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## Beating down Belvedere



by Shane O'Dea

In protecting our buildings we often lose sight of the fact that many of these buildings do not stand alone but that they, as a group, create a sense of place, of history and of continuity. In Newfoundland and Labrador we have a number of such "heritage areas". In Labrador, Battle Harbour has been recognized by the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada as a National Historic District and the Rennie's Mill Road and Beck's Cove/Water Street sections of St. John's have received similar designations. Trinity is effectively a provincial historic district and a section of Harbour Grace's Water Street has been designated by the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador.

These districts are of importance because they contain collections of buildings which, by virtue of their age, architecture and historical associations, speak very powerfully of our past. They

present different aspects of that past such as the life of a fishing community (Battle Harbour and Trinity), urban commerce (Water St, St. John's), urban residential (Water St, Harbour Grace) or the architecture of the rich and powerful (Rennie's Mill Rd).

In September the Heritage Foundation, before it was realized that Belvedere was under immediate threat, recognized another type of district and a different building type: the religious. While not uncommon in Europe where ecclesiastical buildings gathered about the great cathedrals, such districts are rare in North America. In St. John's we have, on the hill overlooking the harbour, a remarkable collection of institutions and structures which have been very influential in shaping the history of Newfoundland and Labrador. What is more remarkable is that these institutions - with some exceptions - are all within one boundary and are centered, like their European prototypes, on the Roman Catholic Basilica of St.

John the Baptist. They include three convents, two with their girls schools and one with an orphanage; two monasteries, one with a boy's school; a bishop's palace and library as well as a charitable institution and its school. Already designated are the Basilica, Mercy Convent, St. Bonaventure's College and the Benevolent Irish Society buildings.

The following buildings were designated by the Heritage Foundation and, with those previously designated, will constitute a very significant heritage district.

- Presentation Convent and its adjoining School were built in 1853, twenty years after the Presentation sisters arrived in Newfoundland. An earlier convent on Long's Hill was burnt in the 1846 Fire. The architect of these buildings is unknown but may have been Schmidt, the German designer who worked on the Cathedral, or J.J. McCarthy, the noted Irish architect who designed St.

Patrick's for Bishop Mullock at the same time as these structures were being built. The superintendent of the project was Patrick Kough (who built Harbour Grace Courthouse) and the builder, James Purcell (who designed the Colonial Building and Quidi Vidi Church).

- The Bishop's Palace built in 1923 to replace the earlier palace of the 1854 which burnt in 1921. The building was designed by the major New York firm of Delano and Aldrich who had previously designed the King George V Institute. A simplified version of the a renaissance palazzo, it has, despite some alterations in use, retained many of its fine interior features.

- The Bishop's Library was likely built contemporaneously with or soon after the old palace in 1854. It has a fine coffered ceiling in the library. Its ground floor space is punctuated by a carriage entrance to the rear offices of the Basilica.

- Mount St Francis was built 1877-80 to house the Irish Christian Brothers who had arrived to take over from the Franciscans the education of boys. A Gothic Revival style building, it is supposed to be modelled on one of the Brothers' monasteries in Wexford.

- Belvedere Convent was originally built in 1826-27 for Hugh Emerson. Emerson sold it to Bishop Fleming in 1847 as accommodation for the Franciscans and it is where Fleming died in 1850. A hip-roofed structure which has some traces of its earlier Gothic Revival detail, it is the oldest of the buildings in this district, the third-oldest building in St. John's. It was occupied by Mercy Sisters after 1859, first as the orphanage and then as their convent.

- Belvedere Orphanage was built 1885 when the original convent orphanage had become too small for its purpose. Designed by Bishop Howley, it is one of the finest masonry examples of the Second Empire style in the province.

## The Current Crisis

The Belvedere buildings are the ones that are currently under threat. Vacated by the Mercy Congregation in 1998, they were offered for sale in a curious and private process in June of 1999. The process involved the congregation's lawyers contacting a considerable number of developers and institutions for "expressions of interest". This was not a public process in that it did not involve advertisements and, as a consequence, the general public was not aware of the threat until the Myles Leger townhouse proposal was covered by the media at the end of October. The sale process meant that only a select group of people knew the property was available and, because of that, there was little interest generated. This had happened once before to the sisters when they were disposing of their Brigus convent under similar arrangements. No one knew the asking price and it was - reportedly, it should be noted - bought for \$30,000 and put back on the market not long after for a figure three times that. While the purchaser did not get that great profit, he/she (again reportedly) did quite well and the Sisters of Mercy did not get what they should have for their property. It should have provided them with some kind of lesson in management - it did not as Belvedere demonstrates. In this case they may be receiving a reasonable return but they will be complicit in the destruction of their own and their church's history because the developers have made clear, as they told The Telegram that they "can't see any other potential but in the land value."

The City Council determined that, despite their age, history and architectural merit, the buildings were not worthy of designation and, at a subsequent meeting, gave permission to demolish. The little, mansard-roofed house that stood at the back of the property was partially burned on Guy Fawkes' night and demolished soon after. One important point to note is that the Sisters have not moved to immediate demolition and have secured the

Convent and Orphanage against further vandalism.

## Belvedere Convent and Orphanage

Belvedere has been occupied as a site since the middle of the eighteenth century when it was called McKie's Grove. A map of 1751 shows a curiously elaborate property on or near the site laid out in four squares bordered by trees. This may have been the ground Peter McKie, surveyor of customs, inherited from his father, John, a member of the garrison, in 1773. In 1811 Peter McKie was given permission to build a house on the property and this may have been sited in the grove as it is said to have been six hundred feet west of the convent.

In 1821 Hugh Alexander Emerson, a lawyer born in Windsor, Nova Scotia of United Empire Loyalists, purchased the house and land from McKie. In 1826 Emerson began construction of a new and ambitious house. During the course of the work the old McKie house, in which Emerson and his family were living, caught fire and partially burned. However it provided accommodation for them until Belvedere was finished.

On 15 August 1827 Emerson held a party to celebrate the completion of the new house (Furlong 22-24, Hogan 85-87). The old house became the residence of the farmer who managed the property and was not torn down until the time of Bishop Power (1870-93), likely when the new orphanage was opened in 1885. Emerson was fully engaged in Newfoundland political life running for the first House of Assembly but not getting elected until 1837 at which time he became Solicitor General. He held that post until 1854 and was a member of the Legislative Council 1845-55.

The death of his wife in 1844 may have prompted the attempt to sell the property the following year. However, it was not until September of 1847 that Emerson found a buyer in the person of Bishop Michael Anthony Fleming (Bill

290). Fleming had just returned from Ireland with four Franciscan brothers who were to teach in the Benevolent Irish Society's Orphan Asylum School. Belvedere was to serve as residence for the monks as well as the Bishop. Fleming died there on 14 July 1850 (Furlong 22-24, Hogan 85-87). The monks did not find the accommodation suitable being too far from the Chapel (then on Henry Street) and the school on Military Road so they later moved into the apartment above the school and, by 1853, had all returned to Ireland (FitzGerald 429-30). It then served as a residence for the seminarians at St. Bonaventure's College while their building was under construction (Higgins 254).

In 1859 Belvedere took on new life as an orphanage for girls under the direction of the Sisters of Mercy as St. Michael's Convent. The convent had, by the 1880s, become too small for the growing number of orphans and a new building was opened in 1885. This structure served as an orphanage until the late 1960s when it became, first, a school and then the offices of the Roman Catholic School Board for St. John's.

## Architecture

St. Michael's Convent, Belvedere was constructed by Alexander Norris (Furlong 22), a Scots builder and carpenter who would later work on Government House and Retreat Cottage, in 1826-27. The house was unusually large in that it contained two drawing rooms and two kitchens as well as a dining room, study and breakfast room on the main floor with ten bedrooms on the second (Times 6 Aug 1845).

A seven bay, two and a half storey timber-framed structure under a hipped roof it may have been intended to be a semi-detached house and that it was a speculative venture which did not succeed. According to Carla Emerson Furlong the house was modelled on houses of western Nova Scotia from which the Emerson family came. A photograph of 1900 shows the house

with a number of Gothic Revival features: label mouldings about the windows and an elaborate Gothic porch. These would have been unusual features in a house of the 1820s and so are likely to have been modifications made by Bishop Fleming when he took over the house in 1847. Fleming had an interest in architecture as did his successor, John Thomas Mullock. The one feature that may have survived from the original house were the dormer windows with arched heads. Many of these features were removed when the buildings was covered in siding sometime in the 1970s but elements of the porch remain. This writer has not been able to examine the interior to determine how much of that is original.

The Orphanage is a three story brick structure over a high basement and topped by a mansard roof constructed in 1884-85. It is a well-modelled example of the style with a central pavilion, quoining and elaborate window hoods. Michael Francis (later Bishop) Howley claims to have designed and supervised the erection of this building (Evening Telegram 19 Oct 1887). Additions to its rear were made 1921-24.

## Conclusion

These two buildings are important both architecturally and historically. The convent (Belvedere) is, after the Anderson House on Signal Hill Road and the Commissariat, the oldest building in the city. Though somewhat altered because of the modern siding, it still retains many of its original features. Its association with H.A. Emerson links it with a political family involved with Newfoundland government from 1832 to 1949. The fact that it was the deathplace of Bishop Fleming links it with the builder of the Roman Catholic Cathedral and the figure who shaped Newfoundland politics when it was in its infancy.

The Orphanage is, with the Benevolent Irish Society's St. Patrick's Hall, the only surviving Second Empire style masonry institutional building in Newfoundland. It is likely to be one of

the few, if not the only remaining building designed by Howley who saw himself as something a Renaissance man writing poetry, operettas, scholarly articles and histories. Both buildings are part of an area of very considerable architectural and historic importance - the religious precinct. This area is probably, after the area comprising the seminary and the cathedral in Quebec, the most compact and closely linked collection of religious buildings in North America. This precinct is worthy of consideration by the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada as a National Historic District.

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## HERITAGE ON A ROLL: NEW ORGANIZATION, NEW STUDIES

The last year has seen a considerable amount of activity on the organizational level for heritage matters. A major national conference, a province wide crisis meeting, and two significant heritage studies.

## Heritage Canada Conference

October 21-23 saw the Heritage Canada Conference held in Newfoundland for the first time in a decade and it managed to attract nearly 160 delegates. It covered a range of issues but focussed on the nature of heritage and strategies for linking social issues and heritage concerns. There were some lively debates occasioned by David Lowenthal's keynote presentation. He talked, in his wryly inflammatory fashion, of the real problems of heritage: its inclusiveness (a problem because a lot of what it takes in is unacceptable or unmanageable), its exclusiveness (a problem because we want to sanitize much of what the past leaves us), its divisiveness (its capacity to be a source of conflict between groups). Addressing the theme of the conference, he proposed a series of strategies: that we adapt to heritage as a changing thing, that we make it part of life, that we make it part of the life of all people in our communities and cultures.

## Association of Heritage Industries

That conference provided a great many ideas that were applied at the local level in the Heritage Forum which followed on 24 October. The Forum was a product of discussions held between various organizations and agencies involved in both heritage and the arts and initiated by the Department of Culture in April 1999. Some 150 delegates came to the Forum from both Labrador and Newfoundland and a broad range of concerns was considered. Among these were the need for a fully-articulated heritage policy, a greater awareness of the value of heritage to our culture, society and economy. The question of a heritage coalition was revived for it was felt that there might be some value in having one organization to present the case for heritage at governmental and other levels. However, the Heritage Forum felt that such an organization should only be developed after due consideration of its form and role and left those matters to the Steering Committee to work out - and to report on to the next meeting of the groups. The interest in and energy generated by the Forum was great and, in part was a product of the work of the delegates, who were backed by funding from the Dept of Culture, Lab Air, HRD, Parks Canada and much administrative support from the Heritage Foundation of Nfld and Labrador. Since then the Steering Committee has secured funding (with the assistance of HRD) and hired a coordinator to do the preliminary work of needs assessment, policy paper research and general organization. Funding is also being sought (with the assistance of Department of Culture) for the economic value study. The needs assessment will provide the basis for a better understanding of the opportunities and obstacles in developing the heritage sector. The economic value study should make clear what people in the Trust have asserted for years, that heritage is a major contributor to the economy. In making that case the study will establish the economic basis for, among other things, greater attention to building preservation. It is hoped that woven into this study will be some consideration of what is called the "green value" of preservation - its value to culture and society. Should the work of the AHI (Association of Heritage Industries) come to fruition it will serve as the basis for a stronger role for heritage. We have already seen something of this in that five representatives of the sector were asked to participate with the arts representatives in a round table on the economy in December - the first time such an invitation had been given to heritage groups.

### Downtown Heritage Strategy

A year earlier the City's Heritage Advisory Committee and the Department of Culture had recognized a need to make the case for the architectural heritage in the city. The heritage area was almost twenty-five years old and it needed a re-assessment. In September 1999 a request for proposals was made and Canning and Pitt, working with Marc Denhez and John Weiler (both formerly associated with Heritage Canada), were appointed to carry out the work. They are now looking at what created the heritage area; at the economic, cultural, demographic and environmental reasons for the built heritage should be preserved; and to develop a strategy for bringing together a preservation of the city's heritage and a development of its economy.

The study team will be holding an open forum in the Foran Room at City hall all-day Saturday 4 March to engage the citizens in the process.

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## Newfoundland Historic Trust Lecture

Marc Denhez and John Weiler will talk on

### Current Trends and Emerging Issues in Heritage Conservation and Urban Regeneration

WHEN: 8 pm Thursday 2 March 1999

WHERE: Foran Room City Hall

open to the general public and a special welcome to new Trust members.