

THE CARRIAGEWAY

A MONUMENT TO OTTAWA'S SHIFTING HISTORY



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Ottawa's reputation as a modern and sophisticated capital city belies a more industrial history. As recently as 200 years ago, this was a town built on hard labour and populated by harder people, where men toiled day and night as loggers and as builders of the Rideau Canal.

Indeed, the construction of the canal, which was overseen by English military engineer Lieutenant-Colonel John By eventually led to the establishment of Lowertown (now the ByWard Market), which itself would become the neighbourhood of choice for the thousands of French Canadians and Irish immigrants who lent their skills – and too often their lives – to the construction of the waterway.

Located at the corner of Murray Street and Parent Avenue in Lowertown, the Carriageway building traces its heritage back to those raucous early days. Stripped of fancy architectural details, its story belongs to working-class hospitality and local grit – a sharp contrast to the political deal-making and grand luxury found down the street at Parliament Hill and the Château Laurier.

Accommodations for Ottawa's working class

The Carriageway traces its origins to 1872. It was commissioned by Eugène Martineau, Ottawa's first Francophone mayor and a prosperous merchant with wide-ranging business interests – including in the forestry industry.

The Martineau Hotel, as it was known in its earliest days, was built at the height of the Ottawa Valley timber boom, when the city's economy revolved almost entirely around logging. Martineau imagined the new property with exactly that workforce in mind. At the time of opening, the limestone building housed four separate hotels. Martineau leased the property to as many keepers, each of whom in turn ran an inexpensive hotel complete with its own tavern. Each catered to the loggers, river drivers and raftsmen who passed through Ottawa in large numbers during the timber trade.

While the approach of running four separate hotels under a single roof may seem odd today, it was not uncommon in Lowertown at the time. The approach was effective for managing the sheer volume of transient forestry labour that moved through the capital each season.

Although the Martineau Hotel was nothing special to look at architecturally, its focal point were the two doors – carriageways – that were broad enough to admit horse-drawn carriages into a rear courtyard and stable. That feature would eventually inspire the building's modern name: the Carriageway.



"55 Murray Street, Ottawa" by Reading Tom (flickr.com), used under CC BY 2.0

Disrepair, destruction – and salvation

The fortunes of the Carriageway over the next century twisted and turned with those of Lowertown itself. Martineau's four hotels were eventually sub-divided into rooming houses (rumours also suggest a brothel was also run on site), and remained so until the early 1970s. As Ottawa's timber trade dried up and eventually disappeared, the building fell into disuse and disrepair.

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A major fire in 1979 should have very well signalled the end of the Carriageway building. Its interior was entirely gutted; only the stone walls remained intact and structurally viable. The building's recently bestowed heritage status by the City of Ottawa was, at the time, likely the only thing standing between it and a wrecking ball.

Toronto Architect Jim Strasman was among the few to be convinced of the potential for what remained of the property. He led a project to convert the Carriageway into modern office space. The cornerstone of his solution was to link the existing structure to an entirely new building at the rear of the property. The two would be joined through a light-filled central atrium.

In a nod to the property's heritage, Strasman duplicated the original two carriageways in the new construction. His design married the memory of the horse-drawn entries with a more modern function.

The restoration was completed in 1982. A later project to add a new wing along Parent Avenue brought the building's total footprint to roughly 48,000 square feet. Its atrium remains the building's focal point.



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A modern monument to Lowertown's heritage

Since its rebirth, the Carriageway has drawn a rotating cast of notable tenants: restaurants and professional and creative services companies among them. Its cachet has made the Carriageway attractive to regional and international film productions shooting in the ByWard Market. The 2018 francophone thriller series, *La malédiction de Jonathan Plourde*, for example, leaned heavily on production at the Carriageway. So too do the many several made-for-television and thriller movies that often shoot on location in the ByWard Market.

In this sense, the Carriageway stands today as a tribute to Ottawa's rich and varied history. It is a building designed and constructed during some of Ottawa's roughest days, and which today serves a decidedly more modern clientele.