

## WILSON, John (1863 – 1952)

**J**ohn Wilson practiced architecture in Collingwood for over fifty years, from 1900 until 1952, designing many buildings in that town and adjacent parts of Central Ontario. One of his most notable accomplishments as an architect was the design of Bigwin Inn, on Bigwin Island, Lake of Bays. He was also an active member of his community, serving on several municipal bodies in the course of his long life.

Wilson was born in Collingwood on August 17, 1863, the son of Walter Wilson and Ann McAllister, both of Scottish birth. As a boy he was interested in anything connected with lumber and building. He left school at the age of fourteen to train as a carpenter, and started work on building construction at the age of seventeen. He subsequently studied architecture through the American School of Correspondence with Fred T. Hodgson, a Collingwood architect and author of several books on construction, as his mentor.

In 1888, Wilson and his older brother Daniel, established Wilson Bros., manufacturers and distributors of building materials and supplies, and also manufacturers of “wooden refrigerators” (ice boxes) and hand operated washing machines. For twelve years, he operated as an architect and designer within the context of the firm. In 1900, however, he established an independent, full-time architectural practice. He was a charter member of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada, and became a member of the Ontario Association of Architects in 1924.

In his long years of practice Wilson designed numerous buildings in Collingwood, including the Collegiate Institute (which later became Admiral Collingwood Public School), St. Mary’s School, King George School, the addition to Connaught Public School (which later became the Contact Centre), the Ann Long Nurses Home, the Collingwood Shipyards Offices, the United Church Sunday School and the YMCA, as well as many houses, offices and industrial buildings. He also designed many buildings in adjacent parts of Central Ontario, including houses and cottages in Shelburne and Muskoka, and schools in Barrie, Meaford, Glen Huron, Orillia, Erin, Midland, Singhampton, Elmvale, Sunnidale Corners and Huntsville.

Wilson designed several theatres - the Empire,

Rex and Gayety in Collingwood, and the Roxy in Barrie, and several hotels - the Capstan, Dardenella and Wasaga Inn at Wasaga Beach, and the Britannia Hotel and Bigwin Inn on the Lake of Bays.

Wilson’s early training and experience as a carpenter and builder formed the basis of his approach to architecture. William J. Carswell, a Collingwood architect who apprenticed with Wilson in 1951-52, wrote: “He was more than an Architect. He was a Master Builder. He took a crew and framed the main lodge at Bigwin Inn. I have heard that if the carpenter couldn’t frame circular stairs, he threw his tools off the job and did it himself.”

Wilson was a versatile engineer, able to design trusses, pile foundations, bridges, dams, and water and sewage systems. For example, he designed and built the first reinforced concrete culvert in Simcoe County. He was also a gifted draftsman, producing beautiful ink drawings on linen and paper.

Bigwin Inn, the extensive resort complex on Bigwin Island, Lake of Bays, is now recognized as one of Wilson’s most notable accomplishments. It comprised lodges and cottages accommodating up to 500 guests, and several public structures, including the Rotunda (the main reception building), the Dining Room Complex, and the Pavilion (the entertainment and dance hall). In these buildings, Wilson combined a number of architectural styles with structural originality and daring, creating large and elegant spaces with a truly international flavour.

John Wilson was a respected member of his community. He was a founding member of the Collingwood Public Utilities Commission, established in 1908, and served on the Town Council in the 1920’s. He also served as chairman of the Vocational Committee of the Collingwood Board of Education for many years. He was deeply interested in Masonry. He was a member of the Manito Lodge, No. 90, for sixty-three years, serving as Worshipful Master in 1895-96. He was also a member of All Saints Anglican Church, Collingwood.

John Wilson was actively engaged in his architectural practice until his death at the age of eighty-nine. One of his last jobs was the

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design of alterations and reinforcement to the clock tower of the Municipal Building on Hurontario Street, Collingwood, and at the time of his death he was involved in alterations to the Gayety Theatre, which he had designed many years before.

John Wilson died on November 17, 1952, predeceased by his wife Ethel, whom he had married in 1902, and by one of their five children.