

Ghost Buildings: Grain Elevators

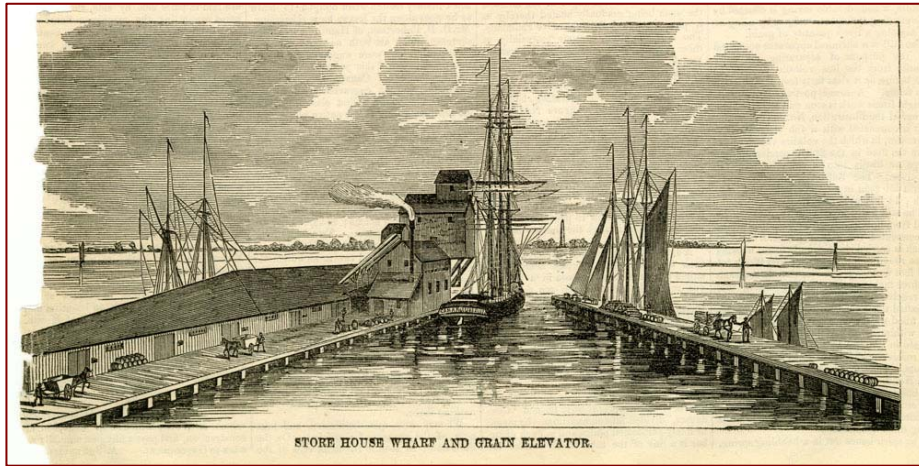


Gooderham & Worts' grain elevator at its Victorian peak, 1896

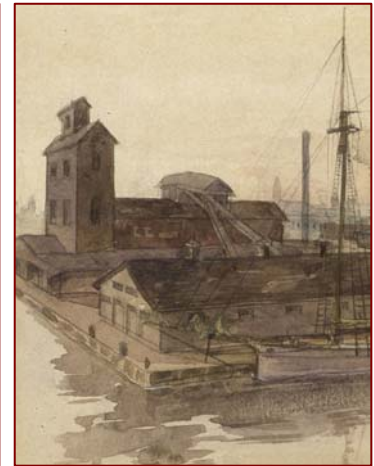
DHD

Over time, Gooderham & Worts evolved from a windmill in the wilderness to a major distillery and briefly a Great War industry. As the size and functions of the business changed, so did the physical fabric of the site. This is the first of an occasional series devoted to buildings that have disappeared, but deserve to be remembered.

Grain elevators were iconic North American structures, celebrated by no less an architectural superstar than Le Corbusier as “primary forms” in his 1923 manifesto, *Vers une architecture (Towards a New Architecture)*. Before the grain elevator started sprouting across the great prairies alongside probing railways in the 1880s, it had popped up along the shores of great rivers and Great Lakes at major trans-shipment points between water and rail. The humble grain elevator represented, in Le Corbusier and other modernists’ view, the ultimate in form-follows-function, stripped-down, utilitarian architecture.



Gooderham & Worts' grain elevator, 1863

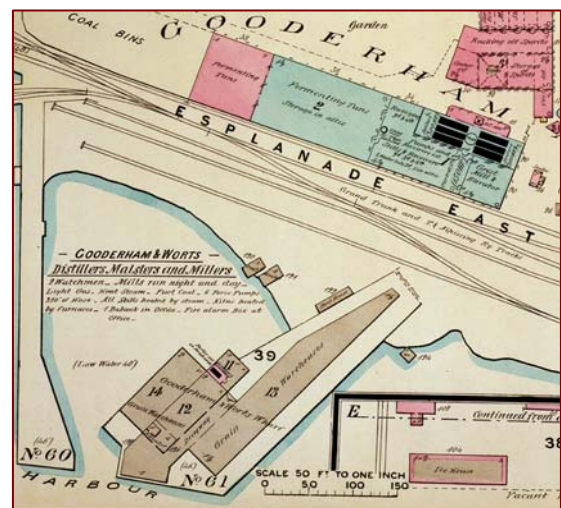


TPL Grain Elevator, 1884 DHD

The grain elevator came to Toronto in the 1860s, with Gooderham & Worts being among the first – perhaps *the* first – to build one. Prior to 1860, the company – like others across the city – had relied on low storehouses lining its wharf (G&W's first wharf and storehouse was added in the mid-1840s). Unlike the railways, such as the Great Western in Hamilton and the Grand Trunk in Toronto, Gooderham & Worts' new elevator was for its own use: to handle the mammoth influx of corn and other grains necessary for making whisky. Originally, David Roberts, Sr.'s new Stone Distillery of 1859-'60 was equipped to accept grain from both ships (at the grain elevator) and from railway cars (directly at the mill).

Details about the operation of G&W's first grain elevator are sketchy. The reporter for the *Canadian Illustrated News (Hamilton)*, who lavished attention on other parts of the new distillery, gave short shrift to wharf operations, stating simply that the elevator buildings existed and were capable of storing 80,000 bushels of grain. D. D. Robertson's April 1863 drawing for the *Canadian Illustrated News (Hamilton)* shows a timber-frame, multi-storey "elevator" perched at the end of the main wharf ready to unload grain from a waiting ship; a building with chimney housing the steam engine; a long, low storage building; and workers leading horse-drawn carts back and forth between wharf and Stone Distillery mill. The mill at the east end of the Stone Distillery was, in fact, fed by both ships (as shown here) and Grand Trunk Railway cars, (as shown in a 1918 photograph taken from the grain elevator).

This first grain elevator seems to have been used at least until the mid-1880s. The 1880 Goad's map provides a few more details - that the steam engine was 15 horsepower and set into a brick arch; the elevator rose five storeys; and a small harbour was created by a western pier stretching from the bottom of Parliament Street. Blatchley's 1884 painting shows a coal shed east of the elevator and the grain elevator looking much as it did twenty years earlier.



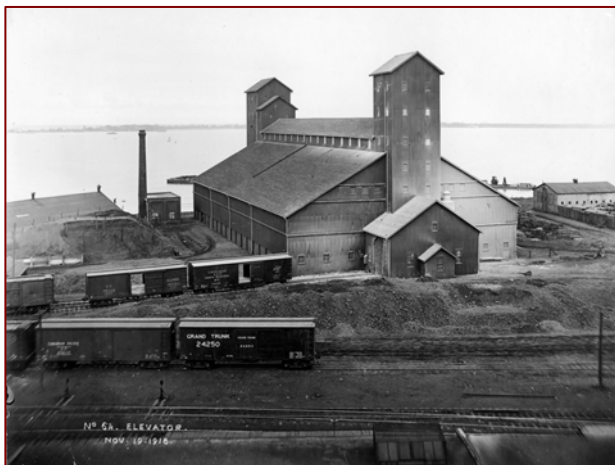
Grain elevator, 1880 Goad's map CTA

Although no plans for Gooderham & Worts' grain elevator have survived, it probably operated much as [Joseph Dart's original elevator](#), built in 1842 at Buffalo. By 1863, in fact, Buffalo was the largest grain port in the world and had 27 wooden grain elevators along its waterfront. Dart's great idea was to use a steam-powered continuous conveyor belt containing small buckets (like that found inside Gooderham & Worts' mill) to unload ships directly. (Earlier, ships were unloaded the hard way: on the backs of mill workers.) He created a "marine elevator leg" that could be swung out over the ship and raise the grain. At the top of the elevator, the grain could be weighed and dumped into a distributor that would direct the grain into the appropriate spout and down into the pre-selected storage bin. The elevator revolutionized grain handling in Buffalo and about twenty years later in Toronto.

By [1890](#), G&W's modest 1860s grain elevator had been replaced by the eight-storey elevator, 280-foot-long building shown on the 1896 chromolithograph at the top of this article. In the 1890s, the elevator was still supplied by both rail and ship, but by the Great War, when the distillery was transformed into [British Acetones](#), grain was received only by rail. Col. A. E. Gooderham's final staff report on wartime operations, provides the best, but still brief, description of grain elevator operations:

The granary or grain elevator is also of corrugated iron and timber construction, and is situated on the bay front, west of the coal shed. The railroad cars may be run on to a ramp under the building, and the grain is then elevated to a horizontal conveyor, running the length of the building. The conveyor discharges the grain into the various bins, from which it is hauled to the mill. The grain is unloaded directly at the mill unless the storage bins there are full, in which case the surplus is taken at the elevator. There is at the granary a storage capacity of from eight hundred thousand to one million bushels, and at this time [May 1st 1917] there are about five thousand bushels in store there.

During the war, over two million bushels of corn were received and processed by British Acetones at the Gooderham & Worts site. At the end of the war, the photographer hired to document British Acetones captured several views not found anywhere else, including a view of the grain elevator from the north (earlier views show the complex from the south, lake side), and interior views showing machinery, such as the [car hauling and unloading equipment](#) at ground level and the distributor and conveyor belt stretching the length of an upper floor delivering grain to bins below.



After the war, the Toronto Harbour Commission returned to implementing its ambitious 1912 waterfront development plan. This involved dramatically extending the shoreline south of Gooderham & Worts. Sometime between 1926 and 1937, the grain elevator disappeared from the landscape ... and modern memory.

According to the *Canadian Illustrated News (Hamilton)* of April 18, 1863, the first grain elevator on the Toronto waterfront was started by the Grand Trunk Railway in fall 1862. If this is the case, the G&W elevator predated it by two to three years. The 100-foot railway elevator was considerably larger (200,000 bushels) and had a different purpose: transportation rather than manufacturing.

A number of articles have already discussed another ghost building, the 1832 windmill that disappeared in the early 1860s, leaving only traces of a foundation commemorated by a brick arc in Distillery Lane.

For a brief history of Canadian grain elevators see The Canadian Encyclopedia. The focus is on prairie grain elevator, but the concepts are similar to waterfront structures.

Although no wooden grain elevators have survived along the Toronto waterfront, two of their concrete successors have: the silos of the Canada Malting at the foot of Bathurst Street, and of the Victory Soya Mills at the foot of Parliament Street.

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