

VIGNETTE – 15 JULY 2007

THE OLD BURYING GROUND

The Old Burying Ground situated on the west side of Barrington Street, south of Spring Garden Road, and across the street from St Matthew's United Church, was the first burial ground in Halifax. It dates from the beginning of Halifax in 1749 and is perhaps the oldest cemetery for the early settlers in the Maritime provinces. It was situated outside the Halifax artillery stockade on land granted in 1749 for a common burying ground. It was used for burial purposes from that date until 1844.

Those buried in this common burial ground include many of the first citizens of Halifax and their descendents, as well as men stationed here with the British Army and Royal Navy. From 1749 to 1844, over 12,000 people were buried there of which less than 10% have marked graves. Many of these graves are unmarked as they are the resting place of the poor or of those who were victims of an epidemic when the production of gravestones could not keep up with the dying.

Looking at the gravestones that are there, one can get an idea of who made up the early settlers, the members of Halifax's founding families, some of the social aspects and traditions of early British North America, as well as of hardships endured by these people. For example, there are graves of children, sometimes whole families, who were wiped out by such illnesses as diphtheria. Several of St Matthew's' early families are represented there.

The oldest remaining marked grave belongs to 2-year old Malachi Salter, Jr (whose father attended St Matthew's) who died in 1752. Others of note also buried here are General Robert Ross who defeated the American force at Bladensburg and was responsible for the burning of Washington during the War of 1812. He was killed on September 12, 1814 during an attack on Baltimore; Captain Laurence of the USS Chesapeake also rested here although he was repatriated to the United States on August 10, 1813; and the 1754 grave of John Connor who ran the first ferry across Halifax Harbour.

The Old Burying Ground contains more than 1200 head and foot stones. The tombstones were hand-carved – chisel marks may still be seen on many of the backs – from slate imported from Massachusetts Bay until the American Revolution. After that, local slate known as ironstone was used, and in the last 20 years of the graveyard's active history, sandstone gravestones were erected.

Most of the graves are laid out on an east-west axis so that the deceased's feet point east and the head west to accommodate the Christian belief that on the day of reckoning the dead will rise.

These graves contain a unique collection of gravestone art. There are a variety of styles, images, and carving skills. There are exceptional examples of traditional gravestone art such as the soul effigies – winged skulls representing mortality and penance, winged

heads symbolizing ascension; urns representing the soul; cherubs representing the soul in flight; bones depicting decay; Masonic symbols of fraternal association; stars representing divine guidance or creation; suns symbolizing the soul rising to heaven; moons for rebirth; birds symbolizing peace or the messenger; poppies symbolizing sleep; hourglasses representing the passing of time or hourglasses spilled showing life interrupted; willow trees depicting mourning, and a coat of arms.

The Welsford-Parker monument was erected on July 17, 1860 as the Sebastopol memorial at the entrance to the Old Burying Ground. It honours 2 local men – Major Augustus H Welsford and Captain William Parker. Both were killed in the Crimean War at the battle at Redan in 1855. It was constructed by George Laing who also built the federal building which now houses the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia. The lion atop the arch represents the bravery of those who died at war.

The graveyard was used by all denominations but was granted to St Paul's Anglican Church in 1793 which has maintained its upkeep.

The Old Burying Ground has undergone changes and restoration over the years. In 1860, it was fenced with the wrought iron fence still seen today and landscaped. Over 100 years later, by the mid-1980's, the toll from the natural elements and vandalism was so great that St Paul's could not keep up. The Old Burying Ground Foundation comprised of members from the local churches, including St Matthew's, and businesses was formed and a complete record was made of the site in 1984. After much deliberation, fund-raising, and research, a landscape plan was implemented and tilted stones were reset during 1990/91. The Foundation continues its upkeep as a park and outdoor museum.

I would recommend that you take a walk through the grounds this summer to experience the quiet oasis it offers, to read the plaques and panels, to see the results of the restoration, and to learn about some of the early Halifax history.

Written by Margaret Fay