

THE PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS

OTTAWA'S DEFINING ICON



Long before it boasted office towers, museums, or hotels, Ottawa had Parliament Hill.

Rising above a town built on sawmills and low-rise structures, the creation of these Gothic Revival buildings established both a visual focal point and a national identity. Their construction in the 19th century transformed Ottawa into the political heart of Canada, setting a precedent for scale, design, and prominence.

As surrounding institutions and commercial buildings followed, they did so in harmony with Parliament, making it the natural starting point for understanding Ottawa's evolution from a timber town to a world-class capital city.



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An influential architectural theme

The story of the Parliament Buildings begins in the late 1850s when Queen Victoria selected Ottawa to be the capital of the Province of Canada. The choice was strategic. Ottawa sat directly on the Ottawa River, which at the time was a natural boundary between the predominantly English-speaking Upper Canada and the predominantly French-speaking Lower Canada.

There were other advantages, besides. Unlike major hubs such as Montreal and Toronto, both of which were judged too close to the American border, and therefore vulnerable to invasions, Ottawa was sufficiently inland to be insulated. And at the time, the quiet lumber town was considered less prone to the street mobs and riots that occurred in those larger financial centres.

Equally strategic was the choice of location for the buildings. Barrack Hill served as a military base and a garrison for the British Army, as well as the operational headquarters for Lieutenant-Colonel John By and the team of British Royal Engineers during construction of the Rideau Canal. Dating back even further, the site had served as a key geographic landmark for First Nations people and early European fur traders navigating the Ottawa River.



William James Topley/Library and Archives Canada/PA-

In 1859, the then Department of Public Works issued a call for design proposals for the new buildings. Nearly 300 drawings were submitted, with a shortlist narrowed to just three proposals. Ultimately, the contract to build the legislative building (which we know now as the Centre Block) was awarded to the team of Thomas Fuller and Chilion Jones; the contract to design the east and west blocks, which would house the departmental offices, was awarded to the team of Thomas Stent and Augustus Laver.

The designs were chosen with a specific scheme in mind. The Gothic style of architecture, which featured rugged masonry, pointed openings, carved beasts and buttresses, that was specified in both proposals mirrored the symbols of parliamentary democracy in Europe. The choice would prove to be an important influence in Ottawa's later development.

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The government allocated the princely sum of \$300,000 for construction of the main building, and \$120,000 more for each of the departmental buildings on the site.

Construction started on site in December 1859, with the cornerstone of the Centre Block laid by Prince Albert Edward, Prince of Wales (who would later become King Edward VII) on September 1, 1860. The work on site was anything but smooth. Workers uncovered bedrock much sooner than expected, and blasting had to be used to put the foundations in place. By early 1861, the project budget itself had been blown to smithereens. A whopping \$1.4 million had been spent on the project – making it the biggest construction project of its time in North America.

The Parliament Buildings received their first occupants in 1865, and officially opened on June 6, 1866 – just in the nick of time to house the government of the new Dominion of Canada following Confederation in 1867. From that point forward, the Centre Block held the House of Commons and the Senate, while the East and West Blocks were given over to the departmental offices of the growing federal civil service.

The East Block in particular became the working home of the country's earliest political figures. Sir John A. Macdonald kept an office there from 1866 to 1873 and again from 1878 to 1883, and with only one exception (R.B. Bennett), every prime minister from Macdonald through to Pierre Trudeau maintained an office within its walls. (Curiously, no Prime Minister since the 1980s has used the East Block as their primary working office, preferring instead to base themselves out of what is now known as the Office of the Prime Minister and Privy Council building (formerly the Langevin Block).



Disaster!

For almost 50 years, the Centre Block stood as the focal point of Canadian democratic life. In an instant, everything changed.

On the night of February 3, 1916, a fire – believed to have started from a discarded cigar or faulty wiring in the House of Commons Reading Room – tore through the building's tinder-dry corridors, which were lined with varnished wood panelling and hung with newspapers, transforming the interior into what one curator later called a breeding ground for fire.

Twenty members of Parliament were sitting in a late-night session when the flames broke through. The alarm sounded at 8:57 p.m., and although firefighters were on the scene within three minutes, the blaze was unstoppable. The fire smouldered and flared for much of the following day before it was finally extinguished around two in the morning. In its aftermath, the Centre Block was completely destroyed.

Seven people lost their lives that night: two parliamentarians, a post office employee, boiler-room workers, and guests of the Speaker's household who had hesitated to retrieve their furs before being overtaken by smoke.

If there were a hero to emerge from this dramatic series of events, Library of Parliament clerk Michael MacCormac is one name to consider. With the flames closing on the library and only seconds to spare, MacCormac heaved shut the building's massive fireproof iron doors, and preserved the building's irreplaceable collection.

Consider also Alfred Hamlyn Todd, the Senate employee whose quick thinking saved the portrait of Queen Victoria that still hangs today in the upper chamber. The Centre Block fire marked the fourth time the portrait was salvaged from disaster. By sheer coincidence, Todd's uncle, Alpheus Todd, was the librarian who rescued the portrait – for the first time – during the 1849 Montreal parliamentary fire.



A new home for democracy and a monument to peace

Although its logistical home was destroyed, Parliament was undeterred. The business of governance would not rest – not least because Canada was heavily involved in the First World War at the time. The Legislature resumed operations the following day inside the Victoria Memorial Museum Building – where it remained until 1920.

The project to rebuild the Centre Block was among the more pressing items of business. Work began in late 1916, under the direction of architects John A. Pearson and Jean-Omer Marchand.

Reconstruction of the Centre Block began that same year, guided by architects John A. Pearson and Jean-Omer Marchand. Although their vision was to maintain the same Gothic style for the building, Pearson and Marchand planned a taller, grander structure using steel-frame construction infilled with brick and terracotta tile – and, of course, built with the latest fire-prevention technologies.

The new Centre Block was completed in 1922. Five years later, on 1 July 1927, the Peace Tower was formally inaugurated by Governor General Viscount Willingdon as part of the celebrations marking the sixtieth anniversary of Confederation. Rising more than ninety metres above the Hill, the tower had originally been envisioned as a memorial to the armistice of 1918 and the sacrifice of Canadian soldiers in the First World War. It was originally dubbed the Victory Tower before Prime Minister Mackenzie King chose the more fitting name Peace Tower.

The tower today houses a fifty-three-bell carillon and the Memorial Chamber, a solemn space dedicated to Canadians who gave their lives in service to the country.



The two flanking buildings had their own trials and reprieves in the twentieth century. The East Block came perilously close to demolition before Prime Minister Lester Pearson intervened in 1966 to authorize its restoration, and the building reopened to serve senators and their staff in 1981.

The West Block, having survived as the oldest of the three original structures, underwent an extensive, years-long restoration between 2011 and 2018 that transformed its interior courtyard into a temporary House of Commons chamber beneath a modern glass roof. The building continues to serve as the official seat of government while the Centre Block undergoes its own major rehabilitation through 2028.

The precinct has also witnessed moments of sobering modern history, including an armed attack on October 22, 2014, when a gunman entered the Centre Block and was confronted in a firefight involving the Sergeant-at-Arms and the RCMP.

In recognition of their enduring significance, the Parliament Buildings and the grounds of Parliament Hill were both designated National Historic Sites of Canada in November 1976, with the East and West Blocks further recognized individually as Classified Federal Heritage Buildings.

Nearly a century and a half after the first stones were laid on Barrack Hill, the Centre Block, East Block, and West Block together remain the literal and symbolic centre of Canadian government. Their Gothic silhouettes are still the measure against which every later addition to Ottawa's skyline has been drawn.