

9 MILL STREET

Oldest Stone House in Perth

A homemade sign in the window of #9 Mill Street¹ stakes a claim to the building being the “*First Stone House Built in Perth – Year 1820*”. While that assertion may or may not be true, the house was very likely built before 1825 and is, with little doubt, the oldest surviving stone building of any kind in Perth.



#9 Mill Street, Perth, Ontario

The streetscapes of downtown Perth represent an unrivaled built heritage in local sandstone, limestone and dolostone. Nearly all of these, however, both commercial buildings and residences, were built in a period between the mid-1830s and the early years of the 20th century. They are largely the work of stonemasons from Scotland, Ireland and England who had first constructed the locks and buildings of the Rideau Canal and then, with the canal completed in 1832, settled in emerging communities along its reach. Over the following 75 years those craftsmen, succeeded by their apprenticed sons, produced the stone architecture we admire today.

¹ As of October 2019.

Nevertheless, while the vast majority of the first settlers arriving at Perth in the years immediately following its founding in 1816 were discharged soldiers and former farm or industrial laborers, there were among them a few stonemasons. At their hands, in the 1820s, stone quarried in the adjoining townships was first applied to public and private accommodation. Describing developments at the Perth Military Settlement in 1823, preacher and diarist Reverend William Bell (1780-1857) wrote that,

The houses are all built of wood, except the jail and courthouse² and one merchant's store, which are built of brick. There is also a stone house erecting this summer, by one of our merchants.³

The implication of Bell's comment is that the stone house erected in the summer of 1823 was the first stone building of any kind in Perth, but he does not mention its location. He might have been referring to the house at #9 Mill Street, but that structure is well documented⁴ as having been built for half-pay officer Lieutenant John McKay (1790-1840), and McKay was not a "merchant" but a bureaucrat. So, where was that 'first' 1823 stone structure located?

The best candidate for the "stone house" mentioned by Bell was the project of "merchant" John 'Craigdarroch' Ferguson (1780-1857) who, in the early 1820s, had a small stone building constructed as a combined house and store at the corner of Wilson and Foster Streets⁵. Craigdarroch⁶ Ferguson was born at Laggan, Balquhidder Parish, Perthshire, Scotland, the son of Duncan Ferguson (1740-1784) and Helen Stewart (1754-1820) and was a former Sergeant of the 104th Regiment of Foot. In addition to his mercantile pursuits, he was the first distiller to produce malt 'Scotch' whiskey at Perth (branded 'Craigdarroch of Perth'), produced in a still on the lot adjacent to his house and store, on the east side of Wilson Street⁷. Ferguson's house/store was most likely the stone "house" mentioned by Reverend Bell, but it was pulled down in 1835 when Ferguson replaced it with a large 2 ½ storey hotel, also built of stone.⁸

John McKay's house and Craigdarroch Ferguson's house/shop were built within a year or two of each other but, whichever came first, the Ferguson building was demolished 185 years ago leaving the McKay house at #9 Mill Street as Perth's oldest surviving stone house and, for that matter, the town's oldest surviving stone building of any kind.

(Perth's oldest surviving building of any kind is the log-built 'Red House'⁹ at 55 Craig Street¹⁰, constructed in 1816 by John Adamson (1755-c1841) as a tavern and inn).

² The brick courthouse and jail burned and were replaced in 1841 by the current stone building.

³ *Hints to Immigrants – Letter XII*, by Reverend William Bell (1824). Bell had his own stone house built in 1835.

⁴ See, *Merchants, Professionals and Tradespeople of Perth* by Gus Quattrocchi (1998).

⁵ #80 Foster Street. See *The Merchants, Professionals and Tradespeople of Perth*, by Gus Quattrocchi (1998)

⁶ John Ferguson chose to be called 'Craigdarroch', after the great house near Moniave, Dumfriesshire, that for 600 years was the seat of the Dumfriesshire Fergusons' Clan Chief.

⁷ Between what is now the Red Fox Pub and Code's Mill.

⁸ Which survives today (2019) as the Red Fox Restaurant and Tavern.

⁹ Now painted white.

¹⁰ Soon to be moved to the grounds of Algonquin College at #7 Craig Street.

Born in Scotland in 1789, John McKay's parentage is unknown. By 1812, at the age of 23 years, he was already a veteran of the British Army, serving in Canada as a Sergeant Major in the Royal Regiment of Artillery. In March of that year, however, he was promoted Ensign¹¹, ordered transferred to the Glengarry Light Infantry Fencibles (GLI), and sent to join his new regiment at Trois Rivières, Lower Canada, to serve as its Adjutant. In the early 19th century, this transfer was notable in a number of ways. In general, transferring British soldiers between regiments was not common, sending a man from the artillery to the infantry was even more unusual, and the promotion to commissioned rank (as an Ensign) of a non-commissioned officer (a Sergeant Major) was a rare event indeed. John McKay's elevation to the officer corps would appear to speak to an unusually high level of education, talent and ability on his part, and a pressing need for a capable Adjutant¹² on the part of the Glengarries.

By the autumn of 1812 the Glengarries and Ensign McKay were at Fort Wellington, Prescott, Upper Canada. When Major 'Red George' Macdonell (1780-1870) staged a surprise attack across the frozen St. Lawrence River against Ogdensburg, New York, on February 22, 1813, McKay commanded one of three sleigh-mounted artillery pieces. Rash and unauthorized as the action was, the Glengarries, supported by militia troops, drove American forces out of the town and Fort de La Présentation, never to return. In the fighting, McKay and impetuous 'Red George' himself were wounded.

On May 10, 1813, while still recovering from his wound at Prescott, Ensign McKay was named Fort Adjutant in addition to his Regimental Adjutant appointment. He held those positions only briefly, however. Major 'Red George' Macdonell could not bring himself to accept a common soldier promoted from the ranks as a fellow officer and gentleman. The resulting conflict between McKay and Macdonell led GLI commanding officer Lieutenant Colonel Francis Battersby (1775-1844) to ask for McKay's resignation from the Adjutant posts.¹³

McKay agreed step aside but maintained his rank and saw further action with the Glengarries at the siege of Fort George (May 25-27, 1813) and the subsequent Niagara campaign of 1814 where he commanded the Demi-Brigade's¹⁴ supporting guns. He was promoted Lieutenant on July 13, 1815 and was placed on the half-pay list when the regiment was disbanded in June 1816.

By August 7, 1816 McKay was at the Perth Military Settlement, receiving location tickets for the 500 acres of land due him as a retired Lieutenant. He drew Drummond Township, C-11/L-7(A); Bathurst Township, C-3/L-7(A) and Bathurst Township C-11/L-29(A)¹⁵.

¹¹ *Royal Military Chronicle, Vol. IV, May 1812* - [To the] "*Glengarry Light Infantry – with the rank of Ensign, Sergeant Major John MacKay from the Royal Regiment of Artillery*". An Ensign holds the most junior commissioned officer rank in the British Army of the day.

¹² Essentially the Regimental administrative officer.

¹³ See *The Glengarry Light Infantry, 1812-1816*, by Winston Johnston (1998 & 2011).

¹⁴ A Demi-Brigade is an amalgamated force of various infantry and artillery units.

¹⁵ The full Bathurst C-11/L-29(A) lot, located on the eastern edge of the township, contains only 100 acres, and nearly all of that is under the waters of the Mississippi River.

In August of 1821 McKay was commissioned a Captain in the 2nd Regiment, Lanark Militia¹⁶ and, in 1822, at about the time he was building his Mill Street house, he was named among the inaugural list of Bathurst District Magistrates. McKay was also appointed Bathurst District's first Deputy Clerk of the Court, but never performed the duties of that office which he delegated to Charles H. Sache (1793-1862) by power of attorney. When the Tay Navigation Company was formed in 1831 to construct and operate a canal linking Perth with the Rideau Canal, McKay was among the first slate of corporate officers¹⁷ and in 1832 he became the Treasurer of Bathurst District¹⁸, a post he held until his death.

John McKay arrived at Perth as a single man but at some later date married a woman named Rhoda. John and Rhoda McKay had at least one son, John McKay Jr., who grew up at Perth and taught for a time at the West Ward School on D'Arcy Street. He later studied law, practiced as an attorney and worked briefly in the 1850s as Clerk of the Lanark County Bankrupt and Insolvency Courts before moving to the United States.

It appears that John McKay Sr. occupied his Mill Street house for less than 10 years. By August 1832 he was living on the Scotch Line in Bathurst Township¹⁹ and in 1834 the Mill Street property became the law office of John Glass Malloch (1806-1873)²⁰. In May 1836 the practice of Attorney Simon Fraser Robertson²¹ replaced Malloch at #9 Mill Street²² and four years after that, McKay was dead.²³

In late February 1840 John McKay fell suddenly ill and sought the Calvinist counsel of Reverend William Bell.

*Late in the evening Dr. Wilson sent me word that John McKay Esq., our District Treasurer, was dying, and wished me to visit him. The night was dark, and the mud deep. I found him composed, and aware that he was dying. His views of the way of salvation appeared to be correct, but he knew nothing of the experimental part [i.e. practice] of religion. I earnestly entreated him to look to the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world. I had one more [visit] with him before he died, but not more satisfactory than the former. He had been a habitual drunkard, and lived a very licentious life, so that his wife had been forced to leave him.*²⁴

¹⁶ *Men of the Upper Canada Militia – 1828-1829*, Edited by Bruce Elliott, Dan Walker, Fawne Stratford-Devai (1995).

¹⁷ *Perth: Tradition & Style in Eastern Ontario*, by Larry Turner (1992).

¹⁸ *Perth Courier*, January 5, 1934.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* McKay was probably living on Bathurst C-1/L-26(E), a property on the western edge of Perth that he had purchased from John Simpson in July 1822.

²⁰ *Bathurst Courier*, August 7, 1834.

²¹ While still a law student in 1833 Simon Fraser Robertson served as 'second' to John Wilson (1807-1869) at Perth's famous 'Last Fatal Duel' when Wilson killed Robert Lyon (1812-1833). Robertson stood trial with Wilson for murder, but both were acquitted. Robertson later became Clerk of the Court of Requests.

²² *Bathurst Courier*, May 10, 1836.

²³ In more recent times the building has seen service as an antique shop. At this writing (2019), it is unoccupied.

²⁴ *Rev. William Bell Diaries, Monday March 2, 1840.*

To what extent Reverend Bell's assessment accurately describes the man and his life may be in some question. With few exceptions Bell considered the entire half-pay officer corps at Perth to be a pack of "*licentious drunkards*" and seldom had a good word to say about any of them. However, a man worthy of promotion from the ranks to an officer's commission and subsequent Crown appointments as Magistrate, Deputy Court Clerk and District Treasurer, was clearly of some merit and could not have been entirely without redeeming qualities.

Two days after whatever cold comfort McKay may have received from Reverend Bell, the *Bathurst Courier* reported that he had died on March 4, 1840.

Died, on Wednesday morning last, after a short but severe illness, John McKay, Esq., Treasurer of the Bathurst District, aged 48²⁵ years²⁶.

John McKay was buried in Craig Street Pioneer Cemetery²⁷, where his wife, Rhoda (1787-1854), was laid beside him 14 years later.

A 1981 Architectural Conservation Report, prepared by Algonquin College, Perth, defined and described the McKay house as follows:

Location: 9 Mill Street
Original Owner: Captain John McKay
Original use: Residence
Built: Circa 1820
Builder: Captain John McKay

Historical Significance:

Due to the location of this building it is most likely the first stone house in Perth, although there is a claim for this by a building erected on the site of the present-day Revere Hotel²⁸.

Captain McKay arrived in Perth in 1816 with a group of military settlers and around 1820 erected this small stone dwelling which is in the area that was first settled.

Architectural Description:

1. *Unit Mass:* Single
2. *Plan:* Square
3. *Storeys:* 2 ½²⁹
4. *Exterior Wall Materials:* stone & wood trim

²⁵ McKay was more likely 50 years of age when he died.

²⁶ *Bathurst Courier*, March 6, 1840.

²⁷ Although Winston Johnston, in his *The Glengarry Light Infantry: 1812-1816* (1998 & 2011), states that John McKay was buried "*in the Perth Pioneer Cemetery*" no burial record or gravestone has been found. His wife, Rhoda McKay, is however recorded as buried there in plot-322.

²⁸ The stone store or house built by Alexander 'Black Sandy' Ferguson at #80 Foster Street.

²⁹ This is an error; the building is barely 1 ½ storeys.

5. *Wings:* Summer kitchen at rear, tongue & groove board on board, evidence of brick chimney
6. *Roof:* Gable, asphalt shingles³⁰
7. *Chimney:* Stone chimneys one at each end
8. *Dormers:* 2 dormers at front, small with 2-pane windows
9. *Roof Trim:* Plain & simple, evidence of a cornice return
10. *Windows:* Aluminum windows, 2 panes at front, at sides 4-pane windows, small square window openings with stone voussoirs³¹.
11. *Door:* Small wood door with 5-panel headlight over.

The McKay House at #9 Mill Street lies within the Downtown Perth Heritage Conservation District.

- Ron W. Shaw (2019)

³⁰ By 2019 the asphalt shingles had been replaced by steel roofing.

³¹ A wedge-shaped or tapered stone used to construct an arch.