

Word on the Streets

Dennis Flynn delves into the history behind some iconic St. John's street names.

BATTERY RD.

Signal Hill

Batt

Dennis Flynn photo

I wander the hills above the harbour

on an August morning as sunbeams crossing Mansard roofs create shadows that slink along the skyline. A well-fed tabby cat hops off a stoop to walk along with me for a block or so before becoming bored with the adventure. I continue on alone, enjoying the landscape and the light.

Taking note of the street signs as I pass them, I think of U2's hit single "Where the Streets Have No Name" about a mythical place in America. That song certainly doesn't apply here where, in my opinion anyway, the streets have the best names: a short street called "Long Street," a Nunnery Hill sidling up to a Prospect Street, plus variations on kings and queens galore, and more places with "Fort" in the title than you can shake a rampart stick at.

So, join me for a quick tour of a selection of curiously named lanes, roads and byways of the province's capital city.

Hill O' Chips

I confess to craving a feed of french fries every time I pass by this short stretch between Duckworth and Water streets. However, the name has nothing to do with fast food; rather, it refers to piles of wood chips (so the story goes) stored in the area years ago. Funny true story: In 2014, Hill O' Chips became drenched in – what else? – cooking oil, after an accidental spill.



Dennis Flynn photo

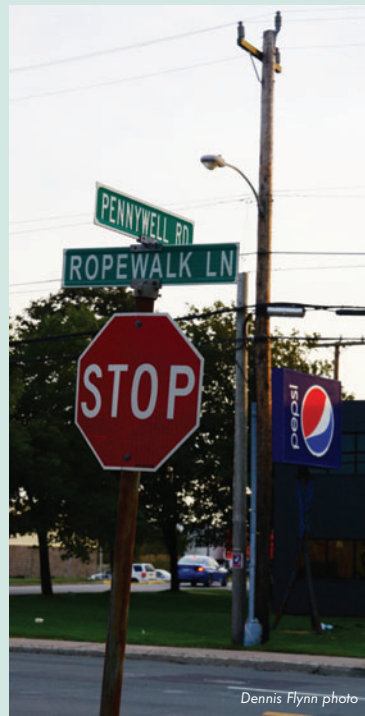
Battery Road

While the stunning scenery in this area has been known to recharge many a soul, this street name has nothing to do with electricity cells. Battery Road and its nearby variations (Outer, Lower, Top and Middle Battery roads) below Signal Hill are named for their involvement in the battles between the French and English circa 1762.

Ropewalk Lane

No, this road was not named for high-wire daredevil acts from some vintage travelling circus. Located between Mundy Pond Road and Empire Avenue, Ropewalk Lane was named by St. John's City Council on September 26, 1962, in honour of the Colonial Cordage Company. Nearby you'll also find Ropewalk Road, Ropewalk Place and Cordage Place, all tied to the same enterprise. The ropewalk was the long, narrow building where ropes were made.

According to the Heritage Newfoundland and Labrador website, "Local attempts to manufacture rope failed until the Colonial Cordage Company was established in 1882. This became one of the most successful manufacturing enterprises in Newfoundland, employing well over a hundred people until it closed after Confederation."



Dennis Flynn photo

McMurdo's Lane

The ornate metalwork signs at either end of this pedestrian-only walkway between Water and Duckworth streets make one wonder about the significance of McMurdo's Lane. According to the City of St. John's Archives 2012 booklet, *History: Street Names, Areas, Monuments and Plaques*, the current McMurdo's Lane name came into being around 1867. Prior to that, it was known as McCallum's Lane (most likely after a grocery store owner located on the laneway), followed by Merchant's Lane (after Valentine Merchant, a tailor and clothier among other things, who acquired the block). Today, shouldering the lane at 210 Water Street is the McMurdo Building – former site of McMurdo's Drug-store, opened by Thomas McMurdo of Scotland in 1823. He and his family trained so many pharmacists as apprentices that the McMurdo family are



Dennis Flynn photo

regarded, according to the Canadian Academy of the History of Pharmacy, as the "fathers of pharmacy" in Newfoundland and Labrador.



Dennis Flynn photo

Duckworth Street

Duckworth Street began appearing on city maps by 1849. The name honours Sir J.T. Duckworth (1747-1817). Born in Leatherhead, Surrey, England, Duckworth came to Newfoundland in 1810 as governor. Previously, the same street was known by the decidedly less interesting name, "Upper Path."



Jim Desautels photo

Signal Hill Road

Many people mistakenly assume that the name of the city's most famous hill – and the road that leads to it – has to do with Guglielmo Marconi, who received the first transatlantic wireless signal there on December 12, 1901. But the name is much older than that. The hill itself was once simply known as "The Lookout," for its commanding view of both the city and the ocean, including approaching vessels. Around the 18th century, the hill was the ideal site for using signal flags to send messages to ships below. The name formally changed from "The Lookout" to "Signal Hill" after the Battle of Signal Hill in 1762. Signal Hill Road, meanwhile, used to be called Vinnicomb's Hill.



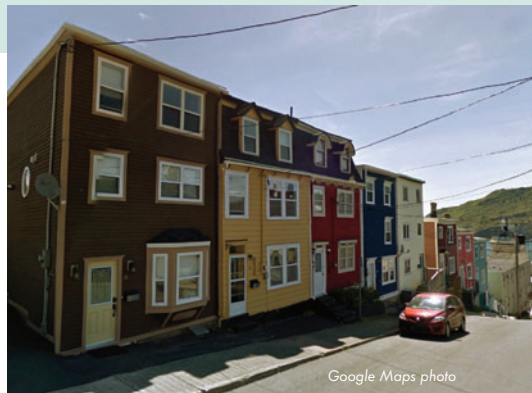
Gower Street

Dennis Flynn photo

Lined with some of the most picturesque older homes in the downtown area, Gower Street has long been a favourite place for photographers and lovers of architecture to wander about. During my own wanderings, I've often wondered what a "Gower" is. As it turns out, it's not a "what" but a "who." Sir Erasmus Gower, Governor of Newfoundland in 1804, is mainly remembered for the laying out of Gower Street. Some time prior to 1849, the stretch between Queen's Road and King's Road was named for him.

Pilot's Hill

Given the rich association of Newfoundland with the early days of aviation and famous flyers such as Alcock and Brown, Amelia Earhart and Charles Lindbergh, one could not be blamed for thinking the colourful Pilot's Hill has something to do with such high-flying ventures – but it does not. This street, running between Duckworth and Gower streets, is named in honour of Canon William Pilot of the Anglican Church, who came to Newfoundland in 1867 as vice principal of Queen's College.



Google Maps photo

Do you know an interesting story behind a street name in a community, town or city in Newfoundland and Labrador?

Email editorial@downhomelife.com to share what you know.



George Street

Dennis Flynn photo

Wedged between Water and Adelaide streets, George Street is said by some to have the most bars and pubs per square foot of any street in North America. (I don't know who did the measurements going around the continent to check, but it sounds like fine work if you can get it.)

Multiple theories offer explanations for how this famous street got named. A 2011 article, compiled and edited by members of George Street United Church (opened in 1873) notes two potential explanations. The first involves an American man – George Hutchings Jr. – who arrived in the city in the early 1700s. "He was granted a very large tract of land in the district for keeping an eye out for the French admiral, de Tourney, believed to have been thinking of attacking St. John's," states the article, which also goes on to theorize the name could be related to King George I.

Quidi Vidi Village Road

The pronunciation of the name itself – let alone where it came from – is a matter of spirited debate in St. John's. According to destinationstjohns.com: "Some say it comes from the French name *Quidville*. Some say it is Latin: *que de vide* or Italian: *qui divide*, meaning that which divides. There is also a legend that a woman by the name of Kitty Vitty lived in these parts, and she had a house of ill-repute, so it was named after her." 📧



Dennis Flynn photo