DANDA
HUMPHREYS

Today, **Building Victoria** describes the structure that, for the past 125 years, has dominated the south side of Centennial Square — Victoria's City Hall

City Hall is born

THE YEAR WAS 1878. Roderick Finlayson, who some 30 years earlier had been the man-in-charge at Fort Victoria pending James Douglas's return, was now the city's mayor, and he was bound and determined that Victoria should have a proper city hall.

The citizens objected. The sum suggested — $10,000 — could, they said, be put to far better use. But Finlayson prevailed, and the competition for plans was announced.

The winner of the contest was architect John Teague, a native of Cornwall, England, who had arrived in Victoria in 1859 en route to the gold fields of the Cariboo. Settling here permanently in the early 1860s, Teague specialized in architecture and construction.

In 1874, the uninstructed (he had no formal architecture training) but inspired Teague decided to become a full-time architect. Before long, his busy Trounce Alley office had produced plans for churches, hospitals, business establishments and residences. Royal Jubilee and St. Joseph's hospitals, the Church of Our Lord at the foot of Blanshard Street, the Bishop's Palace on View Street next to the Roman Catholic Cathedral, and E.G. Prior's fine Pemberton Road home called The Priory are just a few of the Teague-designed structures that survive to this day.

Toward the end of the 1870s, he turned his attentions to Victoria's first purpose-built municipal headquarters. The Victoria of 1878 was a sight to behold. From a small, stockaded settlement bounded by today's Government, Wharf and Broughton streets and Bastion Square, the city had spread its wings north, south and east. By 1878, Government Street had pushed its way north across Johnson Street.

Some saw the proposed city hall site — on the block bounded by Douglas, Government, Pandora Avenue and Cormorant Street (now Centennial Square) — as being on the outskirts of town. Others realized that, the rate the town was growing, it would soon catch up to its newest addition.

Teague's design, described by the *Colonist* as "Anglo-Italian," called for a brick structure with cement and stone accents. Apart from the council chamber, it was to house a police court, jail, surveyor's offices, committee rooms and a museum room.

By May 1878, the foundations had been laid. J. Huntington won the stone, brickwork and plastering contract, J. Bennet was responsible for carpentry, D. Heal provided tinsmithing services, and painting and glazing was by J. Sears.

Even as citizens objected once again to the cost, the structure rose before them. It was a rectangular block (that now forms City Hall's south wing), with a main entrance on Pandora Avenue. Dark red brick with white paint accents rose to the tin mansard roof, with its tall chimneys.

In 1881, the building was enlarged at its southwest corner to house the fire department. The tin roof was extended over the new wing, and another arched doorway and windows added to complement the existing structure. Ten years later, the north wing was added, at a cost of $35,000, to create the City Hall we see today. John Pitcairn Elford won the contract to extend the building 25 metres along Douglas St. and 15 metres along Cormorant (now Centennial Square). The main entrance was moved from the Pandora side to the Douglas side, under the tall tower that now graced the roof.

Enlarged and altered many times, City Hall once boasted chimneys and a tin roof around its square-topped tower. Hydro poles lined the streets in those early days. This photo was taken in 1902. *BCARS E-01538.*

Former mayor Charles Redfern, whose Government Street jewelry store boasted a huge clock high above its entrance, won the contract for installation of the city's civic timepieces. The clocks, ordered from Croydon, England, were a sight to behold. Four dials, each 2.29 metres in diameter, graced the square tower. The bell alone weighed more than 953 kilograms. The clock had to be wound once a week.

This would be the last major addition until the mid-1960s, when Mayor Biggerstaff Wilson lobbied to save the building and improve rather than destroy it. The Centennial Square project included a $594,000 renovation of the building's interior and construction of an addition on its west end. The chimneys were removed, and the tin roof was replaced with one of galvanized iron. Architectural consultant Rod Clack worked with Wade, Stockdill, Armour & Partners and R.W. Siddall & Associates to complete the necessary alterations.

Victoria City Hall today.
John McKay/Times Colonist

Today, the City Hall tower is still visible from downtown, and the building stands as a symbol of the confidence one man had in our city, more than a century ago.

Read more about Finlayson, Elford, Redfern and old Victoria in Danda's book series, On The Street Where You Live, *available in local bookstores. You can contact Danda at 382-4455 or via her Web site: www.dandahumphreys.com*