

Doors Open at Wells Street School



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From classrooms to living rooms, the building at number 64 Wells Street is undergoing major changes.

Aurora's first high school building was erected on this site, overlooking the Town Park, in 1892.

Up to that point the four-year-old high school had been accommodated on the second floor of the public school on Church Street (now the Aurora Cultural Centre). The purpose-built structure on Wells Street was a proud achievement for the town.



It is to be hoped that the teachers and curriculum and learning materials were lively and stimulating, because the building itself assuredly was not. Constructed of dark brick, trimmed with dark-painted wood, it may have met late Victorian notions of suitably sober school architecture but it was not an inviting building.

That first building had four classrooms and a library, along with cloakrooms and a lavatory. The slow but steady growth of Aurora's population in the early years of the twentieth century, combined with a growing acceptance of the value of secondary education, meant that by the early 1920s a larger high school was badly needed. It was decided to build an addition consisting of three classrooms, a gymnasium and an auditorium.

A number of sources state that the old high school burned down. The writer of this article has never found any evidence of such a fire (and surely it would be mentioned in the local press!) or of a fire during the remodelling of the building.

?Remodelling? hardly describes the extent of the changes, although it was the term used at the time. The dour old Romanesque building became a light and airy school in a combination of Georgian and Neoclassical Revival styles, constructed of a light brick and with white-painted wood pilasters, pediments, cornices and window-and-door frames.

It was all topped off by eight silver urns at the roofline. At the time of the official re-opening of the school, in November of 1923, architect David R. Franklin said the building was ?of the Georgian type and purely British design.? Deep within and beneath, however, some elements of the old school were incorporated in the new structure.

By the late 1940s two new schools were needed in Aurora. The Public School board had acquired additional land on Victoria Street to allow for the replacement of the grand but outdated school on Church Street. The High School Board had its eyes on a property on Dunning Avenue which could accommodate a high school with modern facilities and enough space for not only the anticipated post-war growth of Aurora's population, but also for students from the neighbouring townships.

In the end only one new school was built: the Aurora District High School (later The Dr. G. W. Williams Secondary School).

Instead of constructing a new building, the Public School Board purchased the former high school on Wells Street. After the addition of a wing at the rear, the building became the new home of the Aurora Public School in 1952.

One teacher of the time later reminisced that the staff felt they had ?died and gone to heaven,? thanks to the existence of a staff room, an office for the principal and easily-cleaned linoleum floors in the new kindergarten and Grade 1 rooms.

In 1958, the name of the school was changed to Wells Street Public School, as in that year the town's second public school was opened on George Street.

A million-dollar renovation was carried out at Wells Street in 1990, with very careful attention to the preservation of the architectural details.

Less than twenty years later, it was decided that the school needed further major work. From September of 2007, Wells Street students were bussed to Aurora Grove Public School, while decisions were made about what to do about the building on Wells. For the first time in 150 years, no one was starting the school year on Wells Street.

The students never returned. The Wells Street school property was sold in 2011.

Now the old school is to take on a new life. Visitors to this site during Doors Open Aurora on August 17 will certainly see many signs of the old school.

But they will also be able to see what is planned for its new incarnation: Wells Street Schoolhouse Lofts. Showrooms and a model of the sensitively-enlarged building will show how Wells Street will look during its next 90 years.

Don't miss this change to tour the Wells Street Lofts located at 64 Wells Street on Saturday, August 17 from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

For more information about Doors Open Aurora, or to volunteer for the event, please visit www.aurora.ca and click on the Doors Open icon on the front page.