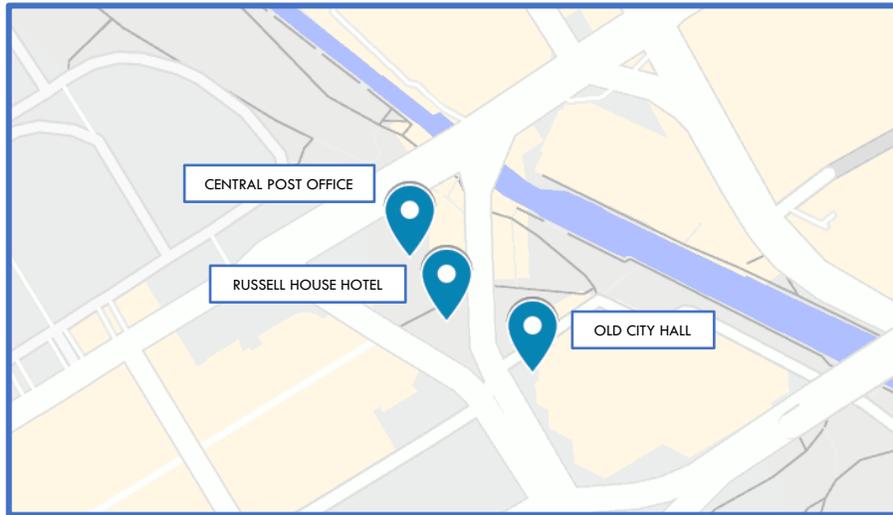


City History Hunt: Confederation Square's Fires



Central Post Office (National War Memorial)

This location was home to the Central Post Office between 1876 and 1938. The fire began around 8pm on January 4th, 1904. It is believed to have begun due to faulty electrical parts. The proximity of the Post Office to other buildings on Sparks street lead to fear that the fire may spread, especially to the nearby Russell House Hotel, however the other buildings were spared. The building was repaired after the fire but was torn down in 1938 to build the National War Memorial in its place. In 1938, a new post office was constructed at Elgin and Sparks to contribute to the redevelopment of Confederation Square.



Figure 1: The Russell House Hotel in 1927 (Bytown Museum, 2014.004.01.99.01)

Russell House Hotel (Confederation Square)

The Russell House Hotel was a staple of Ottawa's social life, holding dinners hosted by Prime Ministers. Both Prime Minister Wilfred Laurier and Sir Mackenzie Bowell resided in the hotel. It was the main stopping point for tourists and Ottawans alike until the opening of the Chateau Laurier in 1912, however it remained in operation until 1925.



Figure 2: Russell House Hotel after the 1928 fire
(Bytown Museum, P3267)

In April of 1928, a fire began on the first floor and burned through to the next morning. The fire had spread throughout the building by early morning. Water from extinguishing the fire left the ruins of the walls covered in ice and there was widespread fear the walls would fall onto the street and pedestrians. The demolition of the building had already been planned prior to the fire, but what was left after the fire was fully demolished shortly after the fire, along with the attached Russell Theatre.

Old City Hall (National Arts Centre)

The Old City Hall took over the building from Nicholas Sparks' first market building in Lowertown, the West Ward Market. The second floor housed City Hall while the first floor held one of Ottawa's fire brigades. The fire of March 31st, 1931 broke out around 9:30pm. The fire brigade lost valuable time as they initially thought it to be an April Fool's Day prank when alerted. Five firemen were trapped when a floor collapsed but were rescued before water flooded the entire room. Despite the major damage and quick spread of fire, no valuable financial records were lost. However, engineering instruments and plans, along with the medical officer's entire library was lost to the fire.



Figure 3: Old City Hall and Ottawa's fire brigade
(Library and Archives Canada / C-002185)

It was soon decided that the building would be torn down to save the renovation costs. For years, the various offices of City Hall would be temporarily located throughout the city until it found its place along Elgin street where it has remained since 1958. Currently, the National Arts Centre on the site of the Old City Hall.



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