NATIONAL HISTORIC SITES IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

ABSTRACT

National Historic Sites are found in every province and territory and define important aspects of our common heritage. This article provides an overview of the broad spectrum of National Historic Sites which are found in British Columbia and which underline the province's important role in Canada's history.

National historic sites serve as tangible reminders of Canada's past and of the persons, places and events that have shaped it. From Pier 21 in Halifax where over a million people first set foot in Canada, to the Battlefield of Lundy's Lane in Ontario which was the site of a major engagement in the War of 1812, to the Bar-U-Ranch National Historic Site in Alberta which commemorates the ranching industry, they are a testament to our diverse yet common historical heritage. In addition, many national historic sites also welcome millions of visitors each year and provide exceptional opportunities for Canadians to learn about and experience their heritage first-hand through interpretive exhibits, educational programs, special events and original historic resources.

Designations of persons, places and events of national historic significance are made by the federal Minister of the Environment based on recommendations from the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada (HSMBC), a statutory advisory body created in 1919. The board is made up of representatives of every province and territory and meets twice annually to review submissions made to it by different groups and individuals from across Canada. In recent years, particular emphasis has been placed on the evaluation of submissions related to aboriginal and women's history, and the history of ethno-cultural communities in Canada so as to better reflect the contributions of all segments of Canadian society within the scope of national commemorative activity.

In British Columbia, there are eighty-six National Historic Sites which reflect the province's important place in Canadian history. While some of these sites are directly administered by Parks Canada, the vast majority are owned and managed by various institutions, other levels of government or by dedicated local groups interested in heritage preservation. Fort St. James, for example, a Hudson's Bay Company fur trade post which was founded by Simon Fraser in 1806, is managed by Parks Canada. The site boasts an exceptional collection of original buildings and costumed staff provide visitors with the opportunity of learning more about a significant chapter in Canada's economic and social history through on site programming.

Similarly authentic, the Gulf of Georgia Cannery National Historic Site in Steveston brings the west coast fishing industry to life, and details both the technical operation of the cannery as well as the lives and working conditions of the workers who were employed there during the industry's heyday. The site is operated by the Gulf of Georgia Cannery Society and benefits greatly from the pride, engagement and enthusiastic support of the local community which continues to have strong links to the fishing industry. At McLean Mill National Historic Site in Port Alberni, the early twentieth century lumber industry is commemorated through a complex of buildings and associated equipment and like the Gulf of Georgia cannery, it is also operated by a local group dedicated to preserving and presenting this significant piece of Canada's past.

LARRY OSTOLA

Larry Ostola is the Director General of National Historic Sites for the Parks Canada Agency.

One of the best-known National Historic Sites in British Columbia is Fort Langley. While the fort is directly associated with the fur trade on the Fraser River and with the history of First Nations, it also has the distinction of being the place where in 1858, Governor James Douglas formally proclaimed the establishment of the colony of British Columbia. As part of an effort to increase awareness of and visitation to National Historic Sites generally, Fort Langley was chosen as one of the participating sites in a national marketing pilot project which has been undertaken by Parks Canada. It is hoped that through this project insights into the needs and expectations of current and future visitors will be gained, client-responsive programs and services will be created which will more actively engage diverse audiences, and ultimately that opportunities will be provided for visitors to create their own memorable experiences at national historic sites such as Fort Langley and establish a meaningful personal connection to Canada's historical heritage.



Fort Langley National Historic Site of Canada

Also of note are the national historic sites which are associated with British Columbia's rich First Nations heritage. These include Nan Sdins the site of a Haida village within Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve of Canada, the 18th century Gitwangak hilltop fortification in Kitwanga and Xa:ytem, a national historic site in Mission which was occupied by the Sto:lo peoples.



Xa: ytem National Historic Site of Canada

In addition to those national historic sites like those previously mentioned which actively offer programs and services to the visiting public, there are a great many others in British Columbia which have been designated for their national significance but which have maintained their original vocations. The Church of the Holy Cross National Historic Site on the Skookumchuk Reserve for example, which was commemorated for being an exceptional example of a 'carpenter's gothic revival' mission church constructed by Salish craftsmen still serves as a place of worship for the community. Similarly, the Abbotsford Sikh Temple National Historic Site, the oldest Sikh temple in Canada continues to actively function, as does the Congregation Emanu-el Temple in Victoria, the oldest surviving synagogue in Canada, which dates from 1863.

Additional examples of national historic sites which continue to fulfill their original roles include Stanley Park National Historic Site in Vancouver which was commemorated as an outstanding example of a large urban park, the Lion's Gate Bridge in Vancouver, which was recognized as an outstanding engineering achievement, the Empress Hotel in Victoria, a landmark chateau style railway hotel and the Victoria City Hall which was recognized as the oldest extant town hall in western Canada.



Stanley Park National Historic Site of Canada

For some national historic sites, their use has changed over time. Hatley Park, an Edwardian estate with superb gardens is now the home of Royal Roads University, while St. Ann's Academy, which played a significant role in early education in British Columbia and specifically the teaching of young women, is now being used by staff of the Government of British Columbia.



St. Ann's Academy National Historic Site of Canada

National Historic Sites in British Columbia are a reflection of the province's significant place in Canada's history. They are an enduring record of nationally-significant persons, places and events and they, like hundreds of other national historic sites across Canada define important aspects of our shared heritage and identity as Canadians.

For more information regarding Parks Canada, the National Historic Sites program and the on-line curriculum-based educational resources which are available, please visit the Parks Canada website at www.parkscanada.gc.ca. For more information about the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada and the designation process please also consult the Parks Canada website.