

Doors Open Aurora: The Inside Story

By Councillor John Abel

Chair, Aurora's Heritage Advisory Committee

Doors Open, the story behind the plaques, represents an opportunity to visit heritage buildings which are generally not open to the public.



This concept originated in Europe over a century ago and has quickly spread. In 1991, the Council of Europe launched European Heritage Days in 50 countries, held exclusively in the month of September. In Europe, with all the cultures, languages and history, you can imagine why this is such a success.

In 2000, the multi-cultural City of Toronto held the first Doors Open event in Ontario. In 2002, Doors Open Ontario was adopted as a province-wide initiative overseen by the Ontario Heritage Trust, running from late April through to early October.

Aurora held its first Doors Open event in 2006. This year marks our eighth year, and along with another 57 Doors Open events throughout the province, allows communities to evaluate and discover their heritage through the efforts of local volunteers.

In the past, Aurora has held its event in July, as not to compete with other municipalities. However, this strategy levelled off attendance figures. We generally have 20 sites to visit, 120 volunteers and just over 3,000 visits. It has remained that way for much of the last seven years. This year we're moving to August.

It should be noted, like Europe, most of the events in Ontario are held in September.

As well as creating awareness and boosting local pride, the efforts of the local volunteers draw tourists and stimulate local businesses.

It is important to inform the public and politicians about the need to protect cultural heritage against the pressures of growth and development.

Admission is free.

We are grateful to the site operators, homeowners and businesses, such as the Aurora Armoury, that have opened their doors this year to allow us to step inside and see beyond the plaques.

The Aurora Armoury was built in 1874, and for the second year will open its doors. The Queens York Rangers (QYR) called this their headquarters until last year, where after a century of service, the drill shed had to be retired for a newer, bigger facility.

The Town of Aurora faithfully rose to the occasion again, when QYR relocated to Aurora's old Hydro Building.

In 1873, the Township of Aurora granted the land, and in partnership with the military, split the cost of construction.

In the 1870's, Aurora had several churches, factories, shops and businesses, with a number of high-end homes being constructed. Although the population was only 1,200, Aurora had a railway station and was strategically best-suited centrally, to assemble neighbouring volunteer militias. Even back then, Aurora was the place to be!

The Armoury was constructed by a local farmer, and much like many others, was designed in the manner of a barn. The Armoury sits on the same footprint today, so from the outside it looks much the same. Most of the upgrades over the years have taken place inside.

The Drill Hall provided summer camps for the volunteer militia. In poor weather conditions, the Armoury provided shelter for drills, necessary to maintain skills for the part-time soldiers.

The Armoury would serve as headquarters in times of natural disasters and civil disturbances. Because of the facility's open interior space, the Armoury was used for public gatherings, celebrations and even as an emergency shelter for the homeless.

It is a storied partnership and an integral part of Aurora's past development. In honour of its heritage significance, The Aurora Armoury was commemorated with a Provincial Heritage plaque in 2007.

The Armoury first opened its doors for Doors Open Aurora in 2012, celebrating the QYR 200th anniversary of the role they played in the War of 1812. We're very grateful that the QYR have invited the residents to visit once again.

Please join us on Saturday, August 17 in Town Park at 10 a.m. to tour The Armoury, shop at the Farmers' Market and join with the volunteer tour guides to spend an hour or two discovering our proud heritage past.