

Goin' Down the Davenport Road

BY **JAMIE BRADBURN**



Unveiling the Davenport Road plaques are (left to right) executive director of Heritage Toronto Karen Carter; heritage advocate Jane Beecroft; Councillor Kristyn Wong-Tam; Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation Chief representative Carolyn King; Greater Yorkville Residents' Association president Gee Chung; and heritage advocate Shirley Morriss. Photo by Jamie Bradburn/Torontoist.

Waves from a glacial lake once lapped along it. When the water receded, the winding path at the bottom of the escarpment left behind proved an ideal path for local aboriginal peoples to travel between the [Toronto Carrying Place](#) along the Humber River and the Don River to the east.

After Europeans arrived, the trail became a route for farmers to bring their goods to the city and a vital link for growing villages like Yorkville and Carlton. While the rest of downtown adopted a straight grid pattern, the old route kept its curves, though numerous widening and paving projects allowed for vehicles, from streetcars to bicycles.

The long history of Davenport Road is now commemorated in Frank Stollery Parkette at the road's eastern terminus, through a trio of pillars prepared by [Heritage Toronto](#) that were publicly unveiled on Wednesday afternoon.



Davenport, the house of Colonel Joseph Wells, east of Bathurst Street and north of Davenport Road, Toronto, circa 1900. Archives of Ontario, Item F 4436.

The road derived its name from Davenport, a home built in 1797 by military officer John McGill, who reputedly named it after a major stationed at Fort York. Located in the vicinity of the northeast corner of Bathurst and Davenport, the home was said to possess an amazing view of the town of York.

When the property was bought by Joseph Wells in 1821, the original house was demolished and replaced with the structure shown above. Wells, a former military officer, also served as a legislator, a bank director, and, until forced to resign due to financial improprieties, the treasurer of Upper Canada College. His eldest son, George Dupont Wells, inspired the names of several nearby roads, including Dupont Street and Wells Hill Avenue.



Canadian Pacific Railway crossing Davenport Road from north, 25 yards distant, circa 1895. City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 200, Series 376, File 1A, Item 3.

During the 19th century, the old trail slowly took on the characteristics of a modern road. To finance improvements, a series of toll booths were set up along Davenport, one of which [survives as a museum at the northwest corner of Bathurst and Davenport](#). By the end of the century, railways and streetcar tracks crossed the road.



Gate to Ardwold, Davenport Road, circa 1909. City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 1244, Item 3138.

Mansions that sat along or above Davenport, such as [Casa Loma](#), had their own access points to the road. This picture shows a gate for [Ardwold](#), the home of Eaton's department store president [Sir John Craig Eaton](#). Built in 1909, Ardwold remained in the family until it was demolished in 1936. The name lingers on through the residential street built on the property, Ardwold Gate.



Car on muddy Davenport Road east of Bathurst Street, 1910. City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 1244, Item 42B.

As automobiles took over city streets in the early 20th century, the muddy nature of roads like Davenport posed problems, especially when snow thawed. Given the deep ruts, we wonder if the vehicle's occupants eventually required a tow.



Hillcrest Park, Bathurst Street and Davenport Road, circa 1911-1912. City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 1244, Item 8213.

For a short time around the First World War, horse racing fans congregated at the southwest corner of Bathurst and Davenport to place their bets at [Hillcrest Park](#). The notes for this photo from the City of Toronto Archives debate whether the crowd has gathered for the opening of the track in 1912 or the ribbon-cutting for the newly graded section of Bathurst Street to the north.



Davenport Garage under construction, looking northwest, July 6, 1925. Photo by Alfred Pearson. City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 16, Series 71, Item 3888.

The horses were soon replaced with transit mechanics. Soon after its formation in 1921, the TTC (then known as the Toronto Transportation Commission) purchased the site and transformed it into [the main repair complex for its streetcar fleet](#). A [garage for buses](#) was built along the Davenport side of the property in 1925.



Dominion Bank branch at the corner of Dovercourt and Davenport Road, circa 1947. City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 200, Series 372, Subseries 3, Item 1430.

Though the building still announces its location at Davenport and Dovercourt, this former branch of the Dominion Bank currently serves as an eye clinic.



Traffic jam at intersection of Davenport Road and Dupont Street, June 20, 1957. City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 1653, Series 975, File 2434, Item 34560x-4.

By the 1950s, traffic volume caused rush-hour backups at the intersection of Davenport and Dupont that required the assistance of Toronto's finest. On the left is the Sign of the Steer restaurant, a European-style steakhouse that hosted banquets and receptions for Toronto's well-to-do.



Sign of the Steer restaurant, 1955. City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 1257, Series 1057, Item 504.

Owner Hans Fread hosted the CBC's first cooking show, *Hans in the Kitchen*, from 1953 to 1954. The former lawyer was a bitter man when he closed the 600-seat restaurant in June 1960, placing the blame on Ontario's "stupid liquor laws." He especially blamed Premier Leslie Frost's wife for persuading her husband not to relax regulations that prevented Fread from serving drinks after 11:30 p.m. on Saturday and all day Sunday. (Mrs. Frost claimed to have no influence on the premier in such matters, and noted that Fread's claims were "one for my scrapbook.")

Fread soon moved to Winnipeg, where he found far better eats than were served in the Toronto restaurants that catered to "Lady Plushbottoms." As Fread told the *Star*: "Torontonians like cubbyhole restaurants. They think a candle on the table makes good atmosphere...Instead of service, we offer our guests a short course in sobriety."



Davenport Road, looking west from Howland Avenue, July 1958. City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 200, Series 372, Subseries 100, Item 284.

Long before a bike lane was first installed on Davenport in the mid-1990s, cyclists enjoyed its non-grid meanderings. Modern cyclists can take a rest in front of the new plaques and contemplate the past, the lives lived on the route they just followed.

Additional material from Spadina: A Story of Old Toronto by Austin Seton Thompson (Toronto: Pagurian Press, 1975), Toronto Street Names by Leonard Wise and Allan Gould (Willowdale: Firefly Books, 2000), and the June 29, 1960, and October 17, 1960, editions of the Toronto Star.

FILED UNDER DAVENPORT ROAD, HANS FREAD, HILLCREST PARK, JAMES WELLS, SIGN OF THE STEER, ARDWOLD, CYCLING, DAVENPORT, HILLCREST, HISTORY