

# A Self-Guided Tour Through a Lively Heritage District

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# INDUSTRIAL DUNDAS+CARLAW

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For decades, Wrigley chewing gum, Colgate toothpaste, Palmolive soap, and many other world-famous products rolled off production lines in the Dundas and Carlaw neighbourhood. This Heritage Toronto tour explores how workers and industry shaped this unique corner of Toronto.



Construction of the Palmolive plant, 1917. The Rolph-Clark-Stone building and the Wrigley building are visible in the background. Library and Archives Canada

### STOP 1 A DISTRICT TAKES SHAPE

If you were here in 1917, you would have seen workers digging the foundations for the new Palmolive factory **A**, which made toiletries and cleaning products for more than 70 years. The company became Colgate-Palmolive in 1928, and this street is named after it. When it closed in the early 1990s, 240 people lost their jobs.

Industrialization completely remade this part of Toronto. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the rich soil in the Leslieville area was used for growing vegetables and flowers for sale in the city and making bricks. In 1906, the city seized a substantial undeveloped property on Carlaw Ave. over unpaid taxes and decided to sell the land in parcels for industrial use. The area was chosen because it was close to the Port Lands and the

Grand Trunk Railway (GTR), which linked Toronto with Montreal. The GTR installed freight tracks to the rear of the factory sites, and development soon followed.

Not all factories were welcome: the neighbourhood fought hard against plans for a tannery. Residents feared “offensive odour” from leather making would impact property values and the quality of life. The tannery ultimately opened outside city limits.

**DID YOU KNOW?**  
When European settlers arrived in this area, the land to the south was a large marshland with a rich ecosystem that the Mississaugas used for hunting and fishing. It was also a place of resting and healing. The Dundas and Carlaw area was part of the 1805 Toronto Purchase treaty between the Mississaugas of the Credit River and the British Crown.

**STOP 5  
HARD TIMES**  
This part of Dundas and Carlaw is still in its post-industrial phase. Most companies in this area survived the economic depression of the 1930s by drastically reducing production and laying off workers.

As prosperity returned after the war, workers fought to get their fair share. One of the longest labour disruptions was in the fall and winter of 1954–55, when



Lockout at the Rolph-Clark-Stone plant. Collection of Linda Luciani

about 130 members of the United Electrical Workers union went on strike at the International Resistance Co. on Carlaw Ave. For 116 days, they fought for a seven-cent wage increase and an additional two cents for health and welfare benefits. The strike was tense: the union reported strike-breaking action and police harassment. In the Cold War political atmosphere, the union was also suspected of having communist sympathies. Although not all the plants were unionized, labour disputes occurred regularly.

Companies began to relocate to the suburbs or other countries in the 1960s. In March 1970, Dunlop Tire announced almost overnight that it would lay off 597 employees and shut its factory, which is now the site of Jimmie Simpson Park **K**. This move

triggered large protests calling for regulation of plant closures, which eventually became law.

**STOP 6  
MAKING A NEIGHBOURHOOD**  
The tour ends outside this 1916 Toronto Hydro-Electric Substation **I**. This vital building transmitted Niagara Falls electricity to nearby homes and factories, supplementing or replacing power generated by burning coal. It was one of many infrastructure improvements built in response to the area’s growth, along with new sewers, schools, and fire and police stations. Underpasses reduced the number of railroad crossings and eased traffic.

The industrial history of the Dundas and Carlaw neighbourhood and the adaptive reuse of many of its factories have created a unique community that continues to change. Its architectural heritage brings to light the stories of the people who worked, lived, and played along Carlaw Ave.

**A PLANNER REMEMBERS**  
“When the factories closed it left an economic vacuum in the area. But vacuums tend to get filled and some far-reaching entrepreneurs bought these buildings and cut out spaces, then rented them.” —Paul Winterton speaking to the Toronto Star, August 23, 1999.



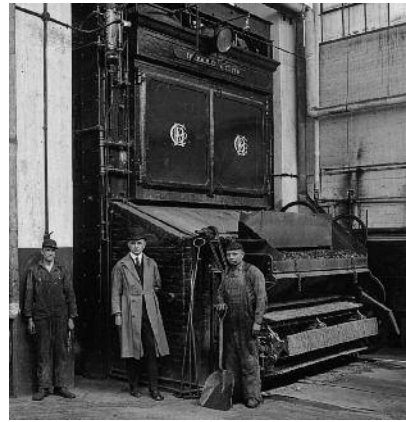
Building the overpass at Carlaw Ave. and Gerrard St. E., 1931. City of Toronto Archives

**STOP 2  
FORM AND FUNCTION:  
INDUSTRIAL ARCHITECTURE**  
The Rolph-Clark-Stone factory **C** in front of you is an excellent example of Edwardian industrial architecture that elegantly combines form and function. Part of its saw-tooth roof, which brought uniform light deep into the plant, was retained during the factory’s conversion to a residential building. Note the faded sign above the entrance. To the south at 181 Carlaw Ave. is the Kent-McLain factory **B**. To take advantage of the GTR freight tracks, it is much deeper than it is wide. Consider crossing the street for a better view.

The food industry supported the growth of the neighbourhood. After Kent-McLain **B** moved, the building was taken over by the O’Keefe Brewing Company, which installed equipment that sanitized, filled, and “crowned” bottles of pop with caps that were likely made nearby at the Crown Cork & Seal factory **F**. Orange Crush was made here in the 1940s. Later, Bowes Co. made and bottled chocolate syrup, jam, and pie fillings in the building. Several chewing gum brands operated in the neighbourhood too.

**DID YOU KNOW?**  
The imposing Wrigley building **E** to the north was modelled after

Wrigley’s main factory in Chicago, which was demolished in 2013, leaving Toronto with an important piece of North American industrial heritage.



Palmolive plant workers and foreman, circa 1920. Library and Archives Canada

**STOP 3  
AT WORK IN PEACE AND WARTIME**  
At its peak, this location would have hummed with vehicle traffic, train activity, and workers arriving and leaving after their shifts. You might have smelled chocolate, rubber, or harsh fumes from soap making. Smoke from factory chimneys filled the air.

The factories were also social places, especially at companies that took an interest in their workers’ well-being. Men and women worked together, but men tended to be production line workers,



Wrigley’s packaging department in 1947. Collection of the Wilkins family



Workers packaging soap at the Palmolive plant, 1919. Toronto Public Library

**PUBLIC SPACE IMPROVEMENTS IN DUNDAS + CARLAW:**  
This tour is part of a project initiated by Councillor Paula Fletcher and the local community that integrates historical structures, features, and stories into public space improvements in the Dundas and Carlaw neighbourhood. Soon a new entrance to Jimmie Simpson Park will be an accessible gateway to the community’s largest greenspace and a signature 9.2-metre brick obelisk by internationally-acclaimed Toronto artist Pierre Poussin will

mark a new public space at the intersection of Dundas and Carlaw. Badgerow Parkette will also be refurbished. The East End “Bridges to Art” project will create murals in four local rail underpasses.

**ABOUT US**  
Heritage Toronto is a charity and agency of the City of Toronto that celebrates and commemorates the city’s rich heritage and the diverse stories of its people, places, and events. Through our programs, including walking tours, historical plaques, special lectures, and pop-up exhibits, we engage the public to reflect on the past—both to make sense of our present and to inform our future.



A worker laying the floor at the Wrigley Building, 1916. City of Toronto Archives



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foremen, or managers, while women worked in administration or packaging. Many female employees were single because they were expected to work in the home after marriage. Couples met at work on Carlaw Ave., and entire families were often employed in the neighbourhood. There were company-sponsored Christmas parties and regular games between factory workers in the Carlaw Softball League.

**A WORKER REMEMBERS**  
“My sister, when she married her husband, the both of them weren’t allowed to work [at Reliable Toy] so she just walked across the road to Rolph-Clark-Stone and she got a job there.” —Yvonne Nearing

During the world wars, many more women entered the workforce in place of men who were serving in the military. Factories also joined the war effort. You are in front of the Reliable Toy factory **D**, which began making plastic bullet tips and oil drums during the Second World War. After the war, it made some of the first plastic toys in Canada.

**A WORKER REMEMBERS**  
“The day they made Doublemint and Spearmint [chewing gum] it would clear your sinuses. There was sugar in the air ... I only worked there three summers and I got cavities at my gum line.” —Denise White

**STOP 4  
ROADS AND RAILS**  
You are now at the heart of the Dundas and Carlaw industrial district. Although the GTR freight tracks are gone, the shapes of the



Wrigley staff family Christmas party, 1950s. Collection of the Wilkins family

condo buildings at the southeast corner of the intersection reflect their path. As you explore the neighbourhood, you might still find tracks poking through the ground or an old crossing sign.

The Queen and Gerrard streetcars brought commuters to the factories. When money was tight, some people would take the streetcar to work and walk home. Workers also lived nearby. Many new homes were built in the 1920s.



The tracks supported the factories, but they were also a reason why the area began to decline. In the 1960s, trucking became cheaper and more convenient compared to rail, and factories began to move to the suburbs to be closer to highways.

The design of many of the Carlaw factories also became obsolete; they could not accommodate the latest production lines.

**DID YOU KNOW?**  
Before the 1950s, this intersection did not exist at all. Dundas St. E. was extended from Broadview Ave. to Kingston Rd. to ease rush-hour traffic. The Woods factory **H** was split in half and the Canada Starch warehouse **G**, now decorated with a mural, was separated from the complex.

