

Looking back on 200 years at Province House

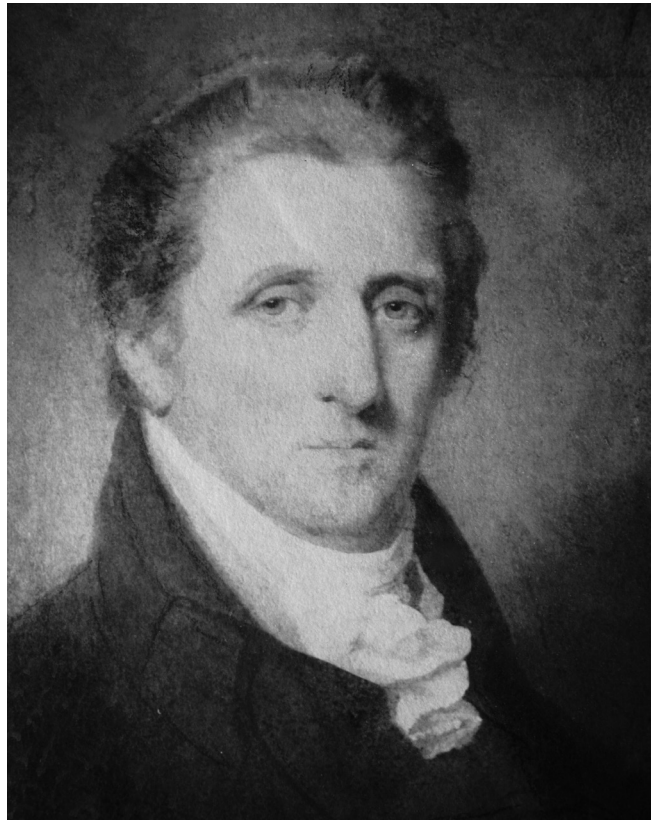
More than 200 years ago work began on a building that would become a central part of Nova Scotia's political and administrative future. Province House was not only a functional place where parliamentary debate could take place and government business could get done, but also a work of art. In this article, the author tells the story of its construction and how the province is celebrating its bicentennial.

David McDonald

The year is 1818. Halifax is bustling with a major construction project on the site of the Governor's original residence. Two men, John Merrick and Richard Scott, watch proudly as Thomas Laidlaw lays the last stone on the building, which they have spent the last eight years trying to complete. This capstone on top of the west pediment is being laid not long after sculptor and carver David Kinnear mounted the arms of George III on the pediment of the east side of the building at the end of March 1818. Merrick and Scott know the amount of work that was put into this magnificent building and they are fully aware of all of the barriers that were overcome to get the project started and to complete it. They know that approval to erect a legislative building was first received in 1787, but Governor Prevost's demand in his 1811 throne speech to build a Province House set their work in motion. They have reason to be proud because their joint project – A Province House – for the citizens of Nova Scotia has just been completed.

John Merrick, a native Nova Scotian and a master painter and glazier, submitted a design in the Palladian style¹ to the joint legislative committee, struck in 1809, to procure plans for the erection of a Province House. His design for a building 140 feet in length, 70 feet in breadth, and 42 feet in height was chosen over Richard Scott's. Prior to working on Province House, he decorated the interior of Government House and the old Legislative Council Chamber. He also worked on the design for St. Matthew's Church and St. George's Church.

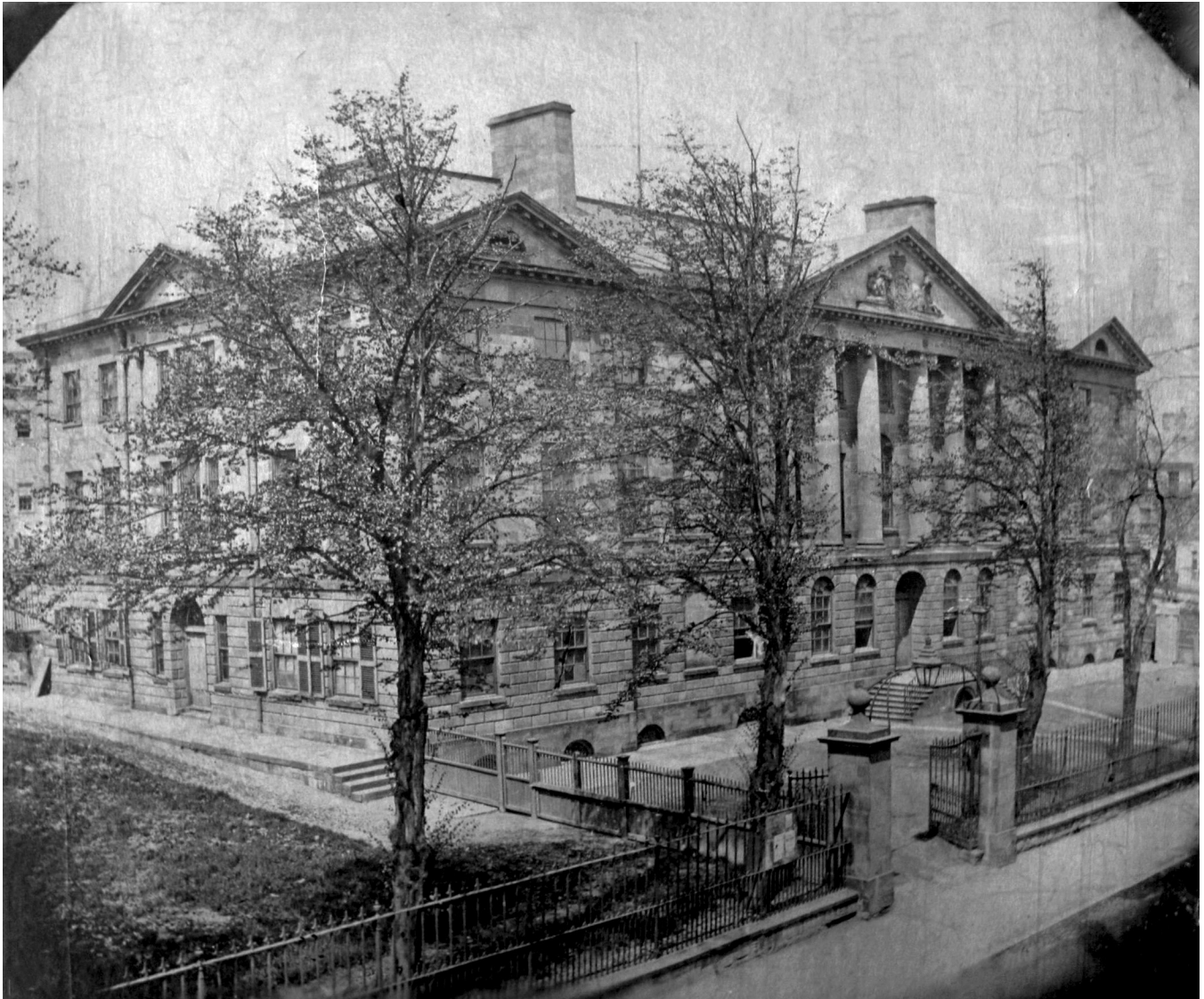
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John Merrick

Richard Scott was born in Scotland and immigrated to Nova Scotia in 1809. A master mason who supervised the construction of the Halifax County Courthouse, he was appointed by the committee to build Province House according to Merrick's plan. Scott also owned the sandstone quarry in Remsheg (present day Wallace) which was the source for all of the sandstone used in Province House.

Photos: Nova Scotia Legislative Library



Province House in the mid 19th Century – the oldest photograph the Assembly Library has of the building.

Imagine Scott and Merricks' excitement as they watched from the crowd as Lieutenant Prevost lay the cornerstone on August 12, 1811 as a part of the masonic ceremony. What were their thoughts when the masons surrounded the excavated site and the Lieutenant deposited a box of coins from the era and a manuscript listing the officers of the day – the commissioners, including Merrick, and the architect, Scott – in a cavity of the cornerstone? What would they have felt when the stone was plumbed, levelled, and squared? When the Lieutenant poured corn, wine, and oil over the stone? And when he stated, "May the building that shall arise from this foundation perpetuate the loyalty and the liberality of the Province of Nova Scotia"?

These two men couldn't have known that in less than a year Nova Scotia would be at war; as a result, they would have difficulty securing labour for their project. They also couldn't have known that labour disputes would delay the construction of their building and costs would therefore balloon to £52,000 instead of the budgeted £20,000.

During the course of the project, the commission and Scott advertised for skilled and unskilled workmen and numerous supplies, including 30,000 feet of spruce boards. As construction continued, the number of workers skyrocketed. In 1811 the original estimate called for seven Masons, three carpenters, an undisclosed

amount of labourers, and for Scott to be on site. The estimated amount spent on labour was £31/week. In 1814, there were actually 50 masons, six carpenters, and an undisclosed amount of labourers plus Scott on site. The project was costing £139 to £160 per week in labour alone. By 1815, the original £20,000 was expended. Thankfully, each subsequent yearly budget included extra sums for finishing Province House.

What were Scott and Merrick feeling on October 4, 1817 when the roof of the building was raised and the Royal Standard was flown to celebrate the occasion? How proud they must have been when they read in the *Halifax Journal* a couple of days later,

We understand the sum voted by the Legislature, at its last Session ... is nearly expended. We should be extremely sorry if the means are not provided to enable the Commissioners to proceed in the completion of the House ...

The Building is particularly well calculated for all Public Purposes; will be a credit to the Province, and a very great ornament to the Town. – We sincerely hope no delay will take place in the finishing of it.



Above: Legislative Library. Below: The House of Assembly.



Province House's Red Chamber.

Fortunately, for Scott and Merrick, the money was granted to finish the building.

Two years later, Merrick and Scott's building was complete, but the interior was not finished. It was, however, ready for the Legislative Assembly and the Legislative Council to meet there on February 11. We don't know if Merrick and Scott were present on that opening day, but they would have read the newspaper account of Lord Dalhousie's speech:

The circumstances of meeting you for the first time in this place, leads me to congratulate you on now occupying this splendid Building – erected for the reception of the Legislature, the Courts of Justice, and all the Public Offices. It stands, and will stand, I hope, to the

latest posterity, a proud record of the Public Spirit, at this period of our History: And as

I do consider this Magnificent work equally honorable and useful to the Province, I recommend it to your continued protection.

To read these words must have provided a huge sense of pride to these gentlemen.

Unfortunately, it would take a little longer for all of the decorations in the interior to be installed. Thirty-one crates full of ornaments were shipped from Scotland in 1819 and installed by James Wilson, who was "a mason and plasterer of unusual skill ... [and] designed much of the work about" the building. Fine details in woodwork to the original House of Assembly Room were completed in 1820 by James Ives, a very well-respected carpenter. Much of the stucco work in the Legislative Council Chamber was finished by Mr. Robinson from England.³

Merrick died in 1829. Unfortunately, he wouldn't witness some of the greatest events to happen in his building. However, Scott, who died in 1867, would have known that in 1835 Joseph Howe defended a criminal libel charge in the court room which he built; he also would have been aware that the first responsible government in the British Colonies would be formed in his building in 1848; and he would have known that the Supreme Court that he built was transformed into the beautiful Legislative Library by Henry F. Busch in 1862.

Both men would be happy to know that Province House survived a fire in 1832 and narrowly escaped another one in 1841. It also survived the 1917 Halifax Explosion with only small amounts of damage to paintings, masonry, and windows. They would also be proud to know that four governors general of Canada were sworn in at Province House.



Exterior shots of Province House from 2007 (above) and 2019 (below)



If they were alive today they would see that very little has changed on the exterior of the building. Since 1819, shutters have been replaced, the chimneys on the north side of the building have been removed, and the doors on the north and south side of the building have been filled in and replaced with wooden blocks and windows, which removed interior hallways and provided more office space. But not much else has changed. And why should it? In 1832, a British travel writer declared Province House “the most splendid edifice in North America.”⁴

The interior has been modified to suit the changing needs of the times. What were their thoughts in 1824, when the Supreme Court ceiling was lowered to accommodate committee rooms? Would they be satisfied with the major renovations that took place between 1886 and 1889 to install a heating system to replace 38 fireplaces and stoves? Would they be shocked to know that during this construction, the current visitors’ gallery in the assembly chamber was built and the orientation of the assembly chamber changed from east-west to north-south? These changes meant the assembly chamber was no longer the same size as the council chamber. Perhaps Merrick might be a little upset that the building has lost its interior symmetry, which is a major characteristic of Palladian architecture, but hopefully this disappointment would be assuaged by the knowledge that these changes over time allowed the public to view the happenings of the House of Assembly and thus strengthened the democratic institution of the Nova Scotia Legislature.

Now, the year is 2019 and Province House is celebrating the 200th anniversary of its opening. A lot has happened in the last 200 years in Province House. I believe Merrick and Scott would be happy with our celebrations and knowing how thankful we are for their contributions to building a magnificent structure. Here’s hoping for another 200 years and more.

For more information on the history of Province House, please visit:

<https://nslegislature.ca/about/history/province-house>

Notes

- 1 Palladian style takes its name from Venetian architect, Andrea Palladio (1508-1580). The style emphasizes symmetry and is based on Greek and Roman Temple design. Some key features in Province House are the fanlight over the door, the Venetian window in the library, all of the important rooms being on one main floor (piano nobile), a hierarchy of stories, and central doorways with triangular pediments.
- 2 Piers, Harry. *Biographical review: Nova Scotia*. Boston: Biographical Review Publishing Co., 1900, p. 104.
- 3 *Morning Herald*, July 4, 1881.
- 4 McGregor, John. *British America : vol II*. Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1832, p. 77.



Province House

Nova Scotia

200 YEARS

1819-2019