

## DARRACH, Neil (1850 – 1926)

**N**eil Darrach was an architect based in St. Thomas, Ontario, who built many of the institutional, commercial and stately residential buildings in the city and central Elgin County over his 50 year career. His buildings exhibit symmetry and simplicity as they were often based on classical prototypes.

Darrach was born in Southwold Township near St. Thomas on April 17, 1850, the son of Neil Darrach, a pioneer Scottish settler in the district. He came to St. Thomas as a youth and began to work in the building trade. His arrival coincided with the boom resulting from the coming of the railway and he was awarded the contract to build the Grand Central Hotel with his brother Alex. It was his skill as a practical builder and his ability as a designer which led to him becoming an architect. Proof of his talent was evidenced year after year when his designs were accepted in competition with those of graduate architects, in many cases prominent designers from Toronto and other large cities.

He designed and built Centre Street Baptist church in 1879 a few months after he opened his office as an architect. Other St. Thomas church buildings include; the Church of Christ, Princess Street (1906) and First Methodist Church, St. George Street (1895). When the Central business district expanded along Talbot Street he designed and constructed such outstanding commercial structures as the Southern Loan Offices, the Duncombe Opera House (1907) and the Mickleborough Building (1902) considered one of the finest department stores in Western Ontario. He also designed many other of the classical white and red brick structures in this commercial area.

Perhaps an indicator of his acceptance was his appointment as the City's official architect from

1896 to 1898. In this capacity he designed and completed the St. Thomas City Hall, an asymmetrical Romanesque revival dominated by a large clock tower (1898-89). Darrach also designed the Wellington Street (1898), Myrtle Street and Elmvale Schools as well as rebuilding the Collegiate Institute (1902) into a symmetrical, three-storey red brick building. In 1906 he also designed the Carnegie Public Library, Curtis Street. Perhaps the triumph of his design efforts was the rebuilding of the Elgin County Court House. The building was originally built in 1853 and gutted by fire on July 1, 1898 and within a week he was commissioned to prepare designs for the reconstruction. He utilized the remaining south rear wall and the original facade as the core, to which he added symmetrical wings for additional office space and a Renaissance dome to give the sense of civic grandeur required by the building.

Neil Darrach relocated his practice to Regina, Saskatchewan in 1911 at the invitation of M.W. Sharon. The resulting partnership of Sharon and Darrach was short lived, but did produce some important work. The first commission was the Western Trust Building, 11th Avenue (1912, now Guaranty Trust) which so impressed the owners of the R. H. Williams and Sons publishing company, the firm was asked to design their new building on Hamilton Street (1913, now Torwest Tower). Darrach also designed Westminster church on 13th Street (1912) before he returned to Ontario with the outbreak of World War 1 in 1914.

Darrach's last design was for the St. Thomas Memorial Hospital in 1923, which was functional and efficient with its centre hall plan yet exhibited the classical symmetrical styling on the exterior which is so typical of his work.