

THE LEGACY OF ALEXANDER STRATHIE: THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE STRATHIE FAMILY OF BONAVISTA, NL

- By Dale Gilbert Jarvis

In the early part of the nineteenth century, a prominent Scottish merchant planter named William Alexander made his home along Newfoundland's north-east coast, in the vibrant fishing community of Bonavista. Bonavista, from as early as the latter half of the seventeenth century, had rivalled St. John's as the fishing capital of North America. The community was ideally situated to serve as a base for more northerly fishing grounds and the seal fishery, as well as having a good inshore fishery. As such, it was a perfect centre of commerce for merchants like William Alexander. At some point between 1811 and 1814 Alexander contracted a fellow Scotsman, an artisan named Alexander Strathie, to construct a home suitable for a businessman of his standing in the community.

Strathie travelled from his home in Greenock, Renfrewshire, Scotland to Bonavista, and by 1814 had constructed what is now known as Bridge House, or Alexander House. The building is the oldest surviving residential structure in the province for which a date of construction can be assigned. Accented by a natural stone foundation, the Alexander home features gable end chimneys, a central hallway, and a highly symmetrical design. The building was designated by the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador as a Registered Heritage Structure in 1986, and emergency funding was approved to stabilize the building and to install a temporary roof until further restoration efforts could be made. Although the roof prevented further water damage, the rest of the house had been vandalized over the years, and further preservation efforts are required. The Bonavista Historical Society has acquired the building, and further restoration work was done on the property in the summer of 2003.

Instead of returning to Renfrewshire, Strathie chose to remain in Bonavista. Thought to be the first of many homes in the town to be built by Strathie, the Bridge House defined the architectural character of the community. Among the many houses Strathie constructed in Bonavista was a house for himself and his wife which became known as "Renfrew Castle", a building now lost. Strathie's wife, who according to different sources was named either Frances or Tryphena, had their first child, Ellenor, on Feb. 6, 1821. By the time of her death in 1838, Frances/Tryphena had eight children, all of whom lived but one, and who all married into the local Bonavista families with names like Lawrence, Miffen and Saint.

One of these children was Alexander Strathie, Jr., who married Elizabeth Miffen in 1852. Alexander Strathie was a house builder alongside his father, and carried on Alexander Sr.'s work in the community once he died in 1869. Three years earlier, Elizabeth had given birth to a son Ronald (Rance) Strathie, who would follow in the footsteps in his father and grandfather and also become a house carpenter. It was in Ronald Strathie that the architectural dynasty founded by Alexander Sr. would reach its zenith, with the work of Ronald eventually surpassing that of both his father and grandfather.

One of the gems of Ronald Strathie's work is the Anglican mortuary chapel, Alexander Chapel of All Souls, constructed 1897-1901 in the Gothic revival style. The structure offers an interesting historical

parallel to Bridge House, in that it marks another architectural collaboration between the Strathie family as builders and the Alexander family as patrons, with the Alexander family donating much of the necessary funds to see its construction. One of the few remaining mortuary chapels in Newfoundland, the building has a particularly fine interior with a hammerbeam roof. The chapel, constructed by Strathie at a rate of 15 cents an hour, is still used for funeral services.

Another excellent example of Strathie's skill as a builder is the Roman Catholic Parish House, built in 1901 by Ronald Strathie for Father James Brown. The house is a brilliant example of vernacular Victorian elaboration. Constructed on a gable-ell plan, which in itself is rare for the area, the house features double front peak dormers, decorative scalloped shingling in the gables, delicate brackets under the porch overhang. Metal finial decorations on all the many gable peaks resemble the sort of elaboration found in some English thatch work. The interior walls are lathe and plaster, and restoration work has revealed wood trim bearing the signature of "Ronald Strathie, Carpenter" on the reverse.

The use of a double front peak in a steeply gabled house became a trademark of Ronald Strathie's work. Houses like the Samuel Mifflin (built in 1905) house and its two neighbours, also originally owned by Miffens, or the Edward O'Connell House, are the best surviving examples. All are marked by their distinctiveness of detail. Raincaps or drip mouldings above windows are very deep, and many feature a roundel in the gable end. The "Strathie House" style became very popular in the community, and double peaked, sharply gabled houses following these examples became common in Bonavista up until the 1920's. At the same time, the style was infrequently followed in nearby towns (although there are two examples in nearby Maberly, and one in Catalina). Houses by other builders such as the Alexander Templeman House follow much the same pattern as the Mifflin Houses. The Templeman house was built in 1895 by Robert Ryder, who had turned down the original contract for the Alexander Chapel of All Souls. It features the same double front peak design, and has elaborate bargeboard on both, but this detailing is not carried through to the rest of the structure, an element of design that sets it apart from Strathie's own work.

Ronald Strathie also worked with established architects on various buildings. One example is the Bonavista Court House, designed by William Henry Churchill, Superintendent of Public Buildings. The courthouse was built in 1897-1899 by Strathie along with builders George Verge and Robert Tucker. The building is in the Second Empire Style, a style first introduced to Newfoundland in the 1870's by the St. John's architectural family of J. and J.T. Southcott, and was the first court house in a series to sport the combination of a mansard roof and tower. Similar buildings were designed by Churchill and constructed in Greenspond (1900-01), Placentia (1902), and Trinity (1903). The introduction of the Second Empire style to the area clearly influenced Strathie's own work, as is demonstrated by the fact that he completed the Second Empire duplex James Groves House at this time (1895-1900) for merchant James Groves. The building features Strathie's characteristic attention to detail and the typical Bonavista gable roundel motif.

While it is not certain if he was the primary building, Ronald Strathie also worked on the construction of the Lockyer/Swyers House. The house is located on Coster Street, one of the major access routes to the downtown Bonavista. The Lockyer/Swyers House was built circa 1911 for John Lockyer, a native of Trinity. He had been recruited by James Ryan in 1904 to be a type of assistant manager for the Ryan

firm. One of his chief responsibilities was ensuring that the various cargoes of goods and fish - entering and clearing from various ports where the firm had operations - were in order.

The Lockyer/Swyers House itself is a two storey second-empire style structure with a mansard roof and bay windows - top and bottom - on the front (western) facade. The clapboard on the bottom of the bay is on the bias, similar to the local Society of United Fishermen (SUF) Hall. The interior is somewhat decorative, typical of an outport merchant's house in the period. The most intriguing feature is the intricate carving in the ground floor "ten-test" ceilings. Ronald Strathie developed this craft when "ten-test" first became available as a building material locally.

The best known of Strathie's work in this respect is found in the W.F. Coaker bungalow at Port Union, but the work in the Lockyer/Swyers House is considered to be more intricate and detailed. Such carving required great patience and when Strathie arrived in the morning to begin the work, he would go into a room and close the door, advising all present not to disturb him for the rest of the day.

Another building constructed by Ronald Strathie, but designed by a trained architect, was Bonavista Methodist (Memorial United) Church, designed by Charles Harris Lench, M. Arch. (Harvard), author of "The Promotion of Commercial Buildings", and son to the resident minister, Rev. Charles Lench. Ronald Strathie in his role as master builder laid the corner stone of the new church on October 31st, 1918 during a service by Rev. Levi Curtis. At the time of its consecration the church was considered to be the largest wooden church east of Montreal, and the most modern in design in Newfoundland.

The church was constructed in a classical revival style, and features a large tower clock, purchased from the Howard Clock Company of New York, and installed by Ronald Strathie. The interior of the church is as finely designed as the exterior. The mid-pitch gable roof is held in place by an elegantly designed open scissor-brace rafter system, the supporting pillars of which also form part of the truss for the sanctuary balcony. One of the most interesting interior details is the massive carved wood arch behind the pulpit. This arch was the work of Ralph Strathie, son of Ronald, fourth in the line of Strathie builders.

As the boom days of Bonavista's fishery-based economy passed, the call for new construction lessened slightly, but the Strathie family, including Ralph Strathie, were always called upon for carpentry work. As carpenters, the Strathies were often asked to construct coffins for the people of Bonavista and the surrounding area. Over time, the family business shifted focus, gradually becoming more involved with the funeral business. Today, descendants of Alexander Strathie Sr. operate Strathie's Funeral Home in Bonavista.

To date, the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador has designated six of the Strathie family buildings in Bonavista as Registered Heritage Structures: Bridge House, Parish House, Alexander Chapel of All Souls, James Groves House, Lockyer/Swyers House and the Bonavista Loyal Orange Lodge, the largest and most impressive wooden lodge building in Canada. All stand as memorials to the creativity and architectural proficiency of the Strathie family.

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