



1882 - Group of tennis players at the tennis ground.

The Common of Halifax Canada's First Park

by Susan E. Markham and Christopher R. Edginton

The City of Halifax was founded in 1749, primarily as a defense outpost to guard the British Empire's northern colonial interests. Initially, 2,576 settlers left England to establish this new settlement that was to serve as an English counterpart to the French Settlement at Louisburg. Shortly after their arrival, these settlers applied to Edward Cornwallis, Governor of Nova Scotia for land on the peninsula of Halifax to serve as a Common. Thus Canada's first park was conceived in 1750, as an area to serve the general needs of the newly arrived inhabitants of Halifax.

The concept of the common can be traced to 12th century (Saxon period) England, where they were first established for communal use by the peasants. It was a space set

aside by the lord of a manor to provide the peasants with one area that would be used for pasture, energy sources (wood or turf), fish, bracken (for cattle bedding), or recreation and leisure purposes (called "air and exercise"). The proposed reservation of land to serve as the Common in the town of Halifax was originally intended:

... for the benefit of the inhabitants and soldiers to prevent a trespass or contention that might arise by cutting wood on lots which would become private property ... that these lands, after they were cleared of its wood, would naturally be stocked with grass that they might hereafter serve for a common pasture for the inhabitants.¹

In 1760 the governor of Nova Scotia initiated the formation of the common. He directed Charles Morris, the Chief Surveyor of Land in

the province to:

admeasure and lay out unto the inhabitants of the peninsula of Halifax 235 acres of land lying in the township of Halifax for a perpetual common for pasturage, for the sole use and benefit of the said inhabitants...²

In response to the governor's request, Morris reported:

In obedience to his Excellency's commands, I have measured and laid out for the said inhabitants of the peninsula of Halifax, four lots of land being numbers 1, 2, 3 and 4, containing in the whole 235 acres...³

As a result of this collaboration, the boundaries of the Halifax Common were established. This original tract of land was covered with poor thin mossy soil and partially wooded. It was also swampy in some areas, with few natural amenities other than a small stream and pond. In order to prepare the Common for

its intended uses, it was cleared of its wooded areas. Although one of the primary uses of the Common was the pasturing of cows, it was noted that the land "... 4 will yield very little herbage, without manuring at the public expense." This may sound comical, but it makes the point that the Common area had to be cultivated as a resource, just as, today, the area must be judiciously managed in order to retain it as a viable recreation and leisure area. The Common was formally granted to the trustees of the Town of Halifax through Provincial Acts of 1763.

The establishment of the recreation resources of the Common, from the 1760's until the late 1800's was gradual, increasing in intensity during the latter part of the 19th century. During this latter period a number of historically significant firsts occurred. Canada's first covered ice rink opened on the common in 1863 and its first public lawn tennis court was established in the Public Gardens in 1876. Both of these events contributed greatly to the development of the parks and recreation movement in Halifax and in Canada.

During the Common's first fifty years of existence, its use was primarily for pasturage and military exercises. The portion of the Common that was used as an exercise ground for the troops provided the residents of Halifax with opportunities to view their military reviews and manoeuvres. The Common was also used informally for strolling, carriage and horseback riding and racing, and the consumption of refreshments from booths that were set up on the Common by private entrepreneurs. However, most of the Common during this period of time remained as an "unsightly morass covered with water, and totally unsuitable either for encamping or for the evolution of troops."⁵

The development of the Common and encroachment upon its original tract of 235 acres of land began in 1818 when an act of the legislature permitted a portion of the Common to be laid out in plots and leased. This allowed the settlers of Halifax to make improvements to the Common. As a result trees were planted and areas were set aside and fenced for cultivation.

By 1829 the need to establish a legislative body to determine policy



1893 - 1st. Bicycle Club in Nova Scotia.

and manage the Common was realized. In this year the Lieutenant Governor of Nova Scotia established an administrative unit called the "Committee of the Common." Three Commissioners of the Common were appointed, who had

... full power and authority to manage, transact and perform all matters and things whatsoever in any ways relating to or concerning the said Common or connected with the preservation and improvement of the said Common and the Roads and Highways leading to, from and through the same...⁶

In 1837 the first formal recreation development of the Common occurred with the provision of acreage for the Nova Scotia Horticultural Society. The purpose of this group was to "improve the culture of the best kinds of fruit, the most useful vegetables, shrubs, trees, and choice flowers."⁷ In 1866, the City of Halifax established the City Garden Plot north of the lands of the Horticultural Society. In 1875 these two portions of land were joined together and came under the jurisdiction of the City of Halifax and became known as the Horticultural Garden (today known as the Public Gardens). The Garden's first superintendent, Richard Power, hired in 1872, had had experience in estates in England and New York. His contribution to the design and development of the Common was immense as well as his contributions to the public park movement in Canada. These gardens, still in

existence today, serve as an example of the influence of European park design on the development of parks in North America. This part of the Common emphasized passive recreation, the establishment of formal gardens, and the presence of ornamental horticulture. The Gardens also allowed for the provision of a number of other activities, such as band concerts, that were held regularly. A recollection of exhibition week in 1880 describes the music activities in the following way:

In the skating rink in the Gardens the Band of the 66th Princess Louise Fusiliers kept the old building quivering and shaking and enabling the promenaders to indulge in giddy waltz or calmer manoeuvres of the lancers of quadrilles.⁸

Recognition of the need to improve the Common was well established by the mid 1800's. Expenditures in 1852 and 1853 for improvement of the Common were \$1,055. In keeping with most governmental units, they had to borrow \$500 of this to make ends meet. The City had been empowered in 1850 by an act of the Province of Nova Scotia to borrow \$500 for the improvement of the Common. Their improvements included road widening, making new roads and promenades, clearing and filling land, planting of trees and the sowing of grass. Not all of the labor for these improvements was paid labor; the prisoners of the Bridewell contributed

labor valued at \$120. Following these improvements the Committee of the Common reported their pride in the modifications made to the Common.

... This great public improvement, and the benefits to be derived therefrom, must be of incalculable advantage to the Citizens, and the Common made a place of attraction not only to our fellow citizens, but to the strange who may visit our shores, and conducive to health as well as pleasure.⁹

One of the most spectacular facilities constructed on the Common in the late 1800's was the Exhibition Building. This building was constructed not only to serve as a place where agricultural products, manufactured items, and various exotic items could be exhibited, but also as a facility for ice skating during the winter months. It also housed a small art gallery. An extremely elegant building, it had towers in each corner and ¹⁰was lighted by day by large windows running from ceiling to floor, which gave it an appearance of having crystal walls. At night it was lighted by gas burners every three feet in the large iron pipes supported by handsome iron brackets in the shape of flowers.¹¹ The Exhibition Hall served as a major recreation and leisure resource for the citizens of Halifax from its

opening (in 1879), attracting thousands of participants to the various exhibitions and activities that it housed for 18 years.

The Wanderers' Amateur Athletic Association, established in 1882, was the foremost sporting club in Halifax from its inception until the middle of the twentieth century. The Club became established in 1886 on what are now known as the Wanderers' Grounds on the Common, and the members built their first club house in 1896. The activities participated in by the members of the Wanderers' Amateur Athletic Association provide a glimpse of the types of activities that occurred on the Common during this period of time. Such activities included football, hockey, baseball, cricket, track and field, curling, snowshoeing and bicycling.

Every summer a circus used the Common to stage its activities. One of the exciting attractions of the Mammoth Empire City Circus was the balloon ascension of Professor Reno, a French aeronaut. Thousands of spectators witnessed the ascent of Professor Reno's balloon from the Common and its unceremonious descent into the waters of Halifax Harbour. Phineas T. Barnum brought

his "New and Greatest Show on Earth" circus to the Halifax Common and attracted an audience of over 8,500 people. Following the traditional circus parade through the main streets of Halifax

... thousands of people began to converge on the Common which resembled the headquarters of a small army with its 1,100 people, 600 horses and ponies, and 60 cages of rare animals and amphibia, and its four large tents and countless small ones.¹²

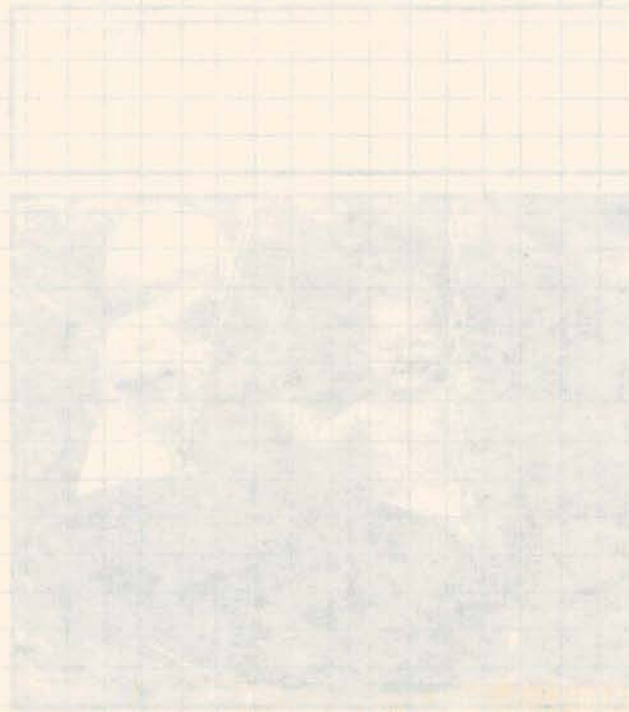
Horseracing was also popular on the Common. The first references to horseracing appear in the mid 1850's. This activity continued on the North Common until the mid 1960's. In the mid 1800's horseracing wagers of up to \$1000.00 were not unusual among the affluent.

When the Common was initiated in 1763, it encompassed 235 acres. Over the course of the years numerous encroachments have taken place. The first encroachments were authorized in 1829, when portions of the Common were leased to private individuals in half acre lots subject to improvements (trees and fences) being made. A cemetery was established in 1833 on the area known then as Windmill Hill, and now known as Camp Hill. Major building



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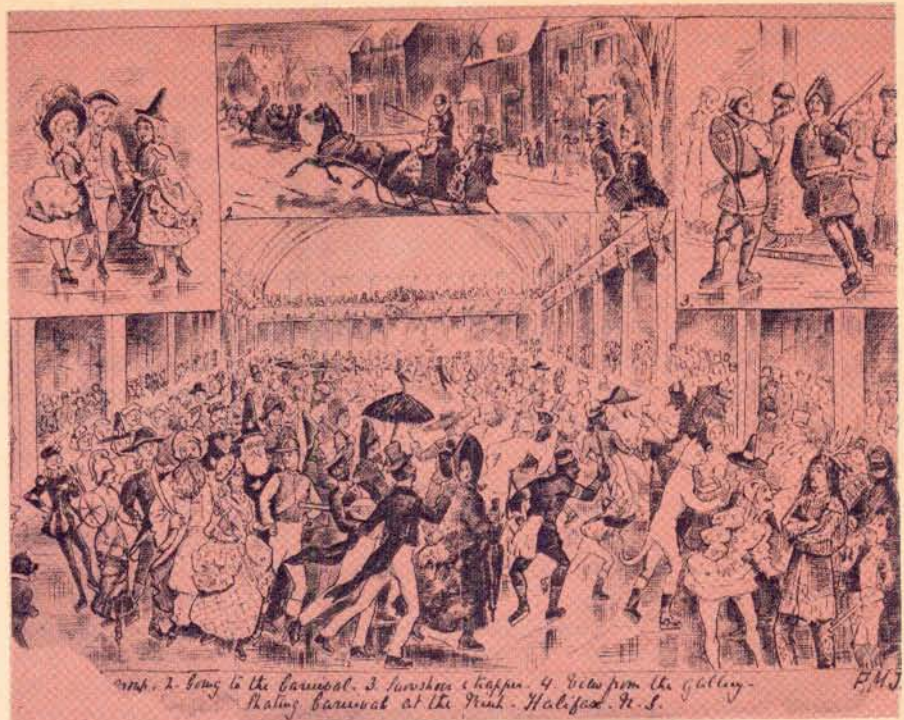
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construction on the Common began with the City Hospital in 1859 followed by the Poor Asylum for the Blind in 1868, which the "Society for the Preservation of the Common" attempted to thwart. Because of the public service provided by this latter institution and the fact that they considered it to be on the least objectionable of the available sites, the objectors withdrew their opposition. The Society for the Preservation of the Common stated that "... we therefore trust that we have seen the end of these inroads on the Common."¹³ They, however, "retained their organization and resources to defend their interests against all comers in future, whatever their character."¹⁴

Contrary to the best intentions of the Society for the Preservation of the Common, encroachments continued. The Convent of the Sacred Heart was given permission to construct buildings in 1886 and Dalhousie College was given permission to build on Common land in 1887. Major encroachments were minimal until the mid 20th century when Queen Elizabeth High School, the Regional Vocational School, the Canadian Broadcasting Studios, Camp Hill Hospital and the Abbie J. Lane Hospital were constructed on the Central and North Common areas. These encroachments have reduced in total the area of the Common from the original 235 acres to less than 63 acres. One may note that all of these encroachments have been in the name of worthy causes.

In the name of the old and the poor, the blind and the sick, of education and religion, and of those who sought cheap home sites when living and needed a burying ground when dead, the Common land has been ravaged. Each encroachment has been justified by its sponsors; each facility has been needed, but the price eventually paid by the public has been high.¹⁵

Major improvements made to the Common during this century have occurred within the past fifteen years. In 1964 work commenced on the North Common with the removal of the winter harness racing track and construction (in its place) of ball diamonds and the Centennial Fountain. This construction was done with the aid of Federal and Provincial Centennial funds. The Centennial Fountain was opened in July, 1966. The Central Common area underwent extensive revitalization in 1968 and 1969, which resulted in six lighted tennis courts, a lighted



1880 - Skating Carnival
Pen and ink sketch by Frances Jones

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fastball diamond, a combination soccer and field hockey field, major cleaning and site renovation.

Today the Common is sectioned into five acres—the North Common, South Common, Wanderer's Grounds, Public Gardens and Victoria Park. The *North Common* is one of the major sport facilities for the City of Halifax. It accommodates nine ball diamonds, three soccer and field hockey pitches, a cricket pitch, as well as numerous open grassy areas and a lighted fountain. It is not unusual for several different activities to take place simultaneously on this section of the Common, with over 400 people participating and spectating at a given time. For example, on a given day one might encounter on this part of the Common such activities as softball, soccer, field hockey and cricket. Further, one would find many people walking or strolling and jogging through this area. The North Common dominates the Common area, as well as the entrance to the downtown area of the City of Halifax.

The *Central Common* is the site of the major lighted tennis complex in the City and a lighted softball diamond, both constructed for the 1969 Canada Summer Games. Also located in this area are a soccer pitch, swimming pool, wading pool, and a large playground to serve the central Halifax residents. The Central Common is an area that features intense recreation activity, particularly during the hot summer months. One of the most recent additions to the area adjacent to the

Central Common is the Nova Scotia Museum. Featuring examples of natural and cultural history of the Province of Nova Scotia, this facility has added greatly to the educational and recreational resources of Halifax and the surrounding region. The Central Common is the area within the Common most likely to be the site of unorganized spontaneous play activities.

Victoria Park is a small two acre park within the larger Common area that serves as a passive recreation area. It contains a memorial fountain and a commemorative statue to the poet, Robert Burns.

The *Wanderers' Grounds* is the traditional home of high quality sporting activities in the Province of Nova Scotia. Current facilities include a running track, a baseball diamond, football field, a lawn bowling green and horse stables. The Wanderers' Grounds were first lighted in 1895. It was not unusual during this era to draw crowds in excess of 4,000 people to lighted sport activities. Today the Wanderers' Grounds is being revitalized with the reinstallation of lights for baseball and field sports. The riding stables in this area of the Common are the home of the Halifax Bengal Junior Lancers Riding Club. Interestingly, the corral for the riding club is housed in an air supported structure. Activities within the Wanderers' Grounds include high school and provincial football matches and provincial level baseball games. As well, the lawn bowling greens were used for the

1978 Canadian-Lawn Bowling Championships.

The *Public Gardens* remain virtually unchanged in form, spirit, and activity from the late 1800's, exemplifying classic formal park design. It remains a passive park catering to the leisure pursuits of strolling, listening to concerts, and viewing the horticultural displays. The Public Gardens are a focal point for Halifax residents and visitors:

The Gardens are a sanctuary which all of our native varieties of birds seem to appreciate, frequent and multiply . . . In the lower gardens . . . are three small ponds connected by a running brook and a miniature water fall and charming with their setting of ferns, plants and pond lilies.

The flower beds have a lure and enjoyment all their own with . . . many variegated colors which are replaced as the season advances. The contour of the beds change from year to year and include a carpet bed featuring some principle event of that year.

The trees and shrubs of the Public Garden are particularly worthy of attention, there being about a hundred varieties of trees and eighty of shrubs. Almost every country and every clime is represented in the collection . . . Moreover, every tree and shrub is tagged with both the common and scientific name . . . 16

Throughout the gardens are numerous monuments, fountains and statues commemorating individuals and events important in the history of Halifax and the British Empire. Surrounding and throughout the garden are tree lined paths for strolling and viewing. The bandstand originally erected in 1887 in honour of Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee, and since restored, remains the site of Sunday afternoon and holiday band concerts.

The historical development of the Common illustrates the growth of the parks and recreation movement in Canada. There are several distinctly different park designs exemplified by the Common. The Public Gardens represent the influence of European park design upon Canada's parks, conducive to passive recreation. The Wanderers' Grounds and North and Central Common are designed to promote active recreation. The multiplicity of activities that have occurred over the 200 year history of the Common exemplify the changing recreation and leisure attitudes and behaviours of Canadians.

The Common has not only *reflected* parks, recreation and leisure patterns, but it has served in a *leadership* posture by providing space in a central city location for a number of recreation facility developments considered to be the first of their type in Canada.

c.1880's Strolling in the Common.



The reduction of the Common from 235 acres of area to 63 illustrates the need to preserve and protect open spaces and recreation areas. The idea of the common, conceived by the Saxons and implemented in Britain and elsewhere was to provide common space for residents' activities. The Halifax Common has served this function. It has been encroached upon, but it remains a significant space providing for recreation and leisure activities for past, present and future Haligonians. The Common is a significant historical area—a foundation of the parks and recreation movement in Canada—and it remains today a living example of the heritage of the recreation and leisure movement. ☒

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Le Communal d'Halifax: Le Premier Parc Canadien

Fondée en 1749, la ville d'Halifax était d'abord un avant-poste destiné à la défense des intérêts de l'Empire britannique au nord. À l'origine, 2576 émigrants quittèrent l'Angleterre pour aller s'établir dans cette nouvelle colonie. Peu après leur arrivée, ils demandèrent à Edward Cornwallis, gouverneur de la Nouvelle-Écosse, de leur accorder des terres dans la péninsule d'Halifax pour en faire un "Communal". C'est ainsi que naquit en 1750 le premier parc canadien.

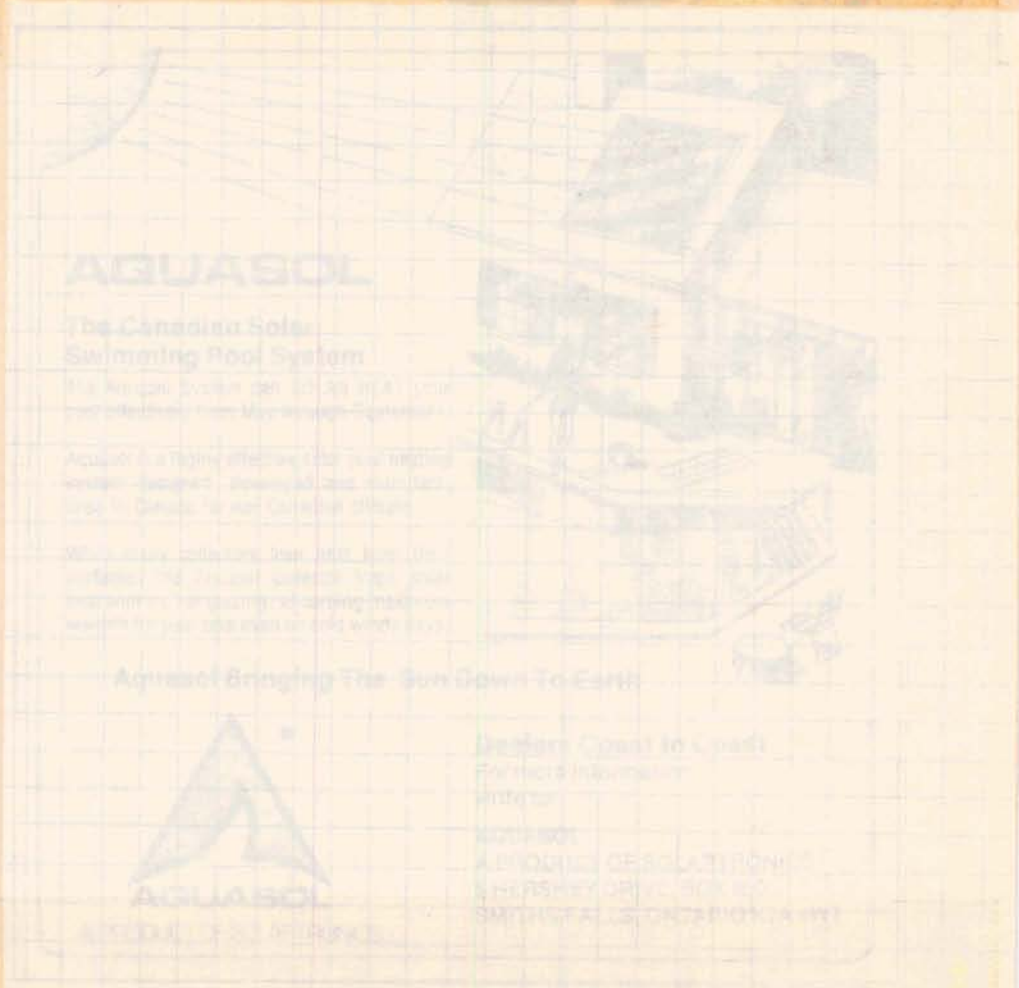
Les premiers communaux remontent à l'Angleterre du XII^e siècle (période saxone). Ils furent d'abord créés pour les paysans. Le seigneur mettait une partie de son domaine à la disposition des paysans qui pouvaient l'utiliser comme pâturage, comme source de combustible (bois et tourbe) ou de fougère (litière pour les animaux) ou comme lieu de pêche, de loisirs et de détente ("plein air et exercices").

Bien que le Communal soit destiné surtout au pâturage des vaches, quelqu'un écrivait que cette terre "... ne produirait que peu d'herbage si le public ne se chargeait pas de son engraissement." Cette mise en garde, un peu comique, montre qu'on devait cultiver le Communal comme une ressource, tout comme aujourd'hui, on doit gérer judicieusement ce domaine afin qu'il demeure propre aux loisirs et à la détente.

Pendant les cinquante premières années de son existence, le Communal d'Halifax servit surtout de pâturage et de terrain d'exercice militaire. Mais il servait aussi à la détente, on venait s'y promener à cheval ou en voiture et on y organisait des courses de chevaux ou d'attelages; des buvettes y vendaient même des rafraîchissements.

La mise en valeur du Communal et

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Le communal d'Halifax: Le premier parc canadien

les empiétements sur les 235 acres de terre qu'il comptait à l'origine commencèrent en 1818, quand une loi autorisa le partage en lots et la location d'une partie de ce terrain. Ceci permit aux colons d'Halifax d'apporter des améliorations à leur Communal; des arbres furent plantés et certaines surfaces clôturées pour être cultivées.

L'exploitation officielle du Communal à des fins récréatives commença en 1837, lorsque l'on en accorda une partie à la Société d'horticulture de Nouvelle-Écosse. Cet organisme se donnait pour but "l'amélioration de la culture des meilleurs fruits, des légumes, des arbustes et des arbres les plus utiles et des fleurs les plus belles".

L'une des installations les plus importantes à être érigée sur le Communal à la fin des années 1800 fut le Palais des expositions. Cet édifice était non seulement le lieu d'exposition de produits agricoles et manufacturés et de divers articles exotiques, mais servait aussi de patinoire en hiver.

La "Wanderers' Amateur Athletic Association", fondée en 1882, fut le club sportif à la mode à Halifax depuis sa création jusqu'au milieu du XX^e siècle. Les occupations auxquelles ses membres se livraient donnent une idée du genre d'activités qui se déroulaient sur le Communal pendant cette période. Citons, entre autres, le football, le hockey, le base-ball, le cricket, l'athlétisme, le curling, les promenades en raquettes, à bicyclette, etc. ...

Chaque été, un cirque s'installait sur le Communal et les courses de chevaux attiraient aussi beaucoup d'amateurs. Cette dernière activité est mentionnée pour la première fois au milieu du XIX^e siècle et se continuera sur le North Common jusqu'aux années 1960. Vers 1850, il n'était pas rare que les riches amateurs misent jusqu'à \$1,000 sur un cheval.

À sa création en 1763, le Communal comprenait 235 acres. Mais de nombreux empiétements eurent lieu au cours des années. On y établit en effet un cimetière en 1833, l'hôpital de la ville en 1859, l'hospice en 1867 et l'asile des aveugles en 1868. Malgré tous les efforts de la Society for the Preservation of the Common (Société pour la préservation du Communal), les

empiétements continuèrent avec le couvent du Sacré-Coeur en 1886, le Collège Dalhousie en 1887 et enfin, au milieu du XX^e siècle, la "Queen Elizabeth High School", l'école professionnelle régionale, les studios de Radio-Canada et deux autres hôpitaux. Au total, ces empiétements successifs ont réduit la surface du Communal de 235 acres à moins de 63 acres.

Le Communal est aujourd'hui divisé en cinq zones: North Common, South Common, Wanderers' Grounds, Public Gardens et Victoria Park. Le North Common constitue l'un des complexes sportifs les plus importants de la ville d'Halifax. On y trouve neuf terrains de base-ball, trois terrains de soccer et de hockey sur gazon, un terrain de cricket, ainsi que de nombreuses pelouses et une fontaine éclairée.

Sur le Central Common se trouve le principal ensemble de courts de tennis éclairés de la ville ainsi qu'un terrain de base-ball éclairé, tous deux construits pour les Jeux d'été du Canada de 1969. On y trouve également un terrain de soccer, une piscine, une pataugeoire et un vaste terrain de jeux. C'est un endroit très actif, surtout pendant le mois d'été.

Victoria Park est un petit parc de deux acres, compris dans la partie la plus importante du Communal, qui

sert à la détente. Les Wanderers' Grounds sont le théâtre traditionnel en Nouvelle-Écosse d'activités sportives de haute qualité, parmi lesquelles des matchs de football aux niveaux scolaire et provincial ou de base-ball au niveau provincial.

Les Public Gardens n'ont pratiquement pas changé depuis la fin du XIX^e siècle, que ce soit sur le plan de la forme, de l'esprit ou des activités, offrant ainsi un exemple de dessin classique de parc.

L'évolution historique du Communal suit celle de la croissance des parcs et des loisirs au Canada.

Sa réduction de 235 à 63 acres montre l'importance de la protection et de la préservation des espaces verts et des aires de détente. Le communal, conçu par les Saxons et implanté en Grande-Bretagne et ailleurs, devait offrir une zone communautaire destinée à des activités diverses. Le communal d'Halifax a bien rempli ce rôle. Certes, on a empiété sur lui, mais il reste toujours l'importante zone réservée aux activités de loisirs et de détente qu'il était pour les générations passées. Le Communal a aussi une signification historique en tant que base du mouvement canadien des parcs et loisirs; il demeure aujourd'hui un exemple vivant de cet héritage. ☐



Kiosque à musique dans un jardin public d'Halifax.

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