

“Jane's Walk” 2021

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Cannington's MacLeod Park

My favourite walk in Cannington starts in MacLeod Park and can go anywhere, but I will take you past some of the more interesting spots where you can rest, eat a packed snack, stop and go back or continue on...or you can always come back another day!

To find this classic park, come East along the main street of Cannington (Cameron Street or Regional Road #12) and turn South on Peace Street, which is just past Foodland.

If you are driving you could park in the Foodland parking lot, and pick up one of their take out lunches if you are planning a longer walk.

The entrance to the park is just down the hill on Peace Street, after a children's playground, tennis courts and the Lawn Bowling Club. At the sign, there is a road and a winding paved pathway and an interesting historical plaque up ahead. But first, let's talk about the origin of the park itself.

Cannington has a reputation for having a community of artists today, but this has been true throughout its history. At the turn of the century, Nelson MacLeod, an artist, saw the beauty of the waterlilies and elms and recognized the potential of this spot beside the Beaver River. He convinced forty-three other citizens of the village to join him in buying the land to convert it to a park. The first Park Board was organized in 1912, and twenty years later his work was recognized by the Toronto Horticultural Society when they awarded him with a Diploma of Merit for “Excellent work in connection with improvements in the new Cannington Park”.

Nelson was quite a character in many artistic ways – he was a regular in performances at the theatre on top of the old Town Hall (the lower floor is now the new library) and photos from the Historical Society show him dressed in many outrageous outfits, including vaudeville style blackface. He was a specialist in make-up and also played the bagpipes and violin, and had the ability to attract a wide following who were excited to be in his productions or support him in the park project.

A local artist of great fame was Robert Holmes, who is commemorated on the plaque. His father came from Yorkshire, England, and opened a blacksmith shop here at the corner of Cameron and Ann Streets (where the GO bus turn-around is). He built a white cottage around the corner (still there, but with many additions) and Ann Street is named after his wife. His eldest son Robert showed artistic ability at a young age, sketching a portrait of his father at his forge and disappearing into the surrounding woods to identify and sketch wildflowers. His father wanted him to become a doctor, so

in 1882 he was sent to study at the University of Toronto. However, the University has no record of his having registered, and he actually graduated from the Ontario School of Art in 1884 with ten certificates. He studied in London and New York and then became drawing master at Upper Canada College, and taught at various schools including the Ontario College of Art, where he worked until his death in 1830.

The Art Gallery of Ontario has many of Robert Holmes' exquisite watercolours, and there are some on display in the "Derryville Hall" building of the Cannington Horticultural Society, up the hill on our walk. If you "Google" Robert Holmes, you can see the AGO's "Forest of Delight" collection where you can take a walk through a sample of his wildflower renditions. And if you keep your eyes open at antique and thrift stores in the area, you might even be able to find a framed print of his work! I did at a thrift store in Lindsay...I recognized his work and snapped it up!

Another bit of artistic trivia – if you are familiar with the renowned Canadian actor R.H. Thompson (probably best known for his depiction of Matthew in "Anne with an 'E'"), his initials stand for Robert Holmes. His mother, Cecily Thompson was very involved in the Arts, especially theatre at the Alumni Association in Toronto, and was a fan of Robert Holmes' work.

Wow, so much about the characters that graced this town! Let's continue to the bridge over the Beaver. This footbridge has been replaced since I arrived here, and probably a time or two before. But before there was a bridge there had to be fundraising to build it, to connect the two portions of MacLeod Park. The "Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire" ("I.O.D.E") paid for a lovely rustic bridge from their Memorial Fund, which was supported by profits from the plays presented in the Town Hall that also toured to surrounding villages. When I was raising my children in Cannington I put together a Summer Children's Theatre group, and we staged a production of "The Three Billy Goats Gruff" on that bridge. The kids, who are now in their thirties, still talk (and laugh) about it!

Crossing the bridge (beware of the Troll!) we can follow the path along the Beaver and walk up the hill to the Horticultural Society's Gazebo. Unfortunately the map for their Nature Trail is no longer there but notice the brick floor with many messages and commemorations given to raise funds for this nice rest spot. From here you have a good view of the skateboard park, the Dench Animal Shelter, the old Curling Club that has been re-purposed as the Devil's Fitness gym and the Rick MacLeish Memorial Community Centre. This is Cannington's arena as well and it is well named as Rick started his minor hockey career in Cannington, played junior hockey with the Peterborough Petes and was drafted by the Boston Bruins. His NHL career included Detroit, Hartford, Pittsburgh and finally the Philadelphia Flyers where he played during their Stanley Cup-winning years. This is also Brock's COVID vaccination site so on a Saturday or Wednesday afternoon you can observe all the activity. And don't forget the Legion, over on the left! If you smell skunk as you sit here, it is a slight scent wafting from the unmarked building behind all of these – a clandestine but legal cannabis grow centre.

After this pause, you can tour the outside of the Historical Society's buildings – the Brandon and Francis log cabins, the Derryville Hall, and the drive shed. These are fascinating to visit when things are open as there are lots of historical artifacts and the oldest cabin boggles the mind that such a large family lived in one room and all slept together in a loft above. During the Cannington Haunted Trail a fire is lit and spooky ancestors hand out candies. There is a traditional fenced garden that will sprout some herbs that were common for the settlers like Clary Sage, the leaves of which were used to mark your place in the Bible. There is also a reproduction barn that is used to store sets and props for the Cannington Haunted Trail that was locally funded and built to blend in with the historical buildings, which were all saved from other areas and transported here. The old railway station and caboose represent the engine that drove these communities as rail was the best way to transport the lumber and brick that built them and those further south, all the way to Toronto.

If you would like to wander the Horticultural Society's Nature Trail (2.5 km from start to finish, but with many exits), go back to the gazebo and down the hill to the path that continues along the Beaver. If you are quiet, you may see herons, muskrats, wood ducks, and other elusive wildlife, but if you are not, you will still see Canada geese and red winged blackbirds who are nesting in the reeds. Spring warblers are coming back now and the varied ecology attracts many different varieties. Following the trail you can also imagine the two dark weekends of the Haunted Trail, with scares galore. Keep to your right so that you can come out into the field with the small playground on the other side of the railway station. The trail continues along the woods, skirting the Claire Hardy Baseball Fields, then crosses a "Hort" Society member's hand made wooden bridge to re-enter the forest. There may be Spring wildflowers, those that inspired Robert Holmes, in bloom at this time. The trail continues to the South to connect with the old railway line. If you turn right, or West, you can walk along the line to Laidlaw Street, on the West side of which the line becomes the Beaver River Wetland Conservation Area and Trail. This trail can take you hiking or cycling (no motorized vehicles please) to Blackwater (12.5 kilometers), where it connects with the Uxbridge trail and ultimately the Trans Canada trail. But that is probably for another day – in the meantime you can go back down to downtown Cannington along any of the streets that end along Shedden Road which parallels the railway line, admiring the Victorian architecture that characterizes the towns in Brock Township.

I hope you have enjoyed some history and storytelling along my favourite Cannington walk, and will come back to see more as the seasons change!