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Dirty Spaces: Environment, the State and Recreational Swimming in the Hamilton Harbour, 1870-1946

In the early 1980s the International Joint Commission on Inland Waters declared Hamilton Harbour on Lake Ontario to be one of forty-three environmental “areas of concern” in the Great Lakes system. Since December 1991, the Bay Area Restoration Council and the Bay Area Implementation Team have been coordinating a Remedial Action Plan for the harbour, aimed at cleaning up the water, re-establishing fish and wildlife habitats, and improving various recreational facilities. Seeking to reverse the process that had transformed a once vital community resource into an area accessible only to industrial users and large shippers, some of the most ambitious environmentalists envision a day when people can once again find designated waterfront clean spaces for swimming. In this paper we examine the history of “regulation” of the harbour, the attempts to control the use of this common public space, and the development and enforcement of formal governmental and informal social rules for swimming.

This research explores the differing visions of the harbour—as a community resource accessible to everyone, as a crown reserve to be protected and regulated, and as a public space where appropriate moral conduct must be guaranteed—through an examination of public swimming. It identifies trends in the degradation of this freshwater ecosystem as they occurred between 1870 and 1946, and examines the ways in which members of the community and legislators perceived and responded to the ongoing pollution of the water and its beaches. In seeking to use the harbour and in responding to perceived environmental changes, different groups of Hamilton residents frequently sought to champion their particular conception of the harbour over competing visions; in particular, views based on social class, race, age, and gender.

This research adds to the public debate over contemporary waterfront development by analyzing previous efforts to sustain, manage, and reshape the social and natural environment to see how people have viewed, reacted to, and lived with these efforts. It contributes to historical scholarship by evaluating the interaction of an

industrializing urban society and its environment. It also demonstrates that environmental, state policy and sport history can be integrated to provide a fuller social and economic portrait of a community. Sources used include: minutes, reports, and correspondence from Hamilton Playgrounds Association; City Council and Board of Parks Management Minutes; Hamilton Harbour Commission Papers; area newspapers such as the *Hamilton Spectator*, the *Palladium of Labour*, and *Steel Shots*; historic maps and photographs of the harbour; and Court Reports of waterfront transgressions.