

Walking through uptown Saint John?

LOOK UP!
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You're sure to find some interesting architecture.
By Nelson Hansen

If you're walking the historic streets of uptown Saint John there's a good chance your footsteps aren't going undetected. There are eyes in the sky - and most of those eyes are about 200 years old.

Saint John's historic architecture showcases some of the finest examples of Victorian craftsmanship to be found anywhere. Commonplace at that time was the act of adorning these magnificent stone and brick structures with decorative grotesques, figureheads and gargoyles. While walking the streets of uptown Saint John - look up. You may be surprised to find there are eyes watching you almost everywhere you go.



The eyes of wealthy landowners and their ladies, the eyes of ferocious beasts and mythical figures sit atop as many as 50 historic buildings in the uptown core. Many of these decorative adornments tell a tale and we needed to find someone to help us decipher the messages sitting on these fine brick buildings.

The writer of 12 books on the history of Canada's oldest incorporated city and well-known local historian and tour guide, David Goss knows perhaps more than anybody about the stories behind some of Saint John's

more remarkable buildings.

His popular "Walks and Talks" tours of the city take visitors on a journey through time. He was gracious enough to show this reporter the best examples of decorative grotesques and gargoyles in Saint John.

Goss has been giving his walking tours for 30 years. He finds comfort in knowing these stunning and mysterious figures have been perched atop buildings for approximately six generations.

"These things make a walk on the streets more alive," he says. "I can reach back to the past. For me there's a sense of continuity. My ancestors walked these streets and felt the sun shining over the same buildings and smelled the same sea air. They also walked under these same heads that look down on the streets today."

Visitors wanting to explore Saint John's unique architectural history can observe a stunning number of decorative grotesques in approximately three blocks of Prince William Street. Goss points to the former Bank of Nova Scotia building at 124 Prince William St. as a prime example of the artistry that gives Saint John such character. Despite its proximity to Saint John Harbour's salt air that can take its toll on stone buildings over the years, the details remain on an assortment of figures, scenes and carved heads that tell a Victorian tale.

"You can see what appears to be a harvest scene, there's incredible detail on a carved dove." Goss also points to a carved head that appears to be something demonic in nature with coins spilling out of his mouth.

"There's this mean looking guy here. He's on a bank and he's spewing coins out of his mouth. I'm quite sure that this is a Victorian reference to money being considered as filthy lucre back then," Goss says.

One of Canada's more historic post office buildings is situated across the street from the old Bank of Nova Scotia building. Three beautifully carved faces gaze upon Prince William Street and those faces tell a tale as Goss explains.

"The middle of the three faces is that of the god Mer-

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cury and that signifies speed. Beside Mercury are two natives. The natives were known for transporting goods down the St. John River in canoes and Mercury is known for his speed. What that means is that people in those days could see those figures and get the idea that their letter or package would be delivered at great speed.”

Just down from the post office is Saint John's best known collection of grotesques at the corner of Prince William and Princess Streets. Known locally as Chubb's Corner, the Chubb Building features perhaps one of the only set of carved heads whose history is well-documented.

The figures of businessman George Chubb and Mayor Sylvester Earle are perhaps the best examples of decorative figureheads to be found in Saint John. Surrounded by what's purported to be Mayor Earle's council members, the placement of both Mayor Earle and George Chubb's faces on the building tells an interesting tale. The eyes of Chubb and Earle cast their steadfast gaze across the junction of Prince William and Princess Streets and into the windows of what was Saint John's original City Hall situated kitty corner across from the Chubb Building.

“This gives council members the message they're being watched and that they'd best be on their best behaviour.” Perhaps the phrase “Big Brother” is as Victorian as it is Orwellian. Some of Saint John's grotesques may serve a purpose in terms of telling the tale of who built or lived in the building. Others may possess frightening faces believed to have warded off evil spirits. Goss is quick to point out that these figures are commonly referred to as gargoyles, something of a misnomer.

“There are in fact, only two gargoyles I'm aware of in Saint John.” Those gargoyles can be found just two blocks uphill at 210 Germain St. Goss points out that gargoyles aren't only decorative, they actually served a purpose.

“All the heads we see on the old buildings in Saint John are ornamental or grotesques, real gargoyles have a water

spout coming from their mouths, they were used to drain water away from the roof.” Indeed the creatures perched atop 210 Germain St., do just that. On one side a satyr-like figure, to the other a large, bearded man. Their meaning remains a mystery but as Goss explains, at one time, the symbolism meant something to someone.

“In Victorian times all of what we see meant something. It may be to convey religious beliefs or to denote ownership of the building. We're not sure of all of it because it's not well documented, these were mainly ornamental features.”

While the majority of this special link to Saint John's past can be viewed within a short walking distance, Goss points out that there are a few examples that are a bit out of the way, but well worth the walk. Saint John Stone Church on Carleton Street possesses perhaps 40 faces atop its

gothic spires, the faces are most likely those of the parishioners of the day.

After the Great Fire of Saint John in 1877 that left approximately two thirds of the city in ruin, Victorian architecture was slowly phased out in favour of more American design as the city rebuilt itself and the extra time and workmanship required for elaborate figures fell by the wayside. While Goss realizes the number of these historic buildings will obviously never increase, he still finds new figures and mysteries after 30 years of exploring the city.

“I'm amazed at the fact we still find heads we've never seen or decorative carvings we didn't know previously existed.

When they were renovating Centrebeam Place they found all kinds of strange and wonderful things in there. I still have friends that show me things I never new existed. Not long ago I was in the South End of the city and I found three small wrought iron heads I'd never seen before. That's one of the things that's great about Saint John, this stuff still keeps popping up.”


To contact Dave Goss for a guided walking tour of Saint John, please phone 672-8601 or e-mail gosswalks@nbnet.nb.ca 



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