

Victoria Hall file/dy

SETTING THE  
RECORD STRAIGHT

Who Did The Stone  
Carvings on Victoria Hall?

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Victoria Hall is unquestionably one of the most architecturally and historically significant buildings still standing in Canada. Few people would argue that one feature that ranks Victoria Hall among the best examples of 19th century Canadian architecture, is the fine stone carvings on its facade. If one were to look in many local history books, architectural digests, or heritage magazines for information on this aspect of its construction, one would see writers confidently awarding the noted Canadian architect William Thomas the credit for the stone work.

The purpose of this paper is to show that this claim is incorrect. The stone cutting contractor at Victoria Hall was in fact, a Welsh born stonemason by the name of Charles Thomas Thomas (1820-1867), and my great-great-great uncle.

The historical consensus crediting William Thomas with the work, has been put together in the last fifteen years or so, by restoration architect Peter John Stokes, architects Howard V. Walker and Eric Arthur, and historian Thomas Ritchie in their various writings on Cobourg and its Town Hall. Peter Stokes writes in the book Victorian Cobourg-A 19th Century Profile:

The stone cutting contractor was no less than the firm of William Thomas...which executed the elaborate ornament of Corinthian capitals...bearded heads...lyre ornaments...as well as the ashlar facings to the street facade.

Thomas Ritchie makes a similar claim in the May 1967 issue of Architecture Canada as does Howard Walker in the Feb/Mar 1984 issue of Canada Century Home magazine.

All of these written sources contradict our family history account which states that Charles Thomas was contracted to do the stone work, 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 (1854-1937). The family story goes on to say that after his work was completed, Charles Thomas left Cobourg and was later killed on a bridge construction project somewhere in the United States. Before he left



Cobourg though, he put his niece Mary under the charge of a Mrs Sarah Wright, a servant at the house of the Hon. James Cockburn in Cobourg. This is supported by data in the 1861 and 1871 Census. Mary Thomas later married Thomas J. Wark (1845-1913), second caretaker and court crier at Victoria Hall. His father was James Wark (1802-1867), the first caretaker of Victoria Hall. Thomas and Mary Wark lived in back quarters in the building and raised a large family. Among the children was my grandmother Clarice Wark-Romano (1892-1970). This family history as is, was passed down verbally to our family, by Mary Thomas-Wark herself. I decided at the outset that if this story about Charles Thomas was indeed correct, then I wanted to try to set the historical record straight, and 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.

First of all, I searched through original source material directly related to the construction of Victoria Hall. These sources however proved to be of little help since in every case when the stone contractor was mentioned, they referred to only a 'Mr Thomas'. The minutes of the Cobourg Town Council 1856 to 1859, and the Cobourg Star also for the years 1856 to 1859 housed in the Toronto Reference Library, referred in every instance to only 'Mr Thomas'. In Edwin C. Guillet's book Cobourg 1798-1948, the Cobourg Star of July 7, 1858 is quoted. It states simply that:

a vast amount of stone cutting has been accomplished...These carvings, together with the fine bearded face which forms the keystone of the arch are the work of Mr Thomas, contractor for the stone cutting, and certainly do him great credit.

As far as I can determine, the writers mentioned earlier, relied only on this Cobourg Star reference from Guillet's book, as the primary evidence in making the William Thomas claim. Because only the name 'Mr Thomas' appears, it would seem that they jumped to the conclusion that it must be the architect William Thomas, without apparently, considering the possibility that the Star



might have been referring to another 'Mr Thomas'.<sup>1</sup> They reinforced this assumption by pointing out that in his youth, William Thomas may have been an apprentice stone cutter, and so would have had the necessary background to do the work in Cobourg.

Before I began my research, I felt that this conclusion had certain flaws, and left basic questions unanswered. Why first of all, would an architect of William Thomas's recognized stature at the time, have allowed himself or his firm to work as stone cutter on a project designed by his chief rival Kivas Tully? If secondly, Tully hoped to surpass William Thomas's St Lawrence Hall on his own Cobourg project as Peter Stokes has written, why then would he have used William Thomas himself, to help do this?

I still however could not find evidence directly related to the building of Victoria Hall, that could prove my point. I then decided to search in the Ontario Public Archives to see what original evidence it might have on Cobourg's Town Hall. I came across the working papers of William and David Burnet, general contractors for the construction of Victoria Hall. Among their notes were two receipts signed by "Wm & D Burnet" for payment to "Mr Thomas... on account of stone construction at Town Hall building". They were dated October 8, 1857 and September 11, 1858, and for 114 pounds and 800 dollars respectively. There was also a letter from John Worthington of Toronto, the Cleveland free stone supplier, written to the Burnets, and dated May 7, 1859. Only one direct reference was made to the stone contractor when Worthington asked, "has Thomas finished up his work, how does his account stand?". The wording of this letter would suggest that this 'Mr Thomas' had a working association with John Worthington. I also discovered an 1859 ledger recording payment on account, to "Mr Thomas for cut stone gate piers". Needless to say I was disappointed since even in the Burnet files there was reference only to a 'Mr Thomas'.

The available evidence on the construction of Victoria Hall was simply too sketchy and incomplete to be conclusive in my study. But recently I



have discovered new evidence although not directly related to Victoria Hall, that does provide a full name reference to Charles Thomas and linking his name to Cobourg, as well as new evidence that links him to the building of Victoria Hall. Firstly, three sources confirm that Charles Thomas lived in Cobourg, and only between the years 1857 to 1859; exactly the period when the stone work was being done. They also confirm that while in Cobourg, his occupation was stonemason. The Poll Book for the South Ward of Cobourg dated December 31, 1857 is the first of these. It lists:

C.T. Thomas/builder/Covert

The second is the Assessment Roll of the Town of Cobourg for the year 1859. It lists him in the West Ward as:

Charles T. Thomas/aged 39/stone cutter/  
householder/King St

It also lists him in the South Ward as:

C.T. Thomas/aged 39/stone cutter/  
freeholder/Ontario St S

Charles Thomas does not appear on the 1856 Assessment Roll, nor does he appear on the Census for 1861. The third of these sources linking Thomas to Cobourg, is a deed made between him and Thomas Scott, the Town Postmaster. It was registered on June 1, 1859 and begins with the statement:

Charles Thomas, Thomas of the Town of Cobourg  
in the County of Northumberland and marble cutter  
of the first part...

It records him and his wife Susan<sup>2</sup>, selling their Ontario St South property to Thomas Scott for 270 dollars. This sale was presumably made when Charles Thomas was ready to leave Cobourg and his work completed.

The most conclusive evidence I found was in the Ontario Public Archives. It proves that Charles Thomas was a subcontractor at Victoria Hall during its construction. Knowing that Thomas was accidentally killed sometime after leaving Cobourg, I decided to search the Ontario Surrogate Court records on microfilm in the Archives, assuming that he might have relocated somewhere else in Ontario and perhaps left a will. I did not find Thomas's will, but in the



Surrogate Court Clerk's Application Register, I did come across a Probate Application listing:

Charles Thomas, Thomas/builder/having resided in  
Ottawa/dying on or about December 26, 1867/widow,  
Susan M. Thomas

Now at least I knew where he relocated, and the date of his death.

With this newly found information I was then able to find a death notice and even an obituary. In the Ottawa Citizen for January 3, 1868, I discovered:

THOMAS-At Quincy, Illinois on Christmas Day.  
Charles Thomas, Thomas formerly of this city.

Although only a death notice, it does at least substantiate our family history which states that he died somewhere in the United States.<sup>3</sup>

But in the Ottawa Times for December 28, 1867, I located this detailed obituary. (copy enclosed) It clearly states that Charles T. Thomas was a stonemason and builder, and most importantly, that he was a subcontractor responsible for some aspect of the construction of the Town Hall in Cobourg. It is fair to conclude that he was the stone cutting contractor, considering what the Assessment Roll, deed, and Poll Book list as his occupation while in Cobourg.

Charles Thomas must have been well established and skilled in his trade considering the significance and scale of the projects he worked on. For example, the Departmental Buildings mentioned in the obituary, are the East and West Blocks of the Parliament Buildings in Ottawa. Thomas's firm on this project, Jones, Haycock and Clark, won tender to build the Departmental Buildings in November 1859. Since there is no record of Charles Thomas being in Cobourg after 1859, it would seem likely that he left Cobourg that year, and moved directly to Ottawa to begin work on these buildings as Superintendent of Works.<sup>4</sup>

The obituary lists his employer in London, England as 'ubit & Co'. This



was probably meant to read 'Cubitt & Co', which was one of the most important contracting firms in Great Britain in Victorian times.

The erection of Brock's Monument under the supervision of Charles Thomas according to the obituary, could be a new source of confusion since architect William Thomas designed it. One must keep the roles of the two Thomas s' separate. While William Thomas was the architect, Charles Thomas was a subcontractor.

The stone contracting firm for Brock's Monument was Worthington Brothers of Toronto; the same firm that supplied the stone for the building of Victoria Hall, as mentioned earlier. Charles Thomas must have established his working association with Worthington's on this project which was started in 1852; the same year the obituary says Thomas came to Canada.

The obituary is perhaps the key piece of original evidence in my study, since it very strongly suggests that Charles Thomas was the stone cutting contractor at Victoria Hall and not William Thomas as previously believed. I submitted my findings to the Canadian Inventory of Historic Buildings in Hull, Quebec at their request. This was their response:

The Ottawa Times obituary notice is...a happy find, and seems to set the matter to rest. I have...filed all of your information in our own research files; from now on, at least, we'll be able to give Charles T. Thomas his full due when we write about Victoria Hall.



The OTTAWA TIMES

Saturday, December 28, 1867

page 2 column 5

Obituary Notice-

A short time since it became our painful duty to record a sad accident to our late fellow townsman, Mr Charles T. Thomas, which rendered necessary the amputation of a leg. Subsequent to the amputation he suffered very greatly, and afterwards a fever set in which ended in death on Christmas Day. The remains will be brought to this city for interment, arriving next Tuesday morning. The funeral will be attended by the Masons and members of the St George's Society, of which due notice will be given.

The deceased gentleman was, during the erection of the Departmental Buildings in this city, Chief Superintendant of Works, under Messrs. Jones, Haycock and Co., and in that capacity earned for himself a high reputation for zeal and integrity. He was a skilled and experienced stone mason, several years of his life having been passed in the employ of Messrs. Ubit and Co., the eminent contractors of London, England.

Mr Thomas was for sometime Superintendant of Public Works under the Imperial Government of Bermuda, which place he left for Canada about the year 1852; since then and up to the moment of the sad accident resulting in his death, he was engaged as subcontractor in the erection of many important buildings on this continent. The present national monument at Queenston reared by a grateful people to the memory of the 'Gallant Brock', was erected under his supervision, so was the Montreal Bank and Town Hall in Cobourg, the latter considered to be one of the handsomest buildings in the Dominion. The subject of our notice was in every respect an excellent man. In business he was strictly correct in all his transactions; as a husband and father, most affectionate, as a philanthropist, his peer was not to be found in this city. In his death the St George's Society experience the loss of a most indefatigable member, and with us, they mourn over the sad event which has removed him from our intercourse, and deeply sympathize with his bereaved widow and afflicted family.



## NOTES

- 1 T. Ritchie does this in his article on William Thomas in the May 1967 issue of Architecture Canada, and even goes so far as to suggest that Wm Thomas also designed Victoria Hall:

A somewhat similar building which also remains in use, was designed by Thomas for the Town of Cobourg. This building is the Town Hall, also called Victoria Hall....The design of Victoria Hall has been variously attributed to William Thomas and to Kivas Tully. There is no doubt that Thomas was associated with the building, since the local paper in 1858 noted the 'carvings...together with a fine bearded face...are the work of Mr Thomas, contractor for the stone cutting...

- 2 Susan Mary Thomas, wife of Charles Thomas Thomas; born 1815 died October 12, 1872 in Ottawa
- 3 An excerpt from the Quincy, Illinois Daily Herald dated October 27, 1867 gives details of Charles Thomas's fatal accident:

ACCIDENT ON THE BRIDGE- We are pained to learn that Mr. C.T. Thomas, superintendent of masonry in the employ of the Quincy Railroad Bridge Company, met with a severe accident yesterday afternoon at the abutment on the Missouri side. He was superintending the raising of one of the largest rock there by means of a derrick, which broke near the top, and a portion of it fell upon his leg, breaking it below the knee in three places, and dislocating his ankle. He was conveyed to his boarding house, on York Street, between Third and Fourth streets, where he is receiving good medical attendance. We sincerely sympathize with the sufferer, who is regarded as an excellent mechanic, and who, in the discharge of his duty, met with this painful accident.

The Daily Herald for December 27, 1867 writes:

Mr C.T. Thomas...died about midnight last Tuesday...For some time the patient seemed improving after the amputation, and it was not until a very few days before his death that real danger was apprehended. His remains were started for Canada, his former residence, on last Wednesday in the charge of Mr Alexander McGraw, who is now in charge of masonry work on the Mississippi River bridge.



- 4 The Ottawa City Directories for 1863, 1864-5 and 1866 list 'C.T. THOMAS, builder and contractor, on Wellington St near Elgin; Parliament Hill.'

In the National Archives, Ottawa I discovered a contract made between Charles Thomas Thomas and the Ottawa Department of Public Works, signed June 1862, to repair winter damage to a dam on the Rideau Canal. Thomas tendered several submissions for work to the Department between 1862 and 1866 for such projects as construction of a cottage at Rideau Hall and repair of two bridges on the Rideau Canal, according to Public Works files.