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Clean Spaces in Dirty Waters:
Class, Environment, and Re-Creating
Recreation on the Burlington Heights and
Valley Inn Shorelines of Hamilton's
Burlington Bay, 1870-1940

During the city of Hamilton's campaign in the 1920s to clean up the physical and moral dirty spaces of Burlington Bay, the Board of Parks Management began an ambitious beautification program for the secluded Burlington Heights and Valley Inn Areas of its waterfront. They aimed to re-create the northwestern entrance of the city — an area of heavy traffic to and from Toronto — and get rid of the many boathouses and squatters' shacks lining the bay's shoreline. The boathouse colony and its hideaway places offered a recreational paradise for sportsmen, who fished, hunted and boated around the bay and the Dundas Marsh, or Cootes Paradise as it is popularly known. However, ever since the advent of the automobile, Hamilton's town and parks planners and social reformers had lamented the fact that these places were also eyesores; and they were the first thing to welcome people arriving at the industrial city.

Burlington Heights and Valley Inn were then-notorious areas, a waterfront colony with a deeply complex society. The boathouses and shacks — like the people who lived in and frequented them for their recreation — were diverse in nature. The colony was secluded by nature itself, by the bay's waters and the high embankments of the shoreline. It stood in stark and quaint contrast to the city's industrial skyline across the water on the southern shore. Not coincidentally, the drinkers, gamblers, and consumers of rougher recreations in these areas of the waterfront lay beyond the reach of Hamilton's police.

City planners and urban reformers saw the colony as a problem for many reasons. Chief among these was its location on the borderland between the city and nature, between Hamilton and its off-limits rail yards, between federal-provincial-county-township and city political jurisdictions, and between the civic-minded imagination of Hamilton's haves and the harsh realities of life for a discernible group of the city's have-nots. The recreational resources surrounding the shack community would become a highly contested terrain as the city searched for a natural landscape that could be designated as one of its social spaces. Town planners aimed to have a regulated, morally clean place of paradise for passive recreation along the shoreline of Hamilton's increasingly dirty waters.

In 1928, the Burlington Heights became the focus of a grand design competition sponsored by the Parks Board. While the fiscal constraints of the Great Depression stymied the entrance beautification project, it did not lessen the desire of park planners to clean up spaces on the city's polluted waterfront for passive recreation. Nor did it lessen the resolve of the boathouse dwellers of subsistence and marginal means to save their tar-paper homes. It didn't help that the boathouse colony was located on the waterfront, a place that plays such a particular, stigmatized role in the sexual and moral history of cities everywhere. The shacks, shanties, and boathouses which lined the water's shores were to be razed and disappear, first to give way to a provincially designated bird and game sanctuary in 1927, and then for the creation of the Royal Botanical Gardens in 1941. But the battle over the boathouse colony lasted for decades — drawn out through the depression years when homes and money were scarce for all but the very well off — and it was played out at a high cost to social peace. Ultimately, however, the city lost a unique and visible 'rough' community of sportsmen.

This paper traces the effort of Hamilton political leaders and conservationists to create sites for appropriate and useful passive recreation on the Burlington Bay. It considers, too, the way in which different social groups both challenged and altered their vision in the face of the environmental degradation associated with the industrial city. It provides insights into the interaction between recreation, class, and the environment in a North American industrial city, and emphasizes the ideological, geographical, social, and aesthetic context of leisure activities. Information for this analysis comes from a variety of sources, including: municipal records such as City Council, Parks Board, Police and Municipal Court Records; Royal Botanical Society and Hamilton Bird Protection Society papers; area newspapers; manuscript censuses and city directories; and oral histories from people who dwelt in the area.