
Prescott House

STARRS POINT, NOVA SCOTIA



Nathalie Clerk



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Introduction

The house of the Honorable Charles R. Prescott, a horticulturist who pioneered in the apple industry of Nova Scotia, was built at the start of the 19th century. It is a very fine example of British classical architecture. Along with the usual out-buildings for livestock and equipment on the estate, known as Acacia Grove, there was a greenhouse where fruits, vegetables and flowers were grown in great variety. Shortly after his death in 1859 the house changed hands; it was acquired in 1930 by a great granddaughter who restored it to its original state.

Acacia Grove

Running through Annapolis and Kings Counties in western Nova Scotia, Annapolis Valley is one of the most picturesque areas of Atlantic Canada. Its beautiful scenery and bountiful orchards have attracted attention since the 19th century, when travellers enthused that “. . . the country continue[s] to improve. At Lower Horton and Wolfville, it seem[s] to be as beautiful and prolific as a garden,” or that:

You have doubtless heard much of the beauty of this township [Cornwallis now Kings County] and are now only surprised that you have not heard more; thousands of acres, almost as level as the green cloth on your card table, are waving with grass and grain, while orchards, loaded with fruits, meet you at every step, and half shut from your view the neat little dwellings they surround.

At one end of this magnificent valley, more specifically at Starrs Point (located in the vicinity of Port Williams on the Cornwallis River), Charles Ramage Prescott built a house that is today considered a fine example of early 19th-century domestic architecture.

Charles Ramage Prescott

The name of Charles Ramage Prescott (1772-1859) is intimately linked with the history of the Annapolis Valley as a political figure and, more particularly, a horticulturist.

His father, Jonathan Prescott, was originally from the United States. In return for working as a doctor and engineer during the capture of Louisbourg in 1745, he was given land in Chester, near Halifax. He lived there for a few years before moving to the capital, where Charles was born in 1772.

Throughout the first decade of the 19th century, Charles made a name for himself as an enterprising — and prosperous — Halifax merchant. This he owed largely to his association from 1800 to 1810 with one William Lawson. Among the activities of their company were the acquisition in 1806 of a large dock in Halifax harbour, and numerous transactions involving other ports in Canada and the United States, as well as with London, Madeira and the West Indies.

In 1796 Charles married Hannah Widden, a native of Cornwallis; the union produced seven children. Hannah died in January 1813, and one year later Charles married Mariah Hammill of Halifax, with whom he had five more children.

Despite his success in business and his young age (he was not quite 40 years old), Prescott dissolved his company in 1811 and soon thereafter left Halifax to live in the country. It is said that this change in lifestyle came about because he was a man of generally poor health who needed a milder climate. In any case, it is known that he began to buy land in the Cornwallis area in 1810. In 1811 he bought 100 acres at Starrs Point upon which to build a house. It is not known precisely when construction began, but it is known that work was completed in 1818, and that Prescott took up residence in the area in 1812. He later added stables, cowsheds, and also a greenhouse, which was something fairly uncommon at the time.

Horticulture at Acacia Grove

After moving to the country, Prescott remained a very active man. He entered local politics, representing Cornwallis Township in the Legislative Assembly from 1818 to 1820, and serving as a member of the Legislative Council from 1825 to 1838. Prescott was also involved in the creation of the Fruit Growers Association and would later become a member of various horticultural societies in New York, Boston, and London.

It was in the field of horticulture that Prescott made his most enduring and noteworthy mark. As one traveller put it:

. . . it would take a day to examine Mr. Prescott's beautiful and extensive gardens where every variety of fruit which the country will produce is blended with every flower, and where the perfection of modern horticulture may be viewed in successful operation.

Prescott was responsible for introducing new varieties of fruit and, in particular, apples to Nova Scotia. He brought in Gravenstein, Ribston, Alexander and Golden Pippin from England; Baldwin, Greening and Sweet Bough from the United States; and Fameuse, Pomme Grise and Canada Reinette from Montreal. Prescott was also very eager to encourage fruit growing in his part of the country and gave away cuttings from his own trees to enrich neighbouring orchards. He also took an interest in other types of cultures and experimented with various varieties of wheat, nuts, and grapes. His flower garden contained more than 50 varieties of roses.

When Charles Ramage Prescott died in 1859, the property was left to his son Robert, who later sold it to Benjamin Kaye. After Kaye's heirs sold the property in 1896, it passed through a succession of owners under whom maintenance suffered; the lawns and gardens were neglected and trees cut down. Completely abandoned for several years, the house was later used by itinerant farm workers. Around 1930, Mary Allison Prescott, Charles's great-granddaughter, rediscovered the property during a trip to the area and acquired it with a view to eventually retiring there. She took up residence with her two

sisters in 1942 and, over the years, not only restored the house, but also reacquired some of the original furniture and assembled a number of family documents.

Mary Allison Prescott died in 1969. Under an agreement made during her lifetime, the house was taken over by the Nova Scotia Museum (1971) and became one of a number of historic homes run by this institution. Its historic and architectural value was recognized in 1973 by the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada.



The picturesque landscape of the Minas Basin area in Annapolis Valley is revealed in this delicate watercolour by English artist George Heriot. It dates from 1807 and gives an idea of what Prescott would have seen when he moved to the area. (Public Archives Canada, C-12731)



Aerial photograph of Acacia Grove in 1967. From the early 19th century on, the Annapolis Valley was famous for its orchards. Prescott did much to encourage fruit growing in the area, in particular by introducing several varieties of apples. (National Air Photo Library, Energy, Mines and Resources, Canada)

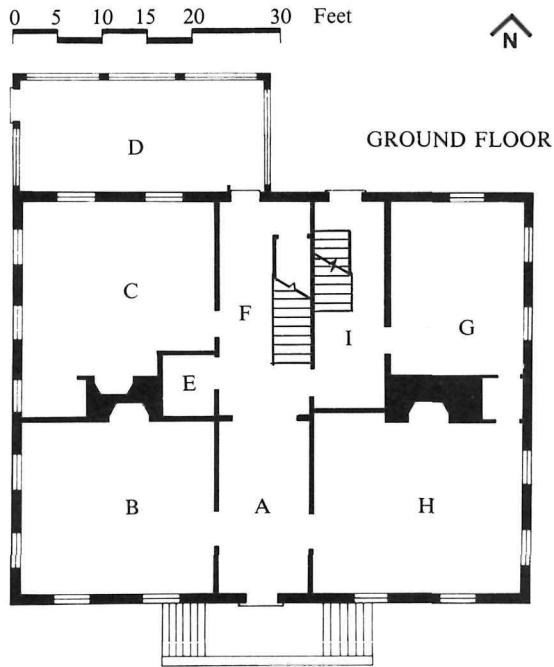


The main door. The small portico, supported by fine columns, shelters an imposing six-panel door with a semi-elliptical multi-paned transom, glass side panels, and pilasters. (Heritage Recording Services, Environment Canada — Parks, 1980)

The simple façade of the house reflects the early 19th-century preference for symmetry and order. The arrangement of the windows and simplicity of ornamentation lend a majestic air to this already imposing house. (Heritage Recording Services, Environment Canada — Parks, 1980)



In the 19th century, Prescott's gardens were widely praised. Today, the groves and flower gardens help to bring back the atmosphere of those days. (Heritage Recording Services, Environment Canada — Parks, 1980)



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Ground floor plan. The main rooms are arranged on either side of the double hall. The reception rooms (living room and dining room) occupy the front of the house and lead into the front hall; the rear hall provides access to the library and pantry. (Heritage Recording Services, Environment Canada — Parks, 1980)



The door between the two halls. Its pilasters, moulded or glassed-in panels, and its multi-paned transom make an impressive sight.
(Heritage Recording Services, Environment Canada — Parks, 1980)



The living room. Mouldings and pilasters decorate the fireplace. A delicate plaster cornice embellishes the ceiling line. (Heritage Recording Services, Environment Canada — Parks, 1980)

The dining room. When she acquired the house, Mary Allison Prescott tracked down what she could of the original furniture and added other antique pieces in order to return the interior of the house to its early years. (Heritage Recording Services, Environment Canada — Parks, 1980)



Another view of the dining room. Note the cyma reversa moulding (S-shaped with the upper part convex and the lower part concave), used here to support large plates. (Heritage Recording Services, Environment Canada — Parks, 1980)



The library. The elegance and refinement of decoration is reflected in the delicate mouldings of the fireplace, over which sits a mirror, bordered by colonnettes supporting a wide entablature. (Heritage Recording Services, Environment Canada — Parks, 1980)



One of the four bedrooms on the second floor; this one features an impressive canopy bed. (Heritage Recording Services, Environment Canada — Parks, 1980)

The House

The Prescott house is simple but elegant. Like many of the large landowners of his day, Prescott drew upon British classical architecture to determine the size, layout and decoration of his new home. Architectural treatises of that time contained numerous examples of this type of house which builders could copy or adapt. This classical architectural style had been popular in England during the 17th and much of the 18th centuries. It was introduced to North America by British immigrants. Thus, houses of this type were built in New England as well as in Atlantic Canada and elsewhere in this country. All have certain shared external characteristics: a rectangular shape; hip roofs with tall, massive chimneys at each end; and an odd number of openings. Prescott House is an outstanding example of this type, in part because it is so well preserved, and in part because of its elegance, its harmonious proportions, and its detail.

Visitors seeing the house for the first time may be impressed by the orderly and uncluttered appearance of the façade. There are five symmetrically arranged windows on each floor, a prominent door in the centre, a course of stonework marking off each storey, and a slightly curved hip roof with two dormer windows and tall chimneys. As was common in British classical architecture, only the door has any special decoration: located under a small portico, it has a semi-elliptical transom and glass side panels.

Visitors might also be surprised by the ample size of the house (52 by 40 feet). The only addition that has been made is a solarium put in by Mary Allison Prescott in the 1950s, which is quite well integrated architecturally with the rest of the house. The brick construction of the house sets it apart from most of this type in the Atlantic region, which were usually made of wood. The whitewashed bricks consist of red clay from the Cornwallis River, which flows into Minas Basin nearby. The two-foot thick foundation walls are of unhewn stone; the lintels, plinth courses and interstorey courses are of stone from Wallace, N.S.

Indoors, the main rooms are all located on the ground floor, and are arranged around a double central hall. Although this arrangement for this type of house was proposed in model books, a single hall is more commonly found. The main rooms are the living room, dining room, library and pantry (now converted to a kitchen). The second floor contains four bedrooms, and the third floor has three bedrooms for the servants. The kitchen is in the basement under the pantry, and a service stairway leads from the basement to the third floor.

The interior of the house features a number of interesting architectural details. The door separating the two halls is framed with Doric pilasters and mouldings that match the decoration of the outside door. A stairway in the rear hall leads to the upstairs bedrooms. Most of the doors in the house have six panels, often decorated with astragals (small half-round mouldings). There are seven fireplaces, each slightly different in size, pilasters, mouldings and moulded panels. The sides of the window recesses are covered with moulded wood paneling. Finally, delicate moulded plaster cornices decorate the ceiling line in the main rooms on the ground floor.

Acacia Grove is closely bound up with the history of the Annapolis Valley, and with the agricultural activities and achievements of its first owner. The house is a fine, representative and well-preserved example of early 19th-century domestic architecture derived from British classical architecture.

Reading

Susan Bugey

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