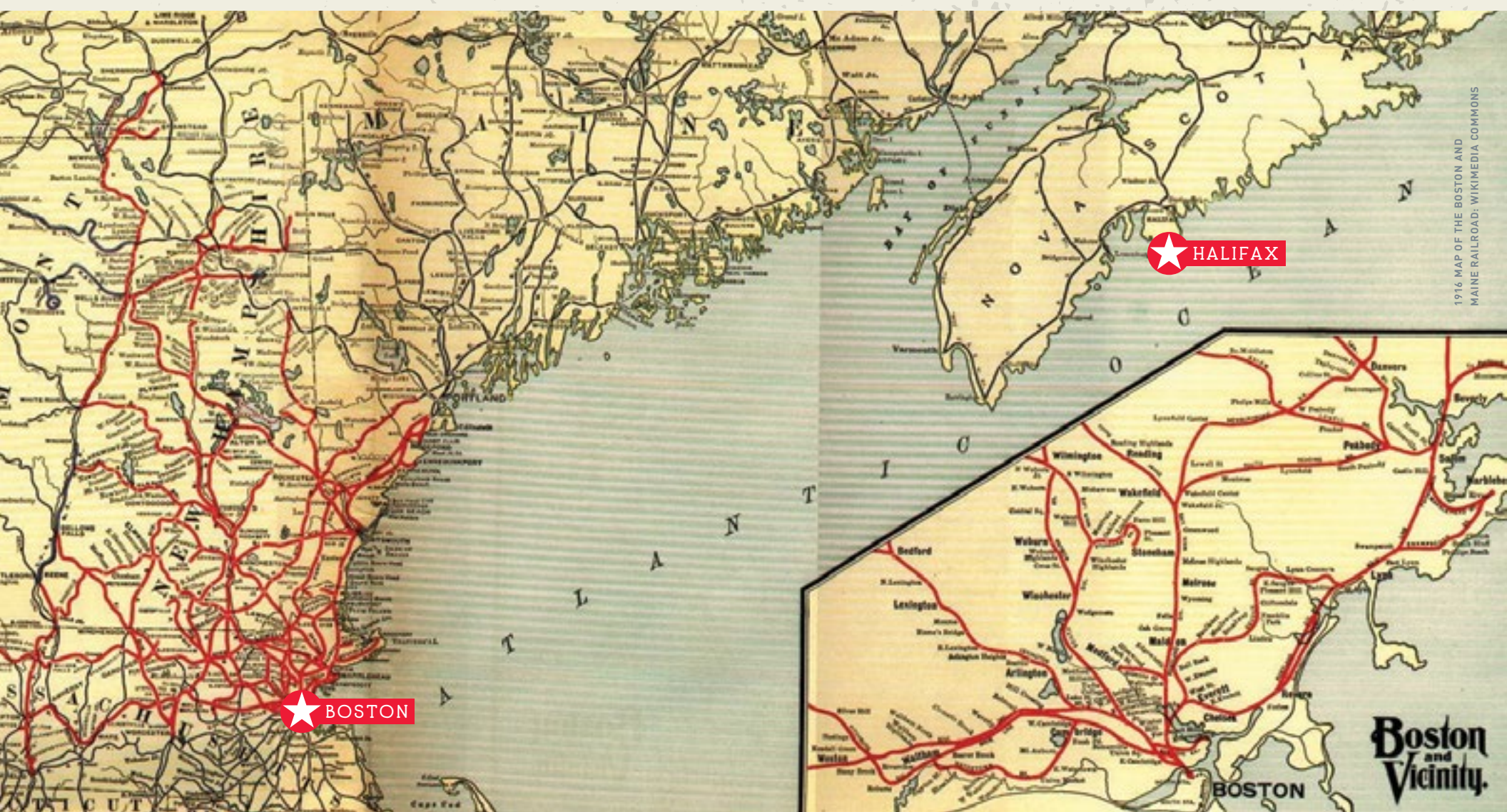


BOSTONIAN AND HALIFONIAN: AID AFTER THE HALIFAX EXPLOSION 1917

On the morning of Thursday, December 6, 1917, Boston banker J. J. Phelan received a disturbing telegram from a colleague in Halifax, Nova Scotia. It requested an immediate relief train with as many doctors, nurses and supplies as possible. Phelan reported the news to the State House. Massachusetts Governor Samuel McCall wired the mayor of Halifax: "Understand that your city in danger from explosion and conflagration... Massachusetts ready to go the limit in rendering every assistance you may be in need of."





THE NIGHT TRAIN TO HALIFAX

In the next 12 hours, leaders from the Massachusetts Public Safety Committee and others in Boston formed the Massachusetts Halifax Relief Commission. The Boston and Maine Railroad’s president was on the Public Safety Committee, and he offered a train that could be ready by 10:00 that night. This first train included 12 doctors, ten nurses and six members of the press. The group, directed by banker Abraham C. Ratshesky, left before hearing back from Halifax’s mayor. Soon after, more Bostonians made the same train journey, including a unit quickly organized by the Red Cross with 25 doctors and 70 nurses, many from MGH. Ernest Codman, MD, a former MGH surgeon who had formed his own small hospital, took his 23-person team to Halifax.

A typical train journey from Boston to Halifax took 27 hours, and the disaster relief trains hoped to cut several hours off the trip. However, before dawn on Friday a blizzard swept the Northeast. Snowdrifts had to be shoveled out before the relief train could continue, and whiteout conditions and gale force winds slowed progress. Around 3:00 am Saturday, the train arrived to find a devastated city.



The relief workers boarded at North Station, but not the one Boston knows today. North Union Station was built in 1893, replacing several independent railway terminuses in the area. It was demolished in 1928 to make way for the terminal under Boston Garden and later TD Garden.



In the 1910s, bandages were made from torn or cut strips of fabric and often wound on a small hand-cranked machine. Civilian volunteers supported the medical effort in WWI by preparing bandages, and after the explosion they prepared bandages for Halifax as well.

COPING WITH SHORTAGES

When the disaster struck, anesthetic stock in Halifax hospitals was low, and some emergency surgeries were performed without until relief supplies arrived. Because of the blizzard and shortage of decent shelter, officials sent out an urgent request for anti-pneumonia serum, a fairly new treatment. The eye clinic also ran out of anti-tetanus serum, but in four days, enough had arrived to treat every patient. Remarkably, there were no recorded incidents of tetanus despite the metal debris.

Some eyewitnesses described the 20,000-foot cloud of smoke from the explosion as mushroom-shaped, well before “mushroom cloud” entered the public lexicon. The Halifax explosion was the largest explosion of human origin before nuclear weapons.

EXPLOSION IN HALIFAX HARBOR

Just before 9 a.m. on December 6, 1917, Halifax was forever changed when two ships collided in the harbor. The SS *Imo* was on the way to New York City to pick up war relief supplies to carry to Belgium. The SS *Mont-Blanc* stopped in Halifax to join a convoy of ships on the way to France,



At least nine of the dead were from the Turtle Grove community of Mi'kmaq First Nations people in Dartmouth. The Mi'kmaq are part of the Wabanaki Confederacy. About 16 families had lived in Turtle Grove, which was demolished by the explosion and never rebuilt. The remains of their school are pictured.

A DISASTER COMPOUNDED

The collision first caused the *Mont-Blanc* to go up in flames. Unaware of the ship's cargo, many people thought they were watching a disaster from afar, and stood at their windows to see the strange and horrible sight. When the explosives detonated, the force shattered windows, embedding glass in onlookers' faces. It destroyed buildings in an area covering 1.6 square miles. The blast was followed by an artificial tsunami caused by the explosion, filled with scalding hot water and twisted chunks of metal.

Approximately 1,600 people were killed instantly, and 9,000 were wounded. In a city of 50,000, the final death tally was over 2,000. The city's only motorized fire engine was destroyed and all but one of its crew were killed. Several hospitals were damaged as well.



The same area of Halifax before and after the disaster. Trains and steam ships departed from Boston to Halifax daily. The two port cities had a close relationship stretching back centuries. During the American Revolution, many Boston British loyalists fled to Halifax. By 1917, many young Haligonians, especially women, moved to Boston to find work. Many in Halifax had family in “The Boston States,” as they playfully called New England, and vice versa.



An estimated 1,630 buildings were destroyed and 12,000 more were damaged — the majority of buildings in the city. Some 6,000 people were made homeless. The Halifax neighborhood of Richmond was hit hardest, but most of Halifax and the town of Dartmouth, across the water, were affected.