



## What happened to city's park plan?

### Toronto sold off public greenspace along downtown waterfront to cover expenses

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Once upon a time, in a city long, long, ago, before the Gardiner Expressway and dozens of grey condominiums, downtown Toronto was blanketed in park space.

If you added it all up, in the early 1800s, Toronto had more foliage than New York's Central Park. But today, the GTA's most usable parks – Sunnybrook, Agincourt and Bluffer's to name a few – are only accessible by car or the TTC.

Who in their right mind would plan a city without parks? No one. It was never supposed to be this way.

In 1793, when the city was still in its infancy, it was given about 485 hectares of Crown reserve around Fort York. The property extended in a sweeping arc from Queen St. all the way down to Peter St. along the water. Just down the shoreline, about 81 hectares stretching east of Berkeley St. near Parliament St. was set aside for public use. About 25 years later, the city linked the two with a park which came to be known as the Walks and Gardens.

These roughly 600 hectares were the city's inheritance. It was similar to what other commonwealth cities, such as Sydney, Australia, got.

"The principles driving the two towns were very similar if you look at the maps," local historian Rollo Myers said. "Except Sydney was able to keep their downtown equivalent of the King's reserve – they call it the Domain. Today it has the Sydney Opera house on it, the conservatory of music, the botanic gardens. All the things we were supposed to have."

What happened here?

"We had a cholera epidemic (around) 1830 and we needed to build a bigger hospital. But to pay for it, we had to sell off the land," said Myers, who is the founder of Friends of Fort York and the Citizens for Old Town.

Then in the 1850s, the Grand Trunk Railway arrived. City council soon realized it had this huge asset in the waterfront Walks and Gardens. The decision was made to sell off parts of the land and put the money into a trust to better improve city parks, Myers said.

The fund helped purchase and develop Allan Gardens, High Park, Dufferin Grove Park and Riverdale Park. Today, Union Station stands on the last remaining section of the Walks and Gardens.

From then on, Toronto relied heavily on the generosity of others to build its system. In 1854, the University of Toronto decided to lease Queen's Park to the city for 999 years for five shillings a year, creating what was perhaps Toronto's first true public park. By 1916, most of the Walks and Gardens land had been sold off and there was little money coming from that fund. The following year, the city hired a new auditor to straighten out the city's finances and from there, you'll find nothing more on the Walks and Gardens trust.

It wasn't until the mid-1950s that the city of Toronto put parks development on its priority list.

Around the same time, in other parts of the GTA, city officials were working to make sure they didn't fall into the same trap.

"In Brampton, former parks directors did a fantastic job of creating greenspaces in the city," said Jamie Lowery, commissioner of community services. "They really kind of strong-armed developers and probably got a lot more parkland than they were entitled to."

There's no better example than the city's 40-hectare Chinguacousy Park. "It's a real jewel," Lowery said.

About a decade ago city officials decided they would make sure Brampton of the future would benefit in a similar way. Officials foresaw a boom and began purchasing 40-hectare plots around the area. Today, the development has caught up and these huge greenspaces are dispersed throughout the city.

Any major land acquisition program would be financially impossible for Toronto Parks and Recreation. Department director Paul Ronan hopes the city's waterfront plan will one day undo history.

"We had a terrific parks endowment and we let it slip. So here we are 150 years later, trying to scrabble around," Myers said.

## Toronto's Parkland History

*How we got our parkland:*

**1793** – The Crown gives Toronto about 485 hectares near Fort York.

**1830** – Cholera outbreak requires Toronto to sell off parkland to pay for a hospital.

**1850s** – The railroad arrives, putting pressure on city council to sell off valuable lakefront parkland to better trade.

**1857** – George W. Allan, an early politician and botanist, donates what is now known as Allan Gardens.

**1867** – The Crown gives the city Toronto Island.

**1878** – The Crown grants 34 hectares along the water for Exhibition Park.

**1911** – Grange Park is donated by professor Goldwin Smith, a famous English writer.

**1928** – Sunnybrook Park is donated by Mrs. Alice Kilgour in memory of her late husband Major Joseph Kilgour. The pair operated the Kilgour Paper Box Company.

**1935** – The city's park system spans 840.91 hectares, largely due to crown grants and private donors.

**1949** – A number of parks are abolished in the city.

**1954** – Toronto changes course, starts pumping money into parks.

**1959** – Marie Curtis Park at the south of Etobicoke Creek is established after Hurricane Hazel – which struck in October 1954 – revealed the area was prone to drastic flooding. Areas along the Don Valley were also seized during this time due to flood danger.

**1960** – Series of lectures at the University of Toronto stresses the need for more parks, comparing Toronto's dismal statistics to Cleveland's, which boasted 5,665 hectares and a similar population.

**2002** – Historian Stephen Otto stumbled upon the Walks and Gardens Trust, lost around 1917. The agreement showed Union Station was supposed to pay into a parks development fund. City Hall was to debate the issue, but it fell by the wayside.

**2007** – Toronto Parks and Recreation boasts of 1,500 parks, spanning 8,000 hectares.