

## **MARCH 2024 SPEAKER - MARTA O'BRIEN**

### **TORONTO ISLAND: A UNIQUE COMMUNITY**

Well-known architectural historian Marta O'Brien fascinated us with her talk, accompanied by archival and her own photographs, of why Toronto Island is unique in geography, history, ownership, mixed uses, and regulations. She also noted that it has been beset over the years by fires destroying a number of landmark wood structures and that the land originally was lived on by Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation.

Originally, Toronto Island wasn't an island but a peninsula of mainland Toronto consisting of Scarborough Bluffs' alluvial deposits being carried by Lake Ontario currents. In 1858 a tremendous storm split it into a group of 15 small islands that settled 1.5 miles offshore. Between 1885 and 1888 the City fortified what Marta called "the mushy fingers of lowlands" with 460 acres of strong soil from a dredging project of the harbour to make it accessible to larger ships. The chain of islands provided natural protection for the harbour. The City also planted trees and shrubs.

Marta told us about a number of early sites: Gibraltar Point Lighthouse (1808-09), Toronto's (then York) first fortified stone building, 6 feet thick, 70 feet tall, limestone from Queenston near Niagara Falls as Toronto lacked strong stone. St. Andrew By The Lake Church (1884), funded by Toronto's wealthy including members of the Massey and Gooderham families who had had large summer vacation homes built there. Lakeside Home for Little Children (1891) funded by *Toronto Telegram* publisher John Ross Robertson, a fresh-air summer holiday for chronic patients of Toronto's Hospital for Sick Children. Royal Canadian Yacht Club summer clubhouse (1872); Island Yacht Club (1950), for Jews since other yacht clubs didn't accept Jews. Hanlan's Hotel (1878), built by John Hanlan, former police constable; "Hanlan's Point" in honour of his son Ned, winner of many national and international rowing contests. Ward's Hotel, opened in 1882, had 60-foot long encircling verandas on the main and second floors, a ballroom, shooting gallery, and a tower.

Residential development, on Ward's Island, began in 1913, for both the upper income—multi-story mansions — and lower — canvas tents "with inside wood walls for better shelter," Marta said, and later small cottages. Marta showed us a 1931 Simpson's ad, "Let Simpsons build you a cottage" — \$311-\$449.50 for supplies to erect an 840 square foot max. place. The Island's peak permanent population was 3,000 in the 1940s, "Toronto was then a factory city and the influx of job-seekers caused a housing shortage on the mainland," Marta explained. Residential use is restricted to neighbouring Ward's and Algonquin islands. Today there are 800 residents in 262 homes. "Four percent of the land use is residential, much less than the 28 percent on which the airport is. Over the years residents have stymied attempts to evict them and bulldoze their homes for other purposes. Under legislation passed in 1993, residents on Ward's and Algonquin Islands may hold title to their homes and lease the lots on which their houses stand until December 15, 2092.

In their wills, Islanders can only bequeath their island property to immediate family. No cars are allowed; the one road is only for city maintenance and garbage collection trucks. Mail is delivered by golf cart. "Taxes are high," Marta said. The first ferries were named after flowers- Trillium, Bluebell, Primrose, Mayflower. The Trillium (1910, 1,300 passenger capacity) was abandoned 1958-73; a heritage rescue campaign returned it to service in 1976.

*Susan Goldenberg*