



The case for a historic vessel registry for B.C.

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In January 2019, Heritage BC sponsored a series of public meetings to gain insight into “exploring the influences and practices, values and vision of heritage in the context of community life.” Such fora are rare and represent an opportunity for those interested to have a voice that may influence government policy going forward. As champions of the maritime history of British Columbia, the authors supported a presentation to Heritage BC on the importance of recognizing the invaluable maritime heritage of this Province.

In British Columbia, dugout canoes of formidable size opened coastal trade routes for First Nations peoples. In the 19th century, steamships ferried miners

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to the Klondike and to the gold fields of the Interior. Since the earliest days of the Province, tugs and barges have transported the products of our forest, mining, agriculture and construction industries and all forms of general supplies to every community on our vast and often hostile coastline. Fishing vessels by the thousands have been instrumental in the development of one of

the world’s most notable salmon fisheries. The world’s first efforts at containerized cargo systems were conceived and tested in B.C. Specialized mission boats brought much needed healthcare and other support to remote coastal communities. Even today, the economy of coastal B.C. is served almost exclusively by the combination of ferries and tug-barge systems where no



The *St. Roch* — one of only a handful of vessels recognized for their historic value.

Photo: Duncan MacLeod, Vancouver Maritime Museum

roads or rail systems can venture. These vessels, operating both on the coast and on our inland waters have been major contributors to the development of British Columbia's "Spirit of Place." Some of these vessels are old — a number now well over 100 years. Regrettably, many of them have been lost to us but their records often survive. However, unlike architectural heritage, there is no current program to ensure the survival of important boats or, at the very least, their formal documentation for the historical record — or perhaps more importantly, the stories that accompanied those boats on their voyages of exploration and service to our communities.

Heritage vessels worldwide

A significant number of countries acknowledge the importance of things maritime to their history and development by the creation of registries of notable vessels. These registries recognize vessels that have made significant contributions to their national or local history or which represent a unique aspect of their local boat-building or shipbuilding industries.

In the United States, there are 133 designated National Historic Landmarks that are ships, shipwrecks or shipyards. Ireland's Heritage Act (1995) defines floating heritage by statute as "any vessel ... of significance because of intrinsic construction, or association with commercial, cultural, economic, industrial, military, political, social or other history of the country." The Barcelona Charter (2002) established criteria for the recovery and safeguarding of active traditional vessels and articulated the need to preserve them as monuments. Australia and the U.K. have extensive registries for their historic commercial and naval vessels. The European Union has a blanket organization for all member states for this same purpose and virtually every EU member country also has a National Registry of important vessels. Canada alone, with the longest coastline of any country in the world, is notably and embarrassingly absent from this list.

In 1989, the Province of British Columbia officially commemorated what was then the oldest vessel still afloat in B.C. waters. In 2018, Parks Canada, at the instigation of the SS Master Society, recognized the importance of "Tugboats of the West Coast" to the Provincial development and economic growth. To our knowledge, these were the only times that floating

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heritage has been officially acknowledged in B.C. The dry-berthed RCMP *St. Roch* at the Vancouver Maritime Museum and the seiner *BCP 45* at the Campbell River Maritime Heritage Centre are designated National Historic Sites (in 1962 and 2005 respectively). The inland vessels *Moyie* and *Sicamous* are similarly recognized. These welcome citations are however lonely testaments to our marine history...a much broader recognition is essential.

It is our position that B.C. should take a leadership role in filling this significant void in our historical record by creating a Provincial Registry of Historic Vessels. This would then serve as a model for other coastal provinces and ultimately the Federal Government to adopt. The creation of this Registry would represent an important first step in the documentation of B.C.'s maritime history and would ideally lead to programs that facilitate the

preservation and restoration of vessels of historic significance.

Designating and determining significance

Not every old vessel is worth preserving. Age alone, while significant, does not merit preservation. Factors such as design significance, builder, amount of original fabric still in place, and association to former owners or historic events are examples of "value-added" attributes which distinguish merely interesting vessels from ones that are truly significant. A set of criteria that is recognized throughout the nautical heritage community would go a long way toward coordinating and confirming assessments of significance. These criteria do not presently exist but the authors are setting out to establish just such a list. Input from other interested parties would be most welcome. Initial thoughts on eligibility of vessels are the following:

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HISTORIC VESSELS

- All vessel types; indigenous, commercial, military and pleasure craft alike; coastal and inland;
- Any material of construction;
- Must have made a notable contribution to the mercantile or social fabric of the Province;
- Should ideally have been built in B.C., but if not, then at least have been designed or extensively modified here and served for an extended period in B.C. in a distinguished fashion;
- Be representative of an important class of vessels;
- Represent a unique type of construction or configuration;
- Be as close to original configuration/construction as possible; and
- Ideally still be afloat in operating condition.

These criteria will undoubtedly change as efforts evolve over the coming months.

The process

The main issues in creating such a registry would be the following:

1. Adoption of a terminology and classification structure that would be used commonly to describe older vessels;
2. Establish a recognition program to highlight candidate vessels;
3. Investigate programs that might be recommended to industry and/or government that give support to owners of heritage vessels (as for example, the concessions given to antique automobile collectors);
4. Raise the profile of floating heritage in British Columbia to a wider public audience;



Photo: BC Shipping News

The *SS Master* — an iconic and historically significant vessel of B.C.'s coast — is a prime candidate for the B.C. Heritage Vessel Registry.

5. Ensure that working vessels are accorded the same respect as are renewed or restored yachts; and
6. Investigate the feasibility of tax relief for the work involved in keeping older vessels maintained and afloat.

The role of museums

Some museums own (or are caretakers of) examples of floating heritage which are still afloat or are dry-berthed. It is potentially possible for more vessels to be included in museum collections but none of the current facilities in B.C. have either the capacity or the budgets. Storage space, maintenance and restoration costs are such that for most institutions this is simply not realistic under present models. The truth is that no museum can successfully maintain floating heritage over the long term and still carry out its other obligations to two-dimensional and three-dimensional artifact collections. Where success is obvious is in dry-berthing heritage — for example, the aforementioned *St. Roch* and *BCP 45*. These vessels then become large, curated artifacts stored ideally in controlled conditions for long-term preservation. However, boats out of their medium also lose much of their charm and appeal. Our museums must be active partners in this Registry process and ideally be the ultimate custodians of it.

Who should be responsible?

A major challenge to such a program is obviously funding. A certain amount of work can and will always be done by dedicated volunteers but there are obvious limitations to that. Preservation of privately held vessels which are regularly in use is likely the most successful model. An owner who actively participates in the maintenance and operation of a vessel will ensure that it is kept in good shape. There are limits however to the extent to which an owner will go to preserve a vessel. A program of tax relief for maintenance expenses would cost governments very little and provide some much-needed relief to owners to encourage preservation and restoration.

In the first instance however, support for the creation of the Heritage Vessel Registry itself is required and ideally administered through a well-recognized, stable institution such as the Vancouver Maritime Museum. This would be a relatively low-cost effort but a vital first step. The task would build on the database already available through the creation of Nauticapedia (www.nauticapedia.ca).

The way forward

The most probable successful approach to solving the challenges of a B.C. Heritage Vessel Registry will be through a partnership of all persons, museums, organizations and governments with an interest in this subject, and ideally with a continuum of government support. Government is not the right vehicle for managing such a program, and no single museum can afford the costs of maintaining floating heritage for long. A program of modest financial support to facilitate the creation of the Registry and then tax incentives in some form for the long-term care and preservation of noteworthy B.C. vessels appears to be the most likely avenue to success in ensuring that B.C.'s maritime heritage is properly documented and preserved to the maximum extent possible. We invite all interested persons to contact the authors to lend their voices to this mission. More articles will follow as we progress on this mission.

Contact Rob Allan at rgallan@ral.ca to provide input.