

THE LACAC OF BROCKVILLE

DESIGNATION REPORT

November 5, 1984

Revised Report

JUNE 2, 1986

Designation Recommendation
and Description for

"SOMERSET" Benjamin Chaffey House

50 Crawford Street
Brockville, Ontario

a. Reasons for Designation

The Benjamin Chaffey House is being recommended for historical and architectural reasons.

Victorian in style, the main house, stable, coach house wall and chapel have been an integral part of the streetscape since the 1850's and remain a constant reminder of it's rich and distinguished history. The stone stable functions as a stable today, St. Alban's Riding School, which operates on the premises, retains the name of the school brought to Brockville in 1901. The main house was occupied by Benjamin Chaffey, Junior, renowned civil engineer and contractor, from about 1859 until his death in 1867.

Historical Background

The Benjamin Chaffey House stands on the northwest corner of Oxford and Crawford Streets. Benjamin Chaffey junior, (1806-1867) is credited with taking part in the building of the Brockville Courthouse, the Independent Church (now St. Paul's Anglican Church), "Rockford" (the Sydney Jones residence), the George Mallock House and the Alexander Morris House (now the Brockville Club), as well as, Victoria Bridge in Montreal and the first Morrisburg Ship Canal.

The land upon which the house was built is part of the original 300 acre crown grant (1801) for Edward Jessup junior. This large piece of land passed through various hands, (including Jonas Jones, Colonel James Crawford and Thomas Smart), until 1853 when this rural lot was purchased by George Chaffey who sold it to his brother Benjamin in 1858.

The new Chaffey House built about 1859 was named "Somerset" after the English County in which Benjamin Chaffey Sr. (1779-1832 d. typhus epidemic) was born (in Norton, Somerset) and from which he and his family emmigrated in 1815. Benjamin Jr. was also born in Somerset (1806) and was only nine years old when the family emmigrated. Benjamin Jr. died in the house on July 3, 1867. His widow (Janet Chisholm Chaffey) continued to live in the house for another twenty-six years.

In 1901 St. Alban's School moved from Berthier, Quebec, under it's Headmaster Rev. Charles Boulden, D.D., who had leased the property. For the next forty-seven years, along with the William-Page property to the west, the school functioned as a private boarding school for boys, patterned on the English "public school" system, preparing boys for post secondary education as well as "character building". Accommodating a maximum of sixty boys at one time, the school maintained small classes and accepted boys of all ages. It prepared many students for Royal Military College and McGill University. Chaffey's house was the senior boys' residence.

Architectural Description

"Somerset" is a well designed post-Gothic styled house built of grey limestone common to this area. It is made up of two storeys, containing 15 rooms, full attic and cellar, with a fireplace in each room and twelve foot ceilings. During the 1920's a long front verandah was removed to brighten the front rooms, but the porch entrance remains.

The stone used in this house is thought to have come from the quarry at Broadway and Oxford Avenue. The foundation is topped by a broad stone plinth at grade level which in turn, supports the rest of the house. All major windows are 9-paned, double-hung and shuttered. The dressed stone sills bear a fine cut decoration. The house has a steep sloped roof without dormers and is free of decorative bargeboard.

The stone wall of the old coach house has been preserved. The St. Alban's school bell has also been saved and is mounted on this wall.

The semi-elliptical stonework lintel over the stained glass window of the chapel building suggests that the chapel was originally a coach house. The first school gymnasium burned down in 1924, and was replaced several years later with a larger brick building which remains at the far west end of the property.

The 2 brick chimneys have been rebuilt to their original design and contain 1200 and 1500 bricks respectively.

Recommendation

The north-west corner of Crawford Street and Oxford Avenue is enhanced by these buildings set well back from the road and unchanged for the past 130 years. It sits on the highest point of land in Brockville overlooking the former playing fields of St. Alban's, to the north, which now comprise the paddocks and pastures of St. Alban's Riding Stables. Together with the Willson-Page house to the west, with no wall nor separating hedge, they provide a park-like site which recalls a part of the history of Brockville. It also, as "Somerset", commemorates the name of Benjamin Chaffey, a prominent citizen in the "history" of Brockville.

References:

1. Geneological notes and letters, Collection, R.G.L. Mainwaring.
 - *2. Deed, Sept. 3, 1853 R.G.L. Mainwaring
 - *3. Deed, Jan. 18, 1858 R.G.L. Mainwaring
 4. Deed, Mar. 28, 1876 R.G.L. Mainwaring
 5. Deed, Oct. 28, 1893 R.G.L. Mainwaring
 - *6. Deed, Nov. 4, 1893 R.G.L. Mainwaring
- * Deeds also in Registry Office