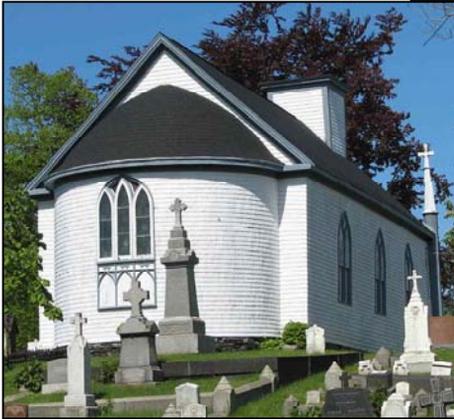


# Holy Cross Historical Trust



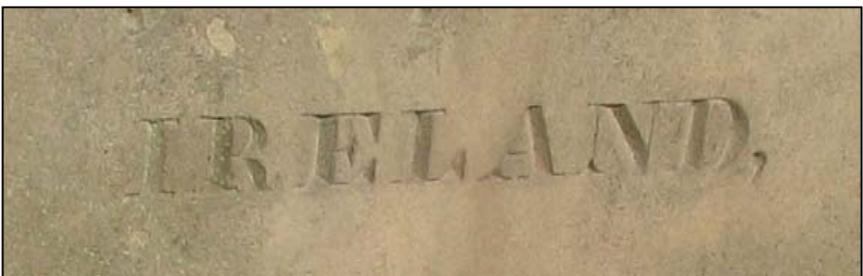
**Developing a Cultural, Religious, and  
Historical Awareness of Halifax's  
Irish Catholics Through the  
Story of the Holy Cross Community**

## Introduction

Holy Cross Cemetery is located in Halifax's downtown area and is part of St. Mary's Parish in the Archdiocese of Halifax-Yarmouth. It is an important cultural and religious landmark for people of Irish descent in Nova Scotia. Developed in 1843, the graveyard had witnessed some 17,000 burials by the end of the nineteenth-century. Although Catholics of various ethnic origins are buried within its gates, Holy Cross is the primary resting place for the immigrant generation of Irish-Halifax and has an unmistakable Hibernian character.

The 2500 grave markers presently visible at Holy Cross represent only a fraction of the burials, but the existing stones tell a remarkable story of Irish migration, kinship, and settlement. Surrounded by the markers of priests, politicians and bishops, the remaining stones are a visible reminder of a generation of Irish migrants who left Eire to build a new life in Nova Scotia. These contributors to our province and our city deserve to be remembered, their lives celebrated, and their resting place preserved.

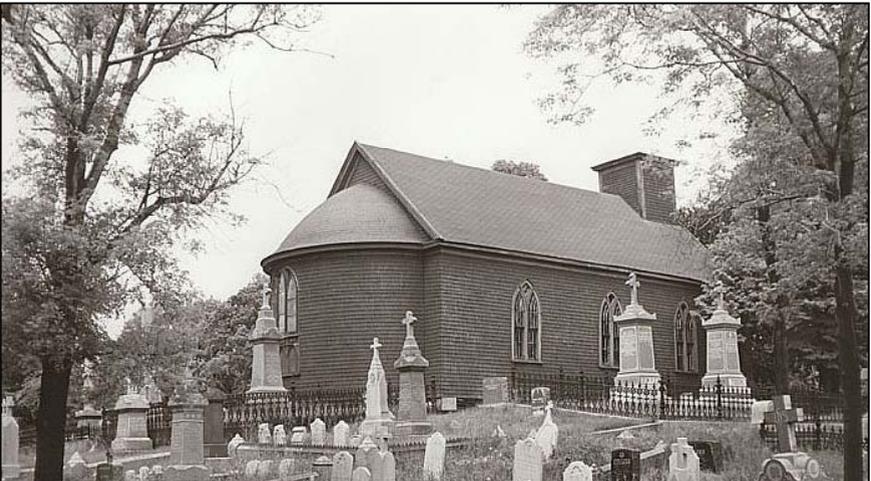
The Holy Cross Historical Trust seeks to recover this history and make it intelligible and accessible with interpretative education and exhibits. This is The Story of the 17,000.



## **Immigration & Settlement**

Irish immigration to Halifax began in the mid eighteenth-century but increased dramatically after the Napoleonic Wars. The first contingent to the city arrived from Newfoundland after a brief sojourn in that colony's fishery. Indeed, in 1817 alone, some 500 individuals followed the long-established Waterford to Newfoundland to Cape Breton route, and arrived in Halifax from Newfoundland. Many Irish immigrants also migrated to Halifax in this period via the timber camps of Miramichi, New Brunswick.

Others migrated directly from Ireland itself. All four provinces of Ireland are represented in the cemetery, although most of those buried come from Munster and Leinster. From 1831 to 1850, thousands of Irish immigrants from Waterford, Kilkenny, Cork, and Tipperary arrived in Halifax to start a new life. They came as tradesmen, shopkeepers, domestics and clerks. Others came while in the military, or as members of religious congregations. Some of these people continued on to the United States and other parts of Canada, yet many stayed and were soon joined by family members and friends. This chain-migration made social networking an important aspect of the Irish-Halifax experience.



## **Social & Cultural Contributions**

In parishes such as St. Mary's, Catholic societies were instrumental in feeding the poor and caring for the indigent. When the Charitable Irish Society was formed in 1786, its members declared their "affectionate and compassionate concern for any of the Irish Nation, who shall be reduced by sickness, old age, shipwreck or other misfortune," promising to aid their poor and downtrodden countrymen.

Part of the Irish immigrant's cultural baggage was an aspiration to organize educational institutions. In 1802, Fr (later bishop) Edmund Burke laid the foundation for Saint Mary's College when he began tutoring young men in the parish glebe. By 1841 the college had been incorporated and, under the care of a number of religious orders (including the Irish Christian Brothers), Saint Mary's developed into an important Canadian post-secondary institution. In 1849, two religious orders of nuns – the Society of the Sacred Heart, and the Sisters of Charity – arrived in Halifax and set to work establishing schools. The Religious of the Sacred Heart immediately started a private boarding school for Catholic girls, still very active although now co-educational, and shortly thereafter also established one of the first free elementary schools in the city. As for the Sisters of Charity, they established Mount St. Vincent Academy (now a university) for women, and went on to staff the Halifax Infirmary hospital, Saint Joseph's School and St. Patrick's School.

The Irish, of course, were also bearers of musical, dance, and literary traditions, and builders, such as Henry Peters, contributed much of Halifax's most important architectural work. Recent scholarly work suggests that the Irish language (Gaeilge) was much more prevalent in the Maritimes even into the early twentieth century than has been previously supposed. This Irish cultural framework provided a foundation for the great upsurge of social and cultural entrepreneurship coming out of Halifax.

## **Business & Political Contributions**

The Irish have made significant contributions both to the city of Halifax and to the province of Nova Scotia. As artisans, labourers, domestics, merchants and military personnel, Irish migrants shaped the fabric of Halifax society. Merchants such as Edward Kenny and Michael Tobin were not only influential players within the provincial economy, but also served in various legislative positions, such as Mayor of Halifax and (in Kenny's case) as the first member of the Canadian Cabinet from Nova Scotia. Reformers such as Laurence O'Connor Doyle and John Tobin assisted Joseph Howe in the struggle for responsible government. Sir John Thompson, a lawyer, became Premier of N.S. in 1882, and the first Catholic Prime Minister of Canada ten years later. While the clergy and religious congregations were building hospitals and schools, the Irish Catholic leadership were instrumental in forging the business and political institutions of a new nation. Archbishop Connelly and leaders of the Charitable Irish Society such as William Condon and Patrick Power, were at the forefront of political engagement in the region.

In business and politics, the Irish presence in Halifax society was not without its rancour. After the Gourley Shanty Riot in May 1856, Joseph Howe lashed out at the Catholic populace, ending the relationship between the Irish of the city and the Liberal-Reform movement, sending most of the Hibernians over to the Conservatives, where they were active as pro-confederation candidates and supporters. The city's Irish community was decidedly anti-fenian, prompting Bishop Connolly to write that his community would "yield to none in loyalty." It is perhaps just this kind of conciliation during this period which allowed such scope for Irish Catholic action.

## **Church & Religious Life**

Roman Catholicism was an important spiritual and temporal force in nineteenth century Irish Halifax. As there were very few Protestant Irish immigrants, Catholicism and Ireland were almost synonymous in the city. Yet, unlike other North American Irish communities, the Hibernian immigrants to Halifax were not (for the most part) famine immigrants, and this set them apart in terms of religious practice and ethos. The rapid early growth in the Irish Catholic population led to severe tensions, not only with Protestants, but also with the Scottish Catholic and Acadian Catholic communities.

As the Irish Catholic community expanded, the proper burial of the dead became an important issue. The early nineteenth-century public burial grounds in Halifax were congested and unsanitary. The first Roman Catholic cemetery in the city was located adjacent to St. Peter's Church (which is now St. Mary's Basilica). By 1835, the wardens of the parish of St. Mary's sought land to build a Catholic cemetery. On 26 July, 1843 (the Feast of St. Anne), levelling of the new burial ground began.

A few weeks later, on the 31st of August, some 1800 volunteers turned out, complete with "pomp and ceremony", to construct a chapel on the cemetery ground. The chapel was framed, roofed, shingled and painted all in a single day, causing a local newspaper to coin the phrase, "the miracle of the day." On the 17th of September, 1843 (the Feast of the Seven Dolours of the Blessed Virgin Mary), the cemetery was consecrated by Archbishop William Walsh, and the chapel was named "Our Lady of Sorrows".

What is too little understood is the extent to which the creativity, force, and achievement of the Irish contribution was shaped by the religious imaginary of the Catholic faith, and the thousands of deeply religious people who responded to it. This collective exaltation expressed in service to others, and the experience of God which was its inspiration, is at the centre of The Story of the 17,000.

## **Restoration to Interpretation**

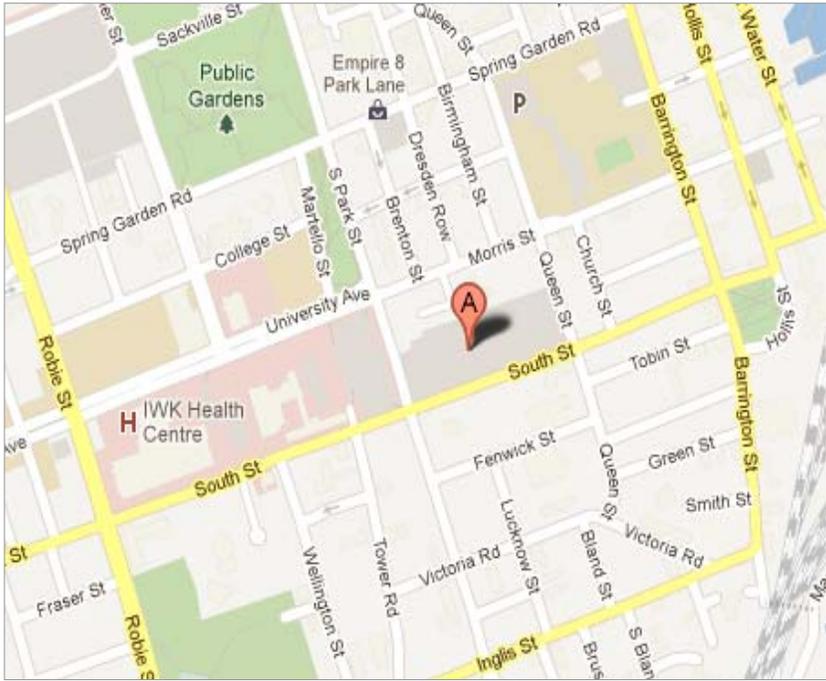
Holy Cross cemetery remains an important landmark for the Irish of Halifax. In 2006, community members formed an organization to address the physical restoration of the burial ground and to devise a plan for sustainability.

Since then, a committed volunteer base, with the help of a number of generous donors, has restored and repaired over 1600 gravestones, erected a new fence, installed new windows, doors, and siding on the chapel, and documented genealogical information in a database.

Now that the physical restoration of the cemetery is substantially complete, an expanded organization, the Holy Cross Historical Trust is starting a new phase of historical research and interpretative education. The mission of the Trust is to improve the understanding of the social practices, institutional organization, and religious and intellectual life of the people buried in Holy Cross Cemetery. The Trust will also act as a laboratory for the training of graduate students, and as a forum to communicate with established scholars and the broader community.

Although the Trust will build new relationships with the academic community, it maintains that the direction for scholarly inquiry will be driven by the Irish and the Catholic communities of Halifax and the friends of Holy Cross. The shared interests of the Irish, the Catholics, and the community of scholars will generate a narrative that will best express the collective life of Hibernian Halifax.





## Contact

If you would like further information on the cemetery, or want to get involved in historical research and cemetery restoration, please email the Holy Cross Historical Trust at <[contact@holycrosshalifax.ca](mailto:contact@holycrosshalifax.ca)>.

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Visit us at: [www.holycrosshalifax.ca](http://www.holycrosshalifax.ca)

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