

URBAN PARKS IN ONTARIO

PART I: ORIGINS TO 1860

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PREFACE

It was about 15 years ago, during my first experience as an instructor in the School of Landscape Architecture at the University of Guelph, that I began to realize that the historians had virtually ignored the origins and evolution of municipal parks and recreational open space in Canada. Recalling the phrase "not to know what comes before you is to remain a child," I felt that one of the cornerstones of philosophical understanding of park and recreation planning, site design and management was missing. I have collected information and photos about the subject since that time.

It has been a time-consuming task to uncover this story in the musty corners and shelves of archives, historical societies, libraries and newspaper morgues. Fortunately, it has also been a satisfying experience. It has convinced me that such an understanding is essential for those concerned about the urban environment and its future in a leisure-oriented society.

I wish to acknowledge the assistance of Charlene Lambert in her role as a graduate student research assistant in the School of Urban and Regional Planning at the University of Ottawa, who proved to be a "digger" par excellence. I also wish to thank my son, John Wright, for his artistic contribution in the sketches in chapter 2, 3 & 4. Also, sincere appreciation is due Betsy Comstock for her excellent editorial advice. Above all, I am grateful to the Ministry of Tourism and Recreation of the Government of Ontario for providing funds to publish this series on the history of public parks and recreational open space in Ontario.

J.R.W.

We are forever indebted to the past. It is the source of our very identity. In the present moment, which changes as we live it, the past is all we know.

Royal Bank letter
(March, 1977)

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1. INTRODUCTION

Urban space, from any time in history or any society on earth, can tell us much about the quality of life by its people.

J.S. French

Virtually every village, town and city in Ontario today has an outdoor space set aside as a public park. This was not always the case. It is only recently, historically speaking, that lands were set aside for recreation with local government support in most Ontario municipalities. In fact, public parks as we know them are a relatively recent development anywhere.

Although it is often assumed that public parks and recreation areas were established in Europe and the United States many years before their appearance in Canada, historic fact does not substantiate this popular perception. Canada's first public parks were established less than a decade after the first park supported by local government funds was established in Britain, and as early as the first public parks in most of the cities of the United States.

Every public open space reflects and to some extent preserves the values of the period in which it was designed and developed. To understand the function of urban open space today, we must look to history. An examination of the changing role of the public park in Ontario over nearly two centuries will help to reveal it as just one element in a wide range of urban open spaces, filling educational, conservation, aesthetic, protective and recreational roles in today's urban environments. At the same time, it will give us a better basis for decisions affecting recreational land use now and in the future.

In the following chapters, the functions of several kinds of urban open space in western society are briefly traced from their origins in Greece and Europe to Victorian Britain and then to Canada, with a closer look at the first public parks in Upper Canada. The origins of public parks in Ontario are compared with the earliest urban parks in the United States. Finally, the rationale behind the creation of the first public parks in Ontario is outlined.

The concept of an urban park had its beginnings in the earliest recorded history. The Hebrews used the word **gan** to mean a fence or enclosure, used for protection against a human or natural enemy. The Hebrew word **eden** signified a place of pleasure and delight. In the English word **garden**, the meanings of **gan** and **eden** are combined to mean an enclosure of land for pleasure and delight. Although the earliest concept of a garden was of a private space, with the Greek agora a major step was taken towards the development of public space that was both a marketplace and a gathering place, and was used for a range of purposes including relaxation, conversation and strolling.

The English word **park** has its etymological roots in the French word **parc**, which in turn had Teutonic origins. The same word is found in the Irish and Gaelic **pairc**, the Swedish and Danish **park**, the German **pferch**, Italian **parco** and Spanish **parque**. In each case, the word describes an enclosure, protection from hostile elements, or a preserve. **Park** appears to have come into popular use in England in the late 1700s when it was defined as “a piece of ground inclosed and stored with wild beasts of chase, which a man may have by prescription or the King’s grant.”¹

By 1851, large and popular city parks had been developed by local government in London and Liverpool. Although a park was still defined primarily as a place for animals, its function as an “inclosed place in cities for public exercise or amusement” had been recognized,² and this interpretation prevailed until the early 1900s. Whitney in the **Century Dictionary** of 1904 still gave as the principal meaning “a tract of land inclosed . . . for wild beasts of chase” and secondly,

*considerable extent of pasture and woodland,
surrounding or adjoining a country-house, and*

The Park: A Changing Concept

devoted primarily to purposes of recreation or enjoyment, and often serving to support a herd of cattle or a flock of sheep, or in Europe, stocked with deer.

But he recognized the recreational function of a park in his third meaning:

*A piece of ground, usually of considerable extent, set apart and maintained for public use, and laid out in such a way as to afford pleasure to the eye as well as opportunity for open-air recreation: as Central **Park** in New York or Hyde **Park** in London.³*

By 1924, parks had come to be viewed as a moral force in the community as well:

The refining influence of parks in every city has not. . . been sufficiently appreciated;. . . many a man, instead of idling away the hours in drinking, would gladly go with his family to enjoy such innocent pleasure.⁴

The idea of enclosure had remained, and was manifested in the customary English wrought-iron fence, or in a hedge or shrubbery to enclose public parks even in the urban areas of the United States and Canada.

A definition of 1925 shows little change in the concept of a park from Whitney's definition 20 years earlier: "a tract of land generally large and enclosed, set apart for ornament or recreation, specifically laid out with walks, drives and recreation grounds; an enclosed chase extending only over a man's own grounds; an open square or plaza in a city; usually containing shade trees and seats as in Madison Square Park, New York."⁵ Only in Fowler's 1931 **Oxford Dictionary** are the "beasts of chase" dropped from the definition, while the

idea of a park as a tract of land “kept in a natural state for public benefit” has appeared for the first time.⁶

A 1978 dictionary defines a park as

1. A tract of land for public use in or near a city, usually laid out with walks, drives, playgrounds, athletic fields, etc.
2. An open square in a city, usually containing shade trees, benches, etc.
3. A national park.
4. An amusement park.
5. A large tract of land containing woods and fields, surrounding a country estate.⁷

After almost 150 years of evolution, the concept of the public park has come to mean an area of land, or land and water, open to the sky and set aside for recreation, managed and supported by local government and open free to the general public. At the same time, its meaning has become all-inclusive, recognizing both public and private ownership and both urban and rural settings, with both man-made and natural components.

In recent years, the term “open space” has often been used in a broad sense instead of **park** to include all urban land and water, both publicly and privately owned, that is open to the sky and reasonably accessible for freely-chosen activity or visual exploration, and that serves people and nature in an educational, aesthetic, productive, protective or recreational way.⁸

The original public park was a product of the Industrial Revolution in Britain and the adverse living conditions of the period, leading to a stirring of the social conscience of the members of Parliament to provide public open spaces through a series of Acts to permit the working classes to enjoy some

of the benefits to which the upper classes had been accustomed for many years. In effect the public park represented a movement to a **public** garden as a contrast to the private gardens or “parks” of the well-to-do. It was viewed as a pleasuring ground, a remarkably different concept from existing commercial and social public squares. The public park became, at its inception, a single-purpose space, unlike any other public open space and set aside for the pleasure and recreation of all the citizens of a municipality. It was viewed as a place of natural beauty, albeit man-made, which would serve as an uplifting moral influence on the lower classes. The park emerged as a romanticized retreat from the noise, sin and sloth of the densely populated industrial cities of Britain.

The early public parks were viewed as pleasuring grounds where a rather narrow range of recreational activities could be carried out, primarily non-organized and passive ones. Historically, the idea of recreation appears to have had a much broader meaning than it is often given today. It was interpreted as including refreshment of both mind and spirit, including physical activity. The Y.M.C.A., founded in the mid-1800s in Britain, was based on such an holistic approach to the development of youth, and was identified by the symbolic triangle indicating spirit, mind and body. It was in the post World War II years that the term recreation came to be identified primarily with physical education. Fortunately, the term is now generally accepted once again in the sense of re-creation of spirit, mind and body.

Besides **park**, a number of other terms — **common**, **esplanade**, **garden**, **oval**, **playground**, **pleasure garden**, **promenade**, **square**, **walk** — have been used to describe urban open spaces. The evolution in the meaning of all of these terms, and several related terms, is traced in Appendix B.

NOTES

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1. Samuel Johnson, **A Dictionary of the English Language**, London, 1785.
 2. **The Imperial Dictionary, English, Technological and Scientific**, Edited by John Ogilvie L.L.D. Blackie and Son. Glasgow, Edinburgh, and London, 1851.
 3. **The Century Dictionary, An Encyclopedic Lexicon of the English Language**, under superintendence of Wm. W. Whitney, The Century Co., New York, 1904.
 4. **The Large Type Concise English Dictionary**, Charles Annadale, Blackie and Son, Ltd. London and Glasgow, 1924.
 5. **Funk and Wagnall's New Standard Dictionary of the English Language**, New York and London, 1925.
 6. H.W. Fowler and F.G. Fowler, **The Concise Oxford Dictionary**, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1931.
 7. **Funk and Wagnall's Standard College Dictionary**, Canadian Edition. Fitzhenry and Whiteside Ltd. Toronto, Montreal, Winnipeg, Vancouver, 1978.
 8. J.R. Wright, W.M. Braithwaite, R.R. Forster, **Planning for Urban Recreational Open Space**, Ministry of Housing, Toronto, 1976, p. 7.

2. THE HISTORIC ROOTS OF PUBLIC PARKS

The allocation of specific areas of land for public recreation began about the middle of the nineteenth century in England. For the first time, lands were set aside under local government authority for the specific purpose of providing recreational opportunities for the public-at-large. To understand the changing function of urban open space over time, however, and speculate on future trends, it is necessary to move further back in history.

The recordings of the first urban settlements show that open space was used primarily as a public area for community assemblies and meetings, whether political or religious. The market square and the temple square were separated functionally and physically in the Middle Eastern cities of 4000 years ago. The temple or religious open space was enclosed, and the market square, which served as both a commercial trading centre and a social milieu, was loosely defined.

The excavations at Mohenjo-Daro (c. 2500 B.C.) indicated a grid system of almost one square mile including a sewer system, but the only open spaces have been judged to be courtyards relating to individual houses, not marketplaces or gathering places in any sense.¹ In eastern cities, generally speaking, the people met and exchanged goods outside the walls of the towns. "Gridiron or not, there were no 'squares' in Mesopotamian towns."² Egyptian towns, on the other hand, were irregular and haphazard in their layout. And while large courtyards within Egyptian temples or palaces appeared to be "squares," they did not function as such.³

It was with the Greeks, and the newly conceived notion of the relationship of the individual to the state, that the square emerged as a public social space. "The Indian, Mesopotamian and Egyptian civilizations did not provide the political, government, social, and — most important — psychological conditions

In the story of life as a whole, it is the large acquaintance with history that gives us the best guide to the future. We cannot change the past, but we can build on it. We cannot wholly determine the future, but we can mould it according to what we learn from the past.

From a museum, Shrewsbury, England

which would create the need for gathering places.”⁴

Although some evidence of planning as a conscious collective effort beyond the construction of individual houses

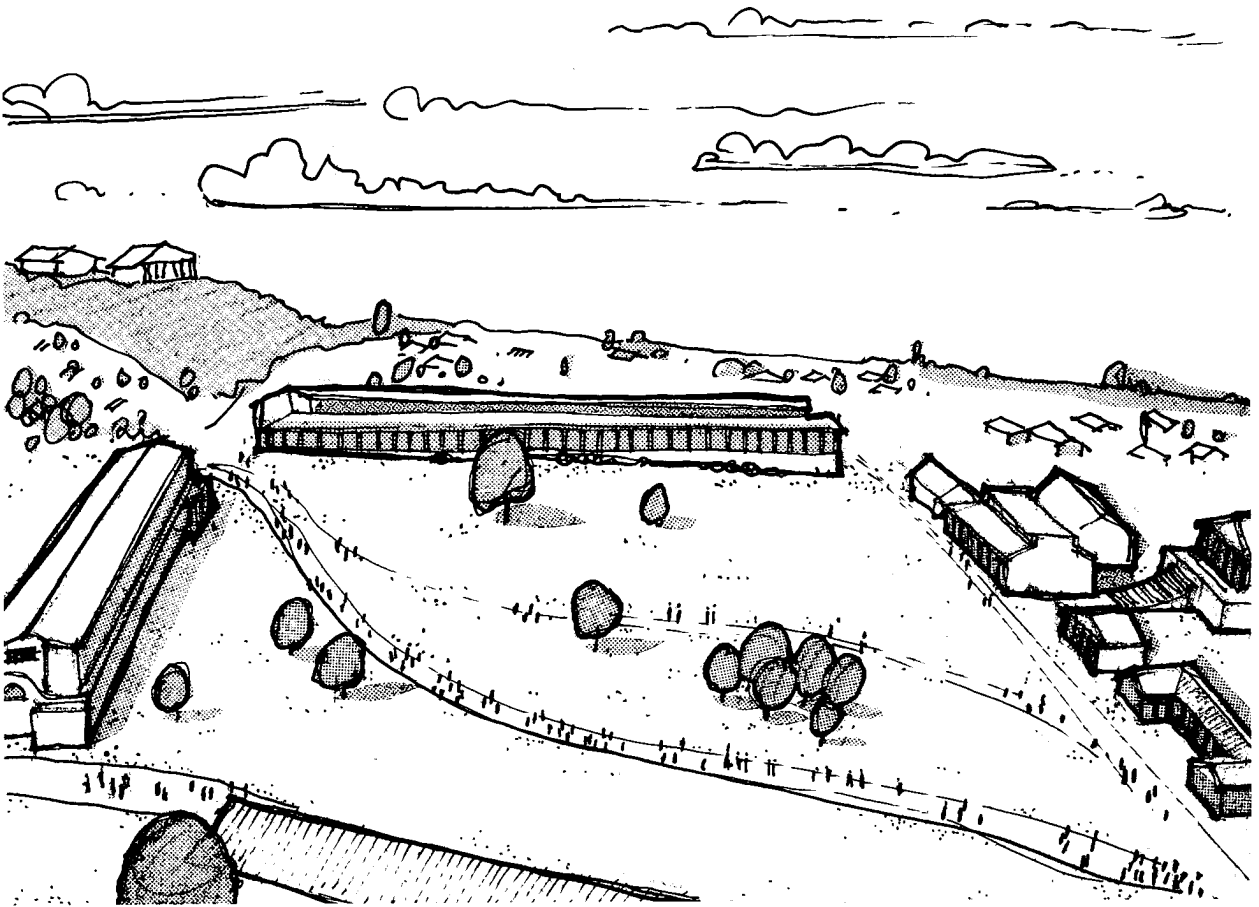


Fig. 2.1 Agora. Athens, Greece.

can be seen in Egypt and in India, it was the Greeks who shaped empty space in the design of a town into a public square that had a specific function. As Zucker explains it, "Only within a civilization where the anonymous human being had become a 'citizen', where democracy had unfolded to some extent, could the gathering place become important enough to take on a specific shape."⁵

The Greeks began to perceive open space as providing a function that was more than a mere counterpart to a physical structure. It appears that sensitivity to the environment and a growing awareness of human scale, as much as the need for a social and commercial gathering place, provided the rationale for reserving and shaping open space within the town. In the concept of the agora as a planned functional open space is the origin of the public square, and in more recent times the public park.

Indeed the agora was the heart of the community, providing both a sense of identity and a sense of place to the residents. It was clearly recognizable as a public space, and resulted from the gridiron street system introduced into Greece and her colonies in the 5th century B.C. by the father of town planning, Hippodamus of Miletus, as part of the planned **polis**.⁶

As the focal point of the **polis**, the function of the agora changed over time in concert with the political and economic life of the city. In later times additional agoras were created. While the original, central agora supported public buildings and public functions, other agoras were the setting for the marketing of specific goods such as pottery, fish and meat, with markets for perishable goods separated from those for nonperishable goods.

Although the marketplace has remained an intrinsic element of most cities of the Western world, its function shifted to satisfy

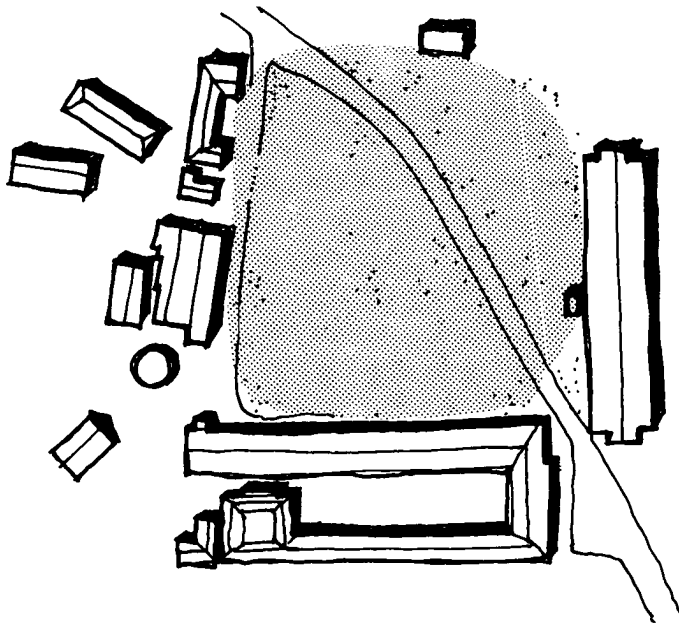


Fig. 2.2 Agora, showing spatial relationship to surrounding buildings.

specific cultural requirements. The practical Romans contributed greatly to both architecture and town planning in their sensitivity to the shaping of open space through “modification by specific proportions and by a superhuman scale.”⁷ The major contribution of the Romans towards urban open space was the concept of a fully enclosed (walled) room in the form of long rows of columns, behind which were situated offices, markets or other buildings all focussing on a rectangular open space. However, the Roman concept of open space was not unlimited views with the landscape as background. The Romans clearly created a defined shape, static, self-contained and superhuman, and a new form of the public square.

Middle Ages

The market square continued to play a dominant role in the towns and cities of the Middle Ages. The medieval city could be viewed as “a compact oasis of urbanism in a country setting,”⁸ and a pride of citizenship emerged among its inhabitants to a degree that may not have been achieved in later historic periods. The towns of this period have been described as organic in form, and most were not places of squalor, dirt and slums as earlier historians would have us believe.⁹ These early towns were built with defence against hostile invaders as the primary concern, resulting in radial street plans, adapted to the terrain.¹⁰ The market square was located in the centre of the town. It was randomly shaped and considered the core, “the very *raison d’être* of the city.”¹¹ The market square was often a



Fig. 2.3 Medieval town square — Innsbruck, Austria, showing proximity of countryside.

widened street that served as a place for market stalls as well as a place for public gatherings and ceremonies. “The marketplace recaptured, in fact, the function of the earliest forum or agora.”¹²

There were gardens attached to the houses and the countryside was close, allowing easy access to rural fields and forests. In addition, the physical form of the town and its structure provided a comfortable human scale and sense of place for the citizens. In fact “until the twelfth century, at least, a sharp distinction between town and country is not discernible, as town and village were quite small and functional specialization had not yet taken over.”¹³



Fig. 2.4 Villa Lante, Italy — a garden of the nobility, 16th. c.

Renaissance

With the Renaissance, and the rediscovery of classical models, came acceptance and development of the concept of towns through city planning. Aesthetic considerations began to play a key role in individual sectors as well as in the overall urban form. The site layouts of the large private gardens of the sixteenth century Italian nobility provided overall design schemes which achieved another step towards functionally designed open spaces that would eventually become public parks. Spatial unity and the use of monuments, fountains and flagpoles in gardens were notable accomplishments of the period in Italy.

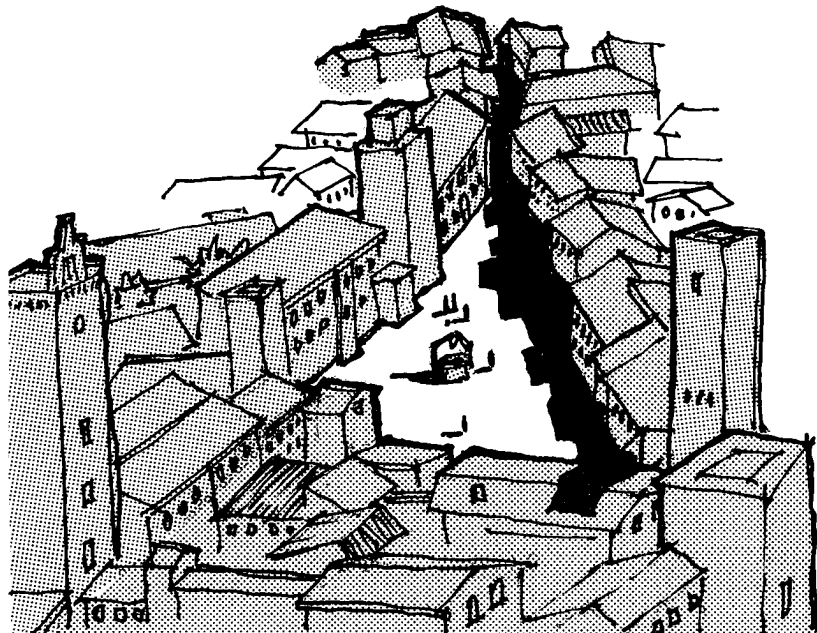


Fig. 2.5 Town square in San Gimignano, Italy.

It was in Italy as well that the public square began to emerge as the symbol for a city. St. Mark's Square in Venice is a well known example. The square had emerged as an essential and dominant public space, and was to remain so until the role of urban open space shifted to public recreation in the mid-1800s.

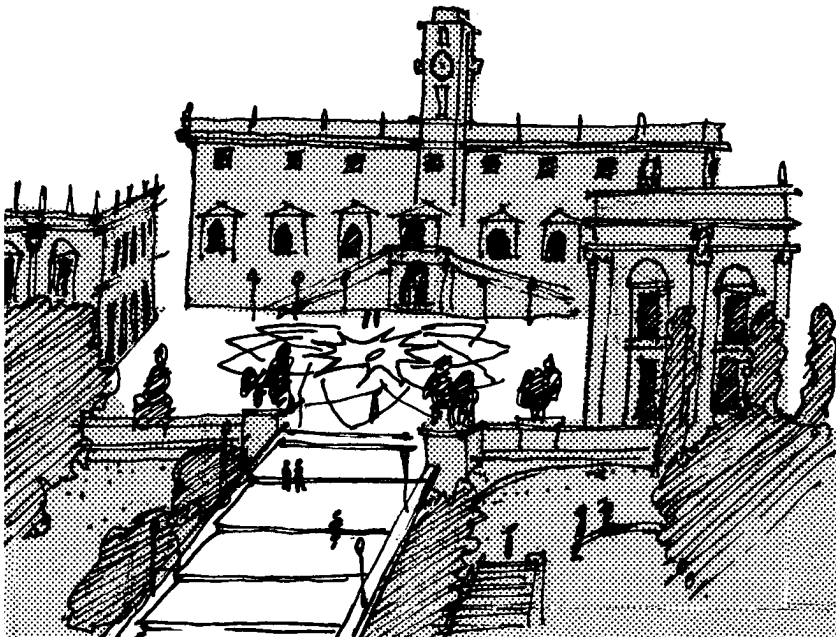


Fig. 2.6 Renaissance Square — Piazza Del Campidoglio, Rome.

The public square was incorporated in the cities of England, particularly in London, in the early 1700s. These squares were reserved for the privileged classes and were located in well-to-do residential areas. Although there was a paucity of vegetation in the early squares, trees and other plants were added in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

**England
18th Century**

An example of an early square is shown in fig. 2.7 with contrast provided by a square in London as it is viewed today, in fig. 2.8.

Many squares evolved from the existing greens or commons of communities that were being encroached upon by the

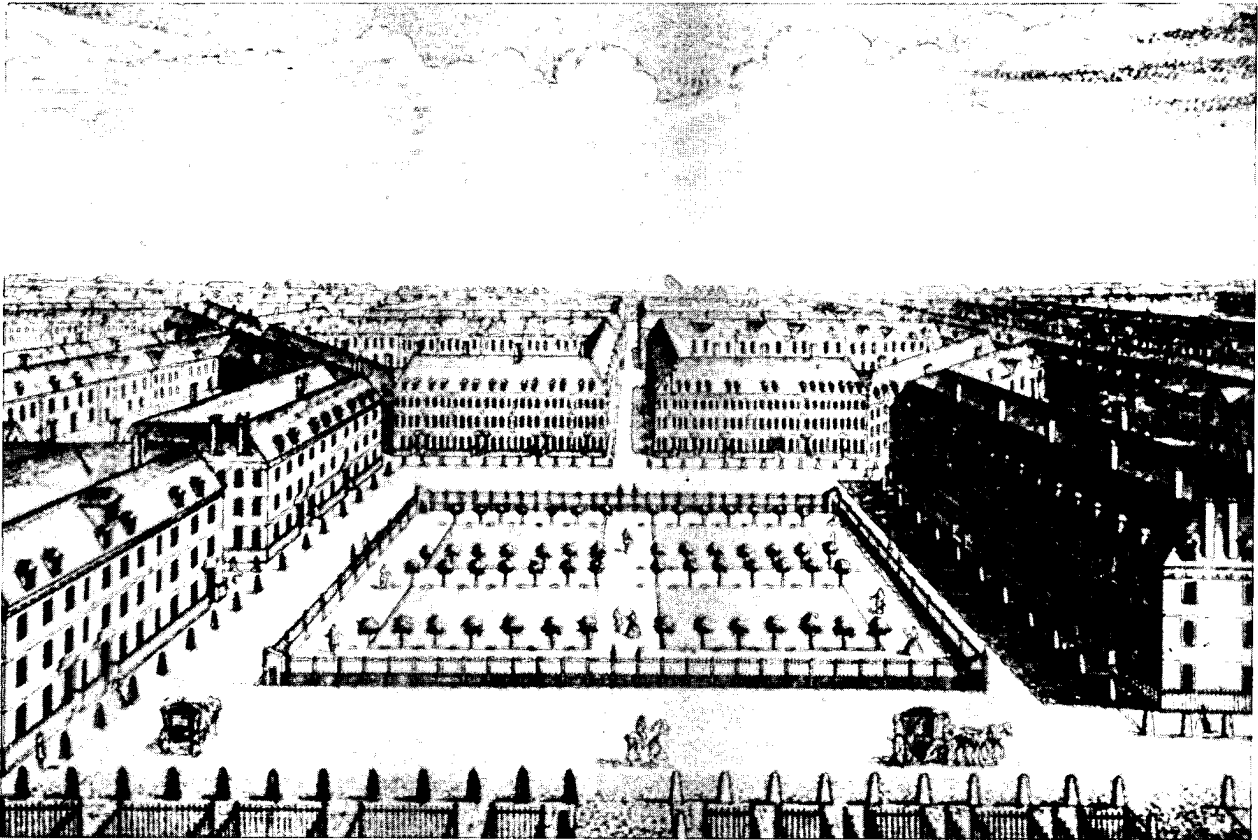


Fig. 2.7 A London square c. 1720.

expanding town of London, while other squares derived from old baronial estates. “English squares developed from the tendency of the British toward gracious living, bourgeois comfort, and, above everything else, the highest degree of privacy. That the greens were so often fenced in, with keys available only to the owners of adjacent houses, clearly illustrates the situation.”¹⁴



Fig. 2.8 Russell Square, London showing appearance today as a public space

Other types of open spaces set aside in the towns and villages of Britain were commons (primarily for animal grazing), market squares, church plazas, monument sites and military parade grounds. Open spaces or squares for public use evolved from the organic form of the settlement's physical form. Such gathering places evolved naturally in villages, trading towns,

and military camps. Although in some cases these spaces were planned, most occurred as a result of natural growth, such as the intersection of major thoroughfares within the settlement, or the open area in the approach to a bridge, or the widening of a street in front of a church. The original public square provided a place for exchange of information, dissemination of news and gossip and a political forum; recreation in the form of games, teaching, lunch and conversation and general sociability; protection in times of danger and a place for military training and drill; trade in the buying and selling of goods; piety in the church plaza or square for worship and prayer. In short, the square was a multi-functional social and commercial space, unlike the public parks of today which are a retreat and escape from the sensory stimuli of the town or city.

The English Pleasure Garden

The fore-runner of the public park was the privately operated commercial pleasure garden of which there were many in and around London and the various resort towns such as Bath and Cheltenham in the eighteenth century. In addition to tea-gardens, some were appendages to taverns and public houses, while in others there was a wide range of entertainment including a small zoo, fireworks displays, music and dancing, and lighted gardens for evening strolling. Spectacular events such as balloon ascents were not uncommon. The gardens were normally open from April until September for three or four days a week. By 1877, the last of London's pleasure gardens had closed, the victims of changing public views as to acceptable amusements and as well to the newly developed public parks of the period.

Many parks originated as land set aside for hunting under the control of a wealthy land owner, or the land around a gentleman's house. Many of these parks or gardens were

acquired in later years for public use. As Chadwick has pointed out, "In fact, the park systems of English towns would be fragmentary indeed, were it not for those parks originally laid out to enhance the mansion of some local dignitary."¹⁵ Before the mid-1800s, the Royal Parks of London and other Crown lands were private, open only to nobility and to the well-to-do on special occasions.

However, while lacking public open space, "the eighteenth century town remained healthy, for the fabric of the town still contained many gardens and open areas for private use apart from the newer private gardens provided by baroque schemes of town improvement, whilst the open country was close at hand for all to walk in."¹⁶

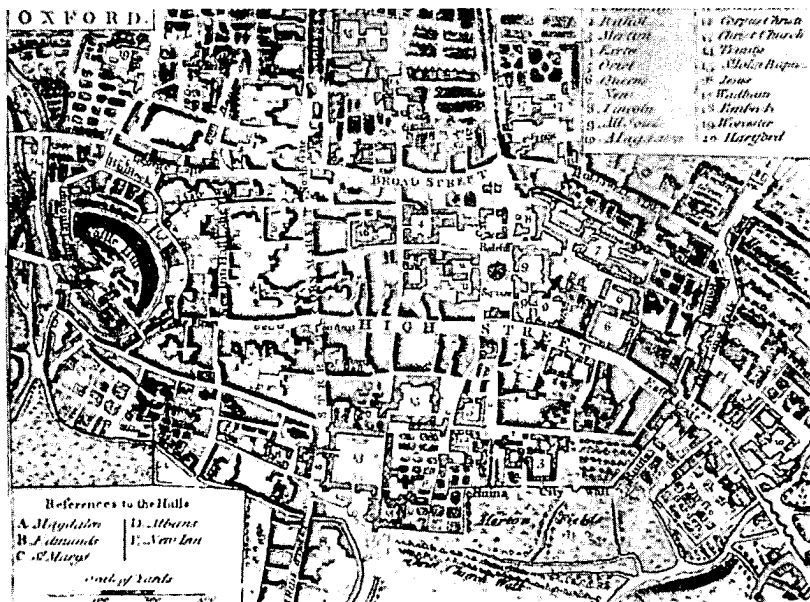


Fig. 2.9 Oxford, England in the 18th c. showing marketplace and private gardens.

Examples of persistently successful open spaces established long before the first public parks were established are St. Peter's Square in Rome; Boston Common (1640s); the residential public open spaces of Savannah, Georgia planned in 1733, with a series of 48 lots grouped around a public square; and indeed the Halifax Common established in 1763. But such spaces were limited in their function, particularly the commons which served primarily as common grazing lands.

England The First Public Parks

The move to designate lands as public parks came about as the result of the Industrial Revolution and the increasing concern for the health and sanitary conditions of urban areas. Increasing population densities and overcrowded housing, along with improper and totally inadequate sanitary conditions caused by a lack of drains, sewers, ventilation and clean water in the industrial towns led to severe health problems among the working classes. Charles Dickens and other nineteenth century writers dramatized the living conditions of this period in Britain.

That there was a general concern about the conditions of the urban environment is evidenced by the number of Royal Commission reports on the subject, such as the **Report of the Select Committee on the Health of Towns** (1840), and the **Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population** (1842). The earlier **Report from the Select Committee on Public Walks** (1833) pointed out that walks were the best means to promote the well-being and health of the citizens. The Victorians, however, were primarily concerned with the worker's health as it affected production:

A man walking out with his family among his neighbours of different ranks, will naturally be

desirous to be properly clothed, and that his wife and children should be also: but this desire duly directed and controlled is found by experience to be of the most powerful effect in promoting Civilization and exciting Industry.¹⁷

A series of Acts passed by Parliament between 1833 and 1843 provided that, through taxes, public funds could be provided for improvements such as sewers and sanitation systems, and for public parks.



Fig. 2.10 Victoria Embankment — showing a public walk that was a fore-runner of public parks.

The first park approved by Parliament specifically for public recreation was Victoria Park in London's East End in 1842. It was the result of a reform group pressing Parliament

to improve the social climate of London by creating better conditions in the East End.

The second area of land purchased and developed for such public purpose under the new legislation was Birkenhead Park in Liverpool in 1843. Of the 225 acres acquired, 125 acres were set aside for the free recreation of the public and the rest was sold for building sites.¹⁸ The park included cricket grounds, archery fields, winding carriage drives and separate pathways for walking, irregular bodies of water and undulating topography. Birkenhead Park, which was designed by John Paxton, proved highly successful and led to the establishment of public parks in most towns in Britain in the period after 1850, as well as the opening of the Royal Parks in London to public access.



Fig. 2.11 St. James Park, London, England, originally a Royal Park.

Although there was a movement in Germany to create public parks a decade or so before the English movement, the public park movement is generally considered to have been born in Victorian Britain. Indeed, “there is no recorded instance of outdoor recreational space on land acquired and owned by the people themselves, developed with public funds and open indiscriminately to all, before the creation of Victoria and Birkenhead parks.”¹⁹

NOTES

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1. Paul Zucker, **Town and Square**, Columbia University Press, New York, 1959, p. 20.
 2. Ibid., p. 23.
 3. Ibid., p. 25.
 4. Ibid., p. 26.
 5. Ibid., p. 19.
 6. Ibid., p. 36.
 7. Ibid., p. 45.
 8. Cecil Stewart, **A Prospect of Cities**, Longmans, Green & Co., London, 1966, p. 79.
 9. Ibid., p. 78.
 10. John H. Mundy and Peter Riesenber, **The Medieval Town**, Van Nostrand, Toronto, 1958, p. 40.
 11. Stewart, p. 78.
 12. Lewis Mumford, **The City in History**, Harcourt, Brace & World Inc., New York, 1961, p. 307.
 13. Mundy and Riesenber, p. 41.
 14. Zucker, p. 199.
 15. G.F. Chadwick, **The Park and the Town**, Architectural Press, London, England, 1966, p. 20.
 16. Ibid., p. 44.
 17. Ibid., p. 51.
 18. Norman T. Newton, **Design on the Land**, Belknap Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1971, p. 227.
 19. Ibid., p. 267.

3. SETTLEMENT PATTERNS IN UPPER CANADA

It is helpful to have a broad understanding of the socio-economic conditions in Upper Canada in the period between 1790 and 1850, to begin to appreciate the factors that led to the establishment of public parks in a still young and developing British colony. Obviously the conditions, the settlement patterns and the economic base of Canada contrasted sharply to those of Britain. Yet despite its status as a fledgling colony, public parks emerged in Upper Canada shortly after their establishment in Britain. How and why are the key questions. This section provides a background to the establishment of the first public parks in Upper Canada.

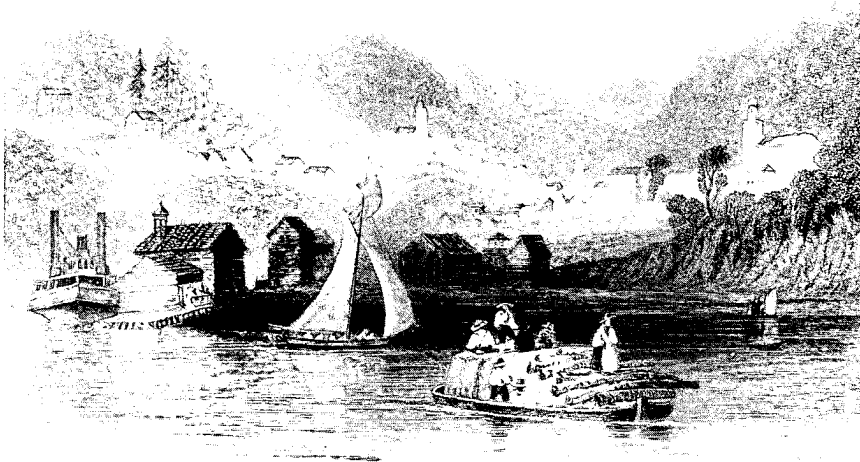


Fig. 3.1 Port Hope c. 1840.

To a considerable extent, the progress of Canada is written in the founding and growth of her cities.

Canadian Magazine (1903)

**Early Settlement:
1790-1820**

The province of Upper Canada, which would later become Ontario, was created in 1791 with John Graves Simcoe appointed by the British Crown as its governor. The first settlement followed the surveying in 1783 of 10 townships, including Kingston, Ernestown (Bath) and Richmond. It was only after 1791 that settlement began to increase significantly in other parts of the province.¹

The lands that the government had purchased from the Indians were granted free to settlers, along with free rations, farming implements, seeds, clothes and other commodities. Most of the early settlers were United Empire Loyalists whose political convictions brought them north from the United States

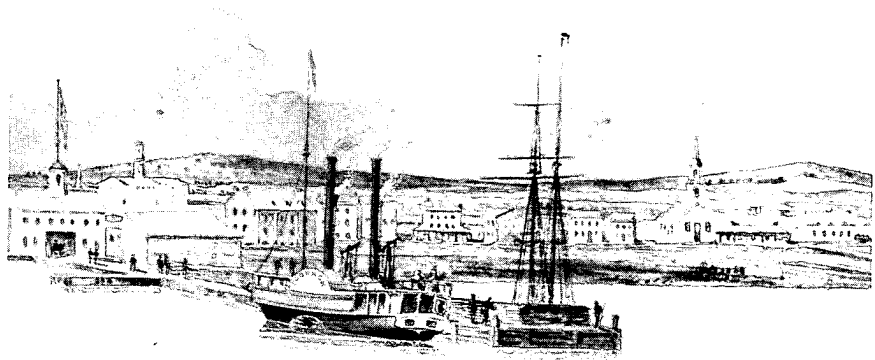


Fig. 3.2 Cobourg c. 1840.

at the end of the American Revolution. While the majority settled in the Maritimes, many made their homes in Upper Canada.

Since water was still the primary means of transportation, settlements grew up close to it. The earliest colonial settlements were along the upper St. Lawrence, and along Lake Ontario from east of Kingston to Niagara-on-the-Lake. Elsewhere in the province in this period there were only scattered Indian villages and a few traders' outposts.

The earliest form of land subdivision in Ontario was the legal grid square. Concessions varied in overall size, form, and in shape, being either rectangular or square. The Crown dispensed land under agricultural settlement agreements that permitted a fairly equitable distribution of property to a wide range of people. As a result, the class-dominated ownership practices of Europe were not established in the new towns of Ontario.

The system was not without elitism, however. English class values were perpetuated to some extent through such practices as giving special grants to influential persons and to persons who could take advantage of flaws in the settlement regulations. For example, land was granted to Loyalists on a scale that allotted 50 acres to a private soldier and 5,000 acres to a field officer. Since the children of a family were eligible for grants as well as their parents, a large family could amass a very large tract of land. Some land was in turn sold to speculators, which further undercut the egalitarian intent of the original settlement policy. In addition, one-seventh of each township was set aside for clergy reserves, to strengthen the Anglican Church, and another one-seventh was retained by the Crown as a reserve to cover government expenses.²

Settlement Policies

In 1826, recognizing that the free land grant system had been greatly abused, the government changed the policy from granting land to selling it to prospective settlers at public auction. (The military and Loyalists still retained the right to secure free land grants, however.) Purchase of land for settlement included the obligation to build roads and bridges fronting one's property.³

Kingston, although only a hamlet, was the only important urban settlement in Upper Canada in 1791. Established in 1783 as Fort Cataraqui, its origins were linked to the need for a garrison on the St. Lawrence River as a defence against the Americans. York (renamed Toronto in 1834) was established as a garrison in 1793, and was made the seat of government of Upper Canada in 1797 because it was a safer distance from the American border than Niagara and offered the best harbour on Lake Ontario.

By 1788, five years after a garrison was established at Kingston, a 300-acre common was located on Point Henry, across the harbour from the town site. In the early 1800s a wall was built to enclose the town, and on the military lands west of town a horse racing track was located on land that would later become City Park. By 1816, Kingston had a population of 2,250 and about 300 buildings, as well as a public marketplace and a church plaza, while the water frontage was reserved for fortification on land that many years later (1967) was to become Confederation Park.⁴

Early Planning

One of the early attempts at planning communities was made by the government of Upper Canada in the 1790s. The lakeshore district around Kingston was planned for a series of townships with a town in each, laid out to a prescribed plan. "The plan consisted of town lots of one acre, town parks of

24 acres, and squares and streets of stated dimensions.”⁵ However, despite this grandiose government scheme to encourage settlement, few of the sites materialized, and the idea of a town site for each township was abandoned in 1794.

It had been the practice to give settlers a town lot and a country or “park” lot, as early as the settlement in Lunenburg, Nova Scotia. This practice was followed in the early settlement days of Toronto and in Peterborough by Peter Robinson, who gave key settlers a town lot and a “park” lot. In other words, the idea of an “estate” or a hunting “park” was a well established precedent in the settlement practices of English Canada.

By contrast with Kingston, Hamilton was not established as a military base but developed as a commercial city, with upstart entrepreneurial forces exemplified by personalities such as Allan McNab and his Dundurn Castle as early as 1835.⁶ London could be described in a similar way. As another contrast, John Galt established towns such as Guelph, Goderich and Galt with land policies to encourage settlement.

By 1820, the total population of southern Ontario was estimated at 40,000 persons, of which over one-half lived in the Quinte or eastern district of the region. In the 10 years between 1828 and 1838 the population of Upper Canada increased more than two-fold, as is shown in table 1.

Population

By 1820, there were only two important urban centres in Upper Canada, Kingston with 2,300 population and York with 1,250, and only a few villages in between. Kingston, which was established as a garrison, was soon recognized as a trade and transportation centre, and the first banks in Upper Canada were established there. The surrounding countryside was the

The Growth of Towns

Table 1
Population of Upper Canada by District 1828-1838

District	1828	1838
Ottawa	3,732	8,016
Bathurst	14,516	23,436
Eastern	19,159	29,498
Johnstown	18,244	31,976
Midland	30,960	37,382
Prince Edward	—	13,212
Newcastle	13,335	35,755
Home	22,927	57,314
Niagara	20,177	
Gore	15,149	50,319
London	19,813	
Western	8,333	
TOTAL	186,345	388,029
Toronto (York)	2,235	12,571

Source: Public Archives of Ontario, Appendix, Journal of the House of Assembly of Upper Canada.

The districts listed in table 1 are shown on fig. 3.4.

best developed in the province and, with no competition from the hamlets in the region, Kingston became the centre of an active trading of goods from the British to the American settlements on Lake Ontario.



Fig. 3.3 Kingston c. 1820

Until the opening of the Kingston Road in 1800, York was considered isolated and it did not share in the heavy trading to the United States through Kingston, although both centres acted as stimulants to their hinterlands. The first stage services from York north to Holland Landing began in 1828, 11 years after such service was provided between York and Kingston. The fact that York was the capital of Upper Canada attracted wealth to the young town, and the construction of well-built brick public buildings enhanced its appearance. Immigrants were encouraged to settle in or adjacent to the townsite. Residents included government officials and their families, large landowners, owners of banks and large businesses and retired army officers, along with the ever-increasing skilled trades people and small businessmen. Although they bore little physical resemblance to the cities in the Old World the settlers had left, the towns of Upper Canada had two Old World characteristics: they were dominated by the middle class and commerce was central to their existence.

While they were a stronghold of the middle class, however, the towns were rather primitive as to architecture and civic pride. By 1820, there were virtually no settlements beyond the hamlet stage in Upper Canada other than York and Kingston. And the appearance of these towns, according to descriptions given in 1825, was rather depressing. York had "streets. . . regularly laid out, intersecting each other at right angles. Only one of them, however, is completely built; and in wet weather the unfinished streets are if possible muddier and dirtier than those of Kingston. The situation of the town is very unhealthy, for it stands on a piece of low marsh."⁷ Kingston for its part is reported to have had buildings "of such an inferior description as scarcely to be worthy of notice."⁸

Isolation due to low-density settlement patterns, inadequate transportation, and the cost of imported manufactured goods were the major problems to be overcome. "Such constraints affected the economic, social and cultural development of Upper Canada, and therefore also urban growth."⁹

Immigration 1820-1850

The period between 1820 and 1850 saw a large immigration of settlers into Upper Canada from the British Isles, especially from Ireland, with passage to the New World easy to secure on timber ships returning for cargo. Despite the fact that about 60 per cent of the immigrants landing at Quebec crossed over to the United States, which was more prosperous and offered cheaper land, the population of Upper Canada saw a substantial increase. By 1841 it had reached nearly half a million with the vast majority of the population living relatively close to the U.S. border, as shown on fig. 3.4, Upper Canada in 1841. In 1851, when the first census was published, 952,004 persons lived in Upper Canada (table 2).

Table 2
Population of Upper and Lower Canada 1851

Upper Canada	952,004
Lower Canada	890,261
TOTAL:	1,842,265

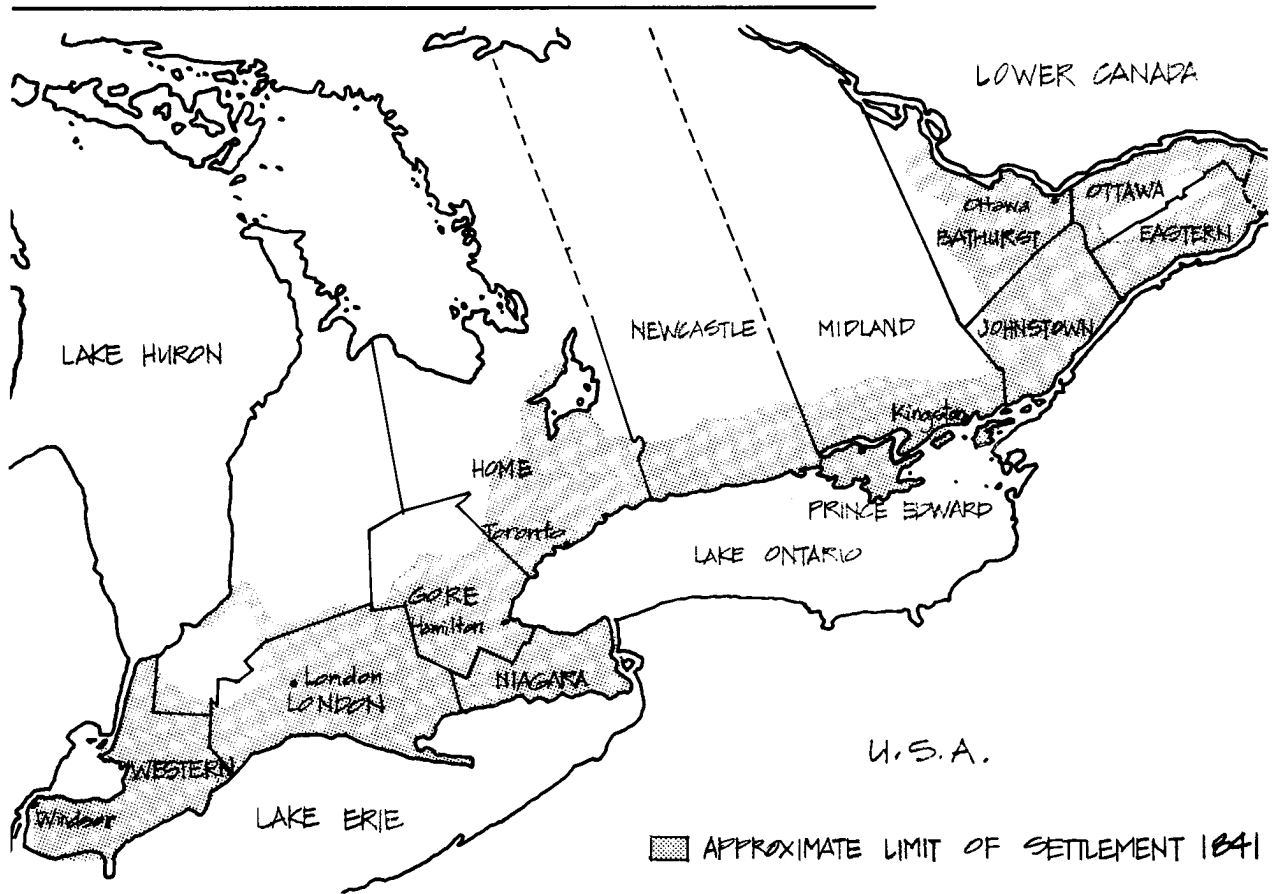


Fig. 3.4 Upper Canada 1841 — showing extent of settlement.

According to the 1851 census, 16 per cent of Ontario’s population lived in incorporated centres, and 84 per cent were rural. While Halton, Lennox and Addington, Dufferin, Peel and Victoria counties still had no incorporated town or villages,



Fig. 3.5 Guelph 1831.

York County, which included Toronto, was more than 61 per cent urban. Toronto was growing rapidly, reaching 30,000 persons by 1851. By the same year, Kingston had reached 11,000 persons and Hamilton 14,000 (table 3).¹⁰

Table 3
Population of Selected Cities
Canada, 1851

Saint John, New Brunswick	22,745
Montreal	57,715
Quebec City	42,052
Toronto	30,775
Hamilton	14,112
Kingston	11,585
Ottawa	7,760
London	7,035

Source: Statistics Canada

There were only 24 centres of more than 500 persons in 1851, 17 of these on or adjacent to Lake Ontario. The population of Upper Canada had grown especially rapidly since 1835, “when profound changes began to develop in transportation, agriculture, manufacturing and trade.”¹¹ Easier access to U.S. markets had altered the scale of trade and finance, with an increasing flow of capital to the cities. It was in this setting that the first public parks were established in Upper Canada.

Recreation in Upper Canada ranged from fishing and hunting, to horse racing, and to spectacles as macabre as public hangings. Cricket and curling became popular by the second quarter of the nineteenth century. For those with some education and at least moderate means, social activities included “assemblies,” evening gatherings offering dancing, conversation and whist. Plays and theatre were available in the larger towns, often performed by professional touring companies.¹²

Recreation 1800-1860

This period saw the beginnings of local musical societies and concerts as well, and by 1850 fraternities and clubs had become extremely popular. Carriage drives and family picnics were another pastime. Most of these forms of recreation, however, were limited to the larger towns, and to people with moderate or higher incomes. For most, with business being labour intensive, the work week was six days long, and it left little time or energy for recreation.¹³



Fig. 3.6 Lower Bytown (Ottawa) 1841.

The Baldwin Act was passed in May, 1849, “to provide. . . for the erection of Municipal Corporations.” Although it does not refer directly to the development of public parks or other space for recreation, the Act reveals the values of the period and the degree of concern given to moral issues. It states that the municipality of each village shall have the power and authority to make bylaws for a range of public purposes such as houses, roads, water, etc., and “for enforcing the due observance of the Sabbath; for preventing vice, drunkenness, profane swearing, obscene language, and any other species of immorality and indecency in the streets or other public places.”¹⁴

But the years between 1820 and 1850 “were still the era of rough roads, horse and saddle, weekly papers, factional politics, and above all, of the town as the backbone of the Upper Canadian way of life.”¹⁵ Upper Canada was predominately Protestant, “with a strong strain of puritanism,” with most homes having a Bible and a portrait of Queen Victoria, “in the sense of loyalty and devotion to the young monarch. . . that had all the fervour of a faith.”¹⁶ Activities such as “card playing, dancing, reading of novels, and even ice skating were widely denounced as dangerous, if not sinful pastimes,”¹⁷ with the Bible being the most popular literature of the day.

One begins to discern the attitudes that would soon be used to justify the creation of public parks for the moral improvement of the population.

NOTES

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1. Jacob Spelt, **Urban Development in South-Central Ontario**, McClelland and Stewart Ltd., Toronto, 1972, p. 18.
 2. Ibid., p. 35.
 3. Ibid., p. 56.
 4. Archives, Queens University, City of Kingston Records, 1816.
 5. Spelt, p. 21.
 6. Michael B. Katz, **The People of Hamilton, Canada West: Family and Class in a Mid-Nineteenth Century City**, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1975, p. 5.
 7. Spelt, p. 53.
 8. Ibid.
 9. Ibid., p. 39.
 10. Ibid., p. 89.
 11. Ibid., p. 93.
 12. G.P. de T. Glazebrook, **Life in Ontario, A Social History**, University of Toronto Press, 1968, p. 60.
 13. Ibid., pp. 60-61.
 14. An Act to provide . . . for the erection of Municipal Corporations, and the establishment of Counties, Cities, Towns, Townships and Villages in Upper Canada, 30 May, 1849, pp. 477-8.
 15. John S. Moir, "The Upper Canadian Religious Tradition" in **Profiles of Province**, Ontario Historical Society, 1967, p. 189.
 16. Ibid., p. 191.
 17. Ibid.

4. PUBLIC OPEN SPACES IN THE EARLY SETTLEMENTS

The major types of public open spaces characteristic of Upper Canadian villages and towns in the early 1800s were the common, the public square, the military parade ground or square, the church plaza and the cemetery. A brief description of each of these types of open space follows.

Common land set aside as public communal pasture for livestock, as a source of wood for fuel, and for air and exercise, originated with the Saxons in medieval England.¹ The practice was introduced by English settlers in the New World as, for example, with Boston Common, on which cattle were grazed, and which remains today a public park with its original boundaries. Commons can be found in many of the villages of the eastern seaboard founded in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. A similar pattern emerged in the early Canadian settlements. One of the earliest examples was the Halifax Common, established in 1750 to serve the residents of the newly founded defence outpost of the British sector of the Maritimes. The common was an integral part of most of the hamlets and villages of early Upper Canada and indeed remained a functional land use in many Ontario towns, including Guelph, as late as the early 1900s. Although in Canadian towns the common served as a ceremonial and festive centre for special occasions, it was not regularly used for recreation as we understand it.

The Common

The public square, which had its beginning in the Greek agora and developed through the centuries in the towns and cities of Europe, was incorporated into the towns and fortified villages of St. Croix and Port Royal in the 1600s. A map of the original townsite of Quebec City shows an open square in front of the church which also served as a market square. The upper town also had two large squares relating to key buildings. A public square was included in the early grid pattern of

The Public Square

The measure of a city's worth — in terms of its respect for the needs of its people — ought to be gauged by the quality of public space it manages to provide.

J.S. French



Fig. 4.1 The common, as found in many early Canadian settlements.

Montreal in 1821, initiated by Lord Dalhousie as a counterpart to the squares of London, England.² King and Queen's Square in Saint John, New Brunswick, which were included in the original town charter of 1785, were set aside as public space in 1840. Similar squares were established in Toronto in the early 1800s, and there were at least four such public squares by 1840.

The square was virtually a trademark of the military townsite. Cornwall, which was laid out as a military garrison, had a square in the traditional pattern which doubled as the market square, as did Morrisburg. The Upper Canada villages of Guelph (1827) and Goderich (1829), established by John

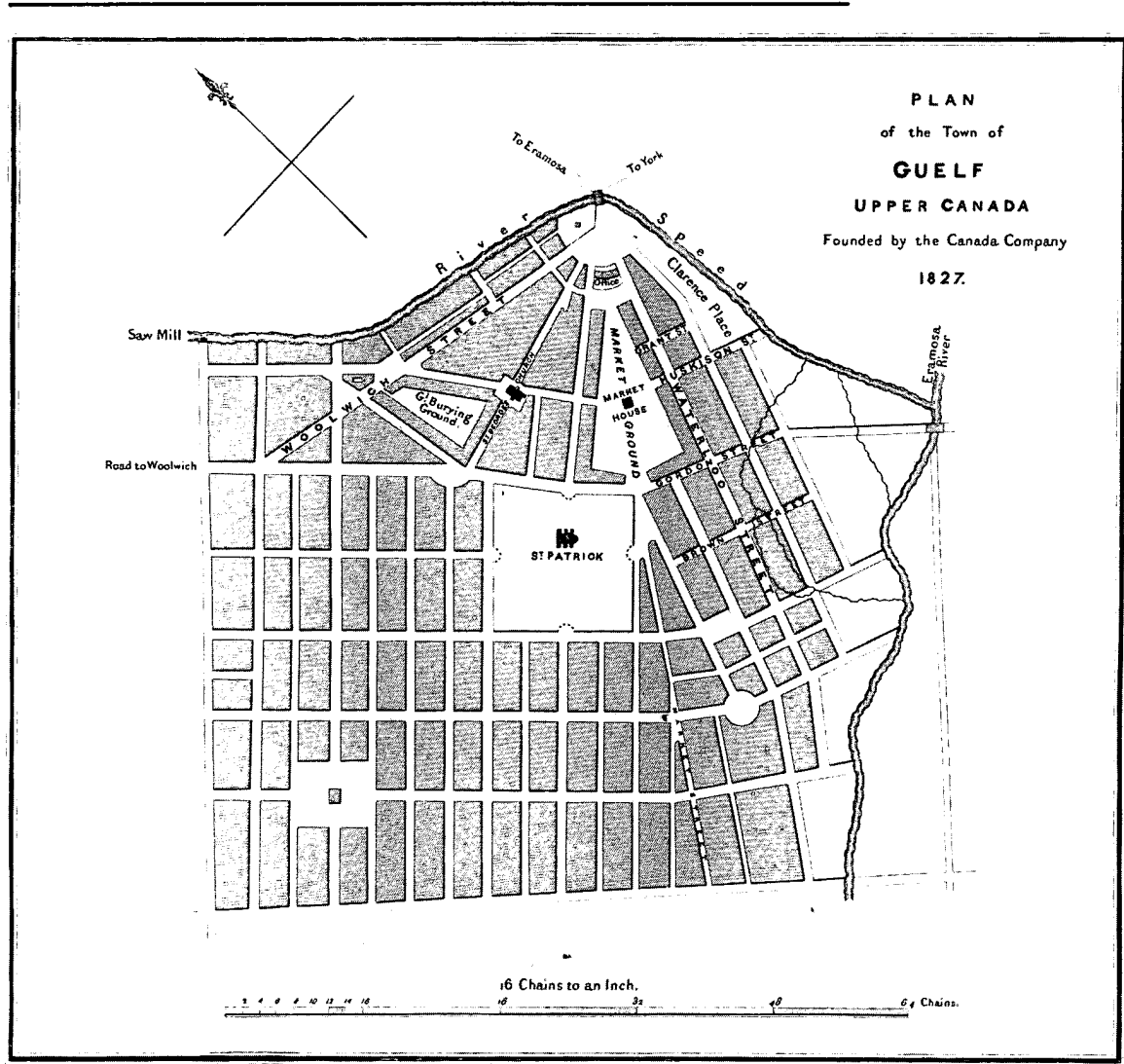


Fig. 4.2 Guelph (now Guelph) — 1827, showing market ground.

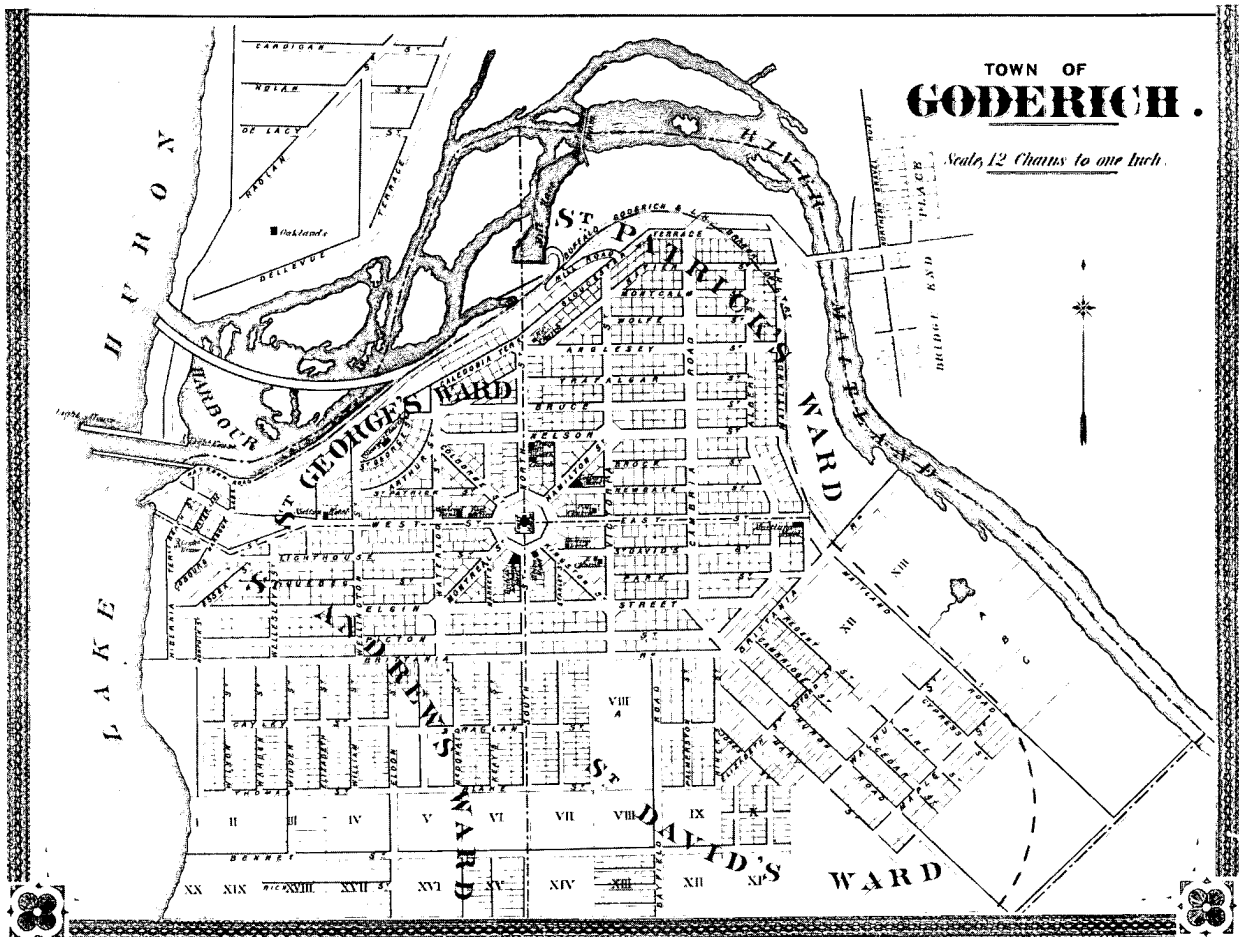


Fig. 4.3 Goderich — showing radial plan.

Galt, were based on a radial plan, with a public square or marketplace occupying a main part of the central core.³ The land adjacent to the impressive Kingston City Hall, built as the

proposed seat of government for Upper Canada, served and still serves as the market square for the town. Similar squares can still be identified in Pembroke, Brockville, Hamilton, Guelph and Peterborough, among others.

Early residential squares were set aside for the more affluent residents living adjacent to them, as was the custom in Britain. In this sense, they could scarcely be considered “public” although they do represent the acceptance of the idea of provision of public green space and an aesthetic character within the city’s neighbourhoods. Their function was simply to provide open space, with pathways for strolling. (An 1865 bylaw in Montreal stated that any games, and walking or lying on the grass itself, were prohibited.⁴)

An open space or plaza in front of the churches of the early settlements was used for religious ceremonies and other public gatherings, and often doubled as the market square. The original plans for Louisburg, Quebec City and most of the towns in Quebec show such plazas.⁵ Church plazas were part of the early settlements in Upper Canada as well, in hamlets and towns along the St. Lawrence River and Lake Ontario.

The early fortresses and defence posts included a square or parade ground adjacent to the barracks. Such spaces sometimes also served as public space for political meetings or other assemblies. Military lands were later to play an important role, as many of Ontario’s public parks were established on former military lands. This was true of Niagara-on-the-Lake, City Park in Kingston and Victoria Park in London. Other well-known park sites in Canada that were originally military holdings include Point Pleasant Park in Halifax, St. Helen’s Island in Montreal, and Exhibition Park in Toronto.

Church Plaza

Military Lands



Fig. 4.4 Chatham c. 1838

Cemeteries

The cemetery was important as a forerunner to the public park. In recent years it has been interesting to see statements made by various recreation leaders on the potential use of cemeteries for public recreation. The comments usually imply that this possibility had never been considered before. In fact, cemeteries near urban areas were used widely for recreation in

the latter part of the nineteenth century.

With few exceptions, these lands were located at the edge of the emerging towns in the early settlement days. In 1833, a portion of the Halifax Common was set aside as a burial ground.

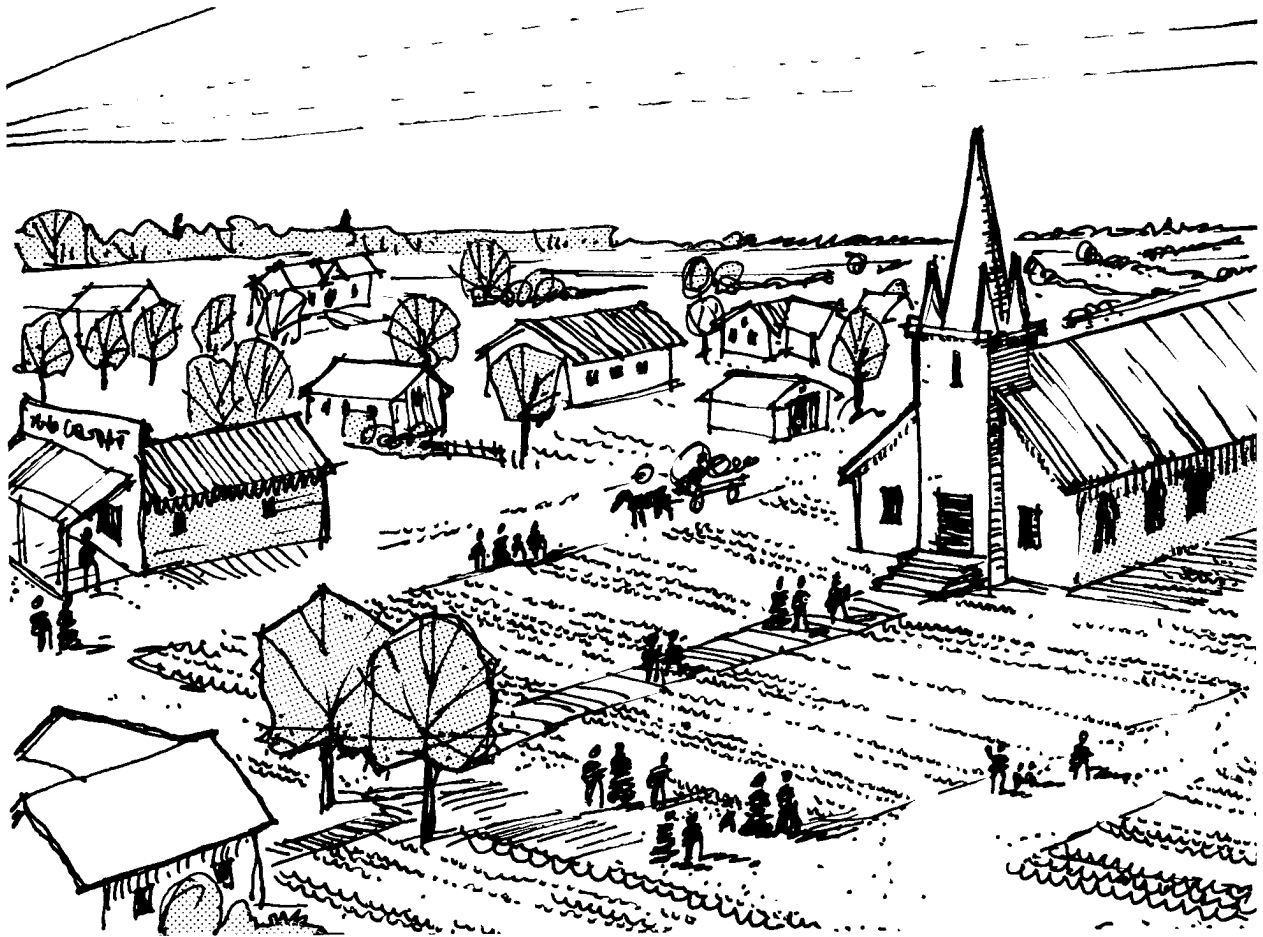


Fig. 4.5 A church plaza c. 1830 in early Ontario village.



Fig. 4.6 Colborne Presbyterian Church plaza today (built 1830).

A cemetery was also located adjacent to King Square in Saint John, New Brunswick. The Toronto General Burying Grounds including the Prospect and Necropolis cemeteries were established in 1826 and St. James Cemetery was founded in 1840.⁶ These cemeteries were used for walking, pleasure outings and picnics, particularly on Sundays. In the 1860s, the Toronto **Globe** frequently mentions the local cemeteries

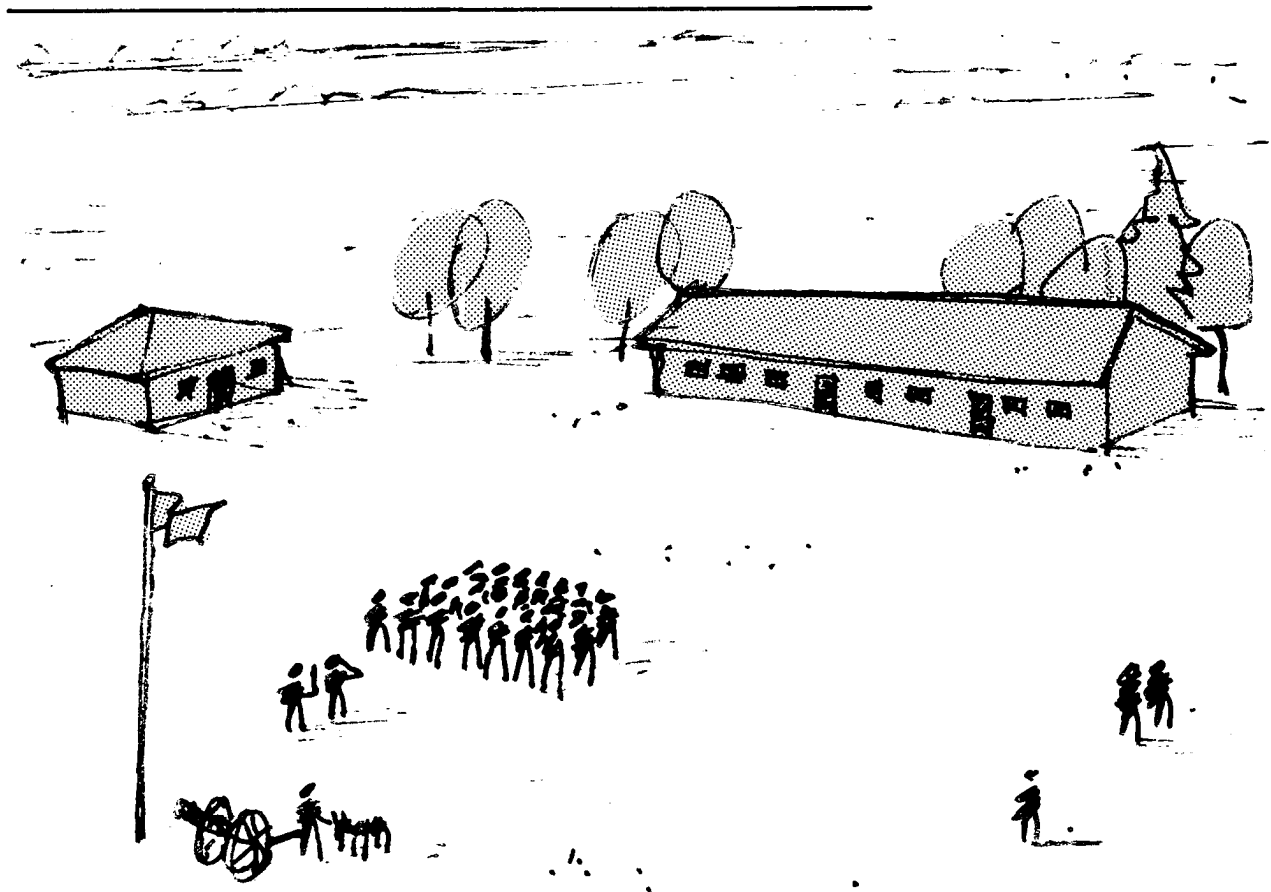


Fig. 4.7 A military square

as interesting places for visiting and recreation. In the 1870s, street car lines on Yonge St. were extended to Mount Pleasant Cemetery to allow better public access to the grounds, with special consideration for Sunday visitors and picnickers. This activity was immensely popular in the large eastern seaboard cities of the United States at a time when “public parks were



Fig. 4.8 An early rural cemetery ground.

virtually unknown in America.”⁷ In fact, proponents of public parks in this early period used the interest shown in cemeteries as an argument for public gardens and parks.

NOTES

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1. Susan Markham, **The Halifax Common 1749 to 1979**, unpublished M.A. thesis, Dalhousie University, Halifax, 1980, p. 7.
 2. Elsie M. McFarland, **Development of Public Recreation in Canada**, Canadian Parks/Recreation Association, Toronto, 1978, p. 8.
 3. John N. Jackson, **The Canadian City**, McGraw-Hill Ryerson Ltd., Toronto, 1973, p. 29.
 4. McFarland, p. 8.
 5. Jackson, p. 23.
 6. Edith G. Firth, **The Town of York 1815-1834**, University of Toronto Press, 1966, p. 311.
 7. Michael Laurie, **An Introduction to Landscape Architecture**, American Elsevier Publishing Co., New York, 1975, p. 65.

5. EARLY PARKS IN THE UNITED STATES

As in Canada, the early settlers to the United States of America carried with them their memories of the older British and European cities, and as a result virtually every new settlement plan included a public open space or square, used for communal grazing of cattle (the common); drilling of militia and public gatherings (the parade square, often landscaped in a formal manner, and often known as “the green” in New England towns); aesthetic purposes; or as a market area, but this use was much less common than in Europe.

The greens of New England towns were often open-ended, seldom geometrically square, and they were often adapted to the natural site in much the same way the agora in Greece was flexible in shape and multi-purpose in function. The green served as “residential square, marketplace, government square, meeting place and parade ground — all in one.”¹ Boston Common (1640) is an excellent example of this type of open space.

Plans of the early colonial settlements, such as the well-known plan for Savannah, Georgia, drawn in 1733, were in traditional gridiron pattern where “the square by frequent repetition becomes an integral part of the street pattern.”² Philadelphia’s original plan, laid out by William Penn in 1682, “located five squares in a broad formal grid pattern.”³ These squares were not often recognized for their potential value as a frontpiece for public or other important buildings. Rather, they provided a sense of place in the residential street pattern. Most of these early squares, however, were provided for the well-to-do residents of adjacent streets, as were the early urban squares in London, and therefore they were not truly public in the broader sense.

The recreational function of cemeteries has not been generally recognized. Laurel Hill Cemetery in Philadelphia,

Every American who visits London. . . feels mortified that no city in the United States has a public **park**. . . What are called parks in New York are not even apologies for the thing: they are only squares or paddocks.

Andrew Jackson Downing (1850)

Mt. Auburn in Cambridge and Greenwood in New York all existed in 1830. They were very popular for Sunday outings with the inhabitants of large cities, and guidebooks even suggested routes to view particularly impressive monuments and viewpoints.⁴

Mt. Auburn Cemetery is considered the forerunner of the great park movement of the U.S., a movement that gained momentum in 1852 with the planning of the mall in Washington by Andrew Jackson Downing, and the planning of Bushnell Park in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1853.⁵

Revolutionary changes in methods of transportation, agriculture, and manufacturing in the nineteenth century — the Industrial Revolution — resulted in the rapid growth and development of urban centres in the United States. This growth in turn had repercussions on the shape and structure of the cities, as well as on the lives of the many people who moved to them to find employment.

The first half of the nineteenth century was characterized particularly by new technical inventions which increased production, both in factories and on farms. As well, markets developed, due to the expansion of credit, the establishment of fairs, and the formation of chartered companies. The resulting rapid growth could not accommodate the many people, particularly immigrants, who moved to the cities. Overcrowding, congestion, disease, and filth were the common results of industrialization in American cities. Rising capitalism ignored the historic roots of cities and the geography of the land. Industries, residential areas and businesses were often built with neither order nor consideration for living conditions. There were few open spaces or recreation areas, and few public services, except in the wealthier neighbourhoods.

Although not all American cities were hit by rapid

industrialization to the same degree as Boston and New York, for example, they showed some common characteristics, among them: muddy, garbage-littered streets, animals such as pigs allowed to roam the streets, and disease due to poor living conditions, especially in the mid-period of the nineteenth century.

While a number of American cities were much larger than Montreal or Toronto by this time, there is no evidence of a move to establish public parks dedicated to the recreational needs of the citizens until around 1850, although there was growing concern about urban congestion and the need for fresh air and sunshine for health reasons. There was also, as in Britain, a strong moral argument, as voiced by a prominent citizen, Andrew Jackson Downing (1815-1852). Downing became the leading spokesman for those concerned with landscape gardening and civic improvement. In partnership with Calvert Vaux, a leading architect of the day, Downing was selected to landscape the Washington mall in 1851, in recognition of his prestige and ability. He was also a gifted writer and his book **Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening** was considered a classic, influencing landscaping in both the United States and Europe.⁶

In 1848, he expressed concern over the lack of public parks, and argued “the general interest shown in the cemeteries proved that public gardens established in a liberal and similar manner near our cities would be successful.”⁷

Another leader in the struggle to establish a central park for New Yorkers was William Cullen Bryant, the respected editor of the New York **Evening Post**. Bryant began advocating a large public park through his paper in 1844, at least four years before Downing’s views were publicly stated. To Bryant credit must be given as the first proponent of Central Park.⁸

The third outstanding personality in the Central Park battle was Frederick Law Olmsted, who eventually designed the park and served as its first superintendent. Olmsted, now known as the father of landscape architecture, contributed significantly to park development in both the U.S. and Canada. Part II of this series provides a more detailed story on Olmsted's contributions.

A major deterrent in the establishment of open space as a public recreational space was the pervasive view that a public park would lead to serious conflict between the gentry and the working classes, as is shown by the following editorial comment taken from the New York **Herald** in 1858.

*It is all folly to expect in this country to have parks like those in old aristocratic countries. When we open a public park Sam will air himself in it. He will take his friends whether from Church Street, or elsewhere. He will knock down any better dressed man who remonstrates with him. He will talk and sing and fill his share of the bench, and flirt with nursery maids in his own coarse way. Now we ask what chance have William B. Astor and Edward Everett against this fellow citizen of theirs? Can they and he enjoy the same place? Is it not obvious that he will turn them out, and that the great Central Park will be nothing but a great bear-garden for the lowest denizens of the city, which we shall yet pray litanies to be delivered?*⁹

It was further queried whether a "gentleman" would ever visit Central Park, or for a moment consider permitting his wife and daughters to visit it.

General acceptance of the public park idea in the United States ran parallel to such acceptance and development in