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NATURAL ROOTS: North York's 250-year-old red oak touched by the lives of explorers, loyalists and rebels

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Edith George weaves the tale of North York's Red Oak and the history its seen.

Canadian history is not boring. In fact, it is very much alive and well in my neighbourhood because we have a living sentinel - the great red oak. What stories it could tell of the history it has seen in its lifetime.

Many who walk past it, smile and admire the green canopy in the spring and summer. We stop and gaze at its full autumn glory and we are awed by the expanse of the bare tree branches in the winter.

The age of the tree varies, but the experts seem to agree the oak is more than 250 years old with the circumference measuring 16 feet, four inches on Aug. 23, 2006.

Historically and culturally, this remnant tree of Toronto's old growth forest is of international importance.

Historically, the red oak is located in the immediately vicinity (as a marker) of the Toronto Carrying Place Trail. The First Nations of North America used this trail as part of the trade route that connected northern and western Canada with the Gulf of Mexico. With the coming of the Europeans, explorers, missionaries and mapmakers used this trail.

Men such as Étienne Brulé and Father Jean de Brébeuf walked this path. This became the military trail for both the French and British regime.

Culturally, who owned this tree and what did their families contribute to Canada and the world?

The below is a short list of some of the tree owners:

In 1848, the land was purchased was by Matthew Griffith.

The Griffith brothers, which included Matthew, Thomas and Joseph with Abraham Welsh (brother-in-law) were the first settlers of this area. They came from Ireland and, by 1878, they owned about 1,000 acres.

Thomas Griffith joined the loyalists in the Mackenzie Rebellion of 1837.

In 1933, the land was purchased by Percy and Gertrude Gardiner. The property became their summer country estate named, "Rivermede". The magnificent home they built still stands and is on the proposed heritage property list of Toronto.

The Gardiners put the community first and their philanthropic volunteerism lives on in their descendants.

Their immediate family, Helen and Paul Phelan (daughter and son-in-law), and Helen Gardiner (daughter-in-law) became members of the Order of Canada.

Their son, George Gardiner, became an officer of the Order of Canada. He was a major force in business, education and the arts. He also established one of the world's finest ceramic museums - The Gardiner Museum.

The present owner of the tree has two sons. I wonder if her sons' ancestors contributed anything to Canada?

Well, one of their ancestors was Ebenezer Doane. He was the master builder of the Sharon Temple in Sharon, Ontario. In 1990, this building was designated as a National Historic Site of Canada. Ebenezer Doane had a nephew by the name of Charles Doane and Charles Doane was a true Canadian rebel.

He joined the rebels marching down Yonge Street in the MacKenzie Rebellion of 1837.

This is what you have folks, the original settlers of the land having a family member joining the Loyalists in the Mackenzie Rebellion of 1837 and the present day owner of this great tree having a family member that joined the rebels in that same rebellion. The loyalists marched north up Yonge Street and the rebels marched south and they eventually did clash.

Dear readers:

Since 1961, I have lived most of my life in the northwest area of Toronto. Always being a history buff with a great curiosity of who were the previously owners of the land where I live, I have been researching this area for the past 10 years.

Some people call this a passion, yet others call it an obsession. Honestly, when I think I can walk away from this project, well, the great red oak leads me to another branch to examine, and holy oaks and elm trees, I start down that branch!

The above is my story. We all are storytellers, and I am looking forward to listening to your tree stories and hoping you will share them in this column as we go forward.

Edith George is a tree-hugging Torontonian. She is an advisor to the non-profits - The Ontario Urban Forest Council (founded in 1963) and Cabbagetown ReLeaf (founded in 2014) and a past director on the board of the Weston Historical Society. Edith hopes people will share their stories of their great trees that are found on their properties. Why do the owners have such passion for their trees? What makes their trees a part of their life?

The tree stories will appear in her monthly column. She can be reached at researcher1@sympatico.ca





