# RESEARCH BULLETIN

No. 187 March 1983

**"Teaching in Mission Country"; The Schools of the Northwest Territories and the Yukon prior to 1930**

Marc de Caraffe, Architectural Historian, Ottawa

## Foreword

The purpose of this Research Bulletin is to present the preliminary findings of a study of educational buildings constructed in Canada before 1930 which is being conducted by the Architectural History Section of the Canadian Inventory of Historic Building. This text is part of a series of reports intended to provide an overview of the architectural evolution of the buildings used for teaching in every region of the country. A more complete analysis of these buildings will be prepared during the coming year.

The information presented here was supplied mainly by persons interested in the subject, who graciously offered their assistance. This information was completed through research on the architectural evolution of school buildings and on provincial or, in this case, territorial systems of education conducted by the architectural historians of the Canadian Inventory of Historic Building.

## Introduction

The story of the first schools in the Yukon and the Northwest Territories reads like a detective novel. Since almost all of the educational institutions built in this part of the country before 1930 were destroyed long ago, one has the impression of arriving on the scene, like the heroes of this literary genre, after the assassin has committed his crime. Like a detective, one uncovers many clues, but they are somewhat confusing and it is difficult to acquire irrefutable proof of the guilt of the accused or, in this case, of the actual existence of schools built in this part of the country before 1930[1].

Everything seems to conspire to confuse the historian in his search. One of the first disappointments is certainly the federal government's refusal, in 1911, to assume responsibility for the education of the Amerindians of the Yukon.[2] Until 1930, and even later, education in the Yukon and the Northwest Territories was primarily entrusted to Anglican and Catholic missionaries. Sources of information on these missions are thus scattered throughout the country since there was no central authority which could have gathered all the data in one place.

Another, far more serious, research problem results from the fact that because of the remoteness of the various missions, the evidence found is often unreliable and even contradictory. Here is an example of such a problem: building materials, ordered in April and delivered in October, arrived at some missions too late for anything at all to be done with them, and construction projects had to be postponed

until the following year. Thus, although the senders never doubted that the mission they helped to found was established in the year that the materials were sent, the missionary who had to spend the winter with neighbours because it had not been possible to build anything, knew very well that the date of construction of his mission was the year following that in which the goods were received. It is not hard to understand how the records of these two parties, separated as they were by thousands of kilometres, can indicate different construction dates - although it does nothing to simplify the researcher's task .[3]

These preliminary words of caution having been said, we shall now briefly outline the background of the schools found in the missions of the Yukon and the Northwest Territories. In an effort to establish a certain classification for these buildings, an attempt will be made in the following pages to present an "identikit picture" of these teaching institutions on the basis of both their religious affiliations and the services offered to the school population. We will then follow the trail of the missions established in this region of the country to discover whether any of these schools still exist.

## The Missionary Beginnings

Toward the end of the Second World War, an observer gave the following description of facilities in the Northwest Territories:

> The North West is a colourful country. Anywhere you go you see first the Hudson's Bay Company with its distinctive architecture, buildings well painted in white and red, the name and trademark well displayed. The R.C.M.P. also immediately catches the eye, with its buildings, the flag ever displayed, and the Mounties in their distinctive uniform. The administrative or the medical services are apt to be in the background. Trade and law are thus represented at every post.[4]

On the basis of this account, it would seem that this region of the country had changed very little since it was first developed by fur traders a century earlier, with the exception of course of the arrival of the representatives of law and order and the appearance of mining towns. This portrait would have been more accurate if its author had included a mention of the missionary institutions.

In several cases, the opening of new trading posts by the Hudson's Bay Company was quickly followed by the establishment of missions by the Anglican and Catholic churches to preach the gospel to the Amerindians and the Inuit.[5] These missionary institutions often consisted of a chapel and a residence called a "mission" (Fig. 1), which would serve as an infirmary or a school or both. At some locations, if the centre was large enough, the infirmary and school could be accommodated in separate buildings.[6]

Until 1930, at least, the Anglican and Catholic churches were primarily responsible for preaching the gospel to the natives of the Northwest Territories. Although this work was done by two separate religious groups which sometimes conflicted with each other, it was carried out according to a single system.

The basis of each organization was the mission, which was under the direct responsibility of the missionary when he was the only religious figure present, or of the mission superior when there were several missionaries. The head of the mission was responsible to the bishop of his diocese.[7]

For an architectural historian, the primary difference between Catholic and Anglican missions lies in the fact that the former were run solely by religious orders. At most missions, the brothers performed various tasks, the sisters nursed and taught, and the priests were primarily responsible for preaching the gospel. At the Anglican missions, the work was shared by religious and lay missionaries.

These arrangements had certain repercussions in terms of the layout of the buildings: at Catholic missions, special rooms, which were basically dormitories, had to be set aside for the sisters, whereas no such provisions were necessary at Anglican missions. At Shingle Point, for example, Susan Elizabeth Quirt, who taught there in 1929, reported that classes were given in the chapel and the abandoned Hudson's Bay depot was used as a residence for the girls and the female staff of the mission:

> The Hudson's Bay house was to be the Girls' House. Partitions were put up to allow for a room which accommodated 10 girls by using bunks - upper and lower; another room for two staff members, using a double bed; a large room to be used as dining room for the children, and what was little more than a back shed served as a very cold kitchen.
>
> The Mission House housed the Principal and his sister and seven boys. The laundry was done there also.[8]

In mission country, one had to make do with whatever one had. The shortage of building materials and manpower prevented the construction of elaborate buildings. In 1938 the buildings of the mission at Shingle Point were completely destroyed by a snowstorm; fortunately, the mission had been abandoned two years earlier.

The differences between religions had little effect on the appearance of the first schools built in the Territories. Whether they were Anglican or Catholic, the structures were the same from one mission to the next, little more than temporary shelters. In fact, the appearance of a school depended mainly on where it was built. This was the only factor which makes it possible to distinguish between two categories of schools built before 1930 in the Northwest Territories: day schools and residential schools.

In the more populous centres, the number of school-age children was often sufficiently high to justify the construction of schools especially for them. These schools were generally small, with only one classroom. The children attended school during the day and returned to their parents' homes in the evening. It appears that very few of these schools, called day schools, were built.

At other locations, the small number of children and the seasonal migrations of the natives precluded the construction of such schools and it was necessary to bring students together in a central institution from several locations in the vicinity. To house these children (some spent their entire youth there because it was impossible for them to return to their parents' homes even during the summer holidays), residences had to be built adjoining the schools. These buildings were called residential schools.[9]

The first residential school appears to have been founded by Catholic missionaries at Fort Providence in 1867. It was quickly followed by a second at Fort Resolution.[10] The Anglicans opened their own at Hay River in 1894.

This new system turned out to be a more effective means of education than that of the day schools; since the children were provided with accommodation, they no longer had to follow their parents on hunting and fishing migrations and were thus able to devote themselves entirely to their studies. In addition, because the students were all assembled in one place, fewer teachers were needed. It is for these reasons that the system of residential schools is still in effect today. In 1927 this experiment was attempted (albeit with little success) for the Inuit at Shingle Point.[11] However, the opening by the Anglican Church of a residential school at Fortymile in the Yukon in 1893 indicates the relative popularity of this type of school.[12]

## In Pursuit of the Missionary Establishments

The fate of every school building was intimately bound up with the environmental conditions in this region of the country. The low yield of a hunting ground or a simple

change in the caribou's seasonal migration route could cause the exodus of the native population from a given centre and the closure of the local school because of a lack of students.[13] At other locations, epidemics could decimate the population of a post. The fate of many schools was dependent upon precarious conditions.

The climatic conditions in the Northwest Territories could also have an effect on the fate of school buildings. Poor construction practices caused the rapid erosion of the permafrost and many buildings had to be abandoned because their foundations had become unstable.[14]

Schools were generally built in easily accessible locations, often at the most popular trading posts, beside the busiest stores, in order to ensure better attendance. Because of the rare periods of sunshine, the land on which a school was to be built had to be carefully chosen to ensure that nothing would cast a shadow on the building during the short hours of daylight.[15] Since it was necessary to take all these factors into account,[16] as strange as it may seem in this vast semi-desert, the number of suitable sites was relatively small.

This shortage of usable land, combined with the difficult climatic conditions, explained the particular layout of the buildings in the Northwest Territories: at most posts, they formed a square. On his arrival at Fort Simpson in 1875, Pastor Garriock described a grouping arranged as follows:

> Fort Simpson like other forts had an arrangement of buildings which in the North was called "the square" and in this particular case, was formed by the two mission buildings on the West, a big house on the North, the Mackenzie River to the East, and sales shop and provision store to the South.[17]

Although such an arrangement of buildings was perhaps used as a protection against snowdrifts, it also had the appearance of a fortification.

The shortage of building materials made the construction of schools even more difficult. At Fort Simpson, parchment was used instead of glass in the windows of the log school built by Reverend Kirby between 1860 and 1861.[18] Building materials were so scarce in this region that despite its rustic nature, this structure was moved around 1925, was renovated, and was apparently still in use in 1959.[19] What has become of the building since that time is not known.

Because wood is a good insulator, and since it was the best material available at the time, the first schools in the Northwest Territories were all built of logs, squared timber or lumber. The wood for the Catholic mission built at Fort Resolution between 1863 and 1864 by Father Grouard and Brother Alexis was brought in by dogsled.[20] However, there were certain risks associated with the use of wood (Fig. 2).

Suitable school sites were so rare that on occasion a mission was forced to establish itself beside that of another religion, resulting in a situation which was not always peaceful. For instance, around 1867, a residential school run by four Gray Nuns was opened near the Anglican mission at Fort Simpson.[21] Because of the difficulties encountered by the Anglicans, the Catholic school won the competition and soon became too small. Between 1917 and 1918, a new school had to be built; this 30-by-22-foot structure was constructed of timber and could accommodate 22 students. Two benches served as desks and the classroom was heated by a centrally located stove.[22] This building was moved in 1931 and enlarged in 1952. Despite these recent improvements, it had to be closed in 1955 when the Catholic students were transferred to a new government school.[23]

With time, the missionary schools of the Northwest Territories became a success and simple log cabins would not suffice anymore. In 1917 the Anglicans built a three-storey residential school at Hay River. Together with the church, this building formed the main architectural complex at this post.[24]

Although it had three floors, the school at Hay River was smaller than the Catholic school at Fort Providence.[25] This is an indication of how large these

buildings had become and of the importance that education seemed to be acquiring in the Territories. However, by 1956, despite its relatively imposing dimensions, the Hay River school was no longer in existence.[26]

Such a fate has befallen almost all of the teaching institutions built in this part of the country before 1930. In 1903, when Fortymile became a ghost town, the school was abandoned and its students had to be transferred to Carcross.[27] The fate of the mission schools varied with the destinies of the settlements in which they were located. Built under uncertain conditions and more often than not with only rudimentary materials, many were unable to withstand the test of time.

The school at Carcross was rebuilt in 1915 with financial assistance from the government.[28] In this two-storey frame building, the ground floor was reserved for the classroom while the second storey served as the teacher's residence.[29] According to certain sources, which remain to be confirmed, it is possible that this building still exists, although a school committee called for its closure in 1960.[30]

In Aklavik the Anglicans did all they could to promote the cause of education. The first school at this post, built by Messrs Hoare and Merritt in 1919, was a small log building.[31] In 1937 this structure was replaced by a larger one after it was decided to bring the students from Shingle Point and Hay River together here.[32]

Aklavik was an ideal location for a school. The initial successes of the Anglican missionaries prompted the Catholics to follow suit quickly. In 1925 they established the Immaculate Conception mission at Aklavik. This mission consisted of a complex of relatively large buildings comprising a hospital, a boarding school, a school, a day nursery and an orphanage.[33]

Despite its size, the Catholic mission at Aklavik could not stem the tide of progress and in 1955 the entire town was moved and the inhabitants installed in a modern residential development.[34]

Some schools had initially been used for other purposes. In his investigation, the researcher will attempt to discover the original functions of school buildings in order to determine if he is not dealing with buildings converted into schools. The school at Fort McPherson is a building whose identity warrants such an investigation. It was established in what was originally a Baffin Trading Company store which had to be moved using dogs, a feat which, as one eye witness reports, was accomplished not without some difficulty:

> This store-house, eighteen feet by twelve, was transported by dogs. Ninety-seven dogs were hitched to the komatik runners on which the building was mounted. And what a sight it was, this strange equipage trundling across the icebound, undulating countryside behind swarms of dogs in numerous fan-hitches. The owners of the dogs ran along beside the great outspread fan of traces, ready with dog whips to break up any fight their animals might engage in.[35]

Despite everything, the operation was completed successfully. In this newly developed region, everything has a certain transitory air and even towns can cease to exist. Around 1970 the federal government decided to move the town of Fort Rae to Edzo, because the terrain at Fort Rae was too boggy.[36] All things considered, there is little that is conducive to the conservation of old school buildings in this part of the country.

On the basis of research findings thus far, we can be certain of the existence today of only one such school building: St. Mary's school in Dawson.[37] Constructed in 1904, this building (Fig. 3) had four classrooms when it was first opened. It was closed in 1956 and converted into a parish hall. Having served the Catholic school population of the city of Dawson, it has fared better than the missionary institutions. Because this school has always been occupied, the decision to close it was fairly slow in coming and, when it was finally made, another use was found for the structure.

## Conclusion

Until the federal government took over responsibility for the education of the natives of the Northwest Territories, the situation there remained almost static in this regard. Education was the responsibility of the Anglican and Catholic churches which, despite government assistance, had to manage with the means at hand. Between 1942 and 1943, government grants totalled only $33 225.15 for all the schools in the Northwest Territories.[38] This was clearly insufficient. During the 1943-44 school year, only 170 children of a total school-age population of 2 450 were enrolled in the mission schools of the Northwest Territories.[39] The mission schools managed to give only a handful of Amerindians and Inuit a minimum amount of general knowledge. Because each missionary institution received only meagre support from outside, it could survive only by resorting to short-term, makeshift measures. In such a context, it was impossible to set up an effective system of education.

Worse still, a 1960 report concluded that the education given these to few students was not consistent with the living conditions in such an environment and therefore did more harm than good.[40] In addition to religious instruction, the school program provided the students with only a minimum amount of knowledge which would have been more useful in the southern part of the country than in a region where survival depended mainly on one's hunting and fishing skills. This lack of success led to the closure of the last missionary school in 1960.[41]

Today, children attend modern schools.[42] The old school buildings have almost all disappeared and while, like their predecessors, some of the new schools are residential institutions, they are being increasingly managed by the native people themselves,[43] a lesson undoubtedly learned from the experience of the missionary schools.

The missionary-school phase is now at an end. Until evidence to the contrary is found, it would appear that St. Mary's school in Dawson is the last witness to a time when the only whites attracted to the Northwest Territories came to trade with the Amerindians, to govern them or to preach the gospel to them.

## Notes

1 Field investigations were impossible because of budgetary constraints. For this reason, the findings presented here are of a preliminary nature and a certain amount of time will be required to verify all this information in Ottawa.

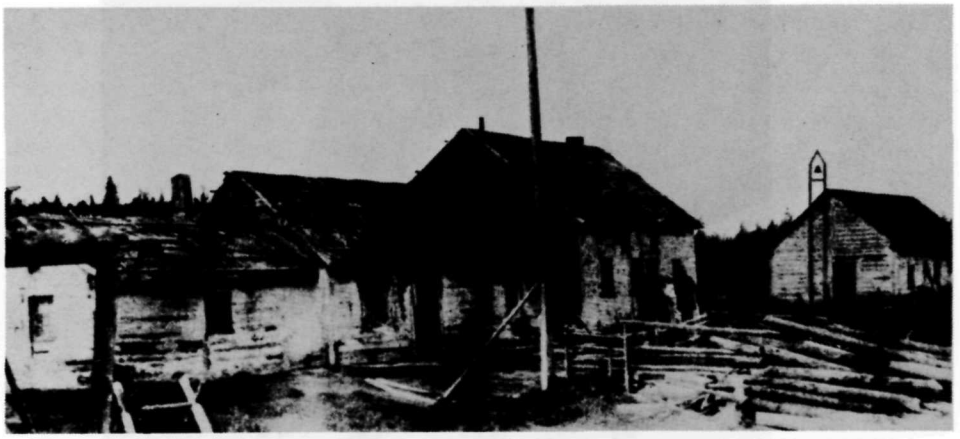
2 Thomas John Sawyer, "A History of the Church in the Yukon," Bachelor's thesis (Bachelor of Divinity), University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, April 1966, p. 40.

3 Right Reverend Donald Ben Marsh, "A History of the Work of the Anglican Church in the Area now Known as the Diocese of the Arctic," The Arctic News (1967), p. 3.

4 G.J. Wherrett, "Survey of Health Conditions and Medical and Hospital Services in the North West Territories," The Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science, Vol. 11, No. 1 (February 1945), p. 58.

5 W.G. Devitt, "History of Education in the Northwest Territories," in Education North of 60; A Report Prepared by Members of the Canadian Association of School Superintendents and Inspectors in the Department of Northern Affairs and Natural Resources (hereafter called Education North of 60) (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1965), p. 61.
6 Reverend Father S. Lesage, Sacred Heart Mission, 1858-1958; Fort Simpson, N.W.T. (n.p.: n.p., 1958), p. 45.
7 Ibid., p. 51.
8 Communication from Mrs. Susan Elizabeth Quirt to the author, June 27, 1981.
9 E.P. Lawton, "A Study of the Attitudes of Indian Parents Toward Education in Fort Rae," Master's thesis, College of Education, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, August 1970, p. 29-30.
10 W.G. Devitt, op. cit., pp. 61-62.
11 Ibid., p. 62. Note: The opening of a school at Aklavik in 1933 eventually brought about the closure of the teaching institutions at Hay River and Shingle Point.
12 Thomas John Sawyer, op. cit., p. 34.
13 D.W. Simpson, "Accommodation for Learning and Living," in Education North of 60, p. 25.
14 Ibid., p. 26.
15 Margery Hinds, School House in the Arctic (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1958), p. 166.
16 Ibid., p. 165.
17 "A Century at Fort Simpson," The Arctic News (Spring 1959), p. 10.
18 Ibid., p. 5.
19 Ibid., p. 11.
20 Pierre Duchaussois, OMI, Femmes héroïques (Montréal: Rayonnement, 1959), p. 49.
21 Reverend Father S. Lesage, op. cit., p. 11.
22 Ibid., p. 30.
23 Ibid., pp. 122-125.
24 John Campbell Wallace, "Hay River, N.W.T.," Master's Thesis, Department of Geography, University of Alberta, Edmonton, April 1966, p. 16.
25 Ibid., p. 18.
26 "A Veteran Returns," The Arctic News (Oct. 1956), p. 4.
27 Thomas John Sawyer, op. cit., p. 50.
28 Ibid., p. 40.
29 Report of the Committee on Education for the Yukon Territory (hereafter called Report of the Committee) (n.p.: n.p., 1960), p. 113.
30 Ibid., p. 98.
31 Right Reverend Donald Ben March, op. cit., p. 7.
32 "Parish Profile," The Arctic News (August 1977), p. 13.
33 Pierre Duchaussois, op. cit., pp. 12 and 20.
34 "The Old and the New Aklavik," The Canadian Architect, Vol. 1, No. 11 (Nov. 1956), pp. 23-25.
35 Margery Hinds, op. cit., p. 164.
36 E.P. Lawton, op. cit., p. 51.
37 Communications from Reverend Father M. Bobillier and Mrs. Valerie Baggaley to the author during the initial phase of this research project.

38 Andrew Moore, "Survey of Education in the Mackenzie District," The Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Feb. 1945), p. 70.
39 Ibid.
40 Report of the Committee, p. 97.
41 W.G. Booth, "The Centralized School," in Education North of 60, p. 97.
42 L'éducation des Indiens du Canada (Ottawa: Information Canada, 1973), p. 8.
43 Ibid., p. 15.



**1. Chapel and mission at Fort Norman in 1898**
It can be seen that the residence was enlarged several times to meet changing needs. Because of its rustic appearance, it seems little more than a temporary shelter by comparison with the chapel. (The Arctic News, Spring 1959.)

**2. Fire in the Dawson public school in 1957**
In these semi-desert areas, not all communities were able to afford the luxury of a fire-fighting service. When fire broke out in a building, particularly if it was a wooden structure, people had to watch the spectacle from a safe distance. (Public Archives Canada C-20106.)

**3. St. Mary's School, Dawson**

The ground floor was used as a classroom while the classrooms on the second floor were converted into a chapel, which explains the presence of the bell-tower. This school replaced the first school building, built in 1899, which had become too small. It is more like a semi-urban school than a missionary teaching institution. (Reverend Father M. Bobillier.)

3. St. Mary's School, Dawson

The ground floor was used as a classroom while the classrooms on the second floor were converted into a chapel, which explains the presence of the bell-tower. This school replaced the first school building, built in 1899, which had become too small. It is more like a semi-urban school than a missionary teaching institution. (Reverend Father M. Bobillier.)

ISSN: 0228-1228

Published by authority of
the Minister of the Environment


Canada