

On Friday, September 7, 2007 at 1:30 p.m., the Ontario Heritage Trust and Doors Open Cornwall-Seaway Valley unveiled a provincial plaque to commemorate Bethune-Thompson House at the house in Williamstown, Ontario.

The bilingual plaque reads as follows:

BETHUNE-THOMPSON HOUSE

Built by Loyalist settler Peter Ferguson in 1784, the original log cabin on this site is one of the oldest surviving buildings in Ontario. The cabin walls were constructed using a French Canadian technique called *poteaux sur sole* where vertically placed, squared logs were held together by horizontal plates located along the top and bottom. The larger home adjoining it was built in 1804 by Reverend John Bethune (1751-1815), the first Presbyterian minister in Upper Canada. This home also incorporated a French Canadian construction technique, *colombage pierroté*, which used a timber frame filled with masonry rubble. The fireplace overmantle installed by Bethune is one of few remaining in the province. In 1815 David Thompson (1770-1857) acquired the house and lived here until about 1836. Thompson was an explorer and cartographer who surveyed much of what is now western Canada and mapped out the Canada-United States border. The house presents a unique architectural and historical record of early Ontario.

MAISON BETHUNE-THOMPSON

Construite par le colon loyaliste Peter Ferguson en 1784, la cabane en bois équarri initialement installée sur ce site est l'un des plus anciens bâtiments conservés en Ontario. Les parois de la cabane furent construites selon une technique canadienne-française appelée *poteaux sur sole*, où des troncs équarris placés à la verticale sont fixés dans des rondins horizontaux situés en haut et en bas. La maison plus grande accolée à la cabane fut construite en 1804 par le révérend John Bethune (1751-1815), le 1^{er} ministre presbytérien de la province du Haut-Canada. La construction de cette maison incorpora, elle aussi, une technique de construction canadienne-française, le *colombage pierroté*, à savoir une charpente en bois comblée par une maçonnerie en pierres brutes. Le fronton de la cheminée, installé par Bethune, est l'un des rares exemplaires encore visibles dans la province. En 1815, David Thompson (1770-1857) acheta la maison et y vécut jusqu'aux alentours de 1836. Thompson était un explorateur et un cartographe qui arpenta une grande partie de ce qui correspond aujourd'hui à l'Ouest canadien et participa au tracé de la frontière canado-américaine. La maison constitue un important témoignage

frontière canado-américaine. La maison constitue un important témoignage architectural et historique du passé de la province de l'Ontario.

Historical background

The Bethune-Thompson House, situated overlooking the Raisin River in Williamstown, has been shaped by the tastes and needs of several owners in at least four distinct periods. Each of these owners built or altered the structure utilizing architectural techniques and decorating styles that were available to them at the time. The structure, as it stands now, is like a catalogue of forms and patterns that helped shape the early years of Ontario's architecture, with touches from the 20th century. The house is architecturally significant for the building techniques used in its construction. Many of these methods quickly fell out of use by the late 18th century, making the house a rare example of an amalgam of early building techniques. It is historically significant for its associations with the development of the Glengarry-Williamstown area within early 19th-century Upper Canada and with the people who lived in it. The house takes its name from two of its prominent owners – the Reverend John Bethune, the first Presbyterian minister in Upper Canada, and explorer and mapmaker David Thompson. It was Peter Ferguson, however, who built the first house on this site in 1784.

1784-1804

The property on which the house is situated was granted to Peter Ferguson (1747- c. 1818), a Scottish immigrant to the American Colonies who served in the King's Royal Regiment of New York. The land grant was a partial acknowledgement of his loyalty to the Crown during the American Revolutionary War. As a Loyalist settler to Charlottenburgh Township in what would become Upper Canada, Ferguson settled there and built a log house on the property in 1784. The completion of his small house was a requirement for the confirmation of Ferguson's grant and he received his formal papers of ownership in 1802.

Ferguson had spent many years in Montreal prior to receiving his land grant and he built his log cabin using a French-Canadian construction technique called *poteaux sur sole* where vertically placed logs were mortised into place and held together by horizontal beams located along the top and bottom. This method of construction took advantage of the abundance of large trees in the St. Lawrence valley, was quite sound considering the harsh climate of the area, and required only basic construction tools and carpentry skills. In houses such as this, only the chimney was constructed of heavily mortared, rough stone – a technique that was developed in early 17th-century Quebec by French-Canadian settlers. The house was heated with a large, open fireplace and had a steep staircase that ascended to a large sleeping loft located beneath a ridge roof. Peter Ferguson was one of the original members of the Williamstown Presbyterian Church congregation; this may account for his sale of the property in 1804 to Reverend John Bethune.

1804-1815

Loyalist settler and Scotsman, John Bethune (1751-1815), was licensed as a minister in the Church of Scotland and emigrated with other family members to North Carolina in 1773. He joined the Royal Highland Emigrants in 1775 and served as their chaplain during the American Revolution. At the end of the war, he rejoined the Royal Highland Emigrants (2nd Battalion) stationed in Halifax and moved to Montreal in 1779 to shepherd the 1st Battalion of the Regiment. In 1782, he married Veronique Waddens, daughter of a North West Company fur trading partner. The couple is reputed to have settled in 1787 in what is now Glengarry County.

In 1804, Reverend Bethune purchased the land from Ferguson and built a larger Palladian-style home on the property that incorporated the original log house as a summer kitchen in the south wing. Bethune balanced this by adding a north wing. The symmetrical wings and front central pedimented porch and window placement gave the home a neoclassical look.¹ Bethune's fondness for symmetry was specifically illustrated by his addition of a false window immediately to the right of the front door where the opening was blocked by the turn of the interior staircase.

Again, French-Canadian methods of construction were used. *Colombage pierroté* consisted of a heavy timber frame with brick infill for lateral stability. The infill in the various walls was comprised of wattle and daub (interwoven sticks and mud), stones and bricks. Considering the early date of the house, the bricks are thought to have been brought from England as ballast on ships.² The Bethune house also incorporated *tôle à la canadienne* – tin roofing with a distinctive diamond pattern. The exterior walls were then covered with a stucco pebble dash finish and painted white. Although the builder is unknown, it is presumed that he was French-Canadian, based on these construction methods that were common in Lower Canada but used less frequently in Upper Canada.

Bethune had the interior of his home finished with careful attention to detail and comfort, provided by a high quality of work. These features included wooden panelling and stair details, an elegantly moulded front door frame, brass door hardware, a pilastered overmantle in the parlour and Elizabethan Revival patterned wallpapers.

The home served as the manse for St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church – the first Presbyterian congregation in Ontario. Bethune had founded the congregation of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Williamstown, was responsible for its construction in 1812, and was the first Presbyterian minister in Upper Canada. Reverend Bethune eventually sold the site of the church and the accompanying burial grounds to the congregation.³ In 1815, upon Bethune's death, the property was sold by his widow to David Thompson.

1815-c. 1836

David Thompson (1770-1857) had made his fortune as a partner in the North West Company. In 1815, he settled with his wife Charlotte Small and their growing family in the comfortable home. By that time, Thompson had mapped out much of what now is Western Canada,⁴ but from 1816 to 1827, he remained busy with his duties as surveyor and mapmaker to the Boundary Commission, mapping out the border between British North America and the United States (along the 49th parallel). Only after 1827 did Thompson himself settle full time on the property. Thompson also served as Justice of the Peace for the Eastern District of Upper Canada from 1820-1833.

During his ownership, Thompson was concerned with making the house as efficient and comfortable as possible. His changes focused on the details of decoration, heating, drainage, basement access and essential maintenance. Such changes indicate the changing standards of housing in Upper Canada during that time. Many of Thompson's changes, however, also reflected changes in Upper Canada domestic architecture during this period – such as the plaster finish coat he applied to the secondary rooms that Bethune had left with only a rough finish.

Other changes had a greater effect on the character and appearance of the house. Thompson removed Bethune's pedimented porch and replaced it with a wider front veranda, in addition to a rear veranda in accordance with the Regency tradition; in the process, the slightly bell-cast slope of the eaves was smoothed out. The small, oval attic window on the front façade was replaced by a broad pediment-like gable which was visible from a greater distance.

The Thompsons operated a sheep, cattle and pig farm on the property, but unfortunately a series of poor business and property investments forced Thompson to return to his former profession of surveying.⁵ He mortgaged the Williamstown house and it was sold to Farquhar McLennan of Williamstown. Sometime between 1834 and 1836, he moved the family back to Montreal in search of a more economical situation.

c. 1836-1937

During this period, the farm changed hands four times but remained within the same family. Farquhar McLennan had emigrated from Scotland in 1802 at the age of 15. He attended St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Williamstown and was a farmer, lumber merchant and tavern owner. Murdoch and Catherine McLennan (Farquhar's son and daughter) inherited the estate from their father and owned it jointly from 1846-1895. Murdoch served with the Glengarry Militia during the Rebellion of 1837 and was a local innkeeper, lumberman and land owner. Murdoch used the home as the centrepiece of his successful business enterprises and became known as "The Laird of Williamstown."

The home remained in the possession of Catherine after Murdoch's death and then passed on to

to Farquhar Robertson, their nephew, who owned the property from 1904-1929. Farming was maintained as a full-time activity for a brief period by Farquhar until his business concerns drew him to Montreal; the home then became a weekend retreat. Upon his death in 1929, the estate was bequeathed to his brother Kenneth Robertson.

Between 1904 and 1937, the interior of the home underwent major changes. All the original moulding profiles and plaster surfaces were covered with a new building envelope. Lath was installed over furring strips and plaster covered the original wood detailing throughout both floors of the house, and new baseboards with a more contemporary profile were installed over the originals. The Robertsons were also responsible for major repair work to the front veranda and an extension to the back veranda, which provided the option of a screened-in area.

1937-1977

In November 1937, the property was sold to William Smart who had been retained by Kenneth Robertson to operate the farm. Kenneth retained the right to live in the home until his death in 1943. William passed the house on to his son, William Jr., who lived there until his death in 1977 with his wife Mae. During the Smart period of ownership, very few alterations were made to the Bethune-Thompson House, except for decorative changes to the rooms, maintenance of the exterior and the installation of a new heating system.

The Bethune-Thompson House was commemorated as a National Historic Site by the Government of Canada in 1966 and a federal plaque was situated on the property.

1977-present

In July 1977, after the death of William Smart Jr., his wife Mae Smart sold the house to the Ontario Heritage Foundation (now the Ontario Heritage Trust) to ensure its continued preservation. (Eleven years later, the Trust bought the adjacent workers' cottage, a timber-framed structure from the early 1840s.) The Trust's conservation strategy for Bethune-Thompson House integrated various heritage disciplines to provide a comprehensive approach to recording and restoring the site. Extensive archaeological, architectural and historical research was conducted before the property was restored between 1985 and 1993. The Bethune-Thompson project became a model that the Trust followed in subsequent restorations of its properties.

In developing a program for the future of Bethune-Thompson House, the key consideration was to conserve the maximum actual historic material while stabilizing the structure in order to reveal important aspects of the history and design of the building and to provide for its continued use. Bethune-Thompson House is considered both a highly significant artifact and a functioning residence. Restoration work was confined to the exterior of the structure so that interior restoration could be properly integrated with future reuse of the property. The exterior now represents the 1830s when David Thompson owned the house.

Archaeological excavations were conducted at Bethune-Thompson House in 1980, 1981 and 1993 and uncovered more than 36,000 artifacts. Found on the property were a number of mixing bowls, a pharmaceutical jar dating from c. 1730-1830, and fragments of a plate rim with a feather edge decorative motif attributed to the Wedgwood Factory in England.

The early 1784 cabin with its original stone hearth remains, and now serves as, the south wing of the present home. It is one of the oldest surviving buildings in Ontario.⁶ The interior of the house contains two examples of hand block-printed wallpaper from c. 1825, put up by Bethune. These have survived in the parlour and the dining room due to the installation of false walls by Thompson; they are now part of the interpretation of the house. A significant amount of the Georgian woodwork also survives from Bethune's time; it can be seen in the front door, staircase and, in particular, the parlour overmantle. This overmantle is one of a few remaining in the province. The north wing was reconstructed in 1930s to replace the original that burned in a fire. Also present on the property are a drive shed, portions of which may date to 1800, and a workers' cottage (1840).

The Ontario Heritage Trust is extremely fortunate to have acquired the Bethune-Thompson House and property to protect, preserve and promote on behalf of the people of Ontario. While there are other extant architectural parallels throughout the province to many of the features and details at the Bethune-Thompson House, there are very few houses that contain so many of these examples under one roof – in addition to having had so many interesting and auspicious owners. The Williamstown house provides us with a unique opportunity to research and understand the history of settlement and daily life within Ontario in addition to the development of architecture and design during a period of over 200 years.



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¹ The porch was later removed by David Thompson when he added the front and back verandas.

² Ballast was extra weight to provide balance on an empty ship. Often it was made up of bricks that had been discarded due to inferior quality. Once unloaded from the ship, the ballast was replaced by a cargo – at this time in British North America, this was generally furs and timber – which provided the required balance for the return voyage.

voyage.

³ Bethune had originally tried to give this part of the property to the congregation, but legal problems had blocked this gift.

⁴ Thompson's name was given to a British Columbia river in commemoration of his contribution to the development of the West.

⁵Thompson went bankrupt in 1834. He had failed to collect on debts owed by his neighbours and also lost £400 owed him by the North West Company when the firm retained to liquidate their assets went bankrupt.

⁶ Two others, also dated to 1784, are the Sir John Johnston House in Williamstown and the George Robertson House located at Upper Canada Village, Morrisburg. The Manor, a stone house in Prince Edward County, has a wing that dates to pre-1793.