

## GODERICH HISTORICAL AUDIO TOURS

By Paul Ciufo

### Courthouse Square

Welcome to “The Square”, the site of a market and the county courthouse since the mid-1800’s. People still flock here to shop, socialize, and face justice.

**Take a walk around the courthouse while listening to this tour.**

People often observe, “it’s not a square; it’s an octagon!”. The design is unique in Canada, with eight commercial blocks, and roads radiating out in alignment with the eight points of a compass.

A well-known story suggests the town plans of Goderich and Guelph were accidentally switched, but historians dismiss this as nonsense. The plan was chosen by John Galt, Superintendent of the Canada Company, and co-founder of Goderich in 1829. Galt was a polymath -- a businessman, world traveler, and friend of the Romantic poets. Galt wrote a biography of Lord Byron, and authored novels second in popularity only to Sir Walter Scott’s.

Town planning fascinated Galt, and he yearned for more creative designs than the grid pattern favoured by the Royal Engineers. The ideas behind The Square’s design can be traced back to Vitruvius, the 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C. Roman architect. Vitruvius’ writings inspired the centralized towns of Europe, and Da Vinci’s famous drawing “Vitruvian Man”. The Square’s layout was also influenced by Galt’s sense of British nationalism; the streets radiating out perfectly form the shape of the Union Jack.

The focal point of The Square is the Huron County Courthouse, where justice has been meted out for over 160 years. Set in Courthouse Park, the current Art Deco building opened in 1956. The original courthouse opened a century earlier, in 1856. The old courthouse was an imposing two storey brick structure with tall Roman windows, grand balconies, and a domed cupola. It met a dramatic end.

In February 1954 a custodian was cleaning floors when he heard light bulbs exploding near the furnace room. He investigated and was met by a blast of smoke and heat, so he sounded the alarm. The Goderich Fire Brigade arrived quickly but flames engulfed the building and shot through the roof. Crowds gathered on The Square as word spread around town. Patrons poured out of the nearby Park Theatre (which is still in operation today).

Sheriff Nelson Hill bolted from a Lions Club meeting at the Bedford Hotel and into the building to grab a briefcase full of papers from his office. County engineer Peter Paterson dashed into

the burning courthouse to save plans for the Auburn bridge, slated to be built later that year. The engineer barely escaped with his life; within seconds of his exit his office ceiling collapsed.

Knowing the building was doomed, the county clerk ordered the fire brigades to hose down the corners where vaults held the most crucial county records. When the vaults were opened three days later most of the documents had been spared.

Two years later, on May 29, 1956, Ontario Premier Leslie Frost opened the new courthouse that still stands. More than 10,000 people toured the new facility that day, and Goderich Mayor J.E. Huckins presented the courthouse with its clock, set to chime every 15 minutes from 5:55 am to 12:05 am, as it still does today.

**Pause the tour and make your way to the southern tip of Courthouse Park to view the Hotel Bedford.**

The Bedford has Romanesque arches along the ground floor and a large cupola on top. The Italianate cupola, or dome, is one of The Square's signature architectural features. The hotel was built on the ruins of the old Albion Hotel that burned to the ground in 1895. The new hotel was built by A. C. Pace and John Bedford and named in honour of Bedford's family.

The Bedford Hotel opened in September 1896 and was one of the largest hotels in Ontario. With its location on The Square and access to Polley's Livery on South Street, the Bedford was the perfect spot for travelling salesmen. The hotel had fifty rooms for a dollar and fifty cents to two dollars per night, including meals. It had eight sample rooms for the salesmen to display their products to customers. On top of that The Bedford had electric lights, call bells, steam heat, and a spacious modern public house well-stocked with the finest wines, liquors, and cigars.

Jonathan Miller was The Bedford's first manager. Weighing in at an imposing 465 pounds, Miller was dubbed the biggest man in Canada; his giant stature matched the size of the new hotel. Miller kept order in the Bedford's public house by cracking a bull whip at the patrons when he had to. Even though Miller was big, he could move. He could run around The Square when the clock began striking noon and complete a circuit before the twelfth chime. Give it a try if you'd like!

Over the years the Bedford hosted many famous guests including Walt Disney, Ontario Premier Leslie Frost, and Canadian Prime Ministers Louis St. Laurent and Brian Mulroney.

The Bedford also served as a community hub. In the aftermath of the Great Storm of 1913, shipping officials headquartered their ground search and recovery operations at the Bedford. During Thanksgiving weekend, 1916, a dinner was held at the hotel to honour the 161<sup>st</sup> battalion's Goderich company, who were going overseas to fight in the Great War. For some it was their last supper in Huron County.

The 1914 Canada Temperance Act which prohibited the sale of alcohol shut down “wet” bars like the Bedford’s for decades. In 1942 the hotel was licensed to sell alcohol for the duration of WW II, then went dry again from 1946 to 1964. It is still a pub and serves beer, including some local beers, to this day.

**Now turn back to courthouse park.**

In 2011 a devastating force of nature threatened the Bedford and other elegant 19<sup>th</sup> century buildings on The Square. On August 21<sup>st</sup> a powerful tornado tore through Goderich, killing one person and injuring 37 others. Winds of up to 300 kilometres per hour caused severe damage, and The Square took a direct hit. The roofs of several buildings were torn off and the courthouse was damaged. Dozens of mature trees were ripped out of the ground, and the bandshell was destroyed.

The people of Goderich rallied and rebuilt. The damaged buildings were repaired or replaced. One hundred and sixty-four new trees were planted in Courthouse Park. The large variety of trees planted, most of them native to the area, make the park the most diverse in Canada as far as tree species. A new musical performance space was built over the concrete stage of the old bandshell, the only part that survived the tornado. The creative design represents the upside-down hull of a shipwreck, a nod to the town’s marine heritage, and the Great Storm of 1913.

Lively, uniquely designed, and rich in history, The Square is Goderich’s heart, past and present.

**To hear about other historic sites on streets radiating out from The Square, listen to the audio tours “South Street and East Street”, “North Street”, and “West Street to Lake Huron”.**