

Defining Spirit of Place for Canada's National Historic Sites

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Abstract. This paper will focus on Parks Canada's recent initiative to clarify "designated place" and "commemorative intent" for existing national historic sites. Management of these sites is situated in the broad context of "values based conservation". The values, or reasons for the importance of each national historic site, are identified through a statement of commemorative intent and physically tied to a designated place. Commemorative intent provides the foundation for a site's presentation, interpretation and management.

Many national historic site designations, especially those with few visible resources, have strong associational values. Understanding commemorative intent can guide visitors to appreciate the *spirit of place* expressed through these values. Two Canadian national historic sites, Jasper House and Athabasca Pass, are examined to illustrate this relationship.

Organizations charged with managing historic sites for visitors, are challenged with providing a valuable experience while meeting administrative requirements. In Canada, nationally recognized historic sites must be clearly delineated with a legally defined boundary. But within this boundary, one must also protect significant cultural resources (archaeological, landscape features etc.) to capture that elusive "spirit of place" and help visitors understand the historical significance of the place and why it must be preserved into the future.

Around the world, most countries have developed systems to identify important aspects of their shared heritage. National governments have codified and institutionalized this initiative with legislation and bureaucratic support. Canada is no exception.

In 1919, the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada was created as an advisory body to the federal government charged with identifying national historic sites. The activities of the Board were further defined in 1953 by the *Historic Sites and Monuments Act*. The members of the Historic Sites and Monuments Board are formally appointed to provide recommendations to the responsible federal minister, currently the Minister of the Environment. Staff support for the activities of the Board are partly the responsibility of the Parks Canada Agency which also manages and interprets federally owned historic sites across the country.

Since its establishment almost 90 years ago, the Board has designated close to 2,000 sites, persons and events of national significance. The choice of subjects for designation has evolved,

reflecting changes in what is considered nationally significant, consistent with the evolution of Canada's population and culture as well as global changes in historical interpretation. For example during the Board's first decade, designations related primarily to ancient Aboriginal sites, in existence prior to the arrival of Europeans, and the history of French and English settlement. Specific interests included French migration and settlement (from the establishment of New France to the Treaty of Paris in 1763 when the French government ceded French territory to Britain), Loyalist settlement (the migration of colonists from the United States to Canadian territory following Britain's loss in the American Revolution), the War of 1812 (between Britain and the United States, fought between 1812 and 1814) and sites relating to the fur trade.

The evolution of national designations has been dictated in part by Parks Canada's National Historic Site *System Plan*. This document identifies five broad themes: Peopling the Land, Developing Economies, Governing Canada, Building Social and Community Life, and Expressing Intellectual and Cultural Life. Within these frameworks, almost every aspect of Canadian life can be found, from Canada's earliest inhabitants, to labour history and social movements. The *System Plan* also covers the range of Canada's current multi-cultural population while recognizing the full depth of the history of First Nations. The traditional foci of architectural history and military history are not forgotten and continue to be recognized within these categories (Parks Canada 2000).

Formal legal protection of heritage is linked to property law which is under provincial jurisdiction according to Canada's constitution, established when the national government was formed in 1867. As a result, the federal government's role with respect to heritage property has generally been commemorative rather than protective. The Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada had, and continues to have, a clear focus on public education. The subjects identified of national significance are presented on bronze commemorative plaques. This commemorative programme is one of the better-known initiatives of the Board with hundreds of bilingual bronze plaques located across the country. Moreover, at some sites, larger, more elaborate interpretive panels have been erected to provide more detailed information. On occasion the Board has recommended the acquisition of sites. The Quebec Citadel and the reconstructed Fortress of Louisbourg in Nova Scotia are two well-known tourist attractions among the 158 federally owned sites.

In recent years, an initiative has been undertaken to standardize the documentation available for each national historic designation and Parks Canada staff are in the process of clarifying the commemorative intent (the reasons for designation) and the designated place (the

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precise location and boundaries) for such sites. The latter concern specifically applies only to national historic sites.

Information about location and significance is not always apparent in the Board's records. However, the current review process is dedicated to identifying the intent of the Board *at the time of designation*. Interpretation of history changes over time, but this retrospective process ensures that the records will be consistent with how that site was interpreted at the time of designation. Recognition of historical revisionism has its place in the process but identification at the time of designation is an essential first step.

In order to create consistency in the records, guidelines were developed and a hierarchy of information for consultation established. The principal source of commemorative intent must be the Board's minutes, the official record of decision. However, when it wasn't an administrative priority to clearly record the reasons for national significance, this information did not always appear in the Board's minutes. Other sources, which may be used to establish intent at the time of designation, are the briefing notes provided before a Board meeting, discussions concerning the text of the commemorative plaque, recommendations for interpretative programming, and a research report prepared by staff for the Board's consideration. The assumption relating to all the above sources is that the information used should reflect the Board's interest in the site and reflect why it was considered to be of national significance.

The definition of designated place for a national historic site follows a similar process. Again, a formal guideline document provides a starting point. The guideline defines designated place as: "a geographically definable location which is circumscribed by boundaries" (Parks Canada 2000, VII-1).

Even with this extensive list of permitted sources, there are designations for which no indication of the historic values or location can be uncovered even after all the sources are exhausted. Here the project requires some more serious detective work including sleuthing expeditions to the national archives in order to search the prolific correspondence between Board members to glean their intentions.

Despite the emphasis on the historical accuracy of the Board's intent at the time of designation, realistically establishing commemorative intent and designated place must be more than a straight bureaucratic exercise, and offer meaning in today's world.

It is at this point we turn to the theme "Spirit of Place". How is it possible to meet the administrative requirements of a national programme while ensuring that the site is adequately and fully represented and interpreted to the public? The answer will be illustrated through case studies of two national historic sites: Jasper House National Historic Site of Canada and Athabasca Pass National Historic Site of Canada.

Both sites are located in Jasper National Park, established as a national park in 1907 when a large tract of land was set aside in order to protect the natural environment. Jasper is the largest and the most northerly of four adjoining national parks (Jasper, Banff, Yoho and Kootenay) and three provincial parks located in British Columbia (Mount Robson, Hamber and Mount Assiniboine) that together form the Canadian Rocky Mountain Parks, a World Heritage Site designated in 1984.

Jasper House and Athabasca Pass are both related to the fur trade, one of the most important economic activities connected with early European exploration. The importance of the fur trade extends beyond the export of furs to European markets and includes the role of fur traders in exploring, mapping and opening up the country. The lucrative fur market in Europe drove the early frontier economy and was the root of alliance-building with the local population as well as wars between rival companies and countries. The continuing search westward for fresh supplies of furs drew Europeans across the North American continent, motivated not just by economic forces but also by the passion to explore new lands and fulfil spiritual goals. Many Christian missionary outposts were established in or near fur trade posts.

Transcontinental travellers followed well-established routes. The most frequented fur trade route originated at Prince of Wales Fort on the southern shore of Hudson Bay and extended westward along major waterways interrupted by portages and longer overland treks, ending at the Pacific Ocean. Simple fur trade posts or “forts” dotted the route. These posts helped establish dominance over a region, against rival companies by providing a location where local Aboriginal populations could bring wares and a place where travellers could rest and replenish supplies.

Jasper House served as one component of this intricate series of fur trade posts. Located on the bank of the Athabasca River, Jasper House was occupied for more than half a century (1830 – 1884). It served as a transfer point for traders going farther inland, leaving the river highways to continue to the Pacific Ocean through the Rocky Mountains by one of two transmountain passes, the Yellowhead Pass to the northwest and the Athabasca Pass to the southwest. The area had been frequented by Aboriginal peoples travelling along these routes prior to European arrival. Archaeological evidence indicates human occupation in this region for at least 10,000 years (Murphy *et al.* 2007, 29).

The Statement of Commemorative Intent for Jasper House identifies the reason for designation to be “that for half a century it

was a main support point for all persons journeying through the Yellowhead and Athabasca passes” (Parks Canada 2005, 14).

Trading posts were often temporary constructions and were frequently relocated within a region. Historical records indicate that between 1813 and 1828 Jasper House was originally situated about 25 kilometres (16 miles) away from the current national historic site on Brûlé Lake. However the precise location of this site has never been identified despite an extensive search. Any vestiges were likely destroyed with the construction of the railway early in the 20th century.

A natural clearing on the river flats provided the setting for the post. Baseline studies of the archaeological record indicate that in addition to its use by Europeans, this site had several layers of early Aboriginal occupation. Contrary to the suggestion conjured up by its name, Jasper House was not a “house” or even a single building. During its heyday, the post was comprised of a number of simple buildings, three of which have been identified by archaeology, historical paintings and photographs. Horses were raised at the post to supply the overland trekkers.

Today there is little remaining of the post. Even at the time of designation, in 1924, the buildings had disappeared. A number of graves sit in a corner of the site and faint reminders of the buildings exist in the landscape. There are two historic trails that converge at this point, leading overland to the Yellowhead and Athabasca passes. The trail leading out of the clearing towards the mountains has been clearly marked by fur traders from the past (figure 1).

The extent of the clearing has likely remained relatively consistent over time. Monitoring of forest edges indicates that there is little encroachment by the forest. This is likely due to a combination of environmental factors including wind-blown sediment, grazing and drainage. The designated place of the historic site has been identified as the clearing, approximately 1.5 hectares (3.7 acres) in size measuring 110 metres along the Athabasca River and 150 metres in depth (HSMBC, December 2004).



Figure 1. The designated place of Jasper House National Historic Site of Canada is defined by the edges of the forest clearing. The trail leading westward into the mountains is visible at the top of the photo (Photo: Parks Canada, 2005.)

For visitors, the site is not easily accessible. Although located only a few kilometres from the town of Jasper, the major community in the national park, the site is not on a main road. The Canadian National Railway line is located west of the site but no public hiking trails or roads are connected with the rail corridor. Because of its isolation, there is no extensive interpretation on the site. The official Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada plaque is across the river at a pull-off on the main road through the national park.

Most visitors arrive at the site as the fur traders did, paddling along the mighty Athabasca River. Today, a small sign on the riverbank identifies this as a historic site. Parks staff created a miniature visitors' centre; a box containing some history on the site and interpretive material as well as a visitors' book that provides a record of visitation. Entries in the book indicate that visitors absorbed the "spirit of place", the solitude of the clearing and the isolation in the landscape. The lack of interpretation and difficulty in accessing the site perhaps aids visitors in understanding the isolation experienced by the early travellers. The sense of place for visitors is inextricably linked to the landscape, the Athabasca River and the historic trails.

The second case study is the Athabasca Pass National Historic Site of Canada. This pass is only one of several passages through the Rocky Mountains crossing the Continental Divide. The height of land also forms the provincial boundary between Alberta and British Columbia. On the Alberta side, the Athabasca Pass lies entirely within Jasper National Park and like Jasper House is owned and managed by Parks Canada.

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The pass served as the primary artery through the mountains for 40 years (1811–1850). It was one component in a transcontinental trip, approximately 3,500 kilometres long, which typically took about 3 months.¹

Typically two transcontinental treks went through the area annually, one from the east and one from the west. Seasonal changes in the Athabasca Pass dictated the timing. The westbound group would begin at York Factory, on Hudson Bay, in July in order to arrive at the pass in October and avoid the deep snow. The group travelling in the opposite direction would leave Fort George, on the mouth of the Columbia River near present day Portland, Oregon in the U.S.A. Eastbound travellers generally left in March with the goal to cross the pass when it was still snow covered and before the spring thaw made the ground too soft for easy travel.

The trip was made primarily along the network of inland rivers and dotted with a series of fur trade posts. The most difficult part of the journey was “La Grand Traverse”, the overland trek through the mountains following the Athabasca Pass. Once through the Athabasca Pass, travellers continued west down the Wood River to the mighty Columbia and on to its mouth at Fort George in the present American state of Oregon.

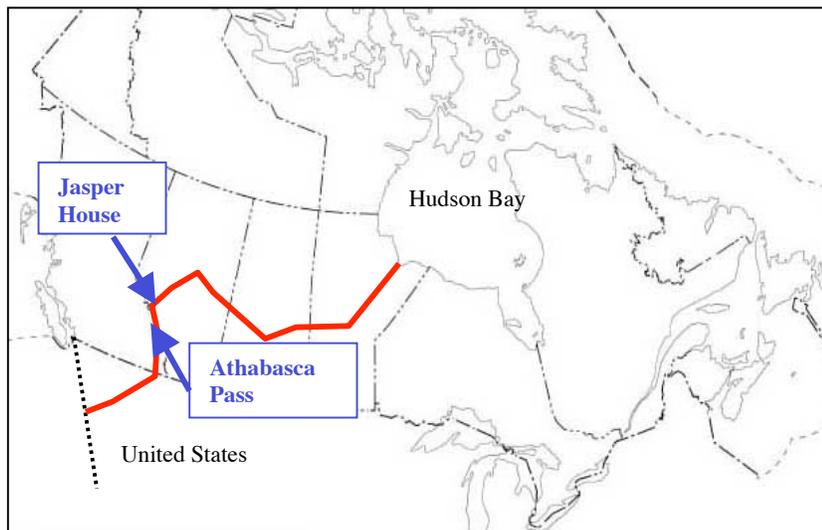


Figure 2. The general route taken by the fur traders during the 19th century indicating the approximate locations of Jasper House and Athabasca Pass.

In contrast to the location of Jasper House with its clearly defined clearing, determining the boundaries for the national historic site of the Athabasca Pass was more challenging. The designated place recognized that the pass was not defined by a single trail but by a

¹ Comparable in length to the better-known Pony Express which ran about 2,900 km between Missouri and California but operated for only two years, 1860 and 1861 (Murphy *et al.* 2007, 71).

series of paths whose use varied depending on the season (the depth of the snow, the height of the rivers) and the weather. Ascending from the east, travellers followed the course of the Whirlpool River and tributaries to the summit and then descended along Pacific Creek to its junction with the Wood River (HSMBC, July 2005).



Figure 3. The Athabasca Pass follows a series of rivers. (Photo: Meryl Oliver, 2007)

The commemorative intent for Athabasca Pass states that for almost half a century, the Athabasca Pass was part of the main fur trade route between Canada and the Oregon Country (HSMBC, July 2005).

While access to Jasper House is limited, access to the pass is even more so. A trek covering the 65-kilometre (40-mile) pass generally takes six days today, more or less the same time it took the fur traders two centuries ago. On the practical site, today's travellers heading west leave vehicles in a parking lot at the entrance to the pass. There are no formal camping areas or supplies en route requiring travellers to be self-sufficient.

Visitors who undertake the trip are rewarded at the summit with spectacular scenery, featuring three small mountain lakes, surrounded by mountains. The central lake is called the Committee's Punch Bowl, so named by George Simpson, the Governor of the Hudson's Bay Company, after the "committee", his employers back in London, England. In 1825, during an overland journey Governor Simpson and his travelling companions drank to the committee's health. This toast has become one of the intriguing legends of this secluded spot.

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Figure 4. The feature of the summit of the pass is three small mountain lakes. The central lake is situated on the watershed and provides the source for both the Athabasca and Columbia Rivers. At one end water flows to the Arctic Ocean, and at the other to the Pacific. (Photo: Meryl Oliver, 2007)

Like Jasper House, the pass has few visible resources associated with the fur trade. The reward for the visitor is an amazing landscape. It is this that provides the experience; the “spirit of travellers gone past” (“Athabasca Pass Log Book” entry, August 28, 2007) captures the imagination of visitors. Another visitors’ box is available to present interpretive material, and a logbook invites them to comment on their experience. Comments reflect that many are moved by the legend of David Thompson, one of the best-known fur traders and explorers and the first European to cross the pass. Many travellers express the sense they are walking in the footsteps of the determined explorers who have gone before. The story of the famous toast at the Committee’s Punch Bowl is legendary; many visitors recorded that they have repeated this ritual with a symbolic toast, as a prize for obtaining the summit and stopping in a spectacular place.

These two examples are perhaps not typical national historic sites due to the challenge of access. Other sites owned and operated by Parks Canada are accessible by automobile and provide programming for a variety of age groups and mobility levels. Access to Jasper House and Athabasca Pass is not simple: a regular motorboat service does not shuttle visitors to Jasper House and neither does a helicopter fly the length of the pass providing a stop for a symbolic toast at the Punch Bowl. While tourist initiatives like these might substantially increase the sites’ visibility and tourist dollars, the privilege of experiencing the site in an “authentic” manner, close to that of the original visitors, would be substantially reduced.

In interpreting historic places that have few resources, perhaps in particular those that are remote, commemorative intent can guide the visitor’s understanding of spirit of place. The tourist industry all too

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often provides a passive visitor experience that can dilute rewards for the visitor and eliminate any authentic spirit of place. In the case of Jasper House and Athabasca Pass, visitors are given the framework for understanding. The information in the visitors' box provides historical background and presents commemorative intent. The visitor is then challenged to put it together and find meaning in the site, a personal "spirit of place".

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