Reconstructing the Built Rural Heritage in Southwestern Ontario

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Abstract

This paper seeks to establish a past and present record of rural built heritage for the larger region of southwestern Ontario, including the Thames watershed. It seeks to document the existence of a vernacular, including the range of rural structures (farm, residential, manufacturing, commercial, and institutional) that structured the rural landscape during its period of European settlement and until World War 1 (1914). In addition, the paper seeks to establish what remains of this vernacular built heritage, as we enter the new millenium.

Concept

The concept of a 'rural built heritage' emerges from the existence of a rural vernacular architecture and the perceived need to establish and record the built elements of a particular rural region, namely, southwestern Ontario. Rural vernacular styles are most commonly associated with older rural systems that pre-date the Industrial Revolution, and which stress traditional styles and local materials (Hoskins,1955; Brunskill, 1970; Oliver, 1997). However, a rapidly developing more modern agrarian system may also result in the development of a vernacular, albeit utilizing some 'imported' styles and materials; such regional vernacular-based rural cultural landscapes have been recognized in North America (Hart, 1975; 1998; Riley, 1987; Conzen, 1990; Birnbaum, 1994; Ennals and Holdsworth, 1998. Alanen and Melnick, 2000).

The settlement of southern Ontario in the 19th century, as a farm-based agrarian system, produced a widespread assemblage of vernacular elements across the rural landscape (Beck and Keefer, 1993; McIlwraith, 1997; Wood, 2000). This landscape has been seriously eroded by agricultural and rural restructuring and urban pressures in the 20th century, but its remaining features are tangible evidence of the period of 'rural dominance' which produced a rich rural built heritage across the region. In turn, the current, remaining built elements represent a major portion of the region's 'human-cultural heritage'.

Human-cultural Heritage is a major value category within which to support designation of a river and its watershed within the Canadian Heritage Rivers System (Parks Canada, 1984; CHRB 1991). Consequently, the research presented here began with work to establish human cultural values, in support of the designation of the Thames River in southwestern Ontario. Although these requirements were satisfied by a relatively modest 'preliminary' survey presented as the *Background Study: Thames River Watershed* (TRBSRT, 1997), it was apparent that, if one wishes to proceed further in establishing the role of rural

built heritage, towards the CHRS objectives of maintaining and enhancing watershed des ignation values, for example, one needs a more comprehensive record of what has exist ed and what remains.

Area and Methods

The area chosen to develop the pre-1914 rural built record and its contemporary remain is the peninsula of southwestern Ontario, specifically the nine southwestern counties (Elgin, Essex, Huron, Kent, Lambton, Middlesex, Norfolk, Oxford and Perth), which contain a much larger set of over 100 original rural municipal units (townships, incorporated towns and villages), the over 60 recent municipal amalgamations, and the complete areas of nine Conservation Authorities (Ausable-Bayfield, Catfish Creek, Essex Region, Kettle Creek, Long Point, Lower Thames, Maitland Valley, and Upper Thames). The area is covered within some 34, 1:50,000 National Topographic Series (NTS) Maps, which are available as digital topographic data. Together, the various municipal, conservation authority and NTS data bases provide the flexible geographic framework for the collection and depiction of built heritage information.

The built heritage information has been gathered from a variety of individual, local, regional and provincial sources. These include early maps, notably the county historical atlases and first editions of the NTS. Information has been sifted from a huge array of written historical material, from collections in county and regional libraries, including each of the nine county archives and the University of Western Ontario Regional Collection. The materials used include large numbers of local histories and listings of specific types of buildings. In addition, field surveys have identified specific buildings which still exist and their condition, as well as many sites of former structures. All the historical information has been recorded using the mix of specific named and unnamed locations, recorded according to the UTM grid, and placing buildings within various municipal and watershed units. The record contains over 13,000 items, but is not yet complete.

Some Interim Results of the Reconstruction Research

What we present here, through four figures and one table, are examples of several ways in which the previously established built heritage landscapes may be reconstructed. All the maps utilize historical data from before 1914, while Table 1 contrasts the historic record with the present day situation. Figure 1 presents a composite depiction for the Upper Thames Conservation Authority watershed. In contrast, Figures 2 and 3 show the locations of specific types of buildings in the same Upper Thames watershed, while Figure 4 presents a more detailed picture for a single, former rural municipality, namely, West Nissouri Township in Middlesex County. Figure 1 is a composite overview for the Upper Thames watershed, which contains all or part of some 60 of the original rural municipalities in the region. Its symbols reflect the array of types of non-residential built elements in the data base. It gives a sense of the overall accumulation of vernacular elements within the pre-1914 built rural landscape. Figures 2 and 3 depict specific built heritage features in the Upper Thames watershed.

Figure 1. *Composite overview of the Upper Thames watershed.*

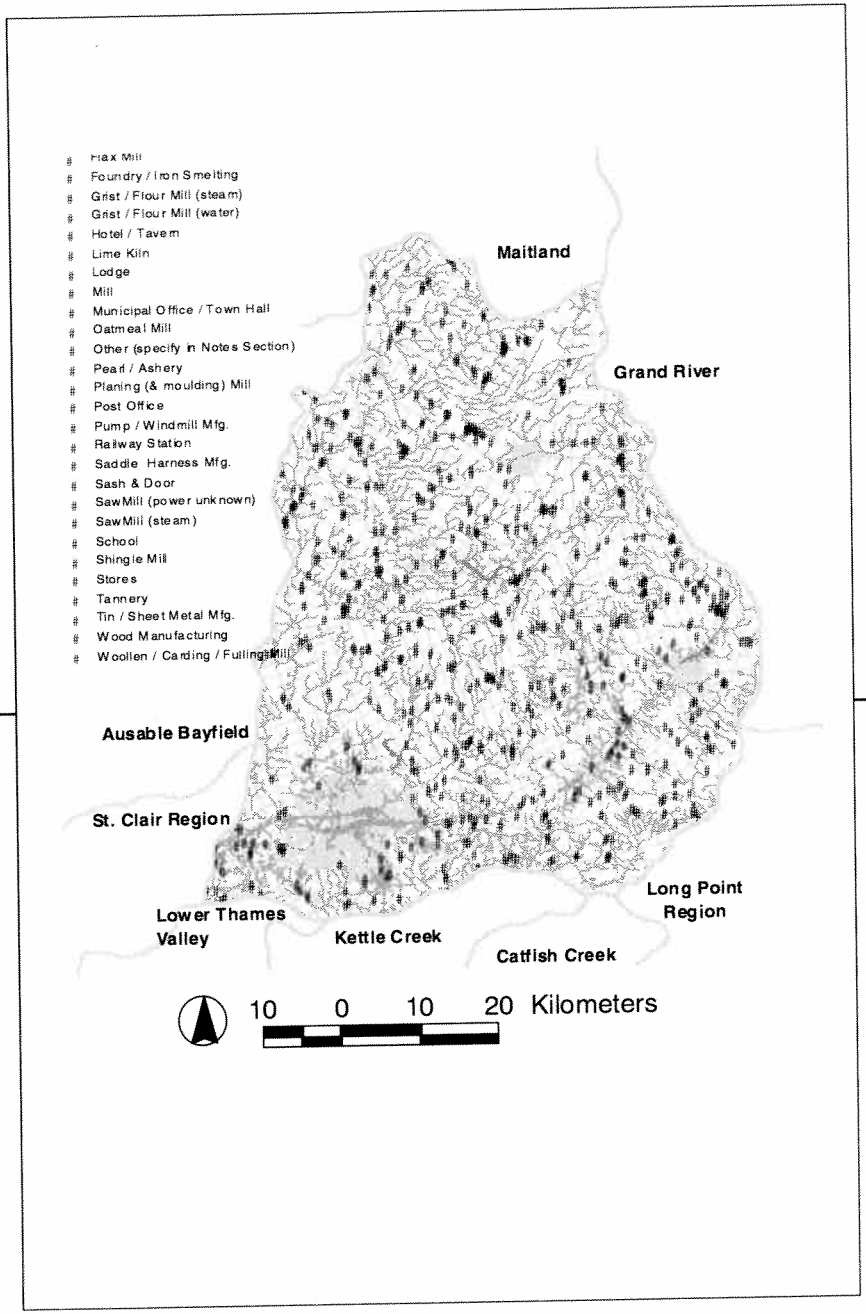
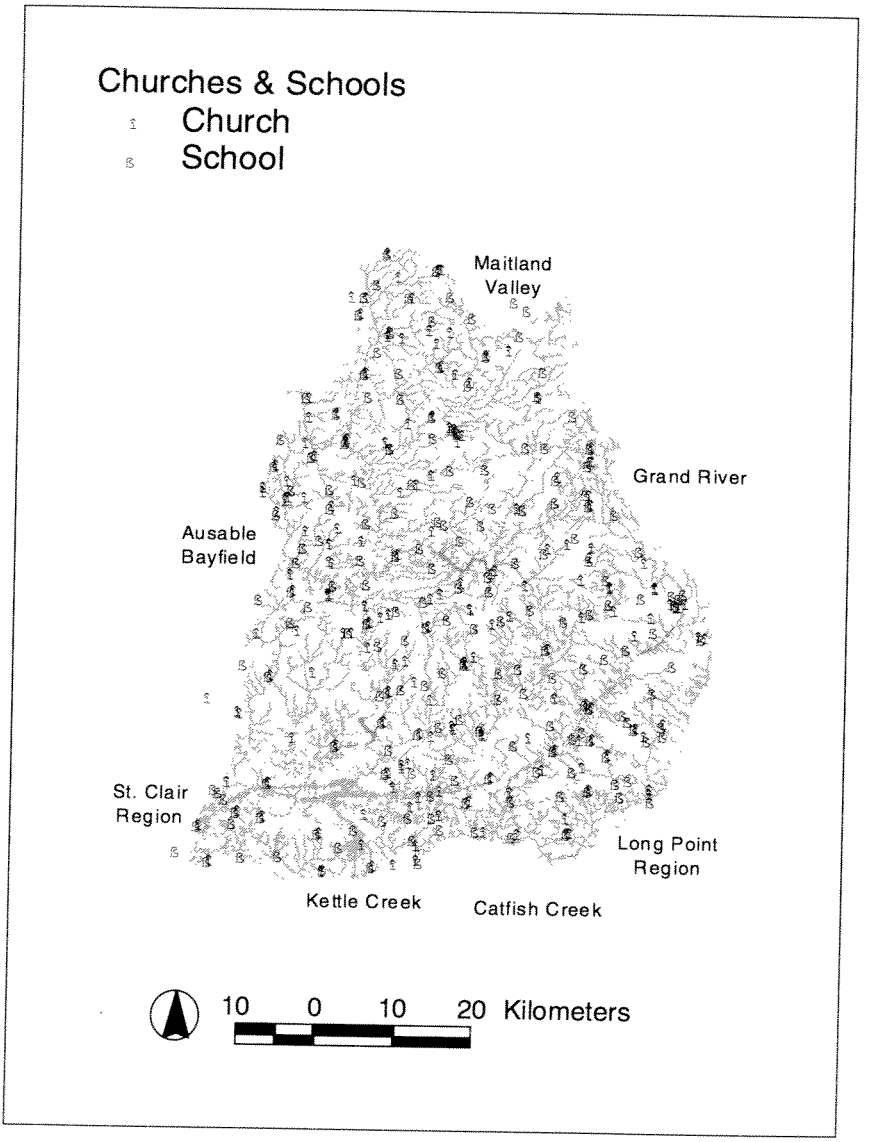


Figure 2 shows the differential patterns of rural schools and churches. The rural schools provide a more regular pattern, as befits a system serving the needs of universal public primary education for farm and non-farm population, within a more or less regular set of school sections (SS#s) in each individual township. The church locations present a more

'random' pattern, reflecting the varied range of religious denominations and congrega tions within the population and across the landscape.

Figure 2. *Rural schools and churches of the Upper Thames watershed.*



Both these sets of important rural institutional structures have suffered major losses. Table 1 contrasts the past and present numbers. Rural school consolidation in the 1960s led to virtually all the former rural schools being declared redundant and their replacement by many fewer township 'Central Schools'. Of the redundant school buildings between 30% and 40% remain in each county, the majority converted to private residences. A slightly larger proportion of rural churches remain, although nearly half have been lost. The

majority of the churches that remain are in the small towns, villages and hamlets, whereas a much larger proportion of open-country structures have closed. Figure 3 shows the former distribution of important local industrial buildings geared to the agrarian economy. Mills, including sawmills, grist, woolen and flax, processing local wood, grain, and fibre resources, utilized sites on virtually every local stream; the majority pre-dated Confederation. Less than 5% remain; many mills were closed before 1914; saw mills closed as farmland was cleared of timber; others lost their water power and did not convert to steam; textile mills consolidated in urban locations. In contrast, cheese factories began to appear in the 1860s, associated with the new manufacturing technology and the shift from wheat to mixed livestock as the major farming type. Virtually all were established before 1914, but many were still operating after World War 2. Thereafter, most were closed, as the major dairy companies bought their milk quotas and consolidated production in fewer centralized plants; less than 10% remain (Table 1).

As Table 1 indicates, the losses of the key rural industrial buildings has been much greater than to the institutional pair. In the Upper Thames watershed, today, only half-a-dozen mill structures survive and only one flour mill (at Arva) is still operating. Likewise, only a handful of cheese factories remain, from the large set that was once manufacturing a major Canadian agricultural export (i.e., cheddar cheese).

Table 1. *Past and present incidence of selected built rural heritage features in the townships lying wholly or in part within the Thames River watershed in southwestern Ontario.*

FEATURE	PEAK PRESENCE	CURRENT PRESENCE/ABSENCE		
	No. (%)	**In Use No. (%)**	**Alternative Use No. (%)**	**Lost No. (%)**
Rural Church*	549 (100)	246 (45)	50 (9)	253 (46)
Rural School*	463 (100)	8 (2)	160 (35)	295 (63)
Saw or Grist Mill*	203 (100)	1 (.5)	7 (3)	195 (96)
Cheese Factory	176 (100)	6 (3)	10 (6)	160 (91)
Total of 4	**1391 (100)**	**261 (19)**	**227 (16)**	**903 (65)**

** - established before 1914; NB. Preliminary count. Based on Built Heritage Inventory and Field Surveys.*

Figure 4 presents a more detailed reconstruction of the institutional and commercial heritage features of an individual township, namely, West Nissouri in Middlesex County. The pre-1914 count for non-residential built elements in the township is over 100, located within one village (Thorndale), in 16 other small nucleations, and dispersed across the township.

Figure 3. The former distribution of important local industrial buildings geared to th agrarian economy in the Upper Thames watershed.

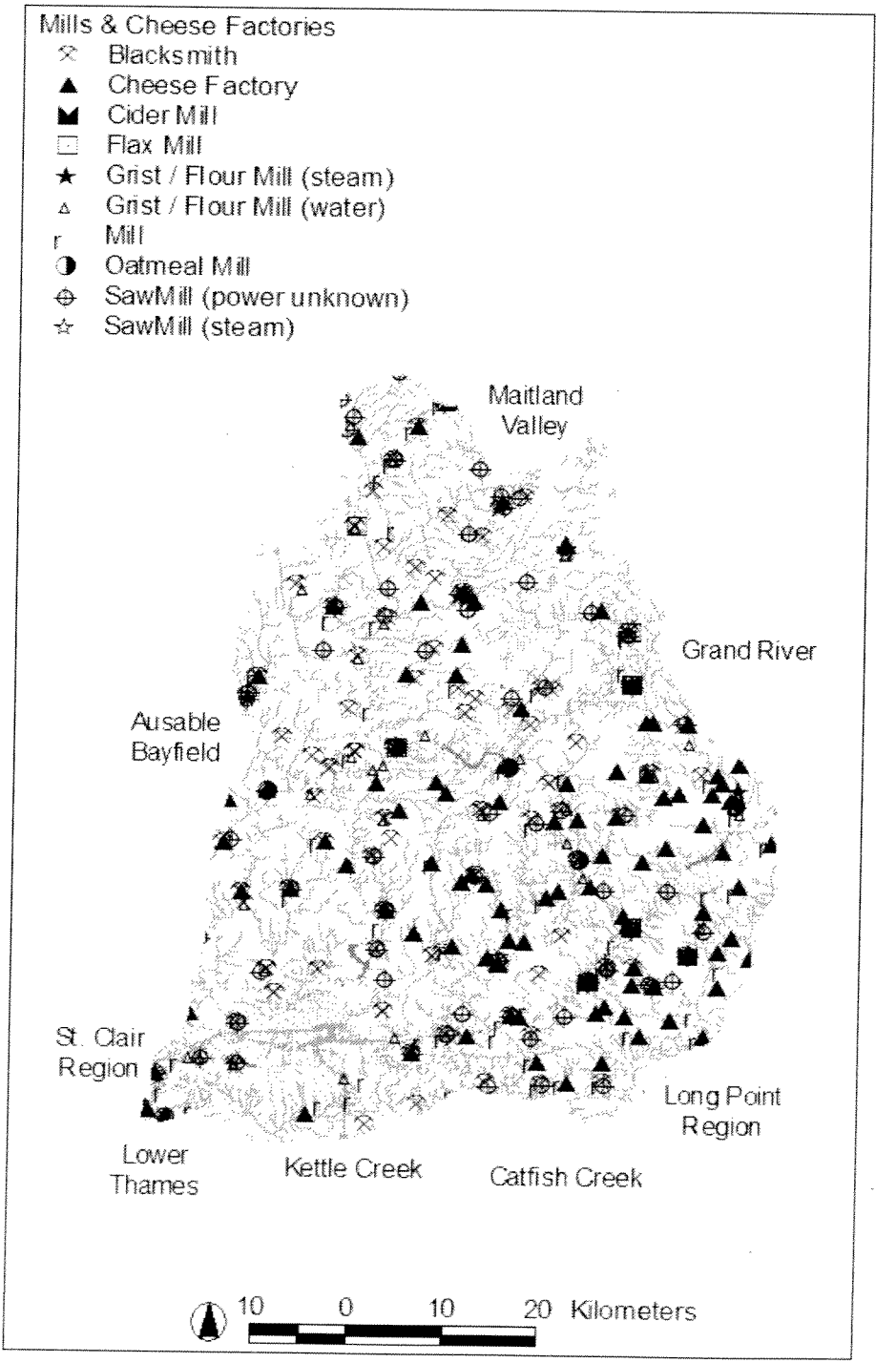
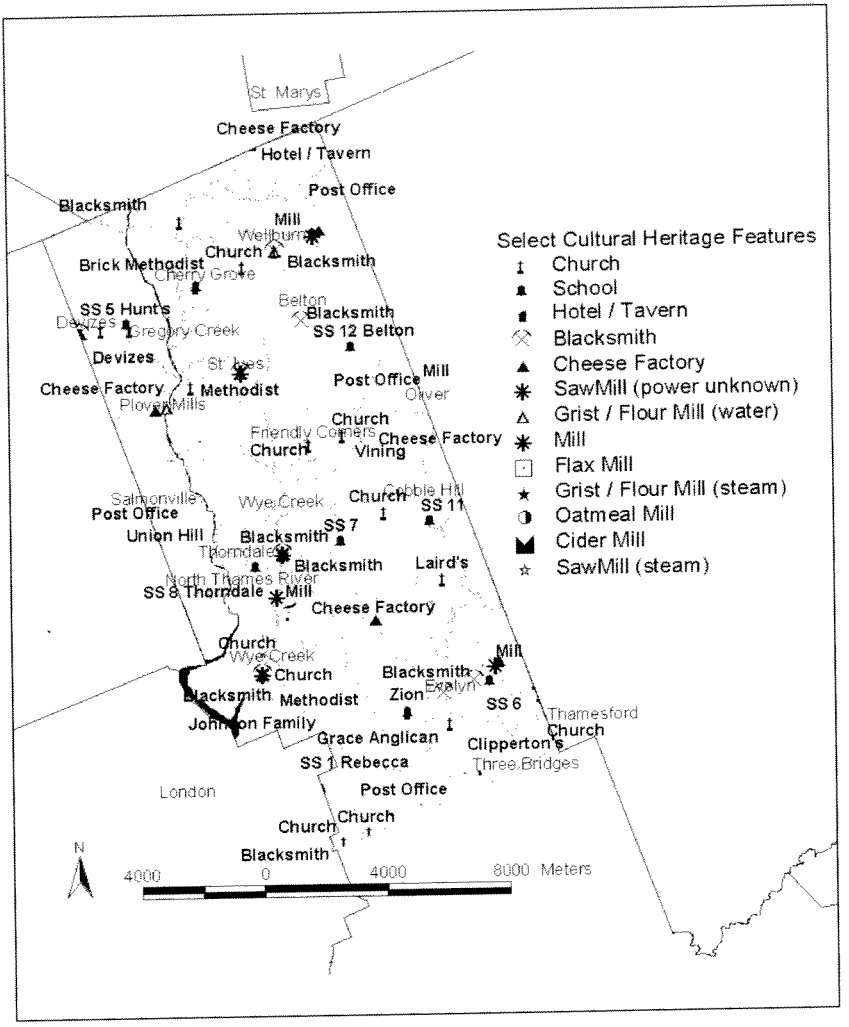


Figure 4. *The institutional and commercial heritage features of Middlesex County.*



Conclusion

Together, the historical records indicate a rich vernacular past. Research continues, with the particular objective of adding the pre-1914 farmstead and residential buildings to the record. In addition, field work will be extended to record the numbers and condition of other remaining vernacular elements. However, of the four built types in Table 1, overall loss is placed at two-thirds, and a similar situation is to be expected for the enlarged array of buildings. This represents a significant loss to the rural built heritage landscape, which underlines the need for formal recognition of the vernacular and greater protection for the remaining rural built heritage elements.

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