

editor834 Oct 21

176-year-old glassworks artifacts unearthed in Hudson

By Nick Zacharias



PHOTO BY NICK ZACHARIAS

An archeological excavation lasting over a month was conducted on the site of the former Canada Glass Works Company, one of the oldest and largest historic glassworks sites in Canada, as mandated by the Quebec ministry of culture ahead of a proposed plan to redevelop the wooded lot in the Como area of Hudson for new housing.

While big industry isn't something that usually comes to mind when conjuring up images of Hudson, there was a time in the mid 1800s when it had bustling glass manufacturing enterprises, archeological remnants of which remain to this day.

There were actually three different glassworks locations in the area, according to local historian David Langlois. Most of the original manufacturing, storage, and workers' housing buildings near what is now the Hudson village core are long gone, but substantial foundations of the Canada Glass Works Company, originally founded as Masson & Cie in 1845, can still be seen in the wooded area in Como (now incorporated as part of Hudson) not far from the Willow Inn.



IMAGE COURTESY DAVID LANGLOIS

The view is looking North from approximately where the Post Office is now located on Cameron. Cameron is the foot path. The four houses to the right are for the glass workers. The glass factory is the two-storey white building, just above the cow. The building was gone by 1890, or a bit before. One of the workers houses still remained in the 1990s and was immediately to the West of Legg's Store. It burned down and was a vacant lot for many years until the new condo building was erected this past year.

Investigation done before development

The land at the site is privately owned and plans have been made to build housing there in a development called Willowbrook, the first phase of which is already underway. According to local archeologist Adrian Burke, the Quebec ministry of culture mandated that an archeological survey be done to assess the historical value of the site. Said Burke, "I'm not directly involved in the dig so I don't have the details, but I'm convinced the site is without a doubt of

national importance.” He said it was already known from a dig performed by the Royal Ontario Museum in the 1970s that there are a lot of well-preserved buildings there.

The developer hired an archeology firm to conduct a thorough excavation this summer. Amélie Guindon of Patrimonia Archéologie, the group hired for the task, confirmed they had a large team in place performing digs over several weeks, which are now completed. Though the results of the study will remain private for now according to the wishes of the land owner, details of the site have been catalogued. Said Guindon, “We followed all the guidelines of the Ministry of Culture. We have 3D scans of all the features, and photos and everything we need. It’s all on record.”



PHOTO BY NICK ZACHARIAS

Many stone foundations and interesting artifacts were uncovered at a historic glass foundry that some hope can be conserved for education at the site of a planned housing development in Hudson.

Learning from the site

This is an example of what in archeology circles is known as preventive archeology – as in preventing the loss of potential knowledge of a site by studying it before it’s destroyed.

“It’s unfortunately common that it works this way,” said Burke. “We’d prefer as archeologists to leave artifacts in the ground, really,” he said, but if construction is imminent the goal is to do as much digging as possible to learn from the site before construction takes place.

"If you find something of major historical importance you try to preserve it, or at least the knowledge of it. We know some things through historical record, but what sometimes people don't think of is there's a lot more to learn ... people wouldn't believe what's right under their feet, if you take the time to dig."

Significant finds

The site as it currently stands shows evidence of easily a dozen foundations of various buildings and glass ovens, including a foundation wall that runs roughly 100 feet through the forest before disappearing under a large pile of rubble beside a newly installed road.

"It looks like everywhere they dug, they found evidence of more buildings," said JJ Corker of Nature Hudson, who is also familiar with the area. Though the remains of these buildings are now shaded under the canopy of the forest, nearly two centuries ago they stood in the open as surrounding trees were razed for fuel to feed their fires. Langlois, who is running for councillor in the Como district of Hudson, shares some colour about the former glassworks in his book, *An English Island – A History of Hudson, QC*. According to the book, the glassworks was a generous employer (paying glassblowers \$5 a day, substantial for the time) which made Como the centre of the district while the village of Hudson consisted of just three or four farms. As a hub of activity, it also served as the local post office in an era when letters from overseas took months arriving, and for a while was called the Ottawa Glass Works, until it was realized too many letters bound here wound up in Ottawa by mistake, and the name was changed. It is one of the oldest known glassworks sites in Canada, second only perhaps to one at Mallorytown, Ontario which closed after just a year of operation in 1840.

Hopes for conservation

While it's clear the Willowbrook development is proceeding, concerned residents like Langlois, Burke, and Corker hope at least some of the site can be conserved as a unique glimpse of 19th-century industry, one that stands out in North America for its size and significance.

Said Corker, "The site is right in the middle of where they want to build, but I think it would be great if they could keep at least a little of it for future generations. If the owner wants to, they could really create an amazing development around the glassworks, protecting part of the site so people could see it and learn about our history."