

Welcome to Osgoode Hall

Welcome to Osgoode Hall. My name is Elise Brunet. I'm the Curator at the Law Society of Upper Canada and I'll be your guide for this introduction to Osgoode Hall.

If you've made the effort to download this file you obviously have some questions about the building. Let's see if I can help. First, if you're still standing outside the grounds, please come in. The fence is a bit scary but the grounds are open to all well-behaved visitors. You are well behaved, aren't you? You may want to pause the tour for a minute while you get to the front of the building.

Osgoode Hall is one of the oldest buildings in Toronto. It seems incredible now, but when the first part of Osgoode Hall opened, the building was sitting just outside the limits of the city. Osgoode Hall was named in the honour of William Osgoode, the first Chief Justice of the province. Today it houses the highest courts of the province. It's also the home of the Law Society of Upper Canada, the regulator of lawyers and paralegals in Ontario. Osgoode Hall Law School, the province's first law school used to be in this building as well but it moved to York University at the north end of the city, in the late 1960s.

The Law Society purchased this land in 1828 and started construction the next year. The Law Society built Osgoode Hall because it needed office space, and it wanted room for its library and to house law students. You can still see the original Osgoode Hall: if you stand in front of the building, you'll notice that there's a central range, a bit recessed, with two wings on each side. The section I'm talking about is the wing on the right, the red brick structure with the stone portico. That Osgoode Hall officially opened in 1832.

Even then Osgoode Hall was considered something special. The city directory, published two years after Osgoode Hall opened listed the building nine times. It was described as a "splendid hall" in a list of the City's public institutions. It was used as a landmark to describe the neighbourhood. It was listed not only under Lot (now Queen) Street but also in the listings for York, King and Front Streets - "in crossing here you have a fine view to the right of Osgoode Hall..."

Everything about Osgoode Hall made it stand out: the scale of the building and the property in a district of single-family homes, its public purpose in a residential neighbourhood, its professional occupants in a working class area, its Anglo-Saxon character in what became the city's main reception area for new immigrants, and its wealth in "The Ward," once one of the city's worst slums. Today, surrounded by skyscrapers and pavement, Osgoode Hall still stands out.

The centre portion was the first addition to the building. Built in 1833, it underwent a major renovation in 1847, which is also when the West wing was built. After all that the central part was demolished and rebuilt in the late 1850s to look the way it does today. The only major changes to the main façade occurred in 1937 when a new wing was added east of the original building and in 2008 when an inclined walkway was added at the front to make the main doors accessible to all. If you go up to the landing, you can see part of the original landing and stairs through the glass margin.

It's difficult to describe the style of Osgoode Hall. I suppose you could say that it's an architectural hybrid with a dominant classical component. As the courts and the Law Society continued to grow, so did Osgoode Hall, although most of the expansion occurred in the back. The building now occupies roughly 40% of the grounds.

You're welcome to enter the building during working hours. This audio tour includes the areas of the building that you can access on your own. The tour takes about an hour, including the time required to go through security. Each track corresponds to a different area of the building so you can choose to do the whole tour or focus on a single area. The courthouse, the Great Library and Convocation Hall can only be visited during business hours – Monday to Friday, 9:00 a.m. to 5 p.m. Because this is a courthouse, you have to go through a metal detector as you go in and you're asked to avoid making too much noise as the courts may be in session.

If you wish to see the inside of the courtrooms or visit the oldest part of the building (East Wing), you will have to join one of our public tours, available in July and August, Monday to Friday, at 1:15 p.m. Tours for groups of 10 to 25 participants can be booked the rest of the year. We are usually open during the weekend of Doors Open Toronto at the end of May.

Our next stop is the courthouse. Enter through the main doors.