time, regrettably, Newfoundland newspapers did not contain photographs. The only images they printed were a few line drawings for advertisements. The search continued at the Diocesan Archives and the City of St. John's Archives, all to no avail.

When local avenues were exhausted, the search was broadened to include national collections. The Library and Archives Canada was able to produce a photograph of the unrelated Thomas R. Bennett (1830-1901), who also served as Speaker of the House of Assembly from 1869-1873. His portrait was already hanging in our collection. Nothing related to Thomas Bennett (1788-1872) was located.

Because of Thomas Bennett's close personal connection to Dorset, England, searches within major British

collections seemed a reasonable next course of action. The following collections in England were consulted:

- the City of London Archives,
- the National Archives (formerly the Public Records Office),
- Cambridge University's digital collection (which includes several very old photographs from Newfoundland),
- Oxford University's digital image collection,
- the British Library,
- the British Museum,
- the House of Lords Records Office and,
- the National Portrait Gallery

The Shaftesbury Historical Society was particularly interested and helpful in finding a likeness of Thomas Bennett. They made contact with the Dorset Records Office, placed an ad in the local paper in search of an 1872 copy of the local church magazine, and searched the obituary columns of the regional newspaper, since Thomas Bennett had died in Shaftesbury. Through contact with the Parish of Shaftesbury St. James, where Thomas Bennett was baptized and buried, it was learned that the church grounds contained several memorials to the Bennett family, including Thomas Bennett, but alas—no likeness. It was very disappointing to have come so close to finding a likeness there, especially given the benefit of the generous assistance of local historians.

In the end, the Wessex Newfoundland Society provided invaluable assistance. The Executive Director of the society, Ian Andrews, advised of a new discovery of an old collection of photographs taken in St. John's. With his help, and through the carefully checked genealogical research of Robert Bayley of Godalming, Surrey, a photograph of Thomas Bennett was located. Although one can never have 100% certainty about its authenticity, (there is no writing on the back of the photograph) we are as sure as anyone ever can be that the photograph represents Thomas Bennett. Mr. Bayley's rigorously checked family tree, combined with the dates and relative perceived ages of persons in the groupings of the St. John's photographs, served as the beginning of the authentication process. The history of photography, the contemporary styles of studio photography, and the provenance are pieces which fit the puzzle. There is also evidence of the 'family face', assisted by the existence of various likenesses of Thomas' brother, Charles Fox Bennett, at various stages of his life.

Robert Bayley's research concluded that his third cousin, Joseph Weston Young, had married Anna Josephine Bennett on February 15, 1870 in Westbury on Trym, now in Bristol. Anna Josephine was Thomas Bennett's daughter.

The photograph was in the possession of James Way, cousin of Robert Bayley. Mr. Bayley advised his cousin to donate the original photograph to the House of Assembly of Newfoundland and Labrador.

At the end of June 2007, Robert traveled to Newfoundland to pursue further genealogical research. He graciously presented the photograph to the House of Assembly. The photograph is very well preserved and is enclosed under glass, in a handcrafted red velvet case which can be clasped with two rounded hooks. Given that the photograph was taken in the latter part of the 1850s, its presentation in the case would have been extremely lavish, well befitting a man of Thomas Bennett's standing.

Newfoundland-born artist Gerald Squires was commissioned to paint a portrait of Thomas Bennett. The unveiling ceremony took place on April 22, 2008, and marked Thomas Bennett's return to the Legislature he once presided over – 171 years after his tenure as Speaker.

Finding a picture, and the subsequent painting of a portrait, makes certain that Thomas Bennett's fruitful career and contributions will be remembered together with the similar contributions of other pre-Confederation Speakers. At long last, Thomas Bennett will take his place officially in the company of his Speaker colleagues, and his rightful place in our parliamentary history.

Determination and tenacity in research are not always rewarded, particularly in circumstances surrounding such a unique search as this. The three year quest was fraught with hope and disappointment. However, Thomas Bennett has been brought home and restored to a people whose pride of place and history is unwavering.

Notes

1. *House of Assembly Proceedings*, 1951, p. 18.
2. *House of Assembly Proceedings*, 1949, p. 751-752.
3. *Journal and Proceedings* of the House of Assembly of Newfoundland, 1834, p.8
4. *Journal and Proceedings* of the House of Assembly of Newfoundland, 1836, index entry.
5. *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*. V.X: 1871-1880, 1972.