

Indigenous Land Use in the Vicinity of Wabash Community Recreation Centre

In 1904, workers constructing a waterworks tunnel underneath Toronto Bay made the startling discovery of human footprints. The footprints appeared to be that of a family making its way toward what is now downtown Toronto. Unfortunately, the workers in their haste to continue their task covered the footprints with concrete and the imprints remained on the bottom of Lake Ontario. Estimated to be 11,000 years old, one is left to wonder about their identity of their makers- Who were those people?

11000 years ago, the glaciers of the ice age retreated northward creating a landscape in the Toronto area that closely resembled that of the boreal forest- a land of spruce, fir, and pine. The shoreline of Lake Ontario known today was several kilometers south of the present shoreline and the then exposed land undoubtedly contained the campsites of the nomadic hunters that passed through the area in the pursuit of extinct game such as mastodon and mammoth. Very little is known of those people that ranged far in small family groups in search of sustenance. Little remains of their passing apart from a few stone implements left behind. Who knows what other evidence was obliterated by Lake Ontario as its waters rose to their present level. Did these first people ever visit the site of the Wabash Community Recreation Centre?

About 6,500 years ago, as climate changed in Ontario, deciduous forests began to emerge in the region. The changing landscape meant a growing abundance of new animal and plant species. The first peoples would still hunt and gather in order to survive, but no longer did they have to range as far afield to obtain their food; they could stay for extended periods of time in an area they found especially favourable. Fortunately, the people left behind signs of their presence in the area and could provide some slight insight into their land use. From pottery shards, campsites, worn trails, tools, and refuse, tantalizingly faint traces of the past could be gleaned. In many cases, the oral traditions of the First Nations' peoples working in conjunction with academics help to trace out what had happened on the land. Still we ask- Who were these people?

Indigenous presence at the exact location of the Wabash Community Recreation Centre is unknown and perhaps undiscoverable, but it is known that the Toronto region during the historic period was used extensively by First Nations people. The people on the north shore of Lake Ontario had been hunters and gathers for countless generations until a new group of the Iroquoian speakers arrived from the south. The new arrivals, the ancestors of the Huron-Wendat people, arrived in the area and brought with them the knowledge of how to cultivate corn. Corn was grown by these people about 1300 years ago, but there is still remains much conjecture about the time Wendat ancestors arrived in the area north of Lake Ontario. Unlike the seasonally migrant people that had moved about the lands for ages, the ancestral Wendat erected longhouse villages and cleared large areas of land where they planted the crops of corns, beans and squash. Their villages remained in place until soil fertility diminished, or the firewood in an area was depleted; they would then relocate to another area not too distant. Hunting game and gathering wild foodstuffs supplemented the diet of these people, but corn was the staple food. Eventually, the ancestors of the Huron-Wendat developed into five separate nations north of Lake Ontario sharing a similar culture, but each having its own distinct political structure and territory. In the late 16th century all five Huron nations consolidated in the vicinity of Lake Simcoe forming the Huron Confederacy.

From their vantage point in Wendake, the land base of the Wendats, the people carried on a ready trade with other Iroquoian Nations such as the Tionontati and the Chonnontons, as well as with Algonquian nations such as the Odawas, Nipissings, Mississaugas and Algonquins situated around Georgian Bay and the Ottawa Valley. Corn, beans, and squash were traded for tobacco, fish, copper, wampum, and catlinite. Their geographic location allowed the Wendat to exercise control over much of the lands in Southern Ontario, including the land where Wabash Community Recreation Centre would be located in the distant future.

Adept at trade, the Wendat found themselves as the middlemen in the fur trade between Indigenous groups and French fur traders in the early part of the 17th century. The Wendat gathered pelts harvested by other First Nations and facilitated their exchange for that of French trade goods such as kettles, iron axes, knives and other goods that made work much less laborious for the Native people. As the Hurons exercised control over the fur trade north of Lake Ontario, the Haudenosaunee simultaneously participated in the European fur trade with Dutch traders- and later the English, from their homelands below Lake Ontario in what would become later known as New York State. The hunger for European trade goods would eventually envelope the First Nations of the Great Lakes Region in a period of conflict known as the Beaver Wars.

Beavers, south of Lake Ontario, were becoming scarce as the demand for their pelts meant they were trapped almost to the point of extinction. The Haudenosaunee coveting a plentiful supply of pelts and looking to establish control over the fur trade, cast their eyes northward to the prosperous trade carried on by the Wendats. In 1649-50, the Haudenosaunee invaded north of Lake Ontario, dispersed the Wendat, and shortly thereafter, overran the Tionontati and Chonnonton peoples as well. For the next 35 years, Southern Ontario would become a beaver hunting area for the People of the Longhouse. Like the Wendat, the Haudenosaunee had mastered the cultivation of corn, beans, and squash, constructed large palisaded villages of longhouses, and they too belonged to a confederacy consisting of Five Nations- the Seneca, Cayuga, Mohawk, Onondaga and Oneida (the Tuscarora would be added in 1722). Two large villages built by the Haudenosaunee, Teiaigon on the Humber near Baby Point and Ganatsokwyagen on the Rouge, were specially located to establish control of trade routes in the Toronto region. The land of the Greater Toronto Area and that of the Wabash Community Recreation Land were firmly in the hands of the Haudenosaunee.

After establishing control of the Lower Great Lakes, the Haudenosaunee continued to attack northward in order to establish greater hegemony over the fur trade. Such attacks brought them into conflict with Algonquian groups and inflamed the ire of the tribes of the entire Great Lakes region. In the latter part of the 17th century, the Haudenosaunee incursions were met with strong resistance and they were driven back into their homelands south of Lake Ontario. Peace was restored in 1701 among the Great Lakes tribes and southern Ontario became home to various Algonquian First Nations. The western end of Lake Ontario, its north shore, and specifically the area of present day Toronto, came under the occupation, stewardship and control of the Mississaugas. The Mississaugas, a sub-group of the Anishinaabe (Ojibway), upon their arrival in the area, would become the third Indigenous group to control, occupy and exercise control over the Toronto Region in half a century.

The Mississaugas who came to live in the Toronto region, unlike their Wendat and Haudenosaunee predecessors, were not agriculturists and did not build large palisaded villages; instead they lived lightly on the land. The Mississaugas built their wigwams on the flats of rivers and creeks flowing into the Lake.

The Mississaugas lived a seasonally migrant life style fishing, hunting and gathering for their sustenance. Little archeological evidence has been found to indicate the Mississaugas' presence on the land, but historical documents record their presence in Southern Ontario, from the 18th century onwards. The Mississaugas would continue their hunting/gathering lifestyle until the settler hunger for land necessitated a series of treaties between the First Nation and the British Crown. In 1805, Treaty 13, reached between the Crown and the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation, allowed for the legal settlement of York, the capital of Upper Canada, and eventually the incorporation of the City of Toronto in 1834. As for the Mississaugas of the Credit, they transitioned from their traditional lifestyle to that of farmers- much like their settler neighbours. In 1847, they left the Toronto region for a new home near Brantford, Ontario.

The land where Wabash Community Recreation Centre is located has been home to First Nations people since time immemorial. Each group has brought to the land its own distinct lifestyle and land use. There is no doubt that the land will continue to be used to both good and sometimes poor advantage. The people will come and go but the land will endure. What will the future say of those people?

The land on which Wabash Community Recreation Centre is located within the Treaty Lands and Territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation and on the Traditional Territory of the Huron-Wendat and the Haudenosaunee. The Greater Toronto Area is home to many Indigenous people today.