

Dawes Road: a Shortcut to the Market and a Natural Resource Base

by Melanie Milanich

Contrary to its current image, Dawes Road in the nineteenth and early twentieth century was several times its current length and played a not insignificant role in the agricultural and commercial development of Scarborough, North York, East York and Toronto.

This pathway, as local historian Gene Domagala points out in one of his columns, was in use as a main north-south route from the north to the St Lawrence Market in the early 1830s. Old Dawes Road, as it is referred to by Ron Brown, is now known as Victoria Park Avenue. It ran from the L'Amoreaux Community at Finch, which was settled by a French Huguenot UEL family about 1816. From there it went on down to O'Sullivan's Corners at Sheppard, and the Wexford lands at Lawrence. After a surge of immigration during the 1820s much of North York and Scarborough were rapidly being cleared and farmed in the 1820s and 1830s.

Dawes Road served as one of the busiest roads in this section of Ontario in the nineteenth century as farmers from the northern areas and along south brought their produce and livestock along Dawes Road to the market in the city. This route was a short cut to avoid having to travel to Don Mills Road to the west or Danforth Road to the east which was in bad repair. One historian tells the story of Mrs Walton, who settled with her husband at Ellesmere and Old Dawes Road in 1823, carrying her butter and eggs 10 miles through the path in the woods to the market.

Lumber was also a major resource being transported along Old Dawes Road. W.H. Smith in his 1846 gazeteer tells us that almost one-half of the acquired land of Scarborough was under cultivation by 1842. Scarborough is "well settled, contains many good farms, a large portion of which are let to occupants, the average rent being \$2 per acre. There are one grist mill and eighteen saw mills, large quantities of sawed lumber are exported" In winter many logs of wood were hauled to York down Dawes Road in the winter.

Old Dawes Road was what is now called Victoria Park Avenue from Finch to St. Clair. The intersection at St. Clair was then Moffat's Corners where Thomas and Alex Moffat ran the Royal Oak Inn at the north east corner. The Wexford Women's Auxillary's book has a photo of this hotel for which they give a date of 1820 for its original construction. William Devenish had settled just east of here at St. Clair and Victoria Park in 1803. His brother in law and William Purdy built a carding mill in 1820 on the Taylor Massey Creek presumably where the Dentonia golf course is today. Devenish is credited with erecting Scarborough's

first frame barn in 1807. The Strangford postal station provided service for the Moffats as well as other early settlers nearby.

Going south from St. Clair, Dawes Road then continued along the present Dawes Road to south of Danforth where it currently ends. At that time, however, it then crossed the railway tracks to connect with Kingston Road near where Main Street is today, just north east of the village of Norway.

A glance at a map indicates that the section does not follow a typical grid pattern along surveyed lots. Could Dawes Road been a native pathway before European settlement? Evidence of the earliest human habitation along Dawes Road is on the south banks of Taylor Massey Creek. This was an Iroquois, pre-contact Huron settlement of the 15th century, first documented by David Boyle, then Victor Konrad as having a possible stratified midden and a nearby ossuary. Because Dawes Road did not follow normal survey lines a special by-law of the Home District was required in 1848 to make Dawes Road an "official" road. Joanne Doucette, a local writer who is of native ancestry, maintains that it is traditionally understood that Dawes Road was a native trail.

Danforth Avenue, "The Danforth" of today, was called the Don and Danforth, meaning that it connected Don Mills Road (Broadview) to Danforth Road which were main thoroughfares. But it was itself a less significant back lane way. Because there were many acres of unmaintained clergy lands and because the lots west of Woodbine were laid out horizontally with landowners only required to maintain the road that faced the front of their property, the Don and the Danforth remained a little used rural backyard. The more populated, main east-west corridor for this area was Kingston Road. Major development did not take place along Danforth Avenue until the Toronto Civic Railway was built in 1913 connecting Broadview to Luttrell Ave. and then with construction of the Bloor Viaduct in 1918. That being said, there was one important event in 1868 that brought the attention of the province and beyond. Charlie Gates held the Queen's Plate at his Newmarket racetrack behind his hotel just east of Woodbine when newspapers reported that 12,000 people attended and a horse could not be found for love or money.

Victoria Park Avenue (up to just north of Danforth) and Dawes Road from St. Clair north to Lawrence were the survey boundaries separating York Township from Scarborough Township. Old Dawes Road was sometimes called the Townline [i.e. township line] in the nineteenth century, or sometimes referred to as the Boundary Line or Concession line. Where Taylor Massey Creek now crosses Victoria Park, near the subway entrance, was deep swampland not drained and filled in until the 1960s when the subway was extended.

Clem Dawes, for whom the road was named, was an early farmer on lot 2, concession 2 of York township. David Dawes, possibly his son, was a blacksmith in Norway at Woodbine and Kingston Road. Clem ran a hotel at the northwest corner of what is now Dawes Road and Danforth. This became a busy intersection throughout the nineteenth century and became known as a "rough and rumble" neighbourhood attracting people from the city who wanted to have a "spree". In the 1860's it was known as Smith's Corners, named after William Smith, another hotel keeper. In the 1870s it became known as Coleman's Corners when Charles Coleman ran a hotel and was appointed the first post master at the intersection.

In 1883, when the Grand Trunk railway decided to put a divisional Sorting yard at Dawes Road just south of Danforth, the area boomed in population and land development and became known as Little York. The name came from the name of the station stop, a flag stop, known as York since the Grand Trunk was first constructed south of the Danforth in 1856. Little York flourished through the 1880s and 1890s. City directories continued to refer to the area as Little York right into the 1920s.

Remnants of Little York still remain to be seen in the area. Bay and gable Victorian houses built in 1890 with stained glass windows line the street north of Danforth Avenue and 1880s semi-detached homes with bric-a-brac built for railway workers can be found on Coleman Avenue. A steam powered grist mill, built in the 1890s and originally called Chalmer's Flour Mill still stands at #10 Dawes Road just north of the railway tracks. The exceptional Gothic Revival house with elaborate gingerbread at 122 Dawes Road was built in 1885. It was owned by Charles Taylor, a maltster, in 1885 and later sold to William Newman. Newman, a prominent businessman in the early history of Little York, began his career as a teamster and owned property on Midburn (originally Midland) in the 1880s.

The significant geological features of Dawes Road go back long before this historical time, however. Glacial Lake Iroquois some 12,000 years ago left a large horizontal baymouth sand and gravel bar crossing Dawes Road just at and south of Danforth Avenue. This had important consequences for the commercial development of the area in millenia to come. Sand and gravel businesses were prolific around Dawes Road in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Sand was used for the production of sand-lime bricks as well as for polishing glass and marble. The gravel was used for roofing, for concrete, and for roads. Roads in York County were gravel into the 1920s, much of the gravel coming from this area.

The sand and gravel baymouth bar was also significant for a number of other reasons. The sand created a prairie type ecology still found in such sites as the land referred to as the Gerrard Prairie or the "Quarry lands" northeast of Victoria Park and Gerrard, and in other local spots such as Prairie Drive off Pharmacy. The baymouth bar was critical in determining the direction of Taylor Massey Creek. It deflected the Creek to the west to make it one of the only rivers or streams in the Toronto area to flow east to west rather than north to south. The flat, solid base of the baymouth bar also provided the strength to withstand the large sorting yards with 420 railway cars and a roundhouse for dozens of engines, making it the perfect site. The area was later used for coal and gravel yards.

North of Taylor Massey Creek the lagoons of Lake Iroquois left clay deposits where the creek crosses Dawes Road. These deposits provided for the brickyards owned by the Chapman family over three generations. John Chapman had settled on Lot 1, Concession 2 of York County by 1850. He had been credited with brickmaking early on and his son David is listed in directories as a brickmaker in 1885. Halsey and Chapman Streets are named after Halsey Chapman who ran the former brickyards that are now the sites of the Park Vista apartments and the George Webster Public School. (see map) Halsey, who lived on Dawes Road was also active in municipal politics.

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