

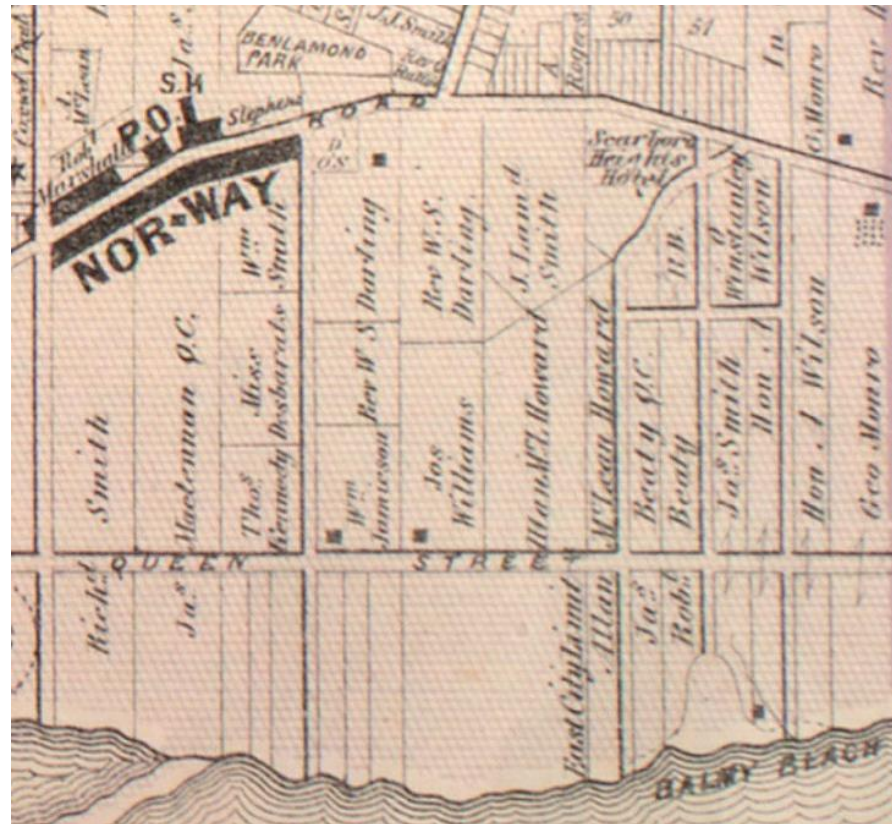
## 10. THE WILLOW AVENUE BARN



The Willow Avenue Barn, July 2022



We know next to nothing about the post-settlement but pre-urban history of the Beaches – between, say, the initial British land grants in the 1790s and the first amusement parks in the 1870s. Few written records from these years have survived, or at least been found and studied. What is especially notable, and a little frustrating, is how little we know about agriculture. Was the land farmed? If so, where, and if not, why?



Southeast York Township, from York County Historical Atlas, 1878

[<https://digital.library.mcgill.ca/countyatlas/>]

One of the few early records showing agriculture – Geo Monro's orchard on northeast corner of his land, depicted with a square of dots – but surely, in 1878, there was more.

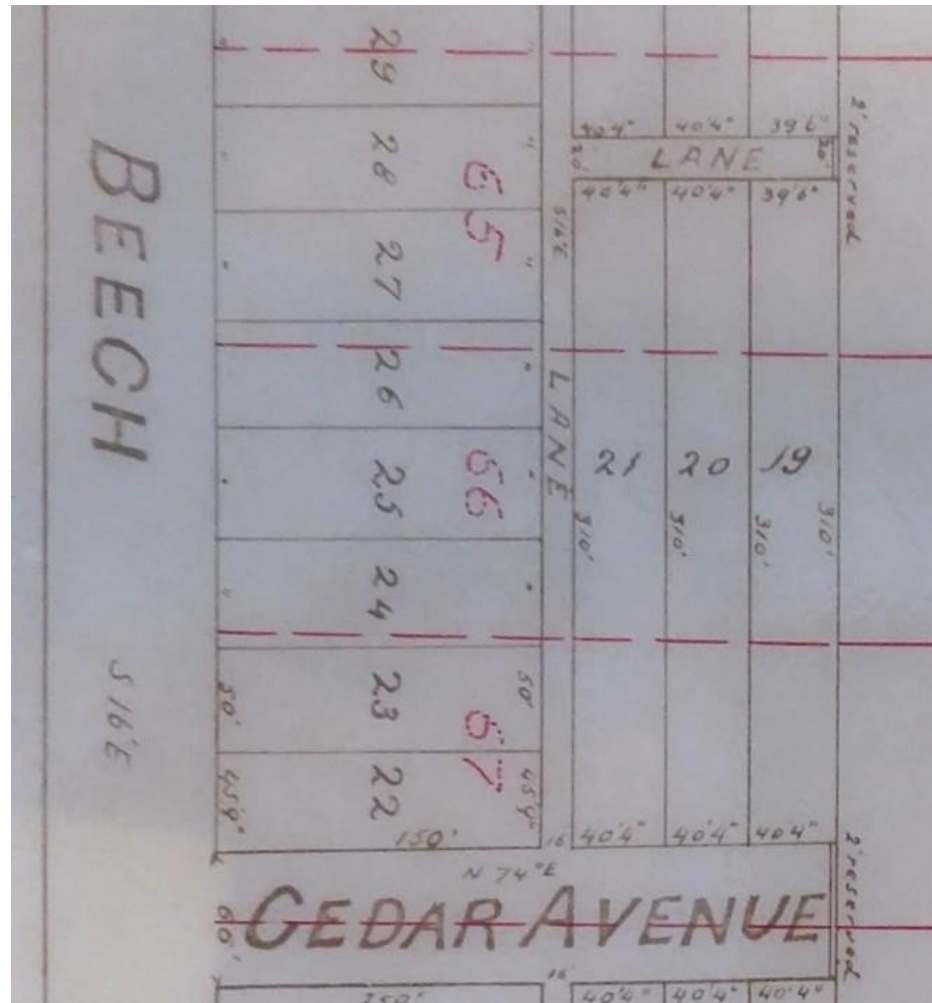
There was certainly no shortage of obstacles to farming, the nature of the terrain and the pattern of land ownership being the most challenging. Yet it is hard to believe that in an entrepreneurial settler society, with agriculture the principal early economic activity, three generations would pass without at least some of this land being cultivated. And in fact we do have fragmentary evidence of farming. But the fragments are meagre and unconnected. Anything new is welcome.

So when an aged resident of Willow Avenue, some twenty-five years ago, referred to a curious back-lane out-building - which she said she had once owned - as a 'barn,' a historian resolved to one day investigate. The building did look like a barn - an unusually small barn, admittedly, and one that, seemingly built at the same time as the housing all around, made little sense. But the use of the name by a neighbourhood old-timer, apparently its former owner, carried weight. Might it be a vestige of neighbourhood farming?

The Willow Avenue barn stands near the middle of a tract of land purchased and further subdivided - it had been part of the original 1876 Balmy Beach subdivision - in 1887 by a pair of speculators (see Sights #1, #3, and #9). They laid out the western half of their tract in conventional street-facing lots along Beech Avenue, a street in the original Balmy Beach plan. But this was not feasible for the eastern half because the original plan had no street along the eastern border, so instead they laid out twelve long, narrow lots fronting on east-west streets that intersected Beech Avenue.

Records are sketchy - this was not part of Toronto until 1909 - but Lots 19, 20, and 21 of their subdivision, on which the barn would be built, seem to have formed a discrete block of land, with a single owner, right from the start. We

know nothing about how, or if, this land was used, but its grade was so steep that farming seems unlikely. Ownership changed a time or two through the turn of the century, but in 1908 it was acquired by William J. Hewitt and with Hewitt's ownership building began.



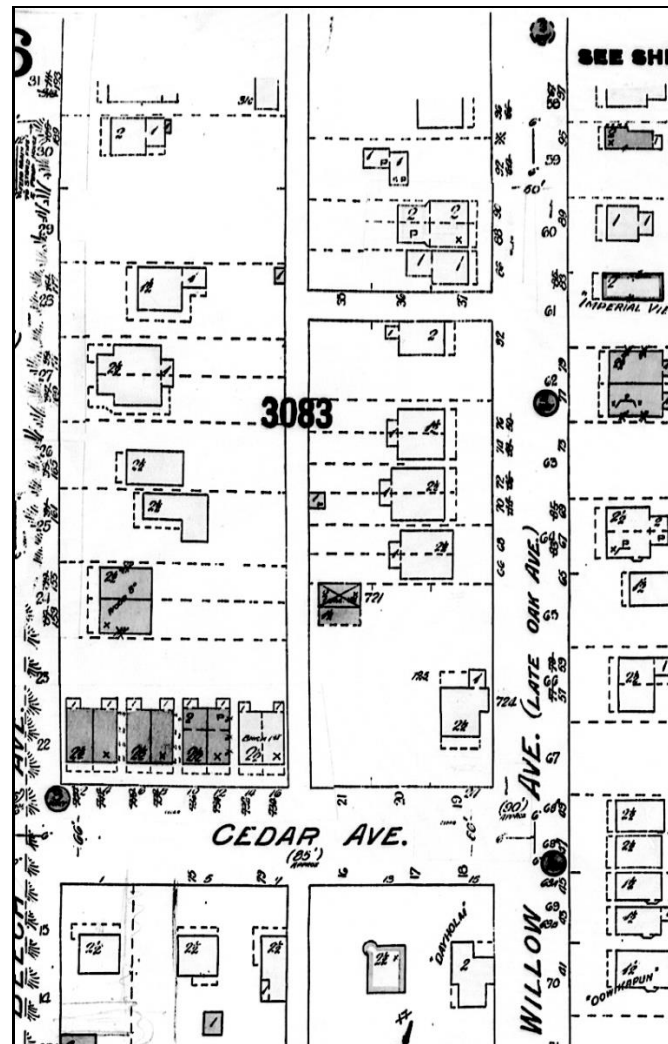
Detail from Registered Plan of Subdivision 733, 26 April 1887 [Ontario Land Registry]  
 Lots 19, 20, and 21 comprised nearly an acre; red lines and numbers refer to lots in the original Balmy Beach Plan (1876).

Like some other 'builders' in the booming cities of the early twentieth century, Hewitt was not a tradesman but a farmer, or at least he had been raised on a family farm in the Fergus area, where his family is thought to have farmed since early settlement times. He came to Toronto intent on using his building skills to make a living and establish his family. Exactly when he arrived, where he initially lived, and what he might have built in his early years in the city we do not know, but by 1908 he had evidently accumulated some capital - a near-acre of land on the urban fringe was obtainable by an industrious disciplined working man, but it was not cheap - and established himself as a capable builder.

A year after acquiring the land Hewitt obtained a building permit to erect a "2 storey & attic brick and frame dwelling" on the southern border of Lot 19, fronting on Cedar Avenue, and the following year he is on record living in this rather substantial house - assessed value \$2200. He had also, by this time, built four nearly identical clapboard-clad semi-detached houses (two pairs) about a hundred feet up the hill fronting on a new street named Willow Avenue running along the east edge of his property, one house he had sold and three he was renting out. But before he could continue building, he had to address the steep slope of the hundred feet between his two building sites; his big corner house was at least fifteen feet below the grade of his clapboard semi-detached houses.

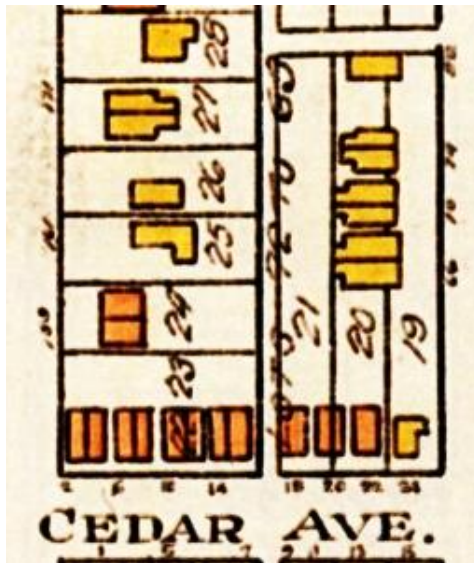
His solution was to pour a concrete retaining wall some ten feet high down the middle of that unbuilt property, creating a stabilized grade difference between its two halves. This gave him enough additional level ground on the upper side, especially at the front of the lots, which sloped front to back, to build another pair of semi-detached houses south of the existing two pairs, which he did in 1912. Below the retaining wall he now had a large, reasonably level area

and on the lower western side, in the corner farthest from the house, he built a stable up against the retaining wall, which became one of the stable's four walls. Parts of the other three walls, as well as some in the interior, he also made of concrete.



Detail, Toronto Fire insurance Plan, 1916, sheet 916 (shaded buildings brick, unshaded wood)  
Plan shows the original Cedar Avenue house, the concrete-walled stable (depicted as brick-clad), the otherwise empty lower property, and the third pair of semis. [Thanks to Barb Myrvold]

This stable, of course, is the 'barn.' As such it is not a product of the area's agricultural past. Horses were as much urban as rural animals in the nineteenth century, for they were drawing private carriages, commercial wagons, and mass-transit omnibuses around cities every day. But why would Hewitt build a stable in 1913? The local street railway had been running on electricity for twenty years; motorized cars and trucks were increasingly common on city streets. And one would think that Hewitt, with most of his property now built up, had no further need to haul in building materials (although he may have been building elsewhere). The most likely explanation is that Hewitt was a farmer at heart – he identified himself as such to the City assessors in 1916 – and being no 'early-adopter', he still got around by horse and wagon; building a stable on the spacious yard beside his house, with room for a wagon or carriage, would have seemed a perfectly normal thing to do.



In fact, so deeply was Mr. Hewitt a farmer that in 1917, only a few years after building his stable, he moved to a rural property further east, at "Stop 29, Kingston Road, Scarborough." He retained the house on Cedar Avenue for a few years, renting it out along with his semi-detached houses on Willow, but in 1924 he sold it to the brothers Frank and William Mallory, architects working in Toronto at that time. He also sold off his land west of the house, carving out three separate lots facing Cedar Avenue, and the buyers of these lots promptly built brick houses on them.

Above: Detail from Goad's Atlas, 1924, with new brick houses on Cedar. (Goad's never showed the stable.)

Interestingly, however, Hewitt did not sell the stable. He kept a fifty-foot strip of land behind the Cedar Avenue lots, from Willow Avenue through to the back lane, vacant but for the stable, limiting those new lots to a ninety-foot depth. Hewitt would have had little need for this stable – he was living in rural Scarborough – so his motive for keeping it is hard to discern. But he revealed his hand in the early 1930s when he built a new rental house on the vacant eastern half of that property, fronting on Willow.

The stable remained on the western half, now a backyard out-building of a house to which it had never had any functional connection. Perhaps Hewitt had used it while building the new house, but one suspects it was the land he had retained, not the stable. His overall objective surely had always been to build as many salable or rentable houses on his property as he could; this new house completed the job. And if he was as parsimonious as his building style suggests, he would have had no reason to demolish such a solid, well-built structure, erected by his own hand. Maybe future tenants would find some use for it.

Hewitt died in the early 1940s leaving all his properties – including the original Cedar Avenue house, which he seems to have repossessed from the Mallorys – to his widow and daughter, and over time they sold them, one by one, to individual owners. By the 1970s the only remaining Hewitt property was one of the semi-detached houses on Willow, where his daughter lived with her family. The stable still stood behind the 1930s-built house, whose buyer had bought a stable whether they wanted it or not.

It was this daughter, Dorothy, who called the stable a barn – she had indeed owned it for a time – and she could only have learned to call it that from her father. But why would Hewitt, who knew perfectly well the difference between a



barn and a stable, have called it a barn? Because to him it probably was a barn. Looking at it now, skillfully rebuilt but not fundamentally altered by Robert Tucci of Camaro Carpentry, one can easily see its barn features: the two-storey structure (hay loft above; animal stalls below), direct access to both levels (building into the hill obviated the need for an earth ramp to the upper), a gambrel roof with dormers (allowing natural light into the loft), heavy timber beams (visible only inside), and the upper level projecting over the lower on the un-ramped side.



The barn in 2010, prior to reconstruction; photo courtesy of Roberto Tucci, Camaro Carpentry

An Ontario barn typologist tell us that barns of this style – defined by the projecting upper level – were common in central Ontario, where Hewitt grew up and presumably learned to build. Does it not seem likely that when it came time

to construct a permanent building for his horses and wagon or carriage he drew on what he knew, and built a small, city version of a barn, in the style he knew from his upbringing, and that he, and thus his family, informally spoke of it as a barn? If so, the Willow Avenue barn is not a vestige of agriculture in the sense of it having been built and used when the land was farmed – indeed this sloping land might never have been farmed – but it is a vestige of agriculture in another sense: it reminds us that parts of this urban neighbourhood were built by farmers.

SOURCES: *(in addition to those cited under the images):*

CTA, Toronto Assessment Rolls (various years) and Toronto Building Permits #14350 and #17197 (both 1909) and #28872 and #32241 (both 1911); Toronto City Directories, accessed through website of Toronto Public Library, digital city directories; Goad's Atlases accessed through website 'oldtorontomaps'; Toronto Fire Insurance Plans, accessed through UT Map Library; Peter M. Ennals, 'Nineteenth-Century Barns in Southern Ontario', *Canadian Geographer*, xvi, 3 (1972); informal conversations with Hewitt's daughter (1917 – 2014) and granddaughter, the current owner and previous owners of the property, and the builder who rebuilt it in 2010; introductory photograph by author; the author lives next door to the barn.

