

The Dawson Block

708-714 Queen Street East

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THE DAWSON BLOCK
708-714 QUEEN STREET EAST
LOTS 4 & 5, GOUIN SUBDIVISION

1985-01-03

LACAC Review

1) JOHN DAWSON

John Dawson was born May 10, 1847 in Ripon England, one of 14 children of Richard and Mary Dawson. His first wife, Jane Hawkswell, died during childbirth on September 16, 1867. About 1869 he emigrated to Canada leaving his son, Alfred, to be raised by his maternal grandmother. Around this time he also married Elizabeth Todd who followed him to Canada. They eventually settled in Sault Ste. Marie where John purchased a small farm. Their date of arrival in the Sault is not known. There is no mention of them in 1871 census. It is also unclear whether John ever farmed the property. The 1881 census lists him as police constable. We know that later he was also appointed goaler.

His respect and influence in the community obviously grew for he was one of the “prominent men” of the town that spoke of the great advantages of rail connections when the first train arrived in Sault Ste. Marie on October 20, 1887. In 1896 he was appointed to a deputation that went to Ottawa and Toronto to lobby the Federal and Provincial governments for a hospital in Sault Ste. Marie. The cornerstone of the General Hospital was laid two years later.

Around the turn of the century John Dawson married for a third time, to a widow, Mrs. Minnie Rebekah Barton Dunn.

John Dawson died on August 22, 1915. He, his second and third wives and all the children from the second marriage are buried in Greenwood Cemetery.

John Dawson’s involvement in the community was extensive. He served as Alderman in 1902, 1903 and 1908, and was an unsuccessful candidate for Mayor in 1906, losing to Dr. J. Gimby. He was initiated into the Arthur lodge of the International Order of Oddfellows in 1890 and rose to become Grand Marshall of IOOF for Ontario in 1912. He was instrumental in founding the Children’s Aid Society in Sault Ste. Marie and served as its first President. He also served as President of the Board of Trade, President of the Liberal Association for the District of Sault Ste. Marie, President of the Humane Society, and, for 18 years President of the Agricultural Society. He was a member and treasurer of the Canadian Order of Foresters and of the Horticultural Society, and a member of the Central Methodist Church, serving on the Quarterly Official Board and on the Board of Trustees of the congregation.

Although John Dawson was a partner in the Grocery Business that occupied his building, he was not an active one. His primary interest was the John Dawson Real Estate and Insurance business, then located on the corner of Queen and Elgin Streets. John had held an insurance license since 1892, being the first agent for London Life in the Sault. The grocery business was run by two of his sons, James and George and, in 1902, he sold the block to them.

In 1915 James joined his father in the insurance business. That same year John Dawson died, leaving the two brothers, James and George, to run both the grocery and insurance businesses. This must have proved to be too much, for by 1918 James was involved strictly in the insurance business while George had a new partner in the Dawson and Gibson Grocery business, still located in the Dawson Block. In 1919, James Dawson entered local politics as a successful Aldermanic candidate. In 1922 he was elected as the first native born Mayor of Sault Ste. Marie.

James' son, Fred, remained active in the insurance business, now known as Dawson and Kennan, until his death in March 1981.

2) PROPERTY

In 1876 John Dawson purchased lots 4 & 5 of the Gouin Subdivision at the corner of Queen and East Streets from a John M. Hamilton who had, himself, purchased the property only two weeks earlier from James A. Gouin, the original subdivider.

Although Mr. Dawson did not construct his building until 1894, an early photograph of the Queen and East Street intersection shows that the site was previously occupied by a pair of two-storey frame (?) buildings with stores on the ground floor, one of which was occupied by MacQuarrie and Company.

In 1914 the Dawson Block was sold to the International Order of Oddfellows, reflecting the close association between this society and the Dawson family. The Columbus Club of Sault Ste. Marie purchased the Block in 1948. On February 13, 1953 fire swept through the top floor of what was now called the Knights of Columbus building. The third floor was completely destroyed and has never been rebuilt.

3) BUILDING

The Dawson Block was erected in 1894. Originally three stories high, it is constructed of dressed, rock-faced sandstone (quarried from the locks) to the street façades and coursed rubble to the North and East faces.

The general appearance mirrors that of the earlier buildings on the site i.e. expansive store fronts at street level with a range of six arched double-hung windows above to the Queen Street side and three to East Street, which has no store frontage.

The original two-storey façade was unmodelled, terminating in a corbelled double string course surmounted by a bell-cast mansard roof enclosing the third floor. This was pierced with hooded, round-headed projecting dormer windows repeating the pattern below.

The upper two floors contained apartments and the Oddfellows' Hall.

Sometime between 1906 and 1912 the third floor was rebuilt to eliminate the mansard roof.

No documented reasons could be found for this, but local tradition states that the concave sides of the mansard roof constituted a safety hazard. Apparently City Council asked that the third floor be redesigned.

The reconstructed third floor was similar in construction to the lower building but more elaborate in detail. The street facades were each divided into 3 bays by pilasters and a wider, two-tier cornice course was supported by shallow projecting intermediate stone brackets between the pilasters. The original round-headed windows were incorporated into the new masonry.

The entire building was surmounted by a projecting cornice, with paired brackets or modillions and a dentilated frieze or bed mould, all of pressed metal.

While the scale and proportions of the original building were not improved by the reconstruction of the third floor, the sensitivity of the design and the quality of workmanship achieved were exemplary.

Following the fire of 1953, the entire third floor was removed.

The various stages of the building's evolution are well documented in the attached photographs.

4) ASSESSMENT

This building merits designation for the following reasons: -

- 1) It is a tangible symbol of investment in the community by one of our pioneer families whose faith in Sault Ste. Marie was demonstrated by a distinguished record of service spanning over a century.
- 2) Although the building has been much altered over the years, the masonry of the main (Queen Street) façade remains, essentially in its original condition, although lacking the dignity conferred by the original attic storey. Given our limited stock of unmodified stone buildings, this façade and the surviving stonework to East Street should be preserved in their present state.

D. Perry Short, Architect
4 January 1985
Sault Ste. Marie

Bibliography

Dawson, Marion G. "Dawson Family History". Unpublished article. 1966. In Local History scrapbook #6. Sault Ste. Public Library.

Hinsperger, Aileen Collins. Stories of the Past: 300 Years of Soo History. Sault Ste. Marie, 1967, No Publisher.

Land Registry Office of Sault Ste. Marie. Book 7C.

Local History Photograph Collection. Sault Ste. Marie Public Library. Photographs numbers 20, 101, 104, 119, 121, 122, 173, 209.

Local History Photograph Collection. Sault Ste. Marie Museum.

Sault Star. August 23, 1915. "Mr. John Dawson Died Suddenly Yesterday Morning".

Sault Star. February 13, 1953. Pg. 1. "Third Floor Hardest Hit by Night Fire".

Sault Star. March 16, 1962. "It's Been a Long Time".

Sault Star. July 12, 1978. Pg. 16. "Queenstown Head Pleased with Cuerrier Plans".

Sault Ste. Marie City Directories. 1901 to 1922. Sault Ste. Marie Public Library.

APPENDIX A

OWNERS OF LOTS 4 AND 5 GOUIN SUB-DIVISION

May 8, 1856: George Johnston received a patent from the crown to 4 acres of land.

Aug. 22, 1860: Samuel Whitney purchases the 4 acres from G. Johnston.

October 13, 1866: James A. Gouin purchases the 4 acres from G. Johnston for \$800.

July 10, 1876: John Hamilton purchases lots 4 and 5.

July 26, 1876: John Dawson purchases lot 4 for \$150.

Sept. 14, 1876: John Dawson purchases lot 5 for \$150.

March 14, 1902: George Dawson and James Dawson purchase lots 4 and 5 from John Dawson for \$12,500.

June 15, 1914: Murdock Campbell, Archibald McNabb and George Bailey, acting as trustees of the Arthur Lodge no. 281 of the International Order Of Foresters purchase lots 4 and 5 from George and James Dawson.

Nov. 12, 1948: Columbus Club of Sault Ste. Marie purchases lots 4 and 5 from the trustees of the I.O.O.F Arthur Lodge no. 281.

June 29, 1978: Robert and Susan Cuerrier purchase lots 4 and 5 from the Columbus Club of Sault Ste. Marie.

Photos Taken: July 2004



Photos courtesy of the Sault Ste. Marie Museum



Photos courtesy of the Sault Ste. Marie Museum

