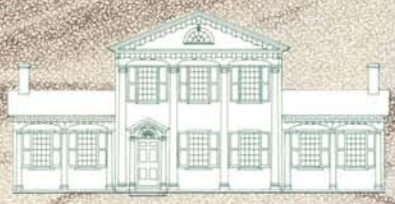
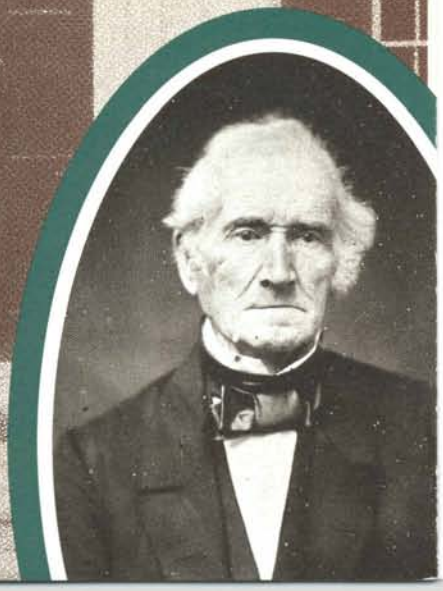
The Barnum House Museum



Grafton, Ontario



Eliakim Barnum

A Landmark of Architectural Distinction

Eliakim Barnum, a successful entrepreneur, built his home in about 1819 on the foundations of a house that had been destroyed by fire in 1814. Oral history and documentary evidence indicates that James Norris, an early loyalist settler, built a two storey frame house in 1811. Burdened with debt, Norris then sold the lot and house to Barnum in 1812 with the understanding he could remain on the homestead until he found suitable lodgings elsewhere. After the fire, Norris completed the sales transaction with Barnum and left the area. It was five years later that Barnum was financially able to build his house which stands today as one of Ontario's finest examples of neo-classical architecture.

Eliakim Barnum Settles in Northumberland County

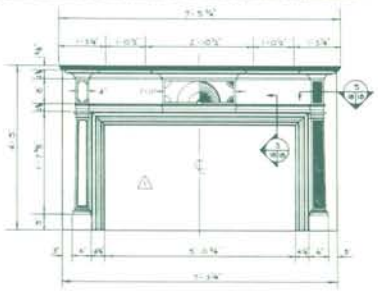
Barnum immigrated to Haldimand Township from the United States in about 1807. A young man in his early twenties, he moved to an area where other American immigrants, often referred to as late-loyalists, had settled over the previous two decades. Initially he operated a tavern and small distillery. He prospered rapidly, purchasing the lot on which Barnum House stands in 1812-1814 and adding 900 acres of adjoining farmland by 1820. Expanding his business holdings in 1830, he erected a grist mill a half mile south of his house and operated a thriving milling business into the early 1840s.

During the War of 1812, Barnum married Hannah Ewing. Together they raised a family of two sons and two daughters: Smith, James, Sarah and Harriet. Barnum joined in establishing the first school in the township in 1820 and acted as the local Justice of the Peace. He was a loyal Tory and helped found St. George's Anglican Church in Grafton. He was also an active member of the militia and eventually became Lt. Colonel of the Third Northumberland Battalion.

The Neo-Classical Style Influences Barnum

When Eliakim Barnum built his house, he was influenced by American architecture that was popular in the New England states at the beginning of the 19th century. These American homes had been in turn inspired by British examples, particularly the work of architects Robert and James Adam, leading proponents of the neo-classical style in Great Britain. Barnum House possesses the elements of this style with its formal arrangement of a central temple front with flanking wings, its articulation of the facade with pilasters linked by elliptical arches and its extensive use of delicately scaled details.

Barnum House
circa 1925



Barnum House is owned by The Ontario Heritage Foundation, a non-profit agency of the Ministry of Culture and Communications and operated in partnership with Northumberland County.

The Foundation is committed to the preservation, protection and promotion of Ontario's cultural, archaeological, architectural, historical and natural heritage for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations of Canadians.

School children participate in an archaeological dig at Barnum House

Barnum House Changes Hands

Smith Barnum, Eliakim's elder son, received part of his father's land holdings during the 1840s. He built a brick house for his family and soon became a prosperous farmer. In 1849 he was made first Warden of the United Counties of Northumberland and Durham.

James, Eliakim's younger son, married Edith Lyon in 1853. They remained on the homestead inheriting the property on Eliakim's death in 1877. James Barnum was responsible for dismantling both the grist mill and the large barn which stood across the road from the house, an indication of the family's diminishing dependence on agricultural pursuits. Following the death of James in 1907, the house remained in the Barnum family for another ten years at which time it was sold to Harry Prentice.

In 1940, the Architectural Conservancy of Ontario, a private organization dedicated to the preservation of the province's architectural heritage, recognized the importance of Barnum House, acquired it from the Prentice family and refurbished it in the style of the early 1800s. The ACO opened it to the public as the province's first period house museum.

The Architectural Conservancy of Ontario presented the house to Haldimand Township in 1958. The Township continued to operate it as a local museum until 1982 when the Township transferred the house to The Ontario Heritage Foundation, a non-profit agency of the Ministry of Culture and Communications.

Barnum House Today

On June 22, 1991, Barnum House Museum re-opened its doors after almost two years of extensive restoration by The Ontario Heritage Foundation. Original paint colours and wallpapers were painstakingly reproduced to show Eliakim Barnum's home circa 1820 to 1840. A two-storey addition to the rear of the house, where an original drive shed stood, was constructed to function as a gallery and heritage resource centre.

Since 1992 the Barnum House Museum Foundation, an incorporated group of volunteers, has operated the museum in co-operation with the County of Northumberland. Rotating displays of buttons, lamps and implements are featured along with the exhibits of early furnishings. Scheduled events include a country fair, an old-fashioned Christmas dinner and activities associated with nineteenth century crafts. Tea is served in the ballroom each Sunday afternoon. Museum memberships are available.

For further information, call (905) 349-2656, or The Ontario Heritage Foundation at (416) 325-5000. The Barnum House Museum is located on Highway 2 in Grafton, east of Cobourg.

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ISBN 0-7729-8866-8