

Urban History Review Revue d'histoire urbaine

URBAN HISTORY REVIEW
REVUE D'HISTOIRE URBAINE

The Toronto Harbour Commission Archives

Michael Moir

Volume 17, Number 2, October 1988

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1017657ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1017657ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (print)

1918-5138 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this note

Moir, M. (1988). The Toronto Harbour Commission Archives. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 17(2), 112–115.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1017657ar>

The development and management of Toronto's waterfront are issues that have challenged the city's administrators and citizens since the late 18th century. The sheltered waters of Toronto Bay, protected to the south by a narrow peninsula of slowly shifting sand, was one of the principal features that attracted Simcoe to the area, and the harbour continued to dominate the growth of the city until the middle of the next century. As Sandford Fleming remarked before the Canadian Institute in June 1850, "To the unequalled excellence of this harbour..., the most facile outlet for the productions of the back country, is principally due the rapid and uninterrupted progress in commerce and in wealth of the western capital."¹ This role was soon largely usurped by the burgeoning network of railways that spread out from Toronto, but the harbour remained an important thoroughfare for certain types of cargo, especially those involved in resource extraction, and recreational use. Its efficient management provided competition for the railways as well as opportunities for diversified industrial expansion, but it was a resource that could not be taken for granted. Natural forces and years of human neglect would lead to its steady deterioration. Fleming continued his address before the Canadian Institute by noting that the maintenance and improvement of the harbour, "so as to ensure a continuance of prosperity, becomes, therefore, of the utmost importance," and, although the shape and character of the waterfront have changed considerably, its development has remained an important issue in Toronto.

As it was in Fleming's day, the answer to this challenge has been management by commission. Appointments of commissioners to oversee harbour improvements were made in 1833 and 1837, when funds were appropriated for the construction and extension of what came to be known as the Queen's Wharf. It was soon realized that such works did nothing to inhibit the natural forces that constantly threatened the harbour,

such as the alluvial deposits of the Don River. In January 1834 the group supervising the construction of the pier called for the appointment of "a permanent and scientific commission to prosecute works in their opinion so urgently called for to secure to the country the best yet most perishable harbour on Lake Ontario."² Although it took 16 years for the government to respond favourably to this recommendation, Toronto harbour has since been cared for by two successive corporate bodies whose boards have represented the interests of the municipal and provincial (later federal) governments and the Toronto Board of Trade. The large amount of information generated during the management of the waterfront has been retained almost intact by the more recent of these organizations. These records form the foundation for the Toronto Harbour Commission Archives, a repository that holds considerable potential for a wide range of scholarly, corporate, and popular inquiries, and yet has remained largely untapped.

The first permanent body responsible for the maintenance of the bay was the Commissioners of the Harbour of Toronto (more commonly known as the harbour trust) that was established in 1850 after a prolonged campaign led by the Toronto Board of Trade. Under the terms of its act of incorporation,³ the harbour trust was charged with the preparation of plans and estimates for the improvement of the harbour, the management of any works undertaken, and the regulation of vessels plying the waters of Toronto Bay. Its broad mandate implied a significant role in planning and development, and the first step along this path was taken in 1854 when the board offered cash prizes for the best essays on the improvement of the harbour.⁴ These and other ideas were subsequently put into substantive form by Kivas Tully, the noted architect who served as the trust's consulting engineer between 1853 and his death in 1905. Their implementation, however, was usually impeded by the scant resources of the trust. As a result, this period of stewardship has

been portrayed by historians as one of ineptitude and inactivity.⁵ Such characterizations disregard the various improvements that the trust did carry out during the 19th century, as well as its prolonged battles with City Council and the federal government to win support for its ideas.⁶ These interpretations can be challenged in part by a consideration of the records left behind by the board and staff of the harbour trust.

The documentary evidence for this period is for the most part written, although a few extant engineering drawings prepared by Tully after 1853 record the development of the Queen's Wharf. The trust's other activities are fairly well represented through approximately six linear meters of board minutes, correspondence, leases, agreements, financial papers, and harbour dues registers. These documents provide detailed information about the administrative development of the trust, the activities of historically important officials (such as Tully and harbour masters Hugh Richardson and John Carr), and various initiatives undertaken after 1870 to ease the chronic and financially draining dependency upon dredging to battle the natural forces continually shaping the waterfront. While recent scholarship has begun to examine some of these measures,⁷ much work remains to be done to place the impact of the harbour trust upon the development of the waterfront into a balanced perspective.

One of the principal reasons that the trust experienced so many difficulties in its work was its primary dependency upon harbour dues, a tariff placed on incoming cargo, to finance the bulk of its operations. It is perhaps ironic that this meagre source of revenue should provide perhaps the most significant heritage of the trust: the various registers and ledgers that kept an itemized account of these amounts. Registers of ships' arrivals were maintained on a daily basis by the deputy harbour master, indicating the name of the vessel, its master,

the wharf in Toronto where it was berthed, the type and origin of its cargo, and often the shipping agent or merchant responsible for payment of the dues. In later years (such records are still created by the harbour commission) this register would also include a ship's destination when leaving Toronto. This information would subsequently be transferred to a dues ledger, which indicated the amounts payable by each vessel or its agent, and a dues register, which provided a statistical summary of each day's activities. Although these records were kept to serve a mundane housekeeping function, they now represent an unrivalled statistical resource to trace the pattern of waterborne traffic entering the port. Along with registers of vessel ownership retained by the National Archives of Canada, these volumes also suggest significant avenues of research for those wishing to build upon recent work on the little-known maritime aspects of the city's history.⁸

The inability of the harbour trust and other agencies to deal effectively with the problems facing the waterfront led to the creation of a new managing body, the Toronto Harbour Commissioners, through a federal act of parliament dated 19 May 1911.⁹ The legislation suggested a role similar to that originally set out for the harbour trust, but the resources given to its successor were far beyond those available to the trust. In the first place, the new commission enjoyed a much larger jurisdiction, for the act established the boundaries of the harbour as the eastern and western city limits (including all waterfront property in between) and extending one mile south beyond the Gibraltar Point lighthouse into Lake Ontario. Secondly, the act clearly set out the city's intention to transfer ownership of its waterfront property to the new board of commissioners. This transfer took place in December 1911, and through a variety of transactions involving the railways that had long dominated the bay's north shore, the harbour commission soon controlled more than 90 per cent of Toronto's

waterfront between the Humber River and the eastern beaches. This gave the board considerable security when borrowing funds to finance harbour improvements, and freed it from the debilitating constrictions of the slender revenues generated by harbour dues.

The financial development was extremely important, for it provided the harbour commission with the means to answer the substantial expectations that accompanied its formation. As public indignation over the dilapidated state of the harbour swelled after the turn of the century, the Toronto Board of Trade gained support for its campaign to create an agency that would replace the previous piecemeal approach to development with a comprehensive plan for the waterfront featuring the reclamation of valuable industrial properties out of the stagnant marsh lands of Ashbridge's Bay.¹⁰ This reclamation effort formed the cornerstone of the harbour commission's waterfront plan of 1912, which also included the recreational development of the western lakeshore to provide aquatic clubs, a bathing beach, and an amusement park as well as the provision of modern dock and rail facilities throughout the central and eastern sections of the harbour. Although the Harbour Commission was ostensibly considered a port authority, the events preceding and following its incorporation clearly indicated that its mandate was to serve as a planning and development agency for Toronto's waterfront.¹¹

Most discussions of the harbour commission have justifiably focused upon the ideas embodied in the 1912 plan, but its subsequent implementation, including various modifications to adapt it to the changing needs of the city, is equally significant. Throughout the succeeding decades Ashbridge's Bay gradually retreated to the east under constant attack from the harbour commission's dredges, and beginning in 1917 industry began to settle on the reclaimed lands. The central waterfront

became the site of efficient passenger and freight-handling facilities as well as of commercial concerns such as Crosse & Blackwell and Tip Top Tailors. To the west, the amusement complex at Sunnyside developed into a popular and important attraction. The basic principles of the plan remained the blueprint for development of the waterfront until the 1950s, and the gradual implementation of most of its recommendations is a reflection of the success that the harbour commission enjoyed during its initial foray into urban planning. Other related activities undertaken by the commission are not understood as well, and their impact upon larger questions of urban development have been generally overlooked. The expertise gained during the formulation of the plan, for instance, led to the appointment of Commissioner R. Home Smith and Chief Engineer Edward L. Cousins to the Federal Plan Commission in 1913, and this combination was repeated in 1918 when both men were made responsible for fuel administration to meet the shortages caused by the war. Cousins and his staff had also been prominent in the preparation of a report recommending radial entrances to the city in 1915.

Council would turn to Cousins and the commission once again in 1918, when the engineer was appointed the city's industrial commissioner. Cousins toured Britain and the United States in an attempt to encourage parent companies to open branch plants in Toronto. Meanwhile, his staff became visible in the local promotion of industrial sites and it would soon go on to manage the Toronto Publicity Bureau. By the late 1920s the Harbour Commission had also assumed a central role in the city's attempts to accommodate airports and over the course of the next decade was assigned responsibility for the development of sites on the Toronto Islands and in the township of Malton. The construction of the St Lawrence Seaway and the creation of Metropolitan Toronto during the 1950s called for responses to a number of important issues, and the Harbour

Commission embarked on a new phase of planning and development that was almost as ambitious as its initial endeavours in 1912.

Most of these issues have had a significant impact upon Toronto's physical and economic evolution, but they have yet to receive the attention that they deserve. The Toronto Harbour Commission Archives contains ample material to support such inquiries. The written record is particularly rich, for the long-standing presence of ample storage space coupled with the permanence of the commission's administrative offices have protected the organization's records from the periodic purges that threaten most corporate memories. Board materials and the central registry files, which have traditionally served as the repository for all original correspondence and reports pertaining to the commission's affairs, have survived virtually intact and are supported by the working papers of most departments and of general managers such as Edward L. Cousins. These records reveal in a comprehensive manner the breadth of the harbour commission's activities, ranging from statements of principals and priorities that guided the planning process through the implementation of these ideas as large-scale construction projects to the subsequent promotion and development of the schemes, be they recreational, industrial, or port-related. They present a distinct perspective upon the management of an urban waterfront, one that is probably unique in Canada, not only because of their scope and content but also because they are concentrated in one archival repository.

Equally impressive is the range of graphic materials that complement these written records. Several thousand engineering drawings have been produced since the initial survey of the harbour during the summer of 1912, and the range of subjects documented by the draftsman included prominent industrial and warehouse buildings, leasehold plans that show the changes to individual sites, and annual

waterfront condition plans tracing the slowly changing nature of the harbour and its occupants. Many of these drawings have been transferred to the archives and these accessions promise to continue in the future.

The photographic heritage of the waterfront is particularly rich, and the archives retains over 30,000 images that reflect the tremendous changes of the past century. By the 1890s the city engineer's office recognized the importance of photography to record the progress of public works,¹² and the harbour commission inherited this appreciation when Cousins left that municipal department to become chief engineer. In 1914 he hired Arthur Beales, a professional photographer, to capture the improvements begun that summer. Over the next 35 years Beales took some 13,500 photographs that provide comparative views of waterfront development, and suggest the enormity of the task. They form a useful adjunct to the written records, capturing the pace of change and the alteration of important buildings and landmarks as no report could. When Beales retired in 1953, this responsibility was given to a freelance photographer, Les Baxter, who not only perpetuated the essence of Beales's work, but also introduced a new perspective by using aerial photography on a regular basis. His images are particularly important as a record of development in Humber Bay, along the central waterfront, and at the east headland of the outer harbour.

Toronto's harbour has undergone dramatic changes since the days of Simcoe and the beginnings of British settlement, and the process of change continues as the city looks to its waterfront to satisfy increasingly diversified needs. Many of the issues that lie behind this transformation, such as the difficult balance of mixed uses for waterfront property and the question of public access of these lands, are just as important today as they were in 1911, and even during the 1850s. A better understanding of these concerns, based on a critical examination of

the historical forces that have combined to shape the harbour, would undoubtedly contribute towards the ongoing dialogue concerning the fate of Toronto's waterfront (as well as other urban waterfronts throughout the country). The varied and comprehensive records that make up the Toronto Harbour Commission Archives provide a rich and relatively untapped resource for such inquiries.

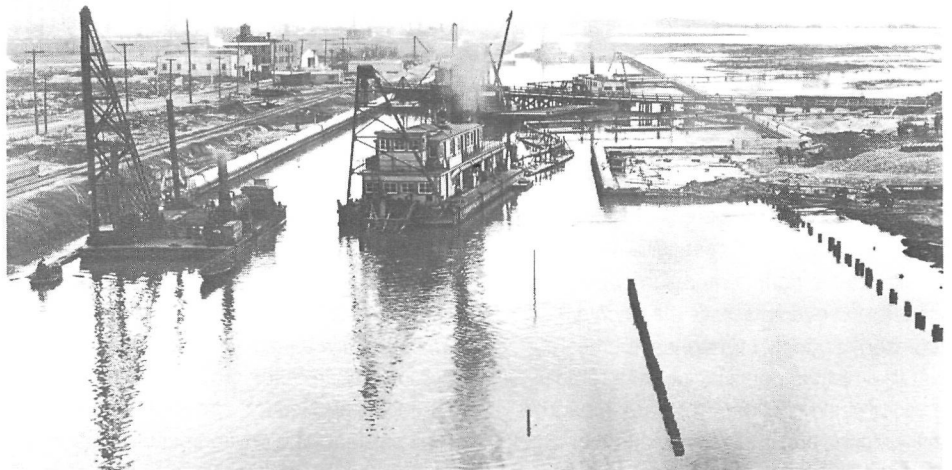
Notes

- ¹ Sandford Fleming, "Toronto harbour — its formation and preservation," *Canadian Journal*, 2 (December 1853), 105.
- ² Canada, Department of Public Works, "Report of the Commissioners appointed to superintend the improvement of the harbour of York," *Memorandum, with accompanying plans and documents relative to the past and present state of Toronto, province of Ontario* (Ottawa, 1881), 3.
- ³ Canada, *Statutes*, 13-14 Victoria, chapter 80.
- ⁴ "Reports on the improvement and preservation of Toronto harbour," *Canadian Journal*, 3 (1854), supplement.
- ⁵ See for example, James O'Mara, *Shaping Urban Waterfronts: The Role of Toronto's Harbour Commissioners, 1911 - 1960* (York University, Department of Geography, Discussion Paper No. 13, March 1976), 16-18.
- ⁶ For a brief account of these various undertakings see *Port of Toronto News*, 33: 2 (1986), 2-5.
- ⁷ See the article by Professor Gene Desfor in this issue.
- ⁸ The records of the registrar of shipping at Toronto, which cover the period between 1874 and 1919, can be found in the National Archives of Canada, Records of the Marine Branch, RG 42, vol. 239, 453-54, 484, 485 A&B. Questions of shipbuilding and ownership by Toronto's mercantile community are examined in M. E. Davidson, "Changing patterns of Great Lakes vessel ownership as a factor in the economic development of Toronto, 1850 - 1860," *Urban History Review/Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 16: 3 (February 1988), 242-54.
- ⁹ Canada, *Statutes*, 1-2 George V, chapter 26.

¹⁰ Roy Schaeffer, *The Board of Trade and the Origins of the Toronto Harbour Commissioners, 1899 - 1911* (York University, Department of Geography, Discussion Paper No. 27, September 1981). See also the article by Professor Gene Desfor in this issue.

¹¹ This theme is discussed in the article by Professor Roy Merrens in this issue.

¹² CTA, Department of the City Clerk, RG 5, *The City of Toronto Archives* (Toronto, 1986), 11.



A pile driver at work on the retaining wall of the Keating Channel, and a hydraulic suction dredge pumping fill onto the marsh lands of Ashbridge's Bay to the south. 8 December 1914.

THCA, Arthur Beales Collection, PC 1/1/335



The same view on 2 June 1930, showing the development of industries including bulk fuel companies, particularly coal and oil refining, along both sides of the Keating Channel and well into the industrial district to the south.

THCA, Arthur Beales Collection, PC 1/1/9032