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2. Osgoode Hall

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2. OSGOODE HALL

BY

THE HON. WILLIAM RENWICK RIDDELL

One of the best known and most interesting buildings in Canada is Osgoode Hall in the City of Toronto. There the Superior Courts of the Province have sat for more than ninety years, even before there was a City of Toronto or a Province of Ontario. In 1832, when Osgoode Hall became our "Palais de Justice," there was only one Superior Court in the Province of Upper Canada, the Court of King's Bench. Created in 1794 to take the place in civil matters of the four Courts of Common Pleas, which had been formed one in each District by Lord Dorchester in 1788, the Court of King's Bench had sat at Newark (Niagara-on-the-Lake) until 1797, when it removed, much to the disgust of Chief Justice John Elmsley, to the new capital, York.

It sat in a room in the Parliament Buildings at the foot of Berkeley street until these buildings were burned by the American invader in 1813—the judges never satisfied, indeed, but unable to procure better accommodation.

The Court followed Parliament to the northwest corner of what are now Bay and Wellington streets, then to buildings on the old site in 1818, until they were accidentally burned in 1824; then to rented rooms, until the new Court House was built in 1826, the foundation stone of which had been laid in the former year. This was on what afterwards was known as Court House Square on the north side of King street, just east of Toronto street.

It was not, however, the needs of the Court which occasioned the erection of Osgoode Hall. A few years after the creation of the Court of King's Bench, another entity was brought into existence by legislative fiat; in 1797 the Law Society of Upper Canada was formed which still flourishes and is an instrument for good. The "Benchers" or governors of that body, after the initial meeting at Wilson's Hotel, Newark, July 17, 1797, held all their meetings at York; these were generally held in the office of the Attorney-General or the Solicitor-General, although some were held in the office of the Clerk of the Crown, at the Court House or the Library of Parliament.

It was, however, recognized that some permanent home should be formed for the Society; and, in 1820, a plot of land

on the southeast corner of King and Church streets was bought for the purpose of erecting thereon a suitable building. At the instance of the Attorney General, John Beverley Robinson (afterwards Chief Justice Sir John Beverley Robinson, Bart.), the name "Osgoode Hall" was selected for the proposed building. The name was in compliment to William Osgoode, the first Chief Justice of Upper Canada, 1792-1794, and Chief Justice at Quebec, 1794-1802. For some reason not apparent the site was, later, considered unsuitable. Nothing was done towards building upon it.

The scheme was enlarged, and by 1825 it was proposed to erect a building to accommodate not only the Law Society but also "the Court of King's Bench with all necessary apartments according to the importance and dignity of its functions," a "building worthy of the Province and its seat of Government." The Benchers were willing to pay as much as £2,000 (\$8,000) towards the project, expecting the Government to pay the balance and provide a site. This plan for a time seemed to be in a fair way of being carried into effect, but, in 1828, the Society came to the conclusion that nothing satisfactory could be done in conjunction with the Government. Accordingly in that year Convocation bought from the Attorney-General six acres of land for £1,000 (\$4,000), and struck a Committee of Management for approving plans, making contracts and superintending the erection of the building.

But the project lagged and it was not until February, 1832, that Convocation could meet in the building; on the same day the Court of King's Bench took possession of the part allotted. The "Osgoode Hall" of that day was part of the present East Wing. It contained chambers for barristers and students, with board, and was occupied in 1832.

In 1833, the part of Osgoode Hall in the centre below the present Library was built "to afford twenty-four comfortable bed-chambers with stair-case and passages and eight commodious offices." From 1838 until 1843, the hall was occupied as barracks by the troops. When the Law Society regained possession in the latter year, it expended £100 annually for some years in erecting the present very handsome stone wall and iron fence.

It was determined, in 1844, to enlarge the building and, in that and the following two years, were built the West Wing and

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the Library in the centre with two domes connecting the two wings. An addition northward was made, in 1856, to the West Wing; and by 1860 the Osgoode Hall as it stood before the extension northward of both wings and centre, was completed. The dome was removed from the centre and a facade of Caen stone set up, while the whole interior was remodelled.