

By: Bill Stevens; originally published in September 2006 Newsletter

An old house located at the end of Sparkes Street was scheduled to be demolished, but a group of heritage enthusiasts convinced the owners that the house should be saved. Thus in January of 1981, Heritage St. Catharines was formed to investigate the feasibility of preserving and restoring the historic May-Clark-Seiler House. The group set about fund raising and seeking support for the preservation, even Pierre Berton, then Chairman of Heritage Canada became an Honourary Patron. In order to create an awareness of the project, the home's history was researched and it quickly became apparent that it could be the oldest home in St. Catharines and perhaps one of the oldest in the province. William May, of German descent, a member of the Indian Department, a private in Butler's Rangers and a United Empire Loyalist emigrated to Upper Canada from New York State in 1783. He petitioned for and was granted (by Crown patent) a 700 acre tract of land in the wilderness of Grantham Township. Here, about 1790, he built a home for his family. William May died in 1827, but the family remained there until 1838, when his grandson William May Junior sold the house to Colonel John Clark, a former officer of the Lincoln Militia and a member of the House of Assembly at York, who was then Collector of Customs at Port Dalhousie. Col. Clark renamed the house and farm Walnut Dale Farm. He died in 1862 at the age of 79 years and is buried in Victoria lawn Cemetery. The house had a number of owners over the next 100 years, when in 1961, Herman and Inge Seiler bought it. In 1979, the Seilers built a new house on the south side of the old home and decided to remove it. However, they understood that the home was old and when approached by the group of heritage enthusiasts, gave them permission to come up with a plan to preserve it. As Heritage St. Catharines set about the task, even to the point of having an historical plaque made, fire struck on October 30, 1984 and the dreams of preserving this unique piece of our heritage was destroyed. The community and especially the members of Heritage St. Catharines were devastated by this unfortunate turn of events. Time passed, the plaque

that was to be placed at the restored home was forgotten in the home of a committee member, only to resurface 21 years later, having been moved once and then placed in the hands of a local man very interested in family history. He realized what it was and contacted Arden Phair at the museum, who picked it up and took it to the museum. Arden advised several former members of the Heritage St. Catharines group that he indeed had the long forgotten plaque. It was decided that even though the home was gone, the site, the history of the home and the efforts of the group that had almost reached their goal needed to be remembered and thus almost 22 years after the fire, the plaque unveiling and historical commemoration took place on Friday, August 18, 2006. A very large crowd attended the presentation by the City of St. Catharines Heritage Committee, including descendants of the families that had lived there. The plaque unveiling was done by John Beverley Clark, Johan May, Vanessa Peters and Lynn Corbey. Following the programme at #3 Sparkes Street, there was a tour of the small May Family Cemetery located south and across the ravine from the house location, hidden behind cedar trees at 18 and 22 Ziraldo Road. A reception followed at another former May home, which is now the Mayholme Foundation Family Research Centre located at 525 Ontario Street. Here, descendants of the May and Clark families were able to look at their family trees, while guests mingled about and enjoyed a peach and cake dessert. A marvelous day and a tribute not only to our past but to those who made the effort to try and preserve our heritage.