

Old Houses of the Quinte Area

By Viva Richmond Graham

OLD HOUSES OF STONE

"Of the many and varied headings under the subject of architecture none is more fascinating than 'old houses,'" claims Mr. William Watson, who is a specialist in this field, as well as being one of Belleville's leading architects. During his college years, he used to spend many summer months, along with an instructor of architecture (now Professor E. E. Arthur, and head of the Department of Architecture of the University of Toronto), in search of old houses throughout Quebec and Ontario.

"Our method, in the country areas," Mr. Watson recalls, "would be to stop at a country store, buy some minor item and then casually ask 'By the way are there any old houses about?'" Puzzled looks usually followed, and the two students were quite likely to find themselves going down an old road, only to find some miserable shack. But more often than not, the search was rewarded, and an extensive, and very intensive record of them is preserved through the drawings to scale of the house-plan of each.

"Incidentally, during our quest, a side interest developed in gravestones, and when we ventured to mention 'graveyards', the country people were ready to call for the men in white suits. However, undaunted, we persevered and our findings proved extremely interesting. We discovered Dame Fashion played as important a role among tombstones as with women's hats, and definite dates as eras could be positively determined by design. I remember, how scandalized a discriminating owner of a lovely, rare old house, was to learn that the design of the mantle piece over his favorite fireplace was the exact and same one as graced certain tombstones in a nearby cemetery. Both had been executed by the same designer.

FASHION A FACTOR

"Dame Fashion, in a way, plays a mighty important role with the fate of old houses. Especially in towns or cities," Mr. Watson recalls, "because it's true, however sad, that the older, more graceful and mellow most houses become, the less are they able to maintain respect and admiration in the eyes of the modern generation, all due to the fact the local district is considered unfashionable.

"Fashionable districts shift from neighborhood to neighborhood and an exclusive residential area may become through the years, out-moded, out-dated and uninhabitable, until at last from utter neglect, the houses must be torn down."

Stone houses, Mr. Watson considers, to be one of our country's outstanding types of old houses. Stone masonry, now nearly a lost art, is a fund of architectural terminology and a layman upon seeing rough, small ordinary fieldstone or limestone built in a pattern of scattered formation may be unaware that this is properly known as polygonal, mosaic or random arrangement of so-called rubble masonry. This is distinct from cut, sawed, dressed or quarry-faced stone, (and it may be noted just here that the limestone for Belleville houses was taken from the bed and banks of the Moira river) which is usually laid in (course) range, broken or random range and designated as ashlar masonry.

At the present time, preservationists are showing much interest in pre-Revolutionary houses of stone to the extent that the historical society of New Paltz, New York, has bought several houses that line the street and said to have been built by French Huguenot refugees between 1698 and 1720.

Though it is not in Hastings County, a well-preserved, pre-Revolutionary stone house stands structurally unaltered in Wellington, of Prince Edward County. It was built by a trapper known as "Old Smoke" by the Indians who assisted in its construction. Nor was it until Old Smoke went all the way to Albany for his sixteen-year old bride did the use of it become evident to them. When the Revolutionary War broke out, Old

Smoke, a loyal American went to fight for his country, only to return to find the very enemy against whom he had fought were now his neighbors, with whom he lived in peace and prosperity. Indeed, the settlement was known as Smokeville, until the name was changed to Wellington upon the establishment of the post office there.

CANNIFTON STONE HOUSE

A gracious, well-built stone house commands a splendid view from a gentle rising site in Cannifton. There is strength and comfort within its four-foot, deep stone walls, its solid cedar floors that gleam like tawny satin and generous, original doors, innocent of nails other than wooden pegs, that swing wide and noiselessly. In the cellar is a huge stone slab four feet by ten which served as the refrigerator back in those days of a hundred years ago.

Mention is made in the Directory of Hastings County dated 1864-5 of new stone buildings being erected; the fine school houses with measurements of thirty-four by fifty-four feet, in Frankford, the imposing four-storied stone flour mill at Shannonville with its "three run of stone and capable of grinding 40,000 bushels of grain a year." While a four-thousand-dollar church of white marble, "as good as Vermont marble" was being built at Bridgewater (Actinolite), a village we are told, which was "nine years ago a wilderness and now a village of three hundred," encouraged mainly by a man named Billa Flint, "who owns chiefly most of the property."

"Stone masonry of the past, lost art that it may be considered, was nevertheless arduous work" confirms a former Belleville stonemason, and while brick houses, such as those on Pinnacle Street were in fashion, rather than stone, in my day, I served my apprenticeship breaking up wagon loads of field stone with a sledge hammer, for foundations and fences. To help build the latter, three poles and a chain were used sometimes to lift the stones in place."

Speaking of stone fences, the stone fence with its ornate wrought-iron cost the original owner of St. Agnes Manor on Bridge Street in Belleville the sum of ten thousand dollars, who was none other than the Honorable Billa Flint of Bridgewater known today as Actinolite.

Thus does the present inherit from the last sculptured history in its fences, tombstones and houses of stone, but what is more significant — a mirror of society.