

# Turning the Light on The Ontario Historical Society and Museum Governance

Robin Nelson

Volume 113, numéro 1, spring 2021

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1076077ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1076077ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (imprimé)

2371-4654 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Nelson, R. (2021). Turning the Light on: The Ontario Historical Society and Museum Governance. *Ontario History*, 113(1), 41–53.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1076077ar>

Résumé de l'article

*Depuis 1953, la société historique de l'Ontario (OHS) a joué un rôle important dans l'établissement du cadre législatif et de formation dans lesquels opèrent les musées de l'Ontario, en fournissant les premiers ateliers de formation muséaux au Canada, en créant un bulletin d'information pour les connecter, et en plaidant avec succès pour le soutien provincial. Dans cet article, nous allons examiner le rôle auto-défini de l'organisation dans la gestion des musées depuis la mise en place, en 1981, d'une politique provinciale des musées, en demandant : comment le rôle de l'OHS a-t-il évolué, pourquoi et de quelle façon ce travail contribue-t-il à soutenir les musées de l'Ontario en général? Nous allons aussi examiner le rôle que joue l'OHS dans la publication, la formation, et au plaidoyer durant trois périodes. Plus récemment, l'OHS se concentre à renforcer leurs capacités en raison de la fusion des municipalités, du désinvestissement des ressources patrimoniales par les gouvernements et de la diminution du soutien gouvernemental aux organismes de services. Leur rôle s'inscrit dans un réseau plus large de relations visant à soutenir les musées sur la base de la valeur supposée de la préservation du patrimoine et du travail muséal plutôt que sur un appel à l'excellence.*

# TURNING THE LIGHT ON

## The Ontario Historical Society and Museum Governance

by Robin Nelson

The Ontario Historical Society (OHS) helped establish the legislative and training framework within which Ontario's community museums operate. Acting on behalf of the OHS, affiliate members with museums successfully advocated for a provincial operating grant to community museums in 1953 and provincial museum advisors in 1959.<sup>1</sup> They also established the OHS's Local Museums Committee in 1953 to improve museums in the province,<sup>2</sup> providing some of the earliest training work-

shops for museum workers in Ontario and establishing a newsletter to connect museums. Since the establishment of the Ontario Museum Association (OMA) in 1972 and a provincial museum policy in 1981, the OHS has played a less prominent role supporting museums. Ontario's community museums can now access services from multiple levels of government, government agencies, and a range of nonprofit associations.

Considering the diversity of assistance now available, this paper examines

---

<sup>1</sup> At a 1948 OHS annual general meeting, the OHS executive and membership supported T.P. Grubbe (the president of the affiliated York Pioneers) resolution to lobby the provincial government to make funds available to community museums. Grubbe then lobbied the province on behalf of the OHS. The province began providing operating grants to community museums after additional lobbying from the founder of the Huronia House Museum. At a 1958 annual meeting, OHS members with museums passed a resolution that the province provide an advisory service to museums. They had also advocated for the province to fund an advisory service through the society in 1955 and 1957. For more information on resolutions regarding museum advocacy made at OHS annual or executive meetings during the 1950s and the OHS's early work regarding museums see Mary Tivy, "The Local History Museum in Ontario: An Intellectual History" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Waterloo, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> OHS affiliate members with museums, including T.P. Grubbe, originally formed an OHS subcommittee for local history museums in 1948. However, the committee became dormant and was revitalized in 1953, which is the date the OHS commemorates as the establishment of the Museums Committee. See Dorothy Duncan, "Museums Committee Turns 35! Part 1: The Committee Forms," *OHS Bulletin*, 56 (1988), 8.

## *Abstract*

*Since 1953, the Ontario Historical Society (OHS) has played an important role in establishing the legislative and training framework within which museums in Ontario operate, providing the first recorded museum training workshops in Canada, establishing a newsletter to connect museums, and successfully advocating for provincial support to museums. This article considers the organization's self-defined role in museum governance since the establishment of a provincial museum policy in 1981, asking: how has the OHS's role evolved and why and how does their work contribute and relate to support for museums in Ontario more broadly? It examines the OHS's role in publishing, training, and advocacy or capacity building in three periods. Most recently, the OHS's focus has shifted to capacity building due to municipal amalgamation, governments' divestment of heritage resources, and decreased government support for service organizations. Their role takes place within a broader network of relationships aiming to support museums based on the assumed value of heritage preservation and museum work rather than a call for excellence.*

**Résumé:** *Depuis 1953, la société historique de l'Ontario (OHS) a joué un rôle important dans l'établissement du cadre législatif et de formation dans lesquels opèrent les musées de l'Ontario, en fournissant les premiers ateliers de formation muséaux au Canada, en créant un bulletin d'information pour les connecter, et en plaidant avec succès pour le soutien provincial. Dans cet article, nous allons examiner le rôle auto-défini de l'organisation dans la gestion des musées depuis la mise en place, en 1981, d'une politique provinciale des musées, en demandant : comment le rôle de l'OHS a-t-il évolué, pourquoi et de quelle façon ce travail contribue-t-il à soutenir les musées de l'Ontario en général? Nous allons aussi examiner le rôle que joue l'OHS dans la publication, la formation, et au plaidoyer durant trois périodes. Plus récemment, l'OHS se concentre à renforcer leurs capacités en raison de la fusion des municipalités, du désinvestissement des ressources patrimoniales par les gouvernements et de la diminution du soutien gouvernemental aux organismes de services. Leur rôle s'inscrit dans un réseau plus large de relations visant à soutenir les musées sur la base de la valeur supposée de la préservation du patrimoine et du travail muséal plutôt que sur un appel à l'excellence.*

the OHS's relationship with community museums since the establishment of a provincial museum policy, asking two interrelated questions. First, how has the OHS's self-defined role evolved and why? Second, how does their work contribute and relate to support for museums in Ontario more broadly?

According to the OHS's Executive Director Rob Leverty, understanding

the Society's corporate history is crucial to understanding who they are and what they still do today.<sup>3</sup> As such, after briefly outlining the research approach, this article describes the OHS's history of support for museums to better understand their relationship to museum governance since 1981. In particular, the Society has a contemporary role in training, publishing, and capacity building, incorporating

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Robert Leverty, 17 January 2018. Toronto, ON.

nonprofit museums and related institutions. After identifying why incorporation has become increasingly important, the discussion considers the Society's capacity building role within Ontario museum governance more broadly. The conclusion argues the OHS has a key and unique position supporting community museums as part of a support network that defines museum work as inherently valuable.

### Research Approach<sup>4</sup>

Ontario museum policy most obviously refers to the provincial operating grant (1953), museum advisors (1959), museum policy (1981), and the associated standards of operation (1984, 2000). However, as noted above, there are a range of government actors and other organizations that enable and support the province's community museums, including provincial associations like the OHS. As such, this article examines governance rather than policy. Museum governance is the broader network of relationships supporting museums, including government, business, and civil society.

In Ontario museum governance,

there are two overlapping and intersecting goals, which have led to distinct relationships. First, community museums deserve support because they collectively tell the province's story. In the absence of a provincial museum focused on the province's history, the provincial museum advisors, the OMA, and the OHS have a perceived responsibility to help museums preserve and interpret local history. Second, some believe community museums need external pressure to encourage excellence. Without requirements tied to funding and guidance from advisors or associations, museums will not improve or meet minimal operating standards.

The difference and co-existence of these justifications for governance is best articulated through a comparison of the provincial Heritage Organizational Development Grant (HODG) and the Community Museum Operating Grant (CMOG). The province reformed CMOG in the 1980s, adding standards as a requirement for those accessing the grant. Organizations that could not meet the new standards moved to HODG, which had fewer restrictions.<sup>5</sup> CMOG worked to support excellence and sus-

<sup>4</sup> The broader research project has taken a policy translation approach, drawing on the sociology of translation and actor network theory. For information on the approach see: Michel Callon, "Some Elements of a Sociology of Translation," in *Power, Action and Belief: A New Sociology of Knowledge?*, edited by John Law (London: Routledge, 1986), 196–223.

<sup>5</sup> The movement of some museums to HODG was expected and encouraged. A 1984 news release on the standards stated, "Non-profit organizations, such as small museums run by historical societies, who may not be able to comply with the new guidelines, will be eligible for funding under the Heritage Organization Development Grant Program" (See: Ministry of Citizenship and Culture. 1984, August 31. "News release: New Standards for Community Museums in Ontario." Archives of Ontario (AG) RG47-51 B310103 standards for community museums). However, the exact number of heritage organizations operating museums that have left CMOG for HODG since the introduction of standards is unclear. Provincial background notes from 1984 states "10 very small museums" qualified for funding under HODG

tain a network of museums adhering to a particular definition of museums, while HODG aimed to support local action more broadly, seeing value in the work of community-based heritage organizations. These programs have continued to reflect distinct approaches to supporting heritage with different application requirements. For example, in 2004 CMOG applicants sent documents and answered surveys to demonstrate they met three standards—interpretation and education, exhibition, and finance. The same year, HODG applicants were asked for minutes from their annual meeting and financial statements to demonstrate they engaged in outreach activities.

To examine the OHS's role within these concurrent and overlapping networks, this article draws from selected interviews with key stakeholders conducted as part of a doctoral dissertation on Ontario community museum governance.<sup>6</sup> It also considers OHS publications from

1953 onwards. Consulted documents include the Museums Committee/Section newsletters (1953-1984), Museum Workshop reports (1954-1970), special publications (various), the OHS Bulletin (1978-2018), Ontario History (1955-2019), and annual reports (2011-2017).

## OHS and Museum Governance Across Time

### *From the Leader to a Leader: 1888 to 1984*

A group of historical societies founded the OHS in 1888 and quickly established themselves in three roles—publishing, incorporation, and advocacy. In 1898, the Province gave them \$500 to start publishing Ontario History, which publishes articles related to Ontario's past. In 1899, the province passed An Act to Incorporate the Ontario Historical Society, giving the OHS the power to incorporate affiliates. Around the same

---

(see: Marty Brent, "Background Notes: Minister's Speech to the Ontario Museum Association October 26, 1984, Sudbury." AO, RG47-51 B3100093 OMA.). A provincial backgrounder on community museums from around 1986 states, "To date one museum has withdrawn from the grant program by choice; 11 have been shifted, most by choice, to the Heritage Organization Development Program, and 204 are meeting the standards" (See: Background on Community Museums. AO, RG47-108 B234377 Heritage Staff Meeting Minutes 1601-13-4). However, the continued movement of museums from one program to the other and/or museums leaving CMOG due to the standards requirements was discussed in author interviews with advisors who worked from the 1970s to 2010s. Further, a 2003/2004 list of 148 HODG recipients includes 18 organizations with museums explicitly in their name (See: Heritage Organization Development Grant (HODG) Program 2003-2004. AO, RG47-41 b932555 HODG 2004-2005 general file). However, that number does not reflect the total number of HODG recipients operating a museum or similar collections-based institutions as historical societies listed also operate museums. For example, the Beaverton-Thorah-Eldon Historical Society Inc. is listed, and they operate the Beaver River Museum.

<sup>6</sup> The dissertation project involved interviews with 29 individuals. Of particular relevance to this paper, two OHS executive directors and an employee of the OHS who works with museums were interviewed. A retired museum advisor who worked closely with the OHS and currently writes a column on museums in their bulletin was also interviewed. Four OMA past presidents interviewed discussed a relationship with the OHS. The director of a small nonprofit museum that does not receive CMOG or HODG but has a relationship with the OHS was also interviewed.

time, the OHS launched a campaign for a provincial museum. After the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) became a provincial museum, but not one devoted to provincial heritage, the OHS began more actively encouraging the formation of historical societies and other heritage groups with museums focused on preserving Ontario's past.<sup>7</sup> By 1932, the Miers Report noted that fifteen of the OHS's twenty-three affiliates had their own museums, which represented over 10% of recorded museums open to the public in Canada at the time.<sup>8</sup>

In 1953,<sup>9</sup> the OHS became more directly and explicitly involved in museum governance when museum workers formally organized at an OHS conference to set up an active museums committee, which became the Museum Section in 1956 and the Museums Committee in 1985. The Section aimed to assist local museums in every possible way.<sup>10</sup> In 1962, they articulated their purpose as to "ascertain the needs and desires of the museums of the province, establish standards, exchange ideas, disseminate information and unite all in a fellowship of museums."<sup>11</sup> Originally, they did so through three tasks: publishing a news-

letter, offering training opportunities to address museum problems, and preparing a list of local museums for the provincial government. In so doing, they continued to enact two of the three roles that the OHS had laid out in 1888 and established a role in professional development.

The Section published information for and on museums, building museum capacity and working to form a community. Most notably, it published a newsletter until 1984, which circulated helpful information and news from museums across the province. Through the newsletter, museums could learn what others were doing and copy each other.<sup>12</sup> As such, the Section defined the newsletter as of paramount importance to fostering museum health and growth.<sup>13</sup> In addition, it distributed relevant booklets and pamphlets, such as a pamphlet titled "Local Museums in Ontario."<sup>14</sup>

The Section also published reports on their annual workshops. It held its first workshop in 1954, encouraging museums to participate because "no one knows everything, but everyone knows something."<sup>15</sup> The workshops reflected the Section's aim to improve Ontario's

<sup>7</sup> Duncan, "Museums Committee Turns 35."

<sup>8</sup> Sir Henry Miers and S.F. Markham, *A Report on the Museums of Canada* (Edinburgh: T. and A. Constable, 1932).

<sup>9</sup> As noted above, a subcommittee for local history museums originally formed in 1948 but had quickly become dormant.

<sup>10</sup> Local Museums Committee, "No Title," *News Letter* 1 (1953).

<sup>11</sup> Verna B. Taylor, "Our Aim and Basis," *Newsletter* 85 (1962): 2.

<sup>12</sup> William R. Yeager, "Museum News from Around Ontario," *Newsletter* 154 (1977): 2.

<sup>13</sup> Andrew W. Taylor and Verna B. Taylor, *Newsletter* 100 (1965).

<sup>14</sup> Dorothy Drever, "Local Museums in Ontario" (Toronto, 1955).

<sup>15</sup> Ruth Home, *News Letter* 5 (1954).

museums. For example, they circulated and discussed the idea of provincial standards as early as 1955 when the director of the ROM made a presentation promoting standards in small museums.<sup>16</sup> There were also presentations on how to appeal to tourists (1954), earn publicity (1960), as well as interpret and present information (1963).

The provincial museum advisors, which OHS members advocated for,<sup>17</sup> often made presentations at the workshops. They worked closely with museums and the Section providing them with a “direct link to the powerhouse”<sup>18</sup>—that is, the provincial government. The Section then served as a “watchdog,” pointing out museum problems in the province and asking how they could be address

In short, the OHS’s early work helped establish museums and the frameworks within which they operated. The historical societies associated with the OHS laid the political groundwork from which museums in Ontario emerged.<sup>19</sup> They collected artifacts and began museums. Working with these societies and museums more broadly, the OHS helped circulate information and improve museums. They also fought for a provincial

policy framework, including the operating grant (1953) and advisors (1959). Their successes changed the landscape of museum governance, leading to support for community museums in the absence of a provincial museum.

In 1971, members of the Canadian Museums Association and the OHS’s Museum Section formed an independent provincial association, devoted to training museum workers—that is, the Ontario Museum Association (OMA). As the OMA developed a training program, the OHS circulated information on the new association, but continued to offer its own training and resources for members. During the 1970s, both associations acted as advocates for community museums, working together against the potential elimination of the provincial operating grant<sup>20</sup> and for a museum policy with standards. In 1973, they held a joint annual meeting and workshop, which served as a starting point for discussions on the eventual provincial museum policy. OHS representatives then went to the Ministry of Culture and Recreation’s events to support the development of policy, regulations, and standards.<sup>21</sup> After rounds of discussions and

<sup>16</sup> T. A. Heinrich, “Standards in a Small Museum,” *Museum Workshop*, 1955, 7–9.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with V. N. Styromo. 24 August 2017. Aurora, ON.

<sup>18</sup> Roberta Gilbank, *Newsletter* 143 (1973).

<sup>19</sup> Leverty, Interview.

<sup>20</sup> In particular, the grant program was threatened by efforts to “deconditionalization” provincial-municipal transfer payments. In 1974 and 1978, the treasurer and a grants reform committee proposed eliminating the museum grant and including the funding as part of a larger payment to municipalities without a requirement for the municipality to operate a museum. For more information on “deconditionalization” and the OHS’ response, see: Roberta Gilbank, *Newsletter* 147 (1974).; William R. Yeager, *Newsletter* 160 (1978).

<sup>21</sup> Duncan, “The Ontario Historical.”

community meetings, the province announced a community museum policy in 1981 and associated standards in 1984. The Section had provided opportunities to discuss and call for standards then supported their development, contributing to governance for excellence.

### One Amongst Many: 1985 to 2007

Following the creation of the OMA and museum policy, the OHS continued to occupy its established roles with some changes. When the Museum Section reorganized as a committee in 1985, it stopped publishing the newsletter, which signaled the less prominent role the OHS began to play in museum governance. The Society was no longer the only provincial association providing services to museums and, following the release of the provincial museum standards (1984), the provincial museum advisors were more active across the province, providing targeted training and advice. However, the OHS continued to have a “grassroots role,” helping “the little guy.”<sup>22</sup>

Despite the elimination of the newsletter, the OHS still published relevant news and advice. It began circulating additional museum-related content and a Museums Committee column in the *OHS Bulletin*. For example, the *OHS Bulletin* circulated short passages about museums’ experiences. In the late 1990s, some museums faced the possibility that their municipal funders or parent

organizations would amalgamate. The Winter 1997 issue, therefore, contained an article arguing community museums in an amalgamation area should write a position paper to defend themselves. The OHS also released special publications for museums. In 1994, the Committee published *Past Reflections: Museum Clippings*, which gathered a range of relevant articles, essays, and reports on Museums. *Ontario History* had issues dedicated to Ontario Museums in 1994 and 2002.

The OHS printed special publications, such as “Serve it Forth!” and “Deck the Halls,” in conjunction with training activities. While the OHS was no longer the only or primary source of training for museums in Ontario, they continued to play a role. After the province released the provincial museum standards in 1984, the OHS offered workshops to help museums meet the standards. Since the OMA provided longer, more extensive training, the OHS gave one-day workshops.<sup>23</sup> The Museums Committee arranged for training on other issues according to expressed need, such as Money Matters! (1999) as well as the Freedom of Information and Privacy Act (2004).

As seen with training, the OHS stopped leading advocacy for museums, but remained a recognized organization representing museum interests. As such, they continued to participate in government-led consultations. For example, they submitted a report on the

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Marilyn Havelka. 14 February 2018. Chayuga, ON.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Dorothy Duncan. 18 July 2017. Orillia, ON.



standards to the Province in 1991 during a review of the museum program, noting that further standards were not needed but guidelines would be helpful.<sup>24</sup> Following a meeting with Ministry of Citizenship, Culture and Recreation officials, the Museums Committee held a forum on living with the CMOG grant in 1996, focusing on what form the partnership between the Province and Committee should take.<sup>25</sup> In 1999, the Ministry consulted with the OHS and other provincial heritage organizations as they changed the CMOG program, asking the OMA and OHS to provide names for targeted consultations. Representatives of the OHS then attended consultations and subsequent workshops, making reports through the OHS Bulletin.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, OHS representatives attended events and supported calls by other organizations for action more broadly. For example, following cuts to the federal Museums Assistance Program (MAP) in 2006, the Museums Committee supported the CMA-led call for a new Canadian museum policy and federal investment in museums.<sup>27</sup>

In short, from the implementation of the standards into the twenty-first century, the OHS's role in museum governance became less prominent. Other or-

ganizations, such as the OMA or CMA, more actively and explicitly supported museums. However, the OHS continued to respond to its members' needs. In particular, the OHS helped build competence around the provincial standards and supported calls for change that would strengthen museums' capacity.

### A Unique Role in the Present: 2007 to today

The OHS continues to see itself as a viable organization serving Ontario community museums. In particular, it takes a blue collar, working class approach to museums. The OHS only works where it is invited, and it is "overwhelmingly invited,"<sup>28</sup> in particular by small and rural organizations. An OHS employee noted, they work with the "small regional rural museums that are usually run by volunteers and maybe one part-time staff member."<sup>29</sup> While the Museums Committee is less active than in the past, it continues to provide some advice, direct members to resources, as well as provide letters of support. More generally, the OHS continues to have role in publishing, training, and capacity building through incorporation.

The OHS publishes museum-specific

---

<sup>24</sup> OHS Standards Review Committee, "The Review of Standards for Community Museums in Ontario: The Report of the OHS Museums Standards Review Committee," in *Past Reflections: Museum Clippings* (Willowdale: Ontario Historical Society, 1994), 69–77.

<sup>25</sup> OHS, "Forum Discusses Future for Museum Community in Ontario," *OHS Bulletin* 104 (1996), 1–5.

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, OHS, "Community Museum Meetings," *OHS Bulletin* 127 (2000), 6.

<sup>27</sup> OHS, "Urgent: Add Your Name to the Online Museum Cuts Petition," *OHS Bulletin* 157 (2006).

<sup>28</sup> Leverty, Interview.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Heather Anderson. 17 January 2018. Toronto, ON.

information in a more limited capacity. For example, the 2008 September issue of the Bulletin included information on the Meaford Museum's Trillium grant for accessibility, the Windsor Wood Carving Museum, and the Canadian Clock Museum. Their "Access Beyond the Ramp" series included an article titled "Programming at Toronto's Bata Shoe Museum."<sup>30</sup> Most recently, retired museum advisor Dr. John Carter has written a column to disseminate museum news.<sup>31</sup> There have also been articles of relevance in *Ontario History*, such as "In Search of Ruth Home: The Untold History of Museum Education at the Royal Ontario Museum."<sup>32</sup> However, there have been no recent larger initiatives such as a dedicated *Ontario History* issue or special publication.

The OHS also continues to provide some training. For example, in 2011 the OHS partnered with the Province and Voyageur Heritage Network to present workshops, including "Training and Resources for Museums on a shoestring budget." The OHS has served as the key provider of training relating to the Province's accessibility legislation and heritage buildings. In 2008, the OHS held accessibility workshops and published

an accessibility binder. They continue to deliver training on accessibility, including workshops at the Algonquin Applied Museum Studies Program and the University of Toronto's Museum Studies program. Since the OHS's 2012 Strengthening Ontario's Heritage Network project, they have also offered relevant webinars, addressing classroom and museum education, social media marketing, accessibility, as well as grant-based government funding.<sup>33</sup> Reflecting funding constraints, the training role is often limited to individual interactions wherein the OHS staff discuss strategic directions or solve problems with members.<sup>34</sup> The OHS also makes individual presentations or workshops on request. For instance, their 2016 Annual Report notes they gave workshops to the Campbell House Museum, Coldwater Canadiana Museum, Grey Roots Museum & Archives, as well as Orillia Museum of Art and History.

The OHS continues to respond to calls for opinions on museum policies and supports others' advocacy. For example, the Society made a submission during the provincial Cultural Strategy consultations, calling for changes to Ministry funding affecting museums.<sup>35</sup> However,

---

<sup>30</sup> John Rae, "Access Beyond the Ramp Part 5: Inclusive Programming at Toronto's Bata Shoe Museum," *OHS Bulletin* 186 (2012), 1.

<sup>31</sup> See for example: John Carter, "Museum Milestones," *OHS Bulletin* 194 (2015), 5.

<sup>32</sup> Kate Zankowicz, "In Search of Ruth Home: The Untold History of Museum Education at the Royal Ontario Museum," *Ontario History* 107, no. 1 (2015): 60–87.

<sup>33</sup> See for example: Rob Leverty, "Executive Director's Report," *OHS Bulletin* 194 (2015), 3.

<sup>34</sup> Anderson, interview. Supported with information in: Ontario Historical Society. *The Ontario Historical Society Annual Report 2012*. (Toronto, 2012).

<sup>35</sup> Leverty, interview

the OHS does not self-identify as an advocate. Its work supporting community museums' relationships to governments can be more appropriately labeled capacity building. Increasingly, a key part of the Society's work is incorporation, which helps institutions build capacity to advocate for themselves. The OHS incorporation role started to increase in the late 1990s and then again in 2007. From 2007 to 2011, the OHS incorporated 47 organizations "95% of which are not-for-profit corporations based outside of the City of Toronto, and 24% of which serve communities in northern Ontario."<sup>36</sup>

Incorporated entities can most effectively advocate for themselves. For example, The Montgomery's Inn Museum INNNovators incorporated through the OHS after the City of Toronto dissolved the advisory board and reportedly planned to shut down the Inn. The INNNovators organized to ensure the Inn remained an active museum. They protested and the OHS supported their work, speaking at a celebration of museums to promote the Etobicoke Historical Society and the Montgomery's INNNovators' position. The groups successfully prevented the museum's closure and the INNNovators now do programming at the museum.<sup>37</sup>

Importantly, the OHS incorporates entities that can directly operate muse-

ums or historic sites. Recent examples of incorporated museums include the Thorold Museum (2019), the Hamilton Police Historical Society and Museum Inc. (2019), the St. Mark's Coptic Museum (2017), the Essex Armoured Soldiers Museum (2014), and the Glengarry Pioneer Museum (2013). The OHS has incorporated museum networks such as the Renfrew County Museum Network (2014), which aims to promote museums and share technical information. It has also incorporated friends' organizations, which similarly work for the survival of heritage resources. As separate incorporated entities, friends groups are able to raise funds in ways a municipal museum or a museum without adequate staffing cannot. These organizations are particularly important for small rural museums. For example, the OHS incorporated the Friends of Morreston Village at Grey Roots, which works to raise awareness and funding for the museum. Filling an additional need and building the capacity of the incorporated entity, the OHS has provided insurance for the Friends of Morreston Village at Grey Roots.<sup>38</sup>

Responding to the needs and concerns of members, the OHS launched an insurance plan for its affiliates in 2008, which the president described as "value added of the first order."<sup>39</sup> All affiliate

<sup>36</sup> Linda Kelly, "Affiliated Societies," in *The Ontario Historical Society Annual Report 2011*, 11.

<sup>37</sup> For information on Montgomery's INNNovators' see: The INNNovators, "Montgomery's INNNovators," Montgomery's Inn Community Museum, 2020, <<http://montgomerysinn.com/about-us/>>. For information on the OHS' involvement see: Ontario Historical Society, "Educational Programmes, Services and Public Outreach," in *The Ontario Historical Society Annual Report 2011*.

<sup>38</sup> Interview with Petal Furness, 15 February 2018. Grey Roots, ON.

<sup>39</sup> B.E.S. (Brad) Rudachyk, "President's Report," in *The Ontario Historical Society Annual Report 2012*, 2.

organizations in good standing are able to apply for General Liability Insurance, Directors and Officers Liability Insurance, as well as Contents and Property Insurance. The OHS was able to negotiate rates to more effectively address the needs and capacities of smaller organizations. For instance, the General Liability rates reflect the gross revenues of the different organizations.

Incorporated entities can also need assistance in attaining charitable status. The OHS meets with these members and helps guide them through the process, making sure their documents are what Revenue Canada wants. Society staff are able to talk on the phone and provide advice on how to complete the necessary paperwork.<sup>40</sup>

In short, the OHS continues to publish and provide training that can be relevant to museums. While they support advocacy, they are not advocates as such. Instead, they enable organizations to work for the interests of heritage in their communities, which can include a need for incorporation, insurance, or advice. The OHS responds to need, based on the assumption that the work of local heritage preservation groups is valuable.

### Explaining the Shift

The OHS has a current and historic role “establishing democratic voices in communities across the province to

defend history.”<sup>41</sup> As they help groups incorporate and formalize organizations, the OHS helps them speak for history and heritage in local communities. The incorporation role is unique; it’s something no other museum service organization can provide. Within this section, I will explore three reasons for the shift in the OHS’s work for museums, which emerged during interviews. The first two interrelated reasons respond to member needs and the third relates to the OHS’s capacity.

In the late 1990s, the province began amalgamating municipalities, reducing the number of municipalities from 815 in 1996 to 444 in 2019.<sup>42</sup> When small communities became larger municipalities, they inherited multiple municipal museums with varying traditions of support for nonprofit heritage groups. Some new municipalities saw this as an opportunity to divest themselves of their heritage resources. For example, a counsellor in an unnamed municipality once noted their city had inherited five museums, shut down four, and only had one left to go.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, the City of Ottawa proposed cutting the heritage and museum budget by 100% in their 2003 budget, thereby eliminating funding for museums inherited during amalgamation. One of the incorporation examples discussed above, the Montgomery’s Inn Museum INNovators, incorporated after Rob

<sup>40</sup> Lerverty interview.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, “Municipal Restructuring Activity Summary Table,” Restructuring, 2018.

<sup>43</sup> Lerverty interview.

Ford's municipal government in Toronto reportedly threatened to close museums, dissolving the Inn's advisory board.<sup>44</sup>

The municipalities are not alone and the OHS' Executive Director perceives a broader trend wherein governments and religious organizations are divesting themselves of their heritage resources.<sup>45</sup> For example, the Canadian Lighthouses of Lake Superior incorporated through the OHS in 2014, obtaining leases from the Federal Government for two lighthouses that had fallen into disrepair. They now maintain the sites, offering tours and events to help showcase marine history.<sup>46</sup> The divestment of resources has caused an unbelievable escalation in the demand for incorporation.<sup>47</sup>

As work is needed to help preserve Ontario's history due to amalgamation and divestment, the OHS's provincial support has effectively decreased. The province decreased the overall provincial heritage operating grant budget by 40.5% in 1996 and, then a further 11.9% in 1997. While there have been small increases to the program, the full funding levels have not been restored and do not account for inflation. The amount that could be done with the money in 1996 is very different from what can be accom-

plished in 2018. As an OHS employee stated, "if you think about inflation, we do more with less every single year."<sup>48</sup> Further, governments have put more regulations and requirements on nonprofits, affecting the OHS and its members.

In short, the OHS promotes preservation through the establishment of legal entities that can then speak and fight for Ontario's history. Government divestment, perpetuated by amalgamation, has increased the demand for these services. At the same time, the OHS has less capacity to do the advocacy itself or offer extensive training.

## Conclusion

The OHS had a fundamental role in establishing the framework within which museums operate. To some extent the OHS is even responsible for the establishment of the OMA, which emerged in part from their Museum Section.<sup>49</sup> Currently, the Society continues to alter the landscape of museum governance through incorporation and supporting members. Leverty notes, "Our job is to turn the lights on so everybody can see, and everybody can participate publicly."<sup>50</sup>

Within museum governance more

<sup>44</sup> Christopher Hume, "City Museum Closures Lume," *The Star*, 12 November 2011.

<sup>45</sup> Rob Leverty, "Saving the Madill Church," (2019).

<sup>46</sup> Paul Morralee, "Volunteer Team Transforms Historic Lighthouse Site: Canadian Lighthouses of Lake Superior Incorporates through OHS," *OHS Bulletin* 193 (2014), 1–2.; Canadian Lighthouses of Lake Superior Inc., "Who We Are," Canadian Lighthouses of Lake Superior, accessed 8 January 2020, <<https://cills.ca/who-we-are/>>.

<sup>47</sup> Leverty interview.

<sup>48</sup> Anderson interview.

<sup>49</sup> Sarah Palmer, "Looking Back," *Currently* 25:2 (2002), 12.

<sup>50</sup> Leverty interview.

broadly, provincial support for museums has become more focused on excellence. The province no longer has a team of museum advisors working to help museums meet the standards but has made increasing demands on museums as they assess the grant requirements.<sup>51</sup> Within this context, the OHS supports local groups when governments are no longer interested in supporting heritage. The OHS is more likely to help organizations receiving the smaller HODG than museums receiving CMOG, as the latter generally accesses services from the OMA. As the OHS works to support HODG museums and establish legal entities through incorporation, it supports a network of relationships aiming to support heritage based on its perceived inherent value rather than a pursuit of excellence. As Lervety noted, “everybody’s history is important.”<sup>52</sup>

---

---

<sup>51</sup> Interview with John Carter. 28 June 2017. Sauble Beach, ON.

<sup>52</sup>Lervety interview.