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St. Lawrence Market

On Saturday, November 1, 2003, the Ontario Heritage Foundation unveiled a provincial plaque in Toronto, Ontario to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the St. Lawrence Market.

The provincial plaque reads as follows:

ST. LAWRENCE MARKET

In 1803, Lieutenant Governor Peter Hunter established a public marketplace here where farmers from nearby townships sold produce and livestock to residents of the town of York (now Toronto). A wooden building was constructed in 1820 and replaced in 1831 by a brick building, which was also used for city council meetings. The market expanded south of Front Street in 1844 with the construction of the Market House and City Hall. It was enlarged again in 1851 when the St. Lawrence Hall and Market was built north of Front Street. The market was an important source of revenue and the City of Toronto rebuilt the north and south market buildings in 1899. The resulting complex, including the present-day south market, was designed by John W. Siddall and completed in 1904. The market remains an important part of Ontario's commercial history.

MARCHÉ ST. LAWRENCE

En 1803, le lieutenant-gouverneur Peter Hunter créa ici un marché public où les fermiers des cantons avoisinants vendaient leurs produits et bétail aux résidents de la ville de York (Toronto). Un bâtiment en bois érigé en 1820 fut remplacé, en 1831, par un édifice en briques, où avaient aussi lieu les réunions du conseil municipal. La construction de Market House et de l'hôtel de ville, en 1844, entraîna l'expansion du marché au sud de la rue Front. Elle continua au nord de la rue Front avec la construction du St. Lawrence Hall et marché, en 1851. Source importante de revenu, les bâtiments Nord et Sud du marché furent reconstruits en 1899 par la ville de Toronto. Terminé en 1904, le complexe, qui inclut le marché Sud actuel, fut conçu par John W. Siddall. Il reste un symbole important de l'histoire commerciale de l'Ontario.

Historical background

A market for the residents of the Town of York, 1803

In 1797, a 5 1/2-acre site bounded by King, Church, Front and Jarvis Streets in the town of York (now Toronto) was reserved for a public market place. A regular, weekly market for residents of the town and farmers from neighbouring townships was established on that site in October 1803 by Lieutenant Governor Peter Hunter. His proclamation reads: “great prejudice hath arisen to the inhabitants of the Town and Township of York, and of other adjoining Townships, from no place or day having been set apart or appointed for exposing publicly for sale, Cattle, Sheep, Poultry and other Provisions, Goods and Merchandize, brought by Merchants, Farmers and others for the necessary supply of the said Town of York.”¹

The first official market in the town of York took place on Saturday, November 5, 1803 (presumably in the open air), 10 years after the founding of the town. However, it was not until 1814 that the legislative act to establish and regulate a market was passed. The first evidence of a built structure to house the market dates to 1820, when a call for tenders appeared in the Upper Canada Gazette. The result was a simple, single-storey wooden structure facing King Street. The market place was also used for other purposes, such as open air auctions. Public floggings had taken place here as early as 1798 and stocks were set up by 1804 and used until the 1830s. The town well was dug on this lot in 1823 and equipped with a pump.

The Brick Market House and Town Hall, 1831

By 1830, the town of York had grown considerably and the Court of General Quarter Session for the Home District passed a resolution in March of that year to obtain plans for a larger, brick market house for the residents, whose number had increased five-fold in less than a decade. Local builders submitted five plans and the tenders were awarded in July 1831.

The new Market House, designed by James Cooper, was built on the north side of Front Street. Based on an open courtyard configuration commonly found in Britain, the butchers' stalls faced the square and the courtyard accommodated the farmers' wagons. Storage and granaries were on the second level gallery. A British visitor of 1832 commented on the “capacious market-house of brick,” which he described as a quadrangular building of great extent for the accommodation of a much larger place, having no equal “even in New York.”² Another observer called the market the best of its kind in the province.³

¹ Upper Canada Gazette, November 5, 1803.

² Isaac Fidler, *Observations of Professions, Literature, Manners, and Emigration in the United States and Canada*, made during a residence there in 1832. London: Whittaker, Treacher and Co., 1833.

³ “City of Toronto from the British Whig,” *Christian Guardian*, December 31, 1834.

The market building served another purpose. In keeping with western European architectural traditions, the town hall was incorporated into the market. The town hall was located on the second floor. Archways on the ground floor provided access to the market courtyard. An archway providing access was also located on the southern wing of the building, and six, symmetrical entrances were located along the east and west walls of the quadrangle.

In 1834, when the City of Toronto was incorporated, the town hall became the Toronto City Council Chamber and the market, previously controlled by the Magistrates of the Home District, came under city jurisdiction. Under Mayor William Lyon Mackenzie, alterations and improvements were made and the building served as city hall and market for a decade. The market soon proved inadequate for the needs of the growing city. By April 1834, the barely three-year old market building was in poor repair. The damp and poorly ventilated cellars were unfit for the storage of meat. Butchers were also hindered by the height of the encircling gallery, which exposed their meat to the sun. The market building was too small and farmers, who had travelled some distance with their goods, were often turned away and left to sell their goods to hucksters (pedlars) and grocers, resulting in a loss of revenue to the city.⁴ That same year, because of the shortage of space, Council had to authorize the construction of a one-storey, wooden-frame fish market nearby where fishers could sell their daily catch from the lake, including trout, whitefish, pickerel and perch.

Nevertheless, the public market was important to the community. It gave residents of the city access to fresh goods and the municipal government derived a sizable income from market fees. In 1844, problems with the existing market building and increased market activity, brought about plans for a new market building to supplement the 1831 building and to include a larger city hall. To accommodate this second market building, the city purchased a water lot directly to the south (between Front Street and the harbour), which since 1825 had been occupied by a large structure housing the Home District Farmers' storehouse.

The New Market House and City Hall, 1844-45

By March 1844, eight designs for the new Market House and City Hall south of Front Street had been submitted by local architects including Henry Bowyer Lane, John George Howard, John Tully and William Thomas. Lane was unanimously selected to be the architect and the cornerstone of the new building was ceremoniously laid in September. The new Market House and City Hall was U-shaped in plan with the Council chamber and offices above the Front Street entrance. The building's most impressive facade, complete with Palladian inspired window, faced south because the harbour was such an important transportation centre in the first half of the 19th century. A multi-functional facility, the front wing of the building also accommodated the police station, with lock ups in the basement. A change in grade south of Front Street allowed the corn exchange (in the lowest level of the central block) to open

⁴ British Colonist, September 6th, 1844.

directly onto the waterfront. While the old north market continued to serve the butchers, the new south market was for vegetables, fruit and poultry.

The St. Lawrence Hall and Market, 1850-51

After the city offices were removed from the north market building, an architectural competition was held to redesign the building. Henry Bowyer Lane and Kivas Tully submitted proposals, and William Thomas was awarded the contract for his neo-classically inspired design. Although Council approved the design in 1845, construction only began in 1850, after the Great Fire of 1849 damaged the 1831 Market House and Town Hall. The resulting facility consisted of two parts, the St. Lawrence Hall and the Market.

The St. Lawrence Hall was a multi-use building consisting of shops on the King Street level and a grand public hall on the upper floors. The public hall was used for civic events, entertainment, and social activities during the 1850s and 1860s, including meetings of the Anti-Slavery Society during which George Brown and others spoke out against slavery. An Ontario Heritage Foundation provincial plaque at St. Lawrence Hall commemorates this building.

The Market was located south of the St. Lawrence Hall. From King Street the Market was entered through the St. Lawrence Hall, whose shops flanked its gated, arched entrance. The Market was a 200-foot, I-shaped building or arcade, which extended south to the north side of Front Street where its two-storey entrance structure stood. A clerestory level in the arcade allowed light to enter the enclosed market in an effort to improve working conditions.

The Market House and City Hall building on the south side of Front Street continued to operate and in 1851, Thomas was called upon to alter and repair the south market building, which had numerous structural and practical faults.

Rebuilding the North and South St. Lawrence Market, 1899

Although the north and south markets served the needs of the city during the late 19th century, the size and quality of both structures were becoming inadequate. The south building was still in its 1840s configuration with an open market court, beyond which stood a Drill Shed and the Northern Railway Depot. The south building was also about to lose one of its principal tenants, the Corporation of the City of Toronto, which was relocating to its new municipal buildings on Queen Street west.

In preparation for yet another architectural competition, a commission comprising a city alderman, a member of the Market Improvement Association, and architect W.L. Symons embarked on a tour of market buildings in Montreal, Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, Cleveland, Buffalo and elsewhere. Their purpose was to acquire information regarding the construction and management of successful markets, taking the best

of what they encountered and applying it to recommendations for the proposed enlargement of Toronto's market.

The commission submitted to Council an extensive report with recommendations for future development in January 1899, complete with architectural renderings by Symons. The St. Lawrence Hall would be preserved and a new north market with a single span roof would be the wagon area for farmers, hucksters and wholesale butchers. The roof would then continue over the streetcar tracks on Front Street "affording a cleanly and convenient alighting place for passengers from all over the city."⁵ A south market building of similar construction would serve as the stall market for vegetables, poultry, fish and meat. A modern cold storage area was recommended for the basement of the south market. The old Council Chamber would serve as a produce exchange, modeled after a market seen in Boston. A wholesale fruit market was proposed for the lower level of the south building, which would be equipped with railroad tracks that would enter into the building from the Esplanade. The budget for the proposed plan was \$150,000.

The City Engineer, C.H. Rust, in collaboration with architect E.J. Lennox, used the Market Commission's report to prepare the terms and conditions for the architectural competition. By the spring of 1899, a jury that consisted of Rust, Lennox and Robert McCallum, Government Engineer and Architect, considered four sets of plans and selected the design of Toronto based architect John W. Siddall. There were high expectations for the New St. Lawrence Market – "a great All Day Departmental Market" which it was hoped would be the catalyst for renewing business activity.⁶

By the beginning of 1902, a substantial portion of the south market building was ready for occupancy. The entire St. Lawrence Market complex was completed in 1904, connected by a glass and iron canopy that spanned Front Street (the canopy was removed in 1954). The north and south market buildings were almost identical in design, each having battered brick piers with stone dressings, running down the east and west facades, and large, segmental-headed windows on the upper level. The 82-foot high steel-frame roof structures had lanterns at the peak which allowed natural light into the buildings.

In the north market building (dedicated to wholesale trade and open only on Saturdays) farmers from the nearby communities of Humber Valley, Clarkson, Thornhill, Markham and elsewhere could drive their wagons directly onto the market's 340 foot by 144 foot floor. During the week, the north market building provided a public space for exhibitions, conventions and assemblies. In the south market, retailers opened daily to sell meat, poultry, fish, fruit and vegetables. The 340 foot by 136 foot space contained 52 stalls and was entered

⁵ Report of Market Commission, Appendix "C" to the Minutes of City Council, 1898, p. 7.

⁶ Committee on Property, Report No.2, January 30, 1902.

from Front Street through the arches designed by Henry Bower Lane in 1844 for the Market House and City Hall. These arches were incorporated in the 1902 south market building and survive today.

The St. Lawrence Market today

Today, the St. Lawrence Market complex is operated by the City of Toronto. The St. Lawrence Hall houses shops and offices and the public hall is used for social activities. The south market continues to be a bustling daily market. The 1902 north market building was demolished in 1968 and replaced by a new structure designed by city architect J.G. Sutherland, which opened in February 1969. On weekends, it is used for the farmer's market. Market Street, running alongside St. Lawrence Hall between King and Front Streets, was closed to traffic and transformed into a landscaped pedestrian mall, Market Lane Park.

Throughout the years, the market place and buildings have played a significant role in the region's social, political and commercial history. Two hundred years after its establishment, the St. Lawrence Market continues to be a vibrant part of the community and an important part of Ontario's commercial history.

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