

**Good old days:** This picture was taken in 1907 and shows Hanlan's Point Hotel. The hotel was later burned to the ground. Many of the old grand wooden buildings were destroyed by fire.

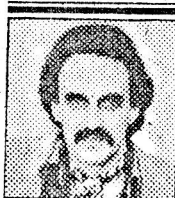
# Toronto Islands: A little country in a city centre

Toronto is built along a fairly featureless shoreline with no commanding hills or heights. The only vantage point from which the city's outline can be read as a distinctive shape is from Toronto Island.

This rare sense of vantage, of near remoteness, gives the Island its special appeal. The view of Toronto's bright towers reflected on the black harbor waters on a fine summer night is the image that define the city.

Seen through a screen of pines and willows, Metro seems almost mysterious across the way; a miniature Manhattan, modern and proud yet amiably accessible.

The Island was not always an island. On early maps it is named the Peninsula and is shown as a straggling sandbar enclosing the harbor at the marshy outlet of the Don River.



**LEON  
WHITESON  
Discovering  
Toronto**

When York was established in 1793 the Peninsula was reserved as Crown land. Only the Ward and Goodwin families were allowed as permanent homesteaders.

In 1858 a great storm on the lake cut through the Eastern Gap. Shifting sands swept by wave action from the Scarborough Bluffs divided the Island into a long spine and cluster of small islets along its four-mile length.

The first real house built on the Peninsula was Governor General Lord Sydenham's summer residence in 1839. Apart from this half-brick, half-timber house there were a few primitive cabins used by fishermen.

The Gibraltar Point lighthouse keeper had a small dwelling at the western edge. Most of the Island was covered in pines and Balm of Gilead.

## Ran first ferry

In the early 1840s the Privat brothers turned Lord Sydenham's house into a hotel. To serve it, they operated the first ferry, named the Peninsula Packet. The Packet was a paddle boat powered by horses on a treadmill in the centre of the deck. This "horse boat" carried many Toronto sportsmen to the Peninsula to shoot blackheart plover or turkeys, to hunt foxes and, weirdly, to take potshots with tallow candles at a tame bear.

In 1867, Confederation year, the Crown granted its 400 acres of Island property to the city. The Island was now served by steamers and, in 1874, its grandest structure, the Hotel Hanlan.

John Hanlan erected his gracious Second Empire hostelry on the point named after him on the inner edge of the west of Centre Island, near the present airport.

The four-storey frame hotel was built on piles driven into the sand. It had steep dormered mansards with finials, open-balustraded balconies and board-and-batten walls with scroll sawn brackets supporting the eaves.

The hotel, later operated by Ned Hanlan, John's son, a famous oarsman, was enlarged in the 1880s and developed as an amusement park. In 1909 it was burnt to the ground.

The Royal Canadian Yacht Club built its first club house on the Island in 1880. It, too, was destroyed by fire, in 1904. Its splendid successor, a high-verandaed Southern Plantation style pavilion described as "

samirrored white and shining in the water" also went up in flames, in 1918. The present club house is an exact replica.

All but a few Island buildings were, and are, made of timber. Lumber was light to transport across the water and easier to anchor than brick in the sands.

But fire was the enemy. So many of the Island's grander buildings were burned down, including the Lakeside Home for Little Children on Lakeshore Ave.

In the last decades of the 19th

Century the Island was very popular. The harbor on a summer night was "one mass of skiffs and sailboats." The city council dedicated its portion of the Island as a park. To celebrate this generous act it stopped all public sale of liquor. Areas on the south and east were leased out for cottages.

The Island cottage style was distinguished by wide verandas that served as summer sleeping porches protected by sweeping roofs supported on fretworked posts and beams. Central front doors were flanked by windows with angled wooden skirts.

Bishop Sweatman's rectory was a charming example, beside St. Andrew's Church. It was a fretworked toy topped by a playful belfry.

The Island's heyday lasted until the Great War. In 1920 the council bought the Ward property, including Ward's Island, bringing its area up to 750 acres.

### **Cottages razed**

Between the wars the Island languished. In the '50s and early '60s the Metro parks department decided to remove as many buildings as possible.

The hotels, the rectory, the amusement parks and the south side cottages were razed. Toronto Island airport swallowed a large chunk of territory beside the Western Gap.

The present battle lines were drawn. On one side are the remaining cottage owners, about 260 of them, on Ward's and Algonquin Islands at the eastern end. Their long fight to keep their homes dates particularly from 1975 when Metro council voted to evict them all.

Organizing themselves around their previous village green, the cottagers have so far managed to stay the execution of their unique lifestyle.

Metro sees the Island as an urban park for all. It has laid out boring formal gardens, erected a clumsy pier and built a Disneyland children's village. The Island school grounds are a nature reserve visited by many mainland children.

The Island is popular with weekend picnickers and cyclists as well as yachtsmen. It is, perhaps, now more familiar to the city's newer immigrants than to its natives. These "ethnics" have the habit of al fresco feasts. Their families love to spread a blanket and relish the lake breeze.

### **Leftover hippies**

The cottagers are mostly old anglo, with a leavening of leftover hippies and artists. They linger over lawn bowls and lazy teas, and hold winter ice carnivals.

Their children spend barefoot summers on Ward's beach and ski to school in winter. A local bride and groom may ride from the clapboard church to the ferry dock in a pony gig piled with blossoms.

The cottagers can commute to work across the harbor, then retreat to rustic peace remotely near the urban buzz.

On frozen January dusks the brave stroll the boardwalk along a white expanse of lake wide as the sea. To the north the glittering city is visible through pines and bare willows. To the south all is silence.

Such stillness is a rare privilege so close to a metropolis. From the Island you can see Toronto's busy silhouette, yet sense the profound solitude that prevailed on this shore before the urban apparition.