

THE PORTICO

SPECIAL HISTORY EDITION

OF GOVERNMENT HOUSE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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Government House (GH): A Chronology of Transitions

1891 – 1945	Residence of the Lieutenant Governor
1905	Saskatchewan purchases GH from Dominion Government
1945	Auction of furniture and other articles from House
1946 – 1957	Veterans Affairs convalescent home (federal government lease)
1958 – 1978	Centre for Continuous Learning, Dept. of Ed. and later a Vocational Centre
1971	Province declares Saskatchewan House an “historic site and protected area”
1978 – 1980	Renovations and restorations
1980	Official opening of restored GH
1984	GH becomes home to Lieutenant Governor’s Offices
2005	Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth, officially opens Queen Elizabeth II Wing <i>Coquette’s</i> , The Gift Shop at GH, begins operation J. E. N. Wiebe Interpretative Centre on the Crown opens

1969 - 1980, Efforts to Preserve the House Prior to the Creation of GHHS

In 1891, when the newly completed Government House was ready for occupancy by the Lieutenant Governor of the North West Territories, Joseph Royal and his family, it was an elegant residence. However, by the late 1960s Saskatchewan House was in a state of disrepair, with rumours circulating about its potential demolition. Concerned local organizations including the Regina Chamber of Commerce (Oct. 1967), IODE (Nov. 1968), and Local Council of Women (Dec. 1968) presented briefs to the government. The Council of Women organized the first official meeting of the *Saskatchewan House Committee* in October 1969, with representation from the Chamber of Commerce, Plains Museum and Architects Association.

In November the government indicated that it had no plans to dispose of the House and would appoint a representative to the *Saskatchewan House Committee*. The following Committee goals were established: to halt further deterioration to or alterations of Saskatchewan House and stop further sales of original furniture, and to develop specific plans for restoration. The IODE and the City of Regina named representatives to the Committee. Possible uses of the House were discussed, such as a home for the Plains Museum, a site for summer plays, or an art gallery.

In 1970 the Committee presented a brief to the Minister of Public Works, but a change of minister brought delay. By March 1971 a Saskatchewan Government Order-in-Council declared “Saskatchewan House to be designated an historical site.” However, the government made no financial commitment toward its restoration.

In early 1971 the Committee forwarded proposals to the government for the administration and usage of Saskatchewan House, including plans for a summer program to celebrate Saskatchewan Homecoming 1971. However, the June 1971 election brought about a change of government and plans for the summer events were cancelled.

On July 9, 1971, the *Saskatchewan House Committee* was incorporated as the *Society for the Preservation of Saskatchewan House*, with Glen Stinson, President; Ruth Hunt, Vice President; Lyn Goldman, Secretary; and W.L. Brown, Treasurer. Over the next few years the Society continued its efforts despite numerous disappointments, with responsibility for Saskatchewan House shuffling through three different government departments. Finally in the March 1974 provincial budget it was announced that Saskatchewan House would be renovated and operated as a Prairie History Museum.

However, the next two years brought more waiting. Early in 1976 the Society wrote to the Premier requesting that alternative accommodation be arranged for the Vocational School so that restoration of the House could proceed. Almost a year later, in May 1977, assistance came in the form of a *Leader-Post* editorial by reporter, James Roe, who recounted the previous decade of efforts on the part of the Society. Roe's language was strong, describing any guarantees for restoration of the House as being frustrated "by a tangled tale of bureaucratic foot-dragging, buck-passing and intergovernmental misunderstandings." Public interest generated by the editorial helped to prompt the government to act; the Society was subsequently assured that suitable space for the Vocational School would be found, and that 1980, Saskatchewan's 75th anniversary, was the goal for completion of the House restoration. Consequently, in early 1978, the Department of Culture and Youth assumed responsibility for the House and retained the services of BLM Architects to assess the state of the House and make detailed plans for its restoration.

On September 4, 1980, in conjunction with celebrations of the province's 75th anniversary, Lieutenant Governor Irwin McIntosh opened the restored House, now called “Government House.” In 1981, as a result of the restoration, the *Society for the Preservation of Saskatchewan House* changed its name to *Government House Historical Society, Inc.*

Chairs/Presidents

Saskatchewan House Committee

1969 – 71 Co-chairs
Ruth Hunt &
Glen Stinson

Society for Preservation of Saskatchewan House

1971 – 76 Glen Stinson
1977 – 81 Les Donnelly

Government House Historical Society

1981 – 86 Les Donnelly
1987 – 90 Joan Church
1990 – 91 Paul Bourassa
1991 – 93 Hugh Benham
1993 – 95 Peggy Leach
1995 – Sheila Carson

Promoting the Role of the House, 1980 - 1991

The Society next began to lobby for the restored House to accommodate the offices of the Lieutenant Governor. Honourable F.W. Johnson, installed as Lieutenant Governor in 1983, supported the idea. On Dominion Day in 1984, the official opening of the vice-regal offices at Government House occurred, and the Lieutenant Governor, after an absence of over forty years, once again conducted business out of offices in the House.

During this period, the fewer than one hundred members of the Society were kept busy with events to attract visitors to the House and with fund raising activities to support the House and grounds. In "A Quarter Century with Government House", Dr. Michael Jackson indicates that Government House was, at that time, managed by the government department responsible for heritage, whose expertise and interest lay in museums, not in a hospitality facility or in vice-regal offices. Problems were also exacerbated by an inadequate operating budget. Jackson credits the Historical Society as being "crucial in keeping Government House viable during its first decade as a heritage property".

With the 100th anniversary of Government House approaching in 1991, the Historical Society began planning celebrations to mark the occasion. A committee of Society volunteers was charged with fund raising to support publishing promotional material about the House, sponsoring Centennial events at the House, and for capital projects such as a Society-run gift shop.

Honouring the Centenary of the House, 1991

The Victorian Tea Room, initially a pilot project begun in December 1990, operated weekend afternoons. Due to its popularity it continued the following year, with teas held almost every second summer weekend. Coffee, a selection of teas and a limited supply of baked goods prepared on-site, were served. This project, convened by Marge Ewart and Betty Westmoreland, with two volunteer hostesses, four volunteer servers and one volunteer cashier served about fifty guests per day.

Besides teas, a variety of other events attracted the public to the House. More than twenty special activities and fund raisers were sponsored by the Society during the centennial – events as varied as a 'murder mystery' dinner, a fashion show, a lace exhibit, a Heritage Day event and a formal ball. One of the most memorable events of 1991 was the Centennial Picnic, held on a Sunday afternoon in late September. Hugh Benham, Chairman of the Centennial Committee, indicated that the Historical Society wanted to celebrate the Centenary with an event "that would allow the public to visit the house and experience the special atmosphere that might have prevailed in earlier times".

Assisted by RCMP in historic uniforms, Lieutenant Governor Sylvia Fedoruk acted as official host to guests, many in period costume, who were treated to song and dance performances by various ethnic groups, six of Regina's musical organizations, plus individual buskers and fiddlers. Magicians, photographers and demonstrators of historic handcrafts crowded the grounds where Little Theatre members impersonated historical figures of the time, horse drawn carriages provided rides, and foods of the Edwardian era were served.

In November 1991 a book launch celebrated the release of "A Tower of Attraction", *An Illustrated History of Government House*. With text by Margaret Hryniuk and edited by Government House Manager, Garth Pugh, the publication's costs were paid by GHHS, assisted by a provincial grant. This book provided a lasting record in word and picture of the first 100 years of Government House.

At this time, school programs were advertised jointly by Saskatchewan Culture, Multiculturalism and Recreation and Government House. For most programs, a fee of \$1.00 per child was paid to the Historical Society. This money enabled programs for primary grade children and some for students in grades four to nine, to be offered.

The story of Government House itself has been carefully chronicled; however, documentation of Government House Historical Society's past is, for certain periods of years, lacking. This issue of The Portico, while not providing an exhaustive record, does summarize the organization's development over almost four decades.

Regrettably, space restraints prevent naming the many persons who are a part of this history. However, the efforts of all are deeply appreciated.

**Thanks to the following for checking the accuracy of this Special History Edition:
Joan Church, Glen Stinson, Ann Sudom, Les Donnelly and Sheila Carson.**

Turmoil Behind the Scenes, 1990 - 1991

In order to increase the type of programming and number of events drawing visitors to the House, more Board members were needed. A bylaw change allowed the Board of Directors to be increased. President Paul Bourassa, Past President Joan Church, Vice-President Ann Sudom, Honourary Director Ruth Hunt, Ex-officio Garth Pugh (House Manager), Les Donnelly, Glen Stinson and Peggy Leach were joined by twelve new members.

Increasing concerns that the House was “underfunded, unappreciated and underutilized” led the GHHS Board to suggest that the Society assume management of the museum and ballroom. In July 1990, a brief proposed that the government continue to own the property and be consulted in matters relating to operation, development and promotion of the House, but the Society be responsible for day-to-day management of the site, with a yearly operating grant from government. Over six months passed with no formal response to this proposal.

On February 19, 1991, government abolished all staff positions at Government House, except that of the manager. That same day, the government requested that the Society take over management of the House six weeks later, on April 1, 1991, rather than April 1, 1992, as originally proposed.

After hastily called meetings, the Society concluded that it was unable to assume operation of the House on such short notice, but was willing to consider a later date. The Society was able to pressure the government into extending abolished positions, allowing time for negotiations to proceed and to obtain assurances that, for the interim, the House would remain open.

Over the next six months, a committee of the Society Board, known as the ‘Transition Committee’, was involved in negotiations regarding arrangements for the House, including discussions about financial assistance from government, building maintenance and government consultation.

Marj Ewart-Betty Westmoreland Volunteer Award

Recipients:

1996 Marj Ewart and
Betty Westmoreland
1997 Ellen Blair
1998 Prue Wood
1999 Rose Miller
2000 Gladys Scheidt
2001 Joyce Weicker
2002 Joan Church
2003 Glenna Melynchuk
2004 Ann Sudom
2005 Jo Wilkinson
2006 Arnold Fritsch

The Early 1990s, A Plan Emerges

The transition plan for the transfer of responsibility for Government House to the Government House Historical Society, proposed under the previous government, was abandoned when the provincial government changed in late 1991. The new government had a stronger interest in Government House, increasing the budget, which allowed for better maintenance of the House and for development of the conservatory. However, the situation was not ideal.

Direction was vested in a complicated structure of five different government departments and agencies. Even with increases in the operating budget, adequate funding remained a concern. A Management Committee was struck, with a mandate to examine financing, management and uses of Government House, and to develop a long-range vision and financial plan. Initially, GHHS was not represented on this Management Committee; Society concerns were relayed to the Management Committee by the House Manager, Peggy Brunson.

The Society was represented on the Collections Advisory Committee, which advised Government House staff regarding collection needs and donation guidelines. However, the Society’s major volunteer project was the Victorian Tea Room. In addition, a Tea Room Boutique was arranged and managed by Sheila Carson, who had become an active volunteer. Two other women who became involved during this time and who would become long-term Board members were Connie Van Dusen and Janice Routley. A summer family picnic and the first of many volunteer appreciation events were begun during this period.

By 1993, GHHS, with just under two hundred members, was sponsoring events which required an average of three hundred volunteer hours per month. With more than \$15,000 raised, the Society began the redevelopment of the Government House Grounds. Assisting with GHHS sponsored events were Rotary Club volunteers, Friends of the Regina Exhibition and IODE members. A heritage fashion show, co-sponsored with the Regina Plains Museum, brought many visitors to the House, and a pre-Christmas children’s shopping day proved popular. In addition, school programs attracted young people to the House, and provided some revenue for the Society.

A strategic plan, developed for 1993 – 1999, adopted the following mission statement: “The Government House Historical Society is constituted to improve and enhance the public appreciation and use of Government House as a museum, in conjunction with other public and private agencies with parallel objectives”.

1994 saw the official opening of the Once Upon A Time Children’s Gallery, which provided a ‘hands-on’ educational experience for daycare, kindergarten and primary grade children, allowing them to experience what life was like for children of a century ago.

Special Awards by the Society

1990: Honourary

Director:

Ruth Hunt

2006: Honourary Life

Memberships:

Glen Stinson

Joan Church

Ann Sudom

Consolidation and Growth, 1995 - 2000

With the approach of the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II, a priority of the Society became the redevelopment of the Netherlands Liberation Memorial Garden. Donations of tulip bulbs by The Netherlands Consulate and the Canadian Department of Defense enabled Society volunteers to plant 5706 red tulip bulbs. In May 1995, with the tulips in full bloom, a ceremony was held to rededicate the Garden and to dedicate the F.W. Johnson Walk, named in honour of former Lieutenant Governor, the late Frederick W. Johnson.

In 1995 the position of Volunteer Coordinator for the Society was created, through the assistance of a grant (renewed annually five times) from the Heritage Branch of Municipal Affairs. Initially, the focus of the Volunteer Coordinator was on tea room activities, but over time, it became broader, to allow involvement with Once Upon A Time Room, the Gift Shop, the Antiquities Show (first held in 1996) and the Family Picnic, which saw 3000 people attend the one held in 1996. That same year a Society representative was appointed to the Government House Management Committee, ending the practice of channeling GHHS views through the House Manager.

A comprehensive Communications Plan, drafted in 1998 by Board member, LeRoy Bidlo, addressed the visibility and marketing of Government House, as well as the Society's relationship to the House and the need to broaden the Society membership. This plan resulted in increased promotional efforts by GHHS. Despite the challenges of working with government bureaucracy, in the latter years of the century the Society continued sponsoring the Victorian Tea Room, the Gift Shop, the Antiquities, Artifacts and Art Event, the Old Fashioned Picnic, a Children's Shopping Day and Government House garden projects.

The Twenty-first Century

After 2000, the twelve member GHHS Board, chaired by long-time president, Sheila Carson, together with a cadre of hard working Society members and volunteers, continued to sponsor all of the previously established programs and activities.

As an outcome of the Bidlo Communications Plan, the Society devoted more of its energy into marketing the House by producing, in 2001, an informational CD ROM about Government House. As well, GHHS participated in the filming of a seven part series by Access Communications, about Government House. During this time the Society continued sponsoring established activities, as well as redesigning the Ceremonial Flag Garden, including the installation of IODE donated flag poles; continuing to repatriate items to the House that were sold at an auction held in 1945, and introducing the pre-Christmas Dickens Singers concerts.

Special activities of the Society in 2002 included working with government organizers to host a public picnic at Government House, in order to mark the Queen's Golden Jubilee. The following year saw the launch of the GHHS newsletter, *The Portico*. Besides providing Society-related information, the newsletter cooperated with the Government House Foundation to keep readers informed about the progress of fund-raising and construction of the new Queen Elizabeth II Wing, to which GHHS had donated \$30 000.

2005, the province's centennial, brought a number of memorable events. One special occasion was the May visit by Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II, to officially open the new wing of Government House, an event attended by many members and volunteers. Another important highlight, the realization of a long-standing dream of the Society, was the opening of the GHHS gift shop, *Coquette's*, in a permanent space across from the main entrance of the newly expanded Government House.

What of the Future?

Throughout the period chronicled in this account of the Government House Historical Society, a common theme has been the preservation and enhancement of this important jewel of Saskatchewan history. After years of uncertainty, management issues and inadequate funding, the building today stands more proudly than ever, ready to tell its story to all who are interested in its past and its future.

Prepared to be a part of that future are the board, the members and the volunteers who make up the Government House Historical Society. As recently as this past fall, the Society recommitted itself to its mission to preserve, enhance and promote Government House as a heritage site.

Emerging as some of the priorities from a recent strategic planning session were issues that have challenged GHHS in the past: the desire to increase membership in the Society, to provide sufficient volunteers to ensure the continuation of society-sponsored programs and events, and to assess marketing strategies aimed at making the public aware of Government House and all that it represents.

Thankfully, the preservation and restoration of the house is no longer uppermost on the GHHS agenda, thanks to the efforts of so many who, over the years, have championed the cause of ensuring that Government House continues to take its rightful place as a living museum and heritage destination.

Compiled by Sheila McKague and Sandra Stretten, Layout Design by Pat Berry

Sources: Notes and documents prepared by Joan Church, Les Donnelly, Garth Pugh; Minutes of Board Meetings; Annual General Reports; GHHS, *Vignette*, Aug. 1991; Jackson, D.M. "A Quarter Century with Government House", *The Portico*, No. 12; Roe, J. "A Heritage Showpiece". *Leader-Post*. May 9, 1977.