

# HALIFAX CITY HALL



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Lithograph of City Hall with Edward Elliot's monogram which appeared in "The Architect", Nov 25, 1887

## Halifax City Hall

In 1987, on the recommendation of the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada, Halifax City Hall became a National Historic Site because of the "Civic pride and optimism... symbolized by its monumental scale, elaborate design and prominent location on the Grand Parade".



But nearly one hundred years earlier, on 18 August 1888, Halifax was also brimming over with pride and optimism. On that day, when the cornerstone was laid for Halifax's new City Hall, Mayor Patrick O'Mullin compared the splendour of the city with the Halifax of days gone by, and concluded by saying:

"I am quite sure [this edifice] will be an ornament to the city and a credit to the architect and the builders, and indeed to all concerned." - Mayor Patrick O'Mullin, 1888

Surveyors originally laid out the streets leading up to the Citadel in 1749, placing "The Parade" at the centre, with St. Paul's Anglican Church taking shape at one end in 1750 and then Dalhousie College in 1821 on the current City Hall site. Dalhousie was reluctant to relinquish this prime location, however, but they were eventually convinced to move (and after considerable debate) in 1886 - in exchange for their current site on the south end of the Peninsula and \$20,000 in compensation.



St. Paul's Episcopal Church, 1777

## Struggle for Civic Incorporation

From its founding, Halifax's population and prosperity ebbed and flowed with war. Prosperity came indeed during the long war with Revolutionary France and Napoleon from 1793 to 1815, but with peace came a deep depression. However, peace also saw what has been called an intellectual awakening, as Nova Scotians sought to reform the city's governance.

One such reformer was Joseph Howe. As owner and editor of the Novascotian newspaper, Howe had the means to arouse the populace against abuses at the hands of His Majesty's Council, or the infamous Council of Twelve — all of them appointed. They considered themselves not responsible to the citizens of Halifax, but solely to the colony's Governor.



Joseph Howe - July 1869

After Howe won a victory against the offended magistrates, who had charged him with publishing a criminal libel, he was soon elected to the House of Assembly and to the leadership of the Reformers, who sought constitutional reform and an end to oligarchical rule by the Council of Twelve.

Halifax's incorporation now became a major goal for Reformers, a goal they finally achieved when An Act to Incorporate the Town of Halifax passed on 10 April 1841.

Halifax's first civic election was held shortly after on 12 May. Next morning the newspapers carried the results, heartily approving of the worthy men elected.





Stained glass window,  
coat of arms, City Hall



Hooked-rug of coat  
of arms, City Hall



Coat of arms sculpture on City Hall exterior

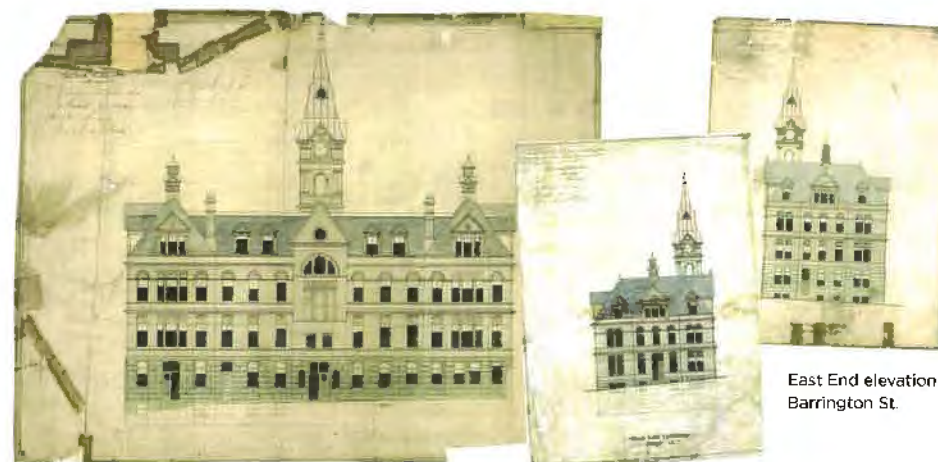
## Prospering Halifax and a New City Hall

Creating Halifax's urban infrastructure did not come without difficulty, but by mid-century, Halifax had a dependable piped water supply, street cleaning, sewers and mud-free sidewalks — all of them befitting a community of some 20,000. Then, after almost thirty years of construction, the completion of the star-shaped masonry fortification on Citadel Hill demonstrated Halifax's strategic significance for British imperial defence. Rudyard Kipling called Halifax "Warden of the Honour of the North".

Its prospering seaport and military importance were symbolically linked in 1850, when the City's coat of arms was granted. It displayed a fisherman with a cod fish in his right hand and a naval seaman, both supporting a blue shield. The shield featured a gold kingfisher (a heraldic symbol for the fishing industry) surmounted by a golden mural crown in the form of an embattled wall, a device widely used in civic heraldry. On a ribbon at the shield's base was the City's motto:

E MARI MERCES ("WEALTH FROM THE SEA").

Tragically, in 1859, the first of two great fires swept along Hollis, Barrington and Granville streets, destroying most of the buildings — and then the city core was razed again in 1861, including several newspaper offices and large stores of liquor, which exploded. Most of the city's older architectural gems date from the rebuilding that followed.



Original architectural renderings - Duke Street

West End elevation - Argyle St.

East End elevation -  
Barrington St.

## A New City Hall

The confidence and prosperity symbolized by the coat of arms found solid expression after the Great Fire of 1861 in such new stone buildings as the Granville Block, the Halifax Club on Hollis Street, the Customs House and Post Office (today the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia). But as Haligonians recognized, especially after they saw Saint John, Montreal and Ottawa all build new city halls during 1870's, their city hall had become more and more inconvenient, with overcrowding and a roof that had leaked for years.

In 1886, then, the City's Board of Works asked for competitive plans for a proposed new city hall. One set of plans, marked "Gladstone", were earmarked for the competition's first prize of \$300. Negotiations also began with Dalhousie College to purchase their building on Grand Parade and build a new City Hall on the site.

Haligonians got their first real view of the plans when *The Citizen and Evening Chronicle* published front, rear and side views of "The Noble Structure". The paper also provided an extensive written description and history of the project.

Then, on 22 October at a special meeting — and after considerable debate — City Council adopted Gladstone's plans as the official design.

Gladstone proved to be Edward Elliot, a Dartmouth native who had trained in Boston and returned to a Bedford Row office in Halifax. He had chosen the Second Empire style, a style that had become immensely popular in the 1870's and 1880's after its use in Napoleonic France.

Typifying the increasingly elaborate and monumental appearance of architecture in this era, the Second Empire style's most distinguishing





feature was the mansard roof, a double pitched roof with a steep lower slope. This may have, in fact, been what won Elliot the contest: the Board of Works and City Council sought a design that would be a visually prominent landmark that acted as a symbol of a progressive and vibrant city.

Elliot's design underwent a series of modifications, and what had begun as a rather austere building ended up becoming a structure with a variety of decorative elements designed to enhance the building's monumental character.

## Constructing City Hall

After a false start when the winning construction bidder could not fulfil his contractual obligations, construction began in earnest when the City brought in Rhodes, Curry Co. from Amherst, to complete the work.

Granite was used for the bottom storey, while for the two upper stories bright freestone from Wallace quarries on the province's North Shore was used. Brown freestone from the River John area made up the trimmings and cornices.

With payments to the original contract, to Rhodes, Curry and to the architect (who received \$500) the total cost of building Halifax's City Hall came to \$105,000.



Official public gathering at City Hall

## First Council Meeting, the Mayor's 'At Home,' and an historic first

Mayor David McPherson presided over the first council meeting in the new City Hall on Wednesday, 14 May 1890, but it was about a week later when, on 22 May, he held an "At Home" attended by twelve hundred well-attired ladies and gentlemen of Halifax.

They approached through the Grand Parade — long a popular choice for the City Hall's eventual location — passing brilliantly illuminated Chinese lanterns on the way. On the second floor, the band of the 63rd Regiment entertained, while on the third floor, guests promenaded and enjoyed refreshments of ice cream and chocolate cake. The Morning Herald's reporter believed everyone "obtained a new idea of the privilege of citizenship in Halifax".

And finally, later that same year on 5 September, the Nova Scotian flag was hoisted on the new flagstaff for the first time.



## The Halifax Explosion

When the Halifax Explosion of 6 December 1917 laid waste to two square miles of Halifax, City Hall became an operational centre in the aftermath.

As Mayor Peter Martin was away, his responsibilities fell on Deputy Mayor Henry Colwell. Colwell had been walking from his South Park Street home to his office with friends when they heard a massive explosion and "The ground came up to meet them". After determining his family had survived, he realized he "held the most important position in Halifax". He reached City Hall at about 9:30 and there he was to remain for the next four days and nights, with virtually no sleep.



Explosion relief efforts - City Hall

Under Colwell, City Hall became the focus for a myriad of relief activities. The distribution of food, for example, was handled on the second floor. Emergency housing was run out of the Tax Collector's Office. Initially, City Hall also served as the headquarters for medical relief.

All of this was possible because although the explosion's blast broke nearly every window and created chaos within offices, the exterior suffered little structural damage. Even the clock tower survived the blast, though the massive old clock never ran again.



## Unveiling and Dedication of the Cenotaph, 1 July 1929

On Dominion Day, 1929, the largest number of citizens ever to gather at the Grand Parade witnessed the unveiling of Halifax's memorial to her citizens who had served in the Great War, and especially to the 1360 men and women who had died. Thousands lined the rails around the Parade and crowded into surrounding streets, even mounting roof tops seeking better vantage points.



Cenotaph of Grand Parade

## A New Coat of Arms and a Mace

During the celebrations surrounding the bicentenary, the lack of standardization in the reproduction of the City's "Arms" caused City Council to authorize the preparation of a revised coat of arms. It differed chiefly from the old coat of arms in having the cod fisherman and naval seaman portrayed in 1860 dress, the year the first arms had been adopted.



Current Halifax Coat of Arms

After considerable deliberation, a new coat of arms gained approval from Council and the Provincial government on 22 October 1964.

In the year following the bicentenary, at a special ceremony on 14 August 1950, the Royal Canadian Navy presented a mace to the City to mark its long association with Halifax. The mace, a symbol of authority, is to this day brought into the Chamber during regular meetings of Council and placed in its holder in front of the Mayor, where it remains until adjournment of the meeting.



Mace

Its stand is fashioned from French-polished wood, with two brass dolphins standing on each end forming the rest for the mace. Engraved on the mace itself is the mural crown from the City's coat of arms denoting Halifax as a fortified city.

The Canadian coat of arms and those of the Province of Nova Scotia, the City of Halifax and HMCS Stadacona appear below the mural crown, and beneath the coats of arms are plaques depicting the sails of a British man-of-war with the Admiral's pennant.

Near the naval crown are four maple leaves, which in turn are enveloped by the thistle, shamrock, fleur-de-lys and rose, all symbolic of those who settled early Canada. Crests of the various armed services units associated with Halifax's history also appear, while clustered near the end of the brass knob are four sea horses, heraldic beasts symbolic of port cities.



Cenotaph - Grand Parade - 1929 unveiling

## 20th Century Renovations

In 1940, City Council had architect Sydney Dumaresq design and oversee comprehensive interior space changes, including to the mayor's office and the Council Chamber. In preparation for the City's bicentenary in 1949, Council had the building cleaned using acid and steam. The Canadian Pacific Railway also gave a massive wooden flagstaff for the Grand Parade, 126 feet high—at the time the tallest in the Commonwealth.

Some of the work however did more harm than good, but citizens were amazed at the reappearance of the cream and red sandstone, which for so many years had been covered with black grime.

In April 1956, under Mayor Leonard Kitz, the well-known Halifax architect, J. Philip Dumaresq, undertook a major renovation of the Council Chamber. He created a seating arrangement in the shape of a horseshoe, with the walls panelled in oak, concealed lighting, and the windows fitted with green bamboo screens. The official opening of the renovated Council Chamber took place on 17 January 1957.

Also that April, A. H. MacMillan, a former deputy mayor and a skillful wood carver, presented the City's coat of arms, carved in American white oak. The arms were placed above the mayor's chair.



HRM's coat of arms, carved in American white oak - A. H. MacMillan



## Grand Parade Improvements

On 16 March 1978, City Council authorized extending the Grand Parade to the entrance of St. Paul's Church, "bringing City Hall and Saint Paul's together across a common green, church and state renewed in the sharing of their City's hallowed ground".

The Grand Parade was upgraded again for the 1995 meeting of the G7 leaders in Halifax; replacing the asphalt on the Grand Parade with paving stones, the balustrade on Argyle Street was upgraded at the City Hall end, new site lighting was installed and the steps down from Argyle Street were renewed.



Present-day Halifax Hall

## Rehabilitation Programme and Halifax Hall

Two years later in 1980 Council approved a five-year City Hall Rehabilitation Programme. Stonework was repaired and windows replaced; extensive changes were also made to the interior to ensure precious space was better used.

Then, in 1983, vacant space on the main floor at the east end was completely renovated to create Halifax Hall, the beautiful reception hall that hosts events such as the annual New Year's Day levee. Materials came from around the globe: pewter chandeliers from Spain, hallway lights from Alabama, chairs from Quebec, and carpet from the Crossley carpet factory in nearby Truro.

In 1998, structural repairs were made to the roof and the tower - which was re-coppered.

A year later the Halifax Foundation, a community foundation serving the Halifax Regional Municipality, placed two clock faces in the tower, the northern one permanently fixed at 9:04.35 to commemorate the Halifax Explosion.



North Clock face permanently fixed to 9:04.35

Ornamental carving over windows on City Hall exterior



Before restoration



After replacement - new carving

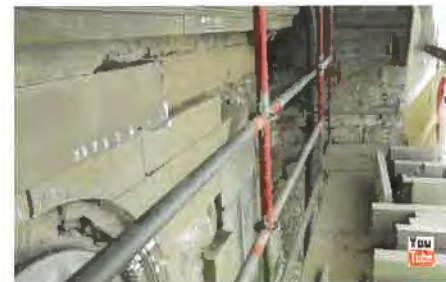
## Latest Restoration of City Hall

In 2009, a major restoration of City Hall was begun, in four phases, for completion in the fall of 2013. The restoration of the stone facade was the project focus but once work began, many other issues came to light - the roof, downspouts, windows and dormers all needed repair or replacing; restoration of the walls of the moat, replacement of the iron railings around the building; to waterproofing the roof on the stables and to restore sections of the retaining wall along Barrington St., which were falling outwards.

Wherever possible, original stonework was kept and a careful architectural design was developed for stone masons to know which stones were to be kept and those to be replaced. New red sandstone was imported from Germany, as it was the closest match, but other stone was sourced locally.

Throughout the restoration, major conservation issues were faced. One such decision was whether to keep the corner stone, originally laid in 1888, or to replace it. Although worn, the main features of the stone were intact, so the project team kept the original stone.

The substantial restoration is protected by cornices and flashing which will reduce the amount of moisture on the City Hall stones. The restoration work is expected to last for over 50 years.



Sandstone Restoration - 2013



Check our YouTube channel for videos on the restoration



Halifax Harbour

## Halifax Regional Municipality and Beyond

With the creation of the Halifax Regional Municipality in 1996, incorporating the region's 380,000 inhabitants under one municipal government, City Hall became its seat of government.

Renovations to the Council Chamber were necessary, however, before the newly elected Council for the Halifax Regional Municipality could meet there. On 11 February 1997, the Council held its first meeting in the remodelled Council Chamber.

A new coat of arms, badge and flag, adopted by Council in 1998, received approval on 29 September 1999 from Robert Watt, Chief Herald of Canada.

Each of Halifax's four founding communities is represented by specific heraldic symbols: a kingfisher for the former City of Halifax, ships for the City of Dartmouth, wavy blue bars representing water for old Halifax County, and a broad arrow for Bedford.

This coat of arms beautifully and fittingly symbolizes the history and diversity of the new metropolitan region that can rightfully take pride in its past achievements, while displaying full confidence in its future destiny.

That our City Hall, with its graceful eminence overlooking the Grand Parade, should be the centre of Halifax's heart for yesterday, today and tomorrow – reflects the rightful pride of her citizens in our notable and often colourful history.



# UNCOVER THE HISTORY & HERITAGE OF HALIFAX'S CITY HALL



Birth of City Hall



Laying the Cornerstone for City Hall



Prospering Halifax & a New City Hall



History of City Hall



City Hall Today

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