

## Castle on the Hill

The Lunenburg Academy  
by Marq de Villiers

place called Gallows Hill right next to a cemetery might not seem the ideal spot to build a school, but for the mayor of Lunenburg in the early 1890s it had considerable advantages: it was a vacant 3.7-acre town-owned lot, for one thing, and so available, not so easy to find in a town built on a small peninsula. It was also high on a promontory, so the new school could be seen for miles and from every entry road to town, thereby proclaiming the community's commitment to universal public education. The alternative site, another knoll on the other side of town, called Blockhouse Hill, would less suit the grandeur of the edifice proposed, in his opinion, and he thereby cast the deciding vote in council. (He was promptly voted out at the next election, but whether the school site had anything to do with it is not recorded.)

he resulting building—now a municipal and provincial heritage property as well as a national historic site—was everything the mayor had hoped: an imposing mass that dominated the town and the surrounding countryside, built to the very latest pedagogical and physical standards and in the prevailing style of the time, a Maritimes amalgam of the Second Empire and Queen Anne Revival styles, with many a nod to the surrounding town's heritage of wooden buildings, a sophisticated vernacular architecture with ornate decorations, generally painted in a rainbow of colours. True, the first drawings were of a schoolhouse in brick, but local opposition sent architect Harry Mott back to the drafting table. And, also true, the builders went bankrupt in the middle of construction. But in the end the edifice was finished, at a total cost of \$30,000.

It was, and is, an outstanding example of the Academy Movement, the drive to bring free education to the population by building in each county a central academy whose teaching standards would be high and whose facilities would be the best possible. With this in mind, the new academy was constructed with a 400-seat auditorium on the third and topmost floor, laboratories well stocked with chemicals and instrumentation, separate classrooms for each grade, and single-seat desks. Mindful of the social mores of the time, the designer, the prominent St. John architect Harry Mott, incorporated no fewer than six stairways and used wide corridors divided down the middle, to allow the easy separation of the sexes. Of course, these wide corridors and extra staircases also had other practical purposes: Mott had been reminded that the earlier academy, built near the town hall, had burned to the ground in 1893, and the new plan had to make egress easy and quick.

The school was ready for occupancy in 1895. It was everything the town had wished for, an imposing Castle on the Hill, a building of dignity, of a gravitas fitting an important ship-building, fishing and trading port. The exterior was painted in a palette of mustards and browns; inside, the birch and other hardwoods on the floors and walls were left in a natural state, to mellow in their own time with use and age. Fittingly, the town went out of its way to hire only the best-trained teachers; nothing but top-grade would do. The 600 to 700 pupils who entered the building in November 1895 would be given the best education available.

Eventually the Academy Movement faded, replaced by the notion of building "shire schools," smaller buildings serving towns instead of whole counties. In the late 1950s and early 1960s the political pressure to build a more "modern" building became irresistible. The academy's third floor was sealed off as "unsafe" and "not up to code," and threats were made to pull the whole thing down. There are now considerable suspicions that the building wasn't unsafe at all—that it was part of the political movement to "keep up with the times." The academy's six furnaces and steam heat came to be regarded as old-fashioned and so were its classrooms. And indeed, a new high school was built in the 1960s, and the academy converted to an elementary school. Which is what it still is, with an enrolment last year of 165 pupils.

Over the years, the building had begun to deteriorate. One of its four towers was struck by lightning in the 1920s and had never been restored (as an interesting sidenote, the pupils who remained in the building in

the immediate aftermath of the lightning strike to complete their exams were given a 20% premium on their marks for bravery). But the place where the tower had been was not properly sealed off, and the wood started to rot. On the sloping mansard roof, wood shingles were replaced over the years by new-fangled asphalt, badly flashed, and moisture got into the walls. Some of the window frames rotted, and a few of the doors had to be replaced. Nevertheless, much remained as Mott designed it. The original cladding of wood shingles is still in place, and so are the wooden brackets and ornamental features that give the building so much of its character. The only significant changes were the loss of the fourth tower and the adoption, 65 years ago, of the present colour scheme, bands of red and white with black trim. The interior remains largely intact. Washrooms were added in the basement early last century, and an elevator installed. The third floor was sealed off.

The building was declared a national historic site in 1983 for "its heritage character... the quality and integrity of its exterior design, in its interior plan, in its interior and exterior detailing, and in its siting.... [it is] a fine example of the Queen Anne Revival, adapted with considerable success to institutional use ...."

In 1995, the 100th anniversary of the school's construction, the town of Lunenburg, in conjunction with the Lunenburg Academy Foundation, an energetic committee formidably directed by a group of local citizens, applied for restoration funding to Parks Canada. UNESCO's designation of the town of Lunenburg as a World Heritage Site helped bump the project up Parks Canada's "to do" list, and slowly a budget was put together: \$276,000 from Parks Canada, \$100,000 from the town, another \$100,000 from the Academy Foundation, and the balance of the approximately \$1.1-million budget made up from various sources, including Human Resources Development Canada (\$100,000) and the Province of Nova Scotia (\$500,000). While the town is the owner, the regional school board manages the property and pays for its upkeep.

Consultants (a group called Delta Four from Annapolis Royal) were hired to do a conservation report. They recommended restoration, not renovation, because the building was so substantially unchanged from the original. This had attracted Parks Canada too, as well as the fact that the building was still being used for its original purpose, which made it virtually unique in Canada.

The school board acted as its own contractor and hired carpenters locally. The province and Parks Canada sent representatives down to help.

Most of the restoration was on the exterior, with some interior work, mostly on the third floor. Stairwells to the third floor were reopened and repaired, and the top level brought up to fire code. The steam heating system was changed to hot water, but the original radiators were left in place.

On the outside, the asphalt was stripped off the roof and replaced by properly flashed wood shingles. The small, central flat portion had been covered with rolled roofing, and there, because it was not visible from the ground, the restorers chose a modern bitumen covering. There were some bad shingles, both on the roof sections where wood remained, as well as on the walls, but most of them were in remarkably good shape. In fact, the carpenters found that the

100-year-old wood was generally better than the new, and they replaced as few as possible. The new shingles were pre-dipped in stain before installation.

The contractors opted not to remove and replace the windowsills, many of which were in a bad state of repair; instead, they chiselled out the rotten wood and used a sophisticated wood filler.

After a good deal of thought, the restorers decided against double-glazing the windows and insulating the walls. Not really because of the expense, though that would have been considerable, but mostly because the academy was already among the cheapest and most efficient buildings to operate in the entire school board. Why? Because the big windows not only let in floods of natural light—they could open to let in the air, and the school site, high up on a hill, had constant cooling breezes in summer, obviating the need for

air conditioning. They controlled the sun not by tinting the windows but by the simple, efficient if old-fashioned method of using rolled blinds. The building had never accumulated moulds or bad air; because of the windows, mechanical air circulation was kept to a minimum. An ancillary but considerable benefit: the school was not only cheap to operate but was among the healthiest buildings anywhere—the number of sick days of staff and students is very low.

In only one way was the consultants' report ignored: the exterior colors. True, they somewhat hedged their bets and asserted that "either alternative [the original mustards and browns and the current red, white and black] is acceptable from a conservation and restoration point of view," but they went on to urge the town to opt for the original scheme, partly as a signal to the town of Lunenburg to encourage a "retreat from the 20th century's preoccupation with white," given the town's historical dramatic use of color. In this they failed. The present color scheme is almost 70 years old, and is firmly associated in the public's mind with the school's identity.

But colour aside, and in spite of residual bits of landscaping being left unfinished, the school continues to serve its original function: "the education of pupils, in an aesthetically pleasing environment, to the highest possible pedagogical standards." Even if these standards are only applied to the primary grades—and even if the fifth graders can't wait to get to the "big school" up the way.

Marq de Villiers, winner of the Governor General's Award for his book *Water*, a national bestseller, lives in Lunenburg. His forthcoming book is on the Sahara Desert, a rather different landscape.