

Urban Planning and Development in Upper Canada

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Article abstract

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Urban Planning and Development in Upper Canada

Gilbert A. Stelter

Résumé/Abstract

Le présent exposé traite de la planification et du développement des villes du Haut-Canada, région frontière de l'Amérique du Nord britannique. Les fonctionnaires de l'Empire, se fondant sur l'expérience acquise par les Britanniques en Irlande et dans les colonies américaines, se servirent sciemment des villes pour favoriser le peuplement de cette région. Au milieu du XIX^e siècle, les entrepôts coloniaux étaient devenus des centres de commerce ambitieux, tandis que l'organisation sociale se reflétait dans une conception traditionaliste du gouvernement local; par exemple, les objets fabriqués ressemblaient énormément à ceux des États-Unis.

This paper describes the planning and development of the towns and cities of Upper Canada, the frontier region of British North America. Imperial officials consciously used towns as agencies for the settlement of this region, based on the British experience in Ireland and the American colonies. By the mid-nineteenth century, the colonial entrepôts had become ambitious commercial centres. While the social system was reflected in a conservative approach to local government, for example, the physical artifacts closely resembled their counterparts in the United States.

The towns and cities of early Canada, founded between the early seventeenth and the early nineteenth centuries, were the products of the world-wide phenomenon of European imperial expansion. In a process going back to ancient times, these empires used urban places as agencies in establishing authority and transmitting the culture and values of their civilization to a new territory. It is my contention here that these small concentrations of population were identifiable social realities which played a significant role in the complex processes of economic and social change. Contemporaries certainly regarded urban places in this way. They assigned definite characteristics to places, realizing that some of these characteristics were shared with urban places in general while some were unique to a particular time and place.

In some respects it is misleading to categorize early Canadian urban places as a single type, for they represented diverse traditions and functions. For example, the towns of the St. Lawrence Valley were the product of the French Empire, while those in the Atlantic colonies were built by the British. A third group was founded by refugees from the American Revolution, resulting in a new colony in the Atlantic region, New Brunswick, and a new western interior colony, Upper Canada. Another basis for distinctions between the towns was the different staples produced in the colonies in which the towns were located. While there was a clear duality between town and country, both were integrally connected and mutually dependent. The Atlantic region was heavily dependent on the fishing industry and the maritime carrying trade; the St. Lawrence area originally emphasized the export of furs and later concentrated on forest products; Upper Canada's major staple was wheat.

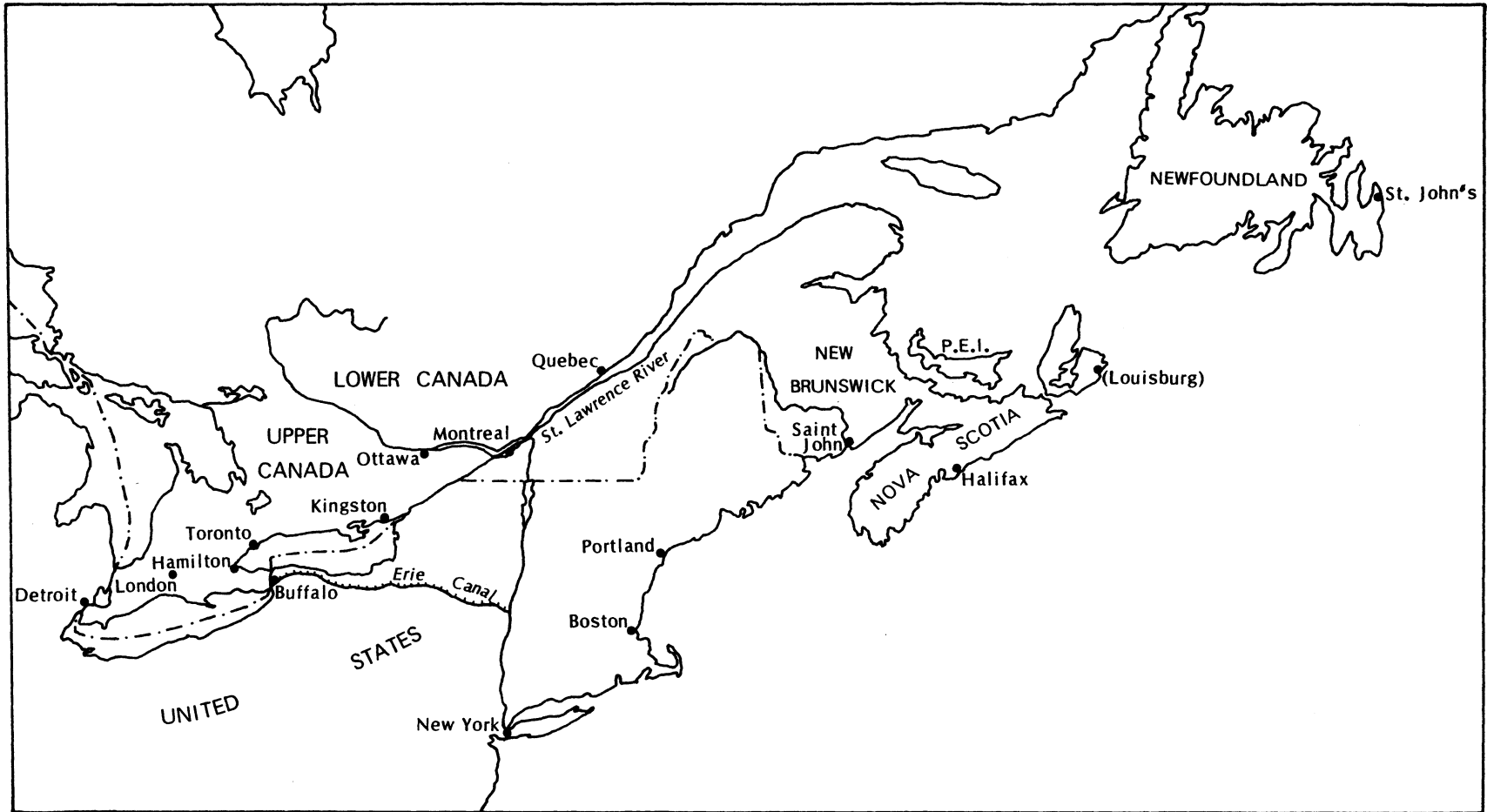
On the other hand, all of these towns shared some basic characteristics regardless of national origin or regional orientation. One of these was function, for towns usually originated as entrepôts and military/administrative centres, representatives of metropolitan forces across the Atlantic. They slowly evolved into commercial centres, still closely tied to transatlantic apron strings, but exhibiting new regional connections and interests. Those towns also operated within a common state of technology which helped determine their character. This was particularly true of forms of transportation and of the material of construction. Major towns founded before the 1820s were all ports, as accessibility for sailing ships determined the location and shape of the urban places. The introduction of the steamboat and improved roads after 1820 allowed urban development in the interior — away from the major rivers and lakes.

In this paper I will discuss the towns and cities of one particular region of early Canada, Upper Canada. These towns were founded late in the eighteenth century and had matured as commercial cities by the mid-nineteenth century. The urban places of Upper Canada were small, even by the standards of British North America. Their significance, however, cannot be measured simply by size or by a quantitative equation with their proportion of the total provincial population. Upper Canada's population was overwhelmingly rural; the urban proportion (based on those living in places of 1,000 or more) was less than 3 per cent in 1811, and rose to only 14 per cent by 1851. Yet these small towns and cities were the seats of imperial and local authority, the crucibles of commerce and industry and the hubs of a growing transportation and communications network. They were also the agencies for the transmission of British civilization from abroad and at the same time the centres of social change within their regional society.¹

I will discuss two aspects of urban planning and development in turn. The first is the British imperial scheme for the use of towns as the framework for settlement of a frontier region. The second — and more detailed — aspect is the actual planning and building of the physical artifacts that these urban places represented.

I

The initial settlement of Upper Canada was a direct result of the American Revolution and this event coloured much of the planning of the new colony. Imperial officials consciously hoped to create a model society obviously superior to that built by the rebellious Americans, but the result was a curious blend of American and British traditions and practice. The first grand design was proposed by the governor, Lord Dorchester, who favoured the township as the ideal form of land settlement, for it combined town and country planning.² In Dorchester's plans, townships were to be 16.1 kilometres square with a town site 1.6 kilometres square. In those townships next to water, the town would front on the water; in inland townships, the town would be located directly in the middle. Local surveyors were directed, as in the case of New Johnstown in 1789, to lay out the town "as nearly as may be, according to the tenor" of the detailed regulations.³ But officials in Quebec City soon recognized that the system was proving unworkable; towns might well inhibit, rather than stimulate settlement. A move to a more flexible system by 1791 was therefore proposed on the grounds that:



MAJOR URBAN CENTRES OF BRITISH NORTH AMERICA IN THE EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY

The Province of Upper Canada officially became Canada West in 1841 and Ontario in 1867 with the confederation of the provinces into the Dominion of Canada. Lower Canada became Canada East in 1841 and Quebec in 1867.



UPPER CANADA IN THE EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY

The prosperity and wealth of towns in all inland countries must depend upon the cultivators of the land; now if the land which would be under culture is locked up in town plots, parks, etc., it may operate against or entirely defeat the speedy settlement of the country.⁴

Only a few townships in the eastern portion of the province were actually laid out on the basis of Dorchester's original scheme. By 1793 it had been abandoned in favour of the ideas of the new Lieutenant-Governor, John Graves Simcoe. Simcoe was in the province only from 1792 to 1796, but his "system" as he called it, provided the basis for much of the province's future development. Contrary to the conclusions that Dorchester had reached, Simcoe believed that a network of towns, combining military and civilian settlement, would "create a solid and permanent system, which would never spring up merely from Agriculture, and would be late indeed, if left to the culture of

Mercantile Monopoly."⁵ The nuclei of these towns would be provided by the provincial corps, the Queen's Rangers, in the ancient tradition of the military colony: "Following the great Masters of the World, the Romans of old, I propose to consider the Winter Stations of these Companies as the Germs of so many well affected Colonial Cities."⁶ The location of these places would be selected on the basis of "natural advantages, the confluence of Rivers, the security of Harbours or the termination of Portages."⁷ These prospective centres, if connected with suitable roads, would, Simcoe argued, stimulate settlement and become the backbone of a stable, defensible society.

Simcoe's design was not to be imposed on completely virgin territory, for the site of old Fort Frontenac had been resurrected as Kingston in 1784 and Newark (Niagara-on-the-Lake) had been named capital of the province before Simcoe's

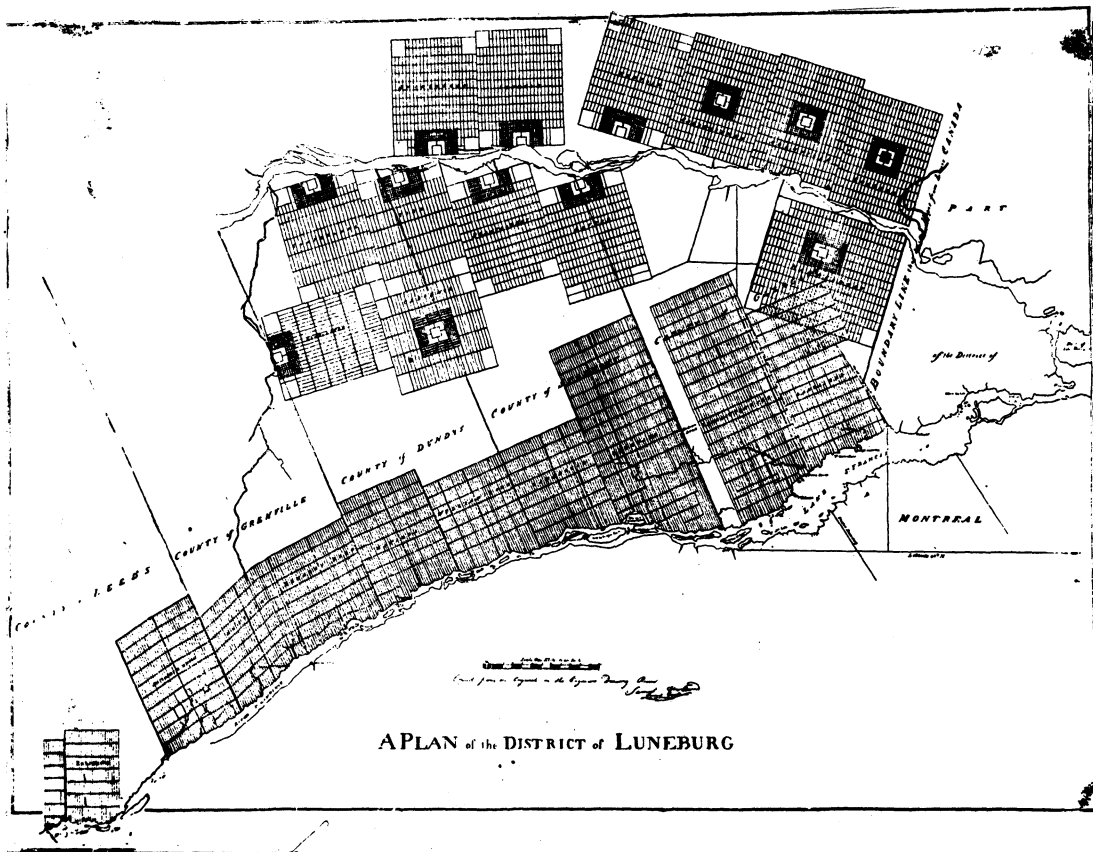


FIGURE ONE

Dorchester's Plans for ideal townships in the District of Lunenburg, 1790

Source: Archives of Ontario.

The plans for the townships fronting on the Ottawa River (above) represented Dorchester's ideal type while those fronting on the St. Lawrence River (below) appear as traditional grids. The ideal types were in the tradition of some American town building which combined urban and rural planning. The town plots, either fronting on the water or located in the centre of the township, were surrounded by government reserves (the white area). Beyond this were the park lots (the dark areas) and then finally the farm lots. Very few of these plans actually were put into practise, but they represent current thinking about the place of towns in a region's development.

TABLE I

INTERCENSAL PERCENTAGE CHANGE, PROVINCIAL AND URBAN POPULATION, 1811-1851

| Decade | Province | Urban ¹ |
|---------|----------|-------------------------|
| 1811-21 | 74% | 390 (123)% ² |
| 1821-31 | 76 | 252 |
| 1831-41 | 93 | 204 |
| 1841-51 | 109 | 154 |

1. Urban is defined as population living in places of 1,000 or more.

2. The bracketed figure includes York and Niagara as urban places, each of which had a population of about 600 in 1811.

arrival. The adjustments he wished to make included the removal of the capital from Newark, which was too close to the American border, to a new site in the interior to be called London. Kingston's naval base, in his view, could not be adequately defended and therefore York, with "the most important and defensible situation in Upper Canada" should become the major naval base, and also serve to encourage economic growth of a relatively uninhabited area. A series of lesser towns along the lakes and in the interior were also projected, to be connected by major roads such as Yonge Street, running north of York to Lake Simcoe, and the Dundas Road, striking west from York toward London.⁸

Actual settlement patterns corresponded fairly closely to Simcoe's vision even though his superiors did not accept his philosophy of the settlement process. In refusing to support Simcoe's demand for the opening of several new posts, Dorchester wrote that "towns with all their beneficial consequences may naturally be expected to follow the Population."⁹ Nor did superiors accept Simcoe's designation of function for certain key towns. London was judged too remote from the rest of the province's population and York was made capital. Dorchester preferred Kingston over York for other purposes, however, and made it the chief naval base and garrison.¹⁰ But a considerable portion of Simcoe's design remained intact. The two major roads were begun and a line of settlement started along Dundas Road to the west, and along Yonge Street to the north. Simcoe's plan probably hastened the development of the southwestern portion of the province and the spread of towns and agricultural settlements in the interior away from the lakes.

II

The building of urban places as physical entities involved a complex interaction between population growth, technological change, and economic activity, but also crucial were the particular traditions of city-building favoured by the builders or even the question of who made the decisions about urban form. Throughout history, James Vance suggests, most cities could usually be roughly categorized in two main types: preconceived and organic.¹¹ The first implies a degree of power and control

TABLE II

URBAN PLACES (OVER 1,000) IN UPPER CANADA, 1811-1851

| | 1811 | 1821 | 1831 | 1841 | 1851 |
|------------------|-------------|-----------|----------|-----------|------------|
| Upper Canada | (76,984) | (134,259) | 236,702 | 455,688 | 952,004 |
| Toronto (York) | [600]* | 1,559 | 3,969 | 14,249 | 30,775 |
| Kingston | (1,000) | 2,336 | 3,828 | 6,292 | 11,585 |
| Niagara (Newark) | [600]* | (1,000) | 1,230 | 2,109 | 3,340 |
| Hamilton | | | (1,500) | 3,413 | 14,112 |
| Ottawa (Bytown) | | | (1,000) | (3,000) | 7,760 |
| London | | | | 2,078 | 7,035 |
| Belleville | | | (1,200) | (1,700) | 4,569 |
| Cobourg | | | (1,500) | (2,700) | 3,871 |
| Brockville | | | (1,000) | (1,500) | 3,246 |
| Port Hope | | | (1,000) | (1,200) | 2,476 |
| St. Catharines | | | (1,500) | (2,700) | 4,368 |
| | | | +1 other | +9 others | +22 others |
| Percentage urban | (1,3)[2.8]* | (3.6) | (8.0) | (11.5) | 14.0 |

(Figures in brackets are estimates)

Sources: For unbracketed figures: 1821-1831, statistics from manuscript sources in Record Group 5, Civil and Provincial Secretaries' Office, Canada West, Public Archives of Canada; 1841, "Population Returns," Appendix M, *Journals of the Legislative Assembly of the Province of Canada*, 1842, Vol. 2; 1851, *Census of the Canadas, 1851-52*, Vol. 1. For estimates: 1811 population of Upper Canada is by author of "Sketches," probably Barnabas Bidwell of Kingston, published in Robert Gourlay's *Statistical Account of Upper Canada* (London, 1822), Vol. 1, p. 108; population for 1821 is Gourlay's estimate, *Statistical Account*, Vol. 1, pp. 620-21. Estimates for towns are based on a variety of local sources and usually differ, by being lower, than those in Jacob Spelt, *Urban Development in South-Central Ontario* (Toronto [1955], 1972), p. 91.

*Note: If the populations of York and Niagara are included in 1811, even though they are each under 1,000, the urban percentage is more than doubled to 2.8%

held only by imperial officials and heads of corporations; the second, that form evolves spontaneously according to the actions of many individual groups. Both types were present in Upper Canada, sometimes within the same town at different periods in its development.

Upper Canadian town builders could draw on the experience of new town building in Europe and the town building that took place in the New World before the settlement of Upper Canada. These traditions represented several basic principles, most of which were adopted in some fashion. The first was the assumption of some degree of government or corporate control over individual development practices. A second was the concern to combine town and country planning by granting settlers land in both. Another was the almost universal adoption of the gridiron, with its regular street pattern. A fourth was the construction of defensive works, designed both to protect the residents of a new town and to subjugate the indigenous population of a region. These principles were put into practice in two eras of English colonization prior to their North American ventures. Early examples were the *bastide* towns founded by Edward I in the thirteenth century in Wales and southwestern France. For example, Flint, in Wales, and Monpazier, in France, were rectangular with a regular street pattern, defensive walls, and central spaces for a market and church.¹² The use of towns as instruments of colonization was continued by the English in the 1609 scheme for the subjection of six Ulster counties through the building of twenty-three new towns, including Londonderry and Coleraine.¹³

The most direct source of town planning ideas came from the British traditions which were worked out in one hundred and fifty years of American and British North American experience. Colonial America provided three prototypes: the New England village, where the town made up part of an urban-rural unit; the huge grid of Philadelphia centred on a large square; the baroque city of Washington, with its diagonal avenues and terminating vistas. Each of these was reproduced in hundreds of western American imitations, which in turn influenced Upper Canadian planners. A fourth type, Halifax, illustrated British methods when imperial strategic concerns were involved. Public facilities, including an Anglican church, were provided to ensure a successful urban venture. The small grid was to be well fortified, basically for the larger purposes of imperial competition.

Elements of earlier town planning and of the major North American types appeared in the plans drawn up for Upper Canadian towns. However, they were never surrounded with defensive walls which could have constrained their expansion. Adjacent fortifications, such as Fort Henry at Kingston and Fort York at Toronto, were constructed because of the long distance American threat, not because of any fear of a hostile local native population. The major form adopted was almost invariably the gridiron. In this respect, the earliest townsite, Kingston, was similar to other Loyalist towns laid out at the same time at Saint John and Shelburne. To accommodate refugees as quickly as possible, government surveyors measured out two grids, each parallel to the waterfront; a triangular space left between the grids was used for public buildings. Town lots were only .08 hectares (one-fifth of an acre) in size, smaller than would later be the case in other towns. Settlers drew for town lots as well as for farm lots, while some also received "park lots", intermediate parcels of land near the town.¹⁴ Niagara was not laid out until 1791 when it was designated a provincial capital. The site appears as something of an afterthought on the original plan of the area, which emphasized agricultural grants. As at Kingston, a grid was located next to the river, but the lots were much larger, .41 hectares (one acre) each, presumably to accommodate the pretensions of the government officials who would reside there.¹⁵

Whereas the Loyalist towns were hastily surveyed, the schemes of Dorchester and Simcoe for other new towns offer some clear evidence of what leading officials thought about town planning under more relaxed circumstances. Dorchester's township plan was a composite of the New England and Philadelphia types. Like other frontier applications, most notably James Oglethorpe's plan of Savannah, it indicated a strong concern for physically co-ordinating the planning of town and country by making the town an integral part of the township survey. The 1.6 kilometres- square town would have a central square and smaller, peripheral squares as at Philadelphia. Eight streets, including four running diagonally, would converge on the square, and be wider than other streets. Lots of .41 hectares in the townsite and park lots of 10.1 hectares (twenty-five acres) were to be granted to settlers. A major departure from the relative spontaneity and equality of the Loyalist towns were regulations for architectural uniformity and built-in class distinctions by lot location.¹⁶

The application of Dorchester's model caused problems almost immediately. In submitting the plans for New Johnstown (Cornwall) in 1789, a surveyor reported that in his view "the present lots are upon too small a scale, that the oblique streets are of no use and that the squares contained in each town plot would only tend to lay the foundation for future contention among neighbours."¹⁷ Some townships in the eastern portion of the province were laid out on this basis, however, and the two original plans for Toronto in 1788 incorporated these features.¹⁸ Toronto's plan, like the scheme in general, was quietly shelved even before Simcoe's arrival, because different situations obviously required particular solutions.

When Toronto was laid out as the colonial capital, York, in 1793, it was a meagre grid of only ten blocks, but it incorporated Simcoe's desire to re-establish the British class system on American soil. Lots at the front of the town facing the harbour were the largest and were granted to the most important officials. As in Dorchester's earlier plans, control was to be exercised over the size and architectural styles of houses on these lots. Only "in the backstreets and alleys" in Richard Cartwright's sarcastic evaluation, would "the tinkers and tailors . . . be allowed to consult their taste and circumstances in the structure of their habitations, upon lots of one-tenth of an acre."¹⁹ In addition to organizing the grid itself, Simcoe also ensured a measure of government control over future expansion by reserving a large tract to the east for eventual residential expansion and a large area to the west for public and military purposes. But even more important, he drew up a scheme whereby future expansion would contribute to the creation of a hierarchically structured society. Some thirty-two park lots of 40.5 hectares (one hundred acres) each, located north of the townsite, were granted to government officials.²⁰ The profits from this land as the town grew in the nineteenth century helped create the elite that Simcoe believed this society required.

Even though the population of early York did not grow quickly, the original site was too small for any expansion. The site also lacked focus, for it had no central place to give it an identity. A major addition was made in 1797, under government control, using land from the government's western reserve. This extension, referred to as the "new town," had much larger blocks than the older portion, and a large space between the two sections became a sort of public use centre with a church, a school, a hospital, and especially a market which helped make King Street the major commercial thoroughfare.²¹

Most other towns in Upper Canada were also laid out with variations on the grid pattern. In the case of Hamilton, a rigid grid located between Burlington Bay and "The Mountain," a portion of the Niagara escarpment, promoted rapid land profits for the original owner.²² Government surveyors laid out London on a

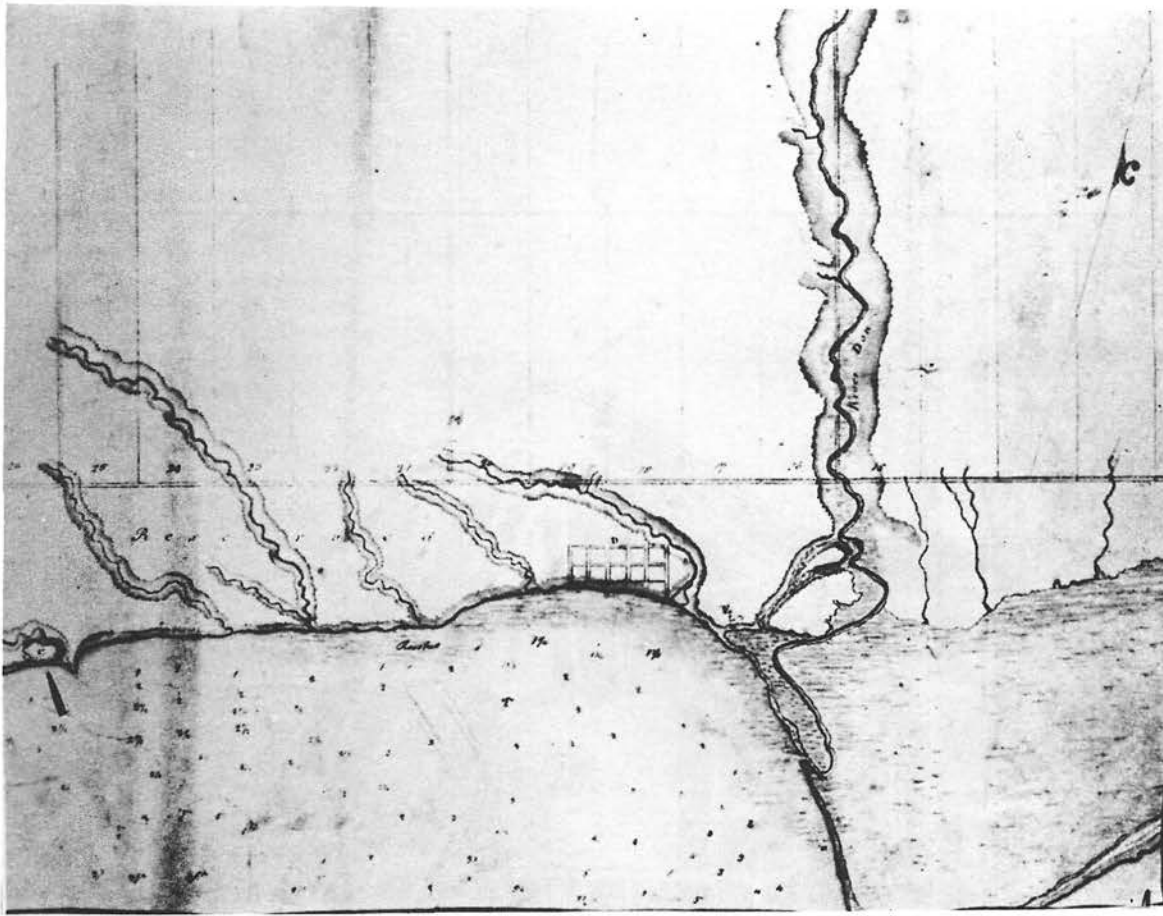


FIGURE TWO
Plan of York, 1793

Source: Public Record Office, London

The compact little ten block grid appears as something of an adjunct to larger purposes. The harbour had been carefully surveyed and was to be guarded by a blockhouse and battery on the island at the western entry to the harbour and by the garrison across at the entry (c). To the north of the townsite were the outlines of the park lots which were granted to government officials.

grid, even though the site focused on the forks of the Thames River.²³ Bytown slowly evolved as two grids on either side of Colonel John By's Rideau Canal.²⁴ More imaginative planning was adopted, however, by the Canada Company for its towns of Guelph and Goderich. While Guelph's plan is usually attributed to John Galt's Scottish background, the probable model was early Buffalo, or New Amsterdam, for Galt visited the Holland Land Company's operations in New York State several times.²⁵ This baroque plan, like Buffalo going back to Washington, was unfortunately a rather awkward application of those principles; the radiating streets met the adjoining grid with difficulty and the whole design focused on nothing more than a river crossing. More successful was Goderich's "asterisk" plan, with eight streets converging on a central market place. In conception, it resembled Indianapolis, laid out about seven years earlier.²⁶ These plans must be judged as promotional devices, and in this respect John Galt was a master. The plans were reproduced in Joseph Bouchette's *The British Dominions in North America*, and, ironically, Goderich is the only Canadian town or city mentioned in Lewis Mumford's *The City in History*.²⁷

The original plans of most Upper Canadian towns were extremely limited in scope and soon were outgrown by the booming communities. While the initial site usually continued to serve as the central core, the expansion beyond it often resembled the growth of organic cities which appeared to have little or no planning. The move from imperial control over development to a laissez-faire system of no regulation came at different times to different places, but roughly mirrored the transition from colonial town to commercial town, about 1820. In addition to the end of centralized planning, several other characteristics of the development process were common to the larger centres. Ownership of suburban land was concentrated in the hands of the elite who had either received it in grants or had purchased it cheaply, early in the town's history. Much of the subdivision of this suburban land was premature in the sense that more land was subdivided than was required for building purposes. The result was a tendency for prices to remain low. Landowners who subdivided their property seldom also developed it, preferring to sell to speculators or to developers who built on a small scale. This process produced fragmented

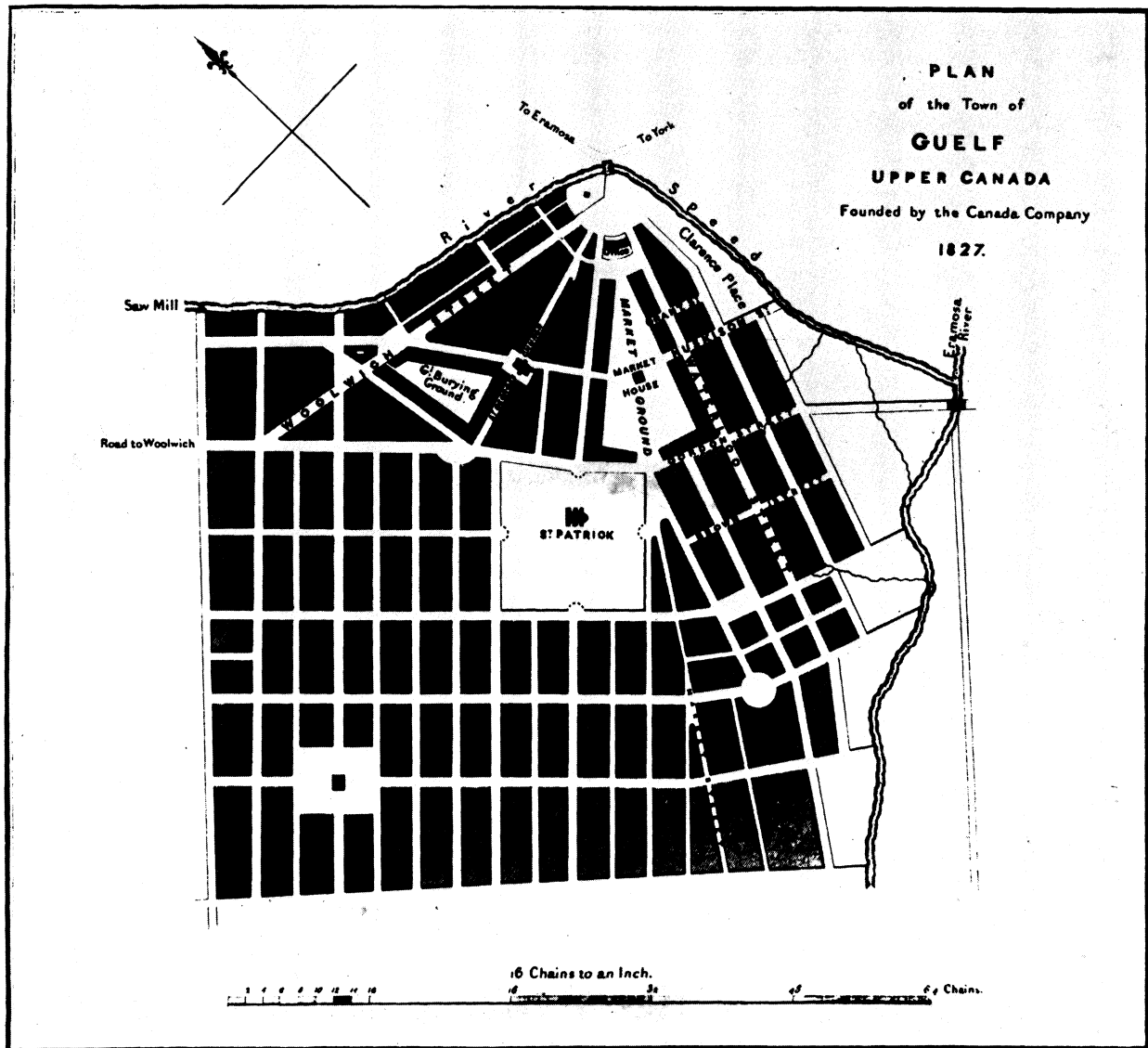


FIGURE THREE

Plan of Guelph, about 1830

Source: Joseph Bouchette, *The British Dominions* (London, 1831), Vol. I, p. 118.

An example of baroque planning on the western frontier, Guelph's plan was probably modelled after a New York land company's plan of early Buffalo. The departure from a simple grid undoubtedly was designed as a promotional device to attract attention to John Galt's efforts to sell land in the area. Major features included the market ground; an enormous plot for St. Patrick's Roman Catholic Church atop a dominating hill; radiating streets converging on space next to the river crossing which, surprisingly, has never been used to locate a major building to take advantage of the terminating vista.

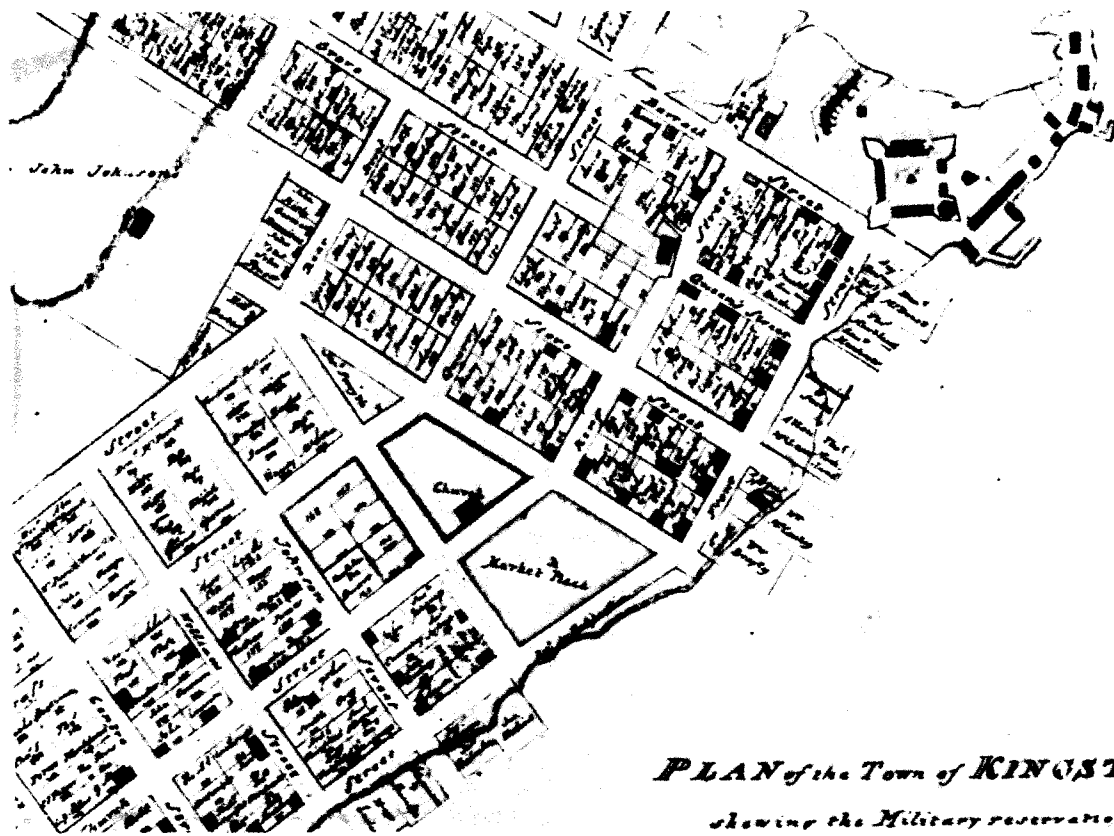


FIGURE FOUR

Plan of Kingston in 1815

Source: Public Archives of Canada.

The plan shows the two grids, each laid out parallel to the river, with the triangular space between used for a market place and a church. Old Fort Frontenac was still shown clearly, together with other military installations, at the small peninsula jutting into the harbour. Ownership is indicated for each lot, but most of them do not seem to have been built on as yet. The town's commercial functions centred on the waterfront, with a line of shops facing Front Street and the port facilities.

patterns of development which tended to inhibit the effective delivery of services to outlying areas.²⁸

In Kingston, the original compact townsite was fully occupied by 1815, according to provincial officials who argued against any projected move of the capital from York. The plan of Kingston for that year, however, indicates that while an owner was shown for every lot, most of these lots had not been built on. The high cost of these relatively small lots, however, forced the development of a new subdivision immediately to the northwest of the townsite, where substantial houses of merchants or professionals were built, along with churches and schools.²⁹ Most new development was on a small scale; an exception was the energetic activity of Archdeacon George Stuart who developed his farm lot No. 24, just beyond the town limits to the west. His imposing mansion, Summerhill, was carefully isolated in the centre of his property. In a small area next to the town, he laid out a large number of very small lots which were to be sold to labourers and mechanics who could not afford city land costs and taxes.³⁰ Most of the houses were built after 1840 in several densely packed rows parallel to the city boundary at Barrie Street, as is clearly shown in the map of 1850.

Toronto's relatively modest expansion before 1820 was carefully controlled, but the direction of development after 1820 depended on the character of the developer. Two important sources of new land for development were the government reserves. The eastern reserve located near the Don River was

generally regarded as an undesirable area because of the swampy conditions. Subdivision proceeded on a piecemeal basis during the 1840s and the 1850s; both the lots and the houses were small in this area which was later to become known as Cabbagetown. The western reserve development followed a different pattern with the government selling sections next to the townsite at high prices in the 1830s. Grandiose plans for incorporating unusual geometric patterns and circular rounds were never implemented, but the residential area did include several squares such as Clarence Square on lower Spadina Avenue. The westernmost portion of this reserve was devoted to public uses including a hospital, a reformatory, exhibition grounds, and a park.³¹

The major sources of new urban land for Toronto's expansion, however, were the park lots to the north, between what is now Queen and Bloor Streets, which had been granted to government officials by Simcoe. The private development of these lots was of two kinds. Some were developed for private speculative purposes without any co-ordination with adjoining lots. In contrast to the old town, new streets laid out were a tangle of conflicting patterns. An example was the suburb west of Yonge and north of Queen known as Macaulay Town, which was a warren of houses, shops, and factories. Other park lots, on the other hand, were developed in larger units or, in some cases, large portions were reserved for public use as parks and as sites for major public institutions such as Osgoode Hall.³²

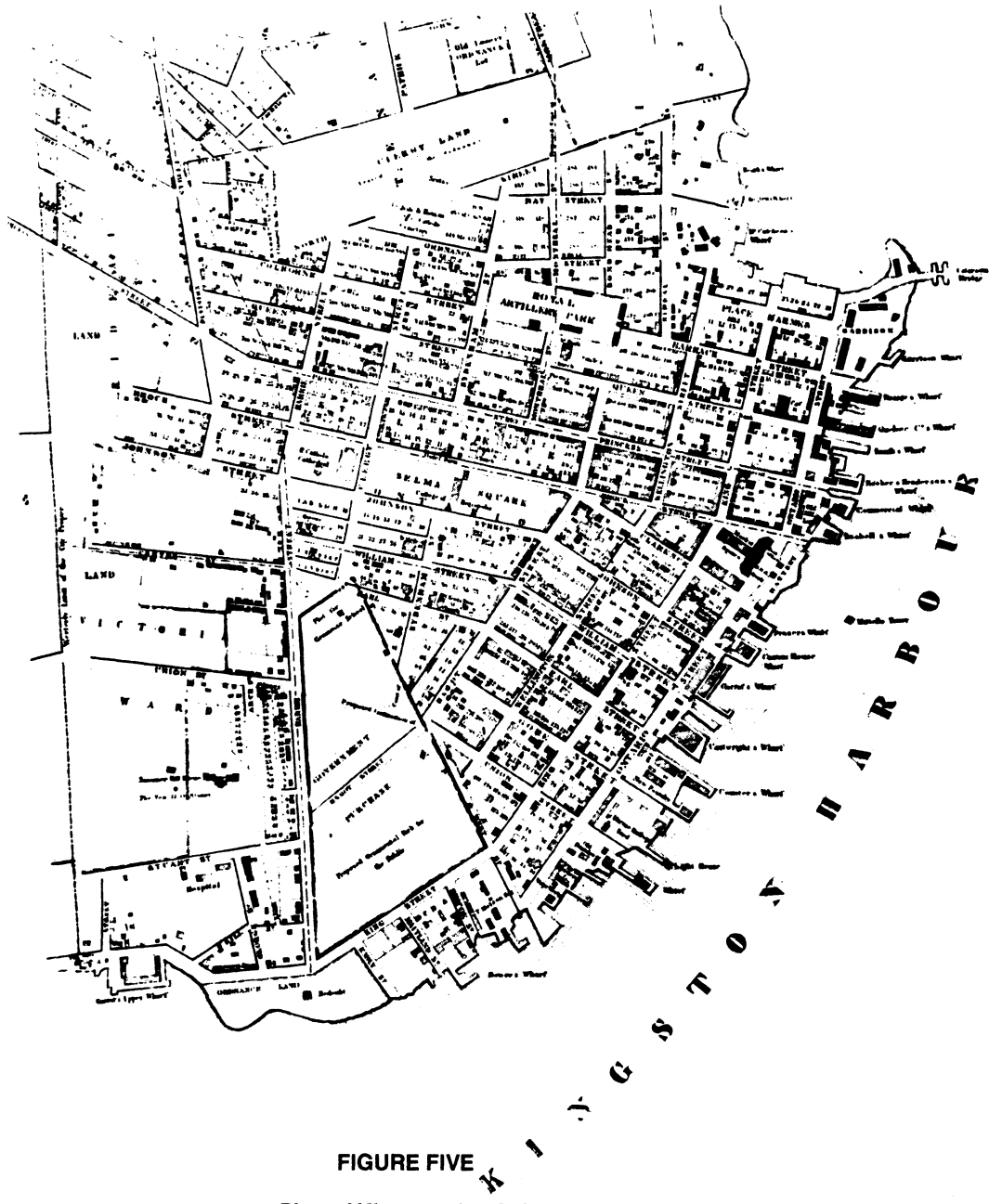


FIGURE FIVE
Plan of Kingston in 1850

Source: Public Archives of Canada.

The town still fronted on the harbour with its numerous wharves, but Fort Frontenac no longer appears on the map. The triangular public space has become the site of the city's magnificent City Hall, built by George Browne. In the suburb of Stuartville (lower left of map) can be seen Archdeacon Stuart's mansion, Summerhill, and the densely packed rows of workers' houses parallel to Barrie Street.

The process of subdivision — that is, turning raw land into housing lots — involved at least three stages in Toronto. Park lots or farm lots on the periphery of the town were divided into transitional lots of more than .41 hectares (one acre), a size suitable for sale to speculators. These were eventually subdivided into new urban lots of .41 hectares or less. This stage of the process usually created the basic street pattern. The pressure for greater density near the central core led to the third phase, the re-subdivision of urban lots into smaller units with narrower lot frontages to accommodate by mid-century the increasingly larger population, which had only limited means to buy or rent.³³

In Hamilton, ownership of the land in and around the

growing city was originally concentrated in the hands of a small elite. The trend by mid-century was to more owners, but a small number continued to hold the major portion. The members of this elite were among the leading promoters of Hamilton's growth and included such provincial politicians as Alan McNab and directors of banks, railways, and other enterprises. When they subdivided and sold their land, it was usually to speculators among the city's professional and business establishment, for urban land ownership provided important collateral in their commercial ventures. Small-scale developers and builders eventually purchased the lots and built for specific individuals. With no regulation, and with vacant lots dispersed over a wide area, development was a decentralized process resulting in a fragmented pattern of urban growth.³⁴

As the urban places of Upper Canada expanded spatially, their internal organization reflected their commercial functions. One feature common to most of the major towns was the commercial and industrial domination of the central core. Prior to the railroad age of the 1850s, this meant a concentration of warehouses, retail stores, and some industry near the harbour facilities. The social geography of the commercial town maintained some vestiges of an earlier type — the so-called “pre-industrial” city — where the powerful were located at the centre near the main religious and political institutions, while the poor lived on the periphery. But the commercial type’s social geography also contained elements of the reverse, which would later become the characteristic form during the industrial age. For this reason it should probably be regarded as a separate type rather than as merely a transition from pre-industrial to industrial. In the smaller towns, like Niagara, the most expensive and the modest houses were mixed in a random fashion,³⁵ while in medium sized places, like Kingston and Hamilton, the wealthiest and the poor could be found near the core and on the periphery. In Kingston, for example, wealthy merchants such as John Mowat were leaving downtown houses or dwellings over shops for country estates in the suburbs. At the same time, the poor were often located in villages of sorts around the outskirts of town.³⁶

The largest city, Toronto, was something of an anomaly in that much of its land assignment and physical organization was established while it was a small colonial capital. More than any other town in Upper Canada, early Toronto could have been characterized as a traditional, pre-industrial place, for it was dominated by a non-commercial political and religious elite who

built their pretentious mansions near the main institutions symbolizing imperial authority. By mid-century, however, Toronto was the commercial emporium of the province and commercial and industrial uses dominated the central core. Like all of the towns of its time, expansion was limited by the lack of public transit, but a degree of residential sorting out had taken place. Rich and poor lived both near the centre and in the suburbs, but the development practices of the park lot owners had built in some spatial differentiation between the rich and the poor on the periphery. The city’s social landscape could be considered “heterodox” and “a jumble of confusion,” as Peter Goheen puts it, only when compared to the situation by the end of the century when a far higher degree of segregation took place.³⁷

Each urban place had some particular physical characteristic — its setting or the peculiarities of local development — that made it look different from other places, but the styles of institutional, commercial, and residential buildings were remarkably standardized across the province and across British North America, for that matter. Some of the major architects such as George Browne and William Thomas took on assignments in several provinces; the rather pompous government buildings looked the same in every province; commercial streets like King in Toronto, Clarence in Kingston, King in Hamilton, and even Ridout in London were filled with stolid Georgian brick and stone structures, with parapet gables acting as fire walls between joined buildings. Residentially, however, the distinction between urban and rural styles that was apparent in Lower Canada did not exist in Upper Canada. Perhaps because most Upper Canadian towns were laid out on spacious grids, the detached



FIGURE SIX

Toronto at mid-century.

Source: Royal Ontario Museum.

At mid-century Toronto crowded near the harbour, facing the wharves across Front Street. Considerable construction had also taken place to the north along Yonge Street, creating an “inverted T” shape. The city’s streets were still lined with sober Georgian buildings, but major new public structures now punctuated the skyline, their classical revival styles a reminder that Toronto was keeping up with current tastes in British North America. For example, St. Lawrence Hall, built after the fire of 1849 had destroyed part of the central core, was designed in Renaissance style by William Thomas who also built the Court House in Niagara and the City Hall in Guelph. The hall’s crowning cupola was similar to those on city halls in Kingston and Cobourg.

house was the norm. Row housing, or the terraces of the British mercantile class in Montreal, was not common in Upper Canada, except in Kingston.

As the towns and cities grew and matured, changes in architectural styles reflected the influence of trends from the outside. Chronologically, the traditions can be divided into the eighteenth century classical and the nineteenth century classical revival. The classical tradition came partly via American vernacular architecture and was characterized by regularity and order. Its early phase, usually referred to as Georgian, emphasized the art of building well, and many Loyalist houses featured the symmetrical arrangement of central doorways and carefully proportioned windows. A later phase, Regency, saw the addition of more decoration such as elaborate fanlights over doors, as in many homes of the 1820s in Niagara, the Grange and Campbell houses in York, and the Eldon house in London. By the early Victorian period, classical revival styles were used as symbolic language to represent the class and cultural aspirations of British officials and the local elite. An example was Osgoode Hall, seat of the Law Society of Upper Canada, modelled on the imposing club houses which appeared in British cities after Waterloo. Other buildings used Renaissance design to proclaim British cultural supremacy. Examples were Kingston's City Hall, Toronto's St. Lawrence Hall, and Cobourg's Victoria Hall, all built by British or British-born architects. Residential versions were Alan McNab's Dundurn Castle in Hamilton, John Cartwright's Rockwood in Kingston, William Cawthra's mansion in Toronto, and innumerable Tuscan villas in every town.³⁸ Far less is known about the styles and circumstances of the average or modest homes of the period. Judging by what remains in places like Niagara, these were often small but well-proportioned, with some evidence of decoration to indicate the presence of current taste.³⁹ The poor, on the other hand, probably lived in small and insubstantial structures made of poor or used lumber or logs, or were accommodated in rooms behind a shop or in servants' quarters in a home.

Travellers through Upper Canada usually commented on the appearance of towns, and while their judgements were based on only brief visits, their impressions were fairly consistent and reflected the changing character of the towns. Visitors to early Kingston were usually surprised to find a wooden town when "the materials for building with stone are so easy to be had here."⁴⁰ The use of limestone was extensive after 1815, however, resulting in homes that were "spacious and commodious," although "very few were remarkable for the taste or elegance of their structure."⁴¹ Particular interest was shown in the new city hall, which served as the provincial parliament buildings in the early 1840s, and the fine stone structures of the military garrison at Fort Henry across the harbour. Early York came in for more than its share of sarcasm, and even a sympathetic observer in 1829 complained that it was "all suburb . . . the town is so scattered that I hardly know where the centre may be."⁴² But Charles Dickens was impressed with the appearance and mercantile character of the city in 1842:

The streets are well paved, and lighted with gas; the houses are large and goods in the shops excellent. Many of them have a display of goods in their windows, such as may be seen in thriving country towns in England; and there are some which would do no discredit to the metropolis itself.⁴³

It was a tribute that increasingly could be applied to each of the major cities and towns. In his *Canadian Gazeteer*, published in 1846, W.H. Smith described younger towns like Bytown as "fast improving in appearance;" Hamilton's merchants were building "almost exclusively of stone;" London consisted of handsome streets of brick buildings three and four stories high after the fires of 1844 and 1845 had destroyed the old commercial core.⁴⁴ The ever-present danger of fire limited the invest-

ment and therefore the quality of much urban building until improved fire control was developed later in the century,⁴⁵ but contemporary observers were usually impressed with the progress which had been made by mid-century.⁴⁶

III

A final word on how these pieces fit together requires a comment on the social order which existed in this urban society. Conclusions about class structure can only be tentative at this stage, for there has been little systematic work beyond that for Hamilton in the 1850s. It seems clear that cities, regardless of size or age, grew more sharply stratified; social divisions became clearer and the gulf between classes widened. It would also appear that property was less equally distributed as time went on; Michael Katz estimates that the wealthiest 5 per cent in Hamilton owned 50 per cent of the city's assessed wealth.⁴⁷ Certainly class exclusiveness in terms of residential segregation had emerged as an element of the social landscape, and ethnicity and religion were strong factors in determining membership in particular classes.

There seems little question that a small elite controlled the political and economic systems of the province and made many of the decisions which determined the direction of urban growth and physical evolution.⁴⁸ What is particularly significant about members of this elite from the point of view of urban development is that they were primarily urban-centred. Individual members identified themselves with the interests of the places in which they lived. Their major base was York-Toronto, for the political and administrative connection was crucial to the nature of their power, but an alliance system branched out into every urban and rural area of the province. As the province matured, the make-up of this elite evolved from that of a traditional upper class based on government position and land ownership, to one of interlocking attachments to politics and entrepreneurial pursuits. Their activities also overlapped into other areas of society, for they dominated or influenced municipal government, social organizations, the churches, and voluntary associations.

The presence of this elite in the cities points to a final qualification that must be made about the character of urban development in Upper Canada. By mid-century, the urban centres had evolved from colonial entrepôts and imperial outposts to ambitious commercial cities eager to carve out their own little empires. In fact, the basic foundations had been established for the full-scale urban system that would emerge more definitely later in the century. And yet, there was more than a little of the traditional colonial town remaining in these places that now so obviously lived by commerce. They shared these remnants of colonial character with other British North American urban centres, for all operated in much the same political, social, and economic context. In this respect they probably differed significantly from American commercial cities. These differences may not appear when comparing occupational structures, but are more likely to surface if municipal institutions, for example, are examined, including questions about incorporation, who ran local government, and who had the right to vote. Other areas which warrant examination include social organization in terms of religion, education, and culture. It may well be that the British North American experience led to a particular brand of commercial city that has not yet been clearly recognized.

NOTES

1. The basic account of Upper Canada's history, Gerald M. Craig, *Upper Canada, The Formative Years, 1784-1841* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1963), tends to ignore urban development. The best general examinations of the towns and cities of this region are Jacob Spelt, *Urban Development in South Central Ontario* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1972); J.M.S. Careless, "Some Aspects of Urbanization in Nineteenth Century Ontario," in F.H. Armstrong, H.A. Stevenson, and J.D. Wilson, eds., *Aspects of Nineteenth Century Ontario* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1973); R. Louis Gentilecore and David Wood, "A Military Colony in a Wilderness: The Upper Canada Frontier," in J. David Wood, ed., *Perspectives on Landscape and Settlement in Nineteenth Century Ontario* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1975); C.F.J. Whebell, "Corridors: a Theory of Urban Systems," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 59 (1969), 1-26.
2. *Seventeenth Report of the Department of Public Records and Archives of Ontario, 1928* (Toronto: King's Printer, 1929), 63-67.
3. *Ibid.*, 108.
4. *Ibid.*, 200.
5. Simcoe to Henry Dundas, June 21, 1794, in E.A. Cruikshank, ed., *The Correspondence of Lieutenant-Governor John Graves Simcoe* (Toronto: Ontario Historical Society, 1923-31), Vol. II p. 284; also, Nov. 17, 1791, *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 82.
6. Simcoe to Dundas, Aug. 12, 1791, *Ibid.*, vol. I, p. 44.
7. Simcoe to Dundas, June 21, 1794, *Ibid.*, vol. II, p. 284.
8. One of Simcoe's fullest descriptions of his overall design is given in a letter to Dundas, Sept. 20, 1793, *Ibid.*, vol. II, pp. 56-65.
9. Dorchester to Simcoe, Nov. 5, 1795, *Ibid.*, vol. IV, p. 123.
10. Dundas to Simcoe, Mar. 16, 1794, *Ibid.*, vol. II, p. 185.
11. James Vance, *This Scene of Man: The Role and Structure of the City in the Geography of Western Civilization* (New York: Harper-Row, 1977), pp. 24-26.
12. Maurice Beresford, *New Towns of the Middle Ages* (London: Butterworth, 1967), p. 381.
13. Gilbert Camblin, *The Town in Ulster* (Belfast: Mullan, 1951), pp. 17-46.
14. Margaret Angus, *The Old Stones of Kingston* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1966), pp. 8, 48; J.D. Stewart and Ian Wilson, *Heritage Kingston* (Kingston: Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 1973), pp. 38, 53.
15. William Kirby, *Annals of Niagara* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1927), p. 73; Peter John Stokes, *Old-Niagara-on-the-Lake* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), pp. 8-9.
16. *Seventeenth Report*, pp. 63, 67.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 107.
18. Copies of plans entitled "Plan of Toronto Harbour, 1788," by Gother Mann, and "Plan of the Harbour of Toronto with the proposed Town and Settlement, 1788," by M. Collins, are in the Map Collection, Metropolitan Toronto Public Library (MTPL). There has been some confusion about the purpose of this plan, for some commentators appear to think that the entire plan was meant for urban purposes. See, for example, Eric Arthur, *Toronto, No Mean City* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964), p. 10. However, only the central portion was to be urban, with the outlying blocks for farming purposes.
19. C.E. Cartwright, ed., *Life and Letters of the Late Hon. Richard Cartwright* (Toronto: Belford, 1876), pp. 54-55.
20. "Plan of Toronto Harbour," 1792, by J. Bouchette, indicates a town site .8 kilometres by .4 kilometres. The actual grid is pictured in the "Plan of York Harbour, 1793," by A. Aitken. Both in MTPL. See also, Simcoe Papers, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 89, and vol. IV, p. 284.
21. "Plan for the enlargement of York . . .", 1797, D.W. Smith, in MTPL. For a general description, see Donald Kerr and Jacob Spelt, *The Changing Face of Toronto* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1965), pp. 55-73.
22. Lois Evans, *Hamilton: The Story of a City* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1970), pp. 80, 100.
23. The plan is reproduced in A. Bremner, *City of London, Ontario* (London: London Printing, 1897).
24. T.L. Nagy, *Ottawa in Maps* (Ottawa: Public Archives of Canada, 1974), pp. 3-10.
25. See the plan for Buffalo in John Reps, *Town Planning in Frontier America* (Princeton: Univ. Press, 1969), p. 352.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 298.
27. (London, 1831), vol. I., pp. 116, 118; Lewis Mumford, *The City in History* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1961), p. 389.
28. Michael Doucet, "Speculation and the Physical Development of Mid-19th Century Hamilton," in G.A. Stelter and A.F.J. Artibise, eds., *Shaping the Canadian Urban Landscape: Essays on the City-Building Process* (forthcoming); Isobel Ganton, "Land Subdivision in Toronto, 1851-1883," in Stelter and Artibise, *Ibid.*,
29. Angus, *op. cit.*, p. 48.
30. Patricia Malcolmson, "The Poor in Kingston, 1815-1850," in Gerald Tulchinsky, ed., *To Preserve and Defend: Essays on Kingston in the Nineteenth Century* (Montreal: McGill-Queens Univ. Press, 1976), pp. 288-290.
31. "Proposed sketch of an intended addition to the Town of York," H.J. Castle, 1833, and "Plan of Lands Lately Surveyed Adjacent to Toronto Garrison," H.J. Castle, 1834, both in MTPL.
32. For an excellent description of these developments, see Peter Goheen, *Victorian Toronto, 1850-1900: Pattern and Process of Growth* (Chicago: Univ of Chicago Dept. of Geography, 1970), pp. 53-54. For a selection of documents on Toronto's early development, see Edith Firth, ed., *The Town of York*, 2 vols. (Toronto: Toronto Public Libraries, 1962 and 1966). The best discussion of Toronto's economic development during this period is F.H. Armstrong, "Metropolitanism and Toronto re-examined, 1825-1850," in G.A. Stelter and A.F.J. Artibise, eds., *The Canadian City: Essays in Urban History* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1977).
33. Ganton, *op. cit.*
34. Doucet, *op. cit.*
35. Based on an examination of the houses pictured in Stokes, *op. cit.*
36. Malcolmson, *op. cit.*, pp. 288-290.
37. Goheen, *op. cit.*, p. 84.
38. The most reliable guides to stylistic changes, although terminology and chronology differ, are Alan Gowans, *Building Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1966); Marion MacRae and Anthony Adamson, *The Ancestral Roof, Domestic Architecture of Upper Canada* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1963); Ralph Greenhill, K. Macpherson, and D. Richardson, *Ontario Towns* (Ottawa: Oberon, 1974); Arthur, *op. cit.*
39. See, for example, houses pictured in Stokes, *op. cit.*, pp. 75, 107, 109.
40. Patrick Campbell, *Travels in the Interior Inhabited Parts of North America* (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1794 edition reprinted 1937), pp. 139-140.
41. Bouchette, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 77.
42. Audrey S. Miller, ed., *The Journals of Mary O'Brien, 1828-1838* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1968), p. 115.
43. *American Notes* (London: Macmillan, 1910), p. 244.
44. W.H. Smith, *Canadian Gazetteer* (Toronto: Rowell, 1846), pp. 24, 75, 100.
45. John Weaver and P. De Lottinville, "The Conflagration and the City: Disaster and Progress in British North America during the Nineteenth Century," Unpublished paper delivered at the Canadian Historical Association, London, June, 1978.
46. See, for example, L.S. Fallis, "The Idea of Progress in the Province of Canada," in W.L. Morton, ed., *The Shield of Achilles* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1968).
47. Michael Katz, *The People of Hamilton, Canada West: Family and Class in a Mid-Nineteenth Century City* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1975), p. 31.
48. Among the best of the recent studies are F.H. Armstrong, "The Carfrae Family, A Study in Early Toronto Toryism," *Ontario History*, 54 (1962), pp. 161-181; R. Burns, "God's Chosen People: The Origins of Toronto Society, 1793-1818," Canadian Historical Association, *Historical Papers*, 1973, pp. 213-224; J.K. Johnson, "The U.C. Club and the Upper Canadian Elite, 1837-1840," *Ontario History*, 69 (1977), pp. 151-168; J.E. Rea, "Two Richelieus in Upper Canada," *Ontario History*, 70 (1978), pp. 189-199; J. Clarke, "The Role of the Political Position and Family and Economic Linkage in Land Speculation in the Western District of Upper Canada, 1788-1815," *Canadian Geographer* (1975), pp. 18-45.