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A River Runs Through It: Recreation and the Thames River, London, Ontario, 1867 to 1891

The Thames River has provided London, Ontario with critical resources that facilitated its growth during the nineteenth century: irrigation for farming, water and power for industry, and a means of transportation. In addition, the Thames River also served the citizens of London as a site for sport and recreation.

To appreciate the recreational history of the Thames River requires acknowledging the social, economic, and political forces that have interacted and competed for access to the river's resources. Struggle between groups and individuals over the use of the river for both recreational and non-recreational purposes persisted throughout the second half of the nineteenth century. This period was also marked by a rapid growth in London's population, which further increased the demands placed on the river. Four critical factors affected recreational use of the river: the actions of the city government, entrepreneurial involvement in the commodification of recreation, the growing problem of human and industrial waste polluting the river, and the 1878 construction of the city waterworks dam. These interrelated influences caused a clear and enduring change to recreation associated with the Thames River.

Changes to sport and recreation on or next to the river included: the relocation of sports such as swimming and skating to specialized facilities in the city; the alteration of the level of the river, which initially facilitated and then diminished navigability for sport and recreational boating; the creation of new riverside recreation areas on land purchased by the city in its attempts to secure a water supply; and the general decreased quality of the river water as a result of human and industrial pollution.

By the beginning of the 1890s use of the Thames River as a site for sport and recreation had generally declined. This decline was a consequence of the increasing availability of facilities in the city, as well as the decreased appeal of the river resulting from unpredictable water levels and growing pollution. Thus the social, economic, and political changes that took place in London between 1867 and 1891 had a lasting, negative impact on recreation that took place on, or next to, the Thames River.