

Preserving Built Heritage in Norris Point: A PLACE Case Study of Bonne Bay Cottage Hospital Heritage Corporation

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Bonne Bay Cottage Hospital Heritage Corporation (BBCHHC) began as a dream to save the Old Cottage Hospital in Norris Point, Newfoundland and Labrador (NL). The heritage building had been the anchor of health and wellness along the province's Great Northern Peninsula for over 60 years. In anticipation of the building's 2001 closure, Joan Cranston



and a team of community leaders formed the BBCHHC to take on the challenge of preserving and repurposing the Old Cottage Hospital. For the past twenty years, the BBCHHC has been committed to “the adaptive re-use of the former Bonne Bay Cottage Hospital for the preservation of local culture and heritage (including arts, crafts, music and oral history); the promotion of health and wellness; and community economic and social development.”² Today, the Old Cottage Hospital has become a social enterprise hub³ hosting a diverse array of tenants and programs including: the Old Cottage Hostel; a

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² Old Cottage Hospital. “About Us,” Old Cottage Hospital, n.d., <https://oldcottagehospital.com/about/>.

³ Joan Cranston, “The Old Cottage Hospital,” interview by Shelly Kawaja, Trails Tales Tunes Presents – Shed Talks, May 27, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/trailstalestunes/videos/660118172613567>.

community kitchen, gardens and greenhouse; the Voice of Bonne Bay community radio station; the Cottage Hospital Museum Room; the Norris Point Public Library; and numerous health services and small business tenants.

The road to resilience, however, has not been smooth. For the past two decades, the BBCHHC struggled with infrastructure upkeep, shoestring budgets, and periods of wavering local support. But, with the help of a wide network of government, industry, academic, and community-based partners, and a tireless team of dedicated volunteers, the BBCHHC persevered in their pursuit of community resilience and sustainable social enterprise in rural NL. The BBCHHC's story can be told through the five principles of the PLACE Framework: **promoting community leaders, linking divergent perspectives, amplifying local capacities & assets, conveying compelling stories, and engaging both/and thinking**. Through this framework we can explore lessons that may assist other leaders and organizations looking to preserve meaningful buildings throughout their own rural communities.

Bonne Bay Cottage Hospital

Bonne Bay Cottage Hospital opened in the heart of Norris Point in July 1940. It was part of a network of cottage hospitals that opened between 1936 and 1954, bringing consistent healthcare services to many isolated areas of NL for the very first time.⁴ From 1939 to 1940, the people of Norris Point and surrounding areas pulled together to build Bay Cottage Hospital. With the government supplying just a foreman and the nails, the local community contributed the land, 10,000 hours of volunteer labour, 90,000 feet of lumber, and \$12,000 in cash.⁵ Upon opening, the facility boasted twenty-three beds, a dental clinic, nursery, and a staff of ten medical professionals. By the time of its closure in 2001, the Cottage Hospital was one of the largest⁶ and longest serving hospital facilities of its

⁴ Heritage Newfoundland and Labrador, "Cottage Hospitals and Health Care in Newfoundland," Newfoundland and Labrador Heritage Web Site, 1997-2025, <https://www.heritage.nf.ca/articles/society/cottage-hospitals.php>.

⁵ Mallory McGrath, "Telling a new rural story: Our small communities are more vibrant than you might think." CBC News, June 2, 2019, www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/pov-mallory-mcgrath-telling-new-story-vibrant-communities-1.5155413.

⁶ T. Barrett and K. Harvey, eds., *One Big, Happy Family: Memories of Bonne Bay Cottage Hospital*. (Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2018).

type and time in the province.⁷ Beyond its medical significance in the area, Bonne Bay Cottage Hospital was celebrated by staff and patients alike for its warm, supportive culture and home-like feel.

By the early 1990s, the Newfoundland government set its sights on a regionalized health care system, and cottage hospitals across the province quickly fell out of favour. Word soon came that Bonne Bay Cottage Hospital would close. The doctors, nurses, staff, and local residents were devastated. The community banded together and lobbied the Provincial Government to keep health care services in Norris Point. The government committed to building a new regionalized health care facility in Norris Point, but the decision to close Bay Cottage Hospital stood.

A New Era

Cranston first set foot in the building in the fall of 1987, a single mother with her 9-month-old baby in arms. “I was looking for a safe community to raise my son on my own”, she

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recalled. Originally from Toronto, Ontario, Cranston accepted a physiotherapist position at Bonne Bay Cottage Hospital in Norris Point. It was important to her to feel “cared for in your own community by

people you knew and trusted”. Cranston mourned the impending loss of Bonne Bay Cottage Hospital and the vibrancy and sense of togetherness it had long instilled in her community. “It wasn’t just closing a hospital”, she recollected, “it was a stab in the heart of the community”. There was a small group who shared Cranston’s passion for the building and its legacy. She rallied them together (**promote community leaders**) and they met around her kitchen table one evening to make a plan for a new life for the Old Cottage Hospital.

The inaugural BBCHHC team was made up of six volunteer members: Chairperson Joan Cranston, physiotherapist; Vice-chairperson Marina Sexton, dentist; Treasurer Colleen Kennedy, Gros Morne Cooperating Association; Secretary

The Old Cottage Hospital itself had always served as a crossroads between local residents and newcomers.

⁷Parks Canada, “Bonne Bay Cottage Hospital Municipal Heritage Building,” Canada’s Historic Places, n/d <https://www.historicplaces.ca/en/rep-reg/place-lieu.aspx?id=5262#:~:text=The%20facility%20served%20communities%20from,and%20type%20in%20the%20>

Sheila Walsh, speech-language pathologist; Director Gary Wilton, Aquaculture Hatchery Manager; and Director Michaela J. Kent, Parks Canada. Some members were originally from the region while others had moved to the area over the years, but all shared a deep connection to the Old Cottage Hospital (**link divergent perspectives**). The mix of people that made up the BBCHHC felt both natural and appropriate. The Old Cottage Hospital itself had always served as a crossroads between local residents and newcomers, welcoming international doctors and medical staff beginning as far back as the 1960s. “It’s often the people that aren’t from here that see the potential”, noted Cranston. The group incorporated in September, 2001, several months before Bonne Bay Cottage Hospital closed its doors that following December.

The BBCHHC presented their intention to preserve and repurpose the Old Cottage Hospital. The Provincial Government agreed to sell them the building for \$1, a win-win decision that would allow the historic structure to stay in the community and save the province the cost of demolition. Norris Point Town Council agreed to designate the Old Cottage Hospital as a municipal heritage structure in 2003. Next came deciding what the building might become.

The team explored uses for the building that would both honour the past and serve the present needs of the region.

With funding assistance, the team hired a consultant to lead them in an opportunity identification process (**amplify local capacities & assets**). Through this process, the team explored uses for the

building that would both honour the past and serve the present needs of the region. A vision emerged: to transform the Old Cottage Hospital into a multi-functional community space to address current community demands—such as additional health services and a home for the public library—and create new opportunities for the community—including an international hostel. A grant enabled the BBCHHC to hire an architecture firm to confirm the building’s structural integrity and prepare a preliminary design plan and budget. The projected cost of the proposed renovation came in at one million dollars. The BBCHHC believed in the vision for the new community space, but felt unequipped to take on a million

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both. With their long-term vision still in mind, they adopted a gradual and more manageable scope and timeline (**engage both/and thinking**). They would start small and move slowly, generating some revenue streams for future growth.

As Is, Where Is

Instead of trying to raise a million dollars, the team looked around the building and posed the question, “What can we use as is, where is?”. The “as is, where is” concept helped the BBCHHC examine the space in a way that evaluated the building’s existing assets from a community services perspective (**amplify local capacities & assets**). The first opportunity was converting the old medical records area into a new home for the Norris Point Public Library. Next, the former male ward was designated as a museum space to display the collection of antique medical equipment that still remained from the hospital’s early days. Patient rooms were repurposed as affordable clinic and office space for local organizations and health providers. The feeling among the team was that everything was coming full circle.

The BBCHHC received a grant to hire 8 local residents to renovate the interior of the building. Next, they appealed to the community for financial support. One Norris Point family donated \$50,000 and in exchange the building was renamed the Julia Ann Walsh Center, in memory of the family’s late mother. And yet, the one-time donation along with the tenant rent payments still wouldn’t be enough to maintain the building. The BBCHHC needed a sustainable revenue source.

The team looked for opportunities in the broader community (**access local capacities**). Norris Point is located on the doorstep of Gros Morne National Park, a destination that welcomes tens of thousands of visitors each year, from all over the world. While the area already boasted several hotels, a four-star Inn, and numerous rental cabins, there weren’t any low-cost hostel-style accommodations. The BBCHHC transformed the Old Cottage Hospital’s former staff residence area into the Old Cottage Hostel, a revenue generating enterprise that would sustain the building’s upkeep and enable ongoing development.

Gaining Community Support

In 2006, five years after its initial closure, the Old Cottage Hospital reopened as the Julia Ann Walsh Center. The BBCHHC had successfully repurposed one-third of the building, but those first few years were especially difficult financially. More difficult still was

convincing the local community that the Old Cottage Hospital could still have value. “The community thought we were crazy for taking over the Old Cottage Hospital”, recalled Cranston. Cranston mused how even the caretaker announced, “It should be bulldozed into the ground!”, despite all his hard work to keep the building in good repair. Unlike its initial construction, which saw droves of local people come together to build it, the task of transforming the Old Cottage Hospital into a community-based social enterprise was, for the most part, not well understood at the local level.

In 2007, there came a shift. It was the launch of Trails, Tales and Tunes, a 10-day festival of music, storytelling, and activities in Norris Point. It was during the event that board member Wilton had the idea to create a temporary community radio station to accompany the festival activities. Wilton wasn’t in broadcasting nor had he ever launched a radio station, but he felt compelled by the idea and with help of fellow community leader, Fred Campbell, took on the challenge. They used the former women’s ward as a festival radio studio. They outfitted the space with equipment and some comfortable chairs and launched what would become the Voice of Bonne Bay (VOBB) community radio station.

As the community gathered in the VOBB studio and tuned in to the station from home, they recognized their own news, their own opinions, and their own stories reflected back in the voices of their neighbours.

Residents began to trickle into the studio and onto the airwaves. In addition to broadcasting the activities of the festival, VOBB interviewed prominent community members to discuss current events, and invited local seniors to share stories from the past. It was a turning point for the BBCHHC. As the community gathered in the VOBB studio and tuned in to the station from home, they heard their own stories reflected back in the voices of their neighbours (**convey compelling stories**). The community realized that the transformation of the Old Cottage Hospital into a community-based social enterprise was, indeed, about them and for them.

Slow, Steady Success for the Future

Community support for the Old Cottage Hospital began to grow. The studio room provided space for local quilters and exercise classes, the VOBB gained permanent station status, and Cranston herself became a tenant, relocating her physiotherapy practice from the new hospital back to the Old Cottage Hospital. The BBCHHC continued to access grants to help underemployed locals find careers and enter the workforce. Even the caretaker

found joy in exchanging stories with hostel visitors from all over the world, gaining a renewed passion for the building and overall initiative. By 2020, the BBCHHC was working with a group of parents to establish another revenue generating venture, the community's first daycare, continuing to use storytelling to gain support and momentum for the initiative.⁸

"Sometimes I wonder if a sign of failure is that it's taken so long," admitted Cranston. But, ultimately, it has been the BBCHHC's slow, organic, "as is, where is" approach that has allowed the team to form critical partnerships, respond to the needs of their community, and ultimately transform an old heritage building into a self-sustaining incubation hub for community resilience and social enterprise on the Great Northern Peninsula.

⁸Joan Cranston, "The Old Cottage Hospital," interview by Shelly Kawaja, Trails Tales Tunes Presents – Shed Talks, May 27, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/trailstalestunes/videos/660118172613567>.