

The Land of the Spirits Virtual Museum of Canada Exhibit: After the Excavations Are Over

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ABSTRACT

The story of Canada's discovery and settlement is reflected in the ever-changing face of its landscape and people. *Land of the Spirits* celebrates this legacy by animating the forest, river and people of one such Canadian hamlet in a project funded by the Virtual Museum of Canada Investment Program. For over two generations, Basin Depot on the Little Bonnechere River was the focal point for a small group of Irish settlers. Once the prime timber had been harvested these pioneers moved on and the land reverted to wilderness. This story is of merit to all students of Canadian settlement — avocational and professional, nearby and worldwide. It is not a view of the wealthy or privileged, but a collection of the common man. Museum visitors will view the objects and ephemera by era, or browse by keyword or theme.

Land of the Spirits will be powered by a dynamic interface – a virtual warehouse – of electronic images, captivating 2D clips and 3D animations that users can hold and rotate. Historic audio and video will paint an experiential tapestry evoking sights and sounds of days gone by. Modern-day explorers and historians will be guided by leading edge technologies, metadata, cataloguing and search protocols to navigate this engaging online resource. For the Land of the Spirits curators and technicians, this open-source project will provide access to information sharing that would be impossible within traditional boundaries. For online users, each visit will be a virtual journey of discovery.

RÉSUMÉ

L'histoire de la découverte et de la colonisation du Canada se manifeste dans son paysage et sa population en constante évolution. « Le pays des esprits » souligne cet héritage en redonnant vie à la forêt, à la rivière et aux habitants d'un hameau dans un projet subvenu par le Programme d'investissement du Musée virtuel du Canada. Sur plus de deux générations, Basin Depot, sur la petite rivière Bonnechere, s'est trouvé le point central pour un petit groupe de pionniers irlandais. Une fois les plus beaux arbres coupés pour l'industrie du bois, ces pionniers sont partis et les terres sont revenues à l'état sauvage. Cette histoire fascinera toutes les personnes intéressés par le peuplement du Canada, qu'ils soient amateurs ou professionnels, proches du lieu en question ou loin à l'étranger. L'exposition ne porte pas sur les riches ou les privilégiés, mais sur les simples citoyens. Les visiteurs verront les objets et collections classés par époque, ou ils pourront faire une recherche par mot clé ou par thème.

« Le pays des esprits » fonctionnera grâce à une interface dynamique – autrement dit un entrepôt virtuel – comportant des images électroniques, des clips et des animations tridimensionnelles captivantes que les utilisateurs peuvent manipuler et faire tourner. Des explications audio et vidéo évoqueront des voix et des images d'antan. Les explorateurs et historiens modernes seront guidés par des technologies, des métadonnées, des outils de catalogage et des protocoles de recherche de pointe pour naviguer dans cette ressource Internet des plus stimulantes. Pour les conservateurs et techniciens de l'exposition « Le pays des esprits », ce projet ouvert donnera accès à des échanges d'information qui seraient autrement impossibles dans des conditions normales. Pour les internautes, chaque visite sera un voyage de découverte virtuelle.

The Virtual Museum of Canada Investment Program has accepted a proposal by the Friends of Bonnechere Parks (FBP) for the production of an online portal celebrating the natural and cultural heritage of the Little Bonnechere River in the Ottawa Valley. Entitled Land of the Spirits, this interactive portal will feature the story of discovery and settlement along the Bonnechere River over several centuries by animating the forest, river and people in and around Basin Depot.

The goal is to illustrate how our Ottawa Valley history is integral to the story of Canada's discovery and settlement. Nature was fully in control when the First Nations arrived but the pendulum shifted once Europeans settled here. Over centuries, man and nature have formed an alliance – each redefining the other in a continuum of give and take.

From Canada's eastern shores, Europeans followed the rivers inland. Over and over along a westward path, the wilderness was displaced by a pattern of discovery and settlement. Furs were traded, timber was harvested, and woodlands were cleared and farmed. In most cases new communities prospered and expanded; others were ultimately abandoned.

Land of the Spirits celebrates this legacy by animating the forest, river and people of one such Canadian hamlet — a collective of once-bustling depot farms in the Ottawa Valley — as a means of exploring and connecting similar communities across Canada. For over two generations, Basin Depot on the Little Bonnechere River was the focal point for a small group of Irish settlers. Once the prime timber had been harvested these pioneers moved on and the land reverted to wilderness.

Historic Archaeology Program

Historical archaeology is a scientific discipline incorporating skills and methods integral to the study of a landscape and its people. As a hands-on experiential tool, archaeology is an excellent device for fostering interest, encouraging critical thinking and stimulating dialogue.

Since 1995 the FBP, in partnership with the Ontario Archaeological Society Ottawa Chapter and the Friends of Algonquin, have hosted a public historical archaeological program to explore these hidden heritage sites along the Little Bonnechere River.

Throughout the spring and summer under the guidance of licensed archaeologists, various school groups, park campers and visitors travel up-river to partake in day-programs incorporating guided tours of these historic properties, lessons in collecting, cleaning and cataloguing recovered artifacts, and digging at various excavations and test pits at Basin Depot and the nearby Lafleur homestead.

Participating elementary and secondary school students are most often prepared for their dig experience with a presentation of a slide show that places these well-preserved sites in context. All participants are able to tap into a wealth of relevant resources and stories available in the Little Bonnechere trilogy:

- Spirits of the Little Bonnechere: A History of Exploration, Logging and Settlement 1800 to 1920 by Roderick MacKay
- Discover the Spirits: A Cultural Heritage Activity Book for Youth
- Visiting the Spirits: Exploring the Hidden Heritage of the Little Bonnechere River (an interactive exhibit available on CD and at www.bonnecherepark.on.ca).

The Collection

As a result of these digs, the FBP have established what some consider Canada’s largest collection of farm depot artifacts, circa 1850 to 1880. This is not a view of the wealthy or privileged, but a collection of the common man.

Currently housed at the Davenport Centre Heritage Hall in Bonnechere Provincial Park, this collection includes a variety of objects including earthenware, ceramics and glass, tools, pipes, coins and animal bones, from 5000 years ago to the present. (Relevant artifacts of interest from private collections will also be included in this project to provide additional information and interpretation.) This collection of artifacts is of merit to all students of Canadian settlement — avocational and professional, nearby and worldwide.

The Online Exhibit

Presently, because of limited space and resources, only a small number of these artifacts are available for public viewing. Land of the Spirits will throw open the virtual door to a collaborative museum featuring this unique collection. Once the exhibit is live, online visitors will be able to conduct virtual archaeological digs at several sites along the Bonnechere River, view an interactive timeline, and tour a virtual museum housing 3D images of various artifacts and audio/video recordings. Teaching resources and a glossary will also be included.

At the entrance to the site an interactive timeline entitled Full Circle will span several centuries and feature three parallel bands illustrating a concise history of the river, forest and people of the Little Bonnechere River, and their ebb and flow relevant to Canada’s natural and cultural heritage, from circa 12,000 BP to 1950.

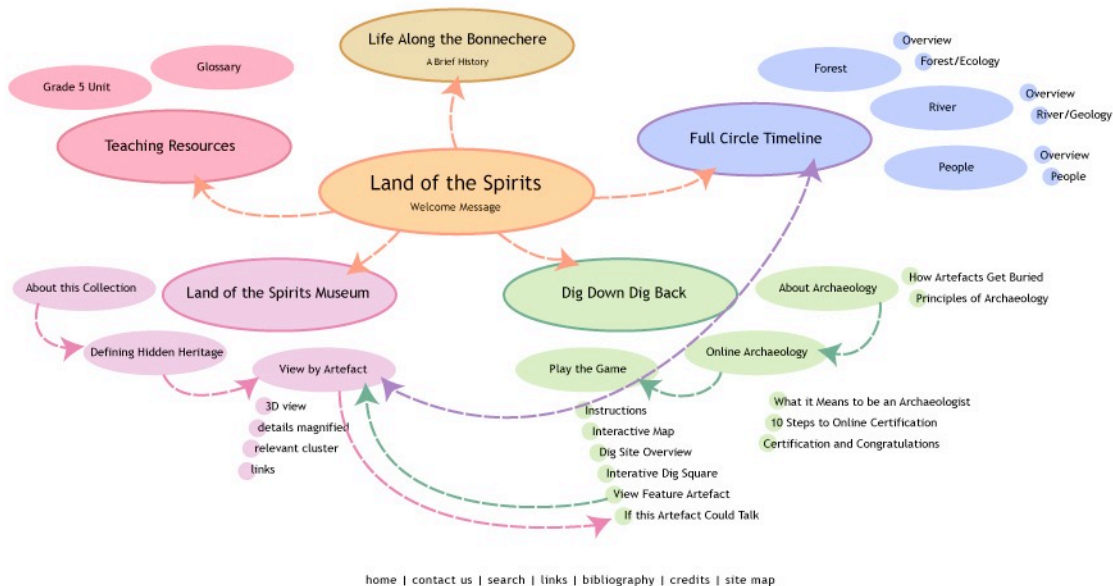


Figure 1: Land of the Spirits Virtual Exhibit Website Architecture

In the interactive game Dig Down, Dig Back visitors will navigate a basic introduction to the principals of archaeology, and then select the depot dig site they wish to explore from a map of the Little Bonnechere River. Each dig will feature a multi-layered grid that can be virtually excavated; found objects will link back to the virtual museum.

The Land of the Spirits museum will be powered by a dynamic interface – a virtual warehouse – of electronic images, captivating 2D clips and 3D animations that users can hold and rotate. Historic audio and video will paint an experiential tapestry evoking sights and sounds of days gone by.

Modern-day explorers and historians will be guided by leading edge technologies, Meta data, and cataloguing and search protocols to navigate this engaging online resource. They will be able to view the objects and ephemera by era, or browse by keyword or theme. Cataloguing data may also provide links to similar historic communities and/or artifacts defining common settlement patterns across Canada.

For the Land of the Spirits curators and technicians, this open-source project will provide access to information sharing that would be impossible within traditional boundaries. For online users, each visit will be a virtual journey of discovery.

Virtual Museum Canada

The VMC Investment Program invests in the development of online heritage content, and is open to public, not-for-profit heritage institutions. In February 2005, the program received sixty submissions for consideration in its call for proposals. The proposals were evaluated taking into account program criteria, desired outcomes, and VMC operating principles and content policy. A total of twelve proposals covering production of online content including virtual exhibits, interactive games and educational resources across a wide range of disciplines and interests were approved.

The total Land of the Spirits budget of \$383,000 includes \$134,000 in in-kind resources and an investment of \$185,500 from Canadian Heritage.

Project Partners

Friends of Bonnechere Parks
Canadian Heritage
Bonnechere Caves
Bonnechere Museum
Friends of Algonquin
Renfrew County Stewardship Council
Ontario Archaeological Society Ottawa Chapter

Final Note: The Land of the Spirits exhibit is now complete and can be found on-line at: <http://www.virtualmuseum.ca/~spirits/> .