

PUBLIC BUILDINGS IN BATTLEFORD, 1876-1878

By Walter Hildebrandt

Battleford was chosen capital of the North-West Territories in 1876 and in the same year the North-West Mounted Police established an outpost there near the forks of the Saskatchewan and Battle Rivers. One reason for the choice of Battleford as capital was its administrative importance because of the large concentration of native people who traditionally wintered in the Thickwood and Eagle Hills to the east and south. Another reason for the choice of Battleford was that it was expected that the railway to the Pacific and the telegraph line would follow a northern route through Battleford. The decision made later not to follow the northern route for the railway dashed the hopes of the residents of Battleford for the growth of their town but in 1876 the prospects for the future development of Battleford were bright.

Once Battleford had been selected as capital, administrative buildings and residences for the officials of the Territorial Government and the North-West Mounted Police were begun. The designs for these structures came from the Department of Public Works in Ottawa. Hugh Sutherland who had been in charge of the Swan River barracks in 1874-1875 was hired to carry out the actual construction. Two of the buildings — the Commanding Officer's residence and Government House — were built in keeping with popular Victorian styles. The reason for choosing Victorian styles for these buildings which put them in startling contrast to the comparatively crude log structures around them is the subject of this study.

Although these buildings were constructed with a style and panache befitting a capital, construction on the frontier suffered from serious limitations. Problems delayed construction in the first year. When Sutherland came to Battleford in 1876 he found no timber suitable for lumber in the immediate vicinity. Logs had to be floated down the North Saskatchewan from Edmonton to fill the need but spring floods swept away a large portion of the material intended for construction. This resulted in a sudden escalation in costs which Sutherland took great pains to justify to the tight-fisted Department of Public Works, a ministry occupied by the frugal Prime Minister Alexander Mackenzie.¹

There were frequent complaints over the quality of the construction. No storm sashes were provided for Government House and Lieutenant Governor Laird found it most uncomfortable. He wrote to the Prime Minister: "When the high winds and cold come together we are nearly perished . . ."² Superintendent Walker also had reservations about the workmanship and asked for men "who knew something of carpentry work" to complete the structures.³ Frustrated with the lack of progress, Walker finally wrote to the Commissioner: "The Department of Public Works finished here last week but all the buildings are as yet in an unfinished state and could not be finished for want of materials and what work is done does very little credit to those in charge of the works."⁴ Thirteen years later continuous shortages of

materials and money had left the buildings in a barely habitable state. As the then Commanding Officer wrote:

I have the honor to make the following report regarding the Commanding Officer's Residence I occupy as quarters and which I consider unfit for such in their present state. During the past winter 4 stoves were kept going the whole time, the building was not any too warm. At night full pails of water froze solid — there is no storm sash — mornings I have seen my bed covered with snow and rain — half of the building has no ceiling, only paper and cotton — parts of the logs are rotten and when soaked by rain throws a dampness and has an odour throughout the house. The moulding inside is in between the cotton and wall.⁵

Yet despite the dependence upon crude materials and the lack of skilled craftsmen and proper equipment, these structures did represent current and popular styles of Victorian society. Gothic and Italianate were two of the more active Victorian modes, although Gothic was considered to be the most British of the competing designs. Victorians, such as John Ruskin, claimed "that Gothic architecture was organic and based on the same principle as natural plant growth"⁶ its architecture more closely tied to the informal "English garden," as compared to the rigid dictates of classical styles. The Gothic was characterized by vertical lines, pointed arches and Christian symbols such as cross or quatrefoil shapes and trefoil designs that were to represent the Trinity; the less popular Italianate featured low pitched heavily bracketed roofs, square tower and asymmetrical plans.

The Commanding Officer's residence and Government House reflect the influence of what was also labelled "Carpenter's Gothic" or "Gingerbread." Most often Gingerbread could be recognized by bargeboards or gable decorations. These references emerged partially because wood was used instead of the stone traditionally employed for Gothic structures. Wood gave builders more freedom to innovate (especially in contrast to the standards of the classic styles) and allowed a greater degree of adaptation to blend with the local environment in terms of materials and appropriate design.

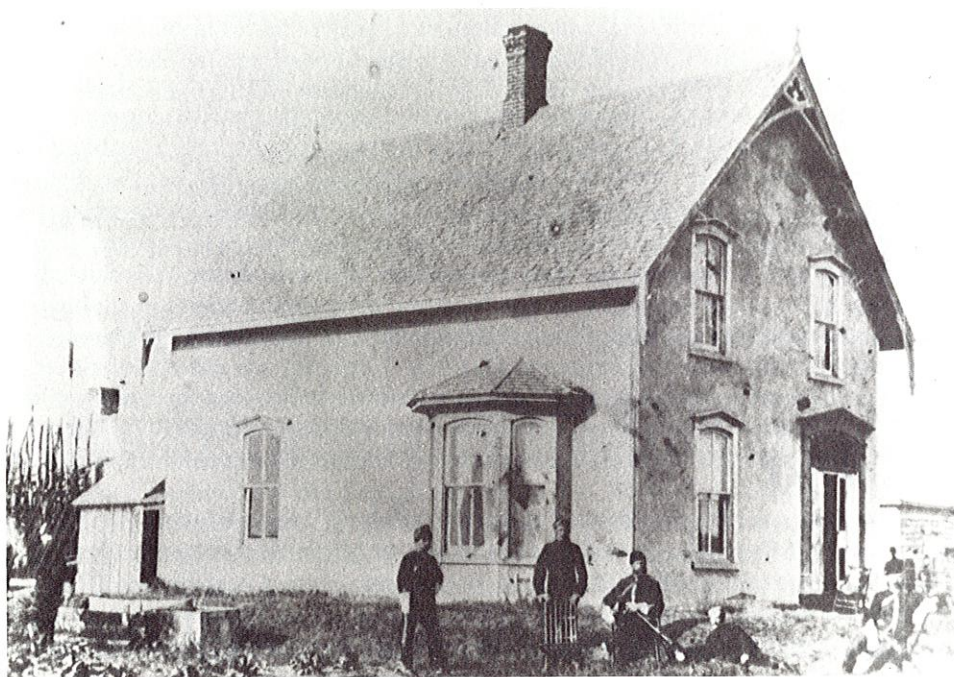
The Commanding Officer's residence provides a good example of Gothic details. Its bay window, the vertical impact of its high pitched roofs, the trefoil design at the bargeboards under the gables, the cross shaped pinnacle originally on the peak of the gable, and the pendants extending down from the end of the gables are all distinctively within this tradition. The planting of white spruce around the building tended to accentuate the vertical height of the roof. Vestiges of what might be considered to be Greek Revival architecture are evident on the Commanding Officer's residence although they are less pronounced than those on Government House; the peaked, pedimented casings above the windows and the columns on either side of the front door are reminiscent of the style. Greek Revival details were often freely mixed with other revival styles in the nineteenth century.⁷

Government House did not display Gothic style to the same extent as the Commanding Officer's residence. High pitched roofs and decorative bargeboards and pendants were standard Gothic features. In keeping with the eclecticism of Victorian structures, Government House also displayed features of the Greek Revival considered appropriate for the "temples" of government. This was evident in the Greek style pillars on either side of the front door and the pedimented window casings.

The Gothic revival was apparent not only in Canada but throughout North America. Its ambience followed the wake of widely read pattern books of architects



Government House as it appeared originally. Fort Battleford National Historic Park



The Commanding Officer's residence, 1879-80. Fort Battleford National Historic Park

such as A. J. Downing and Hudson Holly. Downing is generally considered to be "the Gothic manner's chief herald in America . . ."⁸ Originally a landscape gardener, his designs profoundly affected North American architecture. As a traveller through America in 1849/50 noted: "nobody, whether he be rich or poor, builds a house or lays out a garden without consulting Downing's works; every young couple who sets up housekeeping buys them."⁹ Downing, like Holly, was strongly influenced by English architects and designers. In fact Ruskin's influence on Downing has been suggested by some critics, though Downing, unlike Ruskin, had some tolerance for Greek and Renaissance architecture. But, Downing himself cautioned against grotesque mimicry and urged builders to choose styles in harmony with the environment. As he pointedly wrote in a chapter entitled "The Real Meaning of Architecture," design had to be in harmony with the environment; it had to be in keeping with the purpose of the building, and with the social standing of the builder.

So far as admiration of foreign style in Architecture arises from an admiration of truthful beauty of form or expression, it is noble and praise worthy. A villa in the style of a Persian palace (of which there is an example lately erected in Connecticut), with its original domes and minarets, equally unmeaning and unsuited to our life or climate, is an example of the former; as an English cottage, with its beautiful home expression and its thorough comfort and utility, evince, in steep roofs to shed snow and varied form to accommodate modern habits, is of the latter.¹⁰

Hudson Holly, another prominent American architect, in his essay entitled "Some Accounts of the History of Architecture," presented a more detailed explanation of the Gothic roots in America.¹¹ Holly was searching for a style which most appropriately suited the aspirations of the American people. He considered that the arts were a reflection of the character of a people and that architecture was a more conscious expression of the national character than any other art form. Holly rejected Greek styles as too impractical, and unsuited to the number of windows which he felt were necessary in contemporary buildings. The Roman styles were considered too horizontal, commemorating secular triumphs "but serving no loftier purpose."¹² The Gothic, however, was closer to the style Holly would have liked for Americans, because it embodied Christian principles as well as the British connection. The religious emphasis was particularly important in revealing the "higher aspiration" of a Christian society. Christian spires were evidence to Holly of a more spiritual life than the concerns revealed by "heathen domes." Architecture could be used to "raise the eye above the level of mere human perfection, giving it a 'heaven-directed' aim."¹³ Holly found further fault with the wordly architecture of the Greeks and Romans:

Their lofty pillars seemed rather to spring from the earth, than to rest 'upon' it; and those windowless walls, which in the Heathen temple remained in stubborn solidity to exclude the light, were not pierced on all sides to admit the beams of divine day.¹⁴

Other details characterizing Christian traditions were included on Gothic structures. Trefoil designs represented the trinity and the trefoil pattern carved into the wooden bargeboard beneath the peak of the gable in the Commanding Officer's quarters is a graphic depiction of "Carpenter's Gothic." Cruciform plans were used to symbolize the everlasting sacrifice, while pinnacles represented souls seeking their "finial" in that heaven where alone the soul's consummation 'can' be sought.¹⁵ Although the Commanding Officer's residence was L shaped (as was Government



Commanding Officer's residence, 1976. Notice the bay window and trefoil bargeboard design. The pinnacles at the peak at the gable have not been replaced.

Pat McCloskey, Parks Canada

House) instead of the cross shaped floor plan, it did originally display finials (or pinnacles) at the peak of each gable, and Government House did have a quatrefoil design beneath the peak of the gable.

The adaptation of the Gothic to domestic housing led to the introduction of a number of other features such as bay or oriel windows (which allowed for a feeling of closeness to nature), chimney stacks, roof ceilings and panelled wainscots around interior walls. Both the Commanding Officer's residence and Government House exhibited these additional features, the most outstanding of which was the elaborate bay window in the Commanding Officer's residence.

Of course Greek-revival was not totally excluded from public buildings in North America, nor was it categorically condemned. In fact as Hudson Holly stated:

[for] ecclesiastical structures, colleges, etc., the Gothic designs are rapidly superseding the Italian, while for public buildings for government, and other secular purposes, the Grecian is generally regarded as preferable . . .¹⁶

Details of the Greek-revival are found in the pedimented window casings in both the Commanding Officer's residence and in Government House. Classical details, however, dominated the appearance of Government House to a greater extent than the residence intended for the Superintendent of the North-West Mounted Police. The pillars on either side at the front door immediately attract the eye at Government House, while similar features on the Commanding Officer's residence are less noticeable and give way to the overall picturesque impression of this residence.

Victorians were particularly concerned with keeping a distinct division between their public and private lives.¹⁷ This attitude was translated in the interior layout of many Victorian houses. Clear distinctions were made between areas for formal



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Parlour in the Commanding Officer's residence, 1976.

occasions and private areas where food was prepared or where the family convened. Official rooms such as the parlour or drawing room were frequently close to the front door, this space was generally insulated from other parts of the first floor with the kitchen and servants' dining room at the rear of the house. The second storey was reserved for the privacy of the family. The main staircase, beginning just inside the front door, confronted visitors with this clear division of function. Often a second servant's stairway was located at the back of the house "to keep them out of sight."¹⁸

The interior features of the Commanding Officer's residence are consistent with those of other Victorian houses. Immediately to the left of the front entrance is a large living room or parlour for public or official occasions. To the right, upon entering the front door, a stairway leads to the private section of the house. At the back is the winter kitchen, the servant's dining room and the servant's stairway, while an ell containing the summer kitchen is attached to the rear of the house. The servant's stairway is a typical feature of Victorian homes found in the Commanding Officer's residence. The second storey contains three bedrooms and a small landing.

In Canada, the Gothic and Italianate were readily adopted although no Canadian counterparts to Downing or Holly published their designs in widely read books or journals. It is not surprising that the Gothic was widely used for public buildings in Canada, since the Parliament buildings in Ottawa, with their obvious Victorian embellishments set the trend for public building. As the architectural historian Alan Gowans has written:

Gothic was the style chosen for the Parliament buildings. That was no surprise; the architects hardly had an alternative. It was practically mandatory on them to

express the country's close ties with Britain by taking as their model Westminster New Palace home of the 'Mother of Parliaments' in London.¹⁹

The Gothic mode in Canada sprang primarily from the British connection but the Gothic revival south of the border also had a major influence. Two of Canada's chief architects of the Department of Public Works during the Victorian era were trained in Britain and were experienced with Victorian styles. Thomas Fuller and Thomas Scott were primarily responsible for introducing and implementing the Gothic as the predominant British style for public buildings in Canada in the late nineteenth century.

Public building was a powerful medium for communicating the national styles considered most acceptable by the governing elite. Fuller, whose tenure as Canada's Chief Architect lasted from 1881-1897, was particularly influential.²⁰ His lengthy tenure ensured that Gothic remained the dominant vogue in Canada even for the buildings of the North-West Mounted Police.²¹

It was no accident that officials in Ottawa actually chose to embody national symbols in the buildings of the police, who were sent to enforce eastern laws in what was perceived as a lawless West. Clearly, architecture was seen as a means of communicating ideas; architectural forms were chosen as much for their symbolic implications as for particular building needs. Regionally the buildings erected at Battleford by the Department of Public Works were the first that were not simply log structures. The flourish with which they were constructed was intended to be a conscious reminder to newcomers that they were entering into an Anglo-Canadian West. The buildings at Battleford reflect the desire of eastern architects in Ottawa to see the West develop as an extension of Ontarian Canada. These first "picturesque" structures were harbingers of the Anglo-Canadian society intended for the West.²² The representatives of this society already held key positions in the fledgling society of the North-West Territories. Among these was the influential journalist P. G. Laurie whose proselytising editorials reflected his aspirations for an Anglo-Canadian West rather than one influenced by what he saw as the despicable "republicanism" of the United States. Indeed the message of Laurie's *Saskatchewan Herald* clearly echoed the national and imperial sentiments expressed by the Canada First Movement and he envisaged an organic "holistic" society for Western Canada which would be modelled on British customs and institutions.²³

Despite the derivative nature of Government House and Commanding Officer's residence these buildings are examples of what Douglas Richardson has labelled the "Canadian vernacular."²⁴ Richardson defines this classification as those buildings that, though clearly representative of borrowed styles show adaptation to their setting and environment through structural refinement or the use of local materials. Constructed with logs and covered by clapboard and stucco, both buildings were built of local timber. The discreet simplicity of the decorative details of these two buildings are more compatible with their environment, especially when compared to the garish, exaggerated styles of the late Victorian period. Richardson has written that: "The handling of materials aware but abrupt — helps to identify those structures as part of the Canadian vernacular."²⁵ Government House and the Commanding Officer's residence readily fall within this definition.

Eventually the long awaited transcontinental rail link passed far to the south of Battleford and the significance of the post declined, but the Anglo-Canadian society that these original buildings represented remained and was firmly entrenched throughout the West. Its ideals were disseminated by journalists like Laurie, and the

laws that embodied Victorian social control within the West were enforced by the North-West Mounted Police. These factors contributed to the survival of an Anglo-Canadian society in the West, but many of the buildings initially constructed in the late nineteenth century have not survived. Only the Commanding Officer's residence remains substantially intact among these buildings constructed when Battleford was the Territorial capital.

FOOTNOTES

¹See for example Hugh Sutherland to T. Brown, D.P.W. Ottawa; P.A.C., RG11, vol. 576, September 20, 1877.

²Quote in L. H. Thomas, "The Saskatchewan Legislative Building and its Predecessors," *Royal Architectural Institute of Canada, Journal* 32 (1955), p. 250.

³P.A.C. RG11, vol. 576, Walker to Commissioner, December 17, 1877.

⁴Ibid.

⁵P.A.C., RG18, vol. 1165, file 28, June 8, 1890.

⁶Maass, John, *The Gingerbread Age: A View of Victorian America*; New York, Toronto: Rinehart & Co., 1957, p. 62.

⁷See for example Chapter 3 in Charles Lockwood's *Bricks and Brownstone, The New York Row House, 1783-1929: An Architectural and Social History*, Toronto: McGraw Hill Book Co., 1972. For a discussion of the Gothic style in window detail and the way in which it combined vertical and horizontal lines (both evident in the windows of the Commanding Officer's residence), see John Ruskin, *The Nature of the Gothic*, London: Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1892, pp. 66-68. See also Hersey, George "Replication Replicated, or Notes on American Bastardy" *Perspecta, the Yale Architectural Journal*, no. 9/10, 1965.

⁸Maass. op. cit. p. 62.

⁹Quoted by George Tatum in the introduction to A. J. Downing's *The Architecture of Country Houses* New York: Da Capo Press 1968. Originally published in 1850.

¹⁰*Architecture of Country Houses*, p. 27. His interest in providing tasteful houses went beyond designing only for those who could afford it: "In seeking to prove that taste is not the exclusive property of the rich and well-born, he succeeded in interesting thousands of middle-class Americans in their homes. By emphasizing the importance of the cottage no less than the mansion, his writings transformed the appearance of the American countryside." (p. XVIII).

¹¹Holly, Hudson, *Holly's Country Seats and Modern Dwellings*, Walkins Glen, New York: Library of Victorian Culture, 1973. *Country Seats* was originally published in 1863 and *Modern Dwellings* in 1878. The essay was included in *Country Seats*.

¹²Ibid. p. 7.

¹³Ibid. p. 11.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid. p. 19.

¹⁷For a discussion of the interior layout of North American Victorian homes see: Clifford Clark, "Domestic Architecture as an Index to Social History: The Romantic Revival and Cult of Domesticity in America 1840-1870," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Summer 1976.

¹⁸Ibid. p. 50.

¹⁹Gowans, Alan, *Building Canada: An Architectural History of Canadian Life*, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1966, pp. 118-119. Gowans furthermore explains the Gothic seemed to be more popular in Canada than in the United States since (p. 102): "... to Americans generally gothic seemed undemocratically pretentious, and what was worse, unAmericanly foreign."

²⁰See Christopher Thomas' article "Architectural Image for the Dominion: Scott, Fuller and the Stratford Post Office" in the *The Journal of Canadian Art History*, vol. 3, nos. 1-2 (Fall 1926).

²¹Correspondence between the federal government and officials at Fort Battleford shows that the architects in the Department of Public Works had a definite hand in dictating the shape these buildings on the frontier were to take. See, for example the *Walker Letterbooks* at the Fort Battleford Library Collection. May 17, 1877 to February 21, 1879, particularly the letter written by Inspector Walker to the Secretary of State on December 17, 1877.

²²The picturesque was intended to inspire awe. This picturesque quality was not only to be achieved by the structural design but also by surrounding trees and landscaping. See A. J. Downing's *Landscape Gardening*. Also Downing in his book *The Architecture of Country Houses* wrote: "The picturesque is seen in ideas of beauty manifested with something of rudeness, violence or difficulty. The effect of the whole is spirited and pleasing, but parts are not balanced, proportions are not perfect and details are rude. We feel that at first glance of a picturesque object the idea of power is exerted, rather than the idea of beauty which it involves." pp. 28-29.

²³Hildebrandt, Walter, P. G. Laurie: *The Aspirations of a Western Enthusiast*, unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Saskatchewan, 1978.

²⁴Richardson, Douglas, "Canadian Architecture in the Victorian Era: 'The Spirit of the Place'", *Canadian Collector*, vol. 10, No. 5 (Sept.-Oct. 1975).

²⁵Ibid. p. 24.