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Grave business

Every Saturday morning volunteers fill Holy Cross Cemetery armed with shovels and pickaxes, and a dedication to preserving Halifax's history. We dig it.

by Shannon Fay

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Holy Cross Cemetery was founded in 1843 and it's been falling apart ever since.

The Irish-Catholic cemetery lies in disrepair on a hill in the south end of Halifax. Tombstones have toppled over, sunk into the earth or lie in pieces on the ground like broken china. A sign near the entrance proclaims: "Warning: Gravestones and monuments may fall over and cause injury. Remain on the pathways where possible."

The members of the Holy Cross Cemetery volunteer group ignore the sign. They walk around the graveyard as though it's their living room. Every Saturday from spring to fall, 20 to 30 volunteers come to the cemetery to do restoration work. They come armed with a fleet of wheelbarrows and enough pikes, pickaxes and shovels to rival a mining operation. They spend the morning lifting slabs of concrete, digging up cracked bases and hauling piles of dirt and gravel up and down the hill.

At 8am Maria Mury is one of the first volunteers to arrive. She gets to work shovelling dirt into a wheelbarrow. "I hate to miss a weekend," she says. Mury started volunteering earlier this year. She's kept coming back week after week for the camaraderie and sense of accomplishment.

"You do a little bit and they just appreciate the little bit you do," she says. "Everyone seems to enjoy being here."

Like many of the volunteers Mury doesn't have a direct connection to the graveyard, no ancestors buried on the hill. She started coming after hearing Dr. Brian O'Brien speak about the cemetery. O'Brien is a retired eye surgeon who helps organize the restoration efforts at Holy Cross. Four years ago, he brought the cemetery to the attention of the Charitable Irish Society of Halifax.

"I'm of Irish extraction," O'Brien says. "And I think that we owe a debt of gratitude to the people

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who are buried here."

There's a former prime minister on the grounds, an American Civil War veteran, a row of nuns who established Mount St. Vincent University. And that's just the tip of the iceberg. There are around 2,500 tombstones in Holy Cross, but records suggest as many as 22,000 people are buried in the ground.

"It represents a significant heritage for the people of Halifax," says Michael Nee, one of the group's organizers. "These are people who were labourers, craftsmen, business people throughout the Halifax community."

The volunteer pool is also diverse. Most of the people who come to help aren't Irish-Catholic, but people who live in the neighbourhood. "I sit behind a desk for like 47 hours a week, so getting out here and being in the sun and helping the city out is pretty great," says Kim Hansen, an Alberta native.

Holy Cross has relied on volunteers since its inception. On August 31, 1843, nearly 2,000 people worked together to build the graveyard's chapel, the famous "church built in a day." Today the volunteer group is just about the only thing keeping the graveyard from falling to pieces. The Catholic Cemeteries Commission is in charge of the graveyard as well as other Catholic burial grounds in the city, but O'Brien says they just don't have the funds to fix Holy Cross. While O'Brien is always looking for donations, it's volunteers he really needs.

"Thank god for people like this," O'Brien says, gesturing to the volunteers, "who come every once in awhile to help us out. Because we need help. We need them to come on Saturday morning like these people up on the hill."

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