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# ACO Stratford-Perth County

## More Than Bricks and Mortar

[www.stratford-perthcountybranchaco.ca](http://www.stratford-perthcountybranchaco.ca)

July 2020

### Stratford, Ontario: Canada's cultural tourism destination

By Jaan Pill



Jaan Pill

### A Stroll Along Queen Street

By Mary-Lou Drown

The Stratford Festival began with a suitably spectacular opening performance under a huge theatrical tent, raised at the edge of an impressive park system along the Avon River - populated then as now by swans, ducks, and geese - sixty-seven years ago.

The story of how the Stratford Festival, North America's largest repertory theatre, now bringing over 500,000 visitors a year to Stratford, began at the Festival Theatre on July 13, 1953 - with a stunning evening performance of *Richard 111*, starring Alex Guinness in the title role - has been frequently told.

In *Fifty Seasons at Stratford* (2002), Robert Cushman describes the moment when the performance ended: "The Canadian response was bemused - but ecstatic. A first-night standing ovation (not the automatic event it is now) lasted five minutes: an eternity in theatre time. Everybody knew that history had been made."

*Richard 111*, along with the season's second play, *All's Well that Ends Well*, starring Irene Worth, was performed on a thrust stage designed by theatrical designer Tanya Moiseiwitsch, in collaboration with artistic director Tyrone Guthrie, who had previously visited Canada to produce and direct a documentary drama series (1930-1931) for the Canadian National Railway Radio Department. Initially, the amphitheatre - constructed in parkland next to the historic Stratford Normal School - was covered by a theatrical tent. In 1957, a permanent roof, designed by Toronto architect Robert Fairfield, was installed.

Queen Street in Stratford Ontario is indeed a special street. One only needs to look to the north and you will see the renowned Stratford Festival.

Looking to the south you can spy the train tracks that once belonged to the Grand Trunk Railway. The G.T.R. was a pivotal part of Stratford's history.

According to the Stratford Perth county ACO website there are now six plaqued buildings on the street. If you have a plaque on display it means someone from the committee has done many hours of research on the building. Not all plaques are for homes. Some are for businesses, some for Band Bs, stores etc. They celebrate the first person who lived in the house and their occupation.

Why would you get a plaque? It is an excellent way to find out about your home, or business.

As an example I found out that the first person who lived in my house worked for the GTR as a brakeman. I did some investigating myself and found out that my dad worked with his grandson on the railway in Stratford.



You can wonder and imagine what life was like in the early 1900's. This year I have lived in my home for 40 years.

"The design was strikingly original," John Pettigrew and Jamie Portman observe, regarding Fairfield's task, in *Stratford: The First Thirty Years* (1985). "One of the modern world's few round buildings when it was erected, it was patterned not on any other building but on the tent itself. Fairfield aimed strongly at capturing something of the tent's atmosphere, as can be seen in the use of colour and in the fluted roof capped with coronet and flagpole."

Fairfield also preserved the centrality of the thrust stage by ensuring the stage's centre pillar would be at the very centre of the new building. The thrust stage design, with the audience seated on three sides of it, fosters intimacy between actors and audience, requires minimal scenery, and enables quick and effortless scene changes. With good seats available in a wide arc around the stage, the design also maximizes ticket revenue.



Original model of the Festival thrust stage, a new variant on a centuries-old idea, designed by Tanya Moiseiwitsch in consultation with Tyrone Guthrie, 1953. Though M oiseiwitsch 's stage has been modified a few times since its original incarnation, its basic architecture remains the same today. Photo courtesy of Stratford Festival Archives

Before COVID-19 led to cancellation of the current season, the Stratford Festival was planning to stage *Richard III* again in 2020, starring Calm Feore in the title role, at the Festival's new \$100-million Tom Patterson Theatre. *All's Well that Ends Well*, featuring Jessica B. Hill and Seana McKenna, was also set to be staged again in 2020. A future re-opening of the Festival will take place after the current COVID-19 restrictions have been lifted.

### Park system

Tom Patterson, a Toronto journalist who grew up in Stratford, was a key player in founding of the Festival. Thomas Orr, an insurance broker, also played a strong role by helping save the riverside park system that runs through the heart of Stratford. Many others contributed, in making Patterson's dream of a festival a reality.

By the early 1900s, land along the Avon River had been turned into industrial wasteland. Thomas Orr, working with Montreal landscape architect Frederick Todd, arranged for existing parks to be joined together and cleaned up, creating a pastoral scene.

Then along came a proposal, by the Canadian Pacific Railway, to build a railway along the river. All at once, the park system was under threat. Many residents supported the proposal on grounds it would bring prosperity. Orr argued that keeping the parkland intact made better economic sense.

A brief summary of the plaqued homes on Queen Street includes five homes and one Bed and Breakfast.

### 50 Queen Street (1913)

Joseph Bullock emigrated to Canada from England. He worked on the GTR as a machinist. Later he worked at the Public Utilities Commission.

### 174 Queen Street (1905)

John Whyte Sr. emigrated to Canada from Scotland. It was the Whyte Packing Company/ butcher shop. Today it is a Bed and Breakfast.

### 207 Queen Street (1874)

Allan McPhee was a carpenter born on Cape Breton Island.

### 231 Queen Street (1904)

Christian Rosenberger was a furniture finisher from Preston, Ontario.

### 243 Queen Street (1877)

Edward Kane was a mason. He was born in Ireland and came to Canada with his parents in 1842.

### 253 Queen Street (1906)

Thomas Leo Purcell was a brakeman for the GTR. He was born in Seafo rth.

To find out the "Rest of the Story" of the Queen Street plaqued properties you can go to the Stratford-Perth County ACO website and read all about them. They also have all of Stratford, St. Marys and the county listed in alphabetical order.

When you are out for a walk you can look for plaques all around the around the city. Happystrolling!

Submitted by: Mary-Lou Drown  
a Proud Plaque Recipient



Photo by Dean Robinson

A referendum in 1913 saved the parkland by a margin of 127 votes. Patterson and others have noted that, had the park system been destroyed, the Festival would not have happened.

Adjacent to the parkland, inside of which two Festival theatres are located, is an eminently walkable neighbourhood of century-old houses many featuring Architectural Conservancy of Ontario heritage plaques. The Festival Area Ratepayers Association works to preserve the neighbourhood, with its luxuriant tree canopy, for future generations.

#### Four theatres

A music festival was also launched in 1953, in connection with the Festival. Given that the acoustics at the Festival Theatre were not ideal for music, an alternative space in the park system - the city's Casino, which later became the Second Stage, and subsequently the Tom Patterson Theatre - became the Festival's concert hall.

Initially there wasn't much for visitors to do, when not attending plays. In 1953, a women's organization served visitors meals in church basements. Subsequently, a vibrant restaurant scene has emerged.

In the early sixties, when the Festival began staging musical theatre, it took over the lease at the Avon Theatre, which had opened in 1901. The theatre, with a proscenium stage, has served as a music hall, vaudeville house, and movie theatre until the Festival repurposed it again, back into a theatre.

The Festival rented the theatre each summer starting in 1956 for light operas and bought it in 1963. In 1964, the building was renovated. Afterwards, the exterior and front offices were reconstructed resulting in its current facade. In 1984, the backstage area was enlarged and a renovation completed in 2002 added the Studio Theatre, the Festival's fourth theatre.



The Avon Theatre - which features a proscenium stage - on Downie Street in downtown Stratford. The Studio Theatre - which features a thrust stage - is visible on the right (back of building).  
Jaan PILL photo

## President's Message

Welcome to the first edition of our relaunched newsletter "More Than Bricks and Mortar".

We have talked about publishing the newsletter for some time, and now that we are in the pandemic and are unable to research at the Archives, and we are unable to hold social events, we agreed that this was indeed the perfect time.

"More Than Bricks and Mortar" was published from 2013 to 2017, with two to three issues a year. The writers during that period included Dean Robinson, Marianne Brandis, Rick Huband, Carole Huband, Dan Schneider, and Margaret Murray Nicholson. For this issue, Jaan PILL, one of our newer members, kindly offered us his article about Stratford which was published in Acorn, the provincial ACO's magazine.

In future newsletters we are planning to tie in our plaques with some of the industries that made Stratford prosperous: furniture making, cheese making, the GTR/CNR shops. We will also be looking at other topics such as the role of women in the history of Stratford.

I would like to thank all of those who participated in our first-ever Zoom AGM on Wednesday May 27. Perhaps our next AGM will also need to be held on Zoom!

Allan Tye

For news updates and to view the Festival's current lineup of social media programming and of past Stratford plays available for viewing by audiences worldwide, please check online at

[www.stratfordfestival.ca](http://www.stratfordfestival.ca)

Forums on Anti-Racism are at the Stratford Festival YouTube channel:

<https://www.youtube.com/stratfordfestival>

#### About the author

A retired elementary teacher and writer who recently moved to Stratford, Jaan PILL has helped to preserve a large school property and several century-old houses in Toronto, as documented at his Preserved Stories website, which also features topics such as "How to prepare a five-minute presentation to the Committee of Adjustment."

### **ACO Stratford-Perth County Executive**

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### **ACO Mission**

*"Through education and advocacy, to encourage the conservation and re-use of structures, districts and landscapes of architectural, historic and cultural significance, to inspire and benefit Ontarians."*

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### **Membership:**

<https://aontario.ca/login.php>

Individual \$35  
Household \$40  
Associate \$45  
Student \$12  
Corporate \$60

### **Interested in Volunteering?**

Do you like to write? We need people to write articles for our newsletters. The word count should be from 250 to 400 words. The topic? Something concerning the buildings in Stratford and Perth County and the stories that they tell. Contact Carole Huband [hubandca@rogers.com](mailto:hubandca@rogers.com)

Interested in information about researching or having a plaque made? Get in touch with our plaque coordinator Mark Yakabuski [yakster@rogers.com](mailto:yakster@rogers.com)

Interested in advocacy for Heritage Conservation Districts? There is a group looking into this for Hamlet Ward. Get in touch with Mary Walton [mmwalton1997@gmail.com](mailto:mmwalton1997@gmail.com)  
Richard Wood [rwoodn618@rogers.com](mailto:rwoodn618@rogers.com)