

THE CHÂTEAU LAURIER

THE THIRD CHAMBER OF PARLIAMENT



Few buildings in Ottawa are as immediately recognizable – and as steeped in history – as the Château Laurier.

The copper-roofed castle that rises above Rideau Street where the Ottawa River meets the Rideau Canal traces its origins back to the fierce rivalry among Canada's railway companies at the turn of the twentieth century. The battle for corporate and transcontinental dominance between the largest of the players at the time – the Canadian Pacific Railway and Grand Trunk Railway – saw the companies expand their operations into the hotel business. Their logic: stately hotels situated along their lines would enhance the prestige of travel and attract more tourists.



"If we can't export the scenery, we'll import the tourists," Canadian Pacific Railway president William Cornelius Van Horne quipped upon the opening of the Banff Springs Hotel in 1888.

It wouldn't be long before Canadian Pacific Railway moved its sights east. Five years later, it opened the Château Frontenac in Quebec City. Almost immediately, the building's iconic design and elevated location made it an immediate landmark for passing trains and ships. It would soon become – and arguably still is – the symbol of the city.

Charles Melville Hays, the American-born general manager and later president of the Grand Trunk Railway, did not sit idly by watching his main competitor corner the market on prestige hotels. His goal: to build a chain of château-style hotels stretching across the country. The flagship among these would be a property in Ottawa that would carry the name of his friend and political ally, Prime Minister Sir Wilfrid Laurier.

Early controversies in project location and design

Nothing if not ambitious, Hays set about hiring the best of the best for the design of his new castle. New York architect Bradford Lee Gilbert, who designed what was arguably the city's first skyscraper, was commissioned in 1907 to draw up plans in the French château style.

The relationship between the men did not last. Hays fired Gilbert after the architect submitted drawings of the proposed hotel. The railway man replaced him with the Montreal firm of Ross and MacFarlane, who produced a set of plans that was curiously similar to Gilbert's original work.



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The New York architect sued the Grand Trunk Railway in 1908 and ultimately settled out of court for a sum of about \$20,000, or the equivalent of \$500,000 in today's money. (The arrangement worked well for Ross and MacFarlane, too. The firm went on to national prominence, leading the design of several major national contracts, including the design of Ottawa's Union Station across the road from the Château Laurier.)

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BOMA
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Meanwhile, Hays had other matters to attend to. Designs were one thing, but a hotel couldn't be built without land – and the railway man had his eye on a parcel of Major's Hill Park for its location. He turned to Prime Minister Laurier to secure the property, and although the move cost the Prime Minister some political capital, the siting of the hotel in such a prominent location very much aligned with Laurier's vision of turning Ottawa into the Washington of the North.

Construction work started on the Château Laurier in 1909 and was completed in 1912 for the princely sum of around \$2 million. The finished building was clad in Indiana limestone and crowned with a copper roof, conical turrets, and dormers in the Châteauesque, or French Gothic Revival, style. All were deliberately designed to echo and complement the Gothic Revival grandeur of the nearby Parliament Buildings.

Opening day marred by tragedy

The grand opening of the grand château was originally scheduled for April 26, 1912. Ahead of the gala event, Hays had travelled to England to finalize preparations for the opening. As a man of his esteem naturally would in those days, he secured passage back to Canada on the finest transport available. He purchased first-class tickets for he, his wife, their daughter and her husband on RMS Titanic.



Ross Dunn, used under CC BY-SA 2.0

News of Hays's death reached Ottawa before the scheduled opening, and all celebrations were promptly cancelled out of respect for the man whose vision had built the hotel. Although records vary on whether the hotel's precise opening day was delayed to June 1 or June 12 of that year, Prime Minister Laurier was in attendance and was among the first to sign the guest register.

At its opening, the Château Laurier offered 350 bedrooms, an extraordinary 155 of which had private bathrooms, a remarkable standard of luxury for a Canadian hotel in that era. Rooms were priced at \$2 a night. A tunnel beneath Rideau Street connected the hotel directly to Union Station, allowing arriving rail passengers to walk from their train straight into the hotel lobby without stepping outside, a convenience that underscored the building's original purpose as a railway hotel first and foremost. That station building, of course, survives today as the Senate of Canada Building, a physical reminder of the two structures' shared origin.

The hotel expanded steadily through the twentieth century. A barber shop was added in 1918, and in 1929 a \$6-million east wing brought 240 additional rooms, a ballroom, a convention hall, and the Jasper Tea Room. An Art Deco indoor swimming pool and spa followed in 1930 – with both largely unchanged today.

The “Third Chamber of Parliament”

The building attracted a remarkable roster of long-term residents and tenants over the decades. Prime Minister R.B. Bennett lived in a suite at the hotel throughout his term in office, from 1930 to 1935, while CBC Radio occupied the seventh and eighth floors as a broadcasting studio from 1924 until 2004. Renowned portrait photographer Yousuf Karsh kept both his studio and his residence at the Château Laurier from 1972 to 1992, and copies of his photographs still hang in the hotel's reading lounge. Even today, the hotel is the first choice for many visiting people of prominence, including political dignitaries.



William James Topley/Library and Archives Canada/PA-010295

Its proximity to Parliament earned it the nickname the “third chamber of Parliament,” a nod to its role as an informal extension of Ottawa's political life.

Ownership of the hotel has passed through several hands over the course of the Château's century-plus life. The Grand Trunk Railway eventually became part of the Canadian National Railways, with the hotel remaining an important part of the agency's portfolio. Canadian Pacific Hotels took over ownership in 1988 and rebranded itself to Fairmont Hotels and Resorts after acquiring the American Fairmont hotel chain in 1999. The Fairmont label was added to the hotel's name, making it the Fairmont Château Laurier.



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Changes in name and ownership haven't shaken the hotel's propensity for attracting controversy when the questions of design and construction arise. In 2019, Ottawa's City Council approved an addition to the building that led to vocal protest from heritage advocates who argued the contemporary design clashed with the château's historic character.

A national historic site. A national treasure.

The Château Laurier was designated a National Historic Site of Canada in 1980. The property also carries protection under Ontario's Heritage Act. Its setting overlooking the Rideau Canal places it directly alongside a UNESCO World Heritage Site, reinforcing its status as one of the most significant heritage properties in the country.

Today the Château Laurier continues to operate as a working luxury hotel spanning roughly 660,000 square feet with 429 guest rooms, still welcoming travellers, dignitaries, and Ottawa residents into the same limestone halls that Charles Melville Hays never lived to see completed.

