Subject to Change: The Asylum Landscape Since 1845

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FINAL draft

In May 1845, after considerable delay, the British Ordnance Department granted for the Provincial Lunatic Asylum a 50-acre (20.2-hectare) rectangle in the northern part of the Military Reserve. The grant was more strategic than munificent. The site was small—half the size of a Toronto park lot and a third to a quarter the size of a typical farm lot--and soon constrained by the requirements of military officers, railway executives, provincial and municipal officials, manufacturers, and developers. From the beginning, the asylum and its landscape have been subject to change brought about by natural forces and human factors.

The Natural Environment

The asylum site had been a Mississauga "Reserve for Camping and Council purposes." In 1818, like more than half of the area west of the town and south of today's Queen Street, it was largely covered with young trees and scrub. Among the scattered clearings, however, was one southwest of the present-day intersection of Ossington and Queen. By 1835, much of the uncleared area on the Military Reserve or Garrison Common to the south consisted "chiefly of young timber[:] Poplar, Hemlock, Maple, Oak, and a few Pines"—the "large Timber" suitable for shipbuilding having been "cut down during the late War." The asylum site itself, although "once a black ash swamp," had been at least partially cleared. Surveying it in 1845, John Howard found a toll house, garden, and sheds near the intersection.

By mid-1846 only stumps remained on the property and the Commissioners in charge of construction paid ten pounds for their removal. Two summers later when Augustus Køllner drew the scene "from nature," the area surrounding the building-in-progress was devoid of trees or stumps, although some woods obscured the southern horizon. Early photographs of the completed structure show no nearby woods; yet if left uncultivated and unmown, the ground was apparently quick to produce second growth. In 1879, patients had to cut down "superabundant" trees before planting crops on the former Crystal Palace grounds immediately to the south.

Garrison Creek lay entirely east of the asylum land. On and near that land, however, John Howard observed "several small & never failing creeks" but none "sufficiently high to supply the Tank in the Dome." The largest of these, later called Asylum Creek, rose north of today's Queen Street and flowed (between banks Howard described as "a little swampy") across the western portion of the site—where it was later channelized and ultimately buried-and thence into Garrison Creek northwest of the old fort. A smaller creek entered from just west of today's Ossington Avenue, "meander[ed] through the grounds," exited near the southeast corner, and flowed into Garrison Creek near King Street. This creek—as a swale

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entering a masonry culvert—appears in 1868 and 1910 photographs of the eastern drive to the main entrance.¹⁰

The creeks on site were neither powerful nor picturesque, nor was the surrounding topography. J.C. Tach³/₄, reporting on his official inspection of the asylum in 1860, regretted its placement in "the middle of a level tract in which no broken ground occurs to liven the prospect." A slight rise of land to the southwest apparently did little to break the general flatness and swampiness of the scene. For more than a decade after it opened the massive building was the only focal point in a stark landscape whose ornamentation was just one of many priorities.

Boundary Demarcation

Fence-building was an early concern. A wooden fence and surrounding trench or "Ha Ha" was constructed in 1846-47 to partially enclose the property. 13 Creation of a solid enclosure began in 1851 from Cumberland & Ridout's design for a front wall, east lodge, and east entrance gate. 14 Their wall, which rose at least ten feet above grade from a rubble stone foundation, was of white brick, with brick coping and brick-capped piers on either side. Directly in front of the main building, the masonry was lower but surmounted by an iron railing. Solid walls soon also stretched along the east and west boundaries; in his annual report for 1852 John Scott, the first medical superintendent, commented that the wall on three sides "has added much to the privacy of the patients."

By 1859, due to the porosity of the brick, the east and west walls were already undergoing extensive repairs. Accordingly, when Kivas Tully drew up plans in February 1860 for a masonry replacement for the wooden fence along the south boundary, he introduced stone copings for the wall and stone caps for the piers. With completion of this south wall in November 1861 the grounds were fully and, it was believed, permanently enclosed.

Yet the enclosures as originally built were anything but permanent. In 1888-89, following the government's sale to developers of 24 of the asylum's original 50 acres, the east and west boundary walls—some 1600 running feet—had to be removed from their original locations and reconstructed, from the old materials, 1) along the east side of Shaw Street and 2) east of the Dovercourt Road alignment. As had been the practice since the late 1840s, those male patients who were willing and able provided most of the labour. ¹⁶ Possibly as a result of this rebuilding, piers occur today only on the outsides of the walls: an apparent deviation from the original design and certainly from Tully's scheme for the south wall.

Although less shattering than the loss of nearly half the property, many other events also affected these walls. In the 1890s, two long sheds were built against the south one, to the east and west of the powerhouse, finally replacing rotting and inflammable coal- and wood-storage sheds dangerously close to the main building.¹⁷ These new fireproof structures, which incorporated brick from the original east and west walls, are now the only 19th-century buildings on the site.

Some changes to the walls came from a desire to open up views to and from the property. In 1878 a portion of the solid wall along Queen Street was made more transparent by the

insertion, in front of the newly built medical superintendent's residence, of ornamental iron railing plus iron pedestrian and carriage gates." A century later, the entire front wall was demolished and supplanted in part by the short, staggered stretch of modern cast-iron fencing that meets the east wall today.

The surviving walls exhibit other evidence of change. An 825-foot railway siding for coal deliveries that had to be accommodated during the 1929-40 period created the gap at the southwest corner now filled with wire-mesh fencing. Three windowlike openings in the south wall--between the present Grounds Building and the east shed—have been bricked in. The central section of this same wall has been demolished and replaced by wire-mesh fencing whose posts are set on the original foundation. Concrete copings have been substituted for stone ones atop portions of the east and west walls. A gateway near the north end of the west wall has been bricked in, leaving a visible reminder of the loss of fields to the west, the ensuing demise of the asylum farm itself, and the eventual removal of the stable yard and farm buildings originally served by this entrance.

Drives and Walkways

But to return to the 1840s: Besides fencing, another early concern was smoothing out natural and man-made irregularities. As early as July 1846 the Commissioners were awarding contracts "for deep ploughing and levelling the Mounds on the grounds." John Howard (who in 1844 had laid out St. James Cemetery and the surroundings of Osgoode Hall and who had visited several newly landscaped asylums in the States) naturally envisioned a proper setting for this asylum. In January 1848 he wrote the Commissioners about "the necessity of having the ground ploughed and levelled as early in the spring as possible." Not until March 1850, however, did he begin work on the "plan for laying out PLA grounds" that he submitted in early April. 22

Grading with hand-pushed tools and horse-drawn equipment was slow and laborious. At the end of 1850 John Scott reported "the rough and uncultivated state of the grounds," and not until a year later could he state that "a great amount of levelling has been completed." However smooth, the lawns were still subject to later disruption. During construction of Kivas Tully's east and west wings, for example, Joseph Workman, Scott's successor, wrote: "Until the place is vacated by the builders, which I apprehend will not be before a couple of years more, it will be impossible to carry out the general plan [for the grounds]..."

Yet another concern was about proper approaches to the handsome new edifice. As early as 1848 Howard noted that the carriage drive could be "Macadamized" by breaking "chippings from the stone" of building construction.²⁵ It was 1851, however, before "permanent roads" were laid down in front of the building, and 1854 before the patients had "planked, or other walks" for the exercise already acknowledged as essential to their well-being.²⁶

As the building complex grew within the walls so did the circulation system required to serve it: an evolution documented by successive site plans. There were other improvements. In 1877 third medical superintendent Daniel Clark was pleased to report the installation of "a number of gas lamps . . . to light up the drive and sidewalks from the east gate to the main entrance." By 1897 he was asking for "asphalt pavement" from the asylum to Queen Street and "a great

deal of sidewalk" to replace dangerously rotted boardwalks. Restating the need in 1904, he suggested laying down "granolithic [concrete] pavements . . . instead of planks." Not until about 1910, under fourth medical superintendent C.K. Clarke, was his predecessor's longstanding request realized. ²⁸

The Farm, Garden, and Orchard

In the spring of 1850 attention turned towards those parts of the enclosed grounds designated for food production. Much of the soil was so wet and heavy that draining it, in accordance with the best principles of scientific agriculture, was essential to good production. John Scott initiated the process and Joseph Workman carried it forward.²⁹ The first season's yield—"a large store of carrots, parsnips, onions, beets, potatoes, beans, cabbages &c. . . . for the winter and spring"—was just a beginning. The crops mentioned in annual reports over the ensuing decades included animal fodder (clover, hay, oats, and timothy; field carrots and mangel wurtzel); a broad range of vegetables for immediate and later use (4850 bunches of asparagus and 490 bushels of tomatoes in 1889, for example); pot herbs (calendula or pot marigold, mint, parsley, sage, savory, and thyme); small fruits (citrons, currants, gooseberries, grapes, melons, raspberries, rhubarb, and strawberries); and apples (195 barrels in 1878). The livestock included draft horses, milk cows, laying hens, and hogs.³⁰

In the oft-repeated opinions of the first three medical superintendents, the farm, garden, and orchard existed for several reasons. They produced most of the food for the asylum population. As a result, they made a significant contribution each year to the financial support of the institution. Equally important, they provided opportunities for selected patients to work with soil, plants, and animals, to breathe fresh air, and to get physical exercise: each of which was widely considered a valuable aspect of the care of the institutionalized and the treatment of some forms of mental illness. "Improved and quiet" male patients with farming experience were prime candidates for outdoor work. Women were given few such opportunities until 1918 when an acre of land around the convalescent hospital was fenced off to create a lawn and vegetable plot whose maintenance the women reportedly found "quite a novelty . . . and one which they enjoyed." So late as 1949 the vegetable garden, lawns, and flower beds were offering patients "useful occupation."

Due in part to the vagaries of weather and plant pests, the early medical superintendents' goals--of the asylum producing most of its own food while providing outdoor activity for suitable patients--remained perennially out of reach. The major limiting factor, however, was the inadequacy of the acreage for the number of residents. In his report for 1857 Joseph Workman observed what he, his successors, and provincial inspectors would repeat well into the next century: "The quantity of land available for cultivation is inadequate to the wants and labour capability of the Asylum."

In response, just one year later, 75 acres outside the enclosed grounds were leased to the asylum. Drained where necessary, they soon produced "astonishing" crops.³⁴ A new land crisis arose, however, with completion of the wings, in 1868 and '70. Although the Toronto asylum ranked third in North America in terms of building size and patient population, it fell behind in terms of acreage. As Inspector J.W. Langmuir pointed out, an institution of its size should have "at least 250 acres of land attached to it." In 1870, the Province, acting for the

asylum, purchased from the Federal Government 150 acres in the Garrison Common to the south, between the Grand Trunk and Great Western railways. While Langmuir pursued the need for a bridge to carry patients safely over the tracks to the new holding, Joseph Workman organized crews to fight thistles, build board fences, and drain wetlands. Aided by the steward, he personally directed and mapped an extensive system of trenching and undertiling—especially in the northern part which had, just that spring, been "so inviting to snipes and plover."³⁶

This gain of 150 acres was short-lived. Just one year later 30 of these acres were appropriated for the Central Prison and in 1878, an additional 600 square feet were taken for the Mercer Reformatory. Then, as the result of a land swap between the municipal and provincial governments in 1879, the asylum gained 19 acres on the former Crystal Palace grounds immediately beyond the south wall, but simultaneously lost a stretch of fields along the Dovercourt Road alignment.³⁷ A further assault on the asylum farm came in 1888 when, as previously mentioned, 24 of the original 50 acres were taken and the property reduced nearly to its present size. "We have no farm, and only a few acres of garden ground," Daniel Clark lamented in 1892.³⁸

For brief periods, the establishment of a branch asylum at Mimico (later Lakeshore) in 1888 and of a new asylum at Whitby in 1912 seemed to answer the older institution's need for farmland. So, too, would closing down the old asylum and moving to a larger site outside the city. Such a proposal was under serious consideration until the Great War--with its victims of shell shock and related disorders--put additional demands on all the existing facilities. As a consequence, the hospitals at Mimico and Whitby became independent (in 1892 and 1919 respectively) and kept most of their farm produce at home. The Toronto asylum had lost out once again. To make matters worse, by 1927 its property had shrunk to only 20 acres. The one-acre vegetable garden inside the west wall, plus remnants of the one-acre 12-perch apple orchard near the southeast corner, were then the only living reminders of the institution's agricultural history.

The Ornamental Grounds

After fence building, ground levelling, road building, and crop planting came ornamental landscaping. So early as October 1849, in fact, the Commissioners approved a request to "employ" some of the patients then housed at the Temporary Asylum by having them start "improving and laying out the grounds" at the new site; but these earliest efforts focussed on rough grading. 40 Regarding further enhancement, the Directors of the new asylum cautioned in 1850 that "a large sum" would be required for "the perfecting of the grounds."

Perfection in landscape is an elusive goal. John Scott reported "much progress" planting trees during his two and one-half year superintendency. ⁴² Joseph Workman carried the work forward throughout his 22-year tenure, overseeing the creation of mixed groves of evergreens and deciduous trees, as well as shrubberies and flower beds.

Many of the shade trees planted in the 19th century survived well into the 20th, when poor maintenance, disease, pollution, and natural attrition began taking their toll. Building projects have had a devastating effect. Former employee Emily Hopewell has written that in the mid-

1950s "... the lovely old trees which were in the spacious grounds facing Queen Street were torn down to make way for the new [reception] building." Still, in 1961, east and west of the Howard building and Tully wings, there remained three elms and one horse chestnut with whopping four-foot girths, and 14 elms, horse chestnuts, and maples nearly as big, at three to three and one-half feet in diameter. Many of those trees later succumbed to old age and Dutch elm disease; and the demolition and construction of the 1970s meant additional losses. Replacements around the new buildings include scattered white birches, dense stands of Austrian pines, and rows of ginkgos typical of that period.

The quadrangle, in the area created by the addition of east and west wings and easily seen from windows on three sides, was in the 19th century a valued part of the ornamental grounds, as were the side lawns. The park-like space between the front wall and the main building, however, received the most attention. Plantings that appeared sparse in photographs from the 1860s had become lush by the late 1870s. A guide to the city published in 1878 described the asylum as "inclosed in the midst of very fine grounds and flower gardens."

The ornamental portions of the grounds have at various times accommodated sleigh rides, picnics, strawberry festivals, garden parties, annual sports days, croquet, lawn and court tennis, bowling on the green, baseball and softball, and calisthenics. In the early decades, patients likely to attempt escape were taken out in walking parties (from which they occasionally escaped anyway, usually by climbing one of the walls). Sometime before 1900, enclosure of an "airing ground" allowed these individuals less-supervised access to the outdoors. Many patients have apparently always been free to walk unaccompanied.⁴⁶

From 1860 into the early 1900s, three cast-iron fountains embellished the grounds. ⁴⁷ For the larger one it is likely that Kivas Tully adapted the illustration in a manufacturer's catalogue when drafting the peacocks and dolphins on its pedestal. Placed at the intersection of the drives to the main entrance, its three tiers were clearly visible from Queen Street. The two smaller fountains, standing 175 feet apart some 65 feet from the rear of the main building, provided focal points in the long, mirror-image parterres within the quadrangle. In 1893, when construction of the chapel/amusement/work hall disrupted this area, they were moved close to the main entrance. Later artifacts to grace the front lawn have ranged from an ornamental birdbath, circa 1950, to *Cutouts*, the competition-winning wood sculpture by Colette Whiten that stood near the northeast corner from 1978 until late 1993. ⁴⁸

Lawns and trees have been constant elements of the ornamental landscape. More ephemeral, floral displays have included dense, well-rounded shrubberies in front and hedges and parterres in the quadrangle, in the 1860s and '70s; crescent-shaped beds filled with annuals of one colour edged with another, around 1900; tiered circles with cannas at their centre, in the 1930s; perennial borders ablaze with lilies and roses, circa 1940; a so-called "Japanese garden" composed of horizontal junipers, chipped brick, and precast pavers, in the late 1970s; weed-free mass plantings in the courtyards at the start of the '90s; and "I[heart]CAMH" spelled out with clipped evergreens in 1999-2000. 49

A refreshing innovation of the 1990s has been the involvement of people from the community at large. The Heritage Garden Project, envisioned by staff member Steven

Hughes in 1992 and partially funded by grants from the Evergreen and Friends of the Environment foundations, brought together staff, students, clients, and neighbours. Massplanted junipers soon shared space with native trees, shrubs, grasses, and wildflowers chosen to attract butterflies and hummingbirds. During the same period, nearby residents also created a community garden east of the greenhouse, a wildflower garden beside the tennis court, and—in the summer of 1999--a zucchini-covered arbour on the front lawn. ⁵⁰ What next?

Conclusion

History teaches that this landscape, like any other, is subject to change. It is important to identify those elements, both above and below ground, that merit preservation and/or documentation. The Toronto Historical Board has designated the walls, but the two sheds remain vulnerable and all the old masonry needs conservation. No current tree inventory or ongoing program of tree maintenance and renewal exists, although community gardener Martin Rudd has proposed creating one. Ver half the original 50 acres have been lost, but those that remain include valuable pieces of Toronto's built and open-space heritage: a legacy from those who began working these grounds more than 150 years ago.

Notes

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