

Museum Musings: Nisbet Church and Blockhouse

In May, 1932, the Prince Albert Historical Society met in the City Council chambers (now the Prince Albert Arts Centre). The major focus of the meeting centred around their future plans for the establishment of a museum in the recently re-built Mission schoolhouse at Bryant Park (now Kinsmen Park). A committee of five persons, chaired by Fire Chief J.N. Smith, was directed to take the necessary action to implement this idea.

On December 5th of that year, the City Council approved a request from the Historical Society to donate to the Society the old blockhouse which was situated behind the home of Dr. C.M. Finlayson, who resided at 103 – 12th Street West, a location which now encompasses the Margot Fournier Centre. The City had obtained clear title to the blockhouse, and was more than willing for the Society to take it off its hands and to move it to the “historical corner of Bryant Park” to save this relic of the past.

The Mission schoolhouse referred to was built by the Reverend James Nisbet, who had settled in the area in 1866. Not only a missionary wishing to bring Christianity to the First Nations people, Nisbet was also a trained and skillful carpenter. He erected the log schoolhouse in 1872 to serve as a combined school and church, providing the basics of education and agriculture as well as religious instruction.

The blockhouse was originally constructed by Archie Ballantyne as a stable for William Maclise, Prince Albert’s first lawyer, who had arrived here in 1881. During the 1885 conflict, concerns were expressed that Prince Albert might be attacked, and the stable was converted to a blockhouse, housing military equipment and providing a place of defence. Gun slits were cut into the walls, and what was previously a stable became a part of the fortification around the Presbyterian church and its manse.

The Society’s plans to utilise the two buildings as a museum came to fruition in the summer of 1933 and the “historic corner” of Bryant Park became a tourist attraction for the City. However, space was limited, and the lack of amenities, such as heat and water, resulted in it being a warm weather facility only.

These two buildings, the oldest surviving buildings within Prince Albert city limits, stood for nearly 75 years on that corner of the park. When more appropriate facilities became available to the Historical Society, the basement of the Provincial Court House in 1955, and the current location in the City’s former Fire Hall, the Mission schoolhouse (The Nisbet church) and the blockhouse were utilised as storage for some of the Society’s larger and more cumbersome artifacts.

But time, and the northern Prairie weather, took its toll on the buildings. The shingles on the roofs started to rot and disappear, allowing squirrels and other creatures access to the buildings, and the lower logs began to rot. It became apparent to the Society and to the City that efforts were going to have to be initiated in order to save them, or the buildings would be lost.

It was finally decided that the buildings should be taken apart, piece by piece, numbered and stored, until they could be restored as nearly as possible to their original construction. As their original sites are no longer available, it was determined to re-locate them to the river bank, near the Historical Museum. This not only places them close to their original locations, but places them on a site near where the Nisbet party originally landed. Once they are located on the river bank, it will allow for easier programming and displays that reflect their separate functions.

With new roofs and logs replacing those which had rotted from age, and set on new concrete flooring, these two buildings which were locally dove-tailed and square hewn, will reflect the look of Prince Albert in its earliest days.

To accomplish this task, the Historical Society needs to raise \$200,000. If you, your business, or your organisation is interested in helping us to rebuild a piece of our history on the river bank, where Prince Albert began, please check out our website (<https://historypa.com/>) or contact us at 306-764-2992.

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