

The Land of the Stone Gable

Robert H. Hubbard

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THE LAND OF THE STONE GABLE

Eastern Ontario is a curiously neglected field for the study of pre-Confederation architecture, and this in spite of the fact that it has been so largely avoided by heavy industry and spared the attendant evils of population and pollution. The towns, villages and farmland of the region miraculously have survived is something resembling their pre-Confederation state.

As for the land, few today would agree with Baedeker's guide-book to Canada, published in 1892. "The country traversed is unattractive"¹ is his judgement on what he saw between Smith's Falls and Perth. Unattractive to the purse it may

well have been, but always attractive to the eye. Sparkling with lakes and rivers, its irregular patchwork of fertile plain and rocky woodland at least offered the early settler an abundance of wood and stone for his buildings, and its extremes of climate at least provided him with constant changes of colour as a background to his life.

Such was the environment in which the American Loyalists found themselves after the Revolution, and the British settlers at the end of the Napoleonic Wars. The people supplied the heredity. The Loyalists brought modes of building which were already well adapted to the climate. Of the British, the Scots in particular contributed an economy of design and a precision in the art of stone-cutting. One result of this meeting of heredity

1. Karl BAEDEKER, *The Dominion of Canada*, Leipzig, 1892, p. 157 (in 1894 ed.).



FIGURE 1. The Samuel Heck house near Maitland, built 1804–8 and demolished 1963. (Photo: Shackleton)



FIGURE 2. Poplar Hall, Maitland, after 1815. (Photo: *The Author*)

and environment was the little county town of Perth — which the 1967 Hachette guide-book to Canada dismisses as “an interesting little town” of mills and stone houses². On the basis of recent studies³ Perth and its region may now be described as having a distinctive and pleasant idiom of architecture.



FIGURE 3. Drawing-room of Poplar Hall. (Photo: *Eric Arthur Collection, Ontario Archives, Toronto*)

Though this idiom is common to all eastern Ontario, I deal here chiefly with its manifestations in what has been called the “Rideau Corridor”⁴,

2. *Canada* (Hachette World Guides), Paris, 1967, pp. 583-4. See also Jean S. MCGILL, *A Pioneer History of the County of Lanark*, Toronto, 1968.

3. Marion MCRAE and Anthony ADAMSON, *The Ancestral Roof: Domestic Architecture of Upper Canada*, Toronto, 1963, ch. 3; Courtney J. BOND, *The Ottawa Country*, Ottawa, 1968; Barbara A. HUMPHREYS, “The Architectural Heritage of the Rideau Corridor”, in *Canadian Historic Sites: Occasional Papers in Archaeology and History*, n° 10, Ottawa, 1974, pp. 11-71.

4. HUMPHREYS, *op. cit.*

the route of the Rideau system of river and canal connecting Lake Ontario and the Ottawa River⁵. This waterway, bypassing the international section of the St. Lawrence, was constructed between 1826 and 1832 by the Royal Engineers under Colonel John By at a time when invasion from the south was a real threat to British North America.

The stuff of this architecture is woven from a warp of the general styles current in the early nineteenth century and a weft of the region’s own men and materials. Its character is most clearly to be seen in domestic buildings, though there are churches and other structures to be noted as well.

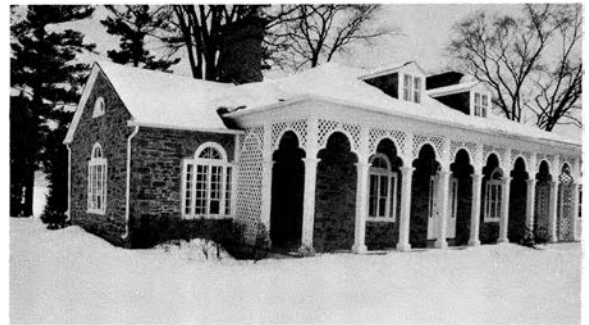


FIGURE 4. River Rest, L’Original, 1833. Architect: James Dowall. (Photo: *Douglas Richardson*)

Period styles originate with the learned architects in the metropolitan centres of the world. Thence they are spread abroad through pupils’ work and builders’ pattern books and in the memories of ordinary people. Having had their original character stamped upon them by the climate and materials of their places of origin, they are in turn affected by those of the regions into which they are introduced.



FIGURE 5. The Haggart-Shortt house, Perth, built 1837 for John Haggart, a Scottish miller. (Photo: *Jean Norry*)

5. Robert F. LEGGET, *Rideau Waterway*, Toronto, 1955.

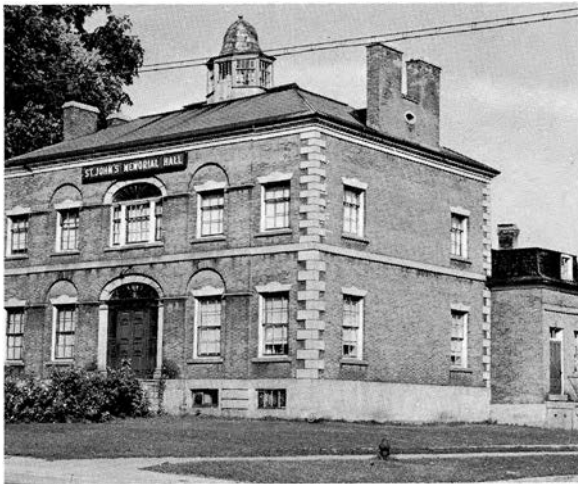


FIGURE 6. The McMartin house, Perth, 1839. Built by Daniel McMartin, an American, this brick house now lacks its original cupolas and balustrades; it now serves as St. John's Memorial Hall. (Photo: Shackleton)

First to appear in Upper Canada was the Colonial Georgian, a style that was already at one remove from its birthplaces in Britain. The Loyalists who brought it here from various parts of the Thirteen Colonies naturally retained their several local ways of building. Thus the wooden Georgian of New England and the stone and brick of the Middle Colonies both exist in Upper Canada.

The Samuel Heck house (Fig. 1) at Maitland on the St. Lawrence, begun in 1804 and unfortunately demolished a decade ago, represents the dominant type of its period and place. The simplicity of its shed roof and the symmetrical placing of its doors and windows are characteristic of the Colonial house in general, whilst the material, stone, reflects the particular traditions of the Dutch and Germans in the Hudson valley.

The scene was soon complicated by the entry of a new period style springing from two sources at the



FIGURE 7. Crysler Hall, Morrisburg, 1846 (now re-erected at Upper Canada Village). (Photo: National Gallery of Canada)

same time. This was the Neo-Classic, a refinement on the sturdy Georgian. It favoured smooth, often stuccoed, wall surfaces and a fastidious use of Classical detail taken from books on Pompeii and Herculaneum. (The Georgian had revelled in showy, large-scale ornament.) The Neo-Classic of our region was derived from both the British Regency and the American Federal, two dialects of the same style language.



FIGURE 8. The Alpheus Jones house, Prescott, 1833. (Photo: The Author)

The Regency style is best exemplified in eastern Ontario by Poplar Hall (Fig. 2) at Maitland, built soon after the War of 1812. The chief characteristic of this house is the strict design that marks the houses of the same period in England. The plane of the stone-work is scarcely interrupted by the shallow window and door openings, and the Classical



FIGURE 9. House in Drummond Street, Perth (now St. Andrew's Parish Hall). (Photo: Dr Christine Rice)

detail is small in scale and virtually restricted to the entablature under the eaves, with its delicate frieze of triglyphs and metopes. The drawing-room (Fig. 3) of Poplar Hall, with its Pompeiian niches and



FIGURE 10. The Sergeant's house, Perth. (Photo: Jean Norry)

delicate Adam fireplace, shows what interior elegance could be achieved on the very edge of the frontier.

The Regency in England was given to occasional outbursts of whimsy, especially when the builders worked on a small scale. The Regency cottage is charmingly represented in eastern Ontario by River Rest (Fig. 4), built in 1833 at L'Original on the Ottawa, with its long, low shape, its rows of pretty Venetian windows and its latticed verandas. If the region as a whole did not indulge in such fancies, the loggia of the Haggart-Shortt house (Fig. 5) at Perth at least represents the Regency taste for shaded galleries; otherwise this is a plain stuccoed house with a hipped roof.



FIGURE 11. House near Burritts Rapids. (Photo: The Author)

The Federal style differs from the Regency in its ampler proportions and greater elegance of design. As early as 1816, in the western part of the province, the Clench house at Niagara-on-the-Lake had reflected the Federal taste for a giant order of pilasters extending over the entire front and for a

big doorway with fan and side-lights. This doorway became universally popular in Upper Canada; a fine example of 1822 is found at Pine Grove, Maitland.

But the Federal as a direct influence had a very limited effect on our region. One notable exception is the Daniel McMartin house (Fig. 6) at Perth, built in 1839. Its ambitious size and its impressive array of arched doorway with a Palladian window above, of quoins and niched windows with keystone lintels, of belvedere and (originally) balustrades at the summit relate it to the grander houses of the United States. Its builder was in fact an Upper Canada "Yankee".



FIGURE 12. House near Burritts Rapids. (Photo: Shackleton)

Whatever its sources, the Classical mode caught on quickly in Upper Canada. A well known house of 1817 just outside the borders of our region, The Poplars at Grafton, is adorned with pilasters and blind arcades on the front, and the gable ends of the central pavilion of the house are given the form of temple pediments.

This stage of development foreshadowed the Greek Revival of the 1830s and 1840s, a movement that was continental in scope. Its most characteristic product was the temple house — regarded by Americans as a symbol of democracy and by Canadians, if they thought about it at all, as a tribute to Byron's espousal of Greek independence. At Crysler Hall (Fig. 7) of 1846, built at Morrisburg and now re-erected in Upper Canada Village, the central pavilion of the house is a temple, complete with Doric columns and pediment. Temple houses do not abound in our region, but the Greek mode left its mark in the general lowering of roof pitches and in a token return of the eaves to suggest the temple shape (Fig. 12).



FIGURE 13. The Roderick Matheson house, Perth, 1840 (Now the Perth Museum). (Photo: Shackleton)

FIGURE 14. Inge-Va (the Harris-Radenhurst-Inderwick house), Perth, begun 1824 for the Rev. Michael Harris. (Photo: Jean Norry)

FIGURE 15. House at Middleville, Lanark County. (Photo: National Gallery of Canada)

FIGURE 16. The Wilson house, Perth. (Photo: Dr Christine Rice)

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In due course the Greek Revival shades into yet another phase of the Regency style, the Italianate. In 1833 the Alpheus Jones house (Fig. 8) at Prescott supplements its collection of Georgian and Neo-Classic features with others that are specifically from the Italian Renaissance, such as the modillions in the pediment, the emphatic stone



FIGURE 17. House on the Scotch Line near Perth. (Photo: Jean Norry)

quoins and lintels, and the string-course that separates the storeys. The Italian mode dominates George Browne's stately design of 1841 in cut stone for St. Andrew's Manse in Kingston. Here an awning roof inspired by the Tuscan villa allows for an interesting play of light and shade over the front; a similar house (Fig. 9) at Perth, now serving as St. Andrew's Parish Hall, lacks the spreading eaves.



FIGURE 18. House on the Mississippi near Lanark. (Photo: Shackleton)

The Gothic Revival, which also had its roots in the Georgian, was at this period largely confined to Kingston. Its appearance in the countryside came too late for it to be of importance in the region



FIGURE 19. The Armstrong house near Burritts Rapids. (Photo: Shackleton)

before Confederation, its effect being confined to details of houses (Figs. 24, 25).

Meanwhile all the foregoing elements of style were being combined to form a genuine regional style in eastern Upper Canada. This is plain to see in the typical farmhouse (Fig. 17) in the Rideau Corridor. Its material is either wood, in the form of logs or squared timbers, or more characteristically the local limestone cut by Scottish masons. The house takes its basic form from the Scottish

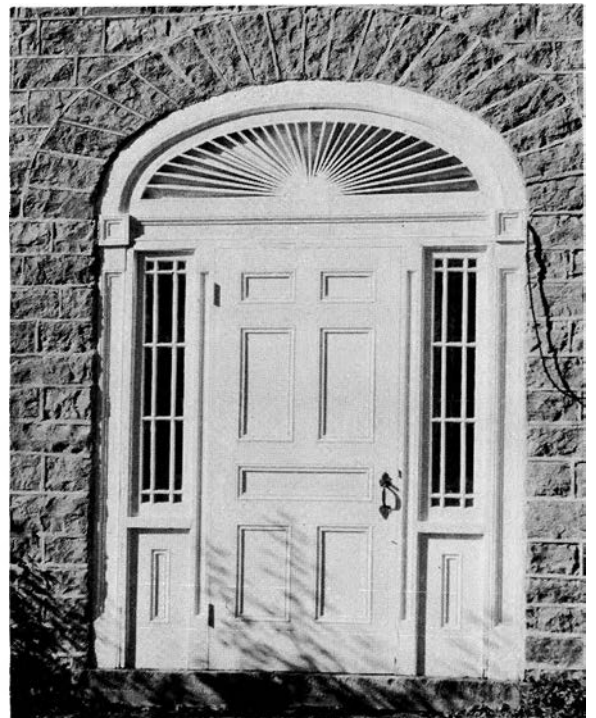


FIGURE 20. Fan-light doorway of the Armstrong house. (Photo: Shackleton)

Regency, but it softens its prim Scottishness by adding attractive features from other sources: the twelve-pane window from Colonial Georgian, the Classical doorway from Regency or Federal, and its sparing detail from the Greek or Gothic revivals. But above all it owes its special character to the gable that breaks the long front of the house.



FIGURE 21. The Cross house, Perth. (Photo: Jean Norry)

In contrast to houses built in the “foreign” styles of the period, the typical eastern Upper Canada house resists ornamentation, whether in the form of the splendid trappings of the Federal mansion or the coy frills of the Regency cottage. In common with stone houses in other parts of the province it prefers the very large windows that are remarked on by early travellers in Upper Canada. (Some writers have recently speculated that the size of windows was dictated by the desire for interior light or a view of the landscape; but these would have been equally valid reasons for their appearance in England or the United States. Probably they represent nothing more than a regional response to the general trend towards freedom and spaciousness of design.)

The evolution of the eastern Upper Canada house is straightforward enough. It begins with the plain stone cottage of the 1820s, such as the Sergeant’s House (Fig. 10) at Perth, the dormers of which were probably added at a later date. Ornament is completely lacking, yet the symmetry and good proportions of this little façade are prime ingredients in the developed product.

From this beginning the progression is towards the slightly larger house that is typified by several storey-and-a-half cottages (Fig. 11) of the 1830s in Lanark County and near Burritts Rapids. Built of rubble stone, they sported such minimal Regency features as transoms over the doorways and tiny

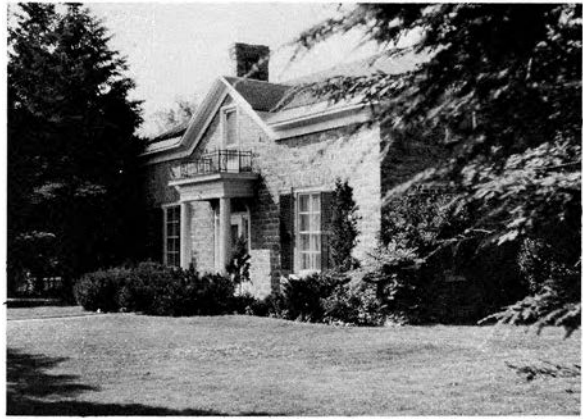


FIGURE 22. The Dulmage house, Perth. (Photo: Jean Norry)

windows in the half-storey, the latter intended to light the upper floor without interfering with the formal design of the front. A little later, several attractive houses (Fig. 12) on the road between Burritts Rapids and Merrickville add fine Federal doorways and often omit the little upstairs window.

One or two designs in the region of a more strictly Scottish character probably had their part in the evolution of the style. The best is the Matheson house (Fig. 13) of 1840, now the Perth Museum. Of two full storeys, it maintains the strictest symmetry in the placing of openings and chimneys. The pediment over the slightly projecting central pavilion is surely one of the precedents of the gable house.



FIGURE 23. House at Burritts Rapids. (Photo: The Author)

The classic example of the eastern Upper Canada house is Inge-Va (Fig. 14) built in 1824 for the Rev. Michael Harris of Perth. Originally it was simply a big stone cottage set in Canadian fashion upon a high basement to raise it above the winter snows. It has large windows and a handsome fan-light over the door. What gives it its real character is, however, the gable over the door, added at some



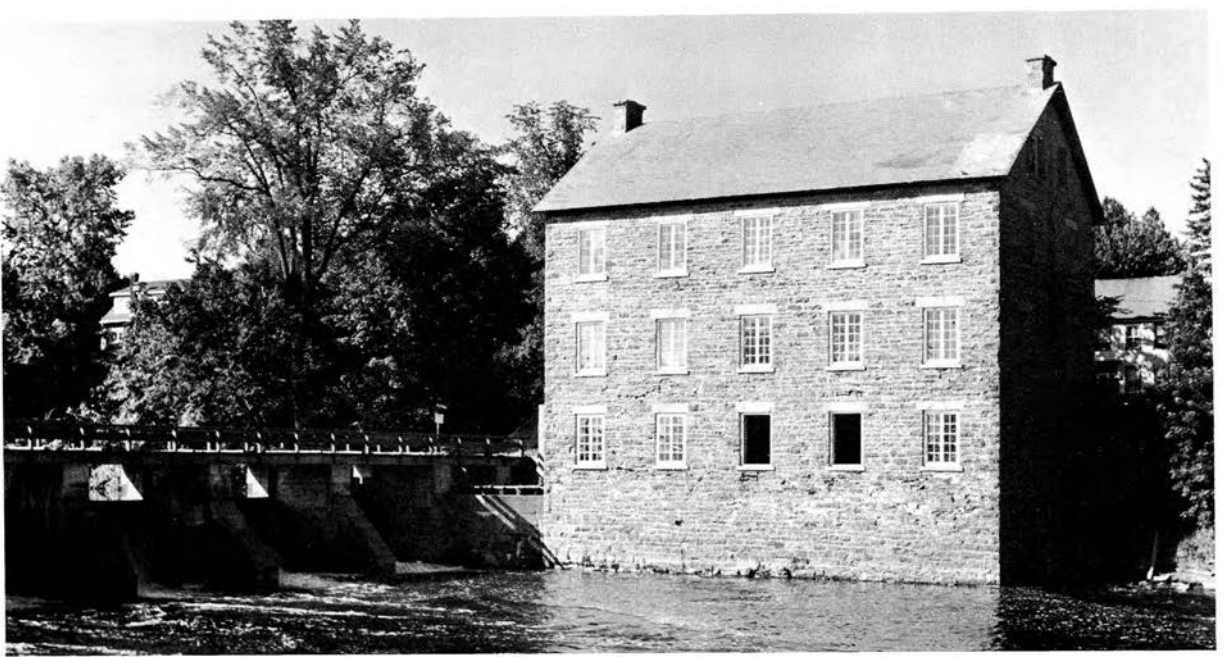
FIGURE 24. The Rothwell house on Back Road near Perth. (Photo: Jean Norry)

FIGURE 25. The Allan farmhouse on the Scotch Line near Perth. (Photo: Jean Norry)

FIGURE 26. Grist Mill, Manotick, 1860. (Photo: Shackleton)

FIGURE 27. Cupola of the Town Hall, Perth, 1863. Architect, Samuel Bothwell. (Photo: Jean Norry)

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time after 1833 — the year when one of Canada’s last duellists died here. The gable was evidently intended to light the attic storey while avoiding the awkward expedient of little windows under the eaves. But there is room for discussion of the origin of the gable here as in other parts of Canada. It is not the Georgian pediment on the Matheson house, which is temple-like and is defined by a string-course. At Inge-Va the gable is continuous in plane with the front. This and its relative steepness suggest some relationship to the gables of the Tuscan and Gothic cottage designs published in the 1840s by Alexander Jackson Downing, the American architect. Yet the Upper Canada house omits Downing’s overhanging eaves and preserves a Neo-Classic purity of line and plane.



FIGURE 28. Christ Church, Burritts Rapids, 1831. (Photo: *The Author*)

Whatever its origins, this gable became the hallmark of the Rideau Corridor house. Not unknown in the rest of the country, it was treated here with great distinction. Its basic good design is found even in a number of squared-timber houses (Fig. 15) with their twelve-pane windows and symmetrical fronts and on weather-boarded houses (Fig. 16) with fine Neo-Classic porches and doorways. But it is the stone house that shows the greatest variety of treatment — and always with restraint and good taste. Sometimes, as in a simple farm-house (Fig. 17) on the Scotch Line near Perth, the proportions are generous and informal and the gable broad, crowning a rectangular Regency doorway. At other times it is very low, as in a house near Lanark (Fig. 18) with a keystone arch over the fanlight and an arched upper window. In one of the best designs, the Armstrong house (Fig. 19) near Merrickville, the gable encloses a little rectangular window and



FIGURE 29. Presbyterian Church, L'Original, c. 1832-6. Architect, James Dowall. (Photo: *Douglas Richardson*)

crowns a splendid fan-light (Fig. 20). In the Cross house (Fig. 21) at Perth a steep little gable gives the doorway a greater prominence; and in the Dulmage house (Fig. 22) in the same town the gable encloses a door giving on to the porch roof. (Sometimes this porch was never built, leaving what is locally dubbed a “suicide door”.)

Before its demise in the late nineteenth century the gable house was affected by successive period styles that entered the region in the intervening years. One cottage at Burritts Rapids (Fig. 23) has round-headed Italianate windows set into both gable and side-lights. The Rothwell house (Fig. 24) near Perth juxtaposes Italianate quoins and Gothic Revival verge-boards. Veranda trellage, a Regency feature never much cultivated here, occasionally appears in its Gothic form, as in the picturesque Allan farm-house (Fig. 25) on the Scotch Line. That a certain distinction of design survived into the sixties and seventies emerges from a comparison of eastern Ontario houses with ordinary gable houses in western parts of the province; the latter are often of wood and indifferently designed.

Other buildings besides houses do not display the regional style to anything like the same extent. The closest approach is in the stone mills at Manotick (Fig. 26) and elsewhere, with their simple, effective design. Civic buildings like the Perth Town Hall (Fig. 27) with its Palladian clock tower and the Court House in the same town with its Italianate portico and side wings are more notable as individual designs than as examples of regional flavour. The churches of the region differ little from those in Georgian “vernacular” in other parts of the province; indeed nothing here can surpass St. Andrew’s at Niagara for its Neo-Classic purity of design. But graceful touches appear in the little pinnacles that top off the quoined tower of the wooden Christ Church of 1931 (Fig. 28) at Burritts Rapids and in

the pretty latticed windows of the stone Presbyterian church at L'Original (c. 1832-6) (Fig. 29).

After Confederation the character of eastern Ontario architecture was lost in the welter of successive styles from Second Empire and Romanesque at the turn of the century to the formless-

ness of today. But though the modest heyday of our region is past, enough of its buildings survive to make it an oasis of quiet enjoyment and a fruitful field for study.

R. H. HUBBARD
Rideau Hall