

# Acorn

Architectural Conservancy Ontario

Fall 2019

Small Places,  
Big Heritage





# Your steps move us all forward.



## **How do you feel when you pass buildings in your neighbourhood still standing after decades or centuries?**

When you see a historic home lovingly restored or a once-abandoned industrial building now housing local artists and shops, is it uplifting? As you well know, our heritage forms more than just a physical connection to the past; it forms an emotional connection as well. Helping communities across the province preserve these links is why the Architectural Conservancy of Ontario exists. It takes a lot of work, however, and in our ongoing efforts every person makes a difference.

**Since 1933**, ACO has helped save hundreds of architecturally significant buildings for future generations to use and enjoy. ACO's mission depends on the commitment and contributions of our members, volunteers and donors. To everyone who has given their time, energy, and money, thank you.

**If you care about preserving heritage structures and neighbourhoods**, please consider making a donation. Contributions from generous individuals and companies who care about heritage help us do the important work of protecting these resources for future generations. The most popular way of giving to ACO is through an annual or monthly donation. We are also grateful to our members who include ACO in their will. A bequest is a wonderful way to make a lasting gift that will support ACO in the future.

## What does ACO do with your money?

- Advocate for the conservation and adaptive reuse of Ontario's heritage buildings
- Offer mentorship and heritage-related work opportunities for students and young professionals
- Honour the work of people who are taking action to preserve Ontario's heritage, at ACO's annual Heritage Awards
- Provide expert conservation advice and assessments at modest cost to individuals and communities, through ACO's PreservationWorks!
- Support local branches across the province, each of which offers services and events that celebrate and advocate for their local heritage
- Support and promote Ontario's Heritage Conservation Districts
- Co-host the annual Ontario Heritage Conference with Community Heritage Ontario and the Ontario Association of Heritage Professionals
- Educate and inform our members through *Acorn Magazine* and our monthly e-newsletter *Acorn in a Nutshell*

## We're in this for the long haul, and we need your help.

**You can donate now at [acontario.ca](http://acontario.ca) or at [canadahelps.org](http://canadahelps.org).** If you are interested in making a legacy gift in your will, or if you would like any information about giving to ACO, please contact Devorah Miller at 416.367.8075 ext. 403 or at [devorah@acontario.ca](mailto:devorah@acontario.ca).

ACO works on behalf of all Ontarians.  
Your support is vital.



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# Acorn

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## Architectural Conservancy Ontario

401 Richmond St. W., Suite 206, Toronto ON, M5V 3A8

T 416.367.8075 TF 1.866.221.1420 F 416.367.8630

W [acontario.ca](http://acontario.ca) E [info@acontario.ca](mailto:info@acontario.ca)

## On the Cover

Chaffey's Old Mill, courtesy of Nicole Watson

## Editorial Committee

Susan Ratcliffe, Chair; Guy Burry, Sarah King Head, Liz Lundell, Devorah Miller, Dan Schneider

## Managing Editor

Liz Lundell

## Art Director

Taylor Kristan

## Photo Editor

Guy Burry

## Associate Designer

Raquel Marin

## Creative Direction

Hambly & Woolley

## Contributing Authors/Editors/Photographers

Marianne Braid, Ron Breckbill, Guy Burry, Larry Carroll, Kyle Davies, Jake De La Plante, Zac Durst, Eileen Godfrey, Debra Honor, Sarah King Head, Judy Humphries, Liz Lundell, Alex MacKinnon, Nancy Matthews, Devorah Miller, Catherine Nasmith, Colin Old, Susan Ratcliffe, John Rutledge, Dan Schneider, Richard Seck Photography, Carole Ann Simpson, Peter Stewart

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# ACO's response to Bill 108 and how you can make a difference



**This issue rediscovers the wisdom of Ernst Friedrich Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful*.** If the articles inspire you to visit the small towns and villages highlighted in this issue, please tell them ACO's *Acorn* brought you there!

ACO learned the power of small at the Ontario Heritage Conference in May.

Going into the conference, ACO's Policy Committee was very concerned about changes proposed in Bill 108 to the *Ontario Heritage Act* (OHA). Bill 108 will allow the Local Planning Appeals Tribunal (LPAT) to undo the work of democratically elected councils, Municipal Heritage Committees and the trained heritage planning staff who advise them. LPAT will be able to approve, revoke or amend heritage designation bylaws. An LPAT adjudicator, with no training or knowledge of either heritage or your community, could quash weeks of your and your neighbours' efforts.

At the conference, ACO took two small steps to fight this change. First, President Leslie Thompson introduced a resolution which proposed that OHA changes be withdrawn from Bill 108. Conference delegates' unanimous support for the resolution was recorded in Hansard later that day when ACO addressed the Standing Committee on Justice Policy.

Secondly, ACO set up an iPad so delegates could comment on the proposed OHA changes on the government's Environmental Registry. Aided by a tip sheet with writing points, conference delegates doubled the number of Bill 108 comments on the Environmental Registry.

Bill 108 was pushed through and passed before all Environmental Registry comments were even published! But we know that ministry staff who will fine-tune the legislation and write the regulations that determine how it functions will read Environmental Registry comments and take them seriously.

The fight is not over. Many small actions could turn the tide. You can tell your MPP you are really concerned about the changes Bill 108 will make to the *Ontario Heritage Act*. You can tell your member that you don't want to lose your voice in saying what parts of the past you wish to pass on to future generations and that you don't want appointed LPAT officials (with potentially little knowledge of heritage in general or your community in particular) to decide what your community is going to look like. Write, phone, email your MPP, or chat with them at an event this fall in your community.

A small action on your part could make a big difference for Ontario's heritage. ■ — Kae

A small action on your part could make a big difference for Ontario's heritage.



# Celebrating ACO's most generous donors

The following people and companies have contributed to ACO's Provincial Office at the \$500+ level in 2019 (up to September 1). We are very grateful for their support.

Donations received after September 1 will be recognized in the next issue of *Acorn*, at the Heritage Awards on October 3, and on the ACO website at [acontario.ca](http://acontario.ca).

## Limestone Sponsors

(\$5,000+)

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# What you can do to protect your local heritage

**When a group of concerned Ontarians got together in 1933 to form the Architectural Conservancy of Ontario**, they did so with a shared commitment to “the preservation of buildings, structures, and places of natural beauty or interest.” Since then, ACO and its members have helped save hundreds of heritage buildings and places across Ontario. ACO was the first heritage organization to press for heritage legislation and funding in the province, and continues to advocate for better legal protections. Our head office in Toronto also supports the work of 20 local branches, and fields calls every day from people across the province looking for information and support.

Just as it was 86 years ago, the heart of ACO is its people: members, donors, and others who care about this work. Your membership sends a message to politicians that heritage matters to many Ontarians, and your participation in ACO programs helps our branches thrive. In the heritage world there is always a building or neighbourhood at risk, a focus for the short term. But while we must address each crisis, the long view is important too. ACO’s future work depends on you.

If you are already donating to ACO, thank you! We are small but determined — and your support helps fuel our engines. If you’d like to join us, we’d be grateful for your support. Whether through an annual donation, a monthly gift, or a bequest, every person who contributes to ACO makes a difference. With your help, we plan to continue protecting Ontario’s heritage for many years to come.

If you have any questions about donating to ACO, please contact [devorah@acontario.ca](mailto:devorah@acontario.ca) or call 416.367.8075. Thank you! ■

photo Susan Ratcliffe



## Call for Submissions Acorn Spring 2020 — Heritage Tourism

**Heritage Tourism is defined as travel to destinations to experience authentic places and activities that represent stories of the past.** The Spring 2020 issue will focus on the intersection of heritage conservation and tourism and will “encourage the conservation and reuse of structures, districts and landscapes of architectural, historic and cultural significance to inspire and benefit Ontarians.”

Thanks to designers Hambly & Woolley, *Acorn* has a new look and will be running items of varied lengths. New to our Fall 2019 issue are “In Detail” and “Worth Celebrating.” In Detail items will be brief highlights of a specific technique or material; architectural element or style; or a “how to” of conservation by subject experts. Worth Celebrating will focus on a high-quality photo with a maximum of 200 words on a heritage success story. Regular articles should be a maximum of either 450 or 900 words in length with three to five high resolution photos.

Before commencing work on an article, please send your proposal or questions to [liz.lundell@rogers.com](mailto:liz.lundell@rogers.com) to avoid duplication and ensure photo guidelines are received.

Deadline for submissions is January 31, 2020. Submitters are encouraged to look at past issues available on the ACO website: [acontario.ca](http://acontario.ca)

The Cabot Head Lighthouse, 806 Cabot Head Road, Municipality of Northern Bruce Peninsula, is undergoing restoration for the 2020 tourism season.



# In Detail

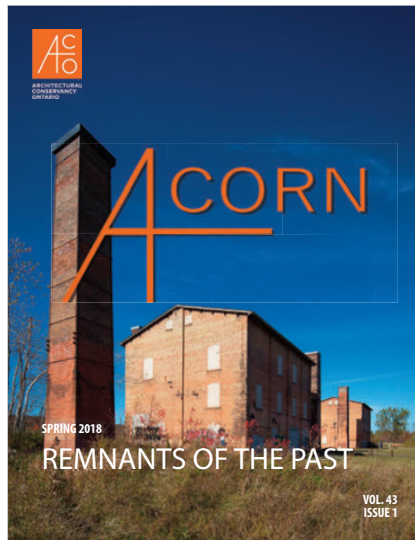
## Acorn Now & Then

From the first *Acorn* in 1976 to our new design, we look at the evolution of ACO's publication.



### 1 Fall 2019

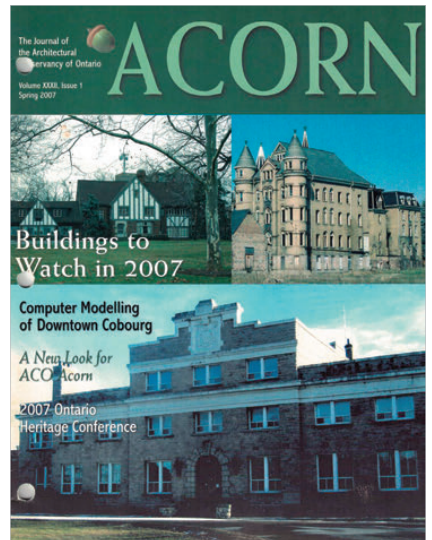
Designers of ACO's branding in 2014 and long-time supporters, Hambly & Woolley, have created a refreshed look for *Acorn* magazine for the Fall 2019 issue.



2

**Spring 2018**

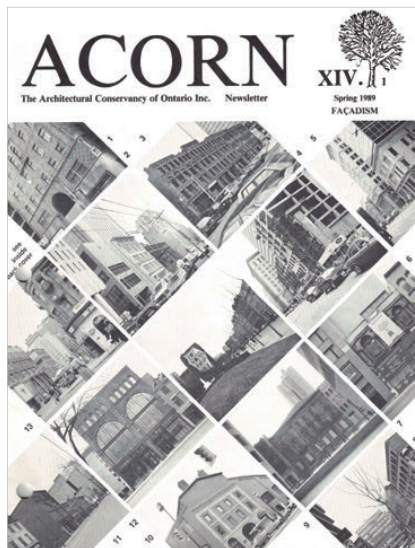
The “Remnants of the Past” theme resonated with members from many ACO branches and saw 18 article submissions for Spring 2018. Working from a template created by Jeniffer Milburn in 2014, this was the second issue designed by Jane Kim.



3

**Spring 2007**

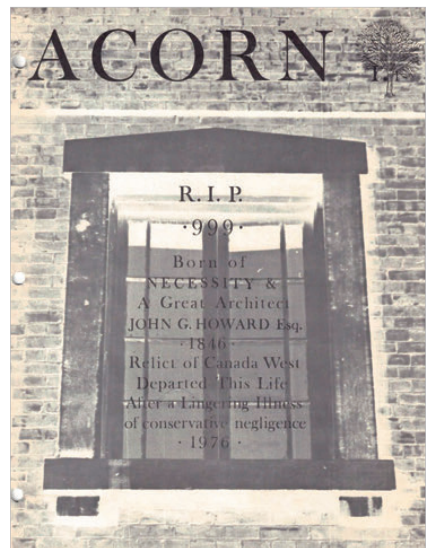
The Spring 2007 issue announced a new look for the ACO *Acorn* journal. This was the first colour issue, designed by ACO member Leanne Piper of Log Cabin Press in Guelph.



4

**Spring 1989**

The Spring 1989 *Acorn* focused on the theme of façadism and was described as a newsletter. PageMaker, QuarkXPress, and Adobe Photoshop were new publishing and graphics programs introduced in the 1980s.



5

**Spring 1976**

The first *Acorn* featured the story of demolition by neglect of 999 Queen Street West, Toronto. The asylum facility was designed by noted architect John George Howard and the cornerstone laid in 1846. It was demolished in 1976. *Acorn's* first editor was Peter Stokes.



# Markdale's Heritage Hot Spot

Fire & Ice serves up ice cream and fire-roasted coffee in an adapted fire hall

By Nancy Matthews

**After more than a year of restorations and renovations**, the old Markdale Fire Hall re-opened as Fire & Ice in September of 2015 — so named because among other things it sells fire-roasted coffee and hand-dipped Chapman's ice cream made in Markdale.

The fire-roaster is in the front half of the oldest part of the building, where sidewalk supervisors can view the process through a window onto the street. A well-designed commercial kitchen occupies the rear part of the original hall, providing baked goods, sandwiches, snacks and light meals.

The upper floor of the old building has been converted into an apartment. There is an outdoor patio located beside the historic mural of Markdale Station. In good weather, the big fire hall door remains open for pedestrian access to the “street market” atmosphere of the south-side addition.

The black used for the vents and pipes in the high ceiling complements the exterior heritage brick and the dark burgundy paint on the interior brick walls. Whitewashed concrete on the south wall displays a few kitschy antiques as well as a variety of locally made food products displayed for sale.

Originally constructed from local brick in 1913, the building was home to the men and equipment of the volunteer fire brigade until replaced by a more modern facility in 1996.

A plan to convert the interior to a concert venue fell through, and the building was used for different community purposes including office space for the chamber of commerce and the agricultural society, storage for off-season sporting equipment and, for a time, also was home to a farmers' market.

Gradually the under-used building fell into disrepair and by 2012 was barred from use due to apprehension that a crack in the north wall brickwork might indicate structural and foundation problems. Given concerns for public safety as well as the apparent lack of a present-day purpose, there was even talk of getting a quote for demolition.

At that point, Heritage Grey Highlands (HGH) called a public meeting of citizens interested in preserving the building which had significant cultural heritage value for its long history of community service, unusual architecture and due to its landmark status.

Although council did not dispute these attributes, the fact remained that the vacant building was of no use to the municipality as well as being an unjustifiable financial drain.

When the ad hoc committee failed to find a community purpose for which the building could be restored, prior to declaring it surplus and offering it for sale, council worked with HGH to designate the original 1913 building under the *Ontario Heritage Act*.



**Building:**  
Markdale Fire Hall

**Location:**  
19 Toronto St. N.,  
Markdale, Ontario

**Completion Date:**  
1913

**Rehabilitation Date:**  
September 2015

**Nominated for Heritage Designation by:**  
Heritage Grey Highlands

Businessman Chris Steele, owner of eCulture on Main Street West in Markdale bought the building mid-2014 then, for more than a year, devoted the bulk of his spare time to converting the fire hall to its present uses.

“As with any restoration project, there were good days and bad days” says Chris. “It turned out the foundation was fine and the brickwork crack was due to a covered over chimney, so a fairly easy fix. Evicting the pigeons from the bell tower so we could enclose it was a much greater challenge. Some of them were still circling a year later, looking for a way back in!”

With a smile his wife Melanie adds, “The day we took possession, I was wondering what had possessed Chris, but as he walked me through a fairly gruesome interior, even then he could visualize this place exactly as it is today.”

In his remarks at the ribbon cutting, Mayor Paul McQueen acknowledged, “The old Markdale Fire Hall is a fine example of adaptive re-use, which is now considered a highly successful strategy for heritage preservation. Hopefully this is only the first among many restoration projects that will bring new vitality not only to Markdale but to our community as a whole!”

From the day it opened, the facility attracted lots of interest and enticed many people to stop on their way through town. Fire & Ice continues to be a popular drop-in place. Chris says that these days the majority of visitors are tourists, but many local people often use the venue for daytime meetings. On weekends, patrons at the bar can enjoy live music from a small stage area. Wifi and



photo Nancy Matthews

large-screen TVs are also available, making this a terrific venue for watching sporting events.

Given that well-preserved heritage sectors in nearby communities like Creemore, Meaford and Collingwood are a proven attraction, it was hoped that Fire & Ice would be the cutting edge for a distinctive new Grey Highlands identity.

“What we really need downtown” says Chris, “is something socially dynamic where people can come to enjoy a variety of experiences.”

It’s taken time, but we now have a well-funded façade improvement program aimed at

improvements to commercial heritage properties on the main street. And there are some very innovative ideas for re-purposing a large tract of vacant land across from the fire hall.

Heritage Grey Highlands continues to work with council and property owners to catalogue and preserve the extraordinary heritage structures in the municipality—not only because of their historic importance to sense of community, but also because attractive heritage streetscapes invariably turn out to be dynamic economic drivers. ■

—Nancy Matthews is Chair of Heritage Grey Highlands.

*The original story with photos by Eric Lundsted first appeared in The Advance on September 16, 2015.*



# Beaverdams

Atlantis in a sea of modernity<sup>1</sup>

By Sarah King Head



**When Beaverdams residents describe themselves as “islanders,”** they mean not only that their small community is (almost) surrounded by water, but also how much their isolation brought on by history defines them.

Settlements in the Beaverdams area of Thorold go back millennia but the first permanent community appears to have been European in the late eighteenth century. The name “Beaver Dams” refers to both actual beaver dams as well as to the crossroads of two important Indigenous trails. Most significant was the Beaverdams Trail that, following a tributary of the Twelve Mile creek from Niagara Falls to DeCew Falls, intersected another trail at the site.

Importantly this ancient Indigenous arterial infrastructure provided the framework for European settlements for more than two centuries.

The settlement was never more than a hamlet, even in its heyday, but its crossroads location always guaranteed it preeminence in nineteenth century bureaucracy. When the town of Thorold’s founder George Keefer laid out an unregistered village subdivision at the site between 1819 and 1832, it already had the basic amenities: a post office, tavern, blacksmith’s shop, school and burying ground. The village at the Beaver Dams was even considered a possible location for the regional jail after the one at Newark burned in 1813. It was also an important centre of early Methodism in the Niagara region, and here that the impressive Beaverdams Church was built in 1832.

Almost no information about the first dwellings exists, but several prominent individuals were drawn to the area. Among these was Dr. Jedediah Prendergast, the father-in-law of St. Catharines’ founder William Hamilton Merritt, who practised medicine here from 1804 until just before the War of 1812.

More important in shaping the community was the impact of successive courses of the Welland Canal after 1829. Not only did they progressively hinder ancient east-west travel across the natural Great Lakes land bridge, they also halted the community’s eastward expansion. The Canal separated the land of many farming families like the Marlatts.

Children who lived on the west side of the Canal (and its improved and expanded successor after 1845) made use of Marlatts footbridge as they travelled via the Indigenous trail to a school that, after 1847, was no longer fee-paying.<sup>2</sup> When plans were made to build the Third Canal further to the east in 1879, the school was moved and rebuilt about 100 metres to the west of the (now infilled) First Canal — still along the trail.

Further change came in 1904 when the low-lying Beaverdams Creek was flooded to create reservoirs to feed hydroelectric power generation at DeCew Falls. The Lake Gibson watershed was born causing many families to lose chunks of their farmland. When the water had receded and the lay of the land around the crossroads became clear, the high ground to the east was snatched up by the enterprising Frank Willson. It was here that the village we know today as Beaverdams was laid out in 1913 and registered as “Beaverdams Centre” in 1916. Village lots were sold to the wave of immigrants who swept into Canada after the First World War.

Industries also sprang up, making use of the disused canals for transportation and power. Thorold Township became known as the industrial hub of the Niagara region, with the small canal communities like Beaverdams, Allanburg, Thorold South and Port Robinson providing a workforce for various factories and mills like Ontario Paper and Exolon.

1



2

During the interwar years, the village of Beaverdams swelled to several hundred people who, along with local farming families, created a largely self-sufficient community with a unique identity. As one elderly resident remembers: “It was great here: we had our store, our school and our church. We never knew about Thorold or anything until we got a bit older! We were like a big family, and that was it!” Growing up in Beaverdams was a charmed existence. While it may not have been an economically affluent community, this didn’t matter.

Water played an important role in shaping the community’s identity. Thus, even though drinking water had to be collected from wells until the 1950s, it was still the perfect recreational vehicle, from swimming in the old canals during the summer to skating and hockey in the winter.

To this day, former residents, some well into their 90s, speak with passion about their special world, cocooned but not entirely isolated from mainstream society. They remember Yates General Store, opposite the schoolhouse, as a place for the older kids to hang around. Teenagers could travel to either Thorold or Welland for high school via the NS&T interurban streetcar from stop 4 until 1959.

Beaverdams Church became the focus of the community. But, one neighbour remembers that he “didn’t know there were different [Christian] denominations until I went to high school.” Another recalls: “We always wanted to go to Sunday School!” There were annual outings, quarterly performances and weddings — activities that further cemented community cohesion.

Although those glory years have passed, Beaverdams remains a vibrant, tightly knit community. A Ratepayers’ Association was established in 2003 to protect the residents’ interests from outside pressures:

*We’re a village. We don’t consider ourselves part of Thorold. We’re Beaverdams. We want that sense of community... We don’t want to be a city, we don’t want to be a town, we don’t want sidewalks.*<sup>3</sup>

Beaverdams continues to embrace change. The remarkable latter twentieth-century natural regeneration has all but erased the area’s industrial legacy while nearby subdivisions encroach on the old landscapes. ■

—Sarah King Head is a historian based in Fonthill and winner of the ACO’s Margaret and Nicholas Hill Cultural Heritage Landscape Award in 2017. She acknowledges the generosity of former residents who shared stories of growing up in or around Beaverdams.



3

- 1 Stop No. 4 (Beaverdams) was located at the southeast corner of today’s Beaverdams and DeCew roads.
- 2 “Ice Sailing on Lake Gibson at Beaverdams,” circa 1905.
- 3 Beaverdams School orchestra, circa 1935.

1 See White, “A Passionate Place to Grow Up,” *St Catharines Standard*, 7 July 2003.

2 See SKH: “Educating Future Citizens: The Beaverdams Story,” *Acorn*, Fall 2016; and *Where the Beavers Built Their Dams: The Evolution of a Unique Cultural Heritage Landscape in Thorold*, Ontario (Heritage Thorold, 2017).

3 White, “A Passionate Place to Grow Up,” *St Catharines Standard*, 7 July 2003, p. A1.



# Bressette House

Restoring and re-purposing Bressette Homestead in Port Severn

By Ron Breckbill



1

1 Bressette House on its original site, circa 1960.

2 Bressette House in its new location at 45 Lone Pine Rd. in Port Severn.



2

**In the late 1800s**, lumber was king in the Port Severn area of Georgian Bay. With major sawmills in both Waubashene and Port Severn, the area was thriving. Edmund Bressette brought his family to Port Severn where he worked at the Georgian Bay Lumber Company mill nearby.

On a parcel of gently sloping land overlooking Georgian Bay and Tug Channel, the Bressette family built a gothic, Victorian style, board and batten house as well as a small barn in the 1890s. While working at the sawmill, Edmund did subsistence farming, was a fishing guide and had other odd jobs to support his family. The house and land stayed in the Bressette family until the early 1990s when the Ministry of Transportation of Ontario (MTO) appropriated the land and house for the expanding Highway 400.

The Georgian Bay Township Historical Society saw an opportunity to save the house and barn. In 1992, with the cooperation of the MTO, the Township of Georgian Bay, and the Ontario Government through a “Jobs Ontario”

grant, many local residents and businesses volunteered hundreds of hours of time to move the house and barn about half a kilometre to the present site near the Township of Georgian Bay municipal buildings.

In the following years, several other historic buildings were moved to this site that is now called the Bressette Homestead Heritage Park. Included amongst these buildings is the first lockmaster’s office (circa 1915) from Lock 45 on the Trent Severn Waterway and famous Canadian artist David Milne’s wilderness cabin from Six Mile Lake (built 1933-39).

Once the Bressette house was moved to its new location, the creative work began. Fortunately, the house had remained mostly original, so restoration was made easier; however, key to the project’s success and viability was that a modern and economically





photo courtesy of Marianne Braid

viable use be found for the house. To accommodate new uses, certain modifications were made such as adding accessible washrooms and ramps, incorporating utility and storage areas, as well as safe and legal entrances and exits — keeping in mind at all times to preserve the historic features of the building.

The Bressette Homestead opened to the public in 1995 with the main floor housing a tourist information centre operated by Muskoka Tourism and the upper floor space occupied by the Community Policing organization. A few years later, the upper floor became the offices of the Southeast Georgian Bay Chamber of Commerce.

In the last few years, Muskoka Tourism and the Chamber of Commerce have placed an additional information kiosk at the neighbouring highway service centre, but still maintain their presence in the Bressette

House. Moving forward, plans are afoot to again re-purpose the house as an information centre — not only providing tourist and visitor information through the Chamber of Commerce, but also drop-off and pick-up of library books from the local library, services and information for local residents and cottagers on municipal matters, and cottage association news and services, making the House and the Bressette Homestead Heritage Park a community hub.

The Georgian Bay Township Historical Society feels fortunate to have preserved a significant, historic structure in our area and, at the same time, re-purposed it to become an integral part of our small community. ■

—Ron Breckbill is a long-time resident of Georgian Bay Township. His family operates Severn Lodge, an historic Muskoka resort on Gloucester Pool. Now retired, Ron occupies his time with hobbies which include serving as President on the board of the Georgian Bay Township Historical Society, as historic consultant for the Gloucester Pool Cottager's Association, and restoring and enjoying his antique Muskoka boats.



# Charming Chaffey's Lock

A heritage haven on the Rideau Canal

By Liz Lundell

**In the present day,** Chaffey's Lock on the Rideau Canal is known best as a summer vacation destination, removed from the fevered pitch of urban life. The heart of the community is less than half a square kilometre carved from eastern Ontario's rocky forests, yet a collection of buildings, engineering works, and landscape features here represent 200 years of heritage. How is it that a community of fewer than 100 year-round residents is the setting for so much cultural heritage preservation? The answers lie in an evolving story of repurposing and recognition.

The hamlet, located 50 kilometres north of Kingston, is named for Samuel Chaffey who was born in Norton, Somerset in 1793. Following the War of 1812, the prospects of settlement in Upper Canada enticed the young Englishman to emigrate in 1816. He and his brother operated successful milling and commercial establishments for a few years in Brockville, and, in 1820, Samuel was persuaded to establish a mill beside a series of rapids between Indian Lake and Mosquito Lake (now Opinicon Lake). He soon met Mary Ann Poole, who was already living nearby, and they were married.

Within a few short years of arriving in the area, Chaffey had built an impressive complex in the rugged Shield country. In an 1827 report, engineer John MacTaggart observed "a very extensive establishment, consisting of saw, grist, and fulling-mills, carding-machines, stores, barns, distillery &c. filling up the whole river, and not to be estimated at a less expense than £5000." Samuel and Mary Ann Chaffey enjoyed a comfortable home with a large barn and several outbuildings.

Although the township had a population of just 126 at that time, access by rivers and lakes was good. The community of Chaffey's Mills grew, attracting Loyalist families who had come across the border in the 1780s, as well as other immigrants from England and Scotland lured by the prospect of farmland that sold for as little as \$2 an acre.



photo Liz Lundell





John Chaffey, nephew of Samuel, built this gristmill in the 1870s. It is a privately owned art gallery today.





1

Mosquito Lake was aptly named. In 1827, Samuel Chaffey died of ague or “swamp fever,” which was only much later understood to be mosquito-borne malaria likely brought to the area by infected British soldiers who carried it from postings in tropical countries. Chaffey left behind his widow and a young son Samuel Benjamin at an inauspicious time. The fallout from the War of 1812 precipitated the demise of the prosperous Chaffey’s Mills operations.

The British government feared that the St. Lawrence River supply route was vulnerable to blockade in the event of future American hostilities, so plans were struck to build a canal to link Montreal via the Ottawa, Rideau and Cataraqui rivers to the inland garrisons on the Great Lakes. Lieutenant-Colonel John By of the Royal Engineers oversaw two companies of Royal Sappers and Miners and the predominantly Irish, French Canadian and Scots labourers and tradesmen who built the 202-kilometre waterway from Kingston to Bytown (Ottawa) between 1826 and 1832.

Colonel By had complete powers of expropriation and these were exercised at Chaffey’s Mills. As By recorded in his 1827 notes: “A place was discovered below the Mills, where a dam could easily be put and two Locks sufficient for overcoming the whole rapids of thirteen feet, deepening the river above, raising the level of the Lakes etc., but by this course the great Mill establishment became drowned.” Only after continued pressure did Mary Ann Chaffey finally receive remuneration from the British government for the loss of the mill operations.

The small cemetery steps away from Chaffey’s Lock is assumed to be the final resting place of Samuel Chaffey. John Scott, Mary Ann’s second husband, who had been involved with the construction of the lock and perished in a canoeing accident in 1834, was interred there as

well. In 1888, at the age of 84, Mary Ann died in nearby Newboro and was laid to rest in the cemetery that still bears her first husband’s surname. Her brother erected a large monument that still stands.

Several other local residents were buried here over the years including descendants of early farming families, canal contractors and lockmasters; however, there are no names on the unworked stones that mark the graves of more than 70 unidentified workers — mostly Irishmen — who came to Canada to work on the canal and whose families never heard of them again.

Malaria killed an unrecorded number of the labourers who, outfitted with pickaxes, shovels, wheelbarrows and pulleys, worked 16 hours a day, six days a week. Disease killed far more than blasting or other construction accidents. An interpretive plaque at the cemetery is dedicated to “Unknown Irish Workers.” It explains the chunks of granite that line the worn path through the trees: “These unmarked stones commemorate the burial sites of many brave Irish and other immigrants who lost their lives while building the Rideau Canal.”

Another significant structure at Chaffey’s Lock was built in the 1840s. The 1837-38 rebellions in Upper and Lower Canada prompted the British to construct a number of blockhouses at strategic spots along the canal to defend against attack. A single-storey house was built on the rise beside the lock in 1844, complete with thick stone walls, loopholes (horizontal slits through which small arms could be fired), and a tin roof to prevent fire, but it was never used for military purposes.

Ownership and maintenance of the area flanking the canal transferred to the Government of Canada in 1855, including responsibility for Chaffey’s Lock. A wood-frame second storey was added to the blockhouse in 1894 and, in an early example of adaptive reuse, the building housed five successive lockmasters and their families. The house was boarded up in the mid-1960s, but several descendants of lockmasters remained in the area.

Throughout the 1800s, the canal itself filled a new purpose, transporting passengers from Kingston to Ottawa as well as logs, agricultural products and machinery. Later, luxury river

1 The white monument at Chaffey’s Lock Cemetery marks the grave of Mary Ann Chaffey, (later Scott). Unmarked chunks of granite are the only headstones for more than 70 unidentified workers who died building the canal.

2 The single-storey stone blockhouse was built in 1844 to protect against attack.

3 Loopholes were filled in but one is visible to the left of the white door. A second storey was added to house lockmasters.

steamers brought travellers and tourists, many from the United States. One of the most photographed steamships was *The Rideau Queen*, which had 20 staterooms with running water and lavatories. While railways and roads slowly replaced water navigation, and the last passenger ship docked in Smiths Falls in 1935, several establishments in Chaffey's Lock date from this era of early tourism, including lodges and resorts which appealed particularly to anglers — many of them American.

As the recreational attraction of the canal grew, residents continued to honour the community's heritage. The Chaffey's Lock Women's Institute was organized in 1924 and, within a few years, had rallied enough support to mark the centennial of the opening of the Rideau Canal by building a community hall. Much of the financial support and donated material and labour came from descendants of early residents of the area, many of whom had been involved in construction of the canal. *Hearth and Heritage*, a hardcover volume published by the Women's Institute in 1981, provides a picture of intense civic pride: "A knowledge of early family associations fosters better understanding, and their accomplishments instills within us a greater sense of pride and self-esteem."

Also in time to mark 100 years from commencement of its construction, the Rideau Canal was recognized as a National Historic Site of Canada in 1925. The heritage value statement on the Directory of Heritage Designations states: "The heritage value of the Rideau Canal lies in the health and wholeness of its cultural landscape,

"A knowledge of early family associations fosters better understanding, and their accomplishments instills within us a greater sense of pride and self-esteem."

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photos: Liz Lundell



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as a witness of the early 19th-century forms, materials and technologies of the waterway, and as a dynamic reflection of the longstanding human and ecological inter-relationships between the canal and its corridor.” It specifically recognized views from the canal banks at Chaffey’s Lock, among other locations.

Parks Canada assumed responsibility for maintenance and operation of the Rideau Canal in 1972. Lock staff continued the tradition of hand-operating the gate winches, also called crabs. During the 1970s, local residents including the Women’s Institute, worked with Parks Canada to improve heritage interpretation and refresh several historical elements — including installing a provincial plaque about the history of Chaffey’s Mills.

The Chaffey’s Lock and Area Heritage Society was established in 1980 to preserve and display historical and cultural heritage information about the area. In 1982, to mark the 150th anniversary of the canal, the Society with Parks Canada restored the 1844 blockhouse and reopened it as The Lockmaster’s House Museum with exhibits that depicted early settlement in the area.

In 2000, the waterway received designation as a Canadian Heritage River. A 2003 report by the Auditor General of Canada noted, “These places recall the lives and history of the men and women who built this country, and they foster awareness of how Canadian society evolved. They contribute in important ways to Canadians’ sense of belonging to their community.”

In 2006, the Government of Canada nominated the Rideau Canal for inclusion on the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site list. It was inscribed on the list in 2007 for its outstanding universal value. Described as a “masterpiece of creative genius,” that allowed the British to defend the colony of Canada.

The UNESCO inscription states: “The Rideau Canal remains the best preserved example of a slackwater canal in North America. It is the only canal dating from the great North American canal-building era of the early 19th century that remains operational along its original line with most of its original structures intact.” Recognition continues, “The Rideau Canal is an extensive, well preserved and significant example of a canal which was used for a military purpose linked to a significant stage in human history — that of the fight to control the north of the American continent.” The Rideau Canal became the fourteenth of what is now a group of twenty World Heritage Sites in Canada and it remains the only one in Ontario.

Tourism continues to build on deep roots. Of the several tourism-related enterprises in Chaffey’s Lock, several were established by families with early connections to the locks and navigation: Simmons Cottages, The Opinicon, Dorothy’s Lodge and Davis Cottages.

The story of privately funded heritage preservation in Chaffey’s Lock is well demonstrated by The Opinicon. In the early 1870s, John Chaffey, nephew of Samuel, built a gristmill beside the overflow weir at the lock. Around the same time, he also built a frame house on the rise overlooking the canal. The property was still owned by the Crown at that time, but in 1899 William Fleming, the first lockmaster, bought this lot for \$66.00. To the former John



Chaffey house, Fleming added several rooms and operated a guest house. Subsequent owners expanded it further with wings and the resort attracted tourists, particularly those who flocked to the area for the plentiful bass and pike.

The Opinicon was owned and operated by four generations of the Phillips-Jarrett-Cross family beginning in 1922. A plaque erected by the family by the cemetery sums up their sentiments: “We hope over these many years we have contributed to the beauty, charm and friendly atmosphere of our wonderful community and we are proud of maintaining the quiet, old-fashioned ambience for which Chaffey’s Locks is famous.”

1 Boaters, anglers, and tourists from across North America and overseas visit this rich cultural heritage landscape.

2 The Chaffey’s Lock Community Hall in 2019.

3 Fiona McKean received ACO’s Peter Stokes Award in 2018 for her restoration of The Opinicon.





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“All of these buildings, structures and sites – comprising a rich cultural heritage landscape – conserve the legacy of Samuel Chaffey and of a waterway that has found new purpose and recognition.”

In 2013, The Opinicon was listed for sale and in December of 2014, Fiona McKean and Tobi Lutke of Ottawa bought the old resort. Extensive renovations and improvements were carried out in order to bring the grand old resort back to life while retaining the old-style charm. Architectural Conservancy Ontario presented McKean with the Peter Stokes Award in 2018 for her exceptional restoration of The Opinicon and for preserving the historic resort’s cultural heritage. Year-round dining, community events and music are attracting visitors again, while the “Liar’s Bench” — for swapping tales about the ones that got away — still stands beside the ice cream parlour.

Across the canal, John Chaffey’s old gristmill, restored several times, still stands. The current owner operates The Mill at Chaffey’s Lock Gallery here during the summer months.

Now a registered charity, the Chaffey’s Lock & Area Heritage Society operates the Lockmaster’s House Museum during July and August. The site is still owned and maintained by Parks Canada, but the heritage society looks after utilities, artifacts, displays, and summer staffing.

The heritage society also owns, maintains and operates the historic community hall, maintains the Chaffey’s Lock Cemetery and Memory Wall, and the Marian Dunn Trail which links the cemetery to the locks site. The Memory Wall, built out of old lock stones, has names and memories of many year-round residents, as well as cottagers from both Canada and the States, recorded on plaques mounted to the wall. The society publishes an informative walking tour guide which features these heritage sites in the hamlet.

The Rideau Lakes Municipal Heritage Advisory Committee also celebrates heritage preservation with a widely distributed heritage map. It identifies heritage sites, lock stations, museums, designated buildings and sources of additional information.

Today, boaters, anglers and other visitors from across the continent and overseas come to enjoy North America’s oldest continuously operated canal.

For such a small place, Chaffey’s Lock has become a gem drawing on federal stewardship and funding, private investment, and, most importantly, an engaged community with a strong feeling of attachment to its history. All of these buildings, structures and sites — comprising a rich cultural heritage landscape — conserve the legacy of Samuel Chaffey and of a waterway that has found new purpose and recognition. ■



# Palmerston: The little town that could

Adapted train station tells of a  
once-booming railway centre

By Susan Ratcliffe







photo Wikimedia Commons

**When John Galt founded Guelph**, he chose a site near the River Speed because of its potential to drive the mills needed to process the crops grown by the early settlers. According to Fred Dahms in his book, *Wellington County*, “Almost every successful community in the County began at a dam site where water plunged into a rocky gorge.”

But not Palmerston, Palmerston was not near a river. Palmerston was different. The mention of Palmerston often brings the question, “Where the heck is Palmerston?”

When the Canada Company surveyed and opened up the Queen’s Bush area in the 1850s, Minto and Wallace townships were among the last to be settled. The area was dense bush and forest interspersed with swamps — a landscape difficult to access and most used only for crossing to reach a better area.

Irish-born settlers from Simcoe County were among the first to claim grants and clear the land in the area that is now Palmerston. They prospered growing wheat until 1858 when the wheat midge attacked and destroyed their profitable crops leaving them starving and dependent on help from the Township government. When the impoverished farmers in Wallace Township were not given their fair share of help, and when Grand Trunk Railway was built in the southern area around Stratford, they became very bitter.

County centres like Guelph and Stratford were rapidly growing because railways brought both prestige and economic benefits. Northern Wellington County towns like Mount Forest, Harriston and Listowel competed in trying to attract a railway to their areas to bring back prosperity.

By the late 1850s, Upper Canada contracted the Wellington, Grey & Bruce Railway to build a line from Lake Huron to Toronto to facilitate access to the ports along the Great Lakes. The railway solicited bonuses from the prospective towns along the desired route. The Townships of Wallace and Minto saw the opportunity to regain their former prosperity and offered a total of \$95,000 to the railway. In 1867, they signed an agreement with the WG & B Railway Company to build a line from Guelph to a point near the Village of Harriston and to erect a freight and passenger station in that area. Two early settlers, brothers-in-law Thomas McDowell and William Thompson, convinced the railway to purchase twelve acres of their land for the station and railway hub.





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That agreement was the beginning of the town of Palmerston. The two clever entrepreneurs quickly began dividing up the area surrounding the station with town lots; one expanded his hotel, while the other began building a flour mill. The website “No One Goes 2 Palmerston Ontario” (NOG2PO) tells the story.

In 1871 the town population had grown to 150 people. William Thompson was named the first Stationmaster of the newly-named Palmerston station. In 1872 McDowell opened a shingle and stave factory to meet the high demand for building materials. He also managed the operation of the Public market and livestock fair. McDermott bought a second saw mill to control the production of materials for the building of the railway. Thompson had a block of business buildings built on what was becoming known as “Main St.” McDermott was still Reeve of Wallace, Thompson was on the Township council.

By 1873, the population of the unincorporated village was 350 people. That fall, Thompson and McDowell sold over two dozen town lots in less than two weeks. Business was certainly good!

By December 1874, Palmerston’s population of 1,693 entitled it to be named a town. As the town grew, the smaller railways like the WB&G and the Great Western were absorbed by the Grand Trunk Railway which was the main contributor to Palmerston’s development as a

railway hub. As the NOG2PO blog concludes, “To see a backwoods farming area turn into a bustling centre of commerce almost overnight would have been a sight to see. The fact that actions of that little wheat midge set in motion a series of events that led to a few people making it rich in a short period of time and the creation of a tightly knit community that still stands proud.”

Palmerston grew quickly around its railway heart. In 1871, the station was completed as a single-storey building with a waiting room and offices; by 1876, it was so busy that a second floor was added to make more room for passengers. In 1882, when the Grand Trunk took over the operation, it expanded with a repair shop and twelve tracks. By 1910, 40 trains per day travelled through Palmerston. The station expanded again adding a larger waiting room, a ladies’ waiting room dedicated, a cathedral ceiling and two large towers with an observation point.

By 1912, the large expanse of tracks had created a dangerous obstacle for the children whose houses were located on the opposite side of the tracks from their school. To facilitate their safe walk to school as well as the smooth flow of the trains, a 600-foot pedestrian bridge — the longest of its kind in Ontario — was constructed. Palmerston’s future as a railway town seemed secure.

Then the world changed. The President of the Grand Trunk Railway perished with the sinking of the Titanic. His death contributed to the decline of the railway and its sale to the growing Canadian National Railway. The mighty steam engines were silenced by diesel trains and the Palmerston repair yard was no longer needed. The roundhouse, round-table and coal sheds were removed. By 1960, roads had replaced rail as the primary means of transportation. In 1970, the last passenger train rode through Palmerston. Ten years later, CN requested the right to abandon the rails through Palmerston. The station closed in 1982. The tracks were later torn up leaving only the decaying pedestrian bridge to overlook the former bustling heart of Palmerston.

So why go to Palmerston today? The once-booming railway centre that was abandoned to time and decay for more than twenty years has become the splendid 26-acre Lions Heritage Park with the restored station, pedestrian bridge, Old 81 Steam Engine, annual handcar races and a railway spike entrance gate — a new park that brings to life the story of the little town that grew. ■

—Susan Ratcliffe is president of the ACO Guelph and Wellington Branch. She is a former president of the provincial board and is chair of the Acorn Editorial Committee.

1 “Old 81” engine and train arriving at the Palmerston Station. Mural by Allen C. Hilgendorf.

2 The restored station is now part of the 26-acre Lions Heritage Park.



# Amherstburg's Belle Vue

Council and community rescue a historic Palladian villa

By Debra Honor

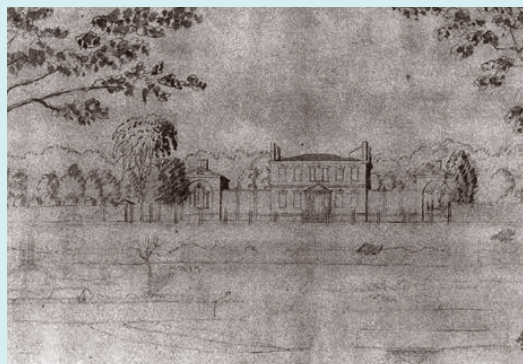
**At the end of the War of 1812**, the Detroit River region was devastated and economically depressed. Robert Reynolds, the Deputy Assistant Commissary General at Fort Malden, returned with the British military in 1815 to build one of the largest houses in Upper Canada at the time.

The Reynolds family were among the wealthy families of Upper Canada. Through his marriage to Thérèse Bouchette des Rivières, Robert was connected to Commodore Jean Baptiste Bouchette of the Provincial Marine and James McGill of the Northwest Company of Montreal. The building of Reynolds' great house infused much-needed money into the economy and gave people employment.

Robert's gracious home on the Detroit River was named Belle Vue by his wife Thérèse. It was designed as a Palladian villa, a style popular in England, Ireland and the United States, but unique in Canada at that time.

The original Belle Vue was a typical five-part Palladian design with a two-storey central block flanked on each side by a dependency connected to the centre block by "hyphen" corridors. Both the front façade facing the river and the garden façade were carefully designed and finished. The property was known for its formal gardens.

Robert Reynolds passed away in 1865, the last of his generation. In 1871, his son Dr. Robert Reynolds sold Belle Vue to druggist William Johnston, who owned stores in Amherstburg and Detroit. Johnston undertook a large modernization project which enlarged and updated the house in the Italianate style, popular at that time. He removed the "hyphen" corridors and filled the space with large reception rooms with bay windows. He also placed an Italianate verandah across the front. Inside, the reception rooms were finished with exquisite panelling and a grand circular staircase in the entrance hall.



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Perry Leighton purchased the property in 1887. He made very few structural changes to the house, perhaps painting the exterior.

John G. Mullen owned coal and Great Lakes shipping companies. In 1924, at the age of 77, he purchased Belle Vue and spent the next three years modernizing the home. The Italianate decorations of the nineteenth century were replaced by the then-popular Colonial Revival style. The Italianate verandah was replaced by a classical portico. Most significantly, the roofs of the side wings were removed, and a second floor added. The whole length of the second floor was now connected. The gazebo wing at the south was also added. A coal-fired boiler provided central heat and electricity was installed. The house and gardens were a showpiece.

John Mullen passed away in 1930, and his wife, Isabelle, lived at Belle Vue until her death in 1944. The family sold the property in 1946 to the Canadian government for use as a Veterans' Home for First World War vets. The house was renovated with multiple bedrooms, bathrooms, institutional kitchen, well-decorated lounge, dining room and library.

On September 30, 1954, the Belle Vue Veterans' Home closed its doors. The house sat empty until 1961 when it was purchased by the Ukrainian Catholic Episcopal Church. In 1962, St. Nicholas Ukrainian Catholic Church opened its doors. The panelled drawing room was decorated with wall murals set into the panels and a chancel was added at the back of the room to serve as the sanctuary of the Church. The second floor of the house was little used.

1 Archival illustration of Belle Vue from the west.





In 1983, the church received a grant through the Canada Ontario Employment Development Project to make major repairs, including a new copper and wood shingle roof, repainting and plastering inside, accessibility features, and beam and pillar replacement to repair some sagging floors. During this time that the house was recognized as a National Historic Site of Canada. The house is also recognized by the Province of Ontario and the Town of Amherstburg.

As with many churches, declining membership forced its closure. St. Nicholas Church closed in 2003 and the Diocese sold the property to a developer.

For many years, the house stood derelict. Belle Vue was included in the National Trust's Top 10 Endangered Places List because it was facing demolition by neglect. In 2009 a dedicated group of local citizens formed the Friends of Belle Vue and started lobbying efforts to save the building. This was done through education campaigns about the architectural, social and cultural importance of the 200-year-old home aimed at the owners, levels of government, historical organizations and the public.

By 2017, the efforts of the Friends of Belle Vue were paying off. Their adept use of social media played a big part in the decision of Amherstburg Council to purchase the property. Local townspeople appeared in droves in front of Council to advocate for the purchase as they





made their decision. The company that owned Belle Vue sold the property to the Town of Amherstburg for \$1.25 million; \$250,000 was the down payment and the rest was to be paid in increments of \$200,000 for five years with no interest.

The Friends of Belle Vue had achieved their goal, and the group re-formed into the Belle Vue Conservancy to assist the town in fundraising to stabilize the building. In the first year, they raised over \$300,000. A grant of \$100,000.00 from the federal government paid for a roof restoration. The next project is to raise funds for window repair and replacement.

After public consultation, plans to develop the property at 525 Dalhousie Street as a conference and wedding venue have been announced and Town Council has

directed administration to start looking into partnerships for such a development. The distinguished history of the grand house will continue to evolve for many years to come. ■

—Debra Honor UE, PLCGS, is a member of the Windsor Essex ACO and a professional genealogist. She is a member of the Ontario Ancestors/Ontario Genealogical Society, the UELAC and the Belle Vue Conservancy.

<sup>1</sup> Belle Vue served as a Veterans' Home between 1946–1954.





OPERA HOUSE

THE CITIZENS  
OF THE TOWN OF  
GRAVENHURST

THIS MONUMENT IS DEDICATED  
TO THE MEMORY OF THOSE WHO  
DIED SACRIFICING THEIR LIVES  
FOR THIS COUNTRY AND THE  
EMPIRE 1914-1918

LEST WE FORGET

WORLD WAR II  
1939-1945

THIS MONUMENT IS DEDICATED  
TO THE MEMORY OF THOSE WHO  
DIED SACRIFICING THEIR LIVES  
FOR THIS COUNTRY AND THE  
EMPIRE 1939-1945

LEST WE FORGET



# Gravenhurst: From ashes to greatness

One town's resilience and  
commitment to rebuilding heritage

By Eileen Godfrey, Judy Humphries,  
Colin Old & Carole Ann Simpson  
Members of Gravenhurst Municipal  
Heritage Committee



**Gravenhurst has had a vastly challenging past.** From multiple devastating fires, to a thriving lumber town, to the loss of sustainable industry to a much loved tourism hub — Gravenhurst continues to show its ability to rise again and again from tragedy.

Let's take a wander through the varied past of Gravenhurst and see how this small town with heart continues to reinvent itself. From its early roots in 1862, Gravenhurst has been a community blessed with beauty and potential. Situated about 180 kilometres north of Toronto, on level ground between Lake Muskoka on the west and Gull Lake on the east, its possibilities as a town and Gateway to Muskoka quickly became clear.

A. P. Cockburn, the first father of steamships, wasted no time in building the first ship, and eventually a full fleet of steamships based in Gravenhurst, that plied the three large Muskoka lakes from Gravenhurst. All around those lakes there were trees — millions of trees — that would create the basis of the town's first industry and provide work for 17 lumber mills.

The Gravenhurst Opera House was built  
by architect John Francis Brown in 1901.

photos: Town of Gravenhurst





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Sometimes it takes a crisis to bring a community to its knees and to create an awareness of its own vulnerability. In Gravenhurst's case, it would be a heartbreaking way to learn a lesson. On a windy night in September of 1887, the clanging of a fire bell and screams of fleeing people echoed through Gravenhurst as fire swept through the core of the town, levelling 45 wooden businesses buildings and 55 homes in its path. By morning, when the flames had died down, citizens quickly came to the realization that their livelihood was gone and that to survive they would need to rise again, smarter and stronger.

In response to this tragedy, the town council passed legislation that all future buildings in the downtown core would be built of brick or stone, not wood. The town quickly moved to rebuild, and from the ashes emerged some of the town's most cherished structures including the Albion Hotel, a beautiful brick anchor in the centre of the community, and due to forward-thinking mayor Charles Mickle, the most iconic structure — the Opera House, anchor of Heritage Square.

As lumbering waned, Mickle invited philanthropist William Gage to build the first Sanatorium for the treatment of tuberculosis (TB) in Canada. Five years later, a second would be built — the first free hospital in the world for the treatment of TB.

As cases of tuberculosis declined, sanatoriums everywhere were closing; locally, Calydor Sanatorium was purchased by the federal government to become a prisoner of war camp for more than 400 Nazi officers for the six years' duration of World War II. Ironically, this camp would later become a popular resort for Jewish vacationers, who were often turned away by other Muskoka resorts. Today it has become a parkland along the shores of Muskoka Bay bordered by a subdivision of lovely homes, a blend of present and past in perfect harmony.

Gravenhurst's first few decades proved to define the fabric of the town. There was a desire to build and develop for growth, yet to honour and respect the roots that run deep. What unifies the community is heart and resiliency in adversity. Gravenhurst citizens treasure their history and heritage and, when needed, have become activists and champions for its preservation; save for a few scars and the occasional defeat.

How is it possible to support sustainable growth while still preserving heritage? Three little words — Municipal Heritage Committee. From the initial days of the Local Architectural Conservation Advisory Committee (LACAC) to the current day Municipal Heritage Committee, Gravenhurst citizens have been active in researching, evaluating, listing and designating properties that have heritage significance to the town.

It is important to note that since the formation of the MHC, designation by-laws have ensured that the Severn River Inn, the Clerk's Office, the Carnegie Library, Gravenhurst Opera House, Albion Hotel, Muskoka Centre (site of the first sanatorium) Gazebo, Gateway Heritage Arch, Canadian National Railway Station, Canada Post Office and numerous private homes and residences have been recognized as assets the community needs to protect.

1 Church of Our Lady at Southwood, Kilworthy, was built by local residents in 1935.

2 Rosehurst, Charles Mickle's home built in 1884, was designated in 2014.



Let's not forget that the town has continued to make progressive strides with new school buildings, a new arena/community centre complex and new commercial developments, but not at the cost of heritage. The Segwun steamship, spared the fate of its sister ships and (although mothballed for a time as a stationary museum), was restored to full operation. She proudly sails the Muskoka lakes and has been joined by a replica steamship of the first steamer, The Wenonah. Additionally her heritage has sparked the creation of a museum and boathouse to pay homage to early life here in Gravenhurst, known as the Muskoka Steamships and Discovery Centre.

The defining moment for the Gravenhurst MHC came in the form of a humble pioneer church. Church of Our Lady at Southwood had been decommissioned and was facing the threat of demolition. With citizen input, donor dollars and the leadership of the Gravenhurst MHC, the little church was saved and designated; it now provides a wonderful site for small gatherings and weddings.

The MHC, a small but mighty group, has continued to work with government at all levels — sometimes collaboratively and sometimes in opposition — to designate sites that are near and dear to the community's history. These include the site of the Lighthouse on Lake Muskoka at the Narrows entrance to Muskoka Bay as well as the steamship wheelhouses which stand in front of the Muskoka Discovery Centre.

Gravenhurst can proudly boast that some of the oldest and most significant buildings survive, with many others waiting in the wings to be listed. For example, in 2019 there are 15 listed properties and 16 designated, comprising 31 properties that are now entered in the Municipal Register.

The MHC has also been the leader in Doors Open events in Gravenhurst, featuring such beautiful structures as Massey Hall (now Scott Hall) at the Ontario Fire College, the former site of the Free Hospital for the treatment of TB, as well as the Masonic Lodge and the former Carnegie Library.

Gravenhurst continues to be a community where citizens work together to try and find solutions that keep the community growing, but not at the peril of our heritage locations. When Rosehurst, Charles Mickle's home came to market, Gravenhurst MHC supported the two young entrepreneurs in restoring and repurposing this iconic home. Special attention was paid to the character of the home and, where possible, elements of the home were restored and reinstated. This iconic centerpiece proudly sits on Bay Street in the heart of Gravenhurst and was designated and plaqued in 2014.

What sets Gravenhurst apart is the support from residents. These people aren't on a committee and aren't elected officials; they are simply our heart and soul residents who come out to support the preservation and education activities the MHC presents. Time and time again, we see our community rallying around our collective heritage to celebrate the efforts of past and present. From the designation of the Gateway Arch, to celebrating our Railway Station, to the designation of the Canada Post Office — we continue to see great crowds and growing support.

It is inevitable that there will be more changes and challenges that we will face as a community; however, comfort is found in the knowledge that a deep history of resilience, flexibility and commitment to rebuilding heritage is the foundation Gravenhurst has built. ■

—This article was researched and authored by Judy Humphries, Colin Old, Eileen Godfrey and Carole Ann Simpson who are members of the Gravenhurst Municipal Heritage Committee and tireless volunteers within the Town of Gravenhurst. Carole Ann Simpson is also a member of ACO Muskoka.

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photo Larry Carroll





# Benmiller S.S. No.2

Restored School Section  
becomes a community hall

by John Rutledge



**This little building in the hamlet of Benmiller, near Goderich, began its life in 1880 as a one-room school, Benmiller School Section No. 2.**

Years later, it was privately used by the International Order of Foresters, who periodically rented it out. Eventually they gave it to the local Township of Ashfield-Colborne-Wawanosh. After the modern Colborne Township Public School closed and the only local church was demolished, the need for a community hall, with up-to-date facilities and barrier-free accessibility, developed. A group of concerned citizens rallied to help the Township restore and upgrade S. S. No. 2 into a community hall, retaining John Rutledge Architect for the project.

Restoration was completed and the hall re-opened in 2016. The central entrance “leg” of the T-shaped floor plan, was extruded outward to house a new lift and a safer stairway. This extension, resembling the original entrance, has many people thinking no addition was added, until they get inside.

The original timber-framed collar tiers and king posts were recreated in the three exterior gables. Original exterior window trim was bent from prefinished metal. Celect Cellular exterior horizontal composite siding

made by Royal Building Materials was used, as it resembles painted wood. Roofing was replaced with shiny bare galvanized metal shingle panels made by Diamond Steel Roofing. Carefully chosen, new low-maintenance materials, when appropriately detailed, can be aesthetically congruent with the character of the original building materials being replaced.

A new louvred belfry, replacing the original as requested, was set atop the apex of the roof ridges. The original bell that was donated back to the building now hangs inside on the new elevator shaft for all to see. There were no bats in the belfry; however, the roof space had been annually filled with brown bats. The roof space was cleaned out and sealed up. Bat houses were built outside as brown bats return to roost in the same place each year — an ecological fact that is often overlooked.

The pre-existing lower level left much to be desired, with a cold cement floor and out-of-date washrooms. A single fifty-foot long, ten-by-ten inch, original hand-hewn





1

timber beam was found holding up the central part of the main floor. Fortunately and unfortunately, it was removed and replaced with steel to increase much needed head room. The basement floor was removed and lowered, replaced with a new insulated, heated concrete sub-floor that is now greatly appreciated by a yoga group during the winter.

The interior layout was re-configured so the lower level and the upper level can be used separately, each with its own kitchen with bar and washroom facilities for increased flexibility for rentals.

The original wood floor in the upper level was refinished. The original wood wainscoting and interior wood trim had been painted and were initially to remain in situ and refinished naturally. For economic reasons, the Sommer Brothers contractors actually saved the project money by gutting the interior, insulating the building from the interior and installing new, naturally stained hemlock wainscoting and trim that matched original wood profiles.

photos Zac Durst



2

The south side of the building was fitted with netting to stop baseballs hitting it from the adjacent ball diamond, although it is a good game when a batted ball hits the new roof. This allowed us to open up three south windows that had been boarded up.

With all of the previously boarded-up windows reinstated, the upper level, multi-purpose room once again has windows on all four sides, as it did when it was originally one classroom. The two sloped, original chalk boards were relocated, one on each side of the room, with perfect examples of handwritten cursive letters above one, and an old map of the world above the other.

With a new insulated ceiling almost raised up to the original thirteen-foot, nine-inch height, reproduction white glass globe “school house” light fixtures, and a central light fixture made from an original wooden ceiling ventilator found during construction, the restored, renovated, and redecorated main floor captures the feel of the school room’s past. To further reinforce the school’s heritage and help muffle sound, historic photos of the building, former teachers and former pupils, were printed onto fabric baffles that were hung on the walls.

Thanks to a money-saving time-and-material contract and local involvement from many stakeholders — including people who had been students when the original building was subdivided into a two room school, community fundraising projects, available grants, and local township support — S. S. No. 2 lives on as an authentically integral celebration of the civic pride of Benmiller’s communities. ■

—John Rutledge is an architect based in Blyth who restores, renovates, and upgrades old houses, small public buildings, and old churches in Southwestern Ontario. John has done numerous ACO Preservation Works! reports.

1 The Benmiller Community Hall, 37015 Londesboro Road, Goderich, began its life in 1880 as a one-room school.

2 The central light fixture in the upper hall was made from an original wooden ceiling ventilator found during construction.



# Winsome Windermere

A cultural heritage landscape on the shores of Lake Rosseau, Muskoka

by Jake De La Plante



1

**It only takes a couple of minutes to walk across the village of Windermere** — located on the shore of Lake Rosseau in Muskoka — and, more often than not, the loudest sound on the street comes from a robin. This tranquility is easy to understand, given that there are only two hundred residents, not counting the vacationers who frequently make the trip to this lakeside spot for some “R and R.” Given its quiet and sleepy persona, it would be easy to assume that there wouldn’t be much in the way of history, culture, or any of the other things that *Acorn* readers might find interesting. However, that couldn’t be more wrong.

If you take a short walk around the shady, white-pine lined streets, you will notice that wherever you look, the residents have managed to seamlessly blend the old and the new into a consistently eclectic mix. The village seems to have grown along with its history. It’s the particular way that the community wears its heritage, that makes it so unique, and many would say special.



The fact that Windermere hasn’t been swallowed by development, or merged into a larger community, is largely due to its physical isolation. The main community is located at the end of the appropriately named Windermere Road, placing it a convenient twenty minutes from the closest town of Port Carling. While this isn’t really far, it means that you really have to intend to go there. The other main cause of the village’s seclusion is that it is bordered by plots of privately owned land.

On the southeast side of town is the Goltz family farm, owned by one of the founding families of the village. This plot of land creates a large zone separating the village proper from the community of Brackenrig. To the northwest of the village is a large, lakeshore estate owned by one of the first families to cottage in the area. The shore and islands surrounding the

photos Jake De La Plante





2

village have offered summer refuge to several prominent families, including the Eatons who owned Ravenscrag, a property immediately across from Windermere House. The dock is a great place to watch for wooden boats. In between these two properties is the Windermere Golf and Country Club, completing the ring of land around the village. These properties, by virtue of simply being there, have largely prevented the incursions of developers, and kept the village more or less within its original boundaries. The presence of the resorts and the seasonal tourists have kept the community stable for over a hundred years.

**1** Christ Church Windermere, 1018 Fife Avenue, was built in 1904.

**2** In 1996 Windermere House was destroyed by fire. The present hotel sits on the old foundations overlooking Lake Rosseau.

“It’s the particular way that the community wears its heritage, that makes it so unique, and many would say special.”



“Despite its quiet persona, Windermere is the proud home of many structures that would stand out in a large city, let alone a village of two hundred.”



1



2

Villagers and vacationers are united by a strong sense of community pride. The villagers are a proud and tight-knit community that, in 1924, incorporated Ontario’s smallest municipality, complete with its own fire service, police, school board and hydro commission, all with a population of less than 200. This pride and independence carries through to the present day, even though the village was amalgamated into the Township of Muskoka Lakes in 1970.

This pride comes to the forefront when it is most needed. In 1996, tragedy struck when Windermere House Resort caught fire and was completely destroyed. Almost before the ground had cooled, the village residents and resort owners, many of whom were local cottagers, were discussing plans to rebuild. The village simply wouldn’t allow their biggest landmark to disappear, and many insisted that an exact copy be built on the site, despite the fact that some of the villagers had never stepped inside. Within a year, a near identical structure was completed.

The village’s will to see heritage preserved isn’t limited to its landmark resort. In the 1990s, the village’s former post office and general store, built in 1896, was in a state of dereliction. It had been abandoned for years, the ceilings were caving in, and the floor was missing in places. However, in 1994, architect Catherine Nasmith and urban designer Robert Allsopp from Toronto decided to take a chance and rehabilitate the property (Yes, former ACO President, Catherine Nasmith). Although it wasn’t easy, they managed to restore and repair the structure, turning it into an office space and summer residence. Rather suitably, the Muskoka branch of the ACO was founded on the porch of the restored building. It currently is home to the 2019 ACO Muskoka Branch’s Windermere History Project.

Despite its quiet persona, Windermere is the proud home of many structures that would stand out in a large city, let alone a village of two hundred. It is not by chance that these buildings have been so well preserved and maintained. It is due to the efforts and pride of the people who call this place home, even if only for the summer. This combination of exceptional stewardship, as well as the pride they take in their unique home, makes Windermere a small place with a big heritage. ■

—*Jake De La Plante is a resident of Bracebridge and he conducted research for ACO Muskoka’s Windermere History Project during the summer of 2019. After completing his degree in Classics at Queen’s, he is now pursuing an MA in Archaeology at Memorial University in Newfoundland.*

1 Historic stone work throughout the village speaks to the skill of local stonemasons.

2 The former Windermere Post Office and General Store built in 1896 has been restored and adapted.



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# Duff-Baby House

Historic house on the south shore of the Detroit River

**This 1798 Georgian building was built originally as a fur warehouse by Alexander Duff.** At some point in the first decade of the nineteenth century, the building was sold to Jacques (James) Baby. In 1812, the first attack by American forces crossed the Detroit River and commandeered the home of François Baby, brother of Jacques, on the river further north. History reports that Brock and Tecumseth met in this house to discuss strategies to repel the American invasion. Jacques Baby went on to be a significant force in the development of Canada and moved to York (now Toronto). His son, Charles, moved back to Sandwich in 1836 and lived in the house for several years. The Baby Point neighborhood in west Toronto is built on Mr. Baby's later homestead.

The Duff-Baby House is currently owned by the Ontario Heritage Trust and has housed a number of satellite offices for various provincial ministries. In 1995, it was restored by the Trust to the 1836 period. It is one of two of the oldest houses owned by the Trust. Although the restoration approaches 25 years since completion, this 2017 photo celebrates the conservation of this important building. ■



**Building:**  
Duff-Baby House

**Location:**  
Sandwich, Ontario  
221 Mill Street, Windsor

**Completion Date:**  
1798

**Owners:**  
Alexander Duff (1798-1807)  
James Baby Family (1807-1871)  
William Beasley Family (1905-1979)  
Ontario Heritage Trust (1979-Present)

**Submitted By:**  
Peter Stewart, B.Arch,  
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At Willistead Manor in Windsor, a 36-room mansion built in 1906 (left), Ultimate Construction completed the heritage wood window restoration including wood conservation, consolidation and repair, glazing, putty and painting works.

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