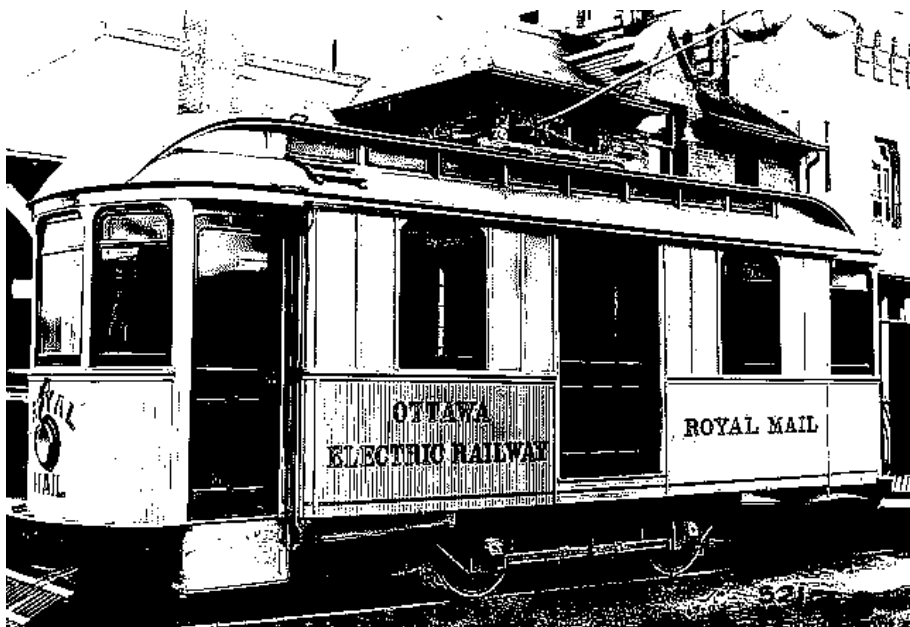


AHEARN AND SOPER



THE ELECTRIFICATION OF OTTAWA

Bryan D. Cook

February 2023

Front cover: *Ottawa Electric Railway streetcar for Royal Mail, c 1900*
(Library and Archives Canada s003511)

About the Author

Bryan D. Cook is an alumnus of Sheffield (UK) and McGill universities and retired from directing Canada's Energy Science and Technology. He now pursues interests in Canadian history, genealogy, fishing, gardening, poetry, and fine woodworking. He is one of those weird types who love cosmology, the physics of relativity and quanta, and the bluegrass banjo! A life member of The Historical Society of Ottawa (HSO), he has authored articles in the *Capital Chronicle* newsletter, authored/co-authored previous Bytown pamphlets, the most recent being *Poetry of the Chaudière*, and published with the HSO the definitive biography and poetry anthology of William Pittman Lett.

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Editor's Note

While the HSO provides editorial support in the publication of the Bytown Pamphlet Series, ultimate responsibility for the accuracy of the content lies with the author.

AHEARN AND SOPER
THE ELECTRIFICATION
OF OTTAWA

The Historical Society of Ottawa

Acknowledgements

This pamphlet originated with a presentation “Thomas Ahearn—The Electrification of Ottawa” by Kelly Ahearn Ray and Anna Adamek to the HSO and my subsequent commentary in the society’s Newsletter, Issue 158 of September 2017. That commentary should now be replaced with the following extensive revision and expansion to include the contribution of Warren Young Soper.

I am grateful to Bill MacGowan for providing an incredibly detailed genealogical Soper Compendium, edited by Earl F. Soper. A definitive biography of Thomas Ahearn by Laura Ott awaits publication. I am grateful for her edit of my original commentary. Thanks also to James Powell, the HSO’s Director of Communications for his review of this pamphlet and his excellent blog *Today in Ottawa’s History—A day-by-day account of Ottawa’s history*. HSO member Jaan Kolk provided much extremely well-researched information debunking some of the Ahearn and Soper legends! Yet again, I am indebted to Christine Jackson for her impeccable editing which adds so much to the quality of this pamphlet.

While I am the author and responsible for any errors, I admit to compiling this pamphlet from many sources. If some other “myths” or factual errors have crept in, I would welcome knowing of them.



The Historical Society of Ottawa

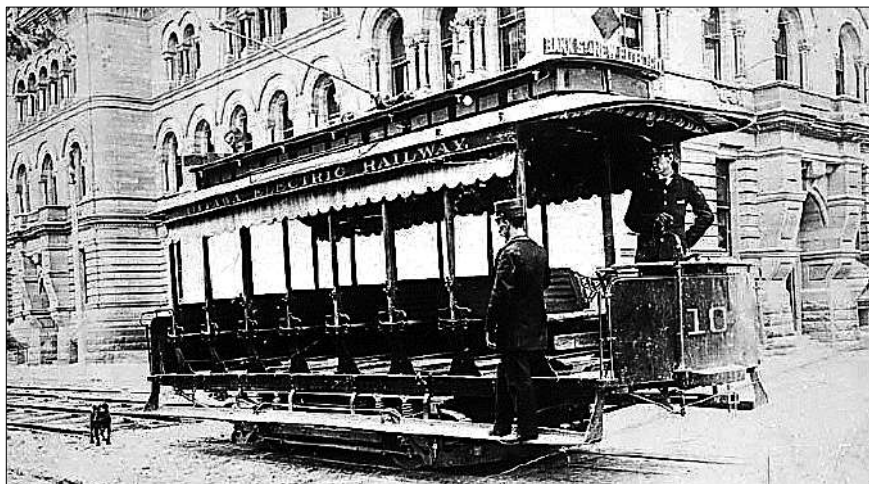
gratefully acknowledges the financial support of
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Preface

From the earliest modern settlement of Canada, an abundant endowment of streams, mighty rivers and waterfalls provided the hydraulic power to mill grains, textiles, paper, timber and metal products. Coal and wood fired the stoves and heated buildings. Horsepower pulled carts, carriages and, later, trams. Streets were eventually poorly lit by whale oil, naphtha and coal gas. Bicycling on the rutted streets was hazardous. Phonographs were hand-cranked. The age of the automobile was dawning. There was no hot water on tap. Newspapers, magazines and, later, the telegraph were the primary means of communication.

At the close of the 19th century, two young men, Thomas Ahearn and Warren Young Soper recognized the value of the hydroelectric turbine and generator to electrify Ottawa, Hull/Gatineau and the Ottawa Valley.

This is the story of their partnership, founded in the age of the telegraph.



An Ottawa Electric Railway Company streetcar at Wellington Street by the (former) Langevin Block, c 1900 (LAC C-002460)

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Who Were These Men?



Thomas Ahearn

Thomas Ahearn, 1903. Photo by William James Topley, LAC PA-012222

Thomas Ahearn was born on 24 June 1855 on Duke Street in Ottawa's LeBreton Flats to the family of a poor immigrant blacksmith, John Ahearn, from Waterford, Ireland and his wife Norah (née Power). Thomas was 12 years old when his father died and his two older brothers took over the smithy. In 1870, Thomas was expelled from the Ottawa College for misbehaviour and, at age 15, had to find his own way amid the golden age of the telegraph and telephone.

He delivered telegraphs in exchange for lessons in telegraphy, in which he excelled sufficiently to be quickly promoted to operator-messenger in the Chaudière office of the Montreal Telegraph Company, co-located with J. R. Booth. At age 19, he travelled to

New York to work as a telegrapher for the “Microsoft” of the telegraph age, the Western Union Telegraphy Company. At the height of his illustrious career, Thomas Ahearn observed of these early years,

I started as a messenger boy and am proud of it. I tried to do my work well. I never loitered by the way; I did not have time as I needed every minute to perfect myself in telegraphy. The boy who loiters on the way when sent on an errand too often remains the errand boy throughout life.

An 1877 article in *Scientific American* on telephone technology by another alumnus of Western Union, Alexander Graham Bell, caught Ahearn’s inventive curiosity. He devised a primitive telephone system based the article’s description of Bell’s pioneering efforts. Using two handmade sets fashioned from cigar boxes and tapping into an existing Ottawa to Pembroke telegraph line, Ahearn made the capital’s first long-distance phone call. Having made newspaper headlines, he then sold his newfangled phone for \$16 to settle a hotel bill.

Bell hired Thomas from his new position of chief operator for the Montreal Telegraph Company to manage the Ottawa office of the Bell Telegraph Company. While employed by Bell, he was responsible for the installation of a company switchboard in the Parliament Buildings.

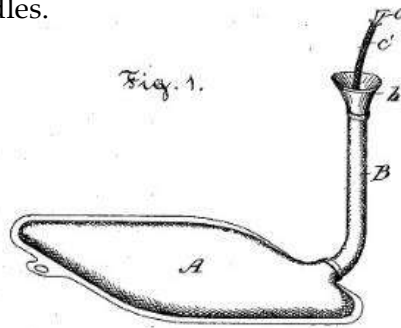
Ahearn was fascinated by electrical technology, both direct current (DC) and alternating current (AC), which was advancing rapidly over his lifetime. He remained agnostic as Westinghouse (AC) and Edison (DC) both sought to disparage each other’s system as more dangerous. The Ahearn and Soper Company installed Edison’s DC lamps in Parliament. Their Chaudière Electric Light and Power Company (CELPC) did not begin to install AC wiring for its private customers until December 1889. After the Great Fire of 1900, CELPC reportedly installed both AC and DC equipment.

In 1904, when the City wanted street lighting changed to AC arc lamps which it had reason to believe were more efficient, Ahearn and Soper's Ottawa Electric Company, which had taken over the original Thomson-Houston DC system, argued the DC lamps were better.

Ahearn was granted nine U.S. patents and 15 Canadian patents which include: a fire alarm telegraph; improvements in telephones; a watchman's detector; a check for commodities measured by meters; an electric heater and hot water heater; a system to warm trams by means of electrically heated hot water; an electrically heated automatic hot water supply; the electric warming bottle, oven and flat iron; and timer and technologies for sound reproduction; driving mechanisms for talking machines; and a 1921 buffer for phonograph needles.

*U.S. patent drawing for
Thomas Ahearn's electric
hot water bottle.*

*[Would you use it with water
so close to the electric cable
and no control?!]*



Contrary to popular folklore, Ahearn was neither the creative inventor of the likes of Edison nor the scientific genius on the level of Faraday. For the most part, he sought to improve on existing technologies. There is little evidence that his patents were ever widely commercialized.

Ottawa's fire alarm telegraph was not based on Ahearn's patent. Rather, it used cheaper boxes produced by Ernest Chanteloupe in Montreal, which even Ahearn agreed were inferior copies of the John Gamewell system which dominated the North American market from 1855 onwards.

There is no evidence that the streetcar heater patented by Ahearn was ever used. Ottawa was not even the first Canadian system to have electrically heated streetcars. The Burton heater, which evolved from the first patent obtained by W. Leigh Burton in 1869, was in use in electric cars at least by 1888 and was popular throughout the 1890s. By 1891, the Westminster & Vancouver (B.C.) Railway cars were being fitted up with Burton heaters by the premiere American electric car builder, J. G. Brill of Philadelphia.

Ahearn's retrofit of streetcar no. 20 in 1882 was not based on his patented hot water system but was rather an old stove body fitted with electric elements. An improved version was used in Ottawa's streetcars rather than the Burton system, likely in order to favour Ahearn and Soper's interests in the Ottawa Car Manufacturing Company (OCMC).

Nevertheless, Ahearn was the consummate and energetic electrical salesman who invited Ottawa's elite on 29 August 1892, as the *Ottawa Journal* reported, to attend a sumptuous banquet cooked "by the agency of chained lightning." The whole meal was prepared on electric appliances and delivered to the Windsor Hotel dining room on a heated streetcar. The electric oven was covered by previous Canadian patents on which Ahearn may have improved. James Powell's excellent account of the meal and menu is found online in *Today in Ottawa's History* headed "An Electric Banquet" (<https://todayinottawashistory.wordpress.com/>).



Thomas Ahearn's oven in operation at the Central Canada Exhibition, Ottawa. The Electrical Engineer, October 1892

Ahearn drove a personal electric car and participated in the first commercial transatlantic phone call, made in 1927 by Prime Minister Mackenzie King to Britain's Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin.



October 3, 1927: PM Mackenzie King speaks with Britain's PM Stanley Baldwin over the first commercial transatlantic telephone service. Thomas Ahearn is in second row to King's right (LAC a130297). Note Alfred Bastien's painting of Canadian troops in an Allied victory parade, Paris, 14 July 1919

In 1884, a prospering Ahearn married into high society by winning the hand of Lilius Mackay Fleck, daughter of Lilius Ingles Walker and wealthy Vulcan Iron Works founder, Alexander Fleck.

Thomas and Lilius had two children: Thomas Franklyn who became president of the Ottawa Electric Railway Company upon his father's death in 1938 and was a prominent Liberal parliamentarian, owning the Ottawa Senators hockey club when its team won Lord Stanley's Cup in 1927; and Lilius (known as "Ethel"), headmistress of Elmwood School, who married Harry Southam, publisher of the *Ottawa Citizen*. Sadly, Lilius Mackay (Fleck) Ahearn died giving birth to "Ethel."

*Lilias
Ahearn
Southam
and child,
1911*



*Thomas
Franklyn
Ahearn,
1927*



*Lilias Ingles (Walker) Fleck,
mother-in-law of Thomas Ahearn.
Photo by Topley Studio, Library
and Archives Canada*

In 1892, Thomas helped pay for a granite fountain with lily pad and spout motifs at Wellington and Bridge streets to provide drinking water for “man, horse and dog.” Its cylinder is inscribed with a dedication to the memory of his mother-in-law Lilian Ingles (Walker) Fleck by her six children.



However, it forced pedestrians onto a high-traffic street filled with heaps of horse manure and winter slush, and so was moved in 1894 to grace a small park co-financed by Thomas at the convergence of Albert, Concession

*Fleck Fountain Plaza, southwest
intersection
of Wellington and Booth streets on
LeBreton Flats, Ottawa, Ontario.
Source: NCC website*

(now Bronson and Commissioner streets—to beautify his childhood playground of LeBreton Flats. It was vandalized and removed circa 1926. Then, unearthed elsewhere in the redevelopment of LeBreton Flats, it has been restored in the Fleck Fountain Plaza as a symbol of the Flats’ regeneration.

Thomas remarried in 1892 to the children’s caretaker and another Fleck daughter (the eldest), Margaret Howett, who was later to become president of the Victorian Order of Nurses and a prominent member and president of the Women’s Canadian Historical Society (WCHS), founded in 1898. The latter of course was the predecessor of the current HSO.



Mrs. Margaret H. Ahearn, c 1900.
Photo by: William James Topley

Ahearn built his mansion, *Buena Vista*, at 584 Laurier Avenue West on the bluff known as Ashburnham Hill, overlooking his LeBreton Flats birthplace (overleaf). It was filled with a wealth of art, curios and bric-a-brac, gathered personally from his many trips abroad. An adjacent structure held an iron plough built by his father in County Waterford, Ireland and imported by Ahearn as a reminder of his humble roots.



*The residence of Thomas Ahearn, 584 Maria Street,
now Laurier Avenue West, Ottawa, Ontario, June 1902 (no longer standing)*



Warren Young Soper

Warren Young Soper in 1913. Photo by Topley, LAC PA-176973

Warren's father, Albert Webster Soper, was directly descended from Joseph Soper, an early immigrant to America (probably from England). He settled in Boston (Mass.) and married Elizabeth Alcocke on May 6, 1656. Joseph must have been of some standing for the wedding to have been performed by John Endecott, magistrate and first governor of the strongly Puritan Massachusetts Bay Colony.

Albert married Eleanor Young, likely in 1848, in Old Town, in the American state of Maine, beside the lumber mills on the Penobscot River about 20 kilometres north of Bangor. Eleanor had been born in 1824 further south beside the Sheepscot River in the seaport of Wiscasset, mid-coast Maine. They were blessed with three children: Emma Augusta (1850) who died in 1876 in Dubuque, Iowa; Warren Young (1854–1924); and Nellie (1856–1890).

Warren immigrated as a five-year old boy with his Methodist parents to Ottawa, Canada in 1859, along with many other American families lured by the timbered wealth of the Ottawa Valley.

By 1881, Warren had become manager of the Ottawa office of the Dominion Telegraph Company. He was still living at home with his father, a “lumberer” by trade, and mother at 234 Bridge Street in the poorer working-class district of LeBreton Flats. They were living, likely in cramped quarters, with grocer William McDonald York who had married Warren’s younger sister Nellie.

At age 27, Warren married Martha Susanna (“Annie”) Newson on Thursday, 23 June 1881 in Ottawa. By 1883, his career in telegraphy had progressed and he was superintendent of the Ottawa offices of the Canada Mutual Telegraph Company located on the corner of Wellington and Elgin streets, while still living on Bridge Street.

By 1891, and now an independent “electrician” by trade, Warren had moved to establish his own household in Ottawa’s Wellington Ward with Annie, their first son Elbert, a cook and a maid.

In 1901, he was calling himself a Canadian, living in Ottawa’s Central Ward with Annie, their sons Elbert N., Harold W. and Walter E., and their daughter Helen A. His “electrical” profession provided sufficient wealth to employ a cook, a housekeeper and a maid, all women of Irish descent. In 1908, an increasingly affluent Warren Y. Soper built a limestone mansion in Rockcliffe Village on a bluff high above the confluence of the Ottawa and Gatineau rivers. It was constructed on the Soper family cottage property and boasted 32 rooms and two-and-a-half storeys. In homage to one of his favourite novels, *Lorna Doone*, Soper named the property “Lornado,” a name it has retained to this day as the official residence of the U.S. Ambassador to Canada. One of the stained glass windows facing the rivers commemorates Champlain’s passage up the Ottawa River and is inscribed with these lines of

historian, Francis Parkman, “In these ancient wilds, to whose ever-verdant antiquity the Pyramids are young, and Nineveh is a mushroom of yesterday, Champlain was planting on shores and islands the emblems of his faith.”



Lornado, sketch by G. Duval, at <https://ca.usembassy.gov/embassy-consulates/ottawa/residence/>



North side of Lornado. Photo by Michael M, May 2020, at Google Maps

The ornamental shelters along the Sir George-Étienne Cartier Parkway (as it is called today), located below Lornado and several other houses, testify to his company's streetcar line which once travelled this route.



Shelter on the parkway below Lornado with steps leading up to Rockcliffe Road.

Source: Google Street View

Ahearn and Soper Electrical Partnerships

In 1879, Thomas and Warren landed a contract to install telegraph sets across the country for the Canadian Pacific Railway. This earned them enough capital by 1881 to establish an electrical engineering and contracting company—**Ahearn & Soper (A&S)**. Warren balanced the salesmanship and relentless drive of Thomas with contractual, accounting and public relations acumen. They were both merciless practical jokers, tapping telegraph code to convince clients of Soper's uncanny telepathic skills! This dynamic partnership would be responsible for constructing and equipping a wide range of electrical projects across Canada.



A sign advertising Thomas Ahearn and Warren Soper's electrical contracting business. Photo by: Canada Science and Technology Museum Corporation, 1988.0441

In 1891, A&S were selling and installing Westinghouse electrical products from a store rented from R. J. Devlin on Sparks Street (opposite page). By 1895, they were manufacturing in a small workshop, with two machinists and a brass finisher, at 327 Albert Street, beside the car sheds of the Ottawa Electric Street Railway Company (sources: city directories and 1901 fire insurance plan).

By 1912, Ahearn was a director of the Canadian Westinghouse Company and vice-president of Wallace Realty Company, profiting from a burgeoning commercial and residential Ottawa market.

Street Lighting

The first electric street lighting in Canada was launched on Victoria Day, 1884, when the Peterborough Light and Power Company lit 17 arc lights on George Street in Peterborough, Ontario. Then on 8 October 1884, Pembroke became the first town in Canada to be extensively illuminated by a combination of arc and incandescent electric lighting under a contract between the town council and W. B. McAllister. On 28 November 1884, *The Pembroke Observer* newspaper reported,

The [sub] contractors, Ahearn & Soper, of Ottawa, [representing the United States Electric Light Company] have just completed their contract with Mr. W. B. McAllister for the supply of electric light apparatus, and Saturday night, our town was the only one on the whole line of the Canadian Pacific Railway from the Atlantic to the Pacific that is wholly lighted with electricity. Mr. McAllister's



*R. J. Devlin & Company
Building,
76 Sparks Street,
with Ahearn & Soper
appliance store (behind
parked carriage), 1891.*

*Source: Topley Studios,
Library and Archives
Canada 3422789*

enterprise met with a prompt response from the merchants and the corporation, the latter one adopting lights for the town hall and the streets. All the principal stores, the skating rink and the Copeland House are lighted, and on Sundays, the churches. The light is very brilliant, but withal soft and steady. Commercial travelers pronounced Pembroke the best lighted town in Canada.

Electric lighting arrived in the Ottawa area in mid-1881, when E. B. Eddy installed arc lights in his huge lumber, match and woodenware works at the Chaudière Falls, in Hull, Quebec. The arc lights were supplied by the Bush Electrical Company, a precursor firm of the General Electric Company, which became a supplier of arc lamps throughout North America. Forty arc lights, with a generator run by hydroelectricity, illuminated the yard. The carbon electrodes or “pencils” used in the lamps lasted eight hours before replacement was necessary. A small, five-arc light system was subsequently fitted on the Ottawa side at Levi Young’s mill on Victoria Island at a cost of \$900. Eddy’s installation was sufficient to light the mill’s interior, the walls of which were painted white to reflect the light and the lumber yard outside. So good was the illumination that it was reported that the workmen preferred to work at night under the lights.

In 1881, a committee of Ottawa City Council reported that the city had sufficient waterpower to light Bush arc lamps of 4,000 candlepower suspended from four 200-foot towers—the moon tower concept—at a capital cost of about \$20,000 and an annual running cost of \$7,000 to \$8,000. The following January, a test tower, 100 to 200 feet high (accounts vary), was built at the top of Nanny Goat Hill overlooking LeBreton Flats. On 7 April 1882, the tower’s arc lamps were tested, but they were a big disappointment. Their brilliance fluctuated and they provided less volume of light than expected, casting shadows and working poorly in severe weather and fog. Erskine Bronson’s steam-powered arc lighting lower on

the grounds of his lumberyard had similar failings. The idea of lighting the city using towers was dropped.

The need for new streetlights became pressing. In early 1884, the City's Fire and Light Committee complained that Ottawa's naphtha and gas streetlights were in "a dilapidated state." In the fall of 1884, the first contract for the electrical street illumination of Ottawa was awarded to the Royal Electric Company from Montreal. Ahearn & Soper did submit a higher bid of \$13,500 per annum on behalf of the United States Electric Company (USEC). This was early days for A&S who would have needed significant capital backing from USEC and may not yet have secured access to sufficient water-power lots on the Chaudière. They ultimately could not compete with Royal Electric who, a month after the bidding, announced a deal for hydropower from Perley and Pattee's Chaudière stations.

Later in the spring of 1885, the Royal Electric contract and its electrical generating capacity was transferred and restructured under the **Ottawa Electric Light Company (OELC)**, originally created by Francis Clemow and G. B. Pattee, who already controlled Ottawa's street gas lighting. By February of 1885, a new directorship was appointed, chaired by G. B. Pattee and including Hiram Robinson, H. K. Egan, A. Mclean, W. R. Thistle, John Christie and H. E. Irvine. The *Ottawa Daily Citizen* reported that this personnel would secure public confidence and guarantee efficient management. It was more of a deal amongst capitalists than a hostile takeover. A city-wide "blackout" occurred as the company moved to new and larger premises at the Chaudière.

The presence of H. E. Irvine on the OELC board is significant for his management of Royal Electric's exclusive rights to operate the Thomson-Houston lighting system in Canada. While the City obliged Ottawa capitalists to manage the utility (OELC) going forward, Royal Electric profited from Thomson-Houston royalties and the sale of equipment and installation.

The OELC would “supply, erect, maintain and keep in repair” 165 arc lamps, each of 2,000 candlepower, for three years, as well as additional lamps as may be required. The City would pay \$13,000 per annum for the initial 165 lamps, \$40 per lamp per annum for the next 15 lamps, and \$80 per lamp per annum for any additional lamps beyond 180. The City required wires to be kept completely insulated, with all installations of plant and equipment inspected and approved by the city engineer and the “Superintendent of the Fire Alarm.” The location of lamps and poles were also subject to the approval of the city engineer. The contract required the OELC to keep the lights on every night from “dark to daylight, excepting when the moon shines bright and clear, and the sky is unclouded.” The lamps had to be lit for a minimum of 280 nights each year. Work to erect the necessary poles and install the arc lamps commenced immediately. Six weeks later, at dusk on 1 May 1885, Ottawa’s new electric streetlights were officially switched on in the presence of Mayor McDougall and other city fathers. The city celebrated the event with a band and a parade.

The night before, while the street lighting system was being tested, Ottawa’s City Council had given the OELC permission to produce and sell electricity throughout the city. By-law No. 600 authorized the OELC to “construct, maintain, complete and operate works for the production, sale and distribution of electricity for purposes of light, heat and power.” The by-law also gave the company permission to string its wires on poles “along Ottawa’s streets, squares and bridges.” Within a year, the OELC had installed 199 arc lamps on city streets, extending far beyond the area previously covered by naphtha and gas lamps, and 85 other arc lamps in local mills and factories.

The vision of electrically illuminated cities and towns was North America-wide and driven in Ottawa by the City Council through contractual arrangements with the OELC and implemented by Royal Electric. Up to the mid 1880’s, Ahearn and Soper were likely

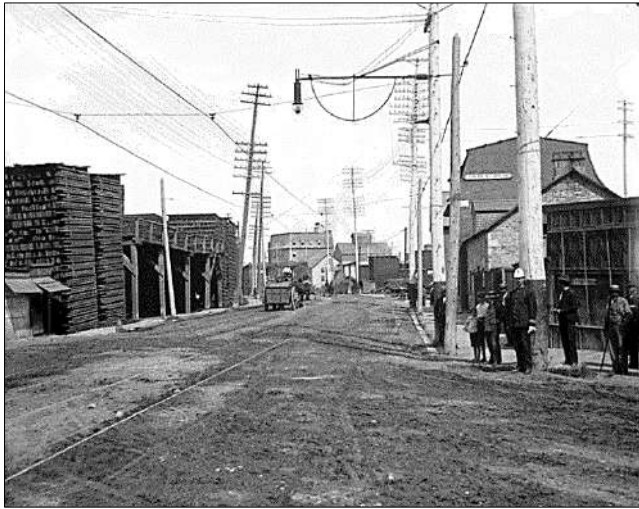
subcontractors at best and not the visionaries as portrayed in popular lore.

While the City of Ottawa was pursuing options to light its streets, incandescent lighting came to Ottawa. In early April 1883, Thomas Edison's patented light bulbs were installed for the first time in Canada at the Canada Cotton Manufacturing Company in Cornwall. Four hundred visitors came to see them switched on, many of whom were parliamentarians from Ottawa. Duly impressed with what they had seen, a plan to electrify the Parliament Buildings was swiftly put into motion to equip both the Senate and House of Commons chambers with 150 Edison 16-candlepower lights each. Ahearn & Soper, representing the USEC, fitted the lights and supplied the power plant in the House of Commons' basement. The lights were officially switched on when the second session of the 5th Parliament opened on 17 January 1884, though not before Ottawa experienced what was probably its first electrical fire. When the Edison representative switched on the lights in the Senate Speaker's dining room to give a preview demonstration to Sir Hector Langevin, the Minister of Public Works, the rubber and silk insulation around the wiring caught fire. Fortunately, the fire was quickly extinguished, repairs made, and the House of Commons was lit up a year before the U.S. Capitol was "electrified."

In 1887, Ahearn and Soper founded their **Chaudière Electric Light and Power Company (CELPC)** and built a small hydro-electric plant at the Chaudière Falls. They also formed a partnership with Robert Hurdman that gave them access to Hurdman's Chaudière hydraulic lots, the first of many such deals that they made to ensure access to waterpower.

It took a while for Ottawa to switch to incandescent street lighting. While some private installations may have been incandescent starting in 1887, most Ottawa streets remained lit by Thomson-Houston DC arc lamps. Toronto followed in 1889, as did

other Ottawa Valley electrical utilities at Almonte, Beachburg and Killaloe, thus founding the roots of the Ottawa River Power Corporation. In 1907, the City of Ottawa moved to replace those DC arc lamps with AC lamping.



Bridge Street looking north from Duke Street corner, LeBreton Flats, Ottawa (LAC/PA-027803). By August 1896, this childhood neighbourhood of Thomas Ahearn and Warren Young Soper was electrified. Note the early street light.



Electric lighting, streetcars and telephone wires at the intersection of Bank and Sparks streets in 1926 (City of Ottawa Archives, Item CA-18235)

The “Battle of the Electrics”

By 1888, the demand for electricity in Ottawa surpassed the generating capacity of both the **Ottawa Electric Light Company** (OELC) and **Chaudière Electric Light and Power Company** (CELPC). Erskine Bronson picked up a share of the market with his **Standard Electric Company of Ottawa** (SECO) in 1891, but that was still not enough. By 1893, the CELPC was the largest company in the market, having most customers on both sides of the river.

The Ottawa Electric Company (OEC)

Rather than fragment the market further, the three companies (OELC, CELPC and SECO) merged in 1894, thus creating the **Ottawa Electric Company** (OEC) to meet the demand. Ahearn assumed the mantle of president and Soper that of vice-president. The OEC’s federal rather than municipal charter and the subsequent federal *Ottawa Electric Bill* of 1905 allowed Ahearn and Soper to operate in Quebec and Ontario and shielded them for a while against municipal politics when Ottawa later wanted to break their monopoly. Their support in the press gallery and from MPs and prime ministers, forged through their electrical work in the Parliament Buildings, had delivered.

Much of OEC’s hydraulic power was furnished by the Chaudière Falls at the old CELPC raceway close to the current No. 2 hydro station. The Great Fire in the spring of 1900 destroyed four out of the six OEC power plants, several miles of distribution lines and the homes of hundreds of customers in Ottawa and Hull. The wide-ranging connections of the OEC’s board of directors and the assets from amalgamation enabled rapid planning and financing of the infrastructure on a much larger scale. A bigger waterpower plant was built and the old Standard Electric Company’s station, which had escaped the fire, was modernized. These, plus the OEC’s steam plant, enabled the OEC to survive the disaster.

On 1 July 1897, when Canada's capital was celebrating Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee and the 30th Anniversary of Confederation, the OEC strained its capacity to illuminate the entire face of the Parliament Buildings with thousands of electric lights.

The Consumers' Electric Company (CEC)

The City had tried in vain to control the Ahearn and Soper monopoly by granting charters to anyone willing to enter the electricity business in Ottawa. The Metropolitan, Deschênes, and Independent Electric companies were unsuccessful in establishing services. Finally in 1901, City Council granted a charter to the **Consumers' Electric Company (CEC)**, founded by J. W. McRae. The following decades would see a continuous struggle to supply electricity to Ottawa customers, closely followed in the press as the "Battle of the Electrics" between the CEC and the OEC. In 1905, the City finally purchased CEC's plant and contracts with 1,359 customers for \$200,000, thus ending Ahearn's ongoing attempts at acquiring the company. These acquisitions became the City's public electricity provider, known as the "**Municipal Electric Department.**"

The Ottawa Light Heat and Power Company Limited (OLHPC)

Ahearn and Soper's acquisition of the Ottawa Gas Company (OGC) in 1908 rounded out their energy empire when they consolidated all their electrical companies under a single holding company, the **Ottawa Light Heat and Power Company Limited (OLHPC)**. In 1920, OLHPC acquired the assets of **The Ottawa Power Company Limited** which included a power plant erected in 1900 at Victoria Island on the Ottawa River. This made OLHPC the largest owner of power at the Chaudière Falls.

OLHPC's Electric Division, formerly the OEC, provided the "**Municipal Electric Department,**" forerunner of **Ottawa Hydro,**

with much needed private sector competition for 42 years. Ottawa's electrical power services were effectively in the hands of a duopoly.

The OLHPC built the Ottawa Electric Building at 56-60 Sparks Street on the site of the former Ahearn & Soper offices.

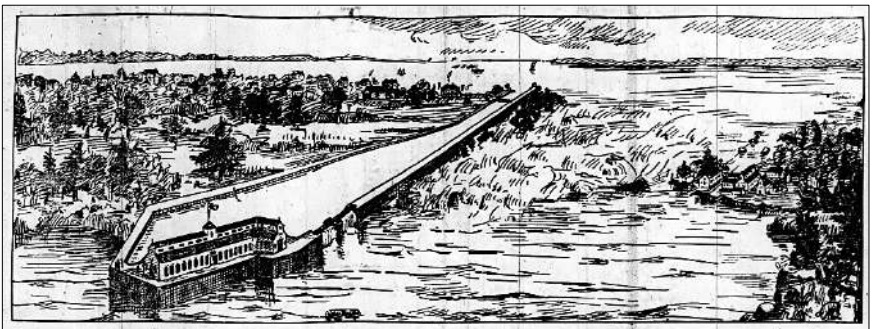
The Metropolitan Electrical Company (MEC)

In 1901, the Metropolitan Electrical Company (MEC) built a 610-metre canal just north of the Britannia Boathouse Club, as part of an ambitious scheme to generate hydroelectric power on the Deschênes Rapids. Although soon abandoned as unfeasible, the residual canal was used in 1951 as the Britannia Yacht Club's protected harbour.



(Left) The Ottawa Electric Building at 56-60 Sparks Street Ottawa, 1950, (subsequently renovated while retaining the façade)

(Below) Proposed Metropolitan Electric Company power canal at Britannia (Ottawa Journal, 25 February 1899, p 3)



Gas Energy

The Ottawa Gas Company (OGC)

In 1906 Ahearn and Soper bought the Ottawa Gas Company (OGC); it was originally the Ottawa Gas and Electric Company and is now incorporated into Enbridge. Until the introduction of piped natural gas in the 1940s, it was Ottawa's primary supplier of gas produced by the water-coal reaction process. It produced an almost indelible scar on Ottawa's landscape when Ottawa East was annexed in 1907 as a prelude to the creation by the City of an industrial and waste complex at the end of Lees Avenue. The area was close to the railway and "conveniently" downwind from the city centre and, within a decade, OGC had established a massive coal gasification plant there with its ten-storey steel-girdered gas storage tank and associated tar works, along with a garbage incinerator and a landfill site. Coupled with the daily discharge of the adjacent slaughterhouse into the Rideau and, downstream, Ottawa rivers, this "industrial park" soon became a major source of environmental contamination which lingers even today.



*Ottawa East, Lees Avenue industrial and waste complex, including the gasworks of the Ottawa Gas Company, c 1920
(<http://history.ottawaeast.ca/>)*

The second remarkable oblique air photo of Ottawa East in 1920 (below) shows the huge plume of smoke rising from the city's garbage incinerator adjacent to the Lees Avenue site (top right quadrant). It has been mounted lengthways here to allow the reader to see the detail more clearly. (Source: Ottawa East National Air Photo Archives IIA20-22))



← Plume of white smoke

Electric Transportation

Prior to 1890, the Ottawa City Passenger Railway Company (incorporated in 1866) consisted of 10 small horse-drawn streetcars, 15 sleighs and 12 omnibuses. In winter, the floors of the sleighs were covered with straw and a tiny coal stove in the centre of the car provided heat!



*Horse-drawn tram of the Ottawa City Passenger Railway Company, c 1871
(Library and Archives Canada)*

In 1890, the City called for bids to build an electric street railway. A Toronto-based syndicate organized by William Homes Howland negotiated a very detailed and practical plan with the City. The City required Howland to put up a \$5,000 deposit, to be forfeited if the project was not completed on time. Howland provided a deposit receipt on the deadline date of October 20, but the City declared that a receipt was inadequate. Howland sent the required cheque to the city council meeting the next day, and Council was about to vote on a motion to accept the cheque and have the Mayor sign the contract when a letter with a \$5,000 cheque from Ahearn was read. They urged Council to disqualify Howland because he had missed

the deadline by one day and to give them Howland's detailed plan to implement lock stock and barrel; Council vote 12-10 to do so. Ahearn and Soper had used their political clout, persuasiveness and business cunning to co-opt Howland's vision!

The Ottawa Electric Railway Company (OERC)

In 1891, their Ottawa Electric (Street) Railway Company (OERC) began operating a fleet of horseless streetcars manufactured by a St. Catherine's, Ontario plant. The first line opened on June 29. Five cars carrying invited guests with Ahearn and Soper as drivers, rumbled at a leisurely pace from the new car barns on Albert Street to the Lansdowne Park exhibition grounds. By 1892, electrically-heated streetcars were being built for Ahearn and Soper by a local carriage and sleigh builder, William Wylie.



Wylie Carriage Company, Ottawa Free Press, 18 June 1892

Wylie had built on the foundation of Shore & Co. to establish the W. W. Wylie Company as a successful manufacturer of carriages, wagons and sleighs. OERC directors recognized the quality of his work and the cost savings of having a local supplier of electric tram cars. Wylie responded by creating the **Ottawa Car Company (OCC)**, where he served as vice-president and managing director.

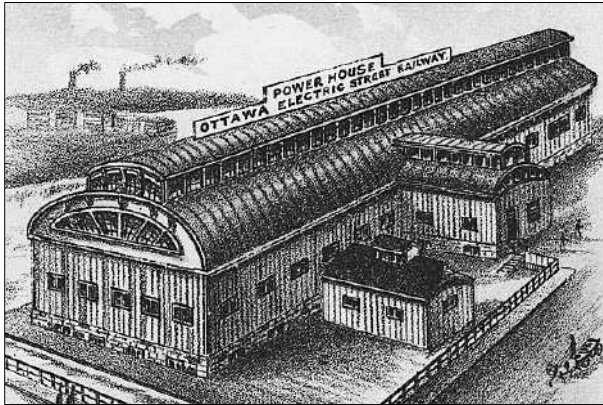
By 1893, the OERC bought the OCC, keeping Wylie on in the same positions. It was renamed the **Ottawa Car Manufacturing Company (OCMC)** in 1917.

The business continued to grow through the 1920s, employing 185 men and shipping 50 to 60 streetcars annually to cities across Canada. From the three-storey building at the corner of Slater and Kent streets, the company had expanded to cover fully two-thirds of the block, occupying almost nine city lots near what is now Constitution Square (340, 350 and 360 Albert Street). On 19 August 1994, Canada Post issued 88-cent stamps featuring an Ottawa Car Company streetcar from 1894 and Saint John Railway Co. Car no. 40. Following Howland's intention, Ahearn and Soper purchased two American sweepers from Lewis & Fowler, which had been proven to keep the tracks clear of snow in the winter of 1890–91 at nearby Utica, New York, in the Lake Ontario snowbelt region.



*Ottawa Electric Railway Streetcar with rotary snow sweeper, c 1895
(Library and Archives Canada, PA-173828)*

The powerhouse for the Ottawa Electric Street Railway was built in 1891 over a flume in the Buchanan channel of the Ottawa River. The following image is from an 1895 illustration looking northeast from Booth Street. Middle Street is on the right and the river is on the left. The great fire of 1900 destroyed the original buildings which were replaced with brick ones, now demolished.

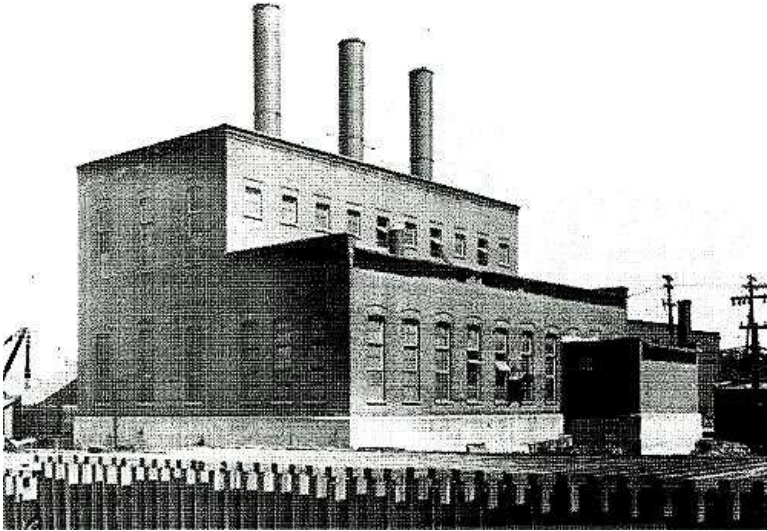


First powerhouse of the Ottawa Electric Street Railway Company, 1895 (below: powerhouse under construction)



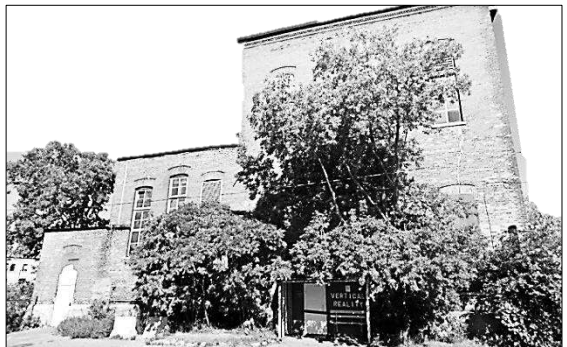
By 1914, the demand for electricity had exceeded the capacity of the rebuilt hydroelectric power station. It may also have lost some capacity due to the construction of the Ring Dam which controlled the sharing of the power potential of the Chaudière Falls. An auxiliary steam plant was built. Although now missing its triple

stacks, it is the only extant example of a thermal electric generation at the Chaudière Falls. Until recently, it housed the Vertical Reality climbing studio at 161 Middle Street.

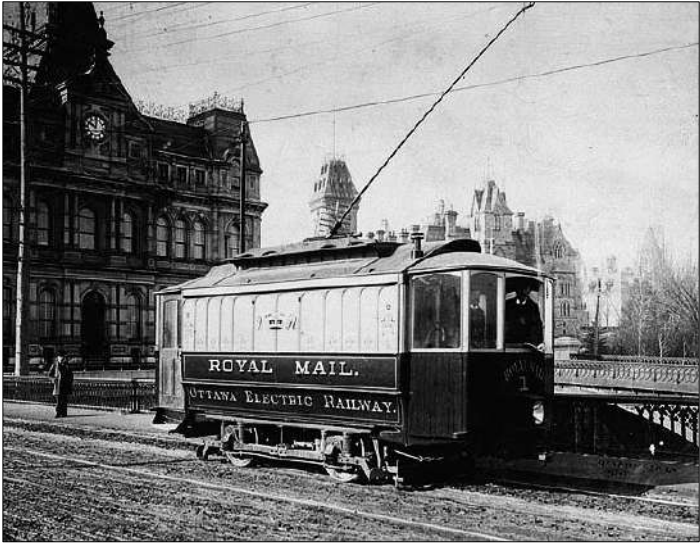


General view of the Ottawa Electric Railway Company steam plant from the northwest, 1958 (COA, OER Collection, CA-15021, 1958)

Former Vertical Reality climbing studio, 161 Middle St., Ottawa



OERC provided over half a century of service in the city. In 1894, the OERC contracted with the federal government to carry the mail from the Central Post Office to the Broad Street CPR railway station and the old Canada Atlantic Railway station on Catherine Street.



Royal Mail streetcar crossing Sappers' Bridge in front of the Central Post Office Building, 1894 (LAC PA-141061)

In 1901, the OCMC built a custom car for the Duke and Duchess of Cornwall and York (soon to be King George V and Queen Mary) to tour the city's streetcar lines (below).



Custom touring car built for the Duke and Duchess of Cornwall, 1901, (City of Ottawa Archives CA001518)



*Streetcar in the snow on Queen Street, Ottawa, February 1892.
Photo by William James Topley*

The Hull Electric Company (HEC)

In 1881, the Ottawa Electric Light Company (OELC) had built a small power plant to feed 325 arc lamps illuminating several streets and 85 others installed in local factories at the Chaudière Falls.

Hull Town Council asked E. B. Eddy to share the electricity that it had been producing since 1885 to feed its factories. The company refused, and in 1887 Hull Council hired the Ottawa Electric Light Company (OELC) to install electricity in the streets of Hull. In 1891, an Ottawa Electric Railway Company (OERC) streetcar route was extended only as far as the northern end of the Chaudière Bridge.

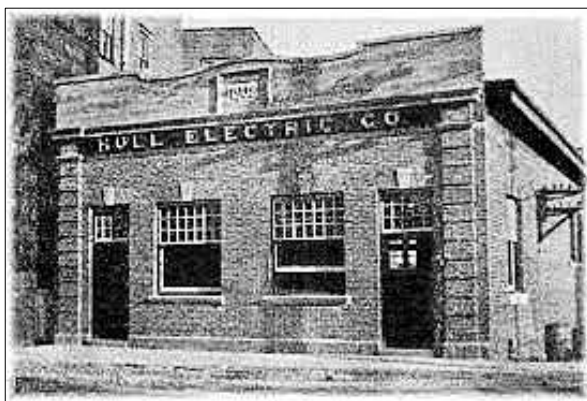
On April 16, 1894, some Quebec businessmen submitted to the Hull Council an urban transportation proposal to connect Hull, Aylmer, Pointe-Gatineau and Ironside by electric streetcar to be powered by a proposed **Hull Electric Company (HEC)**. In May 1894, Bylaw 61 of the Town of Hull granted HEC certain privileges, including a monopoly on transportation services and the distribution of lighting and heating for 35 years. The OEC contested the privilege of supplying electricity to the citizens of Hull and won the case before the Privy Council, which granted the company exclusivity in Hull until 1950.

The Hull Electric Company was incorporated by provincial charter (Victoria 58, chapter 69) on 12 January 1895, with no involvement of Ahearn and Soper. The HEC contracted for hydroelectric power from the Conroy brothers and William Jackson and Robert Hughes, at their Deschênes Rapids power plant in Aylmer (originally the **Ball Electric Company**), to provide electricity for the HEC's streetcars. Lumber barons were now investing in the electrical business.

The **Deschênes Electric Company (DEC)** broke new ground by linking the plant with a new network of transmission lines including a submerged cable crossing the Ottawa River. This enabled it to transmit electricity to the Russell House, a luxury hotel located on Elgin Street within walking distance of Ottawa's Parliament Hill. Its archrival, the Ottawa Electric Company, used its political influence to prevent Quebec's hydroelectric production from crossing the Ottawa River. Bankruptcy and death of the founder led to the takeover of DEC by the **Capital Power Company (CPC)** in 1901, which continued to honour the power agreement of the Deschênes Electric Company with HEC.

Nevertheless, the HEC wanted greater supply stability and more power. Consequently, in 1907, HEC bought Thomas Ritchie's vacant land along Promenade du Portage in Hull and built Chaudière

Substation no. 4 there. It had two generators, two meters, two compensators, a control panel, four switches and four transformers as well as an office. Included in the purchase were the poles, wires, transformers and all the accessories for the streetcar transit system between Hull and Aylmer, as well as all the poles and transmission lines for the lighting system of the streets of Hull South, Aylmer and Deschênes, locations beyond the aegis of the Privy Council ruling. On 11 November 1928, the Hull Electric Company sold its interests to the **Gatineau Electric Light Company Limited**, which sold them to the **Gatineau Power Company** on 6 April 1931. The changes in ownership did not affect the corporate name of the HEC until it stopped running the streetcar system on 30 November 1946. The HEC building still stands as the former Bistro 1908 at 70, promenade du Portage.



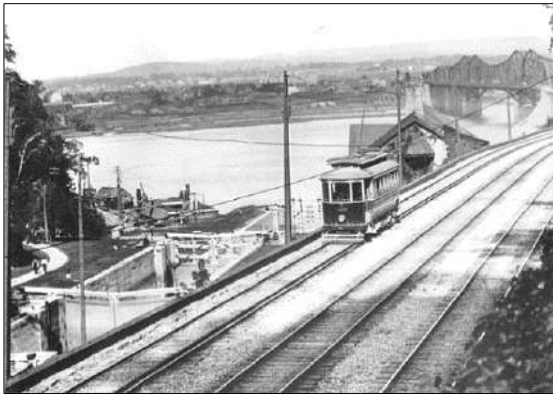
*The Hull Electric Company, 1908
(Canadian Museum of History Photo: ANQ-O V12-100)*

The Hull Electric Railway Company (HERC)

Under Dominion legislation, the CPR's Hull-Aylmer branch line was leased in 1897 to the Hull Electric Railway Company (HERC) for 35 years, and in 1899 the line was purchased by HERC. This was the first case in Canada when a regular steam railway was converted to electrical power. By 1910, some of the HERC's trams were

built by the **Preston Car Company (PCC)**, competitors of Ahearn and Soper's Ottawa Car Company (OCC).

The Hull Electric Railway line was opened on 29 June 1896, servicing the 10 kilometres between Hull and Aylmer. The building of the Alexandra (Interprovincial) Bridge in 1901 dispensed with the ferry link between Hull and Ottawa, when an agreement of August 1901 with Pontiac Pacific Junction Railway and the Ottawa, Northern and Western Railway gave the HER running rights over the bridge. A double track line then paralleled the CPR line to end near the future site of the Château Laurier Hotel.



*Hull Electric Car
No. 48 running
parallel to the
CPR tracks over
the Interprovincial
Bridge, c 1910*

It therefore became possible to travel by electric railway all the way from downtown Ottawa to Aylmer, Quebec, where Victoria Park could now grow as a favoured recreational centre.

Recreation and Suburban Development

Although the OERC's business was brisk during workdays, Ahearn and Soper recognized a need to boost weekend ridership for recreational and leisure purposes.

On 3 May 1894, they built a "trolley park"—Rockcliffe Park—about a kilometre from Rideau Falls at the end of the recently completed double tramline between New Edinburgh and Rockcliffe. There Ottawans enjoyed summer picnics, the well-lit "Persian Nights" shows, and an electrically powered carousel claimed to



Streetcar travelling through Rockcliffe Park, Ottawa, Ontario. Photo by William James Topley, Library and Archives Canada, PA-008797

be the first in the world. A horse-powered ferry also brought patrons over from Hull. In winter it was a favourite haunt for skiers taking advantage of the hilly inclines above the river.



Skiers waiting for streetcar, Ottawa, 1914. Photo by John Boyd

Business was so good that a streetcar barn was opened in November 1900 in Rockcliffe. The landscaped park still exists.

In Ottawa's future "West End," real estate was being developed by the Ottawa Land Association (OLA), a group of speculators with mostly the same principals as the OERC. Land consolidation included the former farmlands of Andrew and George Holland. OERC was contracted to provide service to the Experimental Farm and was expected to do so via Preston Street. Free to choose its path, however, OERC chose to run its line west, down Holland Avenue, and back east to the Farm for the purpose of enhancing the value of the OLA property!



Looking west along streetcar right-of-way on Experimental Farm, c 1930s. By Hands Studio

OERC established a small park—**West End Park**—within the development bounded by Harmer and Hinton avenues and Ruskin and Faraday streets. In 1897 it was renamed **Victoria Park** in honour of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. The park had no amusements other than an auditorium. Some Edison Vitascope pictures were shown there in the summer of 1896, as the Holland brothers, who were in on the land deal, held the Canadian rights to

the Edison system. However, this was not a regular feature and the auditorium was eventually moved to Britannia Park.

Queen's Park, about a kilometre west of the Aylmer Marina beach, was solely run by the Hull Electric Railway Company. The 40-acre park was opened in 1896 with a pier, a merry-go-round, a "mystic maze" and an open gazebo. By 1901, it could be reached by the Hull Electric Railway from the Château Laurier in less than half an hour. It had a daunting "Shoot-the-Chutes" mini-boat water-slide.

Faced with this competition, OERC bought 18 acres of land in Britannia Village fronting on the Ottawa River's Lac Deschênes. A double track tramline of 13 kilometres was purpose-built to link a new Britannia-on-the Bay station through west end farm and cottage country and the city's streets to the Central Post Office—a journey of 28 minutes. It was opened on the Queen's birthday holiday of 24 May 1900 and paralleled the Canadian Pacific Railway tracks, roughly along the south side of Richmond Road. **Britannia Park** grew into the peoples' summertime playground for Ottawa's working and middle classes escaping the grime and industry of downtown. It was less genteel than the strolling parks of the city, such as that of **Major's Hill** above the Rideau Canal locks.

At **Britannia Park**, people enjoyed picnics, swimming and diving, boating and canoeing, concession stands, concerts, evening dances and "Venetian Nights" in the auditoria. The public could stroll down the electrically lit 1,050-foot pier over Lac Deschênes to the three-storey Britannia boating clubhouse. Some could even sleep overnight in hammocks on the veranda! Others could enjoy dancing on moonlight cruises upriver to Chats Falls on G. B. Greene's paddle steamer, the *Queen*, while the *Albert* ferried folk from Fitzroy Harbour. Parents could confidently send their children to enjoy Britannia for a reduced fare, an ice cream and

supervised safety!—the “little folk” would become dedicated patrons of OERC’s trams. Telephone service was installed to the park in 1903, terminating in Hudson & Powell’s store at the site. Early motion pictures were screened at Britannia onto a sheet stretched across the pier entrance to the park. There was also an open-air live theatre to entertain patrons. All a far cry from the placid park and beach enjoyed today.

When it opened in 1900, Britannia Park was not a public park but an addition to Ahearn and Soper’s business empire. Despite the tram fares and entrance tickets, concessions and auditorium fees, the seasonal park and its long tramline operated at a loss. However, it allowed Ahearn and Soper to profit from the development of the western suburbs, including Britannia Village and Westboro along the OERC track. This was the dawn of the daily suburban commute to work!



Britannia Pier, boathouse and open-sided electric tram, c1900



Buy-Out

In 1915, the City's **Municipal Electric Department** had become **Ottawa Hydro**.

The Ottawa Hydro Electric Commission (OHEC)

It was named the **Ottawa Hydro Electric Commission** when it joined forces with the provincial network of the **Ontario Hydro Electric Commission**. In 1947 a public referendum approved the buyout of the OLHPC by the City, thus tripling the number of OHEC's customers to 57,968.

By 1950 Ottawa Hydro had acquired the OLHPC from the City, removing its last private sector competitor. **Hydro Ottawa** was formed in the year 2000 when five municipal local distribution companies were merged: Gloucester Hydro, Goulbourn Hydro, Kanata Hydro, Nepean Hydro, Ottawa Hydro and, in May 2002, Casselman Hydro.

The Ottawa Transportation Commission (OC Transpo)

The buyout of OLHPC by the City in 1947 was sparked by a dispute over passenger fare increases. The Ottawa Transportation Commission (later OC Transpo) took over the Ottawa Electric Railway Company's fleet of 130 streetcars and 61 buses. Fares and electrical rates have been going up ever since in the absence of private competition! The families of Ahearn and Soper burned their historic corporate records rather than turn them over to the City, perhaps a reflection of the colourful and combative history between the parties and their associated companies.

Ahearn & Soper Incorporated

Ahearn & Soper Incorporated is still a business in today's digital age but as a privately held pan-Canadian company providing automation solutions for warehousing, manufacturing and printing, and ID security solutions.



*Decorated Santa Claus trolley car on Sparks Street, Christmas Eve, 1896.
Good publicity for the OERC! (City of Ottawa Archives)*

Final Years

Warren Young Soper

Warren Soper was a connoisseur of art and literature. His residence Lornado was decorated with one of the best selections of paintings in Canada, together with a collection of beautiful and valuable old glass. He authored scholarly essays, was well-read and an ardent supporter of horticulture.

After his daily attention to business delivered to his downtown office in a morocco briefcase labelled "Today," he would drive his magnificent touring car to the links for a round of golf with his friends or his boys, before returning to Lornado.

Over his lifetime, Warren Soper held an impressive portfolio of corporate responsibilities:

- Dominion Telegraph Company, manager
- Canada Mutual Telegraph Company, superintendent
- Ahearn & Soper Ltd, president
- Ottawa Electric Railway Company, vice-president
- Ottawa Car Company, vice-president
- Canadian Westinghouse Company, director
- Imperial life Assurance Company, director
- Frost and Wood Company, director
- Canada Locomotive Company, director
- Ottawa Valley Motor Association, director
- Ottawa Heat Light and Power Company, director
- Central Canada Exhibition Association, director
- Ottawa Electric Company, vice-president
- Ottawa Gas Company, director
- Ottawa Building Company, president
- Dunlop Tire and Rubber Goods Company, president
- Victorian Order of Nurses, board member
- Rideau Club, member

- Ottawa Golf Club, member
- Ottawa Hunt Club, member
- Ottawa Country Club, member
- Engineers' Club, Montreal, member
- York Club, Toronto, member
- National Club of Toronto, member
- Art Advisory Council of Canada, member

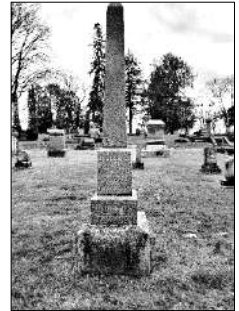
Warren Young Soper died in his 71st year on 13 May 1924 in Ottawa, after lingering for 25 days with a cerebral thrombosis. Such was his importance and stellar reputation that the *Ottawa Evening Citizen* allocated columns over eight pages to his obituary. (A transcription is freely available from this author.) His funeral was one of the largest ever seen in Ottawa, attended by hundreds of his capitalist friends in North American industry, by his many employees past and present, and by the general public who held his philanthropy in high esteem. The cavalcades of automobiles had to be managed through route and parking instructions published in advance by the newspapers. Warren Avenue, a quiet dead-end street off Wellington West, is named in his honour.

Soper was placed by undertaker H. Rogers in Beechwood Cemetery's Mausoleum in the springtime warmth of 16 May 1924. Interestingly, he had eschewed a burial in the extensive Beechwood outdoor plot of his father and mother.



(Left) The "Soper Wall" in the Beechwood Cemetery Mausoleum, Ottawa

(Right) Granite stone obelisk of Albert and Eleanor Soper, Beechwood Cemetery, Ottawa



Thomas Ahearn

In 1927, the city's celebrations of the 60th anniversary of Confederation on Parliament Hill included the inaugural clarion performance from the Peace Tower. The celebrations were broadcast nationwide principally through the Canadian National Railway (CNR)'s radio entertainment system which had been developed for CNR's passengers. The networking was organized by a broadcast committee chaired by Ahearn, though it's unclear whether Ahearn & Soper participated as a contractor. Governor General Lord Willingdon declared that the broadcast "had done more to create a national spirit in Canada than any other movement."

Also in 1927, the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE) donated Ahearn's portrait to hang on the walls of the Dominion Archives in a collection of outstanding Canadians. He had been a member of IEEE since 1887.

In 1926, Prime Minister Mackenzie King appointed Ahearn as chairman (1926–1932) of the Federal District Commission (FDC), the forerunner of the National Capital Commission. As chairman he wielded considerable influence and power, negotiating the revision of the *Federal District Commission Act* to obtain wider powers and more substantial funding.

Today, Ottawans continue to benefit from his overseeing of many land and structural improvements, purchases for parks and demolitions of dilapidated buildings, including:

- the demolition of Dey's Arena and the Lisgar Road shops,
- a new Dow's Lake boathouse to replace unsightly boathouses along the Rideau Canal,
- purchase for FDC parklands of land at Hampton Park, Rideau River east bank between Rideau and St. Patrick streets, Confederation Park, and King Edward Park,

- improvements to Central Park at Patterson's Creek,
- introduction of mandatory patrols by the RCMP of the FDC's parks and driveways, and
- the building of FDC greenhouses and a tree nursery in Rockcliffe.

He also oversaw improvements to the quality, beauty and public safety of, and automobile access to Ottawa's roadways and bridges, including:

- altering the Laurier Avenue bridge to improve access to what is now the Queen Elizabeth Driveway,
- new driveways along Laurier to the Elgin Street subway, and Echo Drive at Bank Street to Bronson Avenue,
- improvements to Lady Grey Drive, the driveway between Patterson's Creek and Fifth Avenue, and the roads of Rockcliffe Park,
- a major public safety overhaul of the roads, tramrails and sidewalks from Rideau Hall Gate to Princess Road,
- a traffic circle at Richmond Road and Island Park Drive to alleviate congestion caused by the Champlain Bridge,
- infilling of the Canal Basin "sewer" and walling off the Canadian National Railway along the Canal,
- extension of the Driveway from Fifth Avenue to Bank Street, and the one-way traffic channels between Bank Street and Bronson Avenue,
- reclamations of the lower end of Bate Island and Lake Flora (Hull), and
- building the Champlain Bridge and its approaches.

The Champlain Bridge across the Ottawa River was of open deck and plate girder design with 25 spans of 70-foot and four 100-foot spans for a total of 2,250 feet upriver from the Remic Rapids. It took just 11 months to complete in 1928.

Ahearn's competent chairmanship of the FDC likely helped with his appointment in that same year to the Privy Council, despite the lobbying of his daughter Liliás "Ethel" against his becoming a senator out of fear for his health!



*Champlain Bridge under construction, 1927
(Toronto Public Library TSPA_0107341f)*

In 2002 the Champlain Bridge was rebuilt, and a section of the original bridge put on display on Bate Island, midway across the bridge, with interpretive panels on the history of the bridge (photo on right).



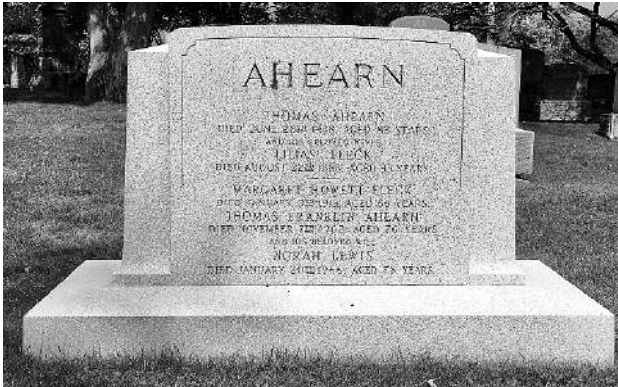
At the age of 70, Thomas finally went back to school. Some sources report that he earned his Master of Electrical Engineering! However, the *Globe* newspaper of 18 February 1926 reported that he passed, at 10 percent above the average, the radio-telegraphy (wireless operation) examination offered by the Radio Branch of the Marine Department, thus qualifying him to work "on

any ship flying the British flag.” It’s unlikely that he was considering a career change in his old age; more probably, he was sensing another business opportunity in marine radio-communication.

At the time of his death on 28 June 1938, Thomas Ahearn had amassed an impressive list of credentials:

- Ahearn & Soper Limited, vice-president
- Ottawa Electric Railway Company, president
- Ottawa Traction Company, president
- Ottawa Car Manufacturing Company, president
- Ottawa Electric Company, president
- Ottawa Gas Company, president
- Ottawa Light, Heat and Power Company, president
- Ottawa Investment Company, president
- Ottawa Land Association, president
- Ottawa Building Company, president
- Wallace Realty Company, vice-president
- Bell Telephone Company of Canada, director and executive committee member
- Canadian Westinghouse Company, director
- Northern Electric Company, director
- Bank of Montreal, director
- Royal Trust Company, director
- Bank of Canada, director
- Broadcasting Committee of the Diamond Jubilee 1927, chairman
- Federal District Commission, chairman 1927–1932
- Guarantee Company of North America, director
- American Institute of Electrical Engineers, member
- Old Time Telegraphers’ Association, member
- Telephone Pioneers of America, member.

Thomas and his wives and children are buried in a common plot with a simple headstone in Beechwood Cemetery, close to the location of the other tycoons, lumber barons and mayors of the time (see image below). The Ahearn “Irish clan” rests in the Catholic Notre-Dame Cemetery.



The Central Canada Exhibition Association approached Ahearn’s son Frank about a memorial to his father. Frank agreed to pay the costs of a refrigerated drinking fountain with four vitreous bowls and a bench at an important tram destination, Lansdowne Park. The fountain was designed by architect A. J. Hazelgrove. A square column at the corner bore the bronze relief portrait of Ahearn sculpted by Felix Weiss, famed for his U.S. Marine Corps War Memorial (Iwo Jima Memorial, 1954) in the Arlington National Cemetery, Virginia, and the bust of Carine Wilson in the Canadian Senate. The fountain was inaugurated 11 years after Ahearn’s death and was relocated twice, finally to the corner of Holmwood Avenue and Bank Street. A short quiet residential street is named in honour of Ahearn, just a few blocks west of the old Britannia Park tram terminal station.



The original Ahearn drinking fountain in Lansdowne Park (photo edited to remove later pylons and graffiti)



Relocated and nonfunctional at the corner of Holmwood Avenue and Bank Street

Postscript

Some may wish to equate Ahearn and Soper with the Robber Barons of the Gilded Age in America. Granted, they developed a horizontally and vertically integrated corporate empire with monopolistic controls which made them both very rich. They rode the “electrification wave,” at times on the coattails of the visions of others, notably in electric street lighting and electrified street transportation. They were astute, opportunistic and, at times, ruthless businessmen, adept at pulling political strings. However, they did not always get their own way, as shown by the eventual electricity supply duopoly and the success of the Hull electric and railway companies. They did much to develop Ottawa as a capital worthy of the 20th century. North American newspapers of the time, the many tributes at their funerals, and their extensive obituaries testify to the esteem in which they were held by business, the public and, sometimes grudgingly, governments.

“The reputation that Ottawa has secured electrically is very largely due to the efforts of Messrs. Ahearn and Soper. Mr. Ahearn’s wonderful grasp of everything practical with respect to electricity and Mr. Soper’s thorough knowledge of the business side of life, made a happy combination that has not only brought wealth to themselves but has made an enviable reputation for their native city.”

—The Buffalo Morning Express, December 27, 1896, p 11.

“There is something of romantic charm in the story of [Warren] Soper and his partner [Thomas Ahearn], who trod together the pathway of success. They were boys in knee breeches at school together; they were telegraph operators together; they were electrical contractors together, and were millionaires together, and enjoyed together the esteem and friendship of their townsmen, who rejoice at their merited success.”

—The Ottawa Evening Citizen, May 14, 1924, p 8.

Acronyms Used

A&S	Ahearn & Soper Incorporated
CEC	Consumers' Electric Company
CELPC	Chaudière Electric Light and Power Company
CPC	Capital Power Company
DEC	Deschênes Electric Company
HEC	Hull Electric Company
HERC	Hull Electric Railway Company
HSO	Historical Society of Ottawa
MEC	Metropolitan Electrical Company
OCC	Ottawa Car Company Ltd
OCCM	Ottawa Car Manufacturing Company
OC Transpo	Ottawa Transportation Commission
OEC	Ottawa Electric Company
OELC	Ottawa Electric Light Company
OERC	Ottawa Electric (Street) Railway Company
OGC	Ottawa Gas Company
OHEC	Ottawa Hydro Electric Commission
OLHPC	Ottawa Light Heat and Power Company Limited
PCC	Preston Car Company
REC	Royal Electric Company
SECO	Standard Electric Company of Ottawa
USEC	United States Electric Company
WCHS	Women's Canadian Historical Society

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**The Historical Society of Ottawa
2021 Declaration on Diversity of Perspective**

The Historical Society of Ottawa (HSO) acknowledges that, in pursuing its long-time mission to preserve and increase public knowledge of our local history, it has often done so within a narrow cultural perspective. Important perspectives that HSO feels should be given more focus include those of Indigenous peoples, racialized groups, people of colour, women, and members of the LGBTQ+ community.

The HSO has committed to do its utmost to ensure that our presentations, publications and activities consider diverse cultural perspectives and recognize past and present injustices. In doing so, HSO acknowledges the roles that the slave trade, colonialism, systemic racism, and civil and human rights violations have played in our history, and which continue to resonate in present times.

The Historical Society of Ottawa

Founded in 1898 as the Women's Canadian Historical Society of Ottawa, the Historical Society of Ottawa (HSO) is the oldest local history organization in the national capital area. It seeks to fulfill its goal of preserving and promoting knowledge of the city's history by inviting historical experts to speak at its meetings, public outreach via a website, social media and presentations to community groups, awards, publication of pamphlets and a quarterly newsletter, semi-annual excursions, and other special events and projects.

The HSO publishes the Bytown Pamphlet Series, each one of which concentrates on one aspect of the rich history of Canada's capital region. Pamphlets are distributed free to Society members, local libraries and other organizations, and are available for purchase at the address below.

New members are welcome (membership rates below).

The Historical Society of Ottawa

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Membership rates (annual)

Single \$35, Family \$50, Student \$10

Life Membership \$350

Back cover: *Ottawa's original LRT—the laying of streetcar tracks on Rideau Street, 1916. Looking west toward Sussex Drive. (Bytown Museum/ City of Ottawa Archives)*



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