

YORK PIONEER AND PRESENT

BY E. A. JAMES

Article 13 EARLY ROADS OF YORK

Road development in the County of York dates back to the closing years of the eighteenth century. Prior to the formation, in 1791, of the Province of Upper Canada, communication between the comparatively new settlement in the vicinity of what is now known as Toronto and the older settlements to the east along the St. Lawrence River was infrequent and irregular and was attempted only by water; while the country to the north had been little more than explored. The formation of roads by cutting the trees and making the way passable was necessarily a gradual work. In the settlement of the Province the pioneer at first followed the course of the shores of the lakes, bays, rivers and the smaller streams. And wherever was found an Indian path it was pursued.

When settlers took up their cabins on the lots remote from the water, paths would be formed to the nearest point on the water. These were irregular, according as natural obstacles barred the way. In time the foot paths became widened for horsemen, and later for vehicles. Afterward attention would be given to straightening the road, leveling hills, grading the way, and bridging streams. This was at first accomplished by the settlers working singly or in parties. Later, public funds were employed to open up new roads and for the improvement of existing highways.

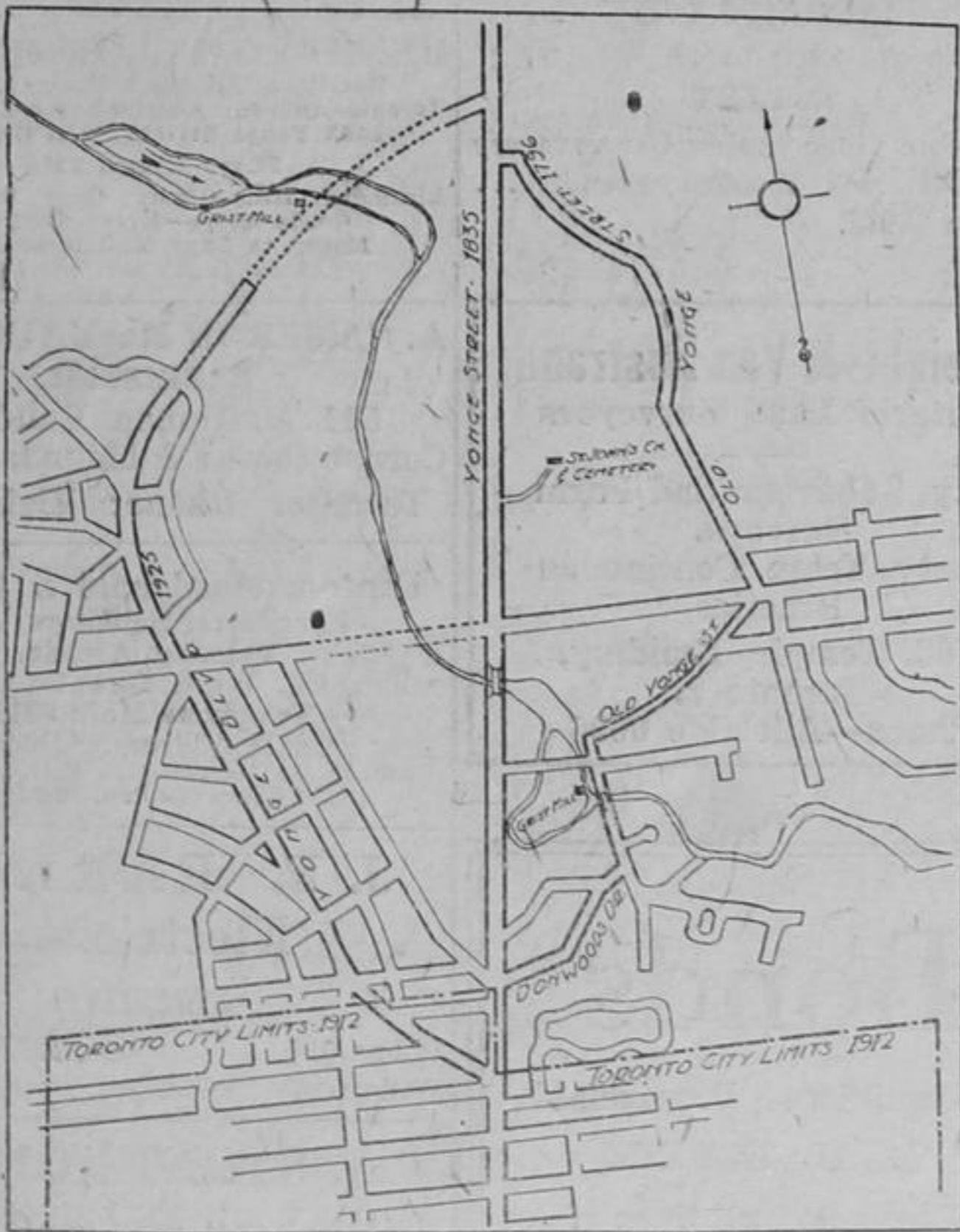
The first settlers found an Indian trail connecting the mouth of the Don River with the mouth of the Humber River. Following these rivers to their sources, Indian paths or portages were found connecting these rivers with the headwaters of the Holland River which emptied into Lake Simcoe.

Military Roads

The Governor of the new Province, Sir John Simcoe, inaugurated a system of roads radiating from Little York, as the site of Toronto was then called, having in mind the military requirements of the Province. In 1794 the building of Yonge Street was commenced, being first laid out as a portage road between Lakes Ontario and Simcoe, and forming a link in the short route from Lake Ontario to the Georgian Bay by way of Lake Simcoe and the Severn River. While opened up primarily as a military measure, and with military labor, its possibilities as a means of colonization were not overlooked, and the county on either side of the road was immediately laid out in farm lots of two hundred acres each. Settlement rapidly followed, and Yonge Street soon became, what it has since continued to be, the "backbone of the County of York".

The development of Yonge Street as a highway is characteristic of the development of the other highways of the County, and those who have studied the original location of this road and its various relocations at York Mills, Thornhill, Jefferson and Holland Landing have been able to trace, not only the progress of highway transportation, but in the various changes, the commercial development of the district.

The development and changes at York Mills are typical and it is therefore enlarged upon. Coming from the south the old road near the top of the hill turned to the east and skirted the hillside, following what is now known as Donwood Road, crossed the river on a ford that even after a hundred and twenty-five years can be located and skirted the east bank of the valley until it reached the high land on the north side of the stream, following what is still called old Yonge Street, until it reached the original survey some three quarters of a mile north from where it first deviated. This first location was chosen because of the minimum of grading and the narrow river crossing. A narrow



Plan Showing the Location of Yonge Street in 1796, 1835 and 1925.

crooked roadway with steep grades was not then objectionable. Traffic was slow and infrequent. Located along this original trail were saw mills, grist mills, cooper shops, stores and churches, together with the pioneer homes of the district. As early as 1830 this road was looked upon as a detour road and the Government of the day were pressed to open it along the original survey.

In 1835 the building of the bridge and highway on the original survey, a highway sixty-six feet wide, diverted the

traffic from the detour road to the present travelled Yonge Street.

When one views the cuts and fills made at that time without the aid of modern machinery, one appreciates the courageous spirit of the early settlers.

Traffic was now increasing. Yonge Street instead of being a pioneer trail was a freight road and a daily mail route. A straighter road and easier grades were required.

Traffic continued to increase. The motor car and motor truck crowded the highway and in 1922 a further improvement of the river crossing was commenced when Yonge Boulevard was located by the Department of Highways for Ontario. This new highway, eighty-six feet wide, turns to the west at the top of the south hill and follows the table land north westerly and it is proposed that it cross the Don River on a high level bridge 800 feet long, meeting the original survey of Yonge Street on the west, slightly north of where the original detour road intersected Yonge Street on the east. With the completion of Yonge Boulevard and the high level bridge, there will be opened to the north a modern motor roadway which will provide not only for the north and south traffic on Yonge Street but also the east and west traffic on York Road and Wilson Avenue.

It may be that this third river crossing will serve in addition to Yonge Street, Avenue Road from the south and Wilson Avenue from the west, thus giving an east and west crossing as well as a north and south.

Settlement duties of the early pioneers on Yonge Street were severe, and it is little wonder they found difficulty in fulfilling their statute labor obligations. They were required to build a dwelling house on each lot within a year of their assignment, and in addition the following conditions were imposed on the settlers: "They must within the time of two years, clear, fit for cultivation, and fence, ten acres of the lot obtained, build a house 16 by 20 feet of logs or frame, with a shingle roof; also cut down all the timber in front of, and the whole width of the lot, (20 chains, 135 feet wide,) 35 feet of which must be cleared smooth and left for half of the public road.

Governor Simcoe's ambitions was to establish a new capital for the Province of Upper Canada at what is now the City of London, and to link this capital by highway with York, Kingston and Quebec. The section from Kingston easterly had already been opened. The road from York to Kingston was to be constructed in time by the settlers; meanwhile communication with Montreal was to be by water. Old maps show the proposed line of the road, some parts of which are located farther north than the present Kingston Road. It is recorded that in 1799 the road from York to the Bay of Quinte was let by Government contract to Asa Danforth, to be cut and completed as far as the Township of Hope, about sixty miles, "so that sleighs, wagons, etc. may travel it with safety". A part of the original road still bears the name of the builder. Two explanations have been made of the very crooked line followed by this road; one is that the builder, being paid by the mile, wished to make it as long as possible; the other, probably the more correct one, is that the road followed an old trail, located by the Indians with a view to high ground, short river crossings and minimum grades.

In the same year the road from York to the head of Lake Ontario (near Dundas), known ever since as the Dundas Road, was opened.

To the east of the Don River a road was opened in 1799 northward to the mills of Parshall Terry, called the "Mill Road". These mills became known as the "Don Mills" and the road, since known as the "Don Mills Road", became an important thoroughfare, especially between 1821 and 1849. It led to the numerous flour mills, saw mills, fulling mills, carding mills, paper mills and breweries which were at that time operating on the Don River. The upper section of this road was known locally as the Independent Road—a road independent of the original survey roads—and was opened at different periods. The section to the north limits of Lot 5 was bought in 1820. The section from this point to the Mill Road at Dunlaps was given in 1831, and the remainder bought in 1868.

Dawes Road was opened north from the Danforth Road in 1828 in lieu of the town line between Scarboro and York. The section of the town line between Danforth Avenue and St. Clair Avenue being very difficult of construction.

Clem. Dawes, eighty years ago, kept an hotel on the north west corner of Danforth Ave. and Dawes Road and perhaps the origin of the road name came from the phrase "the road to Dawes."

N.B.—The writer welcomes comments, criticisms or corrections and he also hopes readers will forward descriptions of incidents connected with the County of York, of which they have particular knowledge.

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