Chateau Clair, Canada's First Vineyard & Commercial Winery

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To many people today, the name Cooksville simply refers to the busy intersection of Dundas Street and Hurontario Street. Perhaps residents can be excused if they do not notice the small collection of old buildings that dot the Cooksville landscape. Certainly there is little to reflect Cooksville's historical character and the busy rural life that once centred on this vital and important crossroads. Almost hidden amidst the small plazas, modern apartment buildings and vast suburban development, small bits of Cooksville's historical character still show, providing a glimpse of Cooksville's early roots – a past that saw Cooksville first established around 1809, become the hub of an early entrepreneurial empire, suffer a devastating fire, and rise from the ashes to become the centre of politics in Toronto Township. In essence, the story of Cooksville is of constant change and re-emergence. It is also the story of few Canadian "firsts", among which saw the establishment of Canada's first vineyard and commercial winery.

Retired German Army Corporal Johann Schiller arrived in the Cooksville area around 1811, and settled on Lot 17, Concession 1, NDS. Upon completing his settlement duties, he began to experiment with cultivating Lambrusca and Clinton grapes, which grew wildly in the area, in hopes of producing his own wine. His efforts were successful, and he produced enough wine to supply his own wants and to generously sell his produce to neighbouring settlers, thus giving birth to Canada's first vineyard. Johann died in 1823, and the vineyard passed into several different owners until the property, which then encompassed 66 acres, was purchased by Sir William George Parker in 1841. The property passed to his son, Sir Henry Parker, who built a palatial mansion which he called "Clair House" around 1846. Together with his brothers, Sir Melville Parker and Albert Parker, Henry developed large wine vaults on the property.

Henry sold the vineyard property and Clair House in 1865 to Charles Day. Day, together with Sir Melville Parker and Count Justin M. de Courtenay (who was brought in to manage the vineyard), founded the Canada Vine Growers Association in 1866 – the first commercial winery association in Canada. Under de Courtenay's management, the winery and vineyards prospered. The estate house, which had been built by Henry Parker, was re-christened as "Chateau Clair", and the wine was sold under the label of "Chateau Clair Wines". The vineyard grew to encompass more than 88 acres of land, and Chateau Clair Wines won first prize in the 1867 Paris Exposition and the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial. Vines from Chateau Clair are also historically attributed to saving the wine industry in France. In the 1860s, French grapes were attacked by blight, to which controls proved ineffective. Count de Courtenay is accredited with sending grape vines from Chateau Clair, which proved to be resistant to the disease, to France to revitalize French vineyards. Many of the world-famous French vineyards today owe their establishment to vines grown in Cooksville by Johann Schiller.

The vineyard and winery were purchased by Solomon White in 1869, and under his direction the vineyard thrived. Nicknamed "Squire", Solomon White focused winery production on red and white wines and brandy. As business began to falter around 1876, White began to focus his energies elsewhere, later practicing law in Windsor. In 1887, the property was acquired by Benjamin Murray, who in turn sold it to Andrew Aikens in

1891. Under his ownership, 5 men worked in the vineyards – down from the 20 men who had worked for Solomon White a few years earlier. Archille Roumegous purchased the property in 1903. He continued to operate a smaller scale vineyard and rabbit farm on the property until his death in 1926, after which the old vineyard began a slow decline. The property passed to Fred C. Clarkson in 1930, who rented the old Chateau Clair house and property to Alfred de Lautels and William Verrage, who managed the "Elmwood Rabbit Ranch" on the site, as well as continuing to produce small quantities of wine. On March 18th, 1932 the 86-year-old estate, Chateau Clair, was razed by fire. Later that year, Clarkson sold the property to Ernest Webb, who demolished the remains of Chateau Clair and the vineyard in 1935 to make way for new construction. The life of the vineyard was over. One of the only remembrances of Chateau Clair in the name of the laneway that once led to the old estate: now called Parkerhill Road.

To learn more about historic Cooksville or local history, please contact Heritage Mississauga at www.heritagemississauga.com, email: history@heritagemississauga.org, or phone: 905-828-8411 x29.