

HAMILTON: THE ELECTRIC CITY

How the Escarpment Played a Major Role in the City's Development

A major hydro-electric power corridor enters East Hamilton at the entrance to the King's Forest Golf Course and the Rosedale Arena in the Red Hill Valley. Under these giant towers and their transmission wires stands an obscure little tower, the only remnant of Hamilton's first electric power transmission system.



A view looking northwest across Greenhill Avenue towards the escarpment from the Rosedale arena in the Red Hill Valley. Photo by C. Redford

The site with its lonely tower has now been recognized for its historical importance with a Hamilton Historical Board plaque which tells the following story.

From the beginning of the 19th century, settlers were attracted to this region by the power of water cascading over the Niagara Escarpment. But it was not until 1896 that five Hamilton businessmen known as the "Five Johns" (John Dickenson, John Gibson, John Moodie, Sir John Patterson and John Sutherland), had the foresight and courage to invest in the new concept of hydro-electric power generation and transmission. They formed the Cataract Power Company and generated electricity by drawing water from the Welland Canal at DeCew Falls, transmitting the power 27 miles (43 kilometers) to Hamilton, making it the foremost electrified city in Canada.

In 1907, the Cataract Power Company evolved into the Dominion Power and Transmission Company with head offices at the Hamilton Terminal Building (now Effort Trust Building at King and Catharine Streets). It was the hub of one of the country's most extensive interurban electric railway systems, offering service to Brantford, Dundas, Oakville and Grimsby. The horse-drawn Hamilton Street Railway was one of the first to adopt electricity.

A port city like Hamilton with major railways combined with abundant electric power attracted many new manufacturers such as Westinghouse, Otis Elevator and many cotton/clothing companies. True to the vision of its electrical entrepreneurs, the city's population and economy expanded dramatically. As a symbol of that growth and prestige, a 100 foot (30.4 metre) lighted tower was erected in Gore Park (1900-1923 where the cenotaph now stands). It was inspired by the Eiffel Tower of the 1889 Paris World Fair.



Photo by C. Redford

Mountain Memories, written by historian Robert Williamson on behalf of HMHS appears monthly. See the Society's website (Hamiltonheritage.ca) for information on events and publications.

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