Keys to “The Padlock”: W.G. Storm’s Cast-Iron Façade for Rice Lewis & Son, Hardware Merchants

by Linda Denesiuk

The Rice Lewis & Son hardware store, nicknamed “The Padlock,” was a prominent landmark on King Street East in late-19th century Toronto (figures 1, 2). Designed by the well-known Toronto architect William George Storm (1826-1892), the store, with its distinctive curved cast-iron façade, is an interesting example of Victorian commercial architecture and a major work in Storm’s œuvre. Although the façade was demolished in the early 20th century, a wealth of documentary material is available for its study. In addition to a number of photographs and engravings, there are more than one hundred architectural drawings ranging from hasty pencil sketches on scraps of paper to annotated full-scale drawings and finished presentation watercolours. A variety of sources is also available on the history of the Rice Lewis & Son business. Together, these materials provide an opportunity to study the store’s unique façade and to examine the complex relationship between a business infrastructure and an architect’s design.
Figure 1. King Street East, c. 1898, with the Rice Lewis & Son hardware store flying the flag. (Art Works on Toronto [Toronto: W.H. Carre & Co., 1898; reprint, Toronto: Balantyre Books, 1984], pl. 14)
Rice Lewis & Son, which became one of Toronto's most successful hardware businesses in the late 19th century, had modest beginnings. In 1846 Rice Lewis, in partnership with John J. Evans, purchased the already-established hardware business of S. Scott & Co. located in the Wellington Building at 52-54 King Street East, on the northeast corner at Toronto Street. The business was renamed Rice Lewis & Co. A sign in the shape of a padlock hung above the door and a large padlock sign stood on the sidewalk in front of the store; the business took its nickname, "The Padlock," from these signs.

In 1853 Evans retired from the partnership and Lewis's eldest son became a partner. The business was renamed Rice Lewis & Son and a period of expansion began. In 1860 the store next door, also part of the Wellington Building, was purchased. During the 1860s, the street-level façades of both stores were remodelled with metal-framed and -arched plate glass fronts.

In 1877, two long-time employees, Arthur Brindley Lee and John Leys, Jr., assumed control of the business. Lee and Leys initiated a more aggressive approach to business and Rice Lewis & Son enjoyed a period of remarkable growth. Although the store's location was good, many prestigious stores on King Street East were closer to Yonge Street. Some time after 1877 Lee and Leys decided to move the business west from its original location, to be nearer the bustle and traffic of Yonge Street. The plans for the move began with the leasing of the Leslie Brothers Building at 30-32 King Street East, at the northeast corner of Globe Lane. The Leslie Brothers Building, constructed before 1836, was plain and somewhat decrepit; its primary value appears to be the land it occupied.

In 1878, Lee and Leys hired the architectural firm of Henry Langley, Charles Langley, and Edmund Burke to construct a three-storey brick warehouse on Globe Lane, directly behind the Leslie Brothers Building. Construction proceeded quickly and the move from the old warehouse took place within months. By the late 1880s Lee and Leys were ready to demolish the Leslie Brothers Building and construct a new store in its place. While details concerning the selection of an architect for this project are unknown, their decision to hire William George Storm was not surprising.

Storm was a well-known architect who had worked on some of Toronto's most celebrated buildings. Although best known for his religious, institutional, and residential buildings, Storm also accepted many commissions for smaller, less prestigious projects, including commercial structures, storefronts, and alterations to existing store façades. These minor commissions kept his practice busy and appear not to have tarnished the reputation that he had earned from his major projects. Storm enjoyed the respect of his peers and, upon the incorporation of the Ontario Association of Architects, was elected its first president.
Storm was therefore a solid choice as the architect for the new Rice Lewis & Son store. Not only was he well-known and well-respected, he was also experienced in commercial architecture. Perhaps most importantly, his clients possessed first-hand knowledge of his work; some years earlier Storm had renovated the home of Arthur Brindley Lee.

The Rice Lewis & Son commission consisted of two distinct but related projects. A five-storey store was to be built on the site of the Leslie Brothers Building, and the recently constructed three-storey warehouse was to receive two additional storeys. A narrow delivery lane between the store and the warehouse was to be maintained at ground level, but the two buildings were to be joined on the second through fifth floors. The warehouse renovations were fairly straightforward and offered Storm few design opportunities. The store project, however, was an entirely different case.

Storm offered Lee and Leys presentation watercolours for two dramatically different store façades. Although neither is dated, they must have been prepared between 1884 and the first months of 1887. One design shows a flat stone façade divided into three bays (figure 3). The ground floor is dominated by large windows with stained-glass insets. Although various decorative devices such as relieving arches, carved colonnettes, elaborate mouldings, and a gabled dormer window are employed, the overall effect is solid and sombre. The steep roof diminishes the effect of the five-storey elevation and the windows of the upper storeys are quite small.

Figure 3. Presentation watercolour by William George Storm of the rejected design for the Rice Lewis & Son hardware store. (Archives of Ontario, J.C.B. and E.C. Horwood Collection, C 11-757-8-1, 77)

7 The date of the building is given in Robertson, Landmarks of Toronto, vol. 3 (1893; reprint, Belleville, Ont.: Mika, 1974), 57. For a photograph of the building, c. 1867(?), and the extreme narrowness of Globe Lane that separated it from the Globe Building, see Metropolitan Toronto Reference Library Baldwin Collection photograph T 12612.

8 A construction tender was issued in The Globe on 21 August 1878. Langley, Langley & Burke also tendered the sale of the cast iron front and the windows from the old warehouse in The Globe on 14 January 1879.


10 See, for example, the drawings in the Horwood Collection: C 11-721, C 11-788, C 11-731, C 11-736, C 11-737, C 11-751, C 11-748, C 11-770, C 11-781, C 11-713, C 11-714, and C 11-786. Two of his commercial buildings in Toronto still stand, a five-unit block at 360-358 Spadina Avenue constructed between 1881 and 1884, and a five-unit block at 350-358 Spadina Avenue constructed in 1890.

11 Morris, 994. The house was located at 420 Jarvis Street. Storm’s drawings for this project are in the Horwood Collection, C 11-722-0-1.

12 Horwood Collection, C 11-757-0-1, 77 and C 11-757-0-1, 78. Whatman paper, watermarked 1864, was used for the former watercolour. There is no visible watermark for the latter, although it does appear to be of the same paper stock. The first tenders for the building were issued in May 1887.

13 Horwood Collection, C 11-757-0-1, 77.
The other design shows an elaborately ornamented cast-iron façade (figure 4). The entire surface is covered with finely detailed decorations. Each storey receives a different treatment, and the overall effect is of layering in an increasingly delicate progression. Commemorating the store's nickname, the segmental pediment on the skyline is decorated with a huge padlock. The façade is curved, acknowledging the Globe Lane intersection and offering an attractive view from Yonge Street. The five-storey elevation seems to soar and large windows dominate. Lee and Leys selected the curved cast-iron façade, although some minor details of the design were subsequently changed.14

The contract drawings indicate that tenders for the store were issued in May and October 1887.15 Several of the contractors who submitted successful tenders signed the drawings, but only one contract drawing was witnessed. The witness, John S. Adams, is listed in the 1887 City of Toronto Directory as Storm's draughtsman.16 The contract drawings were approved by the city building inspector, Emerson Coatsworth, on 12 January 1888 and a building permit was issued to Rice Lewis & Son the following day. The estimated cost of construction was $25,000.17 Tenders for the addition to the warehouse were issued on 22 May 1888.18

Construction of the store and warehouse began in 1888 and was still in progress in August 1889.19 Work had progressed sufficiently to allow the business to begin operating from its new premises by the end of 1889, and by 1890 the original store was vacant.20 Construction proceeded rapidly, but not without incident.
When construction was in progress a crisis erupted. In 1889, in an attempt to ease traffic flow problems, the city of Toronto proposed an extension of Victoria Street south from Adelaide Street to King Street East (figure 5). This proposal envisioned transforming the narrow Globe Lane into a much wider street, and thus required the expropriation of land beside the lane. On 1 October 1889 the solicitors for Lee and Leys, Messrs. Hoskin and Ogden, formally protested the proposed extension of Victoria Street. The objection was understandable, since the plan threatened the demolition of the store that was being built as well as the warehouse that was being renovated. The matter was finally resolved, and on 9 December 1889 the city council was informed that the case of “Lee vs the City” had been dismissed and that the interested parties had resolved all existing differences.

Although the details surrounding the resolution of the dispute are unclear, it is likely that the suit was dropped when the city decided to extend Victoria Street as proposed but agreed to make the street somewhat narrower than originally planned. Only buildings along the west side of the lane had to be demolished. Thus, Globe Lane was widened and renamed Victoria Street and the Rice Lewis & Son buildings survived undamaged (figure 6).

The widening of the street created new design opportunities. In his original design for the store Storm acknowledged the existence of Globe Lane with the quarter-round treatment at the southwest corner of the building, but had paid little attention to the embellishment of the relatively unseen west side. The increased flow of traffic along Victoria Street demanded that some revisions be made to the west side of the store. In May 1891 Storm drew plans to insert windows in this wall to enliven it and create additional space for window displays.

Drawings, photographs, and documentary sources reveal a great deal about Storm’s design for the Rice Lewis & Son store, but one aspect of the project is not resolved by these sources: Why did Storm design such an elaborate façade in cast iron? Storm had used cast iron to frame street-level windows for other stores, but he is not known to have designed any other complete cast-iron façade. While Storm’s œuvre reveals a notable eclecticism, the styles of his best-known works suggest that he was more comfortable with the heavy masses and round-headed arches of the rejected stone façade than the accepted decorative cast-iron façade.

The choice of the design is also surprising because elaborate cast-iron façades were a fad whose time had come and gone by the 1880s. Cast iron had first become

Figure 5 (left). Fire insurance plan showing the Rice Lewis & Son buildings on King Street East and Globe Lane. The hardware store is shown under construction and the warehouse at rear is shown as complete. The original store location, at the corner of King Street East and Toronto Street, is also shown. (Goad Insurance Atlas, March 1892, revised December 1889, sheet 15)

Figure 6 (above). Fire insurance plan showing the Rice Lewis & Son buildings after Globe Lane was widened and renamed Victoria Street. Note the relative narrowness of Victoria Street for this one block. (Goad Insurance Atlas, 2nd ed., March 1890, revised March 1899, sheet 7 [detail]; Figures 5 and 6 reproduced with the permission of Insurers’ Advisory Organization (1989) Inc., copyright holders of these plans/maps.

21 Minutes of the Proceedings of the Council of the Corporation of the City of Toronto for the Year 1889 (Toronto: J.Y. Reid, 1890), #827. For a discussion of traffic problems in the area and a call for better planning, see The Canadian Architect and Builder 1, no. 5 (May 1888): 2.

22 Minutes of the Proceedings of the Council, #1072.

23 Ibid., #1379. The bylaw extending Victoria Street was passed soon after ibid., #1404.

24 On 2 December 1889, The Globe reported that “a letter was read from Mr. Hoskin relieving the city from its promise not to expropriate land on Globe Lane necessary for the expansion. Mr. Hoskin consented to the expropriating of the land going through.” Since measurements on the pre-and post-extension drawings indicate that the Rice Lewis & Son buildings were not narrowed, this expropriation could only have referred to other buildings along the west side of the lane.


William John Fryer, Architectural Ironwork (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1876), 82. Fryer concludes with the observation that "these early stages have been passed, and taste and utility now go hand in hand."

Cast iron façades remained popular in other cities at this time. See Cervin Robinson, "Late Cast Iron in New York," Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians 30, no. 2 (1971): 164-169. They were, however, no longer popular in Toronto. Fletcher (p. 53) notes that they were not being used in Toronto after the mid-1870s.

Storm's books are now housed in the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Room at the University of Toronto. For a complete list of Storm's library, see Marrianna May Richardson, comp., The Ontario Association of Architects: Centennial Collection Bibliography (Toronto: Ontario Association of Architects, 1990). Storm seems to have actively consulted his books. For example, he drew free-hand variations of published designs for metal work in his copy of Lewis Jockals (Gottingham, The Smith's Founder's, and Ornamental Metal Workers' Directory, Comprising a Variety of Designs ... for Gates, Piers, Balcony Railings, Window Guards, Verandahs, Balustrades, Vases, &c. &c. &c. ... [London: M. Taylor, n.d.]).

Victor Delassaux and John Elliott, Street Architecture: A Series of Shop Fronts and Facades, Characteristic of and Adapted to Different Branches of Commerce ... (London: John Weale, 1855), plates 16, 21, and 22.

On the ways in which single-occupant structures constructed by their owners used architectural styles to project business images, see Kenneth Turvey Gibbs, Business Architectural Imagery in America, 1870-1930 (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1984), especially p. 61.

The Illustrated Catalogue of General Hardware, issued in September 1898, is housed in the Archives of Ontario Drawing Collection. For two slightly different examples of the Rice Lewis & Son letterhead, see Archives of Ontario, RG-8, Series I-1 D, Files #1301, Year 1901, Box 610, and ibid., File #1562, Year 1902, Box 671.

On the labour situation in Toronto in the 1880s, see George S. Kealey, Toronto Workers Respond to Industrial Capitalism (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980). Strikes in the building trades are conveniently summarized in Table II.4.


Storm's design fell into many of these traps. Indeed, Fryer's stinging attack, though written some twenty years earlier, could have been directed at the Rice Lewis & Son building itself. Cast iron was still being used for façades in the 1880s, but the designs tended to be simple and restrained. Storm's ornate façade went against current fashion.

The façade is bedecked with a wide variety of motifs and decorations, many echoing Renaissance designs (figures 7, 8). Storm may have culled ideas from design books housed in his extensive personal library. He owned Victor Delassaux and John Elliott's Street Architecture, and may have been influenced by the authors' insistence that Renaissance-inspired designs were ideal for commercial architecture, since the Renaissance was not bound by the same sorts of strict rules that prevailed over the Gothic and Classical styles. While the authors did not include a design for a hardware store, Storm may have been inspired by their discussion of a design for an ironmonger's and brazier's shop, a not-unrelated store-type. Delassaux and Elliott stressed that "a little extra expense in the façade will not be thrown away in this business, the front affording the best opportunity of shewing what the proprietor can effect with the material in which he deals." They noted that an elaborate design could be achieved inexpensively with cast iron. Storm may have been heeding their advice when he designed "The Padlock."

Lee and Ley's probably envisioned the store's façade as a means of promulgating a business identity. A façade of cast iron may have seemed a fitting and appealing choice for a store that sold hardware and iron goods. Even though its extreme decorativeness may have gone against current fashion, Lee and Ley's were proud of their store and used it to advertise their business. In addition to featuring the façade on the frontispiece of their general catalogue, engravings of the façade were used on Rice Lewis & Son letterhead stationery.

Practical considerations may have also influenced the selection. Recurrent strikes in the building sectors continually disrupted construction projects in Toronto during the closing decades of the 19th century. The cast-iron façade may have been seen as an attractive alternative to an extensive use of cut stone, particularly since the stone masons were out on strike in 1887, when Lee and Ley's probably selected the design, and future labour problems loomed. Avoiding the use of stone masons may have seemed prudent in such a climate. The potential backlog of jobs that would await completion upon settlement of the strikes and the concomitant shortage of labour may have contributed to the decision. Thus, the labour situation in Toronto may have encouraged the use of a labour-saving material such as cast iron.

Cast-iron façades were quick and easy to erect, and the on-site assembly was completed by the foundry workers.
The mention of foundry workers naturally raises the question of a foundry. Surprisingly, none of the contract drawings contains a reference to a foundry, and a foundry representative's signature is conspicuously absent. Furthermore, no tender appears to have been issued for the provision of the cast iron.

These lacunae may in fact reflect an important development in the Rice Lewis & Son business. While Rice Lewis had been content to sell imported iron products, Lee and Leys broadened their business base and sought opportunities for expansion. In 1876 a fire destroyed the St. Lawrence Foundry on Front Street East and its owner, William Hamilton, insured for only one-third of his losses, was consequently forced to sell the business. Lee and Leys snatched up the bargain in 1877. Leys became president and Lee vice-president, while Hamilton's son continued to run the foundry as manager. Lee and Leys thus not only sold but also manufactured iron goods.

It seems likely that the forty-five tons of cast iron required for Storm's façade were cast at the St. Lawrence Foundry. The foundry would have been a natural choice for casting any façade in Toronto. It was already experienced in the casting of other shop fronts, as well as whole façades. It also enjoyed an excellent reputation.
and employed well-trained artisans and moulders. Moreover, Storm was familiar with the foundry's work: the St. Lawrence Foundry had cast one of his most successful designs, the iron fence at Osgoode Hall. However, the ownership of the foundry must have been the deciding factor. By using their own foundry, Lee and Leys would have been able to monitor the labour situation, control costs, keep to schedule, and maintain quality. The façade would also have stood as a large advertisement for their second business venture, its decorative design a testimony to the quality of the foundry's work and the calibre of its workers. Thus, the ownership of the St. Lawrence Foundry may explain not only why cast iron was used for the façade, but also why such an ornate, and rather anachronistic, design was selected.

Just as Storm's design for the Rice Lewis & Son hardware store was related to changes in the business's infrastructure, so too was its destruction. The store suffered a sad fate not many years after its completion. In 1904, A.E. Gilverson purchased Rice Lewis & Son and the business was gradually moved from the King Street East store into the Victoria Street warehouse. By 1914, "The Padlock" was vacant. Ferdinand H. Marani eventually renovated the store for Babylon Levon, a rug dealer, and it became known as the Victoria Building. Marani retained much of Storm's design, including the curved façade, but completely refaced the building. The new façade perhaps indicates the fundamental problem of Storm's design: Marani constructed a restrained façade of limestone with ornamental iron windows; Storm's elaborate and decorative design was dismissed. In a discussion of Marani's successful redesign of the façade, a commentator noted that "the original building ... was from a standpoint of design a structure totally without architectural merit." It seems that while Storm may have had reasons for designing such an elaborate cast-iron façade, only his clients were prepared to overlook its anachronisms.

On 14 June 1933, Rice Lewis & Son, which had grown from a small hardware store into a Toronto business institution, was declared bankrupt. For this vibrant business Storm had created one of his most unique and intriguing designs. Although the destruction of this store was a great loss, a wealth of extant materials provides some keys to understanding Storm's design for "The Padlock."

35 On William Hamilton and his foundry, see George Mainer, "William Hamilton," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 10 (1871 to 1880) (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972), 330-31, and Fletcher, 23. Neither Mainer nor Fletcher consider the history of the foundry after the fire. The post-fire history is discussed in *The History of Toronto and County of York, Ontario, Illustrated*, vol. 1 (Toronto: C. Blackette Robinson, 1885), 417.

36 The weight of the cast iron is provided in "The Victoria Building, Toronto," *Construction* 16, no. 4 (April 1923): 141.

37 The shop front of the Golden Lion, 33-37 King Street East, was cast by the St. Lawrence Foundry (Dendy, *Lost Toronto*, 97). Fletcher (2, 23) identified the St. Lawrence Foundry as the location where façades designed by James Avon Smith and John Gemmell in the mid-1870s were cast.

38 Mainer, 331.

39 The fence was designed in 1866. On the casting, see Fletcher, 23. The fence is illustrated in Arthur and Ritchie on pages 70, 71, and 91.

40 For a summary of the business history under Gilverson, see "Toronto's Business Pioneers," *Toronto Board of Trade Journal*, April 1931, 43-46. The warehouse was renovated in 1912 by E.J. Lennox, who designed a simple façade with large plate glass windows set in cast iron frames. The Lennox plans and specifications are housed in the City of Toronto Building Inspection Office, #F1-71.


42 "The Victoria Building, Toronto." 141. The article also notes that the supports that fixed the cast iron to the wall were seriously corroded and thus constituted a hazard.

43 Ontario Ministry of Consumer and Commercial Relations, TC-17555.

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