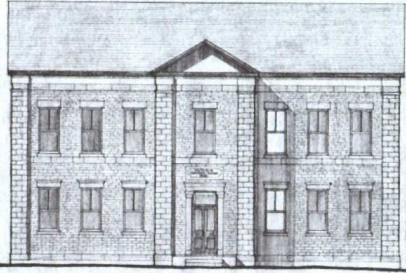




Built in Brockville

Accounts of Local Historic Architecture
by **Doug Grant**

Victoria Common School 28 Wall Street, Built in 1855



My drawing of the front of Victoria School.

Victoria School, built 153 years ago, might claim to be the oldest remaining school building in the city, if it were not for the existence of another building, which stands on the rock at the south-west corner of Perth and George Streets. That old stone building, as far back as 1868, was known as the "Old Rock School". Victoria School, however, certainly has the distinction of being the longest-operating school in Brockville for 116 years when it was closed about 1971.

From Town of Brockville records, kept in the early 1850s, it is possible to put together a picture of this elementary school system. The school board was an agent of the town council and received certain of its funds and also money from the provincial government.

It was in this period, that the idea of consolidating all the elementary students in one central building was conceived. The school board of the time was also far-sighted enough to acquire property for the future needs of the town and land was purchased in each of the three wards. The former District Surveyor for the Counties of Leeds and Grenville, Thomas Hume

An older photo of Victoria School taken from the west side of Wall Street Church.



was approached to prepare designs for, perhaps, three possible schools in the summer of 1854. He was a recognized architectural designer in that period in the Brockville area. These proposed school building designs were completed and presented for approval by the middle of November.

Work was started almost immediately that winter on the most central of the newly purchased sites - the one on Wall street just north of the County Jail. A local builder, William Holmes was given the contract for construction, and proceeded with the foundations, it appears, during January of 1855.

The two men mainly responsible for all this activity were chairman of the Common School Board, Dr. Thomas Reynolds, and the board secretary, David Wylie (also publisher of the Recorder). It is interesting that an account in the Brockville Recorder on April 24, 1856, describes some of the background to the building of Victoria School:

"The town being very compact, an agitation was commenced a few years since, to consolidate all the common schools, and to erect a suitable building in a central position, capable of containing all the scholars of the town. It was urged that this would give greater facilities for the classification of scholars, and that the elementary and higher branches could thus be taught beneath the same roof, while the school would be essentially a common one. The originators of this liberal movement, Mr.

D. (David) Wylie and Dr. (Thomas) Reynolds, at first met with most inveterate opposition; but at length their efforts appear to have been appreciated, for a building upon that plan is now constructed (at a cost of £3,000), and in use, which presents quite a collegiate appearance. It contains five

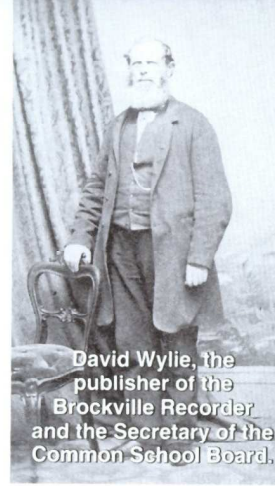
compartments, two above and two below, for the opposite sexes, and is designed for 400 scholars . . ."

By January of 1856, the new school was being readied for its first students as the new stoves were installed by the firm of Snook and Cole, and 11 cords of wood were delivered for the rest of the winter. Rev. John McMurray, minister of St. John's Presbyterian Church, previously Superintendent of Education, was installed as the first teacher of the Victoria Common School, and later became the principal.

Throughout the rest of 1856, there were endless details needed to complete the setting up of the school.

The complete school must have indeed presented a very imposing, strong view to those who first saw it. Constructed of rough-cut solid limestone, probably quarried from William Holmes' own quarry which still exists at Oxford and Broadway Avenues in the east end. It must have been a relatively large structure for its day. Not particularly flashy, but with its structural elements expressed boldly. The arrangement of windows within its exterior walls is regular and balanced and the two tall storeys were completed by a full basement with large bell tower and sloping roof.

Very little has changed on the exterior over the years since it was opened. The bell tower is no more and contemporary iron fire escapes stretch down on each end. The interior has undergone drastic renovations in recent years to accommodate the county offices.



David Wylie, the publisher of the Brockville Recorder and the Secretary of the Common School Board.

The grade 8 class of Miss Bessie Smart standing in front of Victoria School in 1945. Can any of our readers identify anyone here?

