

The Bishop's House

by Dane Lanken

photographs from Robertson Martin Architects, Ottawa

Editor's Note: *There are communities across Canada dealing with “retired” buildings—some grand, some less so—that stand vacant, no longer used for the purposes for which they were built. Often they are threatened with neglect or demolition. The challenge for the many people committed to seeing these sites preserved is finding a new, viable use to which they can be adapted. A good conservation strategy begins with good planning.*

The Bishop's House in St. Raphaels, Ontario, is a case in point. Although the building's future has yet to be decided, the community has followed a strategic approach that includes obtaining funding and hiring heritage consultants. The story of this community's initiative follows.



It was from Bishop's House that Rev Alexander Macdonell directed the expansion of the Catholic Church in Upper Canada.

The owners of the neglected Bishop's House in St. Raphaels, Glengarry County, Ontario were at a loss. This large historic building was empty with deterioration setting in.

A citizen's group came to the rescue by fixing the roof and commissioning a find-a-new-use study for the handsome, solid, interesting and eminently usable building. While the structure has been saved, the group is still looking for a long-term solution to preserve this important building, which dates back to 1808.

It was originally the residence of Rev Alexander Macdonell, the first bishop of Upper Canada and a major figure in pioneer times. It was also a school, from the Reverend's era until quite recently, and an alcohol treatment centre called Mount Carmel House in the 1980s and 1990s.

By the late 1990s it was in need of a new vocation. The school board (which owns the school next door) was interested in the land, but not in the building. And the Diocese of Alexandria-Cornwall, which owns the building, considered demolition but was dismayed by the high cost of knocking down and carting away such a huge pile of stone.

Finally, in the fall of 2004, the present bishop called a public meeting. A good crowd turned out, and though there were no easy solutions there was unanimity that it was an important building, a local landmark, a structure intimately tied both to Glengarry history and church and school history in Canada. Losing the building was out of the question.

Citizens' Group to the Rescue

A committee was struck—the Bishop's House Emergency Committee (BHEC)—and Allan Macdonell was named chair. The aim of the BHEC is to assist the diocese in finding an adaptive reuse for the Bishop's House in a manner that will safeguard its heritage value. Macdonell had gone to high school in the Bishop's House in the early 1960s (as his father had in the 1910s) and had recently returned to the area after 30 years as a sociology professor at the University of New Brunswick. He was joined by Bill Hutton who (with Bruce Wheatcroft) had taken over another big, old building in nearby Glen Nevis and

refurbished it into an arts and conference centre called The Abbey. Also joining the committee were representatives from the school board, diocese and municipality of South Glengarry, and this writer, who has a long-standing interest in architectural heritage.

During a tour of the building in March 2005 water was found running through the ceilings of both wings. Allan Macdonell arranged for roof repairs, and many days that spring and summer were spent airing and cleaning the building. The fine grounds around the building were also spruced up.

The public was invited back into the Bishop's House during Doors Open 2005 and again at an open house that fall. Many former students were among the visitors, most of them with warm memories of the place. Everyone expressed the hope that the building would be saved and reused.

The BHEC commissioned two reports. First, a Building Condition Assessment Brief was developed through the Architectural Conservancy of Ontario's Preservation Works! Program—an excellent buy at \$250. Robertson Martin Architects Inc. wrote the report. Happily it uses words like “stable” and “aligned and level” and states that “The Bishop's House is a historically significant, handsome building, worthy of rehabilitation ...”

Next, a comprehensive \$10,000 “help-find-a-new-use-for-this-building” study was conducted by Mark T. Brandt, Architect, with Julie Harris of Contentworks of Ottawa. Most of the study was paid for by the Stormont Dundas and Glengarry Community Futures Development Corporation (a federal program aimed at stimulating the rural economy), with \$625 each from the diocese, school board, municipality and Glengarry Historical Society.

“It's been a unique challenge,” Mark Brandt said on the eve of the report's spring 2006 release. “This is a building that's significant at provincial and national levels, but it isn't in an urban setting. That scares some developers, but we look at it not as isolation but as isolated splendour. We can see several reuses, including as a mixed-use community centre, or as an apartment building, perhaps with a modern addition. It's a chance to live in an honest-to-goodness, bona fide piece of Canadian history.”

Dane Lanken is a writer living near Alexandria, Ontario. His books include Montreal at the Crossroads (Harvest House, 1975) and Montreal Movie Palaces (Penumbra Press, 1993). He is a Heritage Canada Communications Award winner, 1976.

Editor's Note: For more information about the Bishop's House or to arrange a visit to the site, contact Allan Macdonell (613-525-5410) or Dane Lanken (613-525-1108) or write Bishop's House Committee, 20132 County Road 25, Green Valley, ON K0C 1L0 or email aln@sympatico.ca.

The Bishop's House – A Distinguished History by Dane Lanken

The Bishop's House is in the village of St. Raphaels (pronounced “raffles”). It sits on King's Road, built by Col. John Graves Simcoe, the first road in Ontario to skirt the St. Lawrence between the Quebec border and Cornwall, probably following a trail far more ancient. The King's Road was the major route between Montréal and Toronto until a new highway along the St. Lawrence was built in the 1920s. Today, it is a picturesque country road.

St. Raphaels was settled by Scottish Highlanders beginning in 1786, largely Macdonells at first from Knoydart and North Morar. Before departing, they sought the protection of St. Raphael, patron saint of travellers, and upon arrival in October 1786 named the settlement in his honour. More Macdonells, as well as Frasers, Grants, McIntoshes, McMillans, McTavishes, Chisholms and a McQueen from Glen Garry and Glen Moriston arrived later in 1786. Still more Highlanders arrived in 1790, 1792 and 1802. Thus a vibrant Highland-flavoured community developed, and though French-Canadians and more recently other diverse cultures have also settled here, the area retains a Scottish character.

Rev Alexander Macdonell (1762-1840), the “Big Bishop” as he came to be known, arrived in St. Raphaels in 1804 remaining there until moving to Kingston around 1830. It was from St. Raphaels that he directed the expansion of the Roman Catholic Church in Upper Canada. He oversaw construction of some 35 churches across the colony, opened schools and, in St. Raphaels, established the first seminary west of Quebec.

He built a stone house at St. Raphaels as a presbytery in 1808, four years after his arrival. It remains the core of what is today a substantial, three-storey structure of approximately 2,155 square metres in size, including the basement and verandahs.

From this original house Rev Macdonell directed the construction of St. Raphaels Church, just across King's Road, from 1815 to 1821. St. Raphaels was “the great church in the wilderness,” a vast stone structure that could hold a thousand people. It was to be the centrepiece of a great city—a great city that never grew. It was built by the Scottish-born architect-builder Archibald Fraser, a cousin of Rev Macdonell. Fraser later built the nearby baronial home, “Fraserfield,” as well as important buildings in Cornwall, Kingston and Québec City.

St. Raphaels Church burned in August 1970, leaving only its towering stone walls. These were subsequently stabilized, largely through the efforts of a citizens' group, the Friends of the Ruins. In 1999, the Ruin of St. Raphaels Church was declared a national historic site. Although the Bishop's House is not designated, the commemorative integrity statement developed for the Ruin identifies “the historic ecclesiastical landscape... and readapted historic buildings” as one of the key reasons for their national historic value.

The Bishop's House was, from its earliest days, a place of education under the name College of Iona. In 1818, it became the first publicly supported Catholic school in Upper Canada. John Sandfield Macdonald, later a leading player in pre-Confederation Canadian politics and the first premier of post-Confederation Ontario, attended this school.

By the late 1800s, Iona College became a combined boarding and day school—a girls-only boarding school (drawing students from throughout eastern Canada) and a day school for the village boys and girls. From 1913 it operated as a high school staffed by teaching sisters of the Holy Cross.

In the 1870s the building was given a Second Empire make-over, a mansard roof and first- and second-storey balconies on the façade, and inside, a remarkable variety of pressed metal ceilings, still a very striking feature of the house. Then in 1924, matching east and west wings were added, big, rectangular fieldstone blocks, each 8 by 25 metres, housing classrooms, a dining hall and chapel to the designs by Montréal architect Joseph Raoul Gariépy (1880-1938). The more imposing result included a grander entry configuration with a central porch tower and third-floor central dormer windows.

But in the latter 1960s, an era of change in public education, a new school was built next door and the Bishop's House became strictly a residential facility for the boarding of students. In the 1980s and 90s it housed an alcohol treatment centre, the Mount Carmel House.

The Bishop's House grounds play an important role in any future heritage designation process and in planning for an adaptive reuse. At the front of the house are an axial driveway, mature trees, historic iron gateway, statuary and gardens laid out by a Scottish gardener and including dry-stone walls and front steps.

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