

Historical Plaques: Images from the Missing Plaques Project

The Missing Plaques Project

The Missing Plaques Project is dedicated to changing the way we think about history. This Toronto-based project, which has been used as a model elsewhere in Canada, responds to the idea that the city's history is conservative, boring and British. Tim Groves, the project's founder, has made it his goal to challenge this perspective by creating his own historical plaques which tell stories often absent from Toronto's collective memory. The plaques, which are posters put up using wheat paste, highlight both Toronto's distant past, but also some of the darker sides of Toronto's more recent history, such as the Bath House raids in 1981 and the 1992 Yonge Street riot. These are stories that will almost certainly not be recognized by more official historic plaques, while at the same time have played – and continue to play – an important role in shaping the city of Toronto. Tim presented many of his posters at *Active History: A History for the Future* in September 2008.

We have included three of Tim's posters as part of this volume. The Halloween Riot tells of the first post-WWII Halloween party on Queen's street east. As crowds and revelry grew police intervened and the festive atmosphere quickly turned into a large confrontation. Another plaque is about the Yonge Street Riot, which developed after a racially charged police shooting in Toronto. It led to an afternoon and evening of rioting. The final plaque takes a different approach, focusing on changing place names in Toronto. The Wonscotanach River (is also the Don River) is a good reminder of Toronto's deep Aboriginal history – a history which has only seldom been recognized in the city's urban geography.

For more information about the Missing Plaques Project, or to view some of Tim's other plaques, visit the project's website at:
<http://missingplaque.tao.ca/about.html>

HALLOWEEN RIOT

WHY DID MOB OF "7000" STORM POLICE STATION?

On October 31st, 1945, an enormous and raucous street party filled a section of Queen St. East in the Beaches. It was the first Halloween since the end of World War II. When police intervened, the massive crowd of teenagers became enraged. They attempted to storm the police station and a riot ensued.

Early in the evening scores of teenagers began to gather. Slowly the number grew and grew until the crowd became so big that one police officer numbered them at 7000. The youth became rowdy. Huge bonfires were started in the middle of the road blocking streetcars. Backyard fences were torn down and used to feed the blaze. "Flames were sweeping down the [streetcar] tracks" as gasoline was poured in them. Obstacles were placed to block fire trucks from accessing the site.

Before long police on horseback descended and began clubbing the crowd. The revelry had turned to anger. Police arrested two youth and drove off with them. Someone shouted out "Let's go free them!". The idea took hold of the crowd. They marched north to the Main St. Police Station, chanting "RELEASE THEM! RELEASE THEM!" The Toronto Telegram reported "Hundreds of Halloween demonstrators paraded through east end streets hurling rocks at windows and turning on fire hydrants."

As the crowd approached the police station, police and firemen turned fire-hoses upon them. This did prevent them from reaching the station, yet the teenagers retaliated by showering police and firemen with debris. A police captain said, "I never saw so many rocks and pieces of concrete fly through the air at one time". Every available policeman from across the city rushed to the scene. Police then began clubbing and making arrests. "Spectators complained they were beaten for no reason," wrote the Toronto Star. The crowd dispersed. The riot was over.

The teenage boys that took part in the Halloween Riot were not veterans returned from war, but rather a new underclass of youth. Compared to the special treatment that veterans were receiving, the future of these boys seemed grim. With the war over, their dreams of becoming war heroes were quashed. They now felt they had little to lose. This resulted not only in the Halloween riot, but also in a slew of gangs that sprung up across the city, such as the Beanery Boys, the Tipps Gang, the Junction Gang and the Balmy Beach Gang. Robbed of a future they felt had been promised to them, many teenagers turned to a life of party and crime.

As a better image of the Beaches past has been promoted, the Halloween Riot has slipped into obscurity. This history should be remembered and learned from. Today, many youth still have bleak futures. What youth eruptions will our times see?

Sources:
"7000 Join In East End Riot Cities Rowdiest ever", by Toronto Star, Nov 1st 1945.
"Rocks, Chunks Of Concrete Shower On Police, Firemen Mob of 7000 Held At Bay", by Toronto Telegram, Nov 1st 1945.

Interview with Donald May a participant in the riot.

"GANG BUSTERS", in NOW Magazine, Mar 25 - 31, 2004, Vol. 23 No. 30, by Chris Malcolm.

"Quote from Police Inspector Greenwood reported in the Toronto Telegram Nov 1st 1945



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THE YONGE STREET RIOT

ANGER AT RACISM BOILS OVER IN 1992

A crowd rampaged along Yonge Street, breaking windows, looting stores, and throwing debris at police. On May 4th 1992, the anger of many blacks had finally exploded. This was a response to racism, more specifically, police racism, they asserted.



The Yonge Street Riot started with a rally, organized by the Black Action Defence Committee in protest of the acquittal of four white police officers video taped beating Rodney King, a black man in Los Angeles. Two days earlier, another reason for taking to the streets emerged. A white, plain clothed police officer, in Toronto, shot and killed a 22 year old black man, who police alleged was dealing crack. At the protest, speakers reminded the crowd that the victim, Raymond Constantine Lawrence, was the 14th black man shot by the Toronto police since 1978, (an average of one a year), and the 4th to die.

The crowd of about 1000 people was full of anger. They marched from the US consulate to Yonge and Bloor, where they sat down to block traffic for 45 minutes. The protestors became more unruly as they marched down Yonge St. to City Hall. Thirty protestors approached the doors of the Old City Hall Courthouse and shattered the glass doors, before rejoining the rest of the crowd in Nathan Phillips Square. At City Hall protestors hoped to speak with politicians, instead a line of police blocked their access. Soon chunks of concrete, rocks, cans, and horse manure rained down on both police and the building.

When the crowd stormed back up Yonge St. police were notably absent. The rioting soon began; Hotdog carts were over turned, cars were vandalized, and store windows were broken, leaving the streets covered with glass. Some stores were looted for cigarettes, clothes or electronics. Near Bloor St. a pile of bricks was found, and used to smash windows such as those of Holt Renfrew.

It was getting dark by the time the police had finally mobilized - an hour and a half after the crowd began rampaging up Yonge St. A line of cops blocked the crowd as they headed south down Bay St. After a series of clashes the crowd returned north to Bloor St, followed by the police. At this point organizers negotiated with police to reopen the subways and allow people to leave, the size of the crowd shrank. At 10pm the remaining crowd of about 300, had gathered in a parking lot. When police charged the crowd swinging billy clubs at the demonstrators, the crowd finally dispersed.

Many politicians condemned the rioting, but they were forced to acknowledge and in some cases respond to the racism that had sparked the event. Premier Bob Rae claimed that the root of the riot was not racism but rather Hooliganism. None the less he commissioned a report from Stephen Lewis which found racism was pervasive throughout Ontario, and Rae accepted some of the reports recommendations by changing government policy.

Black activists had little shame at what had happened. "All those broken windows can be replaced with insurance money," said one of the rioters "the black people who were killed cannot be replaced".

Sources: Report on Race Relations: By Stephen Lewis, June 9th 1992. BLACK AND ANGRY: By Paul Kallia and Ross Laver, from Maclean's Magazine May 18th 1992. Anatomy of a Riot, by James Deacon, from Maclean's Magazine May 18th 1992. In conversation with Geetan Heroux. Metro police, mob clash on Yonge St, by Andrew Duffy in the Toronto Star Tuesday May 5th 1992. Hooligans to blame, not victim Rae says: by Matt Maychak Toronto star May 6 1992.

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THE WONSCOTANACH RIVER IS ALSO THE DON RIVER

QUESTIONING PLACE NAMES IN TORONTO

The Mississauga Indians named this river the Wonscotanach. In the 1790's Governor Simcoe renamed it the Don River, after a river in England. As a colonial leader trying to bring about a singularly British culture in Canada, he tried to eradicate all Seneca, Mississauga, and French place names from the colony, replacing them with British ones. Some names were retained but a vast number were forgotten.

Simcoe planned to build a new town in an area known as Toronto, yet in 1793 he named the town York. Not everyone was happy with this change in name. In 1804 a petition was submitted to reinstate the old name, but it was not till 1834 that an effort to rename the town was successful. By the 1830's many citizens were fed up with the town's derogatory labels 'Little York' and 'Muddy York'. A town councilor suggested that the name Toronto be used since "it is the old, original name, of the place and the sound is in every respect much better." There was support for the idea and the Town of York became the City of Toronto.



Despite its native name, Toronto still branded itself a British city. Rivers, streets and neighborhoods were almost exclusively given British names. They were named after places or people in Britain, after the large estates owned and named by early upper class residents of Toronto, and after these upper class residents themselves. Streets were also named after military battles, businessmen and politicians but always adding to the city's British image.

Today Toronto brands itself as a multicultural city, however you would never know it to look at the street names. Just as in the 1830's when our city changed its name from York to Toronto, we should now begin renaming our streets, rivers and neighborhoods. We should give them names in Somali, Portuguese, Mohawk, Tamil, Spanish, Hungarian, Farsi, Tibetan, Cree, Cantonese, Arabic, and the over one hundred other languages spoken in Toronto.

The names we have now will not disappear, but we can start joining them with older and newer names. As a start let us remember the Don River is also the Wonscotanach River.

Sources:
Toronto Street Names by Leonard Wise and Allan Gould.
Geographical Names of Canada. The real story of how Toronto got its name, by National Geographic.
The Mississauga and the Building of Yonge st., 1794 - 1796, by Donald B. Smith, (in the booklet: The Simcoe Legacy by the Ontario Historical Society).
Amazing tales of the St. Lawrence Neighborhood by Bruce Bell.

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