



HEADLESS MARY

Montreal, Quebec

Most people don't go looking for ghosts, and most don't want ghosts to come looking for them. But for more than one hundred and thirty years, curiosity-seekers have gathered in Griffintown, an area of downtown Montreal near the Lachine Canal, hoping to see the ghost of a woman looking for her head. And over the years parents living in the area have warned their misbehaving youngsters that the headless ghost would come after them while she wandered around searching for it.

Griffintown was a bustling, working-class neighbourhood of Montreal where thousands of Irish immigrants settled when they arrived in Canada in the nineteenth century. Life was hard for many of the people living there. It was certainly hard for two friends, Mary Gallagher and

Susan Kennedy, who were staying in a flat in a house at the corner of William and Murray Streets in the summer of 1879. On the night of June 27, they'd been socializing with a man named Michael Flanagan when they got into a terrible fight — and Mary Gallagher was killed. According to court documents, Susan Kennedy had knocked her to the floor and whacked her several times with an axe, chopping off her head. A neighbour living downstairs said the blows overhead were so violent that the ceiling plaster cracked, sending pieces showering down.

Susan Kennedy was found guilty of murdering her best friend. Her sentence — death by hanging — was supposed to be carried out on December 5, 1879, but a judge finally spared her life and sent her to prison instead. She was eventually paroled, after serving sixteen years in the Kingston Penitentiary in Ontario.



A Griffintown street during the spring floods, 1873

In the years following Mary Gallagher's death, several people reported seeing her on the streets of Griffintown, dressed as she had always been in life. And even though her ghost didn't always appear headless, people said she was looking for her head. As the number of Mary Gallagher sightings dwindled over time, locals began to talk about how she just appeared once every seven years — on the anniversary of her death.

Few traces of Gallagher's old neighbourhood remain in Montreal. Abandoned factories and slum housing have been replaced by film studios and trendy condos looking out over the Lachine Canal. But some folks still gather every seven years at the corner of William and Murray Streets to mark the passing of the lively, close-knit Irish-Canadian community that once was Griffintown. And they do so on June 27, just in case the headless ghost of Mary Gallagher decides to go for a walk that night.