

Waterdown at the Turn of the 19th century



Crest of the Village Council

- Part of the territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation, the region is covered by Treaty No.3 (1792).
- First settled by non-Indigenous People in 1805¹, Waterdown was founded by Ebenezer Griffin in 1830 (the year he had the area surveyed into village lots). Waterdown was incorporated as its own municipality on June 5th, 1878 (this would last until 1974).
- Built in 1824, the stone edifice at the corner of Dundas and Mill Street is one of the oldest stone structures in Southern Ontario. Originally called "The British North American Hotel," this establishment was the last old time stand-up bars in Ontario and maintained segregated male and female front rooms until 1966.
- The population of Waterdown in 1900-1910 was around 800 people.
- By 1890, the village was a bustling industrial hub centred around Grindstone Creek. Smokey Hollow, a local dale, was the site of various mills and factories –17 buildings were clustered there (the resulting pollution giving the area its name "Smokey Hollow"). Smokey Hollow and Grindstone Creek declined as centres of industry due to fires and the diversion of water from the creek (for agricultural purposes) after 1910, and most of Waterdown's mills were closed by 1915.
- Stone was quarried from sites around the village ("The View" condominiums, and behind Walmart) and sent across the country. Some of the stone quarried from Waterdown was used to build King's College at the University of Toronto. Memorial Park was the site of a sand and gravel quarry owned by the Anderson Family.
- In 1868, William Heisse built a hotel which was renamed the Right House Hotel in 1875. In 1888 Patrick Kirk purchased the building and over the next three generations, converted it from a frame hotel to into a brick building. A stream once ran through the back of the property (now the parking lot) and was allegedly used to help douse the Great Fire of 1922. The hotel remained in the Kirk Family's possession until 1966. In 1995 the bar was reopened as a family restaurant/pub and christened with a new name: The Royal Coachman.

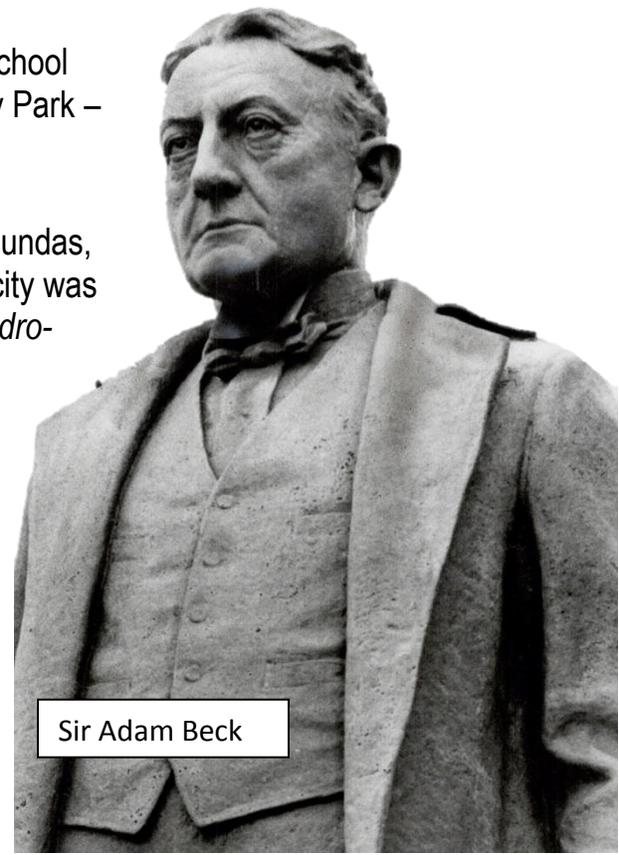
¹ Alexander Brown and Merren Grierson are credited with being the first Europeans to settle in the area.

- An early anecdote from the village's history was recorded in 1967:

In the early days a gun was a household necessity and hunting an industry. Deer and bears were the biggest game, but rabbits and squirrels were also shot for food. Many shooting matches were held, and skill with a gun was greatly admired.

There was one man who spent a lot of time and money practicing. He could do incredible feats with a rifle. If anyone was foolish enough to throw a half dollar in the air, he never saw it again. This man kept a store for a while. He had a little feud in a friendly way with the schoolmaster of the day. To torment him a little one day, he went out on the store verandah from which he could see the schoolhouse about a hundred yards away. He took his rifle and began shooting at the bricks of the schoolhouse chimney. Gradually he shot them loose and they fell into the chimney one by one closing it and smoking the pupils and teacher out. On another occasion, to create a diversion, he sent a few men out to dig up a few groundhogs which were plentiful. They brought in a dozen or so in bags, and he had them taken out in the centre of the crossroads of the village [Mill and Dundas?] and released. He sat on the porch with his rifle and shot them all before they could run away. He was as good with a revolver as the gunners depicted in the Western stories, and from all accounts he had occasion to use his skill.

- Common causes of death were industrial accidents, including being cut by saws in the wood mills – John C. Slater was killed this way in 1910.
- The village's first telephone line, installed in the Stock Building (present-day Pickwicks) at the corner of Dundas and Mill Street in 1882.
- Founded in 1852, the Waterdown Public and Continuation School (now Waterdown District High School) was located at Sealey Park – the first floor of one of the buildings survives as *Scout Hall*.
- The village's roller rink located on Franklin Street, south of Dundas, was a major gathering spot for the community. When electricity was first brought to the village, Sir Adam Beck (founder of the *Hydro-Electric Power Commission of Ontario*) personally threw the switch at a gathering held in the roller rink in 1911.
- Village time was marked by a Bell House, located on the site of present-day Memorial Hall (the bell can be found mounted in front of the hall). The bell in the tower was rung at 7 a.m., noon, 1 p.m. and 6 p.m.



Sir Adam Beck

- The first passenger train arrived in the village on July 1st, 1912 offering – at its peak – nine daily trains between Waterdown and Hamilton, bringing 6000 visitors a month. The train station was located near the Dundas Street Bridge (east of the intersection of Mill and Dundas Street).
- Major fires caused extensive damage in the village – the most devastating being the Great Fire of May 23rd, 1922, which destroyed everything between the American House and The Royal Coachman.
- Two key figures in the village were Dr. John Owen McGregor (1850-1928) and Eliza McGregor (185?-1939). A medical doctor and politician, McGregor’s home – called “The Clunes” – located at 49 Main Street² was the centre of the village’s social life. Dr. McGregor was elected reeve of Waterdown in 1895 and served on the village council for 16 years. Eliza McGregor volunteered throughout the community and was a leader with the Women’s Institute (locally and provincially).



Map showing the approximate size of Waterdown in 1900.

Sources:

Vance, Jonathan. *The Township at War*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2018.

The Extraordinary History of Flamborough: East Flamborough, West Flamborough and Waterdown (Waterdown: The Flamborough Heritage Society, 2017)

The Flamborough Archives (Waterdown Library)

² It’s still there and is now called “McGregor House.”