

Stratford's Building Trades By Allan Tye

When perusing the lengthy list of the historical plaque properties on our website, it really is quite striking how many of the occupations that are listed are in the building trades. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, Stratford went through a number of building booms connected to the establishment of the various Grand Trunk Railway shops as well as the establishment of the furniture and other factories. The number of names on our plaques connected to the building trades is so great that it is not possible to cover all of them in any sort of detail; therefore, I will describe at length some of the more prominent builders and will summarize the others. Of course, as I write, there are more plaque monographs and photographs being added to our website, and inevitably there will be more tradesmen in our future information. Please refer to our website for more details about each of the houses listed in this newsletter.

What is particularly interesting about these tradesmen is that they were often directly involved in the construction of these houses, either as a carpenter, mason, painter, or plasterer, or as someone who would have overseen the construction. The 19th and early 20th centuries were certainly not the time of mass-produced neighbourhoods, especially in a smaller community such as Stratford, and as a result our city has many neighbourhoods that are filled with architectural variety.

Builders Who Were Politicians

Three of our plaques list builders who also became mayor and one of them lists a city alderman. The prominence that was achieved through such construction projects helped to enable these men to become city politicians.



John L Youngs - Builder & Mayor
240 Birmingham Street
Built 1904



John Lants Youngs was born in Oxford County in 1867, the son of a builder. During his summers while attending high school in Stratford, John worked on construction projects in Northern Ontario, including building railway stations. About 1893 John established his own construction company. Throughout his career he was responsible for building many of the iconic buildings in Stratford such as the City Hall (along with Edmund Cawsey), St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, the old YMCA, and the addition to the Stratford Public Library. John fought in World War, being wounded in 1915 and being awarded the Military Cross for conspicuous bravery during the Battle of Mount Sorrel in 1916. In 1919 John was elected Mayor of Stratford. He was an active advocate for ex-servicemen and an official of the Great War Veterans Association, the forerunner of the Canadian Legion.

William Daly - Builder & City Alderman
106 Cobourg Street
Built 1907



William Daly and his parents emigrated from Ireland to Oxford County where they established a farm. After his marriage to Mary Skelly in 1872 and subsequent move to Stratford, William's skills as a carpenter enabled him to move eventually into the house building business to meet the needs of the many new residents arriving in the emerging community. In 1907 James built 106 Cobourg Street as a rental property. James served as city alderman for five one-year terms beginning in 1899.

James Stamp - Builder & Mayor of Stratford
136 Hibernia Street
Built 1894



When James Stamp, an immigrant from England, first arrived in Stratford in about 1876, he first worked as a mason and bricklayer for local contractors Abraham & Filey, Edmunds & Wilson, and Tait & Snazel. He started his own contracting business around 1885 and was extremely successful. His projects included: the Worth Block, Hamlet School, the Perth Mutual Insurance building, the McLagan factory, and the MacDonald foundry. He also built homes for several prominent members of the community.

James had an important municipal career. He first ran for alderman in Avon Ward in 1893. While alderman, he was chair of the Board of Works and was involved with the laying of the trunk sewer and the construction of the present city hall. He was also the chair of the Market and Police Committee. James was elected mayor in 1901 and was re-elected in 1902.

David Scrimgeour - Builder & Mayor
93 Norman Street
Built 1896



David Scrimgeour emigrated from Scotland to Stratford in 1848 when he was four years old. David's father was a carpenter. After spending eight years in California and British Columbia, David returned to Stratford in 1869 to join his older brother, Alex, to form Scrimgeour Brothers Avon Planing Mill located on the south side of Mill Street (now Douglas Street near Huron). They were manufacturers of doors, sashes, blinds, mouldings, scroll sawing, and turnings. They were also contractors and builders who constructed a large number of businesses and houses in Stratford. By 1888 the brothers were also engaged in making furniture.

David was a school trustee and a councillor for many years before becoming mayor in 1881 and 1882. He was later appointed city tax collector and served in that capacity until his death in 1906.

Other Builders & Contractors

Many of the men who were listed as builders or contractors were in fact small-time tradesmen who had a background in carpentry (often learned on the farm) or masonry and who tried to establish themselves as builders. Some had another primary business (such as Thomas B. Johnson the butcher), and decided to branch out into building. I will present details about only some of the members of this quite lengthy list. Please refer to our website for more details.

Thomas B. Johnson - Butcher & Builder
185 Albert Street, Built 1888

James Freeman Jr. - Builder
197 Albert Street
Built 1922

James was raised on a farm in Mornington Township. Early in his life he showed exceptional business sense. At 17 he was selling farm implements and at 25 he owned and operated a highly prosperous machinery business which served the extensive rural territory. He continued to run his business until 1913, when failing health led to his retirement and his move to the city of Stratford. He didn't stay retired, but he engaged in the contracting and construction business, erecting some 30 houses including the one at 197 Albert Street.



Moses Schlotzhauer - Contractor & Builder
121 Birmingham Street
Built 1924

In 1902 Moses and his wife Mabel moved from the countryside to Stratford where he became a well-known contractor/builder. He was in charge of the erection of many Stratford homes.



James Wilson - Builder & Hotel Keeper
192 Brunswick Street
Built 1876

As a young man James Wilson left the family farm in Downie Township and came to Stratford where he learned the bricklaying trade. It appears that by the mid-1870s James had become a partner in the building firm of Cruickshank, Edmund and White, which was responsible for constructing many prominent buildings in Stratford including St. James, Central Methodist, and part of St. Joseph's churches, several of the ward schools, and a number of dwellings. About 1880, however, James entered into a new line of business as a hotel keeper.



Edmund Abner Cawsey - Stone Mason & Contractor
200 Cambria Street
Built 1895

Edmund was born in Allanburg, near Welland, Ontario, and was raised there and in nearby Pelham. By the age of 20 he was residing and working in St Marys as a stonemason in the quarries. By 1891 Edmund listed himself as a builder and contractor. In 1897 the first Stratford Town/City Hall was destroyed by fire. After the design for the new building was chosen, the contract to build the structure was awarded to Edmund Cawsey and his partner, John Lant Youngs. Today, their names can be seen on the marble plaque in the lobby of the city hall.

In 1897 Edmund Cawsey had his invention for a machine to dig trenches to fit sewer lines registered in the Canadian Patents Office. This was at a time when cities were starting to lay out sewage lines and improve their water systems. After the construction on city hall was underway, Edmund was awarded the contract to build the dam and works for the Renfrew Power Company on the Bonnechere River. He was killed in a tragic accident while supervising the construction.

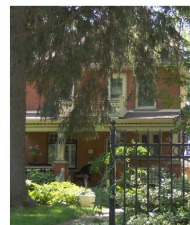


William H. Schenck - Builder
273 Cambria Street
Built 1914



and

361 St. David Street
Built 1916



Growing up, William helped his father, a part-time carpenter, on the farm in Downie Township and learned the carpentry trade. By 1891, William was working as a carpenter for John Kastner, a lumber merchant in Downie Township. After working at the Krug Furniture factory in Chesley for several years, by 1905 William and his family moved to Stratford. During the next 18 years the family resided at a number of locations in Stratford and William established himself as a successful house builder.

John Josiah Otto - Builder
37 James Street, Built 1914

Percival F. Spencer – Builder & Soldier
82 Princess Street, Built 1916

Peter Megan - Builder & Carpenter
123 Brunswick Street, Built 1885

Frederick Nethercott - Contractor
234 Cobourg Street, Built 1909

Martin Kennedy - Retired Farmer & Builder
100 Church Street, Built 1902

Daniel Edford McLeod - Builder
44 East Gore Street, Built 1916

D. Alfred McCloy - Builder & Contractor
45 Front Street
Built 1907

Alfred left the family farm in 1898 to take a business course in Stratford and made it his home for the rest of his life. Rather than following a conventional business path, he followed his father into the carpentry trade, then later was a building contractor, erecting over 50 houses in Stratford. He was an innovative man whose inventions soon claimed his entire time. He established the Dominion Works Specialty and built a factory at 39 William Street where he manufactured and marketed inventions such as the Summer Camp on Wheels.



Thomas Orr - Builder
30 Waterloo Street S.
Built 1896

Thomas Orr was born in County Tyrone, Ireland in 1833. He crossed the Atlantic Ocean and landed in Philadelphia, beginning contract work when he was about twenty. In 1857 he moved to Stratford with his wife and eldest child. In the 1861 census, Thomas recorded his occupation as a carpenter. However, during the next decade Thomas transitioned from carpenter to house builder.



In 1866 he became an active investor with Hugh Dempsey in one of the first cheese factories in Perth County. The following year Thomas was appointed to the Board of Directors of the Perth Mutual Fire Insurance Company. In the 1871 census Thomas listed his occupation as builder, and went on to construct some of the finer houses and buildings in Stratford. In the same year, he also established a planing mill and lumber yard in the vicinity of the present location of the band shell on Veterans Way by the Avon River.

In 1890, Thomas built the house at 30-32 Waterloo Street South on spec. He sold it to Alexander Ferguson MacLaren who had trained as a cheese maker and was in the process of establishing a cheese exporting business in Stratford.

John Orr - Builder
53 Grange Street
Built 1883

John Orr, the eldest son of Thomas Orr, one of Stratford's leading contractors and owner of the Stratford Planing Mills, had followed into the family business by becoming a carpenter. As his father was purchasing land and developing it throughout Stratford, by 1883 ownership of Lot 52 of the Grange Survey passed from Thomas to John, and shortly afterwards he built the Ontario cottage at 53 Grange Street on it, initially leasing it to Howard Jameson, a wheat buyer. John would continue to work at his father's factory but an unfortunate workplace injury confined him to his home on William Street where he died two months later.



Arthur H. King - Business & Builder
111 Wellington Street
Built 1913

Arthur was born on a farm in Downie Township. By 1861 he was listed as a tavern keeper in Stratford, and by the mid-1880s he was the proprietor of the American House Hotel on Downie Street. Over the years he also was involved in cigar manufacturing, managed the Stratford Soda Works Company, developed the Stratford Wholesale Grocery Company, and became a director of The Anchor Wire Fence Company of Canada. By 1909 he had moved into the real estate business and building houses.



William Easson - Mill Owner & Contractor
First Tenant: James Brown, Contractor
89 William Street
Built 1873

In 1844 at the age of 20, William Easson emigrated from Scotland to Canada with his family. His parents established a farm in North Easthope. William apprenticed as a carpenter and soon established himself as a contractor. He and his brother rented a sawmill in North Easthope. By the early 1850s, William had erected a sawmill on the north side of the Avon River in Stratford. Eventually he supplied the GTR for 40 years with timber, including railway ties, cord wood, and cattle guards.



One of his principal contracts was building a house for W.F. McCulloch, in payment for which he received 15 building lots. William built many of Stratford's buildings and at one time was a principal builder in the city. He also did some contracting for the city, including supplying gravel for the sidewalks. At one time he was the largest taxpayer in the city. It appears that Easson built the house at 89 William Street as an income property, as there were tenants listed from 1875 until at least 1881. The first tenant, James Brown, appears to have been a contractor working for Easson.

Carpenters

William Guy (& Bridge Builder), 172 Avondale Avenue,
Built 1880

Frederick Pletsch, 163 Ballantyne Avenue,
Built 1909

Thomas Mitchell Ruston, 34 Birmingham Street,
Built 1903

Richard Edward Offord, 238 Cobourg Street,
Built 1907

Henry Thomas Legg (Lather), 312 Douglas Street,
Built 1890

James Bruce Gould, 37 Douro Street,
Built 1921

Jacob Kayler, 174 Dufferin Street,
Built 1877

William Wilson (& Carriage Maker), 128 Elizabeth Street,
Built 1872

William White, 62 Front Street,
Built 1909

George Falk, 199 Hibernia Street,
Built 1914

Thomas Patrick Witt, 126 Huron Street,
Built 1914

William Cash, 260 John Street N.,
Built 1872

William Benjamin Fraser, 304 Mornington Street,
Built 1889

Edward D. Jacob, 81 Parkview Drive,
Built 1914

Allan McPhee, 207 Queen Street,
Built 1874

Masons

John Perry, 90 Grange Street,
Built 1875

Edward Kane, 243 Queen Street,
Built 1877

George Hildebrand, 8 Strachan Street,
Built 1873

Masons

John Perry, 90 Grange Street,
Built 1875

Edward Kane, 243 Queen Street,
Built 1877

George Hildebrand, 8 Strachan Street,
Built 1873

Painters

Richard Pengelly, 141 Cobourg Street,
Built 1868

Joseph Johns, 175 John Street N.,
Built 1865

Henry Schonmeyer, 173 Nelson Street,
Built 1876

John W. Penny, 144 Water Street,
Built 1891

Plasterers

Plastering as a trade flourished in Ontario and elsewhere from the late eighteenth century to the depression days of the 1930s. Decorative plastering was in great demand to augment popular architectural revival styles such as Gothic, Renaissance and Italianate. Fortunately, many examples of these highly skilled tradesmen's art can still be seen in older residences and buildings because immigrants passed on their skills to succeeding generations. In the 1500s plasterers in England organized a guild to maintain standards and ensure quality and many years later in 1887, here in Canada, an international union was established for the same reasons.

William Ireland, 158 Elizabeth Street,
Built 1889

Francis (Frank) Hassell, 187 Hibernia Street,
Built 1904

John Avery, 330 Ontario Street,
Built 1874

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