



Province House
National Historic Site

Stone by Stone Province House Conservation Project

Fall 2025



Province House National Historic Site is currently undergoing an extensive conservation project. Built more than 175 years ago, Province House is a complex building, and its conservation presents a unique challenge of rehabilitating the structure while respecting its character-defining heritage elements.

The Government of Canada is proudly investing in the long-term preservation of Province House so it can be enjoyed by future generations. For more information about Province House, please visit our website: parksCanada.gc.ca/provincehouse

Quick Tips for Visitors

Even before the building re-opens to the public in 2026, you can get a fascinating “insider” view of the conservation process by viewing the Province House conservation project video series, featuring:

- Holland College partnership
- Exterior masonry walls
- The search for Island stone
- Portico work
- Interior masonry

And now...a behind-the-scenes peek at traditional plastering!

This periodic newsletter showcases the stories of Province House and the efforts being made to save this iconic piece of our cultural heritage. You can also read featured articles from previous issues of ‘Stone by Stone’ or download PDFs here:



Scan for previous Stone by Stone articles

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Scan to access conservation project video series

Fun Fact: Since 2015, over 1000 people have worked toward the conservation of Province House!



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Ongoing conservation work at Province House National Historic Site

The conservation project is now in the homestretch on-site. It has been “all hands on deck” to complete this milestone conservation project. As the second oldest active legislature in Canada, the building has served as the centre of public life on PEI since 1847.

The focus this year has been on preserving the character defining elements of Province House while bringing the building into the 21st century. The scope includes fit-up work such as the interior finishes as well as upgrades to the operational systems: fire and safety; information technology and audio-visuals; plumbing and electrical; heating, ventilation and air conditioning. Numerous improvements to universal accessibility are being implemented during the conservation of Province House, including exterior building access, universally accessible washrooms, and lighting and signage improvement to assist the visually impaired.

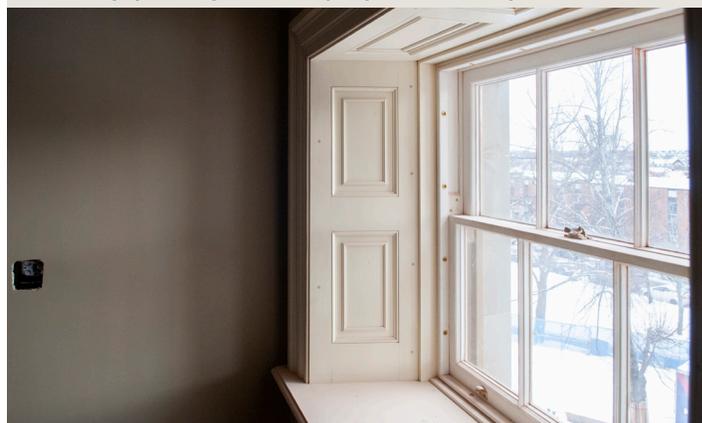
Building materials being loaded in through window in portico



Currently the plastering, painting, and reinstallation of trim is being completed sequentially, starting with the third floor and working down towards the first floor. As the three coats of plaster are completed

in each room, the room is then painted and any window or door trim that was dismantled and stored is reinstalled, while other trim is uncovered and conserved in-situ. Installation of conserved plaster decorative elements (ceiling medallions, cornices, fleur-de-lis, and other elements) follows this schedule too. Historic light fixtures are also being re-installed. Read on for features on the plaster work and trim conservation.

Plastering, painting and trim progress, room by room



Details on traditional plastering are also featured in the newest video in the Province House Conservation video series.



Meanwhile, work on the basement continues. Work has been completed on underground connections for the services for the building (electrical, sewer lines, domestic water, and storm sewer system).

Limewashing in the basement protects the masonry and brightens the space

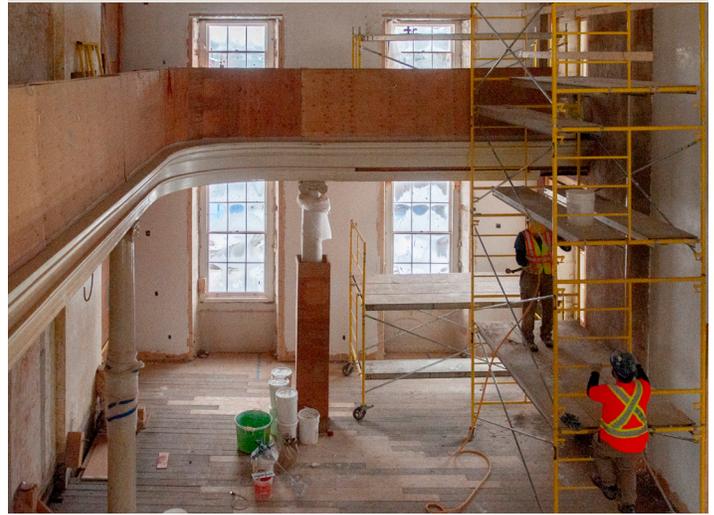


The sandstone walls in the basement have been lime-washed. Now that the basement floor has been lowered to accommodate modern facilities, accessible and inclusive public washroom facilities, as well as storage facilities, are being installed. Mechanical and electrical service rooms are almost complete, with commissioning to follow. Floor and wall tiling is underway.



Geothermal wells connected, ready to heat and cool the building

Plastering some of the taller walls required scaffolding



Progress continues on other facets of the project. The installation of the geothermal heating/cooling system and the sprinkler system are both now complete. Exterior landscaping is underway, including the accessibility ramp.

Goat hair, ‘war brushes’ and ‘devil floats’: A glimpse into the art of traditional plastering

One of the final stages in the conservation of Province House is plastering the walls and ceilings. Dennis Kwan, conservation architect and Built Heritage Advisor for Parks Canada explains. “As beautiful as the inner island sandstone is, it was not considered an interior wall finish that was appropriate to this kind of building at its level of grandeur and refinement at the time. So, what was a traditional interior wall finish? That’s where lath and plaster comes in.”

A rare skillset

Traditional plastering involves a specialized and increasingly rare skillset, as drywall has generally replaced plaster as an interior finish for walls and ceilings. In fact, the firm brought in to handle the plastering, Heritage Grade, has hired a crew of ten traditional plasterers from around the globe—including Ukraine, Botswana, Scotland, Ontario, and PEI.



Kieran Reid, Lead Traditional Plasterer and Foreman with Heritage Grade

Kieran Reid, the Lead Traditional Plasterer on the Province House project, completed his 4-year apprenticeship in Scotland, then worked at plastering in New Zealand, and has been in Canada since 2016. To his knowledge, this is the largest traditional plastering project in Canada. As well as employment opportunities, a large project like this provides training opportunities especially for apprentices on the team. This project is bolstering these rare skillsets within the Canadian workforce.

The basic process

Reid explains the basic process for plastering the walls and ceilings. First, a metal lath or stiff mesh is attached to the studs. Traditionally, wooden lath would have been used, but the metal lath has been used to add strength and longevity.



Metal lath adds strength and longevity

The first coat of plaster – called the ‘scratch coat’ – is quite rough. It is composed of sand and lime with goat hair mixed in. Traditionally, horse-hair was used, but goat-hair is more available commercially now. This layer goes directly onto the lath and is left to cure naturally for 5 to 7 days, as there are no polymers or curing agents added. As the plaster cures, humidity and temperature need to be carefully controlled.



Laying on the third coat of plaster



Left: Sand used in traditional plaster mix; Right: Goat hair used in first coat of plaster

The second coat – called the ‘brown coat’ – levels and fills most of the dips and bumps and you begin to see the final shape of the wall or ceiling. Lime and sand are mixed for this coat; many tonnes of Island sand are being incorporated into the walls and ceilings of Province House. Before curing the plaster, workers run a wooden ‘float’ over the surface to smooth it, and then a ‘devil float’ is used to create swirls which provide a ‘key’ – a roughened surface for the third (and final) coat to adhere to – preventing delamination.

Advantages of traditional plaster:

So why use traditional plastering? First, it conserves the heritage value of the building. It recreates a look and feel most similar to the original, from the smooth, cool walls and ceilings to the curved cornices and elaborate medallions.



Sam Van Esch, Traditional Plasterer with Heritage Grade



Curved ceiling showing second coat with swirls which provide grip for the third coat

Sam Van Esch, a plaster worker from Guelph, Ontario, points out some the other advantages of traditional plaster. “The traditional finishes are really breathable,” Van Esch explains. The natural lime and sand mixture and the absence of a vapour barrier allows moisture and air to pass through, which is beneficial for the longevity of both the exterior stonework and interior layers. The breathability is healthier for the building and the air quality is healthier for people inside the building.

After another curing period of 5 to 7 days, the ‘finish coat’ is applied. It takes two days to apply the lime and gypsum and polish it with a trowel and ‘war brush’. This polishing not only makes it visually smooth but also compacts and strengthens the plaster. The finish coat cures for 5 to 7 days and then the ceiling is ready for the ‘enrichments’ or decorative elements – cornices and medallions, fleur-de-lis and scrolls – to be installed (see “Decorative Elements” in Stone by Stone, Issue 9). This three-coat process results in plaster that is almost 3cm thick on some walls.

Then there’s simply the aesthetics. “ I find plaster to be more beautiful,” Van Esch says enthusiastically. “I’m drawn to it because – for most of my life – I’ve really enjoyed smooth, fine surfaces... I’m very passionate about it.”

Fun Fact: 40 tonnes of sand was used in replastering the interior of Province House. That’s roughly the same weight as a grown humpback whale.



Emma Johansson, graduate of Holland College Heritage Retrofit Carpentry program, who turned her talents toward plastering and now works with Heritage Grade

Personal touches:

Emma Johansson — a woodworker-turned-plasterer from Ontario — enjoys the fluidity and creativity of the medium. “I find it really artistic, it’s very fluid material that we get to work with, and everybody can have their own creative spin...”

Reid notes, “At different times of the day there’s going to be a lot of light that’s going to expose the trowel work, and you can see different

people’s trowel marks and how they’ve put their personal touch to the ceiling...it sounds not quite perfect, but it’s not supposed to be perfect. It tells a story.”

Below, left: Original plaster leaf. **Below, right:** Recreation of this leaf, crafted by Emma Johansson, Holland College Heritage Retrofit Carpentry graduate, who shifted to working on plaster. Her instructor noted that she purposefully took some artistic license to give it her personal touch. Traditionally, several different artists created slightly differing moulds for the leaves in a single plaster medallion.



Above: Site worker pointing to one of the leaves similar to the one Johansson used above.

To repair or recreate? The fine balance of heritage conservation:

One of the challenges of conserving a heritage building is deciding what is in good enough condition to repair and what needs to be recreated using traditional methods.

For instance, on some walls the traditional wooden lath and plaster was in good enough condition to leave in place, simply channeling out and repairing damaged areas. However, most walls had to be completely redone ‘from scratch.’



Original plaster requiring only channeling out and patching

The medallions provide another example of the choices inherent in conservation projects. One medallion in the Legislative Chamber, which had lost much of its detail under layers of paint, will be restored to look as it would have when it was fresh and new in the 1800s – a ‘showpiece’ as Reid called it. This medallion has around 90 leaves as well as other elements, created separately by various artisans in the 1800s, and each has been carefully removed, conserved or recast, and reattached. The medallions in the Library were a simpler design, and therefore could be recast as a single piece. By contrast, other medallions have been conserved essentially ‘as is,’ showing some signs of the wear that happens naturally over the years.



Left: Complex medallion in Confederation Chamber; **Centre:** Detail from Chamber medallion; **Right:** Simpler medallion

Fun Fact: Look up, way up. On the ceilings of this historic building, 18 intricate plaster medallions have been conserved.

A special building, and a complex one:

Several of the plastering crew commented on how special it feels to work on the Province House project.

“Province House is such a big part of our history and it’s such a huge architectural spot in Charlottetown and PEI, and so it’s really cool to say that I’ve worked on such an important building,” says Johansson. Van Esch agrees, “This building has had a lot of history... and will continue to have a lot of history, so it’s cool to be part of preserving a space that is significant, and that people will be able to continue to enjoy for many, many years. It’s been pretty special.”

Reid talks about the iconic Confederation Chamber, “It’s by far the most difficult room in the building to fix up... It’s my favourite room in the whole building, because it is a bit of a challenge...” Besides conserving the three large medallions and other ornamental elements in that room, there are additional complexities like recreating the curved ceiling and tying into the sections of original plaster. The Confederation Chamber also interests Van Esch the most. “There’s a lot of detail and a lot of thinking that have gone into it... we’re starting to see how all that work and thinking and planning is starting to pay off. And in the end, it’s going to be such an extraordinary room to be able to see.”



A complex and challenging structure to plaster over

As artisans, the team enjoys the unique challenges and surprises this project presents. Van Esch notes, “Just the nature of working in an old building... You find little things that you have to stop what you’re doing and step back and say, ‘Ok, how do we figure this out? How do we go forward?’” As Reid puts it, “There’s a lot of late-night thinking that goes into this process to make sure that everything’s done right.” Johansson observes, “It keeps you on your toes. It’s always good to have to problem-solve.” This skilled team’s ability to adapt, innovate, and collaborate ensures that each obstacle becomes an opportunity to honour Province House’s history and to craft a legacy of enduring quality.

Finishing touches: The complexities of conserving trim

As the Province House conservation project enters the ‘homestretch,’ workers and students are turning their attention to the finishing touches. Like every stage in the conservation of this historic building, this involves much more than meets the eye.

The first step in this complex process was dismantling some of the trim, and protecting elements that would remain onsite, such as stairwells and crown molding. In 2018, graduates of the Holland College Heritage Retrofit Carpentry program were hired to focus on this work. It took about a year to complete, and required – as site manager Brian Willis recalls – two tractor-trailer loads of plywood and two tractor-trailer loads of bubble-wrap in giant 4-foot wide rolls.



Plywood and bubble wrap protects trim and floors during conservation project



Window casings, showing thickness of exterior walls

During a recent visit to Province House, we found Gary Loo, a fine woodworker from Wheatley River, PEI, who works with Heritage Grade at Province House as a heritage carpenter, busy reinstalling window trim. He explains how the trim needs to be refitted as the wooden framing and metal studs are slightly different dimensions than the originals were. These studs separate the stone from the wood, a practice which will increase the longevity of the structure going forward. Any time that stone touches wood directly, there is a probability of moisture collecting on the cold stone and creating rot in the wood, so the metal studs solve that issue. Loo and a co-worker fit the frame in place temporarily; other pieces will need to be added before the final fitting and securing.

Temporarily bracing restored window casing in place prior to final fitting



Dismantling the window trim itself was an immense and complex task, due to the three-foot to five-foot thick exterior walls. Josh Silver, Learning Manager at the Holland College Heritage Retrofit Carpentry program recalls, “Due to the size, complexity and beauty of the trim-work, some of those windows have hundreds of pieces. Hundreds, literally. So, we needed to disassemble very carefully, without breaking anything, and then label and catalogue everything very carefully, because another person would be putting it back together. Then each ‘window complement’ had to be crated and boxed.”



A worker chisels a piece of trim by hand for precise fit



Gary Loo and a co-worker carefully moving window trim

Fun Fact: Through careful restoration, 101 windows and 77 doors have been returned to their original splendour.

Conserving windows, doors, floors, and trim through this multi-step process has been a huge learning opportunity for students. Various student cohorts, as well as program graduates hired onto the project, have contributed to the Province House conservation project. Silver explains that students begin by learning about architectural styles, appropriate techniques and materials, and heritage building guidelines before working on real projects like Province House. “It’s a beautiful combination of theoretical and practical experience that absolutely have to be combined,” says Silver.

Coulton Coles, a student in the Heritage Retrofit Carpentry program, is enthusiastic. “When it comes to doing trim on windows and doors there’s a lot of nuance to it, especially different styles. There’s a lot of experience you can get from just one window or one door...it’s almost invaluable, the number of lessons you’ll learn from just doing one thing around here.”



Melinda Burke, Holland College Heritage Retrofit Carpentry student, carrying on a family tradition of craftsmanship

Melinda Burke, who was drawn to the Heritage Retrofit Carpentry Program by her love of heritage buildings as well as her desire to continue a family tradition of craftsmanship, agrees. “Just the skill level of these craftspeople...and you get to break it apart and strip it down and see, you know, the strokes of someone’s drawknife from hundreds of years ago. It’s very cool stuff.”

Silver encourages students to approach the work like detectives. Coles shares, “It’s really neat: in some instances, you can see step by step what someone was thinking during the process – how they were building something, and that’s really cool to see. It also does help you when you’re trying to re-do what they did. In one window that I’ve worked on before, they had all their measurements written out next to the window, so we actually got to use that to help us re-do the window.”

Conserved and re-installed window casings in a plastered and painted room on third floor



The work is challenging and intricate but satisfying, says Coles. “Trying to honour the original state of the piece, especially trying to match with what was done before... There were different materials, there were different building techniques, so trying to match something is difficult. Even if you get 90% close, it feels really good when a piece comes together, and you can step back and not really tell if it’s been re-done. That’s our ideal – make it look as it was.”

Working on iconic buildings is meaningful. “Having your name on something that people will visit, and they’ll walk by, or they’ll take pictures, or be able to admire the work for even just a second – it means a lot to me to be able to say that I’ve put my work into a piece like that,” says Coles.

Burke echoes this, adding a personal element. “It’s interesting to have been a part of something larger than yourself. It’s really rewarding — you can walk by and say, ‘Look, I made that.’” She adds, “I don’t want these techniques and these really specific skills as a crafts-person to be lost. My grandfather was a cooper and a million other things – a jack-of-all-trades renaissance man. I don’t want to see that being lost in my family, so I want to learn these skills and carry that forward.”

Fun Fact: Since 2015, over 90 students have gained invaluable hands-on experience working on Province House.

Profile Series

Ekua Quainoo discovers her passion for heritage conservation.

Ekua Quainoo works with the heritage conservation company, Heritage Grade, as a Construction Project Coordinator for the traditional plastering crew (see article on page 2 of this issue) and for the carpentry crew. When asked about a typical day, she explains, “It’s very interesting, it’s dynamic; it changes all the time. Because it’s a building being renovated, every day comes with challenges, and I have to keep track of all of that. So, I keep track of the staff, of what we’re doing for the day, what we should be doing in the future, and a lot of administrative tasks.”

Quainoo has always had an interest in construction, but there were not many opportunities back home for this career path. She came to Ontario from Botswana to seek out greater opportunities and started working with Heritage Grade in November 2023, which brought her to PEI to work as a Construction Project Coordinator at Province House. “I’ve decided that this just might be my chosen path; I might just continue with heritage restoration. I’m finding it very exciting!” She elaborates, “When you see a building, you don’t know how much work has gone into it, and how much planning and how different things were in the past. So, as you progress with the reconstruction, you also get an idea of how people did things in the past.” She adds, “It’s the transformation; that’s really exciting. You get a little glimpse into the past.”

Regarding the challenges of the project, Quainoo notes, “There have been a lot of unforeseen circumstances, because you don’t know what’s behind any wall. As we peel the layers back, we discover different things, and we’re basically going through the years. So, one previous year’s reconstruction had been done differently to the prior one; so just peeling back, you’re discovering new things and new challenges, and nobody could have foreseen those.”

Quainoo’s delight is in the historic and artisanal details. “I think it’s lovely. It’s a very nice heritage building; there’s a lot of small things that people may have overlooked, that – when you think about it – a lot of effort was put into creating those small pieces. For example, there’s some nails that we found that had different types of heads, and I found that very interesting because each of those heads had to be shaped individually and manually.”

Pointing to the plaster medallion overhead, she describes how her team made moldings of the different elements, carefully recreated them, and reinstalled them. Quainoo smiles, “I only put up two, but I’m excited for the two that I helped put up and



hopefully this will last a long time. And if you do look at them very closely, you’ll see that a lot of them have their own character, so that’s really, really nice as well.” She adds, “All hand-made: a lot of thought and effort went into it. And even just positioning them; if you take a view from right below, it looks really lovely!”



Asked what she thinks of Province House, Quainoo offers an interesting analogy. Where she lived in Botswana, her work location was beside a game reserve, so she saw wildlife on a daily basis. “Province House, I liken to an elephant because of the way it looks on the outside, if you notice the way the bricks are layered. An elephant’s skin is really, really thick... it’s a very strong structure... And an elephant has a very good memory as well; it remembers where it comes from, it has a direction where it needs to go to, and they travel in herds. So, I would liken this building to that because this building has been here for a long time, the community remembers it, the community supports in the reconstruction, and I think, all together we are all helping to restore it.”

