

Heritage Research and Evaluation Report



12800 Yonge Street – Mitchell-Durham House

Circa 1924

Part of Lot 64 Concession 1, King Township

Prepared by: Heritage & Urban Design, Planning & Building Services, 2024

History

Contextual History

The Mitchell-Durham House at 12800 Yonge Street is a circa 1924 frame and cobblestone building in the Arts and Crafts style, and is located in Richmond Hill's Oak Ridges hamlet. Prior to colonization and settlement, the land was inhabited by the Anishnaabe, Haudenosaunee, and the Huron Wendat First Nations. Following the Toronto Purchase in 1787, the area was subdivided into townships, concessions, and lots. 12800 Yonge Street is located within the former Lot 64 Concession 1 in King Township, which was associated with slow, sparse development along Yonge Street, large homesteads and country estates, and summer tourism along Bond and Wilcox Lakes.¹ At the time of its construction, the Mitchell-Durham House was surrounded by large farm lots fronting onto Yonge Street. Over time, the subject property has been

¹ Barkey, Jean. *Whitchurch Township*. Toronto: Stoddart, 1993; 36.

Page 2

referred to as Lot 64 Concession 1 in King Township, 12778 Yonge Street, and 12800 Yonge Street.

12800 Yonge Street

The first owner of Lot 64, Concession 1 in King Township was John McKay, who was granted 210 acres from the Crown in 1797. According to land registry records, the full lot was sold to Richard Hatt in 1819, and was then acquired by Ralph Leeming before being sold to James Wilkie in 1834.² The 1860 Tremaine map confirms that James Wilkie was the owner of Lot 64 at the time.³ According to the 1861 census, Wilkie was a farmer from Scotland who had a one-storey frame house and livestock.⁴

In a vesting order⁵ in 1870, the Court of Chancery transferred the north half of the property, totaling 105 acres, to Thomas Mortson.⁶ Archival documentation confirms Mortson's ownership and residence on the property. According to the 1878 Miles & Co. map, Mortson was the owner of the north half of Lot 64 and had a structure on the west end of the lot.⁷ The 1881 directory confirms that Mortson was a freeholder (owner) of the lot,⁸ and the 1881 census describes Mortson as a farmer.⁹

In 1889, Thomas Mortson sold the east half of the north half of Lot 64 to Michael Ryan.¹⁰ The 1891 census describes Ryan as a coal and wood merchant living in a brick two storey, eleven room house. Ryan's sons, Daniel and John Ryan, worked as a post office clerk and teamster, respectively, and it is unknown if the property continued to be farmed while the Ryan family lived on it.¹¹

In 1911, the property was sold to James Thomas, who sold it to Hugh and Bernice Mitchell in 1912. According to land registry records, land ownership then changed hands several times over the next few years, with ownership reverting to the Mitchells by 1920.¹² Tax assessment rolls for King Township verify that in 1920-1922, Hugh and Bernice Mitchell farmed 52 ½ acres on the northeast part of Lot 64.¹³ According to land registry records, the Mitchells sold a portion of their lot, measuring 304' fronting Yonge Street, to Hugh Mitchell's sister, Ann Angus Durham, and her husband John H.C. Durham, in the early 1920s.¹⁴ This description matches the subject property. Tax assessment rolls verify this sale – in 1923, Hugh and Bernice Mitchell are farmers and

² *Ontario Land Registry Historical Books*. York Region: Lot 61, Concession 1, King Township.

³ Tremaine, George R. "Tremaine's Map of York County." Canada West, Toronto 1860.

⁴ *Census of Canada West*, 1861.

⁵ A court order that passes legal title from one person to another without requiring permission from its owner.

⁶ *Ontario Land Registry Historical Books*. York Region: Lot 61, Concession 1, King Township.

⁷ Illustrated historical atlas of the county of York and the township of West Gwillimbury & town of Bradford in the county of Simcoe, Ont. Toronto : Miles & Co., 1878.

⁸ *County of York Gazetteer and Directory: First Edition (1881)*. Toronto: W.H. Irwin & Co., 1881.

⁹ *Census of Canada*, 1881.

¹⁰ *Ontario Land Registry Historical Books*. York Region: Lot 61, Concession 1, King Township.

¹¹ *Census of Canada*, 1891.

¹² *Ontario Land Registry Historical Books*. York Region: Lot 61, Concession 1, King Township.

¹³ *Assessment roll for the township of King, 1 concession*. King Township, 1920-1922.

¹⁴ *Ontario Land Registry Historical Books*. York Region: Lot 61, Concession 1, King Township.

freeholders on 50 acres of land in King Township, and in 1924, the Durham family is listed as freeholders on 2 ½ acres on Lot 64.¹⁵ The property was then resold again, this time to Nancy and William McKnight in 1924.¹⁶

Archival material indicates that the Durham family likely built the subject house at 12800 Yonge Street around 1924. In the 1922 tax assessment roll, Hugh and Bernice Mitchell owned 52 ½ acres of land with its structures valued at \$990, and in 1923, they owned 50 acres of land with its structures valued at \$1000. In 1924, the Durhams' structure on 2 ½ acres of land was valued at \$2500 while the value of the Mitchell structures remained at \$1000. Since the value of the Mitchell structures did not depreciate after the property was severed and sold to the Durhams, the structure was built after the property was sold in 1922 or 1923. Since the value of the Durham property skyrocketed in 1924, the structure was built by then.¹⁷

Newspaper and census records further confirm that the subject building was built by 1924. According to the *Liberal*, John H.C. Durham sold his "California Bungalow" to William McKnight in 1924.¹⁸ In the 1931 census, the McKnight house is described as a 6-room stucco building, matching the subject structure's description.¹⁹

According to land registry records, the McKnight family sold the subject property back to John H. C. Durham in 1936.²⁰ Tax assessment rolls show that the Durhams did not live on the property,²¹ and in 1941, J.H. and Elizabeth Wharton are listed as tenants on the lot.²² In 1942, while John H. C. Durham was still the owner of the property, the 2 ½-acre lot was put in the care of Hugh Mitchell, who still owned the neighboring farm.²³

In 1948, John H.C. Durham listed his second wife, Bernice Durham, as his joint tenant on the subject property. In 1977, the property was granted to Muriel Mitchell "in trust".²⁴ The subject property remains under the ownership of the Mitchell family today.

The Mitchell-Durham Family

The extended Mitchell-Durham family constructed, owned, and has been associated with the property at 12800 Yonge Street since 1912.

The builder of the subject building was John H. C. Durham, who was born in St. Catharines around 1870, moved to Toronto to become a fire insurance agent, and later married Ann Angus Mitchell. In 1898, he founded the Merchants Fire Insurance Company, where he worked until his retirement in 1922. The Durhams purchased a farm on Lot 64 Concession 1 in Whitchurch Township near Bond Lake around 1907 or

¹⁵ *Assessment roll for the township of King, 1 concession*. King Township, 1920-1922.

¹⁶ *Ontario Land Registry Historical Books*. York Region: Lot 61, Concession 1, King Township.

¹⁷ *Assessment roll for the township of King, 1 concession*. King Township, 1922-1924.

¹⁸ "Bungalow sold." *The Liberal*, August 7 1924.

¹⁹ *Census of Canada*, 1931.

²⁰ *Ontario Land Registry Historical Books*. York Region: Lot 61, Concession 1, King Township.

²¹ By 1936, John H. C. Durham was retired and living in Florida full-time.

²² *Assessment roll for the township of King, 1 concession*. King Township, 1941.

²³ *Assessment roll for the township of King, 1 concession*. King Township, 1942.

²⁴ *Ontario Land Registry Historical Books*. York Region: Lot 61, Concession 1, King Township.

1908, across the street from the subject property.²⁵ It was not uncommon for politicians, business owners, and other wealthy individuals to build large estates in the Oak Ridges area – since the early nineteenth century, families such as the Boultons, Baldwins, McLeods, and St. Georges had established summer or year-round homes around Bond and Wilcox Lakes.²⁶ The Durhams had purchased an older farm located along Yonge Street in Oak Ridges, renovated its circa 1850 brick farmhouse, and built a cobblestone cottage along Yonge Street for the farm manager around 1915.²⁷ The Durham estate was named Craigmore, and the Durhams spent their summers there, often wintering in West Palm Beach, Florida.²⁸ According to the *Liberal*, Craigmore had pasture for 50 cattle.²⁹

The Durhams were active in the Oak Ridges community. John H. C. Durham served as a school trustee in Whitchurch Township,³⁰ and Ann Angus Durham often wrote to the *Liberal* about the family's travels to locales like the Bahamas or Los Angeles.³¹

In 1912, Ann's brother, Hugh Mitchell, purchased the farm across the street from Craigmore at Lot 64 Concession 1 in King Township. The Mitchell farm, also referred to as Wil-Dor Farm in later years,³² ran for decades. According to aerial photography, the farm ran between 1912 and the late 1990s, when low-density housing and commercial development replaced it.³³ The farm was run by Hugh, his wife Rachel Bernice Mitchell (also called Bernice), and their son, William G. Mitchell.³⁴

In the early 1920s, the Mitchells sold the subject property, a 2 ½ acre parcel fronting Yonge Street, to Ann and John Durham. The Durhams built the subject building on the site, and quickly sold it to the McKnight family.³⁵ Newspaper and tax assessment rolls show that the Durhams moved full-time to Florida in 1929, where Ann died shortly after in 1931.³⁶ In 1936, John Durham again purchased the property, but remained in Florida, renting out the property to tenants.³⁷ In 1940, the Craigmore farm on the east side of Yonge Street was sold.³⁸

Based on archival documentation, Hugh Mitchell died sometime between 1943³⁹ – when his name appears in tax assessment rolls - and 1946 – around which time Bernice

²⁵ "Late John H.C. Durham Founded Insurance Co." *The Liberal*, February 23 1956.

²⁶ Barkey, Jean. *Whitchurch Township*. Toronto: Stoddart, 1993; 36.

²⁷ "Notice of Passing of By-Laws: John C. Durham Cobblestone Cottage." *Ontario Heritage Trust*, 1998.

²⁸ "Late John H.C. Durham Founded Insurance Co." *The Liberal*, February 23 1956.

²⁹ "Want ads." *The Liberal*, May 18 1922.

³⁰ "Late John H.C. Durham Founded Insurance Co." *The Liberal*, February 23 1956.

³¹ "Los Angeles and our trip in the vicinity." *The Liberal*, April 29 1920; "Our trip to the Bahamas." *The Liberal*, April 12 1923.

³² "Open house – 19th birthday celebration." *The Liberal*, May 17 1978.

³³ "York Maps Historical Imagery - 1970." *York Region*, 2024.

³⁴ "Deaths." *The Liberal*, April 13 1922.

³⁵ *Ontario Land Registry Historical Books*. York Region: Lot 61, Concession 1, King Township.

³⁶ "Obituary." *Unknown publication*. Niagara-on-the-Lake Public Library. Date unknown; *Assessment roll for the township of King, 1 concession*. King Township, 1940-1949.

³⁷ *Assessment roll for the township of King, 1 concession*. King Township, 1940-1949.

³⁸ "Notice of Passing of By-Laws: John C. Durham Cobblestone Cottage." *Ontario Heritage Trust*, 1998.

³⁹ *Assessment roll for the township of King, 1 concession*. King Township, 1943.

Mitchell married John H. C. Durham⁴⁰ and was added as a joint tenant to the subject property.⁴¹ John Durham died in 1953, and according to the *Liberal*, Bernice Durham lived at the Mitchell farm north of the subject property in the 1970s.⁴² Bernice died in 1983 at the age of 96.⁴³

The Mitchell-Durham families have been prominent in Whitchurch Township since the early 20th century. In addition to the subject property at 12800 Yonge Street, the family is associated with a number of properties in the vicinity, including the Craigmere estate (circa 1850, demolished), the Mitchell farm (demolished), and the J.H.C. Durham Cobblestone Cottage (circa 1915).

Architecture

The Mitchell-Durham House, built circa 1924, is a representative example of the Arts and Crafts architectural style, and more specifically, of the California Bungalow style.

California Bungalow emerged as a type of building within the Arts and Crafts style at the turn of the twentieth century in California. California Bungalows are modestly-sized houses, standing at 1 or 1 ½ storeys tall and featuring low- or medium-pitched gable roofs.⁴⁴ The facades are usually asymmetrical but balanced, and buildings normally have a rustic, snug, and homemade appearance.⁴⁵ The Mitchell-Durham House is an example of the California Bungalow because of elements like the 1 ½ storey massing, cobblestone and stucco exterior with wood trim, front gable roof, decorative half timbering, and stone chimneys.

The Mitchell-Durham House consists of an original building, built circa 1924, and a later rear addition, whose date of construction is unknown. The structure fronts Yonge Street and is set back from the sidewalk. The original part of the building is a 1 ½ storey frame construction structure with a stucco and cobblestone exterior. The structure has a rectangular building footprint and two stone chimneys on the north and south elevations. There is also a medium-pitched, asymmetrical front gable roof where the roofline is lower on the north elevation than it is on the south.

The front (east) façade is asymmetrical but balanced. At grade, there is an enclosed flat-roofed porch with a cobblestone base, topped by a wooden balcony at the second storey. The front door of the house is off-center and has low stone steps leading up to it. The top storey of the structure features decorative half-timbering and exposed bracketed eaves.

⁴⁰ Richmond Hill Public Library Newspaper Archives. *Genealogy binder*, "Doan-Fulton: Durham. N.D.

⁴¹ *Ontario Land Registry Historical Books*. York Region: Lot 61, Concession 1, King Township.

⁴² "Open house – 19th birthday celebration." *The Liberal*, May 17 1978.

⁴³ Richmond Hill Public Library Newspaper Archives. *Genealogy binder*, "Doan-Fulton: Durham. N.D.

⁴⁴ Kalman, Harold. *A History of Canadian Architecture, Volume 2*. Oxford University Press, 1995.

⁴⁵ Cruickshank, Tom, and De John Visser. *Old Ontario houses: Traditions in local architecture*. Richmond Hill, Ont.: Firefly Books, 2009; Kalman, Harold. *A History of Canadian Architecture, Volume 2*. Oxford University Press, 1995.

Page 6

The north slope of the roof features a gabled dormer, while the south slope features a large shed-roofed dormer.

On the rear (west) elevation, there is a two-storey addition covered in vinyl siding.

On the north side of the driveway leading to the house, there is a cobblestone pillar with a limestone cap, matching the materiality of the structure.

Context

The Mitchell-Durham House at 12800 Yonge Street is located on the west side of Yonge Street, south of Estate Garden Drive, and within the Oak Ridges Moraine. The structure sits in the former hamlet of Oak Ridges, a neighborhood within Richmond Hill with a distinct, small-town character. At the time of its construction, the Mitchell-Durham House was surrounded by farmland and country estates, such as Wil-Dor Farms and Craigmore. Although many of the surrounding farms have now been developed into residential subdivisions, the subject building retains its original location, orientation, and context within a large 2 ½ acre lot, and is surrounded by natural areas to this day.

The subject property's surrounding context includes low-density 20th century housing developments to the north, the Oak Ridges Corridor Conservation Reserve and the Oak Ridges Trail to the south, Bond Lake to the southwest, Mitchell Pond to the northwest, and marshland running through the rear of the property.

Nearby buildings that contribute to the 19th and early 20th century rural Oak Ridges character include the J.H.C. Durham Cobblestone Cottage at 12761 Yonge Street (circa 1915), 12764 Yonge Street (circa 1920), 12500 Yonge Street (circa 1910), the Metropolitan Railway Arrestor House at 12485 Yonge Street (circa 1899), the John Beverly Robinson Cottage at 12461 Yonge Street (circa 1836), and the Ryan-Paxton House at 12345 Yonge Street (circa 1892).

Compliance with Ontario Regulation 9/06 – Criteria for Determining Cultural Heritage Value or Interest

The following evaluation applies Ontario Regulation 9/06, the prescribed provincial *Criteria for Determining Cultural Heritage Value or Interest* under Part IV, Section 29 of the *Ontario Heritage Act*. There are a total of nine criteria under O. Reg. 9/06. A property may be designated under Section 29 of the Act if it meets two or more of the provincial criteria for determining whether it is of cultural heritage value or interest.

Criteria applicable to the property are outlined below, along with explanatory text.

1. The property has design value or physical value because it is a rare, unique, representative or early example of a style, type, expression, material or construction method.

The Mitchell-Durham House at 12800 Yonge Street, built circa 1924, has physical and design value because it is a representative example of the Arts and Crafts style, and more specifically, of the California Bungalow style. The Mitchell-Durham House consists

Page 7

of a 1 ½ storey frame and cobblestone structure with a rear addition. Architectural features that contribute to the California Bungalow style include its 1 ½ storey massing, asymmetrical but balanced front façade, stucco and cobblestone exterior, medium-pitched front gable roof with exposed rafters at the eaves, two cobblestone chimneys, wooden and cobblestone front porch, and decorative half-timbering.

2. The property has design value or physical value because it displays a high degree of craftsmanship or artistic merit.

N/A

3. The property has design value or physical value because it demonstrates a high degree of technical or scientific achievement.

N/A

4. The property has historical value or associative value because it has direct associations with a theme, event, belief, person, activity, organization or institution that is significant to a community.

The Mitchell-Durham House has historical and associative value for its association with both the Mitchell and Durham families. The Mitchells and the Durhams, who were prominent Oak Ridges families, were related by marriage and lived on opposite sides of Yonge Street. John H. C. Durham, founder of the Toronto-based Fire Insurance Company and Whitchurch Township school trustee, built the subject structure around 1924 and ran the Craigmere Estate on the opposite side of Yonge Street. The Mitchell-Durham family have been associated with the subject property since 1912, when the Mitchells acquired the property as part of their Oak Ridges farm.

5. The property has historical value or associative value because it yields, or has the potential to yield, information that contributes to an understanding of a community or culture.

N/A

6. The property has historical value or associative value because it demonstrates or reflects the work or ideas of an architect, artist, builder, designer or theorist who is significant to a community.

N/A

7. The property has contextual value because it is important in defining, maintaining or supporting the character of an area.

The Mitchell-Durham House has contextual value because its scale, form, and siting on Yonge Street are important in defining and maintaining the distinct rural 19th and early 20th century character of Oak Ridges.

8. The property has contextual value because it is physically, functionally, visually or historically linked to its surroundings.

The Mitchell-Durham House has further contextual value because it is historically and visually linked to its surroundings in the hamlet of Oak Ridges, and more specifically, as part of a grouping of properties and buildings once owned by the Mitchell-Durham family in the immediate vicinity, including the J.H.C. Durham Cobblestone Cottage (circa 1915) at 12761 Yonge Street. The property is also historically and visually linked to various natural features in the surrounding area, including Mitchell Pond to the northwest, Bond Lake to the southwest, and the marshlands and East Humber River tributary at the rear of the property.

9. The property has contextual value because it is a landmark.

N/A

Maps and Photographs



Figure 1 Circa 1908 postcard (front side) from the Merchants Fire Insurance Company in Toronto, Ontario. Postcard features an image of John H.C. Durham, founder of the insurance company. (Source: Richmond Hill Public Library)

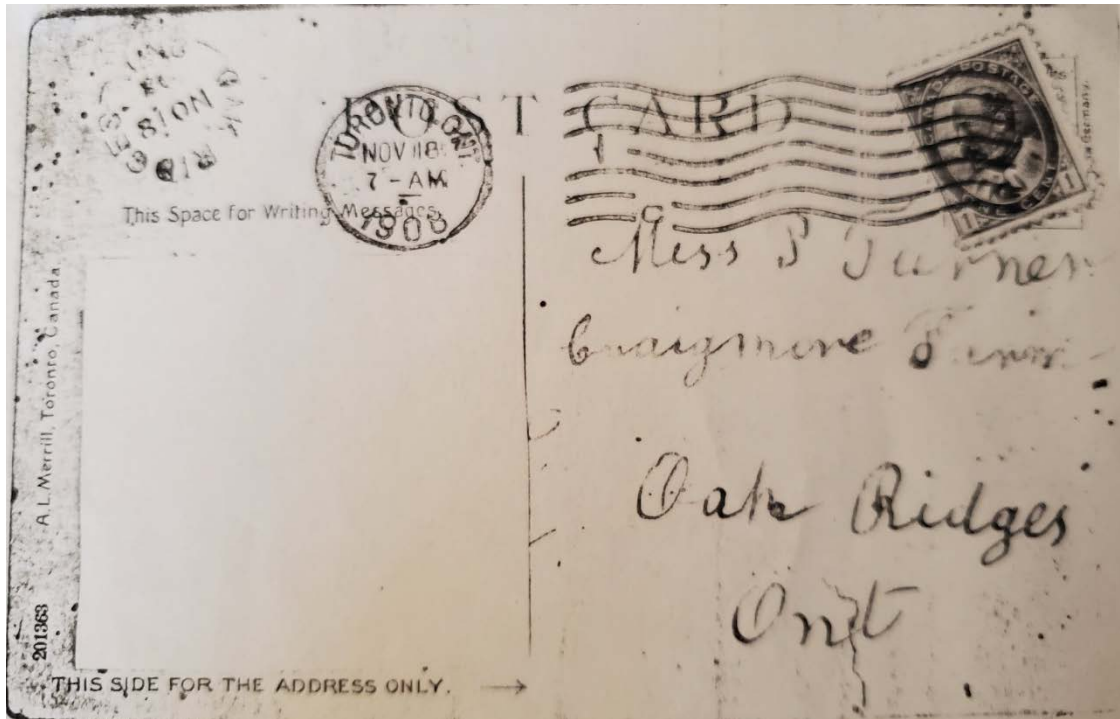


Figure 2 Circa 1908 postcard (back side) from the Merchants Fire Insurance Company in Toronto, Ontario. Postcard is postmarked 1908 and is addressed to Craigmere Farm, Oak Ridges. (Source: Richmond Hill Public Library)



Figure 3 Detail of 1970 aerial photograph showing the approximate location of the Mitchell-Durham House at 12800 Yonge Street (indicated in red). Note the Craigmere farm, also owned by John Durham and his wife Anne (Mitchell) during the early 20th century, located on the opposite side of Yonge Street. (Source: York Maps)



Figure 4 Circa 1980s photograph of the Mitchell-Durham House at 12800 Yonge Street. Note the asymmetrical but balanced front façade, cobblestone and stucco exterior, front gable roof, enclosed front porch, cobblestone chimneys, and decorative half-timbering. (Source: Richmond Hill Local Architectural Conservation Authority Committee)



Figure 5 Current photograph of the Mitchell-Durham House at 12800 Yonge Street showing the front (east) elevation. Note the 1 ½ storey massing, asymmetrical but balanced front façade, cobblestone and stucco exterior, front gable roof, enclosed front porch, cobblestone chimneys, and decorative half-timbering. (Source: HUD, 2024)



Figure 6 Current photograph of the Mitchell-Durham House at 12800 Yonge Street looking southwest, showing the structure's northeast elevation. Note the surrounding large lots and thick, tall vegetation. (Source: HUD, 2024)

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