

Community History, Active Historians and Activism

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Monday March 8th, 2010 was a cold and clear evening. I found myself walking down the south side of Colborne Street in a group of sixty protesters marching towards Brantford City Hall. The protesters, organized through a grass-roots Facebook group, were fighting against the demolition of forty-one buildings on Colborne Street in Brantford's historic downtown.¹ According to some of them, these buildings represented the longest stretch of pre-Confederation buildings in Ontario. To Brantford they represented the historic downtown of a once thriving industrial city. Brantford has suffered from the collapse of its industrial sector and the accompanying suburban flight of the town's middle class. In the mid 1990s, mayor Chris Friel called Brantford's downtown "the worst ... in Canada."² In 2009 Brantford's city council took the unprecedented step of expropriating this stretch of forty-one buildings in the heart of the city's downtown and, in a razor-thin six to five decision, voted to demolish the lot.

Brantford has never been a friend to heritage or historical preservation. The city demolished its historic city hall and market square in 1986 to build a now empty downtown mall. The Eaton Square Mall and the three-storey parking garage behind it were hailed at the time as guarantors of "permanent and effective change" for Brantford's struggling downtown.³ The parking garage looms in concrete dreariness behind Brantford's historic downtown, itself covering a historic canal constructed in the 1840s as part of the Grand River Navigation Company's waterway linking Brantford to Buffalo. Only the once-aptly named Water and Wharfe Streets mark the place where barges used to pull up behind Colborne Street businesses, supplying the booming commercial and industrial centre of Brantford.

Brantford calls itself the "Telephone City" because Alexander Graham Bell lived there while inventing the telephone. Although Bell's house has been designated a National Historic Site and preserved, the city has demolished the site of the first telephone factory as well as the office in which Bell made the first long distance telephone call. A recent attempt to commemorate Brantford's ties to telecommunications history was a disaster. In the early 1990s Bell Canada erected the Icomm Telecommunications Museum, a futuristic-looking 55,000 square foot structure, on the site of an old Massey-Harris tractor factory. Within months the company pulled out of the project, leaving the city with the bill for the futuristic-looking empty shell. Today the Icomm building is an OLG Casino.

At one time Brantford was Canada's third largest manufacturing centre for exported goods behind only Montreal and Toronto, owing mainly to the massive Massey-Harris and the Cockshutt agricultural implement manufacturers.⁴ The

two companies employed nearly 10,000 Brantford workers at their peak. Their closings in the 1980s devastated the city. Little remains of Brantford's once proud industrial history except decaying factory buildings and acres of brownfields contaminated with a 'you name it' of heavy metals and industrial chemicals. Some residents want all the remnants of historic Brantford razed and paved — the old factory buildings as well as the forty-one buildings downtown — because of the bitterness they represent. As they stand today the buildings are a constant reminder of the city's past greatness and its more recent failures. But to many others, including the group marching to save historic Colborne Street in early 2010, the very fabric of the history of their community is at stake. To them and to me these buildings are more than bricks and mortar or the ghosts of capital; they represent past lives, ties to the living city of today and hope for the future.

This article examines the relationship between community history, the prioritizing of built heritage, and the role of academic historians as active participants in current controversies. This is not an academic article, but rather a considered personal reflection based on my experiences as an academic historian working "on the ground" in local public history. I will describe how I found myself, an academic historian, working as an active historian. Much of the article will also discuss Brantford, where I have been working for the past year as the Executive Director of a local non-profit heritage organization. Finally, I will suggest some strategies to bridge what often seems to be a gap between the academic understanding of history and communities' internal understanding and appreciation of their local histories.

My personal foray into what can be called "active history" began while I was completing my PhD in history at McMaster University. As a graduate student I was concerned that the professional discipline of history was increasingly isolated and irrelevant to the public and the public understanding of history. While I aspired to become a professional historian - to teach, research and write in the university environment - I was not satisfied with the idea that the fruits of my academic endeavours might only result in articles in academic journals, monographs in university libraries, and presentations at academic conferences, reaching a handful of other historians and university students. I wanted to believe that academic research could be interesting and accessible to more people. I wanted to find ways to bridge the gap between the history practiced and produced in universities, and the history enjoyed and consumed by the public.

Many people are interested in history. They read and watch popular history and historical fiction. Likewise, many people practice history outside of universities. In Ontario there are hundreds of local historical societies.⁵ There are similar numbers of local museums and archives. Genealogy is a popular hobby across the western world, with countless organizations and websites devoted to collecting and supplying information to people who are researching their family history. Other groups are devoted to researching and preserving built heritage.

Most are staffed by volunteers, many with scant knowledge of academic history, but driven by personal interest and enthusiasm. Preserving local history has also become a public concern. Spurred by the demands of local history and heritage organizations, municipalities in Ontario and elsewhere have drafted and implemented Heritage Plans over the past decade or so.⁶ Many municipalities now employ Heritage and Cultural planners and state - publicly at least - that history and heritage are cultural resources that need to be protected and promoted as part of wider municipal development strategies.

Driven by a desire to not only understand history in detached methodological or theoretical terms but to feel connected to a community understanding of history, I joined the city of Cambridge's Archives Advisory board in 2005. I saw this as an opportunity to use my knowledge and skills to help promote public history. The mandate of the Archives Advisory Board is to advise the Cambridge city council on issues regarding the operation of the archives and to promote the work of archives and the continued development of the archives as a significant heritage resource. In 2006 I suggested that the board concentrate on ways to expand the public profile of the archives in order to increase public and private investment in this valuable cultural resource.

The result was the first "History on the Grand: Local and Public History Symposium." The aim of History on the Grand became: "to provide a forum for members of the academic community, historical and heritage groups, historical sites, local government representatives, museums, archives, and the general public to share research and discuss issues arising from the study of local history and making history public." The first symposium was held in October 2007 in Cambridge. It featured twenty-three paper presentations from a range of presenters including university professors, graduate students, architects, museum workers, and amateur or local historians. At hundred and twenty attendees, it was an impressive turnout for a first attempt at elevating local history

We held a second History on the Grand symposium in October 2009, this time based around the theme of "Industry and the Environment." Like the first, this symposium brought together a wide range of presenters and audience members, creating an engaging forum between academic and local historians.⁷ A third symposium, "People and Place," will explore the history of local immigration, migration, and ethno-cultural groups, and will take place in October 2011.

The History on the Grand symposiums bridged the gap between the academic understanding of history and the community's understanding and appreciation of its history. For example, at the 2009 symposium Jen Hassum, a graduate student in history at York University, presented her paper "Collective Fight, Labour Battles: An Examination of Homefront Discourse and Struggle During the Galt Strike of 1943." After the presentation one elderly local resident spoke to Jen about her personal recollections of the 1943 strike. For this woman, and others attending the symposiums, the academic treatments of their community

56 Dearlove

history demonstrated that what happened locally is important and real history. It recognized and validated the agency of ordinary people in the process of making history. For historians, it provided firsthand evidence of the significance of their research and its impact to the community.

Since the first symposium I have done my own work on local history. I have presented it at national and international academic conferences in Toronto, Vancouver, and Lisbon, Portugal, as well as at talks to local community groups. I have also lectured in Canadian History classes at both McMaster University and Laurier Brantford, providing a local context for national themes. I've also researched, written and led historical walking tours in Cambridge. Recently, I was invited to give a talk about the history of the textile industry in Cambridge. The talk was part of a community art project organized by Sue Sturdy, the Cambridge Centre for the Arts artist-in-residence, called Knit-(Cam)Bridge. The project engaged local residents to contribute knitting that would be used to cover a large bridge across the Grand River in Cambridge. Knit-Bridge paid homage to the once British Empire-leading textile industry in Cambridge connecting current residents to the city's history in a clever and colourful way.⁸

Professional and volunteer work in community history in Cambridge taught me several important lessons about being an active historian. Community history must be inclusive and built upon partnerships. Institutions, organizations and individuals already practicing local history are important potential partners for academic historians. History on the Grand targeted local historical organizations and academic institutions and built successful partnerships with them including the Waterloo Historical Society, Heritage Cambridge, and the University of Waterloo School of Architecture. Community history must be accessible. Events open to the public at no-charge or a small fee such as public talks or walking tours reach wider audiences than a typical two or three day academic conference. While historians privilege the "history" available in archived documents others see community history in the built heritage that surrounds them. Annual Doors Open Ontario events, supported by the Ontario Heritage Trust, bring thousands of people in communities across Ontario into heritage sites to learn more about their local history.⁹ Jane's Walk, inspired by urbanist and activist Jane Jacobs, encourages local communities to organize walking tours, often featuring heritage and cultural sites. In 2010 twenty-nine communities in Canada held a Jane's Walk while other towns have independent Doors Open neighbourhood tours.¹⁰ Each of these examples is a way for academic historians to get more active in local history and more connected to their communities.

Inspired by my experiences in public and local history in Cambridge, I was excited to take the position of Executive Director of the Canadian Industrial Heritage Centre in Brantford shortly after completing my PhD. I soon discovered, however, that though Brantford is just a short thirty-kilometer drive from

Cambridge down Highway 24 it was, from my perspective, a world apart in terms of its recognition and appreciation of community history. Unlike the verbal and monetary recognition Cambridge awards its local history, Brantford views its past with unease and resentment. Brantford's roots go back to the Haldimand Deed, land granted by the British crown to Mohawk Chief Joseph Brant and the Six Nations in recognition of their loyalty during the American Revolution. The Six Nations reserve, located to the south of Brantford, is today the largest First Nations community in Canada. But the modern relationship between Brantford and the Six Nations is marked by mistrust, prejudice, and sometimes outright hostility. This and the rapid de-industrialization of the city in 1980s has convinced many residents that it is better to tear down the city's past than to come to terms with it and build on it.

The negative province-wide reaction to the city's plans to demolish Colborne Street came as a surprise to many in Brantford. It morphed into something bigger than local Brantford politics. In quick succession articles and editorials in the *Hamilton Spectator*, the *Kitchener-Waterloo Record*, the *Toronto Star*, the *National Post* and the *Globe and Mail* drew attention to the proposed demolition of scores of heritage buildings.¹¹ It turned into a story about built heritage; about those trying to save it versus the fiat-like will of what in actual fact was a divided city council. It also became a story about the responsibility of academics to the community and academic freedom because the conflicted Laurier Brantford administration went so far as to censor faculty members who wanted to save the buildings. It was the grand debates about what constitutes history and who owns history in microcosm playing out on in the daily news.

In 2009 with the city's support, Laurier Brantford and the Brantford YMCA undertook development feasibility studies and applied for federal funding to build a joint YMCA-Laurier athletic complex on the Colborne heritage site.¹² Meanwhile, the City expropriated the forty-one heritage buildings. By a vote of six to five the council decided to demolish all the buildings with the help of Federal stimulus money. The longtime advocate of a downtown *tabula rasa* Mayor Mike Hancock cast the deciding vote. However, Laurier Brantford and the Brantford YMCA were unable to secure capital funding for the project, and the Federal funding for demolition fell through after the city's environmental and heritage assessments of the buildings were rejected.¹³ The pro-demolition half of the city's council maintained that the buildings were empty, not salvageable and presented a public safety hazard. However, at the time of expropriation there were several businesses still operating in the buildings, many people living in the buildings, and an architect's report concluded that thirty out of the forty-one buildings were structurally sound and candidates for adaptive re-use.¹⁴ In spite of the lack of a funded development plan for the site and protests by the Architectural Conservancy of Ontario, the Heritage Canada Foundation, the Ontario Ministry

58 Dearlove

of Culture, most media opinion and many residents of Brantford the demolition proceeded.¹⁵

Many others in and around Brantford were against the demolition of Colborne Street. They included academics at Wilfrid Laurier University, including Leo Groarke, former dean of Laurier Brantford, and Lisa Wood, an English professor at Laurier Brantford. Groarke, Wood and other academics vocally opposed the rush to demolish these buildings without any regard for restoration or adaptive re-use. They showed leadership in a community that was ambivalent but still concerned about protecting and preserving its heritage and they are examples of the community involvement encouraged by universities. But in this case they faced criticisms by their own administration. Wood was called into a meeting with the principal of Laurier Brantford, because Mayor Hancock — who is also a member of the Laurier Brantford Board of Directors — threatened to hold Wood and Laurier Brantford liable for any delays in demolition caused by Wood's activism.¹⁶ Although Wood never claimed to be representing Laurier Brantford in her protest against the demolition of Colborne Street, the response by Laurier Brantford and the Mayor of Brantford called into question the rights of academics to be active in their communities.

Despite public and professional outcry in Brantford and beyond - incredibly labeled by the advocates of demolition as outside agitation by a group of "smug, hippy liberals" - the city "deciders" tore down all forty-one buildings on Colborne Street.¹⁷ The last building was demolished in September 2010. Yet for many in Brantford, this public defeat became a rallying cry for the need to protect and preserve the city's history and heritage.¹⁸ For me, it showed how active historians sometimes need to be *activists*. With the Canadian Industrial Heritage Centre I organized an afternoon forum for the discussion of history and heritage in Brantford. I gave a presentation highlighting examples of the adaptive re-use of buildings in Southern Ontario and participated in a round-table discussion along with Lisa Wood now president of the new Brant chapter of the Architectural Conservancy of Ontario on the subject.¹⁹ With the help of the local media many of the heritage preservation ideas discussed at the forum became part of the development dialogue in Brantford.

The October 2010 municipal election presented an opportunity to make heritage part of the public debate as well. Using questions drafted by the professionals at the Architectural Conservancy of Ontario, and inspired by the Toronto mayoral debate on heritage issues, the Canadian Industrial Heritage Centre distributed a heritage questionnaire to all forty-seven municipal candidates in Brantford.²⁰ With candidates' responses published on the Canadian Industrial Heritage Centre website and by local media, the preservation and promotion of community history has become an active and ongoing public and political concern in Brantford.

What is happening in Brantford is indicative of movements in other communities across Canada. There is a growing realization in the face of so-called “conservatives” concerned with property rights and immediate gain than for sustainable and realistic development based on past practice and useful precedent that a community’s history and heritage are important cultural resources that need protection and promotion. For academic historians there are growing opportunities to participate in public and community history, and to help bridge the gap between the academic understanding of history and a community’s own understanding and appreciation of its history by becoming active, and in some cases, activist historians. As academic historians we have important roles to play. I personally believe in a professional responsibility to provide information, resources, and leadership in public and community history.

NOTES

- ¹ Sean Allen, “60 Protest Colborne Demolition,” *Brant News*, 8 March 2010; Richard Beales, “Marchers want city to halt demolition,” *Brantford Expositor*, 9 March 2010.
- ² Paula Kulig, “Blight on Main Street: Even the Mayor says Brantford has the worst downtown in Canada – a victim like so many others of shopping mall,” *Toronto Star*, 19 May 1996, p.D1.
- ³ Janet Kempster and Gary Muir, *Brantford: Grand River Crossing*. (Burlington: Windsor Publications, 1986), 126.
- ⁴ Kempster and Muir, *Brantford*, 45.
- ⁵ As documented on their website, the Ontario Historical Society (OHS) reports 245 active affiliated local historical organizations in Ontario.
- ⁶ In 2006 the City of Cambridge became the third municipality in Ontario, after Toronto and Niagara Falls, to adopt a Heritage Master Plan. See “Heritage Master Plan,” City of Cambridge, accessed 9 November 2010, <http://www.cambridge.ca/article.php?ssid=335>.
- ⁷ For information on past and future History on the Grand Symposiums see “History on the Grand Local History Symposium,” City of Cambridge Archives, accessed 9 November 2010, http://www.cambridge.ca/city_clerk/city_archives/history_on_the_grand_local_history_symposium.
- ⁸ Martin De Groot, “Pulling the wool over...everything,” *Waterloo Region Record*, 30 April 2010; Melissa Tait, “Cambridge gives its Main Street bridge a knitted hug,” *Waterloo Region Record*, 13 September 2010.
- ⁹ According to the Ontario Heritage Trust, since the beginning of the program in 2002, Doors Open Ontario has attracted 3 million visitors to heritage sites in Ontario. (http://www.doorsopenontario.on.ca/userfiles/HTML/nts_1_39_1.html) In 2010, Doors Open Waterloo Region attracted over 10,000 visitors to 41 sites during the one-day event. (“Doors Open Enjoys Great Regional Response,” *Cambridge Times*, 22 September 2010).
- ¹⁰ “Jane’s Walk,” Jane’s Walk, Accessed 9 November 2010, <http://www.janeswalk.net/>
- ¹¹ Paul Morse, “The Battle for Downtown Brantford,” *Hamilton Spectator*, 28 January 2010; “Brantford debates bulldozing history,” *Hamilton Spectator*, 29 January 2010; Denise Balkissoon, “In Brantford: Heritage treasures or hopeless hovels,” *Toronto Star*, 2 February 2010, p.A04; Christopher Hume, “Brantford aims wrecking ball at its future,” *Toronto Star*, 6 February 2010, GT02; Christopher Hume, “Brantford’s Choice: Wreckage or Revitalization,” *Toronto Star*, 8 February 2010; Christopher Hume, “Brantford will live to regret the tragedy of edifice wrecks,” *Toronto Star*, 15 February 2010, GT04; Martin De Groot, “Brantford’s move to tear down historic structures is pitiful,” *Waterloo Region Record*, 19 February 2010; Terry Pender, “Brantford’s Heritage Buildings at Centre of Debate,”

60 Dearlove

Waterloo Region Record, 20 February 2010; Sarah Boesveld, "Heritage to Some, Eyesores to Others," *Globe and Mail*, 5 March 2010, A6; Raveena Aulakh, "Brantford's historic downtown may be gutted on Tuesday," *Toronto Star*, 6 June 2010, A6; Anonymous, "Wrecking our heritage," *Toronto Star*, 13 June 2010, A14; Christopher Hume, "Our history's facing a trouble future," *Toronto Star*, 21 June 2010, GT2.

¹² Paige Desmond, "Teaming up on south Colborne," *Brant News*, 9 July 2009.

¹³ Sean Allen, "Plan B for YMCA and Old Town Hall," *Brant News*, 15 December 2009.

¹⁴ Michael-Allan Marion, "City has to evict last remaining resident," *Brantford Expositor*, 10 February 2010; "Ontario city to demolish historic street, despite Ottawa's objection," *National Post*, 8 June 2010. For a summary of the FedDev review of the proposed demolition see the following report dated 2 June 2010:

<https://docs.google.com/fileview?id=0B1vniNAXPhiZMzMxMDUxZjctZWZmMS00Y2NjLWJkY2EtMjJlYzhkN2ExYjBl&hl=en>.

¹⁵ The Heritage Canada Foundation spoke out several times against the demolition of Colborne Street and named Brantford as number two in its 2010 list of top ten endangered heritage sites in Canada. (<http://www.heritagecanada.org/eng/MayorCouncilColbourneFeb2010.pdf>; <http://www.heritagecanada.org/eng/featured/current.html>) See also the story on Ontario Heritage Connections: http://www.ontarioheritageconnection.org/live/main.php?page=news.201002_m.html. According to the city of Brantford's general manager of engineering, the severe slope behind Colborne Street, which had been stabilized for the past 130 years by the basements of the three storey buildings on the site, would require extensive stabilization and would make the site difficult to build upon. The city's general manager of engineering also stated that the site might stay empty for at least ten years. (John Zronik, "Demolition Enters Home Stretch," *Brant News* 16 September 2010).

¹⁶ Terry Pender, "Demolition Politics and Wilfred Laurier University," *Waterloo Region Record*, 5 March 2010; Mike Lakusiak, "Prof Struggles to Defend Heritage Buildings," *The Cord*, 3 March 2010.

¹⁷ Quoted in the ACORN (Architectural Conservancy of Ontario) newsletter, September 2010. Brantford's federal member of parliament Phil McColeman, also decried what he called "lobbyists" and outside agitators for protesting against the demolition on Colborne Street. (Michael-Allan Marion, "Demolition frustration grows," *Brantford Expositor*, 10 June 2010.

¹⁸ Michael-Allan Marion, "Demolition rallying cry for heritage advocates," *Brantford Expositor*, 6 July 2010.

¹⁹ Michael-Allan Marion, "Giving new life to abandoned industrial sites," *Brantford Expositor*, 15 June 2010.

²⁰ Nick Aveling, "Mayoral candidates debate over heritage conservation," *National Post*, 31 August 2010; Sean Allen, "Heritage an Election Issue," *Brant News*, 26 August 2010; Michael-Allan Marion, "Candidates questioned on heritage stand," *Brantford Expositor*, 27 August 2010; Michael-Allan Marion, "Candidates must reveal where they stand on heritage issues," *Brantford Expositor*, 31 August 2010.