



Historic Unionville is preserving its heritage

Stories, photos by Denise Romberg

UNIONVILLE — Antique collectors nowadays concentrate on collecting one or two things such as furniture or glass, buttons or jugs, or even clocks.

The residents of Main Street in Unionville have added a new twist to an old collection — they're collecting buildings.

"With the exception of two or three homes, the houses are very ordinary examples of their time, but they are a very complete set of their time," explained Peter Anderson, chairman of Unionville's architectural conservation advisory committee.

The committee, formed more than a year ago as a result of legislation creating the Ontario Heritage Act, will be responsible for "designating" certain buildings in the old town in order to "control demolition of buildings of special significance."

The committee has employed an architectural student to do a preliminary survey and work out a photographic list, Anderson said.

"We will then recommend to the town (Markham) the designations, which at the start will be houses owned by members of the committee."

Markham's new official plan sets down preliminary steps to establish 300 acres, that will include Main Street and an area to the north as a heritage conservation district.

The area to the north has been included so that "when a building of architectural and/or historical interest cannot be incorporated satisfactorily into a new development, the town shall endeavor to ensure that such a building is moved to another site," the official plan states.

But Anderson is both puzzled by and concerned about bringing older buildings, incompatible with new subdivisions to the north end of Unionville's study area.

"There are two ways of designating something for heritage purposes," he explained. "Either as a heritage conservation district or by designating specific buildings."

"I'm delighted that they (council) are proceeding with this intent, but I'm very perplexed about which way they should go," he added.

"Our position had been to go through the village designating buildings and then to protect the area."

Anderson described the idea as a "brave" one but said he sees pitfalls. "The money used to move the buildings to Unionville would be supplied by the township. I see severe organizational problems in having the township become a developer."

The town's point of view for the Unionville area is twofold — to find a means to preserve its history while at the same time prepare themselves for an expanded sewer capacity of .8 million gallons by 1981, thus doubling its present capacity.

The impact on development in the area will double the community's 6,000

population, permitting development north and west.

Needs businesses

"The old town must become commercially viable. We can't just make a museum out of it," says John Bose, deputy planner for the town of Markham.

The town planning department realizes that Unionville has special interest because of its character, he added.

"The planning does not undertake a stand to study use, but to realize the goals of a specialized commercial area and historical preservation."

"These goals cannot be achieved piecemeal."

Bose added that the proposed heritage district in Unionville is a draft proposal, an "interim thing."

The town is also studying a proposal for more flexibility in uses for the Main Street area so that zonings for the old village could eventually permit combinations of commercial, industrial and residential uses.

In effect, this would allow an antique dealership, for example, to operate a work shop (classed as an industrial use) at the back of a store (a commercial use).

It is hoped that flexibility in zoning will attract more business to the old village, thus making it more like the commercially active community it once was.

Settled in 1793

Unionville is one of Ontario's oldest rural communities, first established and settled by William Berczy in 1793. Berczy brought with him 64 families who were dissatisfied living in upper New York.

The following year Phillip Eckhart was brought to the settlement by Governor Simcoe to supervise the building of a wharf, the government buildings and houses in York. He was a skilled millwright and surveyor and due to his efforts, Markham was the first township able to boast of a completed survey by 1794.

Governor Simcoe was recalled shortly thereafter and replaced by Peter Russell, who did not take quite the same interest in the little community that Simcoe had.

Growth continued at a slow rate until the shock of the late 1860s when the town of Markham passed a bylaw to bonus the Toronto and Nipissing Railway to the extent of \$30,000. The plan was to build a railway through the township and build two stations, one just a mile south of Unionville. For this the council apportioned \$1,450.

The railway brought about a tremendous change in the commercial activity of the community, diverting grain shipments from Toronto to Unionville, Markham and Stouffville.

The Toronto and Nipissing Railway was opened for service in 1871 when it was connected with the Grand Trunk at the Scarboro junction and the Midland Railway.

The round trip fare from Toronto to Markham was \$1.

By the 1870s, Unionville was a thriving business community. It also served as the seat of government for the town of Markham and did so until 1954 when the municipal offices were moved to Buttonville.

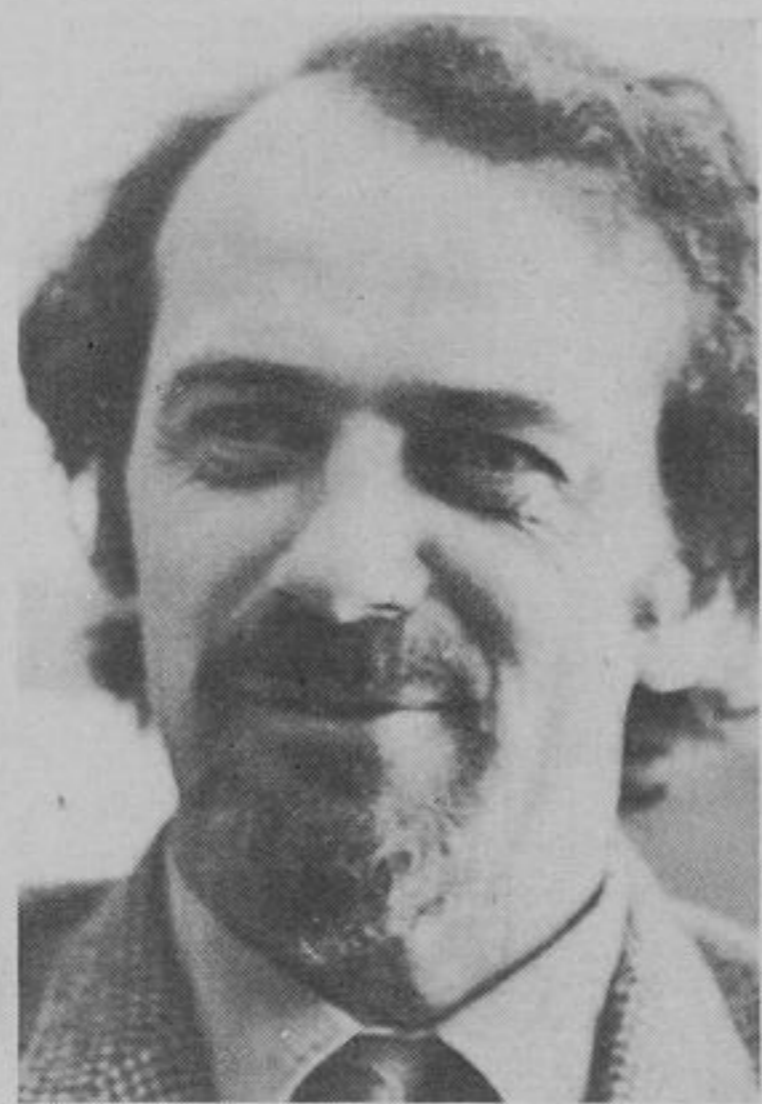
When the rail service opened, Unionville had a population of 250, who were probably the best outfitted in footwear in the country, as there were, according to records of the time, seven shoemakers in the village.

The town also had two cabinet makers, five carriage makers, three hotel keepers, a postmaster who ran a general store, one cheese maker, a tailor, a butcher, three coopers, (barrelmakers) a harness maker, a tinsmith and five storekeepers.

The wonder of it all is how a village, having an access like the Don Valley Parkway to downtown Toronto, escaped redevelopment.

'Not much change'

"I'd think that you would hit the nail right on the head if you were to say



Peter Anderson
... advisory committee

it was an accident," says Ewart Stiver, a 77-year-old resident who has lived and worked there throughout his life.

As far as he's concerned, the town really hasn't changed that much in the last 60 years.

"They haven't got as much business now," says Stiver, remembering the diversity of the village when he was operating his grain elevator business and keeping a general store.

Stiver, unlike other older residents, believes the Conservation Development Society is offering a positive direction for the village's future.

He remembers the resistance to widening Kennedy Road in the late 50s when he served as a trustee for what was then a police village.

"There were a few public meetings over it that I remember — no protest or anything like that, but there were a lot of people against it."

Town records confirm two meetings held in Unionville in 1958 over the rebuilding of a road between the CNR tracks and the bridge at St. Phillip's Anglican Church.

The residents were not successful in swaying the opinion of the Unionville trustees. Instead, the trustees asked Markham council to seek Ontario Municipal Board authority to proceed and permission was granted.

When the issue came up 10 years later, the residents were better organized. Throughout the 60's there had been and influx of new residents, who were originally city dwellers now choosing the country for their homes.

"These people formed a small group interested in keeping a four lane highway out," explains Ken Brown, chairman of the Unionville conservation development society.

The residents were successful this time in keeping the Kennedy Road extension out of Unionville and it appears that if the new proposed



On the move?

Ralene Murphy purchased this 130-year-old house in February and hopes to move it down Unionville's Main Street as soon as restoration brings it to Ontario Building Code Standards is complete. It is now located on property owned by St. Phillip's Anglican Church where a parking lot is planned.

Unionville by-pass is built, as the official plan now suggests, a four-lane road may not present a problem to the residents again.

With the road widening issue out of the way, Brown says the society's focus sharpened on preservation.

To date the society has compiled a list of 109 buildings in Unionville that are of historical or cultural interest.

Main St. priority

Brown says the 100-member society still sets a priority for the future appearance of Main Street.

"Ideally we'd like to see the services buried, but that may not be economically feasible."

"We'd like to see either grass planted next to the road, and a gravel road left, or possibly a brick road. The country charm is nice and we think that it can be preserved," he said.

"Our other priority is trying to get business to come back in."

Brown says he tried a few years ago to encourage a bakery and a butcher to locate in Unionville. At the time he considered purchasing a building on Main Street for such a business.

"The problem is that very few people are willing to come and be the first ones."

There was one business, however, that showed an active interest in locating in the old village, Brown said, but it was deemed unacceptable by Markham council.

"The only people that were really keen were the LCBO."

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140 years old

This Unionville house is one of the few outstanding examples of early Ontario architecture. It was built between 1835 and 1840 and is one-third stone and two-thirds board and batten. Wood panelling on the interior of the house is solid butternut, the windows are all hand blown glass, and the exterior trim is from the land of fairy tales.

Heritage home hassles

UNIONVILLE — Any modern-day developer who fashions himself a builder of homes would be challenged to deal with the development problem that Ralene Murphy faces.

In February, Mrs. Murphy purchased a property package in Unionville. It included a house and a piece of property — the house at one end of the street and the property at the other.

The first element in the challenge is obviously to get the two together, but there are other complications.

For one, the wood frame, post and beam-constructed house is at least 130 years old.

The lot has complications too. It has a seven foot shelf abutting the sidewalk and then drops off almost two stories into a flood plain.

Most builders at this point would probably ask the agent if there were any other properties to discuss; however Mrs. Murphy, an antique shop owner and a nine-year resident of Unionville, was interested in the historical character of the house when she bought the package, knowing full well the hassles she would encounter.

She is also aware that her town friends are backing her in the en-

deavor. Unionville has both an active historical society and a newly-created architectural conservation advisory committee; both groups are actively concerned with saving and restoring the town's old buildings.

Mrs. Murphy admits the house will need asbestos insulation, new wiring, a new roof, and proof that the house is protected by a two-hour fire block.

Myrl Smith, fire chief for the town of Markham and a 45-year resident of Unionville, is not so much concerned about historical preservation as about fire protection.

Smith became volunteer chief for Unionville in 1955 and township chief in 1967.

To him, Main Street is already hazardous.

"If one goes they'll all go, since they're all frame buildings," the chief explains.

But some buildings in the town have been successfully restored. The Unionville House Restaurant, located next door to where Mrs. Murphy plans to move her house, opened this past summer.

Its owners spent almost two years bringing the 1850 building up to Ontario Building Code standards. According to Shirley Anderson, who runs the restaurant, there were 15 concrete pillars poured in the basement of the building for support.

Although, Chief Smith was unable to state specifically his concerns until Mrs. Murphy's building plans are available, he explained that such things as window exposures will be limited because of the distance between the two houses.

This may further complicate Mrs. Murphy's problem by adding to the restoration cost of making windows smaller or eliminating them from certain exposures and adding them to others.

Mrs. Murphy, who plans to live in the house once it is moved and restored, as well as use the downstairs level for her antique business, admits "it's probably cheaper to build a new house, but the point of the whole thing is to conserve the old town."

The concept of conservation is not exactly a new one to Unionville but came on in full force in 1970 as a critical response to the proposed widening of Kennedy Road.

That same year, the first Unionville Festival was held in hopes of bringing a little attention to the village.

Almost 30 years ago, the late Alex D.

Bruce, an historian particularly intrigued by Unionville's history and author of An Historical Sketch of Markham Township 1793-1950, asked Markham council to purchase a property whose owner was about to remodel.

Bruce was keen to preserve Unionville's history through its old buildings and brought a motion before council to prevent William Bartlett, then owner of the Phillip Eckhart home built in 1794, from any remodeling schemes he had in mind at the time.

Since the formation of the Unionville conservation development society, Markham council has been increasingly responsive to the special needs of the old town.

The councillor for Unionville, Carole Bell, claims that "the new people, who probably represent 95 per cent of the population, have been influenced by the old character of the town."

Mrs. Bell has lived in Unionville for the last eight years and has spent almost the last two as Unionville councillor.

"Heritage didn't mean a lot to me until I moved here," she said. "I don't believe that people moved here because they thought it was quaint but rather that they needed a house and it was \$10,000 cheaper here than in Agincourt."

She believes the old town can be preserved and unaffected by new development on the outskirts of the village.

At any rate, the planning is better in her view than apartment buildings.

"I don't want to see apartments in Unionville, or from Unionville," she said.



Ralene Murphy
... house-moving problem



Ewart Stiver
... it was an accident