

Halifax Explosion. Slide Show. Janet F. Kitz.

1. Map of the harbour. It was much busier in 1917 than it is now. There were ships at every wharf, cargo ships, warships, troopships. World War 1 had been going on for three years. Halifax was the main port for the Atlantic seaboard. Soldiers were stationed in the city and at all the forts in case of German attacks. (Show McNab's mention York Redoubt, Point Pleasant Park, etc.)
2. Dockyard. Railway. Sugar Refinery. The railway was very important. Trains brought supplies, grain from the Prairies, equipment, troops.
3. Gottingen Street. Note the Union Jack. Even with the war the city was getting ready for Christmas. There was a big exhibition of Christmas goods at the Exhibition Grounds. That is the Forum now. Store windows were becoming festive. Churches were having concerts with Christmas carols.
4. Halifax Graving Dock. In wartime it was busier than ever, with ships requiring quick repairs. (Explain how a dry dock works. Ship enters, water drained, ship remains.)
5. When a ship was loading or unloading cargo the dock was a busy place.
6. Richmond, the most northerly part of the city, was a bit cut off from the rest. There were plenty of green spaces. It had its own schools and churches. The railway ran along the harbour. Many of the men worked there. There were other factories, like Hillis and Sons' Foundry, the Acadia Sugar Refinery, Richmond Printing Works.
7. Richmond with Bedford Basin, where convoys gathered for the dangerous Atlantic crossing. Convoys were also leaving from New York, as the United States had entered the war in April of 1917.
8. Richmond School
9. A school class. Note the numbers. (it was not uncommon to have 75 students in a class at that time) The date on the blackboard is November, 1917.
10. St. Joseph's School. It was the Roman Catholic Girls' school, but the boys' school had burned down and so girls attended in the morning and boys in the afternoon until their new building, Alexander Mackay, was ready. The girls wore their "tires," as they called their uniforms.
11. Pens. They had to be dipped into an inkwell found at the top of each desk. (Nobel Driscoll sat behind Barbara Orr who had long red hair done in pigtails. Once he could not resist dipping one in the ink. She swung round. Ink flew in all directions. He was sent to the principal.) No ball point pens, and NO computers.
12. Notebooks (Patriotic flags.)
13. Boys on Pier 6, summer of 1917. They attended Richmond school. (The one at the end was always getting up to mischief. He took off his trunks just before the picture was taken.)
14. Map. World War 1 had lasted over three years. Canada had been sending thousands of troops to Europe, mainly from Halifax. Hospital ships returned carrying those who had been wounded overseas.
15. Enemy submarines lurked in the ocean, often not far from land. That year alone nearly fifteen hundred ships had been sunk. Just the last week in November 17 merchant ships and 4 fishing boats had gone down.

16. The convoy system was started in 1917. Ships gathered in Bedford Basin, and crossed the ocean in a group, with heavily armed destroyers to guard them. Sailors from countries that were allied to Canada, like the U.S., Britain and France walked around the city, but those whose countries were not involved, the neutrals, were not allowed ashore in case there were spies among them. Troopships like this one, which had been a passenger ship, were painted with camouflage designs to confuse enemy gunners. Imagine it sailing through the rough sea, with waves splashing. It would not be such an easy target.
17. The naval Headquarters were on HMCS Niobe, a former British cruiser, which did not look like this when sailing the seas. Extra buildings had been added to create offices.
18. The railways were very busy. This is the main station at North Street. Troops and supplies, like grain from the prairies, were all transported by train. (No big planes).
19. Map of the harbour, showing the anti submarine nets.
20. The anti submarine nets
21. On the evening of December 5, two ships lay at anchor at either end of the harbour. In Bedford Basin was the *Imo*, a Norwegian cargo ship. Norway was neutral, not involved in the war, and so her ships could sail freely. She should have left earlier in the day heading for New York to pick up supplies for Belgium, a country very badly affected by the war. The boat that brought fuel for the voyage arrived too late for the *Imo* to get through the gates in the anti submarine nets. They were always shut after dark. So she had to wait for morning.
22. The French *Mont-Blanc*, with a crew of 41, arrived from New York too late to pass through the nets. She had to anchor off McNab's Island. A harbour pilot who had taken out another ship came on board, to guide the ship through the harbour to Bedford Basin where a convoy was gathering, as soon as the gates opened in the morning.
23. This is the *Mont-Blanc's* cargo. It had been loaded in New York, and was considered so dangerous that the longshoremen who carried the materials on board wore thick cloth coverings on their heavy boots to prevent sparks. Wooden partitions separated the different types of explosives. Barrels of benzol, a type of gasoline, crowded the deck. The men were forbidden to smoke there, as it was unsafe.
24. Map of harbour. *Mont-Blanc* was the second ship to enter the harbour, the first an American cargo ship, and proceeded on her correct course, along the Dartmouth shore. *Imo* reported to the guard ship, and was heading for her proper route, along the Halifax side of the channel, but received a signal from the American ship asking her to stay off course. As she again tried to reach her correct route, a tug towing barges came out from the Dockyard, forcing her to remain on her wrong side.
25. Route of two ships. Collision. After the two ships sighted each other, there may have been some panic on board. Certainly there were wrong decisions. *Imo* struck *Mont-Blanc*, breaking through the metal of the bow, creating sparks.
26. Barbara Orr stood at the window of their house overlooking the harbour, with her brother Ian, the ship expert. They watched the collision. "It looked as if they were trying to run into each other. There was plenty of room." Barbara said later. The sparks set the benzol alight, and, very quickly, the fire spread. (The M.B. crew took to their lifeboats and rowed to the Dartmouth shore.) The fire grew more and more spectacular, and the ship drifted closer and closer to the Halifax shore. The three oldest Orr children asked their mother if they could go down the hill to have a better look. Mrs. Orr saw no danger. The workers and people on the shore were not running away. Barbara, Ian and Isobel left the house, their mother and the three younger ones staying at home. Barbara left the others to go to invite a friend to join her.

27. The column of smoke grew ever bigger, sparks shooting up through it. Barbara stopped, mesmerized.
28. The new fire engine of which the city was so proud that they had given it a name, Patricia, and the fire chief's car, both fully manned, raced towards Pier 6 where the burning ship had come to rest.
29. James, Gordon, Alan Pattison, seen here playing in the waves off the Dartmouth shore, with the ship that opened the gates in the anti submarine net in the background, had just left their house near the harbour to go to Richmond School. They were running after the Patricia to see what all the smoke and excitement was about.
30. Explosion! Houses collapsed, walls tumbled, every window was smashed. It was winter. Furnaces and stoves were stoked. Many were overturned by the blast. Wooden buildings soon were ablaze. Barbara had a feeling of somersaulting through the air. She came to near the top of Fort Needham, one of her high tightly laced boots gone. She was covered with a black, wet, oily substance. There were people around staggering, bleeding. "It's the Germans," someone said. She tried to tell them that it was a ship, but no one seemed to hear. She struggled to her feet. Where her house had been, she saw only smoke and flames. Sometimes walking, sometimes crawling, she managed to reach her aunt's house on Gottingen Street, where there was serious damage, but no fires.
31. The Crowdis family's house was very near Barbara's aunt's.
32. Notice how it fell backwards towards the harbour. (The two children survived.) Barbara's aunt and cousins stood outside surveying the damage. They did not recognize the strange figure. "I'm Barbara," she cried. "Barbara has red hair," said her aunt. Her bright, curly hair was black. James Pattison must have lost consciousness. He came round, lying on the road, his cap and jacket gone, but his schoolbag still on his back. His nose was bleeding, a big nail stuck out of his hand. As the black fog lifted he met Gordon, in much the same state, but they could not find Alan.
33. They wandered around. There were fires, and houses were smashed.
34. They did not know that the Fire Chief's car and the fire engine, Patricia, were all wrecked. Only one fireman survived. The old steam powered engine came into constant use.
35. The Acadia Sugar Refinery, before
36. and after. James Pattison's father worked there.
37. Richmond School. Very quickly, soldiers and sailors were organized to help with rescue work. Wellington Barracks at the south end of Richmond, was considerably damaged. A large magazine, well stocked with highly explosive material, stood near the furnace room. Live coals were scattered. Luckily, a soldier was quick to seize a fire extinguisher, and succeeded in putting out the flames, creating great clouds of smoke. People panicked. Rumour spread. There was going to be a second explosion. Soon uniformed men were ordering everyone to go to high ground. Rescue work was slowed. People left their homes and headed for Citadel Hill, Point Pleasant Park, any open ground. Firemen and hospital staff refused to budge. It was nearly noon before permission to return was given, and this delay caused a great deal of harm.
38. Hills and Sons' Foundry. Men had been standing at the windows, from which they had a wonderful view of the fire. One boy was sent on an errand. The foreman told him to run fast, that they would save his place. He was outside when the ship blew up. He was one of the very few survivors.

39. Next day a dreadful snowstorm added to people's misery, and made rescue work more difficult. Only horse drawn wagons could tackle the steep hills of Richmond.
40. Camp Hill Hospital. Barbara Orr was taken here. She lay for some days. Then she recognized an aunt, who was walking though the ward, looking for her. Barbara called out, but she was still so blackened and disfigured that her aunt had no idea who she was. Barbara learned that her fears were correct. She was the only one still alive out of her whole family.
41. It was difficult to tell which baby was which, if the mother was injured or dead.
42. Vince Coleman was train dispatcher at the Richmond Railway Yards. He had been told that the fire in the harbour was very dangerous. He was just about to run, when her remembered that a train was due. He stayed to send a last message, "Munitions ship on fire. Approaching Pier 6. Goodbye." That made it too late for him to escape.
43. He used this instrument to tap out the message. Beside it are his watch and pen.
44. These are the Richmond Railway Yards, where Vince Coleman was killed.
45. This is the train that he stopped. Later it went back to Truro carrying injured and homeless survivors.
46. The Pattison boys wandered through the wreckage, trying to find refuge, but they kept being told to move on. Finally they reached Dartmouth by boat, and their grandparents' house. It was getting late and they were exhausted. Their uncles had gone to Halifax to look for the family, but without success. Later the boys found out that Catherine, Alan and their father had been killed, and their mother was in hospital, badly injured.
47. The newspaper printing press was badly damaged by glass from smashed windows. December 7 brought a single page.
48. The *Imo* was blown across the harbour near the Dartmouth shore. The men who had been on the bridge, and made the decisions about the ship's movements, were all killed.
49. The Richmond Printing Works was very badly damaged. Barbara's grandfather was one of the only people who escaped.
50. Chebucto Road School was used as a mortuary. Here people could go to try to find relatives.
51. On December 17 special funeral services for the unidentified dead were held in the school yard.
52. North Street Station was wrecked and never completely rebuilt. The station at the foot of South Street took its place.
53. Military tents were quickly erected on the Commons, but homeless people were not too keen to live in them. Their own sturdy houses had been wrecked. Tents seemed a bit flimsy. The snow storm that came on the day after the explosion and the cold winter did not help.
54. James Pattison kept his schoolbag and books. It took some weeks for the Sugar Refinery ruins, where his father's body lay, to be cleared. Then he got back his watch that he had lent his father. The hands were gone, but their imprint marked the watch face. Ten minutes past nine, they showed. James had always kept the watch about five minutes fast.
55. Animals were rescued too, and the S.P.C.A. set up a special shelter.

56. St. Joseph's School. Although it was damaged, it was safer than wooden houses. Far more Catholic boys than girls were killed. 55 Catholic boys killed. St. Joseph's...8 girls killed at school, 15 at home. Richmond school 84 killed. Teachers throughout the city sent children home. Many wandered, having no home left.
57. Food supplies were given out at the Armouries. Soldiers were in charge. Stores had been destroyed. In others the food was ruined by shards of glass.
58. It was a very snowy winter. This was one way to carry supplies. Empty wooden boxes made good toboggans.
59. In order to prevent looting, no one could visit the devastated area without special permission
60. Temporary housing was built on various open spaces. They were known as the tarpaper houses, and were quite comfortable even in the bad weather. Rents ranged from \$5 to \$20 a month. A worker might make \$120 per month.
61. Massachusetts was very generous. Its relief supply centre was just like a store. People could choose what they wanted, and paid from their allowances.
62. Governor McCall of Massachusetts came to visit. We still say, "Thank you," to Boston. How?
63. Children who had lost their parents had to be looked after. The Protestant Orphanage on Veith Street was destroyed and practically everyone there killed. Many new orphans were created. Here they are in their temporary home beside Point Pleasant Park.
64. Cleaning up. Crews, horses and wagons came from companies in Montreal and other cities and the area that had been Richmond was gradually cleared up.
People wanted to know who was responsible for all this destruction. An enquiry began less than a week after the explosion. *Mont-Blanc* was blamed. The trial that followed gave the same verdict. An appeal to the Supreme Court of Canada declared both ships at fault, and the Privy Council in London agreed.
65. Building permanent housing. Note the railway that brought materials from the docks.
66. The houses were built of hydrostone, a type of cement mixture. All sorts of names were proposed for the new settlement, but the name that stuck was "Hydrostone."
67. This shows the inside of one of the houses, with Massachusetts furniture.
68. The new Richmond School just after it opened.
Houses are beginning to appear.
69. This is a class in the new school. Mr. Huggins was Principal of both the old school and the new. He was badly injured in the explosion and his daughter was killed. He retired soon after he saw the completion of the new school.
70. Barbara Orr started afresh at Halifax Ladies' College. She never again lived where her old home had been.
71. A temporary church stood for about two years near where the Hydrostone shops are now. Like the houses, it was made of tarpaper.
72. A new church took place of the two that had been destroyed. It was called the United Memorial Church. (Presbyterian and Methodist. Precursor of the United Church)

73. Eric and Marjorie Davidson, who attended this church, as they were before the explosion. Eric stood by the window, playing with his toy train and watching the burning ship. He was blinded by the flying glass.
74. Here he is with his two brothers. He attended the Halifax School for the Blind and eventually became a motor mechanic. (One thing he was not supposed to do was drive, but occasionally that would be arranged. Exciting outings to a beach, or a frozen lake would provide a place for Eric to be at the wheel, his brothers shouting directions.)
75. Dorothy and Carmen Swetnam were the children of the minister of one of the churches that was destroyed. Their mother and Carmen were by the piano when the explosion happened and were both killed. Dorothy and her father were saved, but the house burned down.
76. Weeks later this little cup was found in the wreckage. It does not have a crack. (It is on display at the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic.)
77. Annie Liggins lived very close to the harbour. Her home was completely wrecked and burned down. She was found twenty-six hours after the explosion under the ashcan of the stove. It had protected her, from the snowstorm as well. Her mother and brother and more than fifty people in the block were killed. The soldier who rescued her must have visited her in hospital. On the back of the photograph is written: "To Annie, the ashpan baby. From Sgt. Major Davis."
78. There are memorials in different places in the city. This one is outside the Memorial Library on Gottingen Street. The library itself is a memorial to the explosion.
79. A carillon of bells, donated by Barbara Orr in memory of her entire family, was hung in the tower of the new church. Barbara played them at the opening ceremony. They proved too heavy for the tower, and eventually, were taken out and lay beside the church under tarpaulins. In 1985 a new Bell Tower, on Fort Needham, was dedicated. At the opening ceremonies, who played the bells, no longer by pulling large levers, but on a keyboard? Barbara Orr Thompson.
80. The Halifax Explosion Memorial Bell Tower.