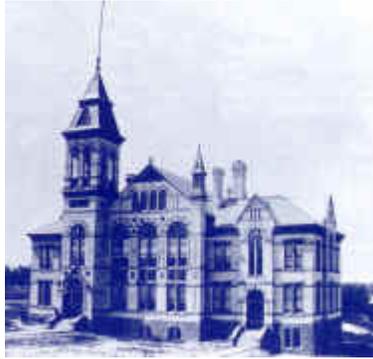


County Information



Perth County Court House

Opened May 9, 1887

The Perth County Court House is one of the most magnificent court houses in the Province of Ontario with very few changes to the original. This pamphlet will briefly explain the history of the building as well as highlight some of the interesting architectural and interior features.

Introduction

The Perth County Court House is the second court house for the County. The original court house and jail were built in 1853 when the County separated from the Huron District.

Within five years, the buildings proved structurally inadequate. Even though the jail was the really contentious issue, complaints about the crowding at the Court House were also a constant concern. During the 1860s, plans for new county buildings were proposed and discarded.

The Present Court House

The fate of the county buildings was tabled until the early 1880s. The turning point was 1884, when conditions at the court house became a major issue as well. Court judges refused to sit in the court room as the odour from the jail yard and the poor ventilation caused illness among the court personnel. A Grand Jury Report presented December 11, 1881 suggested that both the jail and court house were becoming dilapidated.

The County Council had no choice but to proceed with a plan for new facilities. At first, they wanted to erect the new buildings on the same property, but the government objected as the land was too small and the problem would not be solved. The site chosen for the new buildings was 2 1/4 acres from the estate of John Corry Wilson Daly, one of the first settlers. After a legal battle, an Act passed by the government was needed to change Daly's will, and in March, 1885 the land was sold to the County for \$3,500.00. It was an ideal location as the court house could be built facing Ontario Street and therefore be seen by anyone entering Stratford from the east. The land was sufficient to allow for two sizeable buildings with a convenient distance between them.

County Council requested plans for the county buildings from the provincial government, but the government advised that they had no ready-made plans, and suggested that the Council look at the buildings in Orangeville and Brampton as possible styles for the new facilities. An entourage of nine members, including the Sheriff and Clerk, travelled to the different areas and agreed that Dufferin



"The First Court House, 1853-1887"

County (Orangeville) had the most suitable structure, even though there were some features they did not like, including too much gingerbread. The delegation met with disapproval after their trip, not because of their decision, but because of the travel expenses incurred for all of them. The Council suggested that too many people went unnecessarily, "and the hope was expressed that in the case of any more trips, fewer members could do the business as satisfactorily."

The committee recommended that an architect be engaged to design the county buildings that could cost as much as \$40,000.00. London architect, George F. Durand was appointed in March, 1885 with proposed plans ready by May. Tenders were requested for the construction of the buildings and, of the eleven received, only three were given for the completion of the buildings. A local firm, Scrimgeour Brothers, was awarded the contract for the bid of \$65,000.00. By the time the Court House was completed in 1887, the total spent on the buildings was \$95,207.54, the Court House alone costing \$66,738.68.

The Opening

The buildings were both started in 1885 with the Jail opening in 1886 and the Court House in 1887. Originally, the Council had decided to open the buildings on the date of Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee which was June 22, 1887. It was suggested to allow \$500.00 to pay for the festivities. However, the money was returned to a general fund as it was never spent because the buildings were opened instead on May 9, at the beginning of the spring assizes.

Newly-knighted Chief Justice Matthew Cameron was present at the opening when the Warden, George Leversage, officially pronounced the building open for its original purpose, "administration of justice and the transaction of business connected with county affairs." Sir Matthew replied that he was honoured to be the first judge at the opening of the county buildings and felt that "the building is in every sense acceptable to me as one of the judges, and I am sure the people of this County must be proud of the energy and enterprise and wealth which has enabled them to erect such a handsome building as this."

The spring assizes was also the first court session officiated by newly appointed County Judge, James Peter Woods. Woods made no direct reply about the new facilities at the time, but in June at the Quarter Sessions, following the Grand Jury's Presentment, Woods replied "it was gratifying to him to see such a beautiful temple of justice erected in place of the old court house, where people were in danger of their lives. The building was a credit to the County and an ornament to the Province."

Of the May session, the Warden stated "It is a happy coincidence that these buildings should have been completed in the jubilee year of her Most Gracious Majesty the Queen, and that on the occasion of their inauguration, we should be favoured by the presence within them of the newly-made knight, the Chief Justice, and of Your Honour, the newly-made County Judge."

There was no official opening ceremony or celebration, but the Stratford Beacon reported that "the doors were thrown open and the people allowed to look into all the offices." The main attraction was the court room which the Beacon stated "is without a fault, unless perhaps it be its size, which is somewhat

circumscribed, its seating capacity being not perhaps over 200. Otherwise the picture, on which the eye rests with a peculiar sense of pleasure, is complete. The transition from the old to the new room is from the extreme of dinginess and discomfort to a chamber fit for a monarch."

The St. Marys Argus also reported the opening and stated that although the court docket was a lengthy one, "we suppose we have heard the end of grumbling of judge, jurymen, lawyers and frequenters of the court, about the foul air of the building. The trouble will now be with the people of the County who will be compelled to pay for the honour of being the possessors of the best and nicest Court House in the Province."

In December, when the financial responsibilities of Stratford and St. Marys had been decided, the Council voiced their approval of both the architect, Durand, and the new facilities. The Court House remains one of the finest examples of High Victorian architecture in the Province and is a tribute to both the architect and the Council who were far-sighted enough to provide a building whose facilities remain practical and useful to this day.

The Architect

George F. Durand was born in 1850 to Scottish parents. His artistic ability encouraged his father to enroll him in Peel's Art School, London, where after two years of study, specializing in marble sculpturing, Durand began his studies in architecture in apprenticeship with London architect, William Robinson. After completing his apprenticeship, Durand moved to the United States, where he helped with the designs of the New York State Capital Building for a short time. He returned to London where he became a partner with Robinson and Thomas Henry Tracy until they both retired from the firm. Durand then formed a partnership with John Moore until 1888. Durand also chaired the organizational meeting of the Ontario Association of Architects, where he was elected as Second Vice-President. He was unable to complete his term due to his untimely death in 1889, at the age of thirty-nine.



[George F. Durand, Architect]

Durand considered himself an architect-artist and the Perth County Court House supports this claim, as not only the building, but also the terra cotta details are his design. His name appears on the terra cotta panel nearest to the right entrance, which shows a design of a tool with a small inscription of 'Geo. F. Durand, architect.' The Ontario Association of Architects denounced Durand's signing of this building, feeling that it was immodest on the part of any architect to place his name on a building. However, Durand's name is intact and reminds all viewers of his artistic and architectural genius.

Durand's career was short but productive; designing public buildings, residences, schools and churches throughout Southwestern Ontario. Many have been demolished, but several remain in Perth County. These include, Knox Presbyterian Church, Listowel; the Stratford Pumpouse (now Gallery Stratford); the first Stratford General Hospital and the Stratford jail.

Architectural Style

The Site

The Perth County Court House is situated on uneven ground, which slopes to the Avon River. This site enhances the picturesque qualities of the building as well as the character of the structure by highlighting the rusticated basement foundation. Situated at the end of Ontario Street, the Court House can be seen by anyone approaching Stratford from an easterly direction. The Ontario Street sidewalks are perfectly aligned with the main entrances of the building, adding to the symmetry and balance of the site. Impressive, yet simple, the building reflects its function as a Court House by exemplifying strength, balance and orderliness in its facade, despite the gable and tower.

The Style

This building is an excellent example of High Victorian architecture; it combines bichromal masonry and a variety of building materials with features from different architectural styles. Italianate brackets adorn the cornice, while several Queen Anne features include the medieval tower; moulded brick chimneys; and the introduction of small multiple paned windows.

Even more apparent are the Richardsonian Romanesque elements of the building. Henry Hobson Richardson, an American architect, reinterpreted the Romanesque Revival style in a more robust massive manner. Several features of this style are evident in this building. They include the round arch windows stretching over two stories; the heavy doors; the contrasting masonry surfaces; and the rusticated basement foundation. Other Richardsonian Romanesque features are the wall dormers which peak with a gable at the top; the pinnacle placed off centre; and Romanesque motifs adorning the soffits. Other Romanesque features include the miniature columns, completed with capitals, which embellish the arched windows on the front and side facades. The soffits of the cornice immediately above the terra cotta panel are adorned with an intricate rose and maple leaf pattern.

Acton quarry stone was used as the foundation in the basement, and tile drains were placed under the foundation to prevent the accumulation of water around the walls. Credit Valley sandstone was used for the front entrance and slate for the roof.



"Terra Cotta Red Lion holding shield with initials "PC"

Architectural Features

Exterior Features

Front Facade

Above the main entranceway is a semicircular transom, with stained glass windows portraying the scales of justice and crossed swords. Two panels with hands giving benediction are located here as well. Quoins are used to create a pilaster effect complete with capitals on either side of the entrance, giving a good bichromal contrast against the buff-coloured brick.



"Terra Cotta Hand Giving Benediction"

On the tower, a terra cotta panel with "Perth County Court House" and two cherubs is located. This is matched by two other panels, one on each side of the tower. The one on the right side gives the date "AD. 1886", while the one on the left (St. Andrew Street) side has two symbolic figures supporting an Ontario coat of arms.

To the right of the tower are six allegorical terra cotta panels. These represent the following motifs (from left to right):

1. Arts:angels with musical instruments, a score, painter's brushes, etc. represent the arts. The name "H. Plasschaert" is carved on the right side of the panel. He was the leading terra cotta artist in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA.
2. Manufacture:measuring instruments and gears symbolize manufacturing.
- 3 & 4. Justice: a sword surmounted by a lion's head (3) and a set of scales (4) represent justice and the role of the building as a court house. They are placed in the centre.
5. Agriculture:a sheaf of wheat, a plough and fruit represent agriculture which has always been the mainstay of the County.
6. Architecture:a compass and other measuring instruments represent architecture, obviously an important element in this building. The name of the architect "Geo. F. Durand" appears on this panel.

Two blank sandstone shields separate these terra cotta panels into pairs. A third blank shield appears on the small tower. Why they are blank is unknown.

Above the panels are two terra cotta heads representing manufacture and agriculture. At the top, the wall dormer peaks into a gable featuring a terra cotta pediment depicting a female allegory of justice. A lion holding a shield with the initials "PC" for Perth County stands at the very top and centre of the facade. For some reason, the lion was placed over the main entranceway when the building was first erected and did not find its proper resting place at the top until 1967.

A pinnacle, to the right of the central portion of the building counterbalances the main tower. It is much plainer and has only a simplified frieze.

Beside the pinnacle is the barrister's entrance which leads up a back staircase to the court room and court offices. Above the doorway, in the gable of the wall dormer, is another terra cotta pediment illustrating the coat of arms of Perth County. The symbols of the four quarters in the arms are as follows.



Perth County Crest

1. (Upper left) a sheaf of wheat representing agriculture and the main crop of the County at the time it was formed
2. (Upper right) a train representing the progress of industry
3. (Lower left) two plows representing agriculture
4. (Lower right) a beehive representing the industriousness of the citizens.

Side Facades

The north facade facing the river is quite simple and only features a terra cotta pediment engraved with the initials "PC".

In contrast, the south facade facing St. Andrew Street, being an important entrance, has more features. As on the main entrance, there are two hands giving benediction over the entranceway.

Interior Details

The heavy doors of the main entrance lead into a small anteroom with bichromal brick, and colourful mosaic tile on the floor. On the right, a marble tablet is carved bearing the names of the county officials, as well as the craftsmen responsible for building the Court House. At the bottom right hand side, the names of the sculptors Matheson and Heard have been removed, but the indentation is still evident. The entablature is encased in a terra cotta frame with the Perth County coat of arms, surmounted by a beaver crest with the County motto "Perseverance and Industry" underneath.

Directly across from the entrance is the main staircase, complete with ornate turnings and a large carved oak newel post. The flowers on the post represent the four parts of the British Isles – the Thistle for Scotland, the Rose for England, the Shamrock for Ireland and the Leek for Wales. The woodwork on the back or lawyers' staircase leading to the court room, complements the main staircase, but its newel post and turnings are not as ornate.

On the main landing is a large, arched, stained glass window with various illustrations. To create a rectangular shape at the top, triangular wood pieces have been added to the corners with the initials "VR"

for Victoria Regina (Queen Victoria) and a crown carved in each triangle. The semicircle itself, depicts the Canadian coat of arms, representing the seven provinces. The top two panes of glass have AD. and 1886 respectively. The middle sections have illustrations of the scales of justice and crossed swords, and the bottom two sections have the coat of arms of Ontario and the coat of arms of Perth County.

The smaller stained glass window, found on the landing of the back staircase is more simplistic bearing the date "1886 AD." at the top and the Ontario coat of arms.

The Woodwork

The original white pine woodwork and Greek revival trim remain, although they have been re-stained. Wainscotting is present throughout the hallways and rooms. The panelled doors with panelled entranceway are each capped by a rectangular window. Triangular carved wooden pieces are evident above the doorway at the St. Andrew Street entrance, completing the corners of the semicircular windows. The initials 'PC' are engraved in these pieces.

The hallway on the main floor has several well defined arches, with the initials 'PC' carved in wood and located in the centre or keystone position of the arch. Wall pilasters (false columns) are effectively capped with intricate wood design to create Corinthian capitals. The intricate plaster rondels in the ceiling, supporting chandeliers, use the same motifs as those found on the wall pilasters. These are found throughout the building.

Although the woodwork is the same throughout the Court House, the law library is worthy of special mention. The most interesting feature is the original bookcases, which have pilasters at the ends and the tops defined as entablatures, complete with architrave, frieze and cornice, imitating Greek or Roman styles.

There are at least three decorated fireplaces found in the Court House, all made of white oak, with the major differences being the patterning on the tiles and the wood design. The fireplace in the County Clerk's office has ornate spindle-like columns, complete with bases and capitals located on either side of the fireplace, and a sunburst is carved in the mantle. Each tile has a flower.



"Fireplace in County Clerk's Office"

The fireplace in the Sheriff's office also has columns carved from wood, but they are not as ornate. The tiles on this fireplace combine to create a sunflower on each side. The other fireplace is located upstairs in the barristers' lounge. Again, the fireplace is similar, but with more ornately carved columns and well-defined capitals and bases. Each bronze-like tile in this fireplace has an etching of a fruit motif.

The Court Room

The court room is worthy of special note. The large arched windows on the front facade are those of the court room. The windows are completed by the triangular carved wooden pieces with the initials 'VR' for Victoria Regina. The pine gallery pews are original and are completed with a trefoil design at each. They seat about 200 persons.

The judge's bench has ornate pilasters with Corinthian details on the capitals and the entablature. The clerk's bench has similar details, but the columns and capitals are not as ornate. An ornately carved judge's chair sits at the front, with a carved design including the initials 'PC'. Two other chairs are placed at the sides with similar carving.

The same pilaster design is used on the prisoner's box, the two witness boxes, the two jury boxes and the barristers' bench, again with refined detail and a quatrefoil design. These original features were designed by George F. Durand and have remained intact. Several yeas ago, a fire damaged the prisoner's box and a local craftsman replaced it with an exact replica.



"The Judge's Bench"

Other interesting features in the room include the pronounced arch forming a small alcove, where the judge sits and the high, panelled wainscoting around the walls. The pilasters on the walls are adorned with three sunflowers on the frieze part of the entablature. An elaborate rondel remains in place although the chandelier has been removed.

Throughout the building, there is intricate grill-work on the walls to assist in ventilation. This is also very well illustrated by the large circular grills in the ceiling of the court room.

Perth County Court House remains as a fine example of High Victorian architecture whose function is not outdated.



"The Court Room, about 1905"

SOURCES

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