

Organizing Canada's Aboriginal History: Dr. Martha Latta's Legacy; A Reflective Account

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In the late 1970s, Dr. Martha Latta was part of the "new wave" of Canadian-trained archaeologists who cared passionately about understanding the unwritten past. She conducted a review of pre-contact and contact period archaeological sites in Ontario for Parks Canada's Ontario Region in order to present a list of sites to the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada (HSMBC) for consideration for potential national significance. Her approach was to consider environmental circumstances and technological advancements that could be traced through time and to sort and organize the data using these lenses. Dr. Latta's work resulted in two staff reports for the HSMBC that represented attempts to achieve consensus among researchers about sites in Northern and Southern Ontario. They presented a thematic culture history approach to Ontario's Aboriginal history. Other regions of the country were subsequently encouraged to pursue thematic approaches as well. The revised National Historic Sites System Plan for Canada (published in 2000) was the ultimate beneficiary of her early work.

Introduction

Since 1919, the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada (HSMBC) has made recommendations to the minister responsible for Parks Canada about how Canada's history should be commemorated. National historic sites, persons and events designated by the minister responsible for Parks Canada celebrate and help preserve our history in all its diversity. In a fast-changing world, they link us to our past, enhance our understanding of the present and show us the great possibilities for the future. To date, almost 1900 designations have been made, and they are increasing at a rate of about 25 to 30 per year. More than 900 national historic sites, about 380 events and just under 600 people have been recognized as nationally significant within this programme.

Some of the very early recommendations for national significance highlighted archaeological sites related to the history of Aboriginal people—sites which even then had sparked the attention of eminent researchers and amateur archaeologists alike. In Ontario, Fort Ste. Marie II, not far from Penetanguishene, in the territory of the present-day Chippewas of Beausoleil First Nation, was designated in 1920, as was St. Louis Mission near Victoria Harbour. Southwold

Earthworks in southwestern Ontario was designated in 1923 and received a plaque in 1930. Sheguiandah was discussed following the investigation of T.E. Lee of the National Museum of Man and recognized in 1954. Kay-Nah-Chi-Wah-Nung, "Place of the long rapids" (Manitou Mounds, or the Rainy River Mounds as they were then known) on the Rainy River in northwestern Ontario was documented by Walter Kenyon for Parks Canada in the mid-1960s and recognized in 1970. Some of the fur trade posts where Europeans and Aboriginal peoples met and interacted, such as Fort William at the Lakehead, were commemorated early in the existence of the Board (1923) but the focus of interpretation at such places was usually the role of the non-Native in opening up and exploring the country.

Among the early commemorations of Aboriginal people by the HSMBC are Tecumseh, the Shawnee prophet and war chief allied with the British in the War of 1812, designated in 1931, and Mohawk poet E. Pauline Johnson, who was recognized in 1945; Chiefswood, her childhood home, was designated in 1953.

Events which recognize significant activities or noteworthy interactions after contact between Aboriginal people and Europeans, tended, in those early days of the Board, to be events associated

with the signing of treaties such as “The Surrender of Indian Lands” north and west of Lake Simcoe (by treaty in 1798, 1815, and 1818 and plaqued at Orillia in 1932), or the coming of the Mohawks to Ontario after the American Revolution, recognized at both Tyendinaga (1929) and Six Nations (1930, plaque installed 1934). The Carrying Place on the Bay of Quinte, site of the 1787 Treaty between the British and the Mississauga people, at which lands for the Mohawks were acquired, was recognized in 1929.

It was not, however, until the early 1980s that a flurry of archaeological sites relating to Ontario’s Aboriginal history came before the HSMBC—and this is where Dr. Martha Latta becomes crucial to the story. Her formative research contract for the Ontario Region of Parks Canada led to the designation of three new sites in Northern Ontario and an additional nine in Southern Ontario, all in 1982—12 in one year as opposed to three in the previous fifty years! Moreover, Parks Canada went on to a broader program of historical recognition of the contributions of Aboriginal people to the whole of Canada’s history, thanks to her passionate examination of the past.

Ontario’s Nationally Significant Past

If you were an archaeologist in the federal government in the mid-1970s, you really only had two choices about where to work. You might have been a so-called “prehistoric” archaeologist, who might also work on contact-period sites relating to Aboriginal history. If so, you would have been employed by the National Museum of Man’s Archaeological Survey of Canada. Alternately, you might have been an “historic” archaeologist and, in that case, you would undoubtedly have worked for Parks Canada—specialists in excavating and restoring forts like Louisbourg, or towns like Dawson City. There was no other kind of federal employment in the field we now call Aboriginal history.

All nationally significant Aboriginal history and archaeological site requests went through Parks Canada as the support organization for the HSMBC, but no archaeologists from Parks Canada actually had a seat on that body—staff were advisory only. As mandated by the *Historic*

Sites and Monuments Act, the director of the National Museum (Dr. George MacDonald) did sit on the Board. Dr. MacDonald was, in fact, chair of the committee responsible for reviewing submissions on Aboriginal history. For matters relating to Ontario sites he turned to the excellent advice and guidance of the late Dr. James V. Wright. At the fall, 1975, meeting of the HSMBC, Dr. Wright had presented the Board with a brief report on what, from his perspective, were the 21 most important (and mostly pre-contact) archaeological sites in Ontario.¹ While appreciative, the Board (few of whom had training or a real interest in archaeology) felt it lacked context to be able to state that these sites were indeed the “best,” the most “representative,” the most “worthy” of celebration. Thus, it asked Parks Canada to return to the Board with recommendations for what should be the approach to nominating individual sites for recognition.

Things moved forward with glacial swiftness. The Board’s minutes were not approved until 1976, and then it was not until 1977 that consultation between staff of the National Museum and Parks Canada’s senior Ontario regional archaeologist, Ms. Elizabeth Snow, led to the list of 21 sites being whittled down to 12. A Parks Canada task force was established within Ontario Region to carry out preliminary studies on the 12 sites for the sake of evaluation. The internal task force (most of whom were not archaeologists) came to the conclusion that it was impossible to make recommendations on site significance without some type of framework and consistent criteria for site review.

Thus, in 1978, Parks Canada headquarters authorized a research proposal to seek an independent consultant, to develop a framework for the selection of such sites. What was envisioned was an *Archaeological Sites System Plan* similar in scope to the *Historic Sites System Plan* developed in 1981 for the rest of Parks Canada, which organized the viewpoints of history in economic and technological terms and provided a measure of geographic balance to the plan. A parallel plan for archaeological sites was seen as crucial to our understanding of how archaeological sites fit into history. Ontario was to be the pilot province for the approach.

Striving for thematic and geographic balance, five tasks were identified for the framework:

1. Preparing a thematic overview of Ontario "prehistory;"
2. Prioritizing themes in terms of national significance;
3. Formulating criteria to be used in identifying representative sites;
4. Preparing a preliminary list of candidate sites;
5. Assessing the sites already proposed for commemoration.

The resulting document would then be used to assess whether other planning-oriented criteria, such as accessibility, geographic balance, ownership, response of First Nations peoples, and proximity to urban centres, could be applied before sites were acquired for protection and presentation. Acquiring and managing sites by Parks Canada were seen as the best ways to protect cultural resources at the time, but, according to its mandate, Parks Canada could only buy properties that were nationally significant.

Ontario Region let a contract to Dr. Latta, then an assistant professor at the University of Toronto at Scarborough, in 1978 and 1979 to develop a framework, make recommendations on criteria for site selection, and review the 12 agreed-upon sites.² Outside agencies such as the National Museum of Man, the Royal Ontario Museum and the Ontario Ministry of Culture and Recreation were also consulted. Parks Canada staff (principally Elizabeth Snow and then archaeologist John Dewhirst, with the able help of heritage planner Marilyn Watson) also undertook field examinations of sites. My own involvement in the programme began in 1981 when I took over John Dewhirst's position as National Parks Archaeologist for Ontario. Marilyn and I continued field investigations and researcher consultations in the summer of 1981.

The framework, as presented by Dr. Latta and her team 25 years ago, was that of human and

technological adaptation to Canada's varied ecological zones, with consideration of climate, topography, natural resources and cultural inter-relationships. The framework proposed to view artifact assemblages as evidence of the technological capability of the people at a site, with the data on past and present environments giving us information about advantages or limitations that might have affected the inhabitants of the site. She focused on the *scientific* criteria—ecological, cultural and technological—which were current at the time. The criteria represented aspects of the past, focused on technological states and key inventions, and showed how people adapted to different local environments and resources. Dr. Latta recognized that planners and cultural resource managers might want to focus more on the criteria for site evaluation in ways that speak to the public—the information that resource managers need to look after sites, the stories that citizens need to appreciate sites, the enjoyment that the public would derive from an examination of the past, and the challenges that sites would offer to other archaeologists trying to figure out what went on there. The focus on public education, she noted, had to be weighed against the need to protect sites from looting and destruction.

Parks Canada accepted her report with gratitude. After internal discussion, it was decided that the framework needed to be further refined for use within an applied cultural resource management context. A culture history framework (rather than a strictly environmental and technological one) was adopted to allow judgement of the merits of one site relative to another—and in an objective way. We wanted such a framework to identify pre-contact and early contact period cultural themes and processes, to evaluate themes already within our own national historic sites and national parks, to identify known archaeological sites of potential national significance and to provide a basis for site selection that would be applicable to the country at large. The idea was that very important sites would be acquired by Parks Canada and protected for all time, with public interpretation and programmes.

Dr. Latta's report and recommendations on almost 30 well-known sites were submitted in

late 1979 (Latta et al. 1979). She also provided, under separate cover, a confidential assessment of the earlier list of 12 sites—its distribution was restricted so that it would not contribute to the looting problem so prevalent at the time.

Subsequent discussions with staff of the National Museum of Man (now known as the Canadian Museum of Civilization) and other researchers across Ontario led us to construct a general framework for sites, which was based on the inter-relationship of three factors:

1. Generally accepted stages of cultural evolution through time;
2. Geographical and ecological factors which influence cultural development;
3. The range of site types which reflect cultural process at any given time period in any geographical / ecological area.

The framework was applied separately to Northern and Southern Ontario. Instead of representing single historical events like a battle, or individuals of note, the kinds of sites we wanted to recommend represented long-term cultural processes and the cultural record of entire groups of people, the record of which could only be recovered through archaeological investigation. Thus, for our purposes, any sites that might be selected had to have, as a pre-requisite, largely intact resource bases. Furthermore, each site proposed for designation needed to encompass the entire range of activities of its people, with one or two exceptions.

Agenda papers for the HSMBC were proposed for submission in 1980, but staff turnover and changes in responsibilities as Ontario Region's archaeology unit was established resulted in the deadlines being pushed back to 1981. John Dewhirst wrote the bulk of the first paper for Northern Ontario before he transferred to the Prairie Region of Parks Canada. I took over his research project at the beginning of 1981, edited the Northern Ontario paper, and wrote the one for Southern Ontario based on his and my own further field investigations and discussion with knowledgeable researchers at universities, museums and with the provincial government.

We also worked with the acknowledged expert in Ontario archaeology at the Museum of Civilization, Dr. Wright, bringing him up to date with the project. We sought his advice a number of times. He was most gracious in commenting on the approach we were taking and stimulated the discussion towards a number of sites we had not considered. Dr. Wright freely admitted that he had a certain personal bias towards some sites over others, having known them intensively by excavation and research and also by having engaged in academic dialogue with other archaeologists who shared his research interests. He was looking at a measure of *representativeness* for each of the cultural expressions known in the province, but he also chose certain sites because of their *uniqueness*. He understood but did not concern himself with bureaucratic criteria that were of interest to Parks Canada, such as public accessibility or development potential as historic sites.

In the fall of 1981 and the spring of 1982, the Board considered and recommended three new sites in Northern Ontario (Pic River, Whitefish Island, and Cummins) to add to Kay-Nah-Chi-Wah-Nung, or Manitou Mounds, and Sheguiandah, and nine new sites in Southern Ontario (Parkhill, Donaldson, Serpent Mounds, Middleport, Walker, Etharita, Ossossané, Mazinaw Pictographs and Atherley Narrows (now known as Mnjikaning) Fish Weirs to go along with Southwold, which had been recognized so long ago, and the Peterborough Petroglyphs, which had been designated in 1981 following a separate submission from the Ontario government.

Thus, within three years of the submission of Dr. Latta's final reports, there were 16 nationally significant archaeological sites in Ontario—an unprecedented number—and, for the first time, all were presented in a systematic and reasoned framework. We carried on from Dr. Latta's report in giving the HSMBC more context for discussion: we summarized what was known and generally accepted by Ontario archaeologists about all the periods of Aboriginal history and when we could not say there was consensus among researchers about which site to pick, the "slot" was left blank. Only one archaeological site has been added since then—Bead Hill in Rouge Park, as an historic Seneca site.

A number of good things got started 25 years ago with Dr. Latta's initial research, aspects of Aboriginal history commemoration that continue today. At the 1981 meeting where the HSMBC considered the Ontario Aboriginal History Framework, the Board was also presented with a list of archaeological sites from Quebec for further study. It expressed its concern over the lack of recognition to date of the significance of the archaeological history of the province of Quebec and recommended that, upon completion of the investigation of the sites, a report be prepared using the site evaluation criteria developed in the Ontario Region (HSMBC Minutes 1981). Similar thematically oriented submissions are still brought before the HSMBC from all regions of Canada today.

In the mid-1990s, one of the federal government's key objectives for history commemoration became ensuring that the system of National Historic Sites of Canada reflects the country's evolving history and heritage. When it was established early in the twentieth century, the historic sites system reflected the contemporary preoccupation with "great men and events" credited with establishing the modern nation. Mid-century saw a shift of that focus to political and economic history. As we have entered the new millennium, an emphasis on social history has underscored the achievements and experiences of everyday Canadians.

The role of the HSMBC has also changed in the last 85 years—from one that *suggests* subjects for Parks Canada to research, to that of a *receiver* of suggestions. Parks Canada has certainly modified its approach to commemorating all aspects of the history of Aboriginal peoples. About 90 percent of all subjects brought before the HSMBC come from ordinary Canadians representing First Nations, municipalities, historical societies, and heritage organizations who are engaged—even passionate—about our history (Michel Audy, personal communication 2004). Three or four Aboriginal history designations are now put in place each year, representing significant people, cultural landscapes, spiritual places and events in the lives of Aboriginal communities. In Ontario today, there are 43 separate commemorations

attributable to the history and archaeology of Aboriginal peoples (Figure 1), and the list is still growing. There are submissions coming forward for new recognitions all the time.

The HSMBC recognizes that, while Canada's history can be organized thematically, there are still significant gaps in our representation of the history of three prominent groups of Canadians—Aboriginal peoples, ethnocultural communities, and women. The new Historic Sites System Plan, published in 2000, addresses this imbalance by recognizing that all the themes and sub-themes can be viewed as applying to each of the priority groups.³ The new thematic framework is a way to organize or define history to identify and place sites, persons and events in their context. The thematic framework for National Historic Sites provides a comprehensive way of looking at Canadian history. It builds on the 1981 themes, but is simpler in approach, responds to evolving concerns and interests, and reflects recent scholarship on the evolution of Canadian historiography.

Since history is a dynamic process, and what Canadians view as significant changes, the new System Plan recommends an open-ended approach. The plan provides Parks Canada with a means to monitor progress continually and to adjust priorities to ensure that the goal of a representative system is being achieved. The implementation of the System Plan depends on the participation of individual Canadians, heritage partners, First Nations, provinces, territories and the private sector across Canada. From a total of over 900 sites, only 16 percent are managed by Parks Canada with a further six percent under the administration of other federal departments and agencies. That leaves 78 percent of nationally significant historic sites in the capable hands of partners. New designations of events and people of national significance are always welcome.

It is fair to say that the overall development of the revised National Historic Sites System Plan and its application to Canada's archaeological and Aboriginal history would not have proceeded as smoothly, nor as effectively, if the Ontario Region of Parks Canada had not been able to draw upon the expert advice and thorough

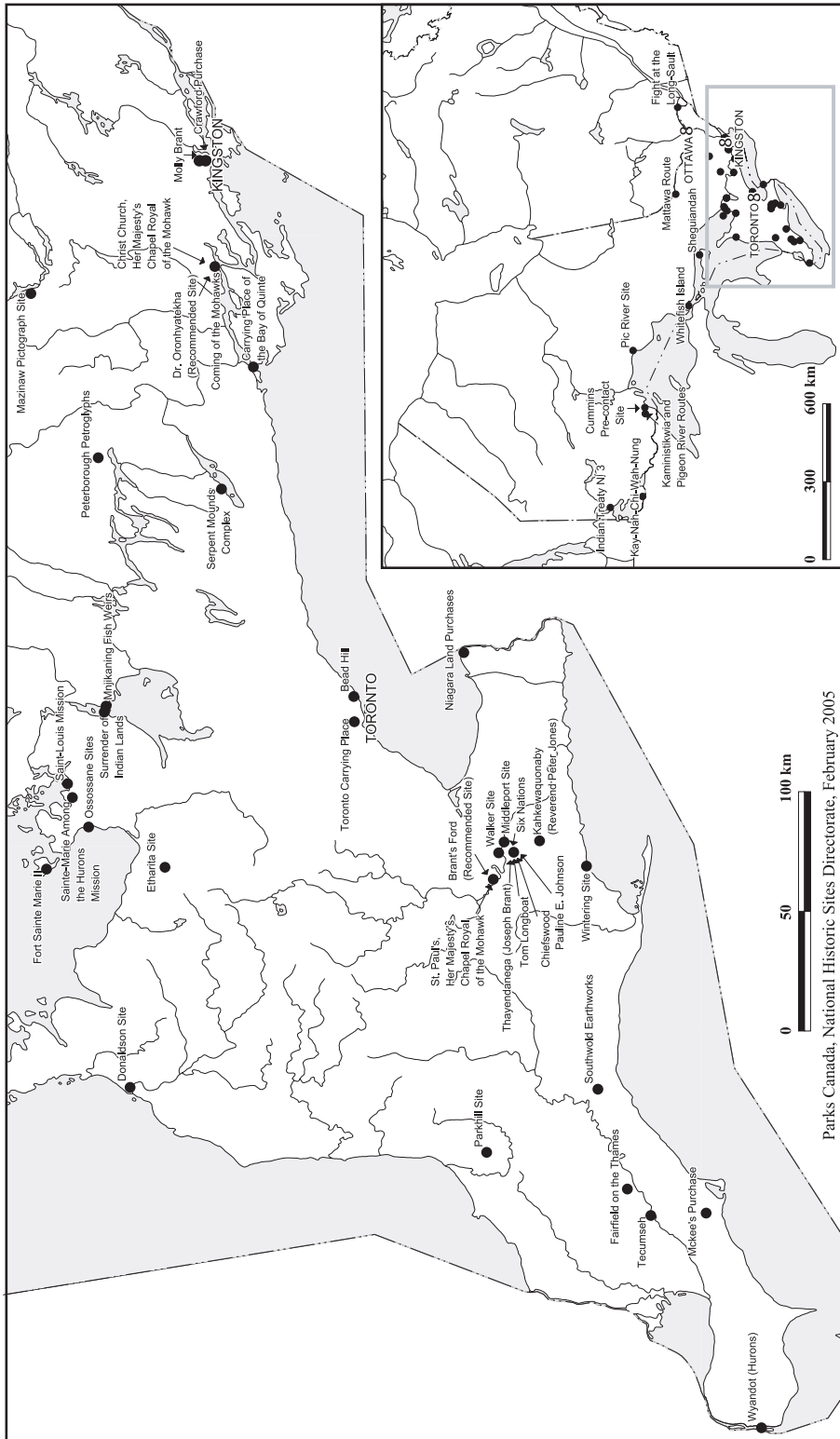


Figure 1. Parks Canada Aboriginal commemorations in Ontario.

Parks Canada, National Historic Sites Directorate, February 2005

research of Dr. Latta and her team at the University of Toronto. The independent analysis of well-known sites, using criteria which followed then current theoretical thinking, was important in discussions with First Nations and Aboriginal organizations, and subsequently with other researchers. We look forward to working cooperatively with all these partners in future designation, commemoration and stewardship of the collective heritage of all Canadians.

Acknowledgements. I would like to acknowledge that the 2004 OAS meeting took place in the ancient homeland of the Wendat people and within the territory of the Chippewas of Beausoleil First Nation at Christian Island. I would like to thank any Elders in the room that day (Aboriginal or archaeological) for their continued wisdom and guidance.

Notes

¹ Much of the chronology for this paper is drawn from personal files gathered by E. Snow, J. Dewhirst and the author in the course of the Ontario Aboriginal history commemoration

project, at the Ontario Service Centre of Parks Canada.

² In recognition of those conference participants from the University of Toronto, I note that Mima Kapches is on the initial proposal as one of the prospective personnel for the project, along with Rob Pihl and John Tomenchuk. Ultimately, other University of Toronto students who participated in the project included Shawn Haley, Robin Dods, Sarah Collins, Richard Stromberg, and Glenna Ounjian.

³ The System Plan is available on the Parks Canada website at www.pc.gc.ca, on CD, in video and printed form.

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À la fin des années 1970, Martha Latta, PhD, a faisait partie de la "nouvelle vague" des archéologues formés au Canada qui se passionnaient pour la compréhension du passé non écrit. À la demande de Parcs Canada, région de l'Ontario, elle a fait une revue des sites archéologiques ontariens datant de la période pré-européenne et de la période de contact dans le but de compiler une liste de sites susceptibles de revêtir un potentiel national important aux yeux de la Commission des lieux et monuments historiques du Canada (CLMHC). Son approche devait mettre en valeur les conditions environnementaux et les progrès technologiques qu'on pouvait retracer dans le temps; et de sélectionner et d'organiser les données conformément à ces paramètres. Le travail de Mme Latta a donné naissance à deux rapports à l'intention de la Commission, qui représentaient les efforts déployés pour obtenir un consensus parmi les chercheurs au sujet des sites situés dans le nord et le sud de l'Ontario. Ces rapports présentaient une approche thématique culturelle à l'histoire des Autochtones de l'Ontario. Les autres régions du pays ont été subséquemment encouragées à poursuivre de telles approches thématiques. Le nouveau Plan du réseau des lieux historiques nationaux du Canada (publié en 2000) a été le bénéficiaire ultime de ses premiers travaux.

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