

Review of the Heritage NL Craft At Risk Program



Heritage NL

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Prepared by the Craft Council of NL Awards Committee

Heritage NL (Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador) is a not-for-profit Crown agency of the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts and Recreation. Established in 1984 with a mandate to help preserve the vibrant heritage of Newfoundland and Labrador, Heritage NL encourages and supports the preservation of the province's architectural heritage and actively promotes the safeguarding of a rich intangible cultural heritage (ICH).

Much of the work of Heritage NL crosses the path of the development of the craft sector in Newfoundland and Labrador. Their ICH initiatives involve unearthing, documenting and teaching of craft skills long treasured by Newfoundlanders and Labradorians. Some skills are in danger of being forgotten altogether, and the educational efforts of this organization have gone a long way towards ensuring that such skills are not lost, but remain a living part of provincial craft history. In addition, work around preservation of the built history of the province involves the retrieval and practice of construction and decoration skills almost forgotten in the building trades.

Craft and Heritage – A Natural Partnership

Revival of endangered traditional skills has the potential to create new cultural and



Participant Karen Pye on loom in foreground with weaving instructor Jessica McDonald in background. Photo credit Heritage NL

economic opportunities. The strengthening of skills provides the foundation for an increased market ready inventory of makers and products rooted in local culture, and highly attractive to buyers, both resident and visiting. Opportunities exist at festivals and other public events for demonstrations and workshops, as well as at arts centres and private studios. Traditional building skills such as the construction of wooden windows are in high demand, and available makers have long waiting lists. The “eat local” trend sees shoppers seeking to know the sources of their food, and traditional growing and foraging skills are consequently a strong marketing feature for makers of food products.

In 2021, Heritage NL launched **Craft at Risk**, a major initiative designed to assess the current viability of traditional crafts in

Newfoundland and Labrador, and to take steps to strengthen those which were most highly endangered. The project had two key areas of focus - craft skills historically practised by residents of Newfoundland and Labrador in their homes and communities, and skills generally practised by the building trades in the construction and renovation of historic buildings.

There were two major components to the project – a series of workshops across the province and an intensive mentor-apprentice program. The workshops were mostly introductory, educational and recreational, and focused on building audience awareness and appreciation. The mentorship sessions were more intensive, resulting in an enriched learning experience for the apprentice and the development of strong, usable craft skills.



Participants of wooden window repair workshop. Instructor Rex Passion can be seen in centre of photo wearing a blue hat, and plaid shirt. Photo credit Jeremy Harnum Photography.

Sixty-seven workshops and training events were held in 52 communities with more than 1000 participants. Twenty-five sessions focused on historic masonry, restoration of historic wooden windows, wooden door joinery and millwork, and roofing of historic structures. Forty-two events centred on craft skills, including basketry, knitting, foodways, birch broom making, black-smithing, sealskin clothing, braided rugs and weaving. Workshops were open to all those expressing

an interest and the long reach of this part of the project was effective in raising a general awareness of the role that essential craft skills played in the day to day lives of generations past.

The Mentor-Apprentice Program was a one-on-one immersion learning experience. An earlier Heritage NL project had developed a province-wide inventory of endangered craft skills and these skills were prioritized when selecting mentorships. Sixty-one people participated in this part of the program working in 19 craft media. In addition, a total of 28 oral histories were recorded with 45 participants and archived in Memorial University's Digital Archives Initiative.

There are several points of particular interest when considering the potential impact of the mentorship part of the Craft at Risk project:

- Nineteen different craft skills were involved.
- Learning opportunities for most of the craft skills taught are not readily available, and, for the most part, are not included in post secondary programs in the province.
- The one-on-one teaching environment lends itself well to focused attention on the specific needs and interests of the apprentices.
- A number of the mentoring experiences involved the passing of indigenous skills, including the making of komatiks, Mi'kmaw style moccasins, and spruce root baskets.
- Mentorships occurred all over the province, with the majority happening in rural areas, including Labrador, where learning opportunities often do not exist.
- Mentorships included the transfer of skills needed in beadwork, blacksmithing, weaving, coopering, letterpress printing, millinery, basketry,

and in the making of bodhrans, komatiks, moccasins, birch brooms, sealskin garments, wriggle fences and historically accurate windows and doors.

One major impact of the Craft at Risk project was the diversity of the Mentor-Apprentice Program. Participants were from all around the province, including 10 from Labrador. They ranged in age from youth to seniors and included people with disabilities. Of the 57 participants who completed post-apprenticeship questionnaires, approximately 30% identify as Innu, Inuit, Mi'kmaw or other Indigenous identity, and one as Latin American. More than half were women, and at least two were nonbinary. Clearly, the program reached an audience that is often marginalized and has more difficulty accessing community programming.

Excellence and Authenticity

At Heritage NL, there is a clear focus on passing skills from one generation to the next. Instructors have learned their skills from their families and communities, and have been making work throughout their lives. These valued teachers have achieved a level of excellence that can only be attained through continual practice and repetition.

Students range from those with a broad interest in cultural history to those with a passion and a drive to master the skills of their forebears. All recognize and appreciate the necessity of making works that are strong, resilient to wear, and intended, sometimes, for a lifetime of practical use. For some, excellence is a goal in and of itself; for those learning skills with a view to making products for the professional marketplace, a high level of excellence will command the highest possible price.



Labrador Komatik makers Alfred Winters, Francine Winters, and Dave Chaulk. Photo courtesy Francine Winters.

For all, an essential ingredient is authenticity – that the object is true to its origins, the techniques used to create it are those that have been used in generations passed, and that the skills have been passed hand to hand through the years.

A growing discernment in the marketplace demands, and will reward, this level of authenticity.

An Effective and Creative Team

A strong working cadre will anticipate obstacles, and make plans for surmounting them. The two major challenges faced by the project were Covid-19 and weather.



Knitting workshop in Torbay. Photo credit Heritage NL

Starting a training program in 2021 in the midst of growing public health restrictions was challenging. The Heritage NL strategy was to begin with online sessions on the four topics that could be covered in webinars and that could be used to raise awareness about the Program; then focus on training that needed to occur mostly or entirely outdoors and in warmer months, and to schedule indoor workshops for the latter part of the two-year program.

A number of training events were cancelled or postponed due to heavy rain, fall hurricanes or bad winter weather. This was particularly challenging during January through March of 2023, when workshops had to be postponed multiple times, so that instructors and venues had to be re-booked and participants re-registered.

To host 1,000 participants in 67 sessions province-wide with only 4 online, in a two year term, is remarkable, especially considering the obstacles noted. This result can only have been achieved with remarkable scheduling skills, and by setting and meeting regular deadlines.

Initial goals for Craft at Risk projected 36 workshops and 10 mentor-apprentice pairings. By the end of the project, Heritage NL had offered 67 workshops and

coordinated 30 mentor-apprentice experiences. This is an extraordinary achievement for a small staff team of three, only one of which was dedicated to the project.

It is clear that the staff team at Heritage NL maintains an incredibly high standard in managing their projects. The impressive results achieved by the Craft at Risk project are a direct indicator of the excellence that can be achieved when communication is strong, consultation paramount, and staff work in a mutually supportive environment.

With this program, Heritage NL has made a valued contribution to Newfoundland and Labrador's healthy and growing professional craft sector.



Mi'kmaq Spruce Root Basket. Photo courtesy Arlene White.

The Heritage NL Fieldnotes Series was created to openly share information concerning the ongoing research projects of Heritage NL in the fields of built heritage and intangible cultural heritage.

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