

An Historical Atlas of Toronto – A Geographical Perspective

By Derek Hayes

I'm not a surveyor, but I love maps, especially old ones. And, of course, many of the very earliest were the result of surveyors slogging through the bush, measuring distances and fixing positions, to create a framework so that land could be settled by immigrants. To sell land, or even to give it away, there had to be some sort of definition on the ground of what was being sold or given, and the only way of recording that was a map. And in a surprising number of cases, the initial framework survived to become the basis of a city or rural area's road pattern.

Such was the case with Toronto, subject of my newly published *Historical Atlas of Toronto* (Douglas & McIntyre, September 2008). After the American War of Independence the decision was made to allow thousands of refugees from the new United States of America to settle in Upper Canada, specifically created in 1791 to allow them to live under a British legal and land-holding system without giving rise to dissent in French-speaking Québec, then to become Lower Canada. The United Empire Loyalists, as the refugees were known after 1789, were to be settled along the northern shore of Lake Ontario, and to facilitate this land was surveyed as far west as Toronto.

Before this could be legally done, the land had to be purchased from the Native peoples. The Royal Proclamation of 1763 had decreed that no land outside the original boundaries of Québec could be taken from Native people without negotiated purchase by the Crown. In the Toronto area a survey in 1787 by Alexander Aitken roughly defined what became known as the Toronto Purchase, negotiated in 1787 and reaffirmed (with a map) in 1805. The original purchase in 1787 was ill-defined, and it seems likely that the



1791 Plan of the Township of Dublin, which was renamed York Township. Plan Ref: 2391 K25. Source: Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources. Copyright: 2008 Queens Printer Ontario. Reprinted with permission.

Native chiefs actually signed a blank document. Concern over the legality of the initial purchase was so much of a concern even to the British, and was the cause of the 1805 confirmation, and at the same negotiations land west of Toronto, the Mississauga Tract, was also surrendered.

At the time the British certainly thought a legal purchase had occurred, for they went ahead with their survey of the lakeshore. Townships were given names by surveyor Augustus Jones—it is not clear to me whether he was told to give them the names he did, or whether he simply made them up—and they copied names of British cities, though most were quickly changed when settlement began. In the western part of the

survey Jones's *Bristol* became Darlington; *Norwich* became Whitby; *Edinburgh* became Pickering; *Glasgow* became Scarborough; and *Dublin* became York, a name it would retain until 1834, when it became Toronto.

The fascinating maps showing the lines laid out by Augustus Jones are today in Crown Land Surveys in Peterborough. On them can be seen the "front line" surveyed by Jones, with the truncated lots south of it reaching to the Lake Ontario shoreline—the shoreline, of course, as it was in 1791, much different from that of today, as Toronto grew out into the lake over a period of a hundred years or more. The "front line" became the line of Lot Street, later renamed Queen Street.

These were the first proper surveys of Toronto, although they are certainly not the first maps. Those were the maps of French traders who valued and used the Toronto Carrying Place as a portage to the upper lakes via Lac Taranto (or other name variations), now Lake Simcoe, and the place from which it seems the very name *Toronto* is derived, from *tkaronto*, a Native word for “trees standing in water,” a reference to fish weirs. The earliest map to carry this name dates from 1675. Later, just before the British swept the French from the Plains of Abraham in 1759, a French trading fort, Fort Rouillé or Fort Toronto, stood at the southern end of the Carrying Place portage route. A superb colour manuscript map showing the fort and its location was drawn by schooner captain René-Hippolyte Laforce in 1757.

Other areas of what is now Greater Toronto were surveyed as the need arose. One early survey was that of Abraham Iredell, who in 1794-96 laid out a plan for Markham, on the east side of Yonge Street, which had been built by the Queen’s Rangers between 1793 and 1796 (and shown in a map in the latter year). Markham was laid out for the German Company of William Berczy, a land grant of 64,000 acres. Upper Canada Governor John Graves Simcoe hoped that Berczy’s settlers would create an agricultural community that would supply York, which became the capital of Upper Canada in 1793.

Military surveyors drew many of the early maps of Toronto. The attack on York by the American army during the War of 1812 gave rise to a considerable effort to improve the defences of the city to prevent a potential recurrence, and of course they all needed maps and plans. There was even a plan for a vast pentagonal fortification along the lines of those built in Europe, though this did not materialize. Another fascinating map was drawn up in 1865 to plot lines of earthworks around Toronto to be used for the defence of the city when it was thought likely that the huge Union armies might turn on Canada after they had defeated the South during the American Civil War. It is just as well

they never turned their attention northward, for it seems most improbable that Toronto would have been able to mount much more than a token resistance. Anyone who has seen those photos of the huge cannon developed and used during the Civil War will appreciate what I mean here.

The beginning of the rise of Toronto as the country’s commercial and financial centre began with the coming of the railway. The first, the Ontario, Simcoe and Huron Railway, which was intended as a portage rail line over the Toronto Carrying Place, began construction in Toronto in 1851, though there were plans (and maps) of proposals for such a railway as early as 1836. The first maps show where stations might have been. Railroading was a highly competitive affair, and there are quite a few maps that show the plans of the rival companies, several in great detail, with actual track alignments and plans of facilities such as depots and roundhouses. The Archives of Ontario has a number of these large scale plans. The railways, of course, created their own growth, and real estate developers rushed to cash in. Communities such as Mimico were laid out around railway stations—in this case on the Hamilton and Toronto line, completed in December 1855—and commuting was born.

Land is subdivided and surveyed and real estate maps are produced in any growing city as existing landowners attempt to cash in on the new demand and newcomers have to be content with smaller lots. Toronto was no exception. The first major real estate sales boom occurred in the 1850s coincident with the coming of the railway, and because so many of them defined the street pattern we see today and named many of the streets this makes them especially interesting—and very relatable to today’s city.

Most of the area that is today central Toronto can be seen as subdivisions of great estates on maps of this period. And real estate was not just confined to city residences. For example, in 1887 at Long Branch, developers promoted a summer resort, a lakeside refuge from

the hot city, and then, as now, produced an attractive brochure to sell their lands and fine houses. Long Branch was to be a “strictly temperance” resort, sold only to “subscribers who can be depended upon to maintain the reputation of the resort.” Imagine trying to sell real estate with those conditions today! But Long Branch was very progressive; a planned hotel was to have “all the latest improvements such as speaking tubes, electric bells, incandiscent [sic] light and Telephone connection directly with Toronto.” Then, as now, the businessman could keep in touch during his vacation.

Other often historically important maps were those produced by fire insurance companies. Usually very detailed, they were intended to show the fire risk building by building, and hence will normally distinguish brick buildings from wooden, at least. One of the very earliest is a sectional atlas drawn in 1858, the work of two city surveyors, William Sommerville Boulton and Henry Carew Boulton. It was in 30 separate sheets, but using the wonders of Photoshop, I was able to piece them together to create a detailed map of the entire city—a digital map that would never have been possible in hard copy.

Many cities needed to promote themselves against others, competing to be a capital, a railroad hub, a financial center, or just to encourage people to settle there, and to do this a favourite medium in those days was the bird’s-eye map, a pseudo-aerial perspective view of the city. Typically published by subscription, the businesses and fine houses of merchants and wealthy residents are classically displayed around the map’s perimeter; these were people, of course, who had paid to be there. But the result is an often magnificent and artistic historical record of what a city looked like—or its promoters hoped it would look like. Toronto has three or four magnificent bird’s-eye maps, which provide a superb historical record of the city at the time they were published.

The *Historical Atlas of Toronto* includes maps of the port and the reclamation of the waterfront, which is vastly


changed from its original shape and size, first by railway development in the mid-nineteenth century and then by deliberate development of port facilities with the creation of the Toronto Harbour Commissioners beginning in 1911. The plans included the infilling of Ashbridge's Bay, east of the Eastern Entrance, and there are a number of

As automobile ownership climbed, there were many proposals for improvements to the city street system. Some, in the 1920s, were influenced by the City Beautiful movement, which promoted grand boulevards and traffic circles. Most were not built—the Depression of the 1930s got in the way—but the southern part of University Boulevard,

1965. In the room was the computer that controlled all of the city's traffic lights, a Univac 1107 in a temperature-controlled room, with banks of whizzing tape machines that cost \$1.5 million. For that the city received a computer with 256k RAM and the equivalent of a 6mb hard drive. It seems to reflect poorly on the vast computer resources required to do the simplest task today.

Another set of interesting—yet very chilling—maps are those drawn up in 1957 to plan the mass evacuation of Toronto in case of nuclear attack. The exit strategy was to avoid at all costs intersecting traffic flows and bottlenecks, all illustrated on the maps. Whether it would have worked is hard to say, but the maps remain as a reminder of those frightening times.

The *Historical Atlas of Toronto* displays over 300 old maps, far more than can be mentioned here. Maps provide a unique geographical perspective on the city's history and this

is the first time they have been brought together in one volume to tell the city's story. It is a history complementary to others more conventional, and hopefully an addition that surveyors, at least, will find interesting. It is featured in the Book Reviews on page 42. 

Derek Hayes, who is a geographer by training, has a passion for old maps and what they can reveal about the past. He is the author of a number of Historical Atlases. More information can be found on his website at www.derekhayes.ca.



Real Estate advertisement and plan of Long Branch Summer Resort on Lake Ontario. The survey plan was prepared by Unwin, Browne and Sankey in 1887. Credit: Toronto Public Library Bds1887.Long Branch.

innovative proposals for this, which were produced before the project was actually carried through, principally after the First World War. Later, the City Airport was also created on reclaimed land. Reclamation was crude by today's standards; a lot of it was done with the city's garbage, dumped directly into Lake Ontario. Then, in the bold 1960s and 1970s came grand plans such as the creation of Harbour City, a residential and commercial development on 510 acres. Highly innovative, the plan was ultimately rejected. But Ontario Place, a much smaller innovation, was opened in 1971.

below Queen Street, owes its origins to these plans. And then, of course, there were the numerous plans for freeways—or expressways, as Torontonians prefer to call them. The interconnecting network, which had its origins in a master plan drawn up in 1943, was partly built, but its incursion into the downtown area was abruptly halted by the public outcry over the demolition of neighbourhoods by the proposed Spadina Expressway, cancelled by premier Bill Davis in 1971.

One interesting map was created for traffic control, and hung in the computer room of the City of Toronto in