

Romancing the stone

A stroll through the historic Scottish charm of Pictou's streets, illuminating facades and folklore

by Shelley Cameron-McCarron
Photography: Catherine Fancy

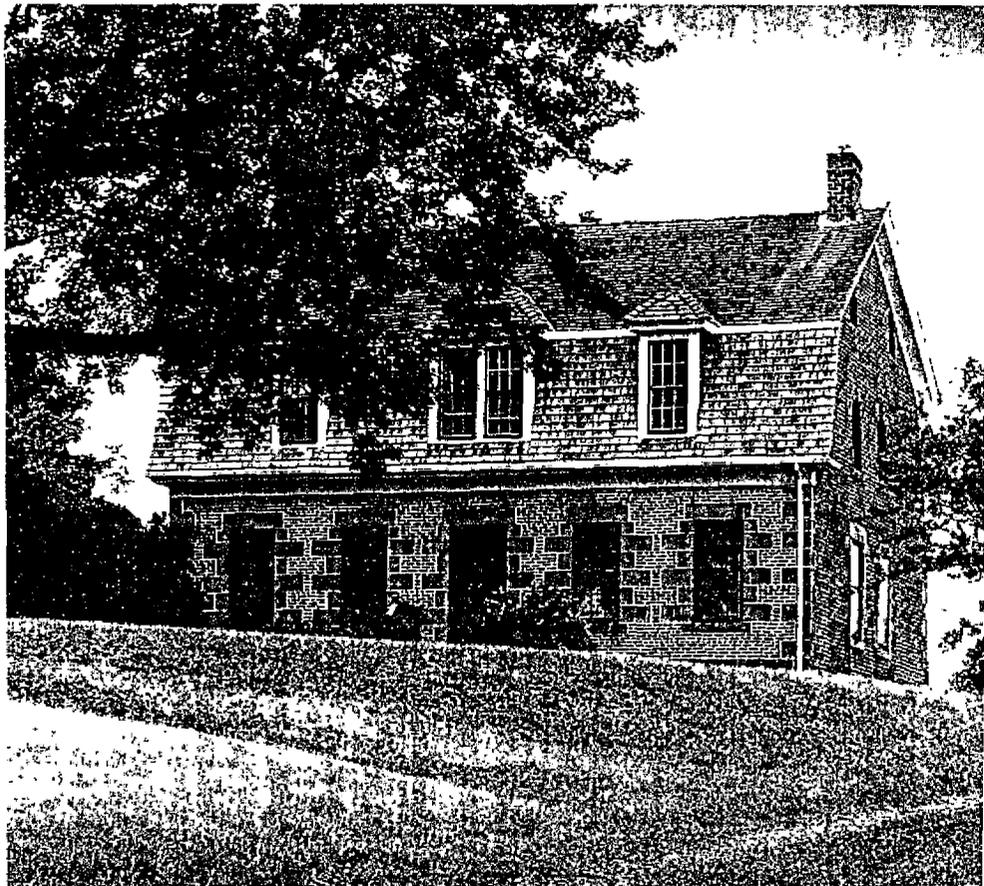


WHEN A BOATLOAD of Highland Scots sailed into Pictou Harbour on the Dutch barque the *Hector* in 1773, it's said the piper on board played as they neared shore. It's doubtful the 189 people on board were thinking their legacy would stand the test of time in this, their new home.

Yet 236 years later, visitors to this historic seaport on Nova Scotia's Northumberland Shore are immediately struck by the enduring beauty of their influence: the town of about 4,000 has some of the finest examples of Scottish 19th century architectural heritage to be found anywhere in North America.

Pictou was one of the major emigration ports and settlement areas for waves of predominantly Highland Scots. They brought many skills with them, not least of which was masonry.

Lori Johnston, Tara MacDonald and



There's said to be more Scottish 19th century architecture in Pictou than in most towns in Scotland. Above: Thomas McCulloch House is of Scottish domestic design, constructed of brick from England and local quarried stone. Above left: Robson House has been both a bookstore and a hotel.

Darrell Burke, who write about this architectural phenomenon in the *Scottish Buildings of Urban and Rural Pictou*, found on virtualmuseum.ca, say that "in the 1838 Pictou County census there are 22 heads of household who list their primary occupation as mason.

"Not only did they bring the skills and traditions, but they found the necessary raw material; fine workable

sandstone, in abundance. Soon they began to recreate the familiar domestic landscape of the homeland in both the town and countryside."

Catherine Fancy, a bagpiper, university student and self-proclaimed history nerd, spent last summer revamping, rearranging and offering 50-minute tours of this architecture, through her job at the Hector Exhibit



The Consulate Inn, built circa 1810, was once the American Consulate. It shows the stone-block construction and five-sided dormers; inside it has an old radiator you can put plates in to keep warm.

Centre, on Haliburton Road.

"There is more [historical] Scottish architecture in Pictou than in most towns in Scotland," she says.

Catherine has taken folks past the stone building on George Street, where it's rumoured Alexander Keith had a summer cottage, and by the Sir Edward Mortimer House at Norway Point, whose history holds a certain fascination.

The 1810 stone mansion, which has had various reincarnations over the years, originally belonged to the richest man in Pictou, if not Nova Scotia. Mortimer arrived from Scotland in 1788, and made his fortune in lumber and shipping. Although he was once known as the King of Pictou, he died insolvent. One theory is that he was a generous man—he lent people money that he didn't get back and paid for many things, while at the same time the lumber industry was waning.

One of the most common aspects of Scottish architecture you see in the town, commonly dubbed "The Birthplace of New Scotland," is the use of big, block stones, five-sided dormers on the second storey, and chimneys on either side of the house—to allow for a fireplace on either side, accordingly.

Like the Old Country, it's also not unusual for homes to be built with the grade of the land.

Water Street is chock-a-block full of stone structures. "One gorgeous building once served as the American Consulate," Catherine says. Now an inn, the building was built circa 1810 and is a perfect example of the five-sided Scottish dormers—boasting five of them. It was also built on an irregular-shaped lot—why the large reception room on the second floor has a back wall a foot narrower than the front wall.

As an added feature, "it has an old radiator that you can put plates inside to keep warm," says Catherine.

Many say the old post office on Water Street, constructed with heavy blocks in 1895, resembles a stone fortress. It's said to be in the *Guinness World Records* as the only building with a window in its chimney. However Dayle Crouse, director of the Hector Exhibit Centre, has been told that the window is actually an illusion. "From the outside it appears to be in the chimney, but really the window is on the side of the chimney," she says.

Dayle tells a story about Sherbrooke Cottage on Haliburton Road, now the Thomas McCulloch House, a provincial

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The old Customs House, built in 1873. During Prohibition, confiscated liquor was poured down its stone basins, to the harbour. Certain people went to the end of the pipe for a drop or two.

It was constructed of local quarried stone (from Lyons Brook) and bricks from England in 1806. A gentleman donated the bricks, but upon seeing how nice the structure turned out, promptly turned around and billed McCulloch for them. Today, the museum is filled with fascinating facts about the town, such as the hotly contested election of 1830, when violence erupted and a man was killed.

Continuing down Haliburton Road, you pass the Poor House (basically, one had to renounce everything in order to be cared for, Dayle says as we walk past) and the David McCulloch house (Thomas's son). This mid-Victorian gem is the largest and most intricately designed brick house in Pictou.

Other highlights include the Customs House, an imposing stone building on Depot Street, with stone basins in the basement. During Prohibition liquor was poured down the basins, into the harbour; it's said that certain people went to the end of the pipe to get a drink.

St. Andrew's Day, Scotland's official national day, was celebrated at the former Lorrain's Inn, a classical stone building on Church Street, built in 1820. The owner of the livery business would come at a certain time to cart the celebrants home, or so the story goes. While those days are long gone, and the landscape of Pictou's streets has changed, the appeal of the old-world skill and craftsmanship of the Scottish masons still remains, strong and steadfast. 🐾

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