

Central Parks

River Road Provincial Heritage Park

Kennedy House



Introduction

The three main-floor rooms are furnished as they may have looked during the 1870s and 1880s when Captain William Kennedy and his family lived here. The rooms represent a combination of period styles. Look closely at the furnishings, textiles and appointments and clothing in this part of the house and you'll gain an impression of the work and life of this Scottish-Aboriginal family in late 19th-century Red River.



Captain William Kennedy's Study



Captain William Kennedy was a courageous man of wide experience and interests. When he took up permanent residence here at "Maple Grove" in 1866, he was 52. Like many country-born people of mixed ancestry, he found few economic opportunities in Red River. He made a living trading goods from England to local First Nations people, Métis and settlers, but his business suffered in the economic crash of 1882. He had accepted scrip (certificates convertible to land)

as payment from many of his Métis neighbours and lost money when the land speculation bubble burst.

Following his education in Scotland, young Kennedy took a posting as clerk for the Hudson's Bay Company, beginning in 1833 in the Ottawa Valley and then transferring to Ungava (Labrador). Being an advocate of temperance, he eventually left the Company's employ in protest of its liquor trade. He opened a store in Kingston in 1846 and started a fishery at the mouth of the Saugeen River two years later. From 1851-3, lured by the romance of the unknown Arctic, he led a search for his one-time tutor, Arctic explorer Sir John Franklin.

Drawing on a strong Christian inheritance from his Native mother, Kennedy and his wife attempted to set up a mission to the First Nations people of Lake Manitoba in 1861, similar to an earlier unsuccessful effort with a mission in the Lake of the Woods area.

Despite the rheumatism which incapacitated him in later life, Kennedy remained a visible personality in Red River society. He opposed the power of the Hudson's Bay Company in Red River and campaigned tirelessly in Canada West for Canadian annexation of the northwest. He was the local magistrate and served on Manitoba's Board of Education. He was active in St. Andrew's Church and a faithful parishioner until his death in 1890. Although his daughter Mary Kennedy thought he was easily led and generous to a fault, he remained, as Anishinabe Chief Henry Prince noted, "one of our country gentlemen."



Eleanor Kennedy

Eleanor Kennedy was a familiar figure in the Parish of St. Andrew's in the 1870s. Known locally as "the Duchess" for her dignified bearing and aristocratic manner, she was the organist at St. Andrew's Church and could regularly be seen walking from here to Miss Davis' school to teach music to the young ladies.

This well-educated and talented daughter of Captain William Cripps of London, England, Eleanor Kennedy had met her Métis husband through Lady Franklin, married him in London, and returned with him to Red River in 1861. During the grasshopper plague in 1868, she was one of several energetic middle-class women who ensured that food and clothing reached all destitute families. When smallpox broke out in 1873 it was Eleanor Kennedy who nursed some of the sick of the parish and who devoted much energy to a vaccination program throughout the district. Parish visiting, tea with friends, music, painting, writing poetry and teaching needlework to her daughter Mary, took up most of her days and made her home a model of Victorian family life.

Yet her disappointments were many. The mission at Lake Manitoba failed after only one year. Her husband was not a wealthy man and became an invalid for almost twenty years. She had one miscarriage, and because of declining family fortunes, her son Willie never went to England for education and never fulfilled his mother's ambition that he become a clergyman.

Mrs. Kennedy saw herself as part of the parish "gentry" but by the 1880s she had, by necessity, also become the economic support of her family. Her millinery and dressmaking skills were valued by her neighbours while her imports of European fashion brought her clientele from throughout Red River. Nevertheless, in 1892-two years after Captain Kennedy's death-Eleanor was forced by mounting debts to sell the St. Andrews house and property. She retired to Virden. The new Women's Canadian Club in Winnipeg honoured her as one of the pioneers of Manitoba. Along with her husband, William, she is buried in the churchyard at St. Andrew's.



The Dining Room



This room was the scene of many family celebrations. "I can't help thinking of you all at Maple Grove," wrote Emma Christie to her friend Mary Kennedy at Christmas in 1883. "I suppose you are busy preparing mincemeat puddings. Do you remember what fun we used to have over stoning the raisins, cutting up the peel and stirring the pudding? I always like to hear what hymns you sing and if you had as much fun at the decorations as we used to." Guests came frequently from distant HBC trading posts. There were visitors from Winnipeg, some of whom gave recitals, as well as merchants, ministers, local politicians, and cousins and friends of the children.

Household "help," usually a young girl from the parish, came at 5 a.m. before the family had risen. She lit the fires and prepared a breakfast omelette before 9 a.m. Dinner was eaten at noon and consisted of fish, veal or venison, suet puddings, cabbage, carrots, potatoes, and desserts of berries, rhubarb tart, milk "shapes" or blancmange. Sunday dinner was more elaborate and was prepared by the "help" while the family was at church. Tea was served at the end of the day and the buns, bannock, butter, and occasional jam were shared with local visitors. In most of the homes of the parish, tea time was a social event of importance.

A common courtesy was the daily exchange of gifts of food. Mary Kennedy took soups to the sick and returned with eggs or bread. Pounds of homemade butter—a valuable commodity—would be exchanged for milk, flour or vegetables. Tucked into Mary's basket on such occasions would be marigolds for Mrs. Scott in exchange for geranium cuttings. The sharing of food played an important part in the yearly ceremonies and, on a daily basis, cemented the ties of kinship, friendship and experience which bound the *people of Red River*.