

#56 Mountain Memories April 2018

BALFOUR (CHEDOKE) HOUSE

By Robert Williamson

Neighbourhood names and pre-confederation homes associated with mountain access roads are the current theme of Mountain Memories. Perched on the mountain brow beside the Chedoke Ravine and waterfall, in what was originally 18 acres of park-like meadow, stands what used to be called "Chedoke House". Only a block away from the busy intersection of Garth Street and Fennell Avenue where they begin their descent of the escarpment on Beckett Drive stands the 24 room stone house of railway promoter and Gore Bank director, William Scott Burn. Built in 1836 about the same time as Dundurn Castle it qualifies as one of the oldest surviving homes on the Mountain. However, being well hidden from public view, it is all but unknown.

Sold to Charles John Brydges the managing director of the Great Western Railway in 1853, it became, like Isaac Buchanan's Auchmar estate nearby, another example of how the Great Western Railway made Hamilton the business epicentre of Upper Canada. An example of this railway golden age can be found in the May 24, 1863 Canadian Illustrated News. It described a giant picnic on the Chedoke estate for all the railway employees and their families in honour of Queen Victoria's 44th birthday and the Silver anniversary of her reign. Everyone enjoyed field events, cricket, music and amusements through the magnanimous business style of Brydges' successor, Thomas Swinyard.

Since 1875, the estate has had a litany of owners but in 1909, William Southam, owner of the Southam Publishing empire, purchased the property as a wedding gift for his only daughter, Ethel May. She married St. Clair Balfour, owner of a successful wholesale business. In 1976 the five surviving Balfour children donated Chedoke House to the Ontario Heritage Foundation and the City of Hamilton under the title Balfour House. It will likely be featured in the Hamilton Tourism and Culture Division's "May is Museum Month" initiative, but it is not scheduled to participate in the "Doors Open" weekend this year.

Given the City of Hamilton Planning Department's decision to identify neighbourhoods with names associated with their heritage, one might expect that the area between Garth, Mohawk, Upper Paradise and the escarpment edge would be called Chedoke after the watershed of the creek or the heritage rich Chedoke mansion. Strangely its heritage was passed over and the extraneous title "Westcliffe East" neighbourhood was applied.

This Mountain Memories column written by historian Robert Williamson, appears monthly for the Hamilton Mountain Heritage Society. See their Website: Hamiltonheritage.ca or call (905) 575-9326

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Photo by Robin McKee

Chedoke House (Balfour House) as it appears today in a publicity photo for "Doors Open". It has eleven bedrooms, an indoor water-closet, a conservatory, its own chapel, schoolhouse, baking ovens and a pet cemetery with headstones.