



## Creating a Heritage Hub



December 9, 2019

### **Dear Mayor Larry Snively and Essex Town Councillors:**

We sincerely thank you for your past support of the John R. Park Homestead. As you know, a visit to the John R. Park Homestead Conservation Area takes visitors back in time to the 1850s. The original house and farm buildings of John and Amelia Park have been restored to bring the nineteenth century to life. Located in the Town of Essex, the Homestead has been recognized by Tourism Windsor-Essex-Pelee Island as the Best Museum/Heritage Space in Windsor-Essex for the past two years. It



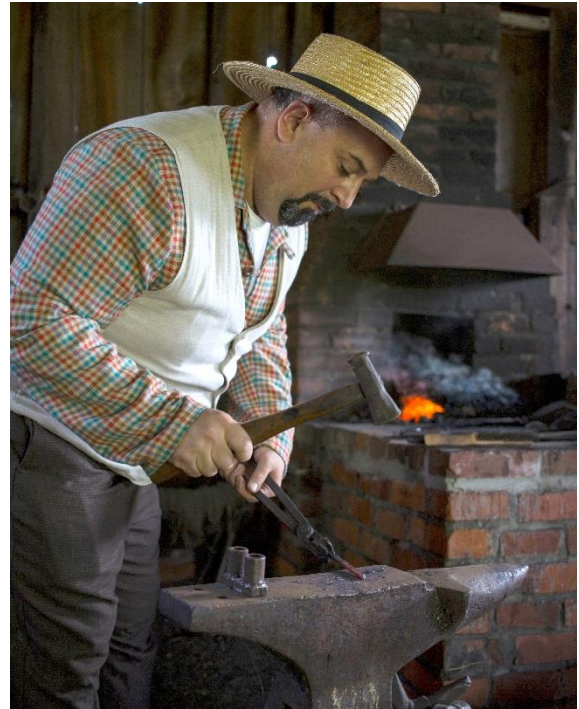
has also received the Russell K. Cooper Award from the Ontario Historical Society for "a living history museum showing excellence in programming, ingenious problem solving or site development". The Homestead is Ontario's only living historical farm museum west of London, giving it significant regional importance, and attracting visitors from far and wide.

### **An important link to our region's history**

When John R. Park and his wife, Amelia (Gamble) Park, completed construction of the Greek Revival Home in 1842, little did they know the impact they would have on our region and community. The three Park brothers – Thomas, John and Theodore - established a shipping and trading business, Park & Co. The Park Brothers were enterprising gentlemen during Essex County's pioneering era, and their ties to the manufacturing and agricultural history of this region are important. They owned and operated a fleet of schooners and steamships exporting natural resources, raw materials and agricultural goods, and importing manufactured goods

from distant, industrial ports as far away as Liverpool. They also operated a sawmill in the centre of the community, taking advantage of the county's expansive Carolinian forests, and the voracious need for lumber in the developing region for the manufacture of homes, barns, outbuildings, furniture, and more.

John Richardson Park operated a blacksmith shop producing hardware on his homestead in the heart of the Iler Settlement on the shore of Lake Erie. This shop produced and maintained iron pieces critical for construction and survival in the 19<sup>th</sup> century – everything from nails, hinges, and handles to wagon wheels, agricultural implements, and kitchenware. This historic shop still functions today, with Homestead smiths replicating this fascinating pioneer-era trade.



### **John R. Park Homestead Conservation Area**

The site's most prominent feature is the historic Park Family home. It is one of only six surviving neo-classical architecture style homes, known as Early American Greek Revivalism, found in Ontario. In addition to the incredible house, the farm consists of eight original farm and outbuildings clustered closely together near the family home. The 19 acre conservation area is situated on Fox Creek, a Provincially Significant Wetland, providing a unique mix of human and natural history components.



The Friends of the Homestead provide critically important volunteer services at the site. In total, almost 90 volunteers contribute approximately 4400 hours annually to aid in the operation of the historic site. These volunteers support the site through a diversity of time and talents, including: helping to maintain the site including the heritage gardens and orchard; assisting with costume creation and maintenance; supporting special events and education programs; caring for and assisting with the museum collections; demonstrating 19<sup>th</sup> century skills; and more.



The Homestead annually welcomes more than 14,000 students and visitors. It is an important tourism destination and educational resource for the region. During maple season, nearly 4,000 students and visitors attend the site. As well, a pilot education program that explores the pre-contact history of the region's Indigenous Peoples was developed in 2019.

### **Why Preserve Heritage?**

Sites like the John R. Park Homestead bring people of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities together. Museums and Conservation Areas are focal points for community and culture, highlighting our Canadian story and providing engaging and authentic educational experiences for all visitors. There are few authentic places where people can experience local history and traditions, while being immersed in the natural environment where these stories first took place, and those early people first lived.



Every historic site has a story to tell. These stories inspire our culture and our convictions. Heritage sites are our connections to the past, and can inspire us into the future. Places like the Homestead are keepers of our collective memory and provide important perspective that helps to shape our present community and to inspire our path forward.

### **The Current Need**

The site is severely limited in its ability to meet our present school programming needs. It features only one indoor climate controlled space. This space seats a maximum of 30 students/visitors (auditorium style) and 20 people (at tables). The facility is aging and washroom facilities are far too limited to meet the needs for important education programs and special tourism events like the Maple Syrup Festival (visitation 3,000 in 2 days) and Harvest and Horses (visitation 1400 people in 4 hours). The current facility has only two female washroom stalls, and one male washroom stall. As the facilities were created approximately 40 years ago, they are not easily wheelchair accessible and do not meet current codes for full accessibility. The site also does not have a 'family' washroom to accommodate



various uses including, but not limited to, adults who require assistance and an adult change table, families and individuals with additional privacy, or other needs.

Schools booking field trips will often bring 60 – 90 students, as they need to be cost effective and fill their buses, creating an additional challenge, as the current 'classroom' area can only seat 30 students auditorium style (20 at tables). Although the bulk of the conservation area field trip experience is spent outside, it is important that we offer modern, climate controlled indoor spaces during inclement weather. These are required for delivery of introduction/safety messages to groups; warming/cooling spaces for comfort and safety during full day field trips. The space is also important for the delivery of

'classroom' elements of the programs where special equipment is used (microscopes, light tables, scientific specimen, etc.) and sensitive historical artifacts can be examined; safe, comfortable, controlled, and quiet spaces for teachers to take children who may be experiencing sensory overload, mental/emotional stress, physical illness; and for shelter during inclement weather or other emergencies.



## Investing in our Heritage

The Essex Region Conservation Foundation is currently raising funds to build a modern, environmentally friendly Heritage Centre with educational and exhibit space, accessible and adequate washroom facilities, and a significantly enhanced visitor and student experience. It is envisioned that this space will improve our ability to



interpret life in the 1850s, while also creating a cultural/tourism gateway hub within the region,



highlight the County Road 50 experience, and create important resting/washroom facilities to complement the region's cycling infrastructure.

The total fundraising goal for these critically important projects is \$1.2 million. Thanks to a significant grant, \$600,000 has already been pledged, but matching funds must be raised to fully capitalize on this one-in-a-generation opportunity.

The Essex Region Conservation Authority knows and understands that the Town of Essex places value in our local heritage as shown by the Heritage Grant Program:

*The Town of Essex Heritage Grant Program builds on the community feedback received through the Harrow Community Strategic Plan, the Downtown Essex Centre Streetscape and Silo District Plan and the Design Charrette and Public Open House to guide the preparation of the Colchester Secondary Plan. Through these public consultations, a desire to improve heritage preservation and develop culture and tourism opportunities was identified.*

### **Our Request – A County Road 50 Tourism Information Hub for \$100,000**

Construction of the new Heritage Centre will enhance the Homestead's tourism capabilities and experiences for the benefit of all neighbouring businesses. Our current facility is limited due to the constraints of the historic buildings and with appropriate additional funding, this point of access could be expanded and enhanced



as a welcoming space. In addition to a seamless visitor/student experience, this space would serve as a tourism/cultural hub, providing an enhanced tourism experience for guests that would highlight many incredible places of interest along County Rd. 50 and within the County of Essex, in line with many Town of Essex priorities.

In partnership with Tourism Windsor Essex Pelee Island, ERCA is proposing to utilize the new Heritage Hub as a tourism welcome area along County Road 50, to allow better promotion of the many local attractions, culinary experiences, wineries, cycling routes and regional events.

As a public space with new washrooms, access to the lake and staff trained in assisting visitors, we believe that this new investment fits perfectly into the Town of Essex's vision for County Road 50 and would support the many businesses along this road. More specifically, this request for \$100,000 in funding supports the following initiatives:

- Support cycling and the regional CWATS plan through the development of end of trip facilities and amenities such as public washrooms and a water refill station
- Enhances Heritage education and outreach
- Improves Tourism opportunities for the Municipality
- Champions the County Road 50 *Community Improvement Plan*
- Supports Agri-tourism support through events such as *Harvest and Horses*
- Heightens *Explore The Shore* promotion/partnership
- Aligns with Town of Essex Strategic Plan
- Improves accessibility within the municipality
- Creates opportunity for a new cultural attraction space to host traveling exhibits from major institutions, such as the Royal Ontario Museum

### **Current Project Status**

Field work for a stage 2 archeological report has been completed and ERCA is able to build in the location shown on the attached map. An architectural firm, Architecttttura, has been contracted to begin the design of the building and we anticipate breaking ground in spring 2020 once permits are in place. Fundraising to enhance the basic building and create a larger, multifunctional space that can better service the community is underway through the Essex Region Conservation Foundation and there is broad support for this enhanced education and tourism destination to serve the region.