



# MONTPELIER



Montpelier was in pristine condition when this aerial photograph was taken in 1995. The oldest part is the central portion with the two projecting wings separated by a massive chimney.

## BUILT HERITAGE | AUGUST 2021

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*This is part of a series of architectural articles by the Bermuda National Trust that will highlight some of Bermuda's endangered historic buildings.*

Montpelier is a listed building owned by the Bermuda Government. Built in the middle to late 1700s, Montpelier is perched on the hillside and once would have enjoyed a fine view of Hamilton Harbour. During the next century there were additions and alterations that surrounded the original T-shaped cottage.

The first owner of record is Bermudian Richard Jennings Peniston who, with his wife and first cousin Rebecca Jennings, took up residence when they returned from the Dutch island of St Eustatius in 1781 after it had been captured and looted by British Admiral George Rodney. The story goes that it was Rebecca's idea to sew their gold into the upholstered seats of the cedar chairs and so were able to escape without their



fortune being detected and seized by Rodney. Richard died in 1810 and Rebecca in 1816 and Montpelier was inherited by her nephews, the sons of her sister Mary, and eventually by Mary's grandson, Richard Jennings Peniston Darrell.



**Montpelier was a well-loved family home in 1978.**

In 1867 the British military acquired Montpelier and 10½ acres by compulsory purchase under The Bermuda Defence Act 1865. Richard's brother, Chief Justice John Harvey Darrell, lost the family homestead Cavendish under the same Act although he was allowed to continue to live there during his lifetime. Montpelier became the residence of senior army officers beginning with Surgeon-Major Robert Bowen, Deputy Inspector General of Hospitals of the Army Medical Department.

A change of use occurred in January 1940. After occupying cramped offices in the Sessions House, Montpelier became the headquarters for Chief Censor Lt-Col Roger Swire and his staff of linguists or 'foreign language readers'. The move required that a barbed wire fence be put up around the house. The censorship operation eventually outgrew Montpelier and was moved to the Princess Hotel and Montpelier returned to military housing.

In 1953 the Bermuda Government accepted the UK Government's offer of £750,000 for their surplus War Department and Admiralty properties - approximately 830 acres and 225 housing units. This was a good opportunity to settle the problem of a residence for the Colonial Secretary (later known as the Deputy Governor). Previous colonial secretaries and chief justices had lived in rented accommodation and in 1951 plans had been drawn up for two new houses to be built at Church Bay in Southampton. When it became known that British Government lands would be returned to the Bermuda Government it was thought sensible to make use of the already existing buildings, so, in 1954, it was resolved to allocate £7,000 to restore Montpelier which was described



as being in “shocking, ghastly and dismal” condition. A further £4,500 was to be spent on furnishings. MP Russell Levi Pearman told the House “I feel the sooner we make use of these various buildings which the Government has taken over the better off we will be”. Another War Department house, Clifton, was assigned to the chief justice.



**Today the front porch of Montpelier has partially collapsed. And why is the light on when the house is empty?**

The land surrounding Montpelier was transferred to the Parks Department in 1955 and a reforestation effort began. Trees and shrubs from Bermuda and around the world were planted. In 1959 the hillside in front of Montpelier was flattened to allow for a better sightline for vehicles exiting into Middle Road and sidewalks were created. The neighbouring Potter’s Field was purchased and in December 1962 the 22-acre Montpelier Arboretum was officially opened. It was hoped it would awaken interest in preserving Bermuda’s open spaces.

Montpelier remained the official residence of successive colonial secretaries and deputy governors. Over the years regular maintenance was kept up on the house. Deputy Governor from 2006 to 2009 Mark Capes held a lunch for the staff of W&E and Parks during his tenancy. Appreciating that an 18<sup>th</sup> century home needed looking after, Capes said “being so old there is always some bit of it that needs painting, fixing or replacing”. This can be said about almost every house in Bermuda. In this case there was a genuine problem of damp in the cellar which had been resolved by a false wall which, for some unknown reason, was removed at about that time.

Since 2018 Montpelier has remained empty and has become increasingly derelict. There have been comments that the police use the house for firearms practice and that the cottage is being used as a gang graffiti platform. Whether this is true or not, Montpelier today is in a





sorry state due entirely to willful neglect – so sad for a once-treasured family home. One wonders why, if the Bermuda Government no longer has a use for the house, it is not sold to someone who would restore and appreciate it.



**The roof of Montpelier Cottage is riddled with cracks and vegetation is growing through the windows.**



**Montpelier's shutters have been allowed to fall to pieces.**



**Sources:** Articles in The Royal Gazette between 1784-1962.

For more on the British military takeover of Montpelier, Cavendish, Clifton and others, see the Bermuda National Trust Bermuda's Architectural Heritage series, Devonshire; and Bermuda Atlas & Gazetteer by Daniel Blagg.