COUNTRY SCHOOLS in Nineteenth-Century Eglinton and the Surrounding Toronto Area

by John P.M. Court

Abstract

The evolution of Ontario’s educational system has been well documented, but less so the stories of early schools in relation to their communities. With a multidisciplinary landscape approach, this case study traces the elusive pioneer history of Toronto’s oldest public school still in operation. During the nineteenth century it evolved from log, country schoolhouses to brick schools for a growing but still-rural small town.

From the beginning of the nineteenth century more public schools were built, and with longer endurance, in the outlying Township of York than in the Town of York or (from 1834) the City of Toronto. Until the 1850s, the City relied almost entirely upon private-venture schools and classical academies – even though its first elected board of school trustees for public education held office from 1816. Displaying the pioneer spirit of initiative, the Township’s public (“Common”) schools were invested from their origins with significant measures of local community resources and dedication. Those factors were consistently more crucial for their founding, growth and survival before mid-century than the sporadic initiatives of government.

Local commitment and voluntarism were especially cherished as values in York Township’s Eglinton community – later a part of North Toronto (1889), which in turn was annexed to the City in 1912. Self-reliance and a distancing from government were sharpened through the community’s inadvertent circumstance as the main battleground for the Upper Canada Rebellion of 1837.

John Fisher School, the oldest elementary school (as an institution, not as a structure) that still continues in operation, began in 1816 as a one-room, log schoolhouse on what is now Bayview Avenue. It was joined about a year later by a similar schoolhouse nearby on Yonge Street, established and run by Eglinton’s Methodist congregation, although controversy emerged over its independence by the 1840s. In fact, both schools were apparently sustained without government support until 1847.

In 1851, York Township built a one-room, brick schoolhouse for School Section 2, the Eglinton area, to replace the two pioneer log schools. This structure has been located as still in existence, now sequestered in a laneway behind Yonge Street and altered by additions to the front and rear, through successive private owners and uses. Its appearance as initially built, however, has been found to be almost identical to that of two township schools from the same era. Fortunately these two “sibling” schoolhouses can be enjoyed in their original context, since they continue to be preserved by dedicated public agencies as historic school museums.

Also extant, surrounded by later additions but maintained in its original use and location, is the 1851 schoolhouse’s elegant, two-storey successor, built in 1888 a stone’s throw east of Yonge on Erskine Avenue, and still proudly carrying on. The links between these four nineteenth-century structures which served School Section 2 are traced through the politics and events that gave rise to them, the character and ambitions of the community leaders found to have been responsible for creating each of them, and even a few of the pupils who attended them.

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