

**The Case of the Mystery Ravine Ruins  
...a Duncan Family Legacy?  
North York Historical Society  
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Issue

“Mystery Ruins” were discovered in a local ravine, and photographed by Alex Grenzebach. They are the remnants of old stone buildings, their origins uncertain. Metro Morning has expressed interest in reporting on the history of the ruins, and what the buildings were used for. NYHS member Clarice Dale was asked to investigate the matter.

Present-Day Location

The present-day municipal address of the ruins is 250 Duncan Mill Road, Ward 34. The general area is bounded by the 401 (north), Don Mills Rd (east), York Mills Rd (south), and Leslie St (west). There are two buildings, both next to the Don River, west of Don Mills Rd. Building No. 1 has a missing roof. It is the westerly of the two, closest to the river. Building No. 2 resembles a tomb, and is located around 75m to the east of Building No. 1. It is relatively close to condos and apartments on the west side of Don Mills Rd.

Historic Location

This site is at the boundary between two parcels of property:  
Township of York East Concession 3, Lot 11 (E3-11)  
Township of York East Concession 3, Lot 12 (E3-12)

History of Lot East 3-11(Moatfield) Property

1827 – William Duncan arrives in Canada from Ireland and purchases property at what is now Sheppard and Dufferin  
1837 – David Duncan is born  
1848 – William Duncan 200 acres from William Bishop. The property is located on the north side of present-day York Mills Rd between Leslie St and Woodbine Ave.

The property is intended for William's son, David. David's new home is close to that of his maternal grandfather, Mr. Mulholland

*Around 1865* – Moatfield house is constructed, in classic Farmhouse Gothic

*1873* – David Duncan marries Anne Laird and receives the farm as a wedding gift. He soon transforms it into a successful dairy operation. David and Anne raise two sons and one daughter at Moatfield

*1874* – Property officially handed over to David Duncan from his father.

Brother Henry resides at the adjacent plot to the south, giving the area the name "Duncan's Corners"

*1878* – Homes and mills all up and down the river are destroyed in a historic flood

*1905* – Duncan Station is erected on the property of Henry Duncan, on the south side of York Mills Rd, by the Canadian Northern Railway. The name is later changed to Oriole and the station moved to the north side of York Mills Rd

*1914* – David Duncan passes away, son Gordon assumes property

*1970* – Kate Duncan, Gordon's widow, sells the property on the condition the house will not be demolished

*1986* – David Duncan farmhouse moved from original location (866 York Mills Rd, now the Prince Hotel) to present-day location at 125 Moatfield Drive, where it becomes an upscale restaurant.

*2011* – Mystery ruins are discovered in ravine near Duncan Mill Road – what purpose did they once serve?

#### History of E3-12 (plot to the North of E3-11)

*1813* – land owned by Alexander Montgomery

*1820* – land owned by Hunter family

*around 1840* – farmhouse built by Hunter family

*1962* – Alf Anderson builds 'Green Acres' farmhouse on the same site as the old 1840 house that was destroyed by fire the previous year

*1970* – local residents are concerned over the preservation of pioneer homes in the Don Mill area, plan devised to relocate homes of significance to the Moatfield Ravine area to form "Settlers' Landing", creating living museum with focus on the 1837 Rebellion

#### Possible Explanations for the Ruins

*E-311 Farm Buildings* – David Duncan was a successful dairy farmer. It is possible the buildings are remnants of his original farm.

*E3-11 Mill Buildings* – the 1878 Historical Atlas of York Township and other historical maps show a Saw Mill located adjacent to the Don River at the north end of the Duncan property. Books and articles mention the family operated a saw mill as the present day street name Duncan Mill suggests. The location of the original mill seems to match the location of the present-day mystery ruins.

#### *E3-11/E3-12 Machinery Shed and Pumping Station*

A Google search for the mystery buildings resulted in an interesting find – a Flickr album containing the ruins and possible explanations. According to the

photographer (who is only identified as “Lone Primate”) Building No. 1 was once a machinery shed and Building No. 2 a pumping station. This is further substantiated in Patricia Hart’s book, “North York residents obtained water from various sources prior to and following the formation of the municipality. With the establishment of...a pumping station on the Middle Branch of the Don River at Oriole...a water supply system was installed which served the Yong Street district for some years” (pg 289). The City of Toronto website also mentioned a water plant constructed in 1923 at Oriole: <http://www.toronto.ca/water/supply/system/history.htm> It is unclear whether the location at “Oriole” means adjacent to the Railway station itself, or somewhere in the general area. The Duncan property was considered part of the Oriole community.

Here is the link to the Flickr album:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/loneprimate/79837711/in/photostream/>

Lone Primate’s Photography Blog:

<http://www.cityinthetrees.blogspot.com/>

There is a series of photographs in a NYHS binder in the Canadiana Room at the North York Library. One of them appears to be Building No. 1, categorized under E3-12. The photos also indicate that E3-12 was once a farm called ‘Green Acres’ and owned by Alf Anderson. This was property once owned by the Hunter family (as per above). The address is 85 Valleybrook Drive. The main farmhouse was a large, stately, building but the farm looks like a fairly large operation in which case other buildings would be present on the property. NYHS photographs show a large barn and several smaller structures. The ruins could be a portion of the original barn, or any other of auxiliary buildings. There was, for example, a small stone house built on the property around 1933.

#### Going Forward:

- Investigate the origin of a photographs found copied in a **NYHS binder, Book #12, Con. 3E, Lots 11-24**. Reference number 971.3541 NOR.
  - i) Reference **#1519**. Caption “old bridge and small stone building just north of Duncan Mill Road January 1973.” The building in the photograph has a peaked roof appears to be the Mystery Ruin Building No. 1.
  - ii) Reference **#1517**. Caption “this house is on ‘Green Acres’ property and is about 40 years old (1973) January 1973.” This is also a small stone house with a peaked roof and could maybe be Building No. 1.
  - iii) Reference **#1518**. Caption “this house is just south of the one above January 1973.” This house is larger, two storey’s, but still nearby.
- Toronto Public Library staff at the North York branch are looking into the matter and will contact me (Clarice) with their findings
- Contact “Urban Decoder” at Toronto Life magazine and see if he or she can shed some more light <http://www.torontolife.com/daily/urban-decoder/2009/02/05/urban-decoder-law-19/>

## Additional Sources

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Mercer, Adam G. and Charles Mulvany Pelham. *History of Toronto and County of York, Ontario*. Toronto: C.B. Robinson, 1885. Volume II.

Nixon, Brad. "Duncan Family." *Bayview Post*. July 1990: P19.

City of North York: Heritage Structure Report December 6, 1988.

1878 Historical Atlas of York County  
City of Toronto Archives

David Duncan House Restaurant Website  
[www.davidduncanhouse.com/history](http://www.davidduncanhouse.com/history)

Real Estate Neighbourhood Overview  
<http://www.yourtorontogreenteam.com/real-estate-homes-houses-graydon-hall-york-mills-don-valley-parkway-.html>