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Davis MacIntyre & Associates conducted one of our largest projects to date in 2016 and 2017: the relocation of a portion of a historic cemetery in downtown Halifax, most of which had been capped by a 1951 building that was scheduled for demolition.

Between 1793 and 1844, members of several Methodist churches in Halifax were buried on a property on the outskirts of Halifax's downtown core. After 1844, burying within the city (except for the Poor House Cemetery) was discontinued and the new Camp Hill Cemetery was used instead. The year 1852, only eight years after burials had been taking place, the new Grafton Street Wesleyan Church was constructed overtop a portion of the cemetery. At this time, remains within the building's footprint would have been exhumed and presumably reburied, and headstones were shifted to other areas of the cemetery. In 1868, the wooden church burned, and was replaced by the slightly larger brick and stone Grafton Street Methodist Church a year later. This is the church that still stands today.

A series of additional construction projects took place on the cemetery property, including a large brick and stone schoolhouse in 1865, an extension around the church chancel in 1928, a church hall connected to the church in 1951, and a final extension to the hall in the 1960s. The 1951 church hall was the most significant impact after the initial church construction, and though the headstones in the portion of the cemetery covered by the hall were reportedly laid flat *in situ* and covered over, the 2016 excavation revealed that all of the stones had been moved in 1951 and later buried in two groups under the southern rooms of the hall.

The many phases of impact caused many complications in relocating and identifying these historic graves. The movement of the headstones - or in some cases, multiple moves - meant that even the 1951 positions could not be relied upon to mark the correct individual's remains. The footings of the building, along with the movement of heavy equipment during construction, had caused widespread damage to the graves, sometimes crushing and sometimes truncating graves, and disinterring isolated bones.

The excavation of the cemetery lasted for approximately 14 months, the first 10 being dedicated to excavation while the remaining four were spent monitoring demolition of the hall - which had remained standing with its floors removed during the excavation. In total, although only thirty-six headstones had been present in 1951, the remains of at least 244 individuals of all ages (from 15 gestational weeks to advanced age) were recovered from the site, and are now reinterred in a crypt below the church, which remains standing. Most individuals were interred in their own separate graves, but three mass graves were identified, one representing mostly primary burials in coffins (possibly related to one of Halifax's several epidemic events), while the other two were secondary burials, meaning that the skeletal remains of multiple individuals had been exhumed and reburied together. The largest of these mass graves was a secondary burial of at least 54 individuals, who due to a variety of pathologies were most likely former residents of the Poor House Cemetery on the neighbouring property.

Notable findings during the excavation include the discovery of a mass grave of at least 54 individuals who were exhumed from their original graves and reburied in one location (likely in the mid-nineteenth century), the presence of three lead coffins (an adult, a child, and an infant buried together), the presence of a remarkably small adult woman with an intact blue shell-edged pearlware plate placed over her feet inside the coffin, two cases of 1830's coins buried over the left side of an individual's chest, and multiple instances of group burials in separate coffins, either stacked or placed side-by-side. Preservation of the remains varied widely, from no physical remains and only a coffin outline (especially in infant burials), to badly degraded bone representing only a portion of the full individual, to nearly complete skeletons. Wooden outlines of six-sided coffins, usually with collapsed lids, were present in almost every instance.

Other archaeological features and artifacts were encountered that were unrelated to the cemetery. These included the footings of the 1865 schoolhouse, an unidentified stream bed or sluice running across the site, footings for two smaller structures or walls, and a variety of artifacts including several that are possibly related to the neighbouring soldiers' barracks to the north.

The full details of this project have been compiled into a large three-volume report detailing all findings. If you are a researcher, historian, or archaeologist and wish to review this data in relation to other cemetery projects, please contact the Co-ordinator of Special Places at the Nova Scotia Department of Communities, Culture and Heritage.



Our first discovery - heatstones lying face-down below the church hall floor



Laura records the positions of the headstones for our site map.



April and Courtney clean the faces of the headstones for recording and photographing.



Many of the stones have been fractured after over a century outdoors followed by burial under the church hall in 1951.



Courtney Glen uses raking light to highlight the inscription on this headstone as she cleans it.



The first individual graves are revealed - one primary burial (a six-sided "Gothic" style of coffin), and one secondary burial (a rectangular stone).



Archaeologists Andrea Richardsson, Colin Hicks, and Cynthia Cormier excavate in the "kitchen section." This soil represents : [REDACTED] ...



Archaeologists excavate a stone and concrete feature related to the 1865 schoolhouse in the North section.



Four archaeologists team up to define and expose a mass grave containing multiple individuals in a secondary context.



The team continues to excavate, some working on graves that have been identified, while others remove layers of fill in search [REDACTED] ...



Our team begins to expose a buried stone wall, placing any isolated bone in a wooden drying tray for identification. Most of this b [REDACTED] ...



The team uses mattocks to remove rubble brick fil left over from the schoolhouse. The layer was over 60cm thick in this par [REDACTED] ...



The graves identified at the northern end of the cemetery were considerably more shallow due to the natural topography of the [REDACTED] ...



April MacIntyre and Andrea Richardson suit up after receiving asbestos awareness training. The presence of buried asbestos-rich [REDACTED] ...



Hazards like falling plaster in the deteriorating church hall meant that excavators had to wear hard hats at certain points in the exc [REDACTED] ...



Intensive excavation meant often working in close quarters with our crewmates. Luckily this was a great team!



Four graves would later be identified within this sturdy stone structure. Was it just a stone fence around the burial plots, or a la...



Worklights were a big help on this project.



This photograph shows the empty outlines of coffins after the remains had been exhumed. It's an excellent illustration of the de...



Excavations reveal the footings of the 1865 schoolhouse, as well as a former natural streambed modified for an unknown purpose.



Excavating within a standing building involved a great deal of shifting backdirt from one room to another.



Excavations proceed rapidly on Feature 50, a former natural watercourse or streambed that was modified with wood planks and...



A faint colour change in the soil indicates a grave shaft in the foreground.



Colin Hicks excavates into the top portion of Feature 50 in the foreground while other crewmembers excavate graves in the...



Excavation proceeds on several graves while a row of fully-excavated graves shows as coffin-shaped voids in the soil.



Colin Hicks operates an electric jackhammer to remove some of the heavily compacted soil that could not be managed with sma...



A detail of Feature 50 (a modified streambed) underneath the stone foundation of the 1865 schoolhouse.



The crew works shoulder-to-shoulder to remove layer after layer of overburden.



The archaeological team moves outside to take over excavation after the top layer of fill has been mechanically removed.



Under a thick layer of fill, stone concentrations and grave shafts begin to emerge.



A few in situ stones are revealed outside, having sunk low enough into the ground to be buried by infilling.



Work continued between the rows of in situ stones in the hopes that some of the graves could be matched to names on the h...



The crew works to excavate Feature 124, a very complex mass grave consisting of stacked and collapsed wooden coffins with b...



After demolition of the superstructure, April MacIntyre monitors excavations to remove the 1951 building foundations, which were...



April MacIntyre works to define a grave exposed in the soil profile at the edge of the property, likely representing someone...



Not even a snow squall halts excavation. Most of the crew works to identify any human remains adjacent to or beneath the foundation...



The crew works to recover remains from grave shafts near the chancel.



Our team works to recover remains impacted by the construction of a cancel surround or vestry made in 1928.

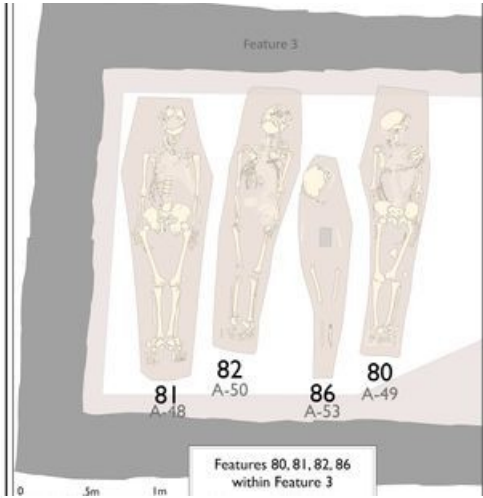


Recovery of remains not accessible while the building was standing proceeded quickly.

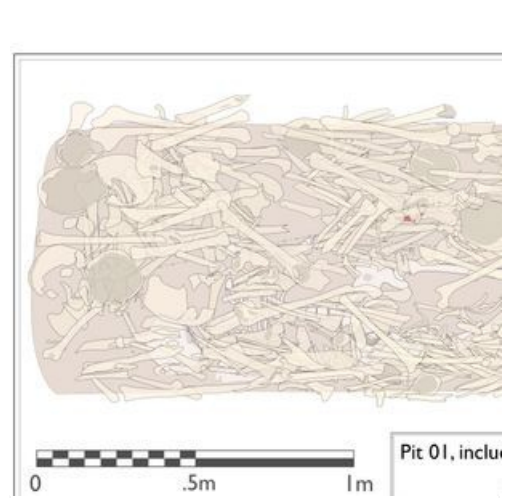
Feature and Site Plans



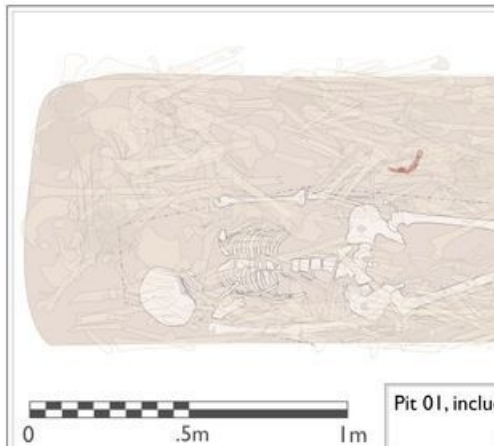
A full plan of excavations on the site, showing graves (green) and other archaeological features in relation to the footings of the building.



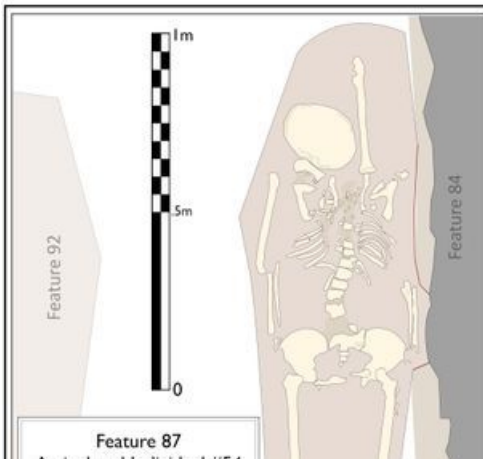
These four individuals may have been members of the Anderson family. Only Elizabeth Anderson (Feature 86) was identified.



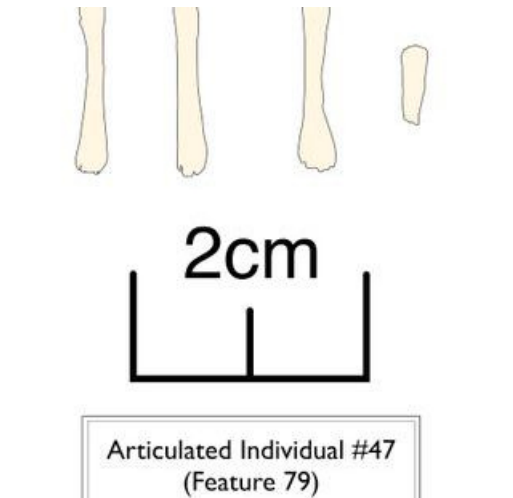
A plan showing approximately 800 of the thousands of bones recovered from a mass grave, relating to the secondary reburial of the primary interment.



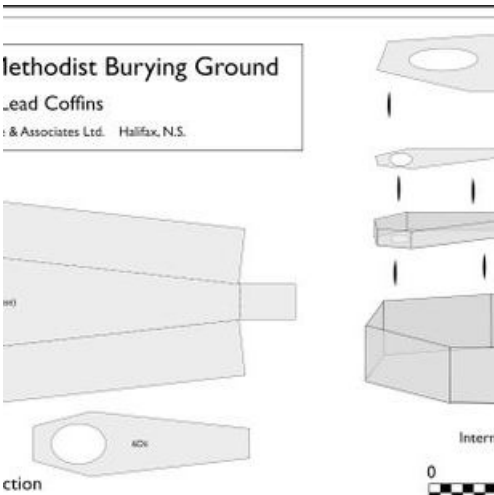
The secondary interment of at least 53 individuals disguised the primary interment of one woman in a wooden coffin at the site.



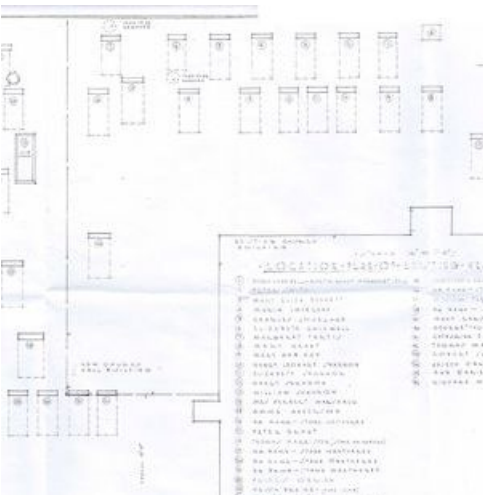
A woman of extremely small stature was buried with a blue shell-edged plate over her feet, inside her wooden coffin. Disturbance was noted.



A drawing of the remains of the youngest individual identified on the site. These long bones are all that remains of an individual.



A sketch of the construction and interment positions of three lead coffins.



A deceptive sketch plan from c.1950 showing the supposed position of headstones and graves in the cemetery. Due to repeated use, the plan is inaccurate.

Gallery: Artifacts recovered from the cemetery lands, as photographed by [Vanessa Smith](#).

Please note that these artifacts relate to archaeological features and general activity in downtown Halifax and were not recovered from graves.



A clay smoking pipe with a masonic symbol.



Reverse side of the clay smoking pipe with the masonic symbol



A Royal pattern creamware plate



An English fireplace tile fragment.



A creamware jug was reassembled from pieces that had been washed across the length of the site by a modified watercourse (Feature 50).



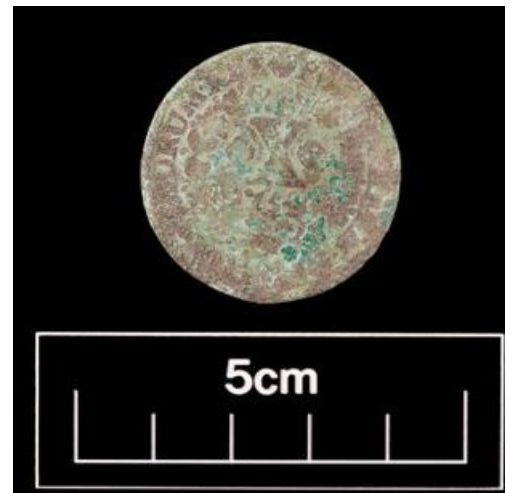
A bayonet designed to be fixed to a rifle. This may have been lost by a soldier barracked nearby.



Hand-painted Chinese export porcelain.



Flint used to strike sparks on eighteenth and



A 1754 Kingdom of Portugal 10 reis coin.

nineteenth century firearms.



2cm

A silver 1825 shilling in remarkably good condition.



5cm

A copper alloy badge, possibly a hat badge, with the cipher GR for King George III dating c.1811 to 1820.



5cm

A clay smoking pipe with a maker's mark.



10cm

An iconic item from Halifax's past, this W. H. Donovan bottle is a frequent find on downtown sites.



10cm

A selection of clay smoking pipes, including two with fluting or "gadrooning."



10cm

A feather-edged creamware plate.



2cm

A fragment of a tortoiseshell comb.

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