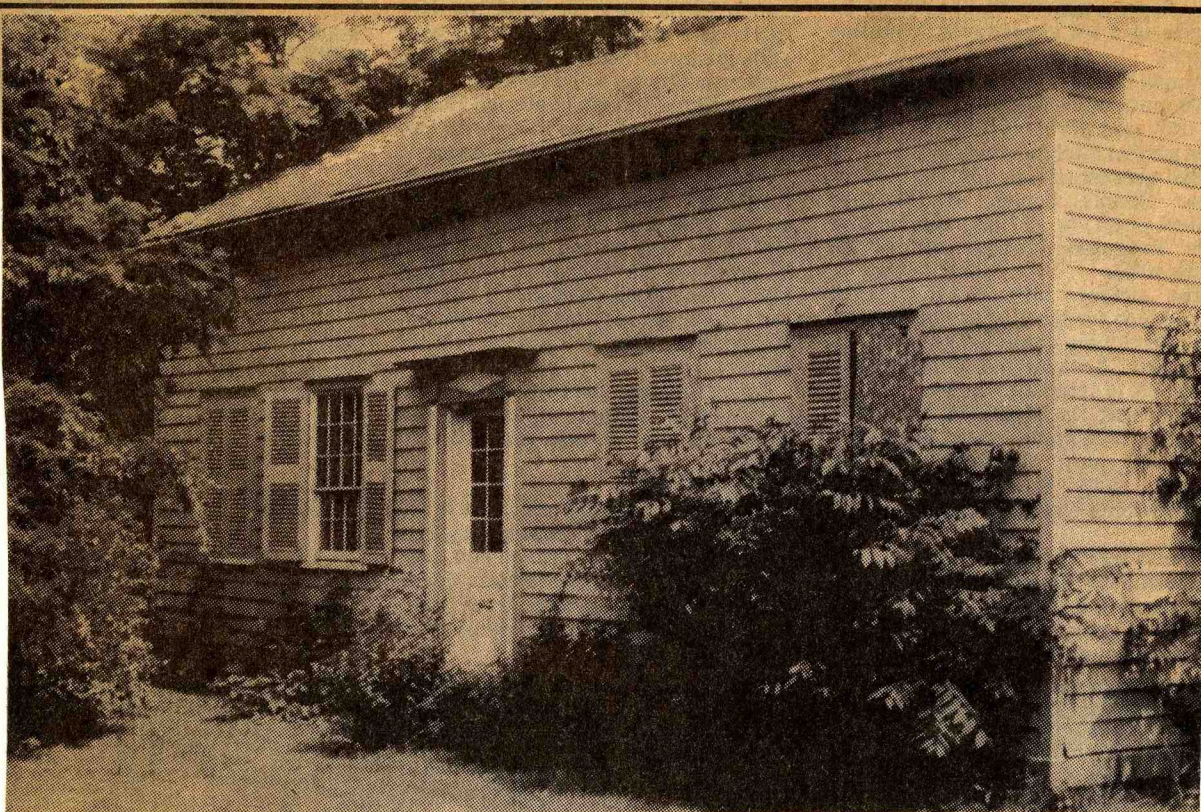


St. Thomas Times

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ON THE MOVE — Selldon House, built in 1834 in Paynes Mills, is being moved by new owner Frank Odorico to Niagara Escarpment, where he will restore the pioneer home. — (T-J Photo).

Elgin history lives on — in Niagara

By TIM GALLAGHER
T-J Staff Reporter

Elgin County has lost a piece of its history, but that piece of history is to live on on the Niagara Escarpment.

Selldon House, built about 1834 in what is today Paynes Mills, was the home of settler William Sells, who built the wood frame structure in what was then the Talbot Settlement. It has been passed down through four generations in its 150-year history but now, with the ravages of time and the cost of upkeep, it has been sold to a Winona lab technician who has almost finished dismantling the house for reconstruction on the escarpment near Lake Ontario.

Frank Odorico didn't think he'd want a house at age 27 but he developed a keen interest in early architecture, particularly that of the Pennsylvania Dutch. On a trip to Pennsylvania about a year ago to see a car show, he found himself taking pictures of old houses, many of which dated back to Revolutionary America. He was sold on the idea of getting a house like those and, after a year trying to find one he liked, he found one along Highway 3 where trees and bushes blocked its view except for the more discerning passersby.

DREAM COME TRUE

It was a dream come true for Mr. Odorico, who plans to restore the main part of the house and use it for a residence.

The house, owned by the Scott McKay family of St. Thomas, was beyond the point where it could be restored unless someone came up with \$200,000 to \$300,000 for the job. Funds from the government weren't available and interest of a group concerned in this area's history was dashed by the enormity of the undertaking. The McKays lived in a house located behind the historic home, which had replaced a log cabin first erected on the site in 1818 until they moved into the city about four years ago.

The house had an addition built on — Mr. Odorico estimates it was sometime in the 1850s — and until

recently had original artifacts in it, although Victoriana items and later period items had been added.

There were hand-woven rugs made from flax and wool harvested on the property; a red tunic believed to be from the militia which fought in the Rebellion of 1837; stone jars and pottery and a pair of sunglasses which had two layers of colored lenses and dated back to 1900.

The family has kept some artifacts and a daughter, Elizabeth Boston, is selling the others along with a card which identifies each and gives a little history about the house.

In this way, say family members, the house's belongings are still preserved, although not at one location as they would have liked. A son, Ian, a university professor is also sifting through family history.

"We didn't want it to be a commercial wipeout," a daughter Rachael said. The original wish of the family "was that the building be restored as much as possible and open to the public for their enjoyment," she noted. "We just financially couldn't do it and as well we were losing the contents."

ARTIFACTS STOLEN

Over a period of time, someone has entered the house and taken artifacts, including two mantel clocks. The thefts and concern for vandalism prompted the family's final decision to sell.

Mr. Odorico seems to be a perfect buyer. The family wanted someone who would preserve the house as much as possible and, at the same time, some good family memories.

Selldon House has entertained tours by service clubs and schoolchildren over the years and was the site of large family picnics.

"It was the site for many, many years of enormous Sells reunions. I remember it as a kid," Rachael reflects. There were tents, platforms and speeches "and all the flies came too as I remember."

The Sells legacy began in Pennsylvania. The family came from a mixed German background and lived in a state heavily influenced by Dutch architecture.

John Sells, of Huntington County, Pa., was killed in the last battle of the American Revolution, at Yorkton, Va. His five sons were divided in their loyalties, with Abraham Sells, a physician, leaving Pennsylvania like many other Loyalists to settle in Canada. He and his wife and six children settled at Port Ryerse, Ont., where he died two weeks after the landing. The family spent a number of years at Turkey Point near Port Ryerse before a son William, settled in what is today Elgin County.

After the death of Eusebia Sells in 1923, the house wasn't used much and remained unchanged inside.

William McKay, husband of Martha Sells and father of Scott McKay, spent some time at the house in summers, as did a cousin, Frederica Sells.

SAT IDLE

However, the past number of years, the house has sat idle.

Mr. Odorico is to add insulation, heating and lighting to the house but is to keep the main part of the house in its original form as much as possible. The addition, however, will house a modern kitchen.

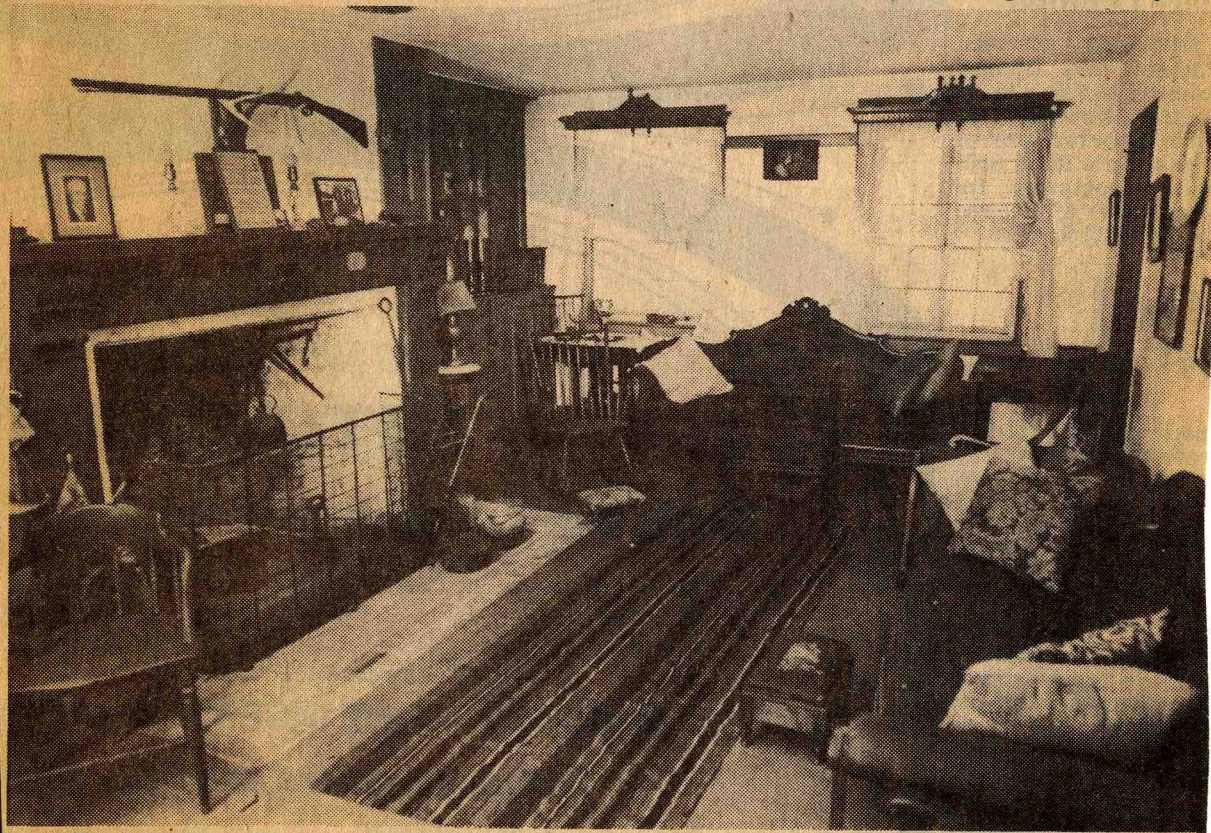
"It has a touch to it. You won't find anything like it," he said from his Winona home.

"It's almost an old showpiece. When I get the house reconstructed, it will look like it's right out of the past."

Alberta McKay, wife of Scott, is sad the house couldn't stay in Elgin. She quotes her husband's father as saying "People don't understand what those pioneers did. We have inherited the fruits of their labor and we don't realize how they worked or the conditions under which they worked."

Although the house and its artifacts are not going to be together as a museum, the McKays feel they have found an agreeable compromise.

"The building is going to be restored and enjoyed. It's hard for us to take but knowing someone is going to use it and it's going to be restored is very reassuring," Rachael says.



A PEEK INSIDE — Scott McKay family photograph shows interior of Selldon the house to a Winona man to ensure its preservation.

Historical Sketch of Selldon

Selldon is the old home of the late William Sells where he settled in 1818. This has been in continuous possession of his descendants since that time and contains the original furnishings which are of great interest to visitors as well as to the family.

After the American Revolution Abraham Sells and his family preferred to remain under the flag of England. He was a physician and the Loyalists--as they were known--were not allowed to engage in professional occupations so he and his family moved from Pennsylvania to Canada in 1798. They landed at what is now Port Dover and settled at Port Ryerse, Ontario but three weeks later Abraham Sells died and was buried there. All of the sons and daughters eventually settled in Southwold.

William Sells, one of the sons, married Elizabeth Fick near Simcoe, Ontario in 1815. He bought land in Paynes' Mills in 1818 from Colonel Talbot and was the first settler here. He of course had to clear the land and their first home was a log cabin which was built a little to the left of the present house which was erected about 1835.

William Sells was a farmer and blacksmith and at first when they needed flour had to walk a long distance to the mill with a bag of wheat over his shoulder. The trip required two or three days and while he was gone his wife and baby were alone in the cabin. One evening when he was on one of those trips hostile Indians appeared and wanted food. Mrs. Sells prepared their meal and while they were eating she slipped out of the cabin with the baby and hid in the woods where she stayed all night and until her husband returned the following day. There were other menaces too in those days besides the Indians as the country was very wild.

However, William and Elizabeth Sells continued to live at Selldon and their twelve children were born and raised there. They were Mary, John, Almira, Abram, Hugh, Elizabeth, Susan, Martha, William Jr., Harriet, Jane, and Eusebia.

In 1862 William Sells died leaving Selldon to his youngest daughter, Eusebia, who never married. When she died in October, 1919, Selldon became the property of Kenneth W. McKay of St. Thomas, Ontario--son of Susan Sells. On Mr. McKay's death in October 1941

Selldon succeeded to his son Scott W. McKay of St. Thomas who is the present owner. Mr. Scott McKay spends as much time as possible at his lovely country home and seems to enjoy as much as his father did showing Selldon to anyone who is interested in the William Sells homestead.

The following quotation was found in a booklet compiled by K.W. McKay--The Sells Family in Canada:

"In any age it is a duty which every country owes to itself, to preserve the records of the past and to honor the men and women whose lives and deeds made possible its present, and to-day, when the whole civilized world is throbbing to social and political impulses of the greatest significance for the future, we ought especially to call to mind such lives and deeds, and catch if we can, inspirations for acting well the part that falls to each of us."

Tribute to Pioneers

In expressing the thanks of Kiwanis to Scott McKay, President Buchanan paid eloquent tribute to the pioneers who made such lovely spots as Selldon, with its ancient locust trees and its venerable 111-year-old house, possible. Those early settlers on the land, the home seekers, were the true founders of the nation. They left landmarks like Selldon, too many of which had been removed by the irreverent and irrevocable hand of time.

Mr. McKay, in reply, briefly sketched the origin of Selldon from the days when his maternal grandparents came from Pennsylvania in 1798 to settle near Port Ryerse, where Abraham Sells died soon afterward, leaving his courageous wife and little family to face life in what was largely a wilderness. They made their way westward and William Sells founded the old home at Payne's Mills on what was then the north branch of the Talbot Road, now No. 3 Highway. He built a log-house in 1818 and replaced it with the present sturdy frame house in 1834. That house still contains much of the original furnishings, including the rug that was woven by pioneer fingers in the house.

Mr. McKay referred to the giant locust trees, far older than the house, and to the locusts that have grown so rapidly in the adjoining McKay Forest, established as a public demonstration woods by the late K. W. McKay, with the co-operation of the Department of Lands and Forests. Mr. McKay said he hoped he will be able to continue the custom of entertaining Kiwanians once a year, instituted by his father, for many years to come. He said he believed the old house and grounds had special feelings of hospitality toward Kiwanians.

Celeste Sells-----1946

Clipping at left taken from St. Times Journal of June 26, 1945



At Seldon



A section of the large crowd gathered at Seldon on August 6th 1950 for the Centennial service of Southwold Township at Paynes Mills. Seats were arranged on the wide sweeping lawns of Seldon within the shade of giant walnut and honey locust trees.