



Fishtown at Leland, Michigan, owned by the Fishtown Preservation Society, <http://www.fishtownpreservationsociety.org> (photo courtesy of Keith Burnham, 2006).

## LESSONS LEARNED AT FISHTOWN: PRESERVING HERITAGE FISHERY TOURISM IN LELAND, MICHIGAN

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### Introduction

A nonprofit community-led effort has preserved a unique working waterfront in Northwest Lower Michigan. Leland is a historic unincorporated village which contains “Fishtown,” one of few extant examples in the Great Lakes region of a traditional cultural landscape developed by commercial and sports fishing and other water-transportation and recreation related activities. It is a landscape that has evolved from its centuries old use as a fishery site. As well, Leland’s Fishtown is a portal to Lake Michigan including access to the Manitou Islands, which are owned and managed by the U.S. National Park Service as part of the Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore. Fishtown has an existing high profile for both local and regional residents and ranks high as one of the State and region’s cultural tourism attractions.

Leland is a historical port on the Great Lakes located on the west side of Michigan's Leelanau Peninsula. Fishtown, a collection of weathered fishing shanties, smokehouses, overhanging docks, fish tugs and charter boats along the Leland River, was once the heart of a commercial fishing village. The nonprofit community-led Fishtown Preservation Society purchased and preserved the Fishtown site and authentic structures, docks, and commercial fishing vessels in early 2007. Fishtown is, and will continue to be, a place where people can walk through, see and feel a connection to Lake Michigan's fishing heritage. This paper seeks to describe some of the experiences, challenges and lessons being learned in Fishtown, thus assisting and enhancing other endeavors in conserving coastal working waterfronts.

### **Background**

The Fishtown Preservation Society was formed in 2001 to assist with the sustainability of historic Fishtown and, as a local newspaper editorial stated, "to assure that the area remains open to the public and that commercial fishing - in some form - continues along its ageless docks." Most of what is called Fishtown was owned by the multi-generational Carlson family, whose ancestors settled on nearby North Manitou Island in the 1870's. The Leland Historic District in Fishtown was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1975 and is also separately listed as a State of Michigan Historic Site. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, when the Carlson commercial fishery came under economic pressure, the family began considering their options for the future of the Fishtown property.

In 2004, the Carlson family decided to sell Fishtown and hoped to sell it to an entity which would preserve it. The Fishtown Preservation Society soon after became a vehicle for the community to acquire Fishtown. In June 2006, the Fishtown Preservation Society reached an agreement to purchase Fishtown for the amount of \$2.8 million for the Fishtown real estate and \$200,000 for the two fishing boats, and related commercial fishing licenses and equipment from the Carlsons.

On February 7, 2007, thanks to the outpouring of support from individuals and foundations, the Fishtown Preservation Society announced it had acquired Fishtown and its heritage fishery. The Society is now in the process of raising an additional \$2 million to complete the necessary payments for the property and to move forward with plans to maintain, preserve and sustain Fishtown's historical structures and to develop educational and interpretive programs. The Fishtown Preservation Society was formed with strong momentum to be viable for the long-term and it has a straightforward mission statement: Fishtown Preservation Society seeks to preserve the historical integrity of Leland, Michigan's Fishtown property and insure that it continues as a publicly accessible and authentic connection to local and regional history, Great Lakes commercial fishing, and maritime traditions and experiences. They also have

engaged institutional partners in helping meet this mission, including Michigan Sea Grant, the Inland Seas Education Association, the Leelanau Historical Society, Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Natural Resources Department, and the Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore.

### **A Change in Dynamic, Non-profit Group Ownership**

A key transition occurred when the non-profit Fishtown Preservation Society purchased the former family-owned set of properties. The buildings are the same historic structures but new disciplines have been added to assure the long-term sustainability of Fishtown and protect the board of directors and the assets of the Fishtown Preservation Society. One example of a policy that has been implemented is a no smoking policy. While in the past, shore-fishers and tourists may have freely smoked tobacco along the docks and while wondering through the retail shops located inside the historic shanty buildings, a new visitor policy was implemented in 2007 for protection of the property. To make the change characteristic of Fishtown, a catchy phrase, “Smoke Fish, Not Tobacco,” was developed and well-crafted small signs were strategically placed on the outside of Fishtown buildings. One can smell the adjacent authentic smokehouses which still operate, smoking lake whitefish (*Coregonus clupeaformis*), the most economically valuable freshwater fish species in the Great Lakes. The campaign to “Smoke Fish, Not Tobacco” has been successful, but as expected, not without some complaints from a few individuals, including anonymous e-mail harassment.

Another example of a change in dynamic due to group ownership relates to site maintenance. When family owned, decisions may have been made quickly and repairs may have been completed with whatever materials were at hand. However, now with group ownership of a designated historic site, procedures and options for repairs need to follow specific guidelines. The Fishtown Preservation Society does employ a full-time staff person to serve a large variety of roles to the Board, including as facility need contact, but responding to site maintenance as a group is an ongoing learning and evolving effort.

Board development is always a key and ongoing challenge with any non-profit. The Fishtown Preservation Society is transitioning from a singular focus on raising funds to purchase the property to long-term stewardship and sustainability. Board strategic planning is ongoing. Non-profits which may acquire working waterfront areas may need to look at the scale of their mission and budget accordingly as early perceptions of functioning solely as a volunteer organization may change due to demands and complications of the facility.

The purchase of Fishtown intentionally included two steel-hulled commercial fishing vessels, fishing gear and transfer of State of Michigan issued commercial fishing licenses from the former owners. It is the intent of the Fishtown Preservation Society to have the boats fish at least a few times a year to

demonstrate and keep viable the commercial fishery. As part of this intent and with group ownership demands, the Society has worked hard to understand key aspects of the complex federal Jones Act (Jones Act U.S.C. Title 46 {H.R.1442}) as it relates to utilizing the vessels and protecting assets and board members. Insurance and liability coverage has taken significantly longer than first anticipated as the issue is specialized. While the boats were not fished in 2007, it is highly likely they will be used for fishing in 2008 and beyond. In addition to the 1958 and 1981 steel-hulled vessels, the Society has also recently acquired a hand-crafted wood fish tug which fished from Fishtown in 1927 through the late 1950s. The Fishtown Preservation Society is determining ways to fully optimize this rare surviving tug from this era of Leland's fishing fleet and further add to the authentic qualities for which Fishtown is known.

### **A Need to Engage Partners**

The Fishtown Preservation Society has intentionally engaged partners to assist with furthering its mission, enhancing its profile and attracting new resources. For example, through contact with Michigan Sea Grant Extension, the Fishtown Preservation Society engaged with NOAA staff in Silver Spring, Maryland, to apply for a NOAA Preserve America Initiative Grant in early 2007. The project "Catching the Fishing History of Lake Michigan, 1871-2006" was selected for funding by NOAA. What seems like a relatively small amount, \$9000 from NOAA, actually leverages additional funds and staff expertise worth well over \$50,000. This partnership is bringing together archival research and allowing the Fishtown Preservation Society to gather some oral histories of the Leland area fishery from those who actively worked the fishery. This information will be shared through a variety of media with larger audiences and set within the context of 200 years of NOAA history.

### **Summary**

The future sustainability of Fishtown as an authentic viable heritage fishery and working waterfront is strong due to local leadership and collaboration and building some small successes into bigger successes. While each working waterfront protection effort will have unique context, it was the intent of this paper to share some examples of various lessons gained by non-profit group ownership, management, and stewardship of this historic fishery port in the Great Lakes and to possibly spur on other coastal working waterfront conservation efforts.

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