



*"View from the Bridge on the Common, Halifax," by Alexander Cavalié Mercer, 1842, Library and Archives Canada. Shows part of Freshwater Brook, which once cut across the Halifax peninsula. The size of the river would have varied with the seasons and rainfall.*

## **The hidden rivers of Halifax**

By Philip Moscovitch, [Halifax Examiner](#), 8 December 2020.

Yesterday, Tim Bousquet pointed us to Stephen Archibald's blog on an old stone pipe unearthed under the Common. The pipe was put in place as part of the effort to bury Halifax's rivers and streams and carried flow from the largest and best-known of them, called Freshwater River or Freshwater Brook. (One of the few remaining visible bits of Freshwater Brook is in the Public Gardens.)

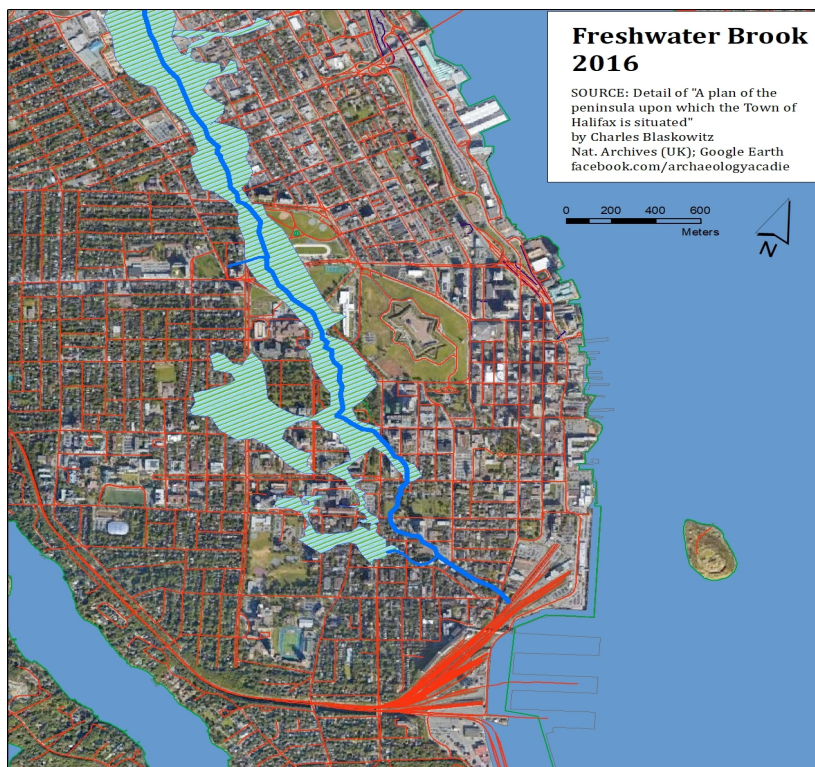
Travelling across peninsular Halifax today, you wouldn't know that significant portions of the area were once wetlands, and that several watercourses flowed through it. The wetlands have been completely lost, and compared to the end of the 18th century, 99.37% of rivers and streams are gone.

Those last two figures come from a 2012 thesis called *Better Planning from Better Understanding: Incorporating Historically Derived Data into Modern Coastal Management Planning on the Halifax Peninsula*, written by then- Marine Management master's student Mike Reid.

By looking at old maps of Halifax and comparing them to current mapping, Reid was able to chart the disappearance of Halifax's rivers and wetlands. The study, he writes:

was able to identify four major watercourses that drain the Halifax Peninsula. Of these four, Freshwater Brook is the most prominent and well known. It ran from what is now the corner of St. Albans Street and Clifton Street, across the peninsula, to its outlet near the intersection of Barrington Street and Inglis Street. It then entered the harbour under a manmade crossing that was known for years as the "kissing bridge". The second major watercourse also starts at St. Albans and Clifton (it would appear that the intersection of St. Albans and Clifton mark a point on the peninsular divide), and flows down the hill roughly along Young Street before forking out at Agricola Street and draining into the harbour on either side of where the Irving Shipyards are currently located. The third and fourth watercourses drain the Western side of the peninsula. Various minor watercourses flowed into the low-lying area associated with the modern-day railway cut, and then joined one of the two more major streams that either flowed North into the Bedford Basin or South into the Northwest Arm.

Reid also identifies the locations of wetlands and says their presence shaped development in early Halifax. Settlement tended to take place at the edges of wetlands, and boggy areas were held communally. One of them is now the Commons.



*Map of peninsular Halifax showing the course of Freshwater Brook overlaid on the city. Image: Jonathan Fowler.*

Reid points to a confluence of factors that led to the enclosure of Halifax's rivers in the 19th-century, including the town's military character and a glut of British engineers with experience in canal-building. Halifax, he writes:

was a deliberate project undertaken by the British Government in order to establish a more permanent military presence in North America. Halifax was planned by the British Board of Trade and Plantations, supported by Parliament and funded by the British Government... Of equal importance was the fact that since this was a planned community, there were professional engineers, surveyors, and the manpower offered by the military on hand in order to aid in the transformation of the peninsula from wilderness into a thriving coastal town. As far as their ability to use culverts, infill and eventually sewers in order to increase the amount of useful land on the peninsula is concerned, the British engineers would have been well schooled in the art of land reclamation. This is largely due to the fact that the latter part of the eighteenth century marked the end of the golden age of British canal building. By the time the development of Halifax was underway, most of the large canal projects in Britain had been completed, leaving a legacy of engineers who were familiar with many of the technical challenges inherent in controlling the peninsula's waterways...

This technical expertise, combined with the ability of the administration and settlers to focus almost entirely on land reclamation and development allowed the city planners to design the city they wanted, as opposed to one limited by the landscape. This ability to modify the Halifax Peninsula is reflected in the very orderly and grid-like structure of the oldest parts of the city...

By 1878, much of the peninsula had already been altered in preparation for development, with only the largest watercourses remaining. Even at this later date however, Freshwater Brook remained a dominant feature on the landscape; this is despite the fact that it was incrementally modified and buried by development.

Saint Mary's University archaeology professor Jonathan Fowler said in an interview that someone standing on the Halifax peninsula in the mid-18th century would have seen a place "cut through with little streams. And not just streams, but wetlands, boggy areas. If you go into Point Pleasant Park and you wander around some of the smaller trails and you look off to the side, very often you'll see a lot of standing water and and little streams, particularly if you're walking through there in the spring... It would have been very much like that."

I asked Fowler if he thought the British were particularly zealous when it came to burying streams. He said he didn't know if that was the case, but that they defaulted to developing colonial towns in grids, because they were drawing on ancient Roman patterns of development:

If you look at downtown Halifax, for example, basically what you have is a Roman-type colony, a gridiron plan with little city blocks of carefully regulated lengths and widths, and with roads all ordered in the middle of it. In a Roman town, you'd have your main temple and marketplace and the like. And in Halifax, of course, the temple is replaced by St. Paul's and it's a sort of military assembly area for a long time. So essentially it's a Roman model.

But despite this subjugation-of-nature-in-the-service-of-a-grid approach, Fowler said we can still see vestiges of the watercourses in Halifax today. Looking at Google Maps while speaking with me, Fowler said:

You see that weird angle on Victoria Road, Smith Street as well to some extent of the fact that Smith Street is truncated in the way that it is? Between Smith and Victoria Road is the line where this river flowed. So that's an example of road development that reflects that early geography.



*The map of Halifax still shows vestiges of the flow of old rivers.*

Bell Road, where it goes across the Common is also an example, Fowler said:

Another fun one is Bell Road, which cuts across the Common by the hospital. It crosses Freshwater River. There used to be a bridge there. It was all boggy land there, and there was a kind of a pinch point in the marsh where two spurs of uplands came together, and it was the path of least resistance — if you wanted to cross the marsh and get your feet as little wet as possible, this was the place you would do it. There was a tavern up in the North End called the Blue Bell, and this was the road people would take to get to the Blue Bell. And became known as Bell Road.

Fowler thinks it's a sign of how disconnected we've become from the history of the land that people were taken by surprise when the southern end of Barrington Street flooded on October 5. He said:

You create an illusion of an order that exists almost outside of longer-term history, landscape history, and I think it it doesn't prepare us well for when Mother Earth takes a turn... This kind of unbridled construction without due regard to history and to the landscape, to ecological history, has a way of making us all a little bit naive about the place we live in. And hence you get these surprising moments like that one



a few weeks ago when the bottom part of Inglis and Barrington flooded. That's just Freshwater River popping up to say hello.

Although the image in the painting above is somewhat bucolic, Fowler said that by the time the river was buried in the 19th century it had been used as a garbage dump for a while. "Freshwater River became clogged with debris and garbage and dead animals — all the rest of it," he said. "It was badly neglected and abused, and probably that abuse contributed to the decision to ultimately block it up and build over it, because it had become such a toxic mess."

At CBC this morning (8 Dec. 2020), Jack Julian writes about Freshwater Brook, and spoke with Peggy Cameron of Friends of the Halifax Common. Cameron talks about the river's history and advocates for daylighting part of it. Julian writes:

Cameron said most of the path of Freshwater Brook remains unbuilt upon, including parts of the Common, the Public Gardens and Victoria Park.

She said creating natural areas in urban settings is good for public mental health.

Cameron said uncovering natural drainage is important as Nova Scotia faces more extreme weather due to climate change, including intense bursts of heavy rainfall.

"We need these kinds of free services from the environment to cope with all of the things we're going to deal with," she said.

Fowler isn't sure about daylighting, saying "the thought has crossed my mind" but he wonders "if it would be feasible" given how much of it is built over privately already. And as for public areas, "I wouldn't want to remove people's ability to get out on the Common and stretch their legs and play baseball and cricket and everything else."

Still, he thinks it's important that we consider what we lose when we bury rivers and otherwise drastically alter our environment in the name of development and profit.

We see how the individual decisions from the 19th century up until now, based on short-term profit-motive thinking, have led to a rewriting of the landscape and this kind of profound ignorance about the nature — the fundamental nature of this place that we all live in. It's as if our ideology, our worldview, has blinded us to something essential about this place. And it's in that way that I find this broader philosophical connection interesting. We can live here in this illusion of culture that we've grafted on top of this landscape, without a very significant appreciation of what this place really is like.