

Museum exhibition shines light on Aurora disasters and resilience to come through



This month, the skeleton of the first of Aurora United Church's two new steeples is set to be hoisted into place.

The design of the new steeples echoes those that were part of the landmark downtown Aurora landmark for generations that were felled first by wind and, ultimately, fire.

It's emblematic of how wind, fire and water have impacted the shape of Aurora and have been the make or break of local landmarks, and this is the focus of a new exhibition staged by the Aurora Museum and Archives at the Royal Rose Gallery, just steps away from the Aurora United Church site.

The latest exhibition to be showcased at the Royal Rose Gallery uses primary documents and photographs to chart how Aurora dealt with severe weather and disasters both natural and man-made beginning in 1893 when a tornado – then thought to be a cyclone – swept through the downtown core, damaging both the church and the site of Aurora's first Town Hall.

Next up is a 1924 explosion at a match factory once located between Berczy Street and the present GO rail line, which took place just before Christmas that year, claiming the life of the factory manager and seriously injuring another.

“Only those two people – which is unbelievable for an explosion in a residential zone,” says Jeremy Hood, Museum Assistant at the Aurora Museum & Archive. “It's so compelling.”

Fast-forward a couple of decades and exhibition-goers can see documents from a significant flood in 1946, followed in 1965 by a fire that destroyed Aurora's then-sole ice arena, sparked by a lit cigarette just days before Maurice “The Rocket” Richard was due to visit. The site of the arena, just north of Chartwell Park Place on Yonge Street, remains vacant in a testament to what was.

Next in the timeline is another fire in Aurora's downtown core in April 1972 when Textile Bargain Centre, a very narrow standalone building, was destroyed – making way for the staircase which now connects shops, restaurants and businesses on Yonge Street to parking on Temperance Street.

And then – the Aurora United Church fire almost exactly 39 years later.

“They are fascinating moments in Aurora's history,” says Hood, noting that part of the exhibition was previously curated virtually on their site and through their On The Spot app. “Elements of this may appear in our grand exhibit that we're planning for Aurora Town

Square in our large-scale exhibit and cases, but we haven't decided what is going to go into that just yet.?

These instances, he adds, are examples of Aurora's resilience as a community.

?We use the Aurora United Church as the most recent example,? he says. ?They were able to go through that impossibility that happened to them and they're still going strong, operating 10 years later out of a temporary location and eager to get back. They didn't falter in all that time. I know a lot of military history, and you can't really destroy people's morale that easily. I think people are very much willing to come together and help each other out and see themselves through these problems and know that things are just temporary regardless of how bad things seem in the moment.

?You see the beams sticking out from a smoking ruin or people knee-deep in floodwaters, but it recedes and it gets rebuilt ? and for Aurora, pushing 200 years here, very few buildings of that original era survive, but we are doing our best and the more we respect that history, the more we can preserve it, remember it, and honour that resiliency.?

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