

Toronto: A Place of Meeting

Public Baths, Sunnyside, Toronto, Canada



Toronto's Sunnyside Beach on Lake Ontario, ca 1910

First Inhabitants, 8000 BCE – CE 1805

Toronto's history, from the end of the last Ice Age to the arrival of the Europeans, encompasses many different periods and cultures, including ancestors of the modern First Nations. Nomadic Paleo-Indian hunters, fishers and gatherers arrived first, 10,000 years ago, followed by Archaic peoples. Ontario Iroquoians were the area's original farmers, growing corn, tobacco and other crops. The name "Toronto" is thought by many to be derived from the Native expression for a "place of meeting."

French explorers, traders and missionaries came to Toronto in the 1600s. Some visited two fur-trading villages established by Seneca Iroquois; eventually, France built its own. The last, Fort Rouillé, was burned in 1759 by the retreating French garrison at the British advance. Nevertheless, Britain defeated France in the Seven Years War, and gained control of Canada in 1763. In 1805, the British completed the Toronto Purchase, buying approximately 260,000 acres from the Mississauga Indians.

Spear point, late Paleo-Indian/early Archaic period, c. 7500 BCE. Robert Ashbridge McCowan Collection. Courtesy Scarborough Heights Record (www.scarboroughrecord.com); James McCowan Memorial Historical Society (www.mccowan.org).

Restored pottery vessel, Middle Ontario Iroquoian period, Uren stage, CE 1250 to 1290. Elliot Collection of aboriginal artifacts. Courtesy Agincourt Collegiate Institute.



Founding of York, 1791-1839

Britain created the province of Upper Canada in 1791 for Loyalist refugees flooding into the upper St. Lawrence and lower Great Lakes after the American Revolution. John Graves Simcoe, the first lieutenant governor, relocated the provincial capital to Toronto, renamed York to honour the Duke of York, second son of King George III. Here, Simcoe established a fort and naval base, a 10-block town and Yonge Street. He also offered free land grants to encourage settlement.

During the War of 1812, York was invaded by American forces; both the fort and the legislature were destroyed. British immigration increased after the war, and York became a wholesale and banking centre.

In 1834, the fast-growing town of 9,000 residents was incorporated as the city of Toronto with prominent journalist William Lyon Mackenzie as mayor. He led a rebellion against the ruling class and attempted to seize the city in 1837. Government forces defeated the rebels, but their goal of responsible government was soon realized.



York from Gibraltar Point, 1828. Drawn by James Gray; aquatinted by Joshua Gleadah. Aquatint, etching and watercolour. Toronto Public Library, J. Ross Robertson Collection, JRR 195.

Portrait of John Graves Simcoe, 1791. Jean Laurent Mosnier. Oil. Toronto Public Library, TRL, 927-1,

Prisoner's box made by 1837 rebel Joseph Milborn, 1838. Toronto Public Library, TRL, Thomas Carfrae Papers, S95. Gift of the Ontario Historical Society

The Railways and the Industrial Age, 1840-1899

Although no longer the capital, in the 1840s Toronto installed gas lamps, plank sidewalks and sewers on main streets. A fire wiped out much of the downtown in 1849, but it was quickly rebuilt.

Toronto's population reached 30,000 in 1851. Many were Protestant Irish, and the Orange Order soon dominated political and cultural life.

In the 1850s, railways linked Toronto to provincial outposts and other cities. They also ushered in the industrial age. By the 1880s, Toronto was a major manufacturing hub.

On July 1, 1867, 10,000 citizens gathered at Queen's Park to celebrate the Confederation of Canada and the new province of Ontario, with Toronto its capital. By 1899, when a new city hall opened, Toronto's 200,000 residents also enjoyed the University of Toronto, the *Star*, the *Globe*, Eaton's, Simpson's, the Parliament Buildings, streetcars, the Toronto Island ferry, the Exhibition and the Toronto Public Library.



Toronto's Grand Summer Carnival, 30th June 1st 2nd 3rd July 1890 celebrating Canada's Confederation. Broadside, printed by Barclay, Clark and Co., Toronto. Toronto Public Library, TRL Broadside and Printed Ephemera.

Booms, Wars and Depression, 1900-1945

The settlement of the Canadian West and the tapping of northern Ontario's forests and mines opened new markets, ensuring Toronto's continued prosperity. Harnessing Niagara provided cheap hydroelectric power.

By 1912, Toronto had doubled in physical size, having absorbed surrounding villages and towns during the previous 30 years. In the booming 1920s, new suburban municipalities rose around an overflowing city of some half million people.

Thousands of Torontonians enlisted during the two world war efforts, also aided by the city's factories. Toronto's diverse economy mitigated the effects of the 1930s Depression.

Most immigrants were still from the British Isles, but increasingly from continental Europe as well. Many lived in "The Ward" behind city hall, where a small Chinatown also developed.



Aftermath of the Great Fire: Bay Street, east side, looking south from north of Wellington Street West, 1904. Henry F. Sharpe. Photograph. Toronto Public Library, TRL, 950-2-4.

Lancaster over "Fair for Britain" Toronto Aug. 31st. 1942. Owen Staples. Tempera. Toronto Public Library, TRL, 943-1.

Metropolitan City, 1946-present

Toronto changed dramatically from a British, Protestant stronghold to one of the most multicultural cities in the world. Today, more than 90 different groups, speaking over 100 languages and practising many religions, live together in this place of meeting.

Economically, wealth shifted from manufacturing to services. Thousands of buildings in the Victorian core were razed for high rise apartments and office towers. Suburban fields were divided for housing, shopping centres and "industrial parks." Subways, arterial roads and expressways were constructed. Yet, a vital downtown and vibrant neighbourhoods were maintained.

In the post-war period, the rapidly expanding suburbs didn't have the revenue for urban services. A metropolitan government was created in 1953 to handle area-wide requirements, while smaller municipalities managed local concerns. In 1998, all were amalgamated into one City of Toronto, now home to over two million residents.



Kensington Market, 1978. Detail. William Sherman. Watercolour over pencil. Toronto Public Library, TR.L. 979-6
Courtesy: William Sherman