

## Recreation on Toronto Island, the Peoples' Resort, 1793-1910

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Résumé de l'article

*L'île de Toronto, surnommée tout simplement « l'île », a toujours été une destination distinctive et populaire pour les Torontois. Dès les premiers jours d'autorité britannique à la fin du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle, l'île fut un mélange du planifié et de l'imprévu, et malgré plusieurs interventions du gouvernement, elle resta un amalgame singulier durant le XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle et au-delà. Dans un premier temps, nous tenterons de retracer l'histoire de l'île au cours du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle en tant que destination récréative. Dans un deuxième temps, nous essayerons aussi de suivre la croissance des espaces verts de l'île et de l'impact de ces derniers sur son développement. Finalement, nous proposerons les raisons du succès continu de l'île et nous partagerons quelques réflexions sur la façon de traiter des paysages à caractère spécial en milieu urbain.*

# Recreation on Toronto Island, the Peoples' Resort, 1793-1910

By David Bain

In 1793, the site selected for the Town of York, later Toronto, featured a useful harbour protected by a long-curving peninsula. Elizabeth Simcoe, Governor John Simcoe's wife, described, "A low spit of land covered with wood forms the Bay & breaks the Horizon of the Lake which greatly improves the view which indeed is very pleasing." In a letter to the Duke of Richmond dated 23 September 1793 Simcoe himself observed that, "...the Sandy Peninsula is so healthy, as that the native Indians have requested permission to encamp upon it with their families at the sickly Season..."<sup>1</sup> In the early decades of British settlement, this peninsula, known as 'the Island,' was not part of the town. Instead it remained in the hands of the British government,

the home of a few military structures [1793/94] and a lighthouse [1808]. Beyond this modest official presence, the Island was treated like common space, an early recreational retreat for hunting, fishing, and bathing. By the early eighteenthies, as the community grew and expanded, it was an increasingly popular resort with a rudimentary ferry service. In the eighteen forties, after the Island was somewhat tentatively passed along to the City of Toronto, officials began the daunting task of trying to define it a part of the community. There were great changes on the Island over the next fifty years, but, at the beginning of the twentieth century, it remained one of Toronto's most popular recreational destinations, a space that cast the city in a unique and

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<sup>1</sup>Elizabeth Posthuma Simcoe, edited with an introduction by Mary Quayle Innis, *Mrs. Simcoe's Diary* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2007), 135; & Edith G. Firth, ed., *The Town of York 1793-1815, A Collection of documents of Early Toronto* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press for the Champlain Society, 1962), 61.

## *Abstract*

*Toronto Island, known as 'the Island,' has always been the city of Toronto's most distinctive and beloved popular resort. From the earliest days of British rule in the late eighteenth century, the island was a mix of the planned and unplanned, and, despite various government interventions, remained a unique blend throughout the nineteenth century and beyond. One goal of this article is to trace the recreational history of the Island in the nineteenth century. A second goal will be to trace the growth of its parkland and its role in shaping and altering the resort. The conclusion suggests reasons for the island's continuing success and then sets forth a few thoughts for dealing with special landscapes in an urban setting.*

**Résumé:** *L'île de Toronto, surnommée tout simplement « l'île », a toujours été une destination distinctive et populaire pour les Torontois. Dès les premiers jours d'autorité britannique à la fin du XVIII<sup>ème</sup> siècle, l'île fut un mélange du planifié et de l'imprévu, et malgré plusieurs interventions du gouvernement, elle resta un amalgame singulier durant le XIX<sup>ème</sup> siècle et au-delà. Dans un premier temps, nous tenterons de retracer l'histoire de l'île au cours du XIX<sup>ème</sup> siècle en tant que destination récréative. Dans un deuxième temps, nous essayerons aussi de suivre la croissance des espaces verts de l'île et de l'impact de ces derniers sur son développement. Finalement, nous proposerons les raisons du succès continu de l'île et nous partagerons quelques réflexions sur la façon de traiter des paysages à caractère spécial en milieu urbain.*

interesting light. While Edwardian society remained staid and conservative, interesting ideas had come to fruition here, resulting in a cultural landscape of note. How did this happen? How did a vernacular resort become a complex recreational destination with something for everyone? This article will follow the journey from sandbar to resort and attempt to offer answers to these questions.

At the outset, a few key definitions. First, the idea of governed and vernacular as applied to landscapes. Cultural geographer J.B. Jackson identifies a governed landscape as one, "... established and maintained and governed by law and

political institutions, dedicated to permanence and planned evolution." He defines a vernacular landscape as one, "... identified with local custom, pragmatic adaptation to circumstance, and unpredictable mobility."<sup>2</sup> Secondly, a resort: *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines a resort as, "A place much frequented or visited, more recently esp. for holidays, recreation, or because of a specific feature."<sup>3</sup>

## The Vernacular Landscape, 1793 to 1830

The Island in its early decades was largely the casual destination of individuals or small groups, a modest ver-

<sup>2</sup> John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), xii.

<sup>3</sup> *OED: Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford U.P.), <www.oed.com> (accessed 2015).



Figure 1. Postcard showing the picnic grounds, Island Park, Toronto Island, c. 1907.

nacular resort. The Simcoes were among the early British users. In the Winter of 1794, for example, an entry in Mrs. Simcoe's diary said: "The weather so pleasant we rode to the bottom of the Bay crossed the Don which is frozen & rode on the Peninsula, returned across the Marsh which is covered with ice..."<sup>4</sup> Access for visitors by boat or over the ice was straightforward, but a land trip required a journey east of town and a plan for crossing the swampy mouth of the Don River. Historian C.A. Joyce notes that: "As early as 1808 the sportsmen and patrons at Campbell and Deary's tavern

met to arrange to build a bridge over the river and gain access to open space they could use for shooting and racing."<sup>5</sup> By 1811, a formal racetrack had been laid out, a straight run to the bend at the lake. Toronto historian Edwin Guillet observed that, "... its location was chosen largely because the peninsula was a popular resort for those who enjoyed the pleasures of walking, riding and driving."<sup>6</sup> But perhaps the most popular activities were hunting and fishing, as the Island was rich in fish, turtles, plovers, loons, swans and other game.<sup>7</sup> Pigeon shooting, an early sport with judiciously applied rules, was

<sup>4</sup>Innis, *Mrs. Simcoe's Diary*, 150.

<sup>5</sup>Charles Anthony Joyce, "From Left Field: Sport and Class in Toronto, 1845-1886" (Doctoral Thesis, Queen's University, 1997), 228.

<sup>6</sup>Edwin C. Guillet, *Early Life in Upper Canada* (Toronto: The Ontario Publishing Company, 1933), 341. This was perhaps wishful thinking on Guillet's part. One unfortunate result of the isolated situation was the loss of most of its protective forest cover and a good deal of sand for building purposes. A petition

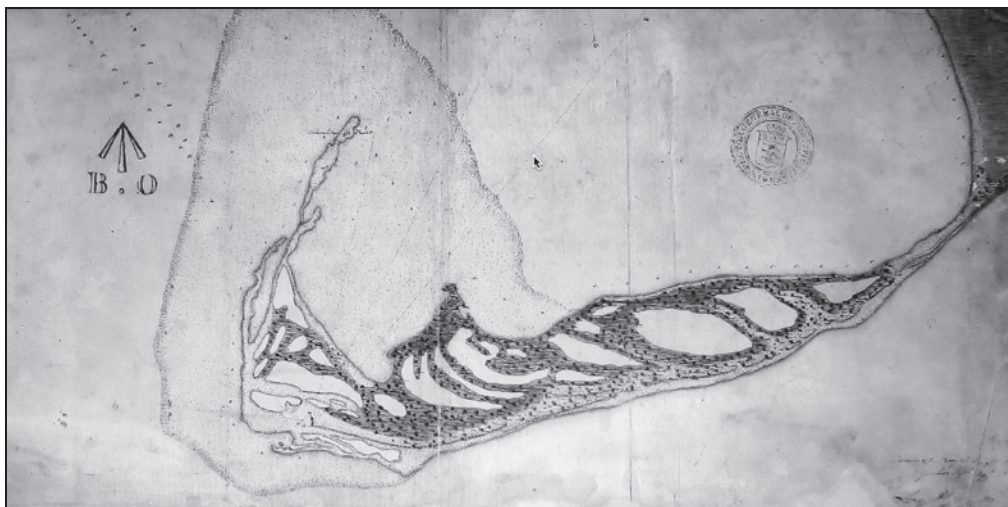


Figure 2. This detail of Toronto Island from Phillpott's 1818 plan of the Town of York shows the sandy bank along the southern Lake Ontario shore of the Island and the many ponds, beaches and swamplands on the north shore, the isolated and largely unoccupied vernacular resort. [*Plan of York Surveyed in 1818 and Drawn in 1823* by Lieut. Phillpotts, Royal Engineers]

also practiced here. The participants were generally members of the local elite and the new upwardly mobile middle class, and they practiced a 'British sport ethic' also applied to field sports like cricket and rugby.<sup>8</sup> As Greg Gillespie noted in *Hunting for Empire*, "...these men desired more than mere athletic participation. They sought moral and physical

improvement through sport..."<sup>9</sup> Overall, in these early decades, it is apparent that most users were male and had enough money to allow free time for sport. But, on occasion, gentler mixed events also took place, as a private picnic mentioned by young Toronto lawyer Larratt Smith in his diary in 1842: "Lovely and hot. I left the office early yesterday & went to

from Harbour Master Hugh Richardson in 1840 recalled the earlier landscape: "Your memorialist remembers since the time he first navigated the Lake, the Island to be well sprinkled with large hardwood and hemlock trees, besides being covered with smaller ones... The greater part... have now fallen... if it be not put a stop to... the Island will ultimately be denuded of trees." See Frederick Henry Armstrong, "Toronto in Transition: The Emergence of a City 1828-1838" (Doctoral Thesis, University of Toronto, 1965), 21.

<sup>7</sup> For example, local historian Henry Scadding wrote that, "The younger Messrs Heward [sons of a prominent citizen] had a field [c.1840?] for the exercise of their sportsman skill on the Island." See Henry Scadding, *Toronto of Old*, ed., Frederick H. Armstrong (Toronto, Dundurn Press, 1987), 132.

<sup>8</sup> "Pigeon Shooting," *Star*, 17 August 1844.

<sup>9</sup> Greg Gillespie, *Hunting for Empire: Narratives of Sport in Rupert's Land, 1840-1870* (Toronto: UBC Press, 2007), 5. Toronto historian John Ross Robertson disagreed, calling it a "...somewhat cruel, [Island] pastime...". He also mentioned that blackheart and turkey shooting and fox hunting took place on the Island. See, John Ross Robertson, *Landmarks of Toronto* (Belleville, Ont.: Mika Publishing, 1976), 2: 765.



Mrs. Widder's pic-nic at the Bend of the Island. Some of the party crossed the Bay in Cull's galley the Wave, & others in Irving's and Stowe's boats. The pic-nic was a large fashionable affair."<sup>10</sup>

### The Vernacular Landscape in transition, 1830-1867

By the eighteen thirties, local entrepreneurs had also started to have ideas for the Island. The fresh lake breezes and stirring vistas now identified it as a promising location for a resort hotel. Wealthy Torontonians already visited resorts in Europe, and American destinations like Saratoga Springs or the Pavilion Hotel in Niagara Falls.<sup>11</sup> Such establishments were characterized by historian Gary Cross as, "...[the] sites of respectable gatherings, not crowds, where traditions not novelty prevailed."<sup>12</sup> When the first Island hotel, *The Retreat-on- the-Peninsula*, opened on the Island in 1833, proprietor Michael O'Connor welcomed what sounded like a respectable clientele, reporting himself,

"ready to accommodate sportsmen, parties of pleasure, and individuals who may wish to inhale the lake breeze." However, it proved, at least on occasion, an isolated retreat for drinkers.<sup>13</sup> Before long, the community found reason to react. In a letter published in the *Christian Guardian* on 15 July 1835, the writer who called himself "*a Citizen*," noted that, "...through the whole of the Sabbath the [Peninsula] house is crowded to excess, by persons that go over and spend the day in drinking, rioting and blasphemy; and it is more likely than not, this will end in quarrelling, fighting and bloodshed."<sup>14</sup> *Citizen* also spoke of, "... all descriptions of persons, both white and coloured," veiled language indicating the presence of the working class. By the eighteen thirties, the Island did indeed have a small fishing community, some market hunters, even a factory owned by Benjamin Knott, but only a handful were permanent residents. And the Sunday cost of the new horse-powered ferry [1835] that normally carried

<sup>10</sup> Mary Larratt Smith, *Young Mr. Smith in Upper Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Library, 1980), 80. As well, Mr. Smith and his friends sometimes visited the Island to spend a few hours bathing, walking, fishing or shooting. See pp. 19, 38, 42, 49, 64 and 66.

<sup>11</sup> For a sense of early resorts in Canada and the US, see, for example, Thomas A. Chambers, *Drinking the Waters: Creating an American Leisure Class at Nineteenth-Century Mineral Springs* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, c.2002); and Patricia Jasen, *Wild Things: Nature, Culture, and Tourism in Ontario 1790-1914* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995). Canadians were apparently quite willing to travel to prominent resorts. An article about Saratoga Springs reprinted in Toronto from the *Albany Gazette*, for example, indicated that "1000 persons arrived at these springs last week, they are from every state in the union, from Canada and Europe" See "Saratoga Springs," *Colonial Advocate*, 2 September 1830.

<sup>12</sup> Gary Cross, *Playful Crowd: Pleasure Places in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 114.

<sup>13</sup> "The Retreat on the Peninsula [ad]," *British Correspondent*, 19 October 1833. The new proprietors, Anderton and Palin, of what was by then called the Peninsula House [1834] continued in the same vein, advertising "a pleasant healthy retreat for individuals and families." Quote seen in Sarah Duane Satterthwaite Gibson, *More Than an Island* (Toronto: Irwin Publishing Inc., 1984), 40.

<sup>14</sup> *Christian Guardian* citation seen in Armstrong, "Toronto in Transition," 345/6.

workers to the factory was high. So, while working class men were no doubt present, the sporting crowd seems at least as likely to be the source of any troubles. At any rate, although the Peninsula and the other hotels that soon followed proved less-than-successful efforts at the sort of rational resorts described by Cross, such small businesses represented the first halting efforts at a more governed landscape.

By the eighteen forties, provincial and municipal government officials began to see a greater need to get involved. In 1846, the Province of Upper Canada stated an interest in dividing the Island into lots to facilitate leasing to individuals. In May of that same year, the City's two-man committee responded, recommending a solution that sounded somewhat like a municipal park, when they suggested, "...render[ing] the Peninsula a Source of pleasant and healthful recreation and exercise to the Inhabitants of the City generally, for which it is so eminently calculated...."<sup>15</sup> In January of 1847, the provincial government granted the municipality a License of Occupation for the Island and the marshlands to the east. Soon thereafter the municipi-

ality, with the situation no longer theoretical, reconsidered leases.<sup>16</sup> In 1850, John Howard, the city surveyor, as well as one of Toronto's most eminent early architects, produced a tentative residential layout for council. Characterized by Island historian Sally Gibson as, "...reminiscent of English seaside resorts," it was perhaps too ambitious at the time to find financial support in the frontier city of 30,000.<sup>17</sup> In 1856, an editorial in a Toronto newspaper, *The Leader*, supported another popular possibility, a large private resort development:

...let a private company take the matter in hand and ask a long lease of part of the Island, at a nominal rent, on condition that they make certain improvements, with a view of affording accommodation to the public, as a place of summer resort for healthful and innocent recreation....<sup>18</sup>

In this particular instance, the idea was to anchor the Island until the municipality had, "a far more secure tenure." And while it was not taken up, a large respectable resort remained a favorite solution in the decades ahead, usually blended with, favoured over, or competing against residential leasing and public parkland.

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<sup>15</sup> Toronto City Council [hereafter TCC], Minutes, 12 March 1846, 37. Later that year, Alderman Cameron, may have actually used the word park when he spoke about his successful involvement in the negotiations with the government to some fellow aldermen within earshot of a *British Colonist* reporter, who wrote: "It is contemplated by the city authorities in the course of time to drain the marsh, and to convert it into a park for the recreation of the citizens, the peninsula being used for a similar purpose, without interfering with the fisheries" See *British Colonist*, 31 July 1846.

<sup>16</sup> A report of the Committee on the Wharves and Harbours Committee from May of 1848 now supported lot development noting that, "...a handsome amount couuld [sic] be realized to the City annually whilst the peninsula would become the most beautiful spot in the vicinity of the City of Toronto." See Gibson, *More Than an Island*, 56-57.

<sup>17</sup> Gibson, *More Than an Island*, 56.

<sup>18</sup> *Leader*, 18 July 1856.

However, over the next few decades, thoughts about any sort of municipal control remained on the back burner. In the eighteen fifties, as Toronto's population increased and Island transportation improved, large numbers from all classes discovered the Island. In the previous decade, the new proprietors of the Peninsula, the Privits, had already expanded the recreational mix by adding a rather modest pleasure ground to the mix.<sup>19</sup> The proprietor from 1853 to 1858, John Quinn, also provided a reliable ferry service, with competition provided by Robert 'Bob' Moodie's high volume option [1854]. Moodie, also an alderman representing blue-collar St. John's Ward [1855-1865], was, in the words of historian Barry Dyster, a man who, "... defended the people's recreation and brought theatre to public life."<sup>20</sup> In his Island role, he also developed a pleasure ground environment that included a ballroom.<sup>21</sup> Thousands now

arrived on civic holidays and on Sundays to picnic, fish, and play sports.

This popularity seemed on a somewhat chaotic upward trajectory when, in late 1857 and early 1858, winter storms broke through the narrow peninsula at the east end, creating an actual island.<sup>22</sup> Harbour Master Hugh Richardson mourned the most recent blow to a natural landscape long under attack by observing,

Those who remember... the Peninsula thirty years ago, with its broad neck, its groves of trees, its cattle feed, and lake road under a high bank, will now, on visiting it, find all replaced by a permanent and wide opening to the lake, and a low strip of beach extending west, almost without a tree, over nearly the [all?] of which the sea ranges during north-east gales...<sup>23</sup>

For the next decade, a course of action was to be a matter of much discussion and indecision.

<sup>19</sup> See "Cheap Pleasure" [ad], *British Colonist*, 27 May 1845; "Cheap Pleasure" [ad], *British Colonist*, 26 May 1846, and "Cheap Pleasure" [ad], *Globe*, 3 May 1850. See also John Ross Robertson, *Landmarks of Toronto* (Belleville, Ont.: Mika Publishing, 1976), 2: 765.

<sup>20</sup> Barrie Dyster, "Captain Bob and the Noble Ward," in *Forging a Consensus*, ed., Victor L. Russell (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 110. Robert Moodie was among those who tried to save today's University Avenue as a park. In 1859, there was a movement to push a road across this avenue, then called College Avenue. During and after the riots that followed, he was a peacemaker and a spokesman in defending this landscape against commerce. See, for example, "City Council Last Night. Visit of the People," *Globe*, 5 August 1859.

<sup>21</sup> For Quinn, see, for example, "The Pleasure Steamer Citizen..." [ad], *Globe*, 24 July 1854; "The Peninsula Line of Pleasure Steamers..." [ad], *Mirror*, 19 June 1855; and "For Sale. The Steamer 'Citizen'..." [ad], *Globe*, 28 August 1858; see also, Gibson, *More Than an Island*, 60, 63. For Moodie, see "The Queen's Birthday," *Globe* 25 May 1858; "Ho: For The Island..." [ad], *Globe* [ad], 18 June 1858; "Quadrille Party at the Island..." *Globe*, 25 June 1858; and "The Firefly," *Globe*, 19 April 1859. See also Dyster, "Captain Bob and the Noble Ward" in *Forging a Consensus*, 91, 110 & Gibson, *More Than an Island*, 60. For Quinn & Moodie, see, "...Captains Moodie and Quinn..." [ad], *Leader*, 26 May 1857.

<sup>22</sup> For an idea of Island damage, see "City Council," *Globe*, 30 March 1853; "Accident to Osgoode Hotel on the Peninsula," *Globe*, 20 August 1857; and *Globe*, 14 April 1858; See also, TCC, *Appendix to the Minutes*, Report #1 Committee on Wharves and Harbours, 6 February 1854, 105.

<sup>23</sup> "Toronto Harbour," *Globe*, 18 January 1858.



But surprisingly, while a course of action was being debated, the Island's recreational life never faltered. A few months after the eastern peninsula and the Quinn and the Parkinson hotels were swept away, Bob Moodie sprang into action. On May 24, just a month after the last violent storm, he brought an estimated 2,000 visitors to the Island to celebrate the Queen's Birthday. On that occasion, the *Globe* reported that the Island, "Ever attractive, is doubly so on the occasion of the Queen's birth-day, and especially at a period when grave apprehensions exist [as to] its speedy and total disappearance...."<sup>24</sup> While the debate about solutions continued, the hotels, the taverns and the ferry service simply got back to business.

### The Governed Landscape, 1867-1910

The indecisiveness created by the License of Occupation was removed in January of 1867, when the Crown stepped aside retaining only a few acres around the west-end lighthouse. Survey-

or Charles Unwin was commissioned to create a survey for development. Like the Howard plan, this one featured a promenade along the shore of Lake Ontario, but its main importance was to be the utilitarian matter of dividing the Island into lots. All lots were to be approximately five acres leased for 21 years renewable at \$25 per year.<sup>25</sup> There was no immediate rush to procure leases and, in the short term, the Island remained a network of pleasure grounds, with ferry captains and small hotels setting the tone. Drinking and rowdyism continued as problems, while the self-regulated ferry service exasperated the situation.<sup>26</sup> Hotel development was a part of the discussion around the Unwin plan, but, beyond talk, no luxury hotels found a foothold.<sup>27</sup>

By the early eighteen seventies, park development in the City of Toronto was a matter of much discussion. Two large parks, Riverdale in the east and High Park in the west, were about to supplement the centrally located Queen's Park. While the possibility of creating a park on the Island near the congested downtown core could

<sup>24</sup> "The Queen's Birthday," *Globe*, 25 May 1858. In addition, "Ho for the Island" [Ad], *Globe*, 18 June 1858 gives a glimpse of the Moodie enterprise: "...A Magnificent Ball Room has been fitted upon the Island by the proprietor, and a splendid Quadrille Band will be in attendance. Wines, Liquors, Cigars and other refreshments, of first-rate quality and at moderate prices. Excellent fishing on the Island, and every accommodation offered for healthful recreation..."

<sup>25</sup> For Unwin's ideas, see TCC, *Appendix to the Minutes*, Report #3 Committee on Wharves and Harbours, 1 November 1867, 149; and Gibson, *More Than an Island*, 72.

<sup>26</sup> In 1869, one unhappy citizen, 'English Mother' seemed to represent the attitude of many citizens, when, frustrated by bad behaviour in the city's St. James Cemetery, she declared, "...would it not be better to let [such behavior] expand its force on the Island, than to pollute our places of burial?" See, "St. James' Cemetery on Sundays," *Globe*, 14 June 1869.

<sup>27</sup> In 1867, for example, there was a request for 5 lots [25 acres] by a group of investors. See "The Island. Proposition to Erect a Summer Hotel," *Globe*, 6 August 1867. And, in 1868, Charles Lindsey proposed a large establishment centrally located on the south shore [Lots 6, 7, 8 and 19]. See, *Toronto Island; the City years* (Toronto: Market Gallery, 1981), 9.



Figure 3. This detail from the 'key to plates' of Goad's 1910 city atlas gives a sense of the great physical change to the Island in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Development created a bulky central and western landscape shaped by park, residential and recreational progress, a transition from natural to cultural environment. [Goad's *Atlas of the City of Toronto*, 1910.]

also be argued to be a greater need, what the municipality saw fit to do there at this time was to start construction of the Unwin boardwalk along the lake. In 1874, a humble section was constructed at the west end. In proposing additional walks in May of 1875, William Hamilton, the Chairman of the Standing Committee on Wharves and Harbors, clarified the rationale when he said:

...your Committee are of opinion that the Island is the most suitable place that could be selected as a public place for the recreation and amusement of the citizens of Toronto... It is made the resort of thousands, both young and old, rich and poor... On a public holiday the Island is completely invaded by the more industrial classes of our citizens, who prefer to enjoy a few hours of the invigorating lake air to a trip into the country. Such little outings as these on the part of

thousands who are nearly all the year round confined in close workshops and factories, have a most beneficial effect on the health of our citizens....<sup>28</sup>

In 1875, the boardwalk was extended to the lighthouse, then east along the south shore before turning north towards the ferry at Mead's [formerly Parkinson's] dock. Despite gaps, it was a strong start towards connecting the two key ferry docks at Mead's and at Hanlan's Point to make the Lake Ontario shoreline accessible, and it also addressed the difficulty of walking any distance in the sand.

A key supporter of a people's resort was influential conservative alderman John Baxter. He had become an advocate for Island improvements, when Queen's Park, in his own ward, was threatened by residential development, declaring that,

<sup>28</sup> TCC, *Appendix to the Minutes*, Report #3 Committee on Wharves and Harbors, 3 May 1875, 188. The total cost of the 1875 boardwalk was estimated in this report at \$3,416.

"The [Queen's] Park would never [now] be the people's park. The University had already taken away the privilege of holding pic-nics on their property. The poor man, however, go unmolested to the Island..."<sup>29</sup> What exactly did he want? Baxter, as a rule, was reluctant to spend money on parks, although he had, in the past, been supportive of Queen's Park. A few years earlier, in 1871, he had also supported hotel development on the Island and created a resolution, quickly approved, that said,

...whereas the Island in front of the City, is a place of public resort, for the health and recreation of the Citizens, His Worship the Mayor be respectfully requested to lay before the Board of police commissioners, the desire of the Council, that a License to keep a respectable and well conducted Hotel, be granted to some person upon the said Island..."<sup>30</sup>

Reading between the lines, he would welcome an improved people's resort balanced by the presence of a large stable pri-

vate establishment rather than a park.<sup>31</sup> So it seemed that the municipal plan for recreation on the Island might be a blend of the public and private, with the exact formula as yet to be determined.

Somewhat surprisingly, another step forward was the matter of public bathing. Public bathing was a contentious and difficult issue for nineteenth-century North Americans. Cleanliness was important—a platform for middle-class values—but outdoor bathing was socially unacceptable.<sup>32</sup> In mid-century Toronto, citizens of a certain income had some choices. In addition to rapidly improving home options, as well as some bathing facilities in the city, the fortunate looked forward to holiday bathing at resorts.<sup>33</sup> However, in Toronto, poorer citizens had limited possibilities at home and no public baths. For the male part of this population, the outdoors beckoned, with the waterfront becoming a battlefield in the class war. For example, in 1868, a police court judge spoke about, "...the number

<sup>29</sup> "The Queen's Park," *Globe*, 3 July 1875.

<sup>30</sup> TCC, *Minutes*, 19 June 1871, 512.

<sup>31</sup> Park advocate John Hallam was not a Baxter fan. In 1888, when Hallam was advocating parkways, he said of Baxter's opposition: "The everlasting 'workingman' argument as usual did good service. The 'works of necessity' argument was also used with equal effect. These have been the stock arguments of Baxter & Co. for years, and have been the means of staying progress in the extensions of our parks and the beautifying of our city." He added that Baxter "...lifted up his hands in holy terror at 'drives for the rich and the aristocrats.'" See John Hallam's letter in the *Globe*, 6 July 1888.

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, Richard and Claudia Bushman, "The Early History of Cleanliness in America," *The Journal of American History*, 74:4 (Mar. 1988), 1213-38. For an idea of the difference between American and British values, see David Glassberg, David, "The Design of Reform: the Public Bath Movement in America," *American Studies*, 20:2 (Fall 1979), 5-21. In the nineteenth century, Toronto seems to have been caught somewhere between the somewhat more progressive attitudes in Britain and the conservative attitudes in the United States.

<sup>33</sup> In 1868, for example, a *Globe* correspondent said of the popular St. Lawrence resorts "...here on the St. Lawrence the drives are really beautiful, it is never too warm, [and] the bathing is generally very good..." See "Canadian Watering Spots," *Globe*, 10 August 1868.



Figure 4. A postcard shows bathers posing for a photograph at one of the Island docks, c. 1908.

of bathers who, during the crowded state of the Island upon Saturday and other afternoons, sought this more exposed positions to recreate themselves, regardless of the proprieties of decency.”<sup>34</sup>

In 1875, it was a debate about the lack of public bathing facilities that officially established the practice on the Island. The Wharves and Harbours Committee had commissioned a design for a bathing house design with the hope of building several along the waterfront. But, this

initiative unraveled at Council, with Alderman Withrow saying that, “It was to be remembered that only a certain class of the citizens would use these baths.”<sup>35</sup> With Council now reluctant to commit to the cost of even one bath-house, the Wharves and Harbors Committee brokered a compromise: “As a temporary measure, and to meet a want which was very much felt, your [Wharves] Committee had spaces fenced off on the Island for the convenience of bathers...”<sup>36</sup> In 1876,

<sup>34</sup> “Police Court,” *Globe*, 30 June 1868. That same year, this problem was addressed when the indecency section in the City’s nuisance bylaw forbade bathing along the shore between 7 AM and 9 PM. See TCC, Bylaw [#467] for the Regulation of the Streets, Sidewalks, and Thoroughfares of the City of Toronto, and for the Preservation of Order and Suppression of Nuisances Therein, 26 October 1868.

<sup>35</sup> Thus, the clauses referring to bathing were removed. See “City Council. City Bathing House,” *Globe*, 22 June 1875.

<sup>36</sup> TCC, *Appendix to the Minutes*, 7<sup>th</sup> and Final Report of the Committee on Wharves and Harbours for 1876, 8 January 1877, 344. As with the 1868 bylaw, a part of this solution was likely to put this trou-



there were two locations on the south shore and one at the western point, all well patronized.<sup>37</sup> Although, the frames were left 'high and dry' by receding water in the Spring of 1877, they were rebuilt as before, although the western site was now located at an offshore sandbar that was reached by a bridge.<sup>38</sup>

While boardwalks and bathing were innovative first efforts to organize the recreational landscape, bigger plans were being weighed. In the late eighteen seventies, responsibility for island improvements passed from the Committee on Wharves and Harbours to the Committee on Property. In July of 1878, Alderman Withrow of the Committee on Property proposed a visit of council members to the Island to consider, among other things, "...the

advisability of leaving certain vacant lots for public squares." However, it was still to be several years yet before the idea of a park of any sort came clearly into focus.<sup>39</sup> First, there was the possibility of another large resort hotel. Several years earlier, the Island Park and Hotel Company had proposed development on prime mid-Island south shore lots 54 through 60. While this proposal was already in jeopardy by late 1879, a hotel spokesman, probably H.B. Morphy, tried his best to tie this proposed development to the park that he knew was coming, "...By having a beautiful park and a large Hotel at the Island numbers would be drawn to the city, and citizens who in the summer visited watering places in the United States would be induced to stay at home..."<sup>40</sup> This effort

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blesome practice out of sight. At any rate, an August 1876 letter written to the *Globe*, for example, seems to support this approach: "About four o'clock yesterday afternoon no less than seven youths could be seen disporting themselves in the water at the foot of Bay-street; and no one was near to put a stop to the exhibition... At the Island the city has provided no less than three large wooden structures for the accommodation of bathers, free, and consequently there is no longer any excuse for these law-breakers." See "City News. The Bathing Nuisance [letter]," *Globe*, 16 August 1876.

<sup>37</sup> The 'Bathing Nuisance' letter writer [fn 36] tells us there were three frames, while the 'Bathing Erection' article [fn 38] identifies the west point as one locale. "The Drowning Season," an editorial in *Globe* of 5 August 1879 lamenting the potential loss of bathing areas, indicates sites on the south shore, therefore pinning down the location of the other two sites.

<sup>38</sup> "The Bathing Erection," *Globe*, 25 August 1876. This article notes the reason for the switch to the sandbar was that: "...bathing at that point [was] considered obnoxious from the near proximity of the connecting crib of the water pipes." For more details on the proposed sand bar move, see: "City News. The Wharves and Harbour Committee," *Globe*, 26 May 1877; and TCC, *Appendix to the Minutes*, Report #20 of the Committee on Property, 25 June 1878, 462. Another reason for the move of the site offshore was that it was not at all appreciated by the earliest residential community, as a letter from "West Point" to the *Globe* makes clear, "On Saturday last the shore and ponds in front of the houses were covered with swimmers, many of whom were drunk and using filthy language." See, "Communication. Police Protection for the Island," *Globe*, 15 July 1878.

<sup>39</sup> "Proposed Improvements at the Island," *Globe*, 10 July 1878. See also, TCC, *Minutes*, 10 September 1877, 1072.

<sup>40</sup> "Civic Affairs. Property Company," *Globe*, 25 November 1879. Another proposal from M.H. Irish tried to create interest in a hotel at the south east corner of the new park suggesting that it would be "...of such magnitude and constructed in a manner that cannot fail to make Toronto a formidable rival to the famous watering places of the Atlantic coast..." See "The City Council," *Globe*, August 8 1880.



at a large and well-financed resort hotel proved yet another disappointment, but the idea of a park was about to come sharply into focus.

In May 1880, on the occasion of a Water Works Committee inspection of a piece of a large north central site, a *Globe* reporter noted the birth of a new municipal initiative:

...the usefulness of the filtering basin at the Island [is] gone... Nobody is likely to buy it in its present condition... a suggestion made by Ald. Trees might be followed out, namely to reserve the central portion of the Island, including the space occupied by the basin, for a park, to which the citizens could freely resort in summer. Hardy trees should be planted, and street scrapings used to fill up the lagoons on the bay side, and by this means a decidedly pleasant place of resort might be furnished at small expense.”<sup>41</sup>

Thus, in June of 1880, Alderman Lobb, seconded by Alderman Irwin, moved to take this land and the basin, saying “...the said [hotel company] leases being null and void... [the parties do] forfeit the leases...[and] that the same and a sufficient number of adjoining lots [the basin land, and beyond] be retained by the City for the purpose of forming an Island Park...”, which was carried.<sup>42</sup>

Island Park was officially born in November of 1880. Bylaw #1028 allocated 46 lots [Lots 23 to 68, 70 -71 and 73-75, “...

together with the peninsula or strip of land formed west of Hanlan’s Point...”], a potential size of more than 250 acres. The bylaw also set up funding for this new park: “...all rents and income derived... from the lands situate on the said Island... shall be set aside and form a fund for the improvement and maintenance of the said Island Park, such fund to be known as the ‘Island Park Fund.’” The creation of a fund seems most practical, since most of the land set aside was water bisected by fingers of sand and construction costs would be high. As regards its size and location, from the beginning, the allocated boundaries only indicated intentions. For several years the park was not much more than a dot on a map, a single point on a sandy spit. Whether intended or not, the large acreage was now to be a sort of ‘land bank,’ with property available for the park and perhaps also for other acceptable uses. Right off the top, the bylaw left open the possibility of a resort hotel noting, “...it shall be lawful to appropriate... lots numbers 54... [to] 60, or other adjoining or substituted lots for the purposes of a public hotel in one block not exceeding forty acres...”<sup>43</sup>

The park process was first driven by the need to develop an official gateway for the Island. Filling was underway in 1881 just to the west of Mead’s Hotel at the northeast corner of the park package.<sup>44</sup> Until the mu-

<sup>41</sup> “The Water-Works,” *Globe*, 29 May 1880.

<sup>42</sup> TCC, *Minutes*, 22 June 1880, 694.

<sup>43</sup> TCC, Bylaw [#1028] to Establish the Island Park, 1 November 1880. The name of the new park may have been courtesy of the ill-fated Island Park and Hotel Company.

<sup>44</sup> TCC, *Appendix to the Minutes*, Report #11 of the Committee on Property, 4 April 1881, 228; and TCC, *Appendix to the Minutes*, Detailed Statement of the Receipts and Expenditures... City of Toronto for 1881, 56.

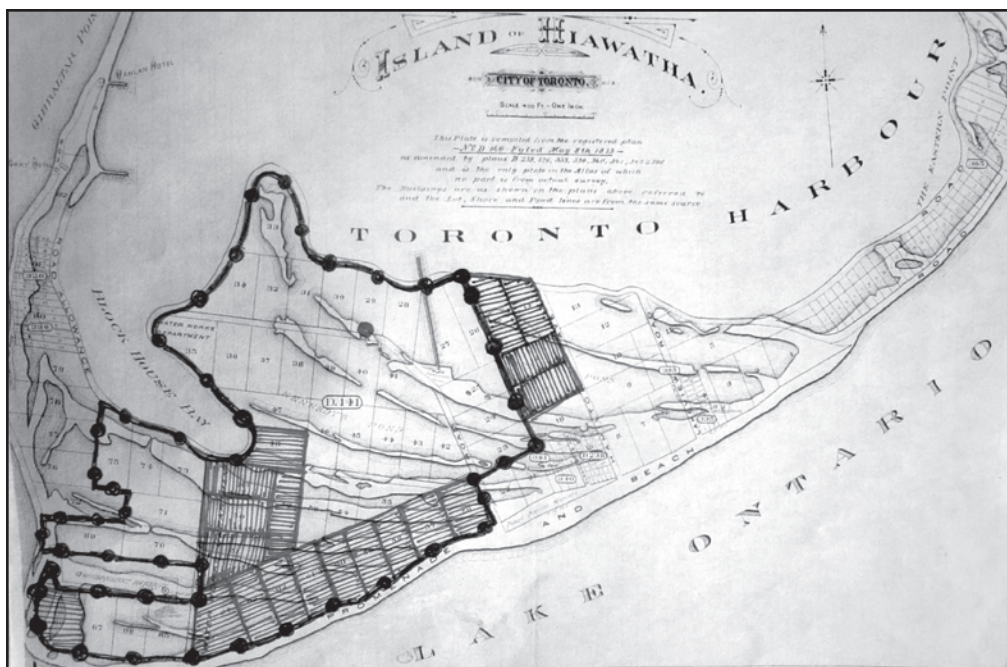


Figure 5. Projected 1880 park boundaries from Bylaw #1028 have been drawn on 1884 Goad's Map. The dotted line shows the designated 1880 boundaries. The dot in lot 29 represents the park's starting point. The hatched areas to the south and west show lots removed from the park area in the early eighteen eighties. The hatched area on the far right indicate lots added by Bylaw 1925 [1887].

municipal wharf was ready [1882], the ferries continued to dock at Mead's. While filling and landscaping proceeded, links to other Island attractions were the priority. A cross-Island boardwalk, described by City Commissioner Coatsworth as, "...800 feet of new sidewalk... laid down... across the lagoons and ponds," was built to allow passengers to get to the scenic south shore and link to the existing boardwalk.<sup>45</sup>

A new privately-funded east-end bathing structure was another opportu-

nity to avoid the construction zone. In July 1882, Wiman's Bath opened on lots 35 and 36 and was made accessible by 900 feet of new boardwalk from the central pier area. Privately funded by former alderman Erastus Wiman, its first board was headed up another former alderman John Withrow. Like a park it had rules that set it apart from the existing bathing areas: "...Admission will be free, but may be refused for sanitary and police reasons. Two days a week are likely to be set apart for females. Boys and girls under

<sup>45</sup> "Civic Affairs. Meeting of the Property Committee Yesterday," *Globe*, 28 June 1881. This walk of 800 feet was presumably an improvement or reconstruction of the 1875 initiative. Over and above, arranging for fill, Coatsworth had considerable impact on the design of the park in its early years.

14 will only be admitted at 7 AM and 6 PM... Diving or jumping from the rails is positively forbidden...," and so on.<sup>46</sup> In 1883, yet another new boardwalk led from Hanlan's Point to the new west end Lakeside Home for Little Children, then continued to the lakeshore boardwalk and onwards to the park.<sup>47</sup>

At the new park itself, strong leadership was now provided by John Irwin, 'the Father of Island Park,' who chaired the Property Committee from 1882 until 1888.<sup>48</sup> The final 1883 report of the Property Committee noted progress, the planting of 1,500 trees and two acres of sand covered by "rich street scrapings," plus sixteen hundred feet of new boardwalk on the lakefront providing a long stretch of usable space.<sup>49</sup>

During the early eighteen eighties, the idea of a large park suffered a setback when the Island Park allotment shrank by about fifty acres. In 1882, Water Works

took Lots 61 to 64 and 48 to 52, and the aforementioned Lakeside Home was built on Lot 68 in 1883.<sup>50</sup> However, a new neighbour to the park, the Royal Canadian Yacht Club [RCYC], represented the sort of community standards appreciated by park promoters. The RCYC had moved from the mainland to the island in 1881, and proceeded to develop waterlogged Lots 12 and 13 into an extensive offshore green space just east of the park core.<sup>51</sup> In 1884, another positive story for Island planners was the lease of the west-end bathing facility on the sand bar to Peter McIntyre, allowing the municipality to step back from the most troublesome of its bathing initiatives.<sup>52</sup>

During the decade of the eighteen eighties, the efforts of sporting icon, Ned Hanlan insured that all of the City-initiated efforts at transforming the Island were not about to eradicate much of the vernacular spirit that made the Island a

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<sup>46</sup> "CN. Wiman Baths," *Globe*, 17 July 1882. See also TCC, *Appendix to Minutes*, 31<sup>st</sup> & final report of the Committee on Property for 1882, 9 January 1883, 1,044. In this period, progress at the park itself had been stalled by a May 1882 storm that caused considerable damage. In July, a *Globe* reporter noted this slow progress: "Before the place can at all be entitled to the name of Park a great deal of filling up and importation of soil will be required in order to make tree culture feasible." See, "The Parks," *Globe*, 15 July 1882. A second Wiman bath was established at the end of Frederick Street on the mainland. It was in ruins by 1887. See, "The Wiman's Floating Bath," *Globe*, 12 July 1887.

<sup>47</sup> TCC, *Appendix to the Minutes*, Committee on Property Final Report for 1883, 16 January 1884, 989.

<sup>48</sup> For biographical information on Irwin, see: "John Irwin Dead at Island Home," *Toronto Star*, 23 September 1904; and "Death of Ex-Ald. John Irwin," *Globe*, 24 September 1904.

<sup>49</sup> TCC, *Appendix to the Minutes*, Final Report of the Committee on Property for 1883, 16 January 1884, 989.

<sup>50</sup> From the original available acreage of approximately 230 acres, 45 acres went to water works [1882: Lots 61-64 and 48-52], about five acres to the Lakeside Home for Little Children [1883: Lot 68], about the same to the Island School [1888: Lot 64, and later part of 65], a total of approximately 55 acres.

<sup>51</sup> See, for example, in, "A Beauty Spot," *Globe*, 6 July 1888, the reporter noted that, "The work performed on the park and at the Royal Canadian Yacht Club grounds is particularly observable, and shows how greatly even a slight effort to aid Nature may increase the attractions of the Island."

<sup>52</sup> TCC, Bylaw [#1372] to Authorize a Licence of Occupation of Part of the West Point of Toronto Island to Peter McIntyre, for the Purpose of Erecting Bathing Houses Thereon," 26 May 1884.

popular resort. Toronto's renowned 'Boy in Blue,' a world-class rower and international sporting star, had been raised on the Island, the son of Island pioneer John Hanlan. The elder Hanlan was a fisherman and the owner of a small hotel, but his son had star power and wanted a grand hotel. Thus, in 1880, despite municipal and community concerns, he was allowed to construct his hotel on the western tip of the Island. He followed up a few years later by adding a pleasure ground. By 1885, a reporter noted that,

...a new merry-go-round, has been built, a roller rink under full canvas is in full blast, a roller coaster adds the roar of swift wheels... not only have the old rifle alleys and bowling alleys been brightened up and made to look more business-like, but fakirs of all kinds are to be seen in force. The side showman is there, the camera obscura man is there, the Aunt Sally man, the patent lifter man, and the ring-the-walking-stick men are there by the dozen and in all varieties."<sup>53</sup>

While the hotel was perhaps not the resort hotel that many aldermen would have envisaged, the sideshow atmosphere revived the endangered pleasure ground atmosphere. It found a ready audience.

In 1884, John Chambers was ap-

pointed Toronto's first Superintendent of Parks. Formerly in charge of Exhibition Park, he had honed an ability at that park to create public parkland despite the influence of the Toronto Industrial Exhibition that shared space. This skill would quickly prove valuable on the Island.<sup>54</sup> In August 1887, Toronto passed a bylaw proposing that \$100,000 be directed towards the government breakwater along the north shore to protect the Island against constant erosion.<sup>55</sup> With this large commitment toward stabilization, the time seemed right to move boldly forward with Island Park. Even prior to the vote to get the elector's approval for the breakwater money, John Chambers set forth his own \$100,000 plan. In his final report to the Property Committee for 1886, he set the stage by embracing the issue of stabilization:

...One has only to draw upon the memories of some of the older inhabitants of the City to ascertain that not many years ago the surface of the sand stretches was considerably higher than it is now, and that they were well clothed with handsome trees. The timber was cut down...[and] the sand was placed at the mercy of the winds. For year after year great gangs of men, horses and carts were

<sup>53</sup> "Where Cool Breezes Blow. How the Island has Become a Summer Resort," *Globe*, 7 August 1885.

<sup>54</sup> Chambers, had been hired by City Council in 1878 to oversee city concerns at Exhibition Park. A native of Canterbury, Kent he also had experience working at British estates and nurseries. For biographical information on John Chambers, see, for example, "The American Florists," *Globe*, 22 August 1891; "John Chambers Resigns," *Telegram*, 21 January 1908; and "Mr. John Chambers Dies at Sixty Four," *Globe*, 2 September 1913.

<sup>55</sup> At first Chambers continued with the ongoing filling and planting at Island Park. See TCC, *Appendix to the Minutes*, 28<sup>th</sup> and Final Report of the Committee on Property for 1885, 11 January 1886, 1,132; and TCC, *Appendix to the Minutes*, 27<sup>th</sup> and Final Report of the Committee on Property for 1886, 7 January 1887, 1,154. For the debenture bylaw, see TCC, Bylaw [#1891] to Provide for the Issue of... Debentures to the Amount of \$100,000, to be Paid to the Dominion Government... for the Safety and Protection of the Island or Peninsula as a Natural Breakwater," 9 August 1887.



employed in carting away the sand from the Island ridges. To protect such a surface as that of the Island, wind breaks are, in reality, as essential as breakwaters.

He then continued, in broad strokes, to lay out his design vision. As much of the central Island was marshland penetrated by lagoons, he proposed protecting certain lagoons and marsh areas, filling up others. He also wanted a new entrance into the large central lagoon from the west of the park, this lagoon to be bridged by, "...a simple but ornamental bridge." South of this lagoon, he felt that only leveling was required to create a large open area. Overall, his approach seemed practical, and, despite the almost complete transformation of the immediate landscape, was somewhat sympathetic, he felt, to the nature of the place: "We have endeavoured to keep the general directions indicated by the old beach lines, and to follow out what we believe to be nature's intentions as to making wind-guards... Following nature is always so much cheaper and better than fighting her..." His overall conclusion was that: "...in no other part of the City can a public park of similar size and beauty be obtained for anything like the same cost...."<sup>56</sup>

While this final statement was highly debatable given the sort of money he was requesting, his solid support of a large park on the Island was a tangible step toward a stable core for the resort.

With a little political sleight of hand, Chamber's now managed to get most of the money he needed. Bylaw 1824 secured Mead's Hotel in 1887 with a somewhat controversial public debenture for \$25,000 employed to buy out Mrs. Mead's leases.<sup>57</sup> In addition, in August 1888, the public approved another debenture for \$75,000 for general park development and, although this money was not specifically directed towards Island Park, in the end it was to be mostly spent there.<sup>58</sup> The results came quickly. In 1887, the removal of Mead's Hotel began, along with dredging in the channel leading to the city wharf to provide fill for work on the lagoons and the anchoring of the north shoreline with 600 feet of sheet piling. The next year, a pavilion gave the park its own focal point for refreshments and for shelter. Improvements had now reached the stage where the park was ready to be a public destination and its official opening was celebrated in July of 1888.<sup>59</sup> Although the park size was estimated in

<sup>56</sup> TCC, *Appendix to the Minutes*, 27<sup>th</sup> and Final Report of the Committee on Property for 1886, 7 January 1887, 1,154. Plans by either Chambers or his colleague, surveyor Walter Bentley, if they existed, do not seem to have survived.

<sup>57</sup> See, TCC, Bylaw [#1824] to Take Lands for Enlarging the Island Park, 23 May 1887; and "Municipal Committees," *Globe*, 3 January 1889. See also, "How the Money Voted by the People was Squandered Without their Knowledge," *World*, 3 September 1887.

<sup>58</sup> "The By-Law Vote," *Globe*, 16 August 1888; "Municipal Affairs," *Globe*, 22 November 1888; "Municipal Committees," *Globe*, 3 January 1889; and "Municipal affairs. An Expenditure of Over \$74,000 on the Island Park," *Globe*, 17 January 1889.

<sup>59</sup> For the official opening, see, for example, "The Island Park Opened," *Globe*, 3 July 1888.



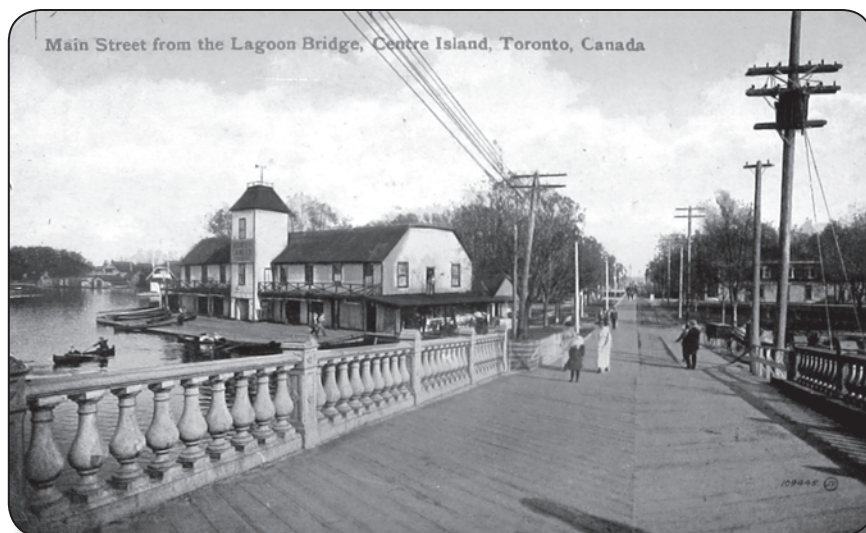


Figure 6. This postcard shows the quiet heart of the early twentieth century resort. It looks from the Island Park bridge along the major thoroughfare of the village towards Lake Ontario and the boardwalk along the shoreline. Long Pond flows under the bridge and through the park. The boat-house on the left was a major source of rentals for use in the Island waterways.

the *Globe* at only twelve acres in 1887, it grew to approximately twenty-three acres in 1888 and forty in 1889.<sup>60</sup> In his year end report for 1889, John Chambers was able to say, “The park daily visited by thousands during the season is now one of the best for pic-nic parties within the City limits, affording ample room for playing lacross [sic.], baseball and other games, without in any way interfering with the comfort of those who desire to rest quietly....”<sup>61</sup>

From 1890 through 1895, Island Park looked to define its role. In 1891, a

400-foot cut from Long Pond to the Bay in back of the RCYC allowed boat circulation right through Island Park, and, in 1892, the Island Fund was used to build a second municipal wharf. That same year, cutting and filling created a water-fowl zoo on an island in a new pond within the park. As well, a 40 by 100-foot wing was added to the pavilion. In 1894, swimming baths were completed on the south side of Long Pond, establishing an official bathing area within the park. Prior to 1895, a private club, the Island Amateur Aquatic Association [IAAA],

<sup>60</sup> See “The Island Park,” *Globe*, 22 November 1887; TCC, *Appendix to the Minutes*, 23<sup>rd</sup> and Final Report of the Parks and Gardens Committee for 1889, 15 January 1890, 1974; and “Municipal Affairs. An Expenditure of over \$74,000 on the Island Park,” *Globe*, 17 January 1889. Central expansion was aided by Bylaw 1925 which made twenty new acres on the east end available [14-17], replacing some of the west end acres removed from the original park package. See, TCC, Bylaw [#1925] to Take Lands for Enlarging the Island Park, 21 November 1887.

<sup>61</sup> For details of work accomplished from 1887 through 1889, see TCC, *Appendix to the Minutes*, 33<sup>rd</sup> and Final Report of the Committee on Property for 1887, January 12 1888, 1,625; and TCC, *Appendix to the Minutes*, 23<sup>rd</sup> and Final Report of the Parks and Gardens Committee for 1889, 15 January 1890, 1,974. See also Gibson, 89. Note that, starting in 1889, Island Park fell under the new Committee for Parks and Gardens, rather than the Committee on Property.

Figure 7. Island Park, 1897. This representation of Island Park is the author's sketch after a Toronto Harbour Works plan used in "[Temple] Plan No. 6 to Accompany Messrs. W.T. Jennings and J.R. Roys Report of Toronto Harbour Improvement dated 28<sup>th</sup> June 1900" [CTA]. It gives a good sense of the heavily used "Central Park." Shown on the plan are 1: the pavilion. 2: a merry-go-round [1891, see 116, Gibson]. 3: the bridge near the Duck Pond that passes over Long Pond. 4: the public baths. 5: the Hanlan Boat House. 6: Mrs. Mead's Hotel. & 7: shelter.



was permitted to lease land to build their hall on Long Pond, launching another park affiliation with a 'respectable' organization. Starting in 1894, the IAAA hosted a popular regatta on Long Pond.<sup>62</sup> Also in 1894, John Hallam, Chair of the Property Committee, initiated the prac-

tice of combining small capital amounts towards one project. This left \$16,000 available late in the year for key jobs like replacing the old wooden bridge over the pond with an iron one, and establishing an 'avenue of trees' from the shore to Long Pond.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>62</sup> For Island Park progress in 1890, see TCC, *Appendix to the Minutes*, 19<sup>th</sup> and Final Report of the Parks and Gardens Committee for 1890, 13 January 1891, 2,551; For 1891, see TCC, *Appendix to the Minutes*, 24<sup>th</sup> and Final Report of the Parks and Gardens Committee for 1891, 11 January 1892, C624; For 1892, see, TCC, *Appendix to the Minutes*, 22<sup>nd</sup> and Final Report of the Parks and Gardens Committee for 1892, 10 January 1893, C627. For 1893, see TCC, *Appendix to the Minutes*, 19<sup>th</sup> and Final Report of the Parks and Gardens Committee for 1893, 4 January 1894, C495. [The Island Park Swimming Baths were demolished in 1901. See, *Toronto Island; the City years*, 13] For the IAAA, see Gibson, *More Than an Island*, 114. [From 1907 to 1939, the IAAA Villa was on the pond west of Manitou Bridge. See Gibson, *More Than an Island*, 129, 201]

<sup>63</sup> See, TCC, *Appendix to the Minutes*, 19<sup>th</sup> and Final Report of the Parks and Gardens Committee for 1894, 14 January 1895, C678; and TCCM, 24<sup>th</sup> and Final Report of the Parks & Gardens Committee for

By the late eighteen eighties, with a summer population of 1,000, cottages and parkland were making the Island an increasingly stable environment. Nevertheless, its public resort status still harboured examples of the vernacular. A key example was the tent communities. By the late eighteen eighties, these seasonal residences—some planned, some unplanned—stood in sharp contrast to lavish cottages. The tents, first popular on Hanlan's Point, had spread well to the east, and were making some residents uncomfortable. John Chambers told the Property Committee: "... Island residents complained about annoyances caused by campers, and [recommended] that the police be asked to prevent any person from camping on the Island parks." The Committee agreed.<sup>64</sup> The tenters, many of them middle-class, found another way. They organized. The Island Campers Association was established in 1887, beginning a long campaign to maintain a place for tents in the resort. So, despite the more controlled landscape, the whole Island continued to be seen as the people's resort, where variety still prevailed and, at least in theory, everyone had a voice.

In 1890, the situation looked about to take a surprisingly sharp turn. At the very end of the year, Alderman Swait found enough support for a bylaw allowing the cancellation of residential leases as they came up for renewal with

the stated goal that the whole Island would ultimately be turned into a park. As there were a mere three renewal applications arising over the next three years, this bylaw drew little attention. In 1893, a *Globe* editorial supported repeal of the Swait bylaw noting that, "...there are two five-acre plots on [the park's] eastern boundary that should be added to it to round it off... [and that is] enough for the next half century..." More to the point, the potential loss of lease and tax money was enough in itself to lead to the repeal of Swait in September 1894.<sup>65</sup> However, from this point onward, the idea of the Island as a park was never far off.

In 1892, a more successful and moderate example of increased control was the purchase of the Hanlon Hotel property and Hanlan's Point by the Toronto Ferry Company. With the addition of six and a half acres of water-lot, the west end point became a square, and the Hanlon Hotel was moved back from the lagoon, increased in size and improved in appearance. The square featured six bowling alleys, a pavilion and a grandstand. In 1895, a *Globe* reporter, after recalling Hanlon's "unpicturesque place," characterized the new undertaking as, "...an area of green sod and shade trees, with charming waterfront promenades constructed in the most substantial manner" and added that, "...the success attained promises a park at the Point which will surpass

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1895, 10 January 1896, C492. See also, "Park Improvements," *Globe*, 26 October 1894; and "By Queen's Birthday," *Globe*, 18 May 1895.

<sup>64</sup> "The Property Committee," *Globe*, 27 May 1887.

<sup>65</sup> TCC, Bylaw [#2794] Respecting Leases of City Lands on Toronto Island, 16 January 1891; See also, "The Island and its Friends," *Globe*, 12 October 1893 and "An Island Policy," *Globe*, 31 August 1894.



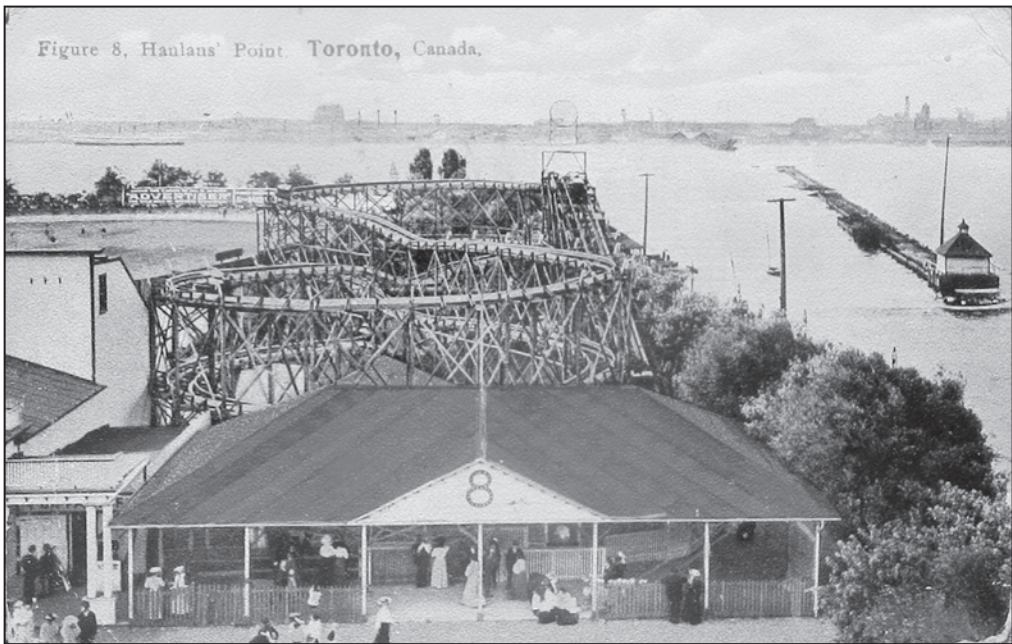


Figure 8. This postcard gives a sense of the amusement park atmosphere on Hanlan's Point, c.1908. The boardwalk runs alongside the trees to the right, the ballpark is in the background, and the roller coaster and some of the booths are in the foreground.

in trees and lawn that at Centre Island...." This new green space was now able to be described in *Canadian Summer Resorts* as "...ten acres of beautiful park...." By 1898 when a stadium was added, it was almost thirteen acres. It was a tamer, but still interesting replacement for the Hanlon Amusement Park, a link to the early Island pleasure grounds.<sup>66</sup>

In combination, the TFC amuse-

ment park and Island Park could now be seen as a version of Exhibition Park just across the bay, a combination of a fair and a park. Baseball, lacrosse and bathing were featured at both. TFC had a bandstand and the ferry company was also allowed to erect a bandstand at Island Park in 1893. Free afternoon concerts alternated between the two, the ferry company footing the bill.<sup>67</sup> On a special occasion

<sup>66</sup> This company had been created in 1890 to stabilize the chaotic ferry service. For the changes at Hanlon's Point see, *Canadian Summer Resorts*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Toronto: Frederick Smily, 1895); Gibson, *More Than an Island*, 105; and Reeves, Wayne C., *Regional Heritage Features on the Metropolitan Toronto Waterfront* (Toronto: Metropolitan Toronto Planning Dept., June 1992), 82 [Hereafter, Reeves, *Regional Heritage*]. See also, "Still Paring Down. Hanlan's Point Lease," *Globe*, 23 March 1894; "The Island Foreshore," *Globe*, 31 March 1894; "Toronto Ferry Company and the Island," *Globe*, 6 July 1895; and "Hotel Hanlan," *Globe*, 12 July 1895.

<sup>67</sup> Gibson, *More Than an Island*, 116; "News of the City. At the Island," *Globe*, 8 June 1893; and "City Hall Notes," *Globe*, 29 June 1893.

like Dominion Day of 1893, a *Globe* reporter observed that, "Thousands of people strolled around the Island beach from Hanlan's to Centre Island and vice versa."<sup>68</sup> All in all, the private 'park' at the Point with its easy resort attitudes, and Island Park, with its traditional, but more relaxed standards, continued the Island's lengthy history as a destination with a range of choices.

At the end of the century, the steady rise of visitors and summer residents continued to offer challenges. The municipality favoured a more planned environment and the residents wanted better services and more input. Thus, in January of 1897, a special Island Commission of politicians and key staff members was set up to consider both planning and problem solving. As reported in the *Globe*, Chambers and other staff members were officially instructed to develop, "...a special plan of the Island laying the whole property out in a systematic manner, settling the park boundaries, providing for proper and necessary water and roadways and promenades and the manner in which the present waste land shall be improved and utilized."<sup>69</sup> This plan may even have been started prior to the creation of the Commission as, in 1895, the same newspaper commented that the Parks and Gardens Committee had asked Chambers and City Surveyor Villiers Sankey to prepare park plans and a

map.<sup>70</sup> Whatever progress was made, no plan from Chambers and Sankey was forthcoming.

A new, more democratic committee helped to move the process forward. It started at a Toronto Islanders Association meeting held in late August 1901, with the association's request for an unpaid commission, including two Islanders: "...we consider that the interests of the of the residents and the public are identical, and we desire the beautifying and improvement of the whole area as a valuable park and asset of the City of Toronto and for the benefit of its citizens generally..."<sup>71</sup> The municipality was not about to cede control, but in January 1902, it did create a new standing committee, the Island Committee, that included two Islanders in addition to the Mayor and six aldermen. John Chambers and City Assessment Commissioner R.J. Fleming were now selected to undertake an Island plan, and, somewhat surprisingly, it was quickly submitted in mid-March at the fourth meeting. Although this plan has not survived, committee minutes indicate that it showed waterways, roads and bridges. These details and the speed with which it was completed suggest that much of the work had been done at the time of the 1897 commission.

In 1902, Chambers supported a recommendation by the Island Committee, ...that the advice of a first-class landscape

<sup>68</sup> "Dominion Day in Toronto. At the Island," *Globe*, 3 July 1893.

<sup>69</sup> "The New Civic Broom," *Globe*, 15 January 1897.

<sup>70</sup> "City Hall Jottings," *Globe*, 19 July 1895.

<sup>71</sup> "An Island Commission. Demand for a Permanent Form of Government," *Globe*, 26 August 1901.



architect should be secured on the proposed plan now submitted, and with this end in view, it is strongly recommended that the services of Mr. Frederick Law Olmstead [sic.], of New York, be secured to advise with the Assessment Commissioner and Park Commissioner on their plans, and that he be paid the sum of \$500 for his services....<sup>72</sup>

This would be Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. [1870-1957]. However, the Board of Control, seemingly reluctant about the \$500 cost, asked the Island Committee to reconsider the need for such help.<sup>73</sup> While the committee continued to support the wisdom of using Olmsted through several more meetings, the matter finally came to a vote in early May. Prior to the vote, J.T. Small, President of the Island Association and a member of the Island Committee said that,

He expected to see the day when there would not be a residence on the Island, but it would be one of the most beautiful parks on the continent. He asked Council not to let the question of expenditure deter them from getting the advice of Mr. Olmstead; he was prepared to make it a condition of the

motion that the sum required be raised by private subscription...

However, when Council deadlocked 11 to 11, discussion on a consultant abruptly ended.<sup>74</sup> Without pause, the Committee refocused on the Chambers-Fleming plan which, at that time, "...was neither approved or disapproved," and at least one alderman indicated that he, "...did not like it at all."<sup>75</sup> With the plan in limbo, on 30 May, the Committee decided that enough land was available for a central park and, either with or without consulting Chambers, passed an updated park bylaw, #4168, removing key park property on the lake, hotel lots 56 to 60.<sup>76</sup> Finally, in early July, John Chambers was instructed to go on a tour of resorts similar to the Island, taking no more than 15 days, and to then prepare a report and plan.<sup>77</sup>

In the Fall of 1902, Chambers headed off to see American parks [Detroit, New York, Brooklyn, Orange, Philadelphia, Hartford, Boston, Bridgeport] and a few Canadian examples [Halifax, Montre-

<sup>72</sup> TCC, *Appendix to the Minutes*, 4<sup>th</sup> Report of the Island Committee, March 18, 1902, 234. As Assessment Commissioner, the competent Fleming, a future mayor of the City was responsible for Island leases. He would seem a good choice to keep an eye on the cost of a plan while Chambers, probably with the continuing assistance of Sankey, worked on the plan.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> "Will Not Employ Expert. Council Rejects Services of Landscape Artist for Island," *Globe*, 6 May 1902.

<sup>75</sup> "Technical Education. The Island Committee," *Globe*, 8 May 1902. For debate, see, for example, "Need of Definite Plan. Island Committee Steering Without a Rudder," *Globe*, 17 May 1902.

<sup>76</sup> TCC, *Appendix to the Minutes*, 7<sup>th</sup> Report of the Island Committee, 30 May 1902, 444; and TCC, Bylaw, [# 4168] to Amend By-Law No. 1028, Establishing the Island Park," 2 June 1902. The updated park Bylaw #4168, also officially added centrally located Lots 14 to 17 and 24 to 27, although all of these had already been designated in previous bylaws. Park proponent Small, noting that the removal of the hotel lots removed the park's "only outlet to the lake" threatened to "test the legality of the bylaw." See "City Wood Only Sighted," *Globe*, 16 October 1902.

<sup>77</sup> TCC, *Appendix to the Minutes*, 11<sup>th</sup> Report of the Island Committee, 3 July 1902, 666.

al].<sup>78</sup> Outside of Belle Isle in Detroit and Coney Island in New York, Chambers does not actually name specific locales, so it is difficult to judge how appropriate his stops might have been. He himself said, "I may state that while on this trip I did not find any work done or in progress that in any way might be compared with the proposition we have before us." However, at the least, Belle Isle would seem a situation worth studying closely. It was a public park on an Island off the coast of a city, was reached by ferry service, and had a fragile natural environment.<sup>79</sup> But, rather than focusing on similarities, Chambers seemed to limit his thinking to technical issues:

...[Belle Isle's] great advantage lies in that the earth there is of a good quality, and when canals are made the material taken from them is used for planting trees, shrubs, etc., whereas [at Island Park] nothing but sand is had as the result of dredging, and all the earth used has to be taken over from the City.

He also felt that a part of Coney Is-

land was similar to Toronto Island, but, again, saw it primarily as a helpful technical exercise: "There a small park has been made in a sandy location, very similar in composition to Toronto Island, but their advantage lies in the ability to obtain earth from fields near by, and yet I was informed that the eight acres made and seeded down and planted with a few trees had cost just \$43,000."<sup>80</sup> While these examples might highlight Chamber's own particular strength at problem solving, they demonstrated little inclination towards a broader vision.

Nevertheless, when Chamber's report was first published in December of 1903, it received positive press. According to the *Star*, it was a word picture of the Island's future, and the *Globe* called it, "...a comprehensive scheme of improvement."<sup>81</sup> Chamber's own summary also sounded promising:

...In laying out the improvement of Island Park, the improvement of the whole Island becomes a necessity, owing to its residential

<sup>78</sup> The list of communities visited is from *Report by Commissioner of Parks on the Laying Out and Improving the Island Park and Island* (Toronto: Rolph and Clark Limited), 1905 [hereafter *Report by Commissioner of Parks*]

<sup>79</sup> At Belle Isle, the early plans for Belle Isle, done in the early eighteen eighties by Frederick Law Olmsted Sr. [1822-1903], sound innovative and worthy of consideration. Olmsted's main idea, as summarized on a biographical website was, "...to place a Ferry dock at one end of the island and build up the area in it's [sic] vicinity. From there the island would be transformed into a natural park...Much like Mont [Mount] Royal in Montreal, the singular feeling to Belle Isle, was to leave the feeling of simplicity and let nature spring out." See *Belle Isle* (2011), <<http://www.fredericklawolmsted.com>> (accessed 2016). In Chamber's defense, by the time of his visit, Olmsted may not even have been mentioned. Olmsted's early work had already been preempted by "extensive gardens and formal landscaping," a racetrack, a dance hall and a skating pavilion. See Joel Stone, "Everything You Know About the Birth of Belle Isle is a Lie- Well Almost," *Detroit Free Press*, 5 May 2014. See also: *About Belle Isle* (Detroit: Belle Isle Conservancy, 2009?), <<http://www.belleisleconservancy.org>> (accessed 2016). This site noted that Olmsted's plans for Belle Isle were largely set aside as they were "deemed too elaborate."

<sup>80</sup> Chambers quotes in this paragraph from *Report by Commissioner of Parks*.

<sup>81</sup> "Word picture of Island's future," *Toronto Star*, 17 December 1903; and "Island Pays its Way," *Globe*, 17 December 1903. See also "Island Improvement" [ed.], *Globe*, 18 December 1903.

character during the summer months...The two most important points to be dealt with are the internal waterways and roadways; and the next point to be considered is the relative location of the landing places, the residential centres, and the principal attractive portions of the park proper.

However, beyond such wise-sounding generalizations and the optimistic amount of parkland shown on his map, detail was lacking.<sup>82</sup> He did map out a circulation system—the bridges, roads and canals—but avoided details. With regard to costing, he simply said that, “Before going into the question of the cost of the various improvements, I would ask that your Committee decide upon the policy to be pursued in carrying them out...”<sup>83</sup> His own immediate agenda was specific, two expensive but sensible ideas for Island Park: the conversion of a small island and swampy ground between the existing park and RCYC into a 36-acre athletic field, and the dredging of Long Pond. In addition, he recommended the acquisition of a small area for parkland

south of the west end Turner’s Baths and a passing reference to additional parkland at the east end of the Island.<sup>84</sup> His map is perhaps the best indication of any sort of master plan, at least with regard to parks, showing the island as roughly half parkland.

By the time his report was published, Chambers time was limited, as he was forced aside in 1908 by a public enquiry into the Parks Department. John Chamber’s last Island contributions were a start towards the expansion of Island Park and the addition of a few smaller parks. In the February 1904 Report of the Island Committee he stated that,

I would recommend... that the work of filling in Athletic Grounds be commenced... My reason for urging that this work be commenced as soon as possible is the fact that as soon as it is finished it would give us nearly forty acres of playgrounds for the boys of this City. This, to my mind, is one of the most essential works to be carried out in connection with the Island.

Progress was made over the next sev-

<sup>82</sup> With regard to John Chamber’s enhanced island mandate, the City of Toronto Archives, Administrative history or biographical sketch notes that, “In 1903, City Council transferred responsibility for Toronto Island to the Parks Commissioner.”

<sup>83</sup> Chambers quotes in this paragraph from *Report by Commissioner of Parks*.

<sup>84</sup> Ald. Burns had already requested that the Island, Committee establish a park on the old Heber Hotel land in January of 1903. See TCC, 12 January 1903, 100. As in 1886, Chambers had additional thoughts on naturalization. “In the laying out of the land on the Island, planting with trees, etc. I intend to preserve the natural features, while improving them from time to time... make the ground of a rolling nature... beautiful little ponds, which when cleaned out are to be planted with native aquatic plants... [use] native trees and shrubs as much as possible... [plus] avenues of trees along the main roadways [elm, maples, etc.]... A good deal of pine will be used in planting the various ridge and islands, as I feel they will do well, as I am informed that at one time the Island was nearly covered with this class of tree...” But it seems more like a tribute to the influence of the recently deceased Island advocate and Chamber’s ally, John Hallam. Hallam’s opinion had been captured in an 1895 newspaper article about Island Park: “The Chairman of the Parks Committee, who, at Chorley, his Rosedale country house, experiments in tree-planting, is of the opinion that the Island can be re-forested and that the next generation may sit under the shade of as fine a forest as that which formerly covered the Island.” See, “An Island Forest [ed.],” *Globe*, 17 June 1895.



Figure 9. Chamber's Toronto Island Plan of Park Improvement and Proposed Water Ways, 1903 [CTA, also available online on CTA and Toronto Public Library websites]

eral years. By 1910, the core park had grown to some 52 acres.<sup>85</sup> At the west end, Robert Fleming had begun the process of acquiring fifteen acres of land around the lighthouse in 1903 and, by 1907, Chambers was recommending the improvement of this well-located pocket of land.<sup>86</sup> That same year, the modest west end park mentioned in his report

was established on Lot 82. First known as Heber's Park, it was renamed Hanlan Memorial Park in 1909. By 1910, it was 11½ acres.<sup>87</sup> At the east end, after the Board of Control first entertained yet another unsuccessful proposal for a resort hotel [1905], the first small pockets of parkland were developed in 1910.<sup>88</sup>

John Chamber's report and its small

<sup>85</sup> TCC, *Appendix to the Minutes*, Final Report of the Island Committee for 1910, 6 January 1911, C165. Following Chamber's departure, park developments at the Island mostly followed the path he had laid out, starting under his successor, James Wilson [1908-1911], and continued by John Chamber's capable son, C.E. Chambers [1911-1947]. Acres of swamp around tiny Toothpick Island became Centre Island Athletic Field [1910]. A bridge ultimately joined this area to the rest of the park [1914], and it later acquired the name Olympic Island.

<sup>86</sup> See TCC, *Appendix to the Minutes*, 4<sup>th</sup> Report of the Island Committee, 25 February 1904, 211. For Fleming's 1903 request to the government, see TCC, *Appendix to the Minutes*, 10<sup>th</sup> Report of the Island Committee, 7 October 1903, 904. For Chamber's proposed improvement of the lighthouse land, see TCC, *Appendix to the Minutes*, 10<sup>th</sup> Report of the Island Committee, 20 May 1907, 756.

<sup>87</sup> For the transition to Hanlan Park, see TCC, *Appendix to the Minutes*, 7<sup>th</sup> Report of the Island Committee, 3 May 1909, 664. For size of this park, see TCC, *Appendix to the Minutes*, Final Report of the Island Committee for 1910, 6 January 1911, C165.

<sup>88</sup> This hotel proposal came from prominent hardware merchant Thomas Aikenhead, among others.



victories might be seen as the last belated nineteenth-century contribution to the Island's long journey from vernacular resort to stable cultural landscape, the beginning of an extended golden period. In 1894, a decade earlier, *The Toronto Island Guide* could already salute the resort as a destination with something for everyone:

...the frivolous young man in search of pleasure... will patronize Hanlan's, where the Ferry Company provides during the summer all kinds of attractions, musical, athletic and social. The family man or the more sedate citizen will go to Island Park, where he can lie on the grass and watch the children play... The melancholy soul who pines for solitude... will go to Ward's and lounge on the Breakwater, and commune with the wild waves.<sup>89</sup>

How did the isolated sandbar become a unique urban resort? There is a direct link between the old vernacular landscape with its great natural beauty, and the more organized environment of the eighteen nineties. Early on all classes had established a stake in the early decades, and this broad base fought for their resort and celebrated new ideas that maintained and expanded it. When the municipality took charge in mid-century, this early tendency towards freedom of choice continued. While a big plan to create an orderly framework was attractive, as was the continuing search for a well-financed private company to establish a 'respectable' resort, other factors

remained more important. Firstly, the municipality's uncertainty about how to manage this unique recreational space reinforced a propensity to slow cautious change and a tolerance for various strategies. This approach proved to be a messy but surprisingly effective planning process. While municipal politicians adopted Charles Unwin's plan to attract residents and stabilize financial planning and the Chamber's plan to increase parkland, other problems and situations were addressed by a spectrum of opinions. The boardwalks and bathing, for example, involved much discussion, were conscientiously debated and eventually resulted in successful improvements. Secondly, while none of the plans for big private resorts came to pass, happenstance intervened with the controversial appearance of Ned Hanlan's resort, insuring a lasting link to fun and games. The ultimate product was a beloved people's resort that endured well into the twentieth century.

Does the Island represent a unique state of affairs, or are there lessons to be learned and applied elsewhere? There is certainly the message that special places should be identified and protected, and that the people most familiar with those places are an important resource in this process. As an example of the strength of community involvement, historical geographer Peter Goheen tells us how

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The hotel, to cost at least \$300,000, was to be at the eastern tip of Ward's on lots 33 to 36. See TCC, *Appendix to the Minutes*, 13<sup>th</sup> Report of the Board of Control, April 1905, A419.

<sup>89</sup> *Toronto Island Guide* ([Toronto]: [Printed by R.G. McLean], c.1894), 10.

Toronto's central shoreline, the Esplanade—promised to the people in 1818, but lost to the railways—has remained a strong idea for the populace right up to the present. He notes in his article, "The Struggle for Urban Public Space," that, "Meaningful urban public space is created not by legislation but as a result of the interest which people take in it. It is their prerogative, and their duty, to define and defend their interests in it, often against the concerted opposition of powerful institutions."<sup>90</sup> This public energy was certainly also present on the Island, the big difference being that, while the shoreline disappeared, surviving principally as an idea, the Island, more isolated from the city and with less early govern-

ance, evolved from a picturesque destination to a beloved cultural landscape. So early identification of the landscapes discovered and used by citizens would be a key.<sup>91</sup> And while big plans and the involvement of various government bodies are often necessary in cities, the grass roots need to be consulted as a routine part of the planning process to deal with special landscapes. This process could be aided by a municipal list of such landscapes, similar to that for architecturally and historically significant buildings. At the very least, such a list would allow those who are closest to and most conversant with the landscapes of their city to have some voice in protecting them from big agendas.

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<sup>90</sup> Goheen, Peter, "The Struggle for Urban Public Space: Disposing of the Toronto Waterfront in the Nineteenth Century," in Alexander B. Murphy and Douglas L. Johnson [eds.] *Cultural Encounters with the Environment* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 59-78. After Rosenzweig and Blackmar 1992?

<sup>91</sup> The definition for 'special landscape' would be a considerable task, but it should include designed landscapes embraced by the citizenry, such as Toronto's early College Avenue. The old College Avenue is today's University Avenue, a downtown automobile thoroughfare. In the eighteen forties and fifties it was a gathering place for a variety of informal activities, later becoming part of Queen's Park. Like the waterfront, its loss as an open space is remembered and often regretted.