

Sackville Connections to the Halifax Explosion

AN INTRODUCTION TO A MARITIME DISASTER

On the morning of December 6, the Norwegian vessel *Imo* left its mooring in Halifax harbor for New York City. At the same time, the French freighter *Mont Blanc*, its cargo hold packed with highly explosive munitions—2,300 tons of picric acid, 200 tons of TNT, 35 tons of high-octane gasoline, and 10 tons of gun cotton—was forging through the harbor's narrows to join a military convoy that would escort it across the Atlantic.

At approximately 8:45 a.m., the two ships collided, setting the picric acid ablaze. The *Mont Blanc* was propelled toward the shore by its collision with the *Imo*, and the crew rapidly abandoned the ship, attempting without success to alert the harbor of the peril of the burning ship. Spectators gathered along the waterfront to witness the spectacle of the blazing ship, and minutes later it brushed by a harbor pier, setting it ablaze. The Halifax Fire Department responded quickly and was positioning its engine next to the nearest hydrant when the *Mont Blanc* exploded at 9:05 a.m. in a blinding white flash.

The massive explosion killed more than 1,800 people, injured another 9,000—including blinding 200—and destroyed almost the entire north end of the city of Halifax, including more than 1,600 homes. The resulting shock wave shattered windows 50 miles away, and the sound of the explosion could be heard hundreds of miles away.



The SS Imo immobilized on the Halifax shore.

Thankfully, the reach of the explosion was not far enough to seriously affect Sackville – only some windows were broken. However, many Sackville area families were affected by the disaster.

Harold T. Barrett

On December 6th, 1917, a devastating explosion rocked the city of Halifax. The explosion was caused after two container ships collided in the Halifax Harbor.

At fifteen, Harold T. Barrett had saved enough money to buy himself a brand-new suit. On December 6th, 1917, Harold decided to wear this suit to go visit family in Halifax. It was not long after he arrived, when the Halifax Explosion occurred.

Harold was hospitalized and could not be identified. He was stripped of his new suit because of the blood and debris that had ruined it. He was in a hospital for three days, and had no way to contact his family. Harold's father, Frank, journeyed to Halifax after the explosion in hopes of finding his son, but with no luck.

While his family presumed the worst, Harold was released from the hospital and set out for home. Unfortunately, after boarding a train, he learned that the train was not going to stop in Beaver Bank. Harold came across a friend, Bill Peverill, on the train who invited him to stay the night with him in Bedford. After that, Harold returned home on the Monday following the explosion to his family's relief.



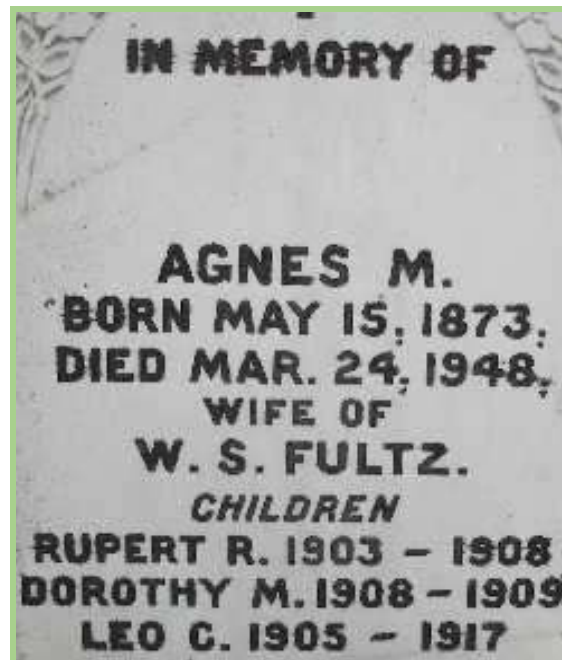
Harold T. Barrett pictured later in life.

LEO CHARLES FULTZ

Leo Charles Fultz, son of William Silver and Agnes Fultz of Halifax, Nova Scotia was born in 1905 and was a relative of the Sackville Fultz family. At the time of the explosion, Leo was 12 years old and though he and his family were Roman Catholics, he attended the non-denominational St. Patrick's Boys School on Lockman Street, which is now Barrington Street. The explosion heavily damaged the school and a new fireproof Boys' School was opened in 1921 and the original school was turned into a spice factory. Leo lived at 270 Gottingen Street in Halifax and would have most likely been walking to school at the time of the explosion.

Unlike many of the Halifax schoolchildren, Leo was not killed immediately by the explosion. He was struck by a falling beam and hospitalized. Unfortunately, Leo Charles Fultz passed away in the hospital due to his injuries ten days later on December 16, 1917.

Leo's great-great-great-grandfather was Johann Fultz. His great-great grandfather was John William Fultz, brother to Anthony Fultz. This would make Leo and Bennett Daniel Fultz, the man who built the structure that is the Fultz House Museum, second-cousins twice removed.



Leo Charles Fultz's stone at Mount Olivet Cemetery

HELEN HOPKINS

Helen Hopkins was a local with connections to two of the large families in Sackville. One side of her family was derived from the Fenerty family who were a large lumber milling family who Charles Fenerty, the unofficial founder of the pulp paper process, was related to. The other half of her family was related to the Payne family. Her grandmother, Emily Payne, was a Sackville local who, during the First World War, built eleven rooms onto her home and raised illegitimate children as her own.

In her book *Take My Hand: A Casual Stroll Through the Life of Helen Hopkins*, she speaks about her experience of surviving the Halifax Explosion. Then, only three days old, Helen Hopkins was living on Waterloo Street in Halifax with her family. Though windows were shattered and properties were destroyed, it was the loss of her father that she remembers the most. Her father, who was a carpenter, was working on a rooftop with a Mr. Peverill on the morning that the two ships collided in the harbour. Mr. Peverill stood unharmed as her father was hurled skyward and then crashed back on to the rooftop, breaking every bone in his body. Despite all of his injuries, Charles Walter Orme Payne hung on long enough to be taken home so he could say good-bye to his family.



Helen Hopkins is pictured above, months after the explosion.

CHARLES PAYNE

Sackville resident, Charles Walter Payne, also died in the explosion. He built the pulpit at St. John the Evangelist Anglican Church. However, in the records he is referred to as Walter Payne. His children and wife survived, however. His wife was born as Gertrude Maude Fenerty, another connection to a historic Sackville family.

THE FENERTY FAMILY

A member of the Fenerty family was killed in the explosion as well, but his relation to the Fenerty family in Sackville is unknown.

MARJORIE GROVE

Marjorie Grove, a Beaver Bank local, was the granddaughter of Peter Blakeney who ran the first telephone office in Sackville and the first post office in Middle Sackville. During a 1992 interview on Seniors in Action, Marjorie Grove spoke about her experience during the Halifax Explosion from a local perspective. While speaking with interviewer Paula Marek, she explained: "We were living down there by the Fultz house and my brother was sitting at the table eating breakfast at that time and he had just sat down and there was a big window right behind him and he had porridge on his plate. And when the window broke, how it happened I don't know, but the glass just came right around him and it swooped the porridge off the table and the dishes off the table and he never got a scratch. And there were two women that lived handy there and they were out just running and screaming. They said "The Germans are in Halifax, the Germans are in Halifax!" They were terrified. There were over 20 panes of glass broken in the house that we were in that day."

OTHER NOTABLE LOSSES

Members of the Wright, Little, Ellis and Fader families, all of whom were families historically involved in Sackville, were killed in the explosion as well.

A CONCLUDING THOUGHT....

Sackville's distance from the explosion limited the direct impact, but the impact on its families and historic residents would last for years.