

## “Citizen John Davis”, a Lowertown Character

“Citizen” John Davis was a familiar and colourful presence in Lowertown in the 1890s. Whether on the street delivering firewood to a customer, canvassing for some cause, entertaining at home or at a social club, or speaking out at a public meeting, everyone knew who he was.

Davis arrived with his family in Ottawa from England about 1883 and quickly found a job as a private coachman. Within a few years he was also selling firewood and sand from his new home at 494 Clarence St. More and more land was needed to stack wood and to supply sand, and Davis eventually owned all the land east of Charlotte Street and north of Clarence. By the time he had mined the sand and sold the lots for development, Davis estimated he had lowered the land level by 20 metres.

As early as 1888, Davis had been recruited “as a representative workingman” to join a committee of citizens organizing a public event. He was gradually accepted as an active member of the local “great and good” who organized events for the City, sat on the boards of its charities, and dominated the public meetings called to gather public opinion on municipal issues. Davis was always careful to ensure that celebrations included events in Lowertown, and always considered himself a spokesman for the “working man”.

Davis was ready to speak out and ask awkward questions about any issue: the proposed interprovincial bridge, municipal electrical supply, a public library, the statue of Sir Galahad. Closer to home he led the citizens of Lowertown in securing a new public school on Rideau Street rather than in Sandy Hill; building city playgrounds to keep children off the streets and out of the old cemeteries, shutting down or modernizing the rendering plant across the Rideau that sent an unbearable stench with an east wind.

In 1911, Davis was also part of the delegation from Lowertown, led by Father Myrand of Ste-Anne, that argued that Porter’s Island was not a suitable site for an isolation hospital and should be made into a park. He was also strongly in favour of conversion of the old cemeteries into a park (today’s Macdonald Gardens) and made sure the local press was steadily fed stories of how the cemeteries were the resort of objectionable characters.

Perhaps his most unusual contribution to the neighbourhood came in 1894 when he opened an indoor swimming pool on Wurtemberg St just north of Clarence. There was no heat, so the pool operated as a skating rink from December to March. Though popular, when the building burnt in April 1896 it was not rebuilt.

Davis was always ready with a song or a poem or a story, and many circulated about him. For example, Davis took the Electric Railway to court because a conductor asked him to take his feet off the seat. It took two jury trials and two appeals for the Divisional Court in Toronto to rule that the conductor was in his rights. On another occasion, Davis made a deal with the city to supply sand to raise and landscape Anglesea Square. The City later accused Davis of digging the sand out of Charlotte Street. Davis admitted doing it, but claimed his men intended to replace the sand with clay, to make a better roadway.

Davis turned over his business to his sons about 1909, and moved from Lowertown in 1914, eventually living in Ottawa South, where he died in 1925.