

COLLIER STREET LANDMARKS

Collier Street Landmarks

The land where Collier Street is situated was once part of a vast forest that stretched north from Lake Ontario. The huge stands of white and yellow pine were described by an early visitor from England who, marvelling at the density of the trees, wrote that they not only ‘shut out all the sunlight but most of the daylight.’ The trees were from one foot to six feet in diameter, the largest were five hundred years old and some stood as tall as a seventeen storey building.

Interspersed amongst these great old trees were stands of Carolinian forest. These forests which were widespread throughout the eastern United States existed only in the southernmost parts of Ontario are made up of deciduous trees such as the tulip-tree, pawpaw, honey locust, sycamore, black oak and hickory. They are all species which require shorter winters and hot and muggy summer days. Not so very far from Collier Street, on a height of land near Todmorden Mills, you may still visit the vestiges of the Carolinian forest.

In 1796 Governor John Graves Simcoe ordered the building of Yonge Street along a route that had been used as a portage trail by both native people and fur traders, from what is present day Eglinton Avenue to Holland Landing 50 kilometers to the north. The first house built not far from here, at Bloor and Parliament Streets, was rather grandly named Castle Frank by Simcoe. Intended as a country residence for his family the log structure was built on a steep bank of the Don River affording fine views of the valley and woods beyond.

In 1834 the boundaries of the early city formed a rectangle with Parliament St. on the east, Bathurst on the west, the shoreline on the south and a line 400 yards north of Queen Street (at approximately Dundas Street). Any land north of that was set aside for annexation when the population could support such growth. But plans were already afoot for this area. In 1830 Joseph Bloor, owner of the successful Farmer’s Arms Inn in York (now Toronto), had retired and moved to the country to a house on land that later was to bear his name. He and Sheriff Jarvis, as a speculation, laid out plans for the village they named Yorkville.

In that same year, at the request of William Henry Draper, architect John Howard drew up

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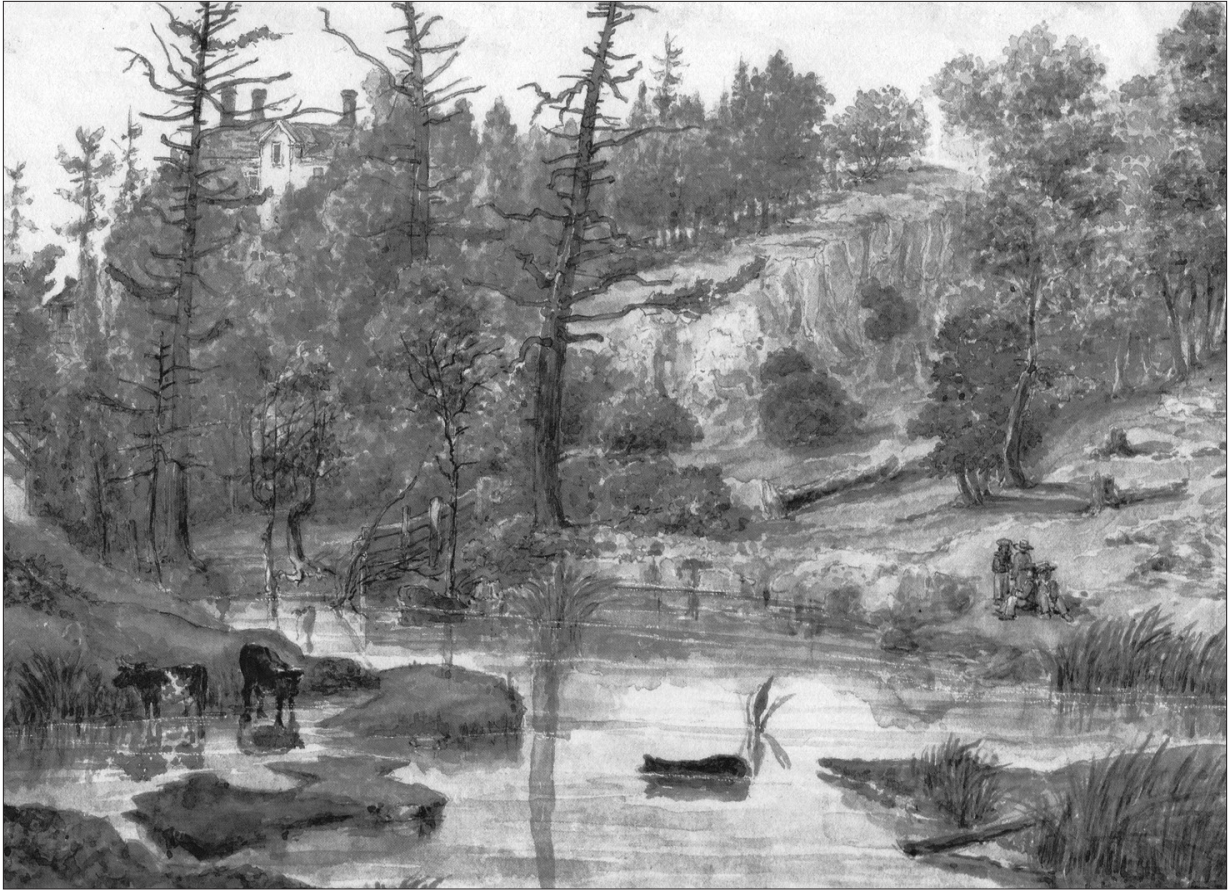


Illustration No. 1: watercolour of Rosedale Valley with Hazeldean in the background.

plans for the construction of a country villa on the land that now forms the north side of Collier Street extending into the ravine. Both of these two men were to play active roles in the early life of our city.

The son of a clergyman, Mr. Draper was born in England in 1801. As an adventurous teenager he ran away to sea and after six trips to India eventually arrived in 1820 in Upper Canada. He settled in the Port Hope area and, encouraged by a local lawyer, studied law. He was called to the bar in 1828. Two years earlier he had married Augusta White, the daughter of an English naval officer, who had come with the Covert family in 1822 to settle in the Cobourg area. The young couple moved to York where Draper joined a prominent law firm. He soon gained considerable success in the courtroom, his eloquence earning him the nickname of ‘Sweet William’.

He was elected to the House of Assembly and served during the tempestuous time of the Family Compact and Rebellion of 1837. He did not enjoy politics and was pleased in 1847 to

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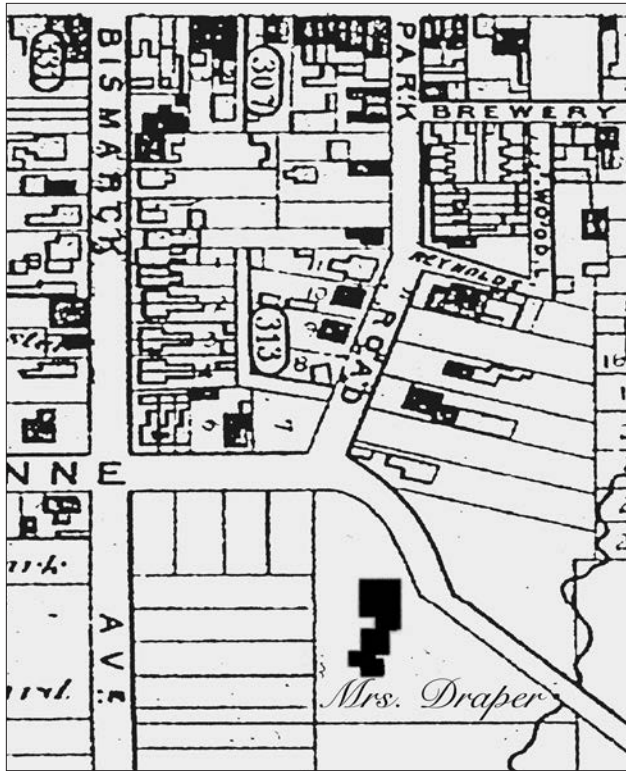


Illustration No. 2: detail from 1884 map.

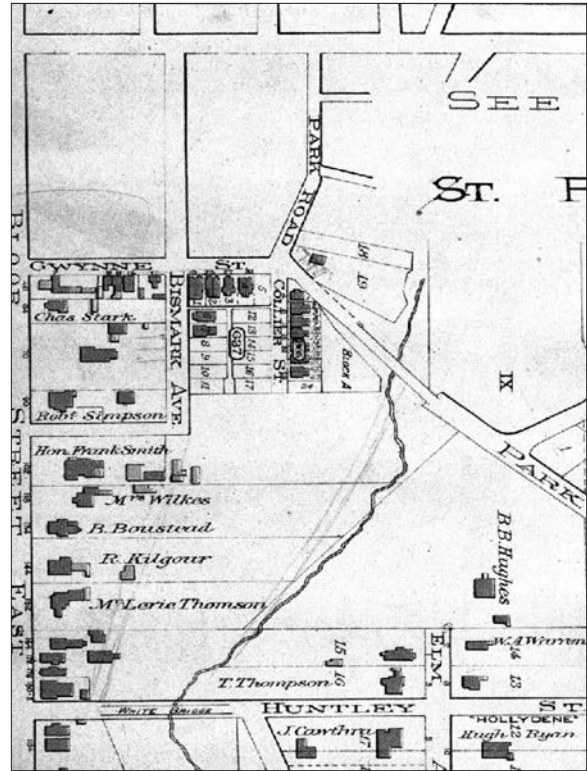


Illustration No. 3: detail from 1889 map.

be made a judge. He eventually served as Chief Justice of the Appeal Court of Ontario. It was not until 1854 that the family moved from the corner of York Street and Wellington Street to ‘Hazeldean’, their new home overlooking the ravine now known as the Rosedale Ravine. (See illustration No. 1) You can just see the rooftop of the house in this early watercolour by an unknown artist.

Always a physically active man Judge Draper continued to walk to church services at St. James Cathedral on Queen Street and to his offices at Osgoode Hall. The couple had ten children and celebrated their fiftieth anniversary in the house. Mr. Draper died soon after in November 1877. Mrs. Draper continued to live in the house with son Francis Draper, a widower, and his young daughter. Frank Draper was later to become Police Chief of Toronto. Mrs. Draper died in 1887. Funeral services were held in the house. In her obituary published in *The Globe* she was described as ‘displaying great courage and devotion when caring for the sick during the cholera epidemic, regardless of her personal safety’. She must have been a formidable presence in early Toronto for the city map of 1884 simply labels the house as Mrs. Draper’s, listing the address as

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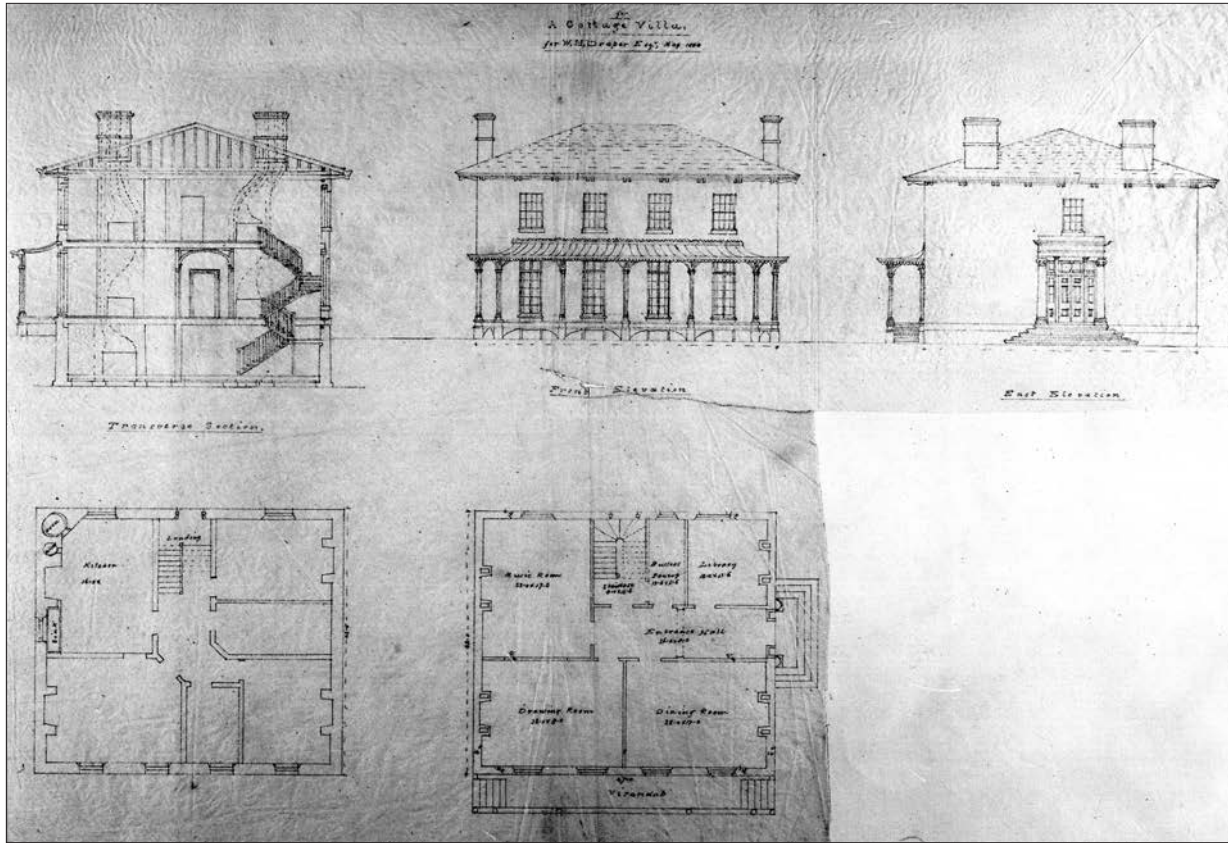


Illustration No. 4: the plans, section, and elevations for Hazeldean house by John Howard. 4 Gwynne Road. (See illustration No. 2) The name of Gwynne Road was later changed to Park Road. Mr. and Mrs. Draper are buried in St James Cemetery.

The house at 4 Gwynne Road was demolished in 1890 and plans were started to construct the houses that are still standing today. It was said that as Mrs. Draper's funeral cortege moved down the street the developers moved in.

John Howard, the architect of Hazeldean, was an ambitious, hardworking man. Also born in England he came to Upper Canada in 1832 and quickly established himself as a popular architect and builder. Many of the public and commercial buildings of the time were designed by him. A brief look at his journals from the years 1833-34, where he recorded his daily work schedule, which included Christmas Day, would indicate he was something of a workaholic. He drew plans for both public and residential buildings, oversaw the construction of most of them, was the drawing master at Upper Canada College, painted and exhibited with other local artists, and many days would break this remarkable routine, pick up his rifle and head out, as he says, "to hunt small birds for the family dinner table". He and his wife Jemima bequeathed their

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own home, Colborne Lodge and the land around to the city. It was the beginning of what was to become High Park.

A trip to Colborne Lodge will give you an idea of the style and appearance of Hazeldean. Described by Mr. Howard as a cottage villa, the plans for the house were drawn up in 1834. (See illustration No. 4) Howard's diary describes a number of meetings with Mr. Draper to discuss the plans for the new house. However it was twenty years before the Drapers were to complete the building and to move in, by then many of their ten children were grown and married.

Hazeldean was featured in a display of lost Toronto buildings. John Howard was credited as introducing the Neoclassical architecture of the Georgian era to the town of York. The architect adapted the style to the Canadian context by simplifying it, reducing the number of windows facing north to protect against winters' cold, and embracing south facing verandahs to shelter against summer heat. He also planned for a greater integration of the houses with their natural surroundings so that his affluent clients could enjoy the large 'suburban' lots on which they were generally built, as was the case with Hazeldean. "Toronto of Old" by Henry Scadding, published in 1875, refers to the Drapers' house as a rural cottage which overhangs and looks down on the same ravine as Rosedale but on the other side. 'Rosedale' was the name given to the more lavish home of Stephen Jarvis and eventually of his son, Sheriff Jarvis. It was the centre of many early Toronto social events. The steep ravine that lay between was impassable in spring and fall and difficult at any time of the year.

Not far from Hazeldean was the village of Yorkville that had been laid out as a development scheme by Bloor and Jarvis. In 1850 St. Paul's Church published a paper reporting that "The neighbourhood is a very favourite locality for residents." The village was incorporated in 1853 and by 1859 it was a popular middle and working class suburb close to Toronto but less expensive to live in. The population grew rapidly and to mark the incorporation the council voted \$12,000 (a great deal of money in those days) to erect an imposing town hall to be built at the corner of Yonge and Yorkville at the top of Collier Street. However the glory was short lived for in 1883 a rapacious, land hungry Toronto annexed Yorkville village. The town hall went on to become a distinctive landmark serving as a library, police station, and finally as a serviceman's club before

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Illustration No. 5: 41 Collier Street.

being destroyed by fire in 1941.

Meanwhile the area around the Draper house was being developed. The maps of 1884 show the Draper house, 4 Gwynne St, standing quite alone while large and small houses crammed the nearby streets. (See illustration No. 2) Brewery Lane and Reynolds Road were made up of small working class houses while Park Road, the west end of what is now Collier Street and Bismarck Street (now Asquith) provided more spacious lots for the larger homes. Altogether it was a very interesting mix. After Mrs. Draper's death the property was bought by developers who immediately applied for building permits to create a new street of houses to be called Collier Street. Two explanations are given for the origin of the street name. Either the street was named after a Mr. Collier, an important figure in the Canada Company, or after Augusta Draper's mother's family name of Collier.

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Illustration No. 6: 1906 photograph of boys playing in front of 41 Collier Street.

A plan for a subdivision was filed in the Registry Office of the City of Toronto on the 25th of January, 1889. All the houses on the north side of Collier beginning at Gwynne Street were registered at the same time and the names Sheppard, West, Ramsay, and Boulter appear many times in the documents suggesting that they were the developers of the site. An analysis of six properties showed that there was a considerable turnover in many of the houses. It is interesting to note that a Miss E.H. Molesworth lived at number 16 Collier St. (now 136) for three years. It took a few years for some of the houses to sell, suggesting that the asking price of \$6000 was too high to be affordable to many people.

Insight into the life within these comfortable homes on Collier Street and Bismarck Avenue

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Illustration No. 7: interior of 41 Collier Street.



Illustration No. 8: the parlour at 41 Collier Street.

was recorded by Helen Murphy Ball whose mother grew up at number 41 Collier Street. (See illustration No. 5) While growing up the Murphy children played on the street. Helen's brother Rowley rowed and sailed near Ward's Island and the family picnicked in High Park. It is possible that Rowley is one of the three boys playing marbles in front of 41 Collier Street in the 1906



Illustration No. 9: Bismark Avenue.



Illustration No. 10: Bismark Avenue.

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photograph. (See illustration No. 6) Visits to grandmother house at number 41 were a different matter.

Helen Murphy Bell wrote, “My grandmother’s parlour was an awesome room. It’s very air whispered, ’Helen don’t touch’. However from a safe position on the floor its tasseled gold silk drapes, the angel’s head plaque on the wall by the door, and the gold filigree (brass to you) could be gazed at with wishful fascination. The mantel surmounted by a towering wall cabinet, was high enough for its own safety but what a glorious wreck a small child could have made of its bric-a-brac, photographs, artificial flowers, etc., had she succumbed to temptation, jumped up and yanked on the fringe of the so carefully draped silk scarf.” (See illustrations Nos. 7 & 8)

At about the same time one block over on Bismarck Avenue (changed during the First World War to Asquith Avenue) two adventurous young ladies are trying out their new bicycles. It must have been a warm Toronto day for the windows are open and lacy window curtains are blowing in the breeze. (See illustrations Nos. 9 & 10)

The directory of 1906 tells an interesting story about the inhabitants of Collier Street. Starting at Yonge Street, on the south side there was a blacksmith, a shop, a horse trainer, a house painter and window cleaners. On the north side there was a large cartage company occupying numbers 2



Illustration No. 11: 1912 photograph.



Illustration No. 12: Rosedale Valley in winter.

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through 14. By 1910 there were three vacancies suggesting that the properties were not in great demand.

A glance at the early maps will show that the original Collier Street ran east from Gwynne Street while Park Road began at Yonge Street and ended on the west side of Gwynne. In 1890 the lower part of Gwynne was renamed Park Road so that Park took a turn north to Bloor Street from where it met Collier. In 1897 the east-west part of Park Road was renamed Collier and the name Gwynne Street disappeared altogether. The strangest part of all is that the houses on Collier were not renumbered to their present configuration until 1907. (See illustration No. 3)

Rosedale Ravine was a treasured location from the earliest days. The first Europeans to build in this area, Governor Simcoe and his wife chose a location overlooking the ravine for their country home. And of course Mr. Jarvis and Chief Justice Draper were very early residents with homes overlooking either side of the ravine. The accompanying watercolour (See illustration No. 1 and the front cover) painted by an unknown artist in the 1860's depicts a river winding through the ravine, cows grazing while a group of visitors enjoys the scene. Just peering over the trees are the roof tops of Hazeldean. The road that wound through the ravine was a magnet for locals and visitors alike. Views of the ravine were a popular subject for early photographers and thousands of postcards were printed showing the picturesque ravine in many locations and in all seasons.



Illustration No. 13: 1926 photo of St. Paul's.



Illustration No. 14: the streetcar turnaround.

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Illustration No. 15: 118 Collier.



Illustration No. 16: 1924 photo of 118 Collier Street.

(See illustrations Nos. 11 & 12) My mother, then a young girl living in rural Saskatchewan, received one such card in 1905. Mark Kenny and John Potter on a recent visit to Florida found, when leafing through a pile of antique postcards, two different views of the ravine. The Ontario Archives has an amazing collection of Rosedale Ravine postcards. One early visitor wrote on a postcard sent to a friend in Chicago, “Have seen a lot of this town, some good parts and some awful bad ones.”

Of the years between 1900 and 1940 there are only fragmentary records. The illustrations 13, and 14 (on the previous page) show St. Paul’s Church on Bloor Street taken from the grounds of the Manufacture’s Life in 1926, a 1931 picture of the loop behind Asquith Street where the Church St. streetcar turned around (Confederation Life Building). The illustrations numbers 15 and 16 (above) show the back and side views of 118 Collier Street taken in 1924.

Doris Stokes, whose brother bought a house on Collier Street in 1942, remembers visiting him and eventually boarding with his family when she came to Toronto to work at the Gage Textbook Company. She describes the street as being in decline with many of the houses, turned into boarding houses, crammed with people living in single rooms, each with its own padlock. Doris describes stepping past drunks lying on the street when coming home of an evening.

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Illustration No. 17 showing David Molesworth's home at 156 Collier Street.

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But help for Collier Street was on the way in the form of two young people, David and Ann Molesworth. Having returned from London, where they had lived in the heart of an exciting city, they re-thought their plans to buy a house in suburban Oakville. David was employed as an architect and when talking to another architect asked him if he knew of any centrally located streets with interesting houses. Remember this was 1955 at the height of the rush to suburbia in North America. David and Ann were daring pioneers in the forefront of the move back into the city centre. Another friend told David that a group of ‘millionaires’ were planning to buy all the houses on Collier and to live on the street. However they decided that the prices were too high considering the condition and location of the houses so backed away from the plan. Another stumbling block to the scheme was that each one wanted the last house on the east end of the street. Prices then ranged from \$13,200 to \$15,000.

Sometime later David decided to take a stroll down Collier and his eyes fell upon 156 (the house most coveted by the millionaires). He continued his stroll around the back of the house and, as no one was home, sat for awhile and enjoyed the view of the then quiet ravine. David asked himself, “How does a new boy in town enquire about buying a house that isn’t even for sale?” Calling the first real estate agency listed in the yellow pages he asked the question he had been mulling over.

“What street are you interested in?” replied the agent.

“Collier”.

Long pause....

“What number?”

“156”

Another long pause....

“Mrs.. Fordham has been thinking of selling.”

(Fifty plus years later and David is still marveling at the incredible coincidence.)

Synchronicity or fate, call it what you will, Ann and David made the decision to buy number 156, (See illustration No. 17) moved there in the fall of 1955 and very soon were encouraging other like minded city dwellers to join them in reviving a street that was deteriorating into a slum.

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Without that first bold move on the part of the young couple Collier Street would no doubt have deteriorated even further and possibly suffered the same fate as similar streets overlooking the ravines and have the houses replaced by an apartment building. Young Fred and Doris Stokes were encouraged to stay on as were Dolly and Reg Boudreau, and soon the Milners, Bognors,



Illustration No. 18: Collier Street in the 1960's.

Whites, Toyes and others pioneers were buying, renovating, and producing large numbers of children, all of which served to keep the street vibrant and lively. A photo taken by *The Toronto Star* for an article about attractive streets in Toronto shows the street as it looked in the 1960's, shaded, children playing, in fact much as it looks today. (See illustration No. 18.)

When we (Evan and Babs Church) moved here in 1979 we were drawn not only by the convenience of living so close to both our workplaces but also by the warmth and attractiveness of the older houses. I have always felt a peace and kind of benediction fall upon me when I turn the corner onto Collier Street, the light seems gentler and the faces are certainly friendlier than anywhere else in Toronto.

Your Recollections of Life on Collier Street

These last few pages are provided so that each person may add their own memories and history. For anyone who is interested in researching the names of the former inhabitants of their homes the Reference Library has street directories going back to the mid-1800's. The Land Titles Office can provide, for a small fee, a listing of all the former owners.

Credits:

Researched by Babs Church and Mark Kenny

Written by Babs Church

Layout by John Potter

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