

Kingston, Ontario
Bellevue House
33 Centre Street

Heritage Character Statement

Bellevue House was built circa 1840-41 as a country estate for Kingston merchant Charles Hales. It served as a residence for John A. Macdonald in 1848-49. The house and the remaining acre of the original nine-acre property were acquired by the federal government in 1964. The house and gardens have been restored to the period of Macdonald's occupancy. A visitor centre was built in 1982-83 on the site of the original carriage house. Parks Canada is the custodian. See FHBRO Building Report 90-326.

Reasons for Designation

Bellevue House was designated Classified for its association with Canada's first Prime Minister, Sir John A. Macdonald; for its Tuscan Villa architectural style and its connection with the villa movement in Upper Canada; and for its landmark status as a National Historic Site.

In the period 1830-40, Kingston's Western Liberties area was developed as a villa suburb in expectation of the city becoming the capital of the United Canadas. Local businessman Charles Hales built Bellevue on this premise, renting the property at various times to government officials. In 1848, Bellevue was occupied for a year by John A. Macdonald, local Tory and corporate lawyer, Receiver General for the United Canadas and, later, a Father of Confederation and the first Prime Minister of Canada. Macdonald's eldest son died while the family was in residence at Bellevue.

The Western Liberties suburb is the best-preserved example of the villa movement in Canada. Derived from the Picturesque movement in Britain, country villa suburbs were popular in North America between the 1830s and the 1860s. The Picturesque ideal was espoused by architects trained in Britain, and made widely accessible through the illustrated writings of American designers Alexander Davis and Andrew Jackson Downing. Its origins made it particularly fashionable among wealthy businessmen and professionals from Britain; hence Picturesque villas were more common in Upper Canada than in Lower Canada or the Atlantic Provinces.

The Picturesque aesthetic is based on landscape painting and emphasizes the visual relationship of a house to its setting. Carefully designed "natural" landscapes were the settings for residences expressing the Picturesque values of irregularity in silhouette, varied textures, and intricacy in detail. Since a variety of architectural styles meet these standards, villa architecture is eclectic. Notable in contrast to Kingston's many classical, Georgian-influenced structures, Bellevue House is a rare early example of Italianate architecture in Canada, and is a well-known landmark.

.../2

-2-

Kingston, Ontario
Bellevue House (Continued)
33 Centre Street

Although encroachments on the property have reduced the size and privacy of the landscaped site, it retains much of the tranquil atmosphere loved by the Macdonalds. The gardens have been restored according to an 1869 map, and include a formal garden with fountain, a reconstructed summer house, and a kitchen garden.

Character Defining Elements

The heritage character of this structure is defined by its Tuscan Villa style, as evidenced by the characteristic asymmetrical massing and interior layout, varied materials, and lively detailing; and by its Picturesque landscaped site within a historic villa suburb.

The Italianate silhouette of Bellevue House - L-shaped plan with square tower entrance, low-pitched roof with wide eaves, bay window, columned verandah, side porch, and projecting balconies - exemplifies the Picturesque qualities of irregularity and variety, and creates the visual interplay of light and shadow sought by Picturesque designers. These characteristics are enhanced by elaborate detailing: scalloped eave fringe, window shutters, balcony canopy, brackets and balustrades, spoke-shaped verandah rails, and tower finial. The use of a white stucco wall finish, derived from the Italianate villas of British Picturesque designer John Nash, maximizes the effect of cast shadows. This combination of profile, ornament, and finish make Bellevue unique in Canada, and these elements must be carefully maintained and preserved.

The interior retains its original layout and proportions. In keeping with the importance of a building's relationship to its surroundings, the Picturesque interior was designed to interact with nature. Thus, at Bellevue, the drawing room and master bedroom face south for the light and the view over the lake, the east-facing breakfast room (now interpreted as Mrs. Macdonald's bedroom) receives early morning sun, the dining room on the west receives late afternoon sunlight. The back parlor has French doors leading into the formal garden via the side porch. Family privacy was protected, as suggested by Downing in his design books, by locating the servants' quarters over the kitchen in a rear extension.

The materials and craftsmanship of Bellevue are of fine quality and most of the original building fabric remains. The windows and exterior wood trim appear to be original, and the colour scheme is based on that of the 1840s. The walls, constructed of local limestone, are covered with stucco. During restoration, the stucco was replaced in kind. The interior retains some original wood and plaster work, while reproduction

.../3

-3-

Kingston, Ontario
Bellevue House (Continued)
33 Centre Street

wallpapers are based on surviving fragments found during restoration. Original materials should be carefully maintained, and any future repairs should be made in keeping with the 1840s design and materials.

Developments to the site have included reinstatement of formal and kitchen gardens, and reconstruction of the summer house. These features are in keeping with the original Picturesque design concept. Unfortunately, the approach to the site from the current parking area gives prominence to the visitor centre rather than to the house.

Modifications to the approach pattern, or screening of the visitor centre by appropriate landscaping, should be considered.

1994.04.18