

Doors Open 2014: Visit The Petch House on Saturday, August 16



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The Petch house is associated with Isaac Petch, one of the sons of a Yorkshire family who came to Whitchurch Township in 1817.

Jonathan Petch, the head of the family, had been a ship's carpenter and no doubt passed on woodworking knowledge to his farmer sons. Family lore says that the house was built in 1844, but experts have said that there are some indications of an earlier date, perhaps even the 1820s.

The Petch family settled at the northeast corner of what is now Wellington and Leslie; the lot extended eastward as far as Woodbine.

Isaac married a neighbour, Emma Hacking, in 1844. If the family's date for the log house is correct, then the construction of the dwelling may well have been prompted by the need for a house for the young couple. The house was on the north half of the original lot, which was bisected horizontally to provide farms for Isaac and one of his brothers, John.



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With the deaths of Isaac (in 1899) and Emma (in 1904), this Petch farm passed out of the family, but the old log house was treasured by the owners who followed.

The late twentieth century brought immense change to the whole environment of the Petch farms. Highway 404 sliced vertically through the properties, and brought with it pressure for commercial development with easy access to the highway and Wellington.

With the sale of the farm for re-development to SmartCentres, the log house was removed from the site under an agreement with the developer.

The house perched forlornly on the east side of Leslie Street for several years, a bit south of Wellington. Unoccupied and exposed to the elements, its condition deteriorated.

After much debate and consultation, it was finally decided to dismantle the house, save all usable components, and have the house rebuilt as closely as possible to its original appearance, with appropriate replacement materials where necessary. This work was carried out under the guidance of timber building expert Peter van Nostrand and by Town of Aurora Parks and Recreation staff.

The site selected as the permanent location for the building was at the main entrance to the Aurora Arboretum, which is, of course, where you will visit the Petch Log House on Doors Open Aurora day.

?But that's not a log house!/? exclaims the passer-by.

One step inside will assure the visitor that it is indeed a log house, but it is true enough that on the exterior the logs are completely hidden by narrow horizontal boards.

Far from being an unfortunate modernization, this cladding is exactly what most early log house owners dreamed of.

For some, the clapboard siding had to await the accumulation of sufficient funds and easy access to a sawmill. For others ? probably including the owner of the Petch house, built at a relatively late date ? the boards were applied at the outset. The boards met practical needs such as keeping out the wind and moisture, and they also were strong indicators that the owners were relatively prosperous.

They were also reminders of the ?real? houses which some log house owners remembered from Great Britain or older parts of the United States.

No early photos of the Petch house have come to light, so how do we know about the board siding? Mainly because of the form of construction used at the corners of the exterior walls.

The joints between the logs are squared off and provide no means of shedding water: they were not meant to be exposed to the weather. Sloping dovetail joints, on the other hand, would have provided the slanted surfaces which allowed water to run away.

Further, the logs are punctured with the holes where the boards were nailed on. The removal of the original boards decades ago, possibly in the belief that they were not authentic, hastened the deterioration of the logs.

Inside, the visitor can see the great size of those logs. How old were those trees when they were cut down in the 1840s or earlier? On Doors Open Aurora day it may be difficult to get a quiet moment in the Petch log house, but if you have the opportunity, imagine away the other people, the noise of traffic, the lights by the front door.

Imagine the house back on its original site to the east, on a rise of land and surrounded by a mixture of cultivated fields and forest. Imagine the Petch children growing up here, cold in the winter, hot in the summer. Imagine Isaac and Emma moving into their first home together.

Imagine the logs as trees in the forest, not yet seen by any European.

The Petch house can take you on a long journey into the past.

The Petch house will feature a number of fun, family-oriented pioneer activities on-site from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. To help plan your day on Saturday August 16, be sure to check out www.doorsopenontario.on.ca to see a full list of participating sites for the Doors Open Aurora event.