

# BUILDING HERITAGE

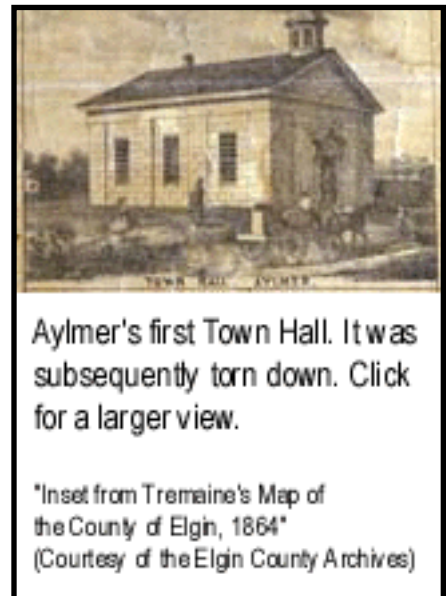
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## A NEW VILLAGE NEEDS A NEW TOWN HALL

In January 1872, Aylmer was incorporated as a village. At a meeting on February 20, it was moved that the existing Town Hall be sold and that a more central position be secured for the erection of a new facility.

An undated document, from the archives of the Aylmer Museum, lists various reasons why the community needed a Town Hall:

- Have no place to hold court
- Have no place to hold any public meetings
- Have no place for concerts, lectures, tea meetings etc.
- Have no place for our young men to resort to for the improvement of their minds, as we should have, from the fact that that we have a library that has cost about \$1000 and by taking the proper steps to organize a Mechanics Institute, we can obtain \$200 per annum government grant
- Our young men could have the use of Council Chambers Room 22X30 feet for Library and Reading Room, to which a debating club and writing class might be attached , each individual giving \$1 towards paying for wood and lights during the winter.
- Moreover any gathering more or less expanded with merchants and others in village.



The first of several referendums during the building's history was undertaken early in 1873. Townspeople directed Aylmer Council, by a 63 to 37 vote, to proceed with plans for the new hall that year.

One of the first acts of the Village Council in 1873, By-law No. 35, was the borrowing of \$7000 for erecting, a Town Hall and Market building, with \$800 to be spent on purchasing the property.

The firm of George Watson and Son, of London, Ontario was selected as the architect, John H. Arkell as contractor and Harrison Maw as construction inspector. From its inception, questions were raised about the quality of the work being done.

The architect inspected the progress in late December of 1873 and wrote:

"...the contractor is not entitled to any more money until the work is further advanced and further I consider the work has not been pushed along as first intended or to the meaning of the specifications."

The inspector of construction contended that he was not a fault for the architect's complaints. The Council contested that two copies of the specification were made, and both the inspector and contractor admitted to being aware that they were not following the exact specifications.



The contract for Arkell stated that the Town wished to have the building completed by December 1, 1873. But by June of 1874, only part of the building was in use. A letter to Town Reeve T.M. Nairn, from Colin MacDougall, a barrister in the neighbouring city of St. Thomas, stated that a "large portion of the work still remains incomplete". Although the town considered several options, including taking on the work themselves or charging Arkell \$5 per day retroactive to December 1, 1873, ultimately Arkell did continue with the construction.

Payments to John H. Arkell began in June of 1873 and continued to the end of 1874. His statement in account with the village of Aylmer for contract was \$7473.69, which exceeded the original estimate of \$7000. The original loan was paid back over 14 years with annual payments of \$500 plus one \$410 payment for interest.

The finished building provided space for the clerk-treasurer's office and the Council chamber. The first floor also housed the post office, police department with the cell block and locker rooms along the north portion of the building.

There was also a Mechanics' Institute with a reading room. Mechanics' Institutes were a movement which originated in

England in 1823 to promote education for working-men, particularly in the newly-popular areas of science and mechanics. There is an annual report of the Aylmer Mechanics' Institute dated May 1, 1878. The membership was 126, number of books in the library 793, books issued 1572, newspapers 13 and magazines 4.

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## A BELL IN THE BELFRY

The Baptist Church Historical Sketch, 1966, states that for seven years prior to 1871, the bell of the old frame Baptist Church was used as the "town bell" to sound the hours of seven, twelve, one and six, as well as such few fire alarms as then occurred. This meant almost unlimited entry into the church for the ringings and when the new brick church was built in 1871, it was felt this practice could not continue. Although the church had considered offering to sell the bell to Aylmer citizens, a committee was later formed to determine the price of a new bell.

A form letter from the Office of the Old Established Iron Bell Foundry in Troy, N.Y. indicates that the request for information was received on October 24, 1871 and a reply dispatched October 27. They could furnish a bell of any desired size or weight over 400 pounds for 42 cents per pound. On October 31, 1871 the committee was "authorized to purchase a bell of not less than 600 pounds and as much heavier as their funds will allow".

On December 24, 1871, Jones and Co. dispatched the invoice with the bill indicating a cost of \$287.35. The bell was first housed in a tower built on the northeast corner of Sydenham and John Streets and was installed in the belfry on the Town Hall in mid 1874. In 1898 the bell in the Town Hall belfry was to be rung by the night watchman, "at 9 o'clock nightly, for curfew".

In the 1950s it was removed and purchased by the St. John's Lutheran Church where it remains today and is rung twice every Sunday.

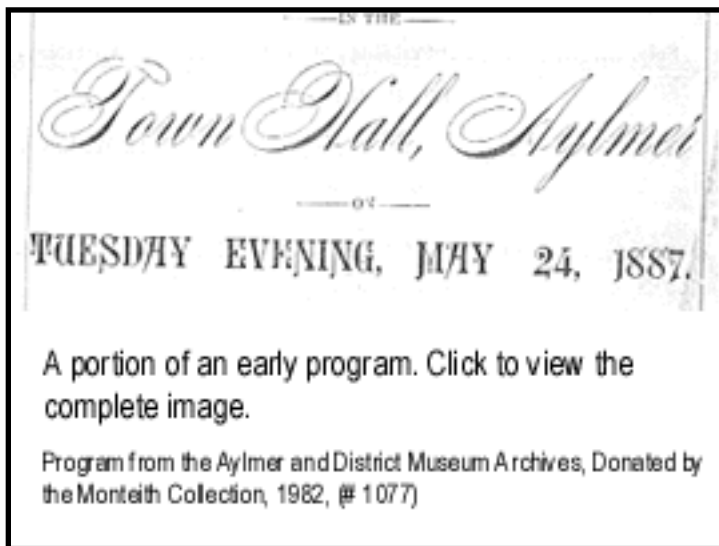
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## GRAND STEREOPTICON EXHIBITIONS

The Opera House on the second floor held concerts, minstrel shows and plays, and was the focal point for church services, meetings and lectures. Facing the audience above the stage was an arch used by Aylmer merchants on which they painted advertisements. A good source of revenue in its day, the auditorium rented for \$15 for the first night and \$8 for successive nights.

Concerts were performed by the schools, the Aylmer Boys' Band, touring companies and individuals, plus numerous local groups that formed during the course of the Opera House's history. They usually started at 8 o'clock and if admission was charged, it usually ranged from \$0.15 for children and \$0.35 for adults.

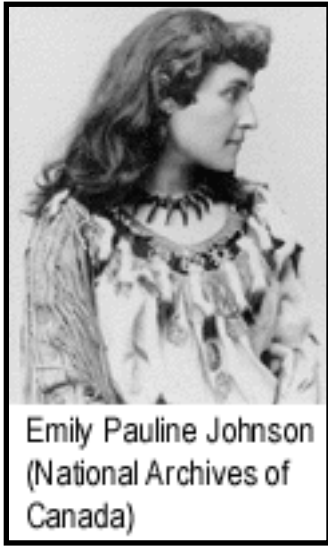
In 1925, Aylmer's only elementary school was The Aylmer Public School. It was in that year that music was introduced to the school's curriculum for grades kindergarten through eight. This gave future Aylmer entertainers the opportunity to develop their talents and perform on the Opera House stage as the school did not have appropriate facilities. The public school concerts spanned twenty-two years with a variety of acts and themes.



The popular Aylmer Boys' Band always satisfied their audiences when they performed, usually a spring concert in May and an anniversary concert in December. This tradition lasted until 1947.

Various other Aylmer organizations, from The Aylmer Male Chorus and the Knox Singing Class to the Aylmer Businessmen and the Court Elgin No. 29 Independent Order of Foresters, put on their own Opera House concerts.

The concerts that came to the Opera House from outside the Aylmer area were surprisingly numerous considering the town's size. When a concert made an appearance, pre-concert assessments were frequently made by the Aylmer newspapers. These assessments attested to the concert's credibility as to whether or not its acts would be offensive to an Aylmer audience.



Perhaps the most famous performer to appear in Aylmer was the Canadian poet Pauline Johnson who appeared in 1892 and 1895. Part Mohawk, her mother was English and father Indian, she made an enormous contribution to Canadian life through her role as "the voice of the Indian race and the English tongue". Reciting her own work, she performed as an elocutionist. The Aylmer Sun praised her for the way she gave her pieces "naturally and with a peculiar grace that captivated us entirely", and also appreciated the celebrated and elaborate Indian costumes that she wore.

Another well known entertainer was Ireland's Rosa D'Erina who performed her "Grand Star" concert on October 1, 1880 as part of a world tour. Much of what could be learned about her was found in letters from her manager and from herself to the town. It was in one of these letters that she made her high reputation clear to the town by means of an advertisement for a previous concert which included reviews of praise by the Princess of Wales, President and Mrs. Grant, and Lord Dufferin, the Governor-General of Canada. She even offered the locals a discount. "My usual tours are \$50, but I will accept \$30."

The stage companies that came to Aylmer were as colourful as they were plentiful. Practically every company had some oddity or strange comment made about it. But, as Aylmer had a vehement ban on anything in the least way "objectionable", none were too colourful. Other performers included local groups and churches, such as the Knox Presbyterian, Methodist, and St. Paul's United whose production of A Dream of Queen Esther was performed in 1927 and 1941 each time by a different organization within the church.

Although not as entertaining as the performances, public meetings were of equal significance to the community. Sir Adam Beck, Chairman of the Hydro Electric Commission of Ontario, came to the Opera House on April 14, 1917 to address ratepayers on the question of bringing hydro power to the Town.

Lecturers and speakers who came before Aylmer audiences at the Opera House covered many areas of interest. Vacation slide shows were billed as Grand Stereopticon Exhibitions. In 1890 Prof. Underhill and Sons thrilled Aylmer audiences with a presentation of a 2000 mile trip over the Canada Pacific Railroad and supplemented the descriptions by projecting five hundred views of points of interest on a screen. Serious political issues were addressed as well. In 1891, reciprocity with the United States dominated discussion. But the political speech of the century came five years earlier on December 4, 1886. Canada's first Prime Minister, Sir John A Macdonald, and his entourage arrived in Aylmer and he spoke in the Town Hall as part of a pre-election swing through Southwestern Ontario.

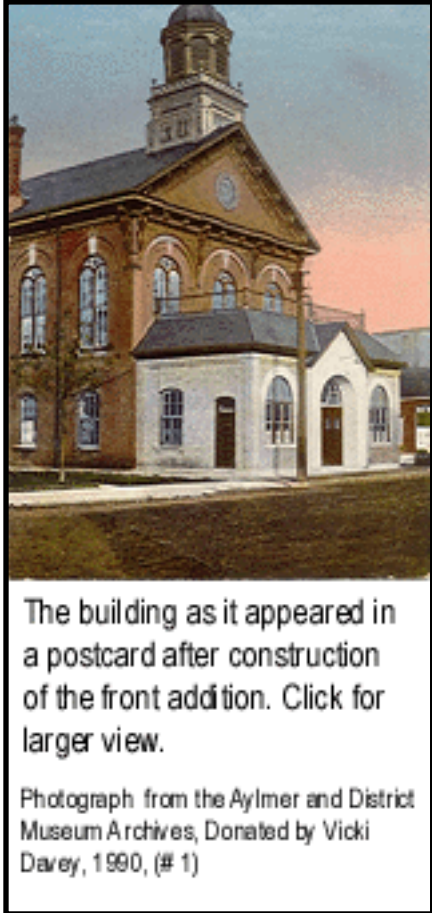


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## A DISGRACE TO THE TOWN

In 1896, just 22 years after its construction, concern was being expressed that the Town Hall's second floor required major renovations in order to attract bigger and better theatrical companies.

An article in a local paper noted that "many first class companies have contemplated an engagement here, but changed their minds when the size of stage and excuses for dressing rooms were presented for their view. Therefore, it is rare to find anything but a second or third-rate company appearing before an Aylmer audience".



A special Council Committee was appointed which reported that the front entrance - which inside had a long and winding staircase - was inadequate and unsafe and that overall the building "is badly in need of repairs".

The following changes were proposed: a 19-foot brick addition to the front with stone facings; a new front stairway 10 feet wide running straight up from the entrance; 3 new offices downstairs; enlarging of the gallery; a new heating apparatus; a 25-foot addition to the rear to accommodate a 14-foot stage addition and new dressing rooms; a new slate roof; new stage scenery and re-frescoing inside; a baggage hoist; a rear stairway and the construction of a basement to put in a furnace.

The Town Council was ready to accept the new roof, the gallery expansion, the frescoing and the front addition, but Aylmer residents voted down the whole package. Despite this, Council decided to spend \$400 for slating the roof, the first time a referendum would be ignored in favour of Town Hall improvements.

The editor of the newspaper, The Aylmer Express, was especially upset by the rejection of the furnace proposal, commenting that "those who sat near one of the four wood stoves, located in the corners of the gallery, were 'roasted' while those sitting in the centre were quite cold".

Two years later the matter was still an issue. The townspeople again turned down a plan to spend \$2,500 to extend the stage and add two dressing rooms, a metallic ceiling, two furnaces,

and a new stairway on the north side.

The Aylmer Express once more remarked that "something must be done. The Town Hall is dangerous, inconvenient, expensive and dirty - a disgrace to the town. The stairway is a death-trap." Two new coal furnaces were installed in December.

It was not until 1911 that a new movement for repairs was again instigated. In those early days, most of the village officers worked from their houses or places of business. But when the village had become a Town, more space was needed. At a special meeting in February, the plans for improvements were presented. Changes now included a 16-foot brick addition to the front of the Hall to accommodate more office space as well as a 6-foot stage addition and a back stairway.

The new by-law came with a cost of \$4000, astounding compared to the original \$7000 cost to construct the whole building. It was once more submitted to the voters and in March the ratepayers gave their approval by a 151- 81 margin. The improvements were carried out in the summer of 1911 and were completed by late August.

On September 10, Clifton Sifton, Minister of the Interior in Wilfrid Laurier's government, addressed a large crowd at the inaugural assembly in the newly restored hall.

The building also housed, at various times, the Town Assessor's office, the Township of Malahide office, and a private business office. During wartime and the Depression, the Clerk's private office was the rations issues office and welfare officer's room. The Council chambers provided suitable space for many functions as well as the meetings of Town Council. For many years the Court was held in the chambers - both Criminal and Small Claims. The Department of Highways, now the Ministry of Transportation and Communications, used the Council Chambers for Driver Examinations. The Ontario Municipal Board also met there. Various clubs and local organizations used the facilities for meetings. The Aylmer and Malahide Telephone Company also made use of the Council Chambers for their annual shareholders' meeting. Both the Fire Department and the Public Works Department were located in rooms at the rear of the building until they were provided with their own buildings elsewhere in 1944.

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## SHOW-STOPPERS

The Aylmer Minstrel Show was a touring entertainment group composed of local talent which performed in front of packed theatres from about 1914 to the early 1950s at the Opera House and in neighbouring communities.

Founded and originally managed by William Starr, the Minstrels were so popular that men would take cots and sleep outside overnight in front of Richard's Drug Store for tickets.

In the centre of the stage was the interlocutor who played a role similar to that of a master of ceremonies. Directed at the interlocutor were comedic skits, songs, and jokes performed and created by the four to six end men. The name end man came from the fact that they sat at the ends of the semi-circle that the performers sat in on stage. Depending on the show's theme, their costumes were usually outrageous tuxedo style suits with huge bow ties and they appeared in black face wearing white gloves.



The singers, also known as the chorus or the circle, were a group of twelve men who also did skits but for the most part sang in solos or groups. Accompanying the singers was an orchestra with six to nine members each year. Included was a pianist along with saxophones, a clarinet, trombone, trumpet, percussion, violin and bass. They also played during intermission.

Minstrel shows commenced with The First Part featuring an overture that included the entire cast and introduced the show's theme. Following this were alternating ballads sung by the chorus, and end songs sung by the end men. These were usually familiar old songs or Negro spirituals. A ten-minute intermission preceded the next segment during which the orchestra would play a few selections.

The next section, called the Olio, means a miscellaneous mixture or hodgepodge. It included various kinds of acts and supported the theme. The show closed with the Grand Finale. This was



usually a song performed by the entire company that would conclude the theme.

The rehearsals, in preparation for the March concert, would begin in January about once or twice a week, becoming more frequent as the show date approached. Contrary to what many may assume, the rehearsals were not held on the Opera House stage. The chorus would sometimes practice at the High School, or near the south entrance of the Town Hall, in a little room in the fire hall. The orchestra would join the chorus and the rest of the participants a few weeks before the show opened on the stage in the Opera House for the final rehearsal.

There was limited use of scenery and props, but any that were needed were usually made in Aylmer. Costumes, however, were rented from the McKenna Costume Company in Toronto. An entire "Minstrel Negro Costume" for one night's use could be acquired for \$3.00. Negro wigs ranged in price from \$0.75 to one made with real hair for \$2.75. The end men's flashy ties

could be rented in any colour for a mere \$1.00 each.



In addition to Minstrel shows, Aylmer's first moving picture was screened at the Opera House. It was a film of the building of the Panama Canal and it included a record of the sounds of the Italian labourers talking while they worked. The sound was pumped through a pipe running up the centre of the theatre.

During the First World War, the Hall sheltered Red Cross meetings and "heated" political gatherings.

After the Second World War, a variety of factors resulted in the Opera House's declining use. First, Minstrel shows lost their popularity and there was a perception that people became too busy to organize the performances and the Aylmer Minstrels were dissolved. Second, there was a considerable decrease in the number of touring shows available. Third, the Aylmer High School built an auditorium and the Aylmer Arena was also built, furnishing more modern facilities. Fourth, the Opera House failed to meet regulations on exits, had an improper and expensive heating system and had structural problems. But the most influential 'show-stoppers' were the advent of radio and television. In the mid-1950s the second storey was taken out of public use.

The ground floor of the Hall continued to be used for Municipal and Police offices, Council meetings, Court hearings, other Board meetings, and meetings of various clubs and local organizations. However, in 1976 the Municipal Offices and Police departments were moved to

the former Talbot Street Post Office after a new Post Office had been built.

This left the fate of the Town Hall in doubt.

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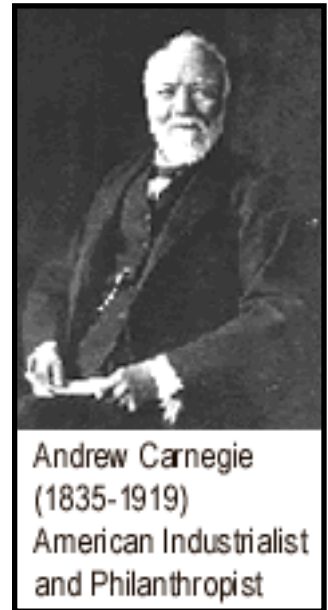
## THE AYLMER CARNEGIE LIBRARY

In the early 1900's the Aylmer library was located in a room above the present Durkee's Clothing store on Talbot St. east. At the time, the collection contained 5,700 volumes and served a population of 2,250.

In the summer of 1911 a petition was circulated in Aylmer and presented to Aylmer Council declaring that the accommodations were inadequate. A committee was created to contact Andrew Carnegie, the American steel magnate, who was in the process of financing some 2,800 new libraries in Canada and the U.S. Council agreed to provide a new site and to maintain the building if Carnegie would provide \$8,000 to construct it.

Aylmer Council had made a previous application to Carnegie, but the Foundation had refused. Then in the spring of 1911, library board chairman Miss Storey was urged at a provincial library convention in Toronto to submit another request. It was observed that several other small towns in Ontario, including Ingersoll, Strathroy and Mount Forest, had recently acquired Carnegie grants.

It wasn't until the spring of 1912 that a new site was found for the library. David Marshall and J. J. Nairn, Aylmer Cannery executives, donated property at the corner of Centre and Sydenham Streets. The town received \$8,000 from Carnegie to complete the project and the Library, which had since grown to 7,000 volumes, opened in the spring of 1913.





Aylmer's Carnegie Library. [Click to view a larger image.](#)

Photograph from the Aylmer and District Museum Archives, Donated by Murray Laidlaw, 1986, (# 4)

The Aylmer Carnegie Library was a typical red brick building of the period; squat, square and heavy. One of its major drawbacks, from the point of view of a public building, was the steep front entranceway. These steps were dangerous in the winter, and hard for older people to negotiate all year round.

The Elgin County Library Board took over the library in 1966. By the late 1970's, as circulation and use of the library increased, the building became too small for the demands being placed upon it.

At the same time, people in Aylmer were beginning to wonder what they were going to do with the Old Town Hall which was standing deserted only a block from the main intersection.

In 1979 the Library Board began a process of expanding the facilities to meet the needs of a growing community by informing Aylmer Town Council of its bid to build a new library on the ground floor of the Old Town Hall.

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## THE FATE OF THE OLD TOWN HALL

For five years Aylmer Council discussed proposals regarding the fate of the building. There were indications that Council might settle the debate by opting for demolition to create twenty new parking spots downtown. This prompted the creation of a citizen's group in 1978, Heritage Aylmer, determined to see the structure returned to its former glory.



The group carried on a long, up-hill struggle for preservation. Many supported restoration of the magnificent structure, including a few municipal councillors and some well-known Heritage enthusiasts.

Consulting Restoration Architect Peter John Stokes:

"Few opera houses in Ontario have the pleasing scale and great charm of that in Aylmer. For its own sake, it is well worth preserving as an example of the best of the mid-Victorian opera house. Aylmer's Town Hall and opera house of 1873 is the epitome of the proud civic building of its day and an excellent representative of the building heritage of Ontario.



The Italianate design, the simple lower storey surmounted by a magnificent range of tall, Florentine windows to the opera house, arcaded brickwork, and boldy-modelled cornice; it is a distinguished architectural composition."

In March 1980, the Old Town Hall was designated a heritage structure under the Ontario Heritage Act. It remains the only building in the city with this honour despite many early structures remaining in use in the town. This designation protected the building against alteration or demolition. It also allowed council to apply for grants from heritage foundations. Elgin County Council, in what was termed "an unprecedented move", had earlier set aside \$41,000 to assist in the renovations. Offers of grant money were received from various historical societies for restoration of the building's exterior and fund

offers from the province toward the interior library renovations were also apparent. A council committee to examine the grants was formed.

However, many loudly opposed the cost of creating a new library on the ground floor, estimated at \$290,000. Some councillors felt that the committee was misleading Aylmer taxpayers with its proclamations of solid financial support behind the project. This led council to announce a referendum would be held on the subject concurrent with the November 10, 1980 municipal



elections. The question: "Are you in favour of restoring the Old Town Hall to house a new public library?"



This was actually the second referendum that year on the fate of the building. The first was held on March 10 but ruled invalid. Councillor Don Pearson lamented the decision: "It's a shame to cast the building to a referendum vote, to jeopardize the chance of having an enhanced library facility by going this route."

His concern was realized. In a vote of 1,032 to 841, Aylmer residents indicated they were not in favour of restoration to house a new public library. However, several councillors believed the question was an oversimplification. While some felt the question was asking whether to save or destroy the building, others interpreted it as asking the town if it would be agreeable to supporting the restoration costs over and above the \$27,000 the town had allotted to it in the budget.

Seven of the nine councillors who had been elected in the November vote had voiced their support for restoration. At a December 1 meeting following the municipal election, Council once again went counter to the public opinion and decided to restore the building to its former glory. The resolution stated:

"After consideration of all factors, be it resolved that council proceed with the restoration of the Old Town Hall to house a new public library as proposed by the report of the 1980 special building committee, and that all application for grants and assistance be made forewith. Furthermore, be it resolved that if sufficient grants and assistance are not forthcoming this project be reconsidered".

This decision shocked even those councillors who supported restoration. During the days that followed, several spoke of a "backlash" they were experiencing because of their decision to go ahead with the project.

In late December, Roger Verbuyst, a local taxpayer, indicated that he was leading a group of Aylmer residents opposed to Council's decision. He had the financial backing of about forty residents and had hired a lawyer to investigate possible ways to force council to abide by the results. Verbuyst stated that he was not against the new library, rather he was against the way the referendum was handled.



Through a law firm in the City of London, a motion was served in Ontario Supreme Court in an effort to quash the December 1 decision to restore the Hall.

Mr. Justice Coulter Osborne heard arguments at the Middlesex Courthouse in London in early 1981. The lawyer representing Mr. Verbuyst argued on a technicality that town council had acted improperly by proceeding to the restoration by resolution rather than by by-law. Also, council acted in bad faith with voters by ignoring the results of the referendum and that council acted in bad faith and against the public interest to the extent that voters who won the referendum in the end really lost the intangible value of their votes. Verbuyst's lawyer admitted council was not bound by the referendum but that it had to be taken into consideration.

The lawyer for the town argued that the result of a referendum was not legally binding upon council. Under the Municipal Act, except in certain well-defined circumstances, a council could not delegate its responsibility for making decisions. If council had said before the referendum that it would abide by the result, it would have been acting improperly.

On Tuesday, January 28, 1981, the Town Office was advised that the Ontario Supreme Court had upheld the decision of Aylmer Town Council to proceed with restoration of the Old Town Hall for use as a library. Work began soon after.

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## RENOVATION

C.A. Ventin Architects, a firm with experience in the renovation of old buildings, was commissioned to do a study on the feasibility of the renovation. The study assumed that a bank would be the tenant on the ground floor, and that the Opera House would be restored for use by the community. Plans to have a bank as a tenant fell through, so the Library, badly in need of new quarters, stepped in.



Gilvesy Construction Ltd. of Tillsonburg was engaged as construction manager and C.A. Ventin retained as architect for the project.

Students under a Summer Employment Works Program had done some preparatory work in the summer of 1980. They removed the front and rear additions. Early in 1981, a Canada Winter Works Program enabled work to progress inside with removal of opera seats, the basement boiler and general basement clean up. The first

phase began of reconstruction began on June 24 1981 and included exterior and structural renovations at a cost of \$195,000.

Few local governments can afford what C.A. Ventin calls "poetic" restorations, regardless of the heritage grants they may receive. Before Ventin gets a job, he first has to demonstrate that he can finish it for an acceptable cost. To do this, he practices selective restoration, salvaging as much of the building as possible.



By November an observer said: "The Old Town Hall is not getting old, but getting better - like a butterfly emerging from its cocoon, the complexion of the building changes each passing moment."

A member of Heritage Aylmer speaking to a Historical Association in May 1982 told of the transformation of an empty, neglected Old Town Hall to a spacious up-to-date library:



"Work on the building included light sandblasting of the bricks, which are three to five bricks thick, the interior ones completely free of salt damage; repointing of the mortar; scraping and refinishing of the fancy woodwork; repair of the slate roof; the building of one chimney in place of the original four; the replacement of window-sashes; and the addition of a front portico with

Italianate pillars and a wrought iron railing."

"To the left of the front door, an oak staircase ascends to the local history room on the second floor. A steel door leads into the library, and an original brick-supporting wall separates the adult library from the children's. A small cellar has become a large basement with much improved drainage facilities, structural steel stabilizers and a gas furnace".



"Money for the project has been provided by the County of Elgin, the Town of Aylmer, the Ontario Heritage Foundation, Wintario (a provincial lottery) and community Services Organizations, Heritage Aylmer, the sale of the old library and individual donations. An elevator was three-quarter funded by the provincial government in a program for the Year of the Handicapped."

As many of the original fixtures were used as possible.

By the middle of May, Elgin County library books were being shelved in the new facility. The Aylmer Old Town Hall Library, a branch of the Elgin County Library System, was officially opened for service with ceremonies taking place on June 18, 1982.

Complementing the building's historical features is a watering trough that once served as a drinking fountain for horses and the public. It is now installed in a mini-park at the rear of the building for ornamental purposes.





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## THE SHOW MUST GO ON

Phase One of the restoration project allowed the ground floor of the Old Town Hall to become the new home for the Aylmer Library. It was not until three years later that Phase Two would begin. But once again restoration struggled through controversy.

A special committee had been set up to investigate what uses the second storey Opera House could be put to and recommended a combined theatre and community centre.

As a result, Carlos Ventin Architects presented a preliminary report on a feasibility study of the restoration in December of 1985. At that time there were two options with estimates ranging between \$285,000 and \$382,000.



Option one, the Town could restore the inside of the existing structure and add a fire escape for the outside north wall. This was the least expensive option representing the only change to the exterior of the building. This was not expected to meet with resistance from heritage groups but did require an entirely new mechanical system (heating, ventilation and air conditioning) for the second storey. Concern was also expressed about dressing rooms and seating space not being sufficient.

Option two, restore and put an addition on the rear of the Old Town Hall on both storeys, allowing for a larger stage, better dressing rooms, more theatre seating, and ability to move library archives and genealogy from the second floor to rear of the first floor. From the outset, concern was expressed about grant money and heritage support due to the structural changes in this option.

The Old Town Hall is designated as a Heritage Building and the Ontario Heritage Foundation (OHF) can veto changes to the structure. According to Dan Schneider of the OHF, the Old Town Hall was "originally designed to have symmetrically balanced facades" and any addition "could seriously alter the (aesthetic) integrity of the building". The historical items on the interior that Schneider wanted to see maintained or restored were the balcony railing and supports and the Union Jack on the ceiling.





The suggestion was made to lease the Old Steam Laundry building just north of the Old Town Hall and connect the two by a second storey catwalk, using the laundry building for dressing rooms. Architect Ventin felt that if council wanted the restoration project to really work, space in the steam laundry building was needed. There was a "point of no return" in terms of the number of seats a theatre needed to break even. Limiting floor space to accommodate dressing rooms and other requirements could jeopardize the viability of the facility.

However, deciding to buy or lease the steam laundry would commit the town to upkeep of another building when, at the time, the Old Town Hall wasn't finished.

Other proposals included omitting the combined kitchen and bar to maintain room for the library's local history section which had been housed on the second floor since the first renovation. This had two disadvantages. First, Ventin advised that removing the bar would limit the facility's potential income. Second, the library and theatre would not be separate. Local history was open some evenings which would interfere with performances. There was also a design conflict. The theatre needed walls to help channel the public, but the library needed sight lines open to keep track of material.

The special committee indicated that council needed to decide what to do about the restoration then Council, interested groups and individuals could go out and find the money and apply for grants. Roger Verbuyst, who had become Mayor, had previously taken Council to the Supreme Court of Ontario to try and stop the original restoration which was opposed by the public in a referendum. But now that the town had the building, he felt it had to be completed.

At a meeting on Jan 27, 1986 council voted unanimously to apply for a grant from the Community Facilities Improvement Program of the Ontario Ministry of Citizenship and Culture for the proposed restoration.

"This building has given me more P.R. (public relations) than any other building I have had. You have really put yourself on the map."  
*Carlos Ventin, Feb 5, 1986*

Aylmer Council approved the preparation of final working drawings for the second storey in Oct 1986, to again be done by Ventin who had supervised the original restoration. By that time, cost had risen to \$408,700 with \$294,850 to be paid with government grants and the remaining \$113,850 to be raised

through donations. In contrast, Heritage Aylmer had only been asked to raise \$25,000 for phase one of the restoration.

Council made no commitment of tax money to complete the work, but the town would take over maintenance once the second floor was finished. However, since the public committee organizing fundraising wouldn't be able to raise sufficient donations in two or three months, the town would have to loan money to the project.

Plans included 94 seats in the main hall and 91 seats in the balcony. Council had ultimately rejected the rear addition proposed in alternative two nor did they pursue either leasing or purchasing the neighbouring building. Dressing rooms would be on a second level above the stage. A sound and lighting booth at the rear of the balcony was also necessary but not as elaborate as most larger theatres.

Restoration no longer included the local history section of the library. Although attempts to accommodate the library were appreciated, the space was viewed as incompatible with the needs of the section and staff withdrew their request for inclusion. Local history wouldn't be removed from the library entirely. Those items specifically referring to Aylmer would be relocated to the first floor.

In Feb 1987, council was still waiting to hear if provincial government grants would be approved for restoration. Soon after, an announcement of \$242,000 in grants moved restoration a step closer to realization, which came after months of waiting by Heritage Aylmer and Council. At the time of approval, approximately \$90,000 of the necessary \$113,000 had been raised through cash and pledges.



In July of 1987, Council named Gilvesy Construction of Tillsonburg as construction manager for the second storey over objections by the only other bidder, Crosby Homes of Aylmer. It was charged that Crosby didn't have enough information when they were making their bid. The construction manager would oversee the restoration and actually do about 40% of the work. Another 60% would be tendered out to local contractors.

Council cited three reasons for the decision. First, Ventin's recommendation of Gilvesy, the company's lower cost for construction management and Gilvesy's role as contractor for phase one. On this last point, questions had been raised over who would be liable for future problems with the building if a new contractor was involved in phase two. If anything detrimental happened to the Heritage aspects of the building, the town would be liable to give back to the Ontario Heritage Foundation \$100,000.

Although the Crosby bid for construction management was higher (nine percent compared to five



percent for Gilvesy), their labour rates were lower. Furthermore, Crosby was a local company with local workers and stated they would buy as much local material as possible.

If the town selected Crosby over Ventin's recommendation, Ventin replied "that he would like a letter from the town holding him harmless if the building were to collapse".

A petition signed by 346 Aylmer and area residents demanded a full public inquiry into Council's choice. Councillor Bob Habkirk, who was overseeing the restoration planning, argued that Crosby had been treated fairly, and that they had been elected to make decisions, drawing on the "facts and materials put before us", and that not everyone would be pleased. A town meeting was held to address outstanding concerns and issues. Ultimately, Gilvesy

remained the selection.

The town received a guarantee from Gilvesy Construction on the renovation cost, but it rose ten percent since the first estimate more than a year earlier, delayed by grant applications and controversy over the selection. Rather than allow cuts, council agreed to a new estimate of \$420,000.

In January of 1988, council voted unanimously in favour of authorizing Gilvesy to begin preparing tender documents for the restoration immediately.

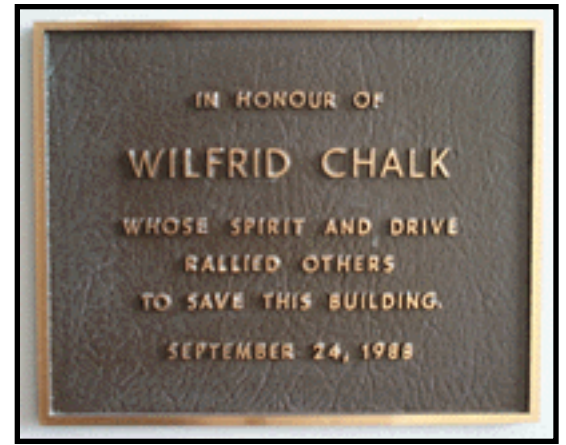
Various pictures in The Aylmer Express during the summer of 1988 tracked the progress of restoration. The floor of the second storey had been reinforced during the library renovation, but the balcony and roof needed to be structurally reinforced. By mid July 1988, most of the structural and drywall work had been completed and workers began adding the finishing touches on the hall and stage.

The official opening was held for the fully restored Opera House on Saturday Sept 24, 1988 with an open house for the public the next day.

Wilfrid Chalk was singled out for recognition as "the man who for the past 12 years has shown the

spirit and drive" to restore the Old Town Hall. He was president of Heritage Aylmer in 1982 and had also actively assisted in the drive to restore the second floor. A plaque was presented to him which continues to hang in the foyer of the renovated Opera House.

Today, the Aylmer Performing Arts Council, Aylmer Community Theatre and other local organizations make regular use of the facility for performances and special events.



# **BUILDING HERITAGE**

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