

# FORMER NATIONAL HOTEL IN PERIL

Ram's Head Development Inc. is currently seeking to amend a city by-law in order to construct



The National Hotel as it appeared in 1945

an eighteen-storey mixed-use building on the southeast corner of King and Sherbourne Streets. The proposal entails the demolition of a building known for much of the twentieth century as The National Hotel. A hotel was first established on this corner in the 1850s when George Ross opened the British Exchange Inn. By 1861, a three-storey brick building, still owned by Ross but occupied by innkeeper Francis Sullivan, is clearly recorded on the tax-assessment rolls.

The building has been greatly altered twice – expanded eastward in 1878 to become the Grand Central Hotel managed by William Burke, and southward in 1905 when owned by Charles Brewer who named it the National. The 1878 expansion was likely in response to legislation enacted under pressure from the temperance movement which increased the number of guest rooms a tavern was required to have in order to qualify for a liquor licence. The 1905 renovation involved the work of architect Henry Simpson, responsible for the building's current appearance with its rounded archways and pressed metal cornice. This was a reflection of the Richardsonian Romanesque style favoured by Toronto's pre-eminent architect at the time, E. J. Lennox. While the building at King and Sherbourne is no longer the same as it first appeared in Boulton's atlas of 1856, its embodiment of these historical changes is surely as important to preserve as any pristine "originality."



And there is more. From 1874 until 1878 this building, prior to either expansion, was home to one of Toronto's earliest museums. In an 1875 photograph taken from the then recently completed spire of St. James' Cathedral, a sign on the hotel's west parapet reads: "Terry's Museum." John Terry, in addition to being a flour merchant and the operator of a parcel delivery service, was for a brief period the curator of a Museum of Canadian Curiosities. According to an 1878 city directory, Terry was "a collector and dealer of Indian curiosities, minerals and fossils of Canada." This he undertook more than a decade before the Royal Canadian Institute opened its Museum of Natural History and Archaeology on Richmond Street. The RCI's

charter of 1851 had committed it to the establishment of a museum but it did not do so until after being joined by the Natural History Society of Toronto in 1885.

One of the Town of York Historical Society's stated purposes is "to foster the preservation of the Town of York's surviving built environment." While the threatened building is not historically part of the Town of York, it does lie squarely within those geographical boundaries and its roots are 150 years old. Furthermore, as a 19th-century example of a combined parcel-delivery office and museum it is of particular interest in relation to Toronto's First Post Office which also juggles these two functions.

The City of Toronto currently has two teams of consultants working on plans for special lighting and interpretation of the old town in order to highlight what little remains of its built heritage. At the same time it is entertaining a proposal that involves the demolition of yet another historic building. At a community consultation meeting held November 6 at St. James' Parish Hall, considerable opposition was expressed to the proposed development, especially by residents of the immediate neighbourhood. An interested group of these citizens has developed a website, *Better Planning for All* ([www.bpfa.ca](http://www.bpfa.ca)), with an on-line petition to save the National Hotel.