

PUBLIC SCHOOL BUILDINGS OF MANITOBA

An Architectural History Theme Study



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On the cover:

Primary elevation for "Frame School Building, No. 3." This design, from 1903, was developed along with two other schemes by architect Samuel Hooper for the provincial Department of Education, which at that time was seeking to provide good standardized designs to rural school districts. (*The Western School Journal*, 1906, pp. 275-77.)

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PREFACE

School buildings are essential aspects of Manitoba's historical development, and a popular focus for heritage attention. In 1994, recognizing the importance of these landmarks, the Historic Resources Branch of Manitoba Culture, Heritage and Tourism undertook a major study of the building type. Through on-site explorations of the nearly 700 extant school buildings across Manitoba, and then a careful review of historical information and academic and popular studies on the subject, the branch developed a study that focused primarily on the physical qualities of these buildings – on their settings, architectural character and material construction. The ultimate purpose of the study was to provide the necessary historical background that would help identify a handful of buildings that could be said to succinctly and effectively sum up the architectural history of the building type in the province. This focus ensures that other important aspects of the history of schools in Manitoba—one-room school experience, immigrant experience, educational theories, etc.—would more effectively be focused on buildings that are at once interesting and important.

The following overview of school buildings in Manitoba is a redesigned extract from the original report. That study included a major section devoted to the inventory of extant schools in Manitoba. A pdf copy of the original study and another of the inventory are available by contacting the branch:

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This present version of the report now also features in a concluding section the results of the work by the Province and various municipalities to select those buildings that merit designation, either as Provincial or Municipal Heritage Sites.

MANITOBA EDUCATIONAL HISTORY

The history of Manitoba's public schools has been organized in the following essay according to five distinct phases in the province's early school building development. The first, brief section deals with the Red River Settlement period. While the schools from this period were affiliated with religious institutions, and therefore were not public, the section provides some necessary background to the changes that were to follow. Moreover, architectural traditions from this period were important for later developments.

The study of public school buildings in Manitoba actually begins in the second section, entitled Pioneer. The section commences in 1871, when the first legislation to enact a public school system was passed. The system was a dual one, providing two boards of education, one Roman Catholic, the other Protestant. The architectural developments of the period mirrored the basic trends of all building projects in pioneer circumstances: thus schools in rural areas were often very simple designs of rugged character. The situation was quite different in urban areas, especially Winnipeg, where some very grand schools were constructed.

It was during this period that the educational bureaucracy was established. With a fierce determination, they immediately undertook the daunting task of creating a system, and a set of buildings, that was to provide the province's children with modern educational opportunities. At this early period the benefits of a formal education were not universally accepted, however, and considerable work was required before the Department of Education ultimately was successful.

Dramatic immigration between 1870 and 1890 upset the ethnic and religious balance in the province, and an immediate consequence was the abolition of the dual public system in 1890. This controversial change begins the third section, Establishment, which lasted until around the turn of the century. The period was marked by the growth of a sophisticated urban school system in Winnipeg, Brandon and Portage la Prairie. In rural areas, there was increasing attention to school designs and a wide range of schemes were employed, much to the consternation of educational authorities. They continually sought regularity and consistency in the construction of school buildings in an effort to ensure a measure of equality of opportunity for all students.

The year 1903 saw the first set of standardized plans produced for the Department of Education. Their introduction was the harbinger for one-room schools, during a period here called Standardization. From that point on, the department was to have almost total control over school design, especially in rural areas. On one level, this meant that most students were provided with a certain equality of experience and comfort. On another level, the standardization of school designs brought a certain dulling conformity to school architecture.

In the province's cities, the period was marked by enormous growth and the creation of some of the best buildings designed in the province. In Winnipeg, especially, where the pride and ambition characteristic of the era was strongly expressed, school buildings were exceptional. There was increasing sophistication of planning and in the essential concerns for hygiene. At the same time, however, there also was a certain regularity of form and style that came to describe the architecture of large school buildings. Schools were becoming clearly institutional, very unlike the domestic and ecclesiastical forms that had described many schools of the previous thirty years.

The final period covered in the study, Stabilization, extended from 1919 until 1939. The trauma wrought by World War I and the recessions and depressions visited on the world economy over those years were to be seen clearly in very new developments in school architecture. In both urban and rural areas there were fewer buildings, constructed at greatly reduced cost, and generally of much more modest design, especially when compared with the buildings constructed during the previous decades.

Between 1870 and 1940 almost 2,300 school buildings were constructed in Manitoba. The vast majority of these were modest one-room structures built throughout the countryside. Over the years more than half of the province's school buildings have been lost, destroyed by fire, demolished because of old age or because school district consolidation rendered them obsolete. Moreover, after the school district consolidation programs of the 1950s and 1960s, many of the remaining one-room schools that remained were sold and moved from their original sites, to be re-used as residences, garages or granaries.