

The ATTIC

PERSONAL REMINISCENCES ON THE EARLY DEVELOPMENT AND GROWTH OF THE AURORA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

By: Dr. Leslie Oliver, Founding AHS President 1963

The year 2023 marked the 60th anniversary of the Aurora Historical Society (AHS). It was a significant event for me, as the founding president, and as one that served on the AHS board for some 38 years. The Society has been pretty much a life's work, triggering many thoughts of years gone by.

As a consequence, these reminiscences come from memory - with much of the detail long gone. Accordingly, with apologies, these notes exclude the names of the principal players to which I owe so much in my years with the Society, including the support of all those Aurora mayors, councillors, and my AHS colleagues in arms. Many, like myself, were caught up in the desire to contribute, voluntarily, to the life and culture of their community.

In recognizing and celebrating the Society's 60th anniversary, I muse on the Society's life experience, its struggles, and accomplishments, now as a recognized leader among Canadian volunteer, community-based, historical societies. I muse, too, over the birthing of the organization, its early struggle for public and political recognition, and the support of municipal council, achieved often through stormy times. In retrospect, in all this, the Society has been fortunate to have been able to contribute to its times, moving with its times, as part of a larger public good, made possible by its times.

Seen in retrospect, the times have been ones of quiet, cultural revolution, and transition. Here opinion around the municipal council table would evolve dramatically, from, Municipal Council having no place in Aurora's cultural life, to the current opening of the multi-million-dollar Aurora Town Square complex.

Throughout this transition, AHS has been a responsible advocate and activist, a participant-observer to Aurora's transition to what has been called a "cultural age". The challenge in documenting these personal reminiscences, given their momentous shift in world view, has been to do so with clarity, objectivity and brevity.

On the role and contribution of history to one's life and times, I recall, from my earliest childhood years, that the notions of "history" and "historic knowledge" have always had a certain fascination - as concept, construct, principle, and key idea. Throughout life, I have been fascinated by what history teaches and foretells of the future.

So it was that in 1962, as a young man, with a wife and 3 young children, and with a professional life to navigate, that a local elder statesman and neighbor, E. H., (Ernest) said to me, on the street one summer's evening, "The Aurora's Centennial is coming up next year, we need to recognize its historic significance, possibly by establishing a local historical society".

E. H. was likely then in his 70's, a respected, well-educated for the times, well read, and a man in which I saw the wisdom of the ages. A few weeks later, he asked me to attend a gathering of several other local social and cultural leaders.

(continued on pg 4)

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CO-CHAIR'S MESSAGE

By: Geoffrey Dawe & Alan Lambert

As I write this, it is difficult to believe that Christmas is only one month away. Although there were a few snowflakes over the weekend, the weather has been deceptively nice. (At some point, the shoe will drop!)

Hillary House has been busy with events, the latest being the Hot Chocolate on the Verandah for the Santa Under the Stars parade on November 23rd. The holiday decorations that have been put up, in and around the House by our great volunteers, which definitely confirm the arrival of the season!

First, an update on the Future of Hillary House. The Town, with our assistance, released a survey to gather feedback on Hillary House and our path forward. Following the analysis of those results, Robin McDougall, Director of Community Services, prepared and presented a report to Council on Monday December 2, 2024. The report and the survey can be found [here](#) and [here](#), respectively.

In brief, there was solid support that the Town acquire Hillary House and that it should continue to be operated as it is currently. Discussions are still ongoing and we will continue to provide updates on the process.

Kathleen attended both the Multicultural Fair as well as the Youth Volunteer Fair and as a result we have recruited some new volunteers! And, speaking of volunteers, a big thanks to you and to our staff for all of your hard work!

FALL/WINTER OPEN HOURS



Monday to Friday, 10am to 4pm

Come for a tour, see the new exhibition, or find that perfect item in the Gift Shop.



Co-Chairs, Geoff & Al.

We recently had a most successful Fall Clean-up day, with over 20 volunteers doing a fabulous job!

Following up on a member's suggestion from our Special Members meeting back in February, we applied for, and were granted a permit with the Richmond Hill Hall Charity Association. We completed our first assignment in October and garnered slightly over \$5,000.00! We are most gratified with the results, and very appreciative of that suggestion. While we do have a number of volunteers to assist with this, we always have room for more. It is a commitment of 3 hours per session, and with a strong group of volunteers, there would be no more than 6 to 8 sessions per year. (And, you get a fabulous AHS branded shirt to wear!)

We encourage you to stop by over the holiday season, to see the beautiful decorations, or perhaps stop by the gift shop and pick up a unique gift for that someone special.

Finally, we wish you and yours a peaceful holiday season, and a Happy and Healthy New Year!

Al & Geoff

HIGHLIGHTS FROM HILLARY HOUSE

Have a look at some past events and programs run by the AHS since the Summer! Did you attend any of them?



Director Sean Cisterna films the *THE RUG* at Hillary House, which had its premiere at Aurora Town Square on October 6, 2024.



Summer months for the AHS have been preoccupied with providing engaging programming for many local campers.



Instructed by writer and historian, Serena Ypelaar, a snapshot of the Heritage Craft Workshop: Intro to Historical Fiction Writing.



SOYRA artists enjoy the beautiful weather and use Hillary House as inspiration for their latest art pieces at this plein air session.



Guests of the AHS Victorian Garden Party all dressed up, enjoying tea and activities on the grounds.



Guests enjoying the weather and afternoon tea at the Victorian Harvest Tea.



Participants enthusiastically complete their masterpieces at Paint Night, in partnership with Royal Rose Art Gallery & Gifts.



Guests listen enthusiastically to local author Ted Barris at the September Speaker Series event.

Want to be involved at the AHS? Contact us to be a volunteer, intern, or to join our Board of Directors! [\(Click here\)](#)

PERSONAL REMINISCENCES ON THE EARLY DEVELOPMENT AND GROWTH OF THE AURORA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

(continued from pg 1) We convened in a storybook Victorian parlor, on Victoria Street, the home of a late successful downtown merchant. Looking back, it was an historic setting for an historic event - for it would be a kind of AHS Founding Meeting. So, when I was asked, at the meeting, surrounded by my elders of many years, who is going to take the lead in this venture. E. H. said “you are” – and the rest is history.

Over the next few months, the AHS, with the support of the mayor’s office and requisite legal counsel, the Society was chartered as one of the first volunteer, citizen-based municipal historical societies in Canada - to be charged with responsibilities for community cultural development. And the rush was on.



Ernest Clarke and Lester B. Pearson, November 1968.

Photo courtesy of Leslie Oliver.

Arrangements were made for gratuitous space in “Doane Hall”, the then somewhat dilapidated, but truly magnificent, Greek Revival, Yonge Street home of Aurora’s first mayor, slated for demolition. With the support of the current owner, the Society’s archives will tell the story of the two-room, elegant, centennial museum, created with the assistance of professional support imported from Toronto. Most importantly, the Society’s Centennial Museum featured historic artifacts and archival materials on loan and gifted for this celebratory event, so this was how the “Aurora Collection” was born.

At the outset, I recall the 1960’s, when public affairs and the public business of mayor and council were

conducted quite differently to those of the 21st century. Municipal Council met, behind closed locked doors, in an improvised town hall on Yonge Street, much like a secret society. To address Council, I was to give two weeks’ notice, and then to wait patiently out in a narrow draughty hallway for the door to be ceremoniously unlocked by the Town Clerk who, without a word spoken, directed me to my seat.

It was a period in which independent, publicly sanctioned, historical Societies, with clearly documented, officially sanctioned, public mandates, like the AHS, were an oddity at the time. And municipal councillors were uncertain as how to treat them, whether as friend or foe. And were often treated variously as both, in requests for financial support, and in lobbying for shifts in public policy and priority in the cultural and social affairs of community.

Looking back, I well recall of those early, formative years in the life of the Society in which its agenda seemed to merge, quite naturally, into two, often interrelated, main streams – community cultural development and interpretation, which focused on museology and curation, and political advocacy in support of the cause of community cultural conservation.



Vivian Wilcox and Murray Oliver working on the AHS Centennial displays. Photo courtesy of the Aurora Banner.

In terms of advocacy, the rush of post WWII, commercially driven, urban development was on, with its many battles both won and lost. The AHS, and its brother-in-arms, the Aurora Heritage Committee

would be in the midst of it all – much as the Society’s archival records and local press coverage of the times will tell:

- With AHS leading the way, municipal council established one of the first Local Architectural Conservation Advisory Committees (LACAC) in Ontario for the protection of its valued historic and culturally significant properties.
- A comprehensive municipal inventory of properties in the historic core would be undertaken with AHS’s leadership and resources.
- With the support of municipal council, working with the assistance of provincial and federal agencies, Aurora would emerge as a recognized provincial and national leader in community cultural heritage and conservation practice.
- The records will tell, too, of the municipal, provincial, and national recognitions received by those early volunteers - variously advocating for AHS, and the Aurora Heritage Committee (LACAC).

Meanwhile, through the work of then board chair John Macintyre and Jackie Stuart, with the support of municipal council, the first Church Street School Museum would be established in two classrooms of the historic, decommissioned school building. The museum would provide a new public face for the AHS. Jackie Stuart would be a personification of the Society, the one that would introduce several generations of children to Aurora’s history and culture through the Aurora Collection, and her many stories told of place and times.



*Plaque unveiling
at Church St.
School.
Photo from the
AHS Collection.*

Indeed, the 1960’s were exciting times for the embryonic Society. In discussions with other municipal, provincial, and national agencies, we explored what the

times required of our fledgling volunteer group in matters of advocacy, program development, and promotion. How could the AHS best contribute to a new kind of, mid-20th century, cultural modernity, one concerned with the emerging role of historic knowledge, and the contribution of cultural conservation to an increasingly, layered, and complex, mid-20th century, modern world of public affairs?



*Erection of the
provincial plaque
at the Aurora
Train Station.
Photo from the
AHS Collection.*

In retrospect, the Society was vaguely aware that it was now in rapidly changing times, as an integral part of a new public cultural agenda, one in which the AHS, along with the LACAC had, themselves, helped to create as significant, local players, once more seemingly “on the right side of history”. The seeming threats to cherished cultural and social landmarks, and understandings (e.g., road widenings, demolitions of culturally significant structures) had led to angry delegations to Council, with widely debated, pressures for change in public policies, standards, and practice. Again, in retrospect, it was all about the prospects of a newly emerging millennium, a post-modern, information, society, and the early years of Canada’s new culturally driven times.

Among other things, culture had gone mainstream on the public and political agendas of the period, along with it the work of the Aurora Historical Society, as a principal driving force. Again, the archives will tell of the Society’s contributions to those times - helping to craft the new national, provincial, and municipal, policies and practices required of the vastly changing times.

Meanwhile, as a principal marker of the Society's growing maturity, AHS archives and the local press will also tell how, under the leadership of John McIntyre, through agreements with the Hillary and Van Nostrand families, and federal, and provincial government agencies, the Society would take on responsibilities of ownership, preservation, promotion, and public programming of Hillary House, as a significant, Canadian National Heritage site, possibly the only Canadian, volunteer-based organization in Canada to take on such responsibilities.

The acquisition of a national historic site would, quite rightly, significantly redefine much of the business and priorities of the Aurora Historical Society. Yet, in its decision, the Board was well aware that, beyond Hillary House, and the significant stories of community and times told, there was a much larger, serious piece of work to be done. For with Ruben Nelson, and by reason of its original charter, it was abundantly clear that the Society must draw much more widely on the history and wisdoms of Aurora's past, in helping to create an ever-deeper maturity of individual and community thought.

The AHS would go on to sponsor, typically, as fund raisers, professionally guided annual house tours, walks, and motor tours, along with interpreted Hillary House tours. Prior to COVID, the annual Hillary House Ball was, for many years, Aurora's socio-cultural event of the year.

To follow in the period would be another historic decision, to turn over AHS's founding "Aurora Collection" to the then newly minted municipal Aurora Museum and Archives (AMA) where it quite rightfully likely belonged. There the collection would be under due legislative protection, as gifts-in-kind, of historic, community significance. The transfer was, itself, a significant accomplishment providing a major milestone in the current development of the Aurora's cultural hub, and a centerpiece of the Aurora Town Square scheduled to open in September 2024.

Through the period, the Society's work would profit from the contributions made by numerous studies by provincial, national, and international agencies of government, and academia. As often happens, theory was catching up to practice, here in the fields of cultural conservation, cultural heritage, and community cultural development. The literature of the time would include explorations in concept development, and theory building, as well as in the documentation of hard won experience in jurisdictional, policy, and program development. (See especially the work of the Ontario Ministry of Culture and Recreation's Ontario Heritage Review.) Here, as the archives and public press of the time will tell, the AHS and the Aurora's LACAC were often cited for their leadership and community contribution.



Helen Roberts examines an artifact.

Photo from the AHS Collection.

Looking back, with all its challenges, the Aurora Historical Society has been on a bit of a roll, having attracted a number of dedicated adherents, friends, advocates, and achievements it can point to. The Society has managed to build a modicum of public and Municipal Council respect, bringing with it best wishes, quiet moral and financial support, for which it is most grateful.

All along, there has been a sense among the Society's Board members, general membership, financial supporters, and community aficionados, that the AHS was on the right track, again on "the right side of history". For these were, in fact, the post-WWII years, bringing with them the promise of social and cultural renewal, based on a new kind of 20th-century cultural modernity of thought and action.

Currently, with the grand opening of a multimillion-dollar Aurora Town Square, it has indeed been a kind of quiet revolution, and an exercise of achievement in community cultural development, one step at a time - often with the enablement of the Aurora Historical Society and its multiple volunteers. It is difficult to imagine that day when cultural matters and community cultural development were viewed as ultra vires, well beyond the responsibilities and interests of Aurora's Municipal Council.

My thanks to all those named and unnamed volunteers, who have filled the president's chair, serving on the

board, and the trenches, variously, over the last 60 years. My thanks too, to succeeding Aurora's mayors and councillors, over often stormy times, for their ongoing moral, financial, and public support of the Society and its causes. For through it all, mayor and council have grown with the Society and emerging public thought - beginning to understand what the 21st century requires of us all in matters of community, social, and cultural development.

Seen in a larger perspective, what these reminiscences begin to chronicle is Aurora's passage through Canada's post-WWII modern times, to 21st-century, postmodern times, to a new millennium, and to what has been said to be a new "Cultural Age" (D. Paul Schafer, *World Cultures Project*, 1998). Dramatically, Aurora's Municipal Council's priorities have shifted from "potholes" to "cultural wellbeing", and with it a multi-million dollar investment in 21st century cultural infrastructure and public programming.

THANK YOU!

The AHS was fortunate to have two emerging museum professionals join our team for the summer season, thanks to a federal grant from Canada Summer Jobs.



Warren joined the AHS team as the Assistant Museum Curator. He accessioned and catalogued artifacts, digitized archival documents, updated the database, and assisted with preliminary research for upcoming exhibitions.



Lia (right) joined the AHS team as the Museum Educator. She created some of our engaging social media content, lead tours of Hillary House, and assisted with the various events and youth programming.

We thank Warren and Lia for their hard work and wish them all the best in their future endeavours.

UPCOMING EVENTS



A FAMILY CHRISTMAS

SUN
DEC 8
2024

10:00AM
TO
4:00 PM

TICKETS: \$5 PER PERSON
Timed ticket entry.
Pre-register on our website to guarantee your spot.

Hillary House is decorated for the holidays! Visit us to have some festive treats, family-friendly crafts, and say hello to Santa Claus!

 Hillary House National Historic Site
15372 Yonge Street. Aurora, ON
www.aurorahs.com
905-727-8991

A Family Christmas

Sunday, December 8

10:00am to 4:00pm

In-Person

Hillary House National Historic Site is decorated for the holiday season! Visit us on Sunday, December 8th for our popular "A Family Christmas" event. From 10am to 4pm, we will offer festive treats, family-friendly indoor crafts, and a photo with our friend Santa Claus. Timed-ticket entry is \$5 per person. Pre-register to guarantee your spot, or drop-in while supplies last. Tickets are available on our website or by phone.



In October, the AHS joined the Richmond Hill Hall Charities Association and had the opportunity to be one of 70+ different York Region charities that participate in charitable gaming at Bingo World and Gaming Richmond Hill. The charitable gaming proceeds earned will help us pay for:

- exhibition supplies
- programming supplies
- collection preservation supplies
- utilities and maintenance for Hillary House

These funds help us keep Hillary House open to the public while providing educational and engaging exhibitions and programming to the community.

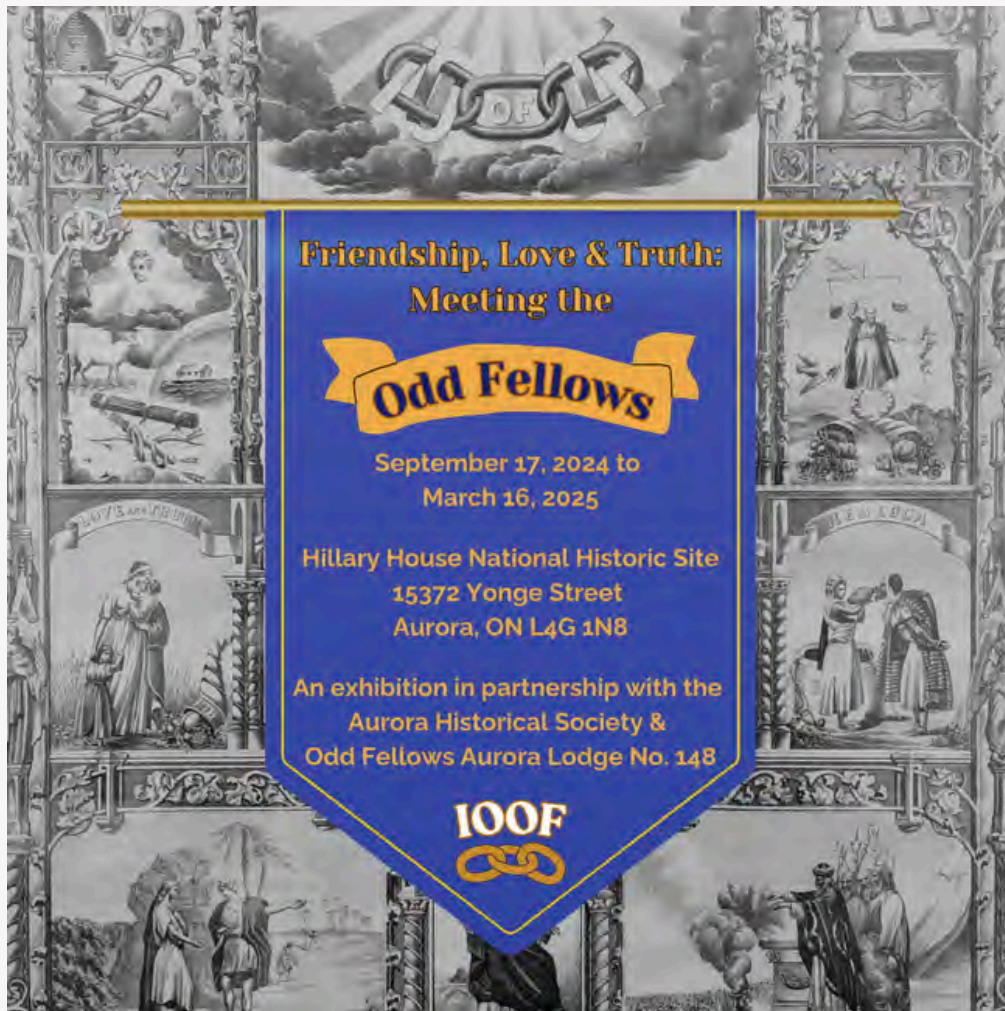
We are so thankful to Bingo World and Gaming Richmond Hill for their partnership and support.

If you're interested in volunteering for this initiative, please contact us at community@aurorahs.com.

A VERY SPECIAL THANK YOU

- Town of Aurora for the yard bins and our lovely hanging baskets.
- AHS Collections volunteer team for their hard work digitizing archival artifacts.
- Everyone who helped in both big and small ways at the Victorian Harvest Tea.
- Hurst Bakery for donating scones for all of our 2024 Afternoon Tea events!
- Our wonderful partner organizations, including Aurora Public Library, Aurora Cultural Centre, Aurora Museum & Archives, and Royal Rose Art Gallery & Gifts.
- The Fall Clean-Up volunteer crew for their efforts in prepping the grounds for winter.
- Kate and Terry for all of their work cleaning up the garden beds.

EXHIBITION ON VIEW



The Odd Fellows are one of the oldest fraternal societies, with millions of members and lodges around the world. Aurora's own Lodge No. 148 celebrated its 150th Anniversary in September 2024. Visit Hillary House to see the newest exhibition *Friendship, Love & Truth: Meeting the Odd Fellows*, on display now.



WELCOME YUNA



Hello! My name is Yuna and I'm a Grade 11 student from Dr. GW Williams Secondary School. I'm currently doing my co-op placement with the Aurora Historical Society at Hillary House! I'll be assisting with social media content creation and digitizing the collection. In the future, I hope to work in a museum so I'm super excited to be here.

We are social! Follow us for more updates through our social media. Click the logos below.



SHIFTING WEATHER: A MESSAGE OF THANKS

By: Selin Kahramanoğlu, Programming & Outreach Coordinator

When the Fall season arrives at our door, we notice that the wind starts to cool us down, the sun decides to sleep a little earlier, and the trees take a break from carrying their leaves. This shift in weather marks a period of necessary change, a pocket of quiet and slowness, all in preparation for the next lively phase of the cycle. This deceleration is not just for nature, but for people too. I welcome the call to soften and change directions. With this in mind, it is with immense gratitude that I conclude my time at the Aurora Historical Society.

After three years, my contract at the AHS officially ended in September. Thank you to the wonderful team that kept my motivation strong, who gave me a platform for creativity, and who encouraged me to lead in my own way. Kathleen, Julie, the AHS Board of Directors, and the tremendous AHS volunteers, will all remain as important members of my community whom I will continue to cheer for in their future projects. I am proud of what we have accomplished at Hillary House, around Aurora and neighbouring regions. My personal highlights include the thoughtful creation of our Youth Mentorship Program and Slow Museum Tour, the perfecting of our afternoon teas, the dedication to growing partnerships with local schools and businesses, as well as the coming together of enthusiastic and generous AHS supporters during challenging times. My only regret? I never won the war against the chaotic squirrels that harass AHS staff at Hillary House.

I started my time at the AHS as a volunteer and I plan to continue in that way. You will still see me every now and then. I have yet to settle on my next work placement, but in the meantime, I am keeping up with personal creative projects and visiting family. Like the Fall season, I am also transitioning into my next chapter, but before the buds return to my branches, I look forward to a moment of rest.

The AHS thanks Selin for all of her hard work and wishes her success in her future endeavours.



Above: Selin shares artifacts at an outreach event, 2022.

Below: Selin assists with installing an exhibition at Hillary House, 2024.



GIFT SHOP

Are you getting rid of items from your house? Donate them to the Gift Shop. We take small housewares, decorative items, teacups, antique items. Reach out to community@aurorahs.com for more information.

I.T. SUPPORT NEEDED

The AHS is looking for someone with I.T. knowledge and experience to assist with various technology related projects. Reach out to community@aurorahs.com if you're interested.

IN MEMORIAM

Joan Patterson (1938 – 2024) - For over forty years, Joan was a dedicated volunteer, working tirelessly, often alongside her husband Jack, for the Aurora Historical Society and the community she loved. Joan began her work with the AHS as a member of the committee which organized a highly successful reunion of former students who had attended the Church Street School. This event coincided with the official opening of the Aurora Museum at its Church Street location in 1981. It marked the culmination of a successful campaign by the AHS to save this community landmark from demolition. In the years that followed, Joan was a member of the AHS’s Museum Committee and Hillary House Committee. She helped with the annual House Tour and countless other events. At Hillary House, one of her favourite projects was the gift shop which she established and which continues at the museum today. At Murder Mystery dinners, Christmas programs, Valentine teas, summer teas on the verandah, and so many other popular events, Joan played an essential role as part of a small group of talented volunteers who made these things possible, but often remained behind the scenes. Thank you, Joan! We will miss you.

Written by John McIntyre

Claire Granie (2024) - Claire was a dedicated member of the Board of Directors from 2015-2018 and AHS Life Member. Her contributions as a part of the Fundraising and Hillary House Ball Committees helped to raise thousands of dollars for the AHS and Hillary House. She will be missed.



Murder Mystery, 2008. L-R. Front: Gloria Sherrard, Joan Patterson, Carol Wake. Back: Jason Wake, Jacquie Kipfer.



Hillary House Ball, 2016. L-R. Claire Granie and Christian Desenclos.

The Aurora Historical Society gratefully acknowledges the support of





VOLUNTEER

WITH THE AHS!



VOLUNTEERING OPPORTUNITIES

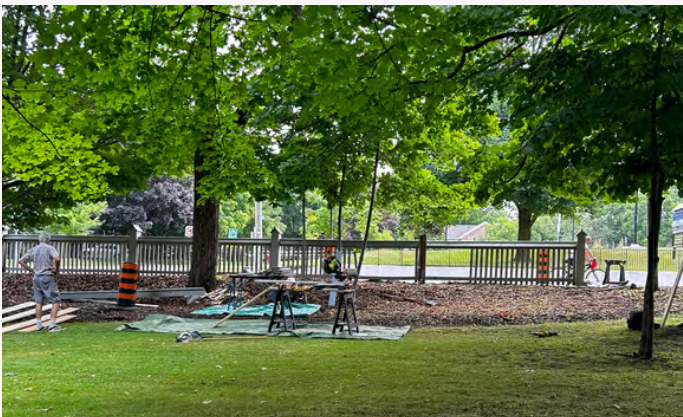
- Board of Directors
- Gardens & Grounds
- Collections & Exhibitions
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- Gift Shop
- Administrative
- Tour Guides & Programs
- Special Projects
- Special Events

Have a different opportunity in mind? Let us know!

Contact us for an Application Form, or click the image above.

FENCE UPDATE

On the night of May 23rd, an incident resulted in a vehicle hitting the fence that lines the Hillary House property along Yonge Street. This was particularly upsetting as the fence had been completely restored in Spring 2023.



Hudeck Contracting repairing fence, August 2024.

The AHS contracted local business Hudeck Contracting to complete the necessary repairs. They responded promptly and quickly got to work repairing the three sections affected. We thank them for their professional work and dedication to heritage restoration.



Repaired fence, August 2024.



Be our guest

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YOUR DONATIONS  MAKE A DIFFERENCE



The AHS is a non-profit, volunteer-led organization that has been operating Hillary House National Historic Site as a museum and centre for heritage education for more than 40 years. As a supporter, you can take pride in your meaningful contribution to the preservation of one of Aurora's most significant historic landmarks.

Help us continue that legacy! We need your support.

- Consider Making a Donation by visiting our website and clicking the Donate Now button. Make a greater impact by choosing “Monthly Giving”. You can target your donation to an area you wish to support.
- Purchase or Renew your Membership now for 2025
Visit our website and click Become a Member or fill out and return the enclosed form
- Attend an Event and Shop in our Gift Shop for that hard-to-buy-for person.

RENTALS

Did you know that you can rent Hillary House for your next event? Book your upcoming wedding photos, parties, or meetings at Hillary House. Please contact us for rental rates and packages available year-round.



MEMBERSHIPS

Have you renewed your membership for 2025? When you become a Member of the Aurora Historical Society, your contribution aids in the preservation, maintenance, and operation of Hillary House National Historic Site and its grounds. We depend on donor support to provide relevant heritage programming to all ages.

MEMBER REWARDS

- Invitations to Members-only exhibit previews
- Members rates on rental of the Ballroom, grounds, and other areas
- Discounts on ticketed events
- Regular updates on upcoming events
- Voting rights* at Member meetings, such as the Annual General Meeting

*Individual and Family memberships only

Click for the Membership Form or contact our office.



AURORA HISTORICAL SOCIETY 2024

Board of Directors

Co-Chair	Alan Lambert
Co-Chair	Geoffrey Dawe
Treasurer	Dan McGeown
Secretary	John Green
Director	Michelle Primeau

Committees

Grounds Maintenance	Alan Lambert
ToA Heritage Advisory Committee Rep	John Green

Staff

Curator / Manager	Kathleen Vahey
Administrative Assistant	Julie Preston

Newsletter Team

Production	Julie Preston
Editor	Kathleen Vahey
Review	Christine McLure

We invite members to submit suggestions for inclusion in the newsletter. Please email community@aurorahs.com

VISIT US

The Aurora Historical Society is an independent, volunteer-led, non-profit organization dedicated to heritage education for all ages. Stop by to see us!



Hillary House National Historic Site
15372 Yonge Street, Aurora, Ontario, L4G 1N8
905.727.8991

community@aurorahs.com

www.aurorahs.com

Open Monday to Friday, 10AM to 4PM