

Canada's Memorial Avenues of Trees: Roads of Remembrance

Les allées mémorielles du Canada : les routes du souvenir

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Even as the interminable Great War ground on and on, deliberations began on the most appropriate ways to honour the close to 61,000 Canadian soldiers who died during this merciless conflict. The idea of memorial trees gained some early support: in Halifax on the Atlantic Coast, maple trees planted in 1913 by the Tower Road School's young principal, George Macdonald Sylvester, were dedicated as a memorial to him following his death on the Thiepval battlefield in September 1916. Some 4,500 km to the west, on the Pacific Coast, a short avenue of maple trees was dedicated in April 1917 to 22 former Victoria High School students who had made the great sacrifice. This treed memorial was conceived by the local Women's Canadian Club under the leadership of its secretary, Mary Elizabeth (MacVicar) Hyndman.

The Victoria High School's roll of honour included Mark Edward Berton, who had enlisted at the age of 15 and died in combat less than a month after he turned 17. "Boy soldiers" (under the age of 18) like Private Berton were not unusual: between 15,000 and 20,000 underage Canadian youths are estimated to have signed up to fight in the First World War.

As an end to the war finally came into view, there was a widespread feeling that every municipality was duty-bound to create lasting memorials to their fallen soldiers. This typically meant statuary: thousands of statues, cenotaphs and crosses were erected in the years following the war. There were those, however, who promoted instead practical memorials such as hospitals, halls and libraries. These memorials, said the *Canadian Municipal Journal*, were "designed with a view to their being of service to the communities in which they will be erected." The *Journal* went so far in 1916 as to propose (unsuccessfully) a 5,600 km transcontinental highway from Victoria to Halifax as a practical memorial to Canada's fallen soldiers.

In line with this school of thought were "Roads of Remembrance" – linear, tree-lined memorial avenues, frequently in semi-rural settings, with each tree ascribed to a specific fallen soldier, usually by means of a small plaque. They were based on two symbol-laden images: France's long, straight country avenues; and living trees representing "the eternal victory of life over death," in the words of the Saskatoon *Daily Phoenix*.

The concept evidently made its way to Canada from Britain, primarily through Millicent Harrington Morrison, a journalist and activist who had connections with the International Congress of Women. Serving as secretary of the Roads of Remembrance movement, she sent far and wide the suggestion that avenues of memorial trees be planted (preferably by relations or friends) to the war's fallen. Through Mrs. Morrison's acquaintance with Major Arthur Haggard, founder of Britain's Veterans Association and a Roads of Remembrance committee member, information on the movement and a request for help was sent to Haggard's sister, the Baroness d'Anethan, in Victoria.

In reporting Morrison's request in October 1918, *The Daily Colonist* noted that the Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire (I.O.D.E.) and other patriotic organizations had already been considering memorials, and suggested that a Road of Remembrance for Victoria might be adopted. Less than three weeks later a boulevard of memorial trees along Shelbourne Street in Victoria and neighbouring Saanich was proposed.

The concept circulated quickly amongst the country's civic and philanthropic groups, notably through women's organizations. Chambers of commerce, Rotary and Kiwanis clubs, veterans' associations and other civic-minded organizations also jumped on board. Mrs. Morrison found a strong and influential advocate in Charles Lathrop Pack, president of the *American Forestry Association*. Pack's passionate endorsement reverberated in Canada: in 1922 the Canadian Forestry Association adopted the Roads of Remembrance idea, offering free advice and information to interested groups. The Good Roads association also championed treed memorial avenues through its magazine, as did the Union of Canadian Municipalities in its monthly journal.

The transformation of Shelbourne Street was slowly pushed forward by the Victoria Chamber of Commerce (which gave credit to Australia for making “a conspicuous success” of the memorial avenue idea). On 2 October 1921, 5,000 people attended its dedication to British Columbia’s war dead. The original enthusiasm waned, however, and the memorial avenue was never completed. About 300 of the 600 London plane trees planted have survived, but not the plaques. Memorial activities and plantings have recently been revived by an active Memorial Avenue Committee.

Four additional fully developed Canadian Roads of Remembrance were eventually initiated: in Montreal (begun in 1922), Calgary (1922), Saskatoon (1923) and North Bay (1928). In January 1922 the Montreal Women’s Club proposed a Road of Remembrance. Constance Winifred (Dobbin) Pope, the project’s convenor, consulted Victoria as well as England and the United States about planting such roads. A section of Sherbrooke Street West was chosen to be lined with Norway maples, each to be plaqued and protected with an iron grille. The first trees were planted on 22 April 1922; some 880 memorial trees eventually lined the street. By 1939, however, about half of the trees had been lost to commercial development, vandalism or public indifference. The memorial was therefore moved to a less troublesome street, beside Cimetière Notre-Dame-des-Neiges. Sherbrooke Street West’s memorial role has since largely been forgotten.

In 1919, the Calgary Parks Department’s annual report referred to a local movement to plant memorial trees, including individual plaques and involvement of the next-of-kin. City council chose to place its memorial trees along an existing boulevard on the north bank of the Bow River. The first poplar tree was planted by the mayor on 11 May 1922, and 3,278 had been planted by 1928. Many trees were destroyed during the 1970s when the roadway was widened. Elaborate memorial services have recently been reinstated, and new trees planted.

In a letter to Saskatoon’s city council dated 10 May 1922, Arbor Day, the local I.O.D.E. suggested a memorial avenue of elms be planted. A special committee headed by Margaret Irvine (Spence) Hanson and Jean Hope (Davidson) Jarvis was established, and on 17 June 1923 the first trees were dedicated in a ceremony before 8,000 rain-drenched spectators. Today there are more than 1,200 memorial elm trees, each with a plaque to a deceased veteran; 112 line Next-of-Kin Memorial Avenue and the rest are in the adjacent cemetery, where new dedications are made each year. Saskatoon’s is the only one of Canada’s major Roads of Remembrance to have survived intact.

A late example of a Road of Remembrance was undertaken in North Bay in 1928, when the Canadian Legion requested the name of a short street, Kennedy Avenue, be changed to Memorial Drive. The British Empire Service League obtained permission to plant elm trees along it, each with a bronze commemorative plaque. The trees ultimately succumbed to Dutch elm disease. No attempt was made to re-establish the road’s original appearance, though it retains the name.

Two other avenues, in Winnipeg (1923) and Thunder Bay (1926), were similar in appearance, but without individual plaques. The 1.6 km-long Chancellor Matheson Road leading into the Manitoba Agricultural College (now University of Manitoba) in Winnipeg has a nearby stone monument listing the names of the deceased. The road was planted with 200 American elm saplings on 14 May 1923, Arbor Day, and dedicated on 11 November. About a dozen trees were moved to the campus quadrangle in 1969; most of the original trees have been replaced, having succumbed to Dutch elm disease.

In the spring of 1925 the Rotary Club in Thunder Bay decided to plant a row of memorial laurel leaf willow trees along a country road. The first tree was planted in June 1926, and the road was officially named Memorial Avenue. It never had individual plaques to the fallen. Road widening began in the 1950s, and by 1978 only 30 trees remained. None of the original trees is believed to survive today.

Hamilton began a memorial avenue in 1923, but it was apparently short-lived. The Hamilton Chamber of Commerce sponsored a memorial avenue of elms, each to be dedicated to a fallen soldier, that it hoped would eventually extend to Niagara, a distance of some 65 km. The first trees were planted on the new Hamilton-Niagara Highway near the city limits on 27 April 1923. The project appears to have unravelled quickly, though, apparently a casualty of this rural highway’s transformation in the 1930s into North America’s first intercity Autobahn-style divided highway.

Some smaller communities also joined the movement: Southampton, Ontario (population 1,537), for example, reported in 1924 that an avenue of 23 memorial maple trees had been planted. While individual plaques were intended, none exist today. Toronto, Vancouver, Ottawa and Quebec City, four of the country’s largest municipalities, do not appear to have embraced the concept – although Vancouver did create a charming

variation: footpaths lined with flowering Japanese cherry trees, planted in 1932, lead to the Japanese Canadian War Memorial (1920). But interest in First World War Roads of Remembrance had faded in Canada by the end of the 1920s, and no further major examples are known to have been created.



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Gordon W. Fulton, titulaire d'une maîtrise en conservation du patrimoine de l'université de Columbia (New York), est l'auteur de l'article sur le sujet figurant dans *L'Encyclopédie canadienne*. Gordon W. Fulton, qui a été directeur national du programme Rues principales Canada, un programme de revitalisation des centres villes, et directeur national des recherches historiques de l'Agence Parcs Canada, est également l'auteur de la première édition des *Normes et lignes directrices pour la conservation des lieux patrimoniaux au Canada*. Gordon a également enseigné la conservation du patrimoine urbain à l'université Carleton d'Ottawa. La convention du Patrimoine mondial de l'UNESCO a été au cœur de 25 années de sa vie professionnelle : il a, entre autres, accompagné divers dossiers qui ont intégré la liste du patrimoine mondial en Amérique du Nord et en Extrême-Orient et réalisé des missions de conseil sur des projets liés au patrimoine mondial pour le Getty Conservation Institute. Il est actuellement Senior Specialist auprès de l'ICOMOS (Conseil international des monuments et des sites) à Paris. M. Fulton a été décoré de la Médaille du jubilé de la Reine Elizabeth II pour ses contributions dans le domaine de la conservation du patrimoine.

