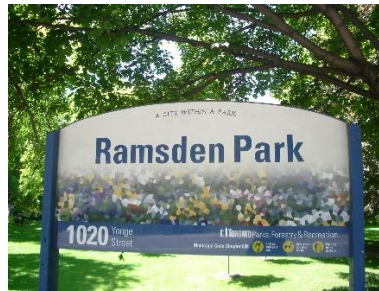


# RAMSDEN PARK

## Centuries of Sustaining Communities

### Deserving the Designation of a Cultural Heritage Landscape



### A PARK THAT BUILT A COMMUNITY

As with all the best cliches, there exists more than just a kernel of truth.

The reality about Ramsden Park, is that long before the residents of Yorkville flocked to enjoy its lush green spaces, the park itself was a life blood industry that created the actual building blocks of much of what would become Yorkville - and in doing so, helped to attract and sustain the population of this neighbourhood.

**The purpose of this submission is to make the case that Ramsden Park should be included in the Bloor - Yorkville Cultural Heritage Resource Assessment (CHRA).**

This summary of historical highlights was compiled by Michael Killinger, a resident of Pears Avenue, at the request and with the assistance of the ABC Residents Association from documents written by those acknowledged below.

In our submission, you will find evidence of the area's value and positive impact to the quality of life of past and present Torontonians and the resident's demonstrated pride and stewardship of what is now Ramsden Park. It is an appeal by the community that Ramsden Park be included in the Bloor-Yorkville Cultural Heritage Resource Assessment (CHRA). The Park has many important stories to tell. Its much earlier connection as part of the Davenport Trail, to the thriving indigenous villages of the Widat and Mississauga People should be elaborated. Philip Cote is more qualified to do that.

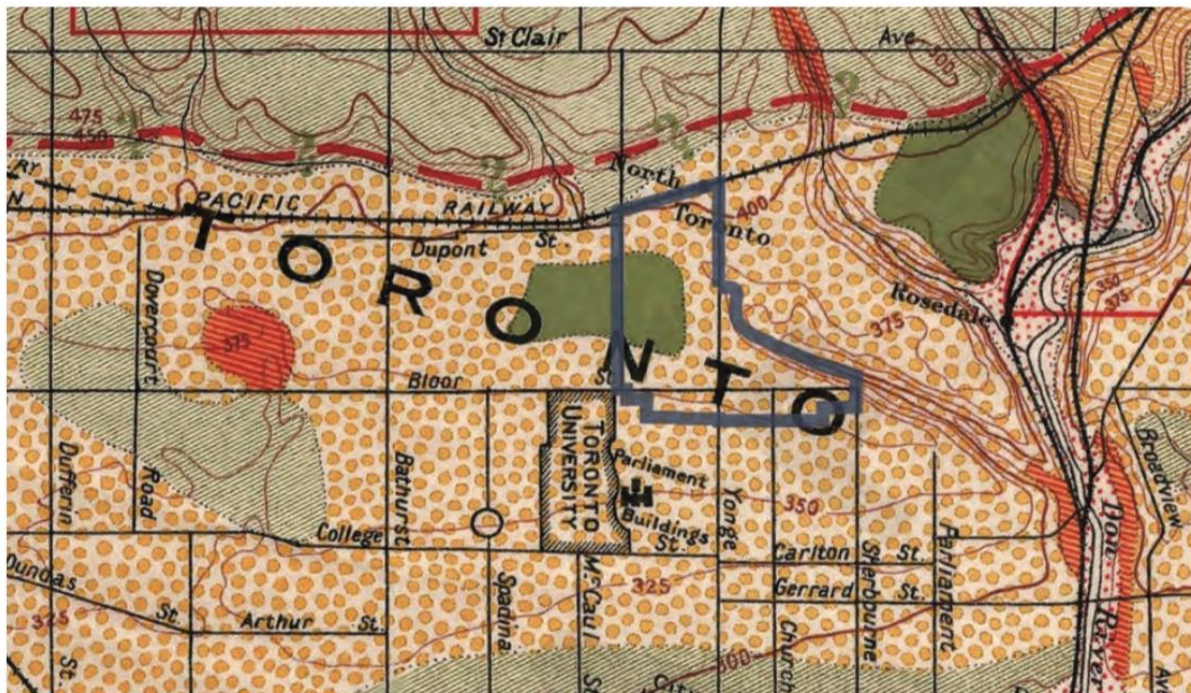
This landscape has been the life blood of the area since the time of its First Peoples and has helped build Yorkville. The unique yellow bricks that came from the Ramsden Park Brickworks give Yorkville character that is appreciated today. For centuries it has sustained the residents of the area. It continues to be its muchloved heart.

It must have its rightful place in this City's rich History.

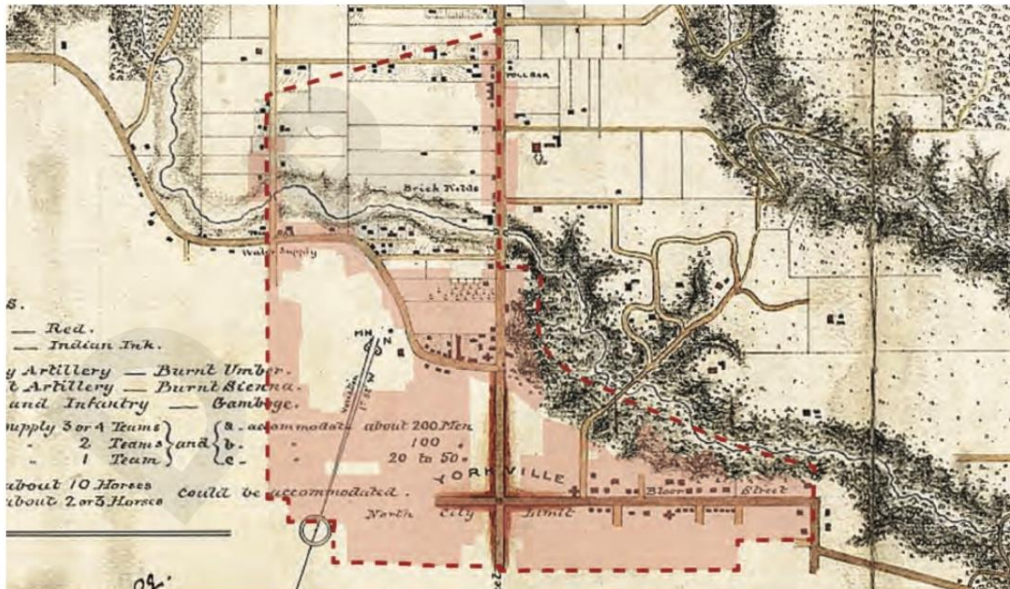
## EARLY HISTORY OF THE RAMSDEN PARK AREA

The topography we see today in the Park is a result of the creek that once flowed through it on the visible surface but is now generally funneled underground into the sewer system. It was this winding creek that was followed by First Nations people who walked the ancient footpath now called Davenport Road as they travelled the north-south route between the Humber and Don Rivers. This creek was later called the Castle Frank Creek, a creek that runs eastward down into the ravine valley where it joins the Don River.

In the Ramsden Park area, it was this creek that made the topography special, and provided exceptionally fine clay for yellow bricks. The riverbank clay was bluish white, responsible at the end of the eighteenth century for the nickname “The Blue Hill” in reference to the stretch of Simcoe’s new road up Yonge Street that passed through the area. The First Nations diagonal route alongside the park area was practical, because “The Blue Hill” was so difficult to travel. The clay, kept wet by Castle Frank Creek, was a mucky area at the best of times and was impassable in the spring and the fall. The bridges that were built to carry Yonge Street wagons over Castle Frank Creek were a constant source of concern to the colonial governments of the day. In 1833, Thomas Roy, a city engineer, recommended macadamizing the route, but the government failed to conform to the standard European depth of 26 or 28 inches, and instead laid the road to a depth of only 8 inches. This cost-cutting measure failed to solve the difficulties of travel and set governments on the eventual path to the burying Castle Frank Creek.



Detail of an 1891 plan showing the study area and Cultural Heritage Resource Assessment (CHRA) areas outlined in blue. The yellow dots indicate sand and the dark green areas identify clay deposits. (*University of Toronto Map & Data Library*)



Detail of the 1868 Fawkes and Hassard military reconnaissance plan with the study area and CHRA areas overlaid. The map also approximates the contemporary built extents along Davenport, Yonge and Bloor Streets (Library and Archives of Canada)

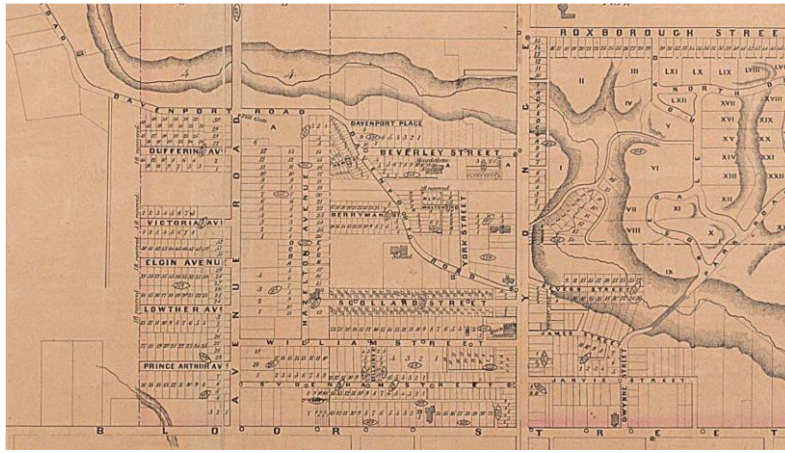
Yorkville was founded in 1830 by entrepreneur **Joseph Bloor** and **William Botsford Jarvis** of **Rosedale, Toronto**. The Village of Yorkville began as a residential suburb. They purchased land in the Yorkville district, subdividing it into smaller lots on new side streets. The scheme was successful, and by the mid-1800s, Yorkville had become a thriving town at the City's northern edge that offered a cleaner and healthier atmosphere than the downtown core. It was located two miles from Toronto City Hall and had a booming local industry including two successful breweries owned by Joseph Bloor and John Severn as well as the long-standing brick manufacturing industry. The suburban location attracted a combination of craftspeople, merchants, labourers, and professionals.

As Toronto's population grew and expanded north in the 1850s and 1860s, Yorkville also grew steadily. Yorkville's growth reflected that of a complete community - predominantly residential neighbourhoods complemented by localized commercial and industrial activity.

Yorkville was not formally incorporated until 1852. As a testament to the industriousness of its founders, their trades are recognized in Yorkville's coat-of-arms with an anvil (blacksmith), a barrel (brewer), a brick mould (builder), and a carpenter's plane (carpenter).

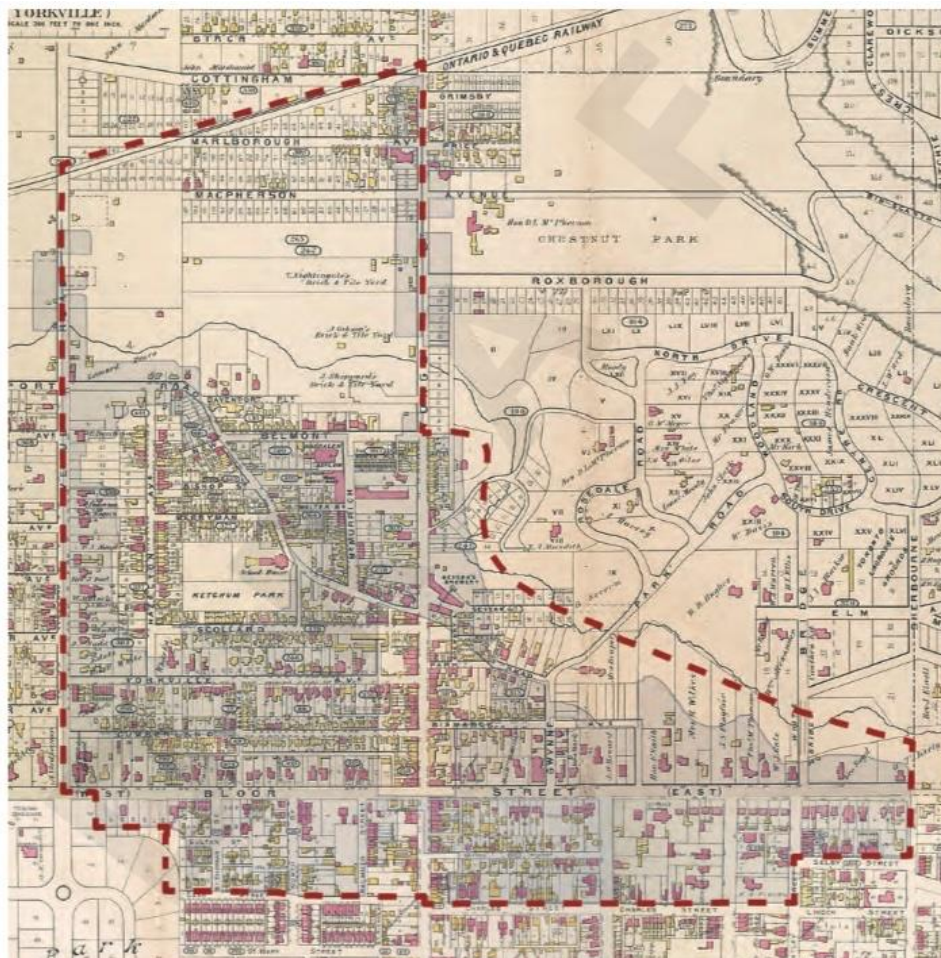


Yorkville Coat of Arms  
Councillor Thomas Atkinson, brick manufacturer, represented by letter A and a brick mould

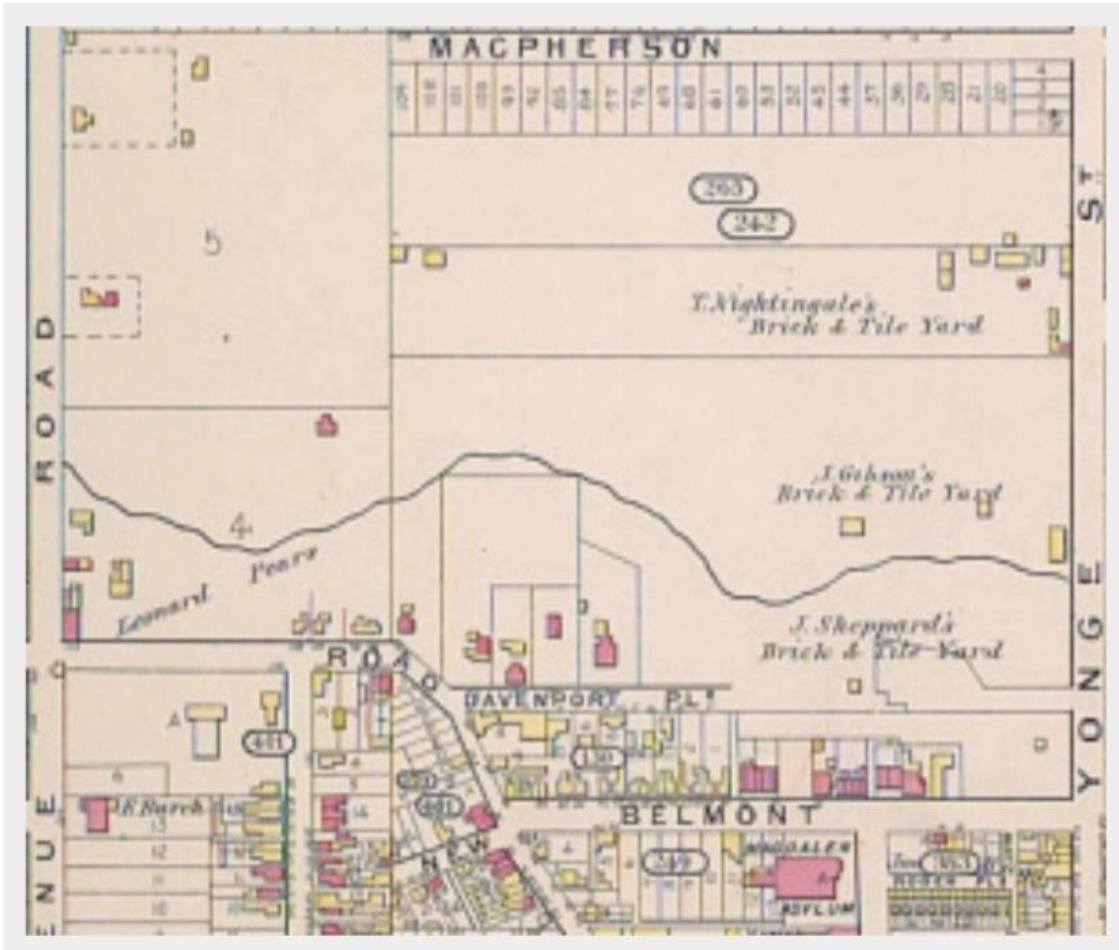


The Castle Frank Brook riverbed, running through Yorkville made for rich clay deposits. According to the early maps, Castle Frank Creek had as many as three ponds in the area of the brickyards. The creek, ponds, and surface drainage into the pit, provided a supply of water essential for brick making, and later, for the operation of steam engines used in the process.

The clay deposits could be found from the east side of Yonge to Avenue Road and from Davenport Road as far north as Marlborough. Such a large area allowed for the establishment of a number of companies operating their own yards.



Composite of plates from the 1884 Goad's Fire Insurance Atlas showing the built extents of the study area at that time. (University of Toronto Map & Data Library)



Yorkville Brickyards Source: Goad's Atlas, 1884

## Bricks Drying on Racks in Ramsden Park (1880s)



Many millions of bricks were manufactured here between 1835 and the late 1890s.

Bricks drying on racks in Ramsden Park (1880s)

Many millions of bricks were manufactured here between 1835 and the late 1890s

## RAMSDEN BRICKS BUILD A COMMUNITY AND A CITY

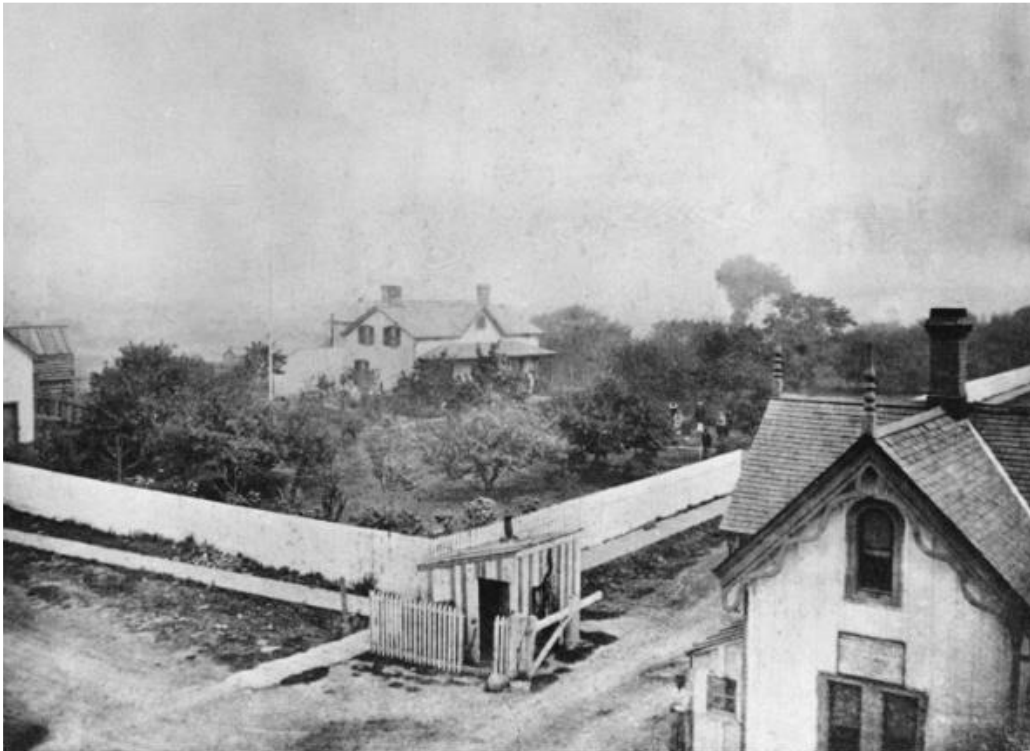
Brickmaking in Yorkville began around 1835 along the banks of Castle Frank Creek and its large pond. The earliest brick-makers' names are not known, but it is likely that they were Yorkshiremen who drew others from the old country to work in the area.

The earliest brick-makers in the records were **John Sheppard** and **William Townsley**. Sheppard and his family worked the clay deposits at the south end of the area, and Townsley's works were farther to the north. The **J Gibson** Brick and Tile Yard lay where Gibson Street now exists (The lane behind Gibson appears as Townsley Lane in early maps).

Of all the Yorkville brick makers, the Townsleys and the **Nightingales** were most prosperous and the Sheppards most numerous and dominant at the south edge of the clay deposits.

**Leonard Pears** owned the most westerly portion of the area (now Pears Avenue). George Pears recalled *"On the east side of Avenue Road in the ravine north of Davenport Road was Pears's Brickyard, one of the North Toronto brickyards (established in 1867). It was closed down and became a garbage dump while I was very young. Still later after 1900, it was taken over by the Aura Lee Club"*.

Leonard Sr. would join the Townsley family making bricks and married their daughter Sarah. The Pears Family built homes that are still standing on Pears Avenue where their present residents overlook visitors enjoying the park.



Looking north east from the corner of Avenue Road and Davenport at the Leonard Pears homestead and brick yards now at 103 Pears Avenue. Pears family members lived in various residences on Davenport Road, Avenue Road and Hillsboro Avenue. In 1885, Leonard Pears built a semi detached structure (now 89/91 Pears Avenue) in which his son Septimus lived for 23 years.

BUILDING PERMIT.

Permit No. 9162

Toronto, Oct 17 1895

Permission is hereby granted to

Passed by

M. J. Pears

Address 9 Pear Ave

for the erection of

one pair semi detached 2 story

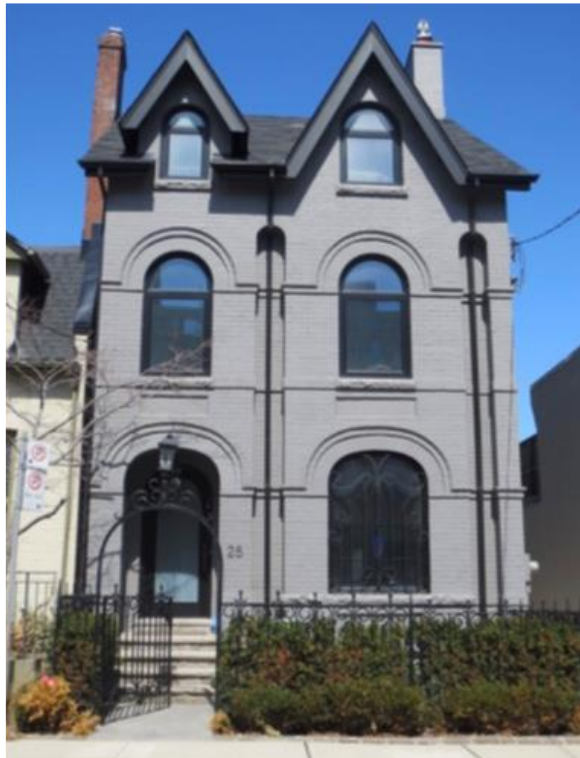
Brick dwellings

Architect

134 1/2 Pear Ave

Cost \$1,000





John Sheppard, 1817-1906: Brick and Tile Manufacturer, Builder Victorian Gothic Revival 28 Belmont Street 1880 The most prominent resident of Belmont Street built many houses, including his own home, above, was well-respected for the quantity and quality of bricks he produced.

The brick-makers who worked the deposits longer than all others were John Sheppard and his family. They had built a large number of houses on Hillsboro Avenue, and Davenport Road, and Belmont Street - extending east of his own home at 22 Belmont Street (now 28 Belmont Street). The majority of John's sons had become brickmakers employed in the family business and all lived along Belmont Street.

Hillsboro Avenue (formerly Davenport Place) and Belmont Street (formerly Beverly Street) were both developed to provide access to the brick works in Ramsden Park. The earliest buildings shown on maps were probably stables and storage sheds. One of these - the former Blacksmith's shop - still stands at the Ramsden Park Lane entrance to the Park.



Former Blacksmith Shop

The majority of houses remaining today on the streets neighbouring the park date from the late 19th and early 20th centuries and were created by, and as a result of the brick making industry in its midst. Most of the Victorian-era homes preserved in Toronto are of a larger scale, built for a wealthier social class. The assessment rolls for Belmont Street and Pears Avenue, however, list the occupations of its residents during the late nineteenth century as bricklayers, teamsters, drovers, carpenters and builders. It is astonishing to see the number of local residents and brick yard owners who worked here and lived around the corner from Ramsden Park as homeowners and renters, for decades, during the 18th Century.

The Yorkville Brickyards were the largest employers in the old village and sustained a number of related businesses and industrial concerns ranging from mould-makers and livery stables, to hotels, where many brickyard employees lived.

- Accountant
- Blacksmith
- Bookkeeper
- Brick Maker
- Brick Manufacturer
- Brick Worker
- Builder
- Carpenter
- Cigar Maker
- Currier
- Dressmaker
- Drover
- Engineer
- Fireman
- Groomer
- Labourer
- Lithographer
- Marble Polisher
- Mason
- Painter
- Saddler
- Shoemaker
- Tailor
- Teamster
- Shoemaker
- Varnisher
- Washwoman
- Watchmaker
- Wheelwright
- Yoeman

Many early residents were employed in the brick-manufacturing industry: including managing horses and wagons for hauling bricks, and building stables and brick-drying racks, keeping accounts for the bricks produced and sold, etc.

Many early residents were employed in the brick-manufacturing industry: including managing horses and wagons for hauling bricks, and building stables and brick-drying racks, keeping accounts for the bricks produced and sold, etc.

The Yorkville yards produced “white” bricks – actually a soft yellow – distinctive in Toronto’s brick-making history because of their colour and because the earliest examples were made of pugged clay (processed in a pug mill operated by human or horsepower), which made them soft in texture as well.

Numerous buildings dot the city, whose bricks originated in Ramsden Park. The special character of their bricks may still be seen in older buildings around the city, like St James and St Michael’s Cathedrals, University College, as well as the St Lawrence Town Hall.



The distinctive 'white' or cream-coloured brick manufactured in what is now Ramsden park can be seen in major Toronto Buildings today, built in the 19th century.





St. Lawrence Hall

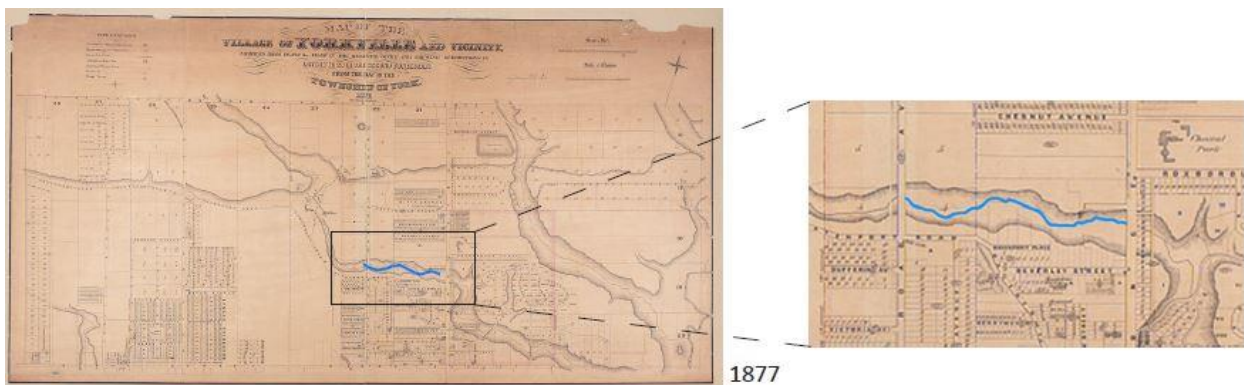
In 1852 the thriving community of Yorkville was officially incorporated as a village. It developed with a suburban relationship to Toronto, offering residents lower housing costs and respite from the noise and pollution of industry. By 1853, the population of the village had reached 1,000, the figure needed to incorporate as a village, and the *Village of Yorkville* did just that. Development increased and by the 1880s, the cost of delivering services to the large population of Yorkville was beyond the Village's ability. It petitioned the Toronto government to be annexed. Annexation came on February 1, 1883, and Yorkville's name changed officially from "Village of Yorkville" to "St. Paul's Ward".



Composite of plates from the 1923 Goad's Fire Insurance Atlas showing the completely built-out study area and Bay Street Extension. (University of Toronto Map & Data Library)

Production in the Yorkville brickyards peaked in the 1870s and 1880s and was followed by an economic depression coinciding with the exhaustion of the clay deposits and the advance of residential development.

By the turn of the century all brick making in Yorkville had ceased. The Castle Frank Ravine itself disappeared from maps around 1890.



The Yorkville Reach Creek once ran through Ramsden park and eventually to the Don River.

The creek was buried and contained within a sewer system running under the park, and once and for all, Yonge Street was filled in above, alleviating transit issues.



February 16, Rosedale Creek Sewer east from Sta 632  
1931 - Rosedale Creek Sewer near Ramsden Park City of Toronto Archives Fonds 1231, f1231\_it1293



*Photo of the Trunk Sewer underneath the Park - The Vanishing Point*

Trunk Sewer underneath Ramsden Park - The Vanishing Point

For a brief period, the city installed a weigh station at Yonge Street and made some use of the area as a garbage dump.

No current day gardening expedition on Pears Avenue is complete without unearthing old apothecary bottles, or shards of dishes or crock ware.



Charles Wilson, Toronto Ontario  
Soda Bottle, Circa 1880

### **A COMMUNITY BUILDS A PARK**

Finally, in 1904 owing to the efforts of **Alderman John Ramsden**, the city took over the dump site, and landscaped most of the area as Ramsden Park, whose uneven, dug-in landscape is the only remnant of its industrial past.



Construction of the existing buildings in what is now the City Works Yard (where Pears Avenue meets Yonge Street) began in the 1920s.

The current 1936 structure is still in use, and the building is a rare Art Deco example of city Public Works architecture.



Ramsden Works Yards: Art Deco Stables erected from 1922-1933. The buildings were originally built as stables to shelter horses and wagons used for street clean-up and garbage pick-up.



Ramsden Works Yards: Wagon used for street litter pick-up. Age ten years, five years' service, exhibited in the Toronto open air horse parade, with a four-yard roller-type dump wagon.



Today the buildings are used for the management of street litter bin pick-up and street letter clean-up operations. They have been well maintained and are among only a few examples of art deco style public works buildings that survive today in the City of Toronto.



Looking West to Pears Avenue - note the northern side, complete with homes.

Park development took place in the rest of the area.

A baseball field was installed, and gradually, evolving iterations have taken place through the years to welcome visitors to play and relax.

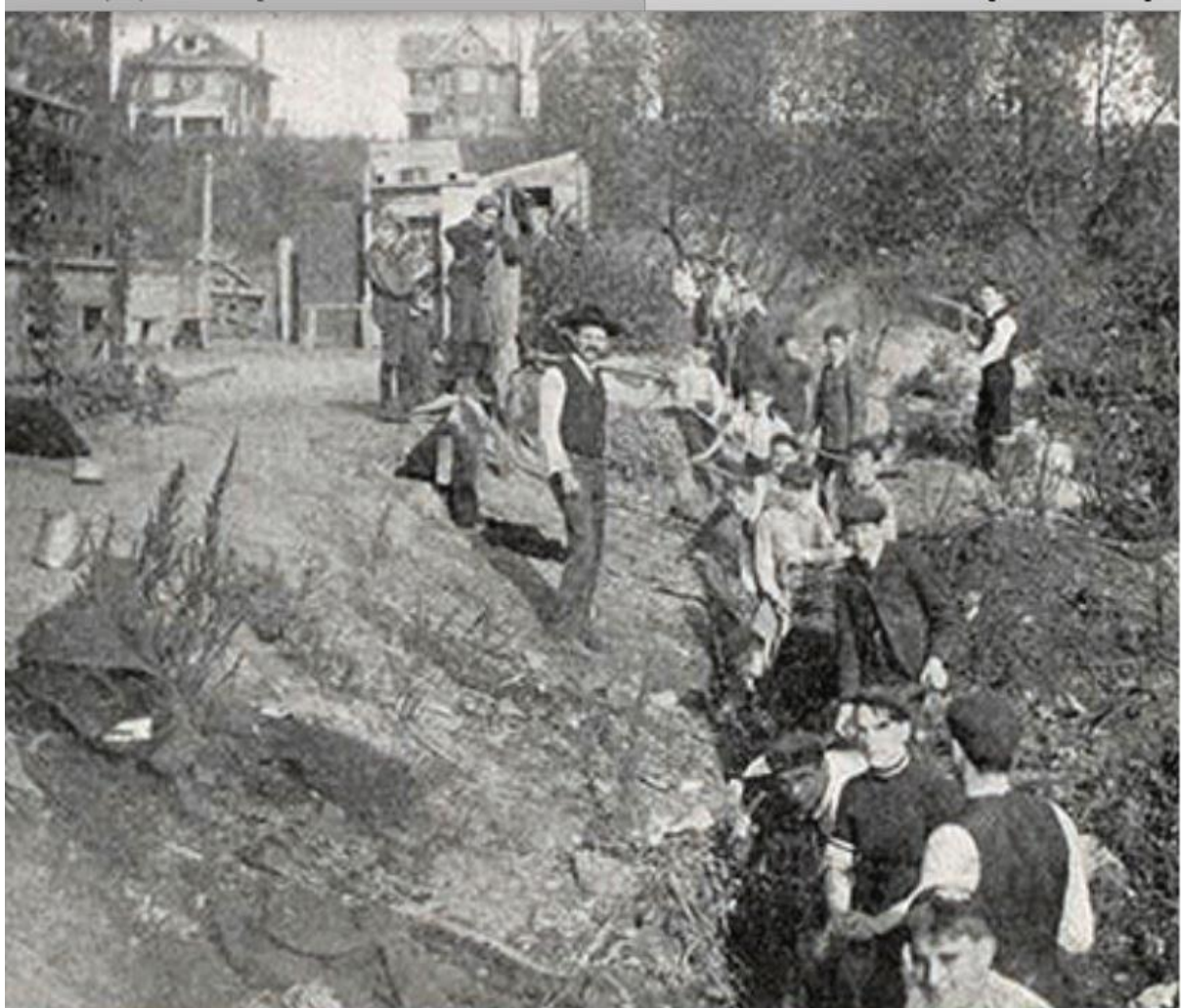
Various entrances from the surrounding streets invited visitors to descend into the park below from Yonge Street, Roxborough Avenue West, Pears Avenue, Gibson Street, and Avenue Road.

The original acquisition of the park did not encompass the entire area between Yonge Street and Avenue Road, but instead, stopped short at a parcel of land at the westerly end along Avenue Road listed in maps as Block A. Notice the full compliment of houses on the north side of Pears Avenue at the time.

That parcel (Block A) had been acquired by The University of Toronto, who were looking to expand their recreational options. It became the **Aura Lee Playing Field** and in 1904 under the auspices of the Aura Lee Athletic Club, almost three acres (1,214 hectares) of land were bought near the corner of Avenue Road and Roxborough Street.



On Thanksgiving Day, a group of “boys” began digging a drain to convert an existing ash heap and duck pond into an athletic park.

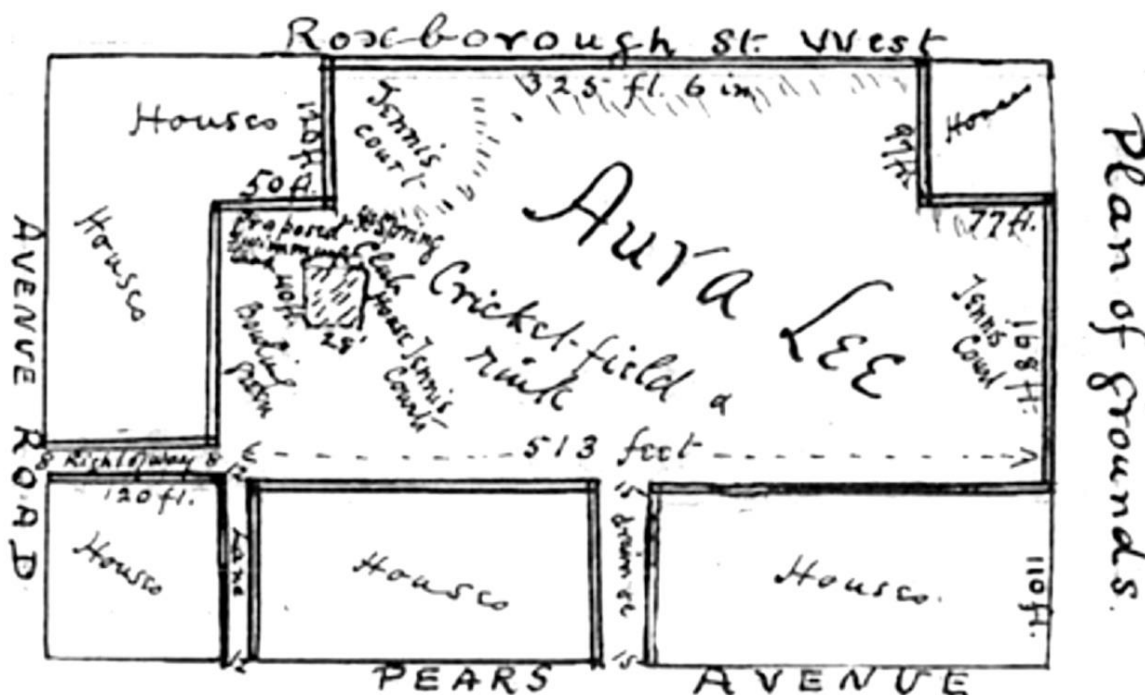


In time, more than six thousand dollars were raised for levelling the grounds; building fences, shelters, and a rink.

The Toronto Aura Lee Athletic Club operated various hockey teams in the Ontario Hockey Association (OHA)'s Senior, Intermediate, and Junior series from 1915 to 1925. The junior team won the OHA championship in 1915-16, 1916-17, 1921-22, and 1924-25. They also won the 1924-25 Eastern Canada Memorial Cup Playoffs but lost the Memorial Cup Final that year. The juniors also won the first Sportsmens Patriotic Association junior championship in 1918-19.



1915-16 Junior Champions





By 1925 however, the burden of taxes and increasing maintenance costs forced the club to close. Aura Lee trustees presented the Avenue Road property deed to the governors of the University of Toronto.

On June 7, 1967: Norman A. Keys, Q.C. “one of the surviving old-timers who with pick and shovel helped to level-out the grounds of the old Aura Lee Club suggested in a letter to the *Globe and Mail*, “*It would be a nice tribute to the many Aura Lee members who served in the First and Second World Wars if this fragment of the Ramsden Park could be called Aura Lee Park.*”

In 1968, use of the former Aura Lee grounds by the University of Toronto Schools formally ended.

### **A COMMUNITY DEFENDS IT**

Wanting to create a recreational complex at Bloor Street and Robert Street, adjacent to the University of Toronto campus, the Greenwin Construction Company, and the City of Toronto agreed to what has become known as the *Aura Lee Transfer*.

The city wanted to extend Ramsden Park, between Roxborough Street and Pears Avenue, all the way to Avenue Road. Greenwin owned the land that the university coveted for their complex but had faced public resistance to rezoning and developing it into apartment buildings. Instead of purchasing the university’s Aura Lee Playing Field, the Greenwin Construction Company exchanged its Robert Street land for it.

By 1968, Greenwin had enough land to build two towers on Pears Avenue and received permission to build from the city by pledging the northerly 1.6 acres of Aura Lee lands to create the western extension of Ramsden Park.

Once again, Greenwin faced opposition. This park had already survived an attempt in the 1950s to build a community centre and pool; in 1960, a major league baseball stadium for 40,000 (no franchise appeared); and several years following, the Bay Street extension to the north. This time, residents of the area were joined by people from across the city in a very bitter battle to prevent encroachment on the park lands.

Greenwin had accumulated enough land for two apartment buildings but decided to construct a 29-storey apartment building plus 17 townhouses, a project approved by the City since it would be receiving, in exchange, 1.6 acres of the northern section of Aura Lee for the park. Residents, including supporters such as **Jane Jacobs**, **Colin Vaughan**, the **League of Women Voters**, and **Municipal Affairs Minister Darcy McKeough**, vehemently objected. At the **OMB**, **Chair Aloysius Kennedy** listened to the outraged residents and overturned the City's decision. Greenwin offered another trade: Aura Lee for the Ramsden Park Work Yard where the developer would build two 34-storey apartment buildings.

### **3000 people join hands to SAVE RAMSDEN PARK**

Once again, furious residents objected. On June 5, 1969, the ABC Residents Association hosted a public rally, "Save The Park", which was endorsed by surrounding residents' associations; it attracted more than 3,000 people. How many of them could have actually realized the significance and storied history of the grounds they were pitching in to preserve?

A compromise was eventually struck, and Greenwin ended up building their apartment buildings on Hillsboro Avenue, above the park - although the damage had already been done when the entire run of historic housing on the north side of Pears had been razed in preparation for the thwarted development.



1969: 3000 people demonstrated in Ramsden Park to oppose the construction of two high-rise towers in the park that would have negatively impacted the neighbourhood.

The City ended up *buying* Aura Lee which now completed the originally intended area for Ramsden Park for the downtown community.

In 1975, residents, led by the fearless **ABC director Diana Midwinter Sharpe** of Pears Avenue, who had earlier been captured by a newspaper photographer confronting a bulldozer over the Aura Lee development. She also fought successfully for the partial closure of Pears Avenue. This prevented its use as a throughway between Avenue Road and Yonge Street by cars and trucks with most of the latter heading to the work yard, and to Yonge Street. Of course, the closure also dramatically improved everyone's safety and enjoyment of the park - as did the 17 cherry trees planted there by Mitsubishi in 1994.



This section of Pears Avenue coming from Yonge Street has recently been re-named **Basil Johnston Terrace** to acknowledge and honour the First Nation presence and positive contribution within our community and our city. Mr. Johnston was a brilliant Ojibway author and educator who accomplished much of his ground-breaking work both collecting and recording Anishinaabe stories and writing about Ojibway history, through the ROM in Toronto, which is just blocks away from the street.





Children's Playground 1974  
City of Toronto Archives Fonds 1526, File 6, Item 43



Today...Off-leash Dog Park / Puppy Pen

## A PARK THAT WILL SUSTAIN THE COMMUNITY

For Ramsden Park's 110th anniversary, using developments funds from the city, a well-deserved restoration project commenced. Several years and phases later, the park has a fresh new polish - with improved access, new lighting and picnic tables and benches, and dog park, tennis and basketball court upgrades, as well as a revitalized children's play area.

The park is ready to face the next 117 years...



***"Spaces need to tell a story for people to appreciate them."***

Gordon Stratford, ONA, RAIC, LEED

The ABC Residents Association believes Ramsden Park has an interesting and important story to tell. Since the City of York's earliest beginnings, this unique landscape has had a meaningful connection to this community. Even today we can see its historic past and its tangible contribution to Toronto's history. **This history must be documented and celebrated.**

**We believe that Ramsden Park meets the criteria for designation as a Cultural Heritage Landscape. The First step towards that goal is for Ramsden Park to be evaluated by the Common Bond Collective during the City of Toronto's Bloor-Yorkville Cultural Heritage Resource Assessment.**



Pears Avenue 2020

**Submitted by the ABC Residents Association**

May 5, 2021

Contact: MH Spence <mailto:mhspence@icloud.com>



Ramsden Park looking WEST from Yonge Street



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*Photos courtesy of the Toronto Public Library and courtesy of The Toronto Archives.*

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Document Design and Layout: Barb Moore