

Chapter 11

Heritage Overlooked and Under Threat: Fort Conger and the Heroic Age of Polar Exploration

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Introduction

Fort Conger is located in *Quttinirpaaq* National Park, on northeastern Ellesmere Island in the Canadian Arctic (Fig. 11.1). The site is of national and international significance because of the important role it played in several High Arctic expeditions between 1875 and 1935, particularly during the height of the race to the North Pole around 1900–1910 (Dick 2001). Fort Conger's historic connections, heritage resources, and enduring sense of place are the reasons for its many designations and honors as a heritage site. In particular, the three standing structures built by American Polar Explorer Robert Peary in 1900 have achieved the highest level of designation made by Canada's Federal Heritage Buildings Review Office as Classified Federal Heritage Buildings, the same accorded Canada's Parliament Buildings in Ottawa. Fort Conger is also one of two places in the Arctic at which the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada (HSMBC) commemorates the First International

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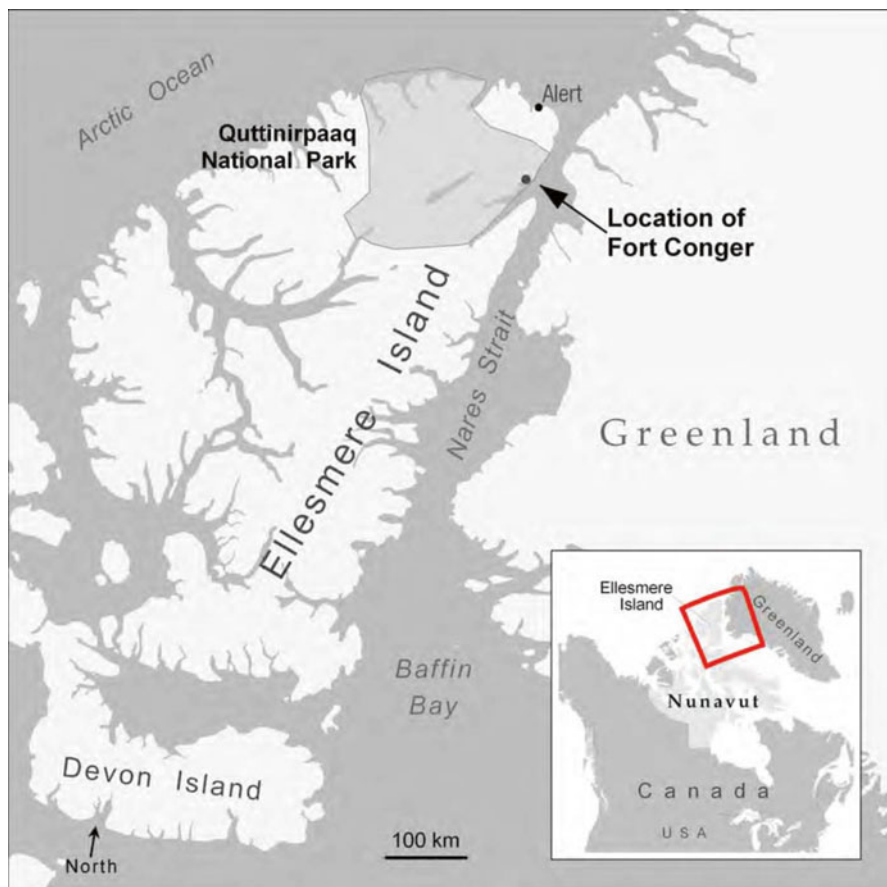


Fig. 11.1 Map showing location of Fort Conger

Polar Year (IPY) of 1882–1883 as a National Historic Event. This relates specifically to the United States Lady Franklin Bay (Greely) Expedition, which established Fort Conger in 1881 (Bertulli et al. 2013). Fort Conger is likewise under consideration as a site of international significance by the International Polar Heritage Committee of the International Council of Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) for inclusion on a list of 20 significant cultural heritage sites in the north and south Polar Regions.

The aforementioned designations focus almost exclusively on the achievements of what has been called *The Heroic Age of Polar Exploration*, and Western science as practiced during the First IPY. As a consequence of this, other factors that are equally crucial to defining Fort Conger's significance as a heritage site have largely gone unacknowledged. For example, the roles played by Indigenous Greenlandic *Inughuit* (Polar Eskimo) in assisting these expeditions, as well as the sacrifices and hardships endured by all participants, have been critically overlooked (Bertulli et al. 2013; Dick 1995; 2001). Furthermore, the destructive effects of climate change and human activity that presently threaten Fort Conger are only now being recognized (Environmental Sciences Group 2009; Broodhagen et al. 1979).

In this paper, we adopt Rodney Harrison's (2013) concept of *Ontology of Connectivity* to explore the wider significance of Fort Conger as a heritage site, by considering the connections and associations existing among *all* of these factors. We argue that such an approach is warranted, given that any future remediation and preservation efforts will require strong public support, as such work is likely to be extremely expensive due to the site's remote location and inaccessibility.

Ideas of Heritage

In his recent book "Heritage: Critical Approaches," Rodney Harrison makes a compelling argument that heritage preservation in the postmodern age needs to be reconsidered. The concept of "what is old" and "what is new" has largely been derived from modernity's relationship to time, ordering, and uncertainty (Harrison 2013:228). Modernism's response to uncertainty, caused by the accelerated pace of linear time, has been to develop a series of principles to order and classify heritage. Thus, what we choose to salvage or protect is often based on objective criteria such as age, accessibility, and national interest. Modernist approaches also treat intangible heritage, such as oral histories, knowledge and skills, as the counterpart of that which can be touched, such as buildings and objects (Harrison 2013:206).

In contrast, postmodern approaches view heritage as a form of production involving the assembly and reassembly of connections among human beings, material objects, and physical landscapes (Harrison 2013:227). This idea is borne out by the fact that physical objects and places often acquire meaning through their connection to intangible heritage such as oral histories. Furthermore, because heritage sites exist in the present, they gain meaning through connections to broader issues like national sovereignty, indigenous rights, and environmental sustainability (Hodgetts 2013). Heritage is seen as an emergent property of these kinds of *dialogical* relationships, and it is within this *ontology of connectivity* that heritage sites acquire their significance, and from which basis decisions affecting heritage sites should be made (Harrison 2013:227). Thus, heritage is no longer seen as simply the material evidence of past events; rather it is something to be experienced in the present. This idea is embodied in institutions like the Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC, where the exhibition of the tiny shoes of a little girl who died at Auschwitz is less about history, and more about experiencing the tragic death of her dreams, those of her families, and the loss of generations not yet imagined (Cameron 2007:41). The same can be said of Fort Conger. Even though the deaths of 19 of its members occurred several hundreds of kilometers away on Pim Island following the abandonment of Fort Conger, the material remains strewn across the site are a constant reminder of the dramatic events of survival and loss of life associated with the Lady Franklin Bay Expedition, including the deaths of 19 of its members (Barr 2008:11). Unlike the Holocaust Museum, however, Fort Conger is difficult for people to experience in such a visceral way, due to its remote location. In the absence of these kinds of first hand experiences, it is therefore not surprising that polar heritage sites have been defined primarily in modernist terms.

Defining Heritage Significance Through National Interests

The effects of global climate change have recently turned the attention of the world towards the Canadian Arctic (Soloman 2007). A warmer Arctic means decreases in sea ice severity, opening up waterways and straits in the Queen Elizabeth Islands to the possibilities of merchant ships and petroleum exploration in the decades to come (Ho 2010). Not surprisingly, the Canadian Federal Government sees these activities as a threat to national sovereignty, due to different interpretations of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) (Gaillard 2001). In a recent article, Hodgetts (2013) argues that the Canadian Government has attempted to substantiate its claims of arctic sovereignty by using HMS *Investigator*, a British Naval ship lost in 1845 AD while searching for the Franklin Expedition, and recently discovered by Parks Canada's Underwater Archaeology Service (UAS). Comments made in the media by Former Environment Minister Jim Prentice were that the ship "represents the convergence of the history of Arctic adventure with the history of Inuit occupation. This is a continuous record of our sovereignty" (Prentice cited in Hodgetts 2013:86). In a similar move, The HSMBS has declared the two Lost Franklin Expedition ships HMS Erebus and HMS Terror as National Historic Sites, even though they have yet to be found (Government of Canada 2010). Hence, the governments of circumpolar nations are quick to support the stewardship of polar heritage sites when national interests are at stake.

The awards and designations afforded Fort Conger to promote Canada's arctic sovereignty indirectly through the site's association with the science of the first IPY. This might seem counterintuitive at first, as many circumpolar nations temporarily set aside their concerns for acquiring new territory in polar regions to engage in collaborative scientific research to the benefit of all humankind (Barr 2008). However, Canada's participation in the most recent IPY (2007–2009) represents an attempt to demonstrate arctic sovereignty through significant investment in polar infrastructure and science. "Scientific inquiry and development are absolutely essential to Canada's defense of its North, as they enhance our knowledge of, and presence in, the region," said Prime Minister Stephen Harper in 2007. "Like I've said so many times before, use it or lose it is the first principle of sovereignty." (Government of Canada 2007). The fact that Fort Conger has attracted various polar expeditions for well over a century, and that many after 1948 were comprised primarily of Canadian researchers and explorers, makes it the embodiment of Harper's "first principle of sovereignty" and a strong symbol of national interest.

Defining Heritage Significance Through Indigenous Contributions

While associating Fort Conger with events like IPY is important, there has been a tendency to overlook other criteria relevant to the site's significance. By commemorating and memorializing the scientific achievements and polar ambitions of

Euro-North Americans, for example, the contributions made by Greenlandic Polar Eskimo or *Inughuit* to the various expeditions of Fort Conger have been largely ignored. One poignant case concerns the exclusion of *Inughuit* from attempts to claim a “farthest north” by the Lady Franklin Bay Expedition (Dick 2001:193). The architects of the First IPY wanted to avoid the international steeplechases of past polar expeditions, in which explorers attempted to plant their nations flags at higher and higher latitudes as a means of conferring honor on themselves and their countries. Regardless, Adolphus Greely, as leader of the expedition, considered the attainment of a new “farthest north” off the coast of Greenland as his expedition’s greatest accomplishment (Dick 2001:212). Lieutenant James Booth Lockwood and Sergeant David Brainard, as well as their West Greenland guide Frederick Christiansen participated in this sledging expedition (Bertulli et al. 2013). It was Christiansen’s hunting skills and knowledge of sea ice, weather, and driving dog teams that allowed the party to succeed. However, Christiansen’s contributions largely have gone unrecognized, as is evident from his omission from a museum diorama constructed some years after the expedition to commemorate this achievement (Dick 2013, personal communication).

Inuit knowledge also made enormous contributions to polar exploration following the tragic conclusion of the Greely expedition. It was put to practical use by Robert Peary, who began questioning the logic of importing technologies and knowledge wholesale from the south for use in the Arctic (Dick 2001). Peary adopted strategies of traveling, hunting, clothing, and shelter based on *Inughuit* traditional knowledge (Dick 2001:349). He employed *Inughuit* from northern Greenland as his primary work force because of their extensive experience living in the High Arctic. At Fort Conger, Peary relied heavily on indigenous technology, as can be seen in his use of Inuit architectural practices for the construction of his winter headquarters (Fig. 11.2) (Dick 1991:349). Peary’s hut complex consisted of three small structures connected together using long snow tunnels with a single entrance (Dick 2001:358–359). These tunnels served as a buffer from outside cold, and regulated the intake of fresh air (Dick 1991). With the addition of insulating layers of earth and snow, the complex was far better suited to North-Eastern Ellesmere Island than Greely’s original prefabricated expedition headquarters (Dick 2001:375). With the exception of one *Inughuit* woman who reportedly died of “liver trouble” in January 1901, all other members of the party survived the winter of 1900–1901 while based at Fort Conger (Dick 2001). They were the first group to attempt this since 19 members of the Greely expedition perished in 1883–1884. Despite competing claims by Frederick Cook who said he got to the North Pole a year earlier, Peary’s successes were due, in large part, to the application of Inuit knowledge to their local situation (Bertulli et al. 2013). Sadly, Peary’s use of *Inughuit* knowledge and labor was not always to mutual benefit. There is very little awareness or recognition of the many stresses and hardships endured by *Inughuit* men and women while working at Fort Conger in the service of these expeditions (Dick 2001:381–389). These include the experience of working far away from their homes and families in Greenland, working in unfamiliar surroundings and under difficult circumstances, episodes of food insecurity and, for women especially, episodes of sexual harassment at the hands of expedition members (Dick 2001:381–389).



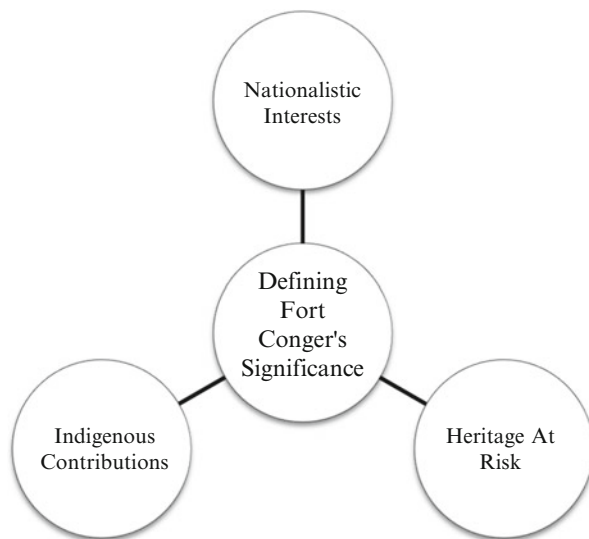
Fig. 11.2 Robert Peary's hut complex reflecting basic principle of *Inughuit* (Polar Eskimo) architecture

Defining Significance Based on “Heritage at Risk”

The effects of climate change and human activity are widely acknowledged as threats to heritage sites, as well as the larger ecosystems of which they are a part (Blanchette et al. 2008). It is therefore surprising that the concept of “heritage at risk” is rarely used as criteria for assigning significance, as the value of something usually increases when it is at risk of being lost. For example, increases in global temperatures have accelerated erosion and biodegradation at sites like Fort Conger (McBean et al. 2005). Ice, snow, and water, accumulating in the interiors of Peary's hut complex according to season, foster moss growth, which, in turn, breaks down wood (Bertulli 2010). Furthermore, Peary's huts have sustained damage from polar bears, which likely caused of 2007–2008 collapse of the only ceramic chimney on the northeast hut (Bertulli 2010). Bank erosion of the tableland on which Fort Conger sits also currently threatens the site. For example, the distance from the northwest corner of the Greely House to the eroding bank was 11.7 m in 2007 and 9.4 m in 2010 (Bertulli 2010).

Most unexpected of all, inorganic chemicals, used in scientific research carried out during the first IPY, present a severe hazard to Fort Conger and its cultural resources. Recent analysis of soils at the site by the Environmental

Fig. 11.3 The “Ontology of Connectivity” defining Fort Conger’s significance as a heritage site



Research Group at the Royal Military College of Canada revealed unexpectedly high levels of arsenic, copper, lead, and zinc as well as some cadmium, chromium, nickel, and mercury (Fig. 11.3) (Dawson et al. 2013; ESG 2009). It is likely that the Lady Franklin Bay Expedition transported these chemical to the site for the requirements of scientific work: arsenic trioxide to preserve faunal specimens for natural history collections; weather recording instruments with mercury; and batteries with copper and zinc (ESG 2009; Bertulli et al. 2013). Tarpaper used in building construction also contains polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs). For these reasons, Fort Conger has been categorized as a Class 1 Site, High Priority for Action on the National Classification System for Contaminated Sites (Bertulli et al. 2013). It is sobering to realize that such elevated contaminant levels stem directly from the very same historical connections that have engendered Fort Conger as a heritage site of national and international significance (Fig. 11.4).

Discussion and Conclusions

In summary, Fort Conger acquires an even greater global significance when more broadly defined in the following ways: (1) as a place where Indigenous knowledge and Western science met to mutual advantage; (2) as an environment where Euro-North American and Indigenous peoples both endured great hardship and suffering; and, (3) as a remote site threatened by climate change and toxins from an earlier



Fig. 11.4 Piles of arsenic trioxide observed in the north part of the Greely house foundation, Fort Conger

century. In particular, the legacy of chemical contaminants left behind by the Lady Franklin Bay Expedition is a powerful testament to the lasting negative impacts that human activities can have on fragile ecosystems like the High Arctic. This fact alone should resonate at a time when many resource extraction industries are turning their attentions towards a warming Arctic (Ho 2010). Yet, such factors have traditionally been overlooked in favor of more modernist notions of heritage, focusing on commemorating the polar ambitions of Euro-North American explorers and scientists. *Ontologies of connectivity*, which explores how *all* of these factors connect to define the significance of Fort Conger, unite the site with important global issues like climate change and the legitimacy of Indigenous knowledge systems. We believe that this will further justify its continued protection and preservation to a general public that is largely unaware of Fort Conger, due to its remote location and inaccessibility.

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