

Photos and Pianos: A History of the Parsons/Collis Building, Harbour Grace



Heritage NL

info@heritagenl.ca – PO Box 5171, St. John's, NL, Canada, A1C 5V5

By Michael Philpott



Fig. 1. The Parsons/Collis Building as it appears in 2021.
Source: Sarah Roberts, Heritage NL.

Introduction

The Parsons/Collis building is a three-storey commercial building with rear additions located at 132 Water Street, Harbour Grace (figure 1). It is one of a handful of commercial buildings predating a widespread fire of 1944 and was recently acquired by the Town of Harbour Grace, which occupies an adjacent building. This report is a preliminary look at the Parsons/Collis building with an eye toward its conservation and reuse.

Early History

The Parsons/Collis building was once one of three attached units occupying the site and two lots to the west. Its adjoining structures once formed part of the same enterprise but were demolished around 2000 (figure 2).



Fig. 2. The Parsons/Collis buildings circa 1990.
Source: Baccalieu Trail Heritage Corporation.

All three buildings began as two-storey mercantile structures with steep gable roofs, dormers, and storefronts (figure 3), a typical mid-19th-century building form in Harbour Grace and other centres. They were likely erected following a fire which destroyed much of the town between LeMarchant Road and Victoria Street in 1858.



Fig. 3. The Parsons/Collis buildings adjacent the mansard-roofed structure, pre-1880.
Source: Conception Bay Museum 2009.048.

While their original use is unknown, the buildings were, according to one account, known around this time as “Pike’s Block” (figure 4). The Pike family boasted a number of well-regarded planters and sea captains, but little is known of their brick-and-mortar operations. One possible owner was Captain George Pike (1808-1888), a planter in the employ of Ridley & Sons with property in the area and father to Susannah Taylor Pike (1856-1894). Susannah would marry Edward Parsons (1852-1929) circa 1875. No marriage record was found but Susannah and Edward’s first child, Minnie Ethel, was born in 1876.

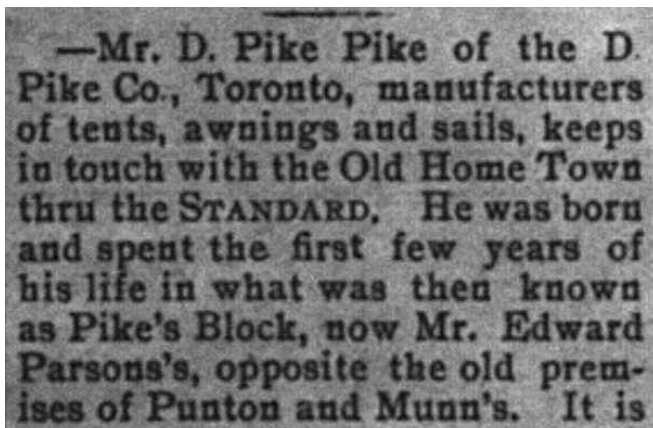


Fig. 4. The only reference found to pre-Parsons use.
Source: Harbor Grace Standard and Conception Bay Advertiser, July 26, 1918.

Parsons Family (circa 1870-1960s)

Then-carpenter Simeon Henry Parsons (1844-1908) is believed to have purchased one or more of the buildings around 1870, and by 1871 offered cabinetmaking, upholstery, and undertaking services from the premises (figure 5). At this time it was known as 180 Water Street.

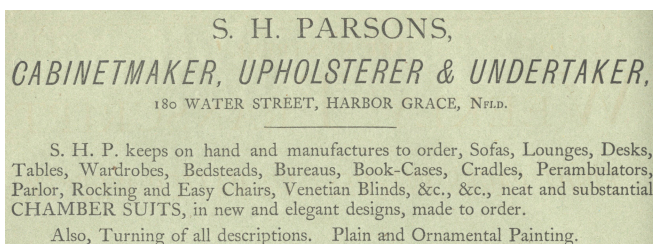


Fig. 5. Ad for S.H. Parsons’ Water Street business.
Source: Lovell’s 1871.

After developing an interest in photography,

Simeon handed off his initial lines of business to brothers Alexander Bradbury (1847-1887) and Edward Parsons in early 1871 (*Harbor Grace Standard and Conception Bay Advertiser* 1871, figure 6) and established a photography studio on the top floor of the premises the same year. Simeon moved to St. John’s in 1872 to practice photography full-time alongside business partner Sherbern T. McKenney (Murphy 2003). He would go on to publish several books of photos and leave behind perhaps the most extensive photographic record of the period.

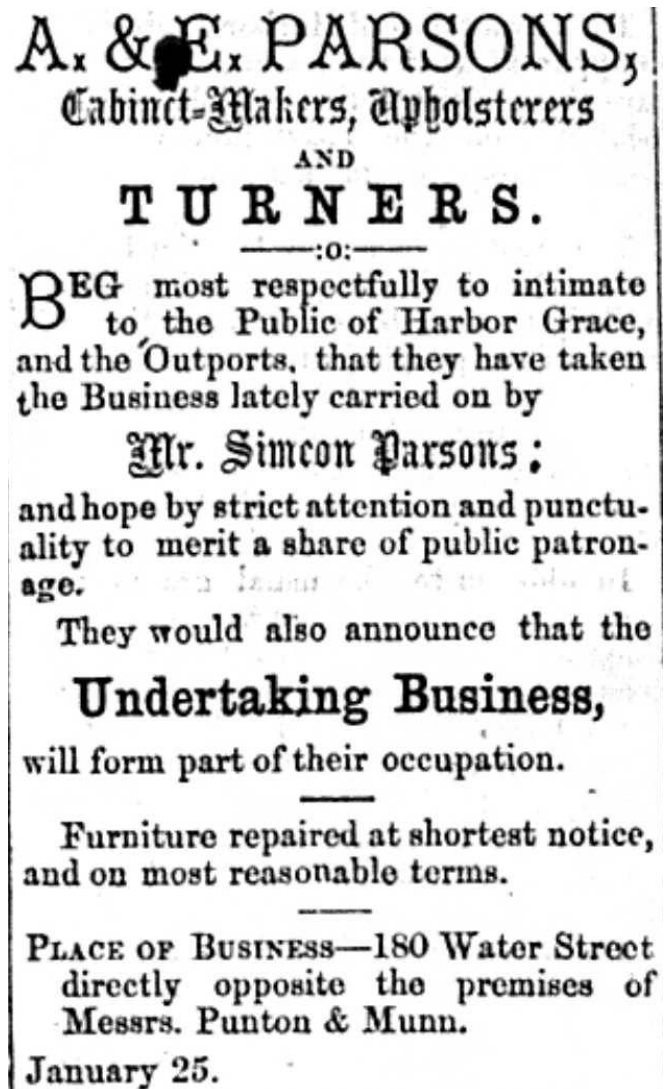


Fig. 6. Alexander and Edward take over.
Source: Harbor Grace Standard and Conception Bay Advertiser, May 3, 1871.

Following Simeon’s departure, Alexander and Edward operated the Water Street business through the 1880s under the trade name A. & E. Parsons. Edward continued to use the name

following his brother's death in 1887. He also maintained Simeon's photography studio and is listed as a photographer in a directory of 1894 (McAlpine). Around the turn of the century the enterprise included a photography shop/studio in the western building, a cabinetmaking shop attached to the rear, and a furniture store in the two eastern buildings (figure 7).



Fig. 7. The Parsons/Collis Buildings after 1944 fire.
Source: Town of Harbour Grace

Edward and Susanna's son, Reuben Taylor Parsons (1878-1968) became director of A. & E. Parsons circa 1906 and led the company for more than 50 years. In 1915 he was also listed as a photographer and picture framer at the premises. Though he did not achieve his uncle's renown, his photos of Harbour Grace are invaluable resources today. By 1956, on the occasion of Reuben's 50th wedding anniversary to Gertrude L.M. Churchill (figure 8), the company was "widely known and probably the oldest remaining firm in Harbour Grace" (*Daily News* August 4).

Reuben and Gertrude's son, Graham Maxwell (Max) Parsons, and wife Jean took over operation of A. & E. Parsons in the 1950s, though Reuben remained involved. Fittingly, Max was a musician and founding member of the local branch of Kiwanis. The Parsons firm persisted through the 1960s, coming to be referred to as R.T. Parsons & Son, and ultimately closed in 1971 (Alastair Collis, personal communication with author, 2021).

Collis Family (1940s-2001)

Althelstan Lockyer Collis was born in 1881 and raised in Trouty by his mother's family, the Lockyers, following the early death of his father. He spent five years in Montreal studying voice, piano, and organ, before settling in Harbour Grace around 1908 to establish a piano repair and

tuning business. He initially operated from his LeMarchant Street home, but travelled the province for extended periods each year to reach remote clients (McCarthy 2019).



Fig. 8. Reuben and Gertrude Parsons celebrate 50 years.

Source: *Daily News*, August 4, 1956.

Althelstan married Mary Melvina Parsons, daughter of Capt. James Parsons and "one of [Harbour Grace's] most popular young ladies," on December 6, 1915 (*Evening Telegram*). The couple had three children including Leslie (figure 9), born in 1918, heir to his father's musical inclinations. Leslie studied music and soon joined Althelstan in business.

Despite significant setbacks in the early 1940s – Althelstan's death in 1940 and a disfiguring fire in 1942 – Leslie married Lillian Martin in 1943 and embarked on a significant expansion of the piano business. He had purchased the eastern Parsons building in 1940 and proceeded to establish a



Fig. 9. Leslie Collis.

Source: Decks Awash Vol. 11 No. 2.

piano showroom, repair, and finishing shop. This included the addition of the middle section seen today (see floor plan below). During this time Reuben and, later, Max Parsons continued to operate businesses in the adjoining units. In fact, the Collis workshop would produce caskets for Max's funeral parlour during downtimes (Alastair Collis, personal communication with author, 2021).

Over time Collis expanded the business and began building pianos on-site. Part of the establishment of the piano factory involved a 1,000ft² addition to the rear of the subject building in 1960 and the installation of an interior rail system for moving pianos around the shop. Equipment used in the factory included a piano bridge duplicator designed by Leslie himself (figure 10).



Fig. 10. Mac Martin, piano rebuilder, working inside the Parsons/Collis building.

Source: Decks Awash Vol. 11 No. 2.

As business continued to grow, the Collis family relocated to St. John's, eventually establishing seven stores across the Island. Leslie and Lillian's son, Alastair (figure 11), joined the family business in 1976. The two continued to offer travelling tuning and repair services until Leslie's death in 1982 when Alastair took full control. The Collis family ultimately purchased the remaining Parsons buildings, primarily using them for storage. With increasing international competition, the Harbour Grace store and factory closed permanently in 2001, though production continued in St. John's until 2010 (MacEachern 2013).

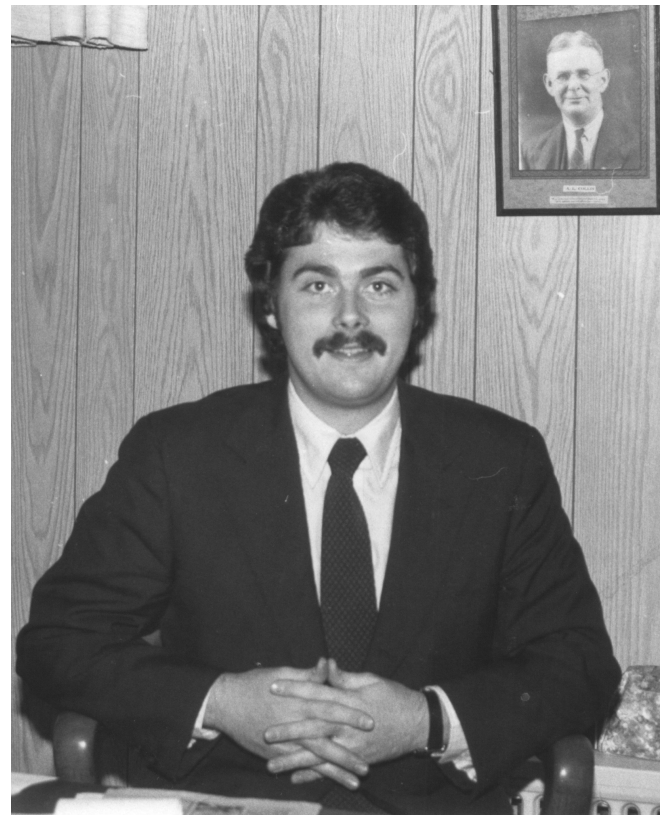


Fig. 11. Alastair Collis. A portrait of Althelstan Collis hangs behind Alastair.

Source: Decks Awash Vol. 11 No. 2.

Recent History

Following the closure of A.L. Collis & Son's Harbour Grace operation in 2001, the Parsons/Collis building was used by former employee Mac Martin and his business partner, John Payne. The pair ran WoodArt Limited, a furniture refinishing company and subcontractor to Saunders and Howell, until the 2010s. It was

briefly owned by a cabinetmaker before being turned over to the Town of Harbour Grace.

The Parsons/Collis Building

The Parsons/Collis building began as a two-and-a-half-storey commercial structure with residence above – the easternmost building in a short range of three (figure 12). Likely in the 1870s, during the establishment of a photography studio in the premises, the middle building was expanded or rebuilt with three storeys, a mid-pitch roof, and an unusual picture window on the second storey (figure 13).

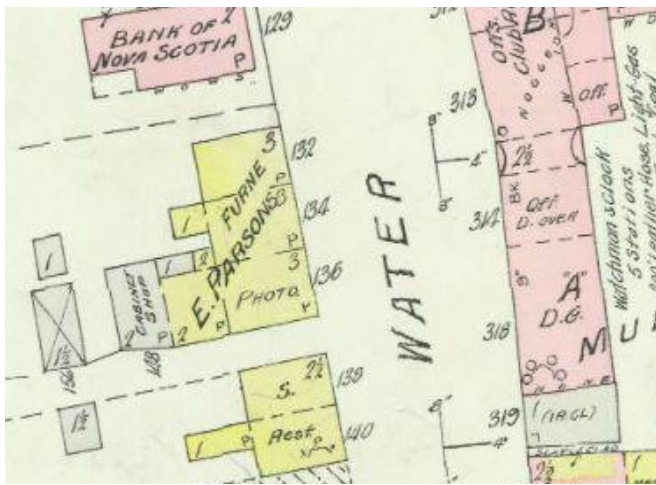


Fig. 12. The subject building is identified as 132 Water Street.

Source: Goad's insurance plans of 1893 and 1914.



Fig. 13. The Parsons/Collis buildings are centre-frame with the raised unit clearly visible, circa 1870s.

Source: Conception Bay Museum.

The eastern (surviving) and western buildings were likewise raised or replaced by 1893 to match the middle in height, roof pitch, and style, though with standard windows in the upper storeys. Wide boards and ghost marks in the surviving building suggest materials from the earlier structures were reused in these expansions. Decorative elements of the renewed buildings included brackets, label mouldings above the windows, and diagonal clapboard.

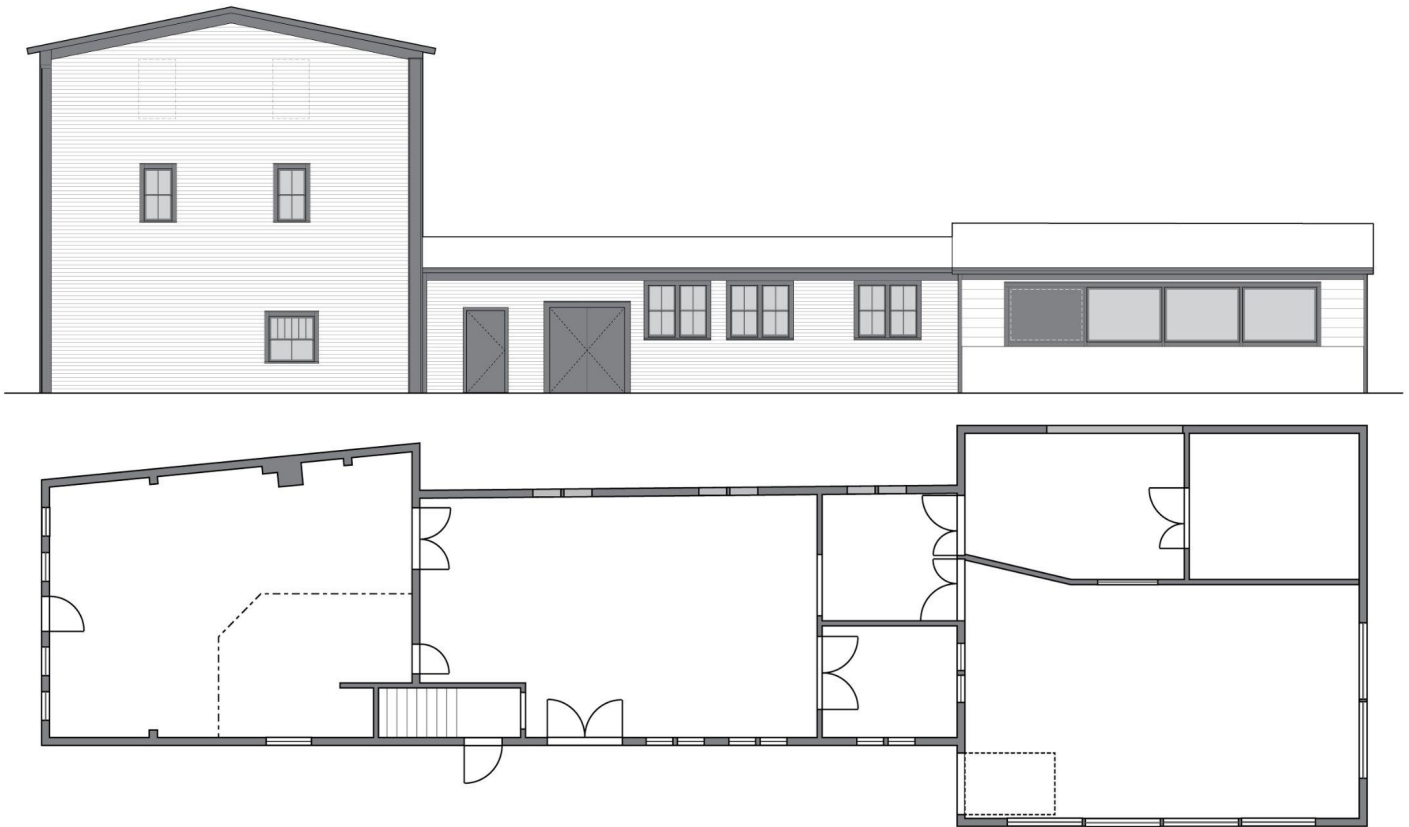
The Parsons/Collis building survived a devastating fire in 1944 unscathed, but by 1982 had been remodeled. Wood windows were replaced with small vinyl sliders and wide siding (figure 14). The interior showroom was modernized in the mid-to-late 1900s with a wood-panelled office in one corner. Around 2000, at the demolition of the attached structures, the building was clad in vinyl and the storefront's picture windows were replaced with smaller, fixed vinyl windows.



Fig. 14. The Parsons/Collis building in 1982.

Source: Decks Awash Vol. 11 No. 2.

In plan the building has three parts: the front-of-house original structure and showroom, a largely open middle section, and a rear workshop (figures 15-16). The middle section was added circa 1940 and was used for technical work including piano assembly and stringing. The rear workshop was built circa 1960 and was used for woodworking and finishing. On the upper storeys of the original building the layout remains relatively unchanged except for the addition of washrooms on the second floor.



Figs. 15-16. As-found elevation and plan drawings of the Parsons/Collis building with storefront and Water Street to the left. Covered window openings on the third storey are indicated. The workshop to the right/rear is in relatively poor condition.

Source: Michael Philpott, Heritage NL.

Potential

The Parsons/Collis building has significant historical value with good potential for reuse and interpretation. While the building has been empty and requires repair prior to use, there are several factors which make reuse viable:

- The ground floor features open spaces suitable for interpretation or events.
- It sits roughly at ground level with piano-sized doors both inside and out, requiring little alteration for accessibility on the ground floor.
- It is ideally located adjacent the existing Town Hall.

There is also an environmental case to be made for the reuse of the building and its materials, i.e.

the conservation of its “embodied energy.”

Due to its association with notable local photographers and musicians, an arts use for at least part of the building would be appropriate. The middle section, for instance, boasts windows on both sides (those on the western side are currently covered) and could provide space for exhibitions or classes. Upper storeys of the front portion could be adapted into office space, while the “storefront” could provide interpretation or public information.

If adapted for public use the Parsons/Collis building also provides potential for future expansion. The rearmost workshop addition is in poor condition and contributes little from an architectural perspective, but could be replaced with a modern wing on the same footprint or extending further east, creating a courtyard between the building and Town Hall.

Given the need to replace existing vinyl windows and otherwise renovate the exterior, restoring original window openings and building details that have been covered or lost should be

considered (figure 17). Benefits of restoration would extend beyond the building, helping to reinforce the historic streetscape of the entire section of Water Street.



Fig. 17. Drawing depicting the potential, restored façade of the Parsons/Collis building based on historic photos. Source: Michael Philpott, Heritage NL.

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The Parsons/Collis Building was documented with the help of Sarah Roberts, Historic Places Intern.

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