

Biography:

Thomas Baker McQuesten (“Tom” to his family) is best remembered today as a politician and a leading advocate and builder of numerous important Hamilton and provincial landmarks (most notably the Royal Botanical Gardens, the McMaster University campus, Gage Park, the High Level Bridge, the Queen Elizabeth Way, the Bluewater Bridge and the Rainbow Bridge). Tom was also a lawyer with deep roots in Hamilton’s legal community.

“Tom” was one of two boys. His older brother, while able, had a nervous disposition, and so it fell to Tom to retrieve the family fortune. Fortunately, Tom showed promise. He did well in school and in athletics. He also appears to have had a legal turn of mind from an early age.

Tom attended the University of Toronto where he supported himself by working summers in lumber camps on the Ottawa River. He graduated in 1904 with a resume that included the editorship of the *The Varsity* and rowing and football “blues”.

Tom attended law school and articulated in Toronto. In 1906, while still a student-at-law, he returned to Hamilton to negotiate and complete the expropriation of land across the Hamilton Beach Strip for a railway client.

In 1907, Tom was sworn in as a barrister by the Treasurer of the Law Society at the time, Sir AEmelius Irving, the first President of the Hamilton Law Association. In the fall of 1907, a Toronto firm hired Tom to open an office for it in Elk Lake, Ontario. Elk Lake was a frontier town at the heart of the Cobalt “silver rush”. Tom loved the north, but he didn’t love the practice of law there. Accordingly, in 1909, Tom returned to Hamilton to join James Chisolm’s law firm. He thought well of the firm (“They have an immense number of small clients and quite a good sprinkling of good ones”), and he seemed satisfied with his \$1,000 annual salary.

Tom appears to have done well in the law. James Chisolm went to war in 1916, leaving Tom to manage the firm. (Chisolm wrote to Tom to remind him to pay the staff their Christmas bonus of one week’s salary and to tell Tom to pay himself a bonus of one month’s pay as a reward for his good, hard work.) By 1923, Tom was legal counsel to the Hamilton Harbour Commission.

Details regarding Tom’s legal career subsequently are sparse. Tom’s biographer, John Best,^[1] does not dwell much on the legal career. No doubt, his legal background was crucial to his work as a politician and builder.

[1] Source: Loukidelis, John. This article is largely based on Mr Best’s excellent biography, *Thomas Baker McQuesten: Public Works, Politics, and Imagination* (Hamilton: Corinth Press, c1991).