

# The Housing of a Work Force: Workers' Housing in Amherst, Nova Scotia, 1900-1914<sup>1</sup>

by Diane Tye

With industrialization, the Maritimes experienced rapid growth as the region developed from an area of farms and small market towns to one of significant manufacturing importance. Patterns of how and where people lived changed dramatically as the rise of the industrial worker brought about new housing demands. The solutions sought to the need for laborers' accommodation in the Maritimes remain largely unexplored yet these decisions have had a continuing impact on both the physical and social development of the region. Here the response to the workers' housing crisis experienced from 1900 to 1914 in Amherst, Nova Scotia, is explored.<sup>2</sup> The paper looks at how new housing needs were met and touches on some of the effects these decisions have had on the social development of the town.

A directory of Amherst in 1899 indicates that initially most residents lived along major routes and on side streets near the town center. These businesses were interspersed among the single family dwellings of doctors, clergy, and merchants and the tenements, row housing, and boarding houses where workers lived. Such eclectic neighborhoods declined, however, with Amherst's industrial expansion. With a large influx of works, the town developed along class lines and class variables quickly began to differentiate residential areas. Commercial, and certainly industrial, sectors were regarded as undesirable by those of middle and upper income levels. This view was clearly articulated by J.A. Quinlan, of the Boston based land developers Warren and Quinlan, in an Amherst interview when he stated, "Most people, especially the better class desire to have some distance from the smoke, soot and deadly gasses of the factories . . ."<sup>3</sup> While Quinlan expressed the opinion in 1918, distance from factories was clearly a factor in the selection of locations for upper and middle income residential areas.

The industrialists established their residential domain on the east side of town far away from the sight and sound of the industries by which they earned their living. This area became a showplace of fine homes, rich in architectural detail and designed by recognized architects. In an adjacent neighborhood, those employed in clerical, mercantile or management positions bought homes. Unlike the houses of the capitalists, many of the middle class dwellings were of an identical design and constructed by a single firm—C.J. Silliker and Company of Amherst.<sup>4</sup> The square, hipped roof house type that lines these streets is so pervasive, locally it has been dubbed the "Silliker house". The house type is associated with Amherst in a broader sense, however, for by 1923 Halliday Homes was nationally marketing a similarly designed plan known as the "Amherst house".<sup>5</sup> The frequent mirror reversal of the house plan so that doorways open alternately on left or right, in addition to some conscious effort to include individual detail, prevented the development of a monotonous line of identical homes. Access to parks and close proximity to schools and shopping made this district attractive to the rising middle class.

Meanwhile laborers struggled to locate adequate housing of any nature. Like most industrially based towns in North America, the responsibility for home ownership in Amherst lay squarely on the shoulders of the workers themselves. With few known exceptions, companies offered their employees no housing options. The Amherst Piano factory constructed less than a dozen homes near their plant, presumably for rent or sale to their approximately 100 employees.<sup>6</sup> Hewson Woollen Mills provided their work force of about 130 with a short row of attached single family dwellings and one large tenement situated on their mill property. Perhaps most surprising is that Rhodes and Curry, contractors for hundreds of worker's houses in other Maritime centers, maintained only three to five double housing units, hardly sufficient for their work force of over 2000. In 1901, Amherst Boot and Shoe employed approximately 200; Amherst Foundry maintained a work force of about forty; C.J. Silliker hired approximately 125 men; and Robb Engineering had about 400 on the pay roll. None of these companies made any provision for their workers' housing needs.

Working class families took accommodation where they could find it. Most often this meant renting space in tenements and boarding houses located on narrow downtown streets. Tenement neighborhoods developed that, judging from newspaper reports of the day as well as oral history accounts, were both crowded and unsanitary. The worst of these areas was on and near King Street, colloquially referred to as "Union Row", "Ram Cat Alley", or simply "the alley". Alf Murdock, son of a middle class merchant, remembers King Street in the early 1900s:

There was a street, well it's called King Street now. It runs



"Silliker Houses", Clarence Street.



Gable end entry house.

through from Havelock to Church Street there. That was called Ram Cat Alley. that was the toughest street imaginable. The people that were living in there were just disgusting. People were scared to walk along there for fear they'd dump some slops out the window on them, you know. I remember it as just a filthy place. Of course I was only a kid but I was scared to death to walk through there. Oh no, you wouldn't go through there. And the streets were not paved then at all, you know. It was just a mud hole.<sup>7</sup>

Newspaper accounts confirm Murdock's memories of "the alley" as dirty and decrepit. Reports of frequent liquor-related brawls, arrests and other incidents suggest that alcohol abuse presented a real problem in tenement areas.<sup>8</sup> Overcrowded conditions coupled with illegally made over-proof liquor were an explosive combination and in 1901 and 1910 shootings took place. The latter of these resulted in a death.<sup>9</sup>

The inability of the laborer to locate suitable housing was of interest to some individuals in higher income levels in so far as it presented a profit making venture. In 1901 the editor of the *Amherst Daily News* writes, "Tenement houses are at a premium in our town. A large influx of population is almost daily taking place and the demand for houses is much greater than the supply. A number of cheap comfortable tenements would be a paying investment."<sup>10</sup> Land transactions for 1900 to 1914 indicate that businessmen saw an opportunity to profit by investing in workers' housing. Most of the prominent men in the community owned a few income properties and/or rented out space above their downtown businesses as living quarters. For example, members of the Christie family who operated a woodworking and coffin factory employing approximately sixty in 1901, formed a real estate company, Christie Land Company. From 1910 to 1927 they rented out approximately eight houses. These were considered as income properties and were not rented exclusively to their employees.<sup>11</sup>

By far the largest investor in working class accommodation was J. Robson Douglas, a local insurance broker.<sup>12</sup> In 1902, Douglas placed a bid on ten acres of land which had been previously used by the town as an exhibition park. Douglas recognized the potential of the property, surrounded by industries, as a residential neighborhood suitable for those



who either did not wish, or could not afford, to live away from the factories. Shortly after he placed his bid, Douglas was awarded the tender. He began to subdivide and in 1904 town assessment records show 174 homes constructed and sixty-five lots ready for use.<sup>13</sup> Officially named the West Highlands, but locally referred to as "Douglstown", the area was home to over 200 families by 1906. Amherst's first, and to this day largest, working class neighborhood was firmly established.

From the West Highland's inception, it was clear the worker was to be allowed little more control over the development of housing here than he had been given in older tenement areas. From the day Douglas was awarded the exhibition park, an emotionally charged debate raged over his acquisition of the land. The householders already living in the vicinity claimed he had been awarded the tender unjustly, protesting his was not the highest bid but that C.R. Casey, a small landowner who had already begun to develop his holdings adjacent to the fair ground, had made the best offer. Protestors argued Casey was more deserving, they questioned Douglas's intentions and motives and accused him of planning to put up substandard structures. Their concerns received coverage in town council minutes and local papers but Mayor Nathaniel Curry, his council, and Douglas, paid little heed.<sup>14</sup>



House typical of off centre entry with hipped roof, West Highlands.

It is difficult to determine now, over eighty years later, if Douglas had an actual representative on council as he was accused, but that he had close connections with council members in unquestionable. The town leaders were his friends and business associates and several of them became directly involved with the building of his homes in the Highlands. Perhaps most central to Douglas's success, however, was the fact that he proposed to construct the type of housing town leaders thought most appropriate for the working class family. The decision to enter real estate and construction were business decisions, but Douglas's proposed house types reflect contemporary attitudes of his day.

The houses J.R. Douglas, and the smaller contractors who followed him, chose to construct are based on two similarly designed floor plans. The most common of these is a rectangular short facade plan with an off center facade entrance. A two storey structure with gable roof, the house fits the description of a Type 5b later form of end gable entry house given by Ennals and Holdsworth in their article, "Vernacular Architecture and the Cultural Landscape of the Maritime Provinces". The authors describe the floor plan:

Generally, the main door, near one corner of the house, opens onto a spacious vestibule and a staircase leading to the second floor. Rooms open off a hallway running the length of the house along one long wall. The first room off the hall is the parlour; the second room most often serves as a dining room, although it too may have been a parlour in the past. A third room beside the dining room at the end of the hall passage was usually the kitchen. This small kitchen is often extended by an appended wing; originally a summer kitchen, this was frequently upgraded later and integrated into the main kitchen. The upper floor was given exclusively to bed chambers, usually matching the room arrangement of the ground floor with the addition of a small bedroom over the entrance hall.<sup>15</sup>

This floor plan, with the exception of the summer kitchen, matches that of both house types in the Highlands. The second plane is of slightly larger dimensions and although it is also of rectangular short facade, the house has a box like appearance. The structure, with hipped roof,

is a simplified version of the "Amherst house". The exteriors of both were originally wooden shingle or clapboard—surviving assessment photos from the 1950s show an equal preference for both. Roofs, too, were covered with wooden shingles. The structures have a characteristic lack of detail with few special windows or ornamental woodwork. Only the verandahs, which from the 1950s assessment photographs appear on at least 125 of 181 houses from the West Highlands, display any decoration.

While nearby residents worried about Douglas's use of cheaply priced materials and speedy construction, he and his colleagues saw quantity house construction as a natural and necessary extension of the evolution of industrial process.<sup>17</sup> Relying on readily available materials, locally produced fittings, new building techniques such as balloon frame construction, and subdivision of property into narrow lots, Douglas succeeded in covering the land quickly with as many houses as possible. He was a shrewd businessman for not only did he profit by finding a partial solution to the town's housing crisis through the use of local materials and industrial means, but he benefited from insurance on the properties as well.<sup>18</sup> His hard nosed business practices were familiar to the mayor and town council and in 1902 Mayor Curry openly congratulated him on his methods, "Mr. Douglas happens to be an up to date business man full of energy. He has secured enough lumber to build a hundred houses or more for almost nothing."<sup>19</sup>

The house types Douglas chose were simple and fast to construct but they also were viewed by much of the middle class as ideal working class accommodation. As Gwendolyn Wright and others have shown elsewhere,<sup>20</sup> by this time a belief in the benefits of homeownership had firmly taken hold among the middle class of North America. Employers saw it as an insurance of a stable work force for the laborer who owned property was reasoned to have a greater commitment to business and community than his more transient co-worker. A general nervousness, not unlike the sentiments described by Alf Murdock in Amherst, were growing in North America about tenement areas. A newspaper search of *The Amherst Daily News* from 1900 to 1914 clearly indicates that Amherstonians knew of housing reforms being carried out in other cities. Articles appear describing municipal efforts from Halifax to Chicago to clean up tenement neighborhoods and to provide workers with reasonably priced single family dwellings. If nothing else, the spirit of boosterism so prevalent in Amherst at the time would cause citizens to take note of current attitudes and improvements in other places.

Not surprisingly, in Amherst one of the advocates of working class homeownership was J.R. Douglas. Defending his purchase of the exhibition property and his intention to create a subdivision, Douglas argued he was enabling every working man to afford his own home.<sup>21</sup> Less self interested were the housing reform efforts of Miss Chase, an Amherstonian who had been employed as a social worker in other parts of North America. Speaking to the Men's Bible Class of the First Baptist Church, she complained of seeing "dirtier homes and dirtier houses and dirtier children here in Amherst" than she had witnessed elsewhere. She urged her audience to remedy this for on a practical level she argued better houses make better workers. Finally she contended better housing created a better moral environment. "A better home means better children who will become better men and women, physically of course, mentally as a result and morally of necessity."<sup>22</sup>

Specific energies were directed at cleaning up downtown tenement areas. By 1907 Union Row had been cleared of any dilapidated buildings, some of the remaining structures renovated for commercial occupancy and the street widened. As town fathers worked at rehabilitating downtown residential districts, they lauded Douglas's plan to create a whole community for the working class. In 1904 a wooden school was erected in the Highlands. This was replaced in 1912 by a handsome brick structure. Downtown churches opened missions in the neighborhood with leadership supplied from outside the West Highlands. Industries, too, supported the establishment of the neighborhood through the contribution of cheaply priced building supplies to those property owners interested in construction or renovation. Victor Woodworkers and Rhodes and Curry are two companies cited in this regard. One Amherstonian commented, "Everyone who worked for Rhodes and Curry had a hunk of mohogany in their house some place, you know."<sup>23</sup> Through the efforts of investors, municipal government, local churches and organizations, and industry, working class housing was erected on streets throughout Amherst, but particularly in the West Highlands district. Under the direction of upper and middle income Amherstonians, a solution to the working class housing crisis was found in the creation of a neighborhood.

What was the reaction of the workers to the housing created for them? Based chiefly on the response of those in the Highlands, the attitude seems to be one of general acceptance. As assessment records indicate, housing sales were immediate and occupancy rates high. While shortage of accommodation no doubt played a part in this, present day homeowners are positive in their comments on home construction.<sup>24</sup> The



building inspector echoes their satisfaction claiming that the structures exhibit no major building flaws.<sup>25</sup> A strong indicator of acceptance is that Douglas's house types were adopted as a "restricted housing code" for the neighborhood.<sup>26</sup> From all possible plans available, the builders that followed Douglas, with few exceptions, relied on his choices. Fitting well into the architectural patterns of the Maritimes, Douglas's types are similar to a slightly larger end entry house that was already popular in the Maritime region.<sup>27</sup> Equipped with a verandah and a few modern incidentals, they presented potential homeowners with a satisfactory blend of the traditional and modern that fit current expectations for modest housing.

Without exception, residents interviewed—some were third generation Highlanders—spoke favorably about living in the West Highlands. Yet, at least some feel a clear message has always been communicated to them by other Amherstonians that they live on the "other" side of the tracks. One resident comments:

Between this side of the track and the other—you've heard of the other side of the track story—well it was sort of that way. And maybe out of our making too. We like where we were, you know what I mean, in our own environment. Years ago you went to the Highlands church . . . and your life revolved around your own community . . . We are different, whether it's because we were a struggling people, you know, the labor class, eh. It was in work, out of work. If anyone hired you, you didn't eat at their table, you didn't walk in their front door, you know what I mean? And so that built people's character. And it does make us different, we are different.<sup>28</sup>

Ironically, homeowners in the Highlands have turned the sense of separation they feel from the rest of the town to their advantage. The entire neighborhood is viewed by those who live there as what Erving Goffman would term a "back region".<sup>29</sup> The space that extends to the boundaries of the neighborhood is seen as semi-private and this has created a feeling of solidarity and community that is not duplicated in other areas of Amherst.

A financial venture, an extension of industrial development, a means of social control—all are valid interpretations of the development of workers' housing in Amherst. This suggests that many of the same forces influencing housing reform in other parts of North America did not stop at Halifax, but pervaded even the mid-size towns of the region. By focussing on Amherst and other industrial towns of the Maritimes, we will approach a clearer understanding of the effects that industrialization and the growth of workers' housing have had on the entire region's past and present.

## NOTES

- The research for this paper is based on a Canadian Inventory of Historic Building survey and follow up report prepared for the Nova Scotia Department of Culture, Recreation and Fitness in 1983-84. I thank the department for their assistance.
- Amherst is situated approximately three miles from the Nova Scotia-New Brunswick border. Between 1901 and 1906 the town experienced remarkable growth as its total value of production rose from 1 to 4.5 million dollars. From 1901 to 1904, the town's population doubled to almost 10,000 where it has remained ever since.
- The Amherst Daily News**, 19 November 1918.
- The extent of C.J. Silliker and Company's influence on the built environment of the Maritimes has not been fully explored. Established in Amherst in 1885, the firm moved to Halifax in 1906 after their plant was destroyed by fire. On December 30, 1902, the editor of **The Amherst Daily News** commented that Silliker had built more houses in Amherst than all other contractors put together. It is also known that the company was involved in construction in other Maritimes centers.
- Little is known about the origins of Halliday Homes' "Amherst House" for no records appear to survive. Specifications for 11 Amherst Houses to be built in Canso, Nova Scotia in 1923 exist in Guysborough County Museum, Canso.
- Work force estimates for the Amherst Piano factory and other industries mentioned in this paper come from the Industrial History Research card catalogue housed at the Cumberland County Museum, Amherst.
- Alf Murdock, Interview. 9 January 1986.
- Although Amherst was officially a "dry" town during this period, court proceedings and oral accounts show an abundance of liquor available in the town.
- Shootings are reported in **The Amherst Daily News**, 12 April 1901 and June 1910.
- The Amherst Daily News**, 10 April 1901.
- Cumberland County Museum, RG1 Christie, 84-129.
- J. Robson Douglas was born to a prominent Amherst family in 1876. An insurance broker, CPR agent, and holder of large lumbering concerns, he was also director of a host of companies including Nova Scotia Car Works, Oxford Worsted Co., Rhodes and Curry, and Amherst Boot and Shoe. In 1925 he was appointed Lieutenant Governor of Nova Scotia.
- Public Archives of Nova Scotia, RG35-201-A-10-24, Town of Amherst Assessment Rolls 1900-1914.
- The "exhibition property controversy" continues in Amherst Town Council minutes 22 May 1902 - 17 June 1903 and in **The Amherst Daily News** 11 - 25 July 1902.
- Peter Ennals and Deryck Holdsworth, "Vernacular Architecture and the Cultural Landscape of the Maritime Provinces—A Reconnaissance", **Acadiensis**, 10:2 (Spring 1981), p. 94.
- Cumberland County Museum, Town of Amherst assessment photographs, c. 1950.
- In **The Amherst Daily News**, 23 July 1902, the editor writes, "The public still doubts and will continue to doubt that Mr. Douglas's logic is as rotten as some pine lumber that is being hauled Highlandward."
- In **The Amherst Daily News**, 17 July 1902, Douglas claimed his chief interest in building houses was that he might insure them. While the editor responded by declaring this reasoning was "the principle of a man buying a barrel to obtain the bunghole", Douglas stood firm on his position.
- The Amherst Daily News**, 18 June 1902.
- For example, see: G. Wright, **Moralism and the Model Home**, (U of Chicago P, 1980) and **Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America**, (Pantheon, 1981).
- The Amherst Daily News**, 17 July 1902.
- The Amherst Daily News**, 13 May 1912.
- Annie Tingley, Interview, 13 December 1983.
- Two hundred homeowners in the West Highlands were visited during the summer of 1983. None expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of construction of their homes.
- Donald Carr, Interview, 18 January 1984.
- For a full discussion of the application of linguist Basil Bernstein's concept of "restricted code" to vernacular housing, see: Dell Upton, "Toward a Performance Theory of Vernacular Architecture . . .", **Folklore Forum**, 12(1979), pp. 173-98.
- For a discussion of this house type, see: Ennals and Holdsworth, p. 100. It is interesting to note that the authors do not interpret the Type 5 b house as the result of continuous evolution from earlier house form popular in the Maritimes. Rather, they suggest it was reintroduced from the United States in response to the need for workers' housing.
- Pearl Maltby, Interview, 25 November 1983.
- Erving Goffman, **Presentation of Self in Everyday Life**, (Doubleday, 1959), p. 107.

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