

ABOUT ARCHITECTURE AND THE GREAT FIRE OF 1877

In the nineteenth century, Saint John enjoyed the benefits of substantial growth in shipbuilding, lumber and mercantile sectors. These associations were reflected in local architecture. The majority of the earliest buildings were wood, especially in the crowded sections of the city. They were built close together and often stocked with flammable materials. Docks and warehouses were full of lumber, oil, pitch, canvas, and dry goods. Straw and hay were always close by. Through the course of the nineteenth century, fires caused a great deal of damage in the city.

The greatest of these fires happened on June 20, 1877, “Black Wednesday,” and changed the course of history, abruptly ending the Golden Age of Saint John. The fire began at York Point near Market Square and within nine hours caused over \$27 million in damage and left 13,000 people homeless. Out of this disaster a boom period of construction rose which lasted approximately eight to ten years. Builders, architects, and craftsmen came from major cities in North America to rebuild the once prosperous sea port. The result today is one of the best collections of Victorian architecture in Canada.

Unfortunately many old buildings were torn down senselessly in the 1960s and 1970s and replaced by modern structures or parking lots. However, the consciousness of citizens has shifted back to preservation of heritage over the past twenty years. This is best exemplified in the [Trinity Royal Preservation Area](#) which came into being by law in 1982. It is a twenty block area located in the heart of Saint John and contains more than 300 properties, of both a commercial and residential nature. The boundaries are King, Charlotte, Water and St. James Streets. The area encompasses a large part of the city, which was rebuilt following the Great Fire.

The name for the preservation area refers to the three churches along Germain Street (Trinity Church, the Church of St. Andrew & St. David, and Germain Street Baptist Church). The name also refers to the Three Sisters Lamp which was placed in St. Patrick’s Square at the end of Prince William Street. The Lamp, which had been at this site since 1848, was in need of repair and consequently refurbished in 1997. The Lamp has long since become the official symbol of Trinity Royal. Royal refers to the names of the streets in the preservation area, many of which are named after royalty (i.e. King, Prince William, Princess...). Distinctive blue and white street signs visually set this area apart from the rest of the city.

Two other preservation areas have been added. A section of Orange Street near Trinity Royal is a designated heritage area as is a portion of Douglas Avenue in the city’s north end. The Saint John Preservation Review Board is a special purpose body set up by the City Council to oversee preservation areas in the city.

Architectural Styles & Points of Interest in Saint John

Sewell House, a white clapboard building, on Duke Street West was built in 1791. It is the city’s oldest standing structure – style: Georgian.

Second Empire Style architecture is predominant in the city’s uptown area. Second Empire Style is distinguishable by its mansard roof and iron cresting. Many examples of the style are found in those buildings constructed after the Great Fire of 1877 along **Germain Street** and throughout the **Trinity Royal Preservation Area**. The buildings, both commercial and residential, are characterized by two storey bay windows also highly typical of Second Empire Style. Old **City Hall** and the old **Post Office**, on two corners of Prince William and Princess Streets are excellent examples of this style of building.

Many structures combine a mix of styles such as the **Palatine Building**, which illustrates the Second Empire, as well as pillars and carvings of early **Italianate** design. The Irving House on Mt. Pleasant Avenue is an excellent example of pure Italianate design. It features round-headed windows, a large veranda, and a flat roof with a **belvedere (or widow’s watch)**, which was where a sailor’s wife could sit and await the return of her husband from sea.

Gothic Revival is another major style of nineteenth century in architecture in Saint John and is most prevalent in churches and cathedrals. Trinity Church, on Germain Street, is an excellent example of **Neo-Gothic** architecture and is distinguished by the high pointed arches in both its steeple and large stained glass windows.

St. John's (Stone) Church on Carleton Street was completed in 1825 in **traditional twelfth-century Gothic form**. It was the first stone church in Saint John and was built using stone ballast from English cargo ships. The tower (steeple) was constructed four years later in the same manner.

Scottish-Gothic architecture is exemplified in **Jones Castle** on Sydney Street. It was the home of Simeon Jones, a brewer, and a former mayor of Saint John.

The **Loyalist House** is a fine example of **Georgian** architecture. It is characterized by the clapboard siding and symmetrical shape of the period, also the Palladson-style fanlight over the front door.

Dunmore Castle, on Rothesay Road, was built using limestone from the nearby quarry. It was erected for Walter Drake in 1920, and stood three stories high. It features a slate roof, large bay windows, and circular stone walls.

Most buildings exhibit a variety of architectural designs. The recently restored **Imperial Theatre** constructed in 1913 is one such example of architectural variety.

Carleton Martello Tower was erected during the War of 1812 to serve as a watchtower and coastal defence. The fort, which took two years to build, is one of several Martello towers throughout North America & Britain.

The Old City Market, the oldest continuing common-law market in Canada, was built in 1876 by local craftsmen. The shipbuilding influence in Saint John is reflected in the design of the market rafters which are shaped like an inverted ship's hull.

Market Square was constructed from seven warehouses (which had been constructed immediately after the Great Fire of 1877) to form the core of a complex which includes the Saint John Hilton, the Saint John Trade & Convention Centre, Saint John Regional Library, New Brunswick Museum, underground parking, shops, restaurants, and services.