



Figure 1. Richard Carr House, archts. Wright and Sanders, James Bay, Victoria; 1863

British Columbia's First Professional Architect: John Wright (1830-1915)

by Martin Segger

John Wright is significant in British Columbia's architectural history as the first professional to establish a practice in the Colony of the Vancouver Island. Yet it was in San Francisco that Wright was to achieve ultimate success in a long and very profitable career.

Wright was born in Killearn, Scotland on May 15, 1830 and came to Victoria in 1859. Little is known about his training or apprenticeship but he is recorded as coming to Vancouver Island via New York and San Francisco. From his office at the corner of Yates and Langley Streets, Wright soon established himself as the institutional image maker for the young expanding colony. Within the brief seven years of his Victoria practice the small West Coast town had begun to establish an urban form which was to a large extent the Victorian eclectic idiom as interpreted by John Wright.

Wright's first major assignment was the design of Fisgard Lighthouse at the entrance to Esquimalt Harbour. On this project he worked with colonial engineer H. O. Tiedemann. Yet immediately the architect established his reputation for innovation which he was to carry throughout his career. The spiral iron stairway in the tower was a unique and efficient design, such that the fabricators paid him \$300.00 for the patent. Also in 1859, he received the commission to design the first Methodist Church at Pandora and Broad Streets, where he introduced the advantages of steam heating to Victoria.

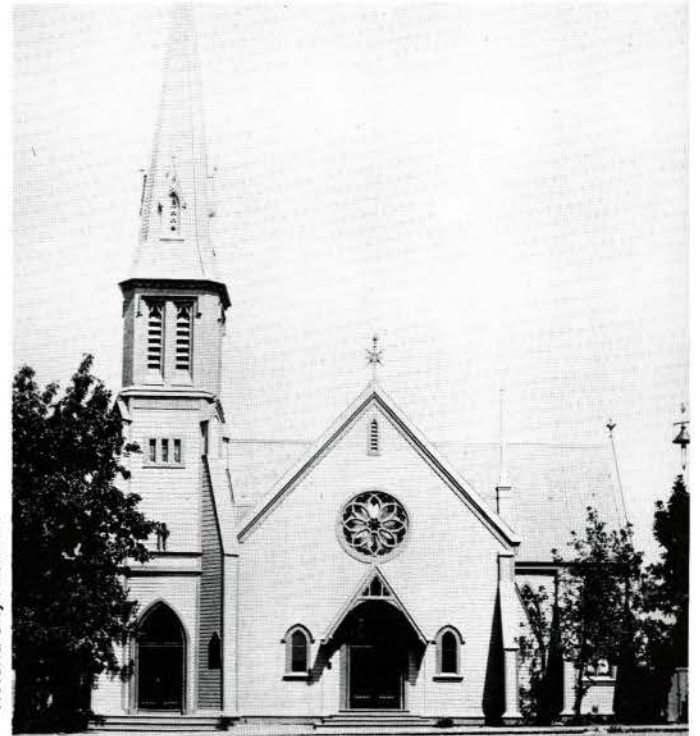
By 1863, Wright was designing comparatively large houses for the city's political and business elite. In 1860, he designed the a large house for Hudson's Bay Company medical officer, W. F. Tolmie. There followed a number of "villas" in the Downingsque tradition; in 1861, one for H.B.C. official James Bissett and in 1863, the Italiante home of Richard Carr, father of painter Emily Carr. (Fig 1) In the same year Wright also executed two ecclesiastical commissions. The First Presbyterian Church, of which both Wright and his new partner, architect George H. Sanders, were members, was a very neat rural Gothic essay with buttressed walls clad in horizontal siding and a 100 foot spire capping an offset belfrey tower. (Fig. 2) Emmanuel Synagogue for the city's rapidly growing Jewish community was a more substantial structure of brick construction and quite consciously differentiated from the Gothic Christian churches of Wright's design by its obvious Romanesque style. An impressive feature of its two storey balconied interior was a stained glass circular skylight.

In 1865, Wright received the commission to design Angela College, a Church of England school for girls under the patronage of Baroness Angela Burdett-Coutts. Although not a large building, it was constructed in brick with Gothic detailed pointed mullions and gable copings in stone. That year Wright also received his most prestigious commission, to redesign the unfinished 'Carey Castle' as the residence for the newly appointed Governor of British Columbia.

Wright's work at Carey Castle transformed this masonry intimation of a ruinous Scottish border castle into a rambling eclectic assemblage, vaguely French in feeling. Numerous renovations over the years generally followed Wright's plan, until it was completely destroyed by fire in 1899. (Fig. 3)

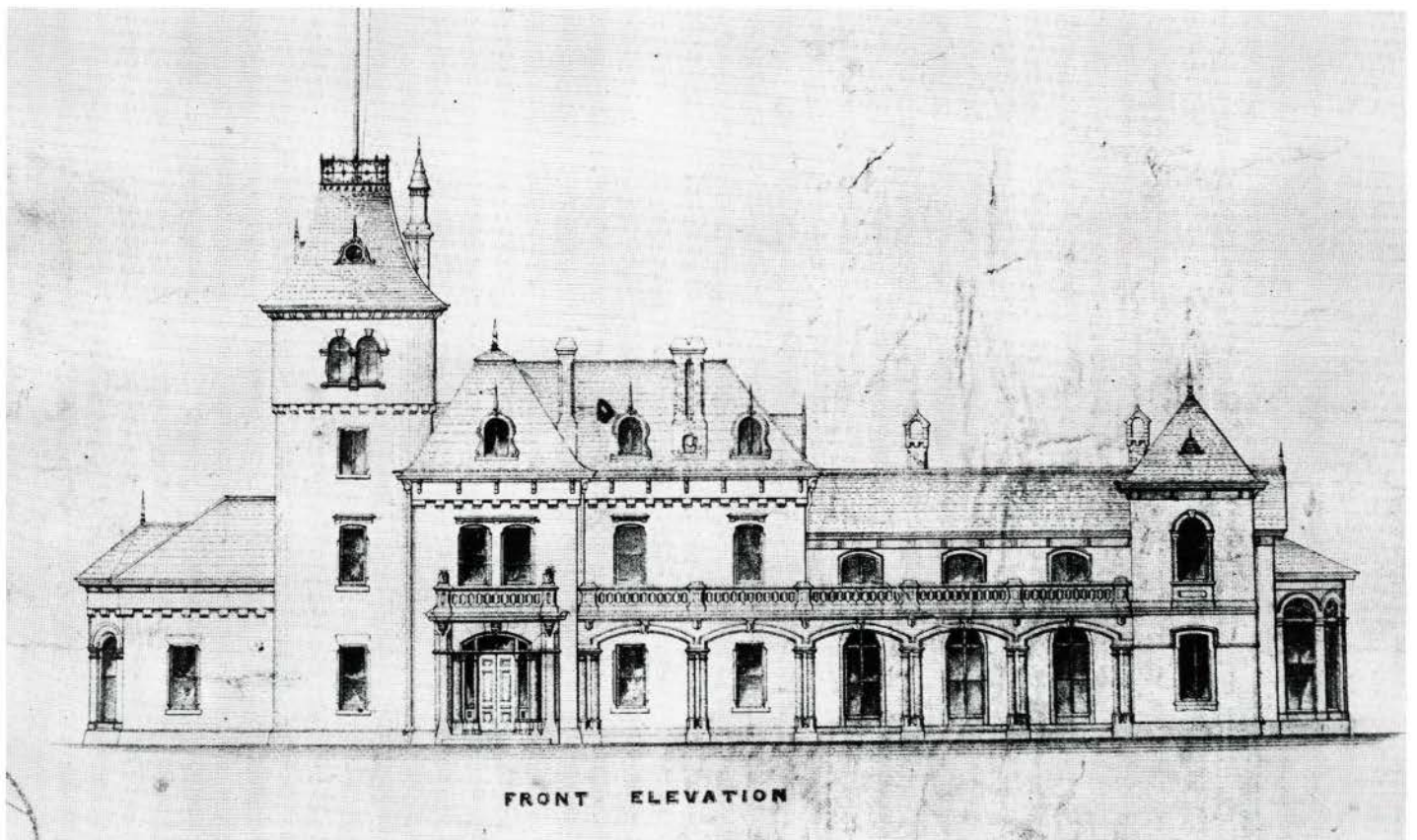
In 1866, Wright and Sanders moved their practice to San Francisco. By this time the firm had produced numerous commercial buildings: hotels (St. Nicholas Hotel, Government Street, and St. George Hotel, View Street) and retail structures (Dickson Campbell Bldg., Store Street and Searby's, and Robinson Bros. Bldgs., Fort and Government Streets). These all followed the vaguely Italianate manner of western boom towns of the period. They had also played an active role in the community. In 1864, while Wright worked on plans to promote and build a "Civic Centre" the firm also designed the Female Infirmary. After leaving Wright and Sanders continued to produce plans for Victoria residences, and Wright himself often visited former friends in the city. In 1871, Colonial Surveyor General, later Governor, Joseph Trutch built an imposing "Swiss Cottage" home on his Fairfield Estate from Wright and Sanders' designs. In 1875, Chief Justice Henry Crease, also had plans drawn up by Wright and Sanders for an Italianate house, 'Pentrelew', in the newly opened Rockland Estates. (Fig. 4) In 1892, the firm submitted an unsuccessful entry in the new Provincial Parliament Buildings competition under the nom-de-plume, "Victoria".

The San Francisco earthquake of November, 1865 which did substantial structural damage no doubt provided an opportunity for architectural skills and might have prompted the relocation of the firm the next year. A second, more damaging quake in 1868, certainly confirmed the wisdom of the move. Innovation was Wright's hallmark, as he was the first architect to introduce new building systems to improve structural safety under earthquake stresses. The Home Mutual Insurance Building of 1869, and the Bank of British North America were noted for the use of these new developments.



Victoria City Archives

Figure 3. First Presbyterian Church, Pandora Avenue where the first services for the Reformed Episcopal Church were held in 1874, was designed by Wright and Sanders in 1863.



Public Archives of British Columbia.

Figure 2. Additions and renovations to Carey Castle, front elevation, archts. Wright and Sanders; 1865.

In San Francisco the firm seems to have taken advantage of connections with many institutional clients which had been initiated in Victoria. In 1881, he designed the Episcopal Church of St. John and in 1892, the San Francisco Theological Seminary. In the early 1890s Wright designed numerous brick manufacturing buildings for the rapidly expanding Levi Straus Co. In 1895, the firm did the Pacific Hebrew Ophanage and Assylum. The firm maintained an extensive ecclesiastical clientele: the First Presbyterian Church (1822) a Catholic technical school (1885), and for the Baptists, a Chinese mission (1887). In 1886, the firm designed the Pacific Union Club. Wright also maintained good connections with the massive railway fortunes, resulting in the general office building for the Central Pacific Railroad and in 1878, the most ornate and prestigious of the early 'Nob Hill' residences, that of millionaire Mark Hopkins (which in 1893, became the first San Francisco public art gallery). Wright and Sanders also continued their special interest in hospital design: Toland Medical School, the Napa State Hospital, the State Deaf and Dumb Institute at Berkeley, the California State Womens Hospital (1894), and Cooper Medical College (1896). There were also numerous banks and commercial structures.

The Wright and Sanders practice remained conservative in a design sense, which was probably the reason for their immense success with establishment institutions. However, Wright himself was particularly noted for his pioneer work in improving the professional

stature and practice of architecture in California. In 1869, he became the founding president of the San Francisco Chapter of the American Institute of Architects and was reelected president in 1882. His large office provided a training ground for a generation of California architects. Wright was well aware of this and undertook the responsibility of maintaining the largest architectural library on the West Coast. He also formalized the training of architects in San Francisco by organizing the professional lectures supported by the Chapter and working to establish a 'travelling studentship' for the most promising architectural student.

A man noted for his robust health and powerful physique, Wright was an energetic promoter of both the profession and his own practice. He travelled the West Coast extensively and it was on one of his trips to Victoria that took he ill and died in the Jubilee Hospital on August 23, 1915, at the age of 85. Of his brief but important contribution to Victoria's architectural heritage the following are significant: Richard Carr House is now a provincially designated historic site and under restoration; Fisgard Lighthouse is now part of Fort Rod Hill National Historic Park; Emmanuel Synagogue is provincially and federally designated as the oldest Canadian synagogue; Angela College and the James Bissett house are municipally designated buildings; 'Pentrelew' although recently demolished was the subject during demolition of an archaeological investigation to record building technology of the 1870s.

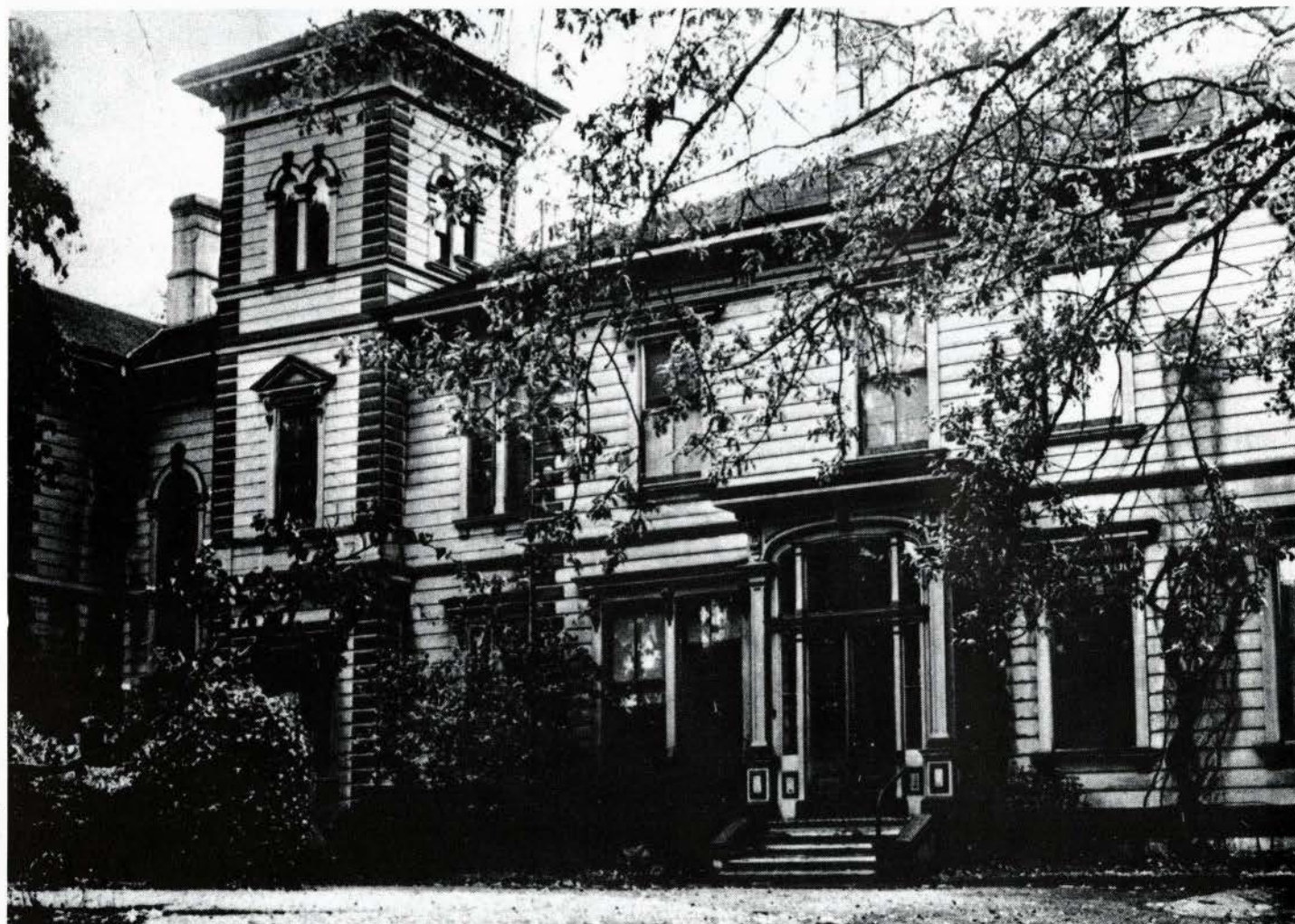


Figure 4. "Pentrelew", 1201 Fort Street, Victoria, was named in Welsh meaning "house on land sloping two ways". Built by Wright in 1875, on five wooded acres, the house was designed in a High Victorian Italianate Villa style.