

Frederick William Cumberland and the Toronto Normal and Model Schools Building

by Yew-Thong Leong



Interior of Auditorium/Theatre, Toronto Normal and Model Schools circa late 1950's prior to its demolition in 1963. Ryerson Archives.

"The whole (building) has been designed with a view rather to utility than to effect, care being taken, however, to maintain that fitness of decoration by which the purpose and importance of the institution may be characterized and upheld," so declared Egerton Ryerson, 2 July 1851, when he laid the corner-stone for the Toronto Normal and Model Schools buildings. Earlier in 1845, Ryerson had introduced the concept of tax-funded public education to Upper Canada after his many trips to similiar European institutions. Schools at the turn of the century were rarities. Even if a privileged family was able to afford the fees, the child could not be guaranteed of a good education. Teachers were of poor calibre being either uncommitted or ill-trained. The Normal School was set up to train teachers, and the Model School was sometimes used for practice teaching. The original Normal and Model Schools opened in November 1847 and did not find a permanent home until five years later in the product of Frederick Cumberland's architectural genius. The building was meant to be a showpiece of Upper Canada's school system.

Cumberland at that period was the reigning architect in Upper Canada. Born in London, England on 10 April 1820, he attended King's College School with John Ruskin, future art historian, and apprenticed, in Victorian fashion, as an architect and civil engineer for five years with William Trees. Cumberland worked briefly with Sir Charles Barry and may have worked on the Houses of Parliament at Westminster. Later he served as assistant engineer in several English railway offices and dockyards, and excelled in foundation construction. At age twenty-five he married Wilmot Mary Bramley and was encouraged to emigrate to Toronto by his spouse's two sisters, Julia and Matilda, both of whom were married to the socially prominent brothers, Joseph and Thomas Gibbs Ridout. He did exactly that in the autumn of 1847, bearing with

him a letter of recommendation from Sir Barry attesting to Cumberland's "qualifications and character". His first job was laying out the interesection of Yonge and Bloor. A year later, he was made County Engineer for the United Counties of York and Peel. In 1850, just three years after emigration to boom-town Toronto, he set up an architectural practice with Thomas Ridout Jr., step-son of Matilda Bramley Ridout.

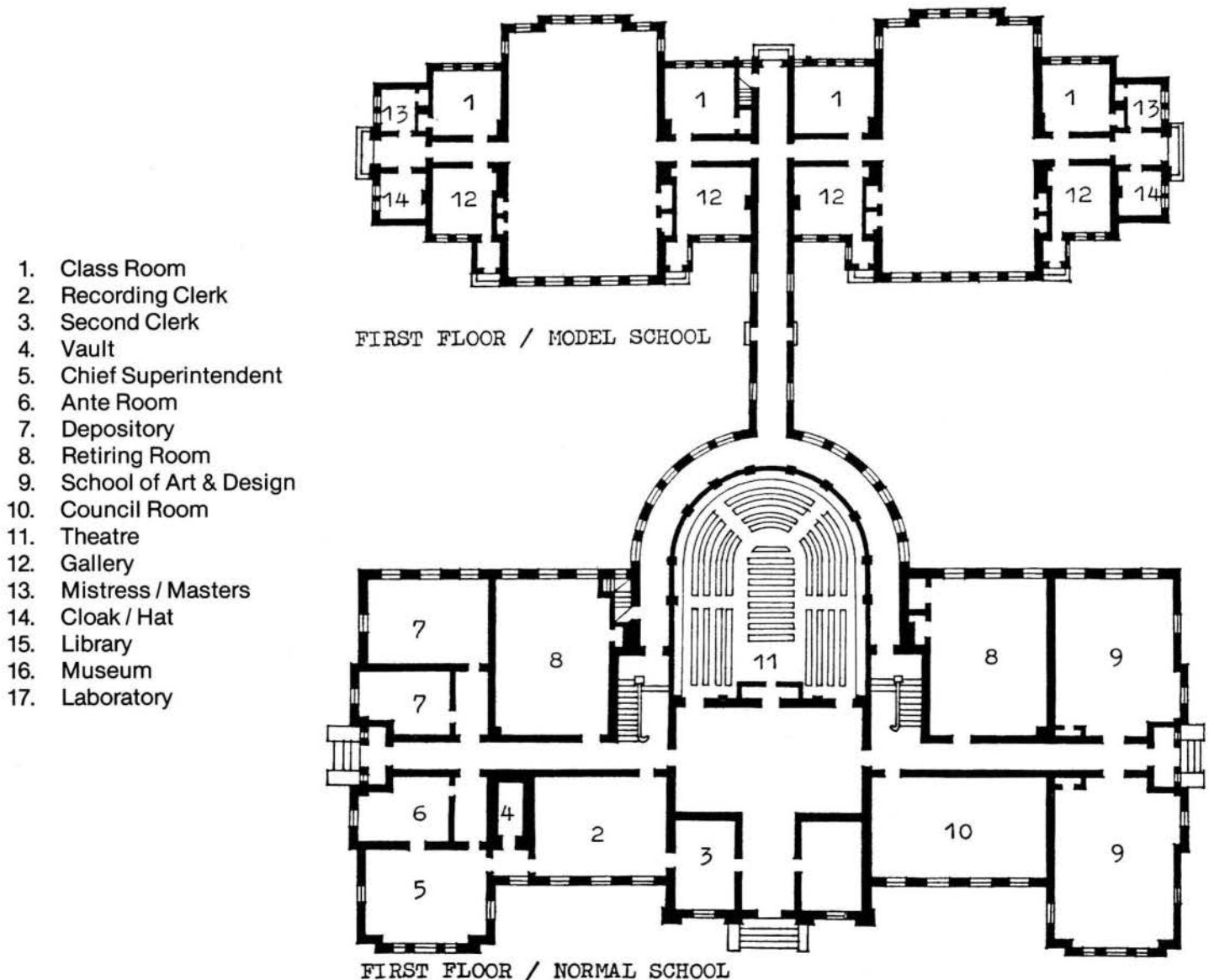
The Cumberland-Ridout partnership lasted only two years and produced two major buildings, the St. James' Cathedral and the Toronto Normal and Model Schools. Cumberland's new partner in 1852, was William George Storm. Two years earlier Cumberland had hired Storm for a brief term to help prepare the St. James' Cathedral drawings. This partnership lasted, much longer than the one with Ridout, 15 years. Cumberland worked mainly on his own; he provided the designs and Storm executed the schemes. Amongst their more significant structures were the Seventh Toronto Post Office (1853), University College (1856), Osgoode Hall alterations (1857) and the Chapel of St. James-the-Less (1858). Towards the end of the partnership, Cumberland became increasingly involved with railway management and less with his architectural practice. His railway career, because of his political lobbying, pushed him into the public eye. He tried politics, representing Algoma as MPP from 1867 to 1875, and as MP from 1871 to 1872. Cumberland served as director or president in various organizations. He also founded an infantry regiment in 1861, the 10th Battalion of Volunteer Militia Rifles and held the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel. His last building was his own house, Pendarvis, in 1860. He died in his home on 5 August 1881.

Stylistically, Cumberland was impressed by his revivalist theorist friend Ruskin. To Cumberland, in Eric Arthur's words, "architecture of the

past was a reservoir into which anyone could lower a pail". Early Victorians (1820's to 1850's) came up with only one style at a time. High Victorians eclectics (1850's to 1890's) such as Cumberland drew up pails with a variety of styles and combined them all in one building. A new ideal was pursued, the building form could be reminiscent of many styles but never distinctive of one. This was called Picturesque, a visual approach to architecture. Any building was good as long as it had these subjective qualities. Picturesque Eclecticism was not new, at the beginning of the century Nash and Soane had thought it would become a comparable historical style, just like Greek or Gothic. It was the High Victorians that brought this style to maturity and Cumberland led in this achievement in British North America. Canada became a nation in the decade (1860's) when High Victorian Picturesque Eclecticism peaked. It became Canada's first national style, as evident in Canada's first Houses of Parliament at Ottawa (Thomas Fuller in 1859-1866).

The Toronto Normal and Model Schools building was one such an example of Picturesque Eclecticism. It was Cumberland's first attempt in the style. He favoured Classical Revival for his secular buildings, which he provided for the exterior of the school building. In contrast the interior was Gothic. This was considered by contemporary opinion

not to be a lack of conviction but rather of his virtuosity in the art of architecture. Gothic was appropriate for an educational institution while Classical was used for civic buildings (the Normal School building housed the offices for the Education Department for Upper Canada). The most prominent element of the buff brick and Ohio sandstone facade was the entry, which had four centre pilasters running the full two storey height of the building. The entablature was Roman Doric, complete with triglyphs, urns and round shields metopes. This centrepiece was crowned by an open Doric cupola which reached a height of ninety-six feet and was flanked by two wings. The whole created a rather horizontal aspect with harmonic proportion. A galleried apse partially housed the auditorium/theatre at the back of the Normal School. This had interior cast-iron ogival arch arcading and traceried Gothic windows. Many of the other interior details were also executed in cast-iron. The Model School, north of the Normal School, was connected by an enclosed walkway to the apse of the Normal School. The floor plans were rigorously symmetrical and reflected upper-middle class Victorian virtues to the utmost. Female students entered, used and exited the left western wing; while male students occupied the right eastern wing. In 1896, a third storey was added. The cupola was converted into a half Classical and half Gothic lantern, as if to give some clues that the building had a



Gothic interior. This attic storey greatly disrupted Cumberland's proportion scheme. Also as the need arose, other buildings, some less sympathetic to the original visual ideals, were added to the site, St. James' Square. The site was bounded by Gerrard, Church, Gould and Victoria Streets. The General Board of Education, equivalent to the present day Ministry of Education, paid £4500 (\$18,000) for the land, which originally was bogs, tree stumps and a creek which still runs today. Landscaping on the seven acre grounds was done by William Monday, who imported trees, shrubs and other plant materials from all over the world.

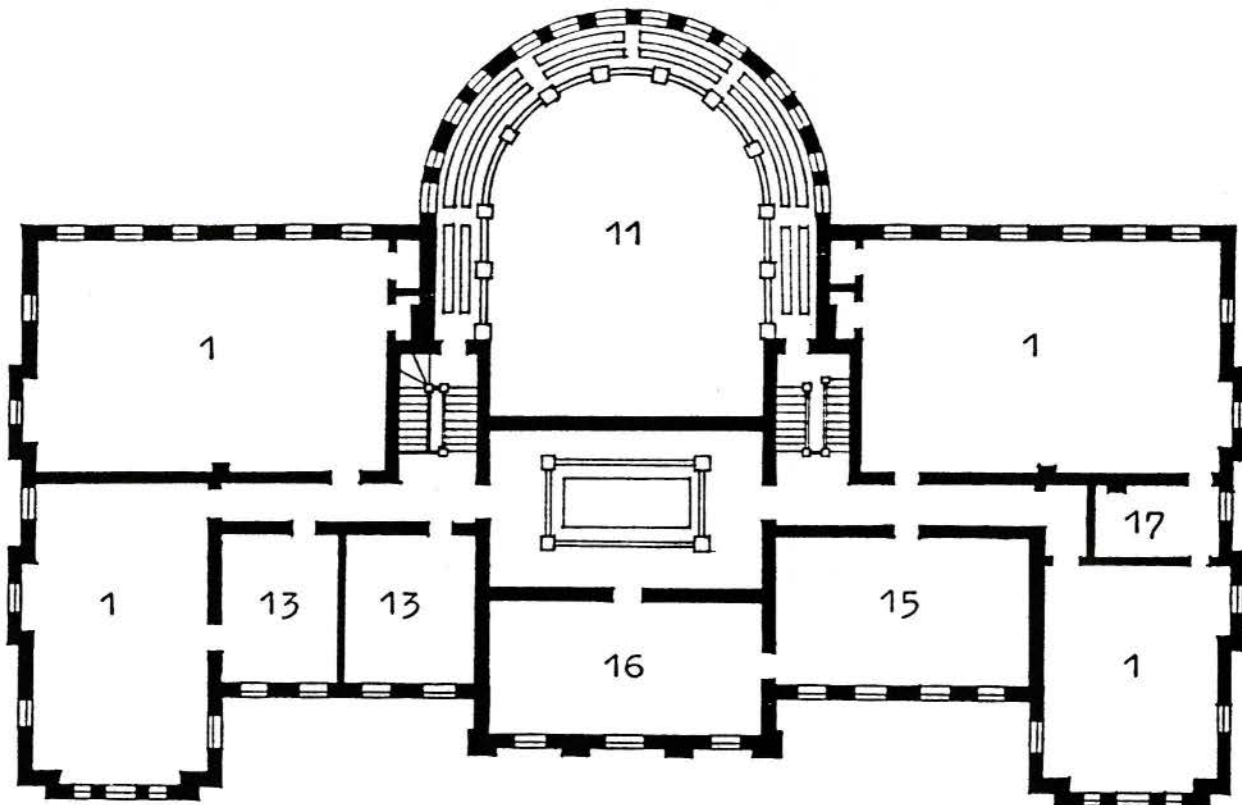
The Normal and Model Schools buildings and grounds were commandeered by the government for the RCAF in 1941, as part of the war effort. At the end of the war, the complex provided rehabilitation training for returning veterans. On 21 September 1948, after the cessation of the training program, the building became the home of Ryerson Institute of Technology (later Ryerson Polytechnical Institute). The original Normal and Model Schools were considered to be one of the finest institutions. Within the walls were nurtured other educational institutes which upon reaching maturity established homes for themselves; the Royal Ontario Museum, the Ontario College of Arts, the University of Guelph and Ryerson Polytechnical Institute. Ryerson Polytechnical Institute expanded and the requirement for space grew. In the late 1950's and early 1960's, plans were made for physical expansion. The architectural firm of Jack Diamond Architects was consulted. Their conclusion was that the main Normal School building was sound and could meet modern regulations if remodeled. The cost would be \$18.5 million. The government disagreed and came out with its own estimate of \$34 million. Without public review, the building was demolished in 1963. As a gesture to history, the facade of the front centrepiece was left untouched; to serve a symbolic monument to the century old history of that site. For a decade that followed, graduates of the institute walked

through the front doors of this monument of their convocation. What was once a significant piece of architecture had now become a backdrop to an annual celebration.

Yet there was a recognition of something lost. On 13 October 1978, the Ontario Heritage Foundation, an agency of the Ministry of Culture and Recreation, unveiled an historical plaque commemorating the Toronto Normal and Model Schools. It was nevertheless a case of too little to late.

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