

Rucksack Summer '98

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News Briefs

- Access to the woods of McNabs Island was restricted and campfires were banned during the spell of hot and dry weather in August, a situation similar to last year's.
- Dalhousie University's Animal Behaviour field course, taught by Andy Horn of the Department of Biology, again visited McNabs Island in late August.
- The Friends of McNabs Island Society (FOMIS) is negotiating with the Nova Scotia Department of Natural Resources a lease for the former Island Teahouse (see photo). Difficulties include the high cost of insurance for the structure.
- There are no reports so far of any debris from the recent tragic Swissair Flight 111 crash off Peggys Cove washing up on the shoreline of the three Halifax Harbour islands, even though items from the plane have unexpectedly fetched up on Eastern Shore beaches on the other side of Halifax Harbour.
- Discover McNabs Island, our successful 91-page guide to McNabs and Lawlor Islands, has been reprinted. The original was published in 1995. Copies of the book are available for \$ 9.95 plus shipping from our society (434-2254) or from most local bookstores. The Bookroom (423-8271) continues to look after distribution of Discover McNabs Island to retail outlets. Other publications available from F.O.M.I.S. are our 18" x 27" colour poster of Halifax Harbour (\$ 5) and our pamphlet/map McNabs Island: Park-in-the-Making (free).

DEADMANS ISLAND: A HALIFAX HARBOUR "ISLAND" IN JEOPARDY

Another site -once sacred ground- remains under siege. It has captured the eyes of those who wish to use the small few acre hill near the end of the

Northwest Arm for a housing complex. A long time local resident took me on a tour of the site. He points out the site of a grave marker, that has long since disappeared. However, that marker for John Dixon, originally from Cape Breton, was removed to the Provincial Archives in 1931. Evidence of graves is gone. At the top of the hill, diggings for a gold cache have so far proven fruitless. But collectors continue to search for shots used in front loading muskets of an earlier era.

Deadmans Island... many will ask: "Where is it? What was it?" When told, they will say "Never knew it existed. How big is it." The small island, facing nearby Melville Island, the home of Armdale yacht Club, to the south, is much less than a mile in circumference. The well-walked grounds, if left alone, would soon be a primeval forest.

There is no doubt that the native population and succeeding Melville Island authorities used Deadmans Island as a burial ground. M'ikmaq travelled the Northwest Arm. They called it Waegvoltic, for "deep water", or "end of the bay", or "salt water all the way up". More frequent use of the burial site likely came about after 1804, when nearby Melville Island was sold by John Kavanaugh and his wife to the Commissioners for His Majesty's Transport Service. Prior to the sale Melville Island had been known as Kavanaugh's Island and before then as Cowie's Island, as it was part of an earlier 160 acre grant to Robert Cowie and John Aubeney.

The area's documented history, however, begins with the military. In 1803, Melville Island was first used for internment of prisoners. In 1808, prisoners from the Napoleonic War and the War of 1812 were kept on the site. In 1855 the island was placed at the disposal of the British Army by the Royal Navy and housed recruits for the British Foreign Legion. Landing at Queens Wharf, recruits marched overland to the island.

By 1856 Melville Island was no longer a Royal Navy prison. It had been transferred to the British War Department and became a regular military prison for backsliding soldiers. In January of that year the number of prisoners stood at seventy, with only two of the buildings occupied.

During periods of military lull Melville Island was available for other purposes. Seeking refuge with the British, deserting Black Slaves, numbering some 800, used the site as a temporary station in 1815-16. At least one eighth of them died of smallpox. In 1847 immigrants with typhus were moved to the island facilities. Thirty-seven, mostly aged, died. For all of the above a burial was paramount.

Original records on the number of people buried on Deadmans Island remain elusive. The 1814 diary of a prisoner of war mentions a burial having taken place on "Target Hill". At the moment there are more questions on the number of burials than answers. Lois Kernaghan, in an article for the Heritage Trust, states the "discovery of various skeletons". Reference is also made to "Target Hill".

Besides its role as a burial site, Deadmans Island served other purposes when the years began desecrating the sacred ground and evidence of its original use. It is basically two islands, at very high tides only. The smaller one in recent times held a house and a dance pavilion, which crumbled from neglect in the 1930's. Another house stood at the foot of the hill in the cove. Whether the higher or the lower hill was used as the burial ground is not known.

Deadmans Island, or "Target Hill", is not a pristine site. No one denies using land for development as long as it is not land with historical or recreational value. This site, however, could and should become part of the park land to Dingle Tower. It could become integrated with the waterfront trail along Northwest Arm, talked about by area planners. It remains part of the historical richness associated with Halifax, a legacy and heritage from time immemorial.

Too few have ever heard of Deadmans Island or "Target Hill". With all visitors to historical Halifax, it is becoming important that we inform ourselves. This small site, as small as it is, is another tourist opportunity for Nova Scotia and for Halifax, and needs to be exploited. If it is covered up it will lose its historical merits and its attractiveness to visitors.

No other area in North America is more fertile than Halifax in its history and heritage. Deadmans Island is another in our doggie-bag of points of historical significance.

J.P. LeBlanc

*(**Editors Note:** The author is the founding president of the Pier 21 Society and co-author of the book *Pier 21: The Gateway That Changed Canada*. The owners of Deadmans Island, really a peninsula except during extremely high tides such as during Hurricane Hortense in September 1996, have recently proposed to build a residential development on the site.)*