



This magnificent 162 year old Georgian manor house on River Lot 51 was never intended to be a family home or as a place where happy children frolicked on the lawns. It was built as an institution!

By consequence, it is not reminder of George Davis and his family who owned this land in 1870, or of the masterful skill of its builder, stonemason, Duncan McRae. To historians this elegant house recalls the constraints of Victorian society and their impact on the Red River settlement.

This building housed Matilda Davis' School for Young Ladies - a finishing school for the daughters of the cream of Red River society. Its purpose was education, yes, but with the addition of subjects like French literature, poetry, music and dancing, all the while inculcating the strictest rules of deportment. Being Graduates of Miss Davis' school enhanced a young lady's opportunity for a "good marriage". As such, this school played a key part in the fur-trade society of the Red River and underlined a fracture point that influenced the demise of that society in the 1870's.

When it was built as a "finishing" school for young ladies in 1858, the mansion was known as "Rosefield". It was situated on a patch of prairie overlooking the Red River. No oak trees were to be found on the property in that era. Twin Oak trees played their part in the renaming of "Rosefield" long after Matilda Davis's School for Young Ladies had disappeared.

The Davis family

The school was under the direction of Mathilda Davis (1820 - 1873), older sister of the landowner, George Davis. George and Matilda's father, John Davis, was a famous chief factor of the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC). It is not certain how George came to own the land. His father died while crossing James Bay on his way to his new posting in 1824 - just months after George's birth. John Davis had "clout" among the HBC officers, so it is likely that his family

would have received the grant of land at Red River as a sort of recompense for the loss of their father/ breadwinner. One could only imagine the trip that the Widow and her infant son would have to make from Hudson Bay to Red River with a York Boat brigade. But where were John Davis' daughters? In 1822, John had taken furlough in England. With him, he took his youngest daughters away to England to be raised in the "proper" genteel fashion. Elizabeth, was 8, but Matilda was just 2 years of age.

Matilda learned all of the Victorian womanly arts. As an "orphan", far from her own family, she lived as a "guest" in the homes of relatives and as a resident in boarding schools. Her behaviour and deportment were crucial to her acceptance by her hosts. The value of good manners, pleasant erudite conversation and cultured speech were impressed upon her from an early age. When she arrived at Lower Fort Garry at age 20, in 1840, she was the answer to the the officers' prayers - a woman who could teach their daughters to become high class Victorian ladies.

Miss Davis' School For Young Ladies

Matilda Davis' school was not the first women's-only school in St Andrews. That honour goes to the girls' school established by Mrs. Ann Cockran in the 1830's. That school taught mostly domestic skills and religion. It was part of the plan by the missionaries, Ann and Reverend William Cockran to "civilize" and to "christianize" the daughters of Métis and Indigenous families. Miss Davis' school was very different because of its purpose, who its students were and the sort of education delivered there.

This school was the product of the anxiety that the officers of the HBC had for the futures of their Métis daughters. This elegant building speaks volumes about the values and attitudes in 19th century St Andrews society. In its day, it was a powerful reminder of the differences between classes and of the racial intolerance that governed society, not only in St Andrews but throughout the British Empire.

At a time when between 80 and 90% of families were products of blends of European and Indigenous marriages, questions of race and class affected nearly every Métis family in Red River. The prejudicial attitudes by incoming British clerics and HBC officers led to increasing discord and social disruption among the people of Red River.

In Miss Davis' school, discipline and etiquette permeated the curriculum. In addition to basic literacy and numeracy, French, Music, dancing and conversation were subjects taught by Miss Davis and her various aides and instructors. Among those, Miss Davis employed included her own elder sister, Nancy, who was in charge of the household duties such as cooking and cleaning. Specialist teachers such as Mrs. William Kennedy, who had been "finished" in England (and had spent time in the entourage of Lady Franklin), taught French, drawing, music and dance. At times, Mrs Ann Cockran, who had not been to finishing school, but had a strong grasp on religion and the core subjects, was brought in when needed.

The school accommodated 40 girls, some were residents and others, who lived nearby, were day students only. The school was not open to every girl, only those whose fathers could afford the fees, the necessary books, wardrobe and transportation to Red River. The cost for one year varied depending on whether one was a resident, a part time or a day student. The annual £130 tuition for a resident was 20 times what a labourer was paid at Lower Fort Garry. The school drew only the daughters and granddaughters of the wealthy, for it was they who had the best "prospects" for a "good marriage" - a marriage into the elites of English or Scottish society.

Each Sunday, the girls walked in a column of two's from the school to St Andrews church for services. After church, they were sometimes invited to the Rectory for tea. There, they would engage in polite conversation with other invitees such as HBC officers, clerics or visiting dignitaries. Mostly the girls would practice their conversational skills or remain silent with perfect posture. Miss Davis' girls were easily recognized by their comportment (walking as if they had eggs in a basket on their heads), their immaculate grooming and their dress.

These Sunday afternoon teas at the Rectory were real tests for Miss Davis and her young ladies. If any of her girls misbehaved or uttered a word out of turn, it reflected on Miss Davis and her school. Social etiquette and "cultural" achievement were stressed so that they could outweigh the effect of being native-born. Discipline at the school was strict.

Life for Miss Davis must have been very stressful. The slightest fault by any of her girls could stir a controversy about her, the quality of the education she was offering and the way she was spending the tuitions she collected. The rumour "mill" in Red River ground out a constant flow of innuendo and gossip and had destroyed lives in the recent past (see The Corbett affair, the Foss-Pelly trial and the fate of poor Sarah Ballenden, a graduate of the school).

Miss Davis is likely to have had many suitors. Unlike many of the British governesses and teachers who came to the Red River settlement, she never married, however tempting the offers were. While some of the English imports married rich old men (the stories of Ann Armstrong and Mrs Lowman, teachers who married the very wealthy James Bird, described as an "old shrivelled bag of dry bones"), Matilda Davis devoted herself to her teaching and to the management of the school.

Marriages in Red River

"Marriages" (a la facon du pays) between Indigenous women and British men had been actively encouraged during the early fur trade period - such connection often guaranteed successful trading partnerships with indigenous bands (and brought happiness for lonely employees).

As times and attitudes changed (largely due to the influence of the missionaries of the Church of England) the fur trade elite began discarding its indigenous and Métis wives in favour of English and Scottish brides (note the marriages of Simpson, Finlayson and Hargrave). This left many of the company's officers with mixed blood children for whom prospects of "good" marriages were poor.

Many of these "gentlemen of the fur trade" held to the traditional custom that a daughter was her father's chattel. A daughter was his property until she was married off to someone who could bring advantage to the father's estate. Being related to a First Nations mother was of no advantage in British society.

As the influence of the Church of England increased in the mid-19th century Red River, the Cockrans' earlier pioneer schooling lost its democratic flavour. Children of the elite were no longer to be taught in the presence of boys and girls from the working class. The developing racism screened out "mixed bloods" both from advancement in the HBC for boys and from advantageous marriages for girls. To overcome this impediment to advancement for their much-loved daughters, fathers sought to give their daughters a high level of social and cultural education.

The cost of the building, £1200, was donated by the English and Scottish officers of the HBC. By so doing, they not only avoided the staggering cost of sending their daughters back to

Britain for “finishing”, they kept their beloved daughters nearer to them. Though most of these gentlemen could scarcely bear to part with their children, they believed, with good evidence, that their Métis backgrounds might make them unacceptable in British society.

The goal of this local “finishing” school was to make their mixed blood daughters more “marriageable” within colonial society. By emphasizing qualities that only ladies of “good breeding” and education would have, they hoped to overcome the prejudices that racism and classism engendered.

Many of Matilda Davis’s students married well, as had the girls whose fathers, a generation earlier, had sent them to Britain for their schooling. The arrangement at Miss Davis’ school was more economical, but the girls paid a price. They became divorced from their mothers’ and their family’s native roots.

The attitudes they carried into their marriages often perpetuated racial and class prejudices that had been exposed in the Red River settlement during the Foss-Pelly trial and the Corbett affair. When the new settlers flowed into the new province of Manitoba, Miss Davis’ girls found it easier to deny any connection to their Métis ancestry in order to find husbands among the newcomers.

When Matilda Davis died at a fairly early age, in 1873, her loss was mourned by former students across the Northwest. She had done her best to transform the lives of her students and make them into young ladies of refinement. However, as Sylvia van Kirk points out in her ground-breaking book, *Many Tender Ties*, (1989), the effect, even of schools like Miss Davis’ School for Young Ladies, which had hundreds of Métis students over its years of operation, was of little help in improving the futures of its “young ladies”. Even though the girls were assimilated into British norms and customs, connection by race to the fur-trade culture was deemed as less than acceptable.

The school struggled on without Miss Davis for a few years, but was eventually taken over by the Anglican Church. As Winnipeg grew into a thriving metropolis, the school was moved toward the centre of the diocese. It eventually became the private school known today as Balmoral Hall. The school house became a private dwelling, as it is today.

As Sylvia van Kirk says about the marriage patterns in the Northwest in the Confederation period: “ it was the mixed-blood children of the fur-trade elite who particularly aspired to assimilate into their fathers’ world” because “it was their social and economic status that was most threatened by the advent of white (British/ Canadian) settlement (p.238)”. At the conclusion of her research, Ms van Kirk states “ as the tenets of British culture gained hold in the West, the traditions and practices of fur-trade society were demeaned and forgotten(p.240)”

A greater loss, perhaps, was that because “ prejudice gained hold to such an extent” that it ended the inter-racial marriages which had brought harmony and mutual respect to the early settlement. With the social approbation “ potential for racial integration was lost” (p.242).

The discrimination against Métis or Indigenous background, especially after the Northwest Rebellion (1885) led to the extinguishment of links to the earlier society not only among the new elites of Manitoba, but in government, in business and in social interactions. As a result, even well to do Anglo-Métis citizens, such as the family of Captain Kennedy, were gradually isolated and driven into poverty or forced to move westward.

George Davis (1824-1904) was a man of exceptional talent.

George came rather late to a career in the HBC at age 28. It was his ability to speak Cree, the language of his mother, and other indigenous languages that got him a job as an interpreter in 1852. It is possible that the job was arranged for him by one of his father's old friends in the company. George was the son of a well-known and highly-regarded Chief Factor, John Davis. Unfortunately, in 1824, when George was just 5 months old, John drowned crossing James Bay to take up a new posting.

George must have proven his worth as an employee because by 1855, he was earning £35 per year, several times what an average HBC worker would earn. In that year, he married Catherine Birston, daughter of a HBC family that lived in Mapleton down river from Lower Fort Garry. In 1862, George became the interpreter and store keeper at the "Stone Fort". A few years later, he was appointed the Chief Clerk (essentially, the accountant and paymaster). At the time of Manitoba's confederation, he was the Chief Factor at Lower Fort Garry, a position he held until his retirement in 1873.

George Davis was an exception to the long-standing policy that the HBC had about not promoting Métis workers into prominent positions within the company. In just 15 years, in the highly structured hierarchy of the HBC, he rose from little more than a clerk to become a Chief Factor. There are few such examples in the annals of the HBC. His father would have been proud, even astonished!

George retired from Lower Fort Garry and went back to his farm.

George bought a second River Lot. He purchased Lot 61, immediately south of St Andrews Rectory. In short order, George proved to be as effective a agriculturist as he had been an officer of the HBC. In the 1881 census, at age 56, he is listed as the father of 7 children, including an 11 month old daughter. His wife, Catherine was listed as 44 years old.

Two signs of his affection for his family are in the census as well. One is that his older sister, Nancy (age 74) is registered as living with his family. And the second indication of devotion, is the fact that the name of his oldest daughter was Alice Matilda in honour of his sister (by then deceased older sister, Matilda).

George went on to live into the twentieth century. Most of his children married into families that lived nearby along River Road. They formed the next generation of original St Andrews HBC families: Sinclairs, Truthwaites, McLennans and Hodgsons. Descendants moved into new communities such as Clandeboye, Petersfield, Lockport and Selkirk and pioneered the newly drained St Andrews Marsh. Several of George's daughters moved west to Alberta and Saskatchewan with Ontario-born husbands.

For more information about the Davis family go to redriverancestry.ca or either of the "Beyond the Gates of Lower Fort Garry" centennial books (either the 1981 or the 2000 editions).