

# HISTORICAL GATINEAU PARK

*A hike to Carbide Ruins reveals pioneer and industrial history*

By Katharine Fletcher | Photos Eric Fletcher

**T**his hike from O'Brien Beach to the Carbide Willson Ruins was formerly known as Discovery Trail. Today it's just No. 36.

Pity.

That's because of all hikes in Gatineau Park, this one offers what's perhaps the most tangible kind of human history.

Even the approach to the trailhead at O'Brien Beach parking lot (P11) is historical. From Old Chelsea, we travel west on the Meech Lake Road, named after Asa Meech, a Congregationalist minister who came to Hull (today's Gatineau) from New England in 1815.

Although the National Capital Commission, the agency which manages Gatineau Park, owns Meech's farmhouse, it remains unidentified, a sad and baffling neglect. Watch for a simple, gabled white farmhouse on your left as you approach O'Brien Beach. Meech built it on 80 hectares of land deeded to him in November 1823.

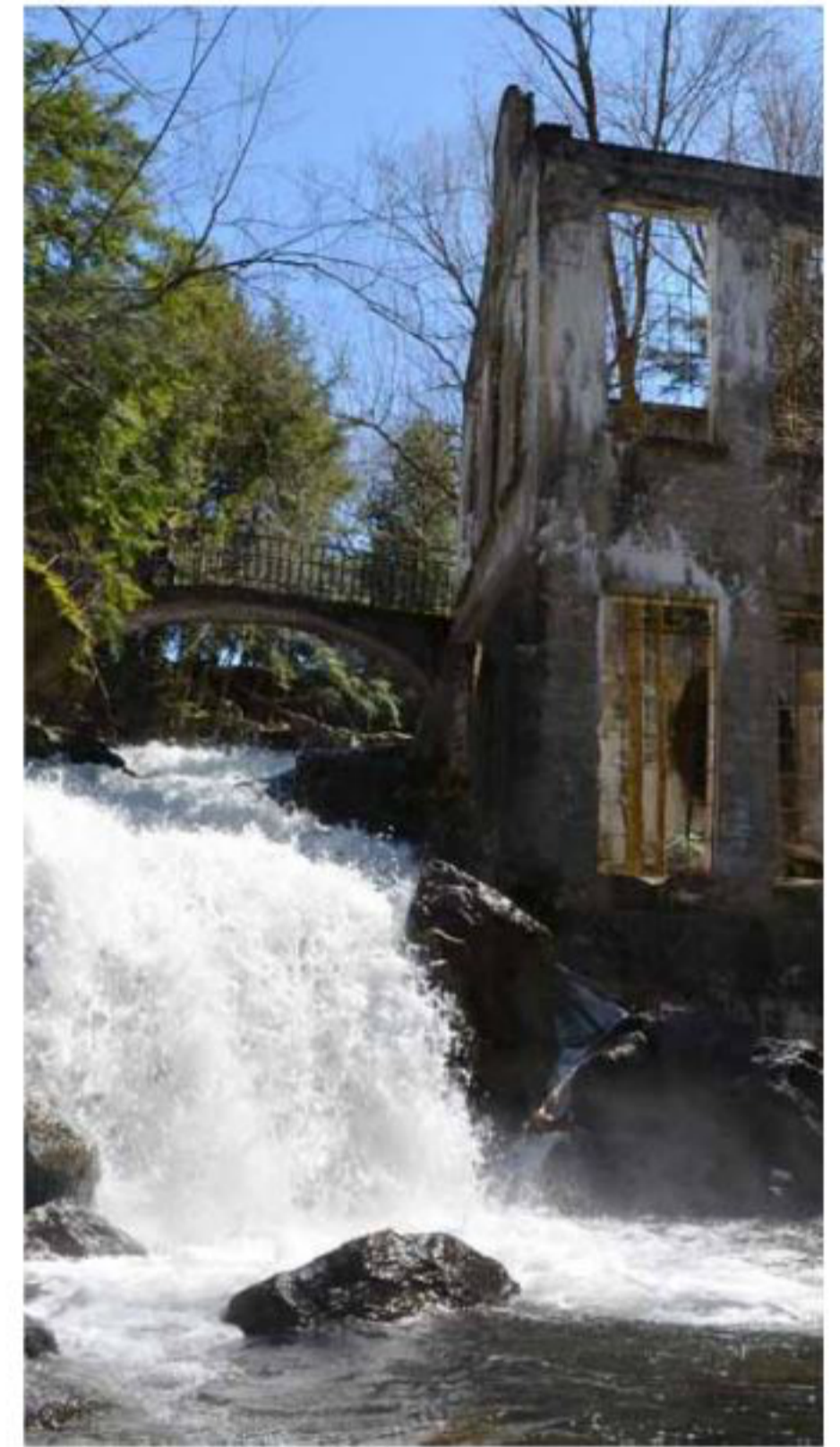
Incidentally, O'Brien is a famous Canadian. Renfrew-born, he became a major industrialist who, among other things, planned

the Crow's Nest Pass section of railway which still connects Alberta to British Columbia. And he founded the National Hockey Association in 1909.

Your footsteps along No. 36 traverse a pioneer trail connecting the earliest European settlers in the Old Chelsea and Meech Lake area to Wakefield. While walking, imagine them felling trees to create a bumpy pathway first for human feet, later horse and wagon.

This is the route Thomas Leopold "Carbide" Willson's contractors would use to haul cement, windows and other supplies to build the dam, generating plant, and superphosphate fertilizer plant (called "The Mill" by locals) in the early 1900s.

Willson was an inventor nicknamed "Carbide" because he inadvertently discovered calcium carbide, used in the production of acetylene gas. After coming to Ottawa in 1901, he searched for a Gatineau Hills watershed that had a reliable waterfall for power



generation. There he could test production of super-phosphate fertilizer, a product he believed would revolutionize agriculture.

We can imagine his satisfaction when discovering the Meech Lake watershed. By 1904 he owned 185 hectares and a few years later had completed a summer home, generating plant and the world's first super-phosphate fertilizer plant. Pleasure at his success was all too brief: in 1915 he died of a heart attack and the site was abandoned. His grand summer "cottage" still overlooks Meech Lake, serving as a conference centre.

### THE HIKE, STEP BY STEP

The 36 trailhead is at the northwest corner of P11.

After hiking roughly 10 minutes, there's a steep descent to the convergence of Meech and Little Meech lakes, spanned by a footbridge. Continuing to the right, circle the western end of Little Meech and, if you look with binoculars along its northeast shore, you might spy the small gap denoting the headwaters of Meech Creek.

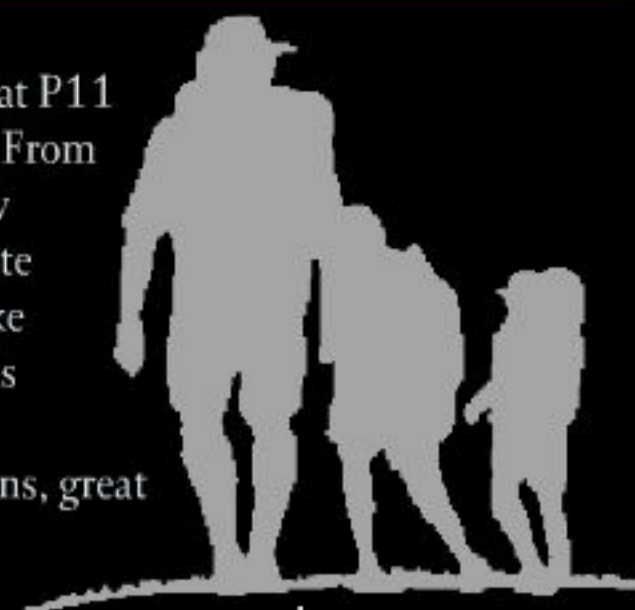
What a perfect watercourse Willson had discovered!

Now ascend the broad trail. Several metres beyond its summit, there's a path veering right. Follow it through the cathedral-like forest and listen for the sound of falling water. A narrow descent and voila:

### TRAILFACTS!

**TRAIL 36** is a hilly, broad, easy-intermediate hike, starting at P11 that has changing rooms and outhouses. Dogs on leash please. From P11 to Carbide Willson Ruins is 3.25 kilometres return. Allow two hours if you like to dawdle, take photographs or contemplate history. Pack a swimsuit and swim at Meech Lake after your hike (despite NCC signage, this remains a popular nudist site. If this bothers you, go early, go in bug season; go in winter ...).

Look for beaver, deer, hooded and common mergansers, loons, great blue herons and kingfisher.



Willson's ruins and the impressive Meech Creek waterfall.

In all seasons, the ruins are picturesque, the heritage poignant. Imagine the power station glowing its blue light in the woods. What would deer have thought of it? Look for remnants of the penstock tubing, which once funnelled water from Little Meech to the turbines.

Cross the arched footbridge to the far side of Meech Creek to examine the octagonal structure that formed the base of the acid condensation tower, where the fertilizer was made. A fire destroyed the wooden tower years ago, so we can only speculate how the process worked.

Precambrian rocks provide a welcome

picnic spot and view of the waterfall to help mentally reconstruct how the scene once looked. Nowadays, lake water cascades through openings in the dam, past the generating station, down Meech Creek Valley to eventually join the Lapeche River.

Retrace your steps. As you near P11, you pass alongside a gravel road leading uphill to O'Brien's and Willson's summer residences. Willson's shy wife, Mary, spent happy times here. She was a piano teacher, so as we stroll by perhaps we can conjure up music floating over Meech Lake and through the woods.

That wasn't the only music at Meech Lake in the early 1900s. Capucin friars used to chant their evensongs while paddling their canoes at twilight ... ■