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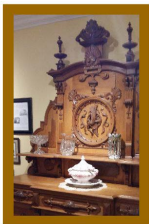
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August 2020

Stratford's Furniture Industry - Part One

By the 1890s more than half of the work force in Stratford was employed by the railway. The residual effect of the railway created more industry and more jobs. Eventually, Stratford's furniture industry would supply almost one-fourth of the jobs in the city.

The first residents created their own rustic furniture to augment the furnishings that they were able to bring to their new home by water and cart. By the 1920s, the city produced almost 17% of the furniture sold in Canada.

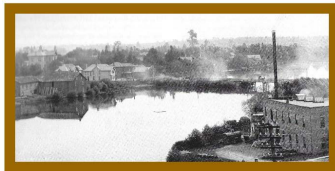


Easson Sideboard

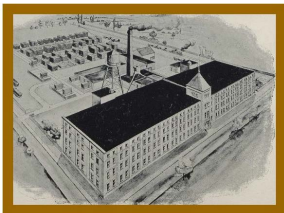
In the 1850s William Easson built a sawmill on the north side of the river for his contracting business. Later his son, Robert, would run the furniture department in the same location. Several pieces from Eassons can be seen in the Stratford Perth County Museum.

William Hepburn, who was already working as a cabinet maker at the age of 16, started a furniture making company in 1867 at the age of 22. His was the first factory to employ more than 10 men. William Hepburn became the mayor of Stratford in 1903.

Joseph Orr began making furniture in his father's lumber business and in 1884 built the first "modern" furniture factory. It was located on the south shore, across from the Easson Mill on the north shore of the river, near Waterloo Street North.



The Orr Factory and part of the Easson Mill



The McLagan Factory

One of his main competitors was George McLagan who in 1900 built the first of the large, four storey, yellow brick factories along Trinity and King Streets after his building on Douglas Street burnt down. McLagan designed most of his company's furniture until his death in 1918. The company he built was one of the leading manufacturers until the 1930s.

Others followed within a few years: Globe-Wernicke in 1903 at 163 King; Stratford Chair Company in 1905 at 459 Albert; Moore-Bell in 1908 at 182 King; Imperial Rattan in 1910, 411 Albert at King; Stratford Bed Company later became Kroehler at 552 Ontario; and in 1913 Farquharson-Gifford Company built the last of the large furniture factories at 390 Douro Street. Most remain standing today except Kroehler, Moore-Bell and Stratford Chair Company. Today, The Bruce Hotel stands on the original Kroehler site.



Imperial Rattan



The Bruce Hotel



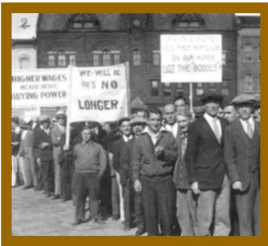
Kroehler Manufacturing

Stratford played its part in WWI. The furniture factories turned to producing boxes to carry rifles and shells as well as some simple furniture for the soldiers' barracks. The women of the town replaced the men in the factories when the men went off to war and the factory output increased.

After the war, the majority of Stratford's furniture manufacturers took part in the annual furniture and undertakers exhibitions usually held in January. The catalogue from 1920 gives details of the industry, ideas on improving advertising, and descriptions of the new innovations in furniture. According to the catalogue, visitors were present from all of the larger centres of Canada from the Atlantic to the Pacific.



McLagan's catalogue 1920

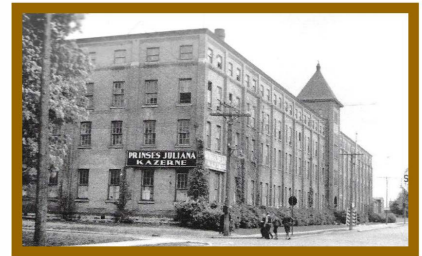


Strikers behind city hall.

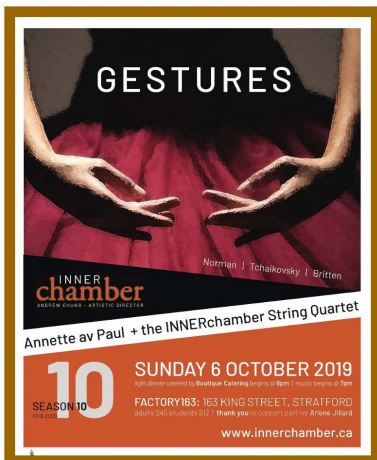
1933 brought the furniture makers' and chicken pluckers' strike, which lasted for two months. A possibility of riots breaking out after strike breakers arrived and after police were attacked with bricks and stones, pushed the municipality to call for the Canadian army to help. Troops from London arrived wearing full battle gear and four tanks moved along Ontario Street to the armouries. After two months all was peaceably settled and the workers returned to the factories.

When WWII began, the old McLagan furniture company on Trinity Street housed a number of regiments including the Perth Regiment and the Royal Netherlands Army.

The Imperial Rattan building on Albert and King Street made wing spars for Mosquito bombers. The Stratford furniture industry also contributed plywood parts for Mosquito and Lancaster bombers as well as furniture for cargo ships.



Prinses Juliana Kazerne (barracks)



Inner Chamber poster 2019

The 1950s saw a major decline in the furniture industry. Imperial Furniture, however, developed a number of award-winning designs in competition with the popular Scandinavian designs of the time. Kroehler and Farquharson-Gifford remained until the 1980s and Krug Furniture closed in 2006 but continues today as Krug, part of four facilities in Southwestern Ontario.

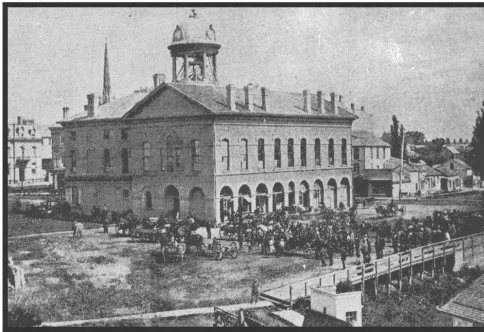
Several other buildings have been repurposed. 163 King has become a centre for visual arts and music as the home of Inner Chamber. The Farquharson-Gifford has several retail outlets. Festival Furniture, the former Imperial Rattan building, is one of the largest used office furniture dealers in North America. The majority of the buildings remain as a reminder of the once thriving furniture industry in Stratford.

Sources:

Stratford Perth County Archives files and vintage photos
Floodtides of Fortune by Adelaide Leitch
 1920 Canadian Furniture World and the Undertaker

Newsletter team: Carole Huband and Allan Tye

Share a photo of your favourite Stratford or Perth County building, past or present!



Stratford-Perth Archives

Built in 1857, **the original town hall** housed market stalls and some permanent stores including butcher shops and grain merchants.

The second floor contained the city departments and council chamber as well as the 500 seat concert hall. What a gem this would be today for our performing arts groups.

The building burnt in 1897 and was replaced with our present city hall.

President's Remarks

Welcome to the first part of our exploration of Stratford's furniture industry. In September you will receive the second part which will highlight our plaqued houses that were built and/or occupied by the owners and employees of this extremely important industry.

We trust that our newsletters are helping to keep alive the passion for historic architecture that our members and plaque holders share.

Our researchers eagerly anticipate the re-opening of the St. Marys and Stratford-Perth Archives so they can continue to explore our local history and the interesting people who helped to create it.

Allan Tye

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

Interested in information about researching or having a plaque made? Get in touch with our plaque coordinator Mark Yakabuski 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 or Richard Wood rwoodn618@rogers.com