COMMENTARY

Time to Commemorate Irish Cholera Victims

Hundreds of Irish cholera victims lie forgotten and unremarked in a mass grave in Burlington Heights.

By Robin De Danann

Published December 11, 2014

One of the saddest tales in Hamilton's history is that of the Irish cholera epidemic victims who came here on the immigrant ships of the 1800s, looking for new life - only to find death on our shores. It's the story of people of great religious faith, left to die without benefit of clergy, and buried without ceremony or dignity.

This story ends with a question: though our citizens were unable to offer the victims care and respect at the time, are we willing to offer it now?

The length of York Blvd once known as Burlington Heights is where much of this story takes place. To illustrate the ugliness of burial conditions for the cholera victims, we can turn to the Hamilton Spectator of 1897:

> Not anywhere else in or near the city of Hamilton is it at all likely that a more historically gruesome ground can be found than that around Burlington Heights ... If there is any place about the city where spirits should come from their graves at midnight and flit about in the darkness, it is the Heights...
>
> There is a burying ground there, away upon the high level to the

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> north of the canal. This bleak barren-looking spot is the last resting place of countless cholera victims who died in the city of the dread scourge in the years 1832 to1854. No drearier spot could be found for a burying ground.

This burying ground was the resting place of hundreds of Irish men, women, and children who sailed to Canada fleeing the political oppression by Great Britain which led to years of starvation brought on by the Great Potato Famine.

Tragically, after surviving a two-month journey on overcrowded ships, in unspeakably filthy conditions, many arrived in the land of their dreams to die alone and untended in quarantine tents and shacks erected along the Hamilton bay front.

They carried with them a disease so contagious and lethal that it killed 50 percent of people who came in contact with it, within twenty-four hours, from dehydration brought on by extreme diarrhea and vomiting.

Understandably, our townsfolk, fearing for their lives, could not bring themselves to tend to the dying or bury the contaminated bodies. Immigrants who died onshore were carted up the hill, two to ten a day, to be hastily dumped into a three acre pit on the marsh side of the boulevard, doused in lime, and covered with gravel.

As the last plague outbreak came to a close in 1854, Hamiltonians were eager to forget the tragedy of the last 20 years. The pathetic cholera victims and their mass grave on York Boulevard lay forgotten for at least 50 years, when further indignities began.

In 1904, men collecting gravel up on the York Blvd heights found several human bones. They had unknowingly discovered the old cholera grave. Finding no other use for the human remains, they sold them to curiosity seekers.

In 1923, gravel-diggers working in the same area unearthed several skeletons. The bodies were quickly reburied, and concerned residents

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by Michelle Silverton,

requested proper attention be given to the burial place.

Hamiltonian John Wallace implored the Hamilton Spectator: "When the sacred spot is at last lovingly cared for as it should be, it will add dignity and reverence to the position."

So a small ceremony took place with a commemorative stone being placed by the mayor, and a short blessing offered by Archdeacon Renison. The stone reads: "Guard carefully this resting place of these unknown soldiers, immigrants, and citizens, soldiers of 1812, victims of Ship Disease and Cholera..."

The soldiers were mentioned because the burial pit lay over an earlier mass grave from the War of 1812. The stone remains to this day, where it was placed in 1926, near the high-level bridge - but the bodies no longer lie beneath. Unfortunately the words, "Guard carefully this place" went unheeded, and further indignities would ensue.

In 1962, bulldozers widening York Blvd uncovered hundred of skeletons. The tomb had been re-discovered. A proper re-burial was promised by the City. For two days, men hauled bones, transferring the mass grave to an open pit in the back of Section J in the Hamilton Cemetery across from Dundurn Park. This time, no stone was placed, no blessing offered.

Unbelievably, the grave of almost 500 was left unmarked, uncelebrated, and forgotten yet again - until the 1990s, when a diligent historian discovered its location and a marker stone was placed - honouring the historian for finding the grave! "To commemorate the diligence of Gary Winston Hill, in locating the burial site of hundreds of dear souls, both old and young, who fell victim to the cholera epidemic, 1832 and 1854."

The small memorial stone now sits invisible, overgrown by plants. A proper re-burial? The grave is a very sad place. It would take the rare person to stand at the site and not feel the heaviness that hangs there in the air.

Who were these people anyway, that we should care about their story or their resting place? These are the very people upon whose backs our

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Hamilton Shelters Remarkably

city was built - the ones who survived, anyway.

Those lucky enough to walk away from the quarantine tents found plenty of work awaiting them. Plenty of work, yes - along with the same lack of respect and compassion suffered by the departed.

The Irish arrived when our growing young city needed them most. Heavy-duty labourers were desperately required to build Hamilton's foundations. And work the Irishmen did - building Dundurn Castle, the Desjardins canal, the railroads, city roads, factories, and more.

Wherever the hardest, most back-breaking labour was needed, wherever the lowest wages were offered, the Irish were there. Desperate to overcome centuries of poverty under English rule and years of famine starvation, the Irish were easily taken advantage of.

In lieu of pay, some workers were offered free plots of land in the most worthless part of the city. "Bridgets and Marys" were popular hires too - it was common knowledge that no housemaid worked harder for lower wages than an Irish one.

Sir Allan MacNab himself was only too happy to take advantage of these desperate folk in the runnings of his luxurious home at Dundurn Castle - expecting 16 hours of labour a day for just room and board. And he got quite a deal from Irish labourers in the building of the castle too - especially the ones who accepted the small plots of land MacNab offering in lieu of pay. The land, of course, was practically worthless at the time, in the area known today as Corktown.

Corktown lay beneath the escarpment where drainage was terrible and the streets were nothing but mud and mosquitoes. Land the builders may have had, but who could afford a house? Wooden shacks sheltered numerous family members, friends, and even boarders in one tiny space.

The Specator noted the squalid living conditions citing one case where as many as 27 were found living in a two room shanty. One young man wrote home, "If anyone else is thinking of coming over, tell them not to bother. There's plenty of work, but very little pay. It's as hard to live here

COVID-19 Free Thanks to Innovative Testing Program
by Jason Allen, published December 21, 2020 in *Special Report: COVID-19*
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by Ryan McGreal, published December 08, 2020 in *Special Report: Walkable Streets*
(5 comments)

These Aren't 'Accidents', These Are Results
by Tom Flood, published December 04, 2020 in *Special Report: Walkable Streets*
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Conservation Conundrum
by Paul Weinberg,

as it is at home".

Prejudice was rampant against the Irish for having brought the plague to Hamilton. Yet they prevailed. Today much of our population counts these very people as forebears. And how do we honour the poor souls who didn't make it out of the quarantine tents?

In contrast, let's look at how another city has commemorated the cholera victims who landed on their shores. Gross-Ile, Quebec is the small island in the St. Lawrence River which was used to quarantine the immigrant ships. Thousands of Irish died here - of cholera, typhus, and ship-fever. Thousands were buried in mass graves and thousands of bodies were thrown in the St. Lawrence. It was a large-scale version of the Hamilton cholera epidemic.

While the Quebec burial practices were similar to ours, the treatment of the sick was very different, as would be future commemoration of the burial sites. Chapels were built on the island so that nuns could offer care to the sick, and priests could be in attendance to administer last rites. The clergy took their lives in their hands to offer service to the needy.

When the plague finally petered out, the Gross-Ile cholera victims (like those in Hamilton) were forgotten...for a while. But in 1909, the Ancient Order of Hibernia erected a 50-ft high Celtic Cross monument was placed, dedicated "to the sacred memory of thousands of Irish who, in order to preserve their faith, suffered famine and exile, and victims of typhus and cholera, ended their sorrowful pilgrimage here, comforted and strengthened by the Canadian Priests".

In 1997, a more recent memorial was erected by another Irish cultural society, the opening of which was attended by the Irish President. It bears lists of names of all known victims from 1832 onwards and single tiny monuments for all 1500 of the unknown.

The listed names and ages would bring a tear to anyone's eye, especially the families, e.g. Michael O'Sullivan, 27; Kate O'Sullivan, 24; Eamonn O'Sullivan, 5; Mary O'Sullivan, 2; Joseph O'Sullivan; 6 months. Recently

published December 04, 2020 in *Special Report* (0 comments)

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by Ryan McGreal, published November 18, 2020 in *Special Report: COVID-19* (0 comments)

ARTICLE ARCHIVES

By Month
By Section

BLOG ARCHIVES

the whole island was designated as a National Park and dedicated "To the memory of all those Irish who perished within sight and feel of the first freedom they'd known for centuries".

Remembrance. Dignity. Honour. In Grosse-Ile, yes. In Hamilton? Not so much. At least five hundred Irish Catholics died here without receiving health care, the last rites, or a funeral mass. They were thrown in a pit on unconsecrated ground, dug up and sold, run over by bulldozers, and moved to a Protestant cemetery, and finally placed in a mass grave which remained unmarked for 35 years.

Having been made aware of these facts, is it not unconscionable to leave the situation unremedied? Poor handling of this tragic situation was perhaps understandable at the time, but what prevents us today from correcting old mistakes?

These people could have been any of our great-great-great grandparents. They may not be our direct ancestors, but they are part of our family. And family deserves better than this.

In closing, a three-part proposal:

1. That a priest visit the mass grave at Hamilton Cemetery to offer last rites or an appropriate blessing to the souls resting there.
2. That St. Patrick's, the symbolic Irish church of Hamilton, offer a funeral mass or at least a commemorative mass, inviting the Irish-Canadian community to take part in the honouring of their people.
3. That donations be taken up toward Famine Relief, in the name of the immigrants who came to our country seeking relief from the Great Famine of Ireland - a great project for St. Patrick's parishioners or members of Hamilton's Irish-Canadian Club.

By Month
By Section

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Robin De Danann is a hobbyist writer, born and raised in Hamilton. Local history is one of her favourite topics of study.

6 Comments

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By Kevo (registered) | Posted December 11, 2014 at 10:34:30

Another place that's worth mention is the City of Toronto's Ireland Park on the lakeshore, hidden behind/beside the abandoned Canada Malton Co. silos at the Bathurst Quay. It's the location (roughly) where the coffin ships arrived with Irish immigrants during the famine. There's statues there depicting the arrival of the Irish, while in Dublin along the River Liffey there's the same Irish statues departing the country. There are also giant stones with the names of those who are known to have died in the fever shacks in Toronto engraved onto it. (foundation website: http://www.irelandparkfoundation.com/)

I'm sure even a single statue on the Burlington Heights or cemetery grounds along the lines of what the Toronto/Dublin memorial has would probably be appropriate and send a message. I've seen both groups of statues and it's fairly haunting to see the emaciated figures.

After reading this article I'm a little happy that my Irish family came later on in the 1800s (~1870s). Thanks for the article, it's always crazy to see how far we've come in certain areas.

Permalink | Context

By Fake Name (anonymous) | Posted December 11, 2014 at 12:00:12

I had no idea... this city has so much history and we do so little to commemorate it.

Permalink | Context

By fran (anonymous) | Posted December 11, 2014 at 14:23:38

This is a disgrace that there has not been proper treatment of these poor souls. The City of Hamilton is built upon the backs of many Irish emigrants and we need to have a proper monument placed by the city and a proper religious burial ceremony by the Diocese of Hamilton. What if it was YOUR ancestors?

Permalink | Context

By erskinec (registered) - website | Posted December 12, 2014 at 22:05:21

Great post. Despite the challenges, the Irish survived and built a great community in Hamilton. In my opinion, their role in the growth and development of Hamilton is still not fully recognized or appreciated. For example, the lost of John Bradley's house, the Bellevue, was a real lost to Hamilton and to its Irish history. Here was one of the original members of the pre-famine community, who achieved significant success in terms of business and politics. In retirement, Bradley builts a beautiful mansion overlooking the community that give him so much - Corktown. Despite his importance to the history of Hamilton and architectural legacy of Bellevue, the City would not save his former home destruction. With regards to the steps that you recommend for the marking the history of Irish cholera victims, I believe they are both reasonable and modest. You have my support.

Comment edited by erskinec on 2014-12-12 22:06:03

Artist and film-maker with a focus on the Hamilton. The Erskine family

has either worked or lived in Hamilton for over 100 years.

Permalink | Context

By 2bhonest (registered) | Posted December 12, 2014 at 23:17:03

If anyone is interested in reading more about this, there is an online book:

Ch2olera: Hamilton's Forgotten Epidemics / D. Ann Herring and Heather T. Battles, editors.

https://macsphere.mcmaster.ca/bitstream/...

It is a fascinating read and explains all the social and economic facts surrrounding the Cholera epidemic. It certainly was a horrendous time.

Permalink | Context

By Richard (anonymous) | Posted September 01, 2015 at 19:37:09

it is disappointing that there is no record of the names of those buried in the mass grave.
Or has anyone had some success?

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