

Figure 1. "St. Paul's Church, Hamilton, C.W. W. Thomas, architect, 1855. Maclure & Macdonald, Lith^{rs} Glasgow." (Reprint by Canadian Historical Reproductions)

A FLAWED MASTERPIECE

O R T H E P R I C E O F P R E S S U R E

St. Paul's Presbyterian Church in Hamilton has been held in high regard for its design and execution ever since its official opening on 7 March 1857 (figure 1). The tower is crowned by an elegant spire, the first and only stone spire erected in Ontario. The architect was William Thomas, designer of Toronto's St. Lawrence Hall and St. Michael's Cathedral; London's St. Paul's; Guelph's City Hall and Market; and many other distinguished buildings in the province. The contractor was the Hamilton stonemason George Worthington, who also built the Custom House and the Hamilton Waterworks Pumping Station (currently the Museum of Steam and Technology).

The church, from foundation to tip of spire, was completed in the remarkably short time of three years, and the spire itself (94 feet high from base to capstone, on a tower 88 feet high) in an incredible six weeks. St. Paul's accomplished what no other church in Hamilton had done at that time: even in Toronto, the major cathedrals were without their spires until the 1870s.

The original contract with George Worthington reveals that not only was the work carefully prescribed, but so also were the deadlines. Worthington was allowed little more than four months to erect the structure "up to the height requisite for the carpenters to fix the roof," and one year from then to "have the whole of the said works to the top of the spire" completed. To guarantee these deadlines, the building committee included in the terms of the contract a penalty of fifty pounds for every week that the work went over schedule. The stonework was certified as complete in December 1856, two months late, and George Worthington was paid adequately—but not without first bringing a court case against the building committee.

Such are the historical facts as described in a report written in 1980¹ and read by us with disbelief in 1987, when we were retained to implement

a major conservation programme. Disbelief because, standing in front of the church and having some acquaintance with the organizational and craft skills required to place stone on stone in late-20th century Hamilton, it seemed impossible that such a quality and quantity of decoration was achieved in three years in the middle of the 19th century.²

However, close inspection of the spire's stonework from the scaffolding two months later revealed the price paid for building so high at such speed. Numerous examples of poor masonry and errors in dimensioning and carving (figure 2) seemed at odds with the quality of the design, and could only be explained in terms of a lack of supervision far above the street and the acceptance of lower standards which inevitably follows on extreme haste.

We experienced that strange mental conflict when what is conveyed by the senses to the mind (what I *see*) doesn't fit the preconceptions (what I *know*), in this case engendered by 135 years of respect and acclaim. Then, suddenly, in light of the contract deadlines and the penalty clause, the significance of late completion of the stonework became apparent. If, as seems likely, the spire was the last component of the masonry construction, then it would have been constructed when the contractor was under the greatest pressure; and if the six weeks recorded for its construction were after the contract deadline for completion of the stonework, George Worthington was actually losing money as he built it. We do not know Thomas's supervisory role in all this, but it is clearly evident that lower standards were allowed on the spire.

Information on the construction process at St. Paul's would be invaluable in this regard, and we would be interested to know if readers of the *SSAC Bulletin* are aware of any contemporary records which may exist.

demonstrates clearly the boldness and strength of Thomas's design. Price per copy is \$42.00, including GST, PST, and postage. Prints are supplied rolled in a shipping tube, and are available by mail from:

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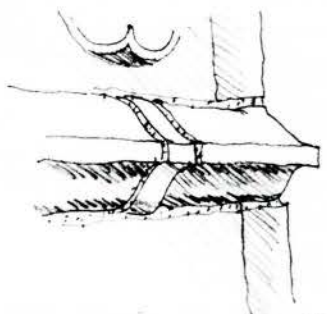
By Alan Seymour

1 Nina Chapple, *St. Paul's Church (Presbyterian), Hamilton, Ontario: An Architectural and Historical Report*, produced for the Hamilton LACAC, 1980.

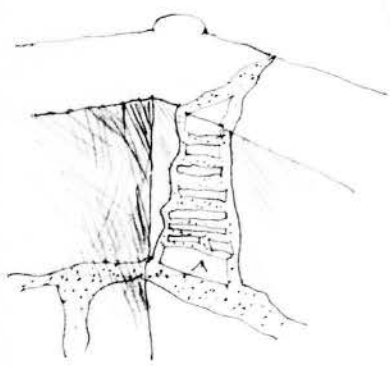
2 Consideration of the recorded dates suggests that six months were spent in site preparation, excavations, and foundation work prior to the laying of the cornerstone on 9 September 1854. Nine months were presumably then spent in transporting, dressing, and carving the stonework before the prescribed four month and one year work periods commenced.

This is an excerpt from an article in preparation which relates the experiences of Alan Seymour, architect for building conservation programmes on St. Paul's Presbyterian Church, the Custom House, and the Museum of Steam and Technology, all in Hamilton, Ontario.

To celebrate the completion of the conservation programme, St. Paul's has sponsored the restoration and reproduction of an original lithograph which hangs in the vestry of the church (figure 1). Profits from the sales of the print will be used to subsidize a regular building maintenance programme. The 18 1/2" x 27 1/2" reproduction, printed on archival-quality 90 lb. matte paper, accurately reproduces the subtle colours and exquisite detail of the original, and

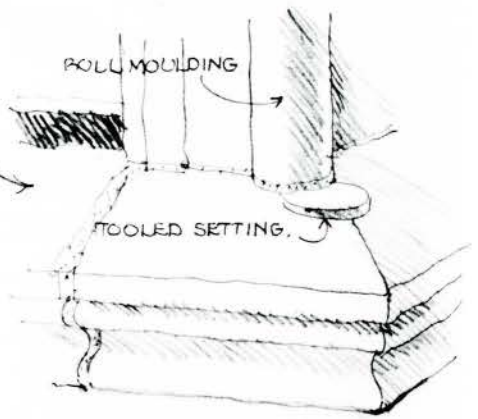


STONE SLIP INSERTED IN LOWER BELT COURSE AS FILLER TO MAKE UP REQUIRED DIMENSION.

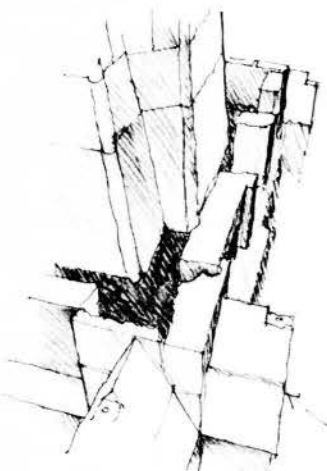


MANY STONES ON UPPER COURSES SO ROUGHLY DRESSED THAT SLATE GALLETING NECESSARY TO REDUCE EXCESSIVE VOLUMES OF MORTAR.

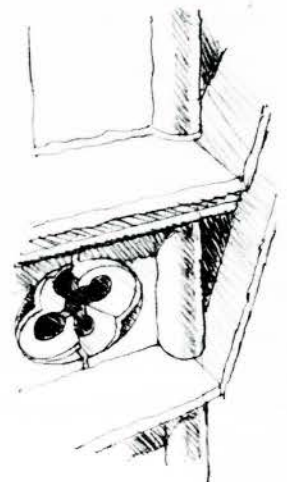
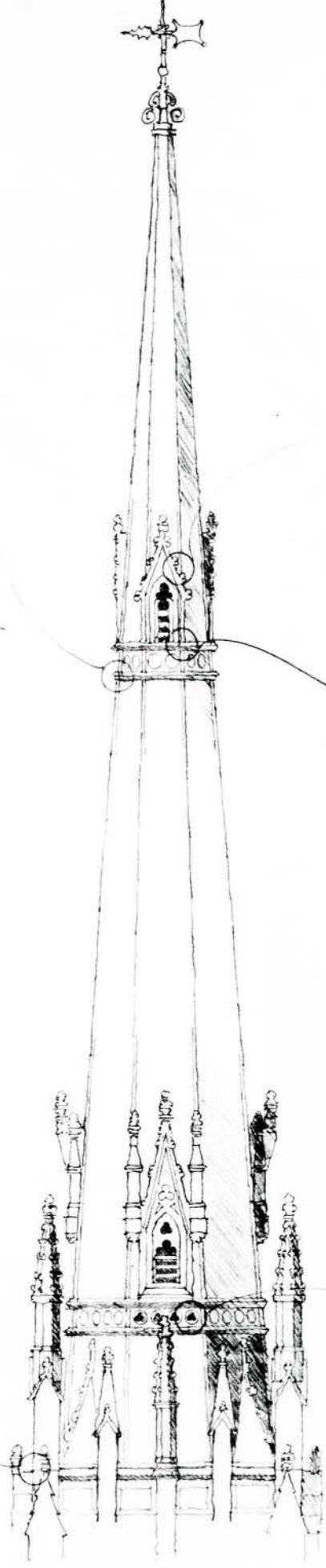
ROLL MOULDINGS AT THESE INTERSECTIONS POORLY CUT AND SET, NECESSITATING SMALL STONE SLIPS AS FILLERS.



EXPOSED TOOLED SETTING FOR ROLL MOULDINGS ON TOP OF UPPER BELT COURSE.



CORNER PINNACLES (20'-0" HIGH) BUILT ON 2 DRESSED STONES + BUBBLE WORK (REMOVED IN SKETCH) DRESSED STONES REDUCE TO 1 1/2" THICK IN SOME PLACES.



CARVED STONE BETWEEN BELT COURSES DOES NOT BLEND WITH ITS NEIGHBOUR BECAUSE CARVED AND INSTALLED IN ERROR UPSIDE DOWN.

Figure 2. Details of the tower of St. Paul's Church, Hamilton, showing examples of poor masonry and errors in dimensioning and carving. (Alan Seymour)

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