

On Thursday, October 28, 1976 at 2 p.m., a historical plaque commemorating Alma College was unveiled at the College, located at Moore and McIntyre Streets in St. Thomas. The plaque is one of a series erected throughout the province by the Ontario Heritage Foundation (now the Ontario Heritage Trust), an agency of the Ministry of Culture and Recreation (now the Ministry of Culture.)

This ceremony was arranged and sponsored by the College's Board of Management; Mrs. H.B. Waffle, Chairperson, chaired the proceedings. Others invited to take part included: Mr. Ron McNeil, MPP (Elgin); His Worship Wayne Neal, Mayor of St. Thomas; Professor Anthony Adamson represented the Ontario Heritage Foundation; Mr. John Wise, MP; Miss M. Elizabeth Bone, Principal, Alma College; Mr. Duncan McKillop, President, Elgin County Historical Society; Mr. A.H. Liebner, Warden of Elgin County; and Dr. Flora Sifton, Principal Emeritus, Alma College.

The plaque was unveiled by Dr. George T. Kennedy, a long-time member of the Board of Management of Alma College; the plaque was dedicated by Dr. R.B. Craig of Toronto.

The inscription on the plaque reads:

ALMA COLLEGE

In response to a petition from a provisional Board of Management appointed in 1876, the Ontario Government granted a charter the following year for the erection of a ladies' college in St. Thomas. In this building, designed in the High Victorian Gothic style by James Balfour of Hamilton, Alma College was opened in October 1881. The establishment of the College resulted largely from the contributions of residents of St. Thomas and Elgin County and the efforts of Bishop Albert Carman, D.D., Bishop of the Niagara and London Diocese of the Methodist Episcopal Church. From its inception the school offered matriculation for university entrance and succeeded in providing liberal instruction to young ladies "to make their lives useful and happy and their tastes elevated and refined".

Historical background

In 1871, the government of Ontario significantly altered and rationalized its secondary school system. Among the principles espoused for the new high schools, which replaced the grammar schools, was that of coeducation. Henceforth, there was no theoretical barrier to female attendance. Nevertheless, the uneven quality of public schools in the province and the continuing suspicion of coeducation in some quarters provided fertile ground for the proliferation of church-sponsored ladies' colleges, distinct from public institutions. The first of these – the Wesleyan Ladies' College of Hamilton – opened as early as 1861, and soon most denominations operated at least one such college.

The idea of establishing Alma College in St. Thomas originated with the Rev. Albert Carman, a Bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church who had been instrumental in the founding of Albert College in Belleville. The project received enthusiastic and generous support from the community of St. Thomas; by April 1876, a provisional board had been appointed by the Niagara Conference of the Church. In March 1877, a charter was received from the province of Ontario for the establishment of a ladies' college as well as a boys' college. The authority for the latter, however, was never used.

The building was designed by James Balfour of Hamilton, in competition with other architects. It was constructed on a six-acre lot in the heart of the city; the cornerstone was laid in May 1878 by the then-Minister of Education. The structure is in the Late Victorian style and is composed of three main sections with a tall central tower.

It was named Alma College by Elgin County Sheriff Colin Munroe in honour of his wife and daughter. When it opened in October 1881, it had nine faculty members and about 50 students. The College was immediately successful and in two years, enrollment had grown to 165 pupils and the number of faculty members to 12. Although under the auspices of the Methodist Church, the school was completely non-sectarian. Students of all religions were welcome, and numerous Protestant denominations were represented on the Board of Management and in the faculty.

The primary purpose of the College was seen to be the provision of a superior secondary education for women within a religious atmosphere. Initially, the College provided a General course (Literary and Scientific), a Music course and a Fine Art course – with courses in Commerce, Fancy Work and Household Science added later. In 1898, it became the first independent school in Canada to establish a school of domestic science. The collegiate level of the General course covered the subjects of the intermediate, junior and senior matriculations of the University of Toronto, and thus prepared the students for university entrance examinations.

Alma College provided education at several levels. It prepared females for entrance to university, if they so desired. Those who chose not to attend university still received the benefit of an excellent secondary education. Alma also offered such courses as Commerce and Household Science, and a strong emphasis on the practice of the arts pervaded the College. At the Chicago World's Fair in 1893, the Arts Department won a medal and diploma and half of the total awards given to private art schools in Canada.

By the turn of the century, the obstacles to coeducation at the secondary and university levels had been largely overcome. Thereafter, the rationale for gender-specific schools such as Alma College could have been questioned. Their continued existence is, however, ample evidence of a demand for the particular type of education they offered.

Alma College continued to operate into the 20th century as a private boarding school attended by young women from all over the world. Its distinguished modern alumni – including Dr. Jean Sutherland Boggs, Curator of the National Gallery in Ottawa, Judge Edna Sanders Ferguson, one of the first women judges in the province and Dr. Katherine Riddell, founder of the International Students' Centre at the University of Toronto – are a credit to an institution dedicated to making the “lives of the graduates useful and happy and their tastes elevated and refined.” Alma College closed in 1994.



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