

Background

East Lake Ainslie is located in Inverness County, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. It was first settled by Scottish immigrants beginning in the early 1800's. Among these pioneer settlers was Alexander (the Weaver) MacDonald, his wife Mary (nee MacLean) and their children. The MacDonald's settled on a 200 acre property approximately 3 miles from the north end of the lake on the eastern shoreline in 1823. In the 1850's (actual date unknown) the family constructed a new home which still stands today. The MacDonald's became the first merchants on the area and also had the first Post Office. Over the years six generations of MacDonald's have lived on the property settled by Alexander.

The family life at MacDonald House and their role in Lake Ainslie's history

Like many other settlers to Lake Ainslie, the MacDonald's would have had much to learn and do during their first few years here. Shelter would have been the first thing on their minds. Many families constructed one room log homes and later replaced these with wood-frame homes. This is likely what the MacDonald's did. The house that currently stands on the property was constructed in the 1850's by Charles MacDonald, one of the sons of Alexander and Mary. This house has four rooms on the main floor, and 4 bedrooms with a large central hallway on the second floor.

At some point in the 1850's Charles became the first merchant in the Lake Ainslie area. His store was located below his home on the family land. A register from the store is currently housed at the Beaton Institute in Sydney. The foundation of the store is still visible, but local people have no recollection of the store still standing. There is very little in the way of documentation of the store other than the register. Charles' brother Donald married the Hon. William McKeen's daughter and moved to Mabou where he also was a merchant.

Charles served as the Post Master for East Lake Ainslie from 1867 until his death in 1897. Charles' wife Hannah took over the role of Post Master until 1925 when her son Dan C. took over. The Post Office remained in the MacDonald home until the current rural Route delivery system was implemented in the 1950's. The post office played a vital role in community life. Not only was it the place to go to get the mail, but it became a source of local information and gatherings. The mail arrived twice a week and it was always an event. The Post Office was nothing like ones we see in today's life. The mail was stored and sorted in the family dining room on a small desk in the corner. The door to the dining room had a small sliding hatch where the Post Master could pass mail to patrons. However, local history tells us that this was not the way the Macdonald's post office operated.

The MacDonald's post office was much more informal than the structure of the space would imply. Many of the patrons to the Post Office would come in the back door on mail day without waiting for an invitation to come in. They would sit on the bench (day-bed) in the kitchen and chat with the MacDonald's and perhaps have a cup of tea and a biscuit. It became more about the visit than about the mail in some ways. Locals would

meet up with each other in the kitchen at MacDonald house, share stories and catch up on which farmers' sheep had lambed or whether the lake had frozen or thawed, or whose crops were ready to harvest. It is possible that many of the shared work gatherings, for harvesting, wool-spinning or barn building, were planned in the MacDonald's kitchen. Most everyone in the area was there on a weekly basis and this may have been the best way to spread word around before the advent of telephones.

Charles remained in this home for the rest of his life and passed it on to his son Dan C and his family. Dan C and his wife Jessie raised three girls and one son, Charlie, in this home. In the late 1970's the last inhabitant of the house (Jessie MacDonald) moved out. Around the same time local community members and family members of the MacDonald's began to think about what they could do to honour the pioneers and preserve their way of life. Jessie's son built his own home for himself and wife (also a Jessie) on the shoreline of his father's property and became sole owner of the family land when his parents died. The Great Grandson of Alexander MacDonald, Charles N MacDonald, offered the home of his birth to the community group for use as a museum. The loose collection of people interested in their local history formally formed the Lake Ainslie Historical Society in 1977. Shortly thereafter the house, barn and a few acres of land were deeded to the Lake Ainslie Historical Society. The museum has operated every summer since 1978.

There is one story that I would like to relate that I feel shows quite a bit about the importance of getting the mail, and how important work was to local farmers. A family of MacKinnon's lived on a farm half a mile north of the MacDonald's. One of the girls in this MacKinnon family told me this story one summer while I was working at MacDonald House. She remembers that once when she was approximately 5 or 6 years old her entire family was out in the fields planting the summer's potato crop. The sky looked as though it would rain soon, and her father was anxious to get the whole field planted before that would happen. He was also very anxious to get to the post office to get a letter that he knew was coming. Instead of going himself to the post office or sending one of his older children who were needed in the field he sent his 6 year old daughter. He put her up on one of his horses, a trusted and calm horse. The horse was so used to going for the mail that the girl's father was able to lead the horse through the gate and tell it to go for the mail. The horse carried this six year old girl all the way to the back door of the MacDonald house where she hollered for someone's attention. Dan C MacDonald was Postmaster at this time, and he came out to the back door to see what the fuss was all about. He was quite shocked apparently to see this young girl alone on the horse. She asked for the mail and received it. Then she had to ask Dan C to tell the horse to go home as she was unable to use the reigns to guide it back. She made it home safely with the important letter (no one remembers what the letter might have been), and the potatoes got planted before the rain came.

Another factor comes into play when looking at the MacDonald house as a gathering place for neighbours... Dan C played the fiddle quite well. The house was often the site of parties and ceilidh's. People would come on Saturday nights to the front room at the

house to dance, hear the fiddle and socialize. There were many other people who played instruments as well but the fiddle was by far the most common.

In terms of the overall importance of the McDonald house and the MacDonald family to Lake Ainslie's heritage one need only look at the fact that the house and some of its contents were deemed important enough by community members that they decided to transform it into a museum designed to preserve the memory of the people places and things important to Lake Ainslie residents.

MacDonald House as a monument to local heritage

In 1978 the dream of many residents of Lake Ainslie came to life. The home of the Dan C. and Mary Jessie MacDonald was deeded to the Lake Ainslie historical Society for use as a museum. The Lake Ainslie Historical Society comprised a group of community members who "were interested in preserving, in a manner as authentically as is possible, the names, dates, and all historical data relating to the pioneers of this area". It took a few years to bring everything together; the official opening of the MacDonald House Museum was celebrated on August 18th, 1984 however the museum had been entertaining guests prior to the Official Opening. The crowd gathered to celebrate this momentous occasion was addressed by such people as local historian and founding Lake Ainslie Historical Society member Peter MacMillan, descendant of the original MacDonald settlers Charles N MacDonald, Reverend Donald Sutherland, Past President of the Federation of Nova Scotian Heritage James O St.Clair, the Minister of Recreation, Fitness and Culture the Honourable Billy Joe MacLean, MLA for Inverness North the Honourable John Archie MacKenzie, the Honourable Senator Allan J MacEachen, and member of the Lake Ainslie Historical Society Chris Campbell. Also in attendance was Mrs Jessie Cameron, daughter of Charles MacDonald, who at that time was in her one hundredth year.

Charles N MacDonald's remarks on the day of the official opening gave a brief history of the family and their life and work. He also spoke of the house as a center for many activities and expressed his desire to see that tradition continue. James O St.Clair, who had consulted with the Lake Ainslie Historical Society members throughout the previous few years spoke of the many 'firsts' that have and occurred at this house, the first store, the first post office and "the first official opening of building which is designated as a heritage house" in Inverness County (Lake Ainslie Historical Society, Official Opening Program transcript). The County of Inverness designated two properties as being a Heritage Property that year, the Smyth house in Port hood and the MacDonald house. He spoke also of the effort put forth by the membership of the Lake Ainslie Historical Society in terms of gathering and collecting oral and written history and of their commitment to educating themselves by attending seminars offered by the Federation of Nova Scotia Heritage.

MLA John Archie MacKenzie's remarks reflected his own memories of the hospitable nature of the MacDonald family during his trips to the area as a child. He also spoke a

few words to Mrs Jessie Cameron in Gaelic but unfortunately the transcribers did not translate these words. John Archie is well known for his commitment to preserving the language of many of our ancestors at Lake Ainslie. Minister Billy Joe MacLean expressed thanks to the dedicated volunteers who put so much work into the project and, his pleasure in being able to work with many such groups throughout the province. Senator MacEachen had been a Member of Parliament for the area for many, many years, and his comments reflected his deep interest in the history of the pioneer settlers and his desire to gather and collect letters written between Scottish immigrants and their friends and relatives who did not make the move to the new world. He told of a tradition among many immigrants leaving the Isle of Mull in Scotland of placing stones on the shores as they left Scotland as a sign of affection for their country. This created a great pile of stones which became known as a "cairn of tears". The tradition of building stone monuments is still seen in Lake Ainslie; one can be found at MacDonald house in honour of all pioneer settlers at and another that is located less than a mile away is in memory of a MacKinnon family.