

Brigadier General Henry Norlande Ruttan

Loyalist forebear: William Ruttan, UE, 3rd Battalion, New Jersey Volunteers

Henry Norlande Ruttan was born 21 May 1848 in Cobourg, Ontario to Henry James Ruttan and Margaret Pringle. The whole of his professional life was interwoven by two major strands, the military and civil engineering.

Ruttan's military life began in his teens when he joined the Cobourg Volunteer Militia mustered against the Fenian Raids in 1866. At 18 he graduated from the School of Military Instruction in Kingston. After he moved to Winnipeg he became a founder of the 90th Battalion of the Winnipeg Royal Rifles in 1883. He served as a captain under the command of General Frederick Middleton during the North West Rebellion in 1885. He saw action at Fish Creek and Batoche. It was at Batoche that the Winnipeg Rifles acquired the nickname, "The Little Black Devils". For his service Ruttan was awarded the North West Canada Medal and Clasp.

Ruttan served as commander of the 90th Royal Rifles from 1895-1900. In 1910 he was promoted to Lt.Colonel of the 100th Battalion of the Winnipeg Grenadiers. In 1912 he became Brigadier General and was awarded the Canadian General Service Medal. On the outbreak of war in 1914 he hoped to go overseas but was turned down because of his age, 66.

Henry Norlande Ruttan's outstanding contribution to the City of Winnipeg would come out of his other profession-engineering. He began his engineering career as a survey engineer for Sir Sanford Fleming. Subsequently he served in the engineering departments of the Grand Trunk, the Intercolonial, and the Canadian Pacific Railways.

After settling in Winnipeg, Ruttan was appointed the first city engineer, a position he would hold until his retirement in 1914. As City Engineer Ruttan's major focus was clean water. In 1900 he promoted artesian wells to replace the polluted Red and Assiniboine Rivers as water sources. Unfortunately these wells proved inadequate, particularly for firefighting as pressure in the hydrants was too low. There were several spectacular fires in the early 20th century, such as the destruction of the luxurious Manitoba Hotel in 1904. Fire insurance rates were high and were limiting the growth of the city. In particular buildings could not be safe higher than three storeys

Ruttan's solution was to be his greatest legacy, the James Avenue Pumping Station. At the time it was the largest such plant in the world. Civil engineers came from all over the British Empire to study its operation. Winnipeg went on a building spree that included the first Chicago-style high rises in Western Canada.

The problem of pure water remained, however, until the construction of the Shoal Lake Aqueduct in 1919. Ruttan had not favoured this project and it was a source of much controversy until recently,

Prior to his retirement, Ruttan oversaw the expansion of the sewer system to parts of the city not previously served, such as the North End. This combined with clean water greatly reduced the incidence of typhoid and cholera

Henry Norlande Ruttan married Andrina Barberie, also of loyalist descent in 1871. They had nine children of which six lived to grow up. In 1914 after his retirement they moved to a grand house at 180 Westgate in Armstrong's Point where he died in 1925. His grave in St. John's Cemetery is marked by a large monument, more grandiose than that of his second cousin Margaret Scott a short distance away. They both, though in different ways, worked to better the lives of the people of Winnipeg.

To this day, the height of the Red River is measured as "so many feet James". Today, both parts of the decommissioned James Avenue Pumping Station are restaurants on the recently gentrified Water Front Drive.

Sources:

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