
Ottawa Teachers' College

OTTAWA, ONTARIO



Dana Johnson



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Ottawa Teachers' College

The Ottawa Teachers' College or Normal School, designed by the architect W.R. Strickland and built in 1875 by J. Forin, was the second institution of its type to be established in Ontario. The rear wing was added in 1879 to house a model school. The College continued to train teachers for Ontario until 1974. While the general massing of forms, with central and side pavilions, follows the 19th century academic tradition, the use of disparate architectural details including the pointed Gothic windows, semi-circular Italianate windows, Romanesque columns and Second Empire roof, reflects a spirit of eclecticism.

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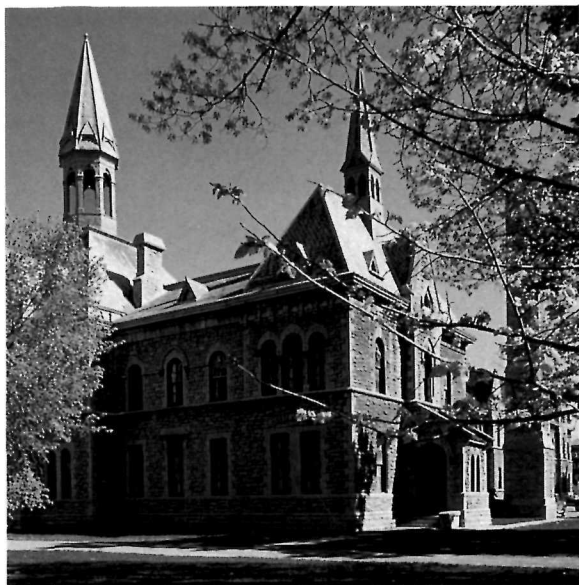
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Introduction

Opened in 1875 as the Ottawa Normal School, the Ottawa Teachers' College (Fig. 1) trained teachers for almost a century within this grand late-Victorian building. Though the institution is now the Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa, the structure remains as a testimony to this long period of achievement and to its architectural grandeur. The Ottawa Teachers' College is significant in Canada's history for two reasons. It housed an activity which society judged crucial to social improvement, the training of those who had chosen the education of youth as a career. To do so, the province of Ontario erected a splendid school whose relatively elaborate character makes it an important architectural landmark for this country. Explaining this dual importance requires an examination of the place of the Ottawa Teachers' College in educational history, and the design of the building within the context of Canadian public architecture.

The Ottawa Teachers' College and Teacher Training

Pity the poor individual who chose a career in education more than a century ago. Imagine, for a moment, that you are a public school teacher in rural Ontario in the year of Confederation 1867. You were probably a woman. Although teaching was formerly an almost exclusively male profession, increasingly it became a job dominated by unmarried women. Whether male or female, you were likely untrained for your position. The only local institution offering professional training was the Provincial Normal School in Toronto. Founded in 1847, it originally accommodated barely 100 students a year, far fewer than the province's rapidly expanding school system required. Nor was it certain that your own education was sufficient to the demands of teaching, for every year dozens of can-

didates for the normal school were rejected because they lacked the basic academic skills needed to take the course of study. Year after year district school inspectors complained of teachers whose abilities were barely superior to those of their students.

Poor training aside, the profession of teaching was not an attractive one. You taught in decidedly primitive surroundings. Over a third of the province's schools were one-room schools of log construction, and another 40 percent were frame buildings. If contemporary descriptions are to be trusted, facilities were limited to a stove, benches and sometimes a blackboard; a well and outdoor privies were luxuries. You taught as many as 60 students in your classroom, and perhaps thought yourself lucky because some of your colleagues in city schools had classes twice as large. Fortunately all of your pupils rarely showed up on the same day; the average student in 1867 attended fewer than half the days the school was open. Work, family duties, disinterest, indolence and lack of suitable clothing often intervened. Though frequent absences eased the overcrowded conditions, they wreaked havoc with your lessons, particularly when you were supposed to teach every subject on the provincial curriculum at all the primary levels.

As if poor training and inadequate facilities were not enough, you probably received little compensation for your efforts. If expenditures indicate the level of support for schooling, the general public was none too keen on formal education. Your own salary was depressingly low, especially if you were a woman. Few teachers were paid as much as a common labourer, and females were paid from one-third to one-half of the amount given to their male counterparts. School board expenditures reflected considerable resistance to upgrading schools: on the average only 66 cents was spent annually per student across the province. Indeed, the lot of a primary school teacher was not a particularly happy one. It comes as no surprise to learn that 60 percent of women left teaching after one

year, usually for the stability of married life. Most able men shunned the profession altogether.

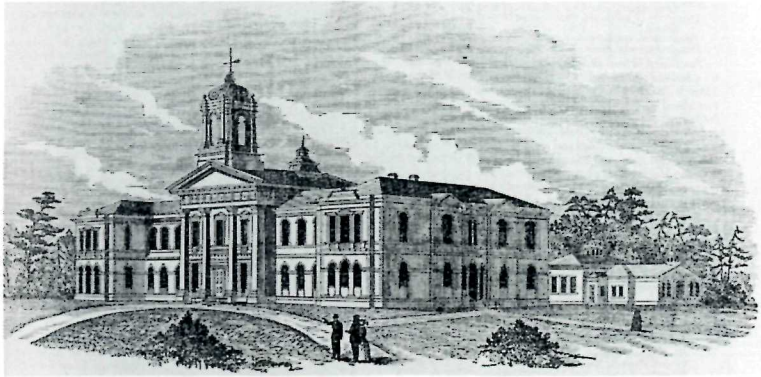
Because education was largely a local responsibility, the provincial government could often do little to remedy deficiencies in the primary schools. But a department of education committed to progress was by no means powerless. One simple provision was to improve the skills of teachers and require boards to hire trained teachers. The development of provincial normal and model schools was one government response to the need to make the educational system of the mid-19th century better.

The purpose of these twinned institutions was simple. As the province's influential Chief Superintendent of Education, Egerton Ryerson, noted

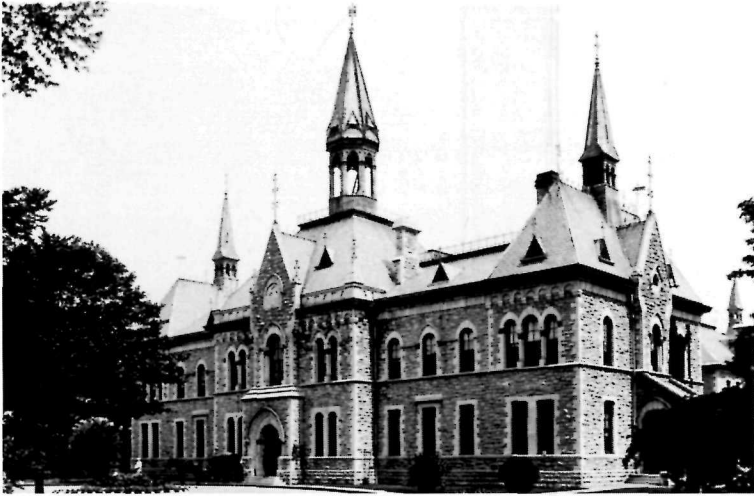
The object of the Normal Schools was to train teachers for the teaching of elementary school, and the object of the Model Schools connected with them, was to afford an opportunity of practicing teaching, and to show them how the Common schools should be conducted.

The normal school (the term derives from the French term "école normale" or the school where standards [norms] are taught) was an innovation in education. So too was the model school. It was an institution designed to be the embodiment of the well-run school, where student teachers could practise their skills.

The first normal school in North America was opened in Montreal in 1836, but it closed six years later. Ontario (then called Upper Canada) and New Brunswick each approved the establishment of one in 1847, Nova Scotia followed suit in 1855, Prince Edward Island in 1856 and Quebec, its second attempt, in 1857. But of all of these early initiatives towards professionalizing teaching, no structure built as a normal school survives. Though it dates to a slightly later period, the Ottawa Teachers' College is the earliest building we have in which to examine teacher training in Canada.



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- 1 A modern view of the former Ottawa Teachers' College before the construction of the new provincial courthouse to the north. (Heritage Recording Services, Environment Canada — Parks)
 - 2 The Normal and Model School in Toronto was built between 1851 and 1852, but was demolished (except for a fragment of its entryway) for the construction of Ryerson Polytechnical Institute. (Ontario Department of Education)
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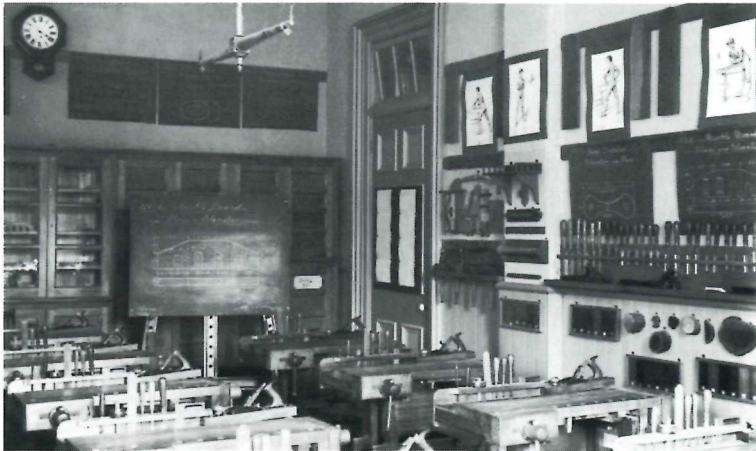
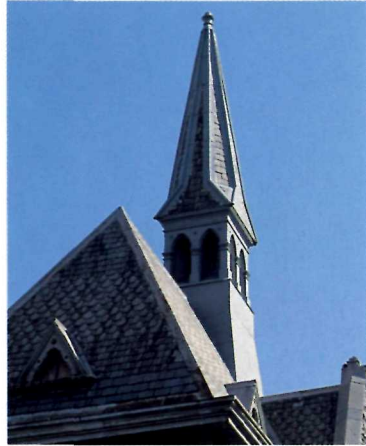
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- 3 The Ottawa Normal and Model School in the 1890s. Except for the removal of its gates, most of its landscaping (required for street widening) and of the ornamental iron cresting, the exterior has changed little since 1875. (National Archives of Canada, PA8857)
- 4 The Normal School in Truro, Nova Scotia was built between 1877 and 1879. Its Second Empire styling made it a quite representative example of the design of public buildings in this period. (CIHB, Environment Canada — Parks)
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- 5 The distinctive front door treatment combines Romanesque columns with Gothic Revival-inspired arches and label mouldings. The stonework is particularly fine. (Wayne Duford, CIHB, Environment Canada — Parks)
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- 6 A typical upper storey window detail shows a range of stylistic influences: a Gothic Revival label moulding within which is set a window with a rounded Norman head, subdivided in an Italianate manner by wooden glazing bars. (Heritage Recording Services, Environment Canada — Parks)
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- 7 Here two round-headed windows with Italianate glazing bars were set within a Gothic Revival surround, with a Romanesque Revival column and a vaguely Byzantine-inspired motif in the stonework above. (Heritage Recording Services, Environment Canada — Parks)
- 8 A rooftop turret was not merely a decorative detail; it also housed the ventilating fans so necessary for fresh air supply in a public building of the period. (Wayne Duford, CIHB, Environment Canada — Parks)
- 9 The shops at the Ottawa Normal and Model School in the early years of the 20th century. Note the gas lighting fixtures and the drawings showing “proper” handling of tools. (National Archives of Canada, PA28201)
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- 10 The “School Gardens” movement of the early 20th century produced a strong interest in small-scale domestic agriculture, and in using the out-of-doors to teach pupils lessons in natural science. Here a group of appropriately dressed female students joins a junior class in the plots behind the 1891 auditorium wing. (National Archives of Canada, C-38987)
- 11 A skating rink located behind the Normal and Model School, ca. 1920. (National Archives of Canada, C-23032)
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- 12 Strickland's decorative program for the interior included simple but classically elegant detailing and woodwork. This staircase, lit by a generously scaled window framed by pilasters and an arch, illustrates how a utilitarian function was handled by a skilled architect. (Heritage Recording Services, Environment Canada — Parks)
- 13 At one time fireplaces supplemented mechanical heating systems. This one served the principal's office. (Heritage Recording Services, Environment Canada — Parks)
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Ontario's first normal school was founded in Toronto in 1847, and for six years it occupied makeshift premises while the government planned a permanent building. This opened in 1852 (Fig. 2), and for almost 25 years was the only centre for teacher training in the province. But it was impossible for one institution to produce enough qualified teachers to staff the province's rapidly growing school system, and the professionalization of teaching proceeded at a snail's pace. By 1877, for example, only 17 percent of active teachers had attended a normal school. Since many officials viewed education as the key to the economic and social improvement of the nation, the supply of trained teachers had to be increased. During the early 1870s, the province responded. As a temporary expedient, the Toronto Normal and Model School was expanded in 1872. Plans were initiated for three additional normal schools in London, Kingston and Ottawa.

The establishment of the Ottawa Normal School proceeded quickly, but the colleges at London and Kingston were not opened until much later. In 1873 a prominent site was purchased, a four-acre block south of the drill hall in downtown Ottawa, and a distinguished institutional architect, W.R. Strickland of Toronto, was appointed to draw up plans for the new building.

The Ottawa Teachers' College and Public Design in Canada

Strickland's task was no ordinary commission, for the normal and model schools were to be an example to every board of education in the province in the proper design of an educational building. The architect was particularly well trained for such a demanding job. He was already preparing plans for a hospital for chronic alcoholics in Toronto for the government, and was deeply immersed in the peculiar problems posed by

public buildings in the areas of hygiene, lighting, ventilation, heating and traffic control. While a hospital and a school are clearly buildings with quite different purposes, both are public structures planned to exacting standards. Strickland's final drawings (at least the fourth set submitted to his demanding client) carefully balanced these standards against the government's limited budget.

Following a common contemporary practice in school design, Strickland proposed a front elevation consisting of an ornate centre entrance with side wings. This led to a T-shaped structure which placed the teacher training facility in front of the less-important model school (Figs. 1 and 3). Financial restrictions delayed the construction of the model school until 1879.

While many institutional buildings of the period were designed in the Second Empire style — the 1877 normal school at Truro, Nova Scotia is an excellent example (Fig. 4) — Strickland showed a sensitivity to local design by working in the Gothic Revival style of the nearby Parliament Buildings. In contrast to the somewhat academic quality of those structures, however, Strickland demonstrated a lively inventiveness in his handling of the style. He described his approach as "Norman," the oldest and most eclectic phase of English Gothic design. Yet this label belied the free approach taken by the architect in his choice of detailing for he borrowed from a number of stylistic sources in typical the late 19th-century fashion. The upper storey windows, for example, were assuredly of the rounded Norman form. But they were placed within stone surrounds with pointed heads which was a later Gothic type of design and then divided by wooden glazing bars of an Italianate design. The ground storey windows, on the other hand, were much simpler in design. The spire was Gothic Revival and the columns were Romanesque Revival in inspiration (Figs. 5, 6, 7 and 8 show some of these details). Such seemingly haphazard mixing of stylistic elements might seem unusual or unattractive by our standards. The practice was certainly condemned

earlier in the 19th century. But to the late-Victorian architect the melding of details derived from various periods into a pleasing whole was the true test of his skill as an artist.

For the exterior, Strickland chose local Gloucester stone from a quarry on Montreal Road while the contrasting smoothly dressed trim was cut in nearby Hull. The walls were laid in irregular courses, that is, the blocks of stone were of varying sizes and were arranged without a regular pattern. In part this practice derived from the nature of the stone, for it was brittle and could not easily be cut into equal-sized blocks. But random work also provided a multi-coloured and irregular effect which delighted late-Victorian sensibilities. The smoothly dressed trim provided a contrast both in colour and texture and thereby focused attention on architectural details such as windows and doors (see, for example, Fig. 5). With its series of projecting and recessed sections, the front possessed a lively rhythm while the varied colours of the Gloucester and Hull stones, coupled with the contrasting slate roof, produced a visual mixture admired by late 19th-century taste. Equally effective, the roofline was broken by a central spired belfry and a series of turrets. Decorative ironwork originally ornamented various parts of the roof and gables. With its stone fence topped with wrought ironwork and its elaborate landscaping, the building presented a decidedly picturesque effect in an otherwise urban area, and contemporaries were rightly impressed.

It was on the interior that Strickland's experience in the design of public building came to the fore. While the exterior is a notable, attractive but fairly typical example of period architecture, the interior presented important problems in organization of space and provision of needed facilities. Since all students took the same program of studies, classrooms were few in number but large in scale. A single lecture hall dominated the lower storey of the normal school, while the upper storey housed two smaller lecture rooms, a library and a laboratory. In keeping with Victorian proprieties, separate entrances

were provided for all rooms — an arrangement, the architect primly noted, which “will . . . prevent the sexes from communicating with each other during intermission, without it coming under the notice of the [teaching] masters.” The model school, constructed to the rear of the normal school in 1879, provided teaching space in keeping with contemporary practices. Male and female students were again separated, each with a floor to themselves. Both floors were divided into three large classrooms, each accommodating 60 pupils, and an assembly hall for 180. Student teachers were allowed to give lessons, though more commonly they watched an experienced master teach from the 60-seat galleries attached to each classroom.

Schools were to be places where learning occurred within suitable surroundings, but all too often 19th-century classrooms were poorly lit, ill-ventilated and badly equipped. Because this was a model school whose design and equipment were to be a guide both for student teachers and for boards of education, the architect chose every element with care. The structure was well lit and airy, with large windows and a mechanical ventilating and steam-heating system capable of delivering generous supplies of heated fresh air equally to every part of the building. Ventilation ducts for each room exited through the rooftop turrets. Large offices, staff rooms, indoor lavatories and cloakrooms for student belongings were also included, making this a model for the efficient, well-appointed school.

Within these walls, thousands of teachers learned the approved techniques of imparting knowledge to the youth of their day. Standards of achievement were high and the college’s code of conduct was extremely strict: for example, students were subject to regulations even in their off-campus hours and could be expelled for offences, wherever they occurred. Curfews were enforced well into the 20th century. The normal school taught the “tried and true” methods of rote learning, rather than innovation. It prepared teachers capable of instructing any part of the provincial curriculum; although females were

expected to take domestic science while males took manual training (Fig. 9). Activities such as gardening (Fig. 10) and sports (Fig. 11) were encouraged.

The Ottawa Normal and Model School (later the Ottawa Teachers' College) served the ever-changing needs of teacher training until a modification in provincial policy led to the institution's transfer to the University of Ottawa in 1975. Changes in methodology, building use and taste have resulted in a number of relatively minor interior alterations, including well-trod staircases with oft-polished woodwork (Fig. 12) and a still-workable fireplace in the principal's office (Fig. 13). An addition, housing several classrooms and an auditorium, was built behind the model school in 1891. The province undertook interior renovations in 1901, 1919 and, after its use as federal government offices during the Second World War, in 1947. But the exterior, except for the removal of ironwork, remains much as Strickland designed it.

In an important way, the former Ottawa Teachers' College stands as a memorial to Egerton Ryerson, the province's influential Chief Superintendent of Education during the formative period of growth in schooling from 1844 to 1876. He was this country's leading educationist of his time, and a formidable advocate for free, publicly supported schools. He proposed the establishment of a teacher training facility in Ottawa, determined many of the building's details and presided over its opening. For much of the institution's existence, it was Ryerson's practices and philosophy of education which were taught in its classrooms. Though theories of education have changed dramatically since Ryerson's day, what he advocated continues to influence education across Canada. In other ways, Ryerson's methods have been superceded: model schools have been disbanded and student teachers now practise in public schools, while faculties of education have replaced normal schools. Conditions for teachers have changed to a remarkable degree, often in ways that Ryerson worked hard to achieve.

Teaching has become a respected and respectable vocation chosen by dedicated and well-paid professionals, as Ryerson hoped it would. In no small measure this development can be traced to the training provided by the normal schools of this country. In other respects, education has changed in ways that Ryerson could not have imagined. Class sizes have shrunk, teachers have become more specialized and the subjects taught have altered in response to social needs and student pressures. Whatever use the building might be put to, 195 Elgin Street should always be a reminder of a formative and important element in our social development — education — and a reminder of days which will never be seen again.

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