

## Architecture: Vanished Neo-Classical Portico



**Earliest known views of the vanished portico to Building 31**

*Detail from October 1869 fire*



*Detail from May 1870 reconstruction*

Sometimes it's hard to "read" heritage buildings, to work out their evolution from the time when they were brand new buildings, perhaps through many changes, to their current condition.

Distillery District buildings, which range in age from 1860 to present, provide some real challenges. Of course, there is always the structure itself, with changes often clear to knowledgeable viewers. Many Distillery buildings, for example, have different bricks and brick patterns that indicate changes made at some point in the past. But sometimes, there is no physical evidence to be seen or discovered. The changes were so complete that any earlier structure has, in effect, vanished. Perhaps the earlier structure was even knocked down before the new structure was built. What can be done then?

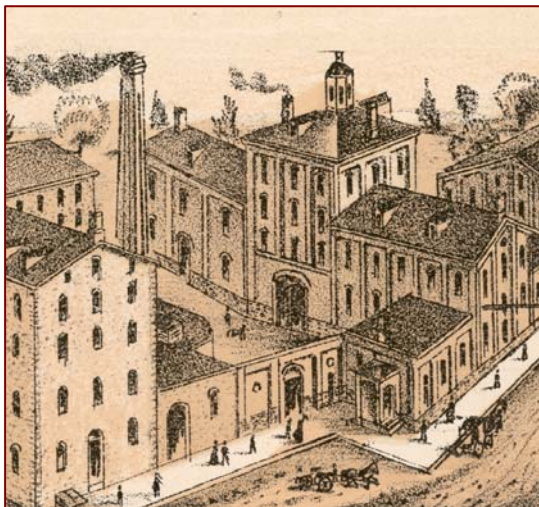
In some cases, there are original plans to provide guidance (but only guidance, since the plans may have been altered during construction ... or never built at all). In some cases there are photographs, which may depict all or part of a building, at a particular point in time (sometimes known, sometimes not), from a particular angle (which may distort relationships among the parts). And in some cases, there are paintings or artist's drawings, which, of course, depend on the skill of the artist, the perspective of the view, and the "truthfulness" or intention of the artist (to depict what was there, not what might or should have been there to make the patron happy).

One of the fascinating architectural mysteries at the Distillery District is the Case of the Missing Portico: did it ever exist; what did it look like; and when did it vanish?

Today, the south end of Building 31, overlooking Trinity plaza, shows evidence of extensive changes in its brick patchwork. It has a single remaining window, and decorative brick details, such as arcaded corbels and sawtooth pattern, found elsewhere on the site. But the current structure shows no evidence of a portico, let alone a beautiful, neo-Classical porch, with two steps, and elegant Ionic columns, framing a single door. So far, no building plans have been discovered and no photographs show a porch.

The primary evidence is contained in various artistic renditions of the building, notably 1869 and 1870 oil paintings and an 1877 chromolithograph found in an illustrated history of Toronto. Glimpses of a portico – or possible portico – are found in other documents, but these are the best views. And they appear to be good “eye witnesses” in favour of the earlier architectural element.

Why might the heavily industrial site contain such a portico? Well, at one time Gooderham & Worts’ offices were in this building. It would have been entirely reasonable to emphasize the location, and the importance, of these offices by ushering visitors in through an impressive entrance ... framed by the classical columns and other architectural details beloved of Victorian architects.



**1877 Bird's-Eye View by Timperlake**



**South façade of Building 31 today**

Both paintings were owned, and probably commissioned, by Gooderham & Worts. The 1877 view is a detail from a plate in Timperlake’s book at the City of Toronto Archives.

Please send your comments or questions to Manager of Heritage Services, Sally Gibson, [sg@thedistillerydistrict.com](mailto:sg@thedistillerydistrict.com).

For more about the history of the Distillery District, see [www.distilleryheritage.com](http://www.distilleryheritage.com)