

**MAKE  
HISTORY.**

Preserve Manitoba's Past.

# OUR ESSENTIAL PAST

## Identifying Significant Aspects of Local History



## A Guide for Communities and Consultants



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### Identifying Significant Aspects of Local History

**S**EVERAL IMPORTANT community heritage initiatives require distinct research, communication and production approaches. Projects whose main focus is on designations and commemorations are especially in need of this kind of attention. It is only through the creation of comprehensive inventories, thorough and thoughtful analysis and rigorous assessments that a community can confidently present its most significant heritage sites and subjects to its citizens as well as to visitors. At the same time, new communication needs and vehicles, like websites, smartphones and primary- and secondary-school education, require succinct and engaging outreach approaches.

To ensure that any Manitoba community has the tools to undertake this important aspect of heritage work, the Historic Resources Branch of Manitoba Culture, Heritage and Tourism has developed *Our Essential Past*, a suite of sophisticated projects that ensure that the foundational materials needed for effective designation and commemoration initiatives are in place, and that other compelling and informative communication materials are also developed as part of a complete heritage package.

The projects that comprise *Our Essential Past*—Pivotal Events, Notable People and Special Places—focus on three traditional subjects of community heritage interest, and together form the bedrock for interpretive, promotional and educational activities that most clearly define and explain a community's history.

The **Pivotal Events** project deals with historical themes and key events that defined the evolution of a community. It is important to note that in this whole initiative a community is not just an urban environment but often also includes a contiguous farming community, or is even distinctly rural.

The **Notable People** project highlights those individuals from around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that most effectively described the various activities that defined daily life in any community – work and leisure, focusing on those with compelling personal stories who can effectively represent others.

The **Special Places** project explores existing physical resources—buildings, structures and sites—and through a select collection of the most important and attractive suggests the historical themes, events and personalities identified in the other two projects.



An essential foundation of the branch's *Our Essential Past* initiative includes local histories. Manitoba communities have developed an impressive legacy of historical information and data through more than 1,000 local histories.

This astounding collective resource features comprehensive information on local pioneers and families, as well as key aspects of local historical development – the formation of an economic and commercial base, development of governing systems, creation of educational and spiritual institutions, provision through clubs and cultural and sports activities of the social infrastructure that binds and builds a community, and finally of the real infrastructure that often still defines a community – buildings, sites, roads and bridges, electrical and telephone services, and perhaps even major earth and water reclamation projects.

Many local histories also contain helpful overviews that cogently focus on pivotal events and themes, like the details of pioneer life and of early community development. Fascinating anecdotes about long-lost customs, daily activities, and tales of heroism, perseverance and tragedy also help to imaginatively make any community's history come to life. And the wealth of archival photographs—of people, places and things—are essential attributes of these trusty books.

Local histories are the necessary resources for a Pivotal Events project and a Notable People project. It is through these materials that each of these initiatives builds the necessary inventories, and through which analysis, assessments and short lists are developed. Local histories are also necessary for a Special Places project, where archival photographs and data on early buildings ensures that analysis, site selections and descriptive texts are reliable and effective.

All of these *Our Essential Past* projects have been developed through partnerships between the Historic Resources Branch and selected communities. Thus the Pivotal Events initiative was accomplished with heritage partners in Wawanesa, Rivers and the R.M. of St. Clements. The Notable People project was undertaken with the support and guidance of the towns of Hartney and Melita and the R.M. of Argyle. And the Special Places project involved work with community and heritage authorities in Birtle, Boissevain, Carberry, De Salaberry, Gimli, Gladstone, Lac du Bonnet and Virden.

All of these projects have also been developed with the assistance of Culture, Heritage and Tourism's Heritage Grants Program. This program has enabled communities to hire trained heritage consultants who carry out all aspects of these projects on their behalf, leaving local heritage authorities and public officials with time to review and guide the results and to develop locally relevant applications.

Technical guides and model projects for each of the three initiatives follow, and are also available from the Historic Resources Branch, or from the Community Heritage Manitoba website.



Other recommended follow-up products are also available for review from the branch or from the CHM website. It is the intention of this whole enterprise that participating communities ultimately would have three distinct popular products that could be used in museums (to help inform visitors about a community's distinct identity and attributes), in schools (to help students appreciate their community's place in Manitoba's history) and in the local library (for the edification of interested local citizens). Thus the Pivotal Events project ultimately would be recast as a booklet called Milestones; Notable People as We Made Manitoba; and Special Places as Landmarks. Each of these booklets would typically be re-titled to highlight the community's name – thus for example Birtle Milestones, We Made Birtle and Birtle Landmarks.

Any Manitoba community will profit from a Pivotal Events and Notable People project, and communities with adequate remaining historical building stock will also profit from a Special Places project. Together, these projects ensure that any number of popular heritage enterprises—plaquing programs, designations and communication projects, like education, websites, geo-caching and articles—are undertaken with all the necessary facts and interpretation already in place. These projects ensure that any future projects are based on facts and information that are accurate, interesting and useful – and that all have been developed with the kind of clear, concise and emphatic heritage messages and activities that resonate in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Questions about this project can be directed to:

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