

**Her-itage: a Quantitative Analysis of Women's History in Historic Sites and Monuments
Board of Canada Designations from 2010-2024**

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Abstract

Over the course of its existence, women have undeniably made many noteworthy contributions to the history of Canada. This research investigates how these contributions are represented in governmental recognition of historical importance. Since their founding, historical regulatory bodies in Canada have used designations like National Historic status to create and perpetuate official narratives and ideals of Canada's history as a settler colonial project. "Her-itage: a quantitative analysis of women's history in Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada designations from 2010-2024" is an examination of how Parks Canada reflects this historical tendency, and whether women's history has been considered of heritage significance by the federal government. It takes a mathematical approach to assessing how many officially recognized heritage resources (persons, sites and events) are relevant to women's history and what percentage of designations as a whole they represent. In particular, it assesses these statistics for designations awarded after 2009 which is the last year for such information being studied. The data show that the percentage of designations related to women's history since 2009 is 0.6% lower than the percentage for 2000-2009 and thus, there has been no increase in this millennium. Furthermore, women are significantly more likely to be recognized as historic persons than sites or events in women's history. These results indicate that women's history and contributions to Canadian history are still underrepresented at least in official assessments of heritage value.

Keywords: women's history, Canadian history, Parks Canada, heritage designations, feminist history

Introduction

The main issue at the heart of this investigation is the oft-debated one of heritage significance, an effort to question what is important to a given collective understanding of shared history. This attempts to interrogate what is commonly considered worthy of preservation and conservation, and in this case, what is upheld as examples of how the Canada of today was shaped throughout history and what it represents in the present.

The intent of this paper is to examine how these questions are answered by the Canadian governing bodies responsible for designating heritage resources, from a feminist point of view and a quantitative analysis. Designations of National Historic status from the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada (HSMBC) between 2010 and 2025 (n=255) are analyzed to determine how many of each of the three categories of distinction (People, Places and Events) are related to women and what percentages of the total for each year this represents. These yearly percentages are then compared throughout the 15-year period to determine how women's history is included overall. These theoretical questions become how heritage value is assigned (or not) to resources that represent women's history in Canada, and how specifically women's history and the people, places and events that shaped it are valued by these bodies.

Heritage Designations

In Canada, official recognition of historic and heritage-related importance can be conferred upon people, places, objects and events in numerous ways by numerous governing bodies. On the provincial level, the most common form this takes is designation of buildings and locations as heritage properties. For example, under the *Ontario Heritage Act*, “municipalities can pass bylaws to formally designate properties of cultural heritage value or interest” (“Designating Heritage Properties”). In Alberta, the *Historical Resources Act* allows the provincial government to designate structures, archeological and paleontological sites and “other immovable works of humans or nature that have historic, cultural, natural, scientific or aesthetic value” as Provincial Heritage Resources (“Designation of provincial historic

resources”).

The highest level of official recognition, by the federal government, is administered by Parks Canada via the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada (HSMBC). Established in 1919, the HSMBC awards designations of ‘National Historic’ status in three categories: sites, events and people. They are defined as such:

“[National Historic Sites] are found all across Canada – in urban centers, rural areas and deep in the wilderness – and are an integral part of our past and present.

[National Historic Events] evoke a moment, episode, movement or experience in the history of Canada.

[National Historic People] are people who, through their words or actions, have made a unique and enduring contribution to the history of Canada.” (“Directory of Federal Heritage Designations”)

The board consists of representatives from each province and territory, the Librarian and Archivist of Canada, an officer of the Canadian Museum of History, and the Vice-President of Parks Canada’s Indigenous Affairs and Cultural Heritage Directorate. This committee evaluates and analyses people, places and events nominated by the public and makes recommendations to the Minister of the Environment and Climate Change on which should be designated (“The Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada”).

Representation Matters

Official heritage designations are reflective of popular attitudes towards history and heritage held by Canadians. A 2022 poll of 1,000 Canadians across the country by the Heritage Trust for Canada found that 89% of Canadians feel that it is “very important” or “somewhat important” to preserve heritage sites and historic buildings, and 61% are “quite” or “very” interested in the efforts to conserve heritage places (Affleck, 2023). Most Canadians are clearly invested in the preservation of the country’s history, and a significant question that arises from this concern in the academic sphere is what exactly is being preserved - that is, what do the powers that be consider important to Canadian history?

Designations awarded by the HSMBC are interestingly both a *record* of Canadian history and a *product* of Canadian history. As Taylor (2016) explains, the establishment of the Board in 1919 was directly influenced by the First World War and the changes in national attitudes caused by the conflict. The Board was specifically concerned with solidifying the nascent national identity in this context of the British Empire. At their inaugural meeting, a framework for preserving heritage sites was proposed that included the following categories: “pre-historic sites, Indian forts, French memorials, Loyalist landing places, and landmarks of immigration from the British Isles” (Taylor, 2016). The preference for settlers from Britain and Loyalists to the British Crown is clear, as is a strong delineation of these histories from French and Indigenous histories. It can hardly be surprising that the historical narrative that arises from this idea of important places is one that prioritizes a white, British settler perspective.

This trend continued throughout at least the 20th century. Shannon Ricketts writes that in the 1920s and 1930s, the result of the commemorative program was to "create a family of historic sites that presented a particular vision of Canadian history--one intimately associated with colonial expansion bolstered by military force and leavened by the architectural legacy of the successful elites" (1996, p. 24). In a discussion of the decision making in the late 1950s, Dianne Dodd (2009, p. 29) explains that “board members saw the purpose of historic sites and plaques as evoking national pride by recognizing the largely white, male elites who forged a nation from a disparate group of British colonies, resisting the pull of the American republic to its south.”

Parks Canada has at least announced efforts to diversify their historic narratives. Their 2000 strategic plan named “Aboriginal History, Women’s History and Ethnocultural Communities’ History” as strategic priorities to address gaps in representation (“Framework for History and Commemoration: National Historic Sites System Plan 2019”). In 2019, they updated their Framework for History and Commemoration documentation, which in part “outlines a more inclusive and balanced approach to sharing stories of Canada’s past” and

“supports recognizing wide-ranging perspectives” (“Framework for History and Commemoration”). In 2022, they hosted 5 virtual workshops with 57 representatives of racialized communities across Canada, which resulted in the Inclusive Commemorations Initiative (“Fostering an inclusive history: Many peoples, many stories”).

The main objective of this paper is to inquire if and how this change in outlook to prioritize diversity has succeeded in the 21st century. A similar question is posed by CJ Pentland (2021) whose paper “Commemoration as reconciliation: Indigenous history and Canada’s heritage designation system” explores how public history is linked to Truth and Reconciliation in light of the 2020 designation of the residential school system as a National Historic Event. I will focus on representation of women and women’s history in NSMBC designations, using a quantitative analysis to compare the numbers of designations made since 2009 to those made prior.

Literature Review

In addition to Dodd's research of Parks Canada designations, scholarly and professional discussion of gender bias and inequality in assignments of historic and heritage importance has been discussed most prominently in the context of the UNESCO World Heritage List, which is comprised of "properties forming part of the cultural and natural heritage which the World Heritage Committee considers as having outstanding universal value" ("World Heritage List"). Sophia Labadi's 2007 paper “Representations of the nation and cultural diversity in discourses on World Heritage” discusses the value systems and values-based typologies that are used to determine which historic sites are worthy of preservation, and conservation in particular (pp. 148-149). She highlights the issues with UNESCO's self-proclaimed Universality framework, such as its Eurocentrism and tendency to simplify complex cultural systems and fall into cross-cultural generalizations (p. 153). This framework also tends to marginalize the “voices, experiences and histories of minority groups such as women or Indigenous people” (p. 154). To an extent, this bias is acknowledged by UNESCO, for example, in the 2016 issue of their publication *World*

Heritage, titled “World History and Gender Inequality”, which “begin[s] with a broad overview that looks at gender bias in the early days of the World Heritage Convention, male/female parity in examining nominations, and attributed gender roles in the preservation of World Heritage sites” (“World Heritage and Gender Inequality”). However, there is still work to be done in achieving the gender equality in historic representation that UNESCO claims as a priority. Vanessa Whittington employed an interdisciplinary qualitative and quantitative approach to investigate gender and human rights in UNESCO's World Heritage discourse in 2022. She conducted a quantitative analysis of 103 sites included in the World Heritage list between 2011-2015 and found that 32% had no clear association with any gender, while 59% had direct or indirect male associations and 8% had direct or indirect female associations. A similar analysis of UNESCO's list of Intangible Cultural Heritage, which indexes non-physical cultural elements such as performing arts and oral traditions, found that of 124 practices included in the same period, 41% involved equal practice between men and women while 38% were associated primarily with men and 9% involved mainly women (“Gender and Human Rights Within UNESCO’s International Heritage Discourse: An Analysis of the World Heritage and Intangible Heritage Conventions”).

In the United States, federal designation of historic importance is administered by the National Park Service (NPS) which designates monuments and sites both in and outside of National Parks as National Historic Landmarks. Similarly to Parks Canada, the NPS features few sites related to women's history throughout the 20th century, and “until the late twentieth century, with few exceptions, historic preservation reinforced a historical narrative that excluded most women and people of color” (Wellman, 2019). Women’s history began to be featured more prominently during the 1960s with the rise of the civil rights movement, with particular attention being paid to the history of the women’s suffrage movement. The NPS states that they have “made many efforts in the past decades to improve the representation of historically underrepresented groups, including women” and specifically have “implemented a women’s history initiative that identifies gaps in current interpretation and explores sites

associated with women for potential National Historic Landmark (NHL) designation” (Feitz, 2014). As of 2014, they had added “nearly 20” sites related to women's history over the prior two decades. Wellman (2019) writes that despite these recent initiatives, only 10 of the 51 national historic parks governed by the NPS deal directly with women, or 20%.

Interestingly, female historical figures are highly underrepresented in statues and monuments: in 2016, the Smithsonian Institution identified 5,575 statues of American historical figures across the country. Of these, 200 or less than 4% depict women (Wellman, 2019).

The blue plaque system in the United Kingdom and Ireland similarly indicates places deemed to be of national historical importance, usually due to association with a historical person or event, with the titular blue metal plaques. The scheme was established in 1866 by the Society of Arts who placed 35 plaques, 4 of which commemorated women. By 2018, 13% of total plaques across the United Kingdom were related to women (Eavis & Spencer, 2018). In London, home of over 1,000 plaques, 15% currently celebrate women – however, since 2016 and a 'plaques for women' campaign, over half of newly awarded plaques have been for women (“London's Blue Plaques”). Similar quantitative analyses of national systems that award designations of historical importance seem to indicate that, similarly to the situation in Canada, public commemoration of historical value includes women as small percentages of the whole.

Designations of 1919-2009

It is clear that for a long period of history, the representation of women was quite low. In the summer of 2009, Dianne Dodd conducted a numerological analysis of HSMBC designations throughout its history and how they reflected women's history. Her findings were stark. Between 1919 and 2008, the HSMBC awarded 1,942 historic designations. Of these, Dodd found 126 to be related to women's history - a mere 6% (Dodd, 2009, p. 33).

She did observe a trend of growth in more recent years following a concerted effort by Parks Canada. In the 1990s, national and regional workshops dedicated to women's history were attended by board members, staff, activists and experts in the field which led to a

noticeable increase in commemoration of women: “the number of designations relating to women rose to 38 out of a total of 311, or 12.2 percent. Up to 2008, there have been 37 out of a total of 198 designations relating to women, or 18.6 percent” (Dodd, 2009, p. 35). The fact that 18.6% of designations between 2000 and 2008 (Dodd, 2009, p. 34) were related to women is reflected almost identically in my own findings.

The ratio of persons of historic value compared to designations of sites and events is also important. Dodd (2009, p. 33) writes that in its early history “the HSMBC showed minimal interest in projects concerning women and/or those put forward by women” and that commemorations of women only increased when the board started a secondary initiative of plaques erected to note “what it called eminent or distinguished Canadians. This accelerated the number of ‘person’ designations in which the majority of women's commemorations are now found” (Dodd, 2009, p. 33). It should be noted that the term ‘secondary’ here refers to any plaque dedicated to a person rather than a place or an event, so it is not an indication of the esteem of women’s history in this case. However, it is pertinent that the advent of such ‘persons’ designations increased the inclusion of women. Women are more represented in the persons category than in ‘sites’ or ‘events’. Dodd (2009, p. 33) found that “Of the 126 designations relating to Canadian women in this federal program made from 1919 to 2008 (6 percent of 1,942 designations) 27 are sites, 66 are persons, and 33 are events.”

There are twice as many designations of women as persons of historic importance than there are of the second largest category of events relevant to women's history. Otherwise, 52% of the historic designations made by Parks Canada of women's history up until 2009 are of individual women themselves. This demonstrates that there was no recognition of events or sites with a role in women's history for the first decade of the Parks Canada program - and only one of each awarded for its first thirty years. This is a clear pattern, and one that is difficult to interpret. It seems obvious that for a large period of Canadian historical scholarship and public consciousness, individual women of the past were much more likely to be deemed 'important' than places where women had lived and worked and events involving women. This trend is reflected in my data on the post-2009 designations, and possible causes are discussed further below.

The impetus for this paper was to conduct an analysis that continues Dodd's work on designations made since 2009, to see if the numbers reflect any change in how women's history is represented. A similar methodology is applied, with strikingly similar results.

Designations of 2010-2025

Approach and methodology

In light of the clear need for more diversity of Canada's history in official heritage designations, this paper is an investigation into the representation of women's history in selections of the Heritage Sites and Monuments Board of Canada. The main research approach taken here is a quantitative analysis, one of determining *how many* official designations of National Historic Events, Sites and People are given to heritage resources related to women's history.

Naturally, an approach like this that is qualitative rather than quantitative and relies on categorizing resources in black-and-white terms as 'related' or 'not' will lack some nuance. While it is generally obvious which National Historic People were women, it is difficult to establish with certainty which events and places are related to women's history. Historic events can involve and impact people of all genders but were only considered clearly 'related'

in this case if the main actors or individuals mentioned were women.

In the case of places, it can usually be assumed that most buildings and places in Canada would have been occupied or used by women, at least incidentally. Many such designations are churches or houses, which women naturally used and interacted with. In the interest of consistency and a clear boundary, I only counted sites or events that specifically mentioned women in their description of significance on the designation website. For example, in 2010 two National Historic Site designations were given: the Dominion Astrophysical Observatory and the Canadian Car & Foundry. The Dominion Astrophysical Observatory is described as such: “World-renowned observatory where many discoveries about the nature of the Milky Way galaxy were made, using the observatory's 1.83-metre reflecting telescope and spectroscopes” (“Directory of Federal Heritage Designations”). The Canadian Car & Foundry’s summary is: “Representative of the wartime contributions made by thousands of women; played an important role in the mass-transit manufacturing industry” (“Directory of Federal Heritage Designations”). In this case, I assessed the second site as having a clear connection to women’s history and consider this year to have 1 of 2 National Historic Site designations as being related to women. This system of classification is naturally subjective based on my own assessments.

For the purposes of this analysis, I searched the Parks Canada Directory of Federal Heritage Designations. These designations are catalogued online (“Directory of Federal Heritage Designations”) and can be searched by several criteria including year of designation. I searched for designations awarded in each year from 2010 up to 2025 to National Historic Sites, Events and People. I considered persons who were women, and sites and events that had to do with women or contributed to women’s rights or history as ‘related to women’.

HSMBC Designations by Year, 2010-2024

Based on the criteria explained above, I made the following table comparing total designations awarded by the HSMBC each year to those related to women. The number of all the year’s designations related to women is listed and calculated as a percentage of the

overall number. The percentages have been rounded to one decimal point. The breakdown of which of these designations related to women are National Historic People, Events and Sites is indicated on the right.

Table 1.

Designations of National Historic People, Events and Sites by the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada as related to women's history, 2010-2024

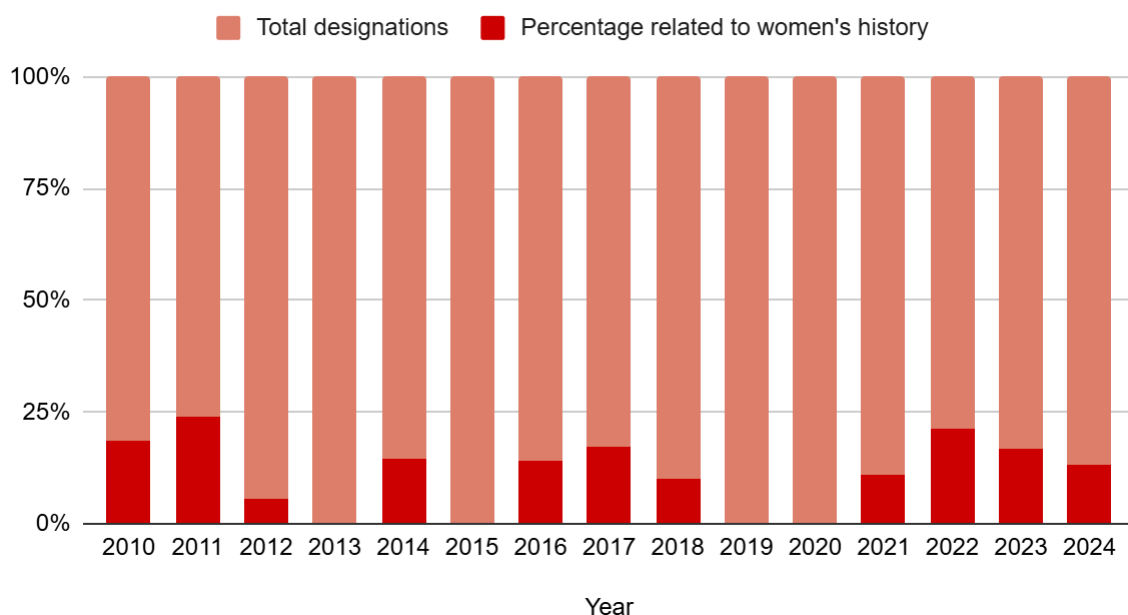
Year	Total designations	Designations related to women	Percentage	People	Events	Sites
2010	13	3	23.1%	1	1	1
2011	60	19	31.7%	12	6	1
2012	17	1	5.9%	1	0	0
2013	2	0	0%	0	0	0
2014	47	8	17.0%	5	3*	0
2015	1	0	0%	0	0	0
2016	12	2	16.7%	2	0	0
2017	19	4	21.1%	4	0	0
2018	18	2	11.1%	1	1	0
2019	21	0	0%	0	0	0
2020	8	0	0%	0	0	0
2022	11	3	27.3%	3	0	0
2023	5	1	20.0%	1	0	0
2024	13	2	15.4%	2	0	0

*One 2014 designation is the foundation of the Royal Winnipeg Ballet in 1939 which I considered relevant as it was founded by two women, Gweneth Lloyd and Betty Farrally.

The percentages of each year's total are visualized in a bar chart below:

Figure 1

Percentage of women's history designations by year

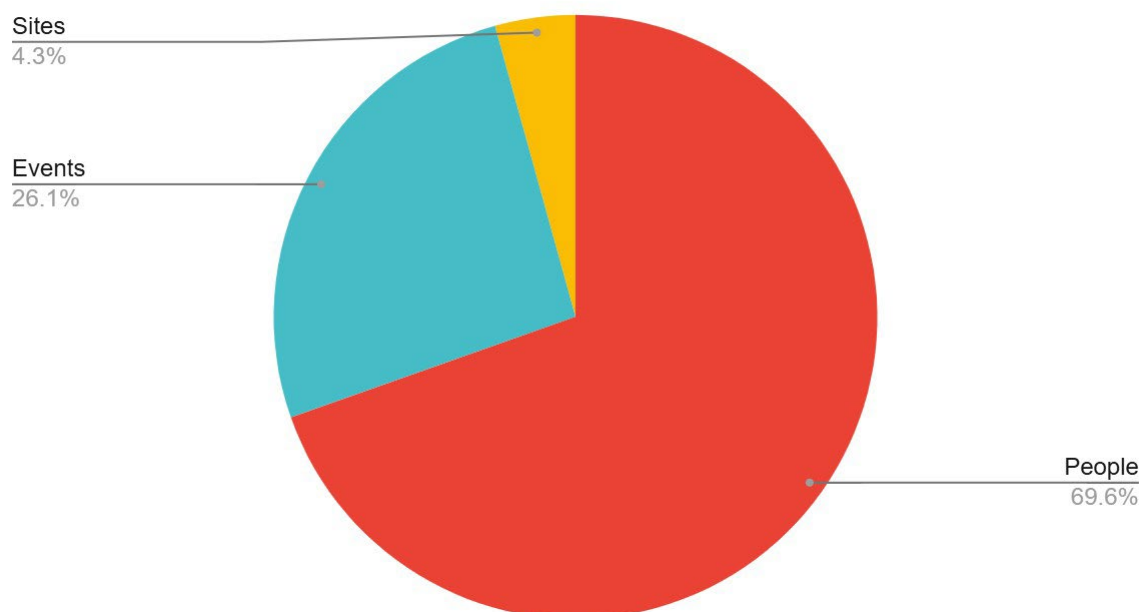


Overall, there were 255 designations given. Of these, 46 were related to women which represents 18.0% of the total.

Of the designations related to women's history, 32 or 69.6% are National Historic People. 12 or 26.1% are National Historic Events and 2 or 4.3% are National Historic Sites. The breakdown of designations by these types is illustrated with a pie chart below:

Figure 2

Breakdown of women's history designations by type



Note. The graph displays percentages of HSMC designations related to women between

2010-2024 as National Historic Sites, Events and People as percentages of the total related designations.

The percentage of women's history of the total designations is markedly similar to Dodd's results. She found that of the designations made between 2000-2008, 18.6% were related to women - which means that there has been very little change in the percentage during the 21st century. Indeed, there was a **0.6% decrease** in the second decade of the 2000s compared to the first.

In four of the years in the 14-year period (2013, 2015, 2019 and 2020), there were no designations given that were relevant to women's history. There is no upward or downward trend in the percentage of such designations made: the pattern is erratic. The most recent year, 2024, has 15.4% which is almost half the percentage in the highest year of 2011.

Analysis and Recommendations

These data indicate that representation of women's history in HSMBC resource designation has decreased over the course of this millennium. Trends over the years since 2010 show no signs of this representation increasing. Based on these numbers, women's history and women's contributions to the history and heritage of Canada are underrepresented.

It is also very noticeable that, similar to Dodd's findings in 2009, there are many more historic people that are women than there are historic sites and events that mainly involved women. In 2016, 2017, 2022, 2023 and 2024, all of the designations given were to persons. This strong trend could indicate a preference in historic institutions like the HSMBC to consider individual women more historically valuable than places frequented by women and events concerning women.

Dodd attributes the over-representation of individual women to the popular conception of Canadian history, in particular the popularity of military history and the perception that most of Canada's heritage resources are related to battle and wars. Similarly to Ricketts (1996), she finds that the idea of Canadian history maintained by the HSMBC is one dominated by military narratives. She writes, "In the literature on popular historical

consciousness in Canada and elsewhere, it appears that many ‘consumers’ of public history are not particularly receptive to women's history as a topic, certainly vis-a-vis such perennial favorites as warfare” (Dodd, 2009, p. 35).

This results in those resources of women’s history that are deemed relevant being those select few that relate to military history and conflict. Most such events are battles, and most such sites are forts and military bases, neither of which tended to involve many women for most of history. It was, however, possible for individual women to be involved in war for varying reasons (such as Laura Secord, a very well-known example of a Canadian woman in history) so they as individuals show up more. This tendency reflects Canada’s history as a settler colonial project, in which conquest and armed defeat and suppression of Indigenous peoples make up a large portion of the past of the nation.

Two other common types of women that are well-represented in Dodd’s findings are religious women like nuns and what she calls “popular heroines” (2009, p. 36) like athletes and authors. I believe it is notable that these kinds of women are those that were part of traditionally male-dominated spheres and are thus examples of women that ‘fit in’ with the male-dominated historical narrative. This raises the question of how women’s history would be represented in this popular consciousness if it focused on more historically female-dominated areas and topics. An interesting future study could be a more *qualitative* investigation of all the women’s history designations, to determine how many of them are related to military history and such ‘popular heroines’, versus how many are more aligned with traditionally feminine spheres. I believe that if Parks Canada endeavored to question and challenge the types of contributions to history and events in the historical narratives that they deem important to the story of Canada, they would find more women’s history to be of sufficient value to include.

Another promising line of inquiry is similar qualitative analysis of designations related to other groups underrepresented in traditional historical narratives. Calculating how many designations are related to histories of Canada from Indigenous, disabled, 2SLGBTQ+,

racialized, immigrant, and linguistic minority lenses could further illustrate if and how the priorities of bodies like the HSMBC have changed and how these priorities are implemented. Such scholarship could both create practical evidence for organizations like Parks Canada to base future strategic planning on and provide insight into how popular understandings of Canadian history and Canadian identities are constructed and upheld.

Conclusion

Women's history, like all history, is a complex and ever-evolving field. Summarizing it in terms of designations of heritage sites is naturally reductive. However, doing so can offer a snapshot of how the Canadian heritage authorities assign value to women and their history. A quantitative analysis of Parks Canada designations of National Historic states indicates a relatively low percentage of designations related to women's history. Furthermore, individual women are much more likely to be designated National Historic People than places, and events related to women's history are to be designated National Historic Sites and Events.

Parks Canada and the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada were founded with the intention of fostering Canadian nationalism within a settler colonial context, and explicitly prioritized histories and identities descended from the British Empire. They upheld and constructed ideas of Canadian national identity that prioritized the voices and stories of white, male settlers for much of their existence. While the HSMBC has undertaken initiatives and strategies to promote diverse histories more recently, the recognition of women's history still lags behind.

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