



IN THIS ISSUE

Grades 4-12

HALIFAX EXPLOSION: 100 Years On

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It's considered one of the deadliest disasters in Canadian history. On December 6, 1917, two vessels collided in Halifax Harbour. One was carrying explosives. The ensuing explosion ripped through the city, literally flattening the north end. Two thousand people were killed and another 9,000 were injured or maimed. It's an accident that scarred the city and its residents for decades. One hundred years later, we look back on the events of that harrowing day and how it continues to impact people, families and communities today.

Related Curio.ca content

- Key Events in Canadian History (collection)
- Shattered City: The Halifax Explosion (feature film)

CREDITS

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Video Review

Before Viewing



The Halifax Explosion is one of the deadliest disasters in Canadian history. Have a class discussion or partner-talk about the following questions. Your teacher can provide a

brief synopsis if you are unfamiliar with the event.

- What do you think life was like in Halifax in 1917?
- How do you think people who survived the explosion coped?
- How do we prepare for disasters today?
- Can you think of any major disasters that occurred recently where people needed help?

Viewing

1. Describe the Mont Blanc:
 - a) What kind of ship was it?
 - b) Why was it in the Harbour that day?
 - c) What was the ship carrying?
2. Describe the Imo:
 - a) What kind of ship was it?
 - b) Why was it in the Harbour that day?
 - c) What was the ship carrying?
3. Why did the Imo and the Mont Blanc collide?
4. What was the immediate scope of the damage?
5. How did the explosion bring the "devastation of World War I home"?
6. Describe Maude Houghton:
 - a) How old is she?
 - b) What does she remember from December 6, 1917?
 - c) How has the Halifax Explosion affected her life?
7. In what ways did further destruction of the North End of Halifax occur after the initial blast?
8. Why is it difficult to determine an accurate number of people killed on December 6, 1917?
9. What was life like in Halifax for survivors after the explosion?
10. How did the people of Boston help after the explosion?
11. Why did Beth Thomson become a nurse?
12. Describe the losses faced by the Jackson family. How are they coping with their losses today?



After Viewing Activities

1. The McTiernan family lived in Halifax at the time of the explosion and, even though their home was destroyed, they decided to stay in the city and rebuild their lives. Several primary documents from the Nova Scotia Archives are available here:
<https://novascotia.ca/archives/explosion/results.asp?Search=&SearchList1=10>

Take a look at the documents and imagine that you are one of the family members. Write a series of diary entries (between three and five entries – 10 sentences each) that discuss how you are rebuilding your life after the explosion.

2. Laurie Swim, a current resident of Halifax, created a quilt that commemorates the Halifax Explosion. The full quilt can be seen here (and one of its panels above):
<http://thechronicleherald.ca/artslife/1481097-lunenburg-quilt-artist-creates-masterpiece-commemorating-halifax-explosion>

According to Laurie Swim, the quilt tells the story of the explosion based on images and eye-witness accounts. She dyed cloth with dark blue pigment and snow. She says that the colour represents the scars of the survivors while the snow represents the storm that followed the explosion.



Create your own piece of artwork — such as collage, painting, sculpture, or poster — that shows what you have learned about the Halifax Explosion.

3. The Critical Thinking Consortium has collected several primary source documents and secondary source documents related to the Halifax Explosion. They can be found at:
https://tc2.ca/sourcedocs/uploads/history_docs/WW1/Significance%20of%20the%20Halifax%20Explosion.pdf

In a group of three or four students, examine one of the documents. There should be one group of students for each of the eleven primary source documents. Groups should fill out the chart on the following page with their observations and be ready to share their findings with the class.



QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

Who do you see in the image OR who is the document discussing?

Observations

Inferences/Conclusions

What do you see happening OR what is described in the document?

Observations

Inferences/Conclusions

Where does the image/document originate?

Observations

Inferences/Conclusions

When was the image/document produced?

Observations

Inferences/Conclusions

Why was the image/document produced?

Observations

Inferences/Conclusions

Summary of what is happening in the image/document

Adapted from lesson materials provided by the Critical Thinking Consortium: https://tc2.ca/scripts/download_t4t.php?id=2173



THE STORY

Minds On

CBC News has prepared an interactive site — A City Destroyed: Experience the Halifax Explosion, 100 years later — narrated by Adrienne Arseneault. It is available at <http://newsinteractives.cbc.ca/halifaxexplosion/>. It includes maps, videos and a 360-degree panning tool for students to imagine what it might have been like to be in Halifax at the time of the explosion. Explore the tool to learn about the geographic region and the events surrounding the explosion.

The crash

It turned out to be one of the most devastating moments in Canadian history. On December 6, 1917, two ships collided in the busy Halifax Harbour. One was the Mont-Blanc, a munitions ship carrying 3 000 tonnes of explosives to troops fighting overseas in World War I. The other was the Imo, a supply ship carrying relief provisions from Canada to Belgium. The result of the collision was the largest explosion to occur in the pre-nuclear world. Not only was the explosion itself catastrophic but the ensuing side effects — a tsunami, fires, and an unanticipated snowstorm — caused what seemed to be a domino effect of unprecedented devastation.

The explosion

Shortly after the ships collided, a fire began on the Mont-Blanc, which ignited the munitions contained in the hold. The fire triggered a massive explosion that instantly vaporized the Mont-Blanc and the Imo before going on to destroy Halifax Harbour — along with the ships in



it — and much of the surrounding land. A mushroom cloud (similar to one produced by a nuclear bomb) formed as a result of the explosion's extremely high temperatures. The cloud could be seen from the surrounding towns and was filled with toxic carbon bi-products, coal fragments, steel particles from the ships, oil, fuel, and soot. This all rained down from the sky, falling on the people and the ground in its path.

To make matters worse



The tsunami

The force of the explosion was so strong that it disturbed the bedrock far under the ocean's floor. People reported that it felt like an earthquake. The ocean floor reacted to the explosion by producing a tsunami that was six stories tall. Many people drowned as the wave made landfall and swept people out to sea. The tsunami also ruined hundreds of buildings in its wake.



The fires

In 1917, most homes and buildings were heated by burning coal and wood. When the buildings were knocked down, either by the explosion or the tsunami, fires erupted in the rubble as the coal and wood caught fire. This created even more damage and slowed rescue efforts.



To make matters worse, fire crews from neighbouring towns came to help but, in many cases, their hoses could not connect to the hydrants because they were equipped with different fittings. The crews remained to assist with the rescue operations despite this obstacle.



The snowstorm

The explosion rocked Halifax at the beginning of December. In an unlucky twist of fate, a Nor'easter — a powerful ocean-based winter storm — hit Halifax the next day. The storm raged for hours and dumped more than 40 cm of snow on the city. The high snow fall hampered rescue efforts and likely contributed to the number of additional deaths.

Injury and death

The Halifax Explosion of December 6, 1917, led to the deaths of nearly 1 500 Haligonians, the injury of 9 000 others and the destruction of thousands of buildings. Essentially, the area around the harbour was laid to waste in the wake of the most powerful explosion the world had seen. Within a few weeks of the explosion, another 500 people died as a result of their injuries. The population of Halifax in 1917 hovered around 65,000 people, which demonstrates the widespread nature of the impact.

People who weren't burned by the powerful explosion had to deal with flying rubble, like shrapnel and broken glass. Many more were injured as a result of the fires that ravaged the city. Still more grew gravely ill after breathing in the chemicals released by the mushroom cloud. Surviving residents of North Halifax, where the brunt of the damage and most of the death occurred, sustained life changing injuries with many requiring amputations.



The CBC News interactive, *A City Destroyed*, offers a click-and-drag map that allows you to explore the extent of damage to the city: <http://newsinteractives.cbc.ca/halifaxexplosion/>

The most common injuries, by far, were to the eye, usually from flying glass shards being embedded in the eye or eyes. Most eye injuries resulted in the partial or full loss of sight.

Halifax today

One hundred years after the biggest explosion to happen on Canadian soil, it is difficult to imagine the blast that levelled more than 2.5 square kilometres in and around Halifax Harbour. The blast killed and wounded so many and left approximately 20 000 homeless. Today's Haligonians have not forgotten that their city was once the site of a horrible disaster. To this day, people dig up broken glass shards in their gardens and they find shrapnel embedded in trees. They pay homage to those who suffered through memorials and statues that dot their city. It has been one hundred years, but the Halifax explosion is not forgotten.



Reflection Questions

By far, the greatest number of injuries sustained after the blast were to people's eyes. Some reports state that almost every single pane of glass in Halifax shattered — even those far from the harbour — due to the ultra-sonic boom that followed the explosion.

1. What do you think life was like for those with vision loss?
2. What services do you think they required?
3. What do you think they had to learn?



STORIES OF HEROISM AND COMPASSION

Vincent Coleman

The number of fatalities suffered as a result of the Halifax Explosion could have been more extensive if not for the bravery and sacrifice of Vincent Coleman, a train dispatcher. At the time of the explosion, Coleman was on duty and realized that there was a train full of passengers about to arrive in the city. He began to message the approaching train using the telegraph, making contact with the conductor at the last minute. Sadly, it was too late for Coleman to leave his post that morning and he died in the explosion. He left behind a widow and four children but saved the lives of many others. Coleman's final message is heartbreaking: "Munitions ship on fire. Making for Pier 6. Goodbye."

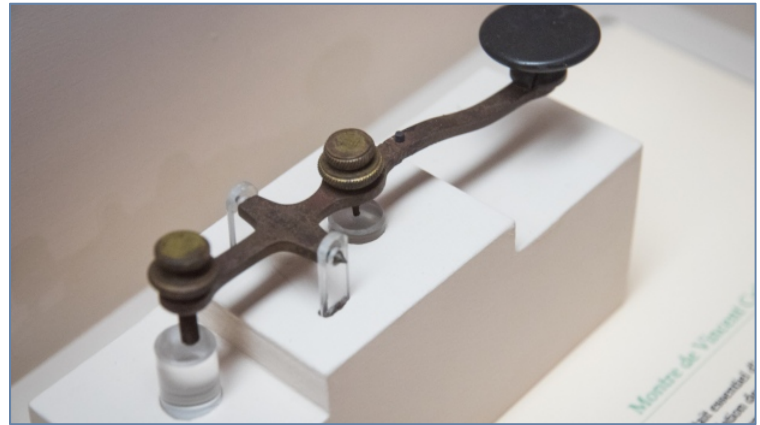
To find out more, read this CBC News article, "The 'ordinary man' who died for strangers when Mont-Blanc exploded":

www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/vincent-coleman-telegraph-halifax-explosion-train-dispatcher-1.4425343

Thank you, Boston!

As soon as the people of Boston heard about the disaster in Halifax, they began to help in many different ways:

- Trainloads of doctors, nurses, surgeons, and Red Cross volunteers came to help with medical needs; a complete hospital unit was sent by Harvard University.
- Supply ships full of food, blankets, clothing, and other emergency supplies were sent.



Vincent Coleman tapped out his urgent message on this telegraph tool.

- The Boston Symphony Orchestra put on a benefit concert within a few days of the disaster.
- An organization called the Halifax-Massachusetts Relief Associates carried on relief work for five years after the explosion to help survivors.

The relationship between Halifax and Boston has continued. Every year the province of Nova Scotia provides the Christmas tree for Boston Common. This gift has been an annual tradition since 1971.

The Beginning of the Canadian National Institute for the Blind

The Halifax Explosion cost over 1 000 people their sight - the largest number of Canadians to lose their vision in a single incident in history. Glass and debris from the explosion were embedded in the eyes of one in 50 Halifax residents as a result of the explosion.

With two per cent of the population requiring extra services and rehabilitation because of the loss of their sight, there was a need for organized care. Volunteers helped people to



learn to read braille, provided transportation to those who needed it, and created systems to help with daily routines such as cleaning, cooking, and doing laundry.

By 1918, this dedicated team of volunteers founded the Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB), which still thrives in Canada today.

Frank Baker

On December 6, 1917, Frank Baker was a Royal Navy sailor who was aboard the Acadia, a military ship that was in Halifax Harbour that day. Baker kept a diary and recorded what he saw and experienced during the explosion and its aftermath. Shortly before his death years later, he gave his diary and a few photos of his time on the Acadia to his son. Here are some of Frank Baker's words from that day:

// The town was literally ablaze, the dry dock and dockyard buildings completely demolished and everywhere wounded and dead. The theatres and suitable buildings were all turned into hospitals or shelters for the accommodation of the homeless. Naval and Military pickets were patrolling the streets endeavouring to keep order. Poor little kiddies homeless, their parents having perished, were crying piteously and anxious relatives were inquiring for their dear ones. //

A Forgotten History of the Mi'kmaw

At the time of the explosion, Tuft's Cove was a small Mi'kmaw village across the channel from Halifax. At least seventeen families were residents of the area that was known as

Kepe'kek in their own language. The village housed a school and several wigwams and houses.

The story of this small community was largely lost until recently. Using oral history provided by Rachel Cope, who was ten years old at the time of the explosion, as well as the work of modern genealogists, historians have been able to reconstruct some of the missing stories.

Many of Rachel Cope's family members, including a brother and a cousin, died as a direct result of the explosion. A brother, a sister, and her mother died within a few months of the explosion from complications due to severe burns sustained in the blast. Rachel was knocked unconscious after the explosion and was not expected to survive, but some of her father's cousins carried her to hospital in Windsor Junction, 20 kilometres away, in a snowstorm. Fortunately, Rachel survived, eventually marrying a man and raising a large family.

Most of the buildings in the village were destroyed by and the tsunami that followed the explosion swept several people, including some children, out to sea. At the time, only nine victims were recorded, but 28 have been confirmed dead using Rachel's oral history. She told a local historian about the missing and presumed dead in 1946, shortly before her own death.

Rachel's great-niece Cathy Martin tries to keep the memory of her ancestors alive. Every year on December 6, the anniversary of the explosion, she stands on the shores of what was once the village of Kepe'kek, and calls out the names of the people who were lost.



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