



A SOCIAL AND LEGAL HISTORY OF 18 ROCKWOOD STREET,
OTTAWA

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A Social and Legal History of 18 Rockwood Street Ottawa

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City of Ottawa Archives

Ottawa Room, Ottawa Public Library

Table of Contents

Origin of the Neighbourhood, 1823-1911	1
Riverview Property Limited, 1910-1918	6
The Harveys and Pearses, 1912-1966	8
Ovila Blais builds 18-20 Rockwood for John Harvey Cottle, 1911/1912	8
Surely the house must be older than 1912?	10
John Cottle Harvey and Mary Harvey on Rockwood Street, 1912-1928	12
Later Residents, 1966 to Date	13
Sources for more information	14
Index of Names	16
Other Ottawa house histories by Marc Lowell and partners	17

A house history is a living document...it is always evolving – author unknown

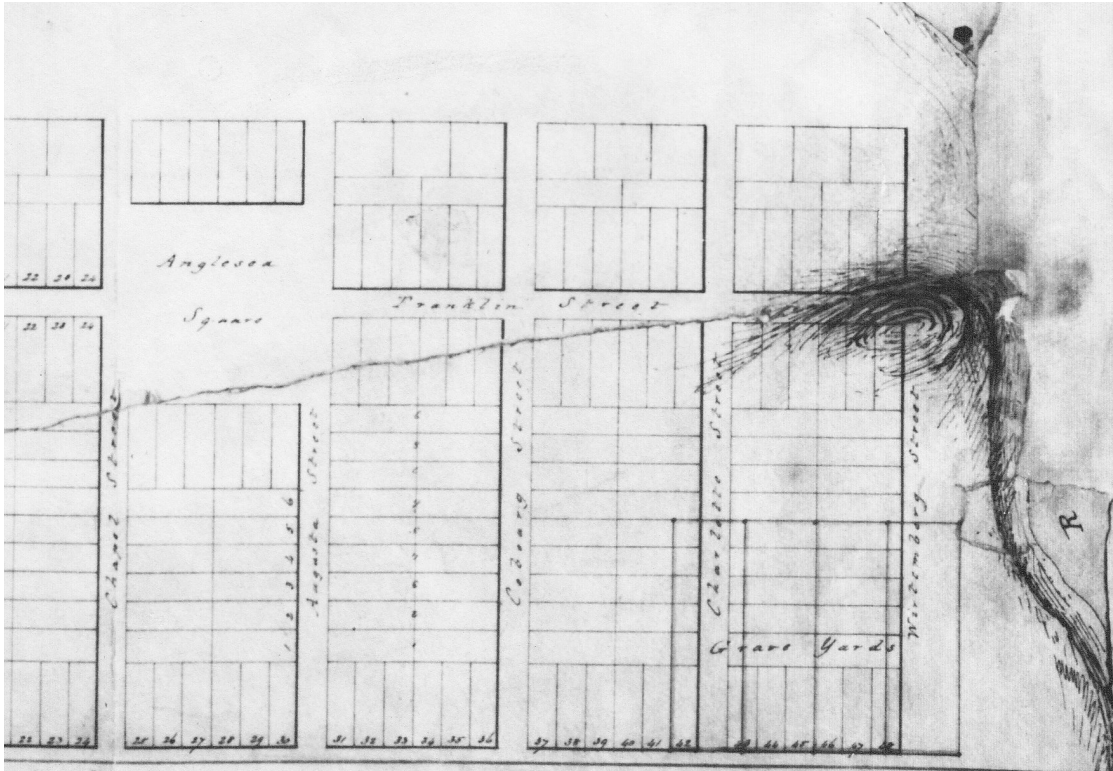
The romantic turrets of 18 and 20 Rockwood Street set it apart from the simpler houses around it, creating an air of mystery. Indeed, the contrast reflects the influence of the First World War: an abrupt change from the nostalgic and optimistic exhibitionism of the Edwardian era, to the focus on modernity, pleasure and efficiency of the twenties.

Origin of the Neighbourhood, 1823-1911

The neighbourhood north of Macdonald Gardens park is part of the original townsite of Ottawa, but the terrain, the economy and the pattern of landholdings combined to maintain it as a semi-rural enclave within the City until the 1920s.

Once the first flush of civic optimism subsided, Bytown remained a large village huddled around the mouth of the Rideau Canal, supporting the limited needs of the military garrison, the timber trade and local farmers. Most of the townsite laid out by Lt-Col By in 1826 remained unoccupied, as did the neighbouring estates laid out by private proprietors like By himself or the Besserers of Sandy Hill.

With the signing of a free-trade agreement with the United States in the 1850s, growth exploded as Bytown (Ottawa as of 1855) became a centre for the export of soft-wood lumber. However, at a time when everyone, except farmers and the very rich, had to walk everywhere and roads were strips of mud, eastern Lowertown was not convenient to the new centres of growth around the Rideau and Chaudière Falls. The land itself did not encourage building: after every rainfall water poured off the high ground to the south and east into often impenetrable hemlock swamps, while the pine-clad hills turned to loose blowing sand as soon as the timber was felled. As late as 1883, when the upper part of the block between Rockwood and Charlotte Streets was sold, the deed



Extract from an undated map of eastern Lowertown showing By's original lot plan before it was modified in 1859. The hatching attempts to show the profile of the terrain, with the peak of Sandy Hill on the bank of the river at Franklin (today Clarence East) and Wurtemberg Streets. (University of Ottawa Archives, Fonds 315 45324)

specified that the sale included all rights to the water power (RO plan 43586 lot 13 North Franklin).

Houses began creeping out along what is now Saint Patrick Street, as a few farmers began renting land for market gardens, and the first Sainte-Anne Church was built in 1868. Nevertheless, no lots were sold east of Charlotte Street until 1871, and townsite lots were not completely sold until 1886.

The land was not entirely vacant: squatters harvested the timber, dug out sand and tilled some of the land without any legal title. Around the area, the City cemeteries (one each for the Roman Catholics, Methodists, Presbyterians and Anglicans) were moved to the present-day site of Macdonald Gardens Park in 1844. While new burials stopped in 1872 with the opening of Beechwood and Notre-Dame cemeteries, the cemeteries remained in a state of increasing deterioration until bought by the City in 1910.

Neighbours found it a convenient place to pasture their dairy cows, and transients and the homeless sheltered among the tumbling grave markers.

In 1879 a new Hôpital Sainte-Anne was built at Heney and Cobourg Streets on a corner of the Roman Catholic cemetery to handle cases of contagious diseases. It replaced an earlier hospital on Cathcart Street burnt down by angry neighbours afraid that the hospital would spread disease in the area. Sainte-Anne was closed down in its turn in 1895. (Brault 1946 pp 242, 308)

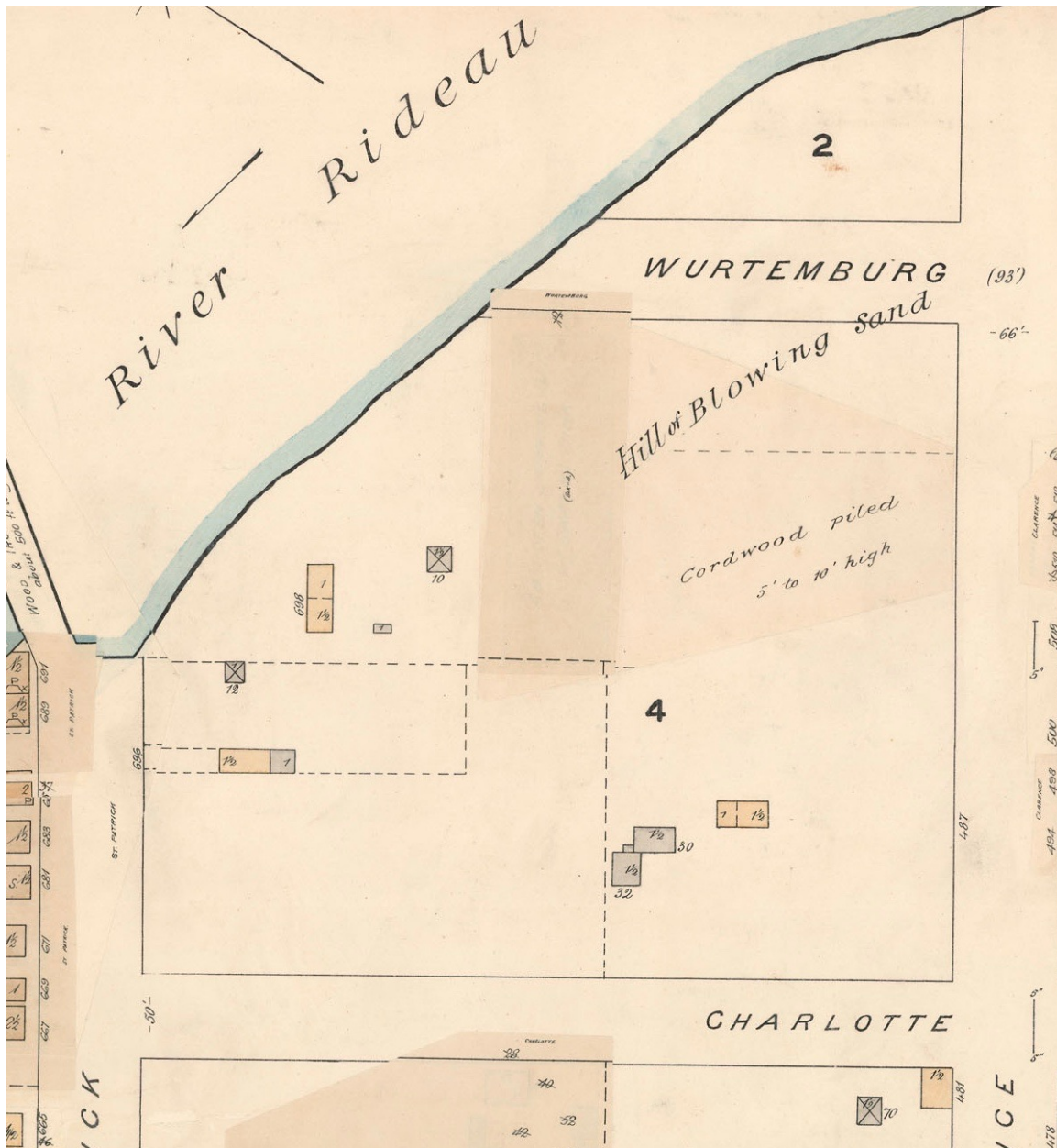
Anglesea Square (today's Jules-Morin Park), planned by Col By as the centre of an elegant neighbourhood, was a particularly bad swamp. In the 1860s it was used as the rifle range for militia training, the men firing east across the square into the steep hillside that rose at that time near Charlotte Street. The future alderman Desjardins, whose family moved to Saint Patrick Street in 1863, recalled picking the lead shot out of the hillside for use as fishing sinkers. This story alone points out how empty the area must have been at that time. (Brault 1946 p 305, Citizen 1926-12-31)

Two landowners, the civil servant John Henry and businessman 'Citizen' John Davis, gradually consolidated all the lots in the area east of Charlotte Street and north of Clarence Street until in 1903 Henry sold his portion to Davis for \$6,500 (RO - abstracts for lots in plan 43586). Henry was strictly an investor, renting out his land, but Davis had a much greater influence on the face of the neighbourhood.

Davis was born in Exeter, England, probably around 1848, the son of a business agent for the Duke of Bedford. John himself entered the Duke's service as a coachman, and proudly remembered that he had driven Queen Victoria during one of her visits to the Duke's estate at Woburn Abbey. This experience as a servant may be behind his later membership in the Workmen's Association, his reputation as "friend of the working man" and prominence in the City-wide Associated Charities (Journal 1888-03-09, 1888-04-18, 1892-08-23, 1896-10-28)

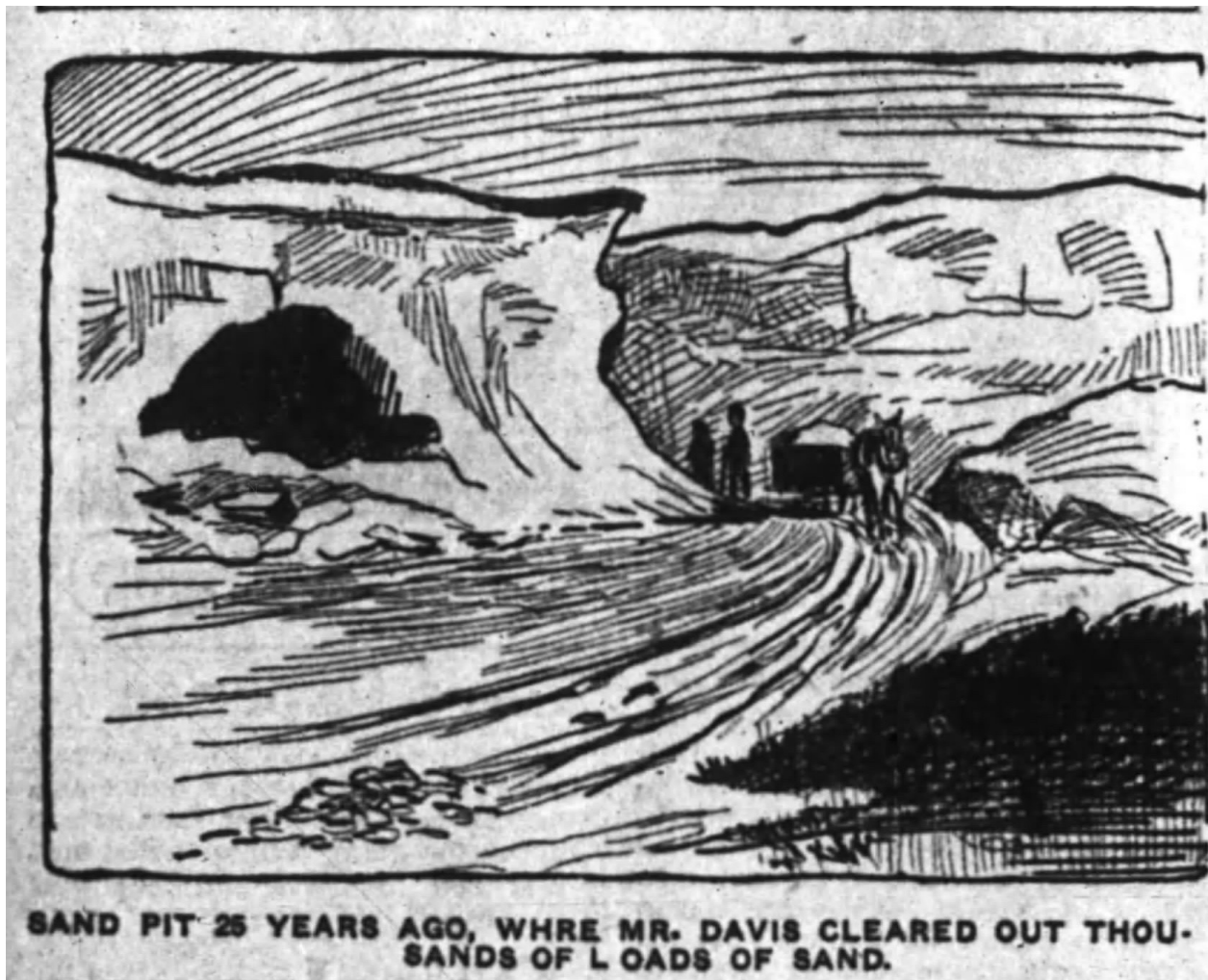
Davis immigrated to Ottawa in 1879 with his wife and family and set up as a coachman. Within a few years he was a substantial citizen, hosting civic dinners at his home at 494 Clarence Street. A recognized community leader in Lowertown, he orga-

nized efforts to landscape Anglesea Square as a public park, and convinced his neighbours to support the construction of drains to carry away the runoff from Sandy Hill



Fire Insurance Map of 1886 revised to 1901, showing the area northeast of Charlotte and Clarence Streets. Note the comments on the blowing sand, and the piles of cordwood. The stub-end of Wurtemberg St was fenced off by the City in 1903 to discourage vagrants. The dotted lines represent wooden fences following the lot lines of the 1859 survey. The fence just to the left of the number "4" marks the south side of lot 1 East Charlotte St. The fence to the left of that outlines lot 38 South Ottawa (St Patrick) St. Comparing this map with the Riverside Property survey below, it will be seen that the current site of 18-20 Rockwood lies partly on lot 38, partly on lot 1. The dark coloured patch just to the left of the word "Hill" marks the site of the Aberdeen Swimming Baths/Skating Rink 1892-1895.

(John Henry was one of his leading opponents). As late as 1911, he was one of the spokesmen (along with Father Myrand of Sainte-Anne's Church) when the Lowertown community lobbied against construction of an isolation hospital on Porter's Island (Journal 1895-08-05, 1895-12-21, 1895-12-31, 1896-10-31, 1896-12-04, Citizen 1911-03-21)



Artist's reconstruction of the land north of Clarence Street in the 1880s (Ottawa Journal 1904)

Many old accounts emphasize the height of the north end of Sandy Hill: a map of 1888 describes the land north of Clarence as a 'hill of blowing sand'. Davis dug out masses of sand: some was used to fill in the swampy land immediately to the west, much of it used in mortar for the stone and brick commercial buildings rising in the growing city. It's a guess how far the hill was dug down: thinking back as a boy, alderman Desjardins was sure the hill was at least 60 metres high; in 1904 Davis himself es-

estimated that he had lowered the hill by 20 metres. One can only suggest that the hill was originally much higher and steeper, and that Davis probably stopped digging when the hill reached a gentle slope safe for construction. (Journal 1898-09-06, 1904, Citizen 1889-07-26, 1926-12-31)

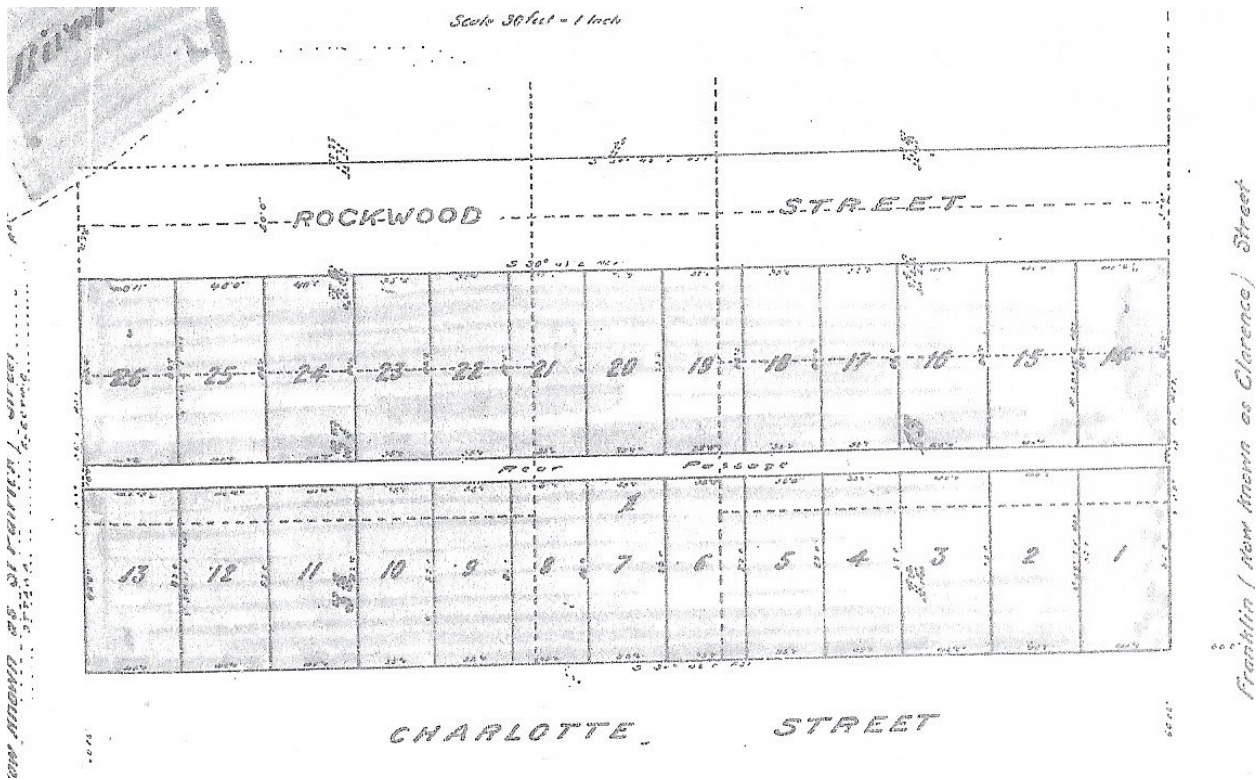
Davis also used the land to stack and dry firewood, which had become his major business, while he and others pastured their horses and stored their wagons on the unused streets. The area, vacant, yet close to town, was also used to dump garbage and sewage, and sheltered the drifters and homeless at the margins of Victorian society. Eventually (1903) the City fenced off the stub end of Wurtemberg Street north of Clarence to discourage vagrants. attracted drifters and the homeless.

Davis made another use of his land: in 1892 he opened the Aberdeen Baths on Wurtemberg Street north of Clarence, the first indoor swimming pool in Ottawa. There was no heating, so it ran as a skating rink in winter until it burnt down in February 1895.

With his purchase in 1903 of John Henry's lots, Davis became sole owner of the land east of Charlotte and north of Clarence. A newspaper story of 1908 noted that Davis was still doing a thriving business (not specified) on the land, but intended to keep it for future sale as residential lots. That day came in 1910, when he sold the land to Riverview Property Limited, a syndicate of investors, for \$45,000. As was common at the time, the buyers mortgaged the property back to Davis for the full selling price. (RO abstracts for plan 45586, Journal 1908-03-21)

Riverview Property Limited, 1910-1918

The ownership of Riverview Property Limited is uncertain: Davis himself may well have been one of the shareholders. However, it was associated with a number of companies promoting development in other parts of Ottawa, possibly through interlocking ownership. One of the associated companies was Rockwood Realty Limited, whose "provisional directors" were listed in 1911 as Cleophas Perron (a hotel keeper at



Riverview Property plan for subdividing the area between Charlotte and Rockwood Streets, 1910. The dashed lines and bold numbers show the lots of the 1859 survey, while the solid lines show the new lots to be sold. Lot 21, the site of 18-20 Rockwood, can be seen just to the right of centre, comprising parts of old lot 1 East Charlotte St, and lots 37 and 38 South Ottawa (St Patrick) St.

65 Clarence Street), Joseph-Albert Faulkner (owner of a clothing and dry-goods store on Dalhousie Street) and Dr. Rodolphe Chevrier (a parishioner at Sainte-Anne).

In two plans filed in 1910 and 1911, Riverview Property created the new Rockwood Street, extended Wurtemberg Street along the Rideau to Saint Patrick Street, and divided the 13 lots of the 1859 survey into 49 lots, which they proposed to sell at \$1,100 to \$1,500 each. These were premium prices for the day, reflecting the closeness to downtown, convenience to public transit (when the alternative for most was to walk) and the pleasant situation. To protect its investment, Riverview required buyers to build no closer than 10 feet from the street line, to lay a stone foundation, to build a house of a minimum of 2 1/2 storeys, and to face the outside with stone, brick or stucco. The sur-

vey included back lanes, a popular feature in townsites of the time, but found in only a few scattered neighbourhoods in Ottawa.

Riverview Property put the 13 lots on the west side of Rockwood Street on the market in 1910, and had succeeded in selling five before the credit crisis brought on by the drift towards the First World War stopped all sales. (Eventually, in 1918, Davis foreclosed and regained ownership of the remaining unsold lots).

The Harveys and Pearses, 1912-1966

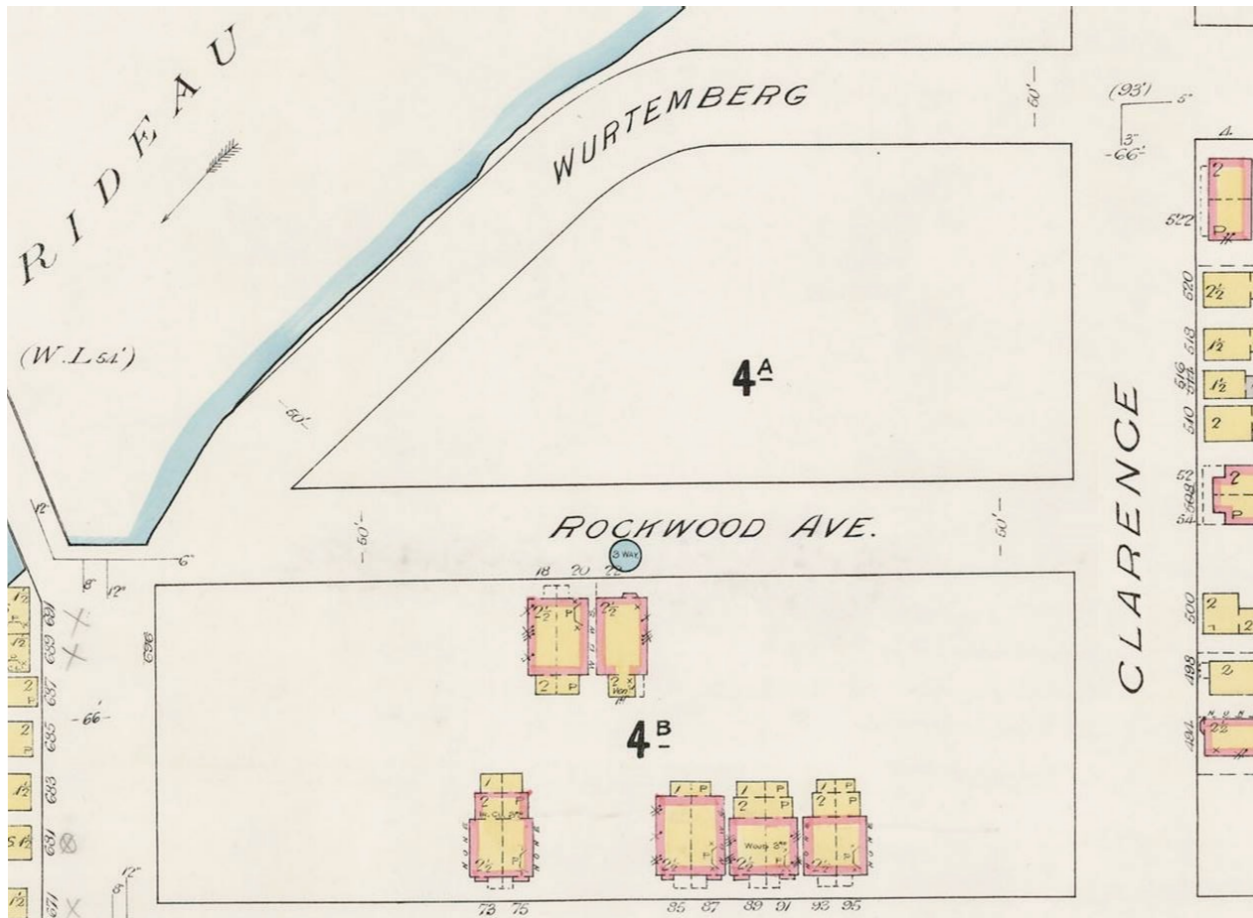
Ovila Blais builds 18-20 Rockwood for John Harvey Cottle, 1911/1912

Josephine Prud'homme and her husband Ovila Blais, a contractor, were the first buyers of lots on Rockwood Street, purchasing two lots (20 and 21) in 1911 for \$1,350 each.

As background a developer of the day was expected to do no more than mark out lots on the ground (a few might do more, but that was unusual). Infrastructure and services were installed by the municipality or private utility companies once buyers had begun to build houses. A buyer who wanted a new house found a suitable lot, then hired a contractor (and perhaps an architect) to design and build the house. As an alternative, a contractor would buy one or more lots in growing areas on credit, then offer the buyer a package deal: a lot, a choice of designs and construction of the house to suit, the buyer taking over the mortgage arranged by the builder. This practice meant the contractor did not have to raise financing for the house until the sale was guaranteed, an important consideration for small builders with limited capital. Sometimes the builder might actually choose the design and begin construction before the house was sold, but this was much riskier.

There is not much to be found about Ovila and Josephine Blais, but from the City Directories, it appears that he was a carpenter who had raised enough money to go into business as a builder. As a young couple without children, they were able to camp out in the houses he was building, moving as each was finished and the buyer moved in.

The 1912 City Directory (information gathered in 1911) records the Blais as living at 20 Rockwood Street, the only residents on the whole street. That same year (March 1912) they sold lot 21 (18-20 Rockwood) to John Cottle Harvey for \$1,500, subject to mortgage and building restrictions (as laid down in the original Riverside Property Sale). As no mortgage was ever registered, the actual price is not clear: \$1,500 cash and assumption of an existing mortgage for \$1,350 (or perhaps more) could be a reasonable (if low) estimate, but then construction of the house was often covered by a separate contract.



Fire Insurance Map of 1901, revised to 1912 (possibly 1915), showing houses existing at that time on the Riverview Property Lands, including 18-20 and 22 Rockwood Street. 18-20 is in its present state (frame house with brick siding, back porches (since demolished) and curves on the roof which appear to indicate the presence of the towers with their shingled roofs).

The City Directory for 1913 records Harvey living at no 18 and the Blais living in a new house at no 22 (on lot 20). Whether the Blais built no 22 completely on spec, or an expected sale fell through, they were unable to maintain control of no 22, and surren-

dered title to Thomas J Nellis or Nelles for \$1: Nellis was Ottawa solicitor for the Quebec Bank (merged with the Royal Bank in 1917), which presumably held the mortgage on the property. Blais' dreams of success were shattered, at least temporarily: by 1918 he is listed as a journeyman carpenter working for a builder in Hull.

Surely the house must be older than 1912?

Although the romantic towers of 18-20 Rockwood suggest that it must be must be far older than records suggest, much of that sensation comes from the fact that all the surrounding houses, except no 22, were built after the Great War, in 1921-1925 or later, at a time when governments and builders were promoting "modern" and "efficient" designs reflecting research into the design of houses that were "healthy" and could be maintained and operated without paid or unpaid domestic help. 18-20 would look quite at home with other houses built for the somewhat extravagant taste of the Edwardian era.¹ No 22, although contemporary with 18-20 represents a simpler style of hip-roofed house common across the City. Still, it is worth examining whether the house might in fact be older than 1912 (e.g. was built before Rockwood Street was laid out).

We can start with the Fire Insurance Map of 1888, revised to 1901. This shows the area east of Charlotte Street as vacant except for a few scattered frame buildings (labelled 487 Clarence Street and 30-32 Charlotte Street). It also shows a fence between lots 58 and "I" of the 1859 survey running across the middle of the future lot 21, i.e. right through the site of 18-20. Given the neighbourhood, it would also be unusual to build a fancy house, especially a pair of semi-detached houses, in the middle of a lot subject to flooding, difficult access to the street, and no access to public services.

A new fire insurance map was prepared in 1901, revised in 1912 and again in 1915 (rather than draw new maps each time, for as long as possible the old maps were simply updated by drawing in new buildings and covering changes and demolitions with darker strips of paper, so that changes could be tracked). The 1912/15 revision is the first to show 18-20 Rockwood, along with 22 Rockwood. This is consistent with the

¹ Compare the Gendron house at Heney and Wurtemberg (1908-09). There were similar towered houses along Rideau Street into the 1970s (all since demolished), and others (albeit somewhat older) can still be found in Sandy Hill.



Enlargement of an aerial photo of about 1922 (based on houses in place on Rockwood Street). Macdonald Gardens, with its bull's-eye lily pond (since removed) is at the bottom, with the Cobourg Car barns to the left, backing on to Augusta Street. Above that, Anglesea Square and Ste-Anne's Church. Rockwood Street can be seen at the upper right, still unpaved and without sidewalks. The towers of 18-20 cast an unmistakable shadow. About this time the City's Architect commented that it would be a long time before the area built up.

information from the Registry Office, which suggests that the other houses were built starting in 1921.

The summary Assessment Roll for By Ward of 1911 (based on information from 1910) is blunt: Rockwood Street is listed as empty of houses². Similarly, the City Directory has no entry for Rockwood Street until 1912, when it lists the Blais as the only residents, at no 20.

² Most assessment rolls were lost when the City Hall burnt in 1931. The printed summaries for 1911 survived, and can be consulted in the Ottawa Room.

Thus the accumulated evidence strongly suggests that 18-20 Rockwood was built in 1911-1912 by Ovila Blais for John Cottle Harvey, likely to a design chosen by Harvey to reflect his arrival as an influential member of the Ottawa business community.

John Cottle Harvey and Mary Harvey on Rockwood Street, 1912-1928

John Cottle Harvey had worked his way up in the hardware business, starting as a clerk with Thomas Birkett on Spark Street and progressing as manager with Thomas Shore at 115 Rideau Street (corner of William), and eventually as senior partner in Grey and Harvey, who took over and expanded Shore's business, with "sample rooms" at 67-69 William Street at the corner of George.

After marrying Mary Pearce in 1901, the Harveys had lived with his in-laws at 15 Elgin Street, before moving to 244 Besserer Street (at the corner of Cumberland) and finally to 18 Rockwood Street in the spring of 1912. It is perhaps a sign of native caution that an established merchant and member of a socially prominent church (All Saints Sandy Hill on Laurier Avenue), chose to build a semi-detached house, with one half rented as a revenue property, but the whole designed in a solid, extravagant style to demonstrate that he had arrived. Similarly, the Harveys summered in the Gatineau, usually with their in-laws, usually at summer hotels in places like Kirk's Ferry, rather than buying a summer place of their own.

The Harveys had begun investing in lots in Sandy Hill even before they moved to Rockwood Street. In 1920-21 they added the lot immediately north of 18-20 to their land and briefly held the next lot after that, selling in 1923 for \$1,200. The street began to build up in the 1920s, but some lots remained vacant into the 1950s.

Harvey continued to prosper, and in 1928 he moved to a much grander house at 324 Laurier Avenue East (now divided into flats), renting out no 18 to Mrs Mary Ward, a widow, and her three grown children. However, in a pattern common in Ottawa at the time, in 1937 or 1938, William Pearse or Pierce, nephew and heir to John Harvey moved into no. 18 with his wife Mabel, and inherited the house on Harvey's death in 1941. The Pearses sold off the extra lot in 1955 for \$3,500, and continued to live in the house until 1966, 54 years after William's uncle had bought it.

Later Residents, 1966 to Date

The Pearses sold to Elizabeth Reid, who rented out both no 18 and no 20. Most tenants stayed between three and seven years, the exception being Rodolfe Bordeleau and his family, who lived in no 18 from 1969 to 1983. During part of this time (1980-1983) a relative, Catherine Bordeleau, lived at no 20. A later tenant recalls a connecting door through the party wall, and it may have been installed at this time. In 1984 the former summer kitchens (enclosed back porches) at both no 18 and no 20 were demolished, and the windows replaced.

Since the very start, ownership of the lot had included use of a right of way to access the back yard. In 1955, the Pearses sold a second right of way, presumably to provide parking for neighbours. In 1983 Mrs Reid had to get a court order confirming her right to use the original right of way. In preparation for selling, in 1993 Mrs Reid had the lot re-surveyed, allowing no 18 and no 20 to be sold separately and clarifying access and parking rights.

Severance accomplished, Mrs Reid sold both no 18 and no 20 in 1993, no 20 to Scott and Deborah Taymun and no 18 to Clinton Laidlaw. Mr Laidlaw resold in 1994 to Robert and Jewel Kennedy, and both houses were in the hands of owner-occupiers, the first time ever for no 20. Together the Kennedys and Taymuns undertook a major renovation, replacing plumbing and wiring, upgrading windows and insulation, painting the brick, installing a firewall between the two units (and sealing up the connecting door!).

Since then, no 18 has passed through several owner-occupiers: Gaylene Schellenberg in 2000, Brian and Caroline Croft in 2007 and Eliot Gillespie in 2013.

Sources for more information

Abbreviations used in footnotes

CD - City Directories

LAC - Library and Archives Canada

RO - Ontario Land Registry Office no 4

VL- Voters Lists for Federal Elections (accessible through [ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com))

Sources

Ancestry.com - a database of family-related information from multiple sources (directories, newspapers, census, birth, marriage and death records, etc.) In some cases records (e.g. census, marriage registers) have been posted as a whole, in other cases individuals post information they have come across. Access by subscription. The institutional version can be consulted without charge at the City of Ottawa Archives.

City Directories - published annually (or more recently biennially) can be consulted on micro-film at the Ottawa Public Library, or in paper at Library and Archives Canada. The Directories list the names of adult residents house-by-house. Older volumes also indicate occupation, sometimes age and relationship, and whether the resident was an owner or renter. Especially in later years, Directory information is not always reliable.

Elliott, Bruce Nepean: the City Beyond. Nepean: City of Nepean, 1991 - A history of the former City of Nepean. useful because much of the former City of Ottawa was at some point within the municipality of Nepean, and much of the development of Nepean was an extension of or response to the growth of Ottawa.

Library and Archives Canada. The website collections.ca provides access to those parts of the collection that have been digitized, as well as introductions to their other collections of material.

Ottawa Citizen - articles from the Ottawa Citizen newspaper are in the Google News Archive, and can be searched through Google, or through a link at the site "ottawahh.com" which provides a better interface.

Ottawa Journal - articles from the former Ottawa Journal newspaper can be searched on Newspapers.com, a subscription-based service which can be consulted without charge at the City of Ottawa Archives and the Ottawa Public Library.

Ontario Land Registry Office 4, Judicial district of Ottawa-Carleton, located at the Court House on Elgin Street. Abstract records trace all instruments (deeds, mortgages and other contracts) registered against a property. All records before the mid-to-late 1990s can be consulted

without charge on microfilm. More recent records are online: instruments can be consulted without charge, but a fee is charged to consult the abstracts.

Taylor, John Ottawa, an Illustrated History. Toronto,; Lorimer, 1986 - a work with more of a focus on themes of urban history in Canada than the Elliott history.

Index of Names

- Blais, Ovila (or Ovide) and his wife Josephine Prud'homme* 8
- Bordeleau, Rodolphe* 12
- Bordeleau, Catherine* 13
- Chevrier, Dr Rodolphe* 7
- Croft, Brian and Caroline* 13
- Davis, 'Citizen John* 3
- Faulkner, Joseph-Albert* 7
- Gillespie, Eliot* 13
- Harvey, John Cottle, and his wife Mary Pearse* 8
- Henry, John* 3
- Kennedy, Robert and Jewel* 13
- Laidlaw, Clinton* 13
- Nellis or Nelles, Thomas J* 9
- Perron, Cléophas* 7
- Pearse or Pearce or Pierce, William (nephew of JC Harvey) and his wife Mabel* 12
- Prud'homme, Josephine, wife of Ovila Blais* 8
- Reid, Elizabeth* 12
- Riverview Property Ltd* 7
- Rockwood Realty* 7
- Schellenberg, Gaylene* 13
- Taymun, Scott and Deborah* 13
- Ward, Mrs Mary* 12

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“Caplans in the Capital”: the Caplan family

Centretown

46 Cartier St (former Carmichael Inn and Spa)
25 Gilmour St
43 Gilmour St (Clarke House)
45 Gilmour St (Fagan House)
59 Maclaren St (Harris House)
660 Maclaren St (available online through johnkingteam.com/blog)
18 Queen Elizabeth Driveway (Haydon House)
25 Somerset St W (Addams House)
300 Somerset St W (Mamma Teresa’s Ristorante)
110 Waverley St
117 Waverley St (available online through johnkingteam.com/blog)

Lowertown

507 and 509 Clarence St
518 Clarence St
524 Clarence St / 102 Wurtemberg St
18 and 20 Rockwood Ave
78 and 80 Wurtemberg St

New Edinburgh

113 Crichton St

Sandy Hill

585 Besserer St
633 Cumberland Street
89 Daly Ave (Gasthaus Switzerland)
27 Goulbourn Ave (available online through johnkingteam.com/blog)
27 Sweetland Ave (available online through johnkingteam.com/blog)

McKellar

842 Byron Ave