

Montreal's Irish Famine Cemetery:
Commemoration Struggles from 1847 to the Present



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Montreal's Famine Cemetery is presently criss-crossed by an urban blight of highways, railway tracks, parking lots, electricity pylons and industrial billboards. The commemorative site is largely inaccessible and consists of a large black boulder squeezed onto a tiny traffic island, straddling two highways, in an unsightly industrial zone. Gaudy advertisements on giant billboards glare down on the boulder, which is encircled by a wrought iron fence. Erected in 1859 by Victoria Bridge workers to mark the Famine cemetery, the monument's purpose is engraved in the stone: "To Preserve from Desecration the Remains of 6000 Immigrants Who died of Ship Fever A.D. 1847-48." Today, its purpose is largely forgotten by thousands of commuters speeding past every day. From a commemoration point of view, Montreal's Irish Famine Cemetery can perhaps best be described as "disgraceful".

Established in 2014, the Montreal Irish Monument Park Foundation proposes a solution to this problem: to transform the site of the derelict Famine cemetery into a world-class cultural and memorial park. The rationale behind the Foundation's proposal is explained on the its website: "Many people do not realize that when they commute over the Victoria Bridge that, at this spot, they are actually driving over a massive graveyard...We feel that a park entry would be of more honor to the victims...and make a much nicer entryway into the city."¹ The Foundation proposes honouring the key players during Black '47, including the 6,000+ victims, the Montrealers who went to the aid of the emigrants, including Mayor John Easton Mills, and the French Canadians who adopted Famine orphans. Noting the lack of greenspace in Griffintown, the park would fill a void by providing both a beautiful entrance to the island from the Victoria Bridge and an Irish sports field. The park would also include a museum, a theatre and a meeting space for various organizations.²

Directors of the Foundation are heavily involved in Montreal's Irish community. Victor Boyle is National President of the AOH, Ronan Corbett is President of the Montreal Gaelic Athletic Association, Fergus Keyes is involved with the Joe Beef Market and Point Saint Charles Community Theatre. I was approached to join the Board of

¹ Montreal Irish Monument Park Foundation website. Mission. <http://www.montrealirishmonument.com/mission> (Accessed January 19, 2016)

² Ibid.

Directors after writing a blog entitled "Montreal Irish Memorial Park Foundation needs support to right a historical wrong" that urged citizens to write to newly-elected Mayor Denis Coderre, asking him to support the project.³ I readily agreed. The Foundation also relies on an "Ad Hoc" Consultative Committee, including Irish Famine experts Dr. Jason King, Dr. Ray Bassett and Dr. Michael Kenneally.⁴ It is our hope the project will succeed, and this paper is both an historic exposé of Montreal's Famine cemetery, especially in regards to commemoration, and a call to action to support the project.

The idea for a memorial park originated in November 1992, when the St. Patrick's Society proposed an Irish "garden of remembrance" at the location of the Famine cemetery.⁵ During the 1990s, there was a global trend to commemorate the Famine's 150th anniversary in 1997, which sparked worldwide construction and refurbishment of Famine monuments. In *Commemorating the Irish Famine: Memory and the Monument*, Dr. Emily Mark-FitzGerald sets out to "explore the visual history of Famine, Famine memory and its recent global commemoration."⁶ In her online summary guide, she lists over 140 new or reconditioned Famine monuments worldwide, including 17 sites in Canada.⁷ The Irish Stone is not among them, as it falls outside Dr. Mark-FitzGerald's criteria of "post-1990s Famine monuments and memorials [which are] primarily three-dimensional monuments and significant renovations or re-dedications (as opposed to plaques or signpostings of Famine-era relics)."⁸ This situation could change if the Montreal Irish Monument Park Foundation is successful in persuading stakeholders to transform Montreal's derelict burial ground into a world-class memorial park, perhaps in a similar way to the creation of Ireland Park in Toronto.⁹

³ "Montreal Irish Memorial Park Foundation needs support to right a historical wrong". Optative Theatrical Laboratories. Blog. July 7, 2014. <http://www.optative.net/blog/montreal-irish-memorial-park-foundation-needs-support-to-right-a-historical-wrong/> (Accessed January 21, 2016)

⁴ Montreal Irish Monument Park Foundation website. Team. <http://www.montrealirishmonument.com/team> (Accessed January 19, 2016)

⁵ Padraig Breandan Laighin to Madame Julie Boivan, Architecte—Agent de developpement culturel, 14 September 1994, Pidgeon Papers.

⁶ The website "Irish Famine Memorials" is a supplement to *Commemorating the Irish Famine: Memory and the Monument*. <http://irishfaminememorials.com/about/> (Accessed January 13, 2016)

⁷ Mark-FitzGerald, Emily. Summary Guide: Famine Monuments – a Global Survey. Updated January, 2014. <https://commemoratingfamine.files.wordpress.com/2014/01/summary-guide1.pdf> (Accessed January 13, 2016)

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Toronto's Ireland Park was created in 2007. See <http://irelandparkfoundation.com/> (Accessed January 13, 2016)

Historically, Montreal's Famine Cemetery has always had a tumultuous existence with constant threats of its encroachment and erasure. Recently, this history has come into sharper focus with the work of Dr. Colin McMahon, the leading academic expert on the Irish Famine experience in Montreal, who provides detailed accounts of the cemetery's history in his 2010 doctoral thesis *Ports of Recall: Memory of the Great Irish Famine in Liverpool and Montreal* and other publications. He has uncovered a wealth of research and many of his sources are cited in this paper. Dr. Jason King, curator of the Digital Irish Famine Archive at NUI Galway, has also provided valuable information, including the translation to English of *Le Typhus de 1847 (Ancien Journal, volume II)*, from the Annals of Montreal's Grey Nuns.¹⁰ This first person account recalls of the horrors that unfolded in Montreal during what is now often referred to as "Black '47".

In the summer of 1847, Montreal was inundated with thousands of desperate Irish Famine refugees and was unprepared to deal with the influx. The quarantine station on Grosse-Île, where rickety "coffin ships" discharged sick Irish emigrants, had failed to prevent typhus from moving upriver. Montreal was at the end of the sea journey because the Lachine Rapids prevented ships from continuing westward. Passengers had to transfer onto smaller boats and traverse the Lachine Canal.

Montreal's Famine challenges began on June 7, 1847, when 2,304 typhus-stricken Famine migrants disembarked in Montreal.¹¹ It was the beginning of a long and difficult summer, as Montreal was inundated "with thousands of the most debilitated and wretched beings, ever thrown upon [its] shores mostly in a sickly, and many in a dying state."¹² In 1847, an estimated 70,000 Irish emigrants overwhelmed Montreal, a city with a population of approximately 50,000 at the time.¹³

The only facilities available were two large sheds, which had been erected in June, 1831, by the Montreal Emigrant Society. Designed to house destitute emigrants, they were located on the south shore of the Lachine Canal near the Wellington Bridge in

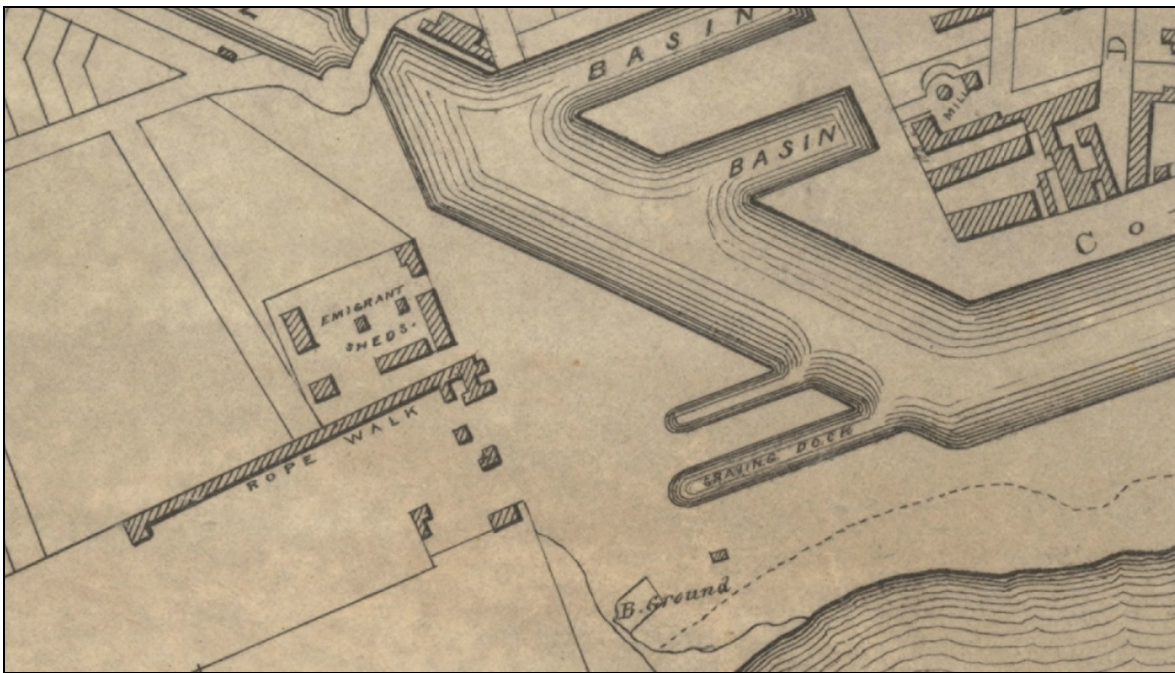
¹⁰ Dr. King included the translation in a Virtual Famine Archive hosted by NUI Galway: <http://faminearchive.nuigalway.ie/eyewitness-accounts/grey-nuns> (Accessed January 13, 2016)

¹¹ Alan Hustak, *Saint Patrick's of Montreal: the Biography of a Basilica* (Montreal: Vehicule Press, 1998), 36.

¹² *Report of the Board of Health for the City of Montreal*, 12 August 1847, 1847 Immigration file, City of Montreal Archives, Fonds de la Ville de Montreal, Montreal, QC.

¹³ James O'Leary. *The Catholic Record*, 16 April 1892.

a "swampy" area.¹⁴ With the influx of Famine refugees, the sheds were quickly converted into hospitals and healthy emigrants were evicted onto the streets. The Grey Nuns, who were located nearby in their Motherhouse, sprang into action to care for the sick and dying emigrants. According to the Annals: "Hundreds of people were laying there, most of them on bare planks, pell-mell, men, women and children. The moribund and cadavers are crowded in the same shelter, while there are those that lie on the quays or on pieces of wood thrown here and there along the river."¹⁵ Severe overcrowding prompted a team of doctors visiting from Philadelphia to describe the improvised hospitals as "mere charnel houses, where the destitute and houseless might die beneath a roof instead of the canopy of heaven."¹⁶



Map 1.0. Excerpt from 1846 map of Montreal¹⁷

The nuns worked tirelessly to separate the living from the dead and to offer care and hope for the survivors. In their Annals, the nuns noted: "Since we had not yet constructed a mortuary for the dead, the corpses were exposed in the outdoors, and

¹⁴ Quoted in *An Irish Heart: How a Small Immigrant Community Shaped Canada*, pages 33-34.

¹⁵ *The Typhus of 1847, Annals of the Grey Nuns, Ancien Journal*, volume II, page 16.

¹⁶ Quoted in *An Irish Heart: How a Small Immigrant Community Shaped Canada*, pages 33-34.

¹⁷ James Cane, "Topographical and Pictorial Map of the City of Montreal" (Robert W. S. Mackay, 1846), Collections de la BANQ, © 2002-2006. <http://www4.bnquebec.ca/cargeo/accueil.htm>. (Accessed January 15, 2016)

once there was a great enough number of them, we made a cemetery for the bodies in the neighbouring fields."¹⁸ Concerning the location of the first Famine Cemetery, it was likely quite near the emigrant sheds to the south of the Wellington Bridge. The 1846 map points out a burial ground to the south-east of the sheds, which may have been used during the cholera epidemic of 1832. However, the *Annals of the Grey Nuns* suggests that the nuns created a new cemetery "for the bodies in the neighbouring fields" once there were too many corpses stacked outdoors, raising a mystery about the cemetery's exact location. At that time, Montreal's chief of police described the grim situation: "One of the common daily sights in Wellington Street, in those sad days, were the coffins on their way to the Emigrant Hospital."¹⁹ Hundreds of plain deal coffins were "piled up in the hospital yard, awaiting the daily toll of the dead, who were always buried at night." Before the sun rose every day, dozens of typhus victims were buried in mass graves near the sheds, prompting a new verb amongst the Irish community: "Trenched."²⁰

In response to the crisis, in late June, Peter McGill of the Montreal Emigrant Society ordered the construction of two more large sheds.²¹ When this proved insufficient, Montreal's Mayor, a handsome and personable American named John Easton Mills, pitched in to help carpenters expand the site in the sweltering heat. By early July, a hodgepodge of buildings had appeared, including a dozen sheds (ten of them used as hospitals), a surgery, a ropewalk and seven outhouses.²²

Despite efforts to enlarge the site, the sheds were unable to contain the massive number of infected emigrants. By early July, desperate Irish immigrants had ventured throughout "all parts of the city and suburbs" in search of food and lodging, essentially exposing citizens to the typhus epidemic that authorities were trying to contain.²³ To exacerbate the problem, a shortage of canal boats trapped thousands of emigrants in Montreal, exposing them to the epidemic. Many tried to strike out on their own and "fell

¹⁸ *The Typhus of 1847, Annals of the Grey Nuns, Ancien Journal, volume II, 22.*

¹⁹ *An Irish Heart: How a Small Immigrant Community Shaped Canada, 40.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Report of the Board of Health for the City of Montreal, 12 August 1847, 2.*

uncounted on the roads and rivers, leaving a trail of nameless corpses."²⁴ There is speculation that some victims were buried hastily at random locations along the canal. This theory is supported by an archaeological discovery in 1886, when human remains were unearthed as workers dug the foundation of the Royal Mill on Mill Street, near the site of the first fever sheds.²⁵

By late July, citizens began to panic, possibly triggered when an emaciated young Irish girl was spotted begging on the corner of Notre Dame and McGill Streets. She was "clad only in a nightgown and with a tin cup in her hand while a policeman was keeping the street clear of all pedestrians until means could be found to convey her back to the quarantine sheds."²⁶ As the death toll climbed, public fear and rage exploded in frequent, noisy protests. Furious Montrealers gathered on the *Champ-de-Mars* parade grounds, demanding to know why officials had allowed sick emigrants to land in the city. Rumours began to circulate that outraged citizens were planning to descend on the fever sheds and burn them or throw them into the river. The threat was not without precedent: during the cholera epidemic of 1832, Quebec City officials had to rebuild emigrant sheds after angry citizens tore them down.²⁷ Citizens and the Board of Health were especially worried that Montreal would be transformed into "into a virtual Quarantine Station" and began demanding that the incoming emigrants be quarantined far away from Montreal on one of the Boucherville Islands.²⁸

Instead, Mayor John Easton Mills and the city's Joint Emigrant Commissioners proposed moving the site of the fever sheds one kilometer to the south-east, on the banks of the river in Pointe Saint-Charles.²⁹ In early August, the hospitalized were moved to the new site, where a total of 22 fever sheds would eventually be constructed. To assuage the citizens' fears, steamboats were diverted to a temporary wharf at the entrance of the Lachine Canal, where emigrants were transferred and taken by barge to

²⁴ *An Irish Heart: How a Small Immigrant Community Shaped Canada*, 40.

²⁵ *Montreal Gazette*, 1 March 1910.

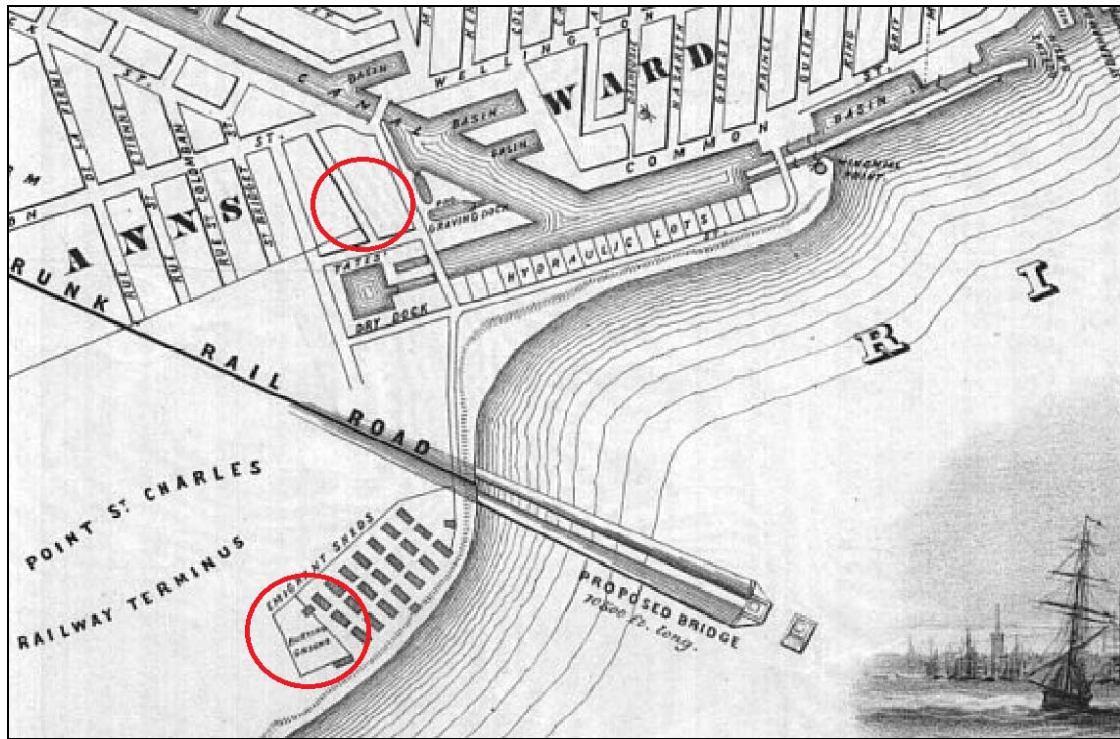
²⁶ *The Montreal Gazette*, 4 August 1942.

²⁷ *An Irish Heart: How a Small Immigrant Community Shaped Canada*, 47.

²⁸ *Pilot and Journal of Commerce*, 19 August 1847.

²⁹ Francis Badgley, "Irish Emigrant Fever," *British American Journal of Medical and Physical Science* (February 1848), 260-2.

the new fever sheds. A paling was erected around the wharf and policemen guarded the gate and all crossings along the canal to prevent infected emigrants from escaping.³⁰



Map 2.0. Excerpt from 1853 map of Montreal³¹

Another grim burial ground was prepared on the west side of the new sheds. As the death toll mounted, more trenches were dug and typhus victims were "buried like dogs in the Hospital pit."³² By the end of the epidemic in 1848, an estimated 6,000 typhus victims had been "trenched" in the mass graves located next to the fever sheds in Pointe Saint-Charles.

To further the tragedy, almost 1000 Montreal residents also died of typhus, including at least 8 Catholic priests, thirteen nuns, and seven Anglican clergymen.³³ Lastly, the devoted mayor, John Easton Mills, also succumbed to typhus on November

³⁰ *An Irish Heart: How a Small Immigrant Community Shaped Canada*, 50.

³¹ Map of the City of Montreal with the latest improvements 1853. James Duncan (1806-1881). M15902 © McCord Museum. The circle above indicates the approximate site of the first fever sheds and possible burial ground. The circle below indicates the second site of the fever sheds and burial ground.

³² "Montreal History & Gazetteer" J.-D. Borthwick, 1891, folio 85" (City of Montreal Archives); *The Pilot and Journal of Commerce* 10 July 1847.

³³ Estelle Mitchell, *Mere Jane Slocombe, Neuvieme Superieure Generale des Soeurs Grises de Montreal, 1819-1872* (Montreal: Fides, 1964), 91-2.

12, 1847. Mills had personally tended to the sick in the fever sheds and his fearless compassion earned him the sobriquet "Martyr Mayor of Montreal".³⁴

The first indication of commemoration of Montreal's second Famine cemetery was "a small mound and a cross"³⁵. Once the typhus epidemic ended in 1848, the site sat abandoned for several years. In 1854, the old fever sheds were converted into housing by Peto, Brassey and Betts, the British firm responsible for building the Victoria Bridge. The site was soon bustling again when up to 500 English and Irish bridge workers moved in. The adjacent cemetery was seen as a "sacred spot"³⁶, no doubt since many of the labourers were Irish Famine survivors and had relatives buried there.

In the autumn of 1859, the Victoria Bridge was nearing completion. Workers were so concerned about the cemetery and that "the remains of their poor countrymen would be forgotten," that they decided "to erect a monument upon the spot."³⁷ According to McMahon, "Legend has it that Irish Catholic workers refused to work until the victims of 1847 were commemorated; however, it remains unclear with whom the idea to create a memorial originated."³⁸ The monument took the form of a gigantic, 30-ton granite boulder. The massive stone was either dredged from the riverbed or taken from a nearby field a few hundred yards from the gravesite.³⁹ Stone masons chiseled the purpose of the monument into the boulder with the following words:

*To Preserve from Desecration the Remains of 6000 Immigrants
Who died of Ship Fever A.D. 1847-48
This Stone is erected by the Workmen of Messrs. Peto, Brassey and Betts
Employed in the Construction of the Victoria Bridge A.D. 1859*

Chief engineer James Hodges oversaw the "Herculean business" of installing the enormous, rough monument in the cemetery. On December 1, 1859, he arranged a derrick to hoist the boulder onto a six-foot stone pedestal, where it was affixed.⁴⁰

³⁴ Bellelle Guerin, *John Easton Mills: The Martyr Mayor of Montreal*.

³⁵ James Hodges, *Construction of the Great Victoria Bridge in Canada* (London: John Weale, 1860), 75.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ See footnote 21 on page 149 of *Ports of Recall: Memory of the Great Irish Famine in Liverpool and Montreal*.

³⁹ Affidavit of Thomas George Fennell, 23 January 1911, LAC, RG46, vol. 45, vol. 119, file 13761, 189.

⁴⁰ *Montreal Gazette*, 10 December 1859.

On the same day, the Anglican clergy oversaw a dedication ceremony. The fact that Catholic authorities were not invited to consecrate this important cemetery, containing mostly Irish Catholic Famine victims, probably rankled the Irish community. During the ceremony, Anglican Bishop Fulford made no mention that the majority of the deceased were Irish Catholic or the political circumstances behind the Famine, but he did close their consecration ceremony with the following assurance: "the bodies of the faithful rest undisturbed until the day of resurrection."⁴¹

In 1870, the memorial grave site was transferred from Messrs. Peto, Brassey and Betts to the Anglican Bishop of Montreal, in perpetuity.⁴² For a British company operating in a British colony, it probably seemed appropriate to transfer the land to the Anglican Church. That same year, in the month of July, Father Hogan from the Catholic St. Ann's Parish led a visiting Irish priest named Father M. B. Buckley to the Famine cemetery. Upon reading the inscription on the boulder, Father Buckley mused: "Why did they not say Irish?"⁴³ Father Buckley had identified a second indignity concerning commemoration in the Famine cemetery: not only did the Anglican Church own the hallowed ground "in perpetuity", but the monument didn't specifically mention the fact that most of those buried were Irish Catholic Famine victims. Still, at least a commemorative boulder marked the site of Montreal's second Famine cemetery.

It is unknown what became of the first Famine cemetery and site of the original emigrant sheds. It is likely the structures were demolished during expansions of the Lachine Canal between 1873 and 1885, when it was deepened and enlarged. In 1876, a burial ground was unearthed during the expansion of the Wellington Basin, which cut into the site of the original emigrant sheds. In the press of September 20, 1876, politician Bernard Devlin is seen "...arranging with the Government for the proper disposal of the remains of the unfortunate immigrants who died from ship fever in 1847 and were buried near the Wellington Bridge and vicinity." The exhumed coffins were moved to the Catholic *Notre-Dame-des-Neiges* Cemetery on Mount Royal.⁴⁴ Presently,

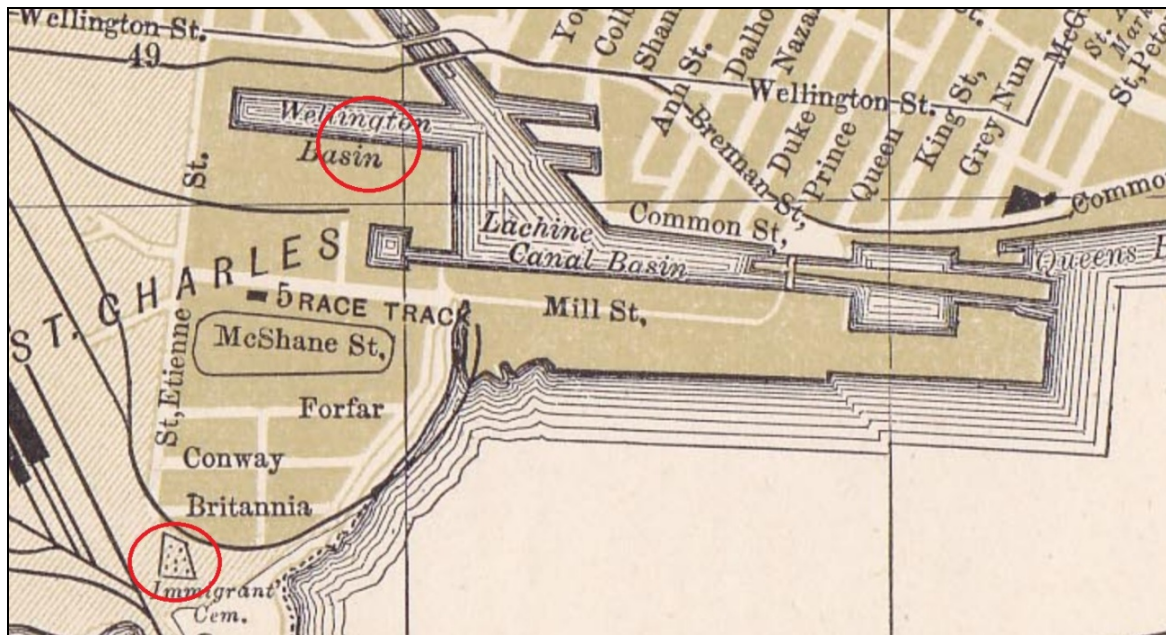
⁴¹ *Montreal Witness*, 7 December 1859.

⁴² McMahon, Colin. *Ports of Recall: Memory of the Great Irish Famine in Liverpool and Montreal*, 155.

⁴³ Rev. M. B. Buckley, *Diary of a Tour in America* (Dublin: Sealy, Bryers & Walker, 1889), 65.

⁴⁴ *The Montreal Beacon*, Friday March 16, 1934, page 43, "A Champion of Many Causes"

there is no commemoration of this first Famine burial site and it is unknown whether or not there are still human remains in the vicinity.



Map 3.0 Excerpt from 1894 map of Montreal⁴⁵

Meanwhile, the second Famine cemetery began to witness a power struggle over the issue of commemoration. Redemptorist priests began organizing annual visits to the gravesite in the mid-1880s to perform requiems "for the repose of the souls of the thousands of Irish Catholics whose bones are there interred."⁴⁶ In 1892, the Montreal chapter of the Ancient Order of Hibernians (AOH) was founded and took over organizing the annual march. With a mandate "to protect the welfare of fellow Irish Catholics"⁴⁷, the fraternal organization approached Anglican Archdeacon Kerr in an attempt to obtain the title to the burial ground. The request was denied because "men of more than one denomination were buried there."⁴⁸ The cemetery began to fall into a state of neglect and *The True Witness and Catholic Chronicle* complained that "the tall,

⁴⁵ Map excerpt from 1894: Map of Montreal 1894 - Illustration. http://www.imtl.org/image/cartes/merge_aa1894.jpg (Accessed January 15, 2016). Note that when the Wellington Basin was dug in 1876, skeletons were discovered and removed to Notre-Dame-des-Neiges Cemetery, as arranged by politician Bernard Devlin.

⁴⁶ *True Witness and Catholic Chronicle*, 26 November 1898.

⁴⁷ Ancient Order of Hibernians website. About the AOH. <http://www.aoh.com/about-the-aoh/> (Accessed January 17, 2016)

⁴⁸ *Montreal Gazette*, 2 March 1910.

tangled grass and the sturdy weed riot luxuriantly over the neglected plot where man's feet seldom stray."⁴⁹

To mark the 50th anniversary of the Famine, an elaborate commemorative event was organized on a scale "never before seen in the history of the Irish Catholics of Montreal."⁵⁰ On September 19, 1897, a parade of 5,000 Irish Montrealers marched with banners and bunting from St. Ann's Church to the Famine cemetery, pursued by 20,000 spectators. Following a requiem for the departed, Father Strubbe and others lamented that the Anglicans refused to cede the site to ensure the cemetery could be properly consecrated and maintained.⁵¹

The following year, the Anglican Bishop was approached by the Grand Trunk Railway (GTR) because the company wanted to purchase the site of the Famine cemetery and remove the commemorative bolder to expand operations. Upon hearing the news, the Irish community became incensed and stakeholders vowed "to prevent by every means in their power the carrying out of such a project."⁵²

With tensions mounting, in the early morning on December 21, 1900, the GTR did the unthinkable: its workers removed "the famous monument" from the Famine cemetery and transported it on a railway track along Saint Patrick Street to Saint Patrick's Square, beside the canal, where it was installed.⁵³ The Irish community was outraged. Expressing "bitter regret that the monument should have been removed from the old cemetery it was intended to preserve from desecration," community stakeholders urged the Anglican Archbishop to demand the GTR to restore the monument to the site in Pointe Saint-Charles.⁵⁴ The Archbishop gave in to the pressure and, in August of 1901, demanded the return the monument to its proper location.⁵⁵ By now, industrial work carried out by GTR was beginning to compromise the cemetery. The company had laid down three railway tracks and was using part of the cemetery as

⁴⁹ *True Witness and Catholic Chronicle*, 7 April 1897.

⁵⁰ *True Witness and Catholic Chronicle*, 22 September 1897.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Montreal Herald*, 30 November 1898.

⁵³ *Montreal Gazette*, 22 December 1900.

⁵⁴ *True Witness and Catholic Chronicle*, 1 June 1901.

⁵⁵ *True Witness and Catholic Chronicle*, 28 December 1901.

a dumping ground. GTR refused to replace the monument, and began to publicly refute the fact that the site was indeed a cemetery.⁵⁶

The case was eventually referred to the Railway Board of Commissioners in Ottawa, which ruled in January of 1911 that GTR could expropriate the entire site of the burial ground apart from a thirty foot plot of land, fifteen feet away from its original location. The rationale was to allow for the construction of a road. The title to the tiny plot of remaining cemetery was granted to the Anglican Bishop. In June, 1912, the remainder of the burial ground was sold to GTR for \$6,000 with the stipulation that GTR would retain funds to maintain the memorial site.⁵⁷ GTR was absorbed by Canadian National Railways (CNR) in 1923. While Montreal's Irish community continued to host commemorative events and annual marches, the forces of industrialization would go on to relentlessly encroach upon the hallowed Famine cemetery, again and again.

In August, 1942, workers engaged by the Kennedy Construction company made a ghastly discovery. While digging a passenger tunnel under the city approach to the Victoria Bridge, they unearthed twelve "coffins of rotting pine wood, blackened by time,"⁵⁸ in "a long trenchlike grave at the foot of Bridge Street."⁵⁹ The Irish community sought permission from the CNR and Anglican leadership to rebury the deceased at the site of the monument. Permission was granted, and the bones were reinterred close to the Irish Stone, in plain grey caskets, during an All Saints Day ceremony on November 1, 1942.⁶⁰ The discovery put to rest any denial that the site was, in fact, a cemetery. This turning point propelled the Irish community "to lay claim to the Ship Fever Monument".⁶¹

A new threat to the cemetery was perceived during construction work for Expo '67. By now, the Irish Stone had been "blackened by a century of traffic" and was often

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ *Montreal Gazette*, 24 January 1911.

⁵⁸ *Montreal Gazette*, 4 August 1942.

⁵⁹ *Montreal Gazette*, 31 October 1942.

⁶⁰ R.C. Johnston to Right Reverend Arthur Carlisle, 29 October 1942, Ship Fever Memorial file, Anglican Archives of Montreal, Montreal, QC.

⁶¹ McMahon, Colin. "Montreal's Ship Fever Monument: An Irish Famine Memorial in the Making". Page 57.

referred to as the "Black Stone".⁶² In the spring of 1966, Montreal urban planners decided that the Stone needed to be moved from its existing position to allow the construction of a new approach road to the Expo site. The Irish Stone Committee was (ISC) formed by community stakeholders and representatives from Montreal's Irish societies were invited to meetings, including the United Irish Societies, St. Patrick's Society, the AOH, and the Irish Canadian Heritage Society.⁶³ Working with city officials, the ISC insisted that the Irish Stone remain in its place. An unhappy compromise was reached when both parties reluctantly agreed on a "split-solution": Bridge Street would be expanded around the Irish Stone, which would now "act as a median strip between two roads."⁶⁴ Following the road work, the monument sat stranded on a traffic island, "with its site extended at both ends."⁶⁵ The Irish community had prevented the monument's removal for a second time, but the fact that a busy highway now surrounded the memorial site was seen as far from ideal.

Another protective strategy was to attempt to secure official historic designation for the memorial site. The ISC asked T.P. Slattery, a historian with the St. Patrick's Society, to "look into the advisability of having the Irish Stone declared a historical monument by the appropriate governmental body and...initiate proceedings in this direction."⁶⁶ Slattery applied to the Historic Sites and Monument Board of Canada (HSMBC) in 1967, requesting that "the Irish Ship Fever Monument" be "properly registered and protected as a National Historic Site and Monument."⁶⁷ The HSMBC did not respond. In 1977, the City of Montreal tried to purchase the burial ground from the Anglicans, allegedly so they could better maintain it.⁶⁸ This prompted Slattery to apply to HSMBC once again in May, 1977.⁶⁹ The HSMBC responded this time and rejected the proposal because it regarded the Irish Famine as a "disaster", which precluded "an

⁶² *Montreal Gazette*, 8 June 1963.

⁶³ *Montreal Gazette*, 10 October 1965.

⁶⁴ Joseph Dunne to Kenneth McKenna, 20 April 1966.

⁶⁵ *The Montreal Star*, 22 June 1966.

⁶⁶ "Minutes of Irish Stone Committee," 13 June 1966, Ship Fever Memorial file, Anglican Archives of Montreal.

⁶⁷ T.P. Slattery to Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada, 25 April 1967, Ship Fever Memorial file, Anglican Archives of Montreal.

⁶⁸ Jean-Paul Langlois a Canon A.E. Hawes, "Sujet: Vente par CN a la Ville de Montreal—Partie du lot 507-69-Quartier Ste-Anne," 16 fevrier 1977, Ship Fever Memorial file, Anglican Archives of Montreal.

⁶⁹ T.P. Slattery to Hon. Warren A. Allman, Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs, 18 May 1977, Ship Fever Memorial file, Anglican Archives of Montreal.

active involvement by Parks Canada in this matter."⁷⁰ Another setback occurred in August, 1982, when the Anglicans sold the Irish Famine cemetery to the City of Montreal on condition that any human remains would be "disposed of in dignity."⁷¹

Throughout the 1990s, with Famine commemoration monuments being erected around the world to mark the Famine's 150th anniversary, efforts were made to improve the site of the Irish Stone. The United Irish Societies (UIS) launched a successful campaign to decorate the fence surrounding the memorial site with 128 shamrocks.⁷² A nearby road, which passes by the site where 22 fever sheds once stood, was baptized *Rue des Irlandais*. In 1994, the City offered to create a fenced in viewing area on the east side of Bridge Street, which the Irish community gladly accepted. A plaque was installed detailing, for the first time, the full and tragic history of the site. It reads:

*In 1847, six thousand Irish people, seeking refuge in a new land, died here of typhus and other ailments, and were buried in mass graves. The stone marks approximately the centre of the cemetery. Immediately to the east of here, twenty two hospital sheds had been constructed. Many Grey Nuns, several priests, and also John Easton Mills, Mayor of the City of Montreal, who selflessly came to care for the sick, themselves contracted typhus and died. May they rest in peace.*⁷³

With improvements to the memorial site in place, the HMSBC was approached again in 1995. This time, HMSBC agreed to study the issue and assembled a committee of academics, drawn from across the country. After a lengthy period of research and much internal disagreement, HSMBC decided in December, 1997, that "it was not prepared to recommend that the Black Stone Monument is of national historic significance."⁷⁴

The difficulties commemorating the Montreal Famine Cemetery from 1847 to the present have been fraught with politics from the beginning. The Irish community has

⁷⁰ J. Hugh Faulkner, Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs to T.P. Slattery, 4 November 1977, Ship Fever Memorial file, Anglican Archives of Montreal.

⁷¹ H.H. Tees to Reverend Canon Malcolm A. Hughes, Administrative Officer, The Synod of the Diocese of Montreal, 23 July 1982, Ship Fever Memorial file, Anglican Archives of Montreal.

⁷² *Ports of Recall: Memory of the Great Irish Famine in Liverpool and Montreal*, 316.

⁷³ Ibid. 318.

⁷⁴ Lawrence Friend, Executive Secretary, HSMBC, to Don Pidgeon, 24 December 1997, Pidgeon Papers.

been unable to fully defend the cemetery because they never owned the land. Instead, they have had to defend it as best as they could through commemorative marches and events, persuasive political discourse and applications for historic designation. The result, far from satisfactory, is an unprotected monument that presently straddles a traffic island on a busy highway in an inaccessible industrial zone, complete with an urban blight of billboards, electricity pylons and parking lots. The burial site, already so compromised by industrialization, is also still at risk of further damage. In 2005, developers purchased the CN's train yards adjacent to the site of the Irish Stone, raising fears of more cemetery disturbances.⁷⁵ The Irish community's numerous strategies to protect the sacred site reflect a resilient community that will not stop until a satisfactory conclusion is reached, one that will finally restore Montreal's Famine Cemetery as a fitting site for commemorating the estimated 6,000 Famine victims buried there.

The Montreal Irish Monument Park Foundation hopes to provide a solution and has adopted many strategies to accomplish its goal of creating a cultural and memorial park on the site. These include general awareness-building, historical research, investigating land ownership, academic work, supporting commemorative events, networking with stakeholders, designing the proposed park, fundraising and lobbying politicians to support the project.

To date, the Foundation has reported some success. Firstly, research carried out into land ownership has resulted in a detailed map that will allow further study. Secondly, to raise awareness, the Foundation has been supporting related Famine events, such as the AOH Annual Walk to the Irish Stone, the AOH annual pilgrimage to Grosse-Île and a travelling exhibition curated by Dr. Jason King and Dr. Christine Kinealy entitled "Saving the Famine Irish: The Grey Nuns and the Great Hunger." First displayed at Ireland's Great Hunger Institute at Quinnipiac University, the exhibition will arrive in Montreal in March, 2016.⁷⁶ Directors are also busy with traditional and social media campaigns, writing letters to editors, and rallying as much support as possible

⁷⁵ *The Gazette*, 27 October 2005.

⁷⁶ Quinnipiac University. News and Events. March 11, 2015. "Ireland's Great Hunger Institute hosting year-long Grey Nuns exhibition". <http://www.quinnipiac.edu/news-and-events/irelands-great-hunger-institute-hosting-year-long-grey-nuns-exhibition/#sthash.e9U8CcPc.dpuf> (Accessed January 21, 2016).

among Montrealers, Canadians, the Irish Diaspora and people in Ireland, including government officials.

Concerning the design of the proposed cultural and memorial park, the Foundation has been working "with a team of three professors of architecture"⁷⁷ to create various blueprints. In one scenario, the Irish Stone would be moved to the east side of Bridge Street and a large granite Celtic cross would be planted in its former location on the traffic island.



Map 4.0. Proposed Irish Cultural and Memorial Park⁷⁸

The Foundation has also been fundraising and networking with various stakeholders and lobbying politicians at the highest levels of government. On Monday, May 11, 2015, Directors Fergus Keyes, Victor Boyle and Ronan Corbett met with Montreal Mayor Denis Coderre, who has 25% Irish ancestry. The meeting was cordial

⁷⁷ Montreal Irish Monument Park Foundation website. Commemorative Site.

<http://www.montrealirishmonument.com/commemorative-site>. (Accessed January 20, 2016)

⁷⁸ Supplied by the Montreal Irish Monument Park Foundation, the design image can be found on the Optative Theatrical Laboratories Blog. July 7, 2014. <http://www.optative.net/blog/montreal-irish-monument-park-foundation-needs-support-to-right-a-historical-wrong/> (Accessed January 21, 2016)

and delivered some impressive results. According to Keyes: "We were pleased that the mayor clearly understood the historical and cultural importance of the area around the Black Rock and indicated that he would be our champion with the possibility of even having some part of the project in place by 2017 — Montreal's 375th anniversary."⁷⁹ On June 14, 2015, now Prime Minister Justin Trudeau wrote a letter of support for the project, announcing that "this year's walk will also support the creation of a beautiful green space around the Black Rock, honouring this sacred site by creating an inclusive site for all citizens of Montreal."⁸⁰

Another strategy is to take advantage of the excitement surrounding Montreal's 375th anniversary. An organization called Alive375 has been tasked by the City of Montreal with planning projects and celebrations with the goals to "bolster Montrealers' sense of pride and belonging", as well as "to increase the city's visibility and profile abroad."⁸¹ Alive375 would be wise to consider proposals by the Montreal Irish Monument Park Foundation to transform Montreal's derelict Famine Cemetery into a world-class cultural and memorial park.

The Montreal Irish Monument Park Foundation's park proposal would seem to be a perfect match with Alive375's goal to increase the city's visibility and profile abroad. Firstly, Montreal's Famine cemetery would finally join the other 140 monuments on Dr. Emily Mark-FitzGerald's list, tapping into a global trend of responsible Irish Famine commemoration. Keyes believes the memorial site could become a "tourist attraction for the millions of Irish in North America whose ancestors arrived in that 1847 summer and survived."⁸² Indeed, Irish blood flows through an estimated 40% of Quebec's population and 15% of Canadians self-identify as Irish⁸³. It is also noteworthy that the number of Irish Americans (39.6 million) is seven times larger than entire population of Ireland (6.3

⁷⁹ *Montreal Gazette*. July 31, 2015. <http://montrealgazette.com/opinion/columnists/opinion-griffintown-has-a-rich-history> (Accessed January 19, 2016)

⁸⁰ Montreal Irish Monument Park Foundation website. Media & Blog. "Mr. Justin Trudeau & Walk to the Rock" <http://www.montrealirishmonument.com/node/49>. (Accessed January 20, 2016)

⁸¹ Alive375 is the organization charged with planning Montreal's 375 anniversary celebrations: Alive375. Mission. <http://www.375mtl.com/en/making-the-375th/about-us/>. (Accessed January 13, 2016).

⁸² *Montreal Gazette*. June 26, 2014. <http://montrealgazette.com/opinion/opinion-an-irish-memorial-park-at-the-black-rock> (Accessed January 19, 2016)

⁸³ Kernaghan, John. Irish America. "The Tragedy of the Hannah". August/September 2008. <http://irishamerica.com/2008/08/the-tragedy-of-the-hannah/> (Accessed January 20, 2016)

million)⁸⁴. Furthermore, since the 1990s, there has been an increase in so-called "Famine travel," whereby people with an interest in the Irish Famine visit commemorative sites.⁸⁵

Alive375's second goal, bolstering Montrealers' sense of pride and belonging, could also be accomplished. Montrealers have excellent reason to be proud for way the city handled itself in 1847. Instead of caving in to fear, the city mobilized to care for the vulnerable refugees. The highest authorities, including religious leaders and the Mayor himself, put themselves at enormous personal at risk to care for the most destitute, with many of them making the ultimate sacrifice for their selfless efforts. It is difficult to imagine how a city could not be proud for such efforts. Concerning the "sense of belonging", Montreal's Irish heritage is very strong and despite past efforts to make the Irish feel unwelcome (e.g. threatening to destroy the fever sheds in 1847) or unworthy (e.g. refusing to cede the cemetery to the Irish community), the Irish clearly belong in the city they helped build. One need only examine Montreal's coat of arms, created in 1833, which includes an Irish shamrock, "likewise indicative of the fact that many of Montréal's early settlers and their descendants are of Irish blood."⁸⁶ With so many Montrealers claiming Irish ancestry, what better way to bolster a sense of belonging than to begin treating the deceased Famine ancestors in a more respectful way?

To conclude, Montreal's Famine cemetery has experienced severe commemoration difficulties from 1847 to the present, resulting from dubious land ownership, political and religious interference and ongoing industrial expansion. The Grey Nuns, ultimately responsible for the creation of the Famine cemetery, concluded Volume II of their Annals (in 1898) with a lamentation about the sorry state of the burial ground:

⁸⁴ Irish Central. "Number of Irish Americans seven times larger than entire population of Ireland". January 17, 2016. <http://www.irishcentral.com/news/-census-shows-almost-seven-times-more-irish-americans-than-population-of-ireland-218344001-237779801.html> (Accessed January 20, 2016)

⁸⁵ For example, the number of visits to Grosse Île substantially increased, rising from 5400 visits in 1989 to a peak of 41 000 in 1997. See Parks Canada. Grosse Île Management Plan. Visitation figures. <http://www.pc.gc.ca/eng/lhn-nhs/qc/grosseile/docs/plan1/sec5/page5a.aspx> (Accessed January 20, 2016)

⁸⁶ City of Montreal website. Coat of arms, flag and symbols. The coat of arms. http://ville.montreal.qc.ca/portal/page?_pageid=5977,42249635&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL (Accessed January 20, 2016)

This place of Point SAINT-CHARLES which we have stridden is a blessed place, it is home to six thousand (6000) martyrs. The railroad that crosses in all directions before us today in Pointe SAINT-CHARLES and the one thousand and one (1001) dwellings that stand in all directions before us, let us barely see the place that in other times was a valley of epidemic...But if the cooled ashes of our Irish brothers have neither marble nor cypress to shade their graves, Heaven will immortalize their glory, and our Canadian annals will register, with respect, this place of their misfortune and the admirable devotion it produced.⁸⁷

In their conclusion, the Grey Nuns had foreshadowed the very sad state of the Famine cemetery today. With the continued deterioration since the nuns recorded their observations, today it is inaccessible, located in an industrial zone, criss-crossed with urban blight, and is still at risk of being disturbed by developers. Despite the small improvements made during the 1990s, Montreal's Famine cemetery is still far from ideal from a commemorative point of view.

The Montreal Irish Monument Park Foundation offers fresh hope that with its multi-pronged strategic approach, it can resolve the issue once and for all. The city's 375th birthday and the objectives of Alive375 could prove to be the perfect catalyst to propel the project forward, especially with support from Montreal Mayor Denis Coderre and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

As such, the Montreal Irish Monument Park Foundation asks supporters to stay tuned to its website in order to stay abreast of the latest developments and learn about ways to offer support the creation of a world-class Irish cultural and memorial park on the site of Montreal's disgraced Famine cemetery.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ *The Typhus of 1847, Annals of the Grey Nuns, Ancien Journal, volume II*, 112.

⁸⁸ The Montreal Irish Monument Park Foundation website is www.montrealirishmonument.com

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