

# **BUILDING PRESERVATION BRIEF: BELVEDERE CONVENT AND ORPHANAGE**

## **Prepared by:**

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## **Executive Summary**

### **Historic Overview**

The Belvedere Property is made up of two existing buildings. These are Belvedere Convent and Belvedere Orphanage. The Convent is the older of the two, constructed in 1827. It is a white, two and a half storey building with a hipped roof. The building was originally a private home but was purchased by the Church in the 1840's. It served as a residence and orphanage until the 1880's. At that point the second of the two Belvedere properties was constructed, the brick Belvedere Orphanage. The Orphanage is a three storey brick structure constructed in 1884-1885.

### **Architectural Importance**

The Convent building is the third oldest building in St. John's, is historically linked to the Emerson family, and was the deathplace of Bishop Fleming. The Convent is one of the few surviving examples of its type in Newfoundland. The Orphanage is, with the BIS building on Queen's Road, the only surviving Second Empire masonry institutional building in Newfoundland. It is possibly the only remaining building in the province designed by Bishop M.F. Howley. Because of their architectural and historical importance, both buildings were designated as Registered Heritage Structures under the Historic Resources Act by the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador on September 25th, 1999.

### **Key Architectural Features**

There are several key historical features that should be preserved and/or restored. These include:

- Original doorways and porches on both buildings
- Wood shingle roof (Convent)
- Large chimneys (Convent)
- Interior trim (Convent)
- Staircase (Orphanage)
- Cast iron window hoods (Orphanage)
- Central tower and windows (Orphanage)
- Dormer windows (Convent)
- Window trim and clapboard (Convent)
- Bell cupola (Convent)

### **Key Landscape Features**

There are a number of landscape features that should be preserved. The most important of these is the formal garden or courtyard immediately in front of the main entrance of the Convent. It is a highly rare

example of early landscape architecture, and is an important part of the heritage fabric of the site. As well, the tree-lined Belvedere Lane leading to the property from Bonaventure is of historical note.

## **Building Preservation Brief: Belvedere Convent and Orphanage**

### **Property Overview**

The Belvedere Property is made up of two existing buildings. These are Belvedere Convent (also known as St. Michael's Convent), a white, two storey hipped-roof building, and Belvedere Orphanage, a red, brick, four storey building with a Mansard roof. Belvedere has been occupied as a site since the middle of the eighteenth century when it was called McKie's Grove. A map of 1751 shows a curiously elaborate property on or near the site laid out in four squares bordered by trees. This may have been the ground Peter McKie, surveyor of customs, inherited from his father, John, a member of the garrison, in 1773. In 1811 Peter McKie was given permission to build a house on the property and this may have been sited in the grove as it is said to have been six hundred feet west of the convent.

### **History of the Site**



The Belvedere Convent structure is approximately 170 years old. In 1821 Hugh Alexander Emerson, a lawyer born in Windsor, Nova Scotia of United Empire Loyalists, purchased the house and land from McKie. In 1826 Emerson began construction of a new and ambitious house. During the course of the work the old McKie house, in which Emerson and his family were living, caught fire and partially burned. However it provided accommodation for them until Belvedere was finished.

The Convent building was constructed by Alexander Norris, a Scots builder and carpenter who would later work on Government House and Retreat Cottage, in 1826-27. The house was unusually large in that it contained two drawing rooms and two kitchens as well as a dining room, study and breakfast room on the main floor with ten bedrooms on the second. It may have been modelled on houses of western Nova Scotia from which the Emerson family came. The house was completed by August 15, 1827.

Emerson was fully engaged in Newfoundland political life running for the first House of Assembly but not getting elected until 1837 at which time he became Solicitor General. He held that post until 1854 and was a member of the Legislative Council 1845-55.

The death of his wife in 1844 may have prompted the attempt to sell the property the following year. However, it was not until September of 1847 that Emerson sold it to Bishop Michael Anthony Fleming. Fleming and four Franciscan brothers used Belvedere as a residence until Fleming's death in the building on July 14, 1850. The monks found the accommodation unsuitable because it was too far from the

Henry Street Chapel and the school on Military Road so they moved into the apartment above the school. By 1853 they had all returned to Ireland.

The building then served as a residence for the seminarians at St. Bonaventure's College while their building was under construction. In 1859 Belvedere took on new life as an orphanage for girls under the direction of the Sisters of Mercy as St. Michael's Convent. The convent had, by the 1880s, become too small for the growing number of orphans and a new building was opened in 1885. This structure served as an orphanage until 1967, after which it was used as a school. It was then used as the offices of the Roman Catholic School Board for St. John's, for "The Monitor" Catholic newspaper and other purposes.



The Orphanage is a three story brick structure over a high basement and topped by a mansard roof constructed in 1884-85. It is a well-modelled example of the Second Empire style with a central tower, quoins and elaborate cast iron window hoods. Michael Francis (later Bishop) Howley claims to have designed and supervised the erection of this building. Additions to its rear were made 1921-24.

### **Architectural Importance**

These two buildings are important both architecturally and historically. The convent (Belvedere) is, after the Anderson House on Signal Hill Road and the Commissariat, the oldest building in the city. Its association with H.A. Emerson links it with a political family involved with Newfoundland government from 1832 to 1949. As the deathplace of Bishop Fleming, it is linked with the builder of the Roman Catholic Cathedral and the figure who shaped Newfoundland politics when it was in its infancy.

The Orphanage is, with the Benevolent Irish Society's St. Patrick's Hall, the only surviving Second Empire style masonry institutional building in Newfoundland. It is possibly the only remaining building designed by Bishop M.F. Howley who saw himself as something a Renaissance man writing poetry, operettas, scholarly articles and histories.



Both buildings are part of an area of very considerable architectural and historic importance - the religious precinct, and both Belvedere Convent and Orphanage were designated as Registered Heritage Structures by the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador on Sept. 25, 1999.

The Foundation designated a grouping of important structures that form part of a Roman Catholic precinct, including Presentation Convent and adjoining school, Military Road; the Bishop's Palace and Library on Bonaventure Ave; and Mount St. Francis Monastery, Merrymeeting Road. These buildings, along with several others in the area that were previously designated, form a significant religious heritage building district. It is likely that this area is, after the area comprising the seminary and the cathedral in Quebec, the most compact and closely linked collection of religious buildings in North America.

### **Key Architectural Features**

A photograph dated to 1870 shows the Convent building with a number of Gothic Revival features label mouldings about the windows and an elaborate Gothic porch. These were likely to have been added to the house under the direction of Bishop Fleming when he took over the house in 1847.



The original house featured fine dormer windows with arched heads which are clearly visible in the 1870 photo to the left. The dormer windows were removed from the building at some point.

The large fireplaces were bricked off from the inside. The large Georgian chimneys however were left in place, and should remain in place if the roof is redone. The chimneys form a large part of the historic look of the roofline, and are a typical feature of the period.



The original cupola and bell shown in the photo to the right were removed at some unknown point, and would be an interesting feature to restore to the building.

The building was covered in siding sometime in the 1970s, but the original cladding would have been clapboard, painted white, and examples of the original clapboard may still exist, hidden beneath the

recent siding. In installing the vinyl siding the original label moulding window trim was lost, but can clearly be seen on the historic photo below.



While there have been deletions over the years, elements of the porch remain. The front entranceway to the convent was originally much grander. The original Tudor-arched wood panel doors remain, are in good condition, and should be retained. The doors were surmounted by a multi-pane transom window and were flanked by gothic arched sidelight windows. The entire porch was then flanked on either side by Roman Doric columns. These columns were capped with small Zwiebel or onion-shaped domes and crosses reminiscent of an Eastern Orthodox style. The porch, which today features a very low gable peak, originally had a richly detailed pedimented gable, with central trefoil motif, a bas relief ivy design, and a cross finial which pierced the gable peak.

The interior of the convent has retained several fine heritage features, notably the wood floors, faux-grained wooden panel doors (both hinged and pocket doors), door trim, mouldings, and baseboards, glass doorknobs, staircase, dumbwaiter, and decorative ceiling work.



While very different in style and function, the Second Empire orphanage building also exhibits some fine features. On the exterior, the most architecturally important features are the cast iron window hoods. This feature of the orphanage is fairly uncommon in St. John's, and while there are a few contemporary examples in the city, Belvedere is the finest Newfoundland example of this type of window ornamentation. The first floor window hoods feature a flat lintel, supported by brackets as seen to the right. The brackets and slightly pedimented lintel are topped with fretwork floral starburst motifs, and the lintel centre is decorated with a raised Maltese cross design.

The second floor window hoods are no less ornate, but designed in a different manner. The lintels on the second floor are arched to follow the arched design of the second floor windows themselves. The lintels incorporate a keystone motif in place of the Maltese cross, consistent with the arch design. Like the first floor hoods, the second floor hoods are supported by decorated brackets. These brackets continue the floral starburst motif, but on the second floor they are embossed rather than fretted out, and are half-fan in shape rather than the full semi-circle of those below them.



The topmost storey is lit by dormer windows, hooded, with their own wooden brackets supporting the hoods, and featuring decorative brackets at the sides of the windows reaching upwards from the window sills. These dormers are very similar in style to those popularized by the Southcotts, and are, along with the roof and central north facade tower, a key element in the orphanage's Second Empire look.

The main southern entrance to the Orphanage is an interesting mix of architectural styles. The general massing, Mansard roof, and decorative eaves brackets reflect the building's overall Second Empire design, while the central pediment and the effect created by the raised wooden panelling are more consistent with a Classical Revival style. As such, the porch is an intriguing element and should be maintained. The current door is likely not original, and the incorporation of a more architecturally sympathetic door is recommended. The staircase is in poor condition and will have to be rebuilt, but this reconstruction could be done using the existing newel posts as a model for the new design.



The interior of the Orphanage is by its nature and history much more utilitarian and institutional than the Convent. The current layout of the building may be of some academic interest, but could easily be redesigned to accommodate some sort of adaptive reuse of the structure. Of note and worthy of preservation are the main wooden staircase and possibly the wainscoting. Also of note are the arched coloured glass windows, particularly the Palladio-inspired windows of the central tower on the north

face of the building. The majority of the panes in these windows have been destroyed, but enough remains of the original glass to indicate how they should be restored, and sashes and mullion bars seem to be largely intact. These decorative windows could be refurbished, sealed, and interior storm windows used to improve thermal efficiency.

### **Landscape Features**

Starting in the eighteenth century and continuing well into the Victoria era, pleasure gardens were very much in vogue. This institution was fed by a proliferation of popular books on the subject. With the Georgian style of architecture and its attention to symmetry came matching planned gardens, laid out on a central axis and composed of geometric arrangements of walkways and planting beds. The formal garden immediately in front of the Belvedere Convent is of this style, and is perhaps one of the very few remaining planned formal gardens of its period in Newfoundland. In St. John's, there are very few remaining examples of nineteenth century landscaping. Both Angel House on Hamilton Avenue and Howard House on Garrison Hill have fine examples of Victorian urban landscaping, and both buildings and their grounds have been designated by the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador. The formal gardens at Belvedere are much older than those of these two properties and should be preserved as part of the character of the property.



The garden immediately in front of the Convent and Orphanage form a beautiful courtyard, enhancing and reflecting the historical and architectural significance of the buildings. The gardens demonstrate how the buildings were tied to the site as part of a larger whole, and are a fine example of the importance of proper site planning. The courtyard area should be preserved and maintained if at all possible, as it frames and displays the properties to their full effect. Taken together, they are a perfect example of synergy, where the sum of the parts is greater than the whole. Quite simply, without the garden, the facades of the two properties would be divorced from their historic surroundings.



Radiating out from the formal garden is a beautiful lane of mature trees known as Belvedere Lane. This type of arboreal laneway is fairly rare in St. John's, as most historic plantings of this period and form have been cut down to make possible road expansions and new developments. Belvedere Lane may need some pruning, thinning, and replanting along its length, and could certainly benefit from the input of a professional arborist.

Moving in the opposite direction, behind the Convent towards the Belvedere Cemetery is a historic tree known as "The Shade Tree". It is interesting for its age, placement, and for the fact that it has attained something akin to landmark status in neighbourhood folklore.

## Heritage Guidelines

Notes for future site development: There are several key architectural features mentioned above that were instrumental in having the buildings designated as Registered Heritage Structures, and these should be preserved. These include:

- Original doorway (Convent)
- Original porch (Orphanage)
- Large chimneys (Convent)
- Interior faux-wood grain trim (Convent)
- Main staircase (Orphanage)
- Cast iron window hoods (Orphanage)
- Central tower, eaves brackets and arched windows (Orphanage)
- Formal garden
- Belvedere Lane

In addition to this, there are several key elements that should be restored/reinstated as part of any future development of the two buildings. These include:

- Replication of the dormer windows (Convent)
- Replacement of window trim (Convent)
- Reconstruction of porch entranceway (Convent)
- Replacement of original 4 1/2 inch reveal clapboard (Convent)
- Replacement of bell cupola (Convent)
- Installation of Eastern White #1 cedar shingle roof (Convent)
- Maintenance/refurbishment of decorative tower windows (Orphanage)
- Replacement of south entrance steps (Orphanage)

**NOTE:** The additions to the rear of the Orphanage constructed circa 1921-24 add very little to the aesthetic qualities of the two buildings, and in themselves have little architectural or historical significance. It may be possible to remove these portions altogether and return the buildings to their late 19th century configuration.



## **Acknowledgements**

The historical information for this report was taken from two articles written by Shane O'Dea, Department of English, Memorial University:

O'Dea, Shane. "Beating Down Belvedere" *The Trident* (February 2000): 1-3.

O'Dea, Shane. "Closing the Corridors of Memory: The Threat To The Belvedere Convent in St. John's" *Heritage3.3* (Summer 2000): 15-17.

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Edited by Dale G. Jarvis, Heritage Preservation Officer.

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