

Founding of Halifax, Nova Scotia Canada



Figure 1 Halifax 2007

A direct result of the treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle was the founding of Halifax, the oldest British settlement in what now is the Dominion of Canada. The project of settling Nova Scotia with British colonists had been urged upon the home government with Shirley and others at various times in the past, but with no result. Now, however, the renewed activity of the French after the cession of Louisburg caused the British Government to bestir itself in earnest. £40,000 was voted for the enterprise, and prospective settlers were offered land and one year's rations, besides tools and arms.

George Montague, Earl of Halifax, head of the Lords of Trade and Plantations was given the task of organizing settlers to establish a permanent British settlement and military station on the Atlantic coast. This settlement was soon to bear his name, replacing the Indian name of "Chebookt" meaning the "Chief Harbor", or "Great Long Harbor" and the French one of "Chibeucton". The Honorable Edward Cornwallis became Governor of Nova Scotia on May 9, 1749. His first task was to bring 2572 men, women and children to their new home. Many were discharged Army and Navy men and they traveled on the Sphinx, a sloop of war and thirteen transports leaving England on May 14th and arriving at Chebucto, now Halifax Harbor, on June 21st. On the 22nd he sent a dispatch back to England saying: "the coasts are as rich as ever the have been represented, we caught fish every day since we came within forty leagues of the coast. The harbor itself is full of fish of all kinds. All the officers agree the harbor is the finest they have ever seen. The country is one continued wood, no clear spot is to be seen or heard of".

I caught up with that Honorable gentlemen a few weeks ago. I was rushing to catch a train and he was standing on a tiny green square above the C.N. Station, his great cloak blowing in the wind, green with age. He had his back to the city he founded over 200 years ago. His eyes are on the harbor and rightly so, for it is the harbor that has, made Halifax what it is today – the second largest Port in the world. It had been a hundred lane highway connected to every port in the world. Yes, we are proud of our super highways today but the water ways built our country to what it is today.



Figure 2 Halifax Historic Properties

The Honorable Edward Cornwallis had a very difficult task ahead of him. In the first place he faced with a forest and his inexperienced workers had no desire to play "hide and seek" with the Indians. Secondly, the ever present "epidemics" took their toll of man power. Yet, in spite of these difficulties, by the 23rd of July twelve acres were cleared. The trees provided logs for the first crude homes. Pointed logs, when place perpendicular, gave the settlers a palisade and some measure of security.

The oath of office was administered in a simple ceremony aboard the transport Beaufort. Engineer Grace and Surveyor Morris laid the plans for the town on the eastern slope of the hill. Luckily, the settlers had helped that first year. Wooden frames and other materials were sent from Massachusetts. By the time the first snow fell, some houses were ready, unfortunately not enough, and so many spent that first winter on transports that remained in the harbor. Perhaps that factor encouraged the "epidemics" that flourished. Fortifications were of primary importance; when Halifax was settled, the hill on the western side was one of the focal points in its defense. The first fortifications began in 1761 by Basti. It was constructed by 500 Maroon Negroes from Jamaica under order of the Duke of Kent. The Citadel as we know it was actually the fourth one built. It is an excellent example of the "Baubon trace system." The Old Town Clock was another of the Duke of Kent's ideas that has endured through the ages. Standing on the slope of the hill overlooking the harbor it has logged the hours of peace, anguish strife since 1803. On the longest day in the history of Halifax, December 6, 1917, it never faltered; lesser structures fell but not the clock. Each anguished hour was recorded in its memory.

The spiritual needs of the people were not neglected – a Church was in the original plans and one year after the settlement was founded, St. Paul's Church opened its doors to anyone who wished to enter and many did. All colors and creed were welcome. Its historic background makes it Canada's oldest Protestant church and the first to hold ecumenical services. A dozen slaves were baptized at one service. Sermons in the Mic Mac Indian tongue, in English, German and French were spoken within its walls. Facing the Grand Parade, it was often referred to as "the Westminster Abbey of the New World" by its English sponsors. It is of Royal Foundation and Exempt Jurisdiction. Many famous people rest in tombs beneath its foundation. The original oak frame was brought from Boston and the cost British treasury 1000 pounds. To serve the spiritual needs of people many other great churches were soon to appear. St. Paul's holds the distinction of being the oldest church and the only one that was considered safe to hold services in after the Explosion of 1917.

Since the Duke of Kent played such an important part in the history of Halifax, I will have to mention his last gift to the city: St. George's Church of England on Brunswick St. It was strictly a "Round Church"; later a chancel was added and a square vestibule placed on the front. The cornerstone was laid April 10, 1800, and completed 15 months later. Unfortunately the Duke had sailed for home before it opened its doors. It was a very popular place to worship for sailors who liked to sit on the circular bench high under its dome, they could look down at the other worshipers through openings and if the preacher was "long winded" they became noisy and he no doubt got the message.

Halifax had a number of hospitals; Victoria General dates back to 1844 but was not until 1859 that the first building was completed. It was known then as the City Hospital. In my childhood I heard many stories of "happenings" there. The one I liked best concerned my great grandmother. Her sister was a nurse and worked there so my great grandmother decided she would like to work there also. She began in the kitchen but when a "flu epidemic" sent a doctor seeking help from the kitchen, she became a nurse and never went back to the kitchen. Later, she met my English great grandfather there and when ill health forced her to give up her nursing career, he took her around the world on a honeymoon. Other hospitals soon followed. The Children's Hospital and the Grace Maternity still exist today.

Its excellent harbor made Halifax a place of importance in world trade. During the war of 1812, Halifax prospered. "Never were times as good in Halifax as when N.S. privateers brought its prizes at its wharves and laid the foundations of the fortunes of Collins, Cunard and others." The first banking system in Canada started as a result of the War of 1812. Up to that time, barter was the system used. The Bank of Montreal was founded on 1817, the Bank of Upper Canada in 1818, The Bank of Canada in 1818, the Bank of N.B. in 1820, the second Bank of Upper Canada in 1821, the Halifax Banking Company in 1825 and the Bank of N.S. in 1832. The first and last mentioned are the only two in existence today. The "army bills" issued in 1812 were the first paper money and the forerunner of our money today. Halifax had many "firsts". Here, the first newspaper in Canada was published March 23, 1752, the Halifax Gazette by John Bushnell, printed by Robert Fletcher, was published in 1766. The first magazine in Canada was published here in 1789, "The N.S. Magazine and Comprehensive Review of Literature, Politics and News".

I mention these things because they provide the economical and cultural background that we take for granted today.



Figure 3 1917 Map Halifax Harbour

By 1901 the population was well over 40,000 and growing. In 1905 drastic changes were to take place. Great Britain decided that Halifax could now stand on her own. Friendly relations had again been established with the U.S.A. and, for the first time in its history, Halifax became the exclusive responsibility of the Dominion of Canada. The British regular troops and the Navy squadron were recalled and Admiralty House was closed. For a short period in its history things were at "loose ends", but gradually the people decided that they could live and enjoy prosperity without their "Babysitter". They still had their natural

resources and with their accumulated wealth the businessmen of Halifax continued to prosper.

Halifax sent vessels to bring back bodies for burial after the sinking of the Titanic in 1912. The Marconi wireless gave the world the news of this tragedy. The bodies were brought back and buried in nameless graves in Fairview Cemetery. This was very sad but when five years later disaster struck home people recall this event and wished they had been kinder.

In August, 1914, the Great War started and Halifax became the focal point of the Maritimes. With its natural harbor it became a haven for hundreds of ships, especially those from neutral countries. Bedford Basin was the examination ground for all shipping that wished to be convoyed.

At the outbreak of the war, in accord with the usual British practice, the army took over the fixed-artillery defenses at the Halifax base, which were in good condition. The approaches to the harbor were well covered by powerful lights. An examination service went into force at midnight of August 1-2, 1914, and a port war signal station was established at Camperdown where there was also a wireless station. The blocking of the eastern passage by means of schooners was a failure, and a barrier was therefore made by means of a line of piles driven across the channel. During a

large part of the war minesweeping service was maintained. An anti-submarine net defense was laid across the harbor entrance in 1917, and mine nets were added the following year. The weak point in the defenses lay in the lack of destroyers, and throughout most of the war of submarines also. In addition to the duties implied above, the naval authorities at Halifax were responsible for operating the patrol vessels which were based there, regulating the traffic inside the harbor, assembling and organizing convoys and routing merchant ships proceeding overseas independently, the handling of troop transports, certain services connected with defensively armed merchant ships as such, collecting and distributing naval Intelligence, and for contraband control.

Halifax was one of the many ports at the disposal of the Admiralty, into which neutral ships were sent to be searched for contraband. At one time during the war more than 80 neutral vessels were anchored in Halifax harbor awaiting examination of their cargoes. In addition, to H.M.C.S. Niobe, many Commonwealth cruisers and other warships use to base at various times. Among these was the distinguished Australian cruiser Sydney, and H.M.C.S. Melbourne which brought a German-owned prize to Halifax. In the course of the war, repair facilities at the base were not always equal to the demands made upon them.

The Halifax Militia battalion composed of the 63rd Halifax Rifles and 66th Princess Louise Fusiliers played an active part in its defense. Other blockhouses and trenches were constructed at MacNabs' Island to guard the waterfront and town itself; a force of various militia units known as the composite Battalion was stationed at Wellington Barracks.

Halifax's population grew overnight since it was the official embarkation centre for troops bound for overseas. Prisoners of war also found their way to Halifax. Existing barracks were no longer sufficient so huts were hastily put up in every conceivable place. The entire north common was covered and only the small area around Camp Hill was kept clear. A barbed-wire fence isolated them from the rest of the world, giving them a feeling of confinement, and a few soldiers waiting there did not long to be sent "overseas". Too many people, Halifax was home, but to the service men it was "the hole", among other not very complimentary names. In spite of all that has been said about the "vice" that existed at this time, I could find little to substantiate this. True, entertainment was a problem. A Y.M.C.A. recreation hut was built on Barrington St. opposite Government House but with over 150 liquor wholesalers and retailers in Halifax it is not surprising those things got out of hand. Sometimes troops had to wait for weeks for a convoy overseas so "boredom" was often their worst enemy. The ones who drank excessively were neither the privates nor the sailors with their thin purses, but they received most of the blame because they were around.

A private's pay in 1914 was \$182.00 annually plus \$300.00 allowance and an increase of \$54.00. A Colonel received pay of \$2400.00, an allowance of \$887.00, and an increase of \$627.00. Finally, a group of people who felt that their troops had been corrupted by the sale of liquor persuaded the provincial government to prohibit its sale. However, this did not help matters. Bootleggers appeared overnight like mushrooms and often sold brew not fit for human consumption.

In 1911, the population was 46,619; in 1917 it was anyone's guess. Popular figures quote "55,000", while others say it was nearer 60,000. Halifax was a crowded city. Everyone was so busy with the "war effort" no one had time to consider the "city"

itself. Streets were narrow, cars were few; horses were the chief mode of transportation. The garrison transports had been drawn by horses; a few years later they were completely motorized.

Nova Scotia had the highest enlistment record of any other province in Canada and all troops passed through the port of Halifax. A port that in 1913 handled 2 million tons of shipping increased its business by 17 million in 1917.

Another problem arose when returning soldiers had to be billeted. The Old Soldiers' Hospital on Gottingen St. was overcrowded so a new white stucco hospital was erected on Camp Hill in 1917.

This, then, is a brief glimpse of Halifax to 1917.