

Indigenous History and Relations at Ashburnham Memorial Park

Includes:

Final Report

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Introduction

Ashburnham Memorial Park is found at 300 Hunter Street East, Peterborough. This 50-acre property is home to a rich history and abundant species. Since 2021, the Ashburnham Memorial Stewardship group has been founded on the goals to preserve the natural space while educating those on the historical importance of the park. For this project, the Ashburnham Memorial Stewardship group has partnered with Trent University and the Trent Community Research Centre to begin the process of documenting and framing the use of uncover and document the Indigenous historical use of Ashburnham Memorial Park. This process of uncovering and documenting the historical use of the park by Indigenous communities should understand, respect, and acknowledge the cultural, historical, and ecological ties to regional communities. In uncovering and documenting the historical use of the park by Indigenous communities, the project looks to respect, honour, and acknowledge the legacy of the land and its historical ties to local Indigenous communities, as well as address the importance. This study aims to begin the process of addressing the importance of this park environmentally.

For this project, we aimed to identify how to undertake primary and secondary research on the Indigenous history of Ashburnham Memorial Park. This information, collected at various sources, aids in showing the importance of Traditional Ecological Knowledge and by integrating historical insights into its strategies. The Ashburnham Memorial Stewardship Group and future land stewards could eventually use the research findings to address contemporary stewardship challenges, such as reducing littering, speeding, and vandalism, ecological stewardship, and promoting a deeper sense of respect and accountability among park users. We also sought valuable guidance for future studies of the Parks Indigenous heritage. This information can be used to understand the process of applying research ethics towards future research. It's with this aspect that we aim to achieve various principles behind the Truth and Reconciliation Act. In this line of study, we also are going to discuss guidelines, procedures, and protocols for approaching Indigenous communities and peoples. We hope to identify seeking and applicational options that may be gathered through this research discussion around the usage of Traditional Ecological Knowledges and Indigenous perspectives. It is important that any relationship built with Indigenous communities and peoples be done through a branch of trust and reciprocity. In our conclusion, we will be providing recommendations, next steps, and resources that will allow for

the continuation of this study. We understand that it is important for this study to be transferable and approachable to future researchers.

Historical Context

Ashburnham Memorial Park is found on the treaty and traditional territory of the Michi Saagiig Anishnaabeg, which is made up of Curve Lake First Nation, Hiawatha First Nation, Alderville First Nation, and the Mississaugas of Scugog Island First Nation (Trent University, 2019). The vast area that is now known as southern Ontario is Michi Saagiig territory, from Gananoque in the east to the north shore of Lake Erie at Long Point in the west. They are known as “the people of the big river mouths” and/or as the “salmon people” because they often fished on the north shore of Lake Ontario (Curve Lake First Nation, 2014).

Michi Saagiig's oral histories highlight that they have been in this area of Ontario since time immemorial. Their oral histories also speak to the fact that they are descendants of the ancient peoples who were alive during the Archaic and Paleo-Indian periods in current-day Ontario (Curve Lake First Nation, 2023). Some of the earliest sites of human habitations in Ontario can be found in what is now known as the Kawarthas. The name “Kawartha” is anglicized and comes from the Anishinaabe word “Kawaategamiing” which means “land of shining waters/reflections.” This name was coined by Martha Whetung of Curve Lake First Nation in 1895 (Francis, 2024).

Alongside oral histories, archeologists have recovered artifacts that detail that First Peoples migrated into this area around 12,000 years ago (Truth and Reconciliation Community Bobcaygeon, 2018). For example, artifacts from 2,500 years ago were uncovered on Chiminis Island in Trent Lakes. Also, a ceremonial centre can be seen at the Serpent Mounds by Rice Lake that dates back to around 2,000 years ago (Truth and Reconciliation Community Bobcaygeon, 2020).

The Michi Saagiig were highly mobile and would often travel great distances to provide food for their people. They were known as the “Peacekeepers” among other Indigenous nations. They mediated peace throughout what is now considered southern Ontario for many generations by being the diplomats, messengers, and negotiators (Curve Lake First Nation, 2014). The

language of the Michi Saagiig Anishnaabeg is Anishinaabemowin (Native Land Digital, n.d.). For example, in Anishinaabemowin, what is now known as Peterborough, is called Nogojiwanong which means “a place at the end of the rapids” (Trent University, 2019).

During the 1600s when colonizers arrived in southern Ontario, problems began to occur for the Michi Saagiig. From 1781 to 1923, they took part in eighteen treaties, with increasing numbers of European settlers arriving in Ontario (Curve Lake First Nation, 2014). The first nation-to-nation treaty, Treaty 20 was signed on November 5, 1818, by representatives of the Crown and the Michi Saagiig (Ontario Ministry of Indigenous Affairs and First Nations Reconciliation, 2024). The next was the Williams Treaty, signed in 1923 and has been said to be one of the worst Treaties to exist because of how unfair it is to the Michi Saagiig (Ontario Public Interest Research Group, 2020).

The Michi Saagiig were forced into smaller family groups, Curve Lake First Nation, the Mississaugas of Scugog Island First Nation, Alderville First Nation, and Hiawatha First Nation because of the pressures from increased European settlement (Curve Lake First Nation, 2014). In 1829, a peninsula along Mud Lake became what is now known as Curve Lake First Nation, as chosen by the New England Company and the Crown. The Mud Lake reserve was official in 1889, and the community changed its name in 1964 to Curve Lake First Nation (Curve Lake First Nation, n.d.). The area was full of many kinds of birds, fish, mammals, plants, and specifically wild rice. Hunting and fishing are still an incredibly important part of their culture and traditions (Curve Lake First Nation, n.d.).

Alderville First Nation is found on the south side of Rice Lake and has been there since the mid-1830s (Trent University, 2019). Many members of the Michi Saagiig lived in their traditional lands near the Bay of Quinte (Grape Island). After the American Revolution, the Bay of Quinte became a hot spot for settlement for the United Empire Loyalists (Alderville First Nation, 2016). As a result of the influx of settlers in the area, the Michi Saagiig moved to the area around Rice Lake which is now the home of Alderville First Nation.

The north shore of Rice Lake, in 1828, was appointed as the Mississaugas of Rice Lake Reserve. In the 1960s the name was changed to Hiawatha Reserve (Hiawatha First Nation, 2023). Hiawatha First Nation is located around 30 km south of Nogojiwanong.

Pomadusgodayang which means “lake of fiery plains” is what we now call Rice Lake. (Trent University, 2019). At one time this area was known for the abundance of rice that grew, hence why settlers called it Rice Lake. With the building of the first dam for the Trent-Severn Waterway in Hastings in 1838, the water levels changed which led to the decline of wild rice beds on Rice Lake (Hiawatha First Nation, 2023).

In the 1700s, members of the Michi Saagiig settled near Lake Scugog, which became the Mississaugas of Scugog Island First Nation. By 1830, settlers had moved into the area and reduced the ability of the Mississaugas of Scugog Island First Nation to continue their traditional way of life (Trent University, 2019). Thus, for many years after, the Mississauga people moved away, some went to live with Curve Lake First Nation. Then in 1844, many moved back to Scugog Island, to reclaim their area and ways of living before the settlers arrived (Mississaugas of Scugog Island First Nation, n.d.). The amount of game, fish and wild rice was different from what it once was. Some of the wild rice that still grew was able to be gathered by birch bark canoes in late summer each year (Mississaugas of Scugog Island First Nation, n.d.).

This summary of the historical context for our research paper scratches the surface of what there is to know about the Michi Saagiig Anishnaabeg and Nogojiwanong. A wonderful book that could be useful for future research and learning is Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg: This Is Our Territory by Doug Williams.

Ethics Review

Trent University’s ethic procedures are based on their policy Ethics Procedures for Reviewing Research Involving Human Participants. Qualitative studies of this nature revolve around human participation in any fashion, including

- Human biological materials, as well as human embryos, fetuses, fetal tissue, reproductive materials, and stem cells. This applies to materials derived from living and deceased individuals.
- Research involving the secondary use of personal information, whether collected for research purposes from an earlier study, or through other activities (clinical, administrative), regardless of whether the data will be identifiable or de-identified; and

- Research involving the secondary use of human biological materials whether collected for research purposes from an earlier study, or through other activities (clinical), regardless of whether the specimens will be identifiable or de-identified
- Living human participants

Since the research that would be done through Ashburnham Memorial Stewardship Group would involve the qualitative analysis of living human participants, the research and studies pertaining to the factors above must be approved by the Research Ethics Board or its subcommittees. This submission is done to ensure compliance with the Tri-Council Policy statement or Ethical Conduct for research involving humans. The Research Ethics Board determines the type of review needed based on risk level, research status, and urgency. However, research involving Indigenous peoples requires additional review by departmental ethics committees. This departmental ethics committee is based out of the Chanie Wenjack School of Indigenous Studies at Trent University. This ensures that ethical standards are adhered to. This added review also ensures that researchers are respecting Indigenous governance, traditional knowledge systems, and community engagement guidelines.

In order to obtain Research Ethics Board Approval, researchers must submit for research approval, researchers must submit their applications through the ROMEIO system, available through MyTrent. The Research Ethics Board in conjunction with the Indigenous Ethics Review process, normally requires 2-8 weeks for ethics approval, depending on the complexity of the proposed research. In the cases where the Research Ethics Board denies a submission, there are appeals that can be made that will allow for amendments to the research proposal.

Guidelines for Engaging Indigenous Nations

Understanding Indigenous Worldviews

To be able to engage with the Indigenous communities the right way, we must be aware of their historical and current relationships to the land. This would involve recognizing the Michi Saagiig Anishinaabeg as the original guardians of the lands of the Ashburnham Memorial Park. It also includes knowing the impacts of treaties, colonialism, and land expropriation on

Indigenous communities. Meaningful engagement includes respecting Indigenous worldviews, governance systems, and protocols surrounding land caretaking and sharing of traditional knowledge (Trent University, 2023).

Engaging Indigenous Nations

Initial contact should start with finding who the relevant representatives of the Indigenous communities are. These could be Elders, Knowledge Keepers, Chiefs, and Band Councils. These people need to be formally invited, and the project goals explained, expressing an interest in meeting personally but also being sensitive to community timelines. Tobacco ties or bundles need to be presented where culturally appropriate as a gesture of respect when asking for knowledge or involvement (Trent University, 2023).

Transparency is critical at this phase; one must explain the research purpose, anticipated outputs, and how Indigenous knowledge will be used. Consultation must start with preliminary sessions of listening and learning from Indigenous viewpoints prior to introducing the research proposal. Respectful discussion involves following protocols for discussion, ceremony, and knowledge sharing set by the community. Planning must be able to involve collaboration to ensure Indigenous representatives co-design research and ethics protocols. It is important to obtain informed consent to utilize Indigenous knowledge and ensure Indigenous ownership of the information that is produced out of research (Trent University, 2023).

Forming Meaningful Relationships

Healthy relationships are built on transparency and trust. This includes open, respectful, and two-way communication throughout the project. Indigenous representatives need to be part of decision-making roles in order to have their voice and opinion shape the project. Their contribution needs to be acknowledged in all publications and reports. To develop long-term engagement, formal agreements such as Memorandums of Understanding, must be established to

outline expectations, responsibilities, and benefits. Capacity development is also a critical component and can include the provision of research training, internships, or co-authorship for members of the Indigenous community. The relationship should not end with the project but should be continued through future collaborations (Trent University, 2023). Reciprocity and respect must guide every interaction. Indigenous participants must receive honorariums or be gifted meaningfully for their involvement. Their intellectual property rights must be protected so that they continue to be in control of their history, knowledge, and historical data. Researchers must also respect sacred knowledge, avoid extractive research practices, and honor Indigenous data sovereignty principles.

Rightsholders & Stakeholders Benefits

The Ashburnham Memorial Park project has numerous advantages for Indigenous communities, especially the identification of their historical context, land use, and cultural values. Secondly, it provides a platform for Indigenous involvement in stewardship and conservation planning and provides opportunities for economic growth through eco-tourism and cultural programming. Researchers and institutions gain important benefits from their involvement in ethically informed Indigenous research approaches. These partnerships strengthen alliances for future Indigenous-driven research and contribute significantly to the work of Truth and Reconciliation. Ashburnham Memorial Park and the local community will have improved conservation and stewardship, guided by Indigenous ecological knowledge. The partnership should contribute to the reconciliation, promotes inclusive histories, and enhances community engagement and education.

The project offers many opportunities for Indigenous communities, particularly regarding understanding their history, land use, and cultural values. It also serves as an opportunity for Indigenous involvement in taking an active role in stewardship, and conservation planning, and creates opportunities for economic development through eco-tourism and cultural programs. Also, researchers and research institutions receive important benefits from their participation in ethically informed Indigenous community-based research projects. This partnership includes

strengthening alliances for the future and Indigenous-led research proposals. Ashburnham Memorial Park and the surrounding community will benefit from improved stewardship and conservation, using Indigenous ecological knowledge as a resource. Reconciliation and histories for inclusion benefit all involved and create ongoing opportunities for community engagement and community educational opportunities.

Relationship Building

Understanding that colonialism is not only historical but ongoing is essential. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada reminds us that reconciliation is not an endpoint but a process that requires sustained, respectful, and accountable relationships (TRC, 2015). One of the first ways the Stewardship Group can apply this understanding is by ensuring that any engagement with Indigenous peoples starts with humility and a willingness to unlearn. The TRC's Calls to Action emphasize the need for education on the history and legacy of residential schools, treaties, and Indigenous rights (TRC, 2015, Calls to Action 62-65). This education should be a priority for all members of the group, so they are not entering spaces with harmful assumptions or ignorance.

Secondly, if agreeable to all parties, the Stewardship group could build long-term partnerships with local Indigenous knowledge holders, not just for consultation, but for collaboration. Indigenous perspectives on land stewardship often center reciprocity, relationally, and deep ecological knowledge that predates settler colonialism (TRC, 2015, Final Report, Volume 6: Reconciliation). Obiero et al. (2021) highlight how bridging Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledge systems leads to more sustainable and equitable resource management. Although their work focuses on aquatic resources in Africa, the core insight—that Indigenous knowledge is rooted in holistic, place-based relationships—can and should inform how we steward land here in Canada.

Additionally, the group could facilitate arrangements for Indigenous-led events, ceremonies, or storytelling as a way of supporting Indigenous sovereignty and presence. The TRC emphasizes the importance of public commemoration not only of harms, but also of

Indigenous cultural resurgence (TRC, 2015, Calls to Action 79-83). This shifts the narrative from one of only mourning to one that includes celebration and visibility.

Lastly, the group can advocate for structural change—this could look like supporting Indigenous land back initiatives, co-developing interpretive signage in Indigenous languages, or creating paid positions for Indigenous stewardship roles. Reconciliation requires action, not just intention, and settlers must be willing to redistribute resources and power (TRC, 2015; Obiero et al., 2021).

By grounding its work in Indigenous perspectives, and by taking guidance from the TRC's work and international examples of Indigenous-led sustainability, Ashburnham Memorial Park can be part of a broader movement of reckoning, repair, and relationship-building.

Discussion

Nestled between wild rice beds that supported Michi Saagiig settlements and abounding with fish, the Odenabe or the Otonabee River, also known as "the river that beats like a heart", was an essential conduit for commerce, travel, and nutrition (Williams, 2020). The higher ground of what is now Ashburnham Park may have served as a lookout, a campsite, or a gathering place, though the exact uses remain undocumented due to the disruptions of colonialism such as forced relocation, suppression of culture, and the favoring of colonial records over Indigenous knowledge systems are to blame for the absence of comprehensive archives, not an absence of history.

The grounds around the Otonabee River, where Ashburnham Memorial Park stands today, were once part of a larger Indigenous land. The land was a source of food, medicine, shelter, and spirituality. The forests, hills, and rivers were not just important for sustenance but also held deep cultural importance rooted in Anishinaabe narratives and beliefs. The elders shared oral traditions that teach us about the land, the river, and how humans are connected to nature. Prior to the Europeans' arrival, the Michi Saagiig shared a symbiotic connection with nature by engaging in seasonal fishing, gathering, and hunting practices. Instead of permanent

structures, their villages were temporary and designed to keep pace with the rhythm of the natural cycle (TRCC, 2015).

The disintegration of communities and strong bonds individuals had with specific localities, such as Ashburnham, were camouflaged by this movement as well as the adverse effects of colonization, including disease, land taking, suppressed oral traditions and reserve setting. The First Nations individuals lost their lands with the signing of Treaty 20 in 1818 and the Williams Treaties in 1923; however, their historical connections and affiliations with these places were not adequately documented (TRCC, 2015). As the European colonizers were occupied with urbanization and farming, they merely documented what they could benefit from, thus Indigenous visibility in official records is invisible.

Although there is history lost, remnants of Michi Saagiig history still exist. Sites in the area, such as the Serpent Mounds on Rice Lake and the Teaching Rocks near Woodview, prove the significance of the area for spirituality and culture. Moreover, oral stories speak about the significance of the Otonabee River as a travel route and for life, and Anishinaabeg beliefs stress how sacred land and water are. The park's history includes used as livestock pastureland by, Reverend Samuel Armour in 1833 and then later on brought by the Women's Patriotic League of Ashburnham in the 1920s, which then got donated to the city in 1937 to be used as a public park and war memorial (Peterborough Historical Society, 2019). In the year 2023 "To Honour and Respect" exhibit at the Peterborough Museum, have begun to recover Indigenous histories in many areas and this project is part of that to honor, respect and reconcile with Indigenous communities.

The true history of Ashburnham Memorial Park, however, will be lacking if there is no deliberate collaboration with Michi Saagiig knowledge keepers, Elders, community members, and a dedication to Indigenous-led study. This absence of colonial histories should not be taken to mean an absence of context; rather, it is a testament to the violence and repression enacted by colonial enterprises such as the violence not only intended to remove people from their lands but also to erase whole epistemological systems, linguistic traditions, and ways of being. This emptiness in the archives is an example of that which was violently taken, ignored, or destroyed. This research is a celebration and appreciation of the oral history, story, and experience that has

been handed down through all the generations of erasure. It requires humility, listening, and learning, understanding that the land remembers and so do its people, who have always cared for it.

It is important to point out that government reports and colonial records are not the sole sources of historical data. Even in the absence or lack of documented records, history is never lost, which means we need to discover information by other approaches. Especially by turning to the land itself, the living tradition of Indigenous peoples, and the cultural expressions, songs and stories that have survived decades of oppression. These sources provide us with the potential for writing history in a manner that is respectful, collaborative, and integrative.

Oral traditions remain a viable and legitimate method of sharing knowledge in Indigenous communities. Engagement with Michi Saagiig Elders and knowledge keepers by interviewing, storytelling, land-based learning, and community-based memory initiatives can play a significant role in the retrieval and conservation of memories that have been marginalised by colonial archives. Furthermore, oral histories offer knowledge about place-based meaning, ceremonial information, seasonal cycles, and principles of land care that are deeply embedded in the landscape but not in written documents. With individuals' permission and following ethical guidelines like the Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession (OCAP) principles, the interviews can be respectfully recorded, transcribed, stored, and shared for future research purposes.

One of the ways that shows promise for recording Indigenous relationships with land is cultural mapping. This is a collaborative form of mapping, not just actual places but also histories, traditions, and relationships connected with them. Researchers can work together with members of the community to create maps that both visually and textually depict the way that space has been used in the past and the present, maps that reflect Indigenous understandings of the world instead of Western mapping conventions alone. In order to help people understand why Ashburnham matters, these maps can be used in public history projects and educational programming.

Furthermore, we can corroborate the evidence of past presence and land use through ecological and archaeological studies. Working alongside Indigenous historians and community members, we can examine old artifacts, investigate how people settled, and explore the remains of traditional fishing weirs, burial grounds, or historic meeting places in and around Ashburnham Park. We can examine how land was used and valued by signs in the landscape, such as old trails used by Indigenous people, where medicinal herbs or plants may be found, or by changes in the types of soil in the park.

Historic recovery can be facilitated by institutions, including museum and heritage projects like the "To Honour and Respect" exhibition at the Peterborough Museum by involving with local First Nations to choose exhibitions, create digital story archives, and prepare interpretive materials in Ashburnham Park. And all documentation initiatives should be guided by research frameworks conducted by Indigenous peoples. From study design to dissemination, this entails giving Indigenous methods, governance, and consent top priority. Besides respecting Indigenous life, this would also leave future generations a rich and varied historical record.

By struggling with the narratives that remain, and by prioritizing the Indigenous voices at the forefront of our knowledge of place, we take a modest yet meaningful step toward not only reclaiming historical truth but also reclaiming dignity, agency, and justice. Ashburnham Memorial Park, like most spaces on Turtle Island, has complex histories, some apparent, some concealed. Our responsibility is not just to uncover them with care and commitment and ensure that these histories are not only remembered but actively carried forward.

Areas of Conflict

During our research for primary and secondary data sources that would help show the historical importance of Indigeneity in Ashburnham Memorial Park, there were aspects of this research that were challenging. Many of the businesses, organizations, and research organizations that we attempted to contact either led us to a dead-end or to each other. These organizations included;

- Trent Valley Archives
- Peterborough Museum
- Parks Canada

- Trent Archeology Department

When we were conducting research into the potential archeological findings of the site, our team aimed to find physical maps that displayed Ashburnham Memorial Park acreage before it was purchased by Samuel Armour. This would have allowed us to glean into the pre-colonial

Conclusion

Indigenous knowledges, experiences, and importances are vital for the continuation of this project. Our primary and secondary data acquisition allows for a base of information to be properly used in a way that allows for a respectful connection with the Indigenous communities that may be connected in the future of this project. After examining the importances on Indigenous historical contexts in relation to the park, as well as the various benefits that arise from this project, we can examine the different perspectives and knowledges that exist in this study. It is important for traditional knowledge to be respected, and holders of said knowledge should be treated with equity and reciprocity. When we discuss the next steps of this project, there is information regarding the ethics approval needed, knowledge sources gathered, and different primary and secondary resource streams. It is important for any relationship that is developed between organizations and Indigenous communities for a foundation of knowledge stemming behind Truth and Reconciliation. Future studies that research the importance of Indigenous histories and knowledges of Ashburnham Memorial Park will need to seek the Research Ethics Board of Trent University, as well as understanding the cultural importance around Indigenous research. In conclusion, it's important that all future researchers, faculty members, and coordinators understand the significance of the research being done and allow for a respectful approach towards this project's final goal.

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