

WATCHMAN'S SHANTY



This 1914 view looking west over the Bay Street crossing shows an elevated watchman's shanty on the left. By this time policemen were also assigned to guard the crossing.



*As Toronto expanded, motor vehicle traffic also increased, as at the Bloor Street West crossing, seen here in the 1920s. An elevated shanty can be seen above the car on the right.
City of Toronto Archives*

This small building is typical of those that provided shelter for the gate tenders or watchmen who guarded the numerous grade crossings where city streets intersected with railway tracks. In an era before electronic signals and automatic crossing gates, the watchman manually lowered the gates whenever a train approached, preventing vehicles and pedestrians from approaching the tracks until the train had passed. The men who were employed in this service were often railroaders who had been injured on the job and reassigned to a task requiring less physical dexterity. Many of these shanties were mounted on a tower fifteen feet above the ground and the ample windows provided a clear view in all directions. The shanty would have been originally fitted with a stove and a bench and for many years was located where the lead tracks for the CPR King Street freight yard crossed over John Street. As the frequency of trains multiplied, level crossings at busy streets became increasingly dangerous and grade separated crossings or underpasses were built to carry railway tracks above the city streets. The first of these opened along Queen Street West in 1885. Early in the 20th century, several expensive grade separations were built throughout the city, culminating in the Union Station viaduct that opened in 1930.



*The necessity for crossing guards is illustrated in this image of the bottom of Spadina Avenue in 1911. Over the years, hundreds of people were killed or injured crossing the tracks.
City of Toronto Archives*