



Into the light

An almost unknown North End institution steps out of the shadows

BY MARJORIE SIMMINS

PHOTO: MARJORIE SIMMINS

Three times daily, a ship's bell peals down the long gold and cream halls and up the carpeted central staircase of the Second Empire-style mansion on Gottingen Street. The bell announces that a meal is about to be served in the light-drenched formal dining room on the main floor. It's one of many elegant traditions observed in Victoria Hall, which is marking its 150th anniversary as a home for senior women.

"There are many traditions that have come down over the years," says Donna Merriam, who is in her sixth year as the hall's administrator. Merriam rings the bell each day and—another tradition—eats dinner with the residents each noon-time. Others traditions include dining tables covered in snowy linens and midday meals such as roasted chicken or baked haddock.

With its rich burgundy and cream exterior, and its 40-odd windows facing the street, Victoria Hall stands

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out in the North End. Passersby often mistake it for an elegant Victorian-era inn or apartment building. “We are one of Halifax’s best-kept secrets,” says Merriam. “Even people who grew up in Halifax don’t know Victoria Hall.” Since it never had a sign, she explains, the hall’s business was a mystery.

But this past summer, a vote to erect a sign on the hall’s front lawn finally passed. It took a year of vigorous debate among the hall’s governing bodies but the handsome sign now reveals the building’s purpose: “Welcome to Victoria Hall—Heritage Residence for Senior Women.”

“We wanted to retain the dignity of the ladies’ home,” says Merriam. She and the seven-member Board of Trustees and 15-member Committee of Management resolved to respect residents’ privacy while garnering a higher public profile for the hall. “Now we’re debating whether to put a website address under the new sign,” laughs Merriam. “I would like all of Halifax to know that Victoria Hall is a wonderful place for elderly women to live. I want the city to be proud of that.”

Resident Fran Martin, 88 years old, came to Victoria Hall two years ago. “The food is good here,” she says. “Just like you cook at home for a family—very nutritious.” A mother of six children, Martin enjoys the company of other residents and the staff. “The people who work here are really friendly,” she adds. “Everything about the hall is great.”



The Hall’s rich history adds to its charm.

Ninety-one-year Laura Davies, a former nurse, echoes her enthusiasm. She moved in last year, after suffering three strokes. Describing herself as “very well now,” she believes that suggesting the move “was one of the best ideas” her daughter ever had. “We are one big happy family,” Davies says. “I would recommend it for anyone.”

Victoria Hall is a private, non-profit and charitable organization, the legacy of three extraordinary Victorian-era Haligonians: Isabella Cogswell, Charlotte Lawson and Jane Liddell. They established a trust fund in 1860 that remains the basis for operations. All three were financially secure but concerned themselves with the city’s less privileged women, many of whom, without pensions or savings, would be homeless in their later years. The three raised funds for a retirement home for unmarried, deserted or widowed women.

On June 26, 1860, the first “Home for the Aged” opened in a rented house on Gottingen Street. It filled almost instantly. The current building, designed by architect Henry Frederick Busch, was completed in 1885. In 1906, the home was renamed “The Old Ladies’ Home.” In 1970, it became “Victoria Hall.”

An all-male group of trustees manages the hall’s funds and an all-female committee oversees the running of the house. The structure has worked for a century and a half. Syd Dumaresq, a trustee whose family has been represented on the Committee of Management off and on since the turn



Although the façade has changed over the years, Victoria Hall remains a landmark.



of the 19th century, is amused by this continuity. “We have one woman on the Board of Trustees now,” he laughs. “But no men on the Board of Management—it’s old Victorian.”

Dumaresq is a fourth-generation architect. His grandfather, also named Sydney, designed an addition on the south end of Victoria Hall in 1914. Dumaresq himself has overseen various recent restoration projects on the building. “Victoria Hall is a beautiful building,” says Dumaresq. “It has fantastic detailing in the mansard roof, the detail-work around the dormers and the tower accentuation at the front entrance.”

It’s just as striking inside. “The baseboards are knee-high and the window trim goes up to the cornice treatment, so that between each window is a beautiful framed wall,” he says. “I love the feeling of elegance. I also marvel that in the old days people designed, built and lived in such elegance, and that Victoria Hall has been able to maintain such a grand interior as a sign of respect for the ladies of the previous generation. It’s important to note that this is one of the few buildings of the 1880s still being used for its original purpose.”

Valerie J. White, CEO with the Nova Scotia Department of Seniors, agrees that the hall is unique. “I don’t know of any other seniors’ homes in Canada with such a long history and that oper-

ates from an original trust fund,” she says. “It is a great housing and living space, for seniors who are still active, but don’t wish to cook or house-clean any longer.”

The hall is currently home to 33 residents. Another 10 rooms are available, plus a respite room. “We are able to cater a great deal to the individuals who live here,” says Merriam. “They are well looked after.” A staff of 26 works around the clock. Merriam herself is “old school,” meaning she lives in the building, as did the “matrons” of earlier years. A “battery of supervisors” oversee day-to-day functions and several doctors are on call. Cooks prepare the food on site. “The hall smells wonderful in the afternoon,” says Merriam. “That’s when the cook staff bake.”

Victoria Hall accepts residents from age 55 upwards. Some residents are in their 90s. Some residents need various forms of assistance, but most are active. “The ladies are on the go quite a bit,” says Merriam, “out shopping or for family suppers.... We do find that sons and daughters will say ‘Well I asked Mum to stay overnight but she said no, I am going home.’”

FEEDBACK



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