



A-Barnum House (03-10) p.1

ARCHITECTURAL CONSERVANCY OF ONTARIO

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NEWS LETTER

THE ARCHITECTURAL CONSERVANCY OF ONTARIO

-and-

THE BARNUM HOUSE, GRAFTON

It is now twenty-five years since the Barnum House at Grafton was first opened to the public. This event was celebrated in October, 1965, with a special tour of Grafton arranged by the Haldimand Township Council, the Barnum House Board and the Northumberland Historical Society.

Dr. Eric R. Arthur, distinguished architectural historian and critic, writes in his monograph, "EARLY BUILDINGS OF ONTARIO" - "There is no house of similar size and material in the United States that is the superior of the Barnum House at Grafton, Ontario".

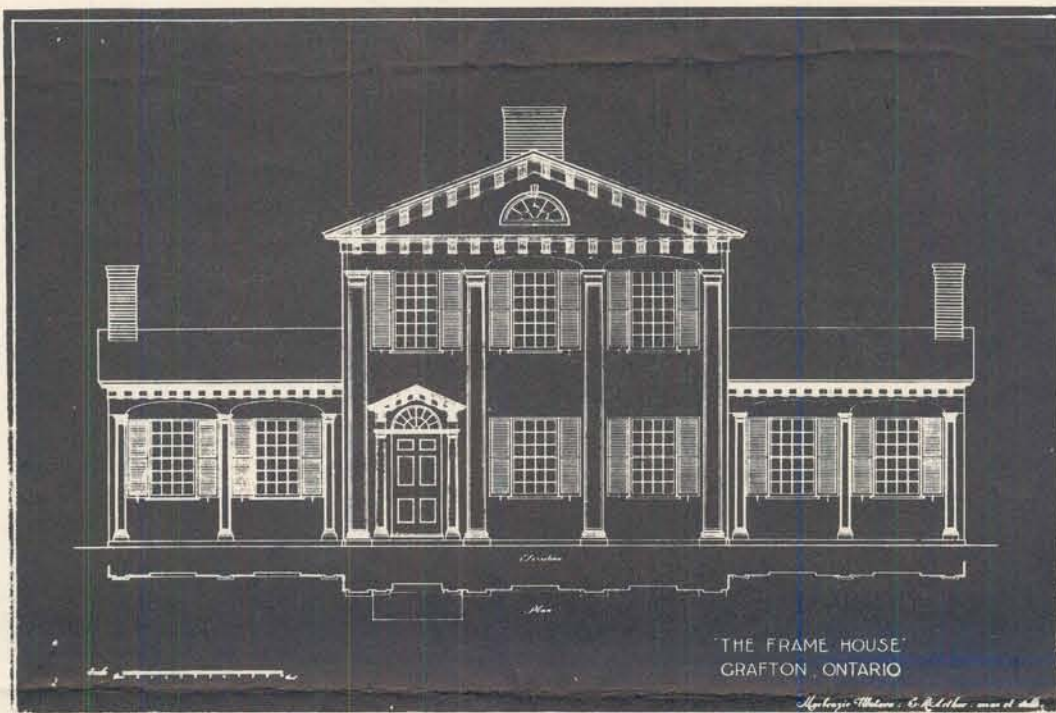
The majority of our members have joined the Conservancy since 1960 and may not know of our connection with the Barnum House: as the origins of the Architectural Conservancy of Ontario are forever intertwined with the history of this beautiful building, we have asked Dr. Arthur to recall some of the happenings of those early days. The story that follows shows vividly the difficulties which have beset the conservation movement in Ontario.

In our next issue, we plan to outline some of the work now being done by our regional branches in Ottawa, Port Hope and Hamilton.

APRIL 1966

THE ARCHITECTURAL CONSERVANCY OF ONTARIO
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In the School of Architecture in the University of Toronto, we have, for thirty years or more, required students going into the third year to make two sheets of measured drawings of early Ontario buildings. The collection now is considerable, with copies in the Public Archives, Ottawa, and the Ontario Archives. It was on a second search for suitable measuring material that I came across the Barnum House at Grafton. I am sure A. S. Mathers or Mackenzie Waters knew of it and led me to it, but I was immediately excited and concerned for its safety. In those days it was unpainted but in such good condition that it would be hard to insert a knife in the joints of the flush boarding of the walls. The window muntins, if I remember rightly, were half-inch and as vertical and horizontal as they were in 1817.



On an early exploratory trip, I found that permission to look inside would be granted, but no photograph could be taken of the beautiful east mantel because of the owner's high back bed which obscured it, and the fact that he was in it and had been for years. This seemed to settle that, but we were delighted and not a little amazed to find that when the family went shopping in the village, the man believed so grievously ill by all his friends, rose and went to a little brook, where, concealed beneath the arch of the bridge, he had a rod and a can of worms. We hastily photographed the mantel and gave piscator the signal that his better half had hove in sight. No harm was done, but when I absent-mindedly took the family a copy of a magazine article in which the mantel was illustrated, my reception was somewhat cool.

It was at that point that I found that the house and 98 acres with a running stream and land on both sides of the highway could be bought for \$4500. My salary at the University had diminished with periodic cuts in the depression to \$2900, and the \$450, necessary as a deposit, put quite a strain on the family resources. Somehow it was arranged and the urgent problem arose, not only of reimbursing me, but of finding \$4500. I knew few people, but the late Mr. J. S. McLean, Mr. R. A. and Mr. Walter Laidlaw, and Mr. Douglas Duncan, all, later, good friends of the Conservancy, were enough in the initial emergency to settle the bill and allow the Arthurs to eat.

Now that we had an unpainted house and a ruinous barn on our hands, it was obvious that something more had to be done, and, at a meeting in Toronto, the Conservancy was born. At that stage, too much credit cannot be given to the late Mr. C.H.A. Armstrong, Mr. A. S. Mathers, and Colonel Mackenzie Waters. A Committee was formed and a name chosen with its model the Thames Conservancy.

The original Committee of 1932 consisted of:

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| Mr. E. H. Blake | Mr. J. M. Macdonnell | * Mr. J. Stanley McLean |
| Mr. E. R. Arthur | * Colonel C. S. McInnes | * Dr. Malcolm W. Wallace |
| Colonel Mackenzie Waters | * Mr. Howard Grubb | * Mr. C.H.A. Armstrong |

(Those marked with an asterisk have since died.)

The Committee was replaced in 1933 by our first Council, consisting of

C.H.A. Armstrong, K.C.	Cyril Inderwick
E. R. Arthur, A.R.I.B.A.	R. A. Laidlaw
Martin Baldwin	G. R. Larkin
Col. A. L. Bishop	John M. Lyle, R.C.A.
E. H. Blake	J. M. Macdonnell
W. A. Boys, K.C.	C. S. MacInnes, K.C., C.M.G.
W. H. Cawthra	Hon. Vincent Massey
Rev. H. J. Cody, LL.D.	A. S. Mathers, A.R.C.A.
Merrill Dennison	R. O. McCulloch
Hon. W. Finlayson, K.C., M.P.P.	J. S. McLean
Mrs. Davis Fraser	Rev. C.H.E. Smith
George T. Fulford	F.D.L. Smith
W. Hamilton Fyfe, LL.D.	H. S. Southam
H. B. Dunnington Grubb	Malcolm W. Wallace
Hon. W.D. Herridge, K.C., D.S.O., M.C.	W. S. Wallace
His Honour Judge Huyke	Lt. Col. Mackenzie Waters, M.C.

of whom fully half are deceased.

It was a splendid Council and in spite of the depression and the normally impossible task of raising funds for the most worthy cause, the original sum was almost doubled to defray expenses of installing heating and plumbing and of decorating. Large and small sums were donated and friends generously gave their time in whatever fields they were skilled. When all was ready, we had a grand opening at which His Majesty the King was represented by the Honourable Albert Matthews, and cabinet ministers mingled with ministers of the church and members of the bench and bar. Curiously enough, I am reminded of two enormously successful events that gave us cheer in the very depths of the depression - the opening of the Barnum House was one, and the Beaux Arts Ball was another. I do not remember the equal to either in the prosperous days since.

In the far off days, we were very inexperienced, even naive, about the responsibilities inherent in owning and operating a "national monument". If we knew of the National Trust, its concern for the great houses of England must have seemed remote and irrelevant. By comparison, we had a cottage to look after, and error followed error until we felt obliged to give the estate away to an authority that might profit by our mistakes and have the resources to maintain the house. How fortunate we now are in the members of the Haldimand Township Council, the Barnum House Board, and the Northumberland Historical Society, who have so admirably and loyally managed the property.

Our first essay at management was to rent the house to the Ontario Handicraft Guild, of which, I think, I was then President. It failed because by a curious reversal of accepted economic theory, we made a little money on poor days and still less on good days. On the poor days our limited staff were able to conduct tours and sell odds and ends of handicrafts, but, when tourists came in great numbers, the girls found life intolerable as they conducted tours, answered questions about Colonel Eliakim Barnum about whom the knew next to nothing, kept an eye on their handicrafts all of which were exposed, and, between panics, endeavoured to interest a customer in a hooked rug or some other craft work of the period.

It was with feelings of relief that the Handicraft Guild returned to the less hazardous but equally precarious work of supporting a shop nearer home. I won't bore the reader with later humiliations in the Barnum episode except for my own attitude which is perhaps amusing. I begged the Council under Colonel Waters not to sell or give the house away - give me, I asked, one year to find a tenant who would pay \$250 per annum for insurance and taxes. I was sure that I could find a fine new Canadian family that would jump at such an offer. I think that several did "jump" at the offer, but none remained to sign a lease. I first had to get them to Grafton and I don't drive a car, and when we got there, I had to describe the house from basement to roof and tramp over every one of 98 acres. On the trip down I became greatly attracted by one very promising purchaser until, as we sat exhausted somewhere with a cup of tea, he announced that he had a wife and five sons over sixteen, and all over six feet, and that he proposed growing pecan-nuts and breeding pheasants. I did not speak to him all the way home in the bus.

I made a good try to create out of Barnum a lively and living property of the Conservancy, but we would have saved ourselves much anguish if we had learned early about the National Trust in Great Britain. Whether cottage or mansion, a building must be lived in as it was before it is received by the Trust. I write from memory, but when Beatrix Potter left a mansion, several thousand acres and two villages in the Lake District to the Trust, everything continued as it had in her lifetime - the grocer remained a grocer, and the chemist and the ironmonger continued their business without a break. Yet even the National Trust, with experience going back to the 19th century, would pale at the prospect of five strapping lads attempting to eke out a living in pecans and pheasants on ninety-eight barren and bushy acres.

I haven't beside me the charter of the National Trust, which has done so much for the Lake District and the countryside of England wherever it was threatened, but we in Ontario may be unique in having in our Conservancy charter the specific charge of responsibility for the preservation of places of natural beauty. It has always been a responsibility of which I have been very conscious, but as a Society, it has been one that we have consistently bypassed because of our preoccupation with buildings. I don't think we existed at the time as a Conservancy, but I awoke one morning to read that the Toronto Street Railway Company was folding up and that Bond Lake was for sale with lots on its shores 30 feet wide. Bond Lake is one of our really great beauty spots, the water appears to be black, and local legends have persuaded many that it is bottomless. Actually, it was formed by the meeting of two glaciers, rather like the fascinating question of one's school days: "What happens when an irresistible force meets an immovable body?" The answer is Bond Lake. I forget what support I got for the preservation of the lake and its surrounding deep woods, but letters were written to the press and influential citizens were lobbied. However, just as we made ready to go into action against the Philistines, a private citizen bought the whole property and remains, as far as I know, in possession to this day. What would we do if it were up for sale today?

I have in front of me the "Proposal for the organisation of a Society for the Preservation of Early Architecture and places of Natural Beauty in Ontario" of October 1932 and the pamphlet of 1933 giving the aims of the Society and the names of Council and Charter Members. I found them both interesting, but I was disappointed to find no mention of our motto, "Take care for common weale". It was such a good motto, and seized upon as perfect out of a number of suggestions from the very knowledgeable Council members of that day. It came from a book I once owned in reprint, "The First and Chief Groundes of Architecture" (1563) by John Shute. I seem to remember though it can hardly be accurate after the passage of thirty years: "Take care for Common Weale as good John Shute hath done". We see him as a good Elizabethan architect, concerned, as he would be today, with the preservation of the old that was good against the inroads of progress of his time, the encouragement of orderly arrangement of buildings in a street and the protection of the English countryside against the speculator.

England always had its Lelands, its Stowes and its Evelyns, and a host of others who loved the city and the countryside and were prepared to fight for their preservation. In North America, such individuals were rare, but here and there in Carolina, Virginia, Vermont and Massachusetts, groups of individuals emerged as though by some sort of magic, ready to record and preserve their heritage of historic buildings.

I am particularly happy therefore that affairs in Ontario are becoming so organised that we can expect great things of the Conservancy in the years to come. We would never have lasted so long or given promise of continuing life were it not for the work of many dedicated people in the last few years. I would like to say in conclusion how delighted I am, as an elderly surviving founder member of the Conservancy, that our paid up members approach legion, and that our affairs are in such good hands.