

Ontario's premier restoration consultant applauds Colborne's sesquicentennial

Early appreciation for space obvious 150 years later

By Peter John Stokes

Colborne, towards the eastern end of Northumberland County, situated at one of the smaller kinks of the Kingston Road, marks this year the sesquicentennial of its incorporation on 1st January 1859, but its layout and development are a little earlier, and cover more than 1,200 acres. Congratulations on your 150th anniversary and your wonderful plan.

The special and perhaps unique quality of Colborne is its inspired layout, the creation of the town site's second landholder, Joseph A. Keeler (son of the original settler Joseph Keeler), who devised a remarkable sequence of urban spaces as the community's focus. This included an impressive very wide main commercial street - King - the developer probably encouraging the high buildings, notably on the north side placed on a sidewalk plinth several steps above the travelled pavement to create a more monumental apex. Also created was a public space, believed to have functioned as a market square, at its western end taking in the trapezoid made by the angled highway approach.

Keeler also provided generous sites for churches, among them the notable 1830 Presbyterian Church in stone, a frame Anglican church, and two brick Methodist churches (Wesleyan and Episcopal). Towards the eastern end facing into the wide section of the main street is sited a striking small Registry Office (built to serve the eastern part of Northumberland) of the stock Provincial neo-Classical pattern. (Perhaps the layout had the help of the surveyor, Greeley, brought to Colborne with forty settlers by Joseph Keeler in 1793).

The Market Square, as we like to think of it, with shops facing west onto it, has evolved more into a very well kept passive park, more like

a green, but this open urban space downtown as part of the centre is unusual for Upper Canada and Canada West, let alone Ontario. It behoves the community, maybe, to restore its periodic market use, particularly as a summer attraction, continuing with its occasional use for special events, and giving local farmers, markets gardeners, and horticulturists a site and opportunity to sell their produce.

This also suggests the occasional use of the main street, King, as a display and exhibit area for a meeting of horse-drawn historic vehicles, even the odd dog-drawn cart and, by extension as a meet for antique and vintage automobiles and other vehicles. This after all should not impede the flow of highway traffic if restricted to the north side, except slowdowns can be expected, caused by fascinated passing viewers which cannot be avoided entirely.

The greatest secret of Colborne's layout is the peephole prospect of its founder's home, the handsome 1820s Keeler House at the head of a narrow street, almost a lane and named Maybee Lane, leading off the north side of the east-west shopping street roughly mid-block. This house is, indeed, an architectural splendour, emulating The Poplars, the historic Barnum House of 1817, just west of Grafton. Keeler's house exhibits a similar flushboard arcaded front with fanlight entrance to one side and pedimented gable roof with matching single storey side wings here graced with front verandas. Joseph Keeler obviously intended to maintain



his view of main street busyness.

Colborne has also other notable architectural gems including the fascinating storey-and-a-half frame house facing you at the western entrance as the highway turns eastwards, and next to it the very wide-eaved brick Ontario Cottage of the second quarter of the nineteenth century. There are many other examples of all periods throughout the village, making any walking tour rewarding for the interested and especially the aficionado.

Colborne, such a special and fascinating place, still there due to the vision and inspiration of its founder and developer, Joseph A. Keeler.

Happy 150th.

Peter Stokes is the Architectural Conservancy of Ontario's pioneering restoration architect, best known for bringing international standards of heritage conservation to his projects throughout the province. He is the recipient of the Eric Arthur Lifetime Achievement Award. His many commissions and volunteer activities attest to the premium he places on saving historic buildings of the finest quality, no matter how challenging the work.

He prepared this article as a tribute to Colborne's sesquicentennial, commenting, "Anything around for 150 years deserves a good party." Written in Mr. Stokes lyrical style, it reflects his love of architecture, his post-graduate studies in urban planning, and his gift of bringing history and architecture to light by sharing his passions in person or with the written word.

A 1953 graduate of the University of Toronto School of Architecture, he was instrumental in designing and supervising development of Upper Canada Village in Morrisburg, Ontario, and the restoration and preservation of Victoria Hall in Cobourg, along with hundreds of other projects. A wealth of information, Mr. Stokes continues to delight audiences with his intimate understanding of architectural heritage and kindly agreed to craft this article on the village of Colborne - mostly from memory of notes he presented to his planning professor in 1957.

Mr. Stokes lives in Port Hope with his wife Ann and two English bull terriers.

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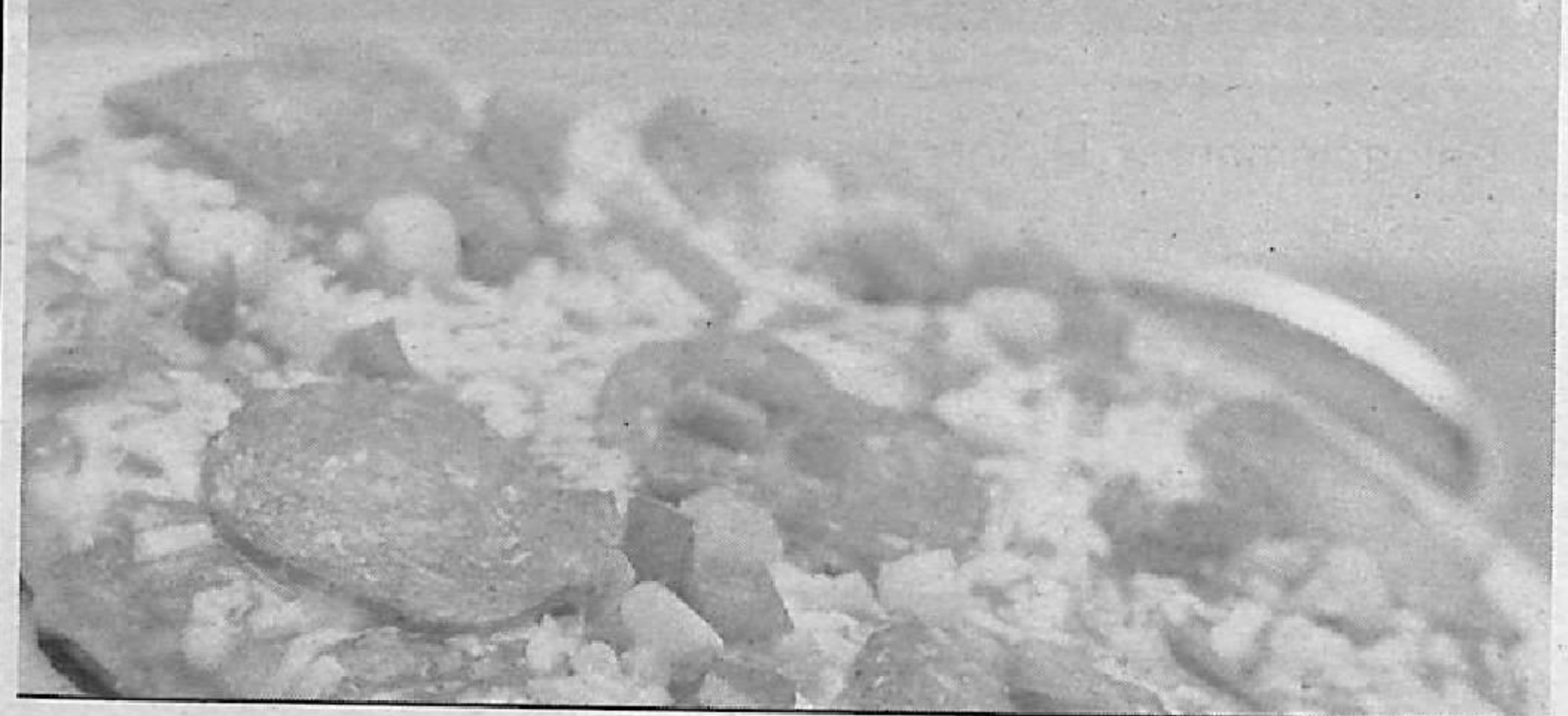
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