The forerunners of McMaster University – the Canada Baptist College and its successor, the Canadian Literary Institute – were established in 1837 and 1857, the former in the bustling city of Montreal, the latter in the small town of Woodstock, tucked away in the pastoral setting of southwestern Ontario. However, for one reason or another neither Montreal nor Woodstock was selected as the site for McMaster University. Toronto, Ontario’s emerging rival to Montreal, was chosen instead. Indeed the competition between the ancient metropolis on the St Lawrence and the new one on Lake Ontario was forcefully personified in William McMaster, the Baptist businessman and financier who in 1887 left the bulk of his million-dollar estate to endow the institution that gratefully took his name. An exemplar of Toronto’s growth in mid-Victorian times, this wholesaler, banker, Grit politician, and senator had cherished plans for creating an institution that would provide what he called in his will a ‘thoroughly practical Christian course of education.’

And what better place to start things off than Toronto, the city that had adopted him as an Irish immigrant and helped make his fortune? Woodstock, the home of the Literary Institute (later renamed Woodstock College), had originally been tipped for the honour, but it lost out to Toronto’s superior cultural and intellectual assets. The home of the provincial government and the provincial university, the ‘Queen City’ also boasted affiliated denominational colleges, reputable private schools, and a burgeoning civic library, not to mention a large Baptist population. After the mid-century a respectable veneer of civilization had descended upon the thriving city on the Humber. Baptist educators, supported by Senator McMaster, reasoned that if Baptist and other Evangelical students were to be educated properly and brought in touch with all that was best and cultured in Ontario then surely they must be tutored in such a setting. They were well aware that Canada’s institutions of
higher learning had been established in expansive urban environments. There were exceptions, such as Bishop’s University in Lennoxville, Quebec, and Acadia University in Wolfville, Nova Scotia – the Woodstocks of those provinces. On the other hand urban universities of note included Dalhousie, the University of New Brunswick, Laval, McGill, Queen’s, and, not least, Toronto.

McMaster and his more learned colleagues in the Baptist constituency chose Toronto, as other denominational leaders in Ontario had done before them, and rejected the entreaties of coreligionists who fancied instead an arcadian and uncluttered setting for their university. It was in Toronto, then, that the institution, chartered in 1887, opened three years later and where it functioned for some forty years before it uprooted itself and sought another urban home in nearby Hamilton. The senator and his friends, though they may have dreamt of making their own contribution to the Evangelical leavening of Toronto’s lump, clearly sought nourishment from that city and aimed to use it as a place where prospective ministers, teachers, and other professionals could be prepared for the changes overtaking Canadian society. Those changes and the future they were shaping appeared to revolve around the growing North American city, noisily represented by late-nineteenth-century Toronto. The marked desire to ‘keep up with the times’ and to anticipate the future’s needs had long been a hallmark of Baptist educators, and it certainly informed the creation of McMaster University.

Throughout its career in Toronto, however, McMaster’s impact on the city seemed negligible, especially when contrasted with that of its formidable neighbour, the ‘Toronto University.’ Despite its generous offering of arts subjects as well as theological ones, McMaster was invariably dismissed as just one of several denominational schools that operated in the city. And even though on three occasions it rejected federation with the ‘provincial university,’ most Torontonians obdurately continued to think of it as part of that institution or merely as a ‘little school for Baptists,’ even though a large fraction of non-Baptists – one-third – ultimately came to be enrolled in its classes. Towards the end of McMaster’s years in Toronto leading alumni pointed out mournfully that ‘it was difficult to avoid acquiring an inferiority complex [in that city]. The newspapers largely ignored our real achievements and the general public [rarely] if ever thought of us at all.’

Toronto’s apparently cavalier indifference toward McMaster infuriated its founders and well-wishers, because from the beginning they had acclaimed their institution not as a miniature copy of its large neighbour but as an alternative. They pointed out that even before the University of Toronto had done so, McMaster offered ‘thoroughly practical’ subjects such as political
science and sociology, and in a Christian rather than a secular or, as that
generation liked to put it, 'Godless' environment. To the charge that Mc-
Master catered to the needs of a small denominational minority in the country
(less than 10 per cent of the Dominion’s population was Baptist) it could
retort that its constituency was really more ‘national’ than the University of
Toronto’s because it embraced Baptists all the way from Quebec to the Pacific
coast. For that matter there had been talk at the end of the 1890s that, as
Wilfrid Laurier said of the nation, the twentieth century would belong to
McMaster and such Baptist sister institutions as Acadia University in Nova
Scotia.

In the years before the Great War broke out some ambitious westerners
had even rhapsodized about a ‘chain of Baptist educational fortresses’ extend-
ing from one end of the country to the other, protecting the faith and meeting
the requirements of a dynamic and ‘peculiar people,’ as Baptists described
themselves. The simpler reality was the creation of Okanagan and Brandon
Colleges and their affiliation with McMaster. Though modest, the two west-
erm institutions provided a hinterland for the fledgling McMaster. Soon
enough, however, Okanagan succumbed to financial woes; but Brandon
survived as a satellite of McMaster until 1938, when it turned non-
denominational and affiliated with the University of Manitoba.

In the interval a variety of calamities, ranging from the Great War to
recurring recessions, sharply curtailed McMaster’s efforts to sustain this
network of Baptist institutions and at times put even her own survival at risk.
Furthermore, the university underwent a serious trial in the twenties when its
theological teachings and instructors, particularly L.H. Marshall, were as-
saulted by Rev. T.T. Shields, the powerful fundamentalist pastor of Toronto’s
Jarvis Street Baptist Church. It was while this controversy was raging that a
campaign was mounted to relocate McMaster elsewhere, with Hamilton
being given a high priority. In short, the university began its search for a new
city to adopt.

After the turn of the century Hamilton was the only major city in the
province without an institution of higher learning. An abortive attempt had
been made to establish a college there in the 1860s, apparently planned along
the lines of the Baptists’ literary institute in Woodstock, a combined high and
post-secondary school that could offer courses up to the equivalent of first
year university. But hard times and retrenchment had shattered plans for this
first Hamilton College. Although a ladies’ counterpart was successfully estab-
lished under Wesleyan auspices, nothing like a Victoria, a Knox, a McMaster,
or a ‘Western University’ – London’s effort to place itself alongside Toronto
and Kingston – had taken root in Hamilton in the nineteenth century. Perhaps
the difficulties that marred Western's début gave pause to anyone in Hamilton contemplating a similar venture for his city. In any case, the awesome problems haunting such an initiative during the 'Great Depression' that stalked the closing decades of the century served to leave Toronto and Kingston in virtually undisputed control of higher learning in Ontario.

The dawn of 'Canada's century', however, brought with it good times, the Wheat Boom, large-scale domestic and foreign investment, new ventures in industrialism, and in particular the rejuvenation of Hamilton. The city's population increased by over 50 per cent to some 75,000 in the ten years after 1900. At the end of that period citizens could point with pride to the new industries enticed to the community, including the merger known as the Steel Company of Canada. Not surprisingly, it was at about this time that local McMaster alumni and some bumptious undergraduates from the 'Ambitious City' began lauding it as a worthy university site and a possible new location for their alma mater. But Hamiltonians were not alone in championing their home town. In 1912 George Cross, a popular McMaster church historian who went on to make his mark at the University of Chicago, doubted 'if any University can expect to fill a truly desirable place in the life of the people of [this] country unless it gathers about it the sympathy and support of some civic community ... Hamilton might do fine things for McMaster.'

The first tentative overtures from Hamilton and the advice offered by Cross were briefly considered by the university and then discarded when it decided to purchase a large parcel of land in North Toronto. Obviously its administration was still convinced that the provincial capital was the place to be. But the need to move from the tiny site on Bloor Street was becoming more and more imperative as the years went by and as undergraduate enrolment continued to inch up.

Plans for moving McMaster anywhere were effectively squelched by the onset of the Great War in 1914. Yet before the Armistice was signed in the fall of 1918 some Hamilton high school teachers and the unsquelchable alumni again took up the question. This initiative, which eventually came to be welcomed by the university, was pursued in the immediate post-war period by a newly formed alumni association, and before long brochures were being prepared extolling the virtues of Hamilton as a scenic setting for the institution. By attracting McMaster to Hamilton the city's image as a 'lunch bucket town' might be dispelled and its way of life (they hoped) softened. The interest of teachers and educators in the project is easily explained. Lawyers and physicians looked forward to having professional schools associated with the university, an institutional advance to which they hoped to contribute and thereby clothe their endeavours with a special prestige. Merchants and man-
ufacturers eagerly contemplated a new market for goods and services. The so-called Removal Campaign was masterminded in Hamilton by a Citizens’ Committee headed by William J. Westaway, a local businessman, and had the full backing of the Chamber of Commerce. It encountered rough weather, however, when the city’s heavily industrialized economy was buffeted in the mid-twenties by a series of slumps. In these circumstances the campaign languished. Then it revived late in the decade amidst a brief flurry of prosperity.

Like Hamilton, McMaster was also besieged by financial and political problems. The protracted and bitter confrontation with Shields robbed it of time and energy that could have been devoted to the intricacies of the removal campaign. Only when the issues raised by Shields were settled in the university’s favour in 1927 could its administration, led by Chancellor Howard P. Whidden, turn productively to the Hamilton project, one that promised fresh opportunities and more breathing space in the emerging suburb of Westdale.

An important question, however, had first to be resolved before the university could take Hamilton’s invitation seriously. By the terms of their own principles and by virtue of the doctrine of the separation of Church and State, Baptists could not and would not accept aid from the public purse for their educational institutions. Only if the city offered land for a campus and its citizens were prepared through a public subscription to commit the necessary funds for a science building would McMaster accept the arrangement. Hamilton agreed to those conditions, and the green signal was flashed for the campaign to go into high gear.