

Canadian Showcase, Chicago, 1893

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Canadian Showcase, Chicago, 1893

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The small but handsome Canadian Pavilion at the Chicago World's Fair of 1893 (Fig. 2) is a little-known building of considerable importance. Its design was a collaboration between two people who served as Chief Architect of Canada, and it marked an important step in the emergence of Canada as a nation in its own right.



FIGURE 1. Canadian Log House, International Centennial Exposition, Philadelphia, 1876 (From *Canadian Illustrated News*, xiv, 15 July 1876; photo: Public Archives of Canada).

The differences between the 1893 pavilion and the rustic log cabin which had been the country's shop window at the International Centennial Exposition of 1876 in Philadelphia (Fig. 1) demonstrate the tremendous cultural strides taken by the young Dominion in the intervening seventeen years. The contrast was deliberate since, in the words of the Canadian Commissioner for the Fair, 'the intention of the Columbian Exposition was largely to show the advancement of each nation in culture and in the arts of civilization since . . . 1876.'¹

The design of the pavilion at Chicago seems to have been laid out in its broad lines by Thomas Fuller, Chief Architect of the Department of Public Works between 1881 and 1896, and worked out in detail by his assistant and successor, David Ewart.² Sent to Chicago in August

¹ 'Report of the Executive Commissioner for Canada to the World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893,' in Public Archives of Canada (hereafter PAC), RG 72, vol. 105, 17.

² In addition to the report cited in note 1, the chief sources of factual information on the Canadian Pavilion are the letter-book kept by Ewart while in Chicago (PAC, RG 72, vol. 104) and Fuller's letter-book for August to November 1892 (PAC, RG 11, vol. 3876).

Thomas Fuller is best known as the co-architect of the Parliament Building (1859-66) and Langevin Block (1883-89) in Ottawa, the New York State Capitol at Albany (ca. 1867-75), and the San Francisco Town Hall (1871-96). His distinguished architectural career in Canada, Britain, and the United States is described in Walter E. Langsam, 'Thomas Fuller and Augustus Laver: Victorian Neo-Baroque and Second Empire vs. Gothic Revival in North America,' *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, xxix (1970), 270. See also Christopher A. Thomas, 'Architectural Image for the Dominion: Scott, Fuller, and the Stratford Post Office,' *Journal of Canadian Art History*, iii (1976), 83-94; and Thomas, 'Dominion Architecture: Fuller's Canadian Post Offices, 1881-96' (M.A. thesis, University of Toronto, 1978). On the work of David Ewart, see Gregory P. Utas, 'The Romanesque Post Office: Prairie Examples' (Screening Paper, Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada, 1977).



FIGURE 2. Thomas Fuller and David Ewart, Canadian Pavilion, World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893 (From J.W. Buel, *The Magic City*, 1894).

1892 as supervising architect for the Canadian Commissioners, Ewart must have taken with him a preliminary design prepared by Fuller; for in a letter to Fuller he was later to describe the tower of the finished building as being 'similar to the design you made first.'³ Nevertheless, in addition to minor changes at least one major reworking of the design was needed before late October, when the pavilion was at last acceptable to Fair authorities, especially Daniel H. Burnham, who had overall responsibility for construction. In the process, Ewart was forced to reduce the dimensions of the building substantially.

³ PAC, RG 72, vol. 104, 104 (letter of 3 Feb. 1893).

⁴ Manitoba had originally requested office space in the pavilion but later withdrew, whereupon the space was allotted to the North West Territories (the present Saskatchewan and Alberta).

Though measuring only forty by sixty-six feet and just thirty-two feet in height to the top of the parapet (with a tower fifty-six feet tall), the building contained reception areas, a post office and press room, as well as quarters for the Canadian Commissioners and for the provinces and territories that participated in the Fair. Representatives of Nova Scotia, Quebec, Ontario, the North West Territories, and British Columbia all had offices there.⁴ As part of their contribution to the cost, Ontario, Quebec, and British Columbia provided appropriate varieties of local woods for panelling and furnishing their offices. This made of the entire building a beautiful and comprehensive display of Canadian decorative woods.

In some respects the Canadian Pavilion at Chicago can be related to the many, mostly small, public buildings in Canada designed by Fuller

while he was Chief Architect. Projecting towers, some as oddly-proportioned as this one, became a hallmark of small-town Canadian post offices of that era, and there is much in common between the over-scaled detail on the tower of the Chicago pavilion and what appeared on many of Fuller's post offices. Although he is best known for his work in the 'Modern Gothic,' some of Fuller's later post offices (such as the one in Victoria, B.C., of 1894-98) took on a classical tone. This tendency was carried further by Ewart during his own term as Chief Architect (1896-1914) in buildings such as the post office at Sarnia, Ontario, of ca. 1900-04, and the Dominion Observatory in Ottawa of ca. 1902-05, the latter a structure with striking similarities to the Chicago pavilion.

What determined the pavilion's style above all, however, was probably the homogeneous Beaux-Arts classicism which had been imported from the eastern United States by Fair authorities.⁵ Even the choice of exterior materials was controlled: the building's cost of just over \$18,000 exceeded the estimate by \$3,000 only because of the insistence of Exposition authorities that it be sheathed in 'staff,' the artificial material whose marble-like appearance gave the site the nickname 'White City.'⁶

Modest as it was, the very presence of this little building at the Fair was evidence of the growth in

Canada's stature in the years since 1876. The Canadian Commission fought for – and achieved – recognition of Canada as an exhibitor in its own right, and not merely as part of the British Empire, on the grounds that Canada had received a direct invitation from the United States government 'just as France or Germany or Russia had received invitations.'⁷ Combined with Canada's creditable showing in the fine arts exhibits and outstanding achievements in the manufacturing and agricultural displays,⁸ the little pavilion advertised Canada's progress towards full membership in the roll of nations.

⁵ See H.H. Bancroft, *The Book of the Fair: A Historical and Descriptive Presentation of the World's Science, Art, and Industry as viewed through the Columbian Exposition at Chicago in 1893* (Chicago, 1893). This work includes a photograph of the Canadian building.

⁶ According to Bancroft (p. 68), even though the natural surface of staff was white, it was nevertheless painted. A large spray-painting machine, operated by a crew of four men, was designed by Frank D. Millet, the person in charge of the Decoration Department of the Fair, to expedite the tedious task of painting the colossal buildings.

⁷ 'Report of the Executive Commissioner,' 17.

⁸ The official Report of the Commissioner (pp. 23-25) listed 2,126 awards to Canadians, including 963 for Manufacturing, 658 for Agriculture, and 192 for Liberal Arts; five awards were for oil paintings shown in competition with countries 'all older in art and showing a larger number of exhibits than did Canada' (p. 19). At Philadelphia no such awards had been made to Canadians.