

## A Marlborough History

The history of Marlborough Avenue/Place is that of a typical midtown Toronto street. From the construction of the first houses, Marlborough has had its ups and downs, seen its character alter and develop, and has provided homes for tens of thousands.

The street is located in the boundaries of the old village of Yorkville, a separate entity from 1853 until annexed to Toronto in 1883. Much of the area around the street was open land, with large brickyards making use of the good clay around the present Ramsden Park.

By 1885 there was street car service from downtown to Marlborough, and by crossing the rail tracks a Metropolitan Railway car could be caught for a ride further up Yonge.

There was also a tollgate located at Yonge and Marlborough by about 1865, charging farmers 1¢ each for livestock, and 10¢ for a horse-drawn wagon. In 1868, however, the town council agreed to move the toll north to Farnham because "its present position in the heart of this village is an eyesore to the inhabitants and a great injury to them in a pecuniary point of view." Even then we had our eyesores!

The street itself is first mentioned in the City Directory for 1874. By that time there were several houses at the Yonge end on both north and south sides of the street. At #4 lived Charles Duke and next door his son, both carpenters. At #15 and 19 lived Alex and John Anderson, both labourers, and at #17, Henry Hutt, a brickmaker who probably worked in the yards down Yonge. Hutt and his heirs lived on the street to the end of the century.

By 1878 there were at least ten houses on each side of Marlborough. The residents were

a mixture – salesmen, confectioners, gardeners, carpenters and shoemakers. But there

was civic spirit, and in 1879 Henry Hutt and his neighbours petitioned Council to construct sewers on the street and issue debentures to the tune of \$1580 to cover the cost.

The petitioners owned half the value of land on the street, and their frontage was worth \$7 to 10 a foot. The Council passed the bylaw and directed that owners hook in.

Sanitation had arrived.

Clearly, however, few owners lived on the street. The 1880 assessment rolls show that the Marlborough lands were speculator-owned. A lawyer, Thomas Ince, owned

#7, 11, 19, 20, 21, 22 and 24 and a team of two lawyers and a builder owned almost all the vacant lots (worth \$10,850).

By 1889 the speculators had cashed in and the street was heavily developed. On the north side, houses ran from #2 to 34; on the south, with some gaps, houses ran from #11 to 167 and a number of houses were under construction. Three years later, the north side ran to #38 and the south to #213, and by 1899 the only gap left was from #109 to 119.

Thus it seems clear that Marlborough had its beginnings in the late 1860s or early 1870s and by the end of the century was essentially as at present (on the south side). On the north side, however, industry gradually crept in and houses disappeared. In 1899, the north had CPR grounds, the Ireland National Food Co., and houses. In 1905, there was the two stone companies and the railway, and by 1914 there was only one house (#4) left. But if there was industry, there was God too, for on the southwest corner of Yonge and Marlborough stood a Methodist Church that lasted apparently into the 1920s when it was replaced by a Pierce-Arrow car plant.

The trains came to the street in the 1880s. The Ontario and Quebec railway first appeared on the map in 1884, and by 1890 the North Toronto station was on Marlborough, lying parallel to the tracks and running roughly from #39 to 61. The station was probably put up in 1883 or 1884 because the City Works Committee on June 3, 1884 approved paving part of the street for \$700 "in view of the large amount of traffic which no doubt will be to and from that station." The main tracks were then at street level (and remained so until about 1914) and the sidings on the north side of the street remained at ground into the 1950s. That worried parents, of course, particularly when Canada Cement operated there into the 1960s, and occasionally in the early days it meant that livestock on the way to market escaped onto the street. Marlborough was also the site from which soldiers left for the Great War – and to which many fewer returned.

Most of the street was unpaved, although in 1888 Council authorized a sidewalk on the Place. Two years later City Council agreed to build a cedar block roadway and wooden curbs on the street, the cost to be paid by property owners. The cedar blocks were about 8" in diameter and 10" thick, set into sand; the sidewalks were 2' x 10' planks; and soon there were even arc lamps.

The houses themselves were lit by gas and heated with coal furnaces, although some of the cottages used coal stoves. And at some point the CPR began to buy up houses along the street, proving to be a benevolent landlord. "I would say they were better than any other landlords," one long-time resident recalled, "for the simple reason that they'd carry you for pretty well a year before they'd evict you." In the

Depression that was important for other streets were not treated so gently. One additional blessing was that coal could be picked up along the tracks. "You didn't have to buy coal. In the summer time all the kids used to run over with their buckets and fill up for winter. And the men were very good. They didn't have to drop any on purpose, but you'd see them throw the odd shovel."

By the 1950s the street was known as "rabbit alley", a reference to the extraordinarily high procreation rate. Children went, then as now, to Cottingham School, but in those days the old school, dating back to 1878, was still in use.

Whitepainters began to arrive in the mid-1960s. House prices were already a far cry from the \$1000 that #17 was valued at in 1880, but as late as 1968 the most expensive sale was for \$29,500. Soon the innards of houses were being ripped out, the wiring and plumbing replaced, the kitchens switched from rear to front, and the cellars dug out. The insulbrick began to disappear, decks were added and porches ripped away. The street was changing again and many of the old residents, some of whom had been on the street since the Great War, began to move away.

The York Racquet Club arrived in 1970, replacing Canada Cement's eyesore with another one. Marathon Realty, the CPR's land subsidiary, began to develop its plans for Summerhill Square – and for turning this street into a traffic artery, and the residents had to organize or die. But organize they did and today Marlborough with its 80-odd houses is a compact little community, a relatively placid island in the midst of a great city.

***P.G.M. / Jack Granatstein***

(Based on material in the City of Toronto Archives, City Directories, Council Minutes, maps, and on interviews done by Penny Macpherson. Material on the 1970s is held in the Marlborough Avenue collection at York University. All this material is open to interested researchers.)

Additional information here:

<https://www.pressreader.com/canada/toronto-star/20131005/283648232613878>

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/real-estate/a-walk-through-marlborough-country/article4116614/>