



Guelph Historical Society

www.guelphhistoricalsociety.ca

March 2005

NEWSLETTER

MARCH SPEAKER

“Was Guelph a Drinkin’ Town

At the March lecture of the Guelph Historical Society, Shawn Day presented his paper entitled, “Was Guelph a Drinkin’ Town?,” a study of Guelph hotels in the late 19th century. Day’s lecture was an engaging presentation in which he used a variety of archival images, maps and charts in his discussion of the drink trade in Guelph.

Day began his study from the quote “Guelph had more taverns than any other town of its size in Upper Canada.”¹

Indeed there were enough hotels and drinking establishments on Macdonnell Street that it was known as “whiskey street”. In 1869, Guelph had a population of 5,700 residents and 20 hotels (19 with liquor licenses) and two saloons, or one hotel for every 285 people. The provincial average was one hotel for approximately 300 people. The peak number of bars was in 1871.

A liquor license required that a hotel provide at least four guest rooms beyond those rooms used by the family. Day explained that hotels were often a residence for single males and young couples.

From Liquor to Beer

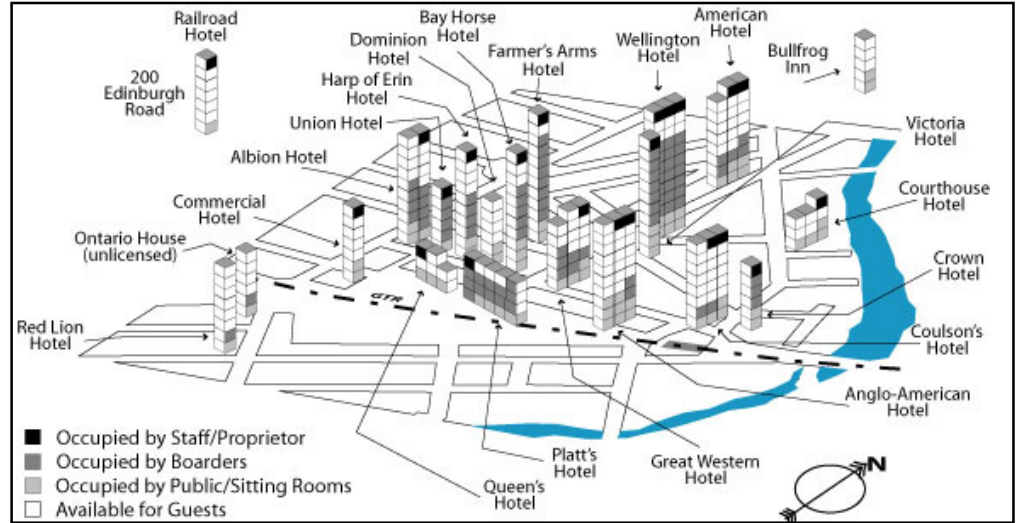
During the period of the study, Day noted that taste for types of alcohol changed from liquor dominance to beer dominance. Beer did not travel as well and was often as expensive as harder liquor. As transportation improved over the course of the 19th century, demand changed from liquor to beer.

Temperance Movement

Day also noted that Guelph had more temperance organizations than any other city of a similar size. Guelph was the first town in Canada to enact local prohibition and the first to repeal it. From 1885 to 1888, Guelph prohibited the retail sale of alcohol. Prohibition in the late 19th century, however, was difficult to police.

Architectural Heritage

The drink trade has left Guelph with a rich architectural heritage. As the map above shows, many of the hotels are still



Map Courtesy of Shawn Day

The map shows the various hotels in downtown Guelph from 1851 to 1931. Many of the hotels still exist. The Great Western Hotel, which in its heyday was the place to stay, is better known today as The Diplomat.

in existence. Some of the historic sites, Day mentioned in his presentation include: Royal Hotel (1856), Albion Hotel (1856), Victoria Hotel in St. George’s Square (1859), New Wellington (1876), and the Western Hotel (1881).

From his study, Day concluded that Guelph citizens did not consume any more or less alcohol than people in other cities of a similar size.

The lecture was followed by a lively discussion in which Day answered further questions about the drink trade.

Shawn Day is a Ph.D. candidate at McMaster University. He received his M.A. from the University of Guelph. His thesis The Keepers’ Trade: Skills, Attributes and the Pursuit of the Hotel Trade in Late Nineteenth-Century Guelph received the award for best M.A. thesis for 2004.

NOTES

The best source for this claim is Verne McIlwraith in the *Guelph Mercury*, which has since been referred to by a number of authors, most recently Isobel Cowie in *Historic Guelph*, The Royal City, 1994-1995, in which she remarks:

“By 1873, nine hotels were listed in downtown Guelph: the American, Farmer’s Arms, the Great Western, Harp of Erin, Parker’s, Thorp’s, Queen’s, the Royal, and the Wellington. Fifteen years later, the number had increased to 22, all within a one-mile radius. No other community in Western Ontario, except perhaps London, had as many hotels and taverns, thus Macdonnell Street was sometime referred to as ‘Whiskey Street.’”

—Shawn Day

NEXT MEETING: APRIL SPEAKER

Guelph Museums: The Future of Our History
Katherine McCracken, Director, Guelph Museums
Tuesday, April 5, 2005
St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church
161 Norfolk St., Guelph (corner of Suffolk and Norfolk Streets)

Note: The GHS Annual General Meeting will begin at 7:00 p.m. The speaker will follow the AGM.

The Guelph Civic Museum's collections are always growing. Though its current site is both beautiful and historic, more space is needed. Newly-appointed Director Katherine McCracken will discuss the Museum's needs and possible changes for the future.

McCracken joins Guelph Museums, having spent the last ten years at Kitchener's Joseph Schneider Haus. She has worked for Alberta Historic Sites Services, the R.E. Olds Transportation Museum in Lansing, MI, the National Heisey Glass Museum in Newark, OH, and as a Preservation Planner for the State of Michigan. She holds a B.A. in History from the University of Western Ontario and an M.A. in Public History from the University of Waterloo.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

ANNUAL BUS TRIP: WELLINGTON COUNTY

Date: June 8, 2005

Price: \$65.00 for members and \$70.00 non-members

Space: Limited to 50 people

The annual Guelph Historical Society bus trip will take place on June 8. Steve Thorning, a well-known local historian, will be our guide for a tour of Wellington County that will include stops in Fergus and Elora.

Participants will have lunch at Drew House in Elora, followed by a short walking tour of downtown Elora. In the afternoon, the group will tour the Wellington County Museum and Archives. Tea will be served at the Museum before the bus returns to Guelph.

The bus is an air-conditioned coach. There will be pick-up points in the north and south ends of Guelph.

Members who are interested in signing-up for the bus trip should contact:

Deb Nash-Chambers
Tel.: 767-9895
nashchambers@rogers.com

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

The Guelph Historical Society would like to welcome all of our new members. The GHS lectures take place on the first Tuesday of the months of October, November, December, February, March and April. We look forward to seeing you at the meetings.



GUELPH HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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