



1913
1964

THE EARLY PRESIDENTS

of the New Brunswick Federation of Labour





Delegate Badge, 1929. This is one of the badges provided to delegates at the annual meeting of Trades and Labour Congress of Canada, held in Saint John in 1929. Note the image of the Labourers' Bell, erected in 1849 on the Saint John waterfront by the Labourers' Benevolent Association to enforce the ten-hour day. The LBA later became Local 273, International Longshoremen's Association, making it the oldest continuously existing union in the province.

University of British Columbia, Rare Books and Special Collections. Vancouver, New Westminster and District Union Label Trades Council Memorabilia, #169



1913 THE EARLY PRESIDENTS 1964 of the New Brunswick Federation of Labour

<i>Foreword</i>	1
1. <i>The Founder</i> James L. Sugrue (1913–1918)	2
2. <i>The Acadian</i> Céline A. Melanson (1919–1921)	5
3. <i>The Longshoreman</i> James E. Tighe (1921–1929, 1934–1936)	8
4. <i>The Machinist</i> Eugene R. Steeves (1929–1932)	11
5. <i>Mr. Labour</i> James A. Whitebone (1932–1934, 1936–1959, 1960–1964)	14
<i>More Sources</i>	19
<i>Delegates, 1931 Convention, Saint John (photograph)</i>	20

© LHTNB 2011

Published by the Labour History in New Brunswick Project,
a Community-University Research Alliance supported by the
Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Visit our website at www.lhtnb.ca, which includes additional
information, documents and illustrations on this theme.

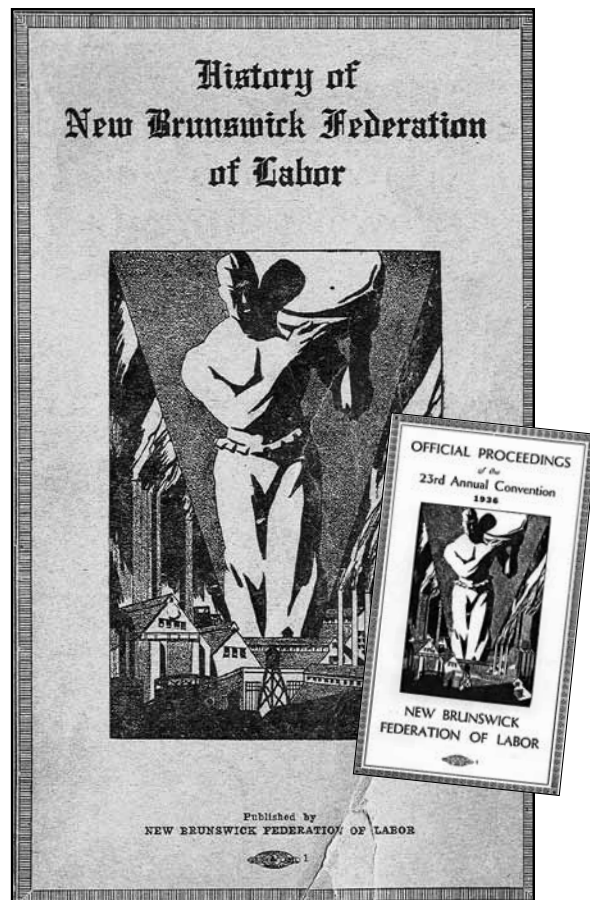
While the supply lasts, copies of this booklet are available
on request, and we encourage personal, library, union and
educational use. Contact us c/o:

Department of History
University of New Brunswick
Fredericton, NB Canada E3B 5A3

Text by David Frank

Acknowledgements:

A big thank you to Nicole Lang and Carol Ferguson,
who assisted in planning and completing this booklet;
to Réjean Ouellette, who prepared the translation; and
to Mandy Wright who created the design. Research advice
and assistance at various stages were also provided by
Christo Aivalis, Robert H. Babcock, Matt Baglole, Jazmine
Belyea, Katherine Biggs-Craft, Kenneth Breau, Dana Brown,
Ben Conoley, Kim Dunphy, Greg Kealey, Raymond Léger,
Don Nerbas, Denise Paquette, Pat Riley, Lisa Pasolli,
Robyn Stiles, and George Vair. The research was assisted
by our project partners at the New Brunswick Federation
of Labour, the Centre d'études acadiennes Anselme-Chiasson,
and the Provincial Archives of New Brunswick.



Social Sciences and Humanities
Research Council of Canada

Conseil de recherches en
sciences humaines du Canada

Canada



Foreword

These pages provide an introduction to the history of an important organization that was created by New Brunswick workers almost 100 years ago. It was one of the first federations of labour in Canada, and it has the longest uninterrupted history. In this booklet about the early presidents of the New Brunswick Federation of Labour we learn about some of the people who helped to build the union movement in this province and how they contributed to the history of our province. The New Brunswick Federation of Labour itself has continued to grow and change in many ways over the years. For instance, in the early years the Federation did not have an official name in French. In order to better reflect the membership, however, in the 1980s the Federation adopted an official name in French as the Fédération des travailleurs et travailleuses du Nouveau-Brunswick.

Over the years our Federation has sought to represent, protect and promote the interests of workers and their communities. All citizens should know the part that organized labour has played in the history of our country and our province. We welcome the work of the New Brunswick Labour History Project in bringing this history to light.

Michel Boudreau, President
New Brunswick Federation of Labour



James Leonard Sugrue
(1883–1930),
was the first president
of the New Brunswick
Federation of Labour,
1913–1918.

*History of Saint John Labor Unions,
Compiled and Published by the Saint
John Trades and Labor Council and
Subordinate Unions (Saint John: Saint
John Trades and Labor Council, 1929)*

The Founder

James L. Sugrue (1913–1918)

When the New Brunswick Federation of Labour was organized in September 1913, the delegates chose James L. Sugrue as their president. He was only 30 years old, but Sugrue was already known as a good speaker with a reputation for responsibility and effectiveness in advancing the cause of labour. Although union history in Saint John went back many years, Sugrue belonged to a group of new leaders who were determined to improve the influence of workers in New Brunswick by strengthening the bonds of solidarity at the provincial level.

Born in West Saint John, 1 September 1883, James Leonard Sugrue grew up in the Irish working-class community there. His mother, Mary Josephine Driscoll, was the daughter of Irish immigrants from Cork; his father, James R. Sugrue, was a Kilkenny immigrant who taught in the city schools for many years. Sugrue and his older brother both went to work in the building trades. “Jimmie” Sugrue, as he was often known, became active in the carpenters’ union. This was a long-established local union, which in 1901 joined up with the American Federation of Labor as Local 919, United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners. The Saint John carpenters at this time were pushing hard for major improvements in wages and conditions, and in 1913 they were the first in their trade in the Maritimes to win the eight-hour day. Sugrue became financial secretary of the local in 1910, and his abilities were recognized more widely when he was elected President of the Saint John Trades and Labour Council in 1912.

Plans for a federation of labour were discussed among provincial labour leaders in 1912, and Sugrue kept the idea alive in 1913. He was disappointed with the inadequate Fair Wages Act brought in by the provincial government that year. He argued that it showed the need for workers to have more influence in provincial affairs: "What a splendid piece of legislation. The workers should certainly be proud of the lawyers, doctors and business men who are representing them. . . . Let's quit acting comedy, brothers, and get down to business. We need a Federation of Labor in this province and the time is ripe for its formation".

At this time only Alberta and British Columbia workers had provincial federations, and New Brunswick's became the third. An organizational meeting took place in September 1913, and the founding convention was held at the Carpenters' Hall in Saint John in January 1914. Within the year the new federation reported 26 affiliated unions representing 3,000 members. Later that year the Federation attracted national attention when the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada came to Saint John for its annual convention, the first time they had met in New Brunswick.

Sugrue believed that workers should use their political influence to bring about social changes. During his time in office, Sugrue met regularly with premiers and politicians to lobby for changes in provincial laws that were endorsed at Federation meetings. In addition to calling for improved

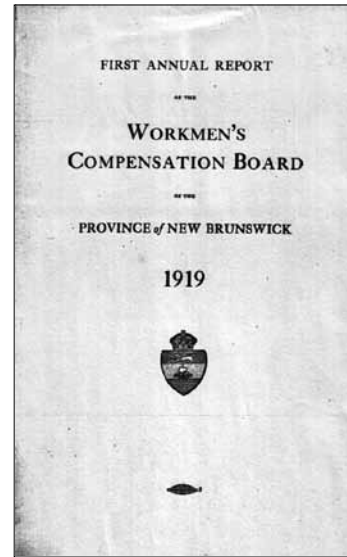
wages and conditions for workers, this included free school books for children, more health regulations and medical inspections in schools, labour representation on public boards and the extension of the franchise to women on the same basis as men. As Sugrue once explained, the cause of labour was important to the whole community: "In the long run we hope to so improve conditions here that the people won't leave for the west in search of better wages and shorter hours of labor".

Sugrue's most important single achievement as president was the enactment of a modern Workmen's Compensation Act. Earlier laws to aid workers killed or injured on the job were very inadequate – payments were low, and the laws required workers or their family to go to court to prove that the accident was the employer's fault; this placed workers in a poor position to refuse whatever out-of-court settlements employers chose to offer. In response to the federation's campaign for better legislation, the province appointed Sugrue and Fred Daley of the longshoremen's union to a royal commission. After investigating recent reforms in Ontario and Nova Scotia and holding hearings in New Brunswick, the commission reported in favour of a new law that would be based on insurance principles and administered by an independent government-appointed board. Despite the opposition of some employers, the province accepted the proposal, passed legislation and brought it into effect in 1918. Sugrue was named the labour representative on the new Workmen's Compensation

Board. As one of three board members, he was in a strong position to defend workers' interests and promote improvements to the system.

Even after he stepped down as president in late 1918, Sugrue remained a regular speaker at the federation meetings, where he kept the delegates posted on the work of the Compensation Board. In 1923, on the recommendation of the Federation, his wife, Estella Newman Sugrue, was appointed to a provincial royal commission on mothers' allowances and minimum wages for women. Although the province enacted legislation in 1930, the government failed to implement the laws at the time.

Sugrue died prematurely on 24 June 1930, the result of poor health brought on by an apparent heart attack two years earlier. He was remembered by the Saint John Trades and Labour Council as "a most worthy friend and brother, one who has on many occasions proved his worth to our Movement". It was a fitting tribute to the Federation's founding president, a man who helped raise labour solidarity in New Brunswick to a new level and showed how a provincial federation could work to achieve social reforms that benefited all working people in the province.



Sugrue was the first labour member appointed to the Workmen's Compensation Board when it was established in 1918. Note the use of the printers' union label on the cover of its first Annual Report.

First Annual Report of the Workmen's Compensation Board of the Province of New Brunswick (Saint John, 1919)



Céline Antoine Melanson
(1885–1957),
was the second president
of the New Brunswick
Federation of Labour,
1919–1921.

L'Évangéline, 28 février 1952, p.10

The Acadian

Céline A. Melanson (1919–1921)

The Federation's second president was a railway machinist from Moncton who was one of the first Acadians to rise to prominence in the New Brunswick labour movement. When they chose Céline A. Melanson as president, the delegates were acknowledging the importance of Moncton and its railway workers within the labour movement. Although there were still few French-speaking delegates in attendance, they were also showing that they could welcome an Acadian as leader of the provincial labour organization. Moreover, in electing Melanson, they were choosing a hardworking skilled worker who had already served several terms as an executive officer of the Federation.

Joseph-Céline Antoine Melanson was born in rural Kent County on 23 February 1885 at Ste-Marie, then known as Mont-Carmel. He was the son of Salomé Cormier and Antoine Melanson, both descendants of families who traced their roots back to the early days of Acadia in the 17th century. At the turn of the century the young Melanson was drawn to the employment opportunities in nearby Moncton. The Intercolonial Railway was the city's largest employer, with more than 2,500 workers in 1920, about 25 per cent of them Acadians. Melanson came to Moncton at 17 years of age in 1902 and started work as a labourer in the railway repair and maintenance shops, where he was soon promoted to more skilled work as a specialist and machinist. He also continued his education by taking business and correspondence courses.

The railways were a centre of union activity, and as early as 1904 there were a dozen different railway locals in Moncton. Melanson became a member of the union in his trade, Lodge 594, International Association of Machinists. In 1914 he was chosen one of the local's delegates to the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada when it met that year in Saint John. Melanson also became a delegate to meetings of the New Brunswick Federation of Labour. He was elected as vice-president in July 1915 and again in 1916 and 1918. After James Sugrue stepped down, Melanson was a natural choice and was elected as President in March 1919.

The end of the Great War was a time of high hopes for workers across the country, and New Brunswick was no exception. At the 1919 convention delegates adopted a Reconstruction Programme that called for a better future for New Brunswick workers: "The world war has forced all people to a fuller and deeper realization of the menace to civilization contained in autocratic control of the activities and destinies of mankind". The programme called for many reforms to promote "democracy in industry", of which the most important was full recognition of the right to organize unions, including for public employees; it called too for the eight-hour day, equal pay for equal work for women and the prohibition of the employment of children under 16. The document ended with strong words stating the importance of the union movement to the province: "No element in this province is more vitally concerned in the future of the province than the working class".

Melanson expected the union movement to play its part as one of the leading institutions in provincial society. When he issued the call for the 1920 convention, he and Secretary-Treasurer George R. Melvin urged all New Brunswick unions to send delegates: "we need the support of every Union in the Province – let this Convention be the greatest one in the history of the Federation". As a result there were almost twice as many delegates that year, and the following year the 1921 convention was the most representative provincial assembly of labour to date, with 98 delegates from nine centres listed as in attendance, representing 7,000 workers. As president, Melanson urged union members to pursue their aims by engaging in political action at the municipal and provincial levels and collaborating with other groups, including farmers and teachers, in pursuing social reforms. He helped extend labour's influence himself, when he was elected to city council in Moncton in 1919, one of several labour aldermen elected to council and the first Acadian to occupy the position of alderman-at-large; he was re-elected again in 1920 and 1921.

At the end of the convention in Saint John in 1921, Melanson retired as President. He was paid tribute and presented with a gift at a banquet in the – unionized – Prince William Hotel. Later that year Melanson became an assistant city clerk at Moncton City Hall, where he later rose to the position of receiver of taxes, a position he occupied until his retirement in 1952. As the newspaper *L'Évangéline* noted in 1921, Melanson's

appointment as a municipal official was a major success for Acadians in Moncton: "He is the first French person to secure a position of this kind and that says much about the skill and tact of our fellow citizen". In due course Melanson emerged as one of Moncton's leading citizens; among many activities, he was a founder of the Cercle catholique de la jeunesse acadienne and served as a director of *L'Évangéline* for more than 25 years.

A journalist once described Melanson as "one of those good hard workers who do not receive enough recognition". When Melanson died on 20 May 1957, he was so prominent that few people remembered that his path to prominence had started in the railway shops and the labour movement. Nonetheless he remained involved in labour matters to the end. In January 1940 he attended the Federation of Labour convention as a delegate of Moncton's Civic Employees Federal Union No. 51, the forerunner of Local 51, Canadian Union of Public Employees. Then in 1944 he was appointed to the Civil Service Commission, the body responsible for the employment of provincial public employees, and he was still serving in that capacity in his last years. Less than a year before his death, Melanson also attended the 44th annual convention of the New Brunswick Federation of Labour in August 1956, where he received an enthusiastic welcome as the only living Past President of the organization. At this time, when the Federation of Labour was about to merge with the New Brunswick Council of Labour to become a more

inclusive body, Melanson represented an important link with the early days of the organization.



Céline A. Melanson with his grandson Guy "Spique" Cormier and his daughter Fernande, in front of 55 York Street, Moncton, in 1942.

Denise Spencer, granddaughter of Céline Melanson



James Edmund Tighe
(1880–1937),
was the third president
of the New Brunswick
Federation of Labour,
1921–29, 1934–36.

*History of Saint John Labor Unions,
Compiled and Published by the Saint
John Trades and Labor Council and
Subordinate Unions (Saint John: Saint
John Trades and Labor Council, 1929)*

The Longshoreman

James E. Tighe (1921–1929, 1934–1936)

When James Tighe was elected President of the Federation of Labour in 1921, he was already a formidable figure in the ranks of labour, both in New Brunswick and beyond. As an official of the International Longshoremen's Association in Saint John, Tighe was responsible for the operations of one of the oldest and strongest unions in the province. One of the founders of the Federation in 1913, he had served several terms as vice-president, and he had also reached high office as a vice-president of his international union. Tighe was known to governments and employers as a strong defender of the interests of New Brunswick workers.

James Edmund Tighe was born at Saint John, 22 March 1878, the son of Nova Scotia-born Mary Driscoll and Irish-born Patrick Tighe, a North End labourer. He attended St. Peter's School and went to work on the railways, initially as a brakeman on the Intercolonial Railway. Like many young Maritimers, Tighe also spent several years in western Canada and the United States, where he worked on various railway lines. When he returned to Saint John, he went to work on the docks. There he became active in the longshoremen's union, whose long history in Saint John went back to its origins as the Labourers' Benevolent Association in 1849.

By the early 20th century the longshoremen needed a stronger union to overcome local divisions and deal with the big railway companies and shipping lines. Tighe was elected to the local executive in 1909 and became a promoter of the

International Longshoremen's Association, which was expanding beyond its origins on the Great Lakes and into the Atlantic and Gulf ports. In 1911 the Saint John longshoremen received a charter as Local 273 of the international union, and from 1912 onwards Tighe was employed as the local's business agent. He was first elected to the international executive council of the ILA as a vice-president in 1912, and as more locals were organized in Saint John, Chatham, Halifax and elsewhere, Tighe became the key representative for the ILA in the Maritimes.

Besides representing workers on the docks, Tighe was also one of the founding members of the New Brunswick Federation of Labour. In the early years of the Federation's history, Tighe pushed hard for the enactment of Workmen's Compensation, a measure that was especially important to the longshoremen and railwaymen. He was elected a vice-president of the Federation in 1916 and on other occasions.

In the period after Tighe became President of the Federation in 1921, the organization was no longer expanding; there were only 36 delegates in attendance at the 1922 convention, much less than half the number a year earlier. Economic conditions were worsening in the Maritime Provinces, and the Federation was becoming less inclusive and less influential. The situation was aggravated by the decision of the Trades and Labour Congress to expel the Canadian Brotherhood of Railroad Employees, originally founded at Moncton in 1908, because they threatened the jurisdiction

of some international railway unions; and there was no place in the Federation for workers who supported the radical One Big Union. Under Tighe's presidency, the Federation continued to lobby for reforms such as vocational training, mothers' allowances, minimum wages and old age pensions. The Federation was also forced to fight a long campaign to defend Workmen's Compensation against the Lumbermen's Association and other employers who were attempting to weaken the Federation's most important legislative achievement.

In the 1920s Tighe supported the business-dominated regional protest movement known as Maritime Rights, for whom defending the interests of the port of Saint John was a major cause. Nonetheless, Tighe was skeptical of granting special concessions to private enterprise and urged that "the fullest protection and safeguard should be provided for the workers". There was a conservative side to his regionalism, for although Tighe was the son of an Irish immigrant himself, he could be hostile towards more recent immigrants, stating in 1928 that the employment of workers with "unpronounceable names" was "forcing our own men to continue leaving the Province".

Tighe left the Federation presidency in 1929. By this time he was rising fast in the ranks of the international union. In 1927 he was elected First Vice-President, second only to the New York-based President, "King Joe", Joseph P. Ryan, who dominated the ILA until the early 1950s. While continuing in high office at the ILA, Tighe still attended Federation

meetings as a delegate, and in 1934 he was returned as President for a second time. He was dismayed that a number of new laws, enacted with labour support, had not been implemented by the Conservative government. This included legislation on old age pensions, mothers' allowances and minimum wages for women. As Tighe put it, "What it has taken years of hard work and money to attain, has been taken away from us in a very short time, and New Brunswick stands alone among the Provinces of this Dominion as the only Province without social legislation". Although the Federation had supported the new Cooperative Commonwealth Federation led by J.S. Woodsworth in 1933, Tighe counted himself a supporter of the Liberal Party.

When he stepped down as President in 1936, Tighe stated that he wanted to make way for "younger men" while still doing his "fair share". His life was cut short by a traffic accident the following year. On a Sunday evening in Saint John the vehicle he was driving collided with a streetcar on Main Street. He died in the General Hospital the next day, 8 November 1937, at 59 years of age.

More than 1,000 people took part in Tighe's funeral procession, which included representatives from all the Saint John unions. The pallbearers were two officers and four past presidents of Local 273. As the procession passed through the streets, one newspaper reported that "citizens stood with bared heads to honor a man who throughout 30 years of life had served his fellows with wise counsel and

successfully upheld the dignity of Labor". John S. MacKinnon, president of ILA 273, underlined Tighe's contributions to both the longshoremen's union and the provincial labour movement: "He had been very active in Labor work in New Brunswick for the last 30 years and had been largely instrumental in having legislation passed to the benefit of Labor".

Although Tighe led the Federation in a period of relative weakness, by 1937 there were signs of rising labour activism in several parts of the province. Strikes on the Miramichi and at Minto were showing that workers were determined to leave the legacy of the Great Depression behind and build stronger unions. Under new leadership, and often in new organizations, the ranks of labour would soon experience large increases in membership and achieve greater recognition for New Brunswick workers.



A Union Memorial. This monument in St. Joseph's Cemetery, Saint John, was erected by members of the International Longshoremen's Association in memory of James Tighe.

George Vair



E. R. Steeves
(1887–1952),
was the fourth president
of the New Brunswick
Federation of Labour,
1929–1932.

*History of New Brunswick Federation
of Labor* (Saint John: New Brunswick
Federation of Labor, 1934)

The Machinist

Eugene R. Steeves (1929–1932)

Eugene Roy Steeves was born at Meadow in rural Albert County, 13 January 1887, the son of Amanda McCuley and Ralph Steeves, a successful farmer who supported the Orange Order and the Conservative Party. The young Steeves attended school in Elgin and then went to work for the Canadian Pacific Railway and Maine Central Railway for several years. In 1912 he secured employment as a machinist at the Intercolonial (later Canadian National) railway shops in Moncton, where he worked for the next 20 years. Steeves remained active in the Baptist church throughout his life and was also involved in fraternal organizations such as the Independent Order of Odd Fellows.

At the railway shops Steeves became a member of Local 594, International Association of Machinists, the same union local that nurtured an earlier president, Céline A. Melanson. Steeves first appeared, together with Melanson, as one of the local's delegates to the Federation convention in 1919. He was elected first vice-president in 1925, and again in 1926 and 1928. By this time he was also a member of the school board in Moncton, where he served ten years; he was also elected later, in 1931 and 1932, to city council as an alderman. His abilities were well-known, and when James Tighe stepped down in 1929, Steeves was elected president of the Federation of Labour.

He began his time in office on a note of optimism. At the 1930 meetings, with the premier in attendance, Steeves remarked on the great progress of labour organizations since their early days: "Labour now had achieved a position of prominence in the state and in the community". Accordingly, he said, there were high expectations for better security and more recognition: "We are working men endeavouring to bring about better conditions for the education and protection of our children.... If we meet with defeat, we will press on until all things, as we see them, are righted". At this time Steeves called for the employment of a permanent secretary "so that the Federation could be kept more in touch with the Labor Movement throughout the province during the interim between conventions". He also suggested that the Federation should give support to an independent newspaper "to help keep our cause more before the public".

Progress was slow. When the province in 1930 finally passed laws advocated by the Federation, including a Mothers' Allowance Act, a Minimum Wage Act for Women and Girls and an Old Age Pension Act, none of this legislation was proclaimed and as a result did not come into effect. Meanwhile, the biggest problem facing labour, Steeves recognized in 1931, was the rising level of unemployment in the early years of the Depression: "this condition would have to be remedied, as unemployment bred evil, which would result in an increase in crime, if something was not done". He argued that shorter hours and higher wages would "ease the situation considerably".

The following year, however, Steeves objected that unscrupulous contractors on relief projects were demanding long hours and paying sub-standard wages. In one case, the Federation had protested, men received as little as 2¢ per hour after charges for room and board were deducted from their pay.

Meanwhile, the Federation was also concerned that labour was without representation on the Workmen's Compensation Board for two years after the death of James Sugrue in 1930. At the province's request, two names were suggested by the Federation affiliates, Federation secretary-treasurer George Melvin, and Steeves; however, in 1932 the convention returned to its policy of submitting only one name for appointments, and Steeves was chosen as the nominee. In July 1932, the government finally accepted the need to replace Sugrue and appointed Steeves to the board. In taking up his work as Vice-Chairman at board headquarters in Saint John, Steeves resigned as Federation president in September 1932.

Like Sugrue before him, Steeves saw his work at the Compensation Board as a continuation of his service to New Brunswick workers. In 1934 Steeves noted that the Federation "had sponsored and supported this Act and is justly proud of this Legislation, it being one of the major pieces of Social Legislation of the Province". The board was in almost daily session, assessing hundreds of individual cases every year. Steeves often reported to Federation conventions on the board's work, and later it was said that

with Steeves on the board “every injured workman was assured of sympathetic treatment of his claim”. Somewhat surprisingly, however, at the beginning of his term in 1932, Steeves had not supported the claims of Grace Betts and Greta Gallant for compensation after the deaths of their husbands in their attempt to rescue children from an abandoned Minto mine shaft; after the case was appealed to the Supreme Court of Canada, Steeves and the board rescinded their decision and authorized support for the widows and their children. This decision, like other cases before the board, helped establish precedents for applying the compensation law.

In 1952, almost 66 years of age and still Vice-Chairman of the Board, Steeves suffered a fatal heart attack. Following his death there were many tributes to his hard work and dedication. At his funeral the pallbearers included the province’s new Minister of Labour, Arthur Skaling, who had started his working life as a bricklayer and local union leader in Saint John. Also assisting was Steeves’s successor as President of the Federation, James Whitebone, who later noted that Steeves “filled a unique place in our ranks”: “His diligence on behalf of the workers during his active years in the Labor Movement was not lessened upon his assuming his duties as the Labor member on the Workmen’s Compensation Board”. At the end of his life, Steeves was remembered as a citizen who had served his province as a labour leader and as a public servant and in both capacities had worked to improve conditions for the workers of New Brunswick.



Mary Anna Beth Stiles and Eugene Roy Steeves, at the time of their marriage in 1913, probably at the bride’s home in Mapleton.

Alyssa Martin, Robyn Stiles



James A. Whitebone (1894–1970), was the fifth president of the New Brunswick Federation of Labour, 1932–1934, 1936–1959, 1960–1964.

This photograph of Whitebone appeared in a volume published by the Federation in 1934, when he was completing his first term of office as president. His contribution to the publication was an essay entitled *“Why You Should Demand the Union Label”*.

History of New Brunswick Federation of Labor (Saint John: New Brunswick Federation of Labor, 1934)

Mr. Labour

James A. Whitebone (1932–1934, 1936–1959, 1960–1964)

James Whitebone (1894–1970) dominated the provincial labour scene for so long that he was sometimes described as New Brunswick’s “Mr. Labour”. Like James Sugrue and James Tighe before him, Whitebone was the son of an immigrant, in this case from continental Europe. His father Jacob came to Saint John from Amsterdam as a boy and spent most of his working life as a cigarmaker and tobacconist; he was buried in the Jewish cemetery after his death in 1917. James Alexander Whitebone was born in Saint John on 31 May 1894. He was raised in the Anglican church of his mother Sarah Pentland, and his generation of Whitebones were assimilated into the dominant culture; he married Lillian Gertrude Lynch, a Catholic, in November 1918. He served in the 1st Depot Battalion, New Brunswick Regiment in 1918–19.

At the age of 13 Whitebone started work as an assistant projectionist in a Saint John moviehouse and later worked as a stage electrician and projectionist at local theatres; he was an employee of the Paramount as late as 1968. He recalled joining his first union in 1912, and in 1920 he was a founder of Local 440, International Alliance of Theatre and Stage Employees and Moving Picture Machine Operators, for which he became the longtime secretary and business agent. Whitebone was elected president of the Saint John Trades and Labour Council in 1927 and continued in that office until 1942 and as president of the Saint John and District Labour Council from 1960 to 1963.

Whitebone began attending meetings of the Federation of Labour in 1920 and became first vice-president in 1930. When E.R. Steeves resigned in 1932, Whitebone became acting president and was elected president at the 1933 convention. It was a difficult time for the Federation, as unemployment was rising and union membership falling. When the Federation sponsored a New Brunswick Section of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation in June 1933, Whitebone introduced J.S. Woodsworth to an audience of 1,000 people at the Moncton Stadium, and the CCF leader called for radical reforms to the social and economic order of capitalism. Whitebone's own political views were more conservative, and he later summed up his policy as "Elect your friends and defeat your enemies".

In 1934 former president James Tighe took charge of the Federation for two years before the Whitebone era began in earnest in 1936. The most effective way to increase union numbers, Whitebone believed, was to win legal support for the right to union recognition and collective bargaining. In 1937 the Federation's lobbying at the provincial capital was reinforced by strikes of workers seeking recognition of the New Brunswick Farmer-Labour Union on the Miramichi and the United Mine Workers of America in the Minto coalfield. The provincial government enacted a *Labour and Industrial Relations Act* (1938) which endorsed union membership and collective bargaining, but Whitebone objected that the law still failed to require employers to recognize unions chosen by their workers.

Under wartime conditions, Whitebone supported the "no-strike pledge" adopted by many unions to support the war effort, but he also objected that employers and governments often failed to respect the democratic rights for which the war was being fought. Union membership increased rapidly in these years, and, as Whitebone put it in 1943, "Every worker needs the union and will need it more than ever in the critical times following the war". In 1944 the federal government brought in emergency measures to enforce union recognition and collective bargaining. When similar legislation was adopted in New Brunswick's *Labour Relations Act* (1945), Whitebone protested that the law excluded public employees: "It is difficult to understand why the Provincial Government persists in refusing to recognize and bargain with legitimate Unions of its own employees while enacting and attempting to enforce laws which required private employers to do so".

Labour's hopes for social reform were summarized in the 1943 "Post War Reconstruction Brief", and after the war the Federation took a leading part in calling for full employment, shorter hours, paid vacations, universal pensions, health and medical care, equal pay for men and women doing the same work, and an end to racial discrimination in the workplace. The Federation attracted new members, including more women than ever before and more delegates from the Acadian regions and the north of the province. However, the Federation was also affected by divisions in the Canadian house

of labour. Whitebone supported the expulsion of radical unions such as the Canadian Seamen's Union and was increasingly identified with the Progressive Conservatives, especially during the years when the former Saint John Trades and Labour Council president Arthur Skaling was Minister of Labour. The exclusion of important new industrial unions from affiliation was a problem finally addressed in 1956, when the new Canadian Labour Congress ended the conflict between the Trades and Labour Congress and the Canadian Congress of Labour. In 1957 the outcome was a "merged" convention of the New Brunswick Federation of Labour and the rival New Brunswick Council of Labour. A vice-president of the Trades and Labour Congress since 1939, Whitebone now became a vice-president of the Canadian Labour Congress. With greater unity in the ranks of labour, Whitebone said, the Federation's purposes remained unchanged: "promotion of the welfare and protection of the interests of the working men and women of New Brunswick, of the Province as a whole and of the communities in which we live and work".

Whitebone remained president until 1959, when he was narrowly defeated by Angus MacLeod, former president of the New Brunswick Council of Labour. A year later, however, Whitebone was back in office, and he remained president until 1964, when he thanked delegates for allowing him to serve so many years: "There is no more rewarding service than that rendered to the working people, and to be chosen to represent and serve them is a privilege and an honour not to be considered lightly".

During his long career Whitebone received many forms of public recognition. On Dominion Day in 1946, he was named a Member of the Order of the British Empire for his service to the labour movement and the country during the war. In 1956 he received a Canadian Picture Pioneers Award for his service to the motion picture industry. He also had a long career in municipal politics in Saint John, where he was first elected as a councilor in 1936. Whitebone was appointed Deputy Mayor in 1958 and became mayor in 1960 following the death of the incumbent, but did not win the next election.

Whitebone was a pragmatic, often cautious, labour leader. He was once described as "a rugged, 192-pound six-footer" but was also remembered as a quiet gentleman who in later years was often accompanied by his cocker spaniel. "He could be forceful", wrote one observer, "but preferred to be quiet and deal in reason and good sense rather than emotion". During his time as president Whitebone saw the Federation's affiliated membership increase from a low of 3,000 members to a high of almost 20,000, a total that reached more than 30,000 members by the end of his life. Whitebone died in Saint John on 17 February 1970 and was buried at Holy Cross Cemetery. There were many appreciations of his long years of service to organized labour and public life in the province. Federation President Paul LePage singled out one of his major achievements: "He served as president of the federation at a time when unions were not recognized and had to face many obstacles to bring the workers to a position

of being recognized by society and governments". A newspaper editorial entitled "Mr. Labor's' Long Service" stated: "New Brunswick was the richer for his life and is the poorer for his death, and the thousands of expressions of sympathy will be as earnest and genuine as the man himself always was".



At the Front, 1945. Army officer C.C. Mann discusses conditions at the front in February 1945 with a delegation of union leaders from the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada, including, left to right, J.A. Sullivan of the Canadian Seamen's Union, C.S. Jackson of the United Electrical Workers, James Whitebone, Vice-President, Trades and Labour Congress of Canada, and Nigel Morgan of the International Woodworkers of America. In 1945 they were all on the same page as supporters of the war effort and the recognition of unions.

United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America/Library and Archives Canada/PA-094333, Library and Archives Canada

Lillian G. Whitebone. In 1929 Lillian G. Whitebone (1895–1965) headed the ladies' entertainment committee for the meetings of the Trades and Labour Congress in Saint John, for which her husband



James Whitebone was the principal organizer. Women often worked behind the scenes at labour conventions. However, Nellie Thorne of Saint John was listed as a delegate in 1921, and there were two women delegates from Milltown in 1922. There were no women delegates in the 1930s and only two in the 1940s, but women delegates were elected in growing numbers after 1951.

History of Saint John Labor Unions, Compiled and Published by the Saint John Trades and Labor Council and Subordinate Unions
(Saint John: Saint John Trades and Labor Council, 1929)



This memorial to the Federation's longtime secretary-treasurer, George Melvin (1888–1954), was erected in Fern Hill Cemetery by Saint John unions affiliated to the New Brunswick Federation of Labour. Whitebone supplied the inscription reading "36 Years of Unselfish Faithful Service – Well Done Thou Good and Faithful Servant". The image at the top is the symbol of the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada.

George Vair



Federation Executive, 1957. Members of the executive of the New Brunswick Federation of Labour elected at the 1957 convention: M.F. Kenny, Newcastle; C.H. Malchow, Bathurst; R.J. Boyd, Moncton; J.A. Whitebone, Saint John (President); W.F. McCarlie, Saint John (Secretary-Treasurer); W.A. MacLean, Fredericton; Rolland Blanchette, Edmundston. With the exception of Whitebone and McCarlie, the others were elected as vice-presidents.

NBFL Proceedings, 1957



Passing the Gavel. In 1964 James Whitebone, the retiring president, hands the gavel to Fred Hodges (1918–1999), the newly-elected president of the Saint John and District Labour Council. Hodges was also the first union member of African-Canadian origins elected to hold office in the New Brunswick Federation of Labour, first as a trustee in 1962 and later as a vice-president.

George Vair



Whitebone was president of the New Brunswick Federation Labour longer than any other individual and was known to many New Brunswickers as “Mr. Labor”. He was also a vice-president of the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada from 1939 to 1956.

Provincial Archives of
New Brunswick

More Sources

This is a preliminary account of the early history of the New Brunswick Federation of Labour, based on work completed by the Labour History in New Brunswick Project (www.lhtnb.ca).

Two older publications were helpful: *History of New Brunswick Federation of Labor* (Saint John: New Brunswick Federation of Labor, 1934) and *History of Saint John Labor Unions Compiled and Published by the Saint John Trades and Labor Council and Subordinate Unions* (Saint John: Saint John Trades and Labor Council, 1929).

For short accounts, see Emery LeBlanc, *La vie à Sainte-Marie* (E. LeBlanc, 1984), pp. 159–60 (on Céline A. Melanson) and “In Memoriam: James A. Whitebone”, *Le travailleur canadien / Canadian Labour* (March 1970), p. 39. See also “James L. Sugrue”, in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, XV (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), pp. 983–85; a biography of James E. Tighe will be included in vol. XVI.

Studies of provincial labour history in this period include Raymond Léger, “L’évolution des syndicats au Nouveau-Brunswick de 1910 à 1950”, *Égalité: revue acadienne d’analyse politique*, 31 (printemps 1992), pp. 19–40, and David Frank, “Provincial Solidarities: The Early Years of the New Brunswick Federation of Labour, 1913–1929”, *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, new series, Vol. 19, no. 1 (2008), pp. 143–69.

Other studies include Robert H. Babcock, “The Saint John Street Railwaymen’s Strike and Riot, 1914”, *Acadiensis: Journal of the History of the Atlantic Region*, XI, 2 (Spring 1982), pp. 3–27, Phyllis E. LeBlanc, “Le travail, le chemin de fer et les transformations économiques à Moncton de 1870 à 1941”, *Égalité: revue acadienne d’analyse politique*, 31 (printemps 1992), pp. 75–93, and David Frank, “Minto 1932: The Origins and Significance of a New Brunswick Labour Landmark”, *Acadiensis*, XXXVI, 2 (Spring 2007), pp. 3–27. See also David Frank and Nicole Lang, *Labour Landmarks in New Brunswick / Lieux historiques ouvriers au Nouveau-Brunswick* (Edmonton: Canadian Committee on Labour History, 2010).

Additional context is available in Jean Daigle, ed., *Acadia of the Maritimes: Thematic Studies from the Beginning to the Present* (Moncton: Chaire d’études acadiennes, Université de Moncton, 1995) and E.R. Forbes and D.A. Muise, eds., *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation* (Fredericton and Toronto: Acadiensis Press and University of Toronto Press, 1993).

DELEGATES, 1931 CONVENTION, SAINT JOHN



Front row (left to right) / Rangée avant (de gauche à droite) :

1. Richard Ivany, *Saint John*
2. C.W. Perrett, *Saint John*
3. Arthur H. West, *Moncton*
4. J. Robson, *Saint John (?)*
5. Charles Lunin, *Saint John*
6. A.G. Clinch
(Press Representative / Représentant de la presse)
7. Fred Cummings, *McAdam*
8. Reginald Rogers, *Moncton*
9. Harold M. Doyle, *Saint John*
10. E.J. Thompson, *Moncton*
11. Joseph B. Murphy, *Saint John*
12. Frank McKenna, *Saint John*
13. James Johnston, *McAdam*

14. Norman Van Horne, *Durham Bridge*
15. George R. Melvin, *Saint John*
Secretary-Treasurer / Secrétaire-trésorier
16. John Mack, *McAdam*
17. John H. Wallace, *Nelson*
3rd Vice-President / 3^e Vice-président
18. Eugene R. Steeves, *Moncton*
President / Président
19. James A. Whitebone, *Saint John*
1st Vice-President / 1^{er} Vice-président
20. John S. Martin, *Chatham*
District Vice-President / Vice-président du district
21. Thomas McDonald, *Saint John*
22. J.A. LeBlanc, *Moncton*

23. George Reid, *Moncton*
24. Joseph Clinton, *Saint John*
25. Edward J. LeBlanc, *Moncton*
26. Walter N. Price, *Moncton*
27. William C. Bowden, *Saint John*
28. William Cronin, *Saint John*
29. Edward May, *Saint John*
30. John M. Power, *Saint John*
31. Henry Savoie, *Moncton*
32. Clayton Mouland, *Moncton*
33. Morton L. Harrison, *Saint John*

Back row / Rangée arrière :

- A. David Hargrove, *Saint John*
- B. Fred M. Stanley, *Saint John*
- C. George B. Lemmon, *Saint John*
- D. J.E. Barry, *Durham Bridge*
- E. John N. Small, *Saint John*
- F. Joseph Monteith, *Saint John*
- G. A. Berglund, *Saint John*
- H. Frank T. Belyea, *Saint John*
- I. Henry McEachern, *Saint John*
- J. Louis Lirette, *Moncton*
- K. A.D. Goguen, *Moncton*
- L. James McGirr, *Saint John*
- M. Albert Harris, *Saint John*
- N. W.T. Alexander, *Fredericton Junction*
- O. F.S.A. McMullin, *Saint John*



Delegates not in picture / Délégués absents de la photo :

A. Allison, *Saint John*
 Herbert Armstrong, *Saint John*
 R.D. Babcock, *Campbellton*
 George Biddiscombe, *Saint John*
 R. Cole, *Campbellton*
 J.J. Davis, *Saint John*
 A. Earle, *Saint John*
 James Gallagher, *Saint John*
 W. Gray, *Saint John*
 A.J. MacKinnon, *McAdam*
 L.A. Moffitt, *McAdam*

Frank Parks, *Milltown*
 Michael Purcell, *Milltown*
 George T. Rawlines, *Moncton*
 W.H. Scott, *Saint John*
 George H. Simpson, *Moncton*
 Everett S. Steeves, *Moncton*
 Arthur Starkie, *Saint John*
 James E. Tighe, *Saint John*
 T.D. Williams, *Saint John*

Source:

Provincial Archives of New Brunswick. The list of names was compiled from the Evening Times-Globe, 8 January 1931 and the New Brunswick Federation of Labour, Proceedings, 1931, which reported a total of 68 delegates. Unfortunately, the newspaper listed Delegate Alexander twice, and as a result the names for the last nine individuals in the front row are not certain.

Source :

Archives provinciales du Nouveau-Brunswick. La liste de noms a été compilée grâce au dépouillement du Evening Times-Globe, 8 janvier 1931 et de New Brunswick Federation of Labour (Fédération du travail du Nouveau-Brunswick), Proceedings, 1931 (Actes, 1931), qui rapportèrent alors un total de 68 délégués. Malheureusement le journal avait identifié le délégué Alexander deux fois. Par conséquent, les noms des neuf derniers délégués de la rangée avant sont incertains.