

# If Walls Could Talk

Meet Our Neighbours: 7 Rideau Gate predates Confederation and has opened its doors to a parade of world leaders. By Janet Uren

**I**f only the walls could talk. Since 1966, when it became the official guesthouse of the Government of Canada, 7 Rideau Gate has played host to more citizens of the world than have most houses in the nation's capital.

The house has not always been so “worldly,” although it does have a long story to tell. It began life modestly in 1862, when wealthy mill owner Henry Osgoode Burritt built the limestone residence for his family at 8 Pine Street in New Edinburgh. The village, founded in the 1830s to serve the mills and factories at Rideau Falls, began to change in 1857 when Ottawa was named Canada's capital and the first governor-general took up residence at Rideau Hall.

During the house's first century, a succession of notable Canadians lived there. Residents have included the grandson of Philemon Wright, the founder of Hull, Canada's naval chief of staff in the 1940s, and the son of the inventive genius Thomas Ahearn, who in 1882 brought electric light to the streets of Ottawa.

The residence, which came to be known as 7 Rideau Gate in 1906, has matured along with the neighbourhood. In its youth, it was Victorian to its fingertips, wrapped in a deep verandah with white gingerbread trim. Today, with all that exuberant excess stripped away, it presents a dignified, rather Georgian face.

The house (one of six official residences in the capital) is now owned by the National Capital Commission and is operated by DFAIT as a home-away-from-home for foreign visitors and a venue for receptions. Inside, the rooms have been refined over time. Gone are the animal trophies that once lined the walls. Densely patterned wallpapers have given way to glowing pastels. A solidly carved Victorian newel post has yielded to a graceful, curving banister. Modern Canadian art is mingled with older works.

Yet the house retains a sense of antiquity. Large windows, high ceilings and ornamental plasterwork remain, and the marble fireplace still drips with carved vine leaves and glossy marble grapes. As NCC designer Anne Malone-Bianconi pores over paint samples and swatches of cloth in her efforts to create a sense of timeless elegance, she is conscious of the need to balance heritage with comfort and functionality. On the other hand, she must also integrate art and antiques—many of them donated by Canadians through the Canadiana Fund—into the house as a living display of Canadian heritage.

Honoured visitors, as they walk through the doors, need to know at a glance that they have arrived in Canada.

*Ottawa historical writer Janet Uren is a neighbour of 7 Rideau Gate as well as DFAIT, to which she also has family ties. Her late father, Philip Uren, served in Washington in the 1950s; her stepfather, Arthur Broadbridge, held a number of posts, including that of Canada's high commissioner to Zambia. He died last March.*



A picture of the house circa 1906 shows the Lambart family, who lived there from 1884 to 1934.



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## Home away from home

DFAIT acts as the official host at 7 Rideau Gate. The five-bedroom house has welcomed a long list of foreign dignitaries as overnight guests, among them the Aga Khan, Princess Margriet of the Netherlands and former Mexican president Vicente Fox. The residence is also used for luncheons, suppers and receptions, acting as the overflow location for DFAIT's 9th-floor hospitality functions.

On June 6 the Government Guest House—as well as the Pearson Building—will again be part of Doors Open Ottawa, the annual open house of prominent Ottawa buildings.