

## Cultural Landmarks of Hamilton-Wentworth

# The Thomas B. McQuesten High Level Bridge

**Location:** York Boulevard, Hamilton, Ontario

The Desjardins Canal Company was the first organisation to construct a bridge that spanned the Desjardins Canal. The company made an agreement with the city to build the bridge in the 1850's. The company agreed to build and maintain the bridge for non-railway traffic. However, due to the rapid expansion of railways and intense competition, the Desjardins Canal Company declared bankruptcy and the bridge was left to deteriorate. In 1869, a intense wind storm blew the bridge down destroying the link between Hamilton and Burlington.



The Hamilton and Milton Road Company had a toll roadway that entered Hamilton by Burlington Heights. However, the company decided it would be advantageous to construct a second bridge. The bridge was so poorly constructed that it was eventually closed down. In 1896, a properly constructed high level bridge was built over the Desjardins Canal. The steel arch which was the substructure of the bridge spanned over 180 feet. The bridge was able to withstand the weight of pedestrians, horses and carriages. The development of the North American automobile placed a new strain on the bridge. The structure of the bridge was unable to withstand the weight of heavy automobile traffic and narrow roadway had become dangerous to traverse. Reports also surfaced that the bridge would sway under heavy traffic. The bridge remained in place, however, proposals for the improvement of the bridge and the city's north-west entrance would result in it being dismantled to make way for the high level bridge.



On March 1927, control of Burlington Heights was transferred to the Board of Parks Management in anticipation of the beginning of the restoration project. During the same year, the Board unveiled plans to remove houses that were situated on the north-west entrance route to Hamilton from Toronto. Thomas Baker McQuesten, who was the chairman of the Board of Parks Management, hired Professor Eric Arthur from the University of Toronto School of Architecture to act as a consultant for the redevelopment of the north-west entrance and bridge. Arthur recommended the Board accept tenders, which would portray the architect's vision of the new entrance. Professor Arthur, W.P. Whitton, a Hamilton architect, and T.D. LeMay, a Toronto surveyor were chosen to assess the submissions. Awards were

available for 1st, 2nd and 3rd place in the sums of \$2,000, \$1,000, and \$500, respectively. The first place winner would also win the privilege of designing the bridge and surrounding area.

The tender clearly stated the required features of the new entrance which included a highway bridge that crossed the canal, a pavilion, tea house, gasoline station, fountains, lamp standards, and balustrades. It was also

noted that extra features which would generate revenue would also be accepted. However, signboards and billboards were not acceptable. All entries had to be submitted by February 29, 1928.

The 1st place prize went to Toronto based, Wilson, Bunnell & Borgstrom which was a consulting engineering and landscaping architectural firm. The 2nd place prize was awarded to Dunnington-Grubb and 3rd place was given to John Lyle.

Borgstrom's plan was less impressive, because it was a more simple and streamlined design. His plan called for the reduction of the high and narrow ridge of the canal. The earth that was removed would be used to widen the road way, which would have a broad avenue flanked by trees and hedges. There would also be a lower level bridge parallel to the high level bridge, but would run along the shore of Cootes Paradise. The low level bridge would provide an alternative route for traffic during the construction of the high level bridge and would continue to be used after the completion of the bridge as an alternative route.



The plan also called for a large Art Gallery which would be located on the bluff overlooking Cootes Paradise. The Board of Parks Management estimated that it would require \$1,300,000 to complete the project. The City of Hamilton agreed to pay for the bridge and the roadway, while the Board of Parks management would have to pay for any other costs. McQuesten estimated that it would take almost twenty years to complete the project, which he hoped would coincide with Canada's 1946 Centennial.

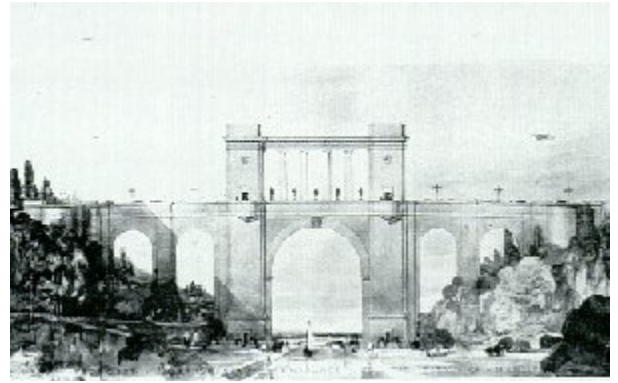
In the fall of 1928, the Board and City Council made an agreement with the Ontario Government to share the costs for the roadway and portions of the bridge. Public support was crucial in making the project successful, since tax revenues would be supporting the project. Therefore, the Board allowed the public to vote on the proposed bridge during the December 1928 election. The Board requested a \$50,000 debenture for the bridge, and linked it with another proposal which was very popular- a public indoor swimming pool in Scott Park. The citizens of Hamilton approved both debentures and the Board of Parks Management continued with their plans for the new entrance.

The City hired E.M. Proctor as a consulting Engineer. His employment by the city was a point of conflict for the Board. It was reported that Proctor and Borgstrom were constantly at odds and argued over several details of construction. McQuesten was also involved in the debates and wanted to preserve Borgstrom's original vision of the bridge and entrance. Eventually, both sides appealed to the Minister of Highways, George Henry to make a choice between Proctor's vision and Borgstrom's vision. The Minister of Highways chose Borgstrom's design.

During this time period, the citizens of Hamilton were quite competitive with the City of Toronto and constantly wanted to out do them in every respect. McQuesten realised the Hamilton City Council was a little apprehensive of spending such a large sum of money on the north-west entrance, so he tried to appeal to Hamiltonians' pride, by inviting a Toronto reporter to Hamilton for a tour. The reporter for the Toronto Star, R.C. Reade was taken around Hamilton by McQuesten looking at parks, the escarpment and the future plans for the north-west entrance to the city. Reade was so impressed that he wrote a story called "Hamilton Shows Toronto How". He was extremely pleased with the proposed entrance and stated "...one of [Hamilton's] demonstrations of superior virtue is the art of planning noble entrances, gateways and by a system of [integrated park](#) and driveways putting its scenic assets into communal circulation."

Landscaping began on June 10, 1929. City engineer, Mr. McFaul was brought in during the summer of that year to inspect the condition of the bridge. He announced the current one would only last two years, and would need to be replaced. Thus, the city was compelled to commit itself to the entire project.

By 1930, John Lyle was hired to design a new high level bridge. The effects of the depression forced him to scale the bridge down from Borgstrom's original vision. Lyle's concept of the bridge marked the beginning of Canadian modernism. The new plan called for a bridge platform of 60 feet, not the standard 30 feet. Local officials scoffed at the width of the bridge and believed it would make the project too expensive. Fortunately, the depression had resulted in Provincial and Federal Government unemployment relief projects. The bridge project received both Federal and Provincial support, however, the project would have to be scaled down even further and the colonnades and obelisk were removed from the plans. The Board of Parks Management was now responsible for landscaping, while City Council would overlook the road and bridge construction. However, the Board ran into significant problems when City Council attempted to change significant aspects of the bridge to reduce costs.



The Board looked for ways to increase the aesthetic qualities of the entrance, so McQuesten decided to use an abandoned gravel pit to create an alpine rock garden which later became known as the Royal Botanical Rock Garden. Construction of the Rock Garden began on November 3, 1929. Tenders for the construction of the gardens were made open to all British subjects. However, Wilson, Bunnell, and Borgstrom of Toronto were chosen to plan and direct the construction of the site. It was reported that ten thousand tons of rock would be required to create the Rock Garden. The rock was retrieved from Albion Falls on the Hamilton Escarpment and from the Waterdown area. This garden took approximately three years to build and was situated on two acres of land. Thousands of annuals were planted alongside five hundred alpine plants, flowering shrubs, and trees. The garden did not receive permission to use the "Royal" distinction, until 1930, when King George V officially gave permission. On May 30, 1930, the Royal Botanical Gardens was opened to the public.

McQuesten and Borgstrom were still having conflicts with City Council over the dimensions of the bridge. Borgstrom wanted the width of the bridge to remain 60 feet, and the embankment to be reduced by 15 feet. City Council countered by pointing out the extra costs involved, but Borgstrom persisted stating "...the narrow, razor back ridge, badly scarred with deep pits on either side, was too narrow and too unevenly balanced on either side, to effectively landscape without a huge amount of filling material of which was not available".

The final changes to the bridge were submitted to the Board of Control. The substructure of the bridge was changed from reinforced concrete to a steel arch. The bridge width was to be 54 feet, instead of 60 feet. There would only be four, 40-foot pylons faced in Queenston limestone. They would be simple with a tapering effect at the top. Each pylon would have a niche for a possible statute. The niche was a remnant of Lyle's original plan which called for the construction of a colonnade for Canadian heroes. The city coat of arms was to be engraved in each pylon to give it a more regal appearance. The total cost of the bridge was estimated at \$300,000. The scaled down high level bridge was not approved by the Board of Control.



It was decided that the engraving of the city coat of arms for \$800 and the four \$25,000 pylons were too expensive and would have to be excluded from the plans. These elements were the basis of the bridge's character and the local newspaper, the *Spectator* became embroiled in the debate by attacking the decision of the Board of Control. "In one moment the board of control dissipates the dreams of cultured Hamiltonians. In a high tone, a tone almost of moral indignation, it orders the removal of these artistic appendages. A bridge is a bridge, what more should it be? We imagine the controllers thinking. What matters

if it be flat, drab, uninteresting, so long as it carries traffic? But bridges have to be looked at as well as driven over, and what a fine monument it will be to the 1931 board of control when, some time in the future, it stands out mean and incongruous against a background of beauty, like a wart on a pretty woman's chin."

Four weeks after the story ran in the *Spectator*, City Council overruled the Board of Control's decision in majority vote and the construction on the bridge began. The Hamilton Bridge Works was awarded \$178,000 to construct the steel substructure, while E.P. Muntz was given \$125,000 for all the concrete work. Another \$122,000 was placed aside for the construction of the mile long boulevard. In August 1931, a new low level bridge was built and in operation, and thus the construction on the high level bridge could proceed. Construction on the new High Level Bridge began on September 8, 1931. The new steel arch was begun on February 1, 1932. The arch was in place ready for the addition of the concrete base and pylons on March 9, 1932. The concrete deck was completed by April 19 and the month of May was taken up by the paving of asphalt, the installation of handrails, twelve ornamental lights, and lighting standards. The Board of Parks Management had not escape scrutiny entirely. In fact, controversy arose when the \$12,000 allotted for landscaping was used to buy nursery stock from nurseries which were owned by friends of the architectural firm, Borgstrom and Grubb. The main point of debate was that the companies were not from Hamilton. However, Borgstrom defended his actions by stating the nurseries had submitted the lowest bids, thus reducing the cost for Hamilton.

On June 17, 1932, the bridge was formally dedicated. Numerous civic officials, board members, and invited guests attended the ceremony. Thousands of citizens arrived to participate in the opening of the bridge. The brass band from the Princess Louise's Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders played *God Save the King* during the opening ceremony. Later on, planes from the Hamilton Aero Club performed acrobatics above.

Ironically, Mayor Peebles, who had not been supportive of the bridge commented that Hamilton could lay claim to having "...one of the finest entrances on the continent." One of the most impressive facts was that the bridge was supposed to take twenty years to build and yet it completed in less than five years.



During the ceremony, a plaque was unveiled to commemorate the individuals who had been involved in the project. After the ribbon to the bridge was cut, thousands of people swarmed the bridge and it took police over one hour to clear the bridge for automobile traffic.

The niches that Lyle had kept in the design remained empty, due to a conflict that erupted over the men who had been chosen to be commemorated. The four men were Adam Zimmerman, MP, Sir John M. Gibson, former Lieutenant Governor General of Ontario, Colonel William Hendrie, businessman and soldier, and Major-General S.C. Mewburn, Canadian Minister of Defence during World War I. The families were approached to produce a bronze likeness of each man and the Provincial Government would pay for them to be placed in the niches. However, since all the men were Presbyterian, Anglican, Methodist, and Baptist churches challenged the decision. The proposal was subsequently dropped.

In 1949, the subject of statues was brought up once again by Walter Chadwick. Chadwick never mentioned the early proposal, instead he suggested that Nora Frances Henderson, who was a local journalist and a local activist should be given a statue and three more individuals would have to be picked by the city. However, intense debate over the statues led to a stalemate and no statues were produced or situated in the niches.



The *Spectator* ran a story on January 4, 1952 about the "missing statues" and suggested that a plaque or a statue of McQuesten be added to the bridge since he was so active in the development of local highways, the Royal Botanical Gardens, the High Level Bridge, other bridges in Ontario, and the Niagara Parks system. Nevertheless, there was no response from city officials.

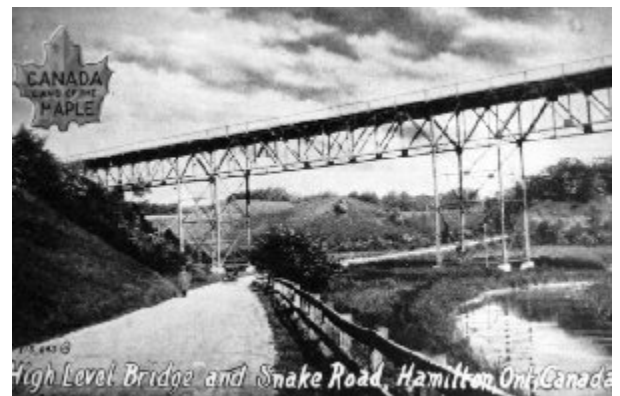
In 1961, the High Level Bridge was in need of restoration. City engineers discovered a crack in one of the concrete abutments and a second one was discovered shortly after in another abutment. Thus, the Board of Control approved a \$34,500 repair project in August of 1961. The Department of Highways contributed 50 percent of the funds need for the project. Though the bridge had cost \$500,000 to build in 1932, the value of the bridge in 1961 has escalated to \$1,000,000 making it a valuable landmark. The renovations to the bridge were completed by June 1962.

In August of 1986, the High Level Bridge was recognised as a historical landmark under the Ontario Heritage Act. During the same time, the Parks and Recreation Committee with the Head-of-the-Lake Historical Society, wanted to dedicate the bridge to Thomas Baker McQuesten, by calling it the Thomas B. McQuesten High Level Bridge.

By 1987, the bridge required substantial repairs. The city estimated that it would cost \$2.3 million to conduct the repairs. When the city announced they were accepting tenders for the contract, they only received one from the Dufferin Construction Company for \$3.3 million. Eventually, they began to receive other tenders, but the price of the tenders increased substantially and reached almost \$4 million. The city announced it would accept new tenders and eventually accepted a tender from Dufferin Construction Company for 3.3 million.

The bridge closed for construction on July 6, 1987 to much of the disappointment of motorists and local businesses in the area. The closure resulted in an increase of accidents on the 403 between Burlington and Hamilton and a loss of profits for local business, which was estimated at \$1.2 million. Another major controversy was the Hamilton-Wentworth Region's Engineering Committee's decision to attach a plaque on the bridge to honour the individuals who were involved in the project. It included the names of two Provincial Ministers, two Provincial Ministries, the Ontario Heritage Foundation, Regional Chairman, Mayor Chief Administrative Officer, Engineering Commissioners, Engineering consultants and twenty-five members of the Regional Council. This plaque would make no mention of the historical importance of the bridge, nor the role T.B. McQuesten had played in its development. This Ontario Heritage Foundation were infuriated that the Engineering Committee would dedicate a plaque in their honour and lobbied for their own plaque which would honour McQuesten and his contributions to Hamilton and Ontario. In order to reduce tensions, the Hamilton City Council decided their plaque would not be located on the bridge after all, rather it would be located "near by" the bridge. The bridge was completed on December 10, 1987 and was officially opened December 23, 1987.

On July 11, 1988, the High Level Bridge was rededicated in Thomas Baker McQuesten's honour and the name of the bridge was changed to the Thomas B. McQuesten High Level Bridge. Many invited dignitaries including Premier David Peterson, Peter Peterson, MP, and Minister Lily Munro attended the ceremony. One of the most notable guest was Her Royal Highness The Princess Margaret. During the ceremony, a plaque commemorating Thomas Baker McQuesten was unveiled, and below it was a plaque commemorating Princess Margaret's participation in the historical event.



In March of 1988, Regional Council decided against the proposal of a plaque commemorating the restoration project.

The Thomas B. McQuesten High Level Bridge is an icon of Hamilton pride and determination. Though the structure serves a functional purpose it also stands as an important gateway to Hamilton and retains its classic grandeur of the early 1930's.

**References:**

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