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London's First Summer Resort The Waterworks Region in Springbank Park

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During the late 1800s the Waterworks region immediately surrounding the pumphouse in Springbank Park had become an entertainment mecca where throngs of Londoners would gather on spring and summer weekends and holidays. Prior to the development of this area, a common destination for those who wished to spend time away from home was Port Stanley, sometimes referred to as the "Canadian Saratoga". The Port could easily be reached by rail since the Great Western Railway as well as the London and Port Stanley Railway typically offered regular rail service on weekends as well as a special excursion train on the Queen's Birthday and Dominion Day. With the beautification of the Waterworks, however, an attempt was made to entice the citizens of London to remain at home rather than depart for the Port. This was accomplished, at least in part, by referring either to the Waterworks or to Springbank in newspaper articles and in advertisements as "London's Summer Resort," and occasionally even as "Ontario's Great Summer Resort."

The purpose of this article is to trace the rise and fall in popularity of the Waterworks region at Springbank, which spanned the years 1879 through 1897. To accomplish this goal it is helpful to divide this 18-year period into three distinct phases.

The first phase, which only lasted two years (1879 through 1881), was associated with steamship travel down the Thames River from docks at the foot of Dundas Street to the Waterworks. The second phase started with the Victoria Day Disaster on May 24, 1881, continued until 1895, and was marked by a decline in the public's use of the region. The third and final phase began in 1895/96 with the advent of the London Street Railway system and the growth of many popular activities and events in the Waterworks that appealed not only to adults but to teenagers and children. This phase, however, also only lasted about two years for reasons explored further in this article. In the aftermath of this final phase a larger more diversified entertainment complex emerged to the west of the Waterworks, which then became London's next summer resort.

SPRINGBANK,
NEAR LONDON.
Ontario's Great Summer Resort
NOW OPEN FOR THE SEASON.
Everything in first-class order. Refreshment
rooms under the management of Mr. J. Cruick-
shank, of the American House. Spend your
holidays at Springbank.
F24ute-tf **J. CRUICKSHANK.**

From the *London Free Press*, July 31, 1888, 6: 4.
Courtesy of the London Room, London Public Library.

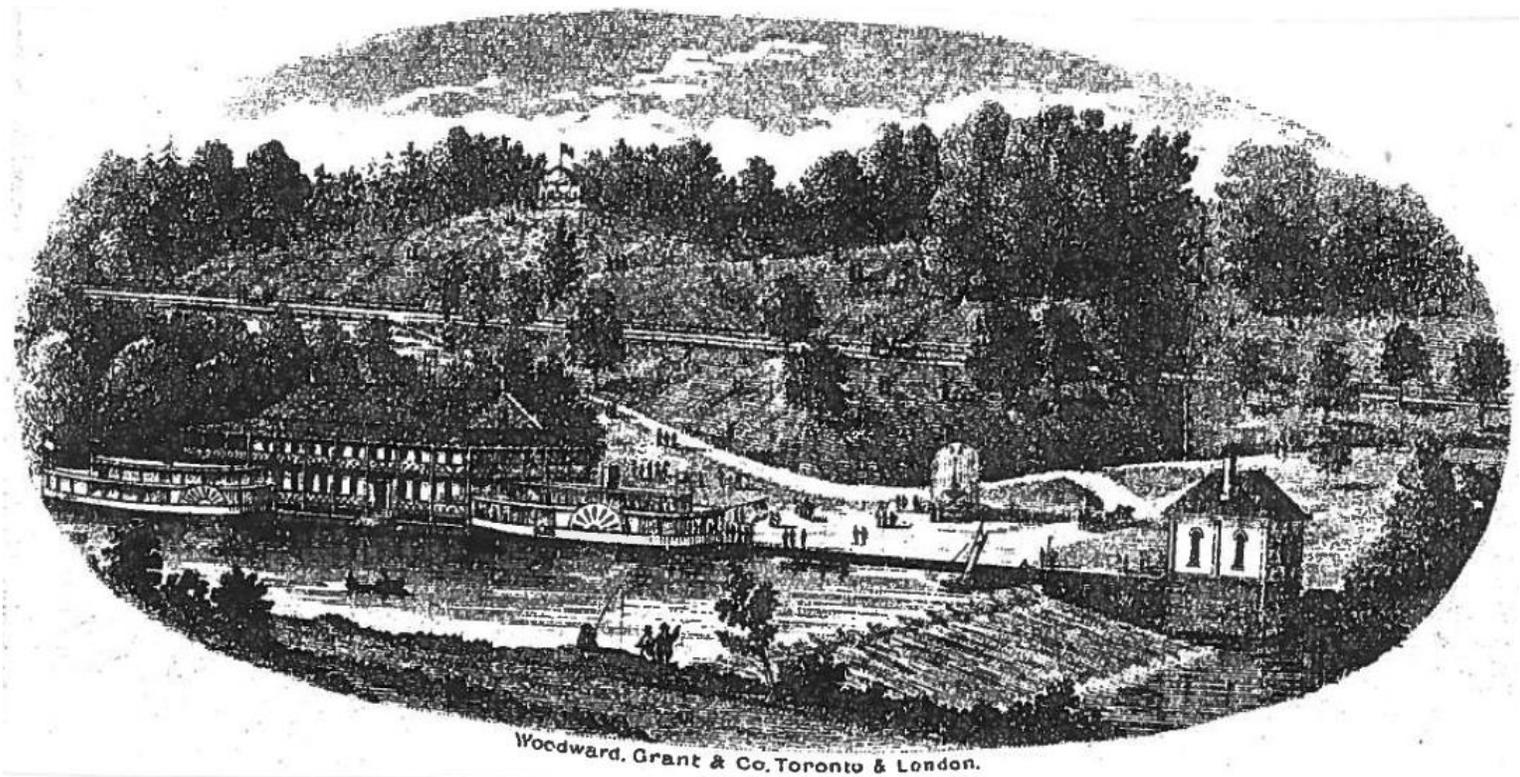
Phase I: Steamship Travel

With the completion of the pumphouse in 1879 (for the controversy and events that led to the need for the pumphouse see Simner¹) the London Water Commissioners provided a thoroughly landscaped area around the pumphouse referred to as the Waterworks region or the Waterworks Park.

This region, which extended from the river to Pipe Line Road (known today as Springbank Drive) contained not only the pumphouse and a number of related structures, but also picnic grounds and a building north of the pumphouse known as Hotel Neebing, which housed a popular dance pavilion.

Every accommodation is provided at the Neebing Hotel, as it has been named, and the lovers of the Terpsichorean art (dancing) will be able to disport themselves to their heart's content in the spacious room which has been set apart for them.²

The Neebing was managed by Conklin and Moore,³ who were part owners of the Tecumseh House in downtown London.⁴ The illustration below shows an artist's rendition of the Waterworks region with Hotel Neebing on the far left, the pumphouse on the far right, the Waterworks Dam in the foreground and Pipe Line Road in the background.



From the cover of the First Annual Report of the Board of Water Commissioners (1879).
Courtesy of the London Room, London Public Library.

The spacious room in the Neebing, mentioned above, measured approximately 40 x 50 feet and was on the first floor together with a bar. Although the building was referred to as a hotel, whether it actually contained rooms for overnight accommodations is unknown. The few existing descriptions contain no mention of such rooms and since the second floor was “wholly devoted to the refreshment room and a counter for refreshments”⁵ overnight accommodations would seem unlikely. Despite the lack of these accommodations the Neebing appears to have been an extremely popular destination for many Londoners in that its balconies were said to be crowded with viewers when, for example in 1880, a regatta was held on the Thames.⁶

In addition to picnic grounds, dance facilities and other forms of entertainment, the Waterworks region also contained another nearby feature that attracted many visitors. East of the pumphouse and at the base of Hungerford Hill, known today as Reservoir Hill, a stairway which is still visible, led to an observatory at the top of the hill that offered a panoramic view of the river and the surrounding countryside.

To celebrate holidays Londoners could visit the Waterworks, by horse or carriage, by walking along Pipe Line Road, or by traveling down the Thames River on any of several steamships that made the journey. The first steamship to navigate this route was the *Forest City*, launched on April 18, 1879, and owned by the Thames Navigation Company under the command of sailing master Thomas Wastie.⁷ The second steamship, launched on May 19, 1879, was the *Enterprise*, which belonged to the London and Waterworks Line.⁸ On May 26th a third steamship, the *Princess Louise*, was also launched by the Thames Navigation Company.⁹

The *Princess Louise* and the *Forest City* were scheduled to leave every hour from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. during the season with stops at Woodland Park and the Waterworks.¹⁰ In addition to providing transportation, and as an enticement to travel down the Thames, both steamers offered musical entertainment throughout their voyages.

Would these inducements, however, be sufficient to overcome the ever present desire to visit Port Stanley instead of the Waterworks? This question became particularly vexing for the city because, in the spring of 1879 when the Thames steamers were launched, a new steamer was also launched at the Port that attracted considerable attention in London.

A special train left this city (London) yesterday afternoon (April 3) for Port Stanley, having on board a large number of citizens, the occasion being the launching of a new pleasure steamer. For a long time the want of a first-class pleasure boat at the Canadian Saratoga has been felt, and the Ellison Bros, and Mr. Thomas Fraser determined to build (such) a steamer that would be credit to all concerned...It is the intention of the proprietors to run the boat in connection with the L & P.S.R, leaving her dock, near the station of the arrival of excursion trains...As there will be a large space on deck devoted to dancing and as food (along with) music is to be supplied, many will probably seek recreation in this manner. For those who prefer to rest there will be provision made, a large number of portable beds being provided. A ladies cabin is to be fitted up in first-class style,

*and all the other arrangements in proportion. It is also intended to have frequent moonlight excursions, special trains being arranged from London to St. Thomas for that purpose. A saloon, under the management of Mr. Thomas Fraser, will be provided on board, and to all who know that popular young gentleman, the bare announcement will of itself be sufficient.*¹⁸

Despite the enticing nature of Port Stanley, during the forthcoming holiday season a large number of Londoners did indeed decide to remain in town. In commenting on what happened during the Dominion Day celebrations that July, the *London Free Press* noted that only 947 people traveled to Port Stanley, whereas approximately 4,000 traveled down river on the local steamers. Thus, the financial investment by the city in the Waterworks region appeared to be quite successful.

*The Princess Louise and Enterprise (during their maiden voyages) were crowded from their first trip in the morning until their last one at nine o'clock. So thronged were the decks of the first-named craft during two of her trips in the afternoon that many citizens were debarred from participating in a sail. It is estimated that fully 4,000 persons visited Woodland Park and Springbank during the day, and we are glad to say that no accident occurred to mar the harmony.*¹⁹

In spite of this initial success, however, it soon became evident to those who elected to sail down the Thames that they would need to contend with several potential difficulties. The first difficulty resulted from the nature of the river itself. Although

the steamers when fully loaded only required a depth of about 6-7 inches to remain afloat, because the water level in the Thames was often quite low and the river had a number of sandbars along with other obstacles, it was not uncommon for the steamers to experience navigational problems. For instance, when an early attempt to launch the *Enterprise* took place on May 9th, it “ran into and stuck on a sandbar (as soon as) her stern reached the water.”¹¹ Later when a successful trip occurred the captain was given considerable credit “...due to (his) foresight in marking all (the) dangerous places on the voyage (in advance of his departure).”¹² As another illustration, consider what happened to the *Princess Louise* on her maiden voyage when she encountered Griffith’s Dam, which was partially submerged and located near what is today the Wonderland Road bridge over the Thames.

*The excursionists down the river yesterday did not have an unmixed pleasure. The boat was too crowded on one of its trips and became stuck in (Griffith’s) dam and it was four o’clock this morning before the last load of the excursionists reached the city...Over a hundred walked up to the city, but the large majority took things as they found them and made the most of it. Navigation on the Thames has not yet reached a state of perfection.*¹³

This accident at the dam is particularly interesting because according to a newspaper account that appeared on May 20th, which was six days before the *Princess Louise* sailed, the placement of boards on top of the Waterworks Dam next to the pumphouse was “... expected to raise the water (level) three feet six inches above the elevation of Griffith’s dam...”¹⁴

Therefore, it was anticipated that the *Princess Louise* should not have run into the dam since, as mentioned above, when fully loaded the ship was said to require only about 7 inches of depth below the water line to clear any obstacles that it encountered. Nevertheless the *Princess Louise* did collide with the dam and had to be removed in order to resume its voyage. While an earlier attempt had been made to destroy the dam through the use of dynamite, the attempt proved unsuccessful.¹⁵

A second and possibly more significant difficulty surfaced the following year with the launch of the *Victoria* on April 29th, which was also owned by Captain Wastie. Here the problem centered on rivalries that, on occasion, would erupt between the captains of the different steamships. On the Queen's birthday that year, a fierce competition took place between the *Victoria* and the *Forest City* near the site of Griffith's Dam.

It is to be regretted that the spirit of rivalry between those in charge of the Forest City and Victoria was manifested in such a manner as to alarm the passengers and even imperil their lives. It was too marked to be called an accident and too flagrant to be treated with silence. On going down the river the two vessels were side by side, and being of about equal speed remained so for some little time...The master of Victoria claims that the master of the Forest City deliberately forced the Forest City on to the Victoria and crowded the later boat on to the shore. Unfortunately a large tree overhung the steamer, and its big branches raked the covering of the upper deck, terribly alarming

the passengers, who received a yet ruder shock when the vessel struck the shore...Several ladies fainted, and a scene of wild disorder ensued on board the Victoria.

That, however, was not the end of it. When the Forest City was again returning to the Waterworks the delayed Victoria...gave the signal for the Forest City to go to the left...this signal should have been obeyed but it was not done in time...and a collision was the result. The passengers got a bad shaking up, and some were thrown from their seats...as the helms were turned one went ashore on each side of the river...The murmuring, which was loud and long, began to grow into profanity when the steamer got off, reached the dock, unloaded and took on one of the maddest crowds that ever bought excursion tickets.¹⁶

This level of rivalry between captains had also surfaced on May 25, 1880 and then again that September when the *Forest City* collided once more with the *Victoria*. Although some claimed that the latter collision was accidental, others felt it was intentional.¹⁷ In either case, due to the competitive nature of the captains, the overall safety of steamship travel down the Thames was always of concern. The final challenge to the safety of travel, however, took place on May 24, 1881, with the sinking of the *Victoria* and the loss of some 200 lives, including Thomas Wastie's son Alfred.²⁰

Phase II: The Victoria Disaster

In 1881 the boating season began with considerable promise. The Neebing was repainted, several extensions were added, and the grounds surrounding the hotel were said to be “in apple pie order.”²¹ In addition, the *Victoria*, which was originally built and owned by Captain Wastie, was acquired by the Thames Navigation Company which also owned the *Forest City* and the *Princess Louise*. All three steamers were removed from dry dock around May 16th and were made ready through extensive repair for the tourist season which was to begin with the Queen’s Birthday celebrations on the 24th of the month. Over \$400 was expended on the *Victoria* to repair her machinery, a small cabin was erected on the upper deck to accommodate the ladies, all of her seats were repainted, and her boiler was “shifted five feet forward....to give her considerable additional speed.”²¹ The *Princess Louise* had her cylinders bored and along with the *Forest City* was thoroughly caulked. A fourth steamboat, the *Dodger*, was also launched “as a tug, in case any of the boats get stranded.”²²

Despite the care that had been taken to ensure the safe operation of all the steamboats, it was on the *Victoria*’s return trip from Springbank to the Dundas Street dock in the late afternoon of May 24th that the disaster took place.

It was about 5 o’clock in the afternoon when the ill-fated Victoria reached Springbank on her last trip. Both the upper and lower decks were crowded, and a large number of pleasure seekers remained on board to return on the same boat. As is usually the case at that hour, an immense crowd was waiting at the wharf for the

arrival of the steamer. Everyone was anxious to secure a place, and in a few moments every portion of standing or sitting room was fully occupied.

James Drennan, in the employ of the Advertiser, was on the upper deck when the Victoria capsized. He gave the following account of the dreaded disaster:

About half-past five we were coming very slow by Griffith’s dam, and I went up to Captain Rankin and remarked: “You have a big crowd to-day, Captain.”

“Yes, I couldn’t keep the people off. They would crowd on, although I told them there were two more boats coming after.”

I left him then and had hardly turned away when I noticed the water rushing in down below over the bottom deck. As I looked down the stair-case I noticed the water ankle deep down below. The crowd seemed excited and kept rushing from one side to the other. Captain Ranking told them repeatedly to stand still and not crowd so much to the side. The boat now commenced rocking and the people all rushed to the north side, when the boat went over on her side and a terrific crash followed, the whole of the upper deck coming crashing around us.

The Princess Louise arrived soon after the catastrophe and moored against the north shore and close to the wreck. A gangway was projected from her deck to the shore, and at about 7 o’clock the bodies, as fast as they were

*received, were ranged in sad array on the upper deck (which) was soon covered....to such an extent that in some instances the bodies of children and infants were placed on top of the adults corpses. The scene on the upper deck was a sight which sent a shudder through the spectators...*²³

A coroner's inquest was held in June.²⁴ Although the cause of the sinking was never fully explained, local historian Ken McTaggart cites a number of factors that may have been associated with the disaster.²⁵ For example, the majority of witnesses testified that the boat was overcrowded and that many of the passengers seemed to enjoy rocking the boat which could have caused it to capsize. It was also suggested in the *Free Press* that a pre-existing hole in the hull may have led the boat to become "water-logged" which in turn may have been responsible for the sinking.²⁶ Regardless of the cause, it is important to note that following the disaster no further ads appeared in either newspaper for the remainder of the year concerning steamship transportation to the Waterworks region, nor was there any mention of the region itself. In fact, the only celebration that took place in London that summer over Dominion Day occurred on the grounds of the Mount Hope Orphan's Asylum attached to St. Joseph's Convent on the southwest corner of Richmond and Grosvenor.²⁷

Little is known about the Waterworks during the years that followed the disaster since the park was rarely cited in the *Free Press* or the *Advertiser* as a place to spend either the Queen's Birthday or Dominion Day. While picnics did occur there from time to time, how many Londoners actually visited the park is not clear since, according to London's mayor, Edmund Allan Meredith who visited in May, 1882 and whose father

was the oldest victim of the disaster of the previous year, both the *Princess Louise* and the *Forest City* were "lying high and dry on the side of the river, the sun warping their timbers, opening their seams, and fast hastening their decay."²⁸ Despite the absence of the steamers, there was at least some boat travel down the Thames that year because the *Advertiser* reported that a few persons who visited Woodland Cemetery, did so by boat.²⁹ Whether this was by row boat or some other craft, however, is unknown since it was possible to rent different types of boats from several boat houses at the foot of Dundas Street. There was, of course, always the option of walking to the Waterworks along Pipe Line Road as well as traveling there by horse or carriage.

It is also worth noting that while this region was rarely mentioned in the press between 1882 and 1887 both papers frequently listed many other sites within the city that Londoners could visit during the two holidays. For example, on the Queen's Birthday in 1883, the *Advertiser* listed "a military review between 11 a.m. and 1 p.m. on Carling's Farm (site of the present Wolseley Barracks then outside of London) followed by a march through the city via Adelaide, Dundas and Richmond Streets."³⁰ In addition, there was a cricket match on the Asylum grounds (north of Dundas Street and east of the present Highbury Avenue) at 10 a.m. and at Tecumseh Park (now Labatt Memorial Park) there was a baseball game followed by lacrosse at 3 p.m. On Dominion Day there was the annual picnic held at the Mount Hope Orphan Asylum.³¹ Both papers also mentioned many outside rail trips as well as trips to Port Stanley where "Londoners could enjoy the beach, board steamers for tours of Lake Erie or visit the Fraser House which featured a band and liberal rates to families who purpose boarding at this Hotel."³²

No doubt these other excursions had once again become popular following the demise of steamer transportation down the Thames.

Because the Waterworks was seldom used throughout this period, to encourage its use, in the latter part of 1887 the *Free Press* ran several editorials urging the resumption of river transportation to the park.

*...When shall a steamboat be again put on the Thames River. It is too bad that the citizens are not able as of yore to enjoy a sail down the Thames and spend a day at the Waterworks or Chestnut Park as it is called. Thousands used to visit the park, but since the accident it has lapsed into its old obscurity.*³³

Possibly in response to the editorials, in May, 1888, Captain David Foster launched two steamboats, the *City of London* and the *Thames*, that would depart from Dundas and once more carry passengers down river to the park.

At 10 o'clock a.m. (on May 25th) the decks of the City of London were freighted with a large number of the more youthful part of the community, who were quickly, safely and pleasantly conveyed to Springbank...The boat returned, and about noon she was again merrily plowing her way through the water with another consignment of the pleasure seekers...The ticket seller (at the dock) soon reached the limit (300 passengers), and the gates were promptly closed by Captain Foster, who was determined to keep within the prescribed number of passengers which he is permitted to carry on one trip, leaving several hundred spectators behind, who were compelled to

*await her return It is roughly estimated that Captain Foster carried upwards of 900 visitors to Springbank during the day...since the inception of the City of London (Springbank) promises to be the formidable rival of Post Stanley as a much patronized pleasure resort.*³⁴

Unfortunately, however, it seems that this promise was never fully realized. Although in 1888 both steamers left the Dundas Street dock at 10 a.m., 3 p.m. and 8 p.m., featured bands that played during all of the trips, and the Neebing was now under new management, during the years that followed the launch of the two new steamers there was very little mention of the Waterworks region in either newspaper. In May, 1889, the only reference to the park was in a column in the *Free Press* devoted to the Queen's birthday: "At home it may be stated that Capt. Foster's staunch steamers will run to Springbank at intervals throughout the day." Only one sentence below this brief announcement the following additional information appeared: "An excursion train will leave at 6 a.m. for Windsor and Detroit. Another will be run by the G.T.R. to Port Stanley at 10 a.m. and at 10:30 a.m. the (baseball teams) the Tecumsehs and Rochesters will contest for supremacy on Tecumseh Park...(then) In the evening Prof. Hand will exhibit his fireworks on the Base Ball Park and "Pete" Baker the comedian, will occupy the Grand Opera House..."³⁵ By not referring to either the Neebing or the picnic area in the Waterworks, and instead by emphasizing these other locations, it would seem that Londoners probably were not electing to visit the Waterworks as long as it was possible to go elsewhere. In May 1892 the *Advertiser* even used the following words to summarize the difference in traffic flow to the Waterworks vs Port Stanley.

*Capt. Foster's boats plied between the city and Springbank for the first time this season on Tuesday. Owing to the cold weather the patronage was smaller than usual...(On the other hand) the Port Stanley excursion season (also) opened on Tuesday. About eight carloads went from the city. Had the weather been fine the crowd would doubtless have been much larger.*³⁶

Thus, both papers were informing their readers not only of other places to visit and enjoy aside from the Waterworks but that there was a marked willingness on the part of Londoners to frequent these other places instead of the Waterworks. Perhaps this is why between 1889 and 1894 the only mention of the steamers in the *Free Press* were brief statements in a column labeled "Amusements." In fact, by 1894 passenger trips along the river to the Waterworks had declined sufficiently to prompt Captain Foster to withdraw the *City of London* from active service. Although the *Thames* continued to run for several more years, it too was withdrawn in 1899, and purposely set on fire by Captain Foster near the Waterworks Dam, where it sunk.³⁷

McTaggart has suggested that the reason for the demise in the use of the Waterworks may have resulted from "swimming becoming a popular pastime and Port Stanley's waters were not polluted as badly as the Thames."³⁸ There is, however, another possible reason, namely, hooliganism. Without the crowds that had frequented the park prior to the *Victoria* disaster, young street toughs were able to have a dominant influence in this region and their presence would often frighten others away.

*One very strong objection citizens have had to going to Springbank on a holiday or public picnic is the conduct of a number of young toughs, who attempt to win glory for themselves by getting drunk and using profane and insulting language in the presence of ladies. Yesterday half a dozen of these young hoodlums conducted themselves in a most unseemly manner, and this morning warrants were issued for their arrest. The majority of them are the sons of respectable parents, but this is not their first offence, and if Spring-bank is to become the popular resort which its natural advantages so pre-eminently fit it for, the Magistrates should teach them a severe lesson when they are brought before them. High Constable (Henry) Schram has determined to put his foot on this thing in the future, and pleasure-seekers may rest assured that they will not be troubled on this score again.*³⁹

Fun fact!

In 1888 steamships left a dock at the foot of Dundas Street at 10 a.m, 3 and 8 p.m. The last boat left Springbank to return to the downtown dock at 10 p.m. Round trips cost just 15 cents (our guess: \$3.10 today!) A discount was offered for those with a large 'excursion party'. Music was played on board by the London South band. A trip up the Thames River to Springbank Park sounds like quite the outing for a summer day!



Phase III: The London Street Railway System

Despite the optimism that the Waterworks region initially enjoyed following the launch of the steamers, because of the many perils that soon became associated with river travel, the region never fully realized its potential and its subsequent decline was undoubtedly hastened owing to a growing lack of attendance. Then, in 1895/1896, in an effort to rejuvenate the region, City Council approved several bylaws that granted the London Street Railway System the right to construct an electric railway to run from downtown to Springbank. Specifically, the bylaws stated that the Railway could enter the Waterworks and operate for six months starting on the 15th of May and ending on the 15th of October, Sundays excluded, each year through 1925. Council also granted the Railway permission to give band concerts, firework displays, and other attractions “which shall receive the sanction in writing of the Commissioners...provided no charge is made to the public.”⁴⁰

Needless to say, by including this last provision in the agreement, it was hoped that the Waterworks would once again become a destination worth visiting. The trains began to run on May 25, 1896, and it was estimated that between 10,000 and 12,000 people visited the region that first day. Providing the public with convenient transportation seemed to create the incentive needed to attend the Waterworks as the scheme was met with an overwhelming response. Unfortunately, however, although 25 cars were used to carry the passengers, “the trip was rarely made with anything like pleasure.”⁴¹

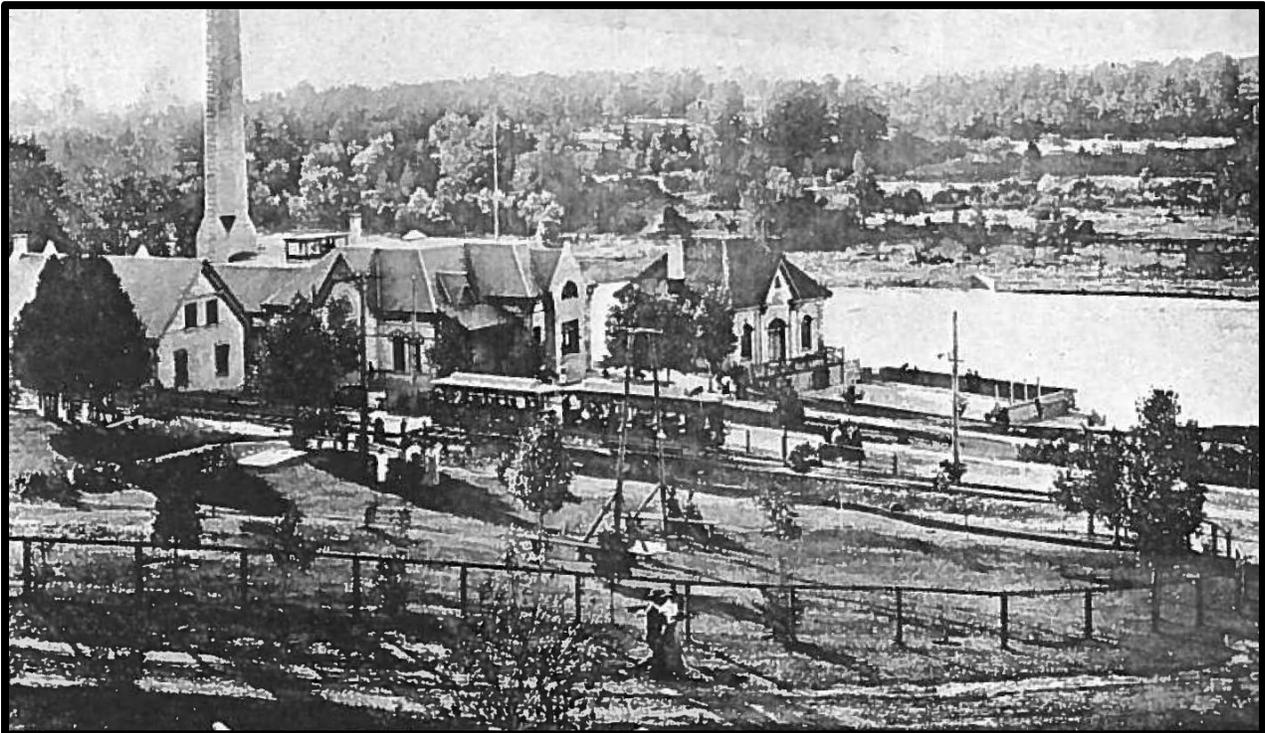
The cars were always crowded to suffocation, every inch of space was occupied...As early as two o'clock in the afternoon fully 1,500

people, male and female, old and young were to be found at the different street corners between Dundas and Richmond and Thames street waiting patiently for the Springbank cars. No one in authority, at the points named, could satisfy their curiosity as to when these might be expected along to convey them to London's new summer resort. Fully an hour elapsed before the crowds were moved in a westerly direction and every car and trailer attached was densely packed with human freight. At 7:10 o'clock last night a reporter boarded a car labelled "Springbank Park" at the corner of Dundas and Richmond streets. Enough people were aboard to comfortably fill the seats, but as the street corner was passed room in the car became a scarce quantity. Ere long standing passengers had overflowed from the aisles in among seats; feet trampled on feet, clothes and millinery were despoiled and tempers were rapidly becoming ruffled. Soon Railway Street was reached, and the first troubles were speedily made to appear small. The car jumped the track, and repeated the trick three times before one hundred yards were covered...Passengers were ordered out of the cars, and climbed back again in the hope that it was for the last time. And after an hour had gone by, it really did prove a fact that the car was speeding "Springbackwards" ... The conductor was on his second round by this time, and a murmur of disgust – sometimes a very audible murmur – greeted him at every turn.

While the *Free Press* was sympathetic to the difficulties the company encountered during its first day of operation, nevertheless, the paper felt that the company's facilities needed to be substantially improved if the railway wished to deliver satisfactory service. No doubt the company was of a very similar mind; by mid-June it had clearly improved its service. In a brief announcement on June 18th the *Free Press* reported that "The Street Railway Company...carried 5,000 people to Spring-bank during yesterday and last evening, and landed them all safely in the city shortly after eleven o'clock."⁴² Then, approximately two weeks later, and as an expression of the manager's overall confidence in his system, he was quoted in the *Free Press* as saying that "the citizens (of London) should not go abroad to spend their money. Let them stay in the city, board a car, and go where all the attraction will be – at Springbank."⁴³

To illustrate the manager's point, shortly after the railway was granted permission to enter the park considerable construction had taken place which was amply documented in the same *Free Press* article. A railway platform was built in front of the pumphouse and the collecting pond nearest the pumphouse had been enclosed and a promenade was placed around it. On the south side of the pond there were "two hundred and fifty incandescent lamps while eight 300-candle power lamps were at the top of a 65-foot pole to form a tower light of sufficient strength to illuminate the whole ground."

In addition to these features, much thought also was given to the need for appropriate entertainment throughout the Dominion Day weekend. A concert by the Musical Society Band was scheduled for the afternoon and evening, and there was to be a "base ball match, aquatic sports, lime-light views, dancing, and a crowd, which, in itself, will be an attraction."



The Waterworks Region, circa 1896. Courtesy of London Room, London Public Library.

All of this was followed that evening by fireworks. Perhaps the most electrifying entertainment though was a “high diver from New York, who will make perilous drops from a high elevation, and turn somersaults en route” along with a wire-walker who was scheduled to cross the Thames starting from the top of the 65-foot pole mentioned above. Because many of the activities had been scheduled to reappear throughout the summer, the park was now finally in a position to offer substantial competition to Port Stanley.

As a further marketing strategy, the following year the Railway opened the Park Theatre on the Waterworks grounds north of the hotel.⁴⁴

*(Although) the building is not a particularly prepossessing one viewed from the exterior, but within it is charmingly comfortable...it is so constructed as to prevent injurious draughts, while all the cool air that the park can furnish will be found within.... The stage is a commodious one, having dimensions of 20 x 40 feet, with an opening of 26 feet. The scenery is new, and the stage is fitted with a drop curtain...there will be two performances — one in the afternoon and the second at 8:30 in the evening.*⁴⁵

Of the various features that the park contained at this point, one of the most popular was the theatre which provide a complete set of highly entertaining vaudeville acts.

The new summer theatre was very largely patronized and the performances gave very general satisfaction. Manager [Albert E.] Roote was careful to provide a thoroughly clean and entertaining list of specialties...Creago and Loring

*were mirth-provoking in negro melodies, songs and dances. Emery and Miss Marlowe, in a bit of nonsense brought down the house. Mack and Elliott, in the portrayal of domestic difficulties unhappily found in some house-holds, were very good. Carr and Newell, in the policeman and tramp act, were also good...Miss Rankin, the star comedienne, was present in the evening, and her songs and dances called forth a number of encores.*⁴⁵

With all of these activities in the park now available to the public, it is not surprising that on the Queen’s Birthday in 1897 it was estimated that 10,000 people traveled by rail to the park.

*The different street corners between Thames street and the route of the Springbank cars were thronged from one o’clock until half-past three with crowds awaiting transportation to the new pleasure resort, and not infrequently the cars were filled before Richmond street was reached...The wonder is that none of the more daring excursionists were not fatally injured. Dozens of them were hanging on to the railing of the cars unmindful of the fact that the space between the cars and the beams on York street and Victoria bridges are not sufficient to admit of a person standing in the position they occupied without endangering life.*⁴⁵

Despite the theatre’s popularity, however, and solely in anticipation of the moral decay that the theatre’s vaudevillian productions were likely to bring about, the theatre was strongly condemned by the city clergy even before it opened. On May 3, 1897 the following article appeared in the *Free Press*.

For some years Rev. Richard Hobbs, pastor at Askin Street, was a farmer, and yesterday he announced that he would go back to the farm and chop wood if he thought his preaching against the evils of the day had no effect. People might say it was none of his business to preach against the pro-posed theatre at Springbank, but he could not agree with them. He was here to give a warning wherever he saw it needful, and he intended to do it. He repeated his assertion that the majority of the people of London were, he believed, on the side of the devil...It does seem too bad that our beautiful summer resort should be thus desecrated. Yes that is the word I am going to use in relation to the perverted use to be made out of our lovely resort...now with its theatre and dancing pavilion, with its evils and evil tendency to all who surrender themselves to its fascinations, the charm of Springbank is gone forever.⁴⁶

Shortly after Rev. Hobbs made this statement, a very similar statement was voiced by Bishop Maurice Scollard Baldwin and Dean George M. Innes of the Huron Diocese, as well as by the Methodist Ministerial Association of London.⁴⁷ In view of such strong reactions, it is perhaps not surprising that no further performances were held in the theatre. What is surprising, though, is that on August 7, 1897, the building was totally destroyed by fire! While the cause of the fire was never determined, the *Free Press* claimed that it was probably the work of an arsonist.

Hardly a stick is left of the building that gave pulpits and church boards a theme for discussion all spring...No effort was made to put out the fire. When it was first discovered, the whole building was

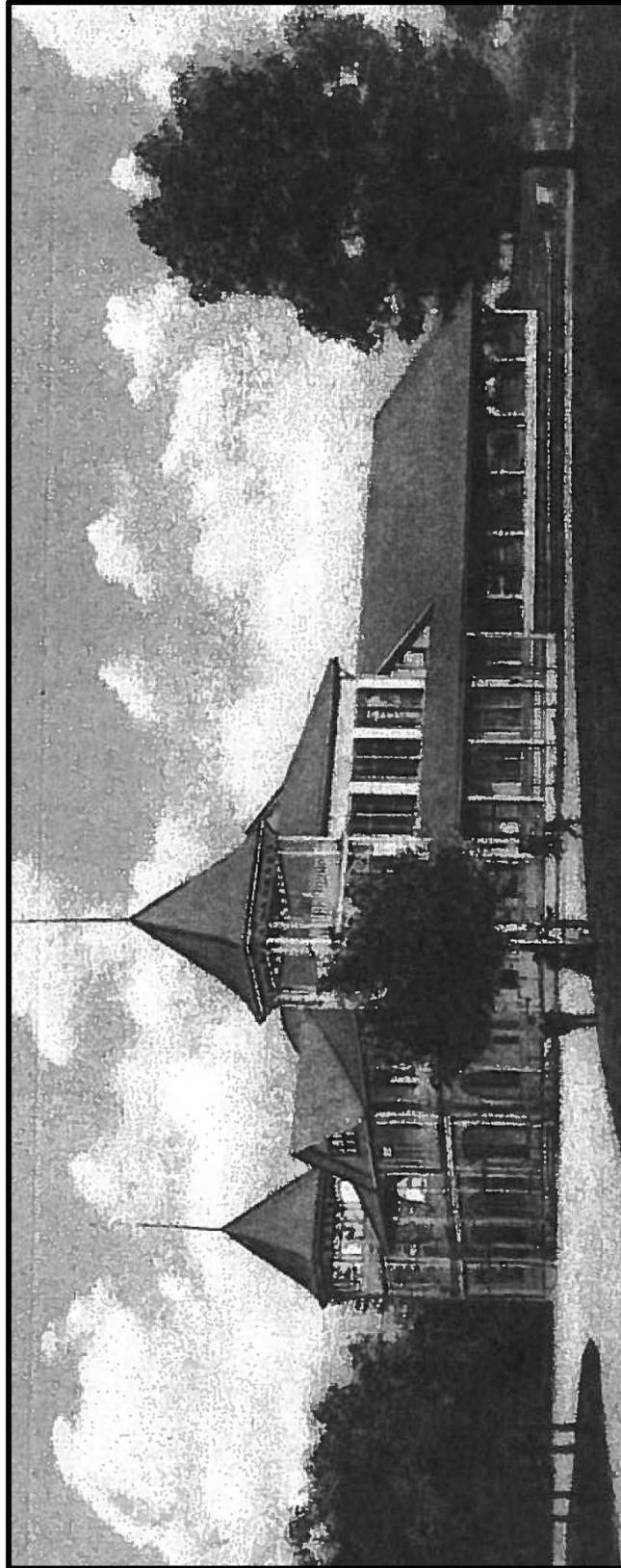
ablaze....the theatre was a complete wreck. Even the floor is burn-ed up, and the offices adjoining went up with the rest. The piano and stage scenery was also consumed...⁴⁸

Then on December 30, 1897 the hotel met the same fate. “The two-story frame hotel on the Water-works property at Springbank was burned to the ground between eight and nine o’clock last night, entailing a loss to the city of \$3,500The cause of the fire is unknown but it is probably the work of a firebug.”⁴⁹

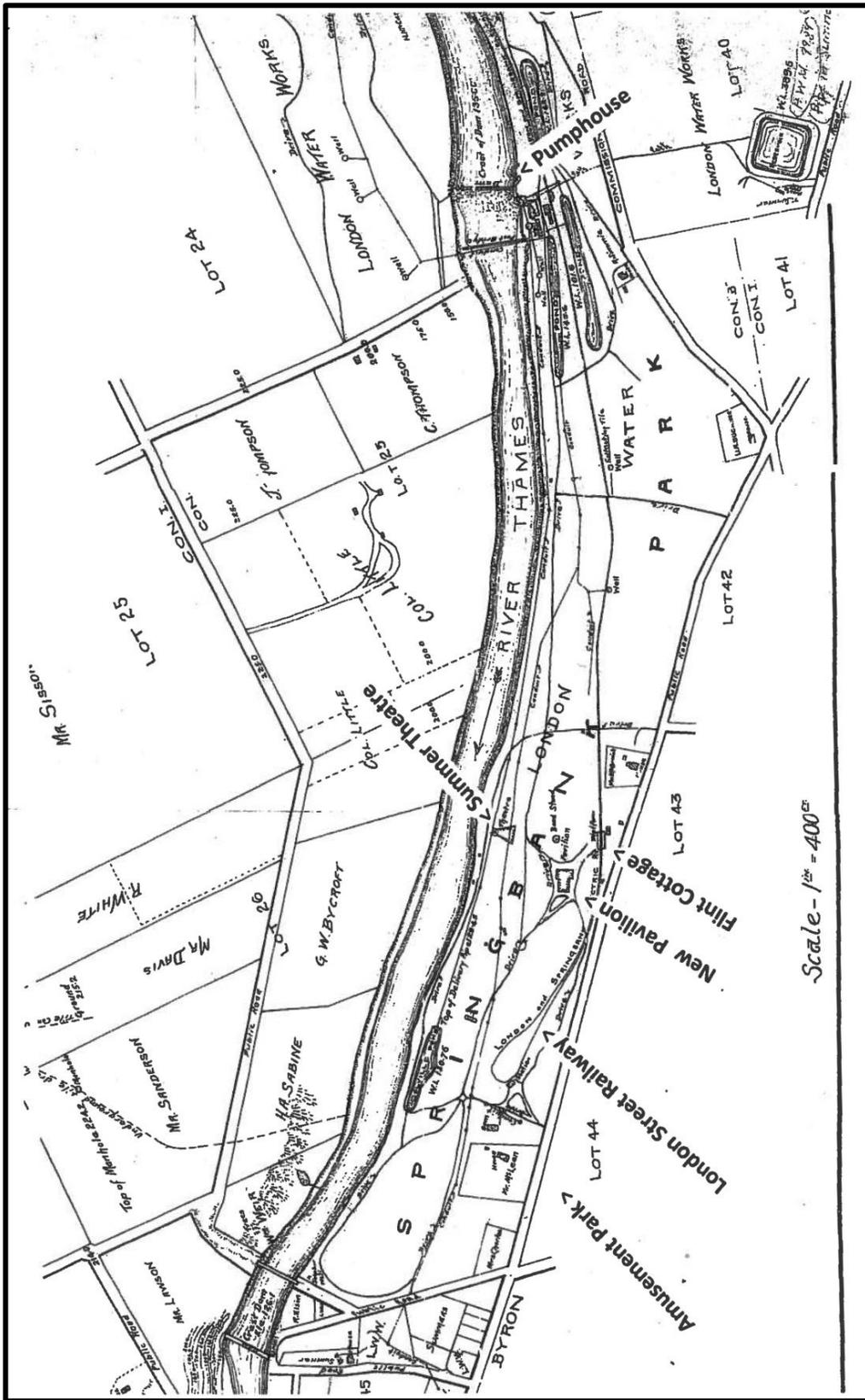
Aftermath

With both the theatre and the hotel gone, little remained to hold the public’s interest in the Waterworks region. To take its place a new entertainment complex, referred to in the *Free Press* as a “resort second to none in Canada,” shortly emerged elsewhere in Springbank as the result of a further bylaw approved by City Council on May 21, 1896. This new bylaw granted the Railway Company the right to lay additional tracks far to the west of the pumphouse.⁵⁰ Within two years following the passage of the bylaw, the Company erected the pavilion illustrated on the opposite page which opened to the public in time for the Dominion Day celebrations.⁵¹

The site for the new pavilion in relation to the pumphouse is shown on the map on page 21. This site may have been selected because of its proximity to a nearby stone cottage, built by Robert Flint in the 1850s, which was remodeled to serve as a railway platform for those who wished to visit the pavilion.⁵² The map also shows the location of the railway tracks along with a new summer theatre, and an amusement park, both of which are described on page 22.



Springbank Pavilion. Courtesy of the London Room, London Public Library.



Springbank Park, circa 1925. Courtesy of the Planning Department, City of London.

Although the pavilion was not officially opened until July 1st, the resort itself received high praise in a lengthy article in the *Free Press* on May 24, 1898, under the following headline.

In the River Park London has a rare resort

*Springbank was never prettier than just now. As the seasons grow into one another the beautiful river park becomes more charming. The annual expenditure of time and labor, of money and skill are combining to make of Springbank a place of resort second to none in Canada. When the new pavilion is completed the crowds will gather at the railway terminus...The west end of the park affords greater space and is distant from the pump house or other sign of life other than nature's own. The base ball park will be close by, and the games, the fireworks displays and the special attractions of whatever sort will be here. The new pavilion will of itself be an attraction, both as regards its architecture and the protection and conveniences it will afford. There will be up-to-date catering by the lessees.*⁵³

Throughout the Queen's Birthday as well as Dominion Day that year the crowds were indeed immense.

(On May 25th) Trolley cars ran only eight minutes apart during the afternoon and on even closer time after darkness had set in, yet there were throngs in waiting for every car. It is estimated that from 8,000 to 10,000 people journeyed to the park on the holiday...There were many private parties, each holding a picnic

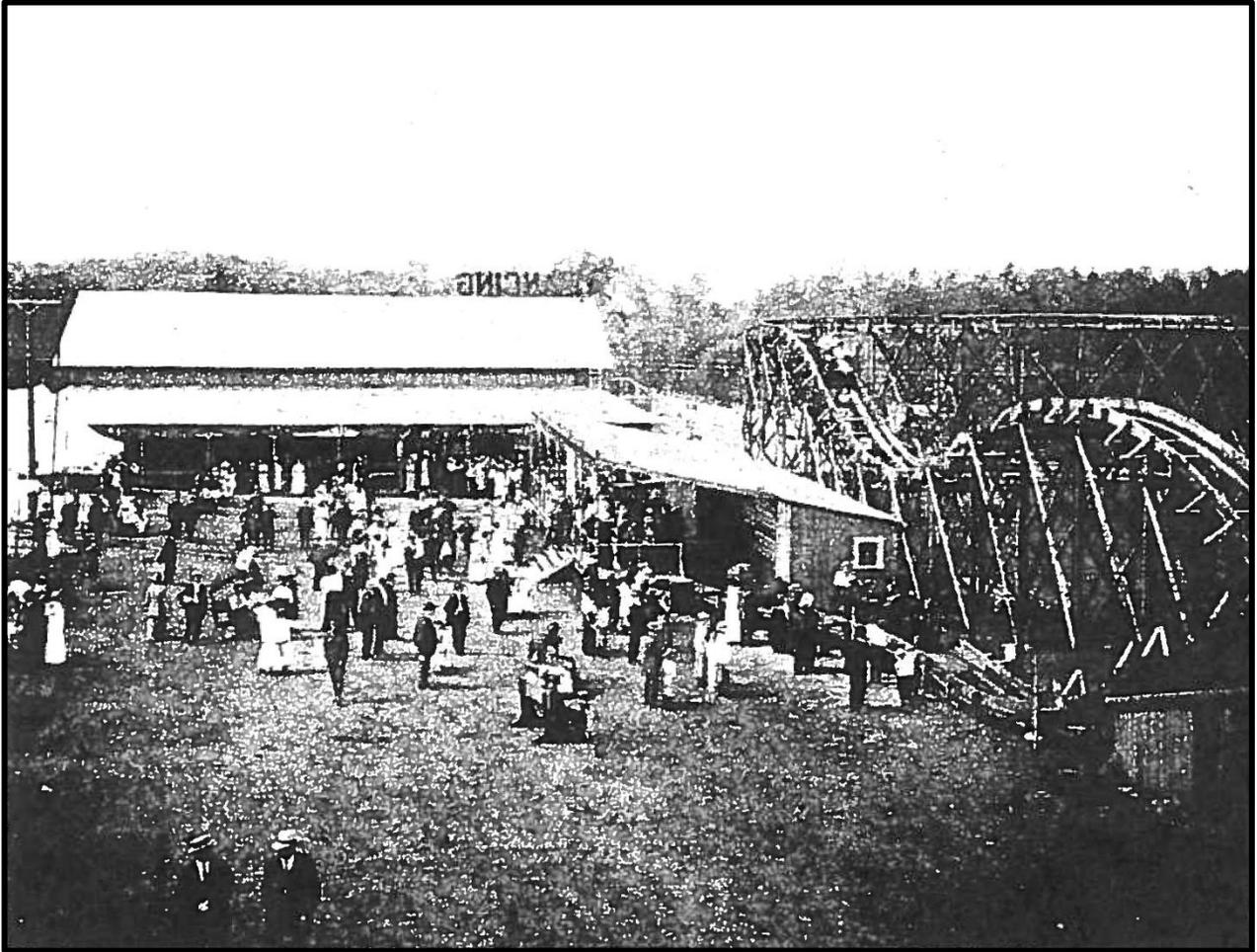
*on its own account, yet practically making one great picnic. The ponds, the pumps, the reservoir and all the points of special interest had their quota of visitors, but the greatest number spent their time at the west end...Several games of base ball and minor sports were conducted on the grounds. The band of the Musical Society gave an afternoon and an evening concert, and both were very greatly enjoyed. The throng of park visitors in the evening were also treated to a very fine display of fireworks by the Prof. Hand Co....The evening's programme was concluded at 9:30 o'clock, but the crowd did not all return to the city until some time later.*⁵⁴

*(On July 1st) The Street Railway Company's lines were patronized to the full extent of the carrying capacity of available cars. Springbank was visited by thousands of citizens, with their families, and a constant procession of cars moved rapidly to and fro on the double-tracked line to the beautiful river park. The new pavilion was informally opened, and gave general satisfaction. At night it presented a pretty sight, with a couple of hundred electric lamps blazing along the promenade verandahs. Afternoon and evening the Seventh Band discoursed music from the upper promenade, and the concerts were much enjoyed. Many people spent the whole day at the Park, others the afternoon, while the largest crowd was present in the evening.*⁵⁵

Then, to further enhance the attractiveness of the park, around 1905 the Railway approached the Water Commissioners with a request to use a theatre, which the city had previously built near the pavilion.⁵⁶ Cognizant of the ire that the Waterworks Park Theatre had caused within the London community in 1897, this time considerable care was taken to ensure that not only the theatre building, but all of the theatre's performances would be above reproach, the Railway Company in a promotional brochure made the following statement.

*The theatre is an open-air one, a delightful place to sit a few hours with the trees all about and the sky above. The covered stage backs to the river, and the rest of the theatre is on a hill making a natural incline...This summer a change was made and a repertoire company (as opposed to a vaudeville company) of extraordinary merit was secured and high-class plays have been put on to the entire satisfaction of thousands of citizens who nightly visit the theatre.*⁵⁷

Finally to emphasize the overall attractiveness of this new resort, the Company even added the following words in its brochure: "Considering the immensity, the artificial beauty interspersing the places of rugged grandeur, the ideal picnic facilities, the delightful river overhung with trees, and the purest spring water of earth, Springbank is indeed a 'Park of Parks'." And to complete this picture, in 1914 a full scale amusement park with a Ferris wheel, roller coaster and fun house, opened across the road from the park near the end of the railway system (see the illustration on the opposite page). "Designed along lines of a miniature "Coney Island" the amusement park attracted many of the soldiers who were training in London during the First World War."⁵⁸ Given all of these features together with the baseball diamond and the ease of rail transportation, it is not surprising that London's first summer resort in the Waterworks region of Springbank was permanently closed and subsequently replaced by this highly diverse entertainment complex that constituted London's second summer resort elsewhere in the park.



Springbank Amusement Park, circa 1914. Courtesy of the London Room, London Public Library.

Endnotes

¹M.L. Simner, "The London Waterworks Controversy: The Great Debate of 1875-1877," *The London and Middlesex Historian*, vol. 24 (2015), 21-31.

²*London Evening Advertiser*, May 27, 1879, 4:4. (Although in several previous publications the Neebing Hotel was referred to as the Northern Hotel, it is unclear if this reference pertained to the hotel's name at one time or instead merely referred to the hotel's location since the hotel was in fact north of the pumphouse.)

³*London Evening Advertiser*, May 27, 1879, 4:4.

⁴*History of the County of Middlesex, Canada*, reprint (Belleville, ON: Mika Studio, 1972) 393.

⁵K.D. McTaggart, *The Victoria Day Disaster* (London, ON Kenneth D. McTaggart, 1978) 28.

⁶*London Evening Advertiser*, July 9, 1880, 4:4.

⁷*London Evening Advertiser*, April 18, 1879, 4:4.

⁸*London Evening Advertiser*, May 26, 1879, 4:3.

⁹*London Evening Advertiser*, May 27, 1879, 4:4.

¹⁰*London Evening Advertiser*, June 30, 1879, 4:1.

¹¹*London Evening Advertiser*, May 9, 1879, 4:4.

¹²*London Evening Advertiser*, May 26, 1879, 4:3.

¹³*London Evening Advertiser*, May 27, 1879, 4:4.

¹⁴*London Evening Advertiser*, May 20, 1879, 4:3.

¹⁵*London Evening Advertiser*, May 9, 1879, 4:4.

¹⁶*London Free Press*, May 25, 1880, 4:2.

¹⁷K.D. McTaggart, *Victoria Day Disaster*, 11-12.

¹⁸*London Evening Advertiser*, April 4, 1879, 4:4.

¹⁹*London Free Press*, July 2, 1879, 4:2.

²⁰*Victoria Day Disaster*; Dan Brock, "Crew and Passengers on Board the Fatal Trip of the Victoria," MS, May 30, 2015. See also Ken McTaggart, *London's Darkest Hours* (London, ON; Ken D. McTaggart, 1999), 1-79.

²¹*London Evening Advertiser*, May 16, 1881, 2:4.

²²*London Evening Advertiser*, May 16, 1881, 2:5.

²³*London Evening Advertiser*, May 25, 1881, 1:4

²⁴*London Free Press*, June 9, 1881, 3:3-4.

²⁵K.D. McTaggart, *Victoria Day Disaster*, 93.

²⁶*London Free Press*, June 10, 1881, 3:3-4.

²⁷*London Evening Advertiser*, July 2, 1881, 2:5.

²⁸*London Evening Advertiser*, June 29, 1882, 4:6.

²⁹*London Evening Advertiser*, May 25, 1882, 3:3.

³⁰*London Evening Advertiser*, May 23, 1883, 4:4.

³¹*London Evening Advertiser*, June 30, 1883, 3:3.

³²*London Evening Advertiser*, May 20, 1881, 4:1.

³³G.A. Onn, *The History of the London Street Railway Company (1873-1951)* (1958). Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts, The University of Western Ontario, London, Canada. [57] See also Ken McTaggart and Paul Merrifield, *The History of The Pumphouse and Springbank Park* (London, ON: Ken D. McTaggart, [2010], 26-27.

³⁴*London Evening Advertiser*, May 25, 1888, 1:3.

³⁵*London Free Press*, May 23, 1889, 8:4.

³⁶*London Evening Advertiser*, May 25, 1892, 8:3.

³⁷K.D. McTaggart, *Victoria Day Disaster*, 100.

³⁸K.D. McTaggart, *Victoria Day Disaster*, 98.

³⁹*London Free Press*, July 2, 1889, 3:3. See also *History of the County of Middlesex*, 992-993.

⁴⁰*Proceedings of the London Municipal Council*, 1895, 1896.

⁴¹*London Free Press*, May 26, 1896, 3:4.

⁴²*London Free Press*, June 18, 1896, 3:5.

⁴³*The Free Press*, June 30, 1896, 5:2.

⁴⁴*London Free Press*, May 20, 1897, 3:6.

⁴⁵*London Free Press*, May 25, 1897, 8:4.

⁴⁶*London Free Press*, May 3, 1897, 3:6.

⁴⁷*London Free Press*, May 5, 1897, 5:5; *London Free Press*, May 14, 1897, 5:3. For an earlier example of London's Protestant clergymen weighing in on what was immoral vs moral see Frederick H. Armstrong, "Obscenity in Victorian London: The Lotto Davene Poster Trial," *Simcoe's Choice: Celebrating London's Bicentennial 1793-1993*, Guy St-Denis editor (Toronto & Oxford: Dundurn Press, 1992), 175-192.

⁴⁸*London Free Press*, August 7, 1897, 3:5.

⁴⁹*London Free Press*, December 30, 1897, 8:5. As an interesting aside, this article also contained information on the history of the building that housed the hotel. "The building, which was formerly St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, of this

city, was removed from the city by the late Charles Coombs, the owner of the mill site upon which the pumphouse now stands. It was Mr. Coombs intention to use it as a storehouse, but his property shortly afterwards passed into the possession of the city, and the place was converted into a summer hotel and pavilion."

⁵⁰*Appendix to the Council Proceedings*, July 5, 1897, 161. See also Pat Morden, *Putting Down Roots: A history of London's Parks and River* (St. Catharines, ON: Stonehouse Publications, 1988), 13-1.

⁵¹*London Free Press*, June 30, 1898, 5:5.

⁵² Nancy Z. Tausky, *Historical Sketches of London: From Site to City* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 1993), 54-55.

⁵³*London Free Press*, May 24, 1898, 3:4.

⁵⁴*London Free Press*, May 25, 1898, 8:4.

⁵⁵*LondonFree Press*, July 1, 1898, 3:6.

⁵⁶*An Agreement between the Water Commissioners and the London Street Railway Company* (1906), 833-844.

⁵⁷*London Street Railway Company Booklet* (circa 1905). Box 201A, London Room, London Public Library.

⁵⁸Alan Noon, *East of Adelaide: Photographs: commercial, industrial and working-class urban Ontario 1905 - 1930* (London, ON: London Regional Art and Historical Museums, 1989), 140.