Archaeological study shines light on 180 forgotten pioneers

By Brock Weir

Time has erased their story.

With no formal records to go by, no one can say for certain how long they had been there.

There is no next of kin to provide answers, at least as far as we know. Nothing to say how they lived, went to school, or what ultimately sealed their fate.

For the better part of two centuries, their story has been forgotten, but a new chapter began on Monday when the remains of this pioneer child was finally excavated from what was once a Yonge Street parking lot.

This now anonymous youngster was the last of nearly 180 of Aurora's earliest settlers recently unearthed by archeologists as part of the process of rebuilding Aurora United Church at its historic home at the corner of Yonge and Tyler.

When Aurora United Church (AUC) was destroyed in fire in April 2014, the congregation was clear they had every intention to rebuild their spiritual home at their traditional spiritual centre, but little did they realise the long road towards ground-breaking would lead to the recovery of nearly 200 of its earliest parishioners.

When the foundations of the first Methodist church on site were laid in 1818, the corner of Yonge and Tyler incorporated both the church itself and its associated cemetery. Over time, and as the community grew, the earliest church reached capacity ? as did its cemetery.

The church rebuilt and, following the last interment in 1869, the cemetery was decommissioned and families removed the remains of their loved ones and reinterred them at the newly-established Aurora Cemetery in the south end of Town.

Or, so Church officials thought.

As it happened, the remains of some 80 pioneers were reinterred by their families but, for more reasons that have been lost to the sands of times, the remains of many more were left behind, their gravesites covered, and their headstones removed and stacked for nearby residents to pick up and use as they saw fit.

It would take tragedy to prompt the re-examination of this story and, following the fire, Aurora native Emily Anson was eager to get her hands dirty and shed some light on our forgotten history.

Ms. Anson, who grew up on Wells Street, a stone's throw from Yonge and Tyler has been the project manager on the archeological dig at AUC since 2017. When the opportunity came up to become involved, she jumped at the chance, not fully knowing the extent of the work that lay ahead.

The first step, she says, was research. They looked into the few remaining historic records ? the bulk of the church's own archives having been lost in the 2014 and a previous blaze ? along with newspaper articles, fire insurance plans and old maps just to get an idea of what might be on site.

Once they had a general idea of where the remains of the cemetery might be, they plotted out the church site, boring 30 cm test pits on a five-metre grid, wherever they thought had potential. They also cast a wider net to the sites of the nearby Victorian homes that used to back onto AUC (bulldozed in 2015 to make way for the redevelopment of the church and associated seniors residence) and performed a ground-penetrating radar study.

While the radar study didn't yield the results they were hoping for, given more than a century of infill, compression from the parking lot, and on-side clay deposits, the test pits were more successful ? as was the discovery just below the surface of cemetery markers that, while removed, had left behind stains on the soil.

?We began stripping the soil in 2017 and we started at the south end at first and didn't find much,? says Ms. Anson. ?But, we started finding things we weren't sure what they were, but it turns out they probably were the end markers for the southern edge of the cemetery. That is when we started finding the grave shafts.?

The process continued, stripping the soil in what she describes as ?manageable sections? according to archaeological guidelines set by the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport.

?One of their concerns is you don't open too much of an area all at once so you're not leaving them open too long and people come and mess with them,? she said. ?We opened an area where we would have 20 ? 30 shafts that we could see. Once we did that, the next step was to open one to confirm the presence of human remains, at which point we called the coroner, the police, the Cemetery Registrar, and we got an order of investigation to actually open the cemetery.

?Once we had the paperwork, we continued to do monitored stripping, and then the process is once we have a shaft stripped, we would dig down by hand and find a coffin. In this cemetery, almost all of the burials have transverse boards over the top, an extra layer of protection. We started finding those and would strip down to the boards with a shovel, clean it off with a trowel and brushes, and remove the components of the burial in sequence.?

While clay deposits played havoc with their radar tests, there was a silver lining there. In some cases, the clay held water and helped preserve the integrity of the coffin walls.

Not every interment fared as well, but each plot revealed more of Aurora's history.

Although early Methodist burials were simple affairs, the grave sites did yield some surprising results, including buttons left behind from decomposed shrouds, nails that still held fragments of fabric that once lined coffins and, in one case, a grave yielded two British coins, from 1820 and 1836 respectively. Some coffin plaques, metal markers identifying who was buried inside each coffin, were also uncovered. The plates themselves were emblazoned with traditional motifs of the time like lambs, sunbursts, cherubs and willow trees, the elements had worn away any clues as to the names of the deceased.

The bones, however, helped fill in the story, and paint a picture of a cemetery replete with not just adults, but several children, an indication of the era's high child mortality rate.

Archeologists showed an uncovered bone to Brian North of the AUC's Rebuilding Committee, and he says he was struck at how it was clear at the first sight of a spine that the individual had been riddled with arthritis.

?You can tell they worked really hard, and you can see that on the bones,? says Ms. Anson. ?You can see how they developed bone spurs and all that stuff. These were hard-working people. They were working the land, and you can see that ? and that, to me, is amazing.?

?This project is personally important to me because I grew up 10 minutes from here and I remember going to bake sales and craft fairs in the basement of this church, walking by it every day,? she adds. ?It is

pretty amazing to be coming back here and sort of do right by the original Aurorans. By doing archeology here, I hope people become more aware there is so much history in Canada and Ontario, specifically. They don't even think about it and this is a great way to remind people there is history beneath your feet, both ancient and not so ancient.

?Your relationships and your predecessors lived on this land and this was their final resting place.?

Currently, each of the 180 pioneers uncovered during this dig are resting in a secure location and it is hoped that later this year they will find a new final resting place in a new plot at the Aurora Cemetery, where so many other people first laid to rest at the church were moved over 130 years ago.

?These remains that have been forgotten will be remembered as our pioneers,? says Mr. North.