

Brockville Museum: our journey

Brockville gets a Museum

To “grow, mature and continue to evolve as a living institution” declared the statement of purpose signed by Mayor Peter Lewis in April 1981, establishing the terms for the new, permanent, Brockville Museum.

As far back as 1924, people in Brockville were talking about the need for a museum. The idea gained traction in the 1960s with the excitement of the upcoming celebration of Canada’s Centennial. Then, in 1971, the Brockville & District Historical Society was re-established, and began efforts to create a museum.

The Historical Society set up its first “Summer Museum” in a building on Court House Avenue in 1972. In 1973 it was on Blockhouse Island. An adult admission to these early seasonal museums was \$0.50. That year, Alderman Frances MacOdrum championed a Council resolution approving, in principle, the creation of a permanent museum in Brockville. In 1974, the “Summer Museum” took up temporary residence in an 1820 stone house once owned by Loyalist settler, William Buell. The house was demolished later that year.

In 1976, Alderman Robert Runciman was chair of the city’s Urban Renewal Committee. He saw an opportunity for the City to acquire the Central Canada Coal Company property and to use the property’s stone house as a museum. The property was purchased and the Historical Society contributed towards the cost of Beecher House. In 1977 a municipal board of directors was appointed to establish the new city museum.

The Brockville & District Historical Society put up one final “Summer Museum” in Cameron’s Mill in the Sheridan Mews in 1980. The building had no running water and visitors were advised to use the public washrooms at the Public Library.

When the new Brockville Museum opened on June 21, 1981, MP Tom Cossitt told the crowd of 200 that it was “a dream come true” and that “such a project as this museum is not only important to us but to future generations”.

40 Years of Growth and Evolution

True to its statement of purpose, the Brockville Museum has grown, matured, and evolved in the over 40 years since it opened.

Much of the 1980s was spent renovating Beecher House, culminating with the excavation and renovation of the rear basement to be used as a space for programming in 1988. By 1989 Curator Deborah Emerton was already eyeing expansion, committing to the goal of building an addition to the museum.

In 1994 the museum launched a collaborative fundraising project to “Build a Future for Brockville’s Past” with the Historical Society, the newly formed Friends of the Brockville Museum, and the City as partners. On October 21st, 1995, the addition officially opened, providing a new home for the museum’s archival collection, object collection, programming, and the display of newly acquired vehicles.

The next decade was marked by new and expanded programs and events that took advantage of the new space. It also saw the collection grow significantly. In 2001, and again in 2002, the museum acquired substantial collections Fulford Home, the Psychiatric Hospital, Public Utilities, S.C.I (Sanmina), and the

Recorder and Times, putting pressures on existing space. In 2003 the museum began leasing off-site storage space to house larger objects, like a 1945 fire truck and horse-drawn carriage. By 2006 planning for how to again expand the museum was underway with Curator/Director Bonnie Burke saying “It’s not fair to our predecessors to just sit back. We would be remiss if we didn’t look to the future, to grow” in explaining the importance of increasing the museum’s physical space. This work culminated with an expansion study in 2011 that proposed another addition to the museum on the existing site.

2011, however, also saw proposals for new condominium developments around the museum’s lot on Henry Street which jeopardized parking and access to the museum.

Starting in 2013, the museum began to evolve in a whole new way: virtually. This evolution expanded access to the museum, first on social media, then by making the collection available online, then with an updated website, and finally by creating virtual exhibits and programs.

The museum was witness to the realities of Climate Change in 2017 as water levels on the St. Lawrence river rose to record levels and severe rain storms caused flooding in the museum’s basements, putting the museum’s collection at risk. This, along with the significant overcrowding of the museum’s spaces, renewed the discussion of expansion. By the end of the year, the Museum Board of Management passed a motion not only to pursue expansion, but to seek the relocation of the museum to a larger and more suitable site. April 2032 was established as the goal for opening a new museum, a date that marks the 200th Anniversary of Brockville’s incorporation. In 2019 a Project Steering Committee was established and in 2021 a Feasibility Study was completed detailing the physical and operational needs for a new, relocated and expanded, Brockville Museum.

Looking Ahead

Today, the Brockville Museum is steward of over 7,000 objects and over 30,000 archival photographs and documents and delivers an average of 200 educational programs annually. The Brockville Museum is bursting at the seams and is looking to the future; a future where a relocated and expanded Brockville Museum not only safeguards our community’s past, as its earliest advocates hoped, but which also serves as a welcoming community hub offering engaging experiences to connect with each other through our stories.