

Wolastoq Park Offers Stunning Views and a History Lesson

By

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The prominent green space overlooking the Reversing Falls and St. John River was for years associated with the former Lunatic Asylum, later known as the Provincial Hospital and finally Centracare, before it was demolished in the nineteen nineties. Its breathtaking views were probably taken for granted by those who worked, visited or resided at what had been Canada's oldest mental hospital. Now owned and maintained by JD Irving Ltd., it has been transformed into a six hectare landscaped park for the public's enjoyment and as a clever tool to promote civic pride in our community's leaders of the past and knowledge of our heritage. JD Irving commissioned a well-known New Brunswick wood sculptor, Albert Deveau of Edmundston to carve massive figures of prominent citizens of Saint John to adorn the park's pathways. Much more than life-size, they are like a walk through time and a history lesson, rolled into one. Each bears an explanation of the individual's role and contributions to Saint John's development. Opened on September 26, 2005, the promontory has been named Wolastoq Park. It is accessible from Lancaster Avenue and the Reversing Falls visitors centre.

Wolastoq means "the Beautiful River", in the language of the Maliseet people who lived beside it. Today, we know it as the beautiful St. John River. For many centuries before Europeans arrived, Wolastoq with its tributaries, lands and forests provided an abundance of food, materials and medicines to the Maliseet people. They were known then as the Wolastoqiyik, people of the Beautiful River. It gave them a transportation route for hunting, trade and travel. The river allowed them to develop and sustain themselves as a separate and unique Nation.

With the arrival of the French and the British the river linked the new communities along its banks and provided a travel and commerce route farther north to Maine, Quebec and the St. Lawrence River. It inspired map-maker Champlain and so many others who over more than three centuries have built the community that is Saint John. The statues in this park tell the stories of some of those people.

Albert Deveau of Edmundston has been a sculptor of large figures for almost 30 years. His training and experience as an engineer proved useful as he tried sculpting three 25 ft. statues from oversized logs for his own yard in 1976. "I began with sculptor's tools but it was so slow. I was too eager to pull out the 3-dimensional image I could see in the log. So I picked up my old Partner chainsaw. My first sculpture was finished 16 hours later." Since then Albert Deveau has produced thousands of pieces for communities across Eastern Canada, the Eastern United States and at big festivals in Ottawa, Quebec City and France. He works in wood, concrete, fiberglass, snow and ice. The Wolastoq Park sculptures are wood, coated with a protective stain. Samuel de Champlain, Madame LaTour (Francoise Jacquelin), William Hazen, James White, James Simonds, Col. Gabriel G. Ludlow, George B. Oland, William Kilby Reynolds, Thomas Stockwell Simms and Benedict Arnold have been depicted in wood and each has a fascinating story to tell.

Here are a few:

George B. Oland and his extended family had brewery interests in both Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. They bought the "Red Ball" brewery and the James Ready Brewery, which later became known as Moosehead Breweries. It still operates successfully today as the largest and oldest independent family-owned brewery in Canada.

William Kilby Reynolds, a native of Maine, was a builder of mills, bridges and railways. He used ingenuity and remarkable mechanical skills to construct a lumber mill at Lepreau, a bridge spanning the Reversing Falls, a street railway in Saint John and The Grand Southern Railway.

Thomas Stockwell Simms was young Maine businessman who moved his broom manufacturing plant to Saint John, took over a brush factory, operated at several locations, turning it into a Saint John institution, T.S. Simms & Co. Limited, known as "Brush Makers to the World". It still operates from its Simms Corner location.

Benedict Arnold, a renowned military figure from the American Revolution, who later sided with the British, lived six years in New Brunswick, operating shipping and trading businesses in Saint John until his position and political fortunes caused he and his family to re-locate permanently to England.

In addition to being a green space for citizens to enjoy, Wolastoq Park is also the site of some notable volunteer work. Bill MacMackin coaches young runners from the Saint John Track Club at the Park. Every Christmas, a tree is placed prominently, overlooking the city. Irving Pulp Mill staff host the community at a carol sing, with refreshments, to mark the holiday season. Visitors to the Reversing Falls find it an easy climb to gain a marvelous perspective on the St. John River and harbour and are welcome during daylight hours. Information: contact Kelly Honeyman.



Photo: Wolastoq Park, at the former Centracare Hospital site at Simms Corner, is a community park, open to the public, courtesy of JD Irving Ltd., which features carved wooden sculptures of well-known Saint John figures from the past. Patrick Oland, of Moosehead Breweries, is pictured beside his Great-Grandfather, George B. Oland, known for his family's success in the brewing businesses.



Community Profile is a weekly column highlighting community causes and work done by non-profit organizations in the Greater Saint John area. It is contributed by Jane Barry, executive director of The Greater Saint John Community Foundation. Contact the foundation at 506-672-8880. To view other Community Profiles go to www.saint-john-foundation.nb.ca