

Bertie Hall, Fort Erie, Ontario

This house is located at 657 Niagara Boulevard (corner of Phipps Street) in Fort Erie, and is on part of the south half of lot 8 in the First Concession of Bertie Township. The 60 acres of land in that south half had been granted by the Crown to Henry Anguish on 30 July 1806 and had come into the possession of John Reis and his wife Anna who, in 1827, had sold it to Henry Sagar for £250. In 1832, Sagar and his wife Hesther, sold it to William Forsyth.

William Forsyth (c. 1774-1841) was probably the son of James Forsyth,¹ a Loyalist who had emigrated from Scotland probably to the Wyoming Valley of New York, at some time between 1765 and 1770. The Forsyth family had settled in Stamford Township after the American Revolution, and their house at Niagara Falls was apparently important enough to be used as a headquarters during the War of 1812 and during the Navy Island incident of 1838, and then perhaps as temporary quarters for Lord Durham and Lord Elgin.

As early as 1818 William himself had become the first man to build "an hotel chiefly for the accomodation of visitors" to the Falls, a big establishment sleeping no less than 150 and eventually with all sorts of extra features - gardens, an enclosed spiral staircase to the beach, a boat to tour behind the falling waters, a ferry service across the river, a stage service to Queenston and Fort Erie. In the 1820's, this witty little man, "sufficiently shrewd and well-informed", tried to monopolize all the good viewing points and fence off access to the waterfront from rival hotels. However, this led him into a political battle with Lieutenant-Governor Maitland over encroachment on military reserves, and the case of the "Niagara Falls Outrage" languished so long before the Legislative Assembly and the House of Commons in London, that in the end William lost heart. In 1832 he sold his enterprises to the wealthy firm of "Clark & Street", and this was when he bought the land at Fort Erie and moved there.

Anguish (Putman) William bought the "Bertie Hall" site as part of a large purchase that included the rest of lot 8 and also lot 7, some of which had been "the Putman crown grant of 216 acres". It was on the farm "known as (Putman)" that in 1833 he began preparations "to build a Stone House", getting the Lieutenant-Governor's permission to quarry on a river-bank reserve - so that this could not have been "Bertie Hall", as sometimes identified, and of course the latter is of brick.

Even before William's death, his sons Nelson² and Isaac Brock Forsyth were becoming important operators in the Fort Erie region. By 1840 Nelson was a merchant with a wharf of his own in that village (then called Waterloo), and leased the ferry to Black Rock, N. Y., from its "superintendent" Col. James Kerby; Brock supplied the ferry-boat, a horse-powered scow called The Bee. By 1843 the brothers had their own "Lower Ferry" further north at their "father's place", probably on the site where it was operating in 1862, exactly on the line between lots 7 and 8; it is described as being from Nelson's new landing "near the Red Mill" over to the Black Rock Dam (Lower Black Rock Village is now the northern part of Buffalo, N.Y.) Brock at this time

was living opposite the Dam, probably already on the "Bertie Hall" lot, which he had inherited in 1841 from his father.

Although Nelson's former partner John McFarlane had, in 1840, been made Deputy to Col. Kerby as Customs Collector at Fort Erie, and the Colonel had spoken of Nelson as "a trusty person", we now find Kerby in 1844 complaining that the Forsyth lower landing was a "rendezvous for smugglers owning small boats" and that Nelson and Brock themselves "owned a host of them for that purpose, and practise it daily". In 1846 Kerby was even shot at when near "the widow (William)

Forsyth's residence". Nelson was probably the Forsyth whose name has come down to us as King of the Smugglers in the district using a cave in that locality that is still known as the Smugglers' Home.

Isaac Brock Forsyth apparently died before 1851, (probably being the Forsyth who died of exposure in 1849.) Henceforward the directories and maps are those of Nelson and Sarah, who was Isaac Brock's widow. In 1851 Nelson is listed in a one-and-a-half-storey frame house, Sarah in a two-storey brick one. It looks as if this is certainly "Bertie Hall". The style suggests it was built not long before - there is a fairly close similarity of design to the Peck House, Prescott, Ont., definitely dated 1848 - but unfortunately we lack any earlier census returns for the area. It is not clear, then, whether it was built by Isaac Brock or Sarah. *(mother)*

In 1870 Sarah transferred title to 146 acres, including part of lot 8 in the First Concession, to her son William Brock Forsyth, then about 22 years old. This probably included "Bertie Hall", for Page's Atlas of 1876 shows Sarah as still owning part of the lot, but a little way north of the house while William B.'s land surrounded the building. The actual corner on which "Bertie Hall" stood is then marked in the name of John Crabb. It is probably, therefore, part of the 10 acres in the south east part of lot 8, fronting on the Niagara River, that William B. had sold in 1872 to Stephen Maule Jarvis, lawyer of Toronto, and of which Jarvis had sold two and a half acres to Crabb in 1874.

Jarvis had also bought some of Nelson's land just to the south, and laid it out into lots for a village registered under the name of "Victoria". Obviously he saw the possibilities of development now that the "International Iron Bridge" was built across the Niagara River at this point, and that three railways also met here; for a while it was anticipated that the place would become, in effect, "a suburb of Buffalo" on the other side of the river. A village did grow up on his lands, both those bought from William B. and those bought from Nelson or his heirs, and it actually developed under the name of "International Bridge" or "Bridgeburg". However, the "Bertie Hall" property sold to Crabb does not seem to have been subdivided yet. Crabb, a native of England, had previously been a hotel-keeper in Chatham, Ont., and he now set up a "Bertie Hall Hotel" on Phipps Street which was probably carried on in the house itself.

Crabb probably defaulted on mortgage payments and lost all claim to the land. In 1892, Robert G. Barrett took over the property from him and in 1904 sold 8 $\frac{3}{4}$ acres which included it, to Frank Thorburn Pattison. Pattison died in 1965 but the property is owned by his estate. In his will, Mr. Pattison directed "That my Executors shall sell (Bertie Hall) and further, that they shall take into consideration in the sale of the same the fact that I would prefer this property to come into the hands of the Town of Fort Erie, or the Historical Society of the Town of Fort Erie, and that in any negotiation in regard to the sale of the same, that my Executors take this into

Correction (1819-1850) died of drowning. Wm Forsyth Jr. = 1802-49 died of exposure 1850

(now likely Wm Jr)

1850

consideration and see that the Town of Fort Erie, or the Historical Society of the Town of Fort Erie should have the first right to purchase and if they fail to express their intention and exercise this right within a period of one year after the date of my death, then I direct my Executors shall be free to make any other sale or disposition of the same."

The present occupant of "Bertie Hall is the caretaker, Mrs. Anne C. Shaddock.

The architect of "Bertie Hall" has not been identified; but there is a fair possibility, though no proof at all, that it was John Lashaw, an American who came from Pennsylvania in 1828. He definitely designed at least two other "Greek Revival" houses in the area - namely "Willowbank", the Hamilton house at Queenston, and "Ruthven", the Thompson house at Cayuga - his own house on North Main Street, Niagara Falls (later occupied by Mrs. W. E. Tuttle) is called "beautiful" in Marjorie F. Campbell's Niagara, and she states that he also "assisted in building Stamford township hall and the courthouses at Welland and Niagara-on-the-Lake".

1. A list of James' family compiled in 1783 gives his son William's age as 9. However, the age of William of Fort Erie is noted as 60 in his burial record, 1841, so that the identification is not certain. Perhaps the clergyman guessed his age.

2. Nelson is not among the sons of William mentioned in the latter's will, but other documents strongly suggest he was his son. Born about 1809, Nelson was too young to have been William's brother. *is mentioned in another will.*

3. Marjorie F. Campbell, in her book Niagara, states it was William who died then, but his death in 1841 is well-documented.