

Exhibition Reviews

Halifax Explosion 1917 Online Resources.

URL: <<http://www.gov.ns.ca/nsarm/virtual/explosion.asp>>

Every December for the past eighty-five years, a solemn memorial has been held in Halifax, Nova Scotia on the sixth day of the twelfth month at 9:04:35 a.m. To the present generation of Canadians that date and time may not appear particularly significant or evoke any immediate recollections. However, to an entire city, a province, and many people throughout a country, 6 December 1917 will be forever remembered as the date of the worst explosion in the history of the world before the nuclear attacks on Japan in 1945.

In the early morning hours of 6 December 1917 a Norwegian vessel, the S.S. Imo, collided with the French freighter, Mont Blanc, in the narrows of Halifax Harbour. The latter ship was carrying over 2500 tons of explosives and her decks were laden with fuel that ignited in the minutes following the initial impact to cause the "Halifax Explosion."

Over 1600 people were immediately killed, 9000 people were injured, approximately 13,000 buildings were destroyed, and 350 acres of residential and business districts of Halifax and Dartmouth were levelled. The damage was estimated to be in excess of \$35,000,000 and more Nova Scotians were ultimately killed as a result of the explosion than during the whole of World War I which was still raging at the time. The disaster stretched the city's estimated population of 65,000 people to their utmost limits.

Haligonians responded quickly and fought valiantly to try to rescue the injured and maimed, provide shelter for the homeless, and get things up and running again. The Halifax Relief Commission was established almost immediately to oversee all of these activities and ultimately was responsible for the distribution of over \$20,000,000 worth of aid that poured in to assist with the rebuilding of the city.

Last fall Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management (NSARM) in conjunction with The Halifax Foundation, launched a new virtual exhibit to

honour the eighty-fifth anniversary of the explosion and to provide greater access to the archives' holdings about this horrific event.

The Web site effectively uses the personal narratives of five survivors, a series of sixteen moving images, and over 150 photographs to chronicle and recapture the devastation that followed the calamity. The story is not all terrible. Much of the focus of the exhibit is on the city's attempts to respond and rebuild itself in the days and years which followed. The section of the Web site entitled "A Vision of Regeneration" confirms that a new Halifax rose out of the proverbial ashes. The rich visual evidence displayed on the site elicits details about Halifax's famed Hydrostone District, for example, that emerged as a model for planned urban communities in subsequent years.

The virtual exhibit also focuses its content on providing greater access to information about the casualties of the explosion. This was accomplished through the use of images of a scanned copy of McAlpines' listing of the dead as well as the inclusion of the Remembrance Book online database that identifies 1951 casualties with personal details that would be of particular interest to relatives and genealogists. The wealth of information that exists at NSARM is further illustrated through the fonds-level description of the records of the Halifax Relief Commission.

It is difficult to discuss this virtual exhibit without referring to the Web site launched almost simultaneously by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) to highlight its made for television movie about the explosion entitled "The Shattered City" which aired in the fall of 2003.¹ This monumental Web site is lavish, with multi-media tools that allow the online user to recreate the explosion, view additional film footage, listen to audiofile personal accounts, and explore a myriad of images from before and after the collision of the two ships. Unfortunately, the CBC Web site is rife with text that clearly was not thoroughly proofread before it went live. The other pitfall is that it portrays the events with a busy, video game style interface. Clearly, the aim of this site is to grasp children's attention and allow teachers the tools necessary to educate their students about the disaster. The mood and the content of the NSARM exhibit is much more in keeping with the true nature of what happened and seems a more fitting tribute to those individuals who lost their lives all those years ago.

For many years Nova Scotian children would read Hugh MacLennan's *Barometer Rising* or perhaps travel to St. Paul's Anglican Church in Halifax to see the shadow of the person walking outside that has been etched into the glass at the moment that the explosion took place. Today, the reminders are still there but these are not as foremost in our consciousness and the story is recounted less frequently. There are still the news reports about the annual gift

1 Retrieved from <<http://www.cbc.ca/halifaxexplosion/>>.

of a Christmas tree to the people of Boston and Massachusetts as an expression of thanks for all the help that they provided in the days following the disaster. Similarly, crowds still gather at Fort Needham in the north end of Halifax on 6 December to hear the bells given by Barbara Orr in memory of the entire family that she lost (both parents and four siblings).

Fortunately, there is now another reminder from NSARM to help Halifaxians mark the date and to solemnly remind us of the huge price that Halifax paid in 1917 and the years which followed. The scars of the Halifax Explosion will always remain and with the memorial of this exhibit they shall not be soon forgotten.

David Mawhinney
Mount Allison University

Lunenburg by the Sea: 250 Years of Challenge and Change.

URL: <<http://www.gov.ns.ca/nsarm/virtual/lunenburg/>>

Last summer, Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management (NSARM) launched a new virtual exhibit to commemorate the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the founding of Lunenburg. It is a captivating use of images, documents, and artifacts.

Lunenburg is a unique community in Nova Scotia and Canada because it was settled by non-English speaking Europeans at the behest of the British who were trying to ensure a stronger presence in what is today Nova Scotia. The group, collectively known as the “Foreign Protestants,” was enticed to come to North America from areas of what are now Germany, Holland, Switzerland and the Montbeliard region of northeastern France.¹

The settlers initially came to Halifax during 1751–1752 and were required to provide labour to assist the fledgling port, founded in 1749, before receiving their grants of land. They were far from a homogenous group being divided by different languages and traditions, but all were surely hoping for a better life in their new homeland.

On 7 June 1753 the first inhabitants of what has become Lunenburg arrived, used a deck of playing cards to draw lots for their properties, and began the process of establishing a community under watchful British eyes. The online exhibit’s first chapter (Lunenburg before 1800) provides images of those very cards and continues the settlement story.

The ensuing narrative confirms that within two generations, Lunenburgers had turned their attention away from the generally poor soil to the bounty of

¹ Winthrop Bell, *The “Foreign Protestants” and the Settlement of Nova Scotia* (Toronto, 1961).