

# the trident

A publication of the Newfoundland & Labrador Historic Trust

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Serving hatch at the O'Reilly House, Placentia.  
(Photo: Lee Everts)

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## *Written in the Walls: Class Divisions in Outport Newfoundland and Labrador*

Lee Everts

"The idea which underlies all is simply this.  
The family constitute one community: the servants another."

- Robert Kerr, *The Gentleman's House, Or, How to Plan English  
Residences, from the Parsonage to the Palace*, 1871

If the walls of two pre-eminent heritage buildings in Placentia could speak, they would no doubt have a story to tell. The Rosedale Bed and Breakfast and Inn is owned and operated by Linda Grimm and Philip Meade ([www.rosedalemanor.ca](http://www.rosedalemanor.ca)) while it is the Placentia Area Historical Society who own and operate the O'Reilly House Museum ([www.placentiahistory.ca](http://www.placentiahistory.ca)). No one would deny that these two buildings, both more than a century old, reflect a dignified past. At one time, both buildings were the homes of two well-to-do families in Placentia—the Verran and O'Reilly families. But there is more here than meets the eye.

The ornate wooden features in their parlours and a grand flight of stairs rising to the top floors were not merely the trappings of the sumptuous lives led and enjoyed within these homes. They were the quiet emblems of a past strongly governed by class divisions, ones that prompted the

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## Historic Trust Adopts New Strategic Plan

The Newfoundland and Labrador Historic Trust will take strategic steps over the next three years (2019-2022) to bring the province closer to our vision of one composed of communities that recognize the value of their built heritage assets.

The strategic plan has been developed by the Board of Directors and provides the Historic Trust with a framework to carry out our mission and achieve our vision through increased collaboration and communication, enhanced program delivery, and sustainable financial management and growth. Public and member comment on the strategic plan was solicited at the Trust's 2019 Annual General Meeting.

### Mission

The Newfoundland and Labrador Historic Trust is dedicated to the preservation of the province's historic buildings and landscapes and their importance to communities.

### Vision

A province of communities that recognize the cultural, environmental, and economic value of their historic buildings and landscapes.

### Strategic Goals

#### *Lead province-wide public discourse on preservation of built heritage.*

The Trust will identify new partners – province-wide, large and small – with which to collaborate, and will reaffirm existing collaborations to strengthen our advocacy for built heritage. Communication and media efforts will be expanded to increase public messaging and foster greater dialogue on the value of the province's historic buildings and landscapes.

#### *Assess annual programs for improved delivery and succession.*

The Trust's longstanding annual events, Doors Open and the Southcott Awards, will be evaluated to ensure continued, sustainable growth. The potential expansion of Doors Open into a province-wide event will be evaluated and tested.

#### *Create a framework for the financial sustainability of the Trust.*

The Trust will undertake necessary updates to its by-laws and membership model to ensure that these better respond to the current needs of the organization and community. Fundraising models will be assessed, tested, and refined to support organizational sustainability and growth, and the potential viability of a built heritage revolving fund will be examined.

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## Nominations Open for 2019 Southcott Awards

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The Historic Trust is now accepting nominations for the 2019 Southcott Awards. The Trust established the Southcott Award program in 1984 to recognize excellence in the preservation and adaptive reuse of the architectural heritage of Newfoundland and Labrador.

Nominations are considered in six categories:

- Heritage Restoration
- Heritage Tradesperson
- Design in Context
- Adaptive Reuse
- Heritage Stewardship
- Lifetime Achievement

The Southcott Award for *Heritage Restoration* is presented to finished architectural restoration projects.

The *Heritage Tradesperson* award celebrates the skill and contribution of an individual in the craft or trade professions in heritage conservation. The individual must work using specialist and traditional methods and exhibit a high standard of craftsmanship.

The *Design in Context* award recognizes that building design has the power to encourage economic development and improve the quality of life for residents in a particular area. Such design may address issues of sustainability or encourage community renewal. The award seeks to recognize individuals or organizations

that have completed an architectural design project sensitive to the heritage character of the surrounding environment. New, infill, and renovations will be considered for how sympathetic the addition or renovation is to the historic context of the neighbouring area with regard to style, scale, form, and building materials.

The *Adaptive Reuse* award category recognizes significant projects that adapt heritage buildings to serve new uses in their communities.

Awards in the *Heritage Stewardship* category are considered for excellence in long-term maintenance of heritage properties that have not been significantly altered since construction.

The *Duff-O'Dea Lifetime Achievement Award*, named in honour of inaugural recipients Shannie Duff and Shane O'Dea, recognizes individuals who have made an exceptional contribution over a period of 25 years or more to heritage conservation in the province.

The deadline for nominations is June 15, 2019.

The awards ceremony and reception will take place in St. John's in late autumn.

For more information on the Southcott Awards or to download a nomination form, please visit [www.historictrust.ca/southcottawards](http://www.historictrust.ca/southcottawards) or email [southcottawards@gmail.com](mailto:southcottawards@gmail.com).

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## Doors Open 2019

Save the date - Doors Open will return to St. John's in September!

Doors Open is a unique opportunity for the citizens of Newfoundland and Labrador to celebrate our built heritage through the exploration of our historic architectural gems. Buildings that are normally closed to the public or charge an entrance fee welcome visitors to look around for free.

To volunteer or inquire about site participation, please email [coordinator@historictrust.ca](mailto:coordinator@historictrust.ca).



## In Memoriam: George Robert Courage

### November 24, 1943 - April 05, 2019

I was saddened to hear of the passing of George Courage, one of the great supporters and animators of the heritage conservation movement in St. John's. I met George shortly after I started working at the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador in 1996. It wasn't hard at that point to cross paths with George in heritage circles; he seemed to be everywhere I went. At that point, he had already been involved with the heritage community for decades.

In the 1980s, George had been one of the Newfoundland Historic Trust volunteers who had organized their downtown historic walking tours, and had helped organize the first Old Home Renovation Fair. He was a dedicated heritage volunteer, and I was fortunate to serve as a board member under him during his (second) time as president of the Trust. He served twice as president, at least once as treasurer, and fulfilled other committee positions. He was on the Association of Heritage Industries Steering Committee, was secretary of the Newfoundland Historical Society, treasurer of HFNL, and a volunteer with Doors Open.



New executive of the Newfoundland Historic Trust are from left to right: Ted Rowe, Past-President; Nancy Cook, Secretary; David Kelland, Vice-President; Canon George Earle, President; George Courage, Treasurer; Mary Chalker, Vice-President; Baxter Morgan, Vice-President.

A dark-bearded George Courage with the executive committee of the Historic Trust in 1981.

I probably got to know George best a few years after I met him. In 1999, he headed up a project on behalf of the Trust for Soiree 1999 to commemorate the fiftieth year of Confederation. George had an idea to curate an exhibit of house models, and he roped me into his scheme. He scoured both Town and Bay to find models and miniatures of traditional Newfoundland houses and buildings: everything from doll houses and church models to pieces of folk art he convinced people to let him borrow off their lawns. He, along with Nancy Cook and Ruth Canning, wrote up a catalog with a history of each of these quirky pieces of art, and the whole thing went up on display at the old Art Gallery in the St. John's Arts and Culture Centre. In 2001, George was awarded the Manning Award by the Historic Sites Association of Newfoundland and Labrador for the exhibit, recognizing him for Excellence in the Public Presentation of Historic Places. It was a lot of fun, and a great introduction to the sort of engaging programming that a young public folklorist like me might be able to do in the future.

For the past two decades, I was sure to run into George at heritage events, markets, downtown rambles, and city meetings. He was eternally active, engaged, and curious, and always had a moment to chat. He was a gentleman.

I'll miss him, and his infectious grin. Thank you, George, for being one of my heritage mentors.

- Dale Jarvis



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## Thirty-Fourth Annual Southcott Awards

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The Historic Trust recognized the recipients of the 34th Annual Southcott Awards on November 19, 2018 at a ceremony and reception at the Crow's Nest Officers' Club in St. John's. The Hon. Christopher Mitchelmore, Minister of Tourism, Culture, Industry and Innovation, opened the ceremony.



Historic Trust President Cory Thorne; Hon. Christopher Mitchelmore, Minister of Tourism, Culture, Industry and Innovation; and Historic Trust Vice President Jessica Dellow.



Colin Greene and Aidan Greene accept a Heritage Restoration award for the Greene House in Tilting, Fogo Island.



Shane O'Dea and Cory Thorne present the 2018 Duff-O'Dea Lifetime Achievement award to David Bradley.

*Thank you to the generous  
sponsors and supporters  
of the 2018 Southcott Awards*



Tourism, Culture, Industry and Innovation



Heritage Foundation  
Newfoundland & Labrador



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## Thirty-Fourth Annual Southcott Awards



Rev. Amanda Barnes accepts a Heritage Restoration award for Memorial United Church in Bonavista.



John Dodds and Diane Boyes accept a Heritage Restoration award for "The Museum," Pike's Arm.



Michael Ladha and Keir McIsaac accept a Design in Context award for 118 Military Road, St. John's.



Bill Hardman of the Hardman Group Limited accepts an Adaptive Reuse award for the MIX, St. John's.



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clear separation of employers and their domestic servants. These class divisions were not only confirmed and fortified by the presence of the domestic servants and their expected deferential behaviour, they were effectively written into the walls and rooms.

The behaviour of the domestic servants was intended to diminish their presence, something that was assisted immeasurably by the physical design of the rooms, passageways, and staircases of the buildings. The domestic servants could easily have gone about their daily chores in the bedrooms upstairs and not even have been noticed by the family or their visitors in the parlour below. That was the idea.

Their invisibility was no accident. It was a central goal, one that was reflected in the ideas of Robert Kerr who had given the servant-keeping world *The Gentleman's House* in 1871. As the above quote expresses, the design of homes like the Verran House and the O'Reilly House was based on the doctrine of division and separation and a need to ensure the privacy of the family.

The class divisions that governed the upper classes had been fixed in Britain for centuries. Over this period, the upper classes—the aristocracy and the landed gentry of Britain—had customarily employed domestic servants in order to permit a life of limitless leisure, luxury, and comfort. Although, by the eighteenth century, a growing number of people in Britain had taken up occupations such as shopkeepers, manufacturers, civil servants, professionals, and lesser merchants.<sup>1</sup> These individuals were generally regarded as the “middling sort” or the middle class and were always keen on ascending the social ladder.

Yet, membership within the ranks of the middle class was anything but secure. The idea of a middle class often defied clear definition with the notion of a “lower middle class” and an “upper middle class.”<sup>2</sup> Given this ambiguity, families were determined to demonstrate their inclusion in the latter. According to people such as B. Seeböhm Rowntree in his *Poverty: A Study of Town Life* in 1908, one of the primary symbols of the middle class that distinguished it from the “working class” was in fact the keeping of a domestic servant.

In Newfoundland, keeping a servant to do things like cooking and cleaning was nothing new. Already in the early 1700s, some of the female migrants in Newfoundland had found work as servants.<sup>3</sup> Much like in Britain, for some of the less fortunate migrants, working as a domestic servant offered at least a meagre reprieve from the miseries of poverty. The population of Newfoundland was growing, and with it there were an increasing number of people such as the Verran and O'Reilly families who represented the professional class.

Henry Verran was the son of Harry Verran, a mining engineer, and Mary Josephine Verran, née Sweetman, who was the only child of Roger F. Sweetman and his wife Honora Sweetman, née Sinnott. Sweetman was to be the final owner of a highly successful fishing firm that had survived for four generations and had once spanned the globe. Given their place amongst the more affluent members of the community, the Verrans built their Second Empire home in 1893 along the laneway that skirts the Orcan River, a channel flowing below the heavily treed and rocky outcrops of Mount Pleasant.

Almost a decade later, in 1902, a Queen Anne Victorian style house was built a short distance away along the Orcan River for magistrate William O'Reilly and his family. Like the Verrans, William O'Reilly, the son of the previous magistrate, was securely a member of the middle class. For both families, the organisation and structure of their homes would be designed to mark their station in life. As expected, a domestic servant, the middle-class badge of honour, was also a part of the arrangements.

Unlike the battery of female and male servants, sometimes numbering over 100, who served in the big houses of the aristocracy and the landed gentry in Britain, many of the middle-class homes only had one female servant. In all likelihood, the domestic servant who worked for the Verrans and the one employed by the O'Reilly family was from the Placentia area or one of the islands in Placentia Bay. Similar to those in Britain, she would have been a general servant or, as the position had come to be known, a ‘maid-of-all-work.’ Unlike the larger houses that employed more than one domestic servant to act as a cook, parlour maid, housemaid,

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or housekeeper, the maid-of-all-work did just as her title suggested—all the work. According to Mrs. Isabella Beeton in *The Book of Household Management*, first published in 1861, “The general servant, or maid-of-all-work, is perhaps the only one of her class deserving of commiseration: her life is a solitary one, and in some places, her work is never done.” It must have been a hard life.

In completing the long list of daily chores that defined a typical day for the Verran House and the O'Reilly House, the domestic servants would have been governed by principles that established expectations regarding their behaviour. The domestic servants certainly needed to be dutiful and subservient. And if they were ever uncertain of their place, a host of accepted rules and regulations existed to help guide and mould their behaviour.

Several manuals were published to this end. Each shared a few pointers on how to be a good domestic servant. In 1859, Mary Anne Baines, who referred to herself as “A Practical Mistress of a Household” published *Domestic Servants, as They Are & As They Ought To Be, A Few Friendly Hints to Employers With Some Revelations of Kitchen Life and Tricks of the Trade*. In the same year, *The Servants Behaviour Book, or, Hints On Manners and Dress For Maid Servants in Small Households* by none other than a ‘Mrs. Motherly’ was also published. It was essential to meet the needs of the burgeoning middle class whose members were always on the look out for an ideal domestic servant.

Mrs. Motherly wasted no time in being kind, yet assertive, in outlining the type of behaviour that would aid domestic servants in their work, including such topics as, “Of The Voice and Speaking,” “Titles of Respect” and “Always Move Gently.” For instance, Mrs. Motherly explained, “Never let your voice be heard by the ladies and gentlemen of the house except when necessary, and then as little a possible.” After all, a raised voice would disturb the privacy of the employing family by declaring the presence of the domestic servant. This was to be avoided. Likewise, Mrs. Motherly felt that the step of a servant “...should never be heard, either on the stairs or elsewhere.” These words of advice were borne of an all too accepted understanding that domestic servants were not to be valued as equals, fellow human beings with ideas and feelings. They were there to do work and that was their one and only purpose.

Alongside their submissive behaviour, the physical nature and design of the doors, rooms, and staircases worked to convey the inferior position that the domestic servant held in a house divided. In one telling way, the homes were designed to further diminish the presence of the domestic servant in the house. One of the methods of doing so was straightforward and entailed designing a house with a network of rooms, corridors and staircases intended solely for servants. These were separate from those meant for the family, only intersecting to allow the domestic servant ready access to a room. Any interaction between the two communities—the family and the servant—was to be limited. While any evidence of the servants had to remain out of sight, these strict rules also applied to other senses such as smell.

As Robert Kerr clarified in *The Gentleman's House*, even “the transmission of kitchen smells to the Family Apartments shall be guarded against; not merely by the unavailing interposition of a Passage-door, but by such expedients as an elongated and perhaps circuitous route, an interposed current of outer air, and so on.” Apparently, one of the many roles of the domestic servants was to protect their “superiors from defiling contact with sordid, or disordered parts of life.”<sup>4</sup> Clearly, kitchen smells ranked as one of those sordid elements of life.

Although the Verran House is now a bed and breakfast, it is still possible to see how the rooms and staircases



Verran House, Placentia.  
(Photo: Rosedale Manor)



O'Reilly House, Placentia.  
(Photo: Lee Everts)



were built in order to abide by the doctrine of division and separation and the attendant need to not disturb the family. One of the guest bedrooms on the ground floor in the Rosedale Manor Bed and Breakfast is located in the room that was once used for the original kitchen. It is not certain whether the domestic servant lived in the residence. If so, there may have been a portion of the kitchen where she bedded down after an exhausting day. In the Verran House, as well as many other upscale homes, this was the central area for the domestic servant. Still, the bedrooms on the upper floor needed to be cleaned and tidied.

While the home was graced with a central stairway, it was a portion of the home used exclusively by the family. Instead, the domestic servant would have used a steep staircase (this was later removed), that led directly from the kitchen to the upper floor landing thereby removing any need for her to use the main staircase.<sup>5</sup> However vital the work of the domestic servant to the functioning of the home, it was work that needed to be accomplished in a way that was invisible to the family. Division and privacy remained the predominant concern. Despite the fact that the doorway was also removed years ago, one can imagine the servant silently mounting the steep stairs, opening the door onto the upper floor, and then going about her business of cleaning the bedrooms.

About a decade later in 1902, the O'Reilly family had moved into their new home. Much like the Verran House, its design accorded with the customs of division and separation that characterised the relationship between the family and their domestic servant. Similar to the Verran House, the O'Reilly House was designed to not only facilitate the work of the domestic servant. Other subtle attributes and features evoked the class divisions that governed much of life at the time.

Leading from the landing at the top of the elegant wooden staircase with its fine handcrafted details were three doors, all adorned with a pearl-white doorknob. Entering the door just to the left would reveal a narrow passageway with a room immediately to the left. This would have been a small bedroom intended for the domestic servant. A window directly opposite the door to the main house certainly helped to brighten an otherwise shadowy corner of this stately home.

One of the most intriguing features of the O'Reilly House, one that clearly demonstrated the accepted class divisions of the time was more than mundane—a doorknob. While the pearl-white doorknob facing the main part of the home was decorative and stylish, the doorknob facing the compartment of the domestic servant was a plain, dark brown, workaday doorknob.

However inconspicuous, this curiously different, seemingly out-of-place doorknob was very much *in* place. It served as a blatant example of the subtle and yet audible messages that buildings such as the O'Reilly House and the Verran House conveyed regarding class and social division. Ironically, two of the other rooms also had similar doorknobs. These were likely intended for the children and much like the domestic servants, it was a symbol of the divisions that existed, in this case, between children and adults during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Perhaps children were felt to not yet appreciate these finer touches of gentility.

Adding voice to the unspoken message of division, a narrow staircase with a low ceiling that would challenge



Central stair, Verran House.  
(Photo: Lee Everts)



Contrasting doorknobs, O'Reilly House.  
(Photo: Lee Everts)

even those of average height to not bump their heads led down to the kitchen on the ground floor. The idea behind the design was to allow the domestic servant, who would have spent much of her time in the kitchen, to be able to reach her bedroom without entering the main part of the house, which was designated for the family. The rear staircase and door also allowed the domestic servant access to the upper floor bedrooms that required cleaning and tidying. Beyond the distant and barely audible sound of her footsteps overhead, her presence would have been imperceptible to family members in the parlour or dining room on the ground floor.

The domestic servants working for the Verran and O'Reilly families may very well have been treated with kindness. There is no way to know. Regardless, they were still part of a world in which the structure and design of the houses where they worked symbolised their humble class in comparison to their employers. It was imperative for these class distinctions to be clearly evident to anyone who crossed the threshold of these two homes, not to mention to the domestic servants themselves. All of these elements—the behaviour of the domestic servants and the physical design of the homes—worked in concert to confirm the place of these two families amongst the hallowed middle-class.



Back stair, O'Reilly House.  
(Photo: Lee Everts)

Every time the domestic servant in the O'Reilly house polished the pearl-white doorknob at the top of the landing, she was no doubt reminded of her apparent lower rank. Likewise, whenever the domestic servant at the Verran House opened the door onto the top landing to quietly clean and tidy the bedrooms, she must have felt the implied slight to her position in the house.

Nonetheless, times were bound to change and already following the First World War, fewer women would be electing to take up work as a domestic servant. Wartime, despite its attendant horrors, carried some benefits. By the 1940s, places such as the United States military base in Argentia would come to offer far better paying jobs with a less excessive workload for women. No doubt, improvements in education also ensured that those who may have opted for work as a domestic servant could set their sights higher.

Already by 1921, the census showed how there were no servants listed as living with either the O'Reillys or the Verrans. Why this was the case is unknown. Perhaps the domestic servants had decided to no longer be the sought-after mark of prestige for others. It was high time to do so for themselves.

*Lee Everts draws on her background in geography, archaeology and folklore to write about the stories, places and events that help to bring meaning to our lives. She has published a book on the history of the Placentia area, *The Placentia Area — A Changing Mosaic*, and will soon be publishing *Maybe They're Not So Bad After All — Another look at some of the less popular animals of Newfoundland & Labrador*.*

#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Margaret R. Hunt, *The Middling Sort: Commerce, Gender, and the Family in England, 1680-1780* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 15.

<sup>2</sup> Andrea Kaston Tange, *Architectural Identities — Domesticity, Literature, and the Victorian Middle Class* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 27.

<sup>3</sup> W. Gordon Handcock, *Soe Longe As There Comes Noe Women: Origins of English Settlement in Newfoundland* (Milton, Ont.: Global Heritage Press, 2003), 92.

<sup>4</sup> Leonore Davidoff, *Worlds Between: Historical Perspectives on Gender and Class* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), 24.

<sup>5</sup> Email to Linda Grimm, 29 May 2006.

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Photo: Don Harper

## News from the Board of Directors

Nancy Brace and Jill Hood stepped down from the Historic Trust Board of Directors earlier this year. Many thanks to Nancy and Jill for their hard work and dedication to the Trust's mission.

The Trust welcomed three new directors at the March 2019 Annual General Meeting: Beverly Bennett, Michael Philpott, and Luke Quinton. They bring diverse expertise in architecture, built heritage, archives, and journalism to the Board.



The Newfoundland and Labrador Historic Trust, established in 1966, is a 100% volunteer, non-profit organization dedicated to the preservation of the province's historic buildings and landscapes and their importance to communities.

### Board of Directors

Cory Thorne, *President*; Jessica Dellow, *Vice President*; Kirsten Morry, *Treasurer*; Emily Wolf, *Secretary*; Beverly Bennett; Grant Genova; Michael Knox; Michael Philpott; Luke Quinton; Tyler Stapleton.