

SIR ADAM BECK

*POLITICS/
BUSINESS*



*Inducted: 2012
Years at GCI & VS:
1869 - 1871*

Sir Adam Beck, manufacturer, statesman, politician and philanthropist, was born on June 20, 1857 in Baden, Ontario, the fourth child of Jacob Beck and his wife Charlotte Hespeler, a sister of Jacob Hespeler. At the time of his death on August 15, 1925, Sir Adam received, according to the Dictionary of Canadian Biography, “tributes such as have seldom been paid to a Canadian of any generation. A man whose achievements are generally regarded as without counterpart in the annals of his country.”

Beck came from an enterprising German immigrant family of builders and makers. Adam’s father founded the township of Baden, Ontario, where he built an iron foundry, a grist mill and a large brick house. As a child, Adam and his siblings stayed busy exploring the factories and horseback riding in the country. From 1869 to 1871, Adam was sent to William Tassie’s boarding school here at Galt Collegiate. It was said by those who knew Adam that as a student he preferred riding to reading but that he also exhibited determination and a visionary ability as well as some sternness, perhaps inherited from his father.

Upon completion of his studies in Galt, Adam returned to the family business in Baden and then, in 1879, established his own factory in Galt manufacturing boxes. For a time in Galt he worked in his own factory, filed his own saws and delivered the finished product in a hand cart. In 1884, Adam established a second factory in London and steadily expanded his business in the Beck Manufacturing Company. By the time of his death he operated branch factories in Hamilton, Toronto and Montreal as well.

Sir Adam’s entrance into the political field began in London in 1901 with his election to the Hospital Trust. During this time he fought against the practice of involuntary submission of poor patients to clinical experiments for the benefit of medical students. Sir Adam’s popular position led directly to his election as mayor of London in 1902 and then in 1903 to the Provincial Legislature as London’s representative. Taking advantage of a growing public demand for a fair distribution of Niagara Hydro-Electric power, Adam earned an appointment as the commissioner who in 1906 produced the bill in the Ontario Legislature that created the Ontario Hydro-Electric Power Commission. Sir Adam was named chairman of the new body and continued in that office until his death. Under Sir Adam’s leadership co-operative, municipally owned electrical distribution systems led to a revolutionary reduction in power prices. At the time of Sir Adam’s death, the investment had grown to the colossal sum of \$ 262 million shared among 400 cities, towns and villages.

Despite the fact that Sir Adam’s ceaseless political activities earned for him the nick name of “the human dynamo”, he found time to carry forward some extraordinary public programs. In 1909, he created the Beck Artesian Well system, which preserved London’s fresh water supply. But perhaps the enterprise closest to Sir Adam’s heart was his establishment of the Queen Alexandria Sanatorium in 1910, which was inspired by his own daughter’s recovery from tuberculosis. The institution, of which Beck remained president until his death, treated hundreds of soldiers during World War I and thousands of civilians.

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