MUNICIPALITY OF PORT HOPE

HERITAGE DESIGNATION

Address: 85 Walton Street

Known as: O'Neill's Music Hall & Opera Block

Architectural Style: Walton Street Heritage District

Date Built: Circa 1871

Date Designated: October 6, 1997 to By-Law No. 44/97

Lot Description: SMITH ESTATE PLAN PART TOWN PLOT LOT 55



Architectural Description

This is a brick commercial block, two storeys high in a single unit. It is the height of style in mid-Victorian commercial design and expresses on the exterior its original function. The rounded corner sets off its position on the south west side of Walton and John Streets. The simple cornice with projecting eaves lies over the second storey which is inordinate in height, but this helps to balance it with its tall, four storey neighbour to the west, the St. Lawrence Hotel.

Old photographs show that the parapet masking the roof has changed, becoming a much simpler design. It has three bays to Walton Street and five bays to John Street on the second storey, the windows being of a large style as to light the auditorium above. The smaller window on the rounded corner was used for displaying signs for the Opera House, as shown in many photographs.

The Opera House was no longer used because of problems with exits and the space now houses an air conditioning system and ducts for the bank below. The windows are elaborately outlined in ornamental brickwork and archways springing from a band course carrying across the pilasters, separating the recessed panels. This sweeps around to John Street.

Bank architects in charge, Marani, Lawson and Morris, did an excellent job of sympathetic conversion to maintain the dignity of the design. This was continued into a more recent extension into the west portion of the Walton Street front. The first floor contains three arched windows and a doorway to Walton Street, with eight arched windows and two doorways to John Street.

Historical Abstract

During the years 1851 to 1853, several land transactions took place in which Hiram Gillett, dry goods merchant and property owner (29-33 Walton Street) acquired the land on which the Music Hall-Opera Block (85 Walton Street) and the St. Lawrence Hotel Block (87-97 Walton Street) were located. In 1851 and 1852, Gillett made two purchases from James and Susan Grant, for the property upon which the Opera House Block was erected. In 1851, he purchased from Jacob Cundle, the property where the St. Lawrence Hotel block was erected in 1853.

In 1865, Hiram Gillett and his wife sold to James and Richard O'Neill, the St. Lawrence Hotel, and the property on which they later erected the Opera House. The O'Neill's had established a dry goods store in the Waddell Block (1-3 Walton Street) in the 1850's. In 1865, they relocated their business to the St. Lawrence Hotel Block.

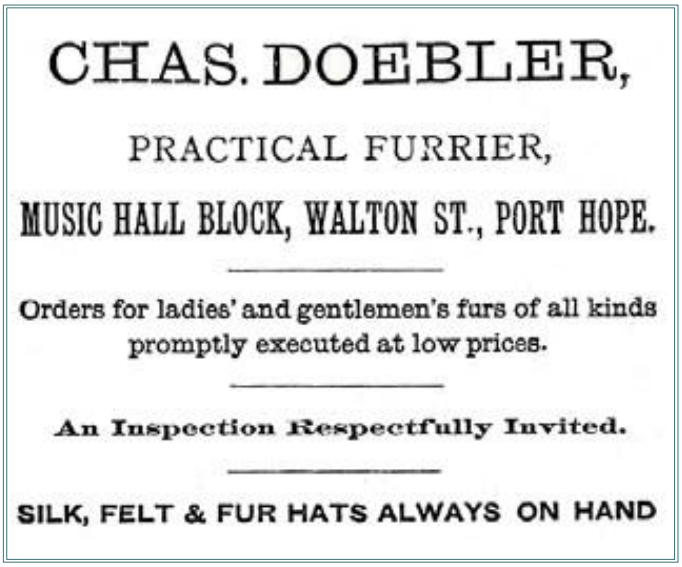
In 1871, the two brothers erected the Opera House Block. Prior to 1870, all concerts, theatrical productions and lectures were held at the Town Hall (56 Queen Street). The Opera House was a music hall without a gallery. The twenty five by fourteen metre room included a large dais at one end of the hall used as a stage with retiring and dressing rooms arranged at the other end of the room. It was noted for its "good acoustic dimension".

The O'Neill brothers briefly moved to Montreal and went bankrupt, sending their property holdings into insolvency in Port Hope. By 1884,

through a number of transactions, Thomas Bradburn acquired possession of both blocks. In 1912, the land and buildings were divided when sold by Bradburn's executors, with the Opera House Block being sold to the Royal Bank of Canada.

After completion of the Music Hall, A.W. Pringle ran a store in the block before he erected his own building (67 Walton Street). In 1871, D. Crawford had a hat store in "No. 2 Music Hall Block". Charles Doebler, practical furrier, ran a store in the block from 1871 to 1880, in the west unit facing Walton Street. John McCabe ran a grocery store in the Music Hall Block in 1876. J.S. Carveth ran a grocery store and butcher shop in the block in 1880. In 1899, the block was restored after being damaged by fire. As entertainment expanded to include cinema, the hall was used as a movie theatre until Famous Players constructed the Capital Theatre on Queen Street (14 Queen Street) in the 1930's.

Histroical Directory Ad





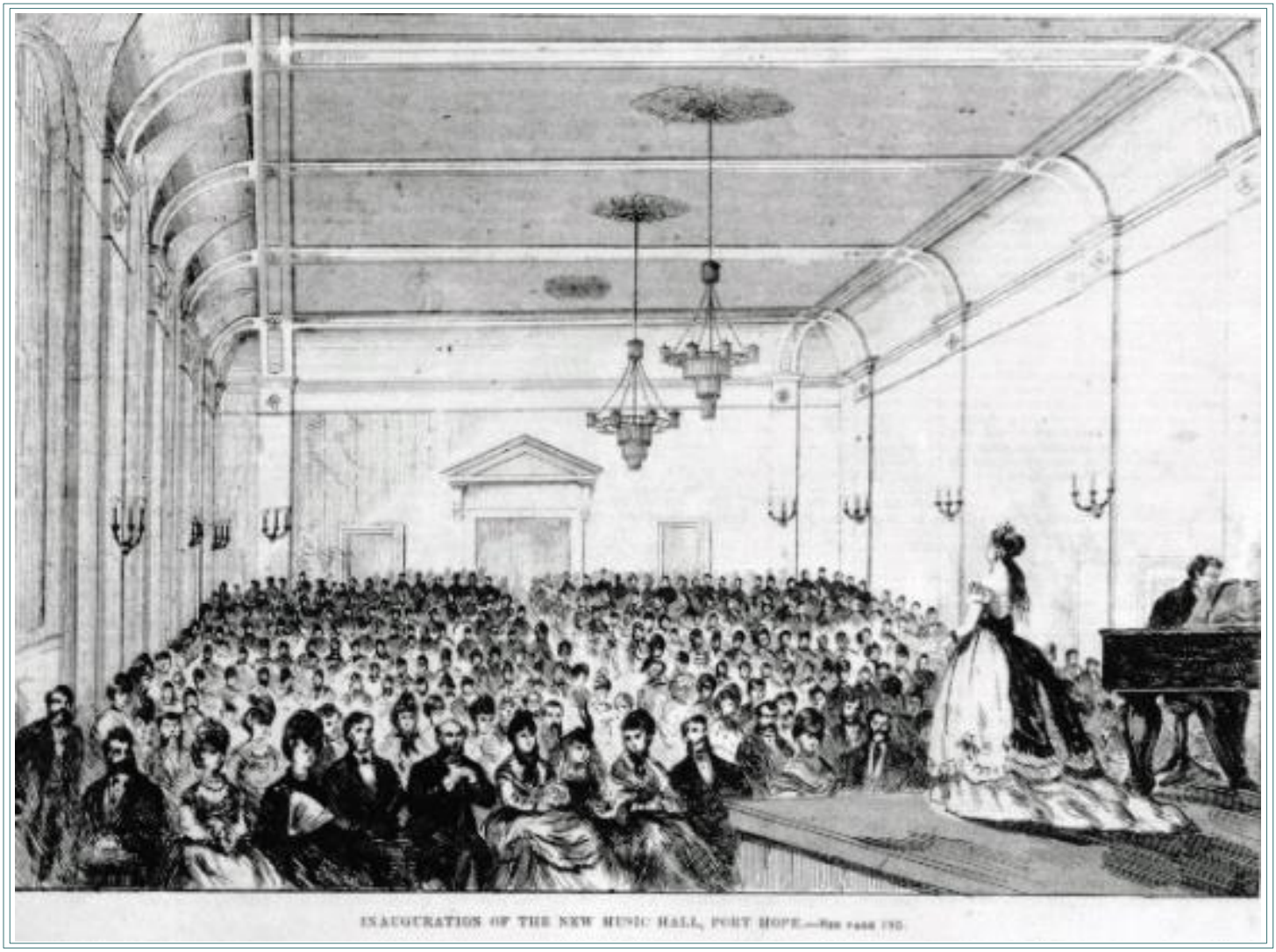
Architectural Detail

A view of Walton Street at the turn of the century with the Porter Block in the foreground, the St. Lawrence Hotel Block and the Music Hall/Opera House Block. The original roof parapet on the Walton Street facade of the Music Hall is visible in this archival photo.



THE NEW MUSIC HALL, AND ST. LAWRENCE HALL HOTEL, PORT HOPE.—See page 170.

O'Neill's Music Hall and Opera Block was illustrated in the Canadian Illustrated News in April 1871 (vol.III, no.12). Along with the adjoining St. Lawrence Hotel to the west, the block created a very elegant corner composition. The original elaborate cornice detail can been seen in the illustration. The smaller window on the rounded corner was used for displaying signs for the Opera House, as shown in many photographs.



O'Neill's Music Hall and Opera Block was illustrated in the Canadian Illustrated News in April 1871 (vol.III, no.12). This view of the interior of the Music Hall illustrated the inaugural performance.