

## Victoria Hall, 1887 – 1889 (Petrolia)

One by-product of Petrolia's revised prosperity during the 1880's was the feeling among some citizens that the town should have an imposing town hall. The town council apparently had plans drawn up for a multi-purpose building as early as 1881, but the idea was voted down within council. Three years later plans were again prepared and submitted to a referendum; the proposal was defeated for a variety of reasons. Some voters thought that projects such as a waterworks system should have priority; others felt that the public building should be more elaborate, incorporating an opera house. Vivid memories of Petrolia's boom and bust cycle had created optimism in some hearts and intense fearfulness in others. The issue became both more urgent and more contentious over the next few years. In 1886, the city clerk moved out of old premises, complaining that the second storey rocked in the wind. On two occasions, when first Sir John A. MacDonal and then Edward Blake came to speak, Petrolia displayed its impartiality by failing to provide a building capable of safely accommodating a large crowd. In 1887, the council solicited new plans from Durand, and by January 1889, capacity crowd was seated in the elegant 1,000 seat opera house of the new \$35000 town hall to witness the opening night festivities. The mayor's speech that night betrayed his nervousness about the still vocal opposition: 'It is impossible for me to conjecture what your thought and feelings are as you sit here and view with complacency, perhaps, the commodiousness, the comfort, and the architectural beauties of this building, but I trust they are only those of contentment and gratification, and that nothing shall occur here this evening to mar the harmony that should reign within these walls.' He was referring, in part, to the local Baptist minister's fulminations against the theatre on moral grounds, but other potential disrupters of the peace has objected to the hall, theatre included, for economic reasons. The critics were strong enough to warrant mention in the Petrolia Advertiser's story on the opening: the 'grand success...must have made those who have...been croaking about the lavish expenditures feel like crawling into a hole and pulling the hose in after them.

Like the Strathroy Public Building designed many years before, and most urban town halls built during the intervening period, Victoria Hall was designed to accommodate, together with an auditorium, most of the town's municipal services: fire station, jail, division court room, council chambers, and offices for the mayor, the town clerk, the chief of police, and the engineer. While the multiple functions of the Strathroy building were ingeniously fitted into a rectangular shape reminiscent of a Greek temple, Durand's design for Petrolia is an interesting exploration of the theory that 'form follows function.' Victoria Hall gives the impression of being built around its various rolls, as if the fire engines had been parked and the mayor seated before the walls began to rise. Durand is nowhere bound by considerations of symmetry or consistency: there is great variety in the size, shape, and grouping of the windows; the gable of the façade has a parapet while the other gables have decorated bargeboards. Each individual section of the façade has a character of its own, reflective of its use. Large double doors designate the fire station. The windows of the tower follow the line of the stairway it envelops. The parapeted gable bay dignifies the entrance hall leading to the courtroom and the opera house.

In general, decoration is meted out as befits each section's role, so that the front gable wing and the towers are adorned with the most noteworthy, features. The former boasts striking forms of ornamentation such as the decorated brickwork at the apex and the official plaques, with their representative oil scene and symbolic beehive, near the door.

An almost blind window even makes this part of the façade symmetrical. But it is on the clock tower that Durand lavishes most of the building's decorative detail, as if to stress the fact that towers exist mainly in order to look interesting. At its top is a belvedere, with a bell-shaped roof and elaborately turned, pierced, and reeded posts, railings, and spandrels. The stage below, originally meant to hold the clock faces, matches the ornate woodwork above with equally elaborate brickwork. The individuality of the building's various parts as aptly epitomized by the hose-drying tower, a miniature house in itself, complete with its own decorated gable, finial, and chimney.

To say that Durand has emphasized the parts of the Petrolia town hall does not imply that he has forgotten the whole. The composition of the building is carefully balance, and the varying elements arranged with the overall effect clearly in mind. For example, the broad arches that are strung along the ground floor appear to provide a heavy base for the structure. These arched windows are carefully integrated with the small-paned windows above by the use in the semicircle portions of a design based on geometrical shapes. The iron stair railing and balcony at the rear of the building rely on the same stark geometry and, in fact, use the motif of a circle held between two vertical bars that is found in the round-headed windows. This interest in basic geometrical shapes is also evident in interior features such as the very dramatic opera box, rather blatantly placed to let its occupants be seen rather than to allow them a view of the stage.

Possibly out of fear of the Baptist minister's admonitions, the opening night program at Victoria Hall featured mainly local talent in a variety of innocent performances. The evening began with a double quartet warbling 'Merrily, merrily goes the bark,' which, according to the Petrolia Advertiser, 'gave a foretaste of the intellectual feast in store for the audience.' The high point of the evening was Mr. H. Corey's poetic account of local events:

Out of the old town hall,

Moved up into the new;

All the spouting and shouting

Is just as good as through!

...Fare you well, old hall,

You ain't worth a cent,

We're going to a better house,

Where we won't pay any rent.

The better house had more glorious days ahead, when it would play host to operatic performances, grand balls, and some of the continent's best touring companies. But the confidence in progress that had finally led to the erection of the town hall proved ill-founded. The departure of the Imperial Oil refineries in 1898 plunged the town into a second and more lasting economic depression, and the building gradually fell into disrepair. In 1960, part of the first floor was renovated to accommodate the town offices once more. Victoria Playhouse Petrolia, an organization formed to restore the building and to revive the theatre, ultimately rescued the opera house. It has succeeded admirably on both counts, and Victoria Hall again serves as a multi-purpose building, though with some new purposes (convention centre, art gallery) replacing some of the old.

Source: Victorian Architecture in London and Southwestern Ontario, Symbols of Aspiration

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