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Newsletter of the West Toronto Junction Historical Society

James Ellis: Architect of the Junction

by David Wencer with files from Barbara Myrvold

This year, the West Toronto Junction Historical Society unveiled a new Junction historical walking tour, with the help of Heritage Toronto, the Ontario Trillium Foundation, and Congregation Knesseth Israel.

The theme of this tour is the life and architecture of James Ellis, an architect who, working both alone and with partners, designed over fifty

buildings in the Junction between 1889 and 1912. It is very rare that walking tours can focus on a specific architect, as most architects do not get the opportunity to design a variety of buildings within a walkable area. While Ellis also designed buildings in other parts of Toronto (and indeed, for other communities in southern Ontario), the largest clus-

ter of his work was in the Junction, where his works reflect the rise of an industrial suburb as it grew through the 1890s to become an independent city in 1908 and, eventually, part of the City of Toronto in 1909.

His designs reflect the architectural styles that were popular in his era, and he was willing to accommodate

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Annette Street emerged as a centre of public life in the Junction with Ellis and Connery's Beaux Arts style Toronto Public Library (145 Annette) and the Masonic Temple (151 Annette). They also designed 137 Annette, the home and dental office of Dr. L.G. Smith. An undated colour postcard of West Toronto.

Largest cluster of Ellis' work in the Junction

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the desires of those who hired him. As such his work was quite varied, including houses, commercial properties, industrial buildings, schools and places of worship. That so many of his building remain today is a reflection of his ability to both please those who commissioned him, as well as create quality designs.

According to research by Toronto Public Library historian Barbara Myrvold, Ellis was born in Grey County in 1856 and began his architectural career in the 1880s with the Meaford Building and Manufacturing Company, in Meaford, Ontario. His first work in the Junction is believed to have been in 1889, the year that the Junction first achieved town status. Ellis must have realized the potential for growth that the town had, as he opened an office in the Junction in the following year.

Ellis lived in the Junction for many years, meaning that he personally used many of the buildings which he himself had designed. In addition to his own home, Ellis worked on several Junction schools, the fire hall, the public library, and the Masonic Temple, where Ellis was an active Mason.

When the Junction went through a recession in the 1890s, Ellis relocated his offices to Adelaide Street in downtown Toronto, where he partnered with another architect named Henry Simpson.

In 1903, his partnership with Simpson dissolved, Ellis moved his offices to Queen Street West near City Hall. A few years later he took on a junior partner named William Connery, and together they worked on many Toronto buildings, including nearly half of Ellis' known Junction designs.

Ellis eventually built a house for himself in the Junction at 358 Clendenan Avenue, next to that of his friend, Junction journalist A.B. Rice. Rice writes that "not a single house had been built in the area for eight years, and when it became known that an architect's house was in course of erection curiosity made it the Mecca of the citizenry out for a walk on Sunday afternoons." Unfortunately, this house is no longer standing.

Ellis died in 1935 at the age of 79, but about two-thirds of his Junction buildings remain today, a testament to their worthy design and aesthetics. Local residents, including members of our own organization, have advocated for the retention of many of his heritage buildings over recent decades.



Humberside Collegiate Institute

James Ellis designed both the original school building which opened in 1894, and the first major set of renovations in 1907. The last of Ellis' designs were demolished in the 1960s when the building was modernized. However his influence lives on in the 1931 additions, which were designed to complement Ellis' vision. The building's distinct red colouring and Romanesque arches are thus part of his legacy. Research by Barbara Myrvold reveals that Ellis served on the Toronto Junction Collegiate's Board in 1908 and 1909, and later on the Toronto Board of Education. Photo circa 1921 source: Les Stringer



James Ellis designed 24A Woodside Avenue, which was built for John D. Farquhar in 1892. Ellis incorporated Arts and Crafts motifs and Romanesque arches, with liberal use of custom pieces of terra cotta for ornamentation. Photo Pat Trusty

Range of buildings reflects area's growth



The Peacock Hotel, designed by Ellis and built in 1891 at Dundas Street West and Weston Road, as it looked in 1925. His work was quite varied, including houses, commercial properties, industrial buildings, schools and places of worship.



204 High Park Avenue was built in 1890 for James T. Jackson, an early Junction real estate agent who was one of the co-founders of the York Tribune, the Junction's first weekly newspaper. It is representative of some of the many grand homes built along High Park Avenue where some of the town's most important families lived in the Junction's early years. In addition to the corner turret, it is noted for intricate brickwork above the second floor and the stone masonry on the first storey.

The Library and the Temple - page one photo

The Annette Street Branch of the Toronto Public Library at 145 Annette Street was a Carnegie library, granted to the Junction when the community was still an independent municipality. Ellis and Connery's design in the Beaux Arts style, featuring a high-ceiling main floor and an exposed basement. One condition of the grant was that there be public lecture rooms included which could be used for public education. The West Toronto Junction Historical Society is but one of many groups to make use of these rooms over the years.

Next door at 151 Annette is the Masonic Temple, designed by Ellis & Connery in 1909. It is also in the Beaux Arts style, and demonstrates the emergence of Annette Street as the centre of public life in the Junction. Ellis was an active mason and served as master of Stanley Lodge prior to this building's erection. The main entrance was redesigned in later years by William Connery.



One of the Junction's fine mansions designed by Ellis, Oaklands, was demolished to allow changes to Annette Street. It was the home of Robert L. McCormack, located at the northwest corner of Annette and Laws Streets. Photo from 1908. Source: Mary Draper (née McCormack)