

Phase 1 Background Report: A History of North York Centre

October 2024



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02. A HISTORY OF NORTH YORK CENTRE

The human history of the lands known today as North York Centre dates back millennia. A variety of elements from these past periods can still be observed in the Centre's built form, while others remain buried beneath the contemporary landscape.

Recognizing that the boundaries of the Centre are new relative to the history of the area, it is necessary to look at the historical context from a regional perspective. Situated between Lake Ontario and Lake Simcoe, as well as between the valleys of the Humber River and Don River, the lands have played a critical role in shaping First Nations and various communities over the years.

For time immemorial, Toronto has been home to Indigenous peoples. Ojibway oral histories speak of Ice People, who lived at a time when ice covered the land. Following the retreat of glaciers approximately 13,000 years ago, groups of First Nations peoples moved from place to place, hunting and gathering the food they needed according to the seasons. Over millennia, they adapted to dramatically changing environmental conditions, developing, and acquiring new technologies as they did so. Waterways and the lake were vital sources of fresh water and nourishment, and shorelines and nearby areas were important sites for gathering, trading, hunting, fishing, and ceremonies. Long-distance trade moved valuable resources across the land.

After corn was introduced to Southern Ontario, possibly as early as 2300 years ago, horticulture began to supplement food sources. Between 1300-1450 years ago, villages focused on growing food appeared in the area today known as Toronto and became year-round settlements surrounded by crops. These villages were home to ancestors of the Huron-Wendat Nation, who would continue to occupy increasingly larger villages in the area and beyond. These villages were connected to well-

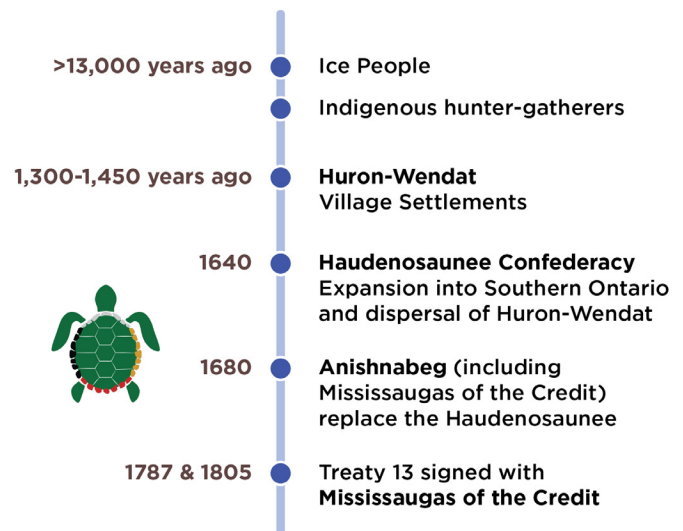


Figure 2-1: A Brief Timeline of the History of Indigenous Peoples in Toronto

established travel routes which were part of local and long-distance trail networks, including the Carrying Place and other trails that followed the Don, Rouge, and Humber rivers to connect Lake Ontario to Georgian Bay.

During an intermittent period of warfare known as the Beaver Wars, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy expanded into southern Ontario in the 1640s and eventually dispersed the Huron-Wendat Nation. The Haudenosaunee established villages along the trails adjacent to the Humber and Rouge Rivers, but by the late 1680s most were pushed out of the area by Anishnabeg peoples arriving from the Upper Great Lakes. While most Haudenosaunee returned to the south shores of Lake Ontario, some stayed in the area alongside the Anishnabeg.¹ Of the Anishnabeg peoples, the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation inhabited the Toronto area when the British Crown sought to establish it as a new centre of European settlement. In 1787 and again in 1805, the British Crown negotiated the signing of Treaty 13 (controversially known as “The Toronto Purchase”) with the Mississaugas of the Credit,

1 With thanks to Darin P. Wybenga of the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation and Peter Graham of the Six Nations of the Grand River First Nation for their review and input on the overview of First Nations history in Toronto provided in this report.

which encompasses the lands of North York Centre, setting the stage for colonization and eventual urbanization of the area.²

The City of Toronto remains the traditional territory of the Anishnabeg, Haudenosaunee, and Wendat peoples and is now home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples who continue to care for this land. The lands in Toronto where North York Centre is located are covered by Treaty 13, between the Crown and the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation, and the Dish With One Spoon Treaty, between the Anishnabeg and Haudenosaunee peoples. Although there are no known sites of archaeological significance within the Centre, various sites are identified as having archaeological potential, some of which may relate to Indigenous history (**Figure 2-2**).

Following the initial signing of Treaty 13, several development periods shaped the Centre's urban evolution, with elements from each still retained in its built form. York Township (now Toronto) was founded in 1793, and shortly after, Yonge Street was surveyed as a critical long-distance link to surrounding regions and the Upper Great Lakes.³ It also formed part of an expansive grid of concession roads facilitating access to farm lots. Yonge Street opened in 1796, inviting colonists to establish farms, mills, and the communities that supported them. Over the course of the next century, the area known today as North York Centre became a stable farming landscape serviced by villages, including Willowdale and Lansing, established at crossroads along the central spine of Yonge Street.

In 1922, the largely agrarian North York Township was established, separating it from urbanizing parts of York Township to the south. The North York municipal office building was constructed

the following year on Yonge Street, at the corner of today's Empress Avenue – recognizing the importance of Yonge Street as a spine for transportation and settlement. The municipal office building included a City Council chamber and community hall. Although it was mostly demolished in 1989, part of its façade was preserved and is now built into the east entrance of the Empress Walk mall and condominium building.

During the early to mid-twentieth century, growth came to North York largely in the form of a grid of residential streets stretching east and west from the spine of Yonge Street, with farms and concession roads continuing to dominate the landscape beyond. In the second half of the twentieth century, development patterns fundamentally changed during an unprecedented urban expansion, largely made possible by the formation of Metropolitan Toronto in 1953 and its fiscal capacity to build regional water and sewer infrastructure, to widen roads, to build highways and to construct subways. Following the Province's completion of Highway 400 and Highway 401 in the 1950s, Yonge Street was widened in 1956 and a building height limitation of 35 feet was removed in 1957.⁴ The Sheppard and Finch subway stations opened in 1974, followed by the addition of North York Centre station in 1987. By 1967 North York had been declared a borough and, by 1979, it was incorporated as a city, the same year the North York Civic Centre opened to further solidify its role as an administrative centre.⁵ While a comprehensive heritage study has not been undertaken in North York Centre, cultural heritage resources have been identified and conserved from these earlier periods. These include listed, designated, and modernist architecture resources (**Figure 2-3**).⁶

2 Map of Ontario treaties and reserves | Ontario.ca
3 Hopkins J. York Mills Heights: Looking Back (1998)
4 Hart, P. W. Pioneering in North York: A History of the Borough (1968)
5 Timeline of North York - North York Historical Society (nyhs.ca)
6 E.R.A. Architects. North York's Modernist Architecture Revisited (2010)

In the early 1990s, the Metropolitan Toronto Official Plan would define the Centre as a hub for large-scale residential and employment land uses, setting the stage for it to grow into the high-density, mixed-use area it is today. In 1998, North York was amalgamated with the City of Toronto, shortly after the consolidated North York Centre Secondary Plan was adopted by North York City Council.⁷

A much higher rate of development would occur in the following decades, including the introduction of service roads to the east (Doris Avenue) and west (Beecroft Road) to distinguish the Centre from the neighbourhoods around it (**Figure 2-4**).

7 North York Planning News: Vol.10, No.3 and Vol.6, No.2 from the Fowler Planning Library

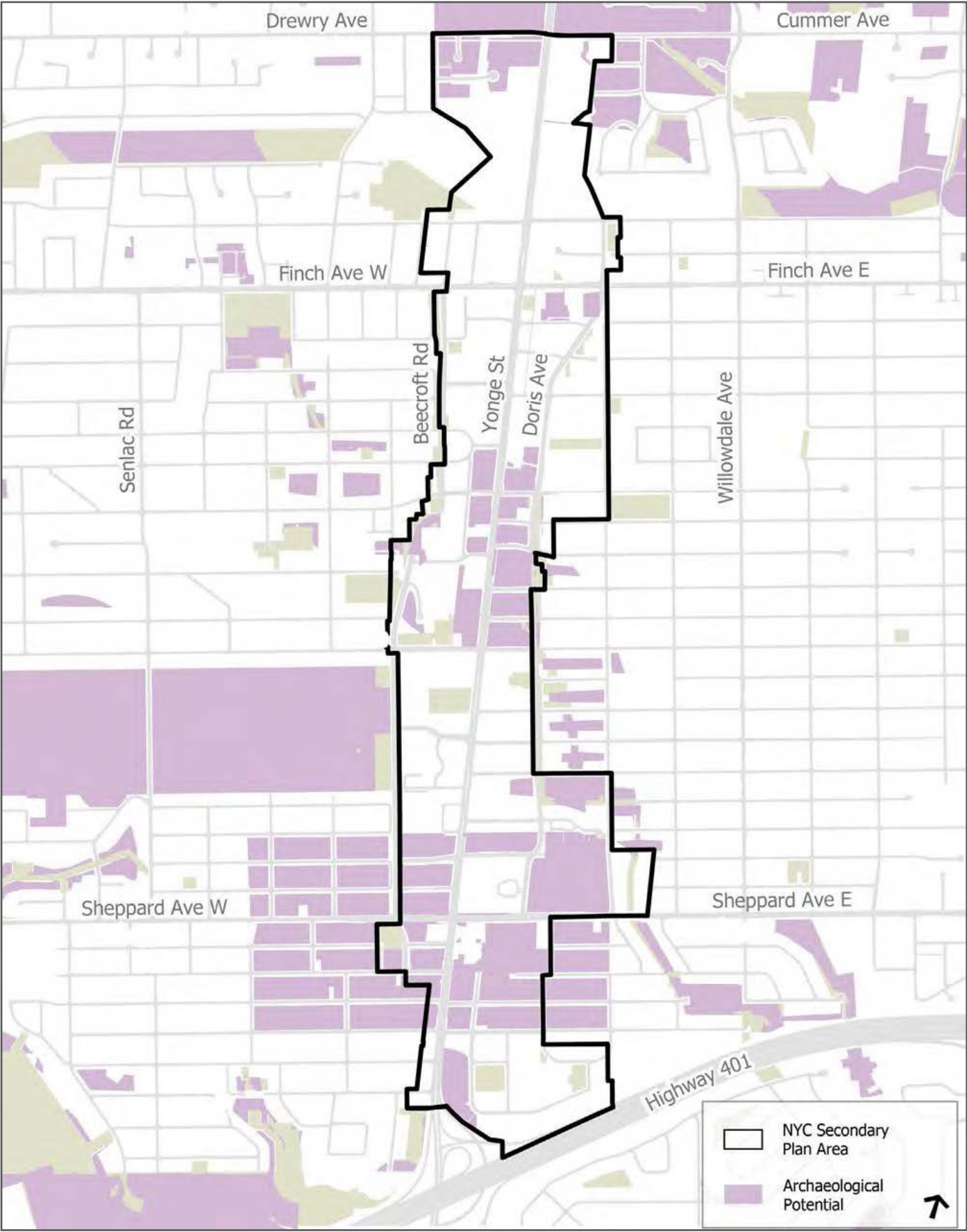


Figure 2-2: Areas of Archaeological Potential in North York Centre

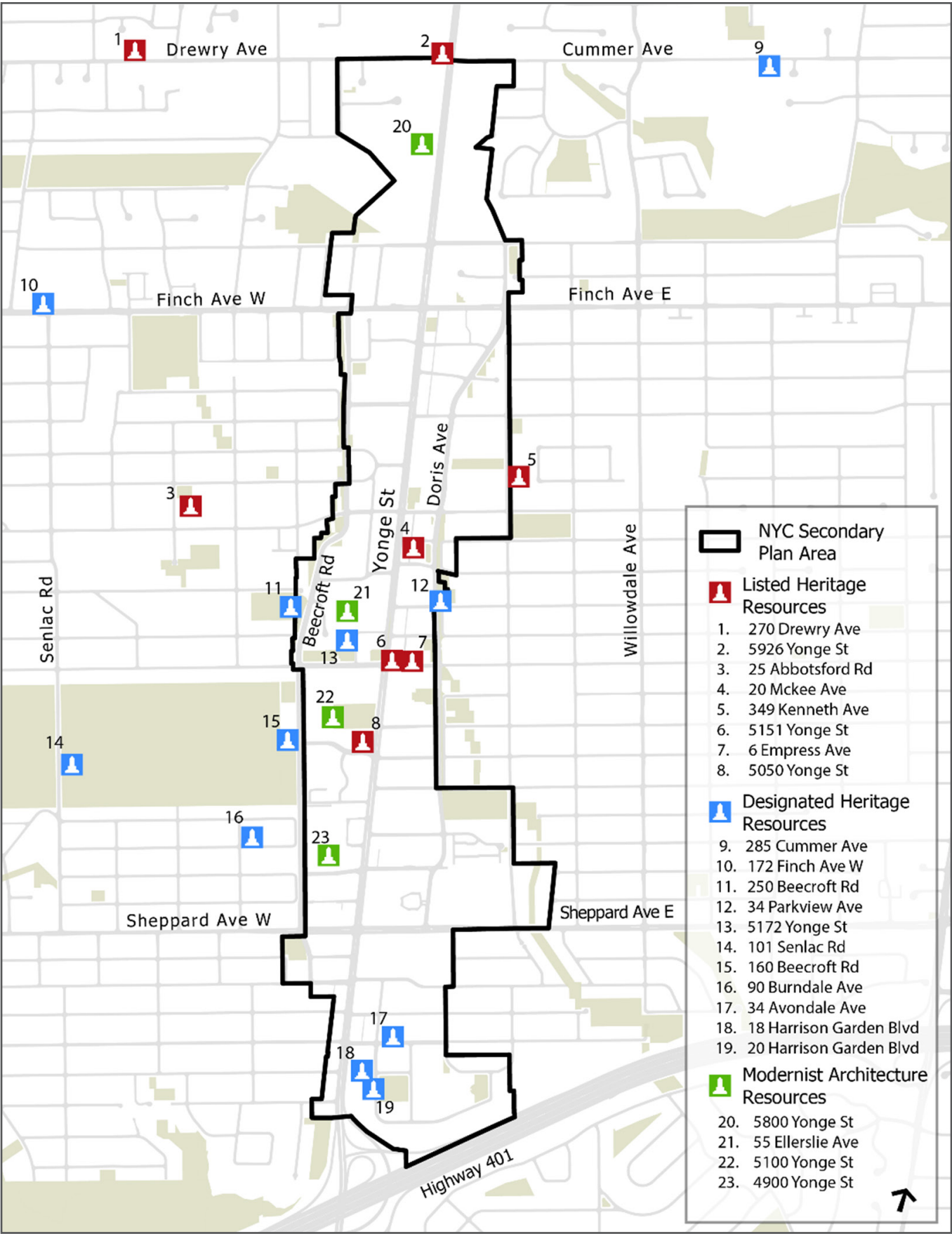


Figure 2-3: Cultural Heritage Resources in North York Centre



(Source: School of Cities – Historical Aerial Imagery of Toronto)

Figure 2-4: Historic Views of Development in North York Centre