



The ongoing challenge to keep National Historic Sites relevant. *by Larry Ostola*

James Harkin had a dilemma. Commissioner of the Dominion Parks Branch from its creation in 1911, Harkin was responsible for overseeing a cluster of parks centred in the Rocky Mountains of Western Canada. Anxious to find a way to spread this budding system of protected areas eastward and make it more national in scope, Harkin hit on the idea of setting aside places of historic importance to the nation.

He expressed his vision in 1914: "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 benefits 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."

The current network of National Historic Sites grew out of Harkin's idea. There had been earlier efforts to

commemorate significant persons, places, and events related to Canada's past. As far back as 1827, for example, a monument was erected in Quebec City to the memory of Wolfe and Montcalm. And in 1895 the Parliament of Canada raised a series of obelisks to mark significant battles of the War of 1812, such as Crysler's Farm and Lundy's Lane. Until Harkin, though, there was nothing systematic about these periodic commemorations.

The National Historic Sites program began modestly enough almost a century ago. As part of Harkin's vision for an eastward advance, the Parks Branch acquired land on the site of Fort Howe in Saint John, New Brunswick, for the first historic park in 1914. This was followed several years later by the acquisition of Fort Anne in Nova Scotia's Annapolis Valley. This latter site became the prototype for many of those that followed and remains the oldest National Historic Site in Parks Canada's nationwide network.

To his credit, Harkin also recognized the need for

Above: Tourists pose for photos at Artillery Park in Quebec City while a re-enactor dressed as a soldier with the *Compagnies franches de la Marine* stands nearby.

expert advice related to the designation of those persons, places, and events that were truly of national significance and not of purely local or regional interest. At his urging, the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada was created in 1919.

To this day, the board, which works in close collaboration with Parks Canada, provides advice to ministers related to the designation of persons, places, and events of national historic significance. To date, 647 persons, 955 places, and 418 events have been formally designated. Bronze government of Canada plaques, which summarize remarkable national stories in a few lines of carefully crafted text, dot every corner of the country.

National Historic Sites range from simple cairns and plaques at places such as Oil Springs, Ontario — the site of Canada's first oil well — to modest dwellings such as the Addison Sod House in Kindersley, Saskatchewan, and architectural gems like the Saint John City Market. Massive testaments to Canada's military history are represented by places such as the Fortifications in Quebec City, while sites like Lower Fort Garry in Manitoba exemplify the network of fur trade posts.

As Parks Canada embarks upon its second century of service to Canadians, the National Historic Sites the agency administers face a number of challenges.

Of the National Historic Sites that have been designated so far, Parks Canada directly administers 167. The remainder are owned by a variety of institutions, organizations, and individuals across the country. While some, such as the Banff Springs Hotel or Vancouver's Stanley Park, continue to fulfill the purposes for which they were originally intended, others, like the Gooderham and Worts Distillery in Toronto and Pier 21 in Halifax, have been successfully adapted to a wide variety of new uses.

As Parks Canada embarks upon its second century of service to Canadians, the National Historic Sites the agency administers face a number of challenges. Beyond the obvious need to make the investments necessary to ensure that these nationally significant places are protected and maintained for the benefit of future generations, the most pressing challenge is to ensure the ongoing relevance of these sites to Canadians.

Reference has sometimes been made to a "nature deficit" — the idea that children are not exposed to nature and the outdoors the way they once were. Of equal concern is the "history deficit" — a generalized lack of historical knowledge and of the persons, places, and events that shaped the country. National Historic Sites have a role to play in helping to address this deficit by connecting citizens to the authentic places where Canada's history happened.

Over the last decade, attendance at many sites has declined significantly. There is a growing sense that solely relying on the traditional historic site menu of products and opportunities will not be enough to entice visitors and reverse this trend, particularly in a context where

there is great competition for precious leisure time. More effective and sustained marketing and promotion of the agency's National Historic Sites and the development of new high-quality products and services offering a range of new possibilities for visitors will be critical in meeting this challenge.

Related to this is the need for Parks Canada not only to reach out to traditional audiences but to seek out and encourage new ones, particularly in the urban areas where most Canadians live. With this in mind, particular attention will have to be paid to those who may not be aware of or predisposed to visit historic sites, but who may be attracted by special events or new activities that engage them and spark their interest.

Increased efforts will also have to be made to better engage and involve local communities and communities of interest and to encourage them to take an active interest in their sites. While once, perhaps, having been viewed as somewhat apart from the communities in which they are located, National Historic Sites have to re-establish their identities as community resources and centres of local activity and be fully integrated into community life.

In order to respond to these challenges, change is already taking place at many of Parks Canada's National Historic Sites. Significant new investments have been made in their conservation, and a variety of new programs and special events have been or are being developed. From public archaeology programs to theatrical presentations, concerts, and community events, creative new ways are being found to bring these sites to life.

At the Fortress of Louisbourg, visitors taking part in a unique evening program can sample eighteenth-century cuisine paired with wines in the company of a sommelier and a historian, while at Fort St. James National Historic Site in British Columbia some visitors have had the chance to spend the night in historic surroundings. Other national initiatives include the MyParks Pass program, which is designed to attract Grade 8 students, and Explora, which provides visitors with various types of GPS-based information and is in use at a number of sites.

As Parks Canada winds down its 2011 centennial celebrations, 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 protected for future generations, but also in the strength and meaning of the connections that are established between Canadians and these special places, including the irreplaceable historical legacy they represent. J.B. Harkin would have wanted it that way. 🍷

Larry Ostola is the director general of National Historic Sites for Parks Canada. For more information, visit www.parkscanada.gc.ca.