

A New Life For Customs House

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It was that great Nova Scotia politician Joseph Howe, who advised his countrymen to repair their "great public structures". It seems entirely appropriate that we, who are privileged to serve in the very legislative chamber which rang to the clarion call of his voice, are now pursuing the restoration of the old Customs House and Post Office on Hollis Street in Halifax.

In 1863 a legislative committee recommended to the Government of Nova Scotia construction of a public building to house the provincial post office, customs and railway department. Work began in 1864 on a building designed by David Sterling in the architectural style of the Italian Renaissance. Constructed by John Brookfield it adequately reflected the mature pride of Nova Scotians in their flourishing province.

Customs and post office services became responsibilities of the Dominion of Canada on July 1, 1867 and pursuant to Section 108 of the BNA Act it seemed appropriate that the new building should become the property of the federal government. It will surprise no one with a knowledge of federal-provincial relations that it took four years to determine which level of government should pay the costs of construction and in what proportions! Construction was finally completed in 1868.

In the chain of events following Confederation, the Tupper Government which had dragged Nova Scotia into the new Dominion was thrown out of office, Tupper himself going on to Ottawa to serve in the government of Sir John A. Macdonald. The new anti-confederate government led by William Annand and Howe held thirty-six of thirty-eight seats in the Nova Scotia House and quickly moved for repeal of that section of the BNA Act.

It is not widely recognized by Canadian historians but Nova Scotia was very close to armed insurrection in its opposition to Confederation. By 1869 it was apparent that the Imperial Government had no intention of allowing Nova Scotia to regain her independence. Howe and the moderate and more realistic anti-confederates revised their position and began to seek more favourable terms for Nova Scotia within Confederation.

Howe became a member of Macdonald's cabinet and, among other matters, presided over the negotiations about which government should pay the construction costs for the Customs

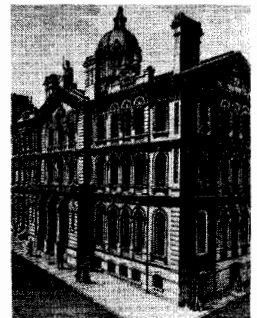
House. The settlement of 1871 called for Ottawa to pay Nova Scotia \$84,000 of a total cost of construction of \$189,060.

Over the intervening years the building has ceased to function as a customs house. The post office has long since moved into newer quarters, as has the provincial museum, which was temporarily housed in one room. Subsequently, the building served as headquarters for "H" Division of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and offices of the Bank of Canada. For the past several years it has been used for dead storage by the federal government. Extensive changes to the interior and the exterior deterioration due to pollution and the passage of time left this building a dim reflection of its once proud self.

Late in the legislative session of 1980, I proposed a motion seconded by then Deputy Speaker Arthur Donahoe, that the province acquire the Old Customs House from the federal government and that it become an annex to Province House. The resolution was passed and consequent negotiations led to transfer in the fall of 1981. Nova Scotia agreed to pay half the assessed value of the land on which the building stands, restore the exterior, maintain it and use it to serve as badly needed space for services to members of the House of Assembly.

Since the time of transfer a multi-party committee under the chairmanship of Mr. Speaker Donahoe has been struck to advise the government on reconstruction. The exterior will eventually be restored as nearly as practicably possible to its 19th century appearance. The interior will be totally refurbished to include office space for government and official opposition caucuses, independent members, the Office of the Speaker, meeting rooms and dining facilities. As an annex to the Legislative Assembly, it will fall within the jurisdiction of the Speaker.

Thus, the wheel has turned full circle, though the recent negotiations for return of this historic building were characterized by a cooperative and friendly spirit unlike those of over a hundred years ago. In itself this says much for the maturation of Canada in the intervening years.



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