

Stonetown Heritage Town - St. Marys

Carved in stone and etched in history, St. Marys is known as the Stonetown. Its magnificent limestone buildings, were crafted by Scottish stone masons and embellished with a European flair. This picturesque town enveloped by river, hills and stone was first settled in the early 1840s on the bank of the Thames River and Trout Creek.

Coming to St. Marys in 1908, this former right of way of the St. Marys and Western Ontario Railway, later part of the Canadian Pacific Railway, completed the well established Grand Trunk Railway. After 80 years of activity, CPR abandoned this section of track and thus, the Riverview Walkway was developed in 1992. This paved 2.4 km path travels from the centre of town south along the Thames River to Canada's largest spring fed swimming pool, The Quarry. Along with the picturesque river, this tour will take you up and through the core area of the "Stonetown" giving you the opportunity to explore attractions along the way.

Begin your tour at the intersection of Queen and Water Streets.

1. Downtown Queen Street



Downtown St. Marys is a good place to study the vernacular architecture of 19th century Ontario. As you walk down the main street, look up to the roof lines, the windows, wood trim and other features original to many of the structures. Unique to St. Marys are the solid, limestone commercial blocks, built along the main street using local stone. The intersection of Queen and Water has a 19th century limestone building on each of the four corners. Look for bronze plaques on some of the store fronts. These buildings have been designated and the plaques provide information about their historic and architectural importance to St. Marys.

2. Timothy Eaton - 166 Queen St. E

He apprenticed in a general store in his native Ireland, and worked in another in Glen Williams, Ontario, but it was in 1856 in a log building on the banks of Fish Creek, just west of the main intersection in Kirkton, that Timothy Eaton (1834-1907) opened his first store. There, assisted by his brother James, the village postmaster, and two of their sisters. In 1860, Timothy and James moved their store operation to St. Marys, where their brother Robert was a well-established merchant. Timothy and James had a number of business ventures in St. Marys, working mostly out of rented quarters, among them the limestone building at 166 Queen Street East. In 1869, Timothy moved to Toronto, where he bought an existing dry-goods and haberdashery business at 178 Yonge Street, and proceeded to build a department-store empire and in the process revolutionize retailing in North America.

At the corner of Queen and Water Streets, turn north onto Water and walk to the green painted, steel bridge over Trout Creek.

3. Water Street Bridge

This steel truss bridge was built in 1899. From its walkway, there is a pleasant view of the Sarnia Bridge, perhaps the most picturesque trestle bridge in Southwestern Ontario, as it is joined by Trout Creek and falls over the old mill dam. On the opposite bank is Milt Dunnell Field, formerly known as the Flats, where generations of St. Marys residents have enjoyed sports and special outdoor events.



4. View of Sarnia Bridge and the Grand Trunk Trail

The original Grand Trunk Railway line to Sarnia was abandoned by the Canadian National Railway in 1989. By 1993, the Town of St. Marys had purchased the right of way through town and in 1996 a volunteer committee was formed to raise money to convert the line, including the high-level Sarnia Bridge, into a community walkway. The Grand Trunk Trail was officially opened in 1998 and largely, because of the view from the trestle bridge, has remained one of the town's most popular recreational areas.

5. Milt Dunnell Field – The Flats Renamed

Frequently flooded by the Thames River, the area of land known as the Flats, was not suitable for any permanent structure. Although the riparian rights to the land belonged to a flour mill downstream, cricket and baseball teams played here as early as 1860, with bats changing to lacrosse nets in the 1890s through 1920 when it was home to the St. Marys Alerts Lacrosse Team. As a young lad Milt Dunnell himself could evade the nickel charge at the gate to watch a referee get tossed into the river after a bad call. In 1922, Dunnell would provide the play-by-play commentary on the team's provincial championship run. Athletic competitions, agricultural fairs, firework demonstrations, as well as cultural fairs and political gatherings have been held on the Flats. Prime Minister Arthur Meighen spoke there during his 1926 federal election campaign and again in 1942 when the town celebrated their 100th anniversary of settlement.

Milt Dunnell, Milt Dunnell Field

Born on Christmas Eve 1905 on a Downie Township farm not far from St. Marys, Milt Dunnell came to be known as the "sports editor of Canada" during his more than 50 years with the Toronto Star. While he was still an infant, the Dunnells moved to St. Marys, where they lived in a modest house in the West Ward, and Milt played all the sports of the day. After graduating from St. Marys Collegiate Institute, he worked in the local post office, was a sales representative for a fruit company, wrote stories for the hometown weekly, the Journal-Argus, and became the St. Marys correspondent for the Stratford Beacon-Herald, a daily newspaper. In 1929 he took a full-time job with the Beacon-Herald and moved to Stratford, where he stayed until 1942, when he joined the Toronto Star. From Toronto he traveled the globe to cover sports, but he cherished his ties to Perth County, where in 2005, in honour of his 100th birthday, St. Marys renamed the town's athletic field Milt Dunnell Field. Milt Dunnell died on January 3, 2008 at the age of 102.



The Riverview Walkway leads from the Water Street Bridge along the creek and then beside the old millrace. It crosses Queen Street and follows the Thames River beside one of the town's most famous buildings.

6. The Opera House



The Opera House was built from St. Marys limestone in 1879 for the independent Order of Oddfellows. Its impressive architectural details and fine stonework are enhanced by the more restrained design of the two limestone commercial blocks that flank it.

The Opera House had stores at ground level, a concert hall above and the Oddfellows' lodge rooms on the top floor. In its years of activity, many plays, concerts, lectures and political rallies were held on its stage. Sir John A. MacDonald, Canada's first prime minister, campaigned here in 1891 during his last election.

The Oddfellows had difficulty keeping up with the cost of maintaining the building and eventually were forced to sell it. In 1919, the entire block became part of the St. Marys Milling Company's operations. The Opera House was used as a flour mill for 50 years and then stood derelict for more than a decade. Rescued in the mid-1980s through the intervention of the St. Marys Lions Club, its interior was rebuilt and converted into apartments and stores. The exterior retains many original features.

Thames River

The north branch of the Thames, a Canadian Heritage River, flows through St. Marys and is the heart of the town. Early economic success depended on the mills along this river. The town's prosperity was also helped by the presence of accessible limestone, taken in blocks from the river block and from quarries along the riverbanks. This limestone has provided the town with its characteristic appearance and earned it the nickname, "Stonetown."

From the Riverview Walkway, take Park Street to Cadzow Park at the corner of Church Street. You may also continue along the walkway to the Quarry, double back and continue on to Park Street.

7. The Quarry, Water Street South

Carved in stone and etched in history, limestone has been important to St. Marys since its founding. Stone from earlier quarrying operations provided building material for many of the oldest homes, churches, and commercial buildings in the

town. Today, the quarries, out of production since the 1920s, are Canada's largest outdoor spring-fed swimming pool. The depth of the water in the Quarry ranges from 20 to 25 feet deep. Deep, cool and refreshing, this swimming hole of legendary stature is a perfect destination on a hot summer day. In fact, former Prime Minister of Canada Pierre Elliot Trudeau dove off the high dive while visiting St. Marys in 1968.

8. Cadzow Park/ St. Marys Museum - 177 Church Street South



The St. Marys Museum is located in Cadzow Park, once the private grounds for the owners of this limestone house. It was built in 1854 for George Tracy, one of the town's earliest settlers. At that time, the house was by far the largest stone residence in the area and was nicknamed "Castle in the Bush." Some years later the park was given the name of Cadzow after an estate in Scotland, near the birthplace of subsequent owners of this property.

Cadzow has been a community park since 1926 and George Tracy's house has been the St. Marys Museum since 1959. It contains a fine collection of artifacts and resource materials relating to this area.

Take Church Street northward toward the downtown area. As the name suggests, several of the town's oldest churches are on this street.

9. Church Street Churches

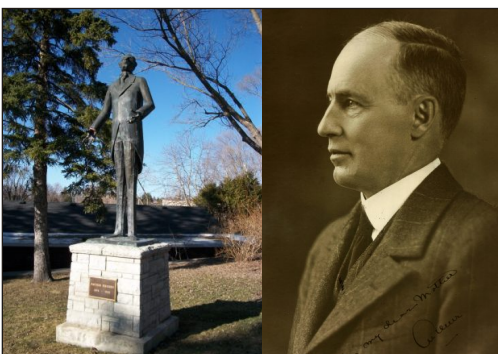
The United Church, 85 Church Street South, was built in 1879 as a Methodist Church using yellow – called "white" - Ontario brick. It replaced a smaller 1850s limestone building on the same site. A portion of the original exterior wall of this stone structure can still be seen at the back of the church. The church tower once supported a graceful spire but it was struck by lightning in the 1940s and not replaced. The interior of this church is a wonderful open space, with the view to the pulpit and magnificent organ unrestricted by pillars or partitions.

Across Elgin Street is St. James Anglican Church. The oldest portion of this church was built in the late 1850s from St. Marys limestone, a simple, rectangular building. In the mid-1880s, extensive renovations, raised the roof and added the square tower, the buttresses and the west entrance porch. The parish hall to the north was added in 1907. The grounds were landscaped by an early rector and are cared for by members of the congregation.



Continue along Church Street to Jones Street East. Lind Park will be visible to your left.

10. Lind Park/Arthur Meighen Statue



This beautiful little park was a gift to the town of St. Marys in 1934 by John Grieve Lind (1867-1947). Similar to R. Thomas Orr of Stratford, Mr. Lind as well as a successful businessman (one of the original founders of the St. Marys Cement Company) was an advocate and generous supporter of the parks in St. Marys. The downtown location and size of this park make it an ideal site for the Meighen statue. The statue of Arthur Meighen was commissioned by the Federal Government in 1967. When the statue was completed in 1969 by Montreal artist Marcel Bratstein, its impressionistic appearance was not considered appropriate for parliament Hill. It was stored in Ottawa until 1987 when it was presented to the Town of St. Marys.

Arthur Meighen

Born in Anderson, a hamlet northwest of St. Marys, Arthur Meighen (1874-1960) in 1920 became the ninth prime minister of Canada. Hoping to ensure for their children a good education, Joseph and Mary Jane (Bell) Meighen moved to 524 Elgin Street West in St. Marys, where Arthur's grandfather had been master of the town's first school. After going to North Ward Public School (since renamed Arthur Meighen Public School), Arthur attended St. Marys Collegiate where, in his final year,

he was elected secretary of the literary society, was a member of the school's debating society and earned first-class honours in mathematics, English and Latin. After graduating from the University of Toronto and Osgoode Hall Law School, Arthur was a teacher, lawyer and businessman before taking up politics as a member of the Conservative party. In addition to his alma mater in St. Marys, a school in Portage La Prairie, Manitoba, has been named for Arthur Meighen, as has a peak in the Cariboo Mountains in British Columbia, an island in the Canadian Arctic, and a federal government building in Toronto. There are two other plaques commemorating Meighen in St. Marys. In the west ward, a plaque in front of 524 Elgin Street West, and at the St. Marys Cemetery, Parks Canada has marked the Meighen gravesite with the honour due to a former prime minister. The gardens at the Stratford Shakespeare Festival also bear his name.

11. First Baptist Church

Across the street from Lind Park is another of the lovely Church Street churches, First Baptist. The Baptist congregation has been in St. Marys since the 1850s; this church has been on this site for more than a century. If you look carefully, you will find the cornerstone, laid July 1902.



Take Church Street back to Queen Street and the downtown.

12. St. Marys Town Hall – 175 Queen Street East

Fire destroyed an earlier frame Town hall on this same site in 1890. Town Council called for proposals for a new building and Toronto architect George W. Gouinlock's plans were chosen. The replacement was built at the cost of approximately \$15,000 using St. Marys limestone trimmed with imported red sandstone. The structure officially opened in June 1892.

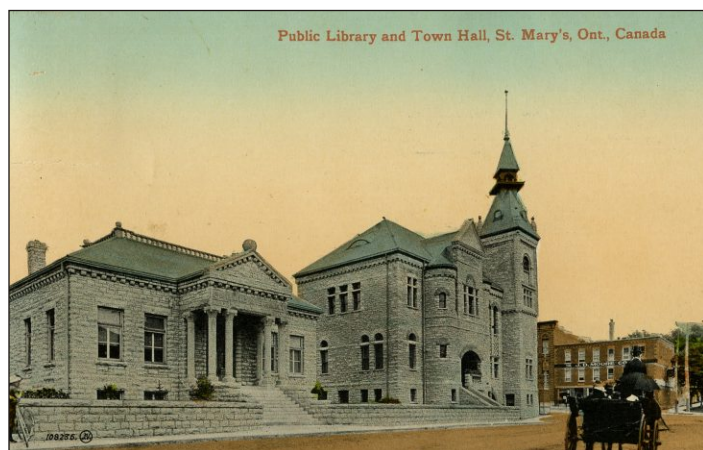
The Town hall has a variety of medieval details including its main tower with the bell chamber, stone porches, turrets and steep gables. The sandstone trim creates an interesting checkerboard pattern on the facade. It is still the administrative centre of the Town, housing the council chamber and offices for municipal officials and their support staff. There is a public gallery complete with stage on the upper floor – the perfect setting for many a “Town Hall Meeting.”

13. Public Library – 15 Church Street

The Public Library was built in 1904-05 with a \$10,000 grant from Andrew Carnegie. J.A. Humphris, a local architect was able to adapt the usual Carnegie design so that it could be built out of St. Marys limestone therefore complimenting the neighbouring Town Hall (built in 1891). An addition to the east, containing new offices and a children's area, was completed in 1988.

This concludes the St. Marys Stonetown Heritage tour.

From Queen Street travel east returning to Highway 7/19. Turn left onto Highway 7/19 and travel back Stratford.



Special thanks for information leading to the development of this tour are given to:

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St. Marys Stonetown Heritage Tour

Home of former Prime Minister
Arthur Meighen

Sarnia Bridge

Milt Dunnell Field

Tourism
ST. MARYS
Ontario

Downtown

Historic Water Tower

Pyramid Recreation Centre

Canadian Baseball Hall of Fame & Museum

East Quarry