



“The circumstance 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 honourable and useful to the Province, I recommend it to your continued protection.”

Lord Dalhousie, 1819



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Province House

Province House, in which the Nova Scotia Legislature has met every year since February 1819, is Canada's oldest seat of government. This architectural gem is one of the finest examples of Palladian style in North America. The lofty halls and bold stature of other provincial capitols might dwarf Province House but none can compete with it for classic proportion and elegance of design.

As a landmark in the constitutional evolution of Canada, it has been said that more history has been made within these four walls than in all other legislatures combined. In 1948 the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada erected a centenary plaque commemorating the establishment here of the first responsible government in the Empire outside Great Britain. Confederation debates, the

Photo Crest above the throne chairs in the Red Chamber.

PROVINCE HOUSE



18th Century Map of Halifax

History of the site

creation of freedom of the press, the swearing-in of governors general, and many royal visits — all these have taken place in these stately rooms.

Occupying a site in the heart of downtown Halifax, part way up the steep rise from the waterfront to the top of Citadel Hill, Province House has an unmistakable air of quiet authority. While its three storeys may be diminutive beside the neighbouring glass and steel towers, its altogether human scale is a symbol of past and present activity within its walls.

Halifax was founded in 1749 as the British stronghold on the east coast of North America, countering the ominous French presence at Fortress Louisbourg. During the first summer of the town's construction, a one-storey wooden building was hastily thrown up on the site of the present legislature, to provide shelter for Governor Cornwallis and his staff. A few years later it was replaced by a more pretentious building which served as the governor's residence for another fifty years.

The story of how the legislature came to be built on this site reveals



much about the power struggles in the young colony. When Governor Sir John Wentworth and his wife, Lady Frances, complained that their residence was falling down, the Legislature willingly agreed to vote £10,500 to build a replacement on a site, three blocks to the south, that had been obtained originally for the purpose of building a permanent legislature. With much pomp and ceremony, the cornerstone was laid, on a fine September day in 1800, for Government House. As sometimes happens with such projects, more money was needed, bringing the final cost to £30,000. During the seven years that it took to complete the house, relations between the Wentworths and the Legislature became severely strained. The colony of only 60,000 inhabitants valiantly strove to collect sufficient revenue to finance this splendid home for the King's representative.

Meanwhile, the Legislature was without permanent quarters. The first representative government met initially in 1758 in the Court House, at the corner of Argyle and Buckingham streets. In 1765, it moved to a building situated on the corner of Barrington and Sackville streets, and then to rented quarters in the Cochran Building, on Hollis Street.

When Sir John Wentworth somewhat impatiently took possession of Government House in late 1805, he pronounced that his old residence might be torn down at any time to

make way for a Legislature. Cooled by the unexpected cost of the vice-regal dwelling, the Members of the Assembly had little heart for a new project, and so it was not until 1811 that any definite action was taken.

The Speech from the Throne, which Sir George Prevost delivered in February 1811, made specific reference to the necessity of a government building in line with "the prosperous state of the Province." Finally fed up with their dilapidated rented quarters on the east side of Hollis Street, the Members took action: an appropriation was passed in March and, on August 12, 1811, the cornerstone was laid.

Building the new legislature

A short time prior to the laying of the cornerstone, three Commissioners were appointed, one of whom, John Merrick, was probably asked to prepare the plan and elevation of the proposed building, the

*Province House, 1819.
Illustration by J. E. Woolford*



PROVINCE HOUSE

work itself was to be conducted by an architect builder, Richard Scott.

Eight years passed before Province House was finally completed, at a cost of £52,000. The final result was a building designed in perfect proportions, endowed with fine architectural detail. It stands today as a high tribute to the builders and artisans of another era who, with their painstaking efforts and native talent, created an edifice of enduring beauty. On opening day, crowds pressed through the building from early morning until dark to admire the splendid new legislature. They were astonished by the large areas of window glass, and stared in fascination and awe at the delicately wrought plaster work on the ceiling and the bas-relief figures on the mantelpieces and around the doors.

When the Legislature met for the first time in Province House on February 11, 1819, the Earl of Dalhousie read the Speech from the Throne, saying, “The circumstance 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 honourable and useful to the Province, I recommend it to your continued protection.”

Main architectural features

The symmetry, regularity and uniformity in Province House, together with the full expression of classical vocabulary, root it firmly in the British Palladian tradition. This style dominated English taste through most of the 18th century and had its greatest impact in British North America during the first quarter of the 19th century. It is typical to see a central door with a triangular pediment or a Venetian window, which is flanked on either side by symmetrical wings. The use of classical orders and a hierarchy of storeys on a rusticated, or rough stone, basement are also characteristic features of this style.

This three-storey building, 43 metres (140 feet) in length and 21.5 metres (70 feet) deep, is constructed of sandstone from Wallace, Nova Scotia. The roof is hipped, intersected by pediment gables. The principal east façade fronts on Hollis Street, the west façade faces Granville Street. The two are almost identical but due to the steep slope of the site, the basement on Hollis Street is visible above grade, giving this side of the building a more imposing appearance. With the royal coat of arms in the tympanum, it is clearly the principal entrance.

The lowest storey is constructed of rough stone, forming a solid base for the main storey. The upper storeys are more



Province House, Hollis Street

refined, characterized by smooth ashlar masonry. The tall windows of the second floor indicate the significance of this storey and the lofty halls within. Another feature which reflects the interior spaces is the use of niches and blind openings in the fourth and twelfth bays, indicating the solid walls with chimneys. This typical Palladian feature serves to break up vacant space and maintain the rhythm and symmetry of the composition.

The north and south façades with their secondary entrances are less formal than the other sides. They incorporate

the features of the Palladian style, with a pedimented central bay, framed by Ionic pilasters. The entrances, now closed off, and centre windows are all variations on the Palladian window and, respecting the classical laws of symmetry, the third storey windows at the south end of the building, where the Red Chamber is located, are blind.

PROVINCE HOUSE

Red Chamber

Legislative



The Interior Layout

The balanced design of the exterior reflects the organization of the interior, with its harmonious volumes and flowing spaces. The central hall plan of Palladian buildings determines that the principal rooms in Province House are situated on the

main (second) floor, laid out around the transverse axis of the building and centred on the grand staircase. The entrance lobby and stair hall on the lower floor are circumscribed by four offices that can be entered off the hall running the length of the building.



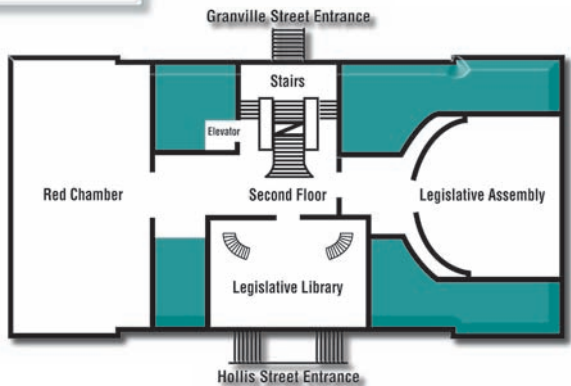
Library



Legislative Assembly



Second Floor Hall



Additional offices are situated on this longitudinal axis, terminating with suites of offices at either end of the building.

Four free-standing columns divide the lobby into three parts, creating an ordered progression of space leading to

the staircase. The graceful elliptical arches supported on square pillars stand over the cross-axis and, being a little lower than the columns, they indicate the subordinate role of this direction.

PROVINCE HOUSE

Interior Detailing

One of the most striking features of Province House is the fine quality of the interior detailing. Ornamental plasterwork throughout the building show the characteristics of refinement and delicacy that are found in the work of James and Robert Adam, during the second half the 18th century in England. These ornaments complement the harmonious spaces and elegant lines, changing in accordance with the importance of each space.

Plasterwork of this quality, scale and period is rare in Canada, due partly

to the limited need for ornate public buildings, and also because of the expense involved, and the scarcity of skilled craftsmen before the 1820s.

In the entrance lobby on the ground floor, the ornaments are primarily confined to the compact, acanthus-leaf capitals of the four classical columns which support the lobby ceiling, and the moulding which borders the ceiling. The upper hall is much more embellished. Here, the foliated capitals have developed into the full Roman Ionic order. They support a ceiling decorated with an elaborate border of superimposed classical ornament.

The largely nineteenth-century style of interior decor reflects phases in the development of Province House. Substantial original work survives of a refined quality rare in Canadian architecture. Alterations to the Legislative Library and the Assembly Chamber in mid-century display the emergence of Victorian taste while at the same time respecting the original work.

Main staircase and Ionic columns viewed from the second floor





Red Chamber

The interior of the doorway to the Red Chamber is framed by fluted columns with intricate capital design and an entablature along the top of the wall ornamented with garlands and sea shells. The coved ceiling is also richly festooned and garlanded and its corners decorated with the plumes of the Prince of Wales, a reference to the Regency period. In addition, all the window and door surrounds, chimneypieces and panels above the windows are delicately pat-

terned with sea and plant life, pastoral scenes, and architectural fantasies. While the source of these decorative features is not known, records indicate that 31 crates of ornaments were received from Scotland for Province House in 1819. Repetitive mouldings could have been produced by local artisans working with imported moulds. The window and door frames, chimneypieces and small ornamental details may have been shipped prefabricated, and installed on site.

P R O V I N C E H O U S E

The Red Chamber embodies the balanced proportions of the best Palladian designs. The entrance, in the middle of the long wall, is flanked by fireplaces. The large expanse of windows extending along the other three sides are a particularly beautiful feature. The Corinthian pilasters on the remaining wall space, along with the elegant mouldings, subtly reinforce the two-three-two rhythm that is found in the overall design of the building.

Still very much in its original state, the Red Chamber was designed as the home of the Legislative Council — the Upper House of the provincial parliament — and it served that capacity until the Council ceased to exist on May 31, 1928. The upholstered chairs, made in Nova Scotia in the 1850s, are those used by the Council members. This room is used today for Committees and for special functions, such as press conferences and receptions.



Ceiling detail from the Red Chamber



Legislative Library

The room in which the Legislative Library is located was originally the Supreme Court of Nova Scotia. Many famous trials were held in this chamber: the first criminal trial was the case against Richard John Uniacke Jr. for killing William Bowie in a duel. This trial was noteworthy in that the defendant's father, Richard John Uniacke Sr., was Attorney General at the time and was responsible for bringing his son before the Bench. The code of honour still existed in 1819, however, and since duelling was a respectable means to protecting one's honour, young Uniacke was acquitted.

Unquestionably the most famous trial of all was that of Joseph Howe on a charge of criminal libel on March 2, 1835. The story of Howe's masterly speech in his own defence, and his acquittal on this occasion, is well known to Nova Scotians, and this amazing feat in large measure paved the way for freedom of the press in Canada and launched him into political life the following year.

With the departure of the Supreme Court to Spring Garden Road in the spring of 1862, the Legislative Library came into being. The library collection, which had previously been scattered throughout the various rooms in Province House, was brought together

in this one room when alcoves, shelving and the mezzanine balcony were constructed.

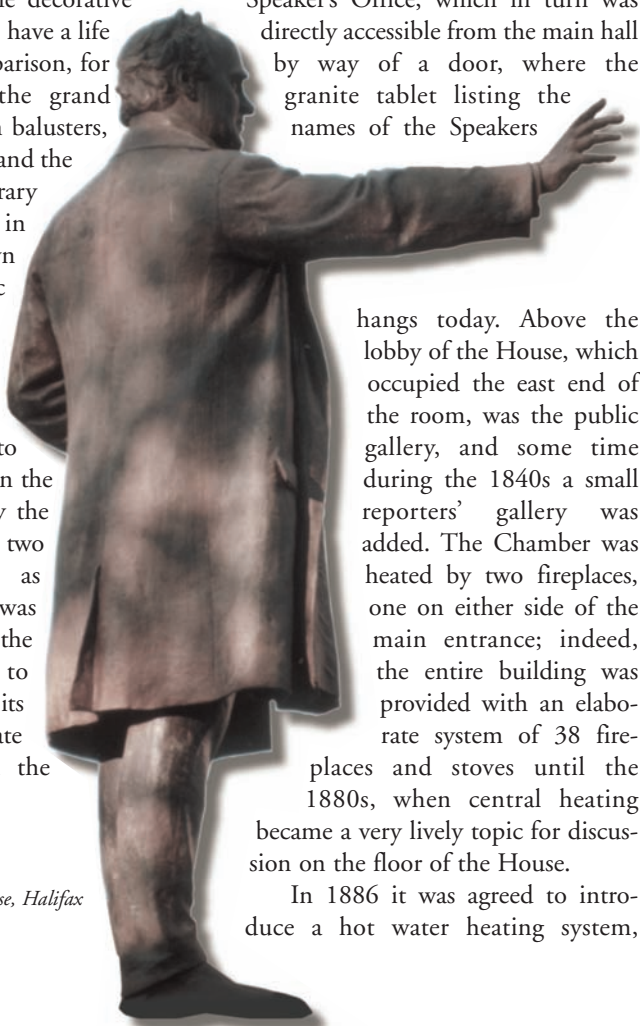
In contrast to the rest of the building, where the ornament is carefully controlled, the fleshy acanthus leaves on the dark-stained wood framing the stacks and the intertwining foliage of the mayflower on the decorative wrought iron seem to have a life of their own. A comparison, for example, between the grand staircase with its iron balusters, colonettes and swags and the ironwork of the library illustrates an interest in ornament for its own sake, a characteristic of Victorian architecture of the second half of the 19th century.

It is interesting to note that the ceiling in the Library was originally the height of the other two chambers but that, as early as 1824, it was deemed advisable, in the interests of space, to lower the ceiling to its present height to create additional space on the third floor.

*Joseph Howe
Province House, Halifax*

The Assembly Chamber

In 1819 the Assembly Chamber presented much the same proportions as the Red Chamber. The Speaker's Chair stood on the west or Granville Street side, with an entrance from the Speaker's Office, which in turn was directly accessible from the main hall by way of a door, where the granite tablet listing the names of the Speakers



hangs today. Above the lobby of the House, which occupied the east end of the room, was the public gallery, and some time during the 1840s a small reporters' gallery was added. The Chamber was heated by two fireplaces, one on either side of the main entrance; indeed, the entire building was provided with an elaborate system of 38 fireplaces and stoves until the 1880s, when central heating became a very lively topic for discussion on the floor of the House.

In 1886 it was agreed to introduce a hot water heating system,



Legislative Assembly Chamber

which meant excavating a cellar for a furnace beneath the north wing. One thing led to another, and it was finally agreed to change the layout of the Assembly Chamber, with the introduction of a colonnaded balcony and additional offices beneath.

During the restructuring, care was taken to save much of the original stuc-

cowork and to integrate it with the new work. It appears that the pre-1886 pattern of the ceiling was preserved, extended and re-centred to the south when the room was enlarged. Some of the elements of the original scheme may have been re-used, such as the shell motif in the pediments over the doors, and new motifs were possibly introduced.

Other rooms

As for the rooms on the ground floor of Province House, they have had many uses over the years, but one can be reasonably certain that the head of government has always retained a presence in the building in one of the offices on the lower floor. Today, the Premier's main office is in a building nearby.

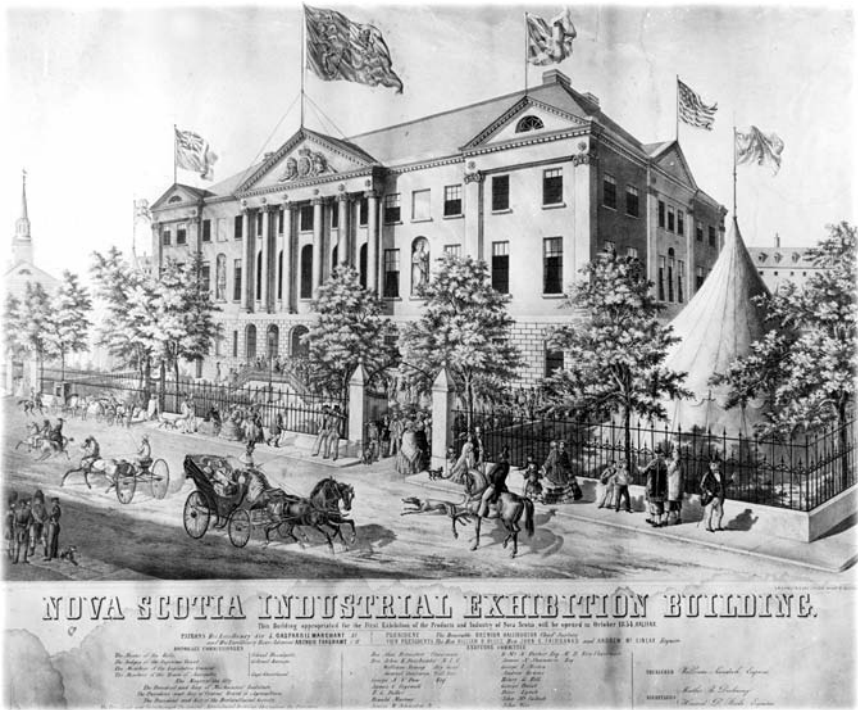
Although the offices and committee rooms have been adapted as the needs have changed, much of the ornamental work in secondary rooms survives, including king mouldings, window and door frames, and mantelpieces. Marine life is a common motif, reflecting both the maritime nature of the province and the imperial claim to naval dominance. This is emphasized in the chimneypieces of the Cabinet Room and Premier's Room where a replica of the Edinburgh monument of Nelson is depicted in relief.

Reference should also be made to the headless falcons in the Assembly Chamber, Members' Lounge and in the South Committee Room, now the Office of the Clerk. The story is told that in the 1840s when anti-American feeling was running high, a hot-headed Member of the Legislature used his cane to knock off the heads of what he presumed to be eagles, the symbols of republicanism.

More than a Legislative Assembly

Province House has been the setting for many events over the centuries. In 1854, inspired by London's Crystal Palace Exhibition of 1851, Nova Scotia sponsored its first Industrial Exhibition at Province House. *The Novascotian* of Monday, October 9, 1854, reported that the Speaker's Room contained mineral specimens, including one small lump of coal under a glass case, "a feeble representation of the two hundred thousand tons of coal which will this year be exported from our mines, and which might easily be increased to ten times that amount." The Assembly Chamber provided the setting for local manufacturers of every description; the Supreme Court (now the Library) housed an exhibit of models and labour saving machines, while the Legislative Council Chamber displayed progress in fine arts. The south yard contained mechanical arts and a tent in the north yard showed products of the soil, including fisheries — "very inadequately represented by a few barrels of fish."

In July 1860, the visit of the Prince of Wales, later Edward VII, produced a patriotic display of unprecedented proportions. All Halifax was caught up in the frenzy of preparation: annexes were constructed in north and south yards to accommodate the 1000 guests, the majority of whom were called upon to pay two guineas for the privilege of



Industrial Exhibition, Province House, 1851

attending the ceremonies and the ball. The prince's visit is commemorated in one of the two throne chairs, made expressly for his use, which stands on the dais in the Red Chamber.

A large composite photograph by Notman hanging in the upper hallway depicts the investiture of the Marquis of Lorne as Governor General in the Assembly Chamber on November 25, 1878. During the next half-century three governors general were sworn in to office in the stately Red Chamber — Earl Grey on December 10, 1904, the Duke of Devonshire on November 11,

1916, and the Earl of Bessborough on April 4, 1931. These ceremonies took place in the days when newly appointed governors general were sworn in on the day of their arrival on Canadian soil.

Setting

At the time of the completion of construction the site was very open, with St. Matthew's Church on the south side and low commercial and residential buildings on the other facing streets. The site has since been enclosed by an iron fence, ordered from the Carron Company Foundry in Scotland. In

Restoration of the building

1826 the *Acadian Magazine* described the “healthy and airy appearance” of the green spaces at either end and the open space in front of the building.

Two monuments have been erected in the centre of these outside areas: Joseph Howe can be seen at the south end, set in a laid out garden, while a memorial to the Boer War is situated at the north end of the building. Lamps from the old Waterloo Bridge, London, England, have flanked the Hollis Street entrance since 1938. Locust trees that were first planted on the site have been replaced by another variety. The overall impression is that the grounds are similar to their mid-19th century appearance. However, outside the limits of the fence, the legislature is now boxed in by more modern buildings which restrict the views.

Nevertheless, despite the downtown development, Province House still commands a prominent place in the historic core of the city. Its proximity to the Grand Parade and the waterfront ensures high visibility.

As the most important public building in Nova Scotia, Province House has always been well maintained. Repairs and alterations have been carried out in keeping with its status and mindful of its prominence and public image.

In 1985 first steps were taken to restore Province House and to repair some of the damage that time and poor craftsmanship had rendered to the integrity and safety of the structure. It was discovered that the pillar wall that served as a base to the building was in such a state of decay that it was necessary to completely replace the stones. To determine what other work had to be done, the building was cleaned with water under light pressure. An inventory was taken, stone-by-stone, course-by-course. Defective stones and their dimensions were listed, which made it apparent that the restoration would take at least three years. All in all, for the four elevations, over 1700 stones, would have to be replaced.

As stone masonry had declined in Canada, qualified professional stone-masons were brought in from England and hired to work with 12 local apprentices.

Removal of the stone from the building was mostly done by traditional hammer and chisel. Once lifted out, each stone was marked so it, or a new stone, could be fitted into its exact place, not unlike a 3-D jig-saw puzzle.

Previous concrete patching and decayed masonry were removed and replaced with stone from the same quarry at Wallace that supplied the original material. The building was cleaned and repointed, and repairs to the windows were carried out. The woodwork was retained where possible, but some sashes were replaced. New metal-framed storm



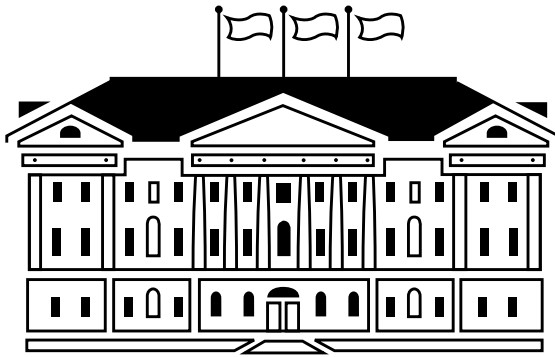
Province House before restoration

windows were applied over the multi-pane sash.

The renovation to the building has made Nova Scotians more aware of the importance of their Province House. In 1994 it was declared a National Historic Site for both its historic and architectural importance to the country.

Queen Elizabeth II at the August 1994 ceremony commemorating Province House as a National Historic Site





PROVINCE HOUSE



Photo—Chris Reardon

Province House
Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada



House of Assembly
Nova Scotia