

## **St. Thomas in the 1870s**

St. Thomas experienced phenomenal growth in the 1870s, from 2000 people to 8000, due mainly to the construction of two rail lines, the Canada Southern and the Great Western Air Line, both completed by 1873. By the end of the decade the two railways employed 672 people combined, making them by the far the largest employers. The biggest industry in the town at that time was Cochrane Manufacturing (agricultural implements) employing 60.

The mere promise of the arrival of the two lines jump-started a building boom that lasted the entire decade. It included new churches, schools and houses but what truly illustrated the boom were the new hotels and large brick commercial blocks that sprouted along Talbot Street from the top of the hill all the way to the Canada Southern (CASO) station.

The accompanying series of PDF's create a visual record of downtown St. Thomas covering the years 1870 to 1900. It was compiled from two sources: an 1894 insurance company "fire plan" and the Cameron Collection of historic photographs.

## **The Cameron Collection**

These historic photographs were assembled by Col. Ian Cameron (1898-1973), Clerk of the County Court and Sherriff. He converted many of them into lantern slides for presentations to various organizations. In later years, local historian Don Cosens made similar presentations using the slides until, eventually, they were turned over to the Elgin County Archives by the Trust that had been established for their preservation.

The entire Cameron Collection can be seen on-line at <https://inmagic.elgin.ca/ask/> - enter "Cameron"

## **1894 Fire Plan of St. Thomas**

Fire plans were devised to give local insurance agents information about the construction of individual buildings and where the sources of water were for fire fighting. Every structure is detailed, street by street, and coloured-coded as to what building materials were used. Building size and what it was being used for at the time were also indicated.

This is the second in a series of St. Thomas fire plans. The first was surveyed in 1882 and then revised and reissued in 1889. The second was first surveyed in 1890 and revised in 1894.

The complete set of 1894 plans can be found here - <https://inmagic.elgin.ca/ask/permalink/24162/>

## **Fire Plan short forms:**

Gro – grocery	H.W. - hardware
Liq - liquor	S - store
Photos - photographic studio	WHSE - warehouse
Offs – offices	D.G. - dry goods
Rest. – Restaurant	Tin sm - tin smith
B.Sm. - blacksmith	
Drs - doctors	
2nd hand s. - second hand shop	
Furne - furniture	