

Take Action: Partridge Island

By: Joe Ellsworth & Caleb Spragg

Step 1: Identify Your Concern

For this social action project that is being undertaken our concern is in regard to Partridge Island in Saint John. The island itself is both a national historic site as well as a provincial historic site. It was the first Quarantine station in North America, had the first lighthouse in New Brunswick, had the first operating fog horn, was the first land thousands of immigrants arrived on in their trip from Europe (especially the Irish Potato Famine, where between 1845-1847 there were up to 2,500 Irish immigrants on the Island at any given time), as well as being a constant source of protection for the Port City in times of conflict as a military base during both World Wars. We are concerned with this site because since 1995 it has not been open to the public and has been greatly neglected in context of its historical and cultural significance. It is now illegal to go onto the Island as it poses a safety risk with unsafe old military fortifications from the Second World War, a treacherous walk across a breakwater to get to the island and no secure dock for boats to arrive safely. By becoming involved the final goal is to get the island open once more to the public for everyone to be able to go over enjoy it and discover it for themselves.

Step 2: Research your Concern

To find out information about Partridge Island there are many great resources available online, as well as materials available in both the Saint John Public Library and the UNB Library as well. In regards to Partridge Island there are not too many different points of view as to why it's closed or if it should be opened, the only real difference in perspective is on the reasons it should be open to the public. Just a few of these could be as a cultural and historical site to discover one's past, as a profitable business venture to help increase Saint John's already booming summer tourist industry which brings in several hundred thousand tourists each year, as well as for an addition onto the already existing harbor passage. In approaching the different actions that could be taken we came up with a relatively comprehensive list in order to get the project started and raise the awareness of the issue. The list includes getting a newspaper article written about it, contact local Councilors, get in touch with Parks Canada and the Historic Sites and Monuments Board, contact the Military to see about restoration for the island buildings, try to contact the Premier, get hold of Waterfront Development as well as write letters of concern to the Premier and Mayor as well.

Step 3: Find Out Who Supports You

As we thought about who might be interested in taking action there were a few different groups that came to mind. One was other residents of Saint John who might like to see the island open especially those who live near the island. We have a plan to go door to door on the west side to see what people in that part of the city think about re-opening the island. Another group was local politicians who might be interested in reopening the island to the public and tourists who could boost the city's economy. Finally those interested in family history might want to be able to get out to the island for the sake of curiosity about their ancestors. The way to get politicians involved is to call them to find out what opinions they have on the topic. If they are in support of opening the island it is likely they will mention it as part of campaigning. To get the general populace behind our cause as well as those interested in their family history we figured getting the word out first was an important step and that is why we figured the local newspaper was a good way. The newspaper seemed like a legitimate way to bring the subject up and garner some attention. Once the article is printed around St. Patrick's Day, things like council meetings in Saint John would be our next area of focus.

Step 4: Create a Plan:

In creating a plan there was not as step 1 do this, step 2 do that approach but rather an approach where we had certain targets that we needed to meet. It was clear from the start it would not be so easy as to talk to one person who agreed with our proposal and it would just happen but rather there would need to be some sort of awareness raised about the issue first. This is where we came up with the idea of trying to get some media coverage about the issue. With this in mind we targeted the local Saint John newspaper that is also a provincial paper called the Telegraph Journal. With this action planned we also realized that it would take more than simply a newspaper article, but also the attention of government officials. Here we planned before knowing who exactly they were to contact councilors, the mayor, waterfront development, the provincial government through the Premiers office, as well as the Parks Canada who take care of National Historic Sites around the country. With this contact made the following steps would be to get involved in the process of making the island public if the right people agreed to help the cause. If no one agreed with the opinion that the island should be open to the public then this would comprise our efforts in attempting to change their opinion.

Step 5: Take Action

When we started to take action we did follow what we had planned to do, we made contact with the Newspaper and have secured a 750 word opinion piece that will be published sometime soon, whenever the internal editors are finished working it over. This piece was intended to appeal to both the Irish in Saint John around the time of St. Patrick's Day and note how most people have no clue about the Island and the Irish heritage on it.

After this we contacted Councilman Bill Farren of zone 1 in Saint John who has Partridge Island in his riding. When talking with Mr. Farren about Partridge Island he held the same beliefs as us that the Island was an untapped gem of culture and history for the city that should be open to the public. Mr. Farren let us know that we were not the first ones to bring the topic up and that there was a major push for the island to be opened about 3 years prior by a gentleman named Bill McMackin who was on the Saint John Waterfront Development board. As much as there was support from Mr. Farren he also told us blunt that the only real issue is there was no funding for the project at all, but that all three levels of government were to join together to try to fund it when ever "the time is right" which he was uncertain on. Although he was well informed of the information about the island he did not have the resources that we needed to halt our plans. After contacting Mr. Farren We contacted Kent MacIntyre who is the General Manager of SJWFD (Saint John Waterfront Development) who again gave much of the information that Mr. Farren did, but a bit more thorough. He let me know that there is a plan for what to do with the island once funds come in that the SJWFD has made over the past three years which includes extending the Harbor Passage onto the Island and refurbishing all the buildings to make it safe. Mr. MacIntyre informed me though that again the issue was funding with not enough money "to even fix the potholes on the streets" but said that they were developing funding strategies both private and public sectors later this year. Here again Mr. MacIntyre told me that all three levels of government were to be responsible for the funding for renovations as well, especially as the military buildings on the island are a federal responsibility.

Although this was the case the next step was to go to the provincial level and try and contact the Premier. Here I was referred to another office of the Provincial government that is the department of local government and environment that would be responsible for Partridge Island as it is part of a local government. Here I tried several times to contact Minister Fitch who never seemed to be in the office, but just left messages with the secretary. As for the third level of government on the federal level, first I contacted Parks Canada who transferred me to Historic Sites and Monuments Board, who would be able to give me greater details on the funding that was to be expected for Saint John and Partridge Island refurbishment. Here I ran into some trouble as the gentleman I spoke with seemed to get quite irritated with me as he could not find any information on the funding, could not find information on any initiative and therefore tried to transfer to me a "cost sharing" branch that could help me better. Unfortunately what happened was he gave me the phone number for Allstate Insurance, not the cost saving branch. And when I called back only got an answering machine. I tried several more times but only ever got an answering machine again with no reply after leaving my name and number.

After going through the preliminary hoops of government in trying to get this island open again a change in plan was required as it was no longer viable to have the goal to have the island open to the public by end of term. It became much more reasonable to raise awareness of the issue of Partridge Island. The bureaucracy really would weigh down on the progress of getting the island open again, especially

the issue of funding as it would no doubt cost at least a million to make the island safe again for the public.

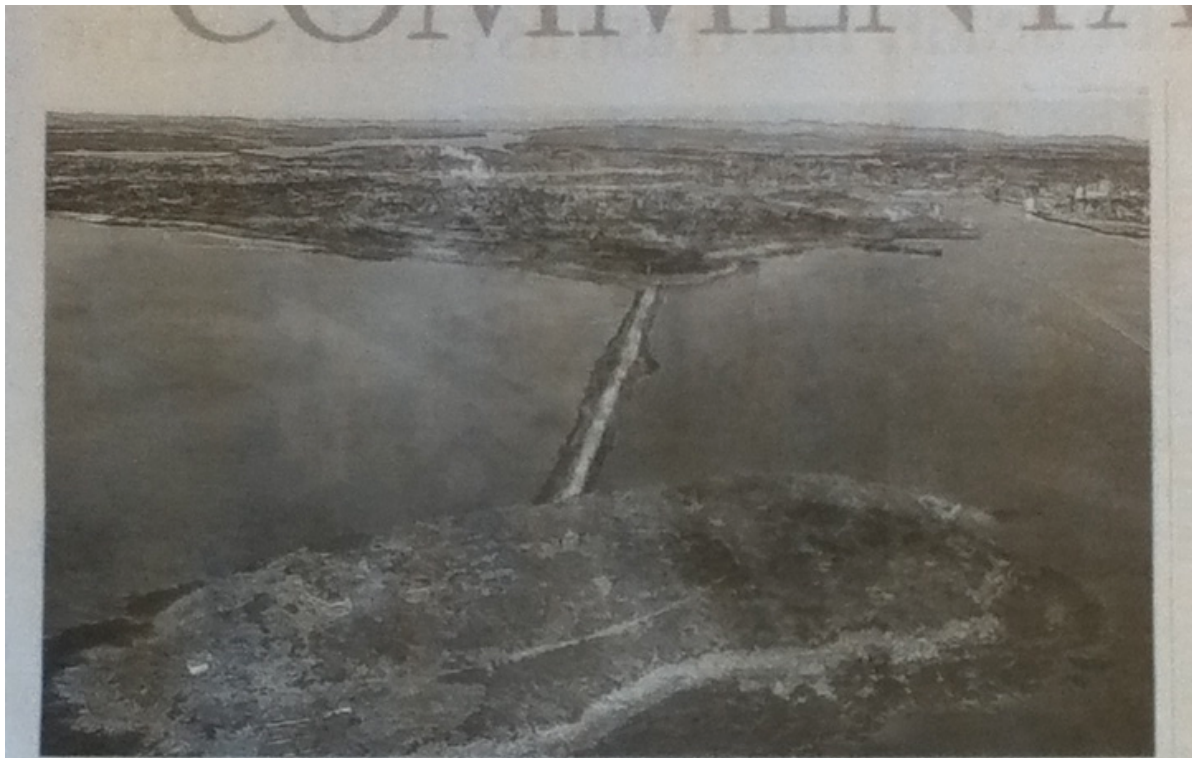
Step 6: Evaluate the Plan

Of what we planned to do and what actually happened finding someone in Saint John politics that had plans for the island was great and gave us more confidence for our cause. When we contacted the newspaper about writing an article and after discussing our topic found there was a good chance it could make it in, we were excited. We still don't know how that part of our endeavor will work out but we are hopeful for it. Probably the thing that didn't work the most was simply the expectation to have the island open by the time this write-up was due or even by the end of the semester. If we had been more reasonable in our goal this would not have been an issue. We did realize it would take more than phone calls to get it open again, but we didn't concern ourselves too much with the time it would take although we should have. But other than that things went well. We were able to speak to several different people and groups over the phone to see what was being done or what could be done. The newspaper was friendly and helpful in letting us know when we could submit articles, who to, and about how long it would take for a submission to show up in the paper given that it was accepted. One of the biggest things we learned about this whole process was that if we were to do this in a class setting in high school we would in all likelihood start at the beginning of the year and give assignments out to smaller groups and try to tackle the project as a whole. That is of course if we were to do something that required lots of people taking part to better our chances of success. The alternative would be to make sure students were attempting something that was within reachable limits.

Step 7: Apply your learning

Really this whole project will be an on-going thing for both of us. We were both interested with Partridge Island before we began this project and will still be interested in it long after this semester is over. We will continue with our efforts to see if there are any responses to our newspaper article as well as speaking to members in the community about interest in the idea. As was mentioned in the previous section some of our learning can be applied to our own social studies classrooms if we were to introduce a project such as this to our students. We mentioned in our article about the possibility of making the island a location for boat tours again for a small fee and that coupled with increased tourism from cruise ships could make the island a reasonable investment for Saint John. One of the ways we could further build on this is if either of us was to get a permanent job and tries to get our classes involved in re-opening Partridge Island. The class would be taking a lot of the same steps we took, but this is a scenario where the more people are involved the more likely there will be a successful outcome.

Appendix: Published Article



Despite its storied history, Partridge Island, just west of Saint John's city centre, is closed to the public. Trespassers risk being fined. PHOTO: KATE DESJARDIN/TELEGRAPH-JOURNAL ARCHIVE

Open Partridge Island to the public

CALEB SPRAGG AND
JOE ELLSWORTH
COMMENTARY

With St. Patrick's Day right around the corner a lot of people are looking forward to breaking out glittering-green dollar store hats and heading to a local pub for some green beer. While much of this entertainment will take place in uptown Saint John, not far away sitting in the mouth of the harbour is neglected Partridge Island – a place famous for its Irish history.

The island has had many different uses over time but perhaps the one for which it is best known is its use as a quarantine station for Irish immigrants. The island was the first quarantine station in North America to prevent the spread of disease, operating from 1785 to 1942. The island went through waves of immigration, with its highest point from 1845 to 1847 during the Irish potato famine. At any given time you could find upwards of 2,500 people on the island. During that era almost 1,200 Irish died on the island.

The island has also historically been Saint John's first line of defence in wartime, being used in both the First and Second World Wars and also during the Pentian raids. Evidence of this

military history is visible throughout the island, whether looking at First and Second World War gun batteries or the underground tunnels that still remain to remind citizens of these turbulent times.

Those who will be heading out for their first or second St. Patrick's Day festivities will likely have no knowledge of Partridge Island other than what they have read in books or on the Internet. This island is, however, one of the National Historic Sites of Canada and that fact con-

IT'S PRETTY HARD TO ENJOY "A LIVING HISTORY ADVENTURE" WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO GET A FINE IF YOU ARE CAUGHT ADVENTURING THERE.

fused us when we were reading about what a National Historic site entails.

From the Parks Canada website it states that "Each national historic site is a distinct and vibrant symbol of Canadian identity. It is also a centre of learning, a wealth of information, a living history adventure, an experience of what Canada used to be and what it is today" and goes on to say, "At all these places, Parks Canada offers activities and learning experiences that stretch the imagination, tug at the heartstrings, and touch the soul."

For the majority of our lives the island has been inaccessible to the public. Boat tours stopped in 1995 and since then some of the older buildings were demolished, although a few still remain.

From the description that we have mentioned on the Parks Canada website, it doesn't sound like these sites are usually shut off from the public. After all, it's pretty hard to enjoy "a living history adventure" when you can expect to get a fine if you are caught adventuring there.

In all fairness there were reasons why

daily basis during the summer months bringing hundreds of thousands of passengers.

If a small fee was charged for passage to the island, there certainly would be plenty of people interested to see this beautiful island and learn of the history there. This would essentially make Partridge Island the Ellis Island of Canada. Anyone of Irish ancestry would be especially interested as so many of their ancestors would have come through Partridge Island on their arrival to the "New World."

Our intent in writing this piece is not to make it a tourist attraction per se, but to have the island open once again to the public, and especially those who are interested in their own family history as well as Canada's past. If making it a place you'd have to pay to get into, then that is a reasonable price.

Our plea then is this, by this time next year, on St. Patrick's Day, let us have this island open again to the public. As Canada's most Irish city we owe it to ourselves to celebrate more than just with pins and hats and make Partridge Island a proud part of our city.

Caleb Spragg and Joe Ellsworth
are students at the University of New Brunswick.

TODIES RAD ON CRIME GOOD ON UNION DISTING