

"SUMMERHILL"

THE WILLIAM WILSON HOUSE

This white frame house is located on the West part of Lot 3, Concession 10, Ramsay Township, in the Village of Appleton. It sits on a rise of land, fronted by five large black locust trees, at the west end of the village facing the Mississippi River. The property was originally part of a 200 acre parcel patented by the Crown to the Canada Company on July 9, 1829, and subsequently sold to James Wilson in May 1836 for £134. In 1847, James sold 65 acres in the west half of Lot 3 to his son William, for the nominal sum of 5 shillings. The sale was registered in February 1851.

The property now comprises 4.25 acres, the balance of William Wilson's original 65 acre farm having been sold off over the years.

William Wilson

William Wilson was born in Cumbernauld, Lanarkshire, Scotland in 1809. He was the eldest son of James Wilson whose family emigrated to Canada and settled in Lanark County in 1828.

William Wilson was a farmer and carpenter. He was also an accomplished cabinet-maker, an example of whose craftsmanship can be seen in the Matheson House Museum in Perth. Besides Summerhill, William Wilson is known to have built at least one other house in the Village (now owned by Alan Mirabelli and Anne Mason), as well as a frame church in the gothic style which was destroyed by fire in 1885. William Wilson died in June 1887 and is buried at the Auld Kirk on the eighth line of Ramsay. His obituary in the July 1 edition of the Almonte Gazette reads as follows:

After a lengthy period of extreme mental and bodily suffering Mr. William Wilson, of Appleton, found a happy release in death last Sunday evening. No man in Ramsay more thoroughly enjoyed the respect and esteem of his friends and neighbours, and the announcement of his death carried deep and sincere sorrow to many a heart. The late Mr. William Wilson was a native of Cumbernauld, Lanarkshire, Scotland. He emigrated to this country with his father's family in 1828. Seven years later he cleared the land and built the house in which he has lived ever since. In the year 1836 he married Flora Lammie (who died about eight years ago), and had a family of two daughters and ten sons. Eight survive him, five of whom were with him in his last moments. For a number of years he has been an architect, and has left many monuments of his skill and handiwork. A man of more than ordinary intelligence, he had a well stocked library and a well stored mind. He beautified his home, and planted with his own hands many trees, which are much admired by travellers passing his late residence. He was a member of the first council of the Municipality of Ramsay for two years, (1850-52) but declined re-election. He was a consistent member of the Presbyterian Church for fifty-two years, and an elder for the last fifteen. About three years ago he had an attack of effusion of blood on the brain,

from which he never recovered, but gradually became feebler until his death. He had long ago made his peace with God, and calmly awaited the time when he would be summoned home. For him death had no terrors, no sting. He had a firm abiding faith in his Saviour, and frequently during the last two years had besought God to take him to himself. May our latter end be like his.

The House

It is not clear when William Wilson built Summerhill. Wilson's obituary suggests it was about 1835, though another oral tradition has the house finished in 1840. Whatever the date of its original construction, the house shows evidence of Wilson's continuing efforts at "beautification".

The Wilson family lived at "Summerhill" until just before World War I when they moved to the prairies, selling the house to the Snedden's from Blakeney. The property was for many years known as the "Snedden Farm" after Herb Snedden, who ran a dairy and market garden operation. In 1954, Frances McLean purchased the property from Herb Snedden. Initially, Mr. Snedden only wanted to sell the house and the house garden (about one acre in all), but the McLeans asked for the land to the west as well, extending to where the Champagne's have built their Georgian style brick house. Summerhill remained on the market, and vacant (the Snedden's having moved next door to the small, more modern cinder-block house) for about two years before Frances and her husband bought it for \$6000. A provision of the sale required Herb Snedden to remove all unpainted buildings from the property within a year. These included a horse barn, dairy barn, wood shed, pump house (now located at the back of the Prosser's garden next door) and a two-story carpenter's shop.

At the time of the McLeans' purchase the house had no indoor plumbing. The privy was located in the backyard under the cedars. Water was brought in by hand as required from the well under what is now the garage. The interior lighting was minimal and rather dismal. The home was heated by woodstoves, though a furnace had been installed in the 1930's and warm air was allowed to rise through a hole in the lower hall floor at the foot of the stairs. It appears the house never had fireplaces, since William Wilson considered them inefficient.

The Exterior

The house is a typical Ontario 1 1/2 storey home with a centre gable decorated with fanciful bargeboard trim. Somewhat unusually, there is a kitchen wing placed to the side, rather than behind the main structure. The house is clad with clapboard, though in the rear this has been replaced with more durable weatherboard. The fieldstone foundation has been covered with a cement coating for added protection. There are three bays on the main facade. The front door is headed by an entablature, and has pilasters on either side. The windows are casements - 8/8 in the front and 18/18 in the rear. The house is constructed on a centre hall plan, with the living room to the right as you enter, and the dining room to the left with the original kitchen (now the family room) behind.

The Interior

The present kitchen is located in the wing to the west side of the main part of the house, and was originally the summer kitchen. It was in poor shape when the McLeans purchased the house, and had come away from the main structure. A cellar was dug, the foundation was shored up and the floor raised 10 inches. It was completely renovated and nothing remains of the original interior. The window on the west end was originally a door. Another door, located where the modern casement window has been installed, led to the back yard. The adjoining entrance hall and double garage were added in the early 1970's.

The downstairs bathroom was originally the pantry. It had built-in shelves which are now in the closet in the main bathroom.

The dining room appears always to have been used as such. The large picture window replaced a door which led to a small verandah. This room contains the only original chair-rails in the house. The baseboards and door and window trim are simpler and more restrained than in the other parts of the house.

The present living room was originally two rooms; the parlour in front (evidenced by the knot-free pine floors, fine dentilled cornice and applied moldings around the window frames) , and a small slip bedroom behind. Both rooms have fine corner-box trim around both doors and windows. There was a small cupboard on the parlour side of the wall which divided the two rooms. The doors which separated them have been installed on the closet in the small bedroom on the second floor. At one point the wide-plank pine floors had been varnished and a thin line painted down the middle of each board to resemble the then more fashionable hardwood. It is also reputed that the casement window sashes in this and the other rooms of the house were brought by the Wilsons from Scotland.

There is no evidence that either the living room or the front hall were ever painted. When Frances McLean took possession in the mid-1950's, she found 18 layers of paper in the hall and 12 in the living room. The woodwork in both rooms seems originally to have been varnished in a very dark brown which may have been grain-painted. The front door was originally six panels, but at some unknown date the top four were removed and glass installed.

The second floor contains four rooms: two bedrooms, a bathroom, and a small sitting room under the centre gable. This may have been a later addition since, unlike the rest of the house, it is constructed with a ridge board.

The master bedroom was always one large room. There were originally four built-in corner cupboards with paneled doors, one in each corner. The doors of two of these cupboards are now on the linen closet in the bathroom. One of the windows in the master bedroom was taken out when the fireplace and chimney were installed in the 1950's, and is now in the garage.

The main bathroom was originally a bedroom. The hooks on the wall are old -probably original to the house - and were to be found in every room when Frances McLean moved in in the 1950's. There was a small opening in the wall about where the toilet now is, which allowed heat from the

woodstove to escape into the adjoining bedroom.

Stairs off the dining room lead to a third bedroom located above the present family room. This room has no connection with the rest of the second floor and was probably originally the hired-man's room. The present blue walls and ochre floors closely resemble the original colours. (The only remaining example of the original floor colour is found in the small closet in the present family room). The modern casement window replaced a tiny original window. The room had been damaged by a fire at the time Frances McLean bought the house.

The Property

Summerhill is set on 4.25 acres of land. About half the property is given over to a stand of pine and balsam planted under a provincially-sponsored tree-farm program in the early 1970's. The property also contains a variety of hardwood trees planted for the most part by Frances McLean during her ownership (1954-88). These include a black walnut, Northern Catalpa, weeping willows, an Almey crab and a King Crimson maple. The current owners, Graham and Rosemary Swan have added a Sunburst honeylocust, a red oak, and a Green Mountain sugar maple.

The most remarkable trees, however, are the five black locusts which line the front of the property. Dr. Perumal, a doctor of arboriculture and consultant to the National Capital Commission, considers them the largest examples of the species he has seen in 25 years as a professional. He estimates the age of the oldest of them at anywhere up to 150 years, in which case they may have been planted by William Wilson himself.

An old tombstone under the crabapple directly facing the rear of the house marked the grave of Albert, son of William and Flora Wilson, who died on August 28, 1866, aged 4 years and 10 months. The tombstone was donated to the North Lanark Museum by Frances McLean.

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