

THE IRCHC OF BROCKVILLE

1 JULY 1979

Designation Report

Designation Recommendation
and Description for

Post Office and Customs House

12 Court House Avenue
Brockville, Ontario

Block 31 Lot 37

A. REASONS FOR DESIGNATION UNDER THE ONTARIO HERITAGE ACT, 1974

The old Post Office and Customs House is being recommended for designation for both Historical and Architectural reasons. This building has been a part of the Court House Ave. streetscape for 94 years and served as the main post office and customs house for 77 of those years. It is an outstanding example from the series of public buildings built by the Dominion government during the 1880's and was designed by the internationally-known architect, Thomas Fuller.

B. Historical Background:

During the 1880's the Canadian Government erected a series of urban structures to be used as Post Offices and Customs Houses. The designs for the buildings came from the office of the internationally-known architect, Thomas Fuller (1823-98).

Fuller was an Englishman who studied and practised in London before emigrating to Canada in 1856, at the age of 23.¹ He had first made a side trip to Antigua where he worked for a few years. He opened an office in Toronto with Chilion Jones, an architect of that city, who was the grandson of Ephraim Jones of Augusta township. It appears that a majority of their early endeavors were designs for churches. In 1859 they won the design competition for the construction of the Centre Block of the proposed new Parliament Buildings in Ottawa. This partnership was dissolved ten years after it had been formed. Chilion Jones went to the Department of Public Works while Thomas Fuller proceeded to Albany, N.Y. as a co-winner in a competition for a new State Capital Building there.

In 1881 Fuller came back to Canada to accept a position as Chief Architect for the Dominion government.

Brockville, about this time, was one of the towns chosen to receive a new post office and the Government purchased this site on Court House Ave. on October 5, 1882.²

The property for the building was part of the land owned by the descendants of William and Alexander Morris who had long owned the complete west side of Court House Ave.³ At the time of purchase the property contained a frame dwelling where the Post Office stands, the former Morris Co. store to the south and the stone house to the north built during the 1830's by Alexander Morris.

The contract for construction of the new building was signed on February 10, 1883 with the contractors, Tompkins & Crain of Ottawa.⁴ The Clerk of Works on the job was George Steacy, a Brockville native. Construction continued for almost three years until January of 1886 when the Department of Public Works took possession of the building.⁵ The staff and operations of the post office moved over from Victoria Hall where they had been located since the late 1860's.

The Federal Government ceased operations in this building in 1963 and in February of 1965 the property was sold to the local Roman Catholic parish. It is presently known as the Catholic Cultural Centre and is finding use as a meeting hall and parish centre.

c. Architectural Description:

There is a resemblance in all Fuller's buildings, yet each has a character all its own, fitted to the characteristics of the town and site. His design style can be classified as bold "Renaissance Revival" with the detailing of "High Victorian". The buildings are basically massive, well-proportioned blocks of rough and dressed masonry, adorned with a variety of busy cut stone elements. It is this interaction between the stable proportions and the richness of the large scale detailing that makes Brockville's old Post Office interesting. This type of aggressive building was typical of many public buildings in the nineteenth century.

The Post Office was located in the centre of the Town, within the vista of the Court House and has been surrounded by some of Brockville's most notable buildings. The majority of the buildings in the area were of stone and three stories in height. In such an impressive location and within a town of such stone traditions, Fuller was given a site to create a structure in a grand style, in keeping with the area and his personal style.

The main facade on Court House Ave. is symmetrical in composition, three stories high by six bays wide. This visually-solid building is faced with pink Credit Valley sandstone while the three remaining elevations are of brick.

The first floor is made up of double arches at the corners with four windows in between. The windows have the characteristic small-paned checkerboard cathedral glass pattern in the upper portion. Within the arches at the south end of the building were the main entrances for the two occupants. Over the two heavy oak panel doors remain the semi-elliptical transoms identifying the tenants. To the left is the gold lettering on glass identifying the Customs House. To the right is a wood panel transom with intricate carvings identifying the Post Office.

The double arch at the north end is now blocked in and used as a fire exit. Originally this led to the passageway for wagons entering to the customs warehouse at the rear.

The facade on the second floor is made up of six windows, similar to the first floor but on a larger scale. They have the same checkerboard pattern but with plain glass.

Above the heavy eave line, the top floor and roof contains three elaborate dormers. This is another of Fuller's design characteristics. These are perhaps the most outstanding

C. ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION cont'd

ing individual features of the building. The central classical dormer is flanked by two with shaped gables. The classical dormer has a triangular pediment containing a variety of foliated cut-stone detailing. The lower portion contains a large semi-circular arch, creating a reveal. Within the reveal are a pair of small double windows, a "1884" date stone and a cut-stone Canadian coat of arms. The two identical shaped dormers are of a more coarse stone construction with dressed weathering stones. Contained within these outside gables is a semi-circular opening with drip stone containing a pair of small windows with a nail head stone pattern above them. The low "hip-gambrel" shaped roof was originally covered with slate but is now of ribbed copper.

The three stories are visually drawn together by the horizontal bands at different levels of intricate dressed-stone mouldings and decorative motifs. Also on the Court House Ave. facade are several inset panels of carved stone in repeating foliated patterns.

In Brockville, Fuller combined all the characteristics of the building including mass, details, colour, etc., to create a single feeling of solidarity and unity, that the Dominion was trying to portray in its new buildings. The precise details and massing suggests an important building. It was meant to be richer in character and more elaborate in detail than the other buildings around it.

REFERENCES:

1. D.S. Richardson, "ONTARIO TOWNS"
Biography of Thomas Fuller
2. Copy of DEED, dated Oct. 5, 1882,
Registered in Leeds County Registry Office
3. Copy of DEED for this property, dated June 9, 1814
Registered in Leeds County Registry Office
4. Records of Dept. of Public Works, public records division
Public Archives of Canada. (Rec. Group 11, Vol.
3919 pp 136-151 gives specification)
5. MEMORANDUM from Thomas Fuller to George Steacy
dated 13 January 1886, collection of D. Grant

D. Recommendation:

The Local Architectural Conservation Advisory Committee recommends that the old Post Office and Customs House be designated under the Ontario Heritage Act, 1974.

The Committee is particularly concerned with preserving the building's outstanding architectural characteristics. It is, however, understood that in order to retain the building's usefulness certain alterations and renovations may be required from time to time. Of particular concern is the exterior facade facing Court House Avenue.

Today many of Fuller's Post Office buildings remain due to their solid construction and good design. They deliver a sense of stability and poise to the streetscape of any town that is lucky enough to possess one. However, many have fallen along the wayside during recent urban renewal projects. It is hoped that the City of Brockville will be able to retain what should be a proud possession.

Our committee would wish to examine any proposals affecting the street-side appearance such as signs, painting, alterations to door and window openings, etc.