

NEWSLETTER

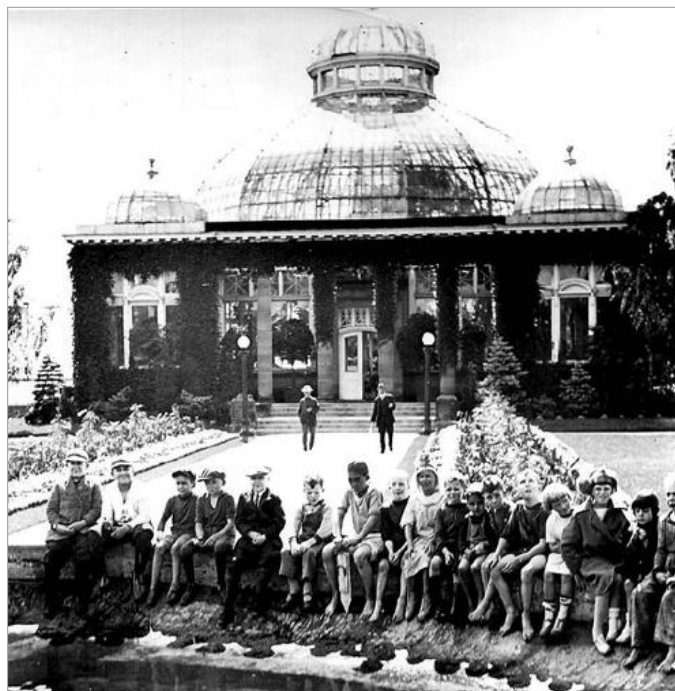
The Town of York Historical Society

May 2012

Vol. XXVIII No. 1

REVISITING ALLAN GARDENS

Seen any good movies lately? If you have not seen them, two fairly recent productions by local directors have each given the City of Toronto a starring role, and the conservatory at Allan Gardens a considerable walk-on part. In director Atom Egoyan's *Chloe*, the greenhouse is the setting for an erotic encounter between actors Liam Neeson and Amanda Seyfried. In Bruce MacDonald's *Trigger*, a heart-to-heart conversation takes place between Molly Parker and the late, lamented Tracy Wright amid much of the same greenery. The location has also served television series such as *Flashpoint* and *Kenny vs. Spenny*, as well as music videos by Bedouin Soundclash and Linkin Park. But have you been there? The botanical garden in this downtown city park is, like Riverdale Farm and High Park, one of the treasures bequeathed to us by our city's founding fathers, open to the public free of charge, seven days a week. Because the Gardens are looking particularly unsightly at the moment – water-main construction slated for



completion in 2015 has taken up much of its southern exposure – we thought we might offer a glimpse into the glorious past of one of the city's oldest parks.

Continued on page 2

Stylish New Neighbours on George Street



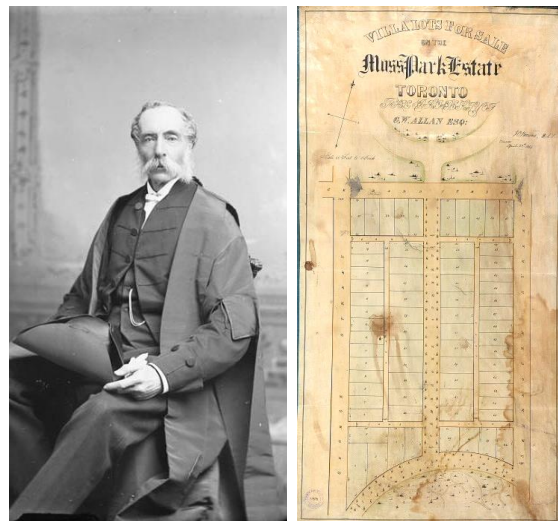
After forty-five years on Davenport Road, Moriyama & Teshima Architects have moved into 117 George Street, just around the corner from Toronto's First Post Office. They have taken over the ground floor of an old warehouse building dating from the 1920s. This they have renovated, leaving much of the brick and wood structure exposed. Into it they moved all new furniture, fixtures and computers, bringing with them only files and drawings – and the koi, for whom a new pond was built near the front entrance. Some cedar salvaged from their former home was used for the louvers on the building's façade, which essentially announced their presence to anyone in the habit of walking that strip. Their website, mtarch.com, acknowledges their recognition of the neighbourhood's history and their proximity to what was once the very centre of town.



Allan Gardens, *from page 1*

The park – bounded by Carlton, Gerrard, George and Sherbourne Streets – was originally part of Park Lot 5, purchased by William Allan in 1819. Allan (1772-1853) is perhaps most succinctly described by David Bain (*Simcoe's Gentry*) as a merchant, soldier and banker and as “a poor Scots immigrant who succeeded in business, rose in

society, and became one of the wealthiest citizens of York.” His Moss Park estate, with its Greek-Revival style mansion, was completed in 1828. His son, George William Allan (1822-1901) – an alderman, mayor (1855), Senator and member of the Privy Council – built a cottage he named Home Wood on the property in 1848. Following his father's death in 1853, G.W. Allan succumbed to development pressures, subdivided the property and offered villa lots for sale as early as 1854. On a visit to England in 1856, however, he was impressed with the Royal Botanic Society's Gardens in London and, upon his return, gave the use of 11 acres of land to the Toronto Horticultural Society of which he was a prominent member. On September 11, 1860, the Horticultural Gardens were officially opened by the 18-year-old Edward Albert, Prince of Wales.



The first pavilion in the park, designed by William Hay and completed in 1861, was a glorified bandstand in picturesque Regency style. Albeit tremendously popular, its rustic timber supports did not weather well and it was torn down in 1878. While increasingly indebted, the Horticultural Society nevertheless replaced it with a large concert hall designed by Langley, Langley and Burke which opened in June of 1879. This new pavilion contained a gas-lit 2,100-seat theatre where, on May 27th of 1882, Oscar Wilde, dressed completely in black, delivered a lecture on aesthetics. In 1888 the entire property, along with the Society's debts, were taken over by the City of Toronto.

The park was renamed Allan Gardens on the death of G.W. Allan in 1901, but in 1902 the pavilion was destroyed by fire. It was replaced in 1910 by a classic Edwardian wintergarden – the Palm House, designed by Robert McCallum – which remains to this day. This building was joined by the Cool House in 1924 and the Tropical House in 1956. Two other greenhouses were relocated here from Exhibition Park in the 1950s. In 2003, the University of Toronto donated a “Crystal Palace” built in 1932 on the corner of College Street and Queen's Park Crescent for its Department of Botany. This now serves as the Children's Conservatory. Children,



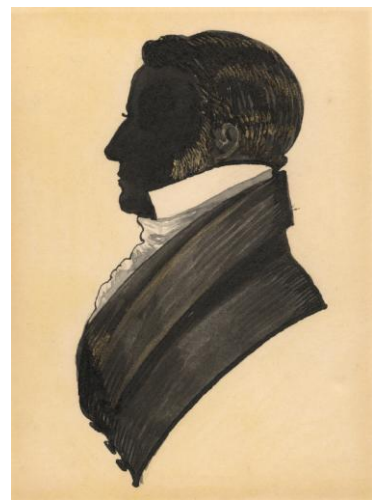
for the record, were initially precluded from paddling in the 19th-century fountain by a barbed-wire fence. There are many Torontonians alive today, however, who fondly recall going cooling off in its waters during many interwar summers, and it was a crowded place during the heat wave of July, 1948. Sadly, it is gone. But if one can no longer seek relief from the summer heat in Allan Gardens, its lush greenhouses remain a marvellous respite from the barren ugliness of many a Toronto winter.

Photos: Page 1: Children sitting around the fountain, c.1920, City of Toronto Archives, f1244, it1943. Above: Watercolour of William Allan, Toronto Public Library, JRR610. Watercolour view of Moss Park by John Howard, source unknown. Photograph of George William Allan, Library and Archives Canada. Map of Moss Park Villa Lots, J.O. Browne, 1854, Toronto Public Library. Left: The pavilion in Allan Gardens, 1884, 1/2 glass plate copy negative, Toronto Public Library, T11689.



Donald Maclean: Our Hero

There is a bronze plaque at Fort York installed “in grateful memory” of those who fell “whilst defending York, 27 April, 1813.” The second name on the list is that of Volunteer Donald MacLean, York Militia. MacLean, who was Clerk of the House of Assembly and fifty years old at the time, had taken up arms in defence of the town and – according to Lieutenant-Governor Roger Hale Sheaffe – “gloriously fell in opposing the enemy with a zeal, intrepidity and devotedness which could not be surpassed.”



That’s oor Donald! Toronto’s First Post Office has officially adopted Donald MacLean as its hero of the War of 1812. Zeal, intrepidity and devotedness notwithstanding, Donald Maclean – in addition to his clerical and occasional judicial duties – served briefly in 1807 as third Postmaster at York. Furthermore, he seems to have harboured some respect for the oft-maligned Royal Mail. In a letter to his daughter he asks for any Scots or English newspapers she might come across but notes that, “unless they are enclosed in the mail for this place they will not find their way; those you forwarded to Allan [her brother] he could not receive...I forward those sent to me by every post to him.”

Born on the Isle of Mull, Scotland, MacLean spent the six years prior to the American revolutionary war in New York. In 1786 he and his family were evacuated to Halifax and thence to Quebec, coming to York in 1801. In the same letter cited above, written shortly before his death, he writes that, “It is generally supposed that the American Fleet from Sackets Harbour will make an attack on this place as soon as the Ice will Permit,” and that the public records for the Province had therefore been “removed some distance out of town.” Questions as to why a middle-aged man with a good job and, by now, a second family to support might volunteer are at least partially answered when he continues:

The Ladies of York are as ready to come forward for the defence of this place as any of our Heroes. Indeed freemen born will never submit to be conquered by the mislead [sic] people and common hirelings urged on by the sinister views of an unprincipled mob government.



Hold onto your hat, gentle reader – the War of 1812–1814 bicentennial celebrations are underway! We will be bringing you more stories about Donald MacLean in future 2012–2014 editions of this newsletter.

Both the silhouette above (JRR3404) and the bird’s-eye view of the arrival of the American fleet at York (JRR905) were painted by Owen Staples, the latter in 1813 – likely for the centenary. John Ross Robertson Collection, Toronto Public Library.

Interpretive Centre Opens at First Parliament Site



The Ontario Heritage Trust kicked off their 2012 Heritage Week activities with the opening of the new “Parliament” interpretive centre, featuring the exhibit *Foundations and Fire: Early Parliament and the War of 1812 Experience at York*. Located in the former Porsche dealership at 265 Front Street East, the centre will be open Tuesday to Sunday (and holiday Mondays) from 10 to 4. Admission is \$5 for adults, \$3 for students and seniors and free for children under 8.



The Odette House Lost

When the property at 81 Wellesley Street East sold for \$4.5 million last September, the listing described it as a “rare boutique building” that was “free of any historical designation/listing” and had “development potential.” The stately late-19th-century mansion and its charming coach house were being sold by the Wellspring cancer support centre, which could no longer afford their upkeep and needed to expand. The sale alerted local residents, and Councillor Kristyn Wong-Tam submitted a request for heritage designation of the buildings in early November that was passed unanimously by the Toronto and East York Community Council. Meanwhile, the new owners – a numbered company – applied for and received a demolition permit for the buildings. Zoned commercial, their demolition required neither Wong-Tam’s input nor notification and, on January 18, the buildings were hastily demolished to the outrage of the local residents’ association and their Councillor. “My heart is broken,” she declared over the destruction of this souvenir of the neighbourhood’s early development. What angers Wong-Tam in this case is the fact that it was in the City’s hands to save the buildings, but its right hand didn’t know what its left hand was doing. While the request for heritage designation was waiting in queue at the woefully understaffed Heritage Preservation Services, the Building department was issuing a demolition permit. Wong-Tam is working to close the loopholes that allowed this to happen. In an on-line statement issued February 8, she suggests that the list of pending properties under review by HPS be consulted prior to issuing any demolition permits. As Christopher Hume noted in *The Toronto Star* on January 23, “Indeed, the trees around the Wellesley property had more protection.”

Island Airport Update



In March, the historic airport terminal was lifted from its foundations and moved to the south side of the Toronto Island airfield. The 73-year-old building was in the way of progress – namely, the construction of a new pedestrian tunnel that will connect the renamed Billy Bishop Airport with the mainland. Although the structure was reinforced with steel beams to keep it from collapsing during the move, this disregard for context has angered architectural conservationists such as ACO Past-President Lloyd Alter: “It mocks the whole concept of National Historic Sites since, as soon as they are slightly inconvenient, they can be ignored or tossed aside with review or discussion by anybody.” Suzanna Birchwood, a spokeswoman for the Toronto Port Authority, said, “We are looking to make sure it’s properly used as a heritage building, whether it’s to move it or keep it on site.” She added that she was confident there would be interest.

Empress Hotel Arson News



The six-alarm fire that destroyed the Empress Hotel building at Yonge and Gould in January of last year was soon thereafter ruled to be arson by investigators at the scene. Surveillance footage taken at the time from local businesses, a police camera on Yonge Street and a camera on the adjacent campus of Ryerson University, has since revealed that a shadowy hooded figure with a backpack entered the building three successive times that night, shortly before the blaze began. Because two firefighters later fell through the roof of the building, possible charges against this “person of interest” could include not only arson but also endangering life. Toronto Police Detective Debbie Harris told *The Globe and Mail*: “I have absolutely no doubt that someone knows who this person is.” Currently, plans for the site remain undetermined.

IT SEEMS LETTER WRITING IS ALL THE RAGE...



For whatever reason, the epistolary art seems to be undergoing a bit of a renaissance. The bases for them are as numerous as the grassroots letter-writing campaigns that have emerged this year. The ailing U.S. Postal Service and the threat of losing post offices in that country prompted Stephen Elliott, Editor-in-Chief of *The Rumpus*, to launch “Letters in the Mail.” For \$5 a month (\$10 for Canadians), readers can subscribe to receive a letter a week from writers including Dave Eggars, Jonathan Ames, Margaret Cho, Aimee Bender and Nick Flynn. Naturally, all subscribers receive the same letter – a copy of the handwritten or typed original – but most authors include a return address and people are writing back.

Portland, Oregon, author Mary Robinette Kowal challenged her friends and fans to write one letter every day in February. Thousands registered as participants in “A Month of Letters,” some of them writing to Ms. Kowal herself who has vowed to reply to each one. She answered our letter – using a quill pen, sealing wax and all! Kowal started the challenge after taking a month off from the Internet and finding herself writing letters. “In a large part it was because e-mail had begun to feel like work, even when it was writing to a friend...Letter writing was purely social and I rediscovered that I loved it.”

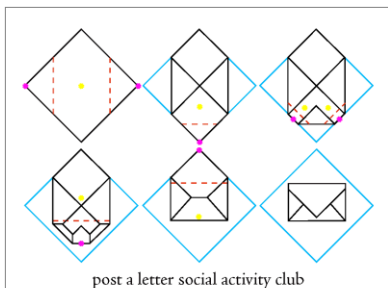


Etsy, the popular on-line purveyor of all things hand-crafted – including cards and stationery – has asked people to commit to sending at least one card or letter a week to friends and family. “52 Weeks of Mail” began on October 9, 2011 and runs to October 7, 2012. The dates were chosen to coincide with World Post Day, the anniversary of the Universal Postal Union’s establishment in 1874.

Postcrossing is a project less about correspondence than collecting, but it allows people to get postcards sent to them from all over the world. After registering on the website, postcrossers will receive at least one postcard for each one sent, often a surprise salutation from somewhere she or he has never heard of.

In December we told you about the Post-a-Letter Social-Activity-Club formed by local artist Angel Chen in order to make time for letter writing several evenings a month. PAL-SAC now meets regularly at Toronto’s First Post Office on the third Sunday of each month from 1-4 pm. Everyone is welcome!

Tourists from many countries make the pilgrimage to Toronto’s First Post Office to write letters as they were done in the 1830s. On April 21, however, Assistant Curator Kate McAuley took pens, paper, walnut ink and Scottish sealing wax off-site to present a letter-writing workshop. The occasion was “A Weekend with Jane Austen,” organized by Karen Millyard. Seen at right is Zak Nesbitt in full Regency regalia doing battle with a quill. Letter writing was almost a craze among the literate classes of Jane Austen’s era. Its return to popularity could only be good news for struggling post offices everywhere!



IN CASE YOU MISSED IT Puzzles and Pinpricks...



Photo: Dennis Hannigan, *The Bulletin*.

Postal Clerk Janet Baptista and her daughter Gemma took part in the annual Valentine workshop held on February 12 of this year. They are seen here with their contemporary versions of the 19th-century puzzle purse. Patrons of Toronto's First Post Office might recall Amira Routledge's tenure during Janet's maternity leave and, as we do, marvel that so much time has past.

...Scoundrels and Soldiers



On March 6th, our annual celebration of Toronto's birthday at St. Lawrence Hall centred on a War of 1812 theme. Peter Meyler, author of *A Stolen Life: Searching for Richard Pierpont*, delivered a well researched and illustrated talk on the "coloured corps" and its contribution during the conflict. Following a break for refreshments, Single Thread Theatre Company presented a piece we had commissioned, *Petticoats, Scoundrels and Soldiers*. In this fast-paced and witty drama, five actors playing a multiplicity of roles managed to present a one-hour primer on the war's major turning points from its declaration by American President James Madison on June 17, 1812, to the Treaty of Ghent, signed on Christmas Eve, 1814.

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Annual General Meeting



Meredith Hogan and Deanna Walter welcomed members to the 29th Annual General Meeting of the Town of York Historical Society, held this year on May 7th in the Meeting House at Riverdale Farm. The standing-room-only crowd was addressed

by Councillor Pam McConnell, who gave a brief history of the farm and also spoke hopefully about the First Parliament Site soon being in public hands. Sheldon Godfrey himself was the very surprised recipient of the fifth annual Sheldon Godfrey Award. In the early 1980s, Mr. Godfrey was responsible for the rediscovery and restoration of the post office, and without him there would not have been a museum at all.



Following the business meeting, Susan Spencer gave an engaging talk on the realities of life for women during the War of 1812. Ms. Spencer, who operates Spencer's Mercantile in Hamilton, Ontario

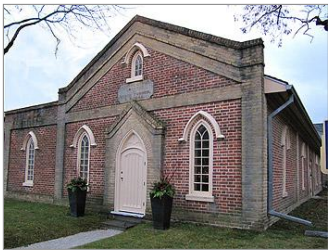


— a shop that caters to (among others) War of 1812 re-enactors — knows a great deal about the period. She can be seen in the photograph at left, herself re-enacting the life of a female camp follower as she totes some of her sutler's goods down the road to the meeting house at Riverdale Farm.

THE NEIGHBOURHOOD AND BEYOND

FINDING THE FALLEN: The Battle of York Remembered Until September 8, 2012

This exhibition identifies the Canadian, British, First Nations and American combatants who died in the Battle of York. Their names are recorded in a newly commissioned Book of Remembrance and their sacrifices are brought to life through artifacts, custom-designed maps and first-person accounts. Historian Richard Gerrard led a team of researchers on an investigative quest through archives, libraries and private collections to identify as many of the fallen combatants as possible.



SETTLING IN THE CITY: Walking Tours Saturdays, May 5, June 2, July 7, at 11:00 am

Enoch Turner Schoolhouse is once again offering *Settling in the City*, a series of guided walking tours exploring the homes, factories, places of worship, businesses and sites that made Corktown the centre of life for many nineteenth-century immigrants to Toronto. Tours start at the Schoolhouse and wind through Corktown, visiting Little Trinity Church, the former Freyseng Cork Company, the Alumnae Theatre, the

former W. Reid Lumber Company, the Parliament interpretive centre and the Distillery District.

\$10 or \$8 for students, seniors and members. 416-327-6997 or enochturner@heritagetrust.on.ca to reserve.

PEPPERING THE TRAIL WITH STORIES: An Evening Paddle Along Toronto's Waterfront Wednesdays, May 30, June 13 and 23, 5:00 – 7:00 pm

Paddle in a 29-foot voyageur canoe and listen to Bob Henderson tell stories of Toronto's shores and the extensive network of trails that lead from it. Mr. Henderson has won several awards for his teaching, and for his contribution to the fields of Outdoor Education and Canadian heritage. He is also the author of several books.

Same Boat Adventures, \$40 per person. To sign up contact Kim Sedore at 416-476-7878 or sameboatadventures@gmail.com.



THE ENCAMPMENT (Luminato) June 8-24, 7:30 – 11:00 pm

Conceived as a "temporal village" marking the bicentennial of the war of 1812, The Encampment comprises two hundred illuminated tents pitched on the grounds of Fort York. Each tent contains an installation representing an aspect of the war's civilian history, gleaned from research into real-live stories of family, love, loss, survival, patriotism, collaboration and betrayal.

Fort York, 250 Fort York Blvd., free admission.

STEAM ON QUEEN: A Steampunk Street Fair Saturday, June 23, 11:00 am – 5:00 pm

Campbell House and Canadian Steam Productions present "for your Amusement and Edification, Wonders and Entertainments assembled from across the Globe." In addition to steampunk artisans and merchants, there will be a gypsy encampment and a lemonade and cider garden. Performers will include Mental Floss Sideshow (performing acts of wanton stupidity), Dragonfly Belly Dance and Nero's Fiddle.

Campbell House Museum grounds, free admission. For further information see steamonqueen.ca.





Post House Condo under Construction

Toronto's First Post Office, or the Fourth York Post Office as it is known to Parks Canada, has endured a lot in its almost one hundred and eighty years. Perhaps the most humiliating to date was spending over fifty years in the middle of the twentieth century as a giant refrigerator, at first for the United Farmers of Ontario. It was in that state when it weathered Hurricane Hazel in 1954. However, the photograph at left illustrates something the old building is encountering for the first time – condominium construction in its very own backyard. While the building above ground will not be as close as it appears in this picture, the underpinning for the parking garage is pretty darn close indeed. One day, while fetching chairs from a closet in the basement, post-office staff discovered that a portion of the foundation wall had been knocked in. We hasten to point out that this was quickly repaired, and also that – being the fire stairwell – it was not particularly historic. The builder

has been especially responsive to all our needs, and has put plywood ramps under the scaffolding and treated them with a skid-proof coating. However, security issues have led to locked steel doors being installed at either end of the rear passageway, compromising our ready wheelchair accessibility. Perhaps the worst consequence at the moment is that there is no place to the rear of the block where the garbage bins can be stored, meaning that they currently sit in the front yard of the 1827 Bank of Upper Canada Building. Unsightly for now, but this we can survive.

POST BOXES FOR RENT

The postal boxes at 260 Adelaide Street East are historical reconstructions of the originals built by James Scott Howard in 1833 and once held by such notables as Mayor William Lyon Mackenzie and the Reverend Egerton Ryerson. At the time of this printing, five of these boxes had become available for rent. Anyone interested should contact the post office at 416-865-1833 or tfpo@total.net.

ERRATUM

In an article on the Guild Inn featured in our September 2011 edition, we mistakenly referred to the Hewetson Shoe Company of *Brantford*, Ontario. In fact, the J.W. Hewetson Shoe Company operated in the City of Brampton, where it was a major employer for 65 years. We are grateful to Helen Warner, a past member of the Brampton Heritage Board, for setting us straight on this matter.

The Town of York Historical Society

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

Any members not in attendance at the Annual General Meeting on May 7 who wish to receive a copy of the audited Financial Statements for 2011, or the minutes of the 2011 AGM, please contact Janet Walters by June 30.

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

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Hours of operation:

Monday to Friday: 9-4
Weekends: 10-4
Closed on statutory Holidays.

The Post Office will be closed May 21 for the Victoria Day long weekend and July 1-2 for Canada Day.

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