

Early Accesses to the Escarpment at Hamilton

WRITTEN BY JOACHIM BROUWER

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Of all the cities and towns that bisect or adjoin the Niagara Escarpment, the amalgamated City of Hamilton shares the longest “frontage” with this unique geologic feature. From Stoney Creek in the east to Waterdown in the northwest, there are more than 20 full or partial roads or accesses going up and down, what is still referred to by locals as a mountain. Many of these started out as First Nations trails.

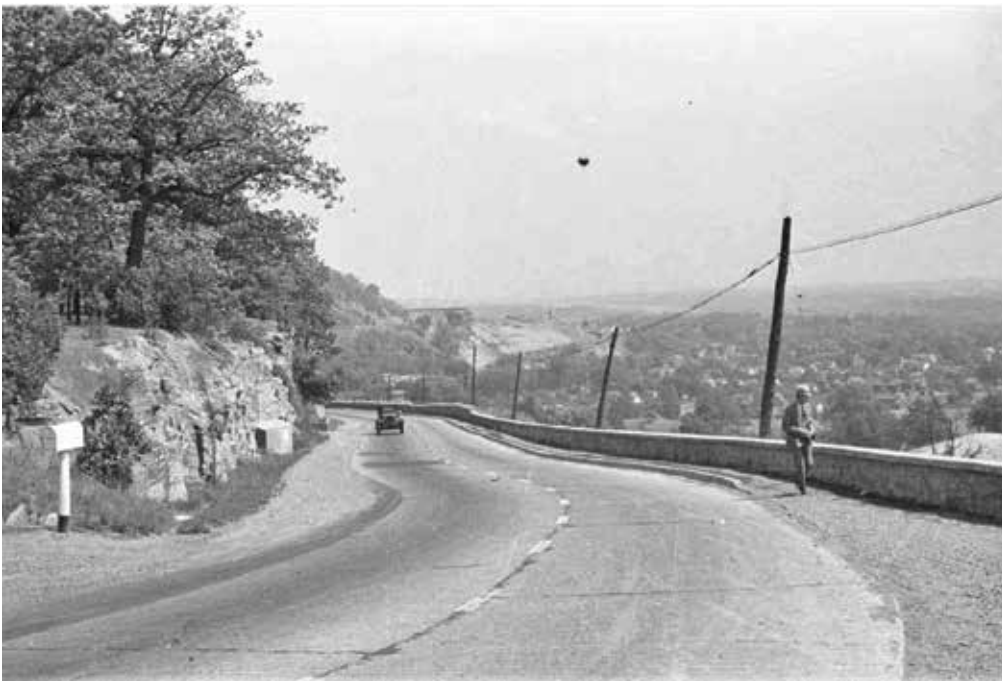
Dundas Peak on the Niagara Escarpment looms on the horizon from the top of Highway 8 at the Dundas Valley. The steepness of the valley wall allows for only a two-lane road. Photo by Joachim Brouwer.





▲ An early 20th-century photograph of Wilson St. in Ancaster. Wilson Avenue or Hwy 2 was the western end of the Iroquois Trail which began in Queenston.

► A toll booth used to be located at the top of the Niagara Escarpment on Toll Road where it turned to Bullocks Corners.



◄ In the 1920s, the Department of Highways improved Hwy 8 access to the Escarpment. This photo from 1934 shows a vehicle driving up the Escarpment and a man enjoying the view of Dundas Valley.

knitting together two great water courses and later two nations. These trails were crucial trade routes between the mound-building and shell-gathering groups in the Ohio River Valley and Chesapeake Bay, and the northern-dwelling, Iroquois-speaking nations. Before being renamed by the Department of Highways in 1917, Highway #2 was known as The Hamilton-Brantford Toll Road and was the access point to Norfolk, Brant and Oxford Counties.

Ancaster Creek winds serpentine-like along Highway #2 access, flowing under it at one point, then twisting and turning as much as a km away, before hugging it closely near the bottom of the Escarpment at old Binkley Corners, now the busy

Many of the Escarpment accesses correspond closely to some of the waterfalls in the Hamilton area, which has been called “The Waterfall Capital of Canada.” Weak points and breaks in the steep rock face of the Niagara Escarpment are natural places for streams from inland aquifers to tumble down to lower elevations. Over the

millennia, the sometimes-torrential flow of water eroded more of the Escarpment wall, creating a gentler slope. Accumulated soil and debris carried in stream water further made terrain, where a walking trail could be established and blazed.

The close proximity of waterfalls and early accesses is particularly evident in the first of three early Hamilton accesses discussed here. Wilson Avenue or Highway #2

access was the western end of the well-known Iroquois Trail, a lower Escarpment native trail starting in Queenston. It became the Detroit Trail when the Mohawk Trail, which ran along the upper Escarpment, was met at present-day Rousseau Ave. and Wilson in the former Village of Ancaster.

Hwy 2 Trade Route

The Iroquois, Mohawk and Detroit trails were the #401 and QEWs of their day,



intersection of Wilson and Main St in West Hamilton.

Grist mills were built at two locations on Ancaster Creek. The upper creek, where the popular Old Mill restaurant and banquet hall is situated, has been extensively developed over the past several decades. The mill chute where rushing water was channelled to the large wooden wheel which turned two giant circular

stones, can be observed from an ornate walkway while dressed in one's best Sunday finery. At a slightly lower elevation and more remote location, the now-ruined Red Mill made use of Sherman Falls nearby, which can be accessed by the Bruce Trail.

Hwy 8 & Dundas Valley

The next access, now known as Highway #8, was Hamilton's primary entry point into

Waterloo and Wellington Counties for decades. The thin ledge of the valley wall, which still cannot accommodate anything wider than a two-lane black-top road, became the primary route of the Pennsylvania Dutch Mennonites, fleeing oppression in the new United States, to their new homeland in the Grand River Valley.

For most of the 19th century, The Dundas-

Waterloo Toll Road, as #8 was known, was the only route for these hardy farmers to team their farm produce to market. Oar-powered boats called bateaux and later lake schooners came up the Desjardin Canal, docking in the turning basin that was dug out of the Dundas Marsh. These vessels brought pails, hoes and other factory goods to be sold in the handful of stores in Morden's Wharf, as



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◀ This old image shows the steep John St. access at the left of the horse and sleigh.



▲ The John St. access is now a tree-lined blue side trail of the Bruce Trail, going beside and at a lower level than the six-lane Claremont Access.

Dundas was first known.

A toll booth was located right at the top of Toll Road, where it made a sharp turn to Bullocks Corners. For many years it was run by John Devans, who built a residence with elaborate landscaped grounds, that both still exist, adjacent to the toll booth. A low stone wall with a decorative parapet of vertically placed field stones was built when the Department of Highways improved the access in the 1920s. One can stop at a viewing area here and look out into the beautiful Dundas Valley.

But for hundreds of years before this, Highway #8 access was a crucial part of an important First Nations trail. A foot path led from the Iroquois-speaking Neutral, (properly known as Chonnonton) villages and towns located in the headwaters of Spencer Creek and Bronte Creek in West Flamborough Township down into the Dundas Valley. Although there were no native habitations in the heavily wooded broken landscape, what became the lower Hamilton, the rich

fisheries, rice paddies and salt licks, drew many Chonnonton victualling parties.

John St. Deer Trail

The third access, John Street, which leads directly to downtown Hamilton, is the least developed, although prior to the Port Dover and Hamilton Toll Road, now Highway #6, it served as the northern entrance to George Hamilton's fledgling new village. Near the bottom of the John Street access, near St Joseph's Hospital, was Bellevue, home of James Durard. General Isaac Brock is said to have stayed here on his way to confront the Americans at Fort Detroit at the beginning of the War of 1812. Bellevue and the adjoining 100-acre estate was sold to George Hamilton shortly after.

The steep John St. access may have started out as a deer path for this once-ubiquitous and less skittish animal to enjoy the generous outcropping of salt in the lower Escarpment. The path seems to have been appropriated and widened by First Nations people seeking quicker access to the inlets and marshes, than

the more convoluted Highway #2 (Iroquois Trail) and #8 (Chonnonton Trail) accesses.

Now a side trail of the Bruce Trail which crosses it near the top of the Escarpment, the John Street access is easily missed, tightly tucked as it is between the second-growth Escarpment forest cover on one side and the looming concrete wall and ramp of the six-lane Claremont Access on the other. However, a new bicycle/pedestrian lane will enable more people to become aware of this little-known access.

The City of Hamilton's early Escarpment accesses are a rich and accessible source of hiking and driving pleasure. The important role that these roads up and down the "mountain" played in shaping the destiny of Hamilton becomes evident when exploring them. **NEV**

Joachim Brouwer is a Hamilton history and rail buff and has served various positions with the Hamilton Mountain Heritage Society. He has been published in Railpace, Canadian Rail, Branchline, Inland Seas and The Hamilton Spectator.



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