



The house that bears the name of Willowdale farmer John McKenzie was one of the first in the 1912 Empress subdivision that sprouted on his farm, near the present-day North York Centre subway station.

For decades, this 1913 Edwardian house was the grandest on Parkview Avenue — indeed, the grandest in the entire neighbourhood. It had modern features such as push-button light switches and a generator in the basement. It had class, too: a grand wraparound veranda punctuated by columns, extensive oak woodwork, a bevelled glass entranceway, a wide staircase, carving-adorned bookcases, and stained glass.

The McKenzie family moved to this house from a farmhouse closer to Yonge Street. While this new house was neither a pioneering house nor a typical working farmhouse, it had the trappings of a farmhouse out back, where there was a pre-existing milk house and a stable that McKenzie added in 1915. McKenzie continued to farm while living in this new house, not retiring from farming until 1920. Even after that, he kept a couple of cows and a very large garden on a parcel of land next door.

HIDDEN GEM

HISTORIC FARMING IN NORTH YORK

How a Willowdale house has survived waves of development pressure

Unlike subdivisions today, the Empress subdivision filled in gradually, with empty lots sold to owners who were responsible for house construction. Many of the early houses were built close to Yonge Street (and its radial railway line), while further eastward, many homes were not built until after World War II.

As the subdivision filled in, vestiges of agriculture disappeared. The parcel with McKenzie's large garden gave way to homes, and the milk house and stable

were hidden by houses and trees. The rural village of Willowdale had slowly become the suburb of Willowdale.

Fast forward to 2014 and the view of the block on the west side of John McKenzie House is unrecognizable. The ring road of Doris Avenue has shorn off the houses immediately to the west. A lone house remains further towards Yonge Street, the rest of the houses replaced by high-rise buildings. Here, the early remnants of Empress subdivision have been erased.

torical Society (OHS), a non-profit organization, undertook a long-term lease and restored the house and outbuildings.

Today, with the OHS now headquartered in the house, the grand main floor and attached coach house are rented out for private functions and used for community events. And a very interesting community initiative is happening next door, in the garden.

The garden sits immediately to the east of John McKenzie House, where the City acquired and tore down a house to create green space. That new space ended up overgrown and underused. Local city councillor John Filion says that he had been reading about food issues when, as he was walking past the space one day, wondered if it might be used as a vegetable garden.

In 2008, John McKenzie House — a house connected to the suburbanization of the area and at the same time its farming past — was host to an event that would reconnect the adjacent parcel of land to its agricultural past. Filion and OHS executive director Rob Levery headed up a community meeting in the parlour to gauge community interest in the idea of using the City-owned parcel as a community garden.



John McKenzie House
In 2013, a heritage conservation easement was signed between the City of Toronto and The Ontario Heritage Trust after encouragement by the OHS. It was a fitting birthday gift for the house in its 100th year. The easement protects John McKenzie House, its outbuildings, the Parkview Neighbourhood Garden, and a small park immediately to the north of the house.

So the volunteer-run Parkview Neighbourhood Garden was born. As in McKenzie's day, the garden is linked to the house: volunteer gardeners hold meetings in the old house, while tools and supplies are stored in the stable out back.

Filion is excited about how the City and community worked together to nurture this public space. "It's the perfect example of government and community working together," says Filion. "I was stunned by the positive response."

The garden is run by a six-person steering committee. Committee member Fran Moscall explains that there are four teams of volunteers who work in the garden at specified times, as well as others who show up and work whenever they have free time. Produce is sold to volunteers and neighbours, with some proceeds going towards garden expenses, and remaining money and produce going to charity.

In 2013, 100 years after John McKenzie House was built, the City acquired an additional property to the east of the Parkview Neighbourhood Garden. The subdivision was deconstructed just a little bit more to expand a grand garden, beside a once-again grand house. †

photos courtesy of The Ontario Historical Society
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