



A Timeless Landmark

Standing proudly in the heart of Niagara-on-the-Lake's downtown, the Court House is one of the Town's most impressive historic sites. Built between 1846 and 1848, it served as the official County Seat of the Niagara District until 1862, when the court was relocated to St. Catharines, a major economic setback for Niagara.

When Upper and Lower Canada were established in 1791, court houses became vital centres of justice, civil administration, and community life, embodying the settlers' moral, social, and economic values.

After the relocation of the court, Niagara's Court House adapted to new roles, becoming a Town Hall, post office, fire hall, bank, suspenders factory, popular library, and even a theatre!

The Niagara-on-the-Lake Museum, originally established as the Niagara Historical Society in 1895, began its journey within the Court House.

"Welcome to the beautiful Town of Niagara-on-the-Lake! I'm so glad you've chosen to explore our Historic Court House and experience the charm of our Heritage District. I hope you enjoy the stories, architecture, and local spirit that make this Town so special. We are proud to share these experiences with you."



Lord Mayor
Gary Zalepa

Scan the QR code to read about the Niagara District Court House online.



Information and images provided by the Niagara-on-the-Lake Museum.

Niagara District Court House

Niagara-on-the-Lake



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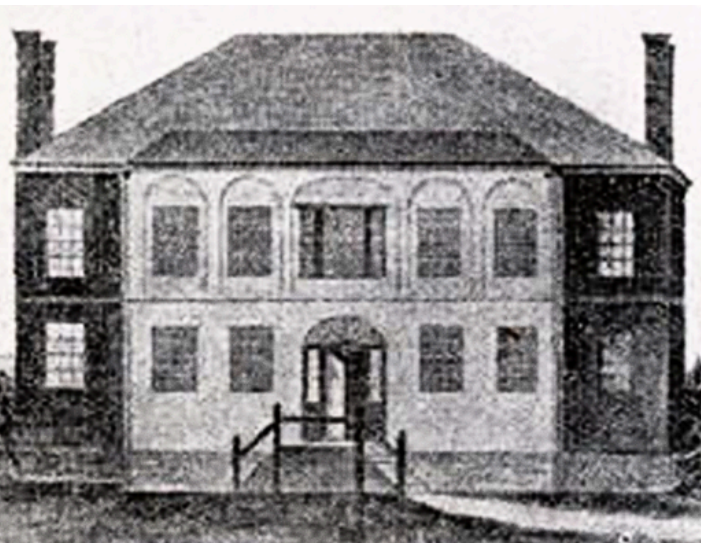
A Masterpiece of Neoclassical Design

Designed by renowned architect William Thomas, the Court House showcases Neoclassical Revival architecture. Thomas' other works include Toronto's St. Michael's Cathedral, St. Lawrence Hall, and the Don Jail. Local builders John Davidson (Master Carpenter) and John Thornton (Mason) led the construction.

Original features included:

- Two elaborate court rooms
- A market hall
- A Speaker's Balcony overlooking Queen Street

Look up! Above the windows and balcony, stone-carved faces peer down, possibly whimsical designs or perhaps portraits of local townspeople. Their expressions remain a delightful mystery. Atop the building, the bell tower houses the historic bell, which still chimes on the hour every day.



Layers of History

This court house is the third built in Niagara-on-the-Lake, and the only one that survives today.

- The first court house stood closer to the river.
- The second court house later became "Our Western Home," a refuge for London's street children founded by Maria Rye.

Although no executions occurred at the present court house, the first court house was the site of two notable ones:

- Josiah Cuttan (1792), an enslaved man.
- Mary Osborn (1801), the first woman executed for murder in the area.

Inside today, many original rooms, court rooms, offices, and the Lord Mayor's office and boardroom remain in use, though the prisoner's cell has long been retired.



Birthplace of the Shaw Festival

In 1962, the Court House began a new chapter as the first home of the Shaw Festival under Artistic Director Brian Doherty.

For 55 years, the second floor transformed each summer into a vibrant theatre, complete with:

- Sets
- Dressing rooms
- Green rooms
- Rows of audience seating

Today, the Shaw Festival continues to use the building for workshops, private events, and performances. A local legend even tells of a particularly rowdy theatre-goer being tossed into the old jail cell during a show in the 1960s!



A National Treasure

In 1980, the Niagara District Court House was declared a National Historic Site.

Its exterior and portions of the interior are protected under an Ontario Heritage Trust Conservation Easement.

In 1981, a time capsule was installed in the building, waiting to be opened in 2081. What stories will it reveal?