

TUNNEY'S PASTURE

A GOVERNMENT OFFICE COMPLEX WITH HUMBLE, AGRARIAN ROOTS



City of Ottawa Archives, MG159-CA008697.

The history of Tunney's Pasture arguably spans three distinct phases. It began life as a largely under-used tract of land on the western outskirts of the downtown core. From there, it progressed to become a thriving government office node that was inspired to exist apart from the congestion of the downtown core. More recently, plans are afoot to transform the 49-hectare campus into a much more modern, mixed-use development that includes commercial and residential spaces, and which aims to double the number of federal employees on site.

Together, these very different phases of its life tell a story that pulls in elements of the evolution of Ottawa itself, from humble, agrarian roots to a booming government centre, and now to a sophisticated capital city.



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A pasture – quite literally – for cows
The name Tunney's Pasture is evocative. Before development, the massive parcel of land in the then Township of Nepean belonged to the Ottawa Lumber Merchants' Association. The group was a who's who of the city's lumber merchants at the time – Philip Thompson, G.B. Greene, John R. Booth, Levi Young, and the firms of Bronsons & Weston and Perley & Pattee – and their aim was to control the river shoreline.

The association hired an Irish immigrant by the name of Anthony Tunney, who arrived in Canada in the 1860s and lived nearby on Fifth Street (now Parkdale Avenue), to watch over the largely vacant land. In exchange for this service, the association allowed Tunney to pasture his own cows on the property. The name Tunney's Pasture was struck and has remained ever since. Critically, while Tunney paid taxes for use of the land, he never claimed ownership of the land. This, as it turns out, was an expensive mistake.

In September of 1896, the lumber association sold the land for \$40,000 to the Ottawa Land Association. Tunney continued to keep animals on the land for a few more years – possibly under the same terms he had struck with the lumber merchants – but that period would be brief. After March 1902, there is no further record of Tunney on the land; he passed away in December 1915.

The pasture remained largely underdeveloped for decades. Prior to the Depression era, it came to include a modest subdivision known as Eldonwood Park that included a collection of shacks that housed families who lived without heat, electricity, or running water.

A campus for government – and a model for office growth
Things began to change – and rapidly – for Tunney's Pasture in the late 1940s.

Inspired by Jacques Gréber's sweeping General Report on the Plan for the National Capital, the federal government acquired the site in 1947 with a vision to build a government employment centre within a quiet and secure park-like campus that was complementary to, but separated from, the congestion of the downtown core. Excavation for the site began in 1950, with the site finally cleared of all occupants by the end of the decade.

Within 20 years, 18 low-rise buildings had sprung up on the site.



Tunney's Pasture Central Heating Plant by P199, via Wikimedia Commons. Licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0

Its entrance vestibule was fitted with a dramatic Byzantine-style ceiling mosaic designed by celebrated American muralist Barry Faulkner.

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The first of the buildings to be constructed on the site, in 1952, was a central heating and cooling plant. Building 13 still stands today and continues to supply heating and cooling to the 13 buildings that now serve the campus. By 1956, four other buildings – the Power Plant, the Virus Laboratory, the Finance Building, and the Bureau of Statistics Building – became the first permanent structures on the site. These were erected to define the initial character of the campus as a coherent group of low, modern classical brick buildings of consistent scale and materials. As in all things, however, even the best-laid plans can change.

By 1965, a second wave of buildings arrived: the Brooke Claxton Building, the Environmental Health Building, the Animal Breeding Building, and a Department of National Defence Data Centre. The Brooke Claxton Building in particular, which was built between 1961 and 1964, marked a radical break from Gréber's original low-rise philosophy for the campus. Designed by the national architectural partnership of Balharrie, Helmer and Morin of Ottawa together with Greenspoon, Freeland and Dunne of Montreal, the building was constructed as the national headquarters of the Department of National Health and Welfare – today's Health Canada.

The architects imagined the Brooke Claxton Building as the campus's defining visual focal point. Located at the main intersection of the campus at Columbine Driveway and Holland Avenue and standing at 19 storeys and 67 metres in height, it was created to deliberately surpass the 150-foot height restriction that has been imposed on buildings in the downtown core. The structure would go on to become the catalyst that would pave the way for the federal government to build genuinely tall modern office towers outside the immediate downtown core and without disturbing the more tightly controlled ceremonial core around Parliament Hill.

Even more significantly, it would go on to host the offices of various ministers of health, including Judy LaMarsh, Marc Lalonde, and Monique Bégin. By extension, it became the administrative hub for the creation and implementation of such landmark social programs as the Canada Pension Plan, Medicare, and the Canada Health Act.

More recently, the basement of the Brooke Claxton Building became home to the Iskotew Healing Lodge, an Indigenous wellness and ceremonial space designed by renowned architect Douglas Cardinal.

Tunney's Pasture continued to evolve in various and surprising ways over the years. In 1971, for example, Atomic Energy of Canada Limited constructed a SLOWPOKE-2 class research nuclear reactor in the northwest quadrant of the site. It continued to operate the reactor on the site until 1984.

By 1980, another wave of development had added three more significant buildings to the site: the R.H. Coats Building, the Jean Talon Building, and the Jeanne Mance Building. By the start of the decade, the campus had almost completely departed from its original Gréber-inspired vision, and was dominated by high-rise office towers.

The R.H. Coats Building in particular, stands as the tallest among the campus buildings at 26 storeys, or 99 metres. It has become known among staff and birdwatchers as a nesting site occasionally visited by peregrine falcons.

All of which is not to say the low-rise elements of Tunney's Pasture have been forgotten or indeed demolished. Many remain, and house the offices of a variety of federal departments, including the Department of National Defence, Library and Archives Canada, Health Canada, Measurement Canada and Statistics Canada.

A vision for an aging campus

Buildings age, as all things do.

In 2011, CBC News published a report that condemned many of the aging facilities on the site. It found that four had been rated in poor structural condition, while others lacked clean water. Workers were, quite understandably, expressing concerns about their health and safety.

The report would go on to become a catalyst for change. In 2014, the National Capital Commission approved the Tunney's Pasture Master Plan – the cornerstone of a strategic long-term planning exercise to recognize the untapped development potential of the site. At its core, the 25-year plan called for the creation of a federally driven mixed-use community that would be tied to the then soon-to-be-constructed light rail system, and which would blend office use with new residential and commercial developments which would be knitted into the surrounding neighbourhoods.

The plan remains in development. The National Capital Commission is working alongside the Canada Lands Company to secure federal and municipal approvals for the development. Meanwhile, the campus has seen a major project to upgrade the aging central heating and cooling infrastructure, and several of the older buildings on the site have been placed on a federal disposal list, with an eye to converting them into affordable housing.

Today the R.H. Coats Building continues to house Statistics Canada, while the Brooke Claxton Building remains the headquarters of Health Canada – both hold various heritage designations. Both will also undoubtedly remain as the broader campus around them slowly transforms from a single-purpose government employment node into a genuinely mixed-use corner of the capital.