

THE MOUNTAIN'S MOST MEMORABLE CITIZEN

By Robert Williamson

To select Hamilton Mountain's most memorable citizen simply review street, park, and neighbourhood names. The list could include: Rymal, Burkholder, Terryberry, Davis, Bruce, Inch, Hill, Jolley, Gourlay, Balfour, Buchanan and many more. On December 4th "Friends of Auchmar" board member, John Kajaste, wrote an excellent story for the Hamilton Spectator entitled "**Celebrating the Rich Legacy of Isaac Buchanan**". He described Buchanan's role in laying the foundation for the city's emergence as a major centre for railway transportation, wholesale trade and manufacturing, making Buchanan a front runner.

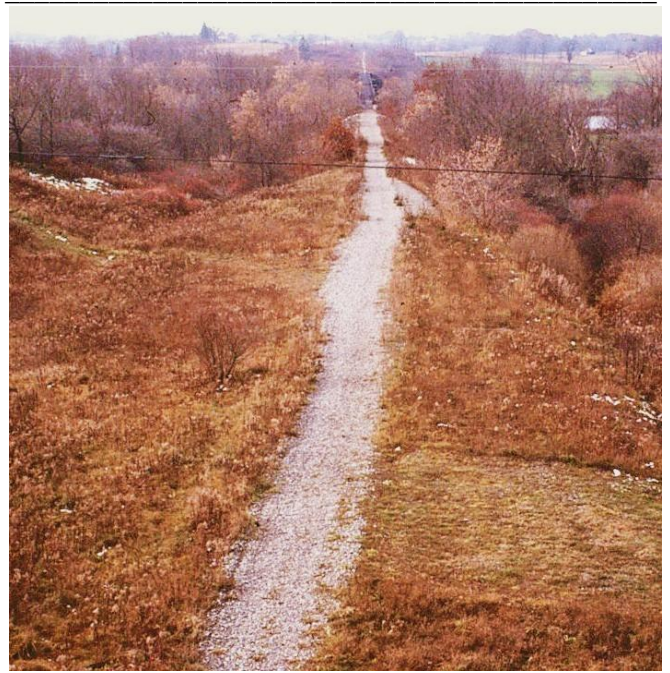
That was followed by a program organized by the "Friends of Auchmar" who held a very entertaining public event as a **Hamilton 2017 CANADA 150 project**. Their brilliant plan called for a presentation by five knowledgeable debaters on the distinctive perspectives of Buchanan's career. Topics included; Architecture, Business, Military, Politics and the Presbyterian Church.

The presenters were colourful in both their arguments and period costumes. The large audience demonstrated by their applause that the two most enduring features of Buchanan's life in their opinion are; his Auchmar Estate and the formation of Hamilton's 13th Battalion, which evolved into the Royal Hamilton Light Infantry (RHLI). Perhaps it was a biased judgement given that the meeting was organized by The Friends of Auchmar and the venue was the elegant RHLI Officers Mess.

However, not all of Buchanan's endeavors were successful. While he was a fearless entrepreneur and his success gave him a sense of infallibility, his schemes for rapid expansion, at times made him a foolhardy promoter. He correctly believed that the Great Western Railway (GWR), with headquarters in Hamilton, was the key to the city's domination of markets in Upper Canada and points west.

However, in 1870 when the Canadian government repealed its Broad Gauge Railway Act allowing a uniform American Standard Gauge track for all railways, there was a building frenzy to capture untapped business markets. The Canadian Southern Railway (CSR), which became an extension of the New York Central Railway, built a straight line between Buffalo and Detroit through the prosperous valleys of the Grand and Thames rivers.

With Buchanan's endorsement and financial investment in 1873, the GWR built a comparable railway parallel to the CSR, in some instances within a few hundred yard of its competitor. When American railway multi-millionaire, Cornelius Vanderbilt, threw his financial weight behind CSR, the Great Western Railway and Buchanan went into bankruptcy.



This abandoned rail-bed of the Great Western Railway's "Air Line" branch south of Hamilton flies like an arrow across the countryside approaching its Grand River bridging point at Cayuga in the middle distance. It is a forgotten but enduring symbol of Isaac Buchanan's rash business investment policy during the railway building frenzy of the 1870s. The failure of this railway brought about the loss of Hamilton's railway dominance, the collapse of Buchanan's wholesale business empire and the debtor's sale of his Auchmar estate.

Toronto's Grand Trunk Railway bought up most of GWR's holdings and eventually merged into the Canadian National Railway. Today, Hamilton is still struggling to regain some of its lost railway service, especially for commuters. Will history repeat itself with LRT and will it become a financial bottomless pit for our next generation of politicians?

This Mountain Memories column appears monthly. For more information about the Hamilton Mountain Heritage Society events and publications see their Website: Hamiltonheritage.ca or call (905) 575-9326