

## **A Unique and Unparalleled Opportunity for the Town of Sackville**

The Sackville Tribune-Post recently carried an article stating that the congregation of the Sackville United Church, unable to sustain its iconic church building, has voted to “put the church building and all or almost all the church property up for sale” to the highest bidder. In another article the Town of Sackville has reportedly decided to dispose of the old post office, now being used as the Town Hall, when the new municipal building is ready for occupancy. And, on yet another page, the ongoing saga of the Memorial Library continues as the administration of Mount Allison University repeated that they can see “no other option” but to demolish this Cenotaph to make way for a much-needed Arts Centre.

This Town, this Church and this University are inextricably entwined by the common thread of their interwoven history and inheritance. The Town Hall, the Sackville United Church (previously the Methodist Church) and Mount Allison University all sit on lands gifted by Charles Frederick Allison who was considered to be the “greatest Methodist of all time”. His conviction of the importance of a solid education for both men and women, that included Christian conscience, is reflected in the Mt A crest (Litterae – Religio – Scientiae) and in the wealth he bequeathed to establish both this school and this church. Mount Allison University was cradled and nurtured to maturity in the pews of the Sackville Methodist congregation of which Allison was a member. Indeed, the current church building was built, and then enlarged after a Methodist Revival, to accommodate the students and faculty of Mount Allison who worshipped there. It was considered “the College Church” and, as recently as forty years ago, the pews were filled on Sunday mornings and then again on Sunday evenings when the Mount Allison Choral Society regularly led the music of the weekly Sunday vespers.

The current unprecedented situation presents all three institutions, the Town, the Church and the University, with an extraordinary opportunity. It is a unique and unparalleled chance for an act of inspired urban planning that could combine a breathtaking expression of community with a wonderful recognition of our heritage, bringing new life and vibrancy to the center of our town.

In brief, the opportunity is this: to develop the property of the Sackville United Church to accommodate a stunning complex for the Arts in the heart of Sackville, and at the portal of the university. Such a project would ensure the university’s reputation for excellence as a liberal arts institution, preserve the integrity of Allison’s vision of this church standing tall at the center of the community and reinforce Sackville’s reputation as a cultural capital in Canada.

Imagine the present manse removed; new facilities for the Arts constructed in its place adjacent to the wonderful birch grove overlooking the swan pond; the existing church sanctuary, with its superior acoustics, renovated to create an inspiring venue for performance whilst honouring that sacred space; and an exhilarating reception pavilion for “town and gown” alike with space for exhibition and community use uniting all. The church building would regain its original splendour and the new Arts structure would express the creative spirit of its function.

The second part of this thesis will require negotiation, but will serve all parties well. Sackville United Church transfers land and buildings to Mount Allison for one dollar, an assumption of the modest debt, and an agreement to allow congregational use, in perpetuity, of the auditorium/sanctuary and community space for church purposes. The Town of Sackville transfers the town hall building and site to Mount Allison for one dollar and an agreement to allow the town use of open space in this area for community activities such as markets, festivals, celebrations, performances and exhibitions. As a result, Mount Allison gains possession of the Allison tract of land bounded by Main and York Streets, protecting the integrity of the campus against the risk of inappropriate new development and creating a locale that places the Arts front and center in the Town. The well-loved heritage streetscape in the center of Sackville is preserved and revitalized.

A corollary to this thesis is that, as a separate undertaking, Mount Allison demolishes the Tweedie Annex and renovates the Memorial Library. Free of 'structural fatigue', watertight, and equipped with the latest in environmental control systems, the historic structure then serves as the University Archives with space for Special Collections. The reading room is restored to life as a multipurpose Memorial Hall, featuring a permanent display that tells the stories of the young Allisonians who made the ultimate sacrifice for our country; thus ensuring the continuity of the trust of the original donors who gave so generously to create this Cenotaph.

As prominent Canadian military historian Dr. Marc Milner, a native son of Sackville and author of *HMCS Sackville 1941-1985*, has stated: "It is tragic to think that on the eve of the centennial of the most catastrophic event in Canadian history, Mt A is even considering destruction of its memorial to those who died in the service of their country during the Great War." This proposal would appear to offer an exceptional funding opportunity to restore the Memorial Library to its original grandeur as envisioned by the architect Andrew Randall Cobb.

This is a bold, win-win-win scenario. Sackville United Church resolves its financial problems and retains space for church purposes without bearing the burden of a mortgage and can continue the valuable work that this congregation has faithfully donated to the citizenry of the "Chignecto Connection" since 1772. This landmark church building with its inspiring steeple and impressive stained glass is restored; the magnificent organ is played and the treasured bell can still peal across the Tantramar. The town achieves a remarkable green space in the heart of town to be available for civic use and retains vital heritage structures while facilitating cooperation between key neighbours in the community. Mount Allison acquires a large tract of land for its campus and a prime site on which to situate exciting Arts facilities whilst being able to save and restore the Memorial Library. Sackville area families descended from the Methodist pioneers - Allison, Black, Bowser, Copp, Crane, Dixon, Fawcett, George, Shephard, Trenholm, Trueman, Ward, Weldon, Wood and others - can celebrate the continuity of the labour and love that these individuals so generously invested in the development of this Town, this Church and this University. The result is a unique and world-class strategy for developing an Arts Centre that will bring renown to the Town, to the Church and to the University.

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