

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

**Summer 2011
Pilot Study on the:
History of the Nova Scotia Museums**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A pilot study focused on history, heritage and the sustainability of the Nova Scotia Museums [NSM] was undertaken over the summer of 2011. The broad aim of the pilot study was to explore various themes in the history of the NSM and their pertinence for featuring in its organizational history.

Between June and September of 2011, eight heritage sites that operate under the complex of the NSM participated in the study. The method of data collection was a combination of on-site interviews and participant observation.

It became apparent early in the study that no recent documented or explicit organizational historyⁱ of the NSM exists in print. Pursuing and undertaking such a project assumed importance because a written organizational history can:

- Act to legitimate the mandate of an organization
- Unite individuals as a collective by virtue of a shared past and identity
- Act as tool to shape future best practices of an organization
- Capture information about the past in print before it is permanently lost

The overall result of the pilot study suggests a need to begin to document and undertake an organizational history of the NSM. This history would not only reflect on the operational activities of NSM, which may include for example, the dates various heritage operations joined the NSM as well as their motivations for doing so. It would also reflect the numerous personalities and motivations of people who worked within the organization throughout the years in various capacities.

The pilot study was funded by two internal research grants totalling \$8,000 from St Francis Xavier University. Undertaking the project was a research team consisting of two individuals. The principle investigator was Gabrielle Durepos, PhD who is an assistant professor at St Francis Xavier University. The research assistant was Alice McVittie who is a 4th year business administration honours student, also at St Francis Xavier University.

The following report features a summary of the pilot study as well as detailed preliminary findings.

SCOPE OF ENGAGEMENT

The objectives of the pilot study are listed below. It is noted that the first objective, namely that of developing an *organizational history of NSM* was the broad aim of the pilot study. The follow-on objectives (2 to 6) were meant to further refine the broad objective of the study. Objectives of the pilot study included:

1. Developing and exploring various themes and aspects of organizational history of NSM. This is done, in part, to flesh out viable avenues for future research.
2. Drawing on insights from past practices outlined in the history of NSM to develop cost effective best practices and draw conclusions for the sustainability of NSM.
3. Fostering an in-depth understanding of history or heritage as a 'commodity' that is offered by heritage sites in Nova Scotia.
4. Exploring the history of select industries in Nova Scotia. This included, for example, an exploration of the relationship between the decline of traditional industry in Nova Scotia and the opening of museums that commemorate those industries.
5. Exploring the daily-lived experiences of interpreters at the interactive centers as they enact heritage.
6. Continuing in the theoretical development of methodologies to do history by drawing on observations of interpreters at the living heritage sites.

METHOD

Research Team

- The research team consisted of two individuals, Gabrielle Durepos, and Alice McVittie.
- *Gabrielle Durepos, PhD* is an Assistant Professor at the Gerald Schwartz School of Business, St. Francis Xavier University, Canada. Her upcoming book titled *ANTI-History: Theorizing the Past, History, and Historiography in Management and Organization Studies* features a full discussion of ANTi-History. She is a co-editor of both the *SAGE Encyclopaedia of Case Study Research* as well as the upcoming *SAGE Major Work on Case Study Methods in Business Research*. She is an associate editor of the *Gender and Diversity in Organization* division of the *Canadian Journal of Administrative Sciences*. Her recent publications appear in *Management & Organizational History* as well as *Journal of Management History*. Her PhD dissertation, which was focused on developing ANTi-History through an empirical study of Pan American Airways was awarded the Critical Management Studies *Best Dissertation Award* at the Academy of Management Conference in 2010.
- *Alice McVittie* is a fourth year Business Administration student who acted as a research assistant on the project while collecting data for her honours thesis. Alice's honours thesis will feature a preliminary analysis on the relationship of the decline of traditional Nova Scotia industries and the opening of museums that commemorate those industries. Gabrielle Durepos is the faculty supervisor on the honours thesis.

Summary of Activity: The Participants

- In June of 2011, a presentation detailing the pilot study was delivered to Stephanie Smith, a key stakeholder in the NSM. Support was expressed for the project. Consent to undertake the study at seasonal civil service sites was obtained. Consent for undertaking research at locally managed sites was negotiated directly with the site director by telephone call, with one exception.

- Between June of 2011 and September 2011, 14 of the 27 NSM heritage sites were contacted via a(n) (electronic or posted) letter and invited to participate in the study.

- Criteria for inclusion specified that participating sites should:
 - Be part of the NSM system
 - Offer living heritage
 - Offer an industry focus

- Response rate:
 - Eight sites responded to the invitation and subsequently participated in the study

- Description of participating heritage sites:
 - Four seasonal civil service sites
 - Two large locally managed sites (M7 sites)
 - Two small locally managed sites that also operate at least one Community Museum

Summary of Activity: Data Collection

- Extensive newspaper and web-based searches were undertaken for each heritage site to identify:
 - The degree and level of presence of the heritage site in the news
 - Miscellaneous information about the heritage site
- Curatorial Reports pertaining to the NSM Heritage Sites were collected from NSM as well as libraries and were analyzed
- Participant Observation:
 - One day of participant observation was undertaken at each site, with the exception of one site where the duration was one and a half day
 - Participant observation was accompanied by extensive note taking, this resulted in 43 pages of typed notes
- Interviews:
 - Interviews with one site manager as well as one heritage interpreter were undertaken at each site. The exceptions were: one site where two site managers and two interpreters were interviewed; and two sites where only the site manager was interviewed
 - This resulted in a total of 16 interviews:
 - Seven interviews were with heritage interpreters
 - Eight interviews were with either site managers or site directors
 - One interview was conducted with a member of the NSM in Halifax
 - Interviewees included four men and 12 women
 - The average age of the interviewee was 46 years old
 - On average, interviewees had worked at a heritage site for 13 years
 - Interviews lasted between 20 and 60 minutes, were undertaken on site, recorded and transcribed verbatim

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The following documents *preliminary results* from the pilot study. It should be noted that some objectives were not satisfactorily realized given the lack of information collected to date on the organizational history of NSM.

1. The development and exploration of various themes and aspects of the organizational history of NSM

- Overall, the pilot study was successful in uncovering *some* information on the organizational history of the NSM. However, the information collected to date is too scarce to develop what might be considered a rigorous organizational history.
- While most interpreters and site managers at heritage operations were generally knowledgeable of the date the site joined the NSM, details concerning the involved actors, their motivations, circumstances of the transition as well as costs to do so were generally unknown.
- Few heritage operations visited provided details of the organizational history of the site as part of the exhibit featured. In one instance, the organizational history of the heritage site was described in explicit detail on their website. Including the details of the emergence of the heritage site as part of the story told of heritage at the site might prove fruitful. Doing so might act to *situate* the heritage site as a product of a time and place, as well as of an effect of certain individuals. It might ensure transparency of its conditions of creation, and by virtue of this communicate an important part of the story told at the heritage site. In short, having heritage sites incorporate their organizational history as part of the story of heritage offered at the site has the potential to *ground* the story that is told.
- Interviewees suggested a favourable outlook on the prospect of an organizational history of NSM being developed.
- Developing an organizational history would depend on access to interviews with individuals currently working with, as well as retired from NSM. Doing so would also require access to documents held at NSM concerning the organizational history.

2. Drawing on insights from past practices outlined in the history of NSM to develop cost effective best practices and draw conclusions for the sustainability of NSM

- Results from the study concerning the history of NSM were too preliminary and scarce to examine by way of developing *extensive* low-resource best practices.
- An early observation made as a result of the research was the importance of the *Interpretive Master Plan* [IMP] as a viable tool that can unite the heritage operations and their stories. While the interviewees revealed that they were generally aware of the document, its degree of implementation varied considerably across sites visited. It was suggested as a promising tool that offers potential for heritage sites to develop and broaden the interpretation offered at the site. One respondent noted that what is needed is both the development and communication of explicit and tangible instructions to implement the recommendations suggested in the IMP that are low-resource based.
- Though an organizational history is dedicated to a study of the past, it is widely believed that a benefit of knowing one's past is the clarity it provides for defining the future. An organizational history might prove as a useful compliment to recommendations outlined in the IMP. Specifically, learning the past practices of the NSM in conjunction with the recommendations outlined in the IMP might be useful to develop tangible and implementable actions for heritage interpreters and site managers that bring IMP recommendations to life.

3. Fostering an in-depth understanding of the ‘commodity’ of history or heritage offered by Heritage Sites in Nova Scotia

- Interviewees were consistent in their conveyed understanding of *history* and *heritage*. It was suggested that history and heritage is an *activity* as opposed to an object or life-less set of facts. Heritage interpreters informed the researchers that their role is to *interpret* a set of information and *construct* a narrative for the visitor based on collected materials from the NSM or site directors. In doing so, the interviewees noted that the story told to visitors varied based on the interpreter and the nature of the visitor interests.
- During interviews, heritage interpreters responded that history and heritage is what they construct daily by interpreting information provided by the heritage site. However, no mention was made as to *where* the information conveyed came from, *who* developed it or *how they knew what they knew* during the researchers visit of the site. Furthermore, no mention was made of how the heritage offered at the site was developed and the nature of its relationship with the emergence of the physical site itself (see findings on result & discussion point one above). This observation is potentially important for at least three reasons: 1) including where knowledge of heritage comes from as part of the delivery of that heritage adds legitimacy to the story told; 2) the history of the heritage is arguably an important and interesting (behind the scenes) part of the story of heritage shared with visitors; 3) it allows for organizations whose mandate it is to offer heritage to be reflective of their own history and as a result, potentially convey heritage historically.
- An organizational history of NSM might begin to provide the necessary information to heritage interpreters, site managers and directors concerning the history of its heritage.

4. Exploring the history of select industries in Nova Scotia

- This objective was dedicated to a preliminary exploration of the potential relationship between the decline of traditional industry through time in Nova Scotia and the opening of museums that commemorate those industries.
- Five of the eight Nova Scotia Museum sites visited had an industry focus. At each site, the heritage interpreters stressed the historic economic importance of the site in terms of the amount of people it once employed, wages it once supplied, the importance of the product or service it provided and the benefit to the community of the resultant economic spin offs from customers who travelled for the product or service.
- Visited heritage sites with an industry focus were all located in rural Nova Scotia where the economy is now typically less stimulated and as a result employment in the area is generally scarce. The economic importance of the heritage site today was noted by the interviewees in terms of the:
 - Increase of tourism it brings to the area and associated potential economic spin offs
 - Local jobs offered by the heritage site in geographical areas where there is otherwise low opportunity for employment
 - Increase in quality of life resulting from an increase of time, disposable income and safety resulting from less travel to work
- In one instance, it was communicated that a driving motivator for opening the heritage site was to provide income and economic stimulation to an otherwise economically depleted town.
- Interviewees did note a remarkable difference in the economic importance of the site due to its changed capacity from a good or service provider (in the 1800s and early 1900s) to a heritage site (in the 2000s). However, the *economic importance of the heritage site today was stressed* in each instance.

5. Exploring the daily lived experiences of interpreters at the interactive centers as they enact heritage

- Heritage interpreters interviewed, with the exception of 1 participant, unquestioningly stated that they derive much meaning and fulfillment from their work. Such was evidenced in tone of the responses whereby joy, pride and excitement were expressed as details of daily activities were revealed.

- Interpreters noted that they are especially appreciative of their employment given the high levels of unemployment in remote rural areas of Nova Scotia.

- Heritage interpreters provided uniform answers to questions pertaining to the way they had come to *learn and know* the heritage they deliver daily at the site. All respondents commented that they learned through a combination of reading provided materials, watching more experienced interpreters, enacting the ways of more experienced interpreters, asking questions of experienced interpreters and finally becoming part of the *community of practice* that will allow for knowledge transfer to incoming heritage interpreters.
 - Interpreters conveyed joy in the ability to share information about heritage with other interpreters. There was no mention of withholding information for the purpose of competing with others.
 - In two instances, interviewees illustrated a parallel with their workplace learning and the workplace learning of the historical actors they interpret. Their description of their workplace learning evoked authenticity in that it resembled the interpreter's description of learning traditional trades and crafts. Respondents described heritage interpretation as a carefully learned craft that is very specific to each heritage site and visitor. The description stands in stark contrast to conventional workplace practices of standardized training and development, which has been documented to sometimes lead to worker alienation.
 - Interviewees noted that their workplace learning was effective and allowed them to perform their job.

- An organizational history would seek to capture the sentiments of heritage interpreters toward their work as well as common practices of workplace learning as important aspects that inform the collective identity of NSM and allow for its celebration.

6. Continuing in the theoretical development of methods to do history by drawing on observations of interpreters at the living heritage sites

- A part of my PhD dissertation (defended in 2009) featured the development of an alternative approach to history, which I have come to call *ANTI-History*. Explaining the reasons for the choice in naming the method offers clues of its essence:
 - First, ANTi-History draws on a method called Actor-Network Theory, which is often described through the acronym ‘ANT’ thus ‘ANT’i-History
 - Second and quite importantly, ANTi-History is anti-histor’y’ but pro-histor’ies’. It seeks to privilege the multiplicity of stories and voices concerning the past as opposed to developing one dominant narrative
- Because ANTi-History was developed through applied archival work, it has never been used as a method to construct history where living actors are concerned.
- The present study has provided a forum to develop a more in-depth understanding of the complexities of using ANTi-History with living actors.

MOVING FORWARD

The direction sought for the project as it moves from its preliminary phases is detailed below.

1. Engage in a discussion concerning the prospects of developing an organizational history of NSM

- The preliminary findings of the pilot study outline potential benefits resulting from the development of an organizational history of NSM. Undertaking the project is important because a written organizational history can:
 - Act to legitimate the mandate of an organization
 - Unite individuals as a collective by virtue of a shared past and identity
 - Act as tool to shape future best practices of an organization
 - Capture information about the past in print before it is permanently lost

- After spending a summer focused on the NSM, the prospect of undertaking such a task is appealing to me. Undertaking an organizational history would require a discussion with key stakeholders from the organization to assess the desire for the project. Also essential for the future success of the project is the continued need to develop relationships with stakeholders from the NSM.

- If desire is expressed by NSM for the realization of the project, further discussion concerning the following would become a necessity:
 - The scope, content and format of an organizational history of NSM
 - Locating, acquiring and obtaining permission to use documents pertaining to the history of NSM that are held on-site
 - Obtaining permission to conduct interviews with current employees of the NSM

2. Application for funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council [SSHRC] of Canada

- On January 15th 2012, it is my intent to submit an application to SSHRC, a national fund-granting agency. If successful, the funds would support the development of an organizational history of NSM. Results from the pilot study outlined in this report will feature as part of the application. The outcome of the grant will be announced in the spring of 2012. My interest in undertaking an organizational history of NSM will not be affected by the outcome of the grant.

- The format of an organizational history of NSM is undecided and open to suggestions. The options for communicating the organizational history include:
 - Preparing a series of papers that would eventually be bound under one cover
 - Developing a book
 - Including the organizational history of respective heritage sites on their websites
 - Including the organizational history of NSM on their website

- It is presumed that an organizational history might appeal to, and as a result would be made available to the following audiences:
 - The general public
 - Current and former employees of the NSM, including those at the executive level, management level as well as site managers and heritage interpreters at all heritage sites
 - Current and past ministers as well as officials of the department whose mandate it is to oversee heritage in the province. As of 2011, this is the Department of Communities, Culture and Heritage
 - Potential and current funding bodies that support NSM
 - Academics, provided in the form of conference presentations and publications in academic journals

3. Closing remarks

- The research was made possible by a grant of \$3,000 from the University Council for Research as well as a grant of \$5,000 from the Centre for Regional Studies. I am grateful to both of these granting agencies.
- I would like to thank Stephanie Smith from NSM for her time and advice in constructing the pilot study. I would also like to acknowledge and thank all those who participated in the study over the summer of 2011.
- It is my hope to either develop or play a crucial role in developing an organizational history of NSM.
- Suggestions, comments and reactions stemming from this report can be e-mailed to gdurepos@stfx.ca or mailed to Gabrielle Durepos, 3090 Martha Drive, St Francis Xavier University, Antigonish, NS, B2G 2W5.

ⁱ One *Masters of Arts* thesis identified did focus on the subject: Arseneau, C. (1994). *The Origins and Early Development of the Nova Scotia Museum, 1868-1940*. Saint Mary's University, Halifax. The timeframe of the thesis is limited to 1868-1940. It therefore neglects the temporal period of 1941-present, which the present study would address.