

# *One Hundred Years of History: The New Brunswick Legislative Building*

*Mary Peck*



Province Hall in 1802. This building was destroyed by a fire in February, 1880. (Provincial Archives of New Brunswick)

All the legislative, executive, administrative and even judicial functions of government in New Brunswick have, at one time or another, been performed within the walls of the New Brunswick Legislative Building. It is not surprising, therefore, that citizens consider it more than an interesting piece of architecture. It is a tangible symbol linking the people to their political system. This article outlines some important events in the life of the building which celebrated its one hundredth birthday on February 16, 1982.

The city of Fredericton lies beside the Saint John River, sixty miles upstream from the city of Saint John where, in 1794, the first

United Empire Loyalists landed at Market Slip. At that time the government of New Brunswick consisted of a Governor, a Legislative Council and a Legislative Assembly. They met at "Mallard House" in Saint John but in 1788 Fredericton was selected as the future site of both the British military headquarters and the government. Today the old buildings of the Military Compound occupy two blocks of the central business area beside the river. One block away, surrounded by wide lawns and sheltered by towering elms, is the Legislative Building.

In the early days, members met in temporary quarters but in 1803 a frame building, "Province Hall", was erected on the present site. By 1880 many people were dissatisfied with Province Hall as the seat of government. One man described it as a "disgraceful looking and shabby, ill-ventilated shanty". Plans for a new building

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had been delayed due to an acrimonious debate between the citizens of Saint John and Fredericton as to which city should be the seat of the legislature. However, by February 4, 1880 the winner of the competition for an architect to design the new building was announced. His name was J.C. Dumaresq. It is interesting to note that a complete set of the original drawings on linen is carefully preserved in the Legislative Assembly Building and that J.C. Dumaresq's great grandson is now in practice with Dumaresq and Byrne in Halifax as the fourth generation of architects in the family firm.

Once the plans were accepted the government advertised for tenders. On February 25, 1880 the *New Brunswick Reporter* stated that there would be from twenty to twenty-five contractors tendering for the new Provincial Buildings and it was probable that the lowest tender would be considerably less than was expected. On this day those working in the old building preparing for the opening of the House could smell a fire smouldering but could not locate it. The fire bells were rung at 10 p.m. but the roof and upper floor of the building were completely destroyed. Investigators decided that the cause of the blaze was "a register grate too close to the carrying timbers". The fire also fanned the flames of agitation for locating the seat of government in Saint John, however, the opponents of the Fredericton site were finally defeated in the Legislature and the list of tenders for the new building was tabled on March 16.

Thirty-two contractors submitted bids ranging from \$61,900 to \$94,200. William Lawlor submitted two bids, \$61,900 for a brick building and \$68,880 for one in stone. The second bid was accepted. There was a tremendous amount of public interest in the construction of the building and all the details involved. One editorial suggested that the Legislature should be a "credit in point of design, elegance and architecture to the province". By May 17, proceedings were finally underway. Mr. Lawlor, the contractor, had arrived in town and commenced the tearing down of "the old landmark".

Work soon began on construction of the new building, as reported in the newspaper:

The constant din of the Stone Cutter's chisel has already accomplished the rearing of large piles of freestone ready for the mason's trowel and large blocks of granite are being laid in place as fast as prepared. The foundation of the new structure will be much larger than before, and at the rear it extends in close proximity to the old Telegraph building. The site of the new building is visited every evening by hundreds of our citizens.

On September 7, 1880, "Old Foggy" wrote to the *Reporter* that "the new Parliament Buildings give evidence of their being beautiful. But it is the first public building ever heard of in the Empire which had been carried to its second storey without a foundation stone being laid with proper ceremony."

Progress was very fast as can be seen by these newspaper accounts. They are from the *Fredericton Capital* whose first issue of September 12, 1880 carried a long article and an engraving of the new Legislature.

October 19, 1880: the stone work of the northern tower on the Parliament Building is completed.

November 11, 1880: A 50 ton load of freestone for the New Parliament Building which started from Dorchester, by Schooner a week ago last Wednesday, is daily expected. The vessel carrying it will have aboard the four freestone pillars for the portico now being erected. Workmen at the building have been idle a week by the Schooner's delay. Only 20 tons of stone are required to complete the building, and the remainder will be offered by the Contractor at a bargain.

November 13, 1880: The contract for heating apparatus for the New Parliament Building has been given to Messrs. Wisdom and Fish of Saint John.

November 16, 1880: The galvanized iron of the New Parliament Building is something enormous, all the facings of the roof will be constructed of this material, as will likewise the cornices. The Schooner laden with 50 tons of freestone and 4 sixteen feet pillars for the Parliament Buildings reached here on Sunday afternoon. The stone cutters are already at work on the pillars.

November 18, 1880: Excellent working weather at the Parliament Buildings. The last cargo of stone has arrived and a consignment of 300 barrels of lime for plastering the interior is expected by schooner daily. 'This done, we shall have Wisdom and Fish both at work'.

On November 30 a long account was given of the laying of the "Contractors Stone", the decision having been made to put a Memorial Stone in the Legislative Library rather than to lay a corner stone. Mr. Lawlor was determined to lay a stone in the only place now available, the base of one of the columns of the portico. Here was placed a copper box about a foot square filled with the following articles:

A large piece of parchment with the names of the Executive Council, House of Assembly, Officers of all the Government Departments, the Architect of the Building, Contractor, Inspector and Sub-Contractor, together with the working Foreman all tastefully inscribed.

A photograph of the new Building, from Mr. Dumaresq's design, executed by Messrs. McMurray & Burkhardt;  
A photograph of the old Corner Stone as found under the old building;

A photograph of the Contractor, Mr. Lawlor;

A copy of the *Canadian Illustrated News*, with an engraving representing the Burning of the old Buildings, by Mr. E.A. Smith;

A copy of every newspaper in the Province, and an extra one of the *Capital*, with a cut and description of the new Parliament Buildings;

Some Acts of the House of Assembly;

A McMillan's Almanac for 1880;

Dominion Postage Stamps; and several coins, silver and copper, of the year 1880, and a collection, kindly presented, of many rare old coins.

Beside these rarities for future times, a postal card was inserted, with an address, 'To the finder of this box'. It read thus: 'When you read this, the subscribers' bones will probably be mouldered into dust. (Signed), T.B. Winslow, Dept. Board of Works;

A.G. Beckwith; W.M. Lawlor; Contractor; H.J. McGrath, Inspector; G. Fred Coy'.

As often happens, finishing the interior of the building took longer than erecting it and the Legislature continued to meet in the Normal School throughout 1881. By March of that year, there was talk of holding a grand ball to celebrate the opening of the building, which was much admired by the citizens of Fredericton. A few critics felt that the distinctive dome 140 feet above ground level was not necessary and christened it "the pepper pot". All approved of the massive front door, seven feet by twelve feet and made of solid walnut. Above it was the six foot high figure of Britannia and the tin roof was surrounded by ornamental iron work, some of which supported the coat of arms.

The new building boasted the latest in steam heating, plate glass windows and fire doors to protect the books in the Library. Some furniture had been rescued from the fire in Province Hall and went into the new structure.

In January, 1882 the citizens' ball committee was created and the Chief Justice presided over its meetings. Excitement and nervousness ran high. Would the gas fixtures arrive in time? Who would receive complimentary invitations? All the tailors and dressmakers in town were working day and night and the Fredericton Brass Band was engaged to play at the Promenade Concert.

The arrangements were described in detail in the *Capital* on February 14, 1882.

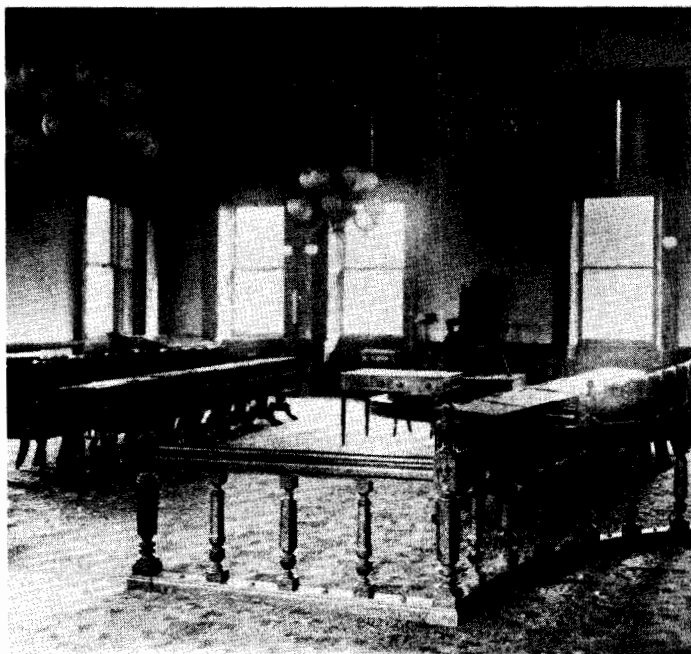
**THE BALL** — A meeting of the General Committee will be held at the City Hall this evening (Tuesday) at 8 o'clock. MESSRS. McMURRAY & BURKHARDT photographed the Parliament House on Saturday afternoon last. They

intend taking some interior views when the furnishing is completed.

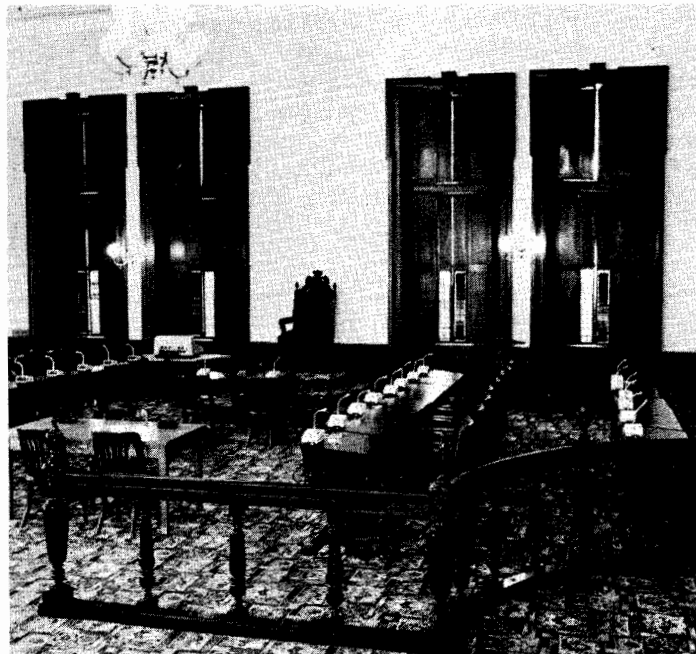
**TICKETS FOR THE BALL** — Gentlemen's tickets for admission to the Ball and Promenade Concert will be for sale by the Secretary, Mr. C.W. Beckwith, John Richards & Son, Geo. H. Davis, Barker House, Queen Hotel and the door.

The Parliament House was lighted up last evening for the first time. The effect in the Assembly Hall was very fine, though the chandeliers are rather high up, which gives the galleries brilliant light but scarcely enough on the main floor. This can be easily remedied by lowering the chandeliers a few feet. When the match was applied to the jets of the chandeliers in the Council Hall little or no gas was found. Inquiry into the cause led to the discovery that a leak existed somewhere in the pipe leading to the drops in this room. This will be remedied to-day, and the lighting tested again to-night. Everything about the building is rapidly nearing completion, and all will be in readiness in ample time for the grand Opening, Ball and Concert.

Fortunately for all, February 16 opened with sunshine and "a mildness that would be no discredit to an April day". The *Capital* stated in an editorial that a wise decision had been made concerning the site for the Legislature and that the splendid new building was in every way worthy of the Province. Many people assembled early for the opening of the Legislature, overshadowed though it was by the Public Ball. There were probably 2,000 people in the building and a very large crowd outside the building at 3:00 p.m. when the Lieutenant-Governor and members arrived in sleighs.



Interior of the Legislative Council Chamber pre-1890. (Provincial Archives of New Brunswick)



The former Legislative Council Chamber, now a committee room, restored as it was in 1882. (Provincial Archives of New Brunswick)

The ceremony took place in the Assembly Hall, as the Council Hall was being prepared for the Ball.

The Assembly Chamber was described as follows by *The Daily Sun* of February 16, 1882:

"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 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 surbase are of cherry and ash."

Many columns of the February 18 issue of the *Capital* were devoted to descriptions of the Ball and of the Concert. Drawings found in the New Brunswick Museum provided illustrations of both events.

The complex arrangements seemed to work well though the Legislative Library was not large enough for a supper room where approximately 670 people were served an elaborate repast. The concert was not well attended and "should not again be combined with a ball". Interest lay in the ballroom, the Legislative Council Chamber.

The elaborate dresses and ornaments of the more prominent guests were described and the identity of the "belle of the ball" was hinted at, but not disclosed. Cut flowers had been brought from Boston for the occasion and the parlour fountain in the centre of the vestibule on the ground floor must have been a real attraction. From the structure, four feet in height and constructed of iron, black walnut and glass, a fountain rose two feet in height from a basin in which goldfish swam. "The dance programme was completed at 3:45 a.m. and then everyone hurried to depart. At 4:30 a.m. the guests had all gone and the light disappeared, and the Grand Ball was over, having proved a most unqualified success".

The Fredericton newspapers contained only praise for the new building. Certainly Lawlor appears to have been a good contractor, working quickly and with few problems compared to the construction of the Post Office, which was built at the same time. However, we do not know how much of this satisfaction was due to the fact that Fredericton was chosen as the site rather than Saint John.

In 1892 the Legislative Council was abolished and the Supreme Court moved into the Council Chamber. The desks, paintings and panelling shown in the photograph of the first Supreme Court chamber on the ground floor were moved to the court's later location on the second floor. These desks and paintings are now in the Justice Building, the present location of the Supreme Court. This building is in the Military Compound and was originally the New Brunswick Normal School.



**The Legislative Building designed by J.C. Dumaresq was completed in 1882. (Provincial Archives of New Brunswick)**

Over the years repairs and maintenance were done and new heating, lighting and plumbing were installed. In 1952 the roof tiles were replaced with copper and in 1964 the Assembly Chamber was completely renovated. By then more space was needed for judges' offices and the press gallery. In 1967 the membership of the House increased by six to fifty-eight so new desks and chairs were added in the Assembly Chamber. A translation desk was also added at this time.

Interior changes and renovations have been made since the Supreme Court and the office of the Lieutenant Governor were moved to other buildings. The Legislative Council Chamber has recently been restored to its original condition. The chandelier was replaced, the wainscoting and railings were reproduced and ten additional desks were built. Carpet similar in pattern to the original was ordered from Scotland for use in what will now be a committee room. The present Legislative Building, designed in Second Empire style, is much more dignified and handsome than its predecessor.

There is a strong resemblance in style between the legislative buildings of New Brunswick and Quebec. The New Brunswick building is smaller and less ornate. It has the added feature of a domed lantern and occupies a beautiful, if less commanding, site.

Today, a tour of the Legislative Building is one of the highlights for visitors to Fredericton. Many stand gazing into the lofty Legislative Chamber, dignified by its original furniture and paintings, dazzling chandelier and steep visitors galleries. Beyond a sweeping circular stair is the Legislative Library, a miniature basilica with clerestory windows. Clearly, the building is as impressive to contemporary visitors as it appeared to those attending its ceremonial opening a century ago.