

History Has Left the Building

Karen Prytula – Director of Communications, Lanark County Genealogy Society

INTRODUCTION

Hello Everyone. My name is Karen Prytula and I am here to speak to you today about the stories that are being left out of Canada's official heritage landscape. I work full time as a secretary, and part time helping other people research their ancestry in Ottawa and Lanark County. From this part time work I have learned an awful lot of local history that never gets told. My passion for local history has led me to some pretty interesting projects. I am the Heritage Keeper for Goulbourn Township (rural Ottawa), for Heritage Ottawa, and the Director of Communications for the Lanark County Genealogy Society. I write a newsletter for the "Old Walls Society", a society that creates a digital record of the old homes of our ancestors.

The lack of heritage conservation is evident if you know where to look and know who to listen to. Our own City of Ottawa admits they don't have the budget to initiate a comprehensive heritage plan. With that said, it is left up to the community to decide how old buildings should be preserved. The younger generation says tear it down, the older generation retaliates that it is a landmark when referring to an old building that does not serve the purpose it was built for any longer. If you want a building in your neighbourhood preserved, you are going to have to do it yourself. You will see at the end of this presentation what one person has done.

We have to prove or demonstrate to those that do not know any better that old buildings can be recycled. The 3R's of Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle can be 4R's; the fourth R being Re-

purpose. A perfect example of this is the Morrison-Lamothe bakery warehouse in Ottawa. You've all been there; it is now the Science and Technology Museum. Yes, it is struggling now, but for years, and years, the building was being used for a purpose other than what it was built for.

I would like to draw your attention to a fad or property developer's trend of allowing a building to fall so far into disrepair, it becomes financially viable for them to tear down an old building rather than maintain it. We see it in the news all the time, and so I will not dwell on *those* losses to our heritage landscape.

I would however like to draw your attention to an old stone home that, while not in this immediate area, has a history not unlike other old homes that are. This particular house is over 150 years old, probably over 180 years old. Something of this age cannot be without history, and since heritage is something we inherit, it is definitely part of our Canadian cultural heritage.

Picture this:

A home you have seen every day since you were little. One that you drove by every day as an adult. A landmark that you would often mention to strangers when they asked you directions. The place you tell your grandchildren about when you speak to them of the sleigh rides you went on in the winter, or the haunted house you visited at Halloween. This is your heritage.

Now picture this:

An elderly woman proud of her grand-mansion who lives most of the year alone. She is a

mother to some adult children, a grandmother to some teenagers, and a great grandmother to toddlers and elementary schoolchildren alike. She looks forward to Easter, summer holidays, Thanksgiving, and Christmas because she knows she will have most of her family home again. In the summertime the little kids are dropped off for the summer holidays. Great-grandma tells the kids about the strange people in the photographs mounted on the wall of the staircase. The children see the over-sized paintings of ancestors dressed in Victorian garb that hang in the parlour, and over the fireplace. They know these are images of their relatives from long ago but can never remember who they are, exactly.

Everyone remembers the curios that sat on the mantle. Nobody really knows who put them there, whom they belonged to, or even what they were, but they were part of the house. And every old house had them. The children who ran through the house, largely unsupervised in those days will all tell you about the dark but soft wall paper in the parlour, the homey smell of the antiques, the door in a room that led to nowhere, its exit boarded up. Likewise, the door on the outside

of the house that led to nowhere because it too was boarded up; a necessity as future generations demanded extensive renovations to a once primitive stone Ontario cottage. But, there were always spare bedrooms no matter how many stayed overnight. Long gone are the days when three little girls, or three little boys slept sideways in a bed because there were no rooms for each of them. The kids have memories from spending their summers with grandma. This is your history.

Does all of this history disappear when the family line dies off or moves out of the area?

This is a fate that the Darou Farm on the Rideau Ferry Road has succumbed to (the subject of this lecture). On this property is an Ontario-style stone cottage. A house of this style is characterized by its central entrance located on one of the long sides of the building, and two fireplaces: one at each short end. It was a common style from the early 1800s to the 1860s, mostly because they were erected faster due to their small size; they were usually only 1 ½ storeys. The Darou farmstead has stayed in the family from the day in 1816 when the King first granted this land to one Peter McPhearson (McPherson).



THE MCPHEARSON-DAROU FAMILIES

Peter came to Canada from Scotland on board the ship *Dorothy* the previous year, in 1815. He brought with him his wife and seven children. Peter is credited with being the first person to chop down a tree in what is now the town of Perth, Ontario. He had been out with a crew of other men to decide the best place to start the town. When they selected their spot, he cut down the tree so it would fall across the river to form a bridge to Cockburn Island. His eighth child was born in 1817 here in Canada only one year after receiving his land. It is believed it was during this birth that his wife died.

So here he is. Peter is pretty much alone in the Canadian wilderness with seven or eight children to care for, *including babies*. The trees on his property would have been much bigger than those we see today, the forest would have been dark, dank, and full of pests like mosquitoes and black flies, not to mention wild animals curious to get a look at these intruders. Like many of his generation, he persevered, built a shanty to shelter the family, and then began work on a permanent log home. Since it was late in the year, the family stayed in Brockville for the winter, where food and supplies were readily available. It would be there that Peter would leave his youngest children for days at a time in the care of some other family. He would come out to his land near Perth with the other men, help them, and get help from them in return.

As he got more land cleared, and crops planted, his farm became a success. He was able to feed his family and sell the excess. It is assumed Peter had extensive knowledge of farming, since after all, he had come from the Scottish Highlands, where improved farming practices led to commercial agriculture. He was able to apply his skills here in Canada. In 1837 construction was begun on Peter's stone house, although his children were all grown up

by now; Peter's eldest son was married and had several children of his own, the eldest of which being 17. We learn from Peter McPherson's will that his stone house was erected and completed before his death, which occurred in 1844. Five generations of Peter's descendants lived in the house and tended to the farm. Over the generations the farm, which originally consisted of 200 acres, has been subdivided and now the house and outbuildings sit on 52 acres. Already lost to time are other outbuildings that no longer exist.

After Peter's death, his son William took over and ran the farm. He had likely been running it by now anyway. It is unknown if any of Peter's other children were still living at home but it is probable. William lived in the stone home with his wife and the ten known children they eventually had. To accommodate the growing family a summer kitchen was added to the rear of the house.

William's daughter Margaret lived on the farm her whole life, working it, and never marrying. When he died in 1859, Margaret was still on the farm. It is unknown if her mother and siblings were still living here at the time of her father's death, but if they were, there could have been one big extended family living here, including people from the previous generation. A second storey was added to the summer kitchen. A veranda was built across the entire length of the front of the house. These are further testaments of a growing and aging extended family.

Margaret's brother John also worked the farm. He died young at the age of 39 in 1882. His wife Lydia was left to raise the children. Margaret, for some unknown reason, sold the farm to John's widow, but continued to live in the house. The extended family grows again. Lydia married Louis Darou who had been brought up on a farm seven miles away as the crow flies. He moved in with Lydia, and there

they had a child of their own, Norman Roy Darou.

The basement was never finished and still sports a dirt floor with a cold storage section walled off. Sometime after the advent of the automobile a three bay garage was built onto the back of the summer kitchen. This may have housed tractors as well as automobiles.

After high school Roy Darou stayed home and worked the farm and became interested in township affairs. Roy became a Township Clerk in 1914, and held that position for 43 years. In 1930 he purchased the farm from his mother, and this is where he and his wife raised their own children. In 1942 he became a County Auditor and became a county clerk in 1944. It was after Roy's death in 1958, that his wife transferred the farm to their son Gordon Darou. It is unclear how long Gordon's own family remained on the farm. But we do know his family sold it to the Town of Perth in 2003/2004. While all this history was taking place, something detrimental was happening to the land.

CONTAMINATION OF THE LAND

A Town dumpsite had been created on adjacent property. This garbage, composed of many different types of harmful chemicals, (household refuse, and biological hazards), was leaching through the ground and spreading out and downwards to the water table. The Darou property was now contaminated by the leachate from the dump. Since the ground was no good now anyway, the Town wanted to purchase the land to build a sewage lagoon on the property or a nearby property. At the same time the Town has been purchasing all the properties that have been affected by the leachate, including what we now refer to as the Darou House. Did the Darou family abandon the property because the ground and water was contaminated? Today, the old stone house that was home to

so many still sits vacant and boarded up. It is falling into ruins. It is unclear if the family let it fall into disrepair because they could not stay on the land any more, or if the Town let it fall apart after the sale.

TAKING ACTION

But what to do about this piece of Canadian Heritage? What is clear is that the Town of Perth cannot afford to renovate the house back to its original condition, so the Town Council, after careful deliberation decided to have the old house torn down. This decision created a stir in the community, and so the Town decided to consult the residents for input to the matter. You know that when a municipality does this they have already made up their minds and made a decision; and asking for public input is merely something they have to do, to be able to say they followed due process (Ottawa LRT comes to mind). Some recommendations that came forward:

- Restore the house to its original design and designate it a heritage building, and re-purpose it as a rural Ontario farm museum
- Dismantle the frame barn and remove it to Algonquin College for a new shop for the Heritage Carpentry Program – as it turns out the school didn't have enough room.
- Have the college students renovate the house as a school project. This would lower the cost to the Town since the students' labour would be free – and it would be another 50 years before the matter arose again
- Have the barn removed and the house torn down and use the materials elsewhere in the community
- The land has already been rezoned for Commercial use (just like our Lebreton Flats). The Town does not want to extend sewer services to the house

because it would be too expensive since the property lies a mile or two out of town.

- Other public uses; Pocket Park, create a place for cars to pull over and picnic, and place an interpretive sign so people can learn about the history of the farm.
- Archives Lanark required more space

After lots of thought and input it was still decided that the building should be knocked down at a demolition cost of \$24,000 – otherwise the Town of Perth claimed to have been looking at \$1,000,000 to renovate the house to today's building code. It should be made clear that if the Town had that kind of money they would have spent it on the house, but that is just too much public money to spend when there are actual necessities that need money too (infrastructure, for example).

In 2011 the Town came to a decision to have the old house torn down because it was too costly to maintain. An interpretive plaque was voted down as well.

The historical society held a meeting to discuss the implications of a decision to demolish the home. Could the Town be establishing a precedent? Will any owner who has a heritage home in the same condition be able to demolish it?

HERITAGE VALUE

An "expert" consulted reported that the house was not owned by an important resident, nor did the house have any important architectural features. Someone even stated the house, as it sits, has no historical value.

Does a house really not have a heritage or historical value because it does not meet these criteria? The lengthy history of this house has just been explained in this paper. What should be done with old homes that have outlived the families they sheltered spanning across three

centuries? We should be proud to have our heritage in existence for such a long time. Three centuries is really not that long, compared to many houses in the U.K. that are still being used today for the purpose they were built for, *several* centuries ago.

The fact that the first owner of this house began the town site of Perth, the fact that five generations have lived in this house (probably three generations living there at any given time), the additions to the house demonstrating the families growth, the fact that a woman ran the farm (many women ran farms but most were out of necessity; only a few like Margaret Darou actually *wanted* to), and lastly the fact that Norman Roy Darou devoted 45 years of his life's work to clerking in a municipal office, *is not enough to be considered historical?* Does all this not matter, now that the house is no longer wanted by its family or by the current owner, the Town of Perth?

Like all of the houses of its era, including those still in use today, and those who have fallen into ruins, they were not built with the aid of trucks, power tools, or electricity. They were built by hand. The stone was quarried and cut by hand, if not on the McPherson property, than from a property close by. Even 'close by,' was 'far' in those days. There were no roads to speak of, just trails from one farm to the other, and this stone was moved to the construction site with the aid of oxen - the McPherson's had four. A tool that had a shovel at one end, and a man on the other dug the foundation. This type of building method is no longer used; it cannot be replicated largely because the knowledge and skills have been lost to time. Future generations did not have to learn it because this house would not need to be replicated by the same family; it was already here, built to house whoever was to live in it for the generations to come. As milled lumber became readily available from sawmills that sprung up along the rivers and fast flowing

creeks, houses could be built faster; these new building materials were less labour intensive.

In addition to the cultural heritage of the house, Rideau Ferry Road, where the house is located, is the original historic gateway to the Perth Military Settlement from 1817. Before that time, the settlers came in by the river.

Much like the way the City of Ottawa works, one year after the debate, the house is still standing in its poor state. Nothing has been done one way or the other. In 2012 the Town Council was convinced to review their decision to demolish the Darou House on Rideau Ferry Road; a positive step, and an opportunity to save an important building. While the experts did not think the building had any importance, more than a few people did, and so the Council reversed their decision to have it demolished. As of December 31, 2014 the home still stood in its original spot, just like it has for almost 180 years.

UPDATE

Perth Town Council has voted to allow a doctor from the nearby town of Lombardy to tear the barn down and remove the house stone by stone, and rebuild it in Lombardy to be repurposed as a winery. Our heritage might be removed, but the history of the house will remain within its stone walls, and its story will be told again, this time in a different municipality. The history attached to the old Darou House has NOT left the building.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Algonquin College
Devoy, Desmond. "Council Finalizes Darou Farm Deconstruction Plans" *Perth Courier*. Feb. 27, 2014.
James, Cathy. "Darou Farm Gets Another Chance." *Perth Courier*. Mar. 21, 2012.
McPhearson Family Tree, provided by descendants of Peter McPhearson
Several local history books