



## **Sarnia Guided Working Walking Tour - 2019**

The tour takes just over an hour and starts at City Hall and but finishes in Veterans Park – behind the Sarnia Public Library.

### **1. Starting Point: 255 Christina St N. – Sarnia City Hall**

Malcome Cameron, St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church & Kenwick Terrace at the intersection of George and Christina Street

Captain Richard Vidal R.N., George Durand, and Malcome Cameron are claimed to be the founders of Sarnia. Prior to their settlement, this land was occupied by the French and Indigenous Peoples and was known as The Rapids. Captain Vidal received a grant of 200 acres for his service to the Royal Navy in **1834**. George Durand bought 25 acres of land from Captain Vidal and built a log cabin store on London road between Christina and Front Street, which Captain Vidal helped him stock by making regular trips to Detroit.

The Upper Canada Government felt that Vidal should be paying duty on his imports. One day, two customs officials boarded his ship and demanded duties on the cargo Vidal was carrying from Detroit. Vidal bluntly refused and ordered the officials off his ship at gun point. Ironically, Vidal was appointed by the government at a later date, as the first customs collector for the Port of Sarnia. Durand later became Sarnia's first post master.

Whereas, Cameron purchased 100 acres of land from Dominique LaForge in the present downtown area. Cameron surveyed his land into lots to be sold to incoming settlers. Cameron was a very busy man as he became a general merchant, lumberman, ship owner, ship builder, miller and land speculator. In 1836, the settlers changed the name from The Rapids, to the Port of Sarnia.

Cameron was known as the 'Apostle of Temperance', and in **1855**, he was the first to introduce prohibitionary measures in the Canadian legislature. Cameron named Christina Street after his wife and they donated St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, built in **1841**. In **1867**, a new church was built directly behind the first church and the original church was later torn down. St. Andrew's is Sarnia's oldest surviving church building. In **1876** the

original bell from the first church was replaced by the present larger bell and for many years was also used as a fire alarm for the Port of Sarnia. In **1965** the clock was replaced by a new electric clock all the way from London, England, directly from the makers of "Big Ben."

Believe it or not, there used to be a prominent nightclub venue in Sarnia that was located right across the street from us, just over there. It all began in **1892**, when a curling rink opened on the second floor. The ground floor of the two story structure was a full service garage and the site later featured Lambton Motors and an Imperial Oil station. In **1925**, the building's owner added a dance hall to the second floor and called it St. Andrew's Hall due to its close proximity to the church.

In **1943**, the name changed from "St. Andrew's" to "Kenwick Terrace." The new name came from the entertainer and musician, Jack Kennedy and his wife, who bought the building. Using the first three letters of his last name and the last four of her maiden name, Warwick, they created the name Kenwick.

Big name bands were a regular event at this venue, including Tommy Dorsey and Louis Armstrong. In Dorsey's words, "The boys and I don't usually play in towns or cities the size of Sarnia, but this city has a reputation throughout the dance band and entertainment world and I just couldn't pass up Sarnia when this Canadian tour was arranged."

*How popular was Louis Armstrong?*

In its place today is a building we know as Kenwick Place, or "the boat building." Kenwick Place was the first major residential highrise development in Sarnia's downtown area. The tower's elliptical shape offers a new dimension of architecture to the City of Sarnia.

*(Feeney, M. E., Cowan, D., & Fazio, G., 1980)*

## **2. First Stop: - 192 Christina St. N. Lochiel and Christina at the Bayside Mall**

### Old Town Hall & Mystery Stones

By **1857**, Sarnia's population surpassed 1,000, allowing it to move up from 'village' to 'town' status. The first council meeting was held and the people of Sarnia elected their first mayor, Thomas Forsyth. Mayor Forsyth carried on as head of council until September when the courts ruled the result of the 1857 election invalid. In **1875**, the town of Sarnia raised enough money to

install sewers and waterworks systems. The surplus money from this project made the building of a town hall possible.

This was the site of the old three storey town hall building made out of yellow brick. When Lake Wawanosh was drained for farmland, a band of rich clay was discovered. 5 brickyards at the north end of Telford Road began producing bricks to build Sarnia out of this clay and sand. Sarnia's Town Hall housed many departments, a jail, a police station and an auditorium on the third floor. The auditorium was used both as a ballroom for social dances and an arena for boxing matches. A farmers' market was located at the back of the building.

In **1953** a tornado tore through downtown Sarnia damaging several buildings in its path, including town hall. The tornado killed 5, injured over 100 and over 500 were left homeless. Insurance was not the same back then that it is today, so consequently, the town hall building was demolished and it wasn't until **1964** that the new city hall was built. This site was purchased and redeveloped by the Hudson Bay Company, until the T. Eaton Company incorporated the site into the new downtown mall.

The mall fills the area of downtown between Vidal Street and Christina, George Street and Cromwell - enclosing Victoria Street. A church used to stand on Victoria street where the wishing fountain is now located in the mall. The mall was developed in response to interest in redeveloping the downtown area, which can also be seen by the three major downtown developments - the Polysar Building (First Place Sarnia), the Seaway Centre and Kenwick Place.

*(Feeney, M. E., Cowan, D., & Fazio, G., 1980)*

If you look closely, you can see four pink granite stones embedded in the concrete sidewalk at each corner of the Lochiel and Christina intersection. The four granite markers come from the Alberta property of internationally noted artist Peter von Tiesenhausen. He says he likes to fire people's imagination and get them asking questions. So he asked Sarnia's permission to bury a 1,000 pound bust 15 feet under the intersection. Tiesenhausen installed the statue made from four melted down Ford engines during a ten day visit to Sarnia in 2008. Funnily the bust, called "Mooring," was chosen to be placed in this location long before the site of the new public art gallery was selected.

<http://www.sarniahistoricalsociety.com/story/mystery-stones-point-to-buried-treasure/>

### **3. Second Stop: 160 – 168 Christina St. N. - Imperial Theater**

The Imperial Theater was originally built as The Capitol Movie Theater in **1936**. The Capitol Movie Theater at the time was another building that received considerable damage from the tornado that tore through town in 1953. As a result, the theater was restored and maintained until it received a full face lift and new name between **1995 and 1997**. It was transformed from a premiere movie-house to a modern theatre for live performances and renamed the Imperial Theater.

<https://www.imperialtheatre.net/theatre-sarnia/>

This restoration was made possible by a \$600,000 interest free loan from the City of Sarnia, payable over 20 years by Theatre Sarnia.

<https://thesarniajournal.ca/for-the-imperial-theatre-these-are-the-good-old-days/>

Theatre Sarnia is the legal owner of the Imperial Theatre under the authority of a Board of Directors from within its membership. Theatre Sarnia is one of the oldest operating Community Theatre groups in Canada with its roots in the Sarnia Drama Club formed in **1927**.

<https://www.imperialtheatre.net/imperial/>

#### **4. Third Stop: 136 Christina St N - N-E Corner of Cromwell and Christina**

##### Red Ryan's Last Crime

In **1936**, Norman "Red" Ryan, one of the most notorious criminals in Canadian history, was killed in Sarnia as he tried to rob the LCBO, which was previously located in the red building on the corner. Known as the Al Capone of Canada, Red Ryan was born in Toronto in **1895**. He served time in prison on three separate accounts for crimes he committed in Canada and overseas, until a daring escape from a 25 year sentence under attack of gunfire from prison guards and police.

Following his escape, Red Ryan continued to rob banks across the midwest of the United States. Yet, all good things come to an end and in **1924**, he was caught in Minneapolis while picking up his mail. Red Ryan was sent back to Canada and was sentenced to life in prison. A Ticket-to-Leave program awarded Red Ryan his release from prison in **1935** for good behaviour, writing the book *The Futility of Crime*, and for refusing to participate in a prison rally that took place in **1932**.

After he was released from prison, Ryan was offered jobs, was invited to meet prominent members of society and was also given an award at the Police Games to celebrate his remarkable transformation from a criminal to a regular citizen. While he had publicly become a law-abiding citizen, Red Ryan's gang started robbing banks again in **1936**. Over time, the public became suspicious and started to speculate that Ryan was involved in the crime waves at the time. Ryan became paranoid and decided to head west to rob a few banks before fleeing Canada.

On Victoria Day Weekend in **1936**, Red Ryan and his gang arrived in Sarnia dressed as railway workers. As the day was ending and stores were closing the gang entered the building and hid. 5 minutes before the store was scheduled to close the gang shot out of hiding shouting, "This is a robbery! Hands in the air!"

Two citizens entered the store while the robbery was taking place. They witnessed the hostages in danger and managed to escape without being seen to call for help at the taxi stand across the street. When police arrived, they stormed into the store and a wild gun fight erupted as hostages scrambled for cover. Ryan did not manage to escape this time.

Bizarrely, Red Ryan and his gang's bodies' were displayed naked in front of Phillips Funeral Home on Victoria Street as a deterrent for aspiring criminals. Later, his body was transported by train to Toronto's Mount Hope Cemetery without being administered the last rights by the Catholic Church.

*(Lacoste, 2018)*

## **5. Fourth and Final Stop – 124 Christina St S. Veterans Park (behind Sarnia Library)**

### Veterans Park – Sarnia Public Library, Boer War Memorial, Sarnia Cenotaph & the Lawrence House

In **1898**, Sarnia citizens petitioned town council for a free library. On June 19th, **1900**, a new library was opened on leased property. In **1903**, Andrew Carnegie offered town council \$15,000 to erect a library building on the condition that they provide a site and guarantee \$1,500 a year for library expenses.

In the early 1900's, children under the age of 12 were not allowed to use libraries. Mr. Gurd, the library board chairman, thought that this was inconsistent with the idea of a public library. In **1931**, a room for children was set aside and a story hour was developed. Sarnia was the one Ontario library that held a story hour for children.

The Sarnia Public Library is also credited as being one of the earliest collectors of Canadian art outside of the National Gallery. This collection was started during the 1920's. The Lambton County Library system began in the basement of the Sarnia Public Library. It was the first county library system established in Ontario.

*(Feeney, M. E., Cowan, D., & Fazio, G., 1980)*

Veterans Park was originally known as Wellington Park and was the only park in existence in Sarnia in **1888**, when the Board of Park Management was organized. In 1891, the park was renamed to Victoria Park after the royal monarch Queen Victoria.

The Boer War Memorial Drinking Fountain was built in **1908** with money donated primarily by the public under a campaign initiated by Boer War veterans. Damaged during the demolition of the old library, it was restored and received heritage designation in **1998**, thanks to the efforts of Patricia McLean. The memorial lists 16 names of those who fought in the Boer War from Lambton County.

Whereas, the Sarnia Cenotaph, is a much larger and more familiar war memorial that list 264 names of those who served in World War I, World War II, the Korean War, and in Afghanistan Peacekeeping. The cenotaph was first unveiled in **1921**.

A year later, a bronze statue was added of a Canadian "Tommy," a man in full uniform worn by the Canadian soldiers in World War I. The Sarnia Cenotaph was renovated and re-dedicated on **November 11th, 1955**, ten years after the conclusion of World War II.

We can also see an old cannon with origins in the **1850** Crimean War, which was purchased from the Military Reserve at Point Edward in **1879**. Known as "Big Tom," after spending over 100 years resting in this location the cannon enjoyed lakeside living when it was moved to Canatara park in **1961** in preparation for building a new public library. Until, when local historians researched the history of the cannon and understood that the move was only suppose to be temporary. They reached out to city council, military associations, and historical groups for their input and blessing to move the cannon back to Veterans Park.

In its history, the park has been a marshalling ground for troops, a gathering place to send troops off to war, and a place to honour those who fought and those we lost to war. In October **1998**, following a proposal by Mayor Mike Bradley, Sarnia City Council passed a motion endorsing that Victoria Park would be renamed "Veterans Park," to reflect the history of the

park and as a way to honour those who served. On Remembrance Day, 1988, the park was officially known as Veterans Park.

*Retrieved from Sarnia Historical Society - The Story Behind the Sarnia Cenotaph:* <http://www.sarniahistoricalociety.com/warmemorialproject/the-story-behind-the-sarnia-cenotaph/>

In **1892**, William F. Lawrence built a home on the corner of Christina and Wellington Street, which has become a fascinating landmark today. The house costs approximate \$30,000 to build in a variation of Victorian architectural variation style known as 'Queen Anne.' Inside, the home has 5 spacious bedrooms, a large alcove stairway and a tower on the third floor that served as a children's games room. From the outside, we can admire the tower, bay windows and tall chimneys.

*Retrieved from: Sarnia Heritage Committee - Heritage Building & Sites Walking Tour Map*

<http://sarnia.maps.arcgis.com/apps/MapTour/index.html?appid=9c66714169b541dcb04f5f7e6ca13fe6>

The last members of the Lawrence family to live in the home were the original builder's wife, her sister and a maid. When Mrs. Lawrence passed away in **1940**, the house was abandoned and everything was left in its place. For nearly forty years, the house was left as it was when it was occupied by the Lawrence family. In **1977**, the last surviving member of the Lawrence family donated the house to the City of Sarnia upon the condition that the city restore the home and maintain the name Lawrence.

*(Feeney, M. E., Cowan, D., & Fazio, G., 1980)*

A generous donation from the Suncor Energy Foundation enabled the City of Sarnia to fully restore the house in **1986**. The Lawrence House Centre for the Arts officially opened its doors in **2001**, providing a venue for performances, exhibitions, educational programs and special activities for all ages. But, is that all?

<http://lawrencehouse.ca/history-2/>

We are going to end the tour on a spooky note. If you are uncomfortable with ghost stories, I suggest you may want to move away from the group for this tale.

Since becoming a public building, there have been several reports of a presence, muffled voiced and footsteps heard from the attic. Staff members have said that doors will lock or unlock on their own with no explanation. Some members of staff are so convinced that Elizabeth

Lawrence's spirit is present that they say good morning and good night to her every day at work.

The elevator has shown the strangest activity. One staff member stayed overnight in the building and said the elevator moved on its own 14 times in 10 hours, yet, there is nothing physically wrong with the mechanics. Since the elevator moves so often on its own, people are encouraged not to ride it on their own.

During a Victorian Tea hosted in the house, guests reported seeing shadows running past them continuously. They perceived this odd movement of light as Elizabeth fussing over her guest dressed in familiar clothes from her lifetime.

Paranormal investigators visited the house in response to reports and brought a Lawrence family tree with them. As they walked around the home their listening devices kept flashing the names of the children. They also took photos inside the house and could see apparent white flashes in some of the pictures, despite no flash being used by the cameras.

The strangest story came from a staff member with access to all the keys for every room in the house. One day, she checked her keys as normal and discovered that one of her keys had been bent into a fish hook!

*(Lacoste, 2018)*

*Print Resources:*

*Feeney, M. E., Cowan, D., & Fazio, G. (1980). The Rapids: History and Architecture of Sarnia. Revised Edition. Typesetting Sarnia Gazette: Sarnia, Ontario, Canada.*