

A Comforting Past: Skirting Conflict and Complexity at Montgomery's Inn

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This essay explores the history of Montgomery's Inn, a nineteenth-century tavern redeveloped in the 1960s as a community museum in the Toronto suburb of Etobicoke. The inn becomes an interesting microcosm for the nature of 1960s commemorations: the weakness of the site lies not in its selection of artifacts or historical themes, but rather in its representation of the past as a simpler and more harmonious time, removed from complexity and the forces of change. This tendency to romanticize the past is due in part to forces at work in the period in which the museum was established. The essay compares aspects of the site's interpretation of the past with the existing historiography on life in mid-nineteenth-century Upper Canada/Canada West. It shows that the "authentic" past at Montgomery's Inn, as much as we can know it, was far from simple and harmonious.

Cet essai explore l'histoire du Montgomery's Inn, un cabaret du XIX^e siècle, converti dans les années 60, en un musée populaire, à Etobicoke, en banlieue de Toronto. L'auberge devient un microcosme intéressant pour les commémorations des années 60 : la faiblesse du site, soutient l'auteur, ne réside pas dans son choix des artefacts ou des thèmes historiques mais plutôt dans sa représentation du passé comme période plus simple et plus harmonieuse, dépourvue de complexité et à l'abri du pouvoir du changement. Cette tendance à romancer le passé s'explique, en partie, par les forces en présence au cours de la période pendant laquelle le musée fût établi. Cet essai compare des aspects de l'interprétation du passé du site avec l'historiographie actuelle de la vie au milieu du XIX^e siècle dans le haut Canada et l'ouest du Canada. Cela nous démontre que le « vrai » passé du Montgomery's Inn, du moins, ce que nous en savons, était loin d'être simple et harmonieux.

"No effort has been spared," the Etobicoke Historical Board commented in 1974, looking back on the nine years involved in restoring a historic tavern in the community, "to make Montgomery's Inn as authentic as it can be. Every original detail of the building has been investigated and reproduced as accurately as ... possible." Board members concluded, in the Proposed Operating Policy, "[it is] essential that the operation of [the] Inn, as our first functioning historic site, be of such authenticity and high quality that it will be a source of pride in this community and an attraction to many visitors." Thirty years later, Montgomery's Inn, a community museum located in the Toronto suburb of Etobicoke, continues to impress visitors with its hand woven replica rugs, period door latches, and meticulously researched paint and wallpaper patterns. What the museum fails

to convey, I shall argue, are the complexities and conflicts inherent to human lives, relationships, and communities. Instead, it presents the past as a simpler and more harmonious time removed from the forces of change, a tendency described by American historian Michael Kammen as the "heritage syndrome": an "alternative to history" that "accentuates the positive but sifts away what is problematic" (1991, 626). This tendency to romanticize the past is due in part, I suggest, to forces at work in the period in which the museum was established. In Etobicoke as in other suburban areas, rapid physical and demographic changes in the 1960s and 1970s contributed to a growing nostalgia for what were perceived as "simpler times" when pioneer values of self-reliance and perseverance guided decision-making. Commemoration initiatives like Montgomery's Inn developed in response to these forces and developments within the museum world: the rise of the living history movement in the 1960s brought new attention to the lives of workers, women, and children in the past; and fascination with pre-industrial activities and landscapes to the exclusion of later periods also fueled anti-modernist sentiments within museums and among the general public. This essay will compare aspects of the site's interpretation of the past with the existing historiography on life in mid-nineteenth-century Upper Canada/Canada West. It will show that the "authentic" past at Montgomery's Inn, as much as we can know it, was far from simple and harmonious.

My interest in Montgomery's Inn is driven partly by personal experience. As an interpreter at the site in 2001 and 2002, I came to appreciate first-hand some of the tensions and limitations of the site's interpretation. Each time I led visitors through the museum, I felt that the static period rooms did little to enliven the past, and the heavy silk ropes protecting the artifacts cast too fixed a line between past and present. Most memorable was my aversion to donning the skirt and petticoats of the nineteenth-century kitchen maid: I petitioned successfully to wear the male costume instead, unwittingly sending shock waves of disapproval throughout the museum community in Toronto. Questions of authenticity were paramount (a kitchen maid could not wear earrings, much less a pair of pants), as were questions of pedagogy (what will the grade threes think?) and propriety (a cross-dressing kitchen maid hardly reflects nineteenth-century mores governing appearance and sexuality, I was told). To understand these reactions better, I set out to explore some of the motivations and beliefs at work in the site's presentation of the past. What I found was a tendency to oversimplify gendered identities and to contain other aspects of life in the period within rigid categories of "female" and "male," "public" and "private," "prohibited" and "permitted." Reference to the historiography of the period shows that the past was more complicated and less pleasant than the museum would have us believe.



Fig. 1. *Montgomery's Inn*, 12 January 1919. John Boyd Collection, Library and Archives Canada. Courtesy of Montgomery's Inn Archives.

Commemorating the Origins of Community in Etobicoke

The Montgomery Years

In 1830, Thomas Montgomery leased from the Crown a piece of land on the Dundas Highway (today's Dundas Street) east of Mimico Creek, in the village of Islington, Etobicoke township.¹ He built a wooden tavern beside the creek, and by 1832 had erected a stone structure on the same site, fronting the highway (fig.1). The inn included living space for his family and rooms for his commercial establishment. It provided refreshment and an opportunity to socialize for the residents of Islington, and it served as a popular stopping point for farmers hauling wheat to the grist mills on the Humber River. Strategically located along a main thoroughfare connecting Toronto with the Niagara peninsula and the southwestern districts, Montgomery's Inn invited travellers to stop for a drink, a meal, or a bed for the night. As far as we can tell from the records, it was neither an exclusive nor a homogenous place. Montgomery admitted and served men from a range of social stations, including Black labourers and farmers, and Native men. He also served—albeit infrequently—women, who likely entered the barroom both as travellers and local residents. While the majority of Montgomery's clientele were White men of Canadian, British, or Irish origins, the presence of difference would have important ramifications for the future interpretation of the site.

As historian Craig Heron has shown, taverns in Upper Canada were among the very few accessible public spaces in the first half of the nineteenth century (2003, 27). Montgomery's Inn was no exception in its role as a *de facto* community centre: the local and regional orders of the Orange Lodge met at the inn between 1836 and 1842, as the Montgomery Day and Ledger books between 1834 and 1856 attest (Montgomery Family); in 1847 and 1849, the inn served as a meeting place for the newly formed Etobicoke Council (Hykel and Benn 1980, 45). These meetings, together with the occasional presence of women and Native and Black men, make it possible to picture the inn as a place not simply of good cheer and (White) male camaraderie, but also as a place that engaged complex relations of politics, ethnicity, race, and gender.

Surviving records from Montgomery's career as an innkeeper paint a fairly detailed picture of his business dealings and daily operations at the inn. Much less documentation survives to tell us about his wife, Margaret Montgomery, and her interests and daily activities. Genealogical records show that Margaret (née Dawson) was born in 1808 in County Monaghan, Ireland. Between 1829 and 1842, she gave birth to seven children, only two of whom—William (1830-1920) and Robert (1837-64)—survived to adulthood. A profound sense of loss must certainly have shaped Margaret's experience. Poor health may also have circumscribed her activities: family records suggest she suffered from rheumatism for a number of years before she died in 1855 at the age of 47 (Hykel and Benn 1980, 12). The dearth of sources on Margaret's life, while not surprising for a woman of her time, may have resulted in part from her apparent inability to write. Although at least a basic literacy was the norm in Upper Canada by the 1830s, the Montgomery family records contain no references in her hand; a receipt of payment to a female servant in 1852, surviving in the Loose Papers of the Montgomery family archival collection, was composed by William Montgomery on his mother's behalf (153). While we know little about Margaret's day-to-day life, our knowledge of women's work in Upper Canadian taverns suggests that it was not easy:

keeping even a small colonial inn required considerable work, most of which seems to have fallen on the proprietor's wife.... The innkeeper's wife, perhaps with the help of her daughters or a maid-servant, cooked and waited on an indeterminate number of guests. It was the wife who was responsible for keeping the premises clean, washing the bedding, and attending to the daily chores of the household. As hostess, it was the wife who usually greeted visitors and clients on their arrival and had to cope with customer complaints. (Errington 1995, 193)

In keeping with this interpretation, Montgomery seems to have closed the inn shortly after Margaret's death. He is last recorded as a tavern keeper in 1856, and from then until his death in 1877 he is listed as a farmer in the Etobicoke Assessment Rolls. After Montgomery's death, his son William rented out the inn to a series of tenants as a farm homestead. In 1946, the Kingsway Presbyterian Church purchased the building for use as a worship space; the congregation announced its plans to sell the building in 1961.

Commemorating Montgomery's Inn

The story of Montgomery's Inn museum begins to take shape in the late 1950s and early 1960s, within the context of dramatic physical and cultural change in Etobicoke as roads were widened and high-rise buildings constructed, and as a growing stream of immigrants began to change the ethnic and cultural composition of the borough. In 1958, the Etobicoke Historical Society (EHS) held its first meeting, and by 1960 society members had initiated the process of gathering information on Etobicoke's "pioneer families" (*Etobicoke Press* 1960, 11). Montgomery's Inn, meanwhile, remained a community landmark rendered almost invisible by its familiarity: "for years during the development of the township," a *Globe and Mail* columnist wrote, "[the Inn] has stood unnoticed at Dundas Street West and Islington Avenue—a big unattractive building with stucco walls" (1962). Its location, however, was coveted as a valuable site for a future apartment building (*Toronto Daily Star* 1961). The EHS's minutes record its decision to encourage Etobicoke Council to protect the inn as a historic site when the building came up for sale in 1961 (4 May 1961). Council demurred, and the building was sold instead to local developer Louis Mayzel. Not unsympathetic to the historical lobby, Mayzel offered to donate the building to the Metro Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (MTRCA) with the condition it be moved off the property (Stuebing 1962, 1). Etobicoke residents began to voice their concerns. An article in the *New Toronto Advertiser* on 22 February 1962 noted, "there is a great sentimental value attached to the Inn. It is the home of Etobicoke. An area council debated within its walls 30 years before Confederation." Concerned that "any memory of Etobicoke's rural past was quickly being lost," and that the inn "would lose much of its significance if moved," the EHS restated its demands to have the building preserved as a historic site in its original location. In the spring of 1962, Mayzel agreed to sell the inn to the historical society for the same price he paid for it (Anderson 1963).

With the urgency of rescuing the building behind them, EHS members began to give voice to their dreams for the building. Society President E.W. Anderson

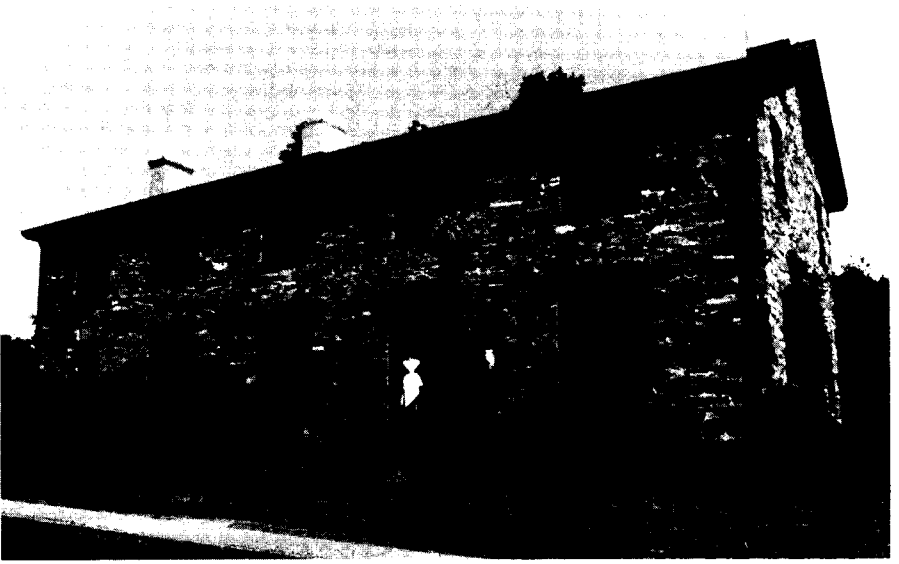


Fig. 2. Restored exterior, c. 1980. Courtesy of Montgomery's Inn Archives. Note that the pebble-dashing of the previous image has been removed to expose the river stone beneath, creating what was thought to be a more "authentic" appearance.

described plans "to restore the Inn to its original state with a number of jail cells in the basement, a public hall and a bar" (Scott 1962, 7).² With the assistance of Dorothy Duncan, museums adviser to the Ontario Ministry of Culture, the society hosted a series of meetings in the fall of 1962, inviting residents to visit the inn and contribute their ideas for its future uses. The majority of residents supported a historical restoration of the building. Dorothy Duncan recalls,

every Wednesday for about a month ... we went to the Inn and we sat there among the dust and the cobwebs and the sagging ceiling and the very dangerous floors—and we ... listened to the residents.... The people who came—and there was a good crowd every evening—said "[it's] our building, and you know, I'm willing to have my taxes pay for something good to happen to this building." (2005)

Despite residents' support for the inn, EHS fundraising efforts proved unsuccessful. Raising funds to pay the mortgage and fuel restoration efforts proved too daunting for EHS volunteers, many of whom had full-time jobs elsewhere. In 1965, they surrendered the ownership of the inn to the Borough of Etobicoke

with the stipulation that "any change in the land use of the total property shall bear in mind the character of the historical building" (Longstaff 1970, 13). Council established the Etobicoke Historical Board (EHB) in the same year with the mandate "to manage, maintain, and restore Montgomery's Inn to use it for appropriate community purposes" (Etobicoke 1965). In 1966, the EHB set out to restore the building's exterior, hiring contractors to scrape away the white pebble-dashing and expose the original river stones beneath (fig. 2). The dramatic exterior restoration had a positive effect on the community's awareness of the building, raising interest and excitement about the inn's future as a restored historical site. Ironically, the restoration that local press described as a "real Cinderella story" was not historically authentic: Montgomery had had the exterior covered with "pebble-dashing" in 1838, less than a decade after the building was constructed (Hykel and Benn 1980, 34).

The inn, however, would remain a contested site in Etobicoke politics for a few years to come. Questions around the future use of the site—exactly what constituted "appropriate community purposes" and who would have access to the site—swirled around the building from 1970 to 1972. In April 1970, the council-appointed EHB recommended that the site be rezoned for commercial use. The building, they maintained, would make an excellent steak house or a restored colonial dining lounge (Longstaff 1970, 13). Residents who had been following the debate around the future of the inn were outraged. "Too often today," wrote Weston resident Elizabeth A. Strathdee in a letter to Etobicoke Mayor E.A. Horton in October 1970, "the achievements of the past are destroyed in the name of progress and authentic beauty is replaced by 'Rockwood Maple' commercialism." She went on: "please let Montgomery's Inn remain our last and only record of Etobicoke's past. The atmosphere of Mackenzie House on Bond Street or Colborne Lodge in High Park could be ours too. We thought Etobicoke had everything! Please don't disappoint us. Save Montgomery's Inn from destruction and let integrity win this once over progre\$\$" (Strathdee 1970). Protests against the rezoning proposal were ultimately successful. In October 1970, Etobicoke Council instructed the historical board to "reconsider the use of the Inn within the framework of authentic restoration" (Longstaff 1971). Restoration work began in 1972, ten years after the EHS had intervened to protect the building from demolition (fig. 3). Two floors of the building would represent the inn's "heyday" from 1850-1855; the basement would be outfitted with a modern kitchen and meeting space. Montgomery's Inn opened on 1 March 1975 as a "living museum" supported by a staff of 14 and a dedicated group of volunteers.



Fig. 3. *Restoration of front entranceway, 1974. Courtesy of Montgomery's Inn Archives.*

Ontario Museum Development in the 1960s and 1970s

The restoration of Montgomery's Inn is not an isolated story of one community that struggled and eventually succeeded in rescuing an old and cherished building. Rather, this story is situated within a larger context of museum creation and heightened historical consciousness in communities across Ontario, and indeed across Canada. In the same period that the inn was established as a museum, the number of community museums almost doubled across Ontario: while only 144 local museums existed in 1965, 225 had been established by 1972 (Ontario Ministry of Culture 1973, sec. 2, 2). A growing nationalist sentiment associated with the Centennial, together with an infusion of federal funds, saw municipalities across the country embark upon commemorative projects from historic building restoration to the creation of museums and recreational centres.³ At work was not only a heightened interest in preserving the past, but also a desire to represent the past in particular ways. As historian Mary Tivy has shown, a very palpable anti-modernist sentiment "shaped the development of community museums in Ontario," manifesting in promotional literature as "the idea of escape through time travel to a better past" and "a simpler life" (1993, 35, 41-42). Contributing to these presentations of a simpler and more harmonious past, I suggest, were nostalgic sentiments generated by dramatic changes in the physical and cultural landscapes of communities in the 1950s and 1960s, and the influence of the living history movement in the United States in the late 1960s.

Urbanization and Nostalgia for "Simpler Times"

Like many other municipalities across Canada, Etobicoke went through a period of rapid urbanization in the 1950s and 1960s. High-rise buildings sprang up to tower over quiet intersections; roads were widened to accommodate growing numbers of cars; and everywhere, old buildings were torn down to make way for the new. Randall Reid, senior interpreter at Montgomery's Inn, remembers the disregard for historic buildings that prevailed in the years before the Centennial:

up until that time if you weren't using a building you just tore it down; there was no thought of preserving it.... A lot of those buildings up the 427, all those farmhouses, they were all burned down by the fire department. They'd set fire to them ... to teach firemen how to put fires out. (2005)⁴

A certain excitement and fascination with this arrival of the "modern" was tempered with growing alarm at the seemingly flagrant destruction of the old. A Toronto columnist captured this sense of anxiety: "in our Metropolitan expansion that sweeps vestiges of earlier times before it, we are in danger of appearing

to have sprung from nowhere. A people unmindful of its past has a rudderless future" (*Toronto Daily Star* 1964). This fear of "losing roots" was often accompanied by a potent anti-modernist sentiment. Recall Elizabeth Strathdee's letter to the Etobicoke mayor in 1970: "Too often today," she wrote, "the achievements of the past are destroyed in the name of progress and authentic beauty is replaced by ... commercialism." As historian Ian McKay observes, such anti-modernist sentiments have been frequently mobilized towards the creation of simplified and idealized community histories: "Profoundly ahistorical," these constructions of the past seek "not to study change through time but continuity preserved by timelessness" (1993, 113).⁵

This tendency to simplify complex pasts in favour of harmonious portrayals lies at the heart of what a number of scholars have described as "the myth of the pioneer"—the idea of the past as a simpler and more authentic time when early settlers consciously forged the foundations of the nation. These were somehow "better people" struggling in more "honest times"—pioneer values of self-reliance, decisiveness, perseverance, and sincerity are glorified in this myth, but rarely placed in context. "Few ... would guess," David Lowenthal wrote in his critique of American history museums, "that pioneers were crucially dependent on supplies and markets, advice and culture" (1989, 120). The notion of early settlers as pioneers embodying nascent national values has a long history in English-Canadian commemoration: "For more than a century," Thomas Matthews wrote in 1987, "scholars have sought to downplay some of the more unpleasant aspects of the Canadian past. They have portrayed our ancestors as a peaceful, hard-working and God-fearing people, and with few exceptions they have assumed that British North American society was characterized by order, stability, cohesion, conciliation, and other outstanding Canadian virtues" (384).⁶ Montgomery's Inn certainly does not escape this rhetoric. Thomas Montgomery is repeatedly described as an "early pioneer" in the inn's promotional materials; the suggestion is that he was among the honourable founders of Etobicoke, despite aspects of the historical record that suggest otherwise. Here we see Kammen's "heritage syndrome" at work—a tendency to "[accentuate] the positive but [sift] away what is problematic" (1991, 626).

If, as McKay and others suggest, the pioneer myth can be seen as a response to the physical indicators of development and change, its nostalgia for a supposedly harmonious (and homogenous) time before may also be prompted by changes in the ethnic composition of the community. Across Ontario, the ratio of foreign-born to Canadian-born residents increased approximately 32% between 1946 and 1955 (Kalbach 1970, 380). Although a community such as Etobicoke

(and even Toronto) would still have felt predominantly British in this period,⁷ immigrant communities were a growing feature of the urban landscape. This difference, however gradual in the early years, did not go unnoticed. Lillian Benson, president of the Ontario Historical Society from 1956 to 1958, may have reflected a broader sentiment among heritage professionals when she wrote to the minister of Education in 1957:

the economic expansion of Ontario is erasing many historic landmarks, the large influx of immigrants is diluting our Anglo-Saxon heritage and our pattern of life is of necessity changing. The study of local history provides not only an invaluable means of keeping alive the best traditions of the past, but also an excellent method of explaining our way of life to new Canadians. (quoted in Killan 1976, 226)

Both Mary Tivy and Gerald Killan, in their studies of the preservation movement in Ontario, cite a fear of growing ethnic diversity as a factor in the drive to protect and present images of a harmonious past. Tivy notes,

in the face of postwar immigration, urbanization, regionalization, and the disappearance of farms, homes, local businesses and traditional institutions, the building of local museums was driven largely by fear of the loss of local character, and nostalgia for the idea of past values and past communities. (1993, 36; see also Killan 1976, 226)

Scholars of museum development in the American context draw similar conclusions: in *Domesticating History*, Patricia West shows how preservationists in the 1940s sought to create an "Anglo-American version of history in reaction to the 'new immigration' and increasing heterogeneity." Museums in this context became places to "renew public vision and private virtues" (1999, 161). While it is difficult to determine conclusively that the same forces were at work in Etobicoke, we can assume that such sentiments would have been familiar to members of the largely British-Canadian Etobicoke Historical Society in the 1960s and 1970s.

Bringing History to Life: The Living History Movement

Beyond a growing sense of urgency to preserve remnants of past life, the creation of Montgomery's Inn as a living history museum reflects changes in historiography and museum interpretation in Canada and particularly in the United States. A new emphasis on social history approaches in the 1960s and 1970s stimulated efforts to present the others of history—women, workers, immigrants, and people

of colour traditionally overlooked in celebrations of White male community leaders (Wallace 1986, 155). Coinciding with—and to a certain extent predating—developments in social history were new approaches in public history aimed at immersing visitors in the past. Taking their inspiration from the open-air museums developed in Scandinavia in the 1880s and in the United States in the late 1920s and early 1930s,⁸ a new generation of “living history” museums sprang up across North America in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.⁹ Typically, these museums present a historically restored or recreated environment—a historic building, farm, or village—that is animated by museum interpreters in period costume. Emphasis tends to rest on an interpretation of the everyday lives of “the folk”—the often nameless, undocumented villagers or farm labourers who performed the physical or otherwise unrecognized work of nation-building (Wallace 1986, 145; Anderson 1982, 306).¹⁰

Montgomery's Inn stands clearly within this living history tradition. Founders envisioned a museum that would impart a “living demonstration of life in mid-nineteenth century Ontario” with a focus on “instruction in the arts and crafts of the period” (*The Globe and Mail* 1972, 5). As much as the inn drew from this museological tradition, it is subject to its criticisms. Over the past 30 years, scholars have questioned the presentation of history in American sites such as Colonial Williamsburg and Greenfield Village. Most criticisms focus on the tendency to cleanse and “whiten” the past at these museums. How could it be, for example, that Colonial Williamsburg missed half of its historical population (the Black half) in reconstructions of the town's history? Freshly painted houses and tidy streets may create a pleasant experience for tourists, critics noted, but they gravely distort past realities. Other criticisms point out the overwhelming focus on the pre-industrial period in living history museums, and the ways these presentations romanticize a time of harmonious agrarian existence before the destructive effects of technology and urbanization (Schlereth 1989, 309; Herbst 1989, 99; Tivy 1993, 37). The objection to these museums, Wallace concludes in his work on history museums in the United States, is not so much their *selective* use of history (as all productions of history are selective), but the fact that they generate “new ways of not seeing” history by erasing conflict, economic forces, and the experiences of the majority of the population (1986, 158).

Gentrifying the Past at Montgomery's Inn

As much as museum founders conceived of the inn within the framework of the living history tradition, they also attempted, whether consciously or otherwise, to move away from some of the presentations of established sites. Dorothy Duncan explains,

I think we did a better job at living history sites than our American neighbours have. I think they had tended to ... "gentrify" their ancestors a little more than we do. When you go to Colonial Williamsburg you see the parlours and the dining rooms and so on; you don't always see the places where the dirty work was done. And I think here in Canada we try ... be a little bit more honest. (2005)

Montgomery's Inn departs from the genteel sitting rooms and carefully presented dining tables of many historic homes, for example, to present among other rooms a working nineteenth-century kitchen and barroom, and an upstairs guest room complete with low ceilings, narrow straw tick mattresses, and uneven flooring. What it fails to capture, however, are the complexities, conflicts, and contradictions that were an intrinsic part of everyday life in the mid-nineteenth century. As Thomas Matthews warned in 1987, in their presentation of an "idealized, sanitized and ultimately two-dimensional view of the past," museums like Montgomery's Inn run the risk of "[stripping] history of its vitality and [wrapping] it in the cloak of middle-class respectability." At such sites, he continues, "one searches in vain for any evidence of the escalating social tensions and class disparities which surely were just as characteristic of the social fabric as white picket fences and dignified Georgian architecture" (385). Two tendencies become apparent in the inn's interpretation strategy: a tendency to simplify complex human relationships, economies, and systems; and a tendency to skirt conflict and "difficult" subjects in order to present a positive and harmonious vision of the past. Consistently, the museum's presentation of the past departs from historical evidence.

Why 1847?

The period that the inn was designed to represent, the years 1847-50, is a good starting point to this discussion of the divide between interpretation and evidence. These dates were meant to capture the inn's busiest years—before Margaret Montgomery's death in 1855, and before the advent of railways reduced the number of long-distance travellers on the Dundas Highway.¹¹ But why 1847 to 1850? Why not 1845 to 1850? My experience working at the site reveals one rationale. During my staff training, a long-time interpreter at the site mentioned that the selection

of 1847-50 related to events in the Montgomerys' family life. From 1829 to 1842, Margaret Montgomery was pregnant almost every second year; she also witnessed the death of four of her seven children as infants in this period. In July 1846, her son John Dawson Montgomery died at age 11. Beginning the interpretation at 1847, this staff member explained, allowed staff to steer away from this period of grief and interpret happier times—the years after 1846 and before Margaret's health declined in the early 1850s. Not only does the museum circumvent potentially disturbing aspects of the Montgomery family history, but it also misses an opportunity to discuss what was certainly a familiar colonial experience: evidence suggests that all Upper Canadian families lived with the expectation that at least one child would succumb to disease or accident before the age of five (Errington 1995, 69). As we have seen, this tendency to "eulogize the past"—to emphasize stability and harmony and avoid the messier aspects of life, such as conflict, grief, and uncertainty—is a frequent criticism of living history museums. It is also an important feature of the myth of the pioneer, where stories of hard work, steady progress, and domestic harmony ignore the ubiquitous violence and disappointment that were part of the settler experience.

*"an honourable innkeeper or ... a scamp?"*¹²

Too often in community museums, unsavoury historical evidence conflicts with and ultimately succumbs to museum founders' desire for a subject worthy of commemoration. Duncan comments,

the community ... always [has] a dream that of course this person, whoever it is, was a ... model person. They had a good deal of money; they were very honest, upright.... But they had just as bad taste as we have; they had all of the shortcomings we have; many of them were dishonest, many of them cheated and lied; but they [the community] don't ever want that to come out. (2005)

Publicity documents created in the late 1970s for the inn consistently place Montgomery in a positive light. He was an "enterprising young Irishman," a "successful innkeeper," a man who rose through the ranks to become a "captain in the militia" (Etobicoke Historical Board 1976). At the same time as these documents were created, however, research into Montgomery's life showed that he was not always the upstanding citizen he was made out to be. Records show that he was consistently in and out of court, both as a plaintiff and a defendant, throughout his career as an innkeeper.

While this alone is not particularly damning—Montgomery lived in litigious times—some of the activities he was accused of would likely have violated the

social mores of his time. In 1839, Thomas was indicted and tried before a jury for threatening to burn down the neighbouring Hargreaves' Tavern. Witnesses before the court claimed that Montgomery was likely responsible for previous arson attempts on another competitor, Mulhollen's Tavern—a failed attempt in 1836 and a successful one in 1839. Despite this and other incriminating evidence,¹³ the jury reached a verdict of not guilty (Hykel and Benn 1980, 77-78). The use of Montgomery's militia captaincy as a marker of respectability is also questionable, associated as the militia often was by mid-century with drunkenness and disorderly conduct (Grazley 2005, 2). Although tours today occasionally reference the less admirable aspects of Montgomery's life, it seems likely that museum staff in the 1970s skirted these issues: "we were certainly in a period where you mustn't say anything too derogatory about the owner," Duncan commented. "So it was tricky to come up with an interpretation policy at that point of what was going to be said about him—[better to] concentrate ... on what innkeepers were doing across the province, and what was likely to have gone on here" (2005).



Fig. 4. *The restored barroom (1974), an exclusively male space in the inn's presentation of the past. Courtesy of Montgomery's Inn Archives.*

A Woman, in the Barroom? Gender Relations at the Inn

The presence of women at the inn—as workers, family members, and customers—is another subject where interpretation departs from historical evidence. During tours of the inn, female interpreters typically “animate” the kitchen, and occasionally the dining and sitting rooms. Women were not permitted in the barroom, visitors are informed, in keeping with typical gendered conceptions of space in the nineteenth century (fig. 4). Certainly by mid-century the ideology of separate spheres was well established in both Europe and its colonies (Comacchio 1999, 152; Hall 1992, 75), but studies in gender history caution against rigid dichotomies. As Linda Kerber observed in 1988, the language of separate spheres “[denies] the reciprocity between gender and society, and [imposes] a static model on dynamic relationships” (38).¹⁴

Indeed, Montgomery’s records show that women *were* occasionally present as customers in the barroom: over 25 entries relating to women are recorded in the Montgomery day and ledger books between 1835 and 1842, and a final entry is recorded ten years later in 1852 (Montgomery Family). Women sometimes came alone, and more often in the company of their husbands or other women. These records are in keeping with Julia Roberts’s findings that women visited Upper Canadian taverns—alone and in the company of others—more frequently in the years before 1840 than at mid-century and in later years.¹⁵ Before 1840, Roberts concludes, “women expressed no hesitation in using the public houses in their travels, seem not to have associated them with sexual danger even when travelling alone, and lived in tavern quarters as boarders for lengthy periods” (1999, 280). While they may have entered without hesitation, they entered on male terms. “Gender mattered in the taverns,” Roberts is careful to point out; “while it did not work to exclude women, it certainly differentiated the terms of their access” (1999, 273).

Rather than conveying the complexities inherent to gender relations and to gendered divisions of space in this period, the Montgomery Inn creates the impression of rigid distinctions between male and female, public and private space. If the barroom is presented as exclusively male, the kitchen and dining room are overwhelmingly female. Comforting smells of woodsmoke and fresh baking waft through the kitchen and dining room, and the visitor is left with the impression of a peaceful, maternal environment (fig. 5). This sense of a “female space” is reinforced by the fact that most of the costumed interpreters (in the 1970s just as today) are women,¹⁶ and most of the activities they interpret were women’s occupations: the sewing, weaving, and butter-churning that the museum’s 1974 operating policy recommended. What is missing in the inn’s presentation of a pleasant “women’s world” apart from the world of men is any suggestion of relationship—



Fig. 5. *Interpreter Marian Banham making pastry in the inn's historic kitchen, c. 1980. Courtesy of Montgomery's Inn Archives.*

either with the women around them or with the men in the other room. Issues such as domestic conflict, employment inequities, and gendered social norms go unmentioned, as do experiences of friendship, sexuality, and marriage. With its presentation of two separate, harmonious spheres, the inn sidesteps instances of interaction between men and women in the past; it suggests by elision that those relationships that did exist were cheerful, contented ones.

Clearly this was not always—or even very often—the case. As Jane Errington has shown in her survey of women's lives in the colony, relationships between men and women were more complex and frequently more troubled than the "cheerful hearth" of the inn's presentation. "For many colonial women of all classes," she notes, "marriage was an exercise in raw power. Marital discord resulted in heated arguments and marital breakdown. A number of women were subject to physical and emotional abuse and some died as a result" (1995, 39).¹⁷ Public discourse about gender relations also departed from idealized portraits in its fascination with the sordid and the sensational. Cecilia Morgan concludes that, although "discussions of the family and domesticity strove to present an idealized version

of gender relations," images of disorder and danger nevertheless crept into public debate in the form of the predatory male seducer, foolish female victim, reckless male youth, and volatile, abusive husband (1996, 143-48, 163). Despite their formulaic structure, such tropes reflected very real fears about disorder and immorality among the Upper Canadian populace (Grazley 2005, 11). These studies hint at the gap between the inn's presentation of the past and the historical context it seeks to interpret. Life in nineteenth-century Etobicoke was not entirely flavoured, it would seem, by cinnamon and tea cakes.

Montgomery's Community:

Race, Ethnicity, and Religion in Nineteenth-Century Etobicoke

Just as Montgomery's records give us a glimpse of gendered interactions in the barroom, so they hint at encounters with social difference more broadly. Consistent with his tendency to record patrons in the Montgomery day and ledger books according to distinguishing characteristics or occupation, such as "Mr. Vanorman bedstead maker" or "Wm Orton the man that got hurt in falling into the sellar [sic]," Montgomery notes "Jessey Tebore frenshman [sic]" as a visitor to the bar; "George the Indian" as both bar patron and employee; and "coloured" men such as Benjamin Davis as employees (Montgomery Family 1834-56; Hykel and Benn 1980, 39, 56). Studies of tavern life in the same period show that Montgomery's guests were not a strange exception. Craig Heron comments,

in most of these establishments, all classes and social groups tended to mix freely. Despite the growing racism of white colonial society, Blacks and Aboriginal peoples were even known to frequent barrooms.... Taverns did not dissolve important social distinctions, but they did permit a cheek-by-jowl co-existence of men of different social ranks and the possibility of dialogue and discussion among them. (2003, 37)

While instances of racism and violence did occur,¹⁸ Upper Canadian taverns saw the accommodation of difference just as often as they saw its exclusion (Roberts 2002, 1). Little mention, however, is made of racial difference—either accommodated or excluded—in museum tours. Staff interpreters describe local farmers and regional travellers among the inn's main clientele; the visitor gets the sense of a rather homogenous group with largely English or Irish backgrounds. While this was typically the case in Upper Canada at the time, elements of diversity did exist in the general population. Native peoples constituted roughly 1% of the population of Canada West in 1861; Blacks, in Etobicoke and in Canada West more broadly, roughly 2% (Roberts 2002, 8; Wayne 1995, 485).¹⁹ That the majority of interpreters at Toronto city museums are White women only solidifies

the impression of an exclusively White environment. The absence of racial (and gender) diversity among museum staff, as studies of museums such as Colonial Williamsburg have shown, has a powerful impact on visitors' appreciation of history (Wallace 1986; Kammen 1991).

Perhaps more apparent in nineteenth-century Etobicoke were social differences of religion and class. Thomas Montgomery was an Irish Protestant and a member of the local Orange Lodge.²⁰ A significant force in nineteenth-century Upper Canada, Lodge members held prominent positions as politicians, administrators, policemen, and businessmen in Toronto and surrounding towns. The years selected for the museum's focus, 1847-50, brought into relief the differences in faith and fortune that separated Montgomery from his Irish countrymen. In 1847, the Great Famine in Ireland reached its peak, and hundreds of thousands of weakened and impoverished people fled Ireland. Over 100,000 immigrants—the large majority of them Irish Catholics—landed at the quarantine station in Grosse Île, Quebec, in 1847 (MacKay 1990, 290-92). Of those who survived, some made their way to destinations in Upper and Lower Canada; thousands came to Toronto. Montgomery and his fellow villagers of Islington would have been well acquainted with these events: local newspapers noted the arrivals of "coffin ships" daily²¹ and commented on the wretched condition of refugees, many of whom died in the "fever sheds" hastily constructed along Toronto's waterfront.²²

It is difficult if not impossible to get a sense of the Montgomerys' reaction to these events. As an Irish Protestant immigrant of considerable means, Thomas may have been embarrassed or contemptuous of the plight of his countrymen; as an Orangeman, he asserted his intolerance for Catholics. At the same time, one story in circulation at the museum suggests rather the opposite, that Montgomery held a "famine benefit" at the inn to raise funds in support of Catholic immigrants; unfortunately, no written sources exist to corroborate this excerpt from the inn's oral history (Lipowski 2005). Regardless of Montgomery's reaction, it is striking that the huge influx of impoverished Irish Catholic immigrants in the late 1840s warrants so little mention at Montgomery's Inn. Although Orange Lodge symbols appear in the inn's upstairs ballroom, museum interpreters rarely mention the political and ideological implications of Montgomery's membership in the lodge, nor the effects of the Irish famine on Toronto-area immigration. Twenty-five years after the famine, Irish-born residents made up 20% of Etobicoke's population; almost 50% of these residents were Catholic (Statistics Canada 1870-71).²³ If the record for the rest of the province is any indication, tensions between Irish Protestants and Catholics "were a major source of civic strife" in the mid-nineteenth century, particularly surrounding the volatile dates of 17 March and 12 July. Instances of violence, however, were surprisingly few (Wilson 1989,

16-17). Indeed, Montgomery's "famine benefit," if it was held, presents a useful metaphor for the complexities of ethnic and race relations in this period. As Donald Akenson notes about rural Ontario in this period, "at least a superficial veneer of tolerance and amity overlay whatever religious difficulties there were locally" (1984, 280). What tolerance there may have been, however, does not equate to a portrait of homogeneity: while the majority of Montgomery's customers may have been White, differences in ethnicity, religion, and class would have stood out almost as fiercely as differences in skin colour.

An Authentic Past?

Gaps between the inn's presentation of the past and the historical context it interprets are more troubling in light of the staff's and the founders' commitment to "historical authenticity." As Randall Reid explains, museum staff were trained to be extremely fastidious: "not only did [we] have to appear to look correct for the 1840s, [our] deportment had to be the same—we had to walk the right way [women, for example, were not to take long strides] ... and if any men had any cologne on that was a no-no" (2005). Even though historical artifacts may have been selected rather arbitrarily—only two of the items presented in the inn's restored rooms, for example, are thought to have belonged to the Montgomery family—they are presented to visitors as relics of "the real," relics of a time more authentic than our own (Magelssen 2004a, 66). Returning 25 years later to my experience as a female interpreter in male historical costume, it is easier to see why my actions caused such unrest among established interpreters. I defended my choice of costume with the argument that, as a "third person" interpreter, I could "step outside myself" to interpret the clothes I was wearing as those of a nineteenth-century male servant. The point becomes, of course, how far is it necessary to go to "authenticate the real," and furthermore, is there much point in trying? If I cannot adopt the speech, the mannerisms or the concerns of a nineteenth-century servant at Montgomery's Inn, should I bother to pull on an apron and remove my earrings? As Alan Gordon argues, authenticity is best understood not as an inherent quality of historical objects (or, for that matter, of the clothing and mannerisms of costumed interpreters), but rather as a *negotiated* concept—subject to differing interpretations of the past and different understandings of what constitutes collective heritage. Authenticity is ultimately unattainable, he concludes, "not simply because the past in all of its detail cannot be recaptured," but "because it is a subjective, not an objective, value, one that strikes at the core of collective identities" (Gordon 2004, 511). Rather than essentialized, harmonious, and ultimately misleading presentations of the past,

some gesture towards the complexity of past lives—and the diversity of present interpretations—is needed in order for audiences to relate to people from the past in a meaningful way. As Linda Levstik has shown in her studies of history education in American schools, teachers' reluctance to discuss divisive or disturbing aspects of the past contrasts sharply with students' interest in these topics, and leads not only to a decline in students' interest in history, but also to a reduction in their capacity for civic participation (2000, 290).

Montgomery's Inn may have fulfilled the goals of its founders, but it has struggled to retain audiences as Etobicoke has grown and changed. Current museum staff are exploring the role of the museum within a changing community, using theatre and oral history approaches to encourage diverse community involvement in museum projects. Whether these methods will be any more successful in evoking the complexities of the site's history remains to be seen. As Patricia West and others have demonstrated, museums are not, and have never been, static institutions. Instead, their relationship with larger social, political, and cultural developments has compelled them to revise and reinterpret "history" constantly. Faced with competing pressures to research and inform, to educate, and increasingly, to entertain, museums must strike a tenuous balance in order to remain relevant. They are obliged not only to keep pace, but to be aware of themselves as agents in the history-making process: a curator's viewpoint determines what audiences will see of the past as much as what they *will not see*. As a microcosm for these concerns, Montgomery's Inn illustrates some of the tensions created by shifting perspectives of the past.

Notes

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1. Originally known as Mimico, the village of Islington changed its name in 1858 to avoid confusion with other Etobicoke places of the same name. I have used the name Islington throughout for simplicity.

2. Sittings for the township's first courts of justice were held in the inn's second floor ball-room; its basement contained cells that constituted the township's first prison (Anderson, 1963).
3. Gerald Killan identifies additional factors that may have played a role in the growth of historical institutions in this period, including increased leisure time in the 1950s and 1960s, increased tourism as highways improved and more people had access to cars, and the Ontario government's decision in the 1950s to take a more active role in the protection and popularization of Ontario's heritage (1976, 226-27).
4. Michael Wallace explores similar attitudes towards the destruction of old buildings in antebellum America. The destabilization threatened by Civil War, he finds, led to new initiatives to commemorate the founding fathers (1986, 138).
5. Paul Litt's study of the Ontario historical plaques program produces similar findings. He shows how local history advocates in the 1970s and 1980s used historical plaques to promote a vision of their town, or of the province more broadly, as a place of shared experience and cohesive cultural identity. The permanence of the plaques—much like that of a historical building—made them an “appropriate talisman for the antimodernist to wield against the specters of amnesia and chaos in contemporary society” (1997, 25).
6. For other references to the pioneer myth in English Canadian historiography, see Coates and Morgan (2002), Furniss (1999, 69-78), Killan (1976, chap. 3), Litt (1997), and MacGillivray (1990, 99-102). A large body of literature exists on the Loyalist tradition and its tendencies towards pioneer mythology. Norman Knowles's work is exemplary here (see chapters 2 and 7 of *Inventing the Loyalists*, 1997). Janice Potter-MacKinnon provides a gendered interpretation of the Loyalist pioneer myth in *While the Women Only Wept* (1993, 156).
7. In 1961, 60.7% of Metropolitan Toronto residents claimed British heritage; 56.9% claimed British heritage in 1971 (Richmond 1967; Reitz and Lum 2001).
8. With their commitment to representing the experience of the ordinary person in history, open air museums in Sweden (Skansen, 1891) and the United States (Michigan's Greenfield Village, 1929, and Virginia's Colonial Williamsburg, 1934) laid the foundations for the living history movement in North America. Detailed studies of these institutions can be found in Kammen (1991) and Magelssen (2004b).
9. In the years since Carl Becker first coined the term “living history” in 1931, over 800 living history museums have been established in the United States and Canada (Anderson 1985, 181).
10. For an excellent discussion of the idea of “the folk” in cultural production, see McKay (1994).
11. Craig Heron notes that “before the arrival of the railways in the 1850s, there was a tavern roughly every mile or two along major roads in what was to become Southern Ontario” (2003, 28). Faster travel options saw fewer long distance and regional travelers as tavern clientele, and many country taverns in Canada West were forced to close their doors.

12. Often, Dorothy Duncan commented, when an opening date is set for the museum, no definitive research has yet been done on "who actually lived there; was this man married, did he have children, was he an honourable innkeeper or was he a scamp, what kind of customers did he have" (2005).
13. Evidence included samples of Montgomery's handwriting, which the court concluded were similar to the threat notes. In both attempts on Mulhollen's Tavern, witnesses claimed, oak coals were found among the ashes. Because Montgomery was known to be the only one in the neighbourhood to burn oak, witnesses alleged that the coals must have come from his barroom fireplace (Hykel and Benn 1980, 77-78).
14. Françoise Noël goes a step further in rejecting the metaphor of separate spheres as a method of understanding nineteenth century Canadian family life (2003, 13-14). For a more nuanced discussion of pitfalls and benefits of the separate spheres metaphor, see Morgan (1996, 9-10).
15. Roberts finds few examples of "respectable women" frequenting Upper Canadian taverns in the 1830s and 1840s, compared with earlier in the century when their presence was more common (1999, 301-302). See also Heron (2003, 37).
16. One explanation for the overwhelming majority of female staff may be the fact that these positions are often part-time and typically very poorly paid. See Edwards (1987) for a discussion of this issue in the Toronto context.
17. For other references to marital discord in Upper Canada, see McKenna (1994, 178-79) and Marks (1999). For comments on women's relationships with men and with other women in the broader American context, see Smith-Rosenberg (1985).
18. See, for example, Roberts (2002, 20-25) and Wamsley and Kossuth (2000).
19. Michael Wayne's assessment of the 1861 Census lists 83 Blacks out of a total of 3,503 residents in Etobicoke in 1861 (Wayne 1995, 485; Metropolitan Toronto Planning Board 1968, 14).
20. Both the local order and the Grand Lodge met regularly at Montgomery's Inn throughout the 1830s and early 1840s (Hykel and Benn 1980, 38, 79).
21. For example, an article in the *Toronto Globe* on 4 August 1847 reads: "The *Virginus* ... from Liverpool, with 496 passengers, had lost 158 by death, nearly one third of the whole, and she had 180 sick; above one-half of the whole will, evidently, never see their own houses in the New World."
22. See MacKay (1990, 265-66) for a discussion of Toronto's response to the crisis.
23. The figures for Irish Catholics in Etobicoke is higher than the Ontario average. 1871 Census statistics show that approximately 35% of Ontario's population was Irish-born; of these, 34% were Catholic. The ratio of Protestant to Catholic immigrants to Upper Canada is surprisingly constant before and after the famine: Catholic Irish made up roughly 35% of the Irish population in Upper Canada (including Irish-born and Canadian-born of Irish parentage) in 1842, and roughly 34% of the Irish population in 1871 (Statistics Canada 1870-71, As Donald Akenson concludes, the Irish Catholic population in Upper Canada was substantial in the pre-famine years, and a "dual stream" of immigrants—both Protestant and Catholic—entered Upper Canada in the years surrounding 1847 (1984, 26-28).

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