

# The Archaeology of Poplar Villa, Pointe Fortune, Ontario

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## ABSTRACT

Built in 1817, the MacDonell-Williamson House reflects the ambitions and aspirations of a retired fur trader, John MacDonell. His life at Pointe Fortune was fraught with financial difficulties, inopportune business ventures and family tragedies. He was a proud man, protective of his family and strongly religious. He left an enduring record of his occupation on the property as revealed by the archaeological investigations that have taken place since 1981 by the Ontario Heritage Foundation. This paper will summarize the archaeological investigations at this property as well as looking forward to future work.

## RÉSUMÉ

*Construite en 1817, la maison MacDonell-Williamson témoigne de l'ambition et des idéaux d'un commerçant de fourrures retraité, John MacDonell. Sa vie à Pointe-Fortune a été parsemée d'ennuis financiers, d'entreprises commerciales malencontreuses et de tragédies familiales. MacDonell était un homme fier, protecteur de sa famille et très pieux. Il a laissé des traces durables de son séjour dans la propriété, comme l'ont révélé les fouilles menées sur place depuis 1981 par la Fondation du patrimoine ontarien. La présente communication résumera ces fouilles en plus de faire allusion au travail qu'il reste à faire.*

For over 40 years, the Ontario Heritage Trust (OHT), formerly the Ontario Heritage Foundation, has worked to promote and protect the tangible resources of artifacts, properties, buildings, structures and landscapes that make up the province's rich and irreplaceable heritage (Fram 1987:7). We are an agency of the government of Ontario, guided by a board of private citizens representing all parts of Ontario, each with a strong interest in one of the many aspects of heritage conservation (Fram 1987:7).

The Foundation owns many types of property outright, from collections of fine art and archaeological artifacts, to buildings and tracts of land. It also holds many conservation easements, which are legal rights pertaining to specific lands or buildings that effectively make the Foundation a partner in the care of a property in order to protect those characteristics important to the provincial heritage. The real properties owned by the Foundation are used and managed so as to conserve all of their heritage values in harmony and balance (Fram 1987:7).

Acquired in 1978, MacDonell-Williamson House had sat vacant for almost thirty years and had suffered from vandalism and deterioration. We stabilized the structure to prevent further damage until a suitable use could be found for the house and property. In 1981, in anticipation of future restoration work, the OHF began an intensive research project surrounding the house and the MacDonell family. The tripartite project involved historical research of the house and family, and on-site architectural and archaeological research.

The house is located at Pointe Fortune, Ontario, on the banks of the Ottawa River, downstream from the Carillon Dam and approximately 100 yards from the Ontario -

Quebec border. MacDonell-Williamson House sits on a cliff above the Ottawa River, looking across a point of land and downstream to Montreal. On the south side of the house is a road which originally was the main route between the towns on the south side of the Ottawa River and Montreal.

The information on the man and his house is meager. The man remains somewhat of an enigma; his ambitious lifestyle was in many ways an anachronism, even in the 19th century. John MacDonell's father, known as "Spanish John," emigrated to New York State from Scotland in 1773. Loyal to the British during the Revolutionary War, Spanish John and his family, which then consisted of his wife Catherine and 5 children (Miles, John, William, Mary and Penelope), moved north to Montreal. What happened in the next few years is not known, but in 1784, aware of the debt it owed its loyal regiments, the British government set aside land on the north shore of the St. Lawrence to accommodate them. Spanish John was granted 2000 acres of land in Lancaster Township. He actually settled in the village of St. Andrews West where he built "Scot House."

What we know of the young John MacDonell, during this period is basically nothing, until 1788, when he was appointed as an Ensign in the Battalion of Militia of Cornwall and Osnabruk (P.A.O. John MacDonell Papers). He held this position until 1793 when, at the age of 25, he signed a five year contract to become a clerk for the North West Fur Trade Company. Before his contract expired, he was made a partner. Three years later, in 1799, he was put in charge of the Upper Red River department. He saw service throughout the Northwest and traveled annually to sit at the meetings the company held at Fort William. John was by this time known as "le Prêtre" and had established a family. He had met during his first winter and allied with Magdelaine Poitras, the 12 year old daughter of André Poitras, a clerk with the North West Company. Marriages *à la facon du pays* were a common practice by the fur traders of the North West and Hudson Bay companies. Many of the European/Aboriginal relationships ended upon the retirement of the fur trader but the relationship of MacDonell and Magdelaine endured his retirement (Van Kirk 1980). MacDonell decided to bring Magdelaine and their children to Upper Canada, although the decision was not without apprehension. In 1812, prior to his retirement from the North West Company, MacDonell wrote to his brother Miles regarding Magdelaine "My intentions are to settle something upon her to enable her to live in comfortable mediocrity" (P.A.O. John MacDonell Papers).

As soon as John arrived in the east, he raised a Voyageur corps of soldiers to fight for the country in the war between the U.S. and Britain. He and the company were sent to the village of St. Regis where they were almost immediately attacked by five companies of New York State militia. Unfortunately, the voyageurs were taken prisoner. By the spring of 1813, John was released and was back in Montreal (Judd 1982: 13). That spring was, in fact, probably the most significant in his entire life. For, in April of 1813, he formally married Magdelaine, his common law wife of 19 years and the mother of his six children. A few days later, John bought a large piece of property on the Ottawa River. The land which he purchased was first patented in 1788 by William Fortune and it was then transferred to his son Joseph in 1797. The Fortunes retained title to the land for 25 years prior to its sale to MacDonell. A 1797 map shows four structures on the land. These

included: an enclosed garden; a wooden structure 14 feet square; a wooden house 36 X 22 feet, originally built as a distillery; and a three bay gable end building with chimney stacks at each end.

MacDonell's improvements to the land were numerous and will only be summarized here. MacDonell house, constructed in 1817, is a large stone structure, late Georgian in style (Cane 1982: 3). The house has double facades, that is, both facades are identical, however, the house is set into a slope and as a result, the East facade is a full three storeys while the West facade is only two storeys high. The interior of the house includes unique room arrangements, quality cabinet work and extensive use of plaster mouldings. It also included two complete kitchens, one in the basement, the second on the main floor. The bedrooms are most unusual; there are three suites of rooms, each containing three "bed-closets" grouped around a central sitting room and fireplace. Additional features in the house include a sitting room with two adjoining "bed-closets" on the main floor adjacent to the kitchen and presumed to be the master bedroom, and a second floor ballroom.

The quality of life enjoyed by the MacDonell family has been cause for some controversy. The large size of the house and its interior detailing suggest that the family lived in relative affluence. This belief has been furthered somewhat by a short story by E.W Thomson called, "Great Godfrey's Lament" (1974 [1896]: 72-89), which is loosely based on the MacDonell family and their house. The author's description of the interior of the house added to the belief that the MacDonells were affluent at least at one point: "...I saw that the windows of that great chamber were hung with faded red damask; that the heads of many a bull moose, buck, bear and wolf grinned among guns and swords and claymores from its walls; that charred logs, fully fifteen feet long, remained in the fireplace from the last Winter's burning; that there were three dim portraits in oil over the mantel; that the room contained much frayed furniture, once a sumptuous red velvet; and that many skins of wild beasts lay strewn over a hardwood floor whose edges still retained their polish and faintly gleamed in rays from the red west" (Thomson 1896: 73:76). Historical documentation, however, suggests that MacDonell and his family never attained the opulence that local tradition and Thomson would have us believe. As early as 1820, just three years after building his house, MacDonell was in financial difficulty. Lord Dalhousie, then Governor-General of Canada, stopped at Pointe Fortune on a trip up the Ottawa River. Dalhousie's journal entry for the 18th of August 1820 reads as follows: "... An old Highland gentleman, a McDonell, came to call on me after breakfast, a tall fine looking man, in full costume of Belt, plaid and Bonnet, he walked as proud as any Chieftain in the Clan; he has been 30 years in this country and having made his fortune in the North West Company, settled here a few years ago. Like a fool he has spent his all in a big house, which he said he can't afford to furnish." (Whitelaw 1981: 33:34)

The years that followed the construction of the house were less than kind to MacDonell, who was plagued by financial problems and personal tragedies. Early in 1818, his daughter Cecile, born in 1807, died (Judd 1982: 21). Nevertheless, the forwarding business he had begun, at first appeared successful. He built a small canal and lock, a storehouse and a retail store. In 1819, John's brother Miles had learned of John's

investment in the steamboat, the *Ottawa*, and wrote him warning that the boat's draft was too deep to be practical on the Ottawa River. How much money John lost on this investment is not known. In 1819, his son John Jr., at that time 15 years old, apparently shot a gun into the darkness to frighten off some intruders who were raiding the family apple orchard, wounding a man. Although the man recovered from the gunshot wound, he died a year later. The issue then came before the courts with the prosecution asserting that young MacDonell had caused the man's ultimate death. Because a proper link could not be established, the subject was dropped. In 1821, his only surviving daughter, Magdelaine, ran away with John Reilly (Judd 1982:23). In that same year, the fur trade company for which MacDonell had worked ceased to exist. It amalgamated with its rival, the Hudson's Bay Company. This development had two significant effects on MacDonell's life. First, it meant that in the last few years (i.e. 1813-1820) he probably earned far less from his fur trade interest than he had expected to. This reversal at about the time he began to build his spacious home was probably soon felt. Even worse, however, was the decision of the HBC not to use the Ottawa waterway to bring goods to the interior. In 1822, he suffered yet another personal crisis. His son John died of hydrophobia, that is, rabies.

By 1821, John's brother, Miles MacDonell, his own unfortunate life in ruins, was living at least part of the time with his brother John at Pointe Fortune. Miles, had been apparently duped by Lord Selkirk, and had been arrested and tried for his role in the problems at Red River and Fort William. He had outlived three wives and was left homeless and impoverished. Miles was apparently in poor mental health for the last years of his life and was described in 1821 by Nicholas Garry as living at Pointe Fortune in a deranged state of mind. Garry may have exaggerated the older MacDonell's mental problems, because Miles often travelled away from the family home and continued to write thoughtful and articulate letters until his death in 1828. (Judd 1982: 29).

In 1821, Miles had attempted to collect money from the Selkirk estate. Two years after his death, in 1830, his son, Donald wrote to John MacDonell and agreed to give his uncle the money claimed from the Selkirk estates in payment for his father's debts. John wrote to Lady Selkirk, pressing his case because of "...a wish of doing justice to my creditors and of keeping a house of my own to die in..." This attempt was unsuccessful and John was forced to sell off more of his property to liquidate his mounting debts (Judd 1982:31).

During the 1840's, the creditors were closing in. In July and October of 1847, he wrote letters defending himself against accusations of bad debts. At about the same time, his son Fingal, fell off a boat on the Ottawa River. Somewhat later, his body was found on the banks of the river and his remains were later removed to a second burial place. Then, at the end of the year, John's only surviving brother, William, died. MacDonell's depression at this time can be found in his words, "...I now find myself alone in the world..." (Judd 1982: 37);

MacDonell's poor financial condition was not for want of trying to establish himself as a leading businessman in the Pointe Fortune area. Located upstream from his house, he had

built a stone grist mill, and a frame saw mill. He was also a Colonel of the 1st Regiment of Prescott Militia from 1822 to 1840. He served as District Judge for the Ottawa District from 1816 to 1825 and he represented Prescott in the Parliament of Upper Canada from 1815 to 1820. He was also involved in the retail trade; in 1822 he contracted for the building of a retail shop. The general ledger for the shop was discovered in MacDonell's desk by the second owners of the house. Listing items sold, and goods and services exchanged, the ledger covers the years 1823 to 1834, although there are also some entries listed through 1846 (McKenzie n.d. (2)).

In terms of archaeology, a survey of the MacDonell property had been carried out in 1978. This included aerial remote sensing and thermal scanning by the Ontario Centre for Remote Sensing. A resistivity survey was also conducted in 1978. In 1981, archaeological testing began. The two field seasons were directed by Tom Reitz. During 1981 a number of areas were chosen for investigation. These included: 1) the northeast basement room within the house, from which over 2,000 artifacts were recovered; 2) 3 window well areas along the west facade of the house; 3) the basement entrance; 4) the retail store. The excavation of the retail store has somewhat clouded the issue of its historical description. An 1842 advertisement for the sale of the building (which apparently never happened), described it as having "...a comptor, shelves, fireplace, chimney, cellars and bins for grain." No evidence for a true "cellar" was encountered, while the fireplace hearth is the most prominent structural feature of the building. Over 8,000 artifacts were recovered from this area. This assemblage appears to represent artifacts related to the destruction of the building and subsequent infilling of the land. Artifacts related to the retail trade that MacDonell engaged in could ostensibly include the following which are based on two seasons of field excavations and on the large quantity of each class of artifact found on site: buttons of every description (365); glass beads (18); container glass (4,638 pieces); ceramics (11,896 sherds); clay pipes (1,747 fragments were recovered, an unusually large sample to be found on a domestic site and therefore is more likely to be representative of commercial activity on the site); and rolled brass artifacts, i.e. "tinkling cones". Actually, the large artifact collection from MacDonell house is unusual in many aspects - the size of the collection stands at over 65,000 artifacts from those two seasons of work. Another area of excavation in 1981 was the basement entrance, which also uncovered a massive stone foundation which runs at an angle to the main house. Based on the recovery of 18th century coins in association with this feature, this could represent one of the buildings that William Fortune constructed and which are recorded on the 1797 map (Reitz 1981:41).

In 1982, excavations on the southeast lawn area uncovered a number of features including driveway bedding and a dry laid wall. Reitz (1982) interpreted this foundation as part of a paddock and/or fenceline, its appearance however is much too massive a feature and may possibly be related to one of the buildings noted on the 1829 map of MacDonell's property.

Archaeology at this site did not take place again until 2000 when a monitoring project took place with the assistance of Parks Canada staff. In 2001, testing in two areas of the property took place, the west lawn area and the east lawn area (Figure 1). Excavation of



Figure 1: MacDonell-Williamson in background with 2001 archaeological investigations in foreground.



Figure 2: Excavations within the west window well recovered an 1830s blue edged ware vessel



Figure 3: South window well foundation



Figure 4: Excavation within the shed. The 1829 stone foundation is at the left, while the excavator is leaning on the extant shed foundation which dates to the 1880s.

these areas recovered over 6,000 artifacts, predominately dating from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. No significant features were uncovered in the areas tested (Doroszenko 2003).

In 2002, investigations were focused on two major areas: 1) the remaining window wells that had not been previously excavated and 2) the areas to the west of the existing sheds on the north side of the house. Foundations of two intact stone window wells were uncovered including one on the west side of the house where the infill closing the well dated to the mid-1830s on the basis of the ceramics recovered from the deposit (Figure 2), and a third that had been dismantled at some point in the 19<sup>th</sup> century on the south side of the house (Figure 3). A builder's trench was documented on the south side of the house. As well, excavations successfully reached the base of the house foundation for the first time during any of the archaeological investigations on the property. Evidence of the Victorian era verandah was also documented. A total of just over 13,000 artifacts were recovered during the 2002 field season (Doroszenko 2003). Not surprisingly, almost one half of the assemblage consisted of window glass fragments. This has been consistent with every archaeological investigation on this property. The predominance of window glass is likely related to vandalism over time, and the blasting for the nearby dam.

In 2003, investigations focused on an area that was to be impacted by the installation of a septic tank. This afforded the opportunity to test inside the extant shed on the north side

of the property where washrooms were to be installed (Figure 4). On the 1829 and 1872 maps showing this property, it is clear that a building once stood during John MacDonnell's occupation. This is thought to have been the ice house, given its size. Our excavations uncovered what I believe to be the south foundation wall to the ice house within the extant structure at the north end (Doroszenko 2004). It is anticipated that sometime in the near future, further work on this structure will be conducted.

On April 17, 1850, John MacDonell died at his home, he was 81. He was buried in the Catholic cemetery across the River in St. Andrews, Quebec. He had never been forced to leave his home by his numerous creditors. Although he has left a scant record for such an important and in many ways unusual man, something of his personality can be pieced together. MacDonell had probably not lived frugally, although there were signs that he had trouble finding funds to keep his home in good repair. He was generous to a fault, but it would also appear that his sons were generous with him. At the same time, he had tenacious creditors and on several occasions was involved in litigations over debts and land transactions. He had a large build and considered himself a giant among men. Set in his ways, not accustomed to compromise, and morally upright, MacDonell saw himself as a clan chieftain. He wanted to stand out, to stand above his fellow man; he was not afraid to be different. He was proud of himself, protective of his family and strongly religious. The tragedy of his life is that if he had dreamed a little more modestly, if he had been better able to judge the economics of the times, he might have been more successful, even in his own unrealistic terms. Nevertheless, MacDonell was able to pass on to his son and chief heir, John Beverly Polifax, enough wealth, intelligence and sense, to at last create something of a monument from the monster home at Point Fortune.

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