



THE HISTORIC PAST can extend a hundred years or a thousand.

In Ottawa, which was still called Bytown when it was picked as Canada's capital, the ultimately historic buildings were built in the middle of the 19th century.

Most—including the recently demolished Rideau Street Convent with its unique vaulted chapel—have been replaced by office buildings or parking lots. But, looked at in a certain way, the loss on Rideau Street was not an unmitigated setback for conservationists—there is good news as well as bad. "It was a classic example of losing the battle and winning the war," says R. A. J. Phillips, Executive Director of a new government-endowed organization called Heritage Canada. "After the Rideau Street disaster, local heritage groups grew tenfold in Ottawa."

Similar reactions have been noted across the country as Canadians have found the visible signs of the past disappearing, but Ottawa's alarm was singular and not without cause:

- The stone residence of Ottawa's first settler had been bulldozed to make room for the Trade and Commerce Building, a structure of limited architectural and historic appeal.

- The erstwhile home of Canada's Supreme Court, one of the four original buildings on Parliament Hill, had been torn down to permit a larger parking lot.

- The Parliament's West Block had been gutted.

- The Goulden Hotel, a building of charm and significance, had been demolished and succeeded first by a service station, then by a parking lot.

- The demolition of Ottawa's grand 19th century railroad station had been stopped only after citizen protest. (It has survived as a National Conference Center.)

The announcement that the Rideau Street Convent was likewise doomed touched off the climactic battle. The Convent, a complex of buildings occupying a full city block, was 120 years old. Matthew Revere had built the first part in the 1850's as the Revere House, a hotel with a resplendent lobby and grand salons. The Hotel became a girls' school in 1869 when the Sisters of Charity (The Grey Nuns) moved in. The first pupils were the daughters of cabinet ministers and Members of Parliament in the new Confederation. Buildings were added from time to time and the extraordinary chapel was built in 1888. One Father Bouillon designed it, and though he remains obscure, it was a work of genius. He used the new construction materials of his age, iron pillars and plaster, to capture the Gothic magnificence of Henry VII's chapel in Westminster Abbey, to which it showed a marked resemblance. The fan-vaulting ceiling gleamed in gold trefoil and turquoise blue and the big stained glass windows shone in amethyst, red, green, amber, blue and gold.

In the spring of 1971 the sisters asked that the property be rezoned as commercial (it was) and put it up for sale. It sold to a developer who had a high-rise office building in mind. But historic-minded citizens took immediate and loud exception. For a short time it appeared that they were to be almost effortlessly successful. The developers agreed to keep the old buildings and con-