

Research Note/Note de recherche

Stratford (Normal School) Teachers' College, 1908-1973¹

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On September 15, 1908, the Stratford Normal School² opened, offering a one-year Second-Class Teacher's Certificate. The School, located on parkland overlooking the Avon River, was one of four identical Normal Schools established in 1908 and 1909 as part of a provincial plan to reform teacher training. Educators wanted to create a stable, well-educated teaching force. The Normal Schools, renamed Teachers' Colleges in 1953, helped meet this demand until the baby boom of the post-World War II era put added strain on an already inadequate system. Finally, in 1973, a second major effort to reform teacher training resulted in the amalgamation of several teachers' colleges with adjacent universities and the closing of others, including Stratford. Although the school is closed, the building remains as a landmark to the essential part that the Stratford Teachers' College played in the development of teacher training in Ontario, and in the cultural and economic development of the Stratford community.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Ontario had inherited an inadequate system of teacher education. Despite the existence of three Normal Schools, most elementary teachers had

1 This paper was written for the Ontario Heritage Foundation Provincial Plaque Program.

2 Normal Schools in Ontario date from 1847. "The word Normal signified "according to rule or principle" and implied that the school was one in which the principles and practice of teaching according to rule were taught and exemplified." *Stratford Teachers' College 1908-1973*, Stratford Perth Archives, Ontario (SPA).

only attended one of the large number of model schools dispersed throughout the province.³ Whereas model schools offered observation and practice teaching under the guidance of a principal and his staff, normal schools provided more formalized teacher training according to the science of pedagogy. Model-school training was designed to lead to normal school following a few years of teaching. However, most model-school graduates had no intention of remaining in teaching beyond the three-year limit of the certificate.⁴ Poor working conditions and salaries that had not kept up with the rest of society made teaching, especially in rural areas, a transient occupation. This left rural elementary schools largely populated by young inexperienced men and women.⁵

In an era when most students did not continue on to secondary school, the new Conservative government of 1905, under James Whitney, was concerned with improving elementary schooling to address the needs of students in the industrializing economy. To improve rural elementary education, Robert Pyne, the Minister of Education, set out to create better teachers by solving the model-school problem. To accomplish this he closed forty-seven county model-schools, replacing them with the four new normal schools in areas designed to increase the local availability of formal teacher training. The decision to place the new Normal Schools in Stratford, Hamilton, Peterborough, and North Bay was based on population density, railway connections, local conditions, and proximity to existing schools in Toronto, Ottawa, and London.⁶

Although Stratford was close to London, its railway connection and public school system made it a better choice than Berlin (now Kitchener). Since most students would be drawn from local communities, Stratford's "unusually good railway

3 Robert M. Stamp, *The Schools of Ontario, 1876-1976* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), 76.

4 Robin S. Harris, *Quiet Evolution: A Study of the Educational System of Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967), 77.

5 Stamp, *The Schools of Ontario*, 75-76.

6 *Ibid.*, 74-77.

centre,”⁷ which had enabled model-school students to return home regularly for the weekends, was an advantage. In addition, the cost of boarding in Stratford, \$2.00 to \$2.75 a week for female students and \$2.75 to \$3.00 a week for male students, was reasonable. Anxious to acquire the Normal School, the local school board Inspector, Russell Stuart, wrote the Department of Education that the board was willing to meet “any reasonable demands which the department may make.”⁸ The Department of Education was convinced that Stratford was the right choice. Not only did it have the required number of school divisions, but “the school inspector would be a great asset.”⁹

As an incentive, the Stratford City Council offered a free site in Queen's Park, a piece of property previously planned for a main public park.¹⁰ In exchange, the province agreed not to erect a fence around the school, keeping access to the property open to the public.¹¹ Like the three other schools, the Stratford building is of Italian Renaissance design, the work of noted provincial architect Francis H. Heakes.¹² The province wanted buildings that were “of good appearance, compact in its construction, [and] ample for all the requirements of a modern Normal School.”¹³ An “attractive structure,” of red brick construction, the building is rectangular in shape, consisting of three stories, plus a raised basement on a stone foundation. The elevated main entrance, which was reserved for staff, is located to the side of a central bay projection, accompanied by a domed roof and a hung

7 Archives of Ontario (AO), RG2-129, Box 2, Memorandum re Normal Schools from the Superintendent of Education to the Minister of Education, unsigned and undated.

8 Ibid., Letter from J. Russell Stuart, Inspector Stratford Public Schools, to John Seath, Superintendent of Education, June 15, 1906.

9 Ibid., Location of Normal Schools, J.L. Tilley, Toronto, June 20, 1906, 2.

10 SPA, Letter from Carolyn Bart-Riedstra, Archivist, Stratford-Perth Archives to William Gerrard, Environmental Co-ordinator-Cultural Heritage Institutional Environmental Service, Ontario, Jan. 15, 1997.

11 Unterman McPhail, Heritage Resource Consultants, Ontario Heritage Properties Program, “Stratford Normal School, Draft,” Mar. 9, 1989, 3.

12 Ibid.

13 AO, RG2-129, Box 2, Memorandum re Normal Schools from the Superintendent of Education to the Minister of Education, unsigned and undated.

staircase. In addition to classrooms and offices, the school consisted of a gymnasium, an auditorium capable of seating 500, and an art room with a skylight which remains operable. Over the years additions were made by the alumni that reflected the life and history of the school. In 1920, a stained-glass memorial window was dedicated in memory of Lieutenant H.V. Pickering, English master, and former students who lost their lives in World War I.¹⁴ A sundial was placed on the front lawn in 1932, dedicated in memory of John Emery, science master. In 1951 a bronze plaque and oak Memorial Altar, with a Book of Remembrances, was donated in honour of former students who died in World War II. The plaque and altar were placed on the second-floor landing of the main staircase in front of the Memorial Window.¹⁵

The presence of the Normal School was of considerable benefit to the economy of the city. Not only did the staff become permanent residents, but every year hundreds of students from the surrounding area became part of the Stratford community. An article in the local paper in 1932 stated that Normal School students brought in close to one hundred thousand dollars annually to the Stratford economy. As the province had hoped, placing the Normal Schools in small cities such as Stratford gave student teachers rural teaching experience, putting them in touch “with the rural communities in which nearly all the graduates get their first teaching experience.”¹⁶ In fact, considerable attention was given by the school to rural teaching. The Normal School staff paid yearly visits to rural schools, and the school held annual Rural Conferences where the staff and local inspectors spoke on problems facing rural schools and the role of the rural school teacher.¹⁷

14 J.W. Coulter and W.A. West, *A Short History of the Stratford Teachers' College, 1908-1958* (Stratford, 1958), 4.

15 Ibid.

16 SPA, *Beacon Herald*, Aug. 19, 1932.

17 SPA, *The Classic, Stratford Normal School and Teachers' College Yearbook*, 1909, 2, 3; 1920, 11.

The school had a rich social and cultural life that frequently spilled over into the community. Commencing in 1913, the school began putting on Shakespearean plays, which were attended by local residents.¹⁸ Social events such as the Formal Opening, the At Home in honour of the yearly graduation class, and The Crowning of the May Queen, renamed the Crowning of the Alumni Queen in 1952, became noted community traditions.¹⁹ Many of the students also played an active part in community organizations such as the Y.W.C.A.²⁰ Since the majority of students were in their late teens and from rural areas, strict discipline and formality designed to build character ruled the students in the school, in their social events, and in their behaviour within the community.²¹ This intensive year of study built lasting friendships that resulted in a strong alumni association. Former students not only returned yearly to attend social events, but also established Ontario's first Student Loan Fund.²²

Stratford had one of the highest enrolments of Normal Schools in the province. With a capacity of 200 students, the school opened with an enrolment of 160. Although there were a few years when enrolment reached over 200, generally students numbered at just under 200 during the following two decades. The Normal School system had proven to be a success. Accompanied by an increase in salaries, the schools contributed to a stable teaching force in the province by the early 1920s.²³ In fact, by 1924, the province was faced with a surplus of elementary teachers.²⁴ However, despite the surplus, Normal School enrolment continued to increase into the early 1930s; at Stratford the number of students peaked at 297 in 1933-34.²⁵

18 SPA, *Beacon Herald*, Aug. 19, 1932.

19 Coulter and West, "A Short History," 4.

20 SPA, *The Classic*, 1950, 47.

21 *Beacon Herald*, Aug. 1, 1997.

22 Coulter and West, "A Short History," 5.

23 Stamp, *The Schools of Ontario*, 123.

24 Department of Education, *Annual Report*, 1926, x.

25 *Annual Report*, 1930, x.

Although salaries were lower than a decade before, a decline in business and industrial jobs made teaching appear more secure.²⁶ To offset this surplus, the Second-Class Certificate requiring junior matriculation was eliminated in favour of the First-Class Certificate, which had been introduced a decade earlier and required senior matriculation. By 1936, better economic conditions, higher admission standards, and the low birth rate of the Depression led to a decline in normal school enrolment.²⁷ Low enrolment continued into the 1940s, in part exacerbated by the war. By the beginning of the baby boom, in the late 1940s, low Normal School enrolment began to be felt in the elementary schools.

In 1950 a report was released by a Committee of the Ontario Normal School Teachers' Association, chaired by H. Bowers, Principal of the Stratford Normal School. The Committee concluded that while the real cause of the teacher shortage was economic "supply and demand," a contributing factor was the declining prestige of Normal Schools. Further, the Committee felt that instead of continuing to contribute actively to educational thought, the schools had "become tranquil pools." Since their inception, Normal Schools had been tightly controlled by the Department of Education,²⁸ leaving most Normal School teachers frustrated with the rigid system of control imposed by the province. To meet "modern educational needs," the Committee recommended the building of new Normal Schools, and the extension of the elementary teacher-training course to two years, with the future objective that all elementary teachers hold a university degree. They also suggested that the name be changed in favour of one that would be more clearly understood than the "flat, drab appellation of Normal School."²⁹ While some of the Committee's

26 Stamp, *The Schools of Ontario*, 146.

27 *Annual Report*, 1936, 26.

28 W.G. Fleming, *Ontario's Educative Society V, Supporting Institutions and Services* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), 22.

29 "A Report of the Normal Schools of the Province of Ontario," by A Committee of the Ontario Normal School Teachers' Association, 1950.

recommendations could be met, others had to wait until the current teacher shortage had passed. In 1951 the Normal School calendars reflected a relaxation of the rigid central control, as principals and teachers were given a “greater share in the planning and presentation of their courses.”³⁰

By 1951, Normal School enrolment declined to a point at which the number of teachers could no longer meet the province’s needs.³¹ A series of emergency plans were introduced between 1951 and 1959 to increase the number of teachers. In addition to the existing First-Class Certificate course, two new courses were implemented—a six-week summer crash course, followed by a full year course two years later, and a two-year course for grade 12 graduates. Further, Normal Schools were re-named Teachers’ Colleges in 1953 to provide greater prestige and attract more grade 13 graduates.³² The efforts to attract more students worked. At Stratford alone, enrolment increased, ranging between 350 and 488 annually during the 1960s.

However, by the late 1960s, provincial educators were concerned that teachers trained during this emergency period were unable to deal with the new school programs being put into effect. In 1966 the MacLeod Report of the Minister’s Committee on the Training of Elementary School Teachers recommended a second major revision of teacher training. It suggested that all teachers, both elementary and secondary, be trained in the same university faculty or college and have a university degree before entry. By the late 1960s, as elementary school enrolment began to decline as a result of lower birth rates, it became feasible for the province to put this plan into effect. In 1972 a report was released by the provincial government detailing the steps that had been taken since 1969 to institute the MacLeod Report. Of the seven Normal Schools opened by 1909, three—London, Toronto, and North Bay—were integrated with adjacent universities. The remaining four (Hamilton, Ottawa,

30 Fleming, *Ontario’s Educative Society*, 24.

31 Stamp, *The Schools of Ontario*, 198.

32 *Ibid*, 199.

Peterborough, and Stratford) were closed. Stratford was deemed outdated; with a capacity of only 200 students, it had been barely able to meet the needs of the high public school enrolment of the 1960s.³³ Antiquated in design, the school could not compete with the modern London Teachers' College, and since there was no university within close proximity, Stratford Teachers' College closed in 1973.

Today, the once Stratford Teachers' College is the only remaining building, of the four opened in 1908-9, that is standing and remains intact. Inside, as well, few spatial changes have been made.³⁴ An impressive structure that has aged well, it is an important part of Ontario's architectural heritage. As a part of the growth of widespread local availability of Normal School training, the school played a vital role in the development of teacher education in the province. When the Stratford Normal School was built, there were a few scattered homes and farms in the surrounding area. Over the years, the city of Stratford grew around the Normal School. By the time the Teachers' College closed in 1973, it had become a part of the community of Stratford, having played an important role in the life of this small municipality.

33 Fleming, *Ontario's Educative Society*, 19.

34 The Hamilton Normal School building has been demolished, and substantial additions have been made to the Peterborough and North Bay buildings. McPhail, "Stratford Normal School," 9.