



Devereaux House: Restoration in Progress

By Dan O'Reilly Photos by Mike Davis

Few people including her colleagues on the Town of Halton Hills heritage committee initially believed Ann Lawlor's dream of saving Georgetown's Devereaux House was feasible.

The front of Devereaux House has rich brick details.



Elaborate gingerbread trim and brick embellishments decorate the roof line.



A house abandoned.

Now, however, after a Herculean crusade encompassing hundreds of volunteer hours, massive fundraising and painstaking restoration, this historic Victorian farmhouse is being transformed into a community facility and the headquarters of the Georgetown Soccer Club.

Located on the west side of Trafalgar Road just north of Maple Avenue, the 1½-storey building is an almost postcard-perfect remnant of early rural Ontario and is considered an excellent example of a 19th century farmhouse with its brick and gingerbread detailing.

It was constructed in the 1850s by Elijah Devereaux, a member of the local Sedentary Militia. His descendants owned and farmed the land for more than 100 years until the death of the last family member, John Devereaux, in 1972.



The interior in need of massive repair.



Employees from Pratt & Whitney Canada volunteered their time to paint and tame the wild front yard.



The curved window on the restored second storey shows what the finished house may look like.



Central stairs with the bannister vandalized.



A volunteer carpenter restored the missing bannister.

It was far from perfect when Lawlor drove past the forlorn, boarded-up structure one afternoon in 2005. "Why is it sitting there?" the real estate marketing executive asked herself, discovering later it was owned by the Town of Halton Hills and the adjacent lands slated for redevelopment as soccer fields and a municipal cemetery.

Those plans did not include preserving the building, which had been massively vandalized.. It was in fact on the edge of being knocked down, with a demolition permit already issued when Lawlor learned of its fate.

As a newly appointed member to the heritage committee, she raised the issue only to be told that while the committee appreciated the building, the deterioration was too extensive

and nothing could be done to save it.

Undaunted she pressed ahead and contacted people she knew shared her passion. That led to the founding of the Friends of Devereaux House, the small but dedicated committee of volunteers which has shepherded the building's survival and renaissance. Lawlor is the chair person.

While some are long-time Georgetown residents others are fairly newcomers. What they had in common was the belief the house could be saved despite the seemingly overwhelming odds.

"It was an absolute disaster. You really had to have vision to see what could be done with the house," says Lawlor, citing devastation that included damaged banisters and stairs, smashed windows, doors ripped off their hinges and structural damage such as a bowed wall.

The first milestone on the committee's long journey to save the house was the organization of a dinner event that raised \$22,000 through ticket sales and auctions of donated goods. It also obtained a \$100,000 Trillium grant and was one of only 19 recipients to obtain a green municipal grant in 2007.

As those fund-raising efforts were progressing, a heritage assessment and condition report on the house was conducted by an Architectural Conservancy of Ontario architect and the Willowbank School of Restoration Arts, a pri-

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vate school dedicated to preserving Canadian heritage sites.

“The reports confirmed the house had heritage value and was worth saving and strengthened our cause,” says Lawlor. “We took the reports to the town which was a good partner and provided a letter of support for the Trillium application.”

With the heritage reports, town support and funding in hand, the Friends issued a tender for architects, ultimately selecting Green Propeller Design, a Milton-based firm specializing in sustainable design. The committed appreciated architect-in-charge Marina Huissoon’s philosophy of conservation and preservation which has been its objective from day one.

“This is one of the first times in the province a heritage house has been restored and upgraded to green principles,” says Lawlor, citing present-day technological features that include a biofilter system, a geothermal (ground source) heating and cooling system, zone heating, an on-demand hot water system and LED lighting fixtures.

In relation to the windows, though, 19th century practices won the day. Devereaux House’s original, multi-pane windows are a significant architectural feature and were retained,

although some repair work was necessary. With the addition of new custom-built storm windows, the R-value is almost equal to the insulating capacity of contemporary windows, says Lawlor.

“Our goal is to recreate the atmosphere of a farmhouse in the 1870 to 1880 period,” says Lawlor of the restoration and repair which got underway in the fall of 2007.

Acting as its own project manager and general contractor, the Friends have been striving towards that goal using a combination of some paid construction workers and volunteers, including a handful of retired specialty carpenters who have been diligently restoring the stairs and the woodwork in the heritage kitchen. A small out-of-view modern kitchen is being built for community events.

“These are the people who are really interested in this house. They appreciate the craftsmanship that is evident in the house and are enthusiastic about restoring it,” Lawlor explains.

This past summer a high point was reached when the Georgetown Soccer Club, which had provided a temporary \$40,000 loan in return for reduced rent, moved into its new second floor offices. The Friends will be renting out

the rest of the building to community events and functions under a five-year renewable lease with the town.

However, there is still considerable work left including extensive brick repointing which can only be accomplished by a specialist in antique brick work, Lawlor says.

None of the committee members ever became discouraged during the now three-year-old project. “We were and are determined to preserve our rural roots in the face of suburbia and the geography of nowhere,” says Lawlor, in reference to the issues raised in *The Geography of Nowhere*, the James Howard Kunstler book which examines the impact of urban sprawl on once-distinct communities.

Although there is a strong movement to preserve Ontario’s rapidly disappearing inventory of heritage buildings, they’re often either moved or new unsympathetic buildings such as condominiums are built around them, says Lawlor.

What’s truly outstanding about the Devereaux House is that it will stand alone in its original site overlooking the cemetery and sports fields on land once farmed by the Devereaux family, says Lawlor. “It will be a signature property of Halton Hills.” ■