

Waterdown at the start of the 20th century (1900s)



The 1764 Covenant Chain Wampum presented by Sir William Johnson to the assembled Indigenous dignitaries at Niagara on July 31st, 1764. It's creation was likely guided by Molly Brant. A replica of this belt was gifted to King Charles III on July 4th, 2023.

- What is now Flamborough/Waterdown is part of the territory of the [Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation](#). The region is covered by the Silver Covenant Chain of Friendship (extended by the 1764 Treaty of Niagara).
- 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).

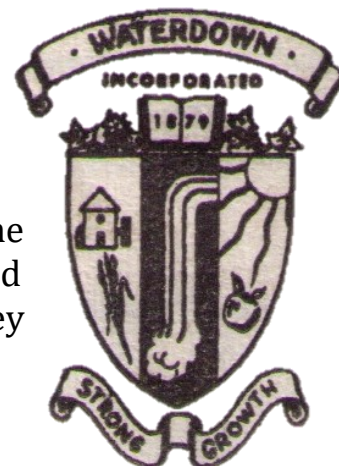


"The American House," ca. 1960s.

- 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.

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

- The population of Waterdown in 1900-1910 was around 600 people.²
- 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.
- In 1842-1843, 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 (where Queen’s Park is now located).
 - [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.
- An early anecdote from the village’s history was recorded in 1967:



Crest of the Village Council,
1878-1974

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.

² Margaret Donkin, "An Analysis of the Changing Land-Use Morphology of Waterdown, 1795-1960," Masters diss. (McMaster University, 1969), 71.

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.
- 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.
 - Lynne Marks writes in *Revivals and Roller Rinks* that in small-town, Protestant Ontario, roller skating had emerged in the early to mid-1880s as a socially acceptable way for working and middleclass men and women to interact. A supervised space, roller rinks were “... *generally judged acceptable by respectable small-town middle-class Christians.*” Unlike swimming in local rivers, ponds and lakes (typically the prerogative of boys and young men, often naked, in the 19th century), roller skating (and ice skating) necessitated layers of clothing. Marks suggests that, at least for small towns, roller rinks provided a solution to another common problem: young single men spending most of their time in local bars and engaging in toxic behaviour.³

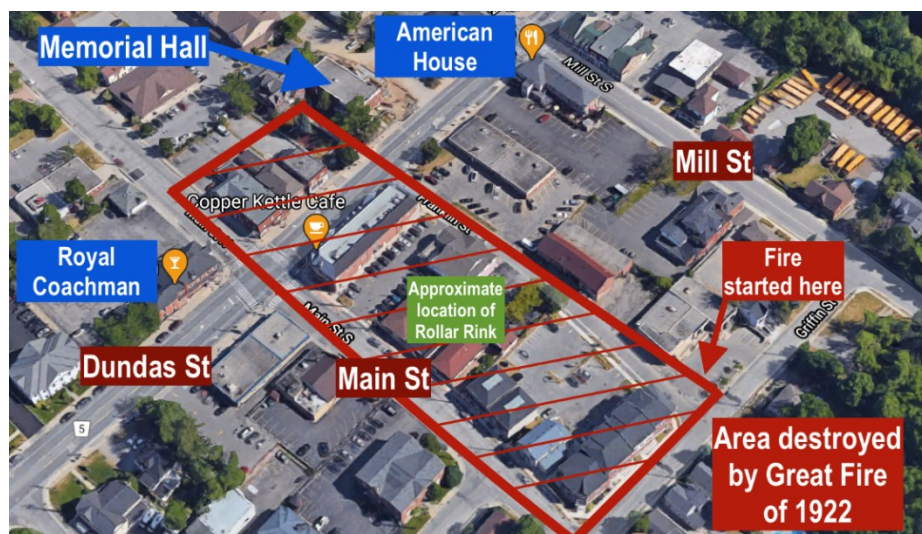
³ Lynne Marks, *Revivals and Roller Rinks: Religion, Leisure and Identity in Late-Nineteenth-Century Small-town Ontario*, University of Toronto Press: 1996, 128-130.

- 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.



(Looking south down Mill Street South from Union Street in Waterdown. Curious onlookers watch the installation of the train bridge over Mill Street near Smokey Hollow, ca. 1911.

- The above photograph from 1911 shows the construction of the railway bridge on Mill Street (heading south to Smokey Hollow). [See what it looks like today by clicking here.](#)
- 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. [Click here to see where the fire started.](#)



- [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 "Clunes" – [located at 49 Main Street](#)⁴ 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* (both locally and provincially), an important driving force in the life of the community.
- Founded in 1852, the *Waterdown Public and Continuation School* (the ancestor of Waterdown District High School) was located at Sealey Park – [the first floor of one of the buildings survives as Scout Hall.](#)
 - As the first public school, the *Waterdown Public and Continuation School* had been built in the centre of the "working class" part of Waterdown (south of Dundas, in what was then the most densely populated part of the community).
- By the start of the 1900s the milling industry was nearly gone – only a few of the factories that once dominated Waterdown's early years were left.⁵ No new construction was being done at all. In her 1969 thesis, Margaret Donkin described what Waterdown would have looked like in 1920:

The industrial sites in the village had decreased markedly . . . [along Grindstone Creek] no mill of any kind was in operation . . . natural forces, fire, flood and drought had done the job some time before the construction of the railroad in 1912. By 1900, all the mills in operation had to rely on steam boilers to supplement the dwindling water supply. Most of the mills manufactured some kind of wood products and a constant supply of fuel was available to stoke the boilers.

*Methods of production and the produce itself were becoming obsolete and if fire struck, rebuilding was not economically feasible.*⁶

Sources:

Donkin, Margaret. *An Analysis of the Changing Land-Use Morphology of Waterdown, 1795-1960*. Masters diss. McMaster University: 1969.

The Extraordinary History of Flamborough: Platinum Jubilee Edition (Waterdown: The Flamborough Heritage Society, 2022)

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

The Flamborough Archives (Waterdown Library)

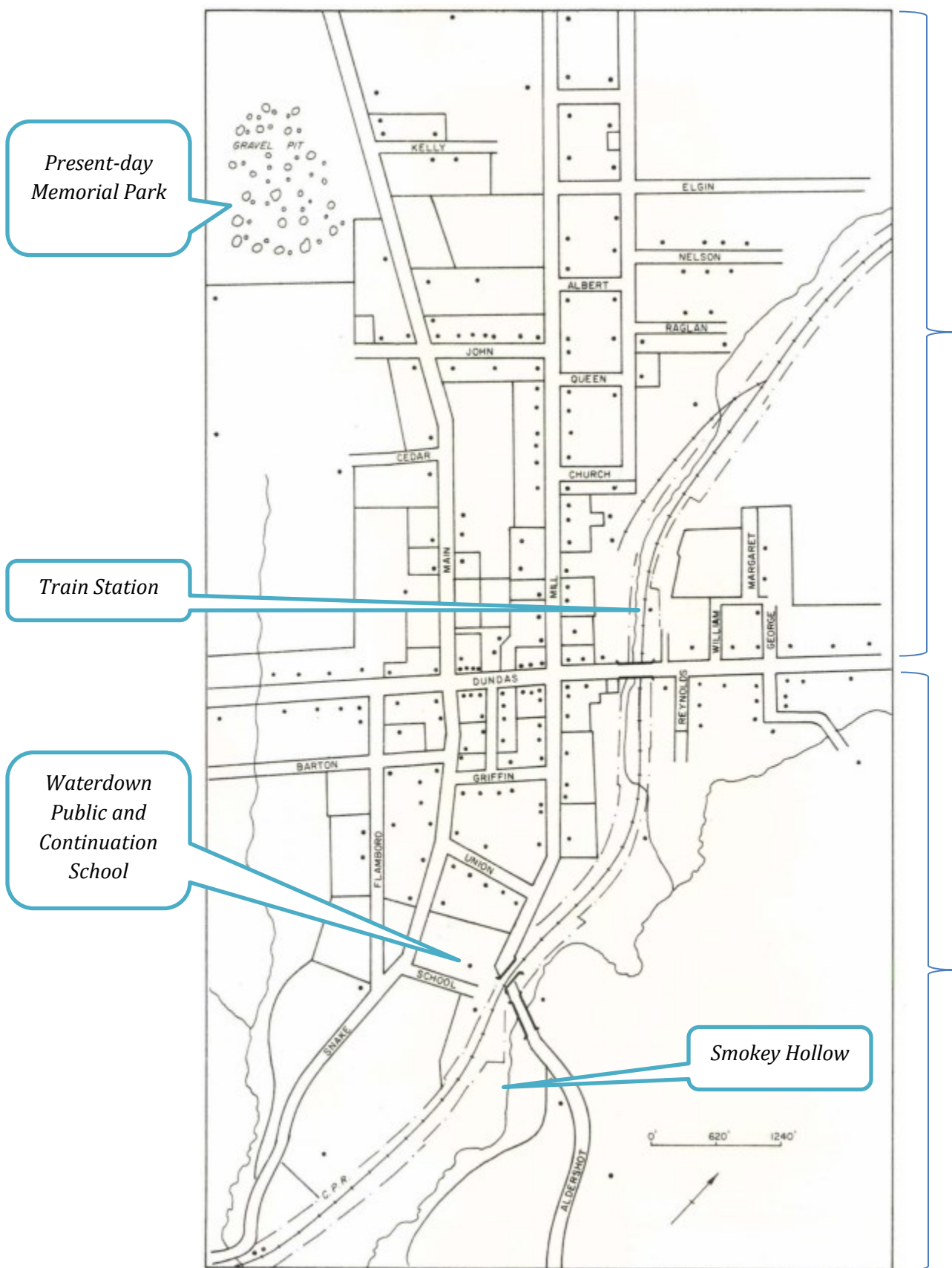
⁴ It's still there and is now called "McGregor House."

⁵ One mill did operate behind the Old Jam Factory at 40 Mill Street North until 1992 (it was on the site of the Edith Court development).

⁶ Margaret Donkin, "An Analysis of the Changing Land-Use Morphology of Waterdown, 1795-1960," Masters diss. (McMaster University, 1969), 75.

Largely Merchant/Middle Class Folks

Largely Working Class Folks



Map of Waterdown as it was in 1920 (Margaret Donkin, 1969).