

Canada's Oldest Seat of Government

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Nova Scotians are justly proud of their legislative building, Province House, which has served as the principal capitol since the Earl of Dalhousie presided over the Opening of the Eleventh Assembly in the Red Chamber, the former Legislative Council Chamber, on February 11, 1819. In the 169 years of its existence it has witnessed a countless number of significant events, both political and social. An official ceremony in the Red Chamber on December 2, 1987, presided over by the Hon. Arthur Donahoe, Speaker of the House of Assembly and Premier John Buchanan, was a fitting commemoration of a successful program of restoration initiated by the government several years before.

In 1982 the Department of Government Services commissioned a study to determine the extent of deterioration of the exterior of Province House and proposals for its restoration. Not long afterwards Speaker Arthur Donahoe, while on a Parliamentary visit to London, journeyed to Bristol to witness the work of the Southwestern Stone Cleaning and Restoration Company, which had been responsible for many restoration projects in Britain, particularly in the city of Bath. Impressed by his observations, the Speaker recommended to government that the Southwestern company be hired to supervise the restoration project. The Government responded favourably and as a result Les Batten, a master stone mason of forty years experience with the company, became the project supervisor and devised a plan for the cleaning and restoration of the building.

It was essential, however, that additional workmen be employed on the project. Since there were no trained stone masons in the province a program was devised whereby Nova Scotian apprentices would be trained by the Bristol artisans while the work was in progress. A private Nova Scotia company was incorporated under the name Canstone Inc. with Les Batten as President. Canstone agreed to employ the apprentices, 12 of whom were recruited from among 170

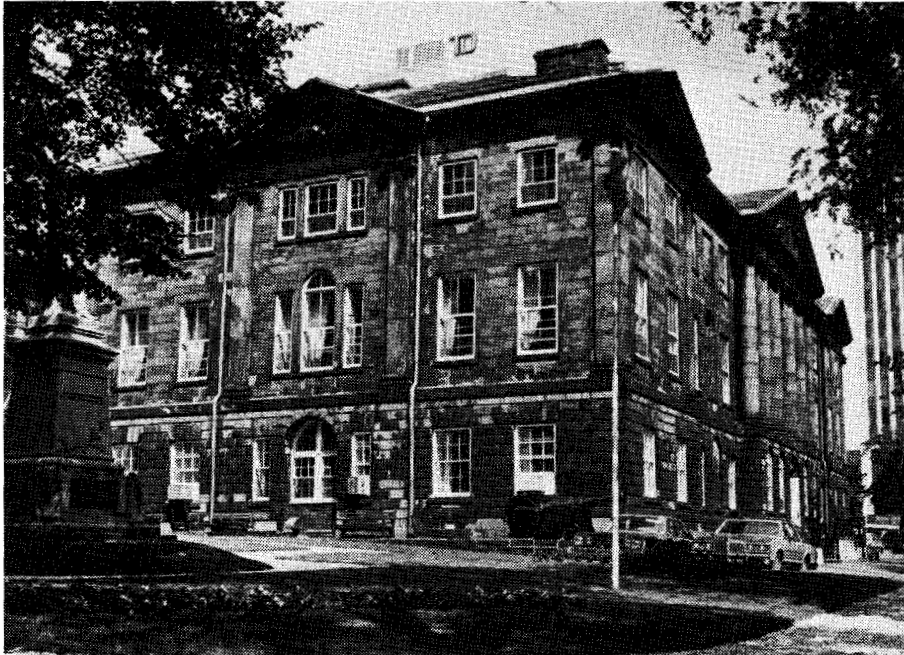
applicants in February 1986. Provision was made for formal training, which would result in proper certification after the completion of a 4-year apprenticeship program based on the British model.

The results have been eminently successful; restoration stone masonry has now been designated a trade in Nova Scotia; a provincial advisory committee has been named and a syllabus produced in co-operation with the Nova Scotia Institute of Technology. In 1989 the potential graduates, including one woman, will be equipped to engage in a trade formerly unknown to the province, and indeed little practised in the rest of Canada.

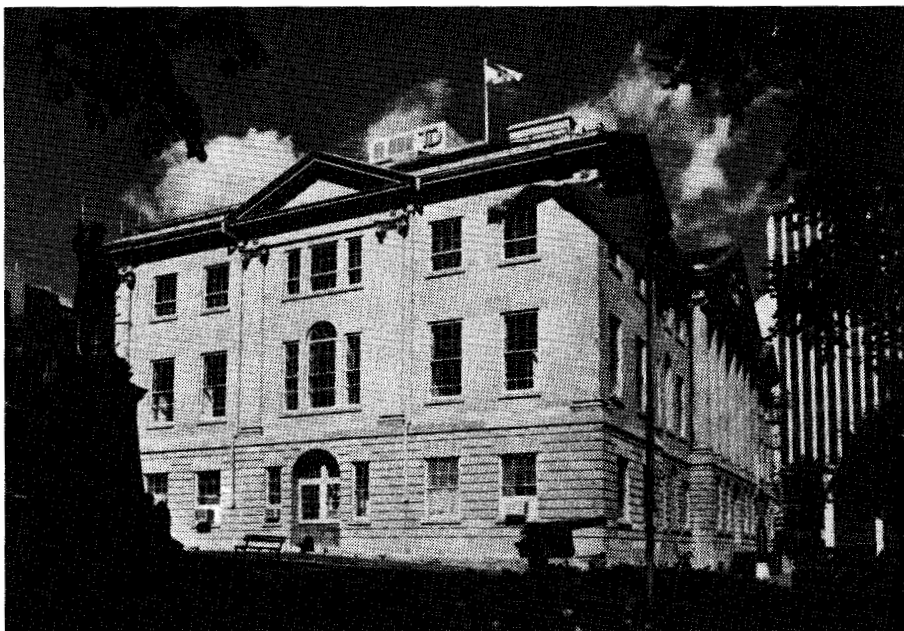
Province House is constructed of sand stone quarried at Wallace (formerly Ramsheg) in Cumberland County and brought by water to Halifax, where it was unloaded at a nearby wharf. It is fortunate that stone from this quarry is still available, for it was necessary to reface some stones, while many others required replacement. After they had been cleaned every stone, whether a chimney, molding or a decorated piece, required very careful inspection. The handsome coat of arms over the Hollis Street entrance, which was executed by a Scottish stone carver, David Kinnear, from one block of stone, was found to be in special need of attention.

Now that the polyethylene wraps have been entirely removed Province House stands proudly in its fence – enclosed square, its warm beige walls in striking contrast to towering steel edifices that surround it on all sides. Haligonians who had formerly accepted the fact that their seat of government was destined to remain somber and retiring in appearance have come to regard their splendid architectural treasure in a new light.

Province House is Canada's oldest legislature building, yet the Nova Scotia legislature had been in existence for sixty-one years before it could claim a building of its own. Its first meeting on October 2, 1758 took place at the court house situated at the corner of Argyle and Buckingham streets; later the assembly moved to rented quarters in various



Acclaimed as one of the finest examples of Georgian architecture on the continent Province House has served the province well, but it was inevitable that the ravages of weather and grime would deteriorously affect the once mellow sandstone fabric of its exterior. The native stone, originally a warm beige, had turned to a non-descript black and in many areas the fabric had begun to crumble (see above). The photo below shows the results of the restoration.



locations in the town. As early as 1787 there was talk of a proper seat of government and a suitable site was purchased in the south suburbs. This location, however, did not meet with unanimous approval and when Governor Sir John Wentworth and his imperious lady continued to pressure the authorities for a new government house to replace the present deteriorating structure a decision was made in 1799 to commence the construction of a new governor's residence on this site.

Faced with the task of financing a lavish building out of its meagre budget the legislature had little heart to undertake

the construction of a building of its own for the next few years. However, in his Speech from the Throne in February 1811, Sir George Prevost made specific reference to the necessity for a government seat in line with "the prosperous state of the Province." In their dilapidated quarters in the Cochran Building the members immediately took action; an appropriation was passed in the following month and on August 12, 1811, the birthday of the Prince Regent, the cornerstone was laid in a splendid ceremony under true masonic protocol the likes of which Nova Scotians had never before witnessed. John Merrick, master painter at the

Dockyard, was commissioned to draw up the plan and elevation for a structure which was to measure 140 feet in length, 70 feet in width and 45 feet in height.

Seven years later the building was completed under the direction of Richard Scott, who was engaged to supervise the construction and who had been named as the architect, though it is very likely his role was to interpret Merrick's splendid plan. The result is a masterpiece of Georgian architecture built in the classic Ionic style, a high tribute to the builders and artisans of another era who, with their talent and painstaking efforts, created an edifice of enduring beauty.

Upon its completion Province House was thrown open to the public. Nova Scotians converged on Halifax from all corners of the province to observe their magnificent structure, the first of its like in the British North American provinces. They gazed in wonder at the enormous expanse of window glass, at the elaborate plaster work in the ceilings and the delicate carving around the many fireplaces and doors. For decades afterward any travel books which included a reference to Halifax mentioned Province House in terms bordering on awe.

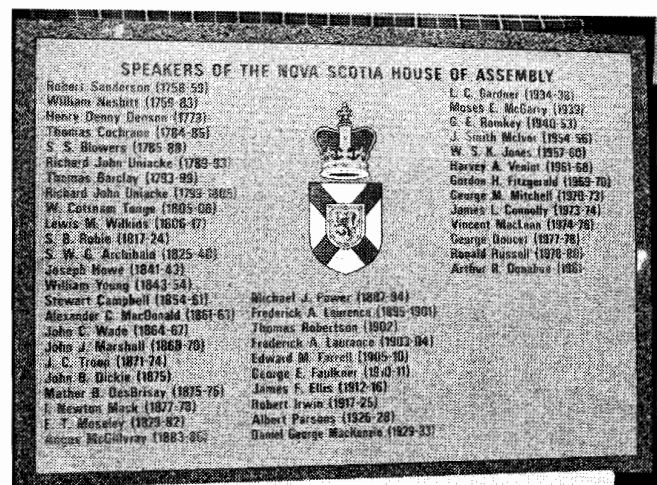
John McGregor, in his *British America* published in 1832, referred to it as "the most splendid edifice in North America" and in the same year the Quebec surveyor Joseph Bouchette, in his *The British Dominions in North America* called it "the best-built and handsomest edifice in North America." In a Mechanics' Institute lecture the Haligonian George Young was perhaps more xenophobic in his comments, for he called it "avowedly the most chaste specimen of classical architecture on this Continent, and infinitely superior either to the Capitol of Washington, or the Bank of Philadelphia, built in imitation of the Parthenon of Athens. Ten years later Charles Dickens was to compare his visit to the Opening of the House in the Red Chamber to looking at Westminster through the wrong end of the telescope.

The exterior of Province House has seen only a few minor alterations since those early days, but on the main level two of the three principal chambers, the House of Assembly and the Legislative Library, originally the Supreme Court, have had radical changes, while the size and shape of the offices on the ground floor have been altered as necessity demanded. At one time all offices of the government were contained in this one building with apparently space to spare for in 1832 John McGregor noted that "the size of this superb building is at present too great for the business of the province; but it must be considered built as well for the use of posterity, as for that of the present day."

Visitors to Province House today are impressed with the many portraits of members of the Royal Family which adorn the walls of the main hallway and the Red Chamber—George I and his daughter-in-law, Queen Caroline, the consort of George II, Alan Ramsay's well known portraits of George III

and Queen Charlotte, William IV by Beechy, Queen Victoria by the native Nova Scotian, Alfred Barrett, Edward the VII, and George V, by Sir Wyley Grier. The likeness of the Duke of Kent, painted by Simon Weaver while the Duke was stationed in Halifax, hangs on the balcony in the Legislative Library. Nova Scotians who have found fame in battle or in the political field are represented—Joseph Howe, Sir John Inglis of Lucknow, Sir Francis Fenwick Williams of Kars, Sir Charles Tupper, Sir Robert Borden, George Murray, James W. Johnston and Thomas Chandler Haliburton, the creator of Sam Slick.

Tablets commemorating the first representative assembly in Canada in 1758 and the birth of responsible government in 1848 hold a conspicuous position in the main hallway. While visitors to many of the provincial capitals may observe



portraits of the speakers who have served their legislatures, there are no such facilities for exhibiting such portraits in Province House. Indeed, to provide space for portraits of the 47 gentlemen who have served as speaker since 1758 would require an art gallery. Recognition of the role these people have played in upholding the democratic tradition in Nova Scotia has now taken the form of a granite tablet containing their names, which is displayed in an appropriate place in the hallway adjacent to the west entrance. This tablet was unveiled by Speaker Donahoe on the same occasion as the restoration, yet another means of honoring the heritage passed down through the years.

The Earl of Dalhousie in his Speech from the Throne that February day 169 years ago observed "this splendid building ... stands, and will stand to the latest posterity, a proud product of the public spirit at this period of your history, and I consider this magnificent work equally honourable, and useful to the province. I commend it to your continued protection."

The province today has honoured this charge; may future generations continue to give it their protection. *