Building Community and Conserving Cultural Landscapes through Inventory

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Abstract

A timely landscape conservation and community-building exercise is taking place in the Ontario village of Blair in parallel with intensifying development pressures. Relationships within this small urban fringe settlement have been renewed and fortified as residents focus on their common landscape heritage – sharing stories about their river flooding, championship baseball games, and milling activities. The identification of this landscape and its stories serves as a model for others interested in engaging the public more effectively in the landscape planning process and protecting landscape resources that are not often highly valued in development decision-making.

Over a four-year period, a computerized inventory of Blair's landscape heritage has been prepared. Using multi-media software, produced through both public and private efforts, the user can experience the landscape's history through a narrative, vector-mapping, and volumes of historic and contemporary images. In addition, information can also be reviewed from a server located at the Grand River Conservation Authority, that provides 'intranet' access among twelve communities within the Watershed.

More important, however, than the technologically-enhanced organizations and delivery of this data is the manner in which it was collected by the community members themselves. Seeing the immense value of environmentally-based learning, local high schools incorporated this community-based data collection into classroom activities. Paired with long-term residents, students documented much of Blair's landscape memories. Other students surveyed and mapped the town's pioneer cemetery; and another group compiled photographs into a simulated "walking tour" of Blair.

Educational institutions are ideal centres for community data collection initiatives. Working closely with community coordinators, students provide the energy and enthusiasm needed for such a large task. And these institutions provide the necessary continuity for an ever-growing inventory; thus presenting monitoring opportunities for landscape change.

Blair shows us that landscape heritage relates at some level to all inhabitants of a community. Identification of heritage landscapes ensures their effective inclusion in the planning process. It can also help reacquaint neighbours; educate young citizens about their heritage; and validate the memories of older citizens – in short, building community while aiding in the conservation of its most common, yet treasured resource...landscape.

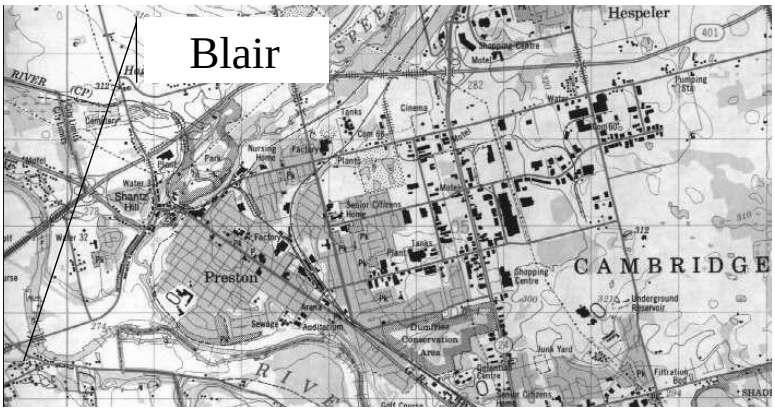

Figure 1: Map of the Village of Blair situated west of the City of Cambridge along the Grand River.

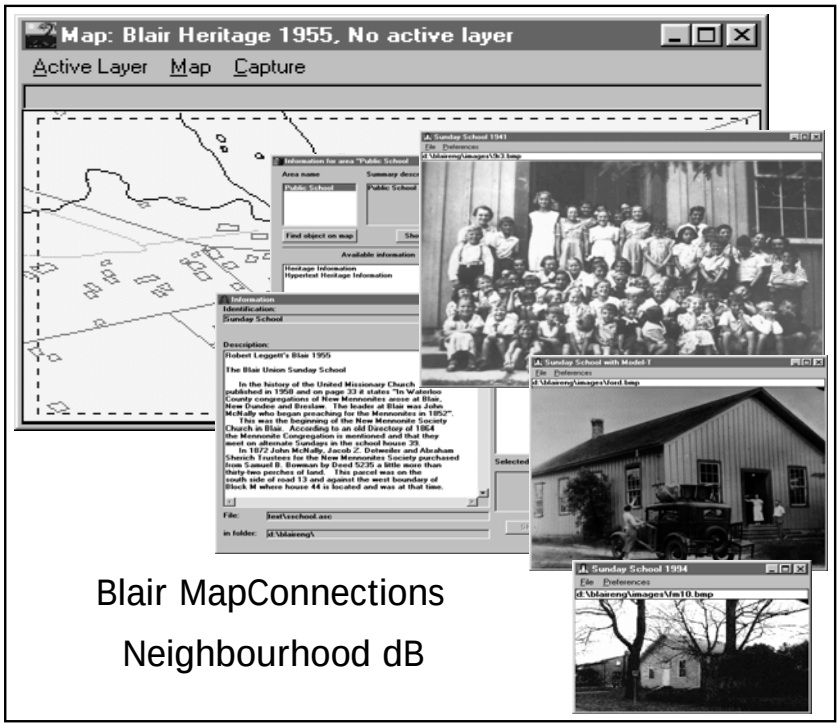

Figure 2: Compilation of the different screen entries of the software product that has been developed to record the information gathered by high school students about the landscape history of Blair. The multi-media database is accessed by 'clicking' on the map. The map serves as a menu to pull up textual and visual information of different elements in the landscape. The history of the Village's church is shown in this example.

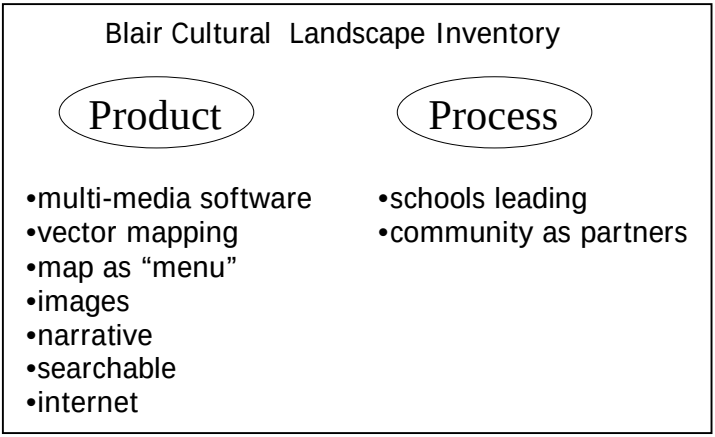

Figure 3: The Landscape Inventory for Blair is a prototype for other communities interested in collecting heritage data. This plate shows that the Inventory is both a multi-media software product and a process which is led by local high schools in partnership with the local community.

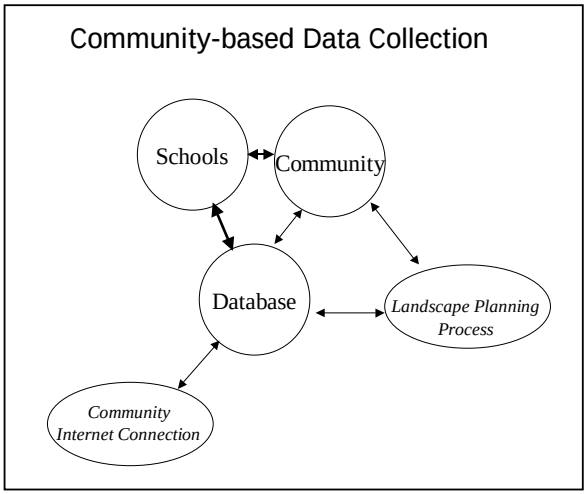

Figure 4: This plate further elaborates on the relationship of the schools with the community in the development of this heritage database. The diagram indicates this database can be accessed by the community in future landscape planning exercises; and the database can also be accessed external to the community via the internet.

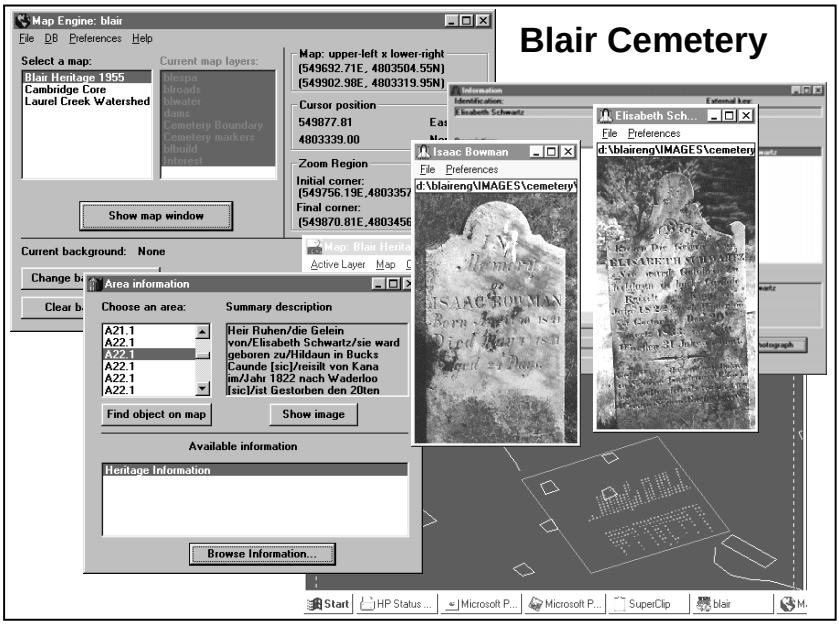

Figure 5: This plate is a further example of the multi-media nature of the software.

Benefits of Community-Based Data Collection

1. **Fills Gap** in times of shrinking government.
2. **Involves Young People in Landscape Heritage**
   - -partnership of schools with larger community;
   - -articulates heritage for larger community;
   - -pedagogical value in research, analysis, writing and technology;
   - -real world experience... learning to appreciate own environment and building environmental ethic.
3. **Validates Memories** of older citizens, preserving precious information.
4. **0MB Representation** -- present *'soft'* landscape knowledge in a form that would be more acceptable in a quasi-judicial forum.
5. **Monitoring Environment** by going back annually to same landscape.
6. **Better Planning** -- before crisis; response to developers' demand for 'upfront' process; avoids consultants 'dropping in'.

Figure 6: The final plate lists the benefits that accrue to a community that becomes engaged in such a community-based data collection exercise.