

Dawson, Yukon
Commissioner's Residence
Front Street

HERITAGE CHARACTER STATEMENT

The Commissioner's residence was built in 1901 to designs by Thomas Fuller as the official residence of the Commissioner of the Yukon Territory. In 1903 a large verandah was constructed across the front and two sides. It was badly damaged by fire in 1906 and after substantial renovations was re-opened in 1908. A second-storey sun-room was added to the annex in 1914. In 1916 it was closed and ceased to serve as the official residence. In 1950 the building was acquired by the Sisters of Charity and operated as a home for the aged until 1963 when it closed once again. It was acquired by Parks Canada in 1973 and stabilization work has been undertaken periodically. The Environment Canada Parks Service is custodian of the building.

See FHBRO Building Report 87-66.

Reason for Designation

The Commissioner's Residence was designated Classified because of its historical associations, architectural qualities and its contextual importance.

The building is closely associated with the exercise of Canadian sovereignty in the Yukon and the establishment of a long-term federal presence there. Once called Government House, the Commissioner's Residence was built and used as the official residence of the chief executive of the Yukon, the Commissioner. As such, it is closely associated with the early political affairs of the Yukon and the individuals who played a major role in them, most notably, George and Martha Black.

The original building has evolved from a predominantly classical but eclectic design, through a dramatic and bizarre period as a Jacobean/gingerbread confection, to the simplified, cohesive, well-proportioned composition that exists today, all the time reflecting an amalgam of the tastes of various designers and the occupant of the day. The interior is also eclectic, a restrained expression of classically inspired features and the influence of the arts and crafts movement.

The building's foundation was designed in such a way that the permafrost conditions in the area would not be disturbed causing instability.

Although little remains of the details of the building's original landscape, it does retain several important contextural relationships including its entire site and other significant heritage buildings in the Government Reserve area. The Commissioner's Residence, along with the former Courthouse, and the former Administration Building, anchors the extremities and identity of the Government Reserve and illustrates Dawson's former role as the capital of the Yukon.

Dawson, Yukon

Commissioner's Residence (Continued)

Character Defining Features

The heritage value of the Commissioner's Residence resides in those aspects of the building which are associated with its role as the official residence of the Commissioner.

The Commissioner's Residence is a two-storey wood frame building that is generally neoclassical in character. Aspects of its original design and the subsequent two major re-buildings are evident on the exterior. Devoid of decoration, the building derives its character from its cohesive and well-proportioned composition - a rigidly symmetrical west facade with a projecting portico which is supported on four plain columns. Both a second floor and ground floor verandah are set behind this; the ground floor verandah extends around the building's two sides.

Inside, the two-storey central hall is the most significant planning feature. Symmetrically set around it are the ground and second floor rooms, and at the far end is the prominent and beautifully crafted staircase to the level above. Functionally the house was separated with the semi-public spaces located in the main block of the house and kitchen and service areas located in the annex at the rear. Changes to the historic plan of the building have been minimal consequently the historic relationship of use and plan remains evident.

The design of the interior is eclectic including some classical features (friezes and millwork details along with the symmetrical plan) and Arts and Crafts detailing (ceiling beams, paneled wainscot, dark stained wood). Light fixtures, the design of which reflects the Art Nouveau and Arts and Crafts taste, radiators and numerous other fittings are also intact and should be carefully protected as part of the building.

The interior of the building is largely intact from the period of the 1908 renovation and retains an extremely high degree of historic integrity. The interior ground floor should be protected in all its plan, detail, and finish.

The foundations of the building - posts on sill - were designed to minimize the effects of permafrost. Although periodic repair and replacement of components has taken place the design of the system is still intact.

Historically situated on a landscaped site which was complete with fencing, outbuildings, and gardens, the site has evolved to the plain grassed area it is today. This design is incompatible with the heritage value of the building situated on it. Should the opportunity arise, site development based on historic landscape precedent would considerably enhance the property.

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