Frederick G. Todd, Visionary of Valley Park System

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The North Saskatchewan River Valley is Edmonton and Capital Region’s cherished signature landmark and a large source of pride for residents. It was 100 years ago in 1907 when a young landscape architect presented the City of Edmonton with the full potential of the region’s picturesque river valley and ravine system and the first vision of an attractive valley parks system. No recent history of the Edmonton and Alberta capital region river valley is complete without a discussion of the influence of Frederick Gage Todd and his visionary ideas.

Frederick G. Todd was an American-born, Montreal-based landscape architect, born in Concord, New Hampshire in 1876. At some time before adolescence, he moved to Massachusetts and attended high school in Andover, Massachusetts. He graduated from Massachusetts State College in Amherst, MA in 1895. In 1900, Todd arrived in Canada and began his landscape architecture practice in Montreal (Peter Jacobs 2006).

Todd apprenticed under Frederick Law Olmstead – the world-renowned landscape architect who designed Central Park in New York City. While many of Todd’s landscape architecture colleagues were advocates of imposing geometrical order on unruly landscapes, Todd agreed with his mentor in that a more natural order was the only order worth emulating (Herzog, 2000).

For nearly half a century, Frederick G. Todd planned, designed and carried out “public and private works of beautification and utility with nature herself as partner” (Peter Jacobs, 2006). Over his distinguished career, Todd was involved in many significant Canadian landscape architectural endeavours. He designed the National Battlefields Park in Quebec and oversaw the development and preservation of the Plains of Abraham. Todd played a significant role in the location of the legislative buildings and designed the surrounding park areas for both the provinces of Saskatchewan and Alberta. Numerous other Canadian public spaces were designed by Todd including Marine Drive in Point Grey, British Columbia for the B.C. Government; Mount Royal Park, Montreal; Assiniboine Park in Winnipeg, Manitoba; Bowring Park in St. John’s, Newfoundland; and St. Helen’s Island Park in Montreal, Quebec (City of Edmonton Planning and Development, 1999; Peter Jacobs, 2006).

Frederick Todd visited Edmonton in the winter of 1906-07 for the purposes of evaluating Edmonton’s potential for public parks. The City of Edmonton formally requested Todd to examine “the city of Edmonton with a view to reporting on the general scheme for parks and boulevards, which would amply provide the future needs of the city as far as best can be foreseen at the present time” (Todd, 1907).

Todd was greatly impressed with the promising future that awaited the young city. However, at this time, Edmonton’s river valley was “a beehive, populated with dozens of coal mines, brick yards, lumber operations and even a couple of gold mining operations and boat builders” (Herzog, 2000). In his report submitted to the City of Edmonton in 1907, Todd declared that Edmonton is:
“situated in the centre of an extensive country rapidly grown in population and wealth, possessed of almost unlimited resources for manufacturing, and with a location admirably adapted not only for the building of a great city but a city of great beauty and attractiveness... Edmonton in 25 or 50 years will have grown to such a size that we of today would hardly recognize it. Not only is Edmonton situated in the centre of a large and remarkably fertile district, but the fact that it is also the capital of an immense province whose future greatness is only beginning to unfold, renders it necessary that it shall also be the center of all those things which are an index of man's highest intellectual attainments, and that it must be a city which will reflect the dignity, stability, and good taste of its citizens” (Todd, 1907).

Todd continued on to congratulate Edmonton on its beautiful setting and its adaptability for both businesses and residential housing (Todd, 1907).

In light of this immense potential, Todd strongly urged the City of Edmonton to make plans for future generations and provide parks and natural open space for its citizens. For Todd, “…no one thing is more important for large cities or cities which are assured of a great future, than that they shall early secure open spaces for the benefit of future generations” (Herzog, 2000).

Todd also wrote that:

“a crowded population, if they are to live in health and happiness, must have space for the enjoyment of that peaceful beauty of nature - which because it is the opposite of all that is sordid and artificial in our city lives - is so wonderfully refreshing to the tired souls of city dwellers; therefore most of the large cities have provided themselves with parks and large open spaces to be used as parks when necessity requires...” (Todd, 1907).

His study of older cities also revealed the large costs incurred by those of them that did not provide for future growth. Newer cities, on the other hand, which made provisions for parks and open space, incurred tremendous savings by setting aside considerable area of land for parks while the land was still cheap. New York City was a prime example of providing its citizens with park space at great cost. In 1907, Todd remarked that,

“For the past seventeen years, New York City has appropriated a million dollars each year for the purchase of playgrounds in the crowded part of the city, and this aside from the enormous sums spent on her large parks; if this land could have been acquired 50 to 100 years ago, the value would have been as nothing compared with what has to be given today” (Todd, 1907).

During this time period, when people were primarily focused on the economic rewards available from resource extraction in the river valley, Todd recognized a very different value presented by Edmonton's grand river valley. The North Saskatchewan River Valley and its ravine systems was the source of the city's great natural beauty. In light of the forthcoming economic success and urban growth, Todd stressed the importance of securing land to ensure the lasting legacy of Edmonton's natural beauty:

“In evolving a comprehensive scheme for parks and boulevards for Edmonton, every advantage should be taken of the great natural beauty of the situation, and also attention must be given to the economic interest of the city, by with-drawing for park purposes, property which is of least value for building, if it is equally valuable for park purposes. Indeed it often happens that the land most unsuitable for building is the best for park purposes, such as the sides of steep ravines and hillsides” (Frederick Todd as quoted in Herzog, 2000).
Todd was correct in his vision that future generations would consider the woods and ravines within Edmonton's natural setting as one of the most valuable assets of the city. He argued that the very integrity of the city’s park system and its survival is heavily dependent on its natural appeal (Herzog, 2000). “I am of the opinion that the future generations would look upon it almost as a crime if these ravines are allowed to become denuded of their woods or otherwise made unsuitable for public pleasure grounds, for there are no other lands such as these located within easy walking distance for the city…” (Todd, 1907).

In his report to the City of Edmonton, Todd made a number recommendations regarding park and boulevard development, focusing on four main areas: (1) large parks, (2) ravine and hillside parks, (3) small parks and playgrounds, and (4) boulevards and parkways. Todd urged the City to secure the land required for a number of good-sized parks to be located in the east, north, and western sections of the city. As these areas are developed later on and the city assumes a large size, he stressed that as much of their present natural beauty be retained as possible and that their natural ‘picturesqueness’ be enhanced through the planting of many trees and shrubs in an irregular way. Todd also recommended that adjacent roadways and walkways be designed with graceful curves and arranged such that the beauty of the park is presented in the most advantageous means possible.

For ravine and hillsides parks, Todd declared that one of the first things that the City of Edmonton needed to accomplish was to secure its ravines and sufficient level land at the top to provide for a driveway. He argued the fact that the houses could face onto these beautiful ravines would make these lots more valuable, aside from providing a beautiful scenic drive about the city, making it a more liveable city and not one where people would go just to make money and then move away” (Todd, 1907).

Todd also identified that the City of Edmonton had done very little towards securing small blocks of land for playgrounds and emphasized that this would become a very serious issue for the city as it grew. He stressed the importance of incorporating open spaces that could be used by children as well as adults within the fabric of the city.

Lastly, Todd’s vision for a system of beautiful parks was to connect them with a series of landscaped boulevards and scenic drives. In fact, Todd felt so strongly that the advantages provided by a system of beautiful boulevards and driveways was so obvious, he felt it was hardly necessary to dwell on it. He postulated that it would “be a matter of regret” to future generations if land for a continuous boulevard along the entire river embankment was not secured before this was no longer possible (Todd, 1907).

Victoria Park, then know as Hudson Bay Flats, was the first river valley park to be implemented as a result of Todd’s (and others) recommendations. Todd thought that this park would be the most valuable of the park system and important to save it from residential development. In 1912, the City of Edmonton purchased 155 acres of land from the HBC for $130,000.00. The site was renamed to Victoria Park by a group of prominent Edmonton women. “The park was a popular success, as picnic grounds and for horse stables, a rifle range and a cricket pitch. During the winter months, the slopes served as a series of sleigh, toboggan, and ski runs.

It took time for Frederick Todd’s vision to gain momentum. It was not until the worst flood in recorded history to hit the Capital Region surged over the banks of the North Saskatchewan River in 1915 that the Government of Alberta moved to adopt Todd's vision for the river valley "in-principle". Likewise, it was not until this same year that the City of Edmonton first incorporated the concept of a river valley park system into the City Plan. Ironically, this came after the many lucrative businesses situated in the river valley were completely swept away by the surging waters (Herzog, 2000). A zoning bylaw in the spirit of protecting open space and parkland did not emerge until 1933. In 1949, Edmonton City Council adopted the Bland-Spence report – a report that recommended that the City oppose further private development
in the river valley and embark on a long-term program to acquire private lands within the river valley (City of Edmonton Planning and Development, 1999).

Throughout the evolution of Edmonton, proponents of urban development and proponents of park development struggled for river valley real estate. The residential neighbourhoods of Riverdale, Cloverdale, and Rossdale had already been established within the river valley and the City of Edmonton was contemplating a fourth – a community known as Walterdale, located between the Walterdale (105 Street) and High Levels Bridges. By 1950, however, much of this land had been acquired by the Kinsmen Club. Existing houses were demolished and a grand park developed in their stead. Kinsmen Park and Kinsmen Sports Centre now occupy this land. MacKinnon Ravine had been stripped of trees in preparation for the construction of a freeway through its heart. It was not until a vocal local community lobbied for the preservation of the ravine that plans to build the roadway were abandoned. A vegetated giant berm of earth in Queen Elizabeth Park is evidence of another successful campaign to protect the river valley and halt construction of major freeway and bridge across the river into downtown (Herzog, 2000).

Finally, in 1970, the City of Edmonton adopted a Top-of-the-Bank policy which defined the limit of the North Saskatchewan River Valley and Ravine system, introduced development principles, and prescribed regulations for rezoning and development permits for adjacent to the river valley and ravine system (City of Edmonton Planning and Development, 1999). This same year, the Province of Alberta invested $40 million into a new Capital City Recreation Park (CCRP) which would finally connect the city’s collection of ‘island parks’ which residents drove to on a series of roadways. The new park initially consisted of 16 kilometres of trails that stretched from Beverly Bridge to High Level Bridge (Herzog, 2000). This trail network has grown considerably since that time to become a major recreational facility in its own right.

By 1985, Edmonton’s Top-of-the-Bank policy had evolved into the North Saskatchewan River Valley Area Redevelopment Plan. An original draft of this area redevelopment plan was released in 1981 which reinforced the protection of the river valley and the continued acquisition of river valley property for future park development. The public, however, were specifically concerned with plans to purchase property for parkland in the river valley residential communities of Rossdale, Cloverdale, and Lavigne. So, in 1983, City Council reversed its previous decision and directed that the river valley area redevelopment plan provide for the preservation of all residential communities in the river valley. Subsequently, area redevelopment plans for Rossdale and Cloverdale were adopted, Lavigne was incorporated into the Scona East Area Redevelopment Plan, and the North Saskatchewan River Valley Area Redevelopment Plan was approved (City of Edmonton Planning and Development, 1999). The river valley area redevelopment plan has been updated numerous times since 1985, but still continues to govern development within the river valley today.

The driving concept of the North Saskatchewan River Valley Area Redevelopment Plan is that it is “a comprehensive plan which envisions the major portion of the River Valley and Ravine System for use as an environmental protection area and for major urban and natural parks. For the central area of the river valley, the Plan envisions a sensitive mix of land uses – residential, recreational, institutional, and commercial development, which are of varying intensities and compatible with Downtown activities. There will be limited use of the Plan area for residential, transportation, public utility, and institutional development. The concept for the proposed land use is based on the fundamental philosophy that a continuous open space system, interspersed with recreational activity nodes, can meet the diverse demand for recreation in an urban setting and yet protect the river valley environment. A linear system offers open space edges in the framework of Edmonton’s urban development and provides maximum visual impact and physical accessibility to the valley” (City of Edmonton Planning and Development, 1999).
The concept of a regional park that encompasses multiple jurisdictions has its origins in Todd’s work. Todd wrote two separate and related reports to local municipal governments: one to the City Clerk and Council of the City of Edmonton and a second to the Town of Strathcona Mayor, N.D Mills describing his vision for a river valley park. In the 1960’s, a concept for a metropolitan regional park was proposed by the now defunct Edmonton Metropolitan Regional Planning Commission. Later as an integral component of the provincial Capital City Recreation Park for the City of Edmonton, the provincial government promoted the concept of a provincial park extending from Devon to Ft Saskatchewan. Development of this provincial park was put into a holding pattern, however, by the creation of the Edmonton – Devon and the Edmonton – Fort Saskatchewan Restricted Development Areas (RDA). These regulations still exist today, although they now are intended to promote good development practices in an often hazardous river valley. In 1996, several municipalities banded together to again promote a continuous park from Devon to Ft Saskatchewan. The River Valley Alliance (www.rivervalley.ab.ca) was formally constituted in 2003 as a not-for-profit company, with 7 municipal shareholders including the counties of Parkland, Leduc, Sturgeon and Strathcona and the Town of Devon and the Cities of Ft Saskatchewan and Edmonton for this exact purpose.

Nearly 100 years after Todd’s visit to the Edmonton and the Alberta capital region, the North Saskatchewan River Valley and its adjoining ravines have come to form the largest stretch of urban parkland in North America. While, many of Todd’s immediate recommendations of 100 years ago are now realized, work continues to establish a continuous river valley park system for Alberta’s capital region. Without the vision of Frederick Gage Todd, however, it is unlikely that the capital region river valley would retain much of its original natural beauty and allow it to be available for the enjoyment of present and future generations. As this park grows, so also will the sense of pride of its citizens for their river valley.
References


Todd, Frederick G. (1907). Letter Report to the City of Edmonton, City Clerk. April 5, 1907. Edmonton Archives.
