

Heritage Assessment Report

Kenny / Dennis Building
1740 Granville Street
Halifax, Nova Scotia

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This structure at the corner of Granville and George streets is one of the earliest remaining stone buildings to be constructed around the Province House square. Begun in 1863 for the dry goods business of Thomas & Edward Kenny, this pre-Confederation edifice, built of granite on a secure stone foundation, has survived one hundred and fifty-five years including a 1912 fire and the effects of the 1917 Halifax Harbour Explosion. Kenny business control passed to William

Dennis of the Halifax Herald newspaper concern in 1900, followed in turn by its last use as office space by the Government of Nova Scotia.¹

Historical Appraisal

The business of “T. & E. Kenny Merchants” was founded by two prominent Irish Catholic businessmen of the city who were active in civic, social, and governmental life. The more ambitious of the two brothers was Sir Edward Kenny, knighted in 1870 by Queen Victoria. His record is sufficiently celebrated to have earned him an entry in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* as well as a previous entry in the *Canadian Parliamentary Companion*. Edward Kenny served as Mayor of Halifax in 1842, and was a member of the Legislative Council of Nova Scotia from 1841-1867 (President, 1856-1867). He was twice president of the Charitable Irish Society, was a founder of the Halifax Club, and was a supporter of both St. Mary’s Cathedral and St. Patrick’s parish.

Kenny was married to Ann Forrestell of Antigonish, whose half-brother was W. A. Henry, a prominent lawyer and one of the Fathers of Confederation. Together with Archbishop Connolly, Kenny was a supporter of Confederation, and this led to his appointment to the Senate, and then to a position in the first Cabinet of John A. MacDonal in 1867. He resigned from his Cabinet position in 1870 to become Vice-Regal Representative in Nova Scotia during the absence of the then Lieutenant-Governor, Sir Charles Hastings Doyle. It was in that same year that he was knighted. His political involvements were something of a family affair as well, for his son-in-law, Malachy Bowes Daly, was elected to the federal seat for Halifax in 1878 and 1882 (eventually becoming Lieutenant Governor of N.S., 1890-1900), and one of Edward’s sons, Thomas, succeeded Daly in the elections as a federal member for the same seat in 1887 and 1891.²

¹ Prior to 1863 a wooden building was on the site: “The old Halifax Journal office occupied a wooden building at the corner of George and Granville Streets, where the stone store of T. & E. Kenny now is.” *Collections of the Nova Scotia Historical Society*: Vol. 8, 198. (1892-94).

² J. K. Johnson, (ed.), *The Canadian Directory of Parliament, 1867-1967* (Ottawa: Public Archives of Canada, 1968).

However, Edward Kenny is perhaps best known as a man of business affairs. By the late 1860s, he was described as “the third or perhaps the second richest man in Nova Scotia” (after Enos Collins). He was one of the founders, along with William Stairs and John W. Ritchie of the Union Bank. “These merchants believed that the existing financial institutions were ‘too restrictive in terms of providing access to capital and were therefore holding back the city’s progress’.”³ Several years later, Kenny and his son went on to found the Merchants’ Bank of Halifax. The bank soon had branches throughout the province, with offices in Pictou, Antigonish, Bridgewater, Lunenburg, Truro and Weymouth. Under the leadership of Edward’s son, the bank flourished and changed its name to the Royal Bank of Canada in 1901. James Frost has noted that Halifax was, at that time, a leading centre of finance in Canada.⁴

The Kenny building at George and Granville was the foundation for the brothers’ early business as merchants. There, they operated an active wholesale trade in dry goods. Initially relying on imports, they soon were involved in the manufacturing of textiles, “turning the top floor of their warehouse into a workshop where some 25 hands produced ready-made clothing”.⁵ The building, therefore, speaks to the central role of Edward Kenny and his family in building the nineteenth century prosperity of Halifax and Nova Scotia. Importantly, it was not just private wealth. Kenny and others in the rising Irish business class – merchants, professionals, shopkeepers, and artisans – gave back to the city with new schools, churches, and a hospital, leading to what Terry Murphy has called a “flowering of Irish associational life” in the middle years of the nineteenth century.⁶ The Kenny building is, in many ways, a symbol of the Kenny family’s place in that society and of the legacy of the several generations of early Irish immigrants to the city and the province.

The story of Edward Kenny and his accomplishments is so overwhelming that the story of William Dennis Sr. seems almost pale by comparison. However, it needs to be emphasized that the Dennis

³ Peter Ludlow, “Sir Edward Kenny: A Historical Brief” (Holy Cross Cemetery Trust, 2012), quoting James Frost, *Merchant Princes*.

⁴ James Frost, “Thomas E. Kenny and the Merchants’ Bank of Halifax: 1864-1908” (Irish Catholic Halifax Project, Working Paper, 2014).

⁵ D. A. Sutherland, “Kenny, Sir Edward” (*Dictionary of Canadian Biography*: Vol. 12, 1990).

⁶ Terry Murphy, “Transformation and Triumphalism: The Irish Catholics in Halifax, 1839-1858” (*CCHA Historical Studies*: Vol. 81, Occasional Paper, p. 56).

family played a pivotal cultural role in Nova Scotia's history through their ownership and management of the Halifax *Herald* and *Evening Mail* (later the *Chronicle-Herald* and *Mail-Star*).

The family name of Dennis and its association with provincial journalism has lasted for well over a century. The first in this line in Canada, William Dennis, arrived in Halifax in 1873 from England, and worked his way up. He was a reporter for the Halifax *Herald* from 1875 to 1881. After a brief stint as editor of the *Winnipeg Sun* and member of the Parliamentary Press Gallery, Dennis took over as an editor of the *Herald*.⁷ He became editor-in chief and President in 1890, and took over complete ownership. In doing so, he carried the newspaper into the twentieth century, where he was known as “the Man who made the Herald”.⁸

In 1900, Dennis purchased the Kenny building and it became the headquarters of the newspaper. Joseph Howe's paper, the *Novascotian*, was still published until the 1920s, and its motto under Howe “The Free Constitution which Guards the British Press” would have been known to Dennis. As Elizabeth Pacey has noted about the particular location of the building which Dennis acquired, “For the newspaper, the building was a particularly fitting location, across from Province House, where freedom of the press had been won”.⁹

Following the neighbourhood fire of 1912, repairs were made to the Kenny-Dennis building, its structural integrity was reinforced, and three new stories were added. This was the same year that William Dennis Sr. was appointed to the Senate on the advice of Robert Borden, where he served until his death in 1920.¹⁰

As the largest daily in Nova Scotia, the *Chronicle-Herald* continues to be a valuable resource for news and official notices, and an important archival resource for historians, sociologists and political specialists. The Halifax *Herald*, for example, was one of the first of the

⁷ J. K. Johnson (ed.), *Canadian Directory of Parliament, 1867-1967* (Ottawa: Public Archives of Canada, 1968).

⁸ Elizabeth Pacey, “Dennis Building: A Report on the Historical and Architectural Significance” (Heritage Trust of N.S., 2017).

⁹ Elizabeth Pacey, “Fate of the Historic Dennis Building now Hangs on Government Decision” (*The Griffin*: Vol. 31, No. 2, 2006).

¹⁰ His nephew, William Henry Dennis, who took over the newspaper upon his uncle's death, was also appointed a Senator in 1932, serving in that position until his death in 1954.

print media to publish details of the 1917 Explosion. As a vehicle for freedom of expression in a democratic society it would be fitting to give recognition to its presence at the physical heart of the city and legislative seat of government.¹¹

Architectural Appraisal

The original 1863 architect for the building was David Stirling, with construction carried out by George Blaiklock. After 1912, the interior was renewed and three more stories added under the design plans of Henry David Jost.¹²

Stirling was a Scots-born architect (1822-1887), the son of a stonemason, and became engaged in work throughout the Maritimes. Among his Halifax buildings were the Halifax Club (1862), the residence of Alexander Keith (1863), and Fort Massey Presbyterian Church (1870) – now Fort Massey United Church.¹³ Wider afield, he designed the Pictou County Court House, the Central Part of Osgoode Hall in Toronto, and the King’s College Library in Windsor. Elizabeth Pacey comments that “by the mid-nineteenth century, he had established himself as one of the principal architects of Nova Scotia ... and was appointed architect for the Dominion Government in Nova Scotia with responsibility for federal buildings in the province”.¹⁴

Henry David Jost was a native Nova Scotian who had trained as an architect in David Stirling’s Halifax office during the 1870s. In early work, Jost collaborated with the builder Henry Peters on the design of St. Patrick’s Church on Brunswick Street. He went on from there to become the sole teacher of architectural drawing at the Victoria College of Art & Design (now NSCAD University), then moved on to running his own practice. In addition to his work on the

¹¹ William March, *Red Line: The Chronicle-Herald and the Mail-Star, 1875-1954* (Halifax: Chebucto Agencies, 1986).

¹² Elsewhere Jost is identified as George Henry Jost (1851-1922): Robert G. Hill, *Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Canada, 1850-1950* (Robert G. Hill, 2009).

¹³ Susan Buggey and Garry D. Shutluk, “Stirling, David.” (*Dictionary of Canadian Biography*: Vol. 11, 1982).

¹⁴ Elizabeth Pacey, “Dennis Building: A Report on the Historical and Architectural Significance” (Heritage Trust of N.S., 2017).

Kenny/Dennis building after the fire, Jost prepared the architectural plans for the “Chronicle Block” on Argyle, since demolished for the Nova Centre. With J. J. Dufferine, he collaborated on the “Garden Crest Apartments” on Summer Street (the facade of which is all that now survives). He had a wide reputation as a skilled practical architect.

The Dennis Building, therefore, is an important example of two Nova Scotia-based architects of both the pre- and post-Confederation periods. However, it is impossible to understand what these architects were doing if you don’t understand the hierarchy of forms that they worked within – the goals of architecture which they sought to honour.

Province House sits on its own square, surrounded by a ring of streets, each faced with their own buildings fronting on the square. As the seat of provincial government and the apex of democratic authority within the province, the Assembly House is *primus inter pares*. It was the natural fate of the surrounding buildings around the square, therefore, to complement and support the political authority of the legislature. Elizabeth Pacey has a nice discussion of the particular implementation of this architectural complementarity in the buildings around Province House:

The presence of the Dennis Building in the context of Province House Square is of utmost importance. The classical dignity of Province House (Canada’s oldest legislature) prompted later nineteenth- and twentieth-century architects to pay homage to the Georgian centrepiece of the square by echoing its classical style. Indeed, for more than a hundred years, buildings that bordered Province House Square echoed the classicism in their own individual ways.

The Dennis Building, constructed in 1863/4, is the earliest extant example of a building that respects the immediate context of Province House Square. Architect David Stirling chose stone as a matching material, along with horizontal string courses and a prominent bracketed cornice as complementary classical details.

Other buildings around the perimeter followed the trend. In 1867 and 1868, respectively, the Sarah Howard Building and the Post Office (now the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia) were designed in the more ornate Italianate classical style. At the turn of the century, the Acadian Recorder Building continued the theme with a strong cornice and rooftop balustrade and classical window ornaments.

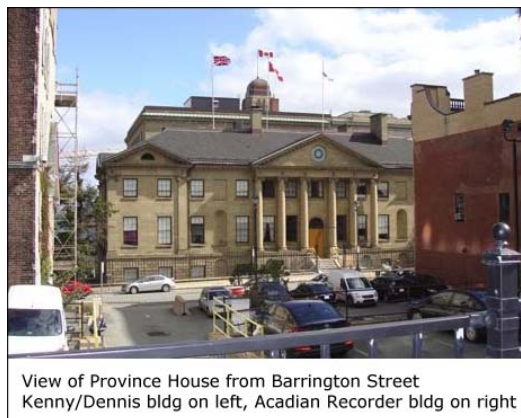
In 1912, when fire ravaged the Dennis Building, the talented architect George Henry Jost was called upon to renew the interior

and add top storeys. Above Stirling's strong cornice, he continued Stirling's details, such as the horizontal string courses and bracketed rooftop cornice, but he chose triplet windows as a distinction. In 1928, when the Johnson Building was constructed a block south, triplet windows again appeared as a design detail.

In 1931, noted Canadian architect John Lyle designed the Bank of Nova Scotia. He completely understood the principle of reinforcing the material and details of Province House. He felt that "certain characteristics of this very fine building should be echoed in the new building." Thus, he, too, in a more modern interpretation, respectfully used classical features, such as the detailed rooftop cornice, the reeded pilasters and the rusticated stonework for the lower level.

In 1935, when the Provincial Building was constructed, reeding appeared around the windows, rusticated stonework was again used on the lower level and a strong decorative rooftop cornice met the cornice on the Bank of Nova Scotia.¹⁵

It has been many years, though, since the architects and planners of Halifax either understood or accepted these kind of architectural goals. Others have noted how the Kenny/Dennis building remains an anchor for the remaining architectural heritage surrounding Province House. The half-block from George Street south along Granville Street is anchored by the Kenny/Dennis structure on the corner, followed by a vacant lot(s), and then nicely complemented at the other end of that lot by the old Acadian Recorder building which possesses a heritage designation. The vacant lot(s) has opened up a space between Barrington and Granville which provides a previously unavailable, and rather magnificent view of Province House from the Grand Parade.



The connection which has been serendipitously opened up, though, is not just a heritage viewplane, but a three-way linkage between City

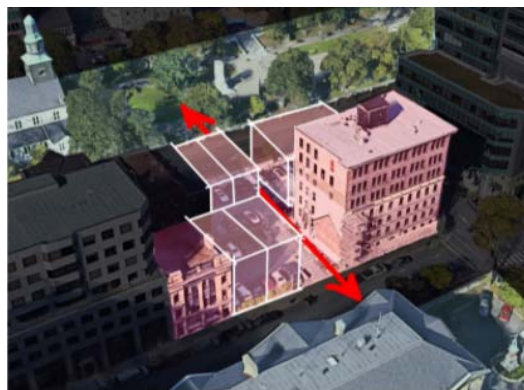
¹⁵ Elizabeth Pacey, "Dennis Building: A Report on the Historical and Architectural Significance" (Heritage Trust of N.S., 2017).

Hall, St. Paul's Church, and Province House. Each one is expressive of neo-classical architecture and each one expressive of responsible power and freedom to associate. Such a linkage makes a powerful statement that uses the most important *heritage* architecture of the city to make a *contemporary* statement about the fundamental freedoms of the Canadian Charter.

Everyone has the following fundamental freedoms: (a) freedom of conscience and religion; (b) freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression, including freedom of the press and other media of communication; (c) freedom of peaceful assembly; and (d) freedom of association.

As it happens, the windows of the Kenny/Dennis building on the south and west sides additionally complicate the redevelopment of the vacant land, both in terms of visual sight lines from those windows and in terms of fire protection.

This past summer, two heritage architecture students, Laura LeGresley and Sara LeBlanc, did an adaptive reuse analysis of the building, and developed a sketch of how the vacant lot might be developed that would preserve the dominance and dignity of the two remaining historical buildings on Granville. In



doing so, they suggested one option, perhaps not the best, for providing a linkage between the Provincial Building and the Grand Parade buildings. These considerations stand in favour of carefully limiting building within the vacant site to establish complementarities with the Kenny/Dennis building and enhance the heritage significance of the entire district.

Construction Assessment

In the case of the Dennis Building, the architect Henry Jost retained the four-storey granite exterior of the building while improving the structural integrity with a modern steel and concrete structure within the exterior walls. As Pacey reports, "Then he was able to add

additional brick storeys, which maintained the harmonious classical appearance of the bottom four storeys. Jost continued the use of string courses between the upper brick storeys and topped the structure off by a strong bracketed cornice, which echoed the bracketed cornice still in place above the fourth granite storey”.¹⁶ Finally, Jost used sets of three vertical windows in the upper stories, matching the spacing of the windows in the lower stories. This kind of sympathetic and complementary treatment of, what was for Jost, an existing heritage structure, is an extraordinary example of revitalization that well exceeds the kind of heritage bricolage which is common today. What is important to stress is the improvements Jost made to the structural integrity of the building, steps which underpinned the additional stories which were added while maintaining the architectural resonance which he was able to conserve.

This leads us, then, to consideration of the Kassner Goodspeed Architects’ Report of March 31, 2010 about the Kenny/Dennis property, a report which raises certain questions, rather than answering them. There is reference to a solid foundation, wall reinforcement, and stone stability. Concern was expressed, however, in relation to cracks, mortar issues, and shrinkage, as well as possible mould and asbestos contamination. The final recommendation was in favour of demolition.

Unexpectedly, though, there appears to have been no comparative exploration of either restoration or adaptive reuse options with cost approximations. Neither is there any evidence of formal consultation with specialists in the field of heritage architecture and preservation, a step which would have seemed prudent given the amount of public discussion about the future of the property. Parks Canada, for example, as a national institution is a major repository of expertise in the field, and there is a growing cluster of Canadian heritage architects now with specialized experience. Without an array of alternative options, costs, and imaginative repurposing for the structure, achieved with evidence of a wider soliciting of specialty expertise and knowledge, it is hard to understand on what basis the final recommendation for demolition can reasonably be justified. Without such information, any decision as to the fate of the building is handicapped through an inadequate base of knowledge.

¹⁶ Elizabeth Pacey, “Dennis Building: A Report on the Historical and Architectural Significance” (Heritage Trust of N.S., 2017).

Conclusion

A tragic disregard and shallowness has allowed too much of the great nineteenth century heritage of Halifax to be lost. For many Nova Scotians, perhaps for most, Halifax is not just the largest and most prosperous city in the province, but it is also the capital city, with all the majesty and authority that that suggests. The role of the city government is broader, therefore, than simply seeking its own prosperity and success. Rather it also has a responsibility as the capital city of the province, and part of that job is protecting the dignity of the legislature and the heritage assets that surround it.

It is hard to imagine any two families, represented in this discussion in their use and occupation of the Kenny/Denny building, who have played a greater role than the Kenny and Dennis families have in their contributions to the development and well-being of the city. If there were any heritage building in the city that deserves protection, surely it would be this one.

Future plans for the Dennis/Kenny Building and the block itself do not exist in strict temporal limits. Context, continuity, integration and radiating consequences are inextricably a part of any assessment concerning the disposition of the building. The decisions which are made about this building will declare for whom the City is being formed, who is to be excluded by erasure of the past, and whether the City is still able to recognize and honour its own greatness.

We herewith submit this assessment as part of our application for heritage designation of the Kenny/Dennis building.