Cities of Comrades:
Urban Disasters and the Formation of the North American Progressive State

by

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of History in the Graduate School of Duke University

2010
ABSTRACT

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Abstract

A fire in Salem, Mass., in 1914 and an explosion in Halifax, N.S., in 1917 provide an opportunity to explore working-class institutions and organizations in the United States-Canada borderlands. In a historical moment in which the state greatly expanded its responsibility to give protection and rescue to its citizens, after these two disasters ordinary survivors preferred to depend on their friends, neighbors, and family members. This dissertation examines which institutions—including formal organizations like unions and fraternal societies as well as informal groups like families and neighborhoods—were most relevant and useful to working-class survivors. Families, neighbors, friends, and coworkers had patterns and traditions of self-help, informal order, and solidarity that they developed before crisis hit their cities. Those traditions were put to unusual purposes and extreme stress when the disasters happened. They were also challenged by new agents of the state, who were given extraordinary powers in the wake of the disasters. This dissertation describes how the working-class people who most directly experienced the disasters understood them and their cities starkly differently than the professionalized relief authorities.

Using a wide array of sources—including government documents, published accounts, archived ephemeral, oral histories, photographs, newspapers in two languages, and the case files of the Halifax Relief Commission—the dissertation describes how elites imposed a progressive state on what they imagined to be a fractured and chaotic social landscape. It argues that “the people” for whom reformers claimed to speak had their own durable, alternative modes of support and rescue that they quickly and effectively mobilized.
in times of crisis, but which remained illegible to elites. By demonstrating the personal, ideological, political, and practical ties between New England and Nova Scotia and Quebec, it also emphasizes the importance of studying American and Canadian history together, not only comparatively but as a transnational, North American whole.
To Mari,
Who made the past six years possible and worthwhile.

To my parents,
My first and most important teachers.

And to the memory of
My grandfather David Carliner (1918-2007),
Who always asked to read this.
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Acknowledgments

Like all historians, my first debt is to the professionals who maintain the archives and collections in which I worked. Archivists and librarians in seventeen cities built, protected, and maintained the collections that are the lifeblood of my work, and they helped me find what in those collections I needed to read. Darlene Brine, Garry Shutlak, and the rest of the staff at Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management helped me find sources, shared their expertise on Halifax history, and welcomed me on my several research trips. Lynda Silver and Lynn Marie Richards at the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic helped with photographs. Barbara Kampas at the Peabody Essex Museum’s Phillips Library generously shared her own research and helped me through mine. Closer to home, for six years I have been the lucky recipient of Margaret Bill’s kind assistance. She has bought items for me, found mysteriously catalogued census reports, and generally has been the best reference librarian a historian could ask for. Joel Herndon taught me how to use Google Earth Pro. The rest of the Perkins Library reference and interlibrary loan and document delivery staff helped me find books and fulfilled countless requests. The circulation staff of Lilly Library, headed by the indefatigable Yunyi Wang, delivered innumerable books.

Some of my sources do not reside in traditional archives or libraries, and I am grateful to their custodians who shared them with me. Thanks to Debbie Amaral and Maurice Umble for their help with Christian Lantz. Bob Britton graciously admitted me to the Halifax Archdiocesan archives; thanks also to Bishop Colin Campbell for helping me. Ritchie
Adamo, the Essex County law librarian, spent several hours in the courthouse basement, both of us covered in red rot, hunting unsuccessfully for records from 1914.

Second only to archivists and librarians are my funders. I literally could not have written this dissertation without generous support from Duke University’s Center for Canadian Studies, which under the leadership of Jane Moss, J.J. Thomas, and John Herd Thompson and the friendly administration of Janice Engelhardt repeatedly funded my research trips to Canada. Duke’s graduate school gave me a summer travel grant for my early research and a Katherine G. Stern Fellowship to write. The Franklin Institute for the Humanities provided the funds to go to New England and a friendly group, led by Christina Chia, with whom to discuss my work. In my final year, I was lucky to receive a generous fellowship from the Josephine de Kármán Fellowship Trust that allowed me to write full-time. Finally, the Kenan Institute for Ethics gave me space, material support, and friendly faces. I could not have coordinated all the support I received—nor the other bureaucratic elements of graduate school—without Robin Ennis and Cynthia Hoglen.

Colleagues, friends, teachers, and acquaintances read my work, pointed me to archives, and shared their specific expertise. Thanks to Avi Chomsky, Tamara Extian-Babiuk, Mitch Fraas, Linda Gordon, Alice Kessler-Harris, Nancy MacLean, Deirdre Mulligan, Max Page, Marc Roark, Jim Scott, Daniel Tortora, Jake Vigdor, the late Richard Winer, and the members of the Franklin Humanities Institute’s Dissertation Working Group and the Kenan Institute’s Graduate Ethics Colloquium. Kathleen Antonioli and Margaret Boittin assisted me with my translations from French-language sources.
I traveled both for research and while writing, and I thank those who made that possible. Myron and Robbie Rosenberg put me up for three weeks while I was researching in the Boston area. Jon and Becca Bijur hosted me there on a briefer trip. Thanks to Shayna Strom for hosting me in New Haven, Pam and Chad Gaffield in Ottawa, and Nancy Wright in Halifax. I am also grateful to the staffs at the coffeeshops where I wrote most of this dissertation: Alivia’s, Copa Vida, Joe Van Gogh, and Beyu in Durham; The Market, the Okayama Prefectural Library, and Mister Donut No. 0678 in Okayama; and Coburg Coffee in Halifax. While traveling, Josh Cherniss, Jon and Becca Bijur, Tarah Wright and Daniel Rainham, Erin Morton, Kazue and Takaaki Matsuo, Hanita Koblents and Mik Owen, and Teresa and Yasuaki Umeki entertained me.

I am humbled when I think of my many brilliant teachers. I hope that Anders Winroth, Glenda Gilmore and Jim Scott will be pleased to see their continuing imprint on my thinking and writing. Julie Byrne taught me most of what I know about Catholicism. Jim Green has done much for me, but perhaps most importantly, he introduced me to the Labor and Working-Class History Association, which has given me an organizational home and a group of friends and colleagues around the country. I am especially grateful to Alice Kessler-Harris, Dan Klein, Leisl Orenic, Bethany Moreton, and Heather Thompson for their friendship. Not only is the LAWCHA gang the most friendly and supportive bunch anyone can hope to find at a history conference, they are also inspiring models of the type of engaged scholarship I hope to practice.

Most important for this dissertation, of course, is my committee: Sarah Deutsch, Robert Korstad, John Herd Thompson, and my advisor, Gunther Peck. Bob’s friendly
gregariousness and helpful advice are always a welcome pleasure. My writing has been improved immeasurably by John, who will no doubt be utterly horrified at this sentence’s wordiness and its use of the passive voice. Sally has the uncanny talent to listen to me ramble and then distill my argument into a few pithy sentences; she has often known better than I what my project is. Throughout, Gunther has pushed me to ask harder and more specific questions, has given me deadlines when I needed them, and has read every word, multiple times, with care and attention.

Colleagues in Durham, Chapel Hill, and elsewhere were comrades-in-arms throughout graduate school. Orion Teal, Max Krochmal, Gordon Mantler, Katharine French-Fuller, Alisa Harrison, Kathryn Kline, Josh Cherniss, Loring Pfeiffer, and my fellow members of the Labor and Civil Rights Working Group read my work, helped me formulate my questions, or commiserated with me at moments they probably did not know were as important as they were. Dana Mulhauser served as an on-call expert on esoteric questions of grammar and punctuation. Thanks also to others who made Durham home, among them Jenny Wood Crowley, Anne-Marie Angelo, Liz Shesko, Pam Lach, Mitch Fraas, Julia Gaffield, Kelly Kennington, Eric Brandom, Kathleen Antonioli, and all the participants in the University Scholars Program.

Finally, we come to the most important people. Thanks to my sister Sarah for giving me, in the form a niece and a nephew, the two best distractions I can think of. My parents, Robert Remes and Deborah Carliner, have supported, helped, and taught me every step of the way, from teaching me to write in elementary school to proofreading, with Sarah, a dissertation draft. My intellectual and emotional debts to them are incalculable. Finally,
Mari Armstrong-Hough’s name belongs in nearly every list above, as teacher, colleague, friend, and intellectual and emotional supporter. Recent months away from her remind me—as if I need reminding—just how important she is to all of my endeavors.
Introduction

Ostensibly, this dissertation is about a fire in Salem, Massachusetts, and an explosion in Halifax, Nova Scotia. The Salem Fire of 1914 burned a wide swath of the city, destroying the homes and livelihoods of many thousands of people, a plurality of them French-Canadian migrants and their descendants. The Halifax Explosion of 1917 killed nearly 2,000 and maimed, blinded, rendered homeless, and left unemployed tens of thousands more. In a historiographical sense, this dissertation uses those events to illuminate the Progressive Era, the expansion of the state in that period, and the ways working-class individuals, families, and organizations responded to that expansion.

Really, though, this dissertation is about Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath in New Orleans in 2005. The week before Labor Day that year, Americans watched their televisions aghast to see the state and society apparently collapse like inadequate levees. The first, dominant story we heard in other parts of the country was of a city collapsed into anarchy, the police fleeing their jobs, looters running rampant, and the poor seemingly inexplicably attacking those who would try to help. Descriptions of hordes of lawless refugees running through the Super Dome and Convention Center became iconic, in particular the horrifying accounts of rapes and murders. Twenty-one-year-old Darcel Monroe told the New York Times that she saw “two young girls being raped in one of the women’s bathrooms. ‘A lot of people saw it but they were afraid to do anything,’ she said. ‘He ran out past all of us.’”1 Another story told of unknown assailants firing guns.

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at helicopters as their crews attempted to rescue stranded hospital patients. This narrative argued that without a functioning state, people—yes, even Americans—reverted to a state of nature in which brutality reigned, cruelty was unabated, and violence went unchecked. The *Washington Post* banner headline the Friday before Labor Day (figure 1) summed up the lesson by linking two states that were, it implied, intimately related: New Orleans was now “A City of Despair and Lawlessness.”

That week was the first in my third semester of graduate school. In the first meeting of Sarah Deutsch’s seminar on North American urban history, she introduced among the scheduled readings Carl Smith’s book on urban disorder in Chicago. Noting his description of fantastic violence and vigilantism in the aftermath of the Chicago Fire of 1871, she predicted that the most dire descriptions of lawlessness in New Orleans would turn out to be untrue.

She was right. Only a week later, there began to emerge from New Orleans a counternarrative to the first that inverted the roles played by authority figures and those stranded in the city. In a piece first published in the *Socialist Worker* on September 9 that spread quickly around the Internet, two visiting San Francisco paramedics wrote of spontaneous organizing by those who remained in New Orleans to work together to try to find food and a way out of the city. The same weekend, the public radio program *This*

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3 *Washington Post* 2 September 2005. That day, the *New York Times* used the same words to describe New Orleans in its headline.


American Life aired an interview with Denise Moore, who sheltered at the Super Dome. She denied the murder, rape, and mayhem that had been the commonplace story a week before. Moreover, she told of self-organized activities by “gangster guys,” who broke into abandoned stores, found fresh clothes for those who needed them, “juice for the babies, water, beer for the older people, food, raincoats so that they could all be seen by each other.” Notably, in these stories, the authorities become the brutalizers, the people who in a time of crisis could not be trusted. The paramedics told of police lying to their group and blocking by force their escaping the city. “We were hiding from possible criminal elements, but equally and definitely, we were hiding from the police and sheriffs with their martial law, curfew and shoot-to-kill policies,” they wrote. Moore said that authorities’ caprice and nastiness fed rumors that the National Guard was planning to massacre those at the Super Dome. In this counternarrative, when the apparatus of the state disappeared, people overcame other divisions and organized to provide for their basic needs. Indeed, in this vision, it was the state that attempted to prevent such organization, either through violence (as in the paramedics’ story) or through delegitimating the organizers as criminals (as in Moore’s story).

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8 Bradshaw and Slonsky, “Real Heroes.”
The themes of this dissertation—the perceptions of order and disorder in the immediate aftermath of disaster, the organic and mutual self-help that families, neighbors, and friends build in times of crisis, the relationships between working-class organizations and the state, migration and diaspora—resonate in the stories that emerged from New Orleans in the first days after Katrina and now, five years after that city’s destruction. The study of historical disasters helps to illuminate what happened in New Orleans and gives modern observers a better understanding of contemporary catastrophes. This project helps explain not only what happens during disaster, relief, and reconstruction, but also the way people and groups have survived in other times of crisis. Salem and Halifax offer clues not only about New Orleans but about the next North American city to be destroyed. Conversely, what happened in New Orleans informs my understanding of historical disasters. Presentism is always dangerous, and historians should always be wary of exporting what happens today back to previous years. But as a contemporary American, I am not able to separate fully the historical experience of disasters in Salem and Halifax from our understandings of what happened in New Orleans. A concern for the future of New Orleans, and for contemporary urban and disaster policy, is implicitly embedded in every chapter.

A major theme in discussions of Katrina is about the failure of the U.S. state to protect and rescue its citizens. The response of Americans to the television images of

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flooded New Orleans made clear that we consider protection and rescue among the most fundamental jobs of the state, if not the two most important tasks. Indeed, human rights activists and theorists increasingly define a state’s ability to protect its citizens as integral to its claim to international recognition of its sovereignty. It is, Francis Deng and colleagues write, “by effectively discharging its responsibilities for good governance [that] a state can legitimately claim protection for its national sovereignty.” 10 In the context of gross human rights abuses such as genocide, advocates of humanitarian intervention now claim that an international “responsibility to protect” civilians exists when their own government is unable or unwilling to do so. This concept has been applied, although not without controversy, to non-wartime disasters. In May 2008, the Burmese dictatorship failed to provide aid for its own citizens after Cyclone Nargis caused severe devastation, and it refused humanitarian assistance offered by other countries. In response, French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner proposed that the Burmese government had ceded its sovereignty when it neglected to aid disaster victims, and that the international community had an obligation to intervene without the junta’s permission. 11 After considerable controversy, the Burmese junta was not forced to accept unwanted aid. 12 The debate, however, pointed to an acknowledged consensus that it is the


job of the state to rescue and protect its citizens.

Political scientists and international lawyers historicize questions of sovereignty and state responsibility by analyzing charters, international agreements, communiques, and treatises on political philosophy. In contrast, this dissertation contributes a social history of the state’s responsibility to protect and rescue its citizens. Whence comes our commonplace understanding that the state exists to protect and rescue its citizens? How do the state’s obligations complement or conflict with expectations for support from individuals or from private institutions?

This dissertation is about the formal and informal obligations individuals, institutions, and the state have had to protect and rescue people from disaster, and what protections and rescues those people expected or hoped for. It seeks to understand how states and citizens defined and understood these responsibilities, and how they evolved. During the Progressive Era, amid large-scale cultural and social changes born of ever-increasing industrialization and migration, people and institutions reimagined, renegotiated, and contested these obligations. Families reconfigured members’ responsibilities to each other as increased mobility and shifting patterns of wage-earning led to greater generational independence. Likewise, workers and their employers renegotiated their relationship and the obligations each owed to the other. Immigrant church members contested the organization of the religious denominations they found


13 Others place the controversy over Nargis and the rise of the responsibility to protect doctrine in the specific context of the history of humanitarian interventions, starting with the Biafra conflict. See Conor Foley, The Thin Blue Line: How Humanitarianism Went to War (London: Verso, 2008).
when they arrived in North America. They did all this in the context of a greatly expanding role for the state. In the Progressive Era, the notion of “good government” was first invented, and the state acquired rescue as a fundamental purpose—drinkers from the saloons, prostitutes from white slavers, Cubans and Filipinos from their Spanish colonial masters, and child laborers from factories. The state increasingly insinuated itself into relationships among individuals and between individuals and civil institutions, and it took for itself responsibilities that had previously been the bailiwick of civil society.

One purpose of this project is to excavate networks of community obligation and solidarity. A historian has few sources to study the ties that bind neighborhoods together. People rarely record borrowing a cup of sugar from a neighbor or saying hello in the post office. But when those same neighbors rescue each other after a disaster, people take notice and record the event. Disasters thus produce unusual records that document where people turned in times of trouble or crisis. Unions, churches, and mutual aid societies were not designed for disaster relief, but how they behaved in disasters shows us something about how they functioned. For this first purpose, then, the disasters function as cameras whose snapshots in time allow us to see a particular moment within an era of change.

Understanding how these networks of solidarity and obligation functioned in the Progressive Era is particularly important because they were in flux, challenged both from within and without. From within, new urban, working-class generations experienced the freedom that came with industrial work and adopted new cultural mores. They contested and renegotiated with their elders previously accepted patterns of obligation. From
without, middle-class social reformers worked to devalue the institutions that had resonated in working-class and immigrant populations and to replace them with new structures sanctioned by the progressive state. Exploring responses to the disasters in Salem and Halifax allows us to study how working-class organizations survived and changed—or didn’t.

During these disasters obligations and relationships between people and between them and their institutions were actively renegotiated. People not only reenacted everyday patterns of solidarity—by turning to their families, neighbors, and churches for succor—but they also established new expectations. The second purpose of this project is to better understand how popular expectations of the state, of civil institutions, and of other individuals evolved during the Progressive Era partially as a result of disasters. In this mode of inquiry, disasters do more than take a snapshot of a moment; they alter the direction of historical change. Families in destroyed cities had to renegotiate what they owed each other when a brother or a grown child abruptly needed a place to stay for months on end, or when a disabled mother could no longer perform the domestic and reproductive labor upon which which her family had depended. Clergy suddenly had to help parishioners find relief even while they were called on to judge the worthiness of their congregants. Employers and workers contested their obligations to each other when a factory was destroyed or when a massive disaster required rapid reconstruction work. The renegotiations that took place in the aftermath of disasters were built on the structures that had preceded them, but they changed the ways that parents and children, clergy and laity, bosses and workers conceived of each other and their relationships.

Disasters also occasioned considerable change in governance, since they often
suggested that the state as previously constituted had failed. This has been true throughout history. In seventeenth-century Puritan Boston, for instance, frequent fires occasioned the increase of municipal state power, as when, after a 1653 fire, a new ordinance required firefighting equipment be kept at each house.\(^{14}\) A hundred years later, after the 1755 Lisbon Earthquake, the marquês de Pombal, Portugal’s master of the kingdom (that is, prime minister), set about recreating urban governance and architecture. In rebuilding Lisbon, Pombal modeled a new type of rational, enlightened city planning—streets of standard and considerable width, intersections at right angles, standardized and more efficient building techniques—that he replicated in cities unaffected by the disaster. Moreover, he declared that all state policies must be reasonable, justified by natural law.\(^{15}\) In both Boston and Lisbon, disasters encouraged the growth of the state. This enhanced state power was intended to prevent and mitigate disasters, but the new regulation and power also increased the role of the state even in ordinary, non-crisis times. In neither case did the disaster by itself cause a new theory of governance.

Boston’s regulations fit into larger patterns of state regulation of personal activities, and Pombal’s reforms were part of a broader Enlightenment project. But in both cases the disasters precipitated and catalyzed the state’s growth.

The Progressive Era was a moment of greatly increasing state intervention, and disasters often occasioned this expansion. The Galveston Plan of commission municipal government, later widely adopted across the continent, was imposed only after a


hurricane destroyed most of the Texas city in 1900. The city’s municipal reorganization had been a political project of the city’s elite in the 1890s, and the disaster enabled them to pass the plan without a debate.\textsuperscript{16} Catastrophe in Galveston also changed the role of the Red Cross, creating new expectations and obligations to the suffering.\textsuperscript{17} The Mississippi River flood of 1927 launched a large-scale federal government relief operation; by changing what Americans expected from their government, it set the stage for the New Deal.\textsuperscript{18}

In the Salem and Halifax disasters we can see moments in which ideas of the state’s role in taking care of its citizens changed. In both the United States and Canada, politicians, reformers, and citizens hotly debated whether the central government owed its citizens aid when they were rendered destitute by a local disaster. Both federal states decided that they owed victims more, rather than less. The U.S. Congress appropriated $200,000 for Salem relief, the first time the federal government agreed to give money to individual victims of a purely local disaster. The Red Cross, jealous of its role as the nation’s unofficial relief agency, strongly opposed the appropriation as a dangerous precedent, since every community would now refuse to do its own fundraising and would instead rely on its congressman. Worse, it argued crossly, fiscal control might be transferred away from the trained and experienced officers of the Red Cross to a “liberal officer” chosen by the local congressman, who might disburse it on political or patronage


\textsuperscript{17}Patricia Bellis Bixel and Elizabeth Hayes Turner, \textit{Galveston and the 1900 Storm: Catastrophe and Catalyst} (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000), 61-8, 84.

John Fitzgerald, a New York Democrat and the chair of the House appropriations committee, objected on constitutional grounds: “It is not a part of the functions of the Federal Government to take care of destitute persons,” he intoned, and requests that the central government shoulder the burden of a purely local disaster “are subversive of our whole scheme of government.”

Massachusetts congressmen and their allies countered with what they claimed were precedents for federal relief, but significantly they argued that the extent of suffering in Salem trumped all else. “We know if men want to do so, they can talk about precedent and all that sort of thing and make a plausible argument, appropriate, perhaps, in settling a legal controversy,” Michael Phelan told the House of Representatives. “But this is not the time for a legal argument. Where people are in distress and suffering, we ought, without drawing fine distinctions, to give them aid unhesitatingly and ungrudgingly.” In making this argument, Phelan, a Democratic congressman from neighboring Lynn, articulated a relatively new theory of the state’s obligations to its citizens: that the nation owed, through its government, aid to those in dire straights, even when the disaster was purely local, simply because they were citizens.

Fitzgerald and the Red Cross failed to prevent an appropriation, explained the *Lynn Item* in July 1914, “for the recommendation of the president had the endorsement of

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21 *Congressional Record*, 63rd Cong., 2nd sess., 1914, 51, pt. 12:11945.
public opinion.”\textsuperscript{22} They succeeded, however, in granting authority for spending the funds to Lindley Garrison, the secretary of war, who wrote the Red Cross that he “sympathize[d] entirely with [its] views.”\textsuperscript{23} In his disapproval, he delayed releasing the money. When the money had not been disbursed by mid-August, the chair of the Salem Relief Committee inquired when they could expect it, but he was told, according to a Salem newspaper, that thanks to the “European war situation they could give no time to the matter at present.”\textsuperscript{24} In November, the War Department claimed to a delegation visiting Washington that Salem no longer needed the money.\textsuperscript{25} It was not until December that Major Herbert M. Lane, recently returned from the Philippines, arrived to give out the promised funds.\textsuperscript{26}

This controversy reveals shifting and contested expectations about the proper role of the government, especially the federal government. Opponents believed that disaster relief was a form of charity, and that such philanthropy was rightfully the purview of private citizens. For progressives like those who spoke for the Red Cross, this did not mean that victims of disasters like Salem’s should be left alone to face the elements; to the contrary, they believed in expert intervention funded by large contributions from the wealthy and small ones from the ordinary. Supporters of federal aid to Salem used

\textsuperscript{22} Reprinted in the \textit{Saturday Evening Observer}, 18 July 1914, 4.


\textsuperscript{24} \textit{Saturday Evening Observer} 15 August 1914, 1.

\textsuperscript{25} \textit{Saturday Evening Observer} 28 November 1914, 4.

\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Courrier de Salem} 17 December 1914, 8. On Lane, see order, J.B. Aleshire (Chief, Quartermaster Corps) “To the Surgeon General”, 3 April 1914, file 477031, box 8310, Office of the Quartermaster General, 1800-1914, Document File, RG 92/8W2/12/8/4 entry 89, National Archives I, Washington, D.C. Unfortunately, Lane’s records from when he was in Salem seem to have disappeared.
various tactics, including finding precedents for national aid and arguing that the country owed Massachusetts because of the commonwealth’s contributions to American independence. Ultimately, however, these progressives’ most successful argument was that the government simply owed its citizens rescue and protection when disaster struck. In 1914, they argued for a relatively modest role for the government; it would be one of many donors, and the authority for the work of disaster relief would stay in private hands. Yet it was not such a leap to suggest that the government should take over the administration of disaster relief, and from there governmental rescue during ordinary times was not far away.

In Canada, the political discourse about federalism and the proper role of the federal government differed from that of the United States, but Canadians similarly debated a federal contribution to the relief of Halifax explosion victims. Haligonians argued that the explosion was a result of the World War and was, as such, the responsibility of the Dominion government. “It is pointed out,” wrote the Financial Post, “that the catastrophe was virtually an incident of the war, and that therefore the whole nation is in a sense responsible for the damage that was done.” When the Dominion government agreed in March 1918, three months after the explosion, to fund the relief commission with an additional $7 million, however, it phrased its responsibility as moral, not legal. “No legal liability rests upon the Crown,” a Privy Council report insisted. But it admitted that the accident happened because of the war. “These considerations make it incumbent upon the Federal Government to provide reasonable and even generous relief

27 Acadian Recorder 2 January 1918, 2. The Commercial Club of Halifax led the campaign and was joined by dozens of religions, community, and fraternal organizations. Acadian Recorder 4 January 1918, 3.
for those who have suffered through the necessities of the war.”28 The necessities of war—and, more to the point, the public unhappiness following the explosion—also required that the Dominion government intrude on what had been a local affair and take over the management of the Halifax harbor.29 As with creation of the Salem Federal Fire Relief in the United States, the Halifax Relief Commission helped to establish the Canadian central government’s role in protecting and rescuing its citizens in times of crisis.

The third project of this dissertation is comparative: to explore the differences in the way Canadians living in Salem or Halifax experienced disaster on either side of the border, and to understand how the state and its obligations to citizens developed similarly or differently in the United States and Canada. More broadly, it is to explore the meaning of progressivism within a Canadian context. In general, the progressive movement is under-theorized in Canadian historiography. J.M. Bumsted’s textbook, for instance, talks of an “era of social reform,” but does not mention a group called “Progressives,” though the reformers he describes for students proposed similar activities and espoused similar ideologies to their U.S. counterparts.30 There were, certainly, people in Halifax who, had they been in Boston, would clearly have been labeled as progressives. Moreover, the progressive ideology of disaster relief that helped to shape the American state’s newfound obligations to its citizens was also active in Canada, imported by the very same relief experts who managed Salem’s efforts. What does it mean to speak of progressives in

28 “Certified Copy of a Report of the Committee of the Privy Council, approved by His Excellency the Governor General on the 9th of March 1918,” item 23, volume 2124, Archibald MacMechan fonds, MG 1, Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management, Halifax, N.S.


Canada? How was Canadian progressivism different from or similar to its American sibling? I answer those question in a particular geographic context: Halifax. Reformers there, like other people in the Maritimes, were deeply connected to the United States. Halifax was a Canadian city, and it responded to a particularly Canadian history, but it was also a borderland city.

By not emphasizing the category of “Progressive,” Canadian historians are able to get away from questions that have too frequently distracted students of American history. My purpose here is not to make an argument about who should “count” as a Progressive, nor to determine which of progressivism’s many strands were dominant. As the debate in Congress over the U.S. government’s obligations to Salem’s sufferers demonstrates, progressives did not all agree with each other. They did agree, however, on the necessity and possibility of rescue. While there was certainly an element of social control in the work of state and state-like rescuers, their desire to help disaster victims was truly and sincerely felt. The question is why these rescue attempts failed, and perhaps more importantly, why their intended beneficiaries appeared to resist them.

The answer presented in the following chapters is largely about legibility, a term used by political scientist James Scott to denote the ways that states have “arrange[d] the population in ways that simplified the classic state functions of taxation, conscription, and prevention of rebellion.” Scott’s key metaphor is the cadastral map, which depicted a geographic region not in all its complexity but rather only for the information that the state found helpful. Moreover, a cadastral map did not just describe; it built a land tenure system by creating and recording legally binding knowledge. As Scott argues, this project of “state simplification” not only facilitated taxation and conscription but also
expanded the reach of the state for the aims of public health, political surveillance, caring for the poor, and, for our purposes, disaster relief.31

My understanding and use the concept of legibility is best understood through a metaphor of an archival document. An illegible, handwritten document contains much information, if only we could read it. If we retype it to make it possible to read, we restore its legibility. At the same time, however, we remove the subtle and nuanced meta-information that was contained in the illegible document: the handwriting, the layout on the page, the color of the ink, the fading of the paper. The state is like the historian, unable to “read” the society it governs. In order to understand the information it knows is there, it simplifies, erases, and loses nuance and subtlety.

In this understanding, legibility is necessary for modern states to operate and provide services, and the growth of an interventionist, progressive state required an acceleration of the state’s project to render its citizens and territory legible. Ironically, the state’s dependence on legibility and the erasures the project required left it unable to understand and adapt to the complex and nuanced systems and structures which working-class families and individuals constructed and in which they lived. The illegibility of working-class culture and mutual support hampered state efforts to rescue disaster victims, not necessarily because people strove to maintain their illegibility but because the state was unable to read and understand their behaviors and desires.

In this dissertation, I seek to do what the state and its agents were unable to do: describe and understand the alternatives to the progressive state and the formal and

informal ways that people rescued each other. The architecture of mutual aid was multifaceted and included families, neighborhoods, friendships, churches, unions, and fraternal societies. I ask how civil society responded to the growth of the progressive state; I offer not only a social history of the state’s expansion but of the alternatives people and organizations offered to it. Civil society, write theorists Robert Post and Nancy Rosenblum, is a term used so often that “it has acquired a strikingly plastic moral and political valence.” I use the term broadly to include formal and informal organizations and institutions in the liminal space between the individual and the state. This includes formal, well recognized organizations like churches, unions, and clubs; it also includes communities, families, and groups of friends. Together with some of the political scientists who theorize about and study contemporary civil society, I seek to understand how the various parts of civil society understood their relationships with each other, with their members, and with the state.\(^3\)

If the Progressive Era was one in which the state took on a growing responsibility to rescue its citizens, it was also an era of new forms of knowledge and authority. The rise of the manager, professional, and expert can be seen in all spheres of North American society. Municipal government reform placed experts who were supposedly above politics in charge, replacing or supplementing elected politicians.\(^3\) In factories, the precepts of scientific management emphasized the knowledge, authority, and status of

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professional managers.\textsuperscript{34} New municipal courts began to move beyond mere arbitration and adopted a sociological jurisprudence that let them expand into intervention into the lives of those who came before them.\textsuperscript{35} Doctors, lawyers, and clergymen demanded, built, and maintained professional knowledge, credentials, and power that sought to expel laypeople and their knowledge from newly professionalized terrains.\textsuperscript{36} Progressive experts on charity rejected the noblesse oblige of the prior generation, insisting instead on a more scientific approach. “Through constant supervision by visitors of all varieties,” writes historian Kathleen McCarthy, “it was hoped that the family could be saved, cured, and improved.” Fundamental to this project of supervision was the need to study, know, and understand—in other words, to render legible—the families they sought to rescue.\textsuperscript{37}

These projects were not uncontested. Patients, for instance, actively negotiated their authority and knowledge with their doctors.\textsuperscript{38} Likewise, working-class individuals and their organizations continued to offer an alternative to the middle-class norms that society increasingly adopted. Sometimes these institutions gave political training to their members.\textsuperscript{39} Sometimes they provided space and opportunities to organize explicit

\textsuperscript{34} David Montgomery, \textit{The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865-1925} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 217.


resistance. In addition, however, their very existence—their continuation in the face of Progressive-Era changes in culture and governance—itself constituted resistance.\textsuperscript{40} Ironically, this resistance could sometime constitute, or appear to constitute, a rejection of proffered aid. These rejections suggest that potential recipients were attuned to the power relations inherent in progressive rescue. Workers and their families sought to create and preserve spaces and institutions where they maintained their own power and authority in the face of a government, culture, and society that sought to place them under the power of middle-class experts.

The development of the professional expert and the resistance to experts’ power happened in multiple countries. It was international, in that it happened in different countries, and it was transnational, in that ideas and people flowed between and among countries and regions. This project is simultaneously transnational and comparative, and these themes and methods run through every chapter. Historian Daniel Rodgers argues that the Progressive Era was a moment of unusual cosmopolitanism in which elites and political thinkers looked abroad for solutions to social problems.\textsuperscript{41} While Rodgers focuses on American links to Europe, the same was true between the United States and Canada. Disaster experts moved across the border and shared their ideas and expertise in both Massachusetts and Nova Scotia. But while Rodgers emphasizes the links between elites of various countries, people and working-class ideas also moved across borders.

As immigrants, emigrants, and families of immigrants and emigrants, the victims


of the Salem and Halifax disasters experienced them in a transnational context. Only 19% of Salem’s affected families—those who lost their home, their breadwinner’s job, or both—were identified by the Red Cross as “American”; a further 20% were Irish and may have been deeply rooted in the United States. The majority were foreigners: 43% were French Canadian, more than the “American” and Irish combined; 6% were Poles; 5% were Italians; 4% were “Hebrews”; 2% were Greek; and 1% “miscellaneous.” The Salem fire was rooted in a specific, American location, but the population that experienced it was diasporic and transnational. Moreover, decisions about relief could not escape the knowledge that most of those who were affected were perceived as foreign.

The presence of so many French Canadians among the victims of Salem’s fire requires a comment on language and terminology. French-Canadian descendants, as historian Mark Richard calls them, had many changing names for themselves when they were in the United States. In the time I write about, they, or at least their ethnic spokespeople, usually called themselves *Franco-Américains*. Sources produced by Anglophone Americans sometimes used Franco-American, sometimes French Canadians, and sometimes simply French. “Franco-American” has too much discursive content—most notably, the historiographically unexplored relationship between French-Canadian immigrants and the French Republic—to be used uncritically. Yet it also feels inappropriate to call my subjects “French Canadian” when they were using a different name.

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term. Therefore, I split the difference and refer to them by both terms. Because I am not writing about their ethnic identity, readers should not take any meaning from when I use “French Canadian” and when I use “Franco-American.” Unless otherwise noted, all translations from French-language sources are my own.

Halifax in 1917 was also a transient city. It was the metropolis of a region undergoing heavy and long-term out-migration to the United States and to the English-speaking provinces from Ontario westward. World War I suddenly brought thousands of temporary migrants into the city. Halifax became a British strategic center, a major port for the (British) Royal Navy, and the home port of Canada’s fledgling Royal Canadian Navy. Many of the half-million Canadian soldiers en route to the battlefields embarked at Halifax, and its harbor loaded the foodstuffs that sustained those soldiers and the civilian population of Britain. The city thus bustled with stevedores, merchant seamen, soldiers, sailors, and with some of their families; wives and children often moved with their husbands and fathers to Halifax for the duration of the war. Many in the city still had family in other parts of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, or Newfoundland; they also had family who had migrated to central and western Canada or to New England. Haligonian social networks, therefore, reached nearby into the city’s hinterland, as well as across the continent in its diaspora. Halifax survivors’ ties to Massachusetts, especially, shaped the way they imagined their rights to access relief.

The primary point of comparison between Salem and Halifax is between “away” and “home.” The French Canadians in Salem were in a diaspora, far away from their ancestral homes, their extended families, and their cultural home. Haligonians, in contrast, tended to be surrounded by extended families, if not in the city proper then in
the nearby countryside. This comparison is a continuing theme throughout this dissertation: how migration and the possibility of migration influenced the way people experienced their disasters and how they interacted with the state.

Within a few weeks of the Halifax explosion, the premier of Nova Scotia had written to officials in California, Ohio, Texas, and Massachusetts asking for information on how they had handled the San Francisco earthquake of 1904, the Dayton River flood of 1913, the Galveston storm of 1900, and the Salem fire of 1914.44 One of the documents Murray received was the galleys of a new book about disaster relief by a Red Cross executive then being published by the Russell Sage Foundation.45 Byron Deacon’s *Disasters and the American Red Cross in Disaster Relief*, which went on sale the next month, was designed as a manual for charity workers and executives those who found their cities struck by disaster, or those who, as the book urged, wanted to plan ahead.46 A compendium of lessons learned from disasters such as the Titanic sinking, the San Francisco earthquake, and the Dayton River flood of 1913, the book suggested principles and procedures for future disasters.47 While Deacon had practical advice for relief

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44 Telegram, Frank C. Jordan to G.H. Murray, 27 December 1917, item 95; Murray to Secretary of State of Ohio, 10 January 1918, item 163; George F. Howard to Murray, 29 December 1917, item 118; and Albert P. Langley to Murray, 26 December 1917, item 94, all on microfilm reel 15,123, Halifax Explosion Collection, MG 27, Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management (hereafter MG 27). A few months later, Halifax officials again sought guidance from Massachusetts about how to establish a relief commission. See telegram, Robert T. MacIreith to A.C. Ratshesky, 9 February 1918, item 113.14, and MacIreith to Ratshesky, 18 February 1918, item 113.16, both in Series C, Correspondence, Halifax Relief Commission fonds, MG 36, Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management (hereafter HRC correspondence).

45 Frederick W. Jenkins to G.H. Murray, 27 December 1917, item 98, MG 27.

46 John F. Moors, review of *Disasters and the American Red Cross in Disaster Relief*, *The Survey*, 26 January 1918, 472.

47 J. Byron Deacon, *Disasters and the American Red Cross in Disaster Relief* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1918).
workers—for instance, how relief committees should be organized, how national and local organizations should work together, and how to divide stricken cities into districts for canvassing—his major purpose was to describe and prescribe a progressive ideology of disaster relief. Deacon’s prescriptions had some weight since by the next year, he was director-general of civilian relief for the American Red Cross.⁴⁸

The first element of Deacon’s ideology was the importance of experts. While he noted the “instinctive impulse to help” that arose after disasters, he emphasized that such spontaneous efforts “must be supplanted by reasoned, organized action” by trained experts, led by “prominent people.”⁴⁹ The central, coordinating committee should represent, he said, “official, business, professional, labor, and philanthropic groups,” and should especially include the executives of charitable organizations.⁴⁰ Social workers were critical participants; Deacon compared them to physicians and lawyers. Unlike well-meaning volunteers, whom he warned would harm relief efforts, social workers were equipped through their professional training and experience to guide families to recovery.⁵¹ A failure to centralize control under a powerful and prominent committee or to vest day-to-day authority in trained professionals could lead to failure. Any independent effort would “seriously hamper the execution of more comprehensive relief

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⁴⁹ Deacon, Disasters, 13, 40, 26.

⁵⁰ Deacon, Disasters, 196.

measures.” Worse, disorganized and unprofessional relief could “promote first idleness
and then discontent” among the very people the volunteers were trying to aid.52

The second element of Deacon’s ideology was that relief should be given not to
make sufferers whole; the job of the relief agency was not “indemnifying the families for
the loss of property or of wage-earners, but [rather] equipping them to live healthy,
happy, useful, normal lives in spite of their misfortune.” “The object of rehabilitation
relief,” he continued later in the book, “is to assist families to recover from the
dislocation induced by disaster and to regain their accustomed social and economic
status.”53 Families—which he argued should be the “unit of relief”—should all be treated
separately, with special attention paid to their individual circumstances and needs; while
it might appear fair to apply hard and fast rules, Deacon argued that the opposite was
ture, and that it was fairer to examine every case on its own merits.54 This sort of relief
necessarily required the investigation and discretion that Deacon insisted were the sole
purview of trained and experienced professionals.

Related was the third, and perhaps most important, aspect of Deacon’s relief
ideology. For him, disaster relief was simply a continuation of other progressive
philanthropy. Chapter 4 explores the ways that the middle-class professionals whom
Deacon insisted control relief efforts often did not share basic understandings of family
with the people they sought to help. Writing of how relief committees should respond to
families in which the husband and father was incapacitated or killed, he emphasized the

52 Deacon, Disasters, 127, 48.
53 Deacon, Disasters, 60, 137.
54 Deacon, Disasters, 84.
patriarch’s non-financial role. “After all, a husband and father is more than an earner of wages,” he wrote. He “supports his family in a moral and affectional sense” and “is an exemplar of worthy ambitions.” If he could not continue in those roles, the relief organization had to take his place.\textsuperscript{55} Deacon’s project then, was to use disasters to reshape families into a patriarchal model, or to strengthen that model if it already existed.

“When a disaster relief committee essays to help the victims of calamity, it assumes a responsibility which is not discharged merely by grants of money or supplies,” Deacon warned.\textsuperscript{56} While this meant extra work and responsibility, it also led to greater authority and legitimacy for the reformers whom Deacon thought should be on relief committees. If municipal authorities were unable to protect the health of their citizens, the private relief workers must take over that part of the state. He did not mention it, but his audience surely all remembered that the progressive commission form of government had been first implemented in the aftermath of Galveston’s storm of 1900.\textsuperscript{57} He encouraged relief workers to use disaster to pursue not only municipal reform, but also, as the opportunity arose, to insert themselves into families’ legal affairs, their parenting, their education, and their employment. “There will be families to move to cleaner and better houses, housewives to instruct in purchasing and preparing food to better advantage, others to be taught needed lessons in infant hygiene, men and women to arouse from the apathy and despair into which their misfortunes have plunged them and to be heartened to face the future with hope and courage.”\textsuperscript{58} Deacon urged his fellow

\textsuperscript{55}Deacon, \textit{Disasters}, 63-4.

\textsuperscript{56}Deacon, \textit{Disasters}, 175.

\textsuperscript{57}Rice, “Galveston Plan.”

\textsuperscript{58}Deacon, \textit{Disasters}, 176-7.
progressives to see disasters as opportunities to continue the social reforms they were already working on. Relief work was a time when social workers could establish the “subtle influence of . . . friendly relations” to encourage Americanization.\(^{59}\)

We know that authorities in Halifax received Deacon’s book, and they most likely read it. The Americans who offered their expertise in Halifax had also likely read the proofs or helped Deacon’s research.\(^{60}\) *Disasters and the American Red Cross in Disaster Relief* was also widely reviewed in public affairs, political, and even literary journals; it seems unlikely that any progressive could have remained unaware of its argument.\(^{61}\) Moreover, the ideology of relief Deacon espoused was disseminated not only through his book, but through people. In 1908, the Red Cross had inaugurated a system through which it drafted employees of central, coordinating charitable organizations in major American cities for disaster relief work. The Red Cross thus became the clearinghouse for information and knowledge about disasters, and it circulated a cadre of workers who shared a common outlook, training, and ideology.\(^{62}\) Several designers of the Halifax relief effort were sent to the city from around North America under this program.

Famously, the first relief train from beyond Nova Scotia to reach Halifax was from Boston. But the connection between Halifax and Massachusetts reached beyond the

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\(^{59}\) Deacon, *Disasters*, 181.


\(^{61}\) Reviews or notices included those in *The Survey*, which offered to sell the book to readers; *The Journal of the Association of Collegiate Alumnae; National Municipal Review* 7 (March 1918): 194; *South Atlantic Quarterly* 17 (April 1918): 182; *The Bookman* 46 (February 1918): 735; *New Republic*, 16 March 1918, 214; and Ethel Bird, review of *Disasters and the American Red Cross in Disaster Relief*, *American Journal of Sociology* 24 (July 1918): 112-3.

\(^{62}\) Deacon, *Disasters*, 19.
provision of aid, or even the reports offered by the Secretary of the Commonwealth. The expertise offered by Massachusetts to Halifax drew directly from ideas and personnel from the Salem fire. At least three of the architects of Salem’s fire relief also designed Halifax’s relief effort: John Farwell Moors, a Boston broker and social reformer who headed the Massachusetts Red Cross; A.C. Ratshesky, a banker from Boston; and Christian Lantz, the general secretary of the Salem Y.M.C.A.

Aged fifty years at the time of the Salem fire, Abraham Captain Ratshesky—Cap to his friends—was a leader in Boston’s Jewish community; the wealthy founder of the U.S. Trust Company, he was five years into a nine-year term as president of the city’s Federated Jewish Charities.63 His first disaster work was as a member of the national relief committee for the San Francisco fire of 1906, but he “made his first reputation as a constructive organizer of relief following the fire in Chelsea, Mass.,” in 1912, wrote the Christian Science Monitor in 1917, “when political and financial control of that city was, for a season, taken out of the hands of the citizens and put in those of a state commission of which he was a member. For five years, without any monetary reward, he aided in the tasks of reconstruction, and was especially serviceable because of the large number of Jews in the city whose interests had to be cared for.”64 Though based in Boston, he had strong ties on the North Shore. He and his wife Edith maintained a large and gracious


summer home, the Birches, less than four miles away from Salem’s burned district in Beverly.\textsuperscript{65} The summer of the fire, Ratshesky led a group of Boston Jewish businessmen to buy a Salem estate called Kernwood and turn it into a country club.\textsuperscript{66} As a banker, he was the sort of businessman whom Deacon would suggest serve on relief committees, and as president of the Federated Jewish Charities, he was experienced in philanthropic work. Combined with his ties to the North Shore and his experience in Chelsea, he was a natural person to serve on the Committee of Fourteen that ran the Salem relief operation.\textsuperscript{67} Governor David Walsh appointed him to the committee, and he served both on the executive sub-committee and on the purchasing committee.\textsuperscript{68} He was also an informal advisor to the Salem Rebuilding Commission.\textsuperscript{69}

The Massachusetts-Halifax Relief Committee was drawn from the Committee for Public Safety, which the Commonwealth of Massachusetts had organized when the United States entered World War I. The Committee for Public Safety ensured and coordinated civilian cooperation with the war effort: it arbitrated labor disputes, regulated the food and fuel supply, issued counter-propaganda, and conducted bond sales

\textsuperscript{65} Their Boston address was the Hotel Touraine. See \textit{North Shore Blue Book and Social Register} (Boston: A.E. Foss, 1917), 67. For photographs showing the grandeur of the Birches, see folders 3 and 4, box 1, Ratshesky Collection.

\textsuperscript{66} Clipping from \textit{Boston Evening Transcript}, 13 July 1914, folder 4, box 3, Ratshesky Collection; \textit{Salem Evening News} 11 July 1914, 10. Ratshesky’s fellow organizers were all members of the elite Elysium Club, on which see Ellen Smith, \textquote{\text{\textquote{Israelites in Boston,}} 1840-1880}, in Sarna et al., eds., \textit{Jews of Boston}, 57.

\textsuperscript{67} \textit{Salem Evening News} 3 July 1914, 9; clipping from \textit{Christian Science Monitor}, 14 December 1917, Ratshesky scrapbook.

\textsuperscript{68} \textquote{List of Committees}, undated, \textquote{\text{\textquote{Massachusetts National Guard - Salem Fire - Salem Mass 1914 – Correspondence – Box 1}}} Massachusetts National Guard Museum and Archives, Worcester, Mass. (hereafter MNGMA).

\textsuperscript{69} \textit{Salem Register} 17 July 1914, 1.
campaigns. The state-level committee, made up of philanthropic- and reform-oriented businessmen and bankers, was supported by local committees in each town in Massachusetts.\textsuperscript{70} A Halifax newspaper was particularly impressed by the Committee’s ability to resolve labor disputes. Under its auspices, Henry B. Endicott had averted a strike of fishermen in Gloucester, and then Endicott and Ratshesky negotiated the end of a five-month shoeworkers’ strike in Lynn. “Twelve thousand workers had resumed their labors at the mere kindly suggestion of a single man,” recalled the Halifax \textit{Morning Chronicle}.\textsuperscript{71} That the Massachusetts side of Halifax relief was staffed by the Committee for Public Safety ensured that many of the same people would be involved in relief in both disasters. James J. Phelan, for instance, was one of the governor’s appointees to the Salem committee, and with Ratshesky was on both the executive sub-committee and the purchasing committee. In 1917, he served as secretary of the Massachusetts-Halifax Relief Committee. Likewise, Robert Winsor was made chairman of the Salem finance committee after donating $10,000; later he was the treasurer of the Massachusetts-Halifax committee.\textsuperscript{72} John B. Tivnan chaired Salem’s local Committee of 100 and served as a local representative on the Committee of Fourteen. In 1917 he was the chair of the Salem Red Cross branch and served on the local Committee for Public Safety. After the explosion, he became chairman of the local Halifax Relief Committee and in that

\textsuperscript{70}George Hinkley Lyman, \textit{The Story of the Massachusetts Committee on Public Safety} (Boston: Wright & Potter as state printers, 1919).

\textsuperscript{71}\textit{Morning Chronicle} 13 December 1917, 10.

\textsuperscript{72}On Winsor: Josiah H. Gifford to Charles H. Cole, 16 June 1915, MNGMA; \textit{Saturday Evening Observer} 18 July 1914, 1; C.M. Breuer to James J. Phelan, 18 December 1918, reel 12, Massachusetts Halifax Relief Committee Correspondence and Papers, Special Collections Division, Massachusetts State Library, Boston, Mass. (hereafter M-HRC papers). On Phelan, “List of Committees,” undated, MNGMA; and M-HRC papers, \textit{passim}. 29
capacity requested Salem residents donate cash to Halifax. “Salem has suffered,” he wrote. “Halifax is suffering much more. Let us open our heart and purses to the stricken ones.” Ratshesky became the C.P.S. official who came to Halifax on the first train and coordinated the first of Massachusetts’s relief contributions.

When the Committee for Public Safety dispatched Ratshesky and his corps to Halifax, it also accredited four newspaper reporters—from the Boston Globe, Boston Post, Boston Herald, and the Associated Press—to go with them and cover the Massachusetts efforts. These journalists sent back glowing reports of Ratshesky’s power and progress. Roy Atkinson, the Post’s reporter, said Ratshesky was “practically dictator in the relief work” in Halifax, and “wielded the axe briskly today, lopping off various relief committee heads and replacing them with men of his selection, while perfecting the co-ordination of relief work in this city.” The Herald’s J.V. Keating agreed, saying that Ratshesky had arrived to find “the energies of the relief workers on the scene being expended to cross purposes. Some of the relief was being duplicated and triplicated while other phases were being entirely neglected.” Keating reported that Ratshesky relied on his experiences in after the Chelsea and Salem fires to draw up a new plan of action to bring “order and effectiveness” to the operation. But if Ratshesky had the role described by the Boston correspondents, it was not reported by their Halifax colleagues. The Morning Chronicle praised his “amazing organizing ability, combined

73 Arthur N. Phippen to Henry B. Endicott, 12 December 1917, reel 12, M-HRC papers.

74 M.D. Sullivan to John O’Connell, 6 December 1917; Caleb [illegible] “to whom it may concern,” 6 December 1917; George B. Ryan to O’Connell, 6 December 1917; Edward McKernon to O’Connell, 6 December 1917; all in Ratshesky scrapbook.

75 Clipping from Boston Post 11 December 1917, Ratshesky scrapbook.

76 Clipping from Boston Herald 11 December 1917, Ratshesky scrapbook.
with unvarying good nature that is proof against extraordinary confusion and
disappointment of such times as the present,” but neither it nor its competitors credited
him with the dictatorial powers that the Boston newspapers did.\textsuperscript{77}

It is clear, however, that Ratshesky left his imprint on Halifax relief. As an
outsider, as the leader of the first relief train to arrive in Halifax, and as the experienced
“rebuilder of Chelsea and Salem,” as a Halifax newspaper dubbed him, he had the clout
to break through local tradition and personality.\textsuperscript{78} It also meant he could ignore sentiment
and specific, local conditions to impose a standard, centralized relief procedure. A
photograph taken for the Boston newspapers showed him at the bedside of George
Arthur, a boy injured at Bloomfield School (figure 2). While the caption described
Ratshesky as listening to the boy’s “sorrowful story,” the banker, still dressed in the fur-
trimmed coat his brother sent up to Halifax in a steamer full of supplies, was actually
examining a piece of paper.\textsuperscript{79} The photographer, accidentally perhaps, captured a telling
moment. One of the lessons Ratshesky told newspaper men that he learned from Chelsea
and Salem was the importance of local voices. “Salem’s problem was a problem for
Salem, he said, just as Halifax’s problem is one to be handled by its own people,”
reported A.J. Philpott, the \textit{Globe}’s correspondent.\textsuperscript{80} But the relief ideology developed by
the Red Cross, expounded by Byron Deacon, and carried into action by Ratshesky
required that a central logic of “expertise” replace the specifics of local experience. Just

\textsuperscript{77}\textit{Morning Chronicle} 13 December 1917, 10.

\textsuperscript{78}\textit{Morning Chronicle} 13 December 1917, 10.

\textsuperscript{79}On the coat, see [Ratshesky’s brother] to Ratshesky, 11 December 1917, in Ratshesky scrapbook.

\textsuperscript{80}Clipping from \textit{Boston Globe} 9 December 1917, Ratshesky scrapbook. Philpott was ordinarily the
\textit{Globe}’s art critic.
as Ratshesky claimed that Halifax’s people would handle their own problem, even while “wield[ing] the axe swiftly,” so too did he visit the hospital to hear individuals’ stories even while paying more attention to his own notes.

The other expert with Ratshesky on the Massachusetts relief train was John F. Moors, the head of the Massachusetts Red Cross. In many ways Moors and Ratshesky were dissimilar—Ratshesky was a Republican, Moors a Democrat; Ratshesky was a Jew, Moors, as Felix Frankfurter would later recall, “was a Yankee of Yankees, a Bostonian of Bostonians”\(^81\)—but they were both childless, rich men whose work in finance funded their philanthropic and reform activities. Just as Ratshesky was at the center of Jewish charity in Boston as head of the Federated Jewish Charities, Moors served as president of the Boston Associated Charities for twenty-six years. In the first two decades of the century, he was perhaps most prominently associated with school reform as the founder of the Public School Association. A Harvard alumnus and a close personal friend of the university’s president, he was at the time of the Halifax explosion not yet halfway through his fifty-year stint on the Radcliffe College Council, and he was about to begin a thirteen-year term on the Harvard Corporation.\(^82\) Praised as a “nonconformist” by Frankfurter, Moors’s election to the Corporation was hailed by the influential progressive journal *The Survey* as “a move to meet the demand that the governing body at Harvard be less representative of big business interests.”\(^83\) According to one observer of the Salem


\(^{83}\) Phillips, *Felix Frankfurter*, 202; *The Survey* 26 January 1918, 475. Frankfurter also called Moors “a leading banker of Boston,” and he was, at various times, an officer or director of the Pittsford Power Company, the Dana S. Courtney Company, the Collateral Loan Company, the State Street Trust Company, the Workingmen’s Loan Association, the Massachusetts Chocolate Company, and General Gas & Electric
relief effort, Moors was “the most widely known exponent of scientific philanthropy in
New England,” though not so widely known that the Salem newspapers did not
sometimes misstate his name as Moore. 84

Also like Ratshesky, Moors had a good deal of experience with disasters before
arriving in Halifax. He worked for two months in San Francisco in 1906 working as part
of a Massachusetts delegation to organize the relief effort there; his work there gained
“world-wide attention,” according to Roy Atkinson. 85 After the Chelsea fire, he was the
governor’s special representative. 86 And he chaired the Salem Fire Relief Committee in
1914, the governor citing Moors’s experiences with the San Francisco, Chelsea, and
“other relief funds” for the appointment. 87 In 1917, he was the head of the Massachusetts
Red Cross, and it was in that capacity that he went to Halifax. Even more than
Ratshesky, he was Deacon’s ideal for organizing and directing relief efforts. He was an
experienced expert on relief, a Red Cross official, a noted social reformer, and a
successful businessman. “Because of his wide experience, gained while directing
reconstruction forces in San Francisco after the earthquake and fire there, Mr. Moors has
been asked by the general committee to give it the benefit of his counsel at all times,” the

Boston Transcript reported. 88 Local Halifax officials turned to Moors for advice on how

84 Montanye Perry, The Salem Fire Relief (Salem, Mass.: Milo A. Newhall & Co., 1915), 23. For errors in
his name, see Salem Evening News 26 June 1914, 5, and Courrier de Salem 24 July 1914, 1.

85 Clipping from Boston Post 9 December 1917, Ratshesky scrapbook.

86 Moors biography in the National Cyclopaedia, 382.

87 Salem Evening News 26 June 1914, 5.

88 Clipping from Boston Transcript 11 December 1917, Ratshesky scrapbook.
to structure their organization and on which experts to bring in to help.

By the end of the first week following the explosion, Dougal Macgillivray, the Halifax Rehabilitation Committee chairman, was feeling besieged. He was a bank manager and leader at the Board of Trade, not a relief organizer. Despite his inexperience, he had been pressed to take the chairmanship, he claimed to his friend Archibald MacMechan, but found himself understaffed and not “catching up” to the task. Faced with much dissatisfaction and criticism, he asked for help. The relief committee turned to Moors, their international expert, for advice. Moors suggested Christian Lantz come to Halifax and consult with them about how to create a scientific rehabilitation office.

Like Ratshesky and Moors, Lantz was a childless social reformer; like Moors, he was not yet married (both men married late in life and remained childless). Unlike them, however, he was a professional reformer, without much personal wealth. Born of Pennsylvania Dutch stock, he attended the Y.M.C.A. Training School at Springfield, Mass., and after five years in business became general secretary of the Greenpoint Y.M.C.A. in Brooklyn. It was there that he first developed an interest in supervised playgrounds, and by the first decade of the twentieth century, he was a leader of the Playground Movement. In 1900, he was recruited to run the Salem Y.M.C.A., where he continued his playground work and, in the words of a newspaper, “made the Y.M.C.A. the civic center of the whole city where all sorts of meetings are held public movements

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89 Personal narrative of Mr. Dougal Macgillivray, n.d. but reviewed 22 February 1918, item 196, MacMechan fonds.

90 Morning Chronicle 19 December 1917, 5. Lantz’s Christian name was sometimes incorrectly given as Christopher.
are planned and a forum for voicing the opinions of all citizens of the city is held frequently.”

He continued his work on playgrounds, using the resources of the Y.M.C.A. to build a playground without municipal help and later winning a post as chair of the Salem Park Commission. It was, as a laudatory *Boston Globe* put it, “as natural in Salem for the people to go to Mr Lantz for a solution of civic difficulties as, so one admirer expressed it, to go to the police when anything is stolen.”

Late in life, when Lantz reflected on his playground work, he downplayed the political or reform motivation. “At once upon coming to the Salem Y.M.C.A. my interest in broadening the gymnasium recreation led to the use of the City public parks for golf, tennis, ball games and aquatics,” he wrote to his niece in the early 1950s. “For many years I was a member of the City park commission and for twenty five years was its Chairman. Among other features playgrounds were established for children.” Though in his telling building playgrounds was merely a natural outgrowth of his belief in healthy recreation, that Lantz was a leader in the playground movement is particularly significant, because it represents two opposing themes within progressivism. On one hand, the very nature of supervised playgrounds revolved around social control, Americanization, and a desire to teach working-class children how to recreate in a middle-class way. On the

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92 Unlabeled clipping, 24 April 1914, Y.M.C.A. scrapbooks. See also Lantz’s obituary in the *Boston Herald* 17 October 1955, in the Christian Lantz Papers, in the personal possession of Maurice Umble, Mason, Ohio.

93 Clipping from *Boston Globe* 23 December 1917, Y.M.C.A. scrapbooks.

94 Christian Lantz to Lena Umble, undated but between 1953 and October 1955, Christian Lantz papers, in the personal possession of Maurice Umble, Mason, Ohio. 
other hand, as historian Sarah Jo Peterson argues, Massachusetts playground activists built local coalitions to support model playgrounds—like that founded by Lantz—and to encourage local government to create their own playgrounds. In Massachusetts especially, where cities held state-mandated referendums on establishing playground systems, advocates like Lantz had to work within cross-class and multi-ethnic coalitions to succeed. His playground activities provided important experience for his work in disaster relief.

After the Salem fire, Lantz was appointed by the governor to the reconstruction committee, and from there he was nominated to chair the rehabilitation committee, charged with helping those affected by the fire restart their lives. As the committee’s sole executive officer, Lantz made decisions himself about what aid to grant sufferers. “It was an enormous task, for it had to deal with problems of clothing distribution, medical care, furnishing of new homes, getting employment for many who had been deprived of work by the fire, arranging the financial affairs of many families and much other work,” recalled a newspaper article a few years later. Lantz, a professional administrator, developed with a fellow member of his committee named J. Chester Crandell “a system . . . not unlike a card index system, which simplified to a great extent, the problems of the enormous task” of keeping track of aid recipients. Crandell, an accountant, worked for Scovell, Wellington & Company, an early management consulting


96 *Courrier de Salem* 24 July 1914, 1.

97 Clipping from *Boston Globe* 23 December 1917, Y.M.C.A. scrapbooks.
Notably, contemporary accounts of the Salem relief effort mostly omitted Lantz. Yet by 1917, the Boston Globe called him a “rebuilder of cities” and a “rehabilitator of stricken cities.” A Halifax paper dubbed him more specifically “the rebuilder of Salem.” Moors and Ratshesky had evidently been much impressed with Lantz’s unheralded work. When Moors telegraphed Lantz to come up to Halifax, the latter arrived bearing the “paraphernalia” of the system he and Crandell developed. He also arrived with the relief ideology he had used in Salem.

It was from Lantz, and therefore from Salem, that the Halifax Relief Committee acquired its defining ideology—the ideology that Deacon described in his book. “Rehabilitation does not mean that losses incurred would be made good from the Relief Fund. There is no prospect that the Relief Fund will be sufficient to cover more than a very small percentage of the loss,” Lantz told a Halifax newspaper. Rather, rehabilitation was “the act of putting one whose affairs have been crippled by disaster in the way of opportunity to begin life anew with reasonable chances of success.” Ten days later, he told a meeting of the Commercial Club of Halifax that rehabilitation workers must be careful to encourage “men and women” to “become independent and self-reliant.”

Echoing the tenets of scientific philanthropy, Lantz declared that relief “is a crutch, but

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99 Clipping from Boston Globe 23 December 1917, Y.M.C.A. scrapbooks.

100 Morning Chronicle 28 December 1917, 1.

101 Unlabeled clipping, 13 December 1917; unlabeled clipping, 14 December 1917, both in Y.M.C.A. scrapbooks.

102 Morning Chronicle 19 December 1917, 5.
must not be leaned on too long if we ever are to be able to give it up.”

Lantz, the Commercial Club’s luncheon program declared, had “been through all the disasters of recent years on the American continent and . . . [was] now here to help us by the benefit of his experience.” Like Moors and Ratthesky, he was one of a growing number of men amassing expertise in disasters and disaster relief, many of whom flooded into Halifax in the aftermath of the explosion. This was a North American group, spanning both Canada and the United States, and their arrival in Halifax was largely coordinated by the American Red Cross. Women participated in the transnational community of experts as social workers who came to Halifax from Montreal, Toronto, Winnipeg, Boston, and New York. Some of them had connections to the Maritimes, or even to Halifax specifically, but many of them did not, seeing instead a potential for professional development. When Lantz was through designing the rehabilitation committee, he handed over its operation to J. Howard T. Falk, another man recruited to Halifax by the American Red Cross. Falk was the secretary of the Mothers Allowance Commission for Winnipeg and an advisor to the Manitoba Public Welfare Commission. Other visiting experts included the head of the Boston Dispensary’s social services department, Katherine McMahon; C.C. Carstens, the secretary of the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children; Thomas Adams, a British urban

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105 Undated staff list (before 25 January 1918), item 162.1; J.H.T. Falk, “History of Rehabilitation Work Since January 9, 1918,” [report for T.S. Rogers?], 26 February 1918, item 162.5, both in HRC correspondence. On the influx of social workers, see Boyd, *Enriched by Catastrophe.*
planner then working for the Commission of Conservation in Ottawa; Lucy Wright, a past member of the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind; and Dr. Thomas Darlington, New York City’s former health commissioner.106

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The chapters that follow examine the responses of individuals, families, neighbors, and formal organizations to the fire and the explosion, as well as to the growing state. Each of the six chapters covers either Salem or Halifax. They are arranged in three sections of two chapters each, and each successive section grows in time and scope. The first one is about individuals in the first hours and days of each disaster; the second asks how informal communities like families and neighborhoods responded to the disasters and to the state over the span of weeks and months; and the third section looks at formal organizations like churches and unions, and it extends chronologically for years. Within each section, the order of Salem and Halifax alternate, and the first disaster I examine in depth is Halifax. I start with the later disaster for two reasons. First, Chapter 1 introduces concepts of spontaneous organization, daily patterns of solidarity, and relief managers that I refer to throughout the dissertation, and because of the availability of sources, this work had to be done in the context of Halifax. Second and more importantly, starting out of chronological order serves as a reminder that I do

not make an argument here about change in disaster relief between June 1914 and December 1917. The analysis in this dissertation does not depend on the chronological difference between the Salem fire and the Halifax explosion.

The first two chapters examine the first hours and days after each disaster, and they ask how individuals responded to the disasters. They ask what people did immediately after the explosion, and how individuals’ social positions—including class, gender, and geographical location— influenced what they did and how they imagined their cities. They interrogate the categories of order and disorder, showing how each were built into and were dependent on the power structure and society of each city. Chapter 1 asks how people in different parts of Halifax and its society perceived order immediately after the explosion, how they created order for themselves, and how the order they sought differed. Chapter 2 examines how the specifics of Salem’s municipal politics affected the type of order imposed by the National Guard. It asks how politics were embedded in the military and civilian relief work. A theme in both chapters is that when ad hoc and unofficial solidarity was formalized and made hierarchical and official, it became less efficient, useful, accepted, and egalitarian.

The third and fourth chapters each begin by asking where survivors lived in the weeks and months following each disaster. Chapter 3 describes the conflicts between relief authorities and French Canadians living in a Salem refugee camp. It asks how conflicts over domestic and formal labor played out spatially in fights over the arrangement of the camp and the refugees’ presence there. It describes how soldiers and survivors battled for power in the camps and what strategies each used. Using detailed records from the Halifax Relief Commission, Chapter 4 explores families’ economies,
asking how the tradition of multifaceted and complex extended families stretched and adapted to meet new challenges after the explosion. Both chapters explore the balances represented by relief: they ask how the state balanced its need to understand, control, and flatten the complexities of citizens’ everyday lives with a fear that it would be saddled with unsustainable material and financial demands. They also explore how survivors struggled to retain their independence and autonomy even while seeking to maximize the money and support they drew from the state. This second section addresses informal parts of civil society: families, neighborhoods, and friendships.

Chapters 5 and 6 move from the informal to the formal; they ask how churches, unions, and fraternal societies responded to the disasters and to the growth of the state. Chapter 5 explores the role of clergy in Halifax’s relief process and asks how churches were rebuilt and reimagined as communities, buildings, and institutions. It compares the Relief Commission’s instrumental use of churches, which emphasized clerical authority, with the ways that lay congregants chose to use churches to come to terms with their grief. It also asks how unions responded to the considerable growth of the technocratic state during the First World War. Chapter 6 asks similar questions about Salem’s churches, unions, and fraternal societies. By combining the stories of the main French-Canadian Catholic parish and the textile workers’ union at the city’s largest employer, it asks how French Canadians crafted an ethnic political culture in church and the workplace. The chapter also asks how fraternal orders changed in the second decade of the twentieth century and uses the fire to explore how societies balanced local and centralizing impulses.
S. Fred Smith, a manager at the Salem telephone company, wrote in the company magazine that the fire “will ever be remembered by the present generation and by generations to follow as one of the most eventful days in the history of Salem.” He was not alone in assuming that the fire would, like its predecessors in Chicago and San Francisco, remain an important part of Salem’s history. Yet today the fire has been nearly forgotten, and there has been little scholarship on it. With the exception of a single master’s thesis written in 1971, nothing was written on the Salem fire between 1915 and 2008. In the year after the fire, two eyewitnesses wrote theses in civil engineering at the University of Maine. They described the progress of the fire and suggested strategies to prevent future urban conflagrations. Geographer Robert Donnell’s 1971 thesis focuses on the effects of the fire on the shoe and leather industries and the choices employers made about where to rebuild their plants. In 2008 the Peabody Essex Museum published a book of photographs of the fire’s aftermath as part of a series highlighting the museum’s collections.

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American disasters have analyzed the fire; most do not even mention it. Rather than recall the industrial history implied by the fire, Salem prefers to look further back to its height as a trading port, and still further back to the witch trials.

Unlike the largely-forgotten Salem fire, the Halifax explosion has become an integral part of Haligonian public memory. Annual local commemorations center on a memorial bell tower that was built in the mid-1980s. Thanks largely to Hugh MacLennan’s 1941 novel Barometer Rising, the explosion also remains a part of pan-Canadian culture. In addition to a Historica “Heritage Minute” about explosion hero Vince Coleman, a CBC docudrama, and several works of fiction, no fewer than eight popular histories have been published, the most recent in 2005. The emphasis is local, bordering on the antiquarian. Surprisingly, although Halifax is often seen as the


114 Hugh MacLennan, Barometer Rising (1941; Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1989).

birthplace of disaster studies, there has been little scholarly work on the topic.116 Saint Mary’s University in Halifax convened a conference in 1994 that addressed a dizzyingly large array of topics related to the explosion.117 Two recent books, one on the response of the Navy and the other on the explosion’s effect on Canadian social work, have addressed questions of institutional history.118 Few works have attempted to put the explosion into a national or transnational perspective or have addressed it in the context of progressive governance.

This dissertation rectifies these absence and places the Salem fire and Halifax explosion in the context of the growth of the North American progressive state. That growth was national and transnational, fostered by the movements of elite experts on rescue and governance and also by the movements of working-class migrants.


117 Ruffman and Howell, eds., Ground Zero.

A City of Despair and Lawlessness

Displacement Of Historic Proportions

Thousands of New Orleans residents were stranded in mandatory evacuation shelters in the city's convention center, as thousands of people were still without power. The city's infrastructure was paralyzed, and the situation was deemed to be a national disaster. The federal government deployed military forces to help with the evacuation and provide assistance to residents. The situation was described as a humanitarian crisis.

On the Streets

For Those Remaining, ‘This Is Total Chaos’

The streets of New Orleans were filled with debris and damage. The city was in ruins, and the situation was described as chaotic. The residents who remained were facing dire circumstances, with limited access to food, water, and medical care.

The Racial Dimension

‘To Me, It Just Seems Like Black People Are Marked’

The situation was described as a racial crisis, with the African American community bearing the brunt of the disaster. The response and assistance were uneven, with some areas receiving better support than others.

Government’s Role

Planning, Response Are Faulted

The government’s response to the disaster was criticized. The lack of preparation and coordination was deemed to have contributed to the worsening situation. The response was described as inadequate and insufficient.

Figure 1.


Collection of the Newseum, Washington, D.C.
FIGURE 2. “George Arthur, a pupil at the Bloomfield School, who was injured in the Halifax disaster is being nursed back to health by the Massachusetts Relief workers. He is shown in the picture telling his sorrowful story to A.C. Ratshesky. The nurse is Miss Edith Choate of Boston.”

Photograph from item 3, scrapbook, box 4, A.C. Ratshesky Collection, P-586, American Jewish Historical Society.
Chapter 1
“Organization Without Any Organization”: Order and Disorder in Exploded Halifax

The morning of Thursday, December 6, 1917, started like any other in Halifax Harbor. It was a clear, sunny day, and the harbor was busy with wartime traffic. A bit after 9:00 in the morning, the *Imo*, a Norwegian-owned steamer bound for New York to collect relief supplies for Belgium, collided with the *Mont Blanc*, a French-owned ship bound for Bordeaux laden with explosives for the front. Both ships were in a rush: the Belgian relief ship had intended to leave the night before but had been delayed, and the French boat had arrived late the night before and missed the deadline for entering the harbor. The circumstances of their collision that morning in the narrows of Halifax Harbor remain controversial.¹ The munitions on the *Mont Blanc* caught fire and soon exploded in what has been called the largest man-made explosion before the atomic bomb.²

The Halifax Explosion came suddenly, especially in Richmond, a working-class neighborhood in the city’s North End. Most people in Halifax had not known that there was a ship fire, so they were going about their normal lives: starting school, beginning their workday, cleaning up from breakfast. Suddenly there was a loud noise. For those

¹ For a detailed reconstruction of the events leading to the collision, see John Griffin Armstrong, *The Halifax Explosion and the Royal Canadian Navy: Inquiry and Intrigue* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2002), 29-40.

south of the devastated area, there followed a few moments of confusion, maybe even an hour or so, as people first imagined the damage to be local and relatively minor. Soon, though, they learned just how bad things were, either by traveling north themselves, or by meeting people coming from the North End. For those who started in the North End, it was clear from the beginning that something major had happened. The explosion knocked down houses and sent shards of glass flying like daggers, and as survivors started to escape the wreckage and regain their bearings, they had to contend with a rapidly spreading fire, sparked by both the flying munitions and upended coal stoves. In Richmond, what hadn’t been destroyed outright by the shock of the explosion burned down. Even in the South End, a neighborhood of gracious mansions and the more modest houses of Halifax’s middle class, doors came off their hinges, plaster crashed down from walls and ceilings, and windows shattered.

At that moment—whatever moment a person learned that something extraordinary had happened—normality was suspended. Small children mustered uncommon bravery to rescue their parents from burning and collapsed houses. Workingmen abandoned their posts to check on their families. Women consigned to the Old Ladies’ Home wandered outside for the first time in months or years. Untrained women long squeamish at the sight of blood volunteered for hours of nursing duty at hospitals deluged with wounded and literally flooded with blood. With the mayor out of town and the city council scattered throughout the city, the city’s deputy mayor and province’s lieutenant governor essentially ceded political authority to a self-constituted

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group of local worthies. Nearly a quarter century later, writing the novel that still stands as the foremost cultural depiction of the explosion, Hugh MacLennan summed it up: “It was all queer; it was a revolution in the nature of things.”

The nature of that revolution depended on the perspective of the observer. In this chapter, I examine the perspectives of three different kinds of actors and interrogate their perceptions of order and disorder. First are those I call relief workers, mostly middle-class men and women who left their workplaces and homes to help people at the overwhelmed hospitals, rescue the wounded, and clear the dead in the devastated area. Many of these people were extending the roles they played in ordinary times. Volunteer nurses nursed more and in different places. Soldiers worked in the devastated area on their own accord, with little or no oversight. Many more people volunteered their inexpert and unusual labor. What they found, both in the devastated area and in hospitals, surprised some of them. Florence J. Murray, a Dalhousie University medical student, spent the day working at Camp Hill Hospital. She was struck by the “organization without any organization,” as scores of people worked alongside each other—trained and untrained, civilian and military, all without direction and on their own authority. This voluntary work was not without hierarchy. Because it was based on people’s preexisting social networks or occupational roles, it recapitulated the hierarchy and inequity of ordinary lives.

In contrast stood relief managers, rich and middle-class Haligonians whose first instinct was to go to City Hall, where Red Cross leader May Sexton found “total

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4 Hugh MacLennan, *Barometer Rising* (1941; Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1989), 171.

5 Personal narrative of Miss Florence J. Murray, n.d., item 192, volume 2124, Archibald MacMechan fonds, MG 1, Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management (hereafter MacMechan fonds).
disorganization." For this second group, the city appeared chaotic and dangerous, and they valiantly wielded telephones, typewriters, and pencils in an exhausting battle against disorder and confusion. The chaos that such people envisioned was a product of their centralized knowledge being insufficient to the task. To these managers, order was by definition created by central committees and the logic of central commands. To some extent, this was a result of a municipal political culture that revolved around the military and its centralized power structure. But it is also the product of any state-based power. The organic, informal logic that volunteers like Murray created was illegible and not understandable by people like Sexton. It was for people in this category for whom the events of December 6 were most literally revolutionary, in that they effectively took over government. Yet if the ordinary organs and activities of democratic governance—the city council, the mayor, the upcoming Dominion elections—were absent or suspended, there was little change because by taking over the municipal state, the relief managers also took over the vantage point and organizational logic of City Hall.

Finally, there were the objects of these relief efforts, those who were suffering from the explosion. In addition to the roughly 2,000 people who died that day or in the immediate aftermath, there were 9,000 who were injured and around 25,000 who were made homeless. Their ideas and experiences of order and disorder were more complex. They enacted a local, informal order, by relying on their everyday networks and practices.

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6 Personal testimony of Mrs. F.H. Sexton, n.d. but revised 7 February 1918, item 224, MacMechan fonds.

7 Michelle Hébert Boyd, *Enriched by Catastrophe: Social Work and Social Conflict After the Halifax Explosion* (Black Point, N.S.: Fernwood, 2007), 67. Local historians and trivia buffs have long tried to come up with precise numbers of casualties for the explosion, but of course this is a fruitless task. The exact numbers are also beside the point. I have used Boyd’s numbers because they are the most recent published estimates. In contrast, Armstrong, *Inquiry and Intrigue*, 3, estimates a more conservative “over 1,600” dead.
of solidarity. By going to locations and people that played a central role in community life in ordinary times, they maintained the regular order of their normal lives. In the understanding of civic, political, and military leaders—that is, those who took control of formal relief efforts—this local order was illegible. To crowd at a doctor’s home or to go to the local convent was disorderly and dangerous because it ignored a more regimented, from-the-top relief process. Similarly, helping oneself to medical supplies from a drug store could be viewed from one perspective as disorderly looting but from another as orderly rescue. Thus North End sufferers created an order that masqueraded as disorder.

Sufferers were also exposed to the opposite, to disorder masquerading as order. Soldiers canvassed Richmond after the explosion, warning that the fire would soon spread to a munitions depot and forcing survivors to evacuate to open fields; thus the embodiments of the state and its order spread disorder by delaying rescue efforts and exposing the wounded to prolonged winter weather. One sees in the story of the “second explosion” warning all the ways in which the state is at best an imperfect relief organization, since it is made up of fallible individuals who cannot be omniscient. It is also imperfect because it by its nature can only understand things from a centralized vantage point. The difference between the centralized knowledge of the state and the local knowledge of individuals is perhaps best exemplified by where people chose to sleep the night of the explosion. The army’s engineering and ordnance corps erected hundreds of tents on Halifax’s Commons, but survivors refused to move into them, preferring instead to stay with their own friends and relatives in severely damaged houses; here they chose the order of everyday connections to the false order of regulated army housing in which those everyday relationships would be obliterated.
The concepts of local and central knowledge, and of the illegibility from above of informal order, derive from the work of political scientist James C. Scott. He argues that, as he puts it, state schemes to improve the human condition often fail because the state cannot, by its nature, see or understand the logic and order by which everyday life is lived by ordinary people.\textsuperscript{8} When states attempt to impose their logic and order on the world, they cannot help but to erase some of the local knowledge that structures everyday life. From a normative perspective, he argues, this destroys the interest, diversity, and excitement of life. Worse, this erasure and deletion destroys the knowledge that is actually required for success of the state’s project. Replacing a peasant’s knowledge of local weather, soil, and planting patterns with an agronomist’s centralized knowledge of the perfect farm fails, Scott says, because not every farm is the same and local knowledge is required for success.\textsuperscript{9} Replacing the complexity of an organic city with the sterility of high modernist Brasilia fails because it destroys the very things that make cities successful: diversity of use, complexity, excitement.\textsuperscript{10}

Here, Scott relies on an extended reading of Jane Jacobs’s classic \textit{Death and Life of Great American Cities} to describe how successful cities create an informal order through which they self-police. Describing mid-century neighborhoods in what she deems “great” American cities, Jacobs identifies much of what all successful cities have. Most importantly, the multilayeredness of dense cities, with their diversities of uses and dense populations, creates a complex web of public and private relationships. In Jacobs’s


\textsuperscript{9}Scott, \textit{Seeing Like a State}, part 3.

\textsuperscript{10}Scott, \textit{Seeing Like a State}, chapter 4.
Greenwich Village, shopkeepers kept watch over the sidewalk and held keys for guests; neighborhood leaders, whom Jacobs calls “public characters,” became known for specific, small areas of expertise. Close relationships were unimportant, indeed undesired. Rather, bonds of neighborhood solidarity were created through everyday life and normal interactions. These bonds were by their nature public and shared, rather than private and individual. What made public characters possible is that they knew large numbers of people, but only in a limited manner.\textsuperscript{11}

To sociologist Kai Erikson, it is these very bonds that are so important in a disaster. His \textit{Everything In Its Path} is a study of a decidedly non-urban disaster: a flood of a West Virginia mining hollow in the 1970s. After the flood, these bonds of neighborly solidarity were disrupted when the population moved. This dispersal, Erikson argues, constitutes a second, more long-term disaster for survivors because it destroyed their social capital and the mechanisms they had in ordinary life to cope with tragedies and difficulties. Without the networks of everyday solidarity forged in pre-flood Buffalo Creek, survivors found themselves adrift in a sea of depression and antisocial behavior, without the familiar moorings of nearby friends and family.\textsuperscript{12}

Smaller-scale disasters like nightclub fires or airplane crashes provide analogies to the way people act in large-scale urban disasters. In nightclub evacuations, for instance, people move in ways that look from afar, or in retrospect, to be illogical or disorderly. From the perspective of those evacuating, however, they are behaving in logically


consistent, well ordered ways, responding to smoke, hazards, and new information. In such experiences, people rely on and recreate the roles and relationships and patterns they had before the crisis. The most successful nightclub evacuations, for instance, happen when people are there in groups and help the others whom they know to evacuate. Regulars at the nightclub, performing roles like Jacobs’s public characters, help evacuate newcomers. So do people in formal and informal authority roles. Thus at a nightclub fire, people look to the band for instructions; in plane crashes it is frequently the flight attendants who take the lead in evacuation and care of the injured.

Scott’s rubric of local and central knowledge, and their respective abilities and inabilities to see and understand informal order, helps us to understand better what sociologists of disasters have long noted. In nearly all disasters studied by sociologists, people are orderly, there is little or no looting, and there is no panic. Yet these have been and remain key parts to the standard disaster narrative, conditioning how even survivors understand and remember their experiences in retrospect. Cultural scholar Carl Smith, writing about overblown or fictive accounts of looting and vigilantism in the wake of the Chicago fire of 1871, argues that they were the product of bourgeois fears of the city. Because the destruction of Chicago in the fire represented the greatest possible


14 Miller, *Collective*, 259-60, 262.


disorder, the fire encouraged the middle class to fantasize and fear the city as a place inherently dangerous and disordered. While there is some truth to Smith’s argument that urban disasters are symbolically important because they legitimize pre-existing fears of the city, it cannot explain the enduring power of the expectation of looting and panic. Rather, what we see is a result of outside observers’ and central authorities’ inability to recognize the logic that exists in people’s immediate post-disaster actions. Those actions do not follow the logic of central authority, which privileges legibility, regularity, and its own central knowledge.

May Sexton, a volunteer leader of the Red Cross chapter in Halifax, was in neighboring New Brunswick when the ships collided. She told Dalhousie University professor Archibald MacMechan that she was “prophetic about the conditions at Halifax, i.e., total disorganization.” From her own perspective, that of a relief manager, she was correct. People at City Hall indeed had little idea what was going on in the rest of Halifax. Conditions at headquarters were chaotic, as rain and snow came in the windows, city officials wandered around drunk, and key elected leaders remained absent. But what Sexton could not see thanks to her literally central vantage point at City Hall, where she went directly after returning from Fredericton, was the informal order created on the ground. This chapter explores and analyzes these differing ideas about and experiences of order and disorder.

The documentary basis for this discussion comes primarily from two groups of sources, each of which presents distinct methodological difficulties. First and most


19 Personal Testimony of Mrs. F.H. Sexton, n.d. but revised 7 February 18, item 224, MacMechan fonds.
important are the papers collected by Archibald MacMechan in 1918 as director of the Halifax Disaster Record Office. MacMechan was an English professor and librarian at Dalhousie and a noted man of letters, a popular essayist, and a Carlyle scholar.\textsuperscript{20} MacMechan’s neighbor and close friend was Dougald Macgillivray, a bank manager and the chairman of the Halifax Board of Trade, who chaired the rehabilitation subcommittee of the Halifax Relief Committee. On December 14, the two friends met, and Macgillivray asked MacMechan to be the committee’s historian.\textsuperscript{21} Charged with documenting the explosion and the city’s response to it, MacMechan began a remarkable oral history and archival project. He wrote to organizations, leaders, and acquaintances in nearby cities and asked for their recollections from the first days of the crisis. He collected the official reports of relief committees, the military, and city government. He kept a detailed “journal” for months after the explosion describing what happened each day with the relief process and the official investigation. He also asked people what they had done and took notes, collecting hundreds of what we would term oral histories of the explosion. His ultimate goal was to write a definitive history of the explosion, but a lack of support from the relief commission coupled with severe personal depression stemming from the war made it difficult for him to finish. After receiving discouraging letters from multiple publishers, MacMechan lost interest in the project, and he never wrote the last chapter.\textsuperscript{22} It would take until 1978 for MacMechan’s book to be published as part of a


\textsuperscript{21}Roper, “MacMechan,” 86-87. Roper does not mention Macgillivray’s position at the Board of Trade.

\textsuperscript{22}Roper, “MacMechan,” 87-88, 89-90
MacMechan’s methodology, such as he had one, creates some problems for the historian relying on his documents. He chose his interview subjects, apparently, by speaking to people to whom he would have spoken anyway. Thus while he was getting his haircut at the George Street Barber Shop twelve days after the explosion, he collected the experience of his barber. Mostly it meant that he spoke to his friends and neighbors. In doing so he replicated Halifax’s social hierarchy, in which professionals and the Dalhousie-affiliated mingled with military officers and their wives. He also reproduced Halifax’s geographical divisions. Because he mostly spoke to people in the South End, he learned what only those people were doing. The few North End residents whose experiences are in his collection were interviewed by his assistant, Dalhousie undergraduate John Hanlon Mitchell. Even with Mitchell’s contributions, there are few stories from direct victims of the explosion, and there is nothing from any enlisted men.

Not only does MacMechan’s collection leave holes, it can be untrustworthy even in what it does record. Just as MacMechan reproduced the social structure of his friends, he recreated their prejudices and assumptions. Officers are given credit for things their men did. MacMechan started his work early, which in general is a good thing, since it means his oral histories were unclouded by time or conventional wisdom. But it also meant that people were still working to cement their reputation as heroes. We can see these two phenomena in the story MacMechan told of Captain John Flint Cahan. Jack

24 Personal testimony of C. Sutherland, 18 December 1917, item 46, MacMechan fonds.
Cahan was a disabled officer who had returned from the trenches at Courcellette paralyzed from the waist down and in constant, acute pain. “He had himself put in his motor, his man-servant acting as chauffeur, and worked all day removing the wounded to hospital,” MacMechan wrote. A paraplegic could not have been of much use moving the wounded. More likely, it was his driver who did the work, while Cahan took up space in the car. Yet Cahan received the credit. MacMechan’s timing also meant his reports were collected in a period in which Halifax, particularly elite Halifax, was fighting over who should be blamed for the disaster and who should pay for rebuilding. The Navy, for instance, was being blamed for not controlling Halifax Harbor appropriately and allowing the explosion to happen; naval officers therefore had an incentive to emphasize the competence of their colleagues and subordinates.

Despite these problems, MacMechan’s collection of documents and notes is useful because they and newspapers provide the only contemporaneous record of what happened in the immediate aftermath of disaster, when people, organizations, and government were not creating much in the way of paper records. The reports that were generated by subcommittees of the Relief Committee were among the only records that document the earliest days of the relief effort. Because MacMechan collected his stories so early, in December, January, and February, he did so before the popular memory of the disaster cemented. What people told him is therefore a fortuitous window into what people were thinking about the disaster in its immediate aftermath.

The second major group of sources for this chapter is a series of 177 oral histories

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26 Unsigned, undated essay, probably an early draft by MacMechan, labeled “The Halifax Disaster,” item 271, MacMechan fonds; Captain John Flint Cahan, C.E.F, n.d., item 123, MacMechan fonds.
taken by Janet F. Kitz in 1985 and 1988. The author of several popular books on the explosion, Kitz in this instance was working with a committee creating a memorial to the explosion in Fort Needham Park. Kitz interviewed hundreds of survivors, mostly very briefly. The people whom she spoke to were, by dint of her timing, mostly very old and had been young at the time of the explosion. They were also a broader cross-section of Halifax society than MacMechan’s interviewees; they include people from both the North End and the South End, of a variety of classes. They are valuable because they provide one of the few sources for knowing what the explosion’s direct victims did and experienced. Nonetheless, the Kitz interviews suffer from problems of accuracy that are familiar to oral historians and to psychologists who study the memory of traumatic events.

All oral historians have to deal with the problem of memory. Kitz’s subjects were particularly susceptible to memory lapses because of their age and the sixty-eight years that had elapsed between the event and their interviews. Psychologists who study the creation and recall of what they call “flashbulb memories”—those created at a moment of public trauma like the Kennedy assassination or a large-scale disaster—highlight particular problems with a project like Kitz’s. Research on flashbulb memories has been especially prevalent since September 11, 2001; the terrorist attacks then sparked an interest and presented a rare opportunity to study the phenomenon. First among these


28 Kathy Pezdek, “Event Memory and Autobiographical Memory for the Events of September 11, 2001,”
problems is that time tends to compress in the recall of these memories. Thus in a 2003 study, participants thought that the events of September 11 were faster and closer together than they were. Second, psychologists have found that such memories are no more accurate than everyday memories, but that they are more vivid, more viscerally felt, and that study participants believe them to be more accurate. This mistaken belief in a memory’s accuracy can be particularly dangerous for an oral historian. Third, psychologists have found that people who are emotionally closer to the event, for instance a cohort of New Yorkers compared to groups of Californians and Hawaiians, had more accurate memories, but still got things wrong. Explosion survivors who recounted their own memories were likely more reliable than those who merely heard or read about it, but even people who told their own stories were likely to be inaccurate. By virtue of their age at the time of the explosion, Kitz’s subjects were likely to have been recounting their parents’ stories and thus fall into the less reliable category.

Reading the Kitz oral histories shows another problem with them. There are common themes and motifs that emerge that are necessarily more the product of cultural scripts than people’s actual experiences on December 6, 1917. One of the common stories in Kitz’s interviews was that people originally thought the explosion was an air-raid. This was indeed something that some people thought at the time, but it appears to

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have become a more frequent first thought in the retelling. How it became a dominant narrative offers some clues about how to use oral histories like these properly, and they show how people’s ideas about war and disasters create scripts that they unconsciously follow in their memory, even when they did not follow them originally.

The Halifax explosion occurred during a fever-pitch of anti-German feeling fostered by war propaganda and encouraged by the government and its friendly press. On December 4, for instance, the *Evening Mail*, a newspaper that strongly favored the reelection of Prime Minister Robert Laird Borden and his coalition government, described a movement among North End merchants to change the name of their main commercial thoroughfare, Gottingen Street, to something less German-sounding.32 Halifax Harbor was well defended against submarine attacks, and the city was under blackout to prevent naval shelling.33 It is not surprising that among Haligonians’ first reactions to the explosion, a common one was to blame the Germans. As we will see later in this chapter, it was an assumption the government, locked in a bitter reelection battle in the Halifax riding, benefited from and encouraged.34 Among people MacMechan asked, more people thought it was an attack from the sea than an attack from the air.35

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32 *Evening Mail* 4 December 1917, 10.
33 *Evening Mail* 4 December 1917, 10; Personal narrative of W.B. Moore, M.D., n.d., folder 23.18, “Halifax Disaster Record Office – Research Notes,” Archibald MacMechan Papers, MS-2-82, Archives and Special Collections, Killam Library, Dalhousie University (hereafter MacMechan Dal papers); Armstrong, Inquiry and Intrigue, 16.


35 See, for example, personal narrative of Mr. Dougal Macgillivray, n.d. but reviewed 22 Feb 18, item 196; [testimony of] Col. W.E. Thompson, A.A.G., 15 March 1918, item 233; statement re explosion at Halifax, J.P.D. Llwyd, Dean of Nova Scotia, 28 December 17, item 168; personal narrative of Miss Jean Forrest,
Indeed, mass fears of bombing directed at civilians—what we would now call strategic bombing—would have been unlikely. Haligonians in 1917 had not yet lived through the first transatlantic flights, and there were not yet any aircraft carriers. Folklorist Helen Creighton recalled in her autobiography that it was around the time of the explosion that she first saw an airplane. It was such an unusual sight that a man near her climbed a telephone pole to see better. While there were the beginnings of an air war in Europe, it was rarely directed at bombing civilians, and when it was, it did little damage. Early in the war, a *New York Times* correspondent visited the site in Paris where a German bomb had exploded. He found a crater only two feet wide by one-and-a-half feet long, and only six inches deep. The bomb had killed three Parisians, but had not damaged any buildings beyond breaking a few windows. By 1917, the technique was not much better. In early November, a squadron of 30 German airplanes had attacked London, but they had dropped their bombs at random and killed only eight people. An Austrian attack on Venice a bit less than two weeks before the explosion included bombs dropped near the railroad station and a police building, but there was little damage and no casualties. New and frightening as they may have been, these air raids were mostly a nuisance, not the terrifying instrument of war they would become.

Nonetheless, there were people in 1917 who first thought that the explosion was

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n.d., item 146; personal narrative of Engineer Commander Richard Howley, R.N., 28 February 18, item 158; and MS narrative of Lt. Rod Macdonald, item 194; all in MacMechan fonds. See also, Mrs. Edith Barss Baker to Walter and Geoffrey Barss, n.d. [1917], item 21, microfilm 15,125, Halifax Explosion Collection, MG 27, Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management (hereafter MG 27).


from an air raid. Lieutenant Rod Macdonald, a returned soldier in the 25th Battalion of the Canadian Expeditionary Force, wrote MacMechan, “Two thoughts seemed to be in the minds of the badly frightened people. Near at hand one lot were shouting about Zeppelins and airplanes, while others were certain that the city was being shelled. I managed to convince a few that neither was correct.”

(Macdonald had perhaps seen what an actual attack from the air looked like and knew this wasn’t it.) Walter Hoganson was at the office of the Daily Echo when there was “a big ‘crash’ (a terrific, terrifying roar),” he wrote to a friend in Massachusetts. “People with scratches, cuts and bruises were yelling, ‘The dirty Huns,’ ‘There [sic] here at Last,’ and many other things, thinking it was an air raid.”

It was, however, a relatively small portion of the population. In contrast, in the sixty-eight-year-old memories collected by Kitz, Haligonians appear to have all feared an attack from the air.

Trying to explain how this happened is necessarily speculative. During the course of the twentieth century, civilian bombing came to dominate the cultural depiction of war on the home front. Especially for the generation Kitz was interviewing, who were in their thirties and forties in the early 1940s, World War II became the dominant model of war. People remembered fear of German bombing in the idioms of the second, and in

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40 MS narrative of Lt. Rod Macdonald, item 194, MacMechan fonds.
41 Walter Hoganson to Harold Kennedy, 18 December 1917, enclosed with letter Sam K. Casson to A.C. Ratshesky, 28 December 1917, scrapbook, item 3, box 4, A.C. Ratshesky Collection, P-586, American Jewish Historical Society. For others who thought it was an air-raid, see personal narrative of Warrena Madden, n.d., item 180; personal narrative of Mrs. Annie Anderson, n.d., item 114; personal narrative of Miss M.E. Doane, n.d., item 140; personal narrative of Miss Margaret Mooney, 25 January 1918, item 189, all in MacMechan fonds; personal narrative of Charles J. Burchell, 27 December 1917, folder 23.18, MacMechan Dal papers.
42 See, for instance, interview of Mary Vaughn, née Prest, 26 June 1985, interview 10; and Hildreth Isnor, née Mason, 25 June 1985, both in Halifax Explosion Memorial Bells Committee Collection, No. FSG 31, MF 298, Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management (hereafter Kitz oral histories).
some ways more consequential, war. This interpretation need not be correct for it to indicate what is useful about Kitz’s interviewees misremembering that they first thought the explosion was a German air-raid. Alessandro Portelli argues that even the mistakes within oral histories are useful to interpret their ideas about the events in question. Thus what is useful about the mistakes of Kitz’s subjects is that they highlight the way they remember the explosion as part of the war. In this instance, we do not need the oral histories to tell us this—there is plenty of contemporary evidence, ranging from the comments of returned soldiers to postcards (see figure 3) to political arguments—to show that Haligonians thought of their disaster as part of the larger experience of war. In other instances, I will use even the mistakes made by Kitz’s interviewees to make arguments about how they experienced and thought about the explosion.

Because of their limitations, the Kitz oral histories are a tricky source to use. I trust people to get the basic outlines of their story correct—whom they stayed with, where they were at the time of the explosion, whether their family members were injured. I treat cautiously other claims. Following Portelli’s model leads me to analyze oral

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44 Eric Grant, a lieutenant in the C.E.F. and the son of the lieutenant governor, was one of many returned soldiers to reach for an analogy to France or Belgium when describing the devastation of Halifax. “Certainly,” he wrote, “I have seen nothing like it elsewhere, including some of the sights I have witnessed in France.” Grant to MacMechan, 29 December 1917, item 151, MacMechan fonds.

45 A postcard published by a Montreal firm showed “Utter Desolation and Devastation so Complete that this Picture might have been taken on the Battlefield of France.” Photograph MP207.1.184/28, M89.10.3, Maritime Museum of the Atlantic, Halifax, N.S.

46 Leading a chorus of others making the same argument, the president of the Commercial Club of Halifax wrote to Prime Minister Borden: “We have no hesitation in asking for full reparation, because the whole country, as far as we can see, is of one mind. Financial journals and the daily press generally have expressed the opinion that this is an act of war and should be looked upon as such and the loss borne by the Government.” A.H. Munshall to R.L. Borden, 8 January 1918, file OCA 109, reel C-4358, Sir Robert Borden Papers, MG 26, Library and Archives Canada (hereafter Borden papers).
histories less for the details and more for what they tell us about people’s memory of the
disaster. That people nearly seventy years after the fact reported that they at first thought
it was an air raid reinforces contemporary documents that show that the explosion was
thought of as an incident of war. That people now (or, rather, twenty-five years ago)
reported having slept outside in the blizzard highlights the severe housing shortage that
lasted for several years after the disaster. That they blamed soldiers for looting suggests a
lasting bitterness against the military.

In addition to the Kitz oral histories and the information collected by MacMechan,
this chapter draws on records created in Ottawa and Halifax by the Army and Navy, then
two separate institutions under different ministers. I also use newspapers, most of which
ran issues nearly entirely devoted to explosion news for days on end.47 Collected in
Halifax and Ottawa archives are also a handful of letters and diaries written in 1917 and
1918 that describe people’s actions after the explosion. Finally, there are letters and other
reminisces written long after the disaster produced independently of Kitz. They share
many of the same problems with her oral histories and will be used in the same ways.

Halifax existed for its harbor. It was the furthest east warm water port in North
America, and as such it was the primary British port in the northeast Atlantic. That meant
a major Army and Navy presence and that the military was the dominant economic and
social institution.48 Even when the British military had withdrawn from Canada, it

47 On newspapers immediately following the explosion, see William March, Red Line: The Chronicle-

48 I use the term “military” here in its informal and inexact sense. In Edwardian Canada, “military” referred
only to the Army, as opposed to the Navy, but I use it here to include all armed forces.
retained a garrison in Halifax only withdrawn in 1905.\textsuperscript{49} That was replaced in 1910 by the Atlantic port of the nascent Royal Canadian Navy, and during World War I the (British) Royal Navy returned a staff there to coordinate convoys.\textsuperscript{50} Hugh MacLennan famously called the city a place which “periodically sleeps between great wars.”\textsuperscript{51}

Once a major center of Canadian trade and finance, by the early twentieth century Halifax had lost these functions to Montreal and Toronto. Immigrants to urban Canada preferred the cities in the central and western parts of the country, which became the industrial, financial, and political seats of power.\textsuperscript{52} Nova Scotia, and indeed all of the Maritimes, suffered substantial out-migration to the “Boston States.” Yet MacLennan’s comment was unfair, since it suggested that Halifax’s renaissance came only at the start of World War I and the influx of new people and money. Rather, Halifax had long been a self-conscious participant in the progressive movement.

Two middle-class organizations were the most visible purveyors of progressive reform: the Civic Improvement League and the Halifax Local Council of Women. In 1906 prosperous professionals and businessmen founded the former initially as a committee of the Board of Trade designed to encourage civic uplift and urban beautification. Frustrated by their inability of the elected city council to resolve what the league perceived as the city’s most serious problems, its focus shifted to reforming


\textsuperscript{50}On the origins of the RCN, its position in Halifax in 1917, and the continuing RN presence there, see Armstrong, \textit{Inquiry and Intrigue}, 9-24.

\textsuperscript{51}MacLennan, \textit{Barometer Rising}, 4.

\textsuperscript{52}David Sutherland, “Halifax Harbour, December 6, 1917: Setting the Scene,” in Ruffman and Howell, eds., \textit{Ground Zero}, 4.
municipal government. They succeeded in creating a hybrid system with both a Board of Control and a city council in 1913. While Halifax was late to reorganize government—by the time the Nova Scotia legislature approved the change, Toronto, Winnipeg, Montreal, and Saint John all had boards of control or commissions—the league encouraged Halifax and Nova Scotia to move more quickly than other Canadian cities and provinces to establish the first city planning ordinances and laws. The league fell into inactivity in the middle of 1916, and it was formally folded into the Commercial Club in 1917.\footnote{Henry Roper, “The Halifax Board of Control: The Failure of Municipal Reform, 1906-1919,” \textit{Acadiensis} 14 no. 2 (1985): 46-95; Andrew Nicholson, “Dreaming of ‘the Perfect City’: The Halifax Civic Improvement League 1905-1949” (M.A. thesis, St. Mary’s University, 2000); D.A. Sutherland, “The Personnel and Policies of the Halifax Board of Trade, 1890-1914,” in \textit{The Enterprising Canadians: Entrepreneurs and Economic Development in Eastern Canada, 1820-1914}, ed. Lewis R. Fischer and Eric W. Sager (St. John’s: Maritime History Group, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1979), 205-229.}

Although the men who ran the Civic Improvement League discouraged women from joining, their female counterparts had their own organization. The Halifax Local Council of Women organized around questions of health, housing, clean milk, the cost of living, and education. It ran the Women’s Department at the provincial exhibition hall, and it helped to found the Children’s Hospital, the Anti-Tuberculosis League, and the Halifax Welfare Bureau. It also brought the playground movement to Halifax, creating supervised play-spaces in the North End.\footnote{“Work Done by the Halifax Local Council of Women During the Presidency of Dr. Agnes Dennis, C.B.E. M.A. -- 1905—1920”, T.S. document, n.d., Scrapbook, microfilm reel 20,204, Local Council of Women of Halifax fonds, Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management, Halifax, N.S. (hereafter LCWH fonds). See also Ernest R. Forbes, “Battles in Another War: Edith Archibald and the Halifax Feminist Movement,” in \textit{Challenging the Regional Stereotype: Essays on the 20th Century Maritimes} (Fredericton, N.B.: Acadiensis Press 1989), 67-89.} The two organizations cooperated on playgrounds, model tenement housing, and flower boxes near the train station.\footnote{Nicholson, “Dreaming of ‘the Perfect City,’” 28.}
explosion was a major test of Halifax’s progressive reform and governance.

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After the explosion came confusion; not the confusion of disorder, of running around in the streets, or of aimlessness, but literal confusion: not knowing what was happening. Jean Ross, a fourth-year Dalhousie student boarding at the Halifax Ladies College, was in the library early that morning, preparing for her first class at 10:00. Eighteen months after the explosion, she wrote that she had first thought something had hit the corner of the building and wondered if soldiers had accidentally launched a shell from their installation on McNab’s Island in the harbor, as they had done a few months earlier. She wandered around campus for some time, exchanging theories with her classmates. Some thought that the Waverly Powder Mills had exploded. Others, “having zeppelins in mind, wanted to go to the cellar,” though someone else thought that they should “get out where one could see the enemy, if any, so outdoors we went.”

Mrs. John James did not have the luxury of such confusion. About thirty years old and Catholic, she was Newfoundlander married to a man from rural Halifax County. “Dark hair, swarthy complexion. Rather illiterate,” was Archibald MacMechan’s appraisal. Her husband was working on the Dry Dock, and she was putting on the water for laundry when she saw a cloud of smoke coming from the waterfront. Worried for husband, she went to the window to look out and then crossed back to the sink to attend to her washing. Then the explosion came. She was knocked in the face and buried in the

56Jean L. Ross diary, reel 15,127, item 1, volume 9, MG 27.
wreckage. She screamed, but when no help came, she managed to extricate herself from the rubble. Dressed only in the thin cotton dress she had been wearing to do her chores, she was cold, but she stayed where she was to wait for her husband. In the meantime, her house caught fire. “She watched it burn and tried to keep warm from the heat from it. She watched the fire until every vestige of her home was gone—and ‘still my husband did not come’. Then a soldier came along and took her to Rockhead Hospital.”57

Thomas Cann, a precocious nine-year-old, lived in the North End with his mother, her second husband, and three siblings, aged four years, eighteen months, and six months. His mother’s fifteen-year-old sister lived with them, too. The mother was getting the kids off to school when the ships collided. From the yard, Thomas could see down to the harbor, and he stood transfixed by the sight of the flames. The next thing he knew, he told MacMechan, he was “pinned by a burning board.” His mother was blown sixty or eighty feet behind the house. When she came to, she was disoriented. Her clothes been blown off her body, leaving her nearly naked, and she was covered in oily soot, but remarkably she had no apparent serious injuries. She soon managed to free Thomas and his sister and carried them to nearby Mulgrave Park, away from the now-raging fire, where soldiers were loading the injured into slovens, a particularly Haligonian type of low, flat wagon. The soldiers took Thomas and his sister Kathleen to the Cogswell Street Hospital, a military installation usually reserved for soldiers returned from the front, but which had been immediately thrown open to civilian casualties.

Thomas’s step-father, Jack Libby, had been working in the basement of Richmond School, about a block away. Like his wife, he was stunned by the explosion, and he had

57 Personal testimony of Mrs. John James, 21 December 1917, item 159, MacMechan fonds.
to climb out of a window and then scramble down a twenty-five foot embankment. Running home, he discovered the house ablaze. Imagining his entire family still in the burning house, he started tearing at it with his bare hands, oblivious to the danger and his own injuries. When his wife approached, she was so covered in soot that he did not recognize her at first, and he went back to trying to rescue the family. “Jack,” she said, “you can’t do anything here. They’re all dead.” Indeed, their two babies and Jack’s sister-in-law Ethel had perished in the burning house. The couple turned their attention on each other. He was bleeding profusely, and she was in shock. Leaning on each other, they managed to make it to Cogswell Street Hospital, where Jack spent two weeks before being transferred to a different hospital, where he spent another three weeks recovering.

Six days after the explosion, Kathleen and Thomas had recovered from their injuries sufficiently that they were transferred to a special shelter for children whose parents were still in the hospital.58

Like Mrs. James, most people’s first thoughts were of their families. “Workmen employed in the centre of the City whose homes were in the North End hurried from the shops to find out what had happened to their wives and children,” MacMechan wrote in an early draft.59 Soldiers, sailors, and officers all ran to check on their families, many stopping to ask permission, but some not.60 Those who were still at home, too, thought

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58 Eyewitness, [Thomas Cann, age 9], 21 December 1917, item 125; Personal narrative of G.H. Libby, 13 February 1917, item 165, both in MacMechan fonds. There are some slight discrepancies between the stories of Thomas and Jack; I have tried to resolve them logically, but some imprecision is unavoidable.

59 Unsigned, undated essay, probably an early draft by MacMechan, labeled “The Halifax Disaster,” item 271, MacMechan fonds.

first of their families. When M.J. Burris, a Dartmouth physician, first heard the collision, he ran to gather up his wife, daughter, and maid and brought them into the basement, so they were downstairs and away from shattered windows when the explosion came. It is telling that although he told MacMechan about bringing his maid into the cellar, she disappears from the rest of his story; only his family mattered at the height of the crisis. 61

Parents rushed to find their children. The principal of Bloomfield High School recalled parents running to the school to get their children. 62 Arthur Frye, the foreman at the Nova Print Company, hurried home to his flat on Garrish Street to find his wife “screeching,” frantically trying to rescue their baby from the wood and plaster that had fallen onto the bed. Happily, they found the baby under the bed unharmed and their other child blown into the back yard. 63

Not all stories ended so happily. Eric Grant was an army lieutenant and the son of the province’s lieutenant governor. On leave from France the the morning of the disaster, he helped in the devastated area, but there were times he could do nothing.

“Approaching the ruins of a house I first heard the loud sobs of, and then saw, a sailor walking up and down in a dazed and distracted way; his sobs were so heart rending that I could not help asking him if I could help him in any way, and what the trouble was. ‘This is my trouble, Sir,’ he said, between great sobs, and taking me around to the other side of the tumbled down house he knelt down beside three prone and lifeless bodies. They were those of his mother, wife and daughter.” 64

61 Personal narrative of Dr. M.J. Burris, n.d., item 122, MacMechan fonds.
63 Personal narrative of Arthur S. Frye, 31 December 1917, item 147, MacMechan fonds.
64 Lt. Eric Grant to MacMechan, 29 December 1917, item 151, MacMechan fonds. On the younger Grant,
For those who were not injured, who did not have a close family member who needed attention, and who were not distracted by their own overwhelming grief, thoughts could turn elsewhere. For some, this meant a personal connection. When Mrs. William A. Henry, wife of a prominent lawyer, went to the North End to check on her own relatives, for instance, she stopped by an address her cook had asked her to check on. Others chose to do more. Those I call relief workers chose to lend their bodies and their labor to help those in need. Often without direction, or even suggestion, they went to the devastated area or to hospitals to help the rescue effort. The order they found there—the willingness of people to help, and the efficiency with which they did so—is a testament to the “city of comrades” Anglican priest and sociology graduate student Samuel Prince described. That others who had not been there later derided their work as disorderly and inefficient suggests the way on-the-ground, ad hoc volunteer efforts remained illegible to those in authority. Finally, upon closer examination, it becomes clear that even the middle-class volunteers who appear to have had little or no connection with those they were helping were not being randomly altruistic. Rather, they were reenacting their own everyday forms of solidarity in extraordinary times.

“The first work of rescue was voluntary and undirected,” MacMechan wrote. “Within a quarter of an hour of the explosion men were rushing up Russel[1] St., the southern boundary of the devastated area. Later in the day, fatigue parties of soldiers and

see Kitz, Shattered City, 60.

65 Personal narrative of Mrs. W.A. Henry, n.d. but read 23 February 1918, item157, MacMechan fonds.

sailors worked under their officers. The number of voluntary helpers was very great.”

This was certainly true, but what is notable is the way that the men who volunteered to clear the rubble, rescue the buried, and bring the injured to hospitals were in many ways continuing the work they did in ordinary times. Yet they were not merely following orders or doing what they were told; they acted voluntarily and of their own volition, enacting their ordinary, daily forms of solidarity.

The most famous example of heroism from the explosion is that of Vince Coleman, a railroad telegraph operator who was one of the few people who knew the Mont Blanc’s dangerous cargo. Predicting the danger of an explosion, he stayed at his post, warning an oncoming train to stop before coming into the city. He died, famously sacrificing himself for the sake of the train’s passengers and crew. Less famous were Frank Carew and seventy-nine longshoremen under his command, who heroically prevented the steamship Picton from exploding. When the fire started aboard the Mont Blanc, Carew and his workers were already unloading a cargo of flour, oats, baked beans, and “a large quantity of high explosives of a very dangerous quantity.” They had no idea what was on the burning ship, but they did know that any fire was dangerous with the Picton’s explosive cargo. “His first thought was for the citizens of Halifax,” J.E. Furness, the director of the shipping firm Furness Withy wrote of Carew. He and the crew stayed there and “covered up every conceivable [sic] spot on the ‘Picton’ so in case of an

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67 Unsigned, undated essay, probably an early draft by MacMechan, labeled “The Halifax Disaster,” item 271, MacMechan fonds.

68 Kitz, Shattered City, 22. For the most famous depiction of Coleman’s heroism, see the Historica Heritage Minute “Halifax Explosion,” available at <http://www.histori.ca/minutes/minute.do?id=10203>, accessed 14 July 2009. Coleman’s heroism was already noted as early as February 1918. See A.C. Ratshesky to Robert Winsor, 8 February 1918, reel 12, Massachusetts Halifax Relief Committee Correspondence and Papers, Special Collections Division, Massachusetts State Library, Boston, Mass.
explosion they would protect as far as they were able, an explosion on the ‘Picton.’”

They were successful, although of Furness Withy’s eighty employees working that day, seventy-one were killed, six were seriously injured, and four received minor wounds. None survived unscathed.69 Though Furness recognized only Carew for his bravery, all of the longshoremen had chosen to sacrifice themselves to prevent an explosion. That not a single one of them chose instead to leave the ship to find safety suggests that their thoughts were not only of the “citizens of Halifax,” but also for each other. Nor could Carew and his two foremen have held their workers there against their will. Rather, the solidarity built through long hours of common labor and collective action through their union held strong that day, as each worker stayed with his fellows rather than choose personal safety.70

A similar phenomenon is seen among the soldiers and sailors who made up the bulk of the workforce in the devastated area after the explosion. Immediately after the disaster all troops were ordered to stand to, and by 1:00 pm every man who could be spared “was also in the City and placed to work, fighting fires, clearing streets, searching for wounded and the dead, patrolling the streets, furnishing guards and fatigue parties generally, and this work is still being carried on,” General Thomas Benson, the highest ranking officer in Halifax, wrote to his superiors in Ottawa nine days later.71 Indeed,

69 J.E. Furness to MacMechan, 10 April 1918, and enclosed narrative, items 54 and 55, MacMechan fonds. Confusingly, Furness reported 80 casualties, but his subtotals added up to 81.


71 Memorandum, General Officer Commanding, MD 6 [Benson] to Secretary, Militia Council, 15 December 1917, file 86-2-1, “Explosion – Reports,” box 4548, Records of Military District No. 6, RG 24-C-8, Department of National Defense fonds, Library and Archives Canada (hereafter MD6 records).
soldiers continued in search parties long after this, through at least January 11.\textsuperscript{72}

As we have seen already in the stories of Thomas Cann and Mrs. John James, soldiers rounded up the injured in, to use the phrase of one officer, “wagons, motors, handcarts—anything with wheels” and brought them to hospitals. This could be gruesome work. The same officer, familiar with the horrors of the front, found himself overwhelmed by “awfullness of the situation, burning and fallen houses, the frequency with which one fairly stumbled over dead bodies, etc., etc.”\textsuperscript{73} All afternoon, soldiers and officers went around in small groups, rescuing the injured and pulling dead bodies out of the wreckage.\textsuperscript{74} Others cleared roads that those with vehicles could get through.\textsuperscript{75} In addition to its natural unpleasantness, this was hard work. Civilians noted the stamina and the hard work of the military workers. “Them soldiers worked like niggers,” exclaimed MacMechan’s barber.\textsuperscript{76}

Though the officers who spoke and wrote to MacMechan and who filed official reports to Ottawa were apt to credit each other for the relief work, it is clear that most of the immediate relief work by soldiers was self-directed and voluntary. Mrs. J.G. MacDougall was the wife of a doctor and herself a nurse. Questioned by MacMechan, she described the work of the soldiers and sailors as “magnificent.” They were not working under direction, but on their own initiative, she stressed. “Wherever you went there were half-a-dozen boys with hands out to help you,” paraphrased MacMechan. She

\textsuperscript{72}Col. R.B. Simmonds to MacMechan, 6 February 1918, item 12, MacMechan fonds.
\textsuperscript{73}Lt. Eric Grant to MacMechan, 29 December 1917, item 151, MacMechan fonds.
\textsuperscript{74}See reports from various officers, mostly lieutenants, items 260-269, MacMechan fonds.
\textsuperscript{75}Personal narrative of Col. Ralph B. Simmon[d]s, 7 February 1918, item 225, MacMechan fonds.
\textsuperscript{76}Personal narrative of C. Sutherland, 18 December 1917, item 231, MacMechan fonds.
“instanced [the] case of a sailor who crept up on a window ledge and went to sleep. [He was] dragged out of it by a mess-mate who abused him for disgracing the U.S. Navy.” 77

Even officers noted the way their men worked without direction. Colonel Ralph Simmonds was the commanding officer of the 66th Regiment, nicknamed the Princess Louise Fusiliers. Made up of local Halifax men, it was among the first responding units on the streets. He praised his men’s hard work, noting particularly one private who removed his own boots to give them to a barefoot woman, binding his own feet with cloth. (Simmonds was quick to point out to MacMechan that the private was provided new boots by the army.) 78

Lieutenant O.B. Jones of the 42nd Battalion, C.E.F., was on a train from Bridgewater that was stopped outside the city. On foot, Jones “proceeded to Richmond and directed soldiers in the work of removing dead bodies,” although by his own admission it wasn’t clear they needed any direction. “His duty was to see that any soldiers standing about should be given something to do. There were very few standing about. The soldiers worked well.” 79

Another officer coming in on the train was Lieutenant Colonel E.C. Phinney, also of the C.E.F. Acting under his own authority, he began to organize soldiers and civilians alike into work parties. “Soldiers came, one at a time,” he told MacMechan, and Phinney did not know from where. They worked so well he was convinced they must have been returned soldiers from the front, since they were “very amenable to discipline, more so than those who had not been abroad.” 80

Officers like Phinney may have emphasized the importance of their own

77 Personal narrative of Mrs. J.G. MacDougall, 9 April 1918, item 195, MacMechan fonds.
78 Personal narrative of Col. Ralph B. Simmonds, 7 February 1918, item 225, MacMechan fonds.
79 Personal narrative of Lieut. O.B. Jones, 4 February 1918, item 44, MacMechan fonds.
leadership, but enlisted men were quite sure that they did the work themselves and under their own volition. One of the very few instances that remains of a soldier telling about his own experiences is the narrative of an anonymous Irish-American soldier who had enlisted in November 1917 at a British recruiting station in Philadelphia. He had arrived in Halifax at the beginning of December and was training for the front when the explosion happened. “I wish it to be understood that although we were soldiers, there was no command given to go to the rescue,” he wrote. “This was absolutely and entirely outside our line of duty as soldiers. Outside of strictly military operations there is no person or persons having the power to order another person to risk their life. And this was certainly by no means a military operation. It was entirely civilian. Not one of that gallant little band needed a command (even if commands could be given) to go to the rescue of their fellow human beings in that hour of dire disaster, and nobody with a heart could do otherwise!”

Charles J. Burchell was a leading civilian lawyer in Halifax who spent much of the day of the explosion helping in the devastated area. Though he told MacMechan that he “had” a soldier and sailor as his “helpers” in gathering the wounded, as a civilian he could not have had command over them. Rather, the three of them must have implicitly or explicitly negotiated the system in which they would work: Burchell drove the car and the soldier and sailor stood on the running boards and loaded the wounded into the car.

81 “My Experience in the Halifax Disaster,” catalogued as “Account related to the Halifax explosion,” MG 30-E90, Library and Archives Canada. It is unknown who the writer was, or why he wrote his manuscript. Given his later emphasis on religious work, it seems likely that it may have been a submission to a Catholic magazine.

82 Personal narrative of Charles J. Burchell, K.C., 27 December 1917, folder 23.18, MacMechan Dal papers. Burchell was designated King’s Counsel, a mark of prestige, and he was a law partner of A.K. Maclean, the local member of parliament. He was also a Rotarian, along with many other Halifax civic leaders. During the subsequent inquiry into the explosion, he was counsel to the owners of the Imo.
If the anonymous American soldier was convinced that he was not required to participate, and even officers noted that men were self-directed, it seems evident that soldiers and sailors did not simply work because they were told to. Mrs. MacDougall’s story of the American sailor who was dragged back to work by his shipmates offers a clue: like Carew’s civilian crew, he was motivated by solidarity with his colleagues. His work in Halifax came from the solidarity and comradeship that his naval training instilled in him for purely military purposes. The anonymous American’s work was motivated by the same thing, plus affection for the city where he was turned into a soldier. If he already felt solidarity with Haligonians after only a few weeks in town, soldiers who had lived there for longer, who had brought their families there, or who dated local women had even stronger bonds. We can see this in the soldiers’ hard work reported by Colonel Simmonds: his men were especially tied to Halifax, and so they were particularly likely to work hard to save their neighbors.\(^{83}\) As we will discuss later in this chapter, the military relief work was not without its problems, and sometimes soldiers’ and officers’ actions made things worse instead of better. But when they were working on their own to help save people, they evinced a spontaneous order and efficiency built on preexisting bonds of solidarity with each other and with Halifax civilians.

The doctors of Halifax and Dartmouth also worked of their own accord. Like soldiers, whose training and experiences had conditioned them to strong bonds of solidarity, the training and experiences of doctors encouraged them to launch directly into medical service. As we shall see later, people knew where doctors lived and converged on their houses in search of medical help. Some of these medical workers were also in

\(^{83}\) Kitz, _Shattered City_, 61-62.
the army. Corporal John Hogbin and Private M.C. Drysdale were medical orderlies in the local Composite Battalion stationed at Wellington Barracks. They first gave aid to the people, including women and children from married barracks, who “poured into the Medical Inspection Room,” according to their commanding officer. When they finished with all those patients at 1:00, they left the barracks and attended to injured civilians until they ran out of supplies that evening. Hogbin was a Boer War veteran who had experience in stopping bleeding, so his work was particularly useful.

Civilian doctors helped too. Dartmouth doctor M.S. Dickson was still in bed at 9:00 and was buried under glass and plaster, though he avoided serious injury. Within minutes of the explosion, his neighbors converged on his house, seeking help. Dickson attended to them, aided by his niece Annie Anderson, a Dalhousie medical student who boarded with him. When they received a warning there might be a second explosion, Dickson joined the other Dartmouth doctors on the street and continued his work. Dr. W.W. Woodbury was a dentist who lived and worked on Spring Garden Road. Perhaps because he was a dentist and not a physician, wounded Haligonians did not converge on his house the way they did at the houses of other doctors. Instead, he based his actions on connections he had before the disaster: he went to the Y.M.C.A., where he sat on the board, and helped with first aid there, mostly binding cuts. The staff at the Y.M.C.A. had realized early on that their building could be of use and had started immediately

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84 “Report on services Rendered by members of Military Forces at Halifax, N.S., on the Occasion of the Disaster, Dec. 6th, 1917” n.d. item 249, MacMechan fonds.
85 Personal narrative by Lt. Ray Colwell and Lt. Arthur, 29 June 1918, MacMechan fonds.
86 Personal narrative of Mrs. Annie Anderson, n.d., item 114, MacMechan fonds.
87 Personal narrative of Dr. W.W. Woodbury, 15 March 1918, item 238, MacMechan fonds.
clearing the first floor and turning it into a dressing station.\textsuperscript{88}

In all three of these cases, the relief work that medical workers performed was a continuation of their everyday life in abnormal circumstances. The army medics were trained to treat large numbers of wounded quickly, and they transferred their skills and attention to the task at hand. Dickson’s work, too, was not different from what he usually did, just performed more quickly and outside. And Woodbury’s decision to go to the Y.M.C.A. shows the importance of pre-existing ties to organizations.

Like their male counterparts, Halifax’s nurses and nurse volunteers continued in the work for which they had been trained. On the morning of December 6, four members of the Victorian Order of Nurses—a visiting nursing organization with only six members total in the city—were in the North End attending to their standard duties. Although all were scratched and cut, none received major injuries, and all four of them set about performing first aid.\textsuperscript{89} “One,” MacMechan wrote, “was dragged into a chemist’s shop in Spring Garden Road and stayed there all day giving first aid.”\textsuperscript{90} The volunteer members of the St. John’s Ambulance Brigade, called VADs for Voluntary Aid Detachment, did not ordinarily work as nurses, but they had been trained in first aid. In normal times, they helped staff a rest center on the pier for returning soldiers. On the day of the explosion, every one of them reported for duty at hospitals and first aid stations, even without receiving orders to do so.\textsuperscript{91}

\textsuperscript{88}Timeline of first day, by J.C. (Jim) Reid, to Mrs. J.G. MacDougall, n.d., item 195d-e, MacMechan fonds.

\textsuperscript{89}“Victorian Order of Nurses,” n.d., item 25, MacMechan fonds.

\textsuperscript{90}Personal narrative of Mrs. H. Bryant, n.d., item 121, MacMechan fonds.

More remarkable, and famous, among women relief workers were those who were not simply doing their jobs. Middle-class women came to the various hospitals around the city to volunteer. Some had a little nursing training; others were entirely untrained. Many were students at Dalhousie University, which would have made them the rough equivalents, in age and class, of the young military officers who helped clear the wreckage. “Dalhousie has every reason to be proud that her children did not falter in the crisis,” the student magazine wrote in late January, once classes had begun again. “If there is any one class of Dalhousians which, in the writer’s estimation, is deserving of special mention, it is the young ladies of the University, who so quietly went to work, assisting in the dressing of wounds, and ministering to the comfort of patients amid scenes of agony and death to which they were absolutely unaccustomed, and which are known to have shocked the nerves of even those accustomed to surgical work.” The magazine presented what it called an incomplete list of thirty young women who helped with relief work. As with soldiers, these women were motivated by altruism, but also by peer pressure. By going to the hospitals, the Dalhousie women were enacting their daily patterns of solidarity with each other, in addition to creating new ones with the people they were aiding and those they worked beside.

Jean Ross, the Dalhousie senior who was in the library doing last-minute homework for Philosophy 8, was a case in point. At first, she was resistant to helping. When “after tea some girl came for volunteers for Camp Hill Hospital,” she refused, despite other girls going. “I thought it was ridiculous sentiment and nothing

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92 Dalhousie Gazette 29 January 1918, 1, 2. On Dalhousie students see also “Dalhousie’s Part in the Relief Work,” n.d., item 26, MacMechan fonds.
more, and what could girls do there, still more I, who hate all sickness. Besides I was so
tired I could hardly stand.” The next day, she heard from a friend “who told me of her
adventures” at Rockhead Hospital, a severely damaged hospital in the North End.
Impressed by her friend’s story, Ross decided to go to Camp Hill herself. Still unwilling
to go alone, though, she hunted for a friend to go with her. Most of her fellow boarders at
Halifax Ladies College who wanted to help were already there, so Ross had to go through
the blizzard to find her friend Abbie Hemphill. The day after that, too, Ross went back to
Camp Hill Hospital, this time after convincing yet another friend to accompany her.93

The person who convinced Jean Ross to volunteer was Margaret Wright, who
with Mabel White and sisters Josephine and Helen Creighton, had nearly taken over
Rockhead Hospital for two days.94 Their stories, too, illustrate the way that everyday
solidarities led to the altruism of outsiders helping North End sufferers. The Creighton
sisters, who were not Dalhousie students, had originally gone north to check on their
relatives. When they reached North Street, they found a slightly injured, eighty-six-year-
old aunt, who told them, “Don’t stay here, we don’t need you, we have our legs and arms,
Go North! Go North!” It was around here that the Creightons met the two Dalhousie
students and the four of them began giving people first aid as best they could with limited
supplies. Around noon, they met a car, Wright told Ross. “The man in it asked what they
were doing and they said ‘For god’s sake come to Rockhead Hospital!’ They consented
and he drove them there.” Rockhead was a soldiers’ convalescent hospital, and when the

93 Jean L. Ross diary, reel 15,127, item 1, volume 9, MG 27.

94 Dalhousie Gazette 29 January 1918, 1. This Helen Creighton was not the one who would grow up to be a
famous folklorist. For the latter’s experience on the day of the explosion, see Creighton, Life in Folklore,
24-28.
four women arrived they found it in terrible condition. Ross paraphrased Wright: “The Hospital was entirely cut off from communication, with the city by the burning district the nurses had all been hurt, the medical supplies blown up.” Josie Creighton recalled to MacMechan that the convalescent soldiers had all managed to get up and act as nurses, replacing those who had been injured in the explosion. There were only two doctors and some orderlies. “The wounded were simply pouring in and were mostly women and children,” Ross wrote. When Wright, White, and the Creightons arrived, the doctors told them to do whatever they could, so they brought tea to the injured and “looked after them generally,” in MacMechan’s words. Without any antiseptic or painkillers, there was little else they could do. The floor was wet with water from the broken radiators and blood from the dying patients. “The beds and floor was crowded,” Wright told Ross. “In the course of the night, some beds had dead bodies taken from them two or three times and live patients put in.” Eventually, soldiers and others arrived with carts, wagons, and motor vehicles to take the wounded to better equipped hospitals, but at some point during the night, they grew tired and wanted to stop for the night. Helen Creighton, her sister told MacMechan, kept them on the job “by dint of coaxing and flattering, etc.” When the evacuation was completed on Friday, Wright said to Ross, “the last ambulance took three corpses and on the front seat with the driver, Margaret and Mabel. He asked if they minded the load but it seemed a small thing after the night.”

Julia DeYoung’s family was not middle-class—her father worked the night shift at a munitions factory—but her mother joined those who were as a volunteer at Victoria

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95 Personal testimony of Miss Josephine Creighton, 22 January 1918, item 135, MacMechan fonds; Jean L. Ross diary, reel 15,127, item 1, volume 9, MG 27.
General Hospital in the South End. She was recruited from Citadel Hill, where she had
been waiting out the warning of the second explosion. Decades later, Julia remembered
her mother working for days without rest. She probably knew people who were injured
or died, and so her volunteering was enacting solidarity with the neighbors whom she
was treating.96

The dark side of relief based on preexisting solidarity was that it could lead to
petty corruption. Four days after the explosion, Hattie Young wrote a long letter to her
mother-in-law, letting her know how the family was making out. Like many other
Halogonians, the Youngs—Hattie, her husband Frank, and their two small boys—spent
several hours on the slopes of Citadel Hill for fear of a second explosion. Unlike many
others, though, the Youngs knew Robbie Langille, an officer at the Royal Artillery Park,
across the street from the Citadel. Langille, who was Young’s cousin, took her husband
Frank into the Artillery Park “for an armful of blankets which they spread for us to sit on
and then rolled them right around and around us so we looked like a big pile of blankets
but we were warm.”97 Langille was offering relief on the basis of his prior network of
solidarity, but that necessarily excluded all the other cold families on Citadel Hill.

Like Langille, women helped at the hospitals because of their preexisting
networks of solidarity, either because of peer pressure, in the case of someone like Jean
Ross, because family commitments brought them north and near hospitals, in the case of
the Creighton sisters, or because they knew or imagined they knew some injured people,
like Mrs. DeYoung. Other volunteers, though, told MacMechan that they went alone to a

96 Interview of Julia Coleman, née DeYoung, 28 June 1985, interview 19, Kitz oral histories.

97 Hattie Young to Mrs. Young [mother-in-law], 10 December 1917, item 9, volume 9, MG 27.
hospital without suggestion from anyone else. Mrs. John F. Stairs, for instance, said she went to Victoria General because it was across the street from where she lived. She stayed all day and “did everything but amputate,” she told MacMechan proudly. Constance Bell, too, offered no indication to MacMechan of why she decided to go Victoria General other than that when she realized the extent of the destruction, she wanted to help. No doubt Stairs and Bell were largely motivated by selfless altruism. But equally true is that their stories to MacMechan do not explain fully their decisions, and likely they were, like the others, motivated at least to a degree by preexisting bonds of solidarity.

When these women got to the hospitals, be it Rockhead, Camp Hill, or Victoria General, they were put to work quickly, doing a wide variety of tasks. Often they found work themselves, doing whatever seemed appropriate. Mrs. Stairs noted that the patients complained only of being cold, so she went home to get hot water bottles to warm them up. Clara Smith, a Dalhousie student, wrote to a friend of what she jokingly called “my nursing career”: “As to what I was doing, it seemed to be a little of everything. I was in tow with a doctor for a day and night, fallowing [sic] his directions which were chiefly to hold the patient while he administered the dressings and other minor duties. The rest of my duties were those of general waitress—you know what that would be yourself.” D.G. Cock was a Presbyterian missionary on furlough from India. He and his wife went to Camp Hill to volunteer. They were put to work washing the wounded,

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98 Individual testimony of Mrs. John F. Stairs, 15 December 1917, item 48, MacMechan fonds.
99 Personal testimony of Miss Constance Bell, n.d., item 117, MacMechan fonds.
100 Individual testimony of Mrs. John F. Stairs, 15 December 1917, item 48, MacMechan fonds.
101 Clara Smith to “Katherine,” 2 January 191[8], item 38, MacMechan fonds. Emphasis original.
since many of them were covered with a black oily liquid that had come down like rain after the explosion.\textsuperscript{102} Warrena Madden, another Dalhousie student, walked into Camp Hill “very brazenly,” she told MacMechan. A Red Cross man there asked her if she had any experience or training, and then, MacMechan paraphrased, “kept her busy all afternoon, assisting in dressing wounds, some times would leave her to finish the dressing.” She stayed at the hospital past midnight.\textsuperscript{103}

They did this work in unpleasant conditions. The hospitals had sustained significant damage, which made work hard. Cogswell Street Hospital had destroyed windows, doors blown off their hinges, and part of the ceiling down in the operating room; Rockhead suffered severe structural damage, with its windows gone, pipes broken, and ceilings and even some walls down; and even Pine Hill, sheltered by Citadel Hill from the main brunt of the explosion, had some broken windows.\textsuperscript{104} The four young women who went to Rockhead were so cold they kept their hats and coats on all night, and they had only a single bag of biscuits to tide them over all night.\textsuperscript{105} When Marjorie Moir got to Camp Hill, she found “blood everywhere”; the injured who were brought in were “dripping with gore.”\textsuperscript{106} By the afternoon, Camp Hill was the main destination for people bringing in injured people. “Patients were brought in in ambulances, carts,
waggons, motor cars, or carried in the arms of friends and placed upon the floors in wards, halls, and offices until it was with difficulty that once could pass through the halls,” wrote one observer.107

All this could look disorganized, even to those who were there. After all, untrained workers were showing up, expecting to be put to work in vastly overcrowded hospitals. People were there with conflicting motives and expectations, and they had to negotiate and renegotiate social expectations and hierarchies while in the midst of difficult, stressful, and unpleasant circumstances. Yet other people noted how well people worked, even without experience or direction. Just as the soldiers working to rescue people from the rubble worked on their own volition with little or no direction from their officers, so too did the women who went to help in hospitals. Whether from the bonds of solidarity that relief workers brought with them into the hospitals, or through bonds forged there in stressful times, these workers managed to build well-functioning, if ad hoc, hospital staffs.

Velma Moore, who arrived at Camp Hill as a volunteer after Thursday tea time, was one of those to whom the situation looked chaotic. Like Jean Ross, she went with a friend, Christine MacKinnon. When they arrived, her “first impulse was to flee,” she told MacMechan, because there was “no person to tell you what to do.” She had, he wrote, “no experience even of sickness.” Yet she stayed and found useful, if unskilled, work: binding wounds, running errands to the dispensary, and finding items that patients wanted.108 They stayed until two in the morning. MacKinnon, MacMechan wrote,

107 [Frank McKelvey Bell?] “Notes of Medical Relief Committee of Halifax Disaster,” item 10, MacMechan fonds.

108 Personal narrative of Miss Velma Moore, 19 March 1918, item 47, MacMechan fonds.
“praised Velma Moore and Gwen Fraser particularly for the way they stuck at their work on Thursday night. They had had no previous experience, had never been up all one night before. It was amateur work, but they used judgement and common-sense, which took the place of training.” Mrs. H. Bryant, who though older than the Dalhousie girls was also accompanied by a friend as she volunteered, reached Camp Hill around noon “and was struck by the confusion,” she told MacMechan. Yet despite the seeming confusion, she was given a job: like the Cocks, she was put to work washing the black rain off patients.

After braving the initial confusion, volunteers then had to negotiate and define a social hierarchy in the hospitals. Jean Ross, the Dalhousie student who was initially reluctant to volunteer at all, found this difficult. She and her friend were put to work by the matron in Ward L, and they were kept busy, but Ross also noticed “an over abundance of workers.” Eighteen months after the explosion, she remained indignant about the hierarchy at Camp Hill, and her place on the bottom of it. “I was pleased when a nurse asked me to do anything which they seldom did but I was less pleased to be ordered by a V.A.D. when I had a first aid certificate myself and knew it was n.g. for this purpose. What sent me home however was orders from a woman in an elegant sealskin coat, doling out sweat biscuits and seating herself at each bedside in turn to hear the story. Her car waited at the door. I thought she was just as well able to run after glasses of water as I was. That I was more suitably dressed was a witness to my sense not hers.” Worse still was that when Ross and her friend decided to head home, they found only a single car at

109 Personal narrative of Christine MacKinnon, 26 March 1918, item 200, MacMechan fonds. MacMechan’s notes are unclear, but MacKinnon may have been a nursing student.

110 Personal narrative of Mrs. H. Bryant, n.d., item 121, MacMechan fonds.
the door. When the friend asked if they could have a ride home, she “was most indignantly answered that it was Mrs. -----’s (our sealskin friend’s) car.” Yet for every Jean Ross who gave up the social negotiations in frustration, there were more women who stayed despite the indignities.

This appearance of disorder and disorganization—the untrained workers, the volunteers in a huff, the difficulty moving around—masks what was truly happening in the hospitals. Florence Murray was a medical student from O’Leary, Prince Edward Island. She was, MacMechan wrote, “inclined to be stout, with very fair, pink and white complexion [and] blue eyes.” Knowing that there would be a demand for her skills, she headed to Victoria General Hospital, performing first aid on the way. While she was walking, though, she noticed that people were being brought to Camp Hill, so she stopped there. When she arrived at 10:00, an hour after the explosion, she found that the convalescents who were the hospital’s normal patients, “were working ‘like slaves,’” as MacMechan wrote in his notes. But what really struck Murray was what she called the “organization without any organization.” Nobody directed the volunteers, but everyone worked intelligently and without argument. The trained, professional staff was so greatly outnumbered that the volunteers had to direct themselves. Further, Ross’s story notwithstanding, Murray told MacMechan that volunteers worked wherever they could be of use, whether in the wards or the kitchen, without regard for themselves or their status. Murray especially praised the way volunteers without experience conducted themselves and learned on the job.112

111 Jean L. Ross diary, reel 15,127, item 1, volume 9, MG 27. Emphasis original.

112 Personal narrative of Miss Florence J. Murray, n.d., item 192, MacMechan fonds.
Related to Murray’s “organization without any organization” is the way Christian
clergy developed an ad hoc ecumenism even before Protestant ministers from various
denominations came together in a formal committee. D.G. Cock, put to work washing
patients, was unusual. Most clergy in the hospitals performed pastoral duties, and for
whomever wanted them. Hugh Upham was a Presbyterian minister from Shubenacadie,
Nova Scotia, who took the first train into Halifax upon hearing of the explosion and
arrived just past noon. He told MacMechan that patients did not seem to care what
denomination he was. “I met a woman in very great pain. Her husband, uninjured, sat at
the foot of her bed. She asked me if I was a Roman Catholic priest. I answered ‘No, I
am a Presbyterian minister.’ She said, ‘Well, it is all the same now. Would you kindly
say a prayer for me?’ Her husband was also of the same mind, and there with suffering
all around us we invoked the Divine Aid of our common Father in her behalf.” Happily
for them—and perhaps their eternal souls—the woman recovered.113 In the devastated
area, Protestants and Catholics worked together. J.P.D. Llwyd was the Anglican dean of
Nova Scotia. He went to the North End, where, he wrote, “the scene was horrifying in
the extreme.” There, “I found a relief party of soldiers taking out the wounded with a
young Roman priest helping them. I joined the party and assisted in taking the taking out
of a number of poor crushed and mangled forms, many of whom must have died before
they reached the hospital.”114 This cooperation in the first hours after the explosion is
particularly notable because only four days later, when the Halifax clergy organized a

113 Personal testimony of Rev. Hugh Upham, n.d., item 234, MacMechan fonds. Upham also reported a
similar interaction in which he was mistaken for an Anglican priest.

114 Statement Re Explosion at Halifax, J.P.D. Llwyd, Dean of Nova Scotia, 28 December 1917, item 168,
MacMechan fonds. Emphasis original.
committee to sit in shifts at hospitals and perform other duties, only Protestants were represented.\textsuperscript{115} When the time came to bury unidentified remains, they were divided between Catholics and Protestants, and each group held distinct funeral ceremonies.\textsuperscript{116} In the case of the clergy, “organization without any organization” meant more ecumenism and cooperation than when the system was formalized.

Further evidence for Murray’s depiction of well functioning hospitals despite the lack of formal organization comes from the results of the early medical treatment. On the first day alone, significantly more than 2,100 patients were seen by emergency hospitals in the city; another 150 were sent by special train to Truro, where there was an emergency hospital. This number includes the roughly 1,400 patients treated at Camp Hill, a brand new hospital with a capacity of only 250 in normal times. It excludes, however, those treated at Victoria General Hospital, which likely treated close to a thousand injured. Four days after the explosion, concerns that there may have been people who did not make it to the hospitals led to a house-by-house canvas throughout the city looking for untreated injured. The investigators found no such people; everyone had received at least first aid. The only untreated injuries they did find were some serious eye cases, which would have been hard to diagnose immediately.\textsuperscript{117} This is not to say the treatment was perfect. An out-of-town nurse was quite critical of the sloppy job some relief workers did in sewing up wounds, complaining that they were closed up with glass, plaster, dirt, and

\textsuperscript{115}Halifax Herald 11 December 1917, 1; Morning Chronicle 12 December 1917, 2; Morning Chronicle 21 December 1917, 8; Daily Echo 11 December 1917, 5.

\textsuperscript{116}J.H. Mitchell, description of burial service for unidentified dead, 17 December 1917, item 282, MacMechan fonds. For more on the funeral for the unidentified dead, see Chapter 5.

\textsuperscript{117}[Frank McKelvey Bell?] “Notes of Medical Relief Committee of Halifax Disaster,” item 10, MacMechan fonds.
cinders still inside. Constance Bell, who volunteered at Victoria General, told MacMechan she thought that though the untrained volunteers had done a good job, it would have been much better to have had more trained people around to begin with. Without any direction or organization, and often without any training, the women of Halifax did pretty well in treating all the injured.

What all these stories demonstrate is the role of organic, ad hoc organization in times of crisis. Sociologists of disaster refer to groups like those formed by the Creigton sisters and the two Dalhousie women, or like those who went to Camp Hill, or like Charles Burchell and the soldier and sailor who rescued people with him, as emergent organizations. But these groups did not emerge from nowhere. The frequency with which we know that women volunteered with their friends—Jean Ross and Abbie Hemphill, Margaret Wright and Mabel White, Josie and Helen Creighton, Velma Moore and Christine MacKinnon, Mrs. H. Bryant and Mrs. J. Gillis; Mr. and Mrs. D.G. Cock—should suggest to us the importance of preexisting social networks and bonds in encouraging this volunteer work. Likely, friends provided not only encouragement for the initial decision to volunteer, but also emotional support while there and aid and advice while doing unfamiliar work. This was as true for the soldiers and others who rescued people and uncovered dead bodies as for those who nursed the injured. It was, then,

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118 Document written by Miss Emily Brown, Providence, R.I., n.d., item 118, MacMechan fonds.

119 Personal testimony of Miss Constance Bell, n.d., item 117, MacMechan fonds.

120 Miller, Collective, 289.

121 This is, necessarily, a partial list. MacMechan did not interview everyone who volunteered, and even among those he did talk to, not all mentioned their friends. Christine MacKinnon, for instance, did not mention that she went with a friend, and it is only through Velma Moore’s testimony that we know they volunteered together.
these relationships that structured the outpouring of voluntary aid and gave it order. But these relationships were by their nature private and unobservable by others. The system and order they created thus looked disorderly to people who did not experience it.

* * *

Among those people—those who saw the city as disorderly—were people who chose to go to City Hall to help organize, rather than go to the hospitals or the devastated area. These people had not seen Florence Murray’s “organization without any organization,” or if they had they mistook it for chaos. These relief managers tended to be managers and organizers in the rest of their lives as well: managers of business and banks, leaders in women’s clubs and organizations, people involved in politics. To them, order and organization by definition took the form of committees and subcommittees, each with duly appointed chairs and secretaries and forms to be filled out in triplicate. From their central position—literally in their City Hall headquarters, figuratively at the center of the relief committee—the enemy was a lack of knowledge. Their inability to know, much less understand, what was going on in the city was caused by the physical disruption of telephone lines and inability of those doing the work to report to City Hall what they were doing. But even had a perfect communication system been in place, those at City Hall could not have known or understood the organic, emergent order in the devastated area and the hospitals because that order was inherently illegible and unknowable to those in a centralized position.

On the morning of December 6, 1917, Halifax’s mayor, Peter F. Martin, was out
of town. He was, at the time, running for parliament on the Union ticket to replace Prime Minister Robert Laird Borden, who had accepted the nomination in nearby Kings County.\textsuperscript{122} Halifax returned two members, and Martin’s counterpart was A.K. Maclean, a Liberal Unionist whom Borden had rewarded for crossing the floor with a ministership without portfolio. The election was scheduled for December 17, and since Borden and Maclean had been traveling around the Maritimes campaigning, it seems likely that Martin was with them.\textsuperscript{123} In Martin’s absence, the deputy mayor, Henry S. Colwell, took charge at City Hall. Colwell, according to MacMechan, was thin, with a wispy mustache, light hair, a square chin, and glasses. In addition to his elected office, he was a successful merchant, and a bit after 9:00 was on his way to the store from his house on South Park Street in the South End. He went home briefly to check on his family and, finding them well, went directly to City Hall to direct the city government. At age fifty-four, Colwell was an important figure in Halifax, not only for his political role but because of his place in the social order. He had been a school commissioner, an overseer of the poor, and the parks commissioner. Perhaps more important was his membership in the Anti-Tuberculosis League—a major progressive organization in Halifax—the St. George’s Society, the Masons, and the City and Waegwoltic Clubs.\textsuperscript{124}


\textsuperscript{123} Borden, \textit{Memoirs}, 2:763; personal narrative of Lieut. O.B. Jones, 4 February 1918, item 44, MacMechan fonds; personal testimony of Mrs. F.H. Sexton, n.d. but revised 7 February 1918, item 224, MacMechan fonds.

\textsuperscript{124} On Colwell’s appearance, see memorandum [of conversation with Henry S. Colwell], 29 December 1917, item 270, MacMechan fonds. On his first actions on December 6, see unsigned, undated essay, probably an early draft by MacMechan, labeled “The Halifax Disaster,” item 271, MacMechan fonds. On his biography, see \textit{Prominent People of the Maritime Provinces} (Montreal: Canadian Publicity Co., 1922), 39.
The first thing that we know Colwell did that morning was walk up Citadel Hill with the chief of police and the city clerk to meet with Colonel W.E. Thompson, the assistant adjutant general and second in command of the entire military district. Thompson promised what military men were already doing: working to rescue victims, recovering dead bodies, and putting out the fires that were still raging in Richmond. He also promised tents, blankets, and mattresses. Colwell also met with W.A. Duff, a railway official, whom he deputized to go out of the city and send telegrams over the mayor’s name requesting help from other towns and cities. At 11:30, Colwell convened in the city collector’s office a meeting of the citizens who had arrived at City Hall to lend a hand. They were, the minutes reported, “all he could speedily convene,” and of course those consisted of local elites; in MacMechan’s words, they were “the best brains and strongest energy available in the city.” Technically, the meeting began as one of the City Council, but with only Colwell, two controllers, and three aldermen present—not a quorum—the self-appointed group of citizens quickly took the reins of government. They appointed Nova Scotia’s lieutenant governor, MacCallum Grant, himself a prominent Halifax businessman, to chair the meeting, and Colwell served as secretary.

Who was at this meeting? Colwell only listed eleven private participants in
addition to the seven officials there, all of whom were also private businessmen.\textsuperscript{129} Another four were appointed to committees and so were probably present, though Colwell did not specify it. All fifteen were men from rich neighborhoods far from the North End. Bob MacIlreith was a lawyer who had been mayor when Haligonians had taken charge of the \textit{Titanic} rescue and salvage operation in 1912, and he had been a leader in movement to reform municipal government; in addition to being a king’s counsel, he sat on the province’s Public Utilities Commission. He lived on the far side of the Northwest Arm, a convenient location for his yachting.\textsuperscript{130} English immigrant James Norwood Duffus was a fifty-three-year-old partner in Cunard, the Liverpool, England-based shipping and passenger line that had been founded by a Haligonian. Duffus was a member of a variety of sporting clubs, plus the Halifax Club.\textsuperscript{131} Alderman John E. Furness was the Halifax director of Furness Withy, another major British shipping concern.\textsuperscript{132} Colwell’s South Park Street neighbor Robert E. Harris, also a member of the Halifax Club, was a justice on the Nova Scotia Supreme Court; he would be raised to chief justice in February 1918. He had received the silk of a king’s counsel before turning thirty and was perhaps the most prominent of Halifax’s lawyers.\textsuperscript{133} Merchant George A. Taylor was on the Board of Control but was a notorious drunk; he stayed, in

\textsuperscript{129}Boyd, \textit{Enriched}, 72, claims that Colwell omitted women including Jane Wisdom from his list of attendees. She does not cite this assertion, and it is probable that she confused the first meeting on Thursday morning at 11:30 with meeting the next day at 11:00, which several women did attend.

\textsuperscript{130}Report, n.d., [R.V. Harris, District Superintendent] to Assistant Commissioner, St. John Ambulance Brigade Overseas in the Dominion of Canada, folder 1, StJAB fonds; Metson, \textit{Halifax Explosion}, 52-53; Roper, “Halifax Board of Control,” 48.

\textsuperscript{131}Prominent People, 55.


\textsuperscript{133}Prominent People, 79-80.
The words of one volunteer, “continuously plastered” all weekend. H.G. Bauld was a member of the provincial House of Assembly and a wholesale grocer; like Harris, Grant, and Duffus, he was a member of the Halifax Club, and his daughters were friendly with Grant’s son.

The morning meeting lasted for forty-five minutes. Colwell reported on his activities of the morning. “A short discussion then took place,” he wrote later in the meeting’s minutes, “as to the matter of the organization of Committees, after which it was unanimously decided that such Committees should be formed at once under the name of the HALIFAX RELIEF COMMITTEE.” Having authorized themselves effectively to take over the municipal government, the men at the meeting then appointed each other to committees. They adjourned at 12:15 promising to meet again at 3:00 that afternoon.

Meanwhile, MacMechan wrote, “To the City Hall, as to the hospitals, flowed a stream of voluntary helpers. Some confusion inevitably occurred, but through this action of the Corporation, systematic efforts were made to feed, clothe, house the destitute, and to remove the bodies of the dead, and find homes for the homeless.” So when the second meeting started, there were more people in the room, but they were of the same sort. The Honorable George E. Faulkner was the president of a financial and insurance company and the past president of the Canadian Club and the Halifax Board of Trade. A

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134 Memorandum [of conversation with Henry S. Colwell], 29 December 1917, item 270, MacMechan fonds.

135 Prominent People, 18; Personal narrative of Miss E. Bauld, supplementary, n.d., item 115, MacMechan fonds.

136 Minutes of Morning Meeting,” 6 December 1917, item 3-3c, MacMechan fonds. Capitalization as in original.

137 Unsigned, undated essay, probably an early draft by MacMechan, labeled “The Halifax Disaster,” item 271, MacMechan fonds.
Halifax member of the provincial House of Assembly since 1906, he had been a member of Nova Scotia’s Executive Council since 1911; at age sixty-two, he also sat on several corporate, bank, and charitable boards.\textsuperscript{138} Willis E. Hebb was an insurance broker and past president of the of the Commercial Club. He had founded the Waegwoltic Club, the country- and sailing club of which Colwell was also a member. Like McCallum Grant and Henry Colwell, he served on the board of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty, and he was also active with the Halifax Poor Association and the Home for Aged Men.\textsuperscript{139}

Joining these civilian worthies were two military men: a naval officer whom the secretary of the meeting, T.C. Stewart, did not recognize, and fifty-seven-year-old General Thomas Benson, the commanding officer of Military District 6. The presence of Benson signified the importance the officers on the Citadel placed on the relief effort.\textsuperscript{140}

By the end of the second meeting, which lasted an hour and fifteen minutes, the organized relief effort was not much further along than when the first meeting started. The assembled citizens listened as Colwell read the minutes of the first meeting, and then on motion they “duly noted and seconded the action taken” and “ratified and confirmed” the appointment of committeemen. Justice Harris reported that he had secured a line of credit to fund the work of the Relief Committee, and the chairs of the subcommittees made reports to the audience. At 4:15 they all went back home to the South End.\textsuperscript{141}

\textsuperscript{138} Prominent People, 63.


\textsuperscript{140} File 14448, box 662, accession 1992-93/662, C.E.F. Personnel Files, Department of National Defence fonds, Library and Archives Canada.

\textsuperscript{141} “Minutes of Afternoon Meeting,” 6 December 1917, item 3d-3e, MacMechan fonds.
Why did the “best brains” in Halifax, all of whom had considerable experience with charitable committees, fail to accomplish much in the first days? For one thing, in their central geographic position, people at City Hall could not know what was happening in the North End. The fire chief had been killed that morning. City officials were missing. Of those who were there, one of the controllers was drunk and the city clerk was useless; Henry Colwell “tapped his head significantly” when describing the latter to MacMechan. The building was in disarray, with windows broken and plaster down.

The citizens’ meetings were held in the collector’s office because, in Colwell’s words, it was “the only room in the building not so badly damaged by the Explosion as to be unfit for the purpose.” Mrs. H. Bryant went to City Hall after the explosion to volunteer but found “everything in confusion,” so she left. On her way out, she met Dean Llwyd, who suggested that she go to Camp Hill hospital, and though she was “struck by the confusion” there too, at least at the hospital she could be of use. In the hospitals, Mrs. Bryant’s initial vision of disorder was deceiving, because volunteers created their “organization without any organization,” an order that did not need to be perceived to outsiders to be useful. At City Hall, organization, control, and direction were the very purpose of activity. Without legibility, there was nothing. The confusion she witnessed had no deeper order because it was all there was.

The second reason the relief managers accomplished so little on the first day was


143 Memorandum [of conversation with Henry S. Colwell], 29 December 1917, item 270, MacMechan fonds.

144 Personal narrative of Mrs. H. Bryant, n.d., item 121, MacMechan fonds.
that they were busy taking care of themselves. In the stories they told MacMechan, they frequently spent the morning and afternoon fixing up their houses by boarding up windows and cleaning up fallen glass and plaster. Banker and broker George S. Campbell, for instance, was in his coat room putting on his boots when the explosion rocked his house. Knowing neither the cause nor the extent of the damage, he went with friends to John McInness & Sons to get building supplies. Along the way, he discovered how bad the damage to the city had been, so he went directly to City Hall. Not finding any officials with whom to commiserate, he visited Richmond—not to help, but “to see it for himself.” Campbell joined the Finance Committee. The highlight of his work with the Relief Committee, he implied to MacMechan, was that the next day he was given a ride home in the blizzard by Prime Minister Borden himself, thus relieving Campbell of the worry of how to get back to the South End in the snow.145

Dougal Macgillivray, MacMechan’s neighbor who gave him the job of official historian, was the manager of the Halifax branch of the Bank of Commerce and the chairman of the Board of Trade. He did not attend either of the two meetings on Friday, because he was looking after his own office and house. The first thing he did after the explosion was send a telegram to the bank’s general manager in Toronto letting him know what had happened. Then he asked the son of a man who owned a building supply company to “reserve glass” and told his stenographer to go to Macgillivray’s house to check on his family. Macgillivray set about cleaning up his office, then went to check on his house and family himself. Warned of a second explosion, he continued walking south.

145 Personal narrative of Mr. George S. Campbell, 11 February 1918, item 124, MacMechan fonds. On Campbell, see Sutherland, “Personnel and Policies of the Halifax Board of Trade,” 213.
and returned home at noon, where he had lunch and tea. After eating, he went back to the bank and continued on repairs until 5:00. It was only on Friday that he was asked (although he did not tell MacMechan by whom) to attend a meeting of the Finance Committee, and on Saturday he attended another “important meeting.” He was later “pressed,” he said, to take the job heading the Rehabilitation Committee.146

Edmund A. Sanders was the secretary-treasurer of the Board of Trade. He was on a street car in the North End going to his office when he heard the fire bells. After the explosion, he headed home, where he found what he termed “severe” damage: broken windows and a piece of metal through the door. His wife was injured—she would later lose vision in one eye—but Sanders spent the day fixing up the house, carrying beaver-board on his head from a building supply store. As he was bringing out broken furniture to his veranda, two soldiers came to warn him to leave the house because of the feared second explosion. He told MacMechan that his house became an impromptu first aid station, with about twenty people receiving treatment, although it was unclear who was doing that work. Sanders, experienced in securing supplies for his own house, eventually went to work on the Supply Committee.147

W.A. Major was the local Halifax manager of R.G. Dun. After the explosion, everyone in his building evacuated in an orderly way, and he went home to check on his wife and property. Finding them in good condition, he had himself driven up to Cogswell Street Hospital, where his son had been convalescing. His son was safe, and Major was amazed at both the destruction and the order at the hospital. “Vehicle after vehicle drove

146 Personal narrative of Mr. Dougal Macgillivray, n.d. but reviewed 22 February 1918, item 196, MacMechan fonds.

147 Personal narrative of Edmund A. Sanders, n.d. but read 19 February 1918, item 222, MacMechan fonds.
up to the hospital and deposited its load of bleeding and mangled mass of humanity,”
MacMechan paraphrased, but there was “very little confusion.” Rather than stay and
help, however, Major walked back to his South End house. After touring the devastated
area (but again apparently not helping the rescue effort), he attended the 3:00 meeting and
wound up with the job of trying to round up homeless people and getting them into the ad
hoc shelters that were being established.148

And so it would take until Friday for the “systematic efforts” MacMechan praised
to get started in earnest, and the sense of panic, chaos, and confusion at City Hall
apparently lasted all weekend, even as relief workers and survivors elsewhere created
their spontaneous order. 149 At 11:00 Friday morning in what was apparently the cleaned-
up and ready city council chambers, Henry Colwell gaveled to order a joint meeting of
the city council and citizens, then quickly turned over the chair to McCallum Grant and
took up the secretary’s pen. 150 While Colwell did not record who was there, the meeting
was notable not just for having more people—men like Macgillivray had finished fixing
the relatively mild damage to their houses and so could lend their attention to City Hall—
but for the difference of who was there. Most notably, the meetings on Friday included
women.

The four women we know were there were leading progressives in Halifax. They
had, long before the explosion, built organizations and institutions devoted to civic uplift
and medical service. As leaders in interlocking organizations of women, they also

148 “Experiences of a Relief Worker,” unsigned but W.A. Major, n.d., item 182a, MacMechan fonds.
149 Unsigned, undated essay, probably an early draft by MacMechan, labeled “The Halifax Disaster,” item
271, MacMechan fonds.
150 “Minutes of Morning Meeting,” 7 December 1917, item 3f-3j, MacMechan fonds.
controlled a large network of middle-class and elite women who through their previous work were familiar with the city in a more ground-level way than their husbands. Their habit was to think not of how things were but of how they ought to be, and to define the steps from one to the other. Though their volunteer work meant their knowledge of the city was often more detailed and action-oriented than their husbands’, there does not seem to be any instances of their working with poorer women, rather than for them.

Andrew Nicholson and Ernest R. Forbes argue that Halifax’s progressives, especially women, were unusual among Canadians for their close connections to their counterparts in the United States. In some instances these connections were biographical; of the leading progressive women in the city, Eliza Ritchie had studied at Cornell and taught at Wellesley, May Sexton had studied at M.I.T., and Edith Archibald had grown up in New York.\(^\text{151}\) But Haligonians continued to build connections even while at home. The Council of Women, for instance, hosted a lecture by Alice Stebbins, the first police woman in the United States.\(^\text{152}\) In 1915, the Civic Improvement League hosted John Sewall, who had led a civic uplift program in Boston, in order for him to spread his ideas to Halifax.\(^\text{153}\) Halifax’s progressives also existed in a national context, and the Council of Women was the local branch of an organization based in Ontario.

Edith Archibald was a noted suffragist, temperance activist, and women’s club organizer; though born in Newfoundland, she grew up in New York, where her father was the British consul general. Charles, her husband, was trained as a mining engineer but

\(^{151}\) Forbes, “Battles in Another War,” 69, 75-6.


\(^{153}\) Nicholson, “Dreaming of ‘the Perfect City,’” 52, 12, 43.
worked primarily a banker; his business ties to Toronto strengthened her links there, and she often brought ideas from central Canada to Halifax. As a younger woman she had gained fame, or perhaps notoriety, for leading members of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union on a raid of three illegal saloons in Charles’s native Cow Bay. By 1917, when she was sixty-three, she had already served as president of the Halifax Victorian Order of Nurses and the Halifax Local Council of Women.  

Archibald’s distant cousin Agnes Dennis was fifty-eight and had been married for thirty-nine years to William Dennis, who by 1917 was a Conservative senator and the publisher of the *Halifax Herald*, a vociferously pro-war, pro-conscription, and pro-Borden newspaper. But she was a leader in her own right, too, working in the same fields as Archibald. After receiving what she later termed her “first training in public work in Temperance Societies,” she set about leading nearly every middle-class women’s organization in Halifax. She had been the founding president of the Halifax chapter of the Victorian Order of Nurses, had been president of the women’s auxiliary of the Y.M.C.A. since 1910, was the president of the Nova Scotia Red Cross, and was on the first executive of the Anti-Tuberculosis League. In 1916, she was made a Lady of Grace of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem, and before she died she would receive a handful of other royal awards, including being made a Commander of the British Empire in 1934.

Dennis’s main organization, however, was the Halifax Local Council of Women, which she helped to organize and of which she was president from 1905 to 1920. Under her leadership, she later wrote, it “promoted and held meetings on many subjects of public interest, such as Health, Housing, Clean Milk, High Cost of Living, Civic

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154 Forbes, “Battles in Another War.”
Improvement, Technical Education, Thrift, Citizenship, etc.” It ran the Women’s Department at the provincial exhibition hall, and helped to found the Children’s Hospital, the Anti-Tuberculosis League, and the Halifax Welfare Bureau. It also brought the playground movement to Halifax, creating supervised play-spaces in the North End.\textsuperscript{155} Like many progressive organizations, the council was concerned with the assimilation of immigrants, and at Archibald’s initiative it founded a “Women’s Welcome Hostel” to house immigrants and act as an employment bureau. Members fought for women’s suffrage, for the regulation of labor, and heard lectures on the plight of neglected children, white slavery, and the achievements of the first woman police officer in the United States.\textsuperscript{156}

Clara MacIntosh had not come to the meetings on Thursday because she was too busy. A little woman, with light hair and blue eyes, she was a nurse and the Lady Divisional Superintendent of the St. John’s Ambulance Brigade. Her husband was a well-known doctor, but he wasn’t home, so when injured people began to arrive at their house for treatment, Clara put her nursing skills to use. Deluged with the injured—the house was so full she made people wait in the furnace room—she handled both first aid and triage, putting the less injured to work cleaning and, in the case of men, blocking up the broken windows. When soldiers came around ordering people to leave their houses for fear of a second explosion, MacIntosh simply moved the operation outside to the Commons. Some patients had to be carried outside, but she laid blankets on the ground

\textsuperscript{155}Undated (but after 1935) biographical sketch, presumably written by Agnes Dennis, in her scrapbook, microfilm reel 10,219, Agnes Dennis fonds, Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management.

and continued her work. She went back inside the house around 2:00, by which time a VAD from the North End had arrived to help her. They continued giving aid to people until 8:00 in the evening, when they went to Camp Hill to help there. MacIntosh reported to MacMechan that she returned home around midnight, when she grew faint. Nonetheless, because the door was hanging off its hinges, people continued to come in during the night, and she even bandaged a man while she lay in bed.157

Jane B. Wisdom was a New York- and Montreal-educated social worker. A native Nova Scotian, she had returned nineteen months earlier to direct the fledgling Halifax Welfare Bureau. Funded by the Russell Sage Foundation, the Bureau’s job was to coordinate social service in Halifax, investigate those who sought relief, and professionalize the administration of charity. Part of Wisdom’s job was to know the circumstances of Halifax’s poor, and then judge them with the “objectivity” of an outside expert. Another part was to create more such experts by training a corps of professional social workers.158 Wisdom stopped by City Hall on Friday morning, she told MacMechan’s assistant John Mitchell, to see if she could help. Finding the meeting already in progress, she went in and participated.159

At the meeting on Friday morning, it was the women who led the discussion on how to deal with the suffering masses. The lieutenant governor opened the meeting by reporting on offers of aid from other towns in the province and noted that doctors and nurses had arrived from nearby to help in the hospitals. They talked about committees

157 Personal narrative of Mrs. Clara MacIntosh, n.d., item 198, MacMechan fonds.
158 Boyd, Enriched, 56.
159 Personal testimony of Miss Jane Wisdom, Social Service Worker, n.d., item 237, MacMechan fonds.
and appointed more men to them, and Justice Harris spoke for some time on the financial situation. It took until Clara MacIntosh spoke up for the meeting to consider how to find out what survivors needed, and how to give it to them. MacIntosh proudly announced that all her VADs had been working in the hospitals and offered “to organize voluntary women workers to visit homes from door to door and look after people.” Her offer stepped on some toes. Jane Wisdom sniffed that MacIntosh “took it upon herself without consulting anyone” and had disregarded Archibald, Dennis, and their higher status organizations. Regardless, MacIntosh’s offer was taken up by Archdeacon William Armitage, the pastor at Anglican St. Paul’s and a de facto leader of the city’s Protestant clergy. MacIntosh turned to Wisdom, who was sitting beside her, and enlisted her help in setting up an office. It was only later in the meeting that Dennis and Archibald offered up the services of their organizations to help MacIntosh’s.

The seeming dispute between MacIntosh on one hand and Dennis and Archibald on the other may have reflected fundamentally different perspectives in the way they saw the city and their roles in it. MacIntosh had spent Thursday getting her hands dirty, providing first aid to dozens of injured people. While we cannot be certain of what Dennis and Archibald did on the day of the explosion—inexplicably, MacMechan did not interview them—there is no indication that they went to a hospital or helped in other ways. MacIntosh also had a history of challenging her social betters. The St. John’s Ambulance Brigade ran a “rest room” on the pier for soldiers returning from Europe, but

160 “Minutes of Morning Meeting,” 7 December 1917, item 3f-3j, MacMechan fonds.

161 Personal testimony of Miss Jane Wisdom, Social Service Worker, n.d., item 237, MacMechan fonds.

162 “Minutes of Morning Meeting,” 7 December 1917, item 3f-3j, MacMechan fonds.
the project dissolved into controversy when a group of women high in Halifax’s social hierarchy tried to take it over. Arrayed against MacIntosh were the wives of Thomas Benson, the military commander, McCallum Grant, the lieutenant governor, and F. McKelvey Bell, a colonel who would soon become head of the Medical Relief Committee. “I will not willingly see a group of women no matter how prominent socially, force service from an organization such as that of the Brigade,” MacIntosh wrote to a St. John’s official in Toronto. “They prize social distinction and publicity more than ‘service to humanity’ under the aegis of the Order of St. John.” From MacIntosh’s perspective, the dispute was over whether one group of women could take over a Brigade project and run it themselves, independently and without oversight. Put another way, she was seeking to impose discipline and maintain control over the members and resources of the organization she headed. She was clearly not afraid to fight people at the apex of Halifax society when she thought it would benefit her organization. Archibald and Dennis had a competitive streak too, and they worked to retain the Council of Women’s dominance among women’s organizations. In 1914 a journalist named Ella Maude Murray had come back from a sojourn in the United States and founded a suffrage organization with herself as president. Dennis and company had quickly organized a rival group, installing their ally Eliza Ritchie as president and demoting Murray to librarian.

The wife of a doctor in a city that thrived on military hierarchy, Clara MacIntosh was no Mrs. Grant or Mrs. Benson. But despite MacIntosh’s actions as a relief worker on

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163 MacIntosh to Dr. C[harles] J. Copp, 11 May 1918, folder 2, St.JAB fonds.

164 Forbes, “Battles in Another War,” 77.
Thursday, her position on Friday was one of a relief manager. Her plan was pure City Hall: to send outsiders—middle-class volunteer women—into a neighborhood and have them report back to the center what was happening. It was fundamentally a plan to impose legibility on an illegible city. It was a difficult prospect. At noon, MacIntosh and Wisdom took over the mayor’s office to set up their operation, and they sent out volunteers armed with typewritten slips of paper telling sufferers where to go for which kind of aid; mostly this meant going to City Hall, where the Material Relief Committee, headed by Wisdom, would see to their needs. If the volunteers found someone who could not go themselves, they were to fill out on a pad of paper what was needed, and bring that form back to City Hall.\textsuperscript{165} Although Wisdom later described their goal as to “try to fill all urgent needs with a minimum for record,” they in fact keep nearly every name and address, fulfilling their unstated goal of imposing legibility on the situation.\textsuperscript{166} MacIntosh reported proudly that the Material Relief Committee had kept a record of all the aid it distributed.\textsuperscript{167}

John Hanlon Mitchell, a Dalhousie undergraduate who would later be hired by MacMechan as his assistant in the Disaster Record Office, arrived on Saturday morning to volunteer. Finding MacIntosh and Wisdom’s office at “the height of confusion,” he “saw that if I wanted a job, I should have to get it myself.” A number of women, he wrote, directed by Wisdom, were taking orders for coal, food, oil, and blankets. The

\textsuperscript{165} Clara MacIntosh, “A Brief Account of Relief Work Undertaken by Mrs. MacIntosh & Assistants at City Hall Following Explosion Dec. 6th,” item 22, MacMechan fonds.

\textsuperscript{166} Personal testimony of Miss Jane Wisdom, Social Service Worker, n.d., item 237, MacMechan fonds.

\textsuperscript{167} MacIntosh, “A Brief Account of Relief Work Undertaken by Mrs. MacIntosh & Assistants at City Hall Following Explosion Dec. 6th,” item 22, MacMechan fonds.
blankets went the fastest, and they had to be constantly replenished from the supplies now coming from out of town by train. Many people who came into the office were looking for the registration or transportation departments, which were down the hall. “Most of those who sought food etc were from the less stricken areas. We gave to all without question, though some were patently undeserving. Our only orders were from Controller [John] Murphy to ‘Give everything to everybody.’”

Also on Saturday morning, yet another progressive woman arrived. May Sexton, like Dennis a leader in Halifax’s Red Cross, was only thirty-seven, young compared to the others. Her husband, Frederick, was the president of the Nova Scotia Technical College; they had met while both were students at M.I.T., she in chemistry, and married while both were working for General Electric. A suffragist like Archibald and Dennis, Sexton supported Robert Borden for reelection, who had granted a limited number of women the right to vote. At the time of the the explosion, she was in Fredericton, New Brunswick, campaigning for his Union government. After confirming that Frederick was safe, she went about her business, even giving a stump speech. She then left for home, arriving early on Saturday morning thanks to the overnight blizzard. Though she arrived late, she told MacMechan that she had been “prophetic about the conditions at Halifax, i.e., total disorganization.”

Like George Campbell, Sexton was largely concerned with her own convenience, and she was put out that she had to “skedoodle” into town herself when her train arrived,

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because there were no cars to pick her up. But she was more concerned about conditions at City Hall. When she got there, she found everyone “dazed” and working in “great confusion.” MacIntosh was claiming that her VADs had finished canvassing the devastated area, but it was evident to others that this was impossible—perhaps because they had been busy at the office Mitchell described. Archibald’s offer to call out the members of the I.O.D.E.—another women’s volunteer group—and the Council of Women had apparently not been taken up. As a result, the women were being “slurred,” Sexton thought. Consulting with Archibald, Dennis, and Wisdom, Sexton remembered that the city had already been districted for the election campaign, and she offered to redirect that work toward the registration of disaster sufferers. It was this intervention, Sexton implied to MacMechan, that led to women’s inclusion in the relief committee. Until then, in MacMechan’s paraphrase, “there was a distinct feeling not to allow the women to take part in the relief work, or have them on the Committees,” perhaps because of disappointment with MacIntosh’s perceived slowness. This “distinct feeling” may also have been a continuation of Halifax men’s discomfort with civicly active women; both the Victorian Order of Nurses and the nearly all-woman Red Cross chapter had been met with resistance from the male establishment.

Even with the addition of what Sexton termed “all the women’s organized efforts of the City” understanding what was happening out in the city was a very difficult job for

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170 Personal testimony of Mrs. F.H. Sexton, n.d. but revised 7 February 1918, item 224, MacMechan fonds. MacIntosh, in her reports to VAD headquarters in Toronto, credited her own members and those of the Salvation Army, but pointedly did not mention Sexton, Archibald, or Dennis’s organizations. Clara MacIntosh, “A Brief Account of Relief Work Undertaken by Mrs. MacIntosh & Assistants at City Hall Following Explosion Dec. 6th,” item 22; MacIntosh to Charles Copp, 13 December 1917, item 29, both in MacMechan fonds.

171 Forbes, “Battles in Another War,” 73-74, 81.
those in City Hall. There were structural reasons for this: the local knowledge required to understand the needs and conditions of North End victims was intrinsically impossible to know from the center, because centralized knowledge by its nature required flattening and simplification, whereas understanding the needs of the victims required nuance, detail, and specifics.¹⁷² This was especially true since the relief managers were all outsiders to the community they were trying to help. There were also specific, contingent reasons the relief managers at City Hall continued to have a difficult time over the weekend. The damaged building was in no condition to withstand the blizzard. J.H. Mitchell described the scene: “It was far from pleasant. There were no windows in the room, and the rain poured in. The heavy wind kept all the doors slamming and creaking.” He was dismissive of everyone who wasn’t a volunteer. “The civic authorities were spinning around like headless poultry, holding frequent meetings but not apparently getting anywhere. Ralph P. Bell also thrust himself up on the centre of the stage as much as possible.” George Taylor was still drunk and getting in the way. “Controller Murphy was one of the few men who remained cool and efficient in spite of the tremendous demands that were made upon him.”¹⁷³ The problems relief managers had, though, extended beyond the specifics and contingencies and into the basics of their project.

The relief managers at City Hall rightly saw Halifax as a city in great need: people who required food, blankets, clothes, coal, and building supplies; doctors coming in from the city who needed transportation; and supplies shipped in from afar that needed to be organized and distributed. They also saw a major logistical challenge. The city had

¹⁷² Scott, Seeing Like a State.

¹⁷³ Personal testimony of John Hanlon Mitchell, 20 January 1918, item 186, MacMechan fonds.
suddenly become far less legible. The maps and city directories that had been accurate on December 5 now depicted a city that no longer existed. As successful social activists, lawyers, merchants, managers, and politicians—and sometimes more than one of these—the men and women who went to City Hall were unaccustomed to the idea that the city could run without them. When they imagined the city around them, they saw chaos, confusion, and disorder. They saw the ad hoc efforts of the relief workers as “higgledy-piggledy,” in the words of one of their counterparts in Dartmouth.\footnote{\textit{Relief Work in Dartmouth},” information from A.C. Johnson, 19 December 1917, item 27, MacMechan fonds.} It was only through their management, they thought, that they could bring order to the city. Their position—both their literal position at City Hall, and their social position in the middle class—made it impossible for them to understand the real order that existed around them.

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The relief managers were not the only ones who imagined a disorderly city in the aftermath of the explosion. A man named E.F. Heffler told a newspaper several lurid tales, including a cash box missing $150, stolen by a “strange man” who “dressed in black suit, hat and dark overcoat, had a foreign appearance and spoke with a German accent.” Heffler also claimed to have seen “a young woman who had her ring finger mutilated and her ring cut off.”\footnote{\textit{Daily Echo} 11 December 1917, 1.} The same day Heffler went to the newspaper, the chairman of the Dartmouth Patrol Committee wrote to General Benson asking for help protecting property in Tufts Cove, in Dartmouth’s North End. The area “is being
“pilfered,” he wrote. “Goods have been stolen.” The Nova Scotia Tramways and Power Company reported in a company newsletter that one of its inspectors, T. Burgess, had been killed in the explosion, and that “by the time his body was found, ghouls had been at work and had robbed him of his fortnight’s pay and his watch and chain.”

Coppersmiths who worked at the dockyard machine shops asked their commanding officer for reimbursement for personal tools that they said had been looted after the explosion.

Yet upon further examination, most if not all of these stories can be explained away. Heffler’s stories were rejected out of hand by the chief of police, who said there was no evidence for them. The chief told a different newspaper that he had heard many rumors but no formal complaints of looting, and that though there had been a report of a tampered safe, it turned out to be false. The request from Dartmouth was rejected by the Army, suggesting that Benson and his officers, at least, did not take concerns about looting in Tufts Cove very seriously. Given the long-standing concerns Tufts Cove property owners had with the supposed squatting and poaching of the Mi’kmaq who lived

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176 MS note, Harry A. Young to Thomas Benson, 10 December 1917, file 86-4-1, “Explosion Relief Work Generally,” box 4549, MD6 records. Emphasis original.


179 Daily Echo 11 December 1917, 1.

180 Morning Chronicle 12 December 1917, 1.

181 “W,” major, to Young, 10 December 1917, file 86-4-1, “Explosion Relief Work Generally,” box 4549, MD6 records.
there, it seems not unlikely that fears of pilfering were merely a continuation of those complaints. The coppersmiths’ tools were just as likely to have been lost in the fire or simply lost in the quick evacuation as to have been stolen. Indeed, it seems difficult to believe that in the midst of a mass evacuation in the face of explosion and fire, anyone would have bothered to steal tools from the Navy’s machine shops. As for the late Mr. Burgess’s pay and watch, the same report described how the force of the explosion “practically tore the clothes off his body.” One may suppose that the same force blew the watch and cash away from his body as well, whence they were lost amidst the rubble.

Indeed, the Halifax police department did not make a single arrest for looting in the month after the disaster. The night after the explosion, the chief sent one of his officers to help run the morgue—not patrol the street and maintain order—telling him he “could do nothing that night.” The chief even claimed that there was less drunkenness after the explosion than normal. The night of the explosion, two ships of the United States Navy sent a total of 160 men and officers ashore to patrol the city. Neither reported any arrests. MacMechan’s first mention of looting in the “journal” he kept as

Footnotes:

182 For a sustained discussion of the Mi’kmaw community in Tufts Cove, see Chapter 4.


185 Statement from Police Officer Leo Tooke, 12 March 1918, item 258, MacMechan fonds.

186 Morning Chronicle 12 December 1917, 1.

official historian came February 16.\textsuperscript{188} Military police arrested potential looters, and in March the officer in charge of the patrols reported to his superior that “quite a number of convictions have been secured.”\textsuperscript{189} But in their records, there are only a handful of arrests noted, all in late winter and early spring. In late February, for instance, the military guards arrested three men for taking a load of furniture and lead pipe without a permit.\textsuperscript{190} In the second week of March, a man was arrested for having in the devastated area a load of lead pipe, iron, rubber, and two chickens, all without a permit.\textsuperscript{191} In April, a woman was charged with stealing some brass from the ruins; two days later the case was dismissed.\textsuperscript{192} These arrests, even if there were convictions, were a far cry from from the early reports of “ghouls” ransacking dead bodies and abandoned houses, stories for which there is no evidence.

Yet survivors claim to remember widespread looting. W.H. Macdonald was a boy who lived on Agricola near West Street with his mother, sister, and brother. Warned of a second explosion, they were evacuated to the Commons. “The looters came in when we were down the Commons, I imagine,” he remembered bitterly to Janet Kitz sixty-eight years later. “The army was supposed to be controlling the streets, I think, at that time.

\textsuperscript{188} Journal entry for 16 February 1918, item 92k, MacMechan fonds.

\textsuperscript{189} Lt. Col. H. Flowers to DAA&QMG, 1 March 1918, file 86-4-1 volume 2, “Explosion Relief Work Generally,” 4549, MD6 records.

\textsuperscript{190} Lt. Col. H. Flowers to DAA&QMG, 27 February 1918, file 86-4-1 volume 2, “Explosion Relief Work Generally,” 4549, MD6 records.

\textsuperscript{191} Lt. Col. H. Flowers to R.B. Willis, 9 March 1918, file 86-4-1 volume 2, “Explosion Relief Work Generally,” 4549, MD6 records. Nothing was supposed to be removed from the devastated area without a permit signed by the city engineer. Report by Maj. W.F.D. Bremner, 10 April 1918, file 86-4-1 volume 3, “Explosion Relief Work Generally,” 4549, MD6 records.

\textsuperscript{192} G.A. Robertson to DAA&QMG, 17 April 1918, file 86-4-1 volume 3, “Explosion Relief Work Generally,” 4549, MD6 records.
They went in and got 300 dollars, and a bunch of rugs that my mother had made. . . .
They cleaned it right out.**193 Three other Kitz interview subjects told stories of looted stores: of a ransacked jewelery store and of children helping themselves to candy from broken shop windows.**194 “Up on Gottingen Street we noticed the stores—people were looting in the stores,” Gertrude Pelham told Kitz. “It was terrible.”**195

Looting is often a way people think about disasters. It is iconic of the disorder that disasters are thought to create.**196 As with T. Burgess’s lost pay, blaming looters may be a handy explanation for the loss of items that were likely destroyed in the original disaster, but whose destruction was forgotten or not noticed until later. The fear of looting is also wrapped up with other anxieties. In the aftermath of a disaster, things are unstable; when everything is up for grabs, who knows what others will grab. Thus at a time when Canada directed its fury against the barbaric Huns and stood on watch against spies and saboteurs, E.F. Heffler imagined his looter with a German accent. At a moment of high class anxiety born of mixing with people of different statuses and of potentially class-changing financial hardship, others focused their fears on economic others. Edith Keating, a young woman at the time of the explosion, told Kitz, “There were a lot of looting but that wasn’t with the ordinary class of people.”**197 Even when fears of looting

**193 Interview of W.H. MacDonald, 3 July 1918, interview 30, Kitz oral histories.

**194 On the jewelry store, see Interview of Irene Jones, née Harrop, 15 July 1985, interview 77, Kitz oral histories; on the candy, see Interview of Florence Bowars, née Romo, 3 July 1985, interview 31, Kitz oral histories.

**195 Interview of Miss Gertrude Pelham, 2 August 1918, interview 113, Kitz oral histories.


**197 Interview of Miss Edith Keating, 2 August 1918, interview 112, Kitz oral histories.
were sincere, they provided an opportunity for those who were of “the ordinary class” to take more power. On December 11, the city announced that “prominent business men, tradesmen and others” would be sworn in as plainclothes police to protect against looting. Among those participating were the son of the city auditor, a king’s counsel, a druggist, and a former police chief. ¹⁹⁸

People who believed that there was looting, or who expected it, were not just wrong. They were acting in ways that in fact created more disorder for the people whose lives had already been upended. “Within a few hours after the explosion, the military established a cordon around the devastated district, which no one was allowed to pass without an order—which citizens having business obtained at the City Hall,” a city official wrote in 1920. ²⁰⁰ This procedure meant that people who lived in the North End found it difficult or impossible to return to their neighborhood, whether to look for friends and relatives, try to find important documents or items from the ruins of their houses, or even just visit their homes. Moreover, the military devoted a substantial number of men to the policing operation: in the nine days following the disaster, there were a daily average of 100 men sent to guard relief supplies, a 13 person mounted patrol, 275 soldiers detailed to the civilian government for duties including guarding, and 78 more men as an “armed guard to prevent looting.” In the same period, there were an average 200 men each day working on search parties.²⁰⁰ This meant there were more than

¹⁹⁸ *Morning Chronicle* 12 December 1917, 5.

¹⁹⁹ Answers to questionnaire requested by W.C. Milner, 12 July 1920, item 7, microfilm reel 15,125, MG 27.

²⁰⁰ Memorandum, [Benson] to Secretary, Militia Council, 15 December 1917, file 86-2-1, “Explosion—Reports,” box 4548, MD6 records. I have combined the counts of officers and enlisted men. A copy of Benson’s memorandum is also item 250, MacMechan fonds.

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two men working as guards for every man helping in the devastated area. Had there been less concern for property, more men could have been put on the search parties.

Although no one appears to have complained about it, there were considerable instances of people taking supplies from drug stores on the day of the explosion. The spontaneous order of the relief workers could thus look from outside as disorderly. Captain John Flint Cahan, the disabled veteran who went with his chauffeur to help transport the wounded to the hospital told MacMechan that he “raided a drug-store.”

The Creighton sisters, who ended up at Rockhead Hospital, first attempted to get supplies at Logan’s Drug Store but found only a single roll of tape and a single bottle of antiseptic, suggesting that someone else had already taken everything before they got there. A Dalhousie student went to a drug store, emptied a few bottles of pills, and filled them with iodine. None of these expropriations were authorized or recorded, and in fact some of them caused a degree of confusion later. A naval carpenter complained that his tools were taken from a chest on shore by American sailors, who used the tools to make stretchers and for other relief work but never put them back. A few weeks later, he had to file for compensation from his captain to get replacements.

The fear of looting that never happened, and the way relief workers helped themselves to needed tools and supplies, is an example of the way order and disorder were often confused in the explosion’s aftermath, particularly for the explosion’s direct

201 Captain John Flint Cahan, C.E.F., n.d., item 123, MacMechan fonds.
202 Personal testimony of Miss Josephine Creighton, 22 January 1918, item 135, MacMechan fonds.
203 Personal Narrative of Miss Florence J. Murray, n.d., item 192, MacMechan fonds.
victims. Order and disorder masqueraded as each other. The people of the North End experienced and created order that was easily seen from the outside—both synchronic and diachronic outsides—as disorderly. Conversely, the outsiders who tried to help them, often under the guise of creating order, often in fact created disorder. If looting is the most obvious example of this phenomenon, it was hardly the most consequential. Just like relief workers, survivors helped each other on the basis of past, daily patterns of solidarity with their neighbors, friends, and relatives. But these networks were broken up by well-meaning outsiders who could not understand them and who sought to impose their own version of order on the lives of North End survivors.

When the explosion first happened, those closest to it enacted everyday forms of solidarity. This meant that people helped the people they were close to and people they knew. The most basic form of solidarity was with family; survivors often went immediately to their own homes or to the homes of other family members to help them. But people also helped their neighbors and friends—those with whom they had had previous contact and relationships. As with the outside relief workers—soldiers, officers, doctors, and and the like—who did under extraordinary circumstances what they were trained and used to doing in ordinary times, North Enders who were used to helping helped their usual charges. Conversely, people who needed aid knew where to go, so they went to schools and doctor’s homes, places where they were used to receiving succor, aid, and support.

Just as survivors’ actions were built on their relationships from before the explosion, so too were the failures of outside relief indicative of and caused by the intrinsic incapacities of the state and of central authority. The failures of the relief
managers at City Hall stemmed from their structural inability to understand what was happening elsewhere in the city. Likewise, the failures of the military—the embodiment of state order—in relief work indicate the way that states are by their nature unable to respond to disaster.

As we have already seen, people’s first thought after the disaster, whether they lived in the North End or the South End, was to check on their families. This was as true for Jack Libby, who ran home and hunted through the burning ruins of his house for his family, as it was for W.A. Major, who went left his office at R.G. Dun to check on his wife in the South End. The rush home meant that employers were left in the lurch, which from the perspective of their managers could create disorder. The general manager of the Canadian Government Railway, for instance, complained, “The regular men to man the services were either dead or seeking their dead and temporary arrangements had to be hurriedly made to restore order and carry on the work.”

Family members who checked on each other performed an important service. They were often the first people to see their relatives and could judge their physical condition. Helen Cooper was nineteen years old and pregnant, living in the North End while her husband was stationed in Halifax with the army. “Only a kid myself,” she joked to Janet Kitz in 1985, “too young to get married.” After the explosion, she remembered sixty-eight years later, she went to see her husband’s father. “That wasn’t very far up the street and he was coming down to meet me. And he said to me for god’s sake woman, go

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205 Personal narrative of G.H. Libby, 13 February 1917, item 165; “Experiences of a Relief Worker,” unsigned but W.A. Major, n.d., item 182a, both in MacMechan fonds.

over and lay down, for your life is a matter of [inaudible]. And he frightened me because I didn’t think it was that bad.” Her father-in-law had seen what she, in her shock, had not: that a shard of glass was embedded in her neck very close to her jugular. He saw to it that she was loaded in a wagon driven by a civilian, and taken to the hospital.²⁰⁷

Similarly, these family contacts meant that people were rescued faster. Ethel Molloy, for instance, was a young office clerk. Immediately after the explosion, she and a friend left work and ran to check on the friend’s mother. “Her mother was in a cupboard and everything on top of her. So we managed to get her straightened up somehow. And I left May with her, I said, My goodness, May, I can’t stay. If your place is like this, what must be home? So I went home and all I remember is seeing people in nightgowns, people jumping around.”²⁰⁸ Margaret Smith’s brother was a seminarian who was in the neighborhood to look at the new organ at St. Joseph’s church. When the explosion happened, he went straight to his mother’s house at the corner of Kaye and Albert Streets, despite being injured himself. She was stuck under a piano. Because he had checked on his mother, he was able to call out to two strange men, who held up the piano while the son pulled out his mother.²⁰⁹

This is also evidence of the order created by families, and by the importance of family in a crisis. (This theme will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.) May Gerroir, a fourteen-year-old eighth grader at St. Mary’s, went home after the explosion

²⁰⁷ Interview of Helen Facey, then Mrs. Cooper, 27 June 1985, interview 13, Kitz oral histories.

²⁰⁸ Interview of Ethel Molloy, 26 June 1985, interview 6, Kitz oral histories. Later in the interview Molloy tells a different story of what she did immediately after the explosion, so perhaps one ought not put too much stock in the memories of a 96-year-old.

²⁰⁹ Interview of Miss Margaret M. Smith, 31 July 1985, interview 106, Kitz oral histories.
and stayed with her mother, who refused to be evacuated when soldiers warned of a second explosion. This meant that they were both at home when her father, a tug-boat captain, and uncle, who was stationed on the Niobe, came home. May, her father, and her uncle went around to the hospitals to find a relative. That evening, the extended family found a place to stay together. “Eventually, of course, my relatives all got together,” she remembered sixty-eight years later.210

“You went around to all the people that you know that needed help—if you could,” one of Kitz’s subjects told her.211 Though family was the most important network to which people belonged, “all the people that you know” extended to friends and neighbors, too. Sometimes this help was rather mundane: an injured man in the hospital was able to find out his wife’s fate by having a hospital volunteer call his mother-in-law’s neighbor. The neighbor, he rightly presumed, would know if his wife was okay.212 One observer described neighbors sharing information about the state of each other’s houses and families in the first few hours after the explosion.213 Other times, this assistance was material. Margaret Nowlan was a school girl just starting the day at St. Mary’s School when the explosion happened. Sixty-eight years after the explosion, her memory was confused and her story full of contradictions, but she recalled the way friends looked after each other. She recalled waiting at the Citadel for the all-clear after the warning of the second explosion. “There was another lady up there that knew us and she went home and

210 Interview of John J. Flemming and May Flemming, née Gerroir, 28 June 1985, interview 21, Kitz oral histories.

211 Interview of Nellie Billard, 27 June 1985, interview 18, Kitz oral histories.

212 Personal narrative of Christine MacKinnon, 26 March 1918, item 200, MacMechan fonds.

213 M.S. narrative of Lt. Rod Macdonald, item 194, MacMechan fonds.
she got us something to eat and she brought us hot tea. And we ate it up there in the rain, on the Hill.” The specifics here—whether she was at the Citadel or, as she had said earlier, another park, or even whether this happened on the immediate day of the explosion—are unimportant. That her memory of neighbors looking out for each other still stuck out nearly seven decades later should suggest it was an important part of the day.214

Most importantly, the support lent by friends and neighbors was emotional. At a traumatic moment, they provided camaraderie and a place to sit, often over a meal. Though she lived in the North End, Mrs. Henry Dunstan was sufficiently middle-class that she had a maid. After the explosion, she and her family went outside for fear of the house collapsing, where they saw a neighbor, Mrs. Mosher, who was so blackened by the falling soot that Dunstan thought she was the Mosher’s “negro servant.” “Mrs. D’s house was soon filled with wounded people—but there was no place to lay anyone down,” MacMechan summarized. Despite the crowds, Dunstan, probably with the help of her maid, fed fourteen people before soldiers evacuated them, warning of a second explosion.215 The same thing happened in working-class North End homes. Julia DeYoung’s father, a munitions factory worker and sometime merchant sailor, had refused to leave the house when sailors and soldiers tried to evacuate him, though the rest of the family went. When they got home from the Citadel, he had tea ready. “We came home—my father had tea made and all the windows boarded up and everything cleaned up. Our neighbors came in and what bread we had and everything—he made everybody

214 Interview of Margaret Nowlan, 26 June 1985, interview 7, Kitz oral histories.
215 Personal narrative of Mrs. Henry Dunstan, 12 February 1918, item 141, MacMechan fonds.
something to eat. Because, you were dazed—you couldn’t go to a store.”\textsuperscript{216} Jean Forrest, a young woman who helped Frederick Sexton collect injured people in a Red Cross car, described a similar scene to Archibald MacMechan. “Some sailors had got a fire going in a house nearby and people were warming themselves, while the sailors passed around cake and bread,” MacMechan paraphrased.\textsuperscript{217}

That most of the solidarity shown by sufferers from the explosion was an expression of the daily solidarity that existed in everyday life does not discount the emergent solidarity shown by fellow survivors who had not before known each other. Just as relief workers volunteered on the basis of their prior commitments and solidarities, but made new connections and developed new solidarity with new people during their work, so too did people in the North End. Some of these spontaneous acts of altruism took the form of giving injured passers-by blankets or coats. One woman, whose family owned a piano store and who lived outside the devastated area but called her house “shattered,” wrote to her cousin about her experiences. A relative of hers had gone out but came running back to the house to warn people about the feared second explosion. “On her way out she gave her coat to a poorly clad woman with two little ones in her arms,” the woman wrote.\textsuperscript{218} Similarly, Mrs. Moore, a woman from the North End whom MacMechan’s assistant interviewed, reported getting a blanket from someone on the street as she wandered around dazed, then got a sweater-coat from someone else

\textsuperscript{216} Interview of Julia Coleman, née DeYoung, 28 June 1985, interview 19, Kitz oral histories.

\textsuperscript{217} Personal narrative of Miss Jean Forrest, n.d., item 146, MacMechan fonds.

\textsuperscript{218} “Maggie” to “Precious Cousin” [Mrs. Copp], 19 December 1917, folder 5, “Explosion Letter,” volume 10, MG 27.
Mrs. Moore had been watching the ship fire with three of her young children, while the baby slept in another room. When the blast came, she was knocked unconscious, only to be revived by the small tidal wave that washed ashore from the force of the explosion. When she extracted herself from the rubble, she found herself standing in water up to her knees, wearing only her underwear. A man came by, and she pleaded with him, “For God’s sake, get my children!” By then, though, the house was on fire, and though the man tried, he was unable to save the four children inside. Distraught, Mrs. Moore wandered up Roome Street, looking for her four other children who had been at school, but before she could find them, she was warned that there would be a second explosion. She soon found a cluster of other refugees, and they drifted west. As they were walking, a flat-wagon picked them up, and took them out to the suburb of Rockingham. The group spent the night in a cottage they found there, and townspeople brought them mattresses, bed-clothes, and food. Mrs. Moore had to rely on this sort of emergent solidarity, since she had little family left: she lost her husband, five children, two sisters, four brothers, her mother, three sisters-in-law, and twenty-five nephews and nieces, leaving her with four young children, of whom three were still in the hospital in January, and a married daughter.

Mrs. Moore did not tell J.H. Mitchell who gave her the blanket and the sweater; it is likely she was sufficiently dazed that she did not notice or remember. Because of the

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219 Personal testimony of Mrs. Moore, 2 January 1918, item 191, MacMechan fonds.

220 On the tidal wave, see Alan Ruffman, David A. Greenberg, and Tad S. Murty, “The Tsunami from the Explosion in Halifax Harbour,” Ruffman and Howell, eds., *Ground Zero*, 327-344.

221 Personal testimony of Mrs. Moore, 2 January 1918, item 191, MacMechan fonds.
geography of the disaster, they must have been her neighbors in some way. If nothing else, they are likely to have had seen each other on the street before, gone to the same grocery stores, or had similar, minor interactions. It was perhaps a similar dynamic that motivated a woman who kept a small shop on Veith Street, about whom Harvey Jones, a newspaper editor, told MacMechan. The building was ruined, and the woman gave away her entire stock to her neighbors, saying, “I can go to service again.” 222 Her beneficiaries were not likely her friends; rather, they were neighbors and customers, people with whom she had built bonds of solidarity through small interactions on a daily basis. In Jane Jacobs’s terms, the shopkeeper was a “public character,” someone who knew many people and who was known by many, but in an impersonal way, and for only a specific purpose. 223 In a time of crisis, however, the role of this public character expanded.

In a similar way, many of the people from the North End who helped their neighbors were people whose aid was an expansion of their normal roles. Mrs. F.J. Hollands was a VAD who lived in the devastated area. She was injured and her house was first wrecked by the explosion and then burned. Apparently unfazed, she set about giving first aid to her neighbors. When she was done with that, she went to Clara MacIntosh’s house and helped with first aid there. 224 Particularly of note in this category were schoolteachers. At Bloomfield, the local public high school, the principal and teachers affected an orderly, efficient evacuation of their charges, fast enough that twenty

222 Personal narrative of Harvey Jones, 17 December 1917, item 161, MacMechan fonds.
224 Clara H. MacIntosh, “Report of the Halifax Central Nursing Division, No. 51, St. John’s Ambulance Brigade,” 13 December 1917, item 33; Personal narrative of Mrs. Clara MacIntosh, n.d., item 198, both in MacMechan fonds.
minutes after the explosion, when a lieutenant from Wellington Barracks came running to offer assistance, there was no need. The teachers gave first aid to the students who needed it, then passed off the children to their parents. The principal stayed at the school until late that afternoon, doing things like running water out of the radiators so they would not freeze and trying to save some teaching materials. At St. Joseph’s, a nearby Catholic elementary school that was harder hit than Bloomfield, a teacher held up a staircase so that children could leave the wrecked building, not minding her own broken leg. Another of her colleagues was knocked unconscious and covered by debris. When she came to, she managed to extricate herself and then, despite her own injuries, helped take care of the children who were in the yard. “Until the arrival of ambulances and other vehicles, the Sisters, though streaming with blood, cared for the fainting and dying children, securing wraps and coverings for those who could not walk,” MacMechan’s informant wrote. Meanwhile, neighbors were arriving at the school and the neighboring convent seeking shelter and succor there. Since it was a preexisting community center and site of refuge, people thought to go to St. Joseph’s in a time of crisis.

People went to other community gathering places, too. All through the war, the Y.M.C.A. had been a hangout for soldiers and sailors, and in the week before it had record attendance. No wonder that people in Halifax knew it as a place to go for help and respite, and that within half an hour of the explosion, “people began to swarm into the rooms, first the hurt and a little later the hungry,” in the words of a report the organization


226 Personal testimony of Principal Matheson of St. Joseph’s School, n.d., item 184, MacMechan fonds.

gave to MacMechan.\textsuperscript{228} Sometimes the gathering points were still more informal. C. Sutherland was a barber on George Street, a fair-skinned and fair-haired man with a big nose, big forehead, and a delicate aspect to him. No one was hurt in his shop, but he and his colleagues turned their shop into an impromptu dressing station, using the peroxide, cotton wool, and sticking plaster they had on hand.\textsuperscript{229} Some people went to drug stores for aid, figuring that they were sites of medicine and that someone could be found there who could help. Florence Murray, a Dalhousie medical student, had ducked into Buckley’s Drug Store to take some supplies when a woman was half-dragged, half-carried in, blood pouring from a cut artery in her face. Murray bandaged her and left her to rest in the store.\textsuperscript{230} In all these cases—the school, the Y, the barber-shop, and the drug store—ordinary people went to ordinary sites, places from their everyday lives where they thought they could get help.

Similarly, people flocked to the doctors’ houses and offices, knowing that they would be able to receive aid there. As we have already seen, many people went to Dr. G.A. MacIntosh’s house, where his wife Clara gave them first aid.\textsuperscript{231} The same thing happened at the houses of M.S. Dickson and M.J. Burris, two Dartmouth doctors. Dickson worked all morning, assisted by his niece, who was a medical student at Dartmouth. When they were warned of a second explosion, they moved the operating table outside and Dickson continued his work.\textsuperscript{232} Burris, too, had a steady stream of

\textsuperscript{228}“Report of the Y.M.C.A.,” item 45, MacMechan fonds.

\textsuperscript{229}Personal testimony of C. Sutherland, barber, 18 December 1917, item 46f, MacMechan fonds.

\textsuperscript{230}Personal narrative of Miss Florence J. Murray, n.d., item 192, MacMechan fonds.

\textsuperscript{231}Personal narrative of Mrs. Clara MacIntosh, n.d., item 198, MacMechan fonds.

\textsuperscript{232}Personal narrative of Mrs. Annie Anderson, n.d., item 114, MacMechan fonds.
patients through tea-time, after which he switched tactics and went around to houses to check on his neighbors. Twenty-two-year old Catherine Boudreau lived with her family in the North End neighborhood of Merklesfield, on the far side of Fort Needham from Richmond. Her sister was just back from a nursing course in Hartford, Connecticut. “Of course,” Boudreau (by now Catherine MacDonald) told Janet Kitz in 1985, “the local people knew that she was home and she was a nurse so that was their first thought.” When Catherine got home from work, “the living room was full of people,” but her sister set her to work tearing sheets to make bandages, and then sent her across the street to bandage people who were waiting in a park. C.C. Ligoure was the only doctor in the vicinity of the North End’s Cotton Factory, which burned down. The severely injured came to his office immediately, and he worked all day, ignoring the warning of a second explosion, assisted by his African-Canadian housekeeper and the Pullman porter who boarded with him. Injured people going or being taken to a doctor’s office was local order dependent on local knowledge. They had to know where doctors (or in Boudreau’s case, nurses) lived. To go there was logical and displayed a sort of immediate order.

The scenes at the Dickson, Burris, and Boudreau houses was repeated at elsewhere. Lieutenant Colonel A.W. Duffus wrote a report about the work his regiment had done on the day of the explosion. The medical officer, Captain A. McD. Morton, “was immediately besieged at his home and attended to the injured as rapidly as

233 Personal narrative of Dr. M.J. Burris, n.d., item 122, MacMechan fonds.
234 Interview of Catherine MacDonald, née Boudreau, 29 July 1985, interview 99, Kitz oral histories.
235 “Medical Work in the North End,” information from Dr. C.C. Ligoure, 25 January 1918, item 166, MacMechan fonds.

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possible.” Lieutenant Colonel Duffus’s choice of words are telling: Morton was “besieged.” For people who valued central order or who were dependent on central knowledge, the idea of people flocking to doctors’ houses was disorderly. It meant that doctors had to do their work in unusual circumstances, with makeshift tools and bandages. In Dr. Dickson’s case, it meant doing his work outside. No records could be kept, no charts consulted, no statistics collected. Worse, it was a spatial transgression: medical work was being done spontaneously, in homes, rather than in hospitals. A report by the Medical Relief Committee, probably written by F. McKelvey Bell, used the same word as Duffus: “Unfortunately for the hospitals many of the local practitioners were besieged in their own offices by crowds of wounded people and as a result for two or three hours the various hospitals were left seriously understaffed.” This may have been a serious concern, but it also demonstrates the concern relief managers like these two high-ranking military officers had for control and legibility.

This was not the only instance of locally orderly behavior appearing as disorderly to those from the outside. We have already seen how people helped themselves to supplies as they needed them. They also disobeyed orders, often so that they could continue doing necessary work. Julia DeYoung’s father was just one person who refused to leave his house when soldiers ordered him to evacuate; instead, he prepared food for his neighbors. Others similarly refused to do what military authorities told them and


237 [Frank McKelvey Bell?] “Notes of Medical Relief Committee of Halifax Disaster,” item 10, MacMechan fonds.

238 Interview of Julia Coleman, née DeYoung, 28 June 1985, interview 19, Kitz oral histories.
preferred to continue their relief work. Mrs. Albert Sheppard, for instance, had been a nurse before her marriage, and she ignored orders to go south and instead went to the Dock Yard, explaining, “They need me there, there are no nurses, I’ll go.”

Most of these disregarded orders were given as soldiers spread the news that there was likely to be a second explosion. The story of this warning and the military orders for citizens to move south and west as a result are the prime example of the way survivors experienced disorder that masqueraded as order. The warning, a Y.M.C.A official wrote, “resulted in something approaching a panic that cannot easily be described.”

Nonetheless, some tried: “The whole street was alive with people running south,” an officer returned from the war wrote. “Mothers badly burnt were hugging babies, old women, who perhaps had not left their beds for years, had in the moment of fright rallied their feeble strength and were bobbling along among the frenzied crowd. Everyone was fleeing clothed as they had been at the time, some had grabbed the thing nearest to them and were carrying articles which were of no value. The cries were fearful, and some I could see were crazy from the shock—shell-shock we would call it in France.” Later, as he went past the Citadel, he saw thousands of people clustering on it, fearing a second explosion.

A school teacher wrote to an American friend fighting overseas, of the “soldiers [who] came galloping down the road ordering people out of the houses immediately as they expected another explosion any minute. . . . For two hours and a half on a frosty winter morning, every living person, even the sick and dying had to stay in the

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239 Personal narrative of Mr. L.A. Myers, n.d., item 205, MacMechan fonds.


241 M.S. narrative of Lt. Rod Macdonald, item 194, MacMechan fonds.
open.” Later, when the costs of the evacuation became clear, the military tried to duck responsibility, blaming civilians for spreading rumor and panicking. Thomas Benson, the commanding officer for the entire military district, wrote to his superiors: “For the first two hours after the Explosion the civil population of the North End were in a natural state of panic, and a report that another explosion was coming resulted in everyone all over the city, including the sick and aged, leaving their houses and congregating in open spaces. This report was circulated by nervous people because of the proximity of the fire to the magazines at North Ordnance and Wellington Barracks.”

It is unclear whether the military was right to worry about a second explosion. On one hand, there the fire was near the North Ordnance magazine, and some in the army were sufficiently worried that at first soldiers threw the munitions into the water to keep them out of the fire. On the other hand, one officer MacMechan spoke to went to the magazine “during the stampede from the North, . . . ascertained that there was no danger, [and] did everything possible to spread the news in order to dispel the alarm and get people back to their homes.”

Regardless of whether the fear was reasonable, the warning had dire consequences because it delayed rescues, made injured people stand outside in the cold, and disrupted the networks and relationships on which survivors relied. The actions of the military, especially the forced evacuations, demonstrate some ways that the progressive state

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242 Copy of letter, Jean H. Armstrong to Mr. Kent, 30 December 1917, item 274, MacMechan fonds.

243 Memorandum, [Benson] to Secretary, Militia Council, 15 December 1917, file 86-2-1, “Explosion—Reports,” box 4548, MD6 records. A copy of Benson’s memorandum is also item 250, MacMechan fonds.

244 Memorandum, [Benson] to Secretary, Militia Council, 15 December 1917, file 86-2-1, “Explosion—Reports,” box 4548, MD6 records. A copy of Benson’s memorandum is also item 250, MacMechan fonds.

remained structurally ill-suited for emergency disaster work. It failed because it had taken as its purpose to protect its citizens and to govern. Disasters were a failure of that protection, and they occasioned a disruption of that governance. At the Halifax explosion, the state failed in that it could not or did not prevent a ship filled with munitions from colliding with another ship. Whether or not the Royal Canadian Navy was to blame for for the collision and subsequent explosion, the failure to prevent it was just that: a failure, albeit one that may have been unavoidable. The technology of the state failed—again, unavoidably—when firefighters were unable to put out the ship fire or the larger fires that came after the explosion.246 These failures may not have caused the disaster, which is to say the explosion may have been someone else’s fault, or perhaps even no one’s fault. They were, however, what made it a disaster. This is a closely aligned point to that of Ted Steinberg, that no disaster is truly “natural,” because it is the social aspect that makes events disastrous.247 A storm that sweeps an unpopulated island is not a disaster because it does not affect people; likewise, a munitions ship that does not collide with a Belgian relief ship, or a ship fire that is put out before it causes an explosion, is not a disaster. It was these failures that made the day disastrous. We ought not be surprised, then, that the state was in other ways unable to handle disaster.

The state’s inability to handle disasters adequately goes beyond the fact that the state has already failed once the disaster occurs. What makes government work in good times—central knowledge—is in short supply. We have seen already the way relief

246 On the response of the fire department, see “The Fire Department,” notes by J.H. Mitchell based on conversation with Controller Hines, 25 January 1918, item 20, MacMechan fonds.

managers’ ability to understand and control the city was hampered by their geographical and societal positions within the city. On a literal level, they simply did not understand what was happening in the city around them, because the phone lines were down. Henry Colwell could not even summon a quorum of the city council for an emergency meeting. Even had they received word of what was happening, and even if the city council had all made it to the meeting, their social position and the logic of central knowledge meant that the spontaneous order would have remained illegible to them. States are made up of fallible people and breakable machines. The literal machines of government—the telephone and telegraph lines and fire engine—did not work, or did not work adequately. When individuals or groups of individuals made mistakes, as in the decision to forcefully evacuate the entire North End, their mistakes were amplified by virtue of their official positions.

The Army and Navy in particular, while an important part of the relief effort, were flawed participants. Their work demonstrates the severe limits the state faced when trying to respond to the explosion. Soldiers and officers imagined themselves to be efficient, orderly, and indispensable. Soon after the explosion, twenty men from Wellington Barracks arrived at Bloomfield High School ready to rescue the children, but they found that ordinary members of the community—the principal, teachers, and parents—had already done their work.248 Civilian Haligonians, too, viewed men in uniform as purveyors of official, correct information. Rod Macdonald, a lieutenant returned from the front, went into the streets to help bandage people but found that “this was difficult work as everyone was so nervous and anyone in uniform was at once surrounded and asked

dozens of excited questions at once.” Military men knew this, and used it to their advantage. Another returned officer intentionally dressed in what remained of his old uniform in order to use its borrowed authority. Of course, sometimes what these military men said was correct, as when a “crowd of women,” including Jean Ross, surrounded a lieutenant “and asked him what the trouble was.” He told them the correct origins of the explosion, but had he been mistaken, or had he warned them of a second explosion, they would have trusted him because of his uniform. Because officers were fallible but trusted, any decision they made or information they passed on was amplified.

The fallibility of soldiers becomes obvious in the stories others told about them. Though many soldiers and sailors in Halifax were locals—it had long been a military city, and many men posted there brought their families to live in the same city—many others were merely there on their way to France. These short-term residents had even less local knowledge than the relief managers. Around midnight the first night, Warrena Maddin was walking home after volunteering at Camp Hill Hospital, when she was stopped by soldiers who offered her a ride. She accepted but discovered they did not know the city, and she had to direct them. One can imagine that their ignorance of Halifax rather hampered their ability to give relief during the day. Though Maddin identified them as soldiers, they may also have been American sailors who landed to help patrol the city that night. If that was the case, the story should remind us that outsiders

249 M.S. narrative of Lt. Rod Macdonald, item 194, MacMechan fonds.
251 Jean L. Ross diary, reel 15,127, item 1, volume 9, MG 27.
252 Personal narrative of Warrena Maddin, n.d., item 180, MacMechan fonds.
who could not find their way around the city were unlikely to do a very good job policing it.

Soldiers were also fallible because they, like civilians, had never before seen the Halifax explosion, so they did not know what to do. Sometimes they made mistakes. For instance, soldiers did most of the identifying of bodies at the Chebucto Street School Morgue in the first week, and the professional who arrived a few days later to take over later complained that they had made lots of errors, making his work of identification harder.\textsuperscript{253} Other times, they asked local authority figures for direction, as when a group of soldiers asked Dean Llwyd what they should be doing with the bodies they were extracting from the rubble.\textsuperscript{254}

As institutions, the Army and Navy were imperfect as relief agencies because they were distracted by their own damage. A lieutenant who was stationed at Wellington Barracks in the North End described the scene there to MacMechan six months later:

“The explosion threw hundreds of rivets, bolts, and big pieces of the *Mont Blanc* into the square, broke rifles in tow, blew the packs off the men’s backs.” Someone blew the fire call, and men tried to enter the married barracks to rescue women and children, only to find that “the stairs were jammed with beams and furniture.” One panicked colonel was said to have shouted “Every man for himself!”\textsuperscript{255} All told, the Army alone suffered 534 casualties, including 22 dead.\textsuperscript{256} The damage to the military’s physical plant was still

\textsuperscript{253}“Morgue at Chebucto School,” information from Professor McRae, 27 January 1918, MacMechan fonds

\textsuperscript{254}Statement Re Explosion at Halifax, J.P.D. Llwyd, Dean of Nova Scotia, 28 December 1917, item 168, MacMechan fonds.

\textsuperscript{255}Personal narrative by Lt. Ray Colwell and Lt. Arthur, 29 June 1918, item 133, MacMechan fonds.

\textsuperscript{256}“Synopsis. Explosion Casualties – Halifax Fortress” u.d. but probably 10 January 1918, file 86-1-3-1, “Explosion – Report re Casualties,” box 4548, MD6 records. There were four men listed as “missing,” but
more considerable. “Considering the damage caused to the buildings it is nothing short of marvellous [sic] that so many escaped unhurt and that in most cases the injuries received were not of a serious nature,” J.A. Wilson wrote to the deputy minister of naval service. Because the explosion was at root a maritime accident, the Navy in particular was concerned with finding all of its casualties. Fred Longland, an English seaman on the HMCS Niobe, wrote about fifty-five years later that he was detailed to look for the bodies of dead sailors. “It was my job to go into the streets and wherever I saw a pair of bell-bottomed pants, to heave out the remains and lay it on one side.”

The Army and Navy were distracted by the work they had to do themselves to recover from the disaster. They, and indeed the entire federal government, also had the business of war to attend to. In this, the difference between the Army and the Navy becomes obvious. While the Army was in many ways ill suited to be a relief agency, it tried hard. We have already seen the way soldiers were dispatched to work as guards and laborers. The Army threw open to civilians all the military hospital in the city—although it is not clear what this meant, since injured civilians seem to have gone to Cogswell Street, Camp Hill, and Rockhead Hospitals even without official permission.

257 Memo, J.A. Wilson to [G.J.] Desbarats, 24 December 1917, file 37-25-1 volume 1, “Halifax Dockyard—Explosion at Halifax Dockyard Dec. 6th, 1917 – Gen. Data & Correspondence,” RCN central registry. Communications between Ottawa and Halifax had been so bad in the wake of the disaster that Wilson, the director of stores in Ottawa, had been dispatched to inspect in person. On damage to Army buildings, see Memorandum, [Benson] to Secretary, Militia Council, 15 December 1917, file 86-2-1, “Explosion—Reports,” box 4548, MD6 records or item 250, MacMechan fonds. For details on the damage to the Navy’s property, see Armstrong, Inquiry and Intrigue, 44-52.

258 Fred Longland fonds, MG30-E183, Library and Archives Canada.

259 “Intermediate Medical Report re Halifax Disaster, Dec 6, 1917” from ADMS, Military District Number 6, to DCMS, Militia Headquarters, Ottawa [10 January 1917], MG 27 (copy also in file 71-26-99-3, “Medical Services, Halifax Disaster,” box 6359, Army central registry).
subcommittee of the Relief Committee.\textsuperscript{260} 

The contrast with the Navy is striking.\textsuperscript{261} To the afternoon citizens’ meeting at City Hall on December 6, the Army sent Thomas Benson, the highest ranking officer in the city; the Navy’s representative was the British admiral Bertram M. Chambers, who had only been in Halifax for two weeks and whom the civilian secretary did not recognize.\textsuperscript{262} When the captains of two American war ships came ashore to offer their men and supplies to the rescue effort, they hunted for someone to talk to; they eventually tendered their offers to Benson and his second in command because they could not find a representative of the Canadian Navy.\textsuperscript{263} While civilians were still organizing for relief, and while the Army helped them, the Navy was busy holding high-level meetings to discuss rebuilding the Dock Yard.\textsuperscript{264}

In the midst of World War I, the Royal Canadian Navy had good reasons to focus on rebuilding the waterfront. The captain of the USS \textit{Tacoma} warned his higher-ups that the destruction of Halifax would “very seriously interfere with the operation of the 


\textsuperscript{261}Armstrong, \textit{Inquiry and Intrigue}, 87, also highlights the difference between the Army and the Navy, but his allied point is about the different organizational cultures of the two departments, and the local Halifax operations’ relationships with their Ottawa masters.


\textsuperscript{264}“Meeting Held in Board of Trade Rooms 8th December 1917 to Discuss Work of Reconstruction as Regards the Port of Halifax Etc.,” file 37-25-1 volume 1, “Halifax Dockyard – Explosion at Halifax Dockyard Dec. 6th, 1917 – Gen. Data & Correspondence,” RCN central registry. For the work of the crew of the American Coast Guard Cutter \textit{Morrill}, see Irl V. Beall, “The Halifax Explosion and the Cutter \textit{Morrill},” \textit{Inland Seas} 23 no. 3 (1967): 179-90.
convoy fleet from now on.”265 Prime Minister Borden called the restoration of the port “of the utmost importance to the Empire.” No less an expert than Chambers, the Royal Navy’s top officer in Halifax, warned that a functioning Halifax port “was an absolute necessity to a successful prosecution of the War.”266 The Canadian Navy was in its infancy, with only two warships, neither of which was directly involved in the war. Complaints were already being heard that the accident was the RCN’s fault. In contrast, no one was blaming the Army, and its operations in Halifax mostly revolved around putting soldiers on boats and sending them off to war—and welcoming back those returning from the trenches. Of any branch of government, the Navy had the most riding on its ability to remain functioning during the disaster. Moreover, its own physical infrastructure, chain of command, and communications lines were significantly more damaged than those of the Army. The senior Canadian officer ashore, Fred C.C. Pasco, was incapacitated by injuries and ceded command before noon. In contrast to the Army hospitals that welcomed civilians, the naval hospital lost its roof and required evacuation. Unlike the Army, which lent its men to civilian relief efforts, Walter Hose, by the afternoon the highest ranking uninjured naval officer in Halifax, ordered that a subordinate officer drive through the city ordering sailors who had gone to help civilians back to the dockyard.267

But while the Navy did little to help, the Army, in its quest to help, actually did


266 “Meeting Held in Board of Trade Rooms 8th December 1917 to Discuss Work of Reconstruction as Regards the Port of Halifax Etc.,” file 37-25-1 volume 1, “Halifax Dockyard – Explosion at Halifax Dockyard Dec. 6th, 1917 – Gen. Data & Correspondence,” RCN central registry.

267 Armstrong, Inquiry and Intrigue, 60, 48, 54.
harm. Soldiers and officers who ordered people out of buildings and herded them to open areas were fallible individuals, afraid of a second explosion, perhaps with good reason. Their official positions amplified their mistakes. Dressed in uniforms, imbued with the authority of soldiers in wartime, they were order personified. But in fact, they spread disorder as they encouraged panic and a mass exodus to the south. They disrupted the relationships and the local order that was built on them by blocking people from visiting or looking for their family members. Worse, forcing injured people to stand outside may have further compromised their ability to recover from or even survive their injuries.

Worst, this official disorder led some to distrust the very people who were trying to help them. Helen Rudolph, née Brush, was seven years old. Soldiers made everyone stay on the Commons for fear of a second explosion, she told Janet Kitz in 1985. “In the meantime the soldiers or somebody got in and sold a lot of things out of the houses, and everything else—there was a lot of stuff going on.” There is no evidence that any soldiers took the opportunity of the emptied North End to loot; indeed, as we have seen there is scant evidence that there was any looting at all. The idea of a black market springing up among soldiers is deeply improbable, especially since the accusation does not appear in any other place. But the fact that Mrs. Rudolph thought this had happened—likely, that her parents had told her the story—suggests that Haligonians responded to the unnecessary evacuation with deep hostility.²⁶⁸

This is a particularly unfortunate result of the warning because in fact soldiers did do a very good job in the aftermath of the explosion. They just did a good job the way everyone else did, as individuals motivated by altruism and especially by preexisting

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²⁶⁸ Interview of Helen Rudolph, née Brush, 25 June 1985, interview 3, Kitz oral histories.
networks of daily solidarity. Like civilian relief workers, soldiers worked on their own initiative, found natural leaders and followed their directions, and created organization without any organization.

The warning of a second explosion was not the only instance of official disorder, of disorder masquerading as order. Another example was the question of where homeless survivors would sleep on the night of December 6. That afternoon and evening, the *Morning Chronicle* reported, “relief bands of military were covering the Common and the slopes of Camp Hill with a mushroom like growth of bell tents, which spring unto being with the passing minutes as if some magical force was behind them.”269 By 8:00, they had erected several hundred tents, each with canvas flooring, cots, blankets, light, and oil stoves for heat, and by 9:00 they stood ready to welcome refugees.270 But no one showed up. One reason was the weather: that night a blizzard began, and people who could sleep inside surely preferred that to even the most well-appointed tents. More important, however, was that people preferred to stay with friends and relatives. The army and other relief workers attempted to create an order that was legible from the outside, an order represented by the straight rows of indistinguishable army tents.271 Instead, people stayed in ways that preserved locally legible order: with family, neighbors, or family friends. For the luckiest people, this meant closing up windows as best they could with blankets, sheets, or boards. For others it meant sleeping crammed on the sofas or floors of

269 *Morning Chronicle* 8 December 1917, 4.

270 Memorandum, [Benson] to Secretary, Militia Council, 15 December 1917, file 86-2-1, “Explosion—Reports,” box 4548, MD6 records (copied as item 250, MacMechan fonds); [Frank McKelvey Bell?] “Notes of Medical Relief Committee of Halifax Disaster,” item 10, MacMechan fonds. How many tents the army erected is unclear; Benson claimed 400, the Medical Relief Committee report says only 250.

271 Photograph labeled “Tents on commons, for the homeless,” MP207.1.184.326, Halifax Explosion Photograph Collection, Maritime Museum of the Atlantic.
neighbors, friends, or relatives in the city. For others, it meant leaving Halifax for the country.

Government authorities also contributed to disorder when they encouraged the population to fear German involvement even when it was clear that the ship collision was an accident. Haligonians didn’t need much encouragement. For years, Canadians had been subjected to anti-German propaganda. For months Haligonians in particular had been warned of a possible German naval attack and told to darken their windows and streets.272 So when the explosion came, it was natural that their thoughts turned first to a German attack, and they feared the Germans would be as brutal to Canadians as they had been to Belgians. At St. Joseph’s School, Sister Maria Cecilia was trapped under rubble. Her first fear lifted when she did not hear flames. Still she lay quietly, waiting to hear voices. If she heard German, she resolved to keep still and play dead so as to avoid their brutality.273 Even when it became clear that the explosion was not, as Sister Maria Cecilia supposed, a bomb or a shell from an airship or submarine, many Haligonians remained convinced that the accident was the work of German saboteurs. On December 10, Hattie Young wrote to her mother-in-law, “I don’t think there are half a dozen people in here [who] think it was an accident[.] It was the work of German spies nothing less.”274 Nine days after that, a woman named Maggie writing to her cousin concurred: “Don’t you think Halifax has had her share of the war? What do you think dear? Some won’t believe but it was the direct work of a German.”275

272 “Experiences of a Relief Worker,” unsigned but W.A. Major, n.d. item 182a, MacMechan fonds.
274 Hattie Young to Mrs. Young [mother-in-law], 10 December 1917, item 9, volume 9, MG 27.
275 “Maggie” to “Precious Cousin” [Mrs. Copp], 19 December 1917, folder 5, “Explosion Letter,” volume
Government officials encouraged these kinds of fears. Colonel W.E. Thompson, Thomas Benson’s second in command, admitted that he had been glad at the prospect of a German attack and suggested he still longed for one. His first thought was, “At last the war has come to us, I’m glad. People will know we’re in it.” Indeed, in March Thompson still fantasized about it, telling MacMechan that he still thought there would be a submarine attack over the summer. Thompson’s colleagues fanned the flames of anti-German paranoia by ordering the civil police commence what one newspaper called the “wholesale arrest” of around fifteen German-born citizens “as a precautionary measure.” If there had ever been any doubt, it quickly became clear that these men had done nothing wrong. Nonetheless, two were interned at a notoriously harsh camp for enemy aliens and a few more were held pending deportation. As for the rest, reported a Dominion police officer fresh from investigating supposed radical influence in a New Glasgow strike, “In some cases the evidence distinctly showed that these men had rendered assistance to those who were suffering from the effects of the disaster.” One of the prisoners turned out to be British. Newspapers also reported that a German spy was

10, MG 27.


277 Acadian Recorder 11 December 1917, 2; Halifax Herald 10 December 1917, 1; Evening Mail 10 Dec 1917, 1. The Recorder counted “about fifteen” arrests; the Mail said sixteen and its cousin the Herald said “at least sixteen”; and the Chronicle later reported fourteen. Morning Chronicle 22 December 1917, 7.

278 The camp where the Germans were sent, in Amherst, was the one where Leon Trotsky had been interned for a time the previous spring, and he later recalled the ruthless humiliation he suffered there. William Rodney, “Leon Trotsky and Canada,” Queen’s Quarterly 71 (1964/65): 365. See also Richard B. Spence, “Hidden Agendas: Spies, Lies, and Intrigue Surrounding Trotsky’s American Visit of January-April 1917,” Revolutionary Russia 21 (June 2008): 33-55; and id., “Interrupted Journey: British Intelligence and the Arrest of Leon Trotsky, April 1917,” Revolutionary Russia 13 (2000): 1-28.

279 Morning Chronicle 22 December 1917, 7.
arrested on board one of the relief ships that arrived from Boston. Among the people arrested and held was Johan Johansen, the helmsman of the Norwegian ship the *Imo*. Johansen was held for more than a month and mistreated in jail, the victim of mistaken identity. Benson requested and received on December 19 two secret service men from Ottawa who were fluent in German. He kept one of them past January 11.

Despite all this, civil and military authorities were privately convinced that the explosion had merely been an accident. When the Duke of Devonshire, the governor general, arrived on December 20, he was met by McCallum Grant, Thomas Benson, McKelvey Bell, Bertram Chambers, and the United States Navy’s intelligence officer for the city. “On the whole they all seem wonderfully cheerful & are confident that there was no foul play,” Devonshire wrote in his diary. Why then did military officers continue to stir up fear of Germans when they knew the collision had been an accident?

The arrests of aliens, Johansen’s jailing, and the bringing in of domestic spies must be understood in the context of the ongoing general election campaign that pitted Tory Robert Borden and his allies in a coalition government against the rump of the Liberal Party, known as Laurier Liberals for the leader who had refused to join forces with Borden. The main issue in the election was conscription—Borden was for it,

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280 *Evening Mail* 13[?] December 1917, 1.


282 Telegram, [Benson] to Chief of General Staff, 14 December 1917; Lt. Col. G.E. Burns DIO, MD 6, 19 December 1917; Telegram, Benson to Secretary, Militia Council, 11 January 1918, all in file 86-2-1 volume 2, “Explosion – Enquiry,” box 4548, MD6 records.

Laurier against—and the primary tactic of the Union campaign in Halifax was whipping up pro-war feeling. Other than Colonel Thompson’s candid comment that he was glad that the Germans had attacked, there is no proof that the military’s continued emphasis on German spies and saboteurs was anything political, but without doubt it served the government’s interests to blame them. It helped the government by playing into the campaign’s anti-Germany hysteria and it suggested another group to blame for the disaster besides the state.

The 1917 election was bitter, dividing Canada on lines of religion, language, and party. In the Maritimes, the conscription debate had been on party lines, and Borden’s drive to create a Union government split the Liberals. Borden’s fellow Halifax M.P., A.K. Maclean, joined the government as a minister without portfolio, and the Liberal Morning Chronicle and Premier George H. Murray also endorsed Union government. The Laurier Liberals rallied around the Acadian Recorder and made life so uncomfortable for Liberal Unionists that Murray tried to back away from his position and Maclean was made miserable. In Halifax, which elected two members to parliament, Borden agreed to step aside and be nominated elsewhere, in order to open up room for another Liberal to join Maclean on the Union ticket, but neither the local Conservatives nor Liberals would bite. The Liberals nominated physician Edward Blackadder and Ralph Eisnor, the leader of the local Trades and Labor Council. The Unionists nominated Maclean and Mayor Peter Martin, a Tory. On December 6, the election was still hotly contested, with the


Tory *Halifax Herald* running vociferously anti-Laurier editorials, the *Recorder* defending him, and the *Chronicle* coming down somewhere in the middle.

After the explosion, both parties faced calls to cancel the election, which was scheduled for December 17. Ironically, at the citizens’ meeting on December 7, it was the husband of suffragist Edith Archibald, Charles, who moved that the election be postponed or canceled; it was soon moved to January 28.286 Maclean told the prime minister that a delay was needed for purely practical reasons: “Many important papers have been destroyed, enumerators have been killed and polling divisions wiped out.”287 The newspapers, distracted by the explosion, stopped or severely cut back their campaigning; the *Herald* did not cover the election again until December 12, and the *Chronicle* stopped altogether.288 Borden himself had been in the Maritimes campaigning, and when he learned the extent of the damage he came home to Halifax, effectively suspending his portion of the campaign.289 The Liberal candidate in Truro dropped out of the election to allow his Tory Unionist opponent to win by acclamation, saying that the explosion demanded unity.290 But for the time being, the two Liberal candidates in Halifax refused to quit unless one of them was nominated by the Unionists.

It was in this context that the government, aided by friendly newspapers, stirred rumors of German involvement in the explosion. The *Herald* may have given up overt

286 “Minutes of Morning Meeting,” 7 December 1917, item 3f-3j, MacMechan fonds; Tuck, “Conscription Election,” 126.
287 Telegram, Borden to A.E. Blount, 11 December 1917, file OC 445, microfilm reel C-4352, Borden papers.
290 Tuck, “Conscription Election,” 110-111.
campaigning for six days, but it continued its rabidly anti-German propaganda, now linked to the explosion. On December 10, a front-page headline warned that the explosion was “Only a taste of what we would experience if the Huns should reach here: When the Brutal Germans Take a City They Assault the Women and Bayonet the Little Children and Carry off the Men as Prisoners.”

On the same day that the Herald’s sister paper, the Evening Mail, reported that a German spy had been arrested on a relief ship, it also denounced Blackadder and Eisnor for “defying the thoughtful and patriotic public opinion of the city and county by persisting in fierce party fight in the midst of the heart breaking catastrophe by which we have been overwhelmed.”

If the government could blame the Germans, it could deflect blame itself. This was particularly important because the usually reliably pro-Borden Herald soon began campaigning for a complete investigation of the accident. The campaign began with continued hints of German culpability: “If men higher up or men lower down, thro [sic] incompetency or duplicity, are to blame let it be known,” the Herald demanded on the same day it warned of German brutality. “If this was the work of the arch enemy whose methods do not stop at killing women and children then the people want to know it. Halifax is deeply concerned in this. All Canada is deeply concerned and the people will not rest satisfied until the truth is known.”

Soon enough, though, the Herald, joined by Borden’s own replacement on the Union ticket, Mayor Martin, began an overt campaign

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291 *Halifax Herald* 10 December 1917, 1. The Herald was repeating what its sister newspaper had printed the previous night.

292 *Halifax Evening Mail* 13[?December 1917, 9.

293 *Halifax Herald* 10 December 1917, page number unclear.
against the Royal Canadian Navy, accusing it of incompetence or worse.  

Luckily for the Union candidates in Halifax, when the rest of the country voted on December 17, Borden and his followers swept Anglophone Canada. Laurier Liberals managed to elect only 20 members outside of Quebec. It became clear to Haligonians that any aid their stricken city would receive would depend on the friendliness of the Union federal government, and so the Liberals’ electoral prospects began to decline precipitously. They began to negotiate with the Unionists to have one of each picked by acclamation, but from their new position of strength, the Unionists refused, and both Liberal candidates gave up on January 22.  

The lasting legacy of these assertions of German culpability, though, was the way Haligonians understood their disaster as part of the larger war. The paranoia about German spies was not the only thing that made Haligonians think that the explosion was war related, but it helped to cement the view. So too did comments from returned veterans, who compared the effects of the explosion to what they had seen in France. Lieutenant Rod Macdonald was such an officer. He was still in bed at 9:00, being lazy and “enjoy[ing] one of the many privileges of a returned soldier.” Though his father suffered a severe eye injury, the Macdonalds offered to take in refugees from the North End. As will be discussed in the Chapter 4, almost no one came. Some time later, Macdonald wrote about his experiences for MacMechan, and like many others, he drew

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on his experience in France. The comparison was not just to the destruction. He also
drew on the symbolic language of the war: Vimy Ridge was a major moment in
Canadian military history, in which Canadian soldiers were seen to have proved their
mettle. Not only had Haligonians been brave, like their sons, husbands, and brothers in
the trenches, but like those soldiers, they had built spontaneous organization on the basis
of preexisting bonds of solidarity. “It was not until some days after the explosion that I
was able to view the devastated area as a whole,” he wrote. “I climbed Fort Needham
and looking from there I thought of Vimy Ridge and the villages to the other side, –
Givenchy, Petit Vimy, Vimy, and Avion. It most certainly was as desolate a scene as I
have ever seen in France and I am sure that the Nova Scotian lads over there will be
proud when they hear with what great fortitude the home folks bore their suffering and
bereavement.”

296 M.S. narrative of Lt. Rod Macdonald, item 194, MacMechan fonds.
Figure 3. Postcard: “Great Halifax Explosion.—Utter Desolation and Devastation so Complete that this Picture might have been taken on the Battlefield of France.” Postcard published by Novelty Manufacturing and Art Co., Ltd., Montreal.

Photograph MP207.1.184/28, negative 20915, Halifax Explosion Photograph Collection, Maritime Museum of the Atlantic, a part of the Nova Scotia Museum.
When the fire started at the Korn Leather Company, it sparked a very different type of disaster from the Halifax explosion. Examining it in contrast to the later catastrophe highlights the role of contingency in the aftermath of large-scale urban disasters. The fact that, for instance, the Salem fire took place in the summer and was significantly less sudden than the Halifax explosion meant that the behaviors and needs of those affected were quite different. The differences and similarities between Salem and Halifax serve to highlight not that post-disaster behaviors are always the same, but rather that they always take place within their pre-disaster contexts. With Halifax, the Salem disaster demonstrates that, despite the theories of the new progressive disaster specialists, peoples’ responses to and understandings of the fire were based on their everyday networks of solidarity, their social positions within the city, and the organizations and institutions they built in ordinary times. The Salem fire helps show that while some of the events described in Halifax are contingent on specific circumstances there and then, other parts are built into disasters in the North American Progressive Era. This chapter comprises a narration and analysis of the Salem fire and its immediate aftermath, both on its own terms and in comparison with the Halifax disaster.

Salem, population about 47,000, was even in 1914 a town with a long history.  

1 The U.S. Census Bureau estimated 46,994 residents slightly more than a month before the fire. *Salem Evening News* 11 May 1914, 1.
Nathaniel Hawthorne, its most famous native son, had secured its fame as the standard model for New England Puritan cities. The oldest incorporated town in Massachusetts, it was the location of one of the most famous events in colonial history and the inspiration for many of Hawthorne’s novels. Salem looked back proudly on a history of trade with East Asia at the turn of the nineteenth century, when, legend had it, the Chinese believed that Salem was the capital of the United States. The city’s heyday ended around 1845, when increasing ship size began to favor Boston, with its larger and deeper harbor. But the wealth generated by its merchants, the museums they founded, and the historical sites that cemented Salem’s place in American culture still dominated the city in 1914.

By the early twentieth century, Salem was an industrial city, sitting amid the textile and leather industries of Massachusetts’s North Shore. But the continuing cultural and institutional legacies of Salem’s Puritan and merchant pasts meant that the city’s Yankee elite could pretend otherwise. While their continued affluence increasingly depended on manufacturing, the memory of Hawthorne’s Salem and the East Asia trade allowed the employing class to remain largely aloof, ignorant of their working-class neighbors. Even more than in other eastern cities, the immigrant workers who powered the factories remained largely invisible to the native-born, Protestant elite. “Founded in 1629 by sturdy Puritan pioneers and intimately identified with the events which led to the independence and up-building of the American colonies,” wrote the national director of the Red Cross, “it is with something of a shock that one finds Salem today the home of a teeming population of immigrants of such recent importation that a large proportion of

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2 On Salem’s various cultural self-perceptions, see Dane Anthony Morrison and Nancy Lusignan Schultz, eds. *Salem: Place, Myth, and Memory* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004).

them is unfamiliar with the English language and without knowledge of, or interest in, the stirring history of Salem herself.”

In 1914, the largest employer was the Naumkeag Steam Cotton Company, which made sheets and pillowcases, and Salem was also home to a sizable shoe and leather industry.\textsuperscript{5} Textile work was low-paying but year-round; leather- and shoe-work paid better but only for seven months. Salem residents also commuted to iron foundries in neighboring Danvers and Beverly and to the United Shoe Machinery Company in Beverly. A committee appointed in 1826 had warned that the establishment of manufactures in Salem would perforce attract foreign workers and create substandard foreign quarters in the city.\textsuperscript{6} They were right. When the Naumkeag Steam Cotton Company was first founded in 1847, its workforce was primarily Irish. As in other parts of New England, French Canadians gradually replaced the Irish as the dominant working-class ethnicity.\textsuperscript{7} There were also smaller but sizable populations of Poles, Greeks, Italians, and Eastern European Jews; the Greek and Polish populations were growing particularly fast in the second decade of the 20th century.\textsuperscript{8}

At the start of the twentieth century, this industrial immigration threatened

\textsuperscript{4}Ernest P. Bicknell to August Cunningham, 14 August 1914, “File 835 – MASSACHUSETTS, Salem Fire 6/25/1914,” Box 56, American Red Cross, Central Files, 1888-1916, RG 200/130/77/1/1, National Archives II, College Park, Md. (hereafter ARC files).


\textsuperscript{6}Selskar M. Gunn and Samuel M. Schmidt, \textit{An Investigation of Housing Conditions in Salem, Mass.} (report to the Housing Committee of the Associated Charities and the the Committee on Nuisances of the Civic League, between 1911 and 1913), 31.

\textsuperscript{7}Canon, “Français,” 104-105.

\textsuperscript{8}Gunn and Schmidt, \textit{Housing Conditions}, 31.
Salem’s political order. In 1901, the voters elected Salem’s first Irish mayor, John F. Hurley, an immigrant landlord and teetotaling former saloonkeeper whose political training had come in the streets. His election changed municipal politics from a sleepy, friendly business to a more rough-and-tumble affair. Between 1901 and 1911, he was elected to four one-year terms, and in 1912 he was reelected for a three-year term, but each election was hard-fought. Marked by bitter ethnic politics, in each election the Yankees accused Hurley of corruption and the Irish accused his opponents of bigotry. The prime place in which Hurley sought to establish patronage was the police department, and he set about building ethnic dominance of the force. In 1912 he appointed the city’s first Irish police chief, and by 1914 he had alienated the growing French-Canadian community by firing a police matron and police-car driver. At the end of December 1914, six months after the fire, in the first modern recall in New England, Hurley was deposed and replaced by the prohibitionist Matthias J. O’Keefe, a leather manufacturer backed by the Better Government Association. Despite his name, O’Keefe was native born and probably Protestant.9 When O’Keefe won the special recall election, the Francophone Courrier de Salem ran an exultant editorial: “Rejoice! For Salem this is the triumph of morality, justice, and respect for the laws; for Mr. John F. Hurley and all

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his administration represents it is the hour of disgrace and reprobation!” O’Keefe’s victory promised, the paper continued, “contentment and happiness for citizens with peace, order, and liberty; a magistrate who honors his post by dispensing justice to all, without distinction of language, race, or religion; who imposes respect for the laws for the great as well as the small, rich as well as the poor, friends as well as enemies.” In other words, Hurley’s defeat six months after the fire represented a victory for the self-proclaimed advocates of “good government.”

The French-Canadian population clustered in a neighborhood called the Point near the Naumkeag factory where many of them worked. Although the community included ethnic professionals—dentists, doctors, lawyers, store-owners—who serviced the Naumkeag workers, it was a primarily working-class neighborhood. After the fire, a newspaper estimated that 6,000 people lived there, crowded into “loosely constructed houses, most four and six stories high, all of them wood and closely congested.” A report commissioned by the Housing Committee of the Associated Charities and the Committee on Nuisances of the Civic League written sometime between 1911 and 1913 found the Point dangerously and unhealthfully overcrowded. “Double four-story wooden tenement houses are common in this district, and the buildings are literally piled one on top of the other,” Selksar Gunn and Samuel Schmidt wrote. The tenements were so close together that little ventilation or light reached the bottom floors. Worse was the dirty condition of the shared toilets, rooms, and yards they inspected. Most of this Gunn

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10 Courrier de Salem 31 December 1914, 4.


12 Saturday Evening Observer 27 June 1914, 1.

13 Gunn and Schmidt, Housing Conditions, 33.
and Schmidt attributed to overcrowding, not only of buildings but within them. Only 27% of the population in their study slept in rooms by themselves or with one other person; 36% slept in rooms with more than three people.¹⁴

Of most concern to the investigators was the Point’s fire risk. There were “practically no building ordinances,” they complained, which put the residents there in great danger. While the law required that buildings more than three stories tall have back stairs, most of these were wooden and thus themselves flammable. “There is no doubt, that if a fire should ever get a good start in that district during the night, many lives would be lost owing to the lack of proper fire escapes,” they warned. “The dangers from conflagration at the Point are very great.”¹⁵

When fire did come, at least it was not at night. Rather, it was an industrial fire that started a bit after mid-day, relatively far from the Point. In a way, it was miraculous that a fire had not started sooner at the Korn Leather Company, which made embossed patent leather. Bertram Ames was a civil engineering student at the University of Maine who happened to be in Salem the night of the fire. He took the fire as the topic of his thesis, and he used the same material for a report for the Underwriters’ Bureau of New England. He described Korn’s business: workers combined scrap celluloid film with alcohol and amyl-acetate. “This coating was applied to leather splits which were subsequently embossed on steam heated machines. These machines consist of steel plates between which the coated leather is inserted and on which heavy pressure is exerted to give the desired design. There were three of these machines in the first story

¹⁴ Gunn and Schmidt, *Housing Conditions*, 33, 38, 40-41, 46.

of the main building.” After the leather was coated and pressed it was stained with black
stain made of lampblack and wood alcohol. All this flammable work was done in a
rickety, four-story wooden building of “poor” quality and with no sprinkler.16

At about 1:30 on Thursday, June 25, 1914, the promised fire finally came. No
one could say how it started; Charles Lee, the one worker who was burned, had other
things on his mind than explaining the fire’s origins, since he had to jump out of a
window to save himself, breaking both his legs. By 2:00, the fire had spread to fifteen
surrounding buildings, and 300 workers had already fled their workplaces. Aided by dry
conditions and high wind, the flames traveled in a crescent shape across Salem, and by
7:00 they had crossed into the Point. The Salem Evening News reported: “The rush of
the flames through the Point district was the wildest of the conflagration, the flames
leaping from house to house with incredible rapidity. Police officers and citizens went
from house to house in the district when it was seen that it must fall a prey to the flames,
warning the occupants to get out and get out as quickly as possible. Soon the streets were
thronged with men, women and children, carrying in their arms all they could of their
belongings, while wagons, push carts and now and then an automobile were pressed into
service in the removal of goods.” The fire burned through the night, and by the time it
reached the Naumkeag cotton mill, the flames were too hot for the modern devices
installed in the factory to stop fires. The Naumkeag mill burned, and the jobs of 3,000
people went up with it.17 Overall, the fire destroyed 3,150 houses and 50 factories,

Underwriters’ Bureau of New England, E S1 F6 1914, Phillips Library, Peabody Essex Museum, Salem,
Mass. (hereafter PEM).

17Salem Evening News 26 June 1914, 1, 5; 25 June 1914, 1; Saturday Evening Observer 27 June 1914, 1;
E.V. French to Willis H. Ropes, 29 July 1914, box 1, E S1 F6 1914, PEM; Bertram E. Ames, “Report No.
leaving 18,380 individuals homeless, jobless, or both. ¹⁸

Unlike the sudden Halifax explosion, the Salem fire arrived in residential neighborhoods with warning. The flames may have been furious, but the five and a half hours between the start of the fire and its arrival in the Point allowed people to plan and react. The fire moved sufficiently slowly that people gathered to watch its progress and that of the firefighters struggling to stop it. It was John Porter Sumner’s eighth birthday, and his father—home from work with an abscess—took him out for a celebratory ice cream. Fifty-six years later, he recalled watching the fire, close enough that he and his father got wet from the spray of the fire hoses. ¹⁹ A postcard photograph showed an almost festive crowd in the street as the fire billowed. Several spectators have bicycles. Some men are wearing suits, but more are in shirtsleeves. One woman has a parasol. In the bottom left corner, two girls face each other and talk, one shielding her face from the smoke. There is a horse-and-carriage sitting in the street, but the picture cannot show if it is traveling, being loaded, or something else. Above all these spectators are pillars of smoke. ²⁰ Salemites watching the fire, like the out-of-town tourists who would soon come pouring into the city to gawk at the ruins, suggest that urban disasters were events that

¹⁸ John F. Moors to Mr. [August] Cunningham, 3 September 1914, “File 835.08 – MASSACHUSETTS, Salem Fire – Reports, 6/25/1914,” ARC files. These numbers are significantly higher than those reported to the Underwriters’ Bureau of New England by civil engineer Bertrand E. Ames: 1,600 buildings destroyed; 1,500 to 1,600 families made homeless, comprising 10,000 people; and 4,000 left jobless. Bertram E. Ames, “Report No. 150 on Conflagration, Salem, Mass., June 25, 1914,” T.S. report to Underwriters’ Bureau of New England, E S1 F6 1914. I follow Moors because he was a national expert on disasters, whereas Ames was fresh out of school.


²⁰ Negative #32828, Miscellaneous collection of circulars, etc., box II, Salem Fire Collection, E S1 F6 1914. PEM.
help shaped urban culture in the same way that professional baseball games and vaudeville did. If baseball helped men comprehend seemingly ruleless industrial capitalism by imposing detailed rules on athletic play, the fire was the opposite: it was a spectacle of rulelessness, unpredictability, and danger.\(^{21}\) Like other unscripted events, the spectacle of disaster also helped to create a community of watchers and sufferers.\(^{22}\)

While important structures burned during those five and a half hours—including factories and homes—the interval allowed people to save their lives, furnishings, and possessions. This meant that the tasks for relief workers were quite different in Salem from in Halifax. The emphasis was on saving possessions, not lives. Like the carriage in the postcard, wagons and motor vehicles were pressed into service to rescue furniture, rather than as ad hoc ambulances. Similarly, the general absence of deaths meant there was no need for large groups of workers to dig through the wreckage to find people’s remains. Instead, relief workers helped families leave their homes and salvage what they could of their possessions.

Also unlike in Halifax, Salem’s disaster came in summer, not winter, and so the prospect of spending time outside, especially at night, was far more pleasant. As we will see in the next two chapters, this meant starkly different patterns in where the homeless slept. The presence of military-run encampments for Salem’s refugees created a space of control and resistance that did not exist in Halifax’s aftermath. For the purposes of this chapter, the warm weather in Salem also meant that finding a place to stay the night of


the fire was not a pressing concern, and many people simply slept under the stars.

The two cities were situated differently. Halifax was the provincial capital, and the provincial elite were largely the same as the city’s elite. Salem, in contrast, had its own cultural and political elite that were quite different from, and jealous of, the Massachusetts elite in Boston. Thus when Nova Scotia’s Lieutenant Governor McCallum Grant chaired the citizens’ meetings in the aftermath of the explosion, he did so by virtue of his provincial office, but he was also a Halifax insider. In contrast, when Massachusetts Governor David Walsh came to Salem the night of the fire, his presence was appreciated, but everyone understood that he was an outsider.

Moreover, the state and its apparatuses were distinct. Not only was the United States different from Canada and Nova Scotia different from Massachusetts, but the instruments through which they exercised power were not the same. In Halifax, the two major military entities were the Army and Navy, both of which were, at the moment of the explosion, engaged in a major war. As we have seen, soldiers from within and without Halifax were stationed there both to service the war machine and on their way to the front. While Military District 6 was based on the Halifax Citadel and the RCN’s home port was Halifax, the soldiers and sailors reported to officers and civilians based in distant Ottawa. In contrast, Salem burned down during peacetime, and the military units that responded were part of the National Guard. The soldiers and officers who responded were all local and reported to commanders in nearby Boston. As we will see, however, the two militaries and two states that responded to the two disasters had similar

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23 Though the Massachusetts Volunteer Militia was reorganized and renamed the National Guard in 1907, it was common to continue to refer to it as the militia, and its soldiers as militiamen. I use “national guard” and “militia” interchangeably.
problems with organization and legibility, thus exposing something structural about the nature of the Progressive Era state and its authority that was alike in Canada and the United States.

Finally the nationalities of the affected population were different in Halifax and Salem. Most Halifax survivors came from Nova Scotia, and of those who were immigrants, most came from no farther than Newfoundland. Their experience of migration, if any, was of them or their relatives moving to the United States. In Salem, according to the Red Cross, only 39% of the families affected by the fire—who lost their home or their breadwinner’s job—were classified as either American or Irish. The rest were foreigners of some sort: 43% were French-Canadian; 6% were Poles; 5% were Italians; 4% were “Hebrews”; 2% were Greek; and 1% were “miscellaneous.”

Many of these people may have been technically citizens, having been born in the United States or been naturalized. But, especially in Salem, they were treated as outsiders by the Anglophone majority.

The preponderance of immigrants, especially Franco-Americans, among the affected population may explain the final difference between Halifax and Salem: the quantity and quality of sources available. In contrast to Halifax, with the oral histories taken by MacMechan and Kitz, plus a variety of other documents and reminiscences, the historical record is relatively quiet for Salem. Nobody hired a local man of letters to write an official history of the fire, and no local historian conducted oral histories with survivors long after the fire. The closest we have to MacMechan for Salem is Montayne

Perry. A fiction writer—including, at least once, for the movies—one-time Y.M.C.A. worker, and past director of Salem’s night schools for immigrants, in October and November 1914 she published a serial in the Salem Evening News describing the fire and especially the relief efforts. Unlike MacMechan, however, she had no pretensions to being a historian, though her work was printed as a book the following year “at the request of persons engaged in social service” as a guide for those involved in future “emergency relief.” Unfortunately, we do not have her notes or source materials, and we know nothing about her research process. She also coyly refused to name anybody in her series, and though in some instances her characters are readily identifiable—as with John Moors—in others it appears that she has created a composite. Hers is, nonetheless, the closest we have to a synthesis of the fire’s aftermath.

Besides Perry’s book, this chapter relies mostly on newspaper accounts. Because the French-language paper, the Courrier de Salem, was burned out of its offices, its news coverage of the fire was quite sparse. It asked readers to give news to its reporter, Joseph E. Gagnon, and it bragged that Gagnon had access to the directors of the various departments. But it missed its first scheduled issue after the fire, and it did not come out until July 3, a week after the fire. By that time, the newspaper focused on life after the


27 Courrier de Salem 3 July 1914, 4; L’Avenir National 29 June 1914, 3.

28 Courrier de Salem 9 July 1914, 6.
fire and did not report on the events of the week before. Other French-language newspapers in New England covered the fire, but only in broad and general strokes. This leaves an Anglophone daily, the Salem Evening News, and two weeklies, the Saturday Evening Observer and the Salem Register. What this means is that in their depictions of the Franco-American population, the sources replicate the silences and omissions of the city’s “American” elite. One can see especially in Perry’s writing the way French Canadians’ status as immigrant outsiders contributed to their othering in a time of need. Immigrants’ difference was imagined as a fundamental part of the disorder Perry and others observed in the wake of the fire. A National Guard officer wrote to his superior that fall, complaining of the way immigrants had used the toilets provided for them at a refugee camp: “It is needless for me to state that the urinals were used by people of all nationalities a number of whom had no knowledge of the proper use of the modern sanitary toilet.”

Whether or not the officer was correct that refugees did not know how to use toilets was less important than that he emphasized that their nationality was related to their ignorance.

Because of the nature of Salem’s disaster, in which there were few injured, the category of relief worker was less pronounced there than in Halifax. There was not the same need for volunteers to dig the dead and injured from rubble or tend to the wounded in hospital. The closest thing there was in Salem were people who looked after and

29 Courrier de Salem 3 July 1914. It is possible but unlikely that the Courrier was printed on June 30, since the next issue made no mention of a missing edition, but if so no copy has survived. On Franco-American newspapers as elite organs, see Robert G. LeBlanc, “The Franco-American Response to the Conscription Crisis in Canada, 1916-1918,” American Review of Canadian Studies 23 (autumn 1993): 345.

helped transport families’ possessions. Most of those people were those with the ability and inclination to move things—that is, teamsters and others with access to motor vehicles. “Automobiles proved themselves of wonderful value in fighting the fires and in relieving people who suffered from the fire,” editorialized the *Salem Evening News.* “Thousands of stories can be told of how the automobile accomplished things that never could have been done by horses and wagons, trolleys, bicycles or any other means of transportation or communication.”

They were provided by men like Richard E. Eagan, the owner of the Bay State Creamery, a company that owned ten “trucks, ice cream teams, and ice teams and [a] pleasure car.” The first squad of militiamen to respond to the fire call left the armory on foot, but they met Eagan in his car, and he offered to carry them to the fire. He then volunteered his car and his services as a driver to ferry militiamen around the city. After this initial job, Eagan put the rest of his vehicles to work, at one point volunteering his entire fleet; he eventually wound up on the relief committee’s transportation subcommittee.

Eagan and his drivers were joined by many similar workers, all of whom were continuing in abnormal circumstances what they did in normal times, that is, carrying

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32 R.E. Eagan to Capt. P.B. Chase, 17 July 1914, MNGMA.

33 *Salem Evening News* 26 June 1914, 9.

34 R.E. Eagan to Capt. P.B. Chase, 17 July 1914, MNGMA.
loads in their trucks. Edward Dunbar Johnson, who wrote a report on the fire a year or two later, remembered laundry teams and delivery wagons pressed into service “moving goods to safety.” The evening newspaper described a nurseryman sending a truck “to the poorer district in the path of the fire, to render aid to those in distress.” The crew saved the possessions of forty-six families.

A postcard with the caption “HOMELESS Endeavoring To Save Their Household Goods at the Big Salem Fire, June 25, ’14” showed nine people on a lawn. In the middle of the foreground, a woman in a large black dress and hat sits facing left, her head turned to face the camera. Behind her is a trunk; in front, a boy leans against a sewing machine. Behind them, in the middle ground, a group of men load or unload a wagon marked “Coal.” One man stands on a trunk, which itself is in the wagon already, placing (or perhaps unloading) a piece of a bedframe with the help of two men on the ground. Two other men and a woman stand around.

The coal wagon’s driver, the nurseryman and his crew, and Eagan and his dairymen did not, on other days, make a habit of carting families’ household goods, especially not for free. In that sense, what they did was unusual or extraordinary. Yet in each case they were extending their usual activities in a logical way, offering help within the patterns set by their everyday lives. Moreover, as in Halifax, they created informal, spontaneous organization without any organization. Peter Chase, a militia captain,


36 Salem Evening News 26 June 1914, 15.

37 Postcard in Miscellaneous collection of circulars, etc., box II, Salem Fire Collection, E S1 F6 1914, PEM.
arrived in Salem on Friday afternoon and tried to take charge of transportation. He found several trucks already on duty, seemingly without direction. “All of these trucks had been provided before I came to Salem and had been at work for one or more days, by whom they were provided I do not know, but I kept them all at work, them and as many more as I was able to get.” Nobody appeared to have kept track of who used whose truck, and indeed it seems likely that teamsters and truck owners offered their services and equipment without anybody requisitioning or even asking them. The next day, the newspaper several times spoke of vehicles “pressed into service in the removal of goods.” The passive voice suggests that the reporters did not witness a particular person conscripting the trucks or their owners, probably because in fact the assistance was voluntary and not “pressed.” As we will see, when the military later attempted to impose external order and create a record of which officers used what truck, the local order that allowed families to save their possessions was lost, and all that remained was confusion.

Even the militia’s aid was, as in Halifax, offered unofficially and without direction. “Almost without exception the commissioned officers of the local militia were absent from the city, in attendance at the Service School session in West Newbury,” Montayne Perry wrote. “But from every part of the city privates and non-commissioned officers hurried to the armory to report and equip themselves for service.” Without their officers, the enlisted men must necessarily have been acting without orders. A postcard shows an unidentified family being helped out of their house by a militiaman. Two

38 Capt. P.B. Chase to Samuel H. Batchelder, 22 July 1914, MNGMA.
39 Salem Evening News 26 June 1914, 5 (the phrase appears twice on the page), 6 (once more).
40 Perry, Relief, 5.
houses down, a building is already on fire, so they have little time left. On the second story of what is at least a three-story house, a man throws things down from a porch, into a pile. By the pile stands a man in shirtsleeves and suspenders, holding an item. To his right is a militia man in uniform, carrying a table. A woman looks on, her right hand resting on her ample chest as if to calm herself. The caption is “Militiamen Helping Remove Household Goods, Salem, Mass.” The assistance the soldier offered this nameless family was given on the basis of something else besides military discipline. He necessarily worked on own volition, since there were no officers in the city to have given orders.

Though most of the relief work in Salem was directed at saving possessions, there were some injured people. Nineteen people were taken to the hospital with injuries ranging from broken bones to smoke inhalation; they later had to be moved when the flames threatened and then consumed Salem Hospital. Another twenty-one were treated at a field hospital established at the Salem Armory. These forty patients and their relatively minor injuries did not necessitate the large-scale volunteer effort that kept Halifax hospitals running, but they did require people to extend their ordinary roles. The first group of soldiers driven to the fire by Richard Eagan comprised eight members of the hospital corps, plus a sergeant. Perry recognized the self-supervision of these enlisted soldiers, though her analysis was rather different: “The first aid training of the

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41 Negative #32830, in Miscellaneous collection of circulars, etc., box II, Salem Fire Collection, E S1 F6 1914, PEM.

42 Salem Evening News 26 June 1914, 9.

43 Salem Evening News 26 June 1914, 7.

44 Salem Evening News 26 June 1914, 9; Perry, Salem Relief, 5-6.
squad demonstrated its value throughout those hours when they worked alone, anxiously hoping that their surgeon, on his way now from the service School, might find them very soon." In fact, the success of this first aid station suggested that commanding officers (and the skills they carried with them) were unneeded.

As in Halifax, civilians with medical training volunteered their help. Perry wrote of a “physician who chanced to come upon” the first aid station and “promptly offered his services.” The *Evening News* described the “valiant service” of a Beverly nurse named Mary Reed, who on her way home for the evening stopped off at Salem Hospital. After the hospital was evacuated, she moved to the armory, where like her future counterparts in Halifax, she stayed up all night. In both these instances, the doctor and the nurse were enacting in unusual circumstances what they did in ordinary times. To the extent that the militiamen at the first aid station followed directions from the doctor, they were voluntarily respecting the authority granted by his training and experience, creating spontaneous order based on their positions before the fire.

Even as relief workers proceeded without formal supervision, those who valued central knowledge and organization perceived, in Perry’s words, the city as “a scene of seemingly hopeless confusion, with the imperative, insistent need for men of recognized authority to dominate the situation, to assume control, and compass, so far as possible, to protection of life and property.” Luckily for them, both the governor, David Walsh, and the Adjutant General Charles H. Cole—the commander of the state militia—arrived

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47 *Salem Evening News* 26 June 1914, 2.

during the evening and lent their sympathy and authority.\textsuperscript{49}

On Friday, June 26, as the ruins still smoldered, the relief managers started their work. Early that morning, Cole called a few leading citizens to the armory for a meeting to discuss the civilian relief operation. No record exists of who attended or what was decided, although it is likely that John F. Moors, the Boston broker and celebrated disaster relief expert, attended as the governor’s representative; in any case, sometime that morning, Walsh named Moors his delegate, citing his experience following the San Francisco and Chelsea fires. At ten that morning, the city council met and decided to call, in the words of a local newspaper, a “big meeting with all classes of citizens” to consider forming a relief committee.\textsuperscript{50}

The use of the word “citizens” is suggestive, given that so many of those directly affected by the fire were aliens. True, the same article had earlier referred to the “French citizens” residing in the Point who had been burned out. But the use of the word suggested a political argument about the nature of relief and rescue. As members of the Salem community, “citizens” in need deserved relief from their community, whether manifested in the state or in an ad hoc committee. Likewise, it was citizens who should make up that committee and exercise control over relief efforts. Referring to citizens was an acknowledgment that relief organization was an inherently political task, built in the context of Salem’s preexisting political terrain. How citizens should be heard, and which citizens’ voices counted, were up for debate. Already, some were considering a wholesale takeover of the city government. “It may be necessary to make over its form

\textsuperscript{49} Salem Evening News 26 June 1914, 1.

\textsuperscript{50} Saturday Evening Observer 27 June 14, 1; Perry, Relief, 22; Salem Evening News 26 June 1914, 5.
of government as was done both at Galveston and Chelsea,” the Boston Transcript wrote.51 The thought was not unanimous, as the Salem Evening News cautioned. “Others said that commission form of government, such as Salem has, originated in a catastrophe such as Salem now labors under, and that as we had just that form of government we had all that was necessary.”52

Rescue and relief are always inherently political, in that they are about the distribution of material resources and power within a community. This was as true in Halifax as in Salem, but the specifics of Salem’s municipal politics highlight it particularly. For the preceding fifteen years or so, politics had been at its most basic a fight between John F. Hurley, the city’s first Irish mayor, and his Yankee opponents. They struggled at the ballot box and over the enforcement of liquor laws. In June 1914, Hurley was halfway through a three-year term, the first since the city charter was reformed to give the office more power. Friday’s noon citizens’ meeting, ostensibly to form the relief committee, was a distinctly political affair. At it, a “unanimous and aggressive” audience derailed the agenda in order to make demands about municipal politics. A few days earlier, Thomas Lally, the city’s director of public health, had fired all the members of the city’s public health board, as part of the battles over who would control municipal government that had raged for at least the prior fifteen years. Using as an excuse fears of epidemic following the fire, the assembled citizens loudly demanded

51 Reprinted in the Saturday Evening Observer 27 June 1914, 8.

the board’s reinstatement. Speakers berated Lally one after another until he finally gave in and promised to reinstate the board. With that important question of local politics solved, the meeting could finally turn to creating a committee to help those who had been burned out of their homes and jobs. Newspaper editor John B. Tivnan declared, in a reporter’s paraphrase, that “time for talk was passed and it was time to get to work.”

After some discussion, the meeting voted to appoint a Committee of 100, and Mayor Hurley “retired with representatives of various organizations to select” it, the Evening News reported. The committee, which actually numbered about 110, was remarkably diverse. Judging from names, about 10% of its members were Franco-Americans, and seven members were women. Of the total, ninety-one are identifiable on the 1910 or 1920 census, in the city directory, or through descriptions in newspaper articles. Of those ninety-one, three listed their native tongue as Yiddish. Though the committee was mostly Protestant, including two former mayors and the man Hurley had defeated in the previous election, it also had a healthy number of Irish Catholics; the chairs of transportation, housing, and employment subcommittees were all Knights of Columbus. Compared to the people who came to early meetings of the Halifax Relief

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53 Salem Evening News 26 June 1914, 15; Saturday Evening Observer 27 June 1914, 1.

54 A list of members appeared in the Salem Evening News 26 June 1914, 15. The list appears incomplete, in that it excludes a few people who were subcommittee chairs. With some exceptions, I have determined members’ ethnicities based on their last names; thanks to limited intermarriage, this is an imperfect method.

55 Morris Newmark (1920 Census, series T625, roll 697, page 164); Harry Pitcoff (1910 census, series T624, roll 588, page 31), and Max Winer (1920 Census, series T625, roll 697, page 119).

56 Hurley’s defeated opponent was William S. Felton (Maloney, “First Hurrah,” 52). The two former mayors were Arthur Howard, who was mayor in 1910 (1910 Census, series T624, roll 587, page 139) and David M. Little, a Spanish-American War veteran, former customs collector, former naval architect, and now officer of the Merchant’s National Bank (Maloney, “First Hurrah,” 42; Saturday Evening Observer 25 July 1914, 1). In addition, Margaret and Harriet Rantoul two unmarried, grown daughters of another of Hurley’s vanquished Yankee opponents, served on the committee (1910 Census, series T624, roll, 587, Page, 104; on the election between Hurley and Robert Rantoul, see Maloney, “First Hurrah,” 51). On the
Committee, the Salem Committee of 100 was a much broader cross-section of the city.

This apparent ethnic and religious diversity should not deceive, however. The committee was overwhelmingly middle-class and elite.\textsuperscript{57} Including the mayor and the city directors, who were appointed ex officiis, there were eleven politicians. The president of the board of trade, who owned a plumbing business, was on the committee.\textsuperscript{58} Five members were factory owners or executives; they were almost all placed in charge of specific subcommittees.\textsuperscript{59} Seven were bankers.\textsuperscript{60} There were seven store owners, and and another five managers, clerks or salesmen.\textsuperscript{61} Fourteen worked in real estate,

\textsuperscript{57}The following numbers should all be read as minimums, since the occupations of nearly a fifth of the members are unknown. Where relevant, I have included wives under their husbands’ occupations. Some people, if they held multiple positions, are included in more than one category.

\textsuperscript{58}John F. Cabeen (\textit{Salem Evening News} 3 July 1914, 9; 1920 Census, series T625, roll, 697, page 127; \textit{Naumkeag Directory}, 221).

\textsuperscript{59}Labor committee chair William F. Cass, shoes (1910 Census, series T624, roll 588, page 27); housing committee chair John H. Deery, in the shoe industry (1920 census, series T625, roll 697, page 170; \textit{Saturday Evening Observer} 27 June 1914, 1); J. Willard Heburn, a leading leather manufacturer, and his wife, who chaired the clothing committee (\textit{Saturday Evening Observer} 18 July 1914, 1); food committee chair John E. Spencer, machine manufacturer (Perry, \textit{Relief}, 42); Alvan Thompson, Helburn’s vice-president (\textit{Naumkeag Directory}, 428, 138); Greeley C. Curtis, a principal in a Marblehead airplane company (\textit{Naumkeag Directory}, 246, 941).

\textsuperscript{60}Henry M. Batchelder (1920 Census, series T625, roll 697, page 138); Leland H. Cole, who became chair of the joint finance committee (1920 Census, series T625, roll 696, page 164); Harry P. Gifford (1920 Census, series T625, roll 969, page 164); treasurer Josiah Gifford (1920 Census, series T625, roll 697, page 29); rehabilitation committee chair Eugene J. Fabens (\textit{Saturday Evening Observer} 11 July 1914, 8); David M. Little (\textit{Saturday Evening Observer}, 25 July 1914, 1); William S. Nichols, (1920 Census, series T62, roll 697, page 171); James Young, Jr (1920 Census, series T625, roll 697, page 125).

insurance, or brokerages.62 Three were lawyers.63 The biggest profession represented was clergyman, with at least twenty-one, of whom eight were Catholic.64 The general secretary of the Y.M.C.A., the secretary of the local Associate Charities, and the clerk of the city’s Overseers of the Poor were all included.65 Some of Salem’s fanciest families—like the Phillips, Batchelder, Gifford, and Rantoul families—had two members apiece. The identifiable French Canadians on the committee are an instructive list, comprising the sort of middle-class elites who saw it as their duty to represent their working-class compatriots. Among their number were the newspaper editor, a real estate and insurance agent, the owner of a funeral home, the pastors of the French Evangelical Church and the smaller of the two Francophone Catholic churches, and a watchmaker-turned-politician

62 John A. Bagley (1920 Census, series T624, roll 587, page 239); James Brenan (Naumkeag Directory, 213, 311); Frederick W. Broadhead (1920 Census, series T625, roll 697, page 4); Paul N. Chaput (Courrier de Salem 17 July 1914, 8); Leland H. Cole (Naumkeag Directory, 235, 414); J. Frank Dalton (Naumkeag Directory, 247); William S. Felton (Naumkeag Directory, 269); Robert M. Martin (Naumkeag Directory, 349); Patrick A. McSweeney (1910 Census, series T624, roll 587, page 253); Fred A. Norton (Naumkeag Directory, 366); Patrick F. Tierney (1910 Census, series T624, roll 588, page 43); Fred E. Warner (1910 Census, series T624, roll 587, page 248); J. Stoddard Williams (Naumkeag Directory, 447); James J. Welch (1910 Census, series T624, roll 588, page 85).


64 Unless otherwise noted, affiliations come from a list published in the Saturday Evening Observer 20 June 1914, 4. The Protestants were: Theodore D. Bacon, North (Unitarian); Henry Bedinger, St. Peter’s Episcopal; Oliva Brouillette, French Evangelical; Frederick W. Buis, First Baptist; John E. Charlton, Wesley Methodist Episcopal; DeWitt C. Clark, Tabernacle Congregational; James P. Frank, Grace (Episcopal); John L. Ivey, Lafayette Street (Methodist); Edward D. Johnson, First Unitarian; Thomas G. Langdale, South Congregational; Alfred Manchester, Second Unitarian; the unaffiliated Robert M. Martin, who was also an insurance agent (Naumkeag Directory, 349); Harry L. Newton, Crombie Street (Congregational). Catholics included John J. Cronin, curate at Immaculate Conception (Naumkeag Directory, 243); Joseph Czubeck, pastor of St. Joseph’s (Polish); Matthew J. Gleason, curate of St. James (Naumkeag Directory, 284); Jeremiah J. Herlihy, curate of Immaculate Conception (1920 Census, series, T625, roll 696, page 115); Michael J. McCall, pastor of Immaculate Conception; Frederick Muldoon, curate at Immaculate Conception (Naumkeag Directory, 359); J. Alfred Peltier, pastor of St. Anne’s (French); Rosario Richard, former curate at St. Joseph’s, now pastor at a French church in Shirley, Mass. (Salem Evening News 3 July 1914, 13). Rabbi Hyman Pitkoff may also have been a committee member (Naumkeag Directory, 383).

then serving his second term in the state House of Representatives.\textsuperscript{66}

Moreover, a funny thing happened to the Committee of 100 and its diversity. Montayne Perry explained: “One Hundred was too large a body to do effective work. These men elected twenty of their number, who speedily reduced themselves to seven, to act with seven men sent by the Governor. Thereafter, these fourteen men were the ruling power, a board of directors known as the Committee of Fourteen.”\textsuperscript{67} In the winnowing process, all the original Committee of 100’s diversity was discarded. The local portion of the Committee of Fourteen was more Yankee, much more elite, and entirely male. Edmund Longley was well known as an influential citizen, the general auditor and solicitor of New England Telephone and Telegraph and a director of Merchants National Bank.\textsuperscript{68} John B. Tivnan, the local committee’s chair, was a newspaper editor and had long served on various public boards and commissions; he was also Catholic and a local leader of the Knights of Columbus.\textsuperscript{69} E.G. Sullivan, elected secretary of both the Committees of 100 and Fourteen, was secretary of the board of trade, and John F. Cabeen was its president.\textsuperscript{70} John F. Saltonstall lived in neighboring Beverly and had told the 1910 census-taker that his trade was his “own income,” which is to say he lived off his

\begin{footnotes}


\footnotetext[67]{Perry, \textit{Relief}, 23.}

\footnotetext[68]{\textit{Saturday Evening Observer}, 11 July 1914, 8; \textit{Salem Evening News} 3 July 1914, 9.}

\footnotetext[69]{See Tivnan’s obituary, \textit{New York Times} 13 April 1931, 19; \textit{Columbiad} August 1914, 16.}

\footnotetext[70]{\textit{Naumkeag Directory}, 421; \textit{Salem Evening News} 3 July 1914, 9.}

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family’s fortune. Eugene F. Fabens was president of the Naumkeag Trust Company and member of firm Edgerly & Crocker. John E. Spencer, a retired colonel, was the owner of a machine factory and the chairman of the food relief committee. Longley and Saltonstall hadn’t even been on the original Committee of 100. The governor’s appointees were considerably more diverse, if only by ethnicity and religion. They included a Jew, A.C. Ratshesky; three Irish Catholics, including former Boston mayor John F. Fitzgerald and Father Michael Scanlon, director of Catholic Charities; and three Yankees, including John Moors and state Red Cross treasurer Gardiner M. Lane. Also included, as an adviser, was Ernest Bicknell, the national director of the Red Cross.

To the people on these committees, the differences that appeared most salient were not those of ethnicity, religion, or class, but of location. Publicly, local, state, and national Red Cross leaders praised each other and proclaimed that they were working with utmost cooperation. Privately, though, they fumed, and by mid-July, tensions were so great between the local committee and the Red Cross that they needed a memorandum spelling out that the local relief committee was not under Red Cross authority, that the latter was just there to help, and that while mistakes had been made, they were no worse than in other disasters. Rumors reached the national press—and were strongly denied—

71 1910 Census, series T634, roll 581, page 151.
72 Salem Evening News 11 July 1914, 8.
73 J.E. Spencer to C.H. Cole, 3 July 1914, MNGMA; Saturday Evening Observer 27 June 1914, 1; Perry, Relief, 42.
74 A list of the Committee of Fourteen appeared in the Salem Evening News 3 July 1914, 9.
that the relief work was plagued by inefficiencies, graft, and other problems.\textsuperscript{77} The Red Cross complained that the Salem committee wanted too much independence, and that they refused to listen to good advice. Mabel Boardman, the chair of the Red Cross’s National Relief Board, complained in a confidential letter that “there is a self-sufficiency about this community not altogether unwarranted” that made working with them difficult.\textsuperscript{78} Bicknell and Boardman blamed the local committee for fund-raising failures. “First, they would not appeal outside the state and did not care for a Red Cross appeal,” Boardman complained, “then they did appeal outside the State with little success; some of them did not like my effort to stimulate interest by an appeal, so that, of course, we did nothing further in that line and besides it was too late.”\textsuperscript{79}

Salem relief managers were indeed jealous of their independence. This was most evident when, less than a week after the fire, they began debating the organization and makeup of a Salem Rebuilding Commission to oversee new building codes, changes to the street plan, and permits in the burned district. The question was wrapped up in the same long-term political debates that had nearly derailed the first meeting the day after the fire over who should control the city. The original plan had been to give the commission its own authority to raise money, “in other words,” as the \textit{Salem Evening News} reported, “it was proposed to make the mayor and council subordinate to the

\textsuperscript{77}Winthrop D. Lane to Bicknell, 17 July 1914, resending letter of 10 July 1914; Bicknell to Lane, 16 July 1914, both in “File 835 – MASSACHUSETTS, Salem Fire 6/25/1914,” ARC files.


special outside commission. . . . The whole tendency on the part of some, indicated a lack of confidence in some of the present city council.” Regardless of the powers of the committee, the newspaper reported unanimity that the commission should be made up of Salem residents. Proposals for a commission with either a majority or minority of outsiders were seen as an insult, “a confession that Salem was not capable of self government.”

The final proposal served two purposes: keeping out outsiders and keeping power away from Mayor Hurley. The final legislation provided for a powerful commission of five Salem residents, to be picked by the governor on the advice of the mayor and city council. Included were two members of the Salem contingent on the Committee of Fourteen, bankers Edmund Longley and Eugene Fabens; a major clothing merchant, landowner, and active member of the Committee of 100, Dan A. Donahue; City Solicitor Michael L. Sullivan, who also maintained a large private practice; and Emile Poirier, a Franco-American who was both a medical doctor and, perhaps more importantly, a major landlord who had lost many of his properties in the fire. These choices are significant. They marked a considerable shift from those who had been active in the earliest relief organizing, while maintaining the dominance of business and financial interests.

An early proposal had called for the committee to include an “expert engineer” and “expert architect” as members. “Some think that these experts ought to be hired outside the commission,” the Evening News wrote, “otherwise their strong desires to

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80 Salem Evening News 1 July 1914, 10.
81 Saturday Evening Observer 4 July 1914, 1.
82 Saturday Evening Observer 11 July 1914, 8; Salem Evening News 3 July 1914, 9.
build monuments to themselves, and their idealism, might lead to extravagance beyond what Salem can stand, and that the other three being laymen might not be able to counteract their influence.”

Eventually, Walsh’s final legislation excluded experts as committee members. Instead, the commission hired a paid secretary and held an “informal conference” with architect C.J. Blackhall and A.C Ratshesky, “who had much to do with rebuilding Chelsea.”

The debates over the relative powers of the local, state, and national relief organizations and the makeup of the Rebuilding Commission illustrate conflicting strands of progressive reform. There was a democratic impulse of local control and home-rule, seen in the insistence on independence from the national Red Cross and Salem domination of the Rebuilding Commission and in the breadth and diversity of the Committee of 100. There was also, paradoxically, an antidemocratic distrust of popularly elected municipal governments, especially when the government was elected by ethnic minorities. Also present was the belief in experts, be they through training, like architect Blackhall, or experience, like Bicknell, Moors, and Ratshesky. These conflicting ideas were characteristic of what historian John Whiteclay Chambers terms the “progressive ethos,” which simultaneously demanded responsive, good government directed by the people, limited the franchise or decreased the power of elected leaders, and replaced the lived expertise of the people with the trained expertise of professionals. One way to reconcile these apparently disparate ideologies is to note that they all privileged the

83 Salem Evening News 1 July 1914, 10.
84 Salem Register 17 July 1914, 1; Saturday Evening Observer 18 July 1914, 4.
knowledge, experience, and culture of the middle class and of professionals over both the working class and, to a lesser extent, the elite.

In a disaster, one reason that trained expertise was required was that without it, many feared, things would dissolve into chaos. The day after the fire, the Salem Evening News described two scenes of perceived disorder. “At the outbreak of the fire,” it wrote, “the men and women employes of the Korn factory were thrown into a panic.” Later, “the residents of the flame-stricken sections of the city became panic-stricken as the wave of flames pursued their mad rush and gained in size.” For some observers, this disorder was gendered or racialized. Women, Montayne Perry wrote, were “faint with fear or half-crazed with excitement” and had to be “cared for and sent to places of safety,” much like children. If women were infantalized, men were emasculated. Through the voice of a militiaman, Perry told the story of an “old fellow out in his back yard with a short length of garden hose, trying to send its little feeble stream into the face of the fire.” Though enfeebled and rendered impotent by his age, the man insisted on “sticking to his post with his little piece of hose.” Using language reminiscent of that describing a stubborn, recalcitrant, and foolish woman, Perry’s militiaman character “had to pick him up bodily and carry him out of danger, and him cursing me up and down because I wouldn’t let him save his house.”

Others likened the fire’s victims to animals. George Heustis was the superintendent of the Malden Electric Co., but he happened to be working at the Salem

86 Salem Evening News 25 June 1914, 1, 5.
87 Perry, Relief, 6.
88 Perry, Relief, 7.
electric plant the night of the fire. When people gathered themselves and their possessions in the plant’s walled yard, Heustis, as a male, managerial, middle-class engineer, could see the danger he believed they were blind to. “I will admit I was using some pretty strong language,” Heustis wrote in his company’s in-house magazine. “It finally became necessary to drive them away, the same as you would drive cattle.”

Perry used a similar animalizing metaphor to describe the way militiamen warned residents to flee the flames. “In the Point district where the conflagration gained its greatest speed, people were literally driven in swarms from their homes, barely in time to escape the flames.” Her depiction stands in stark contrast to the photograph showing a militiaman taking some care to help the residents of a three-decker rescue their possessions.

One of the ways observers, and even participants, signaled their difference from the “swarms” who had to abandon their houses was by expressing disapproval of what survivors chose to save. Choosing to save certain, emotionally significant possessions—or even pausing to save any items at all when the fire was bearing down on the street—seemed frivolous, foolhardy, or disorderly. The importance of what people saved was not necessarily discernible from outside their own families or communities, but their salvage allowed people to maintain some sort of emotional order and control over their lives. The Salem Evening News took a tone that was at once maudlin and mocking, noting the futility of families’ efforts to save their possessions. It described people “dragging their

90 Perry, Relief, 10.
91 Negative #32830, in Miscellaneous collection of circulars, etc., box II, Salem Fire Collection, E S1 F6 1914., PEM.
most valuable possessions from their homes and hurrying them away in every conceivable type of conveyance to sections of the city free from danger. In some cases goods were moved a little way, only to be overtaken by the sweep of fire and destroyed. . . . Many of the families had no place to take their belongings to and they piled them along sides of streets away from the fire.”

What people saved was not necessarily what other people saw as important:

“There was a grotesque side, notwithstanding the pitiableness of the general situation, in the sight of frenzied workers lowering to the yard, by a clothesline, some inconsequential article, while friable goods of value were tossed from windows, naturally, to be smashed,” the Evening News wrote the next day. “One woman might be seen carrying a cheap picture, the glass broken in the crash; another member of the family would follow with an equally unimportant article. Here and there, in the residential sections, curtains in homesteads were drawn. From the front door would emerge occupants carrying sundry cherished heirlooms.”

Looking back on the fire fifty-six years later, John Porter Sumner agreed with these critics. “Most of them,” he wrote of other refugees, “seemed more anxious to save their belongings than themselves. We had seen them carrying some of their things a short distance, dropping them, and then hurrying back for still more things.” Yet when it came to his own family, the order was quite apparent, since he was able to understand the salvaged items’ emotional, not material, importance. When Sumner, then eight years old, wanted to put down the tea table he was told to carry, his mother explained that it was a

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92 Salem Evening News 26 June 1914, 5.
93 Salem Evening News 26 June 1914, 6.
family heirloom and must not be abandoned. Sure enough, when his mother died forty-three years later, he inherited the table he had saved, now imbued with even more value thanks to the memory of the fire. Similarly, he and his father went back to the house a few days later to find the father’s childhood memento.\(^4\)

Sumner’s story also illustrates the way survivors relied on everyday networks of solidarity to rescue their items and survive the fire. During the course of the fire, he was cared for by his father, uncle, maternal grandmother, and paternal grandfather; his family assisted and was assisted by neighbors; and they sheltered temporarily at his parents’ friends’ house and later at his grandparents’ home. That the parents relied on their eight-year-old son to help was apparently not unusual. The *Saturday Evening Observer* described other families working in similar ways, “carting their clothing and what few valuables they could gather in every conceivable conveyance. Later, as the flames circled and became more threatening, many picked up their goods again and started in a steady procession across the bridge to Beverly. Children who were not big enough to join in the work of carrying the household goods were left in charge of piles of furniture and bedding on the common, while their elders went back to save more.”\(^5\)

A picture postcard taken that day showing the homeless camped out on the Salem Common showed what people had managed to salvage from their burning homes. At least a dozen people sit amid furniture, mattresses, and some other furniture on a wooded lawn. Next to one man is a box of small household items. To his right are a group of six or seven people, sitting together. One of them has an umbrella open and resting on the


\(^5\) *Saturday Evening Observer* 27 June 1914, 1.
ground to protect two others from the sun. In a background, one man sits alone amid a pile of furniture and other salvaged items. Elsewhere, six men and women sit together; one man leans back on his elbow, and one of the women shields herself from the sun with an umbrella. This final group looks like they could be on a picnic. The postcard shows not only the items that people chose to save from their homes, but also the way they socialized once safe on the Common. The fire was traumatic, and these people had all lost their homes and most of their possessions. But they remained with their families, friends, and neighbors, keeping each other company, comforting them, and relying on and strengthening the relationships they had before.96

For members of Salem’s immigrant communities, the organizations they relied on to help survive in their new country helped also in the first hours after the fire. These organizations—fraternal and insurance groups, churches, and the like—will be discussed in depth in Chapter 6, but for now we can see the way people within them acted based on their everyday roles. Joseph Czubeck was the pastor of St. John the Baptist’s Church, the Catholic parish serving Salem’s growing Polish population; by varying estimates 175 or 250 of his families were homeless by June 26. His work that morning was more material and practical than spiritual: “The News man saw him this morning, buying the contents of a baker’s cart, and distributing them among workmen going to the factories.”97 A few days later, the same newspaper carried a notice about Olive Fecteau, an invalid who had been missing since the fire. Her family requested that anyone who had seen her contact

96 Postcard with caption “Salem Fire Ruins Salem Mass Homeless on Common June 25 1914,” negative #4228, in Miscellaneous collection of circulars, etc., box II, Salem Fire Collection, E S1 F6 1914, PEM.
97 Salem Evening News 26 June 1914, 2; Courier de Lawrence 30 June 1914, 1.
their minister at the French Evangelical Church.\textsuperscript{98} The Franco-American men whom Hurley named to the Committee of 100 were among those who frequently put themselves forward as spokesmen for the community and to whom Franco-Americans turned for help in ordinary times. For instance, Frank Pelletier was a Franco-American policeman whom Mayor Hurley tried to fire in February 1914. He had brought to a meeting Paul N. Chaput, a real estate and insurance broker, Napoléon Levesque, a funeral director, and Chauncy Pepin, a state legislator, to help him press his case.\textsuperscript{99} All three were named to the initial relief committee.

Outside the connections of the church or ethnic communities, survivors relied on the informal bonds of solidarity they formed with their neighbors. The day after the fire, a Mrs. Green of 5 Skerry Street, feared that her neighbor Mrs. Maguire, who lived in the same building, would worry after her, so she placed a notice in the evening newspaper “that she is in Marblehead and is all right.”\textsuperscript{100} There is no record about what Maguire had been doing, but Green at least expected her to be worried and looking for her. Perry described friends and neighbors who “paused to call out ‘your wife’s up in the pastures, Bill, and the kids are safe with her’; [and] . . . women with a half dozen little hands clinging to their skirts [who] bent to lift and comfort the tired, sobbing child of a neighbor.”\textsuperscript{101} John Sumner likewise remembered his father “helping the neighbors next door, who were attempting to put out a fire on their roof. They were standing on ladders leaning against the house, beating out the flames with brooms. There was very little

\textsuperscript{98} Salem Evening News 20 June 1914, 2.
\textsuperscript{99} Courrier de Salem 24 December 1914, 1.
\textsuperscript{100} Salem Evening News 26 June 1914, 2.
\textsuperscript{101} Perry, Relief, 13-14.
pressure in the water pipes, and the hoses were almost useless. There was only enough water to fill some pails, and my father got up on the roof of our house to throw water on it.”

What Sumner described years later was in content very similar to Perry’s scene of the old man with his “feeble stream” and “little piece of hose,” but the story takes on a very different valence when it describes interneighbor solidarity rather than the laughably futile efforts of a crazy old man.

In Perry’s story, recall, the old man represented the disorder of desperate survivors, and order was restored when a soldier “pick[ed] him up bodily and carr[ied] him out of danger.” As in Halifax, order was imagined to flow from the military, and it erased the local order represented by Sumner’s father and neighbors. Perry saw the burning city as “a scene of seemingly hopeless confusion, with the imperative, insistent need” for a military commander. “An intelligent commander cannot fail to get the desired results,” she wrote. The leader who arrived—unnamed but presumably Adjutant General Charles Cole—was, she said, “of rank so high that his authority was absolute, of personality so calmly commanding that his dictates were unquestioned even in thought, of disposition so kindly and sympathetic that instant confidence was inspired.”

Hers was a progressive ideology of expertise and leadership, in which order came from a great individual who could rescue citizens and perform wonders of organization and rationality. But as in Halifax, the order the military imposed was based on central knowledge and military discipline, and it worked to erase the local knowledge of survivors.


103 Perry, Relief, 7.

104 Perry, Relief, 7.

105 Perry, Relief, 8-9.
In Perry’s telling, the militia went through the Point to empty it, “searching every house from garret to cellar, even when assurance was given by the house-holder that the place had been emptied.”\textsuperscript{106} The \textit{Evening News} credited “police and citizens” with the work.\textsuperscript{107} No matter: the effect was the same. People may have been saved, though given the depictions of the “stifling clouds of smoke, the intense heat, the terrifying rain of embers, the roar of insatiable flame, the crash of dynamited buildings, [and] the incessant, sinister wail of the fire alarm,” it is hard to imagine that the residents in the Point really needed outsiders to order them out of their houses.\textsuperscript{108} The other effect was to separate families and help destroy the local order maintained by families like the Sumners. The day after the fire, there were reports of lost family members and neighbors, like Olive Fecteau and Mrs. Green of Skerry Street. Sarah Abbott, feared dead, turned up at a friend’s home, but she worried that the body once attributed to her might be her seventy-one-year-old brother, from whom she was separated.\textsuperscript{109} It took until July 2 for most, but not all, of the missing Franco-American residents of the Point to be accounted for.\textsuperscript{110} Perry described the fear of one father and husband, though her language betrays her belief that part of his problem was his foreignness, and perhaps a Catholic insistence on too many children: “‘How can I finda my wife?’ demanded a swarthy son of Italy with a bright-eyed youngster clinging to each hand. ‘The fire it came so quick—she taka da babe an’ da two little ones and she run—I snatch a few things and I taka da
\textsuperscript{106}Perry, \textit{Relief}, 9-10.
\textsuperscript{107}\textit{Salem Evening News} 26 June 1914, 5.
\textsuperscript{108}Perry, \textit{Relief}, 9.
\textsuperscript{109}\textit{Salem Evening News} 29 June 1914, 3.
\textsuperscript{110}\textit{Salem Evening News} 2 July 1914, 12.
two big ones and I run ver’ fast—but she is out of sight. I search and I search all night—I finda her not.’”

In their eagerness to empty the Point—perhaps justified—the outsiders who imposed their military order broke up the local order of families. The News “Man About Town” described precisely the problem: “Women went into houses to save their belongings and the firemen had to drag them out. Families were separated and mothers and children spent anxious hours hunting for each other.”

For the military, keeping order—their order—was a primary concern. “One of the first problems was the mat[ter] of police protection, and in addition to police reinforcements from surrounding cities and towns and from Boston, the mayor called out the four companies of the Second Corps Cadets and Co. H, Eighth regiment, for patrol duty. Later in the evening the entire Eighth Regiment and the Naval Brigade from Lynn were on duty,” the newspaper reported the day after the fire.

As in Halifax, the form of disorder feared most was looting. “Our men were given strict instructions to shoot on sight any looters or burglars,” the adjutant general declared. “And the orders carried shooting to kill. We don’t propose to stand for any lawlessness in the burned area while we are in control.” Yet the fears of looting were obviously overblown. “If looters were out to loot in the burned district, they would find little to seize upon,” the Evening News acknowledged in an editorial. “The flames swept the field clean. In hundreds of places where happy homes once stood every vestige of

111 Perry, Relief, 13.

112 Salem Evening News 27 June 1914, 4.

113 Salem Evening News 26 July 1914, 5.

114 Quoted in the Salem Evening News 26 June 1914, 5. See also page 9, where Cole repeats his threat.
contents has disappeared.”

A postcard labeled “Militia Guarding the Ruins on Lincoln St. at Big Salem Fire. June 25, 1914” shows a young—he appears no more than 14 years old—member of the Naval Brigade, posing in front of ruins. He and his weapon could not have been to prevent theft, for even had there been looters there is clearly nothing left to steal in the ruins behind him. The newspaper, even on the same page as it printed Charles Cole’s threat to shoot looters, agreed that theft was not a problem families faced: “There did not seem to be any disposition to disturb articles left unguarded and everybody seemed anxious to help others, but no one seemed to know what to do with goods after once they were out of the houses for it was felt that the flames were sure to overtake them.”

The perceptive Man About Town in the News credited the police with keeping “good order,” but simultaneously praised the populace for “courage and calmness in the disaster.”

A bigger threat to order in Salem were the thousands of tourists who flocked to the city, starting the night of the fire. These were outsiders, without the networks of solidarity that bound together Salem’s victims. “From trains, trolley-cars and automobiles thousands of people poured into the city,” Edward Johnson wrote a year or two later. “It was probably the biggest congestion of motor cars seen in New England. They jammed the roadways for miles. There were quite a few collisions and many

115 Salem Evening News 29 June 1914, 4.
116 Postcard captioned “Militia Guarding the Ruins on Lincoln St. at Big Salem Fire. June 25, 1914,” in Miscellaneous collection of circulars, etc., box II, Salem Fire Collection, E S1 F6 1914, PEM.
117 Salem Evening News 26 June 1914, 9.
118 Salem Evening News 27 June 1914, 4.
narrow escapes,” the newspaper reported, breathlessly estimating the number of tourists at a million.120 They filled the streets, got in people’s way, and gawked at the sufferers. Some of them helped, either directly the night of the fire, or in later days by donating to the relief fund.121 Others were less sensitive, and the mayor had to specifically ban fireworks on the Fourth of July for fear that visitors would set them off and upset Salemites’ jangled nerves.122

The military forces who were assigned to control the actual disorder of the tourists and the imagined disorder of crazed survivors and rampant looters were not value-neutral enforcers of simple order. The 669 men and 96 officers deployed the night of the fire brought with them their own ideas of what order looked like and how to create it.123 While no record remains of precisely how many of these soldiers were from which units, the first unit to deploy and the last to leave was probably also the best represented: the Second Corps of Cadets.124 This is significant because the Corps was one of two elite, independent units in the Massachusetts National Guard. The officers were local executives, businessmen, and the scions of Salem’s old Yankee families, and even the enlisted men were college-educated, middle-class clerks and professionals. Their armory, tucked amid the mansions and cultural institutions on Essex Street, had long served as a clubhouse for Salem’s elite men, hosting musical reviews and dances. The Corps’ last

120 Salem Evening News 26 June 1914, 5. On the growing culture of car tourism and touring—especially, in contrast to sightseeing in burned Salem, in the countryside—see Franz, Tinkering, 3-8.

121 Perry, Relief, 19-20. On fundraising from the tourists, see, e.g., Salem Evening News 3 July 1914, 1.

122 Saturday Evening Observer 4 July 1914, 1.

123 Memorandum, Brig. Gen. Jas. G. White to [Cole], 2 July 1914, MNGMA.

124 Salem Evening News 26 June 1914, 5, 9; 1 July 1914, 10; 2 July 1914, 1; L’Avenir National 7 July 14, 1.
call-out had been to help suppress the Bread and Roses Strike in Lawrence in 1912. As managers and executives in industries reliant on the same immigrant working class that was striking in Lawrence, it had been a personal assignment for many of the Cadets. In the fire’s aftermath, the Cadets were called upon to help the people who, in different circumstances, they could have been attacking. Their use to “preserve order” meant that the order created replicated the social hierarchy that Salem’s elite preferred.

As we will see in Chapter 3, the Second Corps of Cadets controlled and policed the refugee camp established for Franco-Americans, and they and their fellow militiamen distributed food to the burned out. The night of the fire, Salem was placed under martial law by order of Lt. Col. Charles F. Ropes, the Cadets’ commander and a grain dealer in civilian life. In the first few days of the disaster, the militia’s primary job was policing, and that meant controlling movement. Nobody was allowed into the burned area without a pass until the fifth day after the fire, and even then passes were required to open safes, remove property, clean up private property, erect buildings, or travel on closed streets or the wrong way down one-way streets. Passes were given out at the Armory, an imposing, castle-like building with an armed guard standing out front.

Even Salem’s elite found the military order cumbersome. More than a year later, Edward Johnson still complained about the “exasperation in the cases where a sentry

127 Provisional Troops Special Orders 36, 29 June 1914, MNGMA (copy also in unlabeled accordion folder, Miscellaneous collection of circulars, etc., box I, Salem Fire Collection, E S1 F6 1914,, PEM).
128 Murphy, “Merchants,” 12, 15.
would not allow a property owner to go to his own house when apparently there was little
danger.” Insurance adjusters complained of the “rigid rules” that made it hard to get
passes, and the arbitrary power that allowed militiamen to ignore even those passes that
headquarters had issued. “One well known business man was placed under arrest for
attempting to get at his own safe without having the necessary permit.” Montayne
Perry recalled “the most dignified citizen of Salem” being stopped by a militiaman, who
told him, “You can’t get by here, we’ve seen bluffers like you before!”

The fire rendered Salem unrecognizable. Without familiar buildings, the urban
geography was unreadable, even by those who knew it best. Edward Johnson described
the sense of dislocation that followed the fire. “Was this Hancock St. or was it Gardner?”
he described Salemites asking each other. “The district known as ‘the Point’ appeared as
if a great power had swept over it leveling it quite smooth and even with the ground.”

Arthur Beaucage, the editor of the French-language newspaper, wrote of the city
“enveloped in a savage, sinister silence,” a “vast cemetery” with surviving chimneys
appearing as tombstones. On top of this, the city was now turned into a military camp.
“Companies were encamped, in what seemed to the sightseer the amusing shelter of little
pup-tents, which sprang up like mushrooms on lawns and open spaces of different
sections of the city. . . . It became a pleasant and familiar sight to see groups of soldiers at

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130 Salem Register 3 July 1914, 1; Salem Evening News 29 June 1914, 12.
131 Perry, Relief, 11.
133 Courrier de Salem 3 July 1914, 4. Beaucage’s phrase “silence farouche sinistre” was something of a
pun, since while sinistre meant “sinister,” a sinistré was a victim of the conflagration.
their camp fires in places where a few days before the imagination could hardly have
dreamed of them.”134 In Johnson’s view, the soldiers were reassuring, but to one who felt
threatened, bossed around, or otherwise discomforted by the militia, the new atmosphere
would be even more disruptive.

Complaints about the militia kept coming. The night of the fire, Salem’s director
of public works, Patrick Kelley, attempted to create a fireline by dynamiting some
buildings. He was stopped, wrote the Evening News, “owing to the freshness of a
militiaman,” who refused to believe that he was a city official and slashed his car tires.135
The civil authorities asked that soldiers stop digging “garbage holes” in the middle of the
streets.136 A week after the fire, Mayor Hurley and Col. Frank Graves, then commanding
the troops, squabbled in the newspaper over the demolition of walls left freestanding in
the ruins.137 The same day, the commander reported complaints of unsoldierly behavior
and comportment, and he chastised officers for allowing it. “Enlisted men have been,constantly reported appearing in public street with blouses unbuttoned, hands in pockets,
and walking in a slouchy and unsoldierly manner,” he wrote, threatening those
“appearing on public streets lacking in neatness and soldierly appearance” with arrest.138
A week after the fire, rumors of militia misbehavior had grown so bad that Graves was
forced to disclaim them publicly in the newspaper. “There is no foundation for the wide

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135 Salem Evening News 26 June 1914, 6.
136 Provisional Troops Special Orders 6, 27 June 1914, MNGMA.
137 Salem Evening News 3 July 1914, 1.
138 Provisional Troops Special Order 54, 3 July 1914, MNGMA.
stories that have been in circulation about the misdeeds of some of the militiamen,” the paper paraphrased, though Graves admitted that five soldiers had been brought before courts martial for disobedience, drunkenness, or disturbing the peace. In the final case, a drunken militiaman had attempted to visit a woman, but he had accidentally gone into the wrong part of the house and been thrown out. He had not, Graves hotly insisted, assaulted the woman.\textsuperscript{139}

In later months, the militia became embroiled in disputes about payment for trucks during the initial relief and rescue work. The night of the fire, trucks had been offered freely, on the basis of solidarity and sympathy. When the spirit of the initial relief work was replaced by the hierarchical order of the militia and the relief managers, the voluntarism and spontaneous order of the first hours wore off. Originally, as we have seen above, “wagons of every description, . . . auto trucks, private automobiles and even baby carriages” were offered freely, without any external organization.\textsuperscript{140} Friday afternoon, however, the militia’s Captain Peter B. Chase, in civilian life an engineer and physics teacher at Tufts, arrived and imposed military discipline on the operation. Now, rather than trucks being offered voluntarily, they were seen as having been requisitioned, and their owners expected recompense from the state or from the relief committee. But the records kept by the militia were inadequate, and headquarters had to question individual officers months later to figure out who had used what truck when. It was a recipe for hard feelings.\textsuperscript{141}

\begin{footnotesize}
\footnotetext[139]{Salem Evening News 2 July 1914, 5.}
\footnotetext[140]{Salem Evening News 26 June 1914, 5.}
\footnotetext[141]{Chase to Samuel H. Batchelder, 22 July 1914; Capt. James F. Hickey to [Charles H. Cole], 26 December 1914; Hickey to Cole, 26 January 1915; Cole to Josiah Gifford, 6 October 1914; Batchelder to Bay State}
\end{footnotesize}
cream teams, and ice teams and pleasure car, at one time we had as many as ten to help the sufferers, that such little appreciation should be shown,” a bitter Richard E. Eagan, a dairy proprietor, wrote to Chase.  

These many and varied complaints and disputes suggest an irritation with the soldiers even from the elite and middle class who ran the city and its businesses. If the militia was a hassle, a source of “little annoyances that have made us at times a little hot under the collar,” in the words of an editorial in the Saturday Evening Observer, for Salem’s Anglophone elite, how much worse must it have been for immigrant workers? For them, asking for a pass to search the ruins of their home for surviving items meant entering a fortified building that had been intentionally designed to intimidate them. The man from whom they had to ask for a pass would likely have spoken English only, and he might have been a boss, or at least a friend of the boss. The difficulties of insurance adjusters in getting passes and then having their passes honored were likely even worse for working-class tenants hoping to look through the ashes of their homes for stray surviving possessions. Unlike the insurance men, who dressed well and could show their credentials, residents likely had few surviving documents to prove their business in the burned area. A soldier who harassed a pass-bearing insurance adjuster, or who accused fancy and well-known businessmen of being impostors would be unlikely to let

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142 R.E. Eagan to Chase, 17 July 1914, MNGMA.

143 Saturday Evening Observer 4 July 1914, 4.

through a working-class neighborhood resident. The National Guard was designed as a tool of class control, and this fact would have been known as much by the workers as by the bosses.

“We are not a military nation and consequently the people do not take kindly to restraint imposed by military rule,” Frank Graves told the *Evening News*. Yet these restraints were the cost of military aid, he said. “Many times when complainants have been asked whether they wished the troops withdrawn they have begged that they men be kept here.”145 Indeed, many seemed willing to make excuses for the militia and its mistakes. The *Saturday Evening Observer* noted that some people had complained about being “held up when on important missions,” but the paper defended the militia as having “tried to do their full duty. When they have erred it has been from an excess of zeal.” Ignoring past complaints of poor behavior from the soldiers, the paper praised their “deportment” and noted “the marvelous freedom from all rowdyism.” More importantly, it said, the militia had been successful in causing “the absence from Salem of all classes of criminals and despoilers that generally appear in every stricken community.”146 The Relief Committee praised the militia for its “excellent service.”147 In October, Montayne Perry admitted that the “militiaman is sometimes uncouth in manner, lacking in the externals of courtesy to the public.” She provided them an excuse: their training. “The soldier is taught how to approach his superior officer, how to address him and how to answer him, but he has no specific training in relation to the public.”148

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145 *Salem Evening News* 1 July 1914, 11.
146 *Saturday Evening Observer* 4 July 1914, 4.
147 *Salem Evening News* 29 June 1914, 1.
course, an odd excuse, since as members of a volunteer, part-time militia, national
guardsmen spent most of their lives dealing with “the public” rather than superior
officers.

Salem’s elites were willing—eager, even—to forgive the National Guard its
mistakes, perhaps because militiamen had imposed the right kind of order, and the
inconveniences caused by the militia were better than the disorder they feared without it.
Graves was correct to argue that the indignities the militiamen caused were the cost of the
central order they imposed. As with the militia, the rescue and relief offered by the
worthies who made up the relief committee carried a cost in power. In the immediate
aftermath of the fire, Salem’s burned district became the latest battlefield in the long-
running contest over the city’s governance. Salem in 1914 was a city with an insecure
elite, besieged politically by the likes of Mayor Hurley and demographically by the
growing industrial workforce. The first hours after the fire were a moment when the
middle class and elite could unite to aid their social inferiors, even while commanding
power in their streets.

In contrast, we will see in the next section the way the recipients of that aid—the
*sinistrés* of Salem and the explosion survivors of Halifax—resisted the military discipline
and centralized order that came with their rescue. Instead of bowing to the order
represented by the state and the army, they chose to rely on their most intimate of
institutions, the family.
Chapter 3
“It Is Easy Enough to Establish Camps”:
Geographies of Community and Resistance in Burned Salem

When the Salem fire reached the Point at 7:00 the evening of June 25, 1914, it created immediate and pressing problems for the people who had lived in that neighborhood: where to sleep and what to eat. It would soon be dark, and there was, rather suddenly, a severe shortage of shelter. Similarly, the fire burned not only whatever food people had in their pantries but also the stoves on which to prepare it and the stores in which they would ordinarily have bought its replacement. Moreover, these were not only immediate concerns—people had to sleep that night and would have to eat the next morning—but also lasting ones, since houses and grocers’ stores could not be rebuilt instantly.

Some survivors went immediately to neighboring North Shore cities. “Hundreds of people from Salem took refuge in Danvers last night and scores proceeded to Boston via Danvers, Peabody, and Lynn,” the newspaper reported the next day, describing “immense crowds” on the streetcars in the afternoon and evening.1 As the night wore on, the exodus shifted to Beverly, which “offered practically the only refuge for the horror stricken thousands who sought to leave the burning city. Streets leading to other surrounding towns were early cut off by the flames and cars to Beverly were crowded and

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1 *Salem Evening News* 26 June 1914, 2.
the streets were lined with the less fortunate who were obliged to travel on foot.”

Other burned out families stayed in Salem. Some of them secured space in hastily opened shelters, at the Armory, City Hall, the high school, and Christian Lantz’s Y.M.C.A. Those who couldn’t find room inside had to camp. Hundreds stayed on the Common, a downtown park surrounded by mansions, clubhouses, and churches. Others passed what must have been a macabre night in the Broad Street cemetery. Thankfully, it was a warm night, but the impromptu camping must still have been uncomfortable.

People were surrounded by strangers, sleeping out in the open, and often trying to stretch out on whatever furniture they had managed to salvage. “On the Common and in open spaces in the outskirts of the city thousands of refugees tried to find a little rest that awful night,” wrote the Pilot, Boston’s Catholic newspaper. “Many stretched themselves out on the grass; others used mattresses or rocking chairs which they had managed to save from their homes.” In the best of times, open air camping amid a large, noisy crowd could not have been very restful; coming after the anxiety, excitement, and terror of the fire, it is hard to imagine that many people on the Common or elsewhere got much sleep at all.

The next morning, the militia began to establish two large refugee camps. By Friday evening, soldiers had erected 200 tents in Bertram Field, near the high school. Each tent had three cots, and at least originally, one family was assigned to a single tent. The families staying there—mostly Protestants and Irish Catholics—were given their

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2 Saturday Evening Observer 27 June 14, 1.
3 Salem Evening News 26 June 1914, 5.
5 The Pilot 4 July 1914, 1.
rations in the basement of the high school. Nearby was an encampment of the soldiers who policed the area, served food, and did other tasks that fell to them during the period of martial law. At Forest River Park, overlooking the harbor and next to the devastated Point neighborhood, were most of the burned out French Canadians. By Friday night, when the governor arrived for an inspection, there were 100 tents, and the National Guard’s 9th Regiment was busy erecting more as fast as they could. Though military and civil authorities would disagree over who, legally and technically, had control over over the camps, in practice, soldiers patrolled and regulated them.

Faced with the sudden loss of much of the city’s housing stock, the establishment of these relief camps was sensible, efficient, and altruistic. Only the militia had immediate access to the large numbers of tents, cots, blankets, and the like needed to house those who had been burned out. But like all relationships of rescue and relief, the establishment of relief camps, especially under the control of the military, carried with it a politics and a set of power relationships. Camping outside in the mud and the rain, under the watchful and sometimes abusive control of the soldiers, was no one’s first choice. People with the social connections or financial wherewithal to stay inside did so. Soldiers and officers strictly regulated behavior in the camp. The refugees’ behavior and its regulation, and indeed their very presence in the camps, became elements of domination and resistance of and to the state, the military, and Salem’s elite. Bertram Field and, especially, Forest River Park were, quite literally, contested ground.

“Shelter,” as Montayne Perry observed when she wrote about the Salem relief

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*Salem Evening News* 27 June 1914, 1. Though Forest River Park was dominated by French-Canadians, there were also some Italian families there. As we will see, Jews were sent to Bertram Field. It is unclear where Greeks and Poles stayed.
effort that fall for the Evening News, “was the immediate need, when hunger had been appeased.” This chapter examines where people went—literally—to find shelter in the days immediately following the Salem Fire. Where families and individuals chose to go shows us much about the contours of working-class life in Salem. The fire exposed a community in crisis, one in which the ordinary obligations of family, neighborhood, and friendship were put under considerable and unusual strain. Where people sought shelter also shows the networks and patterns of solidarity that shaped everyday life.

Where people sought shelter is particularly interesting in the case of Salem’s French-Canadian migrants, because those choices give shape to the contours of their diaspora. Migrants were less likely to have close family nearby and were thus more likely to rely on networks of neighborhood and friendship. Watching as they went to the relief camp, neighboring cities, other Franco-American centers in New England, or all the way back to Quebec allows us to see the geography of the diaspora and how networks and communities were shaped over space. The fire shows us the fictive kin and the informal communities that replaced the literal family that migrants left behind in Canada.

For the purposes of this chapter, we are interested in the workings of informal communities, not their formal manifestations: families, neighborhoods, and friendships, not churches, unions, or fraternal orders. Separating the informal from the formal can be difficult, especially when religion and ethnicity were intertwined, as with Franco-Americans or Jews. It is important, however, for the historian not to fall into the trap laid by the professional, elite, and middle-class leaders and spokespeople for these communities. The Franco-American community was not coterminous with the church.

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7Montayne Perry, The Salem Fire Relief (Salem, Mass.: Milo A. Newhall, 1915), 14.
and its affiliated organizations, and priests were not the only people with agency. Even if people were active in the church, in lay organizations, and in the other institutions of *survivance* in *les Petits Canadas*, they had informal relationships as well. But since communal newspapers were controlled by businessmen and professionals, mainstream newspapers frequently uncritically allowed communal leaders to speak for their compatriots, and organizational records are, naturally, focused on formal, organizational activity, it can be difficult for historians to understand these sorts of informal communities and connections.\(^8\) Disasters like the Salem Fire provide a rare opportunity to study their contours, their experience, and their uses.

The fire was not, however, just an event that created records that historians can use to discover old and constant patterns of behavior. It created new and unusual forms of state power—martial law to police the city, a state-sanctioned committee to judge the circumstances and worthiness of needy families, and militia-patrolled camps of thousands of working-class individuals—and with them inspired new forms of resistance to the state. This resistance, as James C. Scott argues, is usually contained within “hidden transcripts,” acts performed by dominated people that undermine the power and authority of their dominators, but which by their very nature are difficult to see.\(^9\) Following Scott, historian Robin D.G. Kelley urges historians to look for everyday forms of resistance not just in formal institutions but in lived experience. Working-class organizations may have created spaces where traditional, political resistance could be organized, but for Kelley

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the other activities that happened in those spaces, even when not overtly political, were themselves acts of resistance. This kind of analysis requires a historian to read the silences and interstices of the surviving sources carefully, creatively, and often contrarily. At the same time, such analysis demands scholarly humility to avoid the danger of finding hidden transcripts in places where they are not.

Following the methodological and ideological cues of Scott and Kelley, the choices Salem families made about where to sleep, whom to ask for help, and how to perform their domestic and remunerative labor become evidence not just of the structure and contours of community but also resistance to the growing power of the state. Salemites and outsiders in dominant positions—the military, employers, those responsible for giving out aid—sought to control the intimate choices of working-class families who had been burned out, including where and how they would live, how their domestic labor should be apportioned, and where and under what conditions they would work. In this context, the choice made by most families to find shelter with friends or family or in hastily obtained apartments appears to reveal more than their preferences about where to obtain support. Living outside the relief camps also freed families from the direct military control to which they would have been subject at Forest River Park or Bertram Field. Conversely, the growing campaign by relief officials to encourage refugees from crowded private lodging into the camps appears not only as a standard,

10 In the context of African-American history, Kelley expands Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham’s argument that the black church was “an intersitial space in which to critique and contest white America’s domination.” Kelley’s argument, adopted here and expanded to the non-black working class, was that black institutions served as more than a space in which to organize; the institutions and their activities were themselves resistance. See Robin D. G. Kelley, Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class (New York: Free Press, 1994); and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), quote on page 10.
progressive concern for public health, but also as a way of forcing working-class families into a physical location where they could be more easily controlled. Moreover, the use of camp space as a field of resistance ran both ways. Refugees tried to refuse placement in the camps in order to resist allowing the military power over their lives, but at the same time they worked to make the camps their own and announced them as their address. Elites both wanted refugees concentrated in the camps and waged a concerted campaign to make them move in, and they were terrified of the camps’ permanence and so tried to force residents out.

Three days after the camp at Forest River Park was established, Salem’s evening newspaper told its readers that it was nearly a paradise. The refugees, it wrote in its headline, “are snug and comfortable in tents.” “Everybody about the place appeared bright and cheerful,” it reported, “and there seemed to be a general air of making the best of things.” The next evening, residents of both camps enjoyed band concerts. The Anglophones at Bertram Field were entertained by the United Shoe Machinery Band, and the 8th Regiment military band played at Forest River. Sensing the continued solemnity of the situation, Ellery C. Quimby, the latter’s bandmaster, explained the program to the newspaper: “I did not want to give them a rollicking lot of ragtime selections. So I finally compromised on a program of patriotic airs.” The unidentified reporter was enthusiastic about Quimby’s choices. “That nothing could have been more successful was evidenced by the rousing cheers with which the concert was received,” he wrote. Refugees sang along to the Marseillaise, Maple Leaf Forever, and the Star Spangled

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11 Salem Evening News 29 June 1914, 5.
Banner, for which people stood and gave a cheer. The **Salem Evening News** enthused not only about the entertainment but the food, which it said was “well cooked, palatable, and wholesome and there is plenty of it,” cooked by African-American civilians specially hired for the job. On July 1, the menu at Forest River included bacon and eggs, bread and butter, and coffee and milk for breakfast; beef stew, tomato soup, boiled potatoes, bread and butter, and coffee for dinner; baked beans, boiled potatoes, bread and butter, prunes, rhubarb sauce, potatoes, milk and coffee for supper. A few months later, Montayne Perry had not yet emerged from the reverie inspired by military bands, hired cooks, and military tents. “It is probable that many of these tent dwellers had quarters far more sanitary and comfortable than their burned homes had furnished, and food of better quality and preparation than they had known before,” she wrote.

The fantasies of Perry and her *News* colleagues notwithstanding, the refugee camps were not pleasant places. Though the weather before the fire had been hot and dry, afterwards it turned cold and stormy. By Monday, June 29, the camps were so muddy that Forest River Park had to be oiled to prevent mosquitoes from breeding, and all week the *News’s* readers needed daily reassurance that refugees were comfortable despite the weather. The rain not only made everything damp and muddy; it also

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13 *Salem Evening News* 2 July 1914, 12.


15 *Salem Evening News* 29 June 1914, 1; [Ernest Bicknell?] to F.J. Mulhall, 30 June 1914, “File 835 –
heightened the indignities of life in the camps. On Monday, the line to get the evening meal was long—it “started before 6:00 and was long then; it was still long at 8:00,” the paper reported—and refugees had to wait for food in the rain, unsheltered. They could not return to their tents to try to stay dry or they would lose their place in line. A sympathetic reporter saw “one woman, hatless and coatless, put her hand over her head to protect it from the rain. In her other hand she held the spoon, tin dipper and tin plate, the utensils with which everybody at the park has been supplied.”

The woman’s militia-issued kit was a tangible representation of the humiliation of receiving charity in public. “The bread line is a study,” the Evening News observed. “In it one sees people who still retain all the vestiges of former prosperity but who are now stripped of everything they so lately cherished.” Reduced to poverty and dependence, the camps’ residents also had to contend with the surveillance of suspicious policemen and curious visitors. The police department deployed officers to “watch the lines of people who wait for supplies to see that no fakirs or repeaters get to work at the expense of real sufferers.” The best at this job were inspectors who came from the affected communities, like French-Canadian Frank Pelletier and Pole John Bozek, who used their local knowledge of their compatriots to judge their worthiness. If the police treated

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**Footnotes:**

16 Salem Evening News 30 June 1914, 10.

17 Salem Evening News 30 June 1914, 10.

18 Salem Evening News 1 July 1914, 10.

19 Salem Evening News 1 July 1914, 11; 2 July 1914, 8. Pelletier had been the center of controversy when Mayor John Hurley had tried to fire him. His usefulness to police his own community led Hurley’s opponents at the News to gloat, “The presence of the inspector has proved a good thing all around.”
every refugee in line as a potential fraud, the relief committee’s health subcommittee suspected them all as potential carriers of disease. William McDermott, a doctor on the committee, urged that those in line for food and clothing be “casually inspected from time to time, for contagious diseases.”

Perhaps worse than this official surveillance was the presence of tourists in Salem. Making preparations for what all expected, correctly, to be a massive influx of sight-seers over the Fourth of July Weekend, the Committee of Fourteen heard complaints that “curious hordes [were] desecrat[ing] the privacy of the present homes of the campers.” The committee agreed with a visiting Boston doctor that it was “an outrage and it should be forbidden,” but the governor “believe[d] in a limited right to see the camp” by the public who funded its operation. The governor’s opinion was representative of the broader idea that those who provided relief—in this case state taxpayers—deserved some knowledge about and control over the way their money was spent. By extension, this meant that they deserved power over the refugees and their personal decisions.

The power the state demanded over those whom it helped after the fire was most clearly personified by militiamen—the same young, poorly trained, and sloppy soldiers rich Salemites decried as capricious and rude. They held new authority over the intimate and quotidian details of refugees’ lives. Many of the demands soldiers made of their “inmates”—as they were occasionally called—revolved around health and

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20 Minutes of Health Committee meeting, 29 June 1914, 9:00 a.m., “Letters, reports and records relating to the Salem Fire,” E S1 F6 1914, PEM.

21 Salem Evening News 3 July 1914, 9.

22 On elite Salem’s disputes with National Guardsmen, see Chapter 2.
sanitation. One colonel bragged to the newspaper of the military order he kept in camp. “Wherever paper or other rubbish is seen about the refugee camp,” the paper paraphrased, “the militiaman patrolling that street calls attention to it and some youngster is made to pick it up and put it in waste barrels provided for the purpose.” Woe to the adult who refused a soldier’s order about garbage. One man at the separate camp for those suspected of tuberculosis infection refused to empty a trash can when so ordered, so the militia captain had him arrested and denied food until he complied. An 8th Regiment lieutenant saw Peter Levesque “throw paper and other refuse promiscuously about the camping grounds” and arrested him for for violating health regulations. By the next day in court, however, the charges had been changed to intoxication. The militia retained power even in the courtroom; Levesque’s prosecuting attorney was the regiment’s quartermaster, a Boston lawyer ordinarily in private practice. Though drunkenness charges ordinarily brought fines of $10 or $15, Levesque was sentenced to a month in prison.

The disdain or even hatred of some of those charged with helping the refugees must have been palpable and obvious. People in the camp were under constant suspicion of being cheaters and frauds, diseased and dirty. The state militia’s quartermaster general accused them of not knowing how to use “the modern sanitary toilet” and appeared to

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24 Salem Evening News 3 July 1914, 4.

25 Salem Evening News 3 July 1914, 6.

26 Salem Evening News 1 July 1914, 6, 11; Col. Frank A. Graves to Adj. Gen. Charles H. Cole, 1 July 1914, MNGMA.
ascribe their ignorance to a national characteristic.  A writer for the *News* implied that the baths children received at the camp were an unfamiliar “novelty.” Militiamen and their officers hassled them for no apparent reason other than to make their lives more difficult. Forest River Camp and Bertram Field were particularly fraught spaces because they were military camps. Military logic and training necessarily sacrificed autonomy for order, diversity for sameness, solidarity for hierarchy, local for central knowledge.

It was clear to contemporary observers that the camps were under the practical control of the National Guard. “Throughout the camps military discipline prevailed,” Montayne Perry wrote in the autumn immediately following the fire. “Absolute cleanliness was a rigidly enforced rule, and the most sanitary conditions were manifested.” Edward Dunbar Johnson, made a nearly identical point perhaps about a year later: “Military regulations enforced order and cleanliness, in the care of tents, in the persons and habits of the refugees and in the preparation and the serving of the food.” He credited the vigilance of the military authorities” and the collaboration of the priests from the Franco-American St. Joseph’s parish for Forest River’s “excellent general moral condition.”

What we know about the operations of the camps confirms Perry’s and Johnson’s

27 William B. Emery to Charles H. Cole, 19 October 1914, MNGMA.

28 *Salem Evening News* 1 July 1914, 10.

29 Officers could be quite explicit about this goal. See Perry, *Relief*, 16; *Salem Evening News* 3 July 1914, 6.

30 Perry, *Relief*, 17.

31 Edward Dunbar Johnson, “The Salem Fire,” T.S., page 31, no date but after June 1915, ES1 F6 1914, PEM. The Phillips Library catalog dates Johnson’s typescript from 1914, but this cannot be accurate, since the text refers to the first anniversary of the fire.
descriptions. The militia, as we have seen, erected the camps with militia-owned tents, blankets, and the like. National Guard officers at least twice served as prosecutors in cases related to behavior in the camps. When the militia officially departed—the Second Corps of Cadets turned over Forest River Camp to civilian authorities on July 7, twelve days after the fire—they left relief in the hands of two officers, Colonel John Spencer and Colonel Charles Cutting. Moreover the two colonels, who were always referred to with their military titles, were assisted by remaining officers and soldiers. For instance, the National Guard detailed to Spencer, a factory owner who took over feeding the refugees, a captain, a lieutenant, two sergeants, and a private, all handpicked by Spencer. Even when the camps were technically civilian operations, they remained under military control and discipline.

This is an important point because of who controlled and manned the National Guard in Salem. The National Guard was, by design and training, an implement of class control. As discussed in Chapter 2, this was especially pronounced in Salem, where the city’s cultural and economic elite dominated the Second Corps of Cadets. To the elites who ran the militia operations in Salem, especially those in charge of the camps, martial law was an opportunity to remake Salem’s municipal governance. Colonel Frank A. Graves, the commander of Salem’s other, less elite militia division, the 8th Regiment,

32 See, e.g., Salem Evening News 26 June 1914, 5; 27 June 1914, 1.
33 Salem Evening News 1 July 1914, 11; 2 July 1914, 9.
34 Salem Evening News 30 June 1914, 1; Col. John Spencer to Adj. Gen. Charles Cole, 30 June 1914, MNGMA.
35 Spencer to Cole, 3 July 1914, MNGMA.
directed all National Guard operations in the city after the fire. In civilian life, he had risen from a mere shoe worker in Marblehead to a salesman for F. M. Page and Company in Lynn; in the militia, he had gone from a private to a colonel. In an angry letter to the state adjutant general, he complained bitterly of the civil government’s incompetence. “The civil authorities cannot be depended upon to do the work” of public health, he wrote, complaining that a curtailment of his authority “had resulted in a neglect and defiance to Sanitary Regulations to such an extent that the city is threatened with an epidemic unless the most stringent measures are taken and enforced by the troops on duty here.”

At that moment, public health was a major flashpoint in Salem’s long-running political battles, so Graves’ complaints must be read in the context of the fights between the city’s Yankee elites—backed, ironically, by Franco-American community leaders—and Mayor John F. Hurley and his Irish backers. By asserting that the civil public health authorities were incompetent or powerless, Graves was claiming for himself, on behalf of the Yankee middle-class and elite who objected to Hurley on the grounds of “good government,” the right to run Salem.

In addition to the difficulties and indignities of life in a refugee camp, people living at Bertram Field and especially Forest River had to contend with a relief ideology conditioned by the Salem elite’s desire to control their labor. Contemporary writers about the fire emphasized that its defining characteristic was that both homes and factories had been destroyed. (John Moors counted 50 destroyed factories, including the city’s

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37 *Salem Evening Observer* 15 August 1914, 1.

38 Col. Frank A. Graves to Adj. Gen. Charles H. Cole, 1 July 1914, MNGMA.

39 For example, see Ernest Bicknell’s draft article for a Red Cross magazine, enclosed in a letter, Bicknell to August Cunningham, 14 August 1914, “File 835 – MASSACHUSETTS, Salem Fire 6/25/1914,” ARC
largest. While in public this phenomenon was described in terms of the multiple afflictions of the worker who lost both his job and his house, it was also a deep concern to employers. Salem factory owners were dependent on the labor provided by the very people whom the fire had burned out. Suddenly unemployed, they might leave town in search of work, leaving the city with a labor shortage when the factories finally rebuilt. Perhaps worse, the workers might grow used to life on the dole and refuse to return to their hard work once their labor was needed. The refugee camps simultaneously represented an opportunity to keep workers in the city and under the control of their employers and a dangerous summer camp in which workers could get accustomed to leisure. If employers’ domination was about controlling workers’ location and maintaining discipline, workers’ resistance was conversely located around maintaining autonomy over their personal geography and refusing that discipline.

Salem employers’ fears about their workers were most pronounced at a contentious meeting of the Committee of Fourteen the morning of Friday, July 3. Transportation chair Dan Donahue, a businessman, developer, and store owner, reported that his committee had paid for 150 people to leave the city, and he asked the Committee of Fourteen for a policy on, in his words, “letting people out of Salem.” For the previous week, he said in the newspaper’s paraphrase, “if he found an able bodied mechanic he refused him transportation on the ground that this man would be needed here later on


41 Employers feared the loss of a newly transient labor force after other disasters, too. See John M. Barry, Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997). In contrast, as we will see in Chapter 5, building trades workers in Halifax feared the influx of new, competing workers.
when rebuilding starts.” This policy was endorsed by John Cabeen, the president of the board of trade and a master plumber, who complained that thirty-six families had already moved to New Bedford because their breadwinners had found jobs there, and James J. Phelan, one of the governor’s appointees. “Efforts should be made to hold the inhabitants here,” the latter said, “except in cases of dire necessity.” A.C. Ratshesky and former Boston mayor John F. Fitzgerald, both of whom were the governor’s appointees to the Committee of Fourteen, objected to this proprietary attitude and thought people should be free to go wherever they could take care of themselves. After much argument, the outsiders won. But the local men had demonstrated their fears of being abandoned by their workforce.42

Meanwhile, the officers who ran the refugee camps—themselves Salem employers or their allies—made sure that the men housed there would not fall into dependence or laziness. On the first Monday after the fire, the labor committee, chaired by shoe manufacturer William F. Cass, was appropriated $5,000 of the relief funds with which to employ 200 or more men to clean up the ruins beside regular city workers. Another 40 were employed as cooks and laborers at Forest River, with a similar number at Bertram Field.43 Three days later only 125 men were employed in clearing the burned district, and the Red Cross’s Ernest Bicknell predicted that the number would not exceed 175.44 Men not lucky enough to get a city job were chastised and threatened if they did

42 Salem Evening News 3 July 1914, 9.

43 Salem Evening News 29 June 1914, 1. The assertion that that refugees were hired as cooks appears not to square with the slightly later claim, mentioned above, that camp food was cooked by specially hired African-American cooks.

44 Salem Evening News 2 July 1914, 13.
not look, or if they did not accept whatever job they were offered. “Unless you find work you must report each day at our office between 9 o’clock and 11 o’clock in the morning,” the employment bureau instructed. “Failure to report drops your name from our list,” as did failing to go to work when called.⁴⁵

The afternoon before Phelan and Donahue proposed not “letting people out of Salem,” a Captain Blanchard, a 2nd Corps of Cadets officer at Forest River, took his commanding officer, Lt. Col. Charles F. Ropes, on an inspection tour of the camp, accompanied by a News reporter. What Ropes and the reporter witnessed highlights how both domination and resistance focused on Blanchard’s attempts to discipline work and workers. “The trip disclosed a large number of men entirely content to go on as they are,” the News man wrote. “Capt. Blanchard explained that he had other plans for them.” As he saw it, his main job was to disrupt and prevent the indolence and dependence that he thought were the primary dangers of the camp. “Unless we start these men, this camp will become permanent,” Blanchard told his guests. He complained disgustedly that a few days earlier, he had needed carpenters and “called some of the refugees. They wanted $4 a day apiece.” The wage they quoted was, in fact, the union rate for an eight-hour day.⁴⁶ To Blanchard, hiring camp residents as laborers was a way of disciplining them and forcing them to sell their labor. His opponents sought to resist his discipline by insisting on the union wage. The newspaper article is unclear about the dispute’s

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⁴⁵ Card from Employment Bureau, second unlabeled folder, Miscellaneous collection of circulars, etc., 1914, box I, Salem Fire Collection, E S1 F6 1914, PEM.

resolution, but the implication is that by demanding a too-high wage, the men succeeded in avoiding conscription and that Blanchard gave up.

As the tour went on, Ropes and the reporter witnessed firsthand a similar interaction. The group came across Ovid Pelletier, and Blanchard demanded to know why he wasn’t working. Any man still in camp in the afternoon, Blanchard implied, was a lazy shirker, his work ethic—if he ever had one—sapped by the public charity he was receiving. Pelletier and Blanchard went back and forth, Pelletier offering an excuse why he wasn’t working, Blanchard countering with another reason why he should be. After Pelletier said that he could not find a job, the two men argued about whether a particular firm—one that Blanchard claimed was hiring—was an open or closed shop. To end the argument, Pelletier said that he was not working that week anyway because of an injury. Blanchard closed the encounter by demanding a doctor’s note “or you get out and get a job tomorrow.” As with the men who demanded four dollars a day for carpentry, Pelletier and Blanchard were in a battle of wills and power, the latter seeking to control the former and the former refusing the latter’s authority.

The scene between Blanchard and Pelletier played out several times during the afternoon inspection. Blanchard accosted another man who responded that there was no work to be had because of the rain. Even the reporter, otherwise sympathetic to Blanchard, had to grant the man that “much of the outside work actually was stopped yesterday by the rain.” But though Blanchard lost the battles with Pelletier and the second man, he was able to regroup by exercising his coercive power over women “inmates.” A woman came to the camp, seeking to hire three women to help her move and clean a new home. The women in the camp withheld their labor until Blanchard
“ordered three husky young women out of the mess line for her.” It was only by denying food that Blanchard could coerce labor out of camp residents. The other technique he tried was to threaten to eject them from the camp altogether. When the inspection party came across an Italian in bed at 3:00 in the afternoon, Blanchard ordered him to get a job tomorrow or leave camp.  

Battles over formal, paid labor bled into fights about informal, domestic labor. The fear that Salem’s working-class men were becoming lazy in the camps seemed to find confirmation in the way families divided their work. Montayne Perry sympathized with women who, she said, had an easier time in the camps. “It does seem good to eat a few meals that I didn’t cook myself,” a mother of eight sons told her. But men with a similar attitude she denounced as “the shiftless, the improvident, the unfit.” To Blanchard, that women did any visible domestic labor at all was evidence of their husbands’ laziness. “I found the women paddling all the way across the open field at all hours of the night to get the milk prepared by the nurse for their babies,” he complained. That women did this work did not appear to him to be an acknowledgment of women’s independence or the proper division of household labor. Blanchard insisted that women ought not be up and about at night; that was the proper province of men. “I made a rule that if a woman came over alone, a sanitary guard would be sent back with her and the husband would have to get up.” But the refugee families resisted Blanchard’s intrusion in their arrangements. “I had to rescind the rule, for the husbands wouldn’t get up. Our night feeding fell off to almost nothing. They would have let the babies starve rather than

47 Salem Evening News 3 July 1914, 6.
48 Perry, Relief, 14-15.
get up.” Resistance to the militia’s intrusion into domestic arrangements was not exclusively male. When hospital nurses came to Forest River to give children baths, some families were happy to participate, at least on their own schedule. The nurses gave fifty baths in the morning, but “then there came a lull, as mothers failed to come forward with their offspring,” the newspaper reported. Though interest picked up again later in the afternoon, in the meantime, “the nurses went from tent to tent, gathering up such children as they could find, and took them away to the big hospital tent.” When authorities tried to intrude on the family, mothers and fathers simply refused to participate. When the authorities used force—as when at Bertram Field they took a boy with tonsillitis to the contagious hospital against the wishes of his mother—parents used other tools to protest. The boy’s mother could not stop his being taken away, but she symbolically protested by leaving the camp. “She got past the guards at the gate and went out into the darkness where for a time she was lost,” the paper reported. “Fears for her safety were entertained last night.”

As Blanchard’s threats to eject residents from the camp and the sick boy’s mother’s escape indicate, a major way burned out workers and their employers and allies fought was through presence in the camps themselves. Families that had the choice preferred to stay with friends and family, away from the watchful eye of men like Blanchard. Relief authorities, though, wanted people in the camp so that they would be easier to control. At the same time, they acted contradictorily and disrupted life there to

49 Salem Evening News 3 July 1914, 6.
50 Salem Evening News 1 July 1914, 10.
51 Salem Evening News 2 July 1914, 12.
encourage people to leave.

As we have seen, the night of the fire, hoards of people left Salem. “Many were fortunate enough to find homes with friends in unburned sections or in adjacent cities,” Perry wrote. “Doors were thrown open everywhere with friendly welcome to the sufferers.”

Acknowledging the dispersal of burned-out Salemites, the relief committee established depots in Beverly, Danvers, Ipswich, Marblehead, Lynn, and Peabody. The Cercle Lacordaire, a French-Canadian temperance group, immediately suspended its Salem meetings, noting that its members were in “Beverly, Peabody, Lawrence, Lynn, Danvers, Lowell, etc.” and could go to meetings there.

Eight-year-old John Sumner’s family went to Peabody to stay with the boy’s paternal grandparents. “That night I slept on my grandfather’s horsehair sofa in the parlor. I missed my own bed and our own home,” Sumner recalled fifty-six years later.

Thirty-six-year-old Selma Florence Bartol was expecting to give birth any day when her displaced parents arrived to stay with her and her husband. When she died soon after giving birth, the newspaper blamed “the excitement of the fire and the misfortune of her parents” and added her to the list of fire casualties.

If people had no nearby family—as was often the case, especially with immigrants—they could stay with friends. Six days after the fire, the *Evening News* printed on its front page a column listing Salemites, both Anglo and French, who had

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52 Perry, *Relief*, 14.

53 *Courrier de Salem* 24 July 1914, 1.

54 *Courrier de Salem* 9 July 1914, 6.


56 *Salem Evening News* 2 July 1914, 11.
gone to Danvers “to stay with friends.”\textsuperscript{57} Less than a week after the fire, Ward 1 residents, the newspaper reported, were already complaining that so many of the burned out had come to their neighborhood to stay with friends that the neighborhood was overcrowded and at risk for disease.\textsuperscript{58} The \textit{News} praised a working-class French-Canadian family in Danvers named Soucy for housing thirty-five refugees. “Mrs. Soucy,” the newspaper said, “was completely worn out by her incessant hours of labor in caring for the unfortunate refuges, but she only said that she wished she could have one more.”\textsuperscript{59} Since there was no mention of a system by which strangers could find each other, we may imagine that all of the Soucys’ guests were friends or acquaintances. Staying with friends instead of family could cause confusion, though, and families feared their relatives lost when in fact they were staying with friends. Sarah E. Abbott, reported to be among the fire’s few deaths, was found on Monday alive, staying with a friend in Salem “whither she had gone for refuge.”\textsuperscript{60}

Even more confusion arose when people found shelter with strangers or in public buildings opened to house the homeless. The day after the fire, the \textit{Evening News} ran a list of notices in which refugees informed families and friends of their present locations. A typical entry announced, “Mrs. Labelle’s children are safe at the home of Miss Page, 2 Loring avenue.” Similarly, “Mr. and Mrs. Theriault want[ed] their children, Joseph, William, Louis and Henry to know that they are at Salvation Army hall, Beverly.”\textsuperscript{61}

\textsuperscript{57} \textit{Salem Evening News} 1 July 1914, 1.
\textsuperscript{58} \textit{Salem Evening News} 1 July 1914, 7.
\textsuperscript{59} \textit{Salem Evening News} 29 June 1914, 11.
\textsuperscript{60} \textit{Salem Evening News} 29 June 1914, 3.
\textsuperscript{61} \textit{Salem Evening News} 26 June 1914, 2.
announcements were needed when families were together; that arrangement was the
default. A particularly telling story is that of Theodore Boisvelt, his wife, and their five
children. His family missing, a worried Mr. Boisvelt went the to newspaper the day after
the fire to ask it to run a notice inquiring about their whereabouts. The next day, it
emerged that Mrs. Boisvelt and the kids had been “picked up” in Danvers and taken
home by Mrs. M.E. Willis, a local commissioner. To reunite the family, Mr. Willis
brought them to Lowell, where they stayed with Mr. Boisvelt’s father. For the
Boisvelts, being together, with family, in a different city, was preferable to being with
strangers, nearby to Salem. Furthermore, though Mrs. Boisvelt may have been grateful to
the Willises, and we ought not discount the latters’ generosity, their rescue caused a good
deal of upset for the husband, who did not know to where his family had disappeared.
Such rescue, though apparently sincerely altruistic, was not always desired by its object.

Even when people moved into new apartments, they often did so with friends,
since empty apartments in the area quickly ran out. Six days after the fire, the chair of
the housing committee, noting that tenements were in great demand, requested that all
landlords tell him of empty apartments in their buildings; the next day he announced that
all spaces had been already filled, and that he would start a waiting list for homes in
Salem. It is no wonder that twenty-five people crammed into a house on Lawrence
Street and that seventy Franco-American families had to fit seven or eight families to a
house at Bessom Beach in Marblehead.

\[62\] Salem Evening News 26 June 1914, 15.
\[63\] Salem Evening News 27 June 1914, 1.
\[64\] Salem Evening News 1 July 1914, 8; 2 July 1914, 13.
\[65\] Salem Evening News 1 July 1914, 11; Courrier de Salem 9 July 1914, 6.
Figure 4 is drawn from an undated list showing the locations of families “rehabilitated” by the Salem Relief Committee in places other than Salem. It is incomplete: it does not, for instance, include the Lapointe family, who returned to St. Arsène, in Témiscouata County, Quebec. Nor does it count the couple who, after almost a month at Forest River, went to stay with their uncle in Greenville, New Hampshire. It also does not include the families of at least three workers recruited by M.H. Dumas to work in a factory in Cahoes, New York, those whom another labor agent recruited to Amoskeag Mill in Manchester, New Hampshire, or the thirty-seven sent by the labor committee to farm in Topsfield, Massachusetts. It does, however, provide some indication of the relative popularities of different locations to which refugees moved. The vast majority stayed nearby, in the North Shore cities of Beverly, Danvers, Ipswich, Lynn, Marblehead, and Peabody. Fewer went to the Merrimack Valley cities of Lowell and Lawrence, both industrial centers of the French-Canadian diaspora. Smaller numbers traveled to other cities in Massachusetts and other New England states. Notably, few families traveled to major Franco-American centers like Fall River, Mass.; Manchester, N.H.; Holyoke, Mass.; Lewiston, Maine; Woonsocket, R.I.; or Worcester, Mass. Of these, only Manchester welcomed more than one family on the list.

66 “Number of families rehabilitated in outlying towns,” undated list, third unlabeled folder, Miscellaneous collection of circulars, etc., 1914, box I, Salem Fire Collection, E S1 F6 1914, PEM.

67 Courrier de Salem 24 July 1914, 8.

68 Courrier de Salem 31 July 1914, 8.

69 Courrier de Salem 24 July 1914, 8; 31 July 1914, 8; Salem Evening News 30 June 1914, 1.

The relief committee list of cities corresponds to the news reported by Arthur Beaucage, the editor of the *Courrier de Salem*. On July 24, he estimated that 150 French-Canadian families had moved to Lynn, and 90 families each to Danvers (comprising 700 people) and Beverly.\(^1\) A week later he greatly upped his estimate of the number of families in Beverly to 400, and on August 7 he said 214 families were in Lynn.\(^2\) Whether or not his numbers were correct—the second Beverly estimate in particular is likely to have been inflated, since it helped him make the point that a new church was needed in that city—they did demonstrate that, in accord with the numbers from the relief committee, the bulk of Salemites went to nearby North Shore cities. Other towns and cities in Massachusetts, elsewhere in New England, and Quebec are mentioned very occasionally as destinations for individual families. The families that left Salem did not go far; for the most part they stayed in the area and did not venture far either within the French-Canadian diaspora or back to Quebec.

The geography of this dispersal is important because it helps give shape to the French-Canadian diaspora in New England. Despite being migrants, Salem’s French Canadians had built communities, networks, and institutions that kept them in Salem and its environs. The large Franco-American centers in New England—measured either in population or in percentage of the local population—do not appear to have exerted much pull on Salem’s refugees. As we will see in greater detail in Chapter 6, the major ethnic fraternal orders helped to raise money for sufferers, as did Manchester’s French-Canadian

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\(^1\) *Courrier de Salem* 24 July 1914, 1, 8.

\(^2\) *Courrier de Salem* 31 July 1914, 1; 7 August 1914, 8.
newspaper. Yet these relief funds were quite small, suggesting that the distance French Canadians in Salem felt toward their compatriots was reciprocated. This distance is also seen in newspaper coverage. Though French-language newspapers elsewhere in New England covered the fire, they did not always do so as a communal story. The initial coverage in Manchester’s *Avenir National*, for instance, did not mention French Canadians on the front page. When the article finally got to them on the fifth page, it was only in the context of listing which institutions burned down; the comment was about the destruction of St. Joseph’s, rather than of the French-Canadian community. Coverage was also slim in Quebec newspapers. Montreal’s *La Presse* printed news of the fire for three days. However, *Le Progrès du Golfe* was the newspaper in Rimouski, the largest city in the region from which most Salem Canadians had come. It never reported on the fire.

Some burned-out Salem families did move permanently, or at least very long term, if only to neighboring cities. John Sumner’s father, for instance, worked at United Shoe Machinery. His family left Salem for good, and after staying for a few days his father’s parents, they eventually moved to Beverly, close to his father’s work. Franco-Americans who moved to Danvers and Beverly were sufficiently stable that over the

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74 *Avenir National* 26 June 1914, 1, 5.

75 *La Presse* 26 June through 8 July 1914.


summer they began agitating for French-language national parishes in those two cities.\textsuperscript{78} In September, the \textit{Courrier de Salem}, a vocal agitator for the proposed parishes, noted sadly that 300 Franco-American school children in Danvers had started public school—where the author though it was all but guaranteed they would lose both their language and their religion—since there was no French parish school.\textsuperscript{79} Similarly, a good number of members of Salem’s Laurier Lodge of the Union St.-Jean-Baptiste transferred to other lodges, and still more fell off the organization’s rolls entirely, suggesting that they left Salem permanently.\textsuperscript{80}

Other families, even when they had migrated to Salem earlier in their lives, apparently considered it home and wanted to return. One man mentioned in the \textit{Courrier} originally went to Lewiston, Maine, but a few weeks later moved back to Salem, where he lived at Forest River.\textsuperscript{81} Elie and and Adele Gagnon had moved to Salem from St. Arsène, Quebec, in 1889 as young parents of a single son. By the time of the fire, they had lived almost half their lives in Salem, where they had raised a total of thirteen children, and where Elie worked on the Boston and Maine Railway. According to family lore, during the fire Adele had sprayed holy water around their apartment in hopes of protecting it, until Elie insisted, “It is time to leave.” Homeless, they made their way to

\textsuperscript{78} \textit{Courrier de Salem} 24 July 1914, 1; 31 July 1914, 1, 5; 1 October 1914, 1; 17 December 1914, 1.

\textsuperscript{79} \textit{Courrier de Salem} 11 September 1914, 8.

\textsuperscript{80} “Programme-Souvenir a l’occasion des Noces d’Argent du Conseil Laurier No. 72, Union St-Jean-Baptiste d’Amérique,” 23 June 1929, in folder “[Laurier No. 72, Salem, Massachusetts,] Old Correspondence Only,” Union St-Jean-Baptiste Corporate Archives, Woonsocket, R.I. (hereafter USJBA archives). The souvenir program says only that “un bon nombre” of members transferred and “un certaine nombre” left the organization.

Maine, where Adele had relatives. Adele wanted to stay there with her relatives, but Elie insisted on returning to Salem. Unlike the church-goers and lodge members who joined other local organizations when they got to their new cities, some were not so quick to leave their home organizations, and we may assume that those people expected, at least, to return to Salem. When the Laurier Lodge elected its six officers for 1915 in December, four of them were living in nearby cities. Two years later, all of the lodge’s officers gave their addresses in Salem, including two of the same men.

A third category, like the man who moved to Forest River after some time in Lewiston, traveled more than once after they lost their homes. By two weeks after the fire, all but two of the seventy overcrowded families at Bessom Beach in Marblehead had either moved to Lynn or gone back to Canada. Similarly, a Franco-American family that had gone to Fitchburg moved to Lynn in late August. For the first week after the fire, the population of Forest River Camp kept growing, as refugees returned to Salem. It was these people—homeless, unsettled, often uncomfortably overcrowded, and geographically up-for-grabs—who were at the center of the dispute over where refugees should live. In the first week after the fire, there started a concerted effort to encourage or force refugees into the camps.

Five days after the fire, on Tuesday, June 30, the newspaper reported that

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83 Rapport de l’élection des officiers, 2 December 1914; Rapport de l’élection des officiers, 6 December 1916, folder “Laurier No. 72, Salem, Massachusetts, Election Results Only,” USJBA archives.

84 Minutes of Health Committee meeting, 9 July 1914, 5:00 p.m., “Letters, reports and records relating to the Salem Fire,” E S1 F6 1914 10, PEM.

85 Courrier de Salem 21 August 1914, 8.

86 Salem Evening News 29 June 1914, 5.
“isolated” refugees at “more or less distant points from the center of the city,” either in outlying camps or making homes for themselves in tenements or friends’ homes, were complaining that they could not get food and bedding from the relief committee. The relief committee responded that they held “no disposition . . . to hold back necessities from any of the people,” but that if people wanted this immediate aid, they would have to come “to the two concentration camps” at Bertram Field and Forest River Park. In other words, aid was contingent on families being willing to accede to the military authority and strictures of camp.87

The next evening, refugees began to receive another message of why they should go to the “concentration camps” when newspaper ran two stories of overcrowding—the twenty-five people on Lawrence Street and the concerns from Ward 1 residents. The latter article raised the specter of a public health crisis, suggesting that allowing refugees to stay in overcrowded tenements could lead to an epidemic, not just for those in the building but for the whole city.88 The cure for this unhealthy and dangerous overcrowding could be found in the next evening’s paper: camp life. “In spite of the rain, the refugees in the camps are comfortable,” the paper promised on its front page. “They are far better off than herded into buildings, with less liability of sickness or an epidemic.”89 Inside, the paper was even stronger. People’s health would be “improved rather than weakened by camp life. Many of the campers are people who have not had a vacation from hard work in years and while their present life is anything but a vacation it

87 Salem Evening News 30 June 1914, 10.
88 Salem Evening News 1 July 1914, 7, 11.
89 Salem Evening News 2 July 1914, 1.
in time becomes regarded as at least a relaxation from the grind of years. In many cases more good than evil will result from camp life.” Despite rumors to the contrary, the newspaper urged, despite the rain, it was better to be in tents than in overcrowded tenements.90

The publicity campaign continued the next day. The News’s “Man about Town,” an anonymous columnist on the editorial page, reported that because of the rainy weather, some had suggested that refugees be moved indoors to the high school and normal school. “No worse move could be made,” he confidently responded. “Tents, properly pitched and cared for, are as dry as the proverbial bone and perfectly comfortable. I know from years of experience, not only with the militia on all the recent maneuvers, some of which were campaigns in the mud and rain, but from spending my summers for many seasons under canvas.” Those unlucky enough not to have been camping, the militia would help teach how to stay dry in tents. No doubt remembering his own happy camping expeditions in the woods or the countryside, he insisted that keeping refugees out in “God’s pure air” would keep them healthy. “Don’t worry about the refugees. They will be all right,” he promised.91 In a news article, the chair of the health subcommittee of the relief committee, Dr. Walter Phippen, appeared to agree. Though he preferred to summer at his cottage on Cape Cod rather than “under the canvas” with the Man about Town, he urged that the city “close the shelters at the Salvation Army and Father Matthew halls” and send their residents to the camps.92

90 Salem Evening News 2 July 1914, 12.

91 Salem Evening News 3 July 1914, 4.

92 Salem Evening News 3 July 1914, 9; Account marked “Written by Dr. Walter G. Phippen, 31 Chestnut St. Salem in 1964,” and [Phippen?] to William H.D. Barr, 21 July 1914, both in “Letters, reports and records
If indeed this is what Phippen wanted, it was a change from what he and his committee had advocated a few days earlier. Three days after the fire—before the News began its drive to get refugees to move to Bertram Field and Forest River Park—his committee recommended that “all camps be depleted as fast as possible,” for precisely the same reasons the News advocated the opposite. “The committee believes that it is better to have refugees slightly crowded in houses, rather than in camps, because of the difficulty of maintaining satisfactory sanitation.”\textsuperscript{93} The next day, the committee reaffirmed its position: “It was reported that there are scattered groups of refugees in houses, and it seems best to the committee that these persons should remain in houses rather than go to the different camps, but there should be some medical inspection of these groups.”\textsuperscript{94} We cannot know whether Phippen changed his mind later in the week, perhaps because he perceived an improvement in camp sanitation, whether the newspaper misquoted him, or whether he continued to believe that sufferers would be healthier inside but wanted them in the camps for some other reason.

Whether for reasons of public health, efficiency, or power, Salem’s elites wanted refugees to live in the camps; there, it was easier to control their labor and family life, and they were subject to military discipline. Refugees, in contrast, apparently preferred to stay with friends and families, even if it meant crowding dozens into a house. Though the elites had the power of the state on their side, in the forms of the militia and the relief

\textsuperscript{93} Minutes of Health Committee meeting, 28 June 1914, 5:00 p.m., “Letters, reports and records relating to the Salem Fire,” E S1 F6 1914\textsuperscript{10}, PEM.

\textsuperscript{94} Minutes of Health Committee meeting, 29 June 1914, 5:00 p.m., “Letters, reports and records relating to the Salem Fire,” E S1 F6 1914\textsuperscript{10}, PEM.
committee, refugees were able to use the state’s concern for public health and its desire to concentrate sufferers at camps to their own advantage.

We can see this process in the example of Salem’s Eastern European Jews, who according to the Red Cross comprised four percent of the fire’s victims, or 139 families.\(^{95}\) (The American Jewish Committee’s *American Jewish Year Book* counted between 600 and 700 homeless individuals.\(^{96}\) After the fire, between fifty and eighty individuals found shelter on the second and third floors of Rome’s Furniture Store on Lafayette Street. The conditions were terrible: the building was old and ramshackle, with steep, narrow staircases and bad plumbing. The water gave out entirely over the weekend. Despite this, the building was dry, it allowed the community to stay together, and it provided a place for kosher cooking. This last seems to have been particularly important, and by one estimate, in addition to the people who slept in the building, another twenty or thirty ate there.\(^{97}\) On Sunday, June 28, the chairman of the general relief committee asked the medical committee to inspect the premises.\(^{98}\) There is no record of what the inspector found, but there was no attempt to make the residents move. It is likely, though, that the residents asked for help in making their lodgings more comfortable, and especially for the provision of a plumber to fix the water and the broken toilets, because when none had arrived two days later, one of the residents came to the Armory demanding one. Rather


\(^{96}\) Herman Bernstein, ed., *American Jewish Year Book 5675* vol. 16 (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1914), 143.

\(^{97}\) Col. Frank A. Graves to Adj. Gen. Charles H. Cole, 1 July 1914, MNGMA.

\(^{98}\) Minutes of Health Committee meeting, 28 June 1914, 5:00 p.m., “Letters, reports and records relating to the Salem Fire,” E S1 F6 1914, PEM.
than send one, the head of military operations in Salem, Col. Frank Graves of the 8th Regiment, made a personal inspection. What he found outraged him: “The building is full of flies and dirt and all its rooms are filthy and nauseating in the extreme. Its toilets are insufficient and filthy, and dirt of all kinds prevails to such an extent that the place is reeking with foul odors.” Graves ordered the building closed and its residents transferred to Bertram Field. In consolation, Jews were given a separate section of the camp, their own cook, and their own cooking equipment. The community was apparently sufficiently satisfied with this arrangement that in addition to the people forced from Rome’s Store, forty more came to the camp from Beverly.

We see in this story the way that both the relief authorities and refugees used location to negotiate and contest authority and conditions. Though Graves may have been exaggerating the bad conditions in the building, it is clear that the people living there were dissatisfied too, or they would not have sent the emissary off to demand a plumber. Yet they preferred to live there than Bertram Field, since they could stay together and eat kosher food. When the authorities let them have a separate section of the refugee camp and allowed them to maintain their dietary rules, they agreed to recognize military authority and move to the camp. In order to make Bertram Field acceptable to

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99 Graves to Cole, 1 July 1914, MNGMA.

100 Minutes of Health Committee meeting, 1 July 1914, 5:00 p.m., “Letters, reports and records relating to the Salem Fire,” E S1 F6 1914 1b, PEM; Salem Evening News 2 July 1914, 13.

101 Minutes of Health Committee meeting, 2 July 1914, “Letters, reports and records relating to the Salem Fire,” E S1 F6 1914 1b, PEM; Salem Evening News 2 July 1914, 12.

102 Salem Evening News 2 July 1914, 12. The specific numbers are a bit dodgy. Graves estimated fifty to sixty individuals living above Rome’s Store, and eighty people eating there. The Health Committee twice reported that fifty-three individuals were moved from Lafayette Street to Bertram Field. The newspaper said it was eighty, plus forty more from Beverly.
the Jewish community—that is, to get them to move from the space over Rome’s Furniture Store to the outdoor space of the camp—the militia had to accept a change in the camp’s geography.

The Franco-Americans at Forest River fought similar battles over the space within their relief camp. In both cases, residents worked to make the camp understandable to themselves, and the militia worked to impose legibility from above. The camps, especially Forest River, were crowded and busy. “One can easily lose a comrade there and not find him for an hour, so extensive is the camp and so thick the crowds,” a reporter wrote.103 The density—the thickness—that the reporter noted was not just of people, though it was certainly that: in a space roughly 29 acres about 300 families, made up of around 1,700 people, lived in 274 tents.104 It was also a density of information, of relationships, and of knowledge. The militia, unfamiliar with the customs, the language, and the personalities of the residents, worked to make them legible by shaping the space of the camps; the residents worked to preserve their own local knowledge by resisting the militia’s shaping.

The tents in which refugees were housed were erected in strict, straight order. A snapshot, taken or collected by Flora French, shows the tents, lined up in rows, all indistinguishable.105 Arranged in seventeen streets—all nameless, so far as the official record was concerned—it must have been difficult to tell one tent from another, never

103 Salem Evening News 2 July 1914, 12.

104 Salem Evening News 1 July 1914, 10; 3 July 1914, 4; Courrier de Salem 9 July 1914, 6. For the size of Forest River Park, see City of Salem, Manual of the City Government 2001 (Salem, Mass., 2001), 77.

105 Photo album gift of Miss Flora E. French, Miscellaneous collection of circulars, etc., 1914, box II, Salem Fire Collection, E S1 F6 1914, PEM.
mind to explain to a friend how to find one’s temporary home. Finding friends or former neighbors was made still more difficult by the refusal of the Post Office to disclose people’s new addresses. Because people filed change-of-address notifications with the Post Office, it was the best source for knowing where burned out families were now living. Yet postal privacy rules forbade revealing addresses or similar information for purposes besides mail delivery. Salem’s postmaster received special permission from Washington to share the information with the relief committee—effectively an extension of the state—but not with anybody else. That meant that an individual who wanted to find a friend had to go to the information bureau of the Now and Then Hall instead of the post office that had been established at Forest River Camp. As always, the substitution of regularized, central knowledge for the complexity of local knowledge made the camp easier to govern, but harder to live in. Neat, straight rows of tents were good for patrolling, but bad for finding friends and neighbors, and regulations intended to protect postal customers’ privacy made it harder for them to reconstruct their communities.

Identical, neatly ordered tents were an inadvertent erasure of local knowledge, artefacts of the militia’s desire for order and regularity. Similarly, the Post Office’s

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106 Salem Evening News 2 July 1914, 12. Neither the militia records relating to the camp nor newspaper reports ever mentioned names or other designations for the streets.

107 Robert Ellis Smith, Ben Franklin’s Web Site: Privacy and Curiosity from Plymouth Rock to the Internet (Providence, R.I.: Privacy Journal, 2000), 55-6. Thanks to Deirdre Mulligan and Chris Hoofnagle for their help on the history of postal privacy.

108 Salem Evening News 30 June 1914, 8; 2 July 1914, 12.

reticence was the unintentional side effect of a long-term commitment to confidentiality.\textsuperscript{110} In contrast, some erasures of local knowledge were intentionally designed to destabilize residents’ lives. Captain Blanchard of the 2nd Corps of Cadets warned, “It is easy enough to establish camps; it is more difficult to discontinue them,” and he and fellow officers worked to make it easier.\textsuperscript{111} One camp commander—Montayne Perry did not identify him, but it was likely Blanchard—frequently shifted the rows of tents, making families remove their belongings while the tents were moved and then reestablish their homes elsewhere. “No use of letting some folks get to feeling too settled,” he told Perry. “Some of them would be willing to stay here till the judgment day if we made them too comfortable.”\textsuperscript{112} Similarly, Blanchard objected to refugees building furniture, cooking shacks, or ice boxes, since they signaled permanency. Ovid Pelletier, the man Blanchard sparred with over the availability of work, attracted the captain’s attention because he had built a wooden bedstead, table, and benches.\textsuperscript{113}

Blanchard and his fellow officers worked to dominate the camp’s space. Arbitrarily forcing families to move their belongings from one part of the camp to the next served as a reminder of who was in charge. So too did harassing children to clean up any rubbish that was lying around.\textsuperscript{114} Yet residents fought back, claiming the camp and its space as their own. Pelletier’s furniture was crafted from what Blanchard termed “camp lumber,” an appropriation akin to poaching; not only did Pelletier find the

\textsuperscript{110} Smith, \textit{Ben Franklin’s Web Site}, 49-57.

\textsuperscript{111} \textit{Salem Evening News} 3 July 1914, 6.

\textsuperscript{112} Perry, \textit{Relief}, 16.

\textsuperscript{113} \textit{Salem Evening News} 3 July 1914, 6.

\textsuperscript{114} \textit{Salem Evening News} 3 July 1914, 4.
materials he needed to improve his quality of life, he also enacted resistance to the military by taking its property. Other residents refused to bend to military order and maintained their tents as they had previously lived. The News reporter who toured Forest River with Blanchard noted that some tents were “arranged in orderly fashion; more, in the helter-skelter heap which is so familiar in the tenements.” The reporter meant this comment as a complaint or an insult, but it demonstrates the way camp residents worked to recreate a sense of neighborhood normalcy after their lives were upended by the fire. Camp residents resisted the military order by finding ways to create and recreate their own local knowledge. To fight the sameness of their tents, and make navigation easier, families pinned pieces of paper with their names to the outside of their tents, creating what the newspaper termed “a rude substitute for a doorplate.” The Courrier advocated that refugees rename their camp Binetteville to honor the assistant priest who, in the absence of the traveling pastor, was the community’s spiritual leader. It is unclear if anyone took the newspaper up on the idea—the nickname did not appear again in its pages or ever on the pages of the English-languate Evening News, which preferred the formal Forest River Camp or, once, the folksier “New Frenchtown”—but the suggestion indicates Franco-Americans’ desire to claim the space as theirs. So too did residents’ description of the camp as home. When Joseph Bérubé and his wife visited his uncle Bernard Thibeault, a former Salemite then living in Greenville, New Hampshire, the Courrier described them as “of Forest River Park,” as if that were their permanent

115 Salem Evening News 3 July 1914, 6.
116 Salem Evening News 30 June 1914, 10.
117 Courrier de Salem 9 July 1914, 6. On Donat Binette and pastor Georges Rainville, see Chapter 6.
118 Salem Evening News 2 July 1914, 12.
address. Converely, the French paper noted in mid-July that Forest River residents were entertaining visitors in their tents, treating them like the apartments and tenements that had burned down.

Not all domination and resistance was on a symbolic or discursive level. On the Sunday after the fire, Arthur Tremblay set up a stall to sell beer to Forest River refugees and their visitors. Soon after he started, though, the police came to arrest him for violating Salem’s strict—if unevenly enforced—liquor laws. Although he was arrested and pilloried in the press, Judge George B. Sears dismissed the case for lack of evidence. Literally, Tremblay and his customers were making money and quenching their thirst, respectively. They were materially claiming space as their own, attempting to exert control over it and define what was appropriate and acceptable behavior there. Tremblay’s brief stay in jail was equally material and real, the way the police exercised their greater coercive power to determine what was acceptable at Forest River Park.

Another way in which residents and the police battled was over relief fraud. After the first day or two, when the relief committee prided itself on keeping to a minimum of “red tape” and a willingness to give help to whoever asked, it became stricter and demanded more proof of a refugee’s status and need. On Tuesday, five days after the fire, the newspaper reported the committee’s complaint that there was not “the proper cooperation between the refugees and their friends and the authorities.” Often, the committee complained, refugees sent their friends to register them, but this system could

119 Courrier de Salem 31 July 1914, 8.
120 Courrier de Salem 17 July 1914, 8.
121 Salem Evening News 29 June 1914, 12, 11.
not go on. “The best way to accomplish results is for the people affected to go
themselves;” that way, relief workers could inspect their documents and help them if they
showed “the proper credentials.” Meanwhile, the committee promised to crack down
on those requesting aid but who were undeserving. “In other words,” the newspaper
wrote under the headline “To Eliminate Fake Sufferers,” “it is the aim of the committee
to do more for the afflicted and to cut off the lists all who were not burned out—in short
to get ahead of the fakirs.”

So began a concerted effort of arrests, publicity, and threats. That day, a burned
out man named Price D’Entremont somehow obtained two relief rations, instead of the
one to which he was entitled. He tried to sell the second, asking fifty cents for it—a
quarter of what it was worth—but he picked his customer poorly. The man he tried to
sell it to turned out to be a police inspector, who promptly arrested him. He was tried in
police court the very same day and was jailed for two months. The police announced a
plan of arresting “fakirs” for obtaining goods under false pretenses, a subset of larceny,
and publicizing these arrests. “When it becomes known, [that frauds would be arrested
and jailed, it] will undoubtedly deter many from taking advantage of the relief
committee,” the newspaper confidently predicted.

When Carlo Caielli, an Italian from Beverly who fraudulently applied for and
received a suit of clothes from the relief committee, was arrested, the authorities vowed,

“He will be made an example of in the district court.” The unmarried sixty-four-year-old

122 Salem Evening News 30 June 1914, 10.
123 Salem Evening News 30 June 1914, 9.
124 Salem Evening News 30 June 1914, 10, 11.
125 Salem Evening News 1 July 1914, 10.
told police that he was unemployed and so could not afford the clothes he needed, but this explanation did not sway the court the next day. Caielli was sent to jail, though the newspaper omitted his precise sentence. At the same sitting of the court, Judge Sears sent Felix Richards, a married, forty-five-year-old Salemite to jail for four months for stealing $69 worth of clothing. At the same time, though, Sears dismissed charges against Harry Pinchuk, a Peabody man infamous for being shot in a fight a few months earlier. Police accused him of fraudulently claiming a Salem address, moving into Bertram Field, and obtaining a pair of overalls from the relief committee, but Sears found there was insufficient evidence to warrant conviction.  

Stories like these, like all criminality, might be read as resistance on the part of the fraudsters against the state. The fraud perpetrated by Caielli, for instance, might be the hidden transcript of a poor, unemployed worker, scamming the elite out of whatever he could get—in this case, a new suit, an old coat and vest, a new shirt, a suit of underclothes, three pairs of socks, a pair of shoes, and a felt hat. That the story ends in Caielli’s arrest and imprisonment indicates the danger people faced when their hidden transcripts of resistance were exposed to the powerful. Read more expansively, however,

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126 Salem Evening News 2 July 1914, 1, 8, 11, 9. In 1914, Sears (b. 1865) was nine years into what would be 52-year term on the bench. The son of a Danvers shoe manufacturer, he graduated from Danvers High School but then prepped at Dummer Academy for Bowdin College. When he died, he was remembered as strict, especially in non-support cases and for his startling longevity on the court, which ended only when the legislature forbade sitting judges from simultaneously maintaining private practices. He gained notoriety in 1935 when he acquitted a private policeman who had shot his pistol, perhaps at a striker, while protecting scabs. After the acquittal, the Teamsters sought unsuccessfully to remove Sears from the bench, denouncing him as “unfair to labor and a menace to the public.” See “Funeral Friday in Danvers for Judge Sears; Tribute Paid During Court Recess,” Beverly Times 15 June 1960; “Judge George B. Sears Dead at 95,” Boston Herald 15 June 1960; “To Urge Curley to Take Sears off the Bench,” Boston Herald 19 September 1935, all clippings in Sears’s alumni file at George J. Mitchell Department of Special Collections and Archives, Bowdoin College, Brunswick, Maine. See also Lydia Ropes Dow Finlay, “A Short History of the First District Court of Essex,” T.S., 1977, E E1 C7 F1 1977, PEM.

127 Salem Evening News 2 July 1914, 8.
the stories of relief fraud and their prosecution demonstrate the broader resistance among the camps’ residents as they hid “fakirs” in their midst.

Faced with the difficulty of discerning worthy relief applicants from the fakes, the committee briefly considered forcing legitimate and approved refugees to wear “badges suitably inscribed and numbered” so that they could be kept track of, and so that illegitimate applicants could be turned away.\(^{128}\) Instead, authorities relied on the local knowledge held by police inspectors from the affected communities. As we have seen, a French-Canadian and a Polish police inspector watched the lines of relief applicants, exposing, running off, and sometimes arresting those they deemed ineligible. If those policemen knew who was a fraud and who was not, so too must have at least some of the other refugees, who would have been just as well versed in the neighborhood gossip, scandal, and innuendo as the policemen from the community. One of the men the Polish inspector was said to have caught was “known personally to the inspector to be worth $40,000 to $50,000,” and another man was said to have $25,000. Knowledge of that type of wealth would have been known by the larger Polish community, not just the policeman.\(^{129}\) Authorities recognized this local knowledge when they asked Father Donat Binette to ask his parishioners to turn in the fakes. On the Saturday morning after the fire, he warned his parishioners at the camp that “people from Lawrence were here getting supplies by claiming that they were fire refugees, [and he] asked the French people to be on their guard against these vandals.”\(^{130}\) Binette’s flock must have

\(^{128}\) Minutes of Health Committee meeting, 2 July 1914, “Letters, reports and records relating to the Salem Fire,” E S1 F6 1914_10, PEM. There is no record of why this plan was rejected.

\(^{129}\) Salem Evening News 1 July 1914, 11; 2 July 1914, 8.

\(^{130}\) Salem Evening News 29 June 1914, 5.
disregarded his request. Montayne Perry claimed that fall that a man from Lowell had stayed at Forest River all summer.\textsuperscript{131} The newspaper credited Frank Pelletier and John Bozek—the two ethnic police inspectors—with running off hundreds of impostors, including the rich men.\textsuperscript{132} Even if we allow for some exaggeration, it is clear that some number of refugees looked the other way when they saw people they knew were ineligible for assistance receiving it. In so doing, they were casting their lot with the members of their community and against the authorities. Though relief authorities claimed that the zealous prosecution of relief fraud was to the benefit of legitimate sufferers, those sufferers understood things differently and rejected the surveillance and power the state demanded. They created a sort of moral economy which valued solidarity over the marginal potential increase in aid they would receive if they turned in the “fakirs.”\textsuperscript{133}

Moreover, this moral economy appears to have recognized the legitimacy of applying for and accepting whatever aid was offered, regardless of need. The camp residents who refused to turn in the strangers in their midst and the people they knew were receiving too much aid demonstrated and created this legitimacy. “What’s the use of working?” a refugee asked Montayne Perry. “Aint [sic] there millions of dollars pouring into this city from all over the state, for us? I’ll stay right here and get my share of it, you bet!”\textsuperscript{134} The man she quoted went unnamed, and perhaps he was a composite,

\textsuperscript{131} Perry, \textit{Relief}, 16.

\textsuperscript{132} \textit{Salem Evening News} 1 July 1914, 11; 2 July 1914, 8.


\textsuperscript{134} Perry, \textit{Relief}, 15.
but we have no reason to believe that Perry invented the sentiment. If Perry—an outsider to the community—heard comments like this, we may assume that they were spoken openly among the refugees themselves. In another section of her book, she told the story of a woman who went to relief headquarters explicitly to see if there was any more aid she could get, regardless of her need. “I just wanted to make sure I wasn’t missing anything,” she told a social worker. In Perry’s telling, this attitude arose from “a part of human nature . . . to get one’s share of what is being given,” and she likened “the impulse which leads a broker to strive to corner the wheat market” to that which “lead[s] the poor but wily carpenter to try for two sets of tools, when they are being given away, that he may have one to sell to his less clever neighbor.”  

But what Perry saw as an intrinsically competitive impulse—her clear implication was that the clever carpenter is cheating the neighbor—was in reality a cooperative one. If people requested aid to match what their neighbor or relative got, it suggests they got encouragement, or at least information, from the friend whom they were trying to match. Fire sufferers shared information with each other and hid information from the authorities so that each could receive the maximum. In building and defending this moral economy, camp residents were not only demonstrating their solidarity with their neighbors and compatriots; they also resisted those who controlled the relief effort.

Even Police Inspectors Pelletier and Bozek must have sided with their compatriots to some extent. The *Evening News* may have claimed they ran off hundreds of frauds, but they do not seem to have arrested anybody, and the fakers’ names were kept out of the newspaper. Only one of the people charged with relief fraud was Franco-American—and

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135 Perry, *Relief*, 69-70, quotes on 70.
he had the misfortune to sell his misallocated rations to an undercover, Anglo cop. The Italians who were overrepresented in the arrests—in addition to Caielli, there was an unnamed woman shopkeeper from Beverly whom police charged with “[t]aking away all she could carry from the relief station” and two children named Sofusca who were let go with a warning after returning $25 worth of supplies to which their family was not entitled—were less protected by a broader community. Like other ethnic groups, Italians had officers in the camp who, after the departure of the National Guard, policed their own community. But that community was numerically smaller than either French Canadians or Poles, and it was less well organized institutionally. Salem supported three newspapers in English, and one each in French, Greek, and Polish. When the health committee wanted to advertise its regulations in the ethnic press, though, it could find no Italian medium. French Canadians had two parishes of their own in Salem, and the Poles had one, and as we saw in Chapter 2, Canadian and Polish clergy were on the relief committee. In contrast, as late as 1919, Italians had to make do with a small mission, indicating the relative poverty of Italians’ social networks and institutions. Their over-representation among those arrested for relief fraud reflected that they had a smaller and weaker ethnic community to protect them.

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136 Salem Evening News 2 July 14, 8; 3 July 1914, 2.

137 White armband reading “Officiale Italiano / de questo campo / Campe Police / Camp Police” in bag of ephemera, Miscellaneous collection of circulars, etc., 1914, box I, Salem Fire Collection, E S1 F6 1914, PEM.

138 Minutes of Health Committee meeting, 9 July 1914, 5:00pm, “Letters, reports and records relating to the Salem Fire,” E S1 F6 1914, PEM. The Polish and Greek papers do not survive, and it seems possible that the Health Committee was referring to newspapers from neighboring cities, not Salem.

The thinness of Italian formal institutions probably mirrored something similar for Italians’ informal community. Only 146 Italian families received any aid at all from the relief committee, which means that in the camp Italians had fewer friends, compatriots, and allies.¹⁴⁰ This left them less protected by the networks of solidarity and resistance that sheltered French Canadians, which, in turn, put them at greater risk of even more punitive measures. Forest River’s Captain Blanchard bragged to a reporter that relief authorities had “shipped” five families back to Italy, by way of New York City, at the expense of the Italian consul. “We have only two or three Italian families left and one of them has got to be broke up,” he said. The father of the family had been in Buffalo for months and the mother did not know how to reach him. She was too busy taking care of the children to do any other work, and so Blanchard and his colleagues were trying to put the children in an orphanage to free their mother’s time for paid labor.¹⁴¹ With a stronger local community, these Italian families might have avoided expulsion or forced disintegration. The mother with her husband in Buffalo might have been able to share childcare with another family, or fellow Italians might have sheltered the family through subtle means of resistance. Without the richness or density of the French-Canadian and Polish communities, Italians had less ability to resist the authority of military and relief authorities. Alternatively, the relative thinness of Italian social networks may have made these families less interested in staying in Salem, and they may have been perfectly happy, grateful even, for a free ride back to Italy. The Red Cross’s Ernest Bicknell told the newspaper of a Russian (presumably Jewish) woman who wanted to return home.


¹⁴¹ Salem Evening News 3 July 1914, 6.
She had put down a $10 deposit and received a ticket, which then burned in the fire. The relief committee spoke to the White Star Line and, the reporter paraphrased, “as a result of the committee’s effective work the woman started across the ‘pond’ Tuesday with her babes.” Her husband stayed in Salem and worked to reestablish a home.\textsuperscript{142} The Italians whom the New York consul paid to repatriate might similarly have preferred to return to Europe, especially since as a population Italians were considerably likely to remigrate to their home country.\textsuperscript{143}

Whether to Italy or Ipswich, refugees in the camps did indeed leave; Captain Blanchard’s fear that once established, camps would be impossible to dismantle was not well founded. The population of the camps fluctuated in the first week after the fire, as refugees and authorities contested their relative power. Soon, though, camp residents started to leave in earnest, and by a week and a half after the fire, Forest River’s population had fallen to about 1,000.\textsuperscript{144} (See figure 5.) After that, though, the decline in population stalled. People wanted to leave, but they were stymied because there was nowhere for them to go; the fire had created a housing crisis. The number at Forest River, reported a weekly English-language paper, “is steadily dwindling and as fast as a man finds employment he is supplied with the necessary articles to enable him to start housekeeping.” But the newspaper predicted that the rate of families moving out would slow. “The remainder of the camp is likely to remain some time, however, as there is not one unoccupied tenement in the city so far as can be ascertained. Many of the families

\textsuperscript{142} Salem Evening News 2 July 1914, 13.


\textsuperscript{144} Salem Evening News 8 July 1914, 2.
are moving to nearby cities and to towns, where they intend to remain only until the Salem mills are again in operation. Moving to another city, even a neighboring one, was not so easy, however. The same week, the Courrier complained that some Lynn landlords were refusing to rent apartments to families with children.

It was around this period that people increasingly began to move farther away. Just as the initial contest over the camps centered around labor, so did families’ decision to leave them. On July 17, the Courrier announced that the federal labor secretary had written to between 200 and 300 potential employers in New England, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Maryland, looking for people to take on Salem’s textile and leather workers. “Generally the responses received so far have been encouraging,” the paper reported, “but the department admits that not all of the responses are optimistic for those who seek employment for the burned out of Salem.” Given the worrisome cast of that news, it must have been a relief when, the next week, labor agents arrived from factories in Manchester, New Hampshire, and Cahoes, New York. Both companies already employed numbers of French Canadians. Two weeks later, the Courrier noted three families who moved to Cahoes. Although these migrations appear voluntary, others were less so. Some preferred unemployment and relief to a forced migration to a city where they were strangers. For those people, coercion returned. “They came and yanked down our tent and shoved us into an automobile truck and told us our future home

145 Saturday Evening Observer 25 July 1914, 1.

146 Courrier de Salem 24 July 1914, 8.

147 Courrier de Salem 17 July 1914, 5.

148 Courrier de Salem 24 July 1914, 8.

149 Courrier de Salem 31 July 1914, 8.
was in East Saugus!” one upset man told Perry. “What do they think I want to live in
East Saugus for?” Another family was grateful to have a job and a month’s rent paid in
Lawrence, but even they appear not have been given any choice in the matter.\textsuperscript{150}

And so the relief camps ended as they began, in a struggle over labor discipline,
families’ and individuals’ autonomy, and a dispute over the importance of community. To
the man who complained of being forcibly moved to East Saugus, the community he and
his family had built in Salem, their freedom to choose for themselves where to live and—if
one is to believe a cynical Perry—their ability to collect more relief were worth more
than the promise of employment and permanent housing in an unfamiliar city. Just as
some burned out Salemites had preferred to stay in the discomfort, filth, and
overcrowding of their temporary shelters rather than subject themselves to the arbitrary
power of the militia in the refugee camps, so too did some want to stay in those camps
when the labor committee dictated otherwise.

Neither the relief authorities nor the residents of Salem’s refugee camps were
unified groups. They acted on competing motivations, and so their actions were
sometimes contradictory. Authorities wanted the refugees in camps, where, concentrated,
they would be easier to deal with. But they also feared the creation of a relief camp in
which families would receive long-term aid without working. Refugees were similarly
inconsistent. Although they appear to have preferred to live outside of camps, they also
stayed there and avoided being moved out. Both groups of actors had conflicting
motivations, and they had to balance them as they made decisions. At the root of their
decisions and contestations, however, were questions of power, authority, and control.

\textsuperscript{150}Perry, \textit{Relief}, 18.
Refugees fought to retain power over their own lives, whether it was the power to decide who in the family would be in charge of night feeding, what jobs they would accept and for what wages, or where they would live. Relief authorities, particularly the militia, saw their roles as including the right to control the intimate decisions of their “inmates.” In Halifax a few years later, relief authorities and explosion survivors engaged in a similar set of negotiations and fights over authority, relief, and power. As in Salem, each group contained multitudes, and they contradicted themselves. They exposed the tensions inherent in progressive ideology: reformers wanted to rescue and relieve people, but they sought to make the cost of that help the loss of autonomy and control. Aid recipients, in turn, worked to maximize what they got but minimize the power they ceded over their lives.
Figure 4. “Number of Families Rehabilitated in Outlying Areas”

Other North Shore destinations include Gloucester, Manchester, and Saugus. Merrimack Valley includes Lawrence, Lowell, and Methuen.

Source: Undated list, third unlabeled folder, Miscellaneous collection of circulars, etc., 1914, box I, Salem Fire Collection, E S1 F6 1914, PEM. Totals here incorporate the handwritten corrections to the typed list.
Figure 5. Estimated Population of Forest River Camp

Sources: Salem Evening News 29 June 1914, 5; 30 June 1914, 10; 1 July 1914, 10; 8 July 1914, 2; 9 July 1914, 10; 10 July 1914, 5; 11 July 1914, 6; 13 July 1914, 12; 14 July 1914, 10; 15 July 1914, 4; Courrier de Salem 9 July 1914, 6; 24 July 1914, 8; 7 August 1914, 8; Saturday Evening Observer 25 July 1914, 1; Edward Dunbar Johnson, “The Salem Fire,” T.S., page 30, no date but after June 1915, E S1 F6 191411, PEM.
Chapter 4
“Before the Disaster They Both Worked”:
Family Economies and Family Solidarity Before and After the Halifax Explosion

“In Chelsea, the night after the fire,” Byron Deacon wrote a decade after the Massachusetts city’s 1908 disaster, “relief workers were struck with the sudden disappearance of a large proportion of the refugees, and in San Francisco there was an immediate and extensive exodus of refugees to suburban points.”¹ Deacon was a Philadelphia expert on disaster relief, and his book served as a manual for social workers and urban reformers who found their cities beset by calamity. Frederick Jenkins, the librarian at the Russell Sage Foundation, Deacon’s publisher, sent a copy of its galleys to George Murray, the Nova Scotia premier, who had written to experts and counterparts around the continent, asking for advice about how to handle the Halifax Explosion.² But the book arrived too late, and Halifax relief workers were as surprised as their earlier counterparts in Chelsea. Most North End residents whose houses were wrecked in the explosion “disappeared” and did not avail themselves of the ad hoc shelters established in the first several days after the explosion. Their choices to avoid the theaters, tents, and private homes opened for them suggests the importance and strength of the extended


families and other informal communities on whom homeless Haligonians relied.

At times, the choices made by North End homeless families confused or disappointed their South End counterparts, who were apparently genuinely motivated by an altruistic desire to help the sufferers. That the objects of their charity preferred other aid and support does not negate the original altruism. It does suggest, however, an uncomfortable aspect of charity: that even when offered in a spirit of genuine care, non-mutual charity carries with it a heavy burden of hierarchy that often makes it less desirable than mutual aid offered in a spirit of solidarity.

As described here, aid falls into two general categories: charity and solidarity. Charity is offered hierarchically by people and institutions that have more money, prestige, status, and power to people who have less of these things. Solidarity, in contrast, is given by imagined equals, in a spirit of sharing and mutuality. People give mutual aid within communities, and although there are of course inequalities of status and power within those communities, solidarity helps to even them out because the roles of benefactor and recipient are shared, indistinct, and fluid. This chapter shows that Haligonians preferred to receive mutual aid from friends, neighbors, and family members, and that they turned to the charity of official relief only when they had to.

The chapter proceeds from two basic questions: why did Halifax survivors not use the official shelters and where did they go instead? To account for survivors’ decisions requires us to understand the way Haligonians built and maintained their most important and intimate organizations: their families. From the Halifax Relief Commission’s detailed records, we can reconstruct the complex family economies created by Halifax families and understand how they relied on the productive and
domestic labor of many relatives. Within their families, working-class Haligonians practiced multiple survival strategies before the explosion, and after the explosion they used that experience to again use many strategies to survive. One of those strategies was to try to maximize the material and financial aid they received from the government. This strategy required a trade: in exchange for material resources, families had to give up some autonomy and privacy. This trade was especially keen for those with less power, like poor families, single women, and racialized groups.

Progressive relief represented a trade for the state as well. In order to adjudicate applicants’ claims, the state and its agents labored to make family economies legible. The ideology of rehabilitation called for relief authorities to, in Deacon’s words, “assist families to recover from the dislocation induced by disaster and to regain their accustomed social and economic status.”\(^3\) In order to determine each family’s “accustomed social and economic status,” trained workers had to investigate each claim carefully, rendering the complex, informal, and illegible family economy into simple, formal, and legible decisions about money, housing, and material goods. A key way the relief authorities rendered family economies legible was by trying to monetize all contributions. But as Christian Lantz, the Salem rehabilitation expert who came to set up the Halifax system, warned, “Rehabilitation does not mean that losses incurred would be made good from the Relief Fund. There is no prospect that the Relief Fund will be sufficient to cover more than a very small percentage of the loss.”\(^4\) Had all elements of the informal economy truly been rendered legible and accounted for monetarily, the state

\(^3\) Deacon, *Disasters*, 137.

\(^4\) *Morning Chronicle* 19 December 1917, 5.
would have gone bankrupt. Just as applicants had to balance maximizing the aid they received with their desire to preserve their autonomy and privacy, so too did the state attempt to maximize the legibility of its citizens while still seeking to keep some labor unrecognized. This calculus, too, put women and racialized minorities at a disadvantage, since it was their labor that could most easily be discounted.

The core questions of this chapter are how informal community and institutions—neighborhood, friendships, and especially family—responded to the explosion, and how they responded to, interacted with, and challenged the formal, official work of the Halifax Relief Commission. It also asks what the commission was unable to see or understand about families, and how these failures affected the relief it was able to provide. To do that, it explores how Haligonians extended their preexisting practices of family economies and family solidarity into the unfamiliar terrain of destroyed Halifax. It finds both continuity and change in family practices. Families continued to find and rely on multiple survival strategies, and they continued to depend on the labor of many family members. Extended families and migration retained their important roles. But in the aftermath of the explosion, positions shifted and some elements of families’ economies took on new importance. Relatives outside of Halifax—in the Nova Scotia countryside or farther afield—became sources of money, resources, and power. Families also adopted new strategies after the fire, most importantly relying on and demanding aid from the Relief Commission.

As we saw briefly in the first chapter, and as in Salem, in Halifax the Army sprung into action to provide rudimentary housing for those left homeless. “Relief bands of military were covering the Common and the slopes of Camp Hill with a mushroom
like growth of bell tents, which spring unto being with the passing minutes as if some
magical force was behind them,” wrote a breathless Chronicle. The tents—400 of them
according to Thomas Benson, Halifax’s commanding officer, but only 250 according to
the medical relief chief Frank McKelvey Bell—were equipped with floors, cots, blankets,
lights, and heat, but still no one would come use them.

A clearly upset Bell bragged to his superiors of the speed at which the engineer and
ordinance corps worked, but he complained about their intended recipients:
“Unfortunately although this cot hospital was complete and very comfortable no patients
could be induced to enter it. The patients were stunned and refused to be transferred into
the tents at night.” Despite his implication that the homeless were unreasonable to refuse
the heated tents, he also allowed that the weather made sleeping in tents undesirable.
“The frightful blizzard which occurred was largely responsible for this [that is, people
staying away] and with three feet of snow around the tents on the following day and a
howling gale blowing it was practically impossible to utilize this hospital.”

Benson, in his own report to Ottawa, blamed “the fact that people with homes shared what they had
with the destitute, and Institutions, Halls and Theatres were thrown open.”

Just as people refused to stay in the army tents, so too, for the most part, did they
refuse the offers of South End Haligonians to stay in private homes. Frank Gillis, an

5 Morning Chronicle 8 December 1917, 4.

6 [Frank McKelvey Bell?] “Notes of Medical Relief Committee of Halifax Disaster,” item 10, volume 2124,
Archibald MacMechan fonds, MG 1, Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management (hereafter
MacMechan fonds).

7 Memorandum, [Benson] to Secretary, Militia Council, 15 December 1917, file 86-2-1, “Explosion—
Reports,” box 4548, Records of Military District No. 6, RG 24-C-8, Department of National Defense fonds,
Library and Archives Canada (hereafter MD6 records). A copy of Benson’s memorandum is also item 250,
MacMechan fonds.
alderman from Ward 2 in the South and West Ends, was chair of the transportation committee. As part of his duties, he coordinated offers from his neighbors to house the homeless. When Archibald MacMechan interviewed him, he was clearly proud of himself, his coworkers on the committee, and his neighbors. “Citizens came in large numbers ‘flocking’ to give us places to put people. One said ‘We’ll take two families or two women or husband and wife.’” Yet the putative recipients of this aid were less enthusiastic. Rod Macdonald, a returned lieutenant staying with his parents, tried to volunteer their house for up to twenty-five refugees; volunteers at City Hall told him to expect some, “but a little lad and one family were the only occupants.” Without actual sufferers, the Macdonalds opened their house to the visiting nurses and doctors who were flooding into the city, and the next day twenty-five nurses were staying there.

There was a similar, if less stark, scene at the public shelters that opened at around 6:00 the evening of the explosion. Gillis, in his report to the relief committee’s secretary, counted among his duties on the transportation committee “herding to-gether” the homeless survivors “at different points in the devastated area, under cover in either St. Paul’s Hall, the Academy of Music, Strand Theatre, Columbus Club, in fact in any place where some warmth and food could be given them.” Other volunteers, like W.A. Major and returned soldier Ralph Proctor, told similar stories. Major and his chauffeur drove

8 Personal narrative of Frank A. Gillis, n.d., item 150, MacMechan fonds.
9 MS Narrative of Lt. Rod Macdonald, item 194, MacMechan fonds.
10 “Chronology,” folder 23.18, “Halifax Disaster Record Office – Research Notes,” Archibald MacMechan Papers, MS-2-82, Archives and Special Collections, Killam Library, Dalhousie University (hereafter MacMechan Dal papers).
11 F.A. Gillis to R.P. Bell, 26 January 18, item 196.5, Correspondence, Series C, Halifax Relief Commission fonds, MG 36, Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management, Halifax, N.S. (hereafter HRC Correspondence).
throughout town looking for refugees and bringing those who would come to shelters.

Major told of considerable confusion, since it was sometimes unclear whether a building had been opened as a shelter or not. Meanwhile, Proctor spent Friday—the day after the explosion—driving people around, finding people and bringing them to the Academy or St. Mary’s Hall. “Found people without any shelter, huddled together,” in the words of MacMechan’s notes. “Some were crouched against walls that remained standing. Some people at the reservoir.” Proctor himself stayed in Armdale, avoiding the indignities of shelter life. All told, Gillis estimated that on the first two days of the disaster, his committee moved about 5,000 people and another 1,500 the day after.

Meanwhile, people who lost their homes were searching out places to stay, but not necessarily the same places that were being offered. Eight-year-old Gertrude Hook, who lived in the North End of Dartmouth, spent the morning with her mother and brother seeking help for her brother, who had a badly broken leg from when the stove fell on it. Her father, an auctioneer, worked in Halifax next door to the Old St. Paul’s Church Hall. The proximity in everyday life may explain why, after he returned to Dartmouth to gather up his family, they all crossed the harbor again to return to the church hall, which had been turned into a shelter. As we saw in Chapter 1, locations of succor in ordinary times took on familiar but extended roles in the wake of the explosion. “And we were way up in the top floor,” Gertrude told Janet Kitz sixty-eight years later. “My father was covering windows with blankets and we were—many children—many people were there—that they gathered up.” Though they spent the first night in the parish hall, the next day

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12 “Experiences of a Relief Worker,” unsigned but probably W.A. Major, n.d., item 182a; and Personal narrative of Mr. Ralph Proctor, n.d., item 216, both in MacMechan fonds.

13 F.A. Gillis to R.P. Bell, 26 January 18, item 196.5, HRC Correspondence.
they went to friends of theirs, the Isnors, in Dartmouth. The Hooks then stayed with the
Isnors until Gertrude’s mother’s brother and a half-brother of her father came from
Ontario and took them away. After that, they moved to Detroit for a year.14

To relief workers and managers, the aid they offered seemed obvious: houses
were destroyed and uninhabitable, and the Army, people, and institutions of Halifax stood
ready to help. But the people they were trying to help preferred to stay in their ruined
houses, in the overcrowded homes of their friends and relatives, or even in hastily jerry-
rigged shacks. The Hook family experience is suggestive. They went to an official
shelter—indeed, Gertrude’s father helped to set it up—as soon as they could, but they
escaped the crowds of people “they had gathered up” and went to a friend’s house. The
language used by Gillis and his colleagues is telling, too. Gillis told of “herding to-
gether” refugees; Major too spoke of having to encourage refugees to come into
shelters.15 Another relief worker described to MacMechan that although “many people
opened their homes” to the homeless, “it was difficult to get people to leave their houses
for the various shelters, even if there was only one room there” in the damaged house.16

Given the choice, the Hooks, like their neighbors, preferred to rely on the
solidarity of their friends and family than to depend on official charity. Haligonians’
preference for help from family and other intimates was a survival strategy that was
based in and recapitulated the survival strategies they practiced during ordinary times. In

14 Interview of Gertrude Young, née Hook, 2 July 1985, interview 29, Halifax Explosion Memorial Bells
Committee Collection, No. FSG 31, MF 298, Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management (hereafter
Kitz oral histories).

15 Personal narrative of Frank A. Gillis, n.d., item 150; “Experiences of a Relief Worker,” unsigned but
probably W.A. Major, n.d., item 182a, both in MacMechan fonds.

16 Personal narrative of Mrs. Annie Anderson, n.d., item 114, MacMechan fonds.

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everyday times, families created an economy in which family members of different
genders and generations played a variety of roles and contributed to subsistence. During
the crisis of the disaster, these family economies were often upended—when, for
instance, a destroyed home could no longer house boarders, or when a wage earner was
disabled, or when a family member usually charged with caring for others now, thanks to
an injury, needed care herself—but families still supported each other, relied on extended
networks of intimates, and created new family economies.

Major was surprised, and perhaps a little impressed, by the response he got from
those whom he was trying to help. “In many cases, the men refused to leave the house,
but were thankful to have the women and children taken to places of shelter. Many of the
women also would not leave, preferring to exist in one or two small rooms in their own
residences, rather than go down town,” he wrote to MacMechan. He and photographer
Charles Climo spent all evening on Friday “calling at each house wherever we saw a
light, and asking them if they were safe, or if they wanted to be removed down town. In
one house we came across six men sitting in a small kitchen around a stove. All had sent
their women folk and children down to safety. One man had his arm broken, and head
bandaged, and the others were more or less injured, but they preferred to stay in their own
neighborhood, and were thankful and having their lives saved and the women and
children in safety.”17 Interestingly, Major’s document is the only one that suggests a
gendered component to this phenomenon, but he was not the only person to note the
reluctance of North Enders to leave their neighborhood.

17“Experiences of a Relief Worker;” unsigned but probably W.A. Major, n.d., item 182a, MacMechan
fonds.
The refusal to leave was surprising and confusing to relief workers and managers. On Friday, members of the St. John’s Ambulance Brigade—called V.A.D.s—started canvassing for people who needed relief. The brigade’s Lady Divisional Superintendent, Clara MacIntosh, found herself criticized for sending her workers into the devastated area “when no buildings were left standing and people must have fled.” The common wisdom of those who lived further south was that North Enders would be unable to stay in the devastated area, since houses there were by definition destroyed and uninhabitable. Nonetheless, MacIntosh wrote, “Many were found in uninhabitable houses, loath to leave them or not knowing where to go.” She described her workers finding a group of twenty people in a Richmond cellar—the house above them destroyed—some in pajamas and “very very hungry and cold.”

It seems unlikely that the latter of MacIntosh’s explanations, that these people did not know where to go, could be true, since as we saw in Chapter 1, people in the devastated area wandered throughout the city, and people appeared to know where to go for aid. More likely, as MacIntosh acknowledged, was that they were “loath to leave” their houses and their community.

Perhaps one of the people whom MacIntosh’s V.A.D.s encountered was Mrs. George Miller, who lived in the lower North End at the corner of Gottingen and Uniak Streets. She told MacMechan that she “drifted about for a week or ten days” after the explosion and “managed to live in her house somehow” despite its damage and the destruction of all her bedding. Miller’s house was less than a mile from St. Paul’s, which was used as a shelter; it was surely not through lack of knowledge of the

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18 Clara MacIntosh, “A Brief Account of Relief Work Undertaken by Mrs. MacIntosh & Assistants at City Hall Following Explosion Dec. 6th,” item 22, MacMechan fonds.

19 Personal narrative of Mrs. George Miller, n.d., item 185, MacMechan fonds.
alternatives that she stayed home. She must have decided that it was better for her to stay in her house than to live in a shelter.

The decision to stay in ruined houses was sometimes unintelligible to relief workers. One grumpy volunteer named Marjorie Moir complained about those whom she was helping. She found houses dark “except,” in MacMechan’s paraphrase, “for a glimmer of light from a basement window.” Knocking on the window and shouting to the people huddled inside, she would be told to go to the back door. “Great fun stumbling over ash-barrels and garbage-cans,” Moir grumbled sarcastically. Once a woman invited her inside for a bite to eat, and Moir agreed, expecting, rather unreasonably, “nice, hot coffee”; she was disappointed when offered ginger-ale and a piece of ginger-bread. “May-be,” she told MacMechan, “she thought the ginger would be heating.”

Moir was unhappy at the amount of walking she was asked to do in the cold and snow, and her comments show a basic disrespect for the people she was working to help. More important, they show that she could not comprehend them and the choices they made any more than she could imagine why it was unlikely that a woman in the basement of a destroyed house would offer her hot coffee.

Less unhappy but seemingly no more comprehending was Charles Burchell, a prominent lawyer. Like W.A. Major, he spent Thursday and Friday ferrying people around in his automobile. On Thursday, his task was to take the injured to hospital. Throughout the North End on Friday, he discovered people who had chosen to stay in shacks or ruins rather than come south to shelters. In the backyard of a house on Kane Street were a sailor and his wife. They had somehow fitted up an old hen-house to be a

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20 Personal narrative of Marjorie Moir, n.d., item 188, MacMechan fonds.
shack where they had stayed the night. This couple had themselves found eleven people—including a mother and four-day-old baby and two or three small children—and invited them into the shed. Several of these people, including the sailor’s wife, were wounded. At another location, Burchell found a sergeant and four women in a cellar, all gathered around an oil stove trying to keep warm. Notably, in both these cases, there were groups of explosion survivors who had come together for solidarity and warmth. It is not unlikely that the eleven people the sailor and his wife helped were neighbors or friends, rather than strangers; they were probably people whose relationship was unknown and illegible to an outsider like Burchell but which predisposed them to helping each other.  

At the corner of West Young and Agricola Streets, Burchell found a woman and her three children. Her husband, Burchell implied to MacMechan, had been killed at work. “She had a bit of curtain over the back door and they were living in the kitchen. They had no door at all. I tried three times to get her to go down . . . but they wouldn’t leave the house on account of the danger of having her furniture stolen.”  

It may well have been that this new widow was afraid of looters—as we have seen, the whole city made unreasonable decisions based on such fears—but it may also have been that faced with the death of her husband and near destruction of her house, she was clutching to the familiarity of home, trying to keep her family together in their time of greatest need. Staying at home, preferring to stay in their own familiar neighborhood, to echo W.A. Major, may have been the only way this unnamed woman had to retain order in her


22 [Personal narrative of] Charles J. Burchell, K.C., 27 December 1917, MacMechan Dal fonds. The Hillis Bros. foundry was destroyed and many workers killed, and since the husband was not home, Burchell seems to be signaling that he was dead.
These stories serve as the background to the questions posed in this chapter, because they are opportunities to see what North End residents chose to do after the explosion. Most of the time, we only know what relief workers wrote down; other than Mrs. George Miller, we only hear the confused, uncomprehending, disappointed, but still often sympathetic voices of Major, MacIntosh, Moir, and Burchell. Nonetheless, they offer us a way of seeing what relationships and institutions were most important to explosion survivors. We can begin to see in these stories Haligonians’ preferences for relief. Explosion survivors generally preferred solidarity to charity. That is, they were more comfortable receiving help from their friends and family, help offered mutually. The mutual aid within families and neighborhoods was based on preexisting, daily patterns of solidarity. Halifax families—especially, though not exclusively, those of the working class—relied ordinarily on a complex web of formal and informal labor and care. These networks could reach as near as the house next door or as far as Boston. These patterns of solidarity shifted, stretched, and shuddered in the disaster, but they were the basis of families’ survival strategies after the explosion. In contrast, Haligonians mostly rejected the charity offered by rich strangers. Survivors did not want to stay with the South End elites who kindly welcomed then. They were also wary of the official relief offered by the formal authorities. Working-class Haligonians worked to balance their desire to receive as much money as they could with their need to remain independent from the intrusions and social control of the state and its workers.

23“Experiences of a Relief Worker;” unsigned but probably W.A. Major, n.d., item 182a, MacMechan fonds.
In addition to the previously introduced sources collected or created by Archibald MacMechan and Janet Kitz, this chapter relies heavily on a simple random sample of 739 of the HRC’s pension files. As was standard practice in the period—probably spread throughout North America by Red Cross experts—every family that received aid from the hastily established Halifax Relief Committee or its successor the Halifax Relief Commission, received a file. On an intake form, called a “face sheet,” was recorded all the members of the family, their names, ages, occupations, wages, and address; what unions, churches, or fraternal organizations they belonged to; whether they owned their house; what they paid in rent; what they had lost; where their extended family lived; and similar social data. Then every time they had contact with the relief commission, the social worker or friendly visitor who spoke to them dictated a paragraph describing the interaction.24

For the most part the documents in these files were written by social workers, though occasionally the voice of an aid recipient is preserved. Nonetheless, because they contain the case notes of individual families, they are the closest we can come to understanding those families’ experiences after the explosion. The records—called “pension files” because their longest lasting use was in administering pensions, into

24 There are about 14,000 of these files housed in the 184 boxes of series P (for pension) in the Halifax Relief Commission fonds, MG 36, Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management, Halifax (hereafter cited as series P). About two thirds of the files are from people seeking restitution for minor property damage, and they contain almost no information. I read every sixth box of the first 119; I then read every file mentioned in the randomly selected files. This made for a total of a 739 sampled files. In each case I coded the file with a series of keywords. Because the collection was rehoused after it was catalogued, the physical boxes are not congruent with the box numbers listed in the finding aid or by which they are requested. Thus a particular box described in the finding aid might be stretched over two physical boxes, or it might be combined with a neighboring box, or both. When this was the case, I read through the entire first physical box that contained the described box number. My sampling technique was adapted from Konrad H. Jarausch and Kenneth A. Hardy, Quantitative Methods for Historians (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 68-74.
recent decades, to those widowed or injured by the explosion—were begun by the Halifax and Dartmouth Relief Committees, which were the independent, volunteer organizations created by relief managers in the days immediately following the explosion. They were superseded in January by a three-man Halifax Relief Commission, created by the Dominion government. The commissioners were chair T. Sherman Rogers, a prominent Halifax lawyer; William B. Wallace, a Halifax County judge; and Frederick L. Fowke, a merchant from Oshawa, Ontario. The Commission was granted wide powers for rebuilding the devastated area, held broad fiscal authority, and controlled apparently absolutely the funds given by the Dominion and Imperial governments, along with most of the private contributions.  

Most importantly for our purposes, the commission and its staff were the primary apparatus of the state that survivors dealt with. It operated courts in which property claims were adjudicated; it expropriated land in the North End and redeveloped it; and it decided who got what aid. The latter decision was made primarily by the staff of the Rehabilitation Department, which was helmed by George B. Cutten. Cutten, trained at Yale University as a psychologist, was then president of Acadia University; later, as president of Colgate University, he was a noted eugenicist. But while Cutten was in charge, most day-to-day decisions were made by a staff of women social workers.

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It is these social workers whose voices we hear in the pension files, and it is these social workers whom the aid recipients must have seen as the very embodiment of the state. Often, though not always, they were outsiders, experts converging on Halifax from Boston, Toronto, Montreal, New York, and Winnipeg. While they came to help, they also came to judge. They carried with them a progressive ideology of state assistance, which, as we will see, often conflicted with the expectations and desires of those they claimed to help. Partially because the investigators who made these files were making judgments about recipients’ worthiness and what aid they deserved, they are not entirely reliable. Each file exists only because an individual or family requested material aid from the state. Potential recipients were unlikely to reveal sources of income that were illegal or that might have raised questions about their respectability. Criminal activity like prostitution, smuggling, and theft were all therefore entirely absent from the Halifax depicted in these files, though they could not have have been absent in a port city overrun with soldiers.

Haligonians objected to the relief apparatus, especially in late December and early January, because it was seen as bureaucratic, slow, and ungenerous. It needed to know and understand the city before it could provide the promised assistance. But the process that social workers and their managers used to understand the city—to make it legible—obscured as much as it revealed. “The fact is that the admirable and infallible managers who are in charge of this relief business are so enamored of their routine and ritual, their paraphernalia of office equipment, their card catalogues, their indexes and all their

27 On this convergence, see Michelle Hébert Boyd, *Enriched by Catastrophe: Social Work and Social Conflict After the Halifax Explosion* (Black Point, N.S.: Fernwood, 2007). Specific examples, including the cities from which individual women arrived, are listed on a staff list, n.d. but around 25 January 1918, item 162.1, HRC correspondence.
multifarious apparatus, that they do not seem able to visualize the realities of the situation or get down to close quarters with the actual facts,” wrote a Mr. Justice B. Russell in a letter to the Herald. “A little common sense and real human sympathy would be worth vastly more just now than such an overdose of ‘BUSINESS EFFICIENCY’ and social service pedantry as we have been having for the past five or six weeks.”

To help resolve such complaints, the American Red Cross dispatched J. Howard T. Falk, a Winnipeg social reformer, to reorganize the rehabilitation office. But Falk’s reforms did little to resolve the problem of legibility. After meeting with the Herald’s publisher to quiet public criticism, Falk promised changes: that the 1,500 families that had registered for relief but had not yet been visited by an investigator would not be visited unless they asked for a visit; that all relief activities would be coordinated by a single office; that a “labor man” would be invited onto the rehabilitation committee; and that an executive committee would meet daily to resolve problems. Notably, the latter two reforms never took place, so the rehabilitation department never gained a working-class voice. The first reform solved the problem of too many unwanted inspections from intrusive visitors, but it did nothing to make working-class families’ economies more comprehensible to the authorities. Moreover, despite the fact that much of the rehabilitation staff’s job was to understand families’ complex domestic arrangements, Falk was insistent that his successor be a man.

Using the HRC’s pension files raises troubling ethical questions for a historian.

The records contain deeply personal information about ordinary individuals, from their

28 Halifax Herald 10 January 1918, 3.

29 J. Howard T. Falk, “History of Rehabilitation Work Since January 9, 1918,” 26 February 1918, item 162.5, HRC correspondence.
health to difficulties finding or retaining employment. Some files detail domestic disputes, and others mention encounters with the police. Moreover, because of the relative recentness of the events described in them, the children or grandchildren of the people discussed may still be alive. Contemporary state bureaucracies would certainly protect the confidentiality of analogous records, and contemporary beneficiaries of state assistance would provide the information with an expectation of privacy. Historian Suzanne Morton, using adjacent HRC records, recognized the privacy concerns raised by these records and chose to alter the last names of the families she wrote about.\(^3\) I have made a different judgment from Morton, and I will refer to families by their actual names. I come to this conclusion based on several considerations. First, I am writing more than fifteen years after Morton, and the children of those I write about are now most likely dead themselves. I do not think that grandchildren maintain a legitimate privacy interest for their grandparents. Second, unlike analogous contemporary records, the information I use here does not seem to have been shared or collected originally with an expectation of privacy. The files are replete with examples of Relief Commission workers sharing details with any number of people, seemingly without compunction, and families did not seem surprised by this. Third, I judge that any privacy interest that my subjects retain from the grave is overwhelmed by a competing interest to complete the historical record, and to elevate into scholarship the experiences of ordinary people. In short, I would prefer the grandchildren and great-grandchildren learn something about their ancestors from my work rather than have their forbears’ experiences hidden under a pseudonym.\(^3\)


\(^3\)I am grateful to my colleagues who participated in a lively discussion on this topic, especially Kim
Integral to this chapter is a map created from pension file data available at [http://www.duke.edu/~jar20/maps](http://www.duke.edu/~jar20/maps). This map—really a series of maps embedded together—contains a variety of relevant geographical data. Most important are markers showing the location of the homes on December 5, 1917, of the majority of the 739 families whose files I sampled. The map is inexact because the address data used is imperfect. Though most files included the family’s address before the explosion, some files list families at the address to which they moved later. Worse, it was not always clear what address was from before the explosion and which was after. Even in cases where the pre-disaster address was obvious, it was not always possible to map the address accurately. In the devastated area—that is, north of North Street and east of Willow Park—the task was relatively simple, because a map exists showing each building with its address. The farther the address is from that map, though, the more the specific location of the pin is an approximation. This is particularly the case in Dartmouth, where addresses typically only included the street name, not a number. Despite the approximations, the map remains useful for giving a broad geographical overview of the explosion’s effects.

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As in other places and times, Haligonians built complex and multifaceted family

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They relied on family members of more than one generation to earn wages in the formal economy. They relied on the domestic labor of unpaid family members. They engaged in a variety of informal and creative activities, like keeping boarders to earn extra cash or keeping chickens or cows to decrease their expenditures. Extended families cooperated, often renting houses or apartments to their relatives. In our sample of 739 families, 94 households included multiple members who earned formal wages; 56 kept boarders; 134 merited the keyword “family economy,” meaning that they obviously relied economically on multiple members; and 30 participated in informal economic activity. More families surely relied less visibly on the informal and domestic labor of multiple individuals, be it through scrimping, kitchen gardening, caring, or maintaining relationships with neighbors.

These family economies were, by their nature, multifaceted. Most obviously, they involved multiple family members working formally for wages. They also involved multiple generations living together, as when a parent owned a house and their children’s family lived with them there. In both these examples, the financial ramifications, through additional wages or decreased rent, are apparent. All family economies, though, were under-girded by the unpaid and normally unrecognized labor of women. I take for granted in this chapter that the unpaid, informal labor performed by women at home—what scholars refer to variously as reproductive, domestic, and care work, depending on the context and the specific set of tasks—is just that: labor. The economic and financial aspect of such work was explicit when it was performed for strangers, as when women

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were domestic servants or paid caregivers, or when they kept boarders in their homes. It was also explicit, as we will see at the end of this chapter, in the Relief Commission’s limited system of housework pensions. Even when not explicit, however, unpaid domestic labor’s importance in the family economy was paramount.34

The most explicit way families engaged in multiple survival strategies was to have more than one formal wage-earner. As a stevedore, Patrick Doyle’s income was unstable. The Doyles supplemented it with the small amounts made by his daughters, Margaret, twenty, and Alice, thirteen, who like many young women both worked at Moirs chocolate factory.35 Likewise with the family of shoemaker John Oxner, whose wages varied from $12 to $18 a week; son Louis, fifteen, brought home $8 per week as an apprentice baker under his foreman uncle, and his brother Fred, a year younger, earned $3.50 a week as an errand boy.36 Sixteen-year-old William Banks worked as an apprentice blacksmith, and he added his paltry wages to the money his widowed mother made assisting a school janitor.37


35 File 2230, box 65, series P. Although in some contexts “stevedore” denotes an employer or foreman and “longshoreman” denotes a laborer, in Halifax in 1917 the terms were used interchangeably, with “stevedore” appearing more frequently.

36 File 1283, box 48, series P.

37 File 462, box 30, series P. The file is inconsistent about William’s wages, once saying they were $2.75 and once $3.75 per week.
To these formal wages paid by an employer could be added money earned, often by women, in less formal ways. Margaret Oxner, John’s wife, contributed to the family’s budget by taking in plain sewing. The same was true for English immigrant Louise Denial, whose husband was a soldier stationed in Halifax’s Wellington Barracks. Back home, she had made money as a spiritualist lecturer and a clairvoyant, but she was unable to find an audience in Canada, so she sewed, mostly for soldiers. Also in this category were women who took in boarders or lodgers; though this clearly required labor, the amount was variable and not often counted with the formal wages.

Related to boarders was the money earned as a landlord. Working-class families often owned multiple houses, which they rented to strangers or relatives. John O’Toole earned $13.50 each week as a railroad laborer, but he and his wife, Catherine, owned two houses down the street, from which they collected rent. Similarly, John Gibson, age 70, had spent 20 years working as a blacksmith’s assistant on the railroad and then spent a decade as a teamster. During this time, he and his wife, Ellen, were able to purchase or build three houses, two of which they rented out. The income they earned supplemented the $12 per week that he had earned for two years as a blacksmith at the dock yard.

38 File 1283, box 48, series P.
39 File 104, box 18, series P.
40 In many turn-of-the-century American cities, a greater proportion of working-class families owned houses than middle-class families, and renting out a part of them for extra cash was common. In Detroit, at least, home-ownership was a largely immigrant phenomenon. See Olivier Zunz, *The Changing Face of Inequality: Urbanization, Industrial Development, and Immigrants in Detroit, 1880-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 152-8. The dynamics of home-ownership in Halifax, including whether working-class Haligonians were more like Americans or immigrants to the United States, is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but is something that future use of the HRC’s pension files could help determine.
41 File 4078, box 101, series P.
42 File 2298, box 66, series P.
The Gibsons also made money from a grocery store Ellen ran from their home. Though we do not know how much money she made from the store each week, when it was destroyed, it contained unsold merchandise worth $400 and carried $100 insurance. The Gibsons were not unusual. In my sample were twenty women and six men who worked as shopkeepers. Families appear to have made varying amounts of money from their stores. William Banks’s mother, Theresa, made sufficiently little from her small West End store that also needed to work as a cleaner at a school, where she was the personal employee of the janitor. This was a real hardship, since it made it more difficult to look after her invalid daughter and youngest son. The relative closeness of the school to her home, though, allowed Banks to balance her formal and domestic labor when the store could not support her family. Other times, selling groceries was an aspiration that promised an escape from the drudgery of wage labor. James Huntley worked as a laborer doing odd carpentry jobs, including as sextant at Kaye Street Methodist Church in Richmond. His seventeen-year-old daughter Elsie worked as a telephone operator, and in the past his wife, Lilly, had been a domestic. He dreamed of going into business as a fruit peddler, and two months before the explosion had bought, on credit, a horse for that purpose. The explosion destroyed his stock, and likely killed his horse.

Middle-class families, too, engaged in multiple economic strategies. George and Emma Hope were decidedly middle-class. He earned a healthy amount as a customs house officer. Living with them in separate apartments were a married daughter, whose

43 File 2298, box 66, series P.
44 File 462, box 30, series P.
45 File 2235, box 65, series P.
husband was overseas with the army, and a prematurely widowed daughter. The widow, Gladys, who had children of her own, had moved home in March 1917 when her husband, a barber, died. Since Emma could take care of her grandchildren, Gladys could work as a saleswoman at a department store. Their youngest daughter, Pearl, worked as a clerk in a millinery shop, and although she did not pay board, she sometimes gave her mother money. They did not own their own house, but the one they rented had a lot of land, which allowed them to keep cows, a horse, and several breeds of dogs. The horse was needed for George’s job, since he had a wooden leg but needed to get about to inspect cargoes. The cow was presumably kept for its milk. The dogs the family bred and made money from selling puppies.⁴⁶

Keeping animals was a common way to supplement a family’s formal income. Figure 6 shows a wrecked house and a group of men posing in front of it. In the corner stands a pig that has been freed from whatever enclosure it usually lived in.⁴⁷ Besides having multiple wage-earners and sometimes keeping a store, Theresa Banks and her family also kept ducks, presumably for meat or possibly eggs.⁴⁸ Jacob and Charlotte Bardsley and their family had a complex system relying on multiple earners in different generations, a plot of land in the countryside, and livestock in the country and city. Jacob worked at the cotton factory for just under $12 per month. Son Donald, eighteen, earned considerably more than that at the grain elevator. Daughter Hattie, seventeen, did piece

⁴⁶ File 335, box 26, series P (George and Emma Hope); file 4415, box 102, series P (Gladys Gill); file 4420, box 102, series P (Agnes Perry).


⁴⁸ File 462, box 30, series P.
work at Moirs chocolate factory and contributed $4 each week for her board. Henry, fifteen, worked in construction for $2 a day. In addition to this formal labor, they kept two cows and several chickens, which—like the several young children—were Charlotte’s domain. Just before the explosion, they had slaughtered one of the cows to sell the meat, but it was destroyed. While in a shelter in December, they managed to find several of the chickens to eat them, but the others died in the cold. They did not “live off” of their livestock, Charlotte told an investigator the next summer, “but woman says family find it very hard to manage without them now.” Charlotte clearly felt their loss more keenly than Jacob, since she complained quite bitterly about the small amount the HRC gave her for their loss. Jacob, less connected to the livestock and more mindful of the formal wages, undercut his wife and accepted the payment she would not, agreeing with the investigator that she was “very unreasonable.”

The differing responses of Charlotte and Jacob Bardsley suggest the ways in which the formal and informal parts of the family economy were gendered. Livestock, small shops, and boarders were women’s work, and often undervalued. Even when women’s labor brought obvious and direct economic benefit, it was often invisible, or—especially with boarders and livestock—it was imagined as merely part of the domestic labor that women did anyway. As we will see, this had consequences for the way the state compensated families for the loss of the income these activities brought.

The Bardsleys’ story demonstrates another point about family economies. That families engaged in so many economic activities suggests the precariousness of their finances. Take away one or two of the survival strategies and the whole of the family’s

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49 File 3592, box 89, series P.
financial system would come tumbling down. For many families, this is exactly what happened after the explosion. The Bardsleys found it “very hard to manage” without the livestock. Theresa Banks lost her job cleaning the school and, unable to raise capital to reopen her store, she had to work as a washer-woman, making a mere $3 each week.\(^{50}\) John Gibson died at work on the waterfront from the explosion, and his widow was forced to rely on an HRC pension until her own death in 1932.\(^{51}\) Margaret Oxley complained to a social worker that “they are having a struggle to get along. Before the disaster she was able to help a little by doing some plain sewing, but her sewing machine was totally destroyed, and she is most anxious to have same replaced.”\(^{52}\)

Nor was relying on younger generations a sure thing. Martin and Catherine Johnson lived in a house they rented for $20 per month. Martin, seventy, had been an invalid for the past ten years, and he and Catherine, seven years his junior, had long relied on their sons for aid. Each son worked to support his parents until he got married and moved out. Howard, the seventeen-year-old son, made an average of $17 per week as a boilermaker and gave almost everything to his mother. His younger sister Sadie, nineteen, stayed home to help take care of the family’s four boarders, from whom they got $6 each week. Sometimes Sadie worked as a nurse at the IODE Home for Defectives on Quinpool Road, where she earned $25 each month, but the long hours there had worn her out. George, a twenty-five-year-old soldier, also paid $6 each week in board when he was home, but the army had transferred him to Aldershot. When Howard was killed in

\(^{50}\) File 462, box 30, series P.

\(^{51}\) File 2298, box 66, series P.

\(^{52}\) File 1283, box 48, series P.
the explosion and the house was destroyed, this precarious family economy was upended. No longer could they rely on Howard’s wages, nor, without a house, could they earn money from taking in boarders.53

Widow Bridget Weston found herself in similar straights after the explosion. Her husband had died several years before, and then in 1913 her two older sons died, leaving her and the rest of the family—including an invalid daughter—mostly dependent on a boy then aged sixteen. Weston also supported herself by keeping roomers and boarders for a total of $27 per week—roughly what Sadie Johnson made in a month of nursing. The fall before the explosion, she told the HRC, her son bought a milk route for $1,000 “and was just beginning to build up his trade when the explosion occurred.” He lost his horse, sleigh, and other equipment, and replacing them cost nearly $200. To make matters worse, he had taken a loan for half the cost of the route, and half the loan had come due, plus he had to pay board at the house where he was staying. These costs made him unable to continue to contribute money to the family budget. “Family lost everything,” wrote the social worker, and they “have gone to live with married son who has a number of children and cannot afford to contribute to their support.” Weston was forced to send her invalid daughter, by now thirty-one, to friends in the country and to pay her board, since “she is absolutely helpless and must have care and be in comfortable place.” This left them dependent on the wages of nineteen-year-old Lyda, who made a mere $6 a week as a relief office clerk. In ordinary times this would have been enough for her to have boarded independently of her family, but it was far too small to support

53 File 2659, box 72, series P.
her whole family.\textsuperscript{54}

Even families that before the explosion had not relied on multiple sources of income could find their family economies disrupted by the explosion. Before the explosion, Annie Thompson, a thirty-nine-year-old widow, had lived in the North End in a house she had bought with her husband. Since her husband’s death a year before the explosion, she and her five younger children had been supported by her eldest son, Arthur, who earned a healthy $60 per month on the railroad. When their house and all their belongings were destroyed in the explosion, they went first to the shelter at St. Paul’s Hall, and then to the Theakston Apartments, which had become temporary lodging for many displaced families. But the building was too far for Arthur to commute conveniently to his railroad job, so he began to board at a house closer to work. This little bit of extra expense—Thomas paying for board rather than living at home—meant increased hardship for the family. In this way, the value of Annie’s domestic labor was made visible and evident, since once Thomas had to start paying for domestic labor, he could not afford it.\textsuperscript{55} For financial as well as emotional reasons, many families’ first priority was that the immediate family stay together. This was true for the Oxners, and true also of James Cody. With his wife in the hospital and his cobbling shop destroyed, when Cody got out of the hospital, he took a lower paying job as a railroad laborer to make ends meet. Their three children at first seem to have been staying in the hospital with their mother, but later Cody felt forced to put them temporarily in an orphanage. He was desperate, he told the HRC, to find a place where the family could stay together,

\textsuperscript{54} File 2682, box 72, series P.

\textsuperscript{55} File 4746, box 114, series P.
even if in a single room.\textsuperscript{56}

Although family economies like the Thompsons’ crumbled under the slightest strain, they also remained useful in the aftermath of the explosion. In ordinary times, families set patterns and expectations of support that remained durable in crisis. In other words, family survival strategies before the explosion stretched and expanded to help family members survive after the explosion. More than any other institution, survivors relied on family members for emotional and financial support and for access to shelter and food. In my sample of families, out of 194 families that experienced homelessness (about 26\% of the total), 29 (15\% of the total homeless) went to the wife’s parents; 40 (21\%) went to non-parent relatives of the wife; 19 (10\%) went to the husband’s parents; 34 (18\%) went to other family members of the husband; and 37 (19\%) went to the house of grown children. A further 28 relied on people described as friends—though in fact these “friends” were often distant relatives—and 20 found shelter with their neighbors or rebuilt with them.

An anonymous subject told Kitz about the way her older, married siblings made sure their parents and younger sibling had places to go. At around 6:00 the evening of the explosion, her siblings “came up, and they said you people can’t stay here another night here, in this condition. So my brother said, my sister said, I can take mother and Kay, and my brother said I’ll take my father. And we went down to their place to live. That’s the most important part of it.”\textsuperscript{57} Indeed, family members taking each other in was the most important part of relief, though it was mostly invisible and uncoordinated.

\textsuperscript{56} File 1283, box 48, series P; file 1604, box 54, series P. The file recorded Cody’s address but not why his family could not join him there.

\textsuperscript{57} Interview with anonymous (I), 23 July 1985, interview 85, Kitz oral histories.
The people who sheltered others—a total of 72 families in my sample—did so, often, at not inconsiderable inconvenience to themselves. Rita James, then a school girl, recalled going with her parents and siblings to stay with her married sister, whose “place was broken but not burnt.” Though the sister had only two rooms, she took in all her relatives. “Her place was a real hotel. Standing room only, but she didn’t care as long as people got in off the street.”\textsuperscript{58} Overcrowding was a common motif in Janet Kitz’s oral histories in 1985. Stella Harlan stayed with family, her grown and married sister. “We all stayed at her place, I don’t know how many there was, there was an awful bunch of us there. Of course we slept on the floor and everything else for weeks.”\textsuperscript{59} Likewise, Violet Kidd’s extended family all stayed the night at a house on Agricola Street a few doors north of North Street. Many years later, a combination of old age and distant memories meant she told a confused story to Janet Kitz—she described staying with a married sister, being ordered out of the house at night for fear of the magazine exploding, and later staying with distant relatives—but even if the details were incorrect, her overall theme was of a variety of family members rallying to help each other.\textsuperscript{60}

As with family economies before the explosion, the strategies deployed in its aftermath were complex and multifaceted. Before the explosion, Norman and Margaret Purcell owned their seven-room home in Richmond, where they lived with nine children, aged two-and-a-half to twenty. Norman was a hostler for the railroad, and the two eldest sons were a fireman and an automobile mechanic. Margaret kept house and looked after

\textsuperscript{58} Interview of Rita Castle, née James, 21 August 1985, interview 135, Kitz oral histories.
\textsuperscript{59} Interview of Stella Johns, née Hartlen, 23 July 1985, interview 87, Kitz oral histories.
\textsuperscript{60} Interview of Violet Prest, née Kidd, 2 July 1985, interview 23, Kitz oral histories.
the children. In the explosion, Margaret broke her arm, and the house was destroyed. Norman stayed home from work afterwards to build a shack in what had been their back yard, using material provided by relief. They sent the two youngest daughters to relatives in the country, and Norman and the eldest son stayed in the railroad’s roundhouse, which had been turned into a temporary shelter for employees. The auto mechanic son, meanwhile, stayed home from work to keep house, since Margaret’s injury prevented her from doing so. The family, used to relying on a variety of members in ordinary times, reshuffled their labor in a time of crisis but maintained the principle of multigenerational family support.  

As the Purcells’ story suggests, families used many strategies to keep themselves upright after the explosion. They did a variety of things, relied on multiple people in their social networks, and mixed and matched survival strategies. The Purcells demonstrate several common things families did after the explosion: splitting families up, relying on more or less distant family members for support, spending time in the rural areas outside of Halifax, staying in more formal shelters with strangers, and working to rebuild temporary shelter near their former houses. MacMechan, for instance, spoke to a woman named Mrs. Gibbs, who lost her husband, five children, two sisters, four brothers, her mother, three sisters-in-law, and twenty-five nephews and nieces. After the explosion, she wandered, dazed, into the woods in the undeveloped part of northwestern Halifax until, during the fear of a second explosion, she hitched a ride on a wagon with a number of strangers. Arriving in Rockingham, a Halifax suburb just off the peninsula, she stayed the night in one of the empty summer cottages there, relying on the charity of

61 File 4392, box 107, series P.
Rockingham residents, who brought mattresses and bedclothes to the refugees. The next day, she returned to the city, where she stayed with a married daughter. By the time MacMechan spoke to her, the woman was staying at a shelter at the Acadia Hotel with one of her surviving, unmarried children; the other three were still in the hospital. In this story, Mrs. Gibbs went out of the city on the first night, then stayed with a married daughter, then ended up at a shelter, covering nearly all of the possible places survivors could go.

But the support family members gave each other extended beyond housing. The emotional support Mrs. Gibbs’ daughter gave her after so much death went unstated in MacMechan’s account. More calculable were the tasks family members performed for each other. The Mountain family, for instance, used their thirteen-year-old daughter as a messenger to communicate with the Relief Committee, since her father was at work and her mother needed to stay home to mind the other children. As historian Lisa Levenstein argues in a different context, the work of applying for, qualifying for, and defending state benefits is itself an important, if unheralded, form of labor. After the explosion, this labor became an increasingly important contribution to families’ survival.

Especially immediately after the disaster, Haligonians retreated from the city. Halifax was a metropolitan center for an extended and multilayered hinterland. Most closely linked was the countryside of Halifax County. Somewhat more distant was the rest of Nova Scotia, including its smaller cities. Finally, Halifax drew from other parts of

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62 Personal testimony of Mrs. Gibbs, 2 January 1918, item 191, MacMechan fonds.

63 File 2291, box 66, series P

what is now Atlantic Canada, including Newfoundland. At least 112 families in my sample went to the country for shelter, and 81 left Halifax more-or-less permanently. The explosion caught Halifax in a period of urbanization, and many living in the city had family, or at least ancestral land, in rural Nova Scotia. “Those who had friends in the country flocked out of the city,” MacMechan wrote. “All roads leading out of town were filled with a steady stream of homeless refugees carrying what household possessions were left them on carts or baby carriages. Returned soldiers say it was like the French ordered to abandon their towns at the approach of the enemy.”65 Bertha Ryan went to stay with her uncle for about a week after the explosion. It was an obvious thing to do, she said, “because we belonged to the country, and that is where we—and went back home. That’s about all there was to it.”66 Her description of belonging to the country, even though she lived in the city and had a community there—she worshiped at St. Joseph’s Church, so she at least had her coparishioners—is telling, for it suggests the deep connection between Halifax and the surrounding rural areas. Urbanization was not unidirectional or permanent; families that had moved to Halifax from rural areas retained important ties to their ancestral homes. As with the practice of raising livestock within the city, this suggestion helps break down historiographical distinctions between urban and rural, country and city.

Anita Hartling was a recent arrival to the city from about thirty miles away on the Eastern Shore; she worked caring for an arthritic woman. During the warning of a second explosion, Hartling went to the Commons with her aunt and other family

65 Unsigned, undated essay, probably an early draft by MacMechan, labeled “The Halifax Disaster,” item 271, MacMechan fonds.

66 Interview of Bertha Sullivan, née Ryan, 5 July 1985, interview 43, Kitz oral histories.
members, but they got separated. The story she told Kitz emphasizes both the way survivors helped each other and the importance of family. “So I got in with strangers and we went out some place out the country place—they took me out there for the night. And the next morning the snow storm came up. And we stayed out there, they kept me out there. Nice to me and everything. In the morning my aunt got contact with me and then we went down with a train to Musquodoboit Harbour . . . and we stayed down there.”

Margaret Smith’s story was more convoluted, but it had a similar conclusion. A school-girl, she and her sister were taken by a well-meaning stranger first to St. Joseph’s Orphanage and then to the Infants Home in the South End. They stayed there for a week, effectively missing from their family, who feared they were dead. When their father finally found them, he rented a room for the two girls in a boarding house. Sixty-eight years later, she still seemed disbelieving that her father would put his daughters, unaccompanied, in a boarding house, but there were no other options: Margaret’s aunt, sister, and brother were all at Camp Hill Hospital, and her mother was missing, though she later turned out to be at Cogswell Street Hospital. Shortly, though, “my relatives came down from Shediac and took us back to our grandmother’s.” Margaret stayed in Shediac—a town in New Brunswick about 120 miles from Halifax—for about a year. Relatives “coming down” from the country to take their urban relations back to the ancestral town shows the continuing connections between those who had moved to the city and those who had stayed behind. Although the social networks the urbanized relatives created and maintained in the city—the Smiths, like the Hastings, were active members of St. Joseph’s—helped to sustain them, also important was access to the

67 Interview of Anita Wilson, née Hartling, 3 July 1985, interview 33, Kitz oral histories.
undisrupted structures of cities, towns, and villages in the hinterland.\textsuperscript{68}

Margaret Smith stayed in the country for a year; Wallace Baker stayed even longer. Eighty-eight years after the explosion, he still remembered spending the night of the explosion in his family’s house on Hurd Lane, though it was so cold his mother made him take “a drink of brandy with lots of hot water and sugar.” The next day, they took a train from Dartmouth to Musquodoboit Harbour, where they stayed the night in a hotel. “The next day Mother got a man to take us to our aunt’s house in East Jeddore. Mother sat with the driver; we sat on the floor behind the seat.” It took them all day to get to the aunt’s house, perhaps because of the high snow that had come the night before. After a day with his aunt, Baker’s grandfather came with a horse and sleigh, and they stayed with the grandparents until spring, when they went back to the aunt. They stayed there and did not return to Halifax until the fall of 1921.\textsuperscript{69}

Sometimes, though, these connections between city and country were not welcome. Migrants had come to the city for a reason, and many preferred it there, or they feared what life would be like if they returned to the country. Partly to be helpful, and partly because scarce housing was needed for “able-bodied men and their families,” the Relief Committee sent a seventy-one-year-old widow named Marie Walker to her niece in Enfield, about twenty miles away. A month later, she was back in Halifax, demanding help finding a new home. “Says she has always had her own home, and cannot think of going to live with relatives in the country, altho they would no doubt be willing to keep her,” wrote May Reid, a social worker visiting from Winnipeg. “Claims she has always had her own home, and cannot think of going to live with relatives in the country, altho they would no doubt be willing to keep her,” wrote May Reid, a social worker visiting from Winnipeg. “Claims she has always

\textsuperscript{68} Interview of Miss Margaret M. Smith, 31 July 1985, interview 106, Kitz oral histories.

\textsuperscript{69} Memoirs of Wallace Simon Baker, 2005, folder 1, volume 1, accession 2007-006, Janet Kitz fonds, Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management (hereafter Kitz fonds).
made a living in Halifax and wants to continue living here. She is feeling much better and anxious to get to work.\textsuperscript{70} As Walker discovered, reserving housing for “able-bodied men” with families privileged the rights of married men to independence over that of adult women. It also suggested that men’s formal labor was more important to families and to society than women’s informal work.

It was not uncommon for relief workers to encourage people to leave Halifax. Nelson Deacon, originally from St. Stephen, New Brunswick, was a private in the army; he, his wife Helen, and their children lived in the building for married men at the Wellington Barracks. The shock of the explosion seems to have triggered an early labor for Helen, who gave birth on the day of the explosion or the next day, a month early. A friendly visitor interviewed her twelve days after the birth and suggested that she return to St. Stephen, where the family owned a house. Helen “is disinclined to go, as house is far from neighbors, and without husband would find it lonely,” the visitor wrote; Helen may have particularly feared isolation because of her new baby. Instead, the family went to the St. Paul’s Hall Shelter, where the infant died of pneumonia a few weeks later. In the early summer, after Nelson was discharged, the family returned to New Brunswick.\textsuperscript{71} Native Haligonian Ida Dunbart, widowed in the explosion, went first to St. Mary’s Hall, a shelter. Ernest Blois, the city superintendent of neglected and delinquent children and chair of the Relief Committee’s children’s committee, visited her and impressed on her the importance of bringing her children to the country. Not long after that visit, she and her seven children left the city and went to live with her father-in-law in Ellershouse, in

\textsuperscript{70} File 294, box 24, series P.

\textsuperscript{71} File 703, box 36, series P.
Hants County. That meant living in a house with seventeen people, so they were soon looking for a free place to live in the village. By March they had moved back into Halifax, apparently having given up on country living. In April, the head social worker for the HRC, Jane Wisdom, was still looking for families who wanted to be settled on farms. “As you are aware, several of our people have already done so of their own accord,” responded Evelyn Bolduc, the supervisor in charge of those outside Halifax. But all those who wanted to move to farms had done so, and Bolduc did not know of any more families who wanted to leave Halifax permanently. The social workers who urged survivors to move to the countryside did so under the assumption that cities were desirable for working men but that women and families would be better off in rural areas. Women who had lived their whole lives in the city, or who had intentionally moved from the country, did not share that assumption.

Other times, there appeared to be no choice but for migrants to Halifax to return “home.” This was especially true when they didn’t have a large social network in Halifax, for instance when they were widows or recent migrants. Archibald MacMechan met a thirty-year-old woman he called Mrs. John James, whom the explosion had widowed. He doubted her literacy—she had been looking at pictures in a magazine, he said, rather than reading it—and he noted that more than two weeks after the explosion, she was wearing the same dress she had been wearing that day. She had stayed at the Cogswell Street Hospital for a week, at which point she was taken to a shelter. Her brother-in-law had come to town from Mahone Bay to look for her husband, and he

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72 File 972, box 42, series P.
73 Evelyn Bolduc to Jane Wisdom, 22 April 1918, item 162.14, HRC correspondence.
found John’s body in the morgue the day after the woman was released from the hospital. “Mrs. James is now penniless and homeless,” MacMechan wrote. “Her father lives in Newfoundland, and she supposes that she will go to him when she is able to travel—but she has not yet heard from him.” Her grief must have come from the sudden death of her husband and the destruction of her house, but the unmistakable unhappiness MacMechan captured—“expression dazed even yet,” he wrote—also came from her impending forced return to Newfoundland.74

Mrs. James might have eventually taken advantage of the Newfoundland government’s offer to pay the fare of any of its citizens who wanted to return home.75 For Clarence and Nellie Munro, who had only been in town for two weeks or a month before the explosion, nothing had changed in Newfoundland after the explosion that made them want to go back. But neither did anything hold them in Halifax. The social worker who visited on behalf of the Children’s Committee warned that Nellie “being a stranger, would probably need advice and help.” Clarence, a teamster, had been taken to the hospital in Truro on the day of the explosion—he was missing and presumed dead for some time—and saw no reason to go back to Halifax. In February, the whole family resettled in Truro.76

Families’ survival strategies after the explosion were an extension of their strategies before. Before the explosion, for instance, Joseph and Alma McAndrew lived with a married daughter and their three youngest children in a house that they owned.

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74 Personal testimony of Mrs. John James, 21 December 1918, item 159, MacMechan fonds.
75 Report titled “7. Transportation,” around 26 January 1918, item 196.1, HRC correspondence.
76 File 4731, box 113, series P.
three unmarried children, and three married daughters and their families all moved together into a rented flat. That way, the married children and children-in-law could support their parents and siblings, since Joseph had been severely injured and would probably never work again. The plan was that they would rebuild the two houses the extended family had owned; the sister who had lived down the street would return to her house but share it with a married brother, and everyone else would go back where they had been. The McAndrews make clear how much the post-disaster system of support within families was built around preexisting family structures.

While parents, children, and siblings may have come to each other’s aid, it was a disruption to their lives, and it required renegotiation about familial obligations. In my sample of 739 families, 42 experienced enough internal strife that it came to the notice of the Relief Commission. Mary Young, a widow, moved in with her married daughter, but she was anxious to leave as soon as she could find rooms of her own. We cannot know whether she was anxious for her independence, whether her daughter wanted her home back without her mother’s presence, or whether both were simply eager to restore the status quo ante. This negotiation could happen among family members, but also with authorities. When Edward Simpson, a stevedore, died in the explosion, he left three small children and a widow, Florence. Florence sent for her two grown daughters from her first marriage, Louisa and Mildred, to come from Toronto. Louisa was, wrote a worker at the Relief Committee, clearly unhappy about being there. Pretty and well-dressed, the daughters resented the implication that they were responsible for their

77 File 1281, box 48, series P.

78 File 450, box 29, series P.
mother’s support. Rather, they saw their jobs as advocates. “From their attitude [it was apparent that] they are not intending to work here, but to wait until mother was (as Louise put it) well taken care of, and supported by the Committee.” They said they did not want to work in Halifax—wages were so much lower there than in Toronto that it hardly seemed worth it—but “Mildred wanted it very clearly understood that if she and her sister stayed they would be entirely individual economic units, and would undertake no support for their mother.”79

If immediate family—parents or children—was not able or willing to help, families turned to more distant relatives. Again, sometimes these families simply expanded the roles they played in ordinary times. Mrs. Robert Liang told MacMechan about her spinster aunt, aged eighty, who spent the day of the explosion wandering, outside for the first time in years. She eventually made it to the Liangs’ house, “none the worse for her experience.” Presumably, the aunt had a close relationship with her niece or at least relied on her for some things, since she had no children of her own.80 James Doyle was disabled and unable to work or take care of himself. In ordinary times, two unmarried sisters lived with him and took care of him, and this continued after the explosion, though in straightened circumstances, since one of the sisters worked as a piano teacher and suffered both the destruction of her instrument and the dispersal of her students.81

79 File 1911, box 60, series P. Florence’s age is given in the file as 32, but Louise and Mildred both appear appreciably older than 16, and it is unlikely that Florence would have been married with children before her own 16th birthday.

80 Personal testimony of Mrs. Robert Liang, revised 22 December 1917, item 164, MacMechan fonds.

81 File 424, box 29, series P.
Other times, extended families took care of each other in new and unfamiliar ways. The explosion killed Sarah Newcombe and sent her husband William to a hospital in New Glasgow with a broken leg, leaving no one to take care of the children. The extended family all chipped in to help. Two married daughters carried much of the burden, including for their sister Sadie, a nineteen-year-old widow with an infant child, who had been dependent on her parents. At first, after William was discharged from the hospital, he stayed in New Glasgow with his dead wife’s brother, because he had no home to which to return in Halifax. In February, when he did go back, he moved in with his daughter. By the summer they found it too crowded, and William, the children, and Sadie moved out. Sadie needed money to support her infant, and William needed a housekeeper, so William paid Sadie to keep house, explaining that otherwise she would have to work for another family as a housekeeper. Eight months after that, Sadie was still keeping house, since her younger sister, a fifth grader, was deemed too young to do so adequately. Although the family was used to supporting Sadie after the early death of her husband, Sarah’s death forced them to reconfigure their labor and their support for each other.  

When extended families helped survivors, it could not always be permanent. Grocer Osburn Wallace lost his store, his home, the tenements his family owned, and, worst of all, his wife. He was badly hurt and could not work. Homeless, jobless, and wifeless, he took his kids and went to live with his brother, who the previous year had built a house with two flats. But the flat they shared felt crowded with both families, and the brother was barely making ends meet before the explosion, and he could not afford to

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82 File 459, box 29, series P.
support Osburn’s family too. When the summer came, Osburn escaped the close quarters with his brother and moved his family to the country town of Shubenacadie. Relying on his brother was a natural first choice, and it appears that his brother was willing to help to the extent he could. It was not a long-term solution, however, and Wallace had to balance it with other strategies. Similarly, Ella Scott and her daughter were living alone in Halifax while her husband was working on a ship off the coast of Newfoundland. When their home was destroyed, she went first to a friend’s house who put her up for six days. But she could not rely on the kindness of a friend for very long, so on December 12 she went to Stellarton to stay with her husband’s sister. Even the sister-in-law Scott did not want to rely on too long, and she planned to return to Halifax in the spring to resume housekeeping.

The support that extended families provided was not just a more fortunate member helping a brother or a parent who had lost their home. Perhaps more common was a mutual response, of families banding together to rebuild. Immediately after the explosion, James Kehoe and his wife welcomed into their house two of their four grown children and their spouses and children. Soon after, they were joined by two more children and their families. The elder Kehoes owned a two-flat house, which with four children, four children-in-law, twelve grandchildren, and two more grandchildren on the way, quickly felt very crowded. One of the sons paid his parents $10 per month in rent for the upstairs flat, a relatively small amount, but it presumably helped make up for any lost rental income from another family. Meanwhile, all five men collaborated to build a

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83 File 1601, box 54, series P.
84 File 1615, box 54, series P.
shack in the lot next door “to relieve the congestion.” By May, when the shack was done, though, there were still seven adults and eight children living in the house. Here, the generation with resources—the parents, who still had their house—shared them with the rest of the family. They all shared their labor resources, including the men, who built the shack, and the women, who, one imagines, helped each other to wrangle the twelve cousins.

It was not always the older generation who had the house at which people converged. The Brackett family lived on Creighton Street, just south of North Street. Given the location of their home, it was probably quite damaged, but it was still inhabitable. Mr. Brackett was overseas in the military, and before the explosion his wife lived with their four children. The explosion destroyed the homes of Mrs. Brackett’s mother and sister, and they both came to live with her, the sister bringing along her husband and two children. The three family units—the mother and two daughters—split the rent equally into $5-per-month shares, and by February they had settled, more or less permanently, into living together.

If families like Florence Simpson and her daughters had to renegotiate their responsibilities to each other in the wake of the explosion, so too did the extended families that joined together to support each other. Making this task potentially more difficult was the money offered by the Relief Commission. In June 1918, the Relief Commission put a notice in the newspapers asking that those who had sheltered refugees

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85 File 3814, box 96, series P; file 912, box 41, series P; file 3292, box 82, series P.
86 File 2165, box 64, series P; file 2290, box 66, series P.
put in claims so that they could be reimbursed for their expenses. When people responded by sending in bills for their family members, much discord ensued. The Relief Commission had not intended, it turned out, to reimburse every parent, uncle, or grown child for the time their children, niece, or parent had stayed with them. The resulting disputes suggested disagreement over the proper obligations families had to each other.

Stevedore William Taylor died in the explosion, and his wife Cecilia and three children were made homeless. The friendly visitor assigned to her case said that Cecilia “has apparently no doubt of the willingness of her people to help her, but says they are all too poor to be able to. They are uneducated people of small earning capacity.” Meanwhile, she was afraid that her and her husband’s high hopes for their children—that they would at least finish high school—would be lost. Cecilia was staying with a sister, Mrs. Purcell, and planned to remain there until spring, when she would have her house rebuilt. “Mrs. Taylor,” wrote her visitor, “seems determined to make the best of things.” In late June, she and her children moved back to their rebuilt house, and all seemed well. In August, though, Mrs. Purcell filed with the Relief Commission to be reimbursed for her sister’s family’s board. When the social worker working the case told Cecilia that she would have to pay her sister herself out of her pension, she was taken aback. She was quite willing to pay her sister, but she had not known that Purcell had demanded the money. For her part, Purcell refused to take any money from her sister. She was happy to take money offered by the government but did not want to be paid by her family. In this instance, the situation was resolved without major or lasting upset. Indeed, the entire

87 On this notice, see entry for 3 July 1918, file 3305, box 83, series P; and for 3 July 1918, box 2206, box 65, series P.
story ends largely happily, with the Taylor daughter finishing high school as her parents had hoped. 88

Something similar happened when Pearl Morgan and her parents-in-law, with whom she lived normally, went to live with her aunt and uncle, the Hilcheys, after her husband died while serving on the Navy’s HMCS Niobe. The elder Morgans and the Hilcheys were barely related, so when the former left for the country after about three weeks, they offered the latter money. The Hilcheys refused any payment. There was probably a similar discussion when Pearl Morgan left a few weeks later to stay with her parents-in-law in Bridgewater. Yet in June, the Hilcheys filed to be reimbursed. Pearl was upset: “When asked if she thought bill was just, and if she would have been willing to pay it, woman said she would not. She knew the Hilcheys would not ask or expect her to pay.” Her parents-in-law were less polite. When they spoke to Dorothy Judah, the district supervisor and a social worker who had come in from Montreal, they “appear[ed] mortified and highly indignant at Hilchey claim.” Here we can see the two families negotiating what the obligations of extended relations were to each other. The senior Morgans were unsure what the Hilcheys owed them and offered to pay. The Hilcheys at first signaled that the Morgans—the parents-in-law of their niece—were sufficiently family that whatever aid the Hilcheys gave was as friends and relatives, not strangers. Yet when someone else offered money, they were all to happy to accept it. 89 Applying for, accepting, and maximizing payments and in-kind aid from the HRC and other relief funds became a new and important economic strategy for families like the Hilcheys.

88 File 476, box 30, series P. The story is not unambiguously happy, though, since the youngest brother died of tuberculosis at age fifteen.

89 File 3049, box 78, series P; file 2206, box 65, series P; file 3305, box 83, series P.
The Hilcheys’ willingness to take what was offered to them, as long as it came from the government, was not uncommon. Though it is clear that most people’s first choice was to rely on family members, near or distant, among the strategies at their disposal was to rely on the official shelters that opened in public buildings. We should see people’s use of public shelters not as dependence on the state or on charity, but rather as a way that Haligonians used the state and the resources it offered for their own purposes. They probably did not see moving into St. Paul’s Hall or the Academy of Music as accepting charity, but rather as taking what was due them. Historian Judith Fingard, in her study of the most recidivist criminals in mid-19th century Halifax, described the way the poor used state power for their own purposes; for them, police and the courts were two of several tools people used in settling disputes among each other. Poor women used the courts to protect themselves against abusive men. The poorest Haligonians also connived to be in jail or the poorhouse during the winter. This use of the courts for the purposes of the poor was subversive, since the state did not expect or want to be used in this way. Though Fingard wrote about explicit police power and criminality and her subjects were recidivist criminals, her point is a broader one: people seemingly without power are able to use the apparatus of the state in unexpected and unwanted ways for their own material benefit. In the mid-19th century, the state was relatively small, and the police were among the few of its agents that had direct contact with the poor. The Progressive Era heralded an increase in the scope and purview of the state, an increase that the explosion only accelerated. The creation of the HRC offered Haligonians expanded state resources, and so accepting its money, shelter, or other

support meant an expansion of a time-honored survival strategy.

We can see the difference between an attitude of taking from the state what was offered and receiving charity when we observe that despite offers from people like Rod Macdonald and his family, not a single one of the families in my sample appears to have stayed the night with a stranger.\(^91\) The shelters were public and in spaces familiar to North Enders. In contrast, a private, South End home was unfamiliar, uncomfortable space. Frank Burford, who grew up in a part of the North End called Flynn’s Block, summarized the sense of difference and dislocation working-class North Enders felt about the the rich people to the south. “I was a North-Ender, that’s where I lived. What happened in the South End, it belonged to the South-End people. The South End was a world of its own.”\(^92\) Having just had their world demolished by the explosion, it is easy to imagine why North Enders would prefer the familiar support of their families, or the institutional support of official shelters, and would reject going to the “world of its own” in the south. Private charity was just that: charity.

Shelters might not have been the preferred choice—only 25 families in my sample of 739 went to one—but they were better than staying with rich strangers.\(^93\) Cliff Driscoll, a railway worker, was in Truro when the explosion happened, but he hitched a ride on a relief train. He wound up spending the night at the Academy of Music. “That was the first time I was ever in a box seat, to tell you the truth,” he told Janet Kitz. “We

\(^91\) MS Narrative of Lt. Rod Macdonald, item 194, MacMechan fonds.

\(^92\) Transcript of interview with Frank Burford, 14 May 1982, folder 2, volume 1, Kitz fonds.

\(^93\) On December 20, the Housing Committee reported that 680 people were living in shelters, a substantial number but a paltry proportion of the 20,000 the committee estimated were homeless. See \textit{Morning Chronicle} 20 December 1917, 1.
got some blankets, and to begin with, were on the stage. A lot of people that we knew were there.” But there was soon a rumor of smallpox, and Driscoll fled. “Next night we slept in St. Mary’s Hall. A lot of our friends were there. During the day we were in Richmond, looking for my brother and for others.” He soon left St. Mary’s, and he and his family took advantage of his status as a railroad worker and slept in a train car.⁹⁴

The official, state nature of the shelters is highlighted by the way people used them. Though two of the major shelters were religious spaces—the halls of St. Mary’s Catholic Cathedral and St. Paul’s Anglican Parish—people did not necessarily go to their own church. The Knights of Columbus Hall, for instance, housed about 80 to 100 people, of whom 50 were children. To accommodate them in a city (and country) with separate school systems, there was both a Protestant and a Catholic school teacher.⁹⁵ It worked both ways: We met Ida Dunbart earlier, as she searched to escape her in-laws’ crowded house in the country and came back to Halifax. Before going to the country, she had stayed the night at St. Mary’s, despite being a Methodist.⁹⁶ Explosion survivors used these apparently religious spaces in a secular way, not dividing themselves along denominational lines. As we will see in more detail in Chapter 5, this ecumenical mixing ran counter to the way religious and state authorities preferred to organize relief, in which a family’s priest or minister was given authority over deciding aid families received. The next chapter will show that Haligonians did not necessarily share these denominational

⁹⁴ Narrative by Cliff Driscoll, 16 February 1984, folder 5, volume 1, Kitz fonds.

⁹⁵ Personal narrative of Miss Jessie Parker, n.d., item 214, MacMechan fonds; W.A.N. Conaghan to MacMechan, 29 January 1918, item 1a, MacMechan fonds. See also Maurice Francis Egan and John B. Kennedy, Knights of Columbus in Peace and War (New Haven, Conn.: Knights of Columbus, 1920), 1:171. On Halifax’s system of separate schools, see Judith Fingard, Janet Guildford, and David Southerland, Halifax: The First 250 Years (Halifax, N.S.: Formac, 1999), 174-5

⁹⁶ File 972, box 42, series P.

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concerns. Annie Whiteway, for instance, was a parishioner at the Catholic St. Joseph’s Parish. After her house was destroyed and her husband killed, she took her family to the Protestant St. Paul’s hall, apparently not seeing it as a Protestant space, but rather as a purveyor of official, secular relief. Her priest, Father Charles McManus, saw it differently, and he complained that St. Paul’s was not a “suitable place” for the eldest daughter, Beatrice. McManus urged that the Relief Commission enforce denominational boundaries and make Whiteway to bring Beatrice to the Catholic orphanage “until her mother can get the family together.”

For some reason, McManus did not raise similar objections to another family of parishioners, the Martins, staying at St. Paul’s for three weeks. The husband, James, was a drunk whose pregnant wife sometimes had to resort to calling the police in order to extract money from him, and perhaps—though this is conjecture—McManus was happy to have Protestants worry about the family for a while.

The question of where Beatrice Whiteway should stay arose when she returned to her family from an ad hoc hospital established at the Y.M.C.A.—itself an avowedly Protestant space put to secular, or at least nondenominational, purposes. Her experience points to yet another place families found shelter for their members. For injured Haligonians, a major source of shelter was hospitals. At a time when even relatively simple injuries required patients to convalesce for weeks or months, hospitals provided not only medical and nursing care but also beds, a roof, and food. Jack Libby was severely cut and was taken to Cogswell Street Hospital the day of the explosion, together

97 File 996, box 42, series P.
98 File 705, box 36, series P.
with his wife and two surviving step-children. He spent three weeks there and and then
three more at the St. Mary’s College Hospital. This meant five weeks he and his family
did not have to worry about finding shelter for him.99

The Libbys were lucky that Jack’s step-children initially went to the same
hospital, so the family could stay together. More commonly, extended hospitalizations
forced families to separate. This could mean trying to find a place for children to stay
while both parents were in the hospital or making a family member who usually
performed paid labor or went to school stay home to do the housework usually handled
by an injured wife. After six days, the Libby step-children had recovered from their
injuries sufficiently that they were transferred to a special shelter for children whose
parents were still in the hospital. Other times, separating families was just another
survival strategy employed by survivors. The explosion severely damaged Gertie and
Thomas Hart’s apartment, for instance, and to find shelter they split up. Gertie and the
children went to her parents, and Thomas went to his. Perhaps this arrangement kept
them away from in-laws they disliked, or perhaps it simply distributed their burden more
widely. Regardless, in late December they hoped that a small apartment would be ready
for them in their old building, and by early March they were settled and comfortable.100

The Harts stayed with different relatives, but both families were in Halifax. Other
families had to undergo more dramatic separations, often because men stayed in Halifax
to work while their families went to the country for shelter. When Lottie Butler got out
of the hospital with eighteen stitches, she and her seven-year-old daughter went to

100File 988, box 42, series P.
Lunenburg County, since her house in Richmond had burned down. Her husband, Alerand, a blacksmith on the railroad, stayed in town to continue his work; he lived with his brother, whose house was less severely damaged. (The daughter was in Halifax for at least a week after the explosion; it is unclear where and with whom she stayed.) Though splitting up the family was the best option—Alerand’s brother apparently not having room for everyone—it was far from perfect. In mid-January, Alerand asked the Relief Commission for furniture so that he and Lottie could live together again. About a month later, they moved together to rooms on Macara Street, but they were only temporary boarders there, so they kept on the lookout for more permanent housing—but at least they were together.101

Splitting the family up was one of many survival strategies Haligonians could pursue. Sarah and William Boutilier lost everything in the explosion, although both they and their six children, ranging from twenty-one to six years, survived. Though Methodists, they went initially to the Home of the Good Shepard, a Catholic convent in the West End. Two weeks later, Sarah and the children went to stay with her brother in Sambro; “At present the family are reasonably comfortable, although the Smith’s [sic] are very poor,” an investigator wrote in February. William, a painter, still had work in the city, so he stayed in Halifax. Because of his job, he had unusually dirty clothing, and though he paid the woman with whom he stayed to do his laundry, he could not find the money for board. In June, he and the woman he stayed with tried unsuccessfully to get the Relief Commission to pay his board. The Boutiliers used several strategies—using a public shelter, splitting up the family, going to extended family in the country, and relying

101 File 4772, box 114, series P.
(albeit without success) on the relief authorities to pay board with a stranger—to stay afloat after the explosion. During the dispute with the HRC over William’s board, Sarah’s brother in Sambro wrote an angry letter to Evelyn Bolduc, their social worker, complaining that the relief money was intended for poor families like theirs and that the HRC had paid other families’ board. The letter shows yet another way Halifax families relied on relatives: as advocates before the state.\textsuperscript{102}

Another way families split up, besides going to different family members or different boarding houses, was for some members—usually husbands, sometimes also sons—to build a shack while women and children stayed in warmer, more comfortable spaces. This meant working with other intimates, besides family: friends, neighbors, and fictive kin. Jim Martin, the drunk whose family stayed at St. Paul’s, may have had difficulty with his family, but he apparently had good relations with friends. He and seven other men built a shack on Bilby Street to live in after their houses were destroyed.\textsuperscript{103} Gordon Mitchell, a 22-year-old driver, may have been among those men. His house destroyed and his possessions smashed, he built a shack on Bilby Street with “several men of the neighborhood” while his wife and baby daughter stayed in “more comfortable quarters.” The shack must have been uncomfortable indeed, since in February the men were still asking for mattresses and beds.\textsuperscript{104}

We do not know much about the shacks that these men constructed, but we do know that they were physical manifestations of neighborhoods. Men chose to stay in

\textsuperscript{102} File 1586, box 53, series P.
\textsuperscript{103} File 705, box 36, series P.
\textsuperscript{104} File 721, box 36, series P.
cold, uncomfortable shacks rather than go with their families to warmer, if more crowded and alien, quarters. Staying in the neighborhood, with other “men of the neighborhood,” must have been very important to them. We know that male companionship was important to Jim Martin, who later that spring went on a fishing trip with his buddies—which apparently devolved into an alcoholic bender—even though it meant delaying a doctor’s appointment his wife needed. Perhaps this style of homosociality was similarly important to all the men in the Bilby Street shack, and we can imagine that drink would have kept them warm through the winter. Or perhaps focusing on the male neighbors is misleading: Though Gordon Mitchell’s wife eventually found indoor quarters, the family had at first built their own shack, which they shared with his parents and a married sister. That the wife stayed in the shack at least through the end of January suggests that there was more going on than masculine carousing. The community networks that the Mitchells and the Martins had built in ordinary times before the explosion took on new and added importance in the crisis after the explosion. Just as we saw in Chapter 1, where in the explosion’s immediate aftermath people reenacted and reinscribed their daily patterns of solidarity, so too did they here.

Building shacks was only one of several ways Haligonians relied on friends and neighbors. In my sample, nineteen families worked with their neighbors, and twenty-eight stayed with people they identified as friends. These numbers are small compared to those who relied on families, and the difference highlights the distinction of family as the primary and most important support for explosion survivors. Yet the informal networks

105 File 705, box 36, series P.
106 File 721, box 36, series P.
of friends and neighbors provided an extra level of support, either for those whose families could not help or for those who preferred other help. Margaret Morash, thirty-nine, was the only surviving member of her family, which understandably left her “very lonely and feel[ing] that there is no one now to take very much interest in her.” Her house destroyed and her belongings burned, Morash went to stay with a friend, Mary Haines. She briefly considered moving back to Newfoundland, where she had been born, to try to find some relatives, and she thought about opening a store in Halifax. Neither plan to came to fruition, the former because she could not afford a ticket, and the latter because she was too “nervous and unstrung.” She tried moving in with her dead husband’s sister, but a month later she decided to return to her friend’s house. Without family nearby, Morash relied on a friend for support. We cannot know how long she stayed with Haines, but in the twenty-six years before she died leaving no survivors, Morash did not acquire any family, so she likely continued to rely on friends for emotional and material support.107

The aid was mutual. It is obvious in the case of neighbors who built shacks together that people both helped and were helped without the implicit hierarchy of charity. As with the neighbors who built shacks together, the relationship created between those who sheltered their friends and those who were sheltered was not one of charity but solidarity. Frank Brinton remembered that he and his family stayed the first night with their neighbor before leaving the city for several months. “The lady next door, they lived in a small house,” he told Janet Kitz. “She had a room and she wanted us to

107 File 3821, box 96, series P.
Brinton’s recollection that their neighbor “wanted us to come” is telling, since it suggests that she got something—company, emotional support, perhaps their assistance closing up windows and cleaning up the house—from the Brintons. Sarah Ellen Powell took into her mostly undamaged home three of her married sisters and their families, a total of seventeen people. In ordinary times, an unrelated family boarded with her, so she was used to sharing her home with others. But more important is that Powell’s husband, a stove fitter, died in the explosion, and we can imagine that the busyness and bustle of her sisters and their families may have distracted her, and their presence provided her emotional support. This support may have been particularly important to her, both emotionally and practically, since her six-month-old daughter, Hilda, never fully recovered from a cut on her face she received in the explosion. In April, the baby died. “Mrs. Powell’s husband was killed on the day of the explosion which makes it very sad,” the friendly visitor, A.P. Stairs, wrote. A month later, a visitor described how “Mrs. Powell [was] very sad over death of baby; says time hangs heavily on her hands at all times.” In the face of this understandable grief and depression, the presence of Powell’s family became all the more important. Although the people she took into her home were family and not friends or neighbors, the story demonstrates the way that a tight mesh of social relationships meant that the categories of benefactor and recipient were not cleanly distinct.

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108 Interview with Frank Brinton, 10 July 1985, interview 68, Kitz oral histories.

109 File 3606, box 90, series P.
Haligonians’ social relationships extended far beyond the city. We have already seen how important were their connections to the surrounding countryside. In some ways Halifax recapitulated Canada’s status as both a recipient and donor country for migration. Halifax received migrants from the Maritimes, from Britain, and from Newfoundland. It also sent migrants to central and western Canada and to the United States. All this migration built transregional and transnational networks and communities on which Haligonians could rely in the explosion’s aftermath. These connections are visible on a map created from data contained in a report from the Halifax Information Bureau. The ad hoc information bureau fielded 6,214 inquiries by telegram and mail, people from afar asking whether their friends or relatives had survived, and whether they needed help. (This total excluded inquiries from Newfoundland, which appear to have been handled by a separate office, staffed by Newfoundlanders.)

The map’s most striking feature is the density of inquiries from the United States. Even so, it hides the true extent of Halifax’s ties to New England since the map shows the towns from which people inquired, not the number of inquiries. The number of towns near Boston in which at least one person made an inquiry must stand in for the large

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112 J. Stredder to T. Maclreith, n.d., item 94.1e, HRC correspondence. The map is available at http://www.duke.edu/~jar20/maps.

113 Malcolm MacLeod, “Searching the Wreckage for Signs of Region: Newfoundland and the Halifax Harbour Explosion,” in Ruffman and Howell, eds., Ground Zero, 209-10; Morning Chronicle 17 December 1917, 2.
number of inquiries received from Boston proper. Indeed, so many Bostonians feared for
their relatives’ safety that the city established an information bureau in City Hall to
agglomerate inquiries.\textsuperscript{114} It shows graphically and geographically the deep connections
Halifax maintained to the United States, and that these connections were often deeper
than those to other parts of Canada. This observation is reiterated in my sample of 739
Halifax families. Of these, 41 cases had some connection to the U.S.: roughly 31 of
these had family in the U.S., 20 went to the U.S., and four had family members in the
U.S. who came back to Halifax to help after the disaster. Only 10 families appear to have
left Halifax for what was called “Upper Canada”—that is, any point west of New
Brunswick.

The inquiries as shown on the map were recapitulated by the aid sent to Halifax.
The same regions that are shown on the map as having a high density of inquiries—that
is, the regions with close affective ties to Halifax—are also the places that lent the most
help to Halifax. We have already seen the way that Haligonians relied on outlying parts
of Nova Scotia. As we have seen, 112 families in my sample went to the country for
shelter, where they relied on the social networks that remained outside Halifax. Britain,
linked to Halifax through ties of empire, war-time alliance, and immigration, granted $5
million to the relief fund. Canadian Prime Minister Robert Borden had sought the
contribution on the theory that it would “greatly strengthen Imperial sentiment.”\textsuperscript{115}

\textsuperscript{114}Charles S. Damrell to [P.F. Martin], 8 December 1917, item 113.2d; Thomas M. Wilson to R.P. Bell, 21
December 1917, item 113.2i, both in HRC correspondence.

\textsuperscript{115}Telegram, R.L. Borden to George Perley, 11 December 1917; telegram, N.W. Rowell to Borden, 10
December 1917; clipping from \textit{Ottawa Citizen}, 13 December 1917, all in file OC 445, reel C-4352, Sir
Robert Borden Papers, RG 26, Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa; \textit{Morning Chronicle} 13 December
1917, 6; Kitz, \textit{Shattered City}, 84. For a celebratory and popular accounting of the imperial response to the
explosion, see Beed, \textit{1917 Halifax Explosion}, 75-80. See also telegrams promising contributions in the
folder labeled “1917 Halifax Explosion,” vol. 19, Lieutenant Governor's Correspondence, RG 1, NSARM.
Newfoundland, then still a British dominion separate from Canada, had deep cultural and migratory connections to Halifax. Its government donated $50,000, the St. John’s city government pledged $30,000, and the St. John’s Board of Trade gave a further $10,000.\footnote{MacLeod, “Searching the Wreckage,” 208.} Contrast these donations against the $100,000 sent by Ontario’s government, significantly less than that collected in Massachusetts and only double that donated by the much poorer Newfoundland government. Again we see the relative importance of social, cultural, and especially migratory connections, as compared to the legal and national ties that ostensibly bound Nova Scotia with Upper Canada.\footnote{MacLeod, “Searching the Wreckage,” 213.}

One of the most famous stories to come out of the explosion is that of the relief offered by Massachusetts. Most memorable was the relief train that departed Boston immediately and arrived in Halifax bearing A.C. Ratthesky, John Moors, and the first relief supplies to arrive from the outside.\footnote{For a discussion of this train, see the Introduction. For a popular account of the train’s journey, see Kitz, \textit{Shattered City}, 84-87. The most specific secondary source on the Massachusetts response is by tour-guide Blair Beed, \textit{1917 Halifax Explosion}, esp. 18-30 and 65-74.} Under the auspices of the Public Safety Committee—itself organized to help coordinate civilians in the war effort—Massachusetts raised about $700,000 in cash, plus in-kind donations of clothing, building supplies, and the like. The Massachusetts Halifax Relief Committee, as it was known, focused originally on sending supplies, first on the train and then on two steamships dispatched from Boston. Later, flush with cash, it shifted to providing furniture to explosion survivors. It was in the initial importation of clothes and rebuilding supplies and the later provision of furniture that the Massachusetts Halifax Relief Committee had
its greatest effect. Through discounts and a remission of the import duty, the committee estimated that it provided about $600,000 worth of aid while only actually spending about $200,000. This left more than $260,000 to spend. After consulting with an expert from the Rockefeller Foundation, the committee decided to establish a public health program to help alleviate the long-term effects of the explosion.\footnote{George Hinkley Lyman, \textit{The Story of the Massachusetts Committee on Public Safety} (Boston: Wright & Potter as state printers, 1919), 189-212. See also J.J. Phelan to Warren S. Stone, 21 March 1918, reel 11, Massachusetts Halifax Relief Committee Correspondence and Papers, Special Collections Division, Massachusetts State Library, Boston, Mass. (hereafter M-HRC papers). On the public health commission and its ultimate failure, see William J. Buxton, “Private Wealth and Public Health: Rockefeller Philanthropy and the Massachusetts-Halifax Relief Committee/Health Commission,” in Ruffman and Howell, eds., \textit{Ground Zero}, 183-193.}

The initial appeal sent from Boston to the local Public Safety Committees throughout the state emphasized Massachusetts’ obligation to Nova Scotia because of proximity. Henry Endicott, the Massachusetts Halifax Relief Committee’s chair, promised that “we are all committed as near neighbors of the stricken city.”\footnote{Quoted in Lyman, \textit{Committee on Public Safety}, 191.} In 1919, the committee’s official historian phrased the commitment as related to World War I. The gifts, George Lyman wrote, were “in behalf of a friendly neighbor, now our Ally in the Great War.”\footnote{Lyman, \textit{Committee on Public Safety}, 211.} The references to being “near neighbors” hid the more complex, familial relationship between Massachusetts and Nova Scotia. In 1915, the commonwealth census counted 79,115 residents who had been born in Nova Scotia.\footnote{Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics, \textit{Decennial Census, 1915} (Boston: Wright and Potter as state printers, 1918), 290. Thanks to Larry Martins at Yale’s Social Science Library for answering my reference query.} These migrants were the latest of several generations of mass migration that bound the Maritimes and New England together economically and culturally.\footnote{Alan A. Brookes, “Out Migration from the Maritime Provinces, 1860-1900: Some Preliminary }
residents may have donated funds because of a sense of neighborliness, war-time alliance, or even disinterested altruism, an unknown but large number of donors came from or had family in Nova Scotia. For instance the Intercolonial Club of Boston, comprising 600 Canadians, pledged $1,000 to the Massachusetts relief fund a day after the explosion. The American British Federation, an umbrella group of Canadian, Scottish, English, and Welsh organizations in the United States, soon followed suit with its own fund-raising pledge.

It is apparent that many of the Massachusetts residents involved in Halifax relief had direct ties to the city. Thomas Wilson, for instance, worked for the Boston City Building Department and was detailed to the city’s information bureau, forwarding to Halifax requests for information about Bostonians’ relatives. Included among them was a personal inquiry about a handful of his own cousins. Among the Massachusetts doctors who went to help was a Dr. Fraser, described as “a reputable physician of Lynn [who] formerly lived in Halifax.” His personal connection to his former hometown “was one of the reasons why he was selected to go down,” according to the chairman of Lynn’s Committee on Public Safety.


124 Richard E. Johnson to Henry B. Endicott, 7 December 1917, reel 11, M-HRC papers.
125 Thomas S.P. Gibbs to Henry Endicott, 11 December 1917, reel 11, M-HRC papers.
126 Wilson to R.P. Bell, 21 December 1917, item 113.2i, HRC correspondence.
127 TS memorandum of telephone call from Mr. Reeves, 13 December 1917, reel 16, M-HRC papers.
Halifax. Gertrude Dobson was a Chicago social worker, who came to Halifax with the American Red Cross. Her supervisor wrote in January, “I think as she is a Canadian from New Brunswick she ought to be induced to stay permanently.” 128 Personal connections to Canada, the Maritimes, and Halifax encouraged people in the United States to donate money or volunteer their time.

Individual sufferers and survivors in Halifax knew they were enmeshed in a transnational network, and they and their relatives in Massachusetts used it to their advantage. Having friends and relatives in New England gave Haligonians more power in their occasional battles with the relief authorities. In early January, the Massachusetts committee selected five men and two women from Halifax to oversee their operations. The Halifax committee, as it was called, was in charge of adjudicating applications for furniture, including deciding on the amount and quality to be given in each case. 129 In practice, the Halifax committee often relied on the advice of the HRC’s Rehabilitation Committee and its social workers in deciding who deserved what furniture. This structure meant that the power structures built into the rest of the Halifax relief work was reproduced in the Massachusetts aid. The presence of the Boston committee and the fact that Nova Scotians in Massachusetts had donated to the fund, however, altered survivors’ sense of their rights. They or their Massachusetts relatives could write to authorities demanding that the Halifax sufferer be given their fair share of what the Massachusetts relative had donated.

Most of the time, the Massachusetts committee simply forwarded the complaint

128 Undated staff list (before 25 January 1918), item 162.1, HRC correspondence.

129 Lyman, Committee on Public Safety, 204-5. On varying quality of furniture, see G.F. Pearson to H.B. Endicott, 29 July 1918; and Pearson to J.A. Malone, 29 July 1918, both on reel 12, M-HRC papers.
back to Halifax and ratified whatever decision the Halifax committee made. The explosion destroyed W.T. Murphy’s house, and he had requested furnishings for his new kitchen, dining room, and three bedrooms, including a refrigerator. In May, he wrote to Boston, complaining he had still not received anything. The vice-chairman of the Boston committee, James J. Phelan, simply forwarded the letter to the Halifax committee and told Murphy he would have to take up the case there. Yet sometimes, by writing to higher-ups, aggrieved Haligonians could be taken more seriously. Charles Tanner wrote to Massachusetts Governor Samuel McCall to complain that he had been mistreated and had not received his share of the relief aid donated by Massachusetts. McCall forwarded the letter to A.C. Ratshesky, who in turn gave it to the chairman of the Halifax committee, G. Fred Pearson. Pearson thought that Tanner’s complaint was groundless. “I have investigated this case, and while the facts are generally as stated, Mr. Tanner was blind before the disaster,” he wrote to Ratshesky. Given that, Tanner was not due a pension, though “as a matter of fact, he was allowed the sum of $10.00 a week for a number of weeks in order to rest.” Because Ratshesky had taken a personal interest in the matter, Pearson promised to “look into the case and see what we can do in the way of furniture or other relief. I am writing Mr. Tanner today to come in to see me.”

Though there does not appear in the archives a single case of the Boston committee backing the complaint of a sufferer against the Halifax committee, these

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130 W.T. Murphy to J.J. Phelan, n.d. but rec’d 20 May 1918; Phelan to Murphy 20 May 1918, reel 12, M-HRC papers. For similar cases, see Phelan to G.F. Pearson, 3 January 1918; 24 January 1918; and Phelan to Mrs. H. Stone, 5 December 1918, all on reel 12, M-HRC papers.

131 Pearson to Ratshesky, 6 September 1918, reel 12, M-HRC papers.
complaints were still taken seriously. In one case, for instance, Fred Pearson wrote preemptively to James Phelan about a woman named Adelaid Simmons. Pearson wanted Phelan to know about the situation in case of she “or any of her friends in Massachusetts calling on you. We frequently receive letters from people to whom we refused to make additional gifts, stating that friends of their in Massachusetts have contributed to the fund and it occurred to me Mrs. Simmond’s [sic] might be one of those and therefore it might be [of] service to have a statement from me on your records if any of her friends call.”

The rhetorical strategy of mentioning “friends of theirs in Massachusetts” appears to have been successful in at least getting a second look.

It worked in the other direction, too, when Massachusetts donors wrote to Halifax authorities to demand better treatment of their friends and relatives. These extended networks could be an important source of support. Levinia MacKenzie was an old woman who had come to Halifax three years before from rural Moses River to live with her adopted daughter, Rose Bedgood. After the disaster, MacKenzie appeared to have lost her memory, and Bessie Egan, a sort of private police matron who worked for the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty, took her to the City Home. A month later, MacKenzie felt trapped. Rose, whose husband was overseas in the army and whose own daughter had died in the explosion, was no longer in any position to help. Rose was, the Home matron “judged from . . . appearances and reports concerning her . . . not [of] very good character”; the HRC’s head social worker said Rose was “behaving badly and neglecting her child and mother.” MacKenzie still had a sister in Moses River, the but

132 The archives in question here are that of the Boston committee, the records of which appear to have been kept rather haphazardly.

133 G.F. Pearson to J.J. Phelan, 23 September 1918, reel 12, M-HRC papers.
she reported that Rose had refused to write to the sister for help, apparently for fear that they would both end up back in the country. She also had sisters in Boston, but she couldn’t remember their addresses. Faced with this situation, Egan had “decided quite firmly” that the best place for MacKenzie was in the City Home.

By June, MacKenzie had apparently found a way to make contact with her relatives in Massachusetts, and one of them wrote an angry letter to the HRC, relying on her authority as a donor. “At the time of the terrible explosion in Halifax, this town as well as the whole of Mass contributed money for the relief of those who lost everything in the explosion. I contributed my share as I knew of some people living there, in particular an old lady Mrs Levinia MacKenzie, who lived with her daughter Mrs Rose Bedgood, this old lady lost every thing and we found that that she was placed in the City pour house for the time being,” wrote a furious Mrs. A.E. Anderson of Wakefield. “What was this money give to your Ass. for, to put people in the poor house?” Anderson suggested that MacKenzie be sent back to Moses River, where, Anderson claimed, she owned a furnished home. “She writes me she will die of a broken heart if she has to stay there any longer,” she wrote of the City Home. Ultimately, Anderson’s appeal had the same effect as the letters to the Massachusetts Halifax Relief Committee: the matter was looked into a second time; George Cutten, the head of the rehabilitation committee, took a personal interest in the case; and Anderson received a strongly-worded defense of the Relief Commission’s actions. Nonetheless, we can see in Levinia MacKenzie’s case how the existence of the diaspora and its donations to the Massachusetts fund gave extra support and political power to their suffering relatives in Halifax.

134 File 3819, box 96, series P.
Haligonians also relied on their diaspora in the United States to welcome them if they moved there. Horace Brown had been born in Newfoundland, but his wife, Winifred, was a native Haligonian. They had spent most of their adult lives in the U.S., where Horace began but did not complete his naturalization process. They had returned to Dartmouth in June 1917 after Horace enlisted in the British Expeditionary Force as a cook. The explosion upended their lives, destroying everything they owned. Worse, Winifred and twelve-year-old Eleanor both lost eyes, and ten-year-old Edith was fatally wounded. Edith’s twin Ruth was sufficiently badly hurt that she spent weeks in the hospital. Three weeks after the explosion, a friend of Horace’s sister wrote to the Relief Commission from Boston to make sure that they were receiving all possible aid and to suggest that if Horace could be honorably discharged they would return to the States to earn a living. With the help of Horace’s sister, a missionary to China then on furlough in the U.S., he was able to leave the military in June, and he started well-paid work at the Nova Scotia Car Works as a fireman. By September, the family had returned to Boston. The Browns’ social networks were far stronger in Massachusetts, where they had spent twenty-three years and where their children had been born, than they were in Halifax, where they were near strangers.

Like the Browns, Mary Anna and Michael Lippanen had deeper connections to Massachusetts than to Halifax. They and most of their children had immigrated to Nova Scotia two years earlier from Finland. One son, however, had gone instead to Worcester, Massachusetts. Michael, born Mikho, worked as a machinist and tailor, and their eldest daughter, Mary, had recently begun an apprenticeship in dressmaking. When the

135 File 3067, box 78, series P.
explosion came, Mary lost one eye, and the remaining one was, in the words of a doctor, “badly disorganized inside” and provided only a glimmer of sight. Mary Anna and the younger children went almost immediately to Fitchburg, Mass., where they had support from the son in Worcester and a sister in nearby Townsend. Since someone had to stay with Mary—who remained in the hospital at least through February—Michael stayed in Halifax, “renting a bed” from a Mrs. Hiltz and continuing at his old job. Later that spring, Mary moved into the Nova Scotia School for the Blind, where she began to learn the skills of reading, writing, and living without sight. In July, after the school term ended, Michael and Mary went south to rejoins the rest of their family. But although the family decided that their social networks were stronger in Massachusetts, they maintained ties to Halifax. Mary, especially, seems to have developed close and meaningful relationships with some of those with whom she shared her disaster experience. For some time afterwards, she wrote letters asking after the other patients blinded by the disaster with whom she had trained at the School for the Blind. “I’d love to see Clara again and all the others,” she wrote in November 1919, “but I guess there isn’t much hope.”

Although sometimes—as with the Browns and the Lippanens—Haligonians joined the diaspora after the explosion, sometimes the diaspora came to them. This was true for Florence Simpson, whom we met earlier in this chapter. Her daughters, Louisa and Mildred, came grudgingly from Toronto to help their mother. Lillian Irving had cared for her two sons Charles, seventeen, and Percy, thirteen, alone since her husband

136 File 716, box 36, series P. See also G.F. Pearson to H.B. Endicott, 7 August 1918; and J.J. Phelan to Mary Leppanen [sic], 9 August 1918, both on reel 12, M-HRC papers.

137 File 1911, box 60, series P.
left home five years earlier. Her eldest child, also named Lillian, had gone to Fitchburg, where she lived with her machinist husband. Lillian mère died in the explosion, and though she left a small estate, her house and its contents were destroyed. The boys’ only relative in town was their uncle, whose own house was wrecked and who had his own eight children to look after. Instead, their sister Lillian “came from Fitchburg as soon as she knew of the disaster.” While in Halifax, she took care of her mother’s estate, and then she took her brothers back with her to Massachusetts, where Charles was to work and Percy was to continue in school. The long history of migration from the Maritimes meant that Haligonians had networks at great geographical distance, but regardless of location, they relied on their friends and relatives for support.

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Thus far, this chapter has argued that people relied on and built upon their pre-disaster modes of survival, and that these meant working in solidarity with relatives, friends, and neighbors. The exceptions—people who because of class, age, gender, or race were excluded from mainstream Halifax—prove the rule. Both the Browns and Levinia MacKenzie demonstrate what happened to people with weak ties in Halifax. The Browns had only been in Halifax for a few months, and they had a shortage of friends nearby on whom they could rely. They particularly needed help since Winifred’s injuries left her unable to keep house. Without close family or friends, the Browns returned to the

138 File 1613, box 54, series P.
place where they did have people from whom they could receive informal aid.\textsuperscript{139}

MacKenzie’s only relative in Halifax, her daughter, refused to take care of her. This put her at greater risk for losing her independence, which indeed happened when she was sent to the City Home.\textsuperscript{140} Similarly, Jim and Charlotte Martin lost much of their independence. Jim, as we have seen, was a drunk, his wife Charlotte was illiterate, and even their priest seemed to take little interest in them. To protect their children from Jim’s alcohol-induced financial irresponsibility, the Relief Commission placed the relief money in trust, to be dispensed only when a social worker allowed it.\textsuperscript{141} People on the edges of society for reasons of class, age, gender, and race were, like MacKenzie and the Martins, in danger of losing their pre-explosion independence. People like them either had networks of informal kin with whom they worked to retain their independence and survive—recall that even Jim Martin had friends with whom he built a temporary shelter—or they lost their autonomy and independence. Sometimes both occured.

Mary Swan appears briefly in the Relief Commission’s records. Her marital status was uncertain—perhaps she was a widow, perhaps she was separated from her husband, perhaps she and her child’s father had never been married—and the social worker assigned to her was horrified at the state of her apartment, where she found two men in uniform, recently returned from England, who said they didn’t know the woman very well, despite that one was in shirtsleeves reading the paper and the other was sleeping in his clothes on the bed. The child was playing by himself. “Room not settled

\textsuperscript{139} File 3067, box 78, series P.

\textsuperscript{140} File 3819, box 96, series P.

\textsuperscript{141} File 705, box 36, series P.
and whole house in terrible confusion,” the visitor wrote. “A couple of dozen children playing in halls and yard.” Her minister, trafficking in rumor and innuendo, said that he “did not consider her at all fit to take care of children,” despite acknowledging that he had “no knowledge of her character beyond the fact that he considers her irrational and irresponsible. Said he had heard that the children’s father was not married to her but could not say definitely.” The minister’s disdain for her was apparently common, and apparently Swan had left a wide swath of people in her life who would have nothing to do with her, including a sister in Sydney. The Relief Commission eventually decided she was a fraud and “mentally defective.” Yet even Swan had friends with whom she lived and worked, and with whom she shared resources. She lived with a woman named Mrs. Higgins, and between them they managed to obtain six food tickets in two weeks. (Each ticket was supposed to last one week, so they scammed two extra.) Their practices of solidarity were certainly illegible to the Relief Commission, which struggled mightily to understand who Swan really was and what her true story was, but they were similar to those practiced by families.142

Rita Mariggi was an Italian immigrant with a questionable command of English, although her mother also lived in Halifax. Her husband, also Italian, had been a stevedore in Halifax Harbor, but he was killed in the explosion, leaving nineteen-year-old Rita to fend for herself and their three children, including five-week-old Margaret. According to a neighborhood gossip, Rita was better off without her husband, who was a gambler and spent his money—about $15 a week, though stevedores’ wages were always uncertain—on other women. Rita herself, said another neighbor, “was of good character,  

142 File 960, box 41, series P.
only gay and fond of a good time.” After the explosion, Rita stayed in her house, where only two of four rooms were habitable. Even those rooms had rotten floorboards, ruined plaster walls, and a pervasive stink from the basement. When the HRC found her two weeks after the explosion—with two sick older children and an infant, she had been unable to go looking for them—Rita asked to be moved to St. Mary’s Shelter, but the next day she changed her mind and asked for help moving to stay with her mother, who had offered to take in the family “for the present anyway.” By the spring, she had still not moved, despite increasing harassment from the landlord, who wanted to demolish the building.

Despite this misery and the apparent reluctance of her mother to help, Mariggi had both formal and informal networks to help her survive. In early January, she expected a payment from her husband’s union (though there is no record of her having received it). A few weeks later, she received $20 from an anonymous “Italian friend,” who promised to continue helping his compatriots “from time to time.” Neither of these were enough to support her and her children, however. In April, Mariggi put her children in an orphanage and went to work as a domestic for the woman she’d worked for before marriage. A month later, the formal apparatus of the orphanage had also failed her. She took her children back, complaining that they had been badly treated and not looked after properly, and that the infant had lost weight. She moved into a boarding house, which let her keep the children with her as long as she did some household chores. A month after that, though, the she was forced to leave again, since her children and those of the landlord fought constantly. Mariggi moved in with her mother, but her mother ran a boarding house and was afraid of it developing a bad reputation if her daughter and her
children stayed there. Besides, it was almost unbearably crowded there, with nine sleeping in a room, three to a bed. Unable to care for the infant under these new circumstances, Mariggi turned to a childless couple, the Carmonics, whom she knew through her late husband, and gave them her baby. Peter Carmonic, known around the docks as Peter the Greek, ran a “questionable lodging house,” one which the police wanted to shut down, though they had not yet found a legal excuse to do so. According to a different police report, though, the Carmonic house was simply a sailors’ boarding house, dirty—like all such places, said the police chief—but reputable. Turning to the Carmonics was perhaps the most desperate of Mariggi’s attempts to find support within her community, and she was apparently uncertain about it. At least three times she went to Carmonics to take Margaret back, only to return her when she realized again that she could not take care of the baby.

The survival strategies Mariggi cobbled together with the help, albeit sometimes grudging, of her mother, the Carmonics, and her old employer were important, but they were fragile. As a widow with children, Mariggi was particularly vulnerable. Three children were a burden to feed, clothe, and house. As a single woman, her gender appeared to give authorities license to police her behavior and put her at the mercy of gossips like the woman who talked about her late husband’s gambling. Mariggi knew her vulnerability, and she tried hard to keep Margaret’s adoption a secret. She was right: once the social workers found out, they tried to put a stop to it. After forcing Mariggi to make the adoption official by going to court, Jane Wisdom, the supervising social worker, worked with William Wallace, the judge and a relief commissioner, to block the adoption. Wisdom and her colleague Ernest Blois, the superintendent of delinquent and neglected
children, preferred that Mariggi work within formal systems, rather than her informal support networks. Blois told her “that Judge [Wallace] would not allow the baby to remain at Peter Carmonic’s and that she must take it home and care for it or place it in a Home.” As a Catholic, the obvious orphanage for Margaret was the Home of the Guardian Angel, but, Blois wrote in his notes, “Mrs. Marigge [sic] said she would not put it in the Home as they did not care for it.” The Protestant orphanage refused to take the baby because its parents were Catholic. The Catholic clergy, though, were little better. Mrs. Carmonic refused to go to church because she was convinced that the priest disliked her because, in Blois’s paraphrase, “she has a big house and no help.” Whatever the reason, she was certainly right that the clergyman disliked her. The priest wrote a note of “emphatic protest” against the adoption, on the grounds that since Mrs. Carmonic “does not practice her religion herself she can hardly be expected to guarantee a religious upbringing to her adopted child.” He too wanted Margaret sent to the Home of the Guardian Angel “until Mrs. Carmonic proves she is a Catholic by doing her duty.”

The priest appeared mollified when Mrs. Carmonic signed a contract agreeing that if she did not become a good Catholic within two years, she would lose the baby, and the case mostly disappeared from the desks of Blois, Wallace, and Wisdom. But Rita Mariggi continued for much of the rest of her life to try to balance the demands of the state’s welfare system and those of her informal network. In 1920, Mariggi had an illegitimate child, and the nurse who delivered her baby informed both the HRC and Bessie Egan, the police matron, even though, the nurse said, Mariggi was “Very anxious that H.R.Comm. should not hear of this.” She was right to be afraid, since the Commission cut off her funds until she agreed to put the new baby into the Home of the Guardian Angel.
Guardian Angel. Already, both of her older boys were being cared for at St. Joseph’s Orphanage. Two years after that, she married a man named John Dill in a Presbyterian church. This meant that the HRC would no longer pay her widow’s pension, but it presumably provided a different kind of security, one without the intrusive gaze of the state. In the next dozen years, Mariggi bore seven more children, and she continued to balance Dill’s increasing abuse with her desire to stay free of governmental intrusion in her life. In 1930, for instance, “sick and tired of getting a bawling out” from her husband, she put her eldest son—crippled in an accident three years earlier—into the City Home. She almost immediately regretted it, though, and wrote to the HRC begging help to get him out again. “There was all kinds of men, colored and white, crazy and sick, scrunching, hollering, cursing, swearing, ripping and tearing,” she wrote. “He doesn’t want to stay there. There was no church on Sunday. Joe said ‘For God’s sake take me out of here.’” Four years after that, in the depths of the Depression, Dill demanded that the second son, a star student, leave school and either work or live at the Citadel Relief Camp, the humiliating last resort of the city’s poorest men.\footnote{143 On the relief camp, see Fingard et al., \textit{Halifax}, 144.} In the ensuing fight, Dill struck Mariggi on the side of her head. Mariggi performed a complicated balancing act between him and the state, prosecuting him for his assault before, in the words of the newspaper, “she became soft-hearted and decided she did not want to prosecute” and warned her husband that should he hit her again, he would find himself back in court. Nearly two decades after the explosion, Mariggi was still trying to maintain her independence from the state while using it to get the support she needed.\footnote{144 File 1268, box 47, series P.}
If Mariggi was an outsider because of her class, religion, and gender, other Haligonians were outsiders through transience and temporary residence. Because Halifax was a military city in wartime, there were considerable numbers of people who had recently arrived. Some had been attracted by the booming economy; others had followed a family member in the Army or Navy. Recognizing this population, the Navy agreed to pay for the wives of officers and sailors to leave Halifax and return home, where they would have the informal support of their original community. Elizabeth Hendry and her daughter had come to Halifax from Toronto to be with her husband, a petty officer on the HMCS Margaret, an auxiliary patrol ship. The husband died, the daughter’s body was never found, and Elizabeth went to Camp Hill Hospital with a wound in her right shoulder and a hole in her head so big doctors could see her skull. “I suffer so much with my nerves and dont look the same nor feel the same my little girl I never found I cant sleep at night I think she is alive before the disaster I never had a Doctor now I am never two days well I often wish I had gone with them I was the only taken out of the ruins alive there was six killed so you can understand how I feel,” she wrote in May, her woes pouring out so fast they could not pause for a comma or period. She lost her clothes, a quantity of cash, and a suitcase, and in January she submitted a request for the HRC to compensate her new clothing and a new suitcase. Charlie Ackhurst, the chair of the clothing committee, recommended that they pay the bill, since “possibly being a stranger here she did not get the attention that she should have here.” Nonetheless, as a wife of a Navy noncommissioned officer, she was comparatively well cared for, with a Navy pension and transportation back to Toronto. In Toronto, she had access to her friends and

family, and she was seen by doctors who had not become jaded by the large numbers of
disaster victims, and so who were more willing to stress to the HRC how pitiable was her
situation.\footnote{File 3043, box 77, series P.}

Others, without the institutional support of the military, were less fortunate.
Women without husbands were particularly at risk. Since her husband had abandoned
her a year before the explosion, Florence McNella had supported herself and her two
young children on the meager money she made “working out” as a domestic. This $5
each week was supplemented by the $20 a month her eldest son sent home from the front,
but $40 a month was still a tiny sum, especially when half went to rent. She had arrived
in Halifax only three months before the explosion, perhaps to live with her aged mother.
Other than her mother, though, McNella was a “stranger in town [who] does not know
anyone.” Investigators claimed that she had not lost anything material in the explosion,
but because the house was damaged, their fuel bills were higher, and the pipes froze at
the start of January and hadn’t been fixed by the middle of February. With no friends or
working family to give her informal support, she was entirely dependent on the formal
aid of the Relief Commission, which offered only some food. McNella was poor before
the explosion, and without friends to help materially or serve as an advocate, her
destitution was only made worse by the disaster.\footnote{File 1910, box 60, series P.}
Poor, single women like McNella, Mariggi, and Swan were particularly ill-served by a system in which others relied on the
networks of everyday solidarity.

Blacks, especially black women, faced similar hurdles. As with single white
women, their social networks were particularly illegible to the state, and they faced specific barriers to their receipt of official aid and to their reliance on informal support. Sarah Henry, a 63-year-old charwoman, had like many others a variety of survival strategies before the explosion. She owned her house, where, until 1915, she had lived with a daughter. In September 1915, a second daughter, then living in Cambridge, Mass., with her husband and children, had tried twice—once by rail and once by ship—to move back to Halifax to take her sister’s place caring for their aged mother. Both times, however, the family was stopped at the border. Though the Immigration Act of 1910 did not explicitly forbid black migration into Canada, by 1912, what had been merely customary discrimination hardened into something very near an official policy banning their entry.\(^{148}\) In the case of Henry’s daughter and her family, Canadian immigration inspectors claimed, no doubt influenced by their skin color, that they would become public charges. (Henry’s daughter, though born a Canadian citizen, had apparently lost her nationality when she married her American husband.) This was a self-fulfilling prophecy, since when the family returned to Cambridge they found the husband’s job gone, and they were obliged to rely on charity for several months. With her daughter now on charity, Henry too lost her independence and came to rely on the North Baptist Church. After the explosion, though, all her unofficial supports were gone: her house, which at its best had been derided by the Canadian immigration inspector as a “very old wooden house of no value,” was destroyed, and the church was overwhelmed. This left Henry dependent on the state and on the official relief work of the HRC. From the start,

she relied on official relief, moving first to St. Paul’s shelter and then to St. Mary’s. By the beginning of January, eager again for independence from the state, she arranged to move to Cambridge to live with her daughter. Once again, however, Henry was thwarted by the border. This time, it was American immigration inspectors, working in Halifax, who excluded her and forbade her to try again for a year.149

The Americans’ decision left Henry stuck in Halifax. With nowhere else to go, she was among the last people to leave the official shelter. To get her out, the Relief Commission arranged for her and another black woman still in the shelter to board with Mary Francis, a third elderly African Canadian. The Francis household was “a colored family in an ordinary poor condition; she has only one day’s work a week but had no more before explosion.” By grouping these three women together, the HRC was attempting to replicate the informal communities that aided each other, but this “community” was artificial and apparently based on nothing but a common race.150

In April, the HRC stopped their payment, declaring that “from now on Mrs. Henry must live as she did before the explosion, which was chiefly on the generosity of her friends.” This left her, like Levinia MacKenzie, at risk of winding up in the City Home. Her daughter in Cambridge continued to advocate for her mother to come to Massachusetts, where she would look after her grandchildren while the daughter went out to do day work, but the United States immigration authorities continued to stand in the way. Happily for Henry, though, friends in Halifax came through, and she found a place to stay. The daughter agreed to send $5 a month to help support her mother in Halifax, with the understanding

149 File 3337, box 84, series P.
150 File 1305, box 49, series P. See also file 950, file 41, series P.
that this contribution would keep her mother out of the City Home. Nonetheless, it meant
decreased independence, since the money was routed through the Relief Commission,
who supervised Henry and her expenses.\footnote{151}{File 3337, box 84, series P.}

Sarah Henry’s story demonstrates what made black Haligonians’ experiences
different from and similar to those of their white counterparts. In all but one aspect,
Henry’s disaster experiences were like other poor, single women: her reliance on friends
and family for informal aid; her geographically extended social networks; her fear of
being placed in the City Home; and an attempt to balance a need for more material aid
from the state with a desire to be free of its meddling. But Henry was the only person in
the sample who had any difficulty emigrating to the United States. Indeed, in other cases
the HRC paid the U.S. immigration head tax to ease migration.\footnote{152}{B.F. Felt to Mary E. Brown, 2 January 1918; and Felt to Halifax Relief Committee, 8 January 1918, both on reel 11, M-HRC papers.} Although there was no
explicit mention of Henry’s race when she was denied entry, there seems little doubt that
she was excluded because she was black.

To understand black Haligonians’ experiences after the disaster, it is important to
understand the bifurcated racial geography of Halifax. Most scholarship on blacks in
Halifax has focused on Africville, a neighborhood at the far northern tip of the peninsula.
For years deprived of municipal services like adequate police, sewage, running water, or
acceptable education, Africville’s mistreatment culminated in its destruction in the mid-
1960s in favor of a park and a bridge to Dartmouth. In the wake of the evictions of
Africville’s roughly 400 residents lay a generation of bitterness and continued scholarly
interest, making it, in the words of historian James W. St.G. Walker, “Canada’s most
highly publicized black community.”153 But the emphasis on Africville and its fate has meant a general scholarly neglect of the other black neighborhood in Halifax, the community in the Fifth Ward that clustered around the Cornwallis Street Baptist Church. This historiographical omission echoes a broader lacuna about black Nova Scotians between World War I and the destruction of Africville.154 These two omissions are particularly troubling because they encourage the confounding of all black Haligonians with those in Africville. This is a historically inaccurate depiction, as people understood at the time. For much of the twentieth century, black children from other parts of Halifax and beyond were warned by their parents to avoid Africville because it was imagined as a slum and a “community of ‘drifters.’”155 Moreover, the emphasis on Africville suggests incorrectly that the experience of people there was the normative experience of all black Haligonians. This was especially not the case as regards geographic, social, and educational segregation, the hallmarks of Africville.156 In contrast to Africville’s segregation, Ward 5 blacks lived in a largely white neighborhood, albeit with a cluster of African-Canadians. Halifax blacks who lived neither in the Ward 5 neighborhood near


Cornwallis Street Baptist Church nor in Africville were even more surrounded by whites.\footnote{On the formation of the black neighborhood in Ward 5, see Fingard, “Race and Respectability,” 171. For a brief description of it in a somewhat later period, see Verna Thomas, \textit{Invisible Shadows: A Black Woman’s Life in Nova Scotia} (Halifax: Nimbus, 2001), 89.} Rachel and John Brown, for instanced, were a black couple who lived in Richmond. They rented rooms in their house to a muligenerational, apparently white family, the Youngs.\footnote{File 450, box 29, series P; file 470, box 30, series P.} Figure 7 shows a group of children playing in the snow soon after the explosion, including a black boy. Although we cannot know the relations among these children—for instance, whether the black boy was being excluded or taunted—the photograph suggests that African-Canadian children in Halifax played with white children.\footnote{Photograph originally from the collection of the Maritime Command Museum, Halifax, N.S., and reprinted in Beed, \textit{1917 Halifax Explosion}, 108.}

Africville itself appears not to have been much affected by the explosion. The settlement’s newly built school, unlike many other schools in Halifax, was empty.\footnote{Winks, \textit{Blacks in Canada}, 348.} Bertram Chambers, the highest ranking British naval officer in Halifax, reported that since the neighborhood was on the far side of a hill from the explosion, there was “very little injured except glass.”\footnote{\cite{afw} Only two cases in my sample reported addresses there, and neither of them appear to have sustained much damage. Lavinia and Fred Byers, for instance, an elderly Africville couple, received blankets from the relief committee a few days after the explosion, suggesting that, like the rest of the city, their windows were broken and letting in cold air. Yet they reported very little property loss from the explosion.} Only two cases in my sample reported addresses there, and neither of them appear to have sustained much damage. Lavinia and Fred Byers, for instance, an elderly Africville couple, received blankets from the relief committee a few days after the explosion, suggesting that, like the rest of the city, their windows were broken and letting in cold air. Yet they reported very little property loss from the explosion.
explosion and requested almost no other aid. In sociologist Donald Clairmont’s essay on the neighborhood’s history for a commemorative volume, the explosion does not even merit a mention. At the time, Africville was excluded from maps showing the devastated area. To emphasize Africville in narrating the experience of black Haligonians in the explosion, therefore, is misguided.

Like Sarah Henry, Halifax blacks used many of the same strategies for survival after the explosion as did their white neighbors, but they had to contend with added barriers. The HRC consistently reacted to requests for help and property claims from black citizens with skepticism and a marked lack of sympathy. Katie Donegan, age sixty-three, had been widowed for eight years before the explosion, and like many other women had many strategies for survival. She and her married daughter boarded together, presumably supporting each other, and she also worked as a seamstress. Most of her income, however, came from performing as the “Jubilee Singer” for returned soldiers, for which she sometimes earned as much as $15 a week. As with other families, the explosion disrupted this careful balance. Injured and homeless, Donegan first went to the hospital, then to an ad hoc shelter at a furniture company. With nowhere else to go, she

162 File 3064, box 78, series P.

163 Clairmont, “Historical Overview,” 36-50. Nova Scotia writer and historian Thomas Raddall assumes in his memoir that the black corpses he saw coming to the morgue “must have come all the way from Africville,” apparently discounting the presence of blacks in other neighborhoods. (There is also the possibility that what he saw in the ill-lighted school basement were white bodies covered in oily soot; there were many stories of racial confusion in the explosion’s immediate aftermath.) See Thomas H. Raddall, In My Time: A Memoir (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976), 39. On Raddall’s troubling depictions of African Nova Scotians, especially in Africville, see Ian McKay and Robin Bates, In the Province of History: The Making of the Public Past in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2010), 217-9.


165 Laura M. Mac Donald, Curse of the Narrows (New York: Walker, 2005), 238-240, notes a similar pattern, but her discussion is marred by her apparent belief that all black Haligonians lived in Africville.
then spent more than two months at the shelter at St. Mary’s Cathedral until the Relief Commission, desperate to be rid of her, paid for her and Sarah Henry to live with a third elderly woman. At the end of March, however, they cut off both her and Henry. “From now on Mrs. Donagan must live as she did before the explosion which was on what she earned singing at concerts,” wrote a social worker. The Commission was unmoved when they learned that this was impossible. At the end of April, Donegan asked for a mere two or three dollars because she had only gotten one concert engagement since they had stopped paying her board and would not have another until the middle of May. Elizabeth Walker, the supervising social worker who saw her, instead told Donegan to go door to door in search of sewing work. “Case closed,” Walker wrote.  

Other black applicants received similarly unsympathetic responses. Joseph Thompson worked as a city watchman; he lived with his wife Sophie and an adopted son, Fred. Though Sophie’s left eye was injured and needed daily dressings, they were marked as having “not been effected by [the] explosion.” Lavinia and Fred Byers put in a property claim of nearly $60, a rather small sum, but they received a mere $5 in damages. While nearly all claimants received less than they requested, this was a particularly small proportion. Jane and James Brown, the Byers’ Africville neighbors, received similar treatment. They owned a house and land, and Jane was a storekeeper. Their claim was derided as “extravagant for Africville” and they were granted only $75 in damages. Ada Cooley was separated from her husband, a railroad porter, and she

166 File 950, box 41, series P.
167 File 2229, box 65, series P.
168 File 3064, box 78, series P.
169 File 3058, box 78, series P.
supported herself and her two children by keeping boarders. After the explosion, her two boarders left, leaving her without any financial support. Yet her investigator was distrustful. “If applying for relief be careful,” she wrote, heavily underlining *careful.*

By the end of the 19th century, middle-class blacks in Halifax had largely given up trying to be accepted into “respectable” white society, and they had turned inward, creating a separate and parallel society. Black families and communities took on added importance. The informal networks of solidarity on which blacks increasingly relied were thus especially difficult for white relief workers to understand, and this may be an additional reason—besides simple racism—that relief officials had a distrustful attitude toward African-Canadian applicants. In the entire sample, 33 families disappeared and could not be found by relief workers soon after they registered for relief. Of these, three—a grossly disproportionate number compared to the entire sample—were black. An investigator searched for John Simmons, a teamster, “at many houses” but could not find him. Albert West, a twenty-one-year-old stevedore, lent his overcoat to a person in need of one on the day of the explosion, and a few weeks later he filed to have it replaced. But though he was active in a church and owned property in rural Nova Scotia, the Relief Commission could not find him. If the commission could not find someone as well connected as West, it suggests that the connections and social ties of black Nova

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172 File 2237, box 65, series P.

173 File 1905, box 60, series P.
Scotians were particularly illegible to the officials at the HRC. In this way, perhaps, the historiographical focus on Africville is useful. As historian James Walker writes, “the Africville story serves as allegory for the African-Canadian experience, especially in Nova Scotia.” Africville was famously illegible, with few opportunities for formal employment; a total lack of municipal infrastructure like sewers, fire hydrants, running water, or street lights; no street names or urban planning; a general disregard for legal title to land; and an absence of police or meaningful fire protection. “To outsiders,” writes Walker, echoing Clairmont, “Africville smacked of impermanency and even immorality.” By symbolically standing in for the experiences of other black Haligonians, Africville highlights the illegibility of black communities to the state and to white outsiders.

If black social networks and communities were illegible to the Relief Commission, that was even more true for the small, eleven-acre community of Mi’kmaq who lived in North Dartmouth on the shore of Tufts Cove. Called Kebeceque by its residents and Tufts Cove or Turtle Grove by others, it was a largely seasonal community made up of a handful of families. People there subsisted by foraging for berries, hunting moose, fishing eels, raising chickens, gardening, preserving, selling ax handles and baskets, and sometimes working as laborers. The Mi’kmaq’s survival strategies relied


175 Walker, “Allegories and Orientations,” 156-8, quote on 158.

176 Lisa Lynn Patterson, “Indian Affairs and the Nova Scotia Centralization Policy” (M.A. thesis, Dalhousie University, 1985), 22-23. See also Harry Chapman, In the Wake of the Alderney: Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, 1750-2000 (Halifax: Nimbus, 2001), 196-198. Kebeceque’s precise location is somewhat unclear. It is often described as around the present location of Nevins Avenue in Dartmouth, or north of Grove Street. This would place the settlement about a third of a mile south of Tufts Cove. See Alan Ruffman, “Turtle Grove, the Micmac Community at Tuft’s Cove: Is It Too Late to Recover Its Memory?” Micmac-Maliseet Nations News May 1991, 10.
on a wide variety of activities, solidarity and aid practiced across families, broader kinship networks, local bands, and the entire tribe. Their subsistence also depended on seasonal transience—transhumance, in the parlance of Native Studies scholars.\textsuperscript{177} Their complex networks and their transhumance rendered them illegible to the white, colonial state, and it was exactly this illegibility and transience that were their best tools for resistance.

On December 6, 1917, Kebeceque comprised seven shanties housing twenty-one individuals. Like Haligonians across the harbor, the Mi’kmaq living in Tufts Cove went to the shore to watch the ship fire, and when the explosion came pieces of iron from the Mont Blanc flew toward them. All seven houses were destroyed, and nine people were killed immediately or died from their wounds. Twelve people escaped, many with bad injuries. The school, built and staffed by the Department of Indian Affairs, was also destroyed, and the white man who taught there was killed in Halifax as he prepared to cross the harbor by ferry.\textsuperscript{178} J.H. Mitchell, Archibald MacMechan’s undergraduate assistant, was horrified by what he found when he visited the site. “Of some houses, there is absolutely no vestige, not even of ashes. Others are buried under the shattered trees. Clothing, furniture, stoves, trunks, etc., are everywhere. Mr. Moore, a trifle drunk, discovered the dismembered hand of a child while I was there,” he wrote in his notes. “The devastation is incomprehensible.”\textsuperscript{179} Kebeceque would never be rebuilt, and the


\textsuperscript{179}“The Devastated District of Dartmouth. Personal Observation of J.H. Mitchell,” 19 December 1917, item 173, MacMechan fonds.
visible Native presence in Dartmouth shrank to a single family. But the story is not simply one of unmitigated tragedy, a community “lost” to the explosion, though this is often how it has been narrated. Such a narrative, though well intentioned, presents the Mi’kmaq as tragically but probably unavoidably disappeared, remembered and memorialized in the past but not thought about in the present. It thus ignores white and Mi’kmaw agency, intentional oppression and resistance, as well as their present political legacies. The story of Kebeceque and its destruction cannot accurately be told in isolation from the broader story of the Canadian government’s attempts to dismantle the community long before the explosion and to force the Mi’kmaq into more legible, sedentary lives.

Jerry Lone Cloud was in Kentville, about 50 miles away in the Annapolis Valley, when the explosion happened. But as a leader of the Mi’kmaq at Tufts Cove, his life is a useful way to understand how they were like and unlike their non-Native neighbors. They were alike in that Native and non-Native people on both sides of Halifax Harbor had complex social webs on whom they could rely emotionally and economically. These

180 Interview with Leighton Dillman, 19 January 1981, folder 4, Kitz fonds.

181 Even well intentioned accounts intended to elicit sympathy for the “lost” Natives recapitulate this narrative. See, for example Jennifer Burke, “Turtle Grove: Dartmouth’s Lost Mi’kmaq Community,” in Ruffman and Howell, eds., Ground Zero, 45-53. Ruffman, “Turtle Grove,” is particularly egregious in this regard.


183 Through a policy of indirect rule pursued first by British and then Canadian colonizers, “chiefs” gradually changed from being “first among equals” to more powerful leaders. Harald E.L. Prins, The Mi’kmaq: Resistance, Accommodation, and Cultural Survival (Fort Worth, Tex.: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1996), 174-76. Though Lone Cloud led at the end of this process, it remains clear that his power within the community was mostly informal, and it would be a mistake to characterize him as the spokesperson for the Tufts Cove Mi’kmaq.
networks, built and developed before the explosion, were put to use in new and creative ways after the explosion. Such was true for whites, blacks, and Mi’kmaq. The content of Mi’kmaw networks and strategies, however, were unlike their non-Native neighbors, and those differences illuminate the way Mi’kmaq had long resisted colonial domination.

Like many non-Native Nova Scotians, Lone Cloud’s family lived on both sides of the U.S.-Canada border. He was born in Belfast, Maine, to two Nova Scotian migrants. Like many Mi’kmaq, Lone Cloud’s parents supported themselves in a variety of ways, primarily through subsistence fishing and by selling their knowledge of and skill with medicinal plants. His father sold his herbalist knowledge to a white man named Morse, who marketed the result as Morse’s Indian Root Pills. “Morse got rich on it,” Lone Cloud told journalist Clara Dennis years later. “Father was the Indian. He gave the fellow the secret,” he complained, and “that fellow got rich,” not his father. Lone Cloud’s telling was not bitter, though. “In those days we didn’t care about earning a living because we could get our living in the streams.”

In 1865, a double tragedy struck: first Lone Cloud’s father—then a Union soldier—died, and then his mother. The four surviving children traveled from Waterbury, Vermont, to Boston to Portland, Maine, and back to Belfast, staying with various Mi’kmaq along the way. After two years of travel, he finally made it back to his family’s ancestral home in Nova Scotia. There, he

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184 Ruth Holmes Whitehead, *Tracking Doctor Lonecloud: Showman to Legend Keeper* (Fredericton, N.B.: Goose Lane Editions and Halifax: Nova Scotia Museum, 2002), 50. Dennis, coincidentally, was the daughter of Agnes Dennis, whose role as a relief manager after the explosion is discussed in Chapter 1. On Mi’kmaq selling their traditional knowledge, see Prins, Mi’kmaq, 178.

185 Whitehead, *Tracking Doctor Lonecloud*, 52-53, 55. Lone Cloud claimed (52-53) that his father had been among the soldiers who caught John Wilkes Booth, and that his father had been murdered for his share of the reward money. Though it is true that it was New York troops who caught Booth, the story Lone Cloud told of their tying a millstone around Booth’s neck and drowning him in the ocean is false. Interestingly, though, it seems to mirror a staged event in which detectives pretended to dump Booth’s body into the Potomac River. Interestingly, the lieutenant commanding the New York soldiers who found Booth was also
lived with and learned from a man named Peter Charles, and he supported himself as a laborer, hunter, game guide, and logger, sometimes for cash and sometimes for barter. “People used to be paid in food, clothing, dishes, and presents,” he told Dennis. “They were just as well satisfied then.”

As a young man, Lone Cloud returned to the United States, where he became a showman. Hired by Kickapoo Indian Medicine Company “to dress up in Indian clothes, buckskin and feathers,” he and his colleagues performed in free shows designed to sell the company’s medicine. It was during this time that Lone Cloud took his name—he had been born Germain Laksi—because it sounded more Indian to a white audience. After eight years of selling Indianness on behalf of a white man, he quit and started his own show, which he ran for four years, managing as many as eight employees. When business turned bad, though, his act broke up, and he found work with Buffalo Bill Cody. When Cody booked the show in London, however, he tried to cut wages in half, citing the expense of taking the troupe across the Atlantic. Lone Cloud balked and deserted Cody, eventually rejoining the Kickapoo show, for which he traveled as far as South America. Eventually, he again left Kickapoo to form his own show. During this time, he performed in New Brunswick, where he met a seventeen-year-old Maliseet woman named Elizabeth Paul, whom he hired for an act in which Pocahontas saved John Smith. “I got her for Pocahontas,” he said, and together they toured throughout New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. They married in Kentville, and after some time touring together, they made

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Halifax County their home base. “Had a medicine show first, but I found Nova Scotia a good hunting ground and settled down,” he told Clara Dennis sometime in the 1920s. His “chief work” there was “to get the herbs and make medicine,” but he also supported himself as a hunter and a guide.

This brief biography of Lone Cloud highlights themes of transience and multiple subsistence strategies we have seen among non-Native Haligonians. Unlike them, Lone Cloud and other Mi’kmaq used their transience as part of a multifaceted strategy for cultural survival and considered this movement a very part of their culture. Mi’kmaq traveled not only for economic opportunity but because it was part of what made them Mi’kmaq, and also because it was fun. It also allowed them to pursue multiple subsistence strategies. When Lone Cloud left the Indian shows and “settled down” in Nova Scotia, he was not giving up his transience. He lived at various sites in Halifax, Guysborough, and Hants Counties. Moving seasonally allowed him and his family to pursue various activities—healing, hunting, guiding, laboring, handicraft production—depending on where that activity was possible. This transhumance had become increasingly necessary through the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as possibilities for hunting and fishing decreased and Mi’kmaq increasingly relied on selling their labor.

187 Whitehead, Tracking Doctor Lonecloud, 61-67, quotes on 61 and 67. On the name change, see page 27-28. Lone Cloud’s chronology is inconsistent: he was “twelve or thirteen” when his parents died in 1865, spent at least two years in New England before returning to Nova Scotia, and spent 20 years in Yarmouth before signing up with the Kickapoo show in what, by this accounting, would have been at least 1887. Yet he also says that a total of more than 13 years passed with Kickapoo, his own company, and Buffalo Bill, before the funeral of Ulysses S. Grant, which in fact happened in 1885. Moreover, he described himself as between 37 and 40 when he met his wife, which he said was after his second stint with Kickapoo, but must have been around 1890. See Whitehead, Tracking Doctor Lonecloud, 31, 53, 55, 60, 64, 65, 67. Most likely, Lone Cloud overestimated his time in Nova Scotia before becoming a showman. If so, he would have been around 18, not 30, when he joined Kickapoo in 1872.

188 Whitehead, Tracking Doctor Lonecloud, 82.

189 Prins, Mi’kmaq, 192-93.
Lone Cloud’s decision to spend an increasing amount of time in or near urban centers reflects the increasing urbanization of his fellow Mi’kmaq.\textsuperscript{190} His movement, likewise, reflects his continuing resistance to white demands that Mi’kmaq “settle” and become sedentary farmers.

Lone Cloud’s work in the Indian shows gave him experience interpreting Mi’kmaw culture for white audiences. It also put him in contact with Native healers from around the continent.\textsuperscript{191} Both these things stood him in good stead as a leader when he returned to Nova Scotia. Mi’kmaw medicine men’s major responsibility was healing, Lone Cloud told Dennis. “If their limbs are broken or they get any kind of diseases, they go to the chief medicine man, and he has all kinds of wild medicines.” But responsibilities went beyond what he called “doctoring” and included remembering and reciting oral histories and legends, marrying couples, instructing families “to lead a good life,” and “chastising anyone who needs it.”\textsuperscript{192} Though Mi’kmaw local knowledge was probably most important—indeed, Lone Cloud stressed that a leader could lose his position if he forgot any of the words to an important story—the knowledge he picked up from his colleagues at Kickapoo and Buffalo Bill’s must have increased his effectiveness. But by the time Lone Cloud rose to be chief medicine man, his traditional knowledge was less valuable, and many of his explanations of a medicine man’s job were in the past


\textsuperscript{191}Whitehead, \textit{Tracking Doctor Lonecloud}, 50-51.

\textsuperscript{192}Whitehead, \textit{Tracking Doctor Lonecloud}, 75-76.
tense. As scholar Janet Chute argues, “his narrations were filled with reminiscence, for those from whom he had learned his stories had died, or moved elsewhere.” 193 By the second decade of the 20th century, much of Lone Cloud’s authority and leadership likely came from his ability to negotiate with non-Natives. In 1910, he began a relationship with Harry Piers, the curator of the Provincial Museum of Nova Scotia. He brought Piers physical artifacts and shared with him Mi’kmaw lore; in return Piers helped him draft and send letters to Indian Affairs officials in Nova Scotia and Ottawa. (Though Lone Cloud was literate in English, he apparently used Piers to transcribe important or official letters.) 194 A relationship with Piers may have given Lone Cloud prestige and status among Mi’kmaw as well as whites. By the time Lone Cloud died in 1930, he was recognized as “chief medicine man” in Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island, “perhaps the one Micmac who was easily recognizable to all Haligonians.” 195 Recognizable though he might have been, his race and transience meant he was by no means universally respected. A.J. Boyd, the local Indian Superintendent in River Bourgeois who was the local-most official of the Department of Indian Affairs, derided Lone Cloud as “a professional Indian tramp, who poses as a medicine man.” 196

Kebeceque, the Mi’kmaw settlement on the shores of Tufts Cove, was not an official reserve, which is to say that the land was not owned by the Department of Indian


194 Whitehead, Tracking Doctor Lonecloud, 13-14.

195 William C. Borrett, excerpt from Down East, in Whitehead, ed., Old Man Told Us, 342; Whitehead, Tracking Doctor Lonecloud, 41.

Affairs on behalf of its residents. Although the government ran a school there—paying the salary of its white teacher and rent to the Native family who owned the land—the families who lived in the settlement were otherwise deemed “squatters” on land owned by the white Farrell family. Kebeceque residents waged a long battle to remain on land they considered theirs by right. “The Indians claim that although the land is not a reservation, yet they have surely rights there by long occupation, even if it be regarded only in the light of what is called squatter’s rights,” Lone Cloud wrote in 1917, as the fight was coming to a head. “We claim that we should not be forced to leave.” The fight was largely over transhumance and land: Mi’kmaq wanted space near cities so they could sell their crafts and their labor. At the same time, they wanted to preserve their traditional transience. Their way of life was entirely unintelligible to their neighbors and their overseers in the Department of Indian Affairs. The department, meanwhile, wanted to make them more comprehensible and controllable. “If it could not reduce the total number of Indians, at least it could be fully in control of their affairs and the cost of maintaining them,” writes Lisa Patterson. The complaints by white neighbors like the Farrells, she argues, “reinforced the Department’s natural tendency to concentrate Indians on reserves.”

Landowners in Dartmouth had long objected to the presence of Mi’kmaq and

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197 On the school, see A.J. Boyd to J.D. McLean, 23 March 1918, file 52-2-1; Duplicate invoice, 31 December 1917, file 52-2-5, both in vol. 5026, reel C-8146, Department of Indian Affairs School Files, Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development Fonds, RG 10, Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa (hereafter School Files). Lone Cloud’s letter is to the Secretary of the Department of Indian Affairs [McLean], 27 November 1917, file 10,838-2, Red Series, digitized and online at <http://collections.canada.gc.ca/pam_archives/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=2083086>. A draft of Lone Cloud’s from the collection of the Nova Scotia Museum is reprinted in Whitehead, ed., Old Man Told Us, 303-304.

198 Patterson, “Centralization Policy,” 23.
worked to expel them; as early as 1879, they were “warned off the lands” they inhabited there.\textsuperscript{199} This attempt, like the ones that followed it for a generation or more, were unsuccessful, as Mi’kmaq continued to exercise their traditional rights to camp at Tufts Cove. Settlement there was more or less continuous, though Kebeceque was primarily a winter camp. People stayed there for the cold weather, which meant through the end of May; in a typical year, the population was still growing in February.\textsuperscript{200} In the summer, people tended to return to the country, although as Mi’kmaq came to rely increasingly on selling their labor to urban non-Natives, an increasing number of people stayed year-round at Kebeceque. Meanwhile, as the government explored building a dry dock at Tufts Cove, the land became more valuable.\textsuperscript{201}

In July 1912, a Dartmouth doctor hired by the Department of Indian Affairs to be the medical attendant to the local Mi’kmaq announced that Tufts Cove “was totally unsuited to the use of the Indians.” The settlement was, he claimed, too far away from town to be convenient for residents to walk to their jobs as day laborers. Yet his proposed solution revealed that his concern—like many of his white neighbors—was far more about controlling the Natives than helping them. He proposed that the department buy an official reserve, but the three parcels of land he suggested were no closer to town than Kebeceque. Indeed one of the three options was to buy the land on which the Mi’maq were already squatting. That idea fell through when Vincent Farrell, the Halifax


\textsuperscript{200} A.J. Boyd to Duncan C. Scott, 7 February 1917, file 52-2-1, School Files.

\textsuperscript{201} W.G. Foster to J.D. McLean, 17 December 1914, file 10,838-1, Red Series.
petroleum dealer who owned the land, demanded more money for it than the government was willing to pay. The second option, an abandoned quarry ground, was abandoned because of “bitter opposition from the residents of Tuft’s Cove,” who like Farrell wanted the settlement gone altogether. The third option, to move people to property owned by the Navy, fell through when the Navy refused to transfer the land. By winter 1914, the local Indian agent acknowledged that the Mi’kmaq “must sooner or later be moved from Tuft’s Cove,” but he offered no location to which to move them.  

By the next year, though, a new option appeared, just in the nick of time. Descendants of the original Gersham Tufts offered to sell the department 94½ acres of land about a mile and a quarter north of Kebeceque. Because there questions about who really held the title to the land, it took more than a year for the department to buy the property. While that was dragging on, Farrell became increasingly belligerent, since his land was becoming increasingly valuable. First he demanded that the department pay him rent on behalf of the people who squatted on his land. In May 1916, the department agreed, and sent him $1000 for back rent dating from 1911. But seven months later, he announced that since the tax assessment on his property had gone up, he

202 Memorandum, Duncan C. Scott to Dr. Roche, 28 April 1915; W.G. Foster to J.D. McLean, 17 December 1914; J.D. McLean to A.J. Boyd, 15 August 1914, all in file 10,838-1, Red Series. Officials sometimes referred to “Tuft’s Cove,” but this is a mistake, since the area was named for Gersham Tufts.

203 Duncan C. Scott to Mr. Paget, 12 June 1915; J.D. McLean to J.L. Mackinnon, 15 May 1916, both in file 10,838-1, Red Series.

204 See, e.g., Murray & MacKinnon to [Duncan C. Scott], 14 June 1916; Murray and MacKinnon to [Scott], 23 November 1916; Scott to Attorney General, 10 August 1917; Murray and MacKinnon to [Scott], 30 August 1917; Scott to Attorney General, 7 September 1917; W Stuart Edwards to [Scott] 10 September 1917; Memo, A.S. Williams to Scott, 20 October 1917, all in file 10,838-1, Red Series.

205 Daniel Chisholm to Secretary, 2 October 1916, file 10,838-1, Red Series.

206 Payment voucher, 4 May 1916, file 10,838-1, Red Series.
would now demand $250 a year—rather than $200—in rent. In addition, he demanded that the department remove the Mi’kmaq at the end of the season. “I beg to inform you that I cannot tolerate any longer this treatment or the continual annoyance from the Indians to say nothing of the neighbours, who are continually bringing to my notice matters that are not very pleasant to hear of the conduct of the Indians, to say nothing of the damage they are doing to the property,” he wrote to department headquarters in Ottawa.207 When the department refused to increase the rent it paid, Farrell grew angrier. In February, he denounced the “great deal of annoyance and inconvenience” and declared that “the Indians must be removed” by the first day of May.208 By August, still upset at the disrespect he perceived from the government, Farrell summarily upped the rent to $300 “and not one cent less.” “Furthermore,” he demanded, “I wish to know what you are going to do in reference to the removal of those Indians, who are a nuisance, a source of annoyance and most destructive individuals.”209

While Farrell was hectoring officials in Ottawa, he was apparently also harassing his “tenants.” In March, Jerry Lone Cloud wrote to the department asking for money to help him move to the Indian Book Reserve near Shubenacadie. The department controlled the funds earned from the sale of lumber from the Ship Harbour Reserve, and by asking for it, Lone Cloud was tapping into yet another of his substance strategies. In his letter, Lone Cloud claimed he wanted to take up farming at Indian Book, but it is unlikely that he ever intended to become a permanent, sedentary farmer. More likely, this

208 V.F. Farrell to D.C. Scott, 2 February 1917, file 10,838-1, Red Series.
209 V.F. Farrell to D.C. Scott, 1 August 1917, file 10,838-1, Red Series.
petition was a strategy to facilitate his regular transhumance and a way to escape Farrell’s harassment. The department did not understand his desire for transience, or the idea that “cultivat[ing] the soil” could be seasonal, rather than permanent. The local Indian agent refused Lone Cloud’s request on the grounds that the families could not, as late as April, be set up for permanent farming, ignoring that such was never the intent. In the eyes of Lone Cloud’s colonial masters, his asking for the money earned from selling the lumber on tribal land was asking for charity, and they scolded him: “You should urge the Indians generally to secure work, in order that [by] their labour they may earn a fair livelihood. They should not apply to the Department for assistance when they are able to support themselves.” The department was apparently following the advice W.G. Foster, another Indian agent, had given in 1914: “Do not place much reliance in the opinions of the Indians themselves as to what is in their best interest.”

By the fall, matters were coming to a head. William Dumaresq was the white man who lived closest to Kebeceque. In 1913, his wife Mary had told a department official that they had no objection to the settlement. Now, though, Dumaresq wrote Farrell “threatening me with legal proceedings if I do not have the Indians removed.”

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210 Jerry Lone Cloud to Secretary, 9 April 1917, file 327,252, vol. 3119, reel C-11327, Red Series. The April letter refers to a “petition to you dated 20th March of this year,” which does not appear in the department’s records, though Whitehead reproduces it from a draft transcribed by Harry Piers, Tracking Doctor Lonecloud, 38.


212 J.D. McLean to Jerry Lonecloud [so spelled], 22 May 1917, file 327,252, vol. 3119, reel C-11327, Red Series.

213 W.G. Foster to J.D. McLean, 17 December 1914, file 10,838-1, Red Series.

took out his frustration on the department’s leadership, threatening to go over their heads and talk directly to Prime Minister Borden. “I am entirely disgusted with your Department’s backing and filling and dastardly humbugging,” he wrote, so angry he could hardly control his typewriter. “This matter has gone far enough, and I now propose to have any end of this infernal annoyance.”\(^{215}\) Whites like Farrell and Dumaresq were likely motivated by racism: they did not like sharing their space with Indians, whom they perceived as dirty and lazy.\(^{216}\) But their concerns were also material. Kebeceque campers took lumber and occupied space whites claimed as their own.

Meanwhile, progress was finally being made in buying the Tufts land nearby, officially called Lot 3, and the department began to make plans to forcibly move the squatters from Kebecque there. “If the Indians refuse to locate on Lot 3 as proposed they will be compelled to go there, and their old shacks at Tuft’s Cove will be destroyed,” the deputy superintendent general wrote to the local Indian superintendent. Hopefully, though, the superintendent could get help from one of the Mi’kmaw, Lewis F. Brooks, “who speaks good English and is fairly intelligent,” and this pliant, constructed leader could entice his neighbors to go peaceably.\(^{217}\) Farrell, still wary of the government’s inefficiency and warning that “the neighbours are becoming very dissatisfied with my

\(^{215}\) V.F. Farrell to D.C. Scott, 17 October 1917, file 10,838-1, Red Series.

\(^{216}\) As late as 1953, an pair of anthropologists described Mi’kmaw homes in terms that revealed much about their own prejudices: “In nearly every home [the floors] are scrubbed often. In contrast to the Whites’ conception of the filthy Indian home, the Micmac house is clean, and for that reason probably seems cleaner than it actually is.” Wilson D. Wallis and Ruth Sawtell Wallis, “Culture Loss and Culture Change among the Micmac of the Canadian Maritime Provinces, 1912-1950,” originally published 1953, reprinted in *The Native Peoples of Atlantic Canada: A History of Ethnic Interaction*, ed. Harold Franklin McGee, Jr., Carleton Library 72, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), 131.

\(^{217}\) [D.C. Scott] to A.J. Boyd, 6 November 1917; D.C. Scott to A.J. Boyd, 23 November 1917; both in file 10,838-2, Red Series.
leniency towards your government,” served notice directly on his tenants that they had to
be gone within two weeks. Farrell had good reason to doubt that the forced
resettlement would really happen as promised. When the local superintendent went to
look at the new land, he telegraphed that he “consider[ed] place impossible location for
Indians [because it was] land stony and barren” and with no road for access. It was about
a mile and a half from downtown Dartmouth, and a mile or more from Kebeceque.
Cultivation would be impossible, he wrote a few days later, “except by people of very
ample means, which are entirely beyond the reach of any Indian inhabitants of Halifax
County, or, in fact, of ordinary white inhabitants as well.” He made a brief tour of the
region, looking for what he considered to be a more suitable plot of land. Farrell told
the white officials that he would hold off the eviction until May, but apparently he
continued to harass the Mi’kmaq, and to them he did not rescind his eviction.

Now, Lone Cloud wrote again to the Department of Indian Affairs, but he took a
new tactic. Rather than humbly requesting money to help him and others move, he dug
in his heals. “Since time out of mind, members of the Micmac tribe have camped on
ground near Tufts Cove,” he wrote, but now “the camping land is claimed by Mr. Farrell
of Halifax.” He did not accede to Farrell’s claim, arguing that the Mi’kmaq “have surely
rights there by long occupation, even if it be regarded only in the light of what is called
squatter’s rights.” Since the land was rightfully theirs, he wrote, if they did leave, “it

218 V.F. Farrell to D.C. Scott, 5 November 1917; Jerry Lone Cloud to Secretary, 27 November 1917; both in
file 10,838-2, Red Series.

219 Telegram, A.J. Boyd to D.C. Scott, 23 November 1917; Boyd to Scott 5 December 1917, both in file
10,838-2, Red Series.

220 Telegram, A.J. Boyd to D.C. Scott, 26 November 1917; V.F. Farrell to D.C. Scott, 28 November 1917; J.
Lone Cloud to Secretary, 27 November 1917; all in file 10,838-2, Red Series

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should be by natural arrangement between the Indians and Mr Farrell, and by the payment of money in order that we relinquish our rights.”

The appeal to squatters’ rights was one that Lone Cloud had used earlier—on behalf of another unofficial community at Elmsdale in 1916—and later—writing about the same Elmsdale encampment in 1919. Yet it was an argument he made halfheartedly. “We Indians distinctly do not like the term ‘squatters’ applied to us, when we consider that the whole lands of the Province were once our own,” he had written in 1916.

So matters stood on December 6, 1917. Farrell wanted money, the Indian agent wanted to find land he deemed suitable, and Lone Cloud and the families he represented didn’t want to go anywhere. The explosion destroyed the built environment of Kebeceque, and according to Farrell the land and trees also “received a severe amount of damage.” “The poor Indians were a great source of annoyance and worry to me,” he wrote the department after the explosion, “yet I can assure you that I have the deepest sympathy for them and the sad death that they met.”

Whatever sympathy he claimed, though, for him the matter was over. The Indians were gone, evicted by the explosion rather than by him or the government, and his “annoyance and worry” were over. Two years later, a local politician described the explosion as “the closing scene of Indian life in Dartmouth.” As with the destruction of Native populations and culture in the centuries before, it was a tragic, unavoidable disappearance, and the Natives’ absence meant that the whites who wanted their land could now move in without hassle or

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221 Jerry Lone Cloud to Secretary, 27 November 1917, file 10,838-2, Red Series.

222 Whitehead, Tracking Doctor Lonecloud, 37.

223 V.F. Farrell to D.C. Scott, 28 December 1917, file 10,838-2, Red Series.

compunction.

Of course, the Mi’kmaq were not gone. A dozen Kebeceque residents—four sevenths of the population—survived.225 In the first several weeks after the explosion, whatever official relief they got came from the Dartmouth Relief Committee, a volunteer organization set up along the same lines as the Halifax Committee, and like its Halifax counterpart superseded by the Relief Commission in January.226 This meant that relief was offered, if not by the very neighbors that considered them “a source of nuisance and annoyance,” to use Farrell’s oft-repeated phrase, then by their neighbors’ neighbors, who also imagined Natives as dirty, thieving, squatting interlopers. On Christmas Eve, Adelaide Hiltz, a local relief worker, wrote to Jesse Forbes, a visiting social worker from Lancaster, Pennsylvania, who supervised relief decisions in Dartmouth. Hiltz suggested that the committee accept “No more orders for clothing, boots etc to Indians. They are coming in from the County far and wide, and we are only making trouble for ourselves.” Like the Tufts Cove neighbors who looked to the Department of Indian Affairs to solve their problems, Hiltz wrote, “We will have to leave their wants to the ordinary agencies for looking after them. I do not think their circumstances [are now] very different from what they were before disaster. Several families [are] at Tufts Cove and I think they have already been provided for.”227 The relief Mi’kmaq did get was on a par with the poorest

225 Jerry Lone Cloud to Harry Piers, 31 December 1917, in Whitehead, ed., Old Man Told Us, 304. It is unclear if this number included Lone Cloud and his wife, who were both out of town the day of the explosion but immediately returned. Jennifer Burke counts eleven survivors, but excludes children, Lone Cloud’s wife, and perhaps others. Burke, “Turtle Grove,” 52.


227 MS note, Hiltz to Forbes, 24 December 1917, item 53.21, HRC correspondence. On Forbes’s provenance, see undated staff list (before 25 January 1918), item 162.1, HRC correspondence. For Farrell’s location, see Farrell to D.C. Scott, 28 November 1917, file 10,838-2, Red Series.
of white Haligonians: each got some bedclothes, dishes, clothing, and the like. When it came time to compensate them for their material losses, with a few exceptions, no Mi’kmaw received more than about $200. They were also housed in a temporary tenement building, apparently built just for them on land rented by the Department of Indian Affairs, although the Relief Committee apparently paid their board. Anything else the Mi’kmaq, like other poor Haligonians, had to do for themselves. When they did seek further aid, they fell into the same trap as did Rita Mariggi, and they lost even more control over their lives than before. One of Jerry Lone Cloud’s daughters, Mary Elizabeth, was three years old in 1917, and she received severe burns in the explosion. She was treated by American doctors and stayed for a long time at the Y.M.C.A. hospital. At discharge, she was placed in St. Joseph’s Orphanage, apparently with the consent of her family, since her two surviving brothers delivered her there. However, presaging the abuses of the Residential Schools era, she never again saw her family. She lived at the orphanage until she was old enough to work, and she married her first employer, a widower.

Like their neighbors, the people displaced from Kebeceque relied on their informal networks, near and far. Unlike non-Native refugees for whom staying in a shelter meant living with strangers and away from neighbors and family, a segregated building for Mi’kmaq meant at least that they got to live with people familiar to them. In April, the local Indian superintendent described it as neither too crowded nor unsanitary,

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228 Burke, “Turtle Grove,” 52.


230 Whitehead, Tracking Doctor Lonecloud, 46.
though his standards for Natives were low.\textsuperscript{231} Apparently conditions there were sufficiently bad that those who could—like Jerry Lone Cloud and his family—stayed elsewhere.\textsuperscript{232} As with the broader Nova Scotia diaspora, the Mi’kmaq’s habitual transience meant they had broad networks to whom to appeal. Lone Cloud wrote to a hairdresser in Arlington, Massachusetts, telling her of the death of two of his children in the explosion and of his total material loss. “I wonder if you and some of your good friends would be willing to assist me at this very hard period of my life?” he asked.\textsuperscript{233} Meanwhile, his wife wrote to her nephew, an army private then convalescing with shell shock in London. Though they were not emotionally close—she had apparently not written to him since he went to war—she called on his obligation to her. “As you know I am the one who is your nearest relative,” she wrote, “and if you could see your way to be able to assist me in any way, I would be very glad.”\textsuperscript{234}

As for Kebeceque as a location and a community, Farrell got his wish. The explosion did what he had delayed doing a few weeks earlier, and what he had planned to do in May: disperse the Mi’kmaq and destroy their buildings. He received his final rent payment from the Department of Indian Affairs in January, with the admonishment that it would “not be responsible for any further claim which you make make for compensation.”\textsuperscript{235} Without the angry pushing from Farrell, the department definitely decided against buying a reserve in Dartmouth. “It would be unwise,” wrote the local

\textsuperscript{231} A.J. Boyd to J.D. McLean, 18 April 1918, file 363,417-1, Red Series.
\textsuperscript{232} Lone Cloud to Harry Piers, 31 December 1917, in Whitehead, ed., \textit{Old Man Told Us}, 306.
\textsuperscript{235} D.M. McLean to V.F. Farrell, 4 January 1918, 363,417-1, Red Series.
Indian superintendent to Ottawa headquarters, “to purchase land to accommodate only
the survivors of the Tuft’s Cove settlement, their numbers being rather small to justify an
expenditure that would be required for that purpose.” Rather than focus on the
Dartmouth Mi’kmaq, the department shifted to trying to “settle” the Natives in all of
Halifax County—that is, to force them to give up their transhumance and become more
legible to the state.\(^{236}\) There were, the department estimated, 86 Halifax County Natives
who did not live on reserves, out of a total of about 200 individuals, and only two of the
seven reserves in the county were occupied.\(^{237}\) The goal was to get these transient and
squatting Natives to settle on reserves, where they could be controlled, and to do so as
cheaply as possible. “No land shall be bought for these Indians unless it is un-
avoidable,” the department’s secretary wrote in March.\(^{238}\) The next year, the department
began a program to try to resettle all Halifax County Natives to a the Millbrook Reserve
outside Truro, about fifty miles away.\(^{239}\) In order to accomplish this, the department sold
reserve land in Halifax County and illegally consolidated the proceeds and all other
Mi’kmaw funds into a single account for the whole province.\(^{240}\) By 1943, this policy
grew into the Centralization Policy, in which the government attempted to force all Nova
Scotia Natives to settle on one of two reserves. Centralization remains one of the two
core post-Confederation traumas of Nova Scotia Mi’kmaq (the other being residential

\(^{236}\) [D.C. Scott] to A.J. Boyd, 8 January 1918; [Scott] to E.L. Newcombe, 16 January 1918; A.J. Boyd to
Scott, 9 February 1918, all in file 363,417-1, Red Series.

\(^{237}\) Memo with illegible signature, 12 March 1918, file 363,417-1, Red Series.

\(^{238}\) J.D. McLean to A.J. Body, 30 March 1918, file 363,417-1, Red Series.

\(^{239}\) H.J. Bury to Deputy Minister, 30 May 1919, file 363,417-1, Red Series.

schooling), and the destruction of Kebeceque forms its prehistory.241

Just as Mi’kmak would later use their transience as a way to resist Centralization, so too did they confound the whites who tried to “settle” them in 1918 and 1919.242 Of the eleven Kebeceque residents traced by Jennifer Burke, one went to Millbrook, one to Indian Brook, one to Milton, one to Wellington, one to Windsor, and one to Bridgewater. The locations of two individuals were unknown. The Nevins family—made up of two households—stayed in Dartmouth, where they owned property.243 This left Jerry Lone Cloud and his family, about whom we know the most. He appears to have stayed in Halifax for some time, and Burke lists him as staying in Tufts Cove. A year later, though, he was apparently living in Elmsdale, in Hants County near the Halifax County line. In a letter to the Department of Indian Affairs, he made a similar argument to the one he made to prevent eviction from Kebeceque: that the Natives living there for the past eighty-seven years had rights to the land by virtue of their long tenure there.244 He later accepted resettlement in Millbrook but refused to stay there, itself a recapitulation of his first strategy in Kebeceque.245 In the 1920s, he apparently moved around, sometimes living in Halifax—where he shared his cultural knowledge with Clara Dennis and Harry Piers—sometimes camping at Elmsdale.246 When he took sick in 1930, he was in Halifax, and he


242 On transience as resistance, see Hanrahan, “Resisting Colonialism.”


244 Jerry Lone Cloud to J.D. McLean, 6 March 1919, file 327,252, vol. 3119, reel C-11327, Red Series.

245 A.J. Boyd to J.D. McLean, 16 November 1926, file 327,252, Red Series.

246 A.J. Boyd to J.D. McLean, 16 November 1926, file 327,252, Red Series; Whitehead, Tracking Doctor
was taken to Victoria General; he was buried not on a reserve but in St. Peter’s Catholic Cemetery in Dartmouth.\textsuperscript{247} To the end, his transience had defeated the state that sought to control his movement and destroy his culture.

As part of a broader colonial project to control and assimilate the Mi’kmaq, the state sought to domesticate them, settle them, and destroy their culture; the destruction of Africville a generation after Centralization can be read as part of a parallel project to render legible African-Nova Scotians. These coercive and violent policies were far more drastic than what the Canadian state attempted to do to white Haligonians. Yet for the majority too, the state needed to come to terms with the informal structures of support that people relied on in the aftermath of the explosion. The Relief Commission sought to accommodate the family networks to which most Haligonians turned. It did so partially and largely unsuccessfully, as we have seen, by monetizing family relationships. It sought to adjudicate what assistance offered by families should be reimbursed by the relief fund, and which had been offered simply as a matter of familial obligation. In addition, it created a system of housework pensions for injured women, recognizing the material and financial benefits of women’s domestic labor and rendering it legible. If a woman previously employed in housework could no longer do so because of an explosion-related injury, their families would either have to keep home another, potentially wage-earning family member, or they would have to hire a domestic servant for cash. Either way, women’s domestic labor became visible and monetized once it could no longer be performed.

\textit{Lonecloud}, 43-45.

\textsuperscript{247} Whitehead, \textit{Tracking Doctor Lonecloud}, 45; on reserve cemeteries, see Paul, \textit{Not the Savages}, 281.
The HRC’s housework pension program was unusual, but it rested on ideas about the family and domestic labor that were gaining currency in progressive North America. Cape Breton’s radical labor leader J.B McLachlan, calling the miner’s wife “the greatest financier in the world,” announced a “Wage Earner’s Contest” in 1917 asking how “wives, mothers, sisters, and sweethearts of men” would support a family on a proposed daily wage of $3.50. Fundamental to McLachlan’s question was the understanding that women’s hard domestic labor was integral to families’ survival. Recognition of the monetary value of women’s domestic labor played a role in the movement in Alberta to grant women property rights. Feminists argued that if husbands owned all marriage property, women would not see the financial benefit of their labor. The mother’s pension movement similarly included ideas about the material worth of women’s domestic and reproductive labor, in that instance on behalf of the nation. The Relief Commission drew on these ideas, but its pensions for domestic labor on much the same basis as formal, wage labor were unusual and perhaps unique.

As we have seen, the complex family economies through which working-class families subsisted were carefully and precariously balanced. The loss of any one of the laborers within that economy—formal or informal, productive or reproductive—could


cause disruption and hardship. The Landry family was typical before the disaster.

Michael and Charlotte Landry had seven children, aged twenty-seven to eleven, before Charlotte died of tuberculosis. Michael, together with the younger children, lived with Daniel, a grown son with a wife and baby of his own. (Joseph, the eldest son, lived with his own family, and Leo, nineteen, died in the war.) The family supported itself on the earnings of Michael, a laborer, and Daniel, a carpenter. Perhaps Joseph, also a carpenter, helped out. The next oldest son, Abraham, had tuberculosis in his hip and was an invalid; the other children were all still in school. The explosion upended the Landrys’ precarious balance, destroying their house and all its contents, severely injuring two of the younger children, and, worst of all, killing Daniel’s wife and baby. For the first month or two after the explosion, Michael and the children stayed at St. Mary’s shelter. (It is unclear where Daniel lived.) In late January, when they finally found a house to live in again, they needed someone to do the domestic labor that had been the responsibility of Daniel’s wife. The task fell to fourteen-year-old Bella. The family’s social worker was a woman named May Reid, who was on leave from the Winnipeg Social Welfare Commission. Bella, Reid worried, was “a childish little thing, rather flighty, and not old enough to assume any household responsibility.” But there was no one else, and the Landrys understood that the labor that had been performed by Daniel’s wife had to be performed by someone.251

The value of women’s domestic labor was even more clear in the case of Mary Green. She and her second husband, William, a dock hand, lived with her three children

251 File 451, box 29, series P. On Reid, see staff list, n.d. but around 25 January 1918, item 162.1, HRC correspondence.
from an earlier marriage and their two young children. The explosion did not destroy their house, but it left only two rooms habitable, and only the kitchen stove working. Mary went to the hospital, her leg broken and her eye so badly injured that the doctors removed it. She came home after only two weeks, though, since she had to take care of her two young children, a three-month-old boy and a girl who was two and a half. When she got home she was in no condition to do the housework, so the family kept home Clarence, age fourteen, to do the work his mother could not. Clarence’s older brother, Thomas, was an apprentice at a foundry; he too was staying home because of his mother’s condition. To help, the Relief Commission helped arrange for the family to hire a domestic servant for a month, with the cost borne by a local benefactor. But in April, a visitor from the HRC named G.E. Blakeney found that without Mary’s domestic labor, the family was in a deplorable state. When the visitor arrived, Mary was lying on a “rough bed” in the kitchen, the only room in the house where there was a fire. “Woman says she has tried to bear up until now when she feels so ill and helpless, never knew what it was to [be] ill a day, before disaster, now she has all gone to pieces,” Blakeney wrote. The worst thing for Mary was what it meant for her children, whom she feared she was neglecting. At the next visit, Mary explained that she refused to go to the hospital for treatment, because there was no one to look after the children if she was there. In June, still ill, Mary grew increasingly desperate. Blakeney reported that sometimes William or Thomas had to miss work in order to watch over the children. “Woman says she has been a big expense to her husband since the disaster, it has cost so much more to run the house with her not being able to look after things.” Again, the
disaster laid bare the financial contribution of women’s otherwise invisible labor.\textsuperscript{252}

In order to handle these sorts of situations, the HRC created the housework pension. William B. Wallace, a relief commissioner and a Halifax County judge, laid out the policy of what should happen when a woman was so injured that she could not perform her normal domestic labor, thus forcing her family to hire someone to do it for her. If the husband, Wallace wrote in a memorandum for the rehabilitation staff, earned less than $20 per week, “his wife should be regarded as practically a wage-earner, by reason of the fact that she does all the work of the household and indirectly contributes to the maintenance of the family, and therefore there should be some compensation for that partial disability. A small allowance—$3.00 or $4.00 per week should be made in such cases. Care, however, must be taken that the disability should not be treated as a permanent one, & thus the allowance become permanent.”\textsuperscript{253} Wallace’s policy was directed at families in which the father’s income was undiminished, so it left considerable leeway in cases where the father had died or become disabled.

The housework pension was very unevenly applied—only twenty-six families in my sample received one, and neither the Landrys nor the Greens did—but it explicitly acknowledged the expenses that families like the Greens and Landrys had to bear when women were unable to do their customary work. Despite this acknowledgment, families often had to work to wrest a pension out of the Relief Commission, and this wrestling was itself a form of labor, a new part of the family economy. John and Mary Christian and their five children provide an example. John was a laborer at the Graving Dock, where

\textsuperscript{252} File 298, box 24, series P.

\textsuperscript{253} Memorandum from Judge Wallace, n.d., item 158.146a, HRC Correspondence.
he made $20 in an average week. William, twenty-one, also worked in the dockyard, and he paid his parents $5 for board. His brother Harold, seventeen, was an apprentice plumber, which earned him a paltry $3 each week. The youngest children, Lillian, Bertram, and Jack, went to school. Meanwhile, Mary kept house. The day of the explosion, John had the misfortune to be on the wrecking tug *Stella Maris*, which tried to tow the burning *Mont Blanc* away from the pier. The captain and twenty of it crew died; John was among only five survivors. His injuries were considerable, though: his kidneys were “torn,” a rib fractured, his back was almost broken, and he had to be strapped into his hospital bed for several days. Although he left the hospital relatively quickly—moving to St. Mary’s Hall, since the family’s house had been destroyed—nearly six weeks after his injury, a visitor reported that his “face is all marked up with powder. Looks wretched.” Doctors estimated that he wouldn’t be able to work until April. Meanwhile, John’s formal work for cash was not the the Christians’ only loss. Worst, of course, was the death of their youngest son. William’s work on the docks was disrupted, and he would not find new work until the end of January. Also at the end of January, the family left St. Mary’s shelter and moved to a new house on Clifton Street. Lillian was still attending school at St. Mary’s—St. Joseph’s School had been destroyed in the explosion—which was more than a mile away from the new house. This meant she needed to pay to take a street car to school, an additional burden. On top of all this, Mary had a major cut in her hand, a piece of glass that remained embedded in it at least until the summer, and worsening pain and weakness in her hand and arm.

Mary Christian, of course, did not have a formal supervisor who could order her to come into work or send her home if she was unable to do the task assigned. Moreover, if she did not clean, cook, and do laundry, either someone else had to do the work or family would be dirty and hungry. In January and February, she tried to work, but she often found it impossible; she had to send laundry out and hire a paid domestic worker for other work. By the end of February, her hand appeared to be improving, and she went back to her normal duties. In June, her hand got worse again, and she needed again to hire someone else. Hiring someone required access to cash. When the Christians hired someone the first time, cash came from John’s workman’s compensation, which provided $21.50 each week. When he went back to work, he earned $20 a week. That even this slight decrease in wages made it impossible to pay a domestic indicates the precariousness of the family’s finances. Yet it took much of the summer for the family to get cash to pay someone to do the domestic work. “What I want is the money that should have been given me to pay a woman for working for me since the disaster and until my hand is well again which I hope will be soon,” Mary Christian wrote to George Cutten, the head of the HRC’s rehabilitation division, in July. “Other people have been getting money to pay for having work done and they did not have as much cause for asking as I have.” Considering that her injuries were to her arm and hand and that she still had a piece of glass embedded in her hand, one can imagine the pain and difficulty involved in even writing the letter. She closed with a reminder that there was more to her domestic work than simple labor. The family had lost more than just money. “I have been suffering ever since and I lost my child through the disaster. That is the greatest loss of all to me, a loss which no one can repay.” Mary Christian was eventually ruled 50% disabled, and she
received $18 cash to pay for domestic labor for each of the three summer months. The Relief Commission apparently believed her ordinary, monthly labor to be worth $36, though there is no document to suggest that their valuation was anything but arbitrary.255

Louise Denial, the Englishwoman who was paid for work as a dressmaker and sometime clairvoyant while her husband was employed as a soldier, also performed unpaid domestic labor at home. When seeking a pension from the Relief Commission, she referenced both her outside, if informal, labor for cash, as well as her domestic work. Like others who lost an eye, Denial received a standard pension annual pension of $30, which she was promised for the rest of her life. In September 1918, she wrote to Cutten asking for an increase. Her lost eye, she wrote, meant she could no longer work as a dressmaker, her primary source of cash income. She also emphasized that she was unable to keep house like she used to. Her appeal referred to both her past informal productive labor and her domestic labor; this combination succeeded, and Cutten increased her annual pension to $75 a year. The next spring, after a medical evaluation, the commission ruled that Denial had been 50% disabled for the prior year, and it granted her $210. Like Mary Christian, Denial’s labor was assessed at $35 a month.256

As we saw when family members demanded reimbursement for the shelter and aid offered to their relatives, the Relief Commission could be capricious. Because women’s caring and domestic labor was invisible and illegible, there were not hard rules for what counted and what deserved a pension. The Wasson family—John and Bessie, and their children Ida, Lillian, and John—relied on the labor of all family members.

255 File 4083, box 101, series P.
256 File 104, box 18, series P.
John, who thirty-five years earlier had emigrated as a young man, worked as a laborer at the tar factory. Bessie, born a Newfoundlander, kept house. Ida, twenty, worked in a cannery labeling cans; John, seventeen, was an apprentice electrician. Lillian, twenty-five, worked alongside her married sister, Annie Rogers, at Moirs Chocolate Factory. As with many other families, this arrangement was upended by the explosion, which killed Bessie, wrecked the house, and destroyed all its contents with the exception of two chairs. Ida was severely burned when a stove fell on her, and her arm was severely injured when timbers fell on her. With Bessie dead and Annie married, this left Lillian in charge of caring for her younger sister. In April, John described the situation in a handwritten letter: “One off my daughters was burnt very badly in the explosion and she is not able to do anything with her arm yet the other one has to stay home from work to look after her ever since before the explosion they both worked as I am only a poor man I cannot afford to keep both will the relief be able to pay the board for the girl that has to stay come to look after the girl that was burnt.” Thanks to Ida’s injury and Lillian’s shift to domestic labor, the family went from having four formal wage-earners to having only two, of whom one was an apprentice and thus earned very little. Yet the Relief Commission was unsympathetic. Social workers suggested that Ida was malingering, and they refused to pay Lillian for her time caring for her sister.

Lillian, especially, understood the monetary value of her labor, both to herself and to the commission. “Of course if I did not stay at home with her the relief would have had to pay some one to look after her,” she wrote in early July, “and off course I could not afford to lose all that work for nothing.” Later that month, having received yet another denial, she wrote again. In her second letter, she tried several arguments. First,
she repeated the argument that had she not cared for her sister, the commission would have had to pay someone else to have done the same work: “The relief should have sent word to me at the first start and I could have went to work and they would have to hire some person to look after my sister.” She then explicitly referred to her caring labor as work: “How would you or any off the relief like to work 6 months for nothing[?]” Finally, she insinuated greed and corruption on the part of relief workers and appealed to the rights of donors to have their money distributed fairly: “I suppose the relief are trying to stop the money from the people who suffered through the disaster but it is nothing out off their pocket because the money was sent to Halifax for us people.” Despite this multifaceted strategy, the Relief Commission refused to pay Lillian.  

In her letters, Lillian Wasson argued that the informal work that she did to care for her family was indeed work, and that she deserved to be compensated for it. In doing so, she was adopting wholeheartedly the logic that the Relief Commission applied haphazardly. She sought compensation and recognition for the labor she and other Halifax women had long performed informally. Although Wasson was unusual in describing her care work as work that should be remunerative—perhaps because she had been used to earning cash working at Moirs—but she could not have been unusual in recognizing the importance of her work. The informal, family economies that Haligonians relied on before the explosion were stretched and put to new uses after the explosion. This chapter has shown that explosion survivors preferred the support given to them in solidarity by other sufferers and by those in their social networks to other, 

official forms of aid.

Informal networks and communities like families and neighborhoods were Haligonians’ most important resources. But their unofficial support also included formal organizations, like unions, churches, and fraternal organizations. We have seen already in this chapter the way these formal parts of civil society intersected with the informal parts. In the next chapter, we will explore in more depth the role of formal, private organizations in the explosion’s aftermath.
Figure 6. A photograph of a wrecked house and men posing in front of it. In the corner stands a pig, escaped from its ordinary enclosure.

Figure 7. Children playing in the snow after the Halifax explosion.

Chapter 5  
“A Desirable Measure of Responsibility”:  
Halifax’s Churches and Unions Respond to the Progressive State

At the ad hoc morgue opened in the Chebucto Street School, bodies started to pile up within hours of the explosion. Families clamored at the door, anxious to come to find their dead and barely held back by a small contingent of police. The men who extracted the bodies from the wreckage sometimes knew their identities and labeled them, but sometimes they were unidentifiable strangers, and sometimes the tags they used to mark the known corpses fell off in transit. When an unidentified body arrived at the school, men there—mostly soldiers, working with little food or rest—catalogued the contents of their pockets and tried to identify them.¹

For the unknown dead, membership in organizations could literally become their only connection to others, the only thing that enabled them to become known. One boy, “cast of features Semitic” was only identified by his father through the Catholic prayer leaflets in his pockets. In another case, a teamster was only identified because of “several receipts for Foresters dues, discovered in his clothing.” For others, these objects were not enough, and memberships became their only identity. Body number 480, male, age

uncertain, wore nondescript clothes and carried four keys and a penknife. The head had come off, so there was no face to identify. The only identifying features were a “crucifix and Roman Catholic emblem.” In death the man retained nothing of his identity except his Catholicism.²

On Monday, December 17, in the yard of the Chebucto Street School, the city held a funeral—two, really—for the unidentified dead. John Hanlon Mitchell, Archibald MacMechan’s undergraduate assistant, was disdainful of the spectacle. “It was a gathering of sight seers rather than of mourners,” he wrote: mothers brought their babies, children played, young people flirted. “Only the dogs seemed to comprehend the enormous burden of our sorrow. They slink among the coffins, their every movement betraying dejection.” Survivors who had not yet identified their dead must have mourned privately or invisibly, or they stayed away in the desperate hope that their loved ones would appear later. In the central enclosure, officiants, officials, “soldiers, clergymen, Salvation Armyist, and gloating Newspaper-women dripping with platitudes, were mixed in an incoherent mass.” First came the Protestant service. “Representatives of the different denominations ascended the dais, while those who had not been chosen thrust themselves as far into the foreground as possible,” Mitchell wrote. “A hymn was sung, but the singing lacked strength and conviction. Then the service commenced, each minister taking a share. Most noticeable was a tendency to hurry over the proceedings.”

Accompanied by a military band, the crowd sang two hymns and listened to a sermon by

Anglican Archbishop Clarendon Lamb Worrell, which Mitchell also didn’t like. “The Bishop’s address abounded in typical ecclesiastical bromides, but even he seemed to realize that now words counted for little.” After the Protestants had finished, it was the Catholics’ turn, and the two priests from St. Joseph’s Parish in Richmond conducted their own “special service.” The Catholics and Protestants together sang “God Save the King,” and then they divided into two corteges. The bodies like Number 480 that were identifiably Catholic went to Mount Olivet Cemetery; everyone else was claimed by the Protestants for Fairview Cemetery. They left from two different gates and marched separately to the two different cemeteries.3

Mitchell plainly thought the pomp and sectarianism were a distraction. “Ironically enough,” he noted, “owing to a blunder, only two of those over whom they [the St. Joseph’s clergy] declaimed were placed in the hallowed ground of a R.C. [i.e. Roman Catholic] cemetery.”4 Mitchell’s apparent disregard for denominational concerns in a time of crisis was common among laypeople. In the hospitals and the devastated area, as we saw in Chapter 1, an ad hoc ecumenism developed in which Protestant ministers prayed for and with Catholics. “Well, it is all the same now,” a Presbyterian minister recalled a Catholic woman telling him. “Would you kindly say a prayer for me?”5 Related was the way lay people took a greater role in their churches. The Christian Church was a small North End Protestant congregation; nineteen of its


4Description of burial service for unidentified dead, J.H. Mitchell, 17 December 1918, item 282, MacMechan fonds.

attendants died, more were injured, and no family was spared loss. In the absence of their pastor, a manager at the National Drug Company, L.A. Myers, led a burial service. One of Myers’s coparishioners told Archibald MacMechan that after the service, a soldier asked Myers if he were a minister. “He was not but the soldier had just prepared graves for his wife and children but wanted some Christian burial. Mr. Miles consented to help him, and the soldier buried his own family, then proceeded to his duty.”6 When it came to such basics as a prayer in a hospital or over a grave, the formalities of ordination and denomination became suddenly less important.

Yet even the city-wide day of mourning held on New Year’s Day was denominationally divided. The idea had come from Archbishop Worrell on behalf of the committee of Protestant clergy he chaired. The committee itself only included Protestants, but Worrell consulted with his Catholic counterpart, Archbishop Edward McCarthy, who agreed with the suggestion. But despite the project’s seeming ecumenism, there was no building large enough for a single service. Instead, Worrell suggested to the mayor that each denomination have a single central service all at the same time as each other. In that way, churches would remain separate, their congregations and liturgies distinct, but they would metaphorically come together for a single purpose.7

In death and in prayer, Haligonians were sorted by organizational membership—in churches, in clubs, and in other formal institutions. So too were they sorted in applying for and receiving disaster relief. When they applied for aid from the Halifax

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6 Personal narrative of Mr. L.A. Myers, n.d., item 205; Story brought by Mary P. Freeman, 27 December 1917, item 276f, both in MacMechan fonds.

7 Morning Chronicle 21 December 1917, 8.
and Dartmouth Relief Committees and their successor the Halifax Relief Commission, they were asked, among other things, what organizations they belonged to, including their church, their union, and their fraternal societies. Especially as regards religion, this was basic demographic information, but it was also a way the relief authorities could learn which organizations were otherwise responsible for each family. This chapter asks about those responsibilities: besides the official relief committees, what organizations helped Haligonians? How did those organizations imagine their responsibilities, and how did they enact them? How did civil society respond to and interact with the official relief offered by the state? The Relief Commission represented a technocratic, interventionist, progressive state that challenged and sometimes wanted to appropriate the knowledge and power of unions and churches. This chapter explores how those two institutions responded to that challenge. In short, the chapter asks how the explosion changed Halifax’s churches and unions, and how membership in a church or union altered the individuals’ and families’ experiences of the disaster.

The Halifax Relief Commission was established to do what was best for Halifax and its citizens, and it wrapped itself in rhetoric about the public good. It presumed that the best action could be determined by disinterested, outside experts, with the advice of local experts if need be but without formal consultation with or deference to the people it claimed to help. Its staff comprised professional experts: social workers, a university president, and expert builders and planners. The commission itself was made up of two Nova Scotia judges and an Ontario merchant and former mayor.8 The HRC was thus

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almost a perfect embodiment of a certain Progressive ideal of expert, active intervention on behalf of the people, in which expertise was substituted for democracy. The absence of working-class voices within the relief process was not accidental; it was fundamental to the progressive, technocratic project of efficient and benevolent state action.

Neither churches nor unions—what we might imagine to be the strongest and most important sites of voluntary association—appear to have been loci of organization or self-help in this disaster. Rather, they stood between their members and the authorities, sometimes helping and sometimes hurting. Civil society did not act as an alternative to the state and state-affiliated relief; rather, it mediated, translated, and buffered survivors and the relief authorities. Pre-existing, established organizations were neither here nor there, neither endowed with the money, power, and authority of the state’s Relief Commission nor as free, flexible, and personal as the informal aid offered by families, friends, and neighbors. In size, knowledge, and structure, they were stuck between the individual and the state, and so it was in that role that they found their purpose after the explosion. This chapter asks what roles were adopted and tasks accepted by churches and unions. It finds that compared to the role of the state, embodied in the HRC, and of informal communities like family and neighborhood, organized, formal civil society had relatively little importance in the midst of crisis. That unions and churches—particularly churches, which appeared to contemporary observers to be among the most important institutions in the city—played such a comparatively unimportant role demands explanation.

The Halifax Relief Commission, as established by Dominion and provincial law, was powerful and technocratic. For many workers, particularly building tradesmen, it
was simultaneously employer, landlord, relief agent, and claims court. Its tremendous legal power was ideologically wrapped in the authority of a wartime government and disinterested expertise. The Halifax labor movement’s ideology of laborism was no match for the HRC’s legal and ideological power. Laborism, variously described by historians as a “diffuse, unsystematic ideology” and a “vague political philosophy,” was the ideological and political child of Canadian craft unionism. It was not a specific political platform, and those who espoused it publicly tended not to be theoreticians or ideologues but rather labor leaders and newspaper editors. It called for union rights, the reform of the political system to allow more working-class participation, and most importantly, a “fair deal” for all. Laborists believed in state intervention, and they sometimes allied with Progressive reformers, but their vision of a democratic political system in which labor parties spoke for workers put them in opposition to the sort of technocratic politics represented by the HRC.9

Laborism was a reformist ideology in that its adherents believed that gradualist reforms were needed to liberal, parliamentary democracy to restore its promise, rather than a full reimagining of political economy. Moderation—the belief that existing society needed to be made more fair to everyone—was a fundamental tenet of laborism. “We believe that the capitalists have rights that are sacred and must be respected. We believe that the submerged tenth, the floating laborers, have needs that must be granted,” wrote the editors of official organ of the Halifax-based Canadian Brotherhood of Railroad

Employees a few months after the explosion. Skilled tradesmen could satisfy both: “We have adopted a middle, a moderate, stand that offers justice to both parties and industrial peace as a result.”\footnote{Canadian Railroad Employees’ Monthly vol. 4, no 1., March 1918.} This chapter shows how, after the disaster, unions’ laborist ideology constrained their usefulness to their own members. Faced with a state that did not respect tradesmen’s skilled labor and an economy in which they were increasingly replaceable, laborism proved unequal to the task of taking on the technocratic authority and governmental power of the Relief Commission. The explosion forced Halifax’s unions to become more inclusive and move beyond their base of white, male, skilled and semi-skilled craftsmen, but they were still unable to retain their power.

Religion is a tougher case. Scholars of religion, especially in the United States, have for the past decade or so examined what they call “lived religion,” the way religious community and the presence (or perception) of the divine is experienced in everyday life among the laity, especially in spaces and contexts that are not controlled or organized by clergy.\footnote{The study of lived religion largely originated with Robert A. Orsi, Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985). See also David D. Hall, ed., Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997); Robert A. Orsi, Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004); and Julie Byrne, O God of Players: The Story of the Immaculata Mighty Macs (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).} This chapter points to the need for scholarly attention to lived religion in urban Atlantic Canada because it signals a paradox. Survivors’ wanted pastoral care and a Christian burial for their dead loved ones, yet they accepted—indeed demanded—pastoral care not only from ordained ministers of their own denomination, but by anyone nearby who seemed able. Clergymen were acknowledged as experts and authorities by their parishioners and by the relief committee, yet both groups of laypeople sometimes
ignored or undermined this authority. Even as the relief commission’s social workers looked to priests and ministers to translate and vouch for their parishioners, clergymen’s power was passing into the hands of lay professional experts. Religion, it seems, was at once a deeply important part of people’s emotional, spiritual, and organizational lives and institutionally less significant. Only sustained attention to the lived experience of laypeople can help resolve this seeming paradox. This does not mean ignoring the institutional history of religion. To the contrary, it requires a nuanced understanding of how laypeople and clergy together operated within and understood the institutions they built and rebuilt.

Haligonians’ experiences of the explosion—what they lost, whether they had to flee their ruined homes, whether a family member died—was determined mostly by the geographic location of their homes and workplaces. People who lived and worked close to the site where the *Imo* and *Mont Blanc* collided, like the longshoremen working at the Sugar Refinery Pier or the housewives making breakfast on Richmond’s slope, were at more risk of injury and death. The very existence of a devastated area suggests the way damage to the built and psychic environment was spatially bounded. The importance of home and its location in the experience of the explosion was recapitulated in the choices made by survivors. As Chapter 4 demonstrated, explosion survivors preferred the company, support, and aid of their families and neighbors, the very people with whom they most shared their experiences.

The map available at [http://www.duke.edu/~jar20/maps](http://www.duke.edu/~jar20/maps) shows the homes of a random sample of families who received aid from the Halifax Relief Committee.\(^\text{12}\) The

\(^{12}\)For details on the creation of the map and caveats about its precision, see Chapter 4.
color of each pin denotes the religion specified by each family. Red is Catholic; orange is Anglican; Presbyterian and Methodist are two shades of green. Baptists are turquoise. Jews are lavender. Families of mixed religion or who belonged to other Protestant denominations are dark blue. Yellow denotes families whose religion went unmentioned in their file. Even a quick glance at the map reveals that there was no residential segregation by religion: Catholics lived next to—sometimes even in the same building with—Anglicans and Methodists and Presbyterians. This residential integration is in marked contrast to Halifax’s apparently political and institutional segregation. Each party, for instance, followed a “time-honored rule of Halifax politics” to nominate one Catholic and one Protestant for the two members the city returned to the federal Parliament. Schools and orphanages were also segregated by religion, the former in an unusual arrangement in which they were jointly overseen by a secular government board. Yet these divided institutions were next to each other, creating a literal and figurative neighborliness. The intermixing was symbolized by adjacent blocks of Russell and Kaye Streets about two blocks up from the harbor, where St. Joseph’s Catholic, St. Mark’s Anglican, and Kaye Street Methodist churches all sat next to each other. The

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Catholic elementary school, attached to St. Joseph’s, stood across the street from a Protestant school so new it had not yet opened.

It was these churches—the ones that served Richmond—that were most affected by the explosion. In 1920, a city official estimated that St. Joseph’s lost 404 parishioners, the largest number. Two hundred members of St. Mark’s died. Kaye Street Methodist lost 167. Grove, the Presbyterian church at the other end of Richmond, lost 170 members.\textsuperscript{14} Two days after the explosion, the \textit{Evening Mail} did not yet know the fate of Grove or Kaye Street, but it described St. Mark’s as “a parish wiped out,” with the rector living in its basement. He reported that all his parishioners who lived north of Russell Street had died along with half of the rest of the church. “It is reported that St. Joseph’s chapel has shared the same fate as St. Mark’s,” the newspaper wrote.\textsuperscript{15} Indeed, the Catholic church lost its convent, parish hall, and school. The explosion caused the walls and roof of the main church building to collapse, “and hundreds of tons of brick and slate crashed into the cellar,” according to another newspaper article.\textsuperscript{16}

As Michelle Hébert Boyd argues, the explosion was a major turning point in the history of Halifax social work. The relief committee brought into the city and employed a large number trained social workers from the United States and central and western Canada.\textsuperscript{17} These women and their male supervisors brought with them a system of organization, an ideology of relief, and a way of knowing that relied on professional expertise. Though the greatest experts were themselves, they acknowledged that they

\textsuperscript{14}[Questionnaire and answers to questionnaire requested by W.C. Milner], 12 July 1920, Item 7, MG 27.
\textsuperscript{15}\textit{Morning Chronicle} 8 December 1917, 3.
\textsuperscript{16}\textit{Acadian Daily Recorder}, 21 December 1917, 2; \textit{Evening Mail} 11 December 1917, 1.
\textsuperscript{17}Boyd, \textit{Enriched by Catastrophe}. 376
often lacked the local knowledge they needed to judge applicants’ need and worthiness. For that they turned to other, local experts, people who knew, or claimed to know, the applicant and who could assess them. Most often, official relief turned to pastors for this local knowledge and authority.

Thus while people’s needs had to do with their location and mirrored those of their neighbors, their access to aid was mediated by their denomination and was thus potentially different from their neighbors. Moreover, this sectarian sorting appears to have been imposed by the relief authorities. As we saw in Chapter 1, Haligonians flocked after the explosion to sites of succor, places that in ordinary times they were accustomed to finding help. Though these spaces included religious sites, there was nothing unique about churches and convents; rather, they constituted only a handful of choices among many, including such secular and materialist locations as doctors’ homes, drug stores, and barbershops. In Chapter 4, we saw that when they had the option, most Haligonians preferred to rely on their family and other informal connections rather than turn to more formal sources of relief. The relief authorities’ reliance on priests and ministers was imposed and was not a mere replication of patterns survivors created themselves.

It was the local Halifax Relief Committee that initially formalized a system in which ministers literally signed off on their parishioners’ needs. They also used pastors as a conduit of information from the Committee to survivors. This early system—established in December, as the city was still scrambling to create a sustainable relief bureaucracy—established clergymen as buffers between the relief authorities and their flocks, passing information in both directions. About a week after the explosion,
Archbishop Worrell’s committee of Protestant clergy asked the Relief Committee for formal “access” to the executive committee and its subordinate committees.¹⁸ In response, Dougald Macgillivray, then the chair of the rehabilitation subcommittee, established a system to give clergymen official power within the process. Under this system, survivors received aid based on application forms signed and countersigned by ministers. Worrell’s committee selected denominational chairmen, who vouched for their fellow ministers in their denomination; to signal their approval, they would sign out the applications to their colleagues. These other ministers then filled out the forms and countersigned them, and the applicant presented the twice-signed form at the relief depot. Alternatively, the signatures could be obtained in the opposite order; a minister could make a list of supplies, and then have it signed by his denominational chairman. From Macgillivray’s perspective, this system meant that relief workers had only to learn a limited number of trusted signatures—those of the denominational chairmen.

“Moreover,” Macgillivray explained to Worrell, “we feel it will serve to place a desirable measure of responsibility on your several chairmen and they must impress upon their brethren [sic] that the granting of orders should be done with all possible care.”¹⁹ This system excluded Catholics, since they were not part of Worrell’s committee, but their priests were already organized hierarchically, and it seems they were handled on the same lines. Macgillivray’s scheme created a system in which relief applicants depended on the

¹⁸R.T. MacIlreith to D. MacGillivray, 14 December 1917, item 158.33f, Correspondence, Series C, Halifax Relief Commission fonds, MG 36, Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management (hereafter HRC Correspondence).

¹⁹[D. Macgillivray] to Archbishop Worrell, 15 December 1917, item 158.23, HRC Correspondence. The Dartmouth Relief Committee, also acting on a request from clergy for a formal role in relief, recognized them as visitors to investigate applicants and advise the committee. See Minutes of the [Dartmouth] Registration & Relief Committee Meeting, 24 January 1918, Item 158.232h, HRC Correspondence.
authority and discursive power of their priests and ministers. When clergy signed and
countersigned requests for aid, they were dealing in information—what their parishioners
needed—and wrapping it in two levels of authority.

Ministers acted as conduits of information in the other direction, too. A week
after Macgillivray formalized his signature system, he asked the city’s clergy to announce
at their services that anyone who wanted aid needed to officially register. He hoped, he
wrote, that congregants who were sheltering their friends and family would take interest
in the announcement and force their guests to register with the Relief Committee. In
this instance, Macgillivray arranged to have his information wrapped in the clergy’s
authority for the purpose of convincing laypeople. Both lay survivors and the relief
authorities benefited from this arrangement, because the information they wanted to pass
along was given greater authority and value by being endorsed by clergymen. In
exchange, the clergy benefited, because they expanded the realm of their authority from
the spiritual further into the temporal. Parishioners who might otherwise turn exclusively
to secular institutions or to their families had to accept their minister’s involvement in
order to obtain his signature; likewise the secular relief authorities had to grant “access”
to the clerical committee.

Religious networks also passed information farther afield. The archdeacon of St.
Paul’s Anglican Church, for instance, received word of parishioners who had been taken
to Truro and relayed the news to their friends and to the newspaper. When churches or
individuals from outside of Halifax wanted to raise money or collect donated items for

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20 Macgillivray to William Foley, 21 December 1917, item 158.34, HRC Correspondence. Foley was
Catholic, but Macgillivray told him he was making the same request of Protestant clergy.

21 Evening Mail 15 December 1917, 6.
survivors, they often turned to clergy through their denominational networks. Sometimes, the money they collected or donated themselves was intended for their coreligionists. The Catholic archdiocese, for instance, received money from around Nova Scotia, Canada, and the United States in various amounts—ranging from $5 or $10 to donations in the hundreds—from priests and bishops. The largest among these was $2,000 sent from Toronto Archbishop Neil McNeil, himself originally Nova Scotian. This money was earmarked for destroyed St. Joseph’s Parish. The rector at St. George, an Anglican church in Ward 5, collected and distributed $184, mostly from people who had a personal connection to him. Volunteers in Greenwich, a small town in Kings County, collected clothes and sent them to the assistant priest at St. Paul’s. When a minister in Yarmouth asked the children at his church to donate toys “for the unfortunate children of Halifax,” he wrote to a religious colleague to ask where it should be sent. His correspondent functioned only as source of information, directing the minister to send the toys to Ernest Blois, the city official in charge of children’s welfare.

In none of these cases did the churches function as agents of significant aid or solidarity. These were not the faithful helping coreligionists; even the money received by


23 Rector’s Address reprinted in Parish Notes, pasted in with minutes of annual meeting, 4 February 1918, Minute book 4 Feb 18 to 15 Dec 21, item 1, vol. 318, St. George’s Anglican Parish fonds, MG 4, Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management (hereafter St. George’s fonds).


25 H.Y. Payzant to “Bro. Reid,” 16 December 1917, item 161.6, HRC Correspondence.
the Catholic archdiocese seems to have been designated to rebuild the church, not relieve
the parishioners, and the paltry sum collected at St. George came not because the donors
were fellow Anglicans but because they were friends of the priest. Rather, in these
dependent examples church officials were conduits for information. Clergymen acted as advocates
and gatekeepers. Sometimes they were irrelevant to survivors, and sometimes survivors
used them and their authority to obtain more and better aid. Clergymen did not, however,
act as organizers, at least in the temporal realm.

The federalized Halifax Relief Commission that replaced the local Halifax and
Dartmouth Relief Committees increasingly privileged the expertise of social workers
over the local knowledge of clergymen, but they still relied on priests and ministers for
judgments. Most of the time, ministers acted as relatively neutral translators and buffers,
endorsing the requests made by their parishioners. Sometimes, though, ministers helped
their parishioners by encouraging them to request more aid than they had or by otherwise
advocating for them. There were also instances of ministers standing in the way of
parishioners, for instance by telling relief authorities that an applicant did not need as
much aid as he had requested or by disclosing that a family had been poor before the
disaster and thus did not deserve disaster-related aid. Church authority appears explicitly
in 104 of the total 739 files I sampled from the Halifax Relief Committee’s pension files.
Of these, 56 (54%) were instances of clergy simply vouching for the requests made by
laypeople.26

In other instances, clergymen took a more active role. Mary Carr was the forty-
five-year-old mother of seven children, ranging in age from seven to twenty-three. Her

26For a discussion of the sampling technique and details on the creation of these records, see Chapter 4.
watchmaker husband had died in July 1914, and and the family appears to have lived off the earnings of three sons: William, twenty-four, on the dry dock; Edward, twenty-one, a sailor; and Alfred, sixteen, an electrician’s apprentice. Archibald, twenty-three, worked in Boston. When Mary died in the explosion, it left her family in disarray. The youngest son, Georgie, age seven, was dead. William and Edward were both injured. Archibald quickly came from Boston, but with the family divided among several relatives for shelter, it was hard for the Relief Commission to get definite information. “Visitor could not get a very straight story from Mrs. Downey,” complained a relief investigator of one of the sheltering relatives. There were questions of insurance, about possible migration to the U.S., and about when Edward and William could go back to work. Information was scarce, and grief, confusion, and adolescence made the surviving children hard to pin down. Gertrude, complained social worker Dorothy Judah, was “usual[ly] very non-committal and hard to get information from.” In January, Alfred brought in Father Charles McManus, the family’s priest, to help explain the family’s situation to the social workers. Although the family’s situation still took months more to be settled, it was only when McManus came that the relief authorities first began to understand the situation. As a translator, he was able to command the respect of the professionals in the relief office even while seeming to understand the specific and confusing information about the family. McManus’s involvement was not definitive, and the social workers and the family continued to make decisions on their own, but he was an important early buffer between them.27

For the Carrs, the problem appeared to be confusion over who would or could do what, and the priest offered explanation. For Joseph Scallion, a sporadically employed longshoreman, his wife Bridget, and their six children, it was a question of trust, and the priest provided credibility. Ordinarily, the eight Scallions lived in four rented rooms, but the explosion rendered two of the rooms uninhabitable. “Family large, surroundings wretched,” their investigator wrote. When the Scallions requested new clothing for the children, a social worker suspected that they were just a poor family who saw the relief as a way to get new clothes, and she ordered a home inspection before any aid was disbursed. The family’s priest vouched for them, and though they did not receive much, the priest’s say-so appears to have helped them get a little clothing. As with the Carrs, relief authorities continued to make their own decisions. In the Scallions’ case, they acknowledged the priest’s opinion and appear to have given the family some of what they asked for. However, the decision remained in the social workers’ hands, and they did not grow particularly generous with the Scallions on the priest’s say-so.28

The Relief Commission’s social workers wanted the local expertise that clergymen had, but that knowledge was only one of several things they took into account. The expert knowledge of social workers trumped a priest’s opinion. Henry Ward Cunningham, an Anglican priest, highly recommended the Penney family to the relief authorities “and advises giving clothing, says that family were hard hit.” Yet the Relief Commission remained skeptical. They described only minor damage to the house and suggested that the husband, a laborer, do the repairs himself, since he was out of work. In March they were still living in the basement, which signals that the upstairs remained

28 File 477, box 30, series P.
uninhabitable. Social worker Judah advised that they be given coal, since it was so cold and the house was not yet repaired, “but also advised them that family was practically on the same basis as before explosion which was in all like[li]hood inadequate.” Cunningham’s say-so was not good enough, and despite his recommendation Judah made her own determination that the family deserved little aid.29

One reason social workers were willing to disregard their clergy experts was that they determined the worthiness of applicants on different scales and based on different evidence. The Penney family was poor before the explosion and Cunningham probably long thought they were suitable to receive charity, or at least with all the money flowing into Halifax he thought they should receive some of it. Judah, on the other hand, saw her job as restoring people to the point that they could build back their lives to where they had been, and so people with inadequate livelihoods ironically needed less help. There was a similar dynamic when Charles McManus signed a clothing order for Alice and Frank Phalen. The Phalens lost their house—they went to live with Alice’s mother for a few months before they rented another house on their own—but little else. Frank’s job as a baker continued uninterrupted. Alice lost the order McManus signed, but she did not seek to have it replaced until February, suggesting that they did not need the clothing very badly.30 That McManus judged his parishioners as needing clothes when they apparently did not suggests why social workers felt free to make their own decisions.

Nonetheless, without much authority of their own, laypeople continued to rely on their clergymen as translators and brokers. L.J. Donaldson, the pastor at Trinity Anglican

29 File 1587, box 53, series P.

30 File 456, box 29, series P.
Church, sent a note to the relief committee asking that it send blankets and children’s clothing to Annie and Frank Wildsmith, noting, “This is to certify that Mrs. Wildsmith is well known to me. Family consists of Mr Mrs Wildsmith + 3 children. They have had a lot of sickness all through the year. And now the loss + cold through the explosion has been very serious for them.” To Donaldson, their prior misfortune was a further reason to give them aid, although as we have seen that may have acted as a deterrent when his letter reached its audience. Indeed, no help arrived, so Annie tried again. Since Frank still had his job, Annie had to stay at home with the children, so she wrote a letter asking for an investigator to visit her. Her plea for consideration rested on her pastor’s authority. “You can kindly refer My case to Clergyman Mr Donaldson Trinity Church Brunswick Street, as I received a letter from Him to get an order, & being as it has not been sent to Me, as promised, I am begging to think My case has been overlooked, or the letter has been mislaid,” she wrote.  

Annie Wildsmith recognized that Donaldson had real power, even when his recommendations were not accepted or were ignored by the relief authorities.

There were times, especially when a child or other dependent person needed to be placed with a family or in an institution, when a minister’s opinion was sought out and particularly honored. Martha Phelan was a widow who took care of her son Michael, who was described as “mentally defective.” A few years before the explosion, Martha and Michael had come to the attention of Father McManus when they moved from St. Mary’s Cathedral parish to St. Joseph’s. Martha was a “feeble old lad[y]” and though Michael occasionally worked and brought home a few pennies, the family was never self-
sufficient. Instead, they spent the winters on public charity at the City Home, and in the summers they lived in a shack in Richmond, where they were supported by neighbors. The explosion killed Martha, leaving no one to look after Michael, who was injured; Martha was “said to have relatives in the States but [their] addresses [were] unknown.” From the start, relief authorities turned to McManus both as a source of information—he was the one who told them the family’s story—and as an authority over where Michael should live. McManus thought that the “City Home [was the] only place for him.” Three weeks later, in late January, Michael was finally in good enough shape physically to be discharged from the hospital, and the HRC began the process of moving him to the City Home. However, unspecified “others” objected to the plan, and the HRC became unsure. Faced with this uncertainty, a social worker again contacted McManus, who reiterated his opinion that Michael should live in the City Home. As the Phelans’ pastor, the relief authorities deferred to McManus’s expertise on who should care for him permanently, even when they did not always agree with his opinions about relief.32

Moral guidance and judgment were the special province of clergymen, and this may have been why they were given deference when it came to caring for dependents. When a family was in good stead with their pastor, this could be a good thing; when it was not, it could cause problems. In Chapter 4, we saw how for people on the margins of society like Rita Mariggi and Mary Swan, clergymen were just one of many officials, ranging from judges to social workers, who sought to limit their choices and their independence. In Mariggi’s case, a Catholic priest worked to block the adoption of her child by a friendly family; he deemed none of the adults adequately religious and

32 File 3818, box 96, series P.
preferred for the infant to be raised in the Catholic orphanage. Swan’s Anglican pastor admitted that he “ha[d] no knowledge of her character beyond the fact that he consider[ed] her irrational and irresponsible,” but he was not shy about telling a relief investigator that she was unfit to raise her children or passing on a rumor that those children were illegitimate. Social workers gave clergymen deference, but they also came to the same conclusions independently. Neither the priests nor the social workers trusted Mariggi or Swan, and so agreement was easy.

The story of the Carson orphans illustrates the problems and pitfalls of clerical authority—both for the state and for aid recipients. When the explosion happened, Kathleen, age eight, was just beginning the school day at St. Joseph’s, her parochial school. Her brother Johnnie, age fourteen, was at Victoria General Hospital convalescing from what may have been either kidney or leg surgery. The explosion killed both their parents and their three other siblings and destroyed their home. Kathleen quickly ended up at the Catholic St. Theresa’s Home, probably taken there by Father McManus, who may have found her at the school. As the hospital filled up with explosion victims, Johnnie went to stay with his maternal aunt, Gertrude Gaudet. The Gaudets, too, had lost their home, and they were staying in a small flat. The three rooms there housed Mrs. Gaudet, her two small children, and her mother Margaret Major. (Joseph Gaudet was in the Navy and was frequently absent.) Because a female lodger took up one of the rooms for herself, when Johnnie was there, it meant there were two adults and three children in two rooms. In addition to the overcrowding, there was a question of money. The

33 File 1268, box 47, series P (Mariggi); file 960, box 41, series P (Swan). See Chapter 4 for detailed discussions of these two women and their experiences.
grandmother had lived with the Carsons and worked as a charwoman before the explosion, but the physical and emotional strain had left her unable to work. The Gaudets agreed to give her shelter, but they complained that they could not afford to pay for food or clothes. Major’s third daughter, referred to only as Mrs. Kaill, either lived in the Boston States or had gone there immediately after the explosion. “The housing conditions are most undesirable—very congested with poor ventilation and lighting,” an investigator sniffed after visiting the Gaudets. “Family impressed visitor as having a very low standard of living. Mrs. Gaudet is easy going and good natured but evidently careless and untidy.” In addition, no one seemed to be changing Johnnie’s bandages, so the relief authorities soon bundled him back to the hospital where he could be properly nursed.

With the Carson parents dead, Kathleen and Johnnie had a new group of adults to give them official and unofficial supervision. Their grandmother Margaret Major had lived with them before the explosion; she too survived and also went to to live with the Gaudets. Gertrude Gaudet, their aunt, also sought to provide continuity within the family, and she housed Johnnie informally and tried to formally adopt both children. In addition, however, the family now had to accept official supervision from the relief commission’s Children’s Committee. This meant investigation and criticism of how they lived. “According to opinions expressed by people who knew Mrs. Major and her daughter Mrs. Carson they may possibl[y] have been morons,” wrote a social worker. Another investigator wrote of an apparent consensus among those who knew the family that “Mr. & Mrs. Carson were a very low type. The children had absolutely no training whatever, Mrs. Carson, incompetent and her husband drank.” Major was illiterate, and investigators were concerned that Kathleen apparently knew neither her letters nor her
colors—though of course it is conceivable that she was just a shy eight-year-old unable or unwilling to perform in front of judgmental strangers.

To help them judge the family, the children’s committee workers consulted with clergymen. The Carsons had been raising their children as Catholics, sending them to Catholic school and having them attend church there. Charles McManus, the priest at St. Joseph’s, took a special interest in Kathleen. He placed her at St. Theresa’s, and in January he personally took her to the relief office to arrange for her to get clothing. He also wanted to oversee Johnnie’s placement when he came out of the hospital. But it was not clear that he was the right priest to be handling the family. Henry Ward Cunningham, an Anglican, also knew the family. Margaret Major apparently attended St. Paul’s Anglican Church, and Cunningham claimed that the children had been baptized Anglican, with their Catholic father’s consent. (Cunningham was rector at St. George, and why he, rather than the archdeacon of St. Paul’s, was involved is unclear.) McManus disputed Cunningham’s claim to the family—after all, the children and both parents had always gone to his church—and he produced Catholic baptismal papers for all the children save Johnnie, who it eventually turned out had been baptized Methodist. Cunningham shifted his argument and claimed that the other children had also been baptized Methodist, but that the records had been lost in the explosion. He also claimed jurisdiction because the surviving family, Gaudet and Major, were both Protestant. The relief commission dismissed Cunningham’s baptism claims as improbable, since it was unlikely that all the kids would have been baptized twice, and in any case, regardless of his baptism, Johnnie had attended Catholic church. The relief authorities took on the right to adjudicate between the Catholics and Anglicans, and in this case McManus won the right to have
authority over the family.

In any case, though, McManus and Cunningham both agreed that neither the Gaudets nor Major were suitable guardians for the children, especially Johnnie, who was crippled and apparently had severe behavioral problems. When he was finally discharged from the hospital in late February, he was brought to a detention home “until a suitable boarding home can be found for him.” Unsurprisingly, this upset the boy. “Johnnie said he had expected his aunt, Mrs. Gaudet, to come for him that day and seemed very disappointed when he found he was to go with” the escort from the Relief Commission. Johnnie only spent a month at the detention home, though, before he had to be brought back to the hospital. Then, one Sunday in early May, he ran away from the hospital. “He said he was dying to see his grandmother and this was his reason for running away,” reported the visitor. Though his family took him back to the hospital to continue his medical care there, Johnnie still pined for his family. “The child has a great fear of being sent back to the Detention Home,” wrote a visitor. “He wants to go to his grandmother’s home and told me he was writing to her all the time.” For their part, Gaudet and Major were eager to have both children come and live with them, but the family had to convince both the social workers and the priest. For the social workers, that meant proving that they were not just eager for the monthly pension payments the children carried with them. For the priest, it meant promising that the children would continue to be raised Catholic. In neither case were they entirely successful. Though McManus acknowledged that Johnnie was “devoted” to his aunt, the priest preferred that the boy be placed with a Catholic family. Meanwhile the relief commission feared that the two women seemed overeager for the children. Though the record is unclear, it seems possible that the
hospital delayed Johnnie’s discharge while the relief commission figured out where he would go.

When Johnnie finally got out of the hospital in July, he got his way by threatening to the doctor that “he would not stay in a Home or Institution as he wanted to go to Mrs. Goody [i.e. Gaudet].” Kathleen, on the other hand, was either more docile or happier at her orphanage, and she stayed there under the supervision of the nuns and Father McManus. The priest remained Kathleen’s financial guardian at least through 1930, when her orphan’s pension ended. Though Johnnie went to his family, his grandmother and aunt remained under close watch by both lay and clerical authorities. In April 1920 the relief commission wanted Johnnie to appear before its Medical Board, and Major and Gaudet became “very incensed at the mere idea.” A visitor in July 1921 noted, “Mrs. Gaudet states that John is well cared for, but other reports state not.” In December that year, after an altercation in which the boy hit his grandmother with a flat iron, the family inquired about having him sent to the Industrial School, but they soon changed their mind. Instead they put him to work at a shoe shine parlor and pool room on Barrington Street. This time it was the social worker who became incensed. “[I] have told her she must remove him from this at once,” wrote M. Lockward, “and that if he wants to work and she can arrange for him to learn a trade, such as plumbing, that the Commission will consider keeping up the payments until he is seventeen, notwithstanding he has left school.” Clergymen remained involved too, even Cunningham, who theoretically had no say over a Catholic boy. In 1922, he spoke to Lockward about Johnnie, bemoaning that “he is not very bright and does not seem inclined to work,” in Lockward’s paraphrase. “Mr. Cunningham says he does not know
what to say about the boy.”

Kathleen and Johnnie Carson’s story highlights several aspects of clerical involvement in relief, though it is unusual that all these elements appeared at once. Most importantly, the Carsons’ experience shows how religion was not an entirely voluntary community. Neither the children nor the adults in their family chose which clergymen would be involved in their case; when Cunningham and McManus squabbled over them, it was the relief commission that decided. Although eight-year-old Kathleen seems to have thrived under McManus’s supervision and attention, a girl that young could not be said to have chosen McManus as her spokesman. In contrast it is clear that Johnnie did choose his aunt and grandmother, but that he had to struggle to have that choice respected by the other adults who had power in over life. Moreover, the system in which clergymen were given power over their parishioners depended on a world in which it was clear what denomination each person belonged to. This was not the case. Kathleen Carson, the dead mother, and her sister Gertrude Gaudet were Protestants who married Catholic men. The confusion over Johnnie’s baptism suggests that denomination was not particularly important to them. McManus and Cunningham cannot be said to have been enacting the Carson parents’ religious beliefs, which were unknowable after they died. Rather, they were seeking to make choices on behalf of the dead. In this case and others, the clergymen’s decisions were not necessarily based on what the families wanted. That is, they were not simply agents or advocates for their parishioners. Rather, they judged them and their characters and made recommendations and requests to the relief commission.

34File 2647, box 71, series P (Carson); file 2285, box 66, series P (Gaudet); file 403, box 28, series P (Major).
based on their own judgments. All this adds up to the fact that churches were not an organic expression of their communities’ desires or organizing. Clergy did not speak for their congregations when they conferred with relief authorities. Instead they became another level of authority, often imposed from outside by state officials.

In the Carsons’ case, Cunningham and McManus battled over who would have authority over the family, each brandishing baptismal certificates and making legalistic arguments about church memberships. In other cases, it was explosion survivors who cast doubt on their own church memberships. In at least sixteen cases in my sample, a family received aid from a church not its own. This indicates that it was the position of clergyman that was important to the relief authorities, rather than the congregation. It also suggests the problem of relying on clergy for this job when not everyone was affiliated.

Eva and William McPhee gave their religion as Methodist, but when their home was destroyed and the family lost everything, they wound up relying on Catholic nuns at the Mount St. Vincent Convent. Eva was in “a very depressed state,” and she apparently enjoyed the company and support the sisters gave her while she stayed at the convent. She reported to a relief visitor that the Mother Superior had found her a house, but the nun said there must be a mistake, since she knew of no house. Nonetheless, she promised “that the family could remain where they were until the[y] found something suitable.” In fact, the nuns did find the family space at St. John’s Convent, where they stayed until they moved out to the country for a few months. The sisters also acted as the family’s advocates in dealing with the relief authorities, for instance reporting that they had not
received a stove that had been promised for them and seeing to it that it was delivered.\footnote{File 4378, box 107, series P.}  

Cunningham, the pastor at St. George’s Anglican Church, bemoaned the way sufferers had used him. “I think we did a fair share of relief in those awful days immediately following the disaster,” he told his parishioners. “I only wish that all those whose cards I signed and to whom I gave orders, were in attendance on us as they claimed us as their ‘spiritual Pastor and Master.’”\footnote{Rector’s Address reprinted in Parish Notes, pasted in with minutes of annual meeting, 4 February 1918, Minute book 4 Feb 18 to 15 Dec 21, item 1, vol. 318, St. George’s fonds.} Cunningham had long been worried about declining attendance, and he was upset that he was expected to vouch for people who did not darken the church’s door except in times for crisis. His erstwhile parishioners wanted him for his temporal power vis-à-vis the relief commission; they were not interested in him beyond that.  

Not all clergymen objected to this arrangement the way Cunningham did. Hilda Keddy, a twenty-two-year-old from Cow Bay who worked as a salesgirl at a shoe store, boarded with Mrs. Burrus C. MacLeod. Keddy lost nearly everything in the explosion, and flying glass cut her hand, arm, and face, making it hard to return work. Her landlady, MacLeod, apparently took a “motherly interest in the girl,” and told a relief investigator that “she would rather keep her in town with her, than let her go home, as she can get more attention in Halifax. . . . [She also] says she likes to have girl staying with her, and will do all she can for her.” Part of doing all she could was to advocate on Keddy’s behalf. Soon after the explosion, MacLeod went to a bank building on Agricola Street in the North End where volunteers helped survivors register for aid. Among them was F. E. Barrett, the minister at Robie Street Methodist Church. MacLeod included Keddy on the
request she filled out for herself. Barrett did not know either woman, but he vouched for them anyway, attesting that Keddy lost her “boots, clothes, coat, etc.” When Keddy had not yet received what she needed by the beginning of January, MacLeod telephoned Barrett, asking that he intervene on the girl’s behalf. Barrett wrote a letter, and three days later Keddy had a coat.\(^{37}\) She did not attend Barrett’s church, and she was not attracted by any spiritual authority he may have possessed. Rather, like those who claimed Cunningham as “spiritual pastor,” only to disappear again, she recognized that as a minister, he had the temporal power to move the relief authorities to provide quick aid.

That clergymen’s role rested on their secular power was underscored by the various other people who filled their role when clergymen were not available. A schoolteacher “brought in” a Presbyterian policeman and his wife to make sure that they got proper attention from the rehabilitation committee.\(^{38}\) Mayor Peter Martin was listed as the recommendation for a Baptist bookkeeper and his family.\(^{39}\) These were both easy cases, mostly settled with small property claims and without major difficulties like where to place dependent survivors. Apparently lay authorities were good enough.

Under a policy in which clergymen spoke for their congregations, members of the Proctor Street Synagogue, also called the Webber Shul, should have been represented by their rabbi, variously called Rutberg or Ruthenberg. He, however, apparently decamped for the United States on the day of the explosion.\(^ {40}\) In his absence, Samuel Simon, a fifty-four-year-old junk dealer, established himself as a translator and broker for Halifax Jews.

\(^{37}\) File 963, box 41, series P.

\(^{38}\) File 1614, box 54, series P.

\(^{39}\) File 1588, box 53, series P.

\(^{40}\) File 4096, box 101, series P.
telling authorities that he “wished very much to see all Hebrews [who] apply to relief to the Rehabilitation Committee.” This was a good thing for Louis and Olga Smith and their ten children, who for reasons of pride, language, shyness, or something else, had trouble applying on their own. The Smiths ran a tailor shop, but the shop was destroyed, along with their base of customers, who came from the North End. Their house, too, was in a condition their visitor though uninhabitable. The Smiths had recently moved to Halifax from St. John, New Brunswick, and one of the daughters had become friends with the daughter of a theater owner who was himself good friends with Ralph P. Bell, the HRC secretary. The theater owner wrote a strong letter of recommendation for the Smiths, though he wrote it in patronizing and antisemitic terms. This letter was apparently not good enough, and social worker Dorothy Judah deferred to Simon for his opinion. Simon reported that “having made a thorough investigation today into the case of Mr. Smith, I find that his request for aid is really needed, and I would recommend the proposed amount being given him.” Because Simon was a fellow layperson, though, this felt like charity, and Smith refused it. He “said he cannot go to Simon (for any amount of money),” Judah reported, and so she changed Simon’s offer. Instead of Simon vouching for aid, Judah offered for Simon to find Smith a job, which offer was accepted. The pattern of the Smiths being unwilling to accept charity continued. Olga came into the office in February “asking very hesitatingly” for a bed and comforters for her children, since they were very cold in their leaky house. They filed a claim that was for far less than they had lost, and rather than increase their request, Olga planned to go to New York to work in a factory. This willingness to debase herself with factory work—“This supervisor told her she must on no account do”—greatly impressed the social workers.
They noted several times that they were “absurdly grateful” or “pathetically grateful, and most unwilling to complain.” Most of all, they determined that the man was “quite unable to plead his own cause.” The presence of Simon and his advocacy, unwanted though it may have been, was important to the Smiths getting anything.41

Simon apparently presented himself to the relief authorities and set himself up as the expert on Jews and the translator for Hebrews. Other times it was the relief authorities who went out in search of local experts. Guy Jewers was a sailor on the schooner *St. Bernard*, and like the rest of the crew he was killed in the explosion.42 His parents lived in West Quoddy, a small town at the far eastern end of Halifax County, where his father built ships and fished lobsters and his mother ran a general store with Guy’s sister. They were entitled to compensation only if their son’s earnings had supported them, so when in July 1918 they filed a claim, the Relief Commission had to investigate. To do so, they tried to find professionals or middle-class people nearby who might know the family. At first they wrote to D. M. McGowan “in the belief that you are the nearest Presbyterian clergyman to West Quoddy” and also to Charles Allen, the manager of a nearby lumber mill. “I am not R.L. Jewers’ minister and I am not acquainted with their position financially,” McGowan responded before continuing: “I am under the impression that Jewers (deceased) son of the above was not of much use to his Father or anybody else. This is sub-rosa.” Allen at least claimed to be “well acquainted” with the family, and he reported that the family had a number of other sources of financial support. “We consider them to be in good pissition as far as income

41 File 2294, box 66, series P (Smith); file 3048, box 78, series P (Simon).

is concerned as any one in this vacinity,” he wrote with dubious spelling. “They were in no wise dependent on the dead boy for anything.” McGowan, however, provided the name of the family’s actual minister, James Middleton, and he had a different perspective. While he, too, acknowledged that he was “not able to give you any definite information regarding their financial standing in the Community,” he noted that they were “in Comfortable Circumstances.” In contrast to McGowan, he vouched for the Jewers’s past dependence on their son. “Guy to whom you refer was a great worker & a great help to his father in the way of boat building & lobster fishing,” he wrote. Faced with different testimony from their three experts, George Cutten, the head of rehabilitation, split the difference, offering the family a paltry $500. Although the family initially rejected this amount as “entirely too small,” they eventually accepted it when it became clear they would get no more.43 The relief committee relied on McGowan, Middleton, and Allen not because McGowan and Middleton had special spiritual knowledge but rather because their status meant they were more trustworthy than the family.

Clergymen’s authority rested both on their status as moral leaders and educators—thus their importance in adoption cases—and because they were trusted professionals who were thought to know their parishioners’ circumstances. But the secular importance of churches only went so far; in particular, it did not extend beyond the clergy. In the weeks and months following the explosion, churches were not sites of resistance or organization; people did not visibly unite with their coparishioners qua coparishioners to demand more relief, though they may have done so invisibly. If relief applicants shared advice and complaints about the authorities, if they exchanged information about jobs

43 File 4735, box 114, series P.
and housing, if they found ways of supporting each other mutually, these conversations were necessarily informal, and they rarely survive in the historical record.

One reason churches did not serve as a space for lay organization is that they literally had no space. A newspaper reported that Kaye Street Methodist was so badly damaged that it could not even hold a vestry meeting to decide how it should proceed, and the other Richmond churches were in no better shape.\(^4^4\) St. Paul’s, in downtown Halifax, bragged that it was the only church in the city to hold services on Sunday, December 9.\(^4^5\) Other Anglican churches relied on St. Paul’s to host them, since their own buildings were either ruined or in no shape to hold services. St. Paul’s prided itself as the oldest Anglican parish in North America, and it took special satisfaction in hosting services for St. Mark’s, St. George’s, and Trinity churches. “St. Paul’s, the mother of churches, still stands stretching out loving arms to all,” an unidentified parishioner boasted to the parish magazine.\(^4^6\) Other churches, too, had to find new spaces in which to pray. Catholic St. Joseph’s held mass at St. Mary’s Army and Navy Club and at Mrs. Hurley’s Hospital.\(^4^7\) Anglicans and Presbyterians in Dartmouth’s North End held joint services in space borrowed from a Presbyterian church elsewhere in town.\(^4^8\) Grove Presbyterian in Richmond met with another Presbyterian church until it could decide

\(^{4^4}\) *Morning Chronicle* 8 December 1917, 3.

\(^{4^5}\) *St. Paul’s Church Parish Magazine*, vol. 34, no 1 & 2 (January and February 1918), 1-3, in St. Paul’s Church Parish Magazines, accession 2001-5-311, St. Paul’s archives.


\(^{4^7}\) *Morning Chronicle* 13 December 1917, 7.

\(^{4^8}\) *Morning Chronicle* 14 May 1918, 4; personal narrative of Mrs. Annie Anderson, n.d., item 114, MacMechan fonds.
what to do about rebuilding. Churches were so dispersed and disrupted that they had to take out advertisements in the newspapers to let parishioners know where to go.

Yet parishioners did share information and sometimes helped each other. Members of the Christian Church, for instance, remained sufficiently well connected that a parishioner was able to tell Archibald MacMechan the number of casualties among its members. Moreover, there are a small handful of examples of relief work being organized congregationally or denominationally. An advertisement in the newspaper, for instance, asked Methodists affected in any way by the explosion to come to the Robie Street parsonage to register and ask for help. While there are no records of the Methodists’ activities, the advertisement suggests that there was at least some denominational relief work. These glimpses in the archives may hint at a larger pattern, but they are so rare that they are more likely to be exceptions or, at best, a common but small phenomenon. They were short lived, occurring only in the explosion’s immediate aftermath and not sustained for longer. Moreover, they appear to have happened only at churches marginally affected by the explosion, not the congregations in Richmond or Dartmouth’s North End that themselves were physically destroyed and had the greatest number of casualties.

To Henry Cunningham, the rector of St. George, the explosion emphasized his

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49 *Acadian Daily Recorder* 7 January 1918, 2.

50 See display ads from Oxford Street Methodist, J. Wesley Smith (Methodist), West End Baptist, North Baptist, Salvation Army, St. Matthew’s, Cathedral of All Saints (Anglican), Robie Street Methodist, and Grafton Street Methodist, *Evening Mail* 15 December 1917, 4; and an advertisement from St. Joseph’s Catholic, *Morning Chronicle* 12 December 1917, 3.

51 Personal narrative of Mr. L.A. Myers, n.d., item 205, MacMechan fonds.

52 *Morning Chronicle* 28 December 1917, 7.
need for assistance. Given the long-term decline of his church—its membership had
decreased over the past twenty years it faced new competition from St. Mark’s and as the
neighborhood had become poorer and experienced out-migration—he knew he could not
reasonably expect an assistant priest. Instead he suggested a committee of laywomen to
assist his pastoral work. “That they can do it,” he argued, “was amply proved by the
splendid work of those who came at the call and in home and hospital visited many of the
St. George’s people who had suffered, and arranged for their outfit in clothing, and
reported cases to the rector, and not only of our ladies but I do not forget that our vestry
men were ready, and several visits were made.”

Some churches did significant relief work, but this was charity, not directed at
their own members. St. Paul’s Anglican and St. Mary’s Catholic Cathedral both opened
as shelters. St. Paul’s December magazine bragged that in the first month of the shelter,
over 350 individuals were cared for and 10,000 meals served. The church installed baths
and laundry facilities, and it housed clothing, food, and information committee workers.
“Over a thousand relief orders [were] written for members of many congregations,” the
magazine said; the relief work, it emphasized, was not solely directed at the 300 families
in the church who were affected but rather at everyone, regardless of religion.

Moreover, though the church was proud that “nearly everyone has been busy in some
place,” but it emphasized that the relief work was done by “members of the church

53 Rector’s Address reprinted in Parish Notes, pasted in with minutes of annual meeting, 4 February 1918,
Minute book 4 Feb 18 to 15 Dec 21, item 1, vol. 318, St. George’s fonds.

54 St. Paul’s Church Parish Magazine, vol. 33, no. 12 (December 1917), 6-7, in St. Paul’s Church Parish
Magazines, accession 2001-5-311, St. Paul’s archives.
individually,” not as St. Paul’s members. The assistance they gave must have been in their capacity family members, neighbors, or friends.

If church efforts were seldom about coparishioners helping their fellows, neither were they about reforming the Relief Committee, resolving conflicts, or finding the ways people could best get aid. The only political activity churches engaged in was to sign onto a Commercial Club resolution demanding that the Dominion government provide full restitution for property lost or destroyed in the explosion. But this was certainly not specifically church oriented; the campaign included nearly every club or organization in the city, regardless of purpose or class, ranging from the Catholic Archdiocese to the Orange Order and from the Trades and Labour Council to the Dartmouth Board of Trade. Even scrupulously non-partisan groups like the Masons were included. From the churches’ perspective, the petition was less about parishioners organizing politically for better relief and more about churches wanting money to rebuild their own physical facilities. The entire Catholic episcopacy of the Maritimes wrote a resolution demanding that the federal government “should assume full responsibility for the loss of property in Churches, Schools, and other public Institutions of all denominations in Halifax and the neighboring districts” as soon as possible. Likewise, at a December meeting with cabinet ministers to discuss federal reparations, Anglican Archbishop Clarendon Worrell insisted that churches not be overlooked. “The schools and the churches were most


important buildings in any community,” the newspaper reported him as saying, “and while the school buildings interests would be looked after by the authorities in charge of them he urged that in the public interest the churches of all denominations be put in the best possible condition. Some had lost not only their buildings but largely their flocks; the life lost could never be made good. His Grace felt the Government might be safely looked to do the right thing by all.”58

The emphasis on full reparations indicates one answer to why churches were not a more important site of lay organization: they were busy. As Rev. R.W. Ross wrote in 1925, “Everything was unsettled, old ruts disappeared and conditions were such now that necessary adjustments long delayed were possible.”59 All this jolting out of ruts was distracting. After the explosion, the organizing that happened in churches was about the churches—where congregations should meet and in what form. People do not appear to have used those communities or those authority figures in an organic, voluntary way. In their role as parishioners, people were too busy trying to rebuild their churches. Like other buildings in Halifax, churches had severe physical damage, ranging from the leveling of churches in the North Ends of Dartmouth and Halifax to mere broken windows farther away. An early tally estimated that churches throughout Halifax and Dartmouth suffered $1.1 million in damages; the Relief Commission distributed a bit more than $800,000 for repairs. For some congregations, the damage was total and the amount needed was extremely high; the amounts the Relief Commission gave them were unlikely to cover their full loss. St. Joseph’s received over $115,000 to repair itself, a

58 Morning Chronicle 29 December 1918, 1.

total that probably included the school. Grove Presbyterian got $51,000.\footnote{Certified copy of a Report of the Committee of the Privy Council, approved by His Excellency the Governor General on the 9th of March 1918, item 23, MacMechan fonds; “Churches,” 31 December 1918, item A.6.1, Appraisal Board Records, series A, Halifax Relief Commission fonds, MG 36, Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management.} Farther south, Catholic St. Patrick’s, in Ward 5, received almost $74,000, and even St. Mary’s Cathedral, in Ward 2, got $14,500.\footnote{“Damages Caused by Explosion,” n.d., McCarthy fonds.}

The money churches needed for repairs was the least of it; even when they were paid it still took much time, effort, and energy to repair or rebuild. Emmanuel Church, an Anglican mission in Dartmouth, “resemble[d] a toppled card house,” in the words of MacMechan’s assistant, J.H. Mitchell. The HRC granted the church $12,500 in 1918, but it was not restored until 1920. The displacement and disorientation meant it was hard to focus on rebuilding the church, and the difficulty was compounded by the fact that the pastor left his position to teach at King’s College in Windsor.\footnote{The Devastated District of Dartmouth, personal observation of J. H. Mitchell, 19 December 1917, item 173, MacMechan fonds; Edith Rowlings, The Story of Emmanuel Church, Dartmouth, N.S. 1871-1987 (Dartmouth, N.S.: Emmanuel Church, 1987), 32-36, NSARM vertical file v.374 #6.} The older and larger of Halifax’s two synagogues, the Baron de Hirsch Society, was destroyed in the explosion, but the HRC gave the congregation only $7,625 to rebuild. This was far from adequate, so for the next several years the congregation met in various rented spaces. Meanwhile they looked to raise $30,000 more, a large amount for a community of fewer than 100 families who had just finished raising $12,000 for war relief. Yet by June 1920, when they broke ground at their new location on Robie Street, they had raised two thirds of their goal. The pressure to rebuild must have taken up much of the congregation’s energy.
To understand the way rebuilding took up the organizational energy of Halifax’s churches, it is instructive to consider Cunningham’s church in the Ward 5, St. George’s. On January 17 the vestry met for the second time since the explosion and spent nearly the entire meeting discussing what to do with the parish’s famous round building, including how to pay for repairs and who should do the work. The meeting of the full parish on February 4 followed the same pattern, and subsequent meetings mentioned the explosion only in discussions of how to repair the organ. To save money, the parish hall was mostly repaired by church members, who worked for ten nights and a few afternoons.

Though all churches in Halifax and Dartmouth expended considerable energy on rebuilding—even the vestry of South End’s St. Matthias, which suffered a mere $979 in damage, had to discuss how to repair the windows—for none was it more important than Grove Presbyterian and Kaye Street Methodist, both of which were leveled by the explosion. By 1917, these churches were several generations old, having been founded

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64 Meeting of 17 January 1918, Vestry Minute Book, item 9, vol. 317; Parish meeting of 4 February 1918, Minute Book for 4 February 1918 through 15 December 1921, item 1, vol. 318, both in St. George’s fonds.

65 “Confidential information relating to St. George’s Church,” n.d., Halifax Relief Commission folder, vol. 399, St. George’s fonds.

66 Meetings of 31 January 1918 and 28 February 1918, Vestry minute book, reel 11,518-x, St. Matthias Anglican Church fonds, Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management (hereafter St. Matthias fonds).
initially as missions to the railwaymen and other skilled workers who lived in Richmond. Grove, which started as a Sunday School in the train station in 1860, built a hall in 1863 and the church itself in 1872; it was renovated in 1910 and again in 1916. Kaye Street, too, had begun as a mission. It opened its church building in 1868, welcomed its first ordained minister in 1870, and built additions in 1915 and 1916. All these renovations and additions suggested growth, prosperity, and missionary success. The explosion tested all this. “Where her Churches and Halls, Manse and Parsonage had been were now pile of wreckage or smouldering ash heaps,” wrote Charles J. Crowdis, the minister at Grove.67 When the dust settled, these two churches had merged, creating one of the few local union churches in eastern Canada. United Memorial Church presaged the full, national union of the Presbyterian, Methodist, and Congregationalist churches into the United Church of Canada by several years. How they merged, and how their merger fits into the broader story of Canadian church union, illuminates some of the ways church members used and understood their religious communities. It also offers clues about how and why local lay people experienced and contributed to church union.

At a national level, Canadian Protestants had been seriously discussing the interdenominational union of their churches since 1902, when the Presbyterian principal of Manitoba College was supposed to offer fraternal greetings to the Methodist General Conference and instead suggested that the two denominations merge.68 The suggestion came after each denomination had itself come together through a series of

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68 On this initial proposal and its unofficial character, see N. Keith Clifford, The Resistance to Church Union in Canada, 1904-1939 (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1985), 14-25.
intradenominational unions, and it was based, in the words of historian John Webster Grant, on an increasing “sense of kinship” based on evangelism, the social gospel, and commitment to education.\textsuperscript{69} Official negotiations started in 1904, and four years after that a committee had hammered out the Basis of Union, a formal document describing the theological and ecclesiastical form that a united church would take. Within a few years, Methodists and Congregationalists were committed to union and Baptists and Anglicans had definitively taken themselves out. Presbyterians, on the other hand, dickered and debated for more than a decade. Although there was a continuous majority who favored union, a powerful and vocal minority opposed and delayed it. In 1925, the unionists won and the federal parliament, accompanied by provincial legislatures, passed enabling legislation creating the United Church of Canada.\textsuperscript{70} Each local Presbyterian church voted on whether to join the United Church or the continuing Presbyterian church; church property would stay with the winners of the vote.\textsuperscript{71}

During the thirteen years between when the Methodists formally accepted the Basis of Union in 1912 and the adoption of the United Church of Canada Act in 1925, church union happened locally. Local Methodist and Presbyterian officials, spurred by a


\textsuperscript{71} For an entertaining and insightful description of how this worked at one church, see John Kenneth Galbraith, \textit{The Scotch} (Cambridge, Mass.: Riverside Press, 1964), 100-103.
shortage of ministers, agreed to cooperate in top-down arrangements to divvy up mission
territory, mostly in the West. Picking up the momentum, individual congregations
concluded their own formal unions, again mostly in the West. Their denominational
superiors were wary of these local unions because they did not fit easily into a pre-union
ecclesiastical framework. From whom did they accept discipline, and to whom did they
submit donations? Eventually, however, a compromise was reached in which local
church unions could choose to affiliate with one or both denominations even while
remaining merged. Though local church unions were often based on temporal and
practical need, they were also, in Grant’s words, “formal anticipations of the coming
union,” a way to enact ecumenism and church union before the denominations were able
to muster the political consensus to do so. That is, though they may have been initially
motivated by financial or other temporal considerations, the men and women who
enacted them were performing what they understood to be an important religious act. 

Past scholarship has paid little attention to local church unions because most
scholarly interest has been focused on the dissenting Presbyterians. Moreover,
historians of church union have focused on elite laymen and clerics and their institutional
battles in synods, conferences, and parliaments. They have for the most part not
examined the way church union was built or experienced in local congregations. With
very few exceptions, the scholarship has also given short shrift to church union in the

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72 Grant, *Canadian Experience of Church Union*, 45-49, quote on 46; Silcox, *Church Union in Canada*, 219-230.
73 N.K. Clifford, “The Interpreters of the United Church of Canada,” *Church History* 46 no. 2 (June 1977): 203-214, for instance, judges the competing schools of historiography by how well they explain the phenomenon of dissenting Presbyterians.
Maritimes. Examining the experience of Grove Presbyterian and Kaye Street Methodist helps to correct these holes in the historiography. Though United Memorial Church, as Grove and Kaye Street eventually became, was certainly unusual—it was one of only eight local union churches in the three Maritime provinces—it provides an opportunity to see how church union happened on a local level. Moreover, it demonstrates how the practical considerations of two congregations whose buildings were destroyed merged with spiritual and religious desires for ecumenical union. Finally, it provides an example of how sacred communities responded to the disaster.

For the communities that made up Grove and Kaye Street churches, the explosion was first and foremost a personal and human tragedy. One hundred and seventy members of Grove died. Kaye Street counted 167 dead members, including the wife and son of its minister, William J.W. Swetnam. More than the dead, though, was the grief experienced by the living. These survivors “must bear in their bodies or on their hearts the tokens of suffering and sorrow,” Grove’s minister Crowdis wrote to potential donors a few years later. Homelessness, too, wore on them. Of the 180 families Swetnam tried to visit after the explosion, only 14 were still at their own houses. This dispersal of the community signals the way the explosion was not just a personal tragedy but one experienced on a community level. The explosion and its effects were, Crowdis wrote, “a

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75 Crowdis, “Common Sorrow and a Common Concern.” The numbers of dead are from a questionnaire and answers to questionnaire requested by W.C. Milner, 12 July 1920, Item 7, MG 27. These numbers are questionable; Crowdis gave a combined total death-toll of 239. On community disruption as a continuing disaster, see Kai T. Erikson, Everything In Its Path: Destruction of Community in the Buffalo Creek Flood (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976).

76 Acadian Daily Recorder 9 January 1918, 3.
common sorrow and a common concern,” and they called out for a common solution.77

In early January, the general superintendent of the entire Canadian Methodist Church convened a meeting of the Methodist clergy from Halifax, Dartmouth, and neighboring Woodlawn. The meeting took place at Brunswick Street Methodist Church, Kaye Street’s mother church, which had itself suffered more than $20,000 in damage. “A most significant feature of the evening,” wrote the Herald, “was the reception of a deputation from the Presbyterian denomination,” represented by ministers at St. Matthew’s and St. Andrew’s. “This delegation expressed the willingness and desire of the Presbyterians of the city to co-operate with the Methodists in the matter of re-adjustment and overlapping in the work of reconstruction and rebuilding of churches. It is hoped that the different denominations will work together in this spirit of Christian unity, so that the city may be properly churched and yet not overchurched.”78 The next week, when lay representatives from Presbyterian churches from around the city met to discuss their rebuilding efforts, they appointed a committee to confer with the Methodists on reorganizing and potentially merging churches and raising funds from their parent denominations.79 The joint committee included both Swetnam and Crowdis and was supported by grants of $1,500 each from the Methodist and Presbyterian Churches.80 It

77 Crowdis, “Common Sorrow and a Common Concern.”

78 Halifax Herald 10 January 1918, 3; Acadian Daily Recorder 9 January 1918, 3. For damage to Brunswick Street Church, see “Churches,” 31 December 1918, item A.6.1, Appraisal Board Records, series A, Halifax Relief Commission fonds, MG 36, Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management. On its history with Kaye Street Church, see Crowdis, “Common Sorrow and a Common Concern.”

79 Session meeting of 10 January 1918, 8:00pm, Session Book, 11 January 1893-21 September 1920, vol. 60, St. Matthew’s Church fonds, MG 4, Nova Scotia Archives and Record Management; Journal entry for 16 January 1918, item 77s, MacMechan fonds.

took only a week to agree formally to rebuild Kaye Street and Grove together in a single building. The joined congregations met for the first time in February and elected Crowdis chair. On March 17, the combined church opened in a building made of tar paper, the first church to reopen in Richmond.\textsuperscript{81} This Tar Paper Church, as it was called, could hold 400 worshipers, lasted two years, and cost a mere $4,800 to build.\textsuperscript{82}

Ecclesiastically, the Tar Paper Church was officially two congregations, operating under the name Grove-Kaye Church. Crowdis explained the set-up: “The members of the respective churches retain their prior relation, the Missionary, Connectional and like funds are divided equally, the [Presbyterian] Session cares for the spiritual interest while matters of business are entrusted to a [Methodist] Quarterly Board. All property is held jointly by the [Presbyterian] Maritime Synod and the [Methodist] Nova Scotia Conference.”\textsuperscript{83} Soon after the combined church opened, Swetnam and Crowdis both resigned to mark a new beginning. Swetnam, who as a Methodist minister was used to itinerancy, was transferred to a church in Bridgetown, Nova Scotia. Crowdis consented to being rehired. Although the congregations remained technically separate entities until national church union in 1925, as things got back to normal in Richmond, the churches continued to shift from mere cooperation to real union, a process which, in the words of the parish’s historians in 1975, happened “almost unconsciously.” In 1920, in order to meet the needs of the growing population of the North End, they built a larger, permanent church, and at the same time changed the name to United Memorial Church, signaling the

\textsuperscript{81} Journal entry for 21 January 1918, item 77v, MacMechan fonds.

\textsuperscript{82} Inglis et al., “United Memorial Church”; Crowdis, “Common Sorrow and a Common Concern.”

\textsuperscript{83} Crowdis, “Common Sorrow and a Common Concern.”
Like the larger church union, United Memorial was both a practical and religious concern. It “came about of necessity, and not of choice,” wrote R.W. Ross, a Methodist minister who sat on a joint committee that oversaw the church on behalf of the two denominations; it was a way to cheaply provide pastoral services to a largely depopulated area. Yet it was also clearly a religious and spiritual enterprise, a way of rebuilding a stronger community in Christ. Ross drew a parallel between the way explosion survivors rebuilt their homes and the way they rebuilt their churches. “The people lost everything, and were scattered amongst friends; but they were longing to return to their ruined homes and rebuild some sort of temporary dwelling. What about a church dwelling for these unfortunate people?” Richmond Methodists and Presbyterians were, he wrote, “brethren in adversity. The denominational walls were down, and out of site.” By destroying the physical structures of their churches, the explosion forced these Haligonians to reconsider their churches’ theological and ecclesiastical structures. Crowdis, raising money in 1920, emphasized the newness of what they were doing, the way it was unprecedented and special. “It must be remembered that this [the initial union] meant in a time of sore stress the formulating and accepting of terms of union by individual congregations, the approval of these by the parent denominations and the erection of the church,” he wrote. “Remember, too, that in the East these churches were pioneers in the matter of union.

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There was no precedent nor was any inquired after.” 86 Yet for all the lack of precedent, the merger of Grove and Kaye Street took the Basis of Union as its template and included only the two denominations that were most associated with the national church union movement. Using the national Basis of Union meant the two congregations did not have to innovate or negotiate the ecclesiastical or theological form their new church would take. The Tar Paper congregation created new ways of doing things, but it could only go so far. Local people, both clergy and laypeople, united their two churches for locally meaningful reasons, and they understood their local union church to have a purpose distinct from the national project. Though United Memorial was unique in its location and circumstances, we may extrapolate from it that local union congregations were similarly motivated by their own particular practical and spiritual concerns.

The unified church was a way of comprehending, memorializing, and living through the horror of the disaster. The “Memorial” in United Memorial Church was an explicit reference to the explosion, and as the name indicates, the congregation was dedicated to the memory of those killed in the explosion. Likewise, when the church’s spokespeople told the story of the church, it was impossible to start with anything but the explosion. 87 The memory of dead family members, neighbors, and fellow parishioners lived on in the community created in the unified church, and the religious ritual that took place there was a way of remembering and memorializing them. Though Grove and Kaye Street churches do not appear to have been sites in which people organized to recover materially, the project of rebuilding them was one of the ways parishioners

86 Crowdis, “Common Sorrow and a Common Concern.”

87 See, for instance, Crowdis, “Common Sorrow and a Common Concern.”

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emotionally and spiritually recovered.

The church’s memorial purpose was literally built into it. Surviving family members presented stained-glass windows, the pulpit, chairs, and communion table, the baptismal font, and other church furnishings in memory of lost relatives. A plaque recorded the names of each dead church member from both original congregations. Most of all, the church’s memory was embodied in its ten bells, presented in 1921 by Barbara Orr, then a young woman. Orr’s entire immediate family—both parents and five siblings—had died, and she went to live with an aunt and uncle. They provided money to build a tower, and Barbara paid for ten bells out of her inheritance. As if to emphasize the way lay members of the church had built it and invested it with meaning, Orr played the bells at United Memorial’s dedication. By the 1970s, structural weakness in the tower meant that the church had to stop playing the bells, and they were removed altogether in 1975, but in the early 1980s, the province built a bell tower in Fort Needham Park to serve as Halifax’s primary civil explosion memorial. Orr’s bells were placed in civil memorial, alongside four new ones, thus retaining their original memorial purpose. To signal the continuity between the original church tower and the new secular memorial, Orr, by then an old woman, played the carillon as she had at the initial dedication ceremony. The plaque on the bell tower reminded visitors that the bells originally came from United Memorial, and it retained the list of Orr’s dead relatives. It also included a rededication to all of Halifax and Dartmouth’s dead, injured, and survivors. Now outside the church, the bells’ meaning shifted slightly to become more inclusive, memorializing all the explosion dead. The transfer of the bells from the united church to the Needham bell tower, and the way that even in their move from a sacred to a secular space they retained
their meaning, highlighted that the church had been conceived as a memorial.88

United Memorial Church and its furnishings were physical manifestations of the ways Haligonians used sacred spaces and communities to comprehend and respond to the explosion. Just as the members and leaders of Kaye Street and Grove churches used a preexisting framework—the Basis of Union—to build their local response, so too did those congregations whose responses were less drastic. Churches and members exchanged official resolutions and letters of sympathy to each other with a formalism that seems odd to contemporary eyes. The formal and formulaic expressions of grief, however, hint that churches were a community in which such sympathy was built and experienced.

These formal resolutions and letters were official and ritualistic offers of sympathy. The letters especially provided a physical manifestation of a community’s shared grief, since a family could retain the letter as a memorial. St. George’s vestry met for the first time since the explosion on December 19. “It seems fitting, therefore,” recorded the clerk, “that a resolution of sympathy should be passed by this Vestry, and a word of condolence should be sent to the bereaved ones, who are left, and who still worship with us as members of the Church on earth. It will, no doubt, be some solace to them in their affliction, to be reminded by such a resolution, that the memory of their dear departed is kept green and sacred by the congregation of the Church they loved so well.” With that in mind, Cunningham, the rector, moved a resolution of sympathy toward all bereaved parishioners, especially the warden and a vestryman. The vestry also agreed to

send letters of sympathy to seventeen families or individuals. Finally, they passed a resolution of sympathy for St. Mark’s, a sister Anglican parish that had suffered even more grievously.\footnote{Meeting of 19 December 1917, written by vestry clerk 31 December 1917, Vestry Minute Book, item 9, vol. 317, St. George’s fonds.} Other churches, like St. Matthias and St. Andrew’s, also sent and received these formal notices of sympathy.\footnote{Meetings of 18 December 1917 and 21 January 1917, Minutes of Congregational Meetings, reel 11,521-x, St. Matthias fonds.} Catholic Archbishop Edward McCarthy received sympathetic telegrams from bishops all over the continent and had them reprinted in the newspaper.\footnote{Morning Chronicle 17 December 1917, 5.} These messages, whether from sister congregations in Halifax or from sister dioceses in North America, reminded their readers that they were not alone and that an imagined community of coreligionists spiritually supported them.

As congregations and sacred communities, churches came together for religious and spiritual purposes. When churchgoers voluntarily chose to interact with their churches, they did so to grieve, to memorialize, and to rebuild those communities. In contrast, the relief commission was concerned primarily with material relief, and its interactions with religion existed on a purely material and instrumental level. Clergymen, as trusted experts, were asked to judge their parishioners, just as, in other cases, other trusted professionals or businessmen were asked to do. Lay relief applicants, noting the secular power their priests and ministers wielded, relied on it, using clergymen to translate for them and represent them to the commission. This system worked passably, though it put at a disadvantage people who were religiously unaffiliated or who were in disfavor with their ministers. More importantly, an emphasis on the material aspect of
religion distorts the meaning the faithful found in their churches. Laypeople did not appear to go voluntarily to their churches as a community in which they would find material relief. Rather, they went to their churches to rebuild them and to receive emotional and spiritual support. The members of Kaye Street and Grove churches who filled their new, united church with memorials to their dead relatives built a sacred space that helped to organize their memories and their grief. They did not, apparently, use the community that met there there to improve their material position.

Clergymen benefited from the HRC’s need to inform its professional and expert opinions with local knowledge of families’ financial situations. This system may have distorted the relationships of parishioners and their clergy, since it gave the latter newfound power over the former’s material and financial situation. In a city with separate schools, orphanages, and the like, it meant that denominations retained their social importance even as the rise of scientific charity and social work emphasized technocratic expertise.

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The Canadian Progressive era, and in particular World War I, saw a marked expansion of the state. The state took increasing power over citizens’ lives and labor, and it also increasingly intervened in the economy. Between 1914 and 1918, Canadians saw the imposition of federal prohibition, daylight savings, the Anti-Loafing Act (criminalizing men who did not work), and, of course, military conscription. In 1917 alone, the federal government began to intervene in the grain, coal, wool, natural
resources, and railway industries. These reforms were animated by progressive ideals of efficiency, professional and managerial expertise, and the supremacy of central knowledge.\textsuperscript{92} The Halifax Relief Commission was, at least for Haligonians, the apex of this state expansion, since it meant the state, through the commission, was developer, city planning authority, landlord, employer, court, and relief agent. The HRC embodied the central irony of Progressive-era state intervention: though the government claimed to act on behalf of “the people” and though relief workers were motivated by a desire to rescue and relieve their clients, workers and especially union leaders experienced state expansion as exclusion. The growing, technocratic state devalued and rejected workers’ knowledge and power. Historian Bryan D. Palmer writes that new state initiatives left organized labor “handicapped by its inability to grasp the extent to which the state, as a powerful national force, was engaged in a constant project of regulation and containment.”\textsuperscript{93} In Halifax, the presence of the HRC forced unions to “grasp the extent” of the state’s growth, but it did them little good. Clergymen were able to take advantage of social workers’ need for information from a trusted professional; unions and their leaders were unable to do the same.

Laborism left Halifax’s unions ideologically unprepared for this newly interventionist state that simultaneously claimed to speak for the unions’ constituency—the homeless workers who lived in Richmond—while denying them a voice of their own.


Unions are nearly absent in the records of the rehabilitation section of the relief commission, suggesting that the HRC did not recognize unions’ knowledge of and interest in their members. In its capacity rebuilding the North End, the HRC also would not negotiate with building trades unions. The extraordinary power held by the HRC forced Halifax’s unions to reconsider their roles. Though unions sought to be included in the relief apparatus and very occasionally tried to help members or members’ widows in the relief process, they did not act as sites of spontaneous organization after the disaster. People turned to their families, not their unions or other organizations, for informal relief, and for formal relief they relied on the government. Reacting to their exclusion from the relief process, unions reimagined how they would build and exercise power in Halifax. By the end of the decade, Halifax’s unions demanded a political solution to the city’s ever-worsening housing shortage, they founded a new newspaper to advocate for themselves, and in 1920 Halifax’s ship builders engaged the country’s largest strike that year while contesting a provincial election in coalition with the United Farmes.

There is some evidence that labor unions in Nova Scotia, Canada, and North America raised money for their brothers who were left destitute by the explosion. In Sydney, the Federation of Labor collected $300 the Saturday after the explosion, and the Federation’s president promised at least another $2,000. Similarly, the International Typographical Union donated $500 to its Halifax local for the benefit of members who needed aid; the international was joined by local unions, mostly in Canada. These union

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94 Canadians in this period were inconsistent in their spelling of the word labor; I have tried to follow my sources in my spelling of organizations’ names.

95 Canadian Labor Leader 15 December 1917, 6.

96 Halifax Herald 5 February 1918. Typographical locals long had donated money to sister locals after
donations, however, seem no different—certainly no more class conscious—than fund-raising by explicitly middle-class and professional organizations. Rotary clubs and Chambers of Commerce collected money for Halifax and, like unions, sent donations either to the general relief fund or to their sister local clubs in Halifax. The continent-wide giving of aid to Halifax was not classed. People may have donated through their class-based groups, with middle-class businessmen and professionals giving through Rotary and Chambers of Commerce and workers giving through unions, but the act of charity was the same.

More important was the way Halifax’s local labor unions and their parent organizations did and did not shape and influence relief as it was given out, both on a systemic and individual level. The Halifax Trades and Labour Council sought several times to play a role in the relief process, and relief authorities even invited its representatives to participate. Each invitation, however, was withdrawn, and labor never gained an official role in the distribution of aid. Instead, relief authorities relied on the professional expertise of social workers and the moral expertise of clergymen, relegating class representatives to at best a minor role. This emphasis on professional expertise at the expense of representation was new. When Nova Scotia adopted its Workmen’s Compensation Act in 1915, the board it created included a labor representative: John Joy, disasters; the Toronto Typographical Union, for instance, had given a large sum to to the Chicago local after the latter city’s 1871 fire. See Jacob Remes, “Movable Type: Toronto’s Transnational Printers, 1867-1872,” in Workers Across the Americas: The Transnational Turn in Labor History, ed. Leon Fink (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

the “grand old man” of Halifax organized labor. Joy, a baker by trade, was the moving force behind organizing streetcar workers and the longshoremen, had run unsuccessfully for parliament in 1911 on a Labor ticket, and was an active member of various reform organizations. But when, in order to avoid bankrupting the entire workers’ compensation system, the HRC took over all claims arising from the explosion, it did not include Joy or any other labor representative. The transfer meant a shift in power away from labor and toward the technocratic experts of the HRC.98 That the Workers’ Compensation Board included a labor representative and the HRC did not reflected a shift from 1915 to 1918.99

On December 21, the provincial premier called a meeting to appoint an official commission to handle relief work, with the intent of replacing the ad hoc relief committee. The premier’s meeting included himself, the mayor, and members of the Board of Trade. This was hardly a representative group, and they sought to expand the circle they consulted by writing to a large variety of men to invite them to come to a second meeting a week later. Among the invitees were the French and American consuls, the chairman of the school board, the secretaries of the Rotary Club, Commercial Club, and a group of insurance companies. Most notably for our purposes they included Aaron R. Mosher, the president of the Canadian Brotherhood of Railroad Employees, and Ralph H. Eisnor, the president of the local Trades and Labour Council and the carpenters’ local.100 For unknown reasons, however, that second meeting was postponed and


99 Like the Nova Scotia Workers’ Compensation Board, the federal National Resources Commission, created in 1915, also included labor leaders. See Corry, “Growth of Government Activities,” 65.

100 See “Secretary of the Meeting” [Fred F. Mathers?] to each of the invitees, 22 December 1917, items 79-
eventually canceled altogether, effectively excluding Mosher and Eisnor from any deliberations.101 Around the same time, the relief committee’s rehabilitation department was suffering severe criticism for seeming to harass aid applicants with endless investigations. Among the reforms promised by the department’s new director was that he would bring on a “labor man” to help. The Trades and Labour Council nominated Eisnor. Eisnor was never installed, however, and soon after the Relief Committee was replaced with the federally-constituted Halifax Relief Commission.102 Its members included two judges and an Ontario businessman. They, in turn, hired to lead the Rehabilitation Committee a university president, who was advised by professional social workers. This time the labor movement was not even invited. In fact, there was no notion of representation, and the HRC relied instead on the authority of disinterested expertise.

The relief coming into Halifax from Massachusetts seemed to provide organized labor another opportunity to influence how aid was given out. The Massachusetts-Halifax Relief Committee was organized as part of the Massachusetts Committee for Public Safety, which included labor representatives and which had labor mediation in its purview.103 Canadian labor leaders wrote to the Massachusetts committee, seeking some input in its activities. The grand chief of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, for

87, MG 27.

101 [Mathers] to A.K. Maclean, 10 January 1918, item 162, MG 27.

102 J. Howard T. Falk, “History of Rehabilitation Work Since January 9, 1918,” 26 February 1918, item 162.5, HRC correspondence; Jos. A. Garnett to J.H. Winfield, 14 January 1918, item 158.75, HRC correspondence. Eisnor was perhaps the most visible labor leader in the city, having stood on the combined Liberal-Labour ticket for Parliament in the abortive election (on which see Chapter 1).

103 On the Committee for Public Safety and its early successes in labor mediation, see the Introduction; on other Haligonians’ interactions with the Massachusetts committee, see Chapter 4.

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instance, feared that there was “more or less quarreling and friction over the giving of this relief, some claiming that others got more than their share,” and he sought to quell this trouble. There is no record in the Massachusetts committee’s archives, however, that labor leaders were ever given any formal role.\textsuperscript{104}

Labor leaders were not much more successful when they sought to intervene on behalf of individual members. The Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, for instance, wrote to Commission secretary Ralph Bell about cases of four of its members. Any influence the union was able to exert on the process was subtle, and the letter to Bell was phrased as a request for information, rather than as explicit advocacy. Bell passed the request for information to George B. Cutten, the academic who headed the rehabilitation department. The union’s letter was probably akin to the complaints forwarded from Boston and discussed in the previous chapter: it brought the matter to Cutten’s personal attention, and it forced the social workers to pay extra attention, but the HRC was careful not to do any more than that.\textsuperscript{105}

Even this level of careful and subtle advocacy was rare. In my sample of 739 cases in front of the Relief Commission, only 20 even mentioned that a family member was a member of a union, and even in these files the union was often mentioned only in the context of an insurance payment.\textsuperscript{106} Given the number of railroad workers,

\textsuperscript{104} Warren S. Stone to F.A. Hallet, 16 March 1918, reel 12; J.J. Phelan to Warren S. Stone, 21 March 1918, reel 11; JFO’H [J. Frank O’Hare] to G. Fred Pearson, 15 June 1918, reel 12, all in Massachusetts Halifax Relief Committee Correspondence and Papers, Special Collections Division, Massachusetts State Library, Boston, Mass.

\textsuperscript{105} G.A. Stone to G.B. Cutten, 10 July 1918, item 161.91, HRC correspondence. See also file 475, box 30, series P.

\textsuperscript{106} See file 483, box 30, series P; file 478, box 30, series P; file 967, box 41, series P; and file 2392, box 67, series P.
longshoremen, and building tradesmen who lived in Richmond, it is inconceivable that this low number reflects actual union membership. Rather, it must represent that unions were unimportant to the Relief Commission. A comparison with church membership is instructive. No more than 102 of 739 files failed to list the family’s religion, and as we have seen churches were built into the infrastructure of relief through the reliance on clergymen’s presumed local knowledge. In contrast, files almost never included information about union membership because HRC officials deemed it irrelevant. Although unions and their leaders would likely have had similar—perhaps better—knowledge of members’ financial situations, their expertise was not similarly used. When Mary Murphy wrote to the HRC to complain that she had not received any compensation for the death of her son, who supported her, she emphasized that he was “a union man.” When social worker Jane Wisdom responded, however, she demanded information about Murphy’s other children—who might also support her—and a reference from a clergyman. To Murphy, her son’s union membership apparently signified something, perhaps greater respectability or higher wages. To Wisdom, however, it was irrelevant.  

Rita Mariggi’s husband, Cesare, was a stevedore who belonged to the Halifax Longshoremen’s Association before he died in the explosion; so too was John Carson, the father of the orphaned Carson siblings. In January, as Mariggi’s saga with the Relief Commission was starting, she expected to receive a payment from her husband’s union. Assuming that it arrived, that payment was the only thing the HLA did for her, at least that came to the attention of the Relief Commission. It did not, for instance, come to her

107 File 3035, box 77, series P.
defense when the commission tried to force her to put her children in an orphanage or prevented her from giving her baby to a friend. In the Carsons’ case, the union did attempt to get involved, but only very modestly. The union president, Michael D. Coolen, wrote to Cutten to find out whether the commission was paying money to orphaned Kathleen and Johnnie; Cutten responded that they were getting the standard pension for orphans. In both cases the HLA appeared briefly, but in both cases it seemed to make no effort to defend the rights of the family from the prying of the HRC or the church.

Unfortunately, insufficient archives survive to assess the extent to which unions may have supported their members outside the gaze of the HRC. The carpenters’ local held a meeting about two weeks after the explosion “for roll call, to see what members are missing or incapacitated.” No record, however, remains of what if anything the union decided to do for members who were incapacitated. Halifax-based Division Number 14 of the Canadian Brotherhood of Railroad Employees held its “first regular meeting” after the explosion at the end of February, where it inducted new members and elected a new executive. The wording—from a report of the meeting to the national union’s monthly magazine—suggests that that the union held at least one special meeting, presumably to discuss the explosion, but no records of it remain. Even without knowing the details, however, the fact that these unions held meetings suggests that they

108 File 1268, box 47, series P.
109 File 2647, box 71, series P.
110 *Morning Chronicle* 21 December 1917, 8.
111 *Canadian Railroad Employees’ Monthly* March 1918, 601. No copy of the magazine’s volume 3 appears to have survived, and so there is no way of knowing what, if anything, the local union reported in the December 1917, January 1918, or February 1918 issues.
had some project, however minor, to help their members who were affected by the explosion.

In the aftermath of the explosion, unions remained active on their traditional terrain, at the work site. They found, however, that the explosion had jostled and shifted that terrain, giving employers more power by allowing them to seem as if they were representing the interests of the city writ large. In order to win against employers in this new industrial landscape, unions had to organize on different lines, including outside the workplace and away from the point of production. A union movement that had been dominated by skilled and semiskilled men had to build solidarity with women and with the public. This was an acceleration of shift in strategy that had begun before the explosion and that was happened in geographic areas unaffected by the explosion; nonetheless, in Halifax it happened in the aftermath of the explosion and in the shadow of the Relief Commission.\footnote{For an explanation of Maritimes labor history in the period without reference to the explosion, see Ian McKay and Suzanne Morton, “The Maritimes: Expanding the Circle of Resistance,” in Heron, ed., \textit{The Workers’ Revolt in Canada}, 43-86.}

One example of the difficulties unions faced comes from the street car railway, where discipline and hiring practices after the explosion forced a confrontation between workers and management. Management used a perceived manpower shortage—nine carmen had died in the explosion, three of them on duty—to hire women for the first time. Industry wide, managers in both Canada and the United States were hiring women to break down gendered union solidarity and drive down wages, but in Halifax the introduction of “conductorettes” was seen as specifically related to the explosion. The tie to the explosion meant that unlike in Ottawa and Toronto, where male union-members
were able to build an anti-woman coalitions with the riding public, in Halifax passengers welcomed women workers on the basis that men should be doing the more important (and apparently more masculine) work of rebuilding. The explosion led to fights over discipline: workers were incensed when the company fired a twenty-eight-year veteran named James Adams for missing two days of work after the explosion without permission. Adams’s comrades retaliated by refusing to keep to the timetables, instead bunching the cars in packs. They also filed an official complaint with the city government against their women colleagues, alleging that they were too weak to operate the brakes. The day after the government refused to take any action, several workers stayed home and more than a third of the streetcars did not run. Surprisingly, nineteen of twenty-two women conductors staged a sick-out in solidarity with the very workers who were rejecting them.113

In the middle of February, the company fired two more veteran motormen. The motormen’s union struck, sparking solidarity strikes by workers from the car barns, power house, and machine shop, and even the conductorettes. The suddenness of the strike—even the international union was not notified ahead of time—alienated the public, especially since there was bad weather. The lack of public support was in contrast to a strike in 1913, in which riders had sided with workers. Peter Lambly, in a master’s thesis on Canadian streetcar labor history, argues that the difference was partially attributable to the explosion. He speculates that for a public already taxed by food rationing, wartime shortages, inflation, and then the trauma of the explosion, the inconvenience of a streetcar

strike was too much to bear. Unfamiliar with and unsympathetic to the internal questions of hiring policy and discipline that had sparked the strike, the public sided against whomever they perceived to be disrupting service. Lambly may underestimate public support, however, or at least its importance. After only two days, the company agreed to reinstate the fired workers and give them only a temporary suspension, a union victory, albeit an ambiguous one.\footnote{Lambly, “Working Conditions,” 137-141.} When the union sought redress from the government against competition from women, they were rebuffed, but when their organizing reached across craft lines and included women, as it did for the two-day strike, they were significantly more successful.

If on the street railway the question was gender, on the intercity rails the faultline was race. Before the explosion, the Canadian Brotherhood of Railroad Employees, a national union based in Halifax, faced a mounting challenge by African-Canadian sleeping car porters to be admitted as full members of the union. In the spring of 1917, sleeping car porters in Winnipeg had chartered a new union, which they sought to affiliate with either the national Trades and Labour Congress or, when that was denied, with the all-white C.B.R.E. They were joined by the Halifax-based Canadian Grand Trunk Railways Sleeping Car Porters Association, who also sought full membership in the national union. At the September 1918 annual convention of the C.B.R.E., the president of the Halifax porters’ union used the language of laborism to request “a square deal.” He and his members nonetheless lost, and their union was refused affiliation with the C.B.R.E. Instead, the white union buried the question in a committee in charge of
It appears, however, that Halifax railroad workers, at least the ones with the greatest contact with sleeping car porters, supported the acceptance of black workers. In April, about five months after the explosion and five months before the convention, the union magazine’s report from Halifax’s Division 12 of the C.B.R.E. included a discussion of their black colleagues. “As this Division is composed of the dining car waiters, cooks and pantrymen, we come in touch with the colored porters on the railroad, and lately ‘feelers’ have been put out to know just how they stand with this organization in having a division of their own within the Brotherhood,” wrote the correspondent. Though he admitted the question was “very delicate,” he urged that porters be admitted. “As there are a great many of these men on all railroads, in my humble opinion I rather think they would be a source of strength rather than otherwise, and the C. B. of R. E. should be able to embrace all employees, irrespective of creed or race.”\textsuperscript{116} Whether or not the explosion was responsible for Division 12’s greater tolerance is unclear, of course, and since the union was based in Halifax, the explosion evidently did not make everyone more accepting, but it does fit the pattern of the disaster encouraging more inclusive unions. The C.B.R.E.’s constitutional color bar fell in 1920, and black sleeping car porters were finally allowed into the union.\textsuperscript{117}

The Halifax Relief Commission fundamentally altered governance and labor


\textsuperscript{116}Canadian Railroad Employees’ Monthly April 1918, 119.

relations in Halifax, making worker organization and negotiation considerably more difficult. In addition to administering relief and rehabilitation funds, the HRC was in charge of rebuilding Halifax: dispatching workers to fix private homes, building temporary apartment buildings at the Citadel and the Exposition Grounds, and eventually building permanent housing in the new Richmond Heights neighborhood. From the start, the federal government signaled its plans by hiring Robert Smith Low to be the manager of Halifax reconstruction as one of its first explosion-related acts. Low was a politically connected, native Haligonian contractor nationally famous for having built several military encampments but infamous in labor circles for resisting any demands put to him by unions. His militarist style of discipline was symbolized by the fact that everyone called him “colonel,” a reference to his honorary rank in the Canadian Expeditionary Force. Ralph Eisnor complained bitterly that Col. Low had “been a thorn in our flesh for a year, or more back. This is not the first time we have had trouble with the Colonel.”

Halifax building tradesmen were at a particular disadvantage in fighting Low and the government that had hired him because the massive rebuilding project attracted an equally massive influx of construction workers. Historian Suzanne Morton estimates that more than 10,000 construction workers came into Halifax for work, though high turnover meant that most of them probably did not stay for very long. Competitive pressure combined with political pressure to loosen work rules—not just wages, but also hours and overtime—because of the emergency. Unionized tradesmen had to decide between giving up on rules they had negotiated or potentially being replaced by out-of-town

118 Morton, “Halifax Relief Commission and Labour Relations,” 81-83, Eisnor quote on 83. Low began signing his telegrams as reconstruction manager by December 10, a mere four days after the explosion. See his telegrams in item 19900192, 58A 1 2.11, Col. Robert S. Low papers, in the Air Vice Marshall Clifford Mackey McEwan papers, George Metcalf Archival Collection, Canadian War Museum, Ottawa, Ontario.
sojourners. Carpenters, who were the most susceptible to deskillling, faced the issue in the first three weeks after the explosion; soon enough plumbers, bricklayers, and plasterers had to make a similar decision. In February 1918, when plumbers tried to demand overtime wages for Sunday work, the HRC responded with a public campaign in the newspapers questioning their patriotism and a threat to import 200 replacements from Quebec. Eventually, the plumbers were forced to agree to forfeit overtime until May. Plasterers had agreed from the start to forgo overtime pay, but they too demanded a resumption of union work rules in May and went on strike to enforce the demand. Low and the relief commission were initially unwilling to compromise, but the summer brought a labor shortage generally, and so the HRC eventually was willing to raise wages and restore overtime. It was, Morton argues, not union power, skill, or organization that won the raises, but instead an unrelated labor shortage.119

The Halifax unions’ problems with Low and the HRC echoed the fight between the national Trades and Labor Congress and the Imperial Munitions Board, headed by industrialist Joseph Wesley Flavelle. Like Low, Flavelle was both ideologically opposed to unions and practically committed to eking out the highest possible productivity. Unions, in contrast, demanded the power and prestige that would have come from formal fair wage clauses in munitions contracts. Though unions pressed their point with both the Canadian and Imperial governments, Flavelle refused to give in, denying unions the power that they thought they had earned through participation in the war machine. Unions’ frustration and sense of exclusion that resulted contributed to workers’ growing

dissatisfaction that would eventually lead to the strike wave of 1918 and especially
1919. Halifax unions were excluded from participating in the post-explosion state—
embodied in the HRC—and were unable to force Low to accept their hard-fought rights.
The explosion meant that the situation in Halifax was extreme, but the exclusion of labor
from state decisions was a broader phenomenon.

By the time the HRC withdrew from direct construction work in January 1919,
Halifax’s unions had grown and changed. Halifax’s working class had of course
interacted with the Relief Commission as more than just an employer; Richmond, the
neighborhood over which the HRC had the most direct power as a developer, contractor,
landlord, and court, had been home to the very skilled workers who dominated the labor
movement. They thus increasingly saw class at the point of reproduction: the home.
Working-class Haligonians saw workers as disadvantaged by the relief commission’s
standards of rehabilitation and they increasingly built organizations that challenged the
state not only as an employer but as a political entity. This included organizing, both in
their own crafts—the carpenters local grew over 425% between in the year and half after
the explosion—and more broadly. In February 1919, the Building Trades Council played
a leading role in organizing the provincial Federation of Labour. In May, the Trades and
Labour Council started publishing a newspaper. When that month 2,000 building
tradesmen struck, they demanded an eight-hour day and a uniform wage across crafts,
transforming what had been purely craft unionism into something resembling industrial
unionism. By the end of 1919, the Trades and Labour Council counted 8,000 members,

120 D.J. Bercuson, “Organized Labour and the Imperial Munitions Board,” Relations Industrielles/Industrial
Relations 28 no. 3 (July 1973): 602-616. On the post-war “labor revolt,” see Gregory S. Kealey, “1919:
The Canadian Labour Revolt,” Labour/Le Travail 13 (spring 1984): 11-44; and Heron, ed., Workers’
Revolt.
making it the fourth largest labor organization in all of Canada. Even with that expansion, unionized workers realized they needed a broader base politically, so in January 1920 a newly revived Halifax Labor Party welcomed membership from all “workers, whether organized or unorganized, mental or manual regardless of race, sex, creed or vocation,” and its platform was endorsed by the Great War Veterans Association. The provincial Independent Labor Party’s platform reflected this breadth; it included not only production-related planks about the eight-hour day and reforms to workers’ compensation, but also reproduction-related planks on school reform and housing. While in some ways this was a retrenchment of laborism, since it was a recommitment to political action organized by unions, it was also a broadening beyond laborism’s usual craft-union base.121

Ultimately, this expansion proved unsuccessful. In 1920, the Halifax labor movement simultaneously fought the country’s biggest strike of the year (as measured by total person-days lost) and a provincial election. The strike was called by the Marine Trades and Labor Federation, an umbrella organization of skilled trade unions in Halifax’s shipyards, and it received strong support from other unions, including the Mine Workers, Street Railwaymen, Typographers, and Sheet Metal Workers, who provided the strike fund. Strikers demanded a forty-four-hour work week and a raise of almost thirty cents an hour, double-pay for overtime, and triple-pay for Labor Day and Sundays. But the real importance of the strike was over worker power: workers demanded power over lay-offs and rehiring, an end to physical exams, a grievance system with stewards, the

right to regulate apprentices, washrooms at every work site, payment on company time, and five minutes of clean-up time. What was at stake in the strike was not lost on the company, whose counter-offer was a meager five-cent-per-hour raise. Moreover, the company refused to negotiate with the striking union, effectively making the strike a fight over the right to bargain collectively. Members of other unions recognized that a loss at the Shipyards, Halifax’s largest employer, would cripple the city’s entire labor movement and undo the gains they had made over a generation, so they considered a general strike and tolerated a small level of violence.\footnote{122 Morton, “Labourism and Economic Action,” 83, 89-90, 85-87.}

Four weeks into the strike, a provincial election was called. In campaigning, unions formed a coalition with rural workers and mounted a joint Farmer-Labor campaign across the province. Though the strike continued throughout the election season, the major issue in the campaign was the reproductive question of housing, not the productive question of labor rights. In the rest of the province, the combined party was quite successful, returning eleven members (out of a total of 43) and becoming the official opposition. However, not a single one of these successful candidates was in Halifax County, and in fact the Labor candidates there only even achieved a majority in heavily working-class areas. Though the Richmond Heights polling district was Halifax’s firmest Labor bastion, workers had not built a broad enough coalition to win the election. The broader working-class consciousness that the explosion had fostered was apparently not strong enough two years later to elect provincial politicians. It was also not strong enough to win the the strike, which collapsed the same week as the Halifax Labor Party lost the election. The company won entirely, blacklisting the union
leadership and effectively ending the closed shop throughout Halifax.  

In the aftermath of the explosion and after a year of struggle over organized labor’s role in rebuilding Halifax, the city’s labor movement seemed to shift its ideology to become more inclusive of other workers and other concerns. Galvanized by the way the explosion’s effects, relief and rehabilitation payments, rebuilding, and housing were all classed, Halifax workers tried to build a broader movement and fought for power on the job and in reproductive arenas like housing and schools. They did not, however, fully reject their laborist ideology, and craft-based laborism was no more successful in the Shipyards than it was with the HRC. Later in the decade, the Labor Party collapsed with the Nova Scotia economy, and laborism was replaced by the cross-class, regionalist Maritime Rights Movement.

In the Halifax Relief Commission, with its progressive emphasis on disinterested, professional expertise, both churches and unions faced a challenge. Neither were disinterested, and both were repositories of local knowledge about their members of the kind the social workers and officials at the HRC were skeptical to trust. The difference between church and union was largely what determined their role in the relief efforts and their futures. Churches were led by professional clergy, men in whom social workers had a limited trust to judge their congregants. They were also institutions where members


were used to coming for support, help, and comfort. Clergymen were able to become translators and sometimes advocates for their parishioners, and churches became a place where people could come to grips with their grief. Unions, with no professional leadership, attempted to change in the aftermath of the explosion, but they were ultimately unsuccessful. The progressive technocracy represented by the Relief Commission may have had limited space for churches, but it had no room for laborism.
Chapter 6
“This Spirit of . . . True Brotherhood”:
Solidarity, Reciprocal Aid, and Power in Salem’s Churches,
Unions, and Lodges

At ten in the morning the Sunday three days after the Salem fire, during a lull in the nearly-constant rain, a militiaman rang a bell to mark the hour. Father Donat Binette arrived at a jerry-rigged, wooden altar that soldiers had been building since dawn. Behind him was his congregation: 3,000 men, women, and children, “nearly all homeless, miserable, wet, cold and hungry,” in the words of a sympathetic Catholic reporter. “They were a motley assemblage, the men and women and children of the tented colony, all clad in nondescript garments, ill-fitting and bedraggled. Their faces were gaunt and worn from suffering.” Facing the altar, Binette read the mass, occasionally having to pause when emotion overcame him. “Kyrie, eleison. Christe, eleison,” he read in Greek: “Lord have mercy. Christ have mercy.” “Qui tollis peccáta mundi, miserére nobis,” he said in Latin: “Thou that takest away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us.”

When he finished the Gloria in Exelcis, Binette turned to face his audience for the Collect, an opening prayer. “Dominus vobiscum,” he said: “The Lord be with you.” Breaking form, he spoke in French to his assembled congregation, offering them “words of counsel and advice” that the English-speaking reporter could not understand. A local reporter with better French wrote that Binette urged his flock to be like Job, to “be patient
and everything would come out all right.” He urged them to be thrifty and sanitary, to take whatever jobs were offered them, and, in their new domestic setting, to watch out for their daughters’ chastity. During this sermon, the clouds got darker and darker, and soon the driving, pouring rain resumed. Some in the congregation put up umbrellas, including an assistant who held one over Binette’s head, but nobody left the mass. Breaking again with the traditional liturgy, Binette told his flock not to kneel, since they would get muddy, and he moved onto Communion. “There was no Sanctus bell, but a bugle call sounded—clear, thrilling, and inspiring and then came the elevation of the Host. For a second, as the priest’s hands held up the sacred Host, with his face turned toward the heavens, it grew lighter. The sun showed for the briefest period, and then the torrent fell once more,” the Catholic reporter wrote. He was clearly moved by this seeming omen, and so were the others at the mass. “The people with one accord dropped to their knees in the wet grass and prostrated themselves in adoration.”

By coincidence, the Bible verses Binette read sounded particularly relevant that Sunday. The reading from the Epistles was about enduring misery while waiting for God to redeem his people. “For I reckon that the sufferings of this time are not worthy to be compared with the glory to come,” it began. “For we know that every creature groaneth and travaileth in pain, even till now. And not only it, but ourselves also, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption of the sons of God, the redemption of our body.”

The Gospel reading that

1Pilot, 4 July 1914, 2; Salem Evening News 29 June 1914, 3.
2Romans 8:18, 22-23. The translation is the Douay-Rheims version, which was used by Anglophone Catholics until the mid-20th century; Binette, of course, would have read the passage in French. June 28, 1914, was the fourth Sunday after Pentecost, and following the Roman Missal, Catholics around the world read Romans 8:18-23 and Luke 5:1-11.
followed told the story of Jesus miraculously filling Simon’s nets with fish. Though Simon had labored all night without catching any fish, upon Jesus’s command he tried again, and that time “enclosed a very great multitude of fishes,” so many that their nets broke and their ships were filled to almost sinking.\(^3\) To those for whom the fire had emptied the nets and ships of a lifetime of labor, the lesson about having faith that God would provide would have resonated clearly.

“Never before, perhaps, was there witnessed such a scene in the onetime Puritan city, or in Massachusetts or New England,” wrote the somewhat breathless reporter. Father Binette’s service was unusual for its location, for the presence of “many non-Catholics and Jews,” for the bugle that replaced the sanctus bell, and for the fact that it appears to have abbreviated the standard High Mass.\(^4\) But more important by far were the ways in which it served as a bulwark of normality. For the 3,000 Catholics who attended mass that Sunday and prostrated themselves in the mud when Binette held aloft the host, religion was an important way to make sense of the world, particularly when their corner of it was in crisis. It represented comfort and continuity, a spiritual and emotional architecture that remained intact even when the physical, literal architecture of their lives and neighborhood was destroyed. It provided familiarity amid the unfamiliar, stability amid chaos. It showed a way of understanding the horror that had befallen them. Explicitly, the mass was, in the words of the reporter, “the celebration of the Holy Sacrifice” and a way to ask for and receive support from God; implicitly, it was also a celebration of community and a way to ask for and receive support from priests and

\(^3\) Luke 5:5-7, quote from verse 6, Douay-Rheims translation.

\(^4\) Pilot 4 July 1914, 2.
fellow laypeople. “St. Joseph’s structure is not only destroyed, but the whole parish has been scattered to the winds,” the Salem Evening News wrote the day before, referring to the French-Canadian parish where Binette was the senior curate—that is, assistant priest—and to which the vast majority of his congregants that day belonged. But parishioners had in fact not scattered. Although only about half of the audience was actually living in Forest River Camp, the others were still close enough that they came to the park to celebrate Mass in the rain with their friends and neighbors.

Catholics were not the only ones who looked to their church for support and guidance on the Sundays after the fire, though many of Salem’s Protestants heard a very different message. As Binette was leading his outdoor mass, Harry Newton, the pastor at Crombie Street Congregationalist Church, titled his sermon “A New and Better Salem,” and took for his text a verse from Joel: “And I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten, the cankerworm, and the caterpiller, and the palmerworm, my great army which I sent among you.” To Newton, the years had been lost not from insect infestation but from bad building regulations. “Here is a great opportunity for a city,” he preached, blaming cheap construction for the fire’s damage. “We need brick houses and slate roofs. I hope the city will immediately step in to control all future building operations in this city.” The next Sunday found another Congregationalist minister, Thomas Langdale, leading services in a building that had replaced one that had itself burned to the ground.

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5 *Pilot* 4 July 1914, 2.

6 *Salem Evening News* 27 June 1914, 1. The *Saturday Evening Observer* used precisely the same phrase, 27 June 1914, 4.

7 For a discussion of the number of people at Forest River Camp, see Chapter 3.

8 *Salem Evening News* 29 June 1914, 3. His text was Joel 2:25, quoted here in the King James translation.
not a decade earlier. He preached on a text from the Epistle to the Hebrews that described city foundations “whose builder and maker is God.” Langdale celebrated the “fellowship in disaster that makes us all kin,” and he looked forward to “the new Salem starting with a degree of orderliness made possible by military control and the absence of saloons.” DeWitt Clark, the minister at Tabernacle Congregationalist Church, was similarly upbeat about the disaster. He noted how many of the sufferers were “strangers [who] have come to us, not of the American type,” and like Langdale preached that “in seeking to do acts of kindness and goodness lines have been obliterated and are all one people.” Henry Bedinger, the priest at St. Peter’s Episcopal Church, concurred, praising the “great spirit of kindness and sympathy” that arose from the disaster and promising “out of it will come something better, something more lasting.”

As the Protestant sermons made clear, church services were for spiritual solace and materialist mobilization. The Protestant ministers praised the spirit of generosity that they perceived in ruined Salem, but they also spoke about the real and practical reforms needed for the rebuilt city. For the Franco-Americans of St. Joseph’s, church performed a similar purpose. Later in the day after the rain-drenched mass, Binette put the altar to a different use: as a platform from which to introduce Governor David Walsh. The governor and Lieutenant Governor Edward P. Barry were touring the camp when they came across Binette. The priest suggested that the politicians—both Catholic Democrats—speak to “his people,” and the three of them clamored up on the makeshift altar to address a crowd, again estimated at 3,000, that quickly gathered. Binette introduced Walsh in French and English, and Walsh promised the support of the entire

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9Salem Evening News 6 July 1914, 12. Langdale’s text was Hebrews 10:11.
commonwealth in rebuilding the Franco-American community, including its spiritual home. “You who have lost your Church I urge to stay in your home parish,” the governor said, “and I shall confer tomorrow on a plan for the State-wide bazaar to raise funds throughout the Commonwealth for the building of a Church, even a more beautiful edifice.” As priest, Binette was the translator, perhaps even the literal translator, of Walsh’s civil authority. In return, Walsh acknowledged the primacy of the Church in community life and the French Canadians of Salem as Binette’s people.

Meanwhile the archdiocese of Boston attended to parishioners’ material needs. On orders from the archdiocese’s vicar general—the cardinal archbishop, like St. Joseph’s parish priest Georges Rainville, was on a visit to Rome—its 200 parishes gave up their scheduled collection for Indian and Negro Missions and instead, on July 5, collected money for Salem. Four days later, the archdiocese delivered $5,000 and retained another $28,000 “until plans for aiding the Catholic families who suffered in the fire have been mapped out.” Through the second week of July, the archdiocese had collected a total of $37,637.38, of which $17,000 had been disbursed, mostly through the local parishes: $4,000 to French St. Joseph, $2,230 to Irish St. James, $2,000 to Irish Immaculate Conception, $2,000 to Polish St. John the Baptist, $1,300 to Catholic Charities and $500 to French St. Anne. The total sum collected represented a mere four and a half cents per Catholic in the diocese and only $16.62 per displaced Catholic family in Salem. But by distributing the money mostly through its own parishes, the church

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10 Pilot 4 July 1914, 2.
11 Salem Evening News 1 July 1914, 5; 6 July 1914, 8; 10 July 1914, 8; 11 July 1914, 8; Pilot 18 July 1914, 1. The churches I designate as “Irish” were technically territorial parishes without national designations. In practice, this meant they were Irish. The archdiocese included most of eastern Massachusetts, stretching from the border with Maine and New Hampshire south to Cape Cod and as far west as the Worcester
made sure that the money was allotted along Catholic lines, from Catholics to Catholics.

Churches and the confessional organizations affiliated with them were the most visible institutions to structure community life, especially for French Canadians. Like churches, other institutions of civil society, such as fraternal organizations and unions, tied people to each other in formal networks of solidarity or brotherhood. They also connected people in Salem to broader parent bodies, allowing the destitute to receive aid from imagined communities throughout Massachusetts, New England, the United States, and North America. Of course, different organizations were structured differently and behaved differently. The Independent Order of Odd Fellows, an Anglophone, mostly Protestant fraternal organization, differed in constitution and culture from the Union St.-Jean-Baptiste d’Amérique, a French-Canadian, Catholic group. The Catholic Church, with its global hierarchy and ethnically diverse membership, was different from the mostly independent, mostly Yankee Congregationalist churches. Fraternal organizations and churches comprised members of different classes; in contrast, unions were explicitly class-based. Despite their organizational differences, Progressive-Era institutions of civil society shared much, and similar themes ran throughout their responses to the Salem fire.

These institutions both created broad communities and had the infrastructure through which to distribute aid. In some ways, these sorts of institutions could be like the state: they created, fostered, and managed imagined communities of broad geographical scope; they collected from and distributed to their members considerable sums of money; to some extent they judged the worthiness of potential aid recipients; and in some of the

organizations they relied on an almost state-like hierarchy of authority to allot relief. Yet in other ways they were decidedly not like the state: their decisions about aid were made more informally; their membership was voluntary; and they were animated by a spirit of reciprocal obligation rather than hierarchical charity, to use historian David Beito’s terms.\textsuperscript{12}

This chapter explores the responses of organized civil society to the Salem fire. How did the official leadership of these groups interact with rank-and-file members? Did the organizations see the world and the burned city and make their decisions on the basis of centralized, state-like knowledge or local, informal knowledge? These questions are central to our understanding of civil society and its role in disaster relief and social welfare in any historical moment. But they are particularly relevant in the second decade of the 20th century and among the populations most affected by the Salem fire. In that period, French Canadians continued their long-time battle against ecclesiastical domination by what they called the “Irish” bishops who controlled the Catholic hierarchy. They also fought their bosses, and at the end of the decade they led a strike to demand recognition of their union at the Naumkeag Steam Cotton Company. Meanwhile, predominantly Protestant fraternal organizations faced challenges from physicians entrenching professional privilege, from legislatures seeking to regulate the insurance industry, and from movie-houses and other commercial competitors offering alternative forms of entertainment. Their responses to the Salem fire help to show how they handled what Beito terms a “process of readjustment.”\textsuperscript{13}


\textsuperscript{13}Beito, \textit{Mutual Aid}, 142.
Relief authorities relied on local officials to adjudicate claims; their system was similar to the one established by their counterparts in Halifax three and a half years later. In this way, ethnic and religious leaders took on a role that made them extensions of the state. As the initial crisis after the fire ended, relief authorities switched from providing food directly to providing vouchers. Applicants for aid were required to fill out a form and then take it to their doctor or clergyman for endorsement. “If this application was signed by any physician or clergyman of Salem it was accepted without question and an order for a week’s supply of food given,” Montayne Perry wrote.\footnote{Montayne Perry, \textit{The Salem Fire Relief} (Salem, Mass.: Milo A. Newhall, 1915), 35.} Requiring that aid applicants receive the endorsement of a local authority was a form of compromise. On one hand, it infused the official aid system with local knowledge, translated by a “trustworthy” professional. On the other hand, it put clergymen in the position of judging their congregants. A similar system was put in place for distributing clothing, but Perry noted that it was far from perfect. Ministers, in Perry’s view, could be scammed by their parishioners. “If a refugee donned ragged attire and showed himself to his clergyman with the appeal ‘how can I get work, looking like this?’” she wrote, “it was quite natural that the clergyman should give honest sympathy and ready endorsement to the application for more clothing.”\footnote{Perry, \textit{Relief}, 50.}

Perry may have thought that clergymen were easily convinced by parishioners, but they claimed to be discerning. John P. Sullivan, the pastor at Immaculate Conception, an English-language parish, reported that he or one of his curates “personally investigated” each family who received any Catholic aid; though he did not say so, he
probably used the same investigation methods when he vouched for people to receive official aid. “Ordinarily orders were given on the storekeepers,” he wrote to the archbishop, “but in many cases, where the people were trustworthy, and had never before accepted charity, to spare their feelings, checks for small amounts—generally $10—were given.”

As with the official relief, Sullivan sought to craft a compromise between formal investigation and informal trust of his parishioners.

For the official aid from the relief committee, the physician and clergymen did not have complete authority. After they gave their say-so, professional social workers and relief experts investigated the applicant. This system, apparently designed by Ernest Bicknell, the chief executive of the national Red Cross, led to conflict between local worthies and professional social workers. Montayne Perry wrote her book to be a guide for future relief managers, and she devoted a cautionary chapter to conflicts between local do-gooders and translators—she focused on doctors and wealthy philanthropists, but this category would likely have included clergymen, too—and professional social workers from Boston. As always, she did not use names, and indeed her chapter is best read as a parable, an apocryphal story designed to illustrate her point, rather than as a literal recounting of events. The parable featured a doctor outraged at the perceived injustice of denying one of his “charity case” patients the relief she wanted. “‘Nice state of affairs,’ growled The Doctor. ‘Hundreds of thousands of dollars up there, and a poor sick woman can’t get enough to keep her alive. I’ll see what I can do!’”

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17 Salem Evening News 1 July 1914, 10.
evening, The Doctor commiserated with The Wealthy Citizen, who complained: “They got a lot of philanthropy experts and charity specialists down from Boston. Social workers, they call them. ‘Workers’ is a good name for them. They’re working Salem all right—drawing fat salaries for looking wise and riding around in autos to ‘investigate.’ Time the whole bunch of them were ‘investigated’ themselves, in my opinion.”

The Food Man, whom the two interrogated the next morning, carefully explained to them why an organized, careful, and bureaucratic system is best. The case that originally riled The Doctor, for instance, turned out to be a scam; the family had not been burned out as the wife claimed, the husband had been fired the week before for drunkenness, and they were attempting to live on the dole after he refused work as a unskilled laborer. The Wealthy Citizen, likewise, learned that the experts were all volunteers whose credentials as corporate efficiency experts he admired and respected. Even the women, including a militant suffragist, were paragons of “Justice and fair dealing for all.” Perry’s lesson for future disasters was that that the local experts’ knowledge—corruptible by human sympathy, inexperience, and self-importance—was no match for the objectivity, efficiency, and centralized knowledge of professionals.

According to Perry, the clergy’s first priority was to “look after his own flock first, as was right and fitting, and those who had any time left after that, gave help wherever they could.”

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19 Perry, *Relief*, 37.

20 Perry, *Relief*, 38-44, quote on page 43. The efficiency expert—if indeed it is a specific person and not a composite—was likely Chester Crandell, on whom see the Introduction. For a discussion of Perry and her book, see Chapter 2.

21 Perry, *Relief*, 45.
rabbis would help his own congregants first. The official system sorted aid applicants by parish, setting up clergy as the first line of authority. The daily newspaper explained the system five days after the fire: “Applicants for aid are referred to one of several committees, the St. James and Immaculate Conception parishes having one table, the Polish church another, while the St. Joseph and St. John’s churches also have committees to receive their people, as have the other churches, all nationalities affected having representation.” (The reporter was apparently sufficiently unfamiliar with Salem’s Catholic parishes that he did not realize that the Polish church and St. John’s were one and the same.) At each table, the applicant would be vetted by at least one representative of the committee representing their community. Those committees, wrote the newspaper, were “made up of about 100 people who have either been engaged in charity work or who are well acquainted with the people here so that comparatively few persons ‘get by’ who are not worthy.”

Salem’s Polish population organized for its own relief at St. John the Baptist, the Polish parish. Its pastor was forty-year-old Father Joseph Czubek, who had been born in Ohio to Polish parents. The *Evening News* called him the “leader of his people,” and he was not shy about organizing them outside the church. In 1919, a committee of Jews wrote a heated letter to the archbishop complaining that Czubek had organized a boycott of Jewish businesses. They accused the priest of demanding from the pulpit that Poles not patronize Jewish stores or rent space to them; he also, they said, “asked the

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22 *Salem Evening News* 1 July 1914, 10.

Congregation to raise their hands in a promise to keep away from and boycott the Jews.”

If he could later organize his parishioners for antisemitic activities, he surely could also organize them to help each other after the fire left 250 Polish families homeless. “A crew of nearly a half hundred of the women parishioners has been sewing for the afflicted in the church on St. Peter street, in the school on Herbert street and at the Polish sisters’ convent also, as a result of which a large quantity of clothing has been made for the women and children who need it,” the newspaper reported. “Rev. Fr. Czubeck has had direct oversight of the making and distribution of this clothing, which has been and will be needed.”

Cultural translators and spokesmen could be particularly important when they came from outside Salem to represent a broader ethnic community. Only sixty-one families who received aid were Greek, and although the Greek population in the city was growing, it had few if any formal institutions. Thus when Theodore P. Ion, a Boston University law professor, visited relief headquarters, he brought with him the prestige of his professorial title and the promise of outside help for his countrymen. Ion’s pledge to “aid all worthy Greeks” likely carried more weight than that of Constantine Moustakis, with whom he visited the relief office. Moustakis was a mere thirty-two years old, and only, with his two brothers, a co-owner of a candy shop.

Italians, like the Greeks, possessed few local institutions or resources and also

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24 J.L. Simon to William Cardinal O’Connell, 26 November 1919, folder 68.23, St. John the Baptist, Parish Correspondence.

25 On devastation in the Polish community, see Courrier de Lawrence 30 June 1914, 1.

26 Salem Evening News 30 June 1914, 5.

appeared to look outside the city for aid. On June 7, a group of seven Salem Italians met to form an ethnic relief committee. Although organized and headed by local men, at least one Bostonian was also involved: Americo Brogi, a twenty-eight-year-old Boston telephone clerk, born in Massachusetts to Italian parents and married (at least six years later) to the daughter of British immigrants. In 1914 he was state secretary of the Italian Citizens’ Progressive League and, according to the *Evening News* “rendered valuable service at the Italian table.”\(^{28}\) The committee elected grocer Giuseppi D’Iorio chairman and shoe worker Frank Salvo secretary. It announced it would make an appeal to Italians around Massachusetts “to send relief to the entire community of Salem” as well as specifically to Italians; they also intended to ask the Italian consul in Boston to send aid. Apparently none of the men there were of sufficient stature to watch over the money. John B. Tivnan, the chair of the Committee of 14, was “accepted as the trustee of the special fund to be collected,” and they said they would send all other donations to Gardiner Lane, the state Red Cross treasurer.\(^{29}\)

Salem Jews were more organized than Greeks or Italians—there were two synagogues—but they, too, looked to the broader community for aid. Four days before the Italian meeting, the newspaper announced the formation of a Hebrew Relief Committee. Like its later Italian counterpart, the committee intended not only to help Jews but to aid with the general relief effort. Joseph L. Simon, a real estate agent whose office was in neighboring Beverly, and Max Silverman, a shoe man, were dispatched to

\(^{28}\) *Salem Evening News* 2 July 1913, 13; 1920 Census, series T625, roll 737, page 204. Though the census listed Brogi as a telephone clerk in 1920, by the next year the city directory listed him as a publisher. He also served the Mazzini Association—which was headquartered at his printshop—as its welfare director. See *Boston Register and Business Directory* (Boston: Sampson & Murdock Co., 1921), 47, 322, 724.

\(^{29}\) *Salem Evening News* 8 July 1914, 8; 15 July 1914, 5; *Naumkeag Directory*, 257, 424.
New York to recruit and consult with Jewish leaders of national stature: Judge Leon Sanders, Samuel Dorf, American Jewish Committee Chairman Herman Bernstein, and banker Jacob Schiff. At the end of August, the AJC held a special fund of $1,800 to “be distributed under [its] auspices,” though it is unclear whether any money had been disbursed at that point. Though the New York worthies appear to have done little active fund-raising, Jews from cities nearer to Salem pitched in. On July 12, a Sunday afternoon two and a half weeks after the fire, the Lynn Hebrew Citizens’ Club hosted a benefit to which Lynn theaters promised to send “their best talent.” Also promised were speeches from the Lynn and Salem mayors; the Lynn congressman; Samuel Bailen, “one of the greatest Jewish orators of this state”; and Abraham Alpert, the editor of the Yiddish-language *Boston Jewish American*.

The Greek, Italian, and Jewish efforts were notable for their lay leadership. Whether the leaders of their communal efforts had been recognized leaders before the fire or whether they appointed themselves only in its aftermath is unclear, but the clergy did not appear in newspaper coverage of their work. Like these laymen, there were secular, unofficial leaders of the French-Canadian community who helped keep up morale at Forest River Camp. Henry Shea, who despite his name was a Franco-American leader in Danvers, was praised in the *Courrier de Salem* for bringing tobacco and food to the refugees in the camp. Likewise, Alfred Audet and Adelard Levesque handed out bags...

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30 *Salem Evening News* 3 July 1914, 6.

31 Minutes of Executive Committee meeting, 31 August 1914, American Jewish Committee minute book, Blaustein Library and Historical Archive, American Jewish Committee, New York, N.Y. Thanks to the Blaustein’s director, Michele Anish, for sending the minutes and sparing me a trip to New York.

32 *Salem Evening News* 8 July 1914, 9.

33 *Courrier de Salem* 9 July 1914, 6.
of candy to the camp children one night soon after the fire. Their activities signal the role of lay ethnic leaders in the refugee camps and, more broadly, in the French-Canadian community’s response to the fire.

Beyond the small gestures of a few lay leaders, French Canadians are worth special attention, because they were so heavily represented both among the sinistrés and in the historiography of ethnic groups in New England. The dominant interest of historians has been in the ideology of survivance, a nationalist Catholic project that started in Quebec and migrated to the United States with its adherents. Its proponents argued that it was the sacred mission of the people of Quebec to preserve Catholicism in North America and, eventually, to spread it across the continent. To preserve their religion and culture in the overlapping seas of Anglophones and Protestants that surrounded them, French Canadians had to work hard to preserve their language, their institutions, and their religion, all of which were seen as mutually supportive and constitutive. Since Catholicism and Quebec culture were seen as one and the same, proponents of survivance feared that a loss of religion would lead to linguistic and cultural assimilation, and a loss of language would lead to apostasy. Taking the largely elite adherents of survivance at their word, historians have long focused on the ethnic Catholic church. Sympathetic historians have thus portrayed Franco-Americans as besieged by nativists and Irish bishops, huddling around their churches and ethnic

34 Salem Evening News 2 July 1914, 12.


institutions for comfort and safety; their main story becomes the elite battle between so-called radical and moderate proponents of *survivance*. In this view, French Canadians are like other non-Irish Catholics, practicing cross-class ethnic solidarity against the domineering bishops. Unlike the more famous Italians, who fought for the right to practice Catholicism with the rituals, beliefs, and activities they preferred, French Canadians’ battles were largely about governance. Seeking to mimic the *fabrique* system in Quebec in which elected lay trustees maintained power in their parishes, French Canadian migrants and their descendants demanded more say over how their churches would run and who would pick their pastors.

Given that so many of the ecclesiastical battles were for lay control, it is especially ironic that what looks like cross-class ethnic solidarity to some looks to others like a priest-ridden community, dominated by a politically conservative petit bourgeois elite more concerned with preserving their language and ecclesiastical autonomy than anything else. Gary Gerstle, writing about the politics of labor and identity in

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39 It is, of course, not unusual for historians to portray Catholics as priest-ridden, precisely because they have believed claims of clerical authority without noticing that they were contested. See Leslie Woodcock Tentler, “On the Margins: The State of American Catholic History,” *American Quarterly* 45 no. 1 (March 1993): 104-127. On the history of lay leadership within the American church and the bishops’ contested rise to power, see Jay P. Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience: A History from Colonial Times to the Present* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), esp. chapter 6. For a particular instance of a fight between clerics and laypeople for dominance, see Mark McGowan, *The Waning of the*
Woonsocket, Rhode Island, describes how in 1914 French Canadians demanded that their bishop revoke the appointment of a Francophone Belgian priest to a French-Canadian parish, picketing around the clock to demand one of their own. “Picketing, striking, displays of solidarity,” Gerstle writes. “These were the stock-in-trade of labor militants, and Woonsocket’s French Canadians were clearly well-versed in their ways. But they rarely directed their anger or protest at an economic authority such as an English or Yankee millowner. The clergy’s opposition to labor movements and its pervasive power in the community made such confrontations unimaginable.”

Philip T. Silvia describes an earlier generation of French Canadian immigrants in Fall River, Massachusetts. They were seen, he says, as “too submissive toward employers, unsympathetic or actively opposed to strikes, and ready to accept any wages.”

Anthropologist Pierre Anctil, writing of his fieldwork in the late 1970s, reports how difficult it was to get his informants to even mention unions. “Extremely few persons in Woonsocket could remember moments of social upheaval brought about by strong workers’ protest against their class position, or against the working conditions imposed on them in the mills prior to the Great Depression,” he wrote. His explanation was that French-Canadian elites, fearful of their own status and economic security should

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their working-class compatriots assimilate, successfully prevented the development of class consciousness by “leveling out class distinctions apparent in common discourses and replacing them by images favoring national unity and ethnic consciousness.”

These scholars, both the sympathetic and unsympathetic, in some ways simply respond to and repeat the biases of their sources. The eighth congress of the Union St.-Jean-Baptiste d’Amérique in 1915, for instance, passed resolutions praising the bulwarks of survivance: the fraternal insurance organization noted its “filial submission” to the pope and allegiance to the Church; encouraged recruitment into fraternal organizations; noted that to “hold onto our language and the sacred heritage of our ancestors is indispensable and necessary to holding on to our faith”; cited the importance of bilingual parish schools; and celebrated the Franco-American press and the way it inspired religious and patriotic sentiments. Clearly, to the elites who went to Worcester for the congress, these pillars for survivance were deeply important. Similarly, the labor historians who decry French Canadians’ apparent quiescence echo contemporary observers like economist and race theorist William Z. Ripley, who in 1904 wrote an article in the Atlantic Monthly comparing union participation among various ethnicities. French Canadians “show little liking or aptitude for trade union-organizing and discipline,” he wrote. “The French Canadians seem to be even less useful unionists than


the Portuguese.”46

Yet there are obvious problems with these streams of historiography. Both assume priests’ and elites’ primacy within the community. In so doing, they ignore working-class agency within their religious and ethnic institutions. They therefore cannot explain what other scholars have noted about French-Canadian union activity both in Quebec and New England. French Canadians in Quebec were no more anti-union than other North Americans. Jacques Rouillard demonstrates that unions in Quebec proper developed along the same temporal lines as their neighbors, although they sometimes developed on different organizational lines.47 Across the border, Mark Richard shows that French Canadians in Lewiston, Maine, joined the Knights of Labor over their bishop’s opposition—this at the same moment that the Massachusetts labor commissioner called them the “Chinese of the Eastern States” because of their presumed refusal to assimilate and their imagined willingness to work for low wages and in bad conditions. Richard also notes Franco-American participation in a 1906 streetcar strike and limited participation in a 1913 shoeworkers’ strike. By 1922, he says, ninety percent of loom fixers belonged to unions, which gave them the power to shut down all of Lewiston’s mills if they so chose.48

The Salem fire offers a way to reconcile the undeniable importance of the church and other cross-class ethnic organizations with the equally undeniable fact of Franco-American unionization. By understanding the peculiarities of ethnic Catholic political

culture, we can better understand the way lay Catholics practiced politics in their lives outside the church. Catholics like the French Canadians in Salem remained Catholics in all their endeavors, even the ones that were outwardly secular. This does not, however, imply clerical domination; indeed lay Catholics’ battles for power within the church could not help but shape their civil politics. Scholars like Evelyn Savidge Sterne have recognized that—just as women practiced politics in women’s clubs and southern blacks’ political activity was shaped in their clubs and organizations—working-class Catholics learned politics within their lay religious organizations. This may be particularly true for non-Anglophone Catholics, whose religious practices helped create distinct political practices. As Jennifer Guglielmo argues in the context of what she calls the proletarian feminism of Italian-American women working in the New York needle trades, historians must be attuned to the ways different communities engaged differently within the political sphere. She describes how the politics and activism of Italian women were different from those of men and non-Italian women. Historians should not accept, she says, the contemporary complaints of others who claimed that Italian women were quiescent, insufficiently class conscious, or politically backwards. Rather, they should examine the places and ways Italian women were active.

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Franco-Americans is needed to understand their class and religious politics and the imbrication of the two.

There is no question that the local parish was intensely important to French Canadians in Salem. In 1914, St. Joseph’s Parish was led by Fr. Georges Alphonse Rainville, a fifty-eight-year-old Quebec native. A merchant’s son, Rainville had been born in a village called Saint Marc, about thirty miles northeast of Montreal, and went to seminary in Nicolet and at Trois Rivières before his ordination in 1883. He was “born to be a bishop,” a French actress wrote after visiting Salem in the late 1910s. “It seemed to me that the crozier, mitre, and amethyst ring would suit him very well. He had a simple goodheartedness, a majestic joviality, that let me speak freely to him, though I could not forget that he was a parish priest.” Another observer noted his “unusual executive ability.”

Rainville’s first post had been as a curate in Yamaska, south of Montreal, where he was in charge of building a new rectory. When he moved to Massachusetts, he continued as a “bricks and mortar priest,” moving from parish to parish building physical infrastructure. After assisting in Marlborough, he founded parishes in Cochituate, where he built a church, and Brockton, where he built a church, a rectory, a convent, and a school. When Rainville arrived in Salem in 1904, he found a church of long standing—St. Joseph’s was founded in 1872—but straining at the walls.

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53 “Monsieur l’abbé Rainville est né pour être évêque. Il me semble que la crosse, la mitre et l’anneau d’améthyste lui siérait fort bien. Il a cette bonhomie, cette jovialité majestueuse qui fait que l’on peut causer avec lui très librement, sans cependant oublier une seule minute qu’il est le curé de sa paroisse.” France Ariel, Canadiens et Américains chez eux: journaux, lettres, impressions d’une artiste française (Montreal: Granger Frères, 1920), 272.

54 Salem Evening News 8 July 1914, 9.
He and his parishioners built an enormous and imposing new Romanesque church to hold 1600 people. The building, complete with two 185-foot towers, cost $120,000; it opened a year before the fire. Rainville had arrived just three years after an assistant priest at St. Joseph’s, J. Alfred Peltier, had been dispatched to found a second parish for French Canadians; Peltier’s church, in the Castle Hill neighborhood, became Ste. Anne’s.\(^{55}\)

When the fire struck, Rainville was out of reach, on a ship to Europe to visit Rome and other pilgrimage sites. “What an awful blow will be dealt him when finally the tidings of this mighty disaster to his loved ones becomes known to the loving leader of his people!” the Evening News wrote. “He does not know that his pride, the new church of St. Joseph is a hollow, silent ruin. He does not know that the great and noble looking statue of St. Joseph Still Stands, but like the carven figurehead on a tombstone.”

Given Rainville’s life literally building parishes, the Evening News showed remarkable acuity in focusing on the destruction of the built infrastructure. “He does not know that churches, schools, assembly halls, homes, newspapers, employment and even the rudest shelter are denied to the people he so well loves. And when the frightful knowledge of the things that are comes to him, who can say what the result will be?”\(^{56}\)

The result, when Rainville learned of his neighborhood’s destruction upon his landing in Europe, was that he turned around and came home. He booked passage on the Lusitania and sailed to New York immediately.\(^{57}\) When he got there, he was greeted by


\(^{56}\) Salem Evening News 27 June 1914, 5.

\(^{57}\) Salem Evening News 8 July 1914, 6.
his senior curate, Donat Binette, and Joseph Côté, a priest based in Amesbury. They took him north to Salem, presumably preparing him on the way for what he would see. He got to Forest River Park at 7:30 in the evening on Wednesday, July 15, nearly three weeks after the fire. “M. le Curé mounted the dais erected some distance from the entrance to the park,” the French-language newspaper reported. “Fr. Binette rang the bell. Fr. Rainville was already emotional, and when his flock emerged from the tents where they live to join the crowd already pressed at the foot of the dais, he turned his back and broke into tears.” In addition to Rainville’s parishioners, he was greeted by two Anglophone leaders, a militia captain and the relief committee chair, who formally offered condolences in the name of the people of Salem. It fell to Fr. J.B. Parent, the French-Canadian pastor in Lynn, to console the distraught Rainville. It took some time for Rainville to find words for his flock, but when he did, he bade them, “Courage.”

For the three weeks before Rainville came back, his pastoral responsibilities were taken up by Binette and the junior curates. On Sunday, three days after the fire, the curates planned hourly masses from 6:00 to 11:00 in the morning; the six masses were two more than the four offered on a typical Sunday. Each evening, Binette held an outdoor, public prayer service in the camp. But his work and those of the other priests extended far beyond the ceremonies of sacraments and prayer. Each night after the service, reported the *Evening News*, he gave a “talk on matters that concerned [his congregation’s] physical and spiritual well being.” Despite sleeping indoors in a borrowed room, Binette ate each meal at the camp, where he “consulted on a thousand

58 *Courrier de Salem* 17 June 1914, 5.
matters a day” with laypeople and militia officers.59

The officers and other observers recognized Binette—in the absence of his
superior Rainville—as the primary leader and spokesman for Salem’s French Canadians.
The first community meeting of French-Canadian refugees was organized under the
auspices of the church. The newspaper called him “in charge of the French people at the
park.”60 Montayne Perry agreed and described the priests’ role as both figurative and
literal translators. “In winning the confidence and co-operation of the refugees
themselves, the assistance of the priests and the seminarians was invaluable,” she wrote.
“How the entire confidence of their own people, speaking in the language which they
could understand, they explained to them the regulations for health and order and the
reasons for them, adjusted difficulties and smoothed away misunderstandings as none but
the trusted Fathers could have done.”61 Another observer credited the “vigilance of the
military authorities and the influence of the priests of St. Joseph’s Parish” for the
“excellent general moral condition” and good health at the camp.62

Recognition of leadership was more than just symbolic. Most important, perhaps,
was that priests were given power to dole out relief. When substations for the clothing
and employment committees opened in Forest River Park, the clergy “took a hand,” and
they signed slips to approve requests for clothing.63 This meant that they had direct

59 Salem Evening News 30 June 1914, 10; 1 July 1914, 10. For an normal Sunday schedule, see Saturday
Evening Observer 20 June 1914, 4, which advertised low mass at 7:00, 8:00, and 9:15, plus high mass at
10:30.

60 Salem Evening News 8 July 1914, 6; 26 June 1914, 14.

61 Perry, Relief, 17.


63 Salem Evening News 1 July 1914, 11.
authority over who received aid and who did not, and it forced them to judge who among their parishioners were worthy and who were not. Put another way, though, it meant that Binette and his colleagues could use their local knowledge to the advantage of their parishioners, whose specific needs outsiders might not have otherwise understood. When Franco-Americans in Manchester, New Hampshire, organized a relief fund under the auspices of the Association Canado-Américaine, a fraternal insurance organization, they delivered the money not to the general relief fund but directly to the St. Joseph’s parish priest.\footnote{Avenir National 6 July 1914, 1.}

For Franco-Americans outside of Salem, at least, the logic adopted by the civil and military authorities in Salem seemed to make sense. Binette—and later Rainville, when he returned from his abortive trip to Europe—were translators and leaders, local and ethnic authorities with knowledge of their community and respect from others.

All this responsibility was difficult for Binette to handle. On Tuesday night almost a week after the fire, Binette collapsed and was taken to the Armory relief station. “The army physicians there found he had collapsed from exhaustion,” the \textit{Evening News} reported. “His shoes were burned, great white blisters covered his feet and his condition was pitiful. After receiving treatment he was taken to his home in an automobile.”\footnote{Salem Evening News 1 July 1914, 5. The article claimed that it was Binette’s “first sleep,” but the newspaper had reported the day before that Binette was staying—and presumably sleeping—at the Lafayette Street home of A.N. Webb.} It may also have been difficult for his parishioners to handle. We already saw, in Chapter 3, that Binette’s flock apparently ignored his instructions to expose any “fakirs” in their midst. Though the priest publicly asked refugees “be on their guard against th[e] vandals” who would try to take relief supplies they did not deserve, such frauds
continued to live in the camp, unmolested by their neighbors. The refugees also, as we
have seen, rejected the advice he gave in his first sermon to take docilely whatever jobs
were offered to them.\textsuperscript{66}

Moreover, Catholics had competition. Members of the French Evangelical
(Baptist) Church presumably cared little about what Binette or Rainville had to say. We
know little about this church led by Oliva Brouillette, a married, forty-three-year-old,
Canadian immigrant.\textsuperscript{67} There had been Francophone Protestants in Quebec since the days
of New France, and there was an active evangelist movement that included Baptists
around the turn of the century.\textsuperscript{68} In June 1905, the Baptist Home Mission Monthly
credited Brouillette with six conversions among the “French [in] Salem, Mass., and
vicinity,” though it did not specify the period covered in that count.\textsuperscript{69} So it is unclear
whether the bulk of his congregation had been born Protestant or had converted, and if
converts where they had become Baptists. Despite this uncertainty about the provenance
of Salem’s Francophone Baptists, their presence complicates the image of a religiously
unified French-Canadian community. Brouillette, like other clergy, sat on the Committee
of 100 and acted as a clearinghouse of information for his congregants. Those who knew

\textsuperscript{66}Salem Evening News 29 June 1914, 5. See Chapter 3 for a more detailed analysis.

\textsuperscript{67}1910 Census, series T624, roll 587, page 166.

\textsuperscript{68}On Baptist missionary activity in Quebec, see Jean-Louis Lalonde, Des loups dans la bergerie: les
protestants de langue française au Québec, 1534-2000 ([Montreal]: Fides, 2002), 205-212. On
Francophone Protestants in Quebec generally, see also Marie-Claude Rocher, “Double traîtresse ou double
appartenance? Le patrimoine des protestants francophones au Québec,” Ethnologies 25 no. 2 (2003): 215-
233; Denis Remon, ed., L’identité des protestants francophones au Québec: 1834-1997 (Montreal: Acfas,
1998); David-Thiery Ruddel, Le protestantisme français au Québec, 1840-1919: “images” et témoignages,
Mercury Series History 36 (Ottawa: National Museum of Man, 1983); Roberto Perin, “French-Speaking
Canada from 1840,” in A Concise History of Christianity in Canada, ed. Terrence Murphy (Toronto:
Oxford University Press, 1996), 191-196;

\textsuperscript{69}Baptist Home Mission Monthly 37 no. 6 (June 1905): 248.
the whereabouts of a missing parishioner, for instance, were requested to contact him.\textsuperscript{70}

After World War I, Brouillette put his disaster relief experience from Salem to use in northern France and southern Belgium as director of Baptist relief and mission work. He built six “foyers” that became religious and social centers, distributed farm machinery and school books, and granted relief to orphans.\textsuperscript{71} The contemporaneous glimmers of Brouillette’s relief activities and his subsequent work in France suggest that he was as active for his parishioners as Binette was for his. His very presence disrupts the “clerico-nationalist hegemonic discourse” of French-Canadian historiography.\textsuperscript{72}

Taking into account parishioners’ willingness to disregard Binette’s instructions about fraudulent relief applicants and the presence of Brouillette’s church, it is apparent that the Catholic clergy’s hold on Salem’s Franco-Americans was not complete. Even to the extent that lay Catholics were loyal to their priest and parish that loyalty was neither blind nor without agency. Rather, their devotion to their ethnic religious institutions and practices was intertwined with an insistence on lay power and authority within the church. The church in Quebec had focused on resistance to Protestant domination. In contrast, migrants built Franco-American Catholicism largely in opposition to domination from “Irish” bishops. Key Francophone Catholic institutions—ranging from Maine’s Cause National, founded to demand a French-Canadian bishop, to the Forestiers Franco-Américains, which split from its parent over the right to speak French at meetings—were

\textsuperscript{70} Salem Evening News 30 June 1914, 2.


\textsuperscript{72} Rocher, “Double traîtrise,” 215.
not only devoted to the idea that *Qui perd sa langue, perd sa foi* (He who loses his language, loses his faith); they were self-consciously founded to compete with and fight Irish domination. Franco-American Catholicism was wrapped up in resistance, first to Protestant cultural domination and then to Irish episcopal domination.

In Quebec, parishes’ temporal affairs were managed by a vestry, called a *fabrique*, made up of elected laymen called *marguilliers*. The *marguilliers* oversaw church finances and land, and they served as the representatives of the church vis-à-vis the civil government. Quebec laymen also had control over the school and hired the sexton. While the purview of lay trustees was by definition temporal, their presence meant that laymen had power and authority built into the ecclesiastical structure. When French-Canadians migrated to the United States, they sought to replicate the *fabrique* system. Yet from the start, American bishops undercut or refused this style of governance. In Winooski, Vermont, among the first French-Canadian national parishes in New England, the French (i.e. from France) bishop insisted on appointing the trustees, rather than let the pew-rent payers elect them. He also explicitly reserved his own power to hire and fire the priest and to “direc[t] all that regards the spiritual matters of the parish.” Moreover, he departed from the Quebec *fabrique* tradition by naming the priest as the vestry’s president, secretary, and treasurer; insisting that the bishop be consulted for expenditures of more than $300; granting the priest the authority to name the organist, chanters, verger,

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sexton, and all other officers; placing the school under direct clerical control; and not enforcing *marguilliers’* traditional term limits. In the late 19th century, state legislatures aided the bishops’ drive for increased authority: Rhode Island made bishops the presidents of local parish corporations in 1866; and in 1887 Maine established the “corporation sole” system, granting the bishop the title to all church property. The Boston Archdiocese, too, was a corporation sole, meaning that the archbishop and the archdiocese were legally indistinguishable.

The substance of Franco-Americans’ battles with bishops was the content and style of devotional practice and, especially, the language and nationality of their priests. But the form these battles took was a fight for lay prerogatives in church governance and against episcopal domination. In the first decade of the 20th century, Franco-Americans in Newton, Massachusetts, waged a long-running campaign to demand a compatriot as their pastor, appealing beyond the archbishop to the pope’s representative in the U.S., the apostolic delegate. Though the archbishops changed during the campaign, their line remained the same: that the Irish priest retained their confidence and the lay activists were only malcontents who could be safely ignored. In Woonsocket, Rhode Island, in 1914, Franco-Americans rejected a French-speaking Belgian priest and mounted a

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month-long picket, a rent-strike for their pews, and a boycott of the offertory. The bishops defended their prerogatives to hire and reassign priests, and they refused and resented lay attempts to impinge on those prerogatives.

Newton and Woonsocket were but two of many instances in which Franco-Americans challenged their bishops. The pickets at Ste. Anne’s in Woonsocket were mounted just a few months before the Salem fire, showing that fights over who would control parishes were alive and well. The second archbishop in the Newton case was William O’Connell, who was still overseeing the Boston Archdiocese in 1914. (Just before leaving Maine, O’Connell had met similar, concerted opposition from Franco-Americans when he tried to install an Irish priest at a mixed parish where there were six French speakers for every English speaker.) O’Connell, claims his primary biographer James O’Toole, was not an “unremitting Americanizer”; rather O’Toole depicts him as more concerned with the difficult logistics and practicalities of national parishes than with forcing ethnic Catholics to adopt American or Irish traditions. But O’Connell had arrived in Boston from his prior posting in Portland with a bad reputation among Franco-Americans. As his dismissal of Franco-American concerns in Newton suggests, as archbishop of Boston he was no more eager to accept lay participation in church governance than he had been as bishop of Portland. “The Church is not a democracy,” he

warned the archdiocese in 1912. “In it each member has his well-defined place. The
great body of the faithful are the followers, the disciples of Christ. They neither teach nor
command. . . . In a word, the faithful are to be taught, to be led, to be fed.” His
ecclesiastical ideology brooked neither dissent nor voice for the laity.84

After the fire, the parishioners at St. Joseph’s “scattered to the winds.”85 As we
saw in Chapter 3, most went to neighboring cities, of which only Lynn had a French-
Canadian parish. In Danvers, Franco-Americans had been long stymied in their quest for
a national parish by the Irish priest who did not want to lose parishioners. As early as late
July, 700 Franco-Americans met in Danvers to begin a push for their own parish, buoyed
by their new, larger numbers. The sinistrés displaced by the fire into Danvers, the
argument went, should have the same access to French-language, Catholic worship and
education in their new home as in their old one. Though O’Connell promised in July to
consider the matter, by December the activists had made no headway. By then, however,
they had abandoned talk of the refugees, and instead focused only on the rights of those
who now considered themselves Danvers residents.86 Meanwhile, displaced Salemites in
Beverly were doing the same thing. At a meeting of Franco-Americans in Beverly held
in late July to plan a campaign for a national parish, the chair was a Salem lay leader,
Napoleon Levesque.87 And the second, smaller Francophone parish in Salem, Ste.
Anne’s, also experienced rapid growth as former St. Joseph’s parishioners switched

84Quoted in Slawson, Ambition and Arrogance, 7.
85Salem Evening News 27 June 1914, 1. The Saturday Evening Observer used precisely the same phrase,
27 June 1914, 4.
86Courrier de Salem 24 July 1914, 1; 31 July 1914, 5; 11 September 1914, 8; 1 October 1914, 1; 17
December 1914, 1.
87Courrier de Salem 31 July 1914, 1.
churches. A year after the fire, O’Connell sent a second priest to assist the pastor, and in April 1916 he approved the building of a new, larger parish school.88

With no French church in either Danvers or Beverly, Rainville’s parishioners continued to come to him for pastoral care. Though O’Connell ordinarily saved nearly all of his correspondence, there are no extant records relating to any Salem parish from 1908 to early 1915, and this makes difficult any attempt to assess relations between Franco-Americans and the archbishop in the year after the fire. In March 1915, though, a Danvers priest complained to O’Connell that Rainville was impinging on his turf. In particular, the priest wrote that Rainville had administered last rites and then buried one of his former parishioners, a woman named Rosanna Ducet who had come to Danvers after being burned out of Salem.89

In a letter to the archbishop’s secretary, Rainville defended himself, insisting that Ducet should be counted as one of his parishioners. He made three arguments. First, he cited the civil authorities, who continued to grant marriage licenses to people using their burned-out addresses, continued to collect taxes from refugees, and, most importantly, continued to have refugees (though not, of course, Madame Ducet) vote in Salem through 1915. Second, he claimed refugees as his parishioners because they “continue[d] to declare themselves parishioners of St. Joseph” and because they retained membership in St. Joseph’s lay religious societies. Third, Rainville made a practical argument: that because many of the sinistrés spoke only French, they needed him to understand religion.

89 R.J. Sullivan to Rainville, 23 March 1915, folder 68:1, St. Joseph, Parish Correspondence.
This third was a recapitulation of the standard Franco-American argument that *qui perd sa langue, perd sa foi* (who loses his language, loses his faith). The first claim, resting on legal and civil definitions of residency, would appeal to the archbishop’s sense of ecclesiastical order. Rainville’s parishioners were still his because they technically fell under his geographical jurisdiction.

It was the second argument that took up the bulk of Rainville’s letter and that was the most controversial. It rested on the implicit insistence that laypeople had the right to pick their priests and their parishes. This was the right that Franco-Americans had demanded for decades, when they picketed churches or wrote to the apostolic delegate to demand a French-Canadian priest. In the territorial parish system O’Connell and other New England bishops preferred, the laity had no such right; they went to the parishes to which they were assigned geographically. In all, Rainville concluded, if he did not have the right to perform sacraments for Ducet, he did not have the right to serve any of his parishioners, since all of them were displaced. It was his right, he insisted, to serve those who wanted to be his parishioners wherever they lived. Nonetheless, he closed on a conciliatory note, humbly asking O’Connell’s permission to do what he had been doing.90

When O’Connell’s secretary responded, he ignored the more controversial parts of Rainville’s letter. The cardinal avoided comment on the implicit claim that parishioners had the right to choose their own priest. Instead, O’Connell relied on the civil authorities. If Doucet was still, according to the civil government, a Salem resident when she died, she had the right to use Rainville as her priest not because she chose him but by virtue of her legal residence. Since “her residence in Danvers was merely temporary and begun

90Rainville to O’Connell, 24 March 1915, folder 68:1, St. Joseph, Parish Correspondence.
with the intention of returning to Salem as soon as conditions caused by the fire were suitably overcome, he [O’Connell] judges that she had a sufficient domicile to have had the Sacraments administered to her from your Parish and to be buried therefrom,” the secretary wrote.91

Because O’Connell’s dispensation relied on a determination that the refugees were only temporarily in Danvers, it expired once they were deemed to have left Salem permanently. It did not take long for this to happen. Just over ten weeks after O’Connell granted his temporary permission, he rescinded it. “Good order demands that you cannot go on indefinitely considering your former parishioners as still belonging to your Parish even though they actually have a residence within the territorial limits of other neighboring Parishes such as Danvers, St. Anne’s Salem, etc.,” his secretary wrote. O’Connell ordered not only that Rainville give up “duties of caring for their spiritual welfare and the rights of administering the sacraments” for his former parishioners, but that he take responsibility for telling them of the change. Moreover, perhaps fearing that Rainville would help organize opposition to the order, O’Connell specified that he expected the priest to “cheerfully comply.”92

Rainville was not cheerful. “I do not understand this change,” he wrote the day he received the letter. “But your eminence may be assured that although in the fire of 20 June 1914 I lost everything, what can give me a little comfort on earth is that I have not lost my spirit of obedience to Authority, and I am always ready to sacrifice myself for the

92 Sullivan to Rainville, 9 June 1915, folder 68:1, St. Joseph, Parish Correspondence.
Diocese.” Rainville’s obeisance had an element of irony, however, and the defeat was not as abject as he made it seem. That month, he and his parishioners began a fund-raising campaign to rebuild the church and the school; children and other laypeople organized benefit concerts and fairs. The parish had started in the basement of Immaculate Conception, and they returned to their roots by holding services in the basement of the burned church. They built a small school on top of the roof built over the basement, and they continued raising money to rebuild the church, the rectory, and the school. “All sorts of profit making functions took place,” wrote the parish historian in 1972, “and at the bazaars and carnivals, choice French-Canadian delicacies were served, with ‘cortons’ being the favorite.” Even with the fund-raising, O’Connell continued to stand in the way. Though in September 1915 he granted permission to rebuild the rectory and convent, in spring 1916 he refused to allow St. Joseph’s to build a larger school. Not until the next decade would the parish build a school large enough to suit its needs. Though O’Connell had done his best to make Salem’s Catholic survivors go to mixed parishes, the laity and clergy subtly undermined him, seeming to cooperate and show him deference while working to rebuild their parish and its institutions.

93 Rainville to O’Connell, 10 June 1915, folder 68:1, St. Joseph, Parish Correspondence.


95 Rainville to O’Connell, 14 April 1916; Haberlin to Rainville, 17 April 1916 both in folder 68:1, St. Joseph, Parish Correspondence.


97 O’Toole, Militant and Triumphant, 151, mistakenly says that St. Joseph’s ceased to be a Francophone
Rebuilding the church and the school worked for the sinistrés who returned to the Point. Thanks to O’Connell’s ruling, those who remained in outlying areas were still without a Francophone priest. So Rainville returned to his roots as a builder of parishes, as he had been in Cochituate and Brockton, and he began a mission church in Beverly to minister to the sinistrés who had moved there permanently. To house the new mission, in 1917 O’Connell allowed Rainville to buy an old Methodist church near the town line with Danvers, and Rainville forwarded the cardinal a list of three Franco-American priests who could serve there. Though Rainville preferred one of his subordinates from Salem, O’Connell chose an outsider from Lowell. Again we see a back-and-forth struggle for power within the church, with O’Connell and Rainville both contesting and undermining each other’s authority.

In the longer term, both parishes thrived. St. Joseph’s opened its new school in 1921 and then built a larger one in 1925, and the church remained open and consciously Franco-American until it fell victim to the archdiocese’s financial crisis in 2004. St. Alphonsus, as the Beverly church became, also lasted until the same wave of parish parish after the fire, but as late as 1948 church publications were still in French.

98 Paroisse Saint-Joseph, 12.

99 Rainville to Haberlin, 8 February 1917; Haberlin to Rainville, 24 February 1917; Haberlin to Rainville, 26 March 1917; Rainville to O’Connell, 24 May 1917, all in folder 68:1, St. Joseph, Parish Correspondence.

100 Haberlin to Rainville, 11 June 1917, folder 68:1, St. Joseph, Parish Correspondence.

closures. But Rainville did not live to see this flourishing. In 1948, the parish historian remembered that he had been “worn out by this work [of rebuilding] and undermined by sickness”; he died in 1920 at age sixty-two. Even in death, Rainville worked to build Franco-American institutions. In his will he gave $3,000 to the Collège de l’Assomption, the new Francophone college in Worcester, to create a scholarship for a St. Joseph’s parishioner. The rest of his estate went to the archdiocese, but from the grave he again undermined the hierarchy, since he restricted his bequest to the specific purpose of building the parish school for boys that O’Connell had stalled. Donat Binette, his protégé, helped raise even more money for the school, rallying parishioners to donate in Rainville’s memory. Binette was even more explicit than his mentor in his defiance of the hierarchy. By 1927, then the pastor at Rainville’s old parish in Cochituate, he was a public supporter of the Sentinellistes, a Rhode Island group whose opposition to their bishop was so extreme that they were excommunicated.

The fabrique system and the battles with the episcopacy created a subtle and nuanced political culture. The French-Canadian church was ultramontanist, yet it battled O’Connell, the most ultramontane of the American bishops. The movement fought for

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lay authority, but the power the laity sought was to be subservient to the clerics of their choice. The fabrique was not, that is to say, the republican and democratic congregationalist system Jay Dolan valorizes from the early days of the American church.\textsuperscript{107} The village parish world French Canadians sought to recreate in industrial New England was neither democratic nor particularly republican, arranged as it was with the priest and marguilliers at the top of a strict hierarchy.\textsuperscript{108} Women were excluded from the fabrique, as were those who could not afford to rent pews.

Nonetheless, the fight to let laypeople pick their priests and choose their churches—even while remaining loyal to the greater Church—helped to create a political culture that fostered cooperation and compromise amid conflict. The aftermath of the Salem fire was a skirmish in the long-running war between Franco-American priests and laity and the Irish hierarchy. As in Salem, sometimes Franco-Americans won, and sometimes they lost. O’Connell’s acquiescence to the Beverly mission was a rare unambiguous lay victory. More often, as with the survival of a Francophone St. Joseph’s, there was a continual process of contestation. This ethnic conflict required, at least to some extent, a cross-class alliance. Rainville, as the parish priest, is most dominant in the archives, and it was the middle-class businessmen and professionals like funeral director Napoleon Levesque who spoke publicly at meetings. But it was working-class women and men

\textsuperscript{107} Dolan, \textit{American Catholic Experience}, 110, 114-116.

\textsuperscript{108} Brault, \textit{French-Canadian Heritage}, 8-11.
who made and bought the cortons and paid to attend the fund-raising dances and fairs.\textsuperscript{109} Though the spokespeople of the movement for French-Canadian autonomy in the church were an elite, workers and their families also participated. Together, they created a system in which power was rarely absolute or explicitly contested. Rather, they found advantage here and there, cooperated and compromised where they could, and resisted episcopal domination in subterranean, quiet ways. The fire gives us an opportunity to understand this political culture. But political cultures are never stable, and the fire and the resulting fight over St. Joseph’s parish forced Salem’s French Canadians to practice, reenact and recraft theirs.

The fight to save St. Joseph’s parish in the wake of the fire can help us make sense of the labor history of the community’s largest employer, the Naumkeag Steam Cotton Company, which manufactured Pequot brand sheets and pillow cases. Loom fixers, the most skilled craft in the factory, had organized a union in 1901, and in 1914, it was still led by men with French names.\textsuperscript{110} Other than that, we know little about the state of organizing at Naumkeag before the fire. With a single exception neither the Loom Fixers nor any other textile union was mentioned in any newspapers after the fire, and Aviva Chomsky, in her work on the labor history of Salem, could find no trace of a union before 1918.\textsuperscript{111} The only mention of the Loom Fixers’ Union was that the first weekend after the fire, French-Canadian fraternal organizations set up shop in Loom Fixers Hall to give

\textsuperscript{109}On Levesque, see \textit{Guide Franco-Américain}, 101.

\textsuperscript{110} \textit{Naumkeag Directory}, 475; Massachusetts, Bureau of Labor, \textquotedblleft Thirteenth Annual Directory of Labor Organizations in Massachusetts,\textquotedblright published as \textit{Labor Bulletin} no. 98, II. 47-48.

information and take requests for relief.\textsuperscript{112} That means that at the time of the fire, the union was sufficiently established to have built, bought, or leased a hall; the Loom Fixers’ Union was also mentioned in a magazine article published just before the fire as among the city’s influential organizations.\textsuperscript{113} The union’s leadership and the use of its hall corroborate Mark Richard’s observation of a textile union using the Institut Jacques-Cartier Hall in Lewiston, Maine, for its meetings. Contrary to the suggestion that French Canadians had to assimilate and become Americans in order to adopt an authentic, working-class culture, there was much interplay between Franco-American culture and working-class mobilization.\textsuperscript{114}

Immediately after the fire, Naumkeag’s officers and directors promised to rebuild and “establish a model manufacturing community at the Point, with new-type mills and new-type dwelling houses, the houses to accommodate one and two families each.”\textsuperscript{115} When the factory reopened in February 1916, it was indeed among the most modern textile mills in the country.\textsuperscript{116} Almost exactly four years after the fire, in late June 1918, Naumkeag’s doffers, roving boys, and oilers—all skilled, male workers—walked off the job to demand a large pay increase. By the next afternoon most of the rest of workers in the mill were on strike too. Though management thought that it was the Poles who were the most militant, the union’s organizer was French-Canadian, as was a majority of the strike committee. When the state organized an arbitration committee, the union chose as

\textsuperscript{112} Salem Evening News 29 June 1914, 3.


\textsuperscript{114} Richard, Loyal but French, 199.

\textsuperscript{115} Salem Evening News 6 July 1914, 1.

\textsuperscript{116} Chomsky, Linked Labor Histories, 37, 54.
its representative Albert Langevin, whom the manager identified as “A French Canadian, at one time a Mill operative, and lately active in labor troubles at Fall River and other places.” Langevin was so hated by mill owners that when the committee visited a Fall River plant in order to learn what industry standard conditions were, management there refused him admission. It seems possible that Franco-Americans’ reputation for quiescence combined with their non-traditional methods of political activism to hide their involvement in the strike, making it seem as if Poles were the militant workers, despite French Canadians’ leadership.

The workers won their month-long strike. In the context of very high wartime inflation, management had initially offered a ten percent raise, and the workers walked off demanding seventeen and a half percent, although the demand later went up to twenty-five percent. The arbitration board granted a seventeen percent wage increase to most workers and moreover made the increase retroactive to the start of the strike. Management complained, “The decision of the state Board of Conciliation and Arbitration was in effect the granting of the demands of the striking operatives, and apparently was not based on the result of the investigation” conducted by the committee. Nonetheless, the board of directors accepted the state board’s decision. More importantly, the strike meant that more than just the loom fixers were now organized. Strikers had met to hear addresses by Horace Riviere, a United Textile Workers organizer from Manchester, New Hampshire; John O’Connell of Salem’s Central Labor Union; and a labor leader from Bedford, Massachusetts. They asked for and received a charter as

Local 33 of the UTW. They elected as their business agent O’Connell, a plumber who with Riviere had done much of the organizing.

That fall, apparently emboldened by their success over the summer, the workers tried again. The Loom Fixers and UTW locals together demanded a twenty-five percent wage increase; they coordinated with unions in New Bedford and Fall River, who each demanded fifteen percent raises. The board of directors protested that because of the end of World War I, business had slackened, and they refused to increase wages. The skilled loom fixers appear to have been in the lead, since the board told the manager to “inform the Fixers” of their refusal and “to make the same answer to any demands of the other unions in the Mill.” During the meeting, the manager at the Danvers Bleachery, a satellite operation, telephoned to say that fifty of his workers had walked off the job, also demanding a pay raise. These workers, too, were refused. It also appears to have been the loom fixers, working with their other locals in Fall River and New Bedford, who called off the threatened strike the next month.

O’Connell, as business agent and organizer for the fledgling UTW local, spent the next year organizing a broad, industrial union comprising all levels of workers. The highest-skilled workers, the loom fixers, retained an independent union, though even they


120 Entry for 25 November 1918, Naumkeag directors’ records.

121 Entry for 19 December 1918, Naumkeag directors’ records.
later affiliated with the UTW.\footnote{On the UTW and its difficulty organizing across crafts and skill, see Clete Daniels, \textit{Culture of Misfortune: An Interpretive History of Textile Unionism in the United States} (Ithaca, N.Y.: ILR Press, 2001), 13-28.} In August 1919, the UTW again demanded a twenty-five percent raise, union recognition, and a closed shop. After a month of negotiations, union and nonunion workers went on strike together. Having learned the year before that they could lose state arbitration, management avoided it, and the strike dragged on until November. Again, the workers won. Though only the lowest paid workers received an immediate pay increase, the board of directors agreed to peg wages at five percent more than any other New England mill. The company recognized the union and agreed to a dues check-off, a closed shop, and a grievance adjudication process. In exchange for all this, however, the company sought to increase productivity by between a quarter and a third.\footnote{Chomsky, \textit{Linked Labor Histories}, 51; Nyman, \textit{Union-Management Coöperation}, 1n2, 6.}

This settlement set the tone for the next decade. Wages stayed high—and perhaps most importantly, the factory did not follow many of its competitors to the U.S. South—but in exchange, workers had to increase their productivity.\footnote{On Naumkeag’s decision to stay in Salem, see Chomsky, \textit{Linked Labor Histories}, 52-54.} The politics of the union gives credence to the idea that there was something particular about Franco-American politics in Salem. In the 1920s—at the same time that Salem’s Franco-Americans were rebuilding their schools, growing their churches, and watching as their priests publicly battled New England’s bishops\footnote{Binette claimed that 52 of 55 Franco-American priests in the Boston archdiocese sided with the 	extit{Sentinellistes}, and an opponent agreed that Massachusetts priests were “almost unanimous.” Roby, \textit{Franco-Americans}, 264.}—the factory and the union were developing a nation-
wide reputation for labor-management cooperation.\textsuperscript{126} The juxtaposition of labor and ecclesiastical politics after the fire helps illuminate the particular ethnic and religious structures on which sinistrés depended.

Throughout the 1920s, the union grew its power in the factory and signed contracts that covered not only wages but working conditions, job classifications, discipline, and seniority. The cooperative strategy appeared to be paying off. But in 1927, the company began to resist further union demands in wages, conditions, and authority. When the company challenged the cooperative system, workers responded in kind. Poles, a growing proportion of the workers, challenged the union’s leadership, which had not changed since it was first organized. They demanded greater militancy in the face of increasing management intransigence. Moreover, they wanted a greater voice within the union, which was dominated by French Canadians and Irish; the union president was the former and the business agent the latter. The Poles tried to fire the business agent and replace him with one of their own, but they were rebuffed by a cross-ethnic coalition of Irish and French Canadians. The union executive responded to the challenge by intensifying its position, exchanging greater productivity for more power to make decisions.\textsuperscript{127} The exchange echoed the pattern of French-Canadian ecclesiastical politics, a pattern in which they fought for a lay voice in parish administration yet remained loyal to the Church.

The trade-off at Naumkeag was formalized and expanded in the 1927 and 1928

\textsuperscript{126}Nyman lists thirteen articles that appeared about union-management cooperation at Naumkeag in publications ranging from \textit{Forbes} to the \textit{American Federationist} and from the \textit{New Republic} to the \textit{Boston Herald}. See Nyman, \textit{Union-Management Coöperation}, 210.

\textsuperscript{127}Nyman, \textit{Union-Management Coöperation}, 6-8; Chomsky, \textit{Linked Labor Histories}, 54.
contracts. In the former, the union promised to give two months’ notice before a strike; to promote the distribution of Pequot brand products; and to encourage higher productivity in terms of quality and quantity. In exchange, the company promised high wages, continued employment, good working conditions, and, perhaps most important, monthly meetings between management and union to discuss the factory’s operation. In December 1928, workers rejected a management proposal that would have laid off a number of workers and forced the remaining weavers to tend twenty-four looms instead of thirteen. To stave off a strike, union leadership proposed “joint research,” in which labor and management would jointly come up with a plan for a stretch-out. As Aviva Chomsky writes, “Where workers and unions elsewhere were challenging, protesting, and resisting scientific management and the stretch-out by all means possible, Salem’s union was actually inviting it.”

As with French-Canadian ecclesiastical politics, where the fabrique was dominated by male professionals and the middle class, the people who gained most from the labor-management cooperation at Naumkeag were the factory’s elite workers. The union-sanctioned stretch-out came first to the weaving room, where two-thirds of the workers were women. In 1930, the union agreed to a stretch-out there in which the number of loom machines each weaver watched would increase from thirteen to twenty. This meant that 100 to 150 workers would have to be laid off. Management proposed that seniority would be decided based on the length of time on the job, rather than the date that a worker had begun to work at Naumkeag. Since women took time off when they had children, they had significantly less seniority than their male colleagues who had

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been initially hired at the same time. Though women objected to this arrangement, the union agreed with management. As in church politics, the interests of women, the less skilled, and the less senior fell before the interests of the relative elite.

This order of union-management collaboration collapsed in 1933, when workers rebelled against their union and struck with the left-led National Textile Workers Union. The local leadership of the NTWU strike included such names as Wilfred Levesque and Phileas Peltier; in other words, it was just as French-Canadian as the UTW. In his classic study of French-Canadian textile workers in Woonsocket, Gary Gerstle argues that a newfound, “working-class Americanism” in the 1930s allowed his subjects to forsake their conservative politics of survivance and find an authentic class consciousness. The 1933 strike at Naumkeag might seem to give credence to Gerstle’s interpretation, since it certainly signaled a different kind of union activism among Salem’s Franco-Americans. But a more nuanced and longer-term reading of the event, starting with the Salem fire, suggests that these workers had consistently practiced a specific kind of class politics. Attention to the connections among the class, ethnic, and religious politics of working-class French Canadians reveals them as neither clerically-dominated nor overly conservative. Rather, their class politics, like their religious politics, simply took a different form than those of other communities. Read with the fight for St. Joseph’s after the fire, the labor history of Naumkeag illuminates the way Franco-Americans engaged in

129 Chomsky, Linked Labor Histories, 56-57.

130 A full accounting of the 1933 strike is outside the scope of this dissertation, and it is amply covered by Chomsky, Linked Labor Histories, 58-74. See also Nyman, Union-Management Coopération, 119-181.

industrial unionism.

Both craft and industrial unions relied on notions of mutual solidarity in their ordinary operations. In the fire’s aftermath, union members drew on that customary solidarity and sought to look after their fellow members. Unfortunately, the loss of local unions’ archives means that we cannot know as much as we would like to about the details of their responses to the fire. For some, like the Painters, the Bricklayers, Masons and Plasterers, and the Stagehands, we know only that they held mandatory membership meetings to discuss their response.\textsuperscript{132} For others, we know slightly more. The Edge Makers’ Union appropriated $400 to aid its members, and it established a committee to decide how to divvy up those funds.\textsuperscript{133} The forty-two newsboys who lost their homes turned to their colleagues in Boston; the Boston Newsboys Union sold passers-by buttons for 10 cents each to raise a relief fund.\textsuperscript{134}

The second of the lasting Carpenters locals in Salem was founded in 1904 by twenty Franco-American men. Francophone Local 1210 demonstrates, like the Loom Fixers’ Union and the UTW, that Franco-Americans were no strangers to unionism or union assertiveness.\textsuperscript{135} Six years after its founding, the local successfully demanded a wage increase of six and three quarters cents per hour, which amounted to a sixteen and a half percent raise. Three years after that, they won a further two and a quarter cents, and

\textsuperscript{132} Salem Evening News 29 June 1914, 2, 8; 1 July 1914, 6.

\textsuperscript{133} Salem Evening News 27 June 1914, 2.

\textsuperscript{134} Salem Evening News 1 July 1914, 6.

\textsuperscript{135} In addition to the Loom Fixers and Local 1210, the Naumkeag Directory, 475, listed Franco-Americans as the president, recording secretary, and treasurer of the Journeyman Barbers Association, local 385.
by 1918 their wages had reached seventy cents an hour.\textsuperscript{136} While it is unclear how these wages compared to those won by the Anglophone local, in 1931, at least, their wages ($1.25 per hour), working hours (eight), and work week (weekends and holidays off) were equal to the main Anglophone local and better by fifteen cents an hour than the other Anglophone local.\textsuperscript{137}

The fire left every member of Local 1210 homeless. The North Shore District Council established a special relief fund for the three hundred members—of whom half were married, according to the \textit{Evening News}’s estimates—as well as the handful of carpenters who belonged to the other two locals. This committee of local men was charged with distributing relief money, chiefly $5,000 sent by the international headquarters.\textsuperscript{138} Though we do not know how the money was distributed, or to what extent union members contributed individually, it appears that \textit{sinistrés} benefited from their union membership. In addition to whatever aid they received from the official relief committee, a committee of workers also examined their situation. The Carpenters’ relief committee was presumably more friendly and more sympathetic than its official counterpart.

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\textsuperscript{136} Memorandum to Charles Johnson, Jr., “Local Union No. 1210, Salem, Mass.,” 18 October 1954; and John S. Rogers[?], list of Chartered Local Union’s [sic] in the State of Massachusetts, 20 December 1983, both in Local Histories folder, United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America, Massachusetts State Council Records, 1892-1980, MS col. 015, W.E.B. DuBois Library, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Mass. (hereafter UBC Mass. records). Thanks to special collections librarian Anne L. Moore for these documents. Two locals had been chartered in the 19th century but had not survived into the 20th.


\textsuperscript{138} \textit{Salem Evening News} 29 June 1914, 2, 11; 2 July 1914, 9.
Fraternal orders dotted the social landscapes of both Francophone and Anglophone Salem men. In 1920, one third of American men belonged to a fraternal society, and many belonged to more than one.\textsuperscript{139} They provided entertainment, camaraderie, and mutual aid in times of sickness, injury, or death. For Franco-Americans, they were also a manifestation of the imagined community of the \textit{Franco-Américan}.\textsuperscript{140} Like unions and churches, the fraternal response to the fire demonstrates the way civil society distributed mutual aid and the limitations to their ability to help.

In their heyday, fraternal orders were federations of local lodges, national (or even international) in scope but based on a system of local people providing reciprocal and mutual aid to each other. This aid took the form of sickness or death benefits, the hiring of a lodge doctor, and the creation of a shared space in which men of varying social classes could meet and exchange ideas and information as equals. The aid carried little or no stigma, since the recipient one day could be a donor the next. All members were ideologically and ritually defined as equal brothers, so that even if a man got help from someone who, outside the lodge, was his social superior, the assistance did not carry the weight of charity. The aid given to a fellow member was not imagined as voluntary charity by either party; rather it was seen as obligatory, as giving a brother his due. Lodges built this cross-class and intergenerational solidarity through ritual and exclusion. Orders tended to be segregated by gender, race, ethnicity, and religion, so that even though women, blacks, and Catholics participated in their own fraternal organizations,

\textsuperscript{139}Beito, \textit{Mutual Aid}, 2.


The second decade of the twentieth century was a moment of considerable change and challenge for fraternal organizations, which had become immensely popular in the period since the Civil War. The decade required, as historian David Beito terms it, a “process of readjustment,” as fraternal orders faced a changing culture of philanthropy, the rising power of professionals, increased regulation, and new competition.\footnote{Beito, \textit{Mutual Aid}, 142.}

All the important elements of fraternal orders—local, mutual aid, cross-class solidarity based on ethnicity, masculinity, and ritual, and insurance—came under increasing pressure during the decade. The lodge doctor system, in which lodges paid a set amount per member per year to a doctor to treat members without further charge, was attacked by doctors’ professional associations. They succeeded in building professional privilege and prestige by effectively shunning any physician who did not work on a fee-for-service basis, including lodge doctors.\footnote{Beito, \textit{Mutual Aid}, 109-129.}

Meanwhile, orders themselves began to centralize their operations, a change from when lodges represented a local defense against the centralization inherent in late-19th century industrialism.\footnote{David Thelen, \textit{Paths of Resistance: Tradition and Dignity in Industrializing Missouri} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 156-72.} Rather than local lodge members helping each other, central offices now collected money to build, maintain, and

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operate one or a handful of orphanages, hospitals, or retirement homes that drew money and clients from around the country. Mooseheart, the famous orphanage in Illinois built by the Loyal Order of Moose symbolizes the decade’s shift of focus; it was proposed in 1910, opened in 1913, saw a six-fold increase in residents by 1919, and finally opened its permanent buildings in 1920. The shift represented by Mooseheart left local lodges to become increasingly organizations for entertainment and socializing, rather than for looking after the welfare of their members. Demography exacerbated the shift; it was younger men who cared most about the insurance benefits, and as lodge membership aged, the men who stayed were the ones who cared most about the social, rather than insurance, aspects.\textsuperscript{145}

At the same time, orders and their insurance businesses were coming under increased regulation and potential competition from the government. The previous decade had seen bruising and divisive battles over insurance regulation, and in 1910 fraternal orders united behind the “Mobile Law,” a model state law that regulated fraternal insurance. Though it protected fraternal orders against some competitors and harsher regulation, it also decreased self government and defined the boundaries of fraternal mutual aid. The Mobile Law had passed in forty states by 1919. Fraternal insurance faced a different governmental threat—competition—when late in the decade the federal government proposed a system of compulsory sickness insurance. Though fraternal orders and their allies successfully fought off government insurance, the threat

suggests the new pressures orders faced.\footnote{Beito, *Mutual Aid*, 140-142, 150-151.}

Fraternal orders were more than insurance companies or social welfare agencies, however. These functions were built on a foundation of recreation and ritual. Members joined and ascended through ranks by memorizing and performing elaborate plays. In the 1910s, this recreational aspect also faced competition from automobiles, radio, and motion pictures. Local amusement created by local people, a category that included fraternal activities, lost favor, replaced by an increasingly homogenous popular culture created by outsiders. Even in the organizational world, fraternal orders faced new competition from the new service clubs like the Rotary, Lions, and Kiwanis. These new clubs eschewed ritual and met at lunch-time rather than the evening. They were explicitly for middle-class and professional men, and they drew that group away from traditional fraternal organizations. They also explicitly embraced an ideology of service to others, rather than reciprocal solidarity.\footnote{On the ritual and recreational aspect of fraternal orders, see Carnes, *Secret Ritual and Manhood*; Clawson, *Constructing Brotherhood*, 211-242; Beito, *Mutual Aid*, 295-96. On competition and rising alternative recreations, see Beito, *Mutual Aid*, 205, 215; Roy Rozensweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn of the Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986); Clifford Putney, “Service Over Secrecy: How Lodge-Style Fraternalism Yielded Popularity to Men’s Service Clubs,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 27 no. 1 (summer 1993): 179-190; and Jeffrey A. Charles, *Service Clubs in American Society: Rotary, Kiwanis, and Lions* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993).}

All these changes—centralization within societies, the dismantling of the lodge doctor system, government regulation and competition, and increased competition from other groups and activities—diminished, diluted, or dismantled the system of reciprocal, mutual aid that local lodges embodied. At their height, lodges were groups of men of different classes who came together on the basis of mutual assistance. Though most often
this assistance took the form of insurance, its spirit permeated everything men did in lodges, from the rituals they memorized and performed to the conversations in which they exchanged word of job openings. The decline of lodge doctors and the Mobile Law decreased the scope of mutual assistance, in that they restricted lodges’ activities. Alternative recreations diminished the importance of ritual in men’s lives and so decreased the venues for fraternalism’s ideology of mutualism. Finally, when fraternal orders shifted to centralized charity in the form of orphanages and hospitals, they lost the practice of local solidarity that had been the basis of their work. To the extent, then, that local lodges continued their practices and cultures of local solidarity and mutualism, they were swimming against the tide, rejecting and resisting cultural, legal, and ideological currents in Progressive-era society.

The Salem fire caught fraternal organizations in the middle of this decade of challenges and transformations. Ideally, the fire would lend historians an opportunity to understand the extent to which fraternal solidarity continued in the face of the decade’s centralizing trends. Unfortunately, the records of fraternal organizations and their lodges are scanty at best, and so it almost impossible to examine specifically the way aid was distributed to individuals. We do not know, for instance, whether fraternal relief committees used different criteria to aid burned out families than did the official relief committee. What we can see, however, is the way money was collected and, in broad strokes, how it was disbursed. The pattern that appears across several fraternal orders illustrates how fraternal orders balanced local and centralizing impulses, and how they

148 Beito, Mutual Aid, 57-58, argues that even explicitly working-class fraternal organizations like the Yiddish Workmen’s Circle applied similarly stringent standards on aid recipients as did charitable organizations; the difference, he suggests, lay in the reciprocity between donors and recipients that was inherent in fraternal aid.
attempted to adjudicate—or avoid adjudicating—the claims of their members.

Immediately after the fire, many lodges held special meetings to assess the needs of their members. With the money they raised locally, regionally, state-wide, and sometimes nationally, they established special committees to distribute aid to needy brothers and their families. Often, national or state-wide fraternal leaders—most organizations were hierarchically organized with grand state lodges and a supreme national one—came to Salem to examine the situation and help where they could. Though different orders responded more generously than others, there do not appear to have been significant differences in the way they organized their relief. Some orders showed greater unwillingness to judge their members, and some raised significantly more money than needed. Notwithstanding these differences, the patterns of fraternal relief demonstrated the growing reliance on non-local leadership even while the mostly local or regional fund-raising emphasized the continued importance of local and regional community. Salem’s fraternal fire relief showed that even as orders centralized, regional ties were still stronger than national ones.

The Eagles—originally founded by theater owners and traveling actors and known for their conviviality—exemplify the trend.\(^{149}\) Their Witch City Aerie (all Eagle lodges were “Aeries”), number 481, took out an advertisement in the newspaper, urging all members who needed help to come to the Bricklayers’ Hall, “where the needed help will be forthcoming.”\(^{150}\) Four days after the fire, they reported that they had already distributed $3,000 to members in need. Rather than examine each member to adjudicate

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\(^{150}\)Salem Evening News 27 June 1914, 2, 12.
how much help he needed, they gave a set amount to each burned-out member. Single members received $10; married men got $20. By giving each burned-out member a uniform sum, the Eagles avoided investigating their brothers and deciding whether one deserved more aid than another. Rather, they granted everyone the same amount as a matter of right. They promised the newspaper that this was only the beginning: “This is but a starter as funds are being appropriated by aeries all over the country and it is expected that the local Eagle members will be well taken care of before all of the money comes in.” To help facilitate the process, officers from the Grand Aerie came to investigate the situation, probably to report back to other local lodges to encourage them to send money.151 On the fifth day after the fire, the local aerie estimated that 176 married members and 60 single men were burned out, which at the previous day’s rates would have required $4,120.152

Like the Eagles, the Loyal Order of Moose initially started a relief fund from local accounts and then sent word to other lodges that they needed more money. They held a meeting the same night as the Eagles, where they found 194 members burned out of their homes and roughly the same number left jobless. To help them, the lodge started a fund with $1,000 of its own. They later estimated that 800 people from Moose families were affected by the fire, which, the order claimed, made it the most affected of the fraternal organizations. Nearby Moose chipped in, with lodges in Lynn, Haverhill, and Lawrence all sending $100 to the relief fund. The Boston lodge sent a man to help distribute the relief. Perhaps most importantly, though, Boston contributed by sponsoring a motion at

151 Salem Evening News 29 June 1914, 8
152 Salem Evening News 30 June 1914, 5.
the national Moose meeting later in the summer that the organization contribute $25,000 for the relief of their brothers. The national organization sent $5,000 immediately and arranged to raise the next $20,000 by establishing a special levy of $100 on each local lodge.\textsuperscript{153}

The speedy generosity of Moose in Lynn, Haverhill, and Lawrence is representative of the importance of region to fraternal giving. The fraternal orders had national and sometimes international reach, and they could raise money from far afield based on the affective ties built by the organization. Moose in distant cities donated their share of their lodge’s $100 assessment in the expectation that should a disaster strike their town, Salem’s Moose would reciprocate. Through shared organization, rituals, and, increasingly, projects like the national orphanage Mooseheart, far-flung brothers also understood that they were members of a common community. Nonetheless, such connections at a distance were comparatively weak. The fact that relatively closer brother lodges took more interest in Salem’s plight than more distant ones suggests that fraternal organizations were not entirely successful in building a nationwide community. Even as they were becoming more centralized and building institutions that sought to serve brothers nationwide, local connections and affective ties retained their greater importance.

For orders that had multiple lodges in Salem, the local connection was still more evident. The Ancient Order of United Workmen had four lodges in Salem, which after the fire came together to create a common relief committee. Each lodge named five representatives to the united committee, despite the fact that the lodges were unequally

\textsuperscript{153} Salem Evening News 27 June 1914, 2; 29 June 1914, 8; Saturday Evening Observer 1 August 1914, 1.
affected. The John Bertram Lodge counted forty-four burned out members; John Endicott counted forty-two; the Oriental Lodge had twenty-six; and the Puritan Lodge had only five. That the four lodges formed a joint committee to administer their funds—they raised two or three thousand dollars in the first week—suggests the local connection felt by members of the different lodges. They did not ordinarily go to meetings together, and, judging from the disparate tallies of burned out members, they did not live in the same neighborhoods. But they apparently felt a fraternal connection based on their common membership and their proximity. They expected other New England AOUW members to feel similarly. Grand Master Workman F.W. Waite happened to come from Salem; he wrote a letter to Massachusetts and New Hampshire lodges requesting contributions, but his fund-raising apparently did not extend beyond the region.\footnote{Salem Evening News 27 June 1914, 2; 29 June 1914, 2, 8; 30 June 1914, 5, 12; 1 July 1914, 11. The AOUW had been founded as a sort of conservative version of the Knights of Labor, but its name soon became vestigial and the order became the country’s first insurance-centered fraternal organization. On the AOUW’s history, see Schmidt, Fraternal Organizations, 356-8; and Beito, Mutual Aid, 12.}

Fraternal ties were so strong in some orders that they could raise too much money. The Odd Fellows, one of the oldest fraternal organizations in the country, relied nearly entirely on their members in Massachusetts to aid Salem brothers. The night of the fire, Grand Master William W. Walker—the elected leader of Massachusetts Odd Fellows—wrote a letter to every lodge in the state calling on the organization to raise $10,000. He promised the state-level grand lodge would contribute $5,000, and he called on every male member to donate fifteen cents and every female member to give five cents. But this was the easy part. Harder was finding members to take the money. A joint committee established by the two Salem lodges could find only thirty or thirty-five burned out members, although they suspected that others would come forward, especially
Odd Fellows living in Salem who were members of a more distant lodge. In order to


drum up interest in the relief fund, Walker promised that “any Odd Fellow in Salem who


needs any help can have every want supplied” and explained that members need not have


lost everything to be eligible. A few days later, the committee implored in a newspaper


advertisement: “Will ALL Brothers of the order who have suffered loss by the late


conflagration report at once to the committee.”155


The aid fraternal orders offered could be as much psychic as practical precisely


because the help was fraternal. Members were usually asked to come to a designated


headquarters, where representatives of the lodge’s relief committee would figure out how


to aid them. No documentation remains to show what happened at these meetings. But


when an Odd Fellow went to the hall owned by the Essex Lodge of his own organization,


or when an AOUW member went to the AOUW Hall, he would have felt more at home


than when he stood before a social worker from Boston at the official relief headquarters.


The newspaper emphasized the way fraternal organizations sought to aid their members


without the stigma of charity. “In accordance with the principles of the order of Elks the


relief committee will investigate needy cases and supply aid without publicity,” the


newspaper reported. “A great many needy cases have already been taken care of by


Salem lodge, whose members are working in harmony with the general relief committee


of the city.” By working with the official relief authorities, fraternal committees appear


to have acted as translators and buffers between burned out brothers and the social


workers. The same report emphasized the spatial aspect of fraternal relief. Elks knew


155 Salem Evening News 27 June 1914, 10; 29 June 1914, 2, 8; 20 June 1914, 10; Saturday Evening


Observer 27 June 1914, 8, 12; Circular letter from William W. Walker, 25 June 1914, in Second unlabeled


folder, box 1, E S1 F6 1914, PEM.
their own building, and members and their families felt safe and comfortable there. “The spacious home of the lodge is filled with people who lost their all in the fire and who are being supplied [sic] with food and sleeping accommodations, and wherever good can be done the Elks are doing it.”156 The Knights of Pythias, led by the local and state chancellors, opened their headquarters in a store owned by one of its members; the twenty-four families seeking relief must have more comfortable receiving goods and from a store where they were used to shopping than in a relief depot.157

Masons were the most famous and most elite of the fraternal world, with a much more selective membership. While there is historiographical disagreement about the class makeup of other fraternal orders, there is little doubt about the class position of Masons.158 An early study by Roy Rosenzweig found that Masons, perhaps especially in Boston, were overwhelmingly lower middle class; they were also, of course, all white, Protestant men. They were ideologically anti-working class, for instance condemning strikes and standing as a bulwark against rising Irish political power in Boston. Masons sought to help each other informally and had done so in prior disasters like the San Francisco fire and earthquake of 1906. But unlike other fraternal organizations, they possessed no formalized tradition or structure of insurance or reciprocal monetary

156 Salem Evening News 29 June 1914, 8.

157 Salem Evening News 27 June 1914, 12; 2 July 1914, 8.

obligation.\textsuperscript{159}

The lack of a mutual aid tradition among the Masons shows in their response to the fire. The six Masonic organizations in Salem counted 108 burned out members, which included both those who lost their homes and those who were out of work. The heads of each of those six groups formed a joint Masonic Relief Fund Committee and mailed a questionnaire to each of their members asking if they needed help. Though this fund collected more than $3,600, the lack of a strong response from state bodies contrasts notably with groups like the Moose and AOUW.\textsuperscript{160} The state’s Master Workman donated $500 to the Masonic relief fund, and another umbrella group covering Massachusetts and Rhode Island sent another $300. But in general the state-wide bodies declined to get involved, judging that it was more appropriate for individual Masons to voluntarily contribute.\textsuperscript{161} Ordinarily, Masons were not active in the summer, and when activities started up again in September, even the local leaders seemed primarily concerned with replacing any burned certificates of membership, rather than with helping members’ more important material needs.\textsuperscript{162}

\textsuperscript{159} Roy Rosenzweig, “Boston Masons, 1900-1935: The Lower Middle Class in a Divided Society,” Journal of Voluntary Action Research 6 (July-October 1977): 119-26. On Masonic relief in San Francisco, see the Grand Master’s Relief Report in Proceedings of the M.W. Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons of California, October, A.L. 5906 (1906), 225-239. On later relief efforts—a unified, permanent disaster relief fund was created in the aftermath of World War I and was first put to use after the Tokyo Earthquake of 1923—see United Masonic Relief (Washington, D.C.: Masonic Service Association of the United States, 1931).


\textsuperscript{162} Notice of communication, 7 September 1914, papers of Starr King Lodge, A.F. & A.M. Masons, E S1 L4 F1 S2 1914,, PEM; Notice of conclave, 10 September 1914, papers of Winslow Lewis Commandery,
Anglophone Catholic fraternal organizations appear to have followed the same patterns as the Protestant societies described above. The most important of the Catholic orders was the Irish-dominated Knights of Columbus. The local Veragua Council’s respectability was signaled by its members’ heavy representation among the civil relief authorities. John B. Tivnan, the chair of the relief committee, was a Knight, as were the chairs of the transportation, housing, and employment committees. So too were three of the five rebuilding commissioners. Though the council counted only fifty-eight burned out members, it was deeply involved with the city’s relief efforts. For the two weeks after the fire, the Knights’ clubhouse, a Victorian mansion on tony Washington Square, served as a general distribution station for beds and bedding. Members also lent their automobiles and trucks to the committee to assist with distributing furniture. “Hundreds were assisted through the agency of the Knights of Columbus,” the order’s national magazine proudly reported, and it noted that the city’s relief committee passed a motion of thanks to the council for its assistance.163

In other regards, the Knights’ work after the fire echoed that of Protestant orders. Nearby local councils, the state council, and individual Knights donated money, and state leaders came to Salem to assess the situation and help. Even without a general appeal, Massachusetts Knights sent more than $4,000; it is unclear whether this included the $1,000 appropriated from the state council’s treasury. To spend this money, state leaders installed Bostonian Michael J. Downey to run the organization’s relief fund. Downey’s role was a departure from the mutual ethos of brother helping brother. Though a brother

Knights Templar, E S1 L4 F1 W2 1914, PEM.

163 Columbiad August 1914, 16; Pilot 4 July 1914, 2; Salem Evening News 30 June 1914, 5; 1 July 1914, 6.
Knight, he was an outsider, and his impartiality carried with it a certain coldness. The Veragua Council’s August newsletter hinted at controversy arising from Downey’s decisions: “Your Officers are working to assist all the members and any member who by unjust criticism tries to promote dissension at this time is not worthy of the title Sir Knight. If you don’t understand what we are doing, don’t be afraid to ask and we will be pleased to explain.”

At the same time, the Knights saw their relief activities as a good advertisement. That they were rapidly able to raise $4,000 “attest[ed] in a very gratifying way . . . that many of our Councils are in first-class financial condition, having funds available for such emergencies,” the national magazine wrote. Moreover, the disaster was a good reminder of the importance of insurance. “If a member is overtaken by fire and he is not insured, he is embarrassed financially,” the local officers wrote in their newsletter, “but if he is overtaken by death and is without insurance, he deprives his family of their independence, he should have protected them, and no good knight will allow this possibility to exist. . . . This is a good time to get your friend to sign an application.”

In contrast to the Knights of Columbus, with their mere fifty-eight burned-out members, “the majority of the[m] . . . able to take care of themselves,” Franco-American fraternal organizations were considerably more pressed. Nonetheless, Francophone organizations followed the same patterns as their Anglophone counterparts. As we have

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164 Knights of Columbus, Veragua Council No. 76, *Monthly Bulletin* August 1914, E S1 L4-K2, PEM; *Columbiad* August 1914, 16; *Pilot* 4 July 1914, 2.

165 *Columbiad* August 1914, 16.

166 Knights of Columbus, Veragua Council No. 76, *Monthly Bulletin* August 1914, E S1 L4-K2, PEM.

167 *Salem Evening News* 30 June 1914, 5.
seen, they set up a headquarters at Loom Fixers’ Hall to collect information and offer aid to the sinistrés. Working there were both local leaders—the Laurier Council of the Union St.-Jean-Baptiste d’Amérique was represented by Ephraim Barthelmy, a former editor of the Courrier de Salem—as well as representatives of the central office. From the central office in Woonsocket, Rhode Island, Élie Vézina, the USJBA’s secretary general, opened a special relief fund and solicited contributions from individuals, groups, and local councils; a list in the Courrier announced that in the first week after the fire, the USJBA raised nearly $600. Donors included individuals from around New England, employees from the organization’s headquarters, a “group of friends” from Providence, a company in Woonsocket, and several parishes. Also included were donations from USJBA local councils, ranging from $3.25 from Woonsocket to $10 from Waterville, Maine, and Southbridge, Mass., to $100 from Lewiston, Maine; most council contributions were in the range of $10 to $25. All told, the fund received more than $3,300. “This unfortunate event,” Vézina told the USJBA convention the next year, referring to the fire, “made us see the solidarity that strongly unites all members of our Society and most of all is affirmed in the dark days of adversity.”

The Union St.-Jean-Baptiste’s rival in the fraternal world was the Association Canado-Américaine, based in Manchester, New Hampshire. In later years, the two organization would stake out positions on opposite sides of the Sentinelliste fight, with the ACA taking a more radical position against the bishops and the USBJA staking out a

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conciliatory position.\textsuperscript{169} At the time of the fire, though, the main difference was that the ACA did not operate in Massachusetts.\textsuperscript{170} It was still a major organization of the French-Canadian diaspora, however, and it responded to the fire in much the same way as its Woonsocket rival. In conjunction with the Manchester Francophone daily, it opened a fund to aid the *sinistrés*, starting with a $50 contribution from its own coffers. Without organizational ties to Salem, however, the ACA’s fund remained much smaller. By the time the newspaper stopped actively advertising for donations at the end of July, it had received only seventy donations, for a total of 190.80; most contributions were a dollar or two from individuals, though there were some $5 contributions from ACA and Forestiers locals.\textsuperscript{171} Without a local lodge in Salem, the ACA sent the money it collected to Rainville to distribute as he saw fit. Non-Francophone Manchester residents and organizations, in contrast, collected more than $1,000, which they sent directly to Salem’s mayor.\textsuperscript{172}

The comparison of the USJBA, the ACA, and their Anglophone counterparts illuminates the nature of the French-Canadian diaspora in New England. Francophone fraternal societies helped structure and organize the *Franco-Américaine*. Their ritual and intrinsic ideology of brotherhood made more real and comprehensible a diasporic imagined community that was otherwise too imagined to be easily mobilized. The USJBA collected substantially more money than the ACA because it solicited funds on


\textsuperscript{170} In 1914 the ACA had local courts, as lodges were called, in New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Connecticut, Quebec, and Michigan. See *Le Canado Américain*, 20 July 1914.

\textsuperscript{171} *Avenir National* 1 July 1914, 8; 29 July 1914, 7. The count of 70 contributions excludes the initial donation from the ACA, but the total raised includes it.

\textsuperscript{172} *Avenir National* 11 July 1914, 1; 13 July 1914, 5.
behalf of members imagined brothers. The organization’s leaders were proud of the fraternal spirit of mutual aid demonstrated by the subscriptions: “This spirit of generosity, charity, and, I might add, true brotherhood, is even more precious than the purely financial resources you put into [our] hands to administer,” the general president said at the next USJBA congress.  

The ACA, in contrast, solicited only on behalf of “compatriots.”

“We are required, as Catholics and French Canadians, to come to the aid of the unfortunate—to prove that for us, charity is not just a word,” exhorted the order’s official newsletter. The “charity” of the ACA was apparently a weaker motivator than the “brotherhood” of the USJBA, and the obligations of fraternal brothers were stronger than those of “Catholics and French Canadians.”

Notable also is that in comparison to Anglophone fraternal orders, even the USJBA came up short. Nearly every member of the Laurier Council was affected, if not entirely burned out, by the fire. Yet the organization raised only a bit more than $3,300 to distribute to 254 families—an average of a mere $11.12 for each family. By August 1915, it had not even managed to give out the entire sum collected. Although the fire was a seminal event to his fourth-largest council, in September 1915 the president of the organization could not even remember when it occurred, referring to it as “a year or two ago.”

The local Société St.-Jean-Baptiste also voted a month of contributions to all

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174 *Avenir National* 1 July 1914, 8.

175 *Le Canado Américain* 6 July 1914, 1.

176 The total raised was $3,331.46; the organization’s auditor reported an unspecified residual amount in his report to the Rhode Island insurance commissioner. See Henri T. LeDoux, “Rapport Officiel du Président Général”; Élie Vézina, “Rapport Officiel du Secrétaire Général”; and Report and audit of USJBA by Sinclair E. Allison to Charles C. Gray, insurance commissioner for Rhode Island, 16 August 1915, all in the
members who remained in town and a further $50 to help families in need. Judging from the organization’s financial record books, however, it is unclear whether this money was ever collected or distributed.\textsuperscript{177} This is in stark contrast to Anglophone fraternal organizations, which raised comparably sized funds for the benefit of significantly fewer burned out members.

This difference may reflect the fact that Franco-American fraternal organizations were less important to the lives of their members than the historiography would have us believe.\textsuperscript{178} Franco-Americans may have instead chosen to donate through their parishes or directly to the city-wide relief fund. If so, it would indicate that their ties to their fellow Franco-Americans were felt more strongly in church than in the fraternal meeting, but the comparison of the ACA and USJBA would seem to contradict this hypothesis. Perhaps, like Halifax’s churches, Franco-American fraternal organizations were overwhelmed by the amount of need and by their own organizational difficulties. Their

\textsuperscript{177} Courrier de Salem 9 July 1914, 6. The group’s payments in July 1914 were not out of line with other Julys; that month it paid out about $736. That total was high, but the difference between it and the previous two years was from a $500 death payment unrelated to the fire. Once the death payment is excluded there is no substantial difference. The total payouts in August 1914 were rather less than prior years. The non-financial record books from 1914 are missing, but if the Société St.-Jean-Baptiste made payments to fire sufferers, it must not have done so from their main account. See Records of the Société St.-Jean-Baptiste, vol. 8, MSS 85, PEM. The Courrier de Salem, 24 July 1914, 8, reported that the supreme chief the Forestiers Franco-Américains, a Lowell lawyer named J.H. Guillet, wrote to the local J.O. Gadoury Court asking for the names of members who lost their houses so that the organization could help them, but neither central nor local archives remain from which to learn the details. The Société des Artisans, another Franco-American fraternal order, also operated in Salem, but its records too are lost, and no report of any relief activities appeared in the Courrier.

leaders were dispersed and their members scattered to neighboring councils.\textsuperscript{179} None of the many other French-Canadian social organizations appear to have organized any relief work. The Klondike Club, an independent social organization of French-Canadian workingmen in Salem, lost its clubhouse and did not rebuild it until 1916. Whatever effort members put into the club was probably directed at the club’s needs, and no newspaper reported the Klondike collecting or distributing any aid.\textsuperscript{180} Faced with the devastation of their entire community, Franco-American organizations could not afford to help everyone.

Instead, Franco-Americans around New England called on the government to come to the aid of their compatriots.\textsuperscript{181} This turn to the government in a time of crisis is yet another argument against the familiar \textit{survivance} narrative of Franco-American history. The government was dominated by Anglophones, but unlike the episcopacy, politicians were eager to acknowledge the authority of French-Canadian leaders. The night before the fire, David Walsh, the Irish-Catholic governor of Massachusetts, had spoken at the St. Jean Baptiste Day banquet in Springfield, where he exhorted Franco-Americans, “Preserve your traditions, your faith, your language!” “What a strong contrast between these ideas and those of the Irish in the United States and Canada about

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\item \textsuperscript{179} “Programme-Souvenir a l’occasion des Noces d’Argent du Conseil Laurier No. 72, Union St-Jean-Baptiste d’Amérique,” 23 June 1929, in folder “[Laurier No. 72, Salem, Massachusetts,] Old Correspondence Only”; and Rapport de l’élection des officiers, 2 December 1914, “Laurier No. 72, Salem, Massachusetts, Election Results Only,” both in USJBA archives.
\item \textsuperscript{180} On the Klondike Club, see “Canadian Klondike Club is Hub of French Community in Salem,” \textit{Lynn Sunday Post} 28 May 1967, 13. It was not mentioned in either the Anglophone or Francophone newspapers after the fire. In addition to those clubs mentioned in the text, the city directory listed the Cercle Veuillot, Cercle National Social, Canadian Social Club, and Lafayette Social Club as having officers with French names; none of them had any relief work mentioned in the newspapers. See Naumkeag Directory 470, 471.
\item \textsuperscript{181} \textit{Avenir National} 2 July 1914, 1; 3 July 1914, 1, 6. On the campaign for government assistance, see the Introduction.
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the presence of the French language in school!” gushed the local Francophone newspaper.  

Salem Franco-Americans’ selective use of their church, their lay organizations, and their elected representatives is in accord with Mark Richard’s argument that “French-Canadian descendants became political and cultural members of the host society at their own pace, on their own terms, and largely with their own resources.”

Perhaps, however, a focus on the material and monetary success of fraternal fund-raising drives is misguided. USJBA’s president, Henri LeDoux, may have been overly florid when he claimed that the “spirit of generosity, charity, and . . . brotherhood is even more precious than the purely financial resources,” but maybe he was right. The very presence of civil society organizations may have been more important than their actual work. A relief committee staffed by fraternal or union brothers was an ethically and aesthetically different thing than a committee staffed by outside experts. Telling your troubles to the priest you confessed to was different from telling them to a social worker. The aid offered by civil society was easier, less judgmental, and less demanding. The Catholic Church and fraternal orders combined a local way of knowing with more central, state-like knowledge. Though their relief committees comprised local men, they also relied on leaders from elsewhere. This hybrid system included multiple ways of knowing, and power was distributed across many levels of organizations. At a moment in

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183 Richard, Loyal but French, 252.

which these reciprocal, local forms of aid were increasingly replaced by hierarchical
charity, even the mixed committees, based as they were on local knowledge instead of an
expert’s determination of need, were a form of resistance to the new order.
Conclusion:
Cities of Comrades

In March and April 1919, Basil King—Episcopal priest, Canadian immigrant, and writer of best-selling, moralistic novels—published The City of Comrades, his fourteenth book. It was the story of a Canadian architect nearly ruined by drink who redeems himself through solidarity with other alcoholics and the rigors of the First World War. King, a native Prince Edward Islander, was educated in Nova Scotia and had served as a curate at the Anglican cathedral in Halifax. In 1900, by then only forty-one years old and a rector in Cambridge, Mass., his eyesight failing and his thyroid diseased, King gave up the ministry and began to write best-selling novels. “His prose style is undistinguished; his plots are little more than ingenious mechanisms; his characters rarely come to life,” his biographer Randal Stewart wrote, calling King’s prose “ponderously didactic or mawkishly sentimental.” He continued: “It is not likely that his novels will be read in the future, except perhaps by students of popular literary taste.”

In The City of Comrades, we first meet narrator Frank Melbury, a trained architect from Montreal and son of a railroad magnate, when alcohol has reduced him to a bum sleeping on the New York streets. In a final act of desperation he burgles the house of an important architect. Though he ends up not taking anything, the shame of his attempted

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robbery is enough to send him to the Down and Out Club, a house on the Bowery where drunks and former drunks help each other find sobriety. The club King describes is explicitly based on solidarity and eschews charity; help, support, and aid are offered by friends to friends. They refuse money from outsiders, relying instead on successfully recovered members. “It’s the fact that so much heart’s blood goes into this work that makes it so living,” the club’s leader says. Each task a man performs to help his fellow, each donation, is a prayer. “Prayer is action,” he explains, “only it’s kind action.” Later Melbury describes solidarity as communion. “What I had thought of only as human aid I now perceived to be the celestial bread and wine,” he explains; the brotherly love of his fellow man was itself God. The solidarity and “active brotherly kindness” of his new friends allow Melbury to reclaim his proper station in society just in time for the beginning of World War I. Rejected by his love interest, he answers the call of his native country and joins the Canadian Army. When returns crippled, he sets about trying to enact a different kind of solidarity, that of nations; the final two-fifths or so of the book is given over to a ponderously didactic harangue about why the United States should join the war.³

Oddly, the title phrase never appears in the novel. Without an explicit referent, the implication is that all of New York, indeed the whole world, is a city of comrades. These comrades ordinarily go about their business, but at the right moment—whether it is when a fellow bum needs help drying out, a fellow gentleman requires assistance regaining his footing, or a fellow Anglo-Saxon democracy calls for aid in defeating the Hun—they find their place within the communion of God to offer comradeship. King

³King, *City of Comrades*, 77, 191, 97.
may have gotten the phrase “city of comrades” from Samuel Prince, a fellow Anglican priest from Nova Scotia. Prince had been curate at St. Paul’s Church in Halifax at the time of the explosion, and in his Columbia sociology dissertation, he wrote that the city “gained the appellation City of Comrades.”

Though Prince’s dissertation was as yet unpublished, it seems likely that King and Prince knew each other through their regional and religious connections. Even if King’s source was not directly Prince, it appears that the phrase “city of comrades” was, in 1919, associated with Halifax and its explosion. If so, the novel’s title referred obliquely to Halifax, where King and Prince had both been priests, and which had recently demonstrated to the world yet another way to be a city of comrades.

King wrote under contract to film producer Samuel Goldwyn. Goldwyn, short of marketable stars, instead hired “classy writers” who in exchange for a retainer promised him the right of first refusal for any novel they wrote. If Goldwyn wanted it, he paid a $10,000 advance on a third of the film’s revenue. This was a losing proposition for Goldwyn, who soon learned that whatever King’s (doubtful) talent for writing prose, it did not translate to the screen.

Nonetheless, Goldwyn bought the rights to City of Comrades and assigned it to Harry Beaumont to direct.

Unfortunately for King, by the time his novel was published in book form—it had

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6 Kansas City Times 9 February 1919, 15C.
first been serialized in the *Saturday Evening Post*—it was already out of date: not only had the United States entered the war, its side had already won. For the film version, Goldwyn and Beaumont needed a different crucible for Melbury and his love interest. In the film, Melbury enlists but only gets as far as Halifax, where he is blinded in the explosion; the love interest nurses him back to health. “To get the proper realistic effect” of the explosion, wrote the reviewer for the *Charlotte Observer*, Beaumont “ordered that the set be blown up with dynamite, causing the wreckage to fall on both the star” and another actor.7 To make the connection between Halifax and the solidarity Melbury experiences and enacts while sobering up even clearer, the club’s name becomes the City of Comrades. In the film version, the prayers-through-action that Melbury experiences and the communion he finds through active brotherly kindness of his fellow drunks is explicitly tied to the equivalent actions of Haligonians after the explosion.8

*The City of Comrades* contains, for our purposes, three key insights. First is the very existence of everyday solidarity practiced by ordinary people. King’s novel is a reminder that though the state and its agents could have difficulty discerning this informal order, it was not invisible. Just as King saw it from afar, so too did some of those who witnessed it Halifax. For Samuel Prince it inspired a brief meditation on Peter Kropotkin’s anarchist tract *Mutual Aid*.9 Florence Murray, the Halifax medical student,

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saw it in the hospitals there and called it “organization without any organization.”

Moreover, this solidarity works. Lovey, Frank Melbury’s working-class British sidekick, affirmatively does not want to sober up. He is afraid of the Down and Out Club precisely because he knows solidarity is more powerful than charity. “You wouldn’t be—you wouldn’t be goin’ to the Down and Out Club?” he asks Melbury, worried, in the first chapter. “Worse than missions and ’vangelists, they are.”

King’s second important insight is that this solidarity is always latent. He presages Colin Ward’s famous metaphor: “Society which organizes itself without authority is always in existence, like a seed beneath the snow, buried under the weight of the state.” Ward found proof of this in the behavior of people when everyday rules are suspended, citing Prague Spring, the Poznan Bread Riots, and revolutionary Spain as examples. For King, every city is a potential city of comrades come the need. Initially something of a naif, King’s character Melbury is repeatedly surprised to find the solidarities of everyday life. First, as a former architect and scion of a rich Montreal family, he is amazed by the bond of love that forms between him and a fellow bum and the help they offer each other on the streets. When he decides to sober up, he is shocked to discover that by simply presenting himself at the Down and Out Club, he becomes a member of a community of fellows helping each other and themselves. When he finds his footing, he is again amazed at the brotherly help he gets from his fellow professionals—a doctor and an architect—who care nothing for his moral failings and wish only for

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10 Personal narrative of Miss Florence J. Murray, n.d., item 192, volume 2124, Archibald MacMechan fonds, MG 1, Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management, Halifax, N.S.

11 King, City of Comrades, 7.

him to regain his status in society. When Melbury returns from the war, he knows that this spirit of comradeship needs only to be awoken in Americans for them to join the war against Germany. He does not seek to create afresh American brotherly feelings toward other democracies; rather, he knows it is already there and needs simply to be directed into a war effort.

Finally and most importantly, to King the value of solidarity is not merely material; rather, it is also spiritual and emotional. Frank Melbury’s comrades give him food, a bed, clothes, and eventually a job. But they also give him emotional and spiritual support. King depicts both material and emotional aid together as prayer-through-action. Jointly, they are the species of the communion of man, just as bread and wine are the two species that comprise the communion of God. The spiritual and material, in other words, are indivisible, and each constitutes the other. This is one of the fundamental points about solidarity: that the solace comes jointly and inseparably from the aid offered and from the relationship with the person or organization who offers it.

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This dissertation is about two cities of comrades, Salem and Halifax. It shows how both were cities of comrades before their disasters, though the fire and explosion served to make evident what had existed before. Families, neighbors, friends, and coworkers had patterns and traditions of self-help, informal organization, and solidarity that they developed before crisis hit their cities. Those traditions were put to unusual purposes and extreme stress when the disasters happened. They were also challenged by
the new agents of the state who were given extraordinary powers in the wake of the disasters. This dissertation has described how the working-class people who most directly experienced the disasters understood them and their cities starkly differently than the professionalized relief authorities.

The first way that survivors and their rescuers differed were in their experiences of order and disorder after each disaster. Relief managers sought to read their destroyed cities using their progressive ideologies of order, which valued the knowledge of experts, officials, and professionals. Their ideology prevented them from understanding or even seeing the spontaneous order that survivors and relief workers built. This spontaneous order was based not on aimless altruism but on the connections, networks, and practices of daily solidarity that existed before. Soldiers in Halifax worked on rescue and salvage not in response to orders but because they had solidarity with each other and with their civilian neighbors; the militiamen in Salem who responded without their officers were similarly motivated. Halifax women who volunteered at hospitals went with their friends who were doing similar work; their “organization without any organization” was spontaneous in that it was a new application, but it was based on the relationships they had before the explosion. Survivors in both cities went to places and people they used for support and aid in normal times, including doctor’s homes, drug stores, churches, and, most importantly, their families.

The order that the state imposed was not valueless or neutral; it had real political implications. The specifics of its politics were contingent on the specifics of municipal politics in each city. But they were also general: since the Progressive Era was largely about the rise of the middle class, the politics of official, progressive rescue were the
politics of the middle class. This helps to explain the emphasis on professional knowledge, since that type of expertise privileged the middle class. In Salem, the relief effort became a tool of Salem’s Yankee elite in its political battle against an Irish mayor. In Halifax, the Relief Committee continued a national trend that chose efficiency, expertise, and state power over democratic participation.

Both for survivors and for the state, aid represented a series of trades. Aid recipients got material resources in exchange for granting the state power over their lives. Of course, the loss of homes, jobs, and possessions in the disasters made this not a free choice. Thus sinistrés lived in Forest River Camp, accepting shelter and food in exchange for a loss of autonomy and privacy. Halifax survivors took cash and other relief but had to accept investigators’ snooping and social workers’ judgments. Those with more resources—those with greater social capital or economic capital—suffered less intrusion. It was poor women like Rita Mariggi who faced the most difficulty balancing their personal autonomy with their need for the state’s assistance.

For the state, there were also trade offs. The legibility that social workers and other relief authorities tried to impose on their cities allowed the state to function, but it also imposed new demands. This explains the contradiction we saw in Salem, where the state both wanted people in militarized refugee camps, because that made them easier to control, while at the same it time feared that the camps would become permanent. In Halifax, we see it in the handling of housework pensions and family economies. On one hand, social workers tried to understand these complex, informal economies. This meant imposing legibility and, especially, assigning a monetary value to all labor, including domestic labor. At the same time, the HRC sought to limit financial the state’s liability
and responsibility. If it had succeeded in making all labor visible, legible, and monetized, it would have quickly gone bankrupt.

Individuals and families were not passive in the face of the state’s sometimes contradictory claims. Although poor and working-class people had for years engaged in a complex balancing act and negotiation with the state in order to extract the maximum resources while giving up the least autonomy, the Progressive Era was new in that the state signaled that it would now actively pursue rescue and relief as among its core objectives. As the state sought to do more for its citizens, citizens responded by demanding more while at the same time seeking to maintain the practices of informal solidarity in which they had long engaged.

The Progressive Era saw a change in the way states interacted with and understood their citizens. The technocratic state, with its fetishization of experts, desired to help, regulate, and intervene. This challenged the institutions that had previously had these jobs: churches, unions, and fraternal organizations. These organizations handled their challenges in a variety of ways. Churches professionalized. Clergy, with their advanced degrees, professional titles, and well-respected positions had knowledge and authority that was useful both to the technocrats and to their congregants. Churches in Halifax thus adapted by investing greater power in their clergymen. Though parishioners continued to build their own meanings into religious ritual and spaces, as they did with United Memorial Church, they used the authority of their pastors to press their material demands for relief. The relief authorities in both cities, likewise, used clergy to give them the local knowledge they needed to judge applicants.

Unions had less ability than churches to adapt to the new technocratic order.
because the state was more interested in what it presumed to be the disinterested local knowledge of priests and ministers than in the type of knowledge unions could offer. Unions tried various tactics to remain relevant: in Halifax, they broadened their membership and their concerns, most notably to cover reproductive questions of housing and schooling. Ultimately, this was unsuccessful, as the failed 1920 election and strike demonstrated. In Salem, workers at the Naumkeag Steam Cotton Company experimented with collaboration and cooperation with their bosses. In the factory, the union’s knowledge was useful to eke out ever greater productivity. This attempt failed too, though, when the union compromised too much and workers rebelled in 1933.

Fraternal orders adapted to the new times by emulating the progressive state. They centralized and moved away from their traditions of local, mutual aid and toward larger, national systems of depersonalized charity. In Salem in 1914, fraternal connections were still most strongly felt locally and regionally. State-wide fund-raising drives delivered far more money than most orders needed, but they raised that money, for the most part, from nearby brothers, rather than from the national order. Nonetheless, we can see the way orders were already moving away from the local model, since state- and national-level leaders came to Salem to help administer the fraternal relief funds.

If this dissertation has a single thesis, it is that people preferred to rely on the informal and spontaneous aid offered by their friends and relatives rather than on the official and hierarchical relief given by the state and state-like organizations. Moreover, local communities had built into them ordinarily patterns of solidarity and informal practice of support that in times of crisis came alive. Haligonians and Salemites stretched their ordinary practices of community solidarity and support to new ends after each
disaster. Haligonians had always relied on complex family economies. Though the content of these economies often changed after the explosion, for instance when an earner or carer was injured or killed, their structure of mutual support remained the same. French Canadians in Salem built ethnic institutions—particularly the local parish—to maximize both their own political power and the spiritual and material support they received.

Though formal and informal organizations evidenced continuity before, during, and after the disasters, they also changed and adapted. The friends who went with each other to volunteer in Halifax hospitals relied on their preexisting social networks, but they also renegotiated status, hierarchy, and roles once they were working with strangers in the hospital. Parents, siblings, and grown children who opened their houses to shelter their relatives had to alter their relationships with their family members who came to depend on them. Churches and unions found they had to change and adapt to new conditions, as when the pastor of St. Joseph’s Parish in Salem fought to keep his parishioners. Halifax’s unions and churches, too, tried to adapt—successfully and unsuccessfully—to their new terrain. Changes were most obvious for the members of what became United Memorial Church, who built a new sacred institution as a memorial to their dead loved ones. The Halifax Relief Commission represented the a new type of state intervention, dominated by professionals and their disinterested expertise, and churches, unions, and families had to work with and around it.

Understanding the Halifax Relief Commission as the apex of the progressive, technocratic state highlights the central irony of progressive governance. The middle-class and elite outsiders who tried to help—from May Sexton and Thomas Benson in
Halifax to Frank Graves and Montayne Perry’s “Food Man” in Salem—were sincere and heartfelt in their desire to relieve and rescue the disasters’ victims. With the possible exceptions of George S. Campbell’s smug lack of interest in Halifax and Captain Blanchard’s crushing hostility in Salem, the problem was not ill-will but structural inability. They thought that their training, experience, and especially their status as outsiders meant that they possessed the dispassionate expertise to most efficiently and effectively dispense relief and rescue the sufferers. Their centralized and hierarchical relief, however, had the effect of disrupting the informal solidarity practiced by the sufferers themselves. It was their very outsidersness that rendered them unable to see or understand the patterns of support and solidarity that they were disrupting.

When Salemites clashed with National Guardsmen over the rules in refugee camps and when Haligonians refused to leave their wrecked houses to stay in an official shelter, survivors appeared to reject the centralized, formalized, and hierarchical relief the state offered them. In most cases this was not explicit, intentional resistance to the state. Rather, by demanding relief on their own terms and by, when they could, choosing solidarity over charity, the sinistrés and explosion survivors resisted the ideological, intellectual, and organizational trends of the Progressive Era. In a period of increased middle-class dominance, of the rise of the professional expert, and of the ever-growing emphasis on managerial efficiency, survivors’ choices to reject those things constitutes resistance to the growing progressive state.

Halifax’s North End and Salem’s Point district were both borderlands neighborhoods. Their obvious differences—one in Canada, one in the United States, one French-Canadian, one English-Canadian, one a city at war, one in peace, one a city that
sent migrants, one that received them—pale in comparison to their similarities. They were linked by people, by ideas, and by region. Halifax’s progressive reformers looked toward Boston at least as much as they looked at Toronto or Montreal, just as Nova Scotia’s emigrants picked as their destination the Boston States more than they did Upper Canada. Studying Salem and Halifax together brings to the fore the counterintuitive contours of the Maritime and Quebec diasporas and the ways Salemites and Haligonians understood and experienced migration and the border. The stories of the Salem fire and Halifax explosion emphasize the importance of studying American and Canadian history together, not only comparatively but as a transnational, North American whole.

Ties of literal and figurative kinship bound together Massachusetts and Nova Scotia. These ties encouraged people living in the former to donate money to Halifax relief and sometimes even to travel there to help. More importantly, their donations allowed Haligonians who felt slighted by the insufficient aid they received from the Relief Commission to appeal through another channel. Despite the national border that ran between the Maritimes and New England, migration, family ties, and the Massachusetts-Halifax Relief Committee helped to create a political community that existed in both countries. The map available at [http://www.duke.edu/~jar20/maps](http://www.duke.edu/~jar20/maps) of cities from which inquiries arrived at the Halifax Information Bureau is a graphical and geographic representation of that community. The density of inquiries from New England, especially in comparison to those from central and western Canada, highlights the importance of studying the Maritimes in their North American, rather than purely Canadian, context. This does not mean that the Canadian context is unimportant—the religious, union, and political choices made by Haligonians in their unions and churches
were particularly Canadian—but it does mean that a national perspective is decidedly incomplete.

If the explosion shows the importance of diaspora to the lives of those still in Halifax, the Salem fire shows the perhaps surprising lack of importance of the broader diaspora to Franco-Americans in Salem. Refugees from the Point for the most part chose to stay in neighboring cities rather than go to larger French-Canadian diasporic centers. French Canadians elsewhere showed a corresponding lack of interest, raising little money for their compatriots’ benefit and, in the case of the Rimouski newspaper, not even covering the fire. This was not, however, evidence of assimilation, since French Canadians in Salem fought to retain their ethnic parish and crafted a particularly French-Canadian industrial union. Paradoxically, although diaspora is by definition a translocal phenomenon, Salem’s French Canadians appear to have created a deeply local diasporic culture.

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Disasters exposed the tensions of the Progressive Era and the growth of the interventionist state. The state and its actors in the military and in civilian relief bureaucracies sought to impose order on what they imagined to be a chaotic social landscape. This brought them into conflict with the very people whom they sought to help. Working-class people had durable and effective modes of support of their own, and

13 I borrow the term translocal from Thomas A. Tweed, Our Lady of the Exile: Diasporic Religion at a Cuban Catholic Shrine in Miami (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).
while they wanted the increased material resources that the state brought, they did not want to cede power to the state. These conflicts were resolved through contestation, negotiation, and compromise. Some of this took place at societal or institutional levels, but some took place individually. Workers in Halifax sought to have a voice in the relief process through their unions, but they were repeatedly rebuffed. In Salem, French Canadians sought to influence municipal government by backing the successful recall of Mayor John F. Hurley. Individuals and families contested the order imposed by the state either literally by demanding more relief or through the choices they made to rely more on their families than on officials. “The people” for whom reformers claimed to speak had their own alternative modes of support and rescue that they quickly and effectively mobilized in times of crisis, but which remained illegible to elites.

The stories of the Salem and Halifax disasters are relevant to the history of the Progressive Era because they show the ways the objects of progressive rescue responded and resisted. They are also relevant to contemporary disaster relief. By seeking the very earliest beginnings of the modern disaster relief system, we can better understand the conflicts and tensions inherent in it. Most important is to understand the way that rescue and relief are always and unavoidably political because they are always inherently about the distribution of societal resources and about power. Planners, reformers, and relief professionals should be humble, remembering that the objects of their assistance have local knowledge that is inaccessible to them. Practically, the Salem and Halifax disasters explain why outside and hierarchical relief is sometimes unsuccessful, and why some people appear to “reject” the help offered by outsiders. Because of the importance of organic and spontaneous organizations and communities in responding to disasters, the
ingredients for healthy and strong communities in ordinary times—high social capital and dense social networks—also make them resilient to disasters. The best disaster policy is to build strong, multilayered communities in which friends, neighbors, and family-members look out for each other and have the resources to help in an emergency.

The Salem and Halifax disasters represent a critical turning point in the history of urban destruction from industrial fires to wartime explosions. In nineteenth century urban North America, industrial fires had been common. In 1918, a Canadian government researcher counted 528 urban conflagrations worldwide between 1815 and 1915, causing $2 billion in damages. The United States and Canada accounted for 55% of these, a total of 290 great fires, costing a total of $1.4 billion. Although the decline of candle light, wood heat, and volunteer firefighting had, by the mid-nineteenth century, changed the nature of urban fire to make each one a less threatening prospect, urban conflagrations continued. In the thirty-five years prior to Salem’s fire, Chicago (1871), Boston (1872), Seattle (1889), St. John’s, Nfld. (1892), Hull and Ottawa (1900), Jacksonville, Fla. (1901), Toronto (1904), Baltimore (1904), San Francisco (1906), and Chelsea, Mass. (1908), among others, had all suffered major conflagrations. Changes in

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14 I take the concept of resilience from Lawrence Vale and Thomas Campanella, eds., The Resilient City: How Modern Cities Recover from Disaster (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).


building and firefighting meant that in the twentieth century, large-scale urban fires declined drastically. If the Salem fire was not the last of its kind, it was among the last. That at most six people died in Salem testifies to the strides made in containing and fighting fires, even when fire departments could not ultimately save property.\footnote{Bertram E. Ames, “Report No. 150 on Conflagration, Salem, Mass., June 25, 1914,” T.S. report to Underwriters’ Bureau of New England, E S1 F6 1914;5, Phillips Library, Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Mass.} In 1942, the National Fire Protection Association published a list of North American conflagrations since 1914, a recognition that Salem was a turning point in the history of urban fires.\footnote{Conflagrations in America since 1914: A Record of the Principal Conflagrations in the United States and Canada since the Burning of Salem (Boston: National Fire Protection Association, [1942]).} In 1951, the organization published a list of major conflagrations in the first half of the twentieth century. After 1914, only one urban fire came close to Salem’s in the number of buildings burned or the estimated dollar amount of damages: a fire in Astoria, Oregon, in 1922 that destroyed thirty city blocks and caused $10 million in damages.\footnote{“Conflagrations in America Since 1900,” Part II, Quarterly of the National Fire Protection Association 44 (April 1951), 23-33.}

Instead of the accidental fires of the nineteenth century, the rest of the twentieth century witnessed deliberate urban conflagrations as acts of war, as in Coventry, Dresden, Tokyo, and of course Hiroshima and Nagasaki. All sides of the Second World War unleashed massive, unprecedented violence on cities. Geographer Kenneth Hewitt estimates that strategic bombing destroyed 39% of Germany’s total urban area and an astounding 50% of Japan’s. Neither these statistics nor the equally startling numbers of the dead and bombed out (60,595 dead and 750,000 homeless in the U.K., 550,000 and 7,500,000, respectively in Germany, and 500,000 and 8,300,000 in Japan) adequately
convey the destruction of families, communities, and institutions that came with these urban attacks. Twentieth century wars, their technology, and their ideology created a special brand of horror, which made their urban destructions starkly different from the industrial fires of the nineteenth century.21

The Halifax explosion was not intentional, but as a war-time explosion, it has much in common with these later attacks and at the time was imagined as akin to the destruction of battlefield towns in France. In but one expression of that perceived equivalence, a Montreal firm published a postcard of ruins in Halifax with the caption, “Utter Desolation and Devastation so Complete that this Picture might have been taken on the Battlefield of France” (figure 3).22 Though they could not know it then, Haligonians were witnesses to a new type of urban destruction.

If urban destruction in the nineteenth century was largely a result of industrial accidents and that of the twentieth century from war, the twenty-first century will likely be a period of meteorological and seismological disasters. While there remains scientific disagreement about the effect of climate change on the frequency and intensity of hurricanes, there is mounting evidence that global warming has contributed to a greater proportion of storms being particularly bad. Global warming also contributes to other meteorological disasters, like floods, heat waves, and droughts.23 Moreover, the chronic


22 Photograph MP207.1.184/28, M89.10.3, Halifax Explosion Photograph Collection, Maritime Museum of the Atlantic.

effects of global warming, especially coastal erosion, means that cities are less able to withstand extreme storms and floods.24 As always, the social effects of these “natural” disasters are felt most by the poor, both globally and within developed countries.25 Hurricane Katrina presaged an era of increased danger to coastal cities.

Seismological disasters, too, will likely become worse this century. In the twentieth century, urbanization in relatively rich countries led to a decline in the fatality rates of earthquakes, thanks to improved building codes and other infrastructural advantages of cities. But urbanization in poorer countries has not been accompanied by stronger buildings and better infrastructure. To the contrary, globally poor cities are marked by construction that even in ordinary times is shoddy and dangerous and by infrastructure that is inadequate even absent a disaster. The massive growth of cities in poor, seismically active countries, something that happened rapidly in the latter part of the twentieth century and will only accelerate in the twenty-first, will almost certainly lead to an increased rate of fatalities per earthquake. Cities in what geologists call the Alpine/Himalayan/Indonesian collision zone that runs along the southern edge of the Eurasian tectonic plate—a region where, already, 85% of all earthquake fatalities occur—are in particular danger. The Port-au-Prince earthquake in January 2010 provided a particularly shocking example of what powerful earthquakes can do to cities in a poor

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countries. Frighteningly, Port-au-Prince is not even a large city on a global scale, nor is the Caribbean among the most seismicly active regions on the planet. A major earthquake in a third-world megacity would be even more staggering in its human cost.\(^{26}\) As with the meteorological disasters that will come as a result of global warming, this century’s earthquakes will be worse for poorer countries than for richer ones and worse still for the comparatively poor within each country.

In this new era of urban disasters, understanding the survival strategies and techniques that people employed in past disasters becomes particularly important. As governments and international state-like organizations take an increasing responsibility to protect and rescue all people from disasters, we need a better understanding not just of the resources and benefits they bring to rescue, but also of their blind spots and deterrents, what they erase, flatten, and take away. Future disasters may be precipitated by the weather or by plate tectonics, but they and their effects will remain social. The experience of order and disorder in cities, the responses of civil society, and the adequacy of the state to handle disasters do not depend on their cause. Analysis of Salem and Halifax helps to clarify the spontaneous organization we saw in New Orleans and Port-au-Prince.\(^{27}\) The examination of controversies and contestations in the wake of historical


disasters likewise helps us to understand why survivors of contemporary disasters appear to reject the rescue offered by the state or by outsiders, and it contributes to a model of how contemporary disaster planners should interact with civil society.
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Biography

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