

Aurora's earliest pioneers will not be forgotten: United Church



When a memorial is formally placed at the Aurora Cemetery to mark the spot where the remains of 180 of the community's earliest pioneers have been re-interred, on it will be etched the phrase "Known to God."

It's a simple message, but one that Aurora United Church's (AUC) Reverend Lorraine Newton Comar says "speaks to the fear we all bear at not being remembered."

The names of many of those whose reinterment was marked Sunday have been lost to history, their long-forgotten graves uncovered on the northwest corner of Yonge and Tyler Streets as the AUC began its rebuilding process following a devastating 2014 fire. But now, their collective memory will be a permanent community touchstone.

The AUC community gathered at Aurora Cemetery for a service marking the reinterment of these early members of the local Methodist community on Sunday afternoon.

As much as the AUC community looks forward to beginning a new chapter of its history on their historical and spiritual home in Aurora's downtown core in early 2026, the occasion was a time for the congregation to reflect on their history, which stretches back to 1818.

"We gather here today on sacred ground—not just because this is a burial site, but because of the deep history and memory that lies beneath our feet," said AUC's Reverend Andrew Comar. "On February 21, 1818, Mr. William Tyler of King Township generously gifted land for the Aurora Methodist Church and its cemetery. That land became a place of worship, of fellowship, and of final rest for many members of this community."

"For decades, families laid their loved ones to rest in the belief that they would be remembered. In 1869, the Aurora Cemetery was established, and the Methodist Cemetery was officially closed. Notices were sent to the public, inviting families to move their loved ones' remains to the new cemetery—if they wished, and at their own expense. Some did. But many did not. And so, on a designated day, the monuments that remained were removed, the land was levelled, and the area became a lawn. The unclaimed gravestones were placed in a pile behind the church, near the shed. Over the years, some were taken, some lost, and some simply forgotten. Yet even then, the ground itself continued to hold the memory and presence of those who had been buried there."

The 2014 fire, he said, revealed many parishioners were still at rest in the ground and, in 2019, an archaeological study catalogued the remains before they were stored at the Cemetery until they could be re-interred on the grounds in a respectful way.

It wasn't the easiest of tasks, but working with the Bereavement Authority of Ontario, they were finally able to make it happen earlier this summer.

Two burial plots were donated by the Aurora Cemetery while Baker Vault donated the vaults that now hold the remains. The stone memorial as well, which is still being prepared, has been donated by Thompson Funeral Home.

"We are deeply indebted to everyone who helped make this re-interment possible," said Rev. Andrew. "It has been a long journey. May their legacy live on in the life of our faith community, and within the community of Aurora."

In her sermon, Rev. Lorraine reiterated the power of the phrase "Known to God."

"The words touch us with a tenderness that speaks to the fear we all bear at not being remembered, giving strength to our collective resolve that this memorial is essential so that we can show respect for those who came before, as those who originated and then nurtured the congregation," she said of the early Methodist congregation that eventually became the AUC family.

"What do we know about the lives of those persons, young and old, buried here? Other than two notations in our first history book that speaks of a young woman with her child and William Tyler, who gave the land for the church, and his family members, there are no records of any kind," she continued. "As we have said in the past, the church was a church before the Town was a town, and such records were burned in previous fires. So, we acknowledge today the legacy of those being interred as faithful members of the church and of the community, cared for by the congregation. We honour them all today, whatever their individual stories may be, to whomever each of these persons were.

"We are here today to ensure they will never be forgotten, as they are the pioneers - the original members of Aurora Methodist Church. Young and old, they rest forever - together now, with respect."

By Brock Weir
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