

The Scene of its Achievement History, Tourism, and the Raising of *HMS Nancy*

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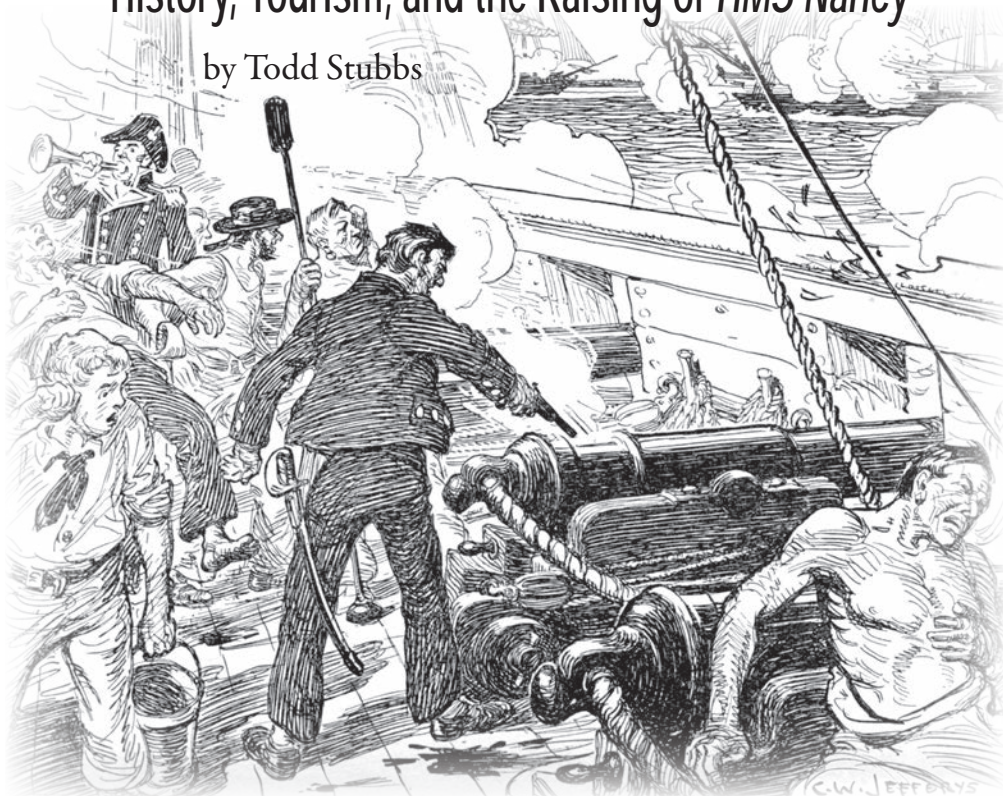
Article abstract

This article examines the debate over the ownership and preservation of an artefact of the War of 1812-14: the wrecked hull of the schooner *HMS Nancy*, which was discovered and raised at the mouth of the Nottawasaga River in Wasaga Beach, Ontario, in the summer of 1925. The discovery precipitated a vigorous struggle for control of the artefact that pitted local historical enthusiasts and politicians against the government of Ontario and its representatives. The crux of the debate concerned where best to store and house the hull. The government initially intended to remove the *Nancy*'s remains to Toronto where, officials argued, the vessel could best enjoy the status of a truly national icon, while an organized group from the Nottawasaga region charged that the artefact should remain in the place it perished as the best way to honour its historical significance as a symbol of British-Canadian nationhood and to make use of its value as a tourist attraction. The events highlight the ways in which Ontarians conceptualized their history and historical meanings of place during a period of tremendous social, cultural, and economic change.

The Scene of its Achievement

History, Tourism, and the Raising of *HMS Nancy*

by Todd Stubbs



In August 1924, the director of dental services for the Province of Ontario, F.J. Conboy, discovered an American cannonball lodged in a bank of the Nottawasaga River, a short distance from his cottage at Wasaga Beach, Ontario. Certain that he was in the vicinity of the lost remains of *HMS "Nancy,"* the British supply schooner that had been abandoned at its moorings upriver in August 1814 to the pounding of American na-

val guns, he embarked on a determined search for the lost wreck. Failing to locate it, he returned the following summer and with the aid of C.H.J. Snider, a journalist and marine historian with extensive knowledge of the region, once again began scouring the riverbanks. Conboy eventually located the vessel on a mid-July morning while canoeing alone near an island a few kilometres distant from the river mouth. Using an iron bar as a

Abstract

This article examines the debate over the ownership and preservation of an artefact of the War of 1812-14: the wrecked hull of the schooner HMS Nancy, which was discovered and raised at the mouth of the Nottawasaga River in Wasaga Beach, Ontario, in the summer of 1925. The discovery precipitated a vigorous struggle for control of the artefact that pitted local historical enthusiasts and politicians against the government of Ontario and its representatives. The crux of the debate concerned where best to store and house the hull. The government initially intended to remove the Nancy's remains to Toronto where, officials argued, the vessel could best enjoy the status of a truly national icon, while an organized group from the Nottawasaga region charged that the artefact should remain in the place it perished as the best way to honour its historical significance as a symbol of British-Canadian nationhood and to make use of its value as a tourist attraction. The events highlight the ways in which Ontarians conceptualized their history and historical meanings of place during a period of tremendous social, cultural, and economic change.

Résumé: *Cet article traite du débat sur la possession et la préservation de la coque défoncée de la goélette HMS Nancy, découverte et récupérée à l'embouchure de la rivière Nottawasaga à Wasaga Beach, en Ontario, pendant l'été de 1925. Cette découverte a été l'occasion d'une lutte vigoureuse pour le contrôle de cette relique historique entre les politiciens et historiens amateurs de la région et le gouvernement de l'Ontario. L'essentiel du différend concernait le choix du lieu où préserver la coque. Le gouvernement voulait l'emmener à Toronto, où, d'après ses fonctionnaires, elle aurait le statut d'une icône vraiment nationale; les Nottawasagayens voulaient la garder à l'endroit où la goélette avait coulé, où l'on pourrait mieux apprécier sa signification historique comme symbole d'une nationalité britanno-canadienne, et où ils pourraient l'exploiter comme attraction touristique. Cette histoire illustre les diverses façons dont les Ontariens concevaient leur histoire à un moment de grands changements sociaux, culturels, et économiques.*

probing instrument he struck “an apparent tree-root, several feet in from the water’s edge ... [and] got an answering ring of iron.” As Snider later put it, this “was a most unlikely spot to find a ship that had sunk in a river, for it was quite surrounded by dry land over which a heavy sod had grown.”¹

In the days that followed, newspapers across Ontario treated their readers to fascinating details about how the charred and rotted remains of the schooner had created a small island where it settled in the

shallow, silty waters of the Nottawasaga. Accompanying these reports were colourful accounts of the *Nancy*’s wartime career and its fiery destruction.² Soon, however, the rush of curiosity surrounding the discovery gave way to a spirited debate about whether the *Nancy* could be recovered and, if so, how to finance the operation and where best to store and house the salvaged hull. The struggle pitted local historical enthusiasts and politicians against the government of Ontario and its lead representative, the provincial archivist,

¹ C.H.J. Snider, *The Story of the Nancy and Other Eighteen-Twelvers* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1926), 63-65, 66.

² See *Toronto Star*, 18 July 1925, 1; *Collingwood Bulletin*, 23 July 1925, 4.

Alexander Fraser. In his official capacity, Fraser—with the initial support of Conboy and Snider—spearheaded a scheme that would remove the artefact to Toronto where, he argued, it could be put on prominent display and thereby promote the *Nancy's* rightful place as a national icon. But an organized group of local people, led by the mayor of nearby Collingwood and a member of the Collingwood-based Huron Institute, soon countered this plan, arguing that the schooner should remain in the place it perished as the best way to recognize its historical significance. Their claims were leavened with arguments for the tourist potential of such an important attraction. Eventually, with the support of a wary Ontario government, the local advocates gained possession of the artefact. In 1927, with further financial assistance from the province, the local group raised the hull and built a temporary shelter and museum on the island, the nucleus of what would become the current Museum of the Upper Great Lakes.³

Emerging out of the private correspondence of the individuals involved and in numerous newspaper reports from the period, the *Nancy* dispute reveals a good deal about how early twentieth century Ontarians constructed historical identities and historical narratives of place. During the first decades of the twentieth

century, historians described the *Nancy* and the exploits of its crew as romantic embodiments of the loyalist tradition and of British values, which served to link Wasaga Beach to a prevailing discourse of British-Canadian nationalism.⁴ The *Nancy's* power as a symbol of the British connection spoke to historical identities that remained vital in post-First World War Ontario, but in so doing it also encapsulated divergent community aspirations linked to Ontario's development as a modern, industrialized province. In their efforts to remove the vessel to Toronto, proponents of the Toronto plan had assumed the city's role as the regional and national hub of modern cultural and intellectual progress, and therefore the ideal permanent setting for the artefact.⁵ Yet for opponents of the Toronto scheme the *Nancy's* power to connect Wasaga Beach to a broadly shared historical identity, coupled with the growth of tourism as a strategy for local economic development, threw into question the priorities of urban centralization. Indicative of developing interconnections between the state and burgeoning tourism economies throughout Canada in the early twentieth century, the provincial government was ultimately decisive in securing the *Nancy's* long term connection to Wasaga Beach.⁶ These intertwined social, cul-

³ On the current facilities see Chris Skeaff and Michael Gurr, *H.M.S. Nancy: The Legacy of a War of 1812 Schooner and Her Crew* (Wasaga Beach: Friends of Nancy Island & Wasaga Beach Park, c. 2002).

⁴ John Herd Thompson, "Canada and the 'Third British Empire,' 1901-1939," in Phillip Buckner, ed., *Canada and the British Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 95-98.

⁵ On Toronto as a centre for the development of a modern culture see Keith Walden, *Becoming Modern in Toronto: The Industrial Exhibition and the Shaping of a Late Victorian Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997).

⁶ Michael Dawson, *Selling British Columbia: Tourism and Consumer Culture, 1890-1970* (Vancou-

tural, economic, and political processes would seem to support Timothy Oakes's observation that, rather than being antithetical to processes of modernity, such as the construction of national identities, place was "the very terrain of modernity's paradoxes and contradictions."⁷

While the legacy of 1812 has long served as Wasaga Beach's foremost historical distinction, early interest in the history of the village and the Nottawasaga region more broadly encompassed a number of significant dimensions to the area's past.⁸ Since the late nineteenth century, amateur historians with the Huron Institute as well as urban museum-based researchers such as David Boyle had explored Nottawasaga's aboriginal history.⁹ Simcoe County's foremost early historian, Andrew F. Hunter, produced sketches of the area as a site for agricultural settlement and a centre for logging, sawmilling, and fishing.¹⁰ In fact, the slow growth of

Wasaga Beach as a destination for permanent settlement and summer tourism delayed the promotion and development of the area as a War of 1812 heritage site.¹¹ Unlike tourist regions such as Muskoka and the Thousand Islands, which came to prominence as early as the 1890s as rustic getaways for the urban middle class, development in the Nottawasaga area lagged, likely owing to the lack of a direct rail connection. By the First World War, however, several cottages and a few small hotels had clustered around the mouth of the Nottawasaga River and with the popularization of the automobile following the war, Wasaga Beach began to attract still larger numbers of summer residents and visitors. By the 1920s, private cottages stretched further upriver from the famously long beachfront, supplanted at the river mouth and the adjoining strip of beaches by expanding commercial enterprise.¹² As the area emerged as a tourist centre during these years, interest in

ver: UBC Press, 2004); Ian McKay, *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994), 33, 34; see also H.V. Nelles, *The Art of Nation Building: Pageantry and Spectacle at Quebec's Tercentenary* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 255-266.

⁷ Timothy Oakes, "Place and the Paradox of Modernity," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 87, 3 (1997): 510.

⁸ The term Nottawasaga region is used throughout to denote the area adjacent to the southern shore of Nottawasaga Bay intersecting Nottawasaga, Sunnidale, and Flos Townships, with Wasaga Beach roughly at its centre.

⁹ John Lawrence, et al., "Exploration of Petun Indian Village Sites," in Huron Institute, *Papers and Records*, Vol. I (Collingwood: Huron Institute, 1909); Gerald Killan, *David Boyle: From Artisan to Archaeologist* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983), 102, 118.

¹⁰ See, for example, Andrew F. Hunter, *The History of Simcoe County* (Barrie: T.H. Best, 1948), 225-231.

¹¹ By contrast more southerly and accessible sites were well known tourist attractions as early as the 1820s. See Patricia Jasen, *Wild Things: Nature, Culture, and Tourism in Ontario, 1790-1914* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 38, 54, 69.

¹² Roy I. Wolfe, "Wasaga Beach: The Divorce from the Geographic Environment," *Canadian Geographer* 1, 2 (January 1952): 59.

its wartime heritage grew.

This interest in Wasaga Beach's connection to the War of 1812 reflected a more general preoccupation on the part of historians with the United Empire Loyalists and Ontario's past as an important building block of British-Canadian nationalism.¹³ As Gerald Killan and Cecilia Morgan have observed, middle class amateur historians and enthusiasts active in the numerous local historical institutes and societies that had emerged during this period were responsible for much of this historical research. According to Morgan, while the women and men who belonged to these societies conducted independent research and wrote histories were motivated by a deep personal fascination with local history, they were often driven by a desire to contribute to the building of a national identity and to celebrate Canada's place in the British Empire.¹⁴ Killan has observed similarly that the first local societies affiliated with the Ontario Historical Society "were not formed by those interested in the past for the uncomplicated reason of understanding how their province had evolved." The primary purpose, he suggests, "was to cultivate British-Canadian nationalism."¹⁵

By the end of the First World War many Canadians worried that an authentic national consciousness had yet failed to accompany the country's growing material wealth and political maturity. A renewed historical enterprise tempered by the war experience, they hoped, would rise above parochialism and lead to the development of a truly national culture.¹⁶ Out of this ferment professional history found a home in budding university departments, and the founding of the *Canadian Historical Review* in 1920 and the Canadian Historical Association in 1922 pointed the way to the continued professionalization of the craft and the wider dissemination of primary research.¹⁷ Yet, while the male-dominated and urban-based professionalization of the discipline attempted to supersede the history practiced by amateur and often female local historians, professional historians and amateur societies retained important linkages through the 1920s, informing one another's work and sharing a concern for Canada's place in the British Empire.¹⁸ Indeed, if many of the first generation of professional historians wanted to craft a Canadian history that emphasized the country's distinctiveness

¹³ Norman Knowles, *Inventing the Loyalists: The Ontario Loyalist Tradition and the Creation of Usable Pasts* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997).

¹⁴ Cecilia Morgan, "History, Nation, and Empire: Gender and the Southern Ontario Historical Societies, 18902-1920s," *Canadian Historical Review* 82, 3 (September 2001): 492.

¹⁵ Gerald Killan, *Preserving Ontario's Heritage: A History of the Ontario Historical Society* (Toronto: Ontario Historical Society, 1976), 4.

¹⁶ Robert Cupido, "Appropriating the Past: Pageants, Politics, and the Diamond Jubilee of Confederation," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Society* (1998):157.

¹⁷ Donald Wright, *The Professionalization of History in English Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005); Carl Berger, *The Writing of Canadian History: Aspects of English-Canadian Historical Writing since 1900* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), 54-55.

¹⁸ Morgan, "History, Nation, and Empire," 527.

and growing autonomy, they continued to acknowledge the “British connection” as an important element of Canada’s national identity.¹⁹

For many scholars during this period, the War of 1812 continued to stand as the first major affirmation of Canadian Britishness and thus a crucial basis for building a national identity within the imperial framework.²⁰ Indeed far from representing a shift away from Canada’s British past, the trauma and national pride associated with the Great War prompted historians to look for timely meanings in the British-American conflict.²¹ The long standing militia myth and the ideal of blood sacrifice, for example, provided an appropriate antecedent to the contemporary wartime experience.²² Writing in 1914, W.L. Grant considered 1812 to be Canada’s first real “baptism in blood.”²³ For others the sacrifice of the war not only affirmed Canada’s status as a loyal British colony but also forged a wider spirit of unity amongst Canada’s diverse

regions and peoples as a foundation for a national identity.²⁴ For them, the war was a great crucible in which shared interests and values, and a shared antagonist, forged a new sense of commonality out of a diversity of Canadians. In his 1915 instalment to the *Chronicles of Canada* series, William Wood argued that “there could not have been a better bond of union than the blood then shed so willingly by her [Canada’s] different races in a single righteous cause.”²⁵

In various historical accounts, the tale of the *Nancy* and its spectacular destruction encapsulated these traits, establishing a modest place for the schooner in the loyalist narratives of the War of 1812 and awakening Canadians to the significance of Wasaga Beach as a wartime site. The earliest and most thorough treatments were E.A. Cruikshank’s two articles, “The John Richardson Letters” (1905) and “An Episode of the War of 1812” (1910), both published in the OHS’s *Papers and Records*.²⁶ Andrew F. Hunter’s brief re-

¹⁹ Phillip Buckner and R. Douglas Francis, eds., “Introduction,” *Canada and the British World: Culture, Migration, and Identity* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007), 1.

²⁰ Morgan, “History, Nation, and Empire,” 503-505.

²¹ Jonathan Vance, *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1997), 155.

²² George Sheppard, *Plunder, Profit, and Paroles: A Social History of the War of 1812 in Upper Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1994), 250.

²³ W.L. Grant quoted in Daniel Francis, *National Dreams: Myth, Memory, and Canadian History* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1997), 56.

²⁴ Knowles, *Inventing the Loyalists*, 164.

²⁵ William Wood, *The War with the United States: A Chronicle of 1812* (Toronto: Glasgow, Brook, & Company, 1915), 172.

²⁶ E.A. Cruikshank, “The John Richardson Letters,” Ontario Historical Society, *Papers and Records*, Vol. VI (Toronto: Ontario Historical Society, 1905) and “An Episode of the War of 1812: The Story of the Schooner Nancy,” Ontario Historical Society, *Papers and Records*, Vol. IX (Toronto: Ontario Historical Society, 1910). Pierre Berton’s, *Flames across the Border, 1813-1814* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1981), 311-312, borrows substantially from Cruikshank. For the most recent account see Barry M. Gough, *Through Water, Ice & Fire: Schooner Nancy of the War of 1812* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2006).



A rare photograph of the US Niagara, Perry's flagship at the Battle of Lake Erie. The Niagara was similar in size and configuration to the Nancy. (Courtesy of the Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society, 976.110.114)

telling in his *History of Simcoe County* (1909) was also well known, and even challenged Cruikshank's views on the origins of the vessel.²⁷ But it was Cruikshank's methodical work that revitalized the story of the *Nancy* as an important strategic link in the battles for supremacy on the Great Lakes and the fur-trade of the continental interior. Moreover, his interpretation of the events, which he initially published in the *Collingwood Bulletin* in 1908, contained elements that argued for the idea of the Battle of Nottawasaga as a crucible in miniature of British-Canadian nationhood.²⁸

According to Cruikshank, the *Nan-*

cy began its career in 1789 as a commercial vessel. The Montreal-based fur merchants, Forsyth, Richardson, & Co., commissioned a Detroit shipyard to build the schooner and from there the *Nancy* soon entered service as a fur-trade ship on lakes Erie, Huron, and Michigan. Before 1812 the *Nancy* was acquired by George Leith Co., and ultimately fell into the possession of the Northwest Company. With the outbreak of war, the *Nancy*, lying at anchor opposite Detroit, was pressed into service as a British transport vessel. In the spring and summer of 1814, when the Americans prepared to descend upon the strategically important

²⁷ Hunter, *History of Simcoe County*, 32-38. Hunter offers scant evidence to support his counter claim that the schooner was "built by the U.S. Government" at "Cayuga Creek, on the Niagara River" (p. 36). Gough, *Water, Ice, and Fire*, 29, corroborates Cruikshank's version.

²⁸ Hunter, *History of Simcoe County*, 36. Hunter notes that the article that appeared in the *Bulletin* in November 1908 was based on the manuscript of Cruikshank's "An Episode of the War."

fort at Michilimackinac Island, the British used the *Nancy* to run supplies from the mouth of the Nottawasaga to the distant fort at the north-western tip of Lake Huron. In this capacity the schooner was a crucial link in the long British supply line that extended hundreds of kilometres from Kingston to the besieged garrison at Michilimackinac. The *Nancy* completed two return journeys before being ordered to take refuge from three prowling American warships in the relative shelter of the mouth of the Nottawasaga.²⁹

As noted earlier, Cruikshank's narrative includes a number of important details that would become crucial to the romantic-loyalist interpretation of the Battle of Nottawasaga as a unifying force at the heart of a British-Canadian national identity. He indicates, for instance, that the *Nancy's* commanding officer, Lieutenant Miller Worsley, was in charge of twenty-one British seaman and nine French Canadian boatmen, and that, starting from York, twenty-nine First Nations allies joined Lieutenant Robert Livingston on his mission to Nottawasaga to warn Worsley to take cover.³⁰ Cruikshank is careful to signal the central importance of the two British commanders, referring to them at various times with rare stylistic embellishment as "daring and adventurous" (Livingston) and "gallantly" confronting the Ameri-

can attackers with "the stoutest possible resistance" (Worsley). In particular, Cruikshank's description of Worsley's conduct following the bombardment, when the blockhouse and the *Nancy* itself were demolished, argues for his stature as the embodiment of British valour. Here Worsley stealthily directs a flotilla of supply-laden rowboats through the American blockade arriving at Michilimackinac under cover of night more than a week later. From there, with considerable guile, he uses the large rowboats to capture two of the attacking American warships, the *Tigress* and *Scorpion*, as they sat at anchor, unawares. In so doing, Cruikshank concludes, "Worsley had regained entire control of Lake Huron and effectually relieved Mackinac from all danger of being forced to surrender from want of provisions."³¹

C.H.J. Snider's *In the Wake of the Eighteen-Twelvers*, published three years after Cruikshank's account, positioned the *Nancy* more explicitly within the heroic-loyalist narrative. Snider was a well-known reporter for the *Toronto Telegram*, an illustrator, marine historian, and avid relic hunter (he was involved in locating the two French ships, *L'Iroquoise* and *L'Outaouaise*, in the St. Lawrence River).³² *Eighteen Twelvers* was his first foray into the popular history of the war and Canadian maritime history more generally, subjects to which he would later

²⁹ Cruikshank, "An Episode of the War," 75-84.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 75-76, 81, 83, 84.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 81, 84, 88.

³² Archives of Ontario (AO), Roger Nickerson, "Introduction," Inventory of the C.H.J. Snider Papers, F1194, pp. 1-2.

devote several published volumes and a newspaper column in the Toronto *Telegram* in the 1930s. Unlike Cruikshank's more dispassionate accounts, Snider admitted that while his tales came from "the logs and letters of the captains and commodores" the "dry bones of record have been clothed with the flesh and blood of fancy."³³ In framing his fictionalized tales, Snider highlighted loyalty and sacrifice and the crucible of war as dominant themes. Thus, for Snider, the battle of Nottawasaga brought loyal English-Canadians, native peoples, French-Canadian voyageurs, and Newfoundlanders allied together with British regulars in a brave attempt to thwart the American menace and preserve the loyal colonies.³⁴ Snider was also keen to connect the heroic narrative of loyalty and martial valour to the Great Lakes region, emphasizing its role as an important node in a transatlantic struggle to preserve the loyal colonies from absorption into the American republic. "The international highway (the Great Lakes basin) is as much devoted to the purposes of peace as Broadway or the Strand," he wrote in 1913. "But a hundred years ago, pike and cutlass heroes who fought the battle of the Baltic

and triumphed at Trafalgar...these same dare-devil tars ploughed the Great Lakes with plentiful furrows."³⁵

State efforts to recognize the *Nancy* as a symbol of loyalty and the Nottawasaga region as a significant location in the historical landscape of Canada accompanied these written accounts. In May 1925, two months prior to the discovery of the wreck, the federal Historic Sites and Monuments Board (HSMB), for which Cruikshank served as chairman, announced its intention to raise a marker at Wasaga Beach in commemoration of the *Nancy*.³⁶ Created in 1919 by the federal commissioner of parks, James B. Harkin, the HSMB was composed of leading Canadian historians and was mandated to recognize Canada's historic places by identifying sites of historical significance, typically by affixing bronze plaques *in situ*. While overtly patriotic in purpose, the HSMB's activities were also tied to the possibilities of local economic development through heritage culture.³⁷ In an article reporting on the planned marker, the Toronto *Globe* noted the importance of tourism for Wasaga Beach and the promotional value of the planned historical marker:

³³ C.H.J. Snider, *In the Wake of the Eighteen-Twelvers: Fights & Flights of Frigates & Fore-'n'-afters in the War of 1812-1815 on the Great Lakes* (Toronto: John Lane Co., 1913), x.

³⁴ Snider, *Eighteen-Twelvers*, 223-262. Snider would return to this same theme in subsequent writings and speeches. See, for instance, Snider, *The Story of the Nancy and Other Eighteen-Twelvers* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1926), an expanded version of his 1913 discussion of the battle of the Nottawasaga. Snider's regular Toronto *Telegram* column, "Schooner Days," also covered much of the same ground. See Robert B. Townsend, ed., *Tales from the Great Lakes: Based on C.H.J. Snider's "Schooner Days"* (Toronto: Dundurn, 1995).

³⁵ Snider, *Eighteen Twelvers*, vii-viii.

³⁶ *Globe*, 30 May 1925.

³⁷ See Canada, "Historic Sites and Monuments," *Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences, 1949-51, Report* (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1951), 123-130.

A cairn on the shore of Wasaga Beach will shortly remind visitors to this spacious summer resort near Collingwood of certain events of the War of 1812. Many of the visitors in the [summer] season live under the flag which came there an enemy ensign, but both nations share the pride in the valour which the new cairn will commemorate.³⁸

Combined with academic and popular historical interest in the *Nancy*, the work of the HSMB thus revitalized the area's wartime history and its status as a significant national historical site.

The discovery of the artefact within weeks of the HSMB's announcement only enhanced these efforts to construct a historical narrative for the area through its connection to the War of 1812, while drawing still more attention to Wasaga Beach as more than simply a place of natural beauty. To be sure, Snider claimed to have located the schooner's remains as early as 1911 hidden amongst some reeds at the southern end of the island that had formed around its sunken hull. The *Nancy's* exposed timbers, he wrote, had been well known long before as a mooring place for boats "[f]irst to the hunters and trappers, then the lumbermen and farmers and sawmill hands, and lastly

the summer cottagers and beach hotel guests" comprising the local population in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.³⁹ But according to Snider the location gradually became "lost to memory", the result of major topographical alterations in the river caused, it has since been shown, by cyclical changes in Great Lakes water levels during this period; by the time Conboy uncovered the hull in July 1925, it was almost fully concealed beneath the brow of the river bank.⁴⁰

Conboy's find triggered an outpouring of curiosity that had been nurtured, then, by historians and government, and only heightened by the tantalizing archaeological puzzle concerning the vessel's whereabouts. In short order the *Nancy* became an immediate sensation.⁴¹ Over the weekend following its discovery a reported 300 persons came to see the partially exhumed wreck.⁴² Adding intrigue were rumours of a lost payship that had supposedly transported funds to soldiers guarding the defensive blockhouse located just above the place where the *Nancy* was destroyed.⁴³ Newspapers reported that visitors were eager to take away souvenirs and that men working on the site

³⁸ *Globe*, 30 May 1925.

³⁹ Snider, *Story of the Nancy*, 63; see also Gough, *Through Water, Ice & Fire*, 157.

⁴⁰ In fact, Snider suggested incorrectly that the changes were the result of "a pronounced drop in the lake levels, following the operations of the Chicago drainage canal," a massive engineering project completed between 1900 and 1922. See Snider, *Story of the Nancy*, 63; on the more recent explanation see Gough, *Through Water, Ice & Fire*, 201, n.240.

⁴¹ I have been unable to locate evidence pinpointing the exact date of discovery. Based on information from articles in the *Toronto Star* (18 July 1925, 1), *Toronto Telegram* (21 July 1925) and the *Collingwood Bulletin* (23 July 1925, 4) the likely date was sometime between 13 and 17 July. In *Story of the Nancy*, Snider locates the date as simply "early July." See p. 65.

⁴² *Star*, 20 July 1925, 3.

⁴³ *Bulletin*, 30 July 1925, 7.

had removed numerous items, including spikes, nails, pottery, coat clasps, a silver button, a belaying pin, a brass flint lock, hinges, a cannon wheel, cannon balls, and pork bones derived from the *Nancy's* cargo of provisions bound for Michilimackinac.⁴⁴ As a result of this activity, government officials were soon alerted and pressed to act—a communication that ultimately set in train the political struggle that would determine the fate of the artefact. Through Conboy and J.A. Currie, a Conservative MPP with family ties to the area, news of the discovery reached two colleagues in Premier G. Howard Ferguson's provincial government: Forbes Godfrey, the powerful minister of the departments of health and labour, and W.F. Nickel, the attorney general.⁴⁵ For Conboy and Currie the most pressing concern was the need take protective measures at the site in order to ward off “trophy-hunting tourists,” to which Nickel responded by suggesting that a provincial constable might be secured for such a purpose, either from Collingwood or the nearby town of Barrie.⁴⁶

Conboy and Currie also floated the idea that the government should finance the removal and preservation of the remains of the *Nancy*. This plan seems to

have been in the works at least as early as 18 July when the *Toronto Star* reported that “a group of summer residents” led by Conboy were preparing to petition the provincial government to take measures to preserve the island and house the *Nancy* there as a “national monument.”⁴⁷ By the morning of 22 July the matter had reached William H. Price, the provincial treasurer, as the first substantive step towards assessing any financial commitment on the part of the government. That morning, Price discussed the discovery of the schooner with the provincial archivist, Alexander Fraser. Later in the day Fraser addressed a memorandum to the treasurer suggesting “that the Government of Ontario should take such steps as may be necessary to raise and preserve the hull, also to acquire and preserve in the Provincial Museum such relics taken therefrom as are of historical interest.” Fraser also noted that he had made plans to travel to Wasaga Beach the next day and upon his return would report to the minister further “on this very interesting subject.”⁴⁸

At Wasaga Beach, Fraser carried out an inspection of the wreck and the surrounding area. Following his survey, he told a reporter from the Collingwood

⁴⁴ Stayner *Sun*, 23 July 1925.

⁴⁵ On the Ferguson government see Peter Oliver, *G. Howard Ferguson: Ontario Tory* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977).

⁴⁶ Toronto *Telegram*, 21 July 1925.

⁴⁷ *Star*, 18 July 1925, 1; see also *Sun*, 23 July 1925.

⁴⁸ AO, Fraser to Price, Snider Papers, 22 July 1925. The Royal Ontario Museum (ROM), founded in 1912. The term “provincial museum” likely hearkens to the ROM's predecessor, the Ontario Provincial Museum, which was housed in the Toronto Normal School and from which the ROM derived many of its original artefacts. On the ROM see Lovat Dickson, *The Museum Makers: the Story of the Royal Ontario Museum* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986)

Bulletin that his mandate was to prepare a report and to collect data on local history for submission to the government. Fraser apparently added that he was “very impressed with the importance of the discovery” and that it was “one of the greatest historical finds ever made in the Dominion of Canada.” When asked about his views regarding what should be done with the vessel Fraser avoided committing the government to raising and preserving the hull, though he supported exhuming it and placing it on the island with a bridge linking the site to the mainland. He indicated that he would be returning to Toronto that night and would consult with Snider—whom the *Bulletin* identified as “an authority on the history of this district”—before making his report.⁴⁹ The question of control and ownership was clearly a pressing concern for Fraser. As his 22 July memo to Price indicates, the archivist had already anticipated collecting miscellaneous relics for the “Provincial Museum.”⁵⁰ A follow-up memo to Price on the 24th, the day after his visit, expressed both his high degree of interest and an anxious concern that “the Government of the Province of Ontario should protect the hull and its contents from souvenir hunters by placing a light open fence around the hull.”⁵¹ The next day, on Fraser’s advice Price reported to the press that it was not certain whether the hull could be preserved in its present

condition and that the province may consider simply erecting a monument to mark the place. In the meantime, he suggested, the loose artefacts found near the site would likely be brought to the museum in Toronto.⁵²

In fact, within a matter of days Fraser, Conboy, and Snider had begun seriously to entertain plans to have the hull transferred to Toronto’s Canadian National Exhibition (CNE). As noted, Conboy had initially proposed establishing a museum for the vessel where it was discovered and renaming the site “Nancy Island.”⁵³ But in a letter dated 30 July from Conboy to Fraser, Conboy reveals that a plan was in the works to relocate the *Nancy* to Toronto:

As promised while you were at Wasaga Beach I have made a survey of the population and find that there are 2,500 summer residents at Wasaga Beach proper and 800 at Oakview which is the summer resort three miles up the River from the bridge. The total population at times runs as high as 4,000. Of this number 80% are from Toronto, 2% from the United States and the remainder from Hamilton, London, Brantford and other like places in Western Ontario. The permanent population is very small, consisting of about five or six families and they are very sympathetic to Toronto as they make their living from the summer activities.

Conboy concluded his letter by noting that he “hoped to have a talk with Mr. Dave Williams of the Huron Institute at

⁴⁹ *Bulletin*, 30 July 1925, 7.

⁵⁰ AO, Fraser to Price, Snider Papers, 22 July 1925.

⁵¹ AO, Fraser to Price, Snider Papers, 24 July 1925.

⁵² *Star*, 27 July 1925, 13.

⁵³ *Bulletin*, July 23 1925, 4.

Collingwood” (who was also a co-editor of the *Bulletin*) because Williams was “the only person who would probably object to the ‘*Nancy*’ being brought to the Exhibition grounds [in] Toronto.”⁵⁴

The subsequent proposal that Fraser and his associates developed and presented to Price on 8 August put forward a case for two potential options for the *Nancy*. The first suggested that the wreck could be raised and “studded” on the island and a “pavilion” erected as both a shelter and museum. The island would then become a public park and measures could be taken to beautify the location. Fraser, however, warned that such an approach would “inevitably” lead to further similar “demands on the Government by other summer resorts in the Province.” Fraser then detailed an alternate and preferred plan whereby the wreck would be removed and transported to Toronto. Aside from the benefits described earlier, Fraser suggested that the lower cost of this proposal, based on estimates supplied by a local garage operator and contractor, William Freeman, would amount to roughly \$2,500. But Fraser felt that even that figure was probably too excessive. Finally, Fraser argued that the island, as Crown land, could easily be sold. To that end, local residents confirmed that the land could be alienated “for the site of a large summer hotel, for an amount of

from one to two thousand dollars.” To further support the real-estate scheme Fraser emphasized that, by the “appearance of the place and its steady growth,” Wasaga Beach’s “future as a summer resort would seem fairly well assured.”⁵⁵

The careful separation in the reasoning of Fraser and his colleagues between the economic identity of Wasaga Beach as a tourist centre and the cultural importance of Toronto points to a crucial dimension in the ensuing struggle for the artefact. These considerations suggest Sophie Forgan’s observation that, during this period, urban museums served at once as “sites of civic status and reputation” for a metropolitan bourgeoisie and as “ornament[s] to the city and... ornament[s] to science.”⁵⁶ The plan to remove the remains of the *Nancy* to a Toronto museum thus assumed the city’s status as a regional and even national cultural hub at the forefront of the young country’s intellectual life. The city was in this sense a central pillar of the modern nation, as both a repository—the nation’s memory—and a centre of learning. Thus, in September, Snider prepared a report arguing that the wreck should be given pride of place alongside other historic monuments in Toronto, such as the site of Fort Rouille, a century-old log cabin, and artefacts of “pioneer days” which together formed “a nucleus of a collection

⁵⁴ AO, Conboy to Fraser, Snider Papers, 30 July 1925.

⁵⁵ AO, Fraser to Price, Snider Papers, 8 August 1925; see also AO, C.H.J. Snider, “A Report on the Schooner *Nancy*, 1789-1925, for the Archives of the Province,” Snider Papers, 23 September 1925. This report, commissioned by the government, is essentially a more expansive version of the plan Fraser had forwarded to Price in August.

⁵⁶ Sophie Forgan, “Building the Museum: Knowledge, Conflict, and the Power of Place,” *Isis* 96, 4 (December 2005): 579.

of great historic and educational value.”⁵⁷ For their part, the Nottawasaga people would contest the separation of local economy identity and national culture, and argue instead for the useful ways the two could work in conjunction through the promise of motor tourism.

Thus, when the Monuments Board finally unveiled its plaque on 13 August, the groundwork for the upcoming struggle over the artefact had been laid. Little hint of the tension to come could be detected during the festivities, however. The speakers were moved by the recent developments to reflect on the wider significance of the *Nancy* and its achievement. In his address, Cruikshank recounted the key points in the *Nancy's* career, while others waxed eloquently on the meaning of those events. “Patriotism,” announced George H. Locke, Toronto’s chief librarian, “you acquire through pride and knowledge of your country. In Canada we are arriving at the point where we glory in our past and by these monuments we realize that our country has a history.” For his part, Snider emphasized that it was the shared history of the loyalty of disparate groups “to the British flag in 1812-14” that enabled Canadians to take their place “beneath the British flag in 1925.”⁵⁸ If these interpretations of the *Nancy's* enduring significance to Canadian patriotism, national identity, and Canada’s historic place in the Empire were merely ceremonial rhetoric, they nonetheless underscored the symbolic im-

portance of the *Nancy* for those wishing to remove its remains to Toronto and for those who would soon dispute that plan.

These tensions emerged after 28 August when, upon considering Fraser’s proposal, Price publicly announced the government’s intention to relocate the *Nancy* to the Canadian National Exhibition. In his statement to the media, Price began by reiterating Fraser’s arguments in favour of transferring the vessel to the CNE where, he noted, “there is at present the nucleus of a historic collection.” According to the *Toronto Star*, Price justified this decision by pointing out that leaving the vessel in Wasaga Beach would entail “a good deal of expense.” Moreover, further echoing Fraser’s reasoning, Price estimated that an arrangement with the CNE “would permit a million and a half people a year to see [the *Nancy*]” and, if programs were sold “giving the history of the battle in which the *Nancy* figured and all the surrounding facts, the receipts would probably defray any expense.” Finally, Price was careful to link the utilitarian and economic arguments in favour of relocating the *Nancy* to Toronto to a higher patriotic purpose:

Too little has been done in the past to recognize the great services of the pioneers of Ontario and those who fought along our frontiers to save Canada for succeeding generations.... The removal of the *Nancy* is, therefore, being undertaken with the idea of inspiring patriotism, love of country and pride in the memory of our ancestors who performed such great services.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ AO, C.H.J. Snider, “A Report on the Schooner Nancy, 1789-1925, for the Archives of the Province,” Snider Papers, 23 September 1925.

⁵⁸ *Bulletin*, 13 August 1925, 5.

⁵⁹ *Star*, 28 August 1925, 17.

The plans drew sharp condemnation from the Nottawasaga region. In a letter dated 29 August, an irate F.J. Sneath, pastor of St. Mary's Church, Collingwood, and St. Joseph's Church, Wasaga Beach, chided Price for reports in the papers that the provincial government intended to remove the wreck to Toronto. "As pastor of the largest—by far—congregation in the Wasaga district," Sneath explained, "I am being asked on all sides to speak publicly against any such removal."⁶⁰ Price's written response to Sneath, while sensitive to both sides of the question, reiterated the utilitarian argument, adding that Colonel Fraser's view, based on a survey of the local sentiment, was that "the general opinion seemed to be that it would fill the patriotic needs much better to have the 'Nancy' on view where people from all over the province would come to see it."⁶¹

Within weeks of Price's announcement the local movement gained an important supporter in Collingwood mayor, J. Robbins Arthur. The first indication of Arthur's involvement appears in a resolution passed by the Collingwood town council, copies of which the mayor sent to the premier, Treasurer Price, and local MPP, J.E. Jamieson, on 14 September. The resolution began by acknowledging the council's appreciation for the province's decision to salvage the wreck. However, it "urge[d] upon the Government the advisability of leaving the historic relic in its

original setting, preserving it on Nancy Island, or such other suitable spot that may be selected at Wasaga Beach."⁶² The involvement of the Collingwood town council represented the first substantial political challenge to the Toronto plan and its concerns were no doubt taken seriously. Collingwood was the largest nearby town to Wasaga Beach, a major regional centre, and would stand to benefit from any increase in tourism in the area.

As Conboy had suspected, David Williams, president of the Huron Institute, was also among the most vocal advocates in favour of retaining the *Nancy* in Wasaga Beach. Soon after the mayor's intervention, Williams began using his position as co-publisher of the Collingwood *Bulletin* to drum up local support. In its 8 October edition, the *Bulletin* denounced the government's apparent reasoning that since "a Toronto man discovered the hull" that city was entitled to "its possession." "Why," the editorial asked, "should a boat which participated in a desperate struggle for national honour be removed from the scene of its achievement? The battle was of tremendous importance to the struggling colonists and its effect upon the nation was of untold importance." The *Bulletin* argued further that the recent growth of tourism in the area added urgency to preserving the *Nancy* in its place of glory. The Nottawasaga region, the *Bulletin* argued, was "awakening to the fact that its historical

⁶⁰ AO, Sneath to Price, Snider Papers, 29 August 1925.

⁶¹ AO, Price to Sneath, Snider Papers, 2 September 1925

⁶² AO, Town of Collingwood to Ferguson, Ferguson Correspondence, F511, RG3-6-0-739, 14 September 1925.

shrines have too long been neglected” and that “the great development of touring during the past few years has served as a stimulant to historical research.” The *Bulletin* then directly countered the claim that an urban setting was preferable for its ability to reach the largest possible audience:

One of the Toronto papers asserts that one thousand people will see the hull if removed to Toronto to every one if it is allowed to remain in its own glorified grave. That comparison may or may not be correct, but this neighbourhood is becoming more attractive every year.

Indeed heritage tourism, the *Bulletin* suggested, had the potential to unlock the region’s hidden past. “[T]he county as a whole should resist any attempt to remove the ‘Nancy,’” the editorial concluded, since Wasaga Beach was part of network of places, including the Naval Establishment at Penetanguishene and Fort Willow at the headwaters of the Nottawasaga, which would serve “as a pilgrimage” alongside the region’s “natural attractions.”⁶³

Regional development through tourism had long been a concern of the Huron Institute. In its inaugural report to the Ontario Historical Society for 1909, the curator of the Institute’s museum, James Morris, noted that the Institute’s chief objective was to “retain in our possession relics and records of the early days of this part of the country.” Colling-

wood was beginning to welcome “many visitors during the year,” he added, and thus the museum “should be considered one of the attractions of Collingwood and our ambition is to make it so.”⁶⁴ Similarly, a month prior to the discovery of the *Nancy*, in an annual report addressed to Premier Ferguson, who was the honorary president of the OHS, Williams attempted to discourage the government from discontinuing its yearly grant to the Institute, arguing that the Institute had become an increasingly popular attraction for visitors to the area.⁶⁵

Nonetheless, while the Nottawasaga interests organized, Fraser pressed ahead with the government’s plan. In fact, his activities and correspondence through the fall and winter of 1925 suggest that Fraser felt that it was imperative to raise and transport the hull as quickly as possible. On 18 September, in order to set the plan in motion, Fraser had approached representatives of the CNE and requested a meeting with its directors. A month later he presented his proposal to the board. The directors were enthusiastic and a clearly pleased Fraser wrote to Price with the news:

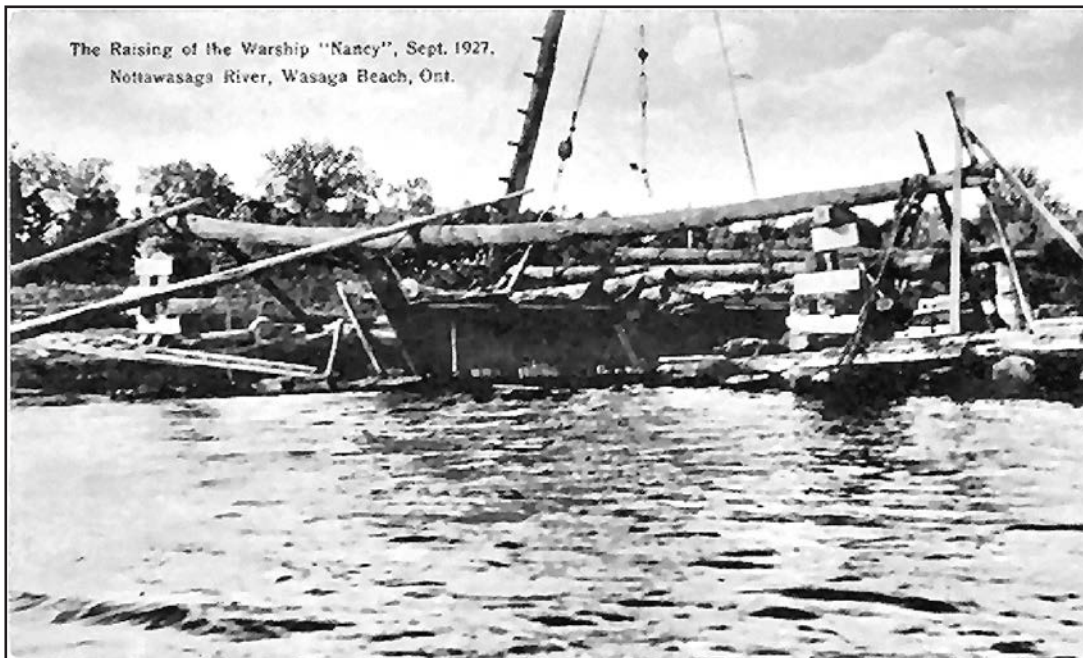
The Directors unanimously accepted the proposal and concurred in the view that the part played by the ‘Nancy’ in the 1812 war was such as to justify them to expect that the hull would prove of educational and historical value with respect to the people of Ontario annually visiting the Exhibition.⁶⁶

⁶³ *Bulletin*, 8 October 1925.

⁶⁴ James Morris, “Report of Curator,” in Huron Institute, *Papers and Records*, Vol. I (Collingwood: Huron Institute, 1909), 92-93.

⁶⁵ AO, Huron Institute to Ferguson, Ferguson Correspondence, F511, RG3-6, 18 June 1925.

⁶⁶ AO, Fraser to Price, Snider Papers, 14 October 1925; see also *Star*, 14 October 1925, 3.



Postcard featuring the raising of the Nancy, September 1927. Courtesy of the Simcoe County Archives.

All that remained to do then was to arrange to have the hull raised and transported.

To that purpose, on 17 October Fraser contacted William Finlayson, MPP for Midland, and asked for the names of “one or two reliable salvage firms.”⁶⁷ The two men agreed to meet at the Wasaga Inn on the 26th. At their meeting, Finlayson introduced Fraser to D.G. Dobson, manager of the Midland-based Georgian Bay Shipbuilding and Wrecking Company. The men, who also included a Mr. Hackman of the engineers’ branch of the provincial department of public works, then surveyed the site of the excavation. Following a brief inspection, Dobson confirmed that the ship could be “quick-

ly and satisfactorily raised at a reasonable cost” and Fraser thereupon directed the contractor to submit a formal tender.⁶⁸ After Fraser received the estimate on the 29th, he wrote to Price indicating that Dobson had proposed to “raise the hull and load it on the cars at Midland for transportation to Toronto for \$1,500.00, that is \$1,000.00 less than the tentative offer made by Mr. Freeman of Wasaga Beach.” In Fraser’s opinion, Dobson’s offer seemed reasonable. Moreover, he suggested to Price that if the tender was accepted, “certain conditions as to the preservation of relics, etc., [should] be inserted in the agreement and that the work should be commenced with as little delay as possible while the weather con-

⁶⁷ AO, Fraser to Finlayson, Snider Papers, 17 October 1925.

⁶⁸ AO, Fraser to Price, Snider Papers, 28 October 1925.

ditions are favourable.”⁶⁹

Despite Fraser’s progress, however, the involvement of Mayor Arthur and the mounting pressure from the Nottawasaga region appears to have raised doubts in Price’s mind. When Price wrote to the archivist on 18 November acknowledging Fraser’s updates with regards to the CNE scheme and the salvaging plans, the treasurer sounded a cautionary note: “There has been considerable opposition in the northern district to the bringing of this hull to Toronto,” he wrote, adding, “I am just trying to get the matter worked out so that there will be as little friction as possible, and I think it could be brought down next Spring. It would then give plenty of time so that it could be used at the Exhibition.”⁷⁰ Upon receiving this communication, Fraser wrote to Dobson postponing their salvaging arrangement.⁷¹ Two weeks later, however, Price wrote again to Fraser with a more urgent appeal for caution: “It might be that it would be better to give the contract to a Collingwood firm, or to some people who live in that vicinity. In that way we might offset to a certain extent the opposition which has been made manifest to the removal of this hull from its present surroundings.”⁷² In effect, Price had forestalled Fraser’s arrangements indefinitely.

With the collapse of the Toronto scheme the Nottawasaga group formed

a “Nancy Committee,” with Mayor Robbins as chair and including David Williams, J.E. Jamieson, and C.H.J. Snider, now a convert to the local movement, to push ahead with their own plan. As early as July 1926 members of this group were active lobbying the government to supply the funds needed to raise the hull. At a conference at Wasaga Beach on 6 July, at which provincial and local politicians and concerned citizens met to “discuss the destiny of the *Nancy*,” Price committed the government to this support “if assurance is given that local enterprise will guarantee its preservation from decay.” Likely anticipating a provincial election call, and perhaps mindful of potential damage to the government over its planned abandonment of prohibition, Price announced, “The Government has no desire to impose its idea upon the people of Simcoe. Rather, it desires co-operation.” Williams suggested that this assurance could be met if the County council agreed to accept “wardenship for the future [maintenance]” of the artefact. In making his own case, Arthur repeated the tourism argument: “Interest in historical relics and changes in transportation had obviated the necessity of centralizing in order that exhibits might be seen,” he concluded.⁷³

A pre-election cabinet shuffle on 19 October 1926 saw Price transferred to

⁶⁹ AO, Fraser to Price, Snider Papers, Snider Papers, 7 November 1925.

⁷⁰ AO, Price to Fraser, Snider Papers, 18 November 1925.

⁷¹ AO, Fraser to Dobson, Snider Papers, 19 November 1925.

⁷² AO, Price to Fraser, Snider Papers, 3 December 1925.

⁷³ *Globe*, 7 July 1926, 1; see also *Canadian Annual Review of Public Affairs, 1926-1927* (Toronto: Canadian review Co., 1927), 541; on the likelihood of an election and the prohibition issue see Oliver, *G. Howard Ferguson*, 269.



Postcard image of Nancy Island with the original shelter (undated). A footbridge now connects the island, which has been substantially enlarged to accommodate the new museum and theatre, to the west bank of the Nottawasaga River (at rear of photo). Courtesy of the Simcoe County Archives.

the role of attorney general.⁷⁴ This appears to have negated his promise. So following the election, which resulted in a Conservative majority, the Nancy Committee applied to the new treasurer, J.D. Monteith, regarding the hull. Monteith met with a deputation from the committee in January 1927 and agreed to consider the matter. In a letter following-up the meeting, Arthur assured the minister that his committee would carry out “the wishes of the Ontario government and such other public bodies as are interested in the raising and preserving (and possibly restoring) the hull of the ‘Nancy.’”⁷⁵

Arthur then arranged to have a copy of Snider’s recently published book, *The Story of the Nancy and Other Eighteen-Twelvers*, sent to Monteith.⁷⁶

By the end of the month, the treasurer reported to Arthur that he had approved their proposal and arranged with the department of public works “regarding the securing of data and submitting of estimates for further work in connection with the raising of the *Nancy*.”⁷⁷ The committee greeted this news with considerable enthusiasm, for it marked the beginning of the process that would see the vessel raised and a museum established on

⁷⁴ See Oliver, *G. Howard Ferguson*, 269, 275.

⁷⁵ AO, Arthur to Monteith, Correspondence of the Treasurer of Ontario, RG6-2 Box 21, 21 January 1927.

⁷⁶ AO, Arthur to Monteith, Correspondence of the Treasurer of Ontario, 21 January 1927.

⁷⁷ AO, Monteith to Arthur, Correspondence of the Treasurer of Ontario, 26 January 1927.

the island under the ongoing stewardship of the Nancy Committee and the county.⁷⁸ In fact Snider, who had previously argued in favour of the CNE scheme, now sketched a framework for a Nancy Island museum, which the committee forwarded to Monteith, and which would ultimately serve as a rough blueprint for the project. Finally, by the spring of 1927, based on the works department's estimates, the government voted the funds to raise and house the *Nancy*. Excavation proceeded through the summer and on 27 October 1927 workers fully exhumed the hull and placed it on the island.⁷⁹ Local builders erected a temporary shed to house it and on 14 August 1928 the Nancy Museum officially opened its doors to the public.⁸⁰

Ironically, the facilities were poorly equipped to attract or impress visitors. In June 1928, prior to the museum's official opening, the Toronto *Telegram* reprinted an article from the Meaford *Mirror* that questioned why, after so much fanfare, the *Nancy* was now "stored away in a tin barn on 'Nancy' Island" where it would be left to "crumble away in dry rot." "The building...is a crude affair and quite unattractive," the *Mirror* noted. "It is certainly not calculated to attract the admiration of tourists and summer visitors."⁸¹ The

committee made periodic appeals to government for funds to improve the site. In 1929, for instance, the Committee urged the federal government to take over custodianship, without success, and in 1936 requested federal funds to beautify the island, "including a new landing wharf for boats, planting of shrubs and trees, filling in larger areas of the island, construction of walks and painting of the building housing the *Nancy*."⁸² Nonetheless, it was only with the interest of the provincially appointed Huronia District Development Council (HDDC) in 1964, which advised the minister of tourism and information, that government gave serious consideration to rehabilitating the site. This activity was part of a wider provincial effort to utilize historical culture to redevelop small centres and enhance their tourism potential, the most notable examples of which were the rebuilding of Midland's Sainte-Marie-among-the-Hurons and Penetanguishene's Naval Establishment.⁸³ Finally, in 1968, the provincial government assumed full control of Nancy Island and with an infusion of money created the Museum of the Upper Great Lakes, which opened its doors in 1969. By 1985, the province had constructed the present facilities, the William H.

⁷⁸ AO, Arthur to Monteith, Correspondence of the Treasurer of Ontario, 9 February 1927.

⁷⁹ *Canadian Annual Review of Public Affairs, 1927-28* (Toronto; Canadian Review Co., 1928), 577.

⁸⁰ See AO, Arthur to Monteith, Correspondence of the Treasurer of Ontario, 9 February 1927; AO, Monteith to Jamieson, Correspondence of the Treasurer of Ontario, 22 April 1927; see also AO, "Memorandum of Expenditures," Correspondence of the Treasurer of Ontario, 10 August 1928.

⁸¹ *Telegram*, 14 June 1928.

⁸² *Toronto Mail & Empire*, 17 January 1929; *Globe*, 15 December 1936, 15.

⁸³ On this movement as it pertained to Sainte-Marie-among-the-Hurons see Alan Gordon, "Heritage and Authenticity: The Case of Ontario's Sainte-Marie-among-the-Hurons," *Canadian Historical Review* 85, 3 (September 2004): 514-516.

Cranston Electronic Theatre—named after the first president of the HDDC—an interpretive centre, and a climate controlled pavilion to house the hull.⁸⁴

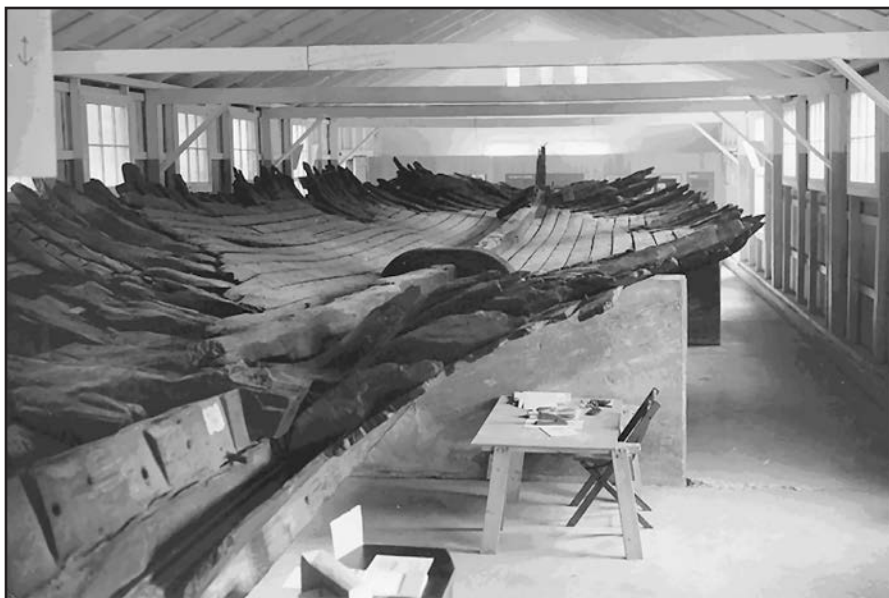
The slow development of the Nancy Island site is revealing for what it suggests about the debate over control of the ship's remains. More pertinent perhaps than any actual economic return on the *Nancy* was the cultural politics the debate encapsulated. It was a politics shot through with regional conflict, but one that also spoke to an important way in which Ontarians confronted the great changes taking place in their society. Above all, the debate suggests the importance Ontarians attached in the interwar period to utilizing heritage attractions not only as economic capital but also as embodiments of shared meanings linking Canadians to a common past. In the case of the *Nancy*, far from being neutral these shared meanings provided the basis for the political struggle over the artefact as an object that was central to modern spatialized conceptions of identity, both local and national. The Toronto interests saw value in utilizing the artefact to build an urban historical collection through which Canadians might learn something and identify with their shared history as members of a British nation. These concerns reflected the tendency for urban Canadian cultural elites such as Fraser to see the building of museums as a more general project of modernity aimed at

ordering the nation's past through education and as an exercise in urban centralization. However, the integrative force of liberal capitalism during this period of automobility and the widespread value attributed to the *Nancy* as a romantic symbol of national achievement also ensured that the centralizing goals of the Toronto plan were met with countervailing efforts to fix the legacy of the *Nancy* to the Nottawasaga region. Here local journalists, politicians, and interested citizens argued that the artefact was crucial to building a sense of place through its connection to national identity and to enhancing the cultural capital of the region. In their efforts, the local group derived grudging if ultimately decisive state support, prefiguring later state efforts to use heritage sites as part of more comprehensive development strategies built around the possibilities of an intra-provincial tourism economy.⁸⁵

Nonetheless, as the example of the *Nancy* suggests, the connection between the commerce of tourism and historical meanings of place can be a fickle one. With the rapid post-Second World War commercial development of Wasaga Beach as a tourist resort catering to urban youth, working-class families, and a growing legion of summer cottagers, many of whom were increasingly drawn from new immigrant communities who did not harbour emotional attachments to Britain,⁸⁶ the historical meanings that historians and local boosters origi-

⁸⁴ Skeaff and Gurr, *H.M.S. Nancy*, 12; on Cranston and the HDDC see Gordon, "Heritage and Authenticity," 512-513.

⁸⁵ Gordon, "Heritage and Authenticity," 515.



The burnt remains of the hull of HMS Nancy in the original museum shed, Nancy Island, Wasaga Beach, Ontario (undated). Courtesy of the Simcoe County Archives.

nally attached to the Nancy Island site had become anachronistic. The broader context for this process was the slow but steady postwar collapse of the British connection as a central pillar of Canadian identity.⁸⁷ This in turn was reflected in a growing detachment on the part of professional historians from the War of 1812 (what some have taken to calling the “forgotten war”⁸⁸) and the thorough disintegration of the myth of 1812 as a loyalist war at the heart of British-Canadian identity. Barry Gough’s recent history of the *Nancy*, for instance, avoids

any overt claims to wider shared meanings and national identity that were present as late as Pierre Berton’s 1981 account.⁸⁹ Rather, for Gough the story of the *Nancy* is simply a historical curiosity—“a reminder...of a world now lost” and “an enchanting monument to past ages of maritime endeavour.”⁹⁰ No longer central to a romantic conception of British Canadian national identity, the story of *HMS Nancy* and the “scene of its achievement” thus remain very much a history and a historic place in search of a new narrative of the War of 1812.

⁸⁶ Wolfe, “Wasaga Beach,” 62-65.

⁸⁷ Phillip Buckner, “The Long Good-Bye: Canadians and the British Connection,” in Phillip Buckner and R. Douglas Francis, eds., *Rediscovering the British World* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2005); José E. Iguarta, *The Other Quiet Revolution: National Identities in English Canada, 1945-71* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2006).

⁸⁸ Donald R. Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict* (Urbana: Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois, 1989).

⁸⁹ Berton, *Flames across the Border*, 311-312.

⁹⁰ Gough, *Through Water, Ice & Fire*, 12.