

OLD TOWN TORONTO

Heritage Landscape and Resources Guide

European Settlement

Possibly the first European to see the future site of Toronto was the French explorer Etienne Brulé, when he and 12 Hurons were instructed by Samuel de Champlain to investigate the general area in 1615. The first fur trade posts seem to have been constructed near the Humber and the present site of Toronto in the early 1600s. Although documentary evidence is sketchy, it is likely that trading continued in the Toronto area into the 18th century. It is known that a formal French trading post called le Magasin Royal, or king's shop, existed in 1720.

In 1750, a new trading post called Fort Toronto was built on the east bank of the Humber. The structure was quickly deemed inadequate, and another larger fort was built later that year, this one called Fort Rouillé in honour of the French Minister of Marine and Colonies. Fort Rouillé (sometimes also known as Fort Toronto, causing some confusion) was constructed on what is now the grounds of the Canadian National Exhibition, and is commemorated with a monument there. In 1759, after the British victory at the siege of Niagara, the French destroyed Fort Rouillé in order to prevent it from being used by their enemies.

In 1787, the "Toronto Purchase" was negotiated with the Mississaugas under Sir Guy Carleton, 1st Lord Dorchester. The boundaries were not clearly defined and are still disputed. An initial survey for the site of the potential new town was completed in 1788.

The American Revolutionary War (1775-83) brought a flood of Loyalists to the area. In 1791, the British pragmatically divided the original, larger Province of Quebec into two: Upper Canada to accommodate the new Loyalist settlers, and Lower Canada which was primarily inhabited by the early French colonists.

In 1792, John Graves Simcoe was sent from England as Upper Canada's first Lieutenant Governor. At that time, the province's capital was Newark (Niagara-on-the-Lake), a site close to the British-American border. With invasion an ever-present threat, it seemed prudent to relocate the capital. A number of sites were considered but early in 1793, Simcoe's Queen's Rangers arrived in Toronto and started construction of a Fort to protect what was thought to be the new temporary capital.

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What made the site especially attractive was its large, sheltered harbour with only one entrance. At that time, today's Toronto Islands were actually a peninsula. The town was to follow the plan set out by Simcoe's surveyor Alexander Aitkin in 1793. It featured a grid of 10 blocks bounded by George, Berkeley, Front and Duke (now Adelaide) Streets that still exist today. Toronto's name was changed soon after to York to honour the Duke of York's victory over the French in Holland.

The limitations of the early plan, with marshes to the east and privately owned land to the north, restricted the Old Town's growth and caused it to move westward. The original ten blocks became known as "Old Town" when "New Town" was created to the west. The area east of the Old Town was reserved as parkland, known as the King's Park.

A large tract between the old and new towns was set aside for churches, a school, the market, courthouse, jail and other public buildings. South of Front Street, the entire shoreline as far as Fort York was retained for public open space, offering an unobstructed view of the lake and the peninsula. In the early days, buildings were primarily made of wood, in some cases brick, and occasionally stone.

By 1797, York's population had grown a handful of Queen's Rangers to 241 people, one quarter of them Loyalists. 2 Key source: Robinson, Toronto During the French Regime, 1615-1793.

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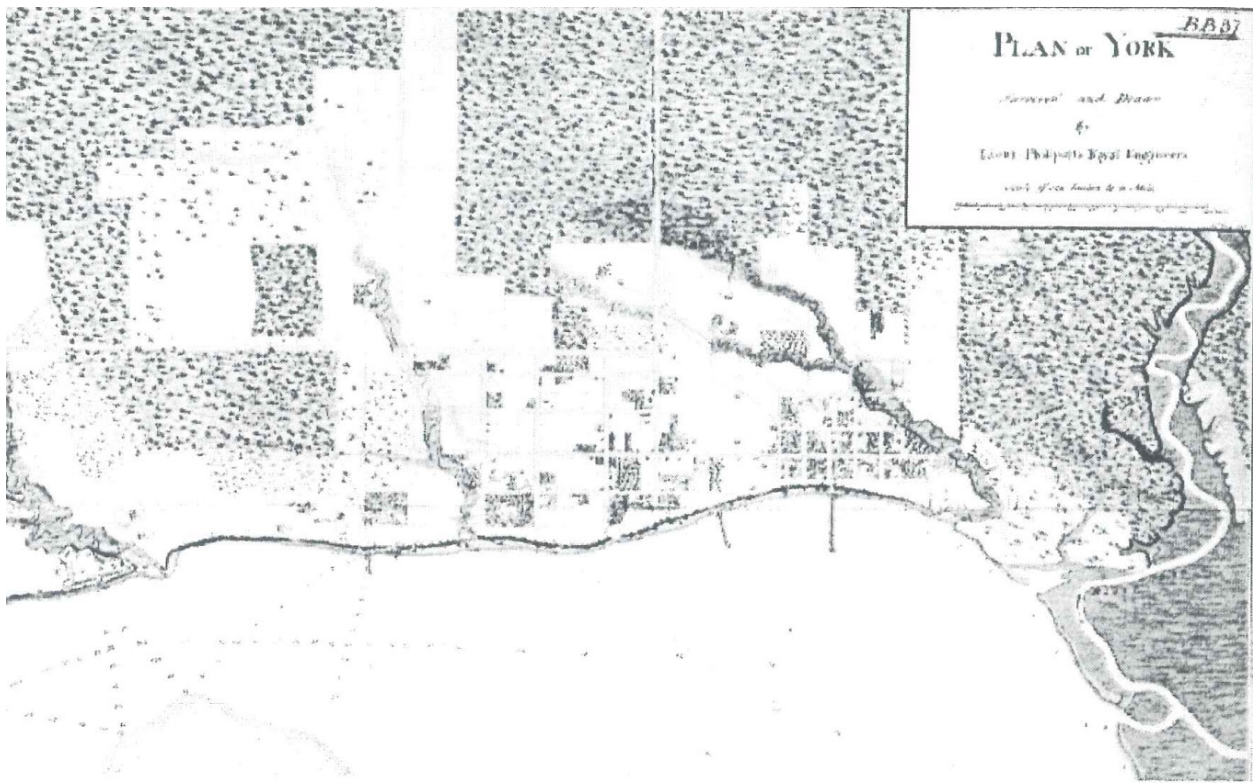


Figure 1. Plan of York, 1818 drawn by Lieutenant Phillipotts. Shows the original ten blocks and growth to the west.

At the time of the American invasion in 1813, the population was 650, and many of the residents were involved in the administration of the capital. When the war ended, Toronto saw a surge in commercial activity and immigration. The town's population continued to grow by leaps and bounds.

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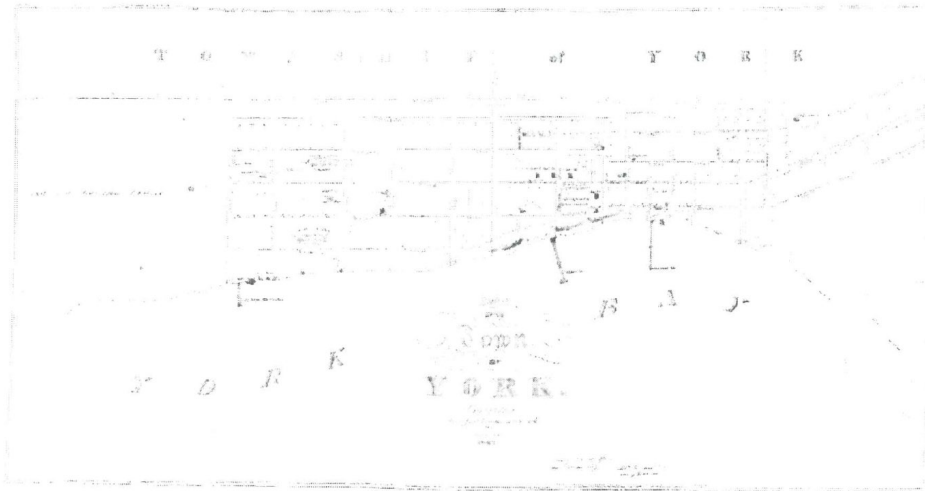


Figure 2. Plan of the Town of York, 1827. Shows the subdivision of the park reserve east of the original town site.

It numbered nearly 10,000 by 1834, the year York became the first city in Upper Canada, its name changing back to Toronto. The city extended from the Don River to Dufferin Street, and north to Bloor Street.

Toronto's first city council was made up of 12 Reformers and eight Tories, with the outspoken Reformer William Lyon Mackenzie as Mayor. The City was divided into five wards. The original ten blocks, as well as some of the surrounding areas, became St. Lawrence Ward. '

Source:

Nelson, Gordon, Heritage Landscape Guide , for the Citizens for the Old Town, Waterloo, Canada , 2001