

RED RIVER SETTLEMENT (PRE-1871)

During the 18th and early 19th centuries, while the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) held sway throughout the interior of northern North America, educational opportunities typically were limited to the children of Company officers, and then usually only to the male children. For these boys this meant a return to Great Britain or the Canadas. For the vast majority of the population, formal education was largely unnecessary. Their livelihoods, tied as they were to manual labour for the Company, the buffalo hunt, or to subsistence farming, required intimate knowledge of nature and the ability to organize men and materials. At that time these occupations rarely required literacy or knowledge of culture that a formal education might provide.

The arrival of the Selkirk Settlers beginning in 1812, and the establishment of a sedentary agricultural community, eventually undermined the economy of the fur trade and the buffalo hunt. It also ushered in a new phase in educational opportunity. The fur trade, with its rigid hierarchies and limited changes for advancement, had only dallied with in-country education with a half-hearted – and short-lived – attempt in 1808 when it provided three teachers from England to instruct the children of Company factors and servants. The hopes of Lord Selkirk and the expectations of his farmers for better opportunities for their children were not to be ignored.

The first school activity for the Selkirk Settlers (who arrived here in 1812) was held, briefly, in 1815 in the governor's house, with the governor himself often leading the instruction. The first permanent schools were not provided until the arrival of missionaries of the Roman Catholic Church (in 1818) and Anglican Church (in 1820). For the next fifty years, the educational needs of the settlement largely were met by church-funded schools operated by Anglicans, Roman Catholics and Presbyterians, and by a small number of non-denominational schools.

The intent of each denomination was generally the same - to provide instruction that would direct children in the tenets and requirements of the religion and to encourage peace, docility and obedience to authority. Anglican and Catholic schools also eagerly accepted Aboriginal children as residential students, underlining the proselytizing component of education at that time. Primary level instruction included writing, mathematics and geography. Instruction for girls, who were often segregated, focused on domestic activities.

The ambitions of the churches and its most promising students quickly lead to the provision of secondary level education, with instruction in philosophy, geometry, classics, and in English schools, French. Bishop Joseph Provencher offered higher level education as early as 1822 and St. Boniface College was opened in 1857. The Anglicans, meanwhile, were operating Red River Academy in 1833, later to become St. John's College. Presbyterians were not able to build their own secondary facility until 1873.

For the Anglicans and Roman Catholics the administrative framework was generally the same. The clergy hired the teachers and oversaw the content of the curriculum. The cost for schooling was generally £5, although those facilities that combined dormitory accommodations charged more - about £20.4 The cost of non-denominational schooling was beyond the reach of most settlers; for example, a European-style finishing school for girls established by Miss Matilda Davis near Lower Fort Garry charged £50 for a year of education, room and board. The exception came with the Presbyterians, who undertook a system in which school policy and teacher employment was decided by trustees chosen at a public meeting.

In 1849 there were 12 schools operating at Red River attended by almost 500 students; by 1870 there were 33 schools, almost evenly divided between Protestant and Roman Catholic parishes. While most schools were actually held in homes, churches, convents (Figure 1) or other facilities that were not always conducive to learning, there were frequent efforts to provide purpose-built facilities throughout the settlement (Figures. 2 and 3)

Most school buildings were of log construction, but a few were built of stone. For the most part the schools were modelled on domestic architectural traditions. Log schools were generally small, consisting of only one room, and were invariably crowded. A simple thatched gable roof covered the structure, which would have been built according to the prevalent construction technology of the period. Called Red River frame or piece-sur-piece, this procedure entailed the placement of short logs into slots cut into a series of vertical logs.

The actual appointments of most schools were minimal: usually just a blackboard and globe. Often, a sloping board was situated on the room's sunny side, under the windows, upon which students practiced writing in their copy books. For larger buildings in the settlement, builders often looked to the Georgian architectural tradition for a model. That style, typically used in domestic building, featured a symmetrical composition, hipped roof and small dormer windows in the roof. The afore-mentioned Miss Davis School (actually the dormitory for the girls) is one of the best remaining examples of Georgian architecture in the province (Figure 4)

The builders of the Presbyterian school at Kildonan drew their architectural inspiration from church precedents (Figure 5). Built of stone, the building is low, with evenly-spaced windows on each long wall (Figure 6). Primary level students were taught in a large front space, while secondary level pupils received instruction in a small room at the back.

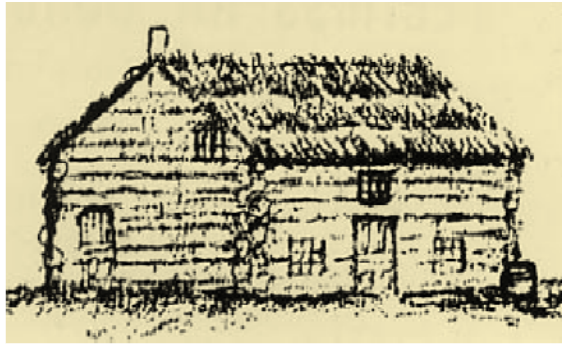


Figure 1.

St. Norbert Roman Catholic convent and school, 1858. The illustration shows roughly constructed log walls and a thatched roof, typical of the era. Demolished. (PAM*)



Figure 2.

St. John's Anglican Church and school, ca. 1830. The tiny log school building sits on the right side of the illustration. Demolished. (PAM)



Figure 3.

Red River Academy in the Parish of St. John's, 1852. The collection of three small buildings shows the influence of Georgian architectural styling, with the hipped roofs and symmetrical facades. Demolished. (PAM)

* Throughout this report, the abbreviation PAM is used to signify Provincial Archives of Manitoba.



Figure 4.

Residence section for Miss Davis' School for Girls, 1857-58. Classes were held in a wood frame building behind the main structure. (PAM)



Figure 5.

Kildonan (West) School, now known as Nesbit Hall, built in 1864. With its small tower, this Presbyterian school has a church-like appearance. (PAM)

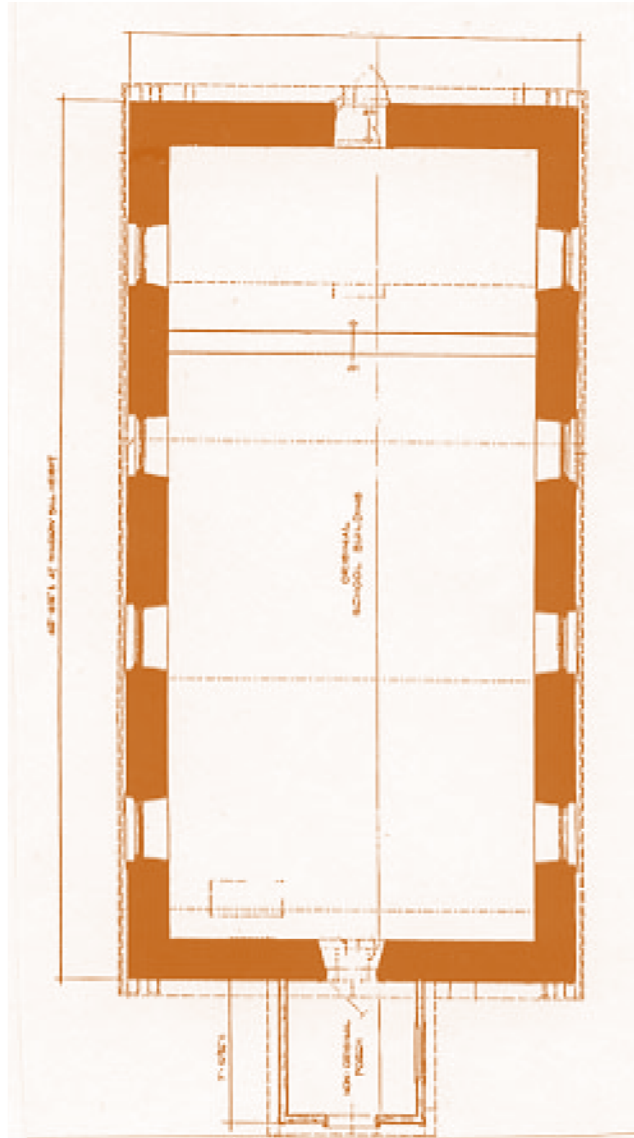


Figure 6. Plan of Kildonan (West) school. Primary level students were taught in the larger section. Secondary instruction was carried out in the smaller area (originally enclosed) at the back. The church was designed and built under the supervision of Reverend James Nesbit, who had apprenticed as a carpenter and stonemason before entering the ministry.



Figure 7.

This perspective illustration of a Henry Barnard design shows the Gothic Revival styling so popular during the 19th century. (*School Architecture in Rural Canada Before 1930*, p. 191)

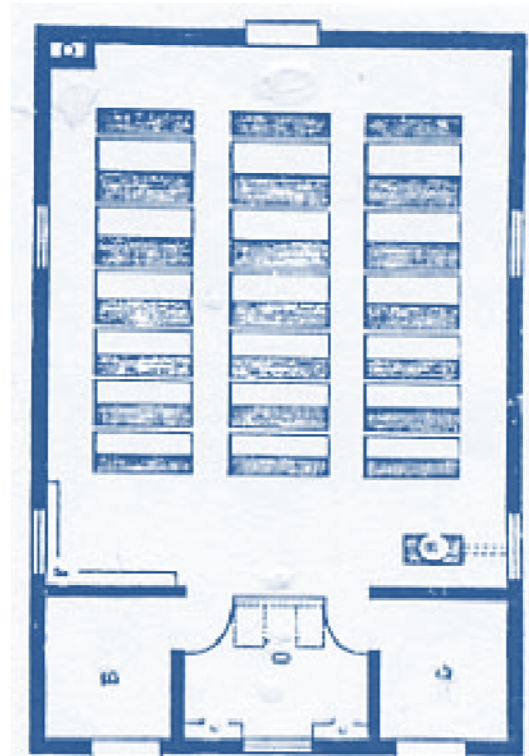


Figure 8.

The floor plan of the Barnard school above features a large classroom and separate entrances for boys and girls (marked B and C). This straightforward plan was to be used for most one-room school designs throughout North America well into the 20th century. (*School Architecture in Rural Canada Before 1930*, p. 191)