Shifting Sites

Mapping the changing landscape of Canada's National Historic Sites. *by Claire Campbell*

PARCS CANADA

Pierre Gaultier de Varennes, sieur de La Vérendrye, certainly had good business sense. When he established Fort Rouge at the forks of the Red and Assiniboine rivers in 1738, he chose a site used for thousands of years as a natural meeting and trading place by Assiniboine, Ojibwa, and Cree peoples. Others who came after him evidently shared this opinion, as railway tracks were laid across the site, depositing grain (or settlers) instead of furs.

By the time the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada (HSMBC) designated the place as a National Historic Site in 1974, it had been buried beneath the railyards for nearly a century. Fifteen years later, when Parks Canada opened The Forks NHS to the public, the site had been transformed again. A quiet urban park reconnected downtown Winnipeg to its historic riverbanks. Instead of costumed interpreters and wooden palisades, Parks Canada introduced only landscaping, adding native prairie species and a smattering of interpretive sculptures. Tucked behind market shops on adjacent property, The Forks once again invited new use in an old space. And now you could bring a latte.

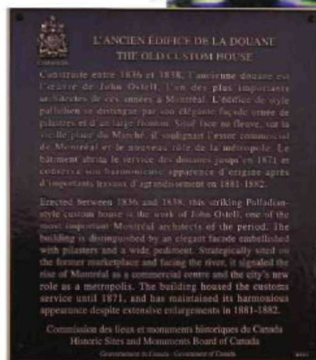
The Forks embodies what I see as the three Rs of Canada's National Historic Sites: reinterpret, re-inhabit, and reuse. Although historic sites promise us a trip back in time, they must continually justify their survival in the present. In addition, these fixed locations are required to convey ever-changing ideas about Canada. As ideas about history have evolved, the HSMBC, which recommends the designation of historic sites, and Parks Canada, which manages 167 of these sites, have often adapted these places to current circumstances in pursuit of that critical fourth R: relevance.

For much of the twentieth century, the HSMBC, when making its recommendations to government, favoured sites that affirmed a coherent narrative of Canada's territorial expansion and the reconciliation of its two founding nations, with dashes of wilderness excitement and technological triumph to enliven the coming of peace, order, and good government. After 1919 bronze plaques on stone cairns appeared on the sites of former — and often long-vanished — fur trade posts from Hudson Bay to the Pacific.

Also recognized were forts where the North West Mounted Police sought to pacify the "rebel" Métis. In the St. Lawrence Valley and the Maritimes, blockhouses, star forts, and stone walls marked first the struggle for a continent between France and Britain, and later efforts to defend loyalist British North America from our republican neighbours to the south. And, of course, there were places associated with leading personalities, from the Duc d'Anville's shoreline encampment to the more comfortable lodgings of prime ministers.

These commemorations, like the board itself, were essentially academic; a plaque announcing an event or place of historical significance rarely interfered with its surroundings. At the same time, the Dominion Parks Branch was experimenting with a more activist approach. James B. Harkin, its first commissioner, envisioned a new category of historic parks as a way of expanding the national parks system eastward. By acquiring properties from the Department of Militia and Defence or other federal departments, the Parks Branch could provide people in eastern Canada with accessible and scenic green spaces complete with evocative ruins, "pregnant with early Canadian history and which but [await] material expression," Harkin said.

MC CORD MUSEUM



STEPEN AUBUCHON

In fact, Canadians were already reusing these sites for their own purposes. In Nova Scotia, Fort Anne had been leased as "park and place of resort" and housed a baseball diamond, while the Windsor Golf Club incorporated the grounds of Fort Edward into a golf course. Farmers in Alberta and Saskatchewan ploughed over the remains of the North West Company's post at Rocky Mountain House and the area surrounding the village of Batoche. In the 1930s, inspired by the reconstruction of Colonial Williamsburg on the one hand and by the exigencies of the Great Depression on the other, the federal government adopted an equally pragmatic view, funding partial reconstructions at large sites like the

Previous page: A boy participates in the "soldier for a day" program for children at Fort Beausejour National Historic Site, New Brunswick.

Above: ***Pierre de La Vérendrye, on the Upper St. Maurice River, 1725,*** **from a twentieth-century print by John David Kelly.**

Left: A Parks Canada's plaque.

PARKS CANADA

Above: At Fortress of Louisbourg National Historic Site in Nova Scotia, three period restaurants serve food and beverages based on eighteenth-century tradition and recipes. Parks Canada has turned dining into a major attraction at its historic sites.

Below right: The brightly painted old town section of Lunenberg, Nova Scotia, established in 1753, is a national historic district.

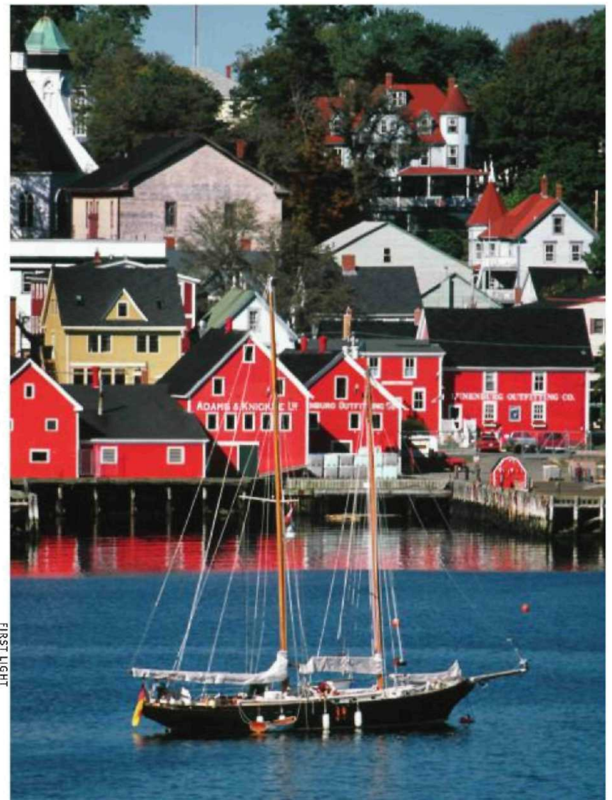
Halifax Citadel and Prince of Wales Fort in hopes of stimulating both the economy and patriotic sentiment. By the 1950s, National Historic Sites were widely recognized — not least by the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters, and Sciences — as attractions designed to draw visitors from Canada and abroad.

Site development accelerated through the 1960s, supported by massive funding for centennial projects and the National Parks Branch's growing staff of historians and archaeologists. Full-scale reconstructions and living history programs became the norm. At fur trade sites like Manitoba's Lower Fort Garry, Canadians could expect well-stocked storehouses, with the big house furnished with fine china and the chief factor's wife in period dress sewing demurely in the corner. The Fortress at Louisbourg rose again in the fog of Cape Breton, the largest reconstruction every undertaken in Canada, and a triumph for — depending on your point of view — Canadian archaeology, the Parks Branch's engineering division, or federal employment programs.

But Louisbourg would prove to be the high-water mark of Canada's historic reconstructions. Ottawa retreated from funding historical megaprojects at the same time as historians retreated from a singular national narrative.New histories were more likely to be framed by the "limited identities" of region, ethnicity, and class, and Parks Canada began to adapt its historic and budgetary resources to suit the times.

Archaeological research, originally used to inform reconstructions, became a showpiece in its own right. At Abernethy, Saskatchewan, old tree stumps marked the lines of shelter belts planted by William Motherwell. Like thousands of other Ontario settlers, Motherwell planted the trees to protect his farm on the open prairie. When Rocky Mountain House NHS opened in 1976, three of the four known fort sites were presented as grassed-over digs; the only "reconstruction" was a metal frame that mimicked the outline of a Hudson's Bay Company palisade. On the Labrador coast, archaeologists located a series of Basque whaling stations and the wreck of a sunken sixteenth-century galleon, then housed their findings in the community of Red Bay.

In presenting a historic site as a place of artifacts, or of history in situ, Parks Canada profoundly altered the nature of a site visit. The interpretative centre at Port au Choix, Newfoundland, was located so visitors would have to walk some kilometres "in the footsteps of the Palaeoeskimo people" across the limestone barrens to the coast. A few kilometres upriver from the reconstructed habitation at Port-Royal NHS, a few text panels at Melanson Settlement direct our gaze across



FIRST LIGHT

open fields to the Annapolis River as the seventeenth-century Acadians would have seen it. The aim of this approach is to convey a sense of place — identification with the past through ambiance and contemplation. With a budget as light as its environmental footprint, this approach is both thrifty and respectful; whether most Canadians can easily visualize a Paleoeskimo camp or an Acadian farmhouse, or whether they will be drawn to Louisbourg's more modest cousins, is another question.

Where earlier sites had presented the story of Canada as a project of continental exploration and expansion, now they depicted the nation as a collection of regional geographies — an archipelago, as geographer Cole Harris described it. In the 1980s, the HSMBC recognized several prairie settlement and field patterns as having national significance, including the Motherwell shelterbelts and the Mormon irrigation systems at Stirling, Alberta. Also recognized was the Métis river lot, still visible on the North Saskatchewan River at Batoche, as part of a move to acknowledge its role in "the history, evolution, continuity of the Métis community" before and after 1885.

The nature of landholding was highlighted in eastern Canada as well, with Strathgartney Homestead on Prince Edward Island chosen to represent the province's historic struggle with leasehold tenure. The concept of cultural landscape affected even that most traditional of historic sites, the star-shaped fort: In 1997, Parks Canada quietly slid the theme of "the relationship of people and landscape" ahead of the more conventional "struggle for a continent" at Fort Beauséjour in New Brunswick.

Individual if grand Italianate homes with "John A. slept here" cachet were becoming a minority. Instead, new sites might be complex groupings of buildings, such as twentieth-century industrial plants — where the historic sites system, admittedly, had some catching up to do. Examples include the Gulf of Georgia Cannery in Richmond, B.C., the Medalta Potteries in Medicine Hat, Alberta, and the Gooderham and Worts Distillery in Toronto. The new concept of national historic district seemed particularly suited to Atlantic communities, such as Lunenburg, Nova Scotia, or colourful Water Street in St. John's, where colonial grids had been overlaid with two centuries of architectural styles and urban activities. Statements of significance now acknowledged not just a single event (or a single actor) but successive occupants and change over time, cementing the trend away from reconstruction.

PARKS CANADA

Left: Parks Canada has entered the world of food tourism. Visitors to some National Historic Sites can even take lessons in Canadian heritage cooking. A Parks Canada food app launched in 2011 provides up to sixty recipes for everything from bannock to Acadian bouilli.

The emphasis on cultural landscape owed much to the new status of Aboriginal history within the historic sites system. The HSMBC and local historical groups had long been interestedin Aboriginal artifacts — the sixteenth-century earthworks at Southwold, in southwestern Ontario, were designated as early as 1923 — but only as evidence of the country's "prehistory."

By the 1960s, however, it was painfully apparent that the fur trade and NWMP posts, which had dominated the first generation of historic sites, told only one side of the story. Early efforts at revision were more or less superficial. Forty years

after Fort Walsh in Saskatchewan was recognized as a key part of the NWMP's Great March West, a second plaque acknowledged the massacre of Nakoda that had precipitated the march in the first place. At fur trade sites across the country, teepees were awkwardly — and, as historians would later argue, somewhat inaccurately — erected outside fort walls to represent Aboriginal camps.

In the 1990s, Parks Canada deemed the history of First Nations, women, and ethnocultural communities "insufficiently represented" in the historic sites system. Ottawa could encourage nominations in new areas or insert alternate narratives at the sites it already owned. It did both. HSMBC plaques at Fort Anne, Nova Scotia, celebrating "imperial vision...extending the realm of Britain beyond the seas" were outnumbered by panels showing Mi'kmaq canoe routes from the Annapolis River and Acadian dykes along the adjacent Allain's Creek. The Riel House in Winnipeg gave over most of the story to the women of the Riel family (in part because Louis himself was almost never there) and the representative features of a Red River frame house on a Métis river lot. The Bar U Ranch in Longview, Alberta, presented the story of prize-winning African-American rancher John Ware as well as those of Aboriginal ranch hands drawn from nearby reserves. And from Kejimkujik National Park in Nova Scotia to Tr'ochëk in Yukon Territory, Aboriginal cultural landscapes encompassing archaeological resources, traditional knowledge, and contemporary uses redefined the scope and meaning of historic sites.

PARKS CANADA

Above: Like other National Historic Sites, The Forks in Winnipeg rents its facilities for weddings and other private functions.

As is always the case with public history, these changes reflected both the academic and the political climates. Historians like Lyle Dick and Simon Evans were winning national awards for their work on National Historic Sites, showing that first-class research about Canada's history could be done on a local and regional scale. Employment equity meant more site interpreters would be women and Canadians of different ethnic backgrounds. The expansion of the national parks system in the North — itself a sign of the political and ecological times — reinforced the need to acknowledge Aboriginal landscapes.

The new interest in diversity and co-management involved local communities in new ways, although sometimes the community brought its own agenda. Grand Pré NHS is co-managed by the Société Promotion Grand-Pré, which hosts its own national holiday in la Fête nationale des Acadiens, as well as la Journée commémorative officielle du Grand Dérangement. When it opened in 1995, the Bar U Ranch NHS in Alberta announced it would "promote environmental citizenship and practice environmental stewardship" in the fescue prairie grasslands; today, the Pekisko Group, which consists of neighbouring ranchers around the protected area, is lobbying for extended protection against exploratory drilling.

Meanwhile, Parks Canada continues to invent new ways to market National Historic Sites as viable attractions. There are reassuringly familiar period entertainments, like croquet in the garden of Manoir Papineau or Victorian carolling inside the walls of the Halifax Citadel. Public archaeology programs — or more recently, geocaching — might appeal to the more inquisitive. Other uses are more...creative. Fortress Louisbourg offers a murder-mystery dinner theatre within its gloomy stone walls; B.C.'s Fort Langley hosts birthday parties where your child can play at being a nineteenth-century fur trader or gold prospector. At The Forks, Parks Canada will rent you the outdoor amphitheatre for your wedding on the banks of the Red River.

Maybe not what La Vérendrye had in mind, but he'd probably appreciate it as good business sense.

PARKS CANADA