

## 1.0 Summary

- A Study should be undertaken, as outlined in Part V of the Ontario Heritage Act, to consider designating Amherst Island a Heritage Conservation District; this for the following reasons and as described in this text.
- Ontario Provincial Policy Statement, 2005 Section 2.6.1 states: “*Significant built heritage resources and significant cultural heritage landscapes shall be conserved.*”
- Amherst Island, in eastern Ontario, is a significant Cultural Heritage Landscape (CHL), with a clearly defined boundary, namely the waters of Lake Ontario.
- The island falls into all 3 defined categories of a CHL: designed, evolved and associative.
- The **intangible cultural heritage** of the island, including the extraordinary absence of industrial noise and the close-knit fabric of the community, are highly significant.

## 2.0 Amherst Island

Disembarking from the Millhaven ferry dock one begins a journey rich in prospects and in anticipation. And disembarking at the Stella dock, one arrives at Amherst Island. Things are subtly but palpably different, for this is a beautiful place: magical, unique and commensurately precious.

Amherst Island might, from afar, be described as long, thin, flat and small, but such a description is misleading, even deceitful. Just as a crucial moment may seem an eternity, so a finite place may seem infinite. Such a place is Amherst Island, and such a moment is this.

Canada is a vast and diverse country often defined by imposed orthogonal and inherited contradictions, a country in which this beautiful island proves an exception to the general rules. Context is everything, perception may be nine tenths of reality and Amherst Island is rare, spectacular and unique. All I know who have visited this place - from North America, Europe, Asia, the Caribbean and beyond - all make the same simple observation: “This place is special.” Special, unique, peaceful, precious, beautiful, rare or even magical; all are applicable here.

Philosophers, poets, theoreticians and academics have spent centuries trying to define the essence of beauty, all generally without success; and magical is even harder to define. Beauty may be recognized but somehow cannot be fully understood. Governments and NGOs working in the cultural heritage field have tried to do the same, and so have agreed upon the concept of the Cultural Heritage Landscape. It is accepted that there are three such landscapes, as defined in the Ontario Provincial Policy Statement 2005, Section 2.6.1, namely “designed, evolved and associative.” This island falls into all three categories, and is uniquely beautiful in so many ways; or magical.

## 3.0 Amherst Island - The Cultural Heritage Landscape

Returning to the surveyor’s arbitrary grid – something foreign to many lands – Amherst Island is a world-class local exception, a well-kept secret in southern Canada, and in eastern Ontario.

Here the grid does not sit comfortably on meandering shorelines, gentle hills and low-lying wetlands.

After the anticipatory pleasures of the ferry ride – towards a seemingly low land with the occasional rocky outcrop and a verdant skyline punctuated by the occasional silo, one disembarks to discover an unexpected variety of stunning cultural heritage landscapes. That which seemed flat is now hilly, that which seemed small is now large, and that which perhaps seemed ordinary proves instead to be extraordinary. When stopping – the car, the iPhone, the CD player, and the excited chatter – perhaps Saint Paul's Cemetery by the old Manse, where Lake Ontario suddenly reappears, there is a remarkable and most-rare stillness, even a silence. Instead of the general dull background roar of industrialized southern Ontario one instead hears the natural sounds of against background silence: birds, crickets, frogs, distant cows, and even rustling leaves or nearly field grasses and crops; all so rare, so unexpected and so valuable.

The straight-but-undulating Stella 40-Foot is the main transverse road of the island; with the Lower 40-Foot to the east and the Emerald 40-Foot to the west being the less-used transverse counterparts. These three are designed grid-roads. In contrast, the often tree-lined Front (north) Road, the South Shore Road and the Third Concession Road are rare and wonderful exceptions to a dull Canadian orthogonal rule. These latter three are, equally, both designed and evolved roads, and so are cultural heritage landscapes even in themselves.

The two shore-roads generally follow the shorelines, sometimes with immediate open views out over the last of the Great Lakes to one side, but often with diverse collections of fields, barns, houses, gardens and the occasional clutch of old cars between road and water. And on the inland side of these roads are larger fields, often framed by woven-wire fences hung off eastern-cedar posts, then cattle, crops, fallow fields, pastures, ponds, barns beyond. And throughout are the heritage homes built by ancestors of those who still live within, or next door, or down the road but typically still on this isle. These homes and farmsteads point to the often-unacknowledged aspect of intangible cultural heritage, which is the essence of community: the importance of those who created, and who have for centuries lived both on and off (i.e. as farmers), this special land of rare communal interest.

The isolation of Amherst Island has produced an extraordinary, caring, safe and close-knit community. In Canada, and throughout the world, we often know not of and speak not to those who live around, near or even next to us. The convenience of modern transportation has brought the consequence of modern isolation; whereas the inconvenience of the island's isolation created a community of extraordinary closeness and co-operation, support and security. This intangible but palpable cultural aspect must not be overlooked, nor be undervalued: beyond just beautiful, this place is indeed magical.

Returning to more-tangible connections, and moving from the periphery to the centre, the Third Concession takes the heritage high-road. This both is and affords access to the cultural heritage heartland of the island. It provides another unpredictable and ever-changing, interconnected

sequence of vistas, and so is probably the most remarkable of these designed, evolved and associative cultural landscapes. The Third departs westward from the Stella 40-foot some 300 metres north of where it should, thus avoiding marshy land. It runs southwest more than a kilometer, under canopy of old sugar-maples and past ancestral homes, barns, silos and outbuildings, then deviates briefly from the maple-avenue where a perilous zig-zag was removed some decades ago, to two right-angle bends – there to keep the road on the higher ground. At the latter of these turns is the highest point of all roads on the island and, remarkably, the one place where the Third aligns with the surveyor's ignored right-of-way.

Here, as the road again heads southwest, are spectacular views, especially southwards, over farm fields down to Lake Ontario, which extends to the horizon. This glorious prospect, and the landscapes that precede, follow and surround it, are paragons of this province. Continuing southwest, through trees and fields, past old houses, barns and farmsteads and, in summer, one is accompanied by swooping birds, buzzing bees, grazing cattle and idle horses, basking snakes and so much more. We descend gradually towards a great marsh with placid pond on the left and, soon thereafter, another sharp bend prevents one from driving into the water. Here is a long shingle beach, generally of limestone pebbles 450 million years old, formed when this land was near the Equator and deep beneath a tropical sea. Beyond lies a little isle, containing and enhancing the view, an integral if separate part of Amherst Island.

The present cultural heritage landscape is far removed from that last ice age, but the event created this topography. Millennia later the toil and enterprise of Northern European immigrants reshaped and created this landscape, and formed a community, and their descendants, among others, have maintained and enhanced it since. The Third Concession provides further wonderful prospects and experiences over several more kilometers: a stunningly beautiful path through a remarkable landscape, one of few provincial roads so felicitously free from the surveyor's arbitrary and, in this case, must unsuitable intent.

#### **4.0 Conclusion and Recommendation**

Amherst Island, with its spectacular location, topography and constantly changing unique vistas – including the roads just described and the adjacent glorious prospects are a provincially significant cultural heritage landscape of both real (tangible) and intangible heritage value. This island is the product of the lives and works of some two centuries of inhabitants who have, since their births collective births created, lived in (and off), and looked after this most-special place.

In the event that the integrity of the island should be compromised – whether physically, socially, culturally, aesthetically or otherwise – that will be a sad day for the Province of Ontario, locally, provincially, nationally and even internationally. The eyes of many watch over Amherst Island and if the magic of this beautiful place, and the associated tangible and intangible cultural heritage values, are irrevocably compromised, the blame will rest in perpetuity on those who permitted such a significant cultural-heritage loss, or destruction, to occur.

A Study should be undertaken, as outlined in Part V of the Ontario Heritage Act, to consider designating Amherst Island a Heritage Conservation District. Please see also some of the relevant government policies as noted below.

Nicholas Holman M.A. (York, UK), OAA, OAQ, CAHP, RIBA, B.Arch and B. Sc. Arch (McGill), BA (Toronto)

**Relevant Documents:**

**Ontario Heritage Act (OHA)** especially Part V

**Ontario Regulation 9/06**

**Ontario Provincial Policy Statement, 2005** (especially Part V, Section 2.6.1)

**Ontario Heritage Tool Kit** (a.k.a. **Heritage Resources in the Land Use Planning Process, 2005**), especially Info Sheet #2 and #5.