

The Home Of The Postmaster

Robert Wyllie's Home and the Legend of Creek Cottage and Robbie Burn's Ghostly Mistress

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Passing through Ayr, one is struck by the many homes enriched with architecture from the 19th century. As villagers, these details seem to simply pass our glancing eyes as remnants of past days. Many of these homes are rich in history and secrets; ones that have been murmured about for decades. One home in particular has brought about much speculation, its history is legendary and so is its unearthly visitor. This home is the Postmaster's home.

As I entered the home, I was struck with its stunning interior, the rich maple and pine flooring, the Canadiana decor. The original windows looked out onto a bright summer's day. The warmth of the sunlight played among the walls and floors of the home as Joan McLorn brought me through, mentioning facts about various parts of the home. It seemed far from menacing nor could I picture it boarding a love sickened phantom. As we sat in what once was an old carriage house which now is refurbished to be featured in Home magazines we commenced our research. Underneath the rustic log supports and beside a stylish stone fireplace we began to search through what seemed like an abundance of information scribbled, scratched and typed on an assortment of papers. At first we came upon information about the Regency style cottages.

The Regency style itself was to have arrived during the reign of George IV, the 'Prince of Pleasure' who, frivolous as he was, spent all his money so that soldiers who were to have pensions were not given them. As a result they were awarded land in Canada and built Regency style homes as many were retired military men from British colonies and replicated architectural characteristics they had seen while working in warmer climates in commonwealth countries. Joan mentioned, after listening to a special on Regency cottages on CBC radio, that they had large verandahs and stylish French doors often dubbing them with the term 'cottage' as was used in the naming of 'Creek Cottage'. Without realizing the weather conditions of the north their designs were reminiscent of southern climates. Interestingly enough, Robert Wyllie, the Postmaster adopted this architectural style for his home. Today 10 Water St. remains to be one of only twenty such homes left in southern Ontario.

Robert Wyllie, the owner himself, arrived in Ayr in 1840. He was an emigrant from Kilwinning, Scotland and was a stone-mason and was licensed as an auctioneer among many things. In the 1830's he and his wife Jeannie immigrated to Canada. He originally settled in Galt where he worked on part of the Dundas-Waterloo road where he remained between 1836 and 1840.

At his arrival in Ayr in 1840, Robert was a man of great intuition and skills. By the fall of that year he was storekeeping and became the second

post master in the area after James Jackson. In that year he introduced the naming of the town Ayr with the opening of his post office.

The Wyllie family owned many buildings in the downtown area of Ayr and rented them out to local merchants. They were known to have run various businesses such as a drug store and an insurance agency. The Wyllie Block as it was name housed the post office and the Wyllie Drug Store which was operated by John Wyllie and his brother William, sons of Robert.

Robert Wyllie named the town simply after the great amount of Scottish settlers from Ayrshire. There was always a close connection with the motherland, its vast beauty and rich history. As we continued to discuss the history of the home, we came upon a story, one that I was anxious to hear. As a master of the post and stories, Robert Wyllie became the bearer of forbidden letters that were meant to have been destroyed. Love letters that were from the famed Robbie Burns.

Settlers that travelled from Ayrshire were very much aware of Robbie Burns' fame and, unfortunate at the time, lack of fortune. Dying at the age of 37 years in 1796 he became known world-wide for his romantic and charismatic poetry written in the lowland Scots tongue. His Auld Lyne Sang which he had popularized can clearly be seen as an influence in the area by looking in the back of a new edition of Andrew Taylor's "Today's and Yesterday's" written by John McPherson who with a group of Highlanders from New York travelled on foot to North Dumfries. However this version entails some influence from their fellow Gaelic Highlanders.

With Robbie's great influence and popularity it was not surprising that much attention was directed towards Robert Wyllie's wife, formerly Jeannie Beckett, an apparent niece of Robert Burns' Highland Mary.

Highland Mary was a woman that was 'tall, fair haired with blue eyes'. After Robbie Burns relationship with Jean Armour broke apart after Jean's father separated them in hopes of warding off the flirtatious Casanova, he became seriously in love with Mary Campbell who was a nursemaid and dairymaid from the Highlands. After falling in love with Burns she was despatched to another area. Some sources even point to an informal marriage between the two. However, after planning their future together Mary took to a sudden death.

Robbie Burns writes in an article about this passing of his dear Highland Mary: "This was a composition of mine in very early life, before I was known at all in the world. My Highland lassie was a warm-hearted charming young creature as ever blessed a man with generous love. After a pretty long tract of the most ardent reciprocal attachment we met by appointment, on the second Sunday of May, in a sequestered spot by the Banks of Ayr, where we spent the day in taking farewell, before she should embark for the West Highlands to arrange matters among her friends for our projected change of life. At the close of Autumn following she crossed the sea to meet me at Greenock, where she had scarce landed when she was seized with a malignant fever, which hurried my dear girl to the grave in a few days, before I could even hear of her illness".

Following her death, he completed various poems about her. It was noted by some sources that they were planning to move away together to Jamaica which was being colonized by the British. His poems include such sorrow and passion:



"Creek Cottage"

And mouldering now in silent dust
That heart that lo'ed me dearly!
But still within my bosom's core
Shall live my Highland Mary.

It was thought that Mary Campbell's father Wallace had burned all letters from Robbie to his daughter and forbidding his name to ever be spoken. However, it seems that this was not necessarily the case. The letters between the lovers were reportedly to have been kept. Eventually, they took quite a journey across the majestic waves of the Atlantic and onto Canadian soil with Anne Campbell, sister of Mary Campbell and mother of Jeannie Beckett. When Anne came to visit Jeannie, which in those days a visit would be sometimes a year or two, she brought the letters along with her. It was said that she had forgotten the letters at her departure and without having noticed until it was too late they had remained in the home, however have never been discovered.

And with the love letters along came an apparent roaming spirit. In 1920, excavations were made to expand the cemetery where Mary lay. Under study it was discovered that perhaps she did not die from simply an illness but from giving birth to a child, a valid reason for her father to have wanted to burn the letters and forbid Burns' name to be spoken. However, this remains a mystery and Mary finds herself in a different land searching for her long lost letters.

The melodious drones of the bagpipes that hummed through the designation ceremony in 1986 recalled the memory of the settlers. Scottish tea and speeches and reading of letters from the Wyllie's home filled the ceremony.

Today the home is welcoming as the floral paintings of Joan McLorn grace the walls and all seems calm. As a home it remains protected as an emblem of our history and beyond its elegance and serene beauty is a legend that will continue to live on.