

St. Andrews – A Loyalist Town

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St. Andrews

Less than 20 miles into Canada after crossing the border at Calais, Me., and St. Stephen, New Brunswick, the traveler realized that a curiously pleasing thing has happened to the landscape. The phenomenon is the opposite of what Alice experienced at the bottom of the rabbit hole, for as the visitor from the United States turns onto Route 127 and heads for St. Andrews on Passamaquoddy Bay, the human scale remains the same but the world around seems to shrink. Gone are the armory-sized supermarkets, banks designed for automobiles and discount store where the distance between house paint and children's socks seems scaled to travel by bicycle. Here, field and farmsteads, stores and roads are just right for the human frame and the human spirit. Old words return to mind: cozy, tidy, neat, handy.

St. Andrews, at the tip of a peninsula just across the St. Croix River from Maine, is only 19 miles by road and minutes by water from the United States, but far away in atmosphere. This determinedly English town was settled by refugees from New England after the American Revolution ended unfavorably to King George III. Though close to the border, it has resisted Americanization and held off the trends and fads that might have changed its character.

In 1784, about 30,000 New Englanders fleeing personal harassment and the confiscation of their property by victors of the Revolution, packed up their tea kettles and cooking spoons and sailed off to the Bay of Fundy. George III was so impressed by the devotion shown by the Loyalist that he gave them this large tract of land near the site of Samuel de Champlain's 1604 landing, on a point between the St. Croix River and Passamaquoddy Bay, an estuary of the Bay of Fundy. When the first settlers came ashore here, they found the town all surveyed by military engineers and laid out in large house lots. The size of the lots, which permitted some distance between houses, is probably responsible for the survival of so many of the early buildings in St. Andrews today, spared by the fires that swept other settlements.

Houses of Wood and Brick

The Loyalist built their homes of wood and brick and lined their streets with the elm and chestnut trees that now cast their shade over descendants of Loyalist and visiting rebels with equal generosity. The trees and some of those first buildings are not all the only remnants of the English spirit, for it surrounds you like a pretty place whose permanent population is less than 2,000. Walk along the cross streets, named in honor of King George and his 12 children, and you will see Englishness everywhere: in neat gardens behind fresh-planted white fences, in bay windows and hipped roofs, in the dignity and solidity of the people.

For me, one bright blue day, the style of St. Andrews seemed to be expressed by the ruffled and starched Priscilla curtains and the lacy verandas of the Shiretown Inn, on Water Street between King and Frederick. Doug Cunningham saw me taking pictures of the Inn and came right over. "A lot pretty here in the spring, isn't it?" I asked.

"It gets so cold," he replied, whipping the cap off his bald dome in delight at receiving the proper straightman's line, "that it's frozen the curls right off my head."

He introduced himself, said that he was a retired government blacksmith, and that he was taking his usual morning walk, on his way home after his stops at the post office, then past the Customs

House, with its neat row of rose bushes, and to the hardware store to mess with the regulars there. He invited me to visit his cottage on the waterfront to see, “the most beautiful view in the world.”

His view was of the American side of the river, of the fish houses along the water and of the phenomenal tide, which can rise 20 feet between low and high water. His house was a straight-forward as the blacksmith himself. In the front room were oak chest of drawers and chairs with pressed oak backs and a radio on which Mr. Cunningham listens to the Red Sox games.

Smith Saltbox

It is a bit hard to pin down even the decade exactly. On one hand, there are traces of the 18th century, as in such houses as the Gladstone Smith saltbox at 109 Queen, built by Joseph Crookshack, a ship’s carpenter, about 1785. The saltbox style, familiar in New England but rare in New Brunswick, makes this building a curiosity. More typical of the old Loyalist houses is the Dunn-McQuiod House at the corner of Water and Edward Street, a hipped-roof, wood-frame house with three fireplace chimneys and eight roof dormers. John Dunn built it in 1784, the year the peace treaty was ratified by Congress, sitting in Annapolis.

St. Andrews is also the 19th century, though, and the influence of the early 1800’s remains in such treasures as the stately Greenock Church and the neo-classic Charlotte County Court House, built during the reign of William IV. Greenock Church, framed in 1822, is a white Colonial building that might be at home at the end of a green in a Vermont village, but certain touches mark it Loyalist. The carving of the green tree, symbolizing the tow of Greenock, Scotland, home of the donor, trims the steeple, and in each corners of the ceiling is a large Scottish thistle. The Court House is little changed from its early days and retains the “double cross” or “Christian” doors.

Another 19th-century souvenir is the wooden blockhouse that commands the harbour and the entrance to the St. Croix River. During the War of 1812, five blockhouses were built on the river to repel any invasion by the old adversaries across the border. The one that remains was recently restored, has been declared a national historic site and is open to visitors in summer.

The 19th century saw the fortunes of St. Andrews at a peak because of ship-building and the West India trade. The town had its tycoons, including Sir William Van Horne, who built the Canadian Pacific railway across Canada to Vancouver. His home was just off St. Andrews on Minister’s Island, which is an island only at high tide. A car can drive there from the time the tide is halfway out until it’s halfway in again. Sir William built an excellent dairy farm on this part-time island, named for its first resident, the pioneer clergyman of St. Andrews, who built there in the late 1700’s.

St. Andrews’ dowager hotel, the Algonquin, was first built in the 19th century. When the 1883 building burned, another great rambling pile of dormers, turrets, half-timbered walls and trellised verandas was up on the same site in 1915. The Algonquin’s porte-cochere is fronted by watered and clipped lawns and formal flower beds whose orderly rings and rectangles are right out of a seed catalogue’s oldest color plates. The hotel has, to the delight of the regulars who return to the porch rockers year after year, recently emerged from a renovation with its old-fashioned solidity unchanged.

Shopping in St. Andrews, in small, prim stores alongside a stroller’s waterfront, is the best in Atlantic Canada, partly because of the army of imported and domestic goods of the fines quality and partly because of the people selling everything from Eskimo parkas and mukluks to 128 kinds of French perfumes. The clerk of a yarn shop paused to talk about seeds for her razzle-dazzle nasturtiums spilling from window boxes outside. A saleswoman looks up from a counter of Wedgwood to offer directions to Katie’s Voce from swimming.

Side by side with shops purveying imported luxuries and crafts from distant parts of Canada are two whose goods are homemade. St. Andrews Woolens Handweaving, Ltd., and Cottage Craft, Ltd. Is carrying on a traditional occupation in Charlotte County, whose seat this is. Grace Helen Mowat, a local poet, novelist and historian, revived the cottage weaving and knitting industry after World War I to give

employment to rural women and, as she explained, “to provide the visiting strangers with articles that would be wholly characteristic of our native country life.”

Cottage Craft is the descendant of the guild she developed. Its shop on (sic) the Public Wharf, where the first boatloads of Loyalist settlers landed, can be identified by the bright lops of yarn tied to its fence, and is chock-full of mittens, scarves, handmade dolls, wraps sweaters as heavy as raccoon coats, handbags embroidered with sweet county scenes, Fundy-fishermen sweaters and racks of topcoats, skirts, and tweed sports coats. Colors are the hues of this northern countryside: yellow birch, goldenrod, clover, black sheep, farmer’s gray, live lobster.

One of the sweaters with which I left St. Andrews, a double-ply yarn in a color misted like the skin of a grape, cost \$42. It was on annual sale, and the clerk insisted that it was a second, an imperfect size; otherwise it would have been \$55. I acknowledge happily that I, too, am an imperfect size and wore it out of the shop with pleasure.

At St. Andrews Woolen Handweaving, I went upstairs from the salesroom to watch as a gray-haired woman in a housedress worked at one of the looms that filled the loft. Her hands moved the shuttle swiftly as she indicated the warp, the strong, lengthwise-running thread used to “set up” the loom, and the weft, the soft filling that goes in with the shuttle.

Each weaver works on one bolt of fabric until it is finished, Blaine Holmes, the proprietor told me, to assure that the weaving is even. The cloth, 36 inches wide when it comes off the loom, shrinks o about 32 inches during the washing and preshrinking process, and garments made from it will not shrink when hand washed. The shop sells the tweed for \$12 a yard, which seems to me a bargain for handmade pure wool, and also offers blankets, garments of tweed and knit good, including another stack of sweaters in every shade from blackfish green to butterscotch.

An attitude is expressed in this work that comes through many small but deliberate choices of things that have always been good over things that are new and different. The flowers blooming in St. Andrews dooryards and on the trellises are old-fashioned cosmos and clematis vines, not the latest neon-orange hybrid begonias. As I stood admiring her screen door, made with a fancy scrolled wood frame, a woman came out of her cottage and stood admiring it with me. “Every year I repair a little of the wood and try to keep it going because I’d hate to have to put on one of those clanging aluminum ones,” she said.

Pressed-Tin Ceiling

Hatt’s Sea Breeze restaurant on Water Street has rejected notions of sound-absorbing paperboards and retains its beautiful pressed-tin ceiling. Hatt’s is one of the several options for the hungry visitor, from English tearooms to lobster houses, but for me it was impossible to pass up the Shiretown Inn, which bills itself as the oldest summer hotel in Canada (1881) although it is open the year round.

Here, in a dining room painted in marigold and white, its varnished floor gleaming, its windows hung with white ruffled curtains, its waitress a blonde buttercup in a puff-sleeved dress, my traveling friend and I sat at a table covered with Victorian lace. At one side of the room was an old cupboard filled with a collection of majolica. At the far end was a buffet table from which we filled our plates with good substantial English food: fish cakes, fish salad, green salad, creamed turkey, kippers, baked beans, roast potatoes and homemade raisin bread.

I settled my parcels around me and contemplated a return trip to the shop where I had seen that strawberry pink pullover with the green and white yoke. And we began to conjecture together, as we ate our fish cakes, all honest fish flakes on the inside and golden crust out, just what home would be like these days if the Loyalist side had won the war.