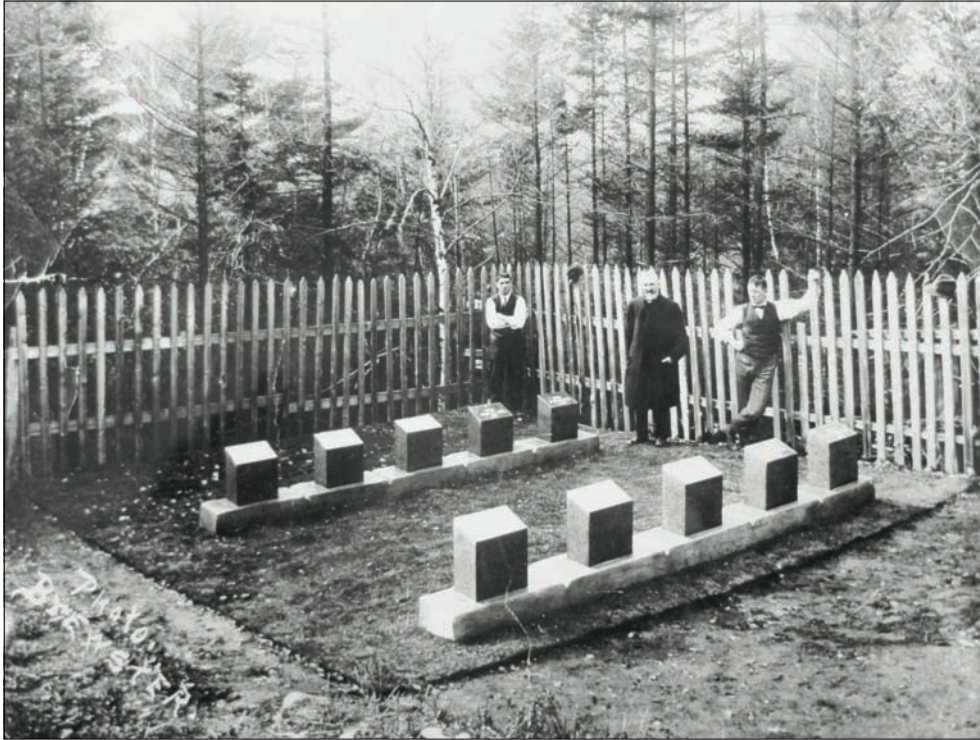


The Rabbi Who Wasn't

by Joel Zemel © 2019



The above photograph shows three men standing near the recently completed gravesite for ten victims of the RMS *Titanic* disaster of 1912 at the Baron de Hirsch Cemetery in Halifax and adjacent to the Fairview Lawn Cemetery. From the time this image surfaced, it was assumed that the man standing in the middle was either one of two rabbis residing in the city at the time. In 2013, a long-held notion concerning the identity of one of the men began to emerge. The photograph was originally from the collection of author/historian Russ Lownds, whose father had been a long-time employee of the White Star Line. The man seen with his arms folded and standing to the left in the above image, has been identified as a local stone cutter Frank Fitzgerald. The man on the right, Fred Bishop, was a local contractor and monument maker.

The man in the middle was long thought to have been either Rabbi Jacob Finegold or Rabbi M. Walter (first name unknown). The photograph was published in *Titanic Remembered* by Alan Ruffman (1999, Formac) and has appeared in other books and articles. Over the years, the image has proliferated throughout the Internet with the caption identifying the middle man as alternately Finegold or Walter. A member of the Baron de Hirsch congregation, Frank Medjuck, had pointed out to Alan after his book was published in 1999, that it is very doubtful the man was a rabbi. Alan eventually contacted me to voice his concerns.

There are two specific reasons why the person standing between Fitzgerald and Bishop could not possibly have been a rabbi. The first, pointed out by Mr. Medjuck, was that a rabbi would never set foot in a cemetery without a hat or a yarmulke covering his head. Upon close examination of the high quality hard copy print at the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic, it became clear that the man was not wearing a head covering of any kind. The second, brought to my attention by Dr. Nathan Fishman was that the man's beard is cleanly trimmed.

An Orthodox rabbi from that time period would simply not have trimmed his facial hair. To add to the confusion, some of the man's physical features have been characterized by less than politically correct authors and historians as stereotypically Jewish.

According to the 1911-12 *McAlpine's Halifax City Directory*, Vol. XLIV, "Reverend Finegold J, rabbi," boarded at the home of Louis Whitzman on 80 Gerrish Street. He was the spiritual leader of Halifax's Baron de Hirsch congregation located in an old converted church on the corner of Starr and Hurd Streets. A schism had developed between this main group and a family named Webber, who were in the process of organizing their own congregation. In 1914, they established their own synagogue in a building on Proctor Street. Therefore, it came as no surprise to discover another Jewish clergyman in the city in 1912. *McAlpine's* also shows that "Reverend Walter M, rabbi," was boarding at the home of one Abraham Webber on 245 Brunswick Street. It follows that this rabbi was the spiritual leader of the Webber congregation.

Following the sinking of RMS *Titanic* in April of 1912, cable ships retrieved many of the bodies from the sea and brought them to Halifax for burial at Fairview Lawn, Mount Olivet and the Baron de Hirsch cemeteries. Located along Windsor Street and Connaught Avenue, the Jewish cemetery would have been shared by the Baron de Hirsch and Webber congregations. On 2 May, Rabbi Walter went from body to body in the temporary morgue set up at the Mayflower Curling Rink to determine whether any of the deceased from *Titanic* were Jewish. Walter was convinced that at least eight of the fifty-nine bodies being readied for burial were those of Jewish men and proceeded to make certain these coffins were separated from the rest. The very next day, as the somber procession of coffins arrived at Fairview Lawn for a service and burial, Rabbi Walter seized on the opportunity to open several more caskets. He determined that ten more bodies were Jewish and ordered them taken to the Baron de Hirsch Cemetery. However, once it was realized the coffins had gone missing, the authorities were called in to prohibit burials in the Jewish cemetery. Even so, permits were issued two days later to allow for two additional victims to be buried there for a total of ten graves.

No one is be certain that all the bodies taken by Rabbi Walter and buried in the Baron de Hirsch cemetery were indeed Jewish. White Star Lines determined that one of the bodies was Catholic - that of a second class passenger, Michel Navratil, who had purchased his ticket under an assumed name, Louis M. Hoffman. Another man, Frederick William Wormald, *Titanic's* saloon steward, was identified as having been an Anglican. The zealous rabbi had deemed that as many as 44 bodies were Jewish - although, four other victims he identified as Jewish turned out to have been of the Catholic persuasion. Needless to say, the clergyman's credibility came under severe scrutiny and no more bodies were assigned to him. The remaining eight bodies that had been removed from Fairview Lawn and held in the Baron de Hirsch burial vault were returned to the Mayflower Curling Rink. It should be noted that the *Halifax Herald* referred to the rabbi as "Jacob" Walter and was the only newspaper to publish a given name (4 May 1912, p. 1, c. 7).

Regarding the photograph itself, there is no visible evidence whatsoever within the image to suggest this person was a rabbi. At the same time, there was no apparent method of determining his actual identity. Nothing was present within the image to indicate the man's true profession or to even indicate why he was in the photograph.



Alexander McDougall

In May of 2012, I was informed of an elderly woman named Mrs. Burns from Truro, Nova Scotia who had recently read a new book on *Titanic* in which the photograph appeared. She subsequently contacted Nimbus Publishing stating that the man in the middle could not possibly be a rabbi because he was her grandfather, Alexander McDougall, the superintendent of Camp Hill Cemetery and an employee of Fairview Lawn. It was also reported she possessed photographs which would prove her claims, but that she did not have access to a scanner or the Internet. Unfortunately, for reasons unknown, a record of Mrs. Burns's contact information had not been kept. Although my research at the time primarily focused on the 1917 Halifax Explosion, I took it upon myself to corroborate her story.

I accessed the 1911 Canada Census and learned that Alexander McDougall had indeed been a cemetery superintendent. His 1925 obituary revealed he had been employed by both Fairview Lawn Cemetery and the adjoining St. John's Cemetery for fifteen years, and that he would also be buried at Fairview Lawn. Mr. McDougall's death certificate from Nova Scotia Vital Statistics (found on the Nova Scotia Archives website) shows he died at age 76 years on 19 October 1925, and that he had been a gardener by profession. His obituary also revealed that he was a well-respected public official and included many of his lifelong activities in the community. Recent information from Dave Cogswell, an information analyst at the Halifax Regional Municipality Archives, reveals that Mr. McDougall had been appointed Keeper of Camp Hill Cemetery (registrar and superintendent) on 30 October 1891, following the death of Mr. James Hutton. The 9 May 1918 minutes of the Board of Control show they were in the process of trying to find someone to fill the vacant position. On 5 June 1919, Mr. Jacob Conrad succeeded Alex McDougall.

The following article appeared in the *Novascotian*, 22 November 1912, p.9., c.3:

The headstones to mark the graves of the ten victims of the Titanic disaster interred in the Hebrew cemetery at Fairview were put in place yesterday by contractor F.E. Bishop, F.W. Christie, C.E., acting consulting engineer for the steam ship company were present and inspected and accepted the work. The ten graves in two rows of five each. Two of the victims were identified being Michael Navatril and F. Wormald both of whom are in the eastern or front row. The other eight being unidentified, their headstones having numbers instead of names. In case that at any future time the names corresponding to these numbers became known the names will be added to the inscription. The stones are cut from what is known as ebony granite and the arrangements of the headstones resting on grey concrete foundations rising out of the grounds beautifully sodded lot present an acceptable appearance. Each headstone has the simple and graphic description "died April 15, 1912" thus fixing in stone the date of the great disaster.

To make certain F. W. Christie was not the man in middle, I contacted a descendant of Christie's who confirmed he was not the person in the image. It appears the 21 November event mentioned in the article took place just prior to the photograph of the three men being taken.

Garry Shutlak, Senior Archivist at Nova Scotia Archives, points out that Fitzgerald and Bishop were dressed too well to have been conducting any work such as digging or lifting, even though they had placed their hats on the picket fence directly behind them. Indeed, the image itself appears to simply have been what is referred to today as a photo-op. The photographer named “Brewster,” whose name appears on the lower left of the image, is not listed in local directories.

This opens up the possibility that the photograph may have only been meant for in-house use by the White Star Line. Still, Alexander McDougall's presence in the photograph is a bit of a mystery. One could speculate that it was a small conciliatory gesture on the part of the shipping company. After all, Rabbi Walter's apparent concerns over the burial of the Jewish *Titanic* victims before the fast-approaching Sabbath, though understandable, did lead him to remove several bodies from Fairview Lawn without Mr. McDougall's knowledge or consent. Also worth noting in the photograph is the conspicuous lack of representation from the Jewish community.

Finding visual corroboration of Mr. McDougall's identity is proving difficult, but the search continues. Although it may be true that this new information about the 1912 photograph has helped clarify some of the ongoing historical inaccuracies and mysteries, numerous unanswered questions still continue to swirl around this unique visual artefact of RMS *Titanic*'s legacy.



The ten *Titanic* graves as they appeared in 2013

Image © 2013 Joel Zemel

UPDATE: I recently asked Cara MacDonald, Reference Services Manager for the Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21 for assistance in finding new information about Rabbi Walter. She found one record stating that on 20 September 1911, a 50 year-old man by the name of Joseph Walter from Massachusetts crossed the border into Canada at McAdam Junction, New Brunswick on his way to Nova Scotia. A follow-up examination of the document itself revealed his occupation: "Jewish Rabbi." Cara also tracked down an entry in the 1910 U. S. Census that lists a professional cantor of the correct chronological age named Joseph Walter residing with his family in Suffolk, Massachusetts.

Although being a cantor is a vocation unto itself, requiring someone of good character and voice, it is not unusual for a rabbi to be a "hazzon" as well. Typically, an Orthodox synagogue would hire a professional cantor to lead the congregation in prayer for the High Holidays. Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, took place on 22-23 September 1911. Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, occurred on 1-2 October. It is reasonable to assume Rabbi Walter had been brought to Nova Scotia by a congregation to lead the holiday services. It is also worth noting that the date of the rabbi's arrival in September offers an explanation as to why his name did not appear in the 1911 Canada Census as a lodger with the Webber family at 245 Brunswick Street.

At this time, it cannot be said for certain that Rabbi Joseph Walter continued to reside in the province for several more months, and that he was the same individual involved in the circumstances surrounding the *Titanic* victims' bodies. However, his distinctive surname and timely appearance in the province gives credibility to the notion.