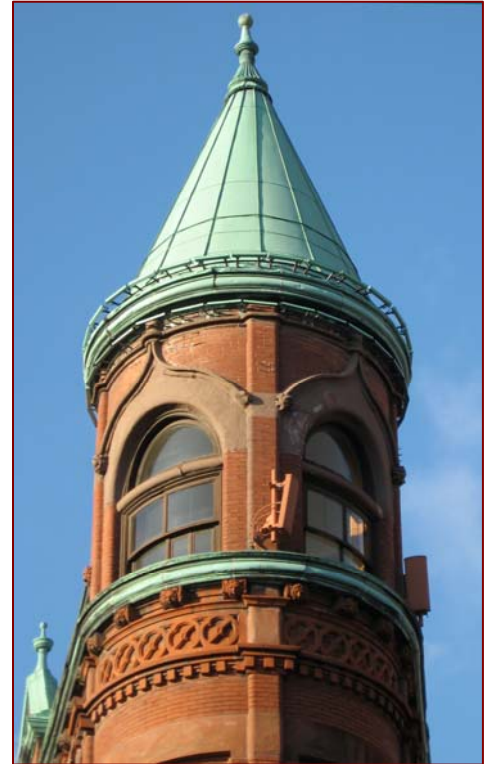


Architecture: David Roberts, Jr.



Pure Spirits Buildings, November 1918 CTA



**George Gooderham's Office atop
Gooderham Building**

*B*orn in 1845, shortly after his father, [David Roberts, Sr.](#), had emigrated to Toronto, David Roberts, Jr. grew up in the vicinity of the distillery district and spent his entire life in the city. No doubt he began learning his craft at an early age, watching his engineer father design and oversee the construction of the great Stone Distillery (1858-'60) and then the Maltings and related redbrick buildings along the west side of Trinity Street (1863-'64).

Perhaps he helped carpenters, bricklayers and other craftsmen with their tasks, and gradually moved on to more responsible duties. In 1864-'65, he studied at Bryant and Stratton's Mercantile College, before entering the office of a Toronto architect, probably Gundry & Langley. He formed a brief partnership with George Shaw before hanging out his shingle. Thereafter, he worked on his own. By all accounts, he was a quiet, retiring individual, who contributed enormously to the architectural history of his native city.



According to architectural historian, Stephen A. Otto, young Roberts' first work at the distillery was probably overseeing the rebuilding of the Stone Distillery after the [1869 fire](#). By then, his father had moved to a farm in Elgin County, so was probably not available for the intense, day-to-day supervision required for this job. Roberts' first independent work for Gooderham & Worts was probably the Pure Spirits complex of still rooms and tank houses that rose on the east side of Trinity Street in 1873. There has been some doubt about who the architect for this exquisite group of buildings was, since no plans or direct references have been discovered. But the accomplished style and corporate logic suggest Roberts as the most likely candidate. Initially, the Pure Spirits complex was capped by a decorative cupola and only two of the four still rooms fronting on Trinity street had a fourth story.

Pure Spirits 1896

In the mid-1880s, the government required distillers to age their whisky for at least two years, which meant that Gooderham & Worts had to double its storage capacity. Roberts Jr. was responsible for the dozen rack and tank houses that quickly rose and established the character of the district beyond Trinity Street. Most of these buildings were single-storey, redbrick boxes, set on stone foundations, with a slightly pitched roof, pier-and-panel construction, and simple-but-decorative brick corbelling. The form, spacing, and design of these buildings was remarkably fine.

The single exception was the massive barrel rack house at the northeast corner of Trinity and Mill streets, designed and built between 1888 and 1890. "Rack House D" (or Building 42) rose six storeys, but followed the same conventions as the lower buildings. Capable of handling 15,000 barrels, Rack House D was essentially an articulated redbrick box of exceptional regularity and architectural purity. Windows and doors occur only where needed for light and access. The north façade, therefore, has no openings at all.



**Pure Victorian industrial architecture
Rack House D, North façade**

Roberts clearly became Gooderham & Worts' primary corporate and personal architect, designing not only utilitarian buildings for the distillery, but also a new corporate headquarters, and houses for family members.

George Gooderham, who had taken over the helm of G&W in 1882, was responsible for moving corporate headquarters from the distillery closer to the financial centre of Toronto a decade later. Roberts' elegant 1892 French Gothic office building rose five stories above Wellington & Front, and still exerts remarkable "presence" among the towers of modern Toronto. Legend has it that Gooderham's office was on the top floor of the "Flat Iron" Building, at the eastern prow of his corporate ship ... where he could observe what was happening down at the distillery on the waterfront.



504 Jarvis Street today

For George Gooderham's "palatial" new residence in the Annex, and his younger son's first home on fashionable Jarvis Street, Roberts chose the hot new style of the 1890s: Romanesque Revival. George Horace Gooderham's home at 504 Jarvis Street was smaller and less extravagant than his father's mansion at 135 St. George Street, but still magnificent. Built on the old lacrosse grounds, 504 contributed to the upscale harmony of the street. And, having survived the turmoil that destroyed many neighbours, 504 now reminds of us of the Jarvis Street that was.

George Gooderham's remarkable residence at Bloor & St. George is the *ne plus ultra* of domestic Richardsonian Romanesque Revival in Toronto and Roberts' masterwork. Architectural historian Patricia McHugh's tribute can't be bested:

Consummately balancing assertive tower, gables, and chimneys with deep round-arched porch, gallery, and windows, the architect has created a composition so firm, so formal-looking, as to endow the picturesque and asymmetric Romanesque with a majestic classic serenity.

Not only is its public face magnificent, but its richly ornamented interior – especially the stunning wood carving beloved of Frank Lloyd Wright – is a testament not only to Gooderham the patron and Roberts the architect, but also the anonymous artisans who made it all happen. No doubt, some of these highly skilled workers also plied their trades at the distillery district, in somewhat less extravagant settings.




**George Gooderham House, 135 St George CTA
Residential Richardsonian Romanesque Revival**

TECT AND BUILDER 53

DEATH OF MR. DAVID ROBERTS.

A prominent architect of the city, and one who has left behind him many monuments of his artistic taste, passed away on Wednesday, April 10th, at his late residence, 480 Huron street, Toronto. Mr. Roberts was in his sixty-second year, and had spent practically all his life in the city. He was the architect for the palatial residence of the late George Gooderham on Bloor street, and also designed that of the late Thomas G. Blackstock, immediately north of it. In private life he was a man of retiring disposition,



THE LATE MR. DAVID ROBERTS.

but, nevertheless, had a wide circle of friends. He was also a member of many of Toronto's leading clubs, and was a past president of the Toronto Rowing Club.

Mr. Roberts was unmarried, and is survived by one brother, Mr. Robert Roberts, of Sparta, and three sisters, Mrs. G. A. Philp, of St. Thomas; Mrs. J. A. Philp, of Sparta, and Miss Florence, who resided with

**Obituary, spring 1907
Canadian Architect & Builder**

As for Roberts, in 1889 when he was tackling several of the most important industrial, commercial, and residential projects of his career, he maintained an office at 36 Toronto Street, not far from The Gooderham Building, and lived at 81 Carlton Street. Some years later he moved into an expansive, semi-detached Annex house at 480 Huron Street, not far from Gooderham's mansion. Roberts lived at 480 until his death on April 10, 1907.

Once again, I am indebted to architectural historian Stephen A. Otto for generously sharing his knowledge of Gooderham & Worts. In addition to speaking with Stephen, I consulted the following: Stephen A. Otto: [*Gooderham & Worts' Distillery*](#) (Gooderham & Worts Heritage Plan Report No. 2, March 1988); [*Inventory of Archival Sources*](#) (Gooderham & Worts Heritage Plan Report No. 4, March 1994); and "Roberts, David, Sr." and "Roberts, David, Jr." in Eric Arthur, *No Mean City* (3rd ed., 1988), p. 257. David Roberts' 1907 obituary comes from the McGill Online *Canadian Architect and Builder*, <http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/cab>. See also Patricia McHugh's *Toronto Architecture: A City Guide*, Eric Arthur's *No Mean City*, and William Dendy and William Kilbourn's *Toronto Observed*.

There is a difference of opinion about who designed 480-482 Huron Street. The City heritage property registry identifies David Roberts, Jr. as the architect in 1897, but architectural historian Patricia McHugh suggests that Gemmell & Smith was probably the firm involved in 1888. Further research is needed to resolve the issue.

Please send your comments or questions to Manager of Heritage Services, Sally Gibson, sg@thedistillerydistrict.com.

For more about the history of the Distillery District, visit www.distilleryheritage.com.