Imagined Futures and Unintended Consequences:
An Environmental History of Toronto’s Don River Valley

by

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Abstract

This dissertation explores human interactions with Toronto’s Don River Valley from the late eighteenth century to the present, focusing on the period of intense urbanization and industrialization between 1880 and 1940. Its concentration on the urban fringe generates new perspectives on the social and environmental consequences of urban development. From its position on the margins, the Don performed vital functions for the urban economy as a provider of raw materials and a sink for wastes.

Insights derived from the intersections between social and environmental history are at the heart of this project. The dissertation begins by documenting the industrial history of the river and its transformation from a central provider in the lives of early Toronto residents to a polluted periphery in the latter half of the nineteenth century. An analysis of the valley’s related function as a repository for human “undesirables” reveals connections between the processes that identified certain individuals as deficient “others” and similar imperatives at work in classifying difficult or unpredictable environments as “waste spaces.”

Efforts to “reclaim” and improve the river are the subject of the remaining chapters. A series of initiatives between 1870 and 1930 aimed at reconfiguring the lower Don as an efficient corridor for transportation and industrial development reveal in their shortcomings and
unintended consequences a failure to accommodate dynamic and often unpredictable ecological processes. Reclamations of a different kind are explored in the conservation movement of the twentieth century, through which the valley emerges as a valuable public amenity. The dissertation concludes by investigating how the valley’s history informs current plans to “renaturalize” the river mouth. Throughout, the Don functions as an autonomous and causal force in the city’s history. On this small river on the urban fringe, nature and society worked in mutually constitutive ways to shape and reshape the metropolis.
Acknowledgments

The mental image of the dedicated scholar labouring away in isolation is a misleading representation of projects such as this one. While I was the one who willed herself to sit still and write, a number of people helped to make that writing both possible and pleasurable. Thanks go first to a supportive committee who from the beginning infused the project with a sense of excitement and possibility, and whose faith in me didn’t flag even as I announced two pregnancies over the course of the project. My supervisor, Ruth Sandwell, helped me to see the possibilities of a place like the Don. Her insightful appreciation of key issues in historical practice, and her dedication to the integrity of past actors, challenged me to think more deeply about the people and places I studied. Just as important, her enthusiastic support for my work in various venues, and her sensitivity to the particular challenges of balancing dissertation work with family responsibilities, made working together a great pleasure. Bill Turkel’s interest in the project from an early stage, his expansive knowledge and his unconventional approach to academic endeavours nurtured the development of this project and helped to shape its guiding arguments. Finally, for her keen critical eye and her constructive comments as this dissertation has progressed, I would like to thank Cecilia Morgan.

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Archives, especially John Huzil and Lawrence Lee, whose knowledge of the area helped to build my understanding. Michael Moir, Archivist at York University’s Clara Thomas Archives and Special Collections, provided generously of his time in sharing his detailed knowledge of the Toronto waterfront. I would also like to thank Jeff Hubbell at the Toronto Port Authority Archives, and Sean Smith at the Archives of Ontario, for kind assistance and support.

Early on in my research, I found myself at the Toronto Reference Library, printing and taping together fire insurance atlases in an attempt to make sense of what was a dynamic and confusing industrial landscape. Generous and patient assistance from University of Toronto GIS and Map Librarian Marcel Fortin opened up a world of possibilities in using GIS to achieve the same ends. With financial support from the Network in Canadian History and Environment (NiCHE) and skilled assistance from University of Toronto Geography student Jordan Hale, we produced the Don Valley Historical Mapping Project (http://maps.library.utoronto.ca/dvhmmp/), a database of geo-spatial information on the environmental and industrial history of the Don watershed. The project greatly facilitated my ability to interpret the historical geography of the area. It remains a resource for a broader community of researchers seeking geographic information on the Don Valley and Toronto’s east end.

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Chapter 1
Moving from the Source: Methods for a River History

On July 31, 1958, Princess Margaret visited Toronto as one of many stops on an official tour of Canada. Her visit sparked weeks of wrangling by civic politicians as to the proposed route of her tour through the city and the duration of her exposure to various publics. In her highly choreographed visit, the Princess was to arrive at Malton Airport (today’s Pearson International Airport) late on the evening of July 30th and meet briefly with dignitaries before travelling by special train into the city. She would “spend the night aboard the train in a quiet spot in the Don valley between Rosedale and Don stations.” At noon the following day, her train would pull up at a siding at Riverdale Park where she would greet the public and assembled schoolchildren from a footbridge over the Don River before carrying on to City Hall. Among the concerns of local residents and politicians alike was just what Toronto she would see from her rail car, and what impression of the city she would carry away following her brief visit. Responding to City Council’s last minute frenzy of tidying in preparation for the royal visit, a Toronto Daily Star editorial admonished:

The mayor and other officials of Toronto have good cause to be ashamed of the filthy condition of that section of the Don river along which Princess Margaret will be driven to Riverdale park. With belated zeal they have rushed a crew of laborers armed with rakes and pikes and disinfectants to tidy the ground and sweeten the atmosphere that Her Highness may not learn how Toronto has befouled one of its beauty spots.

The article went on to compare the City’s efforts to that of “courtiers waving handkerchiefs dipped in perfume before the nostrils of the king of France as he drove through the tenements of

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Paris, that his majesty’s nostrils might not be offended by the odor from the open drains.”

Satirically titled “Our Perfumed Don,” the article made no further reference to perfume, noting only the City’s efforts to disinfect the rank waters of the river by scattering chloride of lime along its banks.

Like a game of telephone, however, the elements of the story became confused through many retellings in the years following the Princess’ visit. Rather than a quick (and surely futile) effort to “cleanse” the river with disinfectant, the story became even more absurd still, with City workers pouring perfume into the river to please the Princess as she waved from the footbridge. The Royal Commission on the Future of the Toronto Waterfront repeated this version of the story in 1992, noting that “the City had perfume poured into the Don, to mask its stench.”

A different version of the story appeared ten years earlier, when Toronto Star writer Jack Brehl commented in a review of local conservationist and writer Charles Sauriol’s 1981 book, Remembering the Don, that the “stream itself got so turgid and polluted that a few years ago it had to be perfumed to keep from offending the sensibilities of the Queen as she walked across a footbridge.” Shortly after Brehl’s comment was printed, Sauriol received a letter from Dorothy B. Lewis of the York Pioneer and Historical Society. Lewis described a vivid dream or memory she had about the river and asked Sauriol to verify if the events had indeed happened:

when the present Queen Mother and George VI visited Toronto in 1939, the school children were gathered in the amphitheatre of Riverdale Park, on the east side of the Don, south of the Viaduct. Here they were greeted by Their Majestys

[sic]. Then the cavalcade drove to the foot bridge over the Don, leading to the Zoo. Here they dismounted and walked over the bridge. As we all know, the Don does not always smell like a rose. This disturbed the city council. It is my “memory” that they poured gallons of scented water up-stream, arranging that this would be flowing under the bridge at the appointed time.5

Ms. Lewis apparently scanned newspaper accounts of the visit for references to perfume, with no success (indeed the 1939 accounts of the event in the Toronto papers make no mention of perfume). No record exists of Sauriol’s response, but it seems most likely that Lewis, and Brehl, confused the 1939 royal visit with Princess Margaret’s 1958 visit at the same location.6

The story of the Princess’ visit and its subsequent transmutations encapsulates in fascinating ways the city’s long and troubled relationship with the Don River. Viewed from this perspective, the presence or absence of perfume in the water is irrelevant. Although the “facts” may have been wrong in Brehl and Lewis’ accounts, the story, like many urban legends, pointed at larger truths: in trying to make a grossly polluted urban waterway presentable for a moment in time—the Princess’ walk across the footbridge—city officials applied a band-aid solution to a real and serious problem.7 The Lower Don River in 1958 was very likely more polluted than it had been at any other point in its history: rapid urban development and a legacy of inadequate sewage infrastructure in the post-war years had turned the Don and other Toronto-area rivers into little more than open sewers, receivers of partially treated effluents from a series of


6 Queen Elizabeth and King George VI did visit Riverdale Park in 1939. Newspaper coverage of the royal visit May 22nd highlighted opportunities for children to view Their Majesties at Riverdale Park (“Thousands, Tired But Happy Reach Home Late at Night: Suburban Children Saw King and Queen in Toronto Parks,” Toronto Daily Star, May 23, 1969, p.6).

overburdened upstream treatment plants. Just eight years before the Princess’ visit, in 1950, a provincial conservation report had identified the Don as Ontario’s most polluted waterway. That city officials waited until the day before the Princess’ arrival to clean up the offending stream is also emblematic of what constituted, in 1958, well over a century of unrealized intentions. Reaching back to the early 1830s, a long line of studies and plans commissioned for the river and Toronto harbour at its mouth had met with apathetic or otherwise ineffectual responses by governing authorities. This legacy of mounting pollution and inadequate response created the river that threatened to embarrass Toronto in front of the world on July 31, 1958. The stench of the river alone made the past undeniably present.

Perhaps most interesting here is the choice of the river in the first place as the location to show off the city not only to the outside world, but also to its own residents. On a footbridge overlooking the grassy amphitheatre of Riverdale Park, with the Don running beneath her, Princess Margaret would kick off her official visit to the City of Toronto. Presumably this choice was not a casual one: Mayor Phillips and his advisors saw in the sweeping panorama of Riverdale park, with its easy proximity to rail and its ample space for crowds, a fitting place to present the city to the Princess, and the Princess to the city. The landscape of the Lower Don would represent Toronto to the world, while reflecting for Toronto residents who they were and how far they had come. Pleasing photo opportunities would be produced for the newspapers and the evening television news, media that happily excised for the public the river’s gag-inducing stench. Accounts of the event suggest that the City’s superficial efforts were successful: like the

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8 Ontario Department of Planning and Development (hereafter ODPD), Don Valley Conservation Report (Toronto: Ontario Department of Planning and Development, 1950), Part VI, 15. In the years that followed Princess Margaret’s 1958 visit, the Municipality of Metropolitan Toronto would inject massive capital into an overhaul of Toronto’s aging sewage infrastructure, replacing inefficient upstream treatment plants with a trunk sewer to expanded treatment facilities on the waterfront, and greatly improving the water quality of the city’s rivers.
roughly two thousand Torontonians who gathered to greet the Princess as she stepped from her train (many more crowded her subsequent visit to City Hall), reporters seemed willing to accept the ruse of a clean river in order to focus their attention on the Princess herself, who, “radiant in blue,” stepped slowly across the “red-carpeted footbridge across the freshly-cleaned Don river… waving and smiling at children.”

Returning to Dorothy Lewis and her efforts to decipher the story of the perfumed river as memory or dream, actual event or subconscious fabrication, we encounter an example of the ways that memory shapes our understanding of past events, and the ways that landscape works to incite and affect such memories. A history enthusiast herself, Lewis’ review of newspaper accounts for references to perfume mirror my own efforts to comb the records for traces of perfume and princeses, and in the dissertation more generally, to piece together a coherent narrative of events through a multiplicity of sources, some trustworthy, some not. The incident, and its reverberations in individual and collective memory, serves as a useful illustration of the ways in which we make sense of the past.

This dissertation explores human interactions with a small urban river from the late eighteenth century to the present, focusing particularly on the period of intense urbanization and industrialization from the 1880s to the 1930s. It investigates the ways in which different generations and different groups of people attempted to grapple with an often unpredictable riparian landscape, creating as they did a series of “imagined futures” for the river and the potential it contained to facilitate human labour and provide for human needs. Corollary to this shifting social landscape is the history of environmental change in the watershed—from the seasonal, incremental changes wrought by the river and the larger geological and climatic forces

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in which it is embedded, to the rapid and dramatic human-induced alterations that transformed the lower river and its huge estuarine marsh into one of the city’s largest industrial areas. The consequences of these changes, intended and otherwise, and the lessons people took away from their interactions with the river in different periods and in different circumstances, have much to tell us about changing human relationships with environment, and the particular pressures and contingencies at work in urban spaces in northern North America.

* * *

Thirty-eight kilometres long from its headwaters in the Oak Ridges Moraine to its terminus at Lake Ontario less than two kilometres east of Toronto’s downtown core, today’s Don River winds through the most urbanized watershed in Canada. At one time a central force in the development of the town of York (later renamed Toronto), by the mid-nineteenth century the river occupied the urban periphery, distanced from the centre by marshy lowlands widely perceived as disseminators of disease, and by very real and steadily worsening problems of pollution in the river’s lower reaches. As the century progressed, an interplay of human and

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10 The relationship elaborated throughout this study between the Don as periphery to a more powerful centre, and its resulting role as a provider of commodities and a sink for the wastes of that centre, draws from an established tradition in Canadian historiography variously described as metropolis-hinterland, core-periphery or centre-periphery theory. Generally attributed to the work of Canadian political economist Harold Adam Innis and the influences he drew from Chicago school theories of social and economic development, centre-periphery theory examines, in essence, the ways that economically powerful societies simultaneously dominate and hinder the economic development of less developed societies and regions. While the concept of centre-periphery has proved useful in applying to the smaller scale of the metropolis, and interrelationships within it, the approach taken here follows more recent interpretations of such relationships in recognizing the role of social and cultural factors in complicating what were primarily economic and political analyses, and in emphasizing a two-way channel of communication between centre and periphery. Thus, while traditional interpretations stressed the ways that the metropole informed the periphery, here the two are seen as mutually constitutive, each forming in reciprocal relation to the other.

Innis articulates his theory of metropolis-hinterland in a number of works on staples development in Canada. See, for example, *The Fur Trade in Canada: An Introduction to Canadian Economic History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1930); and “Settlement and the Mining Frontier,” in *Canadian Frontiers of Settlement* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1936). Marlene Shore provides a useful overview of the influence of the Chicago School of sociology on Canadian academics, and particularly on the development of the metropolis-hinterland thesis, in *The Science of*
natural forces produced the multiple and ever-changing landscapes of the Don, from its industrialized lower reaches to the rolling semi-rural landscape of the upper valley. Human populations capitalized on the river as a conduit for commodities and a generator of power to construct mills and other industries along its banks. Destructive spring freshets and ruinous low summer flows forced adjustments, some mills relocating to more reliable reaches of the river, others rebuilding, and still others closing their doors after floodwater losses. These adjustments recreated again and again what was a regularly shifting landscape, just as the river itself carved new channels, rose and fell, inundated and desiccated the marshy lowlands at its mouth with its changing seasonal flows. By the 1880s, rapid industrialization and a growing residential population resulted in horribly polluted conditions along the river’s lower reaches. Visions of a sanitary and rational river landscape as a basis for prosperity prompted the Don Improvement Plan; by the early 1890s, dredges and pile-drivers had straightened and canalized the river’s serpentine lower reaches. The ongoing imperative of the river—to flow, and to carry with it materials in its path (soils, trees, sewage sludge, structures built precariously on its banks)—has ensured, however, the continuous reworking of that rational landscape, as floodwaters have periodically breached the river’s rigid lower channel, and silt deposits have necessitated costly annual dredging.

Addressing a landscape so radically transformed by human labour, and at the same time so persistently conditioned by natural forces, requires an approach sensitive to the complexity

and considerable uncertainty bound up in human-environment interactions. Dialectics explored in the developing field of environmental history have provided a useful framework within which to situate my work. “Environmental history,” Donald Worster wrote in 1990, “deals with the role and place of nature in human life. It studies all the interactions that societies in the past have had with the nonhuman world…. Wherever the two spheres, the natural and the cultural, confront or interact with one another, environmental history finds its essential themes.” Fundamental to this undertaking is a recognition of the reciprocal influences of social and environmental change. In this way environmental history “deals not just with the power humanity exerts over nature but also with the consequences of those actions and reciprocally with the ways in which nature impinges upon human cultures.”

A recognition of the persistence of natural forces in diverse guises—from the pathogen to the factory farm to the urban sewage system—has fueled efforts to reexamine a troubling and persistent dichotomy between nature and culture. In their attempts to articulate an appreciation of nature as a fundamentally hybrid entity, environmental historians have made a touchstone of literary critic Raymond Williams’ 1980 observation that “we have mixed our labour with the earth, our forces with its forces too deeply to be able to draw back and separate either out.” Histories of industrialized rivers and urban environments have proven especially productive in the development of new approaches to the human relationship with the nonhuman world. Richard White’s influential study of the Columbia River, for example, produced the metaphor of


the modern river as an “organic machine,” an entity “at once our creation and [that] retains a life of its own beyond our control.”^{14} In his 1991 monograph, *Nature’s Metropolis*, William Cronon reemployed the Marxist concept of “second nature” to describe the process of transforming natural entities into commodities, mixing human labour with the energy of the nonhuman world.\(^{15}\) Subsequent studies have used these metaphors to excellent effect, to the point that nature is now widely treated as a hybrid entity that fuses elements of the nonhuman world with forces and materials of human construction.\(^{16}\) This approach not only recognizes humans as part of nature, but acknowledges the fallacy of a pristine nature removed from human influence. As the recent global dialogue on climate change has demonstrated, the effects of human enterprise on the planet are discernible at wide-ranging scales of analysis and in places that have seen only minimal human presence.

Among the criticisms of environmental history is its tendency to concentrate on broad scales of analysis, reducing the complexity of human motivations to the abstract force of the whole. Studies of cities and major rivers within their broader regional context have produced compelling findings that have in many ways shaped the discipline; their broad focus, however, has inevitably limited their ability to account for local distinctiveness. This study takes a different approach, reducing the scale of analysis to allow for a closer examination of human relationships in place. Borrowing methods from the predominantly European practice of

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microhistory, it seeks to discover new meanings through an intensive study of documentary material pertaining to human-environment relationships within a specific place. As Stephen Mosley notes in an essay promoting the integration of social and environmental history, a micro-scale approach can “offer valuable insights into how societies and environments shape and reshape each other, as well as provide an important basis for comparative analysis.” Like social history, he continues, “in environmental history place-centred case studies have become the main testing ground for innovative research: and their modest scale and the relative manageability of source materials are certainly conducive to the development of hybrid socio-environmental history approaches.”¹⁷ In this study, narrowing the scale of inquiry to a small urban watershed enables a detailed analysis of the relationships between past people and past natures as they pass under my lens. The particularities of environmental change come into view, and the variable responses to these changes by different social groups. Thus, we can discern in ways not possible at broader scales of analysis the experiences of local populations as they mobilized for and resisted industrialization, suffered its consequences, and in some cases, seized opportunities created by the landscapes they helped to produce.

As R.W. Sandwell has shown, environmental history and microhistory make good methodological partners. By taking as its starting point the particular and the local, microhistory “provid[es] a focus through which to see the complex daily series of relationships involving humans and nature.” Environmental history, for its part, affords the opportunity to “[augment] our understanding of the relations among people and places” by “[ing] more attention to the

particularities of the physical world.”\textsuperscript{18} To this I would add, both microhistory and environmental history allow for an approach that begins with relationships. Through their close examination of detailed records about people in place, microhistorians are able to detect “more relationships, more kinds of relationships, and in more detail than usually shows up in [other kinds of] histories.”\textsuperscript{19} In environmental history, practitioners have drawn from the disciplinary foundations of ecology, with its attention to the principles of connectivity and the interactions between organisms and their environments, to assemble what William Cronon has called a “tool kit of analytical approaches… that begin[s] with relationships rather than a monolithic ‘system’ as a whole.”\textsuperscript{20}

It is not only the scale of analysis that distinguishes microhistory from other historiographical genres, but also the recognition that social actors and social phenomena are moving targets, presenting only a “partial hand of cards” in any given situation.\textsuperscript{21} As Jacques Revel has observed, microhistory “attempt[s] to study the social not as an object invested with inherent properties, but as a set of shifting interrelationships existing between constantly


\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 133.


\textsuperscript{21} This metaphor is drawn from an article by Sigurdur Gylfi Magnusson: “each and every one of us do not show our full hand of cards. Seeing what is usually kept hidden from the outside world, we realize that our focus has only been on the “normal exception”; those who in one segment of society are considered obscure, strange, and even dangerous. They might be, in other circles, at the center of attention and fully accepted in their daily affairs” (“What is Microhistory?”, \textit{History News Network}, August 8, 2006, http://hnn.us/articles/23720.html., accessed 9 December 2009).
This statement could equally be applied to relationships with (and within) the nonhuman world. Greg Mitman’s comments on approaches to the history of toxicity in past environments reference the material foundations of the discipline as a whole:

environmental history approaches… emphasize contingency and change along [the] material dimensions of the human past, especially as creatures or chemicals become caught up in the projects of human societies and economies. Much of the narrative and analytical power in this approach derives from an assumption that nonhuman substances or organisms have concrete effects on history that we, as historians, can recognize, even if past actors saw them quite differently or not at all.23

The term microhistory tends to connote the detailed study of a person, an event, or a single unit of analysis (a household, for example, or a place) over a defined and typically short period of time: Robert Darnton’s The Great Cat Massacre; Natalie Zemon Davis’ The Return of Martin Guerre.24 Here I use the term a little differently, widening the temporal scope of analysis to a period of two hundred years, and approaching my subject from a series of different vantage points.25 As such, this study is not so much a microhistory as a series of microhistories focused on a single place. Five microhistories come together here, each providing a unique perspective on place over time: the first focuses on water pollution in the lower river in the period between 1850 and 1890; the second, on the experiences of marginalized populations within the valley from the 1860s to the 1930s; the third, on the Don Improvement Project of the 1880s; the fourth,

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on the life experiences of conservationist Charles Sauriol and their intersections with valley history; the fifth, on the most recent improvement plan for the mouth of the river, the Don Mouth Naturalization Project. Microhistory as method, with the insights it derives by altering the scale of observation, is used here to intersect various subdisciplines, including industrial history, urban history, environmental history, histories of science, technology, and public health, and social histories of marginalized populations. This approach departs markedly from existing environmental histories of rivers, offering a novel way to explore human-environment relationships in a particular place.

This project “moves from the source,” much like a river does. Rather than approaching my subject with a defined hypothesis in mind, I sought to allow the sources to drive the project: questions developed and themes emerged through a reciprocal and ongoing relationship with diverse kinds of evidence pertaining to human experience with environment of the river valley. The questions I brought to the project were open-ended: what kind of place was this? How did different groups of people experience this place in different periods? What did they do here, and how did they perceive their environment?

The insights gathered from this study’s deep empirical focus on place are not contained by the bounds of the local. Rather, they have relevance for other scales of analysis (for Toronto more broadly) and as a source of comparison with other North American centres developing in the same period. Comparisons with other urban rivers promise to be especially fruitful. Unlike other sites of urban nature—the city park, the residential garden, the waterfront, the wilds of the backstreet alley—rivers have been uniquely cast as facilitators of human labour and, as such, as bearers of possibilities. As both picturesque landscapes and energy-producing currents, rivers have been connected to a legacy of imagined futures for the city writ large. These connections
have been aptly demonstrated in Joel Tarr’s collected works on Pittsburgh’s relationship with the Allegheny, Monongahela and Ohio Rivers, and more recent works by Ari Kelman on the role of the Mississippi in the history of New Orleans, and Michèle Dagenais and Caroline Durand on Montreal’s relationship with the St. Lawrence and its tributary streams.\textsuperscript{26} Like Toronto, these cities mobilized their (much larger) rivers as conduits for waste, drivers of industry, and, to varying degrees, as sources of drinking water.

Rivers also carry privilege of place as enduring symbols in human consciousness. As Simon Schama observes, rivers have supplied metaphors for the flow of life with their “self-regulating arterial course… akin to the bloodstream of men,” and, in the linear movement of waters “from beginning to end, birth to death, source to issue,” imagery for “the life and death of nations and empires and the fateful alternation between commerce and calamity.”\textsuperscript{27} This is nowhere more true than in Canada, with Donald Creighton’s famous personification of the St. Lawrence as a “force in history” that, lured by its “shining, ever-receding possibilities,” men staked their lives upon, “consoled and inspired by its promises, its whispered suggestions, and its shouted commands.”\textsuperscript{28} Novelist Hugh MacLennan references Creighton’s legacy in his 1961 rumination on Canada’s seven “great rivers”:

\begin{itemize}
\item[27] Simon Schama, \textit{Landscape and Memory} (Knopf, 1995), 261.
\item[28] Donald Creighton, \textit{The Empire of the St. Lawrence: A Study in Commerce and Politics} (Toronto: Macmillan, 1760), 6-7.
\end{itemize}
A great river, after all, is more than a personality in its own right. It is a vital link with a people's past, and also it is a mystery. The eternal river is always a new river yet forever the same; just as men are new each generation but forever the same, and always must re-learn what the others learned before them.²⁹

My chosen river is in comparison insignificant, linking with its short and shallow course neighbourhoods and districts rather than major centres. The subconscious power of this rhetoric nevertheless emerges in citizen efforts to “bring back” the Don as a metaphor for a city’s relationship with the natural processes upon which it depends. The complexity of that endeavour is another indication of the challenges peculiar to rivers: restorationists strive to revitalize not a single place but an entity that flows through multiple and disparate places, while at the same time drawing influences from larger forces at work in the landscape. Thus, their efforts must go beyond simply revegetating river banks to consider the effects of a complex network of influences upon water quality, sediment loads, stream volumes and velocity.

Rivers as dynamic shapers of landscape and human lives have been the subject of some of the most compelling work in environmental history. The majority of these studies have taken as their focus large, powerful rivers that transcend regional, national, and international boundaries.³⁰ Several recent works have explored the particular connections between rivers and cities that develop on their banks, but the rivers on which they focus are once again region-shaping in their influence.³¹ Very few works, in sum, have taken as their focus the small urban

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³¹ See note 26, above.
river encapsulated by a single urban district.\footnote{32} And yet, as I aim to show for Toronto, in the absence of larger systems the small river stood in as the focal point for industrialization and schemes for a more prosperous, healthy, and efficient future.

A microhistory of human-environment relationships on a small urban river, this study is also, fundamentally, an urban history. Urban history dissolved as an active subdiscipline in Canadian historiography in the late 1970s, dismissed for its fascination with the local, the particular, and the political. Toronto in particular is a surprisingly empty historiographical space. Aside from a handful of useful but dated survey works of the city’s history,\footnote{33} a small number of studies by historians and historical geographers have documented aspects of the city’s material history, including works on urban infrastructure,\footnote{34} industrialization,\footnote{35} and the development of various urban and suburban districts.\footnote{36} With the exception of Gene Desfor and Roger Keil’s

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[33]{J.M.S. Careless, \textit{Toronto to 1918: An Illustrated History} (Toronto: James Lorimer, 1984); James Lemon, \textit{Toronto Since 1918: An Illustrated History} (Toronto, 1985); Donald C. Masters, \textit{The Rise of Toronto, 1850-1890} (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1947); G. P. Glazebrook, \textit{The Story of Toronto} (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971); Jacob Spelt and Donald Kerr, \textit{The Changing Face of Toronto - A Study in Urban Geography} (Toronto: Department of Mines and Technical Surveys, Geographical Branch, 1965).}
\footnotetext[36]{Frances N. Mellen, “The Development of the Toronto Waterfront During the Railway Expansion Era, 1850-1912” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Toronto, Department of Geography, 1974); Isobel K. Ganton, “Land}
comparative work on the development of environmental policies in Toronto, historical studies of the city’s relationship with its environment are almost wholly absent.\textsuperscript{37} With all the attention devoted to environmental issues in the media and in scholarly circles, however, it is surprising that so few studies have examined the historical relationships between humans and nature in shaping Canada’s largest city. With its focus on the intersections between social and environmental history, this study offers a new approach to what has been an underdeveloped field in Canadian historiography, especially given Canada’s relatively new status as a country of urban dwellers. In reducing the scale of analysis to a small river at the urban fringe, it contributes to our understanding of the city’s larger relationship with its physical environment over time, and the ways that nature and society have worked in mutually constitutive ways to shape and reshape the metropolis. Nominally insignificant—a small river within what is from first glance a lake city—the Don is in fact, as I will show, deeply entwined in the city’s history.

As a site of significant social, cultural, and environmental change over the past two hundred years, the Don River Valley proved a compelling place upon which to direct my lens. A

\textsuperscript{37} Gene Desfor and Roger Keil, “Every River Tells a Story: The Don River (Toronto) and the Los Angeles River (Los Angeles) as Articulating Landscapes,” \textit{Journal of Environmental Policy and Planning} 2, no. 1 (2000): 5-23; Gene Desfor and Roger Keil, \textit{Nature and the City: Making Environmental Policy in Toronto and Los Angeles} (Tucson, Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 2004). Several forthcoming studies will go some distance toward filling this gap: an upcoming interdisciplinary collection on the Toronto waterfront, for example, will highlight the interplay of nature-society relations in shaping this liminal space at the city’s edge (Gene Desfor and Jennefer Laidley, eds., \textit{Toronto's Changing Waterfront} [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, forthcoming]). Jason Young, a doctoral candidate in History at York University, is preparing a dissertation on the history of the Toronto subway that incorporates environmental history approaches.
rich range of sources documented these changes, including City Council minutes, reports by the City engineer and the City medical health officer, the minutes and reports of the Toronto Harbour Commission and its predecessor bodies, newspaper records, trial records, personal diaries, memoirs, and correspondence. In addition to these textual sources, a vast archive of visual sources provide a companion narrative. Especially numerous after the city’s incorporation in 1834, historical maps chart in detail the changing configuration of the river channel and the marshlands around its mouth as environmental forces and human projects reinscribed the landscape. Fire insurance plans and city directories provided corroborating detail, particularly useful in sketching the industrial history of the lower Don. As a subject of photographs and visual art, the Don is matched by few other locations in the city. Here the Don emerges in its many perceived pasts: valley bucolic, valley industrial, valley rustbelt, valley regenerated.

Sometimes, as many microhistorians will attest, it is simpler to work with too few sources than too many. My rich repertoire of sources presented challenges of their own. Textual sources contradicted each other, particularly in the fine analysis of complicated undertakings such as the 1880s Don Improvement Project. Maps produced by different surveyors in the same year represented the twisting course of the river channel differently, leaving open to speculation whether the channel itself had changed as a result of seasonal processes, or whether the surveyors interpreted differently the liminal space between water and land. As the study progressed, I found increasingly that sources told a lot, but didn’t answer the questions I wanted to ask. Attempting to find out where and when sewage outfall pipes were extended into the Lower Don was a case in point: several studies documented in great detail the history of sewage infrastructure development in Toronto, but didn’t specify the effects of these developments upon my river. Finally, given my open-ended approach, the mass of documentation written about the
river—the problems it presented, studies it inspired, impressions it created, lives it took—presented the formidable challenge of establishing what was representative: would the next source place in dispute the findings I had made, or had I finally reviewed enough to cover the landscape?

Faced with this myriad of sources, defining manageable boundaries for the study was both necessary and challenging. As an environmental historian, I turned to the natural boundaries of the watershed as my unit of analysis, its capillary creeks and streams collecting surface waters, silts and toxins and funneling them to the river at its base, like fragments of historical evidence giving form to a central narrative. My definition of place was continually challenged, however, by sources that pertained almost exclusively to the lower reaches of the river, where the most dramatic effects of industrialization and urbanization were felt. In letting the sources speak, I was in effect speaking for only one section of the river, and a section almost unrecognizable as the same river that flowed further north through rolling farm and woodland.

As the chapters that follow will show, I resolved this bias in the documentary evidence by focusing much of my discussion on the Lower Don, while taking into account the larger influences of the watershed as a whole. What emerges with increasing industrialization in the lower valley through the latter half of the nineteenth century is a story of “two Dons”: the heavily industrialized landscape of the lower river south of Gerrard Street, and the more subtly hybrid landscape of the upper valley. Both are urban rivers, but of very different kinds. Here again we encounter my decision to approach the river as place—indeed as multiple *places*—rather than as a homogenous corridor. While the Don north of the Forks never hosted the concentration of heavy industry that developed further south, it was nevertheless subject to the environmental consequences of milling operations that capitalized on proximity to a developing
urban centre. Like the industrialized Don to the south, it was also subject to the everyday externalities of urban life: by the mid-twentieth century, sewage effluents, road salts, pesticide residues, and animal excrement degraded water quality in the bucolic upper valley just as surely as they did in the “waste space” of the lower river.

It is worth noting here that this project also profitted immensely from opportune developments in the companion field of Historical Geographic Information Systems (HGIS). A GIS is a form of database in which individual data are linked to geographic reference points (typically a point, a line, or a polygon). A GIS of census data, for example, would link each row of statistical information to a polygon representing the district or census tract to which the statistics refer. With its capacity to allow researchers to display, organize, and analyze the geographic aspects of the data they study, GIS has natural applications for historical studies. Since the 1990s, its use in historical research has stimulated the growing sub-field of Historical GIS (HGIS). This project used HGIS methods to analyze the changing configuration of the

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38 What is HGIS? The Historical GIS Research Network, [http://www.hgis.org.uk/](http://www.hgis.org.uk/), accessed 18 December 2009. Over the last twenty years, a number of countries have created national HGIS systems linking administrative boundaries with census and other data. Examples include the Great Britain Historical GIS ([http://www.port.ac.uk/research/gbhgis/](http://www.port.ac.uk/research/gbhgis/)) and the US National Historical GIS ([http://www.nhgis.org/](http://www.nhgis.org/)). Recently, historians have used HGIS to display and analyze geographic data at the local and regional level, and to display the geographic characteristics of qualitative sources. Examples include the Valley of the Shadow project ([http://valley.vcdh.virginia.edu/](http://valley.vcdh.virginia.edu/)) and the Salem Witchcraft GIS project ([http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/libsites/salem/](http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/libsites/salem/)), both of which used GIS to structure and better interpret their data. Some exemplary Canadian HGIS projects include Jason Gilliland and Mathew Novak’s *Imagining London* ([http://geography.ssc.uwo.ca/faculty/gilliland/ImaginingLondon2007.htm](http://geography.ssc.uwo.ca/faculty/gilliland/ImaginingLondon2007.htm)), which explores the social, economic and morphological dimensions of urban development in London, Ontario; GEORIA (Georeferenced Databases for Accessing Historical Data) ([http://mercator.geog.utoronto.ca/georia/home.htm](http://mercator.geog.utoronto.ca/georia/home.htm)), a series of geo-referenced databases of environmental, social, and health-related data in Canada; and the Canadian Century Research Infrastructure ([http://www.ccri.uottawa.ca/CCRI/Home.html](http://www.ccri.uottawa.ca/CCRI/Home.html)), a pan-Canadian, multi-disciplinary and multi-institutional effort to develop a set of interrelated databases centered on data from the 1911, 1921, 1931, 1941 and 1951 Canadian censuses. Particularly relevant in relation to this study is Brian Donahue’s recent study of historical land use in Concord, Massachusetts, which made extensive use of HGIS to display and interpret geographic data (*The Great Meadow: Farmers and Land in Colonial Concord* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007]). Useful sources on methods and developments in HGIS include Amy Hillier and Anne Kelly Knowles, *Placing History: How Maps, Spatial Data, and GIS Are Changing Historical Scholarship* (Redlands, CA: ESRI Press, 2008); and Ian N. Gregory and Paul S. Ell, *Historical GIS: Technologies, Methodologies, and Scholarship* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
river channel and Ashbridge’s Bay marsh in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and to document industrial development along the lower river in the same period. Work toward these ends in partnership with the University of Toronto Map and GIS Library resulted in the Don River Historical Mapping Project, which served as a companion to my dissertation research and a resource for other researchers seeking geographic information on the Don Valley and Toronto’s east end.\(^\text{39}\) The maps of historical changes to the river channel and concentrations of industry that appear in this dissertation all result from this project.

As I move through the history of the river and the various interactions that people have had with it over time, I return to three central arguments. First, I argue that a dialectic exists between perceptions of the river and its valley and the types of uses and modifications it was subject to over time. As Linda Nash has shown for the Skagit River in western Washington, material changes to the river “proceeded in part from changes in language and forms of mediation…. Cultural and material change were intertwined.”\(^\text{40}\) My research traces a general pattern in perception and use of the valley from its position as a central provider in the mind’s eye of early York residents, to a place that becomes increasingly peripheral in the latter half of the nineteenth century as a result of the polluting effects of industrialization and urbanization. Not until the late twentieth century, I find, did attempts to “re-centre” the Don as a potent symbol of environmental deterioration begin to erode persistent perceptions of the river as a blighted and neglected place. This shift from centre to periphery and, to a limited degree, back to centre, had

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\(^{39}\) The project produced GIS databases for the industrial history of the lower Don, for changes to the river channel and Ashbridge’s Bay marsh, and for land ownership in the watershed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The project website (http://maps.library.utoronto.ca/dvhmp/) includes a large number of historical map images available for download, together with GIS files that can be downloaded and viewed using Google Earth.

dramatic implications for the ecological integrity of the valley. By the 1880s, the lower river valley was widely considered—at least by those who viewed it from a comfortable distance—as a diseased and dangerous place, and a fitting repository for the waste products of an industrializing, urbanizing society. One hundred years later, perceptions of the valley as a degraded but ultimately salvageable natural system fueled efforts to reimagine the Don as a vital green space for urban residents and threatened wildlife alike.

Perceptions of marginality are, naturally, wholly dependent upon perspective. The valley meant very different things for those people who called it home than it did for people assessing it from the distance of the town core. For riverside property owners, for example, the “improvements” of the 1880s meant expropriation, not amelioration. For workers and their families who lived in the squalid and poorly serviced neighbourhoods abutting the industrial lands of the Lower Don, industries and the wastes they generated represented a livelihood more than they did a threat. For those who found themselves living in the valley—the squatters of the 1830s, the unemployed hoboes of the 1930s—the Don was likely not so much a “margin” or “periphery” as a kind of borderland, a liminal space at the edge of the city (and, in the depths of its ravine lands, below it) where survival without housing or employment was at least narrowly possible.

Here Ian McKay’s liberal order framework\(^\text{41}\) proves especially “good to think with.” Inasmuch as the valley increasingly failed to meet late nineteenth century liberal order goals of efficiency and predictability, it was increasingly a place to be externalized, cast from the mind. And with it, the sewage, the offal, and the effluents; the impoverished, the homeless, and the

insane—the externalities of the process of nineteenth-century city-building. By continuing to serve the vital function of absorbing and removing urban wastes, the river valley allowed, in a way, for this “blindness” among elite residents to the ecological and social consequences of their actions. Steps taken in the decades after 1970 to remove pollutants and regenerate degraded riparian habitats made limited improvements to the ecological integrity of the river system; trends toward citizen involvement and an appreciation of the resilience of natural systems also departed in meaningful ways from the liberal order ambitions of past projects. This dialectic between the material processes and consequences of urban development, and the ways that different groups of people perceived and responded to these changes over time, points to the larger historiographical contributions this project makes in bringing together approaches from material and cultural history, environmental and social history and exploring the ways in which they inform and respond to each other.

Second, I argue that nature, as material entity and as process, remains a powerful actor even in urban settings where its presence is controlled and constrained and, for most observers, less immediately evident. As Richard White concluded for the Columbia, our control of even a heavily industrialized river is never complete. Inasmuch as nature incorporates human influences and reflects human imaginings, it also operates as an autonomous force in its own right, occasionally destructive, and ultimately unpredictable. Environmental historians have devoted considerable attention in recent years to the agency of nature, and to efforts to recognize nonhuman actors as initiators and respondents in an ongoing dialogue with their human
manipulators. And yet, discussions of agency tend to confuse the point. As Keekok Lee argues, nature is autonomous not in the Kantian sense of intentionality, but in the sense that it is “self-sustaining and self-generating.” It “come[s] into existence, continues to exist, and finally, disintegrates/decays… in principle, entirely independent of human volition or intentionality….” Thus, while it may be difficult to ascribe intentionality or voice to non-human forces, such forces clearly impinge upon human actions, decisions and experiences nonetheless—a fact we are so frequently reminded of in media coverage of the latest fire, flood, or storm event to devastate places at home and away. With this understanding in mind, we can see the ways in which even a small urban river such as the Don has operated and will continue to operate as a causal force in history, as a subject of studies, a provider and destroyer of lives and livelihoods, and a frustrating defier of human efforts to control it.

Finally, I argue that a dialectic of “imagined futures” and unintended consequences characterized the human relationship with the river from the late eighteenth century to the present. Human desires for the river crystallized into a series of imagined futures—seldom implemented development schemes reflective of the values and motivations of the particular cultural, political, and economic contexts from which they sprang. These schemes, ardently promoted and costly to implement, consistently failed to meet expectations. Budget shortfalls


44 Thanks to William J. Turkel for suggesting this concept as an organizing principle for the project.
and fluctuating political will operated to rationalize plans, reducing their reach or overly simplifying their approach. Further, the inevitable adjustments that occurred when the plan met with the physical realities of the place it was to transform produced further setbacks and unintended consequences that worked against the plan’s chances of success. Toronto’s treatment of the Don was not an isolated occurrence: the City modelled its plans on the perceived success of other river cities, its objectives and methods situated within the rapidly industrializing political and economic imperatives of its time. As James C. Scott concluded in his study of high modernist urban planning, such “grand plans” tended to fail in part due to their neglect of dense pre-existing norms and practices “difficult or impossible to codify”—in this case, the complicated ecological interactions and seasonal processes of a river already part human creation, part “natural.” The inflexibility of these plans in the face of unforeseen circumstance, in Scott’s assessment, worked to seal their fate.

This study falls into four parts: 1) Headwaters; 2) Channels and Pools: River as Corridor, River as Place; 3) Reclamations; and 4) Sediments. Part One, Headwaters, introduces the setting for the story, focusing on the period of early settlement between 1793 and 1830, when the river played a significant role in fueling the growth of the town of York (later renamed Toronto). Part Two, Channels and Pools, details the industrial history of the river and its transformation from a central provider in the lives of early Toronto residents to a polluted and vilified space at the urban periphery in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Perceptions of the Don as both a corridor and a place are explored here by way of discussing the river’s shifting significance to different groups of residents over time. Chapter Three explores the factors that led to the deterioration of environmental quality in the lower river, and the perceptions of place that facilitated the use of the valley as a corridor for wastes. The focus here is on the years between
1850 and 1890, when the lower river first emerged as a site for noxious industries and sewage pollution became increasingly apparent. Responses to the pollution problem and its effects on public health are discussed within the context of the Gooderham & Worts Company cattle byres, and the conflict that emerged in the 1890s over the company’s role in befouling Ashbridge’s Bay marsh at the mouth of the river. As the chapter progresses, a trajectory becomes evident in which the Lower Don Valley appears increasingly as a space “set apart” for the purposes of industrial production and waste assimilation. Chapter Four explores further the nature of the area’s undesirability, and the implications it had for people who called the valley home, temporarily or for longer periods of time, in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. The ways in which the Don was conceived as a semi-rural space at once isolated and proximate, restorative and befouled, had implications for the kinds of uses to which it was set, and the opportunities it allowed for those living on the edges of society. Discussion in this chapter is organized around three case studies: 1) a cluster of reformatory institutions that established in the lower valley in the 1860s; 2) a trial of members of the lower valley’s Brooks Bush Gang for the murder of a local Member of the Provincial Parliament in 1859; and 3) selected episodes of “visible” homelessness in the valley in the early twentieth century.

Part Three, Reclamations, explores two very different movements to “reclaim” and improve the river and what both groups conceived, in different ways, as the “Don problem.” Chapter Five documents a series of initiatives between 1870 and 1930 to “improve” the Don in the name of industry, transportation, and public health, centering on the ambitious Don Improvement Plan of the 1880s. The projects proved far more complicated and time-consuming to implement than originally envisioned; even more damning was the fact that they largely failed to fulfill expectations. Conflicting institutional priorities, insufficient funds, and a general failure
to comprehend the complexities of environmental conditions on the ground combined to frustrate project objectives. In the end, engineers’ attempts to transform a complex riparian system into a “flush” for wastes and debris and a viable corridor for shipping and rail traffic were too willing to assume a blank slate—a river patiently awaiting the revelation of its “true value and capabilities.” Chapter Six investigates efforts to reclaim the Don as a conservation success story between 1940 and 1989, using the experiences of Don conservation champion Charles Sauriol as a lens through which to tell the story. Changes in the approaches to protecting urban nature, I argue, are reflected in Sauriol’s personal experience—the strategies he employed, the language he used, and the losses he suffered as a result of urban planning policies. Over the course of Sauriol’s career as a professional conservationist, from the 1960s to the 1990s, the river increasingly became a symbol of urban health—specifically, the health of the relationship between urban residents and the natural environment upon which they depend.

Finally, Part Four, Sediments, turns to current plans to recreate a portion of the historic wetlands at the mouth of the Don in conjunction with a broader waterfront revitalization initiative. The latest in a long history of “imagined futures” for the lower river and its mouth, the Don Mouth Naturalization Project aims to create “an iconic identity for the Don River” while providing flood protection and development opportunities in the former industrial area around the river mouth. The debates these plans have generated around how the river should look, how it should relate to the city around it, and what aspects of its history should be incorporated, will be the subject of discussion here. To what extent, I ask, has the public memory of the river—the history of human relationships with the river, and the lessons people have taken from it over time—been incorporated into plans for the river’s transformation? How, and to what extent, does
the past weigh upon and shape efforts to revitalize languishing urban districts and degraded ecologies?
PART I
HEADWATERS
The Don River and the valley that frames it is perhaps Toronto’s most distinctive natural feature. Running roughly through the centre of the city, the lower valley with its steep ravine walls and wide valley floors creates a very visceral sense of separation between the eastern and western parts of the city. Anyone who has travelled east on the Bloor subway line can relate to the sudden recognition of nature’s presence in the city as the train bursts into sunlight over the Prince Edward Viaduct, the small meandering river snaking across the wide valley below. Insignificant as the river may appear to most subway passengers, it once played a prominent role in the city’s development. The area near the mouth of the river anchored Toronto’s (then the town of York’s) first town plot; further upstream, well-connected settlers received what were considered choice farm lots for agricultural settlement and country estates. Lumber from valley trees and bricks from valley clay fueled the growth of the city; the river itself provided water for industry, and, in a more limited way, a conduit for the transport of goods. This chapter introduces the river valley as the setting upon which subsequent chapters will build. It argues that the river, despite its modest size, played a significant role in the area’s development between 1793 and 1830. Here the story of the Don is also the story of Toronto. Although these narratives will diverge in subsequent chapters, as the Don was increasingly relegated to the margins of the growing city, in the early years of British settlement the Don generated development in York just as York generated development on the Don.
I The Don River Watershed

From the Bird’s Eye

From an aerial perspective, the Don watershed encompasses a network of streams and crevassed ravines that delineate a succession of U-shaped valleys between the river’s headwaters in the Oak Ridges Moraine, north of Toronto, and its outfall thirty-eight kilometres south, on Lake Ontario’s Toronto Bay (figures 1 and 2). Draining a watershed of approximately 360 square kilometres, the river system includes two main branches: the East and West Don, which join to form a single stream, the Lower Don River, at the Forks about seven kilometres north of Lake Ontario. The area below the confluence is known as the Lower Don; the wider watershed surrounding the east and west branches, the Upper Don. A major tributary of the river, Taylor-Massey Creek, also joins the main stream at the confluence. Other major tributaries include German Mills Creek, which drains the eastern side of the watershed, running parallel to the east branch of the river through the towns of Richmond Hill and Markham before merging with the East Don south of Steeles Avenue; and Wilket Creek, a tributary of the West Don running from Bayview Avenue and York Mills Road southeast to join the west branch north of Eglinton.

Most of the tributaries of the lower river have been lost to urban development—buried by fill or encased within sewage infrastructure. These included Castle Frank Brook (also known as Brewery Creek or Severn Creek), Yellow Creek (also known as Rosedale Brook, Silver or Sylvan Creek), Mud Creek (also known as Mount Pleasant Brook) and Cudmore Creek (also known as Burns Creek). Each of these tributaries entered the Lower Don from the northwest in the area roughly bounded by Pottery Road and Winchester Street. Two smaller tributaries, Sumac Creek and Crookshank Creek, entered the river from the northwest between Eastern
Figure 1. Satellite Image of Don Watershed.
Figure 2. The Don River Watershed. Courtesy of the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority.
Avenue and Front Street (figure 3).\(^1\) Today, these creeks are largely invisible, with the exception of the surviving topography of the ravines they once flowed through, and occasional stretches of above-ground flow.

Like the other six watersheds in the Greater Toronto Area,\(^2\) each of which originate along the southern margin of the Oak Ridges Moraine and follow a similar south-easterly direction to Lake Ontario, the Don’s physiography is the result of glacial action during the last ice age and drainage patterns that developed after the glaciers receded.\(^3\) From its headwater hills which rise 300 metres above sea level to its final outlet in Lake Ontario, the Don falls roughly 225 metres. Near its headwaters, the river falls at a gradient of about twenty-three metres per kilometre; along the lower twenty kilometres of its course, however, its gradient declines to less than four metres per kilometre.\(^4\) Under regular flow conditions, the river becomes sluggish over the last three kilometres of its course, dropping only 0.4 metres to the level of Lake Ontario. Widened and deepened in the late nineteenth century, this section of the river requires regular dredging to keep it from filling with sediment—in other words, to keep it from reforming its historically marshy delta.

The river system is perhaps best visualized with reference to the branching pattern of a tree. As the Task Force to Bring Back the Don wrote in their 1991 plan of action for the river,

\(\text{\underline{\text{\textsuperscript{1}}}}\) Lost Rivers: Lower Don River, \url{http://www.lostrivers.ca/LowerDon.htm}, accessed April 27, 2009.

\(\text{\underline{\text{\textsuperscript{2}}}}\) The others being, from west to east, Etobicoke Creek, Mimico Creek, the Humber River, Highland Creek, and the Rouge River.

\(\text{\underline{\text{\textsuperscript{3}}}}\) Regular surface relief patterns across the Toronto region, consisting of parallel ridges and hollows with a general north-west to south-east trend, confine the valley to the same distinctive directional trend (ODPD, \textit{Don Valley Conservation Report}, Part I, 2).

\(\text{\underline{\text{\textsuperscript{4}}}}\) Ibid.
the typical patterns of a natural river are analogous to those of a tree. The above-ground structure of a tree begins with a trunk that branches into major limbs; each limb in turn branches respectively into minor limbs; and each of these branch repeatedly into thousands of smaller limbs and twigs. A river system follows this branching pattern with thousands of tiny, almost imperceptible, rivulets feeding into slightly larger rivulets, until the main tributaries feed into the final artery, or “trunk” of the river.\(^5\)

\[^5\] The Task Force to Bring Back the Don (hereafter TFBBD), *Bringing Back the Don* (Toronto: City of Toronto Planning and Development Department, August 1991), 21.
Such a metaphor reinforces the necessity of studying the river system as a whole: a review of processes occurring along the river’s “trunk,” for example, is necessarily incomplete without reference to the capillary action of its tributary creeks and streams.

**Benchmarks of Environmental Change**

Historically, a massive marshy delta stretched out from the river mouth at the shoreline of Lake Ontario. Five square kilometres in size, Ashbridge’s Bay marsh was once one of the largest wetlands in eastern North America, and supported a vast range of migratory birds and other wildlife. Local historian Henry Scadding (1813-1901) described the marsh as he recalled it in his youth: “in the summer this marsh was one vast jungle of tall flags and reeds, where would be found the conical huts of the muskrat, and where would be heard at certain seasons the peculiar *gulp* of the bittern.”

Located at the eastern end of Toronto Bay between today’s Cherry and Leslie Streets, the marsh was bounded on the west by a sand spit separating Ashbridge’s Bay and Toronto Bay and on the south by a long peninsula (later breached to form the Toronto Islands). In the early nineteenth century it was a popular site for hunters and fishermen. As English writer Anna Jameson wrote in the spring of 1837,

> intersected by inlets and covered with reeds, [the marsh] is the haunt of thousands of wild fowl, and of the terrapin, or small turtle of the lake; and as evening comes on, we see long rows of red lights from the fishing boats gleaming across the surface of the water, for thus they spear the lake salmon, the bass and the pickereen.

From the 1880s on, hunters, trappers and fishermen constructed cottages and boat houses on the sand spit and the peninsula, and by the early 1910s, two small communities had formed at

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Woodbine Beach and Fisherman’s Island (on the peninsula east of the government breakwater; figure 4).\(^8\) Reclamation efforts in the early twentieth century reduced the marsh to only a fragment of its original area. The last residents of Fisherman’s Island were expropriated in 1911 to allow for the creation of the Port Industrial District (see Chapter 5 for further detail).

A sense of the broader valley landscape emerges from the descriptions of several nineteenth century observers. W.H. Smith described the landscape of the lower valley in 1851, likely with future settlers in mind:

> [The] river makes its exit into the bay through a large marsh, and the land near its mouth is low and flat, forming excellent grazing ground. As you ascend the river you perceive that it flows through a beautiful and fertile valley, which is bounded on either side by a range of hills.... The scenery on the Don is pretty and picturesque, being a succession of hill and dale; the soil is generally a sandy loam, varying in quality, some portions being poor, and others particularly rich, with a clay subsoil. The timber is principally pine, with a mixture of hemlock, cedar, oak, cherry, &c.\(^9\)

Further upstream, near Todmorden Mills, the broad valley floor typically flooded in spring, “yielding rich pasturage.” In this area the drama of the landscape was most pronounced: “the banks, which are thickly wooded, rise abruptly, sometimes from the water, but more often at a considerable distance. They are broken by ravines, where tributary streams unite their waters with the Don, and occasionally these bluffs enclose a wide space, giving an amphitheatre-like effect.\(^10\)

A number of observers noted the bountiful wildlife that once inhabited the valley. “The flights of wild Pidgeons [sic] in the Spring & Autumn is a surprising sight,” Elizabeth Simcoe

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\(^8\) Jeffery Stinson, *The Heritage of the Port Industrial District* (Toronto: Toronto Harbour Commissioners, 1990), 16.


Figure 4. Detail from Toronto Harbour Commissioners, *Waterfront Conditions, 1912*. Courtesy of the University of Toronto Map and Data Library. The government breakwater is visible in the centre of the map, running north-south between Toronto harbour and Ashbridge’s Bay (here renamed the Toronto Harbor Industrial District). The narrow peninsula running east-west between Ashbridge’s Bay and Lake Ontario was known as Fisherman’s Island; note the building outlines immediately east of the breakwater.
(1762-1850) wrote in November 1793; “the air is sometimes darkened by them.”

Journalist and publisher John Ross Robertson (1841-1918) recalled a century later that “the lands bordering the stream were alive with genuine game, grouse, quail, woodcock, snipe, plover, sandpiper and wild duck of various denominations.”

Henry Scadding’s description of animal tracks on the river in winter give a sense of the diversity of animals that lived in the valley in the years before agricultural settlement and urbanization dramatically reduced viable habitat:

> After a light fall of snow in the night, the surface of the frozen stream would be marked all over with foot-prints innumerable of animals, small and great, that had been early out a-foraging: tracks of field-mice, minks and martens, of land-rats, water-rats and musk-rats; of the wild-cat sometimes, and of the fox; and sometimes of the wolf.

Having grown up in the valley himself (Scadding’s father, John Scadding, was Secretary to Lieutenant-Governor John Graves Simcoe and owned a farm lot on the east side of the Lower Don), Scadding wrote with considerable authority. Evidently fascinated by the area’s natural history, he wrote of the elm, sycamore, and basswood trees that could once be found in the valley, the vast pine forests of the table lands, and the snakes and tortoises that inhabited the waterway.

Perhaps the most lamented of the valley’s former wildlife, and the most symbolic of its deteriorated habitat, are the salmon that once migrated upstream each fall. Robertson noted that “the river [abounded] with salmon at the proper seasons, and a number of good fish at all times,

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Figure 5. Paul Kane, Spearing Salmon by Torchlight, 1846. Kane’s image depicts Menominee spearing salmon on the Fox River in present-day Wisconsin; the same technique was used by the Mississauga in the Toronto area. Source: Wikimedia Commons, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:PaulKane-HuntingFish-ROM.jpg.

rock-bass, perch, pike, eels.”

14 Scadding recalled the sight of a convoy of skiffs night-fishing along the river in his youth:

Along the winding stream… every summer at night would be observed a succession of moving lights, each repeated in the dark water below. These were the iron cressets, filled with unctuous pine knots all ablaze, suspended from short poles at the bows of the fishermen’s skiffs, out in quest of salmon and such other large fish…. We have ourselves been out on a night-fishing excursion on the Don, when in the course of an hour some twenty heavy salmon were speared; and we have a distinct recollection of the conspicuous appearance of the great fish, as seen by the aid of the blazing ‘jack’ at the bow, nozzling about at the bottom of the stream (figure 5).

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14 Robertson, Robertson’s Landmarks, Vol. VI, 212.

15 Scadding, Toronto of Old, 228.
II The Simcoes' Don, 1793-1796

“This Evening,” Elizabeth Simcoe wrote in her diary August 11, 1793, “we went to see a Creek which is to be called the River Don. It falls in to the Bay near the Peninsula. After we entered we rowed some distance among Low lands covered with Rushes, abounding with wild ducks & swamp black birds with red wings. About a mile beyond the Bay the banks became high & wooded, as the River contracts its width.”\(^\text{16}\) The Don was central to Simcoe’s experience of the new capital during her brief sojourn there from 1793 to 1796. A destination for excursions from her base at the garrison at the western end of the harbour, and later the location of the Simcoe summer home, Castle Frank, the lower river featured frequently in Simcoe’s journal entries and as a subject for sketches and watercolour paintings (figure 6). “We rowed 6 miles up the Donn [sic] to Coons, a farm under a hill covered with Pine,” she wrote in September 1793. “We found the River very shallow in many parts & obstructed by fallen Trees. One of them lay so high above the water that the boat passed under[,] the Rowers stooping their heads.”\(^\text{17}\)

For her husband, Lieutenant-Governor John Graves Simcoe, the river and the harbour at its mouth were key components in an imagined future of security and prosperity at his chosen capital of York. Scanning the waterfront on a reconnaissance expedition in the spring of 1793, he saw in the sheltered curve of the east end of Toronto Bay and its tributary streams a landscape of

\(^{16}\) Innis, Mrs. Simcoe’s Diary, 104.

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 106.
possibility. He noted the harbour’s natural defensibility, and its potential to supply the future town of York and its environs with lumber. “At the Bottom of the Harbour,” he reported to acting colonial Administrator Alured Clarke in May 1793, “there is a Situation admirably adapted for a Naval Arsenal and Dock Yard, and there flows into the Harbour a River [the Don] the Banks of which are covered with excellent Timber.”18 Satisfied with his assessment of the area’s potential, Simcoe had his surveyor Alexander Aitkin lay out a plot for the future town of York immediately west of the mouth of the Don, at the base of today’s Parliament Street (figure

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Figure 7. Detail from Alexander Aitkin, *Copy of a plan of York Harbour with the soundings, shoals &c. surveyed by Order of Lt. Governor, 1793*. Courtesy of the University of Toronto Map and Data Library. Note town plot roughed in northwest of Don River mouth (near mouth of Taddle Creek), slightly right of centre.

7). He established a four hundred acre reserve for “government buildings” west of the river (stretching from the lakeshore north to today’s Carlton Street and west to Parliament), and ordered plans for the province’s first parliament buildings, erected northwest of the river mouth near the intersection of today’s Parliament and Front Streets in 1797 (figure 8). Simcoe’s stay at York was brief, however, and his decisions based on necessarily hasty assessments of the economic and strategic potential of Toronto Bay and its surrounding lands. As Chapter 3 will

19 Adam, Mulvany, and Robinson, *History of Toronto and County of York*, 211.
Figure 8. Detail from William Chewett, *Map of York*, 1802, Toronto Public Library, MS1889.1.6, Courtesy of Derek Hayes. Note Government Park west of Don River and "Governmt House"[sic] (parliament buildings) northwest of the river mouth.
show, it seems he miscalculated the influence of the wide shallow marsh stretching south and
east of the river mouth on the health of York’s future inhabitants. As the town developed and
grew, it stretched north and west, pushing away from its foundations at the eastern end of
Toronto Bay.

The features that attracted Simcoe, of course, nestled within a larger set of considerations
which positioned the area as a suitable site for settlement. As J.M.S Careless concluded,
Toronto’s location had “specific significance… as a junction point of land and water routes that
transected the Great Lakes region;” its “accessible lake harbour, low, easily traversed shoreline,
and gate position on a passage through the midst of southern Ontario, were distinguishing
aspects from prehistoric times—and destined to have repeated influence on its subsequent
history.” The political circumstances of 1793 also played a role. Indeed, the decision to locate
the capital at Toronto was a defensive one, located in concerns of an American invasion given
larger hostilities between Britain and France that erupted in the spring of 1793. Faced with the
threat of imminent attack, Simcoe decided to establish a naval base at Toronto and to relocate the
capital from its exposed position at Newark to the comparatively greater security of Toronto.

Simcoe was not the first to register interest in the Toronto site. A number of prominent
North West Company members had petitioned for land grants in the area in the 1780s, noting the
area’s potential for settlement and the value of improving communications over the Toronto
Carrying Place. Lord Dorchester, Governor of Canada, responded by attempting to acquire land

20 Careless, Toronto to 1918, 9.

21 Simcoe had the site surveyed in the spring of 1793; in late July, he sent a small company of soldiers from his
Queen’s Rangers to begin construction of Fort York. Simcoe followed with an entourage of government officials
and the remainder of his regiment July 30, 1793. For more detail on the establishment of the capital at Toronto and
the settlement that followed, see Carl Benn, The History of Toronto: an 11,000 Year Journey (Toronto: City of
Toronto Culture Division, 2006); and Derek Hayes, Historical Atlas of Toronto (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre,
2008).
rights in the area, resulting in the 1787 Toronto Purchase treaty with the Mississauga (a subject that receives more detailed treatment later in this chapter). The following year Captain Gother Mann of the Royal Engineers drafted a plan for a town site at Toronto, and in 1791 Dorchester approved land grants totalling 2,400 acres to three Montreal-based petitioners. Neither the town site nor the land grants were fulfilled, however, as the creation that same year of the new provincial government of Upper Canada, with its own Lieutenant-Governor, changed the direction of Toronto’s development from a relatively insignificant outpost to the site of the province’s new capital.22

Simcoe relocated from Niagara to York with his family in July 1793, and began the process of establishing his future settlement. With the assistance of the Queen’s Rangers, he constructed a log-hut garrison at the west end of the harbour, and laid out a ten-block town site at its eastern extremity (figure 9). Behind the town, he established a series of one hundred acres “park lots” between today’s Queen and Bloor Streets, lots that were, according to Careless, “quickly sought” by government officials but occupied more slowly.23 Before returning to England in 1796, Simcoe awarded generous farm lots to the north and east of his town plot to military officers and favoured officials within his inner circle.24 Proximity to the Don River appears to have been a significant consideration in awarding these holdings. Lots running east of Yonge Street and north of Bloor, for example, were laid out east and west “to equalize the river

22 Careless, *Toronto to 1918*, 10-11.
23 Ibid., 21.
Figure 9. Simcoe’s original town plot, highlighted in grey. Created from J.G. Chewett, *Plan of the Town of York, corrected, 1827*.

Simcoe himself claimed a 200 acre parcel on the west side of the river, north of the government reserve, in the name of his five year old son Francis. He awarded the 250 acre parcel opposite him, on the east side of the river, to his Secretary, John Scadding, and the lot north of him to George Playter, a respected military captain. In these early years, time limits for settlement duties weren’t strictly enforced, allowing for many absentee landowners.

For many grantees, holdings along the Don complemented already valuable properties closer to town. They could dabble with farming along the flats of the river with little pressure to create

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26 Ibid., Part 1, 33.
Figure 10. Detail from J.O. Browne and J. Ellis, *Map of the Township of York in the County of York, Upper Canada*, 1851, Toronto Public Library 912.71354 B68, courtesy of Derek Hayes. The map shows lots in the second and third concessions east of Yonge running horizontally on either side of the Don.
viable operations. Some, like Scadding, farmed their holdings with relative success.\textsuperscript{27} Others chose instead to erect lavish suburban mansions on their lands overlooking the valley.\textsuperscript{28} This was particularly true west of the river along Yonge and Davenport Streets, where country estates such as Rosedale prevailed until mid-century and beyond.

Most famous of recreational properties along the Don was the Simcoes’ retreat at Castle Frank. Named for their five year old son Francis, heir to the property, the building was located on a bluff rising above the west bank of the lower river, immediately south of today’s Bloor Street Viaduct. Much more modest than its name suggests, Castle Frank was a thirty by fifty foot house constructed of clapboarded pine logs (figure 11). With the trunks of four peeled pines forming a columned façade, the house was “built on the plan of a Grecian Temple.”\textsuperscript{29} The interior of the house was rough and never fully completed, but its large, open room was the scene of numerous social occasions during the Simcoes’ three years at York. Construction of the small dwelling began in the spring of 1794, almost a year after the Simcoes’ arrival. Simcoe’s wife Elizabeth noted the rationale for the building in her diary September 29, 1793: “the Governor having determined to take a Lot of 200 acres upon the River Donn for Francis, & the Law obliges persons having Lots of land to build a House upon them within the year we went today to fix upon the spot for building his House.” “We went 6 miles by water & landed,” she continued, “climbed up an exceedingly steep hill or rather a series of sugar loafed Hills & approved of the highest spot from where we looked down on the tops of large trees…. The height of the situation

\textsuperscript{27} Robertson, \textit{Robertson's Landmarks}, Vol. VI, 194-95.

\textsuperscript{28} ODPD, \textit{Don Valley Conservation Report}, Part 1, 34.

\textsuperscript{29} Innis, \textit{Mrs. Simcoe's Diary}, 170.
will secure us from Musquitoes [sic]."  

A “country retreat” in a settlement still only roughly hewn from the vast forests around it, Castle Frank seems to have served as a kind of pastoral refuge for the Simcoes, and particularly for Elizabeth. Travelling up the Don by sleigh in winter or through the woods in summer, she hosted picnics for friends on the promontory overlooking the valley, sketched local wildlife and scenes along the river, and retreated to the modest cottage with her children when they took ill. A retreat from political life, it was also a retreat to the healing and inspiring environment provided by the height of land and the impressive views of the valley below. She wrote April 18,
1796: “Francis has not been well. We therefore set off to C. Frank today to change the air intending to pass some days there. The house being yet in an unfinished State, we divided the large Room by Sail Cloth, pitched the Tent on the inner part where we slept on wooden Beds.” And two days later: “the Porticos here are delightful pleasant & the Room cool from its height & the thickness of the logs of which the House is built, the Mountain Tea berries in great perfection. Francis is much better & busy in planting Currant bushes & Peach Trees.” Simcoe’s recollections also suggest that she took comfort in a landscape reminiscent, in places, of the English countryside. On a visit to Captain George Playter’s farm July 4, 1796, she walked through pasture that reminded her of “Meadows in England.” The river itself her husband named for a river in South Yorkshire, presumably for its likeness in size and character.

The area around the Lower Don, then, enjoyed a fleeting desirability in the time of Simcoe’s tenure and the years that followed. Here were the country estates of prominent officials in Simcoe’s inner circle, together with the province’s first parliament buildings. By the early 1800s, however, development had begun to move north and west from Simcoe’s original town plot. Although prominent inhabitants of York continued to speculate in lands abutting the river

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31 Ibid., 177. Still under construction when the Simcoes departed, the cottage was used as a temporary home by Simcoe’s replacement, Peter Russell (Administrator of the colony during Simcoe’s leave of absence); the property was later managed by Simcoe’s former secretary, John Scadding. Castle Frank burned to the ground in 1829, reputedly at the hands of some careless fishermen. In the years that followed, the Simcoes sold all of their landholdings in Upper Canada.

32 Ibid., 186.

33 ODPD, Don Valley Conservation Report, Part IV, 1. Historically, the English River Don meandered along a circuitous north-easterly route from its headwaters in the Pennine Mountains through marshy lowlands to spill into the river Trent 112 kilometres to the south. The Simcoes’ allusions to English rural landscapes were shared by other valley settlers. Henry Scadding compared the river in winter to an “English coach-road,” “firmly frozen over everywhere, and coated with a good depth of snow, bordered on each side by a high shrubbery of wild willow…the whole had the appearance of a fine, clear, level English coach-road or highway, bounded throughout its winding course by a luxuriant hedge” (Toronto of Old, 226). Miller John Eastwood apparently found the likeness of the rolling valley landscape so striking that he named the community that grew up around the Don Mills after his Yorkshire home of Todmorden.
valley in the 1810s, by 1820 concerns about the miasmatic atmosphere of the lower valley, challenges surrounding access, and increasing distance from the commercial centre of York had begun to sully the area’s reputation. 

III  Traces of an Aboriginal Past

Like so many narratives of settlement, the story of the Don and the founding of the town of York opens with a cast of largely nameless aboriginal actors; they perform some perfunctory actions of welcome before being escorted off the stage to allow for the “real action” of resettlement and development to begin. Aboriginal presence near the mouth of the Don River receives brief mention in several early accounts. Lieutenant Walter Butler, who landed on the peninsula with a party of men in March 1779, noted in his diary the presence of “a few wigwams” on the mainland west of the mouth of the Don. In 1793 Lieutenant-Governor Simcoe commissioned Joseph Bouchette to conduct the first survey of York Harbour. His description emphasizes the fleeting and insignificant nature of aboriginal presence in the area in the late eighteenth century:

I still distinctly recollect the untamed aspect which the country exhibited when first I entered the beautiful basin…. Dense and trackless forests lined the margin of the lake, and reflected their inverted images in its glassy surface. The wandering savage had constructed his ephemeral habitation beneath their luxuriant foliage—the group then consisting of two families of Mississaugas—and the bay and neighbouring marshes were the hitherto uninvaded haunts of immense coveys of wild fowl.

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As Victoria Freeman notes, both Bouchette and Butler take these to be the only inhabitants of the place, rather than, as was more likely, a satellite family group established at the site for seasonal hunting and fishing. Graeme Mercer Adams’ description of Toronto in 1793 captures this sentiment: “the present site of Toronto was then a desolate marsh, from which rose the smoke of two or three wigwams, whose denizens were the only inhabitants of the place.” For Adams and many other nineteenth century commentators, what was visible to eighteenth century observers such as Bouchette and Butler delimited what existed: the need to consider alternate explanations or the potential complexity of the situation didn’t always present itself.

The Don, like the people it supported, appears in these descriptions as a “landscape primeval,” later to be transformed (in some eyes defiled) to serve the goals of industrious European settlers. Suggestions of an essentially unoccupied, “hitherto uninvaded” landscape lent support to European territorial claims. Silent, mysterious, and ephemeral, the area’s first inhabitants “left no trace” of their passing: by failing, in the terms of Lockean logic, to use the land to its full capacity, they had no legitimate claim to the lands they occupied. Without the investment of human labour to transform the land, its potential remained untapped, wasted—an inconceivable decadence. “Primeval” landscapes and first peoples, then, were united in the Victorian imagination in a romantic space “before time”—a hazy and unremarkable existence before the European instigation of a more disciplined and productive relationship with the land.

37 Victoria Freeman, ““Toronto Has No History!’ Indigeneity, Settler Colonialism and Historical Memory in Canada’s Largest City,” Urban History Review (forthcoming).
39 Legitimate claims to ownership, Locke purported, saw human labour married with the land to transform and “improve” it (The Second Treatise of Government, ed. Thomas P. Peardon [New York: Macmillan, 1952]).
40 Coll Thrush makes a similar observation about the aboriginal history of Seattle, noting the tendency among settler populations to view the area’s first peoples as “shades of the past, linked almost mythically to a lost nature” (Native
As Toronto historian Henry Scadding wrote in 1873, the Don River’s “true value and capabilities… [were] brought out into view” only when “the proper hour arrived, and the right men appeared, possessed of the intelligence, the vigour and the wealth equal to the task of bettering nature by art on a considerable scale.”

Over two hundred years later, we still know surprisingly little about aboriginal use and occupation of the Don watershed in the years before European settlement. Use of the valley in the contact period appears to have been sporadic and seasonally motivated. Anecdotal evidence from early European observers suggests that both the Seneca, an Iroquoian group who established village sites at the mouths of the Humber and Rouge Rivers in the 1660s, and the Algonquian Mississauga, who settled in the Toronto area after the Seneca withdrew at the end of the seventeenth century, hunted and fished in the valley, but established no permanent village sites along the river. Elizabeth Simcoe’s description of native people ice fishing for “maskalonge” and “pickerell” near the mouth of the Don in the winter of 1794 is illustrative of this seasonal use of valley lands: “the Indians have cut holes in the ice,” she wrote, “over which they spread a blanket on poles, and they sit under the shed, moving a wooden fish hung to a line

41 Scadding, Toronto of Old, 559-60.

in the water by way of attracting the living fish, which they spear with great dexterity when they approach.”

Trails across the landscape still in use in the early years of European settlement also pointed to the long-standing presence of aboriginal people. Far from the thoroughfare presented by the Humber River’s Carrying Place Trail, the Don Valley was nevertheless criss-crossed by footpaths that intersected with a larger aboriginal trail network. One such trail apparently originated in Toronto Bay “directly... behind the peninsula” and wound north on the approximate line of today’s Yonge Street to terminate at Holland Landing, gateway to Lake Simcoe and the upper Great Lakes. Another wound along the foot of the ridge along Davenport Road, entering the valley near Rosedale and crossing the river south of Pottery Road before detouring south-east to exit the watershed near Danforth Avenue and Kennedy Road in the city’s east end. Parts of these trails formed the basis for early road development in the colony; as such, they soon lost their connection to a visible aboriginal past.

Two aboriginal names were recorded for the Don, Algonquian words written by early surveyors as Nechenquakekonk and Wonscoteonach. A translation for the latter appears in the letters of surveyor Augustus Jones as “back burnt grounds,” which historian Henry Scadding interpreted as “the river coming down from the back [or possibly black] burnt country, meaning probably the so-called Poplar Plains to the north, liable to be swept by casual fires.”

Presumably Scadding referred to the rolling countryside of the Oak Ridges Moraine at the river’s

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45 The name Nechenquakekonk appears without translation on surveyor Alexander Aitkin’s 1788 map of the Toronto area. The reference to Augustus Jones’ translation is drawn from Scadding (Toronto of Old, 233).
headwaters. Interestingly, the native name places more emphasis on the lands at the river’s origin than on the river itself. 46 Although the details are sketchy, this translation provides a fitting footnote to our discussion about aboriginal use of the watershed: for native people of the contact period, the Don appears to have been less significant than other, larger rivers in the area. The suggestion that the Don was typically passed over places in greater relief Simcoe’s peculiar choice of the river’s marshy lowlands as the eastern anchor-point for his town of York.

The Mississauga: Toronto’s Dispossessed

References to the presence of aboriginal people in the Don Valley, and in Toronto more generally, decline precipitously after the early decades of the nineteenth century. While chroniclers such as Elizabeth Simcoe and later Paul Kane documented their sightings of native peoples in and around the tiny settlement of York, by mid-century aboriginal people had largely disappeared from depictions of Toronto, their legacy firmly relegated to a pre-settlement past. As Victoria Freeman has shown, the “disappearance” of native people from the social fabric of early Toronto was a reflection, in large part, of the loss of their territories in the Toronto area; it also revealed the degree of invisibility that aboriginal people had attained. No longer the romanticized, heroic Indians of Toronto primeval, aboriginal people in the post-contact period were less likely to be perceived as an object of spectacle. As domestic workers, labourers, students, and visitors, those aboriginal people who continued to live in and frequent the city were relegated to the background. 47

46 Thanks to Jason Young for this insight.

47 Freeman, “Toronto Has No History.” Coll Thrush observes a similar tendency at work in his evocative account of Seattle’s aboriginal history. Stories of the city’s aboriginal past, he finds, reflect the widespread assumption that “native history and urban history—and, indeed, Indians and cities—cannot coexist, and one must necessarily be eclipsed by the other” (Native Seattle, 8). For an insightful discussion of aboriginal “hauntings” of place and their function as “social memories inspired by rapid cultural and environmental change,” see Judith Richardson,
A series of land surrenders in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries launched what would become predominantly a story of dispossession for Algonquian peoples in the Toronto area. In 1787, Superintendent General of Indian Affairs Sir John Johnson met with a group of Mississauga chiefs at the head of the Bay of Quinte (near Colbourne, Ontario) to request a surrender of lands running north from Lake Ontario to Lake Huron along the route of the ancient aboriginal “Carrying Place” (an ancient aboriginal portage route from the mouth of the Humber River north to the Holland River, Lake Simcoe and eventually Lake Huron) (figure 12). The resulting agreement contained the names and dodems (clan symbols) of three Mississauga chiefs (Wabakinine, Neace, and Pakquan) inscribed on small slips of paper and affixed with glue to the surrender document. Further reducing the document’s credibility was the omission of details as to the physical boundaries or quantity of the land surrendered, apparently left blank pending the results of a formal survey. Johnson would later recall that the boundaries comprised “ten miles square at Toronto, and two or four miles. . . on each side of the… Carrying Place” stretching north to Lake Huron—some 100,000 hectares, including the territory underlying much of the current city of Toronto.\textsuperscript{48} Department of Indian Affairs records show that goods valuing 2000 British pounds (roughly $280,000 in 2008 Canadian dollars)\textsuperscript{49} were distributed among various Mississauga groups occupying the lands in question. When the land was finally surveyed a year later in 1788, however, surveyor Alexander Aitkin found that

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\item Indian Claims Commission, Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation Inquiry: Toronto Purchase Claim (Ottawa: Indian Claims Commission, June 2003), 19, http://www.indianclaims.ca/claimsmap/completed_claims_8-en.asp?id=73.
\item For conversion of historical currency into modern values, see Dr. Eric W. Nye’s website at: http://uwacadweb.uwyo.edu/numimage/Currency.htm.
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Mississauga and Crown interpretations of the land to be surrendered varied dramatically. The eastern boundary of the land surrender proved to be especially contentious. Aitkin interpreted the boundary as running north from the lakeshore at the eastern end of Ashbridge’s Bay. Wabakinine, head chief of the Mississaugas of the Toronto area, insisted that his people had not
surrendered any lands east of the Don River. As Aitkin continued his survey inland, repeated opposition by local chiefs eventually forced him to abandon the survey.\textsuperscript{50}

The 1790s brought increasing numbers of settlers to the Toronto area, and for the Mississauga, increasing anxiety and frustration. Promises of hunting and fishing rights in perpetuity were compromised, in many cases, by settlers’ claims over the same territories.\textsuperscript{51} Threat of an Indian revolt led newly appointed Lieutenant Governor John Graves Simcoe to investigate the matter upon his arrival to the colony in 1792. Not until 1805, however, did the colonial administration attempt to resolve the uncertainty surrounding the 1787 purchase. Seeking to obtain new land for agricultural settlement and to secure the government’s title to its capital city, then Lieutenant Governor Peter Hunter sent his Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs, William Claus, to obtain a new deed of surrender from the Mississauga. The 1805 Toronto Purchase, signed by eight Mississauga chiefs, affirmed the 1787 surrender of over 100,000 hectares of land between Ashbridge’s Bay in the east and Etobicoke Creek in the west, and running forty-five kilometres north from Lake Ontario. It is doubtful the terms of the treaty were fully understood, however, as the Mississauga chiefs accepted just ten shillings in exchange for ratifying the surrender, and relinquished rights to the same lands they had previously insisted were outside the 1787 treaty (among these the Toronto Islands, long considered sacred territory by the Mississauga).\textsuperscript{52} The Mississauga maintain to this day that they were unfairly compensated

\textsuperscript{50} Indian Claims Commission, \textit{Toronto Purchase Claim}, 20. Thanks to Victoria Freeman for details on the Mississauga signatories to the 1787 Toronto Purchase (personal communication, February 1, 2010).

\textsuperscript{51} Smith, “The Dispossession of the Mississauga Indians,” 75.

\textsuperscript{52} Indian Claims Commission, \textit{Toronto Purchase Claim}, 30. Surrenders of territory north of Lake Ontario in 1818 and 1819 left the Mississauga with just 200 acres along the Credit River west of Toronto.
for lands in the Toronto Purchase, and that the boundaries of the 1805 treaty were misrepresented.  

As settlement pressures increased in the early decades of the nineteenth century, further surrenders restricted the Mississauga to a small fraction of their former territory. In 1847, Toronto-area Mississauga relocated to the Six Nations Reserve on the Grand River in Brantford, a move that effectively removed them from the story of the city’s development. As historian Leo Johnson concluded:

"With the richest of their fishing waters depleted or effectively closed to them and the most fertile soil surrendered… the fragile hunting and gathering economy of the Lake Ontario Mississauga collapsed. The old seasonal harvest of natural crops was destroyed, never to be regained…. The government’s stated policy of impoverishing the Indians for the economic benefit of the new colony had had its inevitable consequence."

While, as Freeman has shown, aboriginal people maintained at least sporadic presence in the Toronto area through the nineteenth century, references to native people in the city decline significantly after the 1820s. A similar trend occurs in references to aboriginal people in the Don Valley in the early nineteenth century: they essentially vanish from the narrative of the valley’s development (whether they were present, and unobserved, is difficult to determine).

This absence of interaction with living aboriginal people, Freeman concludes, created space for a romanticized portrait of pre-contact aboriginal people to develop. Late nineteenth-century depictions of the city’s past, for example, placed essentialized representations of

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53 In 2003, the Mississauga entered into formal land claims negotiations with the Province of Ontario and the federal government.

54 Smith, “The Dispossession of the Mississauga Indians,” 82.

aboriginal people as benevolent co-founders of the town of York. Interestingly, a romanticized Don River also appears in these depictions. In the historical pageant celebrating the city’s semi-centennial in 1884, for example, the city’s pre-contact past was enacted upon the banks of the pre-industrial Don. Freeman cites the Globe’s description of the pageant’s “Indian Wigwam” tableau:

The rear portion [of the tableau] is occupied by a wigwam made of canvas, but painted to represent hides and bark. In front of this tent is a bank sloping down to a piece of water, which the spectator is requested to imagine the Don. On the bank is a canoe containing a fierce-looking red man in battle array, standing erect in the centre, and a meek-looking squaw sitting in the prow. A third Indian is engaged in shoving the canoe off.

Despite evidence of considerably greater aboriginal presence on the Humber, the Credit, and the Rouge rivers, the Don as “Toronto’s river” became the setting for aboriginal occupation in late nineteenth century narratives of the city’s development. Evident here is nostalgia for an exoticized, more picturesque, and somehow more authentic past—a time when “real” Indians travelled along an unsullied Don River. Like the purportedly “vanished” peoples it once played a role in supporting, the river of the past had effectively vanished—transformed beyond the point of recognition by nineteenth century industrial activity.

The Valley’s First Peoples

The conclusion that the Don watershed was used only sporadically by aboriginal groups in the contact period obscures the longer history of aboriginal occupation of the Toronto area. For

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56 Freeman, “Toronto Has No History.”

57 “Toronto’s Jubilee: The First Day an Unqualified Success,” Toronto Globe, July 1, 1884, p.1, cited in Freeman, ”Toronto Has No History!” Freeman notes that the Mississauga represented in the tableau were “quite possib[ly]… enacted by Tyendinaga Mohawks from the Bay of Quinte, who were not at all related to the Algonquin-speaking Mississaugas who were resident in the Toronto area when the British founded York in 1793.” The Toronto Semi-Centennial Committee, she explains, “required only that the Mississaugas be played by ‘real’ Indians, whatever their tribal affiliation, rather than white actors.”
eighteenth century observers like Elizabeth Simcoe and Joseph Bouchette, the valley’s past would have extended into the era of the seventeenth century French fur trade, and likely little further. Not until the late nineteenth century, when decades of agricultural cultivation revealed artifacts from previous aboriginal settlement, did an awareness of a deeper human past in the Toronto area develop. In 1886, road-building activities near Broadview Avenue and Gerrard Street unearthed a cache of bones suggestive of an aboriginal burial site. The discovery captured the interest of archaeologist David Boyle, who supervised the excavation of what would become known as the Withrow site. The site contained human remains and artifacts both from the Archaic period (pre-3000 BC) and from a much more recent Iroquoian village site (roughly 500-600 years old).\textsuperscript{58} Operating at a time when appropriations of cultural heritage were commonplace, Boyle collected a large number of skeletons and other artifacts from the site, which he later included in the collections he curated at the Ontario Provincial Museum. These discoveries pointed to a deeper history of occupation in the watershed, awarding larger significance to the local farmer’s casual discovery of an arrowhead or a stone implement within the upturned earth of his fields.

Indeed, archaeological evidence from the valley confirms a history of occupation and use dating back millennia. Research has shown that small bands of nomadic hunters moved into the Great Lakes region about 11,000 years ago, soon after the continental glacier retreated, pursuing caribou, mammoth, and other large game animals. Evidence of their presence is scant: camps were small and often ephemeral, and as lake waters fell and then rose again, many sites became

\textsuperscript{58} TFBBD, \textit{Bringing Back the Don}, 26; Williamson, “Before the Visitors,” 41-42.
submerged under the present reach of Lake Ontario. Small bands began to settle into more defined hunting territories about 4-5000 years ago, congregating in the spring and summer in large camps at the mouths of area rivers to fish, trade, and gather provisions for winter. Archaeologists estimate a population of roughly 10,000 people in southern Ontario in this period. As Williamson comments, “each of the rivers flowing into Lake Ontario through and around the Toronto area may have supported a regional band of 500 people.” One of the oldest sites in the Don watershed dates from this period. Located on Deerlick Creek, a tributary of the East Don River, the site shows evidence of repeated use over thousands of years.

In the years between 1300 and 1600 A.D., Iroquoian peoples entered the region and constructed large fortified villages in locations across southern Ontario. Large sites occupied for long durations, such as Teiaiagon (today’s Baby Point) in the Humber drainage system and Ganatsekwyagon at the mouth of Rouge River, have proved especially rich for archaeological investigation. In the Don watershed, the Withrow site is perhaps most widely known. More recent finds include the Baker site, discovered in 1972 and excavated in 2000 in preparation for a residential subdivision. Located in the north-central area of the watershed near a series of small tributaries of the East Don, the site contained four Iroquoian longhouses and three midden areas, or waste disposal sites. Evidence of structural repair of the longhouses, archaeologists note,

59 Evidence of lakeshore camps from this period has been discovered along the former shore of Lake Iroquois, remnants of which still exist in the elevated ridge along Davenport Road in Toronto (Williamson, “Before the Visitors,” 28).
60 Ibid., 33.
61 Artifacts recovered from the site have been dated at 2500 and 6700 years old.
62 Weakened by war with the French and their Algonquian allies, the Five (later Six) Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy had largely abandoned the area north of Lake Ontario by 1700. For a detailed account of the circumstances involved in the Five Nations’ retreat, and the area’s subsequent occupation by the Mississauga, see Smith, “Who are the Mississauga?”
suggests long-time occupation of the site. In 1997, construction of a spectators’ stand at a soccer field in North York resulted in the discovery of a late thirteenth century Iroquoian village site and its associated ossuary. Located on a small tributary of the Don River about ten kilometres north of Lake Ontario, just south of Highway 401, the Moatfield Village site once housed several hundred people. The village site itself was roughly three acres in size; around it, maize plantations would have stretched for hundreds of hectares. Excavations directed by the Six Nations Council of Oshweken, Ontario revealed the remains of at least eighty-seven people together with ceramic cooking vessels, animal bones, and stone artifacts. Evidence from the site indicated a reliance on the resources of the watershed to complement an otherwise maize-dominated diet. As Toronto archaeologist Ronald Williamson concludes, “the large proportion of fish among the animal remains at Moatfield, along with turtles, waterfowl and a variety of both land and water mammals, indicates how important the resources of the Lower Don were for the site inhabitants.”

Compared with neighbouring watersheds such as the Rouge or the Humber, the Don presents a relatively sparse archaeological record. Williamson comments: “far less archaeological evidence [has been found] for Aboriginal communities in the Don drainage system,” compared with the Humber, where five significant sites have been discovered to date.

Certainly the size of the river system, compared with the larger Humber and Rouge Rivers,


66 Ibid., 41. Included among these is the site of the former Seneca village of Teieiagon, on the Humber River at Baby Point. Home at one point to roughly 5000 people, the village was abandoned sometime before 1687.
would have played a role in site selection; authors of the 1999 Task Force to Bring Back the Don report speculate, in addition, that “early Indian encampments tended to be small and water-oriented…. Scarp formations among the Toronto Islands, extending from the Humber to the Scarborough Bluffs, tended to deflect Indian movement past the mouth of the Don River.” More typical of the lower and middle Don Valley, they conclude, were “isolated seasonal encampments of small family groups… [engaged in] temporary activities [such as] pottery [firing], hunting and food gathering.”

Thus, while post-contact use of the valley may have been seasonal and selective, evidence from the archaeological record shows the valley supported permanent settlements in the Late Woodland (1000 – 1700 A.D.) period and possibly earlier. The range of resources provided by the river—rich soils in the river flats for maize plantations; fish, waterfowl, and plants and animals from the river’s marshy lower reaches—sustained small village populations for several centuries at least. Important to remember, too, is the role of agricultural settlement and urbanization in occluding the archaeological record. Sites that have been discovered are not necessarily reflective of sites that once existed. As Williamson reminds us, hundreds of archaeological sites have been destroyed in Toronto over the last fifty years of urban development alone.

This potential for obliteration is especially pronounced for the Don: running through the centre of the city, the watershed has seen significantly more development over the last one hundred years than its counterparts in the east and west ends of the city (current estimates place the watershed at over eighty per cent urbanized). While urban developments in a

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67 TFBBD, Bringing Back the Don, 26.

few cases have led to the discovery of archaeological sites, in many others evidence of past occupation went unnoticed or ignored before the plough or the excavator.

Given the fragmented knowledge that we have of aboriginal presence in the valley, aboriginal use and experiences of the valley play a necessarily small role in my discussion. By the time the major events of my story pick up in the late nineteenth century, the history of aboriginal settlement in the valley had been largely erased.

IV Industry and Insight

Early industry: Lumber and bricks

Returning to the 1790s, we return to the promise that John Graves Simcoe saw in a river whose banks were “covered with excellent Timber.” In 1794, in an effort to address York’s desperate lumber shortages, Simcoe granted some land along the Lower Don south of the Forks to Isaiah and Aaron Skinner, sons of a Loyalist miller in Niagara, with the condition that they build a sawmill on the property at their own expense. By the winter of 1795, the Skinner brothers had constructed what was debatably the first saw mill on the Don.69 The following year Simcoe granted Isaiah Skinner permission to construct a grist mill on the site, going so far as to supply “a pair of mill stones and a complete set of grist mill irons” from the government stores “as an encouragement for him”—evidence of the urgent need for experienced milling services in the settlement.70 Soon afterward, the site became known as the Don Mills. Until 1803, the Don Mills

69 During the same winter that the Skinner brothers constructed their mill at Todmorden (on Lot 19, Concession II from the bay), William Berczy and a group of German immigrants from New York State established another sawmill (subsequently known as the “German Mills”) further north, along a tributary of the east branch of the Don in Markham. It is difficult to say which mill was constructed first (ODPD, Don Valley Conservation Report, Part I, 70).

were the only mills close to York. The sawmill provided lumber for shipbuilding and house construction; “nearly every important house in early Toronto,” researcher Ian Wheal wrote in a letter to a Skinner descendent, “used wood from Skinner’s saw mill.” With “only one run of stones,” local landowner William Lea told an audience at the Canadian Institute in 1881, the grist mill “was kept at work night and day:”

The people brought their wheat as far as from Hamilton, and many other ports on the lake. The grain was taken up the Don in boats to the Sugar Loaf Hill, and thence up the flats by ox teams to the mill. People living at a distance… were in the habit of taking a bushel of wheat in a bag on their backs following the path in the woods to the mill.

In addition to lumber and flour, the Don Mills also sold vegetables and fish to families in town. Salmon migrating up the Don were caught, salted down and shipped in barrels downriver. Here the river served again: when surrounding roads were too muddy to travel, or loads too heavy for area bridges, the river provided an alternate means of transportation. The waterway was especially useful in winter, when it was transformed into a frozen highway for people and goods. Like other mills along the Don, the Don Mills attracted other industries, and with them, workers and their families, to live on site. Toronto’s first industrial complex, it included a brewery, a

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71 The next closest grist mills were at Port Hope, one hundred kilometres east of Toronto, and at Dundas, seventy-five kilometres to the west (ODPD, Don Valley Conservation Report, Part I, 71). Although a government-owned sawmill had been constructed on the Humber in the spring of 1794, recurrent problems with tenant millers and milling equipment drove Simcoe to push for a privately owned mill on the Don (Darke, A Mill Should Be Built Thereon, 22).


74 Wheal to Skinner.
distillery, and a second grist mill by 1821. In 1827, a paper mill was constructed on the site, the second in Upper Canada. Named Todmorden by mill owner John Eastwood in the 1830s, after his Yorkshire home, the community that grew up around the mills extended for about a mile from what is now Pottery Road to the Taylor’s Lower Paper Mill. By the 1890s, Todmorden was home to about three hundred people, including industrial workers, proprietors and their families; it remained an independent village until it was encompassed by the Township of East York in 1924.  

By 1825 the Don River and its tributaries supported twenty-three saw and grist mills, and a carding mill had been constructed on the east branch of the river in Markham. Indeed, the river played an important role in influencing the location of a number of Toronto’s earliest communities: Don Mills (later Todmorden) in the flats of the lower valley; York Mills on the east branch of the Don, north of the Forks; and the German Mills on a tributary of the east branch, in the municipality of Markham, are a few of the communities that grew up around milling establishments along the river. For these early industries, the river served a number of functions: most fundamentally, its flow provided energy to power saws, turbines, millstones, and other machinery; water from the river also served as a coolant, and an ingredient for some operations, such as breweries. Finally, and significantly for the ecological ramifications of riverside industry, the river created a convenient conduit for the disposal of wastes. Just as the river provided important services to industry, industry provided essential services to the growing town of York.

ODPD, Don Valley Conservation Report, Part I, 150.
At the peak of water-powered milling in 1860, the watershed supported over fifty mills producing paper, lumber, flour and wool (figure 13). Notably, all of these mills congregated along the upper reaches of the river where gradients were higher and flow rates faster; furthest south were the Don Mills, located at “the first fall in ascending the river.” Dependent as these industries were on consistent and predictable river flow, they were also vulnerable to seasonal fluctuations in water levels. Annual spring freshets and ice jams frequently washed out mill dams, destroyed equipment, and flooded buildings (periodic large floods and their effects on riverside industry are discussed in greater detail in chapter 5). Almost as devastating, occasional periods of drought in the summer months reduced flow rates, bringing operations to a halt for many mill-owners in the watershed. Berczy’s “German Mills,” for example, located on German Mills Creek near its confluence with the East Don River, struggled to survive due to insufficient flows. On Taylor-Massey Creek, where flows were even lighter, three saw mills established in the 1810s failed due to lack of water. Reductions in the volume of flow were due in large part to the deforestation of the watershed, increasing surface run-off and limiting groundwater absorption. As Graeme Mercer Adam wrote in 1885, “the volume of the stream, once considerable, has greatly diminished, owing to the clearing of the country, and it is no longer available for milling uses.”

In addition to environmental challenges, mill-owners also faced heavy investments in

76 Ibid., Part I, 158.
77 Smith, Canada, Past, Present and Future, 19-20.
78 ODPD, Don Valley Conservation Report, Part I, 74; Adam, Mulvany, and Robinson, History of Toronto and County of York, 94. The three sawmills on Taylor Creek were established around 1816 and owned respectively by John Hough, John Heron, and a man named Darke.
79 Adam, Mulvany, and Robinson, History of Toronto and County of York, 94.
costly milling equipment, and volatile markets for their products. Contrary to modern presentations of nineteenth century mills as romantic and peaceful places of retreat, Gary Miedema notes in a 2008 article on Toronto-area mills, “water-powered mills were noisy hives of business, and surprisingly large and risky investments.” Mills often changed hands quickly, or
failed after a short period of operation. As steam came to replace water power in the decades after 1850, mills were no longer tied to often poorly accessible river locations. Water-powered milling peaked in the watershed around 1860. By 1885, timber shortages and the availability of steam power had resulted in the closure of most sawmills on the Don; grist mills also suffered, but a number converted to steam and remained in operation, some into the early twentieth century.

It would be remiss to talk about early industry on the Don River without making reference to brick works. Potteries and brick works were established in the valley at the same time as its first saw and grist mills; they showed even more endurance, operating in the valley into the late twentieth century. Situated as it is in the former lakebed of the ancient Lake Iroquois, the Lower Don Valley contains clay deposits over two hundred metres deep in places—excellent raw material for brick-making. In the early years of European settlement at York, brick-making was typically performed by itinerant tradesmen who burned bricks as they were needed, close to the building site. An 1813 map of York shows a brickyard on the bay west of the Don, one of several clay pits in the lower valley that attracted brick-makers in the early

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80 Gary Miedema, “When the Rivers Really Ran: Water-powered Industry in Toronto,” in *HtO: Toronto's Water from Lake Iroquois to Lost Rivers to Low-flow Toilets*, ed. Wayne Reeves and Christina Palassio (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2008), 68. Name changes, ownership changes, and failed operations were among the challenges facing the authors of the *Don Valley Conservation Report* in their efforts to document the history of milling in the watershed.

81 Although steam was in use in both saw and grist mills by 1850, steam grist mills were still very rare in 1860. Not until the 1870s and 80s was steam in common use in grist mills. In sawmills steam use was common by 1880 (ODPD, *Don Valley Conservation Report*, Part I, 158).

82 Ibid., Part I, 158-59.

83 Ibid., Part I, 161.
years. Not until the 1840s, however, did demand for bricks result in the establishment of permanent brickyards. Brickyards established in Yorkville in the 1840s took advantage of clay deposits from the “Blue Hill” in Rosedale Valley ravine. These yards also produced the popular yellow bricks used in some of Toronto’s earliest brick buildings. According to the authors of the 1950 Don Valley Conservation Report, brickyards in the Yorkville area prospered “until the available deposits were exhausted and the city had grown beyond the area.”

Most famous, and longest lived, of the brickyards in the lower valley was the Taylor family’s Don Valley Pressed Brick Works (figure 14). Constructed in 1889 on the flats west of the river at the base of Moore Park Ravine, the brick works operated for almost a century, ceasing operations in 1984. For the Taylors, established in the valley as owners of almost 2400 acres and three paper mills near the Forks of the Don, the brick works bolstered their already mammoth influence over the valley’s nineteenth century industrial economy. According to biographical accounts, in 1882, twenty-five year old William Taylor remarked upon the quality of the clay while digging post holes for a fence on the family property in the valley. He took a sample to a local brickworks where it was confirmed that the clay would bake “cherry red.”

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84 George Williams, “Sketch of the Ground in Advance of and Including York, Upper Canada,” 1813, University of Toronto Map and Data Library (hereafter UTMDL), NMC22819. Ann Guthrie identifies this as Hugh Monteith’s brickyard, established in the 1810s at the foot of Parliament Street (Don Valley Legacy: A Pioneer History [Erin, Ontario: Boston Mills Press, 1986], 152).
85 Examples include the Yorkville Town Hall on Yonge Street north of Bloor, constructed in 1859, and the Rossin House Hotel at King and York Streets, constructed in 1856 and demolished in 1960 (Scadding, Toronto of Old, 424).
86 ODPD, Don Valley Conservation Report, 161.
87 Darke, A Mill Should Be Built Thereon, 85-86.
88 Guthrie, Don Valley Legacy, 151. The colour of the brick depended on the mineral content of the clay: more limestone produced a yellow colour, manganese produced a brown tone and iron oxide produced various shades of red.
Within a few years, William and his John and George Taylor had established a quarry at the north end of the site and a brick-making factory along the southern boundary of their property, close to the river. The plant combined rock and clay extracted from the quarry and water from Mud Creek, a tributary of the Don, to manufacture the bricks. Improvements in the 1890s increased the efficiency of the plant, and by 1894 the company was producing over 100,000 bricks a day. Winners of prizes at the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893 and the Toronto Industrial Fair in 1894, Taylor’s bricks were used to construct many Toronto homes and landmarks, including Casa Loma, Massey Hall, the Ontario Legislature buildings at Queen’s Park, and the University of Toronto’s Convocation Hall. The Taylors sold the business in the late

89 Ibid., 156.
1890s after an economic depression resulted in steady declines in the demand for bricks; brick production continued on the site for almost a century, however, peaking in the late 1920s.  

A.P. Coleman and the Don Valley Brick Works

Toronto’s river valleys are fitting sites for an exploration of the city’s past. Chasms in space as well as time, they provide a rare opportunity to view the layers of sedimentary rock that underlay the city. In these layers rest a deep history of environmental change in the region—of periods of warmth and deep cold, of forests and lakes forming and receding. Anne Michaels captures this idea of ravine exploration as a form of time travel in her 1996 novel *Fugitive Pieces*. Here the main character, Jakob, discovers the history of Toronto through weekend explorations with his adopted father Athos, a Greek geologist employed as a lecturer at the University of Toronto:

> With a few words… and the sweep of his hand, Athos sliced a hill in half, drilled under the sidewalk, cleared a forest. He showed me Toronto cross-sectioned; he ripped open cliffs like fresh bread, revealing the ragged geological past. Athos stopped in the middle of busy city streets and pointed out fossils in the limestone ledges of the Park Plaza Hotel or in the walls of a hydro substation…. Instantly, the streets were flooded by a subtropical salt sea. I imagined front lawns crammed with treasure: crinoids, lamp shells, trilobites.

> Like diving birds, Athos and I plunged one hundred and fifty million years into the dark deciduous silence of the ravines…. We dipped down into a humid amphitheatre of a Mesozoic swamp, where massive fronds and ferns tall as houses waved in a spore-dense haze. Beneath a parking lot, behind a school; from racket, fumes, and traffic, we dove into the city’s sunken rooms of green sunlight. Then, like andartes, resurfaced half a city away….  

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90 The company changed hands (and names) a number of times over the course of the twentieth century, becoming the Don Valley Brick Company in 1909 and the Toronto Brick Company in 1928. The addition of electricity and related expansions in the 1920s brought the factory to a peak production of 25 million bricks a year in 1928. A key landmark in the Valley, the Brick Works property was expropriated by the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority in 1987; it is currently being redeveloped as an environmental community centre by Evergreen, a national non-profit organization.

Jakob and Athos’ fictional explorations of the city’s ravines could well have been inspired by the work of geologist and artist A.P. Coleman in the late 1800s and early 1900s. For Coleman, the city’s river valleys, and the Don Valley in particular, opened a window into the region’s geological past.\textsuperscript{92} Evidence laid down as sediment and compressed into layers of rock and clay created a legible “document” of past environmental change, and a physical foundation from which to overturn previous interpretations. In Coleman’s work, we see the Don Valley as both a setting to reveal the city’s past as well as the history of ideas about that past. His findings provide a useful departure point for an overview of the valley’s geological history.

Born in Lachute, Quebec in 1852, Arthur Philemon Coleman trained in Classics and Geology before being appointed Professor of Geology and Natural History at Victoria College in 1882. From 1901 to 1922, he taught Geology at the University of Toronto, and in 1914 became the first director of Toronto’s Royal Ontario Museum of Geology (one of the five original museums that form the Royal Ontario Museum). Author of more than one hundred publications, Coleman went on to acquire a reputation as one of the world’s leading geologists.\textsuperscript{93} He combined his academic pursuits with artistic talents and a passion for mountaineering: watercolour paintings illustrate his findings from geological sites, and many of his reports of geological findings also serve as guides to mountain climbing.\textsuperscript{94} Widely travelled throughout

\textsuperscript{92} Prior to Coleman’s discoveries, construction in the Valley had revealed fossils of freshwater shells and trees. Ontario’s first provincial biologist, William Brodie (1831–1909), was among a number of enthusiasts, professional and otherwise, who collected and preserved specimens. Together with naturalist J. Townsend, he identified a previously unknown tree species, the Pleistocene maple (\textit{Penhallow acer pleistocenium}) (Guthrie, \textit{Don Valley Legacy}, 56).

\textsuperscript{93} For an excellent overview of Coleman’s career, including a pictorial catalogue of his paintings, photographs, and geological specimens, see Victoria University Library’s online exhibition, \textit{A.P. Coleman: Geologist, Explorer (1852 – 1939) – Science, Art & Discovery} (\url{http://library2.vicu.utoronto.ca/apcoleman/}; accessed 14 May 2009).

Asia, Africa, Australia, Scandinavia and the Americas, Coleman returned throughout his career to the brick yards of Toronto as a physical archives of Toronto’s geological history—an “archive of place,” to borrow a term from William J. Turkel. Together with the Scarborough bluffs in the east end of the city, the brick yards became the basis of Coleman’s exploration into the Pleistocene glaciation of southern Ontario. Publishing the first results of his Toronto studies in 1887, he returned to the subject repeatedly over the next fifty years.

For Coleman, the layers of sediment revealed in the quarry walls of the Don Valley Brick Works provided a rare opportunity to glimpse the distant past:

one can see the ancient forest of maples and oaks and many other trees on the river shore with deer coming down to drink, bears tearing open a rotten log for its small inhabitants; and at some creek mouth the giant beaver fells a tree with a splash to feed on its branches; while openings in the forest show buffalo grazing. A thunder-storm comes up, lightning strikes a blasted tree, and fire runs along the river bank, stampeding the forest dwellers which rush to the water for safety—all recorded with many more features not referred to in the sand and clay beds between two sheets of [glacial] boulder clay.

The uniqueness of the Brick Works site lay, Coleman found, in the relative completeness of its record. In most places, glaciers not only produced geological evidence but also destroyed evidence of previous glaciations. In a very few sites around the world, traces of earlier glaciations survive. Coleman’s discoveries, published in 1893, helped lay to rest the established scientific belief in a single period of glaciation.

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95 This metaphor is borrowed from William J. Turkel, *The Archive of Place: Unearthing the Pasts of the Chilcotin Plateau* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007).

In the exposed north wall of the quarry, Coleman discovered a complete succession of glacial and interglacial beds (figures 15 and 16). Evidence showed that at least two ice sheets had moved through the region, each leaving behind a layer of glacial deposits. Working from the bottom up, Coleman sketched a geological history spanning millions of years. At the bottom of the quarry he found evidence of Toronto’s foundational bedrock, laid down approximately 450 million years ago as sediments from a shallow tropical sea. On top of this lay the first evidence of glaciation—a thin layer of glacial till deposited by the Illinoian ice sheets, which retreated roughly 135,000 years ago. A sandy layer that Coleman called the Don Formation lay on top of this; within it, Coleman found fossils of mollusks, trees, and mammals such as the giant beaver. Dating back approximately 80,000 years, these fossils provided evidence of a period of temperate climate conditions—proof that at least two major periods of glaciation had occurred, divided by a warmer interval. Fossils found in the next layer provided evidence of dramatically cooler temperatures consistent with the beginning of the last major period of continental glaciation about 75,000 years ago. Above this, Coleman found evidence of the presence of glacial ice in the Sunnybrook Till, deposited as a vast sheet of ice expanded to cover the Toronto region about 45,000 years ago. Two kilometres thick in places, the ice sheet eventually covered the entire Great Lakes region and much of Quebec. It reached its maximum southerly extent in

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97 While evidence of glaciation preserved on land reveals only the most recent periods of glaciation, investigations of sediment layers on the ocean floor have given geologists access to a near continuous record of Pleistocene climate changes. Core samples of these sediments have shown an approximate 100,000 year cycle of alternating glacial and interglacial climate—translating into at least twenty periods of glaciation over the last two million years (Nick Eyles, *Toronto Rocks: The Geological Legacy of the Toronto Region* [Toronto: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2004], 19-20).

98 In Southern Ontario, this bedrock of Paleozoic shale lies on top of the much older Precambrian rocks of the Canadian Shield. ODPD, *Don Valley Conservation Report*, Part I, 4.
Figure 15. Don Valley Brick Works excavation, c.1908, William James Family Fonds, Fonds 1244, Item 2474, City of Toronto Archives (hereafter CTA).
Figure 16. Illustration of Sediment Layers, Don Valley Brick Works. Courtesy of Wayne Reeves.
Ohio before beginning its final withdrawal roughly 13,000 years ago.\textsuperscript{99} Finally, in the topmost layer of the quarry wall, Coleman found sandy deposits formed by the waves of a glacial lake after the ice finally withdrew from Toronto about 12,000 years ago.

Since Coleman’s discoveries, the Don Valley Brick Works site has developed an international reputation for its evidence of climactic and environmental change, particularly between the last two major periods of glaciation. Not to be elided here is the role that the city’s industrial and infrastructure developments played in making Coleman’s discoveries possible: excavations for brick production and railway development, among other uses, exposed the geological layers of Toronto’s undulating ravines and valleys, making visible the patterns that Coleman discerned in his explorations. Geologists who followed in Coleman’s footsteps through the latter half of the twentieth century have worked to sketch in the gaps of Toronto’s geological past. Their work has shown the effects of the advances and final retreat of glacial ice from the Toronto landscape roughly 10,000 years ago—most notably, in the creation of Toronto’s distinctive network of ravines, and the formation of the Oak Ridges Moraine.

Extending roughly 160 kilometres across the northern edge of the city from the Niagara Escarpment in the west to Rice Lake in the east, the moraine forms the headwaters for over thirty rivers in Southern Ontario (figure 17). According to Toronto geologist Robert MacDonald, the

Figure 17. The Oak Ridges Moraine, Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, Land use designation map, [http://www.mah.gov.on.ca/Asset1873.aspx](http://www.mah.gov.on.ca/Asset1873.aspx) (accessed September 29, 2009).

moraine “marks the position where two glacial lobes came together, one from the Lake Ontario basin and the other from the Lake Huron/Georgian Bay basin.” The resulting ridge of crushed rock and sand today forms the distinctive rolling hills and porous gravels of the moraine. These deposits act like a giant sponge, soaking up snow and rain and storing them in vast underground aquifers. Consequently, the moraine is Toronto’s largest groundwater resource; it also continues to provide sand and gravel for the city’s construction industry.

The last glacial event in the Toronto region was the formation of the glacial Lake Iroquois. Created approximately 12,500 years ago by melt waters from the retreating Laurentide ice sheet, the lake lay within and beyond the current basin of Lake Ontario (figure 18). Much of

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downtown Toronto is built on the floor of this ancient lake; its former shoreline is indicated by the prominent ridge stretching across the city south of St. Clair Avenue and east to the Scarborough Bluffs. An antecedent of the Don River entered Lake Iroquois near the site of the Forks. Originally, the river entered the lake as two separate streams (today’s east and west branches of the Don). Moving south from the moraine, these rivers cut deep ravines through the soft alluvial plain of sand, gravel, and clay tills. A large hooked sandbar, much like the one that existed at the eastern entrance to Toronto harbour in the nineteenth century, formed at the point where the rivers entered the lake—the result of the combined forces of sediment-bearing river waters, wave action, and westward shoreline currents. Gradually, sands, silts and clays
accumulated behind the bar, creating a protected lagoon that now underlies the upper valley of the Lower Don.\textsuperscript{101}

About 9000 years ago, the ice front retreated north of the St. Lawrence Valley, freeing a passageway at the east end of the Lake Ontario basin. Lake Iroquois drained to the east and the water level in the basin fell to about sea level.\textsuperscript{102} As water levels dropped, the two main branches of the Don River joined at the sandbar on the old Lake Iroquois shoreline, together with a third stream, today’s Taylor-Massey Creek. United as one, the new Lower Don River flowed first west and then south across the old lakebed before emptying into what would become Lake Ontario.\textsuperscript{103} Long depressed under the weight of up to two kilometres of ice, the block of the earth’s crust underlying most of Quebec and north-eastern Ontario slowly rebounded to its present level (it continues to rise, but at a much slower rate). As the elevation of the outlet to the St. Lawrence increased, the level of Lake Ontario rose, pushing water into the lower reaches of Toronto’s ravines. In the Don watershed, sediment washed down from the upper valley accumulated in the water-filled reaches of the lower valley, eventually creating the distinctive plateau that defines the lower river from Bloor Street Viaduct to the lake. At the point where the river entered Lake Ontario, the process of building a sandbar and backshore lagoon was repeated, forming the sandy peninsula (today’s Toronto Islands) and a protected lagoon known to nineteenth century Torontonians as Ashbridge’s Marsh.\textsuperscript{104}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{101} TFBBD, \textit{Bringing Back the Don}, 21.
\textsuperscript{102} Eyles, \textit{Toronto Rocks}, 24.
\textsuperscript{103} The Metropolitan Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (hereafter MTRCA), \textit{Forty Steps to a New Don: the Report of the Don Watershed Task Force} (Toronto: The Metropolitan Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 1994), 3.
\textsuperscript{104} MacDonald, “Toronto’s Natural History,” 16; TFBBD, \textit{Bringing Back the Don}, 21.
\end{flushleft}
Just as the landscape of the river valley was “made” by glacial processes that occurred over thousands of years, it continues to be “remade” in subtle and incremental ways by seasonal flooding and ongoing processes of siltation. The dynamism of the area around the mouth of the Don, and the challenges it posed for early residents, is the subject of detailed discussion in Chapter 5. Humans, too, have participated in remaking the landscape. Indeed, as subsequent chapters will show, the scale of transformation that occurred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries dwarfed the effects of seasonal processes, as much as it was subject to their influences.

The latter half of the nineteenth century saw an intensification of industrial establishments in the lower valley, and the gradual elimination of water-powered mills upstream. The arrival of rail transportation in the valley in the 1850s coupled with improvements in area roads and bridges attracted more industry to take advantage of the valley’s resources. No longer reliant on the higher flow rates of the upper river, these industries congregated along the lower reaches of the river and around the river mouth to capitalize on proximity to lake-bound shipping traffic, and on access to river water for use as an ingredient, a coolant, and perhaps most importantly, as a transporter of wastes. As detailed in Chapter 3, by the end of the century the Lower Don had become an industrial hub, hosting breweries, tanneries, soap works and oil refineries. Huge population increases in this period also fueled the growth of industries and services: annexations and in-migration to the city brought Toronto’s population from roughly 45,000 in 1861 to 208,000 in 1901. 105 With this expansion of industry came increasing pollution, and increasing marginalization of valley lands. Once central in the minds of York residents as the

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105 Census of Canada West, 1861; Census of Canada, 1901, cited in Adam, Mulvany, and Robinson, History of Toronto and County of York, 268; and Careless, Toronto to 1918, 154.
location of the original town plot, and, further north, a seat for country estates, choice farm lots, and water-powered industry, the valley had become a place of disagreeable smells, unsightly wastes, and disease-ridden miasmas. As mills ceased operations further north, the upper valley took on the characteristics of a rural borderland, stripped of its importance as a provider to the city below.

V Conclusion

With its forested slopes, rich clay deposits, and running water, the Don Valley fueled the growth of the nascent town of York. From the first years of European settlement in the 1790s until the early 1830s, the lower valley featured significantly in the imagined future of the colony. Here Simcoe located his parliament buildings; here, too, the government park reserve for future government buildings. Despite harbingers of undesirability through the 1810s and 20s, it was not until the parliament buildings were relocated to the west end of town (Front and John Streets) in 1832 that the area’s disadvantages were firmly established. The following chapter explores the factors that led to the area’s growing marginality through the nineteenth century, and the consequences for the river’s ecological integrity. It shows how the river, though less appreciated as a driver of economic benefits, continued to serve as a vital component of the city’s economy in its role as a sink (and a conduit) for municipal and industrial wastes. As subsequent chapters move through the history of environmental change in the valley in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the early descriptions of the valley documented here provide an important benchmark from which to measure subsequent alterations.

Despite its increasing marginalization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Don has lived on as a kind of “relic landscape” in the minds of Toronto residents. It has appeared as a subject of local fascination in newspaper and magazine articles, and as a setting in
a number of works of contemporary fiction. Novelists Michael Ondaatje and Anne Michaels, for example, have found in the valley’s plunging ravines and broad vistas a source of creativity. Michaels writes of Toronto: “it’s a city of ravines. Remnants of wilderness have been left behind. Through these great sunken gardens you can traverse the city beneath the streets, look up to the floating neighbourhoods, houses built in the treetops.” As A.P. Coleman’s discoveries illustrate, the valley has also played an important role in Toronto’s intellectual development, attracting the interest of geologists, archaeologists, soil scientists and hydrologists, among others. Condemned in its lower reaches as an undesirable landscape, the river valley nevertheless claims a prominent place in the city’s sense of identity. With its remnant pockets of forest and difficult-to-develop ravine lands, the valley is for many Torontonians a place to slip backwards in time, to clamber down into a distinctly different place, a wilder and less orderly place than the grid of city streets above.

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107 Michaels, Fugitive Pieces, 89.
PART II

CHANNELS AND POOLS:
RIVER AS CORRIDOR, RIVER AS PLACE
Chapter 3  
Making ‘An Objectionable Stream’:  
Urban Waste Disposal and the Don Problem, 1850-1890

“every city that has manufacturing industries has a district set apart therefor, and the Don is the district that nature and expedience have set apart for Toronto.”

-“The Smell at the Don,” *Toronto World*, May 8, 1884

By the 1880s, the Lower Don River was widely perceived as an “objectionable stream” and a persistent threat to public health. Years of waste and sewage disposal by local industries and municipal authorities, combined with changes in the river’s hydrology caused by deforestation, soil erosion, and water diversion for agricultural and industrial purposes, contributed to highly polluted conditions in the slow moving, serpentine reaches of the lower river and the massive reach of marshlands at its mouth. As one area resident commented in a letter to the *Daily Globe* in 1874, “the water and marsh [at the mouth] of the Don continues to be filled with a foul combination of [wastes]… so that whenever the wind sets to a particular quarter, and agitates the water, the result is [an] abominable smell… injurious to the comfort [and] the health of all within its reach.”¹  
Associations of the valley as a polluted and unhealthy space had been in place for several decades. As steam came to replace water power in mills in the 1860s and 70s, and deforestation limited timber supply for area sawmills, the Don area was increasingly seen more for its problems than for its possibilities: steep ravines, poor soils, and an unpredictable riparian environment circumscribed the agricultural potential of the area; persistent perceptions of danger and unhealthiness associated with the marshlands of the lower river provided further disincentive for development.

This chapter explores the factors that led to the deterioration of environmental quality in the lower river, and the perceptions of place that facilitated the use of the valley as a corridor for wastes. I begin by setting out some of the circumstances that fueled the marginalization of an area once considered central to the development of the town of York. From there, I document the history of water pollution in the Lower Don, focusing first on industrial polluters and then on the growing problem of sewage pollution along the lower river in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. Debates on the issue of sewage treatment and water supply in Toronto followed similar developments in Great Britain, where rising urban populations and their associated wastes fouled waterways and threatened public health. The British sanitation movement of the 1840s, and the subsequent bacteriological revolution of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, had a significant if delayed impact on centres in the United States and Canada. Responses to the pollution problem and its effects on public health are discussed within the context of the Gooderham & Worts Company cattle byres, and the conflict that emerged in the 1890s over the company’s role in befouling Ashbridge’s Bay marsh at the mouth of the river. Within this case study, issues of class, corporate control, and the City’s emerging (and reluctant) role as regulator and protector of the public interest emerge as facets in the debate over environmental quality at the mouth of the river.

As the chapter progresses, a trajectory becomes evident in which the Lower Don Valley appears increasingly as a space “set apart” for the purposes of industrial production and waste disposal.

assimilation. The expansion of sewerage systems later in the century served to further marginalize valley environments, reinforcing the separation between spaces for “people” and spaces for their wastes. As Michele Dagenais and Caroline Durand observe in their study of wastewater systems in nineteenth-century Montreal, the implementation of sewerage systems resulted in the “increasingly rigid organization of spaces reserved for human waste and its evacuation.” Removed “from the places where production, commerce, socialization, and family life took place,” these systems produced “a new dynamic between the natural and the social.”

Toronto’s Don River in the late nineteenth century was one of these “spaces apart”: a place designated to receive and process the city’s wastes, and a place that carried with it both the dangers and the stigma of this designation.

My discussion of industrial development in this chapter rests quite deliberately on the years between 1850 and 1890—the period immediately before intense industrialization dramatically transformed the landscape of the Lower Don Valley—for two reasons. First, developments in this period established a pattern of industrialization that persisted and intensified in later years. From the earliest years of industrial development along the river, the area tended to host industries that, due to their smell or unsightliness, would have been unwelcome in more established residential areas. Second, the slower pace of industrialization in

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3 Valerie Kuletz has identified similar processes at work in the deserts of the American Southwest, describing areas designated for nuclear testing as wastelands or “sacrificial landscape zones.” The wasteland designation, she writes, “in fact represents a very important means of justifying the relentless plunder of the region through highly environmentally destructive extractive technologies” while at the same time “support[ing] the region's use as a large-scale waste dump and weapons testing range in the minds of policy makers, government bureaucrats, and military officials” (The Tainted Desert: Environmental and Social Ruin in the American West [New York and London: Routledge, 1998], 13).

these years and the fewer number of industrial establishments allow for a more in-depth study of the rationale for locating in the lower valley, and the incremental effects that industrialization had on the environmental integrity of the lower river system. How the lower valley came to be perceived as a urban wasteland is partly revealed in the stories of these early industries and the effects they had upon the surrounding landscape and upon people’s sensory experience of the area.

Sources on nineteenth century water pollution in the Don Valley are patchy at best. No data exists on the amount of material deposited into the river at any given time, nor on the number of industries that used the waterway as a means of waste disposal. Anecdotal evidence from contemporary officials and area residents sheds some light on the effects of pollution from industrial and municipal sources—the stench of the area around the mouth of the river where wastes accumulated; the sight of blood running from the drainage pipes of a slaughterhouse; the odiferous outpourings of a particular sewage outfall point—but efforts to quantify or classify this waste were few. Faced with this relative absence of quantitative evidence, I have turned to studies on river pollution and urban infrastructure by historians in the United States. Their analysis of the typical waste products generated by different kinds of industry, and the processes involved in the decomposition of water-borne wastes, provides vital context for the kinds of pollutants that would have made their way into the Don in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. Not until the mid-twentieth century do data sources begin to emerge on water pollution

5 One notable exception was the wastes produced by the Gooderham & Worts Distillery’s cattle byres, which were roughly quantified in terms of daily output as part of court proceedings in the 1890s and 1910s. This example is discussed in greater detail later in the chapter.

6 Especially useful here are the following: Theodore Steinberg, Nature Incorporated: Industrialization and the Waters of New England (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Tarr, The Search for the Ultimate Sink; Martin V. Melosi, Pollution and Reform in American Cities, 1870-1930 (Austin and London:
in Toronto’s river systems. These sources will see further discussion within the context of Chapter 6, where I discuss the role of water quality issues in the Don watershed as a mobilizer for local conservationists.

I  An Urban Wasteland

The connotations of insalubriousness so well established by the 1880s had long antecedents in the area around the mouth of the Don. Indeed, from the earliest days of European settlement, certain problems were especially pronounced in the east end. A notice in the Upper Canada Gazette May 18, 1799, for example, cautioned York residents to guard their crops against insects from the eastern marshes:

As the wind blows more frequently from the East at this time of year, and thereby swarms of insects are drove from the adjoining swamp, or marsh, we would recommend to those who have gardens in the town, to set fire to small heaps of horses litter, damp shavings, or any thing that will cause a sharp smoake therein, as the best means of keeping them off, and saving their young vegetables, of which we are in great want.  

More serious still than damage to garden produce was the fever or ague that tormented settler populations each summer. Characterized by alternating symptoms of severe fever and shaking chills, the ‘ague’ or ‘lake fever’ was an almost inevitable, if rarely fatal, aspect of life in Upper Canada in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Now understood as a strain of

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7 Reprinted in Firth, The Town of York, 1793-1815, 230.

8 James L.A. Webb Jr.’s work on the global history of malaria is useful here. As he explains, malaria is best understood as “a kaleidoscope of different infections, with different overlapping patterns” rather than a single disease. Of these types of infections, only one was prevalent in early nineteenth century southern Ontario. This strain, caused by the malarial parasite vivax, was less deadly than its tropical cousins. Infections typically caused “temporary debilitation during the course of and in the aftermath of fever paroxysms” and often resulted in anemia that, in relapses, could turn “increasingly severe.” As Webb shows, the “malarial burden lasted only a few
malaria, a disease spread by the bite of the *Anopheles* mosquito, at the time the ague was thought to result from inhaling ‘bad air’ (hence mal/aria). In a letter to a former employer in Quebec City in September 1801, Toronto printer John Bennett wrote:

I am just recovering from a severe fit of fever and ague which confined me to bed for ten days past—no body can escape it who pretends to live here…. There is a marsh about [half] a mile from where I live from which a thick fog arises every morning - people attribute [the fever] in great measure to that and to the low and uncultivated state of the Country.\(^9\)

Gases produced by decomposing organic matter took on the ominous label of ‘miasmas’ — disease-producing vapours—and the places where such organic matter accumulated, such as swamps and wetlands, became places to fear, avoid, and best-yet, destroy through drainage and fill.

Before the discovery of the malaria parasite in 1880 and subsequent discoveries of mosquitoes as vectors of transmission, place itself bore the mantle of disease risk. Certain environments were considered more ‘unhealthy’ than others. In 1803, for example, Sir Isaac Brock reported in a letter to military secretary James Green that the soldiers quartered in the Block House at the mouth of the Don “are falling ill of the Ague and Fever in great numbers” while the garrison at the west end of town “continues in perfect health.” The evidence confirmed his suspicions about the environment around the lower river, “[shewing] plainly that the

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\(^9\) Firth, *The Town of York, 1793-1815*, 242. In 1911, for example, the *Encyclopedia Britannica* defined malaria as “an Italian colloquial word (from mala, bad, and aria, air), introduced into English medical literature by MacCulloch (1827) as a substitute for the more restricted terms "marsh miasm."’ The term was “generally applied to the definite unhealthy condition of body known by a variety of names, such as ague, intermittent (and remittent) fever, marsh fever, jungle fever, hill fever, "fever of the country” and "fever and ague" ([http://www.1911encyclopedia.org/Malaria](http://www.1911encyclopedia.org/Malaria), accessed April 14, 2009).
character given of the situation of the Block House is… well founded.”

A quarter century later, petitioners to the Upper Canadian Legislature in 1830 stressed the “inconvenience and unhealthiness” of the site of the recently burned Parliament House, located at the foot of Parliament Street just west of the Don marshes, in their call to reconstruct the parliament buildings near the Lieutenant-Governor’s residence in New Town (west of the original town plot). “No person having a regard to health would select [the site near the Marsh] for a residence,” they argued; “the untenanted State of houses adjoining the said Marsh, confirm them in this opinion.”

Conevery Bolton Valencius has provided useful context for this notion of “unhealthy” landscapes in her 2002 monograph, *The Health of the Country*. For nineteenth century Americans, Valencius reminds us, “the environment [did not stop] at the seeming boundary of the skin.” Instead, “the surrounding world seeped into [one’s] every pore, creating states of health that were as much environmental as they were personal.” She continues:

Factors of surroundings—the sodden vegetation of local bottomland, the rot and ‘scum’ atop a nearby stream, the winds that blew over swampland as over soldiers’ fortifications—affect ed the health of environments as they would the health of people within a locale. Place and person were swayed by the same kinds of forces; sloughs and forests underwent the same processes as did lagging recruits and ambitious farmers.

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10 Sir Isaac Brock to James Green, July 29, 1803, reprinted in Firth, *The Town of York, 1793-1815*, 72. Soldiers often found themselves on the front lines of disease in addition to other forms of conflict. For a discussion of mortality rates from disease among soldiers in the nineteenth century tropics, see Philip D. Curtin, *Death by Migration: Europe's Encounter with the Tropical World in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 1989).


13 Ibid., 107. Linda Nash’s work on the links between environment and health in nineteenth century California is also useful here (*Inescapable Ecologies: A History of Environment, Disease, and Knowledge* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006].)
Just as elevated sites with fresh, circulating air were considered salubrious, so low, marshy areas where air and water alike were thought to stagnate were considered insalubrious and malevolent. Miasmas “entered the body as breath or fluid, and they operated within it just as they did within terrain. They carried the environment’s imbalance, disturbance, or putrefaction into the depths of the body, expressing within the individual the sickly tendencies of the locale.” For Brock’s soldiers and the petitioners to the Upper Canadian parliament, then, the marshlands around the mouth of the Don were inherently unhealthy. Ironically, despite mistaken theories about the origin of disease, fears of miasma were not entirely misplaced. Brock’s observations about the disproportionate frequency of ague among soldiers at the eastern blockhouse corroborate other anecdotal sources in suggesting that malaria cases were more numerous in areas adjacent to the marsh. Indeed, the slow-moving waters of the Don marshes would have provided an excellent breeding ground for mosquitoes, and efforts made to avoid these “unhealthy places” and to shut out the dangerous “night air” often had the effect of shutting out mosquitoes as well. Even before significant industrial development in the area, then, the marshy lowlands of the lower river were experienced as a diseased landscape. The very real

14 Valenciis, *The Health of the Country*, 89-90. Valenciis adds that an unhealthy designation could also apply to flat lands where water pooled or stagnated, and to elevated sites in close proximity to sodden, low-lying areas. Locales subject to sudden changes in temperature or wind direction could also be described as “unhealthy.” Her discussion of nineteenth century connotations of elevation may explain in part the massive gap in experience between low-lying neighbourhoods like Cabbagetown and elevated communities like Rosedale. Perched on the western edge of the valley and marketed from the 1860s on as a “luxury subdivision,” Rosedale presented a foil to its lowland neighbours in its associations of respectability, prosperity, and desirability.


16 An editorial in a contemporary medical sciences journal, for example, argued against the siting of the new Toronto General Hospital in the east end of the city, noting “plenty of locations in Toronto” where ague is considerably less prevalent than in the east end, where “scarcely a house has been free from its visitation” (Editorial, “Toronto General Hospital,” *Upper Canada Journal of Medical, Surgical and Physical Science* 3, no. 2 (1853): 69-77). See also Adam, Mulvany, and Robinson, *History of Toronto and County of York*, 286.
presence of malaria made settlement in the area a dubious enterprise well before sewage and industrial pollutants befouled the river and its surrounding wetlands.

Not surprisingly, perceptions of unhealthiness had significant implications for the area’s development. In an 1833 letter to Viscount Goderich, Secretary of State for the Colonies, Lieutenant-Governor John Colborne explained that the westward expansion of the city was the only reasonable option: “the Eastern part of the Town is affected by the effluvia of the marshes of the Don, and the rapid increase in the population requires that the Town should be extended towards the Westward, the most salubrious and convenient site.”¹⁷ Toronto did, indeed, “lean west” in the years that followed, further marginalizing the site of the original town plot near the mouth of the Don. Parliament moved to new and more fashionable quarters in the west end of town (at Front and John Streets) in 1832, escalating with its relocation the desirability of west end real estate (and the corresponding undesirability of the east end).¹⁸ When the city incorporated in 1834, the lower river came to represent an official margin, its curving course forming the eastern border of the city between Bloor and Queen Street. The largely undeveloped area between Parliament Street and the Lower Don was further marginalized by its placement within the city “Liberties,” an ambiguous status that meant residents enjoyed neither full city rights and services nor paid full city taxes. Like other suburban areas around the city, development here was slower and more sporadic than in the more desirable and (marginally) better serviced areas of the centre, and tended to concentrate along central access routes.¹⁹ From

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¹⁹ Isobel K. Ganton, “Development between Parliament Street and the Don River, 1793-1884,” 1974, 35, City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 92, Papers and Theses Collection, Item 347. The Liberties stretched east of the river in a
1834 until the abolishment of the Liberties in 1859, then, the Lower Don occupied a “borderland space” within the everyday experience of the city’s residents and in the official sphere of city maps and jurisdictional boundaries.

Other factors co-mingled to cement the area’s status as an undesirable space. Until 1819, an extensive government reserve locked up land on the west side of the river. Known alternately as “the Park,” the “government park,” or “the Common,” the reserve encompassed almost 400 acres from the Don River west to Parliament Street, south to the lakeshore and north to today’s Carlton Street (figure 19). A series of attempts through the 1810s and 20s to generate revenue from reserve holdings met with little success. In an 1811 survey of the area, Deputy-Surveyor Samuel Wilmot reported that “the land consisted of poor thin soil with the timber principally destroyed, but that with good management it might answer for pasture.” The only valuable timber, he continued, “was close to the lakeshore.” He estimated annual lease values of

thin band from Queen Street south to the lakeshore all the way east to the east end of Ashbridge’s Bay. Lands north of Queen, east of the river, fell under the jurisdiction of York County until the 1880s, when the city began a new round of annexations. Only by satisfying certain population and assessed property qualifications could areas within the Liberties receive full city membership as annexations to existing wards or as wards of their own. In 1859 the Liberties were abolished entirely, bringing full city rights and responsibilities to the suburban area west of the Don and east of the river south of Queen. Interestingly, the area of the “Don marshes”—south of King Street and west of the river—was left out of the 1859 incorporations, likely because of the area’s long-established reputation for insalubriousness.

Simcoe established the reserve in 1793. Originally consisting of the “broken fronts” along the lakeshore between the Don River and Parliament Street, the area was soon extended northwards to include the southern halves of Park Lots 1 and 2 and township lot 16 (its northern boundary running along today’s Carlton Street). The original purposes for the reserve are unclear. It seems Simcoe may have intended it to supply timber to a sawmill and shipyard he envisioned on the lower Don (both facilities were later placed on the Humber) (ODPD, Don Valley Conservation Report, Vol. 1, 27; Ganton, “Development between Parliament Street and the Don River,” 1). Other sources suggest the reserve was intended for “government buildings” (Careless, Toronto to 1918, 21). As the authors of the Don Valley Conservation Report observe, Elizabeth Simcoe always referred to the area as the “Government Farm,” suggesting “that her husband intended it as a farm and woodlot in connection with the Government House… which he intended to build at the foot of Parliament Street” (ODPD, Don Valley Conservation Report, Vol. 1, 30, note 1).

ten to twenty dollars for most of the lots in the Park Reserve, considerably short of government predictions; the plan seems to have gone no further.\(^{21}\) A second survey conducted in 1817 by

\(^{21}\) Samuel Wilmot, letter 112, February 12, 1811, Archives of Ontario, RG 1-2-1, Correspondence and memoranda relating to surveys received by the Surveyor General, arranged by correspondent, vol. 35, cited in Ganton, “Development between Parliament Street and the Don River,” 35.
Deputy Surveyor Reuben Sherwood generated some interest among a group of wealthy land speculators in York (particularly for holdings along King Street, the town’s principal commercial corridor and eastern connector to the highway to Kingston), but few actual sales.

Following these two abortive attempts to generate revenue from the eastern park reserve, the Crown in 1819 granted the entire reserve lands to a group of trustees for the purpose of raising funds for the construction of a hospital for the Town of York.\(^{22}\) The land grant, estimated by government authorities at a value of 6000 pounds, was issued to match funds donated by a charitable society towards the construction of the hospital.\(^{23}\) Not surprisingly, however, given the history of previous attempts to sell or lease the government reserve lands, sales were neither as expedient nor as lucrative as the hospital trustees had hoped.\(^{24}\) Appealing for support for the hospital from the provincial government in 1824, trustee Justice William Dummer Powell reported that the “Trustees could… proceed no further in the Organization of the Hospital Institution, either by procuring necessary furniture or providing suitable help for the Administration” due to the fact that “the sale of the... Lands granted in Trust for the Hospital…

\(^{22}\) The park reserve was one of several government properties granted the trustees for capital-generating purposes. The trustees had the power to sell or lease portions of the land and direct the profits to the construction and maintenance of the York General Hospital. For further detail, see C. K. Clarke, *A History of the Toronto General Hospital: Including an Account of the Medal of the Loyal and Patriotic Society of 1812* (Toronto: William Briggs, 1913), 34-35.

\(^{23}\) Garton, “Development between Parliament Street and the Don River,” 12. The Loyal and Patriotic Society of Upper Canada formed in 1812 to assist families who had lost male breadwinners during the War of 1812 and to reward those who distinguished themselves in the war with medals. The Society ceased operations after the war, and volunteered to contribute its entire assets of over 4000 British pounds towards the construction of a hospital if the provincial government would also make a substantial contribution. See also Clarke, *History of the Toronto General Hospital*; and Edith G. Firth, *The Town of York, 1815-1834: A Further Collection of Documents of Early Toronto* (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1966).

\(^{24}\) Lots along King and Parliament Streets were quickest to sell, and Ganton notes that a few of these purchases were made by the wealthy speculators listed in the Sherwood Plan. The only other major land purchase before 1830 was the Roman Catholic Church’s purchase in 1822 of two five-acre blocks east of Power Street and north of the first rank of lots on King Street. St. Paul’s Church, the first Roman Catholic Church in Toronto, was established on the site in the same year.
failed in producing the disposable funds estimated." The establishment of the Toronto General Hospital will be discussed in further detail in chapter four.

As surveyor Wilmot’s comments suggest, lagging sales could be attributed in part to the poor agricultural potential of the area. Relatively poor soils—with the exception of the river flats south of Pottery Road, reduced the potential for successful farming initiatives. The steep ravine lands of the valley between Bloor and Gerrard further limited agricultural potential and complicated access to valley holdings. Unpredictable riparian conditions brought more headaches for landowners. Seasonal floods washed out bridges and roads and occasionally threatened livestock and outbuildings, and unexpected droughts reduced water flow, threatening mill and agricultural operations alike. For property owners east of the river, the limited number of bridge crossings over the Don, and the poor quality of those that did exist, made access to their holdings especially challenging. These factors added further disincentives to an area already blighted by perceptions of unhealthiness and distance from the growing commercial and residential core of York. And yet, as much as these considerations played a role in reducing the desirability of lands in and around the lower valley, particularly for middle and upper class buyers, they always existed in tension with pressure in various periods to expand the city eastward, and with the incentives that came with undesirability: cheaper land prices; lower taxes.

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25 Justice William Dummer Powell, “Appeal for York General Hospital,” [1824], reprinted in Firth, *The Town of York, 1815-1834*, 228-29. Indeed, although the York General Hospital had been constructed at the northwest corner of King and John Streets in 1820, the building remained unoccupied when Powell wrote in 1824. Temporary occupation of the building by the provincial Parliament after the Parliament House was destroyed by fire 24 December 1824 delayed the hospital opening for another four years, until 1829.

26 No bridges existed north of Gerrard in the Lower valley, for example, until the Prince Edward Viaduct was constructed in 1918.
for property owners;\textsuperscript{27} and, as the century progressed, proximity to industrial employers. As access improved and population pressures increased throughout the century, development increased in the area despite associations of risk.

Isobel Ganton’s detailed study of changing land ownership in the former government reserve lands between Parliament Street and the Don River provides an excellent synthesis of developments in the area west of the river between the 1830s and the 1880s. An official survey of the former park reserve lands in 1833 led to some limited subdivision;\textsuperscript{28} buildings in this area, however, were still very scattered into the 1840s. What is interesting here, though, is the notable shift from the wealthy, prominent citizens who owned farm lots around the lower river in the early nineteenth century (and who, to a limited degree, speculated in real estate in the area as late as the 1820s) to an increasing concentration of middle class and working class landowners. The size and construction style of the houses west of the river provide further clues into the emerging class composition of the area. As the authors of the Don Valley Conservation Report concluded in an overview of the valley’s history in 1950, there were “more large and middling houses in the ‘Parks’” by 1842, “but it was already chiefly a quarter of workmen’s cottages.”\textsuperscript{29}

Proximity to a growing number of industrial employers in the 1860s and 70s attracted more working-class residents to neighbourhoods on both sides of the lower river, a trend not lost

\textsuperscript{27} Property owners in the Liberty east of Parliament enjoyed lower taxes from 1834 until 1859, when the Liberties were abolished. Properties east of the river north of Queen Street fell within County jurisdiction, with its lower taxes and fewer services, until Riverdale was annexed to the city in 1884.

\textsuperscript{28} As Ganton observes, the renewed interest in the former government reserve lands in the 1830s was likely propelled by widespread speculation about the incorporation of the town and the extension of its boundaries east to the Don in the years immediately before incorporation in 1834. The completion in 1832 of James Worts’ wind-powered grist mill, constructed near the harbour at the southern extremity of the former park reserve, likely provided further incentive to buyers in its provision of a source of revenue and flour for nearby residents (ODPD, \textit{Don Valley Conservation Report}, Part I, 136).

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., Part I, 137.
on land developers who advertised the “walk to work” attractions of new subdivisions in the area. Clumped around “railyards, noisome factories and packinghouses,” the neighbourhoods around the Lower Don were among several impoverished working-class districts in the city, J.M.S. Careless has noted, that emerged “between high-value centrally located property and the outlying districts, which became wealthier enclaves for those who could afford the price of streetcar fare to work.”

Here, working-class families “had mainly to be content with little clapboarded or rough-cast cottages…. [where] at least, they had gardens and some space around them, while yet being within walking range of work.” An urban borderland had been created. Segregated from the rest of the city by its poverty, its reputedly unhealthy environment, and its concentration of noxious industries, the area around the lower river had become, by 1880, a blighted space within which to isolate the processes of production and waste disposal so vital to the process of city-building. Toronto writer and publisher Graeme Mercer Adam’s description of the area immediately west of the lower river in 1885 is illustrative. “The extreme end of [the] eastern section [of King Street],” he wrote,

is a dreary wilderness, into which no man ever seems to venture except the aborigines, and in which all the refuse of the city seems to accumulate. It has already been hinted that the unsavoury reputation it bears from a sanitary point of view is probably at the bottom of its want of prosperity. Certain it is that if the curious pedestrian wishes to see the abomination of desolation standing at his very gates he need only take a stroll through this unsavoury region of a Sunday morning.

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30 Careless, Toronto to 1918, 138. Aggregate data from assessment rolls corroborate Careless’ conclusions. Data compiled for the decades between 1870 and 1910 show that property values within the wards on either side of the river (St. David’s Ward, parts of St. Lawrence’s Ward, and, after 1884, St. Matthew’s Ward on the east side of the river) were consistently lower than wards with comparable populations in other parts of the city.

31 Ibid., 89-94.

32 Adam, Mulvany, and Robinson, History of Toronto and County of York, Part II, 287.
As we shall see in the discussion that follows, perceptions of the Lower Don Valley as an urban wasteland had significant effects on the river’s ecological integrity.

II A Corridor of Wastes

Industrial Polluters on the Lower Don

As we saw in the previous chapter, milling operations expanded dramatically along the three major branches of the river between the 1820s and the 1850s. By 1860, over fifty mills had been established throughout the Don River system, including twenty-seven sawmills, twenty-three grist mills, two paper mills and two woolen mills (see figure 13, above). The river provided not only the energy of its flow to power milling operations, but also a convenient means of waste disposal: sawdust, grain chaff, excess dyes from woollen mills and other milling by-products dumped in the river were carried away to become someone else’s problem. Nineteenth-century mill sites are often the subject of nostalgic portraits of “pioneer life,” their mill races and water wheels suggestive of simplicity, continuity, and a certain harmony with the natural elements that fueled them. And yet, as Gillis and Allardyce have shown in studies of the environmental impacts of early Canadian sawmills, their presence had significant impacts on the ecologies of local streams and rivers. Unlike their steam counterparts that used mill wastes for fuel, Gillis explains, water-powered sawmills were designed

33 ODPD, Don Valley Conservation Report, Part I, 158.
34 For further discussion of the nostalgia associated with nineteenth-century mill-sites, and the tendency to over-simplify and romanticize what were often tenuous operations, see Miedema, “When the Rivers Really Ran.”
emitted obnoxious smells from the water and were prone to explode due to spontaneous combustion.\textsuperscript{35}

While the Don never saw the scale or longevity of lumbering activity experienced on other Ontario rivers, sawmills on the river nevertheless played a role in the destruction of local fish populations. W.H. Smith said of the river in 1851, “it was once a tolerable trout stream, as well as full of salmon, but the erection of machinery, more particularly sawmills, has nearly exterminated the fish.”\textsuperscript{36} Salmon stopped spawning in the river in the 1860s, and the last native salmon was reputedly “speared with a pitch fork under the dam at Taylor’s Mill” (the Taylor’s Brothers’ Lower Mill off Pottery Road) in the early 1870s.\textsuperscript{37} Other factors such as deforestation and resulting reductions of surface water supplies were also to blame. As Wayne Reeves commented in a 2007 essay on the environmental history of Toronto, “low [river] flows, rising creek temperatures, the physical barriers posed by dams, and increased run-off—carrying farm wastes, silt and sawdust—ruined fish habitat” along Toronto’s rivers.\textsuperscript{38} Not surprisingly, the extirpation of native salmon and trout stocks from the Don was the subject of considerable

\textsuperscript{35} R. Peter Gillis, “Rivers of Sawdust: The Battle Over Industrial Pollution in Canada, 1865-1903,” \textit{Journal of Canadian Studies} 21, no. 1 (1986): 85. See also Gilbert Allardyce, “‘The Vexed Question of Sawdust’: River Pollution in Nineteenth Century New Brunswick,” \textit{Dalhousie Review} 52, no. 2 (1972): 177-190. As both authors show, attempts by Federal fisheries officials to regulate the dumping of sawdust in Canadian rivers met with vehement opposition by water-powered sawmill owners, who lobbied successfully for exemptions and ignored poorly enforced anti-pollution legislation until 1903, when the threat of legal action by federal authorities, combined with the dramatic decline of the sawn lumber industry, forced mill owners to install sawdust burners or close their operations.

\textsuperscript{36} Smith, \textit{Canada, Past, Present and Future}, 20.


\textsuperscript{38} Indeed, Reeves notes, the shift from water power to steam power in the 1840s and beyond was due “as much to dwindling supplies of surface water (brought on by forest clearances) as it was to technological innovation. Lessened stream flow made milling more difficult.... As resources failed, so did parts of the economy” (“From the Ground Up,” 67).
nostalgia in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Elderly pioneers and local historians described the diversity and quantity of fish in the river in the early nineteenth century, together with other “disappeared” scenes such as the sight of native fishermen night-fishing for salmon by torch-light.\(^{39}\) We will return to the topic of nostalgia and its connection to conservation efforts surrounding the river in Chapter 6.

Sawmills were not the only polluters of the Don in the nineteenth century, however. From mid-century on, the area of the river south of Gerrard Street became increasingly industrialized with the construction of tanneries, breweries, and foundries, and later, oil refineries and soap factories. Lacking the sloping topography required to power mills, the river in its lower reaches was valued primarily as a water source and a method of waste disposal. Industrial development along the lower river is perhaps best explained by developments that occurred over three distinct periods. In each period, incremental factors worked to attract industry to the Lower Don. Between 1820 and 1850, access to water for industrial operations and waste disposal, isolation from residential and commercial districts, access to shipping networks, and the relative affordability of marshy lands in the lower valley were the main factors drawing industry to locate on the banks of the lower river. With the extension of the Grand Trunk Railway along the eastern waterfront in 1856, new incentives for industry included access to convenient and affordable inter-continental transport, and new demands for heavy metal industries such as rail rolling and spin-off industries. In the 1860s and 70s, widespread adoption of steam power stimulated industrial expansion across the city; the existence of a growing industrial hub along the lower reaches of the river with its established benefits of affordable land and convenient rail and shipping access contributed to the expansion of industries around the Lower Don. The 1880s and

\(^{39}\) See, for example, William Lea’s 1881 address to the Canadian Institute (cited in Sauriol, *Remembering the Don*, 92). Richard White documents a similar nostalgia for lost salmon runs in *The Organic Machine*. 
90s would see greater expansion still, with the straightening of the river and the creation of new industrial lands.

What becomes evident in a review of nineteenth century industrial development along the Lower Don is the noticeable concentration of what I will call “noxious” industry around the mouth of the river and in clusters stretching north to Gerrard. By “noxious” I refer to industries that produced what contemporaries considered an unpleasant and potentially harmful affront to the senses—most notably in the form of the stench of animal offal or chemical processes, but also in the form of extreme noisiness, “dirtiness,” or unsightliness. Slaughterhouses, packing plants, and tanneries; soapworks, chemical plants, and oil refineries were among the industry types typically considered distasteful and relegated to the margins of urban centres in late nineteenth century Canada. Industries and land uses that posed a hazard to surrounding buildings could also be found in what urban geographers have called the city’s “back yard”—the waterfront and low-lying spaces along the edges of the urban centre—in this period.\(^{40}\) Land uses and industrial activities that posed a risk of fire typically fell within this category, including coal and lumber storage, stables, and industries that operated steam engines or employed high temperature processes (such as foundries). As the detailed fire insurance plans of the 1880s and on demonstrate, hazardous materials storage and hazardous or otherwise “noxious” industries were increasingly pushed to locations isolated from residential areas and commercial districts.\(^{41}\)

\(^{40}\) The area around the Don has a long history as a repository for hazardous materials. In the early 1800s a powder magazine on the peninsula near the mouth of the river kept flammable material away from the homes of early Toronto residents. W.S. and H.C. Boulton’s 1858 *Atlas of the City of Toronto and Vicinity* shows a second powder magazine on the west side of the river north of today’s Gerrard Street (Toronto Reference Library Atlas Collection).

\(^{41}\) Formal zoning regulations would not be applied to Toronto’s urban landscape until the early twentieth century. As Raphael Fischler has shown, however, nuisance by-laws and other regulations operated as early as the 1860s in ways comparable to modern development controls, directing noxious and otherwise hazardous industries to the edges of urban environment (“Development Controls in Toronto in the Nineteenth Century,” *Urban History Review* 36, no. 1 [2007]: 16-31). Robert Lewis complicates this notion of noxious uses on the margins in his discussion of...
While industrial development of the lands along the lower river was most intense, and most rapid, in the period between 1880 and 1910, a pattern of land use for noxious industry and hazardous materials storage was apparent in the area by 1850. As figure 20 demonstrates, industrial establishments on the lower river before 1850 included three establishments whose longevity and deleterious impacts on the river’s environmental integrity would have a lasting influence on the development of the area: William Smith’s tannery, established on the east side of the river south of the Kingston Road in 1820; Gooderham and Worts’ distillery, established in 1832 near the mouth of the Don, and Lamb’s Glue and Stove Blacking Factory, established in 1848 on the west side of the river north of Gerrard.

Constructed upon fifty acres of the former Scadding property in 1820, Smith’s tannery produced much-needed leather goods for the fledgling town of York. Tanneries in this period typically located close to supplies of tan bark. Anecdotal evidence regarding the former Scadding property east of the Don, upon which the tannery was located, suggests that significant areas of woodland still remained in the area north of Kingston Road in the 1820s. Tanneries were notoriously odiferous operations, and a location removed from residential and commercial districts would have saved Smith from the complaints of his neighbours. Like most industrial

the creation of industrial suburbs on the fringes of nineteenth century Montreal. “In Montreal from an early date,” he writes, “manufacturers sought noncentral locations…. Sometimes this was because nuisance industries were pushed by bylaw or public pressure to the edge of an urban settlement. In most cases, however, it was because firms sought out locational assets being created on the city’s unbuilt fringe as well as in the suburbs” (Manufacturing Montreal: The Making of an Industrial Landscape, 1850 to 1930 [Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000], 261).

42 Naturally occurring tannins in the bark of chestnut, oak, and hemlock (among other tree species) were used to change the chemical composition of animal skins to transform them into durable leathers resistant to decomposition.

43 Robertson, Robertson's Landmarks, 134.
operations at the time, wastes likely found a convenient disposal site in the running waters of the river. Tanning wastes, furthermore, were especially polluting. As Ted Steinberg explains in his history of nineteenth century industrialization along New England’s waterways, “the preparation of animal hides produced large quantities of suspended matter in water, including particles of hair, flesh, and lime, all of which put heavy stress on a river’s supply of dissolved oxygen” (a vital ingredient for the maintenance of aquatic life and the process of organic waste
decomposition in waterways). In limited quantities, organic wastes such as animal flesh will be broken down by microorganisms present in river water; as tanneries, breweries, and other industries multiplied along the lower river in the latter half of the nineteenth century, however, the river’s ability to assimilate these wastes would have been seriously compromised.\textsuperscript{44} Smith’s tannery expanded several times in the 1820s and 30s before ceasing operations in the mid-1840s.\textsuperscript{45} The first along the lower river, it was followed by a number of other tanning operations, several of which continued to operate through the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{46}

Another industry that would have significant ramifications for the environmental quality of the Lower Don was Gooderham and Worts’ grist mill and distillery. In 1831, founder James Worts immigrated from England and chose a half acre lakefront site near the mouth of the Don for the location of a wind-powered grist mill. Twenty-one metres in height, the windmill was a prominent local landmark until its demolition in 1859.\textsuperscript{47} The mill’s strategic location at the east

\begin{itemize}
\item Steinberg, \textit{Nature Incorporated}, 209. Steinberg’s explanation of the process of “self-purification” in river systems is valuable here:

\begin{quote}
Organic pollution, substances ranging from soaps and animal oils to waxes and resins, consists of carbon compounds that can be broken down by microorganisms present in river water. For the biochemical reaction to work properly, dissolved oxygen is needed. If the amount of organic pollution is limited, and the stream has a sufficient level of dissolved oxygen, it is possible for aerobic bacteria to transform organic material into fairly benign substances…. A number of factors can interfere with this process. An especially large quantity of organic pollution can deplete the stream’s supply of dissolved oxygen. In addition, inorganic pollutants, such as acids and alkalis present in industrial waste, can destroy the bacteria needed to carry out self-purification (206).
\end{quote}

\item Susan Smith, “Industrial Development along the Banks of the Don River South of the Present Bloor-Danforth Thoroughfare from 1793-1911” (Course Paper, Department of Geography, University of Toronto, 1994), 26.

\item These included the Bickell & Wickett tannery, established on Cypress Street on west side of river just north of Morse’s Soapworks in 1881 and running in the same location until 1990, and the A.R. Clarke & Co. tannery, established in 1891 at Palace (now Front) and Cypress. The Clarke tannery relocated to a site on Eastern Avenue in the early 1900s and operated into the 1990s; the building was destroyed in a spectacular fire in 2001. Provisioners of, among other things, leather belts used for power transmission in early factories and mills, tanneries often joined other industries in forming constellations of mutually supportive operations.

\item Toronto Historical Association, \textit{A Glimpse of Toronto’s history: Opportunities for the Commemoration of Lost Historic Sites} (Toronto: Toronto Historical Association, 2002), MPLS 156; Toronto Harbour Commissioners, \textit{Toronto Harbour: The Passing Years} (Toronto: Toronto Harbour Commissioners, 1985), 74. The windmill’s
end of the harbour provided access to shipping traffic and attracted farmers from the east end of township and neighbouring York County; it also allowed the mill “to catch the full force of the winds from Lake Ontario.”

Flour production began in 1832, and later that year Worts’ brother-in-law, William Gooderham, arrived from England to join him in the milling business. Surplus grain harvests in 1837 led to experiments with whiskey production; by 1840, the company was producing more than 28,000 gallons of whiskey annually for sale to local innkeepers and residents (steam, rather than wind power, fueled operations from the early 1840s on).

As production expanded, so did the company’s wastes. Initially, Gooderham sold the “spent wash” from the distilling process as feed to area farmers. Recognizing the revenue to be gained by recycling these by-products, Gooderham began fattening his own hogs in the late 1830s, and by 1841 he had established a large dairy on a nine acre site between Trinity and Cherry Streets, across from the mill (figure 21).

The distillery’s main concentration of wastes, then, became not grain residue, but hog and cattle manure. The company’s practice of draining these wastes into the adjacent marshlands of Ashbridge’s Bay, at the mouth of the Don, would become the subject of decades of wrangling with the city government and neighbouring businesses in the

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48 Toronto Harbour Commissioners, *Toronto Harbour*, 74. The nearest alternate grist mill was at Todmorden, approximately five kilometres upriver.


50 Mill founder James Worts committed suicide in 1834 following his wife’s death in childbirth. William Gooderham took over milling operations after his death, partnering with Worts’ son James Gooderham Worts in 1845. The company, known since 1837 as Toronto Steam Mills and Distillery, was renamed Gooderham and Worts’ Distillery in 1845.

51 Newell and Greenhill, *Survivals*, 86.
1880s and 90s. We will return to these disputes later in the chapter. Expansion in the 1850s and 1860s added cattle fattening to the dairy and distillery operations. It is difficult to overstate the significance of Gooderham & Worts to Toronto’s development, as their interconnected products of pork, beef, and rye whiskey became signature Toronto commodities by the turn of the century. By 1871, the company boasted the largest distillery in Canada West, producing nearly half of the province’s spirits and rye whiskey and exporting whiskey to markets across Canada, the United States and South America; family members listed among their commercial interests a number of banks, flour mills, hotels, and the city’s two local narrow-gauge railways.52

Further north along the river, the area between today’s Queen and Bloor Street/Danforth Avenue saw little industrial development in the 1830s. A distillery owned by William Arthurs opened just north of Gerrard in 1833, fattening hogs with the grain residue for a few years before ceasing to operate.53 The P.R. Lamb Glue and Blacking Manufactory, which opened on a tributary of the Don (later known as “Lamb’s Creek”) in 1848, was the first major industry to establish west of the river between Queen and Bloor. Situated at the east end of Amelia Street on the top of a hill now known as Hillcrest Park, Lamb’s produced a number of well-known products including Lamb’s Penney (stove) Blacking and Lamb’s Glue; a tannery was also located on the site (figure 22).54 Originally located on Front Street just west of the mouth of the Don, it appears that Peter Lamb relocated his factory further north along the river to the largely

52 Ibid, 92.
53 Smith, “Industrial Development along the Banks of the Don River,” 22.
54 George H. Rust-D’Eye, Cabbagetown Remembered (Erin, Ontario: The Boston Mills Press, 1984), 111. Peter Lamb’s son Daniel took over the business in 1860. The Lamb family were active members of the Toronto elite. Peter Lamb co-founded (with Joseph Workman) the Unitarian Church of Canada in 1846. Daniel (1842-1920) was politically active as an Alderman between 1885 and 1903; a keen civic improver, Lamb has been credited with responsibility for the public waterworks on Toronto Island, for aspects of the Ashbridge’s Bay reclamation, and for the establishment of the Riverdale Zoo in 1894.
Figure 21. Gooderham & Worts Distillery at Front and Trinity Streets, 1858. Note the five cattle sheds southeast of Front Street, opposite the mill buildings. Source: W.S. Boulton and H.C. Boulton, *Atlas of the City of Toronto and vicinity*, Toronto: J.Ellis, 1858, Special Collections, Toronto Reference Library, 912.71354 B594 BR fo OSS.
Figure 22. Site of Lamb’s Glue and Stove Blacking Factory west of Don River and south of Gerrard Street. Note the small waterway running into Lamb’s Creek. The Don River is off the map to the right. Source: W.S. Boulton and H.C. Boulton, *Atlas of the City of Toronto and vicinity*, Toronto: J.Ellis, 1858, Special Collections, Toronto Reference Library, 912.71354 B594 BR fo OSS.
uninhabited suburban space overlooking the Rosedale Valley Ravine. The business was very successful: five buildings occupied the site in 1858; by 1888, when the factory closed after a devastating fire, twelve buildings clustered on the main property. The firm apparently drew many lifelong employees from the neighbouring working-class district of Cabbagetown; a number of these employees rented small company-owned houses close to the factory. While fire may have been the most significant factor in the firm’s closure in 1888—the factory buildings being, as George Rust-D’Eye observes, “grossly underinsured” at the time of the fire—the nature of the factory’s operations, and changes to the character of the surrounding area, also played a role.

Glue production is a smelly business. Prolonged boiling of animal connective tissue creates the adhesive properties of animal glue; the stench of dead animals and boiling flesh would have been palpable to nearby residents as the area south and west of the factory became increasingly built up in the 1870s and 80s. Incoming residents apparently objected to the prevailing stench of the area, prompting the Toronto City Council to attempt (unsuccessfully) to purchase the property in 1887. Not only did Lamb’s factory emit terrible odours, it also produced a large quantity of noxious wastes. Boulton’s 1858 Atlas shows a tiny creek or drainage ditch running from the back of the main factory building into Lamb’s Creek, which ran

55 John Ross Robertson refers to “Lamb’s Glue Factory” in his historical tour of Front Street, noting that the factory was constructed here in 1846. The factory building is still apparent on the waterfront five years later in a panorama by Francis Hincks Granger titled Toronto, in the summer of 1851 (JRR 341, Special Collections, Toronto Reference Library). Whether it was abandoned by this point, or whether there were two Lamb’s Glue Factories constructed near the Don in the late 1840s—one near the mouth and one further north—is unclear (Robertson, Robertson’s Landmarks, Vol. 2, 812).

56 Minute 1294, 1887, Toronto City Council Proceedings, Printed, 1859-1996 (hereafter TCCP), Former City of Toronto Fonds, Fonds 200, Series 1078, City of Toronto Archives (hereafter CTA); Toronto Historical Association, A Glimpse of Toronto’s History, MPLS 177. Negotiations were unproductive until the factory fire in 1888 dramatically reduced options for the Lamb family; not until 1904, however, was the property formally deeded to the city for park purposes in exchange for building rights along the south and west boundaries of Riverdale park.
for less than half a kilometre before merging with Castle Frank Brook (and from there, a short
distance further into the Don). Organic wastes from animal carcasses, lime from the factory’s
tanning operations, and waste products from stove blacking production all found their way into
Lamb’s Creek, making it one of the city’s most polluted waterways. Residential development in
the area worked to discourage further industrial development; with the creation of Riverdale Park
in 1890, development was halted entirely on the west bank of the Don north of Gerrard.

Without the luxury of modern water quality data to work with, it is difficult to make
conclusive statements about the effects of industries such as Smith’s, Lamb’s, and Gooderham &
Worts’ upon the ecological integrity of the Lower Don River. The river’s ability to assimilate the
organic wastes produced by these industries—largely animal offal and manure—would certainly
have been compromised as industries along the lower river multiplied in the latter decades of the
nineteenth century. It is important to remember, too, that this was a small river—a river you
could throw a stone over. As such, the effects of pollutants would have been more pronounced,
and more rapid, than in other more sizeable urban-industrial waterways such as Pittsburgh’s
Allegheny or London’s Thames. The industries described above represent starting points in the
history of industrial development along the Lower Don River; they are also somewhat
representative of subsequent development. While Gooderham & Worts was the only distillery of
its size on the river, and indeed, in all of Canada West, smaller distilleries with cow or hog
fattening operations came and went over the course of the nineteenth century. Symbiotic
industries, such as packing houses, tanneries, and soap works, also maintained an active presence
along the Lower Don: by 1886, four tanneries and two soapworks clustered around the
constellation of slaughter houses, packing and rendering plants along the banks of the river south of Gerrard Street.\textsuperscript{57}

The extension of the Grand Trunk Railway along the waterfront from the east end of the city in 1856 stimulated demands for industrial development in the area around the mouth of the Don. By 1857 the GTR had constructed a number of workshops, depots, and a station at the eastern end of Front (now Mill) Street west of the river mouth. (Interestingly, City Council permitted waterfront access to the railway company with the condition that they restrict their engine house and depot to a location near the Don River).\textsuperscript{58} Rail traffic also brought new concentrations of hazardous materials: GTR cattle yards immediately northwest of the curving river mouth meant more animal manure found its way into the river and its terminal marsh; demands for coal to fuel steam engines saw the establishment of extensive coal yards near the GTR depot and scattered throughout the expanding industrial district near the river mouth. Railway demands for heavy metal products such as rails and rolling stock also brought a new kind of industry to the area around the mouth of the Don. Just a year after the GTR extended its lines along the Toronto waterfront, engineer Casimir Gzowski established the Toronto Rolling Mills at the mouth of the Don south of the GTR yards. The first plant in the Canadas to produce iron rails, the company re-rolled the worn rails from the Toronto to Montreal section of the GTR. High temperature metal processing meant huge consumption of imported American coal: in 1865 the plant consumed more coal than the rest of the city combined.\textsuperscript{59} While the plant likely

\textsuperscript{57} Smith, “Industrial Development,” 36.

\textsuperscript{58} TCCP, 1852, Minute 17.

\textsuperscript{59} Annual consumption of 16-20,000 tons of coal supplied a 300 horsepower steam engine that drove rails and two thirty-two ton steam hammers (\textit{Toronto Daily Globe}, February 12, 1866, January 24, 1867, cited in Smith, “Industrial Development,” 28).
influenced surrounding air quality more than it did the water quality of the Don, its significant consumption of land around the river mouth would have removed more porous wetlands from the area, contributing to the overall degradation of the river system.  

Rail’s promise of efficient year-round transport also attracted other industries to locate near the rail yards west of the river mouth. By the end of the 1870s, the area had become one of several “industrial hubs” in the city, demonstrated by its concentration of particular industry types, such as animal processing plants and oil and gas industries, and through the grouping of compatible industries such as packing plants, tanneries and soapworks. Two firms whose size and longevity had significant repercussions for the ecological integrity of the river were the G.D. Morse Soapworks, established in 1871, and the William Davies Pork Packing Plant, which relocated to the area from a location further west on Front Street in 1874. Morse followed an established history of soap production along the marshy lowlands of the lower river when he established his factory on three acres of land at the east end of Palace (now Front) Street.

While the benefits of easy access to shipping and rail transport formed part of the incentive for Morse’s east end location, proximity to local supplies of tallow from nearby animal processing plants provided additional rationale. The Morse plant operated in the area for over thirty years before closing in 1906. Like tanneries and other riverside industries, soap factories took

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60 By 1867, the mills had expanded to occupy several acres east of Cherry Street; 300 men, largely from the neighbouring Irish immigrant community of Corktown, laboured in the mills producing 20,000 tons of rails annually. Technological changes and depression in the 1870s, however, reduced the demand for iron rails. Failing to convert to steel production, the Toronto Rolling Mills closed in 1874 (Toronto Historical Association, A Glimpse of Toronto’s History, MPLS 182).

61 Morrison’s potashery produced soap and candles in the same location in the 1850s and 60s; two other potasheries were operating a block north of Palace Street in the early 1860s (City of Toronto Assessment, 1866, cited in Smith, “Industrial Development,” 31).

62 G.D. Morse operated the business until 1878, when it was purchased by Morrison & Taylor (Adam, Mulvany, and Robinson, History of Toronto and County of York, 372).
advantage of the river’s flow to dispose of large quantities of corrosive lye and other by-products. Soap production would have a long association with the Lower Don River through the establishment of the Lever Brothers’ plant on the east side of the river in 1899 (now a subsidiary of Unilever).

If the Don provided an important waste disposal function for companies like the Morse Soapworks, it presented other attractions for other companies. William Davies’ choice of a site at the eastern end of Front (now Mill) Street across from the GTR’s Don Station provided his expanding pork packing business with more space and better rail access; significantly, it also provided him with ready access to a supply of ice from the Don River. A huge ice house located on the site allowed Davies to stockpile and preserve his ice supplies through the summer months, and thus to operate year round. Easy rail access combined with access to ice supplies allowed him to ship his products to destinations across North America, and beyond. His pork packing plant became the first in Canada to slaughter, cure and process pork products continuously and on a large scale.63 As the 1884 fire insurance plans show, the Davies’ plant was a massive operation with intensive land use requirements (figure 23). Factory buildings combined with ice houses and pens for live hogs spanned a space of almost two acres northwest of the river.

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63 Toronto Historical Association, *A Glimpse of Toronto's History*, MPLS 188. In 1927, Davies’ company amalgamated with the Harris Abbatoir Company to form Canada Packers. Operations were relocated to the two Harris abattoirs in West Toronto; the Davies plant on Front Street was sold and most of it demolished.
Figure 23. Animal Processing Factories (including tanneries, slaughter houses and packing plants, and facilities for housing and fattening livestock), 1892. Sources: Industrial establishments drawn from Charles E. Goad, *Atlas of the City of Toronto*, 1892. Shoreline digitized from Map of Toronto and Vicinity, Bureau of Mines, Ontario Department of Lands Forests & Mines, 1891, G 3501 C5 1891 22G, University of Toronto Map and Data Library.

Industrial conventions of the time suggest that Davies, like his neighbours at Gooderham and Worts, likely disposed of animal manure in the river. Whether wastes from

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animal processing operations were also disposed in the waterway is difficult to determine; it is likely, however, that the Davies plant contributed to an already heavy load of organic and inorganic pollutants coursing into the lower river from an increasingly concentrated industrial district in the 1870s and 80s.65

Finally, the 1860s and 70s saw the arrival of another type of industry that would have dramatic consequences for the water quality and safety of the lower river in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Assessment rolls for the 1860s show two oil refineries located on the west bank of the lower river between Palace Street and Gerrard: the Duncan and Clarke Oil Refinery, which began operations in 1867 south of King Street and closed in 1887; and Parson’s Coal Oil Factory on River Street between Queen and Gerrard, which was established in 1866. In 1873 the McColl Brothers Oil Refinery began production on the river flats south of Gerrard Street. Comprising a refinery, lubricating oil and grease facility, the company operated at this location for almost twenty years before relocating to the mouth of the river in 1890.66 Like other North American refineries in this period, the Don plants produced mainly kerosene for illumination purposes and a variety of waxes and lubrication products; until the twentieth century, gasoline was a by-product that was disposed of either by burning or by dumping into adjacent waterways.67 The location of these industries in what was gradually becoming an

65 The historiography of industrial practices in other North American centres suggests that dumping of organic wastes in local waterways was common practice. Michèle Dagenais and Caroline Durand, for example, identify slaughterhouses as a significant source of organic pollutants in Montreal’s Petite Rivière Saint-Pierre in the same period (“Cleansing, Draining and Sanitizing,” 634).

66 The move was partly initiated due to pressure from the City, who purchased the former refinery site for the construction of the high level rail bridge through the valley (TCCP, 1890, Appendix, pp. 468-69). In 1927 the company merged with Frontenac Oil Refineries to become McColl-Frontenac Oil Company. It was later purchased by Texaco.

industrial suburb at the city’s edge was not incidental. As Raphael Fischler points out, as early as the 1860s Toronto City Council took action to prohibit the establishment of oil refineries and storage facilities in the city centre due to the flammability of their products and processes. By 1911, oil refineries were among the dominant land users of the area around the mouth of the Don (figure 24); they would continue to expand their presence in the area, and their impacts on its ecology, through the first half of the twentieth century.

The preceding discussion has documented a number of “foundational” industries that affected water quality along the lower river. By 1890, constellations of compatible industries dominated the area around the mouth of the river, stretching as far north as Gerrard Street (figure 25). As we will see in the chapters to come, railway development through the valley and the creation of additional industrial land following the Don Improvement Project of the 1880s resulted in further intensification of industry along the river south of Gerrard Street. As Susan Smith has calculated, the number of industrial sites along the lower river doubled from 1886 to 1911, with the greatest increase occurring between 1906 and 1911.

“A Present and Growing Evil:” Sewage Pollution in the Lower Don, 1870-1890

Despite a series of proposals in the 1830s and 1850s to use the Don as a conduit for the city’s sewage, sewage disposal in the river was largely incidental until the 1880s and 90s, when the

68 Fischler cites City of Toronto Bylaw No. 432 (1866), which prohibited the storage of more than ten barrels of petroleum and one barrel of benzine in the city centre. South of Front, east of Berkeley, west of Simcoe, and north of Bloor Street, these restrictions did not apply (Bylaws of the City of Toronto, from the Date of its Incorporation in 1834, to the 13th January, 1890, Inclusive [Toronto: Roswell & Hutchison, 1890], cited in Fischler, “Development Controls,” 30, note 54).

69 Smith, “Industrial Development,” 52.

70 Catherine Brace comments in her 1993 M.A. thesis that the 1836 King Street sewer was initially intended to continue east to discharge into the Don River; due to “unspecified problems,” however, Council decided to discharge the wastes directly into Toronto Bay at the foot of Caroline (today’s Sherbourne) Street (“One Hundred and Twenty Years of Sewerage,” 45). Almost twenty years later, in 1853, a proposal tabled by Harbour Trust

Engineer Kivas Tully to drain city sewage into the Don joined a series of other expert recommendations for the City’s sewer system in failing to be realized (Kivas Tully, “Toronto Harbour,” letter to the editor, *Toronto Patriot*, February 10, 1853).
City extended the sewer system to the east and ran several outfalls into the Don. As residential development slowly increased after the 1830s in the areas abutting the lower river, however, street-side drainage ditches would have carried run-off from streets and yards into local creeks and streams, including the Don and its tributaries.\footnote{Brace notes that sources on pre-1835 municipal drainage systems do not reveal the geographic location of drainage ditches and culverts (“One Hundred and Twenty Years of Sewerage,” 39).} The central object of these ditches was drainage of muddy streets, and not sanitation in the twentieth-century conception of the word. As...
Brace notes, “citizens were prohibited from discharging fecal matter into drains for fear that noxious fumes and miasmas would result.” It is unlikely, however, that drainage ditches were kept entirely free of human wastes: heavy rains or poor maintenance could cause backyard privy pits to overflow; in other cases, human wastes may have been deliberately dumped into drainage ditches as part of the common practice of dumping wastes into nearby watercourses. Reports from the medical health officer later in the century show that “night soil dumping” in local waterways was still a prevalent practice despite the imposition of fines. Medical health officer Norman Allen records in his 1891 report that “permission was given to form compost heaps on the banks of the Don, but these were so grossly neglected that dumping of night soil was prohibited within the city limits.”

After two devastating cholera epidemics in the early 1830s, the City constructed its first subterranean sewer system. Completed in 1836, the system comprised six lines in total, all buried twelve to fourteen feet deep: one main sewer ran west to east along King Street between York and Caroline (Sherbourne) Streets; three sewers ran south from Queen to connect with the King Street line along York, Bay, and Yonge Streets; and two sewers ran south from Richmond Street to King along Church and New (Jarvis) Streets. Two main outfall points, at Caroline (Sherbourne) Street in the east and Peter Street in the west, deposited wastewater into Toronto

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72 Ibid, 31.
73 Ibid, 47.
75 The first, in 1832, took 273 lives in Toronto; a subsequent epidemic in 1834 killed over 500 people (Careless, *Toronto to 1918*, 51, 73).
76 The system was subsequently expanded in 1842 with the creation of a drain along York Street and a second outlet into the bay at Peter Street (Brace, “One Hundred and Twenty Years of Sewerage,” 54).
harbour. Evidence suggests that this rudimentary system, which covered only the small commercial district at the core of the settlement, was intended primarily for street draining purposes—to remove the miasmatic threat of standing water and foul-smelling street run-off by isolating these waters underground.\textsuperscript{77} Not until the 1870s, when combined sewers began to be installed in neighbourhoods across the city, would human wastes join stormwater run-off and household waste-water in the city’s expanding underground disposal network.

It is difficult to determine with certainty the number of sewage outfall points constructed along the Lower Don River in the late nineteenth century. While much has been written about the history of water supply and sewage infrastructure in nineteenth century Toronto,\textsuperscript{78} these studies tend to focus on the harbour, and not the Don, as the main recipient of the city’s sewage and thus the principal subject of concern. Spatial data compiled from city sewerage planning reports shows a series of sewers constructed south of Bloor Street/Danforth Avenue along the lower river by the 1880s, but outfall points are not indicated (figure 26). Correlating this data with area topography, however, provides reasonable grounds for inference. The fact that the City would have used gravity wherever possible to drain sewage “down” to the lake and low-level

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 49. As Brace explains, this was not a “public works” project in the sense we understand today: Council struggled with the dilemma of a project that required massive capital outlays with no opportunity for a tangible return on investment (59). Lacking a substantial tax base to work with, they chose to levy a connection fee for all residents or commercial establishment fronting the sewer line for the privilege of attaching a drain from their premises to the main sewer (44). Additions to the core system were small and incremental through the 1840s and 50s, focused on the commercial core.

\textsuperscript{78} See, for example, Brace, “One Hundred and Twenty Years of Sewerage” and “Public Works in the Canadian City”; Riendeau, “Servicing the Modern City 1900-30”; Jamie Benidickson, The Culture of Flushing: A Social and Legal History of Sewage (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007); Wayne C. Reeves, Visions for the Metropolitan Toronto Waterfront, I: Toward Comprehensive Planning, 1852-1935, Major Report No.27 (Department of Geography, University of Toronto, December 1992); Careless, Toronto to 1918; Jones, Elwood and McCalla, Douglas, “Toronto Waterworks, 1840-77: Continuity and Change in Nineteenth-Century Toronto Politics,” Canadian Historical Review 60, no. 3 (1979): 300-323.
outfall points (rather than paying to pump it uphill) favours an interpretation of several sewage outfalls along the lower river.

Regardless of the number of outfalls, sewage disposal in the lower river had become a palpable problem for area residents and health authorities by the late 1880s and early 1890s. An article in the Toronto Mail March 20, 1894 described the lower river as a “pestilential channel” whose waters had taken on “a yellowish green colour, and a slimy, soup-like consistency.” Residents in the neighbourhood “whose noses have not altogether lost their acuteness” apparently complained that “in the hot days of summer it gives off noxious and undesirable vapours.” The river’s “deadly” condition, the article concludes,

arises from the fact that the sewage from a large district is constantly being poured into it.... The slowness of its current is not enough to clear off [these] impurities... and soundings reveal... that the channel is gradually being filled up, a process that is partly due to the Rosedale sewer and partly to the silt brought from the upper reaches of the river.

Rosedale Creek sewer appears to have been the most offensive of the outfall points constructed south of Bloor Street in the 1880s and 90s. Formerly running as an “open sewer” into the Don near Winchester Street, the creek was sewered in 1888 or 1889 in response to the concerns of local residents and the City’s medical health officer.79 Draining “a vast area comprising the north and north eastern portions of the City,” the sewer caught the attention of engineer W.T. Jennings in 1890, who reported on “a present and growing evil caused by the discharge of sewage in the

79 In his inaugural address to council January 16, 1888, Mayor Edward F. Clarke referred to the “projected construction” of the Rosedale Creek Sewer running from Tannery Hollow on Yonge Street into the Don River (TCCP, 1888, Appendix, p.1).
Figure 26. Toronto sewer infrastructure, 1884; overlaid on 1882 contour map. Source: Georeferenced Databases for Accessing the Historical Conditions of Health and Environmental Problems (GEORIA, University of Toronto, http://mercator.geog.utoronto.ca/georia/toronto.html); National Map Collection 22851 (1882), University of Toronto Map and Data Library.

waters of the River Don at Winchester Street.” Conditions presumably worsened as additional outfall points were constructed on the east side of the river in the early 1890s, and even more of

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80 W.T. Jennings, city engineer, “Report on the Disposal of the Sewage of the City of Toronto” (Toronto: J.Y. Reid, 1890), p.5, Two Reports on Sewage and Garbage in the City of Toronto, Larry Becker Library and Rare Books, Larry Becker Fonds, Fonds 70, Series 654, File 72, Box 320120, folio 1, CTA.
Toronto’s rapidly growing population had their homes connected to the sewage system. Even more offensive were the rank and stagnant waters of Ashbridge’s Bay marsh at the mouth of the Don. Separated from the waters of the harbour since 1885 by a north-south breakwater, and hemmed in to the south by a narrow sandbar, the waters of the marsh enjoyed little circulation (see figure 4, above). Pollutants accumulated and either sank or rotted. By the early 1890s, conditions in the marsh were the subject of regular complaint by area residents, and local health authorities expressed very real concerns of a cholera outbreak.

Sewage and industrial pollution undoubtedly had serious consequences for the ecological integrity of the river. Unfortunately, little evidence survives to document this decline, beyond the previously noted disappearance of Atlantic salmon from the river in the 1860s. More clearly demonstrable from the nineteenth-century records was the effect of pollution (and sewage pollution in particular) upon human health. While the city would see its last outbreak of cholera in 1866, the incidence of other water-borne diseases such as typhoid fever remained high until the end of the century. As nineteenth-century observers increasingly suspected, the principal problem lay in the location of the city’s water intake pipe at the foot of Peter Street, only one eighth of a mile from the Yonge and Bay Street sewer outfalls. While city water was used...
initially mainly for firefighting and industrial purposes, a growing number of homes tapped in to the water supply in the 1870s and 80s.\(^{83}\)

As a number of studies have shown, nineteenth century responses to the problem were few, and those improvements that were conducted were grossly inadequate.\(^{84}\) In 1875, for example, the City succeeded in moving the water intake pipe out of the harbour to the lake side of Toronto Island; an “ineffective filtering and delivery system,” however, meant that citizens continued to “rely on fetid harbour water at their peril.”\(^{85}\) A break in the pipe in August 1890, for example, led to one of the city’s most devastating typhoid outbreaks, killing almost five hundred.\(^{86}\) Other initiatives, such as the prohibition of ice cutting on the Don, Ashbridge’s Bay, and Toronto harbour in 1889,\(^{87}\) and tireless efforts by Toronto’s medical officer of health to remove sources of “filth” from the city’s streets (for example, by requiring the regular draining and cleaning of privy pits, conducting regular inspections of homes, schools, and factories, and ordering the drainage of low-lying lands) likely had some effect in improving public health. Measurable improvement is certainly evident in the city’s death rate, which fell from 21.3 per 1000 in 1883, to 15.18 per 1000 in 1896.\(^{88}\) The fundamental issue of sewage contamination in

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\(^{83}\) Between 1874 and 1883, homes with piped water increased from 1375 to 16,000 (Careless, \textit{Toronto to 1918}, 101).


\(^{85}\) Reeves, \textit{Visions, I}, 36.

\(^{86}\) Careless, \textit{Toronto to 1918}, 144.

\(^{87}\) Ice cutting in these locations was prohibited except for industrial cooling purposes (Allen, “Report on the Sanitary Condition of the City of Toronto,” 33-34; Robert Wilson, “A Retrospect: A Short Review of the Steps Taken in Sanitation to Transform the Town of Muddy York into the Queen City of the West,” 1934, Department of Public Health Reports, 1885-1995, Former City of Toronto Fonds, Series 365, File 46, Box 224963, CTA).

\(^{88}\) Careless, \textit{Toronto to 1918}, 145.
Toronto Bay, however, remained unaddressed. Repeated calls for a trunk sewer to carry wastes into the deeper waters of the lake were either ignored by Council or refused by over-burdened rate-payers.  

Like other cities across North America at this time, a series of factors worked against the implementation of pollution controls on local waterways. As urban environmental historian Joel Tarr has observed, competing ideas about the origins of disease, widespread belief in the effectiveness of dilution in treating sewage wastes (regardless of quantity), and “a municipal disinclination to spend public funds for improvements that did not promise any material return” contributed to the heel-dragging among municipal governments in responding to sewage pollution problems. By the early 1890s, conditions in the harbour and adjacent Ashbridge’s Bay had become so foul, and effective responses so unlikely, that for some beleaguered residents and harbour users, litigation seemed the only option.

III Class, Place, and Environmental Risk: The Conflict over the Gooderham and Worts’ Cattle Byres, 1874-1893

In the early 1890s, a group of Ashbridge’s Bay property owners set about to compel the City to abate the nuisance of water pollution in the marshlands to the south and east of the mouth of the Don. A number of sewage outfalls along the north shore of Ashbridge’s Bay constituted part of their grievance, but the dominant source of stench and contamination, they claimed, came from

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89 As Reeves notes, Toronto City Council commissioned and then ignored no less than twelve expert reports on sewage disposal between 1873 and 1909 (Visions, I, 37).

90 Tarr, The Search for the Ultimate Sink, xlii. See also Hamlin, A Science of Impurity and Public Health and Social Justice.

91 City engineer E.H. Keating reported in 1892 that “the sewage discharged into [Ashbridge’s] bay from a population of 9,500 persons comes in at the foot of Blong, Logan, Morse, Carlaw, Pape, Leslie, and like streets” (Rickey v. City of Toronto, Schofield-Holden Machine Co. v. City of Toronto [1914], 30 OLR 523, 553).
the Gooderham & Worts cattle byres, located on the shores of the marsh east of the river mouth (figure 27). Soon after launching his distillery operations in 1837, William Gooderham recognized the capital benefits to be gained by fattening cattle and hogs with the waste products of the distilling process. Grain “wash” or “swill” converted into marketable meat products created a neat and profitable feedback loop in the company’s operations; waste products, in the form of liquidized cattle manure, found a convenient sink in the adjacent marshlands. By the 1880s, Gooderham and Worts’ cattle operations comprised seven byres or cattle sheds with a capacity for over four thousand cows. A piggery on the same grounds added to the olfactory cocktail. Complaints, primarily focused on the stench of the operations, began to accumulate. In 1874, a Reverend Baldwin, resident of Ashbridge’s Bay, submitted a series of letters to the editors of the *Daily Globe* complaining of the unpleasant and unhealthy smells emanating from the marsh as the result of the effluents from the distillery’s cattle byres. Gooderham and Worts responded with a letter of their own, suggesting that Baldwin go “to some quiet watering place and [spend] his summer, as he has often done before” rather than “drawing the attention of his neighbours to any smell he [perceives].” The cattle byres were only one of many industries near

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92 Originally located on the west side of the river east of Trinity Street, the cattle sheds were relocated to vacant land east of the river and south of the GTR line as part of an expansion of the distillery operations in 1866. Ingenious in their efficiency, company owners constructed a pipeline alongside the railway track to convey the grain swill from their Trinity Street distillery to the cattle sheds east of the river (Newell and Greenhill, *Survivals*, 92). It is useful to recall here that the location of cattle byres, like stables generally, would have been regulated by City bylaws due to heightened risk of fire.

93 Desfor, “Planning Urban Waterfront Industrial Districts,” 80. Profits from cattle were derived from the lease of space, rather than the cattle themselves. Gooderham & Worts charged $20 per head per season to feed and house cattle owned by various drovers between the months of November and June. With space to accommodate 4000 cows, they produced an annual income of roughly $80,000 (*Toronto World*, “The Smell at the Don,” May 8, 1884).
Figure 27. Detail from “City of Toronto, 1893.” The Gooderham & Worts cattle sheds are immediately east of the bend in the river, north of the marsh. Toronto Public Library, TRL, Historical Picture Collection, 916-2-1.
the mouth of the Don, the distillers pointed out, including “coal oil refineries, packing houses, slaughter-houses, lard-rendering establishments, breweries, &c, that do at times smell disagreeably.” “Shall we do away with all these industries,” they concluded, “and make Toronto the nice little watering place that would suit Mr. Baldwin, or shall we allow Toronto to make her way up to a first-class city, and let Mr. Baldwin seek for some place more congenial to his sense of smell!”

Presumably by a “quiet watering place” Gooderham and Worts referred to a bucolic (and by inference, backward) rural setting untainted by the sights and smells of industry—to wit, prosperity.

Gooderham and Worts’ sneering response to Baldwin prompted further letters in Baldwin’s defense by others without the means of “[betaking] themselves to some quiet watering place for the summer.” A poem in Toronto’s weekly satirical magazine Grip was particularly effective in skewering the “Don Dictators” and their arrogance:

Ye of the squeamish stomachs; ye dwellers by the Don;  
Ye who about the “Eastern Smells” so woefully take on;  
Ye of the weak olfactory nerves and irritable humours;  
Ye autocrats of impudence, ye insolent presumers  
Who, holding dainty noses, rush daily to the papers—  
I want to say a word to you about these foolish capers.  
Why all this fuming, fury, fuss—why all this letter-writing?  
‘Tis wholly useless labour—just so much vapour fighting;  
For if you’re not content to breathe the odours with good grace,  
You’d better move your families to some nice watering-place.  
A fig for the “Authorities,” the people of the Press!  
They’ve tried their strength with us before—and we run this stench, I guess.  
Don’t care a continental who the “foul effluvia” hurts—  
It’s part of our big business—Us—Gooderham and Worts!!  
You pay your honest taxes and ought to draw your breath  
Without inhaling poison, malaria and death?  
Well; if you want to rid yourselves of this here “Eastern Pest,“

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Go to some quiet watering-place, or, leastwise, friends, “Go West!!”

Apparent in this correspondence is the gulf between those residents who could afford to remove themselves in summer when noxious odours were at their most foul, and those, as one respondent wrote, “whose occupation or circumstances [did] not permit them to accept Messrs. G & W.’s generous advice,” but who nonetheless “[had] a right to be protected from the injurious effects of poisoned air and water.”

As a number of studies have shown, the politics of who suffered most from the effects of environmental pollutants had much to do with social stratification along lines of race, class, and gender.

In the case of late nineteenth-century Ashbridge’s Bay, both class and ethnicity were at work as determinants of environmental risk: those with the least amount of flexibility in escaping the effects of industrial pollution were certainly the area’s workers and their families, many of whom had immigrated from Ireland at mid-century.

While the bulk of complaints about pollution in Ashbridge’s Bay and the Lower Don in the 1870s and 80s centred on issues of smell and “bad air,” water contamination from


98 Andrew Hurley, for example, charts the responses to industrial pollution in post-war Gary, Indiana by different social groups defined by class and race. While middle and upper-class whites had the ability to distance themselves from polluted neighbourhoods, poor whites and African-Americans “found themselves at a severe disadvantage, consistently bearing the brunt of industrial pollution in virtually all its forms: dirty air, foul water, and toxic solid wastes” (Environmental Inequalities, viii-xiv). Similarly, Ken Cruikshank and Nancy Bouchier have shown within the context of nineteenth century Hamilton how those holding social, political, and economic power had the resources to acquire what they viewed as the most healthy places in the city for their homes, offices, and recreation spaces. Industrial areas, they find, “were never just separate spaces for industry, they also were neighborhoods of working-class families” (“Blighted Areas and Obnoxious Industries: Constructing Environmental Inequality on an Industrial Waterfront, Hamilton, Ontario, 1890-1960,” Environmental History 9, no. 3 [2004]: 489). See also Melosi, Pollution and Reform in American Cities, 11-13.

99 See Rust-D'Eye, Cabbagetown Remembered, for a discussion of workers of Irish origin in the communities west of the Don.

100 Martin Melosi attributes this focus on smells to the equation of filth with nuisance that persisted before widespread acceptance of bacteriological theories of disease in the late nineteenth century. At a time when miasmas
the byres and other area industries would have posed a much more serious risk to area residents.

Who chose to complain about pollution problems also showed fissures along class lines. As Gooderham & Worts note, Reverend Baldwin, a local landowner and, judging from his title, an educated professional, “has done more than any one else in communicating to the press… and has said more to ourselves than anyone else” about the stench caused by the company’s cattle byres. Ten years later when the issue of the cattle byres pollution resurfaced in the press, the *Toronto World* concluded that most area residents supported the industrial development of the Lower Don, despite the costs to their comfort. “It is a comparatively few property holders,” the editors asserted, “who are holding to sell for villa lots who feel aggrieved.”

Class conflict over the pollution issue became especially pronounced in May 1884, when a group of industrial workers submitted a petition to City Council defending the distillery and other industries near the mouth of the Don as employers and suppliers of their livelihoods. Written in response to an earlier petition by Ashbridge’s Bay residents “respecting the offensive and unpleasant odour… near the mouth of the river Don” and a subsequent commission appointed by City Council to report on the issue, the petition argued that:

> The said industries give employment to a very large number of workmen, all of whom reside in this vicinity, and a great many of whom are owners of the houses in which they live. The removal of any of these industries would, therefore, not only entail serious loss upon those who have invested their money in them, but

and other sources of filth were perceived as sources of illness, pungent-smelling or “bad air” carried for observers the direct threat of disease (*The Sanitary City*, 77). See also Hurley, “Creating Ecological Wastelands.”

101 *Toronto World*, “The Smell at the Don,” May 8, 1884. Parallels can be drawn here to H.V. Nelles’ seminal work, *The Politics of Development: Forests, Mines and Hydro-Electric Power in Ontario, 1849-1941* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1974). Within this period, Nelles argued, the provincial government worked to maximize industrialization at the behest of powerful business and industrial interests, minimizing public interests in the process. Supported by a business-friendly state and a public conditioned to believe that “what was good for business and industry was good for the people,” industry stood to benefit disproportionately.
would also inflict great loss upon their workmen, and will be a serious blow to the prosperity of this portion of the city.

In view of your petitioners this portion of the city is peculiarly adapted and fitted for the location of manufactories and industries of various kinds…. Your petitioners fear that the growth of this portion of the city may be retarded by an impression which is sought to be created that this locality is an unhealthy and disagreeable one in which to live, whereas the fact is that it will compare favorably in this respect with any portion of the city.

In view of the fact that Toronto seeks to be an industrial centre, and that the majority of large industries are more or less disagreeable in their character, your petitioners… suggest… the reasonableness for taking every step that can by you be taken, by a complete system of drainage and otherwise, to remove even the semblance for any ground of complaint on the part of the residents… and thus encourage rather than discourage the carrying on and commencing [of] the industries in the neighbourhood in question.102

Signed by over eight hundred individuals, including the executive and employees of a number of industries around the river mouth,103 the petition presented a potent statement not only of worker loyalty to the offending industries, but of workers’ interests as home-owners with investments in the future of the district. Like so many subsequent conflicts between jobs and environmental integrity, jobs were placed in direct opposition to environmental reforms: pursuing one would entail the negation of the other. The fact that the language of the petition reflects so closely earlier letters from the Gooderham & Worts executive, together with the presence of Gooderham and Worts’ signatures among other executive signatories, suggests at the very least the involvement of company owners in drafting a text that reflected their interests as much as those of their employees. For workers and their families, the issue was likely not as black and white as the petition suggests. Like other area residents, they were probably bothered by the smell of the

102 Toronto World, “The Don Cattle Byres,” May 13, 1884, p.3.
103 These industries included, among others, Gooderham and Worts Distillery, Morrison, Taylor & Co. soap works, Bickell & Wickett tannery on Don, Lawrence Foundry Co., Consumers’ Gas Co., Don Brewery, and Copland Brewing & Malting Co.
cattle byres and other industries; the threat to their livelihoods, however, was likely more worrisome than the potentially dangerous health effects of offensive smells.

Despite the intensity of debate through the 1870s and 80s about the pollution of the marsh, and the Gooderham & Worts cattle byres in particular, attempts to address the problem were half-hearted and ultimately fruitless. A litigation attempt by the Dominion government in 1884 proved unsuccessful. Details on the outcome and nature of the case are frustratingly thin, the evidence limited to a comment in Jeffrey Stinson’s history of the Port Industrial District that “the out-of-court settlement included an unusual requirement for the company to plant 1000 trees.”

Four years later, in the fall of 1888, the City responded to pressure from area residents by dredging a narrow channel (Coatsworth’s Cut) from the eastern end of Ashbridge’s Bay to the lake to allow for greater circulation in the Bay. While initial reports from health authorities were promising, by July 1891 the shallow channel had filled almost completely with sand and conditions had again deteriorated.

Discussions in the press through this period largely absolve the distillery owners of wrong-doing, pointing to the importance of their establishment in fueling the city’s prosperity.

\[\text{104 Attorney-General v. Gooderham & Worts et al. (1884), 10 P.R.U.C., 259. Even Stinson’s comment about the out-of-court settlement is presented without supporting documentation; he qualifies his comment with the note that no evidence exists that the terms of the settlement were fulfilled (Stinson, The Heritage of the Port Industrial District, 18).}\]


\[\text{106 The Local Board of Health reported in December 1888 on "the very satisfactory completion of the work of making a cut at the east end of Ashbridge's Bay, for the purpose of allowing the polluted water and refuse, which has been so detrimental to the health of the citizens residing in that locality of the city in the past, to flow out into the Lake. Already a very gratifying improvement in the condition of the water of the said Bay can be perceived, and your Board believe that by the opening of spring, the place and its surroundings will be in a first-class sanitary condition" (Report No. 8 of the Local Board of Health, December 14, 1888, TCCP, Appendix, p. 1994).}\]

\[\text{107 Allen, “Report on the Sanitary Condition of the City of Toronto.”}\]
and identifying the range of other industrial offenders in the area that added to the nuisance.\(^{108}\)

The Lower Don in these depictions appears as a providential setting for the city’s wastes, and pollution an inevitable side-effect of the process of industrialization:

> Every city that has manufacturing industries has a district set apart therefor, and the Don is the district that nature and expedience have set apart for Toronto. It is not frequented by the fastidious, it possesses excellent railway and shipping accommodations, the land is cheap, there is good accommodation for working people, and it is accessible to the business centres by the street cars.\(^{109}\)

Given the powerful business interests of Gooderham & Worts,\(^{110}\) dissenting voices were relatively few. Among them was that of William Canniff, Toronto’s first medical officer of health. For Canniff, the pollution in Ashbridge’s Bay conflicted with, rather than exemplified, notions of modernity: “that cow-byres are still allowed to exist within the city bounds,” he wrote in his final report to the City before resigning in frustration in September 1890, “is an indication that the public does not realize the fact that Toronto is no longer a village or small city, but a metropolis of goodly proportions, requiring corresponding conditions.”\(^{111}\)

Not until 1892 did the City again attempt to abate the pollution problem in Ashbridge’s Bay. A survey of conditions in the bay by Canniff’s replacement, medical health officer Norman Allen, in the summer of 1891 documented the effects of the pollution upon local residents.

\(^{108}\) Coverage in the *Toronto World*, for example, portrayed the distillery in generally sympathetic terms, noting with a certain home-town pride Gooderham & Worts’ status as “the largest [distillery] in the world” and the “largest concern in the city.” With “a capital of $1,600,000,” one reporter concluded, the company “pays into the inland revenue of the Dominion $2,000,000 a year, and is one of the best managed businesses in America” (“The Smell at the Don,” May 8, 1884).


\(^{110}\) The company’s proprietors were instrumental in establishing the Bank of Toronto, the Toronto & Nipissing Railroad, and Manufactures’ Life Insurance, among other enterprises.

(notably, the language of the miasmic theory of disease persists in his association of “fog” and “scum” with disease):

In warm weather bubbles of gas arise from the bottom of the Bay, especially in the vicinity of the sewer outlets; a green scum forms rapidly upon the water, and in the early morning a dense fog hangs over the weeds and rushes. When the scum forms, the residents in the immediate neighbourhood state that they suffer extremely from sickness, indeed all whom I consulted complained of illness in their families—diphtheria, sore throat, malaria, nausea, loss of appetite, lassitude and inability to work.

Gooderham & Worts’ cattle byres again appeared, in Allen’s assessment, as “one of the worst sources of pollution.”\textsuperscript{112} Conditions had only worsened by the following summer, prompting the Ashbridge’s Bay Property Owners Association to threaten the City with litigation if actions were not taken to abate the nuisance.\textsuperscript{113} In the meantime, officials from the Provincial Board of Health (PBH) predicted that cholera would reach Canada by the summer of 1893, increasing the pressure to address conditions around the mouth of the Don during the 1892 season.\textsuperscript{114} Given the context of the cholera threat and the persistent complaints of area residents, the PBH intervened in June 1892 with a mandate to clean up the Bay. The mandate, to be implemented by Toronto’s Local Board of Health, included four recommendations:

1) the dredging of a channel through the marsh to make connection between the waters of Ashbridge’s Bay and those of Toronto Bay;
2) the dredging of an eastern outlet through the sand-bar, to make connection between the waters of Ashbridge’s Bay and Lake Ontario [re-opening Coatsworth’s Cut];
3) that [steps be taken] to have the sewers, now discharging into Ashbridge’s Bay, continued into deeper water; and
4) that the proprietors of the Gooderham cattle byres be directed to at once devise and carry out measures for disposing of the refuse from said cattle byres by methods other than allowing it to drain into Ashbridge’s Bay or

\textsuperscript{112} Allen, “Report on the Sanitary Condition of the City of Toronto,” 17.
\textsuperscript{113} TCCP, 1892, Minute 676.
\textsuperscript{114} Desfor, "Planning Urban Waterfront Industrial Districts," 83.
marsh. Should such steps not be taken within a reasonable time it is advised that legal steps be taken by the Local Board of Health to restrain the said proprietors from causing said pollution.\(^{115}\)

The City was forced to act. Less than a month later, Council advised the city solicitor to take legal action against Gooderham & Worts to prevent their further pollution of the marsh and bay. The company received notice that they would be prohibited, after October 15, 1892, from discharging wastes into the marsh; in November 1892 the city engineer reported that the company was in the process of implementing a system to filter liquid wastes from the byres.\(^{116}\)

At the same time, the City applied for permission from the Dominion government to breach the government breakwater separating Ashbridge’s Bay from the harbour, in order to create an east-west channel between the two bodies of water. Their application was refused, partly in response to a deputation from the Toronto Harbour Commissioners, who feared that the migration of flotsam from the marsh would interfere with harbour navigation. Facing an injunction from the Province preventing them from “opening any more sewers into the Bay,” together with “several pending suits” for failing to abate the nuisance in Ashbridge’s Bay, the City felt pressed to find a way to address the problem.\(^{117}\) In October 1892 Council urged city engineer E.H. Keating to develop a proposal for putting Ashbridge’s Bay “in a sanitary condition.” Keating’s emergency relief plan, adopted in November, contained two main components: the dredging of a wide


\(^{116}\) TCCP, 1892, Minute 721, Appendix A, pp. 484, 569; Desfor, “Planning Urban Waterfront Industrial Districts,” 83.

\(^{117}\) Message from Mayor Robert J. Fleming, September 26, 1892, TCCP, Appendix C, p. 511. The pending lawsuits that Fleming referred to may have included the Coleman case, a negligence claim against the City for allowing the condition of Ashbridge’s Bay to deteriorate (Coleman v City of Toronto [1893], 23 OR 345); and a June 1892 letter from the Solicitors of area landowner James Murphy threatening proceedings against the City unless immediate steps were taken to improve the sanitary condition of the Bay (TCCP, 1892, Minutes 576, 638, 842).
channel from Toronto harbour east along the northern boundary of Ashbridge’s Bay and then south through the sand-bar into the Lake; and the diversion of the Don directly south to meet with this channel (figure 28). Significantly, Keating viewed the plan as a temporary measure to allow for better circulation of the waters in the bay in advance of a permanent remedy, the construction of a trunk sewer: “No reclamation scheme,” he wrote,

can be regarded as perfect which does not either provide for or anticipate the exclusion of faecal matter from the Bay…. When [an intercepting trunk sewer] is constructed—as it will be, no doubt, some day—the effect will be to render the waters of the Bay as pure as it is possible to maintain any body of water along the margin of a city, provided, of course, that this scheme is carried out, and that other sources of pollution are not tolerated.

Permission to breach the breakwater was finally granted by the federal government in March 1893, and construction of what would become known as “Keating’s Cut” began that spring.

On the ground, Keating’s plan was considerably more modest than the plan he submitted on paper: the channel was dredged to a width of only ninety feet, significantly short of the three hundred feet proposed in his original plans. Coatsworth’s Cut was completed to specifications at the eastern end of Ashbridge’s Bay, but the diversion of the Don south into the new channel was not completed until many years later (for further discussion of the Keating plan, see Chapter 5). Pollution of the marshlands evidently persisted: in 1893 an Ashbridge’s Bay resident sued

118 Keating’s Plan is the subject of further discussion in Chapter 5. See also Desfor, "Planning Urban Waterfront Industrial Districts," 84-85; Stinson, The Heritage of the Port Industrial District, 21.

119 City Engineer’s Report, November 12, 1892, TCCP, 1892, Appendix A, pp. 568-571.

120 Rickey v. City of Toronto, 550-553. Progress on the Keating Plan allowed the city to sidestep the terms of the 1892 injunction requiring them to cease depositing sewage into Ashbridge’s Bay. At a hearing May 5, 1893, enforcement of the judgment was suspended; a progress report from the city engineer to trial judge Justice Rose in July 1894 “practically ended… the suit.” Despite Keating’s assurances, however, sewage pollution would persist in Ashbridge’s Bay until a trunk sewer was finally constructed in the early 1910s.

121 Stinson, The Heritage of the Port Industrial District, 57.
Figure 28. E.H. Keating, City Engineer, *Ashbridge's Bay Improvement shewing proposed Scheme and Work now in Progress*, Toronto: City Engineer’s Office, 1893, Plans from City Engineer's Annual Reports, Fonds 200, Series 725, File 7 (MT995), CTA. Note the government breakwater, constructed in 1885, on the right (west) side of the marsh, and the sandbar dividing Ashbridge’s Bay and the lake.
the City for negligence, blaming conditions in the marsh for the severe illnesses of his children.\footnote{Coleman v City of Toronto.} Twenty years later, in 1913, boat builder Richard Schofield brought legal action against the City and the Toronto Harbour Commissioners, claiming difficulty in maintaining water access to his boat works due to sewerage construction in the area. Sludge from these sewers accumulated around his wharves, damaging boat hulls and threatening the health of his employees.\footnote{Rickey v. City of Toronto. For a more detailed discussion of the Schofield case, see Benidickson, “Ontario Water Quality,” 120-21.} In both cases, the plaintiffs were unsuccessful in their claims.

IV Conclusion

By 1880, then, the “Don Problem” and related concerns about the marshlands at the river’s mouth were well established in the public consciousness. As I will show in Chapter 5, decades of complaints about pollution problems, combined with the effects of a massive flood in the valley in 1878, fueled support for Don River Improvement Plan in the mid-1880s. Why the City chose to invest funds in a costly river improvement project rather than an intercepting trunk sewer, widely perceived by expert observers as the most effective and permanent remedy to pollution problems along the Lower Don and Ashbridge’s Bay, is the subject of further discussion in Chapter 5. Conceived as the Don was as a “space apart” and a providential site for the city’s wastes, its noxious industries and its hazardous materials, the foul odours and polluted waters resulting from this designation were for many observers the price of prosperity, and the price of keeping other parts of the city more habitable. Not until 1908, when population pressure had compounded an already abominable situation, and the germ theory of disease had gained a strong foothold among expert authorities and the general public alike, would the Toronto electorate
finally approve expenditures for the construction of a trunk sewer, sewage treatment and water filtration plants. By 1910, a secure water intake pipe extended well out into the lake, and a new filtration plant on Toronto Island cleansed incoming water before pumping it across the harbour to expanded reservoir facilities. A primary sewage treatment plant opened at Ashbridge’s Bay the following year. The combined effect of these two developments had a dramatic impact on water-borne disease rates: typhoid was virtually eliminated from the city after 1911, and Toronto’s annual death rate fell from 15.18 per 1000 in 1896 to 11.2 per 1000 in 1914.\footnote{Careless, Toronto to 1918, 187.}

A combination of competing scientific theories on disease etiology and the mechanics of water purification, overburdened municipal budgets, and general heel-dragging among politicians contributed to this slow response, and the inadequacy of previous solutions. As Joel Tarr has shown for American cities in the same period, businesses repeatedly chose the “cheapest sink” for wastes unless prohibited by law, and public officials typically responded only in times of crisis. A widespread faith in technology, coupled with the limitations of early twentieth century science, contributed to the tendency to adopt quick fix solutions—solutions which tended not to solve the problem, but transfer it to other locations.\footnote{Tarr, The Search for the Ultimate Sink, xxi. Michèle Dagenais and Caroline Durand, in their examination of the development of urban wastewater systems in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Montreal, point out the striking similarities of the discourse and the solutions adopted in Montreal with those of other Canadian and American centres in the same period. This similarity, they argue, “attests to the extensive circulation of people and ideas in the period, as well as to the international scope of the question of water” (Dagenais and Durand, “Cleansing, Draining and Sanitizing,” 649).}

\footnote{The 1908 by-law authorized the city to raise $2,400,000 for the “construction of intercepting sewers and a sewage disposal plant and $750,000 for the construction of a water filtration plant” (TCCP, 1918, Minutes 218, 434).}
Chapter 4
Valley Home: Refuge and Subsistence in an Urban Borderland

Not far from the spot where, at present, the Don-street bridge crosses the river, on the west side and to the north, lived for a long time a hermit-squatter, named Joseph Tyler…. His abode on the Don was an excavation in the side of the steep hill, a little way above the level of the river bank…. To the south of his cave he cultivated a large garden, and raised among other things, the white sweet edible Indian corn, a novelty here at the time; and very excellent tobacco.¹

Henry Scadding’s 1873 description of Joseph Tyler’s cave is the first detailed record in what would become a long history of homelessness in Toronto’s Lower Don River Valley. According to Scadding’s account, Tyler was an industrious and inventive recluse, a veteran of the American Revolutionary War who manufactured and sold “pitch and tar” to merchants in town, and ferried the Helliwell brewery’s beer in his “magnificent canoe” when the roads were too muddy to use. He was a puzzling figure—Scadding notes the “mystery attendant on his choice of life of complete solitude [and] his careful reserve.” His choice of location was equally mysterious: the Lower Don River in Tyler’s time (the early 1800s) was separated from the town of York by the woods of the government reserve, making Tyler a man distinctly on the margins. Whether Tyler chose to live on the Lower Don or was pushed there by circumstance is difficult to determine. Certainly his livelihood of pitch and pine knot production would have been facilitated by a location close to the forest, and the river provided easy transportation into town. The uncertainty surrounding Joseph Tyler is emblematic of the history of people on the margins—indeed, the fact that he is named and some details of his life recorded is more than we have for most of the

¹ Scadding, Toronto of Old, 228-29. Scadding (1813-1841) would have been just a boy during Tyler’s time. Although he makes no mention of the specific sources he used to assemble this account, he notes in his preface that he had privileged access to a wide range of governmental, institutional, and private libraries in researching his monograph. As historiographer for the Toronto Association of Pioneers, he would have also tapped the papers and memories of association members.
people who found themselves living in the valley, for various reasons, over the last two hundred years.

In the previous chapter, we saw the Don move, in public perception and experience, from a place central to the development of the town of York to a place increasingly peripheral to the centre, and increasingly polluted as industry concentrated along the banks of the lower river through the latter half of the nineteenth century. With the lower river tracing the eastern boundary of the city until the annexations of the 1880s, the river valley was in the mind’s eye of those residents wealthy enough to enjoy some distance from it a “place on the edges” with all that that implied. Material conditions of the late nineteenth century, particularly sewage and industrial pollution, coupled with elite perceptions of the valley as a source of disease and danger, cemented these assessments of marginality. We saw, too, a distinct shift in land ownership patterns in the valley. As early as 1830, tradesmen and middle class merchants replaced York’s prominent inhabitants as principal land owners in the lower valley. By mid-century, the area’s reputation for unhealthiness, together with other factors such as the growing distance from the centre as the city expanded west, accessibility challenges posed by steep ravine slopes, few and unreliable bridges, and reputedly poor soils for agricultural purposes, made it undesirable for all but the most speculative or poorly resourced of buyers—those compelled by incentives such as lower taxes, cheaper land rates, and rising population pressures in the centre. As industry congregated in increasing numbers along the lower river and the waterfront, it attracted more and more working class inhabitants to the area. By 1880, rising tenancy rates, typically small dwelling sizes, and a tendency toward lots with multiple dwellings characterized an area populated largely by working-class families.²

² Ganton, “Development between Parliament Street and the Don River.”
This chapter explores further the area’s reputation as an urban wasteland, and the implications it had for people who called the valley home, temporarily or for longer periods of time, in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. The ways in which the Don was conceived as a semi-rural space at once isolated and proximate, restorative and befouled, had implications for the kinds of uses to which it was set, and the opportunities it allowed for those living outside the bounds of the liberal order.\(^3\) In the 1860s, a cluster of institutions established in the lower valley that drew, at least in part, on this rhetoric. For the House of Refuge (later the Riverdale Isolation Hospital) and the Toronto Jail in particular, complementary goals of reforming and isolating their inmates found purchase in the semi-rural landscape of the lower valley. The rationale these institutions employed for selecting the lower valley as a location, and the controversies that accompanied that selection process, are explored here as a way of elucidating the stigma of valley lands and the limited options that corporate landowners faced for their holdings. Conceptions of the valley as an “outlaw space”—a harbour for criminals and illicit activities—receive discussion in the second part of the chapter through a case study of the trial of members of the Brooks Bush Gang for the murder of newspaper editor and MPP John Sheridan Hogan in 1859. Finally, I draw upon two episodes of “visible” homelessness in the valley in the early twentieth century in an attempt to reconstruct, as far as possible, the lived

experience of people “living rough” in the valley and the reactions that their presence drew from established Toronto residents.

A connection exists, I suggest, between perceptions of the river valley as a polluted wasteland at the edge of the city and its function as a repository for marginalized people. As Ian McKay contends in his ground-breaking article on the development of a liberal order in Canada, a “bridge exists” between those groups of people—and, I would add, places—deemed unfit for inclusion in the liberal project of individualism, order, productivity and wealth creation.⁴ Toronto is not the only city to witness a connection between ravines or “low lands” and marginal housing: Kellogg’s 1909 Pittsburgh Survey reported on “squatters” and “disreputable families” living in the polluted area of “Skunk Hollow;” Minneapolis’ “Bohemian Flats” shared a similar reputation among nineteenth-century reformers.⁵ Despite substantial work in Canadian historiography on marginalized groups and, in the environmental history literature, on degraded spaces, few studies have examined the links between those places and people relegated to the margins of urban environments. Certainly, land value and perceptions of risk were at work.⁶ Ken Cruikshank and Nancy Bouchier’s study of squatters and working class families in nineteenth century Hamilton is illustrative in demonstrating the geographic connections between industry,

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⁴ McKay, “The Liberal Order Framework.”
⁶ In Environmental Inequalities, for example, Andrew Hurley demonstrates how middle-class whites in Gary, Indiana constructed a “hierarchy of place”—creating homogenous neighbourhoods priced out of reach of the poor while at the same time shielding themselves from environmental hazards. Valerie Kuletz’ Tainted Desert, with its focus on the experiences of American Indian groups occupying nuclear testing zones within the deserts of the American Southwest (areas that she calls “zones of sacrifice”) — is also illustrative in connecting the experiences of a marginalized group with a marginalized landscape.
polluted and poorly drained lands and working class neighbourhoods.\(^7\) And yet, while most studies in the environmental inequality literature describe the unequal distribution of environmental hazards in racialized or working-class neighbourhoods,\(^8\) few investigate the congregation of marginalized populations in already degraded spaces or in urban/rural borderlands. Even fewer explore the link between homeless people and degraded environments.\(^9\) How such spaces were constructed as marginal, and the attractions they held for homeless travellers, have yet to receive detailed treatment.

Pointing to this connection between marginality of place and of human populations conjures a number of theoretical pitfalls, not the least of which being charges of environmental determinism.\(^10\) I do not suggest here that environmental factors alone determined the actions of those who sought refuge in the valley. Nor do I suggest that so-called marginal environments

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9 Todd McCallum’s work on Depression-era hoboes in Vancouver describes the establishment of a hobo jungle in a derelict area of Vancouver’s waterfront, but doesn’t explore the connection between marginal space and the marginalized populations that congregated there (“Still raining, market still rotten’: Homeless men and the early years of the Great Depression in Vancouver” [Ph.D. Dissertation, Department of History, Queen's University, 2004]; “The Great Depression's First History? The Vancouver Archives of Major J.S. Matthews and the Writing of Hobo History,” Canadian Historical Review 87, no. 1 [2006]: 79-107. Similarly, Jill Wade’s excellent 1997 article on marginal housing in Vancouver describes squatters living on polluted foreshore lands along Burrard Inlet, False Creek, and the Fraser River, but doesn’t explore how and why such places were constructed as marginal (“Home or homelessness? Marginal Housing in Vancouver, 1886-1950,” Urban History Review 25, no. 2 [1997]: 19-29).

10 Urban geographers have long attempted to shed the legacy of early twentieth century “Chicago School” scholars such as Robert Park and Ernest W. Burgess, who applied ideas from the nascent field of ecology to argue that competition for scarce natural resources such as land or water led to the stratification of social groups in different “niches” through the urban environment. Inasmuch as environment affected behaviour, they concluded, poorer environments produced populations more prone to crime and deviance. See Robert Park, Ernest W. Burgess, and Roderick D. McKenzie, The City (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1925); Robert Park, Human Communities: The City and Human Ecology (Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press, 1952). For a useful overview of the influences of Chicago School theorists upon social research in Canada, see Shore, The Science of Social Redemption.
acted as corrupting influences upon the people living within them, or that by inhabiting these places, marginalized populations imbued their surroundings with associations of danger and undesirability. The factors that pulled and pushed people to the valley, and that fueled corresponding perceptions of marginality, were certainly more varied and more complex. Instead, I seek to draw attention to what emerges from the sources as an indisputably observable phenomenon: the congregation of people widely perceived as ‘social undesirables’ within what was widely perceived as an undesirable or problematic landscape. In making this connection, I seek to stress that environment *did* play a role in these people’s everyday lives: while it was certainly not the only factor drawing them to the valley, the presence of relatively unoccupied land close to the city centre must have presented some degree of attraction to those without regular work or shelter. Other factors, such as the active discouragement of vagrancy in most parts of the city, and the relative absence of policing authority in ravine spaces, likely also played a role in attracting homeless people.

In an attempt to better understand the forces at work in relegating certain populations and places to the margins, I turn to McKay’s provocative call to re-evaluate the central role of liberalism in shaping Canadian history. As McKay suggests, the extension of a liberal project of rule across “a highly heterogeneous and even unpromising early-nineteenth-century northern North American reality” created a socio-political landscape of centres and peripheries, insiders and outsiders. ‘Centres’ in this analogy represent those places and populations in which liberal ideals were effectively taken up, such as the rational street grids of urban centres, the single-family dwelling, the hegemony of the urban (male) middle class; ‘peripheries,’ by extension, those places and populations within which aliberal practices persisted, or actively resisted, the rise of a new order: the Canadian north, aboriginal communities, labour unions. As McKay explains, the “individuals” at the “conceptual nucleus” of liberalism should be considered not as
“actual living beings” but rather “the entity each one of them might, if purified and rationalized, aspire to become.” In this way liberalism categorized certain individuals as deficient—among them “women, workers, ethnic minorities, and Amerindians” all “[marked] out as ‘Other’” by the liberal model. What is compelling about McKay’s reconnaissance or “re-knowing” of liberalism is its potential to link the processes that marginalized certain populations with similar imperatives at work in classifying difficult or unpredictable environments as marginal or ‘waste’ spaces. His articulation of liberalism as it was expressed in nineteenth century Canada emphasizes the simplification of complex systems, the desire to eradicate unpredictability, and the attempt to extend a rational, managerial ethos across territory and populations. Applied to the land, the liberal vision of individuals “as separate from, and acting upon, the natural world” correspondingly cast environment as property to improve, rationalize, make productive. Environments that resisted improvement, that proved somehow difficult to occupy, to make industrious, or to gain value from—mountain-sides and river valleys, deserts and wetlands—were dismissed by this logic as marginal, deviant, uncooperative, wild. That so-called “peripheral” populations should exist within peripheral environments should not, perhaps, be so surprising. Examples are all around us: the impoverished rural communities of the central Appalachia; the isolated First Nations reserve battling contaminated water and few opportunities; the fishing community pursuing diverse strategies of subsistence on the Atlantic coast. As cultural geographer Rob Shields has observed, social divisions have spatial expression. Places on the margin, in his assessment, become places left behind by the rush of modernity—liminal

11 McKay, “The Liberal Order Framework.”
spaces that invert or actively subvert dominant values of civilization and rationality.\textsuperscript{12} The Don River Valley in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, I argue in the discussion that follows, was one of those places.

Like all histories of people “on the margins,” sources are few and problematic. Those sources that are available—from police records, institutions for the homeless or mentally ill, and contemporary newspaper articles, among others—are flavoured with the prejudices of the day. Even fewer sources exist from the perspective of the marginalized themselves. And yet, to dismiss the sources that do exist as hopelessly problematic is to ignore entirely the experience of a group of people who occupied place in distinct and deliberate ways. Sources do exist for the homeless and for the working class households that established on undesirable lands in the lower valley; the challenge lies in being sensitive to the circumstances which contributed to the creation of each piece of evidence, and, wherever possible, in juxtaposing disparate sources to create a convincing vision of the past. As Alan Mayne wrote in a review essay on homelessness in January 2000, “the task for social historians… is to identify places and activities that have been abstracted by others as dark and marginal and to puzzle through to the experiences of insiders.” To accomplish this, Mayne argues for “an ethnography of place” that merges approaches from history, geography, and archaeology in order to “repossess the neighbourhoods that historians lost” by conflating the “imaginary essence of slums” perpetuated in the documentary record with “the actual social geography of urban disadvantage.”\textsuperscript{13}


This chapter draws upon newspaper articles, trial records, local histories, historical photographs, and municipal reports to sketch a history of the interactions between people and place in the Lower Don Valley. I have chosen to focus not on the working class communities that grew up alongside the industrialized areas of the lower valley, but on people who experienced even less security—those who turned to the valley itself for refuge. Geographically, my focus rests on the southern portion of the lower valley (the area south of Bloor Street/Danforth Avenue) where nineteenth and early twentieth century environmental and social changes were most pronounced. Throughout the chapter, I return to a central dialectic between perception and experience: the tension between the ways the valley and its inhabitants were perceived by the more privileged residents of the centre, and what was happening, as best we can discern from the limited sources that exist, “on the ground.” Like Tim Hitchcock, who marshalled an unconventional array of sources to inform his depiction of the very poor in eighteenth century London, I turn to the unusual source of place itself, and perceptions of place, to shed some light on the experiences of people pushed to the edges of society. The kinds of things people sought in that space, and the opportunities it presented—expected and otherwise—give some sense of the motivations of marginalized groups in choosing the valley over other options for relief housing.

I Isolating and Reforming: Institutions in an Urban Borderland, 1855-1865

As we have seen, by 1860 the lower valley began to take on some of the broad patterns that would characterize its development over the next 150 years. Scattered industry and working class

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housing mingled in the area south of Gerrard (then Don Street) on both sides of the river, and a cluster of institutions carved out space in the valley between Bloor Street and Gerrard. It is to these institutions that I will turn now. What factors were at work in attracting institutions such as the Toronto Jail and the House of Refuge to this location? What rationale did their founders employ in choosing the area adjacent to the Don as a site for reform-oriented institutions? How much did the river itself, and the aura of unhealthiness that so notoriously shrouded its lower reaches, factor in as a determinant, or deterrent, in placing these establishments? The discussion that follows will address these questions, while sketching the history of institutional and civic development in the lower valley in the 1850s and 60s.

By 1860, philanthropists, city and provincial officials had earmarked the area north of Gerrard for three significant health and reformatory institutions. The Toronto General Hospital relocated from its former site at King and John Streets to a four acre site bounded by Gerrard, Sackville, Sumach and Spruce Streets west of the Don River in 1855. In 1860, on the east side of the river, the directors of the Toronto Magdalen Asylum opened the Industrial House of Refuge to provide shelter and reform for “the poor and indigent, …idiots, [and ] …the idle, the lewd, the dissolute and the vagrant members of the community.”15 Finally, in 1865, after a series of setbacks, the Toronto Jail and Industrial Farm opened immediately south of the House of Refuge on the east side of the river (figure 29). For the three institutions involved, it seems the primary reason for relocation to the lower valley lands was economical: land was cheaper here than in other parts of the city.16 The trustees of the Toronto General Hospital set out to support the

15 Communication from Mayor Adam Wilson to City Council, October 3, 1859, TCCP, Appendix No.1, pp.459-61.
16 References to relative land values can be found in Ganton, “Development between Parliament Street and the Don River,” 4; and Careless, Toronto to 1918, 96.
Figure 29. The Don River between Bloor Street/Danforth Ave. in the north and Queen Street in the south, showing the location of the three institutions: the Toronto General Hospital west of the river and east of Parliament; and the new Toronto Jail and House of Refuge (labelled here House of Industry) on the opposite side of the river. Excerpted from the *Illustrated historical atlas of the County of York*, Toronto: Miles & Co., 1878. Courtesy of the Canadian County Atlas Digital Project, http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/Countyatlas/default.htm.

institution with rents from its former, desirable location at King and John Streets by moving to land they owned in trust east of Parliament Street. City council sought affordable land with
agricultural potential and reasonable proximity to the city centre for the location of a new municipal jail and industrial farm. The women directors of the Toronto Magdalen Asylum profited from the City’s purchase of the Scadding property east of the Don by negotiating a charitable lease of five acres of the Industrial Farm site for the location of their House of Refuge.\footnote{The City agreed to a lease of the land immediately north of the proposed jail site for 999 years at a rate of one penny per year. Report No. 4, Standing Committee on Police and Prisons, June 8, 1857, TCCP, Minute 396.} The rationale and accompanying controversies surrounding the location of two of these institutions—the Toronto General Hospital and the Toronto Jail—provide some interesting clues into elite perceptions of the area around the Don, and the factors that the hospital trustees, in the case of the Toronto General Hospital, and the city council, in the case of the Toronto Jail, weighed in making their decision to locate in the lower Don Valley. Caught up within these deliberations on site selection were perceptions of the undesirability of lands on the city periphery, and the people who lived within these margin zones. The working class inhabitants of the lower valley were considered people of “lesser quality” who brought misfortune upon themselves through their lax habits. The land on which they lived, too, was “lesser”—poorer in agricultural potential, plagued by threat of disease, haphazardly developed, and consequently less desirable.\footnote{A considerable literature exists on urban elite assessments of rural places and populations that shares much in common with perceptions of these “in-between” spaces at the city’s edge. See, for example, R.W. Sandwell, “Introduction: Finding Rural British Columbia,” in Beyond the City Limits: Rural History in British Columbia, ed. R.W. Sandwell (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1999), 3-14; Richard White, “Poor Men on Poor Lands: The Back-to-the-Land Movement of the Early Twentieth Century--A Case Study,” Pacific Historical Review 49 (1980): 105-131; Ian McKay, The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1994); James Murton, Creating a Modern Countryside: Liberalism and Land Resettlement in British Columbia (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007); Darcy Ingram, “Nature’s Improvement: Wildlife, Conservation, and Conflict in Quebec, 1850-1914” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Department of History, McGill University, 2008); Raymond Williams, The Country and the City (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973).} In meeting liberal order goals of efficiency, order, and predictability, the lower Donlands fell significantly short. Not quite urban, and not quite rural, the area presented both
opportunity and challenge for urban expansionists. Opportunity, in the form of cheap land prices and limited development controls; challenge, in the form of notoriety, distance, and constrained potential. Frustrated in their attempts to convert their holdings into profitable uses such as residential building lots, corporate landowners conceived of other eventualities, including institutions and parkland. These institutions, I shall argue, capitalized on nineteenth century urban conceptions of the countryside as a more virtuous and wholesome environment to fulfill simultaneous goals of isolating and reforming the “poor… criminal and disorderly” of society—a those that fell outside liberal order goals of self-sufficiency and the accumulation of wealth.

The Toronto General Hospital's Relocation to the west side of the Don, 1853-1856

Beset by financial problems since it first opened in 1829, the trustees of the Toronto General Hospital began to consider more creative solutions to support the hospital’s ongoing operation in the early 1850s. Aware that the land on which the hospital sat (the block bounded by today’s King, John, Simcoe, and Wellington Streets, where Metro Hall now stands) had dramatically increased in value in the thirty years since the building was erected, and seeking to expand their facilities, the trustees resolved in September 1853 to erect a larger building on a plot of land in the former park reserve east of Parliament Street—land they had held in trust since 1819 and from which they had failed to generate adequate revenue. Having resolved to relocate the hospital the Trustees worked quickly to set their plans in motion, selecting architect William

19 Report of the Select Committee appointed to investigate matters connected with the new Jail and Industrial Farm, December 13, 1858, TCCP, Minute 471.

20 Although the hospital was scheduled to open in 1820, construction delays meant the site wasn’t ready for occupation until 1824. When the provincial Parliament House burned down in December 1824, Parliament relocated to the new hospital building, further delaying its opening until Parliament relocated again in 1829.
Hay’s design for a grand building in classical Gothic style and advertising for lease the former lots at King and John Streets. According to C.K. Clarke, former Superintendent of the Hospital and author of a 1913 commemorative history of the institution, the lots went quickly at public auction in 1853, generating annual revenues to feed back into hospital coffers.  

The relocation of the hospital was not without controversy, however. An 1853 editorial in the *Upper Canada Journal of Medical, Surgical and Physical Science* outlined three arguments against the east-end location. The first and “most strenuous” of these was the disadvantages it placed on the public due to its distance from the centre. “Only picture to yourself,” the editors wrote, “the necessity of conveying in the middle of winter, perhaps upon a shutter, any poor man who may chance to meet with a serious accident at the western end, a distance of four or five miles, before he could be received into hospital.” Second, they expressed concerns about the site’s proximity to the ague-producing marshlands of the Don, located about 1.5 kilometres to the south. Acknowledging that the proposed site of the hospital was “comparatively a high one” and “that the building will be considerably elevated in itself... thoroughly ventilated, and properly heated”—features that they felt would go a long way towards mitigating “the baneful influences of malaria”—they were less sure that the intended site would be “completely removed from all the influences of marsh miasmata, engendered by the alluvium drifted down the River Don, and located at the eastern end of the harbour.”  

“When we consider,” they argued, “that during the past summer ague has prevailed very extensively throughout the east part of the city, so that scarcely a house has been free from its visitation, how shall we expect the new General Hospital

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21 Clarke, *History of the Toronto General Hospital*, 63. Clarke suggests that the roughly £800 derived annually from the leases fell somewhat short of expectations.

22 Editorial, “Toronto General Hospital,” 69-70. The connection between marshy lowlands, miasmas and malaria is the subject of considerable discussion in Chapter 3.
That there were plenty of locations in Toronto not subject to these influences (excepting the hospital’s present location at King and John, where ague plagued patients in the summer and fall) should be ample reason, they felt, for siting the institution elsewhere. Finally, the editors pointed out the considerable inconvenience that the proposed location would place upon medical students obligated to walk the almost four miles between the Medical School at Trinity College and the hospital “in search of practical knowledge.”

The concerns outlined in the *Journal* met with a spirited editorial response in the pages of *The Leader* in the summer of 1853. Published by James Beaty, who—significantly—wore a second hat as one of the hospital trustees, and edited by William Lyon Mackenzie’s son-in-law, Charles Lindsey, *The Leader* was an engine for conservative views in Toronto. The editorial dismissed the medical journal’s complaints as “most whimsical and extraordinary,” its authors (presumably Lindsey and Beaty both) responding in turn to each of their three arguments. First, with regard to the site’s distance from the centre, they pointed out that the present location of the hospital “in the extreme west end of the city” was equally distant from the east end, and never produced “the terrible results which the Journal conjures up as certain to flow from its future location at the east.” In response to the risk of ague, “the western and central portions [of the city],” they argued, “have supplied as many cases, in proportion to the quality of the inhabitants, as the eastern.” Falling outside these calculations, they went on to explain, are those “poor quality” inhabitants, who, as members of the labouring class, are

miserably housed, or rather, huddled, in tenements pervious to the night air, and in a constant state of dampness. The reader does not need to be told that the habits of this class render them more susceptible of receiving and being affected by the poison of ague, from their want of that scrupulous attention to cleanliness, which

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23 Ibid., 71.
is so great a preservative of health, and their more general addiction to intemperance.

(Neatly dismissed here, then, are the predominantly working class inhabitants of the lower Don lands—the area surrounding the proposed hospital). Finally, with respect to the inconvenience placed upon medical students, the editors rejected the journal’s concerns, referencing the inadequacy of the current facilities at Trinity College, and the school’s plans to construct new facilities near the site of the new hospital. They noted, in conclusion, that the selection of the hospital site, with “all the advantages which are to be derived from an airy and unconfined position… has met the general approbation of the public. The hospital trustees, they assured the authors of the Journal, “will not…reconsider their determination respecting the site of the new building.”

Construction went ahead at the location west of the Don in 1854, and the hospital opened its first wing to the public in 1856.

The Location of the Toronto Jail east of the Don, 1856-1865

The decision to locate Toronto’s fourth prison on the east side of the river north of Gerrard weighed economic constraints with the City’s desire for self-sufficiency in the housing of its prisoners. In April 1851 the City was approached by the United Counties of York and Peel to support their plans to enlarge the existing county jail, where the City sent a portion of its prisoners. The Counties proposed to enlarge the jail provided the City would commit to

24 Toronto Leader, August 10, 1853. Reprinted in Clarke, History of the Toronto General Hospital, 66-70.

25 With its five high towers surrounding a central castle-like structure, the building was considered among the most impressive structures in the city. Its modern amenities, including “four bathrooms… per floor, water hydrants in every hallway, and ventilation to clean the foul air,” set it apart from its contemporaries. In the years that followed, medical schools were constructed near the hospital and Canada’s second school of nursing opened on the premises (Toronto Historical Association, A Glimpse of Toronto’s History, MPLS 142). For a comprehensive history see J. T. H. Connor, Doing Good: The Life of Toronto’s General Hospital (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000).
occupying the expanded jail for ten years. The City declined, opting instead to construct and manage their own facilities for city prisoners. The rationale for these plans placed significant emphasis on the value of prisoners’ labour in offsetting the costs of maintaining them. These calculations depended upon the City’s ability to find “grounds in a suitable situation… where [prisoners’] Labor might be made available towards their support.” A site with rich agricultural potential, the committee implied, could reduce annual expenses even further. Council approved the committee’s request to search for a suitable site “for a house of correction and Industrial Farm” in April 1856, and in late October of the same year the committee tabled an offer from the heirs of the Scadding property of 135 acres on the east side of the Don south of Bloor Street. Committee chair John Wilson recommended its purchase, noting in his report to council that it was “in every respect suitable for the purpose desired.”

Developments in subsequent years would place in doubt the Police Prisons’ committee’s assessment of the value of the Scadding property for agricultural purposes, and stall the

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26 The United Counties estimated the jail expansion would cost £8500. They proposed to charge the city £1350 annually, £400 higher than the current annual fee of £950.

27 City council’s Standing Committee on Police Prisons estimated a total of £1300 in annual expenses to cover salaries, prisoner support, and the expense of the building and grounds. From this figure, they speculated, £500 could be deducted for the value of prisoners’ labour, and a further £800 deducted in the form of provincial support for the maintenance of prisoners.

28 Report No. 4, Standing Committee on Police Prisons &c., April 9, 1856, TCCP, Minute 229.

29 Report No. 11, Standing Committee on Police Prisons &c., October 27, 1856, TCCP, Minute 683. Negotiations resulted in a final sale of 119 acres of the original 135 acre allotment for the agreed sum of £10,000, funds for which were appropriated from the city’s proportion of the Clergy Reserve Fund (Minute 826, January 12, 1857). The Clergy Reserve Fund comprised funds transferred from the province to the city for its proportion of revenue from sales and leases of Clergy Reserves. The fund totalled approximately 14,000 pounds in October 1856, when the Standing Committee on Finance and Assessment recommended to council “that this money be especially appropriated to the purpose of building a jail and house of industry in connection with an industrial farm and that all further sums received from that source be devoted to the same object” (Minute 631, October 6, 1856).
construction of the jail. In March 1857 the City appointed architect William Thomas to develop plans for the jail and industrial farm, and released requests for tenders for jail construction. Shortage of funds, however, stalled further developments, as did mounting controversy around works expenditures. In 1858 City Council appointed a “Select Committee to investigate matters connected with the new Jail and Industrial Farm.” The committee criticized the Police Prisons’ committee for awarding lucrative contracts in conflict of interest, and attacked their selection of the Scadding property as a suitable site for revenue-producing agricultural labour. Given that the property was purchased “with a view of affording means of so employing the poor and destitute [and the Criminal and disorderly] as to provide for their maintenance,” they argued, “the selection of ground more suitable for cultivate would have been preferable.” They speculated further that of the entire 100 acre area proposed for the industrial farm, “not more than thirty acres can be brought under cultivation without expenditure of a very large amount of labour.”

The Select Committee’s report was followed several months later, in May 1859, by a resolution by Alderman O’Donohue to abandon the jail construction project and return to the idea of sending prisoners to the county jail. The rationale that O’Donohue outlined for abandoning the project is illustrative of elite perceptions of the area around the Don, and the controversy that institutions faced in choosing this area. He referred to the “very heavy

30 Thomas also designed St. Lawrence Hall and St. Michael’s Cathedral in Toronto. He died in December 1860, before the jail construction was completed. Two of his sons completed the jail construction under the name of William Thomas and Sons.

31 Standing Committee on Finance and Assessment, Report No. 14, October 5, 1857, TCCP, Minute 654. The committee report refers to a sum of 9000 pounds “placed to the credit of the Jail and Industrial Farm account by resolution of the Council passed in October [1856]” which, they add, “will be altogether insufficient for the purpose specified.” Now, the committee reported, “there are no funds whatever” for the jail construction, “the amount set apart originally for the Jail being now appropriated for Sewers and other works already started.” The Finance committee recommended that no expenditure be made towards jail construction in 1857 (Minute 739, 1857).

32 Report of the Select Committee to investigate matters connected with the new Jail and Industrial Farm, December 13, 1858, TCCP, Minute 471.
expenditure necessary for the construction of the new Jail and the perpetual drain from its unproductive character, magnitude and distance from the Courts,” factors which are sure to place the institution “upon the revenues of the City for its maintenance.”

Kivas Tully, then Chairman of the Board of Jail Inspectors, considered O'Donohue’s resolution in a report to Council later that year. His conclusions demonstrate more a sense of resignation to the decisions made and money spent to date, together with an acknowledgement of the broader economic recession gripping the city, rather than an endorsement of the Don valley site. The City should continue with construction on the present site, he concluded, because the property “could not be put to any other profitable use by the City, or be sold for one half of what was paid for it.”

Tully’s words reflect a familiar theme in the history of the lower valley: the steep sloping land on either side of the river was difficult and consequently undesirable; its use for institutional purposes and later parkland largely determined—as the hospital trustees learned earlier in the century—by its lack of profitability for residential sales, or, in times of recession, for industry. Construction of the jail finally began in October 1859, and proceeded with much of the same bad luck with which it started. A fire in 1862 destroyed the building just as it neared completion; it was reconstructed based on the original plans and opened in January 1864.

The Rhetoric of the Rural: Possibilities and Imaginings for an Urban Margin

As the case studies above demonstrate, for both the Toronto General Hospital and the Toronto Jail, economic considerations and the paucity of options for valley land holdings seemed to

33 TCCP, 1859, Appendix 1, pp.199-200.
35 Riverdale Park was established on the former grounds of the industrial farm, spanning both sides of the valley, in 1880. Like many areas eventually designated as parkland by national and provincial governments, it presented obstacles for other kinds of land use, such as resource extraction or residential development.
outweigh considerations of the unhealthy character of the area and its distance from the centre in the process of selecting a suitable site. The directors of the House of Refuge likely arrived at a similar conclusion, pleased as they must have been to receive a site from the City on such favourable terms. And yet, beyond this bare economic rationale likely lay other considerations. At the time of their establishment, each of these institutions lay beyond the city boundaries: the Toronto General Hospital lay within the Liberties east of Parliament Street (an area that was incorporated into the city in 1859, two years after the hospital opened); the Toronto Jail and the Industrial House of Refuge fell under the jurisdiction of the County of York until the annexation of Riverdale in 1884. For the Toronto General Hospital, we saw that distance from the centre was used as an argument against the site near the Don. But for the Toronto Jail and the House of Refuge, the benefits of a certain “remove” from the city may have factored in to their selection of a site east of the river. Concerned as they were with isolating and reforming their inmates, these institutions deliberately sought a location more rural than urban in character.36 Deliberations over the agricultural potential of the Scadding property offer evidence of this goal for the Toronto Jail. The search for an ideal site—rural, yet close to the city—reflects tellingly some of the paradoxical ideals about rural space in the mid-nineteenth century, and the changing land uses and valuation of land along the lower river.

When the City purchased the Scadding property in 1856, the area east of the river was still largely rural in character. Market gardens interspersed with older farm estates, and a

36 As James E. Moran comments on the moral geography of lunatic asylums in Ontario, the asylum “was to be strategically located in an area that would promote the health of the patients, with soothing panoramic views and access to fresh water” (Committed to the State Asylum: Insanity and Society in Nineteenth-Century Quebec and Ontario [Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001], 84). Often overlooked in the early Canadian literature on moral reform are connections with the wider colonial project. The impulse to isolate and reform “others” had discernible parallels in colonial approaches to aboriginal populations, expressed most obviously in the form of the residential school.
smattering of industry clung to the banks of the river south of Gerrard. In his description of the Scadding farm in the late 1820s or 30s, John Ross Robertson painted an image of rural harmony comparable to the countryside of England:

Around the homestead fields of... wheat, rye, barley, oats and maize were seen; and orchards containing a great variety of the finest kinds of apple and other fruits.... Asparagus beds and celery trenches were laid out; hemp was grown, and melons of all kinds.... In the flower garden bloomed most of the ordinary English flowers, especially roses of several species.... The [river] flats were converted into meadows, where sheep were to be seen, and all the usual domestic animals; and in convenient nooks here and there, stacks of hay.\(^\text{37}\)

While the property may not have been quite so productive when the City purchased it in the 1850s,\(^\text{38}\) it must have presented enough of a rural, agricultural character to allow the Council’s prison committee to imagine its use as an industrial farm. Neither urban, nor fully “rural” in the sense of working farms dominating the landscape, the lower valley in this period is probably best characterized by the idea of a “borderland.” John Stilgoe’s definition of the term as “a zone between rural space and urban residential rings” is especially useful here. Tracing the history of the term to mid-nineteenth century writing in the American context, he describes “the country” or “borderland” as a place of “working farms with pastures and arable fields, mature trees on sloping land abandoned by farmers as unproductive, and ‘country residences,’ the seasonal or year-round private seats of families with urban business and social connections.”\(^\text{39}\) While the area east of the Don was neither as comfortable nor as established as some of its American counterparts in this period, in the 1850s it was better described as countryside than the “fringe


\[^{38}\] The Scadding homestead persisted on the site until much later in the century, but it is unclear to what extent the site was actively farmed after Scadding Senior’s death in 1824.

suburb” of poorly constructed homes and mixed manufacturing it would become later in the century. The area north of Gerrard, furthermore, enjoyed considerable remove from the stench and filth of the marshlands near the mouth of the river: while the river itself would likely have assaulted the senses, the lands surrounding it in this region of the valley still carried the rural character of the valley lands further north.

As Stilgoe and others have shown, nineteenth-century writing about the countryside infused the landscape with powerful symbolic meaning. James Murton summarizes:

life outside the city was understood to be slower, more natural, and more in line with human rhythms. The idea of the country held connotations of virtue of wholesomeness. It was beautiful and peaceful, calming and relaxing. At the same time, farming represented simple values, hard work, and hardy individuals, along with a sense of community.40

For nineteenth-century social reformers, hard work in a rural environment became a form of therapy and social regeneration.41 Mid-century prison reforms, influenced by the ideas of English social reformers such as John Howard, reflected the belief that criminals were a product of their environment. Just as past prisons strengthened criminal tendencies through corporal punishment, idleness, and lack of segregation of experienced and inexperienced criminals, future prisons would seek to reform prisoners through a “morally superior” routine of hard labour, structured routine, and separate confinement for repentance and reflection.42 Jail farms served the dual purposes of reducing the costs of the institution through revenue from agricultural

40 Murton, Creating a Modern Countryside, 49.
41 Ibid., 60.
produce, and providing training and moral reform to prisoners through healthful labour in a peaceful environment.

And yet, as Raymond Williams showed so brilliantly in his 1973 monograph, *the Country and the City*, the “countryside” has long been depicted by those who visit from elsewhere in paradoxical terms—liberating, health-giving, and beneficial; and at the same time marginal, backward, and removed from the regulating effects of the urban gaze. Such polarized viewpoints, Williams argues, have little bearing on the “real history” of rural spaces, which have encompassed a wide variety of practices and forms of social organization over time.43 This concept of the divide between outsiders’ essentializing viewpoints and actual lived experience in place is useful in thinking about the “borderland” space of the lower Don Valley in that, as a semi-rural space, it had the ability to feed desires for a landscape of rural harmony while absorbing the effects of urbanization from the adjacent city. Crossing the Don bridge at Queen Street, then, the urban dweller confronted a landscape in transition, a bricolage of small industrial establishments clustered along the river banks, scattered dwellings on newly subdivided land, and larger agricultural holdings. Evidence of the “country” past—with its accompanying nostalgia for simpler ways and contempt for the supposed ignorance of country lives—and the inevitably “urban” future would have been immediately apparent.

The institutions that were established east of the Don in the 1850s and 60s, concerned as they were with isolating and reforming their inmates, especially embodied these paradoxical

43 Williams, *The Country and the City*, 1. In Canada, R.W. Sandwell and Ian McKay, among others, have done much to problematize urban middle class conceptions of rural places and populations as essentialized entities removed from the forces of conflict and change. Rural spaces, they have argued, warrant attention for reasons beyond their role as objects of an urban imaginary. Complex, diverse, and dynamic environments in their own right, and primary sites of experience for most Canadians until relatively recently, these spaces have frequently served as reminders of the limitations in applying general theories to heterogenous places and peoples. See McKay, *The Quest of the Folk*; Sandwell, “Introduction: Finding Rural British Columbia”; and R.W. Sandwell, “Rural Reconstruction: Towards a New Synthesis in Canadian History,” *Histoire Sociale/Social History* 27, 53 (1994): 1-32.
ideas about rural spaces. Perched high above the river banks and surrounded by sloping hillsides and the cultivated fields of the Industrial Farm, the House of Refuge and the Toronto Jail occupied what they considered a restorative landscape. From this vantage, the city with its corrupting influences of overcrowding, poor sanitation, and moral laxity was distant enough to be incapable of harm, but close enough to act as a reminder for inmates in the process of their moral education. And yet, in their remove, these institutions also isolated undesirability—criminals, vagrants, the impoverished elderly, prostitutes, and the mentally ill—from contact with the supposedly uncorrupted residents of the centre. Here again, the river valley is at once idyllic landscape and repository for things—in this case, human individuals—considered unpleasant or unsightly. Comparable to the valley’s use as a conduit for pollutants, as we saw in Chapter 3, here it comes to house other “externalities” in the process of city-building: those people who for various reasons and circumstances found themselves pushed to the edges of society.

This pattern of isolating sources of danger, corruption, or disease “over the Don” and outside the city limits continued into the twentieth century. The House of Refuge was converted into an isolation hospital during the smallpox epidemics of the 1870s. As George Rust-D’Eye recalls, the isolation hospital was known to local children as the “pest house”: “visitors to a loved one could come only so close to the grounds, from which point they would have to throw their

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44 Toronto was by no means alone in its categorization of certain urban districts as “spaces apart” within which to isolate social problems and disease risk. Tamara Myers’ study of girls’ cottage residences in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Montreal shows how particular urban spaces were used to separate social problems for “healthful” purposes (Caught: Montreal’s Modern Girls and the Law, 1869-1945 [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006]). Similar trends emerge in Adele Perry’s discussion of smallpox and the segregation of aboriginal populations in nineteenth-century British Columbia (On the Edge of Empire: Gender, Race, and the Making of British Columbia, 1849-1871 [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001], 110-123). Judith Fingard’s work on nineteenth-century Halifax is also relevant here in its illustration of the multiple factors that constructed the waterfront as a space within which to isolate and contain diverse threats, including disease, criminal activity, and other illicit behaviours. See her Jack in port: Sailortowns of eastern Canada (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982); and The Dark Side of Life in Victorian Halifax (Porters Lake, NS: Pottersfield Press, 1989).
gifts to those on the inside.” In the early 1900s, the site came to house the Riverdale Isolation Hospital, Toronto’s treatment and teaching centre for infectious diseases. A second isolation hospital opened on the west side of the valley in the same period. North of Danforth Avenue at Todmorden Mills, World War II saw the establishment of a prisoner-of-war labour camp in the valley. A satellite to the larger internment camp at Mimico, the camp housed mainly German merchant sailors who laboured at the nearby Toronto (formerly Don Valley) Brick Works. It seems the establishment of the camp in the valley followed a similar rationale as the Don Jail and Industrial Farm: proximity to a site for labour, and relative remove from the curious eyes of onlookers and potential avenues of escape.

46 The institution was renamed the Riverdale Hospital in 1957; today it operates under the title of Bridgepoint Health.
47 *Might’s Greater Toronto City Directory* (Toronto: Might Directories), 1900-1940. Known as the Swiss Cottage Hospital, it cared for patients with infectious diseases at a location on Winchester street adjacent to the Don from 1904 to 1930.
48 Order in Council PC 2326, May 10, 1943, authorized the Minister of Labour to use the services of prisoners-of-war in agriculture and other labour projects. Labour camps such as the one at Todmorden Mills held POWs from larger internment camps while they worked for a local company or farm. For further information on German POW labour projects in Canada, see German prisoner-of-war labour project files, 1943-47, R224-114-8-E (formerly RG 27), Library and Archives Canada (LAC), Ottawa, ON. For specific records pertaining to the POWs employed at the Toronto Brick Works between 1943 and 1947, see “Toronto Brick Company, Don Valley, Toronto, Ontario,” RG27, Vol. 954, Files 14-16, LAC. Thanks to Paul Marsden, Military Archivist, Library and Archives Canada, for assistance in compiling this information.
49 Ironically, the valley provided cover to escaped jail inmates and POWs alike. Stories of the infamous Boyd gang of bank robbers, who escaped the Don jail twice in the early 1950s, together with newspaper accounts in 1940 of escaped POW Carl Rabe, credit the woods of the valley in shielding their flight (Brian Vallée, *Edwin Alonzo Boyd: The Story of the Notorious Boyd Gang* [Toronto: Doubleday, 1997]; “Scour Wooded Don Valley for Escaped Nazi Patient,” *Toronto Star*, October 25, 1940).
II  Wild Space, Lawless Space: the Valley as Harbour for the “Criminal and Dissolute”

Linked to perceptions of the Don Valley as a “space for undesirables” was its reputation as a frontier of sorts, a place that harboured and facilitated a certain degree of lawlessness. Stories of attacks and robberies on pedestrians and carriages crossing the Don bridge at Queen Street were commonplace in nineteenth-century Toronto, and the area acquired a reputation as a place of danger and unpredictability for travellers moving to and from the highway to Kingston. These perceptions of risk, certainly, were wrapped up within the history of an urban periphery systematically marginalized by elites. As I have shown, the lower valley in particular had become, by the 1860s, a receptacle for urban discards—for sewage and industrial wastes, for prisoners, for the institutionalized and non-institutionalized poor, and for people who in other ways “didn’t fit” into nineteenth-century liberal order goals of predictability, moral rigour, and capital accumulation. Beyond its function as a “receptacle for undesirables,” the valley also occupied a space in the elite imagination as a place of uncertainty and danger. Its difficult landscape of steeply sloped, tumultuous ravines and marshy lowlands meant that parts of the valley remained, at mid-century, relatively undeveloped: ravine-lands following tributaries into the Don were often still largely wooded, and patches of woodland still existed in the farm lots immediately east of the river. Sloped and partially forested, then, the valley acted as a kind of “underworld” to the city above, bringing with it images of darkness, unpredictability, and other-worldliness: things could happen here that were less likely to happen on the streets above.

Karl Jacoby’s work is relevant here in its exploration of the ways that late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century conservation laws in the United States operated to criminalize the customary activities of country people. In attempting to deal with such “outlaw” behaviour, Jacoby argues, urban conservationists cast these customary practices (including hunting, cutting timber, and setting fires) as manifestations of a backward, deviant rural populace (Crimes Against Nature; see especially Chapter 3, “Working Class Wilderness,” and Chapter 6, “Modes of Poaching and Production”).
Such fears were at least partially justified. For much of the nineteenth century, Toronto police jurisdiction paralleled the city limits in extending only to the west bank of the Don between Queen and Bloor Streets. Not until 1884, with the incorporation of Riverdale, did city police have jurisdiction over the east bank of the river north of Queen Street. (South of Queen Street, the plateau portion of the river on both sides was included within the liberties of the city in 1834, and formerly incorporated into the city proper in 1859). North of the Danforth, valley lands remained unincorporated until the early twentieth century. The east side of the valley, then, and particularly the area north of Queen Street, was an area beyond the scope of Toronto police powers, and likely little monitored by the scant policing resources of York county. It is important to point out here that nineteenth century “police surveillance” differed substantially from the active presence we are familiar with today. In 1858 a total of 65 police constables monitored a population of about 44,000 inhabitants, a ratio of about one policeman to every 677 inhabitants (today’s ratio is closer to 1:474).\(^51\) Not only were police constables fewer per capita but the nature of surveillance differed significantly, focusing primarily on the suppression of rebellions and the regulation of working class behaviour rather than on “crime fighting” *per se*. Enforcing Sabbath laws, regulating merchants, trades and taverns, and making arrests for public drunkenness, vagrancy and prostitution were the kinds of tasks that constables performed regularly; regular surveillance of areas of sparse population and difficult access, such as the Don Valley, was unlikely to have occurred.\(^52\)


With its relatively scant police presence, then, the lower valley presented possibilities for behaviour less likely to be tolerated in the more effectively regulated districts of the centre. Taverns on both sides of the river were widely reputed as “sporting houses” that hosted a range of rough entertainments aimed at a working class clientele. Among them was the Don Vale House, which operated from the late 1840s until about 1875 immediately west of the river at the foot of Winchester Street (figure 30). The tavern served travellers and farmers on their way to market in Toronto; anecdotal evidence suggests that it also catered to a local clientele of working men seeking rougher entertainment. As George Rust-D’Eye recalls in his 1984 history of Cabbagetown, the tavern was known as the “frequent resort of the sporting fraternity;” boxing contests, crude fighting, cockfights, and gambling were among the activities staged in its various outbuildings. Anecdotal references to sporting activities in these taverns in the late nineteenth century give some sense of the illicit flavour of these activities—gaming of all kinds was banned in taverns by provincial statute—and the role of the valley in giving them harbour. Recalling only a partial role in the regulation of social behaviour. Citizen surveillance is at least as important in keeping order, an observation that organizations such as Neighbourhood Watch and Block Parents have used to their advantage. This kind of informal surveillance would have been most effective in small towns where residents were likely to know one another. In urban borderlands and in other areas with transient populations, citizen surveillance would likely have been less effective.

53 Julia Roberts’ review of the limited evidence for Upper Canada suggests that as in England, “the socially respectable began to distance themselves from the sweater and bloodier aspects of sporting life in the taverns in the first half of the nineteenth century” (“Taverns and Tavern-Goers in Upper Canada, the 1790s to the 1850s” [Ph.D. Dissertation, Department of History, University of Toronto, 1999], 198).

54 Rust-D’Eye, Cabbagetown Remembered, 58; Toronto Historical Association, A Glimpse of Toronto's History, MPLS 83.

55 Gaming, or betting for money stakes, would by definition have included blood sports. The “Tavern Act” of Upper Canada banned in any house “licensed to sell any sorts of liquors... any gaming with cards, dice, draughts, shuffle boards, mississippi or billiard tables, skittles, nine pins, or any other implement of gaming in [the] house, ground, or apartment, there unto belonging...” (Statutes of UC, 59 Geo III, C.2, 1818; cited in Roberts, “Taverns and Tavern-Goers,” 188). Broader censure is interpreted in the Magistrate’s Manual of 1835, which cites Home District licensing for taverns in stating that “no unlawful game or games or any drunkenness or other disorder be suffered in
boyhood exploits at the Castle Frank Brewery in the early 1860s to author and newspaper editor John Ross Robertson, former Toronto resident Bob Givins described a “24 foot ring staked out to the old brewery” where he and his friends met to box on Saturday afternoons. “Now,” he continued, “when I pick up a paper and read the report of a prize fight, dog fight, chicken dispute or any other horrible enterprise, my mind reverts to the old brewery in the valley.”

William said house” (W.C. Keele, The Provincial Justice: Or, Magistrate's Manual, Being a Complete Digest of the Criminal Law and a Compendium and General View of the Provincial Law [Toronto: Upper Canada Gazette Office, 1835], 51). In her study of nineteenth century taverns in Upper Canada, Julia Roberts qualifies these regulations with the clarification that the ban on gambling “appears to have been limited to a ban on money stakes, as opposed to playing for treats”(188).

56 Robertson, Robertson's Landmarks, Vol. 1, 213.
Vine’s “Butcher’s Arms” tavern on the east side of the river between today’s Danforth and Sparkhall Avenue was a destination for blood sports in the 1870s. As Ron Fletcher observes, the tavern backed onto a “deeply wooded valley, easy to escape into if the authorities showed up.”

While the sporting tavern may have been considered, as Peter DeLottinville has suggested, a “moral hazard” for respectable travellers in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the area of the valley around the Queen Street (Don) bridge presented more serious threats to passers-by. In the late 1850s and early 1860s, a group known as the “Brook’s Bush Gang” were frequently accused of bullying residents in the area. An amorphous group of loosely associated men and women that varied in number depending on the year and the season, the so-called “Bush Gang” occupied a forty-acre woodlot north of the Don Jail known as “Brook’s Bush.” Using a “deserted barn in a clearing in the heart of the forest” as a base, the group apparently ran stills and gambling operations out of “the bush,” and regularly harassed and robbed area residents. In the spring of 1861, several gang members were implicated in the murder of John Sheridan Hogan, Reform member of the Legislature for Grey County and former editor-in-chief of the British Colonist. The murder inquest and subsequent trial attracted huge crowds and received detailed coverage in Toronto’s Daily Globe, making household names of the gang members, and

57 Ron Fletcher, Over the Don (Toronto: privately printed, 2002), 26. Fletcher’s vignettes, based on a combination of written historical records and recollections passed down by Toronto elders, must be used with some degree of caution. No sources are noted in his text, so it is difficult to verify its accuracy. Nevertheless, the Butcher’s Arms appears as a prominent landmark on Tremaine’s 1860 Atlas of the County of York and on an 1868 military map of the area by H.J.W. Gehle (Sketch Sheets of a Winter Reconnaissance of the Country E. of Toronto between the Don River; & the Township of Scarboro on the E. & the Don & Danforth Rd. on the N. to the Lake Shore, reprinted in Hayes, Historical Atlas of Toronto, 72), and topographical records for the area do suggest a wooded ravine running east-west behind the tavern.

58 W. Stewart Wallace, “The Hogan Case: The Story of the Murder that Brought Disaster to the Once Notorious Brooks’ Bush Gang of Toronto,” MacLean’s Magazine, August 15, 1931, 46. Several sources on the murder, including Wallace and Charles Sauriol’s Remembering the Don, refer to Brook’s Bush as being “north of the Don Jail.” Both the 1860 and 1878 County Atlases for York, however, identify property owned by “Daniel Brook” (D.B. on the 1860 map) east of the Jail and immediately north of Gerrard Street. No other “Brooks” are identified in the area. Whether or not Brook’s property is the same “Brook’s Bush” referred to in the trial and related references is uncertain.
further strengthening images of danger attached to the Lower Don Valley. Over seventy years later, in August 1931, the Hogan murder was the subject of a retrospective article in *MacLean's Magazine*. The case and the spotlight it placed on the “underworld” of the Lower Don Valley at mid-century are especially relevant to our discussion here. Through the testimony of witnesses, including many members of the Brook’s Bush Gang itself, we learn something more about the people who “lived rough” in the valley at this time, and the interactions they had—or were said to have had—with members of the wider society around them.

The Murder of John Sheridan Hogan

At around eight o’clock on the evening of December 1st, 1859, John Sheridan Hogan left the home of Sarah Lawrie on Terauley (now Bay) Street, purportedly to visit Samuel Thompson, the new editor of the *British Colonist*. She never saw him again. Lawrie and Hogan had known each other for seven years, and he visited her frequently, often staying for a night or more. Months passed, and though his friends pressed for information as to his whereabouts, nothing surfaced. Rumours circulated in the local press, suggesting suicide or sightings in the United States; a reward of $600 posted by the provincial government in October 1860 proved fruitless.

On March 30, 1861, sixteen months after Hogan disappeared, James Bright went duck shooting with three of his nephews near the mouth of the Don. They found a body floating in shallow water between the mouths of the “big” and “little” Don (the river’s north and south entrances into the harbour), its head caught in the crotch of a branch that was frozen into the mud. Thomas Bright, presumably the eldest of the three nephews, tied a rope around the body and towed it with his skiff to the Gooderham Wharf across the bay. In the coroner’s inquest that followed, Bright testified that he regularly frequented the marshlands around the mouth of the Don, and as early as a week before had not seen the body. He believed it to be “carried to the
spot by the recent freshets” of the Don.\textsuperscript{59} The body was badly decomposed, but items of Hogan’s clothing allowed for a positive identification by his friends. Sarah Lawrie had sewn a new collar on Hogan’s “under flannel shirt” the day before he disappeared, and she identified the variance of colour between the collar and the body of the shirt, together with a safety pin she had used to take in his underwear. Hogan’s vest, his shooting jacket (an overcoat), and one of his shoes were missing from his body. The post-mortem that followed could discern no obvious indicators of violence, and the case was sent on to the Police Court for investigation.

Despite a lack of physical evidence of foul play, it didn’t take long for the papers to reach their own conclusions. An article in the \textit{Globe} the following day placed great weight on the absence of papers or bills found on the body in speculating upon Hogan’s demise:

\begin{quote}

The state of his clothing when found, and the length of time during which the body remained under water, seem to show that he was assailed when on his road to Mr. Beachall’s house [a friend of Hogan’s who lived east of the Don bridge], robbed of his money, murdered, and his body sunk in the river by some heavy substance…. It is extremely probable that poor Hogan fell a victim to some portion of a gang of miscreants who at the time of his death infested the eastern part of the city, but who have since been sent to the penitentiary.\textsuperscript{60}
\end{quote}

The known presence of gang members in the area, and their reputation for hassling or accosting people moving along Queen Street after dark, certainly gave cause for suspicion. George Allen apparently stated in court that Hogan had told him of being stopped on two occasions by members of the Brook’s Bush Gang while on his way home. Sarah Lawrie later testified that Hogan was on friendly terms with the gang members: “he once or twice said to me that parties belonging to the Brook’s Bush Gang had stopped him, and that he had had some difficulty in getting through, but immediately added, that they knew him well, and he was sure they would

\textsuperscript{59} “Body Found in the Don,” \textit{Toronto Daily Globe}, April 1, 1861, p.2.

\textsuperscript{60} “The Late Mr. Hogan,” \textit{Toronto Daily Globe}, April 2, 1861, p.2.
not hurt him.”\textsuperscript{61} Still, evidence that Hogan may have been carrying a significant amount of cash on him the night he died seemed to sway observers from the press, at least, towards the gang attack hypothesis.

On the 8\textsuperscript{th} of April 1861, sixteen men and women reputedly involved as members of the Brooks Bush Gang were brought to the Police Court from the gaol. Only two of the prisoners, Jane Ward and James Brown, were brought before the court; the rest were called as witnesses. A week previous, James Colgan, a Detective Officer contracted by the Toronto police, had encountered Ellen McGillich, a woman known to be affiliated with the gang, at a boarding house while investigating another case. She told him her version of the events that had happened the night of December 1\textsuperscript{st}, 1859. According to McGillich, she had left the bush that night with Jane Ward, James Brown, John Sherrick, Robert Wagstaff, and Hugh McEntameny. They crossed the Don bridge towards town and stopped for a drink at Kingsbury’s Tavern before walking back towards the bridge along King Street (figure 31). They encountered Hogan in front of Trinity Church, on King Street west of the river. Hogan spoke with them, and Jane Ward took his arm and walked back with him toward the bridge. McGillich apparently walked on ahead, and waited at the east side of the bridge while Hogan and Ward talked. She then saw Ward strike Hogan with something. He cried out, and staggered toward the bridge, and the four men, who had been waiting at the west end of the bridge, rushed in and took hold of him. She heard Hogan say to his assailants not to take his coat from him, as Ward had already taken all the money he had. As Wagstaff and McEntameny ran away, Ward apparently said, “God damn him, fling him over!” McGillich screamed as she saw Sherrick and Brown pick up Hogan’s body and throw him over the south railing into the river. Ward ran toward her and hit her in the mouth, drawing blood.

\textsuperscript{61} “The Murder of Mr. Hogan,” \textit{Toronto Daily Globe}, April 9, 1861, p.2.
Figure 31. The Lower Don Valley in 1866, showing the Don Bridge at the intersection of Queen Street and the diagonal line of King Street. Prepared by Jordan Hale. Base map: National Maps Collection 22351 (1882), University of Toronto Map and Data Library. Roads: DMTI Spatial’s CanMap Route Logistics Ontario—Toronto City subset, 2008.

During this encounter, McGillich spotted a handkerchief with a stone in it tied to Ward’s belt. She took hold of it, and Ward told her: “the man I struck with that will never tell another tale.” According to McGillich, she was too afraid to return with the others to the bush that night, and spent several hours seated on a railing on the opposite side of the bridge before finding shelter for the night in a shed behind Squire’s tavern. She returned to the bush the next day with Brown and Sherrick, who, on spotting blood on the bridge railing, stopped to whittle it away with their penknives. She later saw the two of them in the bush with the victim’s overcoat and vest.62

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On hearing her story, Colgan secured four or five constables from the police chief and headed to Brook’s Bush around midnight (figure 32). They succeeded in locating six of the gang members in an old barn; two others were arrested the next day. John Sherrick was located in the Kingston Penitentiary; McEntamney could not be called before the court as he had since died in hospital. McGillich was promised immunity as a Crown witness, and on April 29th, Ward and Sherrick were tried at the Spring Assizes. Two witnesses corroborated parts of McGillich’s story: Maurice Malone, a “dissipated youth… of respectable parentage”\(^{63}\) who confessed to having witnessed the first part of the struggle with Hogan before fleeing the scene; and, significantly, Dr. T.C. Gamble, a respected physician who testified that he witnessed a struggle on the bridge while returning from visiting a patient at a farmhouse east of the Don. Two other pieces of evidence aided in substantiating her story. Hogan’s missing vest was found in the possession of an associate of the gang; an analysis of the section of the railing over which Hogan had apparently been thrown revealed traces of blood, though tests could not determine whether the blood was human or animal. Contradictory evidence emerged, however, which established some doubt in the minds of the jury: an acquaintance of Hogan’s, Robert McGillivray, claimed that Hogan had been with him in the north part of the city at nine p.m. on the night of his death (and not, as the other witnesses agreed, on the Don bridge at that time).

As a result of this conflicting evidence, together with some contradictory statements in McGillich’s testimony, the jury acquitted Jane Ward. John Sherrick was acquitted upon the production of a convincing alibi, and James Brown was held over to be tried in the autumn assizes to allow the detectives more time to produce relevant testimony against him. Brown was

\(^{63}\) Wallace, “The Hogan Case,” 46.
tried on October 8, 1861. Although the evidence against him was much the same as that produced in the Ward and Sherrick trial, the jury took a different view, and found him guilty. An appellate jury reached the same conclusion on January 10, 1862. Brown was sentenced to death, and was hanged three months later on March 10, 1862.

The trial had a lasting impact on the popular imagination. At the time, many people believed that Brown should also have received the benefit of reasonable doubt that had been

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64 Ibid., 47.
granted Sherrick and Ward. In late February 1862, two weeks before Brown was scheduled to hang, a petition “numerously signed” was submitted to the Governor General requesting that Brown’s sentence be commuted to life in prison. The Governor General, however, would not be swayed. In the decades that followed, commentators reflected what seemed to be a widespread belief that the trial failed to bring the guilty parties, and particularly Jane Ward, to justice. John Ross Robertson wrote in 1885, over twenty years later, that the “really guilty parties escaped punishment, while a comparatively innocent man underwent the extreme penalty of the law.”

Beyond the sensationalism attached to the trial and the notoreity it granted the accused, the trial and its coverage by the local media present a fascinating record of the lives of those “living rough” in the valley in the late 1850s and early 1860s. The circumstances that brought them to “the bush” near the eastern bank of the river, and the kinds of strategies they employed to survive there, appear as contextual detail in places throughout the media record of the trial. Of the men and women accused and those brought to the court as witnesses, most described themselves as “resorting to Brook’s bush” for three years or more. For many, the bush seemed to represent an important fall-back option for lives that moved between the gaol, the hospital, various rooming houses, and occasionally, the home or outbuildings of a friend or acquaintance. The frequency of periods spent in the gaol, typically for larceny or disorderly conduct, is impossible to ignore. McGillich tells the court in the trial of Sherrick and Ward April 29th: “I have often seen robberies committed, and have committed them myself. I am a married woman, but I have been away from my husband four years. In that time I have been twenty-five times in gaol.” As the so-called gang members are called upon to testify, each in turn refers to periods

66 Robertson, Robertson's Landmarks, Vol. 1, 271.
spent in the gaol. Ana Maria Gregory, for example, recalled being in the gaol for two months in the winter of 1859; the police clerk confirmed she received two weeks in the gaol in November 1859 for disorderly conduct; she had been on the street only two weeks when she was again apprehended and sentenced to two months for larceny.\footnote{Toronto Daily Globe, April 9, 1861.} Time in the gaol was often interspersed with time in hospital. Two members of the bush gang, McEntemany and Hannon, had apparently died in hospital before the trial began; another, Biddy Donnelly, was called from the hospital to act as a witness.\footnote{Ibid, April 22, 1861.}

Alcohol seems to have played a prominent role in the daily lives of most of the men and women who frequented the bush. References to taking whiskey in various drinking houses are scattered throughout the trial record; in the bush itself, however, where gang members reputedly operated stills, the drinking was heaviest. Mary Crooks, who spent time with James Brown in the bush, describes “getting drunk” there; she apparently never saw McGillich in the bush “unless she was staving drunk and not able to leave it.”\footnote{Ibid, April 9, 1861.} McGillich later confessed to getting drunk in the bush on the night of the murder: “it takes ten or fifteen glasses to make me drunk. I often go and drink seven or eight straight off, and then stop.” Violence seems also to have been present. Mcgillich mentions being beaten once by her lover, Maurice Malone, in the bush. Her claim of being “boxed in the mouth” by Jane Ward on the night of the murder was corroborated by Constable Gibben, who found her on the bridge later that evening “with blood on her face, clothes, and hands,” looking “as if she had been in a row.”\footnote{Ibid, October 9, 1861.} In her response to one of the

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\footnote{Toronto Daily Globe, April 9, 1861.}

\footnote{Ibid, April 22, 1861.}

\footnote{Ibid, April 9, 1861.}

\footnote{Ibid, October 9, 1861.}
witnesses, Jane Ward makes reference to “a black man who was murdered three or four years ago in Brook’s bush,” whose body was later robbed by one of the women in the bush.\footnote{Ibid, October 19, 1861. The Globe report of the trial notes that a man was later found guilty of manslaughter and sent to the penitentiary.}

Frequently debauched and occasionally violent, life in the bush at least involved some degree of shelter. The men and women who frequented the area congregated in an abandoned barn north of the Don Jail. It seems they also found intermittent shelter in rooming houses and in the outbuildings of employers or acquaintances. Mary Crook noted that she stayed “at Mrs. Smith’s on King Street… off and on.” William Rhodes, a gardener who had frequented the bush for five years before moving into a house on River Street with his wife Louisa, testified that Jane Ward had lived at his house with her child from New Year’s 1860 until June or July of that year; Ana Maria Gregory and Sam Hannon, and Ellen McGillich and Maurice Malone also stopped in for several nights from time to time.\footnote{Ibid, April 9, 1861; April 22, 1861.} The outbuildings at Squires’, a farmhouse about fifty yards from the bush, also provided occasional shelter. McGillich testified that she “slept in Squires’ shed” on the night of the murder. James Brown “slept in the cow-shed among the hay” while he was working for Squires in November 1859.\footnote{Ibid, April 22, 1861.} Numbers in the bush were much fewer in wintertime. Ana Maria Gregory recalls that when she left the gaol on December 1\textsuperscript{st}, 1859, she “did not go to the bush, as it was winter time.” James Squires recalled that Brown “was the only one in the bush” when he worked for him in late November and December of 1859.

The men who frequented the bush seemed to support themselves, at least in part, through a combination of odd jobs in Toronto and its surrounding countryside. Robert Wagstaff testified that he was working “at the Don” with a blacksmith named Berry in December 1859; he
frequented the bush at the same time.\textsuperscript{74} James Brown worked for Squires “cutting stumps” for seven days in November 1859, and four days in December, before heading to Mono Mills north of Toronto for work on a farm.\textsuperscript{75} The women seem to have had fewer, or at least, riskier options.\textsuperscript{76} Most of the women who testified had spent time in the gaol for robbery; others were referred to by witnesses or by the accused as “infamous women.” Mary Ann Pickley, an associate of the gang and witness for the defense, described Ellen McGillich as a “very bad girl.”\textsuperscript{77} And Brown, who insisted upon his innocence until the end, vehemently protested that his guilt was established on the testimony “of a prostitute and her man” (McGillich and Malone).\textsuperscript{78} McGillich herself later traced her acquaintanceship with Hogan to the fact that she “worked about among the gentlemen who were in the habit of dining at the gaol.”\textsuperscript{79} What she meant by this exactly is unclear, but it is evident from these accounts that the women who found themselves “resorting to the bush” were those with few options to support themselves.

A précis of Brown’s life story is perhaps a fitting way to conclude this discussion, in that it sheds light on the circumstances that carried one man to life in the bush, and in this case, to a much worse fate. In the weeks before his execution in March 1862, Brown was visited in prison by a number of clergymen who attempted to prepare him for his impending death. One of these clergymen, Reverend Fish, set about to record a sketch of Brown’s life. According to the \textit{Globe},

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid, April 19, 1861.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid, April 22, 1861.
\textsuperscript{76} While these women seem to have enjoyed fewer options for employment, they may have benefitted from greater access to charity than their male counterparts. Tim Hitchcock finds considerable evidence to support this conclusion in his \textit{Down and Out in Eighteenth-Century London}.
\textsuperscript{77} \textit{Toronto Daily Globe}, April 30, 1861.
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid, March 10, 1862.
\textsuperscript{79} Ibid, October 9, 1861.
which published his story on the day of his death, Brown’s story contained “nothing of very
great importance.” And yet, reading between the lines, it reveals a trajectory of insecure, short-
term work and the dramatic ramifications of injury and youthful errors in judgment in narrowing
one’s options for self-sufficiency. Born in Cambridgeshire, England in 1830, Brown learned to
read and write before leaving school to work as a farm labourer and sawyer. He left England for
the United States in 1855, and apparently fell into “bad company” in Buffalo, losing much of the
money he had earned. Within a year he had crossed the border into Canada, where he worked in
a number of places before accepting a job building rail lines for the Grand Trunk. Injured on the
job at the age of twenty-six, he was apparently sent to the General Hospital in Toronto to
convalesce. Upon his discharge in 1857, he apparently became associated with members of the
Brook’s Bush Gang.  

Until he was arrested for the murder of John Sheridan Hogan in April 1861, Brown had never been charged with any criminal offence. Sent to the gaol a few times for
disorderly conduct—Ron Fletcher notes he was once arrested for “telling Mr. Sparkhall to go to
the devil when the landowner objected to their trespass in his barn off Logan's Lane”—his
record, apparently, was cleaner than that of most of his compatriots. Despite expectations to the
contrary by the clergymen who attended him in his last hours, James Brown never confessed to
the murder of Hogan.  

These rough sketches of the lives of men and women who frequented Brook’s Bush hint
at what it was like to live on the margins of society in the 1850s and 60s. From them, we can

80 Testimony from James Squires suggests that his affiliation with the bush gang may have begun earlier than 1857, or that Brown had mistaken some of the dates of his story in its retelling. Squires testified in April 1861 that he had known Brown for seven years, during which time Brown “was in the habit of resorting to Brook’s Bush” (Toronto Daily Globe, April 22, 1861).

81 Fletcher, Over the Don, 20.

82 Toronto Daily Globe, March 10, 1862.
paint only the broadest brush strokes of the circumstances that may have brought people to piece together a living in the valley. And yet, hazy as these images may be, they are useful as an alternate narrative to elite perceptions of the lower valley as a place of danger and depravity. For members of the “bush gang,” the bush and the valley that enveloped it was a haven to turn to when other options had evaporated, a place to regroup after months spent behind bars. Despite its occasional violence, it was also a kind of social hub for those with few other meeting places to frequent. Trial evidence suggests that men bartered clothing and tobacco in the bush, and that couples spent time there together away from the discomfort of the streets and the moral censure of many rooming houses. “Fallen” or “dissolute” though these individuals might have been in the eyes of the elite, the trial record shows—however imperfectly and judgmentally—that they were also people with life stories, relationships, passions and regrets. Through these records, then, we have come some small distance in closing the divide between elite perception and the actual experience of those living “on the margins.” From here, I will attempt to shed further light on the history of homelessness in the valley by exploring the experiences of people who called the valley home in the first half of the twentieth century.

III Valley Home: Refuge and Subsistence in an Urban Borderland

In the first half of the twentieth century, political and economic circumstances around the world resulted in heightened levels of homelessness in cities across Canada. In ways similar to those of the past, but vastly more visible, the Don became a receiving area for those who either could not or chose not to seek out other means of shelter. While the valley remained an area of preference,

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83 Catharine Cogan’s testimony that John Sherrick loaned a “smock-front and vest” to Robert Wagstaff in order “that that he might go to a tavern for some whiskey and some breakfast for us” suggests that proper clothing was required to enter a tavern (Toronto Daily Globe, April 22, 1861).

84 Toronto Daily Globe, April 22, 1861.
it was not Tyler’s refuge west of the Don bridge nor “the bush” on the east side of the valley north of the Don Jail that twentieth century transients chose; instead, they chose areas still capable of providing refuge: the partially wooded flats of the river north of Bloor/Danforth Avenue, and secluded copses along the upper branches of the river north of the forks. Indeed, after industrialization and the major engineering projects of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries transformed the river south of the Gerrard, what remained of the “rural” in the valley shifted further north.

In the discussion that follows, themes of transience meet with our established themes of centre and periphery, perception and experience. While largely unexplored as a phenomenon in its own right in Canadian historiography, transience was central to Canadian experience in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Moving between city and country in pursuit of seasonal labour, moving west in search of access to land and better possibilities, and moving between provinces with disparate employment opportunities are iconic Canadian experiences. And yet, for nineteenth and early twentieth century observers alike, transience was viewed as both an anomaly and a dangerous development.85 Late nineteenth century reformers puzzled over the conundrum of the “pauperization of the poor” and the need to separate “the worthy poor”—those willing to work—from those of the “professional” class who aimed to take advantage of charitable services. “Vagrants” almost invariably fell into this latter category; perceived as a sign of declining morality, they were repeatedly singled out as targets for hard labour or restricted

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85 A fascination with the state’s long-established discomfort with transience was the impetus for James C. Scott’s 1999 monograph, *Seeing Like a State*. “Gypsies, vagrants, homeless people, itinerants, runaway slaves, and serfs,” he observed, “have always been a thorn in the side of states. Efforts to permanently settle these mobile peoples (sedentarization) seemed to be a perennial state project—perennial, in part, because it so seldom succeeded” (1).
assistance. In McKay’s terms, an entrenched liberal vision cast vagrants as ‘deficient’ individuals for their failure to embrace liberal norms of regular waged work and sedentary living. As cities like Toronto struggled with a huge influx of unemployed men in the early 1930s, “the transient” was again singled out as less deserving of city support than the resident unemployed—a practice that eventually spurred intervention from provincial and federal levels of government in generating make-work projects for unemployed men in remote areas of the country.

Like most marginalized populations, people who sought refuge in the Don Valley in different periods are largely absent from the historical record. Census enumerators walked through the neighbourhoods bordering the valley, but didn’t enter the wooded areas of the valley to record people living there. City reports on housing and homelessness document city-wide housing crises, particularly in the 1930s and during the post-war boom in the 1940s, but rarely reach the level of specificity needed to trace people living rough in the valley. With limited resources and a small staff of overworked constables, policemen did not regularly venture into

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86 James Pitsula discusses these trends as they played out in the reception of “tramps” in late nineteenth century Toronto. The Associated Charities’ decision in 1881 to implement of a “labour test” whereby recipients of aid would have to break a quantity of stones or chop kindling before receiving food or shelter was used as a method, Pitsula concludes, of enforcing a middle class work ethic “on a deviating, floating population. It was also an insidious way of denying the reality of unemployment because the authors of the labour test assumed that the character defects of the poor, not the unavailability of work, was the central issue” (“The Treatment of Tramps in Late Nineteenth-Century Toronto,” Canadian Historical Association: Historical Papers 15, no. 1 [1980]: 132). See also the discussion of vagrancy in the Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Enquire into the Prison and Reformatory System of Ontario (Toronto: Warwick & Sons, 1891).


88 In his 1911 report on slum conditions in Toronto, for example, medical health officer Charles J. Hastings identifies six areas of marginal housing in the city, two of which border on the Don River. His detailed house-by-house investigation, however, doesn’t include a search for the “completely homeless” in the valley lands below the so-called “slums” (“Report of the Medical Health Officer dealing with the Recent Investigation of Slum Conditions in Toronto, Embodying Recommendations for the Amelioration of the Same,” July 5, 1911, City of Toronto Reports Collection, City of Toronto Archives Collection, Fonds 2, Series 60, Box 2, Item 23, Second Floor Stacks, CTA).
the valley, except in pursuit of particular suspects. Indeed, it is precisely this absence of scrutiny that may have attracted people to the valley in the first place. As Bouchier and Cruikshank note in their study of working-class residents and squatters in Hamilton’s Burlington Bay, “one of [the community’s] attractions was that it was nicely secluded from the gaze of the Harbour Commission and city police authorities that workers on street corners and in busy city taverns often felt.” Despite this relative silence in the official record, public interest in the unfortunate and the alien ensured that some coverage appeared in the newspapers of the day. Two groups of “undesirables” received significant coverage in Toronto newspapers: 1) Roma immigrants who camped in the valley in the 1910s and 20s; and 2) the unemployed men who formed a “hobo jungle” on the flats of the river in 1930 and 1931. Drawing upon a limited record of historical photographs and newspaper articles, I will sketch the movement of people through place, and explore the ways that place—including topography and local resources—provided for and attracted populations with few alternatives.

Roma Travellers, 1910s and 1920s

In their illustrated history of immigration to Toronto in the early twentieth century, Robert Harney and Harold Troper made reference to groups of Roma immigrants who carved a space for themselves at the edge of society:

Moving about in family groups or small ‘tribes,’ their wagons or old cars appeared in and around Toronto at certain times of year. The river valleys along the Humber and Don were their favourite campsites and those who did not come

89 Toronto historian Carl Benn notes that until police services reforms in the 1850s the city employed only five full-time constables. Over sixty men were employed by the force in the latter half of the nineteenth century (The History of Toronto, 31.).

into the centre of the city to do business spent their time fishing and making sweet grass and reed baskets.91

The parallels with descriptions of aboriginal peoples in the period of early settlement are striking. Here the Roma appear as “urban primitives,” exotic “others” who, like aboriginal people before them, frequented the modern space of the city for brief transactions before retreating again to what were broadly conceived as backward and incomprehensible lives lived close to nature. As these observations suggest, Toronto’s river valleys provided not only refuge from authorities (examples from other North American cities show that Roma families often faced imprisonment or ejection when confronted by local police92) but also a source of sustenance and livelihood. Toronto photographer John Boyd Senior documented the presence of Roma families on the banks of the Humber River in 1918. His images show women gathering water from the river and cooking meals on fires fueled by driftwood from the river banks. While these images were captured in Toronto’s other major river valley, it is clear from the documentary record that Roma families also camped along the Don.

The images are rich with detail, and provide an excellent companion to the scant textual records available on Roma travellers in the Toronto area in the early twentieth century. The staged nature of the photographs and the messages they convey about mainstream perceptions of groups like the Roma in early twentieth century Canada warrant some additional comment. “Would you imagine, unless told, that this scene is within walking distance of Toronto City

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92 See, for example, John Tylor Lyon, “A Picturesque Lot: The Gypsies in Peterborough,” Beaver 78, no. 5 (1998): 25-30. Lyon documents the arrest and temporary jailing of the male travellers on charges of loitering and obstruction of a public highway; local authorities apparently attempted to deport the families to Mexico, only to find, ironically, that they were naturalized Canadians. See also T.A. Acton, Gypsy Politics and Traveller Identity (Hatfield, Hertfordshire: University of Hertfordshire Press, 1997); and Marlene Sway, Familiar Strangers: Gypsy Life in America (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988).
Hall?” exclaims the caption accompanying the first image (figure 33). “The Gypsy walks as easily and gracefully with the water pail on head as without it.” Likely reminiscent, for the photographer and his audience, of images of African women, the photograph becomes a performance of primitivity and difference, its (seemingly reluctant) subject enacting for her viewers a reflection of their own assumptions. Juxtaposed with this first image of exotic grace is a performance of a different kind: the Roma woman as foil for contemporary ideals about female domesticity (figure 34). In this second image, scattered objects around the tent entrance present a scene of “domestic disarray,” an assessment compounded by the cigarette hanging casually (and mannishly) from the woman’s lips. The caption cements the distance from the kitchens of the World’s Sunday morning readers: “meal-time, commencing with raw eggs. The fire is set ready for kindling in the centre, just gathered drift wood, and upon this potatoes, corn and more eggs will be fried to complete the meal. The youngsters appear to thrive on this diet.” Domestically deficient, yet at the same time graceful and carefree, these characterizations of Roma women fit within a larger fascination with the lives of “authentic others.”

Similar tropes are at work in accounts of Roma encampments along the Don in the same period. An article in the Toronto Star November 5th, 1910 described a Roma camp site near the west branch of the Don (at the end of Soudan Avenue, near the intersection of today’s Eglinton and Bayview Avenues) (figure 35). Discernible here again is the discourse of the urban primitive, the reporter drawing upon a well-established trope of the “vanishing race” in marking

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93 Paige Raibmon documents a similar phenomenon at work in her discussion of aboriginal hop pickers in late-nineteenth-century Washington State. Romanticized by their observers as objects of spectacle, itinerant aboriginal workers found imaginative ways to profit from their imposed roles as performers of essentialized identities (Authentic Indians: Episodes of Encounter from the Late-nineteenth-century Northwest Coast [Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005]; see especially Chapter Four, “Picking, Posing, and Performing: Puget Sound Hop Fields and Income for Aboriginal Workers,” 74-97).

94 Connections between authenticity and the myth of the vanishing race are the subject of considerable discussion in Raibmon, Authentic Indians and; McKay, The Quest of the Folk.
Figure 33. Roma woman carrying water at camp on the Humber River, October 12, 1918, John Boyd Sr. Photographs, Alan Howard Fonds, Fonds 1548, Series 393, Item 15386, CTA.
Figure 34. Roma woman peeling potatoes at camp on the Humber River, October 12, 1918, John Boyd Sr. Photographs, Alan Howard Fonds, Fonds 1548, Series 393, Item 15391-1, CTA.
the Roma’s remove from mainstream Canadian experience:

Tucked away in the bushes around the last bend of a long road to the north of the city, miles from a railroad, and a good walk from any other human habitation, are four little white tents, the dwelling place of the remnants of a gypsy tribe. They have prepared for the winter only by building leaf shelters over the doorways of the tents and there they will stay through storm and sunshine until the wanderlust seizes their gypsy fancies.

At the time, this area of the valley remained rural and largely wooded, with large farms occupying the neighbouring table lands. A different Don than the polluted environment of the lower valley, the area nevertheless occupied a margin in its rurality and its position just outside
the city limits. The reporter noted, “are four men, three women, three children, two bears, and a baboon.” As best he could observe, the group made a modest income by taking up collections after “the bear and monkey [gave] exhibitions on the streets” and from fortunes that “the women of the party tell… to the unwary.” It seems the reporter was left to draw his own conclusions about the possible relationship between the women and men in the camp, and the purpose of their stay in the area. “They are the not the sociable summer camping party,” he reported with disappointment, “that their tents might imply;” nor are they “over fond of stray callers.”

Despite the relative isolation of the camp, local residents—apparently concerned that “these gypsies might have too many of the story book gypsy characteristics”—attempted “to show [the Roma] that there were other parts more favorable to their race.” The article doesn’t elaborate on the means with which the group was made to feel unwelcome. According to the reporter, the families responded by “promptly [purchasing]” the property. Having “shown themselves to be law abiding citizens, and people of wealth,” harassment by neighbours and authorities purportedly ceased. The reporter, however, couldn’t resist the speculation that the group would nevertheless “be off for other parts when the springtime comes around;” with them, he concluded, will go “the covered wagon and the collapsible stoves, the old hay horse, and the scratching hens that they have taken unto themselves.” Here is interesting evidence of the “Other” as a “doubtful [prospect] for liberal individualism.” While the purchase of land granted this particular group of Roma some limited respect as “probationary individuals,” their ethnicity cemented their status as outsiders to the dominant liberal ethos. No further mention of

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95 As R.W. Sandwell has shown, rural areas were often constituted as marginal spaces by urban dwellers, particularly in their role as receivers of the city’s wastes (“Introduction: Finding Rural British Columbia”).

the group appears in the local papers until February 4, 1911, when the *Globe* reported that a “band of gypsies who have been encamped around Eglinton for some time” was taken in by Dominion Immigration Officers “preparatory to being deported to the United States.” Apparently the group consisted of “a number of men, women, and children, four wagons, several horses, and four brown bears.” While it is difficult to be certain if this was the same group described by the *Star* in November, the location “near Eglinton” suggests so. Area residents had apparently complained of the group’s “persistent begging,” adding to Children’s Aid Society reports that children had been observed “running out in the snow barefooted.”

Ten years later a group of eight “Serbian gypsy” families occupied a site further upriver, on the west branch of the Don near the intersection of Yonge Street and York Mills Road (figure 35). Unlike the 1910 camp, this camp was easily visible from the road. An article in the *Globe* June 1st, 1920 noted that the camp was situated “not more than one hundred yards from Yonge Street… so that passing motorists may easily be beguiled to visit their encampment and have their fortunes told.” The camp’s roadside location in the valley provided the dual advantages, the article suggests, of access to the river for cooking, bathing, and drinking water, and access to a source of revenue through roadside sales and services. Men in the camp apparently worked in the city as chauffeurs and coppersmiths, and supplemented their income with roadside sales of used cars and car parts. As the reporter waited, trying to get an interview with one of the women of the camp, he observed children, apparently “too numerous to count” swimming in the Don. They

97 Sporadic deportations seemed to continue throughout the 1910s. In his annual report to the Toronto Board of Health, for example, medical officer of health Charles Hastings reports the deportation of a group of Roma he viewed as “sleeping and living like animals” (“Annual Report to the Toronto Board of Health,” 1914, p.112, Department of Public Health Reports, 1885-1995, Former City of Toronto Fonds, Fonds 200, Series 365, File 16, box 225021, folio 12, CTA.

swim with their clothes on, he noted, “[jumping] into the water and then [waiting] for the sun to dry them.” It wasn’t long before the camp raised the ire of local residents. Complaints throughout the summer of 1920 about “the condition of things at the gypsy camp at York Mills bridge” were directed to the county police and health authorities. The situation was last mentioned in the Star August 21st, when the columnist speculated that “the gypsies are preparing to move to their winter quarters.”

While the evidence here is sketchy and laced with the prejudices of its presenters, it nevertheless supports the hypothesis forwarded by Harney and Troper that Toronto’s river valleys provided—temporarily, at least—refuge and means for subsistence for immigrant families travelling with seemingly scant resources. As Boyd’s images remind us, the river valleys provided access to water for drinking, cooking, and bathing, to driftwood for cooking fires, to fish, and to grasses for basket making. They also provided a degree of refuge from “stray callers” and powerful authorities. Some historiographical context on Roma experience in nineteenth- and twentieth-century North America is useful here. As Marlene Sway has shown, Roma family groups in the United States and Canada used nomadism, multiple occupations, and the exploitation of readily available natural resources as strategies of economic adaptation. Descending in large part from Roma populations who came to North America during the large immigration of Eastern Europeans in the 1880s and 90s, many Roma groups pursued a nomadic lifestyle due not “to wanderlust as much as to pressure exerted upon them by… host societies.” Following occupations that were typically “seasonal, temporary, marginal, and even precarious,” they moved from place to place and engaged in a number of occupations

100 Sway, Familiar Strangers, 39, 44.
Car repairs and used car sales, occasional farm labour, scrap metal recovery, fortune telling and other forms of entertainment were among typical overlapping and gendered occupations.  

The use of the natural environment as a means of subsistence and livelihood also has a long tradition in Roma historiography (as it does, of course, with hunting and foraging groups more generally). Sway records the use of fallen branches and scrap wood to produce bowls, spoons, and children’s toys, and the collection of holly and heather for seasonal sale in nineteenth-century Europe. Mayall notes the use of grasses and wood from camp locations to manufacture brooms, doormats and baskets; clothes pegs, skewers, and walking sticks in the same period in rural England. As Harney and Troper suggest and Sway confirms, many of these craft occupations were extended to North American environments. The location of Roma camps along the Don in the first decades of the twentieth century may have been due in part, these sources suggest, to access to natural resources. Strategic placement along travel corridors for fortune-telling and used car sales/repair occupations was likely also a significant factor, as the 1920 camp at Yonge and York Mills Road suggests, as was distance from the gaje, or non-Roma, population, as both taboo influences on Roma cultural norms and potential sources of threat.

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101 Ibid., 110.  
The “Hobo Jungle” of 1930 and 1931

Transience in the valley took on much greater visibility during the 1930s, when unemployed men established a large hobo jungle in the flats of the lower valley, north of Bloor Street. Sometime in the fall of 1930 a group of transients found refuge in a brick factory in the valley, and rumours began to circulate about the Don Valley “kiln-dwellers.” Some investigative journalism by the left-leaning Toronto Star located the camp in early December—the reporter apparently having “tramped one night almost the full length of the Don valley searching for [the men]” before being tipped off weeks later by a young homeless man who had spent time at the site. “Last night,” he reported, “during bitter winds and near-zero weather, forty-two homeless, jobless, and penniless wandering men slept on ‘hot-flops’ in the Don Valley yards of the Toronto Brick [Company] (formerly the Don Valley Brick Works).” The reporter explained: bricks baked in a series of huge chambers, or kilns, often took up to a week to cool. “While they are cooling, [the men] climb right inside the kilns, stretch themselves out on the hard, warm bricks and seek the solace of sleep.” How did they come to find shelter in a working brick factory? The reporter was careful to point out that these “decent and respectable” men were not trespassers:

These men are not bums. They are not tramps. Nor are they hoboes…. They are residents of the Don Valley yards of the Toronto Brick Co. as the invited guests of Frank E. Waterman, general manager of that company, who has not only issued instructions to his staff that the men are to be allowed the privileges of his brick yard, but he has on several occasions stoutly resented the intrusion of policemen and plainclothesmen.”

This emphasis on the men’s essential respectability stands in marked contrast to perceptions of the Roma. While concerns about Communist sympathies and anxieties about the presence of

106 “Forty-Two Homeless Men Snoozed on Heated Bricks,” Toronto Daily Star, December 2, 1930. Plainclothesmen apparently entered the site in the early hours of the morning and shook men awake with offers of work to test their resolve to find employment. All men, the Star article reported proudly, readied themselves quickly only to find the offers were a ruse.
‘professional tramps’ in the jungle betrayed underlying suspicions about the character of men who had ‘let themselves fall’ into such circumstances, overall these men received a warmer reception than those identified by their ethnicity and economic practices as hopelessly and permanently depraved.

Based on the documentary evidence that survives, the residents of the Don Valley jungle seemed to share an ambiguous relationship with those in the city above them. Frequent references are made in the *Star* coverage of the camp to criticisms and condemnation of the city’s charitable institutions. Inhabitants of the camp apparently “couldn’t understand why every restaurant in Toronto didn’t let them eat the waste food…. They whole-heartedly doubted that the new Central Bureau of Registration for homeless men would make any difference to their plight.”\(^{107}\) While institutional responses to Depression-era homelessness and unemployment fell back on earlier approaches—sorting the “resident” from the “alien” homeless and focusing support on married rather than single men, the public response to the men in the valley tended to be more generous. As the *Globe* reported in the last days of the camp, “[the men’s] self-imposed rigor and independence, their vigorous cry for work and not charity, have appealed to the public imagination. They made good as citizens out of luck.”\(^ {108}\)

Reverend Peter Bryce made numerous visits to the “jungle” to report on the men’s well being, and church and women’s’ organizations across the city organized donations of food and clothing. In a remarkable document that reinforced—in their own words—representations of the valley residents as “ordinary citizens down on their luck,” the “cave and shack dwellers” of the valley scripted a letter of thanks on a

\(^{107}\) *Toronto Daily Star*, December 2, 1930.

\(^{108}\) *Toronto Globe*, October 3, 1931, p.4.
scrap of cardboard and posted it at the edge of the valley. The card, dated August 4, 1931, read as follows:

To whom it may concern: this is to say that we dwellers of the Don Flats (otherwise known as the “cave and shack dwellers”) do hereby wish to thank all those who have tried to help us out in any way and particularly those kind enough to send any supplies in way of food left over from pic-nics etc. which might have otherwise gone to waste and we’ll be glad to accept in future any kindness that this notice might happen to bring to us.

Hoping that things will soon be better we remain thankfully yours.

Signed by names below representing approximately [sic] number of men about [eight signatures are included] (figure 36).

Public fears about the vast number of men congregated in the valley also expressed themselves in the local newspapers. Around the same time as the thank-you card was produced, concerns about Communist agitation centred around the Don Valley camp led to warnings in the conservative newspapers that “all drifters should be cleared out of the cities before winter” to stem the possibility of revolution. 109 The accusations met with vehement indignance by the Star and, reputedly, by inhabitants of the valley camp.

Asked why they chose the valley brick works rather than the House of Industry or one of the city’s night missions, one of the men responded, “we’ve still got a little pride left,” adding that they found begging on the streets demeaning. This sentiment was repeated frequently in the Star’s coverage of the Don Valley camp, and in accounts of hobo jungles in other parts of the country. 110 It was expressed especially clearly in a letter to the editor of the Star from an anonymous jungle resident in July 1931. Identifying himself as a World War I veteran who found himself homeless in the same city he had enlisted from years before, he wrote that he was “of a husky build and suited to manual labor.” “Before I will accept charity or line up in a bread

109 “Don Valley Not Safe for Policeman Soon, Says Range Officer,” Toronto Globe, August 4, 1931.

110 See, for example, McCallum, “The Great Depression's First History;” and Wade, “Home or homelessness.”
Figure 36. Card of Thanks, August 4, 1931. Courtesy of the East York Foundation Collection, Todmorden Mills Museum, City of Toronto.

line,” he continued, “I offer my services for room or board.” He signed the letter only with his location: “Don Valley.” Another letter to the editor from a resident of the hobo jungle suggested, interestingly, that work could be created for the unemployed men of the valley by creating a project to straighten the river north of Bloor Street and to remove unnecessary weeds and trees from the valley.  

112 John J. MacArthur, letter to the editor, Toronto Globe, September 19, 1931. The project never materialized.
If pride was one reason these men chose the valley, the shrinking availability of other forms of relief was another. A follow-up article in the *Star* June 19, 1931 counted three hundred men in the valley “following [the] recent closing of all city missions and shelters, with the exception of the House of Industry.” The brick works population had expanded to one hundred men; an additional two hundred slept “on the banks of the muggy Don river with the sky as a blanket and the earth as a mattress.”¹¹³ Later that summer the jungle had expanded again, with approximately four hundred men camped along the flats of the Don River. As Reverend Peter Bryce observed in a tour of the valley in August 1931, some men slept in box cars and dugouts; others fashioned “most ingenious huts”—“bivouacs of rushes… bound together by striplings sewn through with thatch” (figure 37).¹¹⁴ The photographs below draw attention to the rich visual archive that exists for the Don Valley, and the visible intersections between its social and environmental history.

The river valley provided natural amenities, such as water for drinking, cooking and bathing, reeds and saplings for hut construction, and driftwood for campfires; it also yielded resources from the history of human settlement in the area. A local dump in the valley north of the Bloor Street Viaduct (the site of today’s Chester Springs Marsh) provided a bounty of discarded objects that men used to furnish their make-shift homes: a picture frame, an old trunk, a radio antennae (but no radio), and a semi-functioning kerosene lamp were some of the objects

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¹¹³ “300 Jobless Sleep Nightly Along Don River’s Banks,” *Toronto Daily Star*, June 19, 1931. Michiel Horn provides some context for both the heavy burden experienced by Canadian municipalities in providing relief, and the attempt to clamp down on assistance to transients in order to force them out of the city and into relief camps (*The Great Depression of the 1930s in Canada* [Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association, 1984], 12).

Figure 37. Makeshift dwellings in the Don Valley, 1930-31. Courtesy of the East York Foundation Collection, Todmorden Mills Museum, City of Toronto.

mentioned in a Star article August 20, 1931. The most obvious attraction of the Don Valley site, however, beyond its proximity to the city centre, were the rail lines that ran through the valley. As former East York mayor True Davidson recalled in her 1976 memoir, “the jungle became known amongst the fraternity of those riding the rods, and almost every freight that came down the Don brought more inhabitants to the area.” As the Depression worsened and ever increasing numbers of unemployed men from across the country congregated in the valley, mayors from Toronto and East York vowed to crack down on outsiders seeking relief within

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their city limits. Toronto police promised to “watch every freight train” to “stop transients from forcing themselves on the municipality.”\footnote{“Police Will Watch Every Freight Train for Jobless Influx,” \textit{Toronto Globe}, September 26, 1931; “City Relief Work to Start at Once ‘For Own Citizens,’” \textit{Toronto Globe}, September 19, 1931. It is likely that until this time, the hobo jungle existed with police acquiescence, constables agreeing to turn a blind eye provided transients jumped from trains before they entered the city. Thanks to Laurel MacDowell for this insight.} The coming winter’s relief services would be provided to local residents only, and not transients from other areas, the mayors warned. The gap had widened for the men of the hobo camp. No longer the ‘respectable men’ temporarily ‘down on their luck,’ the inhabitants of the jungle were portrayed increasingly as an alien threat to the city’s stability. In McKay’s terms, they had become outsiders to the dominant liberal order, rather than temporary transgressors.

The jungle, it seemed, had to go. In late September 1931 the Province announced that 2,500 unemployed men would be drafted from congested Southern Ontario centres for work on the Trans-Canada Highway project in Northern Ontario.\footnote{“Quota from South in Jobless Draft Estimated at 2,500,” \textit{Toronto Globe}, September 30, 1931.} Further drafts followed, and by the beginning of October the “peculiar and varied habitations” of the jungle had been demolished, their residents transferred to northern camps or removed to temporary shelters.\footnote{“East York Policemen Houseclean ‘Jungle,’” \textit{Toronto Globe}, October 7, 1931.} As the \textit{Toronto Star} reported, it seems the men of the Don Valley jungle had fared remarkably well for their ordeal: of 213 men examined by medical doctors prior to joining the first road-building contingent, only three were rejected as unfit for hard labour. No diseases were reported, and no cases of malnutrition—in fact, the incredulous reporter noted, the men on the whole were more likely to be overweight than underweight.\footnote{“Men of Don Valley Jungle a Healthy and Husky Lot,” \textit{Toronto Daily Star}, September 30, 1931.}
These snapshots provided by newspaper accounts hint at the ways that both Roma families and Depression-era hoboes used the environment around them to enhance what must have been a fairly marginal existence. Both groups, it seems, chose the valley for access to certain amenities, such as water, firewood, and material scavenged from nearby landfill sites. Distance from authorities may also have been important, as the experience of Roma travellers in other parts of North America, and the jungle residents’ aversion to institutionalized shelter, suggests. The brick works manager’s “[stout resentment]” of the intrusion of plainclothesmen also suggests a limited degree of protection afforded to homeless men under his roof. In its role as a semi-rural space on the edge of the city, and, in its lower reaches, an industrial and heavily polluted space, the Don River Valley became a space on the margins. Devalued by more fortunate inhabitants of the city, it became, as I have argued, a place for people pushed to the edges of society. Despite developments over the last forty years that have seen much of the valley “re-valued” as a recreational landscape, in some respects not much has changed: makeshift tents of the homeless can still be seen on the banks of the river in the lower valley, and as recently as the spring of 2008, the City used the valley as a receptacle for huge amounts of filthy, salt-laced snow from the city’s roads (figure 38).

VI Conclusion

In this chapter the Don has emerged as an ambiguous borderland space shifting and redefining itself in relation to the growing city beside it. It is perhaps best understood as a series of places in space and in time, all broadly definitive, in different ways, of the urban fringe. Moving north from the river mouth, Joseph Tyler’s riverbank cave on the lower river near Queen Street, the woodland resort of the Brook’s Bush Gang east of the river near Gerrard, the pastoral fantasy of the institutional landscape that straddled the river nearby, the hobo jungle on the river flats
further north at Pottery Road, and the camp sites of the Roma, further north still, in wooded riverside locations of the upper valley, each in their time created pockets of possibility, retreat, and remove for people pushed for various reasons to the edges of society. As the lower valley became increasingly industrialized in the latter half of the nineteenth century, spaces with the capacity of providing shelter and retreat shifted further north. It was in many respects the ambiguity of these spaces that made them attractive. Whether polluted by industrial uses or made undesirable by its difficult landscape of steep ravines and marshy lowlands, the valley presented open space unattractive to residents of the centre. Here it was possible to step outside the regulating effects of the urban gaze, and, as temporary campers or longer-term squatters, to feel removed from a discernible landowner.
The people who occupied these places were themselves diverse in their marginality. Where the members of the nineteenth century Brook’s Bush Gang or the early twentieth-century Roma travellers were described within the terms of the “urban primitive,” exotic and incomprehensible others incapable of participating in modern society, the Depression-era hoboes were described in markedly different terms, as “decent respectable men down on their luck.” Temporarily fallen, they possessed in their familiar faces—predominantly white, male, and “willing to work”—the ability to reclaim their full status as individuals within the dominant liberal order. A further divide separated those who were “placed” in the area as subjects of institutional reform and those who sought out the valley for the opportunities it offered. Still, as prisoners at the Don Jail, impoverished or mentally ill residents of the House of Refuge, unemployed transients, or ethnic “others,” all possessed a degree of shared status as society’s losers. Not the heroic rebels against the status quo that Eric Hobsbawn identified as social bandits, they were instead more prosaic figures attempting to stay alive on the edges of a world they had lost or had never gained. In this way, the Don Valley operated (and continues to operate) as a place where various kinds of marginality (and by extension, various political economies) can be seen, from the familiar strategies of the outlaw and the squatter, to the more novel political economies of the Roma traveller and the Depression-era hobo. From this perspective, the valley becomes as much a borderland between rural and urban as a liminal space within which “old” and “new” political economies, modern and premodern lifeways overlapped and asserted themselves.

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121 Hobsbawn defined “social bandits” as “peasant outlaws whom the lord and state regard as criminals, but who… are considered by their people as heroes, …fighters for justice, perhaps even leaders of liberation, and in any case as men to be admired, helped and supported” (Bandits [New York: Delacorte Press, 1969], 1; see also his Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries [New York: Norton, 1965]).
The connections between degraded landscapes and marginalized peoples are best understood, I argue, with reference to the structures of power at work in designating people and places within the framework of centres and peripheries. Valerie Kuletz’s work on the experiences of American Indian groups inhabiting what she calls “zones of sacrifice”—areas designated for nuclear testing within the deserts of the American Southwest—is relevant here. Kuletz’s efforts to map an “alternate geography” of experience for areas designated as wastelands mirror my own work to bring into view, if only fleetingly, the strategies and experiences of historical actors typically overlooked in broader analyses of urban development and environmental change. Kuletz finds, as I do, that in illuminating the place-based experiences of marginalized peoples, we “make[s] visible the centers of power that have made [such] landscape[s] a reality.” Only by listening to those at the margins of power, she finds, can we come to see “the power at work behind the transformation of the land.”

Assessed as marginal by powerful groups in the urban centre, places like the Don River Valley, with its polluted waters and difficult-to-develop ravine banks, and populations like the Roma and the Depression-era hoboes, were among the unintended consequences of the liberal project of city-building in early twentieth-century Toronto. As I have attempted to show, the individuals who “resorted to Brook’s Bush” in the 1850s or sought refuge in the wooded areas of the Don flats in the 1930s were resilient, flexible, and creative actors in their own lives. They sought out the valley for the things it offered, as much as for the things they were denied in other parts of the city, and, for limited periods of time at least, it provided the refuge they sought.

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122 Kuletz, Tainted Desert, 120.
PART III

RECLAMATIONS
Chapter 5
Taming a “Monster of Ingratitude”:
Engineered Responses to the Don Problem, 1880-1930

From the moment that the peninsula raised its protecting head above the waters, and screened the Don from the surges of the Lake, the Don, like a monster of ingratitude, has displayed such destructive industry as to displace by its alluvial disgorgings by far the greater part of the body of water originally enclosed by the peninsula. The whole of the marsh to the East, once deep and clear water, is the work of the Don, and in the Bay of York, where now its destructive mouths are turned, vegetation shews itself in almost every direction, prognosticating the approaching conversion of this beautiful sheet of water into another marshy delta of the Don.

Hugh Richardson, Captain of the Canada, c1834

But the Don, the poor unconscious object of all this invective, is in reality no more to blame than is the savage because he is a savage, not having had a chance to be anything else. In proceeding to lay the foundation of a delta of solid land at its mouth, the Don followed the precedent of other streams, in conformity with the physical conditions of its situation. When at length the proper hour arrived, and the right men appeared, possessed of the intelligence, the vigour and the wealth equal to the task of bettering nature by art on a considerable scale, then at once the true value and capabilities of the Don were brought out into view. Speedily then were its channel and outlet put to their proper and foreordained use, being transformed by means of cribwork and embankments into a convenient interior harbour for Toronto, an arrangement of high importance to the interests of a now populous quarter, where some of the most striking developments of business activity and manufacturing enterprise that the capital of Ontario can boast of, have been witnessed.

Dr. Henry Scadding, Toronto of Old, 1873

Hugh Richardson and Henry Scadding’s comments on the Don—Scadding’s made in response to Richardson’s words almost forty years earlier—provide apt bookends for a discussion about human frustration with, and human alterations of, the Don River and its seasonal processes of flooding and silt deposition. For Richardson, the silt and detritus that the river deposited each spring in Toronto Harbour created hazards for shipping traffic. Unwary ship captains faced damage to ship hulls from floating debris, or the grounding of their craft upon a steadily
accumulating ridge of silt stretching south-west from the river mouth.\(^1\) In his later role as harbour master from 1850 until his death in 1870, Richardson’s dreams for a deep and navigable harbour would continue to be frustrated by the silting actions of the river. For Scadding, the Don was not so much a malignant presence as an undervalued resource, its “true value and capabilities” lying dormant and unseen until the “right men appeared” to take up “the task of bettering nature by art on a considerable scale.” Scadding’s assessment anticipates the modern, authoritarian, and technocratic approach to the river adopted by proponents of the Don Improvement Project in the 1880s and 90s. Comparable to what James C. Scott has called a “high modernist” approach to urban development, this kind of thinking viewed natural environments and their associated human interactions as essentially knowable, predictable, and malleable entities.\(^2\)

This chapter will explore a series of “engineered solutions” directed at what had become known as the “Don problem” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As we saw in Chapter Three, by the 1880s the Don and its terminal marsh were befouled by municipal and industrial wastes and widely recognized as a menace to public health. From the perspective of ship captains and harbour officials, as Hugh Richardson’s comments suggest, even more significant than the problem of filth and disease was the costly and pernicious problem of siltation. A series of engineered responses, beginning in the 1870s, attempted to address these problems. In each case, the projects were far more complicated and time-consuming to implement than planners originally thought; even more damning was the fact that they largely failed to fulfill expectations. Conflicting institutional priorities between the City, concerned

\(^1\) *Toronto Mail & Empire*, February 13, 1895, Vaughan Roberts Papers, Special Collections, SC 26/2, Box 7, Folder 2, pp. 19-20, Toronto Port Authority Archives (hereafter TPAA).

\(^2\) Scott, *Seeing Like a State*. 
primarily with upstream flooding and pollution, and the Harbour Trust, concerned with siltation
at the river mouth, complicated efforts to resolve the problem. Further complications arose, I
argue, as a result of the planners’ failure to comprehend in a detailed way the environment they
were working with, to allow for an element of unpredictability in local ecological systems, and to
anticipate the potential obstacles that can emerge in human negotiations over property rights. In
other words, engineers’ attempts to transform a complex riparian system into a “flush” for wastes
and debris and a viable corridor for shipping and rail traffic were too willing to assume a blank
slate—a river patiently awaiting the revelation of its “true value and capabilities.” For all the
success of projects elsewhere to transform urban environments into working components of the
industrial landscape, the Don and its seasonal processes proved extremely difficult to contain.
Fixing one problem, as successive generations of engineers and planners discovered, too often
created another.

In an effort to document environmental change in the landscape of the Lower Don, this
chapter attempts to “fix” in time in space the contours of a slippery and recalcitrant landscape. In
effect, I faced the same challenges as the nineteenth century engineers and ship captains who
wrestled in much more material ways with the same space. Textual sources contradicted each
other; maps represented in different ways the intersection of water and land in the marshlands
around the river mouth; fire insurance plans, in several instances, merged reality with speculated
futures. What at first seemed straight-forward tasks, such as establishing a clear start and end
date for the 1880s improvement project, was instead a complicated endeavour. Construction
work started and stopped, projects were trimmed and later extended, construction continued even
as city politicians reported the work complete. In the end, the process of determining what
happened when, and where, was much like wading through the uncertain, constantly shifting
muck of the marsh itself.
I A Landscape in Flux

Sporadic references in the historical record can help us to piece together a rough picture of the changing hydrology of the river system through the nineteenth century. As noted in Chapter 2, the Don originated from retreating ice fronts after the last Ice Age 11,000 to 13,000 years ago. Flowing out of a long glacial deposit north of Toronto known as the Oak Ridges Moraine, the east and west branches of the river originally flowed south as two separate rivers into proglacial Lake Iroquois. When the waters of Lake Iroquois retreated some 9,000 years ago to form Lake Ontario, the two rivers joined with a third stream, today’s Taylor/Massey Creek, at the huge sandbar they had created on the lake’s former shoreline. From what is now called the Forks of the Don, the united lower river flowed first west and then south across the old lakebed before meandering back and forth along the valley bottom to its outlet in Lake Ontario. Native inhabitants of the area, French-Canadian voyageurs, and early European settlers would have experienced the river as a dense network of branching tributaries and wetlands stretching from the Oak Ridges Moraine near today’s Richmond Hill thirty-eight kilometres south to its marshy meeting with Lake Ontario. Draining an area approximately 360 square kilometres in size, the river drew its water sources both from the underground aquifers of glacial water in its headwaters, and the annual rainfall and snowmelt seeping through the soils of the region’s forests.3

Mapping the Marsh

Like all rivers (and indeed all ecological systems), this was not a static system. Instead, as I have suggested in previous chapters, the river and the massive marsh at its mouth was a highly dynamic landscape, subject to transformation not only from year to year, but from season to

3 MTRCA, Forty Steps, 3.
season. Seasonal meteorological events such as spring snowmelt, summer rainstorms, periods of drought, and ice jams in winter worked to continually alter the flow and course of the river. This dynamism is perhaps best represented by early surveyors’ attempts to distinguish land from water in mapping the marshy lowlands at the mouth of the Don. Depending on the objectives of the mapmaker—to assess the depth of the harbour, for example, or to determine the extent of traversable, marketable land—what constituted “water” and what constituted “land” were represented differently. Add to this the seasonal flux of the land/water interface, as spring freshets submerged marshy wetland and summer heat waves made previously water-logged channels passable by foot, and “mapping the marsh” for contemporary observers and environmental historians like myself, two-hundred years later, becomes very complicated indeed.

Take, for example, military surveyor Lieutenant George Phillpotts’ 1818 Plan of York (figure 39). Phillpotts shows the marsh in green, and the bay in white, with a clear boundary delineating the two. A sand bar separates the marsh from the waters of the bay, and soundings along the shoreline indicate the varying depth of the approach to the shore. Phillpotts shows only one main outlet for the river, breaking through the eastern sandbar about half way down its length. Placed in comparison with the Royal Engineer’s Office Captain R.H. Bonnycastle’s 1833 Plan of the Town and Harbour of York, Upper Canada (figure 40), the line between marsh and water is not quite so clear. Another military map prepared to assess the defenses of the town of York, Bonnycastle’s’ representation of the harbour (with south, confusingly, at the top of the map) includes annotations describing physical characteristics difficult to represent within the abstract language of the map. Ashbridge’s marsh on the left side of the map, he notes, is “full of creeks and deep ponds.” Two outlets now carry the waters of the Don into the harbour, and the
Figure 39. Lieut. Phillpotts, Royal Engineers, *Plan of York*, 1818. Courtesy of the University of Toronto Map and Data Library.
shoreline between these outlets, rather than clearly defined by a sandbar, is “hid by rushes… weed and mud.” Running to the north and east of the marsh, Bonnycastle identifies an “inland” shore separating the “deep swamp” from what he calls a “marshy meadow with deep runs of water.” At the eastern extremity of the map, he notes that the Don “[finds an outlet through the swamp] by a breach in the sands at the N.E. corner.” The differences between these maps, drawn twenty-five years apart, reveal not only the objectives of the mapmaker (Bonnycastle, presumably, was concerned more with the potential navigability of the marsh than was Phillpotts) but also the shifting landscape of the Lower Don and its terminal marsh, and the
difficulty of delineating in abstract form physical features that were part water, part land; sometimes wet, sometimes dry.  

Not only, as these maps suggest, was this a landscape in flux, shifting in response to larger hydrological changes and seasonal events; evidence suggests that it was also subject to human interventions during the early years of European settlement, and well before. Anecdotal evidence indicates that both the Seneca in the seventeenth century and the Mississauga in the eighteenth century grew corn on the flats of the river. In her diary entries for 1794, Elizabeth Simcoe makes several references to the setting of fires at Ashbridge’s Bay marsh. “Capt. Shaw’s Children,” she writes January 26, 1794, “set the Marshy ground below the Bay on fire…. [T]he long grass… burns with great rapidity this dry weather.” And the next day, “I walked below the Bay & Set the other side of the Marsh on fire for amusement.” Throughout the lower valley, early European settlers worked to improve their properties by constructing drainage ditches and dumping fill to remove standing water. As the following discussion will show, changes to the outlet at the mouth of the river in the early nineteenth century present a compelling example of the fusion of human labour with ecological forces in altering local landscapes. They also foreshadow much larger and more ambitious alterations to the mouth of the river conducted near the end of the century.

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4 A GIS project initiated as a complement to this dissertation, in partnership with the University of Toronto Map and Data Library (UTMDL) and the Network in Canadian History and Environment (NiCHE), has revealed similar problems. Multiple and varying representations of “what was water” and “what was land” have made it difficult to delineate the changing boundaries of the marsh in different periods. The accuracy of the project, we have found, is dependent in large part on the assessments of these early mapmakers. While we can judge the relative “soundness” of the map—for example, whether its coordinates “geo-reference” with existing landscape features, such as street intersections—we cannot, from this vantage, determine what was the “best” representation of the landscape that the mapmaker had before him. In these cases, multiple representations have to stand as an indicator of our uncertainty.


6 John Ross Robertson describes John Scadding’s efforts to improve his holdings east of the Don by draining marshy lands in the valley bottom (*Robertson's Landmarks*, Vol. 1, 194).
A Monster of Many Mouths

In mid-September, 1804, an autumn rainstorm turned the Don into a raging torrent. Waters rose and flooded adjacent farmlands; bridges were swept away; and mill structures damaged. As the *Upper Canada Gazette* reported,

> The late heavy rains have done material damage to the roads in different parts of the country in so much as to render them in some places totally impassable by sweeping away the causeways and bridges…. Considerable damage has also been sustained… in loss of corn, hay, etc., and particularly at and near the River Don in the breaking of mill dams.⁷

Pouring into the shallow flats of Ashbridge’s Bay marsh, the floodwaters broke through the narrow sandbar separating the northwest corner of the marsh from the harbour. The channel created in 1804, it seems, was an ephemeral one, alternately filling and drying out in response to seasonal fluctuations, and never deep enough to allow boats to pass through.⁸ Three years later, a letter published in the *York Gazette* makes reference to the 1804 breach, and suggests deepening the channel to shorten the passage from the harbour into the Don River. Signed by “a Country Subscriber,” the letter notes the difficulty, particularly in high winds, of reaching town through the present channel. “If nature’s hint was improved,” the subscriber writes, “the navigation would be made safe and practicable… [and] would shorten the distance from York to the Don Mills upwards of a mile.”⁹ Despite the hearty support of the editors of the Gazette, it seems no actions were taken to deepen the channel until some years later.

According to nineteenth century Toronto historian Henry Scadding (1813-1901), the northern mouth of the Don that Bonnycastle shows in his 1833 map of the harbour was first

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⁸ Ibid., Part IV, 2, 5.

made navigable in 1812. Known subsequently as the “Little Don,” or “Lesser Don,” this northern mouth was a product, according to Scadding, of the combined forces of nature and human labour:

When invasion was threatened in 1812, all the bridges in the direction of the island were taken down. An earthwork was thrown up across the narrow ridge separating the last long reach of the Don from the bay; and in addition, a trench was cut across the same ridge. This cut, at first insignificant, became ultimately by natural process the lesser Don, a deep and wide outlet, a convenient short-cut for skiffs and canoes from the bay to the Don proper, and from the Don proper to the bay.¹⁰

Some confusion exists, however, as to the role of human agency in creating this cut, and the date of its first appearance. John Ross Robertson, for example, points to John Collins’ 1788 map of the York town site and the presence of a narrow northern cut from the Don into the harbour (figure 41). His explanation, that it was “simply a shallow channel scooped out across the narrow bank of sand as a short cut for fishermen and others desirous of ascending the stream,” suggests that it might have been created by human rather than “natural” forces.¹¹

How and when the northern outlet was created is of less consequence than the recognition of significant flux in the landscape around the mouth of the Don, and the combined energies of humans and natural forces in shaping this landscape. Judging from the dramatic description of the “breach” of the sandbar in 1804, this outlet had closed and opened again, perhaps numerous times, in the years between 1788 and 1804. While the dredging initiatives of 1812 seem to have succeeded in creating a deeper, more permanent channel, the outlet’s omission from Bonnycastle’s 1818 map, and again from J.G. Chewett’s 1834 map of the new City of Toronto

succeeded in creating a deeper, more permanent channel, the outlet’s omission from Bonnycastle’s 1818 map, and again from J.G. Chewett’s 1834 map of the new City of Toronto and Liberties (figure 42), suggest that river silts may have periodically closed the passageway. Efforts to keep the northern mouth of the Don open and navigable would persist through to the

\[12\] Most plans prepared after 1812, with the exception of Phillpotts (1818) and Chewett (1834), depict both a northern and a southern outlet to the river. Examples include George Williams, Sketch of the Ground in Advance of
and Including York, Upper Canada, 1813 (UTMDL, NMC22819); J.G. Chewett, Plan of the Town of York, 1827 (UTMDL, NMC 16819); Captain R.H. Bonnycastle, 1833 (figure 30 above), and Sandford A. Fleming, Topographical Plan of the City of Toronto, in the Province of Canada, 1851 (UTMDL, NMC44116). After 1854, industrial landholders such as the Grand Trunk Railway and Gooderham & Worts embarked upon regular dredging activities in this area to allow access to their wharves.
end of the nineteenth century, when more ambitious projects reconfigured completely the relationship between the harbour, the river, and the marsh.

II Silt

A key protagonist in this story of passages intermittently open and closed, filled and drained, is sediment. Like all rivers, the Don carries suspended silts scoured from upstream river banks and tributary creeks, organic debris such as tree branches, and a host of human-generated refuse. Items that are not caught up in tree roots or washed ashore in an oxbow turn find their way to the river mouth. As water flow decreases near the river mouth (the result of opposing currents or a widening of the river channel), silt and other fine particulates fall out of suspension and sink, forming in many cases broad deltas of rich alluvial soils. Seasonal flooding along the river accelerates this process of sedimentation. As Hugh Richardson was all too aware in his years as a captain of the Canada and later as Toronto Harbour Master (from 1850 until his death in 1870), the predictable annual cycle of fall rainstorms and spring freshets brought especially high concentrations of silt and debris into Toronto harbour.

13 Considerable debate existed throughout the nineteenth century on the origins of Ashbridge’s Bay marsh and its bounding peninsula. Debate focused on two main issues: 1) the kinds of processes that created the marsh and the peninsula (i.e., whether it was a product of lake currents, or sedimentation from the Don, or both); and 2) the time frame within which these processes occurred (i.e., whether it was the product of hydrological changes in the aftermath of glaciation, or of the ongoing influences of the lake and/or river). The contours of these debates are elaborated in the reports prepared for the Toronto Harbour Commissioners’ 1854 call for proposals to improve the harbour, discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

Current understandings of the formation of the historical marsh and peninsula reflect Sandford Fleming’s 1853 assessment that the peninsula belonged “entirely to the present” and that it was in fact “constantly changing.” He argued that the base of the peninsula was "washed from the valley of the Don by that river at an early date" and that "the materials composing the superior and more recently formed portions have been gradually transported along the shore from the eastward, and that this westward progressive motion of the sand and gravel beach is now the sole cause of the extension and enlargement of the Peninsula" (“Toronto harbour--its formation and preservation,” The Canadian Journal 2 [1853]: 106). The marsh, in this assessment, was a product of both the lake and the river: sand-bearing lake currents produced the peninsula separating the marsh from the lake, and sediment deposits from the Don, contained behind the peninsula, contributed to the shallow wetland conditions of the marsh (MacDonald, “Toronto's Natural History,” 16).
Further exacerbating these effects was the incremental deforestation so central to the process of Euro-Canadian settlement in Upper Canada. As early as 1850, forest cover in the Don watershed had been significantly reduced. Browne and Ellis’ 1851 *Map of the Township of York* gives some sense of amount of clearing that had taken place in the township by mid-century (figure 43). Some caution must be assumed here, however, as areas represented in white were likely still partially treed in this period.\(^{14}\) By 1890, further clearing for agricultural purposes and heightened demand for cordwood significantly reduced remaining woodlots in the watershed.\(^{15}\) These observations are corroborated by J. David Wood in his study of landscape transformation in nineteenth century Ontario. By the 1850s, he finds, southern Ontario had lost one third of its original forest cover to land clearance and fuel consumption; three-quarters had been removed by the 1880s; and ninety per cent by the beginning of World War I. Customary practices of wetland the hydrology of local drainage, Wood adds, coupled with drainage legislation in the late 1860s, also worked to disrupt the hydrology of local ecosystems.\(^{16}\) Without trees to absorb surface water and anchor top soils, groundwater reserves diminished, soils eroded, and surface run-off

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\(^{14}\) Most farmers followed customary practices of leaving small copses of trees on their holdings, particularly on hillsides, ravines, and along watercourses.

\(^{15}\) ODPD, *Don Valley Conservation Report*, Part I, 76-77, 165. Farmers typically cleared only one third to one half of their holdings in the 1840s and 50s; after 1865, they often cleared up to two thirds of their land. By the end of the century, many properties in the watershed had been entirely cleared of their forest cover.

Figure 43. Detail from J.O. Browne and J. Ellis, *Map of the Township of York in the County of York Upper Canada*, 1851, Toronto Public Library 912.71354 B68. Courtesy of Derek Hayes.
increased. As twentieth-century conservationists and hydrologists have concluded, increases in the frequency and intensity of so-called “flash floods”—severe and sudden floods resulting from heavy rainfall, typically in summer and fall—can also be linked to the effects of widespread deforestation.\(^{17}\) The steep slopes of the Don Valley add another exacerbating factor: “these heavy slopes,” the authors of the *Don Valley Conservation Report* (DVCR) reported in 1950, “together with the fact that there are no lakes or swamps of any significance to impound run-off, or forest cover to induce deep seepage, result in a high rate of run-off during spring freshets and summer storms, followed by an extremely low flow in the river during periods of drought.”\(^{18}\)

Reviewing the growing register of complaints by harbour industrialists, ship captains, and officials from mid-century on, a rough correlation can be drawn between rising percentages of upstream deforestation and rising levels of silt in the harbour. Contemporary observers also noted this connection. “Even the cultivation of the country,” Hugh Richardson wrote in 1834, “increases the destructive powers of the Don, for the plough of the husbandman annually loosening the soil, the rain storm furnishes the river with a much larger tribute of alluvial matter, than when it only washed in its descent the matted foot of the wilderness.”\(^{19}\) In City Council minutes and Harbour Trust documents, engineers’ reports and editorials in city newspapers, Richardson’s 1834 frustration with the Don’s “alluvial disgorgings” is restated again and again, albeit less colourfully. Sediments deposited near the mouth of the river clogged access routes to industrial wharves, limited the approach of deep-hulled craft, and threatened navigation in the

\(^{17}\) ODPD, *Don Valley Conservation Report*, Part IV, 4.  
\(^{18}\) Ibid., Part IV, 3-4.  
\(^{19}\) Hugh Richardson, “York Harbour,” in Department of Public Works, *Memorandum with Accompanying Plans and Documents Relative to the Past and Present State of the Harbour of Toronto* (Ottawa: Department of Public Works, 1881), Appendix, pp. 3-10.
eastern portion of the harbour. Problems arose not only from the quantity of material deposited, but also the quality: as riverfront industry expanded in the latter half of the nineteenth century, depositions of “sludge” became increasingly foul. In the discussion that follows, I will review a series of attempts to address the “Don problem,” and the consequences, both intended and otherwise, that these projects initiated.

Imagined Futures for the Mouth of the Don

Changes in the shape and quality of the harbour through the nineteenth century occasioned a series of reports and predictions by harbour officials, city engineers, and experts imported from the United States and England, but very little action. In 1833, the Province appointed three harbour commissioners (Hugh Richardson, W. Chisholm and J.G. Chewett) to report on problems in York harbour and make recommendations for its improvement. Reporting to a Select Committee on the Improvement of the Harbour of York in 1834, the commissioners identified sediment deposits at the mouth of the Don as one of several major threats to the viability of the harbour. The solution, they proposed, lay in damming the river’s outlets into the harbour, and diverting its flow east into Ashbridge’s Bay marsh. No action, however, was taken on this recommendation. Reflecting twenty years later on the reception of these plans, former Select Committee member W. Hamilton Merritt noted the government’s reluctance to fund potentially “useless” interventions: “the harbour has continued in its present state time out of mind,” he

20 H. Richardson, W. Chisholm, and J.G. Chewett, “Report of the Select Committee on the Improvement of the Harbour of York,” in Memorandum with Accompanying Plans and Documents Relative to the Past and Present State of the Harbour of Toronto (Ottawa: Department of Public Works, 1881), Appendix, pp. 1-3. Military engineer Sir Richard H. Bonnycastle also submitted his recommendations to the Committee. Like the Commissioners, he suggested damming the mouths of the Don to redirect its sediments into the marsh, and constructing a breakwater along the length of the peninsula. Bonnycastle’s report also contains the first proposal for a trunk sewer which would conduct the city’s wastes eastward across the length of the city and into the marsh, rather than southward through numerous outfall points into the bay (“Report on the Preservation of the Harbour of York, Upper Canada, January 14, 1834,” in Memorandum with Accompanying Plans and Documents Relative to the Past and Present State of the Harbour of Toronto [Ottawa: Department of Public Works, 1881], Appendix, pp. 10-17).
wrote, recalling the committee’s position; “therefore, some natural cause must have preserved its present depth of water…” Writing in response to a new round of proposed improvements in 1853, Merritt added that his views had not changed in the interim: “I have no doubt the [City]… will come to the same determination as the committee of 1834—twenty years since; and not assume the responsibility of destroying one of the best harbours on Lake Ontario by undertaking an expensive and useless experiment.”

Likely more reflective of the provincial government’s unwillingness to fund costly harbour improvements than any fundamental belief in “letting nature run its course,” Merritt’s conclusions are nevertheless remarkable for their recognition of little understood natural forces in the creation and preservation of the harbour, and their hesitance to tamper with these processes.

In December 1852, a storm caused a narrow breach at the east end of the peninsula, creating a temporary separation between the harbour archipelago (today’s Toronto Islands) and the mainland. Anxiety about the potential repercussions for the harbour, combined with ongoing concern about annual sediment deposits from the Don, led to a new flurry of reports and recommendations in the early 1850s. In 1854, the Toronto Harbour Commissioners held a competition “for the three best reports on the means to be adopted for the preservation and improvement of the Harbour of Toronto.” Contestants were asked to comment specifically on the anticipated effects and proposed remedies for the “eastern gap,” and the relationship between the

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22 As lead promoter and general overseer of the 1820s Welland Canal project, Merritt evidently held no philosophical objections to the idea of improvement (Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online, http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?Bioid=38719, accessed January 24, 2010).

23 Between 1852 and 1858, a number of temporary breaches were repaired. In 1858 a severe storm breached the repair work at the narrows, destroying the Peninsula Hotel and permanently separating the Toronto Islands from the mainland (Toronto Harbour Commissioners, Toronto Harbour, 11).
Don, the harbour, and Ashbridge’s Bay. Cash prizes went to three reports: the first to University of Toronto Chemistry professor Henry Youle Hind, the second to Civil Engineer Sandford Fleming, and the third to Provincial Surveyor Kivas Tully. A supplementary prize was awarded to Harbour Master Hugh Richardson, whose report was removed from competition due to conflict of interest. Differing in their recommendations for the harbour, the contestants came closest to agreement in their suggestions for the Don. Echoing the findings of the 1834 committee, all four report authors saw the benefits of damming the Don’s outlets to the harbour and diverting its sediment-bearing waters into Ashbridge’s Bay marsh. Fleming, despite his belief that the sediment loads of the Don were “inconsequential,” saw the river as a useful conduit for sewage away from the harbour and into the marsh. Tully also saw the Don, and ultimately the marsh, as a repository for the city’s sewage. Only Richardson, once such a vocal advocate of “shutting out the Don,” believed that the project should be abandoned due to the conflicts it posed for “private interests.” For all the effort and expense that went into writing and rewarding these reports, the harbour saw no significant improvements (beyond remedial dredging) until almost twenty years later.

25 Ibid., 38.
26 While Tully and Richardson stressed the detrimental effects of the eastern gap upon the harbour and recommended efforts to shore up the narrows in the peninsula, Fleming argued that a permanent opening would accommodate shipping interests and cleanse the harbour of impurities, and Hind argued that sediment action would mend the gap without any necessary intervention. Only Richardson supported the opening of a channel between the harbour and Ashbridge’s Bay, positing that the increased circulation of water would convert the marsh into “clear water and profitable land” (Toronto Harbour Commissioners, “Reports on the improvement and preservation of Toronto harbour,” 37).
27 Ibid.
Early Interventions

When Henry Scadding referred in 1873 to the Don’s “proper hour,” when its “channel and outlet [were] put to their proper and foreordained use, being transformed by means of cribwork and embankments into a convenient interior harbour for Toronto,” he referred not to the ambitious Don Improvement Plan of the 1880s and 90s, but rather to the construction of the Don Breakwater in 1870 and 1871. In the 1850s, two industrial establishments—the Grand Trunk Railway yards and Gooderham & Worts Distillery—constructed wharves in the northeast corner of the harbour near the mouth of the Don. Gooderham & Worts dredged around their wharf at the foot of Trinity Street, and the GTR set about dredging a deep channel alongside their wharf from the Don’s northern outlet into the harbour (figure 44). It wasn’t long before silt from the river began to cause a problem. Large quantities of sediment and detritus brought down by spring freshets and autumn rainstorms reduced the depth of the channel and complicated access to the companies’ wharves. When the eastern gap was further widened by storm action in 1858, drifting sand from lake currents combined with river silts to make the maintenance of a navigable channel increasingly challenging.

Throughout the 1860s, the Toronto Harbour Commissioners responded to urgent requests from area industries, including the Toronto Rolling Mills Company (established near the mouth of the Don south of the GTR yards in 1857), to widen and deepen a continually contracting channel. Having outlaid considerable expense toward maintaining the depth of the GTR/Rolling Mills channel, Harbour Engineer Kivas Tully suspended dredging operations in 1866. “It would be useless,” he explained, “to attempt to keep [the channel] open by dredging, particularly as the deposit from the wash of waters through the eastern channel would largely increase during the

28 Speight & Van Nostrand, “The Old Don Channel,” March 7, 1930, Records Department Inventory, Records Department Fonds, RG 3/3, Box 262, Folder 23, p.11, TPAA.
period of high water. The only method by which a channel could be maintained would be by enclosing it with sheet piling." Three years later, in 1869, Tully produced a plan and budget for the construction of a breakwater extending easterly along the south edge of the channel into the harbour. Construction began in 1870, and the Don Breakwater (also known as the Rolling Mills Wharf) was completed in 1871 (figure 45). The purpose of the breakwater was to prevent the sand and detritus drifting into the harbour through the eastern gap from clogging up the channel and industrial wharves at the river mouth. Considerable dredging was also conducted in the Rolling Mills channel to make the river mouth navigable to larger vessels, the dredgeate being used to consolidate land to the south of the channel. Like many developments along the lower river and harbour, it seems the breakwater was constructed in anticipation of developments that didn’t materialize. Plans by the Toronto and Nipissing Railway to establish terminals on the south side of the channel were abandoned, and the Toronto Rolling Mills ceased operations in 1874. By 1886, much of the breakwater was rotten; the spring freshets of that year destroyed it completely.

In the decade following the construction of the Don Breakwater, the shape of the harbour continued to change, often confounding the predictions of its observers. In April 1858 a severe storm breached the repair work in the narrows of the peninsula; high waters from the lake destroyed the Peninsula Hotel and created a channel four to five feet in depth. Within a month,

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29 Earlier in the same year, the Harbour Master reported that a sum of $600.00 had been expended “in the ineffectual attempt to open the channel to the Rolling Mills at the mouth of the Don; $2,814.11 having been laid out upon it the previous year [1865] with only temporary effect.” Report of the Harbour Engineer, December 31, 1866, cited in Speight & Van Nostrand, “The Old Don Channel,” 13.

30 Speight & Van Nostrand, “The Old Don Channel,” 14; Stinson, The Heritage of the Port Industrial District, 52.

31 These plans are referenced on Wadsworth & Unwin’s 1878 map of the city (figure 7) and in the Report of the Harbour Master, January 2, 1871, cited in Speight & Van Nostrand, “The Old Don Channel,” 14.

32 Stinson, The Heritage of the Port Industrial District, 56.
Figure 44. Detail from W.C. Chewett & Co., *City of Toronto*, 1866.

Figure 45. Detail from V.B. Wadsworth and C. Unwin, *Map of the City of Toronto*, 1878.
the breach was wide and deep enough to accommodate steamer traffic into the harbour. The influx of lake currents through the newly formed gap had significant repercussions for the composition of the eastern harbour. In his May 1858 report to the Commissioners, Harbour Master Hugh Richardson commented that the “cross-beach” separating Ashbridge’s Bay from the harbour (the long north-south sandbar visible on Phillpott’s 1818 map of the harbour) had almost completely disappeared:

I observed the water had made passages over the cross-beach and the mouths of the Don were only bordered by a wide extent of flags and rushes, and the beach much overflown…. Toronto Bay… is laid open to Ashbridge’s Bay, and Ashbridge’s Bay is widely opened to the lake, consequently the water flows freely from the west to the east or east to west.

Initially surprised by the positive effects of this increased circulation—Richardson wrote in 1862 that “the water in the bay is purer in summer and freer from ice in the winter, and the health of the city better assured”—by 1865 he saw the need to contain the silt and detritus entering the harbour from the marsh, recommending the construction of a dyke or some kind of man-made structure to replace the eroded cross-beach.

33 “The Island Hotel Washed Away,” *Toronto Globe* April 14, 1858, p.3; Toronto Harbour Commissioners, *Toronto Harbour*, 11. Recall that just four years prior to the 1858 breach, four prominent experts on the harbour had weighed in on the potential effects of a permanent opening to the lake at the east end of the harbour. Kivas Tully and Hugh Richardson saw only further damage to the harbour with the creation of the eastern gap, and urged efforts to reinforce the peninsula against future intrusions. Henry Youle Hind saw no danger of a permanent breach forming, arguing that sand-bearing currents from the east would quickly mend any natural breaks. Only Sandford Fleming saw the benefits of an eastern entrance to the harbour, noting its potential to provide “a great accommodation to shipping,” to “improve the purity of the Bay water,” and, with the proper construction of groynes to strengthen its banks, “have no effect in lessening [the harbour’s] depth” (*Toronto Harbour Commissioners, “Reports on the improvement and preservation of Toronto harbour,”* 24). In some ways, only Hind was completely mistaken: once formed, the gap continued to widen until it was permanently reinforced with groynes in the early 1890s. As Tully and Richardson feared, the gap did allow heightened levels of sand to enter the harbour. It also exacerbated already discernible changes in the relationship between Ashbridge’s Bay marsh and the harbour.


By the early 1880s, the ongoing necessity for costly dredging caused by persistent silt deposits from the Don, and navigational hazards posed by floating detritus from the marsh resulted in yet another expert opinion on the eastern harbour and its problematic tributary. In 1882 the federal Department of Public Works commissioned Captain James Buchanan Eads, a prominent marine engineer from St. Louis, to recommend a course of action for harbour improvements. After surveying present conditions and reviewing past recommendations, Eads recommended the construction of a dyke or breakwater between Ashbridge’s Bay marsh and the harbour, and the closure of the eastern gap. Echoing Fleming’s assessment thirty years earlier, he argued that the effects of the Don on the harbour are inconsequential: whatever injury is produced by the small quantity of sediment that the Don brings into the harbour, he noted, is compensated for by the increased current it provides when in flood. The large expenditure required to divert the Don into Ashbridge’s Bay could only be justified as a public health measure, and not, he argued, as a means of preserving the navigability of the harbour. In response to Eads’ recommendations (and demonstrating that peculiar Canadian tendency to bow readily to foreign expertise), the Dominion government embarked upon what would be the first major step to reconfigure the harbour. By 1885, a long dyke had been constructed roughly along the line of the original cross-beach, stretching from the disintegrating breakwater at the northern outlet of the Don south to the eastern edge of the eastern gap (figure 46). The dyke, or Government Breakwater as it was known, effectively blocked all water passage between Ashbridge’s Bay marsh and the harbour. It also sealed off the Don’s southern outlet (identified in early maps of the harbour as the river’s primary outlet), giving the river only one passage point.

37 James B. Eads, “Report on Toronto Harbour, Ontario, 1882,” March 4, 1882, pp. 13-14, Booklet and Pamphlet Collection, Special Collections, SC 11, Box 1, Folder 1, TPAA.
Figure 46. Detail from Copp, Clark Co. Ltd., *Plan of the City of Toronto, 1894* (Toronto: City Engineers Office), Courtesy of the University of Toronto Map and Data Library. Note the north-south breakwater dividing Ashbridge’s Bay marsh on the east from Toronto harbour on the west.

into the harbour at the northeast corner of Toronto Bay.38 Eads’ recommendations were only partially fulfilled, however: the eastern gap was never closed, presenting as it did a valuable shortcut for west-bound shipping traffic. Like those before him, Eads’ recommendations failed to take into account the unpredictability of natural systems and the complexity of their interconnections with established human systems. By fixing one problem (the drift of detritus from the marsh into Toronto Bay), he had created another. The reduction of water currents into the marsh led to increasingly unbearable conditions for area residents and industrialists.

Contained on three sides, water in the marsh stagnated, and any flushing action the marsh had once provided to process pollutants was dramatically reduced. Former Harbour Commissioner James G. Worts perhaps said it best in an 1878 report to the Mayor and Council of City of Toronto:

I consider reports on the Harbour to be of very little value. The late Capt. Richardson[,] one of the first navigators of the Harbour… a highly educated and at the same time a most observant and practical man, wrote several works on it, but lived to see his theories all exploded. No person, be he ever so learned, can foresee with any certainty the effects the different currents and winds will have, but one thing we do know, that if the Harbour is kept out of debt and the tolls at the lowest possible rates, we may expect a fair share of business to remain, but should the opposite course be adopted, the expenditure of large amounts of money and increase of the tolls to pay interest, will have the effect of causing our trade to fall more and more to the railways, and eventually the citizens would have to adopt some other tax to keep good their engagements.39

Unintended consequences, as Worts predicted, would continue to dog harbour improvement projects well into the twentieth century.40

III  Inundation

Intimately connected to the problem of siltation was the problem of flooding on the Don. As we discussed above, seasonal floods flushed higher quantities of water-borne silts and floating debris into the harbour, threatening the viability of harbour navigation and necessitating regular and costly dredging activities. Floods also pushed marsh waters heavily polluted with human, cattle, and industrial waste across an increasingly porous isthmus into the harbour. Viewed from the perspective of harbour officials, the central concern with flood waters was not the water itself

39 James G. Worts, “Report to the Mayor and Council of the City of Toronto,” February 25, 1878, Harbour Trust Papers, 1851-1911, Board of the Toronto Harbour Commissioners, RG 1/4, Box 3, Folder 1, TPAA.

but what it carried with it. From the perspective of riverside farmers and industries, however, flood waters endangered lives, threatened properties, livestock, and livelihoods.

Earlier inhabitants of Toronto’s river valleys and table lands may have been more likely to see annual flood events for their advantages as well as their inconveniences. As the authors of the 1950 Don Valley Conservation Report (DVCR) point out,

The yearly enrichment of the meadows or “flats” made it possible to grow corn on them year after year, so that the Indian villages near the river could remain on the same site for long periods…. The muddy flood waters might sometimes spoil the salmon fishing, and the freshets would make the fords impassable without a canoe, but the high water enabled a skilled traveller to navigate many parts of the river which at ordinary times were too shallow to be worth attempting. 

European settlers, it seems, viewed these seasonal events with a mix of resignation and dread. Newspaper coverage of annual spring freshets marked the level of potential danger posed by floodwaters, and described in detail ensuing damages and inconveniences. While severe and sudden floods (the “flash” floods of summer and early fall) were likely less frequent and less intense in the years before widespread deforestation in the watershed, limited surviving evidence suggests that they did occur periodically. In late July 1808, for example, mill-owner Parshall Terry drowned while crossing the river on horseback near the Don bridge (at today’s Queen Street). An account of his death in the York Gazette suggests that the approaches to the bridge had been washed out “by an excessive flood,” forcing Terry to wade or swim his horse across the flooded river.

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41 ODPD, Don Valley Conservation Report, Part IV, 4.
42 Ibid.
43 York Gazette, July 23, 1808, cited in Robertson, Robertson's Landmarks, Volume VI, 357. Just four years earlier, in September 1804, a severe fall flood had put Terry's mills on the Don out of service for three months, threatening his financial stability. Ely Playter (son of early Don settler Captain George Playter) described the extent of the flood in his diary entries for September 11-17, 1804: “the fences gone, all the stacks of hay and grain…. Everything that
Detailed tracking of nineteenth century flood events on the Don by the authors of the *DVCR* reveals a total of thirteen significant floods between 1801 and 1881. Given fluctuating coverage of items of local interest in the Toronto newspapers, these numbers are likely very conservative.\(^4^4\) Flooding in 1850 and 1878 was especially severe, causing deaths and devastating riverside industries along the Don. As the *Globe* reported on the sixth of April 1850, heavy rains on April third and fourth combined with a rapid melt of accumulated ice and snow led to enormous flooding of Toronto-area rivers; losses were apparently greatest on the three branches of the Don. Nine mill-dams were destroyed on the East Branch of the Don, and a stable full of horses and cows wrenched from its moorings and lost downstream. A man was drowned crossing Mount Pleasant Creek (a tributary of the Don) and many houses were flooded on the west branch of the river. Flooding was most devastating, however, along the Lower Don south of the Forks. The Taylor Brothers’ paper and sawmills suffered heavy damages, the mill dam and “three large bridges” on their property destroyed, while “the whole of their farm [at] the flats [was] laid under water” and “fences, hay stacks, and cordwood” swept away. Two bridges on the lower river, including the Queen Street bridge, were lost to the force of water and accumulated debris:

The whole of the flats of the Don, to the west and northwest [sic] of the city, were submerged; the bridge of the plank road leading to Helliwell’s [at Winchester Street]… gave way and was carried down the stream, together with lumber and trees, and driven with great force against the Don bridge proper [at could float did…. We thought more of saving our hay than the Sabbath” (Ely Playter Diary, Ely Playter Fonds, F 556, microfilm MS 87, Archives of Ontario).

\(^4^4\) With the growing available of provincial and overseas news after 1820, the authors of the 1950 *Don Valley Conservation Report* point out, Toronto newspapers included fewer references to local news items “which could be circulated by word of mouth”(Part IV, 7). After 1840 newspapers began to increase in volume and frequency, allowing greater space for local issues. Reports of local floods become more frequent after 1850, but even still, years reputed as “bad flood years” for the province as a whole often fail to generate reports of flooding in the Toronto area. These discrepancies may be due more to a lack of interest in local issues than an absence of flooding in the city (Part IV, 7).
Queen Street[...]; about nine o’clock on Thursday morning, it too gave way, and was swept off by the stream.\textsuperscript{45}

Described by the \textit{Globe} as “the most disastrous freshet that was ever known in the vicinity,” the 1850 flood was the largest on record until that point. Devastating as it was, the damage was not nearly as great as that caused by the flood of 1878.

“Never before in the history of Toronto,” coverage began for the flood of September 1878, “has the Don presented such an appearance as it did yesterday, and at no previous time have its waters occasioned so much damage.”\textsuperscript{46} Originating as a tropical storm in the Gulf of Mexico, heavy rains reached the Toronto area on Tuesday September 10\textsuperscript{th}, dropping five inches of rainfall on the city before abating around mid-day on Friday the 13\textsuperscript{th}. At the height of the flood, waters on the Don rose to a record of eight feet above normal levels. Four of the six bridges spanning the Lower Don were destroyed, the exceptions being the South Park Street bridge (today’s Eastern Avenue bridge), saved when the waters instead washed out the approaches on either side, and the Grand Trunk Railway bridge, a heavy iron and stone structure that withstood the pressure of the flood. Wreckage from bridges and buildings upstream crashed into the bridges below them, creating a domino effect of destruction. The magnitude of the flood and the damage it caused warrants an expansive quotation from the \textit{Globe}:

\begin{quote}
…the waters began to rise early in the morning [of the 13\textsuperscript{th}]. At first the swell was gradual, but… by eight o’clock the river’s banks were filled to overflowing, and the escaped waters sought new channels. Three hours afterwards the [Winchester Street] bridge was submerged so that its place could only be guessed at. Shortly after mid-day the discovery was made that it had been swept away…. The waters rose till they had completely flooded the wide extent of flats lying between Gerrard and King streets, until these presented rather the appearance of a lake
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{45} \textit{Toronto Globe}, April 6, 1850, cited in ODPD, \textit{Don Valley Conservation Report}, Part IV, 8-9. W.H. Smith notes that by 1851 a new and more substantial bridge was in the process of construction at Queen Street (Smith, \textit{Canada, Past, Present and Future}, 4).

\textsuperscript{46} \textit{Toronto Globe}, “The Great Rainstorm,” September 14, 1878, p.8.
than a river. Hundreds of trees floated down the stream, the leafy tops above water. Many of them anchored in the mud at various points throughout the wide expanse of waters, thus forming what looked like a miniature archipelago.…

…the great centre of attraction was the King-street bridge,\(^{47}\) which held out bravely till half-past three o’clock. The scene at this point was both wild and picturesque in the extreme. Long before the bridge collapsed the waters had left their legitimate channel and had found their way over the whole of the low-lying ground both above and below the bridge. King-street was submerged for about one hundred feet on the city side, a thing never heard of before…. Buildings, almost entire some of them, barrels full and empty as well, piles of wood and loose timber, carts, cutters, wheelbarrows, and a miscellaneous collection of buoyant articles were swept down in the utmost confusion. Soon the passage through the bridge was blocked, causing the descending debris to pile itself on the up side…. The climax was brought about when Messrs. McColl’s warehouse, in which there were a number of barrels of oil, was swept down. It came with great speed, and being of itself heavy, it set the thousands of tons of material already accumulated in motion, and this pressing on the bridge, proved its destruction. Slowly at first the bridge yielded to the pressure, but as the supports gave way the structure attained a speedier motion, until getting free from the retaining timber, it swept down the river with irresistible force, carrying everything before it, and followed by the whole of the stuff which during the day had been gathering above it.\(^{48}\)

Three days later, a follow-up article in the *Globe* estimated total damages along the Don River at a range of $200,000 to $400,000. Communication had been restored with communities north of the city, bringing with it a wider view of the devastation in the watershed. The bridge at Thornhill, a community north of Steeles Avenue on the east branch of the river, was apparently the first to give way, taking with it an estimated thirty mill dams and twenty bridges on the east branch of the Don. Losses to industrial establishments south of the Forks proved greater than originally anticipated. The Taylor Brothers reported that all of their mill dams and bridges had

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\(^{47}\) Referenced elsewhere in this dissertation as the “Queen Street bridge.” King Street joins Queen Street west of the bridge. At the time of the flood, the road east of the bridge was known as the “Kingston Road.” Today, Queen Street extends on both sides of the bridge.

been destroyed, together with the loss of thirty tons of paper from their lower mill (figure 47). They estimated damages at approximately $40,000. McColl Brothers’ oil refinery, located immediately south of the Gerrard Street bridge, saw three of their buildings, including their boiler house and warehouse, demolished by floodwaters and carried downstream; they estimated their losses at roughly $2000. Flooding also caused substantive damage at the Davies brewery, Morse’s Soap Factory and Davies pork packing plant along the lower reaches of the river. In the riverside neighbourhoods south of Gerrard Street, and particularly south of King, sidewalks had become uprooted, houses and cellars had flooded, and people’s belongings washed away or destroyed by the high waters. According to the Globe, the desolation along the lower river attracted crowds of up to 40,000 people on the day following the flood. By the 16th, at least two deaths had been reported for the Don: those confirmed included a nine-year old girl swept from the river bank near Don Mount, and a man who had attempted to cross the Queen Street bridge shortly before it collapsed.49

For the Globe, the disaster reinforced the City’s folly in failing to construct adequate bridges at the river’s major crossings. Despite repeated damages caused by spring freshets, the article concludes, “no effort was put forward to discover whether this annual check to traffic could not be avoided, and no endeavour was made to secure permanent bridges.” Only a few months ago, the editors point out, the city engineer “condemned every one of the Don bridges.”50 The events of September 1878 did prompt changes in the relationship with the river both among city politicians and riverside residents. Bridges were rebuilt with higher spans and stronger materials; riverside properties were in many cases removed to a safer distance; and mill owners,

50 Ibid.
fewer in number by the 1880s, began to adopt the practice of opening flood gates in advance of a freshet.\textsuperscript{51} Due at least in part to these changes of practice, annual spring freshets through the final decades of the nineteenth century produced little damage in comparison with earlier years. Seared into the consciousness of riverside residents and industrialists, the Great Rainstorm of 1878 played an important role, I will argue below, in public support for the Don Improvement Plan of the following decade.

For students of environmental history (and perhaps even for some nineteenth century observers), the severity of the flood and its consequences underlines a recognition of the power and ultimate unpredictability of nature. The image of the upstream bridge creating a domino

\textsuperscript{51} ODPD, \textit{Don Valley Conservation Report}, Part IV, 14.
effect of destruction is a useful metaphor: improvements effected in one location may not take into account the potential for upstream impacts, and forces at work in other parts of the watershed. Perhaps, as James Worts commented in the same year as the flood, there is value in recognizing and accounting for the limits of our knowledge. How this played out in the readiness of late nineteenth century publics to accept major improvement projects is difficult to ascertain. As the following discussion suggests, the flood seems to have reinforced for those most affected the need for technological interventions to tame an unruly river. Whether others saw in the rising floodwaters a confirmation that human interventions are necessarily partial is impossible to tell from the evidence that has survived.

IV The Don Improvement Project

The “Don problem,” then, incorporated three central components: siltation and flooding, as detailed in this chapter, and pollution, as discussed in Chapter 3. Divided in its impacts between two primary locations—the lower river (south of the Forks) and the river mouth—the Don problem also propelled the involvement of two distinct institutional authorities with an interest in its amelioration: the Harbour Trust, concerned primarily with problems of siltation and its consequences for harbour navigation; and the City, pressured by a range of stakeholders to respond to problems of pollution and flooding. Overstretched and poorly resourced, the City still commanded greater authority throughout the nineteenth century than the capital-weak and jurisdictionally-impoverished Harbour Trust.52 Not until the establishment of the Toronto

52 In a 1976 Discussion Paper on the history of the Toronto Harbour Commission, James O’Mara notes that the Harbour Trust, created in 1850 to administer port activities on the waterfront, “[ceased to make] any positive contributions to the improvement of the harbour before the turn of the century.” The Trust’s lack of capital and borrowing power, O’Mara concludes, combined with chronic internal dissension, the self-interest of some board members (particularly Gooderham and Worts), and the city’s reluctance to surrender adequate power, crippled the Trust from the beginning (“Shaping Urban Waterfronts,” 14-17).
Harbour Commission in 1911, with its considerable land resources and greatly bolstered jurisdictional control, would the tables begin to shift. Until that time, projects directed at the Don problem would prioritize the City’s interests over those of harbour officials, the Lower Don and its (arguable) potential for shipping and industrial development over similar “imagined futures” for the river mouth and Ashbridge’s Bay.

Concentrating on a portion of the lower river between Winchester Street and the Grand Trunk Railway bridge at Eastern Avenue, the Don Improvement Project would see the river channel straightened, deepened to twelve feet below lake-level, and widened to 120 feet. The works were designed to meet four central objectives: 1) to improve the sanitary condition of the area, 2) to make the Don a navigable stream for large vessels; 3) to accommodate rail traffic into the city; and 4) to create new lands for industrial purposes. Flood control was considered an associated benefit. Important to recognize in all of this is that the Don is a small urban river, bearing little resemblance to great rivers such as the Thames or the St. Lawrence that have been harnessed by other cities for urban infrastructure projects. Why, then, was Toronto so desperate to make it into something it wasn’t? At the time the Don Improvement was being implemented, other North American cities were taking advantage of steam power and railways to create new industrial hubs outside of city centres, and moving away from their former dependence on rivers as drivers of industry. Toronto, conversely, chose to invest massive amounts of public funds into the development of a minor river relatively close to the city centre. The following discussion will identify some of the forces at work that propelled the City to take on the project, and assess the degree to which it succeeded in meeting its goals.

53 Mayor’s Inaugural Address, TCCP, 1889, Appendix, 14-15.
Envisioning the Don “as it ought to be”

For residents of Toronto’s east end, the idea of the improvement conjured images of prosperity and revitalization for an area that had long been relegated to the margins of the city. Throughout the early 1880s, they regularly petitioned Council to take action in implementing a river improvement scheme. Their dreams for the area were ambitious. Memories of the devastating flood of September 1878, and daily experience of the river’s sluggish and fetid condition in its lower reaches, likely fueled their visions for a rationalized Don River. At a public meeting to discuss the project in October 1881, for example, land owner J.P. Doel “pleaded on behalf of the health of the neighbourhood and city for the straightening and deepening of the Don,” imagining a future where the Don would become “the great shipping centre for Toronto.”

Alderman Thomas Davies, who represented the Donlands area at City Council, perhaps best expressed the vision of area residents in his submission to the City’s Committee on Works in early January 1882:

This great scheme… will afford sites and facilities for all kinds of manufacturing enterprises, coal yards, lumber yards, and many factories we may not now think of, the establishment of which will most assuredly go far towards making Toronto, what I believe it is destined to become, a great manufacturing as well as a business centre…. The miasmatic atmosphere with which this locality is too often troubled will be dispelled and the healthfulness greatly increased. Freshets and ice-jams will be things of the past, and the current in the River unobstructed….

The project, he concluded, will “make [the area] as it ought to be—as healthy as any other part of the [c]ity.”

Imagined futures for the Don received perhaps their most breathless expression in real estate broadsides for the period, which referred potential east-end buyers to the proximity of

55 Report No.56 of the Committee on Works, TCCP, 1881, Appendix pp.888-890.
56 TCCP, 1881, Minutes 1026, 1043, 1246.
the improvement and its potential to “materially advance the value of surrounding districts.” As one 1887 advertisement read, “that hitherto despised stream…” will soon become “the commercial shipping centre of Toronto, not only for lake and river, but for railway commerce as well.” The improvements, in sum, would turn a stigmatized and peripheral area into a productive district of the city, producing profits for the City and local landowners alike.

While area landowners and industrialists sought to remove the uncertainty and insalubriousness of their surroundings, City Council members saw the improvements as an opportunity to augment paltry assessment revenues, and to address flooding and pollution concerns that increasingly carried the threat of litigation. Early project proponents would likely have been aware of the success of other urban centres in transforming listless urban waterways into bustling hubs for industry. In early February 1880, Toronto City Council resolved to form a special committee to report “upon the state and condition of the Don River… from a sanitary point of view” and to develop a scheme to abate the nuisance. In conjunction with this resolution, council members suggested the employment of convicts from the Don Jail “in straightening the River Don between Gerrard Street Bridge and Winchester Street Bridge.” Little action seems to have followed from this resolution until the following year, when Mayor McMurrich made special mention of the promise held by the river in his 1881 inaugural address:


58 Long Island New York’s Newtown Creek, transformed with retaining walls and regular dredging into a major commercial waterway in the latter half of the nineteenth century, would likely have been familiar to Council members interested in the transformation of the Don (Newtown Creek Alliance, http://newtowncreekalliance.org/history_a.htm, accessed March 12, 2009). Other examples, such as the eighteenth century transformation of London’s Thames, and work on the Cuyahoga in Cleveland in the latter decades of the nineteenth century, would also have stood as familiar “success stories.”

59 TCCP, 1880, Minutes 11, 116, 189.
The eastern end of the [c]ity along the banks of the Don and the marsh seems to have been specially fitted by nature as the site for manufactures of all descriptions, and judging from the experience of other cities, it will not be long before the advantages of the position will be fully realized. It therefore becomes a matter of importance to consider what steps should be taken by the City to enhance the value of their property at these points, and one step which would be of great benefit would be the straightening of the river Don, and making it navigable for a considerable distance up the river.60

While the City pondered the potential of the improvements, a group of local businessmen worked to set out in concrete terms a vision for a navigable and disciplined waterway as a centrepiece of economic revitalization in Toronto’s east end. Organized under the name of the Don Improvement Company, the syndicate released a circular in early January 1881 addressed to landowners on both sides of the river. “A few gentlemen,” the advertisement stated,

are willing to form themselves into a company for the purpose of widening, straightening, deepening and otherwise improving the Don River so as to allow vessels drawing fourteen feet of water entering and navigating the same, but will not proceed in the matter until some satisfactory arrangements are made giving them the right to purchase all the land they require for the purpose, and with that view have requested me to confer with… [those] owning the land on each side of the river.61

By mid-February, the syndicate had placed a petition before the Dominion government requesting incorporation of the company, with the purpose of “[straightening] the course of the river between the line of Winchester-street…and the bay.” To effect these improvements, the company requested the right to expropriate lands up to five hundred feet on either side of the river.62 Particularly galling to area landowners was the implication that they would be compensated for their lands “at a valuation, after the manner of railway companies for lands

60 TCCP, 1881, Appendix 1-10.
61 Toronto Globe, “The Don,” January 8, 1881, clipping from Vaughan Roberts Papers.
taken by them.” Owners were “to have the privilege, after the improvements were effected, of again taking possession of their property by repurchasing it from the [c]ompany or by lease.” As summarized in the *Globe*, “the [c]ompany would get the land at its present value of five or six dollars a foot, and when selling again would, of course, demand its increased value of $30, $40, or $60 a foot, obtained by reason of the improvements.”

The Bill had passed through the House of Commons and awaited approval from the Senate by the time the Toronto City Council organized a response. Indignant with the company’s apparent presumptuousness in neglecting to inform municipal authorities of their plans, Council resolved on March 7th that representatives of the City in the House of Commons and the Senate should “use their influence to postpone the passage of the… Bill.” The Bill was eventually withdrawn from the House, and the efforts of the syndicate abandoned.

As developments in the following months would show, however, it wasn’t the company’s proposed object of improving the river that area landowners and Council members objected to, as much as their approach to the project, and who stood to benefit. In September 1881, the death of President Garfield took Mayor McMurrich to Cleveland, where he was apparently “struck at the way in which manufactures had clustered round a little stream [the Cuyahoga River] which had been likewise improved,” leaving him with “no doubt that in East Toronto they would find the same result with reference to the Don.” Here was comparable context: a relatively small urban waterway subject, like the Don, to chronic problems of flooding, siltation, and pollution,

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64 TCCP, 1881, Minute 362.
66 Ibid.
transformed with dredges and pile-drivers into a vital industrial corridor in its lower reaches. McMurrich returned to Toronto with new resolve to push forward an improvement scheme for the Don. In early October he joined long-time project proponent Alderman Davies in calling a public meeting of ratepayers to discuss the question. Well attended by area property owners, the meeting reinforced ratepayer support for the project under the auspices of the municipal Local Improvements Act (whereby ratepayers shared improvement costs with municipal councils). It concluded with a unanimous resolution by area ratepayers to shoulder their portion of the costs of the improvement and to request cooperation from the councils of York and Toronto to bring the project to fruition.67 The ratepayers’ consent in hand, Alderman Davies set about convincing Toronto Council of the project’s viability. The improvement would soon pay for itself, he argued, by way of the “immense benefit that will accrue to the City by the increase of taxation as soon as the scheme of straightening, widening and deepening of the River Don is accomplished.”68 Despite Davies’ enthusiasm for the project and the support he enjoyed from the mayor, plans for the project stagnated in the labyrinth of Council committees and sub-committees, and in circuitous discussions about the advisability of carrying out the project, the legislation and funds required to complete it, and proposed methods of carrying it out.

The interest of a new and powerful stakeholder finally propelled the project out of the council chambers and onto the ground in 1886. The Canadian Pacific Railway Company, which had attempted since 1881 to connect their east-west lines with Toronto, succeeded in the spring of 1886 to win the support of then mayor William Howland to create an eastern entrance to the

67 Ibid.
68 TCCP, 1881, Minute 1246.
city along the west bank of the Don Improvement. The timing of the CPR’s interest in the project is significant: the improvement would be completed within the context of larger municipal efforts to accommodate railway development in the city. A straightened river would facilitate the laying of tracks into the city; filled land in the former meandering river channel would create additional space for rail-side industry. (And for several aldermen with manufacturing firms along the river—Davies among them—the relocation of the river channel would extend their property and increase its value through proximity to the railway). Railway interests also shaped the nature of the improvement project, shifting the emphasis from the development of a navigable shipping canal to a rail and road corridor, from the river itself to the space alongside it. The improvement would become, in John Stilgoe’s words, a “metropolitan corridor” with all its associations of modernity and prosperity. Adding the interests of a powerful railway company did much to secure project fortunes, and in March 1886 the Don Improvement Act was passed by the provincial legislature, empowering the City to borrow funds and expropriate lands to complete the improvement works.

Mellen, “Development of the Toronto Waterfront,” 167, 178. Howland apparently made an agreement with the CPR by which they were to run tracks down the west bank of the improvement and pay an annual rental fee to the city for the privilege. Toronto Globe, “Knocked Out Again,” December 11, 1894, p.8. The mayor’s inaugural address for 1888 noted that the CPR was to lay tracks from the main line into the City on the west side of the channel, leaving the Don south of King Street, running in a southwesterly direction, and crossing the tracks of the Grand Trunk at Berkeley Street (TCCP, 1888, Appendix pp.4-5).


Council received the approval of the Ontario Legislature March 25, 1886, in An Act respecting the River Don Improvements (Statutes of Ontario, Act 49 Vic., cap.66); the Act was passed subject to the approval of the eligible electors of the City of Toronto (TCCP, 1886, Minute 927).
Dredges and Pile Drivers Meet River Mud

Having secured the necessary legislation to carry out the improvement project, City Council had only to obtain the approval of the qualified electorate. On August 18th, 1886, Council adopted a Bill “to authorize the straightening and improvement of the River Don.” The Bill established the estimated cost of the improvement, including the cost of lands to be expropriated, at $300,000, one third of which would be paid by the City, and the remaining two thirds to be assessed against the properties benefitting from the improvements. It granted the City the right to expropriate lands within the boundaries of the improvement, extending to a maximum of four hundred feet on either side of the centre line of the river from Winchester Street to the lake. On Saturday, September 18th, 2,724 voters returned a majority of 1,594 in favour of the By-Law. Not surprisingly, wards abutting the river (St. David’s Ward on the west side of the river, St. Matthew’s on the east, and St. Lawrence’s straddling the river to the south) showed decisive support for the By-Law, while wards in the west end of the city showed ambivalent or negative returns. The Bill was passed into law on the 27th of September 1886.

Work began in the fall of 1886; by the spring of 1887, dredging work had begun on the new alignment of the river channel. The area for improvement was divided into three sections:

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72 TCCP, 1886, Minute 927. Accompanying plans divided the area for improvement into six sections between the line of Bloor Street south to the lake: Section 1, from the line of Bloor Street to Winchester Street; Section 2, from Winchester Street to Carlton Street; Section 3, from Carlton Street to King Street; Section 4, from King Street to Eastern Avenue; Section 5, from Eastern Avenue to the northern boundary of the marsh; and Section 6, from the marsh to Toronto Bay or the Lake (Report of the City Engineer, August 17, 1886, TCCP, Appendix pp.547-49). In an effort to prioritize certain aspects of the massive project, and to contain expenditure, the City’s Committee on Works elected to focus only on five of the six sections outlined in the Act respecting the Improvement of the River Don, excluding the area from Winchester Street north to Bloor Street. To simplify the contract letting process, they condensed these five sections into three: Section One, from the lakeshore north to the Grand Trunk Railway (GTR) bridge (immediately south of Eastern Avenue); Section Two, from the GTR bridge north to Gerrard Street; and Section Three, from Gerrard Street north to Winchester Street.

73 Report of the City Clerk to the City of Toronto Council, September 21, 1886, TCCP, Appendix pp.809-10.

74 By-Law No.1767, To authorize the straightening and improvement of the River Don, TCCP, 1886, Minute 1006.
Section One, from the lakeshore north to the Grand Trunk Railway (GTR) bridge (immediately south of Eastern Avenue); Section Two, from the GTR bridge north to Gerrard Street; and Section Three, from Gerrard Street north to Winchester Street. In a decision that would frustrate officials at the Harbour Trust, who had long sought to remedy the Don’s annual deposition of silt into the harbour, the City postponed work on Section One to focus their efforts on Sections Two and Three. While separate contractors were originally chosen to carry out the improvements in sections two and three, one contractor’s decision to bow out left the entire project in the hands of A.F. Manning & R. Macdonald. In sum, the work in this first phase would straighten the river channel from Winchester Street to the GTR bridge, deepen the channel to twelve feet below lake-level, and widen it with piles or cribs to 120 feet (with twenty-three feet reserved on each side for dock purposes). A total of fifty-two feet would be reserved for railway purposes, and fifty feet for roadway. Existing bridges would be replaced with stronger structures of wood and iron, and the low lands adjoining the river would be raised to three feet above the high water mark of the lake (figure 48).

Work on sections two and three carried on steadily throughout 1887. By the end of the year, the bulk of the piling for the new river channel had been completed, and the channel from the GTR bridge to King Street nearly finished. Visible progress on the ground prompted Mayor Clarke to speculate in his inaugural address for 1888 “that the whole of this improvement [sections two and three] will be finished about the fall of this year.”

75 Manning and Macdonald also received the contract to construct new bridges at the Eastern Avenue, Queen and Gerrard Streets crossings. As of the end of 1887, tenders for sections two and three and for bridge construction amounted to a total of about $240,000, leaving $60,000 for land purchases (considerably short of the Assessment Commissioner’s 1885 estimate of land values at $75,000) (Report of the Assessment Commissioner, November 24, 1885, TCCP, Appendix p.918; Annual Report for the City Engineer, 1887, TCCP, 1888, Appendix pp.1896-8).

76 TCCP, 1888, Appendix pp. 4-5.
Figure 48. River Don Straightening Plan, 1886, Plans from Various Reports: Waterfront, Fonds 200, Series 725, File 12, CTA.
reports and council minutes provide a general outline of the work completed to date, the monies expended, and the problems encountered, newspaper coverage for the period fills in the colour and gives us a sense of the magnitude of the work on the ground. Rare accounts, such as the following description of the improvements in a July 1887 article in the *Globe*, portray the sensory experience of the works in almost cinematic detail:

From the railway bridge clear up to Winchester street and the Gaol farm the smudgy, sandy valley presents a scene of dusty activity. A hundred yards or so above the iron bridge a dredge is at work cleaning out the new course between the parallel rows of piles which form the sides of the new channel…. [Leaving] the dredge, with its everlasting creak of the huge iron spoon sinking, filling, rising, swinging and dropping, and [proceeding] along the piling which continues nearly to the Gerrard Street bridge… [one] arrives at the chief scene of labour, about midway between King and Gerrard streets…. [Here] as far as the eye can reach up the valley [one] sees the high banks of sand at the side dotted with men and horses, single and in teams, waggons and carts hauling earth down into the hollow, and shovels flying around as if by magic as the teams string along empty up the bank, pause for a few minutes, descend with a load, dump, and string along up again with as much vigor as before.

In the centre of the valley the eye follows along the two rows of piles till each terminates in a huge ladder-like, black-looking machine, puffing and snorting in short gasps, while every few seconds there comes from it a report like that of a small cannon. These are the pile-drivers. Heaps of long cedar logs lie all around, being trimmed for piles. Men on rafts are seen floating about with various objects. Some are conveying logs to the pile drivers, others are finishing up the tops of the piles which have already been driven, hewing them off and fitting on what appeared to be a sort of timber cap. Between the rows of piles men are busy digging out the new channel, while a constant stream of wheelbarrows, pushed by the laborers with almost automatic regularity, convey the earth from the excavation to the bank of the river…. All around are numerous small boys in the costume which antedated fig leaves, diving out of scows or jumping off the piles, regardless of dirt-dumpings or sun-skinned backs, laughing, shouting, swimming and spluttering.

When the work is completed, the reporter concluded, the “crooked stream” of the Don “will really be nothing more or less than a canal.”

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77 *Toronto Globe*, “A Scene at the Don”, July 14, 1887, p.5.
Problems and setbacks

Despite Mayor Clarke’s optimism for the project in January 1888, the magnitude and ambitiousness of the project soon made themselves apparent in a series of unforeseen problems and associated setbacks. Problems with contractors, disputes with area residents and industrialists, protracted negotiations with project stakeholders, and unanticipated problems with the environment itself all contributed to delay project progress and increase the amount of required funds. Both the cost of lands expropriated and the work performed to date, council minutes reveal, “far exceeded the original estimates, owing to the increased value of the former and unforeseen difficulties in carrying on the latter.” Out of the original $300,000 borrowed in the fall of 1886, only $3000 remained to apply towards the improvement in October 1888. The following month Council passed a by-law authorizing the City to borrow an additional $150,000 to carry on the works.  

By January 1889, cost overruns for the Don Improvement reached fifty per cent over original estimates. Of the additional $150,000 borrowed, only $57,000 remained in February 1889; the city engineer estimated that remaining work on the channel between Winchester Street and Eastern Avenue would cost almost $160,000. On top of its excessive costs, the improvement also ran considerably over its original time estimates. Manning & MacDonald had originally agreed to complete the project by November 1, 1888. Due to the circumstances discussed below, sections two and three of the improvement were not completed until 1891. Perhaps the largest roadblock encountered by the City came from the project’s most

78 By-Law 2184, to authorize the City Treasurer to borrow a sum not exceeding $150,000, for the purpose of carrying on the Don Improvements, passed November 12, 1888, TCCP, Appendix pp.1756-66.

79 Land purchases were expected to cost more than double the original estimate of $75,000; tenders had run $20,000 over budget; and bridge construction, $50,000 over budget (Mayor’s Inaugural Address, TCCP, 1889, Appendix pp. 14-15).

80 Report of the City Engineer, February 1, 1889, “Don River file,” Researcher Reference Files, TPAA.
powerful stakeholder group, one who stood to gain the most from the improvements. A protracted dispute with the CPR over their claim to exclusive use of tracks on the west side of the Don Improvement hampered project progress throughout the 1880s. The dispute was finally settled in 1890 by the Railway Committee of the Privy Council, which granted the CPR a perpetual lease of two tracks on the west side of the Don Improvement in exchange for an annual fee to the City.  

Another area where expenditures of time and funds dramatically exceeded predictions was the expropriation of lands along the route of the improvement. Requested in 1885 to evaluate the value of lands between Winchester Street and the marsh that would be subject to expropriation, the City’s assessment commissioner N. Maughan reached a figure of $75,000, an amount he felt was “ample to remunerate all parties interested for the loss of land and for any

81 Two main issues were at stake: 1) the CPR’s insistence that they have exclusive use of at least two tracks along the improvement; and 2) the amount of the annual or term fee to be charged by the City. On the first point, the City felt they had no room for maneuver: the Don Improvement Act under which the works were being carried out “distinctly [stipulated] that the railway reserves on both sides of the Don Improvement shall be used upon equal terms upon all railways in common, and that no company [was] to have the exclusive use of them” (Letter from Mayor E.F. Clarke to Toronto City Council, February 25, 1889, Don Improvement Committee Communications, 1889, CTA, Series 907, File 1. Reprinted in TCCP, 1889, Appendix pp.168-69). Representatives for the Grand Trunk Railway and the proposed Belt Line Railway, meanwhile, argued that awarding exclusive use to the CPR granted the company undue advantage. The matter might have been dismissed right there, had it not been for the CPR’s threat to exercise their power under the Dominion Railway Act to expropriate lands required for railway purposes along the Improvement.

82 The Privy Council determined in July 1890 that the City should lease to the company in perpetuity a strip of land along the Improvement wide enough to accommodate two running tracks. In return, the company agreed not to exercise their right of expropriation, and to pay an annual fee to the City (the amount and terms of which to be determined by arbitration). While the CPR was to hold overall control of the time tables and management of the two tracks, tracks could be used by other railways provided “periodical compensation” was made to the CPR, who would hold responsibility for regular maintenance of the tracks and any associated improvement costs (Report of the Joint Special Committee re: Esplanade and Don Improvements, July 25, 1890, TCCP, Appendix pp. 1497-1504). Significant as this agreement was, conflict persisted for several more years over the amount and terms of the CPR’s fee for passage over what the City considered an “extremely valuable right-of-way” (Toronto Globe, December 11, 1894). Although the terms of this rent were settled in 1895; newspaper coverage in early 20th c shows that even after this date, conflict persisted through the CPR’s failure to pay the agreed rental amounts (Toronto Globe, “CPR Pays No Rent,” September 10, 1897, cited in Mellen, “Development of the Toronto Waterfront,” 203).
buildings which may be interfered with.”

Claims ranged from expropriated land owners and riverside manufacturers who lost buildings and property to the improvements, to small businesses such as ice cutters and boat builders, and recreational interests such as the Don Rowing Club, whose loss of access to the river forced them to fold or relocate. Disagreements and delays in negotiations over particular properties translated into delays on the ground, as contractors could not proceed over lands still subject to settlement. Increased land values in the area was partly to blame for the attenuated settlement process; bureaucratic foot-dragging and tardiness in issuing payments for land purchases and damages was another. In January 1889, the Assessment Department estimated that total expenditures on land purchases and damages for sections two and three of the improvement would reach $167,000, well over double the original estimate.

Attempts to satisfy multiple and often competing objectives also contributed to cost and time overruns. Having lost the original contractor for Section 3 (Gerrard to Winchester Street), the City decided to proceed with the work by day labour, satisfying frequent demands by the

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83 TCCP, 1885, Appendix p.918.

84 Report No. 25 of the Committee on Works, November 3, 1887, TCCP, Appendix, pp.1311-12; Report No. 30 of the Committee on Works, January 10, 1889, TCCP, 1888, Appendix, p.2071.

85 Report of the City Engineer, August 15, 1888, TCCP, Appendix pp.1505-07; Mayor’s Inaugural Address, TCCP, 1889, Appendix pp.14-15. In an attempt to contain these costs, the City twice amended the original by-law to reduce the amount of land required for the improvement. See By-Law No.1774, A By-law to take lands required for straightening and improving the River Don, passed September 27, 1886 (TCCP, 1886, Minute 1007); By-Law 1803, To repeal By Law No.1774, entitled, “A By-Law to take lands for straightening and improving the River Don,” and enact a new By-law in lieu thereof, taking a less quantity of land, passed April 12, 1887 (TCCP, 1887, Minute 385.); and By-Law No.2005, A By-law to repeal By-law No.1803, respecting lands taken for straightening and improving the River Don, and to make other provisions in lieu thereof; passed May 7, 1888, further reducing the lands required for the improvement in order to save costs.
public to use the improvements as a means of employing out-of-work labourers. Throughout the winter of 1886-87, the “unemployed poor” were set to work cutting into the steep banks on the east side of the river below the Don Jail. It seems that political expediency may have outweighed pragmatism, however, as the scheme proved to be expensive and inefficient. In a report to Council February 8, 1887, city engineer Charles Sproatt responded defensively to allegations of extravagant labour expenses, calculating the expenditure for labour at 27.5 cents per cubic yard of material removed from the “gaol hill.” “Owing to the lateness of the season in commencing the work,” he wrote,

the cost thereof is somewhat in excess of what it should be…. Taking into consideration that the work was commenced for the purpose of finding employment for the workingmen, the cost of operating the work through three feet of frost, the changing of the men weekly, it will be a satisfaction to the [c]ommittee to learn that the extravagant rumors that the work was costing the City $1 per yard is now disproved.

Ultimately, the City decided to cease the use of day labour in section 3 and award the contract to Manning & Macdonald, a decision that ironically involved more unforeseen expenditure, Manning & Macdonald’s estimate running $16,000 over the original contractor’s bid.

As Sproatt’s statement above suggests, the environment itself also contributed to overruns in project expenditures and timing. Winter conditions slowed progress in cutting through steep valley banks. More problematic, and less foreseen, were the dense clay and shale deposits encountered along the course of the new channel north of Queen Street. By the summer

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86 These demands were especially frequent through the winter of 1885, when a series of letters from Toronto residents urged Council to act expediently in initiating the Don Improvement Project as a method of unemployment relief (TCCP, 1885, Minutes 809, 845, 873, 879).

87 TCCP, 1887, Appendix pp.66-68. The Engineer’s Annual Report for 1887 reported that a total of $3,314.69 was spent on employing the “unemployed poor” to work on the gaol hill cutting in 1887.

88 TCCP, 1887, Minute 484; Report No.31 of the Committee on Works, TCCP, 1887, Appendix p.1090; Annual Report for the City Engineer, 1887, TCCP, 1888, Appendix pp. 1896-8.
of 1888, Sproatt was forced to admit that “the quantity of shale found on the line of the new channel is much larger than estimated,” necessitating additional costs for its removal and the subsequent cribbing of the channel (lining it with horizontal planks of wood, rather than simply vertical piles) to provide extra support.\(^9\) As a result of these discoveries, Council elected to dredge the channel north of Gerrard to a depth of only eight or nine feet, rather than the twelve feet originally proposed.\(^9\) These modifications had significant repercussions for project objectives: lost in that difference of three to four feet of channel depth was the vision of a navigable channel north of Gerrard Street; flood protection and “pollution flushing” objectives may also have been compromised in creating a wide and ultimately shallow channel, rather than one with the ability to accommodate higher flows. In a retrospective on the Don Improvements in 1902, the *Mail & Empire* derided the project for its dubious results and excessive expenditures, “the greater proportion [of which],” the article noted, were “thrown away in an abortive attempt to dredge the river to a depth of fourteen [sic] feet. This proved impracticable, as the clay in the river proved imperious to the dredge.”\(^9\)

**The Don Diversion**

Shortages of funds and political will, then, had produced a project that was necessarily fragmentary: only a portion of the river had been modified, rather than the full distance from Bloor Street to the lake contained within the initial 1886 proposals. For the Harbour Trust, the improvement was a farce: in ignoring the river’s mouth, it failed to address their central concern

\(^9\) Report of the City Engineer, August 15, 1888, TCCP, Appendix pp.1505-06. “Cribbing” referred to the practice of reinforcing the vertical cedar piles with horizontal planks of wood, a more elaborate and consequently more expensive procedure than simply “piling” the channel.

\(^9\) Mayor’s Inaugural Address, 1889, TCCP, Appendix pp.14-15.

\(^9\) *Toronto Mail & Empire*, February 12, 1902, reprinted in Vaughan Roberts Papers, p.22.
with siltation in Toronto harbour. Echoing a chorus of engineers and harbour officials who had since 1835 recommended the diversion of the Don into Ashbridge’s Bay as a means of turning “what is now a positive evil… into a benefit—and a profit to the City,” the Harbour Trust saw the Don Diversion as a pivotal part of their plan to create industrial lands in Ashbridge’s Bay marsh and to rid the harbour (and their annual budget expenditures) of the menace of accumulated river silts.

For a brief moment in 1883, it appeared that the diversion of the Don into Ashbridge’s Bay would at last be accomplished. An agreement between City Council and the Harbour Trust in early May 1883 enabled the Trust to cut a channel from the GTR bridge south into the marsh. The work, which was carried out that summer at the Harbour Trust’s expense, was viewed by the City as “turning the first sod” in its larger project to straighten and improve the river Don. The river, however, was never fully diverted. Requests made to the GTR to place a dam of “stop logs” across the old river channel (which fell along their right-of-way) met with resistance, and, mollified by City Council’s promising plans to straighten and improve the river on a larger scale, the Harbour Trust abandoned the project. While the 1886 Don Improvement Project initially incorporated plans to run the river straight south into Ashbridge’s Bay, “Section One” of the improvement had been set aside indefinitely by the time dredging work began further north on the channel in 1886.

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93 Toronto Globe, May 8, 1883, reprinted in Vaughan Roberts Papers, p.15. For the Council resolution on the 1883 cut see TCCP, 1883, Minute 569. Harbour Trust engineer Kivas Tully’s plans for the project are available at the Toronto Port Authority Archives (“Toronto Harbour Works: Specifications for dredging the proposed cut from the River Don to Ashbridge’s Bay,” June 11, 1883, “Keating Channel File,” Researcher Reference Files, TPAA).

94 Toronto Mail & Empire, February 13, 1885, reprinted in Vaughan Roberts Papers, p.19. For an excellent overview of the negotiations and false starts in pursuing the Don Diversion, see Michael Moir (former archivist, Toronto Port Authority), “Historical Development of Keating Channel,” letter to Dennis Lang, Director of Engineering, Toronto Port Authority, March 16, 1990, File No.570-D-2, “Keating Channel File”).
By the early 1890s, daily accumulations of sewage and cattle wastes in the shallow waters of Ashbridge’s Bay led provincial health authorities to raise the spectre of a potential cholera outbreak, forcing the City to act at last. In 1892, Council approved city engineer E.H. Keating’s plan to construct a channel running east-west along the northern perimeter of the marsh, with cuts through the government breakwater on the west side of the marsh, and through the sandbar at the north-east extremity of Ashbridge’s Bay, to intercept north-south sewer lines and carry wastes further out into the lake (figure 49). Keating saw the channel as a temporary intervention to relieve pollution in advance of the necessary and inevitable construction of a trunk sewer.  

His plan saw the Don diverted into the new east-west channel on a line running south of the existing improvements. Having secured funds on loan from the Province, and the permission of the Dominion government to breach their 1882 breakwater, the City set out to implement Keating’s plan in 1893. Once again, however, work on the ground fell significantly short of proposed improvements. “Keating’s channel” was dredged to a width of only ninety feet, significantly short of the three hundred feet proposed in his original plans. Coatsworth’s Cut was completed to specifications at the eastern end of Ashbridge’s Bay, but the Don was not diverted into Keating’s channel as proposed (figures 50 and 51).

Tensions between the City and the Harbour Trust reached a new high, and by the spring of 1897 harbour officials had threatened legal action in an attempt to compel the City to divert the river.  

Urged by the Board of Trade, who sought to make the harbour receptive to new
Figure 49. E.H. Keating, city engineer. *Ashbridge's Bay Improvement shewing proposed Scheme and Work now in Progress*, Toronto: City Engineer's Office, 1893, Plans from City Engineer's Annual Reports, Fonds 200, Series 725, File 7 (MT 995), CTA. Note the government breakwater, constructed in 1885, on the right (west) side of the marsh, and the sandbar dividing Ashbridge’s Bay and the lake.
Figure 50. Don River and major streets prior to straightening, 1882. Shoreline digitized from National Map Collection 22851, University of Toronto Map and Data Library.
Figure 51. Don River and major streets, after straightening, 1894. Shoreline digitized from NMC 97370, University of Toronto Map and Data Library.
ocean-going traffic enabled by the deepening of the St. Lawrence River, engineers from the City and the Harbour Trust came together in 1898 to produce a joint scheme to divert the Don.\(^1\) Initially supported by a promise of a federal loan, funds for the project were revoked in 1902 on the grounds that the Don was not a “navigable stream” warranting federal intervention. Furthermore, the 1902 decision revoked all future federal funding for waterfront improvements until the City addressed the fundamental problem of sewage deposits into the harbour.\(^2\) Another roadblock had been pushed into the course of the Don Diversion. Not until 1906 would the Don Diversion finally get off the ground, the City having received the support of the electorate to borrow $200,000 to straighten the river south of the GTR bridge to the lake, and to improve the surrounding lands in Ashbridge’s Bay.\(^3\) Work finally began in September 1908, and by mid-July 1909 the river had been diverted from its curving westerly course into Toronto Bay to run instead south to an outlet in Keating’s Channel (figure 52).\(^4\)

Final adjustments to the mouth of the river occurred within the context of the newly incorporated Toronto Harbour Commission’s 1912 Waterfront Plan.\(^5\) Under the leadership of THC Chief Engineer E.L. Cousins, a series of studies through 1912 presented different

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1 Kivas Tully, “Toronto Harbour Works,” 1898, Records Department Inventory, Records Department Fonds, RG 3/3, box 105, folder 1, TPAA.

2 Annual Report of the Harbour Master, 1904, Harbour Trust Papers, 1851-1911, Board of the Toronto Harbour Commissioners, RG 1/4, box 4, volume 1, TPAA.


5 Continuing problems with the Don and Ashbridge’s Bay and concerns about the deterioration of port facilities led to the establishment of the Toronto Harbour Commissioners (THC) by a federal Act of Parliament in 1911. Unlike the earlier Toronto Harbour Trust, the THC was granted significant power, together with 1285 acres of marshland in Ashbridge’s Bay and a broad mandate to improve the Toronto waterfront (Stinson, *The Heritage of the Port Industrial District*, 22). The agency was governed by a five-member Board, three of whom were city councillors.
alternatives for the creation of new industrial land within Ashbridge’s Bay marsh. Two options were proposed for the mouth of the Don: the first, to extend the existing north-south river channel further south through the marshlands to empty into a proposed ship channel; the second, to divert the channel west along a route slightly south of its original path into Toronto Bay (figure 53). The rationale for the second alternative, which seemed to confound the
Figure 53. Detail from Toronto Harbour Commissioners, *1913 map of Eastern Section, Toronto Waterfront Plan*. University of Toronto Map and Data Library, G3524 T621 G45.9 1912 east.
Commissioners’ long-held objective to remove the menace of river silts from the harbour, lay in providing additional space for dockage and in allowing for the construction of a roadway across the old channel to provide access to the west bank of the Don. In September 1912 the THC made a decision to adopt the second of the two alternatives, despite its considerably greater expense. The river would curve southwest from the GTR bridge, then south to meet with a widened and reinforced Keating Channel before entering the harbour. Objections by the British American Oil Company, whose property lay along the line of the proposed diversion, led to the final amendment in the long history of plans to alter the river mouth. Rather than curving through the BA Oil property, the river would continue straight south to connect at a right angle with Keating Channel—the same jarring alignment that persists today (figure 54). The new Keating Channel—wider and slightly south of its previous alignment—was dredged in 1914; by the spring of 1915, the channel had been reinforced and the river diverted for the final time.

V Imagined futures and unintended consequences: Looking back on the Don developments

In February 1897, a columnist for the Globe commented that “the Don Improvement was one of those mysterious infatuations to which all men are subject when acting in corporate or

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6 The second alternative, estimated at $626,000, would cost $360,000 more than the first alternative priced at $266,000 (E.L. Cousins to Board of the Toronto Harbour Commissioners, September 3, 1912, “Keating Channel File,” Researcher Reference Files, TPAA). As Michael Moir notes in his 1990 memo on the Historical Development of Keating Channel, no minutes exist of the discussion that led to the decision to adopt the second alternative.

7 British American Oil first recorded their objection to the proposed Don alignment in January 1913; by June of that year they had proposed an alternate alignment for the river, and in early July Cousins reported that a “compromise plan… had been arrived at as a result of his conference with the representatives of the company” (Minutes 401, 673, and 702, 1913, Board of the Toronto Harbour Commissioners, RG 1/1, TPAA).

8 Toronto Harbour Commissioners, Annual Report of the Toronto Harbor Commissioners for the Years 1915 and 1916 (Toronto: Toronto Harbor Commissioners, 1917); Stinson, The Heritage of the Port Industrial District, 57. Backfilling of the former river channel and Keating’s 1893 “Cut” from the harbour to Ashbridge’s Bay continued into the early 1920s.
Figure 54. Don River and Major Streets, after construction of Keating Channel, Ship Channel, and Port Industrial District in Ashbridge’s Bay, 1918. Shoreline digitized from NTS 1918, University of Toronto Map and Data Library.

Governmental affairs. There are few who cannot look back and puzzle over the past advocacy of some absurd public undertaking. But it is hard to be laughed at by the men who profited more than even the landowners by our monumental folly in straightening the river.”⁹ The columnist was referring, presumably, to the owners of the CPR, who had recently reached a very

favourable agreement with the City for annual rents to access the Don Improvement.\(^\text{10}\) Certainly, the City and its ratepayers had paid a high price to encourage industrial development in the city’s east end. Whether their efforts would pay off was still far from clear: the creation of new industrial land along the improvement attracted some industries, especially those in the oil and gas sector, to the area in the late 1890s and early 1900s. The failure to erect swing bridges along the improvement,\(^\text{11}\) and the compromises made in channel depth, dashed forever dreams of a navigable Lower Don lined with docks and coal yards and bustling with ship traffic. As for the benefits to be accrued by higher property values, and Davies’ faith that the work would “become a paying work and a profitable undertaking to the City,” the prospects were still not clear at the beginning of the twentieth century. Reporting in February 1902 on the City’s plans to repay project debts through levies on “improved” properties, the \textit{Mail & Empire} expressed skepticism that the city would be able to demonstrate any measured improvement on the lands involved:

\begin{quote}
not a few ratepayers residing along the banks of the majestic Don are somewhat apprehensive regarding the recommendation that the necessary assessment be levied on the lands rendered liable under the Don Improvement Act, [but] it is not at all probable that this course will be adopted…. In the Act the lands are only liable for the actual benefit derived from the Improvement, and it is contended that it will be rather difficult to establish that the ratepayers along the Don have reaped any material advantage from the straightening of the river.\(^\text{12}\)
\end{quote}

The project had failed in other ways as well. Pollution continued unabated. As early as 1894 it was apparent that faith in the project’s ability to “flush” contaminants and detritus

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\(^{10}\) An agreement on rental rates was reached in 1895. As Mellen shows, however, conflict persisted when the CPR failed to pay the agreed rental rates in the years that followed (City of Toronto, Agreement to Settle Disputes as to the Esplanade Agreement, February 4, 1895, cited in Mellen, “The Development of the Toronto Waterfront,” 202).

\(^{11}\) Swing bridges were originally planned for the GTR crossing south of Eastern Avenue and the Queen Street crossing. They were abandoned due to the extra costs involved and the unwillingness of the GTR to share expenses.

\(^{12}\) \textit{Toronto Mail & Empire}, February 12, 1902.
through a deepened and straightened lower channel had been misguided. An article in the *Toronto Mail* March 20, 1894 presented a satiric account of the City’s “great Improvement,” lauding the solid construction of the new Isolation Hospital while pointing to the irony of “pestilential” river channel running below it. Visitors to the area will see, the article explained, that

immediately below… and in front of [the new hospital] runs—or rather stagnates—the widened Don River. If they look at the water of this pestilential channel they will see that it is of a yellowish green colour, and a slimy, soup-like consistency. If they ask residents of the neighbourhood whose noses have not altogether lost their acuteness, they will discover in the hot days of summer it gives off noxious and undesirable vapours.

The article went on to note that while the river “has been ‘improved’ so far as its width is concerned,” the fact that it receives sewage from a large district makes “its present state… altogether deadly. The Don is… nothing more or less than a big open sewer. The slowness of its current is not enough to clear off the impurities that are daily poured into it.”\(^{13}\) Not surprisingly, public health continued to suffer. Two to three hundred cases of typhoid fever per year remained the norm in the late 1880s and early 1890s. In 1891 a severe outbreak infected almost 900 people across the city, killing 170 of those infected.\(^{14}\) While exposure to contaminated water in Toronto Bay was the main cause of typhoid deaths in these years, the contribution of heavily polluted waters from the Don did little to abate the problem.

Chronic problems with flooding, ice jams, and siltation also persisted, making mockery of Alderman Davies’ 1882 vision that “freshets and ice-jams will be things of the past, and the current in the River unobstructed.” An ice jam that formed near the river mouth in late February

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\(^{13}\) *Toronto Mail*, March 20, 1894, reprinted in Vaughan Roberts Papers, 18-19.

\(^{14}\) Brace, “One Hundred and Twenty Years of Sewerage,” 132.
1902 caused considerable flooding along the lower river, submerging cellars, washing out roads and temporarily blocking the railway lines. The ice jam was eventually dynamited by the city engineer’s department, allowing the waters to recede. The spring freshet of April 1912 was more serious, destroying six mill dams along the river and prompting the *Mail & Empire* to describe the condition of the Don as “a rampage which baffles the memory of the ‘oldest inhabitant’ in the [v]alley.” Memories of the devastating damage caused by the 1878 flood must have run short. The inconvenience caused by repeated floods throughout the 1910s and 1920s finally led the GTR to elevate their rail line, which crossed the Don south of Front Street, onto an earthen viaduct six metres in height in 1928 (figures 55 and 56). Having failed in their efforts over the better part of a century to divert the Don into Ashbridge’s Bay, the Toronto Harbour Commissioners faced the ongoing drain of dredging expenditures at the mouth of the Don through the twentieth century (figure 57). Today, civic agencies spend an average of $500,000 annually to dredge sediment from the Keating Channel.

For contemporaries of the project and for today’s Toronto residents looking back on the legacy of the Don Improvement, it is difficult, indeed, to pinpoint any concrete benefits that

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15 *Toronto Mail & Empire*, March 1, 1902, cited in ODPD, Part IV, 15. As Toronto Harbour Commission Archivist Michele Dale commented in a letter to THC General Manager Gary Reid May 2, 1996, ice jams remain a significant source of damage along Toronto-area rivers. They threaten the structural integrity of bridges, and, by raising upstream water levels, often lead to extensive flooding. The Toronto Port Authority continues to employ dynamite as a remedy for severe ice jams along the Don and Humber (File 570-G-2, “Keating Channel File,” Researcher Reference Files, TPAA).

16 *Toronto Mail & Empire*, April 6, 1912, cited in ODPD, Part IV, 15.

17 Significant floods in the valley were also reported in 1914, 1918, 1920, 1927, 1936, 1942, and 1948 (ODPD, Part IV, 17).

18 Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Corporation and Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, “Don Mouth Naturalization and Port Lands Flood Protection Project: Revised Terms of Reference,” June 2006, 31. Each year, the Toronto Port Authority removes approximately 35,000 m³ (59,500 tonnes) of sediment from the Keating Channel, and an additional 400 tonnes of debris. Collected sediments are then deposited in underwater containment cells at Tommy Thompson Park (Leslie Street Spit).
Figure 55. Clearing ice from railway tracks, Don Valley, c.1910, William James Family Fonds, Fonds 1244, Item 5028, CTA.

Figure 56. Flood south of Wilton Avenue, March 1920, James Salmon Collection, Fonds 1231, Item 1189, CTA.
accrued for the residents of the city, and for those that continued to live near its banks. Certainly, stronger bridges at the major crossing points along the Lower Don allowed for more reliable travel between communities east and west of the river, and the construction of a passenger rail station at Queen Street allowed greater mobility for east end residents. The level of industrialization that did occur along the river south of Gerrard Street brought jobs for the area’s growing working class population. But the major problems it set out to address—flooding, poor sanitary conditions, and the lack of navigability of the lower river—persisted for years after the dredges had retired and the money had been spent. Losses to the human experience of the Lower
Don would also have been apparent to area residents. As George Rust D’Eye comments in *Cabbagetown Remembered*, the improvement “included the removal of five small islands between Queen and Winchester Streets, and the straightening of three big meanders and two small ones…. [F]ill taken from the hillsides surrounding the Don Valley permanently altered the appearance of the landscape.”¹⁹

On top of these losses came additional expenses in the form of damages. As late as 1914, for example, the City and the Toronto Harbour Commission faced court action when two boat-building companies were denied access to the lake during the construction of Keating Channel.²⁰ Damages to the ecological integrity of the river system are more difficult to quantify, imbricated as they were with other factors such as the disposal of raw sewage into the river further upstream and the subdivision and clearing of remaining forested lands further north in the watershed. As we will see in Chapter 6, accelerated urbanization in the watershed in the first half of the twentieth century saw the filling of more wetlands and the pouring of more concrete over previously porous soils, exacerbating flood conditions in the watershed still further. In the end, the Don continued, as it had always done, to fuel the vitriol of Toronto residents. After all the money and effort spent to transform it into a productive economic engine for the city, it remained, in Hugh Richardson’s words, “a monster of ingratitude.”

Etched into the landscape and its ongoing ecological processes, the Don Improvement presents a legacy of late nineteenth-century approaches toward urban environments. Perhaps most obviously, it demonstrates the challenges faced by contemporary engineers in rationalizing

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²⁰ *Rickey v. City of Toronto*. The case was settled in favour of the defendants, who were ordered to pay the plaintiffs $38,000 to purchase their property and settle their claims, and to grant temporary access to the lake via Coatsworth Cut at the east end of Ashbridge’s Bay.
a dynamic river system already linked in complex ways to the city’s metabolism. As early as 1834, Captain R.H. Bonnycastle recommended something resembling a trunk sewer as an essential component of any strategy to address the Don problem. His recommendations were repeated through the century by seasoned observers of harbour processes, including among others, Kivas Tully, railway engineer Walter Shanly, and British sanitary engineer James Mansergh. That the City failed consistently to act on these recommendations explains in part the failure of other harbour improvement projects. As the Dominion government recognized in 1902, until sewage was diverted from the harbour, support for other waterfront improvement projects was pointless. Not until 1908 would the public finally grant support for the construction of a trunk sewer and sewage treatment plant; the project was completed in 1913. While the condition of Toronto Harbour has improved and water-borne diseases virtually eradicated, the Don remains today one of Canada’s most polluted rivers. The river’s condition and the industrial brownfields that line its lower banks have prompted a new Don improvement scheme, this time directed at the mouth of the river and its entrance to the harbour. Like the 1880s improvement, economic revitalization and pollution abatement are among the project’s

21 For an excellent overview of sewerage developments in Toronto, see Reeves, *Visions*, I, 36-44.

22 As Catherine Brace has shown, beleaguered budgets, competing expert opinions on disease etiology and sewage management, and a lack of public support all contributed to the City’s reluctance to act on the sewage issue in nineteenth century Toronto. The Toronto electorate turned down trunk sewer proposals three times between 1850 and 1907 before finally approving plans for a trunk sewer and sewage treatment plant in 1908 (“One Hundred and Twenty Years of Sewerage,” 147, 153; “Public Works in the Canadian City,” 40-41). The consequences of competing expert opinions on the sewage question are discussed in further detail in Chapter 3.


24 The Don Mouth Naturalization Project will be the subject of further discussion in Chapter 7.
key objectives. Whether the project will profit from the mistakes of past efforts to remake the river remains to be seen.

Looking back on the Don Improvement with all the benefits of hindsight, we can identify some of the reasons why it failed. On one level, a dialectic between limited financial resources and unforeseen circumstances on the ground resulted in a scale-back of original project plans, handicapping opportunities for success. Large quantities of clay and shale in the substrate of the channel path slowed construction work and resulted in considerable cost overruns. Faced with dwindling resources and construction objectives that continued to slip from reach, municipal authorities elected to eliminate certain aspects of the project that, ironically, were critical to its success: reductions in the channel depth north of Gerrard and the elimination of swing bridges condemned to failure early visions for a navigable shipping corridor; the omission, early on, of the section stretching south to the lake ensured that sewage and other pollutants would continue to accumulate in the river’s lower reaches. The dramatic growth of the city’s population in the same period only increased sewage quantities, making conditions along the lower river even worse than before. By sloughing off as too costly, ambitious, or extravagant significant components of the original plan as the reality of funds and time became apparent, the City created a project of half-measures, reducing considerably its ability to meet expectations. Other factors that worked against project success included the competing priorities of proponent institutions—the City with its interests in flood control and raising property revenues through industrial development and land creation; the Harbour Trust with its concerns of siltation and interference with harbour navigation. Conflicts between these institutions worked to slow project progress, particularly around the mouth of the river: the Don Diversion so long advocated by the Harbour Trust did not materialize until almost thirty years later, and even then in considerably modified form. Finally, echoing James C. Scott’s findings for the “grand plans” of high
modernist urban planning, the plan’s rigid construction allowed little flexibility to accommodate dynamic and often unpredictable ecological processes; its failure to adequately assess the particularities of the environment on the ground may account in part for its ultimate shortcomings. We will return to these themes in considering current plans for the mouth of the Don in Chapter 7.
In the summer of 1983, Charles Sauriol (1904-1995), conservationist and long-time champion of the Don River Valley, sat down to capture some of his memories of the valley in the 1920s. He recalled a time before the Don Valley Parkway punched its way along the valley bottom, before the worst of the urban pollutants fouled the waters of the river – a time when the river valley was still largely rural, and partly wild. Thinking of the summers he and his family had spent in a cottage at the Forks of the Don, he wrote:

> I remember seeing the full moon break over the pines, spreading its beams of mysterious phosphorescence over the misty shrouds that rose from the river to the flood plain.... Many an evening I walked to and from the swimming hole as twilight gradually closed down on the day. Then, seated in front of the cottage, I could hear the water flowing over the river stones, and sometimes, just at dusk, the strident call of a whippoorwill.¹

Sauriol’s love for the valley was rooted in personal experience – in time spent living and playing in the valley, tending his vegetable garden, harvesting honey from his apiary, watching his children swim in one of the river’s rare deep pools. For Sauriol, lived experience in the Don Valley led to a lifelong quest to protect it.

This chapter explores the intersections between Sauriol’s life narrative and the history of the valley he loved, weaving from these interconnections a microhistory of individual experience in place. Through Sauriol’s eyes and through his sensibility, we come to appreciate a different Don than the Don we came to know in previous chapters. Sauriol’s Don, still an urban river, was

nevertheless a different place than the river south of the Prince Edward Viaduct. Close to the city but surrounded by farm lands and scattered wood lots (at least until the residential subdivision boom of the post-war period), it represented more of a rural borderland than the highly urbanized, industrial river further south.

Discernible in Sauriol’s life story is the history of the river itself, bending a serpentine and mutable path through some of the major events in his life. It was the river that drew his father Joseph to the city in 1886, when he relocated from eastern Ontario to take a job operating one of the dredges that straightened the Lower Don. Sauriol was born eighteen years later, the youngest of seven children in his francophone Catholic household. Less than two blocks from his childhood home near Queen and Broadview, the canalized lower river appears to have been of little interest to Sauriol as a child. Instead it was the upper valley with its rolling “pine-clad” hills and deep swimming holes that captured his teenage imagination. When his family relocated to lower Leslie Street in post-war 1919, Sauriol joined other neighbourhood boys in the East Toronto 45th Boy Scouts Troop. The troop organized regular hikes and weekend camping expeditions to the East Don and to Taylor-Massey Creek. Recalling his first camp-out in the valley at the age of sixteen, Sauriol wrote: “it was a wilderness at our door, an escape from home, school, discipline… which held everything a red blooded nature loving boy could ask for.”

Sauriol’s years with the Scouts would rank among his fondest boyhood memories, shaping his later work as a conservationist and his lifelong passion for the outdoors.

Through his time with the Scouts, Sauriol had been granted exposure to a predominantly middle class, unofficially Protestant institution that, as Patricia Jasen observes, was part of a

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larger pre-war movement in North America and Britain “aimed at countering the alleged effects of urban life and racial decline on these nations’ youth.” By reconnecting boys with nature and outdoor life and so with their natural (masculine) selves, the Scouts and related organizations aimed to produce “strong, self-reliant, [and] resourceful” citizens to revitalize society.3 Through a Scouting contact Sauriol landed his first job in publishing, as a messenger with the Saturday Night Press. He later commuted this experience into a job with the Montreal publishing firm Poirier Bessette, accepting by the early 1930s the position of advertising manager that he would hold for thirty years.4 As his career in publishing began to take hold, positioning him within a distinctly urban and cosmopolitan milieu, Sauriol turned to the valley for release, occupying his time away from work with long solitary hikes in the upper valleys of the Don. In 1927, at the age of twenty-four, he arranged to lease a small farm worker’s cottage near the Forks of the Don. The cottage would become the focal point for his experiences in the valley: the source of inspiration for his later work as a conservationist, and the site upon which he cast his experiments in self-sufficient living.

In the forty-one summers that he would spend on the East Don, Sauriol moved from a casual appreciator of “open spaces” to an inspired and fervent champion of the valley as a vital green space for wildlife and harried urban residents alike. Major signpost events for the Don—including the construction of the Don Valley Parkway in the late 1950s and the protection of

3 Patricia Jasen, Wild Things: Nature, Culture, and Tourism in Ontario, 1790-1914 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 140; Peter J. Schmitt, Back to Nature: The Arcadian Myth in Urban America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 106-114. Sauriol makes no reference to the denominational background of his troop. Although Scouts Canada was from its origins officially interdenominational, in practice most groups were unofficially Anglican. Ethnic and religious groups did form separate troops in this period without controversy, however, leaving open the possibility that Sauriol’s was a Catholic troop. For more on the subject see Leila Gay Mitchell McKee, “Voluntary Youth Organizations in Toronto, 1880-1930” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Department of History, York University, 1983).

remaining floodplain lands in the early 1960s—would make themselves felt in deeply personal ways within Sauriol’s own life history. In Sauriol’s experience, furthermore, we can chart the beginnings of the twentieth century environmental movement, and the ideological shifts through the 1960s and 70s from a utilitarian conservation ethic to a growing recognition of the significance of biodiversity for non-anthropocentric ends. This effort to discern in individual life experiences what Ronald Hoffman has called “the broader contours of the social and cultural landscape” is a defining characteristic of microhistory.5 As Jill Lepore writes of the distinctions between biography and microhistory in exploring individual lives:

> if biography is largely founded on a belief in the singularity and significance of an individual’s life and his contribution to history, microhistory is founded upon almost the opposite assumption: however singular a person’s life may be, the value of examining it lies not in its uniqueness, but in its exemplariness, in how that individual’s life serves as an allegory for broader issues affecting the culture as a whole.6

Sauriol makes such a compelling subject for study in part because he left behind such a rich record of his life experiences. Author of six books about his experiences as a conservationist, an apiarist, and a cottager in the Don Valley, together with numerous unpublished manuscripts and regular diary entries throughout his life, he gathered meaning from the act of self-documenting. His writings, which span almost eight decades, map a life lived deeply, and consciously, in place. As Stephen Daniels and Catherine Nash point out in their discussion of historical connections between the practices of geography and biography, “life histories are also… life geographies.” In pilgrimage tales, travel accounts, memoirs, and other


forms of life writing, “lives are inscribed in time and space, plotted as both story-lines and routeways.”

A compulsion to interpret his place in the world, his responses to people around him and to the environments he moved through, guided his life work. From the time he was sixteen years old, Sauriol actively constructed an identity as a rambler and an outdoorsman. Using the works of Thoreau and Seton as a model, he documented his journeys through the valley, his self-education in native plant and animal identification, his growing knowledge of the methods and objectives of land conservation. Self-improvement was for him linked to efforts to improve the land, both in terms of its ecological integrity and aesthetic condition: from time spent in nature he drew well-being; from his observations and experiments with restoration techniques, he expanded his knowledge of natural systems and improved his qualifications as a conservationist.

His writings also betray a very conscious construction of his life narrative as a journey of personal sacrifice and moral rigour, moving, like Joseph Campbell’s “hero with a thousand faces,” through obstacles and set-backs to reach enlightenment and self-fulfillment. Here Sauriol sloughs off his former identity as ad-man to don the more heroic cloak of conservationist, sacrificing a regular income for the greater good. Like Ernest Thompson Seton’s autobiographical Trail of an Artist-Naturalist, which positions the author as “a fighter” who

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8 At times the proximity between life and art is uncanny, as in Sauriol and his scouting friends’ careful construction of a shanty in the Don woods, only to return to find it destroyed by vandals—much as Yan does in Seton’s Two Little Savages, a story that mirrors Seton’s own boyhood experience (Ernest Thompson Seton, Two Little Savages: Being the Adventures of Two Boys who Lived as Indians and What They Learned [New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1903, 83]).

“made his own way and his own happiness until in the end success had to come,” Sauriol recalled events in his life with a sometimes tiresome sense of self-importance. Tempering my occasional distaste for Sauriol’s autobiographical musings, however, was a recognition that his achievements were indeed remarkable: through his career with the Metropolitan Toronto Conservation Foundation and later the Nature Conservancy of Canada, he oversaw the acquisition of tens of thousands of acres of ecologically significant land in Ontario and across Canada, work that won him sixteen conservation awards and, in 1989, membership in the Order of Canada. A man of his times, as we shall see, he witnessed and contributed to dramatic changes in the physical and cultural landscape of his generation. However he may have characterized his journey, it is clear, too, that he didn’t make it alone. Warm references to friends and colleagues in the conservation movement appear throughout his writings, particularly in connection with the cottage, which served as a meeting place for Don Valley conservationists.

In the discussion that follows, I investigate the intersections between life history and histories of place, biography and geography, in documenting Sauriol’s relationship with the valley through the twentieth century. Using Sauriol’s experiences as a lens, this chapter details the history of citizen and institutional initiatives to protect the valley, from the conservation movement of the 1940s to the environmental movements of the 1960s and 1980s. Changes in the approaches to protecting urban nature, I shall argue, are reflected in Sauriol’s personal experience—the strategies he employed, the language he used, and the losses he suffered as a result of urban planning policies. Over the course of Sauriol’s career as a professional


conservationist, from the 1960s to the 1990s, the river increasingly became a symbol of urban health—specifically, the health of the relationship between urban residents and the natural environment upon which they depend.

I Summering in the Don

Visiting the valley on Labour Day 1966 with his grandsons, Sauriol reflected on the almost forty summers spent with his family at their cottage on the East Don: “how many times we moved back to the city on past labor days after the end of a summer at the cottage. When we moved out in May it seemed as though fall would never come, but it did, and each summer left its indelible mark in [our] memories.”

12 They were summers that, as Sauriol wrote in his 1981 book, *Remembering the Don*, “filled my time with the orchard, the garden, the apiary, the easy living by the then clean Don River.”

13 Having first spotted the cottage on a weekend Scouting expedition at the age of sixteen, Sauriol arranged to lease the building and its surrounding four acres from the Canadian National Railway seven years later, in 1927. Constructed in 1899 by then landowner John Taylor (of the Taylor Brothers’ paper mills), for a hired man who worked on the Taylor farm, the cottage had been sold to the CNR along with a portion of the Taylor estate when railway construction divided the property in 1904.

14 It had seen a series of tenants in the intervening years, and by 1927 was in a state of considerable disrepair. Sauriol, his father, and brother Harry set to work repairing the chimney, repapering the walls, and laying out a 100

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14 Railway construction in the area divided Taylor’s holdings and re-routed the Don River, making the land around the cottage less accessible from the main Taylor property (Charles Sauriol, “The Don Valley as I Knew It,” vol. 5 [1938-42], [194-?], Manuscripts of Charles Sauriol, [194-]1995, Charles Sauriol Fonds, Fonds 4, Series 107, File 38, Box 123723, CTA).
square foot vegetable garden on the property. Sauriol purchased the cottage from the railway company in 1930, and after years of lobbying, finally purchased the land from them in 1939. Crucially for Sauriol in the years that followed, the land included a second, tenanted cottage—the old Philip de Grassi homestead—situated closer to Don Mills Road (figure 58).

The “Lily of the Valley,” as Sauriol came to call it, the cottage was a simple clapboarded structure consisting of a living room, a pantry, and three small bedrooms. Bounded by the Don on the east, north, and west, the property was completely denuded of trees, “save for two old apple trees of de Grassi’s planting, [and] an ancient willow tree.” Employed as a publisher’s representative at the time, and full of the restlessness of youth, Sauriol recalled that the cottage provided him with “a controlling force, something… [to] absorb my energy.”

Evident in his writings from the time is the sense of accomplishment he gathered from his work on the property, and the delight he took in its natural surroundings. Recalling his first extended stay on the property, a Victoria Day weekend in 1928 spent with his father, he wrote:

It was a holiday of walks under the stars, of sleeping in the valley, but within the protection of four walls and a shingled roof instead of in a tent as in former years. A holiday intense with the trilling of frogs and the shrill tones of the spring peepers. …[W]e planted what we wanted to plant, …[digging] down into the soil

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15 Charles Sauriol, “The Don Valley as I Knew It,” vol.1 (1920-27), [194-?], p.8, Manuscripts of Charles Sauriol, [194-]-1995, Charles Sauriol Fonds, Fonds 4, Series 107, File 34, Box 123721, folio 1, CTA.

16 The same year, the CNR also granted Sauriol a perpetual lease of an acre of land across the stream from his cottage (FYFA). Philip de Grassi (1793-1877), a native of Rome, emigrated to York in 1831 after serving as an officer in the British army. He and his family took up a land grant of 200 acres at the Forks of the Don River, where he built a “commodious frame house” and a sawmill (De Grassi Papers, MS COLL 73, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library). A portion of de Grassi’s land was later acquired by the Taylors.

17 Sauriol may have intended a double meaning here, in that the “lily of the valley” represents the Virgin Mary in Catholic iconography.

18 Sauriol, Remembering the Don, 137.

19 Sauriol, “The Don Valley as I Knew It,” vol. 1, 4.
instead of merely walking over it…. [It] took us away from the city to something much more intimate.\textsuperscript{20}

Intimacy is a repeated theme in Sauriol’s recollections of his years in the valley. “I love the cottage and the Don Valley in which it nestles more than any other material thing in life, he wrote in an unpublished manuscript in the 1940s. “I have planted every tree on its acres. Have, with my own hand assisted in the changing of every square foot of the grounds I have so often trod.”\textsuperscript{21} Upon marrying Simonne Menard in 1932, he enjoyed long summers in the valley in her company, and later in the company of their four children.

The river is a constant presence in Sauriol’s memories of the cottage. He noted that its great variety of sounds provided a comforting backdrop for his everyday activities, from the

\textsuperscript{20} Charles Sauriol, “Fourteen Years on Four Acres,” 1945, Manuscripts of Charles Sauriol, [194-]-1995, Charles Sauriol Fonds, Fonds 4, Series 107, File 4, Box 107297, folio 1, CTA.

“gurgling” sound of water moving over stones to the “bem, bem bem” of creekside frogs and the repeating “burble bee” of blackbirds perched on rushes in the spring. Running through his property, the river also provided a mnemonic link to his boyhood memories. A site of relaxation and play for his four children, its cool waters in summer also allowed him to relive his own youthful summers in the valley: “there was considerable pleasure,” he wrote in 1945, “in walking up valley to the old clay bank swimming hole, to strip on the sandy beach to wade into the water by degrees.” Bisecting the property to the west and north of the cottage, the river’s curving course also presented a substantial obstacle to the Sauriols’ movement. In the early years, they forded the river by foot, or accessed the property from the back by crossing a wooden bridge over a small creek. Sauriol experimented with a number of bridge structures over the years, losing several to rising floodwaters. A cable foot bridge constructed in 1946 finally held, allowing the family year-round access to the western half of the acreage. The destructive energy of seasonal floodwaters also brought bounty: during spring freshets, Sauriol recalled, “a veritable procession of branches, logs, roots, journeyed past in the hurrying flood waters for days at a time.” Standing by the river with a sixteen foot pike pole, he was able to gather large quantities of wood to dry as a source of heat for weekend visits in winter.

In his work at the cottage Sauriol revealed himself as a consummate improver, labouring incrementally over the years to better the condition and comfort of the cottage, to expand and refine his garden, and to reforest the four acre cottage property together with his other land

23 Sauriol, “Fourteen Years.”
holdings in the valley (figure 59). Guided by a closely-held vision of self-sufficiency, he planted an orchard, fashioned a pump to draw water from the river, and learned to identify edible plants in the surrounding countryside. In his writings, he made conscious comparisons to the families that worked the land before him. He and his father, he wrote in 1945, “were as pioneers, re-carving in this semi-wilderness a fine place to live.” Introducing his multi-volume manuscript *The Don Valley as I Knew It*, he wrote:

> the persistency [sic] of our efforts to change an unkempt field into a scene of beauty constitutes the basis of the story.... Possibly, the re-pioneering of these few acres on the threshold of a modern civilization has taken a turn quite unusual

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24 Through the late 1930s and early 1940s Sauriol acquired several pieces of what he called “loose land” in the vicinity of his cottage. These small pieces of land (the three pieces he describes were one acre in size or less) were deeded to him by the municipality in return for Sauriol’s promise to reforest them (“Fourteen Years”).

25 Sauriol, “Fourteen Years.”
within the confines of a big city. Possibly, there has been so much of the unusual to write about because we have been unusual people.26

While framing himself as a pioneer, Sauriol was aware of the divergence between his objectives and those of his forebears on the property. Philip de Grassi, the military officer who was first granted the land at the Forks in 1831, cleared the land of its trees to make it suitable for agricultural development; Sauriol, in contrast, worked to reforest the property as a “beautification” project: “I thought only to turn [my acres] into a place of beauty. Forest trees were planted by the thousands, and an orchard too, which grew to fruitfulness. Rich soil was wrested from sod and twitch grass, and became a garden land in which fine fruits and vegetables grew.”27 Here Sauriol’s self-image of the modern pioneer “making the land his own” through improvement positions him within the legacy of liberal ideals in Canada, with its image of the individual (male) yeoman farmer “making a land moral” through his labour.28

Some comment on Sauriol’s social location is appropriate here. A member of the rising professional middle class, Sauriol enjoyed a privilege inaccessible to many in the 1930s and 40s of owning not only a cottage property but a primary home within the city. Sufficient time away from work to enjoy and improve his holdings also characterized his position in society. As an urban advertising executive, Sauriol also occupied the ambivalent position of promoting consumption while at the same time constructing a self-image of the discerning anti-consumerist. As such, he epitomized what T.J. Jackson Lears has identified as the ambivalence of

26 Sauriol, “The Don Valley as I Knew It,” vol. 2.
27 Sauriol, Remembering the Don, 136.
antimodernist dissent in early twentieth century America: typically held by the urban educated elite, antimodernist sentiment placed value in the hard but satisfying lives of rural premoderns; its backward-looking impulses, however, often coincided with an enthusiasm for material progress and possessive individualism in a rapidly urbanizing, secularizing society.29

Sauriol’s professed goals of self-sufficiency and his desire to seek solace in nature define him as a man of his times as much as they set him apart as an “unusual person.” While forging a summer home out the wilds of the city’s Don Valley would certainly have been considered an esoteric activity by most early twentieth century Torontonians, Sauriol’s self-image in this period drew upon an established rhetoric of social and particularly urban reform. As Artibise and Stelter note, “between 1881 and 1921, the proportion of Canadians living in urban places doubled from about twenty-five percent to almost fifty percent of the total population.” In the same period, Toronto’s population multiplied by six.30 A wide range of problems, including poverty, crime, and a pervasive sense of anxiety, were thought to stem from the rapid industrialization and urban growth that was transforming Canadian centres. Social reformers in Canada, like their American counterparts, responded with a diverse array of movements to address the ills of urban life,31


among them what has generally been defined as a “back-to-nature” movement. Distinctly urban and middle class in impetus, the movement promoted the benefits of outdoor life as an antidote to the hectic pace and corrupting influences of the city. “In these days the country has been discovered anew,” J.W. Dafoe wrote in the Canadian Forestry Association’s Rod and Gun magazine in 1899. “No fact of contemporary life is more significant or more hopeful than this return to nature, for breathing space, for those whose daily walk is the tumultuous city streets.”

Nature study in the schools, summer camps and scouting organizations for boys, hiking clubs, and the proliferation of summer cottages among wealthy urbanites were among the outlets for a widespread desire to reconnect with nature at the turn of the twentieth century.

Sauriol would certainly have been influenced by these philosophies. Like many Canadian men of his generation, he recalled that the works of nature writer and back-to-nature enthusiast Ernest Thompson Seton “kindled within me a dormant love for the outdoors.” In keeping with back-to-nature ideals, he saw the Don valley as “a realm of wild life that the city had not

32 The “back-to-nature” movement differed from the “back-to-the-land” movement of the same period, which “sought both to revitalize rural life for those already on the land and to encourage city dwellers to take up homesteading.” Back-to-nature, in contrast, championed short respite in nature as a tonic for city-weary urban dwellers (David E. Shi, The Simple Life: Plain Living and High Thinking in American Culture [Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1985], 194).

33 J.W. Dafoe, “A Day in the Laurentians,” Rod and Gun 1 (August 1899): 51, cited in George Altmeyer, “Three Ideas of Nature in Canada, 1893-1914,” in Consuming Canada: Readings in Environmental History (Toronto: Copp Clark Ltd., 1995), 99. As Altmeyer and Peter Schmitt have shown, the movement took its intellectual assumptions from diverse roots, including Social Darwinian ideas of “overcivilization” and “emasculating” that positioned modern, urban society as a feminizing influence that “weakened the body and dulled the senses.” Opportunities to arrest these trends by exposing young boys, in particular, to robust physical activity in nature, were among the rationale for the scouting movement and the development of summer camps for urban youth (Schmitt, Back to Nature, 96-114, cited in Greer, Kirsten and Laura Cameron, “‘Swee-ee-et Cânda, Cânâda, Cânâda’: Sensuous Landscapes of Birdwatching in the Eastern Provinces, 1900-1939,” Material History Review 62 [Fall 2005]: 37).


35 Sauriol, “The Don Valley as I Knew It,” vol. 2.
During the hard years of the Depression and World War II, the cottage provided solace for his “harassed mind.” He wrote in 1945:

I went out to my place thousands of times.... Often an absent lover I wooed the place in fleeting moments. It may have been only to gather a basket of apples from the snug root cellar on a snowy evening, or to plant a seedling tree, or to gather an armful of wood, or to gaze out at sunset from the dormer windows—but out I went, and as often as I went I cast overboard the debris of the day. Those pinched, sordid thoughts of wars, misery, consternation, and the woe of the world.

Sauriol’s fascination with the valley, however, was more than simply a summer cottager’s desire for escape. Instead, his desire to seek in his acres a place to “cast overboard the debris of the day” met with a deeply personal ethic of conservation. Efforts over many years to improve degraded areas in the valley through reforestation and bank stabilization reflected a belief in the rational management of nature’s bounty. At the same time, in his writings and his later advocacy work, Sauriol expressed a passionately held conviction that the valley should be protected from urban encroachment, its “beauty spots” preserved as places for the physical and spiritual health of the city’s residents. As Altmeyer argues, conservation in Canada in the early decades of the twentieth century combined a concern for pragmatic scientific management of natural resources with a sense of moral duty to preserve nature’s aesthetic beauty for future generations—the two impulses were not, as they are often portrayed, mutually exclusive.

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36 Ibid.
37 Sauriol, “Fourteen Years.”
Sauriol’s conservation ethic extended into his everyday practices, in his efforts to live a “simple life” of discriminating consumption. “So indoctrinated was I in my love of simple things,” he wrote in 1929, “that I was beset with remorse over the wiring of the cottage, which seemed as a desertion of my ideal towards country living.”

A self-described “back-fence producer,” he bottled his own honey from his apiary, made maple syrup from trees he had planted, fashioned preserves (presumably with his wife Simonne’s assistance) from the wide variety of fruits and berries he grew on site, and harvested the annual bounty from his vegetable garden to feed his family and friends. In his idle time, he dreamed of making a living entirely from the land, perhaps through the sale of wild water cress and garden produce, or the offering of “old-fashioned skating parties” for families weary of modern life. Antimodernist responses to a rapidly changing society, Sauriol’s activities at the cottage also represented effective survival strategies for the economic climate of the 1930s. While Sauriol’s decision to pursue a “simple life” reflected the reform-oriented climate of the early twentieth century, it was at the same time more consciously principled, and more sustained, than were the comparable impulses of his contemporaries to purchase a summer home or to send their children to camp.

39 Sauriol, “Fourteen Years.” For an intriguing discussion of “simple living” movements in American history, see Shi, The Simple Life.

40 Sauriol, Remembering the Don, 31.

41 Sauriol, “Fourteen Years.”
Unusual as the Sauriols’ experience was compared with that of most Toronto residents, they were not the only family to seek an alternative way of living in the rural borderlands of the city. In his writings Sauriol identified a number of other “Don Valley roamers” to whom the valley “was a means of escape.”\textsuperscript{42} Some, like Sauriol, sought out the valley regularly as a temporary retreat, pursuing the health benefits of outdoor recreation popularized at the time or realizing a “back-to-nature” impulse to unpack the week’s stresses within “a scene of simple pleasure and untroubled quiet.”\textsuperscript{43} Others squatted in secluded areas or rented properties on extended leases.\textsuperscript{44} As discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4, the valley seemed to provide a harbour for those who found themselves without the necessary resources to survive in the neighbouring city. Sauriol notes in his diary in June 1933 the arrival in the valley of a man named Ramsay with his wife and sixteen year old daughter. Ramsay had apparently lost his Queen Street East bakery after failing to pay the rent for some months. With few alternatives, the family moved “their household belongings and small delivery truck” into the valley and pitched a tent along the railway right-of-way near Sauriol’s cottage. The family later took up tenancy of Sauriol’s cottage in the winter months, camping in a canvas tent on the property through the summer months until Ramsay finally found work with the military in 1940.\textsuperscript{45}

For squatters such as the Ramsays, the valley offered a place to regroup. Much of the land in the upper valley in the 1930s and 40s still rested in large farm parcels, making it possible,  

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\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{43} Schmitt, \textit{Back to Nature}, xvii.
\textsuperscript{44} Sauriol’s immediate neighbours in the late 1920s and early 30s both leased farm properties: the Skelhornes, who operated a piggery on the old de Grassi homestead, on the opposite side of the river from Sauriol’s cottage, and the Maynes, who leased the former Taylor farm over the hill.
\end{flushleft}
along the wooded edges of properties and on sloping ravine lands, to feel removed from a
discernible landowner. As Sauriol comments, “no one seemed to own valley land, although
someone most certainly did.” Precincts right-of-ways through the valley also provided
undeveloped land upon which to camp or squat. As John Stilgoe has noted, “(r)ailway space lay
beyond the everyday landscape and the popular understanding of privately owned land. It
belonged to a faceless corporation and had no inhabitants, except hoboes.” Essentially, the
river valley offered what appeared to be unoccupied and unmonitored space, space in which
people for various reasons sought shelter and retreat, and pursued alternative livelihoods.

II Threatened Paradise, 1940s

In the years following World War II, pressures from population growth and corresponding
residential development were beginning to make themselves felt in Sauriol’s beloved valley.
More and more valley lands (and the adjacent tablelands that drained into them) were becoming
earmarked for residential and industrial development. The growing expanse of paved surfaces in
the lower valley particularly, together with the loss of vegetation, produced detrimental effects
for the watershed’s hydrological regime, including soil compaction, increased surface run-off
and corresponding declines in groundwater reserves. By 1949, the authors of the Don Valley
Conservation Report concluded, fifteen per cent of lands within the watershed had been
urbanized (cleared and partially paved for residential development); this figure would grow

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47 Stilgoe, Metropolitan Corridor: Railroads and the American Scene, 147.
exponentially in the decades that followed. “The city is expanding feverishly,” Sauriol wrote in a 1953 pamphlet advocating valley conservation:

Bulldozers are eliminating the beauty spots of centuries. Chain saws are heard all day long. Top soil is scooped up and sold commercially. Once tranquil highways, including Don Mills Road, are crowded 'bumper to bumper' with traffic. The fields of yesteryear contain rows of houses. Expansion, we are told, will continue. Zealots of progress foresee the city reaching forty miles on each side; duplicating Chicago and other large centres of the United States in terms of millions of population.”

While the upper valley remained largely rural in this period, signs of change were, for Sauriol, unsettlingly present.

With population growth came increasing pollution. Although the construction of east-west intercepting sewers in the 1910s had relieved the Don and Toronto harbour of their functions as repositories for municipal wastes, sewage pollution continued to plague the city’s river systems. Expansions in residential development across the city pushed outdated sewage infrastructure beyond capacity, and growing volumes of partly treated sewage were discharged into the city’s river systems. Storm sewer outlets, furthermore, continued to discharge into the river, carrying run-off from the city’s ever-increasing paved surfaces. Oil from city streets, herbicides, pesticides, road salt, and dog excrement were (and still are) among the contaminants carried by storm sewers into the river system. Furthermore, the sewage system was not infallible: designed to carry both sewage and storm water wastes through the same system of pipes, it succeeded under normal conditions in carrying all wastes to the Ashbridge’s Bay plant for


50 Reeves, 40. Sewage was instead pumped east of the valley to the treatment plant on Eastern Avenue (near the foot of today’s Leslie Street), and from there to discharge into the lake southeast of Ashbridge’s Bay.
treatment. In times of heavy rain, however, the system demonstrated its inflexibility: sewers reached capacity and overflowed, sending raw sewage into the lake and waterways like the Don.\footnote{With a total of 30 combined sewer outfalls and 872 storm sewer outfalls over the length of today’s Don River, “combined sewer overflows” remain a key source of water pollution in much of the watershed. Recent tests by the non-profit organization Lake Ontario Waterkeeper have confirmed that water downstream from combined sewer outfalls is up to forty-four times more polluted than upstream (Lake Ontario Waterkeeper, \url{http://www.waterkeeper.ca/2008/10/16/ask-your-waterkeeper-combined-sewer-outflows-csos/}, accessed 7 April 2009).}

A series of smaller sewage treatment plants in the upper valley also compromised water quality in the river system. Constructed in the 1920s and 30s, these plants were designed to process sewage from their immediate area and release minimally treated effluent into an adjacent river or stream.\footnote{White, \textit{Urban Infrastructure}, 11. By 1949 a total of six sewage treatment plants deposited effluent into the Don. These included: the Lansing and Armour Heights plants on the west branch of the river; the Todmorden and North Toronto plants on the main branch of the Don south of the Forks; and the Scarborough and Danforth Park plants on Taylor-Massey Creek.} Rapid post-war population growth quickly overtaxed these plants, resulting, as the engineering firm Gore & Storrie reported in 1949, in the discharge of “low quality effluents” into the river.\footnote{Gore and Storrie, Consulting Engineers, “Toronto and York Planning Board Report on Water Supply and Sewage Disposal for the City of Toronto and Related Areas,” 1949, p.90, Records of the Information Officer for the Metropolitan Toronto Planning Department, Municipality of Metropolitan Toronto Fonds, Fonds 220, Series 40, File 227, Box 107792, folio 3, CTA.} Tests by the Provincial Board of Health in 1949 found a daily average of 6500 pounds of suspended solids dumped into the Don River from six sewage treatment plants – almost double the normal summer flow of the river itself. Conditions became so bad that in 1950, a provincial conservation report described the Don as an ‘open sewer’ and ranked its water as the most heavily polluted in the province.\footnote{ODPD, Part VI, 15.} For Sauriol, the loss of a battle to stop the construction of a sewage treatment plant on the East Don River at Don Mills in the early 1950s was “one of
the hardest things to live with.”\textsuperscript{55} Whereas the “two Dons” had once been clearly separated in Sauriol’s mind as the polluted, industrialized lower river and the rural, “still untainted” upper reaches, the effects of everyday urban living—flushing toilets, driving cars, spraying gardens—were making themselves felt ever more strongly in the upper watershed.

River waters were not the only sink for wastes in the valley. Across the watershed, the steep slopes of valley ravines became convenient dumping areas for refuse. As Wayne Reeves has noted, until the introduction of sanitary landfill sites in the early 1950s, “Toronto's ravines and waterfront were convenient public dump sites—‘levelling-up places,’ according to the city engineer—for household and industrial waste and street sweepings.”\textsuperscript{56} Joel Tarr has documented the twentieth-century phenomenon within American centres to shift from water to land as a sink for wastes as regulations against water pollution became more stringent and urban expansion necessitated the search for larger and more plentiful waste disposal sites.\textsuperscript{57} As the city engineer’s comment suggests, land filling served the double purpose of storing wastes and removing the barriers to development posed by these yawning divides in the city’s topography. A recent report by the Don Watershed Regeneration Council identified forty-seven of these abandoned landfill sites throughout the Don watershed.\textsuperscript{58} Official dumping by the city was exacerbated by the common private practice of tossing unwanted materials—from the car window or by the truckload—in places where it quickly disappeared from sight. Sauriol wrote heatedly in 1953: “it is not an uncommon sight to see garbage and refuse dumped indiscriminately in the ravine and

\textsuperscript{55} Sauriol, “Sauriol, Charles, 1932-1995.”
\textsuperscript{56} Reeves, “From the Ground Up,” 71.
\textsuperscript{57} Tarr, \textit{The Search for the Ultimate Sink}.
\textsuperscript{58} The Don Watershed Regeneration Council, \textit{Forging a New Deal for the Don} (Toronto: Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, 2006), 5.
along the roads of the Don Valley by people too stupid or selfish to realize they are destroying something that can never be replaced” (figure 60).

Sauriol also perceived a threat from more innocuous sources. Groups of boys hacking at tree trunks in the woods and children picking wildflowers in valley meadows struck him as the “wanton destruction” of nature. “Each year,” he wrote of the 1940s and 50s, “I dreaded the Easter holidays. It was a time when boys spent their holidays in the Don Valley setting grass fires, hacking trees, destroying saplings, shooting birds and leaving, in their wake, an annual trail of destruction. This senseless practice brought the regeneration of tree growth to a standstill and resulted in the ruin of young cedar, pine and hemlock groves.” Sauriol’s outrage here has distinctly moral overtones: here was not only ignorance, but needless waste. Like other proponents of the Nature Study movement, which replaced hunting and collecting plants and animals with passive observation, Sauriol saw the need for a sense of decorum in nature. “Good” behaviour in nature included attempts to beautify, improve, and learn from natural environments; “bad” behaviour was needlessly consumptive or nonsensically destructive. His indignation, too, betrayed the distance he had travelled from his own boyhood, when he celebrated the Valley as “an escape from home, school, [and] discipline.”

III The Don Valley Conservation Association

Sauriol was not alone in his concerns. Across the province, farmers, naturalists, and foresters expressed growing alarm about the effects of deforestation, soil erosion and flooding and their

60 Sauriol, Trails of the Don, 268.
consequences for agriculture and forestry. They petitioned the Province to develop a watershed approach to natural resource conservation, and in 1946, with the participation of a number of municipalities, the Province responded by passing the *Conservation Authorities Act*. The Act enabled local residents to request a Conservation Authority to manage and conserve resources in their watershed. Identified by Toronto historian Wayne Reeves as the beginning of “watershed

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62 As Peter Gillis and Thomas R Roach have concluded, the conservation movement in Canada drew its leadership from two main groups: scientific farmers and lumbermen (“Beginnings,” 112).
thinking” among regional authorities, the Act recognized the need for conservation initiatives to have strong local support and participation: individual municipalities had to agree to take on the responsibility of managing the Authority, and to shoulder some of the costs of conservation activities (shared equally with the Province). 63 Two years later, the Don Valley Conservation Authority formed to address resource conservation issues throughout the Don watershed. Funded by the City of Toronto and the Province, the Authority benefitted from the technical expertise of the Ontario Department of Planning and Development (established in 1944), which published the comprehensive Don Valley Conservation Report as a background and guide for conservation activities in the watershed in 1950.

At the same time as these initiatives, grassroots activism was building around local level concerns. In the February 1947, preserves manufacturer Shirriff proposed to construct a factory on the site of Todmorden Mills in the Don Valley. The proposal would have seen the existing historic mill and brewery buildings demolished to make way for a storage facility. Sauriol was outraged, and together with Rand Freeland, owner of the Fantasy Farm amusement park across the street from Todmorden Mills, and East Toronto lawyer Roy Cadwell, set out to bury the project. A series of community meetings concentrated public opposition to the proposal, and Shirriff abandoned the project the following year. 64 One of the outcomes of this successful community-based campaign was the formation of the Don Valley Conservation Association (DVCA), established by Sauriol, Freeland and Cadwell in the spring of 1947. With a

63 Reeves, “From the Ground Up,” 70. Since 1946, thirty-six Conservation Authorities have been established across the Province to address problems such as flood control, soil erosion, and encroachment of development into river valleys (Conservation Ontario, http://www.conservation-ontario.on.ca/about/history.html). For a detailed discussion of the Conservation Authorities Act and its implications for watershed protection in the Toronto area, see Wayne C. Reeves, “Visions for the Metropolitan Toronto Waterfront, II: Forging a Regional Identity, 1913-68” (Major Report No.28, Department of Geography, University of Toronto, April 1993).

membership of over three hundred Toronto residents, the DVCA worked to protect valley
resources and educate the public about the need for conservation. Activities and publications
emphasized the still “wild and serene” Don Valley as a “green buttress” to the growing city
below it. Nature walks, annual tree planting days, and automobile tours of the watershed
helped inform the public about a threatened wilderness at their doorsteps. The first ever Paddle
the Don event, organized by the DVCA in 1949, set out to prove the navigability of the river
while encouraging Toronto residents to see the valley as a place for fun and recreation (the
annual event continues today as an initiative of the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority).

In 1949 the DVCA reorganized into three regional branches within the Don watershed,
Sauriol taking up the leadership of the East York branch. In the years that followed, public
attention was further directed to the Don Valley cause through a series of popular steam
locomotive trips that Sauriol dubbed the “Conservation Specials.” The first of eleven annual trips
departed from the Don Station on Queen Street East on May 13, 1951, retracing by rail
Lieutenant-Governor Simcoe’s journey to the headwaters of the Don in Richmond Hill in 1793
figure 61). High school students in period costumes adopted the roles of Simcoe, his wife
Elizabeth, and his Aide-de-Camp. Marrying Sauriol’s dual interests in history and nature, the
events brought considerable exposure to the valley cause with an average of eight hundred
passengers taking part each year.

In 1951, Sauriol launched The Cardinal as the quarterly publication of the DVCA East

66 Don Valley Conservation Association, “Presentation.”
67 Other branches included the Leaside and North York DVCAs.
Figure 61. Boarding the "Conservation Special," Don Station, 1951, Historical Photographs of the Don Valley, Photographs of Charles Sauriol, Charles Sauriol Fonds, Series 101, File 20, Item 1, CTA.

York branch (DVCA-EY). Written and produced entirely by Sauriol with modest financial assistance from the DVCA-EY and a number of in-kind donors, the magazine contained a mixture of short articles on valley history, fictional stories emphasizing the moral righteousness of nature stewardship, news about conservation activities, and educational “conversations” between the DVCA mascots, Canny and Candid Cardinal. Sauriol wrote in his inaugural Spring 1951 issue:

Persons residing in the Toronto metropolitan area have at their disposal a treasure trove of nature and a bower of natural beauty which is the envy of many other cities: The Cardinal will endeavour to make these surroundings 'live' for you, so that the streams, woodlands, birds and flowers at your door, will mean more to you than ever before. And in the true spirit of conservation The Cardinal will
fight to protect from further ruin sections of this woodland realm already attacked by the despoilers of the beautiful.

*The Cardinal* ran until 1956, when Sauriol turned to other endeavours (figure 62).

Educational activities also adopted an imperative tone in efforts to protect valley wildlife and native vegetation. Incensed as Sauriol was by “despoilers of the beautiful,” he set out with like-minded DVCA members to put an end to such “menaces to conservation” as “the shooting of song birds, ducks, pheasants; the setting of grass fires; the hacking of trees by juveniles.” In 1947 they established a citizens’ patrol of the valley to protect trees from the hatchets of young boys and rare wildflowers from the enthusiasm of their admirers. The same year, an Easter week “Save the Valley” campaign proved especially successful in “uproot[ing] vandalism.” Visits to schools and Scout groups informed children about the benefits of non-intrusive nature study, while collaboration with local police saw the seizure of “18 axes, 7 bayonets and a few butcher knives” from would-be valley vandalists. The following summer used the participation of a provincial game warden to net almost 140 rifles. Another grassroots campaign that Sauriol initiated involved the placement of over one hundred metal signs on tree trunks throughout the valley bearing the message “Stop: Don’t Cut Trees” in bold red lettering (figure 63). Together, these efforts resulted in a “[sharp decrease in] damage to the valley woods.”

As these activities suggest, the DVCA focused most of its energies on building public awareness of the significance of the valley, and influencing public behaviour in nature. In

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69 Sauriol, “Beginnings of the Don Valley Conservation Association.”

addition to the valley patrols and educational campaigns, efforts to shame those who dumped garbage in ravines appeared regularly in the *Cardinal’s* quarterly “newsettes.”  Decorum in valley environments was also encouraged through positive examples.  Sauriol’s DVCA-EY organized a hiking group in the valley, constructed trails to improve public access, and welcomed the participation of diverse groups in their annual tree planting days. These events provided an opportunity for Torontonians to get to know and therefore care about the wilderness at their doorsteps. As much as the DVCA aimed to cultivate respect for the nonhuman world, they also forwarded an understanding of nature as a place in which humans had no part, except as contemplative visitors or caring stewards. By proscribing certain behaviours and promoting others, they aligned themselves with their counterparts in wilderness conservation in constituting...
Figure 63. “Stop: Don’t Cut Trees,” Don Valley Conservation Association, 1947 (with unidentified DVCA member), Photographs of the Sauriol Cottage, Charles Sauriol Fonds, Fonds 4, Series 81, File 73, CTA.

Like many grassroots organizations of the time, the DVCA performed mainly reactionary functions, protesting the encroachment of development in one corner of the watershed while objecting to the erection of sewage disposal plants in another. Less energy seems to have been directed toward influencing long-term development planning processes. As Stephen Bocking has observed of post-war planning processes in Toronto, decision-making was performed largely by “non-elected officials—in effect, technocrats” with few discernible avenues for public input.\footnote{Stephen Bocking, “Constructing Urban Expertise: Professional and Political Authority in Toronto, 1940-1970,” \textit{Journal of Urban History} 33, no. 1 (2006): 69.}

Sauriol’s reports in the \textit{Cardinal} and elsewhere nevertheless indicate some success in negotiations with government officials at the township and regional level. Meetings with the East York Council in 1950 resulted in the protection of several pockets of woodland in the East Don Valley; a “nature park” at the Forks of the Don was established with Township approval several years later. Communication with the Don Valley Conservation Authority provided another conduit for DVCA members to voice their concerns. Sauriol cites a 1954 \textit{Globe and Mail} editorial in noting that the Association acted as a “channel through which public opinion has been presented to the Conservation Authority of the Don Watershed.”\footnote{“Vox Populi,” \textit{Globe and Mail}, June 18, 1954, cited in Sauriol, \textit{The Cardinal}, Fall 1954. The choice by the Don Valley Conservation Authority to adopt the same acronym as Sauriol’s grassroots Don Valley Conservation Association has proved a chronic source of confusion for researchers seeking to disentangle the histories of the two organizations. Similar as their names were, the organizations differed widely in access to resources, the Authority accessing funds and technical support from the Province and municipalities in the Don watershed, the Association drawing exclusively from the talents and generosity of its members. In 1957 the Authority amalgamated with four...}
IV  Hurricane Hazel and the Creation of the Metro Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (MTRCA)

The quiet of the night was shaken by the reverberations of huge floating trees pounding objects in their path; the water was littered with fast-moving objects scarcely discernible in the darkness. The water rose higher and higher to cover the railway, then the approaches to the Brickworks. Sounds of muffled explosions came from the brick kilns as the water reached the fires in the kilns and extinguished them; a strange note in a scene of disaster.\(^\text{74}\)

From his home on Hillside Drive overlooking the valley, Sauriol watched through the night as heavy rain and winds transformed the Don into a rushing torrent with an astonishing capacity for destruction. It was the early morning of October 16, 1954, and Hurricane Hazel—originally projected to dissipate over southern Ontario—had suddenly re-intensified, pounding Toronto with winds that reached 110 kilometres per hour. In the space of forty-eight hours, the storm dumped 285 millimetres of rain in the Toronto area, washing out bridges and roads across the city and taking eighty-one lives across southern Ontario. In Toronto alone, over 1,800 people were left homeless.\(^\text{75}\) Although no lives were lost in the Don Valley, two cars and their occupants were swept into the river; one man waited over eight hours in an elm tree before being rescued by authorities.\(^\text{76}\) Damage across the province was estimated at roughly $100 million (about $1 billion today). The storm and its consequences marked a turning point for conservation

other conservation authorities in the Greater Toronto area to become the Metro Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (MTRCA).

\(^{74}\) Sauriol, Trails of the Don, 282.


initiatives in the valley (and across the city); it also signalled a transition for Sauriol and his career as a conservation professional.

As the city rebuilt over the winter of 1954–55, it did so with a new awareness of the significance of valley lands as natural drainage channels for flood waters. In 1957, four Toronto-area conservation authorities, including the Don, amalgamated to form the Metropolitan Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (MTRCA), which allowed for greater coordination between jurisdictions in regulating the use of valley lands. The MTRCA had the power to acquire valley lands for flood control and recreation purposes, a decision that would have dramatic consequences for the future of the Don Valley. Sauriol played a large role in these acquisitions as Chairman of the MTRCA Conservation Areas Advisory Board from 1957 to 1971, and as the first Executive Director of the MTRCA Foundation – the fundraising arm of the MTRCA – from 1963 to 1966. Between 1957 and 1994, approximately fifteen per cent of remaining natural areas in the Don Valley were protected as part of the MTRCA floodplains protection program.  

While Hazel can be credited with tipping the balance toward watershed conservation in southern Ontario, and greatly accelerating plans for the acquisition of valley lands, floodplain protection had been a subject of discussion among conservation-minded planners and scientists for a number of years before the storm hit. As Sauriol’s experience tells us, “conservation” was certainly on the minds of some Toronto residents much earlier. The creation of the Toronto City Planning Board (TCPB) in 1942, and at the provincial level, of the Ontario Department of Metropolitan Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, Plan for Flood Control and Water Conservation (Woodbridge, Ontario, 1959); Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, The History of Flood Control in the TRCA, http://trca.on.ca/flood-monitoring/index.dot, accessed February 4, 2010. For a discussion of the movement to protect floodplains and other environments with beneficial “functions” to urban metabolisms, see Chapter 5, “Where Not to Build: The Campaigns to Protect Wetlands, Hillsides, and Floodplains” of Adam Rome’s The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
Planning and Development (ODPD) in 1944 demonstrated some recognition among government authorities of the need for long-term regional planning to guide development initiatives and protect natural resources.

Of particular interest is the Toronto City Planning Board’s 1943 *Master Plan for the City of Toronto and Environs*, which reached back to Garden City ideas of the 1910s and 20s in its proposal to protect the Don and Humber river valleys and their tributary ravines from “encroachment and vandalism” by incorporating them within a green belt linked by a low-speed “drive-way” (figure 64).78 Such a green belt would provide “the principal open spaces of the city for both passive and active recreation,” while creating a “[barrier] between residential and industrial districts, …break[ing] up residential parts of the [c]ity into well-defined separated neighbourhoods… [and] arresting the spread of continuous bricks and mortar to uncontrolled limits.”79 The ODPD’s 1950 *Don Valley Conservation Report* reiterated the need for a regional green belt as a means of protecting valley habitats and providing an outlet for recreation and respite for Toronto residents. Preferable to an equal area of small parks, report authors argued, the green belt concept possessed the “unique advantage of continuity,” allowing “a person with no greater assets than a lunch in his pocket and the spirit of adventure in his heart to escape from the tyranny of private property which normally surrounds him.”80

78 The use of the term “drive-way” here is unusual. Given the period in which this plan was developed, it was likely meant as a “parkway” or scenic low-speed drive. In any case, planners evidently envisioned a road of very different kind than the highway that was eventually built through the valley, ironically (and inappropriately) named the Don Valley Parkway.


Debate about the necessity of providing a multi-lane access highway through the green belt and the challenges of political fragmentation across the region were among the factors that stalled progress on the green belt plan in the 1940s and early 50s. Furthermore, as Stephen Bocking has argued, centralized planning in Toronto in this period served largely to stimulate private sector...
development rather than to protect the city’s natural features. Another factor which contributed to the suspension of the TCPB’s proposed “inner green belt” was the condition of the rivers themselves. As discussed earlier, a series of small and overburdened sewage treatment plants in the upper reaches of both valleys released large quantities of minimally treated effluents into the rivers. On the Don, six upstream plants dumped a daily average of 6500 pounds of suspended solids, almost double the river’s normal summer flow. For the green belt to be enjoyed by its future users, a trunk sewer would need to be constructed to carry sewage to a central disposal plant on the lakeshore. “Unless this is done,” the Toronto and York Planning Board (TYPB) cautioned in 1951, “it seems inevitable that the extensive park and recreation areas planned by the Board and the Don and Humber Conservation Authorities will be grouped around open sewers totally unsuitable for bathing and the many other purposes for which a water-course is such a valuable adjunct to a park.”

The formation of the Municipality of Metropolitan Toronto in 1953, whose Council was chaired by former TYPB chair Frederick Gardiner, had significant implications for conservation in the Don watershed. Gardiner’s “shovels in the dirt” attitude toward urban development,

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81 Bocking, “Constructing Urban Expertise.”

82 The Toronto and York Planning Board (TYPB) was a regional planning body appointed by the Province in 1948 to stimulate regional growth in Toronto and York County. It expanded the jurisdiction of its antecedent body, the Toronto and Suburban Planning Board (TSPB), constituted in 1946. For further analysis of these bodies and their initiatives, see Reeves, “Visions, II,” 14-24.


84 The Municipality of Metropolitan Toronto was created by provincial legislation in 1953. A municipal “corporation,” it assumed planning authority over twelve municipalities within York County, including the City of Toronto. The Corporation initially comprised twelve councillors from Toronto (including the mayor), and one representative (usually a mayor or reeve) from each of the surrounding municipalities. More powerful than the municipalities it encompassed, it had the ability to tax real estate and borrow funds. While the municipalities retained their individual fire and police departments, public health and libraries, Metro took on responsibility for major infrastructure functions such as arterial roads, major sewage and water facilities, regional planning, public transportation, and metropolitan parks. These powers, combined with its additional planning authority over
combined with the strengthened legislative and fiscal powers of the new Metro Council, would see rapid progress on a range of infrastructure initiatives across the metropolitan region. Identified as an immediate priority was an overhaul of the city’s aging and overburdened sewage treatment system. Between 1956 and 1965, Metro made massive investments into the system, closing eleven of thirteen upstream plants across the city and constructing trunk sewers through the major river valleys to carry flow to new and expanded sewage treatment plants on the lakeshore (figure 65).

These developments had profound implications not only for river water quality but also for the enjoyment of newly created valley parklands once made unbearable by the stench of sewage. The removal of the upstream plants contributed to a change in the public perception of urban ravines. Once viewed as inaccessible waste lands and barriers to development—obstacles to be bridged or filled—ravines were increasingly recognized as “urban amenities,” vital corridors of green space slicing through the heart of the city.85 Cooperation between the Metropolitan Toronto Parks Department, established in 1955, and the MTRCA saw valley lands acquired in the floodplains protection program transferred to Metro for development as regional parks at Metro’s expense. By 1966, the MTRCA had acquired almost seventy per cent of Metro’s over 2000 hectare park system.86 While the greenbelt as envisioned by city planners in 1943 surrounding townships such as Vaughan and Markham, enabled Metro to exert considerable influence over conservation initiatives in the region (Timothy J. Colton, Big Daddy: Frederick G. Gardiner and the Building of Metropolitan Toronto [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980], 71-72; White, Urban Infrastructure).

85 Thanks to Toronto historian Richard White for this insight. Armstrong, Evenden and Nelles make a similar observation about the Bow River in this period, when “a new public sensibility that elevated ideas of nature to a social value comparable with economic development” altered both the political economy on the river and relationships governing access and use, from “private appropriation to public reassertion of ownership” (The River Returns, 388).

86 Reeves, “Visions, II,” 61-64.
Figure 65. Metropolitan Toronto Sewage System, 1965, Metropolitan Toronto Annual Report, 1965, Courtesy of Richard White. Note: asterisks indicate treatment plants removed from the system. The local treatment plants in North York remained in the system until the West Don Trunk Sewer was completed in 1967.

would be abandoned, compromised considerably by the construction of two major expressways—\(^87\) the F.G. Gardiner Expressway and the Don Valley Parkway—in the late 1950s, protection of valley lands by the MTRCA and the Metro Parks Department created a close approximation, stitching together into the proposed “U” shape of the green belt a patchwork of protected floodplain lands in the Don and Humber river valleys.

Reaching beyond our discussion of the prescience or responsiveness of policy-makers in the 1940s and 50s, the river itself also played a role in influencing human behaviour over time. As the authors of the *Don Valley Conservation Report* pointed out in 1950, four years before

87 TCPB planners were careful to assert that the green belt “should not be used for any through traffic” and that travel “should be at slow speed by winding roads attractive only to those… who wish to visit the ravine parks for their own sake” (*Second Annual Report*, 17).
Hazel, “much of the Don Valley and [its] tributary ravines are still practically free from buildings.”

Unlike the Humber Valley, where subdivisions had developed on precarious lands within the river’s flood plain (and where seven people would later lose their lives in the 1954 floodwaters), the characteristically steep grade of the Don ravines had generally discouraged construction adjacent to the river. By 1950, the small clusters of workers’ cottages in several areas within the valley had “almost all disappeared,” together with the small number of mill villages that had grown up on the river flood plain. Report authors seemed to gloss over still occupied cottages in the valley such as Sauriol’s. For exceptions such as Hogg’s Hollow, which had seen some residential subdivision in the valley bottom near the site of the former mill village (itself inundated in 1850), report authors had this prescient warning: “there is no guarantee that parts of the flood plain may not again be overflowed…. If such conditions should recur the loss would certainly be much heavier and the surprise of property owners much greater.”

Fortunately, no deaths occurred in the Don Valley as a result of Hazel, and property damage in the valley was certainly less than that attributed to the devastating floods of 1850 and 1878, when milling structures still clung to the river banks.

In the protection of valley lands from private development and the removal of overburdened upstream sewage treatment plants, major milestones had been achieved in the conservation history of the Don. Flood control strategies that focused on large infrastructure developments such as dams and channel reinforcements, and parks that laid a uniform carpet of turf through valley lowlands, however, had their own consequences for fragile valley habitats.

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88 ODPD, Don Valley Conservation Report, Part IV, 18-19. Report authors add that areas more amenable to development, such as the Riverdale Flats, had been precluded from residential development through their conversion to municipal parkland in the late nineteenth century.

89 Ibid., Part IV, 19.
Furthermore, large portions of valley ravine lands remained in private hands, providing sweeping vistas for pricey Rosedale mansions and back-yard play space for houses perched on the valley’s edge. As the sixties progressed, groups like the Toronto Field Naturalists pressed for more comprehensive ecological protection for urban valley lands, and a new generation of environmental activists began to lament the ongoing pollution of the river by stormwater runoff and other sources.

V Heartbreak

The Don Valley Parkway: 1958-1966

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, dramatic changes in the landscape of the valley brought related upheavals in Sauriol’s life. Foremost among these was the construction of the Don Valley Parkway (DVP) and the Bayview Avenue Extension through the valley. “I was standing in a pine grove of my own planting one day last June,” Sauriol wrote in the spring of 1956, when two men came along with maps in their hands. They were trying to locate the position of a roadway in relation to my acres. To any but my unbelieving eyes, the plan was clear enough; the road led across the meadows through my orchard, to the plateau on which stood the cottage. That road as planned would wipe out the work of thirty years.

That fall, Sauriol viewed the plans for the Don Valley Parkway at a public presentation. “[T]he maps confirmed what I had previously suspected. It seemed that my acres and cottage were destined to disappear under a sheet of macadam.”90 Once again, the course of larger events in the history of the valley, and of the city more broadly, would have for Sauriol intensely personal ramifications. As Joy Parr has demonstrated so compellingly in her work on the destabilizing influences of megaprojects in people’s daily lives in Canada, the massive environmental changes occasioned by such projects disrupted people’s embodied understandings of the world—their

90 Sauriol, Remembering the Don, 138.
daily, sensory experience of place. As familiar places became unrecognizable, people lost
established ways of knowing themselves.\textsuperscript{91}

Sauriol’s shock notwithstanding, the Parkway would have been a familiar topic of
discussion for most Toronto residents through the 1940s and early 1950s. First proposed in 1943
as a scenic—and slow moving—access route to future green belt lands, the parkway took on
speed and width with Metro’s plans for a network of expressways radiating outward from
downtown Toronto in the early 1950s. Metro Chair Frederick Gardiner was a powerful advocate.
Since 1948, when he chaired the Toronto and York Planning Board, Gardiner had promoted the
idea of a modern multi-lane highway through the valley as a means of relieving congestion in the
downtown core and carrying automobile traffic efficiently to the city’s rapidly expanding
suburban districts. Famous for “[punching] things through” without pausing to consider
objections, Gardiner had no patience for the caution advised by consulting engineers in planning
the DVP.\textsuperscript{92} According to Timothy Colton’s 1980 biography, Gardiner spent many weekends
tramping through the valley with an aide in tow, determined to find a way to do what his
engineers said was impossible. “We'd go into people's back yards and crawl down the hills,” he
recalled in a 1961 interview with the \textit{Toronto Star},

\ldots [and] by 5 o'clock we'd begin to know what the engineers knew and what they
didn't know. The problem was that there were two big hills and a narrow-gutted
valley. There were railways in it and a river. The engineers were saying you
couldn't put a six-lane highway in it. So we'd have a look at [it and] say: We'll
move the railway over a piece. We'll tear down the hill. We'll shift the river over a

\textsuperscript{91} See \textit{Sensing Changes: Technologies, Environments, and the Everyday, 1953-2003} (Vancouver: UBC Press,
2009); “Notes for a More Sensuous History of Twentieth-Century Canada: The Timely, the Tacit, and the Material
Body,” \textit{The Canadian Historical Review} 82, no. 4 (2001): 720-45; and “Smells Like? Sources of Uncertainty in the

\textsuperscript{92} Colton, \textit{Big Daddy}, 111.
piece, then we can have the highway through there. That's what was done years later.\footnote{Ibid., 62.}

Unlike Sauriol, who experienced the valley as a \textit{place}, for recreation, reflection, and restoration, Gardiner saw it simply as a \textit{corridor} through which to move automobiles and sewage pipelines. As James C. Scott has pointed out, these differences in perspectives—the first perceived on the ground, through daily lived experience; the second most easily discerned from above, from the vantage of the planner’s map or model—have had dramatic implications for communities and the natural systems upon which they depend.\footnote{Scott, \textit{Seeing Like a State}.} The image of Gardiner scrambling down ravine banks presents a modest challenge to Scott’s argument, but one can imagine that he entered the valley map in hand, determined to make the territory conform to his vision for it.

Metro Council approved plans for the Parkway in 1956; work began on the southern reaches of the highway two years later (figure 66). In 1961, workmen pulled down the Sauriols’ cherished cottage. The road right-of-way was surveyed, leaving Sauriol and his family with a portion of their original holdings, including the old de Grassi cottage on the west side of the river. Restored after Hurricane Hazel as the headquarters of Sauriol’s Don Valley Conservation Association, the cottage provided an opportunity to regroup and start over. Demonstrating great pluck, Sauriol and his family packed their possessions and moved across the river (figure 67). By 1964 construction was completed from the Gardiner Expressway north to Bloor Street; the Parkway reached its end-point at Highway 401 in 1967 (to be continued as Highway 404 in the 1970s and 80s).
Figure 66. Don Valley Parkway and Bayview Extension, [195-?], from back cover of 1957 Metropolitan Toronto Annual Report, Courtesy of University of Toronto Map and Data Library.
Typically portrayed by chroniclers of Toronto as “winding mostly through inaccessible ravine land” and therefore causing little disruption to established communities, the DVP nevertheless had significant ramifications for human experience in the valley, forever altering the capacity for what Sauriol or Seton, before him, would have described as moral and physical

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95 Colton, Big Daddy, 165. This relative lack of disruption to existing neighbourhoods differed markedly from Toronto’s proposed Spadina Expressway plan of the same period, ultimately completed only in part before being cancelled in response to public protest.
rejuvenation achieved through experience in an “unspoiled place.” As the largest single piece of infrastructure in the watershed, the DVP had massive implications for the river system, implications that I will touch on only briefly here. As Gardiner’s recollections suggest, highway construction forced the alteration of the river’s course in places, removing ox-bows and softening curves. For the lower river, already strait-jacketed by a railway line along its western bank, the highway further cemented its future as a canal bolstered by steel piling and divorced from its floodplain. Most significantly, the highway project sent a ribbon of pavement through sensitive riparian lands south of the Forks, compromising the river’s function as a wildlife corridor and adding a further source of oil-laced road run-off to the watershed.

Transition

For Sauriol, the loss of the cottage in the late 1950s coincided with a period of major transition in his working life. In December 1956, about a year before the cottage was torn down, Sauriol received a call from F.G. Gardiner asking if he would represent Metro on the future Metropolitan Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (MTRCA). Sauriol was stunned, and deeply honoured. “For years,” he later recalled, “I had been humiliated, ignored, and put to one side, with no clout… to do what I thought should be done.” Especially humiliating and perplexing for Sauriol was his exclusion from the MTRCA’s predecessor, the Don Valley Conservation Authority. Sauriol accepted Gardiner’s invitation, and in February 1957 took up the (unpaid) position of Chairman of the MTRCA’s Conservation Areas Advisory Board. Working with an annual budget of $500,000, Sauriol was expected “to assemble land for conservation areas”

96 Don Valley Conservation Association, “Presentation.”
97 Sauriol, Green Footsteps, 13.
across the Metropolitan Toronto region. “A more pleasant task could not have been handed to me,” he recalled in 1991. Sauriol held the position for fourteen years, stepping down in 1971.

Six years later, Sauriol faced change of a more destabilizing nature. Having worked as an advertising manager with the Montreal firm Poirier Bessette since the early 1930s, Sauriol left due to “changing fortunes” in 1963. He found himself without an income for three years, a situation that in retrospect created the space for him to devote himself more fully to conservation activities. Later in 1963, Sauriol accepted a position as the first Executive Director of the MTRCA Foundation, the fundraising arm of the MTRCA. The position granted him travel expenses as well as a five per cent commission on monies raised. Three years later, Sauriol parlayed his experience with the MTRCA into a job with the newly established Nature Conservancy of Canada (NCC), where he remained for the next twenty-one years. Initially working for a modest annual honorarium, he took on the role of Projects Director in 1968, and finally Executive Director from 1982-1986, retiring in 1987. These personal triumphs reflected a growing environmental awareness within Canadian society that built momentum, much like Sauriol’s conservation career, through the 1960s. As Samuel Hays has concluded for the American context, a key difference between the environmental movement of the 1960s and 70s and its pre-war predecessors was the broad popular support it achieved. Public concern for the environment stemmed in part from the gravity of ongoing problems, including in the urban context the shrinking availability of what was then termed “open space,” air and water pollution,

98 Ibid.
and issues of consumption and waste. For Torontonians, the Don increasingly stood out as a symbol of environmental degradation and mismanagement.

Despite major improvements to sewage treatment and disposal post-Hurricane Hazel, the Don was still dangerously polluted in the late 1960s. Local industries continued to discharge harmful effluents into the sewage system, and combined sewers in the older parts of Toronto, including most of the Lower Don, continued to overflow during periods of heavy rain, sending raw sewage into the river. Fecal coliform levels soared as high as 61 million counts per 100 ml in the late 1960s, 25,000 times the safe swimming level of 2400 counts. The river had also become increasingly inaccessible to Toronto residents, especially in its lower reaches. The construction of the Don Valley Parkway and the Bayview Extension in the late 1950s and early 1960s had cemented the perception of the Lower Don as an urban wasteland criss-crossed with rail and road arteries and littered with abandoned industrial buildings, road salt storage sites and equipment storage yards. Highway construction destroyed a key wildlife corridor in the valley bottom and redirected the river’s water flow, contributing to its low, listless appearance. Fences erected along the freeways made public access to the lower river valley very difficult, further sealing the fate of the Don as out of sight, out of mind.

Sauriol’s approach to conservation, which combined public education about the wonders of Toronto’s “back yard wilderness” with efforts to shame offenders, was joined in the late 1960s by a new and more playful brand of activism. In November 1969, an ad hoc group of University of Toronto professors and students organized under the name of Pollution Probe brought the

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Figure 68. Pollution Probe “Funeral for the Don River,” November 17, 1969. Courtesy of Tom Davey.

The plight of the Don to public attention (figure 68). In 1969, Pollution Probe declared the river ‘dead’ as a result of years of pollution and detrimental development. Probe members led a 100 car cavalcade, including a hearse, from the university’s Convocation Hall to the river. Guests were “issued with ripe grapefruits, tomatoes and old sticks of celery so they had something to hurl at a limousine containing ‘Simon Greed,’ the symbolic infector of the river.” As sousaphone players pumped out the tune of Chopin’s *Funeral March*, mourners gathered on the river’s east bank, just north of the Bloor Street Viaduct, for a ceremony presided over by Hart House chaplain Reverend James Cunningham. Funeral organizer Martin Daly detailed for a crowd of about two hundred

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102 Zoology Professor Donald Chant and then-student Monte Hummel were among the group’s early organizers. For more on the history of Pollution Probe and its influence on environmental politics in Ontario, see Jennifer Read, “‘Let us heed the voice of youth’: Laundry Detergents, Phosphates and the Emergence of the Environmental Movement in Ontario,” *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 7 (1996): 227-250. University of Western Ontario graduate student Ryan O’Connor’s forthcoming doctoral dissertation on the history of the environmental movement in Ontario also devotes considerable attention to the history of Pollution Probe.

the history of abuses to the river, while a student dressed as Elizabeth Simcoe played the role of the river’s widow, weeping as she read excerpts from her diary describing a river once teeming with salmon and water fowl. As subway passengers looked on from the viaduct above, Daly concluded the event by tossing a wreath into the river. “And now,” he announced to the mourners, “we await the resurrection.”

Pollution Probe’s tactics were connected to larger trends in environmental activism, where groups such as Greenpeace (established in 1971) employed guerilla theatre, stunt-work, and other unconventional techniques to capture public attention and bring a sense of urgency to their cause. Close to mind for many observers would have been the June 1969 oil fire on the Cuyahoga River in Cleveland, brought to international attention through an article in *Time Magazine* in the summer of 1969. Mourners’ placards calling attention to the “dead Don” likely also struck a nerve with residents who had witnessed the steady encroachment of residential subdivisions onto farms and woodlands at the city’s edge. As Adam Rome has pointed out with reference to the American context, the environmental movement of the 1960s emerged not only from “a growing concern about the loss of wilderness,” but also in “response to environmental change at the edges of the nation’s cities”:

The residents of post-war suburbs lived in the midst of one of the most profound environmental transformations in the nation’s history. Every year, territory roughly the size of Rhode Island was bulldozed for urban development. Forests, marshes, creeks, hills, cornfields, and orchards all were destroyed in order to create subdivisions…. Again and again, the destruction of nearby open spaces robbed children of beloved places to play—and the losses hit home more vitally than the threats to far-off sites… ever could. The desire to preserve wilderness

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104 *Toronto Star*, “Mock rites;” Claridge, “Pollution Probe.”

105 Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring*, 252-53.

was the tip of an iceberg, the most visible part of a much larger concern about the destructive sprawl of urban civilization.\(^{107}\)

Certainly similar forces were at work in the rural borderlands surrounding Toronto.

The funeral for the Don received widespread media coverage and fuelled new demands from individuals and community-based organizations for a cleaner and more accessible Don. Sauriol’s response was dismissive: “all of my associations with the Don were reasonable and rational,” he wrote in 1991, aligning himself with an earlier generation of sober conservationists; “I avoided such misfits in common sense as the burial held for the Don, complete with coffins and mourners.”\(^ {108}\) Pollution Probe continued their campaign with educational tours of the Don that demonstrated the effects of water pollution, and a series of full-page ads in the *Toronto Telegram*, one of which offered a brimming glass of brown, viscous water from the Don River as a refreshment to politicians.\(^ {109}\) Their message reiterated what long-established groups such as the Toronto Field Naturalists had been saying for years: the Don had the potential to be a vibrant green corridor in the heart of the city, a refuge for wildlife and a destination for recreation, and it was worthy of protection. Unlike earlier groups, however, who struggled to deliver their message to a largely uninterested public, Pollution Probe spoke for a new generation that refused to accept the degradation of the environment as an inevitable consequence of development.

The 1969 funeral was followed by a brief surge of interest in the Don, and a 1971 campaign by the Ontario Water Resources Commission to reduce phosphates in Ontario.


\(^{109}\) *Toronto Telegram*, September 29, 1969.
waterways was successful in raising oxygen levels in the Don and improving aquatic habitat. In the summer of the same year, college students hired for the Don Patrol, a joint initiative of the MTRCA and Toronto company General Foods, removed more than 200 tons of litter from the river and surrounding valley. It wasn’t until the late 1980s, however, that heightened public concern for the environment generated new and sustained visions for a restored river environment.

De Grassi, 1958-1968

As the public awakened to deplorable conditions in environments close to home, Sauriol learned of a new threat to his holdings in the valley. Ironically, the threat would come from initiatives close to his own heart. “I am somewhat fearful for the cottage,” he wrote in his diary September 19, 1966. “Acquisition is in the [MTRCA’s] 25 years plan.” He hoped his recent efforts to convert the de Grassi property into a conservation centre for public education would allow him to stay on, resolving to “put up a fight to keep the old place” while keeping his eyes open for rural properties in other areas (figure 69). The ethic of conservation held so dearly by Sauriol and, presumably, by officials at the MTRCA, is especially ironic here, with its concern for balancing the needs of the individual with those of society at large. But what if, we can almost hear Sauriol ask, that individual was one who treated the land in keeping with that same set of values? What if the public were to be allowed to witness “conservation in action” on private lands?


In January 1967, Sauriol received the expropriation papers for de Grassi. He was crushed. Still chair of the MTRCA Conservation Areas Advisory Board, he understood well the Authority’s policy of removing dwellings from risky floodplain areas in the aftermath of Hazel, and of divorcing parklands from past signs of human occupation. He had held out hope, however, that his efforts in the valley would be celebrated rather than erased. With great sadness, he wrote January 25, 1967:

I would like to hold the dwelling's hands these next few years, watch the things I have planted grow, and take an interest in their affairs, so they are truly mine. And watch too the shade of the foliage cast on the lawn during those pleasant summer afternoons, and look many times more up into the leafage [sic] of the hoary old willow, and feel its company.... There will be a price [per] acre.... But the appraisal will not take into account the tiny pocket of bullrush that… brought to it the swamp tree frogs who without this oasis would not be heard, nor the border
where my herbs grow, and grow and grow as herbs do, [nor] the stones built into a rockery where the domestic catnip has entwined its foliage to soften the stones…. This is the value I place on it, the value of trees helped and prodded and sprayed until they could stand on their own feet, of raspberry rows, and the lush earth where the carrots grew deep and succulent…. 112

By the fall of 1967 Sauriol had purchased property in eastern Ontario’s Hastings County, upon which he planned to recreate a summer retreat. The MTRCA took possession of de Grassi in 1968, bringing to an end over forty years of summering in the Don Valley. Over those years, Sauriol had seen the valley change from a rural borderland of farms and woodlands to an increasingly threatened corridor of urban green space.

VI A New Language

In 1982, Sauriol moved into the pinnacle position of his career as a conservationist as Executive Director of the Nature Conservancy, a position he held until 1986. Over his years with the Nature Conservancy (1966-1987), Sauriol’s language shifted from an appreciation of “beauty spots”—places like the rolling pine-covered hills of the East Don Valley—to a recognition of the value of diverse areas, including swamps and bogs, for their “ecological significance.” 113 This shift in language and approaches at the personal level reflected a larger sea change in the practice of protecting natural environments over the 1970s and 80s. Mainstream environmental organizations such as the Sierra Club, the Nature Conservancy, and the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society increasingly recognized the value of an ecosystems approach to wild lands protection, placing biodiversity ahead of traditional conceptions of beauty in the valuing of natural systems. Within the urban context, growing concern over industrial wastes and their impacts upon human and non-human communities characterized the antitoxics movements of the

112 Ibid.
113 Sauriol, *Green Footsteps*, 84.
In the 1970s and 80s, punctuated by the contamination and subsequent evacuation of the Niagara Falls (NY) neighbourhood of Love Canal in 1978, and the disastrous implications of the explosion at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in what is now Ukraine in April 1986. From these campaigns emerged new avenues for citizen involvement, including efforts to reach across lines of class and race and attempts by public sector agencies to incorporate public feedback into their plans. In Toronto, the movement to revitalize the Don River, which had languished through the early 1980s, received new breath from citizen-driven initiatives at the end of the 1980s. More than ever before, the Don and its potential for renewal captured the imagination of Toronto residents. 1989 would prove to be a landmark year for the Don, and for Sauriol. That year, Sauriol’s beloved East Don Valley received protection as a nature reserve within the Toronto Parks system. For Sauriol, the dedication on September 6, 1989 was “the most rewarding, significant day in [his] long career as a conservationist.” Named in his honour, the Charles Sauriol Conservation Reserve stretched from the Forks northeast to Eglinton Avenue. Later that fall, Sauriol received the Order of Canada for his life’s work to protect natural spaces in Canada. 1989 also marked a turning point in citizen efforts to revitalize the Don. In February, Toronto City Council responded to concerns from local residents’ associations by endorsing a recommendation ‘that the Don River and its related recreation and wildlife areas be made fully

114 The efforts of Niagara-on-the-Lake resident Margherita Howe (1921-2006) are exemplary here. Founder of the citizens’ organization Operation Clean Niagara, Howe worked with other community activists to raise awareness about the pollution of the Niagara River by a U.S. chemical company upstream from her community. Her efforts resulted in a bi-national plan to clean-up the river in 1987, and earned her an invitation to the Order of Canada, a United States Congressional Citation and the First Lieutenant Governor’s Conservation Award (Obituary, Margherita Howe, http://morganfuneralhomes frontrunnerpro com/runtime/381/ runtime .php? SiteId =3811 & Naviga torId=59844 & op=t ribute Obituary& viewOpt= dpaneOnly & ItemId=112422, accessed February 4, 2010).

115 Sauriol, Green Footsteps, 279.
useable, accessible and safe for the people of Toronto no later than the year 2001. Two months later, Toronto magazine published ‘Rebirth of a River,’ an article that looked to other cities, including Cleveland and London, England, for examples of the types of effort and investment that would be required to rehabilitate the Don. Through a series of interviews with Don River advocates from different backgrounds – concerned residents, naturalists, scientists, and politicians – author Pat Ohlendorf-Moffat outlined in broad brushstrokes a vision for a revitalized river. Significantly, she stressed the vital role individuals could play in regenerating the Don by lobbying municipalities to purchase sensitive headwater lands from developers, participating in Don River cleanup and restoration events, reducing individual contributions to toxic runoff by finding alternatives to pesticides and herbicides, and lessening use of sidewalk salt in winter. The article was followed by a day-long public forum on the future of the Don at the Ontario Science Centre, hosted by Toronto magazine. Attended by about 500 people, the forum represented a watershed in public awareness about the Don.

In the months following the forum, a dedicated group of citizens, city councillors and staff worked together to develop a proposal for a public task force on the Don River. Completed in May 1989, the proposal presented a vision for a clean, green, and accessible Don—a resurrection, of sorts, of a long neglected urban river. The Task Force to Bring Back the Don was created several months later with a starting budget of $170,000 provided by the City of Toronto and the Toronto Harbour Commission, and staff support from the city. As Gene Desfor and Roger Keil have observed, this unique formula of strong commitment from citizens coupled with


117 Ohlendorf-Moffat, “Rebirth of a River.”
support from the city government has been an important factor in the Task Force’s success.\textsuperscript{118}

Fundamental to the Task Force’s vision is the idea of a restored Don River as a living demonstration of urban ecological sustainability. From the beginning, the Task Force has focused on small restoration initiatives rather than larger capital-intensive projects, on shovels in the dirt rather than lengthy studies. In \textit{Bringing Back the Don}, their first report to City Council, they outlined six key objectives as part of a restoration strategy for the Don: enhancement of the river mouth; creation of aquatic habitats, including wetlands; restoration of terrestrial habitats; encouraging appropriate uses of the valley; improving access to the valley; and coordinating planning policy for the valley. In the twenty years since its establishment, some 10,000 Task Force volunteers have planted tens of thousands of trees, shrubs and wildflowers in the Lower Don Valley, removed many tons of garbage and debris from the West and Lower Don, and thrown their muscle behind forty restoration projects throughout the central and lower valley.\textsuperscript{119}

By the time of Sauriol’s death in 1995, the river had re-emerged as a symbol of urban health—specifically, the health of the relationship between urban residents and the natural environment upon which they depend.

\textbf{VII Conclusion}

Looking back on Sauriol’s remarkable life, and on the parallel history of the river in this period, one can discern the impressions of key moments in the environmental and cultural history of twentieth century North America. As Sauriol planted trees to reforest his holdings and restore his

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118 \textsuperscript{118} Desfor and Keil, “Every River Tells a Story.”

119 \textsuperscript{119} A number of other citizen-led groups have since formed to address concerns about habitat degradation, access, and pollution in the watershed. For more on these groups, see Jennifer Bonnell, “Bringing back the Don: Sixty years of community action,” in \textit{HtO: Toronto's Water from Lake Iroquois to Lost Rivers to Low-flow Toilets}, ed. Wayne Reeves and Christina Palassio (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2008), 266-283.
\end{flushright}
land to health, he did so within the context of the early 1930s Dust Bowl in prairie Canada and the mid-western United States, and the conservationist ideologies of Aldo Leopold and others that emerged in response to such disasters. In the 1940s, when Sauriol spearheaded a campaign to protect the Don Valley from urban encroachment, and to kindle in Torontonians a sense of respect for the “wilderness at their doorsteps,” he benefitted from (and contributed to) the shift towards watershed-level management of natural resources in Ontario. The construction of the Don Valley Parkway, with its huge reverberations in Sauriol’s life, had larger consequences still for the ecology of the watershed—the inappropriately-named Parkway constituting the largest single piece of infrastructure in the river valley. The turn towards floodplain protection following Hurricane Hazel and its consequences for Sauriol’s remaining holdings on the Don transformed remaining valley-bottom lands into public recreational amenities, reflecting at the same time the well-established parks management policy of erasing signs of past habitation from the landscape. Finally, in Sauriol’s trajectory from conservationist-practitioner on his valley holdings to local activist to “conservation professional,” we can chart the parallel development of the environmental movement in Canada, with its deeply grounded farmer-scientist roots.

Sauriol’s intimate knowledge of place also revealed for us a very different Don River than the industrial, highly urbanized waterway we explored in previous chapters. Here we became familiar with a different kind of urban river: flowing through the rolling landscape of Toronto’s mid-twentieth-century rural borderlands, the river was nevertheless subject to the casual externalities of everyday urban life, including sewage effluents, pesticides, road salts, and motor oil. As Sauriol came to know first-hand, the river that flowed so picturesquely through the landscape of the upper valleys was by the early 1950s little better than an open sewer. Thus, as

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120 See for example Jacoby, Crimes Against Nature.
historical participants in Toronto’s tumultuous twentieth century, both Sauriol and the Don emerged as hybrid entities: glancing backward to a rural, premodern past while moving inevitably toward an urban, modern future. Inasmuch as Sauriol’s “paradise” was itself a hybrid landscape, neither fully rural nor fully urban, part natural system and part cultural artefact, Sauriol himself personified this hybridity in his identity as part urban professional, part “back-fence producer.” The space he chose upon which to live out his dream of the “simple life” was not the wilds of Algonquin Park, but a threatened rural landscape on the urban periphery. Like Thoreau, Sauriol and his family had only to travel a few kilometres from home to reach their cottage retreat, while their contemporaries made the longer trip north to Muskoka and other cottage destinations.\footnote{\textsuperscript{121} For more on cottage tourism in early twentieth century Ontario see Jasen, \textit{Wild Things}, particularly Chapter 5, “A Rest Cure in a Canoe,” 105-132.}

Witness to so much dramatic change through his long twentieth-century life (1904-1995), Sauriol gave voice to a profound sense of loss in his writings about the river and its past. “One by one I have seen the landmarks of my day and of my surroundings disappear…. The farmlands, the trails, the trees, buried in, covered over or chopped down,” he wrote in 1981.\footnote{\textsuperscript{122} Sauriol, \textit{Remembering the Don}, 140.}

Facing the loss of what French historian Pierre Nora has called \textit{milieux de mémoire}, “settings in which memory is a real part of everyday experience,” Sauriol drew comfort from his personal archive of experience—the documents, photo albums, books, and decades of diaries that comprised, in Nora’s terms, a personal \textit{lieu de mémoire}, a symbolic representation of lived past
experience. “I need but go to any one of them,” Sauriol wrote in 1991, to “relive… those days when, as a young fellow, I… hefted a pack on a trek up the Don.”¹²³

The final chapter picks up on this theme of memory and place to consider plans currently underway for a new “improvement” to the mouth of the river, and the debates these plans have generated around how the river should look, how it should relate to the city around it, and what aspects of its history should be incorporated. How does public memory function, I ask, in efforts to conceive a “naturalized” river mouth?

PART IV

SEDIMENTS
Chapter 7

Remembering the Don:
Restoration and Public Memory in the Twenty-first Century

In recent years, the Don has been the subject of renewed interest as a place of possibility within the Toronto landscape. On the river flats north of the Prince Edward Viaduct, the environmental non-profit group Evergreen is transforming the site of the former Don Valley Brick Works into Canada’s first environmental discovery centre.¹ Further south, plans are taking shape to recreate a portion of the historic wetlands at the mouth of the Don. It is to this project and the implications it has for the public memory of the river that this final chapter turns. As we have seen, the Don has inspired a series of “imagined futures” over the past two hundred years, from the dreams of individual millers who hoped the stream’s flow would be sufficient and predictable, to the grand vision of future industry and prosperity mobilized by the Don Improvement Plan of the 1880s. Proposed by Waterfront Toronto in partnership with the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA), and with funding from municipal, provincial, and federal governments, the Don Mouth Naturalization Project (DMNP) promises to be a massive undertaking. The latest in a long history of “improvements” for the lower river and its mouth, the project aims to “transform the existing mouth of the Don River including the Keating Channel, into a healthier, more naturalized river outlet to the lake, while at the same time, removing the risk of flooding to 230 hectares of urban land to the east and south of the river.”² The debates these plans have generated around how the river should look, how it should relate to the city around it, and what aspects of its history should be incorporated, will be the subject of discussion

¹ For more details about the project see http://www.evergreen.ca/rethinkspace/.
² Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Corporation and Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, “Revised Terms of Reference,” 1.
here. To what extent, I ask, has the public memory of the river—the history of human relationships with the river, and the lessons people have taken from it over time—been incorporated into plans for the river’s transformation? How, and to what extent, does the past weigh upon and shape efforts to revitalize languishing urban districts and degraded ecologies?

Over the past thirty years, memory studies have positioned landscape among a range of sites, including place names, folklore, autobiographies, and television, in which “history is embedded or a dialectic of past-present relations is rehearsed.”

According to French historian Pierre Nora, dramatically altered landscapes eliminate opportunities for spontaneous memory in that they remove the sensory cues of past experience. While we might take issue with the unconditionality of Nora’s assertion (to the observant eye, elements of the past persist even in the most radically altered environments), he nonetheless identifies something very real here in human responses to changing landscapes.

In sites like the Lower Don Lands, the combined impacts of industrialization and past improvement schemes have so transformed the landscape as to make it very difficult to imagine any other reality. As Nora would argue, such acts of erasure necessitate “sites of memory” to replace the living memories they obliterated. Projects like the DMNP, with its self-conscious references to past landscape features, could be interpreted within this vein. And yet, the same industrial artefacts that obliterated what came before are themselves cues to a different way of perceiving and valuing past environments. If memory in the sense of

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5 As Joy Parr has demonstrated, the rapid environmental changes wrought by major development projects often have a disorienting effect upon local residents and their embodied understandings of place. Although the processes and projects that have transformed the Lower Don Lands have occurred over a much longer time period, their immediate effects lying well outside of living memory, the transformation of the landscape has been no less significant. See Parr, *Sensing Changes*; and “Notes for a More Sensuous History.”
remembered past landscapes has been mostly erased in the Lower Don Lands, opportunities still exist to appreciate the complex ways in which the past informs the present. Historical geographer D.W. Meinig and landscape historian J.B. Jackson dedicated their careers to transforming the way we look at ordinary landscapes, encouraging their students to see them not as snapshots of the present but as accumulations of complex past decisions and processes. It is with this sense of present environments as complex mosaics deeply contingent upon past decisions, values, and relationships that I situate my discussion here.

This chapter falls into three parts. Part I looks at the ways the past informs current plans for the mouth of the Don, focusing on three overlapping “sites of memory”: 1) the physical realities of the site (the ways in which the past, in the form of contaminated soils or concrete structures, places demands upon the present); 2) conscious referents to past landscapes and the outcomes of past planning processes; and 3) processes and methods informed by past experience. Part II compares the current plans for the river mouth with the 1880s Don Improvement Plan, with particular attention to the relationship between the plans, the political and economic contexts within which they were created, and the territories they sought to transform. Here, insights developed in reviewing the 1880s plan are mobilized to assess this most recent “improvement” for the mouth of the Don. Finally, Part III looks back on the dissertation as a whole, and offers concluding comments.

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I The Don Mouth Naturalization Project

On February 2, 2007, Waterfront Toronto,\(^7\) the city’s lead waterfront development corporation, announced an international design competition intended to secure a world-class plan for developing the forty hectares of lands at the mouth of the Don River.\(^8\) The task given to firms selected for the competition was an ambitious one: they were to envision the ‘renaturalizing’ and revitalization of an area that had been marginalized for years. Waterfront Toronto sought a plan that would create “an iconic identity for the Don River” while addressing flood protection and habitat restoration needs in the Lower Don Lands, a 125 hectare industrial area located south of the rail corridor at the east end of Toronto harbour (the former Port Industrial District).\(^9\) Twelve weeks later, a consortium headed by Michael Van Valkenburgh, Professor of Landscape Architecture at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, was announced as the winner of the competition. The design competition jury, comprised of three architects, a structural engineer, and Canadian landscape photographer Edward Burtynsky, agreed that Michael Van Valkenburgh & Associates (MVVA)’s Port Lands Estuary proposal created “a spectacular and compelling vision for the area” by “balancing and integrating urban and naturalized environments.”\(^10\)

\(^{7}\) Created in 2001 by federal, provincial, and municipal governments to fund, coordinate, and oversee the revitalization of the Toronto waterfront, the Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Corporation (TWRC) later changed its name to Waterfront Toronto. For simplicity, I have used the name “Waterfront Toronto” throughout.

\(^{8}\) Plans to transform the Toronto waterfront are situated within a broader trend of port lands revitalization initiatives around the world, as cities have sought to transform problematic industrial harbourfronts into attractive and profitable spaces for recreation and residential development. Examples include the Canary Wharf and Isle of Dogs projects in London’s Docklands (http://www.lddc-history.org.uk/), waterfront regeneration initiatives in Copenhagen (including designated swimming areas at the Copenhagen Harbour Baths), and the HafenCity Docklands regeneration project in Hamburg, Germany (http://en.hafencity.com/).


\(^{10}\) Ibid., 5.
The mouth of the Don River is the centerpiece of the MVVA design (figure 70). Here the team proposes to create a new kind of territory where “the city, lake, and river interact in a dynamic and balanced relationship”: an urban estuary. The plan shifts the river’s mouth so that it winds south of its current right-angle turn at the Keating Channel, moving through the Port Lands to empty directly into the lake. Keating Channel remains intact as a functioning waterway and alternate outfall for the river. By relocating the river mouth further south, MVVA argues, they produce for it the “iconic identity” sought by Waterfront Toronto: centred in the Port Lands, the river mouth enjoys greater visibility from other points along the Toronto harbour, “reasserting

11 Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates (MVVA), Port Lands Estuary, May 2007, 42. For a video overview of the design, see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bEQiNXXgu4g.
the presence of the river in the city and allowing it to become a symbol of the Lower Don Lands as a whole.”12 Surrounding the river, a newly created landscape is devoted to parkland. Serving as a floodway as well as a recreation space, this central parkland anchors five mixed-use neighbourhoods, each of which combines spaces for living, working, recreation and entertainment with access to transit and pedestrian routes.13 Unlike Sauriol’s desire to create a natural retreat from the city, here nature and culture come together as both destination and extension of the urban fabric. While much of the plan’s focus is devoted to urban revitalization through built form, ecological restoration receives considerable attention in plans for the river corridor itself. Here, MVVA proposes to reference the lower Don’s historic wetlands and native forests by constructing pockets of marsh and woodland habitat around the new river mouth. The “naturalization of the mouth of the river’ is not a token gesture,” MVVA argues; instead, it plays a fundamental role in the creation of a sustainable urban community where access to nature—as aesthetic environment and functional ecosystem—is a key factor in the neighbourhood’s desirability.14

The MVVA team and the board members at Waterfront Toronto who solicited their involvement were by no means the first to imagine a different future for the Lower Don Lands. Visions for the restoration of the river mouth were first forwarded by the Task Force to Bring Back the Don in 1991. Noting the “natural tendency of the Lower Don to fill with sediments,” they recommended allowing “the natural delta-building processes in the lower valley to be accommodated at the [river] mouth,” recreating over time “a delta and productive marsh habitat”

13 *Ibid*, 14, 18. These neighbourhoods would be located on either side of Keating Channel and on the north side of the Ship Channel south of the restored river mouth.
and “once again linking the river biologically and physically with Lake Ontario.” Such a plan would “require some manipulation of the Lower Don channel and the dedication of a portion of the harbourlands as a sedimentation basin and marsh.” The recreated marsh, they speculated, would greatly reduce annual dredging costs in Keating Channel, provide habitat for fish, waterfowl, and other aquatic species, and “[increase] opportunities for pedestrian and bicycle connections to the waterfront.” Furthermore, a revitalized industrial area would “create an appropriate setting for new waterfront development.”

The following year, the Task Force vision was incorporated into the recommendations set out by the Royal Commission on the Future of the Toronto Waterfront, which outlined the benefits of “[regenerating] a marshland delta” and surrounding greenspace. Subsequent planning bodies for the waterfront also recognized the opportunity presented by “large areas of mostly public-owned, underused or vacant land” in the port lands. In March 2000, the Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Task Force recommended “a naturalized river mouth, bordered by park spaces” as part of a larger strategic plan to redevelop the waterfront.

Over ten years of general recommendations were finally given concrete form in the City of Toronto’s 2001 Central Waterfront Secondary Plan, *Making Waves*. Building upon the 1991

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17 Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Corporation and Toronto and Region Conservation Authority, “Revised Terms of Reference,” 5.

18 Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Task Force, *Our Toronto Waterfront: Gateway to the New Canada*, March 2000, 50. In November 1999, Toronto Mayor Mel Lastman, Ontario Premier Mike Harris and Prime Minister Jean Chrétien formed the TWR Task Force with a mandate to develop a strategic master plan for the development of the Toronto waterfront. In producing their final report, the Task Force drew upon a substantial body of existing waterfront studies, including “the solid and comprehensive body of reporting by the Royal Commission on the Future of the Toronto Waterfront and its successor agency, The Waterfront Regeneration Trust; the Gardiner/Lakeshore Task Force; and the Task Force to Bring Back the Don and related initiatives. Of great importance was the work of the City’s Department of Urban Planning and Development Services, including its recent report, “Unlocking Toronto’s Port Lands” (9).
work of the Task Force to Bring Back the Don, and the legacy of subsequent waterfront planning bodies, the award-winning document established the planning context for the Don Mouth Naturalization project and related redevelopment initiatives in the port lands. Key aspects of subsequent projects, including flood protection for the West Don Lands and the transformation of the Port Lands into “a number of new urban districts,” received elaboration here, together with plans for the “renaturalization” of the river mouth:

The mouth of the Don River will be rerouted through lands south of the rail corridor. This will improve the ecological function of the river, provide flood protection for the Port Lands and East Bayfront and attract new wildlife to the area. The renaturalized mouth of the river will also become a key open space and recreational link to the Don Valley, West Don Lands… and waterfront park system….. [and] a gateway to the new urban communities in the Port Lands.

In 2007, Waterfront Toronto identified the Don Mouth Naturalization as one of four priority projects in its ten-year business plan. It selected the TRCA as the lead agency to conduct the naturalization and flood protection work in the Lower Don Lands. Together, Waterfront Toronto and the TRCA then embarked on a series of overlapping environmental assessment processes to assess planning alternatives for the Lower Don Lands. The 2007 design competition was

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19 The Plan won the 2002 Award of Excellence from the Canadian Institute of Planners and the international “2002 Excellence on the Waterfront Award” from the Waterfront Center in Washington, D.C. (City of Toronto, Waterfront Revitalization Chronology, Fact Sheet, January 2008).


22 The Lower Don Lands is currently overlaid with a veritable maze of planning processes. In addition to the individual Don Mouth Naturalization and Port Lands Flood Protection environmental assessment (EA), which harmonizes federal and provincial environmental assessment requirements, a class EA was completed in 2005 under Conservation Ontario’s Class Environmental Assessment for Remedial Flood and Erosion Control Projects for the Lower Don River West Remedial Flood Protection Project, which aims to remove flood risk over 210 hectares of land west of the Don River. Further south in the Port Lands, Waterfront Toronto, the City of Toronto and the Toronto Transit Commission (TTC) have initiated the Lower Don Lands Infrastructure Municipal Class EA, which
intended to produce an overall vision for the area that integrated three concurrent waterfront revitalization projects (the Don Mouth Naturalization and Port Lands Flood Protection Project; the Queens Quay Boulevard Extension Project; and the Lower Don Transportation Infrastructure Project) and addressed the area’s complicated infrastructure challenges.

Significant about the MVVA plan from my perspective is its conscious incorporation of aspects of the river’s past. Artefacts of past improvement schemes work their way into the concept design, together with remnants of the area’s industrial history. The river’s natural history also finds space here, in the integration of ongoing ecological processes such as siltation and seasonal flooding into the functional aspects of the design. This referencing of the past was to some extent unavoidable, demanded by the physical realities of the site—the existence of monolithic structures such as the Gardiner Expressway and the Keating Channel; and the presence throughout of heavily contaminated soils left behind by over a century of industrial activity. As D.W. Meinig wrote in a 1979 essay, “every landscape is an accumulation”: both a “rich store of data about the peoples and societies which have created it” and “a great exhibit of consequences.” The Lower Don Lands, indeed, provide a powerful demonstration of the multiple ways in which the past presses upon and constrains the present. In the analysis that follows, I treat the MVVA scheme as an artefact in itself: like the other imagined futures detailed in this study, the initial concept will be (and already has been) subject to considerable manipulation as it moves through various political and technical planning channels, and again as

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replaces the former Queens Quay Boulevard Extension EA and the Lower Don Transportation Infrastructure EA in assessing the transit and servicing infrastructure needs for the area. This EA will incorporate the outcomes of the Don Mouth Naturalization EA currently underway.

23 Meinig, “The Beholding Eye,” 44.
it meets with the land itself, with all of its particularities and potentially unforeseen responses. The possibility that the scheme will not be implemented at all must also be enumerated among the range of potential outcomes.

“It is neither possible nor desirable to erase the past,” MVVA asserts in the opening paragraph of its *Port Lands Estuary* proposal; “likewise, it is neither possible nor desirable to replicate what nature had placed here before.”\(^\text{24}\) Definitive of the team’s approach throughout its proposal, this statement has important implications for the role of public memory in the site’s reconstitution. Geographer and memory scholar David Lowenthal has observed that as much as the past sustains us as a source of identity, it also constrains us by becoming a burden that “cripples innovation” and options for the future: “we preserve because the pace of change and development has attenuated a legacy integral to our identity and well-being. But we also preserve… because we are no longer intimate enough with our legacy to rework it creatively.”\(^\text{25}\) The MVVA plan presents this kind of “creative reworking” of the past. The plan proposes to “[weave]… several heritage structures… into the new urban fabric” in order to “[speak] to the physical past of the site.”\(^\text{26}\) The incorporation of artefacts from previous “improvements” to the river mouth is especially interesting. Most significant among these artefacts is the Keating Channel, the concrete conduit for the river mouth constructed in the mid-1910s, with its

\(^{24}\) MVVA, *Port Lands Estuary*, 4.


\(^{26}\) MVVA, *Port Lands Estuary*, 26. The MVVA plan identifies only the silos of the Victory Soya Mills for potential heritage uses. As Waterfront Toronto and the TRCA note in their Terms of Reference for the project, “prior to 2004, there were over sixty-one individual built heritage features located within [the Lower Don Lands]…. In the intervening time some demolition of structures has occurred. The City of Toronto’s current Inventory of Heritage Properties identified a total of 31 designated properties and 21 listed structures or landscapes within this area” (TWRC and TRCA, “Revised Terms of Reference,” 40). Comments from the design competition jury suggest that the incorporation of the area’s industrial past might be taken further still: “the heritage elements and the industrial history of the area need to be considered further,” jurors recommended, “through imaginative transformations, adaptive reuse, and possibly through commemorative and educational narratives” (TWRC, *Jury Report*, 6).
characteristic ninety degree turn into Toronto harbour. Unlike earlier visions for the river mouth, which proposed the demolition of Keating Channel to make way for a new, naturalized outlet to the lake, MVVA proposed to retain Keating Channel as a “significant urban artefact of the Port Lands.” As figure 70 illustrates, the main channel of the river would be routed further south through the Port Lands, with Keating Channel serving as a smaller, secondary outlet. “Lined with retail-oriented promenades on both sides,” it would be “reprogrammed as an urban amenity, flood channel, gateway, and connective tissue between adjacent neighbourhoods.”

This recasting of a formerly derelict space as “urban amenity” has significant implications for the site’s social composition. As we saw in Chapter 4, an area that had become by the 1850s a “repository for undesirables,” including gangsters and transients, is here radically reworked as a space for upwardly mobile members of the knowledge economy.

References within the design concept to the historical ecology of the river are another way the past informs this “imagined future” for the river mouth. The proposed routing of the river channel in a winding southerly course through a naturalized wetland environment more closely reflects, MVVA argues, the river’s historical course before it was straightened and channelized in the 1880s. Using Joseph Bouchette’s 1815 *Plan of York Harbour* and other early nineteenth century sources as a reference, the team sketched in broad strokes the historical ecology of the harbour (figure 71).

Based on their speculations, the lower river wound through a lowland savannah before curving west through a marsh formed jointly by the effects of river and lake. In its final leg, the river moved south through the marsh, slicing through the narrow sandbar to slip into the harbour about midway along the marsh’s western edge. By roughly

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27 MVVA, *Port Lands Estuary*, 26, 44.

mirroring this historical course, MVVA professed to release the river “where it wants to be,” at the shore of Lake Ontario.\textsuperscript{29} Taking their “initial clues from [the] river morphology,” they proposed to directly reference the site’s natural history by creating an urban landscape that “has an irregular urban edge generated from a natural condition.”\textsuperscript{30} Pockets of wetland habitat throughout the design not only reference the historical ecology of the river mouth, but create, MVVA asserts, viable habitat for aquatic wildlife and migratory birds and insects, while

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure71}
\caption{Historical ecology of the Lower Don Lands, Courtesy of Michael Van Valkenburgh & Associates, Inc.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{29} MVVA, \textit{Port Lands Estuary}, 10.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid, 7.
enhancing the existing habitat corridor from the river mouth to its headwaters in the Oak Ridges Moraine. Here, nature is a deliberate and acknowledged construction.

The plan also works with the river’s ongoing processes. Like the multiple nineteenth century plans which proposed to harness the river’s natural sedimentation processes to fill Ashbridge’s Bay marsh (none of which were realized), a fundamental strategy of the MVVA plan scheme “is to use what the river makes—sediment—to give form to the project.” In the concept design, river sediments would collect in a sedimentation basin located near the bend in Keating Channel; these deposits would then be filtered and treated for contaminants in onsite processing centres, then used to create landforms such as hills and flood protection berms, and to cap existing contaminated soils within the Port Lands. Thus MVVA proposes a kind of rapid stratification process to bury and seal a troublesome legacy of the area’s past. Such a system would eliminate the expense of annual dredging, transforming a century-old problem into a useful product. Like all aspects of the MVVA design, the sedimentation strategy presents only a rough sketch of the detailed plans required to produce such a system. The effectiveness of the system in removing contaminants, and the feasibility of its expense, remain to be assessed. No mention is made, furthermore, of the ongoing deployment of cleansed sediments once the proposed landforms have been constructed.

In addition to river sediments, the MVVA scheme anticipates the effects of seasonal floodwaters. Recognizing that “the hydrology of the Don River is characterized by extreme

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31 Ibid, 67. The proposed method and expense of cleaning up the contaminated soils left behind by former industrial sites around the mouth of the Don and throughout the Port Lands is a significant area of concern in the ongoing environmental assessment process for the project. Rather than attempt to cleanse contaminated soils in areas slated for residential development, MVVA proposes to leave them in place, purportedly preventing leaching by capping the contaminated soil with captured sediment from the Don River. In areas where extensive excavation will occur, such as the river channel, treating contaminated soils and sediments will be unavoidable. A component of the environmental assessment currently underway will weigh the effectiveness of different kinds of soil remediation strategies, and add detail to the concept of an on-site soil remediation plant to cleanse and recycle soils for use elsewhere in the development.
fluctuations in water flow and floating debris,” the design team proposed the construction of “flexible and adaptable channels that work well for slow river flow and for huge storm events.” Cut to different depths and surrounded by parkland doubling as spillway in times of high water, the reconstructed river channels would have the ability to “accept and deliver varying volumes of water, from low to moderate to severe flood events.” The suggested removal of Keating Channel as an alternate outfall has necessitated alternate spillway routes into the Ship Channel and inner harbour, a concept that has received further elaboration through the ongoing environmental assessment process.

The TRCA’s careful distinction between naturalization and restoration warrants some discussion here. While the MVVA scheme makes deliberate references to the river’s multiple pasts, and employs the phrase “ecological restoration” to describe aspects of their concept design, restoration refers to the establishment of selected wetland habitat features (to the restoration of ecological function) rather than the re-creation of a historical landscape. As TRCA project manager Ken Dion emphasizes,

nothing is being restored through this [project]. We are trying to establish a sustainable green river mouth that is resistant to the new environmental realities being located at the mouth of one of the most urbanized rivers in Canada. It will

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32 MVVA, Port Lands Estuary, 36.

33 In their review of the MVVA design concept, the competition jury recommended that the Channel be disconnected from the river outlet and filled instead with “cleaner lake water” in order to “enhance its potential as an urban place.” This recommendation was later incorporated into the detailed design plan submitted to the provincial and federal governments as part of the environmental assessment process.

34 This is a common interpretation of ecological restoration. As Eric Higgs writes, restoration in the sense of bringing something back to a previous or original condition works well for paintings and old buildings, where “the ultimate goal is present under layers of grime or soil.” Ecosystems, however, “are in constant motion,” with no discernible point of origin. Rather than working with “a fixed historical point in time or a suite of specific ecological conditions,” ecological restorationists attempt instead to determine the “historical range of variability” for an ecosystem (a reasonable long-term boundary on change) through the use of “reference conditions,” historical inferences drawn from records or remnant ecosystems (Nature by Design: People, Natural Process, and Ecological Restoration [Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2003], 118-19).
be nothing like the original marshes that occurred here 150 years ago; as such, [restoration] is not an appropriate term.

Acknowledging the misperceptions introduced by the term “restoration,” Waterfront Toronto and the TRCA have adopted the term “naturalization” instead. “Natural features” such as the branching shallow channels, aquatic grasses and reeds typical of riverine marshes are built into the site’s design, with no expectation of reproducing the full range of historical ecosystem features. Such an approach reflects long-established restoration practices in Europe, where practitioners seek to “renature historic conditions” rather than embrace the fallacy of reproducing pristine landscapes devoid of human intervention. The term also creates space for the inclusion of references to multiple pasts. Whereas “restoration” suggests the reconstruction of a single period in time, “naturalization” is devoid of these temporal connotations. The plan incorporates artefacts from a continuum of time, rather than a single “historical reference landscape.” Thus an approximation of the river’s early nineteenth century outlet to the lake can exist alongside late nineteenth century industrial structures and the early twentieth century Keating Channel. Rather than attempting to recreate some kind of pre-settlement landscape (fraught on many levels, not least the monumental task of removing artefacts of settlement), then, project proponents are free to reference the past through specific landscape forms, and to juxtapose these referents with elements reflective of present sensibilities. In effect, they aspire to create a postmodern

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35 Kenneth Dion, Senior Project Manager, TRCA, personal communication, July 10, 2008.

36 On the subject of language, Mark Woods makes a compelling argument for reconceptualizing ecological restoration as the renewal of “wildness and freedom” rather than “naturalness,” a concept that is in itself such a direct product of the nature/culture dichotomy we seek to transcend. See “Ecological Restoration and the Renewal of Wildness and Freedom,” in Recognizing the Autonomy of Nature: Theory and Practice (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 170-188.

37 For case studies in this vein, see Marcus Hall, Earth Repair: A Transatlantic History of Environmental Restoration (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2005).
landscape, shot through with internal references to the site’s history, forward and backward looking at the same time.\textsuperscript{38}

In the years that have followed the 2007 selection of the MVVA concept design for the Lower Don Lands, the TRCA has conducted public and stakeholder consultations in order to assess a series of alternative designs for the river mouth as required by the environmental assessment process. In May 2009, the TRCA presented the resulting preferred alternative to the public—a variation of the MVVA design which removes the connection between the river and Keating Channel and eliminates the instream island west of the Don Roadway (figures 72 and 73). Next steps include the submission of the environmental assessment (anticipated to occur in early 2010) and, once the EA has been approved, the development of a detailed, phased design for the naturalization work. Implementation plans will likely reflect, at least in part, the loose plan forwarded in the MVVA concept design: a six stage process with channel excavation, soil remediation and sediment capture from the river scheduled to occur in the phases one and two, and park construction, infrastructure linkages and neighbourhood construction slated for phases three through six.\textsuperscript{39} While project implementation was originally forecast to begin by the end of 2010, with a projected completion date sometime in the 2030s, Waterfront Toronto revealed in the fall of 2008 that existing funds would cover only the planning phases of the project, and not

\textsuperscript{38} I use the term “postmodern” here not as an unbounded concept, but with specific reference to its use in architecture and urban design literature. David Harvey elaborates on the use of the term in this context to signify a kind of “architectural bricolage”:

I take postmodernism broadly to signify a break with the modernist idea that planning and development should focus on large-scale, metropolitan-wide, technologically rational and efficient urban plans, backed by absolutely no-frills architecture…. Postmodernism cultivates, instead, a conception of the urban fabric as necessarily fragmented, a ‘palimpsest’ of past forms superimposed upon each other, and a ‘collage’ of current uses, many of which may be ephemeral. \textit{(The Condition of Postmodernity} [Oxford and Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1989], 66).

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 64-71.
Figure 72. MVVA Port Lands Estuary design concept. Courtesy of Waterfront Toronto.
Figure 73. Amended design for river mouth. Courtesy of the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority.

the actual implementation. Predictably, perhaps, funds have been allocated toward the construction of revenue-generating residential and commercial lots, relegating the parkland and naturalization projects to an indeterminate future.40

Ironically, in the same period that progress on the naturalization project has stalled, the concept design for the Lower Don Lands has been the subject of considerable international attention. In addition to several design awards, the project was recently selected by the Clinton

40 Public sector funders hope to receive a fourteen per cent return on their investment through the sale of residential and commercial units, a plan that places considerable emphasis on the marketability of the proposed design plans.
Climate Initiative as one of the urban projects it will support in helping to demonstrate that
cities can develop in ways that are “climate positive.”\textsuperscript{41} The project, it appears, exemplified a
certain zeitgeist in contemporary urban design. Despite the recognition the plan has received for
its innovative design and its steps toward sustainable development, the uncertainty surrounding
project implementation indicates that it may well join the long line of other “imagined futures”
proposed for the Lower Don Lands and never realized. We have been here before: recall the
nineteenth century equivalent of the Waterfront Toronto design competition—the call for “the
three best reports on the means to be adopted for the preservation and improvement of the
Harbour of Toronto” issued by the Toronto Harbour Commissioners in 1854, which asked expert
contestants to turn their attention specifically to the relationship between the Don, the harbour,
and Ashbridge’s Bay.\textsuperscript{42} Although the winning entries were much celebrated, and reprinted for
wider distribution in the \textit{Canadian Journal} of that year, no action was taken on contestants’
recommendations until almost twenty years later, and even then the construction of the
Government Breakwater represented only a partial (and ultimately unsuccessful) remedy to “the
Don problem.” Like past plans, it is unlikely that the project will proceed as it has been set out
on paper: all aspects of the revised concept design remain subject not only to the vagaries of the
environmental assessment process, but also to the uncertainties of the economic climate—
uncertainties that are closer to us all following the 2008 collapse of global financial markets.

\textsuperscript{41} William J. Clinton Foundation, “Press Release: Clinton Climate Initiative to Demonstrate Model for Sustainable
Urban Growth with Projects in Ten Countries on Six Continents,” May 18, 2009,
MVVA Port Lands Estuary proposal received The American Society of Landscape Architects 2008 Award of Honor
and the Best Futuristic Design Award at the 2009 Building Exchange Conference in Hamburg, Germany.

\textsuperscript{42} Toronto Harbour Commissioners, “Reports on the improvement and preservation of Toronto harbour,” 1.
II  Imagined Futures Then and Now

The ambitious nature of the MVVA design, and the dramatic transformation it proposes, invites comparison with the Don Improvement Plan of the 1880s. As we saw in Chapter 5, the area surrounding the mouth of the Don has been subject to a series of “imagined futures”—some realized, and some abandoned—dating back to the early 1830s. The first significant alterations occurred in the early 1870s with the construction of the Government Breakwater. Setting aside regular dredging activities around the river mouth, the next major changes occurred between 1908 and 1914, when the river was diverted from its curving westerly course into Toronto Bay to run instead directly south to meet at a right angle with the Keating Channel. The diversion of the Don mouth was originally proposed as a component of the ambitious 1880s Don Improvement Plan. Much delayed and substantially altered, it was finally implemented in the early twentieth century in conjunction with efforts to improve the harbour and Ashbridge’s Bay. It is upon the 1880s plan that I will focus my comparison, given the rich textual evidence that exists as to the plan’s objectives and rhetoric, and the physical evidence that persists of its shortcomings and unintended consequences. By comparing these two plans we can better appreciate the particular ideological contexts within which they were developed. The knowledge we possess of the outcomes of the 1880s plan, furthermore, provides tools with which to assess this latest “improvement” for the mouth of the Don.

To recap, the improvement plan that developed in the early 1880s and was realized in the latter part of that decade set out to “widen, deepen, and straighten” the Lower Don River in accordance with four central objectives: 1) to improve the sanitary condition of the area, 2) to make the Don a navigable stream for large vessels; 3) to accommodate rail traffic into the city; and 4) to create new lands for industrial purposes. While plans originally aimed to straighten the river between Bloor Street and the lake, budgetary constraints resulted in the work being
confined to the area between Winchester Street and the GTR bridge at today’s Eastern Avenue (an area referred to today as the Don Narrows).

Important to emphasize here is the radically different political, economic and social contexts within which these very different plans were created. Both plans were conceived within the context of similar initiatives in other parts of the world. While the 1880s plan aimed to facilitate industrial development within a rapidly industrializing, urbanizing political economy, the 2007 plan aims to revitalize a derelict district within the context of a broader waterfront regeneration initiative. For late nineteenth-century planners, the river presented opportunities as a site of production; twenty-first century developers, conversely, see its potential as a site of consumption. While the 1880s plan reflected a modernist sense of confidence in the ability to master nature through technology, the 2007 plan displays a post-modern sensibility in its efforts to establish a balance between urban and natural.

Despite fundamental differences in the methods and objectives pursued by the two plans, some important similarities exist. The Don Improvement Plan, like today’s Don Mouth Naturalization Project, set out to revitalize an underdeveloped and problematic area of the city. New industrial lands together with allowances for shipping and rail would attract “all kinds of manufacturing enterprises,” while a straightened channel would purportedly flush pollutants and floodwaters out into the lake. As real estate broadsides for the period speculated, the plan would “materially advance the value of surrounding districts” by transforming “that hitherto despised stream” into “the commercial shipping centre of Toronto.” Both plans sought to create new territory: the 1880s improvement by reclaiming lands in the former winding river channel for industrial developments; the 2007 concept design by doing the opposite—recreating riverside wetlands along a newly winding channel as the centrepiece of a desirable new urban community. Both, similarly, sought to address flooding concerns: the 1880s plan as a corollary objective
flagrantly unsuccessful in its execution; the 2007 plan as a central and driving objective of the larger project. Finally, both plans mobilize the language of health. While the nineteenth century plan sought to “[dispel]... the miasmatic atmosphere” of the area and increase its “healthfulness,”43 the 2007 plan aims to “transform the existing mouth of the Don River... into a healthier, more naturalized river outlet to the lake.” In the divide between these statements lie dramatic changes through the twentieth century in ideas about the origins of pollution and the “health” of the land.44 In the language of the 2007 plan, “healthy” is equated with “natural.” Thus a more “natural” river mouth—one that presents some greater measure of biological diversity and ecological function—presumably enhances the health of the human communities and non-human species it supports. The plan’s promise to remediate contaminated soils—the presence of which stymied previous attempts to develop the site—is another place where health is used as an anticipated benefit of the project.

Areas of connection in the impetus for the plans are overshadowed, however, by the radically different futures they imagine, one plan essentially devised to undo the other. Whereas the 1880s improvement plan envisioned the Lower Don as a bustling hub for manufacturing supported by a straightened and readily navigable rail and shipping corridor, the 2007 plan proposed an equally bustling hub for what the design team called “urbanism,” a form of urban revitalization that seeks to mobilize urban spaces as drivers of culture, creativity, diversity, and environmental protection in the new knowledge economy. Each of the five proposed

43 Report No.56 of the Committee on Works, TCCP, 1881, Appendix pp. 888-890.
neighbourhoods, MVVA anticipates, “will have the complete DNA of a vibrant city: a mix of life-cycle housing, commercial, cultural and workspaces, public realms, parkland and access to water”45 (figure 74). By combining living and working spaces with green technologies and access to transit and pedestrian routes, the plan seeks to achieve neighbourhood sustainability while presenting opportunities for prosperity. This emphasis on sustainability marks another place where the plans diverge.46 While the nineteenth-century plan is replete with the language of “improvement,” with its connotations of an infinitely malleable (and fundamentally deficient or wayward) nature mobilized in service of human ends, the contemporary plan harnesses the language of sustainability, with its implicit recognition of the ecological limits to growth.

Another key area of difference lies in the relationship between the plans and the physical territory they sought to transform. While a detailed concept design is not available for the 1880s plan, the reports of the city engineer and the 1886 schematic he developed (see Chapter 5, figure 48) give some indication of the way project planners interpreted the constraints and opportunities presented by the site’s physical make-up. As detailed in Chapter 5, the trajectory of the plans

45 MVVA, Port Lands Estuary, 18.

46 For more on this within the context of the 1886 and 2007 plans for the Lower Don, see Gene Desfor and Jennifer Bonnell, “Changing Toronto’s Lower Don River in the Nineteenth and Twenty-first Centuries: Socio-natures and Urbanization,” in Changing Toronto's Waterfront, ed. Gene Desfor and Jennefer Laidley (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, forthcoming).
allowed little space for contingencies. Problems were encountered as the project progressed on the ground, necessitating rapid adjustments and constraints to remaining project components. In contrast, the 2007 plan and the assessment processes within which it is embedded present evidence of learning from past mistakes. Flexibility and adaptability are terms that appear frequently in the concept design. Among its goals for the project, MVVA states:

> we want to restore the interaction between lake, river and land by designing around the dynamics of nature: changing lake levels, river flows and climate. We will allow the design to be flexible, dynamic, and fluid so that change is anticipated, expected, and a valued part of the experience of living with nature, rather than a point of vulnerability and a threat to the city.\(^{47}\)

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A belief in the necessity of adaptability in urban design also informs the design team’s vision of a plan in which the urban and natural elements of the landscape “evolve over the course of many years, creating interim conditions, each interesting in its own right, that give form, focus, and character to the developing neighbourhood.” Rather than a fixed design that is somehow “complete” when the shovels are pulled up, MVVA sees its work as setting interactions in motion, enabling the conditions for a vibrant urban neighbourhood. It is difficult to know, of course, how successful, and how flexible, the plan would be if actually implemented. Whether or not flexibility and adaptability, as hallmark strategies of a postmodern design sensibility, will in themselves prove successful, also remains to be seen. The emphasis on these concepts on paper is nevertheless significant, however, especially when placed in comparison with a nineteenth century plan that demonstrated none of these characteristics. Rather than an evolving relationship between built and natural features on the ground, planners seemed to expect an instant fix to long-established problems. The result was a rigid system of infrastructure unable to accommodate the shifting ecological processes it sought to control: the cedar piling that divorced the straightened river channel from its floodplain failed to contain rising waters in times of flood, while river sediments accumulated unabated along the river’s lower reaches, negating the potential for “flushing action” in the channel. The fixed design of the 1886 plan was further cemented with the construction of the Don Valley Parkway in the 1960s, reducing further the potential for adaptability to changing conditions along the Lower Don. Perhaps most pronounced among the failures of the 1880s plan was its attempt to work against rather than with the river’s hydrological cycles. The degree to which the 2007 can reverse this may prove a key consideration for its success.

48 Ibid., 9.
Should the Don Mouth Naturalization Project proceed in the years to come, the extent to which it will “undo” the legacy of its predecessor will be necessarily limited. As noted above, the 1880s Don Improvement Plan transformed an area north of Eastern Avenue (referred to today as the “Don Narrows”) originally excluded from naturalization plans for the river mouth. Efforts by the Task Force to Bring Back the Don and other citizens’ groups to refocus the area’s revitalization on the river’s ecology, rather than the area’s marketability as a destination neighbourhood, have largely been met with indifference. Exemplary here is the Task Force’s attempt to extend naturalization initiatives to the Don Narrows, which have generated discussion in the TRCA’s public consultations but are unlikely to produce more than tokenistic efforts by the agencies involved. The formidable physical constraints of the site, bounded as it is by a rail corridor on the west and a major highway on the east, certainly limit the effectiveness of restoration initiatives. Further limiting the potential for more comprehensive ecological restoration is a political will distracted by the “gem of the Port Lands” and its future marketability, particularly within the context of the upcoming 2015 Pan American Games in Toronto.49

If, as Pierre Nora suggests, we require the creation of “sites of memory” to illuminate past environments and past sensibilities, the MVVA concept design aims to provide those cues. As we have seen in the discussion above, the past informs the project in subtle and overlapping ways, through referents to past landscapes and past planning outcomes, processes and methods informed by past experience, and finally, through the physical realities of the site itself (the ways in which the past, in the form of contaminated soils or concrete structures, places demands upon

On paper, the project challenges the public, as David Lowenthal suggests, to become “intimate enough with our legacy to rework it creatively,” to attempt not to recreate the past but to recognize it and incorporate it within a new and different vision for the future.

It appears very unlikely, however, that the project will be implemented as envisioned, if at all. Like its 1880s predecessor, the project is already considerably short of funds, with implementation plans for the river mouth stalled indefinitely. As we saw for the 1880s plan, financial shortfalls and fluctuating political will resulted in the omission of key design elements that may have produced better results. The fact that the only aspects of 2007 plan currently being implemented pertain to real estate development, and not naturalization, is telling. Whether or not the plan will fall within a long legacy of imagined futures never realized for the Lower Don Lands, remains to be seen.

* * *

The uncertain future of the DMNP compels us to consider the Lower Don as a place still open to future possibilities. As the efforts of the Task Force to Bring Back the Don have shown us, there are multiple ways to envision the future of this space. Not to be elided here, too, are the ways the Don is appreciated in the present. For many Torontonians, the neglected spaces along the lower river provide a welcome place for recreation and reflection, and an escape from the monotony of the city streets. Here, the relics of former industrial establishments and the presence of railway tracks and highway overpasses may do more to signal the area’s layered past than would any designated heritage features within an aesthetically recalibrated landscape. The opportunities for informal experiences afforded by this marginal space within the city present an important contrast to the elite civic vision embodied by the DMNP. Will it be possible to “get lost” in the redesigned Lower Don Lands? What will the likelihood be of unexpected discoveries in such a carefully constructed landscape? Any redevelopment plan of this size compels us to
consider what will be lost or swept aside when the bulldozers arrive to effect another *tabula rasa*. If the 1880s improvement plan has taught us anything, it is to weigh carefully what will be lost in preparing for the next imagined future.

We might wonder what Jane Jacobs, Toronto’s most famous advocate of the “livable city,” would have thought. While the project proposes to “revitalize” what is essentially an industrial brownfield (as figure 75 shows, very little active industry remains on the site), its size and scope will inevitably obliterate (or at least significantly disrupt) the pollution-tolerant organisms that have gained a foothold on this site in the years since the industries moved out.

“Renaturalization,” in this sense, is already occurring. If the adjacent Leslie Street Spit serves as any indication, time may prove the best strategy for renaturalizing heavily disturbed sites. The five-kilometre long peninsula, constructed by incremental lakefilling initiated in the late 1950s, is today one of the city’s most cherished “wild” spaces, and one of few places in the city barred to automobile traffic. Over 400 plant species have been identified on the peninsula, along with a wide range of bird and butterfly species. Volunteers have also reported occasional sightings of

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50 Land use in the Lower Don Lands is mostly commercial/industrial, with limited recreational uses along the waterfront (including the Docks Entertainment Complex and the Martin Goodman Trail). Rail links to area businesses and industries bisect the area. Other active uses include the Don Rail Yard, paper and scrap metal recycling plants, City of Toronto recycling facilities, and businesses related to the film industry.

51 Officially titled the Outer Harbour East Headland, the peninsula was originally intended as a breakwater for harbour expansion in anticipation of greater volumes of shipping traffic with the opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway in 1959. When heightened shipping volumes failed to materialize, the breakwater project was abandoned and the spit took up its main function as a dumping site for excavated materials and waste from construction sites. The Toronto Harbour Commissioners forwarded several development plans over the years, including an “aquatic park” with a hotel, amphitheatre, and boating facilities. Citizens’ advocacy by the Toronto Field Naturalists and the Friends of the Spit (established in 1977) eventually secured the site’s status as an urban park. The northern half of the spit is open to the public as Tommy Thompson Park, managed by the TRCA, while the southern half remains an active dumping zone, managed by the Toronto Port Authority. The entire peninsula will eventually become parkland. For further detail on the spit and its role in harbour authorities’ visions for the Outer Harbour, see Roy Merrens, “Port Authorities as Urban Land Developers: The Case of the Toronto Harbour Commissioners and Their Outer Harbour Project, 1912-1968,” *Urban History Review* 17, no. 2 (October 1988): 92-105.
beavers, otters, red foxes, and coyotes.\textsuperscript{52}

For a range of reasons, the Lower Don Lands is unlikely to see the same future as the Leslie Street Spit. Perhaps most powerful among these is the site’s proximity to and visibility from the city centre. Too valuable to let sit as unoccupied brownfield (or, as in the case of LeslieSpit, as “urban wilderness”), the site also serves as a constant reminder to civic leaders of the failure of past development schemes. From the dubious gains of the Don Improvement Project in the 1880s, to the harbour expansion projects initiated in response to the 1959 opening

\textsuperscript{52} Friends of the Spit, \url{http://www.friendsofthespit.ca/spit_about.htm}, accessed February 5, 2010.
of the St. Lawrence Seaway, and subsequently abandoned,\textsuperscript{53} the area has consistently failed to meet expectations. Ongoing and substantial dredging expenses incurred to maintain clear passage in the area around the mouth of the Don must surely reinforce this sense of the area as a blight on the city’s image. For these reasons, and for the revenues to be reaped from new taxable properties, the Lower Don Lands is likely to emerge, in ways comparable to Vancouver’s False Creek, as the next sought-after residential district for urban professionals. Naturalization, if it happens at all, will almost surely be secondary.

\textbf{III Sediments}

Looking back on the over two hundred years of human experience with the Don documented in this study, several findings can be sifted out from the layers of detail that have accumulated while moving figuratively downstream, from source to terminus.

Most striking in the narrative arc of the five overlapping microhistories that comprise this study was the Don’s slippage in the eyes of civic leaders from a place of relative importance—a place fit enough to host the province’s first parliament buildings—to a place widely perceived, by the mid-nineteenth century, as polluted, dangerous, and disease-ridden. As we have seen, the foul odours and polluted waters resulting from the lower Don’s designation as a “space apart” were for many observers the price of prosperity, and the price of keeping other parts of the city more habitable. Less appreciated as a source of commodities, the river valley nevertheless continued to serve as a vital component of the city’s economy in its role as both a sink and a conduit for municipal and industrial wastes.

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\textsuperscript{53} See note 51, above.
In bringing together approaches from social and environmental history, this study has revealed some of the connections between places and populations constructed as marginal by privileged observers and decision-makers. As we saw, the processes that identified certain individuals as deficient “others” mirrored similar imperatives at work in classifying difficult or unpredictable environments as “waste spaces.” Just as the valley emerged as an ambiguous borderland space shifting and redefining itself in relation to the growing city beside it, the people who turned to the river flats and forested ravines for refuge also demonstrated diverse circumstances and strategies that secured their marginality, from the familiar strategies of the squatter to the novel practices of the Roma traveller. From this perspective, the valley occupied a borderland in both space and time, as much an intermediary zone between rural and urban as a liminal space within which “old” and “new” political economies, self-provisioning and capitalist lifeways overlapped and asserted themselves.

One of the unforeseen outcomes of this study from my perspective has been the identification of the urban fringe as a useful place from which to study the city’s relationship with its environment. By focusing on the edges, this study has illuminated the social and environmental consequences of urban development processes and decisions. A slippery “in-between” space neither fully urban nor fully rural, the Don River valley emerged as a space of its own worthy of our attention. Developments in the periphery, as Richard Harris has shown so compellingly in his work on blue-collar suburbs in Toronto, interacted in complicated and reciprocal ways with varied forces at work in the centre. Approaching urban history from the vantage of the periphery opens up, in Harris’ words, “new vistas,” and allows “familiar urban landmarks [to] take on a new aspect.”

Other cities have had (and continue to have) similar

54 Harris, Unplanned Suburbs, 13.
spaces, and they deserve more attention. In the histories of places like Vancouver’s False Creek, Halifax’s waterfront, Minneapolis’ Bohemian Flats, we might locate evidence of alternate strategies of “getting by” within the context of the capitalist city. As this study has shown, these liminal spaces at the city’s edge provided opportunities for refuge, for self-provisioning, and for pursuing what David Shi has called “the simple life.” As such, they exemplify places where liberal ideals failed to effectively take hold. How these “empty spaces” on the urban fringe were reconceived by proponents of various development schemes through time, and the effects of these redevelopments upon the human and non-human ecologies they displaced, warrant greater attention by urban historians.

Returning to my opening story of Princess Margaret’s 1958 visit to the city, and the city’s last minute efforts to cleanse the river before her arrival, we are reminded of the steadily worsening pollution and inadequate, belated response that characterized the city’s relationship with the Don through the nineteenth and much of the twentieth century. Revisiting this narrative also places into relief the history of the Lower Don as a landscape of progress. The city’s choice of Riverdale Park on the Lower Don as the location for the Princess’ visit, and by extension, the setting from which to put the city “on show,” was a mid-twentieth century expression of a larger and remarkably persistent tendency to showcase the Lower Don as a landscape imbued with future possibilities. From Simcoe’s choice of the marshy lowlands west of the river as the site for the province’s parliament buildings, through the medical and reform institutions that located above the banks of the lower river in the 1860s, the grand visions that accompanied the Don

55 This work has been initiated in studies such as Judith Fingard’s The Dark Side of Life; Cruikshank and Bouchier’s “Blighted Areas”; and Wade’s “Home or homelessness,” but much remains to be done in documenting the intersections between social and environmental history within urban peripheries.

56 Shi, The Simple Life.
Improvement of the 1880s and the reclamation of Ashbridge’s Bay in the early decades of the twentieth century, and finally the current visions for the naturalization of the river mouth, the Lower Don has expressed in material ways a succession of imagined futures for the city and the particular ideological, political, and economic contexts within which these visions were created.

Imaginings for the river reached outward, modelling their designs upon the perceived success of improvement projects in other river cities, and situating their objectives and methods within the rapidly industrializing political and economic imperatives of their times. As we have seen, the tendency of these plans to fail or “underdeliver” reflected the realities of budget shortfalls and fluctuating political will, together with shifting and unforeseen environmental conditions. The rationalization of design plans to accommodate these changing circumstances constrained their potential for success, omitting features that may have produced better results. Cyclical processes such as seasonal flooding and sediment deposition also impinged upon the probability of project success. Here, the river emerged as an autonomous and causal force in the city’s history. Despite its small size, the Don nevertheless played a considerable role in shaping the development of the city and in conditioning the relationship between urban residents and their environment, from the attempts of early harbour masters to corral the debris it jettisoned each spring into Toronto harbour, to the devastating impact of Hurricane Hazel in 1954.

And yet, as much as we can read the history of the river and its relationship with the city as a story of unintended consequences and environmental decline, we must also recall the flip side to this story, in which the river features as an economic success story. An important source of raw materials for bricks and lumber, and the site of valuable industries, the Don helped to build Toronto. Its function as a sink for wastes was no less important, enabling as it did the city’s residential and industrial expansion. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, was a function treated only tangentially in this study: the valley’s role as a transportation corridor. In the 1880s
the valley facilitated the development of an eastern rail entrance to the city. Seventy years later, civic leaders took advantage of the same natural corridor in constructing the Don Valley Parkway, a major artery of commodity circulation and mobility in the region. In both periods, these developments fueled economic growth and contributed in important ways to the city’s expansion. From this perspective, then, a neglected and polluted river was the consequence of building a functioning city of 2.5 million. But this is a story that has been told before.

In the dialectic between cultural and material change that has been in play throughout this study, the Don by the late twentieth century moved from a blighted and neglected place to a degraded but ultimately salvageable natural system, and in this transformation, took on symbolic significance as an indicator of urban health. Efforts by municipal, regional, and citizen groups to protect and promote the river and to remove obstacles to citizen access opened possibilities for new relationships with the Don. With access to the river valley came opportunities to see the Don not simply as a landscape defiled, but rather a place where natural processes—however compromised—continued to function. As Jenny Price pointed out in a recent article about the Los Angeles River, the recognition of nature as existing in the places where we live, and not just in some more pristine form outside the city, brought with it a compelling rationale for sustainability in the practices of our daily lives.57 The attempts of citizen-activists to grapple with the potential of the Don for restoration within the constraints of the existing built environment have yielded, over the last two decades, a newfound appreciation for the hybridity of urban landscapes that are neither fully constructed nor fully “natural,” but some combination of the two. Observers of the Don have taken from their experiences with the river and its history the lessons of ecology: the concept of carrying capacity—that ecological systems have limits in

57 Price, “Remaking American Environmentalism.”
the amount of wastes they can assimilate; and the concept of connectivity—that watersheds must be understood as a connected whole, rather than a series of component parts.

In 2009, the river is cleaner than it has been for almost a century, but still polluted enough to rank among Canada’s most polluted rivers in a 2007 Environment Canada study. Today, the bulk of this pollution comes not from industry or single-source polluters but from the everyday activities of urban life – flushing toilets, driving to the grocery store, salting driveways in winter. Runoff from streets and parking lots carries oil, road salt, animal wastes and other harmful substances into the storm sewer system, and from there directly into the Don. Almost 1200 storm sewer outfalls dump into the Don and its tributaries, and after heavy rains, stormwater makes up over seventy per cent of the river’s flow. Existing pollution makes the river unsafe for people to wade or swim in, but for wildlife, the consequences are life-threatening. According to the TRCA, chloride from road salt is harmful to aquatic wildlife at 240 milligrams per litre of water. Don levels are consistently higher than this, reaching a high of 3,920 milligrams in samples taken between 2002 and 2005. Runoff from streets also raises the water temperature of the river to levels only the most adaptable species can tolerate. White sucker, emerald shiner, fathead minnow, and blacknose dace are among the few exceptionally tolerant fish species that have adapted to the toxic conditions in the Lower Don.

58 The Don’s score of 34.8 out of 100 make it the most polluted river in Ontario (Peter Gorrie, “The Dirty Don: Environment Canada's water quality index puts a numeric value to the `embarrassment' that is the river: 34.8 out of 100,” Toronto Star, December 7, 2007; Canada, Canadian Environmental Sustainability Indicators, 2007, http://www.ec.gc.ca/environmentandresources/CESIFeature2007/CESI2007_e.pdf).
59 Ibid., xiii.
60 Of the 42 fish species that historically populated the Don, 21 remain, most of which are pollution-tolerant, and most of which inhabit the river’s upper reaches. Regular surveys by the TRCA have found only 19 fish species in the lower Don, a low number compared with “the 25-27 species typically found in other river mouths along the north shore of Lake Ontario.” Almost 90 per cent of fish collected were white sucker, emerald shiner and spottail shiner, “all common species with low sensitivity” (Toronto Waterfront Revitalization Corporation and Toronto and
In a watershed that was once almost entirely forested, only 7.2 per cent of forest cover remains. Almost all of the watershed’s original wetlands have been filled or paved over, and eighty-five per cent of its lands have been developed for residential or industrial purposes. Throughout the watershed, soil compaction, vegetation removal, and the growing expanse of paved surfaces have resulted in dangerous increases in surface run-off and corresponding declines in groundwater reserves. For the river, these changes have produced consistently low flows under normal conditions, and sudden flash floods in times of heavy rainfall. In August 2005, for example, surface run-off from a severe rainstorm caused the Don to swell to record highs in some reaches, flooding adjacent roadways and buildings and eroding fragile stream banks. The Ontario insurance industry later ranked this storm as the most expensive natural disaster in the province’s history.

Over the last twenty years, restoration initiatives have recreated a very small percentage of the lower valley’s once extensive wetlands, providing important habitat for moisture-seeking plants and animals. Dedicated groups of volunteers have pulled on rubber boots on Sunday afternoons and trudged through the neglected lands of the lower valley to sink shovels into gravel, haul topsoil, and nurture seedlings. In the valley bottoms, the TRCA has invested considerable funds into improving ecological diversity by restoring native vegetation alongside...
grassy recreation corridors. These efforts represent only small pockets, however, in a landscape dominated by urban networks of transportation, waste disposal, and power provision. In short, the best restoration initiatives cannot alter the fact that the Don flows through Canada’s most urbanized watershed, home to well over 800,000 people. Placed in juxtaposition with the long history of grand visions for the river, the few that were realized remembered largely for their shortcomings, these small restoration projects can be distinguished for their humble expectations, modest size, and relatively rapid implementation. Realized with little funding and less fanfare, these projects have demonstrated that at least limited ecological function can be restored to even intensely manipulated environments. Anyone who has visited the Weston Quarry Garden at the former Don Valley Brick Works has experienced the wonder of a place transformed, from abandoned clay quarry to vibrant wetland. The extent to which the river has become a symbol of the potential for redemption—“bringing back” the Don the rally cry behind the river’s most active citizens’ organization—suggests that something deeper is at work than the rehabilitation of isolated micro-environments. For many Toronto residents, the promise that the Don holds lies in the depth of its decline. Small recoveries become, in this wider context, emblems of hope for a renewed relationship with not just a beleaguered urban river, but the planet as a whole.

64 In addition to these ecological restoration initiatives, the City has initiated a twenty-five year Wet Weather Flow Master Plan to reduce the impacts of polluted stormwater run-off within Toronto-area watersheds. The total capital cost for the 25-Year Plan is approximately $1.047 billion or $42 million per year. For more information, see: http://www.toronto.ca/water/protecting_quality/wwfmmp/about.htm.
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