



Summary of the public consultation on the future of the Halifax Memorial Library

Held May 23, 2019

Published June 6, 2019

For public distribution

The Halifax Military Heritage Preservation Society (HMHPS), as part of its educational and community outreach mission, hosted a public consultation at Royal Artillery Park on the evening of 23 May for residents of HRM concerned about the status and plans for the vacant downtown Memorial Library building and its surrounding site.

Summary as recorded by Leo J. Deveau for HMHPS

The Chair of the evening's proceedings was Chris Marriott, Chair of the Board of Directors for HMHPS. He outlined the agenda for the evening to over 100 people in attendance. He noted that HRM councillors were invited and one, Matt Whitman attended.

The agenda was outlined, including a presentation by HMHPS board member, William Breckenridge, on the historical context of the land and area that encompasses the current site of the Memorial Library, dating from Halifax's founding in 1749 through to present-day.

Many were surprised to learn the magnitude of burials that have been documented and identified on the Memorial Library grounds, which took place for over 100 years. The burials originated from the Poor Workshop which opened its doors in 1760, established just north of the site where the current Doyle condominium building is located. Here, Halifax's poor, destitute, impoverished, and unwanted citizens were housed. Once they died, they were buried hastily, often crudely in shallow graves in coffins built by fellow inmates. Many attendees were also surprised to learn that burials of Bridewell prison

inmates, along with victims of epidemics and disease took place on this site. The burial site is in fact considered an extension from the Old Burial Grounds on Barrington Street, across to the parking lot west of St. Mary's Cathedral (underneath which is also a cemetery holding over 2400 bodies) and going west up to the Memorial Library grounds. This mortuary district, with at least (and likely many more) 20,000 Haligonians, has been termed the "Halifax Necropolis" by noted archeologist Dr. Jonathan Fowler.

Attendees also learned about the discovery of over 220 bodies during the construction of the new Grafton Park condominium site at the rear of St. David's Church on Brunswick Street, and the associated costs for their reinterment of well over \$1 million.

At the conclusion of Breckenridge's presentation, the Chair made it clear that HMHPS is not attached to any one idea for what should become of the Memorial Library site, but that four specific principles be followed:

- The Memorial Library site and building remain public property, according to the original land grant of 1883 by the Province of Nova Scotia;
- None of the over 4500 Haligonians interred on the site shall be desecrated;
- A war memorial and cenotaph be maintained on the site according to the original purpose of the Halifax Memorial Library and;
- The over 4500 interred Haligonians are formally acknowledged via plaque or monument, with the site formally recognized as a cemetery.

As one idea for the site, the Heritage Trust of Nova Scotia presented their concept - The Halifax War Memorial, designed by Dalhousie architectural graduate Gregory Urquhart. The architectural renderings can be seen on the HMHPS web site: <https://hnhps.ca/sites/halifax-memorial-library-and-grafton-park>

At the conclusion of the presentations, a short break was called, followed by the Chair's invitation for those in attendance who wished to share their reflections, take their turn to speak, identify themselves, and be given a few minutes for their remarks.

The general sentiment of many who spoke was that the Memorial Library building should be maintained as a public space not for private or institutional use – not only as it was meant to be in both 1883 as a public park, and 1949 as a memorial site for WWI and WWII Halifax war dead, but also for its architectural features: As one of the only remaining examples of neo-classical architecture in Halifax.

Questions were raised: Is City Council listening to this downtown concern? It was noted there are only three councillors representing the Halifax Peninsula, and only one councillor had shown up to attend - consensus in the room expressed the sentiment: "Who is paying attention in government?"

The designs for an imagined Halifax War Memorial by HTNS were widely regarded as an impressive, “magnificent”, and “grand”, alternate use of the Memorial Library site.

Some thought that though the design ideas presented by HTNS were stimulating, it didn't consider winter use, or ways to reuse the actual Memorial Library structure – possibly as a municipal City Archives and Family History site, with a focus on wartime history, given that the city was such a crucial port during both World Wars.

It was felt that the space could also be a greeting venue for visitors arriving in the city, especially those coming up from the waterfront like the thousands of cruise ship passengers who call on Halifax every summer.

Ideas for repurposing the Memorial Library as a performing arts centre, especially as a rehearsal space, were well received. As was an idea for turning the Memorial Library into an indigenous art gallery.

An attendee had an extensive collection of research on how the Memorial Library actually got built, who participated, how it was funded, etc., that could be incorporated into a new purpose for the building.

Consensus among many attendees was that of a much-needed civic museum for Halifax, as a city almost 270 years old and teeming with history. It was noted that nothing seems to be clarified or shared from City Hall on ideas, plans, costing, purpose, location, timelines, etc, for such a needed facility.

It was noted by the Spring Garden Area Business Association that its jurisdiction generates over \$240 million dollars in tax revenues for the city, and that the association knows how valuable the Memorial Library site and grounds are.

Many feared that an RFP from the city for the site would limit public use and access – such was the proposal that was reported on from Dalhousie's School of Architecture. Concerns were expressed about the environmental impact of tearing down the building rather than repurposing it. It was felt that the building probably contains asbestos and would need to be remediated. However, it was noted by a former Memorial Library employee that during her time working there, asbestos had already been removed. Questions were asked on its current state inside, but no one in attendance knew.

Concerns were expressed about what will happen to the Winston Churchill statue. Attendees believed it to be a valuable historical signature of the Memorial Library site, and Halifax's pivotal service during wartime, especially during the Battle of the Atlantic where North America kept Britain fed and supplied while Europe was under Nazi occupation.

The Old Burying Ground Foundation expressed a willingness to coordinate in a group effort, as the whole Memorial Library surrounding area encompasses both marked and unmarked burials that must be respected and acknowledge publicly.

It was also noted that many who visit the city want to know our history and experience our historic architecture, rather than modern architecture found anywhere. There are bits and pieces of Halifax's history located in different places, but no one site where visitors can get a sense of that history, or be directed to other locations once they have their bearings. This sentiment was captured by the statement: "The City seems quite capable of tearing down statues, but no sense of how to create a place to tell it's deep and diverse history to residents and visitors alike."

Strong consensus was expressed by attendees that regardless of what exact plans come to fruition, the Memorial Library site should be preserved as public land, and the building should be saved if at all possible.

The following names are those who spoke at the public consultation:

David Griffiths
Bill Mont
Matt Whitman
Peggy Walt
Mac Mackay
David Bentley
Victoria Grant
Sue Uteck
Alan Ruffman
Beverly Miller
Hal Jones
Bernie Smith
Alan Marryatt
Andrew Murphy
Rosemary Marr
Joan Hicks
Jim Gould

A backgrounder on the Memorial Library building and grounds, along with a copy of William Breckenridge's presentation can be found at <https://hnhps.ca/sites/halifax-memorial-library-and-grafton-park>

The Halifax Memorial Library: Fast Facts

- 1749 - 1758** A reported site for Jewish burials.
- 1758** The site formally becomes the Paupers graveyard. Chosen for its secure location within musket shot of two palisade blockhouses, Fort Horseman and Fort Cornwallis.
- 1792** Newspaper reporting "body snatching" occurring in the paupers graveyard.
- 1793** June 17th, Management of the paupers graveyard turned over to St. Paul's church.
- 1834** Grant of certus of public property (Province certifies the site as public lands).
- 1851** Province of Nova Scotia passes an act to build a court house on the pauper's graveyard.
- 1851** Paupers graveyard returned to province for management.
- 1853** May 14th, Paupers graveyard site surrendered to the registry of property deeds: Book 103, page 179.
- 1869** Paupers graveyard closes, though north side of the site continues to be used. The Poorhouse on Spring Garden Road closes and moves to South Street where the IWK is now.
- 1883** May 19th, the Paupers graveyard is granted to the City of Halifax (deed no. 14634), with a covenant forbidding the sale of, or building on the site. The site is to remain public land in perpetuity. Formally named Grafton Park.
- 1947** City of Halifax Library Committee agrees to build a library at Grafton Park. Covenant of the 1883 land grant is modified.
- 1949 - 1951** The Halifax Memorial Library opens and serves as war memorial and cenotaph for WWI and WWII Halifax war dead (later to include Korea).
- 1980** Statue of Sir Winston Churchill erected. Designed by Oscar Nemon and based on a photograph taken of Churchill when he visited Halifax in 1943.

- 2008** Halifax Regional Council approves construction of a new central library.
- 2011** The Memorial Library achieves an heritage assessment score (59) needed to declare it a heritage property. Halifax Regional Council fails to take up a motion within six months, denying the building heritage status.
- 2014** The Halifax Memorial Library closes, replaced by The Halifax Central Library.
- 2018** November, Halifax city staff report on Dalhousie P3 development of the Memorial Library is declassified and reported in local media, complete with architectural renderings.
- 2019** May 23rd, The first public consultation on the future of the Memorial Library is held by the Halifax Military Heritage Preservation Society at Royal Artillery Park.