

An Architectural History of the Cathedral Church of St. George Anglican Diocese of Ontario

Directions can be confusing in downtown Kingston. By the compass, the axis of the nave of St. George's is almost southeast (King Street entrance) to northwest (altar), but in ecclesiastical terms the altar is always considered to be in the east even if it is not in that direction according to the compass. This paper will assume that the axis of the nave is east (King Street entrance) to west (altar).

The First Church:

A small blue wooden church was built on the edge of Market Square in 1792. It was only 40 x 32 feet (approximately 12 x 10 metres). This Anglican church was the first church of any denomination under British rule in Kingston. It was called St. George's. A plaque on the British Whig building marks the spot today.

The Present Building:

The present St. George's building dates from 1825. It was a simple stone church with a steeple in front. It was designed by Thomas Rogers, the first practising architect in Kingston. Galleries were built on three sides of the nave (the main portion of the church, where the parishioners sit) inside the church. Parishioners bought or rented box pews either on the floor or in the galleries. Three of the walls of this church are still standing. They form the present Cathedral's nave from the main entrance almost to the edge of the dome.

The building was enlarged 1839-46. The steeple had to be replaced because it was too weak to support the swinging of the heavy bell. The present King Street portico and bell tower, including a stone narthex (lobby) to support it, replaced the former steeple.

The narthex contains three circular rooms. The centre one gives access to the nave while those on the sides originally contained stairs to the galleries. The portico design features large Doric columns and Georgian doors. St. George's may be the earliest Canadian church to have a stone portico. The bell tower is octagonal at the bottom, round in the middle with Corinthian colonettes and octagonal again above that. The

upper octagonal portion has four clock faces. The top of the tower is a ribbed dome. William Coverdale designed this addition.

Governor General Lord Sydenham made Kingston the capital of the United Provinces of Canada East (formerly Lower Canada, now Québec) and Canada West (formerly Upper Canada, now Ontario). He died in 1841 and was buried beneath St. George's inside three separate coffins of lead, walnut and mahogany. The coffins are in a brick vault below the floor of the nave. There is a brass plaque bearing his name in the aisle at what was then the front of the church, but the vault is actually between the aisle and the pillars to the south.

St. George's became the Cathedral of the new diocese of Ontario in 1862. A bishop's chair (cathedra in Latin) was consequently placed near the high altar.

More work to enlarge the Cathedral was done in 1891-94. In general, the design reflects the influence of St. Paul's in London and of Holy Trinity in Québec City. Joseph Power, the son of John Power, designed the addition that included the transepts with galleries and a Sanctuary that included space for the choir. From the air, the transepts give the Cathedral the shape of a cross. The addition also included the organ loft, Lady Chapel and Stuart Room.

The new galleries have military connections. The one on the north is the Royal Military College (RMC) gallery. The southern gallery is associated with the Royal Canadian Horse Artillery (RCHA) Regiment, descended from a unit founded in Kingston in 1871 to help defend Canada against possible attack from Americans.

A large dome was added as part of the enlarged building. The wooden structure of the dome was built in a shipyard in Portsmouth. There were 16 metal Corinthian columns around the drum (base) of the dome which was topped by a lantern (a small structure with glass sides) that had a domed roof. There was a 6 foot (2 metre) cross at the very top. The large dome was covered with copper while the roof was made of slate. There were four smaller cupolas around the base of the dome.

The Johnson Street transept had a portico. It is a slightly more elaborate version of the King Street portico. There was no portico on the north transept. It had a simple recessed door instead.

The Cathedral and the attached hall, together with the Customs House and the Post Office (both built 1856-59 replacing the former courthouse and gaol) that occupy the other half of the block, are a whole city block of limestone buildings. All these buildings were surrounded by wrought iron fences. Sections of fence around the Cathedral lawn remain today on the north adjacent to Boucher Park and on the west side along Wellington Street. The original gateposts remain on King Street.

The interior of the Cathedral was gutted by a fire early on the morning of New Year's Day of 1899. While the stone walls and most of the bell tower still stood, the roof and dome collapsed and the columns (and everything else made of wood) burned. The stained glass windows were destroyed. Even the marble plaques on the walls disintegrated in the heat of the fire.

The brass cross on the high altar, one brass dedication plate below a window and a few fragments of stained glass were all that remained of the Cathedral's interior. Work soon began on reconstruction under the direction of Joseph Power who had done the 1891 design.

The reconstruction of the Cathedral was completed in only eighteen months. There were few changes made in the reconstructed building. The structure of the dome was done in steel instead of in wood. The four small cupolas at the base of the dome were not replaced. The decoration inside the Cathedral is probably a little more ornate than what had been there before. Otherwise, it was a duplicate of the 1890s Cathedral.

Renovations to the interior of the Cathedral by architect Neil MacLennan began in 1975. A new nave altar and communion rail were added. The high altar has been used infrequently since then. The nave altar allows the clergy to face the congregation during all of the service and brings the proceedings forward where they can be seen by all the people. Both the nave altar and the new communion rail are removable. When they are taken out, a large performance space is created that is used for many of the concerts that are held in the Cathedral.

The needlework cushions, or kneelers, at the communion rail were done by a group of parishioners. From left to right they carry symbols of the history of the parish from the earliest times. The same group did the

cushions for the Lady Chapel. All of the chandeliers were installed as part of the 1970s renovations. The chandelier in the Lady Chapel is made of about 2,000 pieces.

Other Features:

St. George's Hall was built on Wellington Street in 1865-66. Built in Gothic Revival style, at first it was a separate building that was not attached to the Cathedral itself. It has a steep roof and gothic windows. John Power was the architect. Some of the main floor of the hall was first occupied by Diocesan offices.

A one-and-a-half storey verger's cottage with a mansard roof forms part of the link between the Cathedral and the hall. The two-storey sexton's house was added to it in 1907-08.

The basis of the present organ is one built by the Woodstock Organ Company in 1929. The organ was rebuilt in 1965 by Hill, Norman and Beard, a British organ builder. The organ was rebuilt again in 1984, this time by the Caron Pipe Organ Company of Montréal. The cost was \$200,000. The third reconstruction of the organ was done in 2008-12. The completed instrument has about 4,000 pipes.

The first two stained glass windows after the fire were installed in 1902. Donated by the family of shipowner and former MP Alexander Gunn, they occupy the most easterly bays on each side of the nave. They were done in the style of Louis Tiffany and appear quite different from stained glass windows made in a more traditional way. Other windows of particular interest are the seven rectangular ones above the high altar and the round one in the Lady Chapel. The most recent restoration of the stained glass windows began in 2000.

The Lady Chapel in the northwest corner of the building is dedicated to the Virgin Mary. The colour blue, Mary's colour, is used in the chapel. For instance, there is a blue crown on the chandelier's chain. An icon to St. George was added to the Chapel in 1976. It was made by André Bieler. There is another icon on the wooden organ case behind the prayer candles in the southwest corner of the nave.

There is a great deal of decorative plaster work on the inside of the Cathedral. The designs on the Ionic columns are especially noticeable.

The decorations were made of plaster using wooden moulds. The higher decorations on the columns are enlarged so that they all appear to be the same size from the floor.

There are many commemorative plaques on the walls of the Cathedral. Most remember people such as the first priest, John Stuart, or members of the parish who died in the First World War. One of the exceptions is a plaque on the north wall that tells of the Mohawk matriarch Konwatsítsyayén:ni, later called Tekonwatón:ti (Mary or “Molly” Brant) (c 1736-1796). She was a helped her own people, Loyalists and British troops fight the American rebels. A devout Anglican, she is buried in what was the St. George`s cemetery at the time. The cemetery, now maintained by St. Paul`s Church, is at the corner of Queen and Montreal Streets in downtown Kingston.

The Blue Ensign on the west wall of the RCHA gallery is from the Royal Navy Dockyard on Point Frederick, where RMC is now. The flag would have been flown before 1870. There are two other flags in this gallery. One is a Union Jack that was the Regimental Colour of the 22nd Battery, Canadian Field Artillery in 1915 and the other is an RCHA battery flag from the Korean War.

There are two flags in the RMC gallery. Both were presented to the college by the Prince of Wales (later King Edward VIII) in 1919. One is a blue RMC Regimental Colour and the other is a “King’s Colour”. A King’s or Queen’s Colour is paraded to represent the monarch. As such, it always has an armed guard when taken out. This one has been in St. George’s since 1942 when the College was closed for the duration of the war. RMC has a new Queen’s Colour based on the Canadian flag.

The dome of St. George’s remains a prominent feature of the Kingston skyline. A large building constructed and reconstructed in four stages by four different architects over about 75 years, it is a remarkably integrated and beautiful design.

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