

The Oblates lands: Opportunity for Truth and Reconciliation in Old Ottawa East

The Oblates ran over one-third of all federal Indian Residential Schools. Their historic headquarters, built in 1885, will soon be home to a new community centre and school.

By GREG MACDOUGALL

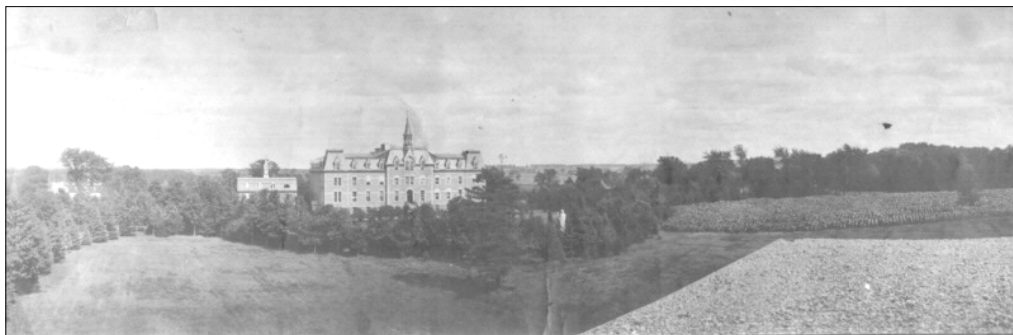
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There is a significant, and unique opportunity in Old Ottawa East for 'Truth and Reconciliation' with regards to the horrific history of residential schools in Canada.

The opportunity is at the historic Oblates site, also known as the new "Greystone Village" development. Specifically, there is the original Deschâtelets Building that is soon to be the refurbished home of a new community centre and the "Au Coeur d'Ottawa" French-language Catholic elementary school, and there are the outdoors spaces: two adjoining public parks plus the 30-metre-wide 'river corridor' alongside the Rideau River¹.

The site was originally acquired by the Catholic Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate in the 1860s to serve as their headquarters. As school principals and through other administrative duties, the Oblates ran 48 Indian Residential Schools – more than a third of all the federal residential schools in Canada – including Kamloops, Brandon, Marieval, St. Eugene's, and Kuper Island, where an estimated 215, 104, 751, 182, and 160 unmarked graves, respectively, were discovered earlier this year. (*Note: The latter two were administered by the Oblates only in the later period of the schools' operations.)

Apart from residential schools, the Oblates were engaged in a larger missionary campaign with many Indigenous nations across the country, including the Algonquin locally; they began these activities in the 1840s, and there were both supportive and colonizing aspects to them. The Oblates also founded and ran the University of Ottawa, and later, Saint Paul University.



One of the first photos of the site (early 1900s). Credit: history.ottawaeast.ca

Call To Action # 79 from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) is about residential school commemoration under a reconciliation framework. It points to the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada, including its National Program of Historical Commemoration (NPHC).

Implicit in the recommendation is to have Indigenous peoples guide whatever form of commemoration is ultimately implemented.

A main form of commemoration under the current NPHC is a plaque. An existing NPHC plaque commemorating the Oblates, at their older site of St. Joseph Church on Wilbrod Street, is notably listed as "Under Review" on the NPHC website.

There is presently a non-NPHC plaque at the Old Ottawa East site, also in need of review, that was installed a decade or so ago by Sustainable Living Ottawa East (SLOE) and the City of Ottawa as part of the Rideau River Nature Trail signage. The plaque has an overview of the Oblates history there, and mentions their missionary activities with Indigenous communities, but doesn't mention the residential schools nor any associated harms.

Further information, references & multimedia not included in this article, are posted online at: EquitableEducation.ca

The City of Ottawa's phase of public consultation ended May 2022. Updates are on the engage.ottawa.ca website under "Old Ottawa East Community Centre and Forecourt Park." But input is still welcome via the city staff contacts on that page, or via the local city councillor's office: capitalward@ottawa.ca / 613-580-2487

So what could commemoration look like at the site? Hopefully, it can be more than plaques and can create space(s) that foster ongoing 'reconciliation' activity, given the public use planned for the site, and the magnitude and lasting impacts of the crimes being commemorated.

In 2013 when I interviewed TRC chair Murray Sinclair, he made clear that even before considering the individual atrocities and deaths, "The forcible annihilation, through removal of children, of one race... is an act of genocide. ... [T]he International Convention on Genocide includes a definition [article 2(e)] that exactly describes what went on in residential schools and why residential schools were created."

To some extent, it will be up to the French-language Catholic school board (CECCE) and the City of Ottawa to decide what commemoration will be implemented at the Deschâtelets Building itself, the City as to what is included at the adjacent public park(s), and the developers (Regional Group, and EQ Homes) for what might go along the riverside corridor.

But if reconciliation is worth the word, those entities need to work with Oblates-impacted Indigenous peoples to implement what the residential school survivors and their families, and the communities, deem appropriate and worthwhile. The Algonquin Anishinabeg Nation – many of whose residential school attendees were taken to Oblates-run schools (either at Amos QC or Kenora ON); many of whose communities now live on reserves that the Oblates helped create; and on whose unceded territory the site is located – should be included at the centre of decision-making.

1: The original Algonquin name for the Rideau River [is] "Pasapedjiwanong," which means, "the river that passes between the rocks."

— Stephen McGregor, writer of *Since Time Immemorial: Our Story. The Story of the Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg* (quote: bytown.net)