BACKGROUND

The Champlain Monument is a public art installation located within the City of Orillia’s Couchiching Beach Park on a parcel of land owned and maintained by the federal government. It was created to encourage tourism to the region, commemorating the advent into Ontario of the white race, under Champlain’s leadership. Mr. Charles Harold Hale, publisher of the Orillia Packet newspaper and community advocate, first proposed the idea of the Monument to officers of the Orillia Canadian Club following a trip to Quebec and St. John, New Brunswick, both of which have their own tributes to the French explorer.

Orillia was the logical site for the piece as the nearest town to the Wendat capital of Cahiagué. Champlain came to the area with the Wendat to strengthen trade relationships and left with first-hand knowledge and experience of their culture and traditions. Records show that they arrived at Cahiagué (which was located near present-day Warminster) on August 17, 1615, and was welcomed into the village by Chief Darontal. Champlain notes in his journal that they passed through The Narrows just outside of Orillia in September and later returned to Cahiagué, where he wintered before setting out for Quebec in 1616.

THE UNVEILING

The monument was commissioned to mark the 300th anniversary of the French explorer’s arrival in the region. The unveiling was scheduled for August 17, 1915, but the work was delayed due to World War One. It was finally revealed on July 1, 1925, in front of roughly 10,000 spectators. Dignitaries included the Honorable Rodolphe Lemieux, Speaker of the House, along with Vernon March, the sculptor, Grand Chief Ovide Sioui of the Hurons at Lorette, now the Huron-Wendat of Wendake, Chief Big Canoe, and Chief John Bigwind of the Chippewas of Rama First Nation.

The delay afforded Orillia the opportunity to garner national attention in the monument’s unveiling. The relationship between French and English speaking Canadians had long been strained, which was further compounded by conscription. With this in mind, the ceremony became a celebration of European exploration and the promotion of good will between English and French Canada, a sentiment reflected in the final wording of the plaque.

MONUMENTAL FACTS

The Monument was created by Mr. Vernon March of Farnborough, Kent, England, the sculptor who would later go on to fashion the War memorial in Ottawa. Orillia’s Champlain Monument includes a 12-foot bronze sculpture of the French explorer dressed for court along with two sculpture groupings and an interpretive plaque. The plinth that it is standing on is made of Benedict Stone, cast in situ, from Montreal and weighs 45 tons. The budget was set at $20,000 but the delay due to the war added $14,000 to the project, primarily due to inflation of the price of bronze.

The men who posed for the piece were Chippewa from Rama First Nation. “Stories are told of the men walking to Orillia from Rama for the work and posing for 9 to 10 hours for the piece,” Mark Douglas, Elder, Chippewas of Rama First Nation. While the Huron-Wendat were the major trading partners with the French in 1615, they eventually moved to Wendake due to war and disease. The Huron-Wendat Nation of Wendake, QC, are known descendants.

FIRST NATIONS REPRESENTATION

Despite its grandeur and artistic merit, the Monument has faced scrutiny for its singular, colonial perspective. The sculpture groupings were designed to emphasize Champlain’s role in bringing Christianity and Commerce to New France. Noted in the souvenir booklet of the 1925 unveiling, they portray the Huron-Wendat at the feet of Christianity and Commerce as though they are receiving these gifts. Yet, the Huron-Wendat were not passive observers but major trading partners with the French. They guided Champlain from the Habitation in Quebec to the area to strengthen these relations, involving the French explorer in a war expedition against the Iroquois threatening Huron-Wendat territory.

He was welcomed by Chief Darontal into the village of Cahiagué, the Huron-Wendat capital, on August 17, 1615 and fished at The Narrows, just outside of Orillia where Lake Couchiching meets Lake Simcoe before setting out for Iroquois country south of Lake Ontario. He was wounded in the advance and wintered in Cahiagué as Chief Darontal’s guest. During this time, he would have gained first-hand knowledge and experience of the Wendat culture and traditions. This complex and cooperative relationship between Champlain and the Huron-Wendat people is lost in Orillia’s Monument. While helping to set the Monument apart from others observed by Hale, its portrayal of Indigenous people is a reflection of the prevailing attitudes of the day rather than historical events.

In 1913 when the piece was commissioned, Indigenous people had few rights under the Indian Act. It took away the rights of First Nations people to practice their culture. It took away the rights of Indigenous people to vote. It restricted their access to the courts. It took away the rights of Indigenous people to gather together in order to protest and educate their children. They were not included in the re-enactment of Champlain’s arrival with the Huron-Wendat held during the unveiling, portrayed by actors instead. The Chiefs in attendance would have
required special permission through the Department of Indian Affairs.

Undeniably a remarkable artistic achievement honouring the French explorer, the Monument falls short in its accurate depiction of the reciprocal relationship Champlain had with the Huron-Wendat people and the important role they played in his trade mission and survival.

**RESTORATION WORK**

Ownership and maintenance of the Monument, together with the parcel of land upon which it sits, was transferred to the Department of Northern Affairs and National Resources in 1955. Today, Parks Canada owns and maintains the piece. In 2015, they conducted a full condition assessment on the Monument amidst growing concern related to the state of the steps and plinth. The final report recommended that both be replaced along with the foundation and that conservation work on the statues be conducted at the same time.

Restoration work began in 2017 and was set out in three phases:

- **Phase 1** - Demolition and removal work with construction of a new foundation.
- **Phase 2** - Conservation work on the bronze statues and masonry steps along with the fabrication of a new plinth.
- **Phase 3** - Replacement of the staircase, plinth, and monument.

To date, the foundation and staircase have been reconstructed on the original site. The bronze sculptures have been reconditioned and are being stored until further consultation with stakeholders.

**DEVELOPMENTS**

Since conducting the condition assessment, a number of developments have impacted the restoration project.

- In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission completed its mandate, publishing 94 calls to action. In it was a commitment from the federal government to a renewed nation-to-nation relationship with Indigenous peoples based on recognition of rights, respect, co-operation and partnership.
  - The restoration project and 400th anniversary commemorations of Champlain’s arrival within the region have raised the profile of the monument in the media. Concerns over the monument’s representation of Indigenous peoples have been raised by members of the public and Indigenous communities with Parks Canada and the City of Orillia.
  - The Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario (ETFO) passed a resolution to explore the feasibility of commissioning an alternative Champlain Monument in Orillia to be installed in close proximity to the original. Members of ETFO have been talking with stakeholders, and have pledged $25,000 to the project.
  - Orillia City Council and the Honorable Catherine McKenna, also received letters from the Huron-Wendat expressing their concerns with the monument’s representation of its people. They would like further engagement in finding alternatives to Parks Canada’s Champlain Monument in Orillia, stressing the importance of working together in developing constructive educational initiatives that reflect and showcase a common history within the area.

There has also been support expressed for the piece. As a result, Parks Canada has placed the restoration project on hold and will not be reinstalling the monument until further consultation can occur. To that end, they have established a joint working group with the City of Orillia to pursue inclusive public consultations and report back to Council and Parks Canada on an appropriate path forward for the Champlain Monument that is respectful and representative of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives.

Information on the working group and public consultation process is available at [www.orillia.ca/champlain](http://www.orillia.ca/champlain).

**SOURCES | ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

1. "Souvenir Booklet of the Champlain Monument at Orillia, Updated, Folder Champlain Monument, File Orilliana, Orillia Public Library.
Audio Clip: Residential school survivors’ stories motivated people to make Canada better, says Murray Sinclair | CBC Radio
