

292 Main Street, Toronto: its history and architecture

Prepared by Barbara Myrvold, Beach and East Toronto Historical Society

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292 Main Street, 2018?

<http://dvbia.ca/directory/danforth-main-st-walk-in-clinic/>



Google map showing location of 292 Main Street, 2018

Summary

The building at 292 Main Street is located on the west side of the street, south of Danforth Avenue. It should be preserved because of its historical and architectural importance to the local neighbourhood. Built between 1884 and 1888, it was one of the earliest houses in East Toronto village and one of only a few surviving from the 1880s. Its builder and first owner was Donald George (D. G.) Stephenson, an important East Toronto resident, being its first reeve, serving from 1888 to 1894, and a major property developer. The Victorian cottage is constructed of red and yellow brick in the bay-and-gable style.

Background

The building at 292 Main Street is slated for demolition as part of a high-rise development proposed by Tribute Communities for the 286-292 Main Street site. In October 2017, Toronto planning staff called the 30-story condo tower “inappropriate” for the neighbourhood and recommended that its planners conduct a full study of the area before deciding whether to approve the application.¹

Surprisingly, City of Toronto planners did not mention the building (or almost any other local historical landmarks) in the "Heritage context" section of their Danforth Avenue Planning Study Area Profile Report, released in March 2017, although several buildings on other adjacent streets, notably on Dawes Road, were included.

Property history²

The building at 292 Main Street is located on Lot 1 of Plan 580, registered on 19 July 1884 by owners Benjamin Morton (1832-1902), one of area’s largest landowners, his wife, Mary Swanwick Hutton Morton (1830-1906) and Donald George Stephenson (1835-97).

The plan created 16 “villa lots” on part of Lots 3 and 4, Concession 1 FB (From the Bay), extending 789 feet west from Main Street to Donald Street (renamed Westlake Avenue in 1909) and 330 feet south from the Don and Danforth Road (Danforth Avenue) to the Grand Trunk Railway tracks.

“D. G. Stephenson” was shown on Plan 580 as the owner of Lot no. 1, which was at the southwest corner of the Don and Danforth Road and Main Street. It had a frontage of 155 feet on the south side of the Don and Danforth Road, 330 feet on the west side of Main Street and 155 feet on the north side of Stephenson Avenue. The present Stephenson Avenue and the former Donald Street were named for him.

Main Street itself was opened in 1885. Running straight north from Kingston Road to Danforth, it replaced the section of Dawes Road that ran through the Grand Trunk Railway’s York yard south to Kingston Road, which was closed in 1884 at the railway tracks. A wooden bridge on Main Street over the tracks was also constructed at this time.³

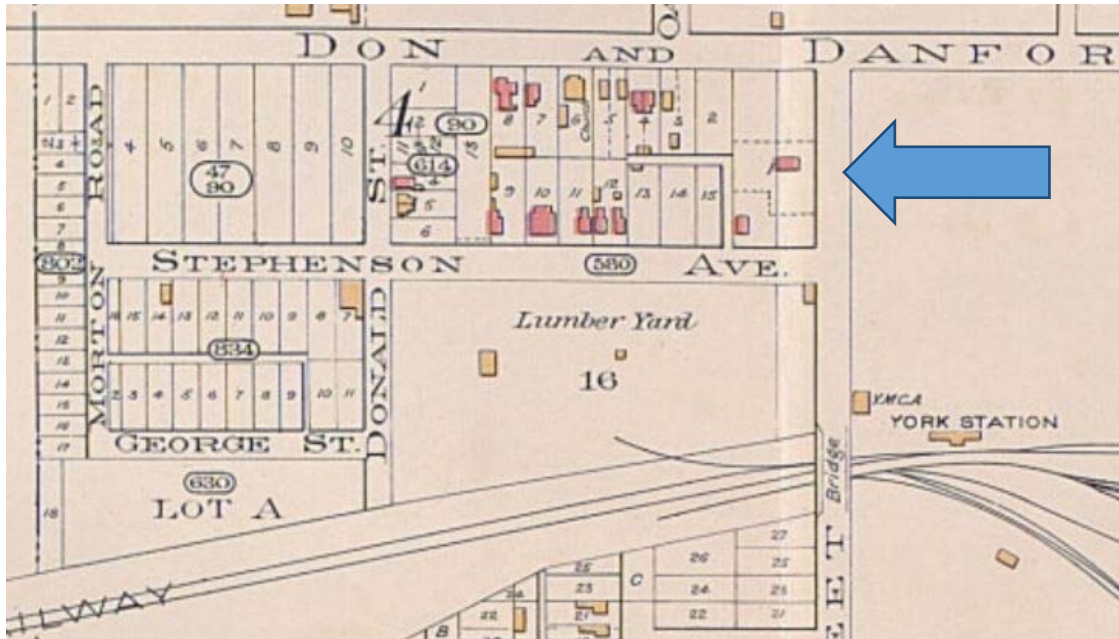
The building at 292 Main Street can be traced back to 1888, the first year for which assessments for the village of East Toronto are available. It was owned by Stephenson and rented to Edward Ireland, a driver with the Grand Trunk Railway. Stephenson continued to own the property until the mid-1890s,

¹ Josh Sherman, “Cty calls 30-storey tower ‘inappropriate’, while Main and Danforth developer touts proximity to transit,” Beach Metro News, 31 October 2017. <http://www.beachmetro.com/2017/10/31/city-calls-30-storey-tower-inappropriate-main-danforth-developer-touts-proximity-transit/>

² The property history Includes research by Grant Van Iderstine for the East Toronto and Beach Historical Society, Summer Canada employment program, 1984

³ Barbara Myrvold, *The Danforth in Pictures* (Toronto: Toronto Public Library Board, 1979), 23.

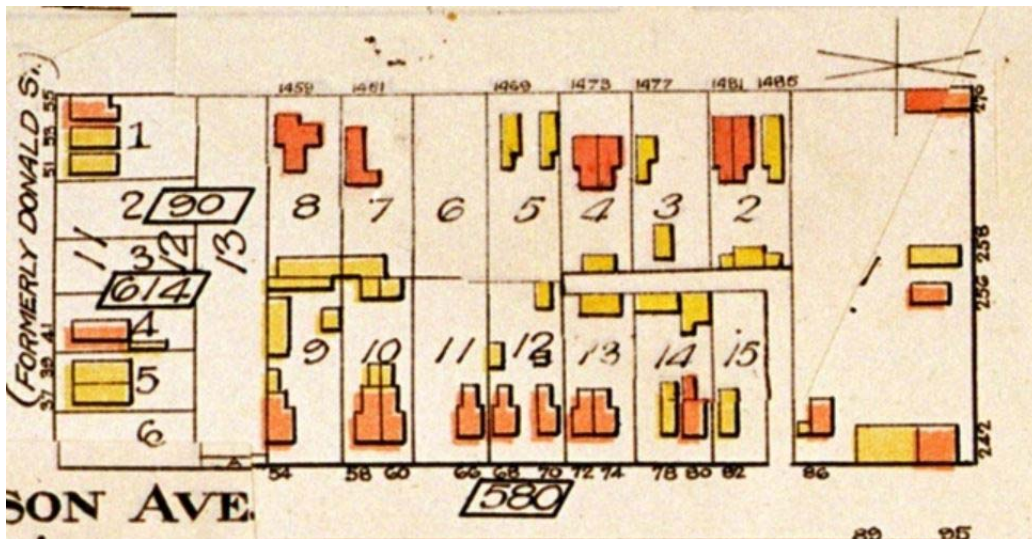
but from 1895 to 1904, the Real Estate Loan Co. was the owner. William Casey a telegraph/telephone operator, was the tenant from 1893-7.



Detail of Goad's Atlas, Plate 39, 1890, showing the present 292 Main Street.

At that time it was the only building on the west side of Main Street between Danforth and Stephenson.

<http://maps.library.utoronto.ca/datapub/digital/NG/goad/1890/39atlas-r-58.jpg>



Detail of Goad's Atlas, Plate 111, 1913, showing the present 292 Main Street.

<http://maps.library.utoronto.ca/datapub/digital/NG/goad/1913/00111.jpg>

At this time, the street address was 256 Main Street



Five-year-old Norman Willis (right), son of L.A.C. and Mrs. Walter Willis, 69 Tranby Ave., and Allan Comer (left), 6-year-old son of Mr. and Mrs. Albert Comer, 292 Main St., will play "Rob the Rooster" in a piano duet at the second annual Kiwanis Music Festival to be held Feb. 19 to March 3 in Toronto.

The building was used as residence for many years. A long-time resident was Albert G. Comer, a music teacher and a church organist, who lived at 292 Main Street with his family from the 1940s to the 1970s.

Allan Comer (right), son of Mr. and Mrs Albert Comer, 292 Main Street, at the Kiwanis Music Festival, 1945.
Globe and Mail, 17 February 1945, p. 10

For the last 40 years or so, the building has been used for medical offices. It is now known as Danforth Main St. Walk-In Clinic. <http://dvbia.ca/directory/danforth-main-st-walk-in-clinic/>

Historical significance

292 Main Street was built and first owned by Donald George Stephenson, one of the most important residents in the early days of the village of East Toronto. During his time there, he was a lumber merchant, a builder, a realtor, a loans officer and a politician, serving as the first reeve of the village, 1888-1894.

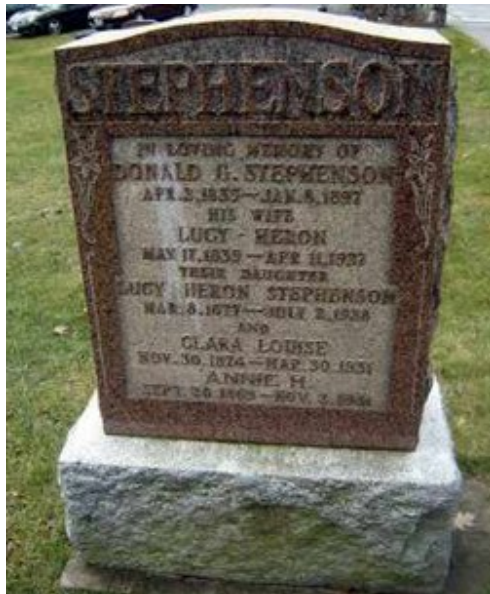
Stephenson was born on 3 April 1835 in Scarborough Township, Upper Canada, where his father, George Stephenson (d. 1858?), operated a saw mill and ran a general store in Highland Creek. The "tall, stout, broad-shouldered" son became a lumber merchant, but being "a born leader" with "a magnetic personality", he soon was involved in other ventures.

In 1866, at age 31, Stephenson entered municipal politics serving on Scarborough Council almost continuously for the next 14 years, mostly as the deputy reeve (1867-73, 1875-6) or the reeve (1877-80). (Being reeve also gave him a seat on York County Council.) Also in 1866, Stephenson became a shareholder and the secretary of the ill-fated Scarboro Oil Company, and married Lucy Heron, a member of a pioneering Scarborough family; the couple eventually had five children, one son and four daughters.

In 1884, Stephenson expanded his business interests to East Toronto, and over the next decade, he was a leader in the burgeoning community. He was one of the petitioners to the provincial government that led to the incorporation of the village of East Toronto on 1 January 1888, and became its first reeve, continuing in the position for the next six years. He served simultaneously on York County Council, and was elected its warden in January 1894, pledging a policy of retrenchment and celebrating the event by entertaining 200 people at Victoria Park.

A highlight of Stephenson's tenure as East Toronto's reeve was the granting of a franchise to the Toronto and Scarboro' Electric Railway, Light and Power Company (T&SE) on 14 December 1892 to enter the village. Evidently no conflict of interest guidelines were in place, for Stephenson also was the first president of T&SE, which was incorporated on 18 August 1892 to provide electric streetcar service along Kingston Road, and to produce and sell electricity to customers in the vicinity.

Stephenson invested heavily in local real estate, and according to his obituary, was "well known as a contractor [who] built many of the houses in his own neighbourhood."⁴ In 1894, his assets included real estate estimated to be worth \$19,000; a lumber yard on the west side of Main Street between Stephenson Avenue and the Grand Trunk Railway tracks valued at \$2,000; a grocery store on Main Street operated by son George; a large, Romanesque style house at the northwest corner of Gerrard Street and Enderby Road, which local architects Edwards & Webster designed for him in 1892 that was built at a cost of \$12,000⁵; row houses on Norwood Terrace constructed in 1894 for railway workers; and the Stephenson Block at Main and Kingston Road where a waiting room of the Toronto and Scarboro' Electric Railway was located.⁶



When the economy crashed in the 1890s, Stephenson was overloaded with property and accumulated huge debts upwards of \$100,000, borrowing heavily to stay afloat. "Servant girls, labourers and farmers had lent money to him," it was later reported.⁷ In July 1894, Stephenson caused a sensation, when, to escape his creditors, he left his home on the 16 July, ostensibly to look after lumber interests in Orillia, but disappeared without a trace. Rumoured to have fled to the New York State, and sighted in Hamilton a year later, his wife and daughters remained in the family's East Toronto home taking in boarders. On 8 January 1897, Lucy Stephenson announced to the astounded household that her 61-year-old husband had been living in the house for last 18 months and had died there that morning, of heart failure (two weeks duration) and tubercular enteritis (six weeks duration), according to his death certificate.

Donald G. Stephenson grave stone, Melville Presbyterian Church, Scarborough

<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/62041355>

⁴ "Mr. Stephenson's death," Toronto Globe, 9 January 1897, p. 28.

⁵ Donald G. Stephenson's house at 2190 Gerrard Street East, northwest corner of Enderby Road, was listed on the City of Toronto's Inventory of Heritage Properties in 1998. See <https://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/1998/agendas/council/cc/cc981028/to12rpt/cl043.htm>

⁶ "Warden Stephenson's troubles; a well-known citizen of York County gets into financial embarrassment and is not to be found," Toronto Globe, 27 July 1894: p. 8.

⁷ Close of a romantic life, Toronto Star, 9 January 1897, p. [1].

Architectural features⁸

292 Main Street is a Victorian cottage of one-and-a-half storeys built in the bay-and-gable style. The house is executed in red brick with yellow brick quoins and a double string course at the second floor level and at the mid-point of the first floor. It has a brick bay window at the front, which is capped by wood entablature and decorative metal balustrade. The vestibule next to the bay window is obviously not original and probably dates from the 1930s or 1940s.

There are two windows on the front of the second storey level, symmetrically placed. They are similar to the main floor bay windows in an unusual window head detail. They have a shallow arch of yellow soldier coursed brick, which is flanked by horizontally stacked bricks. The effect is to create swags on either side.

This same detail is on the William Stewart Darling House (1873-1876) at 57 Benlamond Avenue. It was designated under Part IV, Ontario Heritage Act, By-law 663-89, passed by Toronto City Council 5 October 1989. Heritage Toronto placed a plaque on the house in 2005.



William Stewart Darling House, 57 Benlamond Avenue, 2005?
http://www.torontohistory.org/Pages/William_Stewart_Darling_House.html

⁸ This section includes research by Grant Van Iderstine for the East Toronto and Beach Historical Society, Summer Canada employment program, 1984

The house also can be compared to one in Yorkville at 104 Hazelton Avenue that dates from 1887. It has the identical window detailing, quoins and red-and-yellow brick and is of similar size. The building is designated under Part V, Ontario Heritage Act.

104 Hazelton Avenue, 2018?

<https://www.walkscore.com/score/104-hazelton-ave-toronto-on-canada>

