

Community Life

Rewriting history

Who really did the stone carvings on Victoria Hall?

By Suzanne Ambrose

It was George Orwell who, in his novel *1984*, gave us the Ministry of Truth, a body that freely rewrote history.

Thanks to the research of a Cobourg man, Orwell's 'prophecy' was only two years early.

For now, in 1986, local history will be rewritten, thanks to the efforts of Jim Leonard.

After comprehensive research, taking him as far away as Ottawa and Toronto, Leonard has proven that the stone carvings on the facade of Cobourg's Victoria Hall are the work of his great-great-great-uncle, Charles Thomas Thomas. The work had previously been credited to contractor and architect William Thomas.

Leonard told the Cobourg and District Historical Society at a meeting last week that The Canadian Inventory of Historic Buildings accepted his findings, with a note reading in part "I have...filed all of your information in our own research files; and from now on, at least, we'll be able to give Charles T. Thomas his full due when we write

about Victoria Hall."

Leonard said that his family had for many years believed "that Charles Thomas was contracted to do the stonework, and that he came to Cobourg from Wales, bringing with him a skilled work team and his three-year old orphaned niece, my maternal great grandmother Mary Thomas."

The family story went on to suggest that "Thomas left Cobourg and was later killed on a bridge construction project somewhere in the United States."

But with several sources identifying William Thomas as the stone cutter, Leonard decided he wanted to try to set the historical record straight. "Since I had to refute the accepted historical consensus to do this, I needed to find new primary evidence that would clearly link Charles Thomas to Cobourg and to Victoria Hall," he said.

He started with back issues of the Cobourg Star and Edwin C. Guillet's *Cobourg 1798-1948*.

Leonard said that Cobourg historian Peter Stokes had written that the architect of the hall,

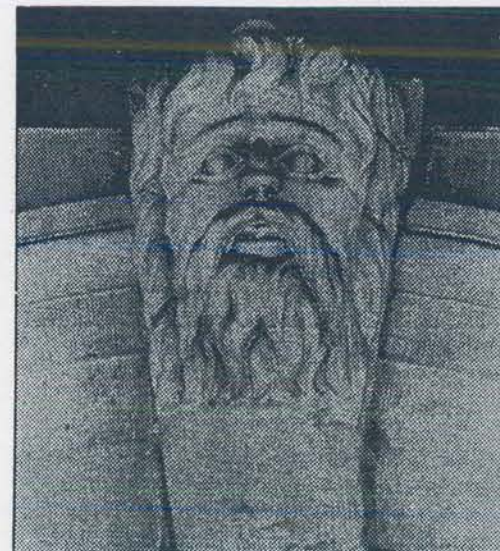


Jim Leonard

Kivas Tully, "hoped to surpass William Thomas's St. Lawrence Hall on his own Cobourg project.

"Why then would he have used William Thomas himself, to help do this?"

Leonard searched the working papers of William and David Burnet, the hall's general contractor, in the Ontario Public Archives, but the information yielded only references to "Mr.



Victoria Hall's famed gargoyle

Thomas."

Leonard said the poll book for the south ward of Cobourg, Dec. 31, 1857; Cobourg's assessment roll for 1859; and a June 1, 1859 deed between Thomas and Thomas Scott, the town postmaster, identify Thomas as a stone cutter.

But the most conclusive evidence came after Leonard checked the Ontario surrogate court records, finding a probate

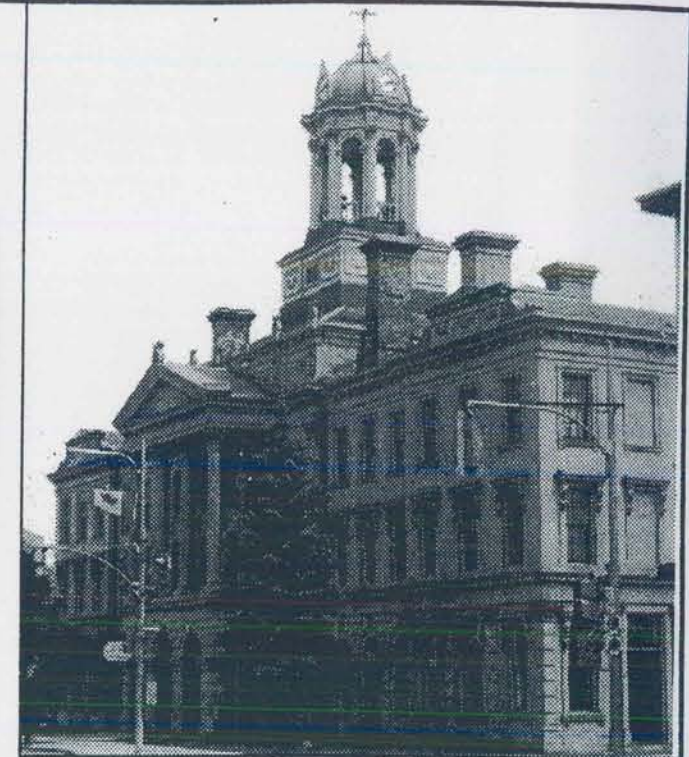
application which said Thomas, a resident of Ottawa, died in late December, 1867.

But the bonanza came for Leonard when he located Thomas's obituary in the Dec. 28 issue of the Ottawa Times.

"Mr. Thomas was...engaged as subcontractor in the erection of many important buildings on this continent. The present national monument at Queenston...was erected under his su-

pervision...so was the Town Hall in Cobourg, the latter considered to be one of the handsomest buildings in the Dominion."

The obituary also says that Thomas "was, during the erection of the Departmental Buildings in this city, Chief Superintendent of Works." Those departmental buildings, Leonard says, are the east and west blocks of the Parliament Buildings.



Victoria Hall today