

On Saturday, September 16, 2006 at 3 p.m., the Ontario Heritage Trust and the Elgin and Area Heritage Society unveiled a provincial plaque commemorating The Red Brick School in Elgin, Ontario.

The bilingual plaque reads as follows:

THE RED BRICK SCHOOL

Opened in 1887, this charming two-room brick school, built by local contractor Fred Taber, replaced a smaller wood-frame building. School Section No. 5 in South Crosby is a very early example of the late 19th century campaign to improve Ontario's system of public education through the construction of better buildings. Committed to fostering social, moral and economic progress through formal classroom instruction, the province's Department of Education encouraged late Victorian era school boards to erect larger, more sophisticated schools. Although local officials were often reluctant to raise the taxes necessary to finance such expensive departmental initiatives, some forward-looking communities, such as Elgin, sponsored the construction of architecturally elaborate schools, which showcased their local pride and commitment to progress through education.

L'ÉCOLE EN BRIQUE ROUGE

Cette charmante école en brique, de deux salles, qui a ouvert ses portes en 1887, a été construite par l'entrepreneur local, Fred Taber. Elle remplaçait un plus petit bâtiment à ossature de bois. La School Section No. 5 de Crosby Sud est un exemple précoce de la campagne lancée à la fin du 19^e siècle pour améliorer le système d'éducation publique en Ontario en construisant des bâtiments plus adéquats. Le ministère provincial de l'Éducation, qui souhaitait favoriser le progrès social, moral et économique a encouragé les conseils scolaires de la fin de l'époque victorienne à ériger des écoles plus grandes et plus modernes. Bien que les responsables locaux aient souvent hésité à augmenter les impôts permettant de financer des initiatives ministérielles aussi coûteuses, certaines collectivités tournées vers l'avenir, comme Elgin, ont parrainé la construction d'écoles intéressantes sur le plan architectural qui témoignaient de la fierté locale et de l'engagement envers le progrès grâce à l'éducation.

Historical background

Opened in 1887, the one-storey, two-room brick schoolhouse for School Section (SS) No. 5 in the hamlet of Elgin is an especially fine example of late Victorian school design.

In a broader provincial context, SS No. 5 South Crosby is a reminder of efforts by both provincial and municipal authorities in the late 19th century to ensure Ontario's socio-economic future by fostering education in rural areas. The upgrading of rural education became all the more urgent when, in 1885, it became known that urban areas had officially begun to overtake rural areas as the home of the majority of Ontarians.

Education in Ontario, as elsewhere in Canada, was a partnership between a central provincial body (after 1877 the Department of Education), which set policy and standards; and municipalities, whose boards of trustees funded almost the entire cost of local education. This divided responsibility resulted in a system in which the quality of education depended on balancing provincial guidelines with local fiscal and political realities. The provincial legislature could pass laws requiring a high level of educational achievement; the Department of Education could frame regulations reflecting those legislative goals; and regional departmental school inspectors could investigate whether the laws and regulations were being enforced at the local level. Nevertheless, the quality of education was determined mainly by municipal officers who built and equipped schools, hired teachers and paid their salaries, and generally responded to local educational demands, rather than those mandated by the province.

In the 19th century, provincial authorities focused on four major areas of concern: student attendance, curriculum, teacher training and the physical qualities of the schools themselves. Departmental representatives urged parents to send their children to the local one-room school (90 per cent of the schools in the province in 1850 were of this size; of these, 52 per cent were constructed of logs, 44 per cent were of frame and the balance were of stone or brick construction) and legislation passed in 1871 required that children between the ages of six and 12 attend classes for at least a part of each year. They affected curriculum by establishing courses of study, authorizing textbooks and setting uniform examinations at certain levels. They influenced the quality of instruction by fixing licensing requirements for teachers, setting up teachers' colleges and contributing to teachers' salaries according to qualifications.

It was the quality of the school buildings that deeply concerned early Victorian authorities. In his first annual report on the state of schools in the province in 1844, the assistant superintendent of education, the Reverend Egerton Ryerson, deplored the buildings that had been erected. They were often simply unheated and undecorated open spaces without seating. Education, Ryerson believed, could not successfully take place within such a setting.

To improve the design of the schools, provincial authorities undertook a series of reformative measures. In 1848, they commenced publication of a monthly magazine aimed at school trustees, the *Journal of Education for Upper Canada*, which included numerous articles on school design and equipment – many derived from the 1848 edition of the pioneering American book *School Architecture*, by the noted Bostonian Henry Barnard. Two years later, the legislature required the appointment of local school inspectors. These officers, chosen and paid by provincial authorities, enabled the Department of Education to gather information about the quality of local schools while transmitting the government's wishes and standards directly to trustees.

Improving schools in the 19th century

Perhaps the most important governmental initiative in terms of trying to influence the quality of the province's school design, rested in publications that advocated a reformist point of view regarding school architecture. In 1857, Ryerson authorized the publication of the province's first manual of school design, *The School House: Its Architecture, Internal and External Arrangements*, which was authored by Ryerson's assistant, John George Hodgins. Its purpose was clear: to make the rural school "what it ought ever to be — the most attractive spot in the neighbourhood."¹ The structures illustrated in *The School House* were unlike the vast majority of existing buildings. Recommended models were larger in scale, grander in their architectural pretensions, better sited and had adequate heating and ventilation. They featured a safe water supply and usable privies, and were given an adequate supply of teaching aids and educational equipment. To make books and other supplies more readily available, Ryerson established the Educational Depository, where local boards of trustees could purchase a wide range of school supplies at a governmentally subsidized price 50 per cent below cost. In 1876, the Department of Education reissued Hodgins' 1856 guide, with many of the original illustrations replaced by plans and elevations of Canadian origin. More significantly, ten years later, the Department published a new study of school design, also by Hodgins, entitled *School Architecture: Hints and Suggestions on School Architecture and Hygiene*, which represented the province's up-to-date views on late Victorian school design.²

Though Ryerson might have operated as if Ontario possessed a highly centralized educational system in which local authorities implemented provincial standards, the realities of state formation and democratic politics in 19th century Ontario meant that local authorities determined the level of education offered in a specific area, while the demands of the economy and individual family needs determined who went to school when and for how long. "To a large extent," note historians Douglas Lawr and Robert Gidney, "it was local values and interests

¹ John George Hodgins, *The School House: Its Architecture, Internal and External Arrangements* (Toronto: Lovell and Gibson, 1857), Prefatory Note, p. iii.

² John George Hodgins, *School Architecture: Hints and Suggestions on School Architecture and Hygiene* (Toronto: Ontario Department of Education, 1886).

which defined the real, as opposed to the formal, powers of the Department in respect to both its regulatory and leadership roles.”³

Local schools followed provincially advocated norms and they were an eloquent reflection of local attitudes towards the importance of education. Opened in 1887, SS No. 5 South Crosby in Elgin is a charmingly designed illustration of two parallel trends: the Ontario Department of Education’s strengthening insistence on more sophisticated rural school architecture, and a local belief that old school models were no longer appropriate for a community such as Elgin. Elgin’s future appeared bright and the community would benefit from sophisticated educational facilities for the formal training of its youth.

Schools in Elgin

Educational opportunities in Elgin followed an architectural pattern typical for the southern part of the province. As early as 1810 there was a log school in the vicinity of what would become Elgin, and the hamlet itself had a frame school, erected in 1842, which measured a diminutive 20 feet by 24 feet. It was succeeded in 1865 by a slightly larger building, and then in 1887, by the existing school building.⁴ The 1887 school, built by Fred Taber of Morton,⁵ is a T-shaped brick structure, measuring slightly less than 42 feet wide by 52 feet deep, with the top of the T aligned along the newly opened Halladay Street. Though it has only one floor level, the rooms are extremely tall, the equivalent of a one-and-one-half storey structure. This exaggerated height permitted the installation of three arched four-over-twelve pane windows along the main (northwest) elevation. Each of these openings was framed by a stone lintel and brick arch of contrasting white brick with a stone keystone, the whole capped by a gable, the central one a freely adapted ogee in form with a date stone. The west elevation was lighted by a single window, which echoed the design of those along the front. This design reflected the interior space, an enormous classroom extending across the front of the building, lit (in approved Departmental style) by fenestration that provided ample natural light falling across the students’ desks from the left. The east wall of the classroom was not fenestrated so that it could accommodate an enormous chalkboard for demonstration use; the interior south wall of the main classroom also shows signs of having been once covered by a blackboard. The modified

³ D.A. Lawr and R.D. Gidney, “Who Ran the Schools? Local Influence on Education Policy in Nineteenth Century Ontario,” *Ontario History*, Vol. 67, No. 2 (1980), p. 10. Their conclusion is supported by Robert M. Stamp, *The Schools of Ontario, 1876-1976* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982) p. 22: “two important realities of late nineteenth-century Ontario education: first, that local conditions determined the extent to which provincial goals might be realised; and, second, that local authorities decided whether conditions in their area warranted program change.”

⁴ Information on the schools in South Crosby is limited because of the absence of local records. See Susan Warren, *Hub of the Rideau: A History of South Crosby Township* (Cobourg: Haynes Printing for the Township of South Crosby LACAC, 1997) Chap. 32, “Chalkboards and Slates” and pp. 212-13, and from Neil Patterson, “Elgin,” address delivered to the Elgin and Area Heritage Society, 22 November 2003.

⁵ Warren, *Hub of the Rideau*, p. 213.

side gable roof was originally covered in wood shingles and the central bell tower initially featured an onion-shaped dome, since modified. The entrances to the school on either side of the structure – one for each gender – were fitted into the stem of the T, directly behind the front classroom. This also gave access to the smaller rear classroom, no doubt used for the instruction of the senior students.

Schools are, by their nature, organic and change over time. SS No. 5 served Elgin as a school until 1964, when the adjacent South Crosby Public School was opened and the 1887 building was converted to use as a community hall. The interior had undergone significant renovation, though the layout of spaces seems to have been retained. The only major change noted to the exterior is the removal of the onion dome on the bell tower.

What the school says about the community

The provincial significance of SS No. 5 South Crosby rests in its status as an early example of important contemporary provincial initiatives to improve the quality of school design in Ontario. However, the school also has a place in the community's history. The 1887 brick schoolhouse was constructed only 22 years after its nearby frame predecessor, which was then transformed into a warehouse for the Dargavel general store. It was built during a transitional period in rural Ontario. To later observers in the Department of Education, the year 1885 marked both the approximate start of wide-spread industrialization in Ontario and the beginning of large-scale abandonment of rural areas by young adults anxious for the advantages of the cities.⁶

At the end of the 19th century Elgin was a vibrant regional centre. Though possessing a population of only about 200 at the time the 1887 school was constructed, the hamlet was the home of a large hotel and 17 significant businesses and manufactories, including a cheese factory, a cabinet maker and two dealers in agricultural implements.⁷ The construction of a splendid permanent new school would appear to reflect the community's confidence in its ability to retain and prepare its youth for the local economy in the face of rural depopulation elsewhere.

⁶ See "Report of the Chief Inspector of Public and Separate Schools," in *Annual Report of the Department of Education, 1920-21* in Ontario. Legislature, *Sessional Papers*, Vol. 55. Paper No. 17, App. A, p. 3: "The changes which have come about in the constitution of the public schools are due mainly to three causes (1) The industrial expansion which began approximately in 1885, induced the trend of population cityward" Furthermore, the Inspector noted, "The date, 1885, then marks approximately the beginning of the movement cityward and the gradual depopulation of the rural districts"

⁷ The first provincial directory to survey Elgin in this period dates to 1891; see *The Union Publishing Company's (of Ingersoll) Farmers and Business Directory for the Counties of Dundas, Glengarry, Grenville, Leeds, Prescott and Stormont 1891* (Ingersoll: Union Publishing Company, 1891), pp. 293-94.

Conclusion

The 1887 brick school in Elgin embodied the most up-to-date ideas about contemporary school design as understood by the authorities of the Department of Education – expressed in their 1886 publication, *School Architecture: Hints and Suggestions on School Architecture and Hygiene*, by John George Hodgins – and is a very early example of reforming ideas about school design and equipment.⁸ In the local context, the school is a remarkable expression of community confidence in the face of changing socio-economic circumstances.

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⁸ The architectural and historical importance of SS No. 5 South Crosby in Elgin is clear from its scale, elaboration of external design and year of construction. If local records were available, it would be possible to say with greater certainty just how closely the design conformed to departmental guidelines. The school's overall quality indicates clearly that the building was the work of a professional architect, but there is no record of who prepared the design, and no plans have yet surfaced. The structure fits with the contemporary work of the Kingston firm of John Power and Sons, but that architect's records (now at Library and Archives Canada) are incomplete and especially fragmentary for the 1880s.