

To clarify the Union cemetery issue —

BODIES ON THE MOVE

The transfer of Sherbrooke's Union Cemetery to Elmwood
by Anne-Reet Ilves Annunziata

It was an unusual challenge. In 1918, all persons interred in the Union Cemetery on Belvedere Street in Sherbrooke's South Ward were removed and reburied in Elmwood Cemetery in the North Ward of the city.

The process leading to this decision was slow, beginning in the late nineteenth century when the Union Cemetery had become sadly neglected. Established in 1849 on 3¼ acres of land (Lot 1442 in the Sherbrooke cadastral records), 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 established separately.) The Congregational Church had paid for the purchase of the land (\$445) but all of these churches were jointly responsible for 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 minutes of the Trustees of the Plymouth Congregational Church for June 19, 1894, reflect these concerns: It was moved that "the Chief of Police take steps to prevent persons loitering in and desecrating the grounds" and "to proceed against trespassers."

Although it can be assumed that the problems at Union Cemetery continued, the concern for maintenance does not resurface in the existing Trustees' minutes except in a short comment in 1905 regarding doing "what is necessary in the way of repairs." On September 8, 1907, the first discussion of the transfer of the bodies was 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, established in 1890 by local businessmen 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 interest in zoning the land for commercial use. Plymouth Church minutes record that "Mr. McManamy was very anxious on behalf of the City that the Union Cemetery should be removed, and the land... made available for manufactory, as it is right in the heart of manufacturing industries." The city's determination was such that they declared that if the Church would not authorize 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. Deliberations continued slowly, however, and it was not until 1913, five years later, that a formal offer was presented to Plymouth Congregational Church by the Elmwood Trustees, detailing the move. The offer 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.

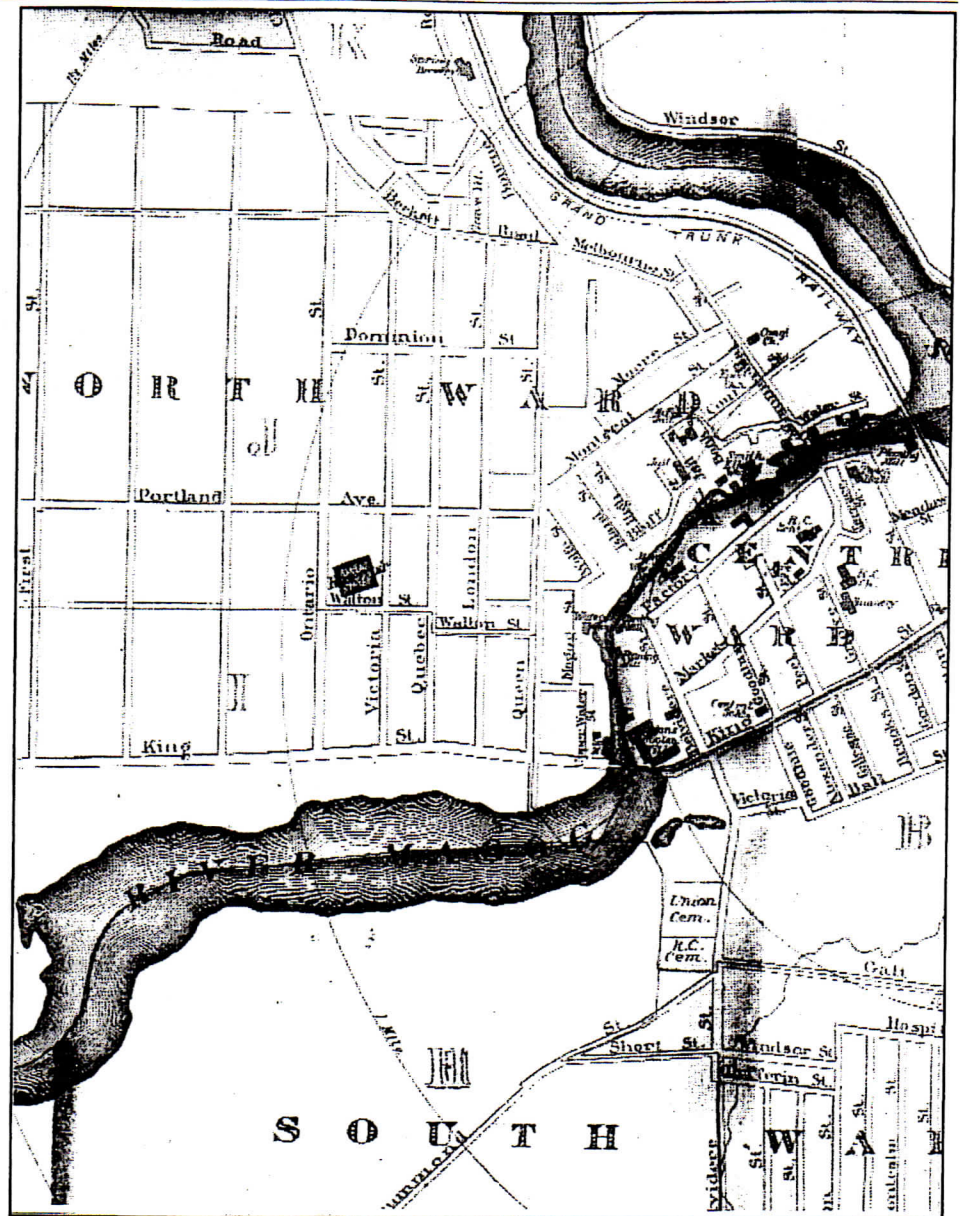
However, as Plymouth Church Trustees needed an Act of Legislature to confirm their title to the property in preparation for the sale and transition, another four years passed before this was formalized, in October of 1916. As a consequence, negotiations with Elmwood were not taken up formally again until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

In the correspondence, the president of Elmwood suggests in emotionally-charged language that any profits from the sale of Union land should be given to Elmwood Cemetery, not held by Plymouth Church; Elmwood was now the 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." The president states that the original financial outlay of \$445 contributed by Plymouth did not reflect the value of the property, even at the time of purchase, and that they had spent no money to maintain the cemetery during the intervening period: "With the exception of the payment of some \$50," Plymouth had not "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."

Heated dialogue appears to have ensued. After much discussion and negotiation, however, arrangements were 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 sent a firm request in May of 1918, stating that they expected to sell the land for \$15,000 and would use this money to pay for the transfer, keeping only the original \$445 with simple interest accrued.

At this point, however, the Elmwood Trustees, aware of the passage of four years since 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 1918, Elmwood Cemetery Superintendent Luther Stevenson was sent to Mount 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, in order to ensure that their proposal reflected 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 since the 1913 proposal: "The



cost of labour, teams and material has more than doubled, and has also very considerably increased since the date of our last communication, 24th July 1917, in addition to which the subject has been further complicated by the difficulty now of getting workmen at any price."

It seems that an agreement was reached: on September 16, 1918, the members of Plymouth Congregational Church were notified 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 had been made from

the pulpit by Reverend Read the previous two Sundays.

The transfer began in the fall of 1918 and continued through the following year. "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," according to the Plymouth Church Trustees minutes of November 21, 1918. The minutes of September 11, 1919, 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 minutes of the cemetery committee of May 17, 1920, report that one part of the Union lot had been sold to Imperial Oil



for \$10,499. In August, the minutes report that the balance of the Union Cemetery land was sold 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 committee minutes of September 20, 1922, report how the monies received from the sale of the land had been used: \$8,500 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."

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, 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," he wrote. "\$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."

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, identified only as "Unknown - from Union - no burial slip."

For those interested in locating the graves of persons 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.

Anne-Reet Ilves Annunziata is Vice-President of the Board of Trustees at Elmwood Cemetery and also Chair of the Executive Committee. Her parents, who are buried at Elmwood, arrived in Sherbrooke from Estonia in February 1949 to work at the Dominion Textile plant. Her childhood was spent in Sherbrooke and she still owns the family home on Durham Street.

Sources:

Plymouth United Church Archives,
Eastern Townships Resource Center,
Bishop's University.
Minutes, Elmwood Cemetery Company.



Top: Section H, Elmwood Cemetery, where the "unknowns" from Union Cemetery are buried. Photo: Anne-Reet Ilves Annunziata.

Bottom: Site of the former Union Cemetery, Sherbrooke. Photo: Anne-Reet Ilves Annunziata.