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“Everything Tells a Story”

Story Intro:

Madeleine McDowell has always felt connected to local history

By Cathy Faye

Madeleine McDowell's family home sits on a quiet street not far from the banks of the Humber River, just a short walk from Bâby Point. During her childhood, she and her family would go on Sunday walks by the Humber, to the Old Mill Bridge and into the valley. By the age of 6, she had learned that Étienne Brûlé is said to have passed by what is now her front door in 1615, and that the French explorer Robert Cavalier de LaSalle had traversed her neighbourhood on his way to the Mississippi. She knew that the now tree-lined, residential streets around her once served as the site for an Iroquois Village and that her neighbourhood had played a major role in the North American fur trade. Needless to say, Toronto's history, and particularly the colourful history of her own backyard, has always been a part of Madeleine McDowell's life. "I was just brought up with it," she says; "it's sort of like breathing."

And indeed, her neighbourhood has seen a lot of history. In the late seventeenth century, the area was home to the Iroquois village of Teiaiagon, located on the southern part of the Toronto Carrying Place Trail, an overland route that connected Lake Ontario to Lake Simcoe and the northern Great Lakes. Teiaiagon became a trading post, with French explorers, Dutch merchants, missionaries, and fur traders all following the route and frequently passing through the village. In the early eighteenth century, French fur traders occupied the area eventually setting up a number of forts, one of which was named Fort Toronto.

McDowell's extensive knowledge of local history and her desire to see it preserved is reflected in her wide range of heritage activities over the years. In 1984, when the federal government announced the Canadian Heritage River Systems, local City of York citizens organized to have the Humber River nominated. Not everyone thought the task would be successful. "Ottawa laughed themselves silly," McDowell recalls. Nonetheless, through the efforts of this group which included both McDowell and her mother, the Humber (with the support of every municipality on the river) was named a Canadian Heritage River in September of 1999.

Another of McDowell's success stories is the continued restoration of the Lambton House, established in 1847. The last public building on the Humber River from the Lambton Mills period, Lambton House operated for over a century as a hotel and tavern

and was a central meeting place for the area. The building was closed in 1988 and shortly thereafter, the owner wanted to have it demolished. The fact that it still stands is due largely to the efforts of a number of local citizens who interrupted the demolition of the House. McDowell recalls that when she arrived with her camera in hand much of the rear of the building had already been torn down. They obtained a stop-work order in less than two hours, halting the demolition of the designated building.



Lambton House about to be demolished (Photo by Madeleine McDowell)

McDowell's approach to heritage work can best be described as holistic. Many people fail to see the link between built, cultural, and natural heritage when in fact "they're all part of the same thing." For McDowell, the Humber River, Lambton House, and the beautiful 300-year-old oak tree near Jane Street are all part of Toronto's history. They all have a past and they are all part of our heritage. "Everything tells a story," she explains, "and I'm a story teller."



Madeleine leading a Heritage Toronto Walk of the Junction (Photo by Olena Sullivan)

McDowell currently leads heritage walks in the city, sharing her knowledge of and love for Toronto's history with interested citizens. She has served as chair of the Humber Heritage Committee since 1985 and is currently the co-chair of the Heritage Committee of the Humber Alliance. She is also active with Heritage York, the West Toronto Junction Historical Society, and the Preservation Panel for Etobicoke York.

Heritage Toronto is honoured to have Madeleine as a member of our Legacy Stories - Planned Giving Program.

Walk Difficulty: