

# Nova Scotia Highland Village Society History

## Ar dileab's ar dochas: Fifty years of the Nova Scotia Highland Village Society

Written by Cheryl Sullivan

### The Mission Statement:

*"The Nova Scotia Highland Village is a non-profit Society with the mission: to protect, interpret and further the collection of buildings and artifacts at the Nova Scotia Highland Village site in Iona; and to preserve and promote the Scottish Highland and Island culture as found in Nova Scotia.*

One of the definitions *The Canadian Oxford Dictionary* gives for the word "society" is "an association of persons united by a common aim or interest or principle." For the past forty years, the Nova Scotia Highland Village Society has been focused on the preservation and the promotion of Scottish culture in Nova Scotia through the creation and maintenance of Highland Village.

It is without doubt that the Highland Village would not be where it is today without the dedication, stubbornness, and dedication of the many volunteers and members of the Society.

### CONCEPTION

The Nova Scotia Highland Village was created during a time when history and culture were beginning to have major economic potential. Starting in the 1880s, Nova Scotia had a period of economic prosperity, with a rise in manufacturing and primary industry. But by the 1920s, the province was going through economic uncertainty marked by labour unrest, large layoffs, and people moving away to find work elsewhere. People began looking for other ways of boosting the economy, and tourism seemed to be an ideal method. Nova Scotia was promoted as a clean, safe, unspoiled place to visit, with hospitable people willing to share their culture and history. Angus L. MacDonald, who became Premier in 1933, was particularly interested in promoting Scottish heritage, and it was during his time in office that the Gaelic College was founded (1939) and the official Nova Scotia tartan was created (1953). It was also under his leadership that the idea of a Highland Village was begun.

In 1938, Scotland hosted the British Empire Exhibition in the city of Glasgow. One of the main purposes of this particular Exhibition was "to direct attention to Scotland's historical and scenic attractions." As a result, Dr. Colin Sinclair, an architect and Gaelic scholar, designed a "Clachan"--a replica of a typical Highland village that showed the buildings and the conditions of life during the 1700-early 1800s. It was a cross-section of Highland housing, and contained nine buildings of various nature, including a castle and a post office.

Not all were happy that the Clachan was part of the Exhibition--some people felt that it was not authentic or historically accurate, or that it did not fit into the overall modern theme of the Exhibition. However, the Clachan proved to be very popular with visitors from overseas and with Highland Scots, and by the end of the year, over 1.5 million visits had been made to the Village.

Among these visitors was a delegation from Nova Scotia, including local residents, government officials, and Premier Angus L. himself. He was inspired by the Clachan and was convinced that it would be an ideal way to promote and preserve Scottish heritage in Nova Scotia, as well as generate some tourism dollars. However, the onset of World War II prevented precious resources from being used for anything but the war effort and little attention was paid to anything else. Secondly, Premier MacDonald had resigned to become Minister of National Defense for Naval Services, and did not return to Nova Scotia until 1945, so plans had to be put on hold.

The idea of a Highland Village remained in the background until August 17, 1953, when W.L. Fillmore and Major C.I.N. MacLeod met with the re-elected Premier Angus L. in his home in Halifax. The initial thought was to commemorate Scottish ancestry in Nova Scotia by reproducing some original Scottish homes and buildings, like those that would have been found in Scotland. The other part of the plan was to create a museum called "The Scot in North America", dedicated to the experiences of Scottish immigrants to the "New World". Mr. Fillmore was encouraged to contact Dr. Colin Sinclair, the designer of the original Clachan, to ask for designs and assistance.

Premier MacDonald passed away suddenly a few months later in 1954, and the project lost a key supporter, especially in government. However, Fillmore and MacLeod continued on with the initial stages of planning, and received copies of the Clachan blueprints from Dr. Colin Sinclair in May, 1954. They took the blueprints and their idea to the November 3rd meeting of the Nova Scotia Association of Scottish Societies (NSASS), a group devoted to the promotion of Scottish heritage all over the province. Serious discussions were then begun to study the possibilities of such an ambitious project. In early 1955, a "site selection" committee was set up to consider possible locations and interest, made up of the following people: Rev. D.A. MacKinnon, Pictou Landing; Rod MacDonald, Sydney; W.L. Fillmore, Amherst; Steven J. MacKinnon, Antigonish; and Major C.I.N. MacLeod, Sydney (non-voting Chairman).

### Competition

While the site selection committee did its research, the NSASS prepared a series of briefs to present to Premier Hicks and the provincial government. The second presentation, made on May 3, 1955, suggested that the ultimate aim of the Highland Village project was "to house an educational and cultural centre for our Scottish heritage and traditions, containing the following sections and facilities: Library, Displays, Short Courses, Gatherings, Pageants, Plays." It also recommended that the site be built up gradually, perhaps over a period of 25 years, and could contain replicas of blackhouses, an log cabin that the first immigrants would have made upon arrival in the province, and a museum about Scottish immigrants and their descendants in Nova Scotia. The government expressed support for the idea, but could not commit any funding to the project at that time.

Meanwhile, the Highland Village project was being discussed in communities all over Nova Scotia that felt they deserved to have Village in their area. The members of the newly-formed Grand Narrows and District Board of Trade were keen on improving the area and promoting economic development. At the April 14, 1955 meeting, "all were in favour of making every effort to bring this tourist attraction to Iona" and the Secretary was given the responsibility of preparing a brief to send to the NSASS outlining the area's assets, "stressing the fact that the only hindrance was the backward condition of the roads." On October 29, 1955, Hugh F. MacKenzie and the Rev. Dr. A.D. MacKinnon presented the brief on behalf of the Grand Narrows Board of Trade to the site selection committee.

They offered many reasons why the Iona area should be chosen, including: 99% of the current resident population were of Scottish descent; land was available that had the Highland ambience with a great view of the Bras d'Or Lakes; the Gaelic language and other Scottish customs and traditions were all practised and very much alive in the area; there was a need to encourage economic growth in this particular region of Nova Scotia to prevent out-migration of the youth; and it had the potential to encourage more tourists and visitors to stay longer in Nova Scotia, and perhaps even persuade more people to visit the province in the first place. It was, by all accounts, a very sound presentation spoken entirely in Gaelic, which impressed the committee members. The Board of Trade minutes from November 10, 1955, reflect the optimism felt after the presentation:

"The Rev. Dr. [A.D. MacKinnon] gave a very elaborate report on the proceedings which satisfied all present that an able presentation had been made in favour of Iona as a site for the Highland Village. Rev. Dr. MacKinnon was warmly applauded for his presentation and as a token of gratitude a large sized hat was passed around to defray the delegations expenses on the trip to New Glasgow."

The Grand Narrows group knew that the Pictou area had a strong case for being chosen for the project--the first Scottish immigrants to Nova Scotia were at that time believed to have been brought there on the Hector in 1773--so they continued to work diligently in the months following their presentation to gather support and to provide favourable conditions for the village to be constructed on Cape Breton. The Sydney Board of Trade endorsed the Iona site, and the Grand Narrows group were doing everything they could to rectify the situation of the road conditions in the area. On February 9, 1956, the minutes of the Board of Trade reflect that the membership were urged again to spread the word: "Referring to the Highland Village project, the President stated that we should endeavour to have the idea sold to everybody.

As long as we are convinced that it would be a good asset to the area, we should go all out to get it." People in the area got the message, because by the critical March 10 meeting of the NSASS Site Selection Committee, it had received the following on Iona's behalf: a brief by the Grand Narrows Board of Trade (already presented); a resolution from the Royal Canadian Legion Branch 124 (Iona); a resolution from the Municipality of Victoria County that endorsed the Iona district above all other potential sites in the area; a motion from the local Home and School Association; and six letters from individuals, five of which were written in Gaelic.

Other communities, such as Pictou and Antigonish, also expressed interest and prepared information for the site committee, which held meetings throughout 1955 to sift through the applications. The key and decisive meeting was held on March 10, 1956, at the Nova Scotia Department of Agriculture office in Antigonish. By this point in time, the committee had narrowed down the options between choosing a site in Pictou County, or a site somewhere in Cape Breton. Lengthy discussion ensued, with the first vote ending up a draw at 2-2. At that point, a suggestion was made to either consider a compromise location (Antigonish, for instance), or for the committee to recommend getting an outside arbitrator since it seemed like they could not settle the issue themselves.

Neither of these options went over well, and Rev. D.A. MacKinnon eventually decided "that in order to break the deadlock and settle the matter he would reconsider his opinion and vote for Cape Breton." After finally deciding that the location of the Village would be in Iona, Rod MacDonald and Major C.I.N. MacLeod were appointed to pick out an appropriate site in the Iona District and the following motion was made to pass on to the membership of the NSASS:

"Moved by W.L. Fillmore and seconded by Rev. D.A. MacKinnon that the first Highland Village be on Cape Breton Island, and the second Highland Village be in Pictou County. Motion unanimously carried." The general membership of the NSASS endorsed the site committee report on March 13, 1956.

(An interesting side-bar: W.L. Fillmore was strongly in favour of Pictou, and supposedly had a check for building the village in his pocket from the millionaire Cyrus Eaton, who also wanted it in the Pictou/Pugwash area. When the vote came through, Fillmore with a flourish ripped up the check--no one was really sure if it was a legitimate check or just a scrap of paper, but as Rod C. MacNeil said "the drama of it was good"!)

## Creation

Now that the initial excitement about the site competition was over, it seemed that the only people still really interested in turning the plans into reality were the citizens of the Iona District. Between 1956 and 1962, the group that eventually became the Highland Village Society gradually assumed all the responsibility for the project due to fading support from the NSASS and the provincial government. The NSASS liked the idea of a Highland Village and had sponsored it, but they did not have any money to help with the actual construction. The project had also lost a key pro-Scottish supporter in the death of Angus L. MacDonald and by this time the Highland Village project was not a high priority on the new government's agenda.

However, these obstacles did not deter the Grand Narrows group from moving on with the next order of the business, which was to obtain a piece of land for the project. By May 23, 1956, Rod MacDonald and Major MacLeod had settled on the general site area in Hector's Point, just outside of Iona. This particular piece of property was ideal since it had been abandoned since 1921, it had the ideal Highland-like landscape (lots of hills), and some of the land was already cleared from previous farming.

On September 8, 1956, a meeting was held about the legal status of the land. It was found that since there were \$280 of back taxes owing on the property, someone or some group would have to pay them. The other problem was that the owner of the property, Stephen Urban MacNeil, had died on July 22, 1937 and left behind no legal will. Members of the Grand Narrows Board of Trade would have to track down the heirs of Stephen Urban and get them to

sign a quit claim deed handing over the land. They were advised to pursue this avenue rather than encourage the land be sold at public auction, because there was always the risk of somebody with outside or nefarious interests driving up the bid price.

On September 10, 1956, a meeting was held with some of Stephen Urban's heirs (Murdock MacNeil, Lexina MacLeod and Florence MacDonald) and their families. The heirs agreed to the idea of signing the quit claim deed and giving the land to the project at no cost, and they also decided that Murdock, as logical heir of the land if there had been a will, would pay the \$280 in back taxes and would eventually be reimbursed by the NSASS or another sponsoring group. For the next year, the rest of the heirs were contacted and signed the deed, which took some time since some of them lived as far away as British Columbia, and the Board of Trade also had some difficulties in locating the exact boundaries of the almost 50 acre site. On September 12, 1957, all eight of Stephen Urban MacNeil's heirs--Mary Hughena Rutherford, Murdock Alexander MacNeil, Mary Johanna Cameron, Lexina MacLeod, Margaret Pauline Allen, Mary Monica Parks, Katherine Teresa Peters, and Annie Florence MacDonald--transferred the land over by deed to Rev. Daniel E. MacDonald, parish priest of Iona.

Two months later, on November 2, 1957, the first meeting of the Highland Village Planning Committee meeting was held. The recommendations from this meeting were then passed on to the November 23rd meeting of the NSASS, who agreed to the following: that the Highland Village become incorporated by the Nova Scotia Legislature, that a legal advisor be appointed to assist with legal matters, that the quit claim deeds to the Hector Point land be handed over to the NSASS as interim Trustee, that the Planning Committee be allowed to appoint more members, and that future plans regarding layout of the site, costs, and a fundraising campaign be defined. The quit claim was then transferred from Father MacDonald to the NSASS to be held until the Village was incorporated. Another later result was the official naming of project as "The Nova Scotia Highland Village", and the first slate of officers:

- President W.L. McCormack Iona
- 1st Vice S.J. MacKinnon Antigonish
- 2nd Vice Bert MacLeod Sydney
- Sec/Treas Earl MacInnis Glace Bay
- Trustees Rev. A.A. Ross Christmas Island
- Rev. Dr. A.D. MacKinnon Little Narrows
- Doug Wornell Sydney
- and other area representatives from across the province. Gerald Murphy, LLB, was appointed as legal counsel.

The next step was to set up the legal procedures and structure for the project, which were critical and needed to be appropriate for a project this size. In the summer of 1958, Edward Russell (a part-time resident of Iona with extensive American connections) contacted two similar historical villages in the United States on behalf of the Highland Village group. Administrators from Colonial Williamsburg (Virginia) and Old Sturbridge Village (Massachusetts) sent Mr. Russell by-law and incorporation information to assist in properly setting up the Highland Village structure. Using these documents, Russell drew up some provisional by-laws and gave them to the lawyer, Gerald Murphy. After some adaptations and changes, Murphy submitted them to Halifax for incorporation.



On June 20, 1959, the Incorporation Charter was signed by Hugh F. MacKenzie, Earl MacInnis, William McCormack, Rev. A.D. MacKinnon, Major C.I.N. MacLeod, Rev. A.A. Ross, and Stephen MacKinnon, and the Nova Scotia Highland Village was officially incorporated on November 3, 1959. Papers to authorize the transfer of land from the NSASS back to the Nova Scotia Highland Village were signed on June 25, 1960 and registered three months later. The dream of a Highland Village was one major step closer to reality.

Meanwhile, the Iona Branch of the Caledonian Society of Cape Breton was formed in December 1957 to be a contact group for the project with the NSASS. One of the best-remembered things that the short-lived group accomplished was what could be called the Highland Village's first marketing plan. They erected a sign on the Hector Point property after going to the trouble of getting official permission from the NSASS. Father Alex Ross recently told a humorous story about the day he, Peter F. MacLean and Murdock MacDonald went and placed the stakes for the sign: "On a certain little hillside we drove the stakes, and that's where it started from there...The other fellows had some sandwiches.....they didn't have any tea, they didn't have anything else, but I had a little flask of Johnnie Walker...Peter F. and I took a few sips, oh, and Murdoch MacDonald said "I never touched that in my life." Peter F. replied, "Never too late to do good.".... and that's what I remember." On the sign was the message "Hector's Point / Iona / Highland Village Site / ar dileab's ar dochas (our heritage and our hope)". People passing by the site would catch site of the sign and stop to take pictures and ask questions of any volunteers that would be there working. This helped to spread the word about the project, which seemed to work because the following appeared in Will Bird's travel book *These Are the Maritimes*, published in 1959:

" 'They're to have a Highland Village in Iona,' announced the third of the trio, a dark and swarthy fellow with hair in his ears. 'You know they speak the Gaelic there as they did one hundred and fifty years ago when the Scots came there from the Hebrides. They've had a real battle over the site for those Pictou Scots and their tales of the Hector seemed in line for it. But it's in Iona, down the "Road to the Isles" that they'll put up an authentic old Scottish town with cottages of field stone, a miniature castle, a post office and a museum. The roofs will be straw and heather, and it's fitting. For Iona is a spot where the Gaelic is really a fireside tongue.' "

## Celebration & Construction

Now that the project had land, legal structure and interested people, it required money and some hard work. Over the next six years, the Highland Village group continued its efforts to obtain government funding while assembling various building plans and attempting to start some modest construction on the site. In order to draw attention to the project and raise some money, an outdoor Scottish concert was held on August 4, 1962. This was the first Highland Village Day, which turned out to be a great success and has been an annual event ever since. Those who attended (approximately 1500 people in total) remembered the first Highland Village Day as a "really beautiful (sunny) day" filled with Gaelic music and dancing. People came from all over-- Nova Scotia, Scotland, Indiana, New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts, and more.

The purpose of the day, as it always has been ever since, was to promote Gaelic culture, to give young and/or amateur performers experience and exposure, and to raise money for operational programs at the Highland Village. An outdoor stage was constructed for the concerts that summer, as well as a log building that was stocked with locally- collected artifacts. This cabin became the first artifact storage building and in the following summer Stephen Rory MacNeil was hired to look after the collection and encourage more donations. Bert MacLeod was a key figure in donating a large number of artifacts to the Highland Village, and his generosity and collecting nature encouraged others to donate objects as well. Many people brought things voluntarily or through word of mouth--Walter MacNeil remembered his father going out through the countryside looking to see what people had and trying to convince them to donate appropriate things to the Village.

The Society also obtained ten and a half acres of land from Rod A. MacNeil for three hundred dollars in 1964, which is the area known as Redden's Hill. A few years later, thanks to federal Centennial Year funding, a larger museum building was constructed, and plans were made to have the museum open at least a few hours a day from June to September. The first funding grant for the Highland Village came from the Victoria County Council in March 1971.

In the early 1970s, the Highland Village group were working on three major issues--site planning, land deals, and construction. At first this was difficult due to the sudden deaths of two key members in 1971--President William L. McCormack in January, and Secretary Hugh J. Murphy in April--the Society had to regroup and reorganize their development plans. At this point in time, the concept of what the completed Village should look like was changing. A majority of the members felt that there should be more to the layout than several buildings depicting life in Scotland, which had been the original plan.

They felt that at least half of the Village should be devoted to the experiences of the Highland settler in Nova Scotia. This shift in focus resulted in a meeting with Barry Diamond of the Technical Division of the Department of Industry and Development in October, 1971. It was determined that a "Master Plan" was needed to design the required buildings, the layout of the site, and to ensure that the representation of content on the site was historically documented and authenticated.

### The content of the Master Plan should be as follows:



A short history of life and conditions in Scotland prior to the departure of the people who emigrated to Nova Scotia, including a description of buildings, landscape and conditions which forced them to move; an historical account of the conditions which these people faced upon arriving in Nova Scotia, as well as what they did for food and shelter, etc. during the early years; an historical account of the frame building village which were eventually constructed, including detailed descriptions of buildings, living conditions, etc. and decisions must be made regarding the nature and content of each of the three sections of the proposed Highland village, such as number of buildings, and the relationship of the buildings to one another. All of these things should be documented where (sic) possible and where this isn't possible, the memories of the people involved will have to suffice." Letter to R.C. MacNeil, dated Oct 8, 1971, from Barry N. Diamond (Dept of Dev)

As a result of this advice from the Technical Unit, many provincial historical institutions (such as the Nova Scotia Museum and the Public Archives) were contacted for available information about Scottish immigration and life. There were some difficulties in tracking down historical documentation to use as reference for the Village--at that point in time, immigration patterns and settlement in Nova Scotia were not topics studied in- depth, so the members had to make do with what information they did have. In April, 1972, the Technical Unit released their "Concept for Development" Report, which contained a detailed plan of the physical layout of the Village. At the same time, a letter-writing campaign was started to appeal to people of Scottish descent and major companies for financial contributions. Many "ordinary" people responded to the idea of the project, much more so than the large corporations.

While this was taking place, the Highland Village group were also in the midst of negotiating a land deal with the Cape Breton Development Corporation (Devco). On February 17, 1972, Alex MacLean and Rod C. MacNeil met with J. Alton MacLean of Devco, who proposed the idea of purchasing some Highland Village land to build a restaurant and motel. The executive of the Highland Village were contacted and quickly agreed to the then confidential idea. Two day later, surveyors for Devco went to the Highland Village site to check the deeds and to scope out a possible site for their motel. The deed for four acres of land adjacent to the Village site was signed on July 19, 1972, and the Highland Heights motel and restaurant were opened the next year.

1973 was also the year that two major capital grants were awarded to the Highland Village. An L.I.P. grant of \$32860.00 was awarded in January and a Devco grant of \$57000 was given in June. Both of these grants enabled the Village to begin construction. Much of the money was used to buy old houses in the area for their lumber to reconstruct or recondition buildings for the site.

The lumber from the store came from the home of George MacKenzie in Cain's Mountain, and the counters and the doors came from A.D. Morrison's store on the road to Loch Lomond Mountain.

The schoolhouse and barn were pretty much reconstructed from their own original lumber. The MacIver/ Nash house was rebuilt in the c.1900 style from lumber from other houses: Nash (St. Columba), MacIver (South Cove), Alex P. MacNeil (Grass Cove), Barra Glen School, Stephen M. MacNeil (Barra Glen), Michael R. & Joseph MacNeil (Barra Glen). During this time, the Board felt that a Manager was needed to oversee the site development, so in 1973 Brian McCormack was hired for this position.

Major capital grants also came from the Department of Regional Economic Expansion in the late 1970s and early 1980s, which helped with the construction of a new outdoor stage and amphitheatre, as well as a new administrative/welcome centre. By the end of 1978, the following buildings could be found on the site: interpretation centre & museum, carding mill, 1880-1900 frame house, schoolhouse, forge, country store, barn, frame house (1830-1875), log cabin, stone (black) house, canteen, public washrooms, outdoor performance centre, and log storage building.



All of these developments would not have happened without thousands of hours of volunteer work. On Oct 27, 1979, the name of the organization was officially changed to "The Nova Scotia Highland Village Society".

Another area that the Society was focusing on was the official "status" of the museum in provincial terms. From the very beginning of the Highland Village project, very little operational monies came from the provincial government through the provincial museum funding system. The Society were usually quite successful in their funding applications for capital projects, but had a tougher time with operational funding. From as early as 1974, the Society sought to change their status as a community museum to a branch or provincial museum, but as of May 1976 the highest level that the Village was able to obtain was "year-round museum". Although the Highland Village had special status and their level of museum assistance was protected, the Society felt that the Village needed and deserved Branch status and would continue to pursue this issue for many years.

### Concentrated Commitment

The 1980s and 1990s saw the Society highly involved in all sorts of economic and cultural consultations in their efforts to support their community with regional development, as well as to persuade the Nova Scotia Museum to accept the Village as a Branch Museum. In the first half of the 1980s, a number of studies were commissioned and completed.

In April, 1984, the Highland Village Society adopted the "Phase II Development Plan for the Nova Scotia Highland Village" The Society newsletter of February 1984 described this study as one that "focuses on both the need to develop educational programs for our members and employees as well as the local community, a number of physical site improvements and an overall marketing strategy." A direct result of the Phase II plan was the implementation later on the same year of a Gaelic training program initiated for staff and community.

The purpose of the program was to give people increased fluency and comfort levels with the Gaelic language and to increase participation with songs/music/conversations. Assistance came from the Nova Scotia Dept. of Culture/Recreation/Fitness and the federal Secretary of State. James Watson was hired to co-ordinate this program. Another result of the Phase II plan was the commissioning of a marketing plan in 1986 that was produced by Pierce Associates to help to set some goals for the Society and museum. The genealogy service now known as Roots Cape Breton was one of the goals produced from this project.

A second set of consultations happened in 1984 and in May, 1995, a Community Economic Development Study was published for Central Cape Breton regarding the communities on or adjacent to Route 223. The project was sponsored by the Society and the purpose was to assess the current economic situation of this region and the potential for new development. It eventually resulted in some specific community development projects, such as the rebuilding of the Federal wharf in Iona, improved telephone services, study of Bras d'Or Lakes & watershed area, and the transportation of the MacQuarrie/Fox House by truck and barge to the Highland Village in 1989 (with funds from governmental sources, ACOA and private donations).

Perhaps the most important report that was commissioned by the Highland Village Society was presented in 1988. The Society retained Doane Raymond Management Consultants to develop a better business plan for the Highland Village and their recommendations were brought to the Society on June 4th. As reflected in the Society's minutes, two major points emerged from the report:

1) Doane Raymond strongly recommended a review of what the museum's operation funds were being spent on. They felt that the museum's resources were being stretched too thin by extra projects.

"These programs [Gaelic language program, Highland roots] need to be supported by external sources of dedicated revenue and not from the Society's operational budget. The report identifies the "Village" as its major product and all other products such as Entertainment, Gaelic language and Highland Roots as secondary products that reinforce the integrity of the Village."

2) They also strongly recommended that targeting Industrial Cape Breton and Metro Halifax with concentrated and focused marketing--Highland Village needed to get the word out better and farther, and the two major population centres would be a good start.

This presentation and the discussion that resulted was a specific turning point for the Society and the Village. Was the Highland Village Society going to be a cultural entity with a museum "on the side", or would the Society concentrate on making the Highland Village a museum of excellence with cultural

activities being a natural outreach from that? Jim St.Clair, President of the Society at that point, remembers this time as a real renewal of energy and focus, as plans were made to concentrate on the site and its needs as a museum.

The members of the Society were so optimistic about these new possibilities that on November 6, 1988, the Board of Directors voted to apply again for Branch status with the Nova Scotia Museum. In early 1989, the application was denied due to lack of extra available funding and personnel resources. The NSM Board of Governors recognized the relevant lack of Scottish culture represented in museums in Nova Scotia, and encouraged the Highland Village with their mandate. The issue was "deferred to a future time and set of conditions". Despite this set-back, the Society pressed on with changes and improvements to the museum. In June 1989, Charlene Kosick, a graduate of the Museum Studies program at UCCB, was hired as the Curator/Education Officer and began to concentrate on tighter artifact collection policies and preservation methods.

A new building, the MacQuarrie-Fox House, was moved in its entirety from Troy, Inverness County to the site in September. 1990 saw the Highland Roots Genealogy Project formally introduced as a growing database of information on Scottish families in Cape Breton, and a site plan was researched and developed for improvements and upgrade to the Village itself. All of these plans naturally needed extra money to keep running, so the Society then sought to increase the level of their base (operational) funding. In January 1991, a meeting with the provincial Minister of Tourism & Culture (Roland Thornhill) and the Minister of Education (Ron Giffin) resulted in a verbal agreement that the level of base funding for the Highland Village would be increased. However, the Society was soon severely disappointed when the verbal agreement was negated by the new Minister of Tourism & Culture (Terence Donahue) three months later.

Despite intense protest, the original decision was not reinstated, and left the Society more frustrated than before. Although they received some extra "one time only" funding that year, this did not make up for what they had hoped for. All of these matters had to be set aside for a time, because in the summer of 1992, the Society's Board had to shift attention to operational matters. After almost twenty years of dedication and service to the Society in various capacities, Brian McCormack decided to leave his position as Manager. A period of uncertainty occurred while the situation was ironed out and the process began to find a new Manager. In June 1993, Rodney Chaisson, another graduate of UCCB's Museum Studies program was hired.

With the election of the new John Savage government in Nova Scotia, the Highland Village Society felt that there might be new opportunities to pursue with regards to operational funding. The Society prepared and presented a report in May 1993 entitled "A Heritage Society for the 1990's". Another application for Branch status was given to the NSM in October 1994, this time taking a different approach. The Society felt that the Highland Village could become a regional branch of the Nova Scotia Museum to support the Cape Breton museum community in areas such as leadership in provincial or heritage issues, museum services, research/resources, education and training. In other words, the Highland Village was proposing being the arm of the Museum Services Division in Cape Breton.

The Society also made the valid points that the Highland Village was one if not the only museum in the province that actively promoted and preserved Gaelic culture, and that the Nova Scotia Museum was severely under-represented on Cape Breton, having only one provincial museum in Sydney and a tiny amount of its overall budget going to museums on the Island. Although this was a sound and reasonable approach, the idea was not at all considered at the time by the Nova Scotia Museum Board of Governors, since their financial situation had not changed from the last time the Society had applied. This process was extremely frustrating to Society members, for they felt that they were being overlooked by the provincial government, despite strong support from the local community and museums within Cape Breton. Regardless of this, the Society pressed on with their plans for the Village site to make it into a first-class museum not to be ignored.

1993 marked the start of some more major changes for the Society and the Village. In October, the long-awaited bridge across the Barra Strait opened, replacing the car ferries that had been used for so many years. This provided more convenient and quicker access to the Village for local residents and tourist alike. In addition to the hiring of a new Manager, this was also the year that a major site development project was begun at the Village and would continue on until the spring of 1999.

During this time period, the following was accomplished: renovation/spruce up of interior/exterior of all site buildings; completed reconstruction of Black House and MacEachern log dwelling, and both were relocated to different spots on the site; rearrangement of the walking plan so that visitors could go through the site in chronological order; new and better pathways which were more accessible to visitors; new landscaping and gardens; improved drainage; improved technology, both for administration and for the Roots genealogy program; Roots Cape Breton program mandate expanded to include genealogical information for all of Cape Breton, as well as parts of Antigonish and Guysborough Counties; paving and expansion of parking lots; improvements to canteen, workshop, stage, and washrooms; improvements to reception/administration building; production of a new orientation video, interpretive panels, and signage; establishment of a Pioneer Church fund to raise funds to build a replica inter-denominational church on the site; and establishment of a website.

The Society also focused on strengthening their heritage programming with the implementation of the Living History Program in 1997, better collections management and preservation, effective marketing, and sought to co-sponsor archaeology field research to begin collecting primary research about early Highland settlers in Nova Scotia and in Cape Breton specifically. All of this hard work and commitment by staff and Society volunteers has paid off in a variety of important ways. In January 1999, the Board of Governors of the Nova Scotia Museum finally approved the Nova Scotia Highland Village as the 26th member of NSM family, contingent on new and sufficient funds being made available to cover increased new costs as a result of this decision.

In other words, there needed to be new monies put into the NSM budget by the provincial government before the transition can occur. In September 1999, the Highland Village received a score of 90.9% on the Museum Assistance Program evaluation, which was top in the province for 1999. This is a direct reflection of the positive improvements that have been made by the Society and Village staff on the site and its operations. By the end of 1999, the Highland Village saw almost 24,000 visitors for the year--a considerable increase from 15,000 just two years before. The fall of 1999 also saw the start of a major three year project to computerize all available genealogical data onto one database, including approx. 140 boxes of school class register lists, which will help to solidify Roots Cape Breton as a major genealogical resource in Cape Breton. Last, but not least, the Highland Village won the Outstanding Promotions Award for 1999 from the Federation of Nova Scotian Heritage.

1999 marked a change in government in Nova Scotia. Dr. John Hamm, a Pictou County doctor, was elected Premier of Nova Scotia. He appointed Rodney MacDonald, Inverness County fiddler and school teacher, Minister of Tourism and Culture. With this change in government came a renewed interest in Gaelic language and culture in Nova Scotia at the political level. The Highland Village met with the new government to outline its vision for the future and once again asked to become a member of the Provincial Museum family.

On June 15, 2000, the Highland Village officially became a part of the Nova Scotia Museum. This marked a new milestone for the site and the beginning of a new chapter in its history. Expansion of Gaelic language and cultural programming, improved interpretative programming and outreach to the Gaelic community, moving the Malagawatch Church, technology development, the transition to a NSM site, and much more headline the years that followed.

### Cultural Activities

Since the bulk of the reconstruction and renovations have been completed, the primary emphasis now for the Society and Village is the programming and interpretation of the site - the visitor experience. Cultural activities have always had a special place at the Highland Village and are of major importance to the Society. This is only a partial list of things that the Society has been involved in over the years:

- preservation of the Gaelic language through staff programs, community classes, school classes, Gaelic Immersion Day (Nov 1985), Eilean nan Òg program (1999), supporting the Gaelic playgroup program
- have helped various staff members who have gone to Scotland with trip preparations, etc.
- Codfish suppers
- fundraising events and activities for the Village, such as the swing raffles organized by John P. MacNeil
- facilitate Clan gatherings on-site
- Highland Village Day
- highly involved in presenting Scottish culture/info/music to community (local, schools, museum, conferences)
- special concerts: the Rankins, the Barra MacNeils, Evans & Doherty, etc
- leader in the Iona Connection: a group of museums and heritage organizations in Cape Breton that support each other-started in July 1984
- members have participated in Federation of Nova Scotian Heritage committees and activities, Museum Studies workshops
- members are active in organizations, etc. that promote local community development
- milling frolics
- participation in other festivals like Celtic Colours, Gathering of the Clans
- genealogy workshops
- promoting Gaelic Day and Gaelic Cultural Awareness Month (May)
- special museum programming--ie. Candlelight tours with Jim St. Clair
- launching of the first book in Following the Path: The Highland Village Series The MacCallum House- 1798 in 1999, using houses found in the Highland Village for background to the storyline

The Society has also been proactive to recognizing contributions by individuals and organizations to the preservation of the Gaelic culture in Nova Scotia, either through their work at the Village or through other means. In 1979, the annual Highland Village Award of Merit was started to honour a "person or organization that has made an outstanding contribution to the Highland Village or to Scottish Culture in Nova Scotia". In 1984, the Highland Village "Volunteer of the Year" award was begun to recognize the valuable contributions of Society members. There has also been a considerable number of special honours throughout the years for different occasions.

\*1976--Highland Village store dedicated to Bert MacLeod (former Society president and collector of heritage)--now known as MacLeod's General Store

\*1979--on Highland Village day, sawmill dedicated to Tom Cash of Irish Cove (donated sawmill building in late 1970's)--known as Cash's Sawmill (Note: this building no longer exists on the site)

\* June 5, 1988--President. Jim St. Clair announces congratulations to Rod C. MacNeil at a Society meeting for winning the "President's Award" from the Federation of Nova Scotian Heritage The award is given annually "to any individual who had given invaluable service resulting in the success of projects and the efficient functioning of their organization" and have to be nominated to be considered for the award.

\*Dec 1988--first Gaelic Heritage Award presented to Cape Breton Magazine and its publisher Ron Caplan. This is a "... a special award to be given occasionally to an institution, organization or person who promotes, records, preserves, encourages or documents the Gaelic culture of Cape Breton--without that person or institution necessarily being part of the Gaelic culture."

\*1990 Highland Village Day--special award was given to step dancer Aggie MacLennan of Benacadie who had danced at every Highland Village Day to that point--"unfailing dedication to the art of step dancing and her willingness to share that talent." (CB Post Aug 9/90)

\*Dec 1990--reception and plaque to the Rankin Family (John Morris, Jimmy, Heather, Cookie, Raylene) recognizing contribution to Gaelic song and CB music --a plaque was also given to Kathleen Rankin, their mother

\*April 30, 1994--Roast in honour of Hector MacKenzie, sponsored by the Highland Village Society-- Special Award of Merit

\*May 15, 1994--Dedication of kitchen in MacQuarrie-Fox House to Sarah (Sadie) and Margaret (Mungie) MacNeil

\*Oct 24, 1996--evening reception to honour the late Margaret MacPhail (Women's History Month programming)

\*May 1997--tribute night to honour Maxwell twins--black men from Marble Mountain who sang and composed Gaelic songs (part of Gaelic Culture Awareness Month)

\*May 1998--CD release party and tribute to the late Joe MacLean (fiddler from Washabuck)

It is obvious that the Nova Scotia Highland Village Society has had a profound and lasting impact on the community of Iona and the region of Central Cape Breton, and has the potential to reach even higher goals. It is the strong, sustained support and interest of "ordinary" citizens that has made all of these things happen, as is the case with so many community museums all over the province. It is obvious when one looks over the records of the Highland Village Society the amount of time, effort, energy, and enthusiasm that has been given to this project by hundreds of volunteers interested in preserving Gaelic culture in Nova Scotia.

*Written by Cheryl Sullivan, 2000.*

### **Highland Village Pipe Band**

Throughout the late 1960s and 1970s, the Highland Village was home to the [Highland Village Pipe Band](#). Scott Williams has prepared a history of the band for the Atlantic Canada Pipe Band Association.