

Stories from the Kitchen Garden at Dundurn Castle

Written and photographed by Helen Powers

Hamilton has many beautiful heritage properties which tell stories from the past and show us how people lived here in different eras. One of the most famous is Dundurn Castle, a stunning mansion built by Sir Allan MacNab on a 50-acre estate overlooking Hamilton Bay. This property has been the setting of many stories during its lifetime and the kitchen garden played a surprising number of different roles. Today it stands in its original glory, having been restored as a living example of sustenance, beauty and social activity in 1855.



Sir Allan MacNab was a local politician for 30 years and the premier of Canada from 1854 to 1856. He was involved in many high-profile initiatives including the establishment of Hamilton's first bank and

railway line. The MacNab family home was finished in 1836 and today there are 40 restored rooms on three floors which delight and educate thousands of visitors each year.

Although the Niagara Escarpment provided a



dramatic visual backdrop to the community, it was the property's location at the head of Lake Ontario that was important to MacNab. He wanted to establish his own opportunity away from Toronto and be part of vibrant

and growing Hamilton with its abundant assets.

Simon Taylor, coordinator of Dundurn's historic garden, feels the kitchen garden adds a great dimension to understanding the family's life. "This was a working

estate in that period and they spent time out on the land, walking and talking, and going to market," he says. "It was functional in that it fed people, impressed people and it is where the girls talked about how delightful it was

◀ The Kitchen Garden at Dundurn Castle, Hamilton, has been restored to resemble the way it was in the 1850s. Visitors especially enjoy seeing garden staff and volunteers in their period costumes.



▲ Simon Taylor, coordinator of the estate's historic garden, delights in sharing and hearing stories about the garden's history.

to start their gardens in April and compete to see who could grow the best flowers."

Authentic Restoration

The diaries of MacNab's daughters were just one source of information used to recreate the two-acre garden in its original location, a short walk from the house. "The fact that the garden gate has a direct axis to the drawing room door shows how important this part of the property was to the family," explains Taylor. As one of the prettiest rooms in the house, the drawing room was often used for entertaining and this included strolling through the beautiful garden.

A landscape architect created a restoration plan based on archeological



The garden's main path forms an axis to connect the tool shed, a central water feature and beyond that, the garden gate and path from the mansion's drawing room. ▼



digs, historical records and garden design principles of the time. The digs actually discovered original remnants of the perimeter picket fence posts, a portion of the central water feature and the garden pathway locations.

“Dundurn echoes the design of many British estates of the time where the necessity of growing food was equally as important as the beauty of the property,” explains Taylor. In 1855, growing one’s own food was

very common and the estate was a living example of sustainable living with local food. At the time, MacNab owned land across the road where he grew wheat and raised livestock. Together with the garden’s abundance, the

MacNabs met their nutritional needs within the community.

In the later 1800s, food became less local as transportation routes developed and food could be brought in from greater distances. With less need

In late May, established plants like flax and parsley form colourful borders to the open annual beds. ▼



▲ Behind a sweep of lavender, rustic tripods will support climbing annual vines.



▲ As in MacNab's time, espaliered pear trees line up along the garden perimeter.

to grow their own food, Dundurn's kitchen garden became more of a flower garden. Greater changes were to come when in 1900, the city of Hamilton bought the estate and its storyline began a new chapter as a public park.

Throughout the next century, the property's role as a park sometimes ran contrary to its needs as a museum. Large parking lots and recreation features were built which were well used by the public but blurred the setting's

historical significance. In 1964, as Canada's centennial drew close, plans were made to reinstate the picturesque landscape style which had been a factor in its designation as a national historic site. Or as Taylor puts it, "The city

began to think about putting MacNab back into his castle." Restoring the kitchen garden however would come several decades later and while this was welcomed by

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▲ On a bright summer morning, the garden is an oasis for all ages.

some, others were not happy. At one point, the garden had become a semi-professional baseball diamond and later it was covered with a large pavilion which was highly enjoyed by the locals for dances, roller skating and concerts. During restoration discussions, Taylor enjoyed listening to the community's memories because he feels Dundurn is all about stories, both to be told and heard.

Delightful Abundance

When the physical restoration work began in 2004, the pavilion was removed and the garden began to take shape by building the perimeter fence and the pathway network. The early stages looked very barren but today apple trees, privet hedges, currant bushes and espaliered pear trees frame views and provide structure to the annual and perennial planting areas. Lush peonies, roses and lilies combine with many fragrant herbs and an



abundance of produce to delight the senses.

The Dundurn staff selects many heirloom plants to grow, guided by family diaries and records of prizes won by the estate at local fairs. A local company's seed catalogue from the 1860s is another great resource to see what was available and popular. It is surprising to learn that there were five varieties of eggplant to choose from that long ago but Taylor says the MacNabs had twice as many cultivars to choose from than we do today.

Gardening practices are kept as authentic as possible and visitors especially enjoy seeing the staff and volunteers in period costumes as they work in the garden. The produce is used in the castle for various programs or donated to local agencies in need. There are many interpretive programs for visitors including the opportunity to harvest food in

the garden and prepare recipes typical of MacNab's era up in the castle kitchen.

Dundurn Castle wonderfully illustrates how this prominent family lived in Hamilton during the Victorian era. The pastoral setting beautifully displays the mansion and other buildings, blending the estate's dual roles of public park and museum. Visitors pass through on paths, picnic in the pavilion and enjoy the views from shady benches. And in the kitchen garden, the MacNabs' stories are being retold, the bounty of the past and present intertwining like a lush garden vine. **NEV**

Helen Powers is a communications consultant in Hamilton whose love of gardens has persisted past her first career as a landscape architect. She first heard of Dundurn Castle through her mother's stories of playing there as a child in the 1930s.