

Grand Trunk Railway Station: Designation Statements

5 James Street North, St. Marys, Ontario

Lots 1 and 2, East Side, James Street North

Municipal By-Law: 33-1987

Revised by Heritage St. Marys

for St. Marys Town Council

December 2016

Identification of Property:

This station at 5 James Street North was constructed in the summer of 1907 for the Grand Trunk Railway. It is the third depot on the line, supplementing the Junction Station, built in 1858, and replacing the station at the Switch near Elizabeth Street, built in 1879. Restored and rehabilitated in 1988, it displays many of the design features of Grand Trunk railway stations of the period.

Statement of Cultural Heritage Value:

The Grand Trunk Railway Station has significant historic associations with the growth and development of the Town of St. Marys. In the mid-1850s, St. Marys had a prime place on the proposed main Toronto-to-Sarnia line of the Grand Trunk Railway. News that the railway was coming to St. Marys with its potential for bringing prosperity was greeted with excitement. However, residents were disappointed when the main GTR depot was built in 1858 at the Junction of the lines to Sarnia and to London – about two miles from the core of the village and inadequately served by an access road.

In 1879, to alleviate this inconvenience, the GTR constructed a small station at the “Switch” near the intersection of Elizabeth and James Streets but this modest building did not create the strong first impression of St. Marys that town officials felt was deserved. When competition was threatened by the St. Marys and Western Ontario Railway (organized in the early 1900s, built and opened ca 1908 as a branch of the Canadian Pacific Railway) the Grand Trunk finally built a proper all-service passenger and freight depot on railway right-of-way, just north of Queen Street. It was a beautiful location. The new station was perched on the edge of the Trout Creek valley, with the magnificent railroad trestle bridge crossing to the north. It stood in the shadow of the iconic stone water tower to the southwest.

The property has strong associative value in the community. For more than a century this station has been the arrival and departure point for local and area residents – those embarking on or returning from short excursions to other communities along the line; those striking out to begin their future at university or in some new profession or trade; those leaving to serve their country in the two World Wars; those arriving as immigrants to make their homes in Canada.

In the mid-1980s, the Canadian National Railway slated this station for demolition. Thanks to intervention by the Town of St. Marys and senior levels of government, the station was saved – a project that gave the community a great sense of accomplishment. In 1988, ownership was transferred to the municipality and the building was completely renovated. Since then, it has been used for various town offices and for several private business or cultural ventures. Most important, passengers can still use this beautiful building when they travel by train to and from St. Marys.

Description of Heritage Attributes

Character-defining elements that make this property worthy of designation include:

Exterior elements:

- The complex, layered hip roof, characteristic of Grand Trunk depots of the period, is highly visible from the Queen Street overpass and therefore of great importance. The roof has a bell cast profile with a semi-conical gable over the operator’s bay. The angular profile of the west bay stands in contrast to the rest of the roof. The west gable seems almost oversized compared with the three miniature gables along the primary roof line.
- The original roof was cedar and since 1988, this roofing material has conscientiously been retained. Visible from the Queen Street overpass, this is a very important exterior element.

- The eaves have an extended overhang with hardwood soffit and curved brackets.
- The gable over projecting operator's bay includes a sign band suspended at fascia level for the station stop sign – St. Marys.
- The east gable is echoed on west side with elaborate bargeboard trim on the gable end.
- A brick chimney is set in the roof just to the south of the west gable. (Although part of the restoration, the 1907 building did not have a chimney of this height.)
- The walls are constructed of Logan brick, highly glazed; the black granite flecks that give this brick texture are easily visible.
- The brickwork is Flemish bond – stretchers alternating with headers – for strong double-brick walls. Around all sides, there is a raised decorative horizontal course two bricks wide at the level of the sills of the larger windows.
- The base course is rock finish limestone blocks, currently painted black.
- The windows in the east and west gables have segmented brick lintels over semi-circular lights; all windows have sandstone sills.
- With the exception of the east-facing windows in the operator's bay, all windows are single, double-hung, with original sash hardware and original storm windows.
- The operator's bay has two, double-hung east-facing windows, set side by side, with an elongated bracket between the two components.
- The main west-facing single door is wood with five horizontal panels. There are two wood and glass side panels with a curved brick lintel and a segmented elliptical fan light over all.
- There are single doors opening to the east on either side of the station agent's office. Two wider doors are placed at the south end of the east wall. They are currently not in use but once accommodated baggage and freight.
- The north end of the building is a projecting bay with three windows facing northwest, north and northeast.

Interior Elements:

- Ceilings throughout the building vary in height according to the height of the layered roof above them – the highest ceiling is in the central waiting area while the north and south wings have lower ceilings.
- The high central ceiling is vaulted and supported by two carved oak beams. A simple wooden crown mold bead separates the walls and ceiling.
- A wall of glass panels set in wood divides the centre area. This seems to be intended to show the separation of the general waiting area from the more private sections. This glass and wood wall extends in sections from the ceiling down to wooden panels forming the lower part of this internal wall. A door connects the space divided by this wall. This glass-paneled dividing wall was part of the 1988 restoration. No record exists of any such division being in place when the building was actively serving passengers.
- The inside walls are painted plaster over the double brick exterior with paneled wainscoting topped with a ledge.
- The interior trim around the windows and doors is plain but substantial – wide side casing and lintels.
- The operator's bay protrudes into the main waiting area at its northeast corner. The trim and framing of the interior windows into this office have been restored to suggest the original, no-public-access, station operator's area. This feature has been modified to allow the interior space to be used but it is still important, showing the original functionality of the building.

- The floor is tongue and groove hardwood with a varnished finish.
- A large fireplace with brick surround and oak mantel is the main feature of the west wall beside the door. This fireplace seems to be a concept of the restoration architect. No records exist to show that the train station ever had an open fireplace. Some long-time residents remember when it was heated by coal or a coal-fired hot water boiler.
- The restoration provided lighting for the main section with suspended single-bulb frosted glass fixtures.

Designated Features

This designation includes all exterior and interior features described in the above lists. Restored features are noted.

Background Documentation

More detailed information about this property is on file in the archives and reference area of the St. Marys Museum.

The Via Station has been featured in various books such as:

Meet Me At the Station, Elizabeth A. Willmot, Gage, 1976;

To Stratford Under Steam, Ian Wilson, Canadian Branchline Miniatures, 2000; in recent on-line inventories such as <http://www.canada-rail.com/ontario/>.