

Ontario Street Heritage Face-to-Face with the Wrecking Ball

by Hayden Bulbrook

Long before my time a grand old post office sat in a commanding place at the junction between Ontario Street, Erie Street, and Downie Street. It was demolished in 1961. The demolition of industrial buildings and banks in the name of urban renewal continued into the 1980s and beyond. City Hall was nearly lost. Last year it was a majestic Italianate building, 91 Brunswick Street, which faced the rise of the machines, its remains carried away in dumpsters. This trend of demolition continues up to the present with the threat to the Ontario Street Heritage Corridor, the latest that stands face-to-face with the wrecking ball.

Four buildings in a row along the Ontario Street corridor are under threat of demolition for a 4+ storey condominium development of significant scale. This development is proposed in a neighbourhood of 1.5 to 2.5 storey single detached houses. Three of these buildings appear to be well-intact. Adaptive reuse and integration into the condominium plan, which the developer has not considered, would be more suitable, appropriate, and environmentally friendly – and would be a marked distinction from a history of demolition in this city.

The developer has stated that the units will be sold at market value and that there will be no affordable housing options, a difficult pill to swallow especially for young Stratfordites trying to break into an increasingly expensive housing market.

It is imperative that we also consider the environmental impact of demolishing heritage buildings. Demolition is inherently tied to waste – waste that amounts to an average of 40 tons added to the landfill when a home is demolished. Most of it is cherished and valuable wood! Is this really what we should strive for as the clear and present danger of climate change is already affecting every one of us?

As an issue that affects Stratford's heritage and community, I'd like to shine light on the history of three of the four buildings that are under threat of demolition. The focus is on 370, 388, and 390 Ontario Street.

370 Ontario Street

370 Ontario Street was likely built between 1902 and 1905. It is a solid red brick two-and-a-half-storey structure with a residential form. This Queen Anne style building holds a commanding presence on the corner of Ontario Street and Trow Avenue with its cross-gabbling acting as an anchor, opening to this intersection. It has several intact features such as stone sills, lintels, and voussoirs; a brick chimney; a Palladian-window; staggered shingle patterned gables; rich red brick that was likely sourced from local brickyards; and a sympathetic bay window on the west façade.



370 Ontario Street
1979



370 Ontario Street
today

Beginning in 1905 until at least 1930, 370 Ontario Street housed George Jeffery, a locomotive engineer with the Grand Trunk Railway (later Canadian National Railway). Jeffery was born on May 17th, 1855, in Kent, England and arrived in Perth County in 1873. He married his wife, Janet Marion Ross, on January 13th, 1886. She was nine years younger than him and was born in Hamilton to Scottish parents, Donald and Elizabeth Ross. George and Janet had two daughters, Mary and Donella.

After a long career in Stratford's railway industry, George retired in 1923, spending his retirement at 370 Ontario Street alongside Janet until her passing in 1930. George would live for almost two more decades, passing away at the age of 93 in 1948, not quite witnessing Stratford's economic transition away from the railway industry. By this point he was living at 15 Worsley Street.

388 & 390 Ontario Street

Both houses were likely constructed by businessman and entrepreneur, Arthur H. King, in c. 1894. The two houses come as a pair and should be regarded as such. 388 and 390 feature full-width shed roof porches with varying wood detailing. A sidelight and a transom light adorn each entry door. 390 features rounded porch columns while the posts on the porch of 388 are squared. Both sit atop red brick piers capped in stone. Roundel windows are located in the peaked gables. Windows are one-over-one. Both buildings feature chamfered corners that oppose each other, demonstrating the mirror pattern of the two.



1979

Today



388 Ontario Street



By 1905, 388 Ontario Street was occupied by Arthur H. King. The eldest of three siblings, King was born in Downie Township on February 9th, 1856, to English-born parents, Henry and Mary King. Arthur worked in a number of industries including employment with the Canada Express Company; as the proprietor of the American House Hotel, which was located on Downie Street; as the manager of the Stratford Soda Water Works Company in 1896; and, at least for a time, as a cigar manufacturer in Stratford's once modest and seldom-known cigar making industry. The 1924 city directory noted that he worked in real estate. These roles, as well as investment in local business ventures, suggest that Arthur built these houses for speculative purposes as Stratford's population grew. On September 24th, 1879, King and Anna Della Walker of Belleville got married. Walker was born on September 22, 1860. The two had three children, Henry, Beatrice, and Arthur. Young Arthur passed away shortly after birth. Arthur Sr. would live until 1930, passing away at the age of 74, while Anna continued to live at 388 Ontario until her death in 1940.

390 Ontario Street

After a series of short-term occupants, 390 Ontario was occupied by Alex Gillies by 1911. Gillies was born in Glasgow, Scotland on January 29, 1877, to parents Gilbert and Jane Gillies. By 1913 he worked under Norval F. Babb, “a jeweler, optician, and issuer of marriage licenses” at 23 Downie Street. Eleven years later he was operating his own jeweler, watchmaker, and optician business, Gillies & Emm, with partner D.B. Emm at the same location. Gillies retired on December 14th, 1941, after working in the watchmaking and jewellery business for 38 years – his entire time in Stratford. He passed away January 7, 1942.

Gillies married Mabel E. Lawson, who was of Irish descent, in Goderich on October 28th, 1908. By 1901 Lawson was working as a clerk, though it is unclear where. In 1956 she granted the property to Otto Wessel, a foreman at Fischer Bearings. She passed away in December 1961, her eightieth year.



Paradigm Shift

Despite the heritage we’ve maintained, Stratford has a long history of demolition. There exists an opportunity to break from this past and adaptively reuse our heritage buildings. Unfortunately, the potential developer of the block composed of 370, 380, and 388 Ontario Street has not considered this. In an era where a lack of affordable housing and the growing threat of climate change affects all of us, it is time that we realize that preserving heritage is as much about our lives today – and tomorrow – as it is about the stories of yesterday.

Update on Ontario Street project

Real estate developer Chancery Developments has sought official plan and zoning bylaw amendments needed to proceed with their project, which would see pair of 15-unit, three-and-a-half storey structures containing stacked townhouses built along Ontario Street between Queen and Trow Streets.

Since the area is currently designated for low- and medium-density uses, Chancery asked city councillors to change the city’s official plan by increasing building height and density limits, as well as to rezone the land to a site-specific designation vetted by city planners. No elevators would be installed for accessibility and the buildings will be sold at market value which is not affordable for many people.

After a meeting on Monday, October 26 that included well-researched presentations by 17 concerned citizens of Stratford who were strongly opposed to the project, councillors, sitting as the planning and heritage committee, voted in favour of allowing the amendments for the construction.

The decision, which will still need approval at an upcoming regular council meeting, comes after months of debate.

Councillors Martin Ritsma, Tom Clifford, Cody Sebben, and Dave Gaffney were opposed. The others, including Mayor Mathieson, voted in favour of the developer and the changes to the official plan.

There is one more chance, on November 8, 2021, to stop this project and to bring councillors on side. We need only two more votes.

However, time is of the essence. You must voice your concern by letter or your intention to speak at the City Council meeting by November 2. If you write a letter of protest you must make sure that it is registered with tdafoe@stratford.ca (Tatiana Dafoe) or clerks@stratford.ca. You must specifically request that it be included as part of the record of the proceedings in upcoming meetings.

If you’re willing to make a presentation (you would have as much as 10 minutes to speak), you must also meet the November 2 deadline and specifically request through Tatiana Dafoe that you want to be part of the deciding meeting on November 8.