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Discovering Downtown Milton

A Historical Glimpse of Downtown Milton

By John Duignan,
 Fitzgerald Insurance
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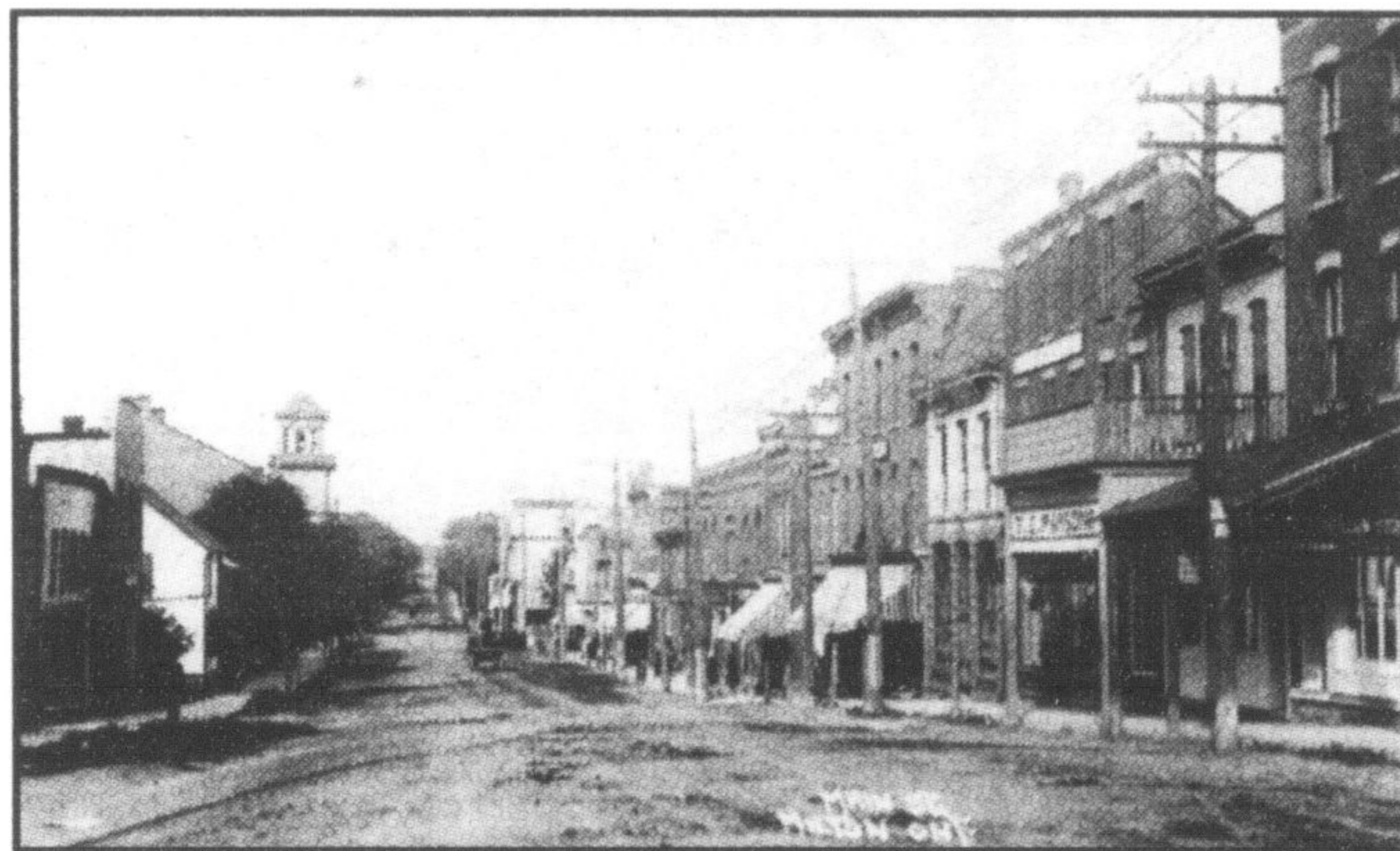
Many readers will recall that the mighty metropolis Toronto in its infancy was referred to rather derisively as "Muddy York". It should come as no surprise that Milton in the early days was mired in mud for much of the year. Salvation came with a drought which devastated local farmers' crops or the freeze-up of winter. The onset of cold weather would often offer a brief respite. Stage coaches might not be up to their axles in mud, but stranded just as hopelessly in a snow drift. Pedestrians might not be covered from head to toe with clayey gumbo but might have to wade through deep snow.

The Main Street that we know now retains many of its older buildings but leaves no hint of the dirt road and plank sidewalks of the past. The local clay that gave rise to several prosperous brick plants was a curse for early Miltonians. Early politics and letters to local newspapers would often revolve around the deplorable state of town roads. What seems comical today was probably not very funny then. The humour in falling face first into the mud or losing a boot or shoe in the gooey soup would soon wear thin on the second, third or fourth occasion I am sure.

Many of the buildings that line Main Street date from the pre-railway period and are evidence of a bustling local economy. Early photos of Main Street, even ones from the early 1900's, years after the railways' arrival, seem to hint at Milton's earlier frontier-town-like existence. Wooden awnings and balconies protruding from store fronts covering the sidewalks, along with false store fronts bearing signs such as "Medical Hall" (now part of Quality Greens), give a wild west sort of flavour to early Milton. Certainly early life could be harsh and meant much hard work and sacrifice. An account from an early Milton resident Anna Ruddy is enlightening. "There was more drinking in those days and on the other hand more, much more, religious fervour. Men drank hard, lived hard, and when they got religion they got it hard. Many a boy went to the devil because of the companionship he found in the drinking places..." And there were plenty of hotels and taverns in Milton. Because of Milton's initial isolation a thriving hotel industry became established to serve the weary traveller.

There was the Albion Hotel located at Main and Commercial Street built about 1855, the Thompson House at 155 to 165 Main, and the Wallace Hotel at Main and Brown Street built in 1864 among others. (The Albion was also known as the Commercial, Kennedy, Charles, Papa Nick's and now as the Knight Cap. The Thompson House was later known as the Royal, the Bennett and the Stone Hotel - the lettering of the Thompson House is still visible on the stone section added in 1864. The Wallace Hotel which burned down in 1973 was also named the Hotel McGibbon, the Mitchell Inn and the Milton Inn.)

And fire in the early days was a great threat especially when combined with drinking and frame structures. A rather sarcastic report of a fire in May 1866 is revealing. "The aristocratic West End has suffered a severe loss in the total destruction of that elegant row of buildings known as Sloan's Block. (This is thought to have been on Bronte between Robert



Watch where you walk! Main Street looking east circa 1910. Designated postally as Milton West (to avoid confusion with a Milton in Quebec) this scene is reminiscent of frontier days.

and King Street.) It appears that Mr. Sloan has been giving a series of reunions of convivial entertainments to his friends at which they generally 'did not go home till morning' and last night the excitement rose to such a pitch that spontaneous combustion took place about four o'clock in the morning when they were all snugly 'sub rosa'. The host and his friends were so overcome with emotion that had it not been for the exertions of the hostess the town would have suffered a serious loss. As it was they were observed to be writing German Text with their feet from the effects of 'tangle leg' when they were rescued. By great exertions the furniture, consisting of two old chairs, a broken leg table and a couch were rescued from the devouring element."

The brick buildings of the Little Block constructed in 1893 at 200 to 208 Main Street replaced a row of frame stores that were lost to fire in 1886. Similarly the brick buildings put up in 1916 at 152 to 156 Main Street replaced frame structures consumed by flames in 1915. The cause of the fire was not known but clearly frame structures were very vulnerable.

This contrasts with a fire in 1897 that broke out in the Winn & Company Shoe Factory (now the Lido) a brick building erected in 1892 at 179 to 181 Main Street. Renovations followed the fire, and the shoe company continued in operation until 1911, followed later by a knitting mill and carpet factory. But brick buildings were not impervious to the ravages of fire. The loss of the Wallace Hotel in October 1973 (more popularly known at the time as the Milton Inn or 'The Upper Hotel' - the Knight Cap was 'The Lower Hotel') is a case in point. Milton firemen were helpless when faced with numerous layers of roofing and myriad false walls inside the hotel. People were dumbfounded that such a structure could be completely lost.

In light of that we should appreciate the number of old buildings that have survived in our downtown. When you walk past these buildings, try to imagine what Milton and its residents were like in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. There are literally thousands of interesting stories and people in Main Street's history ready to be explored. Observe and enjoy.

And as a lesson from our forefathers, wipe your feet and check your smoke detectors.

An article such as this one can not hope to, or even attempt to, summarize the rich and colourful history of Milton. At most it can whet the appetite of the reader to come and discover why generations have been proud to call Milton their home. We are extremely fortunate that our forefathers and our current citizenry have had the foresight to preserve and protect our natural and historic resources. We encourage our new citizens to come explore what makes Milton such a unique and interesting place to live - the best of town and country. You will find Miltonians to be a friendly bunch eager to share our proud and colourful past. Welcome to Mudville, oops, I mean Milton!

For resources and suggested further reading, please contact the author or the Milton Historical Society.

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