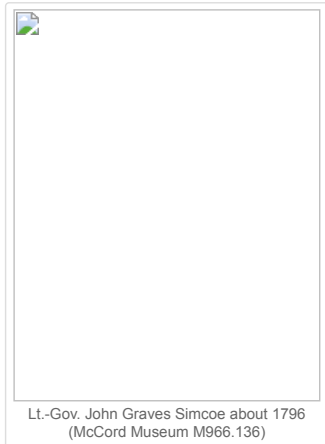


Introduction

by Jane E. MacNamara



The story of Toronto's Park Lots—and Simcoe's Gentry—begins in 1793, when the area along the Lake Ontario shoreline, just west of the Don River, was surveyed as the Town of York—the new capital of Upper Canada. However advantageous this new location may have looked to military strategists—with its defensible natural harbour protected by a peninsula—to the government officials expected to move there, it looked like another frontier.

Many of these officials were settled—rather comfortably, considering the conditions—in communities like Newark or Kingston, where they had been since as early as 1791 when Quebec had been divided into Upper and Lower Canada. Those who had been evacuated from the United States after the American Revolutionary War—whether as disbanded British troops or as Loyalists—had perhaps resettled first in New Brunswick or Nova Scotia. If they had become involved in government, they may have moved on to Quebec. Once resettled, again, in Upper Canada, many were understandably reluctant to move on to York.

So John Graves Simcoe, the newly-appointed Lieutenant-Governor of Upper Canada, provided an incentive that was an ingenious blend of old and new worlds. He used a commodity plentiful in the new world—land. But he had a portion of that land surveyed into “parks”—modest estates suitable for a gentleman's elegant home, advantageously situated with a view of the harbour—a very “old world” concept.

These 100-acre “Park Lots” were located just north of the town. They had narrow frontages (660 feet) on Lot Street (today's Queen Street), to allow all owners access to the town and harbour. The lots were ten times as deep (6,600 feet) as they were wide and extended north to today's Bloor Street.

There were 32 Park Lots running from the Don River, west to about today's Lansdowne Avenue. From there, west to the Humber River, the land was divided into nine “Township” lots, following the pattern of the Park Lots, but double the width. They were 200 acres each, more or less, as the contours of Lake Ontario and the Humber River would allow. The Park Lots closest to the Town of York were the most desirable, and the status of the persons to whom they were granted reflected this.

Lieutenant-Governor Simcoe had a mandate to encourage the development of a class of citizenry that was sufficiently educated—and well bred—to help govern the province. With the Park Lots, Simcoe attempted to create this new gentry. First he gave them titles, a little power—and then prestigious estates.

A Park Lot was just a small part of the land acquired by these hand-picked settlers. Most of the Park Lot grantees were also given a lot in the Town of York—“front” lots, those closest to the lake were the most valued. And virtually all of the Park Lot owners were granted much more Crown land—hundreds, if not thousands of acres, commensurate with their positions and previous military or civil service.

But Toronto's Park Lots were very exclusive. An explanation of the way most land in Upper Canada was distributed during this period will demonstrate how different the Park Lots were.

A person desiring land requested a grant from the representative of the Crown—the Lieutenant-Governor, or the Executive Council—by sending a “petition”. The petition stated the reasons why the petitioner felt he was worthy of a grant, and may have specified a desired acreage and/or location. The Executive Council would hear and rule on a number of petitions at each of its sessions. As the demand for land—and the work load—grew, the Council set up a Land Board to examine the petitions and make recommendations for the Executive Council's approval. Once a grant was approved by an “Order-in-Council”, a “warrant” was issued for a specific amount of land, sometimes stating a township or even a particular piece of property. The warrant was presented to the Surveyor-General or his representative, who assigned a property, if not specified in the warrant. The Surveyor-General's office collected any survey fees due, and issued a “location ticket”. The grantee then had to get to his land and perform “settlement duties” within a certain number of years. Settlement duties, which varied through time, included the clearing of land, the construction of a house of a certain size and maintaining part of a common roadway. Once these duties had been performed and inspected, a “Patent”, giving title to the land, could be issued.

In contrast to the “standard” procedure described above, the Park Lot grantees may have skipped a few steps. Twenty-four of the Park Lots were assigned by the Executive Council on September 4, 1793, in response to petitions, many of which had been written the same day or just a few days before. It seems likely that they were told to request the land. Most of the grantees didn't move to York until compelled to in 1796—which would have made it difficult to undertake standard settlement duties. And when they finally did take possession of their land—without paying survey fees—most received Patents within a few months.

The Land Board's “**York Report**” commissioned by Lieutenant-Governor Simcoe in 1796 shows the state of York's development to that date. Most of the Park Lots had already been granted—but Park Lot 9 was allocated to a Church of England “Incumbent”, Park Lot 12 to a “Judge not yet appointed”, and Park Lot 26 to a “Solicitor General”.

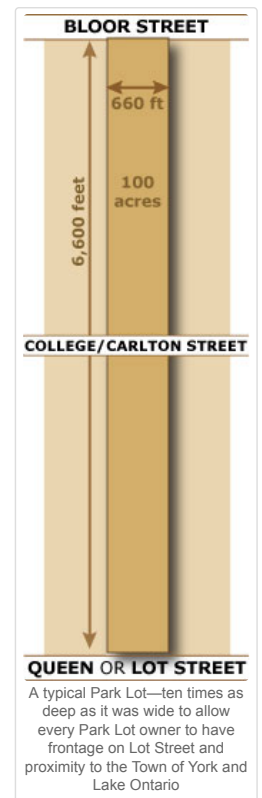
The York Report addressed Simcoe's concerns that a viable town develop at York—not merely a governmental outpost where speculators held most of the land. He wanted real settlers on Yonge Street, and required that houses of a certain size be built on the town lots. The right of the grantee to his property could, and occasionally was, revoked for failure to comply with the regulations.

The York Report also revealed and rectified some of the problems that had cropped up in a land-granting system that the government had been re-inventing as it went along. This is particularly evident in a careful analysis of the Park Lots. The York Report recommended that Park Lots 1, 2, 6, 9, 10, 11, 12, 18, 20, 23 and 26 be allocated to different owners. (They had probably already been traded amongst the grantees.) The grantees for Park Lots 5, 11, 12 and 23 were not yet resident, and the grantees for Park Lots 27 and Township lot 33 had died.

The pages of this web site will demonstrate how each of the early owners of the Park Lots responded to the challenge of building the new community. But there were, and still are, some long-lasting effects of the Park Lot scheme itself.

Each of the Park Lot owners was free to lay out streets and sell lots in any configuration. Their east-west streets did not have to line up with the next owner's east-west streets—and frequently did not. Even today, there are few east-west streets that run more than a few blocks through the Park Lots, and those that do—College, Carlton, Gerrard and Dundas—are far from straight. Today's Dundas Street, the longest east-west thoroughfare, was cobbled together in about 1920 from no less than six streets that had known at least 10 different names.^[1]

When they subdivided their properties, many Park Lot owners held a portion of their lot in reserve, usually to the north. These sizeable acreages, were then available for public buildings when the city expanded. For example the north halves of Park Lots 9 and 10, controlled by the Elmsley family, became home to St. Basil's Roman Catholic



Church, St. Joseph's Convent, and St. Michael's College. Most notably, the north halves of Park Lots 11, 12 and 13, were set aside as "Queen's Park" and today are the sites of the Legislature of Ontario and much of the University of Toronto.

And finally, Toronto owes some of its remarkable north-south avenues to the Park Lot layout and the early owners—particularly Parliament, Sherbourne and Jarvis streets, University Avenue, Queen's Park Circle, Spadina Avenue, and Bathurst Street.

[1] MacNamara, Jane. "**Why is Dundas Street so crooked?**" in *Toronto Tree*, vol. 28, issue 3. Toronto: Ontario Genealogical Society, Toronto Branch, 1997. p 28.
