



Great White Oak

by Madeleine McDowell, Chair of the Humber Heritage Committee

David Orsini and I share a particular passion for a tree; a great white oak near Jane and Bloor in the west end of Toronto. It is located in the rear of a house on the southwest corner of Wetherell St, a short distance north of Bloor Street. I describe the tree as over 260 years old. The historian in me demands documentation. By its height and girth it is at least that, and I prefer to err on the low side. David is a landscape architect and says it is 300 years old. Neither of us argues the point. It is a beautiful and impressive tree, as oak trees go. There are other white oaks around of this age, although this one is in a black oak savannah. What makes it so special is its location on the Toronto Carrying Place. This tree is a living witness to people and events which are part of the history of Canada.

This was a sapling when the French built their second trading fort in 1749, Fort Toronto (from which Toronto takes its name) at the foot of the portage on which the tree stands. It was part of the forest canopy by 1764 when Alexander Henry passed by on June 19th with a group of Mississaugas on his way to Fort Niagara from Mackinac where he had been taken prisoner the previous year in the Pontiac wars. His account of the journey may be seen in Percy Robinson's *Toronto During the French Regime*.

It was a mature tree when Benjamin Frobisher passed by, recommending in a 1784 report that the Northwest Company use this as the preferred route to the West. It witnessed the passage of Lieutenant Governor Simcoe on Wednesday September 25th, 1793 on his way to Penetanguishene. The feet of the war party dispatched by General Brock in 1812 to capture Fort Mackinac trod over the roots of this tree.

In 1828, Chief of the Mississaugas, Peter Jones, whose father Augustus Jones drew the 1792 map of the Toronto Carrying Place, passed by with his people. They were on their way to a meeting about their Treaty with the Inspector General Jacques Baby on his estate.

These whisperings of history rose through the living branches, which overhang Jane Street now in 2004. The spirit of this tree has had contact with those spirits when they were lively people.

In the spring of 1997 this tree was one of 150 oak trees along the Toronto Carrying Place, all over 125 years old, which were proclaimed by Metropolitan Toronto as an ancient oak grove and named in honour of Tuhbananequay, daughter of Wabanosay, Chief of the Mississaugas at the time of the Toronto Purchase. Tuhbananequay was Peter Jones' mother. Naming was done with the permission of the Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation who conducted the dedication along with Alan Tonks.

The continuation of a local gene pool with a pedigree of three centuries is both remarkable and essential. It reflects the integrity of our natural heritage as a living entity. The status of the Humber River as a Canadian Heritage River is integrally associated with such live heritage preservation and perpetuation.

I have attempted to have this tree designated under the Ontario Heritage Act but was told that the city would not consider a tree that was not fully owned by the city for designation. The new house owner on whose property the tree lives is fascinated by the tree's story and likes the idea of designation. I intend to pursue this designation.

Additional Comments by Jack Radecki, Executive Director, Ontario Urban Forest Council
Fran Moscall (Director) and I visited this significant tree on October 25th 2004 with Madeline McDowell. Having grown up in the nearby Humber Valley, I passed the tree many times but never stopped to have a close look. Perhaps it was because of the fencing covering a large portion of the main trunk, which shows to be a least 4 feet in diameter at breast height. After all these years, the tree remains very healthy and has grown with a perfect scaffold system of branches.

As the tree seems to straddle the property line between City Road Allowance and a private residence, there was always a shared concern for its well being. Now that the Private Tree Bylaw has been approved city-wide, there is a better opportunity for protection. I would strongly suggest that readers come and visit this tree and bring others. Then local politicians and city staff need to be contacted by concerned citizens to ensure that this tree stays viable and receives necessary care. The Ontario Urban Forest Council would like to see the Great White Oak become designated and protected as a Heritage Tree.