



EXPLORING HIDDEN LANDSCAPES

NATIVE CANADIAN CENTRE

THE PRESENCE OF INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IN THE TORONTO AREA

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4. THE INDIGENOUS ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY OF TORONTO, 'THE MEETING PLACE'

Jon Johnson

There is a persistent myth that, before the arrival of Europeans, most of North America was a trackless, primordial wilderness largely untouched by human hands.¹ This myth of an empty, wild continent has, not coincidentally, often been used to justify the seizure of Indigenous people's lands for the use of Euro-Canadian and Euro-American settlers. Local histories of North American places often begin with the arrival of Europeans to the area, thereby contributing to the erasure of the Indigenous historical accomplishments and contributions within these locales. Many of the official histories of the Toronto region continue to follow this pattern.²

But Indigenous people have continuously occupied the greater Toronto area since at least the last Ice Age about 11,000 years ago.³ Throughout this time Indigenous people interacted intimately with the Toronto landscape in a co-creative relationship to the extent that Indigenous lands and Indigenous peoples became extensions of each other.⁴ The Toronto area, as with much of the rest of North America, was a 'natural artifact' shaped by thousands of years of Indigenous interaction with their environments.⁵ By the time European missionaries and traders started visiting the lands north of Lake Ontario in the seventeenth century, it has been estimated that there were about 65,000 Indigenous people living in the area.⁶ The Huron-Wendat, Haudenosaunee [i.e., the Five (later, Six) Nations Iroquois] and Anishinabe / Mississauga peoples have each lived in the Toronto area since the time of European contact and each of these groups, despite myriad colonial interventions and modern developments, has left an environmental legacy that is still evident in Toronto's landscape and in First Nations stories about places in this landscape.

Many of the names of streets, cities, rivers and neighbourhoods that currently grace maps of Toronto derive their origins from these First Nations groups. The word Mississauga comes from an Anishinabe term *Masesauee* meaning 'eagle clan,' while Etobicoke comes from an Anishinabe term meaning 'place of the black alder.'⁷ Spadina (Map), a prominent street that

runs through the centre of downtown Toronto, comes from the Anishinabe term *Ishpaadina*, meaning 'the rise in the land' and refers to a natural bluff which runs roughly east to west at the northern terminus of Spadina Rd. This bluff marks the original shoreline of an ancient glacial lake called Lake Iroquois (Map) that preceded Lake Ontario. Davenport Rd., which largely follows the base of this bluff, is also itself an ancient footpath used by Indigenous peoples for millennia, making Davenport Rd. by far the oldest extant road in Toronto. Mississauga runners were known to travel 80 km per day along routes such as this, carrying messages from village to village.⁸ The name Ontario is derived from a Huron-Wendat or Haudenosaunee word translating to 'handsome lake' or 'great lake.'⁹ Even the name 'Toronto', as this chapter will explain, derives from an Indigenous word. These names and places are whispers of Toronto's extensive Indigenous environmental history and their persistence in Toronto's landscape defies assumptions that Toronto is solely a product of European intervention. There are many such places dotting Toronto's landscape, but this chapter will only explore two of these places in depth—the Humber River Valley (Map) and High Park (Map) – to elucidate more fully the historical and ongoing relationships that First Nations have maintained in these places.

Humber River Valley

The Humber River Valley in Toronto's west end is an incredibly significant part of Toronto's pre-colonial Indigenous and early European history. As with many of the city's geographical features, the river valley was formed by the flow of glacial meltwater at the end of the last ice age, over 10,000 years ago.¹⁰ The Humber River has its headwaters in the area of Mono, north and west of Toronto and snakes through Toronto before emptying into Lake Ontario at Humber Bay (figure 1). The Humber River is one of several major rivers running north to south and draining into Lake Ontario. These rivers and their tributaries, along with the Great Lakes, the St. Lawrence River and their respective watersheds, constituted a huge network of waterways that collectively facilitated a great deal of Indigenous movement and travel over a vast area spanning the interior of North America to the Atlantic Ocean and Northern Canada to the central United States. Indigenous footprints and paddle strokes followed the paths of these innumerable waterways for millennia before the arrival of Europeans to the continent.¹¹

Of these myriad waterways, the Humber River Valley is particularly significant for its role in facilitating travel and trade through the area. A



Figure 1

A misty day along the Humber River, beside *Teiaiaagon* (Baby Point). Photograph courtesy of Michael Gil.

major portage route called the Toronto Carrying Place Trail (Map), one arm of which followed the Humber River from its origin to its terminus, was used by First Nations people for thousands of years to travel between Georgian Bay, Lake Simcoe and Lake Ontario. The Mississaugas called the Humber River *Cobecheonk*, which means 'leave the canoes and go back', or 'portage.'¹² This portage was one of the fastest inland routes that allowed one to travel directly through what is now southern Ontario, making the Humber River Valley and Toronto itself a very important and desirable area for meeting, trading and exchanging information.¹³ There are dozens of Indigenous villages and campsites known to have existed within the Humber River Valley, collectively representing several thousand years of Indigenous occupation in the area and attesting to the long-lived importance of this route.

It is this route that is likely responsible for the city's name, 'Toronto'. Although the exact translation and meaning of 'Toronto' are still debated, the term certainly has a First Nations origin, and the most widely accepted etymology of this term is that it derives from the Huron-Wendat term *tkaronto*, which roughly means 'where the trees are standing in the water'.

The term refers to a fishing weir, a blockade of stakes or posts constructed across a narrow body of water to trap fish. The first known reference to 'Toronto' on a map was drawn by René de Bréhaut de Galinée in 1670. The map labels what is now Lake Simcoe as *Lac de Taranteau*. Another French map drawn by Vincenzo Corinelli in 1688 depicts the Toronto Carrying Place Trail and Lake Simcoe is again depicted as '*Lac Toronto*', but there is also a notation at the southern part of *Lac Toronto* that reads *Les Piquets*.¹⁴ (Map F) *Les Piquets* (stakes) refers to the use of fishing weirs around Lake Simcoe and interestingly, the 4000-year-old remains of a fishing weir can still be found at the north end of the lake.¹⁵ Henry Scadding, in *Toronto of Old*, suggests that because the Carrying Place Trail led from Lake Ontario to *Lac Toronto*, that "gradually the starting-place [ie: the lakeshore at Humber Bay] took the name of the goal [ie: *Lac Toronto*]."¹⁶ So it may be that the Toronto Carrying Place Trail, in addition to transporting people, trade goods and information, also transported the name 'Toronto' from its northern to its southern terminus.

With the arrival of Europeans, the Toronto Carrying Place Trail continued to play an integral role in the booming fur trade. As one of the most prominent routes through the area, those who controlled the Toronto Carrying Place could exert significant control over fur trading in the area. Accordingly, the Huron-Wendat, the Haudenosaunee and then the Ojibway (Anishinabe), along with their respective European allies, each vied for control of this route and the area surrounding it at different times. When Europeans first started visiting Toronto the Huron-Wendat had established control over the area. It is widely accepted that the first European to see the Toronto area, Étienne Brûlé, was brought by his Huron-Wendat guides via the Toronto Carrying Place trail in 1615.¹⁷ By the 1660s the Seneca had also secured a presence in the area and had established a large village of about 5,000 people atop a tall bluff overlooking the Toronto Carrying Place Trail. This village was called *Teiaiagon*, meaning 'the knife that cuts through the river' and was located just north and west of the intersection of modern day Jane and Bloor streets, in what is now the wealthy neighbourhood of Baby Point. One can clearly see this 'knife' when examining any map of the bluff, which juts so far into the Humber River Valley that the river must take a wide berth around it, in some places cutting quite close to the base of the bluff. This village was visited by the missionary Louis Hennepin in 1678¹⁸ and more than once by the French explorer René Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle. *Teiaiagon* was likely abandoned or destroyed by the French around 1687 or 1688 during a French expedition against the Seneca led by the Governor of New

France, the Marquis de Denonville.¹⁹ After this, the Mississauga controlled the Toronto area and the Carrying Place Trail, establishing a village at *Teiaiagon*²⁰ and another near the Humber Bay. A series of French forts were subsequently built along or near Humber River to accommodate a highly profitable trade in furs: the first at *Teiaiagon* in the 1720s (Map D), another further south (Map A) on the Humber River in the 1730s and the final one, Fort Rouillé (Map B) was established around 1749 at the western end of the current Canadian National Exhibition grounds. However, all of these forts were destroyed by the French in 1759 when it became clear that the British would ultimately seize control of the area and the Toronto Carrying Place Trail.²¹ Even after the British had formally ousted the French from the area, French fur traders continued to operate in the area, but were unfortunately known to trade significant quantities of alcohol to the Mississaugas for their furs.²² The Mississaugas were increasingly pushed out of the Toronto area and further to the west towards the end of the eighteenth century due to increasing European settlement and harassment, but a map from 1796 shows that First Nations corn fields were still extant at that time on the



Figure 2

A rendition of a 1796 map that showed corn fields still growing along the banks of the Humber River, near the intersection of Bloor and Jane Streets. Map rendition courtesy of Jon Johnson.

floodplains surrounding the Humber River, immediately south of *Teiaiaagon* (figure 2).²³

In May 2010, two young Anishinabek embarked upon a canoe trip along the Humber River starting from Rama (north of Lake Simcoe) (Map E) to Toronto, one of them “to trade in the spirit of his forefathers...his once sought after Hudson’s Bay Point Blanket in exchange for the beaver pelts traded to the Company by his great-great-grandfather.”²⁴ Their four-day journey is a modern-day coyote story, involving harassment by police, struggles to portage their exceptionally heavy fiberglass canoe past sections of the Humber River that are now too shallow to canoe due to diversion dams, and a rock which ripped open the side of their canoe near Dundas Street (Map), forcing them to abandon it. They finally reached the Hudson’s Bay Company’s downtown flagship store via streetcar and proceeded to negotiate a trade with the store’s reluctant manager. Although they were ultimately unsuccessful in their attempt to trade their point blanket for beaver pelts, they were allowed to perform an honour song at the store and left with a copy of the book *The Blanket: An Illustrated History of the Hudson’s Bay Point Blanket*,²⁵ a gift from the store’s manager which valorizes the role of the Hudson’s Bay Company in Aboriginal history.²⁶

High Park

Although the pre-colonial landscape of the Toronto area was densely forested, this forest was also punctuated by large areas of savanna in the sandier soils immediately north of Lake Ontario.²⁷ Savanna is characterized by relatively sparse, discontinuous tree cover and tall grasslands and in Ontario is home to dozens of rare flora such as bluestem and Indian tallgrasses, cylindrical blazing star, hairy bush clover, woodland fern leaf, wild lupine and cup plant.²⁸ Black Oak savanna, so named for its predominantly Black Oak tree cover, is particularly ecologically significant in Ontario because Black Oak is at its northern limit among the Great Lakes of southwestern Ontario.²⁹

Unfortunately, although savanna was once a relatively common part of Toronto’s ecology, it is currently an exceptionally rare and threatened ecosystem here. Because these areas were relatively free of trees, they were frequently the first to be cleared and developed by European colonists for settlement and agriculture.³⁰ Furthermore, savanna is a transitional ecosystem between more open prairie and denser forest environments and is always in the process of becoming a forest. Natural or anthropogenic fire

is required to maintain an area as savanna, but European settlement led to the suppression of fire across southern Ontario which furthered the decline of savanna lands simply by allowing them to succeed naturally to forest.³¹ Remaining savanna environments continue to be undermined by excessive human interference and the presence of intrusive plant species that tend to overtake savanna flora.³² The cumulative effect of these disturbances is that less than 0.5 per cent of the pre-colonial prairie and savanna in Ontario remains intact today.³³

High Park, a large park in the city's west end, contains the last remnants of a once extensive Black Oak savanna which covered much of Toronto's west end, approximately from Roncesvalles Ave. to Royal York Rd. and from the lakeshore as far north as Lawrence Ave (Map).³⁴ High Park's Black Oak savanna (Map) is approximately 4000 years old³⁵ and although it only remains in about 1/3 of the park's 161 hectares,³⁶ it is nevertheless the most significant portion remaining in the Toronto area and one of the most significant portions remaining in Ontario (figure 3).³⁷ The integrity of High Park's Black Oak savanna is partly due to the initiative of the previous owner of the park lands, John George Howard, who transferred ownership of the land to the city in 1873 in return for an annual pension and several



Figure 3

Panoramic photos of two segments of High Park's Black Oak savanna in Autumn. Photographs courtesy of Jon Johnson.

conditions including a guarantee that the park would remain “for the free use, benefit and enjoyment of the citizens of the City of Toronto for Ever.”³⁸ High Park has thus managed to escape significant development as the city grew around it.

First Nations people in the Toronto region knew of and were almost certainly involved in the maintenance of High Park’s savanna. High Park is just east of the Toronto Carrying Place Trail which had been traversed by Indigenous people for millennia before European settlement and First Nations corn fields grew within the savanna lands of High Park.³⁹ The pre-colonial presence and integrity of savanna lands, and particularly High Park’s Black Oak savanna, are almost certainly due to First Nations efforts, but these efforts are not well acknowledged. There is much historical, archaeological and ecological evidence that First Nations groups across North America employed controlled burns at judiciously chosen times to clear area for villages, trails, agriculture and to maintain the delicate balance of savanna ecosystems.⁴⁰ Today’s remaining savannas are direct legacies of these First Nations efforts. Most of the remaining savanna lands in Ontario can be found on First Nations land/reserves such as Walpole Island, Six



Figure 4

Two examples of the tall grasses that can be found in High Park’s Black Oak savanna. Photographs courtesy of Jon Johnson.

Nations, Bruce Peninsula, Manitoulin Island and Alderville.⁴¹ In return, savannas offer significant gifts to First Nations people. Periodic controlled burning encouraged the growth of berries, nuts, fruit, tall grasses and other plants which were important sources of food, medicine and other such gifts not otherwise common in southern Ontario (figure 4). Savanna also offered large, open areas which discouraged the proliferation of biting insects and vermin, facilitated movement through the area and encouraged the presence of large game and fowl.⁴² Deer, caribou, moose, wapiti (i.e., elk), black bear, bison and turkey are all attracted to savanna lands and could all once be found in the Toronto area,⁴³ making savannas attractive hunting grounds. First Nations and savanna environments engaged in a mutually beneficial and reciprocal relationship, each helping to maintain the health and integrity of the other. Inspired by successful Indigenous use of controlled burns to maintain savanna environments, in 2000 High Park officials implemented their own prescribed burning program in the park to revitalize its savanna lands and have made great strides towards the rejuvenation of this rare and important ecosystem.⁴⁴

The savanna lands are not the only ancient Indigenous feature of the park that is threatened and in need of protection. High Park is also home to sacred Indigenous mounds. Some have estimated that there are as many as 57 Indigenous mounds throughout the park although few, if any, of these sacred mounds are formally recognized as such by archaeologists, park staff or city officials.⁴⁵ One of these mounds in High Park recently became the site of considerable controversy. The site in question had for years been used illegally by some local residents as a BMX bike course, but despite the ecologically sensitive and significant nature of the site, park officials had done little to nothing about it. Since 2010 a First Nations-led group called the Taiaiko'n Historical Preservation Society (THPS) had been lobbying city and park officials to stop BMX bikers from using the site, with limited success, on the basis that they were causing significant damage and vandalism to the area and that the site was in fact an ancient and sacred Indigenous burial mound known to them as Snake Mound (Map C).⁴⁶ Of particular concern to the THPS was that the BMX bikers were digging into the mound to create ramps for their bikes, potentially disturbing ancestral remains. While local and alternative news sources had been covering the issue, the issue was only picked up by the national papers after May 13, 2011 when some of the First Nations individuals trying to protect the mounds set up a camp at the site to repair them and to ensure no one could further desecrate them. Although they had been granted permission by High Park

officials to be at the site and to repair it, many of the stories in the national media attempted to represent the campers as protestors and the event as an occupation. In the ensuing media frenzy different First Nations groups, archaeologists, academics, city officials and residents all weighed in on the 'High Park mounds issue'. Many were sympathetic towards efforts to protect the site, but city officials, some First Nations groups and at least one archaeologist questioned the authenticity of Snake Mound, and some media attacked the credibility of those involved in its protection. In turn, the Taiaiaako'n Historical Preservation Society questioned the integrity and credibility of the archaeologists and First Nations groups that suggested the mound was not authentic. Online debate regarding the mounds quickly became a microcosm of larger debates about Indigenous land claims. But in the end, the intense media attention regarding the Snake Mound prompted quick and decisive action by city and park officials. A fence and 'no cycling' signs were erected at the site, High Park staff promptly began restoring and replanting the area, and the Toronto police maintained a much more focused and active presence immediately following the news coverage.

It is commonly understood among many First Nations groups that human remains still have a certain amount of power and spirit associated with them, and so there is a responsibility among the living to ensure the protection and respect of buried remains. In return Indigenous ancestors continue to guide and protect present and future generations. Regarding the High Park mounds controversy, Rick Hill, a First Nations commentator, suggested that Indigenous ancestors, in being discovered or uncovered, are trying to remind the current generation of their responsibilities.

What we realize every summer, every time there's construction, the remains of aboriginal people come to the surface and you might want to say, metaphorically, maybe they are trying to tell us something. Maybe it's a reminder of who was here first, who lived well on this land for 30,000 years and who now is looking to say 'If we continue the way we're going, nobody's going to be able to live well on this land.' Where there used to be cornfields, there are subdivisions with no gardens. To me, it's kind of prophetic.⁴⁷

In this way, the renewal of the mutual relationships of reciprocity between First Nations ancestors and current generations also prompted park and city officials to uphold their responsibilities for the protection of the park.

Conclusion

The Toronto area is deeply inscribed by First Nations efforts, and while there are many stories of Indigenous accomplishment in the area, there is currently insufficient recognition of this in many official accounts of the city's history. There are innumerable examples of places throughout Toronto's landscape which exemplify Toronto's Indigenous environmental history, among which the Humber River Valley and High Park are particularly rich. This chapter focuses on the historical contributions of Indigenous peoples, but it is important to note that the Indigenous histories of these areas are still unfolding in the present. The widespread removal of Indigenous peoples from their ancestral lands via land surrender treaties and reserves undermined the mutual relationships of reciprocity and responsibility that Indigenous groups had fostered among themselves and their territories. The destruction of these relationships and the corresponding loss of knowledge regarding how to maintain the delicate balance of landscapes across North America have greatly contributed to their decline. However, it is estimated that there are about 60,000 Indigenous people living in the Toronto area,⁴⁸ many of whom have renewed or are in the process of renewing their connection to their ancestors and their ancestral landscapes. This growing trend ensures that stories of Indigenous environmental accomplishments and contributions in Toronto and elsewhere will continue to germinate and be told in the generations to come.

Endnotes

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