

NORTH LANARK COUNTY REGISTRY OFFICE, ALMONTE ONTARIO

- HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL ASSESSMENT -

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INTRODUCTION

The North Lanark County Registry Office, located in Almonte on Brougham Street at the corner of Clyde, was built in 1879. It is a warm grey stone building that presents a sophisticated rendering of Kivas Tully's revised standard design for Ontario registry offices. In fact, in most of its exterior particulars, it is the twin of the South Lanark Registry Office in Perth.

The Community of Almonte

The community of Almonte began as "Shepherd's Falls" in 1821 when a Mr. Shepherd opened a sawmill and grist mill on the site. Shepherd was later bought out by Daniel Shipman, a United Empire Loyalist, and the community was renamed "Shipman's Mills", later "Ramsayville" as the major centre in Ramsay Township, then "Almonte".

Almonte was located in the centre of excellent farming country, and was originally established as a local supply point. By the 1870s, when it became a police village, the community had a population of 2,500 --primarily of Scottish origin -- and was already established as a wool manufacturing centre. Ten years later, when a county atlas was prepared the village was described as having "thirty stores and about thirty-five other [commercial] establishments." As a manufacturing centre it possessed "two large gristing and flouring mills, two large foundries and machine shops, one pump and one 'dog power' churn

factory, two cabinet factories, two planing, sash and door factories, three sawmills, one shingle mill, four waggon and carriage, four blacksmith, and four carpenter shops, a boat-building establishment, a 'shoddy' mill and three large woollen factories"<sup>3</sup> in addition to various public facilities.

A description of the village contained in the Canadian Illustrated News in 1879 at the time the registry office was built, describes it as a centre that grew more by accident than design. According to the author:

The village site is hilly, and the older portion is laid out in an hap-hazard sort of way. One theory is that the first builders followed the line of a cow-path, but I presume the settlers naturally built near the shore of a river and that not being by any means straight, the streets subsequently made show all the windings. Anyhow, a great portion of the village is made up of streets which wind about and go up and down with a degree of independence .... A taste for the irregular is discernable among the buildings. It is very rare to find two houses exactly alike, and many are located as though the owners had suddenly got tired of moving them around. As for material, there are building of wood, of brick and of stone, the large mills, the churches and the schools being made of the latter ....

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Almonte was incorporated as a town in 1881.

There is considerable evidence to suggest that during the late nineteenth century, Almonte saw itself as the industrial centre of the county, devoid of the culture that so characterized the county town of Perth. Located as it was near an excellent source of water power, Almonte residents predicted a great future for the village in an age of electricity. They had few pretensions. "In fact there is now in Perth a sort of aristocratic element," said the Almonte Gazette in 1894, "-- a continuation of the better element in earlier days and resembling the conservative character of life in Britain. Such an element is impossible, or at least not to be found in Almonte". In fact Almonte

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did briefly flourish as a minor industrial centre early in the twentieth century, but its industrial accomplishments never over stripped its commercial justification as a reason for existence. For all of that, the town possesses what is architecturally an extremely sophisticated registry office -- a registry office that in design is far more evocative of the level of "culture" Almonte residents ascribe to Perth. A curious phenomenon that like many Scottish puzzles has its origin in shrewd native economy.

#### A Registry Office for North Lanark

In 1863 Almonte became a police village -- a contemporary bureaucratic designation declaring it to be the administrative centre for the north part of the county, secondary in importance only to the county town of Perth.<sup>6</sup>

John Menzies, a politically active Scot who owned 100 acres in the 11th Concession of Ramsay Township,<sup>7</sup> was appointed Registrar of North Lanark, and the county built a modest stone registry office on a portion of Lot 85 of the Anderson Section of the Village of Almonte.

In 1860, the Corporation of the United Counties of Lanark and Renfrew bought "the most northerly quarter" of Lot 85 from Mathew Anderson, merchant, and his wife Janet for a sum of forty dollars "for the purpose of erecting a Registry office and vault thereon according to law".<sup>8</sup> Anderson was owner of a large section of the Almonte townsite, land that had originally been granted to David Shepherd by Crown patent in 1829, sold to David Shipman in 1829, then<sup>9</sup> passed through the hands of various land speculators in the 1850s before

it was sub-divided by Mathew Anderson and sold off as town lots in the early 1860s. It is unlikely that any structure existed on the site prior to that time since the land appears to have been used as farm land until it was divided into town plots in the early 1850s.

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The registry office built by the county was a modest one storey structure of random cut, random coursed stone that remains today beside the present registry office on lot 85. When Sidney Smith, the newly appointed Inspector of Registry Offices, viewed the building in 1867 he described it as follows:

The building is of stone, well built, but only 30 x 20, without every part, but the vault is not fireproof nor vaulted. On the east side there are no windows, and, consequently, much of the space which would otherwise be of use is not available. The fastenings of the shutters to the vault are insecure. The doors are insufficient, and with a common lock afford no protection against fire or burglars. I would respectfully recommend that the Municipal authorities should at once be required to furnish iron grating for the windows, with proper iron shutters outside, and fastenings for the outside door as well; that proper vault doors, with improved locks, should be furnished, and the office made in every respect secure. The Registrar complains, and justly, that he is much cramped for want of room, and the time is not far distant when a vault of dimension almost equal in size to the present building will be required, but at this late season of the year little more can be done than to make the present office secure in the particulars above mentioned.

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Such complaints continued in the years immediately following, and the County slowly but conscientiously tried to keep pace with the new Inspector of Registry Offices' unceasing list of newly required repairs. Finally, in 1872 Inspector Smith's report contained the following words: "I have now no other recourse but to recommend that the county authorities should be required to erect a new ventilated office in accordance with the Government plans".

The plans Smith was referring to were standard plans for registry offices prepared by the province's chief architect, Kivas Tully, in 1868. At the

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time he was insisting changes be made to the Almonte registry office, Smith was not only involved in the process of bringing earlier registry offices up to standard: he was also concerned with making revisions to the standard registry office plan that existed.<sup>15</sup> He was abnormally pre-occupied with the physical characteristics of safe, secure registry accomodation, and his comments concerning the North Lanark office addressed individually each of the areas in which the county built structure fell short of "the Government plans".

The fact that it took five years to list all these shortcomings before reaching the inevitable conclusion that a new office should be built suggests that the North Lanark office was really not that bad. This was certainly the feeling of Lanark County warden Harry Gould who wrote protesting the recommendation.<sup>16</sup> According to Gould the alterations asked for earlier "have been completed according to the directions given, at an expense to the County of over eight hundred dollars", and the County had had enough. Clearly Smith was directed to curb his enthusiasm, for the following year his report contained this rationalization: "some improvements have been made upon the registry office of a very primitive kind but as the Books are rapidly increasing and a new office will be required in a few years it is not necessary to require further changes at present."<sup>17</sup> True to his statement, Smith did not mention accomodation in his reports on the North Lanark Office for 1874, '75,<sup>18</sup> '76, or '77.

### Construction of a New Registry Office

By 1878 Smith had decided it was time to take action. In June of that year Lanark County Council minutes include the information "We have had before us a communication from Sidney Smith, Inspector of Registry Offices, reporting the Registry Office at Almonte in a very unsatisfactory state, and requiring that steps be taken to sell it and erect a new one".<sup>19</sup> With true Scottish circumspection, the Council appointed a Committee on County Property to investigate the situation.

The Committee's report, submitted the following October, confirmed they had found the Almonte office "in a very bad state of repair. The building was poorly constructed in the first place, and is now too small for the present wants or future requirements of the Riding." The Committee recommended unanimously "that if the Village of Almonte would take the old one off our hands at a price that would be fair and reasonable and give the County a site upon which a new one could be erected to recommend the construction of a new one to be built with as little delay as possible."<sup>20</sup>

Land for the new registry office was acquired quickly. In mid November 1878, registry records show the County bought the remainder of Lot 85 from its owner, Daniel Galbraith, merchant.<sup>21</sup> Galbraith had purchased the land from Mathew Anderson in 1860, two days before the county bought the northerly quarter of the lot to construct the first registry office.<sup>22</sup> To date no record has been discovered to reveal how Galbraith used the property. It is possible he constructed a house upon it: the area is intensely residential and Galbraith

owned the lot for eighteen years. He sold it to the County for \$350, \$100 more than the City of Almonte received for the north quarter of the property with its stone registry office twelve years later.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, Galbraith may not have developed the property at all, but rather seized the opportunity to exchange the lot for other property owned by the town valued at \$350. Until further evidence appears, one possibility is as likely as the other. In either case, Almonte seems to have acted as middleman in the transaction, for Lanark County Council Minutes for January 1879 record "the Village of Almonte has given to the Corporation of the County of Lanark a suitable lot ... at a cost of \$350."<sup>24</sup> The site selected was a convenient one, for its location immediately beside the former registry office would permit files to be moved into the new office in a slow orderly fashion and would minimize disruption to registry operations.

Once it decided to act, the Lanark County Council was anxious to get on with the job. By January of 1879, Council Minutes reveal that its Committee "have procured plans and specifications for the erection of a new Registry Office ... with some minor improvements, the same size and dimensions as the Registry Office in the South Riding" and that "owing to a delay solely caused by the Inspector of Registry Offices not approving of these plans where sent to him we have been unable to advertise for tenders..."<sup>25</sup> This delay was not quite as irrational as the Council perceived. They evidently acted upon specifications the Inspector had provided for the registry office in Perth, constructed in 1872. During 1872, however, Inspector Smith had requested the provincial Chief Architect's office to make a series of changes to these plans<sup>26</sup> ,



changes that were further adapted according to suggestions made by registrars  
and submitted for official approval in 1874.<sup>27</sup> By 1879 when a new Registry  
Office was constructed in North Lanark, registry office plans in the Province  
of Ontario were being drawn to a changed set of specifications.

Any problems this caused seem to have been speedily rectified. In all probability  
Perth builder Duncan Kippen was retained to meld the new specifications with  
the plans for the Perth buildings, for the statement of accounts for construction  
of the new registry office includes a \$120 fee for "plans, specifications and  
inspection".<sup>28</sup> Kippen was a Perth contractor and builder who had formerly  
been a member of the Council.<sup>29</sup> The design he submitted was almost identical  
to the one used for the Perth registry office.

Construction tenders were advertised early in 1879, and the lowest bid received  
from Allan Lister for \$2879 was accepted.<sup>30</sup> By June of 1879 the Construction  
Committee was able to report to Council that "the work is now progressing".  
The building shell had been completed by October of 1879,<sup>31</sup> and its  
furnishings were finished during late 1879. By January of 1880 the Committee  
reported the office ready to be occupied as soon as the Government Inspector  
gave his approval.<sup>32</sup> Exactly when registry facilities moved into the  
building is uncertain: the Committee viewed the facility for final approval  
in January or February 1880, and by June Registrar Menzies had requested  
permission to purchase further furniture and to move a counter.<sup>33</sup> No  
record of the change appears in Inspector Smith's reports until 1881 when he  
states "The new office has been completed is a good building and is now  
occupied".<sup>34</sup> All parties seem to have been satisfied with the new accommodations.

## The Building

The exterior design of the building finally constructed appears to have been almost identical to that which survives today. Its most prominent architectural feature is a high arched central entrance flanked by two parallel arched windows marked by prominent keystones and quoins. The keystone and quoin motif is carried through to the windows on the sides and rear of the building, although these are flat and not arched in appearance. The North Lanark County Registry Office's is built of grey and buff limestone, cut but not dressed, and relatively evenly coursed with narrow but prominently mortared bonds. The building is detailed with cornerstones, window and door surrounds, lintels and keystones of contrasting dark brown stone, cut and vermiculated. Its steps are made of the same dark brown stone, as is its central chimney. With some exceptions the design of the building is almost identical to that found on the South Lanark County Registry Office in Perth.

The differences in the exterior design of the Perth and Almonte buildings are minor, but interesting. Their front facades are identical in design form, while the rear and sides of the buildings vary only in the extent of the arch over the windows. The arch over the Perth windows is considerably more exaggerated than those in Almonte -- perhaps reflecting a deliberate attempt to reduce the extent to which the Almonte building is stylized. The other notable difference is that the stone trim of the two buildings is different. That in Perth is smooth cut matched grey limestone. That in Almonte is a cut dark brown stone similar to the stone used in the Perth Jail in that it has vermiculated detail.

This difference in stone may be accounted for by an excerpt on Almonte in the Canadian Illustrated News in January 1879 which indicates there is "a capital stone quarried in the vicinity",<sup>35</sup> in that it argues the stone may have come from the Almonte area. The Almonte building is also more highly elevated than the Perth building, and it contains air vents leading into the foundation and also the apex of the stonework near the roof in the rear. This is accounted for by some of the amendments Smith instituted in the standard plan approved in 1874, for he was concerned with a lack of ventilation in the early<sup>36</sup> offices.

According to fire insurance plans,<sup>37</sup> the roof of the building was once made of slate in agreement with specifications originally laid down by the standard plan for registry offices drawn by Kivas Tully.<sup>38</sup> There was once a lean-to attached to the north-east side of the building: this was added just<sup>39</sup> after construction for use as a coal-house. A photograph of the building taken about 1900 also shows a wooden vestibule covering the front steps and<sup>40</sup> front door, carefully integrated under the arch over the front door area.

This early photograph shows the building surrounded by a wrought iron fence which remains today. The ornate ironwork is supported by stone which matches the stonework in the building. Along the south east side of the building, both stone and ironwork are divided into eight foot segments to span the changing dimensions of the hillside, terminating in an ornate pillar topped by an iron capital at the perimiter of the lot. It is possible that the ironwork for the fence was supplied by the local Rosamond foundry which was active at the time<sup>41</sup> the registry office was built.

Today the roof of the building is asbestos shingle, and its front door is flanked by ornamental lanterns. Neither of these features are original. (The lanterns are not evident in the 1900 photograph of the building.)

The interior of the building is appears to be little changed. There is a vestibule with a semi-circular roof just inside the front door with doors leading to both left and right. The interior is also divided into three equal rooms with barrel vaulted roofs in the typical registry office fashion. although the front room has been sub-divided by a partial divider from the middle of the vestibule to the structural wall between the first and second rooms. Large bolts remain on the windows and doorways to indicate where metal shutters and heavy metal doors once hung -- again according to the standard registry office plan. One original metal door remains as the south interior door leading from the vestibule area.

The plan of the interior of the building drawn by registrar J.C. Smithson in 1969 describes its present configuration fairly accurately. <sup>42</sup> When this is compared with the standard registry office plan prepared by Kivas Tully's office <sup>43</sup> it is clear that the original structural configuration of the building remains intact. The only feature that remains in doubt is the original placement of the counters, since the major changes to the standard plan that Inspector Sidney Smith instituted in 1874 concerned ventilation for the buildings and the placement of interior counters. The two different counter <sup>44</sup> placements shown in the Tully plan, one in pencil and one lithographed, reflect a contemporary concern with reducing the registrar's work of moving ledgers by pushing the public area closer to the vault.

### Community Perceptions

The community of Almonte clearly regards the registry office as one of its important early buildings. When the Ontario government began a review of registry office accommodation in the province in the early 1980s, Mr. J. Rivington then Chairman of the Almonte LACAC, wrote to the Ministry of Government Services stressing the value of the building to the community.<sup>45</sup> When MGS proposed an unsympathetic renovation of the building in 1985 -- an addition which would occupy the entire building lot -- community sentiment was vehemently opposed. The building was thoroughly recorded in 1978 by a co-operative project undertaken by the Almonte Architectural Conservation Advisory Committee and the Ministry of Culture and Recreation to record heritage structures in the town of Almonte.<sup>46</sup> Jean MacPherson, current president of the Almonte LACAC, says the community has wanted to designate the building for a long time but does not believe this is legally possible.<sup>47</sup> The community of Almonte is aware that a new registry office will soon be built, and is already thinking of new uses for the building.

## Endnotes

1. Almonte Gazette, 26 January, 1894, "History of Lanark County: The Town of Almonte", Vol. XXVII, No. 17, p. 1.
2. Irwin & Co., City of Ottawa Directory, August 1873-August 1874. To Which is added Directories of Almonte ... and the Townships of County of Carleton (Montreal: John Lovell, 1873), p. 166.
3. H. Belden & Co., Illustrated Atlas of Lanark County, reprinted as Historical Atlas of Lanark & Renfrew Counties, 1880-1881 (Owen Sound: Richardson, Bond and Wright Ltd., 1972), p. 19.
4. Canadian Illustrated News, 4 January 1879, "The Cities and Towns of Canada Illustrated: XIV Almonte", p. 7.
5. Almonte Gazette, 26 January, 1894, "History of Lanark County: The Town of Almonte", Vol. XXVII, No. 17, p. 1.
6. Gazette (Almonte), "History of Lanark County: The Town of Almonte", January 26, 1894, Vol. XXVII No. 17, p. 1.
7. H. Belden & Co., Illustrated Atlas of Lanark County reprinted by Richardson, Bond and Wright Ltd. as Historical Atlas of Lanark & Renfrew Counties, 1880-1881 (Owen Sound, Richardson, Bond and Wright Ltd., 1972), p. 42.
8. North Lanark County Registry Office, Instrument 499, August 29 1860, Bargain and Sale of Property Lot 85 Plan 6262, Anderson Section, between Mathew Anderson and wife and The Corporation of the United Counties of Lanark and Renfrew.
9. Land Titles record ownership of the same 13 1/2 acres initially purchased by John Romanus from Daniel Shipman in 1852 (Instrument 36), by James D. Gemmill from John Romanus in 1858 (Instrument 110), by Mathew Anderson from James D. Gemmill in 1859 (Instrument 152).
10. Lanark County Registry Office, Survey by Joseph M. Cromwell.
11. "Report of the Inspector of Registry Offices," in Ontario. Journals of Assembly, 1867-68. (Toronto: 1868), Vol. 1, p. 189.
12. Archives of Ontario. Department of the Provincial Secretary, RG 8. Correspondence 1-1-D, 1870, 1871, 21 June 1871. All reports by Inspector Smith on the North Lanark Registry Office.
13. RG 8 1-1-D, 1872, file 877. Report of the Inspector of Registry Offices, dated 12 June 1877.

14. Archives of Ontario, Department of Public Works, RG 15, Plans and Specifications, E-5, "Particulars Respecting Registry Offices for the Province of Ontario", 1868, Vol. 15.
15. Ibid pencilled notes dated 8 Feb. 1872.
16. RG 8, 1-1-D, file 877, 8 July 1872.
17. RG 8, 1-1-D, file 907, 28 June 1873.
18. RG 8, 1-1-D, file 1976, 3 December 1874; file 1802, 29 December 1875; file 1746, 18 October 1876; file 1917, 26 December 1877.
19. Archives of Ontario, Lanark County Records, MG 245, County Council Minutes, June 1878, Appendix 6, Report of the Committee on Contingencies.
20. PAO, MG 245, Minutes, October 1878, Appendix 1, Report of the Committee on County Property.
21. Registry Office, North Lanark County, Instrument 2865, November 13 1878, Bargain and Sale.
22. Registry Office, North Lanark County, Instrument 496, 27 August 1860, Bargain and Sale.
23. Registry Office, North Lanark County, Instrument 3033, 18 Feb. 1880, Bargain and Sale, County to Town of Almonte for price of \$1.00. Then, Instrument 5620, 11 July 1890, Bargain and Sale, William Thoburn et al (representing the Town of Almonte) to Norman Stevenson for the price of \$250.
24. PAO, MG 245, Minutes, January 1879, Appendix 2.
25. Ibid
26. PAO RG 15 S-1 file 1598, suggested amendments, 8 February 1872.
27. PAO, RG 15, E-5, Vol. 15.
28. PAO, RG 245, Minutes, October 1879, Appendix 1.
29. Lanark and Renfrew Atlas, 1880-81, p.42.
30. PAO, MG 245, Minutes, June 1879, Appendix 2.
31. Ibid, October 1879, Appendix 1.
32. Ibid, January 1880, Appendix 1.
33. Ibid, June 1880, Appendix 1.

34. PAO, RG 8, 1-1-D, file 1469, 19 July 1881.
35. Canadian Illustrated News, 4 January 1879, "The Cities and Towns of Canada Illustrated: XVI Almonte" p. 7
36. PAO, RG 15, E-5, Vol. 15.
37. Public Archives Canada, National Map Collection, Canadian Underwriters Association Fire Insurance Plan of the Town of Almonte. January 1950. NMC 9275. 5/8.
38. RG 15 E5 Vol.15.
39. PAO, MG 245, Lanark County Council, Minutes, October 1880, Appendix 6.
40. North Lanark Registry Office, photograph, c. 1900 (North Lanark Registry Office).
41. CIN, p. 10.
42. Almonte LACAC file, North Lanark Registry Office.
43. RG 15 S-1 No. 1777, Box 5.
44. Ibid
45. Almonte LACAC, file Registry Office, letter Mr. J. Revington to Douglas J. Wiseman, Minister of Government Services, 28 July 1982.
46. Barbara Ross, "North Lanark County Registry Office, Almonte" in Almonte LACAC, file Registry Office, compiled July 1978.
47. Interview with Mrs. Jean MacPherson, Chairwoman, Almonte LACAC, Almonte, 14 May 1987.



APPENDICES

ILLUSTRATIONS

## Illustrations

<u>Contacts</u>	<u>Description</u>
7, 8 29,30	south side
9,10,11	facade
12,13,14	north-west 3/4 facade
15	facade, former registry office next door
16,17,18	south (/east) facade former registry office
19,20	north side
21	gate, north-west corner of lot
22-28	details, front facade
31	terminal post, south east perimeter of lot
32-35	fence, south side of lot
36	north facade, former registry office

<u>Slides</u>	<u>Description</u>
1,2,3,4,5	facade
6.7.8.9	facade details
10,11	site showing relationship to former registry office
12	rear
13.14	north facade
15,16,17	south facade showing stepped fence
18,19,20	fence details