

Chapter in Westport's History Ending With Foley Auction

By Deanna Clark - Brockville - The Recorder and Times

Thursday, October 11, 2001

The Foley Estate in Westport is closed and is for sale. It has a prominent place in the village's history. It once housed Westport's first general store. Declan Foley sold everything from eye drops to buggy whips. The shop operated continuously from 1867 to 1945.

Family has had significant impact on picturesque village

Elizabeth Gilhooly walks along the upstairs hallway of the Foley estate, gently touching the delicate wallpaper her ancestors chose more than 134 years ago.

"It's never left the family," she says of the nine-bedroom Victorian home and adjacent commercial property, which once housed the village's first general store.

"Until Now."

The Foley house is one of the oldest homes in the village and the impact the Foley family has had on the quiet little community is legendary. They built St. Edward's Church and anyone who knows the area appreciates the beauty of Foley Mountain, a large expanse of land on the ridge overlooking the Upper Rideau waterway. The family donated the land to the local conservation area authority.

"It's incredibly sad," Gilhooly says now while walking through the spacious living room areas, which once provided shelter to a young Sir John A. Macdonald, a friend of her great grandfather.

Canada's first prime minister often stayed at the Foley house on his way between Ottawa and Kingston.

"It has been such a family gathering place," says Gilhooly, a lawyer and great-granddaughter of the late Declan Finbar Foley, the man who started it all.

But it is now the end of an era for Foley House.

The family has decided to put the home up for sale and this week it moved three truckloads of antiques out of its rooms. The furniture and other articles have been taken to Cornwall for an auction this Saturday, October 13, at the Cornwall Civic Complex.

It is being co-ordinated by Theresa E. Taylor and Associates.

"It's a big turning point," says Naura Gilhooly, Elizabeth's sister, also of Ottawa.

The sisters are helping their mother, Ursula Gilhooly, dismantle the estate. Well-known Westport resident Harold Foley bequeathed the home to his sister Ursula at the time of his death in 1976.

"We have a tremendous amount of memories," says Naura. "In the 25 years we've been directly involved in the house there have been 10 grandchildren born."

"Six generations of my family were born and died here," Naura says, adding you can't help but feel the history all around after so much time has passed.

"The house still had all of its original furniture until this past Tuesday," she says. Despite the passing of time, nothing was removed from the house even as generations have come and gone.

"They were pioneers," she says of her ancestors.

"They ran the general store and sold everything from eye drops to insurance to buggy whips. It was the only local supplier."

Declan Foley immigrated to Canada from Ireland with his sister Bridget in 1836. They were to live with their uncle Rev. Patrick Foley in Ogdensburg, New York. Later Declan would marry Mary Ann Buckley. The couple was drawn to Westport by Declan's brother John, who was a circuit priest.

"He said: 'You've got to get up here. It's beautiful and it looks like Ireland,'" Naura says of how John managed to convince Declan to come to Westport.

It didn't take long for Declan to start a mercantile business. He opened The General Store in 1867. It operated continuously until 1945. Most recently Elizabeth Gilhooly operated the Foley Arms British Pub but she closed it down last month and will resume a career in law.

Declan and Mary Ann had 16 children over 22 years but only seven survived to adulthood.

Foley House is recognized by the Rideau District Museum and it has been used for many fund-raising and charity events.

In 1992, the 125th anniversary of confederation was celebrated with a special toast to Sir John A. Macdonald.

Declan and Macdonald were friends, according to the family. Once Macdonald gave livingroom furniture to the Foleys because his own family didn't like it. This furniture survives and will be at the auction.

The family's contribution to the settlement of Westport is reported in the *History of Leeds and Grenville from 1749 to 1879 - prominent Men and Pioneers*.

"It has been an extremely painful decision to make," Naura says of closing down the house. She has dozens of memories of her family gathering in the kitchen or around the piano in the livingroom.

"But passing it along to another generation just isn't feasible. The time has come," she says.

The Main Street home is on the market and is listed with Pauline Aunger of the Perth and Smiths Falls office of Royal LePage.