

Hamilton's Glazed Architectural Terra Cotta 1905-1925

Essay and Walking Tour by Ann Gillespie



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Architectural historians have tended to focus their attention on studying buildings from the standpoint of their stylistic evolution. Equally important, however, were the materials and techniques employed to construct buildings in any given period defined by the dominance of one or more styles. The use of specific materials and techniques were often associated with particular stylistic phases. Two materials, which have been largely overlooked, are sheet metal and terra cotta. Architectural sheet-metalwork made its biggest visual impact during the High Victorian era, when it was commonly used to create richly ornamented features, such as cornices and window surrounds. Architectural terra cotta is more closely associated with the following Edwardian era, with its more restrained forms of classically-derived ornamentation. This walking tour will focus on the use of terra cotta in its glazed form on buildings in Hamilton, spanning approximately two decades from 1905 to 1925. Its applications will be viewed through the lens of prominent commercial/ office buildings in downtown Hamilton.

Glazed Architectural Terra Cotta Walking Tour

Start the Walking Tour at #1 the Lister Block which houses the Tourist Centre or anywhere you chose to begin.

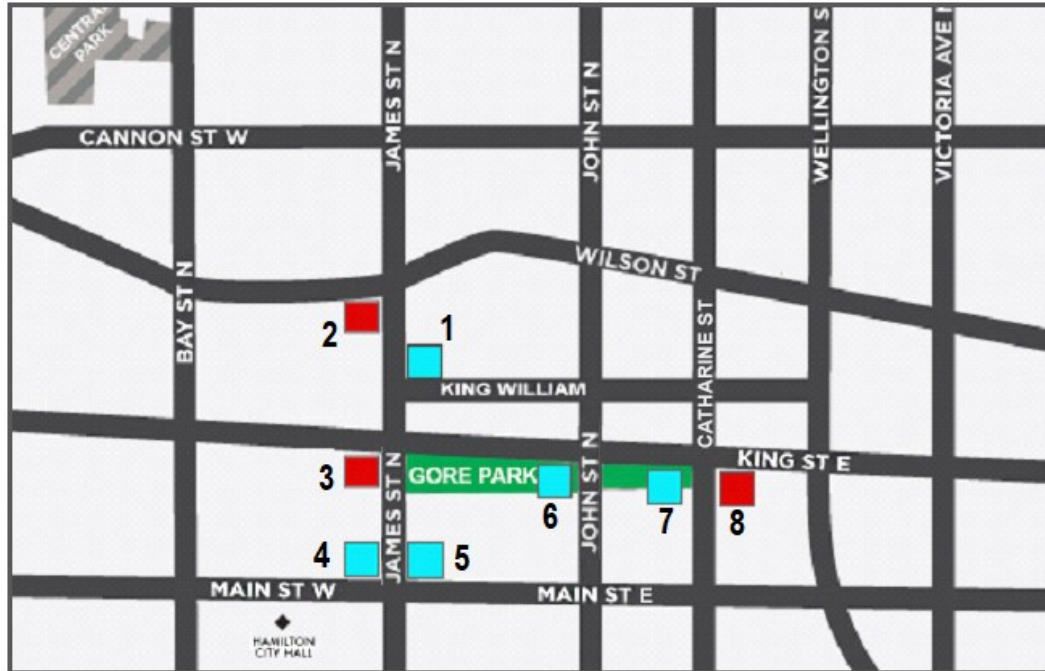
1 Lister Block



2 Site of Eaton's (demolished)



3 Site of Bank of Hamilton (demolished)



4 Sun Life Building



5 Landed Banking and Loan Building



6 MacKay Building



8 Hamilton Terminal Building (demolished)



7 The Royal Connaught



Background on Architectural Terra Cotta in Canada

1890-1930

Architectural terracotta is a clay product used to decorate or clad building surfaces, which takes its name from the Latin for “baked earth”. One of the world’s oldest building materials, its manufacture and use in England and North America did not become widespread until the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Terra cotta is a high-grade fired clay product, which is harder than brick and lighter than stone. It can take on any decorative colour or texture and can be made to look like other building materials, including sandstone, granite and marble. After gaining widespread popularity in North America from the 1880s through the 1920s, it was eclipsed by other cheaper building materials, such as concrete. The architectural terra cotta produced today is mostly for the repair and restoration of historic buildings.

Terra cotta was an extremely versatile building material whose beauty may be attributed both to the skilled hand craftsmanship involved in its manufacture and the plasticity of the clay, which allowed for ease of modelling. As an ornamental material its advantages included lighter weight and lower cost when compared to carved stone and its ability to retain sharp details. It was also fire resistant and highly durable, when properly made, installed and maintained.

There are three basic types of terra cotta: unglazed, glazed and porous. The latter was primarily used as fireproof protection for structural steel and fireproof arches, floors and partitions. Terra cotta was usually cast into hollow blocks, open at the back, with internal compartment-like stiffeners called webbing. Unglazed terra cotta, often confused with sandstone, was predominantly coloured a reddish-brown, matching pressed brick in colour. Most of the unglazed terra cotta used in Canada was made between about 1885 and 1905 by several pressed brick and terra cotta manufacturers in Ontario, where it was frequently used to embellish Queen Anne and Romanesque Revival buildings. Glazed terra cotta was used in Canada from the turn-of-the-20th century to the 1930s, mainly on commercial buildings, and appeared primarily in monochromatic shades of white, cream or grey. It was employed as an exterior cladding material and for decorative elements such as cornices, pilasters, capitals and frieze panels.

The glaze was created by brushing or spraying an aqueous solution of metal salts on the air-dried block before firing. Glazing had the

advantage of producing a relatively impervious surface on the outer face of the block and offered unlimited, fade-resistant colours. Architectural glazed terra cotta was not manufactured in Canada; it was either imported from England or the U.S. Today, there are only two remaining major manufacturers in the U.S.: the Boston Valley Terra Cotta Co. near Buffalo, New York and the Gladding, McBean Co. near Sacramento, California. Glazed terra cotta’s “invisibility” can be explained by its frequent imitation of stone. The earliest documented use of glazed terra cotta in Ontario was on the John Kay & Son carpet store (1898), designed by Samuel G. Curry. Its cream-pink cladding and decorative detail was intended to imitate cut and carved sandstone. More colourful, polychrome terra cotta was being produced in the U.S. by the turn-of-the-century; however, monochromatic shades of white remained more popular and the use of polychrome terra cotta in Canada was rare. One of the finest Canadian groupings of glazed terra-cotta buildings is located in Winnipeg’s Exchange District. Toronto architects Darling & Pearson were leaders in the use of glazed terra cotta on tall office buildings with the former Union Bank (1903-04), a 10-storey steel frame and reinforced concrete skyscraper in Winnipeg’s Exchange District (504 Main Street), now formally recognized as one of Canada’s Historic Places.

In Hamilton’s downtown core, eight noteworthy commercial buildings featuring glazed terra cotta may be identified, all built between 1905 and 1925. Of these, three have not survived: the Bank of Hamilton (1907), the Hamilton Terminal Building (1907) and Eaton’s Department Store (1916/1920). The remaining five are: the Sun Life Building (1905-06), the Landed Banking and Loan Company Building (1907-08), the Royal Connaught Hotel (1914-16), the A.B. MacKay Building (1914-20) and the Lister Block (1923). Except for the MacKay Building, these buildings are all designated under the Ontario Heritage Act.



MacKay Building, Gore Park

Lister Block, 28 James Street North (1923)

The Lister Block was designed by Hamilton architect, Bernard H. Prack and built by the Pigott Construction Co. in 1923. Standing at the north-east corner of James Street North and King William Street, it was erected on the site of the Lister Chambers, built for Joseph Lister in 1852. This prominent 4½ storey stone building was largely destroyed by one of Hamilton's worst fires on February 23, 1923. Its rebuilding began almost immediately and was supervised by Joseph's son, Edmund Lister.

The new six-storey building featured a double-storey base intended to house retail operations with the upper four storeys devoted to office space. The retail spaces were accessed by ground-floor entrances or interior corridors forming an L-shaped arcade. The two facades were treated as a classical tripartite composition, consisting of a base, shaft and cornice. The two-storey base features Corinthian pilasters supporting a simple cornice, all executed in white glazed terra cotta. The truncated corner is articulated by a pair of pilasters framing a round-arched doorway and 2nd storey window. The shaft was constructed of brown rug brick with copper spandrels filling the vertical space between the windows. The crowning terra-cotta cornice features a frieze panel with ornate medallions and scrollwork at the roofline.



The Lister Block would prove to be one of Hamilton's most successful commercial establishments, prospering through the 1950s. The subsequent decline of the downtown core, however, adversely affected its ability to attract new businesses and tenants. By the 1990s, the building was in a serious state of deterioration and in 1995, the few remaining tenants were evicted from the largely vacant building. Facing a very uncertain future, its purchase in 1999 by LIUNA seemed promising. However, it was not until 2010 that a partnership with the Hi-Rise Group made possible a \$25 million revitalization of the Lister Block, which was officially reopened in 2011. WGD Architects Inc. were responsible for the the refurbishment project, which included the meticulous restoration of the architectural terra cotta. The upper floors now primarily serve as offices for the City of Hamilton.



The Arcade/ Eaton's Department Store, 43 James Street North (1916/ 1920; demolished)

One of Hamilton's finest examples of a building which exemplifies the combination of a steel-framed structure with terra-cotta cladding was the former Eaton's building, which originated as the 1916 Arcade Department Store, located on James Street North to the north of the 1888 City Hall. In 1920, a six-storey, seven-bay wide extension was added to the north at the corner of Merrick Street. Designed by the Hamilton firm of Hutton & Souter, its steel frame was faced with a light-coloured glazed terra cotta. Structural columns were clad with terra cotta simulating the appearance of classical pilasters and capitals, which appear to support an unobtrusive cornice, likely also fabricated of matching glazed terra-cotta components. Spanning the columns were large tripartite and quadruple windows, for which the building became known as the "Daylight Shopping Palace". The Arcade was purchased by the T. Eaton Company in 1927 and thrived for many years but was sadly demolished in the late 1980s to make way for the new Eaton's Centre, opened in 1989.



Six-storey addition to the Arcade Department Store, at the time of its opening in 1927, the year it was taken over by the T. Eaton Co. View from the corner of James Street North and Merrick Street. (Toronto Star photo from the Toronto Virtual Reference Library)

Bank of Hamilton (1907; demolished)

The Bank of Hamilton was originally a three-storey building designed by Buffalo architect, Richard A. Waite and erected in 1892 at the south-west corner of King and James streets. Around 1905, Charles Mills was commissioned to enlarge the building. Eight stories and 120' in height, the building was the tallest in the city at the time. It utilized steel-frame construction, made fireproof with steel columns and girders encased in concrete and was serviced by two elevators. The exterior cladding was identified as brown stone, terra cotta and hydraulic pressed brick, with a copper cornice. Typical of early 20th century tall buildings in North America, its facades were articulated by a tripartite classical division, conceived as a base (first two storeys), a shaft (five storeys) and crown (top two stories and cornice). The top storey was entirely clad in terra cotta, which also appears to have been used for the window surrounds of the 8th storey and a horizontal moulding between the 7th and 8th storeys.

In 1923, the Bank of Hamilton was merged with the Canadian Bank Commerce and later formed today's CIBC. The 1907 building was demolished in 1985 to make way for the CIBC's twin bank towers, known as Commerce Place.



1924 postcard view of the former Bank of Hamilton, by then the Bank of Commerce. (courtesy of the Hamilton Public Library, Local History & Archives)

Sun Life Building, 42 James Street South (1906)

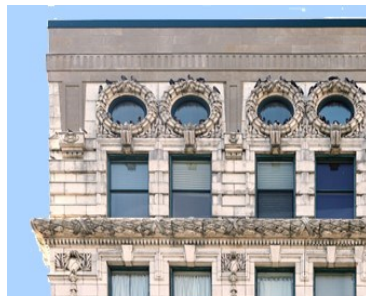
Originally commissioned by the Federal Life Assurance Company, this nine-storey building was designed by Montreal architects, Finley and Spence, and built in 1905-06. Noteworthy as Hamilton's first building with a steel frame, its structure was well disguised by the Edwardian Classical design of its facades, with their division into three sections: a base faced with granite, a shaft of glazed terra cotta (3rd to 9th storeys) and an enormous sheet-copper cornice (removed in 1964). The large, elongated ornamental brackets sprung from corbels at the upper level of the 8th storey windows were constructed of terra cotta, as were the ornamental frames of the paired circular windows of the 9th storey. The extensive use of glazed terra cotta represents the first or one of the earliest instances of its use in Hamilton on a large commercial building.

Acquired by the Sun Life Company in 1915 (1915-1976), the building was renovated in the mid-1880s along with the adjacent Pigott Building as part of the Heritage Gardens commercial/residential complex in the mid-1880s. Neither the sheet-copper cornice or the large terra cotta brackets were restored at this time, leaving the facades with an unfinished appearance. However, the ornate terra-cotta ornamentation framing the circular windows may still be admired.

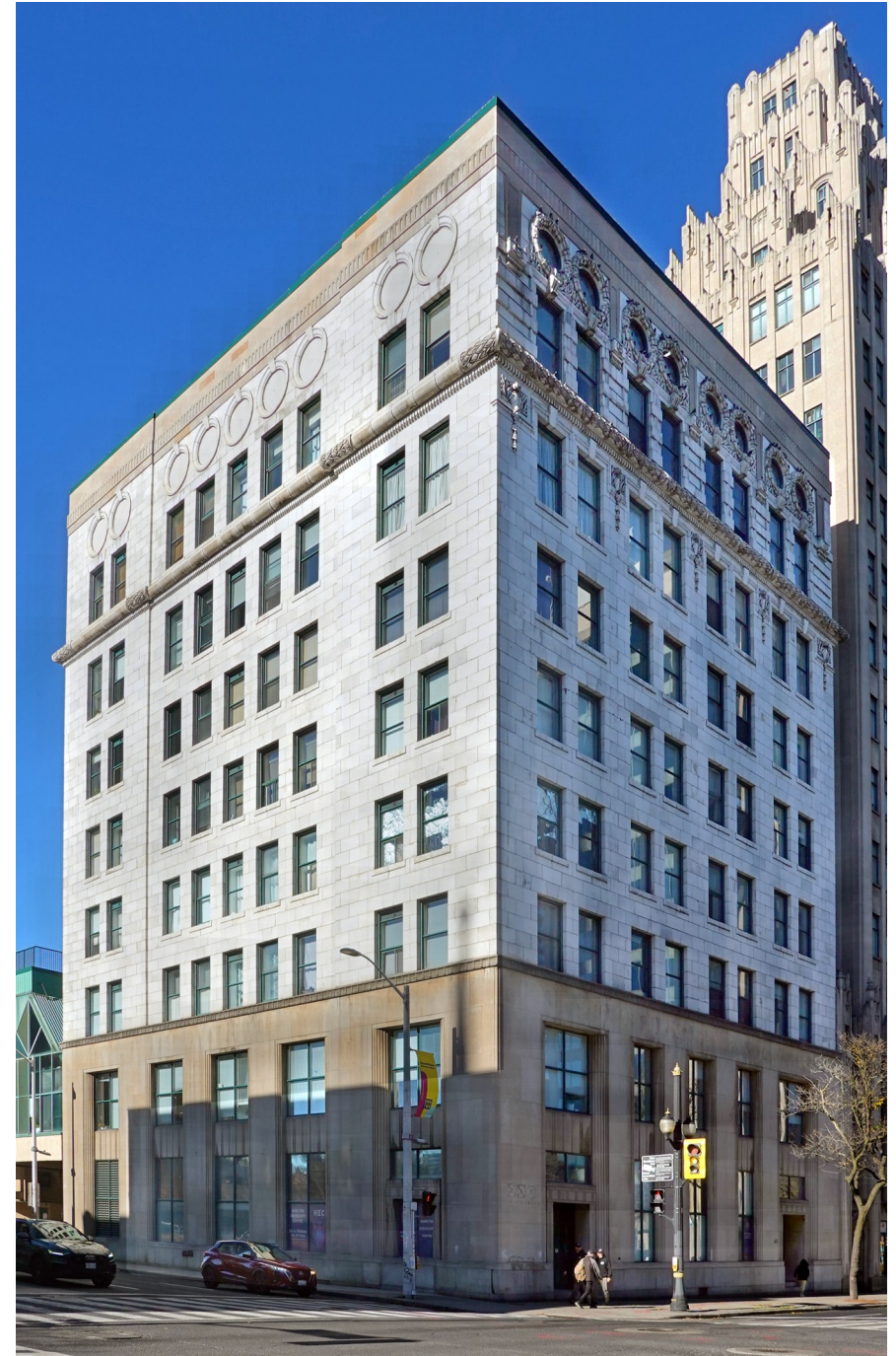


(Left) Circa 1950s view of the Sun Life Building, showing the enormous sheet-copper cornice and terra-cotta brackets still intact. (Toronto Region Architectural Conservancy, Terra Cotta – Artful Deceivers, p. 63).

(Below) Present day view (2024) of absence of cornice and brackets but circular windows intact.



View of the Sun Life Building in 2024



Landed Banking and Loan Company Building, 47 James Street South (1907-08)

The Landed Banking and Loan Company Building, erected in 1907-08 at the north-east corner of Main and James streets, was a steel-framed structure, clad in Indiana limestone and glazed terra cotta. The building, designed by Hamilton architect Charles Mills, was modelled closely after New York's 1904 Knickerbocker Trust and Safe Deposit Bank, designed by the acclaimed North American leaders of the Classical Revival style, McKim, Mead and White (demolished). The two street facades are dominated by three-storey Corinthian half-columns (facing James Street) and pilasters with matching capitals, all constructed of Indiana limestone. The columns and pilasters support an entablature with a frieze bearing the building name and a bracketed cornice surmounted by a balustrade. All of these elements as well as



Entablature with a frieze bearing the building name and a bracketed cornice of matte-glazed terra cotta)

the spandrel panels which vertically separate the window bays were constructed of matte-glazed terra cotta, which closely resembles the colour and texture of the limestone.

The Landed Banking and Loan Company was succeeded by the Canada Permanent Mortgage Company in 1944 and from 1972 to 1985 housed the Mercantile Bank of Canada.



A.B. MacKay Building, 66 King Street East (1914-20)

The A.B. MacKay Building, located at 66 King Street East, was designed by Toronto architects Bond & Smith and constructed between 1914 and 1920 for steamship operator Adam Brown MacKay. It may be noted that the Hermant Building on Dundas Square in Toronto, designed by Bond & Smith and completed in 1913, is a 10-storey reinforced concrete structure with terra-cotta cladding of similar design to the MacKay Building. This building is one of only two known examples in Hamilton of the work of Bond & Smith, who also designed the former Bank of Nova Scotia at 54 King Street East.

This six-storey MacKay Building comprises a four-storey loadbearing masonry structure with a two-storey reinforced concrete addition. Its façade is composed of two piers rising above the roofline and spanned by a panel bearing the name of the building, all fabricated of a buff-coloured glazed terra cotta with ornamental mouldings and other

decorative motifs. The original steel-framed windows and horizontal steel spandrel panels have since been replaced by aluminum-framed windows and porcelain panels.



Adam Brown MacKay (1865-1928) played a major role in the development of marine transportation on the Great Lakes. In 1894, Adam entered into partnership with his brother, Robert Osborne MacKay and formed the R.O. & A.B. MacKay Company. This family business acquired 11 steamship lines, merging in 1910 with Canada Steamship Lines. The building has housed a variety of businesses over they years including the office of A.B. MacKay (1922-1928), several optometrists (1921-57) and Foster's Fashion Shops Limited (1963-1979), when the building was joined with 68 King Street East (Victoria Hall) and became known as the Foster Building.

Royal Connaught Hotel, 82-112 King Street East, Hamilton (1914-16)

In 1911, businessman Harry Frost organized the Hamilton Hotel Company Ltd. to raise funds for the building of a grand hotel. In 1914, a building permit was issued for its construction on the site of the Waldorf Hotel and the cornerstone was laid by the Duke of Connaught, who granted permission to add "Royal" to the name. The hotel was officially opened on June 5, 1916. Designed by Buffalo architects Esenwein & Johnson, in association with Hamilton architect, W.A. Peene, the Royal Connaught was a 12-storey, steel-framed structure with curtain walls of hollow interlocking tile (terra cotta) and reinforced concrete floor slabs. Its Edwardian Classical style was expressed in the tripartite composition of the facades, articulated by the choice of different cladding materials for the base, shaft and cornice: Bedford limestone on the first two storeys, tapestry brick up to the 10th storey and glazed terra cotta for the top two storeys and cornice. The Royal Connaught is an excellent Canadian example of the work of Esenwein & Johnson, the second most active architectural practice in Buffalo at the turn of the twentieth century and architects for the United Hotels Company of America, the largest hotel chain in the U.S. at the time.



Esenwein & Johnson were known for their masterful use of white glazed terra cotta, supplied for the Royal Connaught by the Federal Terra Cotta Company of New York.

In 1930, the Royal Connaught was sold to the United Hotels Company and a 200-room annex completed in 1931. It was taken over by two hotel chains, operating until its closure in 2004. Finally, in 2014, local developers Spallacci Group and Valery Homes, bought the property and extensively renovated the hotel as residential condominiums, known as *The Residences of Royal Connaught*.

Hamilton Terminal Building (1907; demolished)

The Hamilton Terminal Building was erected in 1907 at the south-east corner of King and Catharine streets. The Hamilton Terminal Co. was incorporated in 1906 as a subsidiary of the Cataract Power Company. Its building housed administrative offices and served as a terminus for the city's four interurban radial electric lines and the Hamilton Street Railway. It was the first structure in Hamilton to be constructed of reinforced concrete, which would have allowed for additional storeys.

The four-storey Renaissance Revival building was clad with three different architectural materials: Indiana limestone on the first storey and pressed brick with decorative terra cotta on the 2nd to 4th storeys. It featured a bold cornice, likely built of sheet copper, surmounted by a balustrade supporting a central clock measuring six feet in diameter. By 1931, all four of the interurban railway companies had been shut down. In 1927, the Terminal Building gained a new lease on life as a bus depot but in 1955 operations were moved to a new terminus, leading to its demolition in 1959.

Hamilton Terminal Station. Circa 1909 postcard view showing the attached Savoy Theatre to the rear. (Hamilton Transit History, The Hamilton Terminal Station <http://www.trainweb.org/hamtransithist/HamiltonTerminalStation.html>)

