

# Thirsty City

*A series of walks exploring  
the secret life of water in Toronto.*



## Unearthing Garrison Creek

*How to create a blue-green future  
for a lost river*

*The walk begins at the corner of College and Crawford Streets and will  
take 45 to 60 minutes to complete.*

# Walk Map

-  Sewer
-  Street
-  Walking Route
-  Lost River
-  Point of Interest



**i** Begin your walk at the northwest corner of Crawford and College Streets. Look down at the Garrison Creek icon on the sidewalk. Garrison Creek flowed here for more than 10,000 years until 1884 when it was buried in the sewer below your feet.

In the 1980s, architects James Brown and Kim Storey mapped lost Garrison Creek, the beginning of a communal love affair with its memory. They wanted to bring the Garrison back as a natural system to handle stormwater. Practical, economic, social, and political barriers intervened, but the creek, now firmly entrenched in local sentiment and mythology, lives on in green links, the parks along its path, in curving streets, in the sound of water rushing under streets and in creative community projects.

The idea of using nature as the design template for remaking cities has taken hold since then, and new technologies are being applied to create living buildings and blue-green infrastructure. The environmental, social and cultural benefits are many, including reduced flooding and climate change impacts.

On this walk discover possibilities for a blue-green future for Garrison Creek and learn about the David Suzuki Foundation project to create a "Homegrown National Park" in the watershed of lost Garrison Creek.

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|---|---|
| <b>1</b> De-paving Paradise                           | <b>7</b> Going Off Grid                   |
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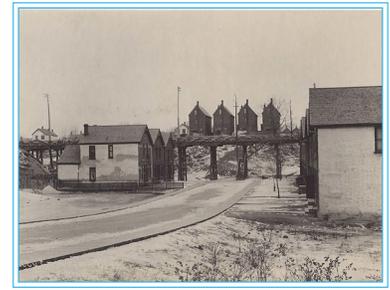
**i** Cross south and take a look at the Metro parking lot.

## 1 De-paving Paradise

This Metro store and parking lot stand on level ground created by filling the ravines of the Garrison and a small tributary from the east. Houses lining the ravine were also buried. When rain falls on the parking lot it picks up oil, gas, salt, and heavy metals, heats up on the warm, smooth asphalt, and speeds into the Garrison sewer under the tarmac. In blue-green parking lots polluted water is captured, filtered and allowed to soak into the ground, and people are getting together to find ways to de-pave paradise.

**i** Head south on Crawford Street; notice the laneway behind the Metro, a candidate for permeable paving that allows water to soak in rather than run off into the sewer.

*Continue south on Crawford Street to Cinder Lane. You are stepping away from the main course of the creek to investigate the edges of its ravine.*



*Sully Crescent looking west to Shaw St, December 3 1901*

City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 200, Series 376, File 3, Item 10

## 2 Cinder Lane

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the cinders and ash generated by heating with coal or wood were picked up along laneways, and dumped in nearby ravines. Now Toronto's 2779 laneways are being re-imagined as a network of greenways and linear parks to provide shade, absorb water, reduce pollution, cool the air, host butterflies, and invite walking, biking, art, gardening, community, food and festivals.

**i** In one year about 1.5 million cubic metres of rain fall on Toronto laneways. More than 90% of it runs into the sewer system. Permeable laneways could save about .645 million cubic metres of water from spilling into overloaded sewers!

*Head west down the lane to Shaw Street and Fred Hamilton Park; notice the sewer grates, a tree languishing under concrete, downspouts, and one rain barrel.*

*In Fred Hamilton Park Garrison Creek is buried under the diagonal pathway to your right. Walk to the top of the laneway behind the first row of houses at the park's edge.*

## 3 WaterHarvest

WaterHarvest, a joint project of the Friends of Roxton Road Parks and F<sub>RM</sub> lab at University of Waterloo, will collect water from a new park building (and, if feasible, from neighbouring houses), filter it through a rain garden, and store it in a cistern under this lane, for use in the park community garden. This will be the first water harvest project in the Garrison Creek Watershed. Beautiful rain gardens exist in both home gardens, and commercial/industrial buildings throughout the GTA.

**i** Notice the cluster of pots with butterfly-friendly plants, and a saucer of damp sand — a puddling site for butterflies. This very small garden is part of the new butterfly milkweed corridor in the Homegrown National Park.

*Continue west across Fred Hamilton Park, down the former Garrison ravine bank and head south on Roxton Road to Harrison Street.*

*Notice the community pollinator garden and fruit trees at the south end of the park.*

## 4 Lost Garrison Creek Meets Lost Denison Creek

At this corner, very close to the confluence of Garrison with Denison Creek, you can hear and smell the rushing water under the sewer grate. You are on top of the Garrison Creek trunk sanitary sewer; it runs day and night regardless of rainfall, because it carries not only rain, but sewage from the surrounding houses. The green sewer vents at the corner release methane gas from the sewer below.

**i** Continue south on Roxton Road to the Roxton Road Parkette on your left. The first thing you will see is a blue canoe filled with butterfly plants.

## 5 Homegrown National Park

The blue-green city recreates habitat and natural linkages within the city. This Community Canoe garden is part of the Homegrown National Park Project. Community Canoe gardens, installed in the parks of lost Garrison Creek, are filled with native flowers - good for the birds, bees and butterflies.

**i** Continue east through the parkette past a willow that likely has its roots in one of the two sewers under this park. Walk south down the lane, noticing the slope of the land. Stop when you get to the sewer grate at the low point in the laneway.



*The way it was*

## 6 Overflowing

Deep below the alley is a combined storm overflow sewer that was built because the original sewer on Garrison Creek was overloaded. Until the 1990's it regularly overflowed into the lake but now it is diverted into the Western Beaches Storage Tunnel where contaminants settle to the bottom and water that flows into the lake is

## 7 Going Off Grid

Just north of here, at Dundas and Crawford, the Garrison Creek sewer meets the Mid Toronto interceptor sewer on its way to Ashbridge's Bay Sewage Treatment Plant. The plant is the largest surface water polluter in North America (13,679,710 kg of pollutants in 2006). New living building technologies seek to completely avoid the unintended consequences of large sewer infrastructures by managing waste and water "off-grid" in closed cycles within the building; zero waste is the goal. Toronto's Healthy House and the Bullitt Centre in Seattle are examples of off grid buildings.

**i** Continue south on the path that skirts the "dog bowl" on the east side. This is what is left of the former Garrison Creek ravine. Stop where you have a clear view looking down into the valley.

## 8 Daylight

Brown and Storey's 1994 management plan for Garrison Creek included daylighting the Crawford Street Bridge and recreating the creek through the park with rainwater harvested from the local neighbourhood. Others have dreamed of a permanent pond in the bowl. Daylighting restores a river to a re-naturalized surface waterway. The best Toronto example is Mud Creek at the Evergreen Brickworks.

**i** Head south on the path, bearing right at the fork, and then diverge onto the grass to find a magnificent slippery elm tree (*Ulmus rubra*).



Mackenzie Keast

*Mackenzie Keast, urban planner and member of Toronto based collective DISTL, created a concept for a lake in the Trinity Bellwoods Bowl*

## 9 Lost Forests

This elm, a living link between earth and sky, brings water up from the soil, and transpires it into the air to fall again as rain. Elm trees have huge vascular systems allowing them to pump up large amounts of water in early spring and produce seeds before other trees leaf out. The forests that once clothed this land were in a perfect balance with climate and rainfall. Living buildings and the blue-green city try to match some of the water balance and ecosystem functions of local natural systems.

**i** *Head southwest past the community green house and another community canoe. You are now moving away from the main course of Garrison Creek which flows southeast under the tennis courts.*

*Continue west along the path to a little bridge just before Crawford Street.*

*It is worth a side trip to see the map of the creek that is inlaid in the sidewalk at the corner of Queen Street West and Gorevale Ave.*

## 10 Lost Wetlands and Birds

Before urbanization this area had many springs and wetlands and was described as “a perfect paradise for sportsmen” who hunted black duck, mallard, pintail, teal, wood duck, geese, plovers, sandpipers, woodcock, and passenger pigeons. This early version of a rain garden receives water from the community centre. It’s not very exciting to look at and doesn’t compare with what once was here, but since it keeps rainwater out of the storm sewers and has some biomass, it has ecosystem functions.

**i** *Cross Crawford Street and enter Logie Lane just to the south. Walk West.*

## 11 Laneway Nature

The greening of this lane will begin in 2015 when the Homegrown National Park Rangers create a community food and pollinator garden on this land belonging to the TTC. To avoid contamination, the garden will be planted in raised beds with clean soil. Mean-time neighbours to the south are growing herbs and flowers on the top of the shipping containers that line the lane.

**i** *Continue west on the lane to Shaw Street, then head south to Queen Street West and end your walk in the grounds of CAMH, now open to the public.*

## 12 Lost Stafford and Asylum Creeks

Stafford and Asylum Creeks once flowed through shallow swampy ravines across the grounds of the Asylum into the Garrison. Around 1856, Kyvas Tully, one of the architects, tried unsuccessfully to use water from the creeks to supply the asylum.

The decision to breach the wall and open the grounds of CAMH to the public makes a nice parallel to the reconnection to nature that underlies the Homegrown National Park and the blue-green city.



Michael Cook and Jeremy Kai

*Asylum Stream sewer (1891)*



## The Thirsty City walks explore Toronto's historic and current water issues.

Discover the secret life of water in the city! You will discover the remarkable water system that brings clean water to our taps, and the sewer system that takes polluted water, both sewage and stormwater, away.

Along the way learn about ancient aquifers, springs and a network of lost creeks that once supported abundant life; and discover exciting new possibilities for a future blue-green city built with nature as the design template.

**For more information visit [lostrivers.ca](http://lostrivers.ca)**

Thirsty City Walks are produced by Lost Rivers, a program of the Toronto Green Community.

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### *Unearthing Garrison Creek Partners*

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*Support for this self-guided tour has been generously provided by*

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