

# Golden Square Mile gets attention it deserves with book, new tourism association



WAYNE LARSEN, SPECIAL TO THE MONTREAL GAZETTE

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The Mount Stephen Club is pictured in 2011, shortly before the Drummond St. landmark closed. It will survive as part of a new luxury hotel. DARIO AYALA / MONTREAL GAZETTE

Montreal's Golden Square Mile may be little more than a vague notion today — a half-forgotten Confederation-era neighbourhood where well-heeled residents wrapped themselves in fur blankets and took horse-drawn sleigh rides between towering snowbanks.

Even most lifelong Montrealers couldn't tell you exactly where it was or who lived there.

But two recent events have brought our venerated Square Mile neighbourhood ("Golden" was a 20th-century addition) back into focus: the publication of a book celebrating its history and architecture, and a concerted effort by local hotels and cultural institutions to attract more business to the area.

The Golden Square Mile Tourism Development Society, launched Feb. 15 at a cocktail reception at Centre Mont-Royal, was formed to raise awareness of the area and boost tourism through such attractions as art, architecture, business and hospitality.

The association is promoting the whole area — which stretches from des Pins Ave. to René-Lévesque Blvd., between Guy St./Côte-des-Neiges Rd. and Robert-Bourassa Blvd./University St. — with a focus on the hotels and museums along its main commercial artery on Sherbrooke St. W.

"It's particularly essential to highlight the portion of Sherbrooke St. W. that runs through the Golden Square Mile," said society president Monica Orr, of Hotel Omni Mont-Royal, who describes Sherbrooke as being "to Montreal what 5th Ave. is to New York."

But while the society's *raison d'être* is drawing business to this venerated area, there remains the age-old question of how to preserve some of the very landmarks expected to attract tourist dollars. As we recently saw with the former Mount Stephen Club, which developed cracks in its façade during renovation work, our historic buildings are especially vulnerable.

Luckily, the area has remained under close scrutiny by preservation groups and activists ever since the controversial demolition of the Van Horne Mansion in 1973.

"The particular way Montreal addresses its heritage and urban development challenges (today) has a lot to credit the Square Mile for," Heritage Montreal policy director Dinu Bumbaru writes in the preface of MacKay L. Smith's new book *Montreal's Golden Square Mile* (InfiniteBooks, 168 pages, \$46.95).

Through a deft combination of high-quality contemporary photos and archival images, maps and brief descriptive passages, Smith recreates the spirit of what was once Canada's wealthiest district in a book that fills a void in the oeuvre of our local history.

From the legendary Scottish financiers and captains of industry who erected grand monuments to themselves in the form of mountainside mansions, to the clerks and merchants who lived in the stone townhouses further down the hill, the families and their properties are carefully chronicled in this street-by-street historical atlas.

If you've ever wondered about a certain building or old house still standing in the downtown area, chances are Smith mentions it in what serves as the next-best thing to a leisurely stroll through the old neighbourhood.

Here is a primer on some key landmarks.



*John Mahoney / Montreal Gazette files*

### **Ravenscrag**

More commonly known by recent generations as part of the Allan Memorial Institute on the Royal Victoria Hospital campus, the picturesque Ravenscrag estate sits on the Mount Royal slope on des Pins Ave. at the top of Peel St. Built in the early 1860s as the home of Scottish shipping magnate Sir Hugh Allan, the 72-room house featured a central observation tower from which Allan is said to have kept his telescope trained on the Port of Montreal, two kilometres away, in order to keep tabs on the departures and arrivals of his ships.



*Montreal's Golden Square Mile / InfiniteBooks*

**Toronto-Dominion Bank**

Known for its distinctive Corinthian-style columns, including four large ones in front, the imposing building on the northwest corner of Ste-Catherine and Guy Sts. features lettering that betrays it as a survivor from another era: the English-only BANK OF TORONTO chiselled into the masonry high above the sidewalk. The Bank of Toronto had opened its first Montreal branch in 1860, but this building was erected in 1908. It became the Toronto-Dominion Bank in 1955, and eventually added Canada Trust. The building was donated to Concordia University in 2005 by TD Canada Trust.



*Montreal's Golden Square Mile / InfiniteBooks*

**Van Horne Mansion**

One of Montreal's most venerated landmarks, its 1973 demolition caused angry demonstrations by the city's heritage advocates. Built in 1870 on the northeast corner of Sherbrooke and Stanley Sts., the 52-room mansion was home to American-born railway executive William Cornelius Van Horne. An avid art collector, Van Horne covered his walls with paintings by European masters and the then-unknown Impressionists. He encouraged the careers of James Wilson Morrice and other local artists. After Van Horne's death in 1915, the house remained in the family until 1969, when high property taxes forced its sale. The Sofitel Montréal Le Carré Doré, a member of the Golden Square Mile Tourism Development Society, now occupies the site.





*Dave Sidaway / Montreal Gazette*

### **Mount Stephen Club**

This venerated landmark at 1400 Drummond St., just below de Maisonneuve Blvd., recently made the news when cracks appeared in the façade during construction work. The 133-year-old mansion, originally the home of Canadian Pacific Railroad president George Stephen, took three years to build and is renowned for its interior woodwork. Stephen retired in 1888 and left the house to his sister Elise and her husband, businessman Robert Meaghan. In 1926, the Meaghan estate sold the building and it became the Mount Stephen Club, a meeting place for generations of affluent Montrealers that eventually closed in 2011. It will survive as part of a new luxury hotel, Le Mount Stephen — a member of the new tourism association. Tidan, the real estate company behind the transformation, remains under tremendous scrutiny, with the Montreal Gazette reporting that Quebec's Ministry of Culture and Communications is suing the firm for unauthorized alterations to the building.



*Montreal's Golden Square Mile / InfiniteBooks*

**Bagg Mansion**

The distinctive red sandstone building on the northeast corner of Sherbrooke St. and Côte-des-Neiges Rd. may be better known today as home to the Adrenaline tattoo parlour, but it was built in 1891 as the home of businessman Robert Stanley Bagg, the son of one of Montreal's most prominent families. The house was considered modest in comparison to the family's wealth. Bagg's father, Stanley Clark Bagg, was a notary, justice of the peace and landowner; the extent of his properties across the island of Montreal is said to have been second only to the Sulpicians. A small street in the Plateau bears the family name.

*AT A GLANCE*

*Montreal's Golden Square Mile*, by MacKay L. Smith, is available in English and French editions. For more information, visit [infinitebooks.ca](http://infinitebooks.ca).

**CORRECTION:** Due to an error in MacKay L. Smith's book *Montreal's Golden Square Mile*, an earlier version of this story incorrectly stated that two floors of the Toronto Dominion Bank building are being leased by Concordia University. In fact, the building was donated to Concordia University by TD Canada Trust in 2005.