

## The Saga of the Transfer of Union Cemetery to Elmwood- Sherbrooke

In 1918 an unusual event took place in Sherbrooke, Quebec. Perhaps it was not so unusual for its day but in retrospect it seems a challenging occurrence - the removal of all persons interred at the Union Cemetery located on Belvedere Street in the South Ward and their reburial in Elmwood Cemetery in the North Ward of the city.

The process leading to this decision was slow, beginning in the late 1800's when the Union Cemetery was becoming sadly neglected. Established in 1849 on three and three quarter acres of land noted in the cadastral records of Sherbrooke as lot 1442 in the South Ward it had been designated for use as a cemetery by Protestant denominations other than Anglican- Congregational, Methodist, Presbyterian and Baptist. (The Anglican Church cemetery was separately established.) The Congregational Church had paid for the purchase of the land (\$445.00) but all these churches were jointly responsible for the upkeep and maintenance.

By the end of the century the cemetery was almost full and was poorly maintained. The area around it had become highly industrialized so that the location was no longer appropriate for a cemetery. The June 19<sup>th</sup> 1894 minutes of Trustees of the Congregational Church reflect these concerns *"It was moved.....the Chief of Police take steps to prevent persons loitering in and desecrating the grounds.....and also authorize him to proceed against trespassers....."*

Although it can be assumed that the problems at Union Cemetery continued the concern does not resurface in the existing minutes of the Trustees except in a short comment in 1905 regarding *"what is necessary in the way of repairs....."* until September 8<sup>th</sup> of 1907 when discussion of a transfer of the bodies is recorded. *"It was moved by A.M. Sangster, seconded by J.S.Mitchell that action be taken towards closing up and removing the bodies from Union Cemetery, and that the matter be referred to the secretary of the Church for legal opinion as to the necessary procedure."* Elmwood Cemetery which had been established in 1890 by local businessmen who were concerned about the deteriorating conditions at Union was considered to be the appropriate transfer site.

An additional motivation for action at this time was pressure from City Fathers, Alderman McManamy among them, who expressed their interest in the land for commercial use. Plymouth Church minutes record: *"Mr. McManamy was very anxious on behalf of the City that the Union Cemetery should be removed, and the land.....made available estate for manufactory, as it is right in the heart of manufacturing industries."* The minutes continue to reflect the City's determination that if the Church would not move forward with the transfer *"the City will obtain authority to expropriate the property and remove the bodies and the Church would thereby lose control of the situation."*

Plymouth Church minutes indicate that a Cemetery Committee had been formed in 1908 to deal with the Union issue. This Committee examined the costs involved in a potential transfer by having the process evaluated by a marble dealer and an undertaker who

provided an estimate. However deliberations continued slowly and it was not until 5 years later, in 1913, that a formal offer was presented to Plymouth Congregational Church by Elmwood Trustees detailing the move. It stated that persons would be able to choose their relocation site in Elmwood from any available spaces and that all persons not claimed by relatives would be re-buried in the “new” South West corner which was to be beautified with pathways similar to the other sections of Elmwood. All monuments and stones would also be repositioned.

However as Plymouth Church Trustees needed an Act of Legislature to confirm their title to the property in preparation for the sale and transition another four years passed before this was formalized in October of 1916. As a consequence negotiations with Elmwood were not taken up formally again until 1917. Correspondence indicates that the costs and property value were assumed to have increased considerably since the initial estimate was proposed. Despite cost increases the estimated accrual from sale of Union’s land is believed adequate to pay for the transfer of what is assumed to be approximately 700 bodies.

The correspondence reflects that the President of Elmwood in what appears emotionally charged language suggests that any profits from the sale of Union land should be contributed to Elmwood Cemetery, not be held by Plymouth Church, as Elmwood is now steward of the Protestant community’s graves. *“While admitting that legally the Church has a right to this surplus..... I am profoundly convinced that morally, which is the only standpoint from which the Church should consider the question, it has no right and would place itself and religion in a false position before the Community.....”* He states that the original financial outlay of \$445.00 contributed by Plymouth did not reflect the value of the property even at time of purchase and that they have spent no money to maintain the cemetery during the intervening period, *“...with the exception of the payment of some \$50.00 during over 40 years assumed any responsibility for the proper care of it, what has been done has been by private effort and its condition past and present has been a standing disgrace unkempt, a resort for the disreputable and at present its graves are befouled with human excrement and filthy beyond words.....”*

The minutes reflect what appears to have been heated dialog, however after much discussion and negotiation, arrangements were finally made between the Plymouth Congregational Church Board, representing Union Cemetery interests and the Board of Trustees at Elmwood to relocate the persons buried in Union to comparable spaces on the Elmwood grounds. The Trustees at Plymouth finally send a firm request letter in May of 1918, stating that they expect to sell the land for \$15,000 and will use this money to pay for the transfer keeping only the original \$445.00 with simple interest accrued.

At this point however the Elmwood Trustees, aware of the passage of four years from their earlier proposal and the potential cost increases generated by the War decided that current actual costs should be validated before formalizing their agreement. In June of that year the Elmwood Cemetery Superintendent Luther Stevenson was sent to the Mt. Royal Cemetery in Montreal with the mission to report back regarding the costs of various services, not only related to the transfer itself but also to perpetual maintenance,

to ensure that their proposal reflects current expenses. As a result of Mr. Stevenson's report the Elmwood Board notified the Trustees of the Congregational Church that based on the information from Montreal they must raise their prices from their earlier quotes to reflect cost increases from the 1913 proposal. They state that as "*the cost of labour, teams and material has more than doubled, and has also very considerably increased since the date of our last communication 24<sup>th</sup>, July 1917, in addition to which the subject has been further complicated by the difficulty now of getting workmen at any price.*" (Canada, as a dominion of Britain at the time, entered into the war immediately with British Empire's declaration of war on the 6th of August, 1914.)

It seems that an agreement was reached because the members of Plymouth Congregational Church were notified on September 16<sup>th</sup> 1918 that their Trustees would be entering into a contract with the Elmwood Cemetery Company for the transfer of Union. A notice was published in the Sherbrooke Daily Record (Sept 17, 1918) that "*legal representatives*" of the persons buried in Union have the opportunity to choose a suitable site of comparable size in Elmwood from "*all the unsold ground available*", the announcement having been made from the pulpit by Rev. Read on the previous two Sundays.

The transfer began in the fall of 1918 and continued through the following year. Plymouth Church Trustees minutes of November 21<sup>st</sup> 1918 state: "*The Cemetery Committee reported that about 300 bodies had been removed from the old Union cemetery to Elmwood and the work was progressing very favorably.*" September 11<sup>th</sup> 1919 minutes note that the "*removals*" work was completed and they could proceed with selling the land.

Although the transfer of bodies and stones was completed in the fall of 1919 financial negotiations regarding the land sale continued for some time. The May 17<sup>th</sup>, 1920 minutes of the Cemetery Committee at Plymouth Church report that one part of the Union lot had been sold to Imperial Oil for \$10,499. Later in August of that year the minutes of a special meeting of the Cemetery Committee report sale of the balance of the Union Cemetery land for \$26,331.47. From this amount payments were made to Elmwood, the attorneys (\$255.46) as well as the Mitchell Estate (\$462.58) for a loan, leaving a profit balance of \$11,814.60 to the Church. Final calculations of money owed to Elmwood for the work was based on a total of 895 bodies removed at \$23.57 per body for a balance of \$21,096.15

The September 20<sup>th</sup> 1922 minutes of a special meeting of Plymouth Church Cemetery Committee report how the monies received from the sale of the land had been used - \$8500 was invested in two mortgages which would be paying first interest in December of that year. "*It was moved by Mr. Webster and seconded by Mr. Sangster that other money from the earnings should be used to paint the outside of the church including the steeple, two coats; and that the contract be given to the lowest bidder. Carried.....*"

And although the President of Elmwood had suggested to the Board of Plymouth Church that they as a religious institution should not be making a profit from the sale of Union land a clue to the actual financial outcome of the event can be found in a note from a Plymouth Board member to Pastor Read on August 11<sup>th</sup> of 1922:

*“I saw Stanley on the street today and he said that you were anxious to know just how the cemetery matter was coming out.....\$12,000 which will be net to the Church....on the whole I think we can congratulate ourselves upon our handling of a very delicate matter with the minimum of criticism or dissatisfaction, and after all coming out with a fairly substantial balance on the right side of the ledger.”*

**Financial Overview Report (1919)**

There were the remains of 895 bodies removed. 550 were claimed leaving 345 unclaimed. Of the claimed, 371 were adults and 179 children; unclaimed, 188 adults, 157 children. Total 559 adults, 336 children.

The claimed graves occupy 12,715 square feet @ 15cents per foot, \$1,907.25. Unclaimed graves occupy 7,236 square feet @ 10 cents per foot, \$723.60. Perpetual maintenance on the whole at 25 cents per foot \$4,987.75.

There were 18 claimants who had relatives removed to lots of their own, 43 bodies in all occupying 857 feet at present prices would amount to \$433.50

42 representatives bought 3633 feet additional space at cost of \$1,803.40  
116 stones and monuments removed, requiring 2084 cubic feet of concrete for erection. New cases were supplied in all cases with exception of 8, three of which were iron caskets.

One claimant had two relatives put into caskets at his own expense. Total due the Cemetery Company is \$21,096.15 on the basis of \$16,500. for 700 graves, there being 195 over estimate @ \$23.57 per grave, making \$4596.15 additional.

Total cost of removal as per itemized statement below was \$6700.73 leaving a balance of \$14.395.42 due the Company.

**STATEMENT OF INCOME AND EXPENDITURE**

Received from the Church \$6700.73	Supervision (L.S.)	\$700.00
	Labor	3413.36
	Shells	2017.04
	Gravel, Cement and etc	301.98
	Insurance	104.52
	Cash on hand for c/s	
	Accounts	163.83
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	\$6700.73	\$6700.73

Sources:

Plymouth United Church Archives, Eastern Townships Research Center, Bishops University.

Trustees minutes- Elmwood Cemetery Company

**ADDENDUM:**

The names of all reinterred persons that were available are listed in the Elmwood Cemetery records. Some have been noted as “from Union”. For others the date is the only clue. And many have no name being identified as “Unknown - from Union - no burial slip.”

For those interested in locating the graves of persons who were transferred from Union a walk through Elmwood Cemetery would be in order. The South West corner of the cemetery, the section in which many of the transferred were buried, can be found by taking a right turn on the first drive after passing the office. At the end, before the drive turns north, the entrance is identified by a low granite monument on which the event is described.

As families were able to choose any available lots transfers are also scattered through the older sections of the cemetery. These can be identified by dates of death prior to the establishment of Elmwood (1890). 110 stones and monuments were moved.

As there were a number of the transferred persons buried in the South West corner who had no stone and no relatives to claim them they lie under the grass without markers to identify their remains. Hopefully the monument at the entrance to this section acknowledges their memory.