

An Evening of Oral History at the Port Royal Habitation, curated by Ernest J. Dick, 3 August 2016

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We like to offer that Canada began at the Habitation at Port Royal on the Annapolis Basin in Nova Scotia in 1605. Here, Samuel de Champlain built a small enclosed 'Habitation' and good documentation survives of the buildings and activities of New France. Of course, the Indigenous people, the Mi'kmaq people, had been living in this area and using the Annapolis Basin for centuries, and in 1613 Virginians burned the Habitation, interrupting this effort of colonization. Then, the Scots established their "New Scotland" nearby in 1629, and in the 1630s, Acadians began diking and farming the marshlands of the Annapolis river. Annapolis Royal became the capital of the British colony of Nova Scotia from 1710-1749 and Acadians were deported from here in 1755. Planters, Loyalists, Yorkshiremen, Germans, Brits, summer residents, retirees, and refugees arrived over the years, with all leaving their contributions.

There is much history here, and the fortifications begun by the French in 1702 at present-day Annapolis Royal were purchased by the federal government in 1917, becoming Canada's first national historic park/site as Fort Anne. The Historical Association of Annapolis Royal was founded in 1919 and began promoting and organizing the recognition of the Habitation at Port Royal, among dozens of other projects over the years. Eventually the Association published *A History of Port Royal – Annapolis Royal, 1605 – 1800* by Brenda Dunn and *A History of Annapolis Royal – Town with a Memory, 1749 – 2005* by Barry Moody, and, most recently, it is restoring the lighthouse in Annapolis, dating from 1889.

In 1941, the newly constructed Habitation, based on original drawings, opened to visitors and this past summer the Historical Association celebrated the 75th anniversary of the Habitation through oral history. The Association searched out workers who had built the building and furnishings, guides who had worked there, and locals who had lived with the Habitation over the years. Wine and finger foods were served on a beautiful summer's evening, forgoing the moose muffle soup that journals of the original inhabitants recalled.

Some 70 people came out, seating themselves on the replica 17th century benches around the courtyard to listen to each other's stories. The Association brought in professional sound recording and amplification equipment so that anyone could hear. Some wanted to hold a mike and stand while others needed to sit with their friends and family. Everyone felt comfortable offering their memories.

The community of Lower Granville, now known as Port Royal, had been expropriated by the reconstruction of the Habitation. All the houses, but one, were moved or destroyed and the school, church and stores closed down. The community hall was moved and still retained the Lower Granville name. Thousands came to Port Royal to visit the Habitation over the years but a few also resented the loss of their community. This ambivalence about the Habitation had festered over the years – but now could be admitted and celebrated in our remembering. Stories were told of the family still living in the surviving 19th century home making lobster sandwiches for the newly arriving summer guides and then serving the Prime Minister’s security detail their hard apple cider.

Indeed, residents of Lower Granville invariably worked at the Habitation over the years, and even boarded summer students, with everybody present recalling these becoming lifelong friendships. The Association’s historian, Barry Moody, bought his home at Port Royal and founded the local heritage activist group, the Annapolis Heritage Society, because of his summer job at the Habitation.

Another thread of our local history was the adjoining Acadian community dating from 1654 – the Melanson settlement now accessible as an archaeological site. Twin brothers Alain and Wayne Melanson (9th generation members of the Melanson family) have long worked for Parks Canada at Port Royal and also Fort Anne, and their stories enlivened the evening. Indeed, Alain has developed his own oral history of the area with his nightly graveyard tour of the old Garrison Graveyard. Both brothers offered their stories of their own first visits to the Habitation and then connections to the local community over the years – continuing the Melanson story of the area.

Summer staff at the Habitation until the 1960s was often hired because of their family’s political affiliations; this could now be admitted without recrimination. Guiding at the Habitation was unilingual English in its first decades, despite the French story they were telling. One 1960s era guide sheepishly told of his high-school French being considered sufficient for those days, and we were all pleased to see it being replaced by the easy bilingualism of Acadians, speaking whatever French, English, or combination thereof that visitors are most comfortable with.

The Habitation is a perfect setting for re-enacting and dramatizing history, continuing the tradition begun in 1606 when the “The Theatre of Neptune” was performed here. Literally dozens of pageants, plays, films, documentaries, and re-enactments have been held at the Habitation over the years. Indeed, the Habitation has often been used as a film set representing other period and stories, offering another theme for us to follow up on at another time.

Everyone in attendance had visited the Habitation over the years, and there was not enough time for everyone to tell their story. But none could top the

memory shared by one woman who had visited her grandparents, who lived across the road from the Habitation, and had used the Habitation as her own private playground with her cousins.

Of course, we recorded the stories shared on that evening, and the sound quality is very good. Whether the recording will ever be listened to or used remains to be seen. Like so much of the best oral history, you had to be there to experience it – and a great privilege it was to do so.

We began the evening with a welcoming drum song by Judy Pearson, elder from the Mi'kmaq Bear River community and an interpreter at the Habitation. And we ended the evening as the sun went down behind the ramparts of the Habitation, when the courtyard cooled very quickly.