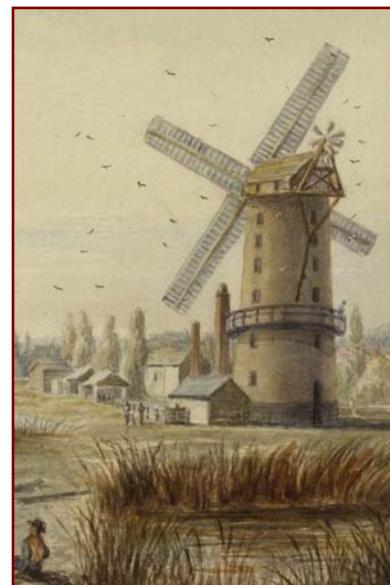


Trees then & now



Elizabeth Simcoe's bay & trees near the Don River, 1793 TPL

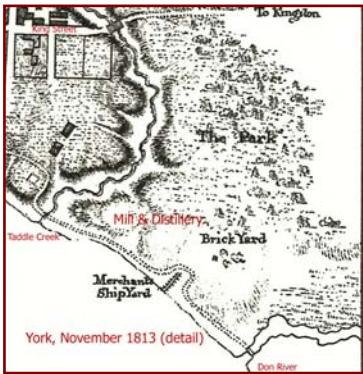


Poplars and rushes 1830s

On July 30, 1793, Governor and Mrs. Simcoe landed in Toronto (soon to be renamed York) where they encountered the “dense and trackless forests” described a few months earlier by surveyor Joseph Bouchette. By July, soldiers were busy chopping down “a great deal of wood” near Garrison Creek so they, and the Simcoes, could pitch their tents. Almost immediately, the Governor escorted his wife to view the “grove of fine Oaks” that covered the proposed town site two miles to the east where a 10-block settlement would rise just northwest of today’s Distillery District. A little while later, the couple ventured up the Don River and through a thick pine forest composed of huge trees – suitable for masts in the Royal Navy – where Castle Frank would later stand atop a sugarloaf hill overlooking the wooded river valley. Trees were present in wild abundance.

While the Governor was busy carving a capital out of the raw wilderness, his indefatigable wife explored, described, and painted the local scenes. Before long, she set up her easel near the mouth of the meandering Don, which she described as a “creek” on first encounter. The resulting water colour featured the tranquil and expansive bay, the peninsula on the left, and the various evergreen and deciduous trees along the water’s edge. (Identifying trees painted by Europeans new to the Upper Canadian interior is dicey.)

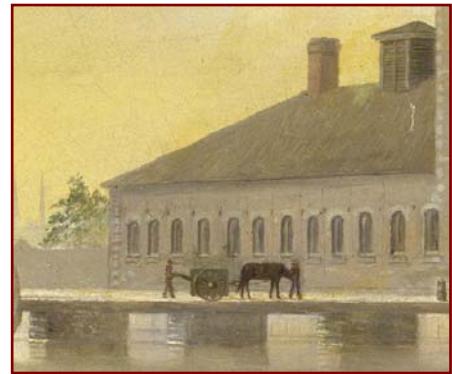
Behind her stretched the fertile marshland near the mouth of the Don River that had created it, filled with bulrushes, water lilies, marsh marigolds, cane grass and duck weed, and home to immense numbers of fish, waterfowl, and wildlife ... but few trees. The area near the future windmill and distillery was probably fairly scrubby, threaded by small creeks, and home to scattered trees ... such as the poplars mentioned by Mrs. Simcoe and depicted in William Armstrong’s painting of the windmill.



“Wood” east of York, 1813

By the 1850s, William Gooderham had established a large estate on the south side of Mill Street containing an expansive garden, conservatory, and plantings of more trees. His neighbour just to the north, Enoch Turner, was a well-known horticulturalist, who occupied what was once known as leafy Vale Pleasant along Taddle Creek. When he moved to “Allendale” at 241 Sherbourne Street, he arranged to take some of his beloved “small trees” with him. Meanwhile Gooderham’s nephew and partner, James G. Worts built his estate on Mill Street to the east of Trinity Street. Whether he planted linden trees near “Lindenwold,” as his estate was named, is unknown. None appear in the photograph of the house or on the dinner plate based on the photo. But it’s a nice thought. There were certainly other trees accumulating along Trinity and Mill Streets.

Naturally – or perhaps unnaturally – as the distillery grew and the site became increasingly industrial, trees and other natural elements were pushed to the side. Yet, hints remained. William Armstrong’s May 1870 painting of the reconstructed Stone Distillery shows a tree – perhaps a poplar – growing just to the west of the fermenting cellar where Building 8 now stands. Given the conflagration that had consumed the Stone Distillery only six months earlier, the survival of this tree is surprising, even miraculous.



A tree grows in the distillery, 1870 DHD

By 1894 when F. W. Micklethwaite took an amazing aerial shot looking east along the Esplanade, and Gooderham & Worts was at its Victorian peak, several mature elms – about 17 metres high and about 50 years old – still marched solidly along Mill Street between Parliament and Cherry Streets. Perhaps they had been planted by William Gooderham, whose family home stood where two rack houses can be seen in the photo. Meanwhile, the lane north of the Stone Distillery – now known as Distillery Lane – was completely devoid of vegetation. William Gooderham’s grand garden was a thing of the past, and basically lost to modern imagination. Another photograph taken for the City Engineer’s Office around the same time shows trees at Mill and Cherry Streets near Rack House J (Building 65) that was constructed in 1889.



Tree-lined Mill Street, June 1894
CTA 376-1-66



Trees & Rack House J, Cherry Street, 1890s
CTA 376-2-81

By November 1918, trees along Mill Street between Parliament and Trinity Streets had been removed, probably to make way for new hydro poles on the south side and increased industrial activity on the north side where British Acetones had expanded the plant during the war. Over time, a few trees made their way back to Mill Street. But Distillery Lane in the heart of the plant remained a nature-free-zone.

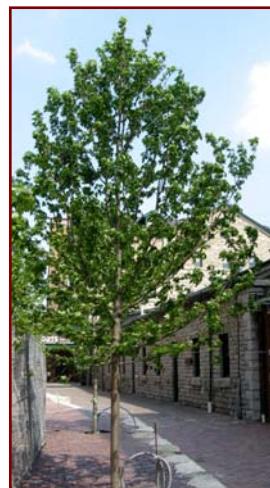
Recently, trees have been returning to the post-industrial Distillery District. About forty trees have been planted along Mill Street and Distillery Lane – a blend of silver maple, red maple, and Zelkov. To provide instant pleasure and a sense of green accomplishment, the new trees are quite large: about 10 metres tall and 8 to 10 years old. One of the more exciting sights to greet tree-hugging visitors to the revitalized Distillery District was a trio of red maples, lying in wait at the centre of Mill Street. With the help of large machines and strong landscapers, the great root balls were plunged into the earth where they have taken up residence just as new condo owners are taking up residence in the Pure Spirit condominium.



Tree raising Mill Street



Trio of maples lies in wait on Mill Street



Distillery Lane

For more about the landscape history of the Distillery District, see [Gooderham & Worts Heritage Plan Report No. 7, Landscape History, Inventory and Guidelines](#) by du Toit Allsopp Hillier, March 1994. (NB large file to download.)

Please send your comments or questions to Manager of Heritage Services, Sally Gibson, sg@thedistillerydistrict.com.

For more about the history of the Distillery District, visit www.distilleryheritage.com.

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