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Proposal for a Public History Display in Halifax: Commemorating Dr. John Slayter Following the McNab's Island Cholera Outbreak of 1866

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The subject of the following proposition aims to receive provincial permission for the construction of a historically informative public display in memory of Doctor John Theodore Harding Slayter (April 7, 1830 – April 17, 1866) who was Chief Health Officer for the Port of Halifax at the time of his death. A commemorative historical display would aim to educate and familiarize public audiences with the accomplishments and selflessness of Dr. Slayter throughout the extended visitation of the emigrant steamship named the *S.S. England*. The ship made an emergency stop in the Halifax Harbour on the early morning of April 9th, 1866, carrying an extensive number of Cholera-infected passengers from overseas. Dr. Slayter not only played a significant role in the protection of Nova Scotia and its citizens from the spread of Cholera by halting the vessel’s movement from entering further into the harbour, and in doing so containing the illness to McNab’s Island (which is a large Island located just before Point Pleasant Park and Shearwater), but he also worked tirelessly alongside his team to temporarily shelter, care for, and potentially cure, the overseas passengers of the *England*. Dr. Slayter ultimately succumbed to the very disease he sought to cure, marking him as the only Nova Scotian and last new case of Cholera to die on McNab’s Island during the events of the outbreak.¹ The commemorative public display is proposed to be erected as a rectangular prism-shaped structure along the Halifax waterfront and boardwalk, overlooking the similar silhouette of McNab’s Island that Dr. Slayter himself would have likely seen during his departure from the mainland of Halifax. The display plans to include a brief, yet informative overview of the 1866 cholera outbreak on McNab’s Island that appeals to both local communities and tourist visitation, a biography of Dr. Slayter and his efforts during the crisis, and visuals that are user-friendly to a broad audience, such as a photo of Dr. Slayter, a current map showcasing the current location of the display in comparison

¹ Ian Cameron. “Halifax and the Cholera Epidemic of 1866,” in *The Nova Scotia Medical Bulletin*, 1984, p. 153.

to McNab's Island, and other relevant materials such as labeled photos of the *S.S. England*, and notable landmarks in relation to the events (and how to currently visit them). A commemorative display surrounding the personal sacrifice of Dr. Slayter and his efforts within the struggles of the 1866 cholera outbreak are beyond deserving of public presentation to reestablish the historical memory of Dr. Slayter as a Nova Scotian citizen and hero.

In early April 1866, the *S.S. England* partook on a relatively routine departure from Liverpool, England, with a charter planned to arrive at the shores of New York after their travels overseas. On this charter, the steamer travelled across the Atlantic Ocean carrying a total of 1,260 passengers, and a working crew of 100, however population numbers began to dwindle at a rapid pace once Asiatic cholera was identified roughly five days after the vessel's departure.² After Captain Grace Master of the *England* heard tell of both passenger and working engineers experiencing symptoms of infection, he determined that the best course of action would be to make an emergency detour towards the Halifax Harbour, in fear that the ship would no longer make it to its intended destination in time. The ship's arrival to Nova Scotia's shores on April 9th of that same year revealed the unforgiving nature of the disease; Provincial Secretary and Nova Scotia Premier Charles Tupper – now known most famously today as one of the Founding Father's of Canadian Confederation – identified that the increased spread of cholera aboard the *England* had likely resulted from crews barring the ship's hatches in preparation for a severe storm that had developed on-route for a total of three consecutive days.³ Furthermore, overcrowded passenger arrangements paired with poor sanitation practices ultimately led to the

² W. B. Wallace. "Halifax Heroes: The Story of a Pestilence," in *The Canadian Magazine*, vol 5: issue 3, 1895, p. 1.

³ Madeline Fowler. "From Empire to Colony: The Halifax Cholera Outbreaks of 1834 and 1866," in *Acadiensis: Journal of the History of the Atlantic Region*, vol 47: issue 2, 2018, p. 62.

creation of a breeding ground for infectious disease.⁴ By the fifth day of travel and the arrival of the England in the Halifax Harbour, Halifax officials reported a total of 160 infectious cases of cholera, and 46 deaths – six of these deaths being members of the ship’s crew – with both infection and fatality totals continuing to rise by the hour.⁵ Upon the arrival of the vessel, and the yellow flag was seen hoisted aboard the *England* to indicate the spread of disease, Chief Health Officer Dr. John Slayter ordered the *England* to drop anchor along the shores of McNab’s Island, located adjacent to Hangman’s Beach (which is recognized today as Maughers Beach) and south of the only lighthouse stationed on the Island.⁶ While maintaining close communication with Dr. Tupper, Dr. Slayter, who was later accompanied by two other medical officers named Dr. Gossip and Dr. Garvie, and medical student Frank Forbes Garvie, hurried to the *England* for exterior and interior investigations regarding the vessel and the condition of its passengers.⁷ There were reported to be medical staff onboard the England during their voyage overseas, however records indicate that they had been exhausted and overwhelmed with the rapid spread of cholera during the initial stages.⁸ Dr. Slayter – who voluntarily agreed even though it was not within his official duties as health officer to do so,⁹ was the first to enter the ship’s quarantine from the mainland on April 10th; He immediately initiated a plan to both contain the illness from spreading between individuals, and to care for those who were afflicted by the bacterium.¹⁰ Firstly, Dr. Slayter

⁴ SC. Maura. *The Sisters of Charity Halifax*. Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1956, p. 17.

⁵ “Narrative of the Cholera on Board the Steamship England,” in *British Colonist*, July 4, 1866. Nova Scotia Archives; Sisters of Charity – Halifax Congregational Archives, Microfilm, 5375, p. 1; Fowler, “Cholera Outbreaks of 1834 and 1866,” p. 62.

⁶ John Slayter. *Letter from Dr. Slayter to Dr. Tupper*. Nova Scotia Archives. M.G. 100, vol 222-4, #4-5 S.S. England Correspondence. April 9, 1866; H.W. Hewitt. “History of McNab’s Island: Fever and Cholera on the Steamer England – Dr. Slayter Died at His Post,” In *Hewitt Histories: Dartmouth Patriot*, issue 6, 1901. Nova Scotia Archives; Sisters of Charity – Halifax Congregational Archives, Microfilm, 5136.; Cameron, “Cholera Epidemic of 1866,” p. 149.

⁷ “Narrative of the Cholera,” *British Colonist*, p. 2.

⁸ “Narrative of the Cholera,” *British Colonist*, p. 1.

⁹ Wallace, “The Story of a Pestilence,” p. 1-2.

¹⁰ “Narrative of the Cholera,” *British Colonist*, p. 1; Cameron, “Cholera Epidemic of 1866,” p. 149.

called upon Vice-Admiral Hope to send an additional ship from the nearby naval dockyard, to which the *Pyramus* was swiftly anchored (and the *England* moved) to the shores of Finlay's Wharf as an acting quarantine hospital for the sick. Initially, approximately 400 patients were transferred from the *England* to the *Pyramus*, and the remaining passengers were removed from the contaminated vessel onto McNab's Island, where temporary tent-shelters were established near the shoreline while also being an accessible distance away from the more permanent structures that became living for the doctors and volunteers.¹¹ A team of volunteers from the Cunard Shipping Lines were promptly tasked in sanitization and fumigation aboard the *England* under the arrangements of the primary company agent James B. Morrow, however their precarious labour over the next couple of days alone did not account for the sheer quantity of deceased, possibly infectious, human remains that were scattered along the ship's vicinity.¹² The overwhelming number of cases continuing to rise, a severe lack of coffins, and at one stage, multiple smaller boats filled with corpses anchored nearby the lighthouse that no soul was willing to attend to, led to a temporary arrangement to throw many of the deceased bodies overboard outside of the Halifax Harbour – also a likely decision prior to Dr. Slayter's arrival at the *England*.¹³ Another concern amongst the doctors and Halifax's reaction to the crisis was the possibility of illness reaching the main city; Dr. Tupper – who was in contact with both Dr. Slayter and the military – established orders to ensure twenty-four-hour surveillance of the contaminated locations, as Dr. Tupper had quickly identified passenger attempts to escape quarantine by swimming to mainland or hiding in the woods located on the island.¹⁴ Authorities

¹¹ Cameron, "Cholera Epidemic of 1866," p. 149.

¹² Cameron, "Cholera Epidemic of 1866," p. 149; Steven Laffoley. *Death Ship of Halifax Harbour*. Lawrencetown: Pottersfield Press, 2009, p. 78-79.

¹³ "Narrative of the Cholera," *British Colonist*, p. 2.

¹⁴ Cameron, "Cholera Epidemic of 1866," p. 151; Fowler, "Cholera Outbreaks of 1834 and 1866," p. 62-63; Wallace, "The Story of a Pestilence," p. 3.

were also notified of contaminated materials floating throughout the harbour, as reports routinely began to appear stating that pillows, mattresses, blankets, clothing, and in one case reported by a local fisherman, an inhabited coffin, were all seen floating along the surface of the water and appearing as far as the Halifax wharves, however these materials became easier to dispose of properly once passengers were completely transported to McNab's Island.¹⁵

Over the course of multiple days, chaos and unrest continued along the island, however Dr. Slayter and his team of volunteers had been working extensively to isolate the dying on board the *Pyramus*, visit the sick in quarantine tents along the island, maintain civility amongst the exhausted Irish and German emigrants – who each believed that the other were the cause of the illness,¹⁶ as well as providing aid with the burial of the dead within the designated locations – a task that no other person apart from the four doctors would agree to aid in, which initially involved transporting dead bodies around the outside of the lighthouse and across the Thrum Cap beach, and climbing atop to Great Thrum Cap at the most southern point of the Island until new burial pits were later dug deep enough.¹⁷ The average mortality rate by the 13th of April across McNab's Island during the cholera crisis was approximately 25 individuals a day, with 50 to 60 sick cases falling on that date specifically,¹⁸ however the doctor's organizational resources were slightly further established after four days of work across the ships and quarantine stations, and interest in providing aid from the mainland began to reach Dr. Slayter once word had spread of the horrors occurring across the Halifax Harbour. Roman Catholic cooperation arrived at McNab's Island after Archbishop Connelly heard tell that many of the passengers who arrived

¹⁵ Cameron, "Cholera Epidemic of 1866," p. 152; Hewitt, "Dr. Slayter Died at His Post."

¹⁶ "Narrative of the Cholera," *British Colonist*, p. 4-5.

¹⁷ "Narrative of the Cholera," *British Colonist*, p. 3; Wallace, "The Story of a Pestilence," p. 4.

¹⁸ "Narrative of the Cholera," *British Colonist*, p. 4.

aboard the England were Catholic, and by the next morning, the Archbishop and Reverend Alexander McIsaac arrived at the quarantine location to begin hearing spiritual confessions and providing comfort to the island's patients.¹⁹ After the discovery of the suffering faced by the emigrants, and also that many sick children had lost their parents to illness with no one else to care for them, the Archbishop gathered with the Sisters of Charity in the Saint Mary's Convent on the evening of April 15th to request volunteers for childcare and material donations, to which every Sister was eager to help.²⁰ The Archbishop chose to allow Sister Mary Clare Connolly and Sister Mary Vincent Power – with Sister Mary Alphonsus Doucet joining them some days later – to sail to McNab's Island on April 16th and care for the orphaned, while also later requesting clean clothing from the mainland for each child.²¹ After meeting Dr. Slayter upon arrival at the island, the sisters were directed to one of the buildings Dr. Slayter had maintained control of for aid in their support,²² and throughout their stay, the sisters consistently housed, bathed, fed, entertained, and cared for each child that arrived at their doorstep, along with facing unexpected occurrences with both the death of children, and concerns regarding Father McIsaac, who was found unconscious on the island after being struck down by a patient.²³

While the chaos did not halt by April 16th to 17th, McNab's Island and the anchored ships were progressively gaining structure with the help of more volunteers. Not only did the Sisters of Charity, the Doctors, and fumigation crews continue their work across the Island, other staff such as the police and military authorities stationed on land and in the harbour (who proved to be

¹⁹ Maura, SC, *The Sisters of Charity Halifax*, p. 17-18.

²⁰ SC. Mary Clare Connolly. Diary. Sisters of Charity - Halifax Congregational Archives. Box 1, File 1. 1906; Maura, SC, *The Sisters of Charity Halifax*, p. 18.

²¹ Connolly, SC, Diary, 1906, box 1, file 1; Maura, SC, *The Sisters of Charity Halifax*, p. 19-20.

²² Cameron, "Cholera Epidemic of 1866," p. 152.

²³ Connolly, SC, Diary, 1906, box 1, file 1; Maura, SC, *The Sisters of Charity Halifax*, p. 19-20.

rather unhelpful according to Dr. Slayter),²⁴ and grave-diggers – a task assigned to local convicts who were paid in the form of barrels of rum,²⁵ were finally moving in a direction that lessened the number of ill patients daily. Dr. Slayter identified that conditions were generally improving amongst the patients as well, specifying that there were only nine deaths on the night of April 15th, and only a total of sixteen total deaths were expected until the cholera crisis was no longer a threat to the passengers of the *England*.²⁶ Unfortunately, the Chief Health Officer's estimations did not account for his own health, as on April 17th, Dr. Slayter had succumbed to cholera at approximately 10:00 am at age 36, no more than six hours after showing severe symptoms of the disease while helping arrange the deceased.²⁷ Dr. Slayter's death was widespread news across Halifax, and local newspapers received countless letters emphasizing his influence on Nova Scotians as a phenomenal character and loyal individual within Halifax's medical sector.²⁸ Volunteers Father McIsaac, Frank Garvie, Dr. Garvie, and Dr. Gossip all developed symptoms of cholera during (and after) their involvement with the 1866 cholera outbreak, however Dr. Slayter was the only participant to die of the disease on the island.²⁹

On the evening of April 18th, the *England* – now fully sanitized and fumigated – carrying a total of 1,007 passenger and crew, lifted anchor and set sail towards their original destination to New York; 55 patients remained on the island, some of which being sick, while others were members of family who chose to remain with their loved ones during recovery. Patients continued to receive treatments for various illnesses, such as gangrene – where amputation

²⁴ Cameron, "Cholera Epidemic of 1866," p. 151.

²⁵ Maura, SC, *The Sisters of Charity Halifax*, p. 20.

²⁶ Cameron, "Cholera Epidemic of 1866," p. 152.

²⁷ J.B. Garvie. *Letters from Dr. Garvie to Dr. Tupper*. Nova Scotia Archives. M.G. 100, vol 222-4, #4-5 S.S. England Correspondence. April 17, 1886; Wallace, "The Story of a Pestilence," p. 5.

²⁸ Fowler, "Cholera Outbreaks of 1834 and 1866," p. 63-64.

²⁹ Cameron, "Cholera Epidemic of 1866," p. 153.

became necessary, and ship fever, however all but five emigrants that were transferred to the City Hospital in Halifax, were brought aboard the steamer *Louisa Moore*, and on May 17th, the ship arrived in New York with no reported incidents.³⁰ Due to inconsistencies in accurately recorded statistics between the *England's* departure from Liverpool and its arrival to New York, there is no definite statistics surrounding the death toll from the cholera crisis, however there was an estimated 200 total cholera-related deaths that were buried (and nearby in the harbour) across the vicinity of McNab's island.³¹ Over the course of the coming months, the doctors and volunteers were slowly relieved from their duties, and after participating in mandatory quarantine procedures to assure no contagion was present, the medical professionals and religious volunteers returned to their lives on mainland. During these precautions, The Nova Scotia House of Assembly voted on multiple awards to be given to those who were directly involved with the crisis efforts; On April 23rd Dr. Slayter's widowed wife was to receive \$2,000, and doctors, Archbishop and Sisters were rewarded each with a gold watch, however the Archbishop and Sisters declined to accept the reward.³²

Discussion surrounding the erection of a public historical display in relation to the 1866 cholera outbreak at McNab's Island involved substantial thought regarding the nature of information and its purpose. While the efforts of all Nova Scotian's and passengers aboard the *England* who provided support during the crisis are deserving of recognition within their own respects, for this purpose it was collectively agreed upon to commemorate the actions of a single individual, rather than the community efforts as a whole. This public display aims to achieve the presentation of a broad outline of the events, multiple notable figures, and significance of the

³⁰ "Narrative of the Cholera," *British Colonist*, p. 6; Cameron, "Cholera Epidemic of 1866," p. 152-153.

³¹ Cameron, "Cholera Epidemic of 1866," p. 153.

³² Connolly, SC, Diary, 1906, box 1, file 1; Cameron, "Cholera Epidemic of 1866," p. 153.

crisis, while also highlighting the accomplishments of an individual who is best representative of why the historical relevance of the topic is impactful to the public historical memory of Nova Scotia. Given that the inspiration for this proposition is largely based on archival material provided by the Sister's of Charity Archive located at Mount Saint Vincent University, it would seem like an obvious choice for this public display to be in commemoration of the three Sisters of Charity who notably partook in the crisis efforts on McNab's Island, however after further consideration regarding the later history of the Sisters of Charity convent, it was agreed upon that a public historical display may be considered harmful or offensive to audiences and related communities. In recent years, Canada and its government have been in its early phases of facing the complex truth surrounding the establishment of residential schools, which had contributed to one of the most detrimental movements of Indigenous abolishment across North America. In Nova Scotia, the Shubenacadie Indian Residential School (SIRS) is most notably remembered as one of the most violent and abusive facilities towards Indigenous students across the nation, and throughout their operation between 1929 to 1967, the residential school was managed and staffed voluntarily by the Sisters of Charity collective.³³ While it is understood that the events of the 1866 cholera outbreak and the establishment of the SIRS in 1929 occurred throughout vastly different time periods, and that the sisters who volunteered at McNab's Island were not directly involved as individual influences towards the events of the residential school, there continues to be uncertainty amongst the present Sisters of Charity and their presentation of documentation of the facility; The controversy surrounding the history of the topic and involvement of the Sisters of Charity seems to have provided gaps in what should be accessible information, notably directing blame towards the 1951 campus fire at Mount Saint Vincent University that destroyed

³³ Martha Walls. "The TRC, Reconciliation, and the Shubenacadie Indian Residential School," in *Acadiensis: Journal of the History of the Atlantic Region*, vol 50: issue 2, 2021, p. 73-74.

much of the physical records located on site – many of these claimed to be residential school records – however there still remains questions regarding the location of records that document the SIRS between the years of 1951-1967.³⁴ Due to the recent, and relevant controversy surrounding the damage and harm done towards Indigenous peoples, it has been collectively agreed upon that a commemoration specifically surrounding the Sisters of Charity would not align with the current beliefs and values that Nova Scotia aims to reflect through the presentation of history along the Halifax Waterfront, hence the decision was made to instead commemorate the accomplishments and hardships of Dr. John Slayter. McNab’s Island currently houses a bench along the main trails that includes a small commemorative plaque dedicated to the three Sister’s of Charity, and it is overall agreed upon that this is a suitable method to preserve the actions of the sisters at McNab’s Island in 1866.

On April 18th, 1866, soon after the departure of the *England*, Dr. John Slayter was buried with masonic honors atop the hill where the initial quarantine encampment was settled along McNab’s Island. With certainty that the location of his grave was hidden from the harbour, yet visible from Halifax’s city, the living doctors erected a temporary headstone at his burial.³⁵ His coffin was later moved to Camp Hill Cemetery on December 19th, 1866, and in August, 1867, the City of Halifax later erected a monument at his residing location, which read the following: “This Memorial Is Erected by the Mayor and Aldermen Of the City of Halifax, To Mark the Estimation Entertained By the Citizens For the heroic conduct of JOHN SLAYTER, M. D., Late Health Officer for this Port, Who, while in the discharge of his duties on board the steamship England, in quarantine in the harbor of Halifax, Fell a victim to cholera, April 17th, 1866, In the

³⁴ Walls, “Shubenacadie Indian Residential School,” p. 77-78.

³⁵ “Narrative of the Cholera,” *British Colonist*, p. 5.

36th year of his age.”³⁶ While it is suitable to suggest that Dr. Slayter received a public display that appropriately commemorates his involvement in the 1866 crisis, it is important to consider that this monument that continues today to hold the granite-carved plaque is no longer legible.³⁷ This indicates that Dr. Slayter’s most identifiable physical fragment of historical memory has been lost to weathering of time, prominently due to Halifax’s lack of continued monumental preservation in cemeteries and other relevant publicly accessed locations.

The informative proposition presented in relation to the 1866 cholera outbreak at McNab’s Island aims to construct a historical commemorative display on the Halifax waterfront and boardwalk, both to educate and familiarize audiences with the impacts of the crisis itself, while also reconstructing the historical memory of arguably the most important individual involved in the event’s occurrences, Dr. John Slayter. The Chief Health Officer for the Port of Halifax was not only responsible for ceasing the movement of the *S.S. England* upon its arrival to the Halifax Harbour – limiting the spread of cholera from breaching into densely populated city – however he also contributed tremendously to the leadership and organizational efforts that ultimately saved the lives of many of his patients and working peers at the sacrifice of his own life. The historical memory of Dr. Slayter in Halifax serves as a significant and relevant representation of bravery during a period of uncertainty and fear caused by illness, and the modern social struggles and experiences of the public that became a prominent reality during the outbreak of Covid-19 in 2021 has developed into a global conversation regarding the response to rapidly-spread disease – one that broad audiences throughout Nova Scotia, Canada, and the rest of the world will be historically conscious of for a profoundly long time. As he was a husband, father, and loyal Nova

³⁶ Cameron, “Cholera Epidemic of 1866,” p. 153; Wallace, “The Story of a Pestilence,” p. 6-7.

³⁷ Laffoley, *Death Ship of Halifax Harbour*, p. 189-190.

Scotian whose name has now been forgotten by the passing of time, it is within the City's best interest to consider the erection of a commemorative public historical display dedicated to Dr. Slayter in honor of his heroism, bravery, and sacrifice during the 1866 Cholera outbreak on McNab's island.

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