

## Ontario History



### Spaces and Places to Play

## The Formation of a Municipal Parks System in London, Ontario, 1867-1914

Robert S. Kossuth

Volume 97, Number 2, Fall 2005

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065881ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065881ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Kossuth, R. S. (2005). Spaces and Places to Play: The Formation of a Municipal Parks System in London, Ontario, 1867-1914. *Ontario History*, 97(2), 160-190. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065881ar>

#### Article abstract

How a municipal parks system formed in London following Confederation provides insight into the struggle that existed between public recreation and those who championed its provision, and political leaders concerned with the expense of providing public parks. Victoria, Queen's and Springbank Parks, all formed in the 1870s, provided Londoners with public spaces to recreate. Each park came into being for different reasons and served specific recreation and leisure roles. Not until the turn of the century, however, did growing pressure from external and internal social reform movements such as national playground initiatives lead London to organize their parks into a coherent system through the formalization of a recreation bureaucracy.

# *Spaces and Places to Play:*

*The Formation of a Municipal  
Parks System in London, Ontario,  
1867-1914*

by Robert S. Kossuth

Colonel Mahlon Burwell, the surveyor who prepared London's town site, bequeathed a parcel of land south of Stanley Street between Wharncliffe and Wortley Roads to the town as a recreation ground before his death in 1846. This land was later named St. James' Park.<sup>1</sup> Despite this generosity, by 1856, the land donated by Burwell had not been improved and remained

vacant. To correct this situation, London City Council entered into a six-year lease agreement with Mr Thomas Francis, the former City Inspector, with the stipulation that he improve the property by planting trees thereon.<sup>2</sup> In 1861, as Mr Francis' lease ran out, council learned that he had not met the conditions of the lease and had grown only potatoes on the land and no trees. Shortly thereafter the



*Fountain at Victoria Park c. 1880. Courtesy of The University of Western Ontario Archives, RC 41086.*

lease was terminated. Subsequently, London City Council re-leased the land to a Mr Coleman. When attempting to take possession of the property, Mr Colman had to physically remove the former tenant, Mr Francis.<sup>3</sup> It is not clear how long Mr Coleman remained the leaseholder of the property, but the city did hold onto the land until 1878 at which time the 'park' was sold for building lots with a portion of the profits being set aside to finance improvements at the city's newest park, Victoria Park.<sup>4</sup> Thus, London's first piece of property designated to be a public recreation area ultimately never served its intended purpose. This first attempt at providing public land for recreation in London illustrated that this contested terrain often pitted the interests of elite citizens and the city corporation against the needs of the local citizenry.

The above account of the brief history of St. James' Park provides some indication of the marginal priority attached to the provision of recreation land by London City Council prior to the early 1870s. No discernible interest in improving land owned by the city, or in purchasing new property to be used as a public park, existed through the 1850s and 1860s. This situation likely existed, in part, because city politicians did not view

## Abstract

*How a municipal parks system formed in London following Confederation provides insight into the struggle that existed between public recreation and those who championed its provision, and political leaders concerned with the expense of providing public parks. Victoria, Queen's and Springbank Parks, all formed in the 1870s, provided Londoners with public spaces to recreate. Each park came into being for different reasons and served specific recreation and leisure roles. Not until the turn of the century, however, did growing pressure from external and internal social reform movements such as national playground initiatives lead London to organize their parks into a coherent system through the formalization of a recreation bureaucracy.*

**Résumé:** *De la lutte qui eut lieu entre ceux qui défendaient l'idée de développer une politique de loisirs publics, et ceux qui s'inquiétaient des dépenses que la réalisation d'une telle politique entraînerait, le cas des parcs municipaux établis à London après la Confédération est particulièrement significatif. Les Parcs Victoria, Queen's et Springbank ouverts dans les années 1870, ont offert aux habitants de London des espaces de loisirs publics. Chaque parc fut créé pour des raisons différentes et répondait à des fonctions de récréologie et de loisirs diversifiées. Ce n'est qu'à la fin du siècle que les pressions de plus en plus importantes exercées par des mouvements sociaux aussi bien internes que externes, comme par exemple les initiatives nationales pour l'établissement de lieux de loisirs, ont conduit la ville de London à organiser ses parcs dans un système cohérent par la mise sur pied d'un service administratif spécial chargé de les gérer.*

such extravagances as a priority when faced by the more pressing concerns of building and managing a growing city. Yet, as the population of London increased with the expansion of the mercantile and industrial base during the 1860s, some citizens began to recognize the need to

<sup>1</sup> Pat Morden, *Putting Down Roots: A History of London's Parks and River* (St. Catharines: Stonehouse, 1988), 7-8. For information on the role played by Mahlon Burwell in the settlement of the London area see Frederick Armstrong, *The Forest City: An Illustrated History of London Canada* (Windsor: Windsor Publications, 1986), 45.

<sup>2</sup> *History of the County Middlesex, Canada* (Toronto and London: Goodspeed, Publishers, 1889), 237.

<sup>3</sup> *London Free Press*, 22 April 1861.

<sup>4</sup> J. J. Talman Regional Collection (JJTRC), Achives and Research Collections Centre, D. B. Weldon Library, The University of Western Ontario, *Proceedings of London City Council*, 11 March and 23 September 1878.

provide publicly accessible land within the city that would be available for use by residents.<sup>5</sup> This early growth of opinion brought this public desire to the attention of the city's governors, suggesting that it was the city's responsibility to provide publicly accessible space for recreation to its citizens. This pressure exerted by groups and individuals within London soon became part of the larger desire to build a city of the first order. To this end, by the early 1870s, the need to provide publicly accessible parkland in London became an issue that the city's leaders could no longer ignore or neglect.

The issue of providing public space for facilities such as parks represents one of the critical foundations upon which the broader examination of nineteenth century Canadian leisure, recreation, and sport history is formed. Although other areas of investigation, such as the influence of private sports bodies<sup>6</sup> and the vibrant tavern culture of the day,<sup>7</sup> are important; in terms of recognizing the role of publicly owned and managed spaces and facilities, municipal parks provide a uniquely useful mechanism for understanding the role local govern-

ments played in the growth of sport, leisure, and recreation. To understand how formal sport, leisure, and recreation bureaucracies developed in Canadian urban centres, it is necessary to examine the impact of provincial and local legislation on the formation of public recreation spaces and places in urban communities such as London. In addition, it is important to consider that city governments while fostering urban and industrial growth, not only delivered and regulated many recreational aspects of daily life, but also, indirectly, generated greater interest in the variety of issues related to leisure and recreation. The examination of the relationships between the various levels of legislation and the development of municipal recreation bureaucracies provides some insight into the manner in which individual towns and cities were influenced by broader policies framed by their provincial legislators, as well as by unique local circumstances. In addition to these public influences, a variety of emerging concepts concerned with the social importance of providing public recreation space that were advanced by parks and playgrounds movements in

---

<sup>5</sup> JJTRC, *Proceedings of London City Council*, 20 May 1867, and *History of the County Middlesex, Canada*, 209. London's population and commercial and industrial base had grown rapidly since the middle of the century. According to Frederick Armstrong, *The Forest City: An Illustrated History of London Canada*, 68-105, in 1851-52 the population of London was 7,035. In 1854, the year prior to London becoming a city, the population had grown to 10,060. Thus, between 1860 and 1880 the city's population increased from 11,200 to 19,941, evidence of the city's continuing urban growth.

<sup>6</sup> Alan Metcalfe, *Canada Learns to Play: The Emergence of Organized Sport, 1807-1914* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1987), 20.

<sup>7</sup> For an examination of mid-nineteenth century tavern culture in London, Ontario see Kevin Wamsley and Robert Kossuth, "Fighting It Out in Nineteenth-Century Upper Canada/Canada West: Masculinities and Physical Challenges in the Tavern," *Journal of Sport History* 27:3 (2000), 405-430. Also see Edwin Guillet, *Pioneer Inns and Taverns, Vol. 3, Quebec to Detroit, with a detailed coverage of the Province of Ontario* (Toronto: Ontario Publishing, 1958), 210-16.



North America must be examined. It is necessary to recognize their influence on the formation of recreation-related cultural practices at both the local, regional, and national levels.

This study will illustrate how a recreation bureaucracy situated within London's governing framework emerged. Specifically, this investigation examines ideas that contested the purposes a public park ought to serve. Most notably this became an issue in the case of London's first public park, Victoria Park. The actors involved in this process included public park proponents, municipal leaders, along with groups and individuals who promoted a variety of agenda and who sought to define overtly and covertly this emerging element of London's cultural landscape. In the case of two later parks, Queen's and Springbank Parks, the influence of individual actors and public bodies such as the Board of Water Commissioners (responsible for the city's water supply) served to define how these early parks were administered. Ultimately, it was a relatively small group of prominent Londoners who, through their political, economic, and social influence, assumed the leadership roles in determining where, how, and for whom the city's parks were constructed.<sup>8</sup>

It can be argued that a local recreation bureaucracy, acting according to the prevailing legislation and for the

popular social reform and improvement movements, existed to meet the needs of London's elite citizens. In turn, these same individuals were more often than not concerned with the financial obligations involved in providing public recreation places and spaces. However, such a conclusion is overly simplistic and does not account for those wealthy and influential citizens who were genuinely guided by the altruistic belief that a city and its inhabitants could be socially improved through public recreation initiatives. The continued need to balance financial costs with the purported social benefits of public parks often led to disagreement within the group of elite men who governed London. This ongoing conflict underscored much of the debate that surrounded the early organization of public recreation in London. The extent to which these initiatives served to reproduce the ideals and values held by the individuals who comprised the city's leadership must be weighed in terms of this conflict. In the end, this discord was predicated upon two practical matters: how much land should be purchased, and what forms of recreation practices should be privileged on public spaces.

These questions emerged as a result of the growing acceptance among many Londoners that providing land and space for recreation represented a right of citizenship rather than a privilege. Another,

---

<sup>8</sup> Roy Rosenweig, *Eight-Hours For What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 129. Rosenweig suggests that public parks represented a contested terrain where city industrialists sought to gain social control, improve health for productivity, and foster civic pride, while workers were more interested in space for more active uses centered on play and recreation.

more practical, concern revolved around the need to foster civic pride in order to distinguish London from surrounding towns and cities. Attracting the right sort of man, representing the right social class, required a progressive city to meet their leisure and recreation needs. These actions, over time, demonstrated to like-minded individuals the presence of a shared understanding of the types of recreation activities that should be available in a progressive city. The adoption, reproduction, and entrenchment of this shared understanding promoted the need for amenities such as accessible public parks and began to influence decisions made by local politicians who eventually ceded control to an emerging parks bureaucracy. Of course, a broader review of this set of circumstances would suggest that these attitudes and related actions were not unique to the City of London at this time. Over the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, attitudes toward the provision of public land were defined and established as parks came to be viewed as essential rather than optional elements of any urban centre's physical constitution.

To determine the extent to which public recreation and park formation in Ontario and London was shaped by antecedent external influences, it is necessary to briefly examine certain international and national events that impacted upon later provincial and local developments.

Specifically, early legislation in Britain related to common lands and cemetery design in the United States were clearly important factors that served to formalize an understanding about the role of parks among middle-class reformers and like-minded elite citizens. This recognition that a need existed to provide public spaces for leisure and recreation was further crystallized as public recreation came to be viewed as a remedy to the growing environmental and social ills resulting from urbanization and industrialization.<sup>9</sup> To this end, it is necessary to explore early British and Canadian legislation, along with the pertinent ideas arising from the parks movement in the United States to determine the impact upon later political decisions made by London City Council during the 1860s and 1870s. These wider influences served to frame the ongoing debate surrounding the place of public recreation as part of the functioning municipal body. Finally, with specific reference to the provision of public parks, differences in the conception of how parks were to be used, requires a measure of attention. Either these sites were used to promote cultural improvement through respectable leisure practices, usually the goal of social elites and middle-class reformers, or the spaces served as sites for 'baser' sports and physical recreation activities, usually promoted by entrepreneurs and members of the working classes.

---

<sup>9</sup> Hugh Cunningham, *Leisure in the Industrial Revolution c. 1780-1880* (London: Crown Helm, 1980), 93-94. Cunningham argues that in England, during the period of industrialization, public land was viewed as a site where worker's physical and moral health could be maintained in the face of growing pollution and immorality.

Initially attention accorded to the issue of public space for recreation and leisure in British North America centred upon the issue of providing parks. Although there is evidence in Canada that as early as 1826 there was a need expressed for a "Public Walk" in Toronto,<sup>10</sup> the earliest legal documentation acknowledging the need for public parks is found in early nineteenth century British legislation. According to Hazel Conway in *People's Parks: The Design and Development of Parks in Britain*, municipal parks existed in Britain as early as the seventeenth century. However, it was not until the early nineteenth century during the period of rapid population increases in urban centers as a result of industrialization that official recognition of the need for urban parks arose. In 1833, the Select Committee on Public Walks presented a report to the British Parliament suggesting that parks would improve the health of those living in cities and provide accessible space for 'rational' recreation.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, in 1830, horticulture expert John Claudius Loudon remarked upon the growing interest in landscape-garden cemeteries in Britain. He suggested that new urban cemeteries be made large

enough to serve as breathing spaces for city dwellers.<sup>12</sup> In response to this growing sentiment a succession of legislative acts were passed in Britain that focused on maintenance of existing public lands such as commons, and ensured that new parks were created in towns and cities. The first piece of legislation passed that dealt specifically with these ends was the Enclosure Act of 1836, which exempted common fields from enclosure if they lay within a specified distance of a town or city. For example, any 'common' within ten miles of London, England, could not be enclosed.<sup>13</sup> A second piece of legislation, The 1848 Public Health Act, stated that "Local Boards of Health are empowered to provide, maintain and improve land for municipal parks and to support and contribute toward such land provided by any person whomsoever."<sup>14</sup> Therefore, before the midpoint of the nineteenth century, legislators in Britain had already begun to address the need to provide open, public lands for people to address their health and recreation needs. In concert with Britain, the United States and the colonies in British North America were beginning to address similar issues.

---

<sup>10</sup> J. R. Wright, *Urban Parks in Ontario Part 1: Origins to 1860* (Ottawa: Province of Ontario, Ministry of Tourism and Recreation, 1983), 60.

<sup>11</sup> Hazel Conway, *People's Parks: The Design and Development of Victorian Parks in Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 4.

<sup>12</sup> James Stevens Curl, "The Design of the Early British Cemeteries," *Journal of Garden History*, 4:3 (1984), 228.

<sup>13</sup> Conway, *People's Parks*, 224. Common fields were exempted from enclosure if they lay within 10 miles of London, 3 miles of a town of 100,000, 2.5 miles of a town of 70,000, 2 miles of a town of 30,000, 1.5 miles of towns of 15,000, and 1 mile of a town of 5,000. In 1845 the General Enclosure Act was passed which extended the limits of the earlier Act.

<sup>14</sup> Conway, *People's Parks*, 225.

A cursory examination of public park development in the United States provides some indication of the influence American urban architects had in terms of how London, Ontario's earliest parks were conceptualized. In the United States, according to David Schuyler, public parks were viewed as important in so much as they fit into the larger concern for improved urban design.<sup>15</sup> Parks represented a way to confront the problems created by industrialization and urbanization that had become apparent by the middle of the nineteenth century. Schuyler argues that "during the 1840s and 1850s proponents of the new urban landscape applied the lessons of cemetery design and crusaded to create large public spaces within the city."<sup>16</sup> The example of this movement forwarded by Schuyler is that of New York City's Central Park. This space, designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, served to "shut out the urban environment . . . and to provide the elements of a rural setting that, he felt, met the psychological and social needs of residents of the city."<sup>17</sup> Further, landscape reformers such as Olmsted promoted parks as mechanisms for maintaining social order, thereby suggesting "that the

physical spaces humans occupy influence their patterns of behavior."<sup>18</sup> Schuyler also suggests that Olmsted viewed parks as spaces for quiet contemplation, restraint, and decorum, activities clearly in line with ideas promoted by middle-class social reformers. William Miller, the head gardener of Fairmount Park in Philadelphia who was commissioned to redesign London's Victoria Park in 1878, likely drew upon the same sensibilities that Olmsted brought to Fairmount Park in Philadelphia as a design consultant in 1867.<sup>19</sup> It is not surprising that the legislation in Britain, which focused on securing space for public parks, combined with moral-reforming ideas promoted in the United States through rational urban park design, influenced the parks movement in Canada, particularly in London, Ontario. Clearly, these two approaches represent the two primary social and cultural influences promoting the idea that in order to provide morally and physically healthy urban environments for citizens, there needed to be some provision of free and accessible parkland. These early international influences formed part of the basis for the emerging forces in Canada that sought to secure recreation spaces in urban centres

<sup>15</sup> David Schuyler, *The New Urban Landscape: The Redefinition of City Form in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 5-7. According to Schuyler the critical concerns in these cities were the failing environment and social disorders. Solutions to these concerns were proposed by early park designers who believed that properly constructed parks could influence patterns of human behaviour to influence reform while also raising the level of 'civilization' in America beyond that which existed at that time.

<sup>16</sup> Schuyler, *The New Urban Landscape*, 4.

<sup>17</sup> Schuyler, *The New Urban Landscape*, 5.

<sup>18</sup> Schuyler, *The New Urban Landscape*, 6.

<sup>19</sup> JJTRC, Toni Lynn Nahdee, Essay on "Victoria Park and the Urban Parks Movement," 1990, 18.



such as London. This evidence of like-minded individuals working to create public parks represents the emergence of common patterns of behaviour leading to the formation of recognized and reproducible mechanisms to ensure the protection and dedication of publicly accessible space for recreation and leisure purposes.

The first land set aside in the British North American colonies specifically for the purpose of public recreation and leisure occurred in 1763 when the Governor of Nova Scotia granted 240 acres of land to the citizens of Halifax.<sup>20</sup> About half of this land grant exists today and is still referred to as the Halifax 'Common'. In Ontario, in 1851, Toronto City Council established a committee in charge of Public Walks and Gardens. This committee directed the retention and development of garrison grounds that had been leased to the city by the military authorities for the purposes of pleasure and recreation. An 1860 by-law entrusted care of all the city's public walks, gardens, and parks to this committee and stipulated that the garrison lands

could not be used for 'games' without the council's permission.<sup>21</sup> This early example of the regulation and use of public land exhibited the tight control that municipal leaders believed was required, particularly in terms of the appropriateness of the types of recreation activities that took place there.

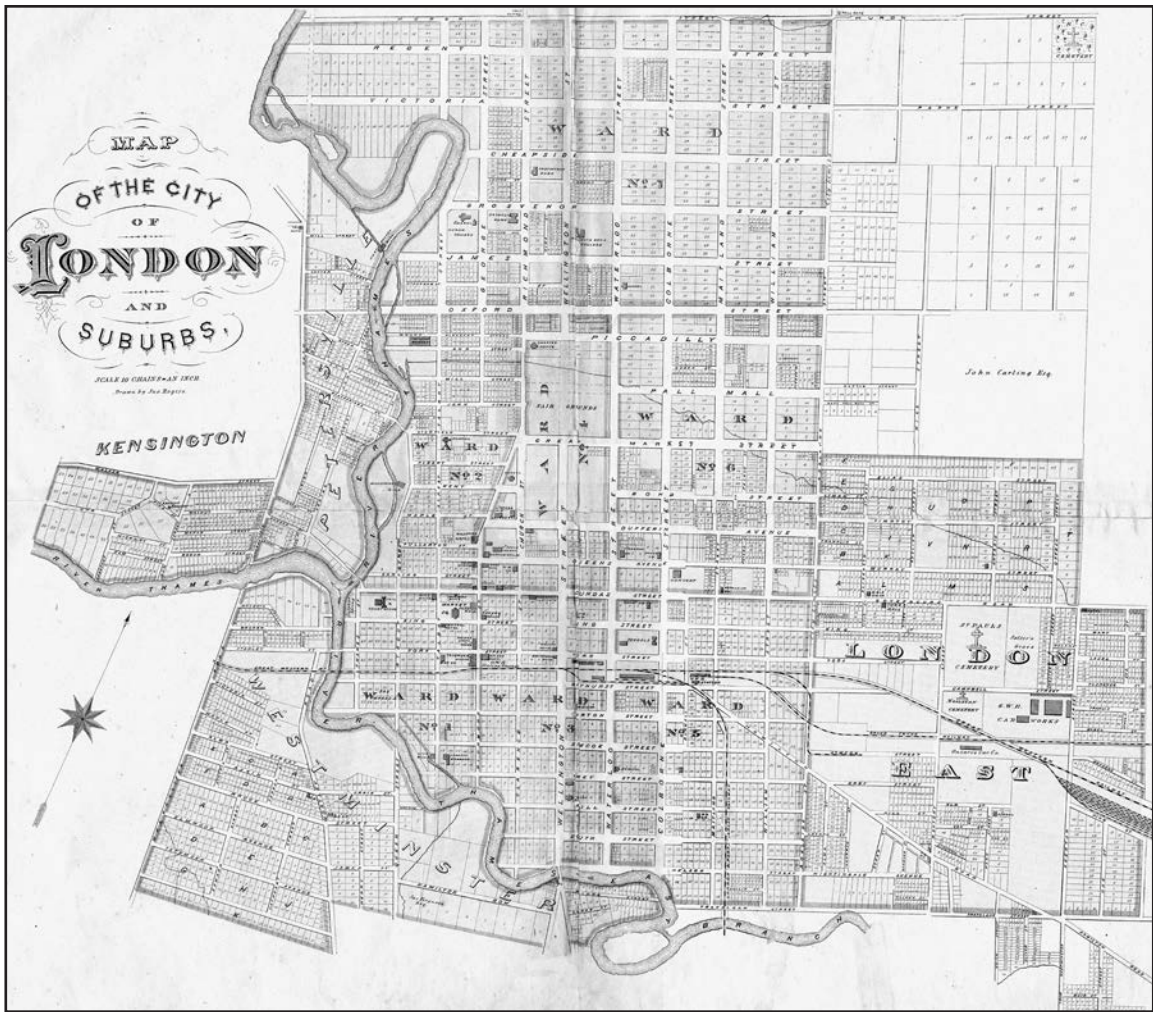
As was the case in Toronto, by Confederation Londoners began to request that land be set aside for public recreation. This initial interest in providing municipal land for public recreation occurred a full fifteen years before the passing of the first provincial legislation in 1883 that addressed the provision of public parks in Ontario municipalities.<sup>22</sup> This relatively late action by the province to consider the question of providing public parks is a clear indication that this area of public life had been considered primarily the concern of local governments in Ontario before that time. In the case of London, Alderman James Egan first moved to secure funds to provide for a public park in the city in May 1867.<sup>23</sup> The following year, on 4 May 1868, Aldermen Egan and John Christie

<sup>20</sup> Elsie McFarland, *The Development of Public Recreation in Canada* (Ottawa: Canadian Parks/Recreation Association, 1970), 7. The two governors of Nova Scotia at this time were Jonathan Belcher (1760-1763) and Wilmont Montague (1763-1766), no indication is provided as to which (or whether either) donated the land.

<sup>21</sup> McFarland, *Public Recreation in Canada*, 8.

<sup>22</sup> Province of Ontario, *Statutes*, 1883, 357-367, Vic. 46, C. 20, "An Act to provide for the establishment and maintenance of Public Parks in Cities and Towns."

<sup>23</sup> JJTRC, *Proceedings of London City Council*, 20 and 27 May 1867. James Egan was an Alderman for the 7<sup>th</sup> Ward in north London from 1867 to 1877, with the exceptions of 1874 and 1876. According to the *City of London Directory, 1863-64* (London: Thomas Evans Printer, 1863), James Egan's occupation was listed as "artist," living on Talbot St., between Market and Litchfield. The *London City Directory, 1866-67* (London: Sutherland Publishers Co., 1866) listed Egan as the proprietor of a photographic gallery and stock depot business (the listing is accompanied by half page advertisement). Egan, it can be argued, was a relatively successful businessman but he was not a member of the city's elite citizenry that



*Image 1 - Map of London 1875. This Map of London and Suburbs exhibits the absence of dedicated parkland in the city with the lone exception of the Fair Grounds. Victoria Park is not yet listed on the map. In addition, the map lists Salter's Grove, the future site of Queen's Park. Courtesy of The University of Western Ontario Archives.*

successfully tabled a motion to form a special Park Committee that would provide a report to council on the practicality of securing grounds for a public park.<sup>24</sup> Securing suitable land for a permanent park proved to be a more difficult task

than Alderman Egan had anticipated and, as a temporary measure in June of 1868, Middlesex County Council granted the City of London use of the grounds of the County Court House as a park to be used daily between five a.m. and

included, for example, men from the Glass, Carling, McBeth, McCormick, Leonard, Minhinnick, and Labatts families who represented a consistent presence within London City Council.

<sup>24</sup> JJTRC, *Proceedings of London City Council*, 4 May 1868.

eight-thirty p.m., under the condition that ornamental trees had to be planted on the grounds.<sup>25</sup> It is unclear how long this agreement lasted, but it is evident that this arrangement was considered only a temporary measure and was not deemed sufficient to meet the recreation needs of Londoners. According to local historian Pat Morden one reason the Court House grounds may not have been well used and ultimately accepted by Londoners as a park resulted from the knowledge that several public executions had been held there in 1838-39.<sup>26</sup> At least in part because of the questionable suitability of the Court House grounds, the need for a permanent public park in London remained an unresolved political issue. By the early 1870s, two men began to champion the cause for a permanent public park, the aforementioned Alderman James Egan, and local businessman and politician John Carling.

During the late 1860s and into the early 1870s the continuing interest in Canadian and American urban centres toward providing public space for recreation began to influence both London's citizens and members of the city's political leadership to consider the need for designated land for these purposes. To this end, London politicians debated the issues of the expense involved in securing land and how any lands secured should be administered. By the middle

of the 1870s, a degree of unanimity had been achieved amongst London's political leaders that creating a public park was a necessary undertaking as part of the larger program of building a vibrant and desirable city.

In September 1870, James Egan presented London City Council with a plan to purchase a parcel of land for a park on Richmond Street for \$3,200. The proposal was forwarded to the finance committee for review. The committee responded to Alderman Egan's request, stating that they agreed that the city needed to buy parkland but the \$3,200 for the proposed parcel of land was "more than the property was worth."<sup>27</sup> This unsuccessful attempt did not dampen James Egan's efforts to secure land for a park. In 1871, after losing his bid to become mayor, Egan settled in as the chair of the newly formed Standing Committee on Public Parks. Shortly thereafter, he made a second attempt to secure the \$3,200 to purchase land for a park, but again the proposal was rejected.<sup>28</sup> No further action was taken in the matter of securing land for a city park until 1873 when Egan travelled to Ottawa to request the title to a portion of the old garrison grounds for use as a public park. He had hoped to obtain forty acres north of Central Avenue, including Carling's Creek and Lake Horn. Instead Egan was offered only thirteen acres, the land that would

<sup>25</sup> JJTRC, *Proceedings of London City Council*, 29 June 1868; and *History of Middlesex County*, 238.

<sup>26</sup> Morden, *Putting Down Roots*, 8. The executions were the result of the rebellion that began in Upper Canada in December 1837.

<sup>27</sup> JJTRC, *Proceedings of London City Council*, 19 September, and 10 and 31 October 1870.

<sup>28</sup> JJTRC, *Proceedings of London City Council*, 16 January and 24 April 1871.

form Victoria Park.<sup>29</sup> London City Council accepted the offer and paid \$48,000 for the land, which had an assessed value of \$100,000.<sup>30</sup> A suggestion was put forward that the newly acquired land should be used for building lots and not a park raised the ire of local businessman and politician John Carling who spoke in favour of using the land for the park. Carling implored:

It is not merely the city of today that they should look to but the city it was likely to become 40 or 50 years hence . . . Let us go to work and provide an expansive pleasure ground, a breathing place for the citizens, where they and their children may assemble and breath purer air.<sup>31</sup>

As a result, through the persistent efforts of James Egan and the support provided by John Carling, London acquired part of the former garrison grounds to constitute the city's first public park. With the land secured, the debate surrounding the new park turned to two related questions, whom should the new park serve and how should it be used?

The dedication of Victoria Park by

Governor-General Lord Dufferin took place on 27 August 1874.<sup>32</sup> Following the official dedication, Mayor Benjamin Cronyn expressed his hope that upon the Governor-General's next visit to London the grounds would be suitably laid out.<sup>33</sup> The mayor did not elaborate upon what he meant by 'suitably laid out'; however, over the next four years attempts to achieve agreement on this point resulted in disagreement between a variety of groups and individuals who harboured differing ideas as how best to use the new public grounds.<sup>34</sup> In 1875, James Egan, the Alderman responsible for originally securing the land, moved to give "the City of London the power to dispose of by sale or otherwise, any portion or the whole of Victoria park."<sup>35</sup> Why Egan assumed this position, which seemed to contradict his earlier actions to secure a park for the city, is not clear.<sup>36</sup> However, following a brief debate his motion was soundly defeated by council who viewed the land to be a 'gift' that obligated them to keep the property for the initially intended use as a park.<sup>37</sup>

Two perspectives dominated the

<sup>29</sup> Morden, *Putting Down Roots*, 8.

<sup>30</sup> JJTRC, *Proceedings of London City Council*, 5 April 1875.

<sup>31</sup> *London Free Press*, 19 December, 1873.

<sup>32</sup> Armstrong, *The Forest City*, 112.

<sup>33</sup> *London Free Press*, 28 August 1874.

<sup>34</sup> *History of the County Middlesex, Canada*, 236. Victoria Park, as it had originally existed, was deemed an "eyesore" with decaying barracks and a stump fence, but was transformed by Council into "the beautiful place it is now."

<sup>35</sup> JJTRC, *Proceedings of London City Council*, 22 March 1875.

<sup>36</sup> JJTRC, Nahdee, "Victoria Park and the Urban Parks Movement," 16-17. Nahdee suggests that Egan may have been a land speculator who likely owned land in the northern section of Ward 7 which he represented in council, an area at that time considered to be a land speculator's paradise.

<sup>37</sup> JJTRC, *Proceedings of London City Council*, 5 April 1875. The argument was forwarded that the



debate over the best plan for the development of Victoria Park. There were individuals and groups who viewed the park as a good site for sports competition and physical recreation. For example, in 1874, part of the park had been used for football, while as late as 1876 the space had been used as a cricket pitch.<sup>38</sup> Opposition to the continued use of the land for physical recreation activities became evident when in September of 1876 an application made by London Tecumseh Baseball Club president J.L. Engelhart to use part of the park for his team's diamond was rejected.<sup>39</sup> The Parks Committee's dismissal of Engelhart's request to use the park set off "a controversy, much coloured by ward politics [that] developed and dragged on for months. Engelhart became so discouraged that he withdrew his application."<sup>40</sup> The controversy over the use of Victoria Park took a new turn in April 1877 when the application by the London Cricket Club to use part of the park was accepted by council.<sup>41</sup> Yet, as had been the case with the professional baseball club, the ama-

teur cricketers quickly lost their privilege to use the park the following year. Thus, the debate over the new park focused primarily on the types of activities that ought to take place there. By 1880 the city's by-laws expressly forbid "foot-ball, or throw stones, or play at any games" in the park without the permission of City Council.<sup>42</sup> As a result, in the case of Victoria Park, it was clear that sports and physical recreation had lost out to more civil, rational, and sedate forms of leisure.

In 1878, after much vacillating, a decision concerning the permanent design and function of Victoria Park emerged. London City Council voted to employ William Miller to lay out Victoria Park.<sup>43</sup> Miller had been involved in the design of the gardens at the United States Centennial Exhibition at Philadelphia in 1876 and at that time was the head gardener at Fairmont Park in the same city. His plan to create an ornamental landscaped park met with acceptance, but not universally. Aldermen Egan and Pritchard voiced their opposition to the plan objecting

---

price of \$48,000 paid for the land that was worth \$100,000 represented a gift from the federal government.

<sup>38</sup> JJTRC, *Proceedings of London City Council*, 26 October 1874 and 26 April 1876. In Mr. I. McKnight's 1874 request to use Victoria Park for a football match between the London and Hamilton clubs, no mention was made of the type of football game to be played.

<sup>39</sup> JJTRC, *Proceedings of London City Council*, 25 September 1876. The request to use Victoria Park was passed to the Park Committee that turned down the Tecumseh's request at the 9 October meeting of council.

<sup>40</sup> Morden, *Putting Down Roots*, 45.

<sup>41</sup> JJTRC, *Proceedings of London City Council*, 16 April 1877.

<sup>42</sup> *Charter and By-Laws of the City of London, Including By-Laws of the Board of Police Commissioners, and Important Agreements entered into by the Corporation of the City of London*, London, Ontario, 1880, 89. The by-laws also limited the use of horses and carriages in parks and specifically forbid walking on the grass unless permission had been granted to do so.

<sup>43</sup> JJTRC, *Proceedings of London City Council*, 11 March 1878.



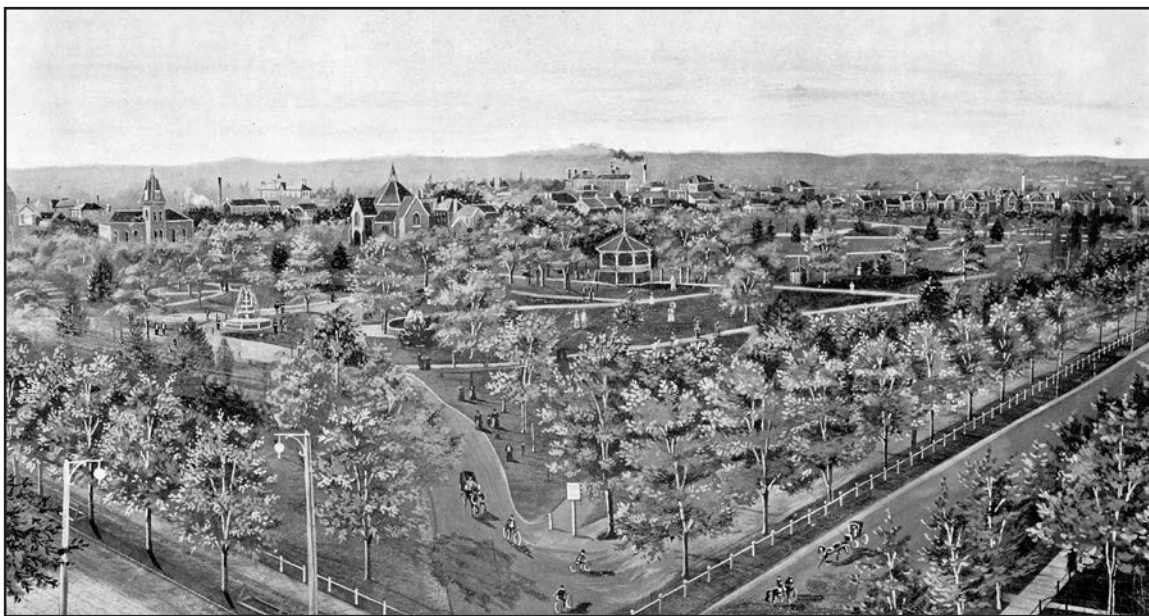


Image 2 - *Birdseye View of Victoria Park c. 1900*. This illustration exhibits the ornamental garden theme that was adopted in 1878. Courtesy of The University of Western Ontario Archives.

to the expense of the project, and after losing a vote on the issue both promptly resigned from the Park Committee in protest.<sup>44</sup> The decision to create an ornamental park can be explained, in part, by the advantages it offered those elite Londoners whose mansions were built in close proximity to the park. According to the *History of the County Middlesex, Canada*, it was noted that the improvements to Victoria Park “had the effect of raising the value of property in the neighbor-

hood very considerably.”<sup>45</sup> Thus, after four years of debate and conflict the fate of Victoria Park had finally been decided. London could boast an ornamental landscaped park to serve its citizens as a site of rational and moderate recreation well into the twentieth century.

With the final form and function of Victoria Park confirmed, park advocates turned their attention toward two new park sites, Queen’s (formerly Salter’s Grove prior to May 1879)<sup>46</sup> and Spring-

<sup>44</sup> JJTRC, *Proceedings of London City Council*, 15 April 1878. The division of Council over whether or not to accept Miller’s plan for Victoria Park was put to a final vote that passed by a ten to eight count. The vote was split amongst the ward representatives, except for wards three and four, the latter of which was the location of Victoria Park. Although no specific reason is suggested as to why Miller’s ornamental plan for Victoria Park was accepted, the available evidence indicates that the councilors whose wards were in close proximity to the park sought to ensure that the park provided the nearby and mostly wealthy residents with a suitable public garden not an athletics ground.

<sup>45</sup> *History of the County Middlesex, Canada*, 237.

<sup>46</sup> Salter’s Grove Park was the initial name given to the newly acquired land, which subsequently was renamed Queen’s Park in 1879.

bank Parks.<sup>47</sup> By 1878 both parks were in their infancy, the Salter's Grove land had recently been purchased by the city for \$11,000,<sup>48</sup> while Springbank, had been created from the land surrounding the recently constructed waterworks' dam and pump house. As in the case with Victoria Park, the manner in which these two sites were formed caused additional controversy, primarily over the financial concerns surrounding the projects. In the case of Salter's Grove, this concern was dealt with through community action that supported the development of the park site. For Springbank, where the issue of creating a park was little more than an afterthought, once the site for the waterworks had been selected the concern turned to the safe passage of visitors to and from the park. Thus, in the case of Salter's Grove, arguments over its location and use depended more upon meeting the needs of Londoners who were not served by Victoria Park, while the suitability of Springbank Park as a holiday retreat was not questioned until

the *Victoria* steamboat disaster of 1881.

A municipal by-law establishing Queen's Park passed on 5 May 1879. This enactment completed the proposal initiated a year earlier by former Mayor Benjamin Cronyn (1874 and 1875) and a group of ninety supporters.<sup>49</sup> This project had its roots in a citywide vote held on 3 July 1878, when the city's electorate voted not to sell either the existing Exhibition Grounds or Salter's Grove.<sup>50</sup> Moving from this show of support Cronyn enlisted a group of influential and concerned citizens to raise funds to improve Salter's Grove and create a second public park in London. According to the subscription book listing the donations, \$945 was raised "for the purposes of fencing in and laying out Salter's Grove as a Public Park for the City of London."<sup>51</sup> In a move to avoid the problems that accompanied the creation and development of Victoria Park, a city by-law was drafted and passed that formally established Queen's Park and set out the conditions under which it would be managed. The

---

<sup>47</sup> Salter's Grove was located in London East, and Springbank down the Thames River near the village of Byron in Westminster Township.

<sup>48</sup> *History of the County Middlesex, Canada*, 237. The land known as Salter's Grove was purchased from the estate of the recently deceased Dr Salter, a long time resident of the city.

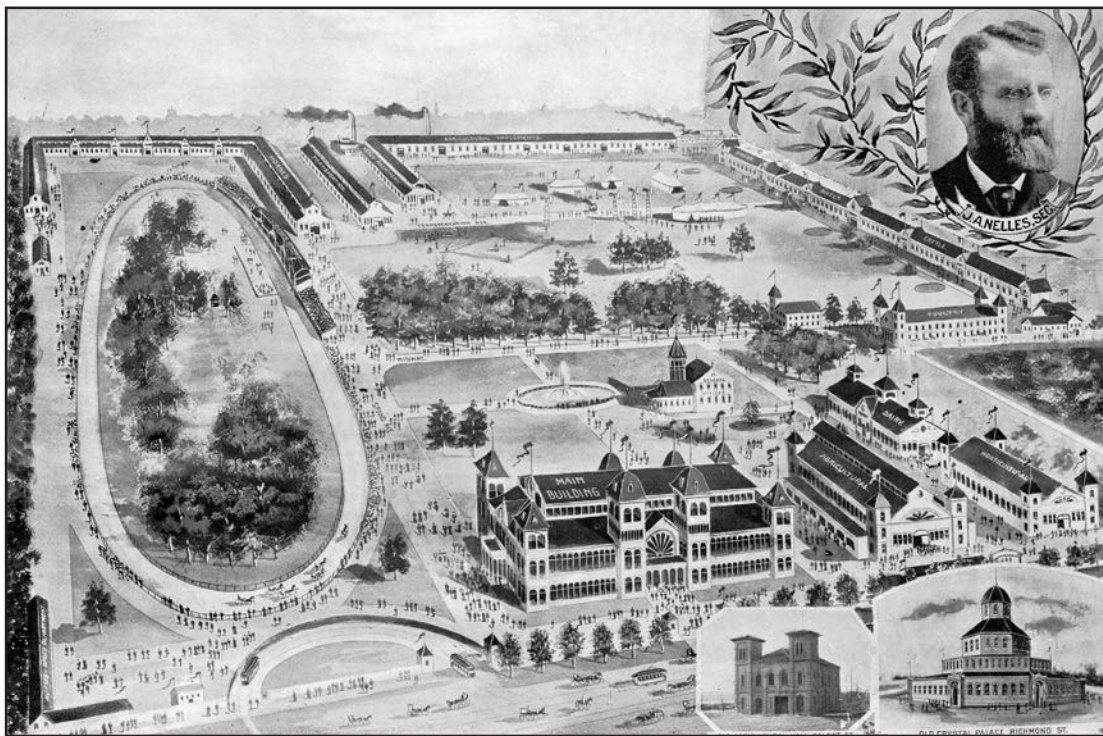
<sup>49</sup> *History of the County Middlesex, Canada*, 237.

<sup>50</sup> *London Free Press*, 4 July 1878. The vote to determine which piece of land should be sold followed several months of debate. A special committee had been appointed to determine a suitable site to which the Exhibition Grounds could be removed. At the 6 May meeting of Council three separate motions were tabled calling for the sale of one or both of the existing Exhibition Grounds and Salter's Grove. At the 3 June Council meeting a decision passed requiring that the question of the sale of these two sites be put before the city's electorate. This vote resulted in a nearly two to one count in favour of the city retaining both sites.

<sup>51</sup> JJTRC, Records of the London Public Utilities Commission, *Salter's Grove Subscription Book*, 1879. Notable example of the city's elite citizens who donated to this cause were John Carling and John Labatt (brewery owners), C.F. Hyman (tannery owner), W.R. Meredith (City Solicitor), Benjamin Cronyn (Mayor 1874-75), Robert Lewis (Mayor 1878-79, and A.M. McCormick (Mayor 1873).

first clause of the by-law clearly set out the purpose of the grounds to exist as “a public Park for the recreation and amusement of the citizens of London.”<sup>52</sup> The city also appointed three prominent citizens, Benjamin Cronyn, Andrew McCormick, and William H. Birrell, as trustees responsible for the administration of the park along with the Mayor, the Park Committee Chairman, and the City Engineer. In addition, the document limited

the number of days that admission could be charged to the park to twelve, with the proceeds applied to its operation. This clause likely warranted inclusion to limit the use of the park for fairs and exhibitions.<sup>53</sup> The official dedication of the park by Mayor Robert Lewis and the park’s trustees took place on Queen Victoria’s birthday in 1879 before a crowd estimated to have numbered about 6,000 people. The opening ceremonies were



*Image 3 - Birdseye View of Queen's Park c. 1900. This illustration of Queen's Park and Western Fair Grounds c. 1900 exhibits the multiple uses of the property. The use of the park for physical recreation purposes such as horse racing and baseball (note the diamond top-middle of illustration) is clearly represented. Courtesy of The University of Western Ontario Archives.*

<sup>52</sup> City of London, *By-Laws*, “By-law For Establishing a Public Park, to be Called Queen's Park,” 1879, 217-218.

<sup>53</sup> *History of the County Middlesex, Canada*, 204-206. The Western Fair Association was formed in 1868 when the City Horticultural Society and the East Middlesex Agricultural Society decided to combine their respective fairs.

followed by an athletics meet held on the new 200-yard track and then a lacrosse match between the London Lacrosse Club and a Native team.<sup>54</sup> It could be argued that this new park was conceived and managed in such a way as to meet the needs of those Londoners interested in physical recreation whose interests had not been met by Victoria Park after 1878; however, no direct evidence with respect to discussions at city council meetings exists to substantiate this being the case. In an illustration of Queen's Park circa 1900 the dominance of the Western Fair buildings is evident. Yet, the illustration also depicts the space being set aside for physical recreation activities such as racing and baseball. Therefore, Queen's Park served several functions quite different from Victoria Park, and represented a citizen-led initiative that sought to provide publicly accessible land for physical recreation and exhibition purposes. However, although this project began as a popular movement, the implementation of bureaucratic regulations and legislation in the form of the 1879 municipal legislation provides evidence that the men who comprised London City Council were unwilling to cede their leadership position over the form and function of public recreation

grounds in the city.

Springbank Park, formed during the late 1870s, served a substantially different recreational purpose from either Victoria or Queen's Parks. This 'accidental' park came into being in 1879 when the city purchased land surrounding the newly built waterworks dam and pump-house several miles down the Thames River from London.<sup>55</sup> Shortly thereafter the site became a popular day excursion destination. Commercial steamboats operated by local entrepreneurs and consortiums ferried visitors to and from the site during the summer months.<sup>56</sup> Unlike the newly created Queen's Park that operated under the authority of its trustees and representatives of City Council, the management of the recreation area at the waterworks site fell entirely under the control of the Board of Water Commissioners. The Board, formed under the 1873 Waterworks Act for London, existed autonomously as the administrative body charged to oversee the operation of the city's waterworks system.<sup>57</sup> So, although Springbank Park did serve Londoners, its *raison d'être*, function, and administration were unique when compared to Victoria and Queen's Parks.

How Springbank became a park lies

---

<sup>54</sup> *London Free Press*, 27 May 1879. No information was provided to identify which nearby community the Native team represented.

<sup>55</sup> As the crow flies, the distance between the dam at Springbank and the forks of the Thames River is slightly more than three miles.

<sup>56</sup> Morden, *Putting Down Roots*, 13. The role of the river steamboats was critical to the popularizing of Springbank as the only alternatives were poorly maintained paths that provided access to the site.

<sup>57</sup> Province of Ontario, *Statutes*, 1873, 570-71, Vic. 36, C. 102, "An Act for the Construction of Water-Works for the City of London."



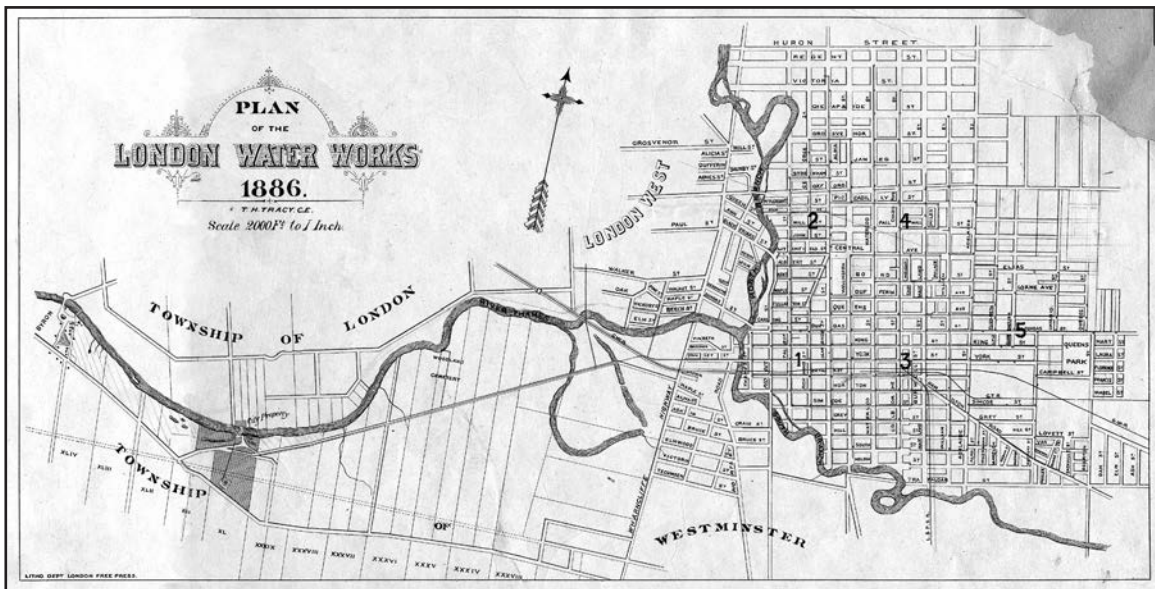


Image 4 - *Map of the London Water Works system, 1886.* Springbank Park is located at the site of the pump and dam (next to the word 'Township' in the bottom left of the map). Courtesy of The University of Western Ontario Archives.

in the decision made by the city to locate the waterworks several miles down the Thames River. There had been an ongoing debate concerning the project beginning in the early 1850s until the completion of construction in 1878-79. Although the waterworks project was not directly concerned with providing public parkland, the organizational structure that developed under the Board of Water Commissioners represented the template that would ultimately be employed to administer public recreation in London after the turn of the twentieth century.

When the decision was made to

build the waterworks system the most controversial issue facing city leaders was the question of how to finance the project. One possibility outlined in the Waterworks Act provided the option of allowing a private company to build the system.<sup>58</sup> Two offers from private companies to build and run a municipal waterworks were received in 1875 and 1876 for consideration by the city voters. After public input both proposals were rejected, confirming the option of building a city-owned and -operated system.<sup>59</sup> One important reason that a public waterworks system received ac-

<sup>58</sup> Province of Ontario, *Statutes*, 1873, 572, Vic. 36, C. 102, "An Act for the Construction of Water-Works for the City of London."

<sup>59</sup> *History of the County of Middlesex, Canada*, 274-275. The private proposal of 1875 was supported by several prominent citizens including lawyer George Gibbons and local businessman and railway promoter Allan MacNab. A second proposal presented in 1876 was supported by similarly prominent Londoners including George S. Birrell, Charles Murray, Isaac Waterman, Ellis W. Hyman, John McClary, John Elliot, Thomas Muir, and George Moorhead.



ceptance from Londoners resulted from an amendment made to the Waterworks Act of 1873 that removed the requirement that all homeowners and renters had to pay for the water whether they used the services or not.<sup>60</sup> Despite continued concerns over the cost of building a waterworks system, on 14 December 1877 the citizens of London voted to approve the raising of the funds needed to complete the project.<sup>61</sup> The management structure of the waterworks included an elected Board of Water Commissioners.<sup>62</sup> The first Board, which included Chairman John Carling, Mayor Robert Lewis, and J.M. Minhinnick, administered the entire operation of the waterworks including the land secured at the dam and pump-house site.<sup>63</sup> Shortly after the completion of the dam and pump-house on the south side of the river and the reservoir atop Hungerford Hill in 1878, the property became a popular day holiday destination for Londoners who participated in boating, picnics, and a variety of related recreational activities.

Prior to the construction of the waterworks at Springbank, most Londoners

with means spent their summer holidays in the city attending military parades<sup>64</sup> and sporting activities or left the city on special excursion trains to visit the Town of Port Stanley on Lake Erie.<sup>65</sup> Prior to the existence of Springbank Londoners were interested in taking part in a variety of outdoor recreational activities both within and outside the city. Therefore, it was not surprising that when the land at the waterworks opened to the public, and its suitability for recreation became apparent, the Board of Water Commissioners in concert with commercial entrepreneurs, including the steamboat operators, were quick to take advantage of the situation. The novelty of an excursion down the Thames River by steamboat quickly captured the interest of Londoners who began to flock to the Springbank waterworks site starting in the summer of 1879.

Beginning on the Queen's birthday on 24 May 1879, the new steamer *Enterprise* made several trips down river carrying excursionists to the waterworks.<sup>66</sup> On Dominion Day of that year it was reported that four thousand people had

<sup>60</sup> E.V. Buchanan, *The History of London's Waterworks* (London Public Utilities Commission, 1986), 9.

<sup>61</sup> JJTRC, *Proceedings of London City Council*, 26 December 1877.

<sup>62</sup> Province of Ontario, *Statutes*, 1873, 558 and 570-71, Vic. 36, C. 102, "An Act for the Construction of Water-Works for the City of London." The clause stated that "The commissioners and their successors shall be a body corporate, . . . and shall be composed of three members, of whom the mayor of the City of London for the time being shall be *ex officio* one, and said commissioners shall have all the powers necessary to enable them to build the water-works hereinafter mentioned, and to carry out all and every other power conferred upon them by this Act."

<sup>63</sup> *History of the County of Middlesex, Canada*, 275.

<sup>64</sup> *London Free Press*, 27 May 1867. The military review on Dominion Day in 1867 attracted a crowd of six thousand.

<sup>65</sup> *London Free Press*, 26 May 1869. For example, on the holiday to celebrate Queen Victoria's birthday in 1869, it was reported that some four thousand people from London visited Port Stanley.

<sup>66</sup> *London Free Press*, 27 May 1879.



*Image 5 - Springbank Park, Steamer, and Pavilion. This photograph of Springbank Park c. 1880 exhibits the facilities at the site including the pavilion at the river's edge and the gazebo on top of Hungerford hill. Also clearly visible is a river steamer docked at the site. Courtesy of The University of Western Ontario Archives, RC 41035.*

growth in the popularity of Springbank as a day excursion destination played a role in not only providing a space near the city to use for recreation, but it also helped to further justify the utility of the waterworks project beyond the provision of water to the city. The use of the property extended

visited Springbank by steamer to enjoy the natural amenities of the river and dancing at the Pavilion. A similar number of people, again about four thousand, patronized Springbank the following Dominion Day, while it was also noted in the *London Free Press* that fewer people had left the city by train to visit Port Stanley than in past years.<sup>67</sup> The rapid

beyond simply summer excursions; Springbank also served as a popular weekend retreat. In one instance, on 8 July 1880, a “Grand Regatta” was staged promoting Champion rower Ned Hanlan as the featured performer.<sup>68</sup> Although he did not actually race, this event attracted more than three thousand spectators who were ferried to Springbank to watch pro-

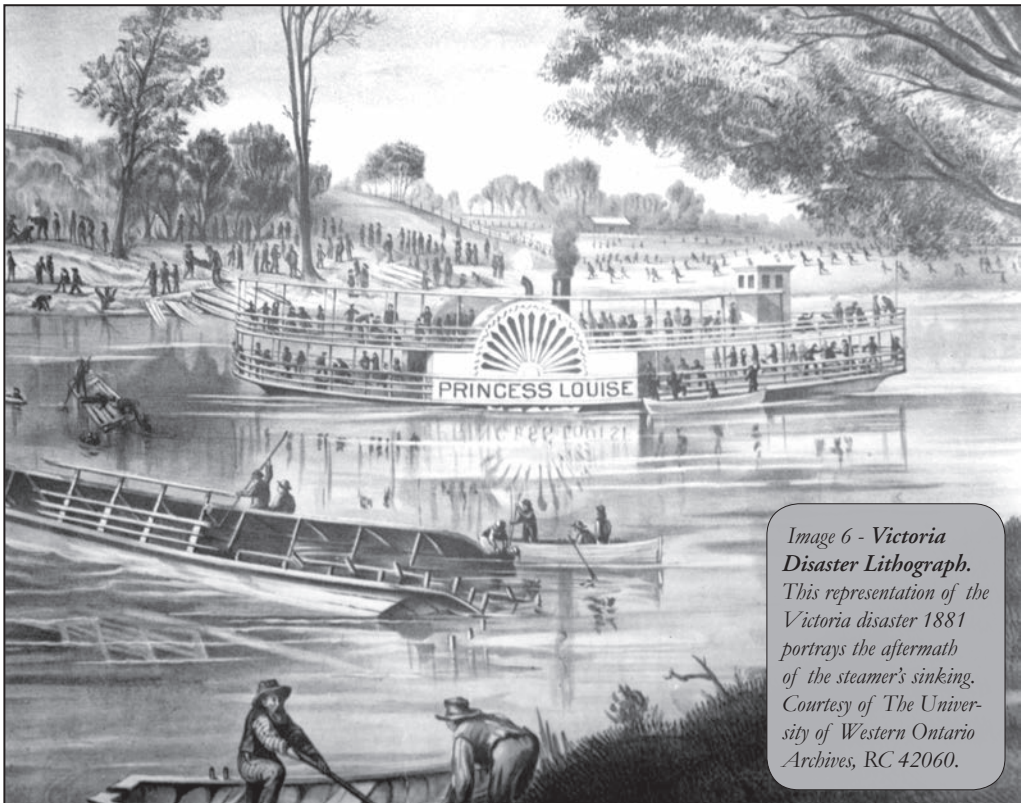
<sup>67</sup> *London Free Press*, 2 July 1880.

<sup>68</sup> *London Advertiser*, 9 July 1880. Ned Hanlan was at the height of his rowing career competing internationally for world and national championships. The regatta competition in London would have been well below his standard and he was likely in attendance because of a paid appearance fee to generate public interest in the event.

fessional and amateur rowers and canoeists compete.<sup>69</sup> The great success of the “Grand Regatta” represented a highpoint of the popularity enjoyed by Springbank in the summers of 1879 and 1880. The following year, on 24 May 1881, the steamer *Victoria* capsized on the return trip from the park to the city resulting in the deaths of more than one hundred and eighty people. This disaster abruptly ended Londoners’ brief affair with the park.<sup>70</sup> By Dominion Day in 1881, a month after the accident, it was reported

that seven hundred people made the trip to Port Stanley, while no mention was made of anyone patronizing Springbank Park.<sup>71</sup> Thus, from its opening in 1879 up to the 1881 *Victoria* disaster, Springbank enjoyed great popularity. The disaster did not result in the end of Springbank as a recreation site, but it would be several years before people would once again be attracted back to the riverside park in considerable numbers.

The period spanning the early 1870s to the early 1880s represented the infancy



*Image 6 - Victoria Disaster Lithograph.*  
This representation of the *Victoria* disaster 1881 portrays the aftermath of the steamer's sinking. Courtesy of The University of Western Ontario Archives, RC 42060.

<sup>69</sup> *London Advertiser*, 9 July 1880.

<sup>70</sup> For an examination of the *Victoria* disaster see Kenneth D. McTaggart's, *The Victoria Day Disaster* (Petroli: Skinner Printing, 1978).

<sup>71</sup> *London Free Press*, 2 July 1881.

of park development in London. The city, over roughly a five year period, went from having almost no public land set aside for recreation to operating three parks serving a variety of recreation needs. Despite this growing interest in providing public land for recreation, there existed only a semblance of a coherent park scheme in terms of the formation, operation and management of public parks in London. The difficulties facing the organization and administration of these parks at this time lay primarily in how land could be accessed. Specifically, there were conflicts that arose between both members of City Council and among citizens over appropriate uses of public spaces. Finally, the formation of Springbank Park, which did not fall under the direct control of the City Council or its Park Committee, provides evidence that a coherent approach to park development and administration did not exist. A further hindrance to the provision of an organized system of parks in London occurred in 1882 when, as part of a general reorganization of the committees of City Council, the Board of Works and the Parks and Exhibition Committees were combined to form the No. 2 Committee.<sup>72</sup> This reorganization resulted in the further subjugation of park concerns within the larger public work's portfolio and budget.<sup>73</sup> Although

a degree of common understanding had developed concerning the need for accessible public space for leisure and recreation, issues that arose over the form and function of public parks and who should control their use remained contested terrain. The primary forces involved in park regulation and administration at this time were those bureaucratic controls which took the form of local legislation that represented City Council's will. Thus, London could boast several well-established parks by 1883, yet there had been very few developments with respect to the administration of these sites as a park system beyond the limited guidance provided by London City Council, the appointed boards of trustees, and in the case of Springbank the Board of Water Commissioners. This situation did not change following the passage of the Province of Ontario's 1883 Parks Act. This legislation had been specifically designed to allow towns and cities to form Parks Boards to administer existing parks and acquire land to create new parks. The legislation address the types of park concerns that existed in London and other Ontario municipalities, yet the city did not adopt the Act until after the turn of the twentieth century.

In 1883 the Province of Ontario passed "An Act to provide for the establishment and maintenance of Public

---

<sup>72</sup> JJTRC, *Proceedings of London City Council*, 19 January 1882. This reorganization resulted in the amalgamation of the existing committees of Council into three comprehensive committees. The result was that each committee assumed a variety of responsibilities that were not always complementary. For example, the new No. 1 Committee comprised the former Finance and Assessment, Railway, Salaries, Jail and Printing Committees.

<sup>73</sup> JJTRC, *Proceedings of London City Council*, 19 January 1882.



Parks in Cities and Towns.”<sup>74</sup> The focus of this legislation was to provide towns and cities with an instrument to form a Board of Parks Management to administer public lands. The most important and controversial aspect of the Act involved the provision that afforded the Board the power to purchase or lease land for park purposes.<sup>75</sup> According to the 1883 legislation, a Parks Board in London could have secured up to 1,000 acres of parkland; yet, in 1883, Victoria and Queen’s Parks combined totaled only fifty four acres.<sup>76</sup> Furthermore, an important provision of this legislation stated “the Board shall not interfere with the water-works or any municipal corporation or of any company.”<sup>77</sup> This clause of the Act had critical implications in the case of London where the vast majority of the city-owned parkland, located at Springbank, fell under the control of the Board of Water Commissioners. This provision, along with the clause that would have assigned a Parks Board the power to decide how to spend public money to purchase

or lease parkland, most likely resulted in London not adopting the province’s Public Parks Act.<sup>78</sup>

There is no evidence to suggest that any city politician, private citizen, or group sought to implement the provisions of the Public Parks Act in London after 1883. Victoria Park continued to be administered by the parks subcommittee of the recently created No. 2 Committee while Queen’s Park remained under the control of its board of trustees. Similarly, Springbank continued under the governance of the Board of Water Commissioners. No additional action was taken to alter the administration of parks in London until 1893 when a by-law was passed “To provide for Assessing Lawns, and Regulating the use of Parks, Squares and Gardens.”<sup>79</sup> This by-law served to reaffirm that the No. 2 Committee of City Council was responsible for Victoria Park and all other public parks and open spaces within the city. However, the by-law did not apply to the waterworks property. Two further provisions of this

---

<sup>74</sup> Province of Ontario, *Statutes*, 1883, 357-367, Vic. 46, C. 20, “An Act to provide for the establishment and maintenance of Public Parks in Cities and Towns.”

<sup>75</sup> Province of Ontario, *Statutes*, 1883, 361, Vic. 46, C. 20, “An Act to provide for the establishment and maintenance of Public Parks in Cities and Towns.” The acquisition of land for cities was limited to 1,000 acres and 500 acres for towns.

<sup>76</sup> JJTRC, Public Utilities Commission of London, report by Robert Duff, “London Parks and Recreation 1871-1973: A History of the Recreation Department,” 1973, 88. The figures used in the report are for 1913; however, it is unlikely that the acreage of either park changed during the interim.

<sup>77</sup> Province of Ontario, *Statutes*, 1883, 361, Vic. 46, C. 20, “An Act to provide for the establishment and maintenance of Public Parks in Cities and Towns.”

<sup>78</sup> McFarland, *Public Recreation in Canada*, 12-13. According to McFarland, the Act originated in Toronto, the first city to adopt it in order to provide for a city wide parks plan similar to that in Chicago. The first towns and cities to adopt the Public Parks Act were Port Arthur in 1888, Ottawa in 1893, Kitchener in 1894, Hamilton in 1900, and Brantford in 1901.

<sup>79</sup> City of London, *By-Laws*, 1993, No. 764, “To provide for Assessing Lawns, and Regulating the use of Parks, Squares and Gardens.”



by-law outlined the employment of a Park Ranger or caretaker to be responsible for any construction and maintenance in Victoria Park, and a provision for part of Queen's Park to be used as an exhibition ground with the permission of City Council. Thus, after a full decade, city leaders exhibited no interest in forming a Board of Parks Management for the city. On the contrary, they remained content to maintain the status quo that had existed prior to 1883 with the administration of the city's parks continuing under the direct or indirect control of City Council. Clearly, London City Council did not want to cede control of this potentially expensive public investment to a largely autonomous Board of Parks Management. Therefore, to maintain command over the purse strings, city councillors remained unwilling to implement the

provincial legislation and risk the possible expense of being forced to purchase new land for parks purposes.

By the late 1880s in London, how the city's parks were being managed had changed very little. Victoria Park remained an ornamental landscaped park that served to enhance the stately homes of the city's wealthiest residents, some of whom were the same individuals who in 1878 sought and won the right to have the park redesigned to that purpose.

In turn, Queen's Park, located in the industrial east end of the city, was put to more practical use as a fair grounds and athletic park. Finally, Springbank Park remained on the periphery physically, socially, and politically, still shunned by most Londoners because of the *Victoria* steamer tragedy and largely ignored as a site for public recreation by the Board

of Water Commissioners for the same reason. Therefore, by the 1890s, park administration in London relied primarily on municipal legislation for regulation and operation. Parks did not operate as independent entities, although they did constitute an increasingly legitimate part of



*Image 7 - Fountain at Victoria Park, c.1880. This photograph provides evidence of the dominant place of this type of ornamental feature in the park. Courtesy of The University of Western Ontario Archives, RC 41086.*

the city's landscape that, over time, had become a recognizable element within London's social and political establishment.

Beginning in the early 1890s there were two critical events that influenced decisions concerning how public lands were administered in London. These were the rebirth of Springbank Park as a popular leisure destination and the advent of the playgrounds movement in London. These changes were related to the growing recognition of the demand for improved recreation space and facilities, eventually culminating in the formation of a Board of Parks Management in 1912. According to Pat Morden, "as early as 1904, a group calling itself the Civic Improvement Society of London began asking the owners of vacant land to allow children to play on it."<sup>80</sup> This movement was both a product of the continuing public interest in providing places for rational recreation and the more recent focus concerned with providing playgrounds for children to remove them from the dangers of unsupervised leisure activities in and around the city. A second reason why the city finally adopted the Public Parks Act was the recognition of the many improvements that had been made to Springbank Park by the Board of Water Commissioners beginning in the early 1890s. Although there was no evidence of persistent discontent with

the city's two parks at this time, the steps taken by the Board to transform Springbank Park at the turn of the century began to capture the attention of Londoners. In particular, the improvements at Springbank moved the city's politicians to consider the advantages of a park system run by an independent body free from the day-to-day business of city politics.

Springbank Park, during the years after the 1881 Victoria disaster, did not attract regular visitors. It is likely that some individuals continued to make their way down the Thames River by wagon, boat, foot, or, on horseback during this period, but such activity would have been the exception rather than the rule.<sup>81</sup> The popular day holiday recreation site during the 1880s remained the Lake Erie community of Port Stanley. For example, in an 1885 summary of the Dominion Day activities, the *London Free Press* pointed out "as usual, the attractions of the lakeside overbalanced all else in the opinion of the general public."<sup>82</sup> The fortunes of Springbank did not change until 1888 when the first serious attempt to revive steamboat service to the site began. An advertisement in the *London Free Press* announced that the steamer, *City of London*, would be making regular trips to the park, and touted Springbank as "Ontario's Great Summer Resort" with refreshment rooms under

---

<sup>80</sup> Morden, *Putting Down Roots*, 49.

<sup>81</sup> *London Free Press*, 26 May 1885. The article noted that there were busses running to Woodland Cemetery and Springbank, yet most holiday travelers, almost 1,400, took the train to Port Stanley.

<sup>82</sup> *London Free Press*, 2 July 1885. This article estimated that the crowd at Port Stanley on that Dominion Day exceeded 8,000.

the management of Mr J. Cruickshank of the American House.<sup>83</sup> It was in response to the growing success of these commercial ventures that, by 1890, led Springbank's administrators to host boat and canoe races and dancing as part of the Queen's Birthday celebrations.<sup>84</sup> The Board of Water Commissioners also undertook a number of projects to improve the grounds and facilities at Springbank Park included the planting of shade trees along roads and driveways, the removal of brush and stumps, and the construction of benches and swings.<sup>85</sup> The next major event that spurred the popularity of Springbank was the construction of an electric street rail line to the park in 1896.<sup>86</sup> This new method of transport was critical to the future popularity of the park. The London Street Railway Company, as a part of its agreement with the Board of Water Commissioners to run the street rail line to Springbank, reserved the right to stage band concerts, fireworks displays, and other attractions so long as written permission was obtained from the Commission and there was no

admission charged.<sup>87</sup> The Board of Water Commissioners and their commercial partners undertook these improvements as a long-term project that sought to create an accessible and functional public park for Londoners.

The majority of the improvements to Springbank Park undertaken by the Board of Water Commissioners prior to and following the turn of the twentieth century focused on upgrading facilities and the grounds for park visitors. These improvements to the park included: the planting of trees, shrubs, and flowers; maintenance and alterations to the park's pavilion building; and the leveling of a section of the grounds to create a picnic area.<sup>88</sup> In 1906, the Board of Water Commissioners hired a permanent gardener for Springbank Park who "was engaged to look after the plants and flower beds . . . on the advice of the committee appointed by the City Horticultural Society."<sup>89</sup> The following year, in 1907, additional recreational facilities were constructed, including tennis and bowling lawns.<sup>90</sup> The expanding array of

---

<sup>83</sup> *London Free Press*, 29 June 1888. This commercial hotel was located on the bank of the Thames River opposite the park and waterworks.

<sup>84</sup> *London Free Press*, 26 May 1890.

<sup>85</sup> JJTRC, London Public Utilities Commission, 1893, "Annual Reports of the Board of Water Commissioners."

<sup>86</sup> Gerald Alfred Onn, "The History of the London Street Railway Company, 1873-1951" (Masters thesis, The University of Western Ontario, 1958), 63.

<sup>87</sup> Onn, "London Street Railway Company," 316. Of course, the money taken in by the company for these promotions came from fares.

<sup>88</sup> JJTRC, London Public Utilities Commission, 1898, 1901, 1902, 1903, and 1904, "Annual Reports of the Board of Water Commissioners."

<sup>89</sup> JJTRC, London Public Utilities Commission, 1906, "Annual Reports of the Board of Water Commissioners."

<sup>90</sup> JJTRC, London Public Utilities Commission, 1907, "Annual Reports of the Board of Water Commissioners," and Morden, *Putting Down Roots*, 15.

facilities and amenities available to visitors demonstrated the Water Commissioners' interest in providing Londoners with a quality recreation site. The motive for these actions seems to have been the promotion of the dual utility of the waterworks as both a source of clean water and respectable leisure. The Commission also exhibited a willingness to work with community organizations such as the London Horticultural Society to foster improved relations with the citizens of London. Therefore, the projects undertaken to improve the grounds at the park under the administration of the Board of Water Commissioners provided clear evidence of the advantages enjoyed by that independent body in providing a quality recreation site for Londoners. This situation contrasted the continued lack of direction evident in the administration of the city's other parks where local politicians remained unwilling to cede control over the potential expenses involved in improving and expanding these public lands. These circumstances left the practical management of the city's parks to the bureaucratic controls set out in local by-laws. As a result, through the implementation of a relatively clear plan for administration and improvement of Springbank by the Board of Water Commissioners the level of organization associated with park management in London was greatly improved, exhibiting

to Londoners the potential benefits of an independent parks board.

A second critical influence that generated interest in the need for a rationally administered public park system in London was the emerging North American playground movement.<sup>91</sup> In London this movement appeared as part of the broader international and national social reform initiative that sought to provide children with a physically and morally safe environment for recreation particularly during time away from school. Recreation historian Elsie McFarland identifies the role played by the National Council of Women, its local councils and member organizations in organizing and administering the playground movement in Canada.<sup>92</sup> By chance, it was at the eighth annual meeting of the National Council of Women, held in London in 1901, where the issue of playgrounds came to the fore. It was at this meeting that the following resolution was passed:

Whereas the agitation for vacation schools and playgrounds where children may find organized recreation having become so widespread that it is now known as the playgrounds movement, and whereas the establishment of such vacation schools and playgrounds is acknowledged by educators and philanthropists to be desired in

---

<sup>91</sup> Benjamin G. Rader, *American Sports: From the Age of Folk Games to the Age of Televised Sports*, 4th ed. (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1999), 108-109.

<sup>92</sup> McFarland, *Public Recreation in Canada*, 19. According to McFarland, The National Council of Women was formed in 1893 in part due to the encouragement of Lady Aberdeen who had been elected the president of the World Council of Women the previous year in Washington, D.C.





*Image 8 - Postcard of Springbank Park. This photograph of Springbank c. 1915 suggests that the park continued to attract visitors and the facilities such as the pavilion continued to serve park goers. Courtesy of The University of Western Ontario Archives, RC 140714.*

Peters of Saint John, New Brunswick, a programme was established by the National Council

every community, and whereas the necessity for such schools and playgrounds to improve the condition of children in the cities of Canada is obvious, therefore, be it resolved that this National Council of Women of Canada declare themselves in favour of the establishment of vacation schools and playgrounds, and pledge themselves to do all in their power to promote their organization.<sup>93</sup>

Also included in the resolution was a call for all local councils to petition school boards to allow playgrounds to be used, under proper supervision, for recreation during the summer months. Under the supervision of Miss Mabel

of Women to promote vacation schools and playgrounds throughout the country. Cities where action was taken to establish these facilities for children included Montreal, Halifax, Saint John, Toronto, Hamilton, Ottawa, Winnipeg, Vancouver, London, Port Arthur, Peterborough, Brantford, and Sault Ste. Marie.<sup>94</sup>

In London, the push to create playground space for the city's children came from a variety of directions. According to Pat Morden, the Civic Improvement Society of London represented the first group to call for public land for children to play.<sup>95</sup> This organization, along with the London Council of Women, actively sought out sites for playgrounds in the city.<sup>96</sup> A speech by London Mayor

<sup>93</sup> McFarland, *Public Recreation in Canada*, 19, referred from The National Council of Women of Canada, *Report of the Eighth Annual Meeting and Conference*, 1901 (Ottawa: Taylor and Clark, 1901). 152.

<sup>94</sup> McFarland, *Public Recreation in Canada*, 21-34.

<sup>95</sup> Morden, *Putting Down Roots*, 49.

<sup>96</sup> Mrs. James McNiven, "London Local Council of Women," *The Local Council of Women, London, 1893-1914* (London: A. Talbot and Co., 1937), 11. This brief history of the local council of women lists "providing of Recreation Parks and Children's Playgrounds . . ." among the primary accomplish-



Adam Beck to London City Council in August 1904 provided some indication that these groups had been able to exert a degree of influence upon local politicians. The Mayor, in his address, called for the city to secure land for park purposes, in particular, grounds suitable for children's playgrounds. Beck argued that the city's schools did not provide sufficient land for playground purposes because much of the land surrounding schools had been sold off in the past leaving little room for playgrounds. Finally, the Mayor pointed to the successes of public play-

grounds for children in cities such as Buffalo, New York, and London, England, arguing that "Truant officers, I believe, where play grounds exist, have little to do, for the play ground instructors keep an eye on the children who ought to be at

school."<sup>97</sup> Despite this strong statement in support of playgrounds by the mayor, it was not until 1908 that a Playground Association was formed in London to supervise playground, skating, and swimming programmes.<sup>98</sup> The following year Beck played a role in the acquisition



*Image 9 - City Bathing Pool. A swimming pool represented one of the facilities constructed at Thames Park specifically for the use of the city's children during the summer months. Courtesy of The University of Western Ontario Archives, RC 140700.*

of the land that formed Thames Park, the first new park to be created in the city since Queen's Park was dedicated in 1879.<sup>99</sup> Thames Park became one of the first public playgrounds for children in Canada.<sup>100</sup> With the formation of a

ments of the organization.

<sup>97</sup> JJTRC, *Proceedings of London City Council*, 15 August 1904. According to Armstrong, *The Forest City*, 138, Sir Adam Beck, through his political service at both municipal and provincial level, became one of London's most celebrated citizens.

<sup>98</sup> McFarland, *Public Recreation in Canada*, 34.

<sup>99</sup> Duff, "London Parks and Recreation 1871-1973," 6. In 1909, as a member of the Board of Water Commissioners, Adam Beck secured land on the south side of the river at Ridout Street to augment the city's water supply. This parcel of land became Thames Park.

<sup>100</sup> Morden, *Putting Down Roots*, 49.

third park in London, the need for the city to provide improved administration of parks became increasingly apparent. Consequently, this social pressure to improve playground conditions along with the continued success of the Board of Water Commissioners administration of Springbank led London City Council to finally recognize the advantages of placing recreation lands under the control of dedicated administrators, eventually leading to action being taken in 1912 to adopt the Public Parks Act of 1883.

London City Council, recognizing that the Board of Water Commissioners was already operating and maintaining a park system that was greater in size than that managed by the council, finally turned the administration of all the city's parks over to the Commission in 1912. City politicians proceeded by requesting a special Act of Provincial Parliament that entrusted "The Water Commissioners . . . [with] the whole management and control of all public parks in the City of London, and Springbank Park . . ." with all the powers of the Board of Park Management as set out in the 1883 Public Parks Act.<sup>101</sup> This Act gave the Commission the power to assess and levy the rate-payers of the city for funds to maintain, improve, and expand the park system. The underlying reasons for this decision likely lay in the recognition of the Board of Water Commissioners' expertise and

the need to divest the city's politicians of the increasing responsibility involved in managing parks and playgrounds. As a result, all parks in London, including Springbank Park, were finally brought under the control of this autonomous administrative body.<sup>102</sup>

The development of a comprehensive ten-year plan for the city's park system represented one of the first projects undertaken by the Parks Board to meet the future public recreation needs of the city. The plan, developed in 1913 by a Mr Dilger an expert in the field from Detroit, represented a bold step toward rationalizing parks management in the city.<sup>103</sup> This action, taken independently of London City Council, provided a clear indication that the city's parks had been removed from the direct control of city politicians. Similarly, under the new Parks Board, the conflict over how parkland ought to be used was minimized as these decisions now fell within the portfolio of new professional managers such as E.V. Buchanan, the first General Manager of the Parks Board.<sup>104</sup> In 1914, the Board of Water Commissioners changed its name to reflect its broader mandate, becoming the Public Utilities Commission of London.

The foundation of public interest in the idea of providing public places for sport, recreation, and leisure can be traced to precipitant events in Britain

<sup>101</sup> Province of Ontario, *Statutes*, 1912, 896, 2 Geo. 5, C. 107, "The City of London Act, 1912," brackets mine.

<sup>102</sup> Duff, "London Parks and Recreation 1871-1973," 7.

<sup>103</sup> Duff, "London Parks and Recreation 1871-1973," 10.

<sup>104</sup> Duff, "London Parks and Recreation 1871-1973," 11.

as well as those that occurred in North American cities such as New York and Toronto where the parks movement first emerged. The initial attempt to create a public park in London can be credited to two individuals, James Egan and John Carling. However, their plans could not have been realized without wider popular support for the endeavour, particularly from their peers.

When the land for London's first park, Victoria Park, was secured, the issue turned to the purpose for which the land should be used. The decision to redesign Victoria Park into a landscaped ornamental park was influenced by middle- and upper-class Londoners who sought to foster

and maintain moral and rational recreation in London. These attitudes were evidenced through the actions of the city councilors who, between 1876 and 1878, voted to reserve the park for rational forms of recreation while opposing the use of the land for sports such as baseball and cricket. However, this action did not receive unanimous support, and the decision to create an ornamental landscaped garden to compliment the

nearby properties of some of the city's wealthiest and influential residents did result in a degree of intra-class conflict. Clearly, Victoria Park's proximity to the homes of many elite Londoners led to a high degree of personal interest among these influential individuals as to how Victoria Park should be used. London's second park, Queen's Park, did not serve



*Image 10 - Queen's Park c. 1910. Although primarily a site for physical recreation, Queen's Park also maintained ornamental elements such as this fenced pond. Courtesy of The University of Western Ontario Archives, RC 140689.*

the same purpose as its downtown predecessor. Londoners viewed Queen's Park in a different light. It represented a site for sport and physical recreation, and was later deemed appropriate to serve as an exhibition and athletic grounds. Finally, Springbank Park existed on the periphery of the city's recreational consciousness prior to the turn of the twentieth century. It fell into and out of favour depending upon ease and safety of access and the

quality of the facilities found therein. By the 1880s, these three parks had come to be known and accepted as places where a variety of recreation activities were offered. Yet, the management of parks in London remained a concern of London City Council primarily because they represented a potential financial burden.

The provision of public land for leisure and recreation in London beginning in the late 1860s resulted not only in the setting aside of space for recreation, but also legitimized the concept of dedicating public land for specific recreation purposes. Conflicts arising over the acquisition and use of these new public lands were deferred to the local governors who primarily represent the interests of the London's established elites. Ultimately, because they served an acknowledged critical social function, these parks were legitimized in the public's consciousness well before they became formally established within the city's municipal bureaucracy. A formal and professional approach to park management in London did not arise until after the turn of

the twentieth century. This resulted from increasing public pressure in the form of the playgrounds movement and the Board of Water Commissioners success in attracting visitors to Springbank during the 1890s. These influences began to alter the rigid position adopted by local politicians against ceding control over parks to an autonomous body. Thus, it was not until 1912 when the city formally adopted the Parks Act of 1883 that the administration of public land and facilities became a bureaucratic concern that functioned in concert with local legislation to organize and regulate leisure and recreation. The course of events that led to this form of parks administration in London provides insight into the local nature of leisure and recreation formation and administration in Ontario. The length of time between the recognition of the need for public parks and the eventual establishment of a professionally managed parks administration may in part be explained by the persistent marginalizing of leisure and recreation concerns in favour of more 'important' elements of urban life.

---