

APPENDIX A

Red Row Building History

Coal mining in the Sydney Mines area began in earnest by the late eighteenth century, under a British government enterprise directed by the Duke of York. However, in 1827, a private corporation—the General Mining Association—took over the rights to coal mining in Cape Breton. By 1828, the GMA began to develop the Sydney Mines operations, managed locally by Richard Brown, who built a substantial brick house—later known as “The Beeches”—on a hill near the one of the town’s mine shafts. A number of row housing units for workers and craftsmen were constructed throughout the town, including what would become known as Red Row.

The building history of Red Row remains shrouded in mystery, given the meager documentary research that has been completed on the structure. To date, there is no direct evidence of the actual year that Red Row was constructed, although some local traditions attribute its building to coincide with Brown’s house, around 1828. Others have argued that a mid-nineteenth century date for the Row may be possible. While the building has not yet been precisely dated, nonetheless Red Row remains a unique architectural legacy of the early coal mining landscape.

In the evolution of the Sydney Mines coal mining built heritage, a number of rows of what were likely workers’ housing were erected in different locations in the town. These were possibly of wood frame construction, likely one-room, one and one-half story dwellings, with a sleeping loft above. These rows are depicted on the A.F. Church map of 1877, and the two insurance atlases of the town from 1904 and 1914. A local publication by the Sydney Mines Historical Society discusses these early rows—although there is no attribution to sources of information. Several were close to the mine working at Sutherland Corner; names mentioned are King William Row, Cahill’s Row, Scalping Row. In the 1830s, rows were built near the mine shaft on Main Street and Convent Street. These rows included Blue Row, Madeaon’s Row, and three others. It was in this area, as well, that Red Row was built. And this publication states that Red Row was a later build, likely in the 1860s.

The original Red Row house form was a series of one and a half story single room units, what architecturally would be referred to as a hall house or cabin plan—with a multifunctional cooking and living space on the ground floor. Above would be a half-story sleeping loft—as evidenced by the floor-level eyebrow windows that would permit light in this upper half-story. The surviving row contains 12 units, with an end unit (likely unheated and being used for storage) having been removed. Recent architectural investigation indicates that the row was built in at least two phases, a break in the brick coursing clearly indicates where several later units were added onto an earlier section.

A major renovation occurred ca. 1900, when the roof was raised to accommodate a full second story, permitting more sleeping space. It could be at this time, as well, that rear kitchens were added. The design of this enlarged form (as it appears today) may well have been modeled on new rows that were being built ca. 1900 in other nearby mining towns—Red Row being

enlarged to resemble the form of the more modern company houses of the time. When originally built, the units had only a single entrance door on the façade wall; the rear door (as well as another window or door) was later punched through the back wall—possibly during this renovation. It is not inconceivable that Red Row was renovated after the GMA properties were sold to the Nova Scotia Steel and Coal company, and the Dominion Coal Company in 1900, modeled on the new housing being built by NSSC at the time.

In terms of the building fabric, the origin of the brick used in Red Row is still unknown. The brick may be local. There was a fledgling brick yard in Sydney in 1831, and Richard Smith had established an early (ca. 1830) brick-making operation for the GMA operation in Stellartown. Or the brick may have come as ballast from England. The brick used in Red Row was hand-formed in molds—rather than machine-made. Machine-made brick became more widespread ca. 1840 in the United Kingdom and North America, but hand-made brick was still being made after that date. Red Row was built using a brick bond that is known as a common bond—one course of headers usually followed by three courses of stretchers. The walls, however, are three bricks deep—an unusual brick bond pattern requiring further investigation. The bricks used in Red Row are of relatively mediocre quality, with a number of “inclusions”—or impurities in them. The brick is also of a lower quality than that used in Richard Brown’s house, and of different dimensions.

To date, no historical research has been done on the other rows that once stood in Sydney Mines. Thus, one cannot say definitely what materials were used for these other rows—whether frame or brick. The fact that no other examples seem to survive points to some type of wood frame construction, but this is only speculative. Some architectural evidence from Red Row, however, points to the fact that this structure exhibited built features beyond the minimal construction standards one might expect in row housing for mine workers. The fact that it was made of brick—when the majority of houses in the community were using wood—in itself points to a higher status dwelling. But there is other evidence. Curved brick arching over the window lintels, dressed window sills made from limestone with rusticated edges, large cut limestone blocks used for the foundation, decorated brick dentils at the roof plate level—all these are finishes beyond necessity. The use of brick—combined with all of these architectural features—indicates a structure that likely had a more refined hierarchy of finish than the rows no longer extant.

Understanding the building history of Red Row is of great importance to Sydney Mines and the greater Cape Breton industrial area. Mining company houses are the important legacies of the industrial landscape that characterized most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Cape Breton. Houses are historical documents—just as are diaries and government records. And the most important of these documents—including the architectural record—must be maintained so that future generations can interpret the evidence these structures hold. In many ways, Red Row remains unique—regardless of whether its construction dates from ca. 1830 or ca. 1860. Red Row holds within its walls information about the evolving nature of coal mining in Cape Breton, as changing space in the house mirrored changes in family relations, work patterns, community dynamics. The nature of living in row housing in a single-occupation economy mirrored not only the urban configurations of the industrial European homeland, but even the

earlier nucleated medieval agricultural landscape, where peasants often were housed in row housing owned and operated by the local landed gentry.

Red Row remains unique among Cape Breton's surviving built heritage. Where single room row housing was once widespread, these twelve units make up the last surviving long row in Sydney Mines—and perhaps much of Cape Breton. Red Row speaks to the emergence of mining culture in the region, its evolution over time, and the different ways that culture was interpreted by both mine owners and operators, and the families that worked for them. Much architectural and documentary research remains to be done on Red Row. But from the initial work that has been conducted to date, there is no doubt of the importance of this structure to Cape Breton's history. And to the larger history of Nova Scotia, and Canada itself. Red Row speaks of Canada's early industrial culture, and how that culture informed the daily life of people who lived here.