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Historical Research and the Canadian Parks Service

James De Jonge

The Canadian Parks Service (CPS) of Environment Canada is the leading federal agency responsible for identifying, protecting and commemorating nationally significant examples of Canada's cultural heritage. Among its activities are the operation of a system of national parks, national historic parks, a program of erecting historic plaques, and a national cost-sharing program with various agencies and organizations to acquire and preserve sites of outstanding national importance. These initiatives have resulted in the commemoration of persons, places, and events across the country that represent a variety of historical themes. National historic parks include the remains of a Viking settlement at L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland, Les Forges du Saint-Maurice in Quebec, the Hudson's Bay Company post at Lower Fort Garry in Manitoba, and the Klondike National Historic Sites in Dawson City, all recognized as major accomplishments in heritage preservation and interpretation in Canada.

The commemoration and preservation of the country's heritage is an active and ongoing process which in recent years has expanded beyond traditional military and political themes to other areas including native history, natural resource exploitation, and urban history. Central to the initiatives undertaken by CPS across the country is an extensive program of historical research. Although the findings of historians employed by the department are directed to meet the objectives of the program, this work is often of interest to other agencies and individuals involved in academic research and heritage preservation. Several current projects are related to themes in urban history and may be of interest to the readership of this journal. This article outlines in a general manner the scope of work carried out. It will be followed by brief entries in subsequent issues of the *Urban History Review* which will highlight specific aspects of research that is related to an urban context.

Historians are located at CPS national headquarters in Hull, Quebec, and also at the five regional offices (Halifax, Cornwall, Quebec City, Winnipeg, and Calgary). There are two historical research units at headquarters - the Architectural History Branch, which deals specifically with aspects of architecture, and the Historical Research Branch, which tends to look more broadly at persons, places, and events in Canadian history. Both branches devote a large proportion of their time to the preparation of historical reports for the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada (HSMBC). This seventeen-member board consists of representatives (active in the historical community) from the provinces, the territories, and federal agencies. It advises the minister of the environment, who is responsible for the Canadian Parks Service, on whether persons, places, and events are of national significance and how best to commemorate them (by a plaque, by employing a cost-sharing agreement, or by an acquisition by the federal government). The board serves as an important force behind the activities of CPS and relies heavily upon the research findings of CPS historians in formulating its recommendations.

The research prepared on behalf of the board ranges from reports on specific buildings, individuals, and events to broader thematic overviews. In the area of urban history, for example, major studies have been completed on court-houses and town halls, and research is underway on a long-term study of industrial complexes. Historians also have been investigating the significance of specific parts of urban centres in different parts of the country for possible designation as historic districts.

In addition to their work for the HSMBC, historians in the Architectural History Branch do research in support of the Federal Heritage Buildings Review Office (FHBRO). This inter-departmental advisory body is responsible for evaluating federally owned buildings that are at least 40 years old. FHBRO determines whether they have heritage significance and, if so, identifies the distinctive features that contribute to the character of each structure. This process assists federal departments in providing an appropriate level of protection for historically significant buildings. To date, FHBRO has evaluated more than 600 buldings across the country, a large number of which are located in urban centres. The reports prepared by architectural historians, which form the basis of the FHBRO review, are often of a broader interest. In the case of urban buildings, they specifically address the connection with national themes and the importance of a structure in the development of a particularly community.

An important research tool used by CPS historians in the preparation of reports on individual buildings, and on thematic studies of various bulding types, architectural styles, and construction materials, is the Canadian Inventory of Historic Buildings (CIHB). This resource centre, located at CPS headquarters, has exterior photographs and computerized information on some 200,000 buildings across Canada, including 65 categories of architectural detail. The computerized records are supplemented by a collection of historical photographs, maps, plans, and other support materials. Information from the CIHB data base is available to interested members of the public at a modest cost.

The historical units at the five regional offices generally concentrate their research efforts on specific structures and sites already in the possession of CPS to guide planning, preservation, and interpretation programs. Again, this work can have a bearing on urban themes; for example, past research on military garrisons by various regional offices provides insight into their impact on the development of surrounding communities. More information on current projects by the regions and the headquarters branches will appear in upcoming issues.

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Anyone interested in the historical research programs of the Canadian Parks Service is invited to contact:

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