

## Cultural Heritage Evaluation Report

Address: Black Watch Building,  
Date: 2026

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Prepared by: Sally Coutts, Heritage Consultant

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Photo Credit: <https://almonte.com/historic-photo-archive/>

### Executive Summary

The Black Watch Building, 34, 36, 38 Mill Street, is an early 20<sup>th</sup> century commercial structure, located on Mill Street, Almonte's traditional main street. Mill Street runs roughly west to east from Almonte Street to Bridge Street, slightly curving to follow the shoreline of the Mississippi River. Many of the town's early retail commercial structures were constructed on the south side, facing the mills that bordered the Mississippi River. Mill Street is characterized by low rise commercial structures that represent a range of architectural styles.

The Black Watch Building was constructed in 1909 - 1910, after a fire destroyed a three-storey commercial structure in the same location, which itself had replaced a hotel. It is a good example of a commercial main street structure and contributes to the distinctive character of Almonte's historic core. It is included in the Downtown Almonte Heritage Conservation District and is a "Contributing - strongly contributing" building within the District.

The building has undergone changes since its construction, including the construction of a brick storefront at 38 Mill Street, the replacement of the second floor sash windows at 34 and 38 with undersized windows and minor changes to the storefronts at 34 and 36.



Photo Credit: <https://almonte.com/historic-photo-archive/>



Photo Credit: Sally Coutts

The property has cultural heritage value for its design, associative and contextual values. It meets five (5) of the nine (9) criteria for designation under Part IV of the Ontario Heritage Act.

**Introduction**

Located on Mill Street, Almonte’s traditional main street, the Black Watch Building is located on the south side of the street and has an open lot to its west.<sup>1</sup> Mill Street is lined by a diverse mix of commercial, public, and residential buildings, many from the 19th and early 20th centuries. The building is well-known for its distinctive “Black Watch CHEWING TOBACCO “A Man’s Chew”” wall sign. Historically there were mills on the shores of the river across from the Black Watch Building but only one, converted into condominiums, remains. There are now vacant lands and a 1970s post office across the street from the building.

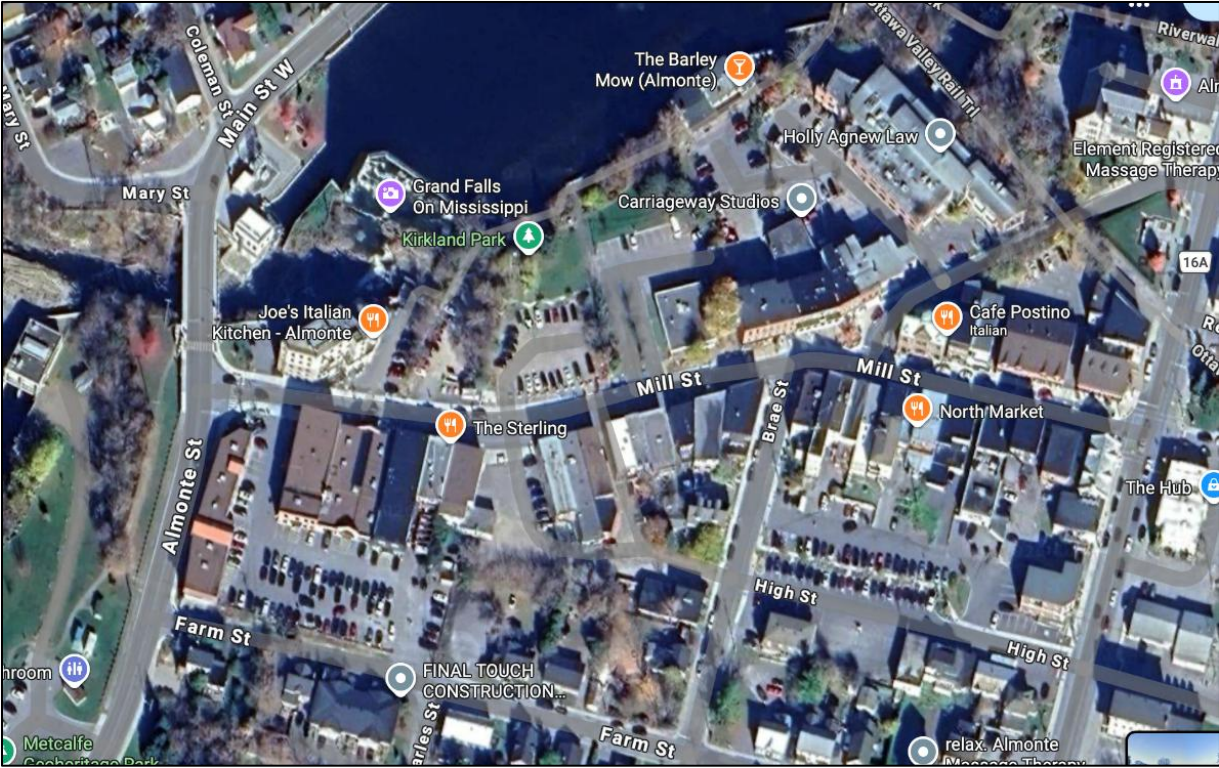


Fig. 11 Aerial View Mill Street, Almonte, ON, Google Maps

<sup>1</sup> Mill Street does not run precisely east – west but for ease of description, it is considered to do so in this document.

<b>Criterion 1</b>	
The property has design value or physical value because it is a rare, unique, representative or early example of a style, type, expression, material or construction method.	<b>Yes</b>
<b>Response to Criterion</b> The Black Watch Building has design value as a representative example of a late 19 <sup>th</sup> , early 20 <sup>th</sup> century commercial main street building. Features of this building type include two to four storey, flat-roofed massing, cornice or decorative brickwork at roofline. Large glass display windows had recessed doorways, secondary cornices separating the first and second storey, often located on the front lot line, and directly adjacent to neighbouring structures or separated by a small gap.	

### **Supporting Details – Criterion 1**

#### Description of Building

The Black Watch Building, located on lower Mill Street next to an empty lot, is part of a commercial street wall with buildings set flush against the sidewalk running east to Bridge Street. The flat-roofed, two-storey structure is divided into three storefronts, each with a ground-level entrance and three large second-floor windows featuring stone sills and lintels. Brick pilasters separate the building sections, while decorative coursing defines the cornice. A pressed metal secondary cornice separates the first and second stories. The west wall is painted with a large advertisement for “Black Watch CHEWING TOBACCO “A Man’s Chew’.”

Attributes that express their value as an early-20<sup>th</sup> century commercial main street structure:

- Rectangular two storey massing
- Symmetrical front façade
- Rectangular windows with stone sills and lintels
- Simple brick pilasters dividing the upper storey into three and marking the corners
- Red brick exterior cladding, laid in common bond
- Remaining elements of the original storefronts in evidence at 34 Mill Street
- Scalloped metal secondary cornice with brackets and semi-circular rosettes separating first and second storeys
- Decorative brick coursing at the roof line
- Painted “Black Watch CHEWING TOBACCO “A Man’s Chew”” sign

#### Commercial Architecture

Upper Canada’s mercantile sector grew rapidly in the early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, prompting the construction of purpose-built shops. The development of Mill Street

followed a pattern found elsewhere in the quick growing cities and towns throughout the province. The earliest commercial structures tended to be two and three storey side-gabled structures, a form also popular for residential buildings.<sup>2</sup> By the 1863 Walling's Map, see below Figure x, there was a hotel on the property at 32 – 36 Mill Street. This hotel burned down and was replaced by a flat roofed, three storey commercial building, which burnt down in 1909 and was replaced by the present building.



Caption: This photograph from the late 19th century shows the varied rooflines constructed as part of Mill Street's initial development.

In 1877, the lot upon which 32, 34 and 36 Mill Street was developed with Murphy's Hotel, which burned down, was later redeveloped with a three-storey commercial block. By this time, the vast majority of commercial structures built across Canada, were flat roofed structures with retail uses at grade, with the upper storeys devoted to storage, residential or community uses.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Kalman, Harold, A History of Canadian Architecture (Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 566

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, Kalman, p. 568



Photo Credit: <https://almonite.com/historic-photo-archive/>



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After the 1909 fire, the 1877 commercial structure at 32-36 Mill Street was replaced by the current structure. Like its predecessor, it featured a flat roof, retail at grade, plate glass windows and a recessed front door, decorative brick work at the roofline and regularly spaced rectangular windows, although it was two storeys in height, not three. The continuation of the building type on the lot indicates the ongoing popularity of the building type for small scale commercial enterprises.



Photo Credit: <https://almonte.com/historic-photo-archive/>

<b>Criterion 2</b>	
The property has design value or physical value because it displays a high degree of craftsmanship or artistic merit.	<b>No</b>
<b>Response to Criterion</b>	
As a brick structure constructed quickly in 1909 after an earlier was destroyed by fire, the Black Watch Building does not display a high degree of craftsmanship or artistic merit. Research undertaken preparing this report did not reveal anything noteworthy about its construction. The property does not meet this criterion.	

<b>Criterion 3</b>	
The property has design value or physical value because it demonstrates a high degree of technical or scientific achievement.	<b>No</b>
<b>Response to Criterion</b>	
As a simple commercial vernacular building, the Black Watch Building does not demonstrate a high degree of technical or scientific achievement. The heritage consultant has reviewed other main street commercial structures in Almonte, along with	

the character and construction methods of the buildings, and concluded that as a simple brick structure constructed by local labourers, the property does not display a high degree of technical or scientific achievement

<b>Criterion 4</b>	
The property has historical value or associative value because it has direct associations with a theme, event, belief, person, activity, organization or institution that is significant to a community.	<b>No</b>
<b>Response to Criterion</b> As a simple building constructed for commercial purposes, the Black Watch building does not have any direct associations with a theme, event, belief, person, activity, organization or institution that is significant to a community.	

<b>Criterion 5</b>	
The property has historical or associative value because it yields, or has the potential to yield, information that contributes to an understanding of a community or culture.	<b>Yes</b>
<b>Response to Criterion</b> The Black Watch Building has historical and associative value as an early 20 <sup>th</sup> -century main-street building that reflects Almonte’s transformation from a small grist-mill community in 1819 to an industrial hub with a thriving main street by the early 20 <sup>th</sup> century. The street developed early in the town’s history along the banks of the river and does not form part of Almonte’s original grid. Its unique route is a distinctive feature of the town and reflects its origins as a track connecting the mills.  From the 19 <sup>th</sup> century until the present, Mill Street has played a vital commercial role in the history of the community. Its north side along the water was the site of many of the town’s mills and the many townspeople worked there, while the south side included stores, hotels, a bank, and the Mason’s Hall. The town’s first telephone exchange was also located on Mill Street. <sup>4</sup> Farther east, the post office, a centre of town life, occupied a prominent lot.  The Black Watch Building has historical and associative value as its connection to Almonte’s public life reflects Mill Street’s long-standing role at the heart of the community. Since the 19 <sup>th</sup> century, main streets like this have shaped small-town life, hosting parades, public celebrations, and everyday village activity. Mill Street remains a central gathering place for social, commercial, and recreational life in Almonte. It is also a popular tourist destination and has appeared in many films.	

**Supporting Details – Criterion 5**

The Black Watch Building has historical and associative value because, as an early 20<sup>th</sup> century main street building, it illustrates the transformation of Almonte (now part of the

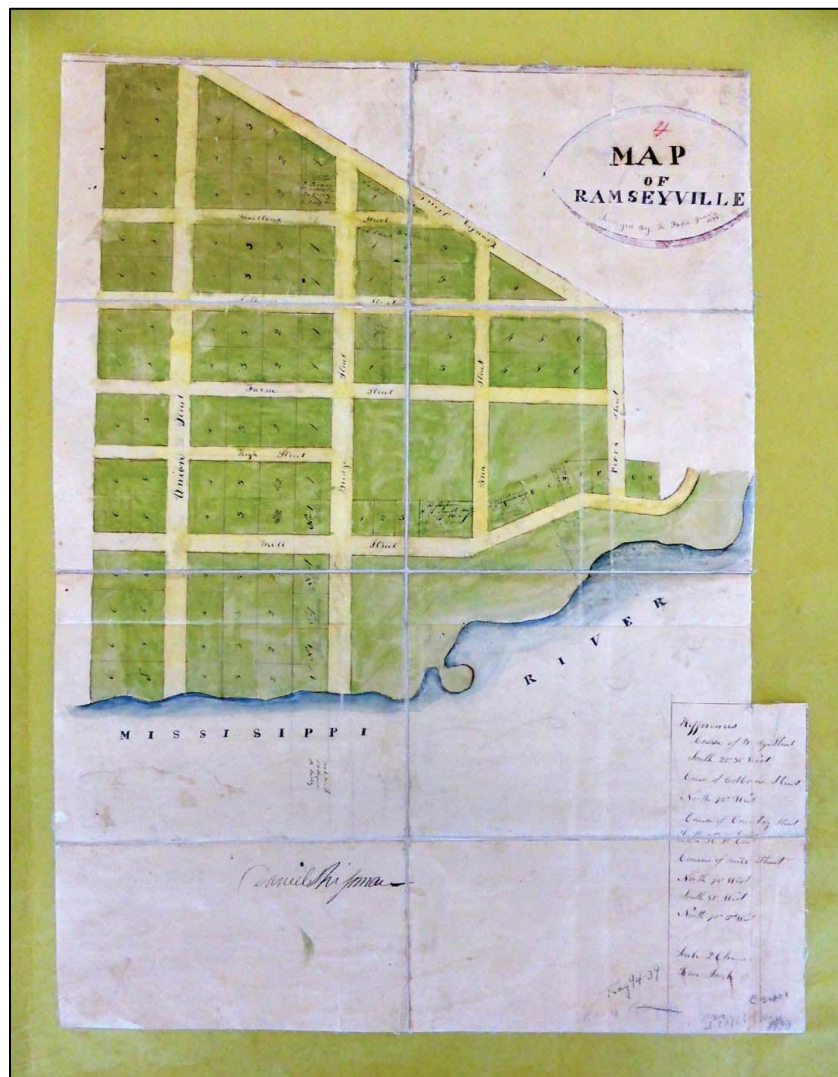
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<sup>4</sup> Downtown Almonte

Municipality of Mississippi Mills) from a small community with a grist mill in 1819 into an industrial hub with a bustling main street by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. From the 19<sup>th</sup> century to today, Mill Street has been central to the community's commercial life. The north side, along the water, was the site of many of the town's mills and provided work for many residents, while the south side supported stores, restaurants, hotels, a bank, and the Mason's Hall.<sup>5</sup>

### Mill Street

Mill Street was one of the community's first streets developed by early settlers as a route along the river. Its distinctive route has defined the character of the historic commercial core of Almonte from the earliest days. The early survey below, shows that the unusual configuration of the street was well-established in 1839.



<sup>5</sup> The cultural landscape of Mill and Little Bridge Streets is discussed in "The Downtown Almonte Heritage Conservation District Plan," pages 32-24

1839 survey of Ramsayville, Daniel Shipman's settlement on the south side of the Mississippi River. (Source: LAC. "Map of Ramseyville [sic, now Almonte], surveyed by H. Falls." H12/440/Almonte/1839, NMC3670.)

From 1839 when the survey above was completed, until 1863, Mill Street flourished as the town's main commercial thoroughfare. Its distinct pattern was firmly established as the main street, with mills on the north side of the street and shops on the south.



Wallings Map of Almonte's commercial core in 1863.

When the map above was completed, the familiar flat-roofed two and three storey form was not fully established and some of the earliest buildings, including the first building

on the 32, 34, 36 Mill Street lot that burned down in 1877, had side-gabled roofs. The photo below shows a variety of rooflines.



Photo Credit: <https://almonte.com/historic-photo-archive/>

Murphy's Hotel, the original building on the site, is noted on the map above, but had burned down by 1877.<sup>6</sup> It was replaced by a three storey structure that burnt down along with its neighbours in 1909 and was replaced by the current two storey structure.<sup>7</sup> This pattern of incremental change and loss and replacement of buildings because of fire or the aspirations of individual property owners contributes to the richly textured character of Mill Street.

The building that preceded the current Black Watch Building was a more elaborate building than the structure that replaced it. This is probably due to the owners' interest in getting their businesses operating again as soon as possible.

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<sup>6</sup> "Black Watch Building," Municipality of Mississippi Mills, Building File

<sup>7</sup> Almonte Gazette, "Under Fire Again," 17/09/1909, p. 4

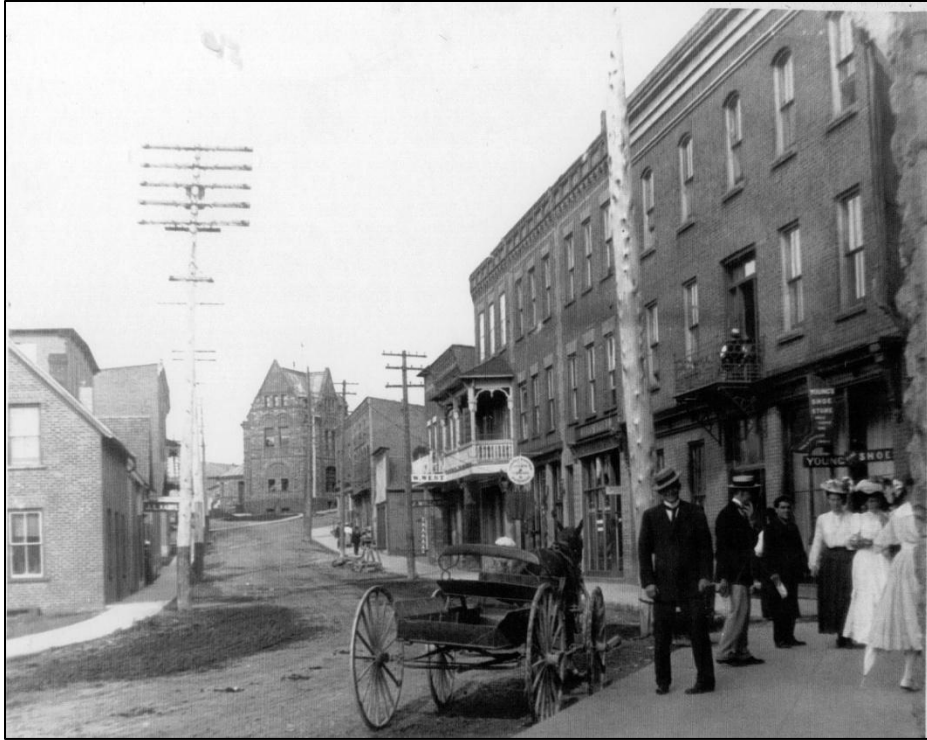


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By April 1910, the *Almonte Gazette* was reporting that new shops and businesses were opening in the Black Watch Building. A new Masonic Lodge followed in June.<sup>8</sup> The building's rapid construction highlights Mill Street's vitality and importance in 1910, which it retains today.



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<sup>8</sup> Op. cit, "Black Watch building," The "Almonte Gazette" articles are quoted in the Building Files



Fire Insurance Plan, 1889 Source; Library and Archives Canada, C.E. Goad Insurance Plan, Almonte, Sheet 2.

<b>Criterion 6</b>	
The property has historical value or associative value because it demonstrates or reflects the work or ideas of an architect, artist, builder, designer or theorist who is significant to a community.	<b>No</b>
<b>Response to Criterion</b>	
The builder and architect of the Black Watch Building are unknown, and it is probable that a local contractor built it after the fire that destroyed the previous building on the site.	

<b>Criterion 7</b>	
The property has contextual value because it is important in defining, maintaining or supporting the character of an area.	<b>Yes</b>
<b>Response to Criterion</b> The Black Watch Building has contextual value as part of Mill Street, Almonte's historic main street. The entire length of the street is included in the "Downtown Almonte Heritage Conservation District Plan", designated under Part V of the <i>Ontario Heritage Act</i> in 2015.	

### **Supporting Details – Criterion 7**

The Black Watch Building contributes to the distinctive atmosphere of Almonte's historic Mill Street. This lively main street shapes Almonte's identity, serving as a popular destination for visitors and featuring a diverse array of commercial buildings with retail spaces at street level. Though these structures vary in design and age, they share common features such as flat roofs, storefronts (some extensively modified), and their alignment directly on the front property line, resulting in a cohesive and visually appealing streetscape.

<b>Criterion 8</b>	
The property has contextual value because it is physically, functionally, visually or historically linked to its surroundings.	<b>Yes</b>
<b>Response to Criterion</b> The property has contextual value as one of many structures that line Mill Street that together form Almonte's historic main street. These buildings share a retail use, are similar in form, massing and design and an historic location.	

### **Supporting Details – Criterion 8**

The Black Watch Building is located at the lower end of Mill Street. The street is characterized by a wide range of two to four storey, commercial structures constructed in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Each building and commercial block on Mill Street contributes to the character of the main street.

<b>Criterion 9</b>	
The property has contextual value because it is a landmark	<b>Yes</b>
<b>Response to Criterion</b> The Black Watch Building is a landmark because of the distinctive Black Watch advertisement painted on its west façade. Commercial wall signs were a common feature in 19 <sup>th</sup> and 20 <sup>th</sup> century cities and towns but few remain, which contributes to the feature's status as a landmark.	

### **Supporting Details – Criterion 9**

Since its construction, the Black Watch Building has displayed an advertisement on its west wall, likely chosen for its visibility due to the adjacent undeveloped lot. The current

version of the Black Watch Chewing Tobacco advertisement remains an important landmark.

### Wall Signs/Ghost Signs

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it was common to paint advertisements directly onto the walls of commercial buildings. These wall signs appeared in both small towns and large cities and were a familiar part of the streetscape. As neon signage became more widespread in the 20th century, wall signs declined in popularity. However, some survived, and interest has grown in preserving them, often based on the faint remains known as “ghost signs.”

The west wall of the Black Watch building has been exposed since the building was constructed, making it a suitable place for advertising. Historic photographs show that advertisements appeared on the wall soon after completion, and a faint ghost sign with the word “Shamrock Woolens” can still be seen beneath the current Black Watch sign.

