

Introduction

Cast aside as mere relics of a bygone era, historic schoolhouses stand as silent reminders of a post-modern twenty-first-century society that celebrates economic progress, worships gleaming glass-enclosed structures, and all too often ignores the lessons of the past. Thinking about bygone schoolhouses conjures up images of “little white schoolhouses” or the stately “palace schools” of Victorian and Edwardian Canada. Most remaining old schoolhouses are endangered, at the mercy of cost-conscious, modernizing school boards, left abandoned and now falling apart, or dependent upon the generosity of new owners with deep pockets and a genuine commitment to historical preservation. A new bureaucratic order is emerging where “even bigger is better” when it comes to educating children, and school closures threaten the very existence of Maritime communities — from busy urban neighbourhoods to bucolic country villages.

Traditional schoolhouses all over the Maritimes have disappeared at an alarming rate. Since the early 1900s, school closures, abandonment, and demolition have come in waves, usually driven by the allure of social and economic progress. More recently, our local neighbourhood schools have come under siege in the latest wave aimed at replacing older, deteriorating buildings with “big box” school facilities. In the United States, the National Trust for Heritage Preservation responded in June 2000 by adding historic neighbourhood schools to its annual list of “America’s eleven most endangered historic places.” Across Maritime Canada, we are bearing silent witness to the relentless destruction of our remaining heritage of these architectural treasures and the abandonment of small, community schools.

Canada’s turn-of-the-twentieth-century boom period saw the country’s population mushroom from 5.3 million in 1901 to about 9 million in 1926. The number of schools in the Maritimes and elsewhere grew at a phenomenal rate. Compulsory school attendance ensured that the vast majority of students stayed in school for much longer than had the previous generation. The demand for local schools was such that the one-room schoolhouse became a ubiquitous public building on the rural Maritime landscape. Many of the tiny schoolhouses in use throughout the Second World War were rendered physically or functionally obsolete, or both, by the early 1950s. Some of the oldest wooden buildings, from the late 1800s, needed either substantial repair or replacement. With mechanization came farm consolidation and abandonment, causing many rural families to drift into towns and cities, virtually emptying many rural schools. School board

consolidation and the expansion of busing and specialized support services led to larger, more centralized district schools. Elementary and high school students were separated in small towns, villages, and farming areas, creating the need for even larger central or regional secondary schools.

School enrolment surged after the Second World War, particularly in the growing dormitory suburbs of Halifax, Saint John, Fredericton, and Charlottetown. Modern one-level “egg crate” functional design schools experienced their heyday in the 1950s as overstretched school boards sought to accommodate the bulging student enrolments. In the late 1970s and 1980s, educational progressives promoted the so-called “open concept” plan featuring classrooms without walls and more flexible use public spaces. More recently, newly constructed “big box” schools sought to mimic dominant trends in the workplace. Post-modern architecture, “cineplex” student lounge areas, and computer-equipped “pods” of classrooms came into vogue. Cost conscious school boards in the 1990s embraced “no frills” architecture and rigidly adhered to new regulations, in bureaucratic compliance with air quality and ecological concerns. In the modernizers’ universe, heritage schools were seen as dinosaurs and just another obstacle to “progress.”

“Save our schools” movements have periodically flared up in Maritime Canada but generally remain confined to local community fights. Throughout the Maritimes, ordinary parents and citizens have rallied to save the last remaining local schoolhouses. Grassroots groups from Nova Scotia’s Strait Region and South End Halifax to hamlets in PEI’s Eastern District have arisen to alert the public to the threat to their prized local schools. Yet, one at a time, historic schoolhouses are closing and being demolished or repurposed by school boards committed to centralization, modernization, and uniformity in the public school system. In the relentless march of progress, small community schools are deemed disposable in pursuit of an efficient, cost effective, “one size fits all” school system. Within a generation, these small schoolhouses will likely vanish before our eyes in cities, towns, and villages in a post-modernist, bureaucratic education world where “bigger is better” and citizens are further removed from control of the schools.

Public education has drifted off course in Maritime Canada. *Vanishing Schools, Threatened Communities* seeks to raise historical consciousness. Surveying the contested history of public schooling makes us more aware of the democratic foundations of our state school system. We begin to recognize how far removed we have become from the lofty ideals of public schooling. What really mattered, right from the beginning, was small community schools, good teaching, educating for character, and advancing a democratic society. If the past is any guide, the pendulum does swing in the peculiar world of Maritime education. The schoolhouse remains unsettled because every generation seeks to reinvent public education. In the twenty-first century, returning to first principles might be a good place to start.

Chapter 1

Schoolhouses and Communities — An Endangered Heritage

CBC Radio Halifax's *Information Morning* program regularly features early morning reports from every corner of rural and small town Nova Scotia. Most of the Community Contact reporters are content to bring us quaint local news about family picnics, store openings, folklore, community work bees, and colourful village personalities. On November 25, 2009, Anita MacLellan of Upper Economy, NS, broke the mould with a report from the front lines in an age-old battle. "Our Bass River Elementary School, founded in 1913, is slated to close," Anita told the listeners, "and it's a major issue here in rural Nova Scotia."

When Anita's tone turned to anger and she went further in registering her concern, CBC Radio host Don Connolly quickly intervened and redirected the conversation back to the usual local fare. It was a missed opportunity to delve into a serious public issue. The pattern was all too familiar. While the state of education consistently ranks high among Maritimers' concerns, local education issues usually fly below the radar screen. Unless concerned parents or students raise a ruckus, critically important education issues rarely get covered in the mainstream media or find their way onto the public agenda.

Probing more deeply into this seemingly small, localized conflict brings a bigger and recurring public policy issue into sharper relief. Speaking openly after the radio show, Anita let loose with deeper concerns. "Closing Bass River School," she declared, "is — to our school board — just a matter of dollars and cents." Moving the students to West Colchester Consolidated School down the road to save \$7,000 a year made no sense whatsoever to her or to Martha Brown, Chair of the Bass River



Brandishing a petition, Wendy Cox holds forth at the Bass River General Store in January 2010. "People talk at the store and everyone's concerned. What will happen to the town if we lose our little school." (Private Collection)



Showing signs of neglect, Bass River Elementary School, Bass River, Nova Scotia, erected 1913, was recommended for closure, and the issue sparked a local skirmish in early 2010 with the Chignecto Central Regional School Board. (Private Collection)

Elementary School Committee. “It’s not fair,” Anita said, “pushing forward with little or no regard for the local community.”¹

The local battle to save the historic Bass River Elementary School was really part of a much larger story. It was a small but important skirmish in a struggle being waged for years by concerned citizens throughout the Maritimes. Whether it is Colchester County, NS, Georgetown, PEI, Fredericton, NB, or the Halifax Peninsula, local groups of “school savers” have proven resolute in fighting the good fight — committed to not only heritage preservation but to local control over public education.²

Schools have always played a vital role in shaping and sustaining community identity, particularly in the Maritimes. From the 1780s until today, the school has served as the social anchor for most communities, from the smallest village to the most populous urban neighbourhood.³ Since the mid-nineteenth century and the advent of the “common” tax-supported school system, schoolhouses have also been a contested terrain — a place where shared community values were forged, tested, and either sustained or lost. The rise of the state or public school in Maritime Canada as elsewhere was also intimately connected with the extension of the administrative education state. Initially, state schools were conceived as a principal agent for “educating the masses,” but eventually they served as the advance guard for “social progress,” expanding the presence of bureaucratic forms of social behaviour

in community life.⁴ The narrative arc of the Maritimes' social and political history takes on a different look when viewed through the lens of community schools created, defended, won and lost.

Endangered Community Schoolhouses

The stereotypical “little white schoolhouse” may well be a thing of the past. When children and families gather for Victoria Day fireworks, that burning schoolhouse no longer captures the imagination of our younger generation. Schoolhouses, like heritage homes, are too often viewed as relics that stand in the way of progress. City and regional school boards tend to subscribe to the “bigger is better” vision of modern education and see older schools as black holes crying out for needed repairs and technological upgrades. In the early twenty-first century, even here in the Maritimes, when it comes to education, that which is old is somehow suspect, everything new is by definition better.⁵

Historic and stately schoolhouses, once thought of as important civic landmarks and built to last, are slowly passing out of existence. Such schools inspired pride, required significant community investment, and fostered local participation in city and small town life. Today's schools are creatures of the twentieth-century “age of progress.” Here in the Maritimes as well as elsewhere in North America they come “super-sized” and bear testimony to our increasingly fast-paced, disposable society. Modern elementary and secondary schools resemble “big box” stores, indoor shopping malls, or airport terminals. In their architectural design, they are shiny and glassed-in and surrounded by blacktop, but most have a life expectancy of a mere thirty years. In scale and organization, they also symbolize the increasing bureaucratization of schooling, which is undermining local control over education and threatening community identity.

One-room schoolhouses were originally built throughout the Maritimes to meet the needs of children scattered across the countryside. From their origins in the 1790s as little log schoolhouses, they evolved into wooden clapboard structures and came to dot the landscape of much of Maritime Canada. Along with the courthouse and the church, the schoolhouse was a vital centre of community life in hundreds of towns and villages. By the late 1920s, one-room schoolhouses in the Maritimes numbered over 5,000, the furthest extension of the rural school system. Since then, most have not only vanished from the landscape but also from records and memory.⁶

Rise of the Administrative Education State

Schoolhouses in cities and towns arose in response to the bulging urban population in mid- nineteenth-century Maritime Canada. A massive influx of immigrants, mainly from Great Britain and the United States, had swelled the major ports of the maritime colonies, Halifax and Saint John. Changing

social conditions in these cities aroused a Victorian spirit of reform as well as popular anxieties. From the 1840s onwards, a growing faith in social progress and “civic improvement” among local leaders generated interest in a range of social and humanitarian concerns, including the schooling of children. The port cities of Halifax and Saint John housed new immigrants, many of whom were either “able-bodied paupers” or “unfortunates,” often labelled as the “friendless, homeless and vagrant.” While some public-spirited individuals and groups were undoubtedly motivated by altruism, historians Alison Prentice and Judith Fingard have found much evidence that the middle classes were also seeking to restore order and a sense of stability through the reform of social institutions such as schools, workhouses, asylums, and hospitals.⁷

The public school system in the Maritime Provinces, like that in Canada West (Ontario), arose during the mid-nineteenth-century social reform wave. Reverend Egerton Ryerson’s 1846 report on Public Elementary Instruction in Canada West reflected the most progressive thinking about education and exerted considerable influence. His conception of universal public education was highly centralized and patterned after schooling in Prussia, Britain, and Massachusetts. Ryerson and his staunch ally, J. George Hodgins, promoted a centrally regulated general education aimed at containing pauperism and preventing criminality among the poorest classes.⁸ Larger schoolhouses built mainly in cities and large towns reflected, in many ways, these prevailing theories about the nature and purpose of schooling. Urban school architecture in the Maritimes and English-speaking Canada, as Attila Horvath has amply documented, found its roots in Prussian militarism and theories of social control.⁹ The original “grammar school” designs were influenced by both the Lancastrian “factory schools” and Jeremy Bentham’s theories associated with architectural advances in prison reform.

Master architects of Victorian schools saw the schoolhouse of the mid-nineteenth century as an architectural showpiece. “The school should be ‘the prettiest building in the village, next to the church,’” Henry Kendall wrote in 1847, “and even though cheaper materials like deal instead of oak should be used, ‘nothing (in it) need be ugly.’” Consistent with the hierarchical social order of the time, British school reformers like Joseph Lancaster promoted school designs that resembled small cathedrals on the outside but operated on the inside much like factories. Such schools were modelled after the Chrestomathic school in Birmingham, England, and supported a “monitorial system” — overseen by monitors and ruled by teaching masters.

Beneath the stately facade, the Lancastrian schools featured extraordinarily large rooms for instructional purposes. Students were supervised by monitors, typically seated at the front on a high chair, and in large assembly rooms accommodating 300 or more pupils. Teaching masters oversaw the factory-like system from the wings. The buildings themselves were designed to isolate pupils from undesirable outside influences as much



Teacher and pupils pose for formal photograph at Highbury School, Kings County, near Kentville, NS, 1895. (NSARM, W.L. Bishop Collection)

as possible. Windows in the Lancastrian schools were located at least six feet from the floor or were in the roof so that children were not distracted by the outside world.

Schoolhouse buildings in Maritime cities and larger towns reflected the influences of the early American and British master architects. Most of the early schoolhouses were designed and built according to architectural concepts and rough plans popularized by Dr. William A. Alcott of Hartford, Connecticut, in a widely circulated 1831 “Prize Essay” on the construction of schoolhouses. As the common school system expanded in New England, small wooden schoolhouses were hastily built, mostly by well-intentioned groups of local citizens. In the 1840s, the legendary American school designer Henry Barnard emerged as a major force, calling for significant improvements in the early primitive designs. As Connecticut’s first commissioner of education (from 1845), Barnard wielded considerable influence and vigorously promoted Greek Revival architecture for school buildings. His classic 1860 book found existing buildings grossly inadequate, and Nova Scotia’s superintendent adopted his recommendations for improved space, better ventilation, student seating, coat racks, wall blackboards, and proper playgrounds.¹⁰

Most of the early Canadian schoolhouses were built from designs imported from elsewhere. In his 1857 book entitled *The Schoolhouse: Its Architecture, External and Internal Arrangements*, J. George Hodgins provided clear guidance and recommended designs for the schools of Canada West. He too emphasized the importance of ensuring that schoolhouses, particularly those in small towns and larger villages, were “the most attractive spot in the neighbourhood.” His recommended plans, prepared with the aid of H.C.



The Model School, Truro, erected in 1875, was used by the Provincial Normal School to train teachers until 1900. The “Normal School pupils,” under “the watchful eye of one of the teachers” received “practical lessons in the art of teaching.” (NSARM, Notman Studio Collection)

Hickok, the assistant superintendent of public instruction in Pennsylvania, called for a system composed of “Grammar, Union, or Superior Common Schools.” While the book included plans for schools of varying sizes and types, for small towns and bigger cities, they all mimicked the stately, austere gothic revival style popular at the time.¹¹

Rural schoolhouses in the Maritimes had much humbler origins. After the passage of Nova Scotia’s Free School Act in 1864, school design plans were urgently needed to house the mushrooming pupil population and facilitate the construction of some 760 new schoolhouses. A teacher at the Provincial Normal School in Truro, William R. Mulholland, was pressed into service to prepare the first set of standardized plans. His drawings provided six different versions of single-storey, one- and two-room wooden structures that offered “an advantage in heating, ventilation, and in keeping discipline.” Over the succeeding decades, hundreds of those traditional “little white schoolhouses” sprouted-up, most of them patterned on Mulholland’s simple, easily implementable plans.¹²

Compulsory Schooling and System Expansion

The school system in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island, founded at mid-century, expanded dramatically with the introduction of compulsory schooling. The first province to enact a compulsory school law was Ontario (1871), but it was limited to four months a year for children ages seven to twelve. Such measures in the Maritimes were delayed by the region’s rural economy and dependence on farm life for its subsistence. Farming took precedence over schooling for most rural families, and school attendance was highly dependent upon the rhythm of work both on farms and in the fishery. Urban schools, based upon Katherine McLaren’s school attendance

research, were “more or less well attended” because “at least the great majority of children were enrolled.” While irregular attendance remained a chronic problem in the countryside, it was slowly improving in the cities and towns.¹³

Gradually over time, and by 1910, most school sections had compulsory attendance laws. Prince Edward Island amended its Public School Act in 1877 to include a compulsory clause covering every child ages eight to thirteen and requiring attendance for twelve weeks a year. In Nova Scotia from 1883 onwards, a local two-thirds majority vote in any school section resulted in compulsory attendance for children ages seven to twelve, except for those living more than two miles from the nearest public school. New Brunswick began voting on the question in 1905, and its Compulsory School Act of 1906 required attendance for children ages six to fourteen in cities and incorporated towns, and from seven to fourteen years in rural areas.¹⁴ Compulsory school laws caused the numbers of pupils to swell and slowly transformed the entire public system of education.

The pioneer form of school district organization in the Maritimes, based on a one-room school within walking distance of every home, gradually yielded to larger units of administration (regional school boards) and to more centralized schools that offered a wider range of education services. One of the earliest enthusiasts for consolidation was Sir William Macdonald, the Montreal tobacco manufacturer and philanthropist, who hailed from Tracadie, Prince Edward Island. Nostalgic about his rural PEI upbringing but resentful that his own education had been ended early, he became engrossed in rural education in the late 1880s and spearheaded several initiatives over the next two decades. Influenced by James W. Robertson’s work at Ottawa’s National Experimental Farm, Macdonald formed a partnership with Robertson and began in 1899 to promote more practical education training — mostly gardening and carpentry — in rural elementary schools.¹⁵

Going further, Macdonald and Robertson established their own Consolidated Schools Project, a fund to assist in the consolidation of small, anglophone rural schools into centralized schools offering practical training. With great fanfare, consolidated schools were opened between 1903 and 1905 in each of the Maritime provinces, serving as models and financed for up to three years. Macdonald’s scheme met with some modest success. While the earliest consolidated schools reportedly improved school attendance and encouraged more pupils to go on beyond grade eight, they did meet stiff local resistance, particularly in two school sections — Hillsborough, PEI, and Middleton, NS. Few rural Maritimers rallied to the cause of Macdonald’s project, and most local citizens remained unconvinced that the plight of country schools was serious enough to warrant the added costs involved with consolidation.¹⁶

Macdonald set the wheels in motion for consolidation, but it was ultimately left to provincial education authorities to take over funding to

encourage boards to amalgamate schools. In Nova Scotia, fifty-three school districts were merged into twenty-two, and in New Brunswick four consolidated schools had come into existence by 1920. Yet parents in Middleton, NS, succeeded in reversing consolidation, complaining bitterly about the distances pupils travelled to the new district school. In Hillsborough, PEI, local resistance was so determined that Macdonald was forced to extend his initial grant for six years past the original three. Finally, in 1912, the Hillsborough consolidated school was closed, only to be abandoned, fall apart, and then torn down.¹⁷

While one-room schoolhouses dominated the Maritime countryside, most schools in cities and larger towns took a decidedly different form. From the time of Confederation until the 1890s, school buildings in Halifax were modelled after the British grammar school and reflected the gothic revival style of architecture. Such schools were handsome and ornate buildings, but they were designed with little regard for meeting the practical needs of teachers and pupils. Modern school architecture emerged after 1870 in the form of the so-called “palace school,” with Victorian style and grace, but incorporating the latest advances in lighting, heating, and washroom facilities.¹⁸ Four of these impressive two-storey brick palace schoolhouses still survive today in Halifax, the original Halifax High School/Academy, the Tower Road School, the Russell Street School, and the Chebucto Road School, all renovated by new owners, private school promoters, or citizens groups and designated for other community purposes.

Educrats and the Ideology of Consolidation

School consolidation eventually became part of the plan developed by provincial education authorities and driven by a new class of “educrats,” consisting mainly of school superintendents, inspectors, and design architects. School administrators in the Maritimes came under the spell of North American experts like Edgar L. Morphet, who produced research that set school size standards based upon the provision of “a more adequate program at a more reasonable cost.” Following Morphet’s criteria, school structures were designed to meet minimum size requirements. From 1960 onwards, six-grade elementary schools were constructed as six-room or twelve-room structures. Three-grade high schools of 300 students required twelve rooms, and a four-grade high school of 400 students was designed with sixteen rooms. Such school design theories dominated education thinking and unleashed a new wave of school consolidation. Between 1960 and 1966 alone, over 600 one-school boards disappeared in Atlantic Canada.¹⁹

School consolidation came slower to the Maritimes than to Ontario and the West. In 1966, school authorities reported that some 400 Nova Scotia schools, enrolling over 78,000 pupils, still did not meet the minimum standard of six rooms. An estimated 106 schools had six to eight rooms,



The first Consolidated School to open was in Middleton, Annapolis County, in September 1903. The Macdonald Consolidated School served as the initial model for the amalgamation of five or more small one-room schools by offering transportation to bring the pupils to a central location. (Macdonald Museum, Middleton)

accommodating another 36,000 pupils. Three out of five (59 percent) Nova Scotia schools had eight or more rooms in 1966, and those schools housed 22 percent of the total school population. The biggest consolidation wave hit the Maritimes from the 1970s onwards. In 1972, PEI adopted a new school act that resulted, over time, in the dissolution of many little community school boards, the establishment of five regional boards, and the consolidation of most of the one- and two-room schools.²⁰

From 1900 until the late 1960s, the battle lines were drawn in the struggle for control over rural education, especially in the Maritimes. Sporadic skirmishes broke out between education authorities and defenders of local community schools. Education officials insisted that the one-room schools were outdated, wasteful, inefficient and denied pupils the opportunities afforded in consolidated schools with supposedly better-trained teachers, gyms, auditoriums, and lab rooms. “For seventy years, rural Canadians held tenaciously to the system that gave them control over their schools,” stated Jean Cochrane in her popular 1981 book *The One-Room Schoolhouse in Canada*. To many Maritimers, consolidated schools were too expensive, threatening to drive taxes up, too dependent upon unreliable transportation, and located too far from home for little children. The onslaught of social and economic change eventually led to the decline and disappearance of the one-room schoolhouse system. Gone but not forgotten, the little schools linger in memory. Even today, asking Maritimers gathered around a farm kitchen table about their

“lost schools” is most likely to evoke bittersweet memories and the oft-voiced complaint: “They told us it would be up to the community.”²¹

The Onslaught of Modernist Education

With the arrival of the Baby Boom generation, school enrolment surged, particularly in the growing post-war suburbs of Halifax, Saint John, Fredericton, and Charlottetown. Gradually the modern one-level “egg crate” functional design schools of the 1950s gave way in the late 1970s and 1980s to the so-called “open concept” plan, featuring classrooms without walls and more flexible use public spaces.²² More recently, newly constructed “big box” schools began to mimic dominant trends in the workplace: post-modern architecture, expanded student lounge space, and accommodation for more high tech equipment, particularly computers. Cost restraints in the 1990s led to economy measures such as “no frills” architecture and energy efficiency regulations, as well as legal requirements to address air quality and safety concerns.²³ All of these emerging priorities conspired to sound the death knell for most of the remaining heritage schools.

Since the early 1950s, school boards in the Maritimes have been enthusiastic supporters of new school construction, often aided and abetted by generous provincial capital grants. Many older, architecturally significant schools have been closed for “financial cost” reasons but only after sometimes stormy local parent meetings. Most of the early twentieth-century palace schools have been declared surplus and abandoned or sold-off to community groups or private venture schools.

The Maritimes’ largest and oldest city, Halifax, provides a dramatic illustration of the prevailing trend. The contrast with Boston, New England’s most historic city, is particularly striking. A fascinating 2002 survey of Boston public schools in Doris Cole and Nick Wheeler’s *School Treasures: Architecture of Historic Boston Schools* reveals that thirty-two of 118 schools (27.1 percent) still in service were built before the end of the First World War (1919) and seventy-eight schools (66.1 percent) were erected before the Second World War (1939).²⁴ In the case of the Halifax Regional School Board, the reverse is true. Of the Halifax Region School Board’s 137 schools in 2009, the oldest was built in 1918 and 102 (74.5 percent) were built after 1950. The oldest school, Saint Joseph’s Alexander Mackay School, built in 1918, is the only school remaining from the so-called golden age of school architecture.²⁵

In Nova Scotia, lighthouses have acquired an iconic status. The province’s licence plates proclaim that Nova Scotia is “Canada’s Ocean Playground,” so it is little wonder that lighthouses have first claim on the loyalties of Nova Scotians. The fact that over 150 lighthouses remain in operation in Nova Scotia may well be the result of the vigorous efforts of local preservationists. That movement was sparked, in large part, by the federal government’s decision, back in 1968, to automate and de-staff the coastal lighthouses.