

Our Built Heritage

Some are gone, many still stand in their original glory. They are more than just old buildings. They are Fort Erie's most notable, most unchanged, historic architecture — a significant link to the area's rich history.



Louis McDermott Collection

Fort Erie Town Hall.
Until it was torn down in 1989, this building stood on Queen Street.

By Austin M. Fox

Greater Fort Erie offers a surprising range of historic residential and institutional buildings. The town contains many of the architectural styles favoured in the English-speaking world from the 1790s up through this century. Just being an old building, however, is not enough

for architectural recognition. A number of the older structures have been so altered over the years they could not be included in this short list of Fort Erie's notable, mostly unchanged, historic architecture, presented here more or less chronologically.

One of the earliest dwellings, now gone, was the so-called "French House,"

or “Rough Cast.” Standing on Point Abino, about on the site of the present Buffalo Yacht Club station, it was built about 1790 by Obadiah Skinner. A simple storey-and-a-half log cabin covered with stucco, it had a vaguely *Québécois* look. It had once served as a farmhouse but later became a utility building for the sand company before being torn down about 1912.¹

Real survivors

Another very old log cabin, also dating, as best one can ascertain, from about 1790, survives on the Keith Miller property near the southwest corner of Ridge Road North and Bowen Road. Its site is alongside the old Indian trail on the ridge leading from Point Abino to the Niagara River near the mouth of Frenchman’s Creek, and thence along the river to Niagara Falls. Resting on a slope, with a spring-fed pond nearby, it may have been used as a shelter for several farm animals. One can see that the mortar-filled beam openings mark the former existence of a tiny hay loft. Built of roughly squared cedar logs from the nearby swamp, the little structure has lasted through all these years.

Probably the oldest residence in Fort Erie is the Wintemute home at 185-187 Niagara Boulevard near Bertie. Corporal Abraham Wintemute and his sons, Peter and John, fought with Butler’s Rangers during the Revolutionary War. The Rangers were a British Loyalist regiment, many of whose members were recipients of Crown Grants in the Fort Erie area. Though the Wintemute home (circa 1799)² still stands, and the original late Georgian Colonial, or Federal style configuration is yet recognizable, the original structure, over the years, has been much altered.

On the other hand, the finest Federal style house in the town, the Haun-Lawson house (1812), is quite intact and therefore might be said to retain its architectural integrity. Occupying a gracious site overlooking Yacht Harbour, the next bay east of Crystal Beach, the house lives on not far east of Prospect Point Road. Sturdily built of local limestone, probably by itinerant stone masons, it billeted British officers during the War of 1812 and is the place from



Harvey Holzworth Collection

▲ Early cabin. Built in the *Québécois* tradition, this building stood on Point Abino from the late 1790s to 1912.



Stephen Fox Collection

◀ Still standing. One of the few log structures remaining in Fort Erie is located at the north end of Ridge Road.

which two American fugitives from the 1866 Battle of Ridgeway sought to get back by water to Buffalo.

Among the special features of the Haun-Lawson house are handsome fireplaces, a ballroom on the west side of the whole second floor, and the huge beamed cellar kitchen that can be entered from the slope to the lake.

Overlooking the Niagara River at 657 Niagara Boulevard at the corner of Phipps Street stands Fort Erie’s best Greek Revival house, noble Bertie Hall, named for the king’s representative in the Niagara area during the early days of



Austin Fox Collection

▲ Symmetrical. *The Haun Lawson House on Yacht Harbour Road demonstrates the Federal principle of symmetry.*

Bertie Hall. *This building on Niagara Boulevard is a textbook example of Greek Revival. It has been locally designated.*



the nineteenth century. It was built by William Forsyth about 1833³ on a Crown Grant originally awarded to Henry Anguish, another of Butler's Rangers. Anguish had sold his Crown Grant and slipped back into the United States, where he became one of the founders of the town of Tonawanda.⁴ (Another Ranger, Cornelius Winney, became the first white settler in what was to become Buffalo and opened the first trading post there about 1798.)⁵

Numbered among Bertie Hall's outstanding features are its three marble

fireplaces on the main floor, its high ceilings, gracious spiral stairway, and exquisite Greek Revival carved woodwork. It also boasts a 12-foot-high stone cellar. The rumor, however romantic, that from this cellar or nearby riverbank a passage extended under the river to the U.S. shore through which fugitive slaves escaped to Canada is entirely unsubstantiated. Now owned by the Niagara Parks Commission, Bertie Hall houses the extensive Mildred M. Mahoney doll house collection and is open to the public.

Rather than in the Bertie Hall cellar, fugitive slaves were probably hidden in a place on Forsyth's property along the Niagara River near Bertie Hall called Smuggler's Cave. Though its exact location is unknown, one comes across enough references to the cave to suggest its reality and its further use by Forsyth's sons, Isaac and William Jr., in their smuggling activities, especially involving kerosene. The existence of a cave may provide the origin of the tunnel theory. Fort Erie historian Louis McDermott believes the cave fell into disrepair in 1865 and was demolished.

Architectural quality

The quality of Bertie Hall's architecture, which originally boasted more appropriate round fluted columns, lends credence to the theory that it may have been designed by John Latshaw (1806-1883), perhaps the Niagara region's first significant architect. He entered Canada from the U.S. some years after the 1812 war and in time designed a hotel in Niagara Falls for William Forsyth. Among his commissions are the Canadian Alexander Hamilton's Greek Revival mansion (later owned by winery president John Bright) in Queenston, the Methodist Church and the present Historical Society stone building on Lundy's Lane, the Lincoln County courthouse in St. Catharines, and maybe the Niagara-on-the-Lake courthouse, and the grandest Greek Revival mansion in all of Canada, Ruthven in Cayuga.⁶

Additionally, the Grange, now owned by the John Campbells, at No. 1 Burns Place in Fort Erie, built just about the same time as Bertie Hall, with an equally elaborate Greek Revival interior, may



Fort Erie Historical Museum



◀ Italianate. *The Grange*, located on Burns Place, boasts wide eaves and a sloping hip roof, characteristic of its current Italianate style.

also be by John Latshaw.

David Thompson, who built Ruthven, was related to the wife of John Anderson, builder of the Grange. Her rich Yule family probably supplied the money. Also, her father held Anderson's mortgage on the Grange.⁷

The Grange (1830s) was constructed on a Crown Grant issued to yet another family of Butler's Rangers, one named Powell.⁸ John Anderson was the first rector and later the first full-time pastor of St. Paul's Anglican Church on nearby Niagara Boulevard.⁹ Although it was probably constructed in Greek Revival style, it appears now as a handsome Italianate homestead. Its wide eaves, paired brackets, and sloping hip roof indicate this change. A serious fire in the 1860s probably resulted in this alteration, for the Italianate style had come into fashion. The interiors of the Grange and Bertie Hall are the two most richly stunning in the town.

Two Greek Revival cottages also enrich the architectural heritage of the town. One is the little Wintemute-Treble farmhouse, built by Peter Wintemute¹⁰ on a Crown Grant, at 1995 Nigh Road near Chapin. The other is the Gorham house at 477 Gorham Road, a little north of Ridgeway near Nigh Road. Both are pre-Confederation dwellings dating from the 1840s or 1850s, with almost no exte-



rior alterations.

The next architectural style to come into popularity is Gothic Revival. Examples are rare, however, in the town. One finds it chiefly in the area's churches. An outstanding example is St. Paul's Anglican Church on Niagara Boulevard at Gilmore Road. It is the third church building on this site, a pleasant natural elevation overlooking the Niagara River. The first was wooden.¹¹ The second, a masonry edifice, was constructed in 1881 from limestone salvaged from old Fort Erie, at that time in ruins. After a fire, the present imposing structure rose from the ashes, utilizing some of the old

▲ Greek cottage. *This Greek Revival cottage on Nigh Road is visible through the trees in late fall and winter. The style's features have not been altered over the years though the structure is in poor condition today.*

flint-veined limestone as well as additional limestone from nearby quarries.

A less formal but also picturesque Gothic Revival building which stood by the International Bridge, is the former B-1 railway office, dating from 1873. Its quaint steep gables and charmingly ornate yellow brickwork help to form what is a very appealing little building as well as an evocative memento of Fort Erie's bustling railroad days. Unfortunately, when cleaned, the little structure, which could serve as a station model for an old-fashioned miniature railway, was sandblasted instead of being chemically washed. Some of the soft brick surfaces, therefore, have been damaged. Nevertheless, the little station office is a major nostalgic attraction of the Fort Erie Railroad Museum on Central Avenue. At present, it serves as the Museum gift shop and offices.

Charming churches

The country churches of the town also form a charming part of its historic architecture. A notable example is St.



Fort Erie Historical Museum

▲ Hallmark style.

Typical of many 19th century homesteads, this Ridge Road dwelling retains hallmarks of Italianate style — the paired brackets and round headed windows.

mer.

Inside, the original pews, tongue-and-groove wainscoting and diamond-paned casement windows are intact. The chapel is an official Town of Fort Erie landmark.

Another officially designated landmark building is the Cruikshank house (circa 1860) standing on Crown Grant land on the north side of Hwy. 3 (Garrison Road) just a few short country miles from the Peace Bridge. It was owned and occupied by the illustrious Canadian military historian, General Ernest A. Cruikshank. The Cruikshank house combines both Gothic Revival (the steeply-pitched gable) and Italianate (the round-headed openings, the fretwork at the top of the



Fort Erie Historical Museum

John's Anglican Church on Ridgemount Road, a stone's throw north of Bowen Road. It is a neat, small white clapboard house of worship in a rural Colonial Revival style with well-proportioned round-topped windows and a good Venetian window centered over the chancel.

Another notable country church is the Holloway Chapel (1894), beautifully sited near the entrance of historic Point Abino. It is apparently the only non-denominational house of worship in the town. It has a Canadian or American clergyman of a different faith conducting the service each Sunday during the sum-

▲ Paired chimneys.

Once owned by Brigadier General Cruikshank, this home shows examples of paired chimneys and a deep dentilated cornice. Its plaque can be seen from Garrison Road.

Historical chapel.

Designated in 1994, the Holloway Memorial Chapel is located on Point Abino Road.



Austin Fox Collection



Austin Fox Collection

▲ Attention to detail. Queen Anne style is exemplified by this Point Abino Road farmhouse. Gingerbread decorative shingles and metal cresting are shown in this window detail.

porch posts, and the double front door). With its steep central gable, centered doorway, five-bay facade, and veranda across the front, it helped to establish a pleasant, now familiar design for Canadian farmhouses throughout Ontario.

The town possesses some other fine, more purely Italianate buildings, such as the brick Masonic Hall (1869),¹² formerly public school S.S. #11, with a separate entrance for boys and girls, and the local library on the second floor. It stands on the west side of Ridge Road in Ridgeway, between Disher and Elm Streets. Another significant Italianate structure in Ridgeway is the limestone Fort Erie Historical Museum (1874)¹³ at 402 Ridge Road, a bit north of Dominion Road. It was built as the Bertie Township Hall and used for that purpose until Bertie

was incorporated into greater Fort Erie. This building is likewise a designated historic landmark.

Two nearby high-quality Italianate dwellings are the frame Disher house (1860s) on Ridge Road North across from the Masonic hall and the brick Kuipers house at 477 Ridge, of about the same vintage.

Old school architecture

The Stevensville School, S.S. #9, was built in 1879 for \$ 2,200.¹⁴ It is located on Airline Street, and although unused, it deserves recognition as one of the handsomest Italianate buildings in the town of Fort Erie.

A stunning Queen Anne style brick house is the McLeod-McGowan farmhouse at 164 Point Abino Road South, on the east side between Erie Road and Michener. It dates from the 1880s or 1890s and possesses some of the area's finest barns.

The Wisconsin House (1901) on Point Abino, once stood in Buffalo on the Pan-American Exposition grounds. The official headquarters of the state of Wisconsin and designed to conform with the Exposition's architectural requirements, it was Spanish Renaissance in style. When the Pan-Am closed in the fall of 1901, Buffalonian Henry Dickinson purchased the building, had it dismantled, and moved it across frozen Lake Erie in forty-eight hay-wagon loads.¹⁵ Originally it had five pointed Moorish arches across the front porch and seven small Moorish arches across the second floor loggia. The front is now enclosed in summer-cottage screening, but original arches can be seen on the sides and rear of the house. The Arts and Crafts two-storey living room is encircled by a gallery off which the bedrooms lead.

As one moves into the twentieth century in the town, one finds a number of good Art and Crafts houses, dating from the 1910s and 1920s. One of the best, owned by the Unterbergers, stands at 181 South Mill Street in Ridgeway.

End of an era

The Fort Erie municipal building, on the corner of Jarvis Street and Central Avenue, built in 1922-1923 but now gone, might also be said to belong to the Arts

Pan-Am Expo Souvenir. The Pan-American Exposition gave us a wonderful souvenir in the Wisconsin House, now located on Point Abino. Most of the Moorish arches have been altered in recent renovations.



Cathy Herbert Collection

GLOSSARY

Architectural styles: all those mentioned can be found explained and illustrated in almost any book on architectural studies or history (Georgian Colonial Revival or Federal, Greek Revival, Gothic Revival, Italianate, Queen Anne, Prairie, Arts and Crafts, Post-Modern)

Bay: as used here, simply a window or door opening

Cheek wall: a side wall, particularly of a flight of stairs

Hip roof: a low, flattened, pyramidal-shaped roof

Loggia: a recessed but open gallery along the front or side of a building, often at an upper level

Pilaster: a tall, slender rectangular column, usually with a capital and base, set in a wall

Rough cast: an early form of stucco which was applied when wet

Venetian window: one having three parts, the larger center one having a square top and being wider than the two narrow flanking ones

[Editor's note: One useful reference is John Blumenson's *Ontario Architecture: A Guide to Styles and Building Terms, 1784 to the Present*, Toronto: Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1990.]

and Crafts family. It had a low-slung, storey-and-a-half, hip-roofed, wide-eaved, squarish, bungalow look. Additionally, it showed on the Central Avenue side a heavy, wide-eaved dormer typical of the style. Niagara-on-the-Lake restoration architect Peter Stokes saw in it "a distant kinship with some of Frank Lloyd Wright's early work." Wright's early work, such as his Prairie style houses in the early part of the twentieth century, were the culmination of the Arts and Crafts movement in the United States. In this red brick town hall building, rectangular forms stood out. They were visible in the capital-less plaster pilasters, the tall ribbon windows set, à la Wright, just under the eaves, and the brick-filled spaces below the windows. The brick cheek walls led up the stairs to a central entrance surmounted by a theatrical-looking marquee of scalloped opalescent glass, probably a later addition. Inside, the building had been partitioned into bland little office spaces.

Designed by Niagara Falls architect, Charles Martin Borter, the building served as the Bridgeburg municipal center until 1931-1932 when Bridgeburg became a part of Fort Erie, and the civic functions of the merged municipalities took place here.

In July 1995, the building was demolished following the opening of the new, Post-Modern Fort Erie Civic Centre on Garrison Road.

The old Fort Erie town hall, which stood on the south side of Queen Street, was demolished in 1989 to make room for the new facilities needed for the ever-expanding truck commerce over the Peace Bridge. This imposing four-storey municipal building was designed by the architectural firm of Nicholson and Mitchell and built in 1892.¹⁶ With its steeply pitched, stepped roofs, diamond-paned casement windows on the third floor, limestone quoins, window trim, and foundation blocks, the brick structure had a slightly medieval, Tudor look, vaguely resembling one of those old English guild halls.

As well as municipal offices, the venerable old town hall housed at various times the Fort Erie Fire Department No. 1, the Fort Erie Library, and the Canadian Legion. It was also the scene of a number of social events, especially those of the 44th Regiment.

The building's bell has had a colorful history. It was turned over to the Douglas School when the school opened in 1909. Later back at the town hall, it was used to signal fires. Then when the frigate *Fort Erie* was commissioned at Quebec in October of 1944 for Second World War duty, it was given by the town to the ship to use as the ship's bell. The *Fort Erie* was recommissioned some time later, perhaps for duty during the Korean War. When the ship was finally dismantled in Italy in 1956, the bell was



◀ Bridgeburg town hall. Having served as a town hall, fire station, police station and library, this classically Moderne building had both historical and architectural importance. It was vacated by the Fort Erie town administration in 1995 and demolished to make way for a new courthouse.

▼ Wright's inspiration. This Arts and Crafts style home on South Mill Street in Ridgeway follows Frank Lloyd Wright's inspiration.

returned to the Fort Erie Canadian Legion, which has displayed it proudly over their bar ever since.

The town boasts other notable examples of historic residential and institutional architectures. Unfortunately, they could not be included because of limitations of space, or because of the scarcity of information about these structures. The town needs to keep better records of its historic architecture and to be more watchful in preserving it.¹⁷



NOTES

¹Alice H. Stafford, "Recollections of Point Abino," privately printed, 1964.

²The Welland County Registry Office shows that a patent was granted to Abraham Wintermute (note variation in spelling) on July 8, 1799.

³Marjorie Freeman Campbell, *Niagara: Hinge of the Golden Arc*, Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1958, p. 292.

⁴John Percy, *Tonawanda: The Way It Was*, Kenmore N.Y.: Partner's Press, 1979.

⁵H. Perry Smith, *History of the City of Buffalo and Erie County*,

Vol. I, Syracuse: P. Mason & Co., 1884, pp. 67-68.

⁶Lundy's Lane Historical Museum, 5810 Ferry St. (also called Main Street) at the corner of Sylvia Place, Niagara Falls, Ontario.

⁷Files of Louis McDermott.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Bea Painter, "St. Paul's Anglican Church: A Brief History, 1793-1993," privately printed, 1993, p. 1.

¹⁰Files of Louis McDermott.

¹¹Painter, pp. 1-2.

¹²Cathy Herbert and John Burtniak, *Scenes of Greater Fort Erie*, Ridgeway, Ont.: By the Authors,

1989, p. 56.

¹³See datestone above entrance and landmarking inscription on boulder at entrance.

¹⁴Herbert and Burtniak, p. 72.

¹⁵Austin M. Fox, *Symbol and Show: the Pan-American Exposition of 1901*, Buffalo: Meyer Enterprises, 1987, p. 56.

¹⁶Fort Erie *Times-Review*, November 26, 1988, p. 18.

¹⁷In preparation is a separate booklet which, the author hopes, will contain fuller coverage of the notable historic architecture above, as well as descriptions of well-deserving others.



Harvey Holzeorth Collection

Africa House.
This structure was moved to Point Abino in approximately 1902. It was the Africa House at the Pan American Exposition, held in Buffalo in 1901.

Establishment of a LACAC

Erin Wilson

In the fall of 1995, the Bertie Historical Society petitioned council to establish a Local Architectural Conservation Advisory Committee (LACAC). Mike Cloutier made the presentation on behalf of the society and on February 5, 1996 a new committee of council was formed.

These are the responsibilities of this committee:

- To examine properties and areas that may now deserve the protection offered by heritage designation or will in the future.
- To facilitate the community's interest and involvement in heritage conservation through a recognized and accessible forum.
- To promote heritage conservation in

the community, to encourage a conservation ethic and a climate of responsible stewardship of the community's heritage assets.

- To advise property owners on appropriate conservation and maintenance practices.
- To determine the value of heritage resources.
- To provide municipal councils with advice to assist it in making decisions on sometimes complex heritage matters.

The first members of this committee were Judy Saunders, James Brown, Tony Aiello, Lee Moore, Wayne Redekop, Richard Berry, Bruce Cummings and Erin Wilson.

Designation is the assigning of a by-law to protect a particular heritage property or district. It means that a property cannot be altered in an unsympathetic way, moved or demolished without going through a process which tries to find a solution best for the property, owners and municipality.

The following are examples of heritage resources which can be designated: waterways, roads and bridges, engineering works, railways and stations, abandoned lands, mines and mills, battlegrounds, fields, farmsteads and outbuildings, homes, landscape elements, churches and cemeteries, schools, community initiatives, heritage districts, parks and gardens, public works and utilities, social

Lincoln Hotel.
Owned and operated by Ed Buck, this hotel was located on Lincoln Street in Crystal Beach.



Cathy Herbert Collection

institutions, industries, commercial and main streets, street furniture, hotels, entertainment facilities and archaeological sites.

Designation provides a process to ensure that changes respect the heritage value of what exists. It provides a window of time before demolition to negotiate another solution. It becomes part of the land title and remains even if the ownership changes.

Designation does not force an owner to finance a restoration of a property. It does not allow public access without owner consent. It does not prohibit alterations to a



John Burtiak Collection

▲ Douglas School.
This Fort Erie public school was built on High Street and operated between 1909 and 1984.



Louis McDermott Collection

◀ The Power House.
Built in 1928 as offices for Canadian Niagara Power, this building later became a restaurant and burned in 1990.

property, or prohibit demolition.

Age is not the only criterion used to determine whether a heritage property deserves to be designated. An application may be made in any one of the following areas:

- association with a historic figure,
- association with a historic event,
- association with a scientific, technological or other such event,
- existence attributable to unusual circumstances,
- unusual construction techniques,
- first structures in the community,
- constructed by a master builder,
- craftsmanship or decorative extravaganzas,
- ethnicity,
- unusual or regional architecture,
- individual or collective initiative.

In order to have a heritage property designated, the LACAC will guide an individual or group through the application

process. Town Council reviews the application and gives notice to the community as to its intentions. LACAC's role is strictly advisory. Council retains the power to designate and to repeal designations.

The photographs in this section represent a sampling of Fort Erie properties that no longer exist.

I.O.O.F. Hall.
Located on Ridge Road, this building burned in 1989.



Fort Erie Historical Museum



◀ **Tawiscaron Village.**
Although the buildings at Frontier Landing on Dominion Road lasted only three years (1983-1986) they represented a traditional Iroquoian lifestyle.

Tourist Home.
Owned by Mrs. N. House, this tourist home on Highway #3 in Ridgeway advertised Simmons Spring Filled Mattresses. ▶



◀ **Queen's Hotel.**
Located beside the railway tracks in Ridgeway, the Queen's Hotel was also the post office depot.

▲ **The Royal.**
This Crystal Beach hotel was located on beachfront property.



Cathy Herbert Collection



Cathy Herbert Collection

◀ **G.T.R. Station.**
This station in Bridgeburg replaced a smaller structure in 1901. It was demolished in 1973.

▲ **Royal Hotel.**
This hotel was located in Bridgeburg along the Niagara River.



Louis McDermott Collection

▲ **Pickwick Arms Hotel.**
Located on the south west corner of Garrison Road and Mather Boulevard (presently the Fort Erie Legion) this hotel was renamed the Mather Arms and then the Fort Erie Hotel.

▲ **Erie Beach Hotel.**
This grand building boasted 65 rooms — 36 with private baths. It was built in 1910 and burned in 1935. ▼



Mrs. Rebstock Collection

▲ **Hotel Bellview.**
Many Crystal Beach Park visitors stayed in this hotel which overlooked the ferry dock.



John Burtniak Collection