

# the bridge

Connecting people, places and ideas from the downtown east

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## The Benevolent Mr. Coatsworth

By Coralina Lemos



Mr. Coatsworth, courtesy of the Toronto Reference Library.

As we welcome the birth of *the bridge* community newspaper, my thoughts turn to Emerson Coatsworth Sr. who around the age of sixteen was inspired to gain a vocation in the carpentry trade, and in time was employed in the construction of dams and bridges.

Born in England, he grew up in St. Catharines, Ontario, where his widowed mother settled with her four children. At

the age of twenty-six, Coatsworth arrived in Toronto to supervise the building of the Don Bridge at the forks of King and Queen Streets; an essential connection known to provide ease of passage from Toronto to Kingston. Choosing to accept work at various province-wide locations, by the following year he was awarded his first city contract to plank Palace Street (now Front), from

Trinity Street to the St. Lawrence Market, including portions of Wellington and Church Streets. This led to additional employment opportunities, one of which was the building of Berkeley Street Methodist Church, on Queen Street East, of which he was founding trustee.

By the mid-19th Century, Corktown was comprised mainly of blue-collar workers who lived in labourers' cottages that lined main and side streets. Quick access to people wanting work was beneficial to him and a good reason to move his family to a cottage frame house on the south side of King Street, just west of Gilead Place. It was also at this location where he kept a workshop. He was a man with a compassionate nature, evident in his generosity to the needy of Toronto's east end whom he helped anonymously by supplying them with coal and wood during winter months.

Given his undeterred nature from a young age, within a few years of living in Toronto he was elected to the School Board for St. David's Ward and for one year served as the districts Alderman. Coatsworth then went on to be City Commissioner.

(Note to Reader: not exactly laid out as original)

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Assuming the role in 1873, his duties covered overseeing the construction of buildings, control over sanitary and fire departments, the care of streets, and other responsibilities. With a population of roughly 70,000, the city was reported to have been growing rapidly, resulting in the lack of affordable living accommodations. This is evident in a letter Coatsworth wrote to architect and friend, William G. Storm, where he mentions, "...not a home to let is to be found. Small houses are renting as high as \$17 per month and others at \$20 -

\$25..."

Emerson Coatsworth continued to own two lots he purchased in Corktown from James Beaty Sr. up to 1885, and in a decision to sell he did so to the Wilkins Brothers, local realtors and builders.

~ Coralina Lemos is a Corktown resident. She is the author of, "Corktown: The History of a Toronto Neighbourhood and the People Who Made It," an award-nominated book available at Preservation House, Toronto or visit her website. ©