

CANADA

The tree that says thank you

After a 1917 explosion in Halifax, Boston rushed help. Every year, Nova Scotia says thank you with a tree.

WHERE	Halifax, Nova Scotia
WHO	The people of Boston, who sent help to Halifax, and the people of Nova Scotia, who say thank you every year
WHEN	1917 to today

4 min read

CHAPTER ONE

The story

On the morning of 6 December 1917, two ships collided in the harbour of Halifax, a city in Canada. One carried explosives. It caught fire. Crowds gathered to watch. Then it blew up.

It was one of the biggest man-made blasts ever, before the atomic bomb. About 2,000 people died. About 9,000 were hurt, many by flying glass. Hundreds lost some or all of their sight. More than 1,500 buildings were destroyed.

Help through a blizzard

Boston and Halifax had traded together since the 1700s. The day after the blast, a blizzard hit and slowed help from other cities. But a telegram, a message sent by wire, reached Boston in the United States. That same night, medical teams set out by train.

The train carried 30 leading doctors and surgeons, 70 nurses, and supplies for a 500-bed hospital. It made its way through the snow.

Boston also raised more than $100,000 in the first hour, one report says. A symphony orchestra played a benefit concert. The state of Massachusetts gave over $750,000.

> **Most Nova Scotians love and remember the assistance that Boston gave us 104 years ago.**
>
> SANDRA JOHNSTON, WHO RUNS THE TREE FOR BOSTON PROGRAM, QUOTED BY CBS NEWS IN 2021

1917
year of the Halifax explosion

2,000
people killed, about

1971
year the yearly tree gift began

A tree every year

Nova Scotia is the Canadian province around Halifax. It did not forget. The yearly gift began in 1971. Each year, the province sends Boston a Christmas tree.

The tree is a spruce about 45 to 50 feet tall. The public can nominate trees. One is chosen, cut, and sent more than 600 miles to Boston. There, it is lit on Boston Common. The manager of the program keeps a list of about 15 trees for the future. In 2021, the tree was 60 years old and 48 feet tall.

The tree growers who began the gift also hoped to sell more trees. But it has grown into a yearly thank-you. More than a hundred years on, people still remember the train that came that night.

How it unfolded

- **1917** The Halifax explosion. Boston sends a relief train that night.
- **1971** Nova Scotia begins the yearly tree gift.
- **1976** The provincial government takes over the gift.
- **2021** Nova Scotia sends Boston a 48-foot spruce.

CHAPTER TWO

What makes it special

The thanks has outlasted the disaster by more than a century. A single night's help is still repaid every winter.

It began partly to sell trees, and still became real gratitude. Good things often start with mixed reasons.

OUR TAKE

A kindness done in a hurry, in a blizzard, can be remembered for a hundred years.

CHAPTER THREE

What we can learn

1. ### Act fast when help is needed

   Boston sent a train the same night the plea arrived.

   Try this: When someone asks for help, do one useful thing within the hour.

2 Give what you can

Boston sent doctors, nurses, supplies, money and a concert.

Try this: List three things you could give: time, a skill, or money. Offer one.

3 Say thank you, and say it again

Nova Scotia thanks Boston every year, not once.

Try this: Thank someone who helped you long ago, and tell them what it meant.

4 Make remembering a ritual

A tree each year keeps the story alive for new generations.

Try this: Pick one date each year to thank a person or group that helped you.

ONE THOUGHT TO TAKE AWAY

Thanks given every year can last longer than the trouble it answers.

Sources

The Canadian Encyclopedia
Halifax Explosion

CBS News
Tradition behind Boston Common's Christmas tree has endured decades and a pandemic (2021)

Mental Floss
Why Nova Scotia Sends Boston a Christmas Tree Every Year (2015)

Fact-check note: The sources agree on the main story and differ on details. Deaths and injuries: the Canadian Encyclopedia gives 1,946 dead and 9,000 wounded; CBS News gives about 2,000 killed and about 9,000 injured; Mental Floss says more than 1,500 killed instantly; the story says about 2,000 and about 9,000. “Hundreds lost some or all of their sight” follows the Canadian Encyclopedia (hundreds blinded or partly blinded); CBS News counts nearly 600 treated for eye injuries. Damage: the Canadian Encyclopedia says more than 1,500 buildings destroyed and 12,000 damaged, and 25,000 people homeless or without proper shelter; Mental Floss says more than 1,600 homes destroyed and 6,000 people homeless; the story gives only the Canadian Encyclopedia’s 1,500 buildings. “Biggest man-made blast before the atomic bomb” follows CBS News (largest until Hiroshima) and Mental Floss (largest non-nuclear explosion). Boston and Halifax trading since the 1700s is from Mental Floss. Boston’s help: CBS News says medical teams set out that night after a telegram, through the snow; Mental Floss gives the train’s contents (30 doctors and surgeons, 70 nurses, a 500-bed hospital unit) and says more than $100,000 was “reportedly” raised in the first hour, a benefit concert by the Boston Symphony, and over $750,000 from Massachusetts; the Canadian Encyclopedia confirms relief organised in Boston without giving these figures. The story gives no arrival date, since accounts differ. The tree: CBS News says a first tree was sent the year after the explosion (1918) and again in 1971 and every year since; Wikipedia says a tree was also given in 1971 and every year since, and that the annual gift was started by a Christmas tree growers’ group in Lunenburg County to promote tree exports as well as to thank Boston, and that the provincial government took it over in 1976; the story says the yearly gift began in 1971 and does not claim a 1918 tree. The tree size (about 45 to 50 feet), the public nominations, the 600-mile distance, the list of about 15 future trees, the 2021 tree (60 years old, 48 feet tall) and the quote are from CBS News. The quote is Sandra Johnston’s. “Lit on Boston Common” is from CBS News and Wikipedia. Lines marked "Our take" are interpretation. Everything else comes from the sources above.