



P.O. Box 1749  
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**Item No.**

**Peninsula Community Council  
April 16, 2012**

**TO:** Mayor Kelly and Members of Halifax Regional Council

**SUBMITTED BY:**

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Peter Stickings".

Peter Stickings, A/Director, Planning & Infrastructure

**DATE:** March 2012

**SUBJECT:** **Historic Irishtown Special District Signage Project**

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### **INFORMATION REPORT**

#### **ORIGIN**

At its June 13, 2011, meeting, Peninsula Community Council passed a motion to forward a presentation from the Irish Association of Nova Scotia, also known as An Cumann, regarding the recognition of "Irishtown" to staff for a report.

#### **BACKGROUND**

An Cumann submitted a letter and made a brief presentation at the June 13, 2011, Peninsula Community Council meeting. They requested the support of Council in recognizing historic Irishtown in downtown Halifax. The request is one of a number of initiatives by the non-profit association to acknowledge the historic role of the Irish in the settlement and development of Nova Scotia communities. An Cumann consulted with local historian, Dr. Terry Punch, to outline the history and development of Halifax's Irishtown. Irishtown, at its peak, was located east of Barrington Street toward the harbour, and from Prince Street to the end of Hollis Street. See the approximate bounds of Irishtown in Attachment 1.

An Cumann proposed a signage project to identify and recognize historic Irishtown. They relate that such a project would serve to recognize both the historic Irish immigrant community and the diversity of local history in HRM. HRM Staff met with the group and Dr. Punch to discuss the details of this project. They have requested that HRM cover the capital costs associated with the signage project in the amount of \$3,500. This will be funded from an already approved project account. An Cumann will cover any other associated costs in the approximate amount of \$2,000.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **1.0 Historical Significance**

Dr. Terry Punch's historic background research into the significance of Irishtown is included as Attachment 2. He relates that the Irish formed an identifiable group in the early foundation of Halifax and that the Irish Gaelic language was spoken and heard regularly. The Irish were actively engaged in the fishing industry in downtown Halifax but moved out to fishing villages such as Ketch Harbour, beginning in the 1760s.

A second wave of Irish immigrants began to repopulate downtown Halifax, in the 1830s, as the local economy developed. Between 1860 and 1890, Irishtown was in its prime. Over 50% of residents along the lengths of Lower Water and Salter Streets were Irish. There was also a significant Irish presence along Bishop, Sackville, Prince, Bedford Row, Hollis and Granville. The Irish were the majority of the population in downtown Halifax, at this time, and it became known collectively as "Irishtown". Downtown Halifax was never a ghetto: defined as a socially or economically disadvantaged area consisting of a single ethnic or minority group. The residential population of downtown Halifax was middle class and multi-cultural, even at that time. Dr. Punch relates that the Irish arrived as immigrants seeking a new life in Halifax. By and large, they were not part of the major diaspora linked to the potato blight in Ireland between 1845 and 1852.

Dr. Punch relates that from 1890 onward, downtown Halifax lost much of its residential character as the area was converted for other uses, especially commercial. The Irish residents made significant contributions to social life and economic prosperity, especially in the port industry and commercial waterfront. Today, An Cumann wishes to recognize the contributions of the Irish community to the greater HRM community by publically recognizing historic Irishtown.

### **2.0 Policy Analysis**

Regional Council adopted the Neighbourhood and Special District Signage policy in 2008. It is now administered by Community & Recreation Services. The purpose of special district signs is to identify a special district, provide heritage and cultural information, and demarcate the district's boundary. The policy defines a special district as an official or unofficial cultural district. The Barrington Street Heritage Conservation District is an example of an official cultural district, designated under the Heritage Property Act. As it has no formal designation, Council can recognize historic Irishtown as an unofficial cultural district under the Special District Signage policy, provided that it meets certain policy criteria. The Special District Signage policy defines an unofficial cultural district as follows:

A Cultural District is a geographically defined area that conveys a special sense of time and place through a concentration of buildings, structures, and spaces. A district will have a sense of a connectedness through past events or use and have an appearance of visual cohesion and characteristics that set it apart.

Irishtown was primarily residential but also included industrial and commercial uses, concentrated along the waterfront. Most residential buildings in downtown Halifax were replaced by commercial structures, beginning in the 1890s and continuing to the present time. However, the section of Hollis

Street between Morris and Bishop, is the only existing example of how a residential streetscape would have appeared between 1860 and 1890, when Irishtown was at its prime. This particular section of Hollis Street also lies at the centre of the original Irishtown of the 1750s, where Irish immigrants lived and worked in the fishing industry of the time (Attachment 1).

This section of Hollis Street includes several Georgian style houses including the Alex Mclean House and William DeBlois House, municipal heritage properties. Along this section of Hollis, there are also several more municipal heritage properties including a high proportion of early nineteenth century houses of stone construction. The streetscape represents the evolution of residential ownership trends in downtown Halifax. Wealthy merchants, with positions in government, first settled the area and resided in the neighbourhood until the end of the 1800s. When commercial activity on the waterfront increased, the wealthy residents left this area and the neighbourhood was used by middle-class residents, including many Irish, until the 1940s. At this time, many of the residences were converted into rooming houses and apartments. The revitalization of downtown Halifax in the 1970s was the catalyst for the restoration of this block.

This block is located within an area identified by the Downtown Halifax Secondary MPS as "Precinct 2: Barrington Street South". The MPS also identifies this precinct as a potential municipal heritage conservation district. It identifies the vision for this precinct as downtown's southern gateway to provide for a transition in scale and intensity between the downtown and the established low-rise residential areas to the south and west. The low to mid-rise heights and concentration of impressive historic buildings will serve as a renewed community focus for the surrounding neighbourhoods and lend to the precinct's traditional "European" charm and character.

This section of Hollis, reflecting the form of historic Irishtown, is adjacent to an area identified by the Downtown Halifax Secondary MPS as "Precinct 1: Southern Waterfront". It is up the hill from the adaptively reused and integrated power plant facility, a landmark development of signature architectural quality. The vision for this precinct includes new waterfront plazas framed by new potential cultural attractions at the foot of Morris Street and Marginal Road. It seeks to stimulate pedestrian movement throughout the area. The southern waterfront is a precinct defined by the Harbour, with open spaces along the Halifax Harbourwalk at the end of the streets leading to the Harbour. Lower Water Street will have great sidewalks, landscaping and a streetwall that emphasizes its meandering qualities. Pedestrian-oriented retail shops and services will frame open spaces.

### **3.0 Administration**

An Cumann has related to staff that they endorse a signage project that would include an interpretive panel on municipal property, and signs with the label "Historic Irishtown" placed on existing street signs to demarcate the special district delineated by the following streets: Bishop, Hollis, Morris, and Lower Water. See the proposed boundary of the special district signage project outlined in Attachment 1.

The HRM Asset Naming Administrative Order does not apply because this project does not seek to name new municipally owned streets, land, or buildings. Nor does this project seek to change the names of any existing municipally owned assets. The aim of this project is to identify a cultural district, demarcate its boundary, and provide heritage and cultural information relating to it.

The main concern of HRM Traffic & Right-of-Way Services relates to downtown sign clutter and increased maintenance costs. There is a great deal of demand for signage in downtown Halifax due to the high rate of pedestrian and vehicle traffic. Organizations offering commercial, cultural, and social services all compete for sign real estate to promote their own particular brand of service or interest in the area. Such competing interests can result in a large number of signs of varying shapes, sizes, and colours that can be unattractive or disorienting to the general public, especially where no design guidelines exist for signage. Distinctive street signs can also be costly to replace if damaged or stolen. Traffic & Right-of-Way Services relates that the way to avoid sign clutter and increased operational costs, is to use a simple design that is cost effective and easily reproducible.

The Traffic & Right-of-Way Services' sign shop will produce and install the street sign labels employing a simple and cost effective design. Special District Signage, Policy 4.1, states that HRM will maintain an annual operating budget for the maintenance of special district signage. An Cumann has requested that HRM cover a portion of the capital costs associated with the signage project. HRM will provide the total amount of \$3,500, consistent with previous special district signage projects in Fisherman's Cove and the Hydrostone Neighbourhood. The group will cover all remaining costs.

Tenants and property owners, in and around the proposed special district, may have concerns with this signage project. These potential concerns remain unaddressed. An Cumann has expressed, they will prepare and undertake a community engagement exercise, if Council decides that such consultation is necessary.

## **CONCLUSION**

The proposed signage project would serve to recognize the historic Irish immigrant community and the diversity of local history in HRM. The project would identify a cultural district, demarcate the boundary, and provide heritage and cultural information.

This particular downtown block meets the definition of an unofficial cultural district as it conveys a special sense of time and place through a concentration of buildings, structures, and spaces that date back to a time when Irishtown was at its prime. The district would connect past – and existing – residential uses along Hollis, Morris, and Bishop Streets with past – and existing – commercial/industrial uses along Lower Water Street, through an appearance of visual cohesion and characteristics that set it apart.

The signage project would help to further the visions for precincts 1 and 2, as identified in the Downtown Halifax MPS. It would provide an identifiable southern gateway for downtown Halifax while attracting public attention to the concentration of impressive historic buildings. It would serve as a renewed community focus for the surrounding neighbourhoods and lend to its traditional “European” charm and character. The interpretive panel would serve as a new cultural attraction at the foot of Morris Street and the street sign labels would stimulate pedestrian movement and, in turn, pedestrian-oriented retail shops and services in the area.

Council may wish to direct staff to pursue this project further. Staff may provide guidance to An Cumann as they prepare and undertake a community engagement exercise, if Council decides that such consultation is necessary.

### **BUDGET IMPLICATIONS**

There are no budget implications for this project.

### **FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT POLICIES/BUSINESS PLAN**

This report complies with the Municipality's Multi-Year Financial Strategy, the approved Operating, Project and Reserve budgets, policies and procedures regarding withdrawals from the utilization of Project and Operating reserves, as well as any relevant legislation.

### **COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

An Cumann has expressed that they will prepare and undertake a community engagement exercise, if Council decides that such consultation is necessary. This proposed community engagement process will comply with the HRM Community Engagement Strategy. Council will be informed of the results of community consultations after completion.

### **ATTACHMENTS**

- Attachment 1 – Approximate Bounds of Irishtown
- Attachment 2 – Historic Background of Irishtown: There Were Two

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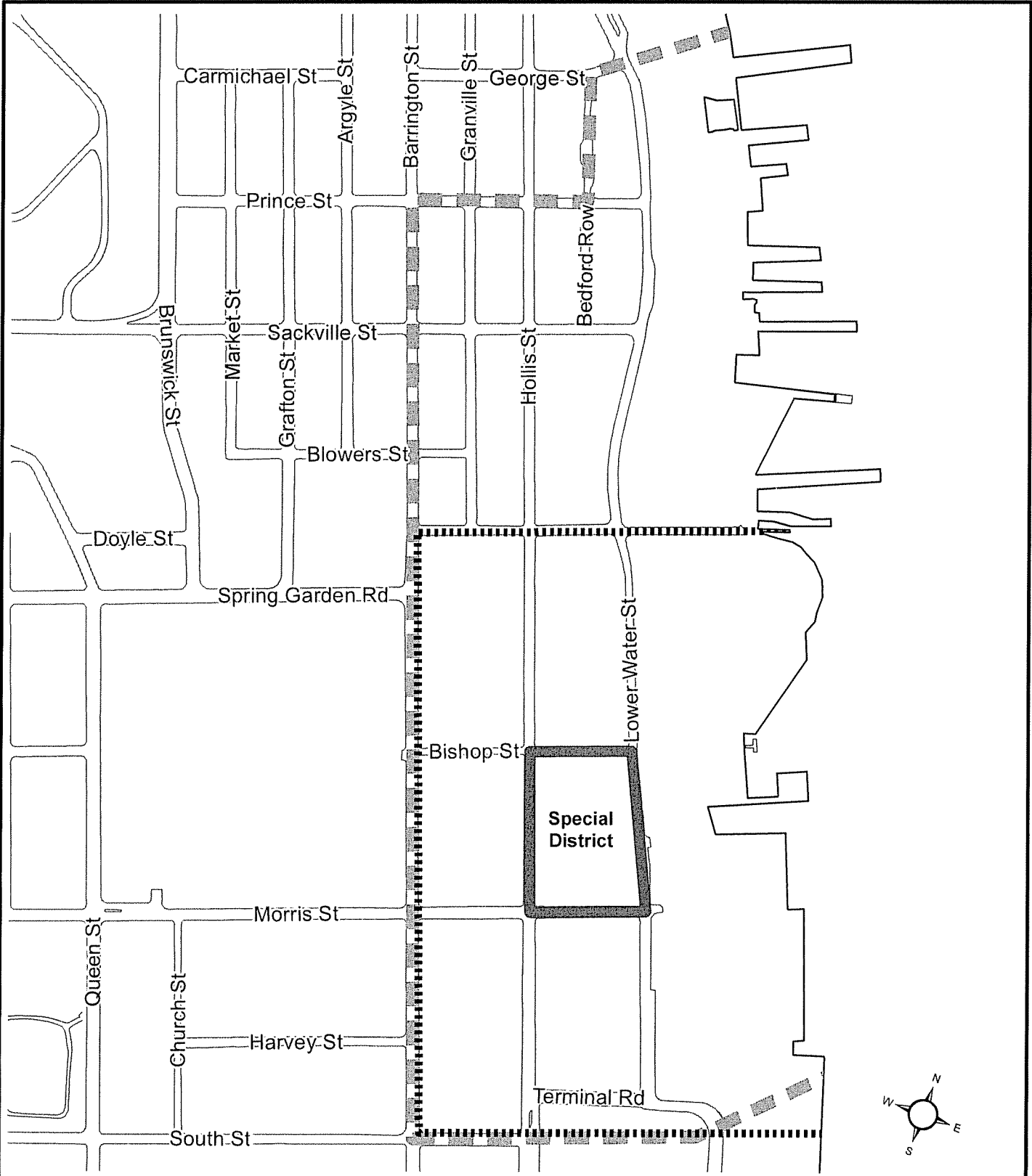
A copy of this report can be obtained online at <http://www.halifax.ca/council/agendasc/cagenda.html> then choose the appropriate meeting date, or by contacting the Office of the Municipal Clerk at 490-4210, or Fax 490-4208.

Report Prepared by: Seamus McGreal 490-5113

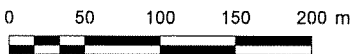
Report Approved by:

  
Austin French, Manager of Planning Services, 490-6717

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**Approximate Location of  
Irishtown in 1750s and  
1880s**



- Special District - Signage Project Boundary
- Approx. 1750s Irishtown Boundary
- Approx. 1880s Irishtown Boundary

**HALIFAX**  
REGIONAL MUNICIPALITY

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT  
HERITAGE AND DESIGN SERVICES

HRM does not guarantee the accuracy  
of any representation on this plan

## **HISTORIC BACKGROUND OF IRISHTOWN: THERE WERE TWO**

**– Terrence M. Punch, FRSAI, FIGRS --**

**Halifax was founded in 1749. The first settlement clustered up the slope between the Harbour and Citadel Hill, and from about the location of Scotia Square and the Cogswell Interchange to about where St. Mary's Basilica now stands. Fearing attack, the British surrounded this small grid of streets with a palisade and a series of wooden blockhouses.**

**The climate here was more severe than people from southern England were used to, and the method of building suited to North American winters was unfamiliar. The settlement party had been hastily gathered by authorities who made little effort at what we'd call quality control. The collection of debtors, tradesmen down on their luck and ex-servicemen was not promising material to carve a town out of a pine forest on the side of a hill. There was wholesale desertion from the outset, and contagious disease thinned the ranks further in the next few years. Foreign Protestants, mainly German, were recruited as a replacement population. While most of them were removed to Lunenburg in 1753, some remained and lived generally in the area outside the palisade along what became Brunswick and Gottingen streets, as far as what was appropriately called North Street. The English called the north suburb "Dutch Town".**

**The Irish formed another identifiable group in early Halifax. A New Englander who had studied law at the Dublin bar, Jonathan Belcher, claimed in 1756 that the language of the Halifax streets was "wild Irish". He was using the customary English expression for Irish Gaelic. This Irish population was transient and mostly engaged in fishing. Only a handful were more permanent residents. These fisherfolk erected their cabins in an area stretching south of the town palisade, and lying conveniently alongside the harbour as far as the logically named South Street. The English referred to that district as "Irish Town".**

This terminology lost any relevance after the 1760s, as fishing communities grew up at a distance from Halifax town, at places such as Prospect, Ketch Harbour and so forth. Those fishing villages assumed an Irish character as fishing families from Newfoundland or directly from Ireland formed their nucleus. Halifax's first Irish Town, very similar in location to that of a century later, had no continuing existence between 1760 and the 1830s.

Halifax had its first significant geographical expansion during the 1830s as it finally found its economic feet, and immigration from Ireland necessitated growth beyond the confined space between Citadel and Harbour. Maynards Fields developed a northern suburb bounded by the Common, North Street, Gottingen Street and the Citadel. A similar southern suburb grew up in Schmidville, bounded by the Citadel, Park Street, Morris Street and the Old Burying Ground. East of that was the area of the late nineteenth-century Irishtown.

Irishtown grew up where it did, no thanks at all to the fact that three generations earlier, an Irish Town had covered much of the same area. Economic and transportation history offer the explanation for why a second aggregation came to inhabit that neighbourhood.

The Halifax waterfront, from the Naval Yard to the shore facing Georges Island, was substantially rebuilt between 1825 and 1835, and dozens of wharves reached long fingers into the Harbour. Sailing vessels, ranging from West Indiamen to coastal schooners, tied up alongside. Loading and unloading cargoes, warehousing goods, and delivering them within the town, were all labour intensive jobs. In a town of about 15,000 souls in 1838, 511 labourers, 92 crewmen on vessels, and 58 truckmen were listed among the heads of families in a census. By my actual count, 41 of the 58 truckmen were identifiably Irish. Men with names like John Brown defy easy classification. What we see is a labour force that was predominantly linked to activity in the Harbour.



Most, if not all, of us here this evening, drove here in an automobile or a city bus. Until late in the nineteenth century Halifax had no regular public transit system, and ordinary employees did not own carriages and riding horses. The working week was customarily six days long, and each day was 11-12 hours in length with a break at midday. Men walked to work, carrying their lunch with them. That was not so rare in Halifax down to the 1940s. The reason the city's north end was considered working class owed to the fact that many employees at the Dockyard, Shipyard and, until 1917, a range of factories and the main railway station and freight yards spread along the waterfront in that part of the city. Between the 1830s and the 1880s it was that same need to live close to the workplace that encouraged a working class neighbourhood to develop along the harbour front and up the hill for a few blocks behind Lower Water Street. Since, by 1880, about 40% of Halifax's population was ethnically Irish, it cannot come as much of a surprise to learn that in 1884, 40% of the population of Irish Town was Irish.

The only surprise is that the percentage was not even higher. Since street listings in directories only name householders, it would require a name by name study of a contemporary census (1881) to determine the precise proportion of Irish in that district. I think that once roomers and boarders and crewmen who spent much of the time at sea were counted in, the Irish percentage would rise closer to 50% in that neighbourhood. On Lower water and Salter Street, the Irish exceeded that, even just counting householders.

I'd like to run through a few figures from the 1870s and 1880s with you at this point, before proceeding to take a quick look at the early twentieth century as it affected the area.

## IRISHTOWN STREETS, HALIFAX, 1873/74 and 1884/85

Figures were reached by identifying Irish people resident in inhabited buildings. The City Directories do not specify the number of individual residents in each building, so the figures represent the number of householders. For purposes of detecting population trends, two directories a dozen years apart were used. Since the area studied coincided to a good extent with the expanding use of the old downtown for business purposes as opposed to residential use, the overall number of inhabited structures fell from 535 in 1873/74 to 489 in 1884/85. Some of the 489 buildings were being used mainly for commercial or professional purposes, but contained quarters for a caretaker or janitor. Such accommodations were counted as inhabited buildings for purposes of this survey.

The streets considered fall within the area commonly referred to as "Irishtown" in the period between Confederation and the Halifax Explosion, say the half century 1867 - 1917. Apart from Lower Water Street, five north-south streets were counted: Bedford Row, Hollis, Granville, Barrington and its southern extension, Pleasant Street. These were examined house by house from Prince or George Street to the area where the modern railway station is located. Eight east-west streets included are South, Fawson, Morris, Bishop (formerly Wallace), Salter, Blowers, Sackville, and Gas Lane. All or relevant portions of fourteen streets have been surveyed for this purpose.

The following table shows the identifiable Irish numbers and percentages for the several streets within this survey. The area is contained approximately within a roughly rectangular section of the Halifax Downtown stretching southwards. The western limit was the centre line of Barrington and Pleasant streets. The eastern limit was the Harbour. The northern limit was Prince Street, except for Bedford Row and Lower Water which were taken to the square that used to surround the ferry landing. The southern limit was Gas Lane, around the end of Hollis and up South Street to Pleasant. This would amount to between 18 and 20 city blocks and the wharf frontage along the harbour.

In assigning Irish ethnicity no distinction was made between those actually born in Ireland or householders with Irish names but who were themselves the children or grandchildren of Irish-born people. Similarly, I have not distinguished between those who were Roman Catholics and those who were not. Again, the social spectrum within the Irish population can easily be seen, since within the district resided several Irish labourers and stevedores and also Rev. James B. Uniacke, Sir Edward Kenny and Sir Malachy Bowes Daly, a future lieutenant-governor of the province. My sole criterion for counting anyone as Irish was the fact that he or his ancestors had been born in Ireland.

**IRISHTOWN STREET BY STREET**

STREET NAMES	1873/1874			1884/1885			Change 1873/74-1884/85
	"Irish"	Total Houses	Percentage	"Irish"	Total Houses	Percentage	
	Lower Water (all)	83	154	54%	82	136	
Salter (all)	7	14	50%	6	11	54%	(1)
Blowers (part)	2	8	25%	5	10	50%	3
Sackville (part)	6	32	18%	14	30	48%	3
Bishop (all)	4	17	23%	6	14	43%	2
Granville (part)	13	52	25%	21	50	42%	8
Bedford Row (all)	14	41	34%	15	44	34%	1
Pleasant (east side)	1	18	4%	6	21	29%	5
Hollis (part)	18	132	14%	31	109	28%	13
Barrington (east side)	8	21	38%	5	21	24%	(3)
Gas Lane (all)	2	7	28%	1	5	20%	(1)
South (part)	3	8	38%	1	6	17%	(2)
Fawson (all)	2	8	25%	1	9	11%	(1)
Morris (part)	0	23	0	2	23	9%	2
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>163</b>	<b>535</b>	<b>30.5%</b>	<b>196</b>	<b>489</b>	<b>40.1%</b>	<b>+27</b>

SUBMITTED TO AD CUMANN  
- CERRENCE M. PUNCH, 3 DECEMBER 2009

## THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

The conversion of the downtown from residential to commercial and professional use accelerated markedly between 1887 and 1903. Whereas there had been 489 buildings inhabited by households or at least by live-in caretakers in 1887, a decade and a half later the number of such premises had fallen by thirty percent to 343. In both years, some of those buildings were multi-unit structures, or even tenements. The trend away from residential use continued. The relevant section of Barrington Street still had eleven inhabited buildings in 1903. By 1909, the number had fallen to nine, and by 1920 to just four.

Due to the failure of contemporary census returns to connect names with specific addresses, it would be a very tedious and lengthy process to identify the inhabitants of the area to obtain an accurate total of residents within the specified area, let alone what number of them were of Irish origins. If one used the simple statistical yardstick that an average household at the time consisted of 5 persons, then the Irishtown area had about 2700 residents in 1873, of whom about 800 were Irish. By 1885 the population had fallen to 2450, of whom 950 were Irish. That was the high point of the Irish presence, it seems, as by 1903, only 1700 people lived in the district, and possibly 625 of them were Irish. The area's population was shrinking in the last few decades of the nineteenth century, a process which continued into the twentieth century. From being 40% of 2450 people in 1885, the Irish represented 36% of 1700 people by 1903. In short, the Irish had become a smaller portion of a smaller total population within the 18 or 20 blocks studied.

By 1903, no Irish people at all resided in Gas Lane, Fawson Street or the lower end of South Street, and only one on Morris Street between Pleasant Street and the Harbour. Pleasant Street had become a street inhabited by

professional men and major business owners, and of the 29 households only one was Irish. On Hollis Street, south of Morris, only three householders were Irish, though curiously the trio included a stevedore and a future Canadian Senator! What this adds up to is that the southern end of the former Irishtown had lost any slim claim it had ever had to be included properly within Irishtown. Five "Irish" out of approximately 75 households in that part of the district is so slight as to be meaningless in claiming it for Irishtown. The most unequivocal streets within Irishtown were Lower Water, Bishop, and Salter streets and Bedford Row, all four in their entirety. The blocks of Sackville, Prince and Blowers street east of Barrington Street also fit the pattern, as do a few city blocks on Hollis and Granville streets.

There seems little reason to imagine that the area resumed a residential character as the twentieth century progressed. Anyone more than 50 years old and remembers Halifax before 1960 is well aware that inhabited homes had ceased to exist in that area. The only residents were occupants of the occasional flat or rooms above or behind a business or shop. Therefore, Irishtown was in its prime between about 1860 and 1890, and then began to lose its Irish character as well as its general population as the area was converted to other uses.