

# Parks Canada's National Historic Sites: Past, Present, and Future

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THE PARKS CANADA AGENCY IS RESPONSIBLE FOR ADMINISTERING NATIONAL HISTORIC SITES across Canada as well as a number of other programs related to Canada's historical and built heritage. This article will briefly outline the evolution of what is referred to as the program of national historical commemoration from its inception to the present day, with a specific focus on the development of national historic sites. It will then describe some of the current challenges that the agency faces with respect to these sites, and, finally, some recent initiatives that have begun to address these challenges.

## **Development of the program of national historical commemoration and national historic sites**

Parks Canada's national historic sites program traces its origins to 1917, when Fort Anne in Nova Scotia's Annapolis Valley was acquired by the government of Canada as Canada's first national historic park.<sup>1</sup> The eighteenth-century fortification, which remains a tangible reminder of the Anglo-French struggle for supremacy in North America, was the first real expression of a program of national historical commemoration that continues to this day.

There had been earlier efforts to commemorate significant historic figures and events in Canada. One early commemoration occurred in 1809, when work began on a monument in Montreal, funded through public subscription, honoring British Vice-Admiral Horatio Nelson and his victory at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805. In 1824, a monument was inaugurated on Queenston Heights on the Niagara river to the memory of another military figure, Major-General Sir Isaac Brock, "the hero of Upper Canada," who had captured Detroit and later died at the Battle of Queenston Heights in 1812 turning back an American invasion of the province during the War of 1812. In 1827, in Quebec City, the cornerstone of a monumental obelisk bearing the names of Generals Wolfe and Montcalm, both of whom lost their lives in the decisive Battle of the Plains of Abraham in 1759, was laid. The memorial, which still stands in the city, bears an inscription in Latin which reads: "Valour gave them a common death, history a common fame and posterity a common memorial."

In the late nineteenth century, in the context of a growing public interest in Canada's history and historical commemoration (Taylor 1990, 5–22), the Canadian Parliament spon-

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sored the erection of a series of other historical monuments to commemorate significant battles of the War of 1812, such as the Battle of the Chateaugay and the Battle of Chrysler's Farm.

Not surprisingly, given the perspective on history which was prevalent at the time, many of these early historical commemorations were of military figures and significant military or political events that had shaped the country, and, with few exceptions, this was a tendency that would continue in the early twentieth century as the newly created program of national historical commemoration got underway in earnest.

The driving force behind the creation of the program by the government of Canada was J.B. Harkin, an energetic and capable public servant who served as the first commissioner of the Dominion Parks Branch, which had been created in 1911 and was the first government organization of its type in the world.

As commissioner of the Parks Branch, Harkin was responsible for the administration of a number of national parks, which were mainly located in the Rocky Mountains of western Canada. Anxious to establish more of a national presence, Harkin viewed historical parks (Figure 1) as a means of doing this and expressed the view that

It would be doubly beneficial if these historic spots were not only properly restored and marked but they should be used as places of resort by Canadian children who, while gaining the benefit of outdoor recreation, would at the same time have opportunities of absorbing historical knowledge under 'conditions that could not fail to make them better Canadians' (Taylor 1990, 28–29).

Under Harkin's leadership, the Dominion Parks Branch began to solicit the views of interested groups and individuals with respect to sites that might be worthy of acquisition. By 1914, land on the site of what had been Fort Howe in Saint John, New Brunswick, was purchased, followed by Fort Anne in 1917. Work also began on evaluating a number of other sites which had the potential to be candidates for acquisition.

An event that was to have a profound influence on the development of the program of national historical commemoration occurred in 1919. William Roche, the minister of the interior at the time, asked Harkin to develop a policy proposal related to historical heritage on behalf of the department. Harkin responded by proposing that a network of national historic sites be established across Canada and that a board composed of authorities in the field be established to assist the department in determining what

**Figure 1.** Young visitor at Carleton Place National Historic Site.



sites were of interest to the country (Taylor 1990, 30–31). It was on the basis of this recommendation that the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada (HSMBC) was established that year. Over ninety years after Commissioner Harkin's initial recommendation, the board, in close collaboration with Parks Canada, continues to provide advice and make recommendations based on submissions from the public on the national commemoration of persons, places, and events of national historic significance to Canada. It is composed of specialists in history, architecture, and a variety of other fields, and its members represent different regions of the country.

The initial recommendations made by the HSMBC with respect to historical significance were largely related to military events, and were located mainly in central Canada in the provinces of Ontario and Quebec. Sites such as the Battlefield of Eccles Hill, Fort York, and Batoche, which were all designated in 1923, are illustrations of this. There were some exceptions, however. Les Forges Saint-Maurice in Quebec, the site of Canada's first industrial village, was designated in 1919, and Oil Springs in Ontario, the site of the first oil wells in Canada, was designated a few years later (Parks Canada 2009). These early designations related to industrial activity in Canada were the precursors of conscious efforts made several decades later to better represent different aspects of Canada's history in the program of national historical commemoration.

Until the 1930s, the efforts of the Parks Branch and the HSMBC were largely confined to the erection of historical markers in the form of bronze plaques that provided basic information regarding the historical significance of a particular site. However, some additional properties, such as Fort Wellington in Prescott, Ontario, were acquired through transfer to the Parks Branch from the Department of Militia and Defence. These began increasingly to serve as local and regional historical attractions and often housed eclectic collections of historic objects of various types.

During the 1930s, in the context of the Great Depression and government expenditures on public works projects, a number of reconstruction and restoration projects were carried out by the Parks Branch. These included the reconstruction of Samuel de Champlain's seventeenth-century Habitation in Annapolis Royal, Nova Scotia, and restoration work on Quebec City's fortification walls and on Prince of Wales Fort, a massive masonry structure on the shore of Hudson's Bay in northern Manitoba. These and other reconstruction efforts marked the start of a gradual transition from the simple commemoration of sites of historic importance to their preservation and eventually presentation for the benefit of the public.

This tendency, which also included the acquisition of an increasing number of national historic sites by the Parks Branch (such as that of Fort Wellington in 1923, cited above) for the benefit of the public, would continue sporadically for several decades and culminate in some respects with the largest project of this type ever undertaken in Canada, the partial reconstruction of the Fortress of Louisbourg in the early 1960s.

Louisbourg, which had been a thriving eighteenth-century port and military stronghold, was almost completely destroyed by the British following their capture of it in 1758 during the Seven Years' War. The site, which had lain largely undisturbed in the intervening years, was acquired by the federal government in the 1960s largely in an effort to provide alternative employment to Cape Breton coal miners affected by a major decline in their

industry. A painstaking reconstruction based on extensive and detailed historical research was undertaken, and one-fifth of the town was eventually rebuilt and staffed with accurately costumed animators with the intention of realistically portraying life in the fortress at its height. The Fortress of Louisbourg became and has since remained one of Canada's pre-eminent national historic sites and a very significant contributor to tourism and regional economic activity generally.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the number of national historic sites continued to grow, either by being designated by the government of Canada on the recommendation of the HSMBC, or by being acquired and directly operated by Parks Canada. Some additions to Parks Canada's portfolio of sites included Bellevue House, the former home of Canada's first Prime Minister, Sir John A. Macdonald, which was restored and opened to the public in 1967, the year of Canada's centennial; L'Anse aux Meadows, site of the only documented Viking settlement in the New World, which became a national historic park in 1970 (Figure 2); and a number of historic canals, such as the Rideau Canal National Historic Site (Lothian 1987, 155–156), which were no longer of commercial or industrial significance but which were transferred to Parks Canada because of their historical significance and tourism potential.<sup>2</sup>

As a direct consequence of the growth of Parks Canada's responsibilities related to national historic sites, this period was also marked by the significant development, growth, and professionalization of the disciplines which serve as the foundation of the national historic sites program, including both underwater and terrestrial archaeology, historical research, conservation, curatorial services, collection management, and interpretation. Major research projects were undertaken in support of the sites and Parks Canada became an acknowledged national and international leader in many of these fields.<sup>3</sup>

**Figure 2.** L'Anse aux Meadows National Historic Site.



Significant advances were also made in terms of national policy development. An initial national historic sites policy was introduced in 1968, and would be subsequently updated until, in 1994, the current national historic sites policy was adopted along with the cultural resource management policy, which, as the name implies, serves as the basis for the agency's management of the cultural resources in its care.

By the 1990s, there was also a recognition that more attention had to be paid to the commemoration of under-represented themes in Canada's history. As a result, the commemoration of the history of Aboriginal peoples, women, and ethnocultural communities was made a strategic priority and Parks Canada made and continues to make significant efforts to consult with relevant groups and individuals to encourage public submissions related to persons, places, and events in these thematic areas that could potentially be candidates for a designation of national historic significance. These efforts have been successful, and both submissions and designations related to all three thematic areas have increased significantly.

The mid-1990s were also a time of financial challenges, with reductions to staff complements, a considerable scaling back of research efforts, and a virtual halt to any new acquisition of national historic sites by Parks Canada. So while the program of national historical commemoration continued in collaboration with the HSMBC, the direct involvement of the government of Canada was mostly limited to designating persons, places, or events of national historic significance and erecting a commemorative plaque. Subject to the availability of funding, cost-sharing agreements between Parks Canada and non-profit owners of national historic sites were also occasionally entered into as a means of providing some financial support for their on-going conservation.

At the present time, there are 956 national historic sites that have been formally designated by the government of Canada. Of this number, Parks Canada directly administers 167. The last two additions to the agency's portfolio were the *HMCS Haida*, Canada's only remaining Tribal Class destroyer from the Second World War, and Saoyué-?ehdacho, an Aboriginal cultural landscape some 5,000 kilometers in extent sacred to the Sahtu-Dene people of the Northwest Territories. The remainder are owned and administered by other levels of government, groups, and institutions in the not-for-profit and private sectors, and by private individuals. Some, such as the Parliament Buildings in Ottawa or the Banff Springs Hotel in the Rocky Mountains, continue to serve the purpose for which they were originally constructed, while others have been put to new uses. Approximately half of the national historic sites administered by Parks Canada are staffed and offer public programs (Figure 3).

Over time, and in recognition of the lead role the agency plays in terms of Canada's historical heritage, Parks Canada has also been assigned a number of other important responsibilities. Apart from its on-going work in support of the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada, the agency also administers the Federal Heritage Buildings Review Office, a program related to the conservation and presentation of the gravesites of Canada's prime ministers, the Heritage Railway Stations Protection Act, and, most recently, the Heritage Lighthouse Protection Act. It is also responsible for administering the Canadian Register of Historic Places, an on-line searchable database of historic places in Canada. Finally, since 1976, the agency has also been assigned responsibility for the implementation of the World Heritage Convention in Canada.



**Figure 3.** Fur Trade at Lachine National Historic Site.

### **Current challenges for national historic sites**

Quite apart from the usual challenges related to both capital and operational funding that are familiar to any organization responsible for the administration of historic sites, there are a series of other challenges related to national historic sites that Parks Canada is facing on the eve of its hundredth anniversary.

The first of these, and the most significant, is to ensure the on-going relevance of these places to Canadians, particularly in the context of an increasingly urban, rapidly changing society. The seriousness of this challenge has already been made apparent through a troubling pattern of declining visitation to the national historic sites that the agency is responsible for administering. While there are many factors that may be contributing to this, ranging from changing economic circumstances to outdated program offers, clearly Parks Canada must find the appropriate means to ensure that national historic sites, which are tangible reminders of the persons, places and events that shaped the nation, touch Canadians in a meaningful way and inspire powerful personal connections to them, consistent with the agency's vision.

Relevance ultimately translates into public support, and this is particularly important at a time when governments in many different jurisdictions are having to make increasingly difficult choices about the programs and services they will continue to offer their citizens. Enhancing relevance by reaching and responding to new audiences with different needs and expectations will be critical, particularly in the face of formidable competition for increasingly valuable leisure time and associated expenditures.

Directly related to the issue of relevance is the need to enhance basic public awareness

of the national historic sites that the agency administers. Most government organizations like Parks Canada traditionally have not taken a very sophisticated or consistent approach to activities such as marketing and promotion. Beyond traditional products such as historic site brochures, regional visitor guides, and occasional ad placements, there has been little in the way of a sustained and coordinated effort to ensure that Canadians have a basic awareness of Parks Canada and national historic sites and what they have to offer. The results of this speak for themselves. In a national survey commissioned by Parks Canada in 2009, 82% of respondents considered national historic sites “a source of pride,” but only 5% of Canadians were aware that the agency was responsible for operating them. Respondents also clearly expressed a strong view that the agency should enhance its efforts to increase awareness through a variety of different methods. A particularly important means of generating increased awareness, given the rapidly growing proportion of the population that seeks information on-line, is to ensure that the agency has a useful and easily accessible on-line presence. This continues to be a work in progress.

Greater efforts will also have to be made to engage both local communities as well as communities of interest to make national historic sites focal points for community activity and community life and, ultimately, accessible community resources. Traditionally, staff at many sites have chosen both how and when to engage and involve these communities. At times, they have been largely excluded from site operations and activities and called upon only to participate in a given site initiative on the basis of meeting a particular requirement of Parks Canada’s, such as consultation related to management planning. For meaningful engagement of these communities to take place, this must change, and the agency must be willing to engage citizens both on their terms and on the basis of their needs and interests, as well as our own.

In order to respond to the needs and expectations of both existing as well as new audiences, investments are also required to upgrade existing infrastructure and facilities at our national historic sites, as well as to offer new and innovative programming and ensure that agency staff have the necessary training and skills to effectively carry out their responsibilities. Facilities and exhibits that are in some cases decades old will require refurbishment, and the dated research upon which many programs and exhibits are based will similarly need to be reviewed and updated, particularly if new and different perspectives on the past are to be presented.

As well, a significant shift in thinking is also required with respect to the types of programs and activities that are encouraged at national historic sites and the uses to which sites can be put. While the requirements of historic resource conservation and the reasons for which a particular site has been deemed to be of national historic significance cannot and should not be forgotten and must remain a primary consideration, there has been, in some quarters, a belief that unless a given program or activity was directly related to the reasons for a site’s national significance it should not be allowed to take place. This very limited view of the role that national historic sites can and should play may appeal to some traditional or specialist audiences, but it does not respond to the relevance challenge or the need to more effectively engage local communities and communities of interest.

This is not to suggest that there should be an “anything goes” approach to the manage-

ment and use of national historic sites. However, there are enormous opportunities to employ creativity and ingenuity and provide non-traditional opportunities for many different kinds of visitor experiences and community uses that create meaningful connections between citizens and these very special places. Through the provision of opportunities for these types of experiences and uses, there will also be opportunities for the agency to meet its conservation and education objectives (Figure 4).

Two final challenges relate to the nature and location of the portfolio of 167 national historic sites that Parks Canada currently manages. As outlined earlier, while designations of persons, places, and events of national historic significance have begun to more appropriately reflect the breadth and diversity of Canada's history, this is not true of the portfolio of national historic sites that the agency currently administers. Acquired over many decades in a number of different ways, the sites mostly relate to Canada's political, military, and fur trade history. In addition, the agency does not administer any sites in a number of medium and large urban centers, including two of the largest cities in the country, Toronto and Vancouver. Further reflection will be required to determine how best to address these challenges.

### Some recent developments

While there are, as detailed above, some significant challenges related to national historic sites that Parks Canada will have to address, a number of recent developments and significant successes have provided a basis for optimism for the future.

In 2009–2010, a major national television advertising campaign featuring Parks Canada places, including national historic sites, was broadcast across Canada. The campaign yielded some encouraging results related to general awareness of the agency, and continued efforts like this, as well as a more coordinated and systematic approach to promotion and marketing of the sites in general, will begin to address the current awareness gap referred to earlier.

The agency has also recently benefited significantly from infrastructure spending undertaken by the government of Canada. Major investments at many national historic sites across the country have resulted both in conservation improvements as well as significant enhancements to visitor facilities and exhibits that have enabled them to better meet the needs and expectations of visitors.

As well, in the context of an overall renewal of the agency, Parks Canada has made renewal of its national historic sites a priority. This renewal initiative, which is in its initial stages, will provide a focal point for addressing the major challenges that have been identified related to national historic sites, encouraging innovation and the sharing of successes and best practices across the agency. A significant aspect of this renewal will be related to positive community engagement. National historic sites are being encouraged to proactively reach out to local



**Figure 4.** Halifax Citadel National Historic Site.



communities and communities of interest, and dedicated staff specializing in external relations will be key to making this a reality.

Finally, innovative new programs have also begun to be developed across the country. At the Fortress of Louisbourg National Historic Site, visitors can enjoy eighteenth-century cuisine paired with wines in the company of a sommelier and a historian. The activity takes place in the evening, a time when the Fortress has typically been closed to the public. At Fort Langley, a canoeing experience on the Fraser River has been developed. It invites the active participation of visitors and has also re-established the important historic link between the river and the fort. At other sites, barriers to public access have in some cases been removed and public archaeology programs, theatrical presentations, concerts, and other types of non-traditional programs are all examples of program opportunities that are being explored.

As Parks Canada prepares for its hundredth anniversary, the agency's national historic sites face not only challenges but also exciting opportunities. Success in the future will be measured not only by how well these national treasures are safeguarded for future generations, but also in the strength and meaning of the connections that are established between Canadians and these special places.

## Endnotes

1. While land on the site of Fort Howe in Saint John, New Brunswick, was acquired several years earlier, there were no extant resources associated with the site. Fort Anne was the prototypical national historic site.
2. It is important to note that while (as is evident in the text) many sites were referred to as "National Historic Parks" in the past, the use of that terminology was subsequently discontinued and historic properties are now all known as "National Historic Sites." The historic canals for which Parks Canada is responsible (which are national historic sites) pose a particular challenge financially in terms on-going capital costs which are substantial.
3. One significant example of the types of projects undertaken is the underwater archaeological excavation of sixteenth-century Basque whaling vessels at Red Bay, Labrador. The excavation is considered to be an international best practice, and in recognition of this, UNESCO adopted an image of one of the vessels excavated as its symbol for the 2001 Convention for the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage.

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