How High Park became Toronto’s “country” sanctuary
Architect and surveyor John George Howard donated High Park to the city in 1873 and lived in Colborne Lodge till he died in 1890.

Skating at High Park in 1908. The winter carnival was a raging success, with about 50,000 attendees.

By: Valerie Hauch News reporter, Published on Thu Apr 07 2016

It was a Toronto winter carnival unlike any other – if only because it featured a “Wolf Man.” On Saturday Jan. 31, 1925, tens of thousands of Torontonians cheered in High Park while they watched “Wolf Man Joe LaFlamme” drive a sled team of timber wolves and huskies across Grenadier Pond and up onto the snowy slopes of the park, dashing around on a circuit.

The Toronto Daily Star had brought LaFlamme – a trapper, dogsledder and hotelier – and his team in from the northern Ontario town of Gogama (near Sudbury) as the highlight of the High Park winter carnival, organized by the newspaper. Various winter sports, such as skiing, snowshoeing, tobogganing, were demonstrated and competitive events held.

Although LaFlamme was apt at wrangling the wolves (aside from one wee mishap in which a wolf escaped for a day before being recaptured), a Star article warned people: “don’t let your children or dogs near them.”

The carnival was, well, a howling success, with the city forced to add more streetcars to ferry people to High Park, where the Star estimated 50,000 had gathered for the event.

In an editorial the Star opined that if the event made people “visit High Park and Grenadier Pond” and discover the “great winter playground” that was on their doorstep, it would be worthwhile.

Even Miss Canada turned out for the High Park winter carnival and the Star’s Monday Feb. 2 edition (there was no Sunday paper then) showed a toothy “Miss Canada” hugging “Sparky,” a “brush wolf” that LaFlamme had also brought from Gogama and described as more “docile” than the timber wolves on the dogsledded team.

Tobogganing in High Park in 1913 - just one of the various winter sports held at the carnival.

The “Wolf Man’s” foray into High Park may not have been quite what its former owner John George Howard had in mind when he and his wife, Jemima, agreed in 1873 to convey their country estate to the City of Toronto “for the free use, benefit and enjoyment” of all citizens for ever after.

Certainly, Howard, a conservative member of the Toronto establishment, meant for that enjoyment to be sober in every way and the 161-hectare High Park...
remains the city's only remaining "dry" area, where liquor cannot be sold – a stipulation Howard insisted on.

The gifting of High Park's then 48.5 hectares (120 acres) to the city was not without some strings. Howard would continue to live at his home, Colborne Lodge (on a private 45-acre parcel), and he was to be paid an annual pension of $1,200 as long as he lived. That added up to more than $20,000 before he passed in 1890 at age 86. The city was also required to forever maintain the burial site and stone cairn for the Howards, situated close to their residence, now a house museum.

The cairn was designed by Howard and built two years before his wife died from breast cancer, in 1877. The fence around the cairn includes a portion of the railing that had surrounded St. Paul’s Cathedral in London, designed by famous architect Sir Christopher Wren. Howard paid to have it shipped when he heard it was being torn down. The ship transporting it sank in the St. Lawrence River, but Howard was able to salvage part of the railing.

Howard had carved out a successful career as an architect of houses, churches and public buildings (the most famous being the since-demolished Provincial Lunatic Asylum on Queen St.), after emigrating from England with his wife in 1832.

Shortly after arriving in Toronto, he changed his legal surname from Corby to Howard. He claimed he had been born illegitimate and was descended from the 4th Duke of Norfolk, Thomas Howard. However, the Dictionary of Canadian Biography website cites birth records showing he was “the fourth of seven children” born to a John and Sarah Corby in England. (The website also notes that although he and his wife were childless, Howard had three children with his longstanding mistress, a Mrs. Mary Williams.)

By 1836, the Howards purchased their lakeside property, which stretched from Lake Shore Rd. to Bloor St. and was part of “the country.” Howard built a Regency-style summer home, Colborne Lodge (which he designed and named after his patron, Sir John Colborne, lieutenant-governor of Upper Canada). It was beautifully situated at a point on a hill overlooking Humber Bay, hence the name “High Park.” The couple lived there part-time, also maintaining a city house.

The Howards rented out a section of the estate south of the current Grenadier Café to tenant farmers, but much of the land was too hilly for farming. According to www.highparknature.org, the couple also planted orchards and gardens around their home and Howard recorded in an 1883 diary entry that he counted “10,993 spring bulbs in bloom.” Much of the land was kept in its natural forested state and while Howard occasionally hunted, he and his wife and visitors enjoyed walking, carriage rides and picnics and boating and fishing in Grenadier Pond.
Later in his life Howard worked as a civil engineer surveyor for the city, as well as private developers. When he retired in 1855, he and Jemima moved permanently to Colborne Lodge.

At Howard’s request he was appointed “forest ranger” by the city in 1878. The park was still off the beaten path for many Torontonians who didn’t have personal transportation. (Dufferin St. was the city’s western boundary in the 1870s.) The roads accessing the park weren’t great, but determined picnickers in the 1870s and 1880s made their way.

By the time of Howard’s death in 1890, Toronto had grown westward enough that streetcar lines came within walking distance of the park. The City acquired the Colborne site, and more adjoining land was bought over the years.

A deer paddock was added in 1893 and the High Park “zoo” was born. Today there are 11 paddocks featuring bison, llamas, peacocks, cattle, sheep and more. Today’s park maintenance approach promotes the natural environment and native species of plants and trees, like the provincially rare black oak savannah. High Park is home to a diverse population of wildlife, from red-backed salamanders to muskrats, birds of prey and 12 species of fish. It hosts wildflowers, such as wild lupine not seen elsewhere in the city, according to www.highparknature.org.

Thousands of Torontonians come to High Park every spring to view the spectacular blooming of its many Sakura cherry trees beside Grenadier Pond. Two thousand Sakura cherry trees were presented to Toronto on April 1, 1959, by the Japanese ambassador, on behalf of the citizens of Tokyo. They were a gift of gratitude to thank the city for its support of Japanese-Canadian refugees after the Second World War. Since then, the Consulate General of Japan has planted additional cherry trees in High Park and elsewhere in the city, in the spirit of ongoing friendship.

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Correction—April 8, 2016: This article was edited from a previous version that included an incorrect photo. Magnolia blossoms were misidentified as cherry blossoms.