

BALFOUR, James (1852 – 1917)

James Balfour was a successful architect in Hamilton, Ontario during the last two decades of the nineteenth century. He was born on December 24, 1854 and was educated at Central School Hamilton. He left Canada at age 18 to apprentice with the prominent Scottish architectural partnership of Frank Peddie and John Kinnear in Edinburgh. He then moved to New York City for a year, and returned to Hamilton to open an office in December 1875 at the age of 23.

Balfour first worked in the popular Second Empire style, quickly establishing himself as a designer of residential and commercial buildings in the Hamilton area. By 1885 his designs were drawing inspiration from Henry Hobson Richardson, the prominent American architect and one of the most skilled proponents of the Romanesque Revival style. Balfour designed a brownstone building for the Canada Life Assurance Company in this style in 1883, purchased by Henry Birks and Sons in 1929. He entered the Toronto City Hall and Courthouse competition but his designs were passed over in favor of that by E.J. Lennox. Undeterred by the loss of this important commission, he submitted competitive designs for the Oxford County Court House in Woodstock, Ontario in 1889 and received first prize. Regrettably the scheme was never realized.

Balfour's consistency of style and architectural ingenuity appear to have impressed Hamilton city councilors, who awarded him first prize in the

competition for Hamilton City Hall in 1887 (demolished 1962). This capable design for a dignified Romanesque work of Port Credit Sandstone became the crowning achievement of his career.

Balfour designed many buildings in the Hamilton area, including: a block of dwellings for the Hamilton Real Estate Association, Hannah Street (1876); Wesley Methodist Church, John Street North at Rebecca (1878, demolished 1975); Larkin Hall, John Street North near King Street, a block of stores and theatre, (1878-79); Erskine Presbyterian Church, Pearl Street at Little Market Street (1884); Y.M.C.A. Residence, Jackson Street, (1889, demolished 1958); Tuckett Tobacco Company, Queen Street North, office and factory complex (1890); Bell Telephone office and exchange, Hughson Street South, (1890); Central Presbyterian Church Sunday school, Jackson Street West at MacNab Street (1889-90); and Power House, James Street South, for the Hamilton Electric Street Railway Company (1892). He also designed many large refined Victorian houses.

Balfour was responsible for Alma College, St. Thomas, (1878-81, with addition 1888-89) which is an unusual combination of Venetian Gothic and asymmetrical Second Empire style. One of his finest designs was the Institute of Fine Arts, Jefferson Avenue, Detroit, Michigan (1893-94, demolished 1921) with its imposing Richardsonian Romanesque facade framed by two large turrets under a high pitched roof.