

# Benares Historic House

*step back into the era of the early 1900's*

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## Welcome to Benares Historic House

1507 Clarkson Road North, Mississauga

With over 160 years of history, this exquisite estate has been home to four generations of the Harris Family. Originally purchased in 1836 by Captain *James Beveridge Harris*, the estate consisted of 197 partially cleared acres, a running stream, and most importantly “*an elegant stone house...well adapted for any gentleman’s family*”, (along with numerous other buildings) “*...forming a most desirable investment for any gentleman possessed of capital*” Upper Canada Land, Mercantile & General Advertiser August 1835



Harris came from a family rich in the tradition of military service. By selling his officer’s commission in the British Army, he was able to purchase Benares and move here with his wife *Elizabeth Molony*. Together they raised eight children, but tragically three of their sons died early in life, leaving *Arthur Harris* (1843-1932) to inherit the property.

The farm was a vital part of the family life at Benares. In the early years it provided much of the family’s food and income. The estate at one time extended from the current QEW in the north to the C.N.R. tracks in the south, from Clarkson Road east to Lorne Park Road, and consisted of a number of outbuildings, including a large barn and a separate hired man’s house. The potting shed, dairy, bake oven and stable still stand today.

To Arthur and his wife, *Mary Mcgrath*, were born three daughters, *Annie* (1882-1986), *Naomi* (1884-1968) and *Margaret* (1887-1887). While Naomi spent her entire unwed life at Benares, Annie was married to *Beverley Sayers*. Their three children, *Geoffrey Harris Sayers*, *Dora Sayers Caro* and *Barbara Sayers Larson*, donated the home and many of the original furnishing to the *Ontario Heritage Foundation* (now *Ontario Heritage Trust*, or *OHT*) upon the death of their aunt, Naomi Harris.

Benares is said by some to be the inspiration for Canadian author Mazo de la Roche’s famed **Whiteoaks of Jalna** novels. Mazo did in fact live in a nearby residence known as Trail Cottage, on land which once belonged to the Harris family. A close friend of the family, she lived here while writing several of her world famous novels. What are the mysterious connections between Jalna and Benares? Are they one and the same? Nobody really knows for sure! However, in April 2008 Parks Canada and the Historic Sites and Monuments Board unveiled a plaque at Benares, honouring Mazo de la Roche as a person of national historic significance. <http://www5.mississauga.ca/museums/plaqueunveiling.html>. To find out more about the intriguing life and work of Mazo de la Roche go to the Mazo de la Roche Society website at [www.mazo.ca](http://www.mazo.ca) .

The home was restored, and furnished with original family artifacts, by the *OHT* to reflect the early decades of the 20th century. In 1995 Benares Historic House opened to the public as a museum. It is now owned and operated by the City of Mississauga as one of the *Museums of Mississauga*.

## Why is it called Benares?

### What's in a Name?

Edgar Neave, the original builder of the house, named the home 'Benares', a Holy City in India that is now known as Varansi. There had been a British military garrison at Benares, and although Captain Harris did serve in India, he was closer to Kanpur, not Benares. However, the Harris family adopted the name that had been given to their new home.

### So, Why 'Benares'?

Neave was clever to use the name of a British military garrison. After all, he was a land developer who profited by selling 'improved' farms to established buyers. At the time, the most likely buyers for ready-made farms were men retiring on a military pension or, in Benares' case, to a man who had sold his rank for cash. Retired soldiers had wealth but had little prospect of fitting into the established nobility in Britain, so most of these officers moved to Canada to start a new gentry. The Harris' neighbour, George Truscott, was also a retired army officer who had served in India.

## Early History of the House



A small home started in 1836 or 1837 by Edgar Neave, was sold to J.B. Harris in 1837. Most sources say that Benares was "incomplete" when J.B. bought it but, to be precise, the structure was finished except for doors and windows. Until these were added, houses were not officially considered 'houses' by the taxman, so developers like Neave left homes 'incomplete' to circumvent property taxes while awaiting a buyer for the land.

### Fires

The first home burned in 1855. Made of masonry, the present 'back kitchen' was the only part to survive the fire. There was a second fire in an outbuilding around 1856 where the family may have been living while the 'new' house (today's house) was under construction. However we don't know where this elusive second fire occurred or, for that matter, if there was a second fire. See the separate entries on the two fires for details on the myth and mystery surrounding the curious conflagrations.

### Cheap Bricks

To replace the burned home, construction of the present house was started in 1856 in the Georgian Revival style. Captain James wisely chose to build the new home with brick – a building material far less susceptible to fire than wood. The contractor of another home rejected these bricks, from a brickwork in Milton, so the thrifty J.B. got them on the cheap.

When Was the House Completed?

A letter to J.B written in December 1857 by his sister Margaret, gives us a clue as to when the present home was finally completed. Margaret writes, "I hope your new house will soon be ready for you." So, a house must have been started many months before Christmas of 1857 – probably right after the first crops were sown in April. Given the time it takes to build a solid masonry structure the size of Benares, the Harris probably didn't move in until sometime in 1858.

# Harris Family Tree

