

Anne's World Green Gables

From **The Anne of Green Gables Treasury** by Carolyn Strom Collins and Christina Wyss Eriksson

"It's lovely to be going home and know it's home... I love Green Gables already, and I never loved any place before. No place seemed like home."

(Anne of Green Gables, X)

Although Anne Shirley is a fictional character, Green Gables is a real place. It is situated on a small piece of farmland on the north shore of Prince Edward Island, near the village of Cavendish (Avonlea in the Anne Books).

When L.M. Montgomery began to write Anne of Green Gables, she used the farmhouse that belonged to her cousins, David and Margaret Macneill, as the setting. Like Mathew and Marilla Cuthbert, the Macneills were an elderly brother and sister who ran the family farm. The house was just a few hundred years away from the house that Maud lived in with her Grandparents, so Maud visited her cousins often. She specially enjoyed walking down Lover's Lane.

Since 1936, Parks Canada has maintained the Macneill home (now known as Green Gables) and the surrounding acreage as Prince Edward Island National Park and, during most of the year, the house is open to visitors. Green Gables today has clapboard siding painted white with dark green trim and shutters, but during the years Anne would have lived there (1877-1884), the house was shingled. Since there was a sawmill in Cavendish in the mid-1850s, buildings could be made of shingles or clapboards rather than logs or stones (as they had been in the early years of settling the Island).

The house stands on a hill that slopes down to a little creek; across the creek are woods, full of birch, maple and spruce trees. The Haunted Wood is up the hill beyond these woods and does, indeed, give the startling impression of being haunted, with its ghostly-looking pine trees. There is also a small meadow (Mr. Bell's field) near the Haunted Wood. Lover's Lane winds through more woods to the southwest of the house. Walking through these woods today, it is easy to imagine Anne and Diana strolling to and from school or racing back and forth between Green Gables and Orchard Slope.

The front door of Green Gables opens into a tiny vestibule; another door opens into the front hallway (two doors helped to keep blasts of cold winter air from entering the house). To the right of the entry is a steep flight of stairs leading to the second floor. To the left is the parlour, which was closed off most of the time so that it would stay clean and neat for special occasions. The sitting room is actually a combined sitting room/dining room, with a dining table and chairs and buffet on one side for company meals or Sunday dinners. On the other side of the room are comfortable chairs, a large round table, a bookcase/desk and a small heating stove. After the kitchen, this was the room the family used the most.

Between the sitting room and kitchen is a small bedroom where Mathew would have slept. This room is simply furnished with a narrow bed, a washstand and a trunk. The trunk was used as a bedside table, as well as for storing clothing.

The center of activity at Green Gables was the kitchen. It was used for cooking and serving everyday family meals, and as a sitting room:

The Kitchen at Green Gables was a cheerful apartment—or would have been cheerful if it had not been so painfully clean as to give it something of the appearance of an unused parlour... Here sat Marilla Cuthbert, when she sat at all... knitting, and the table behind her was laid for supper. (Anne of Green Gables, I)

The heart of the kitchen was the large black iron cook stove. The introduction of the cook stove in the mid-nineteenth century placed the cooking a step above the open-fire cooking of the early settlers, opening up a whole new world of culinary possibilities. The stove was much more efficient and more reliable than a fireplace, so a greater variety of food could be prepared. It was not only used for cooking, but for heating the large room. This was comforting in the harsh cold of winter, but extremely uncomfortable in the summer. Fortunately, Prince Edward Island summers are mild, and since the main meal of the day was served at noon, much of the heat of the stove would leave the house during the afternoon.

Green Gables was not equipped with running water in Anne's day; water had to be drawn from the well near the back door for cooking, dishwashing, household chores, laundering clothes and bathing. The well at Green Gables was the "deepest in Avonlea" which meant there was an ample water supply, though this was cold comfort to Anne when she had to search there from a missing Dora Keith.

The storage of food commanded much space in farm homes. Staples such as flour and sugar, as well as prepared foods, canned goods and dishes, were stored in a room called a Pantry. Anne's Green Gables had two pantries—a "sitting room pantry" and a "kitchen pantry". The walls of each would have been lined with shelves, and there may also have been some cabinets and a worktable.

Some foods, such as apples, carrots, onions and potatoes, were stored in large bins in the cellar. Fruits and vegetables too perishable to store in the cellar for any length of time were canned or dried in summer to last until the next canning season (the Mason jar had been available since the 1850s for home canning). Meats were smoked, cured in brine or dried in the fall to supplement fresh meat through the winter.

A constant challenge was keeping insects and rodents out of the house, as Anne learned when she discovered a drowned mouse in a pitcher of pudding sauce that she had neglected to cover! Of course, there was no plastic wrap or foil in those days; instead, saucers, plates, inverted bowls or clean kitchen cloths would be used to cover food.

Although not mentioned in any of the Anne books, it is possible that Marilla's kitchen was furnished with an icebox. A small compartment for food would be topped by a compartment for a large block of ice. The cold air created by the ice would drift down into the food

compartment. However, with eggs and milk available fresh each day from the hens and cows on the farm, refrigeration was not as necessary as it is today. (Are you wondering where the blocks of ice for the icebox would have come from? In those days, ice was cut from the frozen ponds in winter and stored in ice-houses for use in the warmer months. The blocks of ice would be surrounded by thick layers of hay or sawdust to keep them from melting, even in summer).

Originally, the kitchen wing of Green Gables did not have a second story as it does today. However, above the parlour/sitting room wing was a second story containing four rooms—Anne's bedroom and the spare room on the front of the house, Marilla's bedroom and one other room near the rear.

Anne's room was the east gable room—the room beneath the part of the house that comes together in a point. It is just over the front entrance. When Anne first arrived at Green Gables, the little room was sparsely furnished and very plainly decorated:

The whitewashed walls were so painfully bare and staring that she thought they must ache over their own bareness. The floor was bare, too, except for a round mat in the middle such as Anne had never seen before. In one corner was the bed, a high, old-fashioned one, with four dark, low-turned posts. In the other corner was the aforesaid three-cornered table adorned with a fat, red velvet pincushion hard enough to turn the point of the most adventurous pin. Above it hung a little six by eight mirror. Midway between the table and bed was the window, with anxiety white muslin frill over it, and opposite it was the washstand. The whole apartment was of a rigidity not to be described in words, but which sent a shiver to the very marrow of Anne's bones. (Anne of Green Gables, III)

After Anne had lived in it for a while, however, the room took on a great deal of personality. By the time she was sixteen, her little room was transformed:

The east gable was a very different place from what it had been on that night four years before, when Anne had felt its bareness penetrate to the marrow of her spirit with its inhospitable chill. Changes had crept in, Marilla conniving them resignedly, until it was as sweet and dainty a nest as a young girl could desire... The floor was covered with a pretty matting, and the curtains that softened the high window and fluttered in the vagrant breezes were of pale green art muslin. The walls, hung not with gold and silver brocade tapestry, but with a dainty apple-blossom paper, were adorned with a few good pictures given Anne by Mrs. Allan... There was no "mahogany furniture," but there was a white-painted bookcase filled with books, a cushioned wicker rocker, a toilet table be frilled with white muslin, a quaint, gilt-framed mirror with chubby pink cupids and purple grapes painted over its arched top, that used to hang in the spare room, and a low white bed. (Anne of Green Gables, XXXIII)

If you visit Green Gables today, you will find Anne's room decorated in precisely this way.



The spare room was the bedroom reserved for guests. Anne was in awe of spare rooms, perhaps because they were denied her in her early childhood when she was a servant in other households. Even Marilla would not permit the “stray waif” (as she thought of Anne that first night at Green Gables) to sleep in the spare room. Though the furnishings were not elaborate, they were of the best quality the Cuthberts could afford. Linens were trimmed in lace, and the walls were papered. Like most bedrooms in houses of that era, it contained a washstand with a large china pitcher and a bowl. These were used for the daily sponge baths common at the time. (Tub bathing was rare. Some households had a ritual of Saturday night bathing with water heated on the kitchen stove and a tin tub set on the kitchen floor. L.M. Montgomery remarks in her journal that her grandmother was not in favor of tub bathing, but Maud insisted on a bath at least every two weeks!)

Marilla's bedroom was at the back corner of the house, over the dining/sitting room. It was rarely visited by Anne and apparently was used only for sleeping and dressing by Marilla.

Closets were not common in houses at the time. Instead, clothes were stored in trunks and large cupboards called wardrobes. Out-of-season clothing was kept in the attic with plenty of mothballs or moth-deterring herbs. Anne's bedroom is the only one at Green Gables with a closet, perhaps because the space was created naturally about the stairwell.

In present Green Gables, the fourth upstairs room (the west gable room) is furnished as a sewing room with a treadle sewing machine, quilting frame, spinning wheel, yarn winder, trunk and other sewing accessories. The west window provide good light, do the room may well have been used this way, especially since sewing was an almost constant activity in homes like Green Gables. The room could also have been used for storage. When Davy and Dora Keith came to

live at Green Gables, Davy slept in the west gable room. (The upstairs rooms would not have been heated, so the family would not have spent much time in them during the winter months.)

In 1914, many years after Anne would have left Green Gables, a second story was added over the kitchen. Today, one of the rooms in the addition has been furnished as a bedroom for a hired man, and a small area is used for storing some things that were probably used during the Anne years—snowshoes, trunks and tools. The other rooms are used as office space for the staff in charge of the house and are not open to the public.

Visiting Green Gables today is a moving experience for readers of Anne of Green Gables, for the house is furnished as closely as possible to the descriptions in the Anne books. One almost expects to see Anne herself dashing into the kitchen to tell Marilla about her latest adventure!