

## The Homes Front The Accommodation Crisis in Halifax, 1941-1951

Jay White

Volume 20, numéro 3, february 1992

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1019268ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1019268ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (imprimé)

1918-5138 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

White, J. (1992). The Homes Front: The Accommodation Crisis in Halifax, 1941-1951. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 20(3), 117-127. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1019268ar>

### Résumé de l'article

En 1942, aucune ville du Canada n'était aussi proche du front que Halifax, en Nouvelle-Ecosse. Pourtant Halifax, pas plus que le reste du pays, n'était prête à soutenir une longue guerre, et la ville avait beaucoup de mal à satisfaire la lourde demande en logements et en services municipaux. Par contre, son port était prêt. En effet l'énorme investissement national dans la construction de nouvelles jetées et installations ferroviaires, commencée avant la première guerre mondiale, permit à Halifax d'accueillir les énormes navires de guerre britanniques et les paquebots affectés au transport des troupes. Son vaste port offrait un asile sûr aux centaines de navires marchands alliés, menacés par les sous-marins allemands. Mais la ville de Halifax était complètement dépassée par l'accroissement de sa population (70%) en moins de deux ans. Le peu d'emplois dans l'industrie, le ralentissement de la construction de logements, l'extrême mobilité de la population et le peu d'empressement du gouvernement fédéral à assumer la responsabilité des problèmes locaux firent que Halifax « eût un rôle difficile à jouer sur la scène de la guerre ».

— Citation tirée de « Gateway to the World », un film réalisé par le ministère de l'industrie et de la publicité de la Nouvelle-Ecosse, en 1946.

## ***The Homes Front:***

### ***The Accommodation Crisis In Halifax, 1941-1951***

**Jay White**

#### **Abstract**

***No city in Canada was closer to the front lines of battle in 1942 than Halifax, Nova Scotia. But Halifax, like the rest of the country, was unprepared for a long war and the city struggled to cope with the heavy demand placed on her housing stock and municipal services. In one respect, Halifax was ready: the massive federal investment in new piers and rail facilities, begun before the First World War, enabled the port to accommodate huge British battleships and passenger liners converted into troopships. Her commodious harbour provided safe haven from German U-boats to hundreds of Allied merchantmen. But on the domestic front, Halifax could not even begin to manage the effects of a 70% rise in population in less than two years. Few industrial jobs, limited housing construction, a very high transient population, and a reluctance on the part of the federal government to accept responsibility for local problems all contributed to Halifax having a "rather uncomfortable rail seat at the spectacle of war."***

***— quotation from "Gateway to the World", film produced by the Nova Scotia Department of Industry and Publicity, 1946.***

#### ***Halifax (The Native Speaks)***

I do not think of Halifax  
With great ships at her feet,  
But only of a leafy lane,  
A garden gay and neat.

Only of bright sails skimming  
The waters of the Arm,  
Of April-blooming dogwood,  
October's vibrant charm.

I see no mighty fortress  
With stern face to the foe,  
But just an old and quiet town  
Wrapped in December snow.

For Halifax is cobbled streets,  
And tall trees in a park,  
And thin mist blown by salty winds,  
A foghorn through the dark.

And all the cherished things that warm  
The heart, remembering still  
The grey and patient city  
Beneath its ancient hill.<sup>1</sup>

This quaint portrait evokes an urban landscape far removed from the rough and sometimes disorderly bustle of a seaport and garrison town. Poetic licence is compounded by a twofold irony: these verses appeared in 1949, in the wake of a period during which Halifax faced its greatest wartime challenge. The military presence so obviously downplayed here was more pervasive in the preceding decade than it had ever been in the city's 200-year history. Second, the author was Agnes Foley Macdonald, wife of Canada's wartime Minister of National Defence for Naval Services, Angus L. Macdonald. Few observers were more ideally positioned to celebrate the role Halifax played in the Royal Canadian Navy's maturation into a battle-hardened fighting service. Yet the author chose to express the ambivalence felt by many

Haligonians toward the military in general, the Navy in particular, and the changes wrought by a long and difficult war. The stated accent on a tranquil past rather than the use of realistic images of the city may simply reflect the poetess's insulated social position. However, it also serves to introduce questions about how enduring the impact of the war had been. This article examines the physical and social impact of the Second World War on Halifax, and explores the strained relationship between community identity and the role Halifax was expected to play as Canada's foremost military base. It proposes that the war had modest lasting effects on the city. There was considerable continuity in its development.

The social structure and urban character of Halifax were cast in the mold of an eighteenth century outpost of British sea power. By the end of the nineteenth century, the urban-military matrix which had directed the course of urban development since 1749 was beginning to break down. After imperial forces withdrew in 1905, Halifax began to search for an alternative role for itself within a continental economic framework. The quest failed because Halifax never succeeded in overcoming its locational disadvantages. Instead, the city became a regional entrepot while continuing to maintain traditional trade linkages with Europe and the Caribbean. In the interwar period, the state of Canadian military preparedness was influenced by both international convention and domestic economic conditions, neither of which induced federal authorities to upgrade or even maintain the elaborate harbour defence and dockyard complex built by the British nearly a century before.

The Second World War necessitated improvements on a massive scale, but other than the small area encompassing

**Résumé**

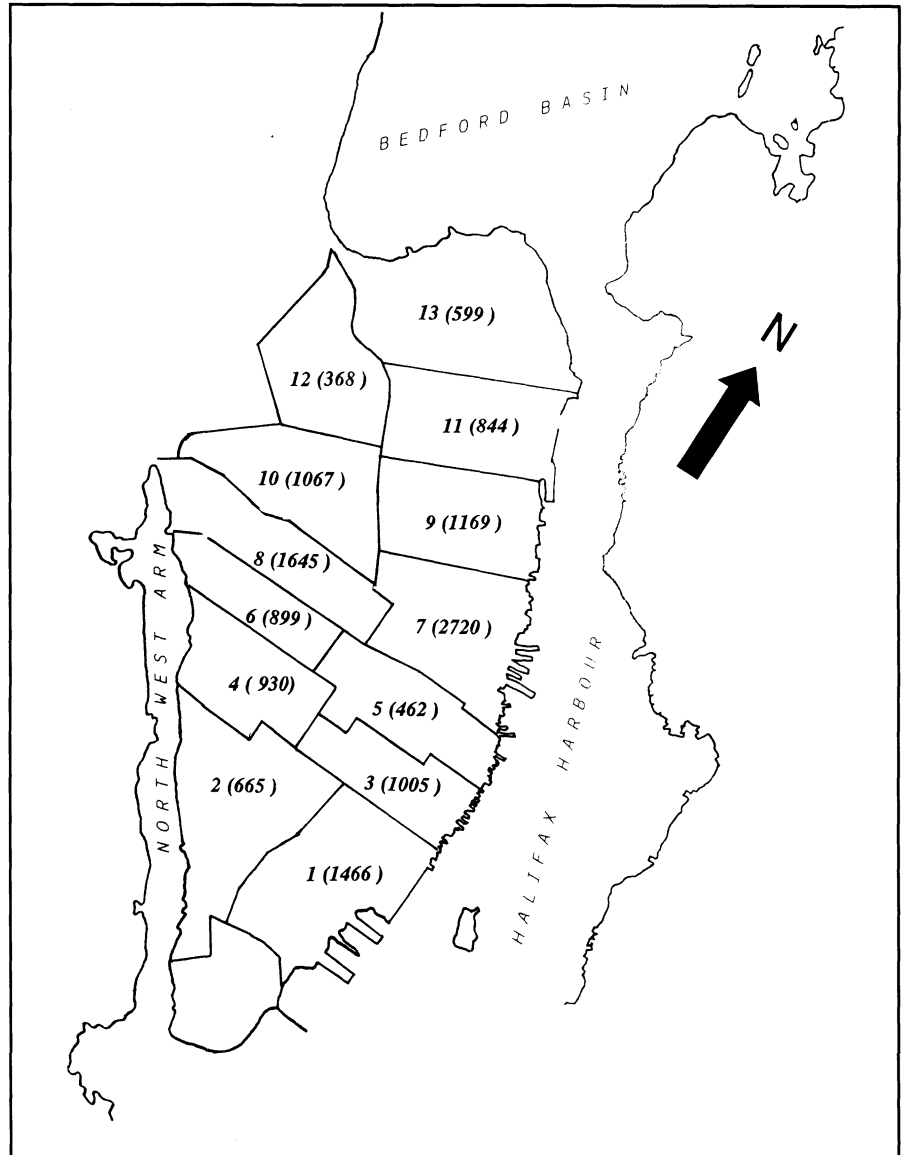
*En 1942, aucune ville du Canada n'était aussi proche du front que Halifax, en Nouvelle-Écosse. Pourtant Halifax, pas plus que le reste du pays, n'était prête à soutenir une longue guerre, et la ville avait beaucoup de mal à satisfaire la lourde demande en logements et en services municipaux. Par contre, son port était prêt. En effet l'énorme investissement national dans la construction de nouvelles jetées et installations ferroviaires, commencée avant la première guerre mondiale, permit à Halifax d'accueillir les énormes navires de guerre britanniques et les paquebots affectés au transport des troupes. Son vaste port offrait un asile sûr aux centaines de navires marchands alliés, menacés par les sous-marins allemands. Mais la ville de Halifax était complètement dépassée par l'accroissement de sa population (70%) en moins de deux ans. Le peu d'emplois dans l'industrie, le ralentissement de la construction de logements, l'extrême mobilité de la population et le peu d'empressement du gouvernement fédéral à assumer la responsabilité des problèmes locaux firent que Halifax "eût un rôle difficile à jouer sur la scène de la guerre".*

— Citation tirée de "Gateway to the World", un film réalisé par le ministère de l'industrie et de la publicité de la Nouvelle-Écosse, en 1946.

**MAP 1**

**Halifax Peninsula, 1944**

**Showing number of dwellings in each Platoon**



the Dockyard and H.M.C.S. *Stadacona*, the war had little impact on the long term development of the city. The future course of urban growth was not revealed until several years later, when Cold War politics dictated that a peacetime naval establishment should remain indefinitely

in the city.<sup>2</sup> Because a permanent naval service required permanent housing, the Department of National Defence now accepted responsibility for providing adequate accommodation for service families—a complete reversal of its housing policy during the war.

At the heart of the wartime housing crisis lay the fact that Halifax was much better equipped to accommodate ships than people. A fine natural deepwater harbour and huge sums spent on new piers and railway improvements between 1911 and 1935 combined to produce facilities eminently suited to handle the largest vessels afloat on a year-round basis. But the function of Halifax as a winter adjunct to Montreal—emphatically underscored by Sir Alexander Gibb in his influential report on Canadian ports in 1932—resulted in underutilization of harbour facilities and prevented the formation of a stable, year-round labour force on the waterfront. This lack of inter-war economic stability in turn affected housing demand, since seasonal workers required cheap, short term rental accommodation (preferably within walking distance of work) rather than single family dwellings on suburban lots.

By the end of the 1930s, Halifax possessed several geographically segregated neighbourhoods, each reflecting stark differences in economic class: these included the “over-housed” south end, (Platoons 1 and 2); the newer, medium-density middle class district on the western side of the peninsula (Platoons 8 and 10); and finally the high-density, working class neighbourhood located adjacent to the shipyard and naval base (Platoons 7 and 9). [See MAP 1]. A fourth area extended over the vacant, underdeveloped or less desirable land at the northern end of the peninsula (Platoons 12 and 13). Over time this area accumulated a number of unattractive industries and institutions: the City Prison, city dump, Infectious Diseases hospital, an abattoir, fertilizer plant, and two cemeteries. It was here that Wartime Housing Limited built its first housing project, on glebe land purchased from the Roman Catholic diocese. Here too, overlooking Bedford Basin, stood

Africville, a black shantytown that the passenger trains conveniently bypassed now that the main line into Halifax skirted along the Northwest Arm.

The contrast in land use between the northern and southern halves of the peninsula mirrored similar differences in socio-economic class. In the south end lived an “old money” elite, whose elevated status was based largely on shipping, mercantile and financial enterprises. Their homes were elegant, their properties expansive. On the opposite (or northeastern) side of Citadel Hill, dingy flats, rooming houses, and unpainted row housing lined narrow, unpaved streets and lanes. Further north could be found the Hydrostone housing project laid out by the renowned planner Thomas Adams after the great 1917 explosion; but it seemed out of place in the working class north end, and local residents said so when it was first proposed.<sup>3</sup> In fact the explosion dealt the north end housing stock a blow from which it never fully recovered. In its aftermath, people moved southwards into increasingly crowded neighbourhoods ringing Citadel Hill. Slum conditions and the lack of affordable housing had already reached the critical stage by the 1930s, but no effective solution was found to deal with the crisis before the outbreak of war.

In-migration to Halifax began in earnest just after the onset of hostilities, reaching a peak in the third quarter of 1940. The influx continued more or less unabated through 1941, falling off sharply in the first quarter of 1942 due to the entry of the United States into the war. This relieved Halifax of primary responsibility as a convoy assembly port, but the closure of the Gulf of St. Lawrence that summer due to U-boat activity offset this development to some degree. The follow-

ing year brought more substantial relief when the Royal Canadian Navy moved its basic training operations from Halifax to Deep Brook, Nova Scotia. In late 1943 a national publicity campaign dissuaded individuals and families of service personnel from coming to Halifax, but by then the urban population had more or less stabilized.

The declining influx did not, however, reflect a corresponding drop in housing congestion. In 1941, one in four households were overcrowded; by 1944 the ratio had climbed to one in three. Despite the construction of 900 bungalows and a dozen “staff houses” by Wartime Housing Limited, the majority of low to middle-income tenant households in Halifax continued to live in overcrowded accommodation.

The majority of the twenty thousand wartime transients who came to Halifax between 1940 and 1943 needed some form of temporary housing, particularly non-commissioned servicemen, young women seeking office work, and unskilled workers seeking employment on the waterfront. Most civilians came from smaller communities in the Maritimes, and although they griped about the housing shortage they were also grateful to have a job. Servicemen stationed in Halifax, their wives and sweethearts, and civilian employees transferred from larger cities outside the region tended to be more openly critical of the conditions they found, and their complaints attracted a wide audience.

Few cities in Canada have ever been so reviled as Halifax during the Second World War. Everyone, it seemed, detested the place—servicemen because they could not get a drink, their wives and sweethearts because it was so hard to find decent housing, war work-

*The Homes Front*



*Hollis Street, looking north from the Nova Scotian Hotel, ca. 1942. Foreground: the Knights of Columbus Hut, one of a dozen canteens, clubs and hostels built or opened for transient service personnel during the war. Across the street stood the Salvation Army Red Shield War Service Centre, and next door the Grosvenor Hotel (centre foreground), a favorite with merchant seamen. The Navy League of Canada built a hostel for the Merchant Navy two blocks north of here; its long roofline is clearly visible near the centre of the picture. (SOURCE: National Archives of Canada, PA180546)*

ers because the high cost of living consumed a disproportionate share of their paycheques. Cobbled thoroughfares, unpaved sidestreets, an overburdened public transportation system, obsolete water supply, inadequate health services, draconian liquor control regulations, and overcrowded restaurants, cafes, and cinemas combined to produce an atmosphere that would have been oppressive even without the damp climate, gasoline and food rationing, or blackout regulations. In many respects the city resembled a military camp more than an urban community, yet authorities refused to declare Halifax a restricted area.

Halifax landlords were roundly criticized in the national press for charging exorbitant rents, but in reality the cost of housing rose everywhere, as workers arriving from smaller communities to work in war industries competed for available accommodation. Unlike sugar or gasoline, the supply of housing remained essentially unregulated. Even after rent controls were imposed in mid-1941, tenants and landlords found ways to circumvent the system. Native Haligonians did not like what the war had done to their city, although many benefited economically from the war boom. There were too many strangers, too many ships, too many uniforms, too many camp followers. Halifax was less prepared to house a large influx of workers than cities with a larger industrial and manufacturing base, since industry tended to stimulate housing construction. Under normal conditions, a revived local economy would soon have spilled over into the building trades, and the housing stock would have expanded to meet the increased demand. That this did not happen in Halifax may be attributed to two main factors: military priorities affected the availability of labour and materials for residential construction, and the majority of the war-

**Table 1**

Platoon	Location	Dwellings	Average Rent*
One	SE	1466	\$42(44)
Two	SW	665	\$34(70)
Three	SE	1005	\$22(54)
Four	SW	930	\$50(60)
Five	SE	462	\$32(36)
Six	SE	899	\$41(62)
Seven	NE	2720	\$20(27)
Eight	NW	1645	\$29(43)
Nine	NE	1169	\$23(37)
Ten	NW	1067	\$33(42)
Eleven	NE	844	\$28(32)
Twelve	NW	382	N/A(29)
Thirteen	NW	112	N/A
Fourteen	NE	599	\$28(43)
TOTAL		13,965	

\* Figures in parentheses are for 1951. Since census tracts did not correspond precisely with the Platoons used in the Cousins Survey, comparisons are approximate. Due to small number of cases, Platoon 13 was omitted. Platoon 14 is therefore numbered 13 on Map 1.

time transient population were not industrial workers, therefore the government made scant provisions for housing them.

This failure to expand the housing stock during the war only exacerbated an already chronic shortage of affordable, adequate accommodation caused by two decades of slow economic growth.

Many Hydrostone dwellings administered by the Halifax Relief Commission during the 1930s remained vacant for months on end because the rents were so high. Low income wage-earners— young adults, seasonal workers in primary resource industries, domestic servants—survived the depression by staying at home longer, working short-term positions while living in rooming houses, taking cheaper accommodation outside the city and commuting, and

returning to smaller communities—where the cost of living was lower—between jobs. New housing construction in Halifax was confined to a relatively small area in the western portion of the peninsula. In older sections of the city, conversion of large homes into apartments was more common than replacement of existing structures. The multiple-family apartment building was almost unknown in Halifax other than the occasional dilapidated tenement where sanitary facilities were often totally inadequate. One reason for the undersupply and poor quality of apartments was the seasonal, transient nature of the peacetime labour force. Single waterfront workers who came to Halifax only during the busy winter period were more likely to seek out temporary accommodation in a rooming house than look for an apartment. On the other hand, those with families who did require an

## *The Homes Front*

apartment were more likely to settle for cramped or dilapidated quarters if the landlord would agree to occupancy on a month-by-month basis. It was much easier psychologically to accept living in squalid conditions if the occupants knew their stay would be temporary. The war was a different matter—who could tell how long it would last?

Other than skilled labour related to the military and shipbuilding, the occupational profile of wartime Halifax was characterized by a plentiful supply of service sector jobs—both in government and private firms. Generally speaking, young men and women from smaller communities in the Maritimes came to Halifax seeking manual and clerical jobs, while demand for skilled employees at the Halifax Shipyards and Dockyard was filled by workers from other parts of

Canada. The government turned to women as a convenient reserve labour pool after the armed forces or war-related industry had absorbed most able-bodied male workers by mid-1941.<sup>4</sup> Men and women employed in war industry earned the best wages, but most of those jobs were in Central Canada. The persistent labour shortage in certain occupations like stenographers and the building trades was at least partly due to the exodus of skilled workers from the Halifax area in search of better opportunities and wages outside the Maritimes. To the extent that National Selective Service regulations would permit the mobility of skilled labour, there was a steady out-migration of workers from Halifax. Industrial workers—even those engaged in essential war work—were not excluded from this trend: hundreds of shipyard workers obtained NSS

permits to leave the city when a month-long strike halted production in August 1944.<sup>5</sup>

Halifax had never been a highly industrialized city, and this did not change substantially during the war.<sup>6</sup> To be sure, there were skilled workers in the Halifax Shipyards and a fair number of technical jobs related to military applications, but on the whole the war boom in Halifax was centred in the hotels, restaurants, cafes, hostels, laundries, cinemas, dance halls, and retail stores. Unfortunately, employees in those establishments—waitresses, maids, kitchen help, ushers, sales clerks—saw their wages eaten up the high cost of food and housing. On the other hand, jobs were so plentiful that employers hired workers with little or no experience, and an unsatisfied employee could easily trade one position for another.<sup>7</sup> But the war economy was a mixed blessing for the working class, particularly those who were not qualified to take advantage of the high demand for clerical workers in government offices and military administration. There was also some resistance in the business community to the upward trend in wages caused by the labour shortage. One local employer complained that the government pay-packets were too fat—thus driving up the going rate for the same occupation at private firms.

The rhythm of wartime life in Halifax was set by the military. Royal Canadian Navy shore establishments mushroomed from a peacetime complement of 500 to nearly 17,000 by 1945.<sup>8</sup> It was clear from the beginning of the wartime expansion programme that military authorities—particularly the Royal Canadian Navy—were unable to forecast their barrack requirements, thus beginning a lengthy series of *ad hoc* responses to meet accommodation emergencies as they arose. Of 1,400



***Wartime Housing Limited bungalows for war workers under construction in Dartmouth, ca. 1942. A similar project, the first in Canada, was built by WHL in the north end of Halifax in 1941, and is visible in the background of this photograph.***  
(SOURCE: Public Archives of Nova Scotia, Bollinger Collection #84)



naval ratings training in Halifax by the spring of 1940, only a third were in barracks. That summer, the Navy requisitioned the Exhibition Grounds and erected temporary buildings to house the hundreds of new trainees pouring into the city. The RCN later acquired the Army's Wellington Barracks, a nineteenth-century stone relic of Imperial garrison days, renaming it after a more appropriate hero, Nelson. Meanwhile, the arrival of 2,000 British officers and ratings to take over forty-four (the RCN manned the other six) aging American destroyers on loan to Britain intensified housing demand. In this case the British were put up in RCN barracks, but the Royal Navy also resorted to using Armed Merchant Cruisers in harbour as floating hostels. The housing crunch continued through the winter of 1940-41: a Christmas Eve fire destroyed a barracks block and two other buildings in the Dockyard, and delays in completing new corvettes created a bottleneck in the flow of personnel from shore to ships.<sup>9</sup>

The Navy struggled to keep pace with manning, training, accommodation, and administrative functions—all of which were concentrated on the Halifax peninsula. To overcome the scarcity of building materials and skilled labour (not to mention the time needed for new construction), the RCN had quickly swallowed up most of the spare office and accommodation space in the city—commandeering hotels, fairgrounds, Victorian-era army barracks, a venerable arts College, and many other buildings. Until early 1944 half the naval personnel in Halifax lived outside barracks, supporting themselves on Lodging and Compensation Allowances (popularly known as "Lodge & Comp.") Servicemen and their families thus competed directly with civilians for accommodation, transportation, food, and other commodities

made scarce by wartime shortages and rationing. The service accommodation crisis did not subside until the RCAF embarkation depot (known as "Y" Depot) was vacated by the Air Force in late 1943. By the end of January 1944 the RCN had moved 3,000 personnel into barracks at "Y" Depot, which now became HMCS "Peregrine".

The federal government built several hundred small bungalows in the Halifax area for civilian workers in war industry, but only a handful were allotted to service families. Federal housing policy regarded the provision of wartime dwellings to be a temporary measure, and the RCN could not predict in the middle of a war what its postwar requirements for personnel accommodation would be; consequently no comprehensive plan for relieving the serious congestion in Halifax was ever put forward. The failure to provide new construction sufficient to accommodate the majority of naval personnel in Halifax undoubtedly affected service morale and caused service-civilian relations to deteriorate.

The following is one example of this animosity: in May 1944, the Officer Commanding at H.M.C.S. *Stadacona*, the main RCN establishment in Halifax, received a letter from a private citizen expressing the opinion that naval personnel were "unreliable" and "irresponsible". The letter explained that landlords and landladies were being "victimized and blackmailed" by service people who, once ensconced in an apartment or flat, seemed only too eager to "involve the landlord in difficulties with the Rentals Board on some ... concocted grievance". The writer suggested that the Navy undertake measures to avoid referring such disputes to civilian authorities, in order that "unfavorable publicity and

deceitful activities of unethical personnel can be controlled at the source".

In replying to these charges, a naval officer wrote that naval personnel "for whom service accommodation is not available and who must live ashore are in precisely the same position as civilian residents of Halifax and it is not considered possible to curtail their private freedom of action in any way ... [therefore] I am unable to take action against a group of men who, I am sure, the great majority of Halifax residents fully appreciate have given up comfortable homes and positions in order to be of service to their country".<sup>10</sup>

The immediate causes of the housing crisis seemed obvious: a huge influx of service personnel and job-seeking civilians, and a shortage of workers and building materials in the construction industry. The extraordinary demand created by the expansion of the Royal Canadian Navy certainly contributed to the housing emergency; but the state of the urban housing stock was due not to the Navy but to the stagnant local economy of the twenties and thirties, when residential construction was almost exclusively limited to modest single-family dwellings for the few middle class families who were moving to the city.

One-quarter of the housing stock across the peninsula was judged to be in need of external repair in 1941.<sup>11</sup> While homeownership among the urban population had traditionally been high in Halifax, the influx of residents who had located in the city only for the duration of hostilities drove up the percentage of tenant households. After two years of war, 62 per cent of the 13,500 dwellings on the peninsula were occupied by tenants. By comparing average annual incomes of wage-earner families with mean rental costs, it was discovered in 1941 that the lower third of



wage-earner families were paying 50 per cent more for housing than they could afford.<sup>12</sup> Over 2,000 tenant households consisted of two or more families by 1941, a telling benchmark of overcrowding.

Rent controls imposed late that year to curb inflation and profiteering were poorly enforced in Halifax. Landlords and homeowners subdivided dwellings without notifying authorities—drafty attics and damp cellars suddenly became makeshift lodgings with little privacy and inadequate sanitary facilities. In many cases tenants submitted to inflated rents for substandard accommodation rather than risk losing what they had.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, 'mercenary' tenants sometimes sublet rooms in their apartments, putting two or three boarders in a single room and charging the full rate to each person.<sup>14</sup> Landlords often refused rental accommodation to servicemen and their families, believing that armed forces personnel were more likely to report rent control violations.<sup>15</sup>

But these conditions were not unique to Halifax—every other major urban centre in Canada faced similar circumstances. Why was Halifax proclaimed to be the "most congested city in Canada," and why were housing conditions worse there than anywhere else?

According to 1941 Census data, housing conditions in a number of other Canadian communities were comparable to Halifax; in some cases they appear to have been worse off. Halifax was singled out largely because of its military and strategic importance, which brought large numbers of service personnel from all regions of the country. Because the city became one of the primary symbols of Canada's war effort, Halifax came under public scrutiny more closely than other communities. Press reports from or

about "an east coast port" were popular across Canada because everyone had a friend, relative, or loved one who was either in Halifax, on their way to Halifax, or had passed through Halifax on their way overseas.

The wartime population of Halifax has often been pegged at 120,000, but in fact, no one really knows how many people resided in Halifax during the war. The preceding figure appears to have been based on a press report regarding the number of ration books distributed in the city in 1941; it stuck, no doubt, because it happened to be about double the pre-war urban population. Even if accurate, this number is practically meaningless because it does not reflect the frequent fluctuations in both resident (through transfers) and transient (i.e., troop movements) sub-populations. It also does not account for those who worked in Halifax but lived—either by choice or necessity—outside the city.

In early 1944 the Department of Munitions and Supply undertook a house-by-house census in Halifax and Dartmouth under the direction of E.L. Cousins, War-time Administrator of Canadian Atlantic Ports. This survey provided the only accurate demographic snapshot of the Halifax peninsula between 1941 and 1951. The Cousins figure of 95,459 on the Halifax peninsula must be considered fairly reliable for early 1944, but again extrapolating precise estimates for 1942 and 1943 is impossible since there were times when the numbers of transients in the city nearly equalled the resident population. This of course contributed to the accommodation crisis since traditionally, transients paid a premium for their accommodation to compensate the supplier for maintaining excess housing capacity. The Cousins survey reported that one-fifth of the penin-

sular population had arrived in Halifax after September 1939, not including more than thirteen thousand servicemen and women in barracks. On the Halifax peninsula, the majority of military personnel were naval; the Kellock Commission of Inquiry into the Halifax Disorders reported approximately 18,000 naval personnel in the city when the war ended. Numbers of service personnel living in civilian accommodation, known as Lodging and Compensation (or "Lodge & Comp"), varied considerably, but a rough estimate of about five thousand seems reasonable for the 1944-45 period. Interestingly, the population in civilian accommodation, (that is, excluding service personnel in barracks), was the same in 1944 as the peninsular total for 1975—remarkable given the marked changes in housing and land use that occurred in the intervening period.<sup>16</sup>

The most striking feature of the Cousins survey is the overwhelming congestion of Platoon Seven, the predominantly working class neighbourhood adjacent to the Dockyard, naval base and shipyards, not coincidentally the city's biggest wartime employers. Comprising the area adjacent to the Deep Water Terminals and the southern boundary of the Dockyard, and including slum row housing on Maynard, Creighton and Agricola Streets, Platoon Seven held the largest number of dwellings. Running a distant second, Platoon Eight, which extended westward from Robie Street to the Northwest Arm between Quinpool and Chebucto Roads, was a much different area both in terms of architecture and social structure. A prototype of post-WWII residential subdivisions built for the middle class, Platoon Eight had been the focal point of most building activity in Halifax in the 1930s.

A dwelling, as defined by the Cousins survey, constituted any self-contained

## *The Homes Front*

family household, whether one person living in a one-room apartment or a dozen people in a Wartime Housing bungalow. In Platoon Twelve, the average size of a household was the same as Platoon Seven, but virtually all dwellings were either four or six-room single detached units built by Wartime Housing Limited. Since Platoon Seven was an older area, it was characterized by large houses subdivided into apartments and rooming houses—four out of five households were tenants. Whereas the mean number of rooms in tenant-occupied households in Platoon Seven was 4.3, owner-occupied dwellings averaged 7.3 rooms.

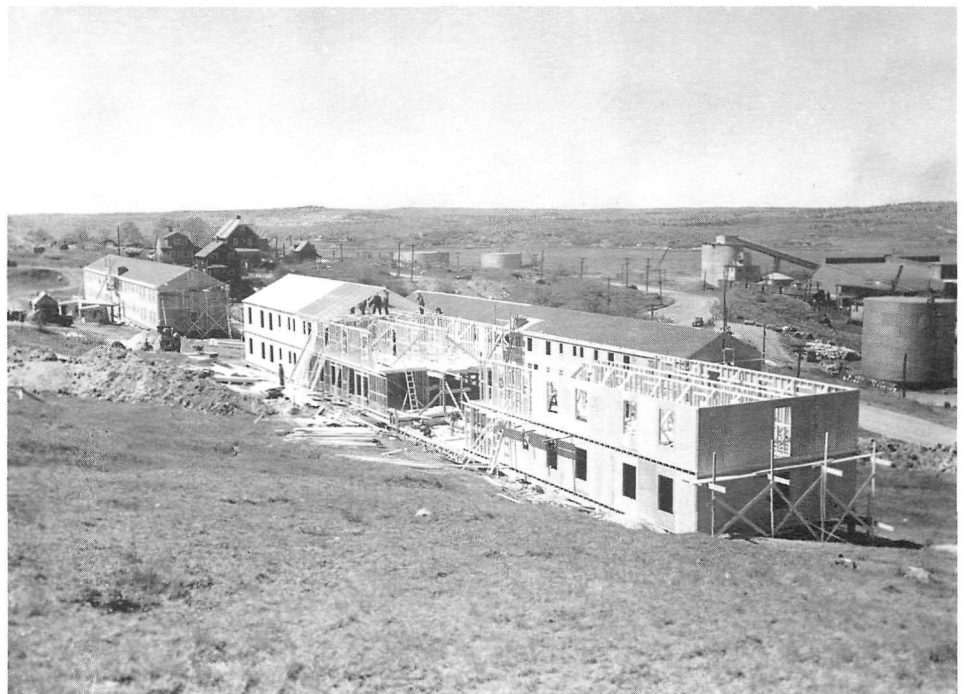
Low assessments meant lower taxes, so landlords were seldom disposed to maintain and repair rental properties, particularly when tenants could not share some of the costs by paying higher rents. When demand skyrocketed after 1939, there was little time, fewer workers and even scarcer materials available to either make improvements to or expand the existing housing stock. The only logical recourses in order to meet increased housing demand were utilization of unused space (e.g., attics and cellars), subdivision of larger homes into multiple family units, shared accommodation, and, of course, rent increases. Some landlords (and landladies) were more unscrupulous than others, to be sure, but the evidence clearly shows that housing costs were on average no higher in Halifax than any other demand-driven market during this period. Indeed, the Halifax market adhered to the national trend toward higher rental costs which was one lingering effect of wartime prosperity and postwar inflationary pressures.

The accommodation crisis in Halifax was most acute in the three years between

1941 and 1943; however, the magnitude of the problem depended a great deal on what section of the city was being examined. Platoon Seven once again stands out with one dwelling in four in either poor or very poor condition. Not surprisingly, the runner-up for worst housing conditions is the adjacent Platoon Nine, but it has only half the rate of deterioration. Generally, the further one moves away from the waterfront, however, the better the housing.

There can be little doubt that living in Halifax during the war was an unpleasant experience for many people, and the general quality of housing contributed to social conditions as much as any other

factor. But the Cousins survey shows that housing conditions varied so much across the peninsula that blanket generalizations are impossible. One conclusion which can be drawn is that widespread resentment, social tension and frustration occurred among those residents who could afford decent housing but could not get it, or those who were accustomed to cheap depression rents and house prices. It would be misleading to argue that everyone who came to Halifax during the Second World War was forced to live in substandard housing; nevertheless, the effects of fierce wartime demand for decent rental accommodation prevented many from securing the type of housing they felt



***Wartime Housing Limited "Staff Houses" under construction in north end Halifax, 1941. Staff houses were barracks-like structures built to house single male workers. Although not intended to outlast the war, they served as "emergency shelter" housing well into the 1950s. Some were converted into apartments and used by Dalhousie University as married students' residences. (SOURCE: Public Archives of Nova Scotia, Bollinger Collection #11)***

## *The Homes Front*

they deserved. By refusing to build decent affordable housing for service families in Halifax during the war, government and naval authorities shifted the burden of the housing crisis onto the civilian population and service personnel living outside barracks.

Both interwar stagnation and wartime shortages had contributed to a deepening housing crisis in the early 1940s, but because the origins of the crisis ran deeper than mere "emergency" wartime conditions, the housing problem continued well beyond 1945. Even after the Cousins Survey reported that the

crisis was over, the housing situation was just as acute at the end of the war as it had been in 1942. When a Halifax alderman called publicly for "freezing tenants in their present premises" in April 1945, he was "besieged by phone class and letters" from tenants who faced eviction on May 1st. "There are a lot of Halifax people who cannot get places," he told Council, "... including wounded returned men, pregnant women, bedridden ones and old ladies. They are absolutley [sic] distracted; I had one of them suggest that we storm the Port Administrator's [E.L. Cousins] Office. It is impossible to find a home within a radius of 40 miles of Halifax." Council agreed that the reason was "service people outside of town [who] hear about vacancies that may occur and they are gone before a Halifax man has a chance to do anything about it. These men have brought their wives from all parts of the country and have filled the houses."<sup>17</sup> It is evident that the competition for scarce housing resources remained a persistent sub-theme of service-civilian relations until the end of the war. Indeed, it was not until the 1950s that the housing situation in Halifax began to improve. Only then did major changes alter the course of urban development (chief of which was the building of the Angus L. Macdonald bridge in 1954), freeing up cheap land for residential and commercial development, and setting the stage for rapid urban growth in the 1950s and 60s. After 1950, the Royal Canadian Navy became a more or less permanent component of the urban economy—and social structure—of Halifax, but this came about not because of the Second World War. It occurred because the exigencies of the Cold War demanded that the extensive upgrading of facilities at the naval base be maintained.



*"No Vacancy". As part of a nationwide publicity campaign to dissuade people from moving to Halifax, the National Film Board produced newsreels that were shown in theatres across Canada in late 1943. This scene, staged by the NFB at the same time, was part of a series illustrating how difficult it was to find rental accommodations in Halifax. (SOURCE: National Archives of Canada, PA180551)*

## ***The Homes Front***

### **Notes**

1. Agnes Foley (Mrs. Angus L.) Macdonald, *Dalhousie Review* vol. 29, no. 1 (1949), p. 50.
2. See Hugh Conrad, "Sudden Explosion of Dartmouth City, A Rival to Halifax," *Atlantic Advocate* 58 (January, 1968), pp. 18-22, 24.
3. See Janet Kitz, *Shattered City* (Halifax: Nimbus, 1990). On Thomas Adams see John C. Weaver, "Halifax Relief Commission, Housing and Town Planning, 1918-1921", *Plan Canada*, 9 (1976), pp. 36-46.
4. Ruth Roach Pierson, *Canadian Women and the Second World War*, Canadian Historical Association Booklet No. 37 (Ottawa, 1983), p. 8.
5. Halifax *Herald*, 8, 9 August 1944.
6. Industrial development is mentioned only briefly in the 1945 Master Plan—"Halifax", the authors explain, "has not been an industrial city". Civic Planning Commission, *The Master Plan for the City of Halifax* (Halifax, November 1945), p. 83.
7. Dianne J. Taylor, *There's No Wife Like It* (Victoria, 1985), p. 107.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 531.
9. G.N. Tucker, *The Naval Service of Canada* Vol. II, pp. 118, 280; H.B. Jefferson papers, MG 1 Vol. 489a, 12 November 1940, Public Archives of Nova Scotia [PANS].
10. RG 24 (D 10) vol. 11,105 file 52-3-2 vol. 1, Wild to Officer Commanding, H.M.C.S. "Stadacona", 27 May 1944; A/Captain E. L. Armstrong to Wild, 5 June 1944, National Archives [NA].
11. Canada. Dominion Bureau of Statistics. *Halifax Housing Atlas* (Ottawa, 1944), p. 1.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 3. This estimate was based on the assumption that 20 per cent of annual income should be the upper limit of the cost of shelter.
13. RG 24 vol. 11,105 file 52-3-2 vol. 1, "The Housing Situation in Halifax", 21 March 1942, NA.
14. D. Bruce Wilson and W.A. McIntosh, *A Survey of the Public Health Services of the City of Halifax, Nova Scotia* (King's Printer: Halifax, 1942), p. 58.
15. Taylor, p. 116.
16. City of Halifax Planning Department, "Population Statistics: Past, Present and Future," (February, 1975), Fig. 5, Distribution of the Estimated Present Population by Census Tract. The peninsula total in 1975 was 81,974; in 1944, it was 82,018.
17. Extracts from Minutes of a Meeting of the City Council of Halifax, 15 March 1945, RG35-102 (34H.1), PANS.