

## Simcoe Days in York



**View of York Harbour from near the mouth of the Don River, 1793 TPL**

Lt. Governor John Graves Simcoe, his energetic wife Elizabeth, and their entourage entered Toronto Harbour aboard the schooner *Mississaga* early in the morning of July 30, 1793. Although they had arrived during the previous night, Lieutenant (later Surveyor General) Joseph Bouchette recommended against entering the dangerous harbour before dawn. Having surveyed “Toronto Bay” the previous November, Bouchette was in a position to offer good advice (see map). The ship was piloted past the treacherous sandy shoals off the Peninsula — later the Island — by Quebec-born fur trader and long-time resident, Jean-Baptiste Rousseaux. The vice-regal couple was rowed ashore to select a site for their tent, which was pitched near Garrison Creek and the future site of Fort York.

While the Governor was busy carving a capital out of the raw wilderness, Mrs. Simcoe explored her immediate surroundings and recorded her observations in both words and pictures. Her first diary entry in Toronto (soon to be York) described a visit to the eastern end of the Bay where Worts & Gooderham would build their windmill 40 years later:

We went in a Boat 2 miles to the bottom of the Bay & walked through a grove of fine Oaks where the Town is intended to be built. 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. The water in the Bay is beautifully clear & transparent.

Thereafter, Mrs. Simcoe – sometimes with her husband, sometimes with other escorts – frequently crossed the future site of the Distillery District, because riding on the Peninsula and traveling up the Don River were among her favourite pastimes. (Setting fire to both sides of the marsh southeast of the Distillery District site was another, more eccentric amusement.)

On August 24<sup>th</sup>, Simcoe received news of the Duke of York's "having distinguished himself" in a military action, and immediately decided to name the new town "York" in a ceremony featuring military salutes and the presence of Ojibways who happened to be in the area. Presumably, the painting of "York Harbour" reproduced here, was painted after the official naming ceremony when Mrs. Simcoe set up her easel "near the mouth of the Don" and painted the primordial scene embracing the Bay ... and the future distillery.

In 1831, around the time that Worts & Gooderham were building their windmill and Bouchette had retired, the surveyor recalled his own first encounter with the bay depicted by Mrs. Simcoe:

I still distinctly recollect the untamed aspect which the country exhibited when first I entered the beautiful basin.... Dense and trackless forest lined the margin of the lake, and reflected their inverted images in its glassy surface....and the bay and neighbouring marshes were the hitherto uninvaded haunts of immense coveys of wild fowl: indeed they were so abundant as in some measure to annoy us during the night.

The Simcoes were in residence at York for a relatively brief, but fundamentally important period. The Governor established the physical and governmental form of the new colony; and his wife left us unparalleled descriptions of natural, social and domestic life. Together, they also gave us a holiday to celebrate this week-end. Cheers.



**Joseph Bouchette's November 1792 survey of "Toronto Harbor" shows the *Mississaga* approaching the eastern end of the Bay ... near the future site of the Distillery District and a lone "Indian hut" on the shore**

This map detail is from the oldest Toronto map held at the City of Toronto Archives, MT00101, which shows an "Indian hut" on the future distillery site. Other sources of information include Elizabeth Simcoe's *Diary*; Joseph Bouchette's 1831 *The British Dominions in North America*; and Sally Gibson's 1984 *More Than an Island*.

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