

## Ottawa: The City as Conglomerate

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## OTTAWA: THE CITY AS CONGLOMERATE

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Ottawa (formerly Bytown) did not develop on the ecological principle that sociology has borrowed from biology. It developed as a conglomerate, to borrow an expression from geology. It was a lumpy, unintegrated and distressingly heterogeneous community that was fused in the nineteenth century into what might be called a city.

What ended up as Ottawa began in the fur trade era as a transportation break point. Its site was the junction of three major streams and numerous small ones. Its site was also distinguished by the impassable Chaudiere Falls and a number of somewhat less formidable rapids on the Ottawa River. The land near the present city centre was a mixture of rocky promontories and swamps. Settlement did not begin on the present-day core, but outside it. The initial settlement was across the river in present-day Hull. Subsequent settlement was upstream at Richmond and at a number of locations in the surrounding area. The hinterland, in a sense, was established before the metropolis. Moreover, the initial settlement was of two types: that at Chaudiere dependent on the timber trade, and much of that in the surrounding area dependent on farming or on the pensions and patronage received by the gentility of the Ottawa Valley.

Pioneer "Ottawa", then, exhibited several characteristics that were to become part of its pattern of development in the later nineteenth century.

Physically, the site of the city was broken up by numerous physical obstacles. Human ingenuity, rather than over-coming them, tended to add to them, first with the construction of the Rideau Canal and later with a snarl of railway lines.

Politically "Ottawa" grew to maturity in a jurisdictional jungle. It was located on a provincial boundary, which ensured that it would develop as only one focus of an urban region that extended into Quebec. Similarly, the prior development of communities surrounding "Ottawa" provided other competitive foci in the form coherent and autonomous towns. When the city did expand to embrace them, it could

assimilate them only imperfectly. Indeed, the political autonomy of Bytown was only established as late as 1837 when it was declared no longer subservient to the dictates of Nepean Township. The arrival of the "national" government in the 1860s only sharpened the jurisdictional competition, adding a federal voice to those of the city, two provinces and nearby municipalities.

Economically, "Ottawa" was likewise fragmented. It depended at various times and to various degrees on timber, agriculture, public works and government. Each economic element tended to have its favored site in the "city". On an economic basis alone, Ottawa can be seen to have developed from at least four foci: Chaudiere Falls (hydraulic power and timber), Rideau Falls (hydraulic power related to timber and food processing), Lower Town (public works), and Parliament Hill (government).

Physical, political and economic factors alone ensured the development of a cityscape that resembled the workings of a deranged quilt-maker. But there were additional complications.

Ottawa's social or human contours were no less complex and fragmented than the physical, political and economic factors that determined the shape of the city. The population of the city was the product of a series of quite unique in-migrations, distinguished more by their occupational characteristics than the characteristics of ethnicity or class. The migrants did not disperse through the city. Rather, they congregated in definable areas.

Ottawa ultimately became a city that was composed of a multitude of imperfectly digested elements. Its development was not characterized by the conventional sorting out process that is considered typical of the late nineteenth century city. Ottawa began "sorted out". It struggled throughout much of the nineteenth century to find principles and mechanisms of integration.