Now you see it, now you…won't!: The growing porticoes, disappearing wings, and secret attics of PEI's Province House

Prince Edward Island's Province House was very much a work-in-progress as it was being built – with budgets and popular opinion changing the scope of the project several times and leaving some quirky architectural features. But it has stood the test of time for over 170 years and ongoing renovations mean it will be preserved for many more.

Laura Morrell

Prince Edward Island has a respectably lengthy history when it comes to democratic government led by an assembly of citizens. Our first House of Assembly was elected in 1773 when Prince Edward Island was a British colony known as Saint John's Island. The main settlement of Charlotte Town had been laid out around a natural harbor by Charles Morris, Chief Surveyor of Nova Scotia, in his 1768 survey. Green space was set aside on high ground overlooking the harbour for buildings to house the colonial administration. Governor Walter Patterson named it Queen Square and, while it was the site of many different buildings throughout the colony's history, it eventually became home to Province House.

As often happens in life, having a plan and implementing it are two very different endeavours. The burgeoning city had space to build administrative buildings but lacked the financial means. The initial grant of £3,000 provided by the British Colonial Office for construction wound up paying the salaries of Governor Patterson and other officials when the mostly-absentee landowners refused to pay their quit rents, which were supposed to fund the colony's administration.[1] It wasn't until 1812 that the first public building was built by John Plaw on Queen Square. The Plaw Building was a small wooden structure shared by the courthouse and the legislature. By the mid-1830s, after the British Government abandoned quit rents in

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favour of a land assessment tax, the legislature was able to turn its attention towards building a "solid and well constructed edifice for the deposit and safe custody of all Public Records."[2]

In August 1839 a contest to design a brick building to hold the two legislative chambers, offices, committee rooms, a library, visitor galleries, the courts, and seven public offices was published in newspapers in Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick. The winning plan was designed by Island architect Isaac Smith, who was awarded £20. By this time, Smith had a solid track record as the designer –and builder– of most of the key buildings in the colony. His plan called for a three-story building in the classic revival style popular in other British colonies.[3]

Records indicate two substantive changes were made over the course of construction: one set removed architectural elements to reduce building costs, and the next replaced some of those same architectural elements to make it more attractive.[4]

In March 1842 the legislature approved £5,000 to build the Colonial Building (as Province House was first known), then immediately passed an act appointing building commissioners to contract with Island tradespeople and to oversee construction while also doubling the budget to £10,000. Still, the lowest tender for construction came in at more than £2,800 over the available grant. Rather than delay the project while an increase was debated in the legislature, the building commissioners had Isaac Smith, who was also the contractor, remove parts of the design to bring it within budget.

The cornerstone was laid May 16, 1843, kicking off the official beginning of construction. The first stage of construction saw the basement excavated and the exterior walls built. Despite being still in the early stages of construction, public opinion of the building's skeletal silhouette wasn't favourable. Grumblings around town and in the newspapers spurred Smith to take the plans back to the legislature in 1844 for approval to make two significant changes to the exterior: small wings were added to the ends of the building, and the porticoes were extended.[5]

The addition of the wings also served a functional purpose, as offices for the President of Legislative Council and the Speaker of the House of Assembly were added to the second story of each wing, behind their respective chambers. Oddly enough, the third floors of each wing were never designated as anything but decorative, and are only accessible by way of the building's attic.

In Smith's initial design of the Colonial Building, the porticoes were recessed into the façade, a feature of classical architecture that was popular at the time. They were extended outward to improve the grandeur of the building, with one oversight: the large windows installed along the second floor of the building were never replaced with doors to allow easy access to the roof of the portico from the library. A number of distinguished guests have had to climb out the window over the years in order to address crowds below.

The legislature moved into its permanent home on January 26, 1847, and continued to meet there for 168 years. In January 2015, Province House was closed so that extensive conservation work could be undertaken.

While there are no plans to modify the building's silhouette with extra wings or expanding porticoes, workers have been finding interesting bits of the past hidden in the walls, such as a kazoo, antique pudding tins, rum bottles, and a pair of eyeglasses. The work is also providing experience for a new generation of specialized Island tradespeople. Six recent graduates of the Holland College Heritage Retrofit Carpentry program were hired to work on the Province House restoration, documenting and photographing wooden infrastructure and decoration for removal and restoration.[6] Province House is expected to re-open in the early 2020s.

Notes

1   Cullen, Mary K. *A History of the Structure and Use of Province house, Prince Edward Island, 1837-1977*. Parks Canada, National Historic Parks and Site Branch. Manuscript report number 211. (Ottawa: Government of Canada, 1977), 5

2   *Journals of the House of Assembly of Prince Edward Island* (Charlottetown: John Henry White, 1837), 6.

3   Cullen, 10.

4   Ibid., 13.

5   Ibid., 15.

6   CBC News, (2017). "Holland College grads working on Province House conservation project" [Online]. Available: http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/prince-edward-island/pei-holland-college-heritage-grads-province-house-1.4185010.