

# The Prairie Style comes to Peterborough

Each historic building designated by Peterborough's Heritage Preservation Office under the Ontario Heritage Act has many stories to tell, whether of local culture, recreation, or business; architectural style or structural innovation; or the daily triumphs and tragedies of individual families. The home built at 487 Hunter Street West by Alva Cressman (1860–1934) and his wife Clara Henderson (1860–1926) is no exception. The house, set on four city lots, is not only a unique example of Prairie-style architecture, which became fashionable during the first two decades of the twentieth century, but also a concrete symbol of the taste, affluence, and aspirations of the Cressman family, whose fortunes peaked during the same period. Although the Cressmans had all either died or left Peterborough by the 1930s, the home they built remains a tangible reminder of local history—and of the vicissitudes of fate that can change a family's circumstances overnight.



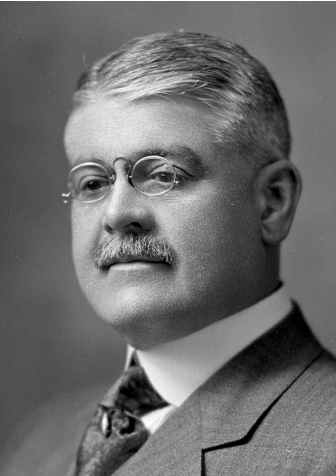
The Cressman store stretched about one-third of a block south of the current Bank of Commerce (c. 1927).

In 1915, when the house at 487 Hunter was begun, the Cressman family was doing very well indeed. Yes, there was a war on, and bits of news were filtering back from Belgium of local young men being wounded or killed in the trenches. But the extent of the war's tragedy had not yet been felt, and business was good. The family had moved to Peterborough in 1898 and established a "dry-goods" store at 385 George Street, settling initially near Aaron Cox on Scott Street and then at 212 Brock (demolished for Brock Towers). Over the years, Cressman's expanded, and the store became synonymous with quality merchandise. For the home, customers could buy John Crossley rugs from Halifax ("the best ever"), linens from William Ewart & Sons of Belfast, and wall papers from renowned "Canadian, American and English designers." American Lady corsets were on offer for women—"a model for 'your' particular figure"—as were "quality" silks from France and dresses from New York. And men were not left out. Indeed, "Men's Week at the Cressman Store" was advertised on June 10, 1915, and brought with it the sale of "snappy and new" suits, Balbriggan underwear, soft felt hats, and Oxfords.

All had not been smooth sailing for the Cressman family, however. Alva Cressman's father, Noah (1837–1864), whose ancestors were part of the Mennonite emigration

from Pennsylvania to the Waterloo area, died when his only son was four. But Noah, a chemist and druggist when he was 24, seems to have managed to give Alva a good start. Before moving to Peterborough, Alva was "engaged in the mercantile business" in Norwich, near Brantford.

The department store Alva established in Peterborough had seen its share of setbacks too. On the afternoon of Saturday, February 7, 1903, a fire broke out in the basement of Cressman's that "completely gutted" the store and "entirely consumed" its contents, from the cellar up to the third floor. At the time, damage to the stock alone was estimated at between \$30,000 and \$40,000. The equivalent in today's money would be about \$750,000.



Alva Cressman, c. 1907 (PMA)

What did Cressman do? He held a fire sale, began renovations, and went on buying trips to replenish stock, visiting Montreal markets as early as March 12. By April 3, the millinery at Cressman's reopened. The "grand" reopening followed two weeks later, "amid the sweet strains of music, the glow of electric lights and the bustle of several hundred men, women and children." The *Peterborough Examiner* reckoned that Cressman's now compared favourably with "any of the stores of our leading Canadian cities."

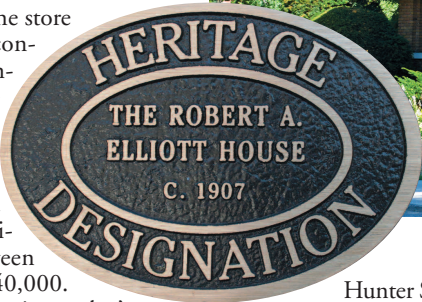
And so it was in 1915. Cressman & Company was a going family concern. It seemed past time for the Cressmans to build a family home, one designed to make its mark on the domestic architecture of Peterborough, one that fully announced the aspirations of the family. The Prairie-style residence at 487



Harry Cressman, c. 1907 (PMA)

# The Cressman House 487 Hunter St. West

The first in a monthly series of features focusing on Peterborough's historically designated properties.



Hunter Street West is the result.

Constructed between 1915 and 1916, the house sits on a property that encompasses four city lots in the "Old West End." Originally part of the estate of George A. Cox, the severed land purchased by the Cressman family from William George Morrow for \$7,750, according to Andrew Elliott, was large. It gave architect Stephen Burwell Coon, hired to design the house, ample space to construct a more horizontal building, one that could be viewed to advantage from



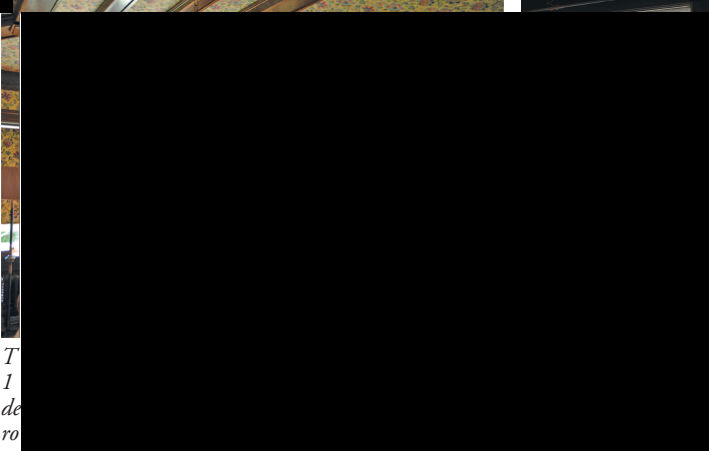
Stephen Burwell Coon

multiple angles and streets (i.e., from Hunter, Belmont, and Homewood).

The Prairie style of architecture Coon chose, a style closely associated with Frank Lloyd Wright, is characterized by neutral colours, minimal ornamentation, flat or hipped roofs, overhanging eaves, and bands of windows. All these elements emphasize the horizontal line of a building and are intended to integrate the house into the relatively flat architecture of the American Midwest, hence the name "Prairie." The style developed in the first two decades of the twentieth century, so it was a relatively modern choice for the firm S.B. Coon and Son. Influencing the selection of a newer style may have been Stephen's son Burwell Rancier Coon, who had joined his father's firm after graduating from architectural studies at the University of Toronto in 1913. Or Cressman himself might have been impressed by the style on one of his many buying trips. (For more on S.B. Coon and Son, see the excellent article by historian Elwood Jones "Mystery of the Wright-esque architect on Weller solved" in the *Peterborough Examiner*, June 9, 2012.)

The house at 487 Hunter is a good example of a Canadian "take" on the original Prairie-style residence. Francis Conroy Sullivan, one of the few Canadian architects who studied under Frank Lloyd Wright, helped introduce these stylistic modifications in Canada. They included a more compact, less sprawling building and more emphasis on vertical elements.

Still, 487 Hunter has the characteristically neutral colours of the Prairie style, evident in its use of buff brick, cream stucco, and wooden features painted brown and beige. Its wide, overhanging eaves (especially above the front and side



doors); its plain, hipped roof; its bands of windows on each storey and other elements emphasizing the dwelling's horizontal line (e.g., stone coursing and low brick walls on the north and east elevation) all mark the building as consistent with Prairie-style design. A coach house matching the style and finish of the main house was originally intended for two vehicles, having offset doors on the north and south elevation, where two driveways once entered the property from Homewood and Hunter.

The house was completed in 1916, and the family, had moved in by at least January 1917. The store was doing well too during the home's completion. Cressman's boasted The Cressman Victrola Parlor and Club ("with time payment privileges"), two staff hockey teams ("the main floor boys" and the "third floor and clothing section team"), and the "Cressman Five"—a basketball team that consistently made the finals. Fred Cressman was its captain and was one of two players who "did practically all the scoring."

But there were rumblings of trouble ahead, even as 1916 began. From "Somewhere in Belgium" a letter arrived thanking the Cressman staff for sending a care package and explaining that, on the Western Front, "the rain falls in torrents incessantly and the mud is in some places knee deep." It concludes, "We are having quite a hard time of it out here now."

Also that year, the athletic Fred Cressman decided to enlist. By September 1916, he was making arrangements to go overseas as a "Birdman," having completed a four months' course at Newport News and Buffalo on a Curtiss Bi-

plane. In October, Cressman employees gave him a wrist watch, a rousing send-off, and "their best wishes and a sincere desire for his safe return"—Fred was said to be "extremely popular with the staff." By January 1917, he was taking part in a five weeks' course on the grounds of the Old Crystal Palace in London, as a Probationary Flight Officer of the Royal Naval Air Service. During World War I, RNAS pilots flew marine patrols using large amphibious aircraft called, affectionately, flying boats.

On Christmas Day 1917, Alva and Clara Cressman received a cablegram from the Admiralty containing "the sad message" that Flight Lieutenant Fred Cressman was missing and presumed dead. He was buried at sea after drowning in a seaplane accident on December 24.

Happier times did follow. Harry Cressman married Florence Johnston in 1918 and established his own residence at 499 Homewood. According to Elwood Jones, Florence was the first female golfer to make a hole-in-one at the Peterborough Golf Club. The Cressman's youngest child, Jessie, married Edward Douglas Huycke (son of Judge E.C.S. Huycke) in 1921 and eventually settled in Toronto. But one wonders whether Alva and Clara Cressman ever recovered from the death of their youngest son. Then Clara died suddenly in November of 1926.

In early 1927, just months after his wife's death, Alva Cressman sold the family business to Eaton's. Harry, the remaining Cressman son, moved to Vancouver that year too, and his father followed him in 1928. The property at 487 Hunter Street West was sold to Dr. Herbert Maxwell Yelland.

By the autumn of 1934, both Alva and Harry had returned to Peterborough, to be interred in Little Lake Cemetery.



Flt Lt Fred Cressman, c. 1917 (PMA)



Jessie Cressman, c. 1907 (PMA)

All the children worked in the store. Fred was vice-president, Harry secretary treasurer. Jessie was 18 when they moved to Hunter St. W.