

Architectural details

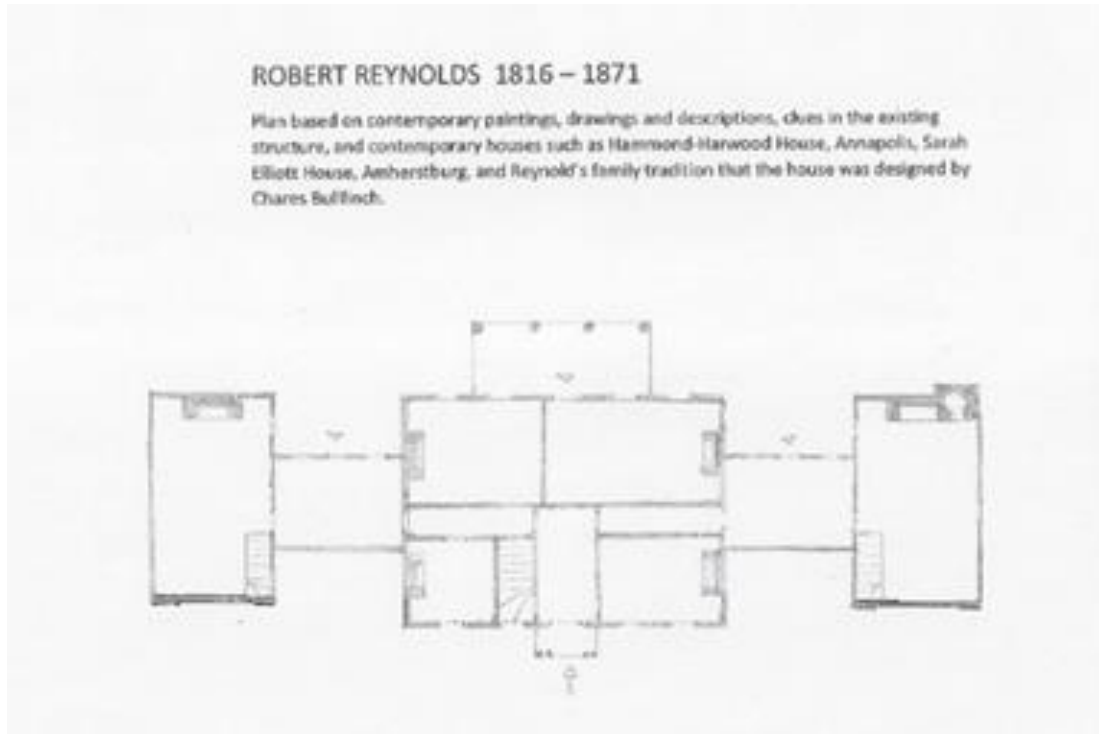
Belle Vue is a significant piece of architecture. How did Robert and Therese come up with such a design for their new home? By 1816 taste was moving into Regency period. Regency was very much oriented to the site – a view or spectacular location, was lighter, with verandas and large windows and French doors. As well, classic motifs were still popular. Belle Vue is a classic, neo- Palladian / neo-classic country house mirroring Palladian farm homes in England and Ireland, and in the new United States where this style became known as Federalist. There is no documentation of an architect designing the house. However, a Reynold descendant, Mrs. Pendergast of Toledo, Ohio, stated that the house was designed by Charles Bulfinch, a prominent Boston neo-classical architect. There is no documentation that Bulfinch designed the house, but he published pattern books. We also know that Catherine painted from prints and pattern books, including pastoral scenes of English Palladian country homes, and was familiar with Palladian/neo-classic design. That coupled with the reference to Bulfinch, who published a great number of pattern designs to be copied, suggests that perhaps Catherine did have a hand in the design of the house. It is interesting that Christ Church Amherstburg was being constructed at the same time, and the Reynolds family were patrons of building the church, donating bricks etc. The church is in the same style as Belle Vue and suggests the influence of the same designer.



“Belle Vue from the east” (in the collection of the Detroit Institute of Arts) was painted by Catherine Reynolds about 1820 and shows the house upon completion. It is set in an idealistic pastoral landscape with the owners strolling the fields and the milk maid looking after the cows. The thick woods behind the house are on Bob Lo, and the sails of a ship going up river can be seen behind the house. The West Front also done by Catherine, looks to be more of a design piece for the house. The house is designed very much as a Palladian Villa, very popular for prosperous farmers in the late 18th and early 19th century, and the federal heritage designation is for this style. The house is very long and low, and is in five parts: 1) a large two story central block with a low pitched hip roof, four tall chimneys, five upper floor windows, four lower floor windows with a central door, central venetian (three part) window over the door, Palladian door, lintels over the windows with winged keystones, one story porch over the front door with pediment and paired classic columns at the corners, brick tracery in a chain link pattern denoting the line between the first and second floors. A pediment was added to the roof eve, we believe, at some point before 1865 – this does not appear to be original as the structure in the attic suggests that it was added later, but probably during the Reynolds ownership. [More investigation is needed] 2) Two dependencies, or stand alone buildings to each side- south dependency was the kitchen with cooking fireplace and brick oven - north dependency use is unknown – maybe laundry or farm office, story and a half with a low pitched front gable, Palladian window set in a brick arch with brick labels to each side, lunette window in gable, one large chimney at the back 3) “hyphens” connecting the dependencies to the main block, one story with shed roof sloping to the back, front wall mimicking a colonnade with pilasters with finials at the top of each, back wall with centre

door and two windows opening onto the back farmyard. Catherine's painting shows the house without shutters, and the walls are a buff colour. Whether this represents the red brick or a painted finish is up to speculation. The two paintings give a glimpse of the landscaping. Both show the back and sides surrounded by a high stockade fence enclosing the farm yard and gardens, rows of ornamental or fruit trees can be seen behind the fence. This supports local lore that the house opened out into beautiful formal gardens in the rear. The West Front shows an open fence across the front of the house enclosing perhaps an area of lawn.

So much has changed inside the house that it is difficult to guess at the internal arrangement of rooms in the early period. The floor plan is a recreation and taken from similar homes built in the U.S. and later houses in Amherstburg.



Centre Block: front door opens into entrance hall, to right is dining room with passage to kitchen behind, drawing room at back opening onto porch and to gardens, to back left a morning room or bedroom, and at front a bedroom or office with a passage to the north dependency between. The stair was likely in a similar location but a strait flight between the walls at the left of the entrance hall and lit by the lower and upper windows on the north side of the door. This is based on the location and design of the basement stairs below.

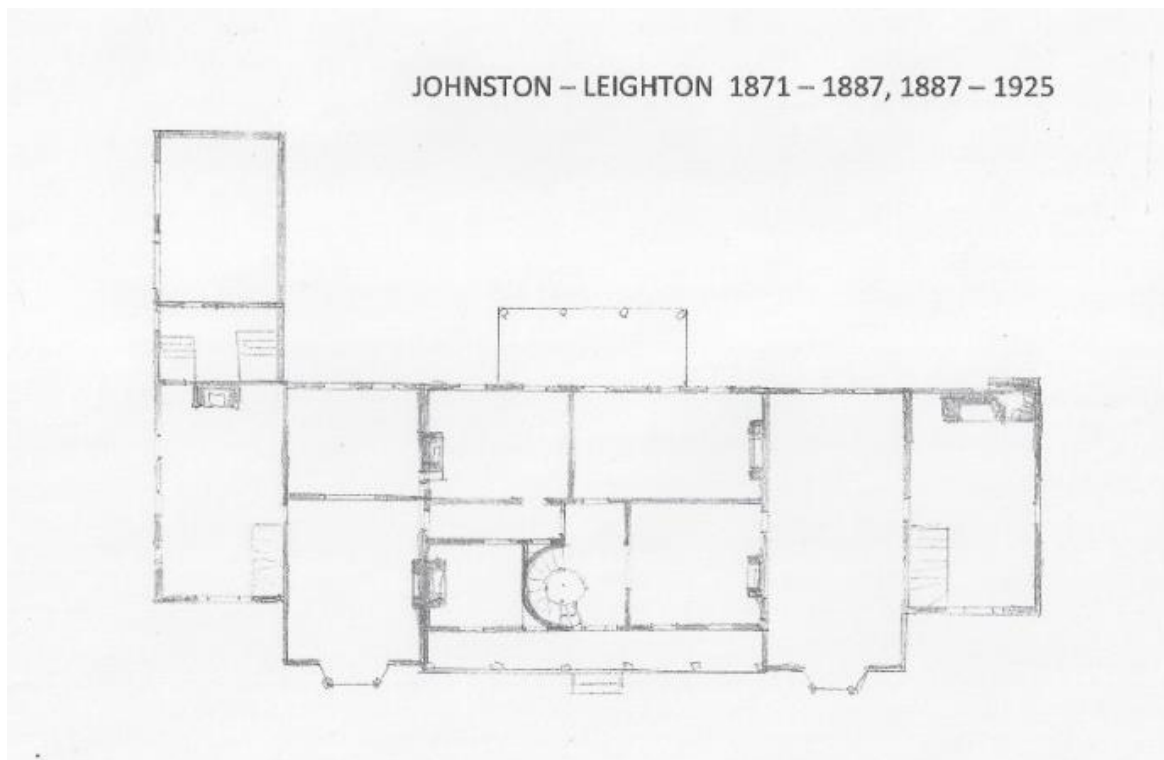
South Dependency: This was a free-standing building containing the kitchen with cooking fireplace and bake oven. The front façade has a beautiful Palladian window set in a brick arch. A narrow, enclosed stair with winder steps led to an attic room that may have been a servant's room or work room. Under the stairs were steps to a cellar. A one storey "hyphen" passage connected the kitchen to the dining room in the main house. The front wall was windowless and finished outside with pilasters. The back wall had a central door flanked by windows on each side. This room was likely a sort of mud room, work room, candle room, firewood storage etc.

North Dependency: This mirrored the South Dependency. The stair has been removed, likely in the Johnston period, but the area where the floor has been filled in can still be seen in the basement. Instead of a cooking fireplace and oven there is a large working fireplace. This room may have been farm offices, a laundry or work room. The stair led to at least one attic room, again maybe servant or farm hand quarters. This dependency was connected to the main house by a one story "hyphen" as was the south. Neither "hyphen" was heated as there are no chimneys or fireplace.

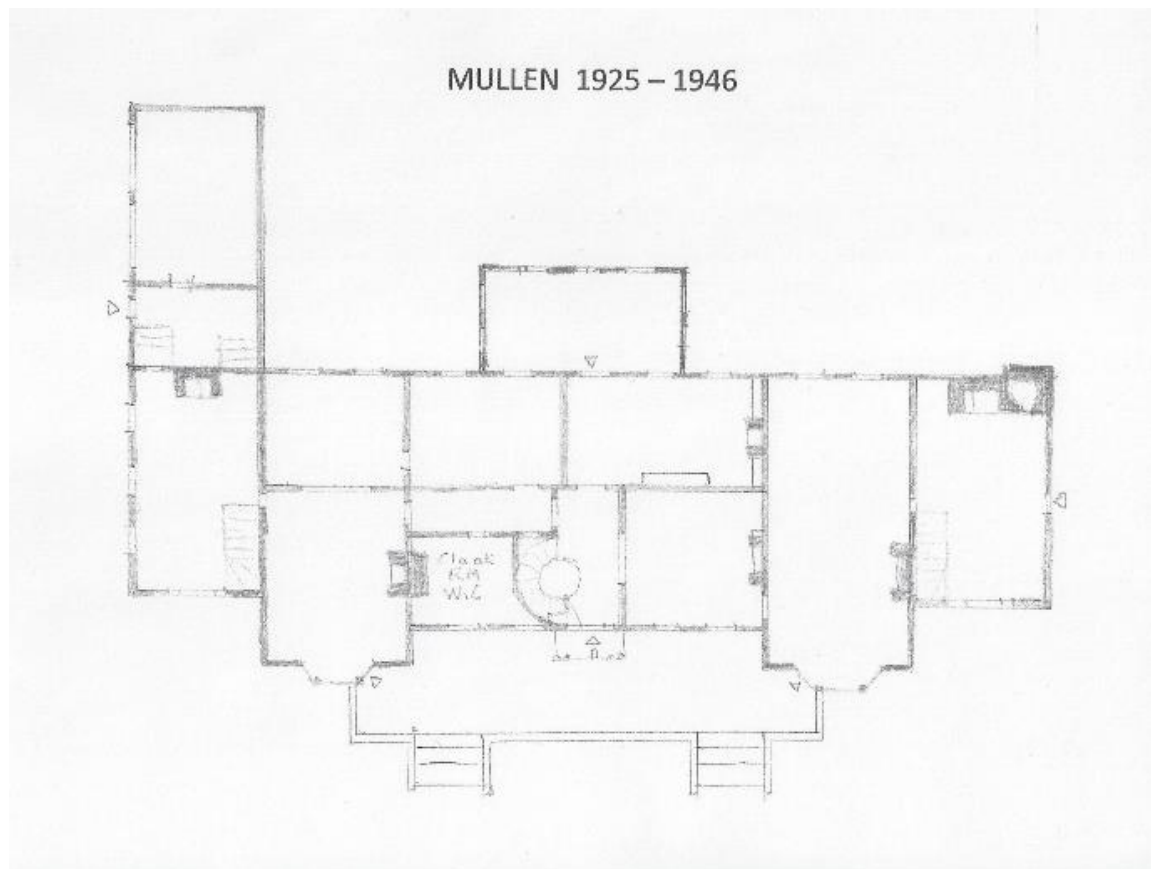
William Johnston updated and considerably enlarged the house into an Italianate Villa. The design and workmanship was very fine. The “hyphens” connecting the main house with the side dependencies were removed and replaced by large reception rooms, each with a bay window overlooking the river. The attic space was finished as rooms with hallways connecting the second floor of the house from end to end. The bedroom windows on the north and south sides of the centre block were bricked in to allow for the new roof structure over the infill rooms. The lintels and winged keystones can still be seen on the outside. The window in the north-west bedroom was filled inside with a shelf unit which has nice neo-classic detail that matches the fireplace. That could be from the Johnston period or from the later Mullen renovations in the 1920’s. The classical front porch was removed and replaced with a verandah that stretched across the front of the main block, connecting with the roof line of the new bay windowed reception rooms. The exterior was trimmed in the Italianate style with bracketing under the eaves, cornice mouldings and Italianate columns and brackets on the verandah. The windows are shuttered with louvered shutters. Several are closed, and the two windows behind the circular staircase are shuttered closed. The walls appear quite light, suggesting that the brick was painted. This would make sense to unify the varying colours of the different bricks used in the new construction. Inside, it appears that a circular stair was installed to replace the original straight stair. This new stair encroaches awkwardly onto the front door, and the curve of the wall covers the windows beside the door, which may explain the shuttered closed windows outside. Contemporary descriptions refer to a square entrance hall with a circular stair on the left. The new reception rooms to the north include a dining room and breakfast room. The kitchen was moved from the old pioneer kitchen in the south dependency to the north dependency. The south reception room was one large drawing room with beautiful carved paneling, and surprisingly a decorative fireplace (no chimney). The pioneer kitchen likely became a study, with a door to a screened porch. The basement was also connected from end to end under the new infill rooms. As one walks through the basement one sees the original hand hewn log timbers, then moves into the sawn lumber of the new construction, then back to the hand-hewn logs etc.

At this point it is difficult to assess changes to the second floor. More research needs to be done. The second floor of the centre block was connected to the upper floors of the rest of the house, so hallways must have been created. Also, at this time the upstairs landing and likely some bathrooms were created.

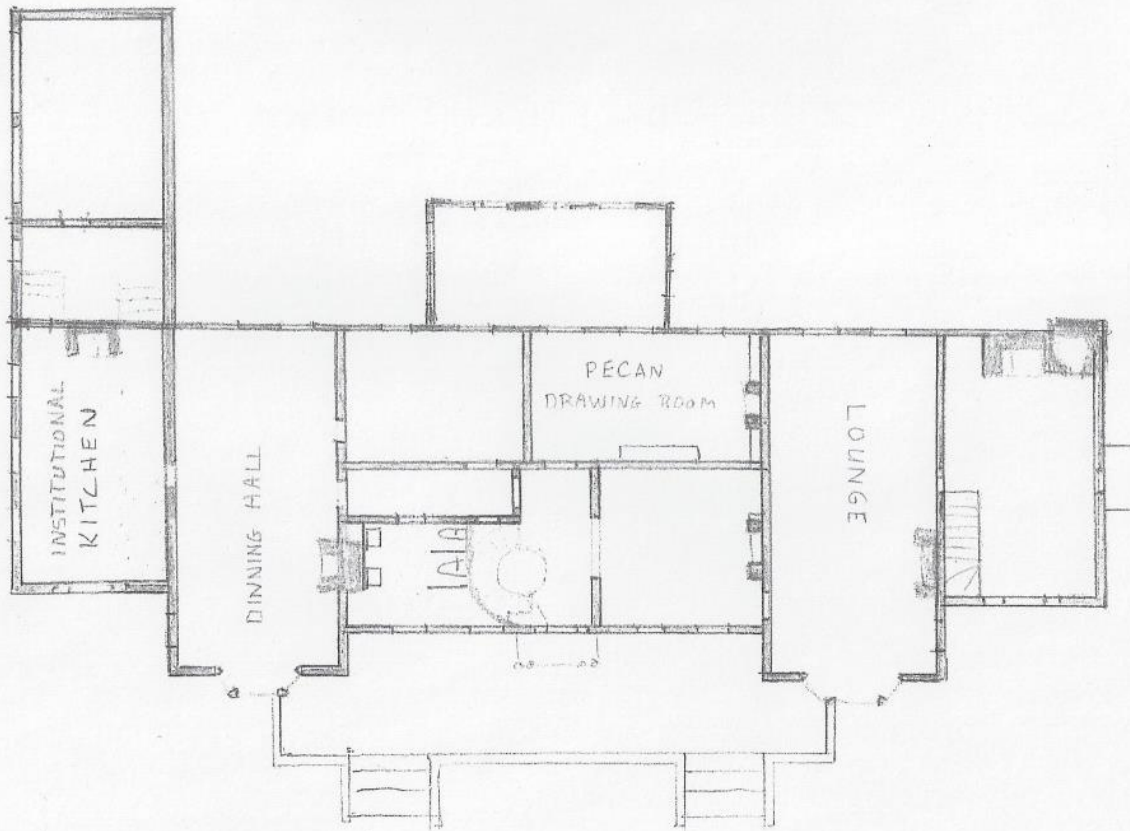
The house appears to have remained little changed through the rest of the Johnston ownership and through the Leighton ownership



An entry in *Men of Achievement: Essex County, 1927* by Francis X. Chauvin, states the New York architectural firm of Palmer and Riley updated the house in the then popular colonial revival style during the ownership of **John G Mullen**. This effectively restored the house to its look when first built. The family moved in after three years of renovations in 1927. The Italianate verandah was removed and replaced by a neo-classic porch over the front door, similar to the original design. The bracketing under the eaves and Italianate details on the bay windowed reception rooms were maintained. The north-east chimney with its fireplaces on the centre block was removed. A new large poured concrete and limestone porch was added across the front of the centre block. The back porch was rebuilt with a full basement including vault, and enclosed. It appears that the basement was dug deeper, and cinder block walls were constructed to create storage and furnace rooms. Mr. Mullen was the owner of a large coal and shipping company, and there is a huge coal room in the basement to feed the furnace. A walk in safe was created under the back porch, as well as a storage room. The new reinforced concrete front porch had a room underneath. There was a walk out from the basement to the rear garden. The house was decorated in the colonial style, but it appears the woodwork in the main reception room and the circular stairway was maintained. Classic mouldings and archways on the second floor may have been done at this time, or may be a carry-over from the Johnston period. There is an interesting oven set in the kitchen/dining room wall. The flooring in the north reception room indicates the removal of a wall. The paneling in the “pecan drawing room” may date from the Mullen renovations or be earlier. The marble mantle in the front reception room appears to be older and may date from the Reynolds period.

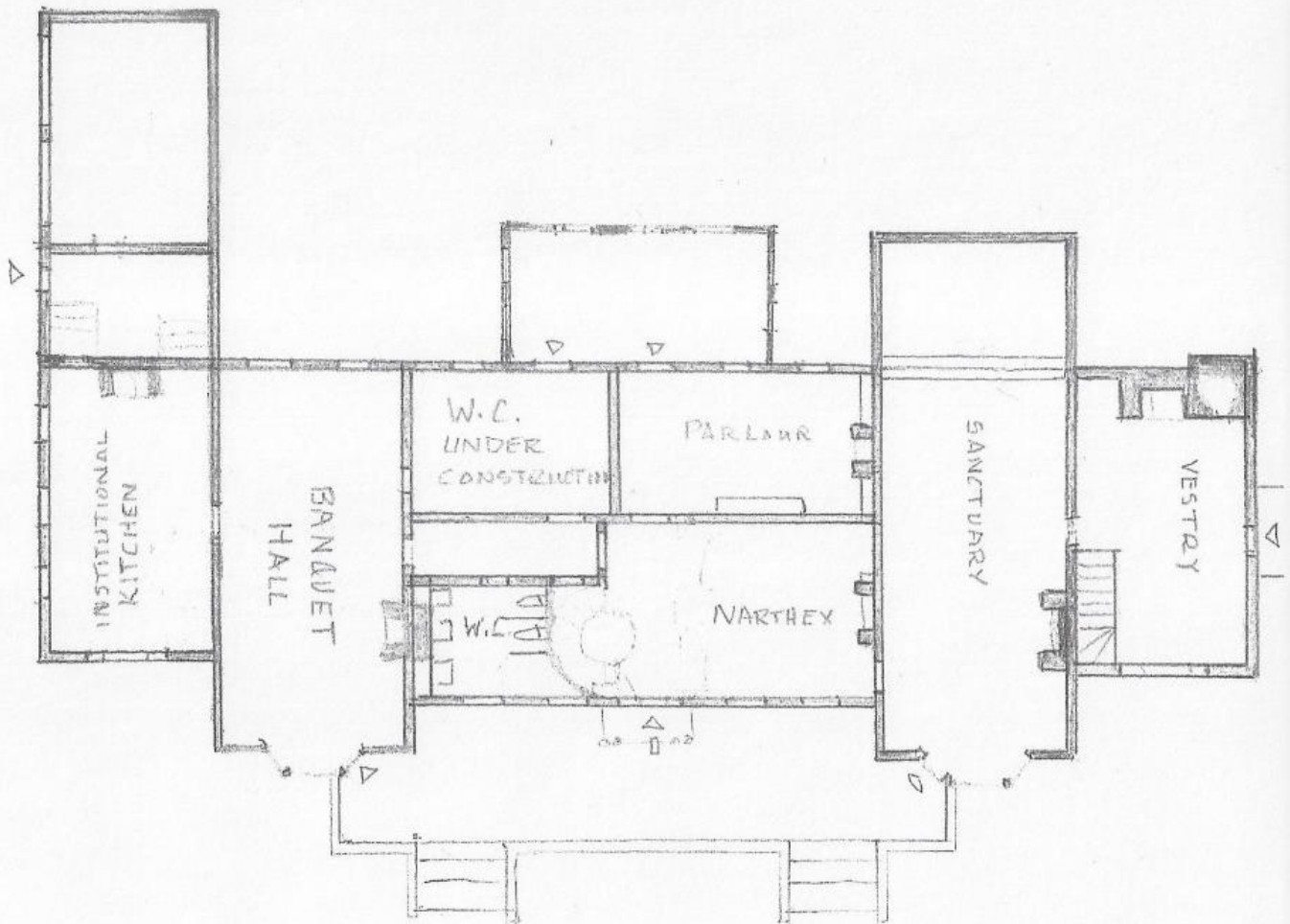


BELLE VUE VETERANS' HOME 1947 – 1954



Under **Veterans Affairs**, the second floor became a series of rooms, each numbered. Cupboards along the north hallway were built for linens etc. Several bathrooms were made and finished with large glass tile on the walls. A sprinkler system was installed throughout the building. An institutional kitchen was installed in the north dependency. The dining room was enlarged by removing the wall between the dining room and breakfast room. The south reception room was made into a lounge. The drawing room was furnished as a library. The house was finished with fireplaces and panelling as left by the Mullen family. Local lore has it that the basement was unfinished but furnished with pool tables for the residents' enjoyment. It should be noted that the building by today's standards was not at all accessible. The stairs are steep and narrow and the floors on the second-floor change levels by a couple of steps as one proceeds along the hallway.

St. NICHOLAS CATHOLIC CHURCH 1962 – 2005



The grounds were cleaned up and are remembered as a place for picnics and weddings. The carriage house was made over as a serving area for outdoor functions. The south reception room became the church sanctuary and an addition to the back created the chancel area. The old pioneer kitchen became the vestry for the priests' robes. The commercial kitchen served the dining room for banquets etc. The wall between the front hall and front reception room was removed – the line can still be seen in the ceiling. Bathrooms had been installed behind the circular staircase. More bathrooms were installed in the north-east room of the centre block. The second floor was not put into use and was unattended, although a room over the kitchen was used as a church office. It should be noted that the panelling in the south reception room, now sanctuary, had been badly damaged by vandals. In 1982 (?) the church accessed grants through Parks Canada to repair the house. A new copper roof was installed over the centre block, and a wood shake roof on the rest of the building. An accessible ramp was added to the front porch, and other repairs were made. A new federal plaque was installed in the gardens by the front porch.