

The Inventory of Pre-Confederation Buildings in the Township of Ancaster, Summer 2020

Date: Wednesday, January 6, 2021

Submitted by: Bob Maton, President, Ancaster Village Heritage Community (AVHC)

Submitted to: Hamilton Municipal Heritage Committee

Recommendation

The Ancaster Village Heritage Community (AVHC) has delivered an inventory of 110 heritage buildings in Ancaster to the City of Hamilton. We are recommending acceptance of our Inventory results, as formulated by Shannon Kyles, leader of the Inventory, and Alissa Golden, City of Hamilton Heritage Project Specialist and our liaison with the City Heritage Department.

The Inventory and Research Working Group (IRWG) of the City of Hamilton met on December 7, 2020 and supported forwarding the results of the Ancaster Heritage Inventory to the Hamilton Municipal Heritage Committee for consideration of their referral to City Council for Council adoption.

At that HMHC meeting, to be held January 29, 2020, this author, in company with Shannon Kyles, will present the Ancaster Heritage Inventory results and will ask for HMHC support for our recommendations to go to Council for final approval of their inclusion on the Municipal Heritage Register - providing 60 days' delay of demolition in order to allow Council to consider Heritage Designation for such a building. A handful of properties have also been identified as candidates for designation under the Ontario Heritage Act, requiring further research and assessment.

Background

The Township of Ancaster, close neighbour of the City of Hamilton and now a delightful part of it, is the third oldest Police Village in Ontario, formally established in 1792-3.

For centuries previously, three or possibly four Indigenous trade routes wound through the woodland and intersected at what is now the corner of Rousseau and Wilson Streets in Ancaster. This intersection lies at the brow of the Niagara Escarpment, where until recently the 1860-built Brandon House stood. The earliest European settlement in the Region sprang from that same few acres, and continued to expand southwest and eastward along Wilson and Rousseau Streets throughout the 19th century, as well as on the fertile farmland surrounding it. Euro-Canadian settlement was drawn here initially by the water-powered mills taking advantage of the power generated by Ancaster Creek, which spills down the Escarpment at that location, and by the produce of the rich farmland.

“By 1823 [only thirty years after its establishment], Ancaster had become the second largest urban conglomeration in Upper Canada, exceeded only by Kingston. Robert Gourlay’s “Statistical Account of Upper Canada”¹ [of 1922] noted that Ancaster had 162 stone houses, five sawmills, five doctors and four grist mills. By this time, Ancaster could also add a newspaper to

¹ Robert Gourlay, Statistical Account of Upper Canada 1822, McClelland and Stewart, 1974, cited in Joachim Brouwer, “The Enduring Legacy of Ancaster”, Hamilton Spectator, Aug. 28, 2020.
<https://www.thespec.com/opinion/contributors/2020/08/28/the-enduring-legacy-of-ancaster.html>

its asset base, George Gurnett’s Gore Gazette. Army Lieutenant Francis Hall waxed effusively about Ancaster, claiming it merits to become the Metropolis of Upper Canada.”²

But by 1823 decline of Ancaster’s importance had set in, along with weakening of its growth, a consequence of the advent of steam power and the progress of industry in Dundas, which had access to the Desjardins Canal for transportation of its production.

Over recent years, a great number of the earliest buildings, dating from the late 1700s and early 1800s, have been demolished to make way for more modern development. In the mid-1970s, the historic village was studied as a potential heritage conservation district by the former municipality but was never designated as one. However, there were a set of urban design guidelines that were created to help guide change and new development sympathetic to the historic character of the area. Many of the oversized, modernistic and ersatz structures that have replaced genuine heritage buildings despite some being tastefully designed are clearly a poor substitute for the original buildings. Some indeed conform closely to heritage architecture guidelines, while others make only a half-hearted effort.

Nevertheless, a significant event occurred in March of 2020 that mobilized considerable public support for the preservation of heritage buildings in Ancaster. The historic Brandon House (1860) was demolished, abruptly and traumatically, by the new owner, an anonymous numbered company based in Toronto. Neighbours were profoundly shocked by its loss. It was the elegant and tidy stone home which for 160 years had welcomed people to Ancaster from its perch atop an embankment at the main intersection in the Village, where Ancaster’s European history had first originated.

The reaction from the neighbourhood, and from lovers of Ancaster everywhere, was swift and strong. Our Councillor proceeded to list all remaining Inventoried buildings on Wilson Street, 31 in total, on the Municipal Heritage Register.

Meanwhile, these tragic events lent impetus to the formation of the Ancaster Village Heritage Community, Inc.

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AVHC was officially incorporated on June 5, 2020. This was only a few months after its founders, Bob and Sandy Maton, organized an initial neighbourhood meeting with our local Councillor, in October 2019, hoping he would deal with traffic problems along the Church, Lodor and Academy Streets corridor connecting Wilson and Rousseau Streets.

Thus, AVHC Inc. was born in response to long streams of vehicles speeding through our formerly quiet neighbourhood. As we studied the problem it became clear that traffic was cutting through our semi-rural streets to avoid rush-hour traffic logjams on Wilson Street, themselves caused by the densifying development and intense traffic at the Region of Hamilton’s busiest intersection, Rousseau and Wilson Streets.

At the same time, since housing values have been rising, developers have intensified efforts to purchase and demolish characterful heritage buildings, along Wilson Street particularly, in order

²Joachim Brouwer, Ibid.

to replace them with high-density condos and commercial buildings. These were, incrementally, both adding to traffic pressures and undermining the living environment of existing residents. In their effort to monetize the lovely heritage character of the Town, developers were quickly destroying the very feature of Ancaster which was its main attraction.

As a result, over past months AVHC has evolved into a volunteer organization working to preserve the heritage of one of Canada’s oldest communities, and to encourage positive developments that will sustain and enhance the quality of life in our community. AVHC also works with other like-minded local volunteer organizations to enhance their ability to respond to proposed changes as well.

Bill 108

Early in the summer of 2020, AVHC learned that the Provincial Conservative government was implementing amendments to the legislation governing the designation of heritage buildings across the Province (Bill 108). These changes, expected to be implemented sometime in 2021, would allow owners/developers increased power to avoid designation. Our main concern was that in future the Act shall eliminate the Conservation Review Board, which has considered designation appeals, and replace it by referral to the Local Planning Appeals Tribunal (LPAT) for decision. The LPAT is a hearing process at arms’ length from government but with unaccountable authority to determine the outcomes of appeals to City decisions about Planning Applications.

Ancaster Inventory of Heritage Buildings: The Process

Coincidentally, in the spring of 2020 AVHC learned that Carol Priamo of the Architectural Conservancy of Ontario (ACO) was organizing an inventory of the built heritage structures in the Beasley Neighbourhood of Hamilton, hoping to complete that project before January 1, 2021, when Bill 108 was originally supposed to take effect. We asked if we could join in and receive help from the ACO to organize an urgent inventory of our own heritage buildings in Ancaster for the same reason, Bill 108 in order to protect them by listing them on the Municipal Heritage Register, or possibly have them Designated Heritage.

The AVHC Board agreed with the idea; Carol Priamo and the ACO said they would provide help; City heritage staff Alissa Golden and Miranda Brunton provided guidance on the City’s existing heritage inventory and Municipal Heritage Register listing process; Laurie Brady, Membership Secretary of the ACO, was appointed to lead our inventory; and we proceeded to recruit 20 local volunteers through our Facebook page to inventory 105 identified pre-1867 heritage buildings in Ancaster. We started with 162 buildings, but demolitions and boundary changes had stripped out 57 of these in recent years. Most of the survivors had been inventoried previously, going as far back as 1975, but in order to list them on the Municipal Heritage Register the records needed to be updated.

It seemed to us that there was good reason to recruit local volunteers to carry out the Inventory documentation. It is clear that a major aspect of preserving heritage stock is the mobilization of community members who value their local heritage, to learn about it and to begin to actively advocate for it. And considering our own mandate to preserve heritage, mobilizing and training community members in heritage architecture could provide powerful impetus to our efforts.

The Inventory process began in the early summer of 2020. City staff (Alissa Golden, Heritage Project Specialist, Planning and Economic Development Department of the City of Hamilton) presented an information session orienting our volunteers to the heritage preservation system and the implications of what they were about to do for preserving these buildings. Laurie, who had worked on a similar Inventory in Brantford the previous year, provided training in photography and completion of the Inventory forms.

In mid-summer, just as we were ready to begin the Inventory itself, Laurie Brady was regrettably forced to resign, but we continued under the fine leadership of Shannon Kyles, President of the ACO Hamilton Branch, who is a learned professor of architecture at Mohawk College. Not only did the volunteers do a great job on the Inventory process, but Debra Mills did skilled work administering the data, and Maureen Hayman contributed her legal skills by locating each building on the Town grid. Our results were deposited on the Dropbox site over late summer, and by the middle of October all of our buildings had been inventoried by the volunteers.

There was a lot of feedback from volunteers, who unanimously agreed that the process had worked well for them; and as the Inventory progressed, they often remarked that they had begun to notice and appreciate local heritage buildings much more. There will be considerable rewards from this process, considering the accumulated stock of fine photographs and documentation of heritage buildings all around Ancaster that is now available. AVHC can use these in future to help preserve heritage buildings in the Township.

After the volunteer work had wrapped up, Alissa Golden and Shannon Kyles continued to work together to check submissions for accuracy.

The Heritage Inventory project is an important dimension of our AVHC mandate to preserve the cultural landscape and quality of life in our precious Town. As Laurie Brady said, “Leading a group of community volunteers through an inventory project is a new experience and ideal opportunity for me, and such a pleasure. This Ancaster group is fun, talented, enthusiastic and ambitious, with a voracious appetite to learn all about local built heritage.”

Conclusion

Propelled by the impending implementation of Ontario Bill 108, i.e., new legislation which will make designations of heritage buildings more difficult, AVHC initiated an Inventory of 105 non-designated and non-registered heritage buildings in Ancaster. The Inventory was carried out by 20 kind and enthusiastic volunteers, mainly residents of Ancaster. Guidance and training was provided by Alissa Golden of the Planning and Economic Development Department of the City of Hamilton; Shannon Kyles, Carol Priamo and Laurie Brady of the Architectural Conservancy of Ontario Hamilton Branch. Alissa Golden and Shannon Kyles have worked together to finalize the first phase of the Inventory; i.e. reviewing the data provided by our volunteers and determining which buildings should be nominated to be forwarded to City Council to be listed on the Municipal Heritage Register, as well as identifying candidates for designation warranting further research.

The work completed to date will result only in Municipal Register listings for the time being. There are a small number of properties identified as candidates for designation, but additional research and review is necessary to designate them. Further discussion will be undertaken by the leadership team to determine how this research will be done.

Below is a photo of many of the inventory volunteers assembled for photography training at the Seniors' Achievement Centre in Alberton Aug. 12, 2020. Laurie Brady took the photo; I'm second from the right, and Debra Mills is the last person on the right.

