

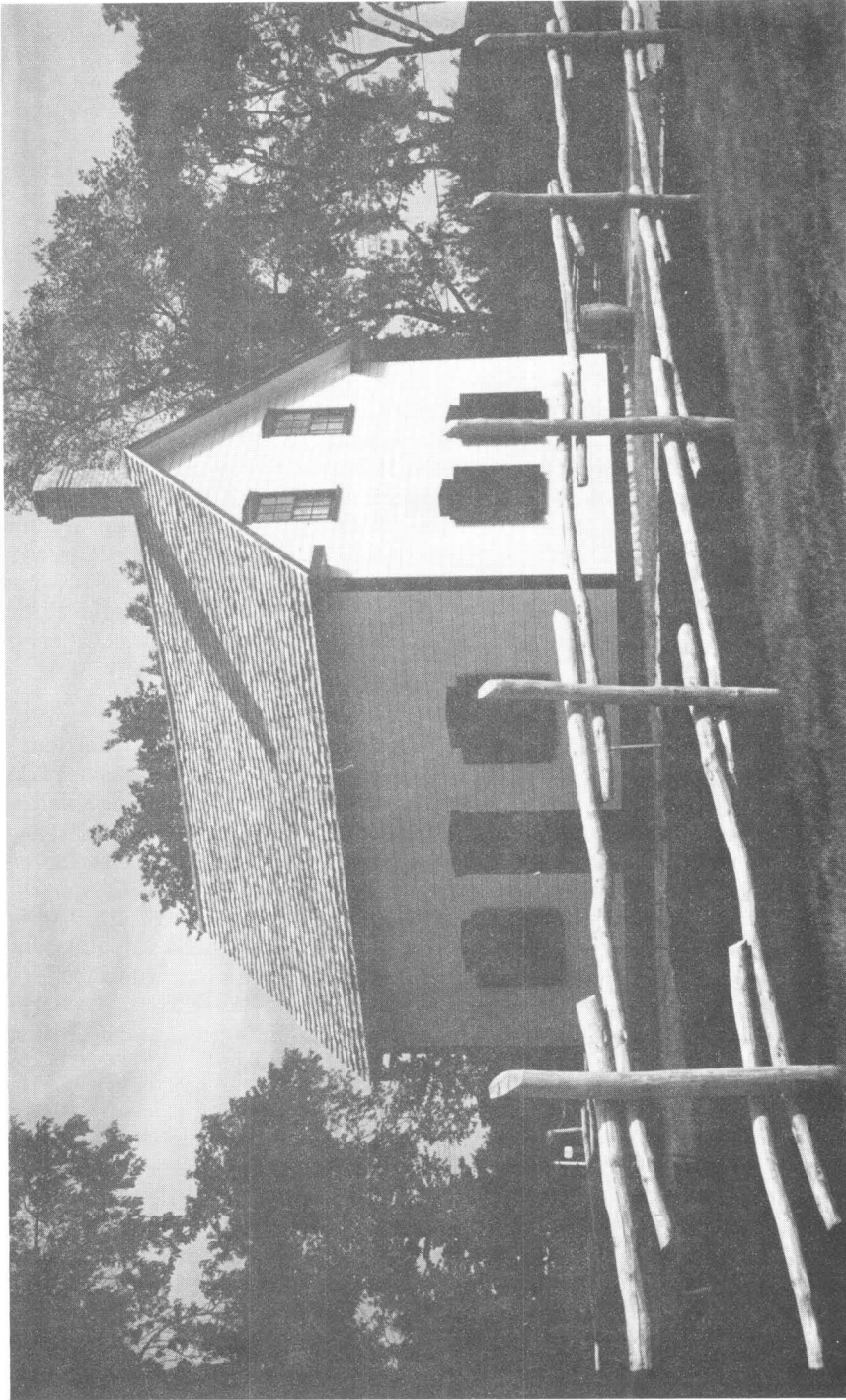
Riel House: A Critical Review

by **FRITS PANNEKOEK**

Riel House was opened to the public by Parks Canada in the summer of 1980, after almost a decade of research and restoration. Situated at 330 River Road, St. Vital, Manitoba, it was acquired by the Manitoba Historical Society in April 1968, and was subsequently transferred to the federal government on 15 April 1970. The house, operated on contract by the St. Boniface Historical Society, is a three room structure, consisting of a living area, two bedrooms, and an undeveloped upstairs. Julie Lagimodière, Riel's mother, occupied one bedroom, and the other was presumably for Marguerite, Riel's wife. There were other bedrooms in the 1880s. The house has been restored to the period just after Riel's lying "in state" there in 1885.

A precise estimate of the cost of the restoration is not available from Parks Canada. Given the usual cost of these projects and the care for which Parks Canada's restoration work is internationally known, the cost, including salaries, building materials, and modern infrastructure, was probably between 500,000 and 750,000 dollars. Some argue such alarming costs prove that the restored house-museum is the single most expensive method of communicating history. Conversely, its defenders will argue that the cost per visitor over a ten-year period is much lower than the cost of a hardcover book because the house-museum reaches an incredibly large audience. Riel House, for example, has received approximately 100,000 visitors since its opening. Any Canadian novel or history book selling that number would be a overwhelming best seller and receive careful, critical, and envious reviews.

When the large audience, the money, the real and potential impact on Canadians' perception of their past, and the professional attention paid by historians, archaeologists, architects, anthropologists, and educators to the development of these sites is all taken into account, it is surprising that these restorations have not been taken more seriously. If anything, these projects have been shunned as antiquarian and pedestrian by many in the academic community. Archivists, who tend to cater to university academics more than to any other single group, have also generally treated the "historic site researcher" and his projects with the same contempt usually reserved for the genealogist. This disdain had some foundation in the past. A careful examination of the very first work done in historic site



Riel House as restored by Parks Canada.



Interior view of Riel House.

preservation in the 1950s provides ample evidence of lack of professionalism.¹ In the last decade, however, several major historic site projects have reached a sophistication that merits careful and scholarly review. Because of their potential impact on the public at large, the research involved in the restoration process, and because increasingly scarce dollars exist for more traditional historical vehicles like books and journals, historic sites and their associated publications will become increasingly viable means for the communication of history.

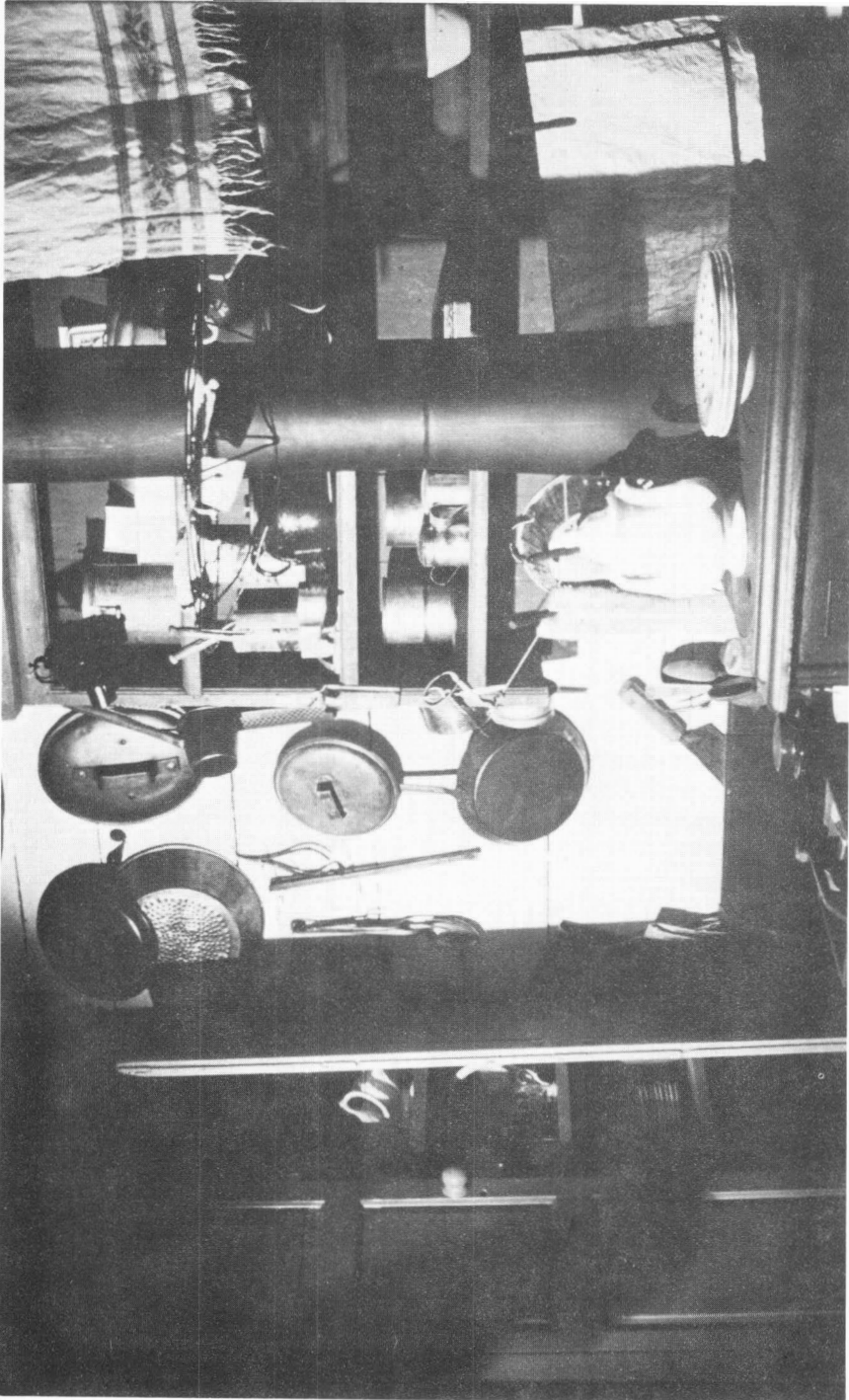
To evaluate Riel House critically, it is essential to outline the restoration process briefly. The first activity upon the acquisition of a historic building, other than the immediate stabilization of the physical remains, should be historical research on the evaluation of the land base and the structure of the building. While this research continues, it is usual for "as found recorders," along with historians, to analyze the evolution of the building. Historians search through sales slips, photographs, oral traditions, drawings, and other sources for clues. No detail is too small and nothing is too insignificant for either the architect's or the historian's scrutiny. The markings on the walls, and the paint and wallpapers are all minutely probed. At the same time as the stripping of the structure is taking place, the archaeologists are working with the historians to expose the invisible subsurface elements of the site to determine the material cultures of the various generations of occupants and the nature and location of vanished buildings.

The major difficulty in directing this research is the integration of the findings into a coherent whole with meaning for each of the various disciplines. Unfortunately, the historians, archaeologists, ethnologists, and architects are most often interested in entering the debates current in their respective fields. Since no discipline assumes precedence, it becomes next to impossible to articulate a single coherent message at historic complexes developed by National Historic Sites.

Nevertheless, because a large amount of time and money is focused by all disciplines on material culture, that aspect has traditionally become by default the focus of interpretation. In Canada this has meant that the historic site professionals, especially historians, have been outside the mainstream of Canadian historiography. There are few schools in Canada that have any interest in historical archaeology; no history department save that at the University of Manitoba will confess to teaching material history. Consequently, for the past twenty years, Canadian historic sites professionals have turned for models to the United States, Great Britain, and France, where the study of material culture has achieved enviable sophistication.

Another major problem faced by professionals in the historic site disciplines is that the final expression of their work, the restored and interpreted building, is not always entirely, nor even partially under their control. The mysterious discipline, "interpretation," usually taught in Faculties of Physical Education in the United States and the more American of our universities, filters all of the information to ensure that it is "suitable" for public consumption. In the best circumstances, interpreters act no differently from competent editors and publishers. More usually,

1 Read for example the first fifty volumes in the *Manuscript Report Series* issued by National and Historic Sites, Parks Canada. The improvement after the first fifty is phenomenal.



Kitchen utensils and stove in Riel House.

however, they have an intense anti-academic bias and so reduce the historical messages to a pre-digested pabulum so that nothing is left at the site to challenge the public intellect and imagination.²

At Riel House "site interpretation" consists of the restored house itself, a small exterior "interpretive node" which attempts to explain the context of the house, and a pamphlet. The interpreter at the site at the time of my visit added nothing to the printed information and was generally uninformed about Riel's life, Métis material culture, and the details of the history of the site.³ The general public have no ready access to the research materials upon which the site was restored and interpreted since these are only available in the virtually inaccessible *Manuscript Report Series*, now only reproduced on microfiche and thus almost guaranteeing that general readers will never see any of the volumes.

Given these problems, the critical question that must be posed about Riel House is how successful is it as a statement about the Red River Métis of the 1880s and the Riel family. In order to answer this, we must first determine what thesis National Historic Sites was attempting to articulate at Riel House.

If the background historical research reports by Robert Gosman are carefully examined,⁴ it is clear that he did attempt new insights into Métis social structure and material culture. Important is Gosman's contention that there were two distinct groups within Métis Red River — one almost French Canadian in culture and the other part Indian and part French Canadian. The first group emerge with greater clarity in the years following the Sayer trial, and consisted of those who assembled material possessions, became literate, and ensured the formal education of their children through the Church. Most were successful traders or merchants and included families like the Riels, Delormes, Hamelins, Brelands, and Marions. The second group were hunters. Gosman did very careful analysis of the material culture of the two groups and determined that the bourgeois Métis purchased fancier, more sophisticated goods at the Hudson's Bay Company stores. They lived in carpenter-built houses, even though the interiors were probably still sparsely furnished. The farmer-merchants were also more likely to wear manufactured clothing than the hunters. The hunters' clothing was decorated by beads, porcupine quills, and silk, while the merchant-farmers' clothing was a more conservative unadorned broadcloth. All however seem to have worn the waist sash.

Unfortunately, Gosman's research emphasized the period through the 1860s, because the house was initially assumed to date from 1868, although his conclusions may be applicable to later decades. The historical evidence suggested, however, that any house on the site in the 1860s could only have had one room, whereas the Riel House showed clear and irrefutable signs of always having had three rooms on the main floor. Subsequent careful research by Diane Payment, Parks Canada's Métis specialist, and by the archaeologists suggest that the house now on River Road was likely built in 1880 or 1881. Despite this, however, Parks Canada was not prepared

2 It is interesting to note that the slender volume by Freeman Tilden, *Interpreting our Heritage* (Chapel Hill, 1957), has not yet been surpassed in the eyes of many interpreters.

3 The site was visited by the reviewer in September 1982.

4 See Robert Gosman, "Riel House, St. Vital, Manitoba," and "The Riel and Lagimodière Families in Métis Society, 1840-1860," both in *Manuscript Report Series*, No. 171 (1975, 1977).

to extend the Gosman research through to the 1880s; at least, no available Manuscript Report indicates the existence of additional research. Consequently, Parks Canada appears to have had to refurbish and interpret to a period for which they had no major historical synthesis. The archaeological reports⁵ attempt only a listing of the artifacts unearthed in the dig. Any analysis is limited to the second report and the dating of the house.

There is evidence that some very specific furnishings study for the new period was completed. Perhaps by 1885 when Riel lay “in state” in the house, its furnishings should have reflected more the new consumerism of the Manitoba frontier. But what of the impact of the new Ontario influence on material culture? From period descriptions of Métis interiors, the house is likely overfurnished generally, but underfurnished in the goods of the new industrialism. It does, however, reflect the “genteel poverty” of the Riels. From the historical information, the house would seem to be too liberally littered with articles of clothing. It might also have told more if the river lot had been preserved intact and the outbuildings reconstructed. Instead the house stands as a shrine to Riel — not a carefully articulated and digested historical observation about the Métis and their complex material culture.

It almost seems as though Parks Canada was afraid to publicize the new ground broken by their historians and to expose new views of the material texture of the Métis community. In saying this, it also must be conceded that Parks Canada faced an impossible task. They chose to restore the house to a particular moment in time when history is about change through time. Nevertheless, it was incumbent upon Parks Canada to make certain that these changes were carefully communicated through other means of interpretation.

If Riel House is less than successful, it should nevertheless alert the archivist to the several problems that house restoration projects present. While these projects can result in the accumulation of incredible collections of material, they place heavy demands on the resources of archival institutions, simply because the amount of money that governments spend on these projects assures that a substantial number of historians, research assistants, and assorted interpreters and curators will tie up scarce archival resources. It might be useful for archivists to create a closer liaison with the government and private agencies undertaking these projects. Archives should demand to be included in the planning and development stages. In some instances, projects accumulate several miles of original records, several hundred oral interviews, and thousands of photographs, and should perhaps have an archivist on staff.

The buildings selected for restoration are associated with major events and are the equivalent of the most precious museum artifacts or most prestigious archival documents. Yet too often archivists, who determine what will be saved for future generations, make judgements ignoring the particular needs of restoration disciplines. For example, an archivist associated with a major project suggested that the lumber company records relating to several buildings that were to be restored were “only of

5 See Michael Forsman, “Archaeological Investigations at Riel House, Manitoba, 1976,” and Kevin Lunn, Jennifer Hamilton, and Peter J. Priess, “Archaeological Research at Riel House, St. Vital, Manitoba: A Reassessment of the Artifact Data,” both in *Manuscript Report Series*, No. 406 (1977, 1980).

interest to the restoration project and consequently should not merit archival treatment." Since only a handful of Canada's built heritage will be fully restored to museum standards, these buildings and their accompanying documents are as precious to Canada's heritage as any archival document. Such restoration projects also present one of the few opportunities to create as complete a record as possible of man's past activities through archival collecting. They present exciting interdisciplinary possibilities that have hardly been explored.