

# Robert Wilson, Pioneer Teacher

It is somewhat singular that the three men of most importance in the pioneer education work of London bore the same name, though they were unrelated, of different nationalities. **John Wilson**, barrister, was a Scotchman, the first local superintendent of education; **Nicholas Wilson**, an Irishman, one of the first teachers appointed, and **Robert Wilson**, an Englishman and the first teacher in London who had a professional training in a Normal school.

Robert Wilson was born in Hull, England and came to Canada with his parents when he was thirteen years old. His father purchased land on the 12th concession of London township. Robert was kept busy clearing the land, planting the grain, tapping the maple trees, making sugar, gathering the harvest, patching up the log cabin, and adding to the primitive and unique furniture with which it was furnished. There was no time for school, and no school to attend. But whenever a spare moment Robert utilized it for he was a natural student. He had received a rudimentary education before he left England, and he wanted more. Books were not easily obtainable, but wherever one could be borrowed or bought he availed himself of the opportunity.

When Robert grew to manhood he enlisted in the loyal militia, and as one of the London cavalry troop, he mounted his horse, and rode forth in defense of Queen and country. His military experience was devoid of results but it extended his circle of acquaintance, who society he derived great benefit from. To none, perhaps, was he more indebted that to Mr. John Wilson, who became his guide and friend.

As Robert Wilson developed he soon realized that there was more for him than a farmer's life. He opened a little school in his neighbourhood and for this work he was already as well fitted as the average teacher because they was no regular training for persons entering the profession in Canada. Discharged soldiers, crippled mechanics, old women with no means of support and young people who were anxious to make a little money could try their hand at pedagogy. Wilson had better qualifications than most of these and his success was apparent from the first.

Around 1842-43 Robert moved into the flourishing police village of London, bringing his niece with him as housekeeper. He opened his first school in a building on Ridout Street, just north of Dundas, but subsequently moved it to more commodious quarters in the new Mechanics' Institute on the Court House Square. The Mechanics' Institute had been inaugurated in England about 1823 by Dr. Birkbeck. Institutes were opened in Toronto, Kingston, Hamilton, and London, where it was permanently organized on the 1st of January, 1841. Wilson was not one of the original members of the institute

but he joined and became a very active member, filling at times the office of secretary.

Robert Wilson desired to improve himself further so when the first training school for teachers opened in 1847 - the Normal School of Toronto - Robert enrolled as a student.

In 1848 the amended school act came into force, and a board of trustees was elected for London, and John Wilson was chosen as local superintendent of education. Four teachers were appointed at a salary of £50 a year and fees, the schools not being then free. Mr. Nicholas Wilson was one of the first appointments, but the other three were not trained professionally and the school board wanted to secure the best talent available. The board wrote to Robert Wilson, offering him a school with a salary of £60 and fees amounting to six shillings and three pence, to ten shillings for each pupil. Robert accepted the position and that his work was successful may be gathered from the fact that the superintendent of education in his report the following year, made special reference to the superiority of Robert Wilson's school, and the excellent results obtained by the only teacher who taught on the new normal system.

The need for enlarged school accommodation for the growing town soon became apparent. City Clerk, A.S. Abbott and John Wilson undertook to secure land for what became known as the Union school. Robert Wilson was especially active in this process as well, even going to New York in connection with the plans for the building. It was opened in 1850. Robert expected to be made head master of this new school but instead was given the place of assistant to Mr. Nicholas Wilson with a salary of £120. Robert was of course disappointed and speculated that Nicholas Wilson had obtained the job due to political prejudice. Robert resigned in his first year and Nicholas Wilson's tenure of office did not last much longer, he was superseded in 1851 by Mr. Hamilton Hunter.

Whether or not Robert Wilson intended to resume his career is not known but there was no opportunity in London at the time. He opened a general store on Dundas Street opposite the market. And this he advertised as a 'temperance store.' That was a novelty because all general stores sold liquor. In fact, it was the prevailing beverage and many leading citizens were distillers and brewers. There were, however, a few active citizens who were not only total abstainers but were commencing to preach the gospel of social reform.

Mr. Simeon Morrill, a tanner, and Robert Wilson organized societies of Sons of Temperance and Daughters of Temperance. These societies became rivals for popularity with the tavern, and attracted quite a few young men by their facilities for social enjoyment. Among these pioneer 'sons' was a certain Mr. John Carling, who

subsequently entered upon the occupation himself. Wilson continued his store for a year or two and became a prominent member of the temperance movement. He took up auctioneering for a livelihood and erected a house on William Street, just south of the creek. Wilson became interested in civic affairs and in 1854 was elected one of the councilors for St. George's Ward, having for his colleagues Mr. John Carling and Mr. Wm. Barker. His active career soon came to a close, however, for in April of 1854 he was stricken with typhoid fever, and passed away at the end of the month. On the first of May his friends and fellow-citizens met at his house; then the funeral cortege moved on to London Township and in the family plot in St. George's churchyard, on the 13th concession, they laid him to rest.

Robert Wilson was married twice. It was during his brief military career that he met the lady who became his first wife-Miss Ann Coyne, of a well-known Elgin County family. She only lived about a year, and died, leaving a baby girl, who soon followed her. His second wife was Miss Charlotte Cudmore of Woodstock, who survived him many years. There were also three children, two boys and a girl.

Robert was a man of many talents, he was a fairly accomplished musician, an artist of no mean ability, a poet whose verses compared not unfavourably with the work of much better men.

**Source: Robert Wilson, Pioneer Teacher; London and Middlesex Historical Society  
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