

BLAIR & SON FUNERAL HOME

Two Centuries, Two Families

*“Show me the manner in which a nation cares for its dead and I will measure with mathematical exactness the tender mercies of its people, their respect for the laws of the land and their loyalty to high ideals”*¹ – William Gladstone (1809-1898)².

In 1836, 30-year-old David Hogg (1807-1883) opened a furniture store in a one-and-one-half storey frame building at 17 Gore Street West in Perth, supported by a workshop in its back yard. Evolving over nearly two centuries, that business continues today, at the same location, as Blair & Son Funeral Home, although the furniture showroom, now Blair & Son Home Furnishings, has moved to Dufferin Street.

David Hogg was an army brat³, born in the Royal Artillery Barracks at Colchester, England, the son of Lieutenant John Hogg (b.1780)⁴ and Susan Martin/Martyn (b.1780). The Hogg family were Scots and as a youth David apprenticed to a cabinet maker at Edinburgh. In time, he established himself as an accomplished craftsman and family tradition holds that *“some of his work ... found a place in Buckingham Palace”*⁵.

In 1831, at Edinburgh, David Hogg married Jane/Jean Seymour (1813-1834). They became the parents of two children⁶ before sailing for Upper Canada in 1834. Tragically, Jane died during the passage. Left with two small children, aged just one and two years, a year later David married Isabella Inglis (1813-1881)⁷ at Perth.

David Hogg appears to have been drawn to Perth by a paternal uncle, also named David, a discharged Gunner of the Royal Artillery who had taken up a land grant at the Military Settlement in 1816⁸. Gunner David Hogg became a leading figure in the early days of the community. He was an auctioneer and merchant with a store and auction rooms at the corner of Gore and North Streets (#9 Gore Street West), more-or-less next-door to the site upon which his nephew David Hogg later established his cabinet making and undertaking business. At various times through the 1830s and 1840s David Hogg, the uncle, held the posts of Bailiff, Crier of the Court of King's Bench, Constable, Market Clerk, Drummond Township Clerk, and 1st Lieutenant of the Perth Artillery Company, Lanark Militia.⁹

¹ This quote appears in the marketing material of nearly every funeral home in the English speaking world.

² Three-time British Prime Minister, 1868-1883, 1880-1886, 1892-1894.

³ A 19th century British Army acronym for 'British Regiment Attached Traveler'.

⁴ Family histories record that prior to service with the Royal Artillery, John Hogg had served with the 20th and 24th Regiments of Foot.

⁵ Rev. John Fowler, *Perth Courier*, June 1, 2005.

⁶ John (1832-1903), Mary (1833-1913).

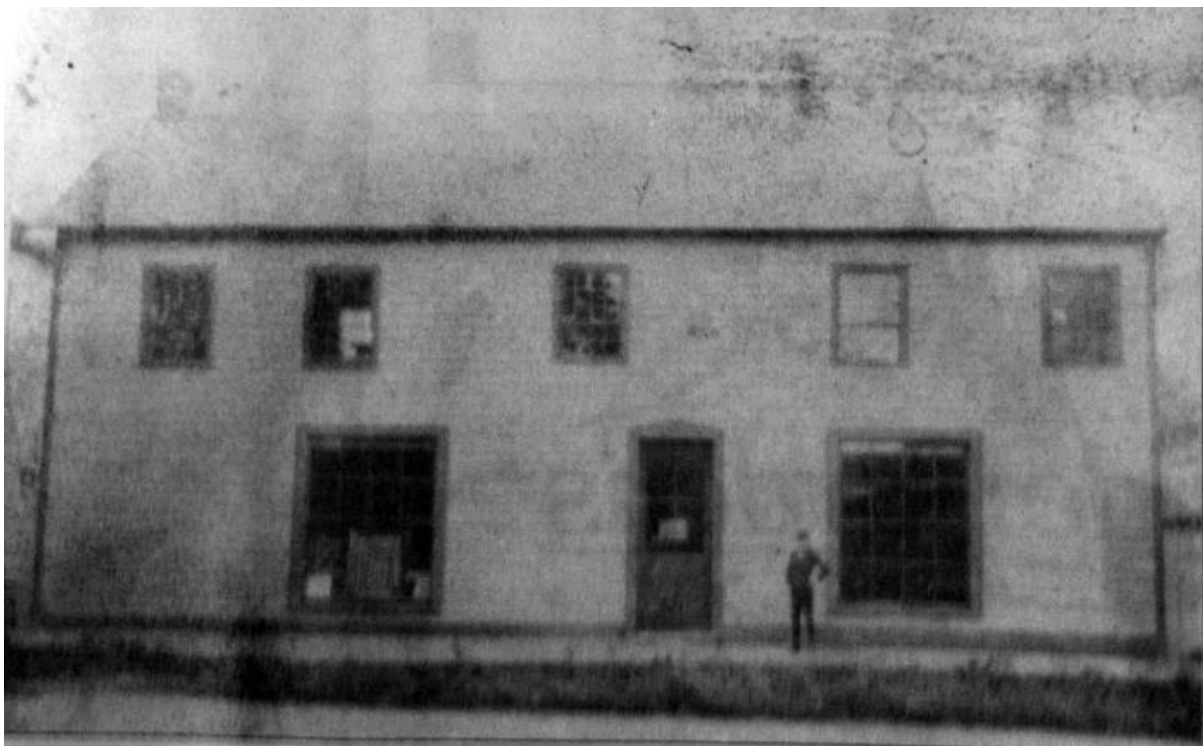
⁷ Daughter of Andrew Inglis (1791-1828) & Elizabeth Hall (1790-1866).

⁸ Gunner David Hogg arrived with a wife and daughter and was located on Drummond Township C-2/L-22(NE) on November 21, 1816.

⁹ Gunner David Hogg returned to regular military service in about 1845, becoming Barrack Master at Cornwall, Penetanguishene and Toronto.

Shortly after David Hogg the younger arrived at Perth in 1834, he was joined by his brother William (1810-1871). Although William was also a trained cabinet maker, he does not seem to have practiced that trade at Perth, but rather, ran a Tavern for a number of years. In 1838 he married Catherine Scoular (1807-1880) and they had four children born at Perth before the family moved to the village of Galbraith in Ramsay Township. There he built a workshop on the family farm and produced furniture for customers in the immediate neighborhood. He also worked as a cobbler and tanned his own leather.

At Perth, elder brother David Hogg opened his cabinet making business at No. 17 Gore Street West and prospered. By the 1840s the back-yard workshop had been much expanded into a 'factory' producing a wide range of furniture.



*David Hogg Sr.'s establishment at 17 Gore Street West, built 1836, demolished c1910.
(Image courtesy of Perth Remembered)*

As a woodworker, Hogg was often called upon to produce coffins. At first, he built them on request, but soon found it useful to keep a coffin or two on hand. Frequently an order included delivery to the grieving family's home and, as Hogg owned horses and a wagon fit-for-purpose, customers sometimes turned to him to transport the deceased to the cemetery.

In the first years of Upper Canada pioneer communities like the Perth Settlement, before the advent of 'Undertakers' or 'Funeral Directors', the funeral process began immediately after a death occurred.¹⁰ Female neighbours gathered at the home of the deceased to lay out the body. The corpse was typically laid on a bed or a flat surface, such as boards or a door placed on

¹⁰ Jewish funerals were an exception to the Christian practices described here.

sawhorses, and covered with a white sheet. The corpse was first washed and then, using materials readily at hand, the mouth was closed by tying a handkerchief under the chin and coins or pebbles used to close the eyes. Once washed, men were usually dressed in their best 'Sunday suit'. In some customs women were buried in their wedding dress; in other cases, they were interred wearing their 'best-dress'. The body might be laid out in the front room, the bedroom, or the kitchen.

While the body was being prepared by the women, a coffin was constructed by male members of the family with the help of neighbors, or by a local woodworker like David Hogg. Coffins for ordinary people were made of pine boards, polished with lamp black. Coffins for the wealthier class were covered with black cotton cloth. Female relatives assisted by neighborhood women made a 'tucker', a padded lining of pleated white cloth, and a small pillow to elevate the deceased's head completed the interior trim. Children's coffins were, of course, much smaller and covered with white rather than black fabric.

As David Hogg increasingly assumed responsibility for relieving relatives of funeral preparations, he employed an on-call team of Perth women to line coffins with 'tucker'. As these women were often called upon to line a coffin in failing light, late in the day or even after nightfall, Hogg designed a specialized kerosine lamp and had a local tinsmith produce at least four of them. The lamp itself was firmly fastened to a horizontal shelf that could be adjusted for height, up or down a central metal rod. The top of that rod ended in a loop so the lamp could be hung above the work, while the bottom of the rod was mounted in a weighted base ensuring the lamp, if set inside or beside the coffin, would not tip over. Opposite the lamp on the adjustable shelf was a shallow tray in which the necessary carpet tacks, needles, etc. were kept within easy view and reach.



David Hogg Sr. designed 'tucker lamp'.
(Photo courtesy of Blair & Son Funeral Directors)



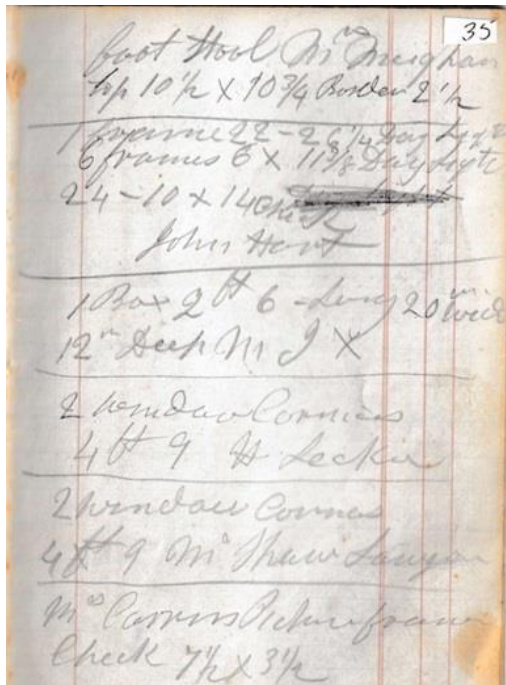
Coffin Plate
(Courtesy of B. L. Massey Collection)

Metal handles, a cross, and a coffin plate could be purchased at most local hardware stores. The coffin plate, usually with commemorative details inscribed on it, was often kept as a family keepsake rather than buried with the coffin.

The body was kept in the home from one to three days, although hot weather or a very obese corpse might require a speedier burial. In winter, the stove was allowed to go out to keep the house cool. In summer, if ice was available, a bathtub full was placed under the body, or packed around the abdomen to slow decomposition and minimize odour.

Well into the 20th century it was customary in Lanark County and much of Canada to wake the deceased at home for two days, followed by the funeral and interment on the third day. What took place during a wake varied by religious denomination and ethnic custom. Generally, family, friends and neighbours stayed up all night, taking turns to sit with the body. Most often this 'visitation' was a social occasion; stories were told, music played, and the life of the deceased recalled. In other traditions, it was a more solemn affair where there was little talking -- instead, prayers were said, and hymns sung. In almost all cases, visitors were provided food and drink.

On the third day, the minister or priest attended to conduct the funeral service at the family residence. In later years, in town, where there was closer proximity to churches, the coffin would be moved there for the service. Sometimes, getting the coffin out of a small cabin or house presented a challenge. Steep narrow stairs could seriously complicate the maneuver. A coffin might have to be stood on end to pass around a tight corner, or a window removed from its frame to allow egress.



A page from David Hogg Sr.'s order book c1857. Note dimensions for a coffin (box), third item from the top.

(Image courtesy of Middleville Museum)

The family, assisted by neighbours, usually dug the grave themselves. In winter the ground had to be thawed with bonfires or the bodies could be stored in the woodshed or barn, or later in a receiving vault or 'dead house', until spring. At Perth, there was no cemetery vault until one was built at Elmwood Cemetery, Perth, in 1897.¹¹ In the spring, there was a rush to bury the deceased before the weather got too warm.

If the grave was on the family farm, or in a nearby churchyard, pallbearers carried the coffin on their shoulders. If the burying ground was at some distance, the coffin was transported on a horse-drawn wagon, followed by a procession of family and mourners by carriage or on foot.

The owner of that team and wagon might be a family member, or liveryman, but was often the same carpenter or cabinet maker who had built the coffin. Over the years, as he was increasingly called upon to 'undertake' more of the funeral arrangements –

supplying the coffin, providing mourning clothes, arranging pall bearers, digging the grave, assuring transport, etc. -- the wagon evolved into a purpose-built hearse. It has been said, however, that the "the 19th century funeral director required only a fine pair of black horses and a black suit to adequately serve the needs of the community". By the 1840s, what had been a sideline for carpenters and cabinet makers, was evolving into the profession and business of Funeral Director.

¹¹ The vault served not just Elmwood, but also cemeteries throughout the area.

In 1859 David Hogg suffered a serious reversal when his Gore Street workshop, in the rear of the furniture showroom, was destroyed by fire, described as “*the largest and most destructive fire that had ever occurred in Perth*”¹² to that date.

The alarm was given, and the fire engines were speedily on the spot; but the building (a large three storey stone one) being filled with dried lumber and other combustible materials was one sheet of flame before the engines could be got to play upon it, and efforts were therefore directed to preventing the spread of the flames to adjoining property.

There was a pretty stiff breeze blowing at the time, which increased the intensity of the flames. The front shop belonging to Mr. Hogg was with great difficulty saved, as also the dwelling house and workshop of Mr. James Williams, but a stable belonging to the latter was burnt down, as well as some lumber sheds belonging to Mr. Hogg. The dwelling house and outhouses belonging to Mr. Josias Davies were also in imminent danger. The adjoining fences were burnt, and the gardens destroyed. Mr. Hogg lost a quantity of tools

...¹³

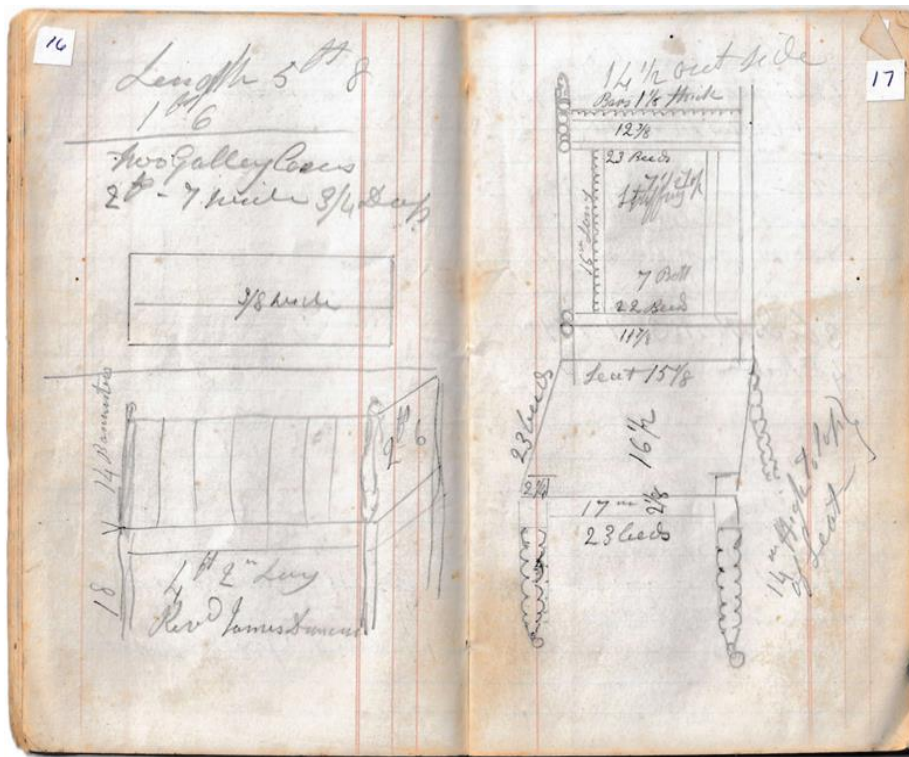


Perth Marble Works shop adjoining the Hogg Furniture and Undertaking building, c1910
(Image courtesy of Stewart Blair)

¹² *Perth Courier*, September 2, 1859.

¹³ *Id.*

By chance or design, for over 65 years the Hogg furniture store and undertaking establishment on Gore Street had as a near-neighbor the Perth Marble Works where stone cutters shaped and engraved tombstones and produced architectural features¹⁴. In 1850 Josiah Davies Jr. (1805-1866) had purchased auctioneer David Hogg's property at #9 Gore Street West (corner of Gore & North Streets) and opened the Marble Works in its back yard, fronting North Street. The enterprise was later taken over by his son, Robert N. Davies (1840-1924) and, at about the time it was sold to Horace William Cryderman (1848-1903) in 1873, the yard shifted to front on Gore Street, directly adjoining the Hogg furniture store. Ownership later passed to stonecutter James H. Dolan (1856-1934) in 1882, then to Levi Albert Campbell (1864-1913) and later to Leopold J. Ruch (1876-1943) who operated it until it was sold to Hugh McEwen in 1939 and moved a short distance east to 29 North Street.



Design sketches from the order book of David Hogg Sr. c1857.
(Image courtesy of Middleville Museum)

David Hogg's eldest son, John (1832-1903), apprenticed with his father and then worked briefly in cabinetmaking shops at Montreal and Toronto. He returned to Perth in the early 1850s and for a number of years the furniture and undertaking firm on Gore Street operated as 'D.&J. Hogg'. However, in 1859, perhaps due to the fire, John Hogg took over management of the cabinetmaking and undertaking business of William J. Bell & Company¹⁵ at Carleton Place. After a brief

return to the Hogg business at Perth a few years later, in 1870 John left for Paisley in Bruce County where he opened a furniture factory and established that village's first undertaking establishment.

¹⁴ The Perth Marble Works advertised "Monuments, Tablets, Head Stones, Chimney Pieces and Hearth and Comfit Stones manufactured from American and Italian marble". (Comfit stones were slabs of dressed marble for kitchen use preparing pastries and confectionaries).

¹⁵ William James Bell (1833-1890) was the son of John Bell (1806-1849), a Carleton Place merchant, and the grandson of Rev. William Bell (1780-1857) of Perth. After serving his apprenticeship under David Hogg at Perth, he opened his own cabinetmaking & undertaking business at Carleton Place. In 1859, when Bell left for the California goldfields (where he remained for many years), he hired John Hogg to manage his Carleton Place business.

In addition to the Gore Street store and workshop, from an early date David Hogg also owned a sawmill on Haggart Island on Mill Street. In 1871, in partnership with William James Pink (1843-1922)¹⁶, he expanded that operation to include an adjoining planing mill and factory producing chairs, cabinetry and cheese boxes. In another reversal, however, that enterprise was also destroyed by fire in 1881.

In addition to his business interests, David Hogg Sr. was active in local public affairs. In the 1850s and 1860s he served on the executive of the Perth chapter of the Reform Association of the United Counties of Lanark & Renfrew and in 1854-1855 sat on Perth Town Council. In the same period, he was also a leading figure in the local chapter of the Temperance League.

Management and ownership of the Hogg furniture and undertaking business passed to a new generation in the early 1870s when David Hogg Sr. retired in favour of his son, David Hogg Jr. (1842-1929).



David Hogg Sr. Sideboard c1850
(Photo by Author)

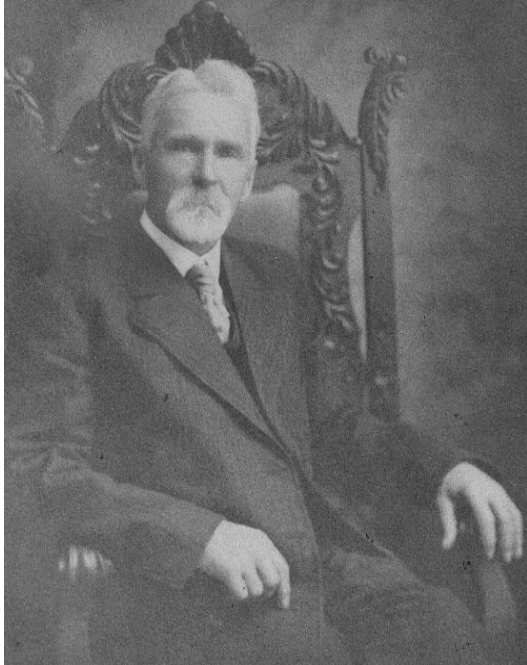
*The pioneer furniture manufacturer of the county ... at one time engaged in its production on a large scale ... was compelled to discontinue having had an accident. The senior Hogg retired in favor of the present proprietor, who if he did not inherit all of his father's skill in mechanism, still possesses the integrity and credibility to carry on the family reputation. Although the exterior of the building is the same as in the past, the interior is crowded with the best furniture manufacturers in the Dominion produce. Mr. Hogg gives special attention to embalming and undertaking, keeping two hearses and all other funeral requisites.*¹⁷

¹⁶ William J. Pink was Mayor of Perth 1887-1888.

¹⁷ *Toronto Mail*, May 14, 1887.

In 1835, David Hogg Sr. had married his second wife, Isabella Inglis, and over the next 25 years they had a family of at least eight children¹⁸. Their oldest surviving son David Jr., born at Perth in 1842, apprenticed with his father and, as a young man, became a partner in the furniture and undertaking business. When the work injury forced his father's retirement, and his half-brother John moved to western Ontario, David Hogg Jr. carried on the family business at Perth.

A third surviving brother, William Drummond Hogg (1847-1940), had studied law under Lanark County Crown Attorney, Edward George Malloch (1842-1915) and after being called to the bar in 1874 practiced in Ottawa.¹⁹



David Hogg Jr. (1842-1929)

Furniture produced in the Hogg furniture workshop was noted for both its style and high quality. A sideboard produced c1850 by David Hogg Sr. is on display at the Perth Matheson House Museum²⁰ and an 'Arrowhead Rocking Chair', made by David Hogg Jr. in the 1870s is in the collection of the Canadian Museum of History²¹ at Gatineau, Quebec.

In November 1871 the undertaking business on Gore Street attracted its first competitor when John Riddell (1821-1908) opened a furniture store and undertaking establishment at 51 Herriott Street. That venture, however, seems to have lasted only until 1875.²² A quarter century later, in 1900 and 1901, George Asselstine, a carriage maker and furniture dealer located in the Stanley Block at 64 North Street, advertised himself as an undertaker but with emphasis on offering a hearse for hire.²³ More than six decades passed before another funeral home opened at Perth when Gerald W. Morrow (1939-2013) established the

Morrow Funeral Home at 30 Drummond St. West. It operated from 1964 through 1976.²⁴ Thirty years later, in 2007, John E. O'Dacre established the Perth & District Funeral Home Inc. at 15 Victoria Street. Later renamed the O'Dacre Funeral Home, it went out of business in 2020.

¹⁸ David Hogg Sr. was the father of 12 children in all. By his first wife, Jane Seymour (1813-1834) -- Mary (1832-1913) & John (1832-1903). By second his wife, Isabella Inglis (1813-1881) -- Elizabeth (1836-1916), Susannah (1838-1876), David J. (1842-1929), William Drummond (1847-1940), Isabella Morrison (1849-1936), Jennetta Hall (b.1852), Christina (b.1854), Margaret (1856-1942). There may have been two additional sons, Francis (b.1840) and Andrew (b.1845), but, if so, they seem to have died as children.

¹⁹ In partnership with Daniel O'Connor, under the firm name of O'Connor & Hogg.

²⁰ Classed as a 'Fish and Fowl' sideboard, made of walnut.

²¹ The Museum description notes that the chair is made of "*Basswood and hardwood, with original painted decoration [and that] rocking chairs, such as this one, were popular additions to many Canadian homes during the mid- to late 1800s. The back spindles of this one have been curved and flattened to ensure maximum comfort for tired backs. This example retains the original painted finish and, under the seat, the paper label of the maker, David Hogg Jr. of Perth, C.W. (Canada West)*".

²² Between 1859-1874 Riddell was in business as a cabinet and chair manufacturer at 51 Herriott Street. Then, from 1874 through 1893, in partnership with mason J. H. McCann, the business was located in the two-storey brick building they built at 92 Gore Street East, a building that remains today.

²³ George Asselstine moved to Winnipeg in about 1901.

²⁴ The Morrow Funeral Home was destroyed by fire in 1974 but was re-built and briefly re-opened in 1975.

Through these years, without interruption, the enterprise founded by David Hogg in 1836, and later carried on by the Blair family, continued to provide funerary services to Perth and area.

David Hogg Jr.'s undertaking service was equipped with its first purpose-built hearse in the summer of 1875. A *"magnificent hearse ... built by Mr. Stanley²⁵, who made a first class job of it. The enterprise of Mr. Hogg deserves every encouragement."*²⁶

For the next three decades, the driver's seat of that horse-drawn conveyance was occupied by teamster Patrick Spence (1822-1909). As owner of Perth's leading livery stable Spence was well qualified for the job. From the 1860s, many years before he went to work for David Hogg, he had furnished a rental hearse, drawn by his team of matched blacks.

*In connection with his livery, Mr. Spence drove a hearse for years before he engaged with Mr. D. Hogg for whom he drove for 32 consecutive years ... In that time [he] attended about 4,000 to their last resting place. He was present when the first corpse was laid in Elmwood Cemetery [1872] and also at St. John's Cemetery [1872] and he has witnessed the transformation of these cemeteries from vacant fields or bush lots into silent cities of the dead.*²⁷

When Patrick Spence went to work for David Hogg, although he continued to operate his livery stable for another 10 years, he sold his own hearse to Owen Byrne (1841-1917)²⁸. Byrne also operated a livery business and competed with the Hogg hearse for a number of years, advertising that he had *"purchased that beautiful hearse from Mr. Spence and is prepared to attend funerals on the shortest notice"*.²⁹

In 1900 David Hogg Jr. took George W. Thompson (1863-1921) as a business partner. Thompson was no stranger to the enterprise. He had learned the cabinetmaking and undertaking trade as an apprentice and employee in the Hogg shop.

Attempts to preserve bodies by embalming techniques began in antiquity, but it was the American Civil War (1861-1865), that drove the advancement of embalming processes, instruments, and chemicals. The families of soldiers killed far from home wanted to bury them in their own church yards. In the years following the war, the techniques learned came into general use, but it was not until 1884 that the *Perth Courier* reported:



²⁵ Matthew Stanley (1845-1922) first established his business on Wilson Street but after it was destroyed by fire in 1874 moved his factory into the former Farmers' Foundry building on North Street. He manufactured buggies, buses, and hearses, as well as farm wagons. Stanley later (c1895) moved to England where he became Superintendent of the Birmingham Street Railway Works.

²⁶ *Perth Courier*, July 30, 1875.

²⁷ *Perth Courier*, November 19, 1909.

²⁸ Byrne was also proprietor of the Union Hotel, 100 Gore Street East, c1865-1909.

²⁹ *Perth Courier*, February 20, 1874.

*We notice by the Casket Paper published in Rochester, N.Y. in the interest of the undertakers, that Mr. David Hogg, of Perth, received a course of instruction in the Rochester School of Embalming”.*³⁰

Six years later the newspaper further reported that,

*Mr. G. W. Thompson of the firm of Hogg & Thompsom, Undertakers, has passed his examination for embalming according to requirements of the Canadian Embalmers Association, Toronto”.*³¹

While Hogg & Thompson routinely applied the new science from the 1880s onward, for many years the embalming was carried out in the home as the body of the deceased was prepared for the traditional residential wake and funeral.

In the early 1900s, the frame structure that had housed the Hogg furniture store since 1836, was renovated and faced with brick. Over the years, the shell of the stone workshop destroyed by fire in 1859 was scavenged by local masons for building material and eventually replaced by large sheds where the horses, carriages and winter cutters were housed.

In February 1919 David Hogg Jr. retired after 55 years in the furniture and undertaking business, *“having been for some time the very oldest head of any business concern in any line in Perth or Lanark County”.*³² His only son, William (1880-1960), then a bank manager at Walkerville, Ontario, and later a lawyer, was not interested in becoming an undertaker and furniture dealer, so David Hogg’s share of the business was sold to Alexander Blair (1875-1953)³³. A native of Westport, Leeds County, Blair had apprenticed as an undertaker with the firm of Goodfellow Undertakers and was a junior partner in that business for 18 years. Although David Hogg continued to assist with funerals for a number of years, for the first time in 65 years the Hogg name did not appear on the sign hanging outside 17 Gore Street East.



Alexander Blair (1875-1953).
(Image courtesy of Blair & Sons Funeral Directors

By the latter decades of the 19th century, furniture was no longer manufactured on site and in 1920 the firm of ‘G. W. Thompson & A. Blair’ advertised a,

³⁰ *Perth Courier*, October 31, 1884.

³¹ *Perth Courier*, September 14, 1900.

³² *Perth Courier*, January 3, 1930.

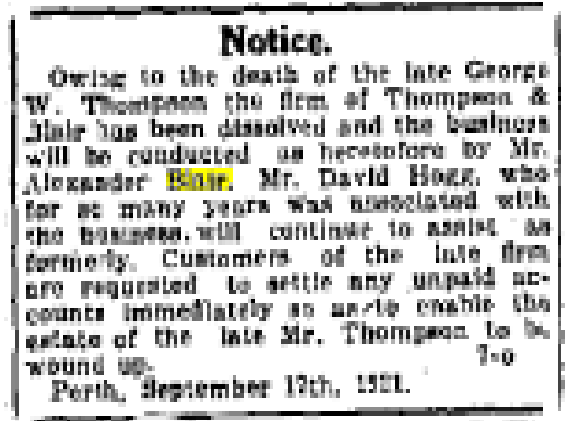
³³ Alexander Blair’s grandparents had emigrated from Scotland in 1820 via the ship *Alfred*, settled in Bathurst Township and later moved to a farm in Crosby Township near Westport. Alexander was the son of Henry Blair (1838-1919) and Elizabeth Gorsline (1849-1917).

*Large and varied stock of furniture, window shades, pictures, house furnishings, etc., equal to anything in the area. Upholstering and picture framing neatly and carefully executed. They are also funeral directors and embalmers.*³⁴

'Thompson & Blair', however, only existed for two-and-one-half years. In August 1921 George Thompson died, at the age of just 58 years.

Alexander Blair chose not to seek out a new partner but purchased Thompson's share of the business and carried on as 'Blair's Furniture and Undertaking', a sole proprietorship.

The undertaking business had much changed over the years since David Hogg Sr. first began selling hand made coffins in 1836. Nevertheless, as had long been the tradition, when George W. Thompson died in 1921 and when David Hogg Jr. died, aged 87 in 1930, even their wakes and funerals still took place at their homes. The Blair undertaking service prepared their bodies and supplied the caskets and hearse, but the company still did not offer a viewing parlor or chapel, or the full range of funeral services provided today.



Notice.
Owing to the death of the late George W. Thompson the firm of Thompson & Blair has been dissolved and the business will be conducted as heretofore by Mr. Alexander Blair. Mr. David Hogg, who for so many years was associated with the business, will continue to assist as formerly. Customers of the late firm are requested to settle any unpaid accounts immediately so as to enable the estate of the late Mr. Thompson to be wound up.
Perth, September 17th, 1921.

However, although most wakes and funerals would still be held in the home of the deceased for many years to come, the first dedicated 'viewing parlor' at 'Blair's Furniture and Undertaking' on Gore Street opened in the early 1920's -- a small room adjoining the furniture show room.

In 1927 Howard A. Blair (1905-1934), eldest son of Alexander Blair, completed training at the Banting Institute's Canadian School of Embalming³⁵ in Toronto and joined his father as business partner. Now operating as 'A. Blair & Son', the enterprise undertook a major renovation project, and in June that year opened a much expanded and improved funeral home.

*Perth has a practically new undertaking establishment; Messrs. Alex Blair & Son having just completed extensive changes and improvements to their business on Gore Street. On the ground floor of the building, with an entrance from Gore Street, is situated a new, private funeral home, beautifully equipped and with a fireplace and other comforts. A new building, 22 X 36 feet in dimensions, has been built at the rear of the main building, and in this is situated the casket display room, and a new morgue. The morgue is all in white enamel, with a tile floor, latest improved morgue table, and running hot and cold water. The entire building, including the new addition, is heated throughout by a new hot water heating system. The whole establishment is now much more conveniently connected, is a credit to the firm and to the town and is probably not equaled anywhere even in the largest cities.*³⁶

³⁴ A 1920 trade Journal quoted in *The Merchants, Professionals & Tradespeople of Perth*, by Gus Quattrocchi (1998).

³⁵ The Ontario Funeral Service Association's Canadian School of Embalming operated at the University of Toronto's Banting Institute until 1968 when the training of Funeral Directors moved to Humber College.

³⁶ *Perth Courier*, June 13, 1930.



Alexander Blair and the Blair & Son vehicle fleet c1934.
 (Photo courtesy of Blair & Son Funeral Directors)

Dating from the establishment of municipal government in 1849, undertakers Hogg and then Blair carried out indigent burials paid for by the County or Town of Perth. As was a long-standing tradition in the trade, Blair & Son provided funeral services for young children free of charge. From a very early date, Coroner's inquests and occasional autopsies were carried out at the Blair & Son morgue, a practice that continued until these procedures were moved to the Perth Hospital in the 1970s.

As had David Hogg Jr. before him, Alexander Blair served as a director of the non-profit Elmwood Cemetery Corporation. Blair was also a generous supporter of local charities, an example of which was the funding of complete furnishings and equipment for a private room at Perth's Great War Memorial Hospital when it was opened in 1923.



Howard A. Blair (1905-1934)
 (Photo courtesy of Blair & Sons
 Funeral Directors)

Only four years later, however, Howard Blair died at the age of just 29 years leaving his wife, Helen K. Paterson-Blair (b.1911), but no children. Nevertheless, the business continued to operate as 'A. Blair & Son' as Howard's younger brother, Hugh Stanley Blair (1909-1967), joined his father in the family business. Hugh Blair had first worked at Shaw's Clothing Store in Perth, then as a traveler for Cluett-Peabody Co. Men's and Boys' Wear of Kitchener, and later as a city traveler with the firm of A. Stein & Co., wholesale dealers in gent's furnishings in Toronto.

A new branch of the business was created in 1926 when Blair Undertakers purchased an 'Invalid Car', thus adding ambulance services to its business portfolio. The vehicle was a 1926 Studebaker Big Six EP, built at South Bend, Indiana, USA. *"A long felt want, [it is] up-to-date in every particular and certainly a valuable asset to the community. Mr. Blair is deserving of commendation on his enterprise"*³⁷.

³⁷ Perth Courier, August 20, 1926.

The Studebaker was replaced in 1941 with a Packard Brantford Henney model *“commodious in the extreme and completely outfitted with everything man’s ingenuity can contrive for the comfort and conveyance of the ill or injured ... the ‘last word’ in present day types of such motorized vehicles”*.³⁸

The Packard’s straight-eight engine, chassis and power train were built at Detroit, Michigan, while the coachwork was constructed by Brantford Coach & Body Company of Brantford, Ontario.



1926 Studebaker Invalid Car
(Image courtesy of Flair & Son Funeral Directors)

The ambulance service was updated again in 1955 with an eight-cylinder Pontiac model built by Superior Coach & Body Company of Lima, Ohio. It was

“rated as one of the finest ambulances in eastern Ontario ... equipped with first aid kits, portable oxygen unit, fire extinguisher and air conditioning ... grey with the interior in ivory and green [it could] be converted to a two-stretcher ambulance by the folding attendant’s seat”.³⁹

The Blair Ambulance Service transported ill and injured patients from their homes, or the site of automobile and other accidents, to Perth’s Great War Memorial Hospital and provided patient transfers from GWMH to hospitals in Ottawa, Brockville and Kingston.

In that era, almost every local funeral home provided community ambulance services -- but not because ambulances represented an attractive profit center, as operations usually failed to break-even financially, but because funeral homes were most often the only business in town with staff on-call 24/7, they were best equipped to take on the job and the service demonstrated commitment to the community thus generating goodwill. At Perth, Blair & Son furnished ambulance services to the town and surrounding area for nearly 50 years, and when the Ontario Government assumed responsibility for ambulances in 1970, former Blair & Son employee, Mike Sergeant, became the first manager of the Provincial Ambulance Service at Perth.

Blair & Son purchased their first motorized hearse in 1928, *“of the latest type and modern in every respect ... a Greer-Heeney, with an eight-cylinder Continental engine. It was driven to Perth from London Ontario”*.⁴⁰

³⁸ *Perth Courier*, July 17, 1941.

³⁹ *Perth Courier*, September 15, 1955.

⁴⁰ *Perth Courier*, April 6, 1928.

A major advance in the funeral services offered by Blair & Son came in 1938 when prominent architect Edward Gardiner (1902-1986)⁴¹ of Ottawa was engaged to design the stone chapel that today graces the east side of Blair & Son's Gore Street facility. Constructed over the course of 1939, the new facility was officially inaugurated with a three-day open house attended by an estimated 1,800 people on the first weekend of December 1939.



Alexander Blair with the 1928 Greer-Heeney Hearse

At a time when the city of Ottawa was served by only one funeral home, those attending the Blair & Son open house at Perth found a facility offering services then “*rendered to clients in only the larger cities*”. The new facility represented not just a more modern funeral service for Perth and area but was the first of its kind in Eastern Ontario. “*Included in the very interested observers were funeral directors from Ottawa, Toronto, Montreal, Brockville, Gananoque, Smiths Falls and Elgin*”. The *Perth Courier* set out an effusive description of the new funeral home.

Beyond the beautifully panelled oak doors the chapel is outfitted with mahogany finished pews providing comfortable seating capacity for 125 persons ... floors of birch, a wide main aisle richly carpeted, walls and ceiling delicately tinted in appropriate shades and leaded glass windows. The chancel, at the front of the chapel, [is] reminiscent of a friendly old church ... a front arch supported by four Doric columns ... a large chancel table, with a high three-panelled background screen ... a round stained-glass window at the rear. Completely hidden by the chancel table and screen, a two-manual Northern Hammond organ installed by Orme Limited of Ottawa.

Commodious slumber rooms [provide] ample accommodation in a homelike atmosphere for the repose of a body during the two days preceding the funeral service and for the comfort and convenience of relatives remaining in the rooms overnight ... furnished with restful chairs and chesterfields, color scheme of mulberry, green and gold, carried out through rich carpeting and beautiful draperies. A well-ventilated smoking room for the use of those who may be spending some time in the slumber rooms, loyalist maple furniture upholstered in homespun covers ... an electric fireplace. A family room off the chancel, with private entrance and exit. A washroom with appropriate appointments ...⁴²

⁴¹ Later Chief Architect for the Federal Department of Works 1952-1963.

⁴² *Perth Courier* December 1, 1939

The *Courier* also described a clergyman's vestry and a private office, "furnished with a beautiful oriental rug on the floor, electric fireplace, where friendly informality enters into all arrangements".⁴³

The new Blair & Son facility at Perth briefly predated establishment of the Hulse & Playfair Funeral Home in Ottawa⁴⁴. The Hulse & Playfair home on McLeod Street, completed in 1940, was partly styled on the recently completed Blair & Son facility at Perth. Also in 1940, Blair and Son supplied all furniture and carpets for the new funeral home of McEvoy Brothers in Ottawa.

Creation of the new funeral home had been part of a much wider plan for modernization of the Blair & Son business. However, material and labor shortages created by World War Two dictated postponement of furniture store renovations, and that work was not completed until the summer of 1946.



*Extensive alterations and improvements to Messrs. Alex. Blair & Son's furniture establishment on Gore Street are a real credit to the firm and the town of Perth ... Their large show windows have been installed in the front of the building to replace the former two windows and are modernized with recessed awning boxes. Both floors are equipped with fluorescent lighting, the walls tinted in a pale shade of green, and the base boarding is of a mahogany shade. The building is reinforced with steel beams, with only two posts in support, thus eliminating the several former posts. A hand operated elevator has been installed in the rear of the building for the carriage of furniture to the second floor. On the large ground floor will be displayed chesterfield suites, occasional chairs and tables, and dining room furniture. A new department to be known as 'The Sleep Shop' will be located on the second floor to display samples of various types of beds, springs, mattresses, couches, pillows, cribs, and juvenile furniture. Sample mattresses will be exhibited in panels on the walls. In another department on the second floor will be shown bedroom suites and bedroom chairs.*⁴⁵

An additional furniture show room opened in March 1951.

The end of WW2 also made new cars available for the first time in five years and the first new model to reach Perth's Perkins Motors in 1946 was "sold to Hughie Blair's Funeral home". It was a 1946 Pontiac limousine for the transport of funeral parties.

Alexander Blair died at about mid-day on September 9, 1953⁴⁶, having that morning supervised a funeral at St. John's Catholic Church. The business that had engaged him for 34 years was carried on by his surviving son, Hugh Stanley Blair (1918-1967).

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Now Hulse, Playfair & McGarry.

⁴⁵ *Perth Courier*, August 22, 1946.

⁴⁶ His wife, Mable Ethel Ewing-Blair, died at Perth in 1963.

In June 1957 funeral arrangements for long-time Member of Parliament for Lanark, Dr. William Gourlay Blair (1890-1957)⁴⁷, were entrusted to Blair & Son Funeral Home. Led by Prime Minister John Diefenbaker (1895-1979)⁴⁸, the funeral was attended by an 18-member delegation of MP's and former Ontario Premier George Drew (1894-1973)⁴⁹. In addition, many other prominent figures from local, provincial, and national politics, also attended.

The chapel at Blair & Son was not always used exclusively for funeral services. For two Sundays in June 1963, it was loaned to Rev. Harold E. Budge and the congregation of First Baptist Church when their sanctuary was undergoing renovation.

Second generation funeral director Hugh Stanley Blair died, aged 58, in October 1967, at which time his wife, Margaret Wright Hall-Blair (1918-2001), stepped forward to manage and secure the future of Blair and Sons Funeral Home.



Hugh S. Blair (1918-1967)
(Photo courtesy of Blair & Sons Funeral Directors)

Born in Toronto⁵⁰, Margaret Blair had come to Perth and a position at the Perth Collegiate Institute (PCI) as girls' physical education teacher. A world class athlete, she had qualified for the swimming and diving squad of the 1940 Canadian Olympic Team. Unfortunately, she was denied the opportunity to compete when that year's Summer Olympics (the XII Olympiad), scheduled for Helsinki, Finland, were cancelled due to the outbreak of World War II. She married Hugh S. Blair in 1942 and was the mother of two sons, Stanley and Stewart.



Blair & Son Funeral Home 2024
(Image courtesy of Blair & Son Funeral Directors)

⁴⁷ Dr. W. G. Blair was elected MP for the riding of Lanark in 1945, 1949, 1953, and died only six days after being elected to his fourth term on June 10, 1957. He was a distant cousin of the Blair family of the funeral home.

⁴⁸ Prime Minister 1957-1963.

⁴⁹ Ontario Premier 1943-1948, Federal MP & Leader of the Opposition 1948-1956, High Commissioner to the United Kingdom 1957-1964.

⁵⁰ Daughter of Stewart W. Hall (1879-1951) and Margaret Wright Croft (1881-1976).

In 1970, Stanley Blair graduated from the University of Western Ontario with a degree in business, returned to Perth and joined the family business. Three years later, Stewart, Stanley's younger brother, joined the family enterprise after an apprenticeship with Turner & Porter, a funeral establishment in Toronto. For the next quarter century, 'Blair & Sons, Furniture and Funeral Directors', was owned and operated by mother Margaret and sons Stanely and Stewart.



Stewart Blair

Business growth, improvement, and refinement were a constant at Blair & Son, ranging from the installation of air conditioning in 1964 to demolition of the old Hogg sheds at the back of the Gore Street property in 1971 making room for a new garage and an extension providing additional family rooms completed 1972. The business also expanded with the 1972 purchase of Amy Funeral Home in Smiths Falls and the 1975 acquisition of Young Funeral Home in Lanark. The Lanark branch closed in 2013 but the Smiths Falls home continues to serve that community as part of the Blair & Son business.

Although it remains part of the family business, in 2007 Blair & Sons Home Furnishings moved from the Gore Street location to a new facility at 7070 Highway-7. The space formerly occupied by the furniture store was remodeled and incorporated as part of an expansion that included a new embalming room, more garage space, a reception center and remodeled business offices. The re-construction work of 2007 revealed framing beams original to the building when it had accommodated David Hogg Sr.'s 1836 furniture and undertaking business -- testimony to the craftsmen of the early Perth Settlement, and the good fortune of escaping the 1859 fire, those beams were found perfectly sound and, as they could not be improved upon, left in place.

Blair and Son, first established by David Hogg Sr. in 1836, is the second oldest funeral home in Canada, the oldest being the Morse & Son Funeral Home of Niagara Falls, dating from 1826. Over the course of their long histories, both businesses have been in continuous operation at the same location, and both have been owned and operated by only two families – Morgan and Morse in Niagara Falls and Hogg and Blair at Perth.⁵¹

- *Ron W. Shaw (2024)*

⁵¹ The third oldest funeral home in Canada is probably the 'Roadhouse & Rose Funeral Home - Playter Chapel', begun in 1841, Newmarket's oldest business. 'Stephenson & Son Funeral Home', now 'Denning's Funeral Home' in Ailsa Craig also claims to be the third oldest funeral home in Ontario (and possibly Canada) but no supporting dates are provided on their website.