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# Province House Celebrates it's 175th Birthday

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by Bart Armstrong

*In Halifax on August 12, 1811 the cornerstone was laid for a building that would serve as the seat of government for the 70,000 residents of the colony of Nova Scotia. In February 1994 this same building, home of the Nova Scotia Legislative Assembly, celebrated its 175th year of continuous use.*

The laying of the cornerstone for Province House was one of the last official duties of Sir George Prevost before being transferred to Quebec as Administrator of Lower Canada. Later he was appointed Governor-in-Chief of the Canada's and then Commander-in-Chief of the British forces during the war of 1812.

At the 3 p.m. arrival of His Excellency and entourage, the assembled military troops, both regular and militia gave the standard Royal Salute and the band played "God Save the King." Prevost was then greeted by the Commissioners who would take charge of the construction project. They in turn escorted Sir George to a marquis provided for the occasion where he was received by the Grand Master and various officers of the Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons.

After refreshments were served the ceremony commenced with a benediction by the Grand Chaplain. Hundreds of loyal townfolk joined with the leaders of the military, religious and political communities to hear the many speeches that followed. Officials attending the historic event included the Chief Justice, the Bishop of Nova Scotia, the Judge of the Admiralty, Attorney General, Treasurer, Speaker of the Assembly, Secretary, the architect and commissioners for the building's construction and the Surveyor-General.

***"May the Building, that shall arise from this foundation perpetuate the Loyalty and Liberality of the province of Nova Scotia."***

*Sir George Prevost  
Lieutenant Governor of Nova Scotia 1811*

The latter was a man named Charles Morris who was the third man, all of the same name, to hold such an office. They were father, son and grandson. The fourth Surveyor-General, John Spry Morris was a great grandson to the first Charles, the very man who laid out the original streets of Halifax and Dartmouth upon their founding in 1749 and 1750 respectively.

The original plans of 1809 called for a legislative building measuring 80 feet by 50 feet with a total cost of about 5,000 pounds Sterling. If constructed it would have been the smallest legislative building in Canada, smaller even than the one in Charlottetown.

But soon a modified plan called for a larger structure measuring 140 by 70 feet and a new cost of an estimated 20,000 pounds.

Due to war efforts and a lack of skilled trades people, the entire project took eight years to complete at a whopping cost of 52,000 pounds.

On February 11, 1819 the new building was finally officially opened as a legislature. One of the first official acts by the politicians on that day was the voting in of their own salary increases.

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## The 175th Anniversary

This year politicians and the electors gathered to celebrate the birthday of the building. On February 10, 1994 a very select group of politicians and other officials were entertained at a formal dinner hosted by the Bank of Nova Scotia. The following day, on exactly the 175th birthday, the present Lieutenant Governor, Lloyd Crouse presided over a formal ceremony in the legislative chamber followed by an entertaining yet informative skit about the building and its occupants over the years. Two days later the building was opened for public tours and displays.

At 2:00 p.m. on the 11th many of the current MLAs sat in their seats in the legislature. Around them sat many dignitaries including the Right Honourable Robert L.

Stanfield, a former Nova Scotia Premier, former Lieutenant Governor Al Abraham, former Premier and now Senator John Buchanan, Senator Al Graham, MPs Mary Clancy and Geoff Regan, Chief Justice Lorne Clarke and other officials including several former Speakers of the Legislature. In the public galleries sat some 200 guests and members of the public.

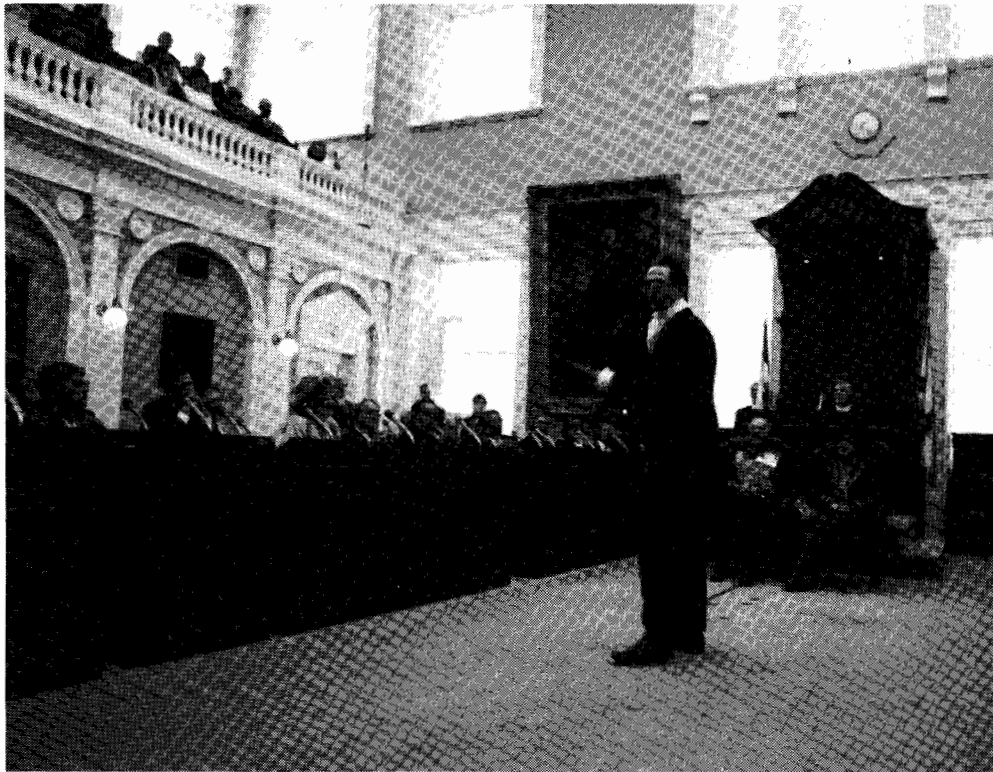
After the playing of the national anthem and a prayer offered by Nova Scotia MicMac Grand Chief Ben Syliboy, local actor Gary Vermeir entertained those gathered in a carefully prepared skit that saw him dressed in costume of the day and impersonating the "ghost of Jacob Hurley," Province House's first custodian.

Thirty-four year old Vermeir is a partner in the four year old production company "Brainstorm Productions" which specializes in doing productions for live



The 175th Anniversary brought together a number of former Lieutenant Governors, Premiers and Speakers. Seated current Premier John Savage (l), and Robert Stanfield. Standing (l-r): Senator (former Premier) John Buchanan, former Lt. Gov. Clarence L. Gosse, former Lt. Gov. Alan R. Abraham, former Speakers Gordon Fitzgerald, George Doucet, George Mitchell, Vince MacLean, Ron Russell, current Speaker Paul MacEwan, and former Speaker Harvey A. Veniot

*(Information & Communications Services, Province of Nova Scotia)*



Many of Nova Scotia's cabinet members and MLAs watched actor Gary Vermeir's skit on the history of the building. Speaker Paul MacEwan is in the Chair. In front of him is Lieutenant Governor Lloyd Crouse and Mrs. Crouse.

*(Information and Communication Services, Province of Nova Scotia)*

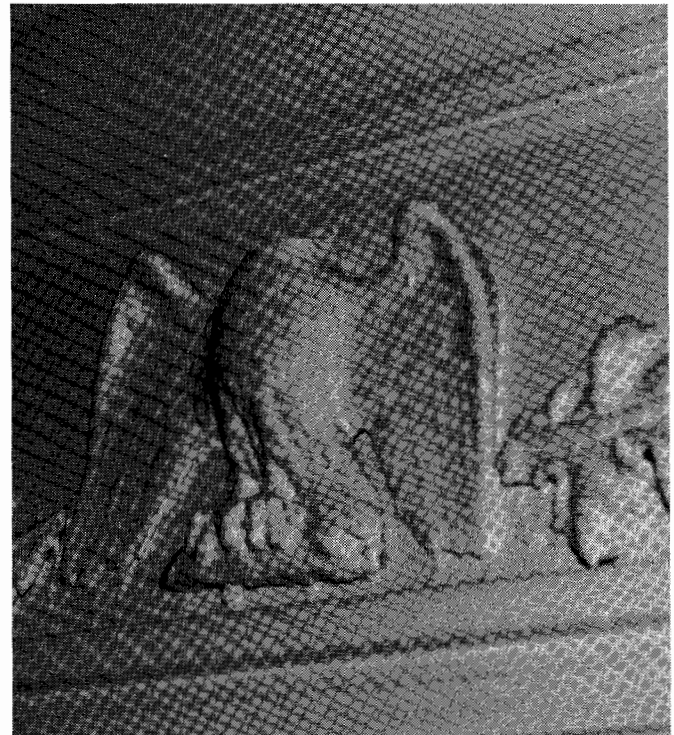
conferences. Vermeir studied a large package of materials supplied by the Legislature and then wrote his own script.

He wore a mid 1880's costume of a well dressed worker. It consisted of black pants and a white blouse with formal frilly cuffs and high neckline under a black highcut waste coat and black frock.

Throughout his presentation "the ghost" would refer to a variety of past officials by their appointments. As he spoke of an early Lieutenant Governor he would then turn the floor over to the current Lieutenant Governor for a few comments. He would continue his skit until it was time to introduce another key player, be it the Premier, the Speaker or the leader of the Official Opposition. Each current occupant of office would then take a few minutes to pass on his views of the historic event.

While many officials were unable to attend the ceremony, warm greetings were read from two former premiers, a former Speaker, the leader of the provincial NDP and the Prime Minister of Canada. Greetings were also read from the Speaker of the House of Commons in London.

Ghost Jacob's skit took the guests through the building's long history. With wit, wisdom, and considerable humour his one person, several act play began with the story of how the estimates to build the structure were more than doubled. Mid-way through the

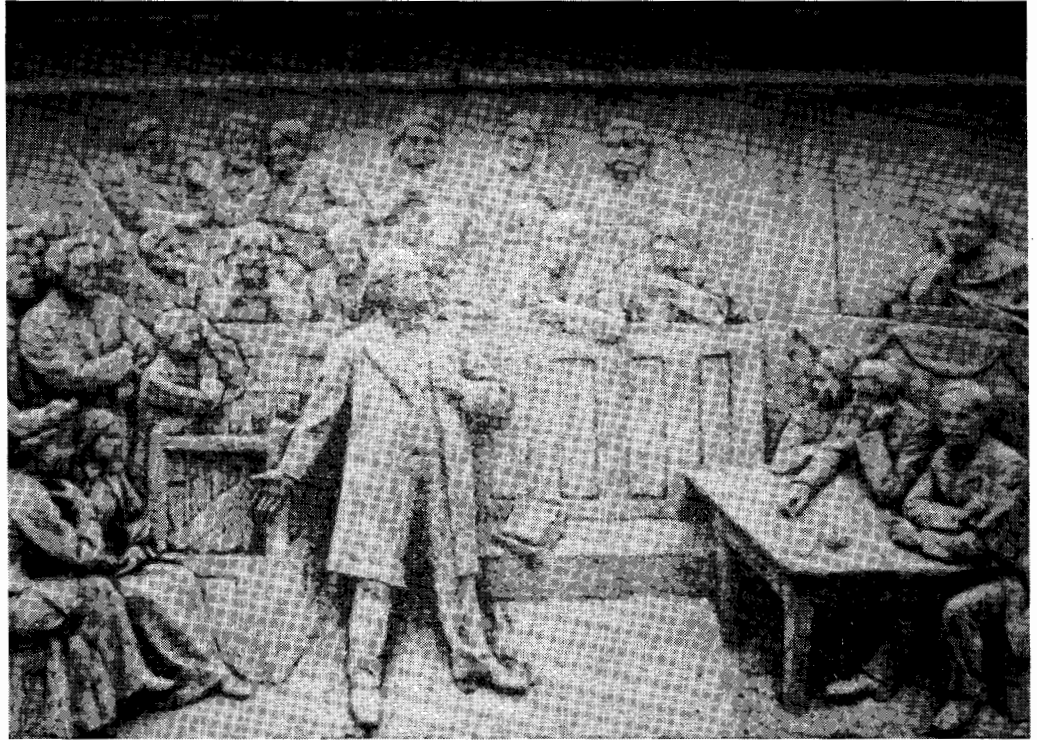


**A British falcon decapitated in the 1840s during a Canada-US trade dispute when it was mistakenly identified as the American eagle**

*(Information and Communication Services, Province of Nova Scotia)*

**A scene from the 1835 trial of Joseph Howe.**

*(Information and Communication Services, Province of Nova Scotia)*



presentation he remembered when the Premier still had his office within the building. Those assembled, including the Premier laughed at the reference to the recent relocating of his offices to another building across the road.

The sound of a pin dropping could have been heard as Jacob told of the 1840 duel Joseph Howe fought with his adversary, the young John C. Haliburton. John had taken offence to an article Howe had published and felt it was an attack on his father Chief Justice Haliburton (author of Sam Slick) who had presided over the Howe libel trial of 1835.

On the morning of March 14, 1840 the two appeared near the tower in Point Pleasant Park. As the ghost explained, Haliburton first fired but missed his target. As the audience sat in silence Jacob said that Howe, a marksman, took slow but very careful aim, then quickly raised the pistol skyward and fired his shot with the exclamation "let the creature live."

Jacob also told of another duel with less fortunate results. Richard Uniacke, son of the Attorney General was being tried for murder. He was tried by his very own father, after he shot and killed William Bowie after being challenged to a duel. In those days a man was expected to uphold his honour and go through with the challenge, even at the cost of life.

Uniacke's July 1840 trial was the first criminal trial to take place in the Supreme Court chamber, now the

library at the Legislature. After all was said and done Uniacke walked away a free man for upholding his honour.

Jacob also told how the legislative chamber was arranged a little different than it is today. There once were about 20 open fireplaces in the building. In the early days the Speaker's chair was along the west wall which resulted in the government side sitting on his right, the side with some of the building's open fireplaces. The opposition, on the traditional left, sat along the wall with many windows and not fireplaces —the coldest spot in the chamber.

Recalling the 1840's feelings of Nova Scotians, ghost Jacob also told of the antics of MLA Lawrence O'Connor Doyle. At the time Maine and New Brunswick were heavily engaged in a dispute regarding logging rights. Upon the announcement of the arbitrator's decision, one said to favour the Americans, Doyle started to gaze out of the upper gallery windows.

He then noticed that in the architectural design above many of the windows there were what he thought to be carvings of American Eagles. In anger he took his cane and smashed a number of their heads. Later it was discovered that they were not American eagles but British falcons. To this day some of them remain headless.



Seven year-old Katharine Langille and her eight year-old brother Chris visited the Legislative Library during the anniversary. (Information and Communication Services, Province of Nova Scotia)

But the ghost said it must have rubbed off, as Doyle was later to have "lost his head and even moved south to the US."

After the skit was completed a piper played happy birthday and those gathered moved to the Red Chamber at the other end of the building to enjoy a ceremonial cake and other refreshments.

The following Sunday Province House was opened up for the public. Several hundred visitors were allowed to enter the Premier's old office, the cabinet room, the Red

Room, the Assembly Chamber, the library and public galleries.

Guests could view a video on how the legislature works, look at many displays of early day artifacts and pick up a free copy of a ceremonial 175th anniversary poster, or purchase at little cost ceremonial pins, mugs and tote bags all suitably engraved with the artist's logo specially designed for the occasion.

In the Assembly Chamber they could actually sit in the Speaker's, MLA's or premier's chairs and stand in the very room that held its first legislative meetings in 1758. Ninety years later in this same room our forefathers saw, for the first time in a British colony, the establishment of responsible government.

It is here also that many heated debates before confederation took place and were men like Charles Tupper and John Thompson served as MLA's and then Premiers before becoming Prime Ministers of Canada.

*Charles Dickens visited the legislature in 1842 and later described his recollections "like looking at Westminster through the wrong end of the telescope."*

A visit to the library would put the visitor in the room that once was the Supreme Court of Nova Scotia and site of many other famous trials besides the "freedom of the press" trial of 1835. Here four pirates from the "Saladin" were tried in 1844. Only after the ship floundered in Nova Scotia waters did the horrible story surface. They attempted to seize the 70 tons of copper, 13 bars of gold and about \$20,000 in coin from the Saladin in which they were employed. In the process eight of the ten other members of the crew were murdered, two were set free at trial and the four remaining crew were sentenced to hang, a sentence carried out within days.

Today the library and adjoining spaces and a few satellite offices are the home of some 200,000 books on government and Nova Scotia history. The oldest book in the collection is an astronomy book translated from Arabic to Latin and dated 1488. ♦