

## *Destination Unknown: Tracing Strays from Atlantic Canada, 1860-1920*

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Millions of North Americans are descended from Atlantic Canadians who migrated from the Maritime provinces of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to other parts of Canada and the United States. Historians estimate that 264,000 persons left the three Maritime provinces between 1871 and 1901, out of a total population of 894,000.<sup>1</sup> Such numbers do not bode well for the genealogist and my research nearly foundered on the shoals of this exodus. Fortunately, I discovered some techniques for tracing the movements of these Atlantic Canadians who had left home for points unknown.

Disaster struck my research on the Fisher family of New Brunswick when individuals and even whole families suddenly disappeared without a trace from local sources for the late 1800s. Where had they all gone? The gaps in the census records and church registers told me the bare outlines of the story but not where they went or why they had left. I did not know it then but my family's experience was not unique, they had taken part in one of the great internal migrations in North American history. In only a generation, almost one-third of the population left the Maritime provinces. Out-migration peaked in the 1880s and 1890s and hit hardest in New Brunswick. Young adults left in droves. In four counties in the St. John River valley, more than 20% of the total population and almost 60% of young adults left during the 1880s.<sup>2</sup>

Historians blame the out-migration on economic failure in the 1860s and 1870s which ended Atlantic Canada's "golden age of wood, wind and sail". Timber and shipbuilding had made the region one of the world's leading centers of shipping and trade by 1860. But exports to the United States fell sharply when demand dried up with the end of the Civil War and the cancellation in 1865 of the Reciprocity Agreement

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<sup>1</sup> Alan A. Brookes, "Out-Migration from the Maritime Provinces, 1860-1900: Some Preliminary Considerations", *Acadiensis* (Spring 1976), pp.28-29.

<sup>2</sup> Patricia Thornton, "The Problem of Out-Migration from Atlantic Canada, 1871-1921: A New Look", *Acadiensis* (Autumn 1985), pp.20-23.

which allowed free trade between the United States and British North America. The collapse of the Maritime economy contrasted with rapid growth in the United States, and central and western Canada. Jobs in the cities of the industrial heartland and cheap land in the west lured young Maritimers from their homes in search of a better life. Even lumbermen were in demand and better paid in Maine, Michigan, and Minnesota.<sup>3</sup> Nearby New England was the most popular destination: 33% of New Brunswickers living in the United States in 1880 were in Maine and 29% were in Massachusetts.<sup>4</sup> New York, Ontario, the mid-west and California also received large numbers of emigrants from Atlantic Canada. The spread of railways and passenger steamships in these years made it easy to seek out greener pastures.

By my estimate, over 40% of the Fisher family left New Brunswick. It was not always so. None of the family had left the province between 1800 and 1850 and only two of them left in the 1850s. Eleven of the forty-one children of the generation born between 1836 and 1872, however, left home. The exodus accelerated with the next generation. Seventeen of its thirty-eight members (45%) born in New Brunswick between 1865 and 1905 moved to the United States or another province in Canada, while twenty-one (55%) stayed put. Generally, I did not know where these twenty-

### **Getting Started Researching Your Maritime Ancestors**

Genealogists with Maritime roots are blessed with a large selection of published works and Internet sites to help them with their research. The best overall guide to the region is Terrence M. Punch and George F. Sanborn Jr.'s *Genealogist's Handbook for Atlantic Canada Research* (Boston 1997). It includes chapters on resources available for each of the provinces and the Acadians. On the Internet, the best primary sources covering the region as a whole are available at the Library and Archives of Canada's web-site which holds digitized images of the Census of Canada for 1901 (though without a name index). Researchers can also search an index of personnel records of First World War soldiers that are linked to digitized attestation papers which hold valuable genealogical data. The AMICUS union catalogue should also be searched for published family histories, local histories and genealogical reference works relating to the Maritime provinces.

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.40-43.

<sup>4</sup> Alan A. Brookes, "Out-Migration from the Maritime Provinces, 1860-1900: Some Preliminary Considerations", *Acadiensis* (Spring 1976), p.43.

eight strays had gone, only that they had disappeared from the censuses and other records of their communities.

For my direct line, I did know the destination thanks to my father and family tradition. Lawyer, newspaper editor and sometime mayor George Frederick Fisher had died in Fredericton, New Brunswick in 1894 at age 49, leaving a widow and four children destitute. None of them remained in that city seven years later when the next census was recorded. Probate records revealed only that his son Charles Frederick Fisher had “sometime since left this Country and his actual whereabouts is unknown.”<sup>5</sup> The trail stopped cold. In fact, my great-grandfather Charles Fisher was living with his great-aunts in Middleton, Nova Scotia where my grandfather and father were later born. New Brunswick sources, however, did not hold the answer. His three sisters had also left. The two eldest ultimately went to California, after stops in Chicago and Winnipeg, Manitoba, and the youngest went to Georgia. Without inside information, it would have been very difficult to trace the movements of this family after the death of their father in 1894.

How would I trace the strays for whom I did not have inside information? The most valuable sources for finding their destinations ultimately proved to be newspaper obituaries of parents, the Social Security Death Index (SSDI), and on-line indexes to the

### **New Brunswick**

The best guides to the records of New Brunswick are by Robert Fellows: *Researching Your Ancestors in New Brunswick* and *Starting a Family History Project in New Brunswick*. The Provincial Archives is a leader in making resources available online for the genealogist. Its website includes indexes of births (1801-1906), marriages (1810-1932), and deaths (1888-1951). Researchers can also find indexes of land grants, land petitions, letters patent, and cemetery records. A series of county guides which can be downloaded in PDF is a hidden treasure, providing an exhaustive list of church registers and other sources available for each county and include the microfilm reel number so they can be ordered easily on Inter-Library Loan. Links to other Internet resources can be found on the NB Gen Links web-site. The best published source is Daniel Johnson's *Vital Statistics from New Brunswick Newspapers* which runs to over 90 volumes of birth, marriage and death notices from 1784 to 1900. Best of all, a search and extract service is offered for a moderate charge.

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<sup>5</sup> York County Probate Records, G. Fred Fisher, PANB reel F11762.

U. S. censuses of 1900, 1920, and 1930. The parents of those who left generally lived their whole lives in New Brunswick and died there sometime between 1880 and 1950. Cemetery transcripts, church registers, and death certificates (an index for deaths 1920-1951 is available on-line at <http://archives.gnb.ca>) provided the date of death. From there, it was often possible to find an obituary in a local newspaper which included the names and places of residence of children still living. The 1906 obituary of David Michael Fisher of New Maryland is a good example of the information that could be found about strays. The local church register and cemetery records gave the date of his death and it was not difficult to find a notice in the newspaper the *Daily Gleaner*: "A family of twelve survive, including: William, of Fredericton; Hugh, of Bangor, Me.; David, of Boston; Charles, living near Harvey; Mrs. John Fletcher, of New Maryland, and Mrs. Thomas Furneth, of St. John."<sup>6</sup> This notice was also useful for tracing movements within New Brunswick. Unfortunately, the obituary was not complete, omitting the names and residences of the other six children. Following up with the Genealogy.com's index to the 1900 census, I located David M. Fisher living in Holliston, Mass. and a possible match for Hugh Fisher in New Limerick, Maine.

Even a poor lead from a newspaper notice could be better than no lead at all. Charles H. B. Fisher's 1932 obituary read: "He is survived by seven children, Dr. E. Bayard Fisher and Walter S. Fisher, in the Canadian West; Atwood M. Fisher, Frances Louise Fisher, Fred E. Fisher, C. Percival Fisher and Mrs. Harold A. Brooks, of

### **Nova Scotia**

Terrence Punch's *Genealogical Research in Nova Scotia* is an excellent guide to resources available in the province and the best starting point for researchers. Several venerable county histories written at the turn of the last century exist for Nova Scotia and hold a wealth of information on the first settlers, often with brief genealogies. The Nova Scotia Archives has served genealogists less well than the New Brunswick Archives but still has some useful resources available at its web-site including databases of marriage bonds (1763-1840) and persons killed in the Halifax Explosion of 1917. It also lists publications for sale including short guides for genealogists to eight of its counties. The GenWeb site for Nova Scotia is a gateway to other Internet sites of interest for Nova Scotia research.

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<sup>6</sup> *Daily Gleaner*, 2 February 1906, p.8.

Washington, D.C.”<sup>7</sup> Those residing in Washington, DC were found with the help of Ancestry.com’s index to the 1930 census (although Atwood was indexed as Alwood) but one might have hoped for a more specific location than the “Canadian West”. Subsequent research in city directories and on-line sources eventually turned up E. Bayard Fisher in Medicine Hat, Alberta in 1922 and Walter S. Fisher in Prince Rupert, British Columbia in 1914.

The obituary for William Moss from 1918 was more specific stating that he was “survived by one son, Charles, of Littleton, Maine, and two daughters, Mrs. Samuel Hodgson, of New Maryland, and Mrs. Arthur Bennett of Cross Creek.”<sup>8</sup> The notice, once again, was useful for tracing movements within the province as well as those across the border. George Edward Fisher’s 1936 obituary in the *Daily Gleaner* stated that he was survived by his wife and three daughters: “Mrs. Henry Odland, Seattle, Wash.; Mrs. E.S. Gallop, Montreal, and Mrs. Kenneth L. Golding, Fredericton; six grandchildren and a sister, Mrs. David Pottinger, Montreal.”<sup>9</sup> In this case, it helped pinpoint members of two generations in far-flung and perhaps unlikely destinations for New Brunswick strays.

Another trick involved using a known birth date in Atlantic Canada to search the on-line SSDI for the United States. Although Fisher is a common surname, searching with an exact birth date holds some prospect of narrowing down the number of matches in the index. My greatest success using this technique was discovering Frederica Addison Fisher, born 30 January 1894, who had left New Brunswick before the 1901 census with her mother Bessie Eloise (Addison) Fisher. Tradition held that they had gone to South Carolina or Georgia. I searched the SSDI for a “Frederica”, with no entry in the surname field to allow for the probability of her having married, using her exact date of birth and entering Georgia as the state. Thanks to her unusual first name, the search produced a single hit for a “Frederica McComb” who was born 30 January 1894 and died 12 May 1986 in Decatur, Georgia. Her obituary from the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, obtained by Inter-library loan, gave me the names of two surviving

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<sup>7</sup> *Daily Gleaner*, 3 August 1932, p.9.

<sup>8</sup> *Daily Gleaner*, 4 May 1918, p.12.

<sup>9</sup> *Daily Gleaner*, 25 August 1936, p.6.

sons.<sup>10</sup> A phone call later, I was speaking to Dr. Robert Ellison who confirmed in a soft, southern accent that his mother Frederica Fisher had originally come from New Brunswick. Best of all, he sent me a photograph dating from 1890 which included my great-great-grandfather. No one on my side of the family had ever seen a picture of him!

In total, I found that twenty-eight Fishers spanning two generations had been swept along with the flood of emigrants from the Maritimes between 1860 and 1920. Their destinations included Massachusetts, Maine, Vermont, New York, Washington, DC, Washington state, Georgia, Illinois, California, Ontario, Quebec, Manitoba, Alberta and British Columbia. Seventeen had gone to the United States and eight had gone elsewhere in Canada. My research demonstrated that our family had migrated much farther afield than ever imagined. By the 1920s, Fishers had spread to all corners of North America. One Fisher returned to New Brunswick after living in Minnesota for a few years and Rebecca Eliza Fisher's destination is still unknown. Migration from the have-not Maritime provinces has never really stopped and many North Americans today can trace their roots to ancestors from New Brunswick and Nova Scotia.

Newspaper notices and on-line databases are, of course, not the only method for tracing strays. City directories, probate records and oral traditions are also valuable. Newspapers also seem to be more prone to factual and typographical errors than official documents. But through obituaries and on-line indexes to U. S. census and social security records, I was able to determine the destinations of more than twenty Fishers who had left Atlantic Canada. Tracing their descendants in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in their new homes spread throughout North America will pose new challenges. But the Internet, e-mail, and on-line databases are making the challenge of long-distance research easier.

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<sup>10</sup> Obituary, Frederica Ellison McComb, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 14 May 1986.