

THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

There should be a new life for the old Hanrahan's Hotel



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For over a century, Hanrahan's has stood on Barton East, three blocks from James Street North. Billie Holiday sang here. The Tragically Hip and Carole Pope played here. Evelyn Dick stayed here. But for the Hanrahans, the family memories stretch further back.

"So much history in that building!" says Laura Hanrahan, whose family wants to see the hotel repurposed. Laura and her siblings Sharon, Tom, and Tony are the great-grandchildren of local businessperson Thomas A. Hanrahan. The three-storey hotel at Barton and Catharine is his legacy.

Thomas and his brother John were seasoned hoteliers in prosperous, late-Victorian Hamilton. The Hanrahan brothers owned two establishments on King Street East. Then, much like today's entrepreneurs — the owners of the new businesses that have opened in Barton Village in the last few years — Thomas made the move to Barton. He bought a railway hotel called the Mechanics' Hotel and built a new one, calling it the Hotel Hanrahan.

In 1908, the Hamilton Herald ran a glowing review: "One of the leading and first class hotels of Hamilton . . . The building is a handsome three-storey brick structure which has just recently been completed and which possesses every modern and up-to-date improvement. There are about thirty well-lighted and spacious rooms, furnished in a most tasteful manner . . . The place is a very popular one and a large patronage is continually enjoyed."

For decades, Laura Hanrahan says, the Hotel Hanrahan doubled as a family home. "Our father, Thomas Hanrahan, grew up in the hotel as a young boy along with his parents, his sister Pat, our great-aunt Anne, and our great-grandparents."

Another resident and family notable was Judge J. Arthur Hanrahan, the founder's youngest son. Patrick Brode, author of *Unholy City: Vice in Windsor, 1950*, calls him "a compelling figure." In his youth, says grandson Peter Duffus, Arthur was self-educated due to illness. A visiting Grand Trunk Railway executive inspired him to become a speed-typing champion. He became a Windsor court reporter, then a magistrate, despite having no formal legal training. In 1957, Judge Hanrahan was the only Canadian appointed to the UAW's new Public Review Board.

When founder Thomas Hanrahan died in 1915, the funeral began at his hotel before moving to St. Mary's Cathedral. His widow Mary ran the business with their son Joe, the Hanrahans' grandfather. Laura's charismatic father Thomas became a stockbroker, not a hotelkeeper. "My grandparents sold it in 1950 to a hotel company out of Buffalo that promised to keep the name."

As a tavern, Hanrahan's diversified into classic Steeltown grit. There was a neon sign. It sponsored sports teams, hosted beloved musicians like Billie Holiday, Dallas Harms, Tom Wilson. Marci's Bakery, now one of the city's fastest growing companies, spent a year using the tavern's kitchen.

Now John Barton Investments plans to tear down the hotel to build a commercial building, townhouse condos on the brownfield behind it. The city wanted adaptive reuse, but the developer claims it's beyond help. A demolition permit is pending.

When Paul Wilson wrote about Hanrahan's this fall, the stories poured in. Yes, in recent years it was a strip club. But let's not hold Hanrahan's exotic-dancing phase against it. Mills Hardware was Maxim's before Thier+Curran converted it into today's performance space. Now that the Broadview Hotel has opened in Toronto, strip club Jilly's is just a memory.

And for Hamilton developers, remediation is par for the course. Historic gems like LIUNA Station, the Lister Block, the Royal Connaught, and Westinghouse HQ were derelict for years, sometimes decades.

I call on Councillor Jason Farr to stop Hanrahan's from meeting the fate of the Connolly.

Adaptive reuse strikes an elegant balance between old and new. It's green. It's good business. It suits our city. Accolades come to firms like Core Urban and Cobalt Connects who rehabilitate buildings in need of some TLC, like King James or the former Hotel Hamilton. And Hanrahan's is an important part of the Barton streetscape.

Jeremy Freiburger of Cobalt Connects has completed five adaptive reuse projects with no formal heritage protection. "In all cases," he says, "retaining the existing building was the most cost effective way to build affordable space. We also love the embedded narrative that comes with legacy infrastructure."

John Granger, Director of Development for the Drake Hotel Properties, believes in adding to "the existing bones of historic properties." He says, "There is always character in a historic property that we are interested in revitalizing . . . We find there is something in an existing community and neighbourhood that has additional appeal — character is there that builds up over time and can't be fabricated. This enable[s] a best of both worlds scenario — appreciation for the past while bringing in a new and exciting future."

I asked local heritage mason Jason Schubert for his take on Hanrahan's. "It's gorgeous," he said. "It was properly built. This could be an awesome showpiece."

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