

# NEWSLETTER

## The Town of York Historical Society

October 2013

Vol. XXIX No. 3

### SPRUCE COURT CELEBRATES 100<sup>th</sup> ANNIVERSARY



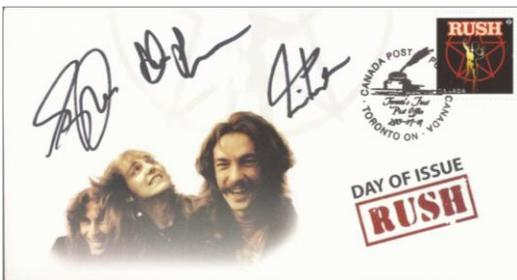
On June 26, 1913, Lieutenant-Governor Sir John M. Gibson laid the cornerstone for a housing development on Spruce Street, near Sumach. To encounter it now for the first time, one would be struck not only by its charming English-cottage aesthetic, but by how different its homes are from their older neighbours – tall, dark and handsome though the latter may be.

Instead of having long, skinny backyards separated by fences, these cottage flats fronted onto a large shared lawn. The interiors were different too. There were no dark hallways; rooms radiated off a central living/dining space. Casement windows provided natural light and cross-ventilation. The homes had electric light fixtures, hot running water, closets (!) and bathrooms with tubs and toilets. The kitchens – with built-in cabinets, sinks, laundry tubs and gas stoves – faced the courtyard. Mothers could keep an eye on children playing outside.

The design of Spruce Court, by Eden Smith, was influenced by the British Garden City movement whose proponents valued architectural aesthetics, quality materials and workmanship. They sought to eradicate disease, vice and crime by providing safe yet convenient homes for the working poor. Toronto's Medical Officer of Health, Charles Hastings, had published a report on slum conditions in 1911. The contrast between the filthy, overcrowded flophouses it portrays and the homes at Spruce Court was a stark one.

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### Post Office Creates Rare and Valuable RUSH Collectible



Toronto's First Post Office created its own day-of-issue covers for the RUSH stamp released by Canada Post on July 19th of this year, and has had ten of them autographed by all three band members: Geddy Lee, Alex Lifeson and Neil Peart. Each cover is printed on 100% cotton paper and shows the band in an earlier era with the "star man" logo, which also appears on the stamp, as a watermark. Each is numbered out of ten and comes with a certificate of authenticity signed by both the band's management and the museum's curator.

*Continued on page 4*

## Spruce Court, *from page 1*

Spruce Court was built by the Toronto Housing Company (THC), a public-private initiative created in 1912. The THC Board and shareholders were scions of Toronto business and industry. Its first president was G. Frank Beer of the Canadian Manufacturers Association. Shareholders received small dividends from the company, but their interests were also served in other ways. They needed a pool of cheap labour. Workers needed to be properly housed if they were to be healthy and productive. They also needed to be within the reach of public transit. Toronto's population was growing; there was a critical shortage of affordable housing.

Construction of the project began once the public aspect of the partnership was established. For more advantageous conditions in which to operate, THC lobbied the provincial government. The Ontario Housing Act, passed in April of 1913, not only set building standards but allowed municipalities to guarantee bonds for developers. Once Spruce Court was completed, there was already a waiting list for the 38 new homes, which varied from small, one-bedroom flats (\$14.50/month) to four-bedroom, two-storey units (\$29/month). THC was able to demand character references from prospective residents, who included tradesmen, factory workers and department-store clerks.

In the Depression, many tenants could no longer afford even these rents. THC ceased to be profitable and the company folded in the mid 1930s. Under different ownership, Spruce Court remained fully occupied and well maintained throughout the 1940s and 1950s but the next decade saw the complex change hands many times and leases were not renewed. By 1973, many of the apartments were vacant.

Fortunately at this point, instead of being razed, the buildings were listed on Toronto's Heritage Inventory and acquired by the City. A tenants' association, formed in 1974, evolved into a housing cooperative that bought the property in 1979. Last year, the co-op received a grant from Heritage Preservation Services and, under the guidance of ERA Architects, repairs were undertaken to the brickwork. Then, just in time for its 100th birthday, the complex was "spruced" up with a fresh coat of paint to all exterior woodwork. On September 8, Heritage Toronto unveiled a plaque in the Spruce Street courtyard to commemorate the Co-op's important place in the history of public housing.



## BUILDING BETTER HOMES FOR WORKINGMEN



SIR JOHN GIBSON LAYING THE CORNERSTONE OF THE FIRST UNIT OF THE MODEL HOMES BEING ERECTED BY THE TORONTO HOUSING COMPANY ON SPRUCE STREET.



Photographs: Cover: City of Toronto Archives, Series 838, Item 285. Above: Picture taken from *The News*, June 27, 1913; Dining Room, Spruce Court, 1913-15, City of Toronto Archives, F1244, Item 2365. Left: Spruce Court in July, 2013, courtesy of Ecopainting.

# THE NEIGHBOURHOOD AND BEYOND

## WAR ON THE HOMEFRONT: WOMEN AND THE WAR OF 1812

**Thursday, November 14, 7:00 pm**

Dr. Jane Errington teaches the history of colonial North America at Queen's University. She is also the author of three books, including *Wives and Mothers*, *School Mistresses and Scullery Maids*, and numerous articles examining the social and intellectual history of Upper Canada in the first half of the 19th century. In this presentation she will shed light on the female experience in the War of 1812 era.

**Parliament Interpretive Centre, 265 Front Street East; \$5/\$3 students. For reservations please call 416-212-8897.**



## TOUSSAINT: TRADITIONS OF THE DARK MONTHS

**Saturday, November 23, 7:00 to 10:00 pm (one intermission)**

Danceweavers presents a fascinating evening of storytelling and music based on Celtic traditions of Breton folklore. During the "black months" of November and December, folk would gather by the fire to listen to bleak and eerie tales of Merlin, Morgan le Faye and the ancient forest of Broceliande. This event features renowned storyteller Bruce Carmody and well-known fiddler, singer and composer Anne Lederman. Not suitable for young children.

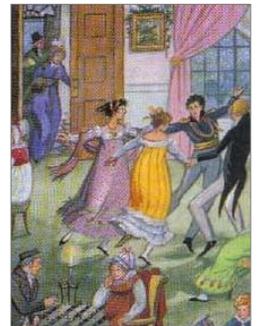
**Montgomery's Inn, 4709 Dundas Street West; \$20/\$15 students and seniors. Tickets available through [danceweavers.ca/toussaint](http://danceweavers.ca/toussaint). Pre-registration recommended.**

## CHRISTMAS-CARD WORKSHOP AND AFTERNOON TEA

**Sunday, November 24, 1:00 to 4:00 pm**

Card-making expert Linda Lorraine will lead a hands-on workshop, after which participants can write Christmas cards using quill pens and enjoy a sumptuous seasonal tea. Additional cards will be available for purchase, but you're welcome to bring your own from home. Don't forget your address book! You'll want to seal your correspondences with wax and mail them with TFPO's unique postmark. This is a York Regency Society annual event.

**Toronto's First Post Office, 260 Adelaide Street East, \$20 plus \$2 for materials. Register at [danceweavers.ca/jane-austen](http://danceweavers.ca/jane-austen) or in person at Toronto's First Post Office.**



## SMART ADDRESS: Art Deco, Style Moderne and Their Contemporaries in Toronto

**October 26, 2013 to January 25, 2014**

Toronto saw tremendous change in the decades between the two world wars. In a society hungry for the new, the design community, architecture in particular, responded to the challenge as never before. This exhibition explores our city through the buildings that went up in the 1920s and 1930s. Get to know a Toronto that was at times astonishingly sophisticated, edgy and quite daring.

**Toronto Architectural Conservancy/The Market Gallery, 95 Front Street East, 2nd Floor, free admission, Tuesday to Friday 10-4, Saturdays 9-4.**



## ENOCH TURNER SCHOOLHOUSE: The Annual Founder's Dinner

**Friday, December 6, 6:15 pm**

During WWI, the schoolhouse that brewer Enoch Turner built in 1848 served as a recruiting station. In honour of the forthcoming centenary of the war, this year's annual dinner features musician and historian Jason Wilson performing highlights from his show, *Soldiers of Song*, a revival of the world-famous Canadian comedy troupe, the Dumbells. The evening also includes carol singing, great food and emcee Donna Tranquada.

**Enoch Turner Schoolhouse, 106 Trinity Street; \$110 per person/\$800 per table of eight. RSVP by Monday, December 2. Call 416-327-6997 or e-mail [amcarty@enochturnerschoolhouse.ca](mailto:amcarty@enochturnerschoolhouse.ca).**



## RUSH Collectibles, *from page 1*

The text on the back celebrates Rush's induction, earlier this year, into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Originally printed in an edition of 100, all unsigned copies have been destroyed in an agreement with the band's management. *There are, and will only ever be, ten of these in existence.*

These covers are available for \$500 each, as they were designed to be a fundraiser for Toronto's First Post Office. Having kept its doors open for thirty years by operating a full-service post office, the little museum has naturally struggled somewhat of late. It is hoped that the sale of these collectibles will bring in some much-needed revenue.

To purchase one of these unique covers, or for additional information, please contact Janet Walters, Director/Curator, Toronto's First Post Office at 416-865-1833 or [tfpo@total.net](mailto:tfpo@total.net).



Above right: Alex Lifeson, centre, Neil Peart, left, and Geddy Lee, of Rush accept their band's induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame during a Ceremony at the Nokia Theatre on Thursday, April 18, 2013 in Los Angeles. Photo: Associated Press.

### POST BOXES FOR RENT

At the time of this printing, a few of the iconic postal boxes at 260 Adelaide Street East were available for rent. Anyone interested should contact Toronto's First Post Office at 416-865-1833 or [tfpo@total.net](mailto:tfpo@total.net).

### WHY NOT JOIN US?

Help us tell the story of the Town of York and early Toronto through research, exhibitions, interpretation and outreach, education programs and more!

As a member you will receive (in the mail, of course!) the TYHS newsletter and invitations to all events sponsored by the Society or held at Toronto's First Post Office. Membership also entitles you to a 10% discount in the museum's gift shop and in-house use of the Society's library. Your tax-deductible membership helps in ways that exceed its nominal cost. It declares your belief in the importance of Toronto's history and the preservation of its built heritage!

### The Town of York Historical Society

Individual Membership	\$25
Family Membership	\$40
Lifetime Membership	\$250

Directors: Tom Arnold, Sheldon Godfrey, Sanford Hersh, Judith McErvel, Jennifer McIlroy, and Councillor Pam McConnell

## Toronto's First Post Office is administered by the Town of York Historical Society

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#### Hours of operation:

Monday to Friday: 9:00 – 5:30

Saturdays: 10:00 – 4:00

Sundays: 12:00 – 4:00

Closed on holiday Mondays and the Sundays preceding them.

**The Post Office will be closed Monday, November 11 for Remembrance Day.**

Toronto's First Post Office is a museum and National Historic Site. The Town of York Historical Society is a legally incorporated non-profit organization and registered charity. Gratefully acknowledged is the support of the City of Toronto; the Ontario Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport; our members, donors and customers; and Canada Post.