

# WEEK-END

Cahier **C** LE CANADA FRANCAIS  
Le Mercredi 28 avril 2004

## *The Johnson vault yields its secrets*

**MICHEL PHANEUF**

translated by Adelaide Lanktree

More than a century after having been abandoned and destroyed, the Johnson vault at the foot of mont Saint Grégoire has at last yielded its secrets. The archaeological excavations undertaken in 1999 and 2002 have permitted archaeologists to gain knowledge about this tomb built more than 200 years ago and even to make some unexpected discoveries.

The detailed results of these excavations under the auspices of la Société de restauration du patrimoine Johnson were made public April 16<sup>th</sup> at a successful conference which brought together different people and representatives of organizations involved in the project notably Jean-Paul Lasnier, president of la Société and main instigator of the project, la Société d'histoire du Haut-Richelieu, Sir John Johnson Centennial Branch of the United Empire Loyaltis of Canada, Bernard Hébert, archaeologist responsible to the Quebec Ministry of Culture and Communications, and Gérard Gagné, osteo archaeologist who participated in the two excavations.



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# The Johnson vault yields its secrets...

Those in charge underlined the fact that this research marks a first in Quebec. On the one hand because it marks the collaboration of cultural organizations devoted to heritage engaged in the development of an historic site in Haut-Richelieu, and also the sepulchers are those of known persons. Documents have already permitted us to establish that Sir John Johnson, in 1830, his wife Mary Polly Watts in 1815, and his son, John Johnson in 1841 were buried in this vault. Moreover, the remains of four others including a son-in-law, were also placed in the tomb.

Speaking in his turn, Gérard Gagné, described the site and the excavations that took place in 1999 and 2002. According to what we know about the vault's history, the construction dates back to the years 1810 to 1812. The last burial was in 1843. Completely abandoned at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century it was vandalized at different times and little by little deteriorated until its demolition in 1957.

According to a la Société d'histoire du Haut-Richelieu document about the project, it was an imposing construction set on a foundation about four feet thick. The exterior measured 18 feet wide by 30 feet long. A wall with an opening divided the interior into two sections, one reserved for the entrance and the other for the burial vault. The outer sanctuary is of carved stone. We could touch a rudimentary stone floor joined with mortar.

The slab foundation is more than six feet deep.

M. Gagné explained that the first intervention on the presumed site of the vault was one of evaluation. The objective was to verify whether there were signs of the structure and the burials contained therein.

The research led by Christian Bélanger and Gérard Gagné in 1999 provided conclusive results. Not only did they find a part of the structure, but they recuperated more than 120 bone fragments confirming at the same time the presence of ancient burials.

The second intervention in 2002, took the form of a real archaeological excavation with an aim to recuperate the bones found in the tomb and to learn to whom they belonged. He said : "A grid of the entire site was made and it was excavated by trowel".

A total of 858 bone fragments were recovered, indexed and analyzed. An abundant harvest which also yielded some surprises also some curiosities. Also, having found many bones such as tibias and femurs the two archaeologists found few skull bones. This leads one to believe that many skulls were stolen during plundering that occurred in later years.

Another element that intrigued the researchers is that the bones were found throughout the tomb instead of in a precise section. We do not know whether this is due to decisions



*Nicole Poulin, president of la Société d'histoire du Haut-Richelieu, in company of archaeologists Bernard Hébert and Gérard Gagné, and of Marie Deschênes, owner of the field on which was built the ancient Johnson family funeral vault in Mont-Saint-Grégoire.*

made by the people in charge of the tomb or by disturbances that occurred over the years.

The archaeologists were also astonished to find children's bones in the tomb, some seemed to be of very young children aged one to two years. However, the burial of the children did not appear in the official registers.

According to M. Gagné, we can formulate two hypotheses as to the number of persons buried in the vault; the first is the presence of less than ten persons, seven being adults and three children; the second which the archaeologists feel is more plausible, counts 12 persons that is to say seven adults and five children from

less than one year to 15 or 16 years of age.

It is very difficult to determine the sex of these children as for the adults the study of the bones permits us to believe that there were six men and one woman. Among them, Sir John Johnson himself, his son William, and/or Adam, his wife Mary Watts and possibly his son-in-law, Edward MacDonnell.

The excavations are now completed the site of the Johnson's Family's ancient burial sepulcher has now been catalogued and registered under the number "BiFg-1" in l'Inventaire des sites archéologiques du Québec (The Quebec archaeological sites) and falls under la Loi des biens culturels

du Québec. It may not be destroyed and henceforth must be written in the diagram regulations of Mont-Saint-Grégoire and of the MRC of Haut-Richelieu.

As for the costs of the project, they amount to 14 140,00\$ states la Société de restauration du patrimoine Johnson financial report. The costs were defrayed by the Sir John Johnson Section of the United Empire Loyalists Association of Canada, subsidies from Provincial Deputy Minister Richard Le Hir and from the Quebec Ministry of Culture and Communications, and also a gift from la Société d'histoire du Haut-Richelieu. A total of 14 227,00\$. There is presently a surplus of 87,00\$