

Bridging the Border Cities: A History of Windsor and its Twentieth-Century Cross-Border Relationship

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Abstract

The city of Windsor, Ontario, Canada began the twentieth century ready to embrace its urban future. Described as the future “metropolis of Canada”, Windsor, as part of a larger geographical association known as the Border Cities, was in a very advantageous position for its close proximity to American industry, its million dollar building permit record, and its sense of urban pride. With the hiring of expert planners, such as Thomas Adams, the Border Cities embraced a future of an amalgamated “Greater Windsor” that anticipated a population of one million people. Situated alongside the Detroit River directly opposite to Detroit, Michigan, the cross-border relationship between the two cities is at the heart of the history of the region. As each of the Border Cities developed its own planning models as independent towns, the need to bridge the gap and connect to the United States was a necessity for their economic success.

This essay analyzes the early twentieth-century planning history of Windsor. By focusing particularly on Walkerville, a meticulously planned autonomous town within the Border Cities, the aim is to demonstrate how the need to connect to Detroit was not only integral to economic success but an inherent element of its culture and society. The 1920s marked a period of a serious public discussion regarding unification. As the municipalities looked inward, they also extended their gaze more officially toward the United States. The desire to build a bridge and a tunnel was an attempt at progressive infrastructure that built upon a history of ferry systems, row boats, and foot crossings. Examining this region around the turn of the twentieth century, this essay focuses on the planning history of the area, the influence of public opinion, the devastating effects of the Great Depression, and the resulting amalgamation of the Border Cities.