

# Love at First Sight

My affair with an old house

BY JANET UREN



**Dog days:** (Top) Janet Uren with Jake, the dog that precipitated her move out of an apartment and into this house. (Bottom) The entire building was repointed to repair damage done in the past by repointing with concrete (which causes the stone to break with repeated freezing and thawing)

IT WAS A SATURDAY MORNING, I remember, when I poured myself a mug of coffee and started to thumb through the newspaper ads. A dog — a very *big* dog — had unexpectedly arrived in my life and made me suddenly restless in my downtown apartment. I began to look around, and a park-filled neighbourhood east of the Rideau River caught my eye.

The paper advertised an “affordable” property just off Beechwood Avenue, and I made an appointment to see it on Monday. In fact, though I was eager to be pleased, the house was awful at any price. My sister was bracing. “If you like the neighbourhood,” she said, “let’s drive around and see if we spot any ‘For Sale’ signs.”

That’s how we came to see the real estate sign posted on the porch of a small stone double on Crichton Street. A plaque on the

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building told us that the house had been constructed by stonemason Alexander Garvock in 1874 and was considered an outstanding example of an early dwelling in New Edinburgh.

Despite that glorious stone exterior, the house was decidedly ugly on the inside. Two large square openings led from a cramped hallway into a long, extremely narrow living-dining room. The carpeted floor undulated like the sea. An ugly free-standing gas fire stood in front of the old mantelpiece. A deep step — some 14 inches — led down into a barn-like kitchen at the back. Upstairs there were two smallish bedrooms and an undistinguished bathroom. Next door to the main dwelling, there was a second apartment, even smaller than the first.

It was all pretty bad, and yet I loved this house on sight. Maybe it was the thick stone walls and the deep windowsills, a sense of solidity, of having endured over time. Or was it the low cellar, where I could see cedar logs cut some 130 years ago and hoisted into place to support the new house? Those logs, still covered with bark, bear living witness to a generation of men and women who built Ottawa.

I first toured the house on a Tuesday. My sister went with me to see it again on Thursday. “It’s not as stupid as most of your ideas,” she said encouragingly. I made an offer that afternoon. On Friday, the offer was accepted, and I started packing.

**LATER I WOULD RESEARCH** the origins of my new home and learn that Alexander Garvock was the son of Scottish immigrants James Garvock (1812-73) and Annie Ironside (1820-82), who came to Ottawa with two daughters and three sons sometime after 1860. In Ottawa, the Garvocks prospered, especially Alexander, who was a stonemason. He and his son and grandson literally helped build the young city.

In 1874, young Sandy Garvock — 32 years old, not long married, and the father of a brand new son — was established in business and ready to build a house. In those days, most of the vacant land in New Edinburgh belonged to the estate of Thomas McKay (builder of Rideau Hall and founder of the industrial village in 1829). Garvock laid down \$350 for a double lot on Crichton Street, and there he built a solid stone house for his wife, Mary Ironside, and two sons (Alexander, born the same year the house was built, and James, three years younger).



**Past perfect:** (Top) A solid wall once emphasized the narrowness of the living-dining room. Uren opened up the space to showcase the original staircase. (Middle) The new fireplace in the living room features plaster castings from antique Indian wood carvings. (Top left) The heritage plaque dates the house to 1874. (Bottom left) A piece of a broken marble tombstone was uncovered at the base of the hearth and now stands in the garden as a memorial to Alexander Garvock. The words “Mullowney 1868” are just discernible. Clearly, the stonemason broke the stone while he was working on it and saved it to use in construction

The layout of the house suggests that it was originally built as a single dwelling. Sometime before 1888, however, when Garvock decided to sell, he added a kitchen wing at the back and jammed a new staircase into a slightly too small space on one side of the house. He may also have rebuilt the front to create two doors instead of one. The new owners — Gustaf Rennock to the east and Frederick Schroeder to the west — paid \$1,400 and \$700, respectively, for the property. These men were part of a wave of German immigration to New Edinburgh in the late 19th century. Rennock was a contractor, and Schroeder worked for the Ottawa Electric Railway Company.

In 1905, Rennock and Schroeder sold out to Callahan McCarthy, who paid \$1,200 for the entire property. The lot had been subdivided by that time, and William and Christina Munro had built a house at the bottom of the property, facing onto River Lane. As for McCarthy, he modernized the older house, introducing electricity in 1907 according to inspection tags discovered in the rafters. He may also have converted one of the upstairs bedrooms into a closet and bathroom so that the privy in the back garden could be removed.

The McCarthys — nine of them at their peak — lived in the tiny house for many years, and the property was eventually left to two elderly and unmarried McCarthy daughters (Kathleen and Emily). New Edinburgh had hardly begun its evolution from working-class neighbourhood to classy enclave at the time, and the century-old house on Crichton had seen better days. Indeed, there was talk of demolition.

Stephen P. Nickerson arrived in the nick of time. He bought the old house for \$13,700 in 1971, gutting the interior and upgrading as economically as possible to turn the building into two rental properties.

Gladys Blair, writing for the *New Edinburgh News* that year, was one of the last to see Garvock House in anything close to its original state. She described deep windowsills with inside shutters that fastened with enamelled knobs. She noted decorative acanthus-leaf plasterwork above the arches leading into the living room and dining room and one remaining porcelain door handle. She also admired a grey marble mantelpiece.

**WALKING THROUGH THAT FRONT DOOR** as a new homeowner some 30 years later, I found less to admire. I won't trouble you, dear reader, with the horrors of the move: you will have had your own catastrophes. But you may feel

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**Bound by tradition:** The new kitchen (above) maintains an old-fashioned look, right down to the reproduction hardware. Uren also had the whole house repainted in deep heritage colours – reds, greens, and yellows. The marble mantelpiece (right), dating to the late 19th century, was moved from the living room to one of the upstairs bedrooms



for me if you imagine me at 5 o'clock in the morning on my first day in my new house. I had fallen asleep about 2 o'clock on a mattress thrown down on the living-room floor. I opened my eyes to heat, humidity, and a strong smell of skunk coming in the open window. Everything I owned lay piled around me — bookshelves, chairs, couches, and boxes galore. The carpet was old and dirty, and the walls were a dull, unrelieved white.

I trudged to the back door, opened it to let the dog out, and sank down despondently on the broken stone lintel, my head in my hands, wondering what I had done. Suddenly a cardinal flashed through the yard — a bright, tiny explosion of scarlet. I chose to see it as a good omen.

The next week the contractors moved in, and I wasn't so sure. What had been a dismal, inelegant little house had at least been habitable. After three days, the ground floor looked like a bomb site. I was appalled. A house that had stood for 133 years, I thought, was about to fall down after only a few days in my hands.

In fact, the months that followed were a great adventure, with saws howling and hammers thundering away in nightmarish clouds of sawdust. The renovation included replacing rotten pillars that were holding up the floors and the installation of new flooring. Where a solid wall once emphasized the narrowness of the living-dining

room, a half wall and pillars were introduced to open it up to the staircase (original to the house). This staircase is almost identical to others in the neighbourhood and is thought to be the work of a local craftsman in the 1870s.

When the dust finally settled, a charming little house emerged — one more in keeping with its original history. Traditional crown moulding and old-fashioned baseboards in the living room tied in nicely with a new kitchen that maintained the heritage look with a glass-fronted cabinet, a terra cotta floor, and reproduction hardware. Upstairs, I replaced the pine floors — with some hesitation, since I knew that the soft golden wood would mark easily. In fact, the accumulating shallow scrapes from dog claws and footsteps are beginning to return some of the old character to the upstairs. I find that I like the sense of wear. I eventually had the whole house repainted in deep heritage colours — reds, greens, and yellows.

I plan to live here as long as I can, and when I move on, I hope that someone will take over who feels as I do — that what is old and rare and unusual has value. I like to think that on a fine summer morning a century from now, someone like me will be sitting on the stone lintel at the back of Garvock House and will see a cardinal flash through the garden. A message from one generation to the next. **END**