

The Ontario Archaeological Society: Past, Present, and Future

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ABSTRACT

The Ontario Archaeological Society, founded in 1950 largely by avocationalists, is the largest organization of its kind in Canada. The OAS is a duly constituted, non-profit, charitable, volunteer-run group whose mission includes the dissemination of information about Ontario's archaeological record and to advocate for the protection and celebration of our archaeological heritage on behalf of all the people of Ontario. The OAS aims to achieve these goals for its members and the community at large by maintaining an office and a part-time Executive Director, by publishing a newsletter, a refereed journal, occasional publications, maintaining a website, supporting an electronic list serve, by offering through its local Chapters, programs of lectures, workshops and other events, by holding an annual free public information and learning fair as well as an annual Symposium. Further, it offers a travelling educational kit aimed at schools as well as posters and other materials. In addition, the OAS has a long history of advocacy. It has advised the Ministry of Culture and many other ministries on archaeological legislation, (most recently the new Ontario Heritage Act) and related regulations and policies as well as advocating on behalf of heritage matters in general where our advice is sought or where the Board considers our comments to be prudent and useful. The OAS, with one half-time staff member, a Board of Directors of five, and a membership of around 500, faces challenges similar to all small volunteer organizations: funding, communications issues, membership numbers and volunteer recruitment and commitment, but with the assistance of its Chapters and a dedicated core of passionate volunteer members, it remains committed to its mission amid a changing archaeological and political environment.

RÉSUMÉ

La Société ontarienne d'archéologie (SOA), fondée en 1950 en grande partie par des non professionnels, est la plus grande organisation de son genre au Canada. La SOA est un organisme caritatif à but non lucratif dûment constitué, dirigé par des bénévoles et dont la mission comprend la diffusion d'information au sujet du passé archéologique ontarien ainsi que la protection et la célébration de notre patrimoine archéologique au nom de toute la population de l'Ontario. La SOA œuvre à la réalisation de ces objectifs pour le compte de ses membres et de la population en tenant un bureau supervisé par un directeur général, en publiant un bulletin de nouvelles, une revue scientifique et des publications occasionnelles, en exploitant un site Web et un serveur de liste, en organisant des conférences, des ateliers et d'autres activités par l'intermédiaire de ses sections locales, et en tenant une foire annuelle gratuite d'information publique ainsi qu'un symposium annuel. De plus, elle offre des outils éducatifs itinérants aux écoles et distribue des affiches et d'autres documents. En plus, la SOA défend les intérêts du secteur depuis longtemps. Elle a conseillé le ministère de la Culture et de nombreux autres ministères sur la législation en matière d'archéologie (entre autres, récemment, la nouvelle Loi sur le patrimoine de l'Ontario) et les règlements et politiques connexes, et elle intervient dans les causes patrimoniales en général lorsque ses conseils sont sollicités ou que le conseil d'administration considère que notre participation est prudente et utile. La SOA, avec un employé à mi-temps, un conseil d'administration composé de cinq personnes et un effectif d'environ 500 membres, doit relever des défis semblables à ceux de toutes les petites organisations bénévoles. Ceux-ci sont liés aux sources de financement, à la communication, aux adhésions, au recrutement et à la rétention des bénévoles, mais avec l'aide de ses sections locales et d'un noyau dévoué de membres bénévoles enthousiastes, la SOA reste fidèle à sa mission dans un climat politique et archéologique mouvant.

I am pleased to see new as well as familiar faces here today to engage in these discussions about a subject about which I am passionate. Indeed, I think anybody in archaeology and heritage must be passionate about the subject or we wouldn't be in it in the first place; it would be much more lucrative to be a plumber and you would probably have better hours.

It's that same passion that really gave birth to the Ontario Archaeological Society in 1950, and it's significant, I think, that it was not a group of professors or business people (for archaeology as a business was as remote a possibility then as a man on the moon); no, it was a group of enthusiastic students who had completed an "extension course" on archaeology under Prof. J. Norman Emerson at the University of Toronto who began the OAS.

After getting excited by his lectures, they asked themselves, "is this all there is?" The answer, sadly, was "yes". There was no Discovery Channel, no internet, and few publications on the subject. They decided to plug that gap and form the Ontario Archaeological Society.

The OAS was created as a non-profit, volunteer-based, non-governmental group with a paid membership, constitution and elected board of directors. Structurally and organizationally we have added since then, incorporation and registered charitable status, as well as a network of locally-based "arms" of the Society, called Chapters.

These Chapters are active in their local areas and there are currently six spread across the province: Hamilton, London, Ottawa, Thunder Bay, Toronto, and Windsor. Of course, it is the Ottawa Chapter which has organized and is hosting this Symposium.

Currently, the OAS has about 500 members of which around 70 are institutions, such as libraries and universities, rather than individuals.

We have an elected Board of Directors consisting of seven members – the Chapters each have elected Executive Committees, as well – and one half-time paid employee, our Executive Director, Lise Ferguson.

In support of our stated Mission:

1. To bring together individuals interested in archaeology;
2. To facilitate the exchange of ideas and information;
3. To discourage illegal archaeological investigation and excavation;
4. To publish archaeological literature; and
5. To stimulate the interest of the general public in archaeology;

...the OAS runs a number of initiatives. These include:

- a newsletter, Arch Notes, published six times a year
- a refereed journal, Ontario Archaeology
- a website and internet discussion forum, OAS-L
- an annual symposium, now in its 32nd year
- a hands-on annual public event, Archaeology Day, to engage the general public

In addition, to all of the above, Chapters have active and varied programs including lectures, workshops, newsletters and other publications, as well as special public events. Nearly all of this, remember, is done with volunteer labour only.

The other major role the OAS plays is that of an advocate on behalf of our archaeological past and its physical remains. Almost from the beginning, the OAS found itself writing about issues of the day and appealing to various levels of government for stronger protections for archaeological heritage. We still maintain this advocacy role.

The OAS was in the forefront of the development of the Ontario Heritage Act in 1974 and subsequently it has agitated for substantive change to plug the holes in that very leaky legislation.

As you know, our community finally achieved that goal with the passage of the new and improved Heritage Act this year- about which you'll hear more from the next speakers. It only took us about 15 years of hard work, several setbacks, and seemingly endless committees and consultations to achieve our goal, but we did it.

What about the future of the OAS? Well, we face the same issues any smallish membership-based, non-profit group does today: the recruitment of new members and money, or lack thereof.

I should point out that the OAS has been, for a number of years, the very grateful recipient of a Provincial Heritage Organization Operating Grant from the Ministry of Culture. Without that grant the OAS could not sustain our current level of service and programs. Membership dollars simply do not cover expenses.

In terms of membership, I personally cannot believe that there are only about 400 people in the province who care enough about our past to support the OAS with an annual membership. Increasingly, the membership base is aging and this, too, is a problem.

Lise Ferguson, our Executive Director, tells me that she receives on average one e-mail query per day and one or two phone calls per week from the general public inquiring about archaeology: "I have an artifact I'd like someone to look at"; "My son is doing a project..."; "I need to hire an archaeologist to survey my property"; "I want to sell/buy/hunt for artifacts – where can I do that?"; and the number one request: "I'd like to dig on a site – can you help me?"

Clearly, the increased awareness of all things archaeological via books, popular magazines, specialty television channels and the internet, has raised the expectations of the public, but we cannot deliver what they want.

We have a fundamental disconnect between public interest and the current climate of archaeology in Ontario today. The rise of Cultural Resource Management archaeology has meant that while more archaeological investigation work is being carried out than ever before, fewer opportunities are available to volunteers. Licensing requirements, and costs have made it onerous for groups like the OAS to offer dig opportunities, not to mention the chill that has descended on all NGOs like us in terms of liability insurance costs and strictures.

Understandingly, the exigencies of archaeology as a business gave rise to the Association of Professional Archaeologists in Ontario while the OAS has always been inclusive. Our membership includes professionals, students, avocational archaeologists and those who are just plain interested in archaeology. Sadly, it seems that a number of professional archaeologists and those they employ are not members of the Society. Why?

We must ask ourselves, if 90% of the archaeology being done today is CRM work, is the OAS still relevant? Do we still have a role to play? The results of our recent membership survey seem to indicate that we do, but the members are divided on where we should be directing our efforts.

As we move into a new strategic planning cycle, the 2006 Board of Directors will have to address these issues. However, I am confident that the OAS, the oldest and largest archaeological organization in Canada, will remain committed to its Mission amid a changing archaeological and political environment.