

VIEWS

Dr. Clement Ligoure: ‘He was a very fine example of altruism’

by [Suzanne Rent](#) December 12, 2024



Dr. Clement Ligoure. Credit: Queens University Archives

On Sunday, author and historian [Joel Zemel](#) hosted a book launch for his latest self-published book *Dr. Clement Courtenay Ligoure: Publishing, Social Advocacy and the 1917 Halifax Disaster*.

I wasn't able to attend, but I contacted Zemel for an interview instead. We spoke on Wednesday.

I wrote about Ligoure before in [this Morning File](#) in November 2020. Ligoure was the first Black practicing physician in Nova Scotia. For that Morning File, I spoke with David Woods, who wrote a play called *Extraordinary Acts*. It tells the stories of the Black community during the Halifax Explosion. One of the stories in the play was about Ligoure, who treated hundreds of patients in his clinic on North Street.

Ligoure was born in San Fernando in Trinidad, immigrated to the U.S., and wanted to go to Queen's University to study medicine. Ligoure eventually headed to Halifax.

In Nova Scotia, Ligoure, along with William Andrew White, co-founded the No. 2 Construction Battalion and recruited Black soldiers. Ligoure also served as publisher of the *Atlantic Advocate*, the first newspaper for African Canadians, started by Wilfred A. DeCosta. There are only four surviving issues of the *Atlantic Advocate*, and you can see them online [here](#) at the Nova Scotia Archives.

Zemel has been researching Ligoure for years. Zemel has two other books on the Halifax Explosion, including *Scapegoat: The Extraordinary Legal Proceedings Following the 1917 Halifax Explosion* and *Betrayal of Trust: Commander Wyatt and the Halifax Explosion*.

But there was one question Zemel wanted to answer: where did Ligoure die?

Zemel said the inspiration for his new book began when William Breckenridge [started an application](#) to get registered heritage designation for the house on North Street where Ligoure had his private hospital.

Zemel wrote [this column](#) about that application, and then got to work researching more about Ligoure's life, including what happened to him after his time in Halifax.

Zemel's knowledge of Ligoure is extensive. He knows dates, timelines, and details of the doctor's life that are all in the book, of course. As are details about his time with the No. 2 Battalion. Zemel said Ligoure recruited for seven months, and was one of the best recruiters the battalion had.

As for Ligoure's medical career, Ligoure's first medical practice was at the Keith Building, which was the Green Lantern. The Atlantic Advocate had its office in the same building.

In January 1917, Ligoure purchased the house on North Street. He moved the Atlantic Advocate press there, and had a 15-bed clinic he called the Amanda Private Hospital, named in honour of his mother.

Zemel said on the day of the explosion, Ligoure was in his office on North Street, along with two other people: Bessie Waith, Ligoure's aunt who worked as his housekeeper; and a boarder named Henry Dennis Nicholas, who was also from Trinidad and worked as a pullman porter in Halifax.

Ligoure wrote to his father in Trinidad about the explosion, saying when the blast happened, he was standing next to a student who lost an eye. Ligoure wasn't injured, although his hospital sustained some damage. Ligoure's clinic was designated "No. 4 dressing station."

"He worked day and night. Sometimes he wouldn't get back until six in the morning. He went to City Hall to ask for help and the military gave him help. They gave him a couple of nurses and a couple of personnel to help him," Zemel said.

"He treated sometimes 150 people a day. He did that for over a month, for no pay."

Zemel said about 200 doctors from across the province who came to Halifax to help after the explosion also weren't paid.

"The thing that makes Dr. Ligoure unique is that he lived here," Zemel said.

Zemel said it was known when Ligoure died because that information appeared in medical journals. The date of Ligoure's death was May 23, 1922.

"Everyone assumed he died in Halifax, but nobody could find out where, why, or whatever. It all led to a dead end, literally a brick wall," Zemel said.

So Zemel started searching records and newspapers from the West Indies, guessing Ligoure had returned home to Trinidad.

He found the [Digital Library of the Caribbean](#). It has copies of the Port of Spain Gazette from the mid 19th century to the end of December 1922.

Sure enough, Zemel found a death notice from the paper dated May 24, 1922.

Then Zemel went ahead a few issues and found a complete write-up of Ligoure's life.

"It just answered a lot of questions," Zemel said.

That write-up said Ligoure and his aunt, Bessie Waith, left Halifax on June 10, 1921. Zemel said according to deeds, Ligoure returned the house on North Street to its previous owner's widow the February before he left the city. Zemel guesses Ligoure may have spent those last months in Halifax with Waith at her house on Morris Street.

In 1919, before Ligoure went back home to Trinidad for good, he visited his parents and returned to Halifax unwell.

"It said in the write-up that he had contracted a serious illness. They don't say what it was," Zemel said.

Zemel asked Dr. Allan Marble, a local author and historian, who suggested Ligoure likely had tuberculosis.

"That's the reason he shut his practice down. He was too ill to continue," Zemel said.

During a visit to see his brother in Tobago in May 1922, Ligoure contracted malignant malaria. He died a few days later in a hospital in Port of Spain. He was just 34.

In his research, Zemel also found this [copy of a speech](#) Ligoure made to the Dominica Brotherhood Union on Jan. 23, 1920.

Zemel said Ligoure's legacy goes well beyond being the first Black doctor to practice in Nova Scotia.

I don't use the word hero, but you can't describe his behaviour and actions during the explosion as anything less than heroic. He really went all out to help people in an altruistic manner. He was a very fine example of altruism.

It makes him an important Black figure for many, many reasons. All of his patients, every one of them is a reason he's an important man.

You can purchase Zemel's latest book at Carrefour Atlantic Emporium in Halifax, and it's [on order](#) at the Halifax Public Libraries.