



Photo by Gordon Beck/Montreal Gazette

# The Black Rock

*A story of the past with a promise of a future*

In 1870 an Irish priest, Father M.B. Buckley, in North America collecting money to build the cathedral at Cork, visited the "Irish Stone monument". Changes that have since altered the appearance of the area around the stone had not yet obliterated the scars of the tragedy. "I came down with Father Hogan", Father Buckley wrote, "To see the spot where so many of my fellow countrymen so miserably perished. There was the desolate spot, enclosed by a fragile paling there the numerous mounds and, above all, in the centre, an enormous stone. "May God have mercy on their souls!"

During the construction of the Victoria Bridge, the workers resurrected the memory of 1847 in the form of the dead buried in hastily constructed coffins; clothes and shoes still visible. They insisted the site be memorialized in some way. With no time or funds, they lobbied heavily for a Stone to be lifted out of the clay and be allowed to stand guard over the hopes and dreams of those poor souls who came, but could not leave.

The Irish workmen who had set in place the enormous stone – themselves long passed - had intended it to stand on the spot forever "while grass grows and water flows." Their inscription haunts us:

**To preserve from desecration  
the remains of 6000 immigrants  
who died of ship fever  
A.D. 1847-48  
this stone  
is erected by the workmen of  
Messrs. Peto, Brassey and Betts  
employed in the construction  
of the  
Victoria Bridge A.D. 1859**

To preserve from desecration.....



In 1900 the Grand Trunk Railway decided to shift the stone several streets away to St. Patrick Square. The railway consulted nobody; it made no public announcement. About nine o'clock on the morning of December 21, 1900, hoping a controversy would be avoided by moving quickly and quietly, the "Irish Stone" was hauled up with a large steam derrick; run on a flatcar along the track on St. Patrick Street and unceremoniously deposited in a corner of the Square.

It would not take long before the railway realized its mistake.

The Irish community was in an uproar. Spearheaded by the Ancient Order of Hibernians and the Saint Patrick's Society it demanded that the monument be restored immediately to its original and rightful place. Years passed in inconclusive controversy. In 1910 the Grand Trunk made a formal application to the Board of Railway Commissioners asking for the right to expropriate the old site in order to improve the approach to Victoria Bridge. The board announced its decision in 1911. The land was reduced to a quarter of its original size. The stone was to be shifted about fifteen feet to the east from where it had at first stood. The Bishop of Montreal (at that time Right Reverend John C. Farthing) sold the land to the Grand Trunk. The railway assumed responsibility for its perpetual maintenance.

With this pretend compromise between sentiment and utility in place the issue remained settled for half a century - until Montreal began to make plans for Expo '67.

Eventually, Bridge Street needing to be widened and straightened, the "Irish Stone" was again standing in the path of progress. Councilors Kenneth McKenna and John Lynch-Staunton spoke up in defense of the stone. It was sacred in the eyes of the Irish community, they insisted; it must not be disturbed. A committee was formed and consultations with the civic administration took place. At the meeting of City Council on June 21, 1966, Chairman of Montreal's Executive Committee Lucien Saulnier announced that Montreal's planning and public works department had worked out a "modest proposal" deserving of Swift himself. The "Irish Stone" would remain unmoved. Bridge Street would be changed instead. It would pass on either side of a central dividing mall. On this mall the stone would stand, with its site extended at both ends.

And there it sits to this day, the first memorial in the world dedicated to the Great Hunger remains isolated in the centre of a grassy island. Cut off from its community in a prison held guard by passing cars driven by motorists blissfully unaware that they are desecrating the graves of 6,000 Irish.

In 2007 the AOH was approached to research the possibility of purchasing the 10.5 acres lot on the East side of Bridge Street between rue Des Irlandais and the Postal Station in the hopes of creating a suitable and lasting memorial around the Stone to preserve the site from desecration. In 2014 the **Montreal Irish Monument Park Foundation, Inc.** was created for the entire community to participate in the endeavor. When Hydro-Quebec purchased the 10.5 acres in 2017 our dreams for the memorial was lost forever.

Or so we thought.....



In 2017, after countless hours of planning and a heartfelt appreciation for the significance of the site Hydro-Quebec made 1.5 hectares of land available for the development of the Memorial.

A triumvirate committee was formed to represent Hydro-Quebec, Ville de Montreal and the Global Irish community in the development of a Memorial not just to the plight of the Irish, but to the story of 1847 and its Heroes.

2019 began with the recommendations of a reconfigured Bridge Street and the basics of that memorial being presented to the Ville de Montreal on January 30 for review and consideration. The sin of paving over a Cemetery would be corrected.

In June of 2019 the **Montreal Irish Monument Park Foundation, Inc.** participated in the **Office de consultation publique de Montréal** consultation process for the secteur Bridge-Bonaventure which included a public presentation by all stakeholders and a subsequent workshop where information, opinions, and plans were discussed in an open and well-organized setting.

It was this process that allowed the Irish Community to meet people and organizations with a clear vision of the importance of properly developing the area and how all these visions could be realized. **Montreal Irish Monument Park Foundation, Inc.** have met with other stakeholders and shared mutually beneficial go forward strategies that will benefit the sector.

Finally, the workers' promise to "To preserve from desecration....." may be fulfilled.

