

Restoration of Province House, Prince Edward Island

Judith Tulloch and John Way

Province House, Prince Edward Island's Georgian legislative building has long been regarded as the "Cradle of Confederation". In September 1846 twenty-three leading politicians from Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island and the United Province of Canada met in the legislative council of Province House to discuss proposals put forward by the Canadian delegation. By the end of the conference they had reached general agreement on the desirability and the feasibility of union although the details were only hammered out at a meeting in Quebec later in October. For more than five years the federal government, through Parks Canada, has been involved in a massive renovation project on this historic building. This article deals with exterior renovations; a subsequent one will describe the refurbishment of the interior.

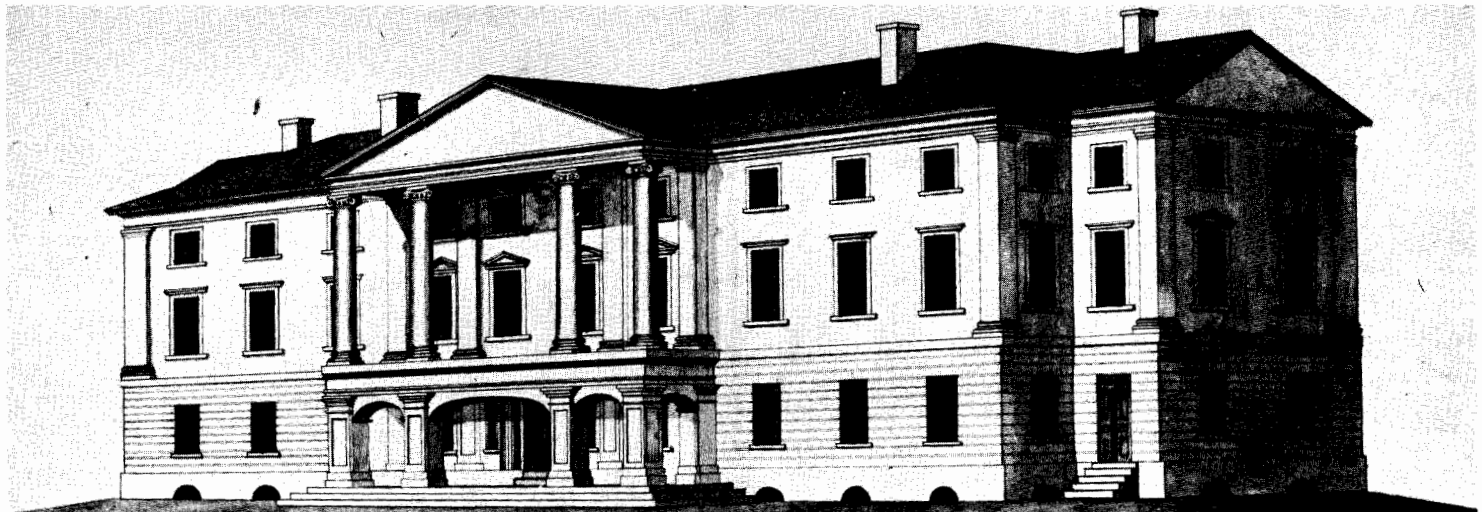
Throughout its long history Province House has been the focal point of Prince Edward Island's public life. When Charlottetown was first surveyed in 1768 a central square, soon named Queen Square, was reserved for future administrative buildings. Prince Edward Island was separated from the older colony of Nova Scotia in 1769, two years after a lottery in London had awarded all but one of the Island's sixty-seven townships to British government, commercial and military notables. The failure of many of these absentee owners to meet the terms of their grants meant that the new civil government in Charlottetown had no money to erect public

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buildings and not until the passage of the first *Land Assessment Act* in 1833 was the Island legislature empowered to raise money for local purposes. Armed with this new financial power, the government constructed a residence for the lieutenant-governor, Government House, in 1834 and a year later, a Central Academy.

One major edifice was still lacking to make Charlottetown a colonial capital worthy of the title. This was a permanent home for the legislature and supreme court. For many years, these two bodies had met in private homes or taverns, a practice which once prompted the doorkeeper to describe the assembly as "a damn queer parliament." Construction of a small courthouse in 1812 helped to provide more conventional accommodation for the public business. In 1837, however, Lieutenant-Governor Sir John Harvey commented on the lack of a suitable building for safe deposit of colonial records. The assembly seized Harvey's suggestion and expanded the proposal to include space for the two branches of the legislature as well as public offices for colonial administrators. Accommodation for the supreme court was later added.

A competition for plans for the building was advertised in Maritime newspapers during the summer of 1839. The winner was declared to be Isaac Smith, a Yorkshireman, long resident in Prince Edward Island, whose previous work had included Government House, St. Paul's church in Charlottetown and the Georgetown and St. Eleanor's courthouse-jails. Funding for the new project was granted by the legislature in 1842 and construction contracts were signed that autumn. Of the seven contracts, six were awarded to Island tradesmen. The only non-residents were John and Charles MacKenzie of Pictou, Nova Scotia, who supplied the Nova Scotia



Drawing of Colonial Building thought to have been done by the architect, Isaac Smith. (Public Archives of Canada)

sandstone from a quarry near Lyon's Brook, Pictou County. Island contractors were John Boyle (excavator), John Watts, William Bain and James MacDuff (bricklayers and stonemasons), Nathan Wright and Henry Smith (carpenters and joiners), George Chudleigh and William McKay (plasterers and slaters), Henry Smith (painter and glazier) and James Millner and Son (plumber and brazier).

Construction work began early in the spring of 1843 and the cornerstone was laid by the lieutenant-governor with appropriate pomp and ceremony on 16 May. By December 1846, the building was nearly complete. Contracts had been let in 1845 to furnish the major public room including the assembly, legislative council chamber, supreme court and library. The successful bidder seems to have been local cabinetmaker, Charles Dogherty. Later another prominent Island craftsman, Mark Butcher, supplied furniture for the offices in Province House which housed such functionaries as the colonial secretary and treasurer, the surveyor general, the collector of impost and the judge of probate. Locally designed, built and furnished, Province House represented the epitome of Island craftsmanship of the mid 19th century, a time of unprecedented prosperity and optimism.

The legislative sessions of January 1847 marked the official opening of Province House, or as it was more commonly called at the time, the Colonial Building. The supreme court occupied its ground floor quarters in June 1847 while the public offices opened a year later in August 1848. According to the newspaper advertisement announcing this opening, office hours were from 10:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m., hours no doubt envied by the modern office-worker!

The presence of the legislature, the supreme court and public administrative offices made Province House the centre of Island political life in the 19th century. Indeed the building was the social centre as well since its spacious public rooms were often used as banquet halls for honoured visitors. In 1859, for example, the Nova Scotia-born Crimean War hero, General Sir William Fenwick Williams, was feted at a dinner and ball held in the assembly chamber in Province House. Later guests included the Prince of Wales (1860), American congressman General Benjamin F. Butler (1868) and Queen Victoria's third son, Prince Arthur (1869).

It is as the site of that first meeting of colonial delegates in September 1864 that Province House has its unrivalled place in Canadian history. The importance of this event was officially acknowledged by the Canadian government on the 50th anniversary of the conference in 1914. Although the outbreak of the First World War forced postponement of planned ceremonies, the federal government presented a commemorative bronze plaque which was placed in the legislative council chamber, site of the meetings. This room had served as government meeting and office space since abolition of a separate legislative council in 1893. During the 1920s, the chamber was gradually cleared of its office clutter and given an appearance more in keeping with its historical importance. This historic character was further recognized in 1974 when the Canadian and Island governments signed an agreement whereby Parks Canada undertook a major restoration program to preserve and interpret the building. Planning for the work began with a statement of the themes which would form the basis of site development. The primary theme was defined as "the birth of Canadian confederation" while the secondary theme was to be "the architecture, history and setting of Province House." This combination of themes acknowledges Province House's importance as the "cradle of confederation" while ensuring that its ancient and continuing role as the centre of Island public life is maintained. When development work is com-

pleted, the legislative council chamber, the library-conference room and several administrative offices will be restored to the 1864 period. Yet, just down the hall, the Island legislature will still hold its sessions in the assembly room in use since January 1847. Within this 19th century government building, the political past and present remain side by side.

Restoration Process

Province House was built almost a century and a half ago. It's exterior has had to withstand rigorous climatic conditions, soot and grime from coal burning furnaces, while the interior has had hard and continuous usage over this period. It was built without today's knowledge of engineering construction and practices, with traditional materials that had been used in various parts of the world for many centuries. Knowledge of these materials and building trades was handed down by word of mouth in this era, as few tradesmen could read and write in 1840.

The preservation and restoration, to the 1864 period, required a considerable amount of research using documented drawings, photographs and original specifications. There were no original drawings available from any source except for some sketches of elevations. Drawings of the construction of the building were non-existent so a lot of investigative work had to be undertaken to find out the construction details. Various parts of the building both internally and externally were carefully taken apart to check on the condition and the method of construction. One of the biggest problems was to find out exactly how the building looked in 1864. Many changes were made over the years to the inside of the building during its use as provincial offices and Island legislature. Marks on woodwork, plaster, etc., give an indication of where and how things were located. Old photographs were carefully examined and portions enlarged. An open door, for example, in one photograph gave a clear indication of the appearance of a stairway in the West wing. Exterior photographs gave an indication of the size and location of the stone chimneys projecting above the roof.

Many changes were made over the years in an effort to accommodate the rapidly expanding government services and very few records were kept of these changes. The changes in use of offices were sometimes recorded but not changes in the fabric of the building i.e., doors added, walls changed. In many cases there was an apparent conflict between the historical description of the building and the building itself. However, as investigations proceeded and plaster was carefully removed, many of these features appeared. One instance was the case of the missing vault. The description of the building indicated that there was to be a total of seven vaults. Only six were apparent in the building, complete with steel doors and stone surrounds. However, when investing a bookcase recessed in the wall, a stone surround to the opening appeared and when the whole bookcase was removed, there was the evidence of a small book or paper vault. This is but one instance of the careful investigative work which had to be done to the building before any restoration work started.

Prior to the investigative work, the interior was completely measured and photographed and a set of "As Found" drawings completed showing details of room dimensions, profiles of wood trim around doors and windows, details of plaster mouldings, types of doors and skylights. Concurrent with this work a record was made of all the mechanical and electrical services in the building which had been introduced since the days of gas lighting, coal burning stoves,



Workmen removing asphalt shingles from roof prior to laying of new slate roof. Note re-constructed stone chimney above roof. (Parks Canada, 1981)

and privies with septic tanks which were typical of the 1864 period. While the careful assessment of the interior of the building was being completed, it was decided that the exterior of the building would be the first part to be restored.

The exterior was in a reasonably good state of repair and there had not been many changes made over the years. The major change was to the roof, which had leaked in various places, resulting in the slate being replaced with asphalt shingles. The main work on the roof involved the replacement of the existing asphalt shingles with slates, the cleaning and repair of the exterior stonework of the building, and repair and replacement of windows, doors, and glazing. Stone chimneys were also built above the roof as they were in use in 1840.

The restoration of the slate roof presented its own unique problems in terms of finding a source for the purchase of the slate in the correct size and colour, reinforcing the roof trusses to take the additional weight, building up stone chimneys and finding a source of stone for these. Fortunately, a number of slates were found in the roof space, and following research, it was apparent that the original quarry in Wales, could not provide the slates. Another source of slate of identical colour was found in the United States and fortunately they could provide the size and colour needed. The slates were installed in combination with copper and lead flashings as specified in 1840. The upper portion of the roof was flat and the original specifications for the copper work were used to replace the tar and gravel type roof which had been installed in recent years. The traditional trades of slate and copper roofing have been dying out over the last 25 years, but there were enough local tradesmen on the Island, capable of doing the work with some "on site" training. An extensive amount of supervision was required to ensure that a successful watertight roof was produced with these traditional materials.

Prior to slates being installed an assessment was made of the structural strength of the old roof trusses. The joints in the trusses had shrunk over the years and although they had the capacity to carry the slate roof originally, they now needed reinforcing with metal straps to ensure adequate strength. At the same time as the trusses were being reinforced, the old chimneys from the heating stoves were extended above the roof. This work entailed some interesting research to find a source for the purchase of the stone. The original specifications indicated that the face stone or ashlar came from a Nova Scotia quarry and the original quarry was located outside Pictou. Unfortunately, this quarry has not been operating for many years but a quarry at Wallace, Nova Scotia, had produced stone of a

similar type, about five years previously. A chemical and visual analysis of the stone indicated it was virtually the same as the original stone. It was found possible to obtain blocks from the Wallace quarry and have them cut to the appropriate size, and shipped to Charlottetown for installation in the chimneys.

In 1978 the exterior of the building appeared as a structure that was in need of a clean and "face lift". Large areas of stonework were in reasonably good condition but, over the years, had suffered from an accumulation of dirt and grime from coal and gas fired heating appliances. This dirt had impregnated in the face of the stone and was causing some areas to spall off due to water retention and frost action. Other areas were just worn away by the action of rain and freezing conditions. These areas were patched if they were small, and replaced by new stones if they were large. When the patching, pointing and replacement was completed the whole building was washed from top to bottom. The decades of dirt accumulation could not be removed by soap and water washing but a special chemical cleaning process was used which dissolved the dirt without damaging the face of the stone. When the dirt was removed sufficiently to give an even colour to the face, the wall was sprayed with a high pressure water wash to remove all chemicals from the face of the building. The face of the stone is now clean and will not absorb and retain moisture as much as when covered with dirt and grime. This cleaning will help preserve the face stone for future years.

The exterior windows and doors also required careful examination and analysis before starting any construction work. Every window in the building was checked to see if it was original or had been replaced in succeeding years. A number of windows on the ground floor had been replaced in the 1930s and were not identical to the originals. Moreover, they were showing signs of bad deterioration on sills and frames. These windows were replaced with new ones identical to the original design. Other original windows were examined for problems of rot and general deterioration. Many bottom frame members and sills were renewed and in some cases the whole window was repaired because of deterioration. Most of the windows, which were double hung sash, were not operating so new operating cords, pulleys, and weights, were installed. Parks Canada's mandate for restoration work is to retain as much of the original windows rather than replacing. The glazing of the windows had also been changed in many places over the years, and glass similar to that provided in the 1850s was procured and installed in all the repaired windows. The glass of the 1850s was slightly imperfect and had small bubbles and lines which were apparent when viewed from inside the building. A source for the glass was found from an old demolished greenhouse in New Brunswick built about 1900.

The entrance doors to the building were the next subject to be considered. Research in original documents, including old photographs was required before it could be determined if the doors belonged to the 1850 period. There was also considerable discussion about the possible existence of a door on the North side. When the washroom installed in the 1930s was removed, and it was possible to look at the exterior wall, the original door frame was found together with indications of a fanlight over the door. Further investigations indicated that the present main doors are not original. The design of the panels was somewhat different in the 1850s. This means all exterior doors must be replaced and a "new" one added on the North side.

As a result of work on the exterior of Province House the building has the same appearance it had when Canada was being brought together as a country.