Remember Markham

Newsletter of the Markham Historical Society and Markham Museum

Editor: Lorne R. Smith Fall, 2026

Editors Comment

By Lorne Smith



As I drive around Markham Village I observed that the streets remain about the same but with more traffic, the trees have grown larger and the homes and businesses have seen significant changes. Many of the small family homes have been demolished or rebuilt with a large multistoried home replacing it. Many older homes have been converted to commercial designation with a large variety of businesses being conducted on site. On Main Street the buildings look the same but the businesses have all changed. The old Tremont Hotel profile is the same as I knew it in my youth but today it looks abandoned.

In rural Markham most of the barns have been demolished or are falling down. Most of the farm houses now stand empty as the land becomes owned by development companies. Some of the very productive Class A farmland now stands fallow or grown up with weeds. Markham now has only one active dairy herd in production, the Paul Reesor and family, *On the Hill Farms* on Steeles Avenue. I just found a photo of the family being recognized by Don Reesor as being long time customers on the occasion of the closing of Reesor's Marmill in 1995.

Recently on a very sunny morning I stopped to walk over the 9th Line Baptist Cemetery on the Ninth Line north of Major MacKenzie Drive to remember many of the farm family names buried there over the last 175 years. To my delight I became aware of the honking of a very large flock of Canada Geese flying overhead as they returned from their morning feeding on the harvested soy bean fields within the Rouge National Urban Park (RNUP). They were headed back to the local Toogood and Reesor ponds and the many stormwater management ponds in the area. The natural world still does exist in Markham. It made me recall my early years when at this time of the year we would hear a flock or two at night flying high overhead as they headed from their northern summer breeding grounds on their way to the sunny south for the winter. I guess the ability to stay over winter here in Markham and Lake Ontario is the result of "global warming". I really appreciate that the whole eastern side of Markham is now protected within the RNUP.

I have become aware that very few of the people we meet or do business with have grown up in Markham. We now live in a new community where our history is not seen as being important. I no longer know who the "influencers" are besides the mayor and councilors. I am not on social media. My community influencers of the past were Ewart and Howard Stiver, the Lawrie boys, Carmen Lewis, Charlie Reesor, Reg Perkins, Keith Kennedy, Bill Hood, Fred Wicks, Ashmore Reesor, Austin Reesor, Carman Lewis, Chuck Parsons, Lachlan Cattanach, Paul Mingay, Tom Havercourt, Judy MacIntyre, Tim and Peggy Clark, to name a few. Now even Janet Lawrie Whitely has left Markham for Haliburton.

The Markham Historical Society still struggles to provide a limited program of events in this changing City of Markham Community. We need some new blood to keep the Society going if members feel it is worthwhile. We would like some of our younger member to step up to continue our challenge of telling Markham's story to our new population.

Coming Events

Christmas Program

John Lunau Centre
Markham Museum
Monday, December 14, 2026 7:00 p.m.
Bring your Christmas stories.
Members are invited to bring their favourite
Christmas Goodie to share

Annual General Meeting

John Lunau Centre
Markham Museum
March 8, 2027 7 p.m.
Program to be arranged

A Found Story of an Early Accident

By Lorne Smith

In March, 2010 Carol received a note from Sidney Ramer of New Hamburg with a story about an accident affecting her father Frank Reesor of Cedar Grove. Sidney grew up in Markham as one of the Ramer clan.

Sidney gave an account from the winter of 1937 when he was working for Carol's father on the home farm Lot 5, Con 10, behind the cider mill at Cedar Grove Sidney tells the story of he and Frank going back to the bush to cut firewood. They had cut down a tree the day before with a crosscut saw and had cut it up into 4 foot pieces. Normally they used the axe to cut it into stove lengths but he recounted that this time Frank decided to split the log lengthways using wedges. He stood the log on its end and stood on the stump to drive the wedges into the top of the log. It had been very cold the night before and all of the equipment they had left in the bush was very cold.

In Sidney's words " First he would hit one wedge, then the other. As I said these wedges were cold. As I remember he hit one wedge, then the other and once when he hit one wedge the other wedge flew out and hit him on his forehead between his eyes. It knocked him off the stump. Blood came out of his eyes. We headed for home and walked out of the bush to the road".
Sidney continued that he ran quickly to get Frank's wife Ella to phone Dr. McKay of Unionville to come quickly to patch him up.

Frank Reesor had that indentation in his forehead for the rest of his life. I kept that steel wedge at the farm for many years.

Trudy Tatangelo Memorial

Recently the MHS received a donation in memory of Trudy Tatangelo following her passing on November 16, 2023. Trudy was a long-time member but did not attend many of our meetings. She was well known within the Markham Garden and Horticultural Society.

Recent Letter from Helen Hisey Finstead, R. R. 1, Etzikom, Alberta.

In response to the previous Remember Markham newsletter about the Peaches Community, Helen responded with some of her memories.

"Thank you for your note and newsletter. It brought back a lot of memories of living in a good community. Yes, the church was the centre of that community and was a special part of my childhood. We kids even cut the grass in that cemetery for 25 cents an hour–although I believe the picture shows the newer addition to the cemetery.

Yes, my mother is in that picture of the ladies. She went by Rea, although her full name was Mareda. That old swimming hole was on Brignal's farm. The boys often went there after a day of harvest and would often swim in the nude for many didn't own a bathing suit (including my brother Bruce). One night Marg Brignal showed up for a swim too, and many of the boys had to just stand and watch.

The Peaches families were fine folks and good neighbours. I remember one summer when Dad was in the hospital and Mom and Bruce (16) were trying to do the harvest alone. One afternoon the neighbours just showed up and stooked the whole crop for us without a word.

Thank you for the memories. I think it is important as a reminder of what life was like back then."

Helen continued with more details about her life in the community. As children they attended the little Peaches United Church on the corner of their farm. Her mother's great-grandfather, Thomas Peach donated the land to the Primitive Methodist Church. Many of the Peach ancestors are buried in the cemetery.

The letter included photos of the church and events. One shows a party at the home of Annie Hoover, just south of the church. Interesting that I knew all of the children as I am in the photo.

Helen continues that the congregation was not very large. The main families were the Hoovers, Kirks, Warriners, Millers and Hiseys, with a few other occasional attenders like the Frisbys and Sales.

She concludes with "They were all very fine people and sincere in their faith".

A Leadbetter Cattle Story

By Lorne Smith

Our son, Donald Smith, operates a small farm on McCowan Road north of Holt (Mount Albert). He has always had a few beef cattle including a variety of breeds:

Angus, Belted Galloways, Herfords, and Wagyu but has now started breeding to a new Canadian beef breed called Speckle Park. This breed was developed in Saskatchewan and officially recognized by the Canadian Government in 2006. The Speckle Park breed was developed by cross breeding stock of Aberdeen Angus, Shorthorn and the British White Park cattle. The photo shows some of the calves at his place and the one in the front is identical to the animals from the Chartley White Park Cattle photo; white with black nose, ears and four black hooves. One difference is that the Speckle Park cattle are polled, while the early White Park cattle have horns. The interesting historical connection is that Don's Great Grandfather Charles Leadbetter was the herdsman for this Chartley White Park herd before he emigrated to Canada in 1905 to eventually open the Leadbetter Butcher Shop on Main Street, Markham in 1922. The late John Leadbetter was the fourth generation of Leadbetters operating that shop.

I am particularly proud of this Leadbetter connection as my mother was the youngest daughter of Charles Leadbetter.





White Park Cattle

Old Trees in Markham

By George Duncan

As Markham continues to grow as an urban community, old trees that have been part of the rural landscape are becoming harder to find. Some are preserved in greenspaces within new developments, but more often, it seems that individual trees or even woodlots are removed to make way for what comes next on the land. You can see this process unfolding as you travel through the parts of the city that are now under construction, for example, the former York Downs golfcourse.

Markham's heritage conservation districts are good places to seek out really large, old trees that have survived in our historic villages. In Markham Village, there are some noteworthy black walnut trees at the rear of properties fronting on Main Street North. These trees are of particular historical interest for their connection to the Pennsylvania German settlement of the area. In *Markham 1793-1900*, it is noted the late historian G. Elmore Reaman wrote in *The Trail of the Black Walnut* that Pennsylvania German settlers looked for places where black walnut trees grew as a sign of fertile, limestone-based soils that would be ideal for agriculture.

I have also heard stories about these settlers bringing black walnut saplings with them to Markham from their homes in Pennsylvania. One such tree, said to have been brought to Markham Township by the Heise family in the early 19th century, used to stand in front of the John Heise farmhouse west of Highway 404 and Victoria Square. The farm was at the northeast corner of Elgin Mills Road and Leslie Street, now part of Richmond Hill. I measured the circumference of the trunk of that tree with Janet Fayle, the local historian, in the early 1990s. The tree was battle-scarred from lightning strikes and old age, but remained majestic in scale. The trunk was 12 feet in circumference. The house, tree and barns are now all gone, replaced with commercial big-box development.

On the east side of Markham Village, a noteworthy giant of a tree is found on the west side of Albert Street, just south of Joseph Street (see the accompanying photograph). It is a Bur Oak with a trunk that I estimate by pacing it off to be four and a half feet in diameter. I have heard it could be as much as 200 years old, which means it was here before Markham Village was much of a

settlement. It's hard to photograph this spectacular tree due to the closeness of everything in the immediate neighbourhood.

I recall an even larger Bur Oak tree on the south side of Church Street, a little west of Ninth Line, that was a noteworthy local landmark. The tree appeared to be in good health and set to go on for many more years, but one day in the early 2000s I drove by to see the tree in the process of being cut down. It was unthinkable to me that someone could decide to do such harm to the landscape. The tree was not anywhere near the house on the property. I wonder how many other people in the community were aware of this tree and were witness to its regrettable loss. The removal of this tree made me think about the fact that we don't seem to have many truly huge, truly ancient trees in this part of Ontario.

George Duncan



Bur Oak tree on Albert Street in old Markham Village.



Black Walnut Tree overlooking Markham Fair Grounds

Fall Barbeque at the Markham Museum

By George Duncan

The MHS Fall Barbeque took place at the Markham Museum's picnic pavilion on Monday, September 14. The weather was perfect for an outdoor gathering. Based on the positive feedback from the 2025 event, the main course was sourced from Big Bone Barbeque on Bullock Drive. This year's meal featured pulled pork, beef brisket, and for the first time, spareribs. A bountiful assortment of salads, desserts and hot and cold beverages was provided by members of the Society. About 30 people were in attendance.

Lorne Smith welcomed everyone to the barbeque, and took a moment to offer condolences on behalf of the MHS to Doug Denby on the recent passing of his wife, Jean, a long-time member of the Society and a former staff member at the Markham Museum. Esther Lewis said grace in thanks for the evening's food and fellowship.

Lorne brought a variety of books and other items from his collection of materials on local history to offer to any interested members to take home with them. George Duncan gave a presentation on the art of paint graining, which was a technique widely used in the nineteenth century to create the effect of hardwood on pine woodwork. A base coat approximating the colour of the lighter portions of the wood grain would be applied, then a glaze coat in a darker colour was applied and worked over to create the appearance of oak, mahogany, walnut

or maple. George brought a selection of paint graining tools and a sample of paint graining to illustrate his talk.

Thank you to the staff of the Markham Museum for hosting the event, and to all who kindly brought food and drinks to share.



Paint graining tools from c.1900, left to right: Metal combs for straight grain; rocker grainer for heart-wood grain; roller for rays in white oak grain.



BBQ Food Table

Old Town Hall featured on Doors Open Markham walking tour

By George Duncan

Doors Open Markham was held on Saturday, September 26, offering a diverse selection of sites to visit throughout the City of Markham. One event situated in old Markham Village was a walking tour of some of the historic sites on Main Street. Tours were held at 10:00 a.m. and 1:00 p.m., with the point of beginning being the Old Town Hall at 96 Main Street North. Space does not permit a description of all of the featured sites, however, here is the story of the first site on the tour:

The Old Town Hall is a landmark building in the centre of the commercial core of the village. This large brick structure in the Italianate style was constructed in 1881 to the design of local architect John Anthony, who resided on Church Street. It served the Village of Markham, which had been incorporated in 1873. At first, the village council met in the former Methodist Church, a frame building that became vacant after the Methodist congregation built their impressive new brick church. As the village grew, a larger, purpose-built structure was needed for municipal purposes and this new town hall was constructed on a plot of land adjacent to the Franklin House Hotel. John Wilson was the builder.

The Old Town Hall was the centre of Markham Village's municipal administration and numerous community-oriented activities from 1881 until the 1940s. The building contained a public meeting hall and divisional court, council chamber, jail (a small lock-up), fire hall, and housed the local Mechanics' Institute, the precursor of the public library. There also were lodge rooms for the Freemasons and Oddfellows.

One special point of interest regarding the Old Town Hall is that it hosted a recital by the renowned Canadian poet E. Pauline Johnson on the occasion of the Queen's birthday in May, 1892. Emily Pauline Johnson, or Tekahionwake, was the daughter of George Henry Martin Johnson, an Indigenous interpreter for the Anglican Church, who became Chief of the Six Nations, and his English-born wife Emily Susanna Howells. Markham Village was one of many stops this gifted writer and performer made on her tours throughout Canada, the United States and England during the period 1884-1909.

On stage E. Pauline Johnson performed dramatic recitations of her poems that reflected her Mohawk heritage and other distinctly Canadian themes.

A new Town Hall was built in 1950 at the north end of the village, today's south east corner of Main Street and Ramona Bouldevard. The Old Town Hall was converted into a movie theatre in the mid-1940s, which involved some renovations that detracted from its historical character. A boxy vestibule was added to the front, and windows were bricked up. The Roxy later became the Towne Cinema which had closed by the early 1980s, after which this important historical building was restored on the exterior to represent its 1881 period of construction, with some minor changes to accommodate modern commercial uses. An historical plaque on the north side of the Old Town Hall shows a colourized photograph of the building as it was during its earlier history, as well as a photograph from its movie theatre days.



The Old Town Hall at 96 Main Street North taken in the early 2020s.

In Memorium

Helen Burton: January 15, 1934 – October 21, 2026

The Board is saddened with the news of the passing of Helen Burton on October 21, 2026 at Markham Stouffville Hospital. Helen and her husband Don Burton were active members of Markham Historical Society for a number of years. Don, as President Designate, passed in February, 2006. Helen has continued to regularly attend our open meetings. Helen was very fond of her garden and its flowers over the years at her home. Most of us remember her feisty spirit and great sense of humour.

MHS extends its sympathy to her daughters Diane Handley (Steve Handley) and Lori Burton ((Richard Wood) and their families. At Helen's request there will be no service or reception to honour her life.

Jean Denby: June 23, 1942 – August 25, 2026

It is with deep sadness and gratitude that we acknowledge the passing of a cherished member of our community, Gertrude Jean (nee Warne) Denby. She passed away on August 25th after a short stay at Markham Stouffville Hospital. Jean was kind, caring and soft-spoken; her quiet strength left a lasting effect on the lives of many.

Jean was born on June 23, 1942 in the Village of Fonthill, on the Niagara peninsula. In 1944, when Jean's father reported for duty in the Canadian Army, her mother took her children to live with Jean's widowed maternal grandmother in the Village of Unionville. Jean learned to play the piano when she was growing up, completing her grade 8 level from The Royal Conservatory of Music. Jean lived there until 1964, after she graduated from Toronto East General Hospital nursing program and married Douglas Denby that same year. Together they embarked on an exciting decade of new beginnings.

They lived in four communities, the most adventurous being the small village of Ivujivik in the Arctic. There they survived a typhoid breakout, went beluga whale hunting, and Jean stared down a polar bear. Since there was no doctor in the village, Jean did her best to care for the sick. One episode placed her on a rescue helicopter taking her infant son to a larger community for emergency medical treatment. It was during these years that Jean and Doug grew their family (Karl, Sean and Tanja).

In 1972, the Denby Family moved back to Jean's cherished childhood home on Main St. in Unionville where Jean wrapped herself and her family in history and family heritage. Much of the mid-19th century furniture (wardrobes, grandfather clocks, dressers, etc) in their home had been shipped from her maternal Grandfather's family in Scotland by Jean's father. Jean's Royal Doulton collection lived in one of those pieces

Her home was adorned with memorabilia – on display are a pair of snow shoes from her grandfather's mining days in Timmins, whalebone and ivory carvings from her days in the Arctic, as well as dishes and silverware acquired over the years from parents, grandparents and Doug's aunts. Jean's connection to her Scottish heritage is evident in her extensive collection of Anne of Green Gable books.

Traditions were important to Jean …from tending the peony bushes in the backyard that had been planted by her grandfather; annual baking afternoons with Tanja and Tanja's daughter wherein she shared childhood memories; to the annual family Christmas ornament sharing (Jean and Doug travelled to Muskoka to find the "perfect" ornament for each family member;, Jean gently and lovingly built her family heritage. She was the cherished matriarch of the family and the hostess of all family gatherings. Friends were often invited to pull up a chair and join in the festivities.

In her spare time Jean was an active member of the Unionville and Markham communities. She helped with skating and swimming clubs and with Girl Guides; she offered talks about living in the Arctic. She was involved in the Central United Church Women, Unionville Historical Society, Markham Historical Society and was on staff at Markham Museum where she was a docent and also made transcriptions of handwritten documents. Jean supported MHS with presentations to students in schools.



Jean Denby 1972



Jean Denby presenting at a school for MJHS

Slowdown in Development

By Lorne Smith

In the Winter 2020-2021 Remember Markham it was reported that TACC had begun removing the topsoil from the Brown and Carr farms on Lot 21, 22 Con 6 on the north side of Major MacKenzie Drive east of Kennedy Road. The topsoil has been removed, the topology re-sculptured to include a huge storm water management pond, the services installed, the roads installed, light standards put in place and a sales office built. However, no houses have been built. The attached photo shows the progress on that property in October 2026 exactly 6 years later. This speaks to the slowdown in housebuilding in the City of Markham. In a way it is a sad commentary on the use of Class 1 farmland.



Note the condos on Markham Road in the background.



Remembrance Day, Nov. 11, 2026
Unionville Cenotaph



Lorne Smith, Harry Lewis, Don Miller
Senior Members of the Special Displays at Markham Fair
Members of the Peaches Community
Presidents of Markham Fair: Don Miller(1991), Rob Miller(2011), Kristen Miller(2027)
Don and Harry have been Volunteers with Ashore Reesor in the Saw Mill at Markham Museum