

Restoration and adaptive re-use of:

- **95 Main Street East for use as the Musée Vankleek Hill Museum**

95 Main Street East, Vankleek Hill

Restored derelict 1834 building for use as Museum, archives & visitor centre

Purchase 1999: \$22,000+ transfer costs (Vankleek Hill & District Historical Society)

Lead Architect: J. Denis Seguin – estimated 4,000 hours volunteer time

Financial Partners: Federal Job Creation Partnership; Champlain Township;
Vankleek Hill & District Historical Society; Private Donors

Restoration Actual Costs: \$78,000 with support of volunteers

(Estimated True Costs: \$150,000)

Official Opening: September 20, 2009

In 1995 plans began for the 1997 Centennial – Bi-centennial of Vankleek Hill - founded in 1797 and incorporated in 1897. The Bi-centennial Committee was led by co-chairs Deputy Reeve Gary Barton and J. Denis Seguin Architect. The Committee saw that there was a need for a lasting memorial to the celebrations. In terms of a built legacy, decisions were made to establish a Museum and to restore the Higginson Observation Tower.

95 Main Street East, Musée Vankleek Hill Museum



The fledgling Museum project was turned over to the newly founded Vankleek Hill & District Historical Society. A review was made of a selection of four or five available buildings, and the building selected, 95 Main Street East, was on the brink of demolition. It was derelict and had not been in regular use for over 30 years. But its location in the centre of the shopping district, and its distinctive early Canadiana architecture of 1834 made it the building of choice.

Research showed that the 1834 original intent of the building was for use as a general store; however, the builder went bankrupt.

In selecting this building, the Historical Society agreed that the future Vankleek Hill Museum would interpret early life in Vankleek Hill through a general store theme. With that decision, “There was no question the building had to be brought back to its primary intended purpose,” reported Denis Seguin who as an architect volunteered his services for the project.

“The objective throughout the Museum building project was to do the restoration correctly. In other words, the choice was to fight for the good of the building and to use an authentic approach in design and materials. This deliberate approach made the project appear to be slow in reaching its goals. Today, the building is in operation as a Museum with its general store theme, and no one questions the efforts made, or the time taken. Most visitors are unaware of the efforts by so many to achieve this historical built environment, and that is alright.”

After the purchase, the Historical Society turned the building over to the Town of Vankleek Hill, and signed a 20-year lease.

Based on Mr. Seguin's advice, the Historical Society used time and techniques as opposed to relying solely on money to solve every problem at each project stage. As an architect, Mr. Seguin insisted that the original 1834 building techniques demanded respect.



There were two principal challenges:

- to understand the level of structural decay; and
- to understand the level of restoration needed to maximize the authenticity of the restoration.

The project was approached with limited funding; and as a counter balance, with a high number of volunteer hours and the re-use of materials.

Examples of the restoration approach initiated by Mr. Seguin:

- The goal was to install a new tin roof with 50+ years of life. The replacement cost estimate was \$15,000. Under Mr. Seguin's supervision, and with his hands-on assistance, the roofing job was completed for \$7,500 using volunteers over a two-year period.
- The ground floor required raising to a level state from a 9" sag at the centre. Jacks were borrowed and placed under supporting posts in the basement, and under Mr. Seguin's supervision slowly cranked over a two-year period.
- All the toe connections required support. Mr. Seguin added concrete pads in the basement to provide solid, long-lasting life.
- The east brick wall was damaged from years of water seepage. Local bricklayers removed, cleaned, turned and re-used the bricks. Local second-hand bricks of the same era were donated and used as replacements as needed.

[Denis Seguin, jacks & pads]



According to Mr. Seguin in his preparation of the interior and exterior drawings of the building, the interior and the outward appearances of the building had to be as authentic as possible. There are no known interior images, and he worked from the only known photograph of the building exterior, taken in ca.1895 when in operation as a country general store. There were no firsthand accounts of this general store of 1860-1910. But there were memories of handed-down stories such as the 1910 purchase of a teapot as a wedding gift.

Documented interviews revealed that the building, constructed for use as a general store, had served for different owners in sequence as: home, general store, millinery shop, grocery store, feed store, fruit storage, veterinarian home & office, farmer's co-op store. And that, no matter the business, the front porch was often used by Vankleek Hill shoppers as a place to sit and socialize.



[Denis Seguin, installing completed cabinets]

Only select Eastern Ontario pine was used to refit the interior of the building as a general store. Specialty woodworkers from Eastern Ontario and Vankleek Hill were chosen to create interior milled columns, brackets, the cabinets and shelving. Missing stair rails were copied and milled. Inside, the heating and air

exchange ducts are camouflaged as stovepipes. The opening of a blocked gable window revealed cedar shingle, and an original paint colour which was then digitally matched and added to the exterior detailing.



On September 20, 2009 the Musée Vankleek Hill Museum at 95 Main Street East, Vankleek Hill was officially opened. At the opening, J. Denis Seguin, now president of the Vankleek Hill & District Historical Society, congratulated donors and volunteers at all levels for their involvement in the 12-year project.

[At first Gala held inside Museum, Denis Seguin thanks donors & volunteers. More financial pledges are received. 2008]



Mr. Seguin concluded, “It goes back to having a neighbourhood. In order for a neighbourhood to be successful there are core values that need to be present. Our early settlers in Vankleek Hill recognized that. They started the building process – homes, churches, schools, post office, town hall, library, meeting places. They needed lasting buildings of integrity to meet, to socialize, to educate, to share ideas. History was created in these buildings. Our re-use of these buildings today reinforces those earlier values, and allows us to add our experiences to the layers of history. We take these buildings from their beginnings, add our respect and send them as our gifts into the future neighbourhood.”