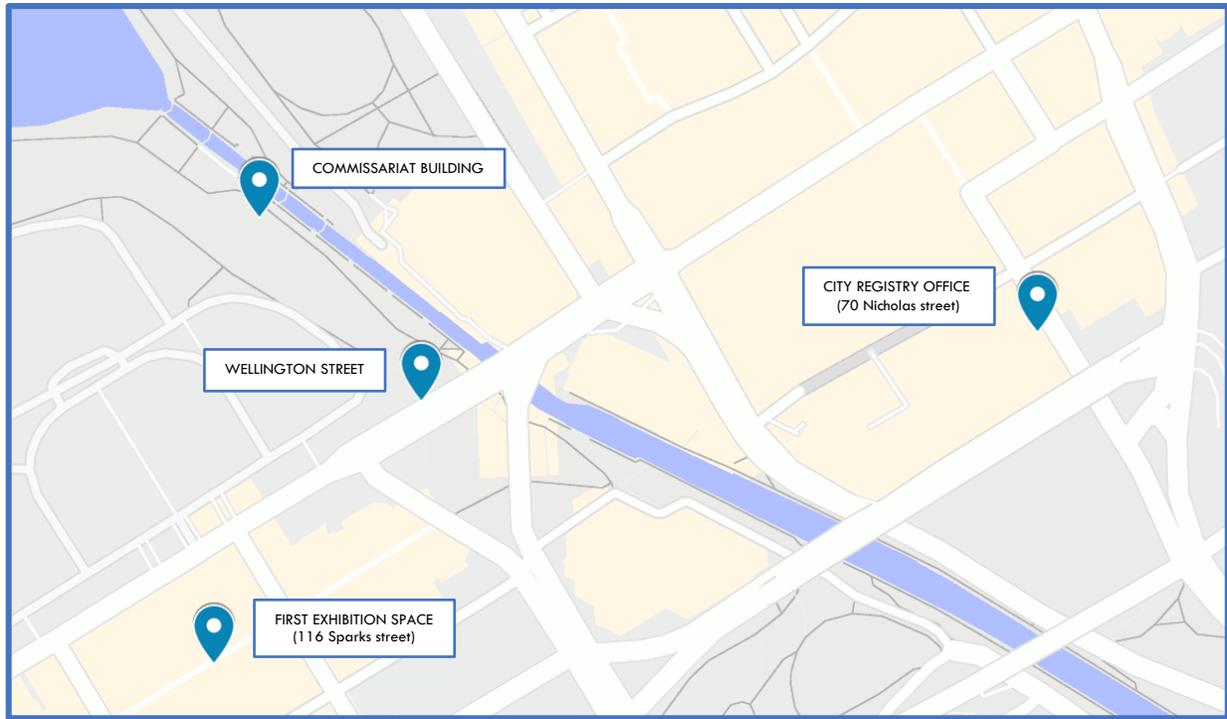


City History Hunt: The Evolution of the Bytown Museum



First Exhibition Space (116 Sparks street)

In 1898, a group of women from Ottawa decided it was important to preserve the history of Ottawa and Canada. They joined together to create the Women’s Canadian Historical Society of Ottawa (WCHSO). The WCHSO was the only historical society established and managed entirely by women of the twenty founded in Ontario between 1869 and 1900. Members worked to establish Ottawa as a respected national symbol, to construct a local identity despite Ottawa’s residents being geographically, historically, ethnically, religiously, and linguistically divided, and to include women in the history of the area.

“Lone Exhibition”, their first exhibit, was put on at 116 Sparks street in May 1899. The artefacts were a collection of loaned items by members and the general public. The theme of this and the three following exhibits were a celebration of the area’s early settlers and had similar contents due to their reliance on donations.



Figure 1: 116 Sparks street from 1955 used as the Center Theatre (City of Ottawa Archives, MG393-NP-34657-1)



City Registry Office (70 Nicholas street)

The WCHSO found a home for their collection in 1917 at the Old Registry Office. World War One allowed the members of the WCHSO to convince the City of Ottawa that its citizens needed an institution that would preserve and remind them of their rich history. This aided them in obtaining the building.

The women used their prominence in society to conduct the necessary repairs and cleaning, including garnering volunteer inmates from the adjacent jail to paint and decorate the building. The WCHSO's third exhibition marked the opening of the Bytown Historical Museum on October 25, 1917.



Figure 2: Four members of the WCHSO outside the old City Registry Office in 1926 (Bytown Museum, P4315b)

Initially, the WCHSO was greatly involved in writing and speaking about the history of Ottawa and the surrounding areas. However, by 1934 their efforts were mostly put towards the collection and preservation of artefacts for display at the museum, leaving men to publish and lecture at their meetings. This coincided with the growing discrediting of the WCHSO due to the fact that it was solely run by women, especially by the Bytown Pioneer Association, along with the masculinization of a field that was slowly being managed more by the government.

Commissariat Building

On June 27, 1952, the WCHSO officially welcomed visitors at the new location of the Bytown Museum in the historic Commissariat building along the Ottawa Locks of the Rideau Canal. The Commissariat, built as a storehouse during the construction of the Rideau Canal, allowing the museum to expand. The building continues to be the oldest stone building in Ottawa and the Bytown Museum's best and biggest artefact.



In 1956, men were allowed to join the society and it was renamed the Historical Society of Ottawa the following year. The Historical Society of Ottawa ceased management of the Bytown Museum in 2003 and has since been a not-for-profit charity organization managed by a Board of Directors.



Figure 3: Image of the Bytown Museum from a postcard in 1969 (Bytown Museum, P1851)



Wellington Street

Beginning in 1982, Parks Canada, who had taken ownership of the building in 1972, performed maintenance on the building to ensure its safety and longevity. During this period, the Bytown Museum was temporarily relocated to a building along Wellington street. The Bytown Museum resumed its use of the Commissariat building three years later in 1985.



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