

Wolfville Historical Society

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NEWSLETTER

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Randall House Museum

259 Main Street

Wolfville

Nova Scotia B4P 1C4

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We gratefully acknowledge the grant from the Department of Communities, Culture and Heritage and the work of painter Alex Porter that aided us in making Randall House look like new!

Retrospect: The WHS in 2015

"A year of rebuilding" may be the best way to sum up 2015. We did not undertake any highly-visible outreach, as we had in 2014 (in particular, we refrained from putting up big interpretive panels and Recruiting Office replicas in downtown locations).

Behind the scenes, however, Board members and museum staff worked incredibly hard to try out new fund-raising schemes (the greeting cards being a fine example – thank you Anne, Charles, Heather, and Martin); to put the Society's financial records into more logical and comprehensible shape (special thanks to Treasurer Greg and past Treasurer Derek Watts); and to keep our program of talks fresh and exciting (for which Wendy deserves most of the credit, plus several WHS members who suggested possible speakers). In the fall, Randall House got a bright new coat of paint.

With the departure of curator Dr. Roger Marsters early in the year, the Board faced a difficult situation. We were lucky that Krystal Tanner (Museum Interpreter in 2014) was available for the summer months and could be hired as Acting Curator. Krystal proved herself far more than just a place-holder. With the very able assistance of Mercedes Peters and Devon Thomson, Krystal oversaw a highly innovative program of exhibits and events, from Mercedes' informative and timely exhibit on Mi'kmaw culture to a "Scary Story" night. The digitization of the collection, supervised by Christine Lynch, made major progress. The "Birth of a Festival" exhibit, guest-curated by Katherine Ryan, brought a lively infusion of theatrical brilliance into the museum. And a lecture-discussion on "Magna Carta 800," held at the Farmers' Market and featuring Dr. Jennifer MacDonald and Judge Alan Tufts, reminded us all why history still matters in the age of the Internet.

Anthony Harding (Past President)

Looking Forward: The WHS in 2016

The Society is of course active on a variety of fronts – talks, exhibits and so on – but the fact is that the maintenance and promotion of Randall House is at the heart of our endeavours. And while an old house can be a crotchety and demanding partner, as many of us know all too well, it is also a fascinating repository of human experience. We have started off the new year with a bright new exterior, but now must look at what we can do to improve the interior.

In recent years the Society has been forced into some difficult decisions. Most particularly, we lost the storage space that we had rented for our textile collection, which, given its fragility, requires a temperature-controlled environment. Unable to find any other space, we were forced to adapt a bedroom in Randall House. One of our goals is to rectify this situation; if Randall House is to fulfill its role as Wolfville's community museum, we must ensure that as many rooms as possible are available for exhibit. To that end, a sub-committee of the Board will be meeting with representatives of the Town, in the hope that together we can find a solution to this problem; indeed, we are optimistic that a closer working relationship with the Town may prove mutually advantageous in a variety of ways.

As incoming President, I am very pleased (and relieved!) that Anthony is willing to change hats with me and assume the task of Vice-President. I am equally pleased that Krystal is bringing her energy and ideas back as Curator of Randall House in a few short months – and I look forward to working with Board and Society members to develop the potential of both our museum and our Society.

Martin Hallett (President-elect)

Wolfville's First Skating Rink

□ *The following article from the Wolfville Acadian of January 29, 1942 has recently been added to the research files at Randall House. The D.A. Munro house mentioned is the dark red storey-and-a-half dwelling directly across from the Randall House on Main Street. The street on its eastern side, "extending from Main street to the water-front", is now a narrow lane and a favourite access point to the dykes – the busy waterfront is just a memory...*

"Do you remember Wolfville's first skating rink? Probably not, but it was built during the summer of 1879, and the man responsible for the project was D.A. Munro, one of the town's most enterprising citizens. The rink was located facing the street that now extends from Main Street to the water-front, in the rear of the residence of Mrs. D.R. Munro. It was round in form with an extensive ice area, and a mast in the centre which supported the roof. There was then no hockey but the rink was a gathering place for skaters of both sexes and all ages. Some of what was then deemed to be the "older generation" spent much of their time there, and it was reported that among the gentler sex some not only spent the afternoon in skating but took their supper along and stayed for the evening.

Often there was a band in attendance and a refreshment booth catered to many patrons in dispensing such delicacies as appealed most to the palate.

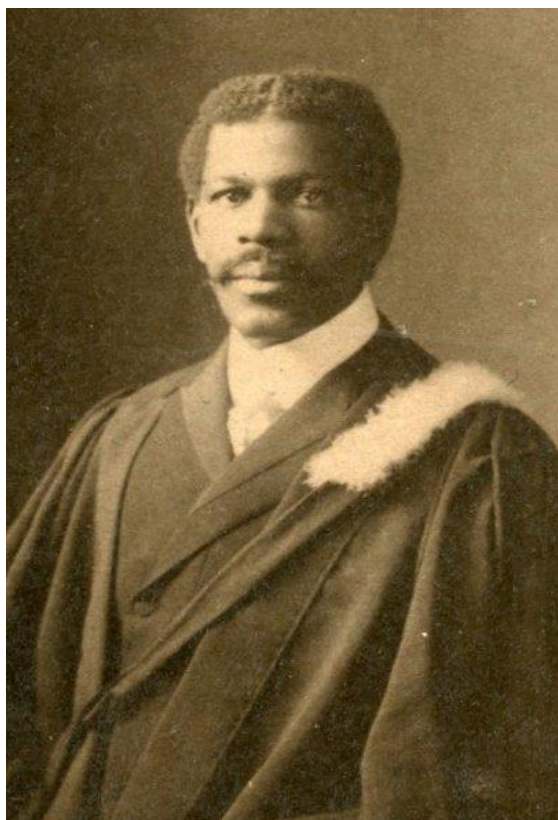
In this rink was installed the first electric light in Wolfville and one of the first two in Nova Scotia, the other being in Halifax. It was an 'arc' light and brilliantly illuminated the spacious arena for one evening each week. On other nights the skaters had to be content with oil lamps.

The first carnival was a notable affair with a military band in attendance from Halifax, a professional costumer and a galaxy of colorfully dressed skaters. There were many figure skaters in Wolfville at that time and it was a pleasure to watch their skillful and graceful manoeuvres. On one occasion the public spirited manager engaged for an evening the services of a professional skater from Norway, Axel Paulsen by name, who entertained a large gathering of interested spectators. There were also evenings when a full program of ice sports and competitions were put on for which generous prizes were given and in which were engaged entrants from various parts of the province. “

Submitted by Heather Watts, Archivist Emeritus

Wolfville at War: Reverend William A. White Chaplain to the No. 2 Construction Battalion

Watch this space! In 2016, Wolfville Historical Society is collaborating with Acadia University, the Nova Scotia Black Cultural Centre, the Valley African Nova Scotian Development Association, and a host of other community and academic partners in a symposium that will illuminate a unique and extremely important aspect of Wolfville's involvement in World War 1. A date hasn't been set yet, pending confirmation of funding, but we're hoping to have it either in early March or early October, 2016, so Acadia University students can participate.



"To Do Our Share": The African Canadian Experience in World War 1 will honour the courageous service of the Reverend William A. White and of Canada's "Black Battalion," the No. 2 Construction Battalion in the Great War.

Reverend William A. White was a remarkable man. Virginian by birth and the son of formerly enslaved parents, he was studying in Baltimore when he encountered a Canadian Baptist missionary, the noted Miss Helena Blackadar. An Acadia graduate herself (1894) she suggested the promising young African American should enroll at Acadia University. He arrived in Wolfville in 1899.

William A. White was Acadia University's second African Canadian graduate (1903). During his time here he supported his education by preaching moving sermons in churches from Truro to Digby. Upon

graduation Reverend White was ordained at Wolfville Baptist Church. Brother White was appointed in June of 1903 "General Missionary to the African churches of Nova Scotia."

When World War 1 broke out, African Canadian volunteers were turned away at nearly every enlistment office. Despite protests, petitions, and the intercession of MPPs and MPs, it was only after two years of war and the terrible losses overseas that Black enlistment was permitted. The military decided, on profoundly discriminatory grounds, that Black men should not serve in integrated units, nor would they be allowed to fight. Instead, they would be employed as a labour corps. The No. 2 Construction Battalion trained at Pictou, NS, and included men from across Canada as well as a few Americans who crossed the border to enlist.

As chaplain to the No. 2 Construction Battalion, Reverend William A. White was the only Black commissioned officer in Canadian Expeditionary Forces in WW 1. The unit provided essential support services for the war effort, and cut timber, built roads and fortifications, and restored buildings, first in England and, by 1918, in France.

After the war, Reverend William A. White served as pastor at the historic Cornwallis Street Baptist Church in Halifax for 17 years. In the 1930s he delivered the first broadcast sermons on Maritime radio. Just before he died of cancer in 1936, William White was awarded an honorary Doctorate of Divinity by Acadia University, the first African Canadian to be so recognized in Atlantic Canada.

Reverend White and his beloved wife, Isey, raised a large family, several members of whom went on to stellar careers, including daughter Portia White, the great Canadian contralto. Descendants include Senator Donald Oliver (retired; Acadia Class of '60); actor, filmmaker and novelist Anthony Sherwood, whose film *Honour Before Glory*, based on William A. White's wartime diary, will be shown at the symposium; and well-known Nova Scotia author, playwright and journalist George Elliott Clarke, recently appointed Canadian Parliamentary Poet Laureate.

A highlight of the symposium will be mounting an historical plaque in honour of the Reverend William A. White at the Acadia University campus. An edited volume of the papers presented at the symposium will also be completed within the coming year, for 2018 publication.

The special contribution of the Wolfville Historical Society will be collaborating with the Nova Scotia Black Cultural Centre in the development of an exhibit on Reverend William A. White and the No. 2 Construction Battalion for display during the symposium.

Submitted by Karolyn Smardz Frost

Do you have something you would like to contribute to future editions of the WHS Newsletter?

If so, please contact Martin Hallett at kaiserhallett@yahoo.ca