



## DEATH, DISASTER, AND DISGRACE IN VICTORIAN LONDON – WALKING TOUR

Take a tour back in time through the Dark history of Victorian London. May this tour shatter your notion of an idyllic Victorian past. Be warned, London in the 1800s had its share of death, disaster and disgrace.

### Photo Gallery:



Richmond Street 1875  
LPL Archives



Southeast Corner Dundas and Richmond 1883  
LPL Archives



Southwest Corner of Richmond Street 1860  
McCord Museums

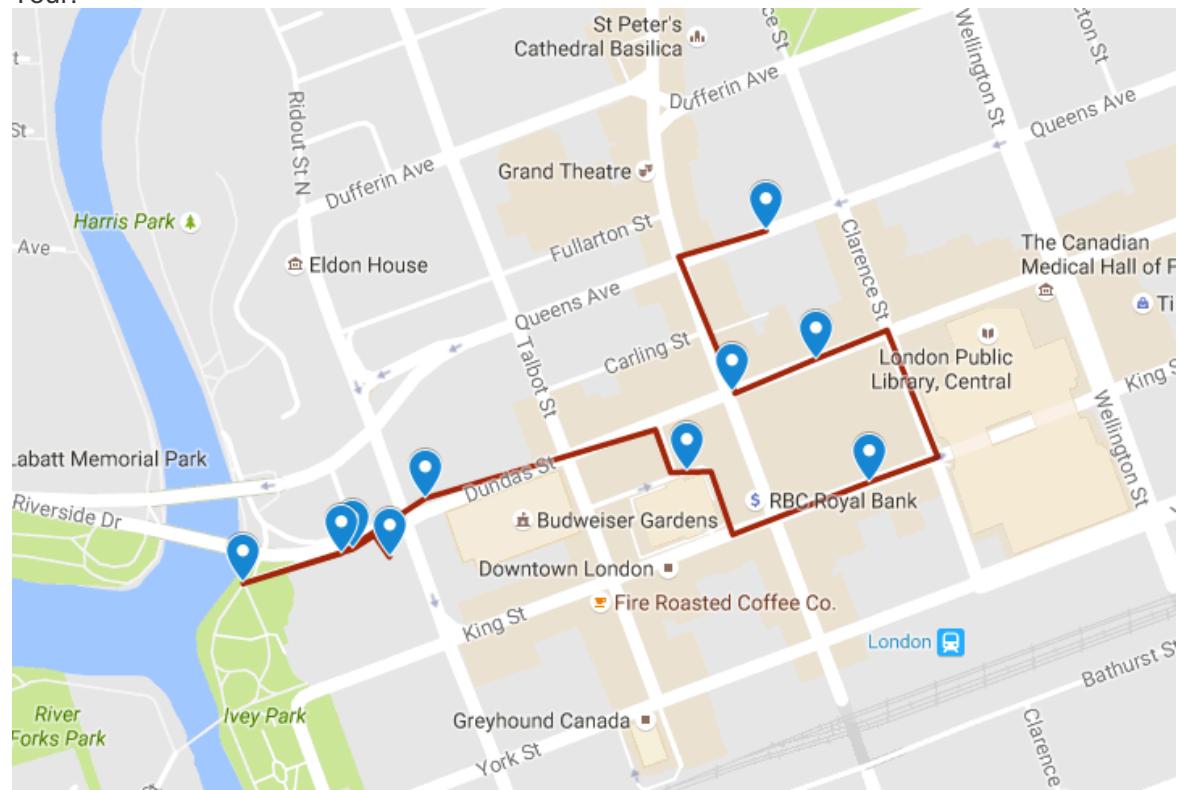


Dundas and Talbot 1883  
UWO Archives

### Guidelines

- The *Guide Tags* app is only available for android devices
- For your safety, please follow the path specified in the tour
- Be aware of your surroundings while following the tour and listening to the audio. When reading the text it's best to pause and do so at the locations.
- When you arrive at your destination, press "Listen in Browser" to activate Soundcloud Audio file.

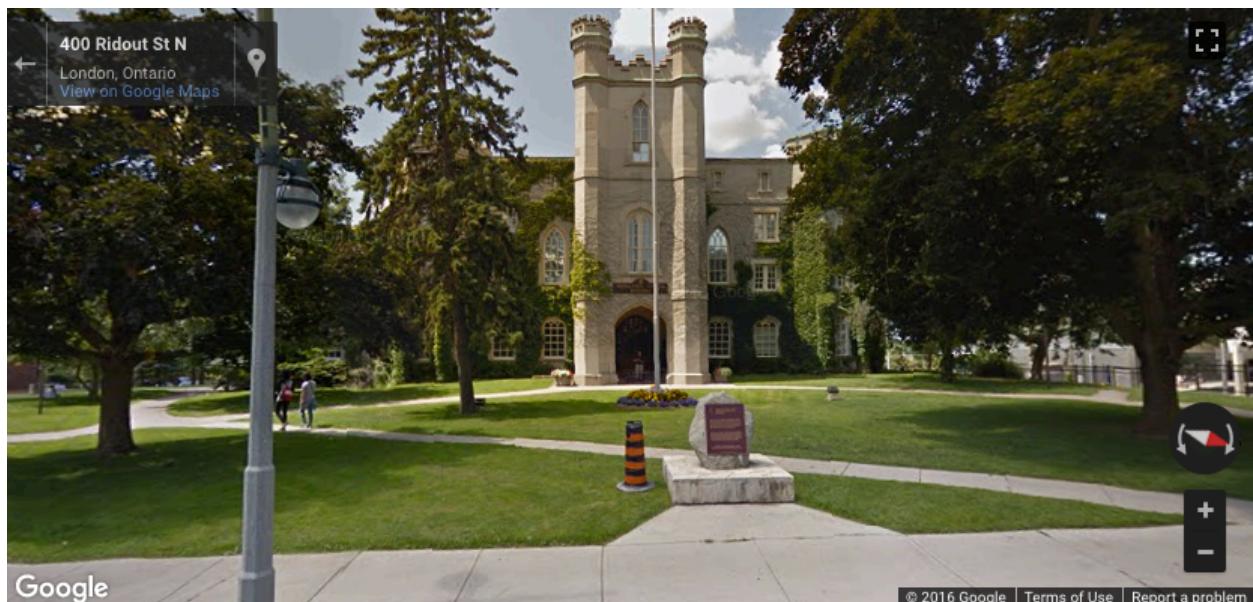
Tour:



**Length of Tour:** approx. 1 hour

**Distance:** 1.65 km

**Starting Point:** London Court House, 399 Ridout St. North



## Death, Disaster, and Disgrace in Victorian London Walking Tour

### Middlesex County Court House, London, Ontario



*Middlesex County Court House approx. 1878*

*Source: Ivey Family London Room, London Public Library, London, Ontario, Canada*

**Soundcloud:** <https://soundcloud.com/user-641111179/court-house-introduction>

Welcome to the Middlesex County Court House, the first destination of the Death, Disaster, and Disgrace in Victorian London Walking Tour. This imposing structure sets the scene for the dark history that will be revealed as you embark on a journey through Victorian London, Ontario. Although the Victorians are known for their strict morals and prudery, historical research will show a contradictory and darker side of their society, not so different from the present day.

Many of the stories on this tour have a connection to the Old Courthouse, but not all are as unfortunate as the first individual you will learn about...

**For additional information on The Middlesex Court House, read below.**

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O'Connor & Lancaster

COURT HOUSE

Photo Artists.

*This is an early photograph of the Middlesex County Court House, believed to date to 1870, from King and Ridout Street. The jail is visible, as well as the county offices across from the Court House, and a fence that has been left in disrepair.*



*A photograph of the Middlesex County Court House, prior to alterations made in 1878. The description below the image was added in 1939.*

The Middlesex County Court House, about 1875. Work was begun on the Court House in 1827 and the building was completed in 1831. In 1878 extensive alterations were made, the building was considerably enlarged. The jail, at the rear of the Court House, was built 1842-4.



*This photograph of the Middlesex County Court House was taken facing South-West along Dundas Street. In 1878 the Court House underwent alterations, which this photo captures. The photo dates to approximately 1890.*



*This photograph (ca.1895) shows alterations made to the Middlesex County Court House after 1878, specifically the addition to the front of the building and the central tower.*

PRIDDIS, ALFRED

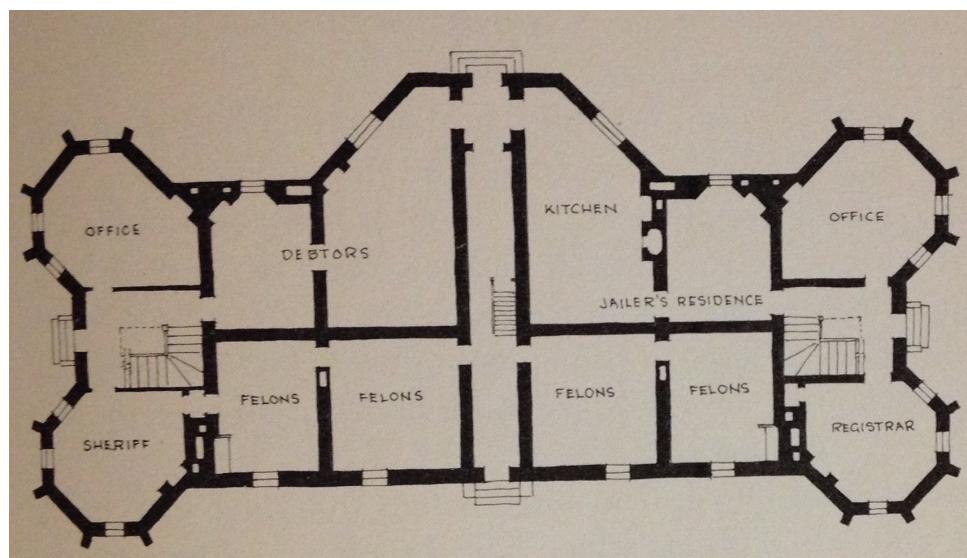
10 JI 1872, 3:2

Police Court

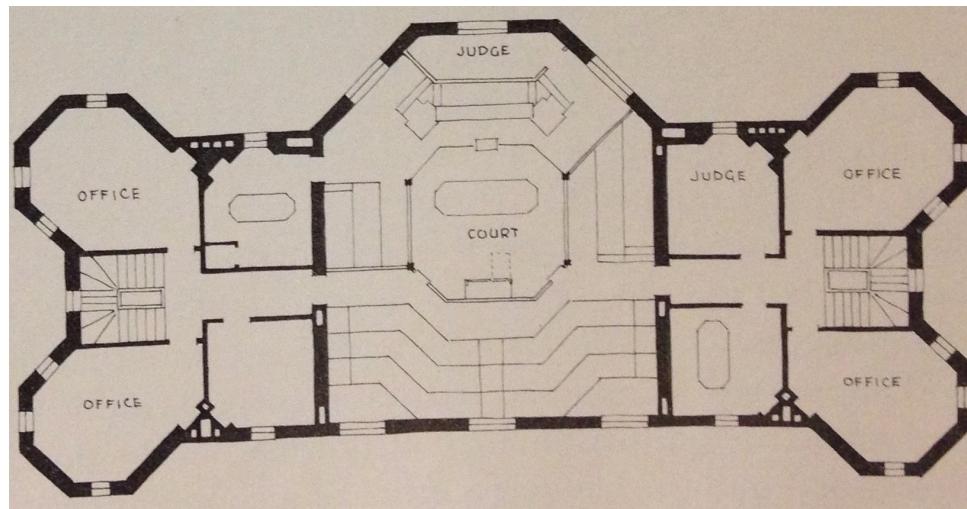
L.E.P.

- summoned to go to court
- keeper of the Club Saloon on Clarence St.
- charged with allowing disorderly characters to infest his house, contrary to the license law

*This court record from 1872 is an example of some of the court cases tried at the Middlesex County Court House. "Disorderly characters" in the bars of downtown London were just as common in the Victorian era, as they are today.*



*Architectural plan of the ground floor of the Middlesex County Court House.*



*Architectural plan of the second floor of the Middlesex County Court House.*



*A passageway in the Middlesex County Court House that leads to the jail.*

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### **Additional Information**

The Middlesex County Court House was designed in 1827 by John Ewart, a popular architect, who is best known for his design of Osgoode Hall in Toronto. The construction of the building was completed in 1829, with later additions in 1878, which emphasize the Regency Scottish Gothic style of the structure.

The jail was expanded in 1843, extending from the rear of the Court House, but does not retain the same semi-Gothic style of architecture. There is an underground passage way located on the ground floor of the Court House that leads to the jail, which is represented in the architectural plan included in the photo gallery above.

In 1974 the present London Court House was opened, replacing the Old London Middlesex County Court House, which is now used for administrative purposes.

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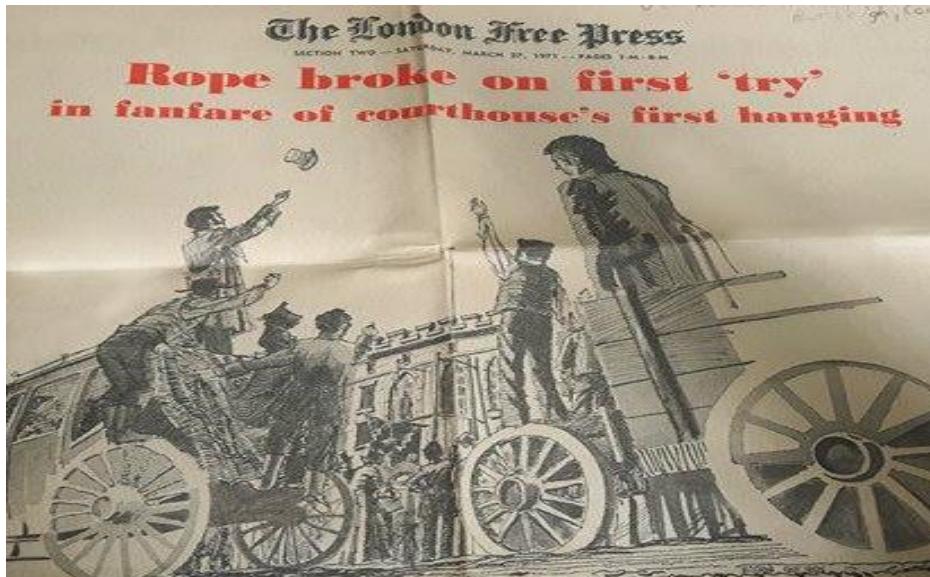
#### **Sources:**

Ivey Family London Room, London Public Library, London, Ontario, Canada

Cornerstones of Order: Courthouses and Town halls of Ontario, 1784-1914 by Marion MacRae

<http://www.historicplaces.ca/en/rep-reg/place-lieu.aspx?id=8873>

# The Hanging of Cornelius Burley



*Cornelius Burley's death was one of the most unique in London's history, and drew a large crowd*

**Soundcloud:** <https://soundcloud.com/user-641111179/corelius-burley>

Cornelius Burley was the first...and the second man hanged at the London courthouse. The mysterious series of events leading up to and following his execution make his hanging one of the most unique in London's history. On August 19, 1830 over 3000 people gathered to witness his death. Unbelievably, the first time Burely fell through the scaffold, the rope around his neck snapped. He fell to the ground somewhat stunned but soon recovered and walked back up the stairs to where the Sheriff waited with new rope to receive his doom. After the second hanging, Burley's body was publicly dissected and the world renowned phrenologist Orson Squires Fowler took his skull on a tour across America and Europe. The skull was recovered in London in the sixties and was displayed in the Eldon House museum before finally being buried in 2001. There is one final twist to Burely's story. Scholars now believe that he was innocent and that he was sacrificing himself to save his cousin.

**For more information on Cornelius Burley's crime and a full copy of his confession read below**

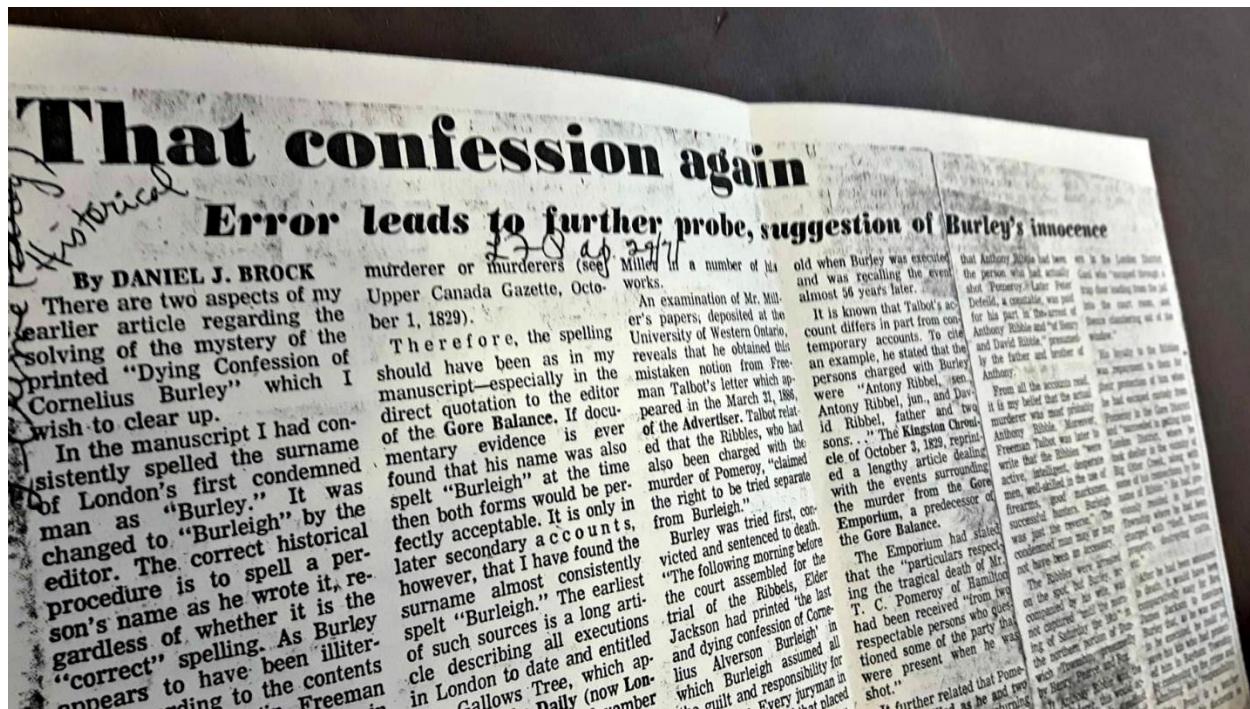
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## Burley's Crime and his Innocence

In 1829 a warrant was issued for his arrest, because in the midst of a heated argument he shot one of his neighbours cattle, and then fled to his Uncle Henry Ribble's farm in Bayham Township. When Constable Timothy Conklin Pomeroy arrived to bring him justice, the violence escalated and he was shot and killed. He was accused of shooting Pomeroy, along with his uncle, Henry Ribble, and his cousins Anthony and David Ribble. The Ribbles had a lawyer, were established

farmers in the area, and were well educated, while Burely was from out of the county and was described as "poor, ignorant, weak-minded and almost an idiot". Nevertheless, the Ribbles and Burley were all put into the cells of the temporary wooden courthouse. Interestingly, during a jailbreak that winter Burely refused to leave his cell, perhaps believing he would be found innocent. All hope of this were dashed when Burely confessed to Reverend Jackson, who is said to have sat with him in his cell and "brainwashed" him for several hours. Burely's confession, and subsequent hanging acquitted his cousin Anthony Ribble, who would have stood trial after Burely.

Burely was not the type to commit a murder. He was also reportedly illiterate, which made the hand written and eloquent confession that Reverend Jackson read for him on the gallows all the more questionable. Jackson printed and published a copy in a pamphlet titled "The Dying Confession of Cornelius Burley" two weeks after the execution.



*New evidence outlining the possibility that London's first, and second hanging victim was more than likely an innocent man*

### Burley's "Confession"

*As I am on this day to be execute as the just reward of my crimes, and the only satisfaction which can be made to meet the penalty of the civil law which I have violated, I feel it to be my duty to all those who stand here as spectators of my disgrace, and also to God, who has been justly offended with me on account of my transgressions, to make the following humble confession before I die; an I sincerely pray that it may be acceptable in the sight of the Almighty God, and have a tendency to check the progress of evil, and prevent others from doing as I have done.*

*I have always been wicked and thoughtless from my youth, having been brought up under the tuition of my parents who were tender and kind in many respects, but never appreciated the benefits arising from education of religion therefore I never was instructed to read or write, nor did they ever attempt to impress my mind with religious sentiments; having no attachments to any*

*system of religious instruction themselves, I was left to wander through the world under the influence of depravity, with out the advantages of education or religious instruction to counter-balance the influences of my natural propensities of evil of various kinds, particularly that of frequenting places of profane resort. I was often found in the merry dance, and lost no opportunity of inducing thoughtless and unguarded females to leaves the paths of innocence and virtue. I lived in constant neglect of the holy Sabbath, and considered it as a day of profane amusement and I entirely neglected the worship of God; and daring profaneness employed my tongue, which ought to have been employed n the service of God, and in imploring his pardoning mercy.*

*I was married at the age of 21 to a respectable young woman by the name of Sally King; but soon found pretext to forsake her, as jealousy arose in my mind. (Perhaps without any just causes) that she was guilty of the same crime that my propensities led to. Some time after this, perhaps in June 1829, I married a second, (the first being still alive) – her name was Margaret Beemer, of Waterloo.*

*The unfortunate circumstances which led to my untimely end were as follows: A misunderstanding took place between Mr. Lamb and myself, in which I considered that the said Mr. Lamb defrauded me; and I could get no legal redress for the fraud, and being influenced partly with a spirit of revenge and partly with a desire to get redress, I took the law into my own hands and shot a steer belonging to the said Mr. Lamb for which transgression a warrant was issued, and I was pursued and taken; but by a stratagem I escaped from the constable, and fled to the township of Bayham in London district, whither I was pursued by Mr. Pomeroy, the unfortunate victim of my rashness.*

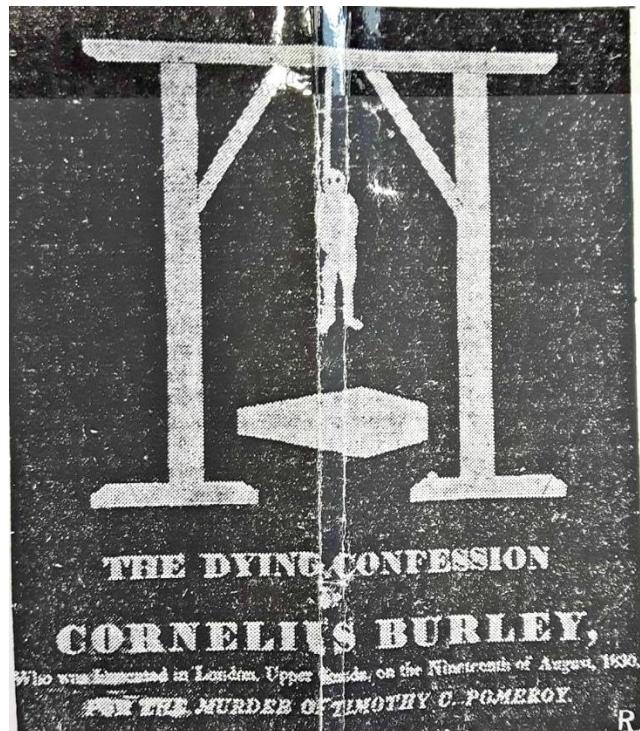
*I made use of various means to escape from him and those who were aiding him in pursuit of me, until the dark nad unhappy night of the 15<sup>th</sup> September, 1829, when the heart appalling deed was committed, the thoughts of which produce the keenest remorse.*

*That evening I took the fatal instrument of death and after close examination that it was in order to do execution, I fled to avoid them, but in my flight I came near meeting them before I was aware of my danger; but as soon as I saw them I stepped behind a tree to avoid being seen by them, but Mr. Pomeroy at this moment altered his course and came toward the tree behind which I stood. I then supposed that he saw me, and was determined to take me; I then under the impression at the moment, concluded that my escape could not be effected without taking the life of Mr. Pomeroy; I accordingly presented my rifle, and ordered him to stand back, but gave him no time to escape till I fired on him, which shot was instrumental in bringing him to an untimely grave, and me to this disgraceful end. Yes! O yes! It was I who did this murderous deed; it was I alone who was guilty of this horrid and bloody crime, and none but I was guilty of shedding the blood of that trusty man, Mr. Pomeroy, who was faithfully performing his duty to his King and country.*

*As an act of justice due to Anthony Ribble, I am constrained to say that he had no hand in the crime whatever. Neither had any other person. It was altogether my own act for which I now feel to abhor myself and feel deeply humbled in the sight of God. O that I could recall that most shocking and dreadful deed! But as I cannot, I wish to warn all others nor to do as I have done. And I further say, that now considering myself as a dying man, I attach no blame to his Lordship the Chief Justice, nor his assistant on the Bench, the Sheriff, the Jurors, or Witnesses in my conviction and execution, as I believe they all acted from pure motives, and did their duty with punctuality in obedience to the laws of the country; and I only suffer the penalty that s justly due my crimes. I feel grateful for, and desire to acknowledge the favour of being visited by the ministers of the different denominations, whose instructions have been instrumental in leading me to my last*

*refuge, which is Christ alone; and in my great extremity I have gained a confidence that through the merits of Christ alone I will be saved, although the chief of sinners.*

*I now bid farewell to the world, and to all earthly things at the age of twenty six; and I sincerely hope that all you who behold my disgrace, will take a warning by my untimely end, and avoid the snares into which I have run. I freely forgive all that have injured me, and I sincerely ask forgiveness of all whom I have injured, but particularly God, whose righteous laws I have violated, but who has become the reconciled through Jesus Christ, and had given me as evidence of his love. O praise the Lord! I now leave this world with the fullest confidence that my sins are washed away in the Blood of the Lamb, and with sincere desire for the happiness of all I leave behind, I say again FAREWELL.*



*This was the cover of the pamphlet produced by Reverend Jackson following the hanging.*

### **After Burley's Death**

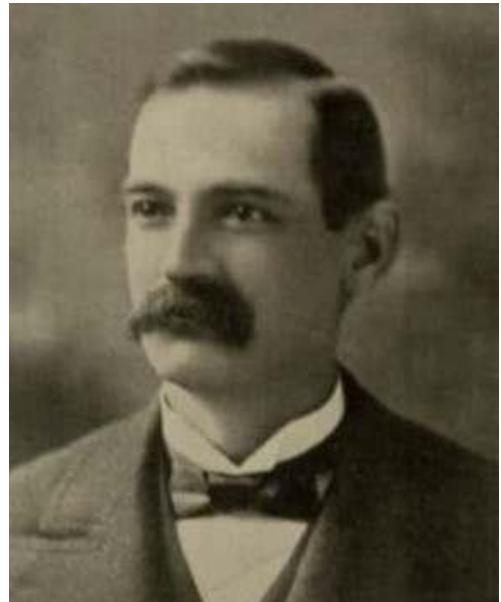
After he died on the gallows, his body was cut down and immediately set upon by medical doctors, who in those days would dissect corpses at the scene as a kind of second show for those attending the hangings. The famed phrenologist Orson Squire Fowler had interacted with Burley prior to his death and had become fascinated by the shape of his skull. Fowler had a theory that the shape of a skull could predict behaviour, and coveted Burley's as part of his research. During this macabre second show Fowler sawed the domed top of the skull, inserted a lighted candle in the spinal hole at the base, and used it to illustrate his theory that the location of thin and thick sections of the wall of the skull indicated certain characteristics. He became a multi-millionaire by touring and

lecturing all over the world with Burelys skull, demonstrating his theories. It eventually ended up back in London when Fowler gifted it to the Harris family. Reportedly, he did not even remember Burley's name when questioned about the skulls origin. Burley's final remains were kept at Eldon House until 2001, when he was finally laid to rest.

Burley's tragic story shows the flaws of the justice system in Victorian London. Bias coloured the eyes of the courts, and it is now evident that an innocent man was hanged. Stories like this show that London in the Victorian era was not immune to deadly errors.



*The skull of Cornelius Burley, taken from his body after the hanging by phrenologist Orsen Squires Fowler.*



*Orson Squires Fowler, the Phrenologist who made millions because of Burley's death and dissection*

### **Sources:**

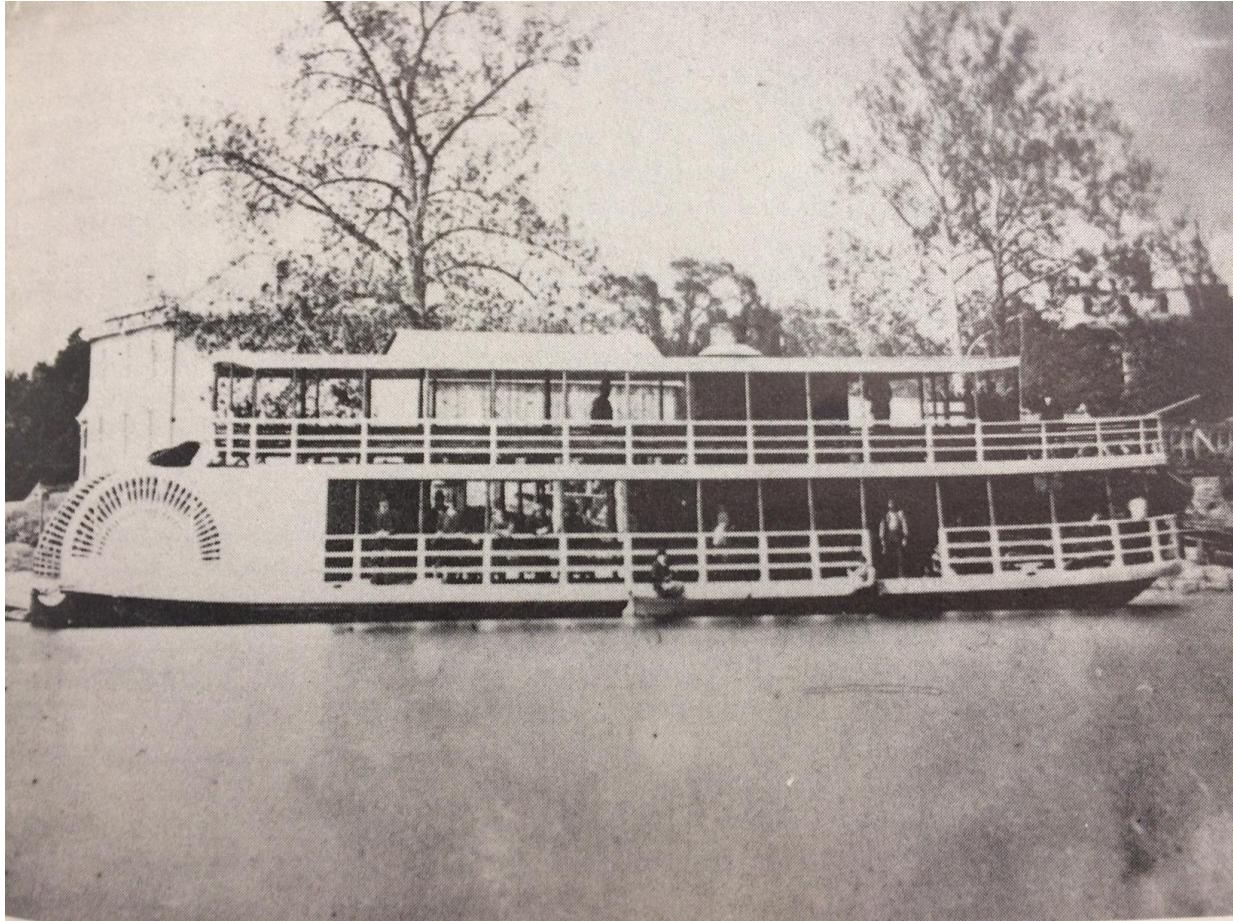
Ivey Family London Room, London Public Library, London, Ontario, Canada.

<https://dotydocs.theatreinlondon.ca/Archives/hangi...>

<http://uwindsorlance.ca/2013/10/25/the-hanging-of-...>

<http://www.canadianmysteries.ca/sites/donnellys/pr...>

# The Capsizing of the SS Victoria



*The SS Victoria picking up firewood, 1881*

**Soundcloud:** <https://soundcloud.com/user-641111179/ddd-ss-victoria>

On May 24<sup>th</sup> 1881, one of the worst Canadian Marine disasters struck London Ontario. The SS Victoria, a small double-decker ship capsized on the Thames River, killing more than 200 individuals. Returning from Springbreak to London, the boat was extremely overcrowded at almost double its capacity. The oscillating movement of passengers and eventual dislodging of the boiler keeled the boat to the side, taking the innocent Londoners into the water with the crash of the upper deck. Bodies were pulled from the water for days, transforming the shoreline and the Princess's Louise's deck into a morgue, and shock rippled through the city. This was the greatest loss of London life in a single day.

**To learn more about the capsizing of the SS Victoria, read below**

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## **The SS Victoria**

Built by George T. Merriman, the SS Victoria was officially registered on April 7<sup>th</sup> 1879. This

double-decker ship was white and blue with red and yellow trim, overall measuring 80' long by 32' wide and able to carry a load of 400 passengers. The cost for a round trip ticket from London to Springbank was 15 cents in 1881 and on the holiday, travelers were plentiful.

The SS Victoria came into view of the Springbank Sandbar around 5pm on that fateful day, patrons were eager to get aboard and be on their way home. Earlier, a different boat ran aground and the passengers were brought back to the dock. This resulted in an overflow of passengers, nearly 700 people clambered aboard in an effort to get a good seat or location. The pursers (ticket takers) were Herbert Parish and Alfred Wastie, both sons of men that owned or previously owned the Victoria. They had no idea this would be their last trip. Although there were too many people on board, Captain Rankin shrugged, stated he could not be responsible for the crowd and pulled away from the dock. Usually the water sat 16 inches below the deck, but on this day, water was splashing over the 8 inches of space. The passengers were oblivious to the forthcoming danger.

### **The Disaster**

As people rushed to one edge waving to friends along the shoreline, the lower deck quickly took on water. The boat began to keel to the side, and the angle dislodged the 60-horsepower boiler which sat on the main deck. The boiler slid to the weighted side crashing through the support beams of the upper deck, which instantly came crashing down on the passengers below. The boat collapsed. Thrown into the water, more than half of the passengers were trapped under the debris, screams of fear rang in the air. Some people were able to swim to the shore, and they alerted the city by walking, soaking wet and stricken with terror, into town.

By 7pm, about 80 bodies had been pulled from the water. A sister ship, the Princess Louise came to the site, and the deck was transformed into a floating morgue. The search continued for 5 days, ultimately uncovering 200 bodies from the river.



*An  
artist's  
rendition  
of the  
disaster*

## The Lives Lost

Hundreds of men, women and children were aboard the ship and 200 bodies were pulled from the river. However, the possibility of lost bodies in the water was all too real. The horror of the scene and the fight to survive was evident on the bruised and mangled bodies. Individual stories were captured of those who barely survived, and the lost lives:

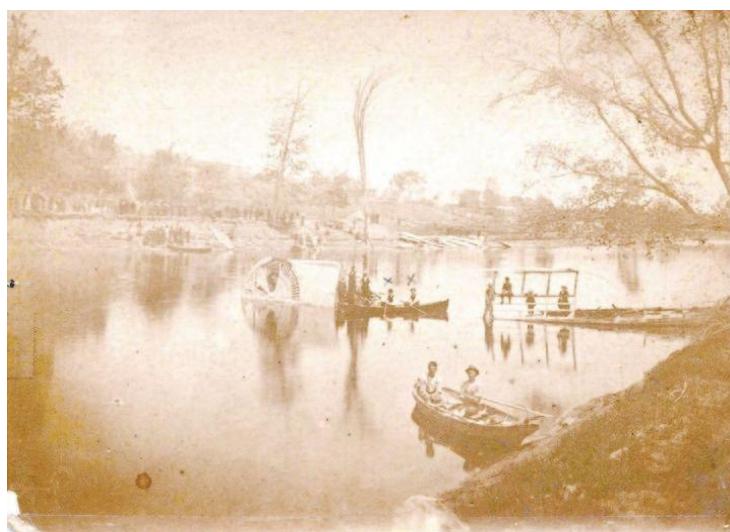
After falling into the water, Will Skinner watched his sister be pulled down by another drowning victim, unable to help her.

Father James Perkins was enjoying the ride with his 8 year old son, Jimmy and was caught off guard by the sudden impending doom of the ship. Separated from his son in the water, he saw a boy he thought was Jimmy and pulled him to shore. He screamed in agony after realizing this boy was not his son. Jimmy's body was found two days later.

Willie Glass and Fanny Cooper were sweethearts, to be married early June 1881, but their lives were taken by the Victoria Disaster. Buried together, their inscriptions read "They were lovely in their lives" on one pillar, and "in death they were not divided" on the other.

Two sisters, Henrietta and Mabel Hogan, 9 and 12 were tossed from the upper deck into the water. Mabel was in shock, unable to pull her body to the surface. Although Henrietta reached out, Mabel sank to her death before her sister's eyes.

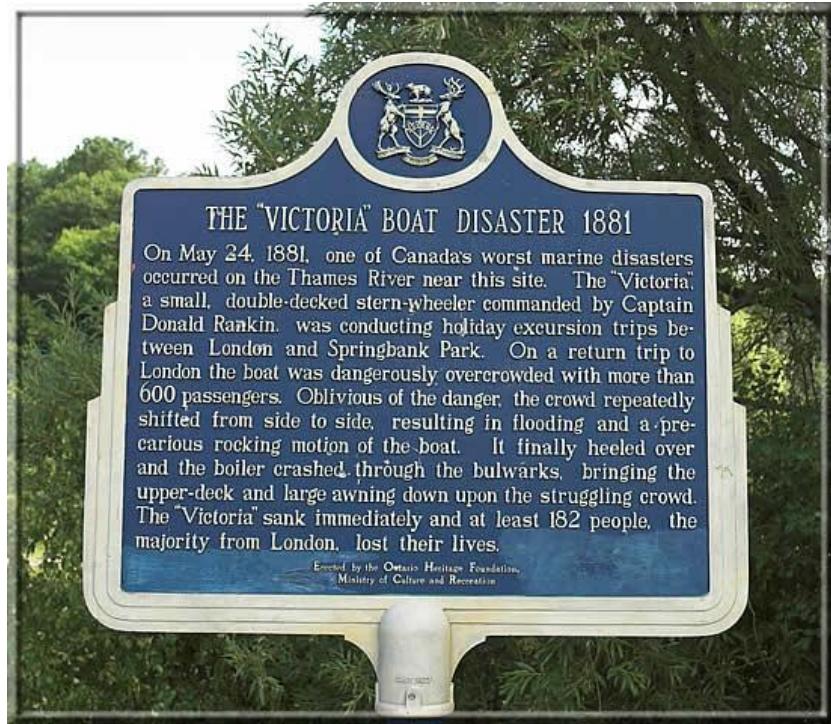
There were not enough coffins for all the bodies, more were brought in from Toronto and Hamilton. It took days for family members to identify all of their loved ones strewn about the ground, hearkening a mass grave. The horrific event was followed by a month of public mourning, businesses were suspended for several days and a plan for a memorial monument was created. The boat was eventually extracted from the lake and sold for scrap. The disaster of the SS Victoria remains one of the deadliest days in London history, and is recognized as a major Canadian nautical disaster.



*The recovery effort following the disaster, 1881.*

## The Verdict

The entire city was shaken by the great loss on the Thames River. An inspection of the event took place over the next couple of weeks, and the verdict was announced on the 14<sup>th</sup> of June, 1881. Many people and elements were to blame. It was decided that the capsizing occurred because water was leaking into the hold after hitting a rock or snag on the river. The engineer was guilty of not informing the captain, and the captain was guilty of taking on the role of captain and wheelhouse- therefore not providing the proper attention to either role. The boiler was not properly secured to the deck, a fault of the government inspector who passed the boat's examination the previous year. The captain and engineer were both arrested on manslaughter, but released on bail set at \$3,000. The Middlesex Grand Jury took over the case in the fall, and the jury did not indict the men. There was no jail time following the loss of more than 200 souls in London.



South shore

A plaque dedicated to the victims of the disaster, located on the southshore of the Thames River

## Sources:

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Brown, Alan L. "The 'Victoria' Boat Disaster 1881." *Ontario's Historical Plaques*, June 2005. [http://ontarioplaques.com/Plaques/Plaque\\_Middlesex...](http://ontarioplaques.com/Plaques/Plaque_Middlesex...)

McTaggart, Kenneth D. *The Victoria Day Distaster*. Petrolia, Ontario: Skinner Printing, 1978.

Reaney, James. "My London: Sad and ugly scenes followed the Thames River tragedy." *The London Free Press* , May 2015.<http://www.lfpress.com/2015/05/21/my-london-sad-an...>

Various primary newspapers clippings provided by: "Victoria (Steamboat), capsized, May 24 1881." *Maritime History of the Great Lakes*, 1881. Accessed October 17 2016.  
<http://images.maritimehistoryofthegreatlakes.ca/59596/data>

# Henry Sovereign – Mass Murderer



*Henry Sovereign killed his wife and seven of their children, and was hanged for the crime at the London court house.*

**Soundcloud:** <https://soundcloud.com/user-641111179/sovvereign>

Henry Sovereign committed what is considered the first – and the worst – mass murder in Ontario. It was 1832, and the middle of winter in Windham Township. During the night on January 22, Sovereign ran to his uncle-in-law's house and told him two intruders had attacked his home. They rushed back, only to find the mangled bodies of Sovereign's wife Polly and seven of their children. He became the prime suspect when the murder weapons were found on his farm. Sovereign was known to drink, and people speculated he murdered his family in a drunken rage. Despite his claims of innocence, he was hanged in London on August 13, 1832.

**To learn more about Sovereign's crime and the consequences, read below.**

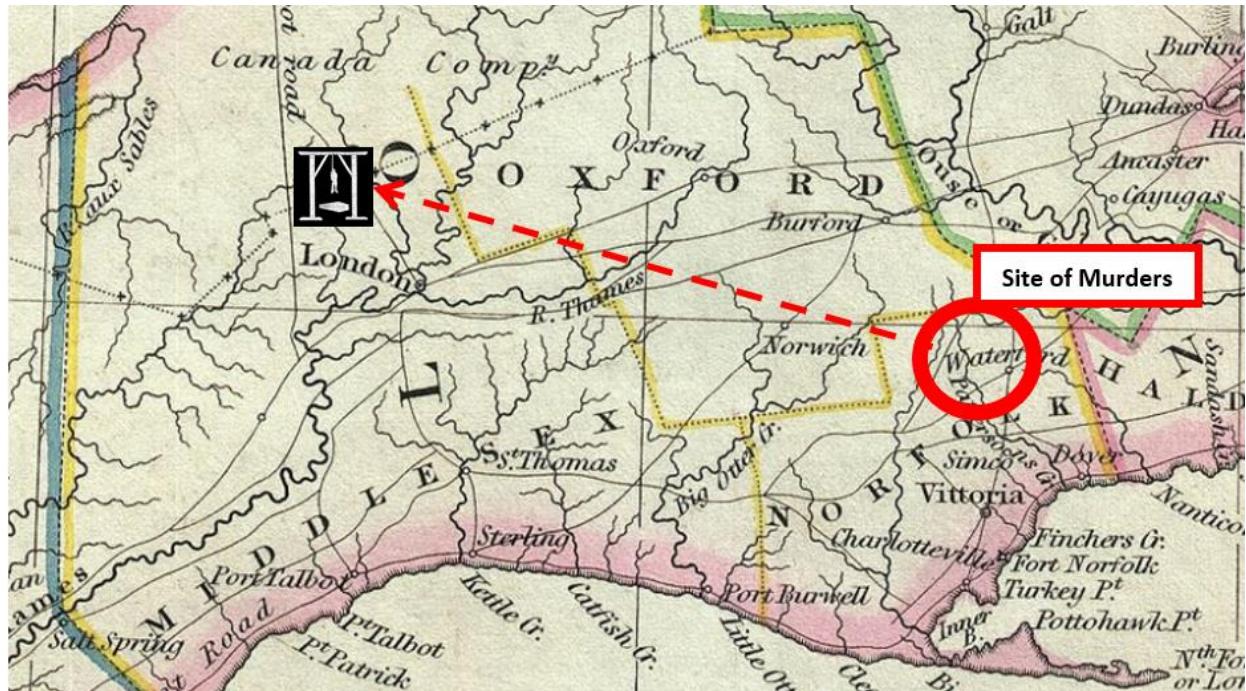
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## Country life

Henry Sovereign (also spelled Sovvereene) was born around 1788 in New Jersey, in the United States, but his family moved to Upper Canada in 1799. By 1812, Sovereign had created a good life for himself: he was married to Mary Beemer (who went by Polly) and he owned land in Windham Township in Norfolk County.

However, in 1819, he ended up in court, where he was found guilty of killing a horse and was sentenced to hang. Judges took liberties with these unnecessarily harsh old laws, and this time Sovereign escaped the noose.

The next thirteen years passed by uneventfully. Sovereign and his wife Polly raised their eleven children, and he provided for them by working as a farmer and shingle weaver. Those who knew the family said he was "rather affectionate to his wife and children" – except when he was drinking. Under the influence of alcohol, Sovereign was angry and abusive.



*The murder occurred in Windham Township, Norfolk County, but Sovereign was imprisoned, tried, and executed in London.*

#### **"Most atrocious murder"**

In the early hours of January 23, Sovereign ran to his uncle-in-law's and told him that two men with black-painted faces had broken into his home, and he feared for his family's safety. The two men, accompanied by several other neighbours, hurried back to Sovereign's house. Inside they found the dead bodies of two of his children, while an infant lay half-burnt in the fireplace. A fourth child, who was still alive, succumbed to her injuries later. Outside, the corpses of his wife and several children lay between the house and a shed. Witnesses said there was so much blood it had melted through the snow. The four remaining children survived; one was in the house unharmed, and the three oldest were away from home.

Constable John Massacer soon arrived, and noticed that Sovereign kept walking by his wife's body as if looking for something. When the constable investigated, he found a bloody blade on the ground. The handle lay separately nearby, and the men realized it had belonged to one of Sovereign's sons.

Suspicious of the circumstances, Massacer arrested Sovereign and discovered a bloody jack-knife in his pocket. Another search of the house turned up a gory broomstick and a maul, hidden in the bed, that was "nearly covered with human hair of different colours."

Newspapers across Upper Canada and even in the United States reported the crime in horrifying detail. Reverend Ryerson's account was published in a New York paper, where he described seeing the scene of the murders and meeting Polly's distraught family, who questioned, "Did you ever witness such a sight? Who would believe that any man could come to this?"

**MORIBILIS SACRIFICE OF HUMAN LIFE...** It is this day our painful duty to record one of the most bloody cases of human depravity and savage cruelty which ever polluted the annals of crime—a case at once disgraceful to our district, revolting to our feelings, humiliating to our species and affording the blackest evidence of man's desperately wicked and awfully malignant and unrelenting propensities; a case so hellish in its character, so inexplicable in its conception and so astounding in its results, that while we write the blood of the murdered innocents seems to lie congealed and clotted before us and all the faculties of our mind to be absorbed in the awful reflection that we and the monster whose deeds are about to record are descendants of the same common parents, heir of the same evil

**MOST ATROCIOS MURDER.**  
The late Upper Canada papers contain an account of the murder of a *mother* and *six* children, and the strongest suspicion of this act rests upon Henry Sovereign, the father of the family. The following particulars are from the pen of the Rev. Mr. Ryerson:

A general horror has been excited in the minds of the inhabitants of the London District, by the perpetration of one of the most atrocious and unnatural crimes that ever stained the history of man—it is the murder of a mother, and six, if not seven children! I will briefly state the particulars of this dark and bloody transaction, as detailed to me by the deeply afflicted Father and Brother of the murdered woman, and also by one of the Coroner's jury that investigated it.

*The London Sun*, a local paper run by Edward Allen Talbot, reported on the sensational murders [left]. *The Evening Star*, a New York City newspaper, published Rev. Ryerson's description of the crime and its aftermath [right].

### Justice hangs in the balance

Sovereign spent seven long months at the jail in London before finally going on trial on August 8, 1832. This trial focused on the murder of his wife Polly, not the children (Elizabeth, Effy, David, Julia, Susan, Job, and Polly). It was a landmark case not only because of the scale of the murders, but also because the proceedings were written down in the earliest known record of an assize trial in London.

The prosecution called as witnesses the neighbours who had accompanied Sovereign and found the bodies, as well as a doctor who performed the autopsies. He testified that Polly's fatal wound, which passed through her liver and aorta, matched the knife found beside her. Furthermore, he said that the position of Sovereign's minor injuries on his arm and chest meant they could only have been self-inflicted, to add credibility to the story of intruders.

Sovereign told the jury "my life is now in your hands and...I can only now assure you of my innocence," but he did not answer the key questions. Why had he abandoned his family to the intruders instead of defending them? What was the strangers' motive for murdering a random family in the night? Why would the killers rely on finding weapons at the house instead of bringing their own? The jury returned with the verdict in less than an hour: guilty.



*One of the murder weapons was a maul such as this one, used for splitting wood and shingles.*

### **"Awful eternity"**

Sovereign was tried and convicted on a Wednesday, but his hanging was scheduled for the following Monday, August 13, 1832. The owner of the *London Sun*, who had recorded the trial, came to visit the convict. He felt "an indescribable thrill of horror" as the door clanged shut behind him, leaving him in Sovereign's dark cell. The newspaperman wrote that, "His hair, which was full and bushy, was perfectly white, although his age did not exceed 50. His eye brows and lashes were dark, his forehead was high and capacious, but projected too much over the face...His beard, which was closely shaved the day of his trial, had grown considerably."

On Monday, around 300 Londoners came to watch the execution, the second one to take place in the city. It was a smaller crowd than attended the first hanging, as a cholera outbreak was ending. Sovereign approached the scaffold and asked the sheriff if he should remove his shoes. His lawyer yelled from the crowd, "For God's sake Sovereign, confess. Don't die with a lie in your mouth!" He got no response. In his sentencing, the judge had told Sovereign that "with a most remorseless ferosity [sic] you have hurried [your family] into an awful eternity," and Sovereign still did not repent or admit his crime. Instead, he calmly ascended the scaffold, and joined his wife and children in that "awful eternity."

London's court house had only been built three years earlier, in 1829, but it was already clear that the region had enough criminals to justify its existence. And not just petty criminals, but a mass murderer the likes of which had not been seen before. Londoners came out to see the executions to satisfy a morbid curiosity, and also, perhaps, to reassure themselves that there was now one less threat walking the streets of Victorian London - streets that were no less dangerous than they are now.

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# The Hanging of Benjamin Simmons

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**Soundcloud:** <https://soundcloud.com/user-641111179/the-hanging-of-benjamin-simmons>

What is now the Ontario Courthouse used to be a number of retail buildings and apartments. In one of them, 60 Dundas Street West, a terrible stabbing took place on June 5th 1885. Benjamin Simmons came home that Friday night in a drunken state and found his partner Mary Ann Stokes. Simmons asked for money for more alcohol but was denied. Later that night Simmons went to his neighbour's, Detective Schram, house and office holding a bloody knife.

*"I've killed the old woman by – I have!"*

Mary Ann Stokes was found in the shared apartment lying in a pool of her own blood with four stab wounds. Two days later she died. Benjamin Simmons was hanged on November 27th in the morning. He was the seventh hanging at the London Courthouse.

Scroll down to learn more about Benjamin Simmons' crime.

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## The Murder

Benjamin Simmons and Mary Ann Stokes' relationship had never been a good one. They moved in together a year before the murder but it was never peaceful. Their landlord had complained a number of times of how they would fight. The cause of the murder was that Simmons was enraged Stokes would not loan him 10 cents to go buy more whiskey.

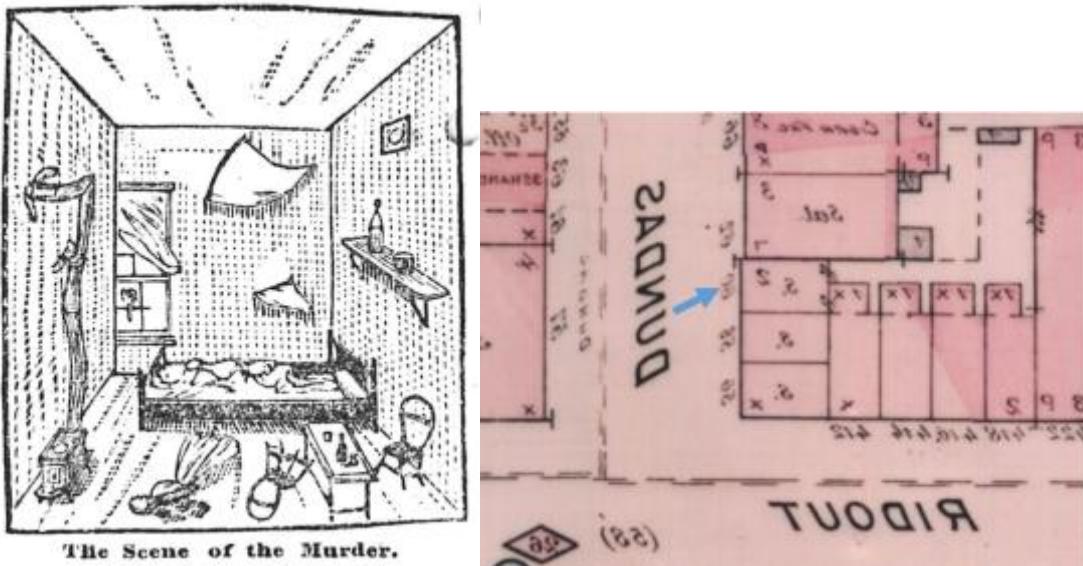
The crime itself was a bloody one. Benjamin stabbed Mary Ann four times. He used a large jack knife. Once in her left breast, once in her right breast and then twice in her left arm where he severed an artery. A piece of the knife broke off during the stabbing and was lodged into her arm.



*A horn handle jack-knife*

After the stabbing Benjamin left with the knife and went to Detective Schram's office. He confessed immediately to the crime. He exclaimed, "I've killed the old woman and I intended to do it, and I ought to have done it long ago." Simmons was brought to the courthouse, which was just across the street, without a struggle.

Mary Ann Stokes was found in the apartment lying in a pool of her blood. She was moaning and clearly pained. It was obvious to the doctors on site that she would likely not make it. Stokes was rushed to the hospital and died two days later from blood loss.



*Drawing of the murder scene in the apartment. - 1881 Fire Insurance Plan - show apartment at 60 Dundas St W*

## **The Hanging**

Benjamin held a calm demeanour the entire time. He did not fight being arrested. He did not fight being detained. His trial took place on September 17th. He did not argue for his innocence or his sentence. All he said was that he wanted was to have the most time possible to come to terms with his fate. His execution was scheduled for November 27th.

London's public was not happy with the sentencing. They pitied Simmons and did not want him to be hanged. A petition was sent to the courts to change his punishment to life in prison. It did not take.

On the morning of the 27th of November the hanging took place. Simmons was calm. He loudly spoke his last prayer so that the entire crowd of 50 to 60 people could hear. The crowd began to cry as the noose was placed over Simmons' head. In a quick pull of the lever it was over.

Violence due to alcohol was a concern in the 1800s just as it is today. Mary Ann Stokes was a victim of a drunken rage that could and does occur in the 21st century.

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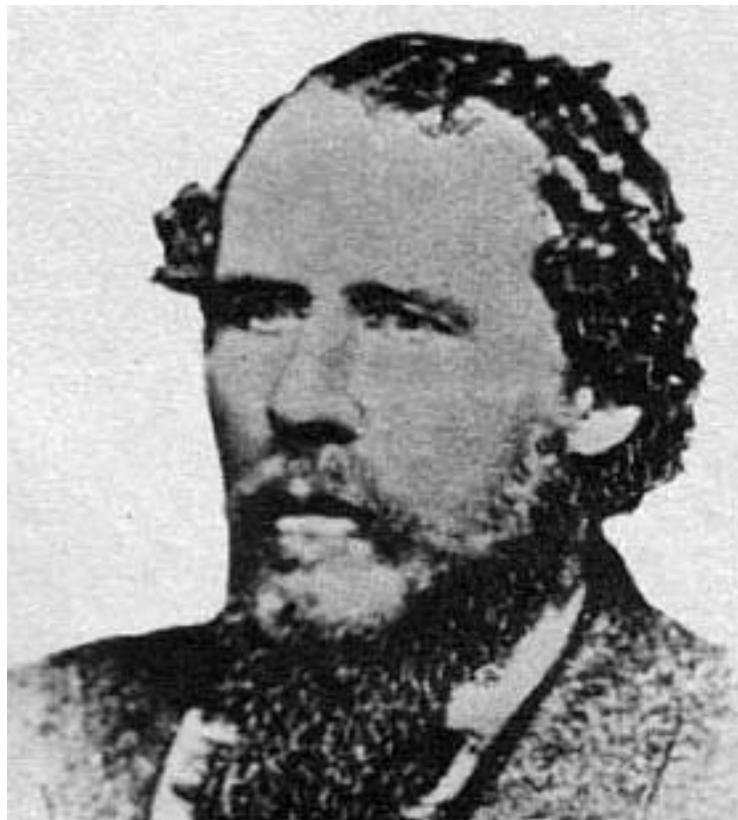
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## Death, Disaster, and Disgrace in Victorian London: Francis Evans Cornish

Francis Evans Cornish was a man of great wealth and fame, known to many today for his legacy as the 1st Mayor of Winnipeg. To his contemporaries, though, Frank Cornish was nothing but a violent, drunken "coward."

SoundCloud Link: <https://soundcloud.com/user-641111179/francisevanscornish>



Francis Evans Cornish

Born February 1st, 1831 in London, Upper Canada, Francis Evans Cornish was the son of a prominent immigrant family. His father was both a practicing physician *and* lawyer. From a distance it would appear that Francis Cornish lived a predictable Victorian bourgeoisie life. He was Married to Victorine Leon Clench in 1853, called to the bar in 1855, and was appointed as Queens Counsel in 1857. Perhaps the most notable case of his incredibly successful law career

was his prosecution of the infamous "honest" Jack Donnelly; of [Black Donnelly](#) fame. And though some history books may tell this story, his contemporaries might tell you others.

It was often cited that Frank Cornish's penchant for the drink fueled his erratic and often violent behavior. Long before running for mayor of his hometown, Cornish participated in local politics. He was elected Alderman on numerous occasions and though he painted himself as a man of the people, his violent, riotous behavior sometimes threatened those he swore to serve.

In 1858 he was arrested for assault when he and four others were apprehended in their attempt to "seize some cattle which had been impounded by the sheriff." This same year he had drunkenly assaulted Mayor [David Glass](#) outside of Glass's home; for which he was fined \$10. This was not the first time Cornish's short temper and fast fists had gotten him in trouble, and it wouldn't be his last.

In 1863, while acting as Mayor of London, Cornish was involved in a late night, alcohol fueled altercation with a prominent British Military Officer -Major Bowles. Cornish's wife was rumored to have had relations with Bowles, to which -according to Cornish- Bowles boasted about freely. After a night of heavy drinking, Cornish confronted Bowles with his fists cocked and a fight broke out on the steps of the old [Tecumseh House](#). The altercation ended with two assault charges laid upon Cornish and the evacuation of an entire British garrison.



Tecumseh House circa 1890



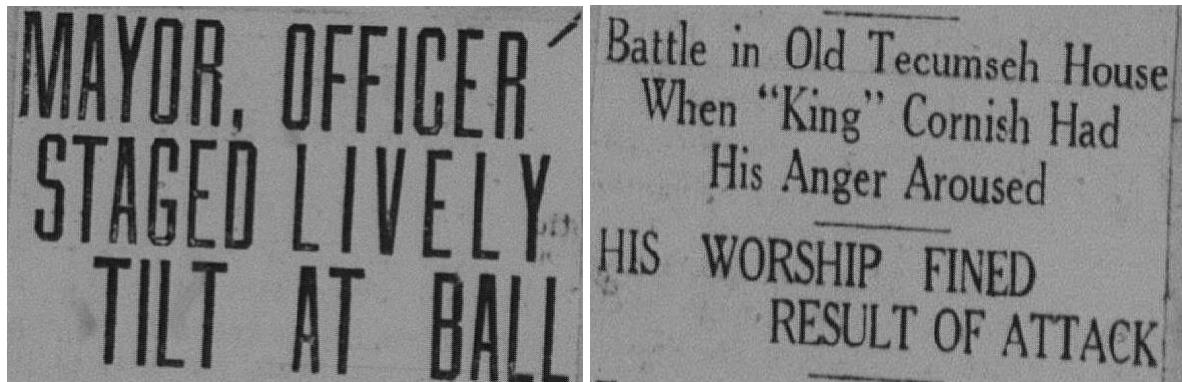
Tecumseh House (background) circa 1865



From the London Free Press

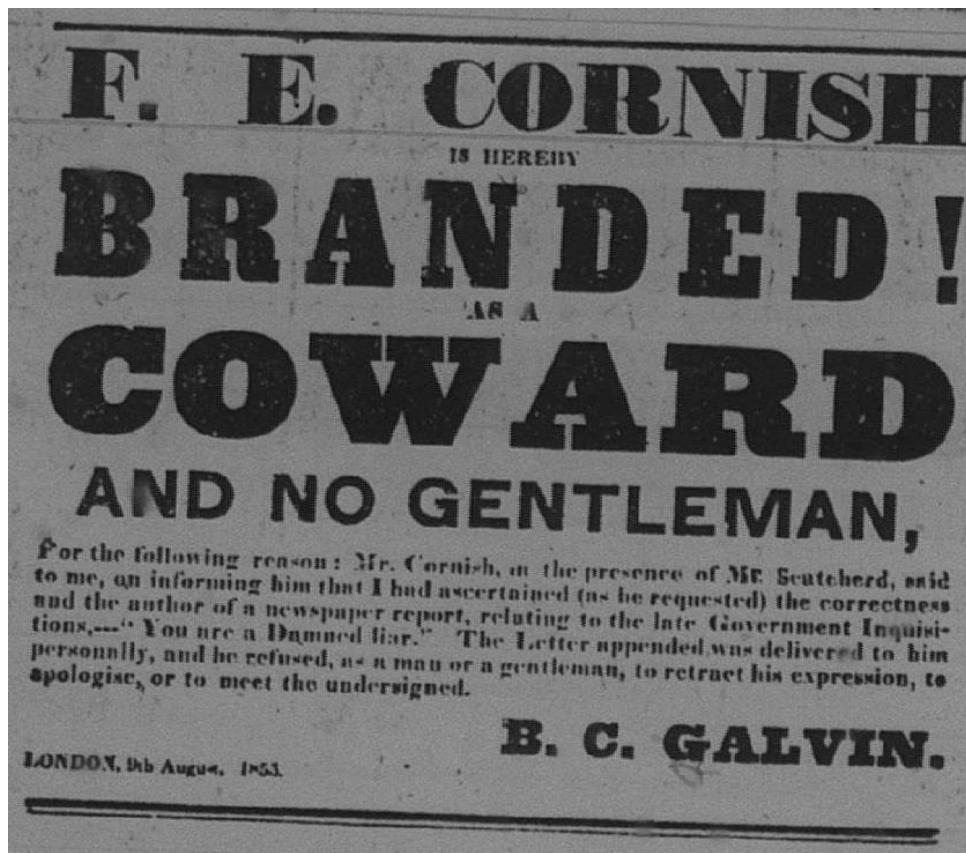


Lobby of Tecumseh House circa 1914



London Free Press Headlines

Cornish's foul mouth was something of a spectacle for the times as well. Upon calling Mr. B. C. Galvin "a damned liar," and refusing to repent for his actions, Galvin publicly shamed Cornish. Publishing an open letter to Cornish and the city, Galvin took out an advertisement in the local paper, officially branding him "a coward and no gentleman."



Mr. Galvin's Open Letter to Cornish

But it is here, at the site of the old City Hall, where perhaps Cornish's most brazen act of drunken behavior took place. While under the influence, Cornish road his horse up and down the pedestrian walkway of City Hall; through the arcade, up and down the stairs. Arrested for being drunk and disorderly he was arranged in court for the next day. As chief magistrate Cornish tried, prosecuted, and defended himself. He fined himself, paid himself, and took his judge's fee in the process.

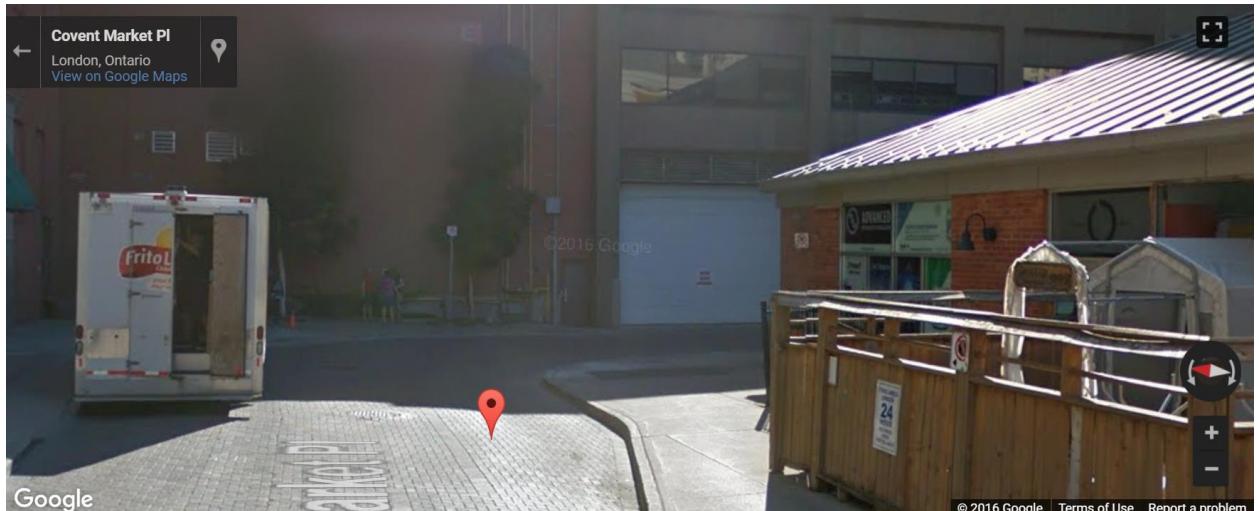
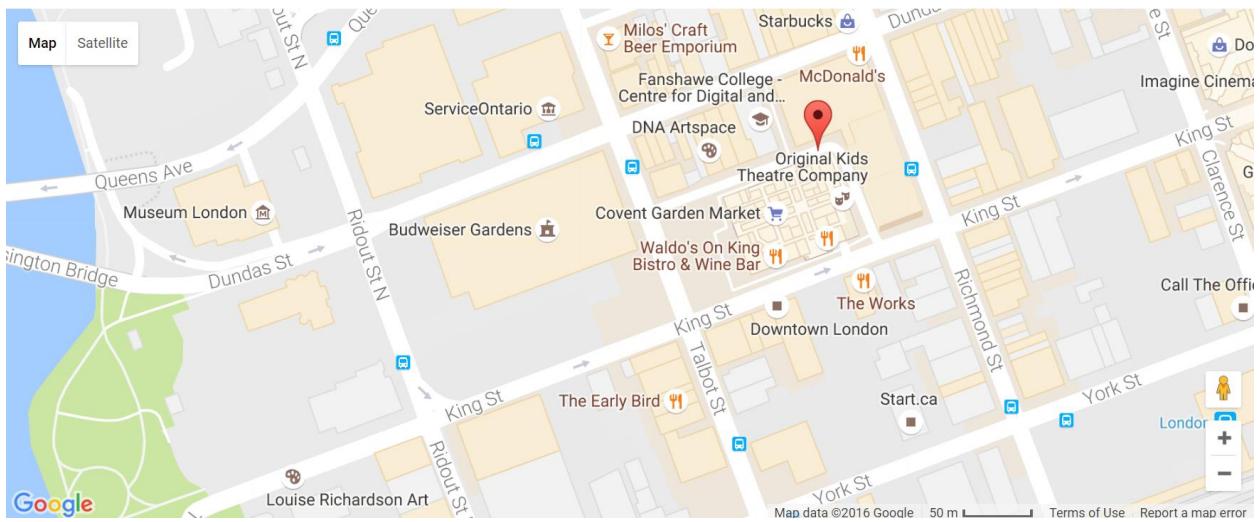


Old City Hall circa 1900 juxtaposed with the current structure today

In 1865 it is alleged that Mayor Cornish incited riots at the election polls in an attempt to block his opponent's constituency from casting their votes. The city militia was called in and Cornish eventually lost the election. After several years of a somewhat disappointing political career, Cornish moved west.

By 1871 Cornish had made his way to Manitoba, leaving his wife and family behind, where he would eventually become the 1st Mayor of Winnipeg. Though he put his law degree to good use, his heavy drinking, quick tempered, violently erratic behavior would not cease. Here, again, he was accused of manipulating the polls, excessive drinking, and violent outbursts.

For four years, from 1861-1865, Francis Evans Cornish acted as Mayor and Chief Magistrate of London. Though his accomplishments are many, so too are his faults. His term as Mayor was riddled with corruption allegations and public embarrassments. Indeed, his entire life was riddled with them.



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# Marion "Peg-leg" Brown

*On June 24, 1898, Constable Michael Toohey was murdered near the Grand Trunk Railway Station while in pursuit of a "one-legged tramp" who had just assaulted a railroad employee. This single act would generate an international manhunt, controversial trial, and an infamous legacy.*

Soundcloud: <https://soundcloud.com/user-64111179/marion-brown-audio-edited>

**Marion Brown - The Accused**



During the spring of 1898 the accused, Marion "Peg-leg" Brown, was incarcerated in Texas for burglary. In June of that year, Brown managed to break out. After escaping a gun fight in Texas, Brown is reported to have hopped a series of freight trains to reach London, Ontario. Three months after the murder of Constable Toohey, Brown was arrested in Washington State and returned to London to face trial. The trial would conclude with Brown being condemned to hang nearly a year after his flight from Texas.

### Constable Michael Toohey – The Victim



Constable Michael Toohey, member of the London Police Force and father of three small children, was murdered by a "one-legged tramp" on the evening of June 24, 1898. After witnessing an assault on a Grand Trunk Railway guard, Toohey pursued the assailant for five blocks. The chase ended with Toohey being fatally shot. The murder launched an international manhunt for the perpetrator.

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### **The Crime, the Culprit, and the Punishment**

On June 24, 1898, Constable Michael Toohey was murdered near the Grand Trunk Railway Station while in pursuit of a "one-legged tramp" who had just assaulted a railroad employee. London's Via Railway Station has since been built the spot of the old Grand Trunk Railway Station. The murder launched a three-month international manhunt. The search ended in Washington State with the arrest of Marion "Peg-leg" Brown. Brown was returned to London to face the charge of murder. Though Brown maintained he was innocent, on March 29<sup>th</sup>, he was found guilty and sentenced to hang. Prior to Brown's May 17<sup>th</sup> execution, over forty lawyers appealed to Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier to have the conviction overturned on the grounds of a biased trial. However, these requests were ignored and Brown was hanged as scheduled on a stormy May morning.

## From Murder to Execution

- Murder of Toohey**  
June 24, 1898  
  
Grand Trunk Railway guard, James Ross, is assaulted by a one-legged tramp and Constable Michael Toohey is shot and killed in the attempt to apprehend the perpetrator
- Mass Arrests**  
June 26, 1898 - September 24, 1898  
  
Chief Williams of the London Police Force instructs officers to arrest every tramp in the county matching the description of the suspect.
- \$500 Reward**  
June 29, 1898  
  
A \$500 reward is offered for the capture and delivery of the suspect to any police station in Ontario
- Spreading the Word**  
July 1, 1898 - July 30, 1898  
  
A description of the suspect is dispatched to every town and village with a population greater than 150 in Canada and the United States
- Marion Brown is Arrested**  
September 24, 1898  
  
United States Marshall A. L. Dilley arrests Marion "Peg-leg" Brown in a theatre in Washington State
- Return of Brown to London**  
October 15, 1898  
  
Brown has been extradited to London. A large crowd eagerly awaits the arrival of the notorious suspect.
- Is Justice Possible?**  
November 4, 1898  
  
Brown's first preliminary hearing is held before a crowd of 400 spectators. Brown insists that the trial will not be fair and impartial as the public is prejudiced against him.
- Trial Postponed**  
November 28, 1898  
  
At the request of the defence, Brown's trial is postponed to allow time to prepare their case
- Trial Concludes**  
March 28, 1899  
  
Defence attorney, McPhillips concludes his defence by stating that the wrong man is on trial and that none of the ninety witnesses could "show positively that the man who fired the shot at Toohey was Brown."
- Sentencing**  
March 29, 1899  
  
Brown is found guilty in the murder of Constable Toohey. He is sentenced to hang.
- A Last Chance**  
April 1, 1899 - April 30, 1899  
  
Defence attorney Mr. McPhillips circulates a petition which receives the signatures of over forty lawyers demanding a retrial for the condemned man
- The Hanging**  
May 17, 1899  
  
Marion "Peg-leg" Brown is hanged in front of a select crowd in the closed off yard of the jailhouse

**Grand Trunk Railway Station, ca 1900 Juxtaposed with the Via Railway Station 2015 – London, Ontario, Canada**



**The Cost of the Conviction**

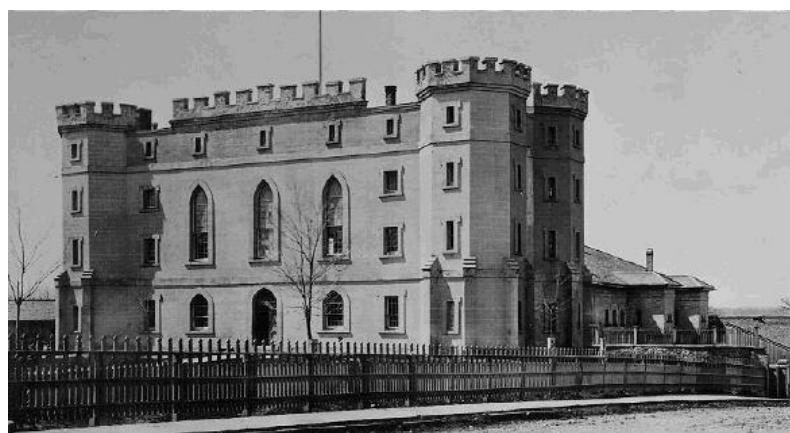
The execution of Marion Brown was the eighth to occur in London. Brown's trial cost approximately \$4500, making it one of the most expensive trials to have ever occurred up to that time in the history of Middlesex County. Despite this high cost, it appears that the \$500 reward was never paid to Washington Marshal A.L. Dilly for the capture and delivery of the notorious criminal.

**The Return of Brown**

Prior to his execution, Brown was heard to say that no grass would ever grow on his grave. In 1985, during construction at the Middlesex County Courthouse, Brown's body was unearthed by an excavator which was digging in the courthouse parking lot. Brown's prophecy appears to have been correct. Layers of concrete and tarmac were all that covered his grave.

**The Haunting Continues**

Guards have claimed that the ghost of Marion "Peg-leg" Brown still haunts the courthouse. It is said that the stomping of his peg-leg can still be heard echoing from the old jail cells at the start of each new year as well as on the anniversary of his execution.



*Old London Courthouse*

*London Free Press Reports on the Trial*

<p><b>READY FOR THE EVIDENCE NOW.</b> — Jury Secured to Try the Case of Peg-Leg Brown. — <b>A LONG, WEARISOME TASK</b> — Empanelling of the Jury Occupied Nearly Six Hours.</p>	<p><b>THE PANEL EXHAUSTED</b> — Mr. McPhillips, Counsel for the Defence, Scores a Point. — <b>CROWDS ON THE INCREASE</b> — Mr. Lount Outlines the Evidence Against the Peg-Leg Which He Characterizes as a Chain of Connected, Unbroken Links.</p>
<p><i>London Free Press - November 5, 1898</i></p> <p><b>IS DRAWING TO A CLOSE.</b> — Trial of Peg-Leg Brown is Nearly Ended. — <b>ADDRESSES TO THE JURY</b> — Made by Counsel for the Defence and the Crown. — <b>THE JUDGE'S CHARGE.</b></p>	<p><i>London Free Press - March 24, 1899</i></p> <p><b>MET DEATH CALMLY.</b> — Marion Brown was Hanged Yesterday Morning. — <b>A DRAMATIC SCENE.</b> — Impassioned Appeal of Dr. Johnston on the Scaffold. — <b>THE COUNTRY'S CRIME.</b> — "Culmination of Cruelty and Not of British Law." — <b>BE MADE NO CONFSSION.</b></p>

**Victorian Age Hysteria**

Before the arrest of Marion Brown, over forty other one-legged drifters were taken into custody across the country based on nothing but their missing limbs. These poor, innocent, men were deprived of their freedom because of the panic which enveloped a nation following a single vile act. While this reactionary impulse is still present today, its early forms can be seen playing out in the less than innocent Victorian Age.

## Notes

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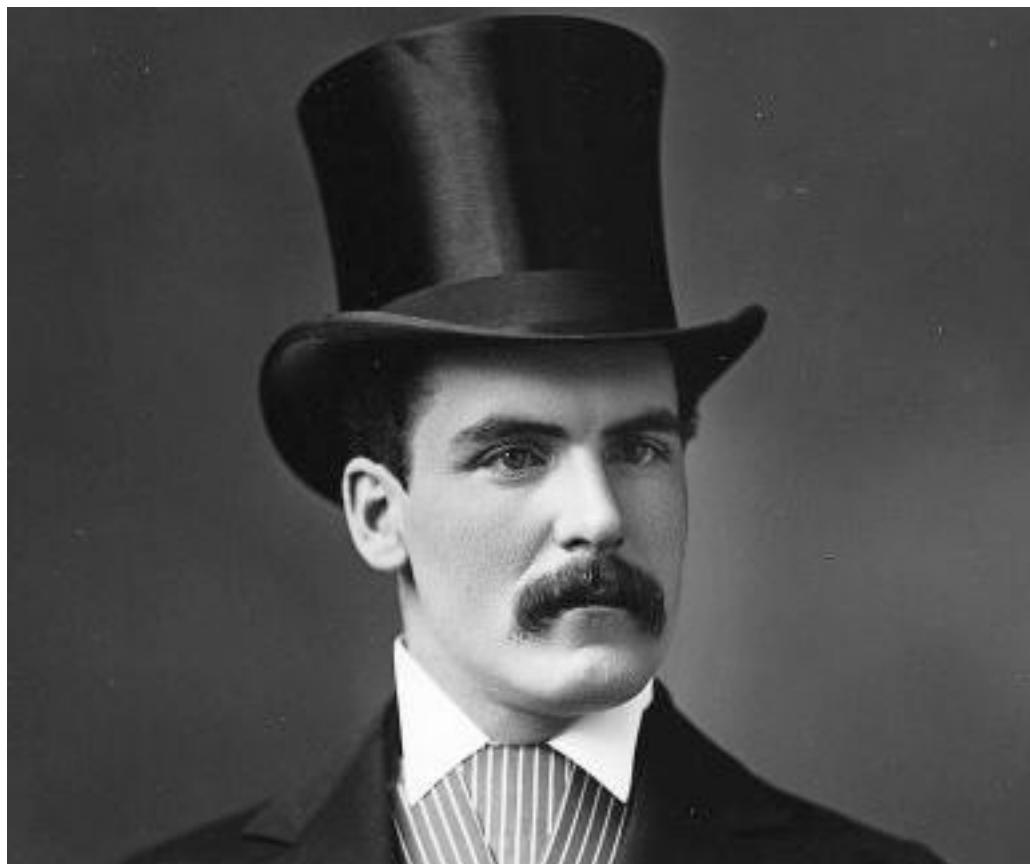
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## **Death, Disaster and Disgrace in Victorian London: Dr. Thomas Neill Cream**

Soundcloud: <https://soundcloud.com/user-641111179/thomas-neill-cream>



Now a government office building, 206 Dundas was once the private offices of notorious serial killer, Dr. Thomas Neill Cream. A few months after his arrival in London, Ontario, rumours began to circulate that Dr. Cream performed profitable sideline abortions. Then, on May 3, 1879, a pregnant Kate Gardener's body was discovered in an outhouse behind Dr. Cream's office. Beside her chemically disfigured face lay an empty bottle of chloroform.

Summoned by an inquest, Dr. Cream claimed Kate had visited his office frequently, begging for an abortion, but he refused to perform the illegal surgery, ultimately turning suspicion towards others. Although no suspects were named, the verdict remained murder by a "person or persons unknown." The citizens of London, however, were sure of Dr. Cream's guilt and as a result his practice dwindled. Seeing no other options, Dr. Thomas Neill Cream left for Chicago where his killing spree continued.

To learn more about the crimes of Dr. Thomas Neill Cream, Read Below!

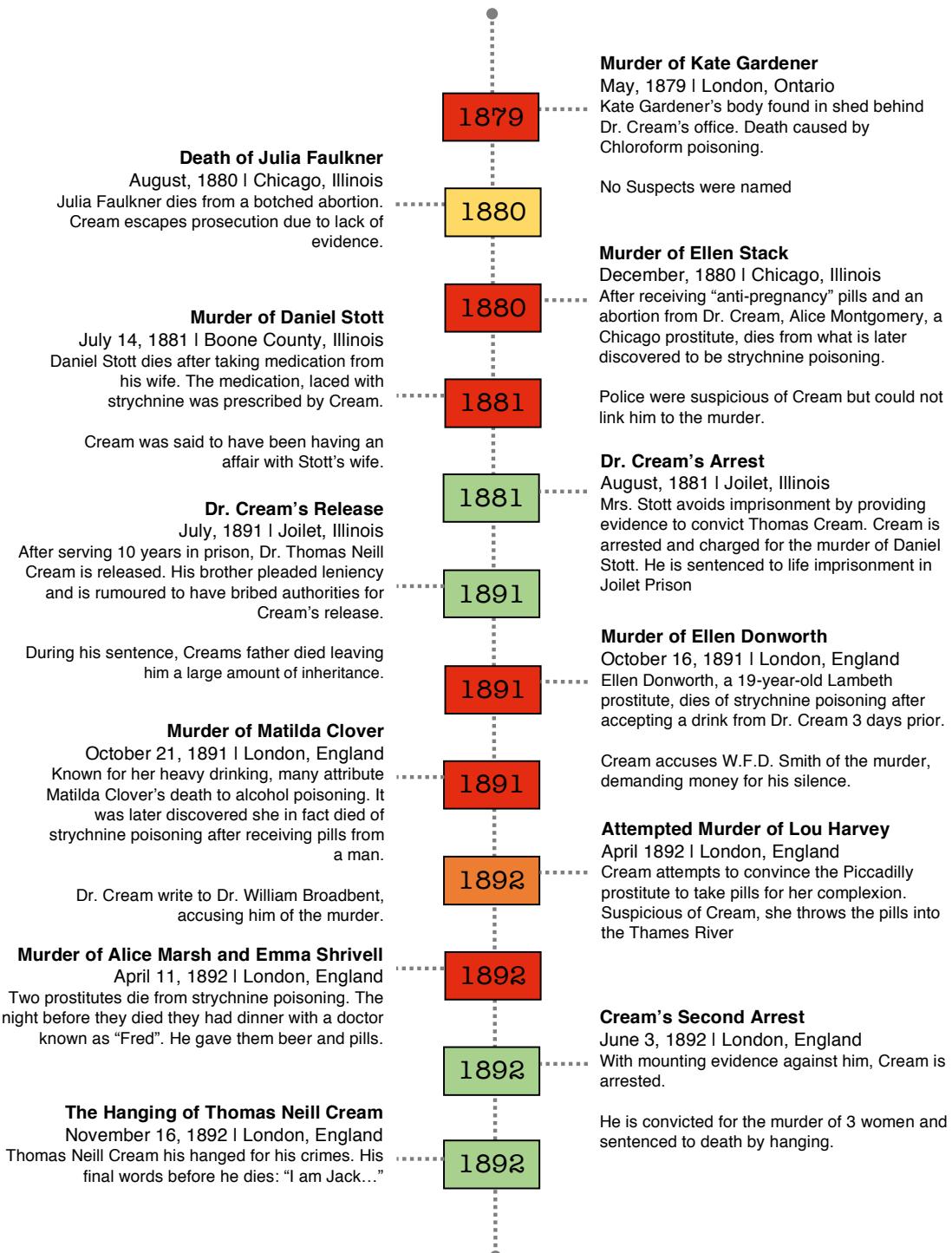
### Profile of a serial Killer

Thomas Neill Cream earned his medical degree from McGill University, in Montreal, Canada. He furthered his studies at St.Thomas's Hospital in London, England. Holding high esteem as a medical practitioner, Cream never felt the need to conceal his identity in public, despite his dramatic and conspicuous appearance. He really fit the profile of a Victorian serial killer. With crossed eyes covered by round gold rimmed glasses and black top hat coupled with an upturned moustache, Thomas Cream was anything but ordinary.

In Lambeth, Cream was constantly in the public eye. He consort with prostitutes, and spent evening dancing, drinking, and doing drugs in high class music halls and theatres. His public appearance drew attention to himself eventually earning him the name the cock-eyed Lothario.



## Timeline: Murders to Execution



### The Dr. Cream Method

Thomas Neill Cream's victims were almost always prostitutes, or women seeking an abortion. He killed his victim's using pills laced with strychnine, claiming the pills would prevent pregnancy. Because he was a physician, his victims often felt they could trust him, and therefore would ingest the pills. Cream often tried to divert attention away from himself by writing letters and blackmailing others he accused of committing the murders. These letters would play an important role in his capture.



*Strychnine poisoning causes uncontrollable body contractions. These contractions cause a restriction of oxygen flow to the lungs, resulting in a slow and painful death by anoxia.*

### Capture

During his stay in London, England, Cream had befriended a former New York City detective John Haynes. He had been closely following the murders that were now a massive story in the newspapers. However, Haynes became suspicious of Cream because he knew so much detail about the murders.

This suspicion increased when Cream mentioned the murder of Lou Harvey, a victim Haynes had never read about in the papers. Haynes contacted Scotland Yard and an investigation opened with Thomas Cream as the main suspect. Evidence of blackmail letters, prostitutes accounts of a man fitting Cream's description, and forged paperwork led to Cream's arrest on June 3, 1892.

Picture Gallery: Images from *Illustrated Police News*



CREAM CONSULTING ROOM WAS FREQUENTED BY LADIES.

**Cream Consulting with women**  
Cream often targeted prostitutes and women seeking abortions



CLOVER WAS LYING ACROSS THE BED.

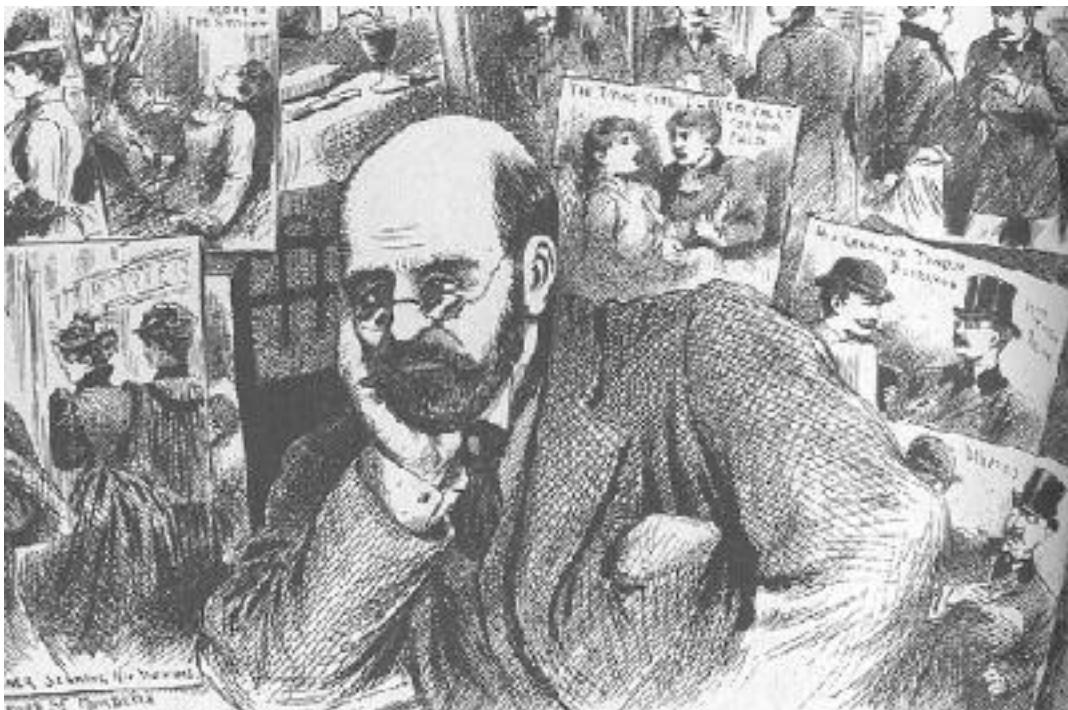
**Death of Matilda Clover.**

*It was initially thought Matilda Clover died of alcohol poisoning. It was later discovered she died of strychnine poisoning.*



NEILL CREAM SENTENCED TO DEATH AT THE OLD BAILEY.

***The Trial of Thomas Neill Cream***  
*Thomas Neill Cream is found guilty of the murder of 4 women.*



***Years of Killing in Review***  
*Cream is sentenced to death for his crimes.*

## Cream's Hanging

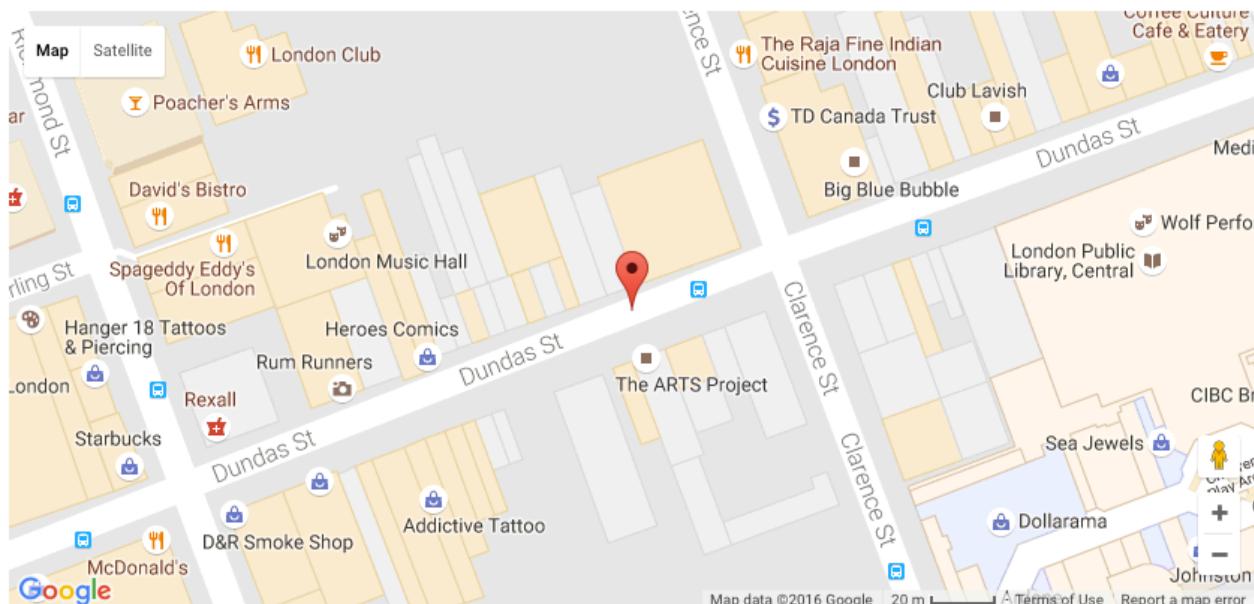
During his trial, Lou Harvey, the prostitute Cream claimed to be one of the poisoners victims, was a prime witness and detailed when Cream attempted to murder her. With this testimony and other evidence against him, he was found guilty for the murder of 4 women and sentenced to death by hanging.

On November 16, 1892, Thomas Neill Cream was hanged. According to legend, as he was being hanged, he uttered the words "I am Jack..." Cream was unable to finish his sentence before the platform of the gallows dropped.

Many people tried to link Cream to the murders of Jack the Ripper. However, this was proven incorrect, as Cream was in prison in Illinois when the Jack the Ripper murders occurred between 1888-1891.

When reflecting on London, Ontario's past, the cities rich history of bustling industry come to mind. But London was once a city that housed an international serial killer. Although most of his murders occurred in Lambeth, Thomas Neill Cream's serial killing began in the city of London over 150 years ago. Rarely do we consider that someone who committed such heinous crimes could have lived somewhere so close home.

### The Location of Dr. Cream's London Medical Office



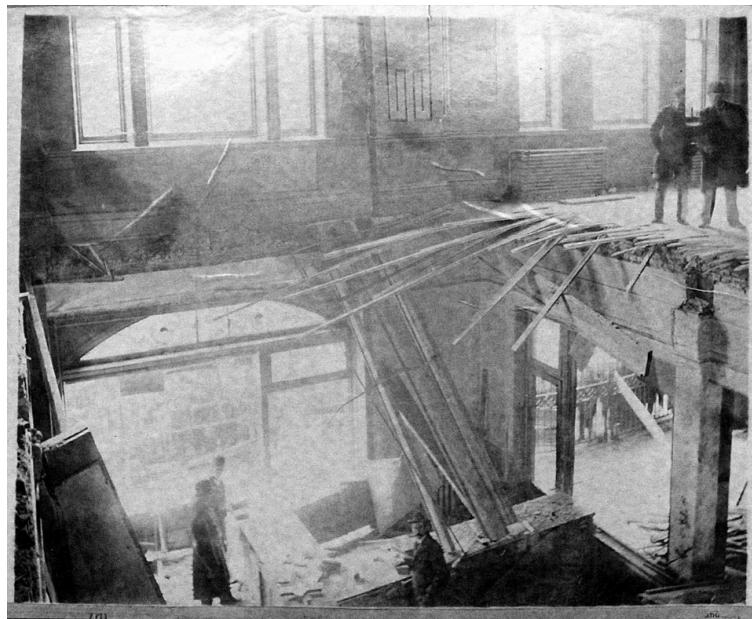
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# The Collapse of City Hall



**Soundcloud: <https://soundcloud.com/user-641111179/collapse-of-city-hall>**

A disregard for local building codes had deadly consequences on January 3, 1898. Hundreds of Londoners gathered on the second floor of City Hall, then located on Richmond St. just south of Dundas, to hear the municipal election results. In the midst of the celebrations, a loud crack sounded throughout the building: a support beam had snapped, and the second floor collapsed. Renovations in earlier years had ignored newly implemented building regulations, and the second floor couldn't support the weight. People fell through the floor and landed, ironically, in the city engineer's office. Many were crushed, by both the falling citizens and the 500-pound safe that was formerly housed on the second floor. In all, about 23 people died and 150 were injured.

**Read below to learn more about the City Hall Collapse.**

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## The Collapse

London passed its first building bylaw in 1893. Yet, when Mayor John Little renovated the first floor of City Hall a few years later, in 1888, he did so with little regard for building regulations. A wall on the first floor was removed and a 12-inch-thick wooden beam was installed to support the large room above.

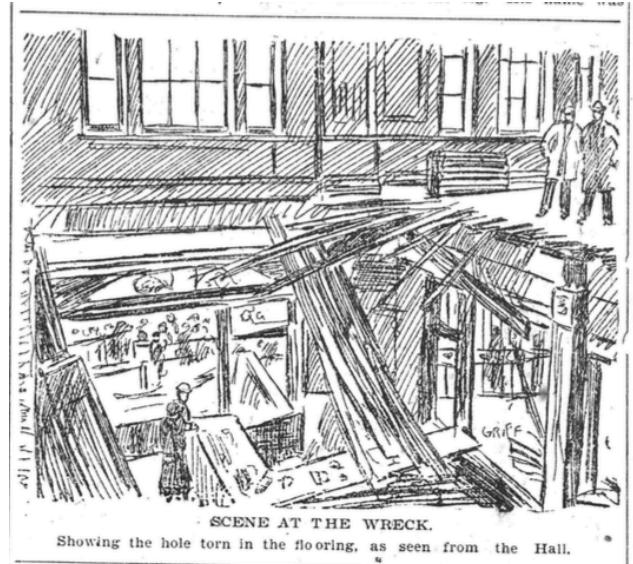
On election night, 1898, hundreds of Londoners – mostly men, as they were the ones who could vote – gathered at City Hall to hear local election results. Dr. John D. Wilson won the mayoralty, and people surrounded the podium to cheer him on. The final speaker of the night, Mr. Toothe,

went up to the podium to give his speech around 10 pm. In their excitement, people were cheering, stamping their feet, and jumping up and down. Following a loud cracking noise, the floor sank and then gave way completely. London's citizens fell to the floor below, followed by a 500-pound safe and a steam radiator. People were crushed in the aftermath. 23 Londoners died and 150 were injured.

The people fell into the centre of the office of the city engineer.



*The Damage*



*A sketch of the damage*



*Residents gather to see the collapse*



*The beam that supported the second floor*

## The Aftermath

A vacant store next door was used as a makeshift hospital. Common injuries included broken bones and internal and external bruising. Lists of the dead and injured flooded local newspapers and eyewitness accounts provided graphic descriptions of the collapse. Queen Victoria sent her condolences from England. One of the men who died in the accident was shoemaker John Burridge, who survived the SS Victoria Disaster 17 years earlier, but succumbed to the collapse.

Unfortunately, little was done to enforce local building bylaws following the disaster. It wasn't until the Reid's Crystal Hall Disaster of 1907 that Londoners began to take building codes seriously.



*Newspapers extensively covered the event*



*City hall on Richmond Street looking south toward King Street, circa 1910.*

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Sources:

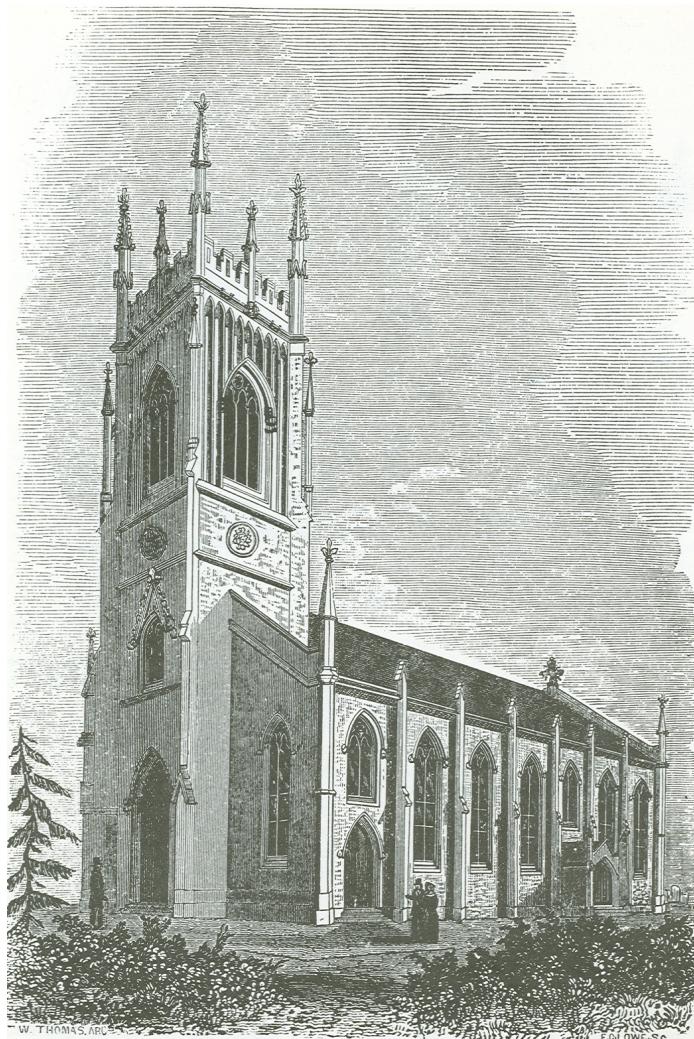
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## Death, Disaster, and Disgrace in Victorian London Walking Tour St. Paul's Cathedral



*Sketch of St. Paul's Cathedral*

**Soundcloud:** <https://soundcloud.com/user-64111179/stpauls-cathedral-conclusion>

St. Paul's Cathedral is the last destination of the Death, Disaster, and Disgrace in Victorian London Walking Tour. The grounds of St. Paul's Cathedral are significant to London's history, as it once served as the village cemetery, and was the final resting place for many of the individuals discussed throughout this walking tour. The gravestones remaining on the North-West corner of the grounds are a reminder of the human element of dark history. Those living in London during the Victorian era faced real dangers and disasters, despite the romanticized notions we have of Victorian society today.

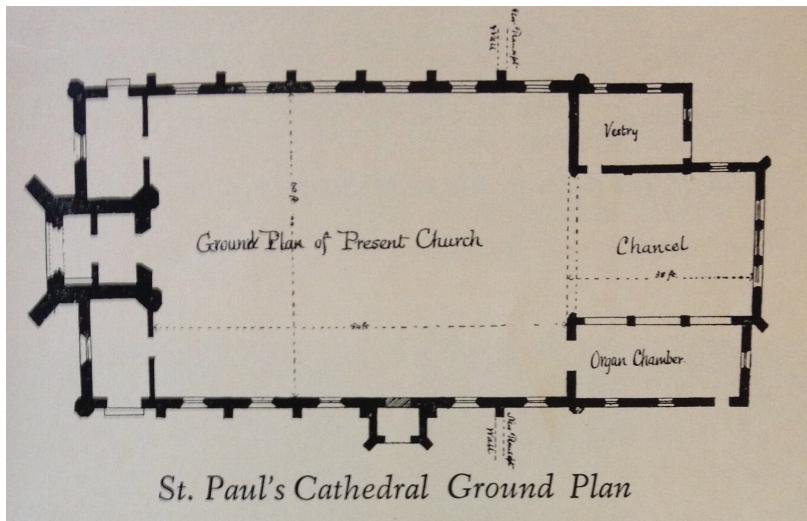
**For additional information on St. Paul's Cathedral and the cemetery, read below.**

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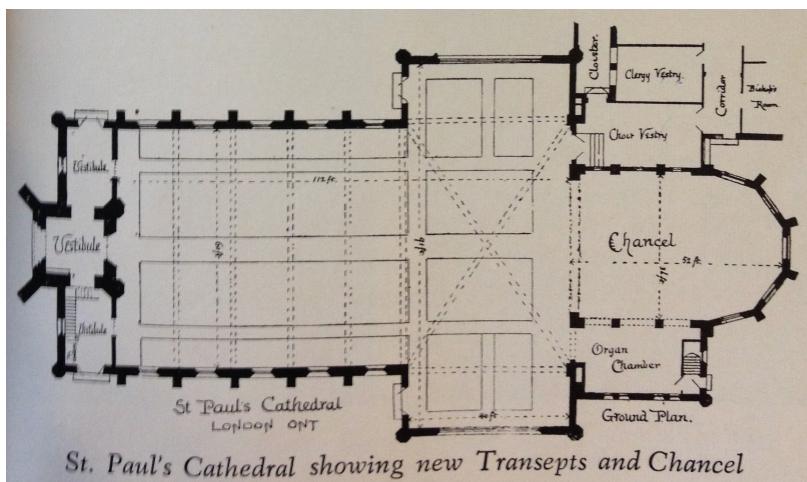


UTH-WEST VIEW FROM CRICKET SQUARE, 1860, SHOWING PINE STUMP FENCE

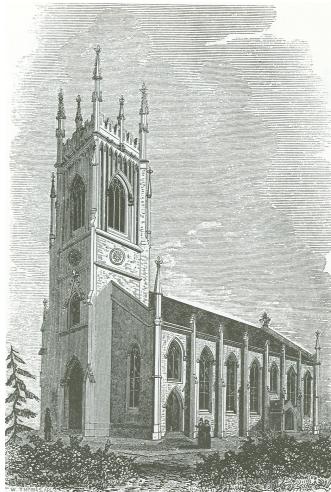
This photograph dates to 1860 and shows the rear view of St. Paul's Cathedral looking towards Richmond Street. The stumps in the picture are remnants of the trees that would have surrounded the area, and would have acted as a fence, preventing livestock from entering onto the grounds.



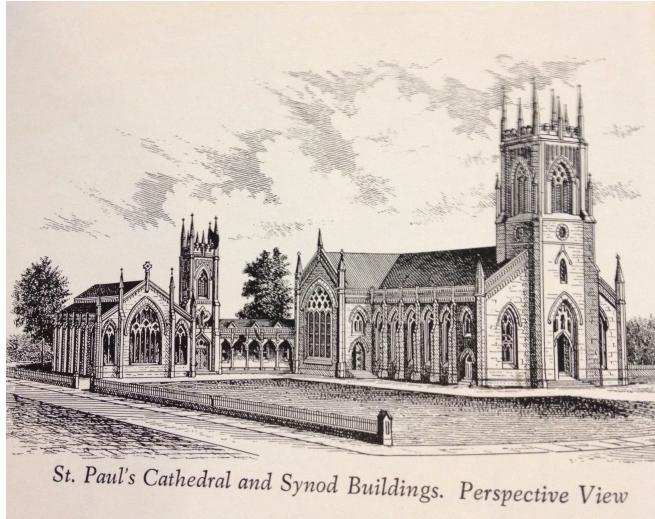
Ground plan of St. Paul's Cathedral.



Ground plan of St. Paul's Cathedral.



*Sketch of St. Paul's Cathedral, which served as London Ontario's first Anglican Church, as well as the village cemetery (Left.)*



*Sketch of St. Paul's Cathedral and Synod Buildings (Right).*

*St. Paul's Cathedral and Synod Buildings. Perspective View*

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## Additional Information

The construction of St. Paul's Cathedral was completed in 1834, and included space for the village graveyard. Ten years later, the Church caught fire, burning to the ground. The construction of St. Paul's Cathedral, as you see it today, was completed in 1846. The architecture of St. Paul's Cathedral, like the Middlesex County Court House, combines Gothic detail with Classical form.

St. Paul's Cathedral cemetery is no longer actively used, and only a fraction of the graves remain in situ. In 1879, The city of London passed a by-law prohibiting the interment of bodies within the municipality. Many of the graves were relocated by wagon to the new burial site named Woodland Cemetery. The 12-14 gravestones that remain on the grounds of the original cemetery can be found in the North-West corner of the site, along Richmond Street and the North boundary of park area belonging to St. Paul's Cathedral.

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### Sources:

- Downtown London: Layers of Time, ed. Michael Baker
- Gargoyles and Gentlemen: A History of St. Paul's Cathedral, London, Ontario 1834 - 1964, by Orlo Miller (1966)
- St. Paul's Anglican Cathedral, City of London, OGS Cemetery Transcripts (1984)
- Ivey Family London Room, London Public Library, London, Ontario, Canada