

The Glengarry News

Section of Bishop's House slated for removal

September 5, 2018 by TARA MACDONALD News Staff

South Glengarry council is expected to approve a request by the Glengarry Fencibles Trust, a group dedicated to the preservation and re-use of the Bishop's House of Glengarry, to demolish a section of the historic house in St. Raphael's later this fall.



TARA MACDONALD PHOTO

HOLY GROUND: “For members of my living history unit, who recreate and educate the public on early Glengarry history and what life was like during the War of 1812, the Bishop's House is Holy Ground,” said Jim Mullin, a living history re-enactor with the Glengarry Light Infantry Fencibles. “Major recruitment and training of the Glengarry Light Infantry took place right here at the original home, which predates the War of 1812. The home gives living history re-enactors a nod of approval from the regimental forbears as well as from Father Macdonell himself.” He is shown here with Brenda Baxter.

“To put it simply, I feel this is a very ironic position that I’m in,” remarked Trust president Brenda Baxter when she addressed council recently. “Because three years ago, as a group, the Glengarry Fencibles Trust was arguing very passionately to save the Bishop’s House and here I am to request a demolition permit for part of the house.”

The additions that are slated for removal have little historic value, explained Ms. Baxter. “The section to be demolished includes the tail section at the back of the building which was added in 1939, along with an in-fill section with no foundation, a shed and some aluminium-sided sections which were put on in the ‘80s.”

The Municipal Heritage Committee has approved the demolition application, relates township Clerk Kelli Campeau.

The committee’s recommendation was to be presented to council September 4.

Since acquiring the building in 2016, the Trust has worked tirelessly to restore the Bishop’s House to its former glory in hopes of re-establishing the building as a vital part of the community. Plans include a tea house, interpretive centre, a concert hall and a concierge’s suite. Estimates place the planned renovations at roughly \$2 million.

Working with Dry Stone Canada, the Trust began restoring the retaining wall which was originally built in the Bishop’s college garden in 1826. In 2017, the Trust partnered with Parks Canada in a cost-sharing agreement to double the amount the group had already fundraised for a total of \$200,000 for the replacement of the roof, window repairs and the removal of “unsympathetic alterations” to the building. The veranda has also been removed; it will be replaced by an exact replica later this year. Passers-by will now be welcomed with a new custom-made sign that has been commissioned from local artist Noella Cotnam.

One of the oldest and most historic houses in Canada, the Bishop’s House, the home of “Big Bishop” Alexander MacDonell (1762-1840), is an element of the St. Raphael’s Ruins National Historic Site. The spacious stone house was reputedly built by François-Xavier Rocheleau in 1808 while the larger, matching stone wings were added by architect Raoul Joseph Gariépy in 1924 when the building housed Iona Academy, Ontario’s first institute of higher learning.

Over the years, the House was used as a presbytery for priests and a dormitory for girls. It housed the first printing press from which communiques went forth to Upper Canada and in the 1980s to mid 1990s was used as a rehabilitation centre by the former Mount Carmel House.

By the late 1990s, the House was all but forgotten and left to face nearly two decades of neglect and decay. By 2015, the Catholic Diocese of Alexandria-Cornwall had decided that the building should be demolished. But the demolition application was rejected by the township.

After more than a decade of fighting to protect the landmark, an agreement was finally reached with the Diocese by which the Trust took possession of the three-storey edifice March 31, 2016 for \$2.

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