**Halifax Public Gardens Nova Scotia Horticultural Society Gardens Audio Tour Transcript**

Welcome to the Nova Scotia Horticultural Society Gardens audio tour. This tour explores the history of the southern half of the Halifax Public Gardens – the half closest to Spring Garden Road - and highlights the unique qualities of the horticultural and ornamental elements that define it today.

This tour uses enhanced verbal descriptions and detailed directions guiding you from one location to the next to create a more accessible experience. If desired, you can obtain a map of the tour route at the visitor information desk inside Horticultural Hall or download from the “audio tours” page on the halifaxpublicgardens.ca website.

Our tour begins just inside the gate located midway along the southern fence of the gardens, along Spring Garden Road. The gate opens onto a circular stone plaza with a small, centrally located stone fountain. Behind that is a white cottage with wooden siding, Horticultural Hall. There are benches around the plaza if you would like to sit while we introduce the Nova Scotia Horticultural Society and some of its accomplishments.

If you’re not in the plaza yet, simply pause the audio on your mobile device and resume playback when you’ve reached this entrance.

**The Nova Scotia Horticultural Society and their Gardens (**titles shown in blue are for reference only, not stated in audio**)**

We begin our tour by learning about the origins of the Gardens. The British established the fortified settlement of Halifax in 1749 on ancestral lands of the Mi’kmaq people. At the time of its founding, Halifax was scarcely more than a small camp surrounded by a palisade, a defensive wall constructed of logs.

Over the decades, the British constructed the first citadel, a fortified summit originally named after King George III, and cleared the area to the west of Citadel Hill to offer unbroken arcs of fire against an enemy attacking from that direction, as well as to serve as grounds for military training. In 1763, the King granted this cleared area as “Common land… to and for the use of the inhabitants of the Town of Halifax… forever.” This became known as the Halifax Common, part of which now forms the site of the Halifax Public Gardens.

Come the early 1800’s things were more established in Halifax, and in terms of gardens, there were two of note at the time: the Adams’ Garden, near Royal Artillery Park, and Spring Garden, at the southern edge of town.

Some credit Prince Edward, Duke of Kent, the military commander stationed in Halifax from 1794 until 1800, and future father of Queen Victoria, with sparking the public’s interest in developing social green space. You can hear more about this history in our Royal Connections audio tour.

In 1836, the Nova Scotia Horticultural Society was founded with the goal of promoting the study of botany, and the practice of horticulture. Many prominent Nova Scotians, including Joseph Howe, a future premier of the province, were counted as members of the society.

Desiring a garden to showcase horticultural techniques and technology, and to host rare and interesting plantings, in 1837 the Horticultural Society requested, and was granted, by an act of legislature, a 999-year lease for a 5½ acre portion of the Halifax Common. That land, granted free of charge, was described as “a mere bit of waste ground; a sort of cross between a dismal swamp and a blueberry barren… a receptacle for dead cats, broken bottles, and old boots”.

The original plans for the Horticultural Society Gardens were laid out the following year by James Irons; an architect, shareholder, proprietor for Rosebank Nursery, and the first superintendent of the Horticultural Gardens. Irons was advised by botanist Titus Smith Jr., an intellectual and polyglot known to locals as the “Dutch Village Philosopher”.

An 1851 map of the gardens by James Irons shows symmetrical and orderly designs, overlaid with winding paths, shady groves, captivating flower beds, and a small pool created along a stream. In addition to Horticultural Hall, other structures included a greenhouse, a barn, and two dwelling cottages. A croquet lawn, archery range, and children’s swings were among the amenities available.

Though the Horticultural Gardens enjoyed much success, it was soon apparent that despite the land having been granted freely, its upkeep would be taxing on the society and its members.   
  
By the 1870’s, enthusiasm around the Horticultural Society had diminished, and the society had fallen into debt.  Furthermore, the city of Halifax had created a separate public park a decade earlier on the land adjacent to the Horticultural Gardens. The city therefore decided to buy out the shares of the members of the Horticultural Society and combined the two sites. By 1874, with additional land acquired in the northwest corner, the footprint of the 16-acre Halifax Public Gardens we enjoy today was set.

We’ll talk more about the Horticultural Gardens and its transition into the Halifax Public Gardens as we move between the stops on our tour.  But now, we’re going to discuss the newest built structure in the Gardens, the Swan Fountain, and the oldest structure, Horticultural Hall.

**Swan fountain and the Horticultural Hall**

In September 2003, the intense and destructive Hurricane Juan struck the Halifax area. Eighty mature trees were toppled in the Public Gardens; iron fencing was crushed in places, pathways torn up, wiring and irrigation systems uprooted. A 24-hour radio appeal by the Maritime Broadcasting System shortly afterwards raised over a million dollars from the public to repair the damage, which took 9 months, during which the Gardens had to be closed to the public.

Juan Plaza commemorates the rejuvenation of the Gardens after the hurricane. Completed in 2004, this circular stone plaza boasts wide walkways bordered by false cypress, hawthorn and maple trees, and numerous shrubs including Kousa dogwood.

Swan Fountain dominates the centre of this plaza. From a central fountain, water cascades over the edges of a large, shallow bowl held up by five swans and into a round, stone pool below. The swan imagery acknowledges the Victorian fascination with waterfowl, and celebrates the tradition started by King George V in 1926, of swans being gifted by British monarchs to the Halifax Public Gardens.

Next, turn your attention to Horticultural Hall. Designed by James Irons, and built in 1847, it served as a meeting hall for the members of the Nova Scotia Horticultural Society, as well as providing storage space. In 1877 a facility for serving refreshments was added.

After Hurricane Juan, this municipal landmark was restored to look just “as it did 100 years ago”. The single-story building measures 22- by 36-feet and is built in classical-inspired style. It features a symmetrical three-bay façade facing the street, with a small, sturdy peak centred above an ornately detailed white screen door, and a welcoming flight of stone steps.

On each side of the door, two large French pane windows are framed with dark green trim, contrasting the white, wooden cladding that covers the rest of the building. At the top, a windowed, octagonal cupola surmounted by a brass weather vane is positioned at the centre of the roof. A wide porch encircles 3 sides of the building and has been a popular outdoor seating area for generations of Haligonians and visitors.

Inside, the heavy timber framing and clad planking are visible in the open room design that today hosts a visitors’ centre and café. The entire structure sits atop a ‘frost-free’ storage cellar. Known as “Thompson’s Cellar”, it was named after a man who was effectively an early security guard at the Gardens, whose main job was herding the patrons out at closing with the help of his trusty whistle.

Lastly, take note of four tall and very old American elms, planted just outside of the Horticultural Hall at roughly each corner, and dating from 1847, the year the Hall was built. These living monuments are sometimes referred to as the “four sisters” and are among the few plants remaining from the Horticultural Society Gardens.

**To either side of the fountain, a small building can be found - the washrooms of the Gardens. As you stand facing the street, to your left you will find the men’s washroom, and to your right, the women’s, each with a trellised pathway leading from the plaza behind them.**

**Still facing the street, turn right and take the trellised path leading behind the women’s washroom. Once on the gravel path just past the washroom, continue for 10 metres until you reach the first intersection. Then take the left fork for 25 meters until you reach a small tree planted close to the fence on your left, with a plaque denoting it as a black ash.**

**Please pause the audio if you have not yet reached the black ash tree**.

**The Black Ash - Wisqoq**

To understand the history of the Public Gardens, it’s important to understand the history of the land on which the Gardens stand. As already mentioned, the Halifax area forms part of the ancestral lands of the Mi’kmaq, which extend throughout Atlantic Canada. Halifax is known to the Mi’kmaq as K’jipuktuk — the Mi’kmaw word for Great Harbour. The area between downtown Halifax and Point Pleasant Park, originally forested with sprawling freshwater wetlands, was a gathering place for the Mi’kmaq.

On October 1st, 1999, members of the Mi’kmaq community selected this location to plant a black ash tree, known in the Mi’kmaq language as “wisqoq”. The planting ceremony was part of annual Treaty Day celebrations in Nova Scotia, which aspire to increase awareness of the Mi’kmaq Nation, its history and culture.

The wisqoq is the subject of multiple stories, such as the Anishinaabe legend that the creator came to a famous Anishinaabe chief, Black Elk, in a dream, and showed him how to grow the tree and prepare its wood. The wood of the wisqoq is used by Mi’kmaq people in the creation of furniture, snowshoes, baskets, and other items after it is pounded and peeled into malleable strips.

Take a moment to appreciate the small tree before you. The wisqoq has characteristic compound leaves and thin branches and is a member of the olive family.

It is typically found in swampy woodlands and prefers wet conditions. It lives to around 150 years, over 200 years in ideal conditions.

The tree is native to the eastern United States and southeast Canada. It’s considered critically endangered, with under 50 recorded instances of trees surviving in the wild. The destruction of wetland ecosystems is a major factor in its scarcity.

**Continue straight along the path for 30 metres, until you find yourself in front of a large stone structure – a grotto.**

As you make your way to the next stop, take a moment to notice the iron fencing defining the perimeter of the Public Gardens. One of the first changes made after the Horticultural Gardens was absorbed into the Halifax Public Gardens was to introduce a unifying landscape design known as Gardenesque. The Gardenesque philosophy was that gardens were a work of art, rather than a work of nature, and that gardens should be self-contained and independent of their surroundings.

The newly amalgamated 16-acre garden was surrounded by a border of elm and linden trees and a rustic wooden fence. The wooden fence was replaced in 1907 by this ornate iron fencing. Ironwork had become very popular in the in the second half of the 19th century after advances in manufacturing that accompanied the industrial revolution allowed for widespread commercial availability.

**Please pause the audio if you have not reached the stone grotto yet.**

**The Grotto**

As a design element, the grotto speaks to the 19th century popularity of anything “picturesque” and is an example of the use of “fake ruins” in a landscape - intended to look old.

The bulky, rough-hewn grotto was fabricated of grey cut stone of various shapes and sizes, with an interior alcove large enough for children to perch in as they play. The grotto was constructed over a natural spring which acted as the source for a drinking fountain in the alcove. Unfortunately, this spring was diverted by blasting during later construction of the nearby hospital and as such the water fountain was removed.

**Continue past the grotto along the path another 25 metres, until you reach an intersection. Take the left pathway for 5 metres and on the left-hand side of the path you will find a tree with long, dull-green canoe-shaped leaves with pointed tips and serrated edges, and depending on the year, spiky seed pods. Pause the audio until you reach the tree.**

**The Elusive American Chestnut - *Castanea Dentata***

The American chestnut tree, a relative of the beech tree, is a shapely, large tree with deeply fissured dark grey bark and long, slender, serrated leaves. At certain times of the year, it can have distinctive thread-like yellow catkins.

This tree is virtually extinct in its natural range in eastern United States, where it once dominated. Its existence was jeopardized in 1876, when a dozen Japanese chestnuts carrying a fungal infection were imported to New Jersey. American chestnuts had no natural immunity to the Chestnut blight which would effectively wipe them out by 1950. Its rot-resistant, straight-grained wood was sorely missed as a source of good timber, and its nuts as an important food source in the Appalachian region of the United States.

Nova Scotia, physically separated from the afflicted areas, remains a reservoir that preserves the American chestnut, first planted here prior to 1876 by immigrants from the eastern United States. Nova Scotia is north of its natural range but still habitable. Indeed, the current largest American chestnut in the world, known as the Ashdale Tree, was planted in Hants County, Nova Scotia, in 1905.

The Public Gardens contains three mature American chestnuts, and in the summer of 2021, a fourth American chestnut, a sapling, was found growing in a flower bed. It was thought to have been pollinated within the Gardens and planted in the flower bed by a squirrel.

**Return 5 metres to the intersection take the left fork of the path, heading towards a massive, grand tree with what looks like camouflage patterned bark about 18 metres down the path, on the right side at the junction of several pathways. This is a London Plane Tree.**

**Please note however that, in the interval between this script being written, and it being recorded in the fall of 2022, vandals entered the grounds one night and inflicted significant damage to more than 30 trees in the Public Gardens, including this magnificent tree. Using a hatchet to hack away the bark completely around the trunk of the tree, known as girdling, the vandals cut of the flow of nutrients from the roots and leaves to the rest of the plant. It’s not clear at the time of this recording how many trees of the 30 trees attacked in this fashion will survive. Three have already succumbed to the destructive attack and have sadly been removed.**

**We decided to keep this stop in the tour, hoping that the London Plane Tree endures, but if not, it will serve as a remembrance for what we have lost by this senseless act of vandalism.**

**London Plane Tree - *Platanus x Acerfolia***

The London Plane Tree came into existence by chance, being a hybrid of the Oriental Plane tree and the American sycamore, which are normally found in entirely different parts of the world. It’s likely that the two species were brought into close proximity in Britain sometime in the 17th century by botanical collectors, resulting in cross-pollination.

Remarkably tolerant of polluted urban environments and requiring minimal space for its roots, the tree was initially planted along London streets during the Industrial Revolution in the 19th century. It is an ideal city tree, and one of the most efficient at removing pollution particles from the air.

Like all sycamores, the London plane tree has bark that “exfoliates'', falling away periodically to reveal new inner green and cream bark, giving it it’s unique “camouflage-like” pattern. The tree produces spiky, drooping seed clusters which resembles a smaller version of a chestnut, a food source for squirrels and birds. The London plane tree grows to around 75-100 feet tall and can live up to 400 years.

This one stands in memory of Lieutenant Henry Keating of Halifax, who was killed while serving in Nigeria in 1898. The nearby bronze plaque indicates it was planted by the children of Morris Street School, which Henry Keating attended.

**From the London plane tree, continue straight ahead along the path you were on, for another 5 metres, stopping just past the decorative cast-iron light post on the left-hand side. Ahead, and to the left, you will find a large, open lawn area bordered with benches, the Family Lawn area. You’ll see a signpost indicating it as such.**

**The Family Lawn Area**

The family lawn area of the Halifax Public Garden, originally part of the Horticultural Gardens, has changed greatly over time. In the 1860’s and 70’s, while still part of the Horticultural Gardens, the lawn area hosted an archery range and croquet field. Once those activities waned in popularity, a lawn tennis court, the first in Canada, replaced them in 1876 as part of the newly expanded Halifax Public Gardens. In the 1950’s a small zoo existed in the lawn area. Monkeys and exotic peacocks were kept in rustic cages. Now, as part of the modern Halifax Public Gardens, the family lawn area serves as an open children’s playground and picnic area. Two concrete games tables along its northern side encourage the al fresco playing of chess and chequers.

**From the corner of the family lawn area where you are currently, continue straight along the length of the family lawn area about 35 metres, until you reach the first intersection on the right, with two spiral juniper trees on either side of the path you are seeking.**

As you move, a little more information about the transition of the Horticultural Gardens to a Gardenesque style using plants popular during the Victorian times. By 1874, whenthe town of Halifax acquired the Horticultural Gardens, much of the grounds were being used more like a commercial plant nursery, in an attempt to offset some of the operating costs.

Richard Power, the new superintendent responsible for unifying the amalgamated gardens, described the Horticultural Gardens at that time as follows: “Half of the ground was taken up with a forest nursery, a quarter with gooseberries, raspberries and currants and 2 acres of rhubarb.”

Power kept some of the existing buildings, most notably Horticultural Hall, and most of the pathways, but almost all the plants were removed and replaced with trees and flower beds suitable for a pleasure garden following Gardenesque design principles.

He introduced new trees, many that were considered exotic at the time they were planted. These trees were often widely spaced out to optimize viewing of their unique features.

Raised flower beds fashioned into intricate geometric shapes were created, and plants selected that emphasized colour and texture. The Victorian gardening technique of ‘bedding out’ was put into practice, whereby greenhouses constructed by Power, across the street from the gardens, were used to grow annuals used to replenish the flower beds with blooms in optimal conditions.

Wide expanses of carefully maintained lawns were laid out, an important element of the Gardenesque design as the lawns helped to emphasize the intricate details of the plants on display.

Please pause the audio until you’ve reached the first intersection on the right, with the two spiral juniper trees.

**The Allées**

The path on the right side that runs between the two spiral juniper trees is the beginning of the Petite Allée, one of two wide promenades added to the Gardens by Superintendent Power. The width of the promenade was designed to allow two women in Victorian dresses to be able to stroll side-by-side. This promenade takes us past many of the built structures in the Gardens and ends at Fitzgerald’s bridge.

Running parallel to the Petite Allée, about 50 metres to your left, there is a second, even wider promenade. That tree-lined walkway is called the Grande Allée, and it replaced the fence that marked the northern boundary of the Horticultural Gardens prior to the merging of the two Gardens. We’ll visit the Grande Allée later in the tour.

**Move along the Petite Allée promenade heading between the two spiral juniper trees. A couple of metres along, just past the lamp post on the left, the dahlia beds of the gardens can be found. There is a stone pathway running through it for closer observation of the flowers. Head into the dahlia beds and take them in as you listen.**

**The Dahlia Beds**

The dahlia beds of the Halifax Public Gardens are among its prime attractions, much admired by both modern and Victorian Haligonians alike. Dahlias were brought from Mexico to Europe, and they became very popular there by the 1830’s. Crossbreeding, and the plant's naturally complex genetic makeup allowed it to be transformed into the many varieties seen today.

Since 2011, a late summer event called Dahlia Days is hosted by the Nova Scotia Dahlia Society, which was formed in 1985 by a small group of gardeners to promote the cultivation of the flower in the province.

Dahlia days is a multi-day event that includes information on how to grow dahlias, which pests to look out for, and other gardening tips. Gardeners of the Public Gardens share their expertise, and work tirelessly to keep the dahlia beds in prime form. Also crucial to the event is the talented florist Neville McKay, of My Mother’s Bloomers, who creates beautiful flower arrangements incorporating dahlias, which are then raffled off.

In 2015, one of our gardeners received funding to participate in the American Dahlia Society’s open competition for North America. Five dahlias cultivated in our Gardens were awarded first place blue ribbons. See if you can find the Cornel, Ivanetti, Tiny Treasure, Camano Puff and Hollyhill Blackwidow, all winners.

**If you’ve ventured off the Petite Allée to admire the Dahlias, return to the promenade near the lamp post. Once on the path, continue in the direction you had been heading, away from the spiral junipers and towards a bridge in the distance. After 30 metres, stop and note a small tree, with drooping or weeping branches on the left-hand side of the promenade.**

**Weeping Copper Beech**

This is a Weeping Copper Beech tree, one of 140 species of trees represented among the 675 trees currently growing within the Public Gardens.

Victorian gardens valued having a wide assortment of trees and plants. Exotic specimens were particularly sought-after, including trees that had been manipulated through grafting to produce unusual effects, such as the weeping or cascading branches that you can see on the Weeping Copper Beech.

The northeast corner of the Public Gardens was designed to feature many varieties of weeping trees, and you can learn about them on the Weeping Trees Area audio tour.

**Now continue straight along the promenade for another 15 metres, until you reach a classical statue - the Roman goddess Flora - on your left.**

**If you have not yet arrived at the Roman Goddess Flora, please pause your audio until you reach the statue.**

**Classical Statuary of the Gardens**

There are three classical statues of Roman Goddesses found along this path – all of them appropriate to the Public Gardens. The statue before you now represents Flora, the Roman goddess of flowers, and spring. She was one of several Roman fertility goddesses, and her name is still used to describe plants in a general sense.    
  
In front of the Bandstand, you’ll find Diana, the goddess of woodlands, wild animals, the hunt, and the moon. Diana was often worshiped alongside the water nymph Egeria, who is depicted atop the Public Gardens’ Victoria Jubilee fountain, which you may be able to see in the distance, looking to the northwest.

The final statue is Ceres, the goddess of agriculture, fertility and the harvest. Her name stems from an old word for “nourishment.” The statues are made of artificial stone, manufactured by Austin and Steeley’s Stone Works of London, a leading manufacturer of architectural and garden ornaments during the 1800’s. Procured in London at a cost of 75 English pounds by Andrew Uniacke for his good friend Chief Justice Sir William Young, the statues, along with several ornamental urns, arrived at Corbett’s Wharf in Halifax on the 9th of July, 1874. The statuary and the urns were later bequeathed to the Halifax Public Gardens by Sir William Young in 1887.

Though the stone features were only guaranteed for 10 years, they lasted into the early 2000’s, well over a century. The urns, which had deteriorated significantly, were replicated through casting and re-installed in 2014 as part of The Friends of the Public Gardens’ Victoria Jubilee Campaign.

With funding provided by The Friends in 2019, the statuary has been undergoing the same process, albeit gradually over time; Diana was restored in 2020; Ceres in 2021, and Flora in 2022. It’s hoped these versions will last even longer than the originals that provided some 140 years of service.

**From Flora, continue straight for 50 metres, until you find yourself in front of the Bandstand of the Public Gardens.**

As you move to the next stop, some background on the relationship of the Horticultural Gardens with the public.

If one were to look at a late 1840’s list of the 124 or so members of the Horticultural Society, it would read like a who’s-who of Victorian era Halifax, including names such as Joseph Howe, Samuel Cunard, Enos Collins, Brenton Haliburton and Alexander Keith.

When the Horticultural Gardens first opened, the Horticultural Society considered the garden to be a public amenity, a place to share knowledge, cultivate new plant varieties, and appreciate the art of horticulture. It became an important social venue in the thriving port town.

A decade after its opening, however, the Gardens became overwhelmed by the cost of maintenance. The society began relying on the sale of memberships to support the upkeep of the Gardens, and, as a result, public access was largely restricted. On limited days of the week some were admitted with a guest pass, or for a fee.

One yearly occurrence where the Horticultural Gardens were truly open to the community was during their annual bazaar. A quote from an observer of one of the bazaars is as follows: “Thousands of our fellow citizens attended, adding by their presence a pleasing character to the scene. The music afforded by two highland pipers and three military bands also ministered to the enjoyment of the company, the wares for sale executed with the usual taste of the ladies.” This account describes a very inviting and open event, but one which is not reflective of the norm within the Horticultural Gardens at that time.

**The Victoria Jubilee Bandstand**

Concerts have always been a popular outdoor pastime in the Gardens. One of the most notable concerts held prior to the building of this bandstand happened in August 1869 to mark the visit of Prince Arthur, Queen Victoria’s third son. According to the New York Times, the prince received “a most cordial welcome” from the 6000 people who turned out for the concert.

A decade later in 1878, another royal visitor, Princess Louise, Queen Victoria’s fourth daughter, sponsored a fund-raising concert in the Gardens while on a visit to Halifax. The concert was hugely successful, and $800 of the money raised was used to construct this bandstand in 1887.

The bandstand was commissioned in honour of Queen Victoria’s Golden Jubilee, and since its construction it has been an iconic presence in the Gardens. Designed by Halifax architect Henry Busch, it features geometric design, “gingerbread” style decoration and a strong use of bright, primary colours. It forms the focusof symmetry for the 32 ‘floating flower beds’ of brilliant colours and geometric shapes that surround the bandstand.

The entire structure was restored as close as possible to its original appearance in 2011, including reviving its original copper roof. No blueprints were available, so the restorers relied on old photographs for an accurate as possible restoration. About 20 metres further down the path on the left-hand side, there is a display featuring a vintage photograph of the Halifax Garrison Artillery Band in front of the bandstand. This was the photograph used to recreate the original ceiling of the bandstand.

The hosting of musical concerts was heavily associated with the idea of Victorian pleasure gardens and is a tradition that continues today with free concerts on Sunday afternoons and at other times throughout the summer.

**From the bandstand, continue along the Petite Allée promenade for 40 metres, until you spot a unique carpet bed on your right. It should display an image, or perhaps a message created using low-lying plants. Also note the third and final goddess statue - Ceres, just across the path from the carpet bed. Please pause the audio until you reach the carpet bed.**

**The Carpet Beds**

Carpet beds are a specialized form of raised bed, one that originally created patterns using different colours of plants.  The practice later expanded into representational imagery, with clocks being a popular subject, as well as the use of plantings to spell out words or sentences. Carpet beds were fitting for a Gardenesque style garden, which emphasized showcasing control over nature through landscape design and horticultural knowledge.  
  
There are two carpet beds in the Halifax Public Gardens: the one before you now, and another near the main gates. They’re a tradition started by the Gardens original Superintendent Richard Power that is still carried out today. Each year the beds feature an organisation or institution, though earlier in the Gardens’ history the smaller of the two beds simply presented a stern message - “Please keep off the grass”.   
  
The physical task of planting a single carpet bed in the Public Gardens can take a few weeks. A unique planting technique invented by one of our retired gardeners involves ladders, laid horizontally just above the bed by propping them a foot or so off the ground at the far ends of the bed. A grid of strings and a reference image are also used.

Greenhouses are essential in the process of creating a carpet bed.  Exotic plants are raised during the fall and winter, and then planted en-masse come spring and summer.  Small, low-lying, slow-growing plants are used including Santolina sage, echeveria, and sempervivums.

**From the carpet bed, continue along the Petite Allée for about 20 metres, until you reach a 3-way fork. Take the left path just before the sundial, which was installed in 1967 to celebrate the 100th birthday of both the Halifax Public Gardens and the nation of Canada. Taking the left path, continue straight for about 30 metres, until you reach a coniferous tree labelled “Cedar of Lebanon” on the right, which stands on the edge of a small pond. Pause the audio until you reach the cedar.**

**The Emblematic Cedar of Lebanon - *Cedrus Libani*** *(Not stated in the audio)*

This noble tree before you, the Cedar of Lebanon, is the national emblem of Lebanon, and is featured on both the Lebanese national flag and coat of arms. The cedar of Lebanon is a symbol of strength, longevity, and wealth.

The Cedar of Lebanon is a slow growing evergreen tree with widely spreading, mostly horizontal branches. It can reach over 30 metres or 100 feet tall. These trees have been known to live hundreds of years, with the oldest tree in Lebanon believed to be 3000 years old. It prefers acidic soil such as that found in Nova Scotia.

The cedar of Lebanon is one of four “true cedars” of the genus “cedrus”. It is the most cold-hardy of the group, typically found at elevations of 1200 to 2000 metres above sea level in its natural habitat in the Middle East.

It’s a great source of timber owing to its pleasant scent and high-quality wood. The timber was often used in the construction of palaces and temples, and its scent has been preserved for thousands of years in archaeological sites. The tree also played a role in ancient Egyptian burial practises, both as a construction material in sarcophagi and as a source of resin used in mummification.

Historically, the cedar of Lebanon was the main source of timber in Lebanon but due to long term over-harvesting it has almost disappeared from the Lebanese mountains.

**Continue moving left along the path for 15 metres until you reach the intersection with a wide, gravel path, the Grande Allée that we mentioned earlier.**

**The Skating Rink and Arched Gatehouse**

As you look right towards South Park Street, imagine a large barn-like building stretching for about 180 feet along the right side of the Grande Allée. An indoor ice-skating rink was constructed at this spot in 1859 by the British military, reportedly one of the first indoor rinks in the country.

This rink came equipped with coal gas lighting for night skating, and there was a raised platform at one end so bands could entertain the skaters. Skating parties, and costumed masquerades were very popular in the winter, with dances held in the off-season. After providing decades of service, a fire damaged the building in the late 1880’s leading to the skating rink being dismantled.

During the time of the Horticultural Society, and lingering into the time of Halifax Public Gardens, the rink was not publicly accessible, nor was the tennis court in the Family Lawn area. There was a resulting public outcry opposing those restrictions, which succeeded in overturning them. The pressure applied by Haligonians at the time for open access to the recreational facilities set a precedent, ensuring that the Gardens as a whole continue to remain free to the public into the present day.

After the rink was torn down, a very elegant arched gatehouse was constructed at the end of the Grande Allée, where it reached South Park Street, and it became the main entrance into the Gardens. Also designed by Henry Busch, the two, single story wings flanked an impressive 21-foot high by 16-foot-wide archway. Sadly, this impressive building was torn down around 1908. Only the gates remain, moved to the current front entrance in 1907.

A vintage photograph of the South Park Street arched gateway and a sketch of the interior of the rink and some skaters can be seen if you want to wander down to the end of the Grande Allée after the tour.

**Now, turn back towards the direction from which you came, passing the Cedar of Lebanon now on your left. About 18 metres past the cedar, take the path that branches to the left, until you intersect with the Petite Allée where you’ll find the tropical bed on your left, just before the bridge.**

**The Tropical Bed**

The tropical bed of the Public Gardens is a simulated desert setting. One can find agave, euphorbias, dracaenas, palms, cacti, and succulents planted in this bed.

The tropical bed would have been an exotic delight for the Victorian-era residents of Halifax, many of whom likely would not have travelled outside of Canada or even outside of Nova Scotia. The exotic plantings were not only aesthetically pleasing, but educational at a time predating the widespread access to information and images we enjoy today.

The Victorians loved the idea of “the wilderness”, and the notion of botanical expeditions in rainforests and deserts of faraway lands was thrilling. The development of greenhouse technology, including portable greenhouses called Wardian cases, during Victorian times was essential for the transport of exotic plants to places like Halifax, far outside the natural range of plants such as these.

The tropical bed of the Gardens is another example of the practice of “bedding out”, where plants, especially exotic plants, are grown or stored in greenhouses during the fall and winter. When conditions are favourable in the spring and summer, they are planted in the Gardens and, as the weather deteriorates, returned to the greenhouses to overwinter.

**From the tropical bed, turn left and walk 12 metres, stopping on the bridge that crosses Freshwater Brook.**

**Freshwater Brook**

Freshwater Brook was once a natural waterway that had its source in wetlands in the North Common area near Windsor Street, flowed through the Public Gardens, and then made its way southwest, past Fenwick and Lucknow Streets towards where Barrington meets Inglis, before emptying into the harbour near where visiting cruise ships now berth.

As Halifax developed most of the brook was encased in underground culverts in the late 1800s, except for this small section running through the Gardens. Construction during the 1990s inadvertently redirected the water flow away from the Gardens so the main sources of water now are rainwater and runoff.

The upper and lower bridges that cross the Freshwater Brookwere originally built of wood. In 1911 two new concrete balustrade bridges with classical planter urns at each corner were erected.

This upper bridge is dedicated in memory of Halifax native Francis Joseph Fitzgerald, a Boer War veteran and later an Inspector in the Royal North West Mounted Police, which would later become the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. He died leading what came to be known as the Lost Patrol in Yukon Territory in 1911.

This setting, featuring beautiful red Japanese maples, and delicate, globe-shaped, shrub-sized ornamental Japanese maples of green and red, is extremely popular as a place for taking wedding photos and school graduation photos.

**Cross the bridge, continue 10 metres, and then turn right, taking the path that follows the brook downstream for 75 meters until you reach the main gates of the Public Gardens.**

As you travel alongside the brook, there are several features of note. On the right-hand side in the vicinity of the decorative lamp post there is a small fountain on an island that honours Abbie Lane, a journalist, broadcaster, city councillor, and the first female deputy mayor of Halifax, serving in that role in 1954. She is perhaps more widely remembered for her work with the Canadian Mental Health Association. The Abbie J. Lane Memorial Building, part of the hospital complex located a block from the Gardens, is named in her honour.

As you get close to the Gates, you’ll pass the Power Bird Baths on your left. These honour the first superintendent of the Halifax Public Gardens, Richard Power as well as two of his sons, Richard and George who also served as superintendents. Together, the Power family dedicated over 70 years of service in the Gardens between 1874 and 1970.

**Please pause the audio until you reach the Main Gates, the final item of interest on the tour**

**The Halifax Public Gardens Main Gates**

The gates were purchased originally for the main entrance at the end of the Grand Allée at South Park Street in 1890. They were erected as a tribute to the Halifax Provisional Battalion for its role in the 1885 North-West Rebellion, the patriotism resulting from which is considered by many historians as instrumental in uniting Nova Scotia with the rest of Canada. A plaque commemorating the service of the Battalion is affixed to the exterior face of the gates. They were moved to their current location at the southeast corner of the Gardens in 1907, when the perimeter iron fencing was installed. A matching wrought iron housing for the gate and smaller secondary gates were added on either side at that time.

The gates were created in the foundry of Walter McFarlane and Company in Glasgow, Scotland, also known as the Saracen Foundry, the foremost manufacturer of ornamental ironwork in Scotland. It was renowned for its ironworks that were exported throughout the British Empire, with a number of works being found as far away as in India and Brazil.

McFarlane worked for a jeweller before apprenticing as a blacksmith, and this background is reflected in his ornate design for the gate. The gates are iron, painted black, and adorned with the coat of arms of the city of Halifax.

Many mature trees were toppled near the front gates during Hurricane Juan in September 2003. The gates were not damaged by falling trees, but the uprooting of large trees undermined the gates’ foundation.

While the foundation was under repair, the gates were dismantled for cleaning and repairs. Layers of paint were removed, revealing fine detailing that had been muddled by the thick coats accumulated over the years. The entrance plaza in front of the gates was redesigned, relocating a statue of Sir Walter Scott to Victoria Park across the street, to optimize the view of this impressive example of late Victorian architectural ironwork.

*[Two-second pause]*

We thank you for taking this audio tour of the Horticultural Society Gardens Area of the Halifax Public Gardens.

As a unified garden, the Halifax Public Gardens combines the educational role of the past Horticultural Gardens with the function of a Victorian pleasure garden. We hope you’ve enjoyed learning about the history of this original and historic section of the Halifax Public Gardens and the features within it.