

Report to Council, 12 December 2011

Thank you your worship and members of Council.

My name is John Sabean. I am the President of the Pickering Township Historical Society and the Past Chair of Heritage Pickering. Those, at least, are the hats I am wearing tonight.

I am here to speak in favour of the Proposed Action to Preserve Selected Heritage Structures on Federal Lands.

First I would like to thank the staff members who have worked so hard and so diligently on this Proposed Action. It was not an easy task, and came, I am sure, with a lot of soul searching.

Secondly, I would like to commend Mayor and Council for allowing staff to proceed with this Proposal. And, I was, indeed, pleased to see so much passion expressed last week over this issue by members of Council.

In April 1974, 2 years after expropriation, the Governments of Canada and Ontario published a report, prepared by some of the country's most distinguished architects and historians, evaluating the architecture of what they called the "North Pickering Project" and of the Federal airport site. As their bottom line they remarked:

"The Panel were struck forcefully by the distinction, concentration, and strong local flavour of the architecture on both the Airport Site and NPP Site. Almost without exception the buildings would be classed as examples of vernacular architecture—many of them outstanding examples. Webster defines 'vernacular' as 'belonging to or developed in a particular place; native; indigenous; the common mode of expression'. This quality gives the architecture in the region coherence, even though several distinct forms of vernacular are to be observed. The variation is extensive enough to be considered rich; combined with workmanlike handling of consistent quality, and a landscape setting of unusual beauty, the resulting impression of the architectural traditions in this area must be that they are both distinctive and distinguished—a physical resource, an architectural heritage, and a cultural legacy to be cherished, and protected."

The report covered some 259 buildings, and at that they missed some. The survey was only a windshield one and thus, despite their enthusiasm, they were completely unaware of what the area really had to offer. For example, they did not know about the construction of the Hoover-Watson House, built by the rare construction method known as plank-on-plank. I wrote a report on this house for Public Works Canada in 2007 and was blithely unaware of this point myself. Not until I did a report for you last year, when the ugly insulbrick had been removed, did I, along with Gordon Zimmerman and Isa James, come to realize what a treasure we had discovered. And furthermore, I also came to realize that this structure formed an enclave with 2 other Mennonite homes, one built of Stone and bearing an inscription 1857 (the date of construction), and another of wood frame.

The writers of the above report made special mention of Mennonite structures:

“A number of structures in the combined sites show various regional characteristics ... but of all these the most important and most nearly unique are undoubtedly associated with the Mennonite culture. The severe but beautiful churches of these ‘plain folk’ are readily recognized and unusually well preserved. Their houses are much richer, more remarkable, and previously have been unrecognized. To these a later ‘doddy house’ for the older generation ... was often added.... Though the type is found elsewhere in the province, it is *not* well known. It is common locally and individual examples are of provincial significance.”

I commend to you the reading of this entire document.

Without some rational thinking, and that very soon, all of this and more will be lost to the citizens of Pickering.

There is an image—dating from Medieval times—that is important for us to comprehend. It is the concept of “standing on the shoulders of giants”. This concept has been quoted in literature and even in stone on cathedrals for hundreds of years. It suggests to us that we, in our day, can see farther, and can produce greater works, because we stand on the shoulders of giants—we built on those structures created by those who preceded us. And, believe me, this city has seen many giants in our history.

Let me change the image a bit. For over 150 years the Township of Pickering (father to the Town, and grandfather to the City of Pickering) was governed from Brougham. Your predecessors sat in Council in that hamlet. In fact, the citizens of Brougham erected a purpose-built structure in 1854 to hold the Council. That building was used for a number of years and still exists as the present Community Centre. Later the Council was moved to another location, a former hotel, in Brougham and there it remained for well over 100 years. That building, as historic as it was, and as important to Pickering’s history, was one of the first to be removed by the federal government after expropriation.

The Hamlet of Brougham was also the site of an early entrepreneurial enterprise, by the Bentleys and the Woodruffs—some of those giants I referred to. And, just as important, Brougham is the home of the Blue Box. In another former hotel an organization headed by Jack McGinnis—one of those giants—conceived of the idea that has now spread across North America and into many parts of the rest of the world. And no one has thought to even erect commemorative plaques in their honours.

In short, the Hamlet of Brougham was the cradle of Pickering’s administrative history, it was the womb of Pickering’s entrepreneurial endeavours, it was the birthplace of the Blue Box, and it remains the geographical epicentre of the city today. However, with every structure that is removed from the hamlet the closer the hamlet comes to being a ghost town—like Howell’s Hollow a mere kilometre down the road.

While I commend you for the Actions which you propose, I am appalled by the continuing wholesale destruction of heritage buildings on the Federal lands, and not much appeased by the prospect of moving buildings out of their context.

I have said from the beginning, and continue to say, the responsibility for preservation in the Federal lands is not that of the city, but purely a Federal one. The Federal government created the scene, they are the ones that need to deal with it and in an honest, open way—one that gives due regard and respect for the people on the land and the heritage that has accumulated over many years. This, by the way, is how the authors of the 1974 report envisioned it; they talked about restoration and preservation, not about demolition.

The bottom line: there is no real urgency in removing structures from the airport site; there is an urgency in protecting our heritage.

Further suggestions:

1. The City of Pickering should contact the Town of Markham and work in concert with them toward a common goal.
2. The City should attempt to restore the Working Group with Transport Canada and Public Works Canada so that issues such as a moratorium, tenancy, etc. can be worked out in a way satisfactory to all.
3. Council should follow through with the designation of Tullis Cottage and Ever Green Villa, an issue brought up about 6 or 7 years ago to Council but never completed.