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Herschel Island: Heritage in the Face of Adversity

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Introduction

Herschel Island, just off the Yukon coast in the Beaufort Sea, is a small land form measuring roughly 9 miles east to west with a maximum width of approximately 5 miles. Consisting of well drained tundra formed into gentle hills, deep ravines and cliffs of loose clay, Herschel Island supports a wide variety of arctic flora and fauna, most renowned of which are the great pods of Bowhead whales which occur conveniently close to its shores.

It has been speculated that these pods may have been a significant feature in the subsistence of a continuous, though perhaps seasonal, prehistoric human occupation of the island. Ranging from early Thule cultures through prehistoric and protohistoric Mackenzie Eskimo cultures (Yorga 1980: 3), this occupation of Herschel Island and the utilization of its resources has continued through the historic to the contemporary period.

On 17 July 1826, Sir John Franklin discovered the island and named it for Sir John Frederick William Herschel and his son, both famous British astronomers (Bruemmer 1980: 26). But it was not until 1888 that Herschel Island was "rediscovered" by an American exploratory whaling mission and the island rose to historic prominence. In its time, Herschel Island has been the center of the Western Arctic whaling industry; the hub of the Hudson's Bay company's Western Arctic fur trade; and a key post for the North West Mounted/Royal Canadian Mounted Police Arctic patrols. In its heyday, the community on Herschel Island living on the shores of the island's natural harbour of Pauline Cove, numbered over 2,000 inhabitants and attracted such



noteworthy citizens as Reverend I.O. Stringer, later to become Bishop of the Yukon, and Sergeant F.J. Fitzgerald, later to become the leader of the famous Lost Patrol. By 1944, Herschel Island was "completely deserted...not a soul was to be seen" (Henry Larsen, as quoted in Bruemmer 1980: 35). Although the R.C.M.P. returned to the island in 1948 to breed sled dogs, the detachment was small and eventually closed in 1964, at which time all properties were turned over to the Canadian government (Warner 1976: 43).

In mid-summer of 1981, a small party of representatives from Parks Canada and the Yukon Territorial Government travelled to Herschel Island. To help assess the heritage resources and potentials of the island, the services of Parks Canada's Klondike National Historic Sites' staff archaeologist were requested. In the course of the tour, this archaeologist was able to effect a cursory reconnaissance of the prehistoric and historic sites in and around the Pauline Cove settlement. What follows is a brief review of these resources (Fig. 1).

Prehistoric Resources

While prehistoric sites are known to be located on Herschel Island at Osborne Point and Lopez Point (Synergy 1974: 16), as well as at Avadlek Spit and Pauline Cove (Yorga 1980: 3), only the site at Pauline Cove, the "Wash-Out" site (NjVi-2), was visited. This site, located on the bank facing MacKenzie Bay, is known to have consisted of at least six house ruins containing Thule type artifacts. However, wave erosion has apparently destroyed most, if not all, of the site (Yorga 1980: 42; Hett 1978: 17). In 1978, the archaeologists excavating the Wash-Out site established a line of wooden stakes along the bank to measure bank erosion (Fig. 2). This summer, the stakes were less than 2 meters from the beach and probing of the bank revealed no evidence of structural remains or artifacts. Similarly, surface survey for artifacts washed up on the immediate beach area revealed nothing. It is quite possible that wave erosion is posing a similar threat to the other prehistoric sites on the island, since these too are located on banks, sand spits and barrier beaches.

Historic Resources

The remains of the historic Herschel Island settlement at Pauline Cove can be divided into six units: the community itself; the whaler's Cemetery; the ice houses; an historic Inuit Cemetery; the N.W.M.P. Cemetery, and a second historic Inuit Cemetery.

The historic community, situated on the spit of land separating Pauline Cove from MacKenzie Bay, consists of 14 extant structures and 40 readily observable structural features. These latter non-extant features are identified by the presence of foundation posts/piles, floor members and/or mounded depressions (Fig. 3). These depressions are square, rectangular or ovoid in shape and all have had soil mounded around their perimeters, likely for insulation. Some of the depressions are small and may be indicative of sheds, caches or even cellars, while others indicate quite substantial structures. All features conform to the general east-west orientation of the community. There are also a number of curiously uniform knolls which may indicate structures or middens.

The 14 extant structures consist primarily of warehouses, residential shacks and sheds (Fig. 4). Thirteen of these buildings date from the historic period, including the Northern Whaling and Trading Company warehouses, one of which has its roof constructed from the ribs and keel of a boat; the Anglican Mission, originally a whaling warehouse; and the N.W.M.P. detachment building. This last structure being built in 1893 by the Pacific Steam Whaling Company, is of particular interest since it represents the earliest frame structure and the first prefabricated structure built in the Territory.

While the overall condition of these structures is still reasonably good, they are nonetheless subject to a number of threats. One such threat is pack ice which can be forced up and over the low beach surrounding the community. Indeed, the westerly wall of the Northern Whaling and Trading Company's tin clad warehouse has been gouged wide open by pack ice (Fig. 5). Unmonitored site visitations have also resulted in the damage and destruction of much of the historic resources at Herschel Island. Arson is believed to have destroyed one of the historic tin clad warehouses in 1973 (Synergy 1974: 28). The indiscriminate looting of artifacts over the years has now completely removed all surface artifacts dating to the historic period from the community.

Just north of the community on the eastern tidal flats of Pauline Cove, 24 whaler's graves are to be found. While some are unmarked, the majority are identified by a wide variety of tooled wooden grave markers. Although one grave in this cemetery dates to 1916, the vast majority date to the 1894-1897 period. The oldest dates to 1890. Although most inscriptions on these markers are still legible, consisting of cut

tin sheeting nailed onto the marker or of deep carvings, others have been rendered illegible as a result of age and/or exposure which constitutes the greatest threat to this resource.

The flats on which the cemetery is located are a bog. The standing water on the flats originates from two sources: 1) high westerly winds which drive waves from Pauline Cove up over the beach and onto the flats, and 2) a fresh water spring draining onto the flats from the hills to the north. Early in the 1970s, a storm toppled all but two of the grave markers in the whaler's Cemetery (Fig. 6). Consequently, the wooden markers are lying in water and are thus exposed to the threat of rot and corrosion (especially the tin letters of the inscriptions) as well as the usual problems of weathering by wind, sun, precipitation and so on.

To the northwest of the whaler's Cemetery, the inhabitants of the Herschel Island community blasted a number of subterranean icehouses out of the permafrost at the foot of hills. Constructed in the early years of the settlement to provide the community with ice for fresh water during the short summer months, as well as providing cold storage for perishables, these houses consist of small log vestibules leading down by steep stairways into full log-walled cellars. The structures have been heaped over with soil. By as late as 1974, eight such ice houses were reported as being extant (Synergy 1974: 29). However, only two now remain intact and the remains of only two others are obvious (Fig. 7). Solifluction accounts for the decimation of this resource. The hillsides are in an active state of erosion evidenced by heaps of soil piling up on the flats below and around the two remaining ice houses. Indeed, the Historic Sites and Monuments Board's commemorative plaque for the island, erected in the same general vicinity, is presently leaning at a precarious angle and is in danger of toppling.

Solifluction is also posing an acute threat to approximately 100 historic Inuit graves located east of the ice houses. This cemetery is also located below the hills to the north and thus many graves are in danger of being completely buried by the collapsing hillsides. The cemetery is characterized by wooden grave fences and a wide variety of tooled and untooled wooden grave markers. Unfortunately, almost all of the inscriptions on these markers have weathered into illegibility. In addition, frost heaving is causing a number of grave fences to contort and a combination of frost heaving and wind erosion have exposed six coffins (Fig. 8). The tops on most of these coffins have become partially detached from and/or caved into the caskets, in turn exposing the human osteological

Cemetery, and a second historic Inuit Cemetery.

remains within. The remains themselves appear to have been disturbed in that the bones do not conform to any expected or uniform deposition. This may very likely be due to small animals now being able to get inside the coffins.

Wind erosion, frost heaving and solifluction are threatening two other cemeteries associated with the historic settlement. Both are west of the large Inuit graveyard, on the hill behind the ice houses. The first, consisting of only two N.W.M.P. graves, is regularly maintained by the R.C.M.P. Consequently, new stone grave markers have been erected and the wooden grave fence is in good repair. However, this graveyard is dangerously close to the edge of the hill. While this area of the hill is not at present in a state of erosion, the threat of eventual solifluction exists.

Further up the hill and to the west, a second historic Inuit cemetery is located (Fig. 9). It consists of approximately 10 graves characterized, as in the first Inuit cemetery, by badly weathered wooden grave fences and markers. The majority of these graves appear to date from the 1910-1930s period. Also, the most contemporary grave associated with the community is found at this cemetery, dating to 1956. As with the first Inuit cemetery, frost heaving and wind erosion are in the process of toppling the fences and markers, weathering the inscriptions and exposing the coffins and their contents. Also, this cemetery is at the edge of active solifluction and is in danger of sliding down the hillside.

Summary

Heritage resources on Herschel Island, in particular those around Pauline Cove, are indeed barely surviving under adverse conditions. Such natural factors as wave erosion, pack ice, wind, frost heaving and solifluction are ongoing phenomena which continue to damage and/or destroy a wide range of prehistoric and historic resources. Coupled with the threat associated with increased and unmonitored human visitation, which has already removed all historic artifacts from the community and reputedly destroyed one historic structure, the heritage resources remaining are in danger of being rendered incomprehensible and/or irretrievable.

Herschel Island is envisioned as a strategic base for the exploration and exploitation of the off shore petroleum resources (an estimated 6 billion barrels of recoverable oil and more than 90 trillion cubic feet of natural gas) in the Beaufort Sea (Warner 1976: 44). The problem of massive and perennial site visitation could prove devastating to the remaining heritage

Figure 9. Location of resources in the area of the Pauline Cove settlement. (Drawing by A. Graham-Stevenson.)

resources (Fig. 1). These resources must at least be properly, accurately and thoroughly documented, if not researched and/or preserved, while something still remains.

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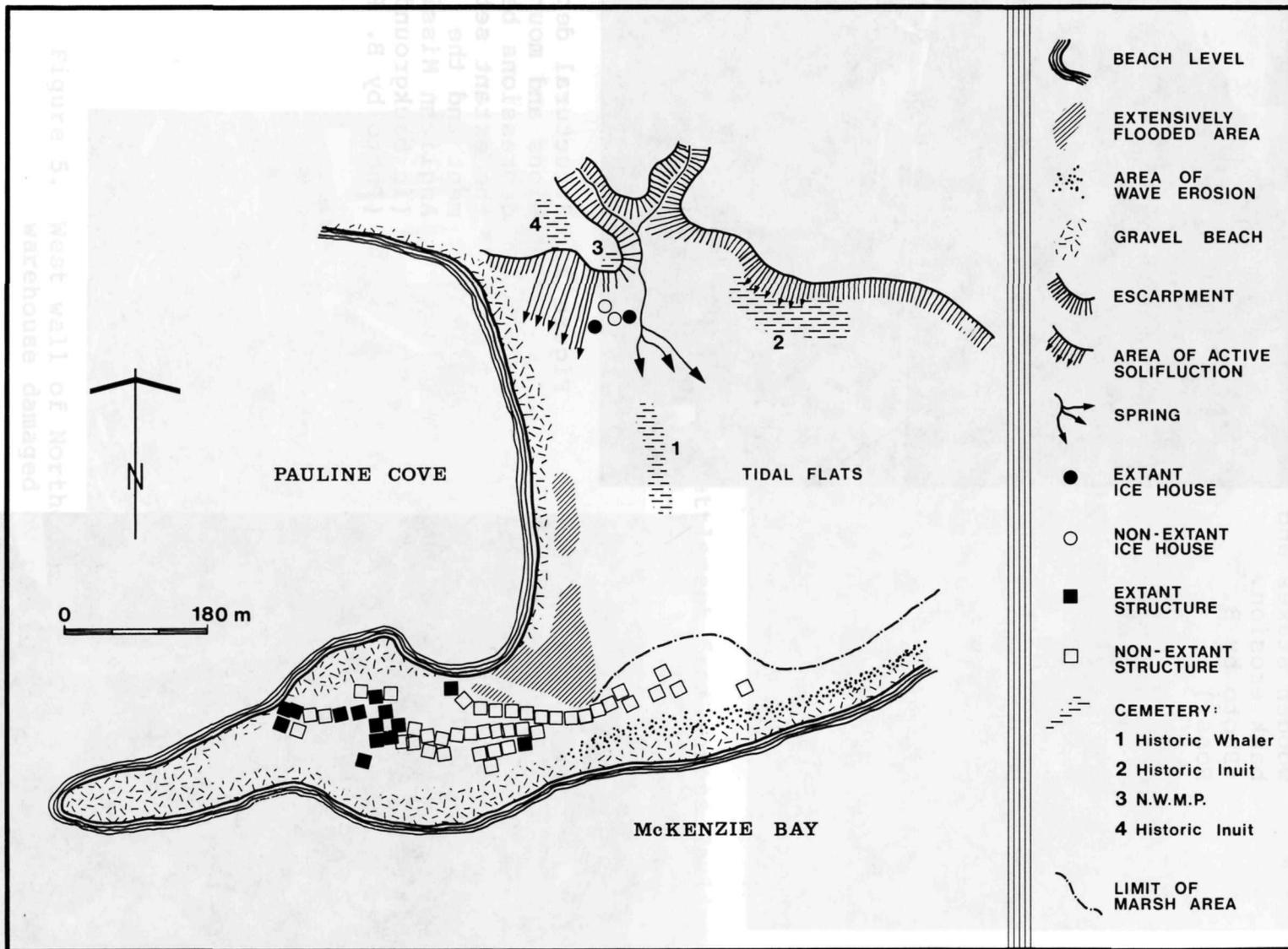


Figure 1. Location of resources in the area of the Pauline Cove settlement. (Drawing by K. Graham-Stevenson.)

Figure 2. Area of the Wash Out site (NjVi-2), showing line of wooden stakes and bank erosion. (Photo by B. Ross.)

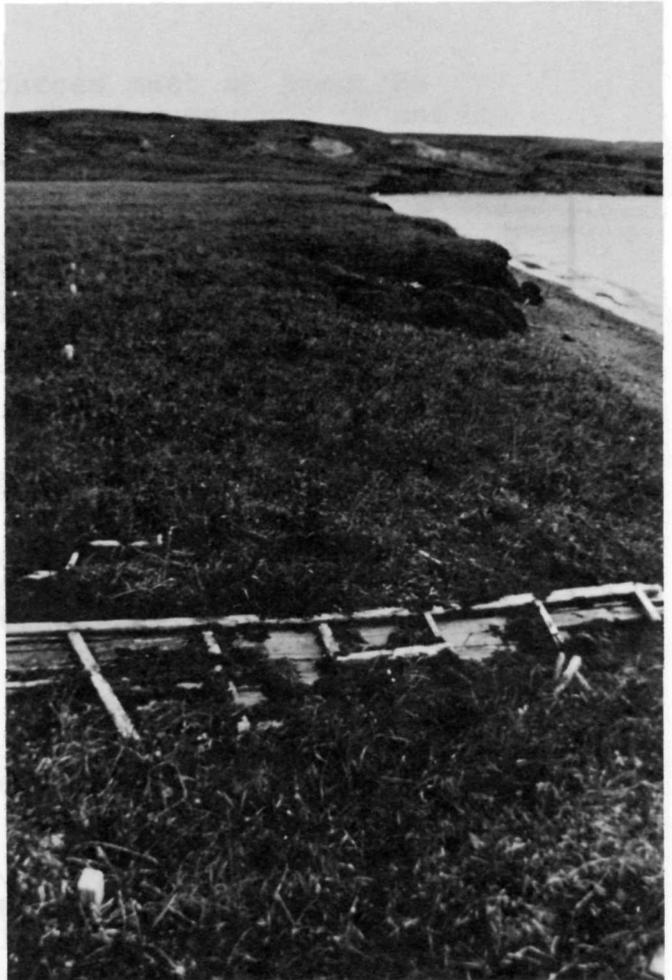


Figure 3. Structural depressions and mounded depressions between the extant settlement and the Anglican Mission (in background). (Photo by B. Ross.)



Figure 6. Topped grave markers in the whaling settlement.



Figure 4. View of extant settlement from across Pauline Cove. (Photo by B. Ross.)



Figure 5. West wall of Northern Whaling and Trading Co. warehouse damaged by pack ice. (Photo by B. Ross.)

Figure 6. Toppled grave markers in the whaler's cemetery. (Photo by B. Ross.)

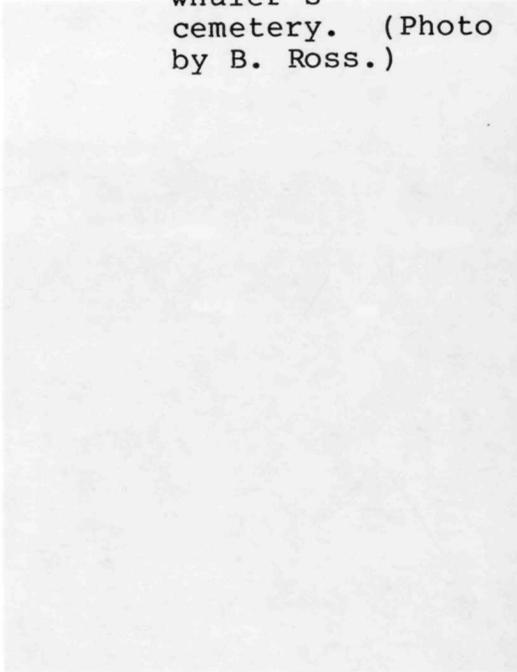


Figure 7. Extant and non-extant ice houses in area of solifluction. (Photo by B. Ross.)

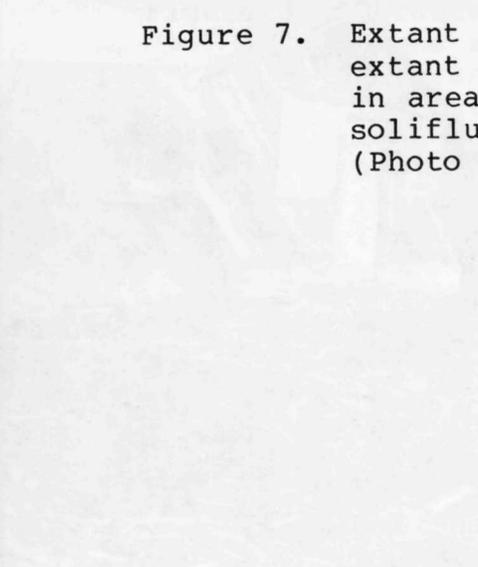


Figure 8. West wall of North warehouse damaged



Figure 8. Exposed coffins in large historic Inuit cemetery.
(Photo by B. Ross.)

Figure 9. Wooden grave fences in second historic Inuit cemetery, overlooking Pauline Cove and the Herschel Island settlement.
(Photo by B. Ross.)





Figure 8. Exposed coffin in large historic Inuit cemetery. (Photo by B. Ross.)

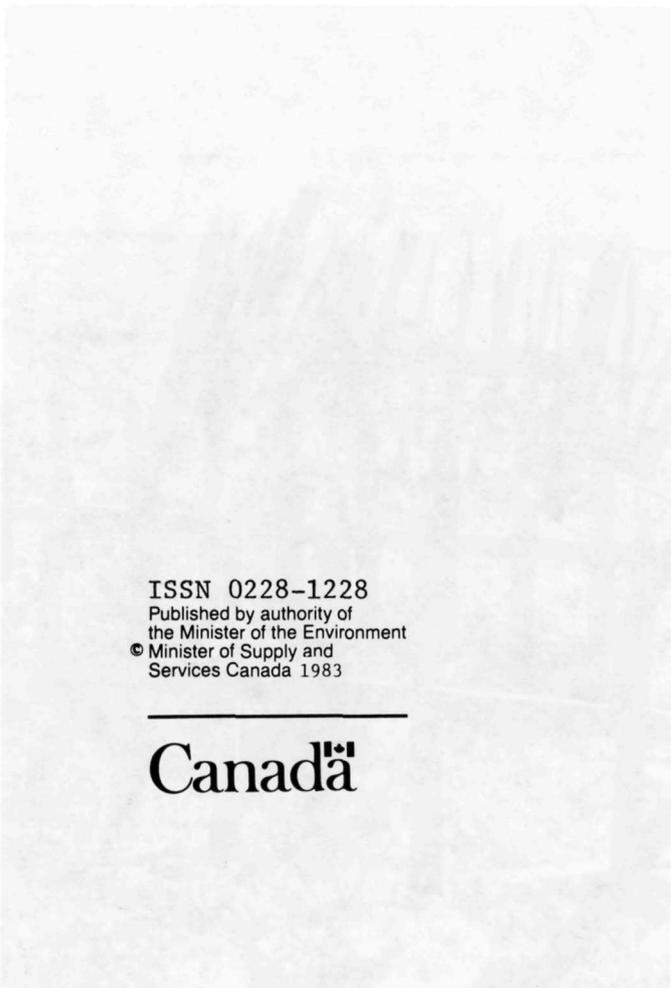


Figure 9. Wooden grave lenses in second historic Inuit cemetery, overlooking Pauline Cove and the Herschel Island settlement. (Photo by B. Ross.)

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