

Hughes Drug Co. Apothecaries' Hall:
Canada's Oldest Drug Store

'Melissa A. James
University of Prince Edward Island

ABSTRACT

This paper sketches a descriptive history of Canada's oldest retail drug store, the Hughes Drug Co. Apothecaries' Hall, which was founded in 1810 in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island. The paper focuses on the period 1880 - 1917 for which company records exist. Although it went through seven changes in ownership, the business remained a drug store until 1986 when the building was converted to house a couple of fast food franchises. This was an unfortunate ending to a unique story in Canadian retailing history.

INTRODUCTION

In 1864 when the Fathers of Confederation met in Charlottetown, P.E.I. to plan Canada's confederation the Apothecary Shop had already been doing business for over half a century. Legend has it that the morning after that historic meeting, Canada's soon-to-be first Prime Minister, Sir John A. MacDonalld, asked the Apothecary Shop to prepare a potion to cure his hangover (from the previous evening's celebration) (MacAndrew 1975, p. 4). The Apothecary Shop was the first of its kind in Canada and this is where its historical significance lies. It was a novelty to Prince Edward Island, as well as to the rest of Canada. In 1986, one hundred and seventy-six years after the Apothecary Shop was opened, and over two million prescriptions later, Canada's oldest drug store became a fast food franchise and a historic tradition was lost.

THE APOTHECARY SHOP: 1810 - 1874

What is here referred to as Hughes' Drug Store was founded as the Apothecary Shop by Thomas DesBrisay, in 1810. On December 24 of that year the following announcement was published in The Weekly Recorder of Prince Edward Island.

'The author would like to thank the Prince Edward Island Department of Industry and the University of Prince Edward Island for funding in connection with this research paper.

Thomas DesBrisay Junior informs the public that he has opened an Apothecary Shop in Charlotte Town and intends to supply the medical wants of the inhabitants in general, where he offers for sale a variety of genuine drugs and medicines... N.B.: Prescriptions made up with accuracy and despatch.

DesBrisay began the business with an inventory of \$2,000 worth of medical, health, and drug supplies, and various cures for Islanders and their livestock (MacAndrew 1975, p.3). However, his line of merchandise later expanded considerably as evident in this 1818 advertisement in The P.E.I. Gazette.

Jamaica spirits, moist sugars, soap, men's and women's cotton stockings, pantaloons and short drawers, wadding for bonnets, cutlery, horse fleams, oyster knives, snuffers with trays, iron and britannia metal tea spoons, plated spurs, sugar nippers, plated and brass-mounted harness, quills and ready-made pens... Furs received at a liberal price.

The Apothecary Shop represented a significant change in the facilities for consumers of this time period. Before the opening of the shop, no other store was selling prescriptions to the people of Prince Edward Island. Many people made their own medications at home, while others went directly to their doctor who would have the prescriptions made at the Medical Hall.

The Apothecary Shop was located in Charlottetown at the corner of Grafton and Queen Streets, the main intersection of the city and one of the best possible retail locations since this was traditionally the meeting place in town. The store was also located within walking distance of the wharfs (Charlottetown was a major port) which would have been convenient for those travelling by ship.

The building's interior contained hand-carved oak furnishings with a large mirror surrounded by coloured glass which separated the store from the dispensary. The ceiling was finished with ornamental pressed-tin surfaces. In 1901 the exterior of the store was renovated with Island sandstone and pressed brick imported from Ontario. It was an outstanding structure in those times and the newspapers praised the architects and contractors. Even today it is described as "an ornament to the city" (Rogers 1983, p. 235). Those renovations, however, were carried out after the drug store had changed ownership.

When Thomas DesBrisay died in 1857 his son, Theophilus, took over the business. In 1874 the family sold the company (but not the building) to Dr. K. Frank Beer and George E. Hughes who both worked across the street at the Medical Hall. Beer and Hughes leased the building for \$1,200 a year and bought all the stock for \$500. They renamed the store Apothecaries' Hall Company and the Hughes family operated the store for the next 75 years.

every male Islander and widowed or working female. These directories had a long life and were used by most Islanders. The ads in the directories usually focused on particular products made by George Hughes himself (See Appendix). The few ads for manufactured products usually relied on the manufacturer's own copy.

A well known form of promotion used by Hughes was a calendar cook book which the store published. The Hughes' Household Calendar Cook Book (1909) was filled with advertisements for various Hughes' products as well as recipes for plum pudding, carrot pudding, jelly rolls, drop cookies, and Boston brown bread. It also contained listings of historical events for each day of the year and jokes which often depicted contemporary commercial life, for example:

J - I am very fond of electricity.

F - Yes, the grocery man told me that you like to have everything charged (Hughes 1909, p.9).

From the drug store's ledgers it is evident that few of Hughes' customers were extended credit. This may have been, in part, because the large numbers of rural customers were hard to track down and collect from; they were predominantly farmers and fishermen with distinctly seasonal cash flows. Selected businessmen and professionals were, however, given liberal credit terms. Some of these, for example, Colonel Gray (one of the Fathers of Confederation) and George Tweedy (a prominent town lawyer) didn't pay their bills for up to a year and a half while continuing to charge purchases. While small general stores relied on credit customers to survive, Hughes' did not. The P.E.I. Hospital, Lunatic Asylum, Quarantine Hospital, Government Poor House, Charlottetown Driving Park, House of Assembly, and the Convent de Notre Dame were also frequent customers. Many pages in the store's ledgers account for purchases by the P.E.I. Hospital, for example, half pints of brandy (used as a pain killer) and iodine were purchased on a regular basis as well as various prescriptions.

The most detailed account of prices exists in a ledger dated 1888. Prices for prescriptions in that year ranged from ten cents to one dollar and twenty-five cents. Most seemed to fall within the twenty-five to fifty cent range. These prices were probably somewhat higher than those of competing drug stores since Hughes, by that time, had developed a strong following of customers on the Island.

When the original Apothecary Shop opened in 1810 there was no competition. But as the population of the Island grew and more doctors began to practice, the need for more pharmacies increased. In 1843 Watson's Drug Store opened in Charlottetown at 33 Queen Street, not far from Hughes. In 1845 James Gourlie opened a store in nearby Summerside. In Queen's County (where Charlottetown was located) ten more drug stores opened between

References

Apothecaries' Hall and Hughes' Drug Store day books and ledgers, 1880 - 1917. Store archives.

Gallant, Allison J. 1963. "A History of Pharmacy in Prince Edward Island," Thesis, Edmonton: University of Alberta.

Guardian Newspaper 1986. "Charlottetown Loses Landmark Drug Store," (September 2).

Horne, H. Shirley 1978. "Island Landmark," The Atlantic Advocate, 68, 8, (April), 45 - 48.

Hughes, George E. 1909. Hughes' Household Calendar Cook Book, P.E.I. Collection, Library of U.P.E.I, Charlottetown, P.E.I.

Larter, Ralph. Interview with former employee of Hughes' Drug Store, November, 1990.

MacAndrew, Barbara 1975. "Canada's Oldest Drugstore," EPA Horizons, 6, (February - March), 2-4.

Rogers, Irene L. 1983. Charlottetown: The Life in Its Buildings, Charlottetown: The Prince Edward Island Museum and Heritage Foundation.