

Michel Prévost, University of Ottawa chief archivist

During the 1980s and 1990s, the heritage houses on Séraphin Marion, in the University of Ottawa's historical sector, were a bit down at the heels. Over time, the old buildings had lost their beautiful wooden ornamentation, a typical feature of the Victorian style that was very popular at the end of the nineteenth century in a wealthy neighbourhood such as Sandy Hill. To make matters worse, in the 1960s and 1970s the old buildings were painted gray, one of our two official colours, along with garnet, in order to visually link them with the University. Doing this masked the attractive red brick. On top of that, the paint had begun to peel, giving these historical houses an air of neglect.

Fortunately, things began to change for the better after 1995, with the restoration of two houses, including 145 Séraphin Marion, built in 1884. The house, long-time home of the Department of History, is named for Pierre Savard, a former history professor and director of the Centre de recherche en civilisation canadienne-française from 1973 to 1985. Savard played an important role for the Franco-Ontarian community, chairing a 1977 task force on the arts in French Ontario. Since 2010, an Ottawa Catholic high school has borne the name of Savard, an eminent historian.

After extensive work by C & L Construction Ottawa, based on plans by architects Murray and Murray, the house was returned to its former glory. C & L's Aurel Levesque did his best to respect the historical character of the building. The company has extensive experience in restoring historical sites, having done work at Stornoway, home of the leader of Opposition, and on Parliament Hill.

C & L sandblasted the paint with chemically treated blasts of water and carefully repaired the mortar. Hundreds of damaged bricks were replaced with new ones of the same colour. Finally, the wood ornamentation was redone according to the original plans. The original façade of the house was recreated thanks to photographic research at the University archives. It's worth noting, though, that the photos of the original houses were not found in the building section of the archives, as you'd expect, but rather, in the sports section. At the time the photos were taken, young people would play ball on the Tabaret lawn, right across from the house. Close inspection of the photos showed all the architectural details of the building. Thanks to these old pictures, it was possible to faithfully reproduce the porches, balconies and delicate wooden ornamentation. It's a good example of how archives are useful for more than just exploring the past.

The work was made possible in part through funding from Ottawa architects Murray and Murray and Associates Inc., as well as from the City of Ottawa's design and heritage divisions. This partnership has allowed the University of Ottawa to showcase its rich built heritage and to restore the beauty of its historical sector. In 1997, the City of Ottawa recognized the exceptional quality of the work by presenting the University of Ottawa with a certificate of merit in the restoration category.