



The Founding of ACO London

Architectural Conservancy of Ontario was founded in 1933 by concerned citizens of the province worried about the loss of heritage buildings. ACO was incorporated for “the preservation of the best existing examples of the early architecture of the Province, and for the protection of its places of natural beauty.” Today, the ACO has grown to include 25 different branches and an expanded mandate and vision with an emphasis on conservation and re-use. It also produces a province-wide magazine entitled *Acorn*.

2016 marks the 50th anniversary of the founding of ACO London, which has worked tirelessly for half a century to conserve London’s priceless built heritage. The movement to conserve and protect London’s heritage has seen victories, losses and sometimes results in between. Nevertheless, ACO London has been a visible and major partner in promoting awareness of London’s heritage and fighting to conserve our shared past and has, in the process, significantly impacted the built landscape of the city.

ACO London has encouraged and actively participated in the drive to designate outstanding heritage properties – starting with Eldon House. Since then, they helped to compile the City’s first Inventory of Heritage Resources which is constantly being updated. ACO London also actively advocated for the seven Heritage Conservation Districts designated so far. The branch has produced five publications to date – and they participate in the research, recording and archival conservation of our architectural heritage resources.

ACO London continually monitors developments, acts to avert threats to the region’s heritage architecture, and informs the community on its potential to act and conserve our architectural resources whenever possible!



South corner of Richmond and Dundas, 1940s
(Courtesy of Ivey Family London Room, London Public Library)



Elizabeth Spicer, 1981
(Courtesy of Ivey Family London Room, London Public Library)



East side of Ridout Street, 1950s
(Courtesy of Western Archives)

Potential of London as a Heritage City

By the middle of the 20th century Victorian era architecture had acquired a reputation as old fashioned and stodgy. Many buildings during this period met their demise at the wrecking ball, such as New York’s Beaux-Arts Penn Station in 1963. Conservationists in London expressed their concern that some of London’s Victorian buildings could meet a similar fate. Londoners knew the city had a unique stock of quality Victorian architecture that could be saved for future generations. The Forest City had the potential to become a veritable treasure trove of Victorian architecture and many looked to the buildings along Ridout Street as especially significant—representing one of the earliest commercial and financial ‘nodes’ of our city.

Betty Spicer and The University Women’s Club

Elizabeth “Betty” Spicer (1917-2008) was a driving force behind the founding of ACO London. A graduate of The University of Western Ontario and University of Toronto Library School, she was a member of London’s University Women’s Club. Spicer was a founding member of ACO London and served as President for some time.

She was also the founder of the London Public Library’s London Room which started in the 1970s as a small room in the main library. Her honours in the heritage community included a citation from the London and Middlesex Historical Society, the Ontario Genealogical Society London and Middlesex Region, member of the Diocese of Huron Archives Committee and was archivist for the Church of St. John the Evangelist.

Founding of Architectural Conservancy Ontario - London Region

In 1965 the fate of the Ridout Street Complex was of concern to conservation-minded citizens. The buildings—over 100 years old by the 1960s—had been poorly maintained. A restoration project was championed by the Reverend Orlo Miller, a respected local historian who inspired the University Women’s Club of London to become involved in built heritage. They obliged by making an inventory of London’s heritage buildings and were also especially interested in the historic core of the city along the Thames. As interest in the project grew, the University Women’s Club invited Professor William Goulding of the University of Toronto’s architecture faculty to deliver a speech. He suggested that London form a branch of Architectural Conservancy Ontario. Shirley and Godfrey Sprague, who belonged to ACO Toronto previously, along with Ian and Anne McKillop, drove to ACO’s head office in Toronto to ask for assistance and support in forming the London Region branch.

The London Region branch—which was the second to be formed in the province—was founded on a hot summer evening on July 14, 1966. The first meeting was held at the Middlesex Court House and included members of the London & Middlesex Historical Society, city planners, the Public Utilities Commission, architects, academics, the University Women’s Club and more. Elizabeth Spicer served as acting chair of the first meeting and the first elected officers were R.E. McKillop (President), G.W. Bartram (Vice President), Derek Newton (Treasurer), and Spicer as Secretary. She emphasized the branch’s activities would not be limited to just London, but the Middlesex region in general. The newly formed branch set about to advocate for London’s heritage through public engagement, sponsored projects, books, walking tours, and collaboration with other heritage groups in the city.