

The Simcoe Legacy: The Life and Times of Yonge Street



The Ontario Historical Society



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A collection of the papers from the seminar which explored the legacy of John Graves Simcoe, Upper Canada's first Lieutenant Governor, and his search for a route to Canada's interior that led to the building of the longest street in the world.

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Foreword

To celebrate the 200th anniversary in 1996 of the building of Yonge Street, The Ontario Historical Society held a two-day seminar, co-sponsored with the Metropolitan Toronto Reference Library, on February 16 and 17, 1996. The papers in this volume are some of the presentations that were given at that seminar. Together, they explore the legacy of John Graves Simcoe, first Lieutenant Governor of Upper Canada, and his search for a route to Canada's interior that led to the building of the longest street in the world.

Our thanks to Linda Kelly of Sheguiandah, who attended the seminar, for providing a brief overview which indicates some of the riches that could not be included in this volume. We also wish to thank Dr. Donald Smith, of the University of Calgary, for his paper on "The Mississauga and the Building of Yonge Street, 1794-1796," which he generously submitted as an addition to these seminar papers and which we are pleased to publish here as a particularly appropriate introduction to the topic.

There have been many enthusiastic anniversary celebrations for Yonge Street in 1996. We hope that this volume will help contribute as well to those memorials of our historic past, and to the pleasure and profitable instruction of all those who are interested in the life and times of Yonge Street.

Wyn Millar
Chair, Publications Committee
The Ontario Historical Society

Introduction

Linda Kelly

"The Simcoe Legacy: The Life and Times of Yonge Street," a seminar co-sponsored by The Ontario Historical Society and the Metropolitan Toronto Reference Library to celebrate the 200th anniversary of Yonge Street, took place on February 16 and 17, 1996.

The seminar opened on Friday evening with greetings from the present Lieutenant Governor of Ontario, the Honourable Henry N. R. Jackman, who recounted some of the hardships endured by the first Lieutenant Governor of the province, John Graves Simcoe; his wife, Elizabeth Posthuma Gwillim Simcoe, and two of their children who accompanied them.

The first speaker of the evening was Dr. Robert Surtees, of Nipissing University in North Bay, who spoke on "The Lure of Furs in the Canadian Interior; the First Nations and their Skills and Knowledge of Interior Travel." He was followed by Dr. Stanley Mealing, Professor Emeritus, Carleton University, who spoke on "The Spot Destined by Nature to Govern the Interior World," which outlined the role of Yonge Street in Simcoe's plan to civilize Upper Canada.

After these two presentations there was a reception featuring foods of the era. Guests dined on beef jerky, cornbread, forcemeat balls, and cheese, while the Hogarth Trio provided period music on the fife and drum.

On Saturday, the first speaker of the day was Lorne Smith, who as a direct descendant of the Berczy Settlers was especially well suited to the talk which he gave on "William Berczy's Settler Axemen." That was followed by a slide presentation on "Surveys, Settlers, and Settlements," by Ted Garden, representing the Ontario Land Surveyors. Mr. Garden noted that Yonge Street was opened in 1796 but was not considered passable for many years. He praised the surveyors for their endurance and skill in creating a straight road while struggling through swamp, bogs, and creeks. Jeanne Hopkins, of North York Public Library, followed this presentation with a talk and slides showing the modes of travel, tollgates, and hotels on Yonge Street.

Rosemary Vyvyan, the historical planner at Discovery Harbour (formerly the Historic Naval and Military Establishments) at Penetanguishene, continued the trek up Yonge Street, with its military history particularly in mind. Linking Michilimackinac, Penetanguishene, and York was a prime concern in extending Yonge Street, and the speaker outlined the history of Penetanguishene in particular. Dr. Carl Benn of the Toronto Historical Board spoke on the 1837 Rebellion as it was played out on Yonge Street as a tragedy rather than a comic opera.

Lunchtime featured a visit from John Graves Simcoe himself (as portrayed by Lieutenant Colonel Michael Stevenson), and lunch was made up of foods reminiscent of the period -- foods that could be packed and carried on a journey. Next followed a talk and series of slides by Dr. Rae Fleming, author and historian from Woodville, Ontario, on the theme of transportation on Yonge Street from 1796 to 1996.

Michael McClelland, of Edwin Rose Architects Inc., representing the Toronto Society of Architects, illustrated the changes on Yonge Street over the years with graphic material showing how buildings and population expanded and grew more dense with the passing of time. He described how store fronts on city blocks initially faced the street, with small courtyards within, in contrast to how they may now appear. Tracy Calvert gave a slide presentation that followed Yonge Street from its muddy beginnings all the way to the Minnesota border. Covering a total of 1,178 miles, the street is known provincially as Highway 11.

The seminar concluded with a description by Iain Craig, Kleinburg resident and high school teacher, of a trip planned for September and October 1996 to re-enact the historic trip, by batteau, horseback, and canoe, made by John Graves Simcoe in 1793 from Toronto to Penetanguishene.



The Mississauga and the Building of Yonge Street, 1794-1796

Donald B. Smith

"I still distinctly remember the untamed aspect which the country exhibited when I first entered the beautiful basin." So wrote Joseph Bouchette about Toronto harbour which he visited in 1792, just a year before Lieutenant Governor John Graves Simcoe founded York. In 1792 only two families inhabited the mainland and the long peninsula joined to it by a narrow neck of land. These two families belonged to the Credit River First Nation. They called themselves Anishinabeg, meaning "human beings"; the fur traders called them Chippewa (or Ojibwa), and most frequently they gave all the Ojibwa on the north shore of Lake Ontario the name, "Mississauga."

In the 1790s primeval forest covered the western crescent of Lake Ontario. Tall groves of oak, ash, maple, hickory, black walnut, and pine reached upwards twenty to thirty metres. The woods in summer abounded with wildlife - beaver, deer, and bear. In the spring and fall salmon ran in the rivers and creeks flowing into Lake Ontario.

The Mississauga's seasonal round began with *seegwun*, "the sap season," when hot sun and frosty nights caused the maple sap to flow. After sugar-making, families moved to the Credit River for the spring salmon run. About the first of May the Mississauga socialized and held their religious ceremonies. Then, breaking into smaller groups, they scattered to their planting grounds, frequently on the flats of one of the creeks or rivers flowing into Lake Ontario. Toward the end of summer or *neebin*, the abundant season, the women harvested their corn. Many Mississauga then canoed or walked to the Credit for the beginning of the fall salmon run, or gathered large quantities of wild rice growing in the neighbouring shallow lakes and slow streams. In the late fall or *tuhgwuhgin*, the fading season, they travelled in small family groups to their individual hunting grounds. Natural landmarks clearly marked each family's boundaries. They remained there throughout *peboon*, the season of freezing weather. When *seegwun* arrived, they brought their furs to the traders, and returned to the maple sugar groves.

The designations that the Mississauga gave lakes and rivers reveals their history. To the north lay their ancestral homeland: Ojibwa Kechegame, "the big water of the Ojibwas," or Lake Superior, later celebrated by Henry Longfellow, the American poet, in "Hiawatha." During the 1690s the Anishinabeg had swept down from Lake Superior and the north shore of Lake Huron, expelling the Iroquois from present-day southern Ontario. They termed the Humber, "Cobechenonk" -- "leave the canoes and go back" -- for the river marked the beginning of the Toronto Carrying Place. Here they portaged their canoes north to the Holland River, paddled across Lake Simcoe, took the Severn River to Georgian Bay, then crossed Lake Huron past *Mundeoomenis*, "Spirit Island," or Manitoulin Island, to *Batwetig*, "the Falls," named Sault Ste. Marie by the French. Several of the Iroquois placenames

remained, however. "Toronto," the area around the important portage leading from the mouth of the Humber to the Holland River, bore an Iroquois name which the Mississauga took to mean "looming of trees." Niagara, or "Oo-noo-nah-gah-rah" (as the Mississauga pronounced the word), and "Ontario," meaning "beautiful lake," were both Iroquois words.

The settlers designated the rivers at the western end of Lake Ontario by their distance from Niagara - the Mississauga called these same streams by their natural features: Red Cedar (4 Mile Creek), Small Alder (5 Mile), White Cedar Place (8 Mile); Eagle's Nest Place (10 Mile); Last Creek - in going down (12 Mile - today's St. Catharines); Salt Lick where deer resort (40 Mile - today's Grimsby). The Mississauga named the carrying place over Burlington Beach (the long sandbar separating Burlington Bay from Lake Ontario) "place where a small kind of turtles lay their eggs." The settlers referred to the creeks east of Burlington Bay by their distance from the Bay. The Mississauga, though, called the 12 Mile (or Bronte) Creek, "that which lies at the end," and the 16 Mile (or Oakville) Creek, "having two outlets" - probably a sand bar divided the river into two beaches at its mouth. The next river, Missinnihe, "the Credit or Trusting Creek," derived its name from the traders, who annually assembled here and gave the First Nations credit for the following year.

Just east of Missinnihe flowed the Adoopekog, "Place of the alders," a word still recognizable in "Etobicoke." And past the Humber, or "Leave the canoes and go back" River, one came to the long peninsula, now Toronto Islands, which formed a deep harbour. The First Nations termed the sandy peninsula "Menecing," or "on the island." Elizabeth Simcoe, Upper Canada's first Lieutenant Governor's wife, recorded in the mid-1790s: "The Indians esteem this place so healthy that they come and stay here when they are ill." On a clear day from "Menecing" you could see the spray rising like a cloud from "Kahkejewung," or Niagara Falls, over sixty kilometres directly across the lake. Near the narrow isthmus connecting the peninsula with the mainland flowed the Wonscotonach, or "back burnt grounds," the river flowing through country previously swept by fire. More British than the King of England, Lieutenant Governor Simcoe renamed the river, the Don, after a major watercourse in northeastern England. He also designated the "Leave the canoes and go back" River, the Humber (the Don River in England flows into the Humber which, in turn, reaches the North Sea). The Lieutenant Governor also changed the name of his new settlement from Toronto to York. Only forty years later, in 1834, did the town fathers reverse his decision, and restore the name to "Toronto."

Lieutenant Governor Simcoe's Yonge Street, built to connect York in a straight line with Holland Landing fifty kilometres to the north, passed through the lands of the Credit River Mississauga and the Lake Simcoe Ojibwa. Wahbanosay, the leader of the fifty or so Mississauga who had their summer encampment at the Head of the Lake (present-day Hamilton), assisted Augustus Jones, the surveyor, in the winter of 1793-94 in running a line for the route. Winter was preferred for doing such work, as the ground was hard, and one could see easily in the leafless forest.

A few years after the road's completion in 1796, Jones married Wahbanosay's daughter, Tuhbenahneequay. Their son, Peter Jones, later recorded his Mississauga grandfather's amazing