

Charles Bruce Fergusson

ISAAC HILDRITH (c. 1741-1807)

ARCHITECT OF GOVERNMENT HOUSE, HALIFAX

IF TO BUILD is the noblest of all the arts, or if architecture may be regarded as the flowering of geometry or as frozen music, then surely should Isaac Hildrith be known and remembered. Strange to say, however, little has been generally known about him; for though he may be credited with having been the architect in charge of the construction of Government House, in Halifax, and his name may even occasionally be mentioned in connection with a survey of a proposed Shubenacadie Canal, practically all the rest has been silence. Yet research discloses that Isaac Hildrith had a varied career, for he was a house carpenter, a merchant, a master builder, a surveyor, and perhaps an engineer, as well as an architect, and his connection with Government House alone should be sufficient to warrant a proper appreciation of his services, at least as long as that noble mark and monument of our past shall continue to be the official residence of the Lieutenant-Governor of Nova Scotia.

Isaac Hildrith was born in Ellerton, Yorkshire, England, in or about the year 1741. There he apparently received a practical education, as well as considerable training in carpentry and construction. He was probably involved in the making or improving of inland water transport in England, for subsequently when offering to do similar work in America he stated that the Commissioners of the Swale and Bedale Brook and Linton Dock and Dam Navigations, in Yorkshire, could furnish testimonials of his character. He also declared that Honourable Leonard Smelt, sub-governor to the Prince of Wales, who had known him from his youth, and whom he had frequently had the honour to serve, could supply a certificate of his qualities. He married a woman named Ann, whose maiden name may have been Wood, for when

Isaac Hildrith made his will in the year 1790 he had a brother-in-law named Richard Wood, in Ellerton, Yorkshire, England.

In 1770 Isaac Hildrith migrated to Norfolk, Virginia. There he was both a merchant and a house carpenter. In addition, he was employed in making a survey not only of the Falls of James River, in Virginia, but also of the proposed canal between the North River and the Eastern or Southern Branch of Elizabeth River.

At the request of James Holt, one of the gentlemen named in "An Act for opening the falls of James River, by Subscription, and for other purposes," which was passed in the twelfth year of the reign of George III, Hildrith attended the Commissioners for the proposed canal between Elizabeth River and North River on several occasions in 1774 in order to assist them in forming an opinion of the practicability and the expense of such a communication. With them he viewed the lands on March 28th, 29th, and 30th, 1774, and he afterwards submitted in writing his observations, as well as an estimate of the expense of opening a canal both from Kemp's Landing and from the Great Bridge, and a plan of a lock. Hildrith declared to them that if no person better qualified were available he would offer his services as director of the proposed work.

Having been engaged in these surveys, he was regarded by the rebels as a useful man, and he was strongly urged to join their party. He refused to do so, and for that reason he was regarded by them as inimical and he became, as he himself put it, subject to frequent abuse and insult.

At Norfolk in 1775, Hildrith joined Lord Dunmore, Governor of Virginia, who by removing the powder from the magazine at Williamsburg had occasioned the first armed uprising of Virginia. Hildrith was then sent with two others to reconnoitre the neighbouring country and to make sketches of such places as might be fortified so as to keep off the approaching enemy. Shortly afterwards he was with Lord Dunmore in the engagement near Kemp's Landing, and he assisted in building the fort at the Great Bridge. Commissioned as an Ensign of a Company of Provincials, Hildrith was sent by order of the Governor to beat up for volunteers. Upon his return to Norfolk he collected a number of carpenters, constructed carriages, mounted several field pieces, and began a drawbridge for the defence of the town. When the enemy appeared before the fort at the Great Bridge, Hildrith was sent as Lieutenant of a Company into the woods to prevent the enemy from cutting off the communications between the fort and Norfolk, and for three weeks he continued

in daily skirmishing with the enemy till the fort and the town of Norfolk were abandoned.

Owing to these circumstances, Hildrith had no opportunity of getting his effects on board the fleet. The result was that he lost a great deal of his merchandise, all his household furniture, and his book debts to a considerable amount.

He remained with Lord Dunmore, doing such service as he was ordered to do, until August 5, 1776, when he obtained permission to resign his commission and return to Great Britain. He landed at Whitehaven, England, on September 6, 1776, and then he returned to Ellerton in Yorkshire.

Between the time of his return to England on September 6, 1776, and the beginning of 1778, about which time Hildrith recounted his experience in a petition, whose contents were certified by Lord Dunmore on January 3, 1778, as being just and true, Hildrith depended solely upon his hand labour for the support of himself and his family. The memorial was read by the Lords of the Treasury on July 15, 1778, when consideration of Hildrith's petition for relief was postponed.

Hildrith was residing in London on March 30, 1781, when he drafted another petition to the Lords of the Treasury. He then stated that he had been further reduced by the necessary expenses of supporting himself and his family so as to be unable when opportunity served to return to Virginia for the recovery of his property. When this memorial was read on July 13, 1781, it was decided that he would be paid £100 in full and passage money on going to America.

In the same year he returned to America, hoping to resettle in Virginia under the protection of the commissioners appointed by Act of Parliament to inquire into the losses and services of the American Loyalists. He resided at Charlestown till the evacuation of that place in December 1782.

Then Hildrith went to Kingston, Jamaica. From there he went to New York in June, 1783, and from New York he proceeded to Shelburne, Nova Scotia, in July, 1783.

At Shelburne in 1786 he drafted a memorial to the commissioners on Loyalist claims, stating that he and his family had been reduced from a comfortable competence to a state of necessity, and estimating his losses in the late troubles in America at a total value of £280. These losses included £90 for ironmongery, £75 for groceries, rum, sugar, flour, salt, and so forth, £50 for earthenware, and £65 for furniture and working tools. Meantime, in 1785, Hildrith received a grant of 360 acres of land in Shelburne County.

Before long Isaac Hildrith was engaged in designing and building the largest church in the town of Shelburne. By 1788 the Rectors, Wardens, and Vestries of the two parishes of St. George and St. Patrick, having since the first establishment of the town attended worship in a very ordinary building, hastily erected, and intended merely for temporary use, decided to build a more fitting church which would be sufficiently capacious to accommodate the people of both parishes and at the same time be ornamental to the town. Parliament granted £300 for this purpose, and additional funds were raised by subscription and otherwise. Proposals for building the church were presented by Messrs. Isaac Hildrith & Aaron White and Messrs. Weart Banta and Henry Dow, with plans, sections, elevations, and estimates. The tender of Hildrith & White was accepted even though their estimate amounted to £620, Nova Scotia currency, whereas that of Banta & Dow amounted to £600. The opinion was that the superiority of the former Master Builders' plan in strength, convenience, and beauty claimed the preference, notwithstanding the difference of £20 in the estimates. The contract was signed and ratified, and the original proposals, with plan, elevation, and section, were shown to the Lieutenant-Governor and the Bishop for their sanction and approbation, which were granted. The church was raised and covered in by December 11, 1788, and the surveyors of public buildings in the town surveyed the work and materials on December 17, 1789, and certified that the church appeared to them to be erected and built of good and sufficient materials and that the work was executed in a neat workman-like manner agreeable to the original contract, plans, and proposals.

Thereupon the Church Wardens took possession of the Church from the contractors in the name and behalf and to the use of the two parishes, in due form of law, by receiving at the hands of Hildrith & White the key to the great west door, turning out the builders, and locking the door upon them, and then immediately opening the door again. Thus Christ Church, Shelburne, was completed by Hildrith & White and turned over to the church authorities in December, 1789.

Just as in Virginia he had been engaged in surveying a proposed canal, estimating the cost of its construction, and making a plan of a lock for it, so in Nova Scotia Isaac Hildrith was involved in making a survey of the location of a proposed Shubenacadie Canal and in reporting upon the practicability and probable expense of cutting a navigable canal between Minas Basin and Halifax. Lieutenant-Governor Sir John Wentworth had put forward the proposal in 1794, with a view to transforming a natural watercourse comprising a river

and a chain of seven lakes into a navigable inland waterway that would increase the trade of Halifax and form an important part of a projected, short, and protected water route between Halifax and Quebec that would be of great value for national defence. On July 7, 1797, the House of Assembly of Nova Scotia made provision for granting a sum not exceeding £250 for a survey of the area and a report upon the feasibility and cost of constructing a navigable canal. Isaac Hildrith and Theophilus Chamberlain accepted this assignment. They surveyed and took levels from Halifax Harbour to tide-water flowing from Minas Basin up the Shubenacadie River, and in their report of November 15, 1797, they proposed that there should be a canal, containing twenty locks, capable of accommodating a vessel of 60 feet keel and 16 feet beam, drawing 4 feet of water. They provided a plan of the proposed canal and an estimate that it would cost £32,002.17.6.

Assured by Hildrith's report that such a canal was practicable, a group of promoters, including William Forsyth, Andrew Belcher, Richard Kidston, and others, petitioned for aid in undertaking the project. Although a bill for that purpose was introduced in the House of Assembly of Nova Scotia in 1798, further consideration of the matter was deferred to the next session and more than 25 years elapsed before construction of the canal was actually begun.

Meantime Isaac Hildrith became the architect and the master builder of the new Government House in Halifax which was built in the early years of the nineteenth century. The first Government House, an official residence for the Governor of Nova Scotia, a small wooden structure, one storey high, had been erected in Halifax in the centre of a clearing on what is now the Province House lot in the year 1749. Nine years later it was torn down to make room for the second Government House on the same site. Built in the year which witnessed the convening of the first elected legislature in the Province and in any territory now forming part of Canada, as well as the year of the second capture of Louisbourg, it was a well proportioned two-storeyed wooden building which made a rather handsome appearance. To John Parr, who became Governor in 1782, it was still "a most excellent house"; but to Sir John Wentworth who succeeded Parr in 1792 it seemed to have deteriorated so rapidly that the whole structure was in danger of falling into the cellar. By 1799 it was not only regarded by Wentworth as so decayed and rotten as to be probably detrimental to health, but it was said by the legislators of the Province to be unfit to be the residence of the Governor or Commander-in-Chief of Nova Scotia. Even though the need for a Province House to accommodate the legislature, the courts, and other public offices had previously been

recognized, it was decided to proceed first to purchase a site and build a mansion House for the residence of the Lieutenant-Governor. In 1799 the Legislature appropriated £10,500 for the site and for the building. The lot chosen was one in the south end of Hollis Street, which had been previously purchased from William Cochran for a Province House. The new Government House was to be built of stone. Isaac Hildrith was selected as the architect, plans and estimates were made, and the corner-stone was laid on September 11, 1800, in the presence of all the notables of the town, including naval and military officers, following which a cold collation was served at Government House for those in the procession.

It has been stated that there is a tradition that the plans of the new Government House, whose corner-stone was well and truly laid in 1800, came from the Adam brothers, even though there is an absence of that stucco ornamentation in which those architects delighted. It may have been, however, that Isaac Hildrith was the architect who prepared the plans, as well as the architect in charge of construction. The committee of the legislature which reported on the subject of the new Government House, on April 6, 1802, stated that it appeared from the architect's account that the plans and estimates of the building were actually paid for by the public and that they cost the sum of £75. It appears that he procured or prepared the plans of the building, and he was the architect in charge of construction until, at his own request, considering his services no longer necessary in that capacity, he was discharged from the position effective December 31, 1806, although he was in attendance at the building for some time thereafter. On January 22, 1807, a joint committee of the two houses of the legislature "having a full conviction of the ability and professional skill of Mr. Hildrith, and satisfactory proofs of his zeal, integrity, and diligence in conducting the work he has been engaged in, respectfully recommend[ed], that, with his discharge, the Sum of Fifty Pounds, be granted him as a Testimonial of the public opinion of his Merit and Services." Consonant to this recommendation the House of Assembly, on January 23, 1807, resolved that "Isaac Hildrith, the architect, employed in building the New Government House, be discharged from the Thirty-first day of December last, and that the Sum of Fifty Pounds, be granted and paid to the said Isaac Hildrith, as a Testimonial of the favourable opinion entertained by the Legislature, of his ability, integrity, diligence, and zeal."

Meantime, Sir John and Lady Frances Wentworth had moved into the new, unfinished, building late in 1805. By the time Wentworth retired in 1808 more than twice the sum originally allotted had been spent on the build-

ing, and taking into account new furniture and additions and repairs considered necessary by his immediate successors the total cost approximated £30,000. This was a fine building in a town of about 8,000 people and in a Province having a total population of only about 65,000.

In 1803 Isaac Hildrith received a grant of lot no. 2 in the north suburbs of Halifax, and within nine months of the effective date of his discharge from the position of architect in charge of construction of Government House, Halifax, he died in Shelburne on September 16, 1807, at the age of 66. The inscription on his tombstone is as follows:

Here lyeth the remains of Isaac Hildrith Esq. Architect who departed this life Sept. 16, 1807 aged 66 yrs. He was a native of Ellerton in Yorkshire England. A loyal subject an able artist and an honest man. This stone is erected at the desire of his lamenting faithful wife.