

MDHS



MERRICKVILLE DISTRICT
HISTORICAL SOCIETY

January, 29 2021

Dale MacEachern
External Relations Manager, Ontario Waterways
Parks Canada, Government of Canada
34 Beckwith Street South
Smiths Falls, ON
K7A 2A8

Sent via email to: Dale.MacEachern@canada.ca

Dear Mr. MacEachern,

Thank you for providing the Merrickville and District Historical Society (MDHS) with a copy of the Draft Management Plan for the Rideau Canal National Historic Site of Canada and UNESCO World Heritage Site (including Merrickville Blockhouse National Historic Site of Canada).

Many of our comments and concerns result from Parks Canada's decision to not create a management plan for the Merrickville Blockhouse National Historic Site. As you are aware, this National Historic Site had its own stand-alone management plan previously. During consultations prior to this draft management plan with Parks Canada, MDHS was given to understand that the management plan for the National Historic Blockhouse would be incorporated within the wider Rideau Canal Management Plan. MDHS was supportive of this initiative. In fact, this has not happened. By categorizing this National Historic Site as a Management Area within the Management Plan for the Rideau Canal, the Merrickville Blockhouse National Historic Site no longer receives the focus and recognition we believe it requires by virtue of being a National Historic Site. And, since it was only identified as a management area, was not deemed by Parks Canada to have enough significance to be included in the feedback survey posted on its Rideau Canal Management Plan on-line consultation site (<https://www.rideauplan.ca/home>). How are Canadians to be provide feedback on the management plan for one of their National Historic Sites if it is not included in the survey?

In addition to this broader comment, our organization has taken the time to review the document and has the following comments on its contents:

Our organization has taken the time to review the document and has the following comments related to specific parts of the Draft Management Plan.

2.0 Significance of Rideau Canal and Merrickville Blockhouse National Historic Sites

Given the decision by Parks Canada to incorporate the Management Plan for the Merrickville Blockhouse National Historic Site of Canada within the wider Rideau Canal National Historic Site of Canada Management Plan, we would like to see the text relating to the designation of the Merrickville Blockhouse as a National Historic Site on 1939-05-29 included as part of the historical timeline. It, too, received its designation under the Historic Sites and Monuments Act (as was the Rideau Canal in 1925), but the text in the last paragraph of section 2.0 is much more opaque.

Perhaps a paragraph dedicated to the timeline for the Merrickville Blockhouse National Historic Site could be added after the Rideau Canal timeline to acknowledge the additional designations/recognitions afforded this building by the federal government:

1. Merrickville Blockhouse was recognized with its own Heritage Character Statement (1992) by the Federal Heritage Buildings Review Office (FHBRO) in accordance with the Treasury Board Policy on Management of Real Property.¹
2. The Merrickville Blockhouse was placed on the Canadian Register of Historic Places in 2007², a Federal, Provincial and Territorial (F/P/T) body administered by Parks Canada.

3.0 Planning Context

MDHS notes that Parks Canada is identifying its role as that of a convener since *“Parks Canada is well placed to bring all these disparate groups together to celebrate, promote and enhance the corridor to become a world-renowned destination.”*

This marks a departure from Parks Canada’s previous level of involvement with its partners and MDHS would like to signal that a new mechanism for collaboration will be necessary for Parks Canada to convene these organizations.

3.3 Indigenous Peoples and the Rideau Canal

MDHS is pleased that Parks Canada is *actively pursuing way to grow our relationship with these communities through cooperation and new partnerships*. We would request that Parks Canada share its findings with respect to indigenous peoples’ guidance for interpretative programming with all of the partners operating cultural programming along the Rideau Canal.

¹ [https://www.historicplaces.ca/media/15176/1991-078\(e\)blockhouse.pdf](https://www.historicplaces.ca/media/15176/1991-078(e)blockhouse.pdf)

² <https://www.historicplaces.ca/en/rep-reg/place-lieu.aspx?id=7445&pid=0>

In addition, it should be noted that the MDHS would be open to having Indigenous-led curation of space within the Blockhouse Museum.

3.4. Living History

“Parks Canada works with not-for-profit organizations who operate museums” including the Merrickville Blockhouse Museum. MDHS has, in the past, had difficulty “working with” Parks Canada and would appreciate regularly scheduled meeting to assist with operational issues relating to real property. A planning meeting in the spring (prior to the summer season) is particularly crucial since maintenance issues which affect operations need to be identified and carried out prior to the opening in late May.

4.0 Vision

The document mentions that the Rideau Canal *“is a cultural destination – a symbol of integrity and authenticity – where its engineering works, heritage landscapes and historic buildings are well-protected and appreciated.”* *“In the years to come, Parks Canada will continue to work with its partners to elevate the Rideau Canal, both national and internationally, into a world-renowned, welcoming, and lively site that inspires people to discover and connect with Canada’s natural and cultural heritage.”*

MDHS remains curious as to how Parks Canada defines its partners and what mechanisms will it create to work with these partners. Parks Canada’s engagement strategy and mechanisms have not been clear in the past and MDHS would like to encourage Parks Canada to be more definite with respect to its communications regarding engagement strategies and mechanisms with its “partners.”

5.0 Key Strategies

Key Strategy #1 – Realizing the Waterway’s Full Potential as a Great Canadian Outdoor Destination

Objective 1.2: Land-based Visitation to Lock Stations is Increased and Visitors are More Engaged with the Canal

Targets: By 2025, 520 (2) master plans are developed, in collaboration with key stakeholders, for strategic lock stations ()and/or groups of lock stations), that outline priorities for future site improvements to support visitor experience and canal operations. Examples could include Kingston Mills lock station, Jones Falls lock station, or the lock stations within the City of Ottawa. By 2030, an additional three (3) master plans are developed.

MDHS believes that the Merrickville lock station should be identified as a strategic lock station for the following reasons:

1. Merrickville Blockhouse National Historic Site is the only National Historic Site along the Rideau Canal.
2. With consistent visitation of 10,000 people annually, it is well-placed to offer support for the targets listed in Objective 1.1 to offer trip planning tools and support for paddlers, cyclists, campers, etc.
3. Blockhouse Park surrounding the lock station is located in the village of Merrickville-Wolford which provides access to community infrastructure (grocery stores, pharmacy, restaurants, shopping, health-care)
4. Merrickville lock station is located right on Highway 43.
5. Merrickville lock station is located an hour's drive from Ottawa and already receives many "day trippers"
6. Merrickville Blockhouse is located in Blockhouse Park, next to the recently renovated "Merrickville Depot."

Targets: By 2022, a Visitor Experience Strategy is developed for the Rideau Canal.

MDHS believes that a Visitor Experience Strategy for the entire Rideau Canal system would provide linkages among the various stakeholders operating along the Canal system and would like to see the signage developed for the 2007 UNESCO World Heritage site designation to be reviewed to take into account new understanding of history along the Rideau Canal (eg. inclusion of indigenous stories and multiple perspectives).

Objective 1.3: Relationships with Strategic Partners are Developed and Strengthened to Manage the Rideau Canal in a Collaborative Way

Targets:

- Parks Canada meets annually with partners, stakeholders, organizations, local communities and the tourism industry to discuss ongoing management of the Rideau and to explore new initiative and opportunities for the Canal.

MDHS supports regular meetings with Parks Canada to discuss ongoing management of the Rideau Canal. Timing of these meetings should support Parks Canada's partners and stakeholders in preparing for the summer season, traditionally the time of year when most people visit the Rideau Canal.

- Parks Canada meets annual with key regional and municipal tourism organizations to ensure the Rideau corridor and its many attractions, amenities, services and experiences are collaboratively marketed and promoted with a consistent approach that effectively leverages the Rideau Canal brand and the National Historic Site and UNESCO World Heritage Site designations.

MDHS supports a consistent approach and notes that Parks Canada would like to leverage the National Historic Site designation. The wording here could be sharpened to include the Merrickville Blockhouse as National Historic Site within the Rideau Canal National Historic Site.

Key Strategy #2, Demonstrating Excellence in Sustainability, Protection and Presentation

Objective 2.1: The Rideau Canal’s Engineering Marvels, Heritage Landscapes and Natural Beauty are Protected

Targets:

- By 2030, the cultural landscapes at 5 key lock stations are described and documented to support the commemorative integrity of the water as well as the visitor experience opportunities that support heritage connections.

MDHS supports the description and documentation to support commemorative integrity of the waterway and believes that the Merrickville Blockhouse National Historic Site should be included as one of the 5 key lock stations.

Objective 2.2.

Objective 2.3: Ecological and Cultural Aspects of the Rideau Canal are Presented to Visitors and Integrated in Tourism

Target:

- The next Visitor Information Program survey shows an increase in its learning indicator as visitors at the Rideau Canal are educated about the cultural and national heritage of the Rideau Canal through the use of new and emerging technologies.

MDHS believes the Merrickville Blockhouse National Historic Site could be a prime site for educating visitors about the cultural and natural heritage of the Rideau Canal. For the MDHS to contribute to this target *“through the use of new and emerging technologies,”* MDHS will require support from Parks Canada to install internet connectivity at the Merrickville Blockhouse National Historic Site.

6.0 Management Area: Merrickville Blockhouse National Historic Site of Canada

As noted previously, the opening section should re-reference designation under the Historic Sites and Monuments Act in 1939.

It may also be pertinent to add that for the time it has been open to the public (since 1967) access to the interior of the Merrickville Blockhouse has been provided by a 3rd party – the Merrickville and District Historical Society with the support of the Village of Merrickville-

Wolford. Parks Canada contributed several panels and artifacts in 2007 as part of its UNESCO World Heritage designation project. MDHS believes that it is important that the document acknowledges that the provision of an “authentic and engaging glimpse” for local citizens and visitors is not being provided by Parks Canada. Further, this level of interpretation of the building cannot be taken for granted. MDHS’ ability to sustain itself is an important contingency for Parks Canada to take into account, because if we were to cease to exist or did not have the capacity to open the building, this building would simply be viewable from the exterior. The Blockhouse would then become a much less engaging space. The Merrickville Blockhouse Museum provides historic interpretation and visitor services to approximately 10,000 visitors annually –in the same range as Parks Canada’s Fort Wellington (12,000) – at no operational cost to Parks Canada. We believe that MDHS has provided 53 years of programming at a National Historic Site for free – a role that is not likely to be taken up by Parks Canada or other agency in the foreseeable future and we would like to be to count on Parks Canada to be an engaged landlord in seeing that our role can continue in this way.

As noted in the planning context, *“capitalizing on opportunities for collaboration between the Blockhouse Museum and the Rideau Canal can broaden visitors’ understanding of the evolving role of the waterway and its impact on shaping the region, and engage visitors in experience the latest chapter in the canal’s long history.”*

Targets:

- The Merrickville Blockhouse is maintained in fair to good condition in the next State of the Site assessment through regular monitoring, maintenance and repair.
- By 2025, a dialogue is initiative to identify opportunities for collaboration in visitor experience and marketing and promotions efforts at Merrickville Lockstation.

MDHS would like to suggest an additional target, which supports Parks Canada’s notion of capitalizing on opportunities for collaboration stated above.

MDHS Proposed Draft Target: Merrickville Blockhouse National Historic Site is included in the Visitor Experience Strategy to ensure that Merrickville Blockhouse remains a landmark within the Village of Merrickville-Wolford that is appreciated and as a treasure enjoyed for its historical significance in the defense of British North America, as an integral part of the Rideau Canal, and as a treasured local museum.

As stated in 1.0 Introduction, MDHS is hopeful *“that Parks Canada will indeed maintain an open dialogue on the implementation of the management plan, to ensure that it remains relevant and meaningful.”*

In addition, we would like to have a follow-up interview with Dale MacEachern scheduled for early in February. He can reach out to MDHS at info@merrickvillehistory.org or call Ann Martin, President, MDHS, directly at 613-207-2042.

We look forward to our face-to-face meeting with Parks Canada officials. If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Ann Martin
President, Merrickville and District Historical Society