

# The Ultimate Antique: An 1830 Whitby House Relocated to Queenston

Words & Photos by Chris Mills

In October 1812, the British army under Major General Isaac Brock lobbed cannon balls and mortar from Queenston Heights on the Niagara Escarpment in an orderly attempt to dissuade U.S. invaders from landing on Canadian soil.

He got shot for his troubles.

Today, Bev and Doug consider it the perfect baptism of fire for their home.





The house before. Almost 25 years ago, this wreck in Whitby was surrounded by a new development and destined to be eliminated. Doug and Bev of Queenston bought it with the help of Mel Shakespeare, who brokers heritage houses, and it was moved for restoration.

The old house renewed, restored, and renovated. The rear of the house in spring, overlooking the Niagara River and the Queenston Docks.

If you step into Bev and Doug's home in this southeast corner of Niagara-on-the-Lake, a sense emerges of having stepped back a century. But you've actually stepped back almost 180 years.

More than 20 years ago, the Queenston couple found the house in Whitby, surrounded by new development and up for sale by the developer.

"I hate to see these old houses just torn down, so it's great to actually save one of them from the bulldozers," says Bev, an antique dealer specializing in vintage textiles and quilts.

They purchased it in its entirety through Mel Shakespeare, a broker of recycled historic houses, numbered every brick and beam, packed it into a

couple of 45-foot trailers, and tucked it all into a warehouse while they sought a place to rebuild.

They eventually bought a plot of almost 1.5 acres that overlooks the Niagara River in the Village of Queenston, and reassembled the house with the skills of local millworkers, masons and carpenters.

## The Ultimate Antique



The front sitting room with one of the several fireplaces in the house.



Something new: the sunroom addition has walls of windows, a ceramic tile floor and a walkout to the slate patio.

“We took our time with it, so it was definitely a labour of love,” says Doug, who contracted the workmen and finishers to ensure the authenticity of every aspect of the reconstruction. Bev researched and conducted the decoration, including a full year painting.

“We’ve always been great admirers of antiques and old houses, and we liked the idea of restoring one,” she says. “After all, a house has to be the ultimate antique.”

Constructed originally in 1830 by a prosperous Pennsylvanian, Robert Schooley, the house saw its share of history, including as a sanctuary for Robert Schooley Jr. who hid from the British following his activities in the unsuccessful McKenzie Rebellion of 1837.

### On the Escarpment

Relocated to Niagara-on-the-Lake in 1989, the house now overlooks Queenston Landing, the riverside docks where in the 18th and 19th centuries the site provided the staging location for everything that moved down the St. Lawrence into central North America. It’s situated a few hundred yards from the Bruce Trail, from the site of Brock’s death, from the redan platform where a mortar fought the American invaders, and from William Lyon MacKenzie’s original printery, home of one of the seven oldest working printers in the world.

The property bears all the benefits of the northern reaches of the Carolinian forest, replete with pin oak, Kentucky coffee tree, sweet gumwood, sycamore, beech, maple, spruce and white pine mixed with gardens of wild flowers and a patch of apple, peach and pear trees.

Starting with the wreck they faced, it’s difficult to fathom how they accomplished what stands today. But perusing such sources as heritage home magazines, Doug unquestionably knows his house.

“The Wilderness Georgian design (called Federal in the



The master bedroom has a side door to the huge balcony that overlooks the expansive back yard and the Niagara River.



The authentic kitchen was entirely restored except for the original floor, which was too worn to be retained. The owners did, however, reclaim all its original nails.

Continued on page 28

Continued from page 19

U.S.), has a very symmetrical ordered look about it with Greek Revival touches in the entry, plus heavy soffits and frieze on the outer trim,” he says, reciting details with evident pride. “That frieze has 14 separate layers of wood to create the look.”

### Accurate Restoration

Original beams, four original brick fireplaces and wood mantels, doors, panels and trim, survived, as did much of the original pine flooring.

“We weren’t able to use the original kitchen floor because it was so worn, but we managed to harvest all of the original nails from it,” says Doug.

Original windows were also replaced, but they found a Menonite manufacturer in St. Jacobs that specializes in vintage windows and replicated everything except the original transom over the front entry that required re-blown glass.

“The biggest challenge was the amount of time spent finding historic reproductions wherever we could,” says Doug. For instance, a local blacksmith manufactured all the window locks and railing hangers.

“Because of all the historic homes in Niagara-on-the-Lake, we were able to find tradesmen familiar with the work done back then. Our mason had worked on the restoration of Fort George, so he knew exactly what to expect.

“We were very particular about making an accurate restoration, but at the same time worked to make it warm and livable. The fabulous location makes the two work well into one.”

“We were fortunate in that the home’s only ever had three owners so it’s never been detrimentally renovated,” says Doug.

One concession to modernity was the bathrooms that underwent serious updating, although they managed to find





This is the view of the Niagara River from the balcony off the master bedroom. Eagles fly along the river.

a wood and brass overhead pull-chain toilet.

Lighting also had to be updated with potlights in the kitchen. However, the rest of the electrical lights are converted gas lamps. The basement is finished, but original posts, beams and floorboard stand out.

During the reconstruction phase, Bev and Doug needed a place to store everything on the property, so they constructed a 24-by-36-foot coach house prior to the move that now doubles as a garage and skylighted studio.

The only other addition is the back sunroom and slate patio deck -- a nod to the architectural influence of Niagara-on-the-Lake -- that overlooks the river. Four months of the year they can watch bald eagles moving up and down the waterway.

The story goes that during the 1812 battle to gain a foothold in Queenston, the Americans sent a team to scale the heavily treed cliffs that overlook the river in order to attack the British mortar bombarding them. Once the mortar was turned on them, the British were forced to mount a comparable force up the cliff to recapture it.

Looking out over Queenston Docks from Bev and Doug's property, you can envision it all almost in their backyard, although the riverbank now houses their boathouse, and flowers occupy their garden, not cannon.

But in Queenston, history lives in the backyards and streets. It's hard to turn a corner without a building from 1795 or church from 1879 crossing your view.

Doug says, "It's been a great experience and we feel really privileged to have been here." **EV**

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