

# Signal Hill National Historic Park

Newfoundland



## SIGNAL HILL

The earliest record of signalling on Signal Hill in St. John's dates from 1704. Known originally as the Lookout, the hill was first called Signal Hill in 1762.

Signals were effected by flags hoisted on a yard-arm. They gave merchants time to prepare docking facilities, and in the 19th century harbour pilots and customs officials also watched for the signals.

After 1795 signals were sent from a blockhouse at Ladies' Lookout. New blockhouses were built in 1815 and 1859, succeeded by Cabot Tower, constructed between 1898 and 1900 to commemorate the Cabot quatercentenary and Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee.

1. Summit of Signal Hill.  
Au faite de la colline.



Signals were sent from here until 1958. Guglielmo Marconi made communications history on Signal Hill on December 12, 1901 when he received the first transatlantic wireless message in a hospital near Cabot Tower. The Canadian Marconi Company operated a wireless station in the tower from 1933 to 1960.

The first official fortification in St. John's was Fort William, built in the 1690s to defend against the French, who were based at Placentia. England and France valued the Newfoundland fishery for economic reasons and also as an excellent training ground for naval recruits. The French took Fort William in 1696 and 1709 before being removed from Placentia to Louisbourg by the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713.

A French force from Brest captured Fort William on June 27, 1762, a move designed to improve France's bargaining position after the loss of Louisbourg and Quebec. That September a British force under Lieutenant-Colonel William Amherst recaptured St. John's. Advancing overland from Torbay, they took Signal Hill on the 15th and opened fire on Fort William on the 17th. The French surrendered the next day. In the 1770s Fort Townshend was built west of Fort William, out of the range of guns on Signal Hill.

In the Napoleonic Wars it was decided to fortify Signal Hill itself. Queen's, Wallace's, Waldegrave, Duke of York's, Quidi Vidi Pass, and Carronade Batteries date from this period. A number of small batteries on the summit looked toward St. John's.



2. St. John's from Signal Hill.  
La ville de Saint-Jean depuis Signal Hill.

The hill was considered a place of ultimate retreat for the townspeople and garrison. An impressive show of strength there in September 1796 deterred a French fleet under de Richery.

After the Napoleonic and 1812 Wars the defences of Signal Hill declined, with the summit batteries, Quidi Vidi Pass, Carronade, Wallace's and Duke of York's Batteries abandoned by 1830.

There was considerable construction in the 1830s as part of an attempt to concentrate the garrison on the hill. One beneficiary was Queen's Battery, which received a new barrack in 1832-33.

The hill enjoyed another revival during the American Civil War, but was vacated when the garrison

3. Queen's Battery.  
La batterie de la Reine.



withdrew from St. John's in 1870. In World War I a contingent of the Newfoundland Legion of Frontiersmen manned Waldegrave Battery, while in World War II the United States maintained an anti-aircraft battery on the hill.

After the withdrawal of the garrison in 1870, two of the barracks on Signal Hill were converted into hospitals. The first, erected near George's Pond in 1842-43, was known as St. George's Hospital. It was busiest from 1888 to 1890 during a major diphtheria epidemic. St. George's was destroyed in the Great Fire of July 8, 1892.

St. George's was replaced by a barrack built on the summit between 1837 and 1840. It was first known as the Diphtheria and Fever Hospital, later shortened to Signal Hill Hospital. It received mainly smallpox and tuberculosis patients before burning down on December 18, 1920. It was here that Marconi received his famous message.

There was also a cholera hospital, built in Ross's Valley in 1892. Named Prowse's Folly after public health officer Judge D.W. Prowse, it was used only twice. It succumbed to fire on May 6, 1911.

### Points of Interest

Interpretation Centre  
Queen's Battery  
Cabot Tower  
Powder Magazine  
Marconi Plaque  
Soldiers' Canteen



4. Signal Hill Tattoo.  
Spectacle militaire de Signal Hill.

### Walking Trails

North Head Trail  
Gibbet Hill  
Queen's Battery  
Ladies' Lookout  
Cuckold Cove

Cover photo (Cabot Tower) courtesy of Ben Hansen.

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