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## Description

# The Basswoods mark the course of a former stream in Westmount Park

By **Michael Walsh**

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O the scent of the limes on the linden tree!  
How it brings the love-days back to me,  
How it wakens the mem'ries of long ago  
Of summer months with their sunlit glow  
And the hum of bees in pastures green  
And the purling of streams that wound between,  
And sequestered haunts we used to know  
When we were young in the Long Ago.

*Linden blossoms, Jeffrey Dolezal Hrbek*

Have you ever wondered why Montreal's residential streets run as narrow strips from north to south – and the commercial ones traverse an east to west direction? The answer is quite an interesting story. It begins when the Champlain Sea retreated (10,000 years ago) leaving behind a myriad of rivers and streams. Jumping forward, to 1627, France's seigneurial system of land distribution capitalized on these waterways. Specifically, long narrow pieces of farm land ('rangs') were divided into lots, measuring 3 x 30 arpents that assured farmers had access to water which typically flowed from north to south. (The exception is Côte des Neiges road that followed a stream called the Ruisseau Rainbault.)



In Westmount, several streams flowed through today's

Westmount Park and converged into the Glen stream (present day Glen Road and Saint Catherine intersection). The former's name was chosen, in the 1800s, because the area resembled a deep Scottish valley. It has been described as a "cool stream... towards a pool where ducks and geese are fed". The stream flowed into St. Henri des Tanneries' Lac St. Pierre. Interestingly, under Glen Road's stone arch bridge, there is a manhole where one can still hear the stream's water flowing. (This is not something I would recommend!)

At this point one might ask what this has to do with trees – quite a lot actually – some species are water-loving and mark the locations of the park's original streams. Specifically, the basswoods that line a path at the park's Melbourne Avenue entrance, mark the course of a former stream that ran from Mount Royal into Saint-Henri.

'The tree's name originates from fibre ('bast') obtained from the inner bark. In fact, in 1991 a 5,300 year-old Iceman, discovered in the Ötztal Alps, was wearing a knife sheath and shoe linings made from bast fibers.'

These trees are known as American basswoods (*Tilia Americana*). In Europe they are called lindens and in England limes (not to be confused with the citrus fruit). The tree's name originates from fibre ('bast') obtained from the inner bark. In fact, in 1991 a 5,300 year-old Iceman, discovered in the Ötztal Alps, was wearing a knife sheath and shoe linings made from bast fibers.



Basswoods are easily identified by their asymmetrical heart-

shaped leaves with serrated edges. A unique feature is a modified leaf ('bract') that is attached to the tree's flowers and pea-sized fruit. The leaves and flowers are used to make *Tilleul* – a calming herbal tea with a 'woodsy' flavour. The tree's strong-scented flowers (similar to jasmine) can produce large quantities of nectar that bees convert into honey of a whitish colour and described as having a minty taste. The trees' copious amount of nectar production is reflected in a bee hive in Iowa that is reported to have produced 600 pounds of basswood honey in a period of 30 days. The trees' natural habitat is from New Brunswick to Manitoba and south to Texas.

'In Europe they are called lindens and in England limes (not to be confused with the citrus fruit).'



Finally, mythology tells the story of the sea nymph Philyra,

daughter of Tethys (goddess of the seas) and Oceanus (god of the oceans) giving birth to a centaur named Cheiron. Grieving that she had produced a child that was half man and half horse – Philyra asked the gods to relieve her as a human form. The gods obliged by transforming her into a beautiful lime tree. Cheiron stayed with his mother, at the base of the tree, where she educated him with wisdom and kindness. That is why, to this very day, limes are associated with love and care

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*Images : Michael Walsh*

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**Michael Walsh** is a long-time Westmount resident. He is happily retired from nearly four decades in the field of higher education technology. A “professional student” by nature, his academic training and publishing include statistical methodology, mycology and animal psychology. Today, he enjoys spending time walking with his dog while discovering the city’s past and sharing stories of the majestic trees that grace the parks and streets. He can be contacted at [michaeld2003@hotmail.com](mailto:michaeld2003@hotmail.com) or through his blog [Westmount Overlooked](#)

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