

150 years of history stands proud on Dickson Street

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Published on Nov 05, 2008

CAMBRIDGE -- In a town with grand old buildings by the score, historic City Hall stands alone.

Conceived in controversy and saved from the wrecker's ball in the 1960s by public uproar, it's now part way through a restoration that will cost \$5 million by the time it's finished in two years.

The building turns 150 today, a rare survivor among the hundreds of town halls built across Ontario in the 1800s, said Sean Fraser, conservation manager at the Ontario Heritage Trust.

"It's one of the Top 10 of its type within the province."

It's one of the few civic buildings protected by a heritage designation policed by Ontario Heritage Trust.

And it's one of the few multi-purpose town halls that remain a seat of government.

"This is one of those early generation town halls, which makes it so rare," Fraser said.

Like most of its long-lost brethren, the old Galt town hall was built with a public hall upstairs and town offices, council chambers, a jail and police station on the two floors below.

Of the surviving siblings, the Cambridge town hall is unusual for not having been turned into a museum or performance hall, Fraser said.

Cambridge, with its three founding municipalities, has three town halls still standing. The 1914 Hespeler town hall stands unaltered on Tannery Street. It remains a city fire station, with a Hespeler museum in the old town offices.

The former Preston town hall also still exists, smothered under additions, at King and Waterloo streets. Today, it's a working fire station and home to the Allan Reuter Seniors Centre.

When first proposed, Scottish Galt angrily objected to the plan for an Italianate-style town hall.

But council didn't bend, and high society in the town of 3,000 -- then the district's economic powerhouse -- danced until dawn at the grand opening Nov. 5, 1858.

The building cost \$3,650, covered partly by a loan, partly by a provincial grant and partly by the \$130 the town received for selling the utilitarian Dumfries Township Hall that stood on the site. It was rolled down Cambridge street on logs and stands today as a duplex, near Parkhill Road.

Work on the building started May 13, 1857, the same day Galt was incorporated as a town. Work stalled at one point over a dispute between the town and the contractor.

The clock tower was added in 1897, to mark the 60th anniversary of Queen Victoria's reign. The bell continues to mark the hour, around the clock, every day of the year.

Inside the tower, where the public no longer has access, there are dozens of signatures on the woodwork left by local soldiers about to leave for the trenches of the First World War.

"It's been a central building in downtown Galt for 150 years," said Kathy McGarry, president of Heritage Cambridge.



Cambridge City Hall turns 150 today.



A public square was opened this year beside Cambridge City Hall.



Construction workers are nearly done installing a glass bridge between the city's new office building and the rear corner of historic City Hall. This photo was taken a late September.

"It's almost like a touchstone, a cornerstone."

While she's butted heads with the city over the just-completed \$30-million city office building next door, she praised politicians for saving -- and restoring -- the old building. It sets an example for private property-owners, who should restore their old buildings as well, she said.

While Cambridge City Hall is historic, it's not the oldest continuously used public building in what's now Waterloo Region. That honour likely belongs to the Wellesley Township hall, built in 1854 at Crosshill.

Cambridge City Hall is a beloved building that's a "fundamental part of our community," Mayor Doug Craig said. "I think it's the gem of Cambridge. I don't think there's any question about that."

In the mid-1960s, the City of Galt wanted a modern city hall and was prepared to demolish the old one for a parking lot. But the public outcry persuaded council to restore the building instead.

Last year, almost \$1 million was spent to replace the slate roof. Starting next year, the city plans to spend another \$3.7 million over two years to renovate the interior and replicate the grand entrance stairs off Dickson Street, which were removed in the 1965 renovation.

Council chambers are now closed as a \$1.9 million glass link is built between the old and new buildings. Council will meet in the foyer of the new building until the chambers are renovated.

With all the work underway or planned for the next year, a community party isn't possible.

"Once we get the interior done, hopefully by next fall, we will have an open house and celebrate the 151st birthday," Craig said.



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