

Cultural Precinct is focus of new Museum exhibit



By Brock Weir

150 years ago this year, the Fenian Brotherhood launched a series of raids throughout what is now Canada, to provoke Great Britain to withdraw from Ireland.

The British, however, were quick to respond and, by 1871, put an end to the raids.

Amid the British victories, members of the Aurora Infantry Company, now part of the Queen's York Rangers, were celebrated at Town Park with a huge community celebration welcoming them home.

Over a century-and-a-half on, their medal will take pride of place among a myriad of objects and photographs with close ties to Aurora's 'Cultural Precinct' in the new exhibition from the Aurora Museum and Archives entitled *Built Culture: Memories of the Precinct*.

The new exhibition, which opens this Wednesday, March 30, with an opening reception running in the Aurora Cultural Centre's Brevik Hall from 3 to 6 p.m., examines over 160 years of cultural activity within the Cultural Precinct Area of Aurora's historic downtown core.

'We were presented with this project from [Aurora Museum and Archives curator] Shawna White,' says Michelle Johnson, a Master of Museum Studies student at the University of Toronto, who built the show along with fellow students Sarah Spotowski and Rebecca Frerotte, in collaboration with Ms. White. 'The scope of covering the Cultural Precinct seemed very timely. We went over a few different options on what to include in the exhibition, but the Precinct provided us with a wealth of content and stories about both the uses of the buildings and the history of the architecture.

'It is the intention of this exhibition to be a sampling of those stories that took place in the buildings, within the boundaries of the precinct to act as a resource for the community, while discussions are happening around the precinct.'

Adds Ms. Frerotte: 'While the Town continues to look at the future of the neighbourhood and make plans, this is taking a look back at what the Cultural Precinct has been in its 160 year history.'

Over the years, what is now described as the 'Cultural Precinct' has meant different things to different people.

The trio hit the ground running looking for key dates, exact uses of buildings in the area - both long-lost and extant - and how their

uses evolved, such as the Mechanic's Hall at the southeast corner of Mosley Street and Victoria Street which has evolved from that early community hub, to the Aurora Lions Hall, to the Romanian Orthodox Church which now calls it home.

“We wanted to tease out the stories that aren't necessarily so obvious,” says Ms. Johnson.

Adds Ms. Frerote: “Our process was very site-centric to begin, so we divvied up the sites in the Precinct and had a lot of fun really going through the archives and resources here at the museum. There are a lot of recent artefacts that have come into the archives, like the Mortgage from Mechanics Hall, and it is great that we can handle the tangible history of these buildings through those ephemeral events that took place.”

Another important place to start were early fire maps for the Town of Aurora, notes Ms. Spotowski, which chart which structures were on every plot of land in Aurora at any given time for insurance purposes. It helped understand the footprint, how things changed, and uncovered small but interesting details. She was most interested with the people, she says, and these maps kick-started further discoveries into local teachers, hoteliers, and other people who were community leaders within the Precinct area.

“While researching Church Street School and Aurora Public School, there was a collection donated by a former teacher, Donald Webster, and it was really enlightening to see how education in Ontario in the 1930s was,” she says, noting additional archival materials included school newspapers charting issues within each area schools from big ticket items to seemingly trivial matters. “There was a selection of student newspapers he supervised them printing and those students complaining how the school was too small and all of their little 1930s problems were really great.”

“The most interesting thing for me was learning about the actual people.”

As they put the finishing touches on the show ahead of next week's opening, the three Masters students agree that this exhibition is the “capstone” to their education, which has allowed them to really feel the value of making those connections between archives, museums, and the community around them.

“We worked with a core of five people who aren't actually employees of the museum that have just been amazing in giving us extra bits of information when we need it, filling in holes, answering our questions, and it is just so lovely to see the community come together over a shared history,” says Ms. Spotowski.

Adds Ms. Johnson: “It was a true collaborative relationship with Shawna. She really mentored us through the process to let us know what high standards look like in terms of research, talking to people and getting facts right. I know I definitely feel comfortable going out into the world as a museum professional having done an exhibition like this so comprehensive in scope.”