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Archives Photos Preserve Memory of Alma College

Since Alma College was destroyed by fire in May 2008, photographs of the College from the Archives' collection have been printed in numerous publications, including the *Toronto Globe and Mail*, *Canadian Architect*, and the Ontario Heritage Trust journal *Heritage Matters*.

ALMA COLLEGE REMEMBERED

By Beth Anne Mendes and Erin Semande



Alma College, 1891. Photo courtesy of Elgin County Archives.

TELLING ONTARIO'S STORIES

By mid-afternoon on Wednesday, May 28, 2008, Alma College in St. Thomas was reduced to a smouldering ruin.

The loss of this significant site to fire represents an enormous heritage loss for the province. Much of what stood of this once-impressive 19th-century school building after the fire – the skeletal brick remains of its exterior walls and towers – was later pulled down for public safety reasons. While the chapel survives and has potential for restoration and reuse, the grandeur that once was Alma College is now only a memory recorded in photographs and the printed page.

Alma College was built in 1878, largely thanks to the efforts of Rev. Albert Carman, a Methodist Episcopal Church bishop. Carman was instrumental in laying the groundwork to establish the institution. The College officially opened in 1882. It operated until 1989 as one of Canada's leading finishing schools for young women. Girls and young women were being educated in growing numbers during the second half of the 19th century with the opening of provincial public schools and private ladies' colleges. Alma College offered classes in the visual and performing arts.

The High Victorian Gothic building was designed by Hamilton architect James Balfour (also known for his work at Hamilton City Hall and the Detroit Institute of Arts), and built by Henry Lindop of St. Thomas. The 10-acre site at 96 Moore Street in St. Thomas was selected for its rail accessibility as well as its then-acceptable distance from the distractions or "vices" of larger urban centres.

Balfour designed Alma College in the High Victorian Gothic style with a grand central tower, asymmetrical wings, pointed arch window and door openings and detailed window transoms. The school also had French Second Empire design elements, including its mansard roof. During the 1880s, a five-storey addition in the Scots Baronial style added rounded corner turrets and a hipped roof to the southwest corner of the building. The building boasted a high degree of craftsmanship in the use of local buff bricks, grey-green sandstone, decorative polychrome slate on the turrets and mansard roof, and timber trim and frame.

Prior to the recent fire, the Alma College site – vacant for the past 12 years – included the grand main school building that has been lost, and a small chapel, music building and outdoor amphitheatre, three of which remain.

Alma College officially closed in 1994. Many of its alumni have become innovators and pioneers in the fields of law, music, politics, government and education. The College lives on through a large and active alumni; the Alma College International Alumnae Association has chapters throughout the world. Undoubtedly, their memories will help keep the history of this wonderful building and important institution alive, as scholars and supporters of heritage compile the written, personal and visual testament to one of the province's great landmarks – Alma College.

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