

Municipal Government in Ontario—An Historical Sketch

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Fire Protection.

As the Canadian towns began to fill up and the streets to take shape, with buildings, mostly of wood, coming into closer neighbourhood, the danger from fire rapidly increased. In Kingston, Queenston and York this soon came to be a matter of much importance, especially in Kingston where one or two of the more wealthy of the citizens, owning stores and warehouses, had not only insured their buildings but had provided themselves with special apparatus, popularly dignified by the name of "engines," for the suppression of fire. However, the lack of any special building regulations or any corporate organization for coping with fires occasioned uneasiness to the prudent. About the beginning of 1812 a severe fire in Kingston brought the question vividly before the citizens. It was at first proposed to take up the matter through private initiative and to raise by subscription a fund for the purchase of an adequate fire-engine with hose, hooks, ladders and buckets. A volunteer fire company, as in the American towns, was also proposed. As an inducement for the citizens to join the company it was suggested that the volunteers should be exempt from serving on juries, or being elected as parish or town officers,—another side light on the craving for such honors. However, it was generally recognized that an efficient local administration, commanding the confidence of the citizens, was indispensable. Hence it was proposed that the Legislature should be at once petitioned for an Act to incorporate the town and thus give to its magistrates the necessary authority to make such by-laws, rules and regulations as they might deem necessary for the benefit of the community. But all such projects were immediately checked by the outbreak of the war. After the peace the question of civic incorporation for Kingston was again actively discussed, especially over the head of such subjects as fire-protection, improvement of the streets, and the suppression of drunkenness and vice, the legacy of war. Certain public-spirited citizens had graded the streets and laid stone foot-paths opposite their own properties, yet there was no general or concerted action. Thus while the town was prosperous and flourishing as regards many of the citizens, it was miserably backward in its corporate life. Lieut. Francis Hall, an English officer, who visited Canada at this time, gives the following concrete picture of the difference between an American and a Canadian town. Comparing Sackett's Harbour with Kingston he says: "It covers less ground than Kingston, and has fewer good houses; it has, however, the advantage of a broad flagged footway; while the good people of Kingston, notwithstanding the thousands expended in their town, and the quarries beneath their feet, submit to walk ankle deep in mud, after every shower." In attempting to account for this difference, he thinks it must be due to the fact that the people of Canada are simply here to accumulate a fortune with which to retire to Britain. Though this was an unfortunate tendency in the earlier days of the colony, resulting in much impediment to Canadian progress, yet it had little to do with municipal backwardness. The real reason for the contrast was that on the American side the people were not only permitted but encouraged to improve their local surroundings by corporate self-government, while in Canada these democratic practices were regarded as "the very worst principles" of the American system.

Incorporation.

The people of Kingston, as of other towns, were quite alive to the great defects in their local civic life, but neither the magistrates of the Quarter Sessions nor the people of the towns had any encouragement or even authority for attempting improvements. Still they did not cease to urge their needs upon the Legislature. Finally, Kingston obtained some measure of relief by the passage of an Act, the first of its kind in Upper Canada, to regulate the police within the town. This was not really a measure of self-government. It simply gave to the magistrates of the Quarter Sessions the power "to make, ordain, constitute and publish such prudential rules and regulations as they may deem expedient relative to paving, keeping in repair, and improving the streets of the said town, regulating slaughter houses and nuisances, and also to enforce the said town laws relative to horses, swine or cattle of any kind running at large in said town; relative to the inspection of weights and measures, firemen and fire companies." To meet the expenses of local improvement the magistrates were authorized to levy a special tax upon the ratepayers, not exceeding in the aggregate £100 in a year. With a total annual spending power of \$400, the magistrates were not likely to indulge extravagant conceptions of civic improvement. Still they immediately took advantage of their limited powers, and before the end of 1816 had drawn up and published in the *Kingston Gazette* a set of fourteen rules and regulations, which served as a nucleus for future by-laws in many Upper Canadian towns. These regulations referred to such matters as turnpiking the streets, grading and paving the sidewalks, preventing the obstruction of the streets, or furious driving thereon, regulating buildings with a view to prevent fires and to facilitate the extinguishing of fires and the regulation of slaughter-houses and other nuisances.

Public Schools.

In the same year, 1816, the first public school Act for Upper Canada was passed. This gave to the people of the different towns, villages and townships the first real measure of local self-government, in that it permitted them to meet together for the establishment of schools. The inhabitants of any section providing at least twenty scholars were authorized to build a school house, and, having undertaken to pay part at least of a teacher's salary, they might elect three trustees to examine and engage a teacher and authorize text-books, subject only in the latter case to the veto of the district Board of Education. Thus people who could not be trusted with the power of electing representatives to look after streets and regulate carters and nuisances were deemed quite competent to choose representatives who should be sufficiently wise and well-informed to qualify teachers and authorize text-books, as well as pass upon the other educational needs of the country.

In 1817 the measure of local government authorized for Kingston was extended to the towns of York, Sandwich, and Amherstburg. The same year authority was given to the magistrates of the Niagara district to establish a market in the Town of Niagara. This was of the same nature as the authority granted for the Kingston and York markets. From time to time other places, as they rose to importance or acquired influence, were granted the privileges of a market and a local police under the conditions already given. Also, with the increase of population and the settlement of new regions