



A House is a House—Or Is It ???

By Janice McClelland

When the Bruce Trail Conservancy purchased 214 acres of meadow and forest from Scouts Canada in March 2023, an old stone house came along for the ride.

This land purchase (Akela & Scouters Heather & Ross Hamlin Nature Reserve at Riverside Woods) preserves a permanent route for the Bruce Trail and in due course will remove over a kilometre of road walking on the 2nd Line and, with the necessary permissions, help us cross the Nottawasaga River on a footbridge connecting with the Bruce Trail on the north side of the Hockley Valley Road – all excellent, but what about this house?



When I and another hike leader, Dan Revington, were hiking on the newly acquired property, we noticed something different about this house – carved in a stone above the door was the following: “Erected AD 1857 by James Dodds”.

Those words etched in stone revealed that the house was built 167 years ago – 10 years before Confederation! We could not help but think that this man, James Dodds, must have had a sense of pride in his accomplishment, carving his name on the date stone above the front door.

Preparing for a hike in early October, I was standing in front of this house when a gentleman, unknown to me, approached. Fortuitous for my research, it was Bill Raschke, who lived in this house with his family from 1982 to 1985. On May 31, 1985 at 4:55 pm Bill saw a storm coming and he walked from the garage to the house, just as a tornado struck. The solid wood front door of the house was blown open, all the windows shattered, with glass blowing across the house. His wife suffered a broken hip as she was blown across the house and Bill ran upstairs to rescue their infant son who was asleep in a crib. Bill grabbed the boy by the scruff of his sleepers, insulation & debris sifting into the crib as the roof was blown off. That was the major damage to the house – the garage where Bill had been working was gone – only the foundation left. Bill still recognizes that it was a close call for him and his family. The roof was re-built, except a dormer that was not replaced.

At the Dufferin County Museum, Archivist Laura Camilleri read me the will of James Dodds. James and his wife Mary Foster were immigrants from Armagh, Ireland. James was age 55 when he built the house and sadly died 5 years later in 1862. In his will, James referred to the house as the “mansion house”. Indeed, it probably was considered a mansion in his day.

James and Mary had 10 children. James willed the house to one of his sons, John. To his wife Mary, he bequeathed “the sitting room and one bedroom for her life, in addition to \$40 dollars each and every year so long as she is alive together with our cow and 4 sheep kept summer and winter”.

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This past summer, I received an e mail from a woman staying at the Best Western in Orangeville, who was on an ancestral discovery journey – she & her sister are great, great granddaughters of James Dodds! I offered to drive them to see their ancestral homestead in Canada – which they had searched for but been unable to find. After showing them the house and our newly created Upland Side Trail, we enjoyed a late lunch together where they gave me a copy of a newspaper clipping from an Orangeville newspaper that has a photo of the 4 Dodds brothers. Beneath the photo it says: “The boys came from County Armagh, Ireland in 1819, spent some time in New York State and later arrived in Muddy York in 1820. They worked on the Welland Canal to achieve their start”.

Further family research has shown that James Dodds & his family were living in Mono around 1842. They may have lived with a relative who had already settled in Mono or may have squatted on this land and built a log house, possibly very close to the site of the stone house – then officially purchased the land in 1856 and built the stone house one year later.

Two of James’ brothers settled close by, Robert, on the lot immediately south of James and George about two miles east and north of James. As well, James’ wife’s relatives lived on the lot immediately west of James. No doubt proximity aided mutual assistance, promoting survival & prosperity, especially for families that had come from very difficult conditions in Ireland/British Isles.

Indigenous peoples in many cases shared their knowledge of nature and helped the new immigrants to survive. (Treaty #18, dated Oct 17, 1818, whereby Indigenous Chiefs sold 1.5 million acres from Nottawasaga Bay south to Orangeville and including this area, opened most of Dufferin County for settlement.)

After John Dodds sold the land, the Thompson family occupied this same house and farm for 75 years. They were known for their fine farm and raising Clydesdale horses. In addition to the house, there were 3 barns in a U formation, just west of the house.

In 1946, Goodyear Tire & Rubber Company in Toronto purchased the adjacent property to the north & west, donating it to Scouts Canada with the aim of providing families who had lost a loved one during WWII with an opportunity to experience nature. In 1968, Lot 6 with the stone house was also purchased by the Scouts. For 55 years many young people from the local area and more broadly enjoyed the benefits of connecting with nature here in its forest and meadows, including planting trees that are now very, very tall!



During the tenure of the Scouts, in Spring 1977 there was a terrible fire (believed to have started in the milk house from a heat lamp used to provide heat for 6 goats with pneumonia). 13 cattle, 10 calves and 3 horses were in the field that night and they survived – unfortunately the goats did not. The fire, which was visible from Shelbourne, took all 3 barns and at its height scorched the shingles on the house.

Through both fire & tornado this sturdy stone house has survived. It is now listed for sale along with 22 acres that the Bruce Trail Conservancy was able to sever. The real estate listing says: “Hockley Opportunity” – “Sitting stately atop a hill, on 22 rolling acres is one of the last, turn-of the century, Georgian style stone houses in Mono. Quiet rural road near Adamo Estate Winery and Hockley Valley Golf & Ski, Bruce Trail and Mono Cliffs Park. House uninhabitable. 5 minutes to Orangeville. 90 minutes to Toronto”. The exterior of the house has been designated as historically significant. The Bruce Trail Conservancy supported the historical designation knowing that it would protect the exterior of the house from being demolished. For a Conservancy and its members - respecting our collective history is the right thing to do.

Just a footnote to say that the Scouts have been relieved that the entire property was purchased by the Bruce Trail Conservancy, knowing that nature will be protected on all property that the BTC owns. We all owe a debt of gratitude to volunteer Dave Moule, who nurtured the relationship with the Scouts over many years, to volunteer Phil Kidston who helped provide Scout contacts and to the many volunteers who have built trail, helped with the Seed Orchard, re-roofed a building, stewarded the land and the list goes on!

The Bruce Trail Conservancy and the Caledon Hills Club is akin to those pioneer families with their large families, relatives and neighbours – we are working together for a common goal that will benefit future generations. These early pioneers were taming the wilderness...167 years later, we are “preserving a ribbon of wilderness, for everyone, forever”.