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# *Renovating the New Brunswick Legislative Building*

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**by Robert Power and Colin Smith**

*The New Brunswick Legislative Building, designed by J.C. Dumaresque opened on February 16, 1882. Despite the fact that the Legislative Chamber could be considered the most important room in the province, historical research indicates that the Chamber was probably renovated only three times during the next 100 years — in 1892, 1916 and 1964. Tradition rather than change is highly regarded in New Brunswick. This article describes the most recent interior renovations to the Chamber completed in 1988. Exterior restoration work on the sandstone facade was undertaken during 1989 and interior renovations in other areas of the Building continue as funds are available.*

**W**hile drawings and specifications for the original construction of the Legislative Building exist, information on previous renovations is incomplete. How monies were spent, or on which part of the building the work was carried out, is frequently unclear in the documentation. The balcony of the Assembly Chamber was enlarged in 1892, additional sections of wainscot were installed above the original and a walnut canopy was installed over the Speaker's Chair in 1916. More recently, a window for translation services was installed in the east corner of the Chamber. Over the years, various improvements have also been made to the electrical, lighting, heating and fire safety systems.

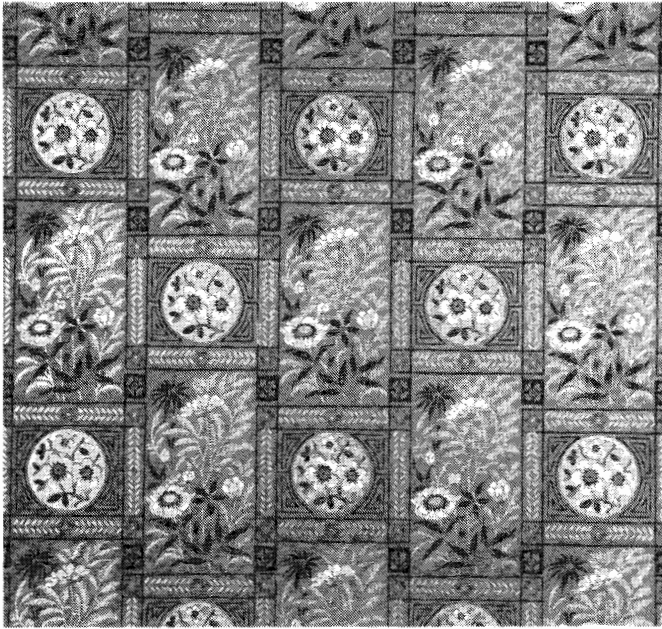
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Various changes in the organization of the Legislature have also occurred. The number of members' chairs has increased from 41 in 1882 to 58 today. Because of these alterations and additions, a restoration of the Assembly Chamber to its original form was not feasible. As a result, the 1988 project was a renovation based on historical information rather than a period restoration.

The most impressive architectural feature of the Chamber is its height, which is very striking because of the relative smallness of the room. A reporter who attended the official opening described the Assembly Chamber as follows:

The visitor is at once impressed with the noble proportions of this chamber, which, including the galleries, is 55' long by 43' wide, while its beautifully panelled ceiling is 43' from the floor. Rising from the front of the gallery are eight Corinthian columns, of wood, supporting panelled arches with carved capitals. Running around two sides of the chamber, 22' from the floor, is a dentil cornice. The ceiling is divided into four panels by the beams of the roof trusses. Two of these



Wallpaper - Legislative Assembly Chamber

panels are concave centres from which are hung sunlight gas reflectors, at the same time affording ventilation for the room. The windows are fitted with elegant cherry shutters, the doors are of cherry, and the dado and surpase are of cherry and ash.

The recent renovation was based on a study of historical records such as press releases, government journals and research papers. Early interior photographs were reviewed, and paint, wood, plaster and carpet samples were examined.

***The earliest photographs of the Chamber showed vertical shading which suggested wallpaper. During examination of the walls, the absence of paint confirmed that wallpaper had indeed been used.***

Investigation of ceiling finishes revealed that from five to eight layers of paint were applied to the plaster surfaces. The extra paint layers were mostly found on the decorative plaster mouldings. This would indicate that the ceiling cornices and medallions were highlighted in different paint colours. The ceiling was initially painted gold. The layer of grime found between the first and second coats of paint revealed that the original gold colour had been exposed for at least several years. Only later were the mouldings highlighted in colours such as pink and light green.

Paint investigation of the wooden pillars of the gallery revealed a red ochre finish, and during the renovation they were repainted a similar dark red. The Chamber woodwork was covered with numerous layers of dark varnish, or in some cases dark brown paint. After the removal of these paint and varnish layers which covered the natural beauty of the wood, it was treated with Danish oil before coats of clear satin varnish were applied.

During the renovations, a late 19th century decorative painted ceiling was discovered in a Committee Room off the Chamber. This plaster ceiling, painted in *trompe l'oeil* style, had been covered over by a tongue-and-groove wooden ceiling in 1903. This painted ceiling is the best example of decorative treatment found in the Legislative Building. The tones of dark red, grey-green, silver and gold are remarkably similar to the colour scheme chosen for the Legislative Chamber.

The wide frieze and fret border at the middle and top of the Chamber walls are Néo-Grec in design and colour. The classic Greek meander is a hand-printed paper by Bradbury and Bradbury. The frieze background colour, which matches the paint colour of the ceiling, gives the appearance of a stencil. Burgundy, terra cotta, black and metallic gold provide the accent colours. This Greek key motif was incorporated in the 1916 renovations of the



Tassels on draperies in the Assembly Chamber

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Chamber, and is also found on the pilasters of the vestibule and hallway.

Wallpaper designs from similar public buildings of the period were researched. The intent was to find a wallpaper that would complement the architectural character of the Chamber, as well as be appropriate to the dignified functions of the Legislative Assembly. A 19th century reproduction Brunschwig & Fils wallpaper, "Japanesque," was selected. The original document is in the archives of the Cooper Hewitt Museum.

Late Victorian interiors were influenced by Japanese design, resulting in an Anglo-Japanese style. While earlier wallpapers imitated other materials such as stone or fabric, the Anglo-Japanese designs did not attempt to make a flat wall appear three dimensional. The unique tones of Japanese woodblock prints influenced the colour palette of these wallpapers. The designs are Victorian interpretations of the delicate and ageless simplicity of Japanese graphics.

Since the late 19th century was an age of revival influences, it was common to mix several styles. Often in conjunction with the Anglo-Japanese style, Gothic and Néo-Grec elements were incorporated. As well as making a pleasing contrast in design, the colour ranges complemented each other. The Anglo-Japanese style used the famous "Greenery Yallery" colours of the English Aesthetic movement: shades such as ochre, olive and teal highlighted with cream, terra cotta and gold. The Néo-Grec style favored the red-based colours ranging from terra cotta to burgundy, with accents of cream, black, olive, gold and copper.

The pure wool Oriental-style Wilton carpet, supplied by Gordon Sands, was commissioned from the Scottish BMK mill in shades of dark green, grey, terra cotta and rust. The traditional 27-inch widths of carpet were hand sewn together during installation. Broadloom did not exist until the early 20th century.

In keeping with the original Wilton carpets of the Legislative Building, the Chamber's new carpet is the darkest colour in the room. The carpet contrasts with

rather than repeating the tones of the wallpaper. Monochromatic colour schemes were not popular in the 19th century. The fabric for the draperies and portières is a Brunschwig & Fils cotton satin weave from France. The colour and sheen of the fabric reflects the wallpaper. The ornate style of the drapery is typically late Victorian in design.

The Gallery portières, traditionally used in the Chamber, serve a double purpose: to soften the architectural outlines of the Romanesque arches, and to provide a practical barrier against draughts and noise. The gracefully-looped drapery festoons and jabots are fringed and tasselled. Bullion fringe, moss fringe, tasselled braids, tiebacks and gimps in shades of olive green, bittersweet and cream complement the olive-gold satin. The jabots are lined in an olive green and brown striped Venetian silk, also from Brunschwig.

The members' chairs and desks were repaired and refinished. Stripped of an accumulation of many years' use, the pieces were refinished with aniline water-based stain, lacquered and hand-rubbed.

Since the chairs would receive extensive use, it was decided to use a modern upholstery fabric. The choice was a drab sage/olive green polyester/nylon blend fabric from Brunschwig. New black leather inserts were installed on the members' desk tops.

The existing brass and crystal chandeliers, originally fitted for gas burning, had been converted to electricity in 1917. Interestingly, the chandeliers are still fitted with the mechanism which allows them to be lowered to the floor to light the gas burners. Restoration included upgrading the wiring, refinishing the brass and replacing missing crystal prisms which were custom made at their original source in Waterford, Ireland.

It was necessary to maintain additional modern lighting fixtures in areas such as exits and stairwells. However, the interior looks equally impressive viewed in natural light or under the illumination provided by the magnificent hanging fixtures.