

Thomas York

Thomas York, a Black Canadian, was likely born around 1748. Although the specifics of his journey to Montreal are unclear, he entered into a two-year servant contract with Patrick Langan in Quebec City in March 1788.

In 1807, Thomas married Flora Freeman, also a Black Canadian, and they later relocated to Cobourg after 1817. Together, they raised three children: Flora, Thomas, and William York. Thomas passed away in March 1848 in Cobourg, Ontario, at the remarkable age of 100. His wife, Flora, died in 1860.

Their son, William York, born in 1821 in Quebec, married an Irish woman named Margaret McGuire in Cobourg, Ontario, in 1847. By 1861, William had established a successful bathhouse and shaving parlor business in Cobourg. The York family also operated a store on King Street, which likely evolved from the initial barber shop into a prominent tobacco shop.

Due to the success of their business, William and Margaret built York Cottage at 284 College St., a family residence for over 80 years. Constructed around 1850, this home remains one of the few documented Black middle-class residences in Cobourg from that era, although it was sold out of the York family in 1937.

Thomas J. York, born in January 1878 in Cobourg, Ontario, was the youngest of nine siblings, comprising five brothers and three sisters. He worked in the family barber and tobacco shop and chose to remain a bachelor, living with his spinster sisters in the family home.

Cobourg Star, March 15, 1848

In Cobourg, on the 11th instant, Mr. Thomas York Sen., a coloured man, said to be between the 105 and 110 years of age. He was present at the taking of Quebec.

Page 16 The Cobourg Daily Star, Friday, April 22, 1988

York Cottage: Merchant's home of the 1850s in classical style

By Peggy Wright

The cottage located at 284 College St. was lived in by the same family for over 80 years. It was built around 1850 for the York family, one of the few black families of middle-class status recorded in Cobourg during that era.

William York and his wife Margaret McGuire had at least seven children, all named on the family tombstone at Union Cemetery. It is thought one or two more may have been buried elsewhere.

York Cottage, as it was known, was a far cry from the homes of other black families in the area. Covert Street was known at the turn of the century as "nigger alley."

The York family had a store on King Street. Historian Rob Mikel says the business was probably a bath house and shaving parlour when it first opened. It later became a very fine tobaccosist shop.

Cobourg resident Madeline Rooney can remember that the store had a "first-class" reputation.

The house is a fine example of the classical revival style of architecture and features a beautiful front entrance. The single-leafed door has Greek Revival details similar to a handful of other homes in Cobourg and is situated within a classically styled portico.

It is single-storey dwelling, sitting high on a full basement. A low-pitched hip roof with wide eaves and boxed cornices enhance the classical feeling of the house.

It has a crushed marble exterior which is not believed to be original.

There are porches on the front and back, the latter called a "charming Regency glazed porch/sun room" in files of the local architectural conservancy stored at Cobourg Public Library.

A small wing has been added on the south side, the date of which is unknown.


The house is surrounded by a beautiful wrought iron fence with a cobblestone base and posts. The fence once ran further to the south, to include property which has since been sold and built upon. The remains of the

post can still be seen on the south property.


When the property finally left the York family in 1937, the new owners replaced the front windows and exchanged the large classical fluted columns on the front porch with brick ones.

These changes perhaps give the house a more turn of the century look.

The original windows are still contained on the north and south sides of the house. They are double-hung, with four panes, plaster surrounds and wooden lugsills.



The front entrance features a Greek revival porch.



York Cottage — fine sample of classical revival architecture at 284 College St.

Source: The Cobourg Daily Star Friday, April 22, 1988 – p. 16

POST

EXTRA!

The Saturday Morning Post / Post Extra / February 17, 1990

The cottage with the classic touch

By Barry F. King

Cobblestone posts flank the entrance to the 140-year-old home built for William York and his wife Margaret McGuire. With matching stone base, an iron picket fence extends around the corner lawns and, further south on College Street, an additional post marks the original dimensions of the property.

Beginning with a smaller structure, the Yorks enlarged their home in 1870 with further additions, in particular to the south side, being completed in later years. De-

scribed as plaster in 1861, the early exterior may have been covered with a crushed marble stucco. The most notable feature, however, is the entrance portico with its Classical Revival detailing. The pediment features a gentle arch and returning eaves. Support was provided by two large fluted columns before they were replaced by the present square brick pillars. Sheltered beneath the portico, the doorway includes a three-paned transom and sidelights. Mouldings are used to unite the entrance fenestration and to decorate the single-panelled

door in a classical pattern. One of Cobourg's early barbers, William York was born in Upper Canada of African ancestry. He appears to be related to Thomas York who was also of African ancestry and five years his senior. Thomas was a teamster whose business included two carriages for hire. Another fact common to both men was the birthplace of their wives, Ireland.

William died in 1873 at the age of 53, but the family continued the business for many years. In 1878, the Cobourg Sentinel carried their advertisement:

"York's New Barber Shop & Bath Rooms Baths! - These Elegant Rooms are now open to visitors at the following prices viz. - Single Bath \$0.20 Seven Baths \$1.00 Barber Fares - Twelve Shaves 50c Hair Cutting 15c Shampooing 15c A share of public patronage is respectfully solicited."

On April 29, 1881, a large fire at the northeast corner of King and Division Streets reduced the four storey Smith Block and Hitchin's Block "to a smouldering heap of ruin." Driven by an east wind, the flames were so intense that

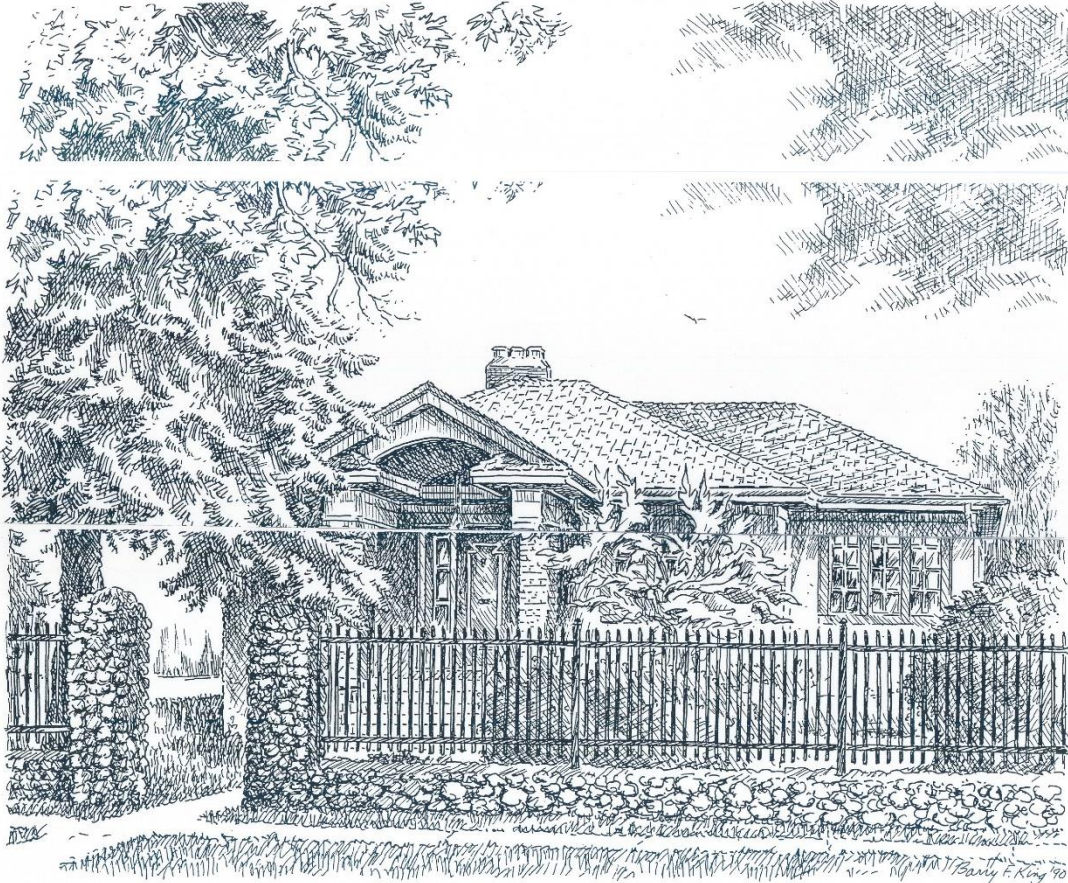
neighbouring buildings to the west were also set alfire. One of these was the Horton Block on the northwest corner of the intersection. Along with other businesses, including the second floor office of the Sentinel Star's Editor, the block contained York's barber shop and fancy store. Saturated with water, the shop sustained \$275 in damage but fortunately was insured.

A proud moment for the York family came with the election of officers to the Epworth League of the Division Street Methodist Church in 1893. Chosen as vice-

president of the Missionary Dept. was Miss Maggie York.

The Yorks continued to live on College Street until 1938 — more than 80 years. The family stone in Union Cemetery includes William and Margaret with the names of most of their children. These include Gilbert, Thomas, Donald, Charles, Benjamin, Carolina, Fannie, and Margaret, and two infants.

Officially designated under the Ontario Heritage Act, York Cottage continues to be a reminder of an interesting period in the history of Cobourg.



York Cottage, 284 College St., Cobourg

Source: The Saturday Morning Post
February 17, 1990

BATHS! YORK'S

New Barber Shop and Bath Rooms.

THESE ELEGANT ROOMS are now
open to visitors, at the following prices,
viz :—

SINGLE BATH.....\$0 20
SEVEN BATHS..... 1 00

BARBER FARES.

TWELVE SHAVES.....50 cts.
HAIR CUTTING.....15 "
SHAMPOOING.....15 "

A share of public patronage is respectfully
solicited,

Cobourg, 15th May, 1878. at YORK'S. 255

Source: Cobourg Sentinel
May 11, 1878