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The William Saunders Building (#49)



The William Saunders Buildings (#49)

Looking back...

In 1886, the federal government established Ottawa's Central Experimental Farm (CEF) as the central research station of the newly formed Experimental Farms Branch of the Department of Agriculture. The 465-acre plot of land on what was then the outskirts of Ottawa cost \$120,000 and was designed to conduct research on a wide variety of agricultural goods, including wheat and corn, other grains and produce. The CEF was considered an ideal spot, not only because its climate was considered to be average for the Dominion of Canada, but because it also possessed different soil types that would allow proper research to be done locally.

When the CEF was created, this site was home to the residence of the Farm's first Director, from 1886-1911: William Saunders. Appointed in 1885 to study the feasibility of creating a national farm research system, Saunders was considered a premiere agriculturalist who was also a well-known chemist, entomologist (insect expert) and even a pharmacist. Saunders was enticed to take on the new role of Director and he and his wife, Agnes, and two of their five children moved to the newly built residence on this site. One of Saunders' older sons, Charles, is credited with developing Marquis wheat.

The building...

Designed by Ottawa architect John Bethune Roper, the Saunders Building was built in 1935 on the same site as the former Director's residence to act as the new administrative building for the CEF. It opened in 1936 to mark the 50th anniversary of the CEF. Built as a result of the 1934 Public Works Construction Act, it is also associated with measures taken by the government to alleviate unemployment during the Depression.

The William Saunders Building is a good example of the Collegiate Gothic style of architecture, similar to that seen in both the Archives Building and the Royal Mint. The main façade is articulated with a central tower, medieval-derived carved stone detailing, projecting wings and coat of arms over the entry. The building's interior expresses a formal character with decorative finishes such as terrazzo floors with marble borders and wood doors and trim.

Today...

The William Saunders Building is currently home to one of the largest dried plant collections in the world. This collection, called a herbarium, has 1.2 million irreplaceable specimens protected in a climate-controlled environment. Staff can identify plants from anywhere

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in Canada as well as support research on plant classification worldwide. This collection is permanently available for future study and provides an essential foundation for science. Billions of dollars can be saved when noxious agricultural weeds and dangerous invasive plants are prevented from entering Canada.

The collection, along with the plant research library, also provides information for the development of new crops,

ecological studies and assessing impacts of climate change. There are about 5000 requests for information each year and over 3000 specimens are loaned to research centres around the world as part of a cooperative international network. As a result, Canadian scientists are able to borrow research material from other countries to help improve Canadian crops and to protect Canadian biodiversity.

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