

The Black Creek Watershed

By Ian Wheal

Landscape: The Area from south of Eglinton Avenue to just north of St. Clair Avenue is part Prairie-Savanna remnant (gravel bar prairie) and part upland woodlot (Carolinian forest) with some bogs and wet lands (notably at Smythe Park in the West and in the East the peat remnant area at Weston and the Black Creek Drive expressway).

The topography is hill and dale (hills bare or partly wooded) with several springs that watered the area North of Keele & St. Clair (Lavender Creek area). A few seasonal ponds once existed in hollows. Agriculture tended to be mixed farming - pasture, fruit and vegetables, market gardens, and woodlots in hollows, ravines, and on slopes. Although well watered there were seasonal variations with summers hot and very dry, even arid and semi desert conditions causing soil and sand erosion. Winds blew alternately hot and cold over the area. **The Lambton area (including the golf course) is the largest prairie remnant with an oak-savanna landscape.**

The Black Creek and Roundtree – Lavender Creek tributary were usually slow, sluggish streams with adequate water, but sometimes very shallow and subject to floods and flash floods. They were fed by an underground network of aquifers and springs. So the whole area south of Eglinton Avenue is alternately dry and moist. North of Eglinton Avenue the soils are still sandy with some clay but less prairie–savanna and generally more wooded with clearings and farming (as late as 1960 in Chalkfarm area of Jane and Wilson) being pastures and woodlots.

North of Finch Avenue the soil is more rich clay and drainage varies with small short streams (Hoover Creek – York University) and Springs Creek (out of the Downview Lands) as well as ponds, swales, and wetlands in hollows and ravines. Numerous springs in and along ravines feed the Black Creek. North of Finch Avenue the area is less hilly – more upland clay and forest.

Aboriginal or native pathways crossed Black Creek or passed just south of it on the Davenport ridge or gravel bar (East – West route) and the Carrying Place Trail to Huronia – Georgian Bay on the east side of the Humber River (North – South route). The French explorers Etienne Brule and Sieur de la Salle passed by or crossed the Black Creek watershed in the 17th Century. Other European explorers followed. European settlement was sparse and followed aboriginal encampments.

John Scarlett (1786-1865) was a pioneer settler in the south part of the Lambton area in the early 1800's. During the War of 1812 he was a dispatcher and post rider. He built Scarlett Road after the War of 1812 and built his house, called Runnymede, and a race course nearby. He gave his name to the area called Scarlett Plains (Runnymede – St. Clair)

Dundas Street was laid out in 1813 during the War of 1812 and ran along the Lake Iroquois Shoreline to south of the Davenport gravel and sand bar. Weston Road followed in 1846 running northwest across Lavender and Black Creek to the small hamlet of Weston. Mt. Denis was another hamlet along Weston Road, South of Weston. The area North of Weston was virtually empty and forested up to Woodbridge (on the Humber River).

So crossroad mills along the Humber River (Lambton, Mt. Dennis, Weston and others) were outposts in what was in pre-1850 York Country an unsettled or sparsely settled area.

A gold rush founded on rumor took place in the spring of 1824 to the Credit River area north of Brampton. A wave of immigrants traveled by Dundas Street and Scarlett Road to pass by Black Creek. But it was the railway era (1850-1856) that brought Black Creek to notice and by 1855 it was named on maps. The first railway, the Ontario, Simcoe and Huron Railway chose a middle route (rejecting the westerly Humber River and the easterly Don River) in favour of a route that followed up an indentation of the Lake Iroquois shore (across Lavender Creek) just east of Black Creek to Collingwood (1853). The Toronto and Guelph Railway (Grand Trunk) followed in 1860 and crossed the Black Creek watershed north of St. Clair Avenue. The Toronto Grey and Bruce Railway followed in 1871 partly paralleling the Grand Trunk Railway as far as Weston and then beyond to Woodbridge. The Toronto Belt Line (1892 – 1894) ran west, or rather west to east, up the Humber River to join the Grand Trunk Railway at Carleton (Davenport and Old Weston area). Cottages actually sprang up along Black Creek thanks to the Belt Line (1893). By 1914 the Toronto Suburban Railway (TSR), an electric Radial Line, crossed the Black Creek valley north of St. Clair Avenue to follow Weston Road into Woodbridge, and by 1917 the TSR had built west from the junction a short distance north of St. Clair Avenue all the way to Guelph.

The Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) established a major depot at West Toronto in 1888 and expanded west to Lambton in 1910 (West Toronto Lambton Yards). The CPR utilized the waters of Black Creek for a short time after 1888 by building an aqueduct before hooking up to the West Toronto Junction waterworks.

The Union Stockyards was started by Andrew Dods, David Rountree, and others in the summer of 1903. The stockyards took advantage of good road connections and the well drained, easily graded Davenport sand and gravel bar. After 1903 cattle and horse drover trails ran across Black Creek and Lavender Creek valleys from West York and Peel to the new stockyards. Packing houses followed soon afterwards. Urbanization quickly settled a rural area (St. Clair School, 1890-1970).