

Aurora's history in the spotlight for Heritage Week in February

Driving past Yonge and Wellington, east on Wellington, heading to the 404, I find myself zoned out, thinking about which child needs to be driven where and who needs to be picked up and when. I wonder if I might be able to get a few groceries in the 30-minute window that I have between, what feels like, a perpetual cycle of dropping off and picking up. If I play my cards right, I might be able to make good use of this small window of time that I have.

I suspect that this is a conversation that many residents of Aurora have on a daily basis as we work, raise families, pay mortgages, and curate our lives in this place. It is these conversations that securely place Aurora as an excellent example of a suburb of the Toronto area. It is a great place to raise a family, start a small business, make a home. The challenge is, however, that when we are all busy running this race, we tend to overlook many of the elements that give Aurora the qualities that make it such an ideal place to raise a family - an ideal place to put down roots.

If you are driving east on Wellington, for example, do you ever stop to notice the many heritage buildings that line the street on both the north and south sides? Have you ever noticed the Henry Machell House, located at 17 Wellington Street E, whose family name was part of the original 'Machell's Corners' name for the area prior to Aurora? What about if you ever venture north of Wellington on Yonge Street and happen to stroll past the many heritage homes on Catherine Street, one of the streets included in the Heritage District of Aurora?

The reality is that Aurora has over 250 heritage designated properties, and more are being added every year. While most people think of Aurora as a modern up-and-coming suburb, Aurora, in fact, has a very rich history and heritage. Our local history is full of places, people, and stories that are full of historical significance.

It is for these reasons that Aurora is happy to be participating in its Heritage Week.

Heritage Week is designated by the Province of Ontario to run every year during the third week in February. Across our province, towns and cities have the option of using this week to bring attention to the myriad ways that the history of the people of this province have shaped what it has become today.

One of the major challenges in regards to local history is that when you are surrounded by it, as those of us who live in Aurora are, you can lose sight of how important it really is. It is easy to just assume that these 'old' houses are interesting because of their architectural features, or their unique inhabitants, but the relevance might stop there. If you, however, take a moment, you will realize that these properties, and the stories that they tell, are hugely relevant to the way that we live our lives in this town.

Whether it has to do with the names of our streets, what parks or community centres are known as, or the home that we live next door to, these stories say a lot about why we do what we do in Aurora.

Aurora has always been a bustling community. When the first steam powered locomotive, named Toronto, arrived at the Aurora Train Station, now the GO Station, it was a sign that Aurora was now a key stopping point for travelers between Toronto and locations that were farther afield, finally ending in Collingwood. In doing so, Aurora became a town with thriving industries such as The J. Fleury Son Foundry which opened in 1859 and The Wilkinson Plough Company which opened around 1868. The Sisman Shoe Company, which moved from Markham to Aurora in 1901 and was responsible for many well-known types of footwear including military boots for members of the Canadian Expeditionary Forces in World War I and World War II, even manufacturing the boots that were worn by the Canadians who stormed Juno Beach on June 6, 1944 on D-Day, as well as the boots that CCM used for their well-known hockey skates, is another key example. There are countless other industries that flourished as a result of Aurora's key location along the train-line and the industriousness of the early families who lived here.

It is easy to see that this innovative spirit is alive and thriving in Aurora as we continue to grow into the modern town that we are becoming. This is why it is so essential that we celebrate our local history.

Pulitzer Prize winning novelist Robert Penn Warren said, "History cannot give us a program for the future, but it can give us a fuller understanding of ourselves, and of our common humanity, so that we can better face the future."

As our town continues to grow and evolve, what better way to understand where we might be headed, than to appreciate who came before us and what they did? History is not static, it does not stagnate and rot; it is dynamic. Over time, we focus on different elements of said history.

Perhaps we are interested in understanding the role that women played in the local history of Aurora.

If you spend any time learning about Horton Place, you would learn a great deal about this. Someone else might be interested in understanding why Aurora was such a perfect location for a tannery, as evidenced by the presence of Collis Leather, located on Tyler Street.

There is something in Aurora's history for every single one of us. It is up to us to look up from our dashboards, take a few minutes to veer off of the roadways that we use to get to and from where we need to go, and appreciate that this rich local history is one of the greatest gifts that this Town has to offer.

Please join the Heritage Advisory Committee on February 16th at 10 a.m. at Town Square, 50 Victoria Street, as we kick off the Town's Heritage Week opening ceremonies.

More information can be found at www.aurora.ca/heritageweek.

We look forward to seeing as many of you as possible for this free event.

By Cynthia Bettio, MemberTown of Aurora Heritage Advisory CommitteeWorking Group for Heritage Week Planning