

Trust Looks To Refurbish Historical Cemetery

By Nicole Myshak

In the heart of Halifax lie the mortal remains of thousands of people who shaped the society that surrounds them.

These individuals established, and served within, the schools, hospitals, churches and institutions built around their final resting place.

And yet, despite their legacy, factors of vandalism, weather, time and neglect have threatened to bury with them the memory of these faithful departed.

Dr. Brian O'Brien hopes to stand against this possibility and preserve both the historical and ancestral heritage of those resting within Halifax's oldest Catholic cemetery.

In collaboration with fellow members of the Holy Cross Cemetery Trust, O'Brien has begun a fundraising campaign to assist in restoring the site, which has been used since 1842.

"I really want to do this," he states. "The present condition is deplorable."

O'Brien explains that the Trust has both the encouragement and authorization from the Archdiocese of Halifax and the Catholic Cemeteries Commission. "We have their approval to undertake what we're doing," he says.

As he provides a tour of the graveyard, O'Brien motions to where fences have been damaged by those seeking a shortcut across the cemetery property. Continuing on, he passes several tombstones that were knocked over and smashed by vandals.

"The devastation, it is appalling," he says sadly.

While some grave markers are leaning slightly, others seem ready to topple over. O'Brien comments that they look like the rickety teeth of a vitamin-deficient person.

He indicates that the Trust would like to begin to "refurbish the place."



GRAVE MARKERS at Holy Cross Cemetery are in dire need of repair. A trust has been formed to raise \$800,000 to repair the stones, provide lighting, secure the property from vandalism and other things in order to preserve the historical property. (Contributed photo)

O'Brien says they aim to restore the gravestones to an upright position. He adds that, come May, volunteers can do some of the manual work themselves. However, he stresses that the remainder of the realignment demands professional attention.

Greater security through improved lighting and fences is also needed. O'Brien is certain this would help to minimize vandalism.

Another major task of the Holy Cross Cemetery Trust pertains to the names and inscriptions on the gravestones.

Trust members intend to research and record this information and place it onto an interactive disc to be made available to the public. In the future, O'Brien says a computer-based cataloguing system would be accessible to visitors of the graveyard and those completing genealogical research.

The price tag on these and other restorative initiatives is an estimated \$800,000.

O'Brien admits this is a "substantial undertaking." Even so, he's happy to contribute his time and energy. "This is something new for me," he says. "I want to get it done."

Recently retired from a 50-year long career as an eye surgeon, O'Brien believes in the importance of this endeavor.

He explains that there are 2,500 stone markers within the confines of Holy Cross Cemetery which designates some of the final resting places for 25,000 people, most of whom are of Irish descent.

Amongst these are people from "all walks of life," he adds.

O'Brien notes how the first Catholic Prime Minister of Canada, Sir John Sparrow David Thompson, as well as numerous archbishops, "war heroes," clergy, religious,

mayors, "and ordinary people," like his own relatives, lie in the South Park Street graveyard.

Buried at Holy Cross are his great grandfather and great grandmother as well as his great-great grandfather and great-great grandmother. Additionally O'Brien discovered that several of his mother's relatives were also laid to rest there. "I didn't even know it!" he exclaims.

He calls their presence just "one reason" for his motivation.

O'Brien insists that the memories of all of these people should be respectfully commemorated. "We owe it to our ancestors," he says.

He hopes that those with family members in the graveyard might feel the same and take on the responsibility of fixing the grave markers of their deceased relatives.

Although many of the tombstones in the cemetery are "hardly legible,"

O'Brien points out a few which were restored by relatives of the deceased.

He speaks of the trials endured by former generations and how, through them, their descendants are "lucky to be alive."

O'Brien also acknowledges their "substantial contribution" to society in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and Canada. He's adamant that something must be done "in honour to them."

Citing one such example of the lasting legacy left by these people, the chairman of the Holy Cross Cemetery Trust recounts how on Aug. 31, 1843, 1,800 men were "motivated by Bishop Walsh" to build Our Lady of Sorrows Chapel.

Following a Mass at St. Mary's Cathedral Basilica, the men took tools and supplies and made their way to the present day site of Holy Cross Cemetery. In one day they built the chapel that stands in the center of the cemetery.

O'Brien is disturbed that the graveyard's current condition could reflect the present generation's concept of, and regard for, their own heritage.

And yet he notes honestly that, for much of his professional life, he worked on the periphery of Holy Cross Cemetery without an awareness of the treasure next to him. "I didn't even notice it," he confesses.

Even so, the first time he visited the cemetery O'Brien says he was struck by "the mess" he encountered.

Surprised by what he saw, O'Brien was motivated to do something.

Through becoming involved O'Brien says he experienced an "awakening" to the importance of his personal history. He speaks of this as a "journey" of rediscovery.

With emotion he recalls his grandfather telling him to remember who he was, and where he came from. "I sure understand now," he says. †