The Intertwining of Local Nature and Our History and Culture

by Brian W. Baetz

The areas in and around Cootes Paradise, comprising the lands within the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System, are distinctive and unique in terms of ecology and biodiversity. But nature is always interwoven and intertwined within the matrix of activities carried out by humans living on the land, and this area has a number of interesting aspects relating to history and culture. The material below relates to a series of history and culture related perspectives, taken from interviews with local experts in the context of preserving the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System (C2EP). For the full interviews, please type the following URL into your Web browser:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r570AvEpyrs&t=1460s

Dr. David Smith, Associate Professor Emeritus of Archaeology at the University of Toronto Mississauga is an expert on First Nations archaeology and has a particular interest in the lands surrounding Cootes Paradise. In a wide-ranging interview, he had many perspectives to share on the specialness of this area from an Indigenous culture perspective:

"The culture called Princess Point, which is a woodland culture, these were the first farmer/cultivators in Canada. All cultures change through time, and these cultures were changing in various ways. The introduction of agriculture was a huge thing economically, but with the associated growth of population there was sedentism, the practice of living in one place for a long time. Staying in one place changes your attitudes toward the environment, as it becomes much more important that you control particular places instead of territories."

"A whole lot of other things change, including styles, and one of the ways that we track that in a general sort of way is through changes in pottery style. We've got a pretty good handle on that they were using pottery as containers. That's what defines the Woodland period, they started using pottery in Ontario around 1,000 BC and then it changes a lot in terms of the form. We have one of the few whole pots that dates back to Princess Point. They would break these things and throw them away, but for some reason they broke this pot but then threw all the pieces into one place and an archaeologist found it and was able to glue it back together again. I'd say there's only about five whole pots from this time period in existence."


Dr. David Smith, holding a Princess Point Culture Pot

"These are actually remarkable pieces of technology because they're made completely by hand, they are not wheel thrown. They're extremely symmetrical, and the walls are consistently relatively thin. I can pick this pot up, but if I had made this thing the walls would be so thick you couldn't move the thing. What they were used for was a variety of stuff that you would use containers for storage for food and water, but also for cooking. We've got maize (corn), that's a big deal, and it's the earliest maize in Canada. Princess Point is the site after which the culture is named, and is internationally known. Textbooks for North American archaeology have whole sections on the Princess Point Culture because it is associated with that change in the economy."

"The origins of agriculture worldwide are extremely important questions to archaeologists and to anthropologists because it completely changed our lives…good, bad or indifferent. It completely changed their lives living in one place 24/7, and was very different from moving around as hunter-gatherers where they would have had an extremely well-balanced diet. Generally, they would not have been living from hand to mouth, as Southern Ontario in prehistoric times was rich, rich, rich. They ate everything and they would have had a highly varied diet. What happens with agriculture introduction is that very often you end up focusing on one or two crops and one or two animals like Wheat-Barley-Sheep-Goats in the Middle East and this is not conducive to long-term good health. Dental problems just go through the roof. Our modern dental problems are basically a result of agriculture."

"These were highly intelligent, highly sophisticated and well- adapted peoples. We're no better adapted than they were and we're no more sophisticated actually either, we just got lots more iPads and things."

Mr. Stan Nowak of the Dundas Historical Society is a well-versed expert on many aspects of Dundas history, including aspects relating to a key Great Lakes transportation asset. "The

Desjardins Canal was the biggest and earliest industrial foothold into Dundas, aside from the Spencer Creek with all of its mills. The canal was the brainchild of Mr. Peter Desjardins, who had the vision and went into partnership with William Lyon McKenzie. The canal started being dug out in 1827, and the idea was to link the western part of Lake Ontario to Dundas which was then a thriving industrial community to provide easier transport for the ships to come into Dundas and for easier access to ship the goods further east. Unfortunately Peter Desjardins passed away mysteriously in 1827 just after the canal was started, and it was finally finished in August of 1837. Then the floodgates opened, there were boats coming in and businesses were being set up and the town's population exploded. Hotels and warehouses were built up and down the canal and the town simply thrived for about 20 years. All sorts of goods came in—flour, sugar, wheat—and the mills located on Spencer Creek were able to ship out their goods and it was a great symbiotic relationship." Nothing lasts forever, and the Desjardins Canal needed periodic dredging as sediment from the clearing of upstream farms gave an early indication of the widespread effects of soil erosion. On top of this, rail transport came to the area and gave a more reliable and cost-effective method of moving goods in and out of Dundas. All that remains today of the Desjardins Canal is the stretch of open water between the West Pond of Cootes Paradise and the Urquhart Butterfly Garden, cleaved in half by Olympic Drive, and a popular spot for waterfowl photography. The Turning Basin, where ships turned around to go back out to Lake Ontario, was filled in and is the site of today's Centennial Park where many go to enjoy Japanese cherry blossoms in Spring.

Photo of the Desjardins Canal, near the High Level Bridge (courtesy of Hamilton Public Library)

John Bryden, a former MP from the Chretien Liberal era, is an author and local expert on Dundas history. His focus in the film is on the road infrastructure that slices through the Dundas side of the C2EP. “The original section of the York Road was a busy thoroughfare for horses and wagons and perhaps cannons during the War of 1812. What's neat about the road is it is still in its original configuration and would probably would have had an Oak Forest on either side. At the top flat part of the York Road you get a lovely vista out towards downtown Hamilton. At one point there is a clump of trees (coordinates: 43.29091, -79.92154) that marks the location of a watering-hole waystation that would have been used to refresh the horses hauling munitions from a storage area up on the Escarpment down to Burlington Heights during the War of 1812. A bit further down is an S curve that would have existed in 1812. It goes down the incline one way and up the incline on the other side, and it would have probably had a log bridge at the bottom. The reason for this particular shape is so the horses pulling a wagon or soldiers’ horses pulling a cannon would be able to get up the incline fairly easily. It's quite unique to have a road that old that still follows the original route.”

Vintage Map of the York Road

Clump of Trees south of York Road, marking the War of 1812 era Watering-Hole

While the area is renown for its Indigenous cultural roots, there are also vestiges of its settler history and culture. Farming was done on the Dundas side of the C2EP by the Morden, Hopkins, Newman and Cartwright families amongst others, and some farming still continues on the south side of York Road by the Benvenuti family. There is a pioneer cemetery near the corner of Old York Road and Old Guelph Road, approximately 100 metres in from the road (coordinates: 43.29726, -79.9056). First registered by James Morden in 1798, the property was later registered to Joseph Hopkins in 1803. The burial ground has a total of 25 stones, first used in 1816 for Patty Mariah Hopkins and last used in 1905 for Anne Hayes Newman. The majority of stones, both whole and fragments, have been coalesced into a cement pad. There is one remaining independent marker, a family column for the Newman family.

There is no doubt the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System is a very special collection of open space treasures, across Hamilton and into Burlington. But the specialness of the area is only magnified when you consider its cultural and historical aspects. The first site for growing corn in Canada and the first area for clay pot production in Canada are pretty impressive attributes. The latter point perhaps explains the profusion of potters coming out of Dundas, including my own daughter, Jasmine Baetz. But what I find most intriguing is that clump of trees on the south side of York Road, a lasting marker for the role that horses and nature played in the success of the British Crown in the War of 1812. If the C2EP played even a minor role in keeping Canada a sovereign nation rather than an extension of New York State, we are certainly in great debt to these lands and need to ensure their conservation as important and significant greenspace.

<Brian Baetz is the Director of McMaster's W Booth School of Engineering Practice and Technology, and is working with fellow Club members John F. Evans, Kevin Empey, Jen Baker and Brian McHattie on fundraising for land acquisition in the Cootes to Escarpment EcoPark System>