

Walkerville: The Heritage of a Company Town



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Photo: Foxley – The Ambery-Isaacs House, designed by Albert Kahn, on Devonshire Road (Photo courtesy of Pat Malicki)

Among the shrinking number of 19th-century company towns, Walkerville – part of the City of Windsor since 1935 – remains an outstanding example of what can happen when

a visionary industrialist acquires acres of French farmland for his fiefdom.

This industrialist was Hiram Walker – a farm boy from Massachusetts, an enterprising Yankee grocer and distiller of vinegar in Detroit who looked south across the Detroit River and saw his future in the narrow farms stretching back from the Canadian shore. It is a short step from vinegar to whiskey and, in 1858, Hiram took that step. Hiram Walker & Sons became legendary for its Canadian Club brand.

On the eastern edge of Windsor's core lies the picturesque precinct still stubbornly referred to as Walkerville. Walkerville comprises about four square blocks, from the shore of the Detroit River where the distillery stands, southward to Ottawa Street, bounded on the west by Lincoln Road and on the east by Walker Road. But land acquisition did not stop there. Walker eventually spread his land holdings more than a mile to the south, developing the Walker Farms, where hops (for the future brewery), corn and rye (for the whiskey, of course) were harvested. Swine husbandry evolved – the swine consumed the mash produced by the distilling process.

Developed on the English "Garden City" Plan, the company town provided modest housing for distillery workers close to the industrial hub (Walker Road). The housing consists of parallel streets (Monmouth and Argyle), lined with small cottages, quadruplex row houses and semi-detached housing. It is noteworthy that workers were required to live in company housing at modest rent. Ironically, workers had to live teetotal; Walker's police force made sure of that.

The Walker sons' Walkerville Land & Building Company hired outstanding architectural firms. At the outset, Hiram's architects of choice were Mason & Rice, a prominent firm from Detroit that built the company's beautiful administrative office in 1892. The early 1890s saw fine duplexes rise on Devonshire Road for middle management and clergy. (In addition, Hiram built the town's church on Riverside Drive, as well as a street railway and railway hotel.). Farther inland were more elegant residences for the upper class – the directors and managers of various Walker enterprises. Hiram himself never took up residence in Walkerville as did his sons, but commuted daily by ferry from Detroit.



Photo: Hiram-Walker Executive Building (now a museum), designed by Albert Kahn (Photo courtesy of Pat Malicki)



Photo: Willistead Manor, interior, designed by Albert Kahn (Photo courtesy of Pat Malicki)

Edward Chandler Walker, the “Number One” son, built his fine house in 1909 and named it for his deceased elder brother, Willis. Willistead remains the most architecturally distinguished house in the region. For this physical expression of self-worth, Chandler chose Mason & Rice’s extraordinary draftsman, Albert Kahn. The son of a German immigrant rabbi, Albert rose to international prominence through the burgeoning automotive industry, designing grand houses and innovative, light-filled factories across the continent and abroad.

With government assistance, Walker built the Lake Erie, Essex and Detroit River Railway to transport farm produce in and out of his empire, as well as to ship liquor across the border (even during Prohibition, thanks to a loophole in the law). At one point, he and his sons developed a summer resort in the town of Kingsville on Lake Erie – the Mettawas Hotel, with its own beautiful rail station designed by Mason & Rice – taking advantage of the desire of Detroiters to get away from the rapidly growing metropolis and kick back on sunny beaches. A private ferry service brought the travellers directly across the Detroit River to Walker’s dock, and then on to the elegant train station on the town’s main street, Devonshire Road (since demolished by the Chesapeake & Ohio Railway).

At the heart of the town, in 1904, the Walker sons had a fine stone church built in honour of their mother, and named it in her memory – St. Mary’s Anglican Church. Architects Cram Goodhue & Ferguson of Boston and New York drew the plans, reminiscent of an English country church with modest Gothic elements. Over the decades, Walkerville has lost some of its fine structures, especially those built for the distillery. But its picturesque charm still draws discerning home buyers looking for old-fashioned architectural beauty – fine houses on large, landscaped lots, and excellence in building materials and construction techniques. It remains Windsor’s most admired neighbourhood.