

People In Action

If you ask Catherine Hennessey of Charlottetown, P.E.I., to pinpoint the very moment she became a heritage activist, it would be almost forty years ago when she saw workers preparing to remove some wainscoting in historic Province House to install a new heating system.

Know it, love it, protect it, has been her motto and her rallying cry. Here's an example. In 1864, St. Andrew's Chapel was moved down the ice of the Hillsborough River from its original home near Mount Stewart and attached to a Catholic school in downtown Charlottetown. In 1987 fire destroyed the school damaging the chapel. When the Church threatened to tear it down, Catherine raised sufficient concern — and funds — to have the chapel carefully dismantled and moved back (this time by road) to its original site.



Her work and advocacy led to the formation of PEI's Heritage Foundation in the early 1970s. She served as its executive director for ten years. Subsequently, she served on Charlottetown's heritage review board and on city council. She counts among her major victories of this time an agreement with the Heritage Canada Foundation and the Charlottetown Area Development Corporation to restore a block of buildings just south of Province House. "It was the first time that large amounts of money were committed to heritage restoration," she says now. "And let me tell you — after that, people started to sit up and take notice."

It proved to be an important catalyst for change that led to the recognition and renewal of many of the city's historic structures and heritage streetscapes.

But even Catherine agrees that it is her work outside the system that has had the most influence. She once protested plans to build a tall building on the waterfront by floating a balloon on a string so people could see how high the building would be. She has fought to protect old trees and has waged war on developments that threaten viewscales.

She bought her own home — one of the oldest houses in Charlottetown — in 1999 and lovingly brought it back to life from a near derelict state, proving that it is possible to find a new use for anything.

It was in that house that Catherine entertained Governor General Adrienne Clarkson shortly after receiving an Order of Canada for her work in heritage preservation. And it is from there that she continues collecting information, advising and counselling.

But even the indefatigable Catherine Hennessey admits she would be happy now to pass the torch. "Often people come up to me after something awful has happened and ask 'Catherine, why didn't you say something?' Cripes, I feel like saying, why didn't you?"

Still, it would be difficult to imagine Charlottetown without Catherine Hennessey's voice or influence.

"Heritage means you respect what you have," she says. "It helps you identify who you are and where you came from." She bristles, however, at the current fashion of heritage preservation for the sake of tourism. "No!" she says, "We should not do it for the tourists. We should do it for ourselves."

(The City of Charlottetown is the 2005 recipient of HCF's Prince of Wales Prize).

Editor's Note: I would like to thank Ann Thurlow of Charlottetown, P.E.I. for this contribution.