

Archaeology and the Community Museum

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ABSTRACT

Beginning in 1993, Dundurn National Historic Site in Hamilton, Ontario underwent a major restoration of its heritage structures and nationally significant landscape. A programme of mitigation and research-based archaeology began well in advance of construction, and continued throughout the project. Far from creating hurdles, archaeology provided the restoration team with invaluable information, and radically changed the content of and approach to the interpretation of the site.

RÉSUMÉ

Depuis 1993, le lieu historique national de Dundurn, à Hamilton, en Ontario, fait l'objet d'un programme permanent de restauration de ses bâtiments et de son paysage d'importance nationale. Avant que ne débutent les travaux de construction, un programme de mesures d'atténuation et d'archéologie fondée sur la recherche a été mis en place et il s'est poursuivi tout au long du projet. Loin de constituer un frein au réaménagement du lieu, les activités d'archéologie ont fortement éclairé l'équipe chargée de la restauration, en plus de transformer radicalement la nature et l'approche utilisées dans l'interprétation du lieu.

For over 20 years I have had the good fortune to work as a museologist at sites with active archaeological programmes, first at Historic Fort York in Toronto, and more recently at Dundurn National Historic Site in Hamilton. Currently, I am a Museum Advisor with the Ministry of Culture, and have travelled throughout the eastern and northern parts of the province visiting heritage institutions. In the course of my career, I have become convinced that the museological/archaeological partnership can be a mutually beneficial one, as I hope to demonstrate in my talk today.

First, what are community museums? The Province of Ontario, by policy and through an operating grant programme, encourages communities to tell their unique, local stories, and by extension the aggregate story of the province, through the operation of collections-based museums. Currently, 179 institutions meet the provincial standards and receive the grant. Another 300 or so operate outside the programme. About 70% of our museums are located within heritage structures and landscapes.

While touring these museums last fall to deliver workshops on the new provincial "Physical Plant Standard", I was struck by the general lack of awareness of the archaeological responsibilities of stewards of heritage properties. It is important to address this lack of awareness, due to the following circumstances.

Recent changes to the Ontario Heritage Act, and to the Community Museum Standards, explicitly spell out the requirement for museums to properly manage the archaeological resources under their control. Many of these institutions were founded or expanded in the time around the country's 1967 centennial celebrations, and so are due for major re-restoration. Finally, many, in a quest for financial self-sufficiency, are undertaking re-

development projects. All of these situations will require interaction between museum curators and archaeologists.

In 1989 I began working on such a major re-restoration/re-development project at Dundurn. This nationally significant site comprises 7 heritage structures set in a 14 hectare cultural landscape. The site was known to have rich archaeological potential, so archaeological mitigation was built into the restoration plan and budget. The initial thought was to satisfy legal requirements, and demonstrate that the museum was a good steward of its cultural resources. Dr. John Triggs was hired as Archaeological Director.

As it transpired, the archaeological work was able to proceed a full year ahead of construction, resulting in what we referred to as “leisurely mitigation”, at a pace and level of investigation more common to research based projects. Besides just clearing the site for construction, much new information about building chronology and condition was contributed to the planning process. Also some tantalizing glimpses of a potentially much richer site interpretation were given. Accordingly, additional funding and partnerships were sought, and the project grew to include contract and grant staff, a volunteer contingent, and an annual McMaster University field school with a pure research mandate.

As mentioned earlier, archaeological investigation provided valuable information to the restoration team. Questions about historic building materials and techniques were answered, and sub-grade conditions discovered. Because mitigation was done well in advance of construction, this information was incorporated at the planning stage, not through costly work stoppages and change orders as is so often the case. On balance, I am convinced that the archaeological budget more than paid for itself in reduced construction costs.

As archaeological information came to light, the interpretation of the site began to change. Whereas previously the museum had focused narrowly on Sir Allan MacNab and the mid-nineteenth century estate, we came to understand that the site had been an important place for the people at the head of Lake Ontario for thousands of years. This provided fodder for many new public programmes and exhibits, and fostered interest in the site from many new audiences.

Because archaeology was ongoing, it provided a reason for repeat visits. Previously, the site had suffered from a public perception, common to community museums, that once you’d visited, you’d seen it all.

The project generated lots of media interest, with dozens of print, radio and television features each year. Generally, these raised the site’s profile, and helped to develop a reputation that Dundurn was a good steward of the site.

So obviously, there were many advantages to the museum in including thoughtful archaeology in planning and development work. But there can be benefits to the

archaeologist as well, whether one is a professional consultant, a volunteer, or member of a chapter of the OAS.

Firstly, museum staff can be very sympathetic clients and research partners. They will welcome discoveries and new information in a way that some private clients may not, and understand and appreciate the interpretation of material culture. Like archaeologists, most museum workers are in the business because they are passionate about their subject, and will contribute energy, ideas and enthusiasm.

Museums can bring additional resources to a project, such as expertise in conservation, artifact identification and interpretation, ethical repositories for collections, and access to grants and new sources of funding. Many sites are also in a position to offer internships and field schools, helping to strengthen the profession.

Finally, museums can provide an ideal venue and new audiences for the promotion of archaeology and education of the public. In many cases, the museum will be happy to manage much of the public side of a project on your behalf.

I would like to conclude today by urging you to look for opportunities to partner with your local museum, whether as a paid consultant, community volunteer, or OAS chapter member. I hope you will find, as I did, that the partnership can be a mutually rewarding one, and will go far in promoting public awareness and appreciation of both our fields.