

EWART, David (1841 – 1921)

David Ewart played a pivotal role in the development of a national Federal architecture. As Chief Architect for the Dominion Government from 1897 to 1914, during the tenure of both the Laurier and Borden governments, he helped to turn their nationalistic aspirations into built form and create a unified Federal presence during a period of rapid expansion.

David Ewart was the son of a Scottish builder, born at Penicuik, near Edinburgh, Scotland in February 18, 1841. He was educated in Scotland at the Edinburgh School of Art and emigrated to Canada. On the advice of a friend in Montreal, he sought employment in the Dominion department of Public Works at Ottawa. He was first appointed in 1871 as an assistant to Mr. Rubbige, assistant engineer and architect. Ewart later came to be first assistant to Thomas Fuller, who was chief architect in the department, and who designed the original Parliament buildings. In 1897, on Fuller's retirement, Ewart succeeded him as chief architect and held this post until 1914. After that he was retained by the government as consulting Dominion architect.

Prior to Ewart's tenure, most of the public buildings throughout Canada were designed by his predecessor, Thomas Fuller which were distinctive and substantial Romanesque Revival designs. During Ewart's tenure the designs became more uniform and spartan in their simplicity, in keeping with stylistic demands of the period. Ewart supervised the erection of more than 150 post office buildings and 50 armories and drill halls during his busy career and headed a talented team of draftsmen and designers. For seventeen years all of the plans for public buildings prepared by the department were under his meticulous inspection, including military buildings and penitentiaries, giving a new unity of design and uniform standards to Federal architecture. Ewart did much to improve the appearance of Ottawa as a national capital, as in the 1870's it was still a town and along way from the distinctive and monumental city that it was when he retired.

Ewart's earlier work was influenced by the Romanesque style, which was popular during the last decades of the 19th century. His best example in that style is the rugged Dominion Observatory, Carling

Avenue, Ottawa (1902). He was perhaps a true supporter of the Gothic style but realized it did not suite modern commercial work. Instead he incorporated Tudor and Elizabethan details into his designs and are clearly evident in his later works, such as the original Dominion Archives building (1904-07); Victoria Memorial Museum, McLeod Street (1904-12); the Royal Mint, Sussex Drive, (1905-08); and the Customs Department building, MacKenzie Avenue (1914-15), all in Ottawa.

He did however make designs in the Classical style as evidenced in his designs for the main Post Office, St. Joseph Street, Quebec City (1909). Although Fuller designed the original Parliament buildings, Ewart evidently did much of the work on the main tower (1873), all of which was destroyed by the fire of 1916. Ewart developed an international reputation as he was decorated by the French government for his designs for the Canadian commission at the Paris Exposition of 1878. He did similar work for the Canadian exhibit at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893, superintending the work in person.

Ewart designed many armories across Canada which were built at the turn of the century to train militia in their patriotic duties. They appeared fortress-like with crenelated and octagonal towers built of rusticated masonry and cut stone. Some of his Ontario armories include those in: London, Dundas Street, (1902-03); Woodstock (1904); Guelph (1906); Belleville (1907); Niagara Falls (1910); Port Arthur (1913) and Galt (1914).

Towns and cities across the country have a noble and distinctive Federal architectural presence, as represented by his Public buildings. Some examples of his designs include Federal buildings at; Deseronto, Ontario (1901, demolished), Aylmer Ontario (1913-14), and Cranbrook, British Columbia (1911-12). These buildings have a distinctive massing based on Romanesque prototypes, with a large clocktower, picturesque profile and massive quality which is distinctly Canadian. All of his federal buildings worked towards a typology, incorporating a variety of uses for small and medium sized centers.

David Ewart did much to develop a Canadian Federal architecture, countering the Classical federal style of the United States, with a true national style for Canada.