

Photographer Unknown, St. Paul Street showing Griffin's Opera House (August 1917) St. Catharines Standard/Niagara Falls Review Fonds.

Researched by Lucy Webster



August 1917, St. Paul Street showing Griffin's Opera House, (Photograph) Brock Archives & Special Collections, St. Catharines Standard/Niagara Falls Review Fonds

The image appears is a photograph of downtown St. Catharines, specifically St. Paul Street. Obviously, the image is in black and white, and it seems to be a rather bright day as lighter shades blanket every surface in this photo. The street itself is very wide, especially considering just how narrow it seems in the present day. Only one vehicle and one horse are on the road the moment this photo was captured. Bulbous streetlights, advertisements, and townsfolk wearing mostly suits and ties litter the scene.

I selected this photograph to work with because Griffin's Opera House is visible in it. This building has quite the history in terms of changing owners and titles. It was constructed on 1913 and officially opened on May 6th, 1915, with Charlie Chaplin's silent film, *The Tramp*.¹ In 1941 the building underwent construction and was reopened as The Palace Theatre. The theatre went through renovations once more in 1973 and reopened one final time as Town Cinema on August 2nd, 1973. After changing hands multiple times after another fire, more reconstruction, and high expenses, Town Cinema was forced to close in late 2004 and remains on 280 St. Paul Street to this day.

¹ "Museum Chat Ask Alicia – Town Cinemas." Museum Chat, July 29, 2016. <https://stcatharinesmuseumblog.com/2016/07/29/ask-alicia-town-cinemas/>.

One of the main reasons I've selected this photo is because it actually shows the Griffin's Opera House. It is situated a little way back and to the right of the shot. It advertises a performance by Fannie Ward, a well-known performer of the time. As the former Griffin's Opera House building still stands today on the corner of St. Paul Street (now completely vacant), this image is an interesting look back into the history of a street that many students of Brock commonly traverse because it is close to both the downtown bus terminal and the Marilyn I. Walker School of Fine & Performing Arts.



St. Paul Street in downtown St. Catharines, (Photograph) Francis J. Petrie Collection, [Niagara Falls Public Library](#)

Another image captured showcases a closer look at the Griffin's Opera House. The front of the theatre itself is comparatively small to some of the other buildings on St. Paul Street, but it's another interesting glance into a scene so familiar yet distant to what we know as downtown St. Catharines today, especially considering the current state of the former Griffin's Opera House.

Today downtown St. Catharines is bustling with small businesses, restaurants and community hubs, but there are also lots of abandoned, boarded up and vacant buildings that pepper the city. It's a sad sight to see, especially the building that used to be the Griffin's Opera House. While we are lucky to have establishments such as the Film House in the Performing Arts Centre or the Niagara Artists Centre, looking into these old photographs and histories from the early 19th century display what used to be and what we could have had just around the corner on St. Paul Street.

Further Reading

Campbell family., James H Campbell, John S Campbell, and Brock University Library. Archives. Campbell Family Fonds. RG 47, 1837. (Brief history of the Griffin's Opera House)

“Museum Chat Ask Alicia – Town Cinemas.” Museum Chat, July 29, 2016.
<https://stcatharinesmuseumblog.com/2016/07/29/ask-alicia-town-cinemas/>

“Plan of the Grand Central Hotel.” Brock University Digital Repository, January 27, 2009.
<https://dr.library.brocku.ca/handle/10464/90>.