

## 341 Erie Street - Industrial Architecture Right Before Our Eyes

### Hayden Bulbrook

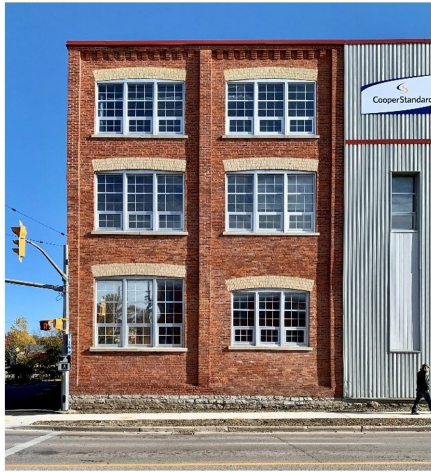
"To view an interactive story map of 341 Erie Street follow click [here](#) "



*1. The rather inconspicuous north and west facades of 341 Erie with the building's history revealed most by its street-facing corner, October 2020. Hayden Bulbrook.*

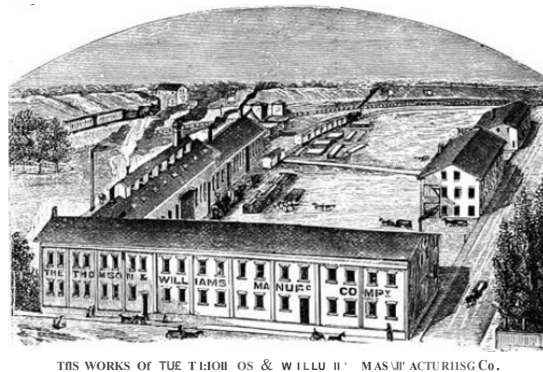
Stratford's industrial history is rich, stretching beyond the GTR/CNR shops and the furniture factories. Alongside the manufacture of goods came beautiful, orderly brick and cement buildings, often decorated sparingly with corbelling, that dotted along some of the city's older neighbourhoods. Many of these buildings, most of which were built in the early 20th century, contained a factory floor, warehousing, design rooms, and offices under one roof - often expanding floor space during boom years - in an era characterized more by local production rather than off-shoring.

Alongside one of Stratford's main corridors, Erie Street, sit two industrial buildings, 342 Erie (repurposed as a medical centre) on the southwest corner of Erie and West Gore and 341 Erie on the southeast corner. We will focus on the latter. 341 Erie is a curious case as its history is fairly inconspicuous today. Save for the brick facade along the northwestern corner, one might mistake it for a modern industrial building. After all, much of it is clad in corrugated metal siding.



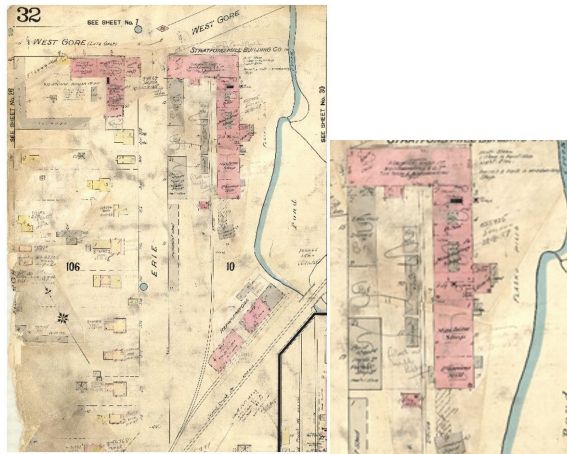
*2. Northwest facade of 341 Erie with preserved brick facade, white brick arches, corbelling, and sympathetic updated windows, October 2020. Hayden Bulbrook.*

In reality, 341 Erie is full of rich industrial history that continues today. Its transformation to an industrial space began in 1874 when agricultural implements company Thomson & Williams Manufacturing Co. was established. According to an 1882 illustration from the Town of Stratford publication, it was an extensive L-shaped factory with a rectangular two-storey frontage situated on the corner of Gore (West Gore today) and Erie streets. By the early 1880s it was Stratford's most prominent industry - aside from the GTR Shops - employing nearly 200 people. Capitalizing on Stratford's extensive railway hub, already a spur line connected the factory to the GTR line, as evidenced by the illustration. Demonstrating innovation and acclaim, the manufacturer exhibited its 20 horsepower engine, grain crusher and dairy apparatus at the 1876 Centennial International Exhibition in Philadelphia.



*3. An 1882 illustration of the Thomson & Williams Manufacturing Co. Town of Stratford, Canada.*

After a series of short-term occupants such as local manufacturer James Corcoran; the George T. Smith Middling Purifier Co. of Jackson, Michigan; and the North American Mill Building Co., William Preston purchased the building in 1905 and organized the Stratford Mill Building Company. This company manufactured and sold "mill machinery, boilers, engines, threshers, separators, and other machinery." Among the mill machinery were the branded "Stratford Roller Mills and "Stratford Sifters." By this point, the plant included a 265 x 50 ft building containing "engine and boiler rooms, the blacksmith shop, the millwright shop, and the planning mill," as well as two three-storey buildings, one 96 x 40 ft and another at 1060 x 50 ft. Despite a fire-proof roof, fire ravaged the mill in December 1912 destroying the engine room and the blacksmith, machine and workshops.



4. Fire Insurance Plan showing Stratford Mill Building Co. 1908, updated 1913. Courtesy of Western Archives.

Plans to reconstruct were made in early 1913. Local architect J.S. Russell was contracted to design a three-storey white brick factory with structural steel and iron construction at a cost of \$15,000. Later updates noted a cost of \$60,000. Red brick likely substituted the white brick at this point. However, the Stratford Mill Building Company's days were numbered as the Canadian General Electric Co. had struck a deal with the Allis-Chalmers Co. The Canadian G.E. Co. ultimately purchased rights to the plant as well as its assets to manufacture and sell Stratford Mill machinery and machinery produced by Allis-Chalmers. Mr. Preston continued to oversee operations and the plant operated under the Allis-Chalmers name until around 1930, according to city directories. Perhaps the Great Depression had had an impact.

Founded in 1901 as a harness business, G.L. Griffith & Sons Limited relocated from Melbourne, Ontario to Stratford in 1912. The original factory was situated at the southeast corner of Waterloo and Albert streets. By 1928 the company had also entered the rubber business when it purchased the Federal Manufacturing Company and relocated it here from Wingham. The rubber business, which retained its name, was located at a separate plant at 315 Front Street.

In 1934 G.L. Griffith & Sons Limited decided to consolidate the two production lines moving its facilities to 341 Erie Street. By 1953 it employed about 225 people. 1934 G.L. Griffith & Sons Limited decided to consolidate the two production lines moving its facilities to 341 Erie Street. By 1953 it employed about 225 people.

The industrial history of 341 Erie continued after Griffith & Sons. Shown as vacant in 1965, it was Plant 3 for Standard Products throughout the 1970s into the early 2000s. Its beautiful brick facade was still visible in the 1980s, as photographic evidence shows. At that time Standard Products also had Plant 2 across the street in what is now the Jenny Trout Centre. By 2003 341 Erie had become Cooper Standard Automotive Plant 3. By this point much of the facade was covered. Generally, industrial architecture has shifted from form to function, conspicuous to inconspicuous. I believe the latter phenomenon has especially removed our awareness of industry from everyday life. As factories are now typically relegated to industrial parks on the edge of towns and cities, we forget the important role they play in giving purpose to so many lives.



5. View of north and west facades, June 1985. Courtesy of Stratford-Perth Archives.

Clad in corrugated metal siding, 341 Erie gives observers only a faint notion of its storied past. Through closer examination we notice the brick facade on the corner of Erie and West Gore. We can also observe from the rear entrance of the plant, exposed brick painted a dull brownish grey. Further still are long brick buildings evidenced by the chimney, blackened windows, corbelling, and spalling red brick. One need only observe for a few moments to let the imagination flow and picture the industrial past impacting the senses; the sight, smell, and taste of coal smoke billowing out of the chimney, the chatter of men against the clanking of machinery, the vibration of motors, the hum of railcars moving along the spur line. Today, the present Cooper Plant 3 is analogous to Stratford's industrial history; glimpses of it are still there. Sometimes you just have to do a little digging and let your imagination run to really soak in that history.



*6. Rear view of 341 Erie with older mill building and brick of main building visible, October 2020. Hayden Bulbrook.*

#### References

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Various Vernon's City Directories.

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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) or Richard Wood [rwoodn618@rogers.com](mailto:rwoodn618@rogers.com)