

Say Good-Bye to Gore Park

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My friend Susan Schneider had a studio on the second floor of a retail establishment overlooking Gore Park in the 1970s. We would gaze over the beautiful park, the stunning buildings, and the streetcars comparing it to similar parks in England and France. The area was beautiful. Downtown Hamilton was a destination for fashionable people to shop, dine, and go to the theatre.

Over the decades, the iconic Beaux Arts buildings were torn down and replaced by glass boxes. The Georgian buildings were destroyed and replaced by more glass. The theatres were taken out, and finally, this November, the final pre-Confederation buildings were allowed to collapse for no better reason than a simple failure to act. The developers were playing the long game. 'Let the Hysterical Society blather on, and we'll just wait it out until they collapse.'

The Hamilton Region ACO along with many other groups repeatedly called for action. The buildings were designated in 2012. By 2014 it was obvious that the owners were stalling. Businesses started moving out as there was no maintenance taking place. By 2016 we were all hammering away at the city, but nothing was done. Yes, the area was designated, but designation really means nothing. If the owners decide to let a designated building rot, then the city must take action. We kept calling on the city to do something. They did nothing. Now the last bit of history from Gore Park is gone. How many people know what we have lost?

The Gore as a distinct area, predates the town of Hamilton which was originally conceived by a Canadian of Scottish heritage, George Hamilton in 1812. This triangular piece of land was left undeveloped by the two founding fathers of the town, Hamilton and Nathaniel Hughson. Hamilton and other residents of the area requested a town hall, a court and a jail to save them traveling to Niagara for any court business. The Gore District, later Hamilton,

was thus a result of application to York and Niagara Districts. The famous fountain was erected to celebrate the end of a cholera epidemic in 1860.

Businesses grew up around the rectangular piece of land for almost fifty years, over the first half of the 19th century. That the land was recognized as 'common ground' by the citizens, follows the historic pattern of common land use in Britain. The majority of Hamilton residents in the first half of the 19th century were from Britain.ⁱ The first few waves of colonists designed both their homes and their towns according to British precedents. "Direct British influence in Upper Canada reached its maximum density in the years directly following Waterloo (1815)."ⁱⁱ

Despite several attempts to make use of the land for market or commercial useⁱⁱⁱ, and many attempts to use it as commercial land^{iv}, the land remained as common land for almost 50 years. After that it was a public park.

The building at 18-22 King Street predated both the incorporation of Hamilton as a town in 1846 and the development of the town around the park in 1853. In effect, the people of the Gore District had been fighting to keep the space open and for public use from the early 1800s until the implementation of the Special Committee on Ornamenting the Gore on King Street in 1853.

What made this property special is not only that it was the only remaining building to predate the town in the Gore Park, but that the style of the building follows the general trend of buildings found in town squares across the province from that time period. Now there is virtually nothing left of the buildings surrounding the once magnificent Gore Park.

There are still some lovely areas left in Hamilton, but as far as areas that represent the history of the city, we now have nothing. Imagine Rome tearing down the Pantheon to build a bank. Imagine Boston paving over the Boston Common and Public Garden. Imagine London making Big Ben into a spa. What is wrong with us?

We have associations like ACO and Historic Hamilton, but what we need are people going around and checking on designated buildings and then having the clout to make the owners do something. For many years now, the ACO, The Friends of Gore and Gore enthusiasts have been fighting to save the last remaining buildings from the original park. The owners, after agreeing to preserve them and promising to protect them, left them open to the elements until they collapsed. Say goodbye to Gore Park, the original center of Hamilton and say hello to a few more rich people getting richer, building glass boxes and another truckload of dead songbirds.

ⁱ Katz, p. 62 (71% British, 10% Canadian born, 19% other).

ⁱⁱ MacRae, p. 68.

ⁱⁱⁱ City Council Minutes. Nov. 9, 1833.

^{iv} Bylaw 83, 1853.