

*“The most savage controversies
are those matters as to which
there is no good evidence either way!”*

Bertrand Russell

Chapter Five

OAK ISLAND'S THORNIEST ISSUE

JOTHAM B. McCULLY
AND HIS MASONIC LIFE IN TRURO, NOVA SCOTIA, 1849
By Robert W. Cook

Grand Lodge of Scotland sent agents to Nova Scotia to recruit new agents to start chapters (Lodges) there. After originally founding “the Thistle Lodge #393” in 1827 in Halifax, the agent set out to the community of Truro, and hired a local by the name of Jotham B. McCully. McCully, an engineer by trade, was charged with finding new members and devising the local chapter’s rituals. These secret rituals were based on those used by the Scottish Rite tradition. Those rituals were to be conveyed only to the initiated member as they ascended to the higher levels of the order.

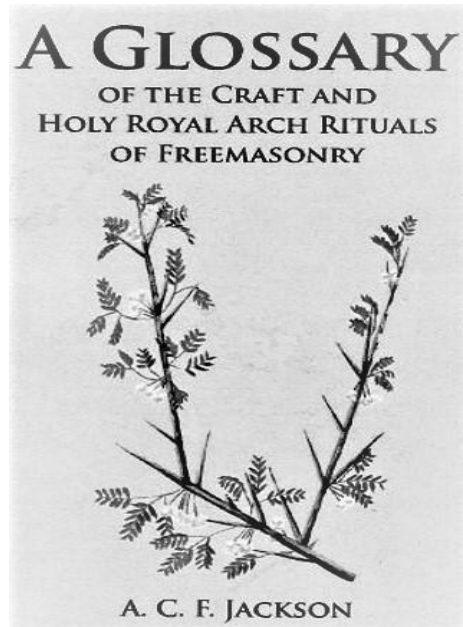
In reviewing excerpts found on the Oak Island Tours website discussing the Truro Company, it shows that in 1849, McCully's neighbor Simeon Lynds had told him about organizing an unsuccessful group in the early 1800's to pursue a possible treasure on Oak Island. The treasure story became an obsession with McCully as the years passed. So much so that in 1849 Jotham decided to contact one of the original searcher team members from that early group, an aging Anthony Vaughn. Anthony related the groups' early days and how their workings became a chore ending in failure. Enlivened by these story's, McCully thought they should start a new venture where he would entice the public with glorified tales of lost treasure and sell shares in the undertaking.

Soon the “Truro Group” was formed and finding the elusive Oak Island treasure was planned. Because of McCully's background in engineering and his organizational skills, he became the manager and fundraiser for the group. He would publicize the dig and offer shares in the company when meeting anyone interested in striking it rich. To publicize the effort with his ties to the local newspaper,

the Liverpool Transcript, he would write his version of the Oak Island Story to encourage people to step forward and purchase shares in the company. June 2, 1862 McCully's salesmanship peaked as he wrote his masterpiece called "*The Oak Island Diggings.*" Not one word had been previously written about searching for treasure on the Island in any publication. It appears to me, with no story yet told, McCully would not be limited in his storytelling. So it was up to Jotham to form his own narrative going forward while enticing the public with stories about previous secret digs. His imagination went wild as he authored stories of success and eventual failure, as early searchers for the treasure came so close but just out of the grasp of a fortune. His story would have to fire the public's imagination, all while encouraging them to reach deep into their pockets for the chance to be rich. He had to convey the group's expertise and relay a sense of knowledge in any kind of future operation. He thought privately, who knows, they might really find something! In my opinion, he did a terrific job at his task.

His contrived history of the early diggings would have to tell a unique story yet be framed as realistically as possible and be a real eye-opener. The wow factor was uppermost in his mind.

In 2010, Dennis J. King wrote a full detail of JB McCully's usurpation of masonic rights in his book, "*The Oak Island Legend: The Masonic Angle.*" Recalling that McCully had been charged with secret Masonic details and a prolific knowledge of circumstances explained by the agent of

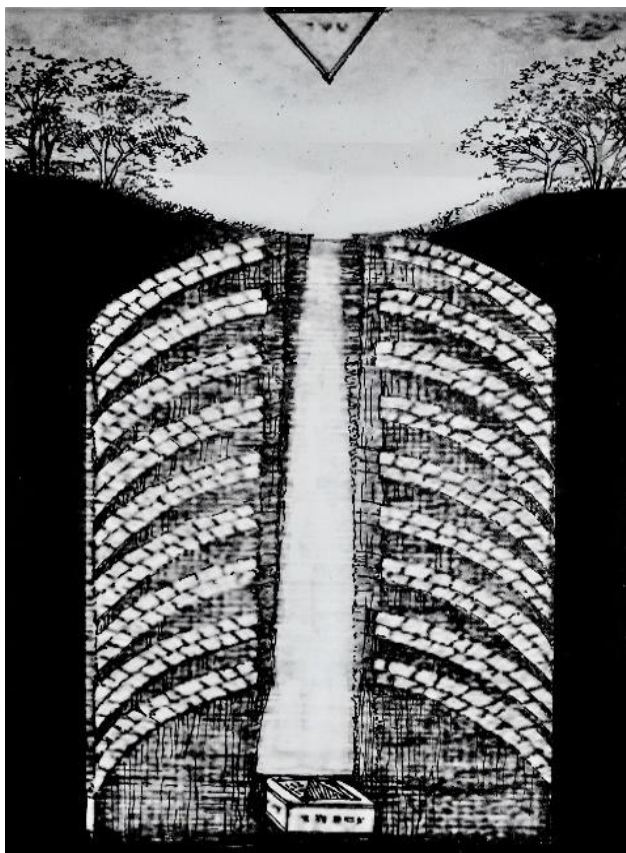


A Glossary. By A.C.F. Jackson

the Mason's Scottish Rite, it became apparent McCully decided what he had learned about secret themes would be a clever way to write an Oak Island synopsis. At the same time he believed it would raise interest in those to invest in the new venture. It had become a win-win situation for the group and for Jotham himself. Read more about Mr. Jotham Blanchard McCully in the fonds of the Nova Scotia Archives.

Enoch and Hiram Abiff

As told in the Book of Enoch in the Bible, it says Enoch the grandfather of Noah and considered the father of Freemasonry, was visited by God and given a vision of the end of the world and all of the world's knowledge by way of a great flood.



Enoch's Vault, Created by Robert W. Cook

It also says Enoch lived 365 years before he was known to have “walked with God.” One of only two men (Elijah was the other) who never died but escaped to heaven directly by God's hand.

Because of Enoch's devotion to God while still on Earth, he and Methuselah his son it is said in the Book of Enoch, built deep underground, nine brick vaults, one atop of another in the bowels of Mount Moriah. He filled each level with bits of knowledge, and at the lowest level, the ninth level, he placed a triangular plate of solid gold measuring one cubit, 18 inches per side. Etched on the face of the gold plate was “The Ineffable Name of God.” When the pit and the vaults were complete he covered the site with soil and placed a flagstone cap. At the surface he erected two pillars and labeled them Boaz and Jachin. He inscribed all the worlds’ history, arts, and science on one pillar. On the other he placed hieroglyphics pointing to the great treasures in the vaults below. The pillars were all but destroyed by the great flood and all nearly lost, until thousands of years later.

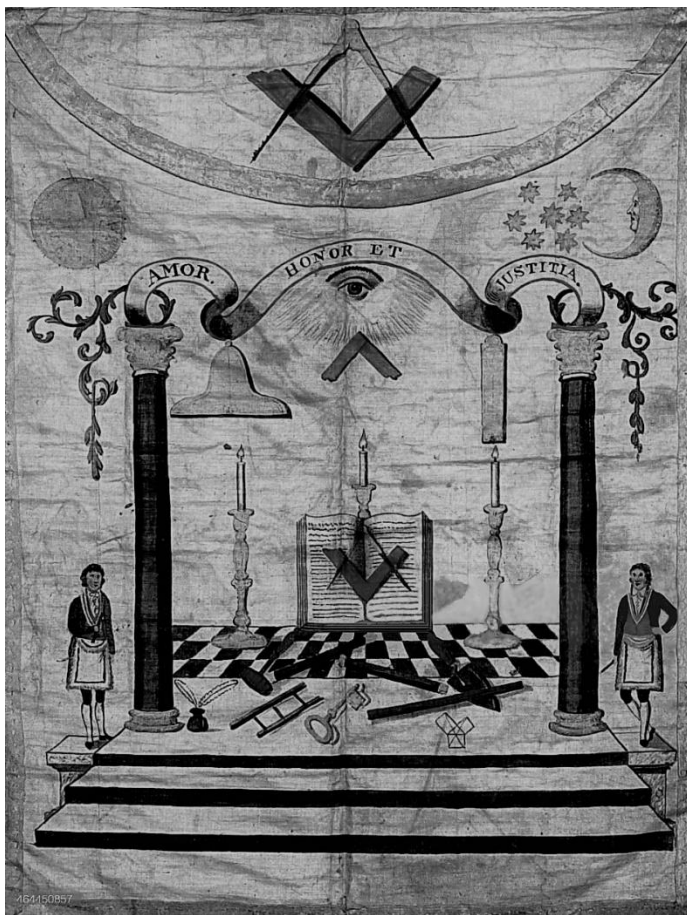
The site was being prepared for construction of Solomon's Temple (966 BC) and during excavation for the foundation, Hiram Abiff, Solomon's architect, saw remnants of broken pillars protruding above the surface. Connecting a few sections and interpreting the etchings on the broken pillars, he dug under the flagstone layer where he came upon the roof of the top arch. Lying beside the ceiling tile he discovered the Great Pillar of Knowledge. It was in that highest arch that the first Masonic secret meeting was held beneath the partly constructed Temple. The Scottish Rite of Freemasonry, the 13th degree, is called the Royal Arch of Enoch.



Courtesy Todd E. Creeson

When an initiate into Freemasonry is escorted between the two pillars beyond which awaits the “Mysteries” of which Freemasons are the custodian and depository of the “Great Truth,” they become the keepers of what is unknown to the rest of the world.

This image shows the two pillars and other symbols of Freemasonry, published in 1820 in the *Masonry Monitor*. This cloth depiction below is similar to that illustration and the apron given to Washington by Lafayette, which is found in *“The Craft and its Symbols,”* page 11.



Masonic Lodge w/two pillars on cloth. Variation of “The Masonic Chart”

The architect, Hiram Abiff, was the other part of the Enochian story in the Bible. Having found Enoch's secret vaults and having sworn to God not to tell anyone of his findings, he was approached by three ruffians at the Temple who insisted Enoch tell them what he had found. Because of his promise to God, Abiff was beaten and killed by the men as he refused to tell the secret. The three ruffians took Hiram's body and buried it under an Acacia tree. This eventually pointed the way to his grave, which Solomon and his closest confidants finally found.

Today, as the initiates are led between the two pillars, they are fanned by a branch of the Acacia tree in remembrance of the man who kept God's name secret and chose death rather than give up his sacred promise. Hiram Abiff teaches mankind the lessons of trust and allegiance to their brothers and to God.

Now we move forward in time to McCully's story in the 1850's. I believe after the Truro group was formed, it was time for Jotham to write his story about the history of what had gone on 50 years before regarding the island and its secrets. With his knowledge of all the Masonic rituals, he planned a perfect scenario he could write a parody using the Masonic secret rituals as a basis for an 'Oak Island Mystery Story.' I believe he felt it would fit right into his scheme - *Enoch's pit with the nine levels, with a great treasure at the bottom, lost for years, to find the greatest treasure of all time!*

The newspaper was waiting, and the people were waiting to invest. It was time for him to deliver and deliver he would!

Some of the greatest writers of the day had impacted McCully's mind. The new Mystery treasure writers had its own genre! The first of that kind was Edgar Allen Poe, and his short story called the Gold Bug. Poe had it published as a small book and after it hit the corner newsstands, it sold by the thousands. In fact more than 350,000 copies sold, which made him a rich man. In 1849 McCully was one of the first to buy a copy.

In the Jotham Blanchard McCully fonds of the Nova Scotia Archives, one can read about his interest with this storytelling genre. He marveled at the mystery and the treasure everyone wanted to find.



The Gold Bug. Illustration by Herpin Inv.

Poe's story was centered on Sullivan's Island where a boy rowing to the island from the mainland found two men, Mr. Le Grand and his servant, Jupiter. It told of their adventures looking for Captain Kidd's buried treasure. Thanks to Poe's popularity and wealth, a group of writers formed a secret society of authors with a common

theme, “Mysteries and treasure seeking.” All these authors passed on a method or a combination of common pieces that they thought would assure their combined storytelling success. They would be referred to as ‘pseudo-historical story writers,’ as they were generally very entertaining but a little overstated and shy of the truth. Poe’s *Gold Bug* had all the pieces and became the base-line example they used. This group had some success, including A.L. Spedon and his “*Rambles Among the Bluenose*” written in 1863, where he quoted McCully’s account of the Oak Island Legend. Other members included: J.P. Forks “*Captain Kidd and Buried Treasure*” in his 1857 letters; James DeMille’s book “*Treasure of the Sea;*” Harold Wilkins “*English Treasure Story;*” Ralph D. Paynes book of buried treasure; and Robert Lewis Stephenson’s “*Treasure Island.*”

James McNutt in 1867 wrote about discovering 3 lengths of gold chain brought up from a “Money Pit” in his diary.

Twenty years later Edward Rowe Snow wrote 20 books on treasure buried along the east coast of the United States. Snow was the author who used the etched ‘90 foot Stone’ supposedly found at the bottom of the Oak Island Money Pit. His reference might be the sole source of any 90 foot Stone cipher. These authors used various clever ciphers and rock carvings with unreadable but almost decipherable markings. Another ploy was the intentional misspelling of names and places etc. (close but oddly wrong). They used strange markings on trees, and codes with no definitive meaning. The words “Vault” and “Chamber” were frequently used. When an odd stone was found it was usually sourced from a far off country. “Only found in Egypt” would be the line. If miners were mentioned they would always be from Spain or Portugal. Treasure would always be “Gold” or the “Holy Grail,” or “Arc of the Covenant,” etc. Famous celebrities were always in the vicinity, such as John Wayne, FDR, Captain Kidd, or Jesse James. You would always locate a rough hand-drawn map involved, usually on parchment, with foreign language words spaced around the outside.

“Trees” and “Islands” were a must as pirates traveled by ship in those days. There was usually some penalty involved for getting too close to the treasure and involved warnings of a curse or death. Unique trees were used as landmarks, some with codes and figures carved in the bark.

In 1862, Jotham B McCully published an article in the *Liverpool Transcript* titled, “Oak Island Diggings.” True to form, he wrote,

“when he discovered the spot in question from its being sunken, and from the position of three oak trees, which stood in a triangular form round the pit. The bark had letters cut into it with a knife on each tree facing the pit, and one of the trees being so directly over the pit, that two large branches formed a crotch, were exactly perpendicular to the center, and had a hole bored through, and an oak tree-nail driven in, on which hung a tackle block...”

“On a narrow point at the far eastern end of the island there were a row of ‘Majestic Oaks’ that were said to be The only island of the 360 in Mahone Bay and this was the only one with these mighty oaks,” was the description given by the Chester Municipal Heritage Society (MHS) in a letter to James Soper of the National Museum of Canada in March of 1977.



Majestic Oaks at Smith's Cove. Courtesy W.R. Macaskill, Nova Scotia Archives.

When I first saw the old photos of those 'Oaks,' I immediately thought to myself, "*Those aren't Oaks!*" I had never seen any oaks that looked anything like those. The main trunks looked too vertically tall with sparse branching. The canopies were formed like umbrellas. I did years of research looking through tons of tree books, which I use in my illustration work. I also found only Northern Red Oaks grow in Nova Scotia. During my long career as an illustrator, I painted specific trees and landscaping around the new buildings that we designed and were to be constructed in the future all over the world. I knew those trees were not Red Oaks mainly because of all the references to those Isaac's Point trees. No one ever mentioned their bright red leaves in the fall. Who could have missed that certainty? As a professional visual artist and using all my reference material, I searched for trees that had that particular profile. These were tall trees with a main trunk, branching out up high with other major limbs in an upward direction then abruptly ending into an arched leafy crown. I noticed something. The trees were all in a single row down the point to the

end, all somewhat equally spaced! It is like someone came along decades earlier and planted them on purpose. This group of trees were certainly distinct, unlike any of the Pines, Spruces, or Oaks that were common and grew randomly all over the area. In my search I found one tree that had the perfect profile, size, and characteristics - *The Acacia*. Yes, the Acacia wood was the material Moses used to build the Arc of the Covenant. The same wood was used for the Tabernacle furniture. It was also the tree that was the headstone of Hiram Abiff's grave, and the Crown of Thorns made to punish Jesus as he died on the cross. I had finally made a connection - *the secret Masonic rituals and initiations of which the Acacia tree was a major part.*



Poster titled, "The Light of Masonry." Courtesy www.masonicarts.com

The Acacia branch waved over the new initiate's head as he is led into the inner sanctum between the two pillars, to the Holy Of Holies, where in the Temple, originally Solomon's Temple, the Arc of the Covenant was kept. These masonic symbols are universally used by various lodges and organizations as depicted in the poster.

Acacia Trees

The Acacia's lifespan is on the short side, usually around thirty years, which explains why these trees disappeared from a sequence of photo's first taken in 1870's, with the last one being seen in the early 1900's. The Acacia wood is water resistant and immune to fungus. Their wood is very dense but very flexible. The wood's durability is the highest of any tree. The Acacia produces special properties in its sap. If the sap, which contains the ingredient DMT is ingested, it causes a psychoactive hallucination. This liquid was used in Masonic circles up until the late 1700's when it was banned. In the ritual, when the liquid was given to an initiate, he would see angelic figures appearing from nowhere and have a feeling of God's presence. Historically, the Acacia represents four symbols - Renewal, Fortitude, Purity, and Immortality. It was written that the "Tree of Life" and the "Burning Bush" were both Acacias.

The only problem I had was putting this tree species that far north. I was told by one of the TV show's historical research cast members (Doug Crowell) when I first approached him on this subject years before that Acacias couldn't grow up in the Canadian Maritimes. Even though I had found Acacias growing in Ireland and in the Azores of the north Atlantic, and even finding a Masonic Lodge in Nova Scotia named "Acacia Lodge," they didn't go for my theory. I never heard back from Doug nor the Producers of the program, and I decided at that time to drop the idea. Until recently, which I'll address later in the chapter.

The 90 foot Stone

The first public knowledge of this famous stone and its significance wasn't mentioned until Jotham B. McCully submitted his "*Oak Island Diggings*" article to the Liverpool Transcript, in 1862. He

mentioned in this article the “stone” provided proof their new searcher group's efforts were not a waste of time. McCully had turned on his salesmanship as he tried to correlate Enoch's Pit under Solomon's Temple to the story he was imagining at the bottom of the Money Pit. Imagine the parallels – *a stone at the 9th level was found about two feet long and a foot thick, with several characters engraved on it.*

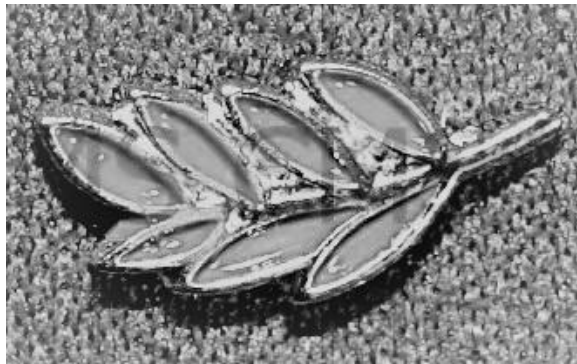
Being made public, this prompted a letter from the Halifax Historical Societies’ agent, John Hunter Duvar, who wanted to see this “historically significant” stone. After time went by, McCully wrote to Duvar saying he had word the stone was placed in the construction of a fireplace in an island cabin built by John Smith. He told Duvar he had seen the actual stone himself. Smith had died years earlier, and a Mr. Graves purchased the cabin and had rented the place to be used as an office for the current group of treasure seekers - The Oak Island Association. Trying to put off Duval knowing there wasn't any real 90 foot stone, McCully said they had covered up the stone with a new staircase, and it would be impossible to see. McCully had used the idea of a cipher inscribed stone as a fool-proof method to sell more shares. Now after telling the Historical Society they wouldn't be able to actually see the stone, it gave him exactly what he needed, more time!

Knowing at that time the cabin was about to be torn down, he and his Masonic brother, A.O. Creighton, showed up to the cabin and as workmen were dismantling the house, removed what looked to be a similar sized and shaped stone from the fireplace. They carted it back to McCully's. Now he had plenty of time to chisel some marks on the stone's surface and even carved his initials on the bottom corner “JM.” After finishing he delivered the stone to Creighton's bookbinder's shop in Halifax where they displayed it in the front window for everyone to see. There it remained for over 50 years, seeming to disappear around 1919.

I am sure whatever cipher or marking was said to be etched on the stone, in reality there never was a real 90 foot Stone. The only real 90 foot Stone was just McCully's fake used to make the whole treasure story more believable. Jotham's parody of the masonic ritual and Enoch's Pit at Mt. Moriah was simply his take on the Oak Island's lost treasure, the "stone" being a replacement of the gold triangular plate at the 90' level with the "Ineffable Name of God" etched on it.

Who knows? The stone that Doug Crowell found (2018) in the basement of old Creighton's bookbinder shop might well have been the stone displayed in his front window all those years.

Epilogue



Masonic Acacia twig pin. Courtesy Masonicbuys.com

Did the early Masonic inductees have their meetings on Oak Island for the privacy it afforded? Could the stories of locals seeing fires at night across the bay simply be Masons gathering quietly out of sight? Were those Acacias planted by the brotherhood for the use of their Lodge initiations and its historic rituals? Were those famous trees Acacias after all? I was asked to use one of my well known paintings of Smith's Cove and its wonderful trees for a new book cover that Joy Steele and Gordon Fader had written, named *"Oak Island, Mystery Solved, The Final Chapter."* I had not told Joy or Gordon of my ideas, because I believe their historical,

scientifically realistic book went perfect alongside of mine. Their story doesn't get in my way and none of my ideas refute theirs. I did finally tell Gordon about my tree ideas and why I felt the famous trees were Acacias, even though I believed that none could grow there. A quiet pause came as Gordon blurted out, "***I had Acacias in my back yard in Halifax!***" OMG, I was flabbergasted as he, a well-known marine geologist and scientist for the Geological Survey of Canada, had just handed me the Holy Grail!

Finally it all came together. Especially as he drove over to his old home, photographed the trees and cut off a few branches so we could see up close the rows of leaves and the sharp thorns.



Acacia's in Halifax, Photographed by Gordon Fader P.Geo. 2021

In telephonic conversations between myself and Gordon Fader throughout the summer of 2021, I fully briefed him on my research involving Freemasonry, JB McCully, and the storytelling of the Oak Island treasure tale. Gordon helped me assemble the evidence he had grown up among and provides the following narrative.

"I have lived in the west end of Halifax City for most of my life. At one time I resided on Phillip Street where next door grew this large Acacia tree. There were many others planted along the street. They were usually late leafers. Their blossoms were very fragrant and hung like bunches of grapes. On close examination you could see many sharp thorns along the branches. They were very pretty trees with rough bark and a light airy texture."

"Recently (with a promise to Bob Cook), I went back to the old neighborhood to see their condition and photograph their parts. Yes, some were still there, and some had been cut down given that they had been planted so close to the street. They had probably been planted by the city crew sometime around the 1940's as that was the time that area of the city was being developed into new subdivisions. Searching the literature for other regions of Acacia trees, I learned near Coburg Road where summer guests used to stroll the grounds of Birchdale On the Arm, there was a handsome group of Acacias surrounding Acacia Cottage. The cottage had been moved back in the 1950's to South Street at the foot of Henry Street. Acacia Cottage at 6080 South Street was built in 1816 across from the Waegwoltic Club within a grove of Acacia trees (hence the name). Another area was called "Acacia Grove" near a dignified brick house built by a Mr. Prescott, which followed the formal Georgian style of architecture (British Colonial). Prescott had retired from business in Halifax and relocated to his rural estate in the Annapolis Valley. There he built a fine home with British classical inspiration set in the midst of out buildings, gardens, and orchards. He was best remembered for introducing an improved variety of Apple and establishing "The New Brunswick Fruit Growers Association."

"It is my recollection; the property came to be known as "Acacia Grove." The property changed hands many times until it finally fell into disrepair. In the 1930's Prescott's granddaughter restored the place, and now it's administered by the Nova Scotia Museum."

"As a co-author with Joy Steele of a recent book, "The Oak Island Mystery Solved, The Final Chapter," published by Nimbus, I was always intrigued by the so-called 'Oak Trees' on Oak Island. Likely why it was called so. In fact, the wonderful painting by Robert Cook of the trees on Isaac's Point is on the cover of our book. After living on a street of Acacias, I have become sensitive to the growth and development of these trees. The oak trees of Oak Island appear to me to be more like Acacia's than oaks. Oaks do come in a wide variety, but their strong, large horizontal branching made them perfect for shipbuilding in earlier days."

"I am not a specialist in Botany in any way, but I'm suggesting that those famous trees on Oak Island certainly may have been Acacia's and not oaks at all. The distribution of these trees in Nova Scotia suggest this is a possibility. The photos of the trees, branches with thorns and leaves, I took in the early fall of 2021 here in Halifax, NS."



Acacia Branch with leaves,
Halifax, NS. 2021. Courtesy G. Fader, P.Geo.



Reported Acacia Tree thorn
and leaf photographs from
Halifax, NS. 2021.
Courtesy G. Fader, P.Geo



Neighborhood Acacia Tree in Halifax, NS. 2021.
Courtesy G. Fader, P.Geo