

The ATTIC

DIGGING INTO THE PAST: A SUMMER IN THE COLLECTIONS ROOM

By: Elizabeth Glauser, Summer Assistant Curator

When you tour Hillary House National Historic Site, you are transported back through the many eras the house has witnessed. From the Victorian-style Consulting Room to the elegant 1950’s Drawing Room, the museum is home to three floors of artifacts and history for visitors to immerse themselves in. Well, all except one.

There is one room on the third floor that is closed off to the public, and with good reason. What was once a bedroom is now stacked wall to wall with shelves lined with boxes holding a myriad of artifacts, records, and archives - all attributed to the three families that lived in Hillary House: the Geikies, the Stranges, and the Hillarys. Every artifact tells a different story and with thousands of items in the collection, only a small fraction of them are on display. When not out for public view, these objects are housed in dedicated collections spaces such as the Collections Room, until they are rotated out for display, used for research, or programming.

Keeping this room organized is no easy feat. To track the thousands of items in the collection, each level of storage is given a location identification (ex. Collections Room, Shelving Unit A, Shelf 1, Box A, Tray 1). Additionally, each item is formally accessioned and catalogued.

This process involves assigning a unique object number and physically attaching it to the item, creating paper and digital records with all of its information and features, digitizing (taking a photo or scan), and finally properly storing the item. This ensures that every object can be tracked through the museum’s collections database and makes it easier to locate items throughout the museum.

This summer, I am focusing on cataloguing part of the extensive archeological collections at Hillary House.

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MESSAGE FROM THE CO-CHAIRS

By: Geoffrey Dawe & Alan Lambert

Our message in the Spring edition of the Attic started with us eagerly awaiting spring! The weather, at that point, just did not want to cooperate. Well Spring did come and that was quickly followed by one of the hottest summers (so far) that we have experience over the last few years. The lesson is be careful what you wish for!

First up, we would like to welcome our summer staff – Elizabeth and Erika. You can read more about them in the following pages.

And, once again, we had a great crew in for our spring cleanup. And, then they got to do it all over again after that nasty early July storm went through. Fortunately, we did not sustain any damage to the building or grounds.

We have been busy over the last few years with a landscaping plan – the goal being to retune the grounds to something more representative of the early days of Hillary House and manageable for our resources. Part of that work has been on the gardens at the front (Yonge Street side) of the property, where part of the old gardens have been re-sodded. A big thank you to Jon Durzi of Miller Compost for helping to arrange with Queensville Sod Farms Ltd. for their generous donation.

Unfortunately, we were turned down for our Ontario Trillium Foundation (OTF) grant request – the goal being foundation work on Hillary House. However, we are still pursuing other opportunities, and we continue to participate in Bingo (new volunteers always welcome!).

Lastly, no Co-Chair message is complete without thanking our dedicated staff and volunteers! Please enjoy the rest of your summer.

AURORA HISTORICAL SOCIETY 2025-2026

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- Programming & Outreach Coordinator Leena Bethune

Newsletter Team

- Production Julie Preston
- Editor Kathleen Vahey
- Review Christine McLure



Al Lambert and Geoff Dawe
at the Aurora Home Show.

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

HIGHLIGHTS FROM HILLARY HOUSE

Have a look at what the AHS has been up to since the Spring! Did you attend any of our events?



Volunteers Sandy and Jai representing the AHS at the Aurora Chamber of Commerce Home & Active Living Show in April.



Volunteers at the Spring Clean-up in May after clearing branches, raking, and preparing the grounds for summer visitors.



A special moment shared at the Mother's Day Tea in the historic charm of Hillary House in May.



Fossil specimens highlighted during our June Speaker Series presentation with Annette Sandberg.



Guest decorating a vase in celebration of Italian Heritage Month at the June Paint Night in partnership with Royal Rose Gallery.



AHS booth welcoming visitors at the Aurora Chamber of Commerce Street Festival in June.



Assistant Museum Curator Elizabeth cataloguing artifacts in the archaeology collection.



Museum Educator Erika lending a hand with sod installation at Hillary House.

AHS Members receive 15% off all ticketed events. Inquire with the AHS Office for details.

UPCOMING EVENTS

Join us at Hillary House for one of our upcoming events. Click on the images below for more information.



Slow Museum Day

Saturday, July 18th and August 15th from 1-4PM

Free to attend



Movie Night At Hillary House

Saturday, July 25th

6:30pm to 9pm



Victorian Flower Arranging Working

Saturday August 22nd

From 2pm to 4pm



Speaker Series

Thursday, September 24th

7:00pm to 8:30pm

SAVE THE DATE



AURORA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

VICTORIAN HARVEST TEA

September 12, 2026

TICKETS:
\$37.50
PER PERSON

TWO SEATINGS:
12:00PM
2:30PM

Hillary House National Historic Site
15372 Yonge St.
Aurora, ON L4G 1N8
www.aurorahs.com
905-727-8991

Victorian Harvest Tea

Saturday, Sept. 12th. Two seatings: 12pm or 2:30pm

*no special children's ticket or crafts



DOORS OPEN ONTARIO

September 20, 2026

Doors Open

Sunday September 20th, 10am to 4pm

Free to attend



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25 BUTTERNUT RIDGE TRAIL, AURORA

NEW EXHIBIT

Opening in August!

This exhibition explores women's history through the lives of those who called Hillary House home, stories often overshadowed by the doctors who shaped the site's public identity. The women's labour, identities, health experiences, and leadership reflect wider patterns in women's history and reveal how roles and expectations changed over time. By centring these stories, visitors gain a deeper understanding of the many ways women shaped the household and community.

CURATOR'S PICK

The AHS recently acquired this Scarlet Fever notice from the Canadian Museum of Health Care in Kingston, ON.

Public Health agencies used signs like this to alert communities to the presence of contagious illnesses and to help limit transmission. These bright, highly visible notices were typically posted on the front doors of affected homes, warning neighbours and visitors that someone inside was ill and that precautions were necessary.

This striking red notice is a powerful reminder of how public health measures were communicated in the past, long before modern reporting systems, vaccines, and digital alerts. It reflects a time when disease control relied heavily on community awareness, personal responsibility, and clear visual warnings.

SUMMER OPEN HOURS



Tuesday to Saturday, 10am to 4pm

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

NOTICE Scarlet Fever IN THIS HOUSE

All persons except the Attending Physician, Health Officer, Nurse, Sanitary Inspector, or, in case of death, the Undertaker, are forbidden from going to or leaving these premises without the permission of the Medical Officer of Health, and no person shall carry off, or cause to be carried off, any material, or article wherein such disease may be conveyed, until after the disease has ceased and the premises, dwelling, clothing and other contents have been rendered free from danger by means of such disinfection and cleaning as the Provincial Board of Health may direct, and the Medical Officer of Health shall prescribe the precautions to be taken.

Any person or persons removing this notice without the permission of the Medical Officer of Health shall be liable to a penalty of not less than \$10.00 nor more than \$100.00, in the discretion of the governing Magistrate's bench, which may also be inflicted, pursuant to the provision of the Public Health Act.

BY ORDER OF

The Local Board of Health

The Aurora Historical Society gratefully acknowledges the support of



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continued from page 1...



An assortment of ceramic and glass items (left) and metal items (right), organized for a head count before getting their accession numbers assigned to them.

Since purchasing Hillary House in 1981, over 300 artifacts have been collected from around the grounds and most have not been thoroughly identified or catalogued. These items range from animal bones to farm tools, medical bottles to makeup cases, likely with many more yet to be discovered. Overall, they're mostly everyday items that the different residents of the house would have used, and sorting through them can help shed more light on their lives.

Archaeological artifacts require careful handling to ensure they remain stable for future research and interpretation. Many of the items uncovered around Hillary House are ceramic pieces, metal fragments, glass bottles, bone, and personal objects that have spent decades in the soil, making them fragile or prone to deterioration. Before anything is catalogued, each object is gently cleaned using dry methods such as soft brushes or cloths to remove loose soil without damaging the surface. Water is avoided unless absolutely necessary, as moisture can cause further breakdown in certain materials.



Tray of archaeological artifacts at Hillary House.

Once cleaned, the artifacts are placed in acid-free trays with foam supports that prevent movement and abrasion. Metal objects are separated from materials that could react with them, and glass/ceramic fragments are cushioned and/or bagged to avoid chipping.

Environmental conditions in the Collections Room such as stable temperature, low humidity, and limited light exposure, helps to slow deterioration and keep the collection safe.



An intact bottle of Dr. S.N. Thomas's Electric Oil (left) and an advertisement with the same bottle (right) from 1870-1890. Image Credit: East Carolina University Digital Collections.

Cataloguing archaeological material is both rewarding and complex. Unlike intact objects with clear functions, many archaeological finds are fragmentary or incomplete, making identification a puzzle. Ceramic sherds may be matched by patterns or manufacturing techniques to determine their age or use. Metal pieces can be corroded beyond recognition, requiring close inspection or research to understand what they once were. Even everyday objects can be difficult to place without context.

That challenge is compounded when items have no clear provenance beyond "found on the grounds." In these cases, clues like patterns, manufacturing marks, or comparisons with known household objects become essential for building an understanding of the daily routines and choices that shaped life across the generations who occupied Hillary House.

Even with these challenges, each artifact adds depth to our understanding of domestic life at the site. The work may be meticulous, but every newly catalogued item helps illuminate how residents lived, worked, and interacted with their environment.

AROUND THE GROUNDS

The grounds at Hillary House received a major boost in June with fresh sod installed across the front lawn, part of a broader landscaping plan to revitalize the property and enhance accessibility and aesthetics.

A huge thank you to volunteers Donna, Mike, and Owen for their help laying the new sod. Their effort gave the grounds a fresh, polished look and made the space feel more welcoming. We're also grateful to Miller Compost and Queensville Sod Farms Ltd for supplying the high-quality materials that made this project possible. Thanks to everyone involved, the property is looking greener, healthier, and ready for the summer season. We're excited to continue these upgrades to keep the site vibrant and inviting.



In early July, a severe storm left tree branches scattered across the Hillary House grounds. We extend our sincere thanks to John and Marjorie Bare and Al Lambert for stepping in to help with the cleanup. Their quick work restored the property's safety and appearance, ensuring the grounds remained welcoming for summer visitors. Their support is deeply appreciated.

SOCIAL MEDIA CORNER

This summer, our social media channels are buzzing with fresh content highlighting Hillary House. Museum Educator Erika has launched behind-the-scenes posts, artifact spotlights, and short history features that showcase daily work across the site. You'll also see focused series on collections highlights, staff introductions, and exhibit previews, all created to share more of our stories with the community. Follow along for regular updates, fun finds, and a closer look at what makes Hillary House such a special place to explore.

First used in the 17th century by Antonie van Leeuwenhoek to study microorganisms, glass slides became vital tools by the late 19th century as germ theory gained acceptance.

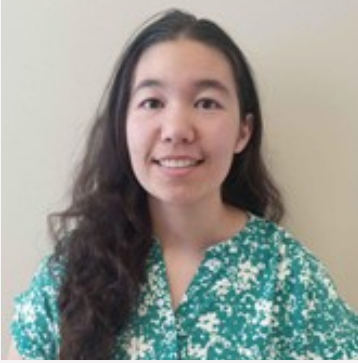


Follow us on socials!

Follow us for more updates through our social media.



WELCOME TO THE AHS



Elizabeth Glauser is this summer's Assistant Museum Curator. She holds a degree in Earth Science with a concentration in Paleontology from Carleton University and is currently working towards a second degree in Applied Museum Studies at Algonquin College. With her current work in the museum world, Elizabeth hopes to find a position in collections or conservation. Outside of work, she enjoys drawing, reading comics, and bird watching.

Erika Rakowsky is the new summer Museum Educator. She holds a Bachelors of Humanities with a minor in History from Carleton University, where she studied intellectual history, religion, philosophy, politics, and more! She loves history and learning about the past and is excited to share what she's learned with everyone who comes to the museum. In September, Erika is starting a Master of Museum Studies degree at the University of Toronto, where she hopes to focus on the role families and children play in museums and historical/heritage institutions.



IN MEMORIAM

Jane Hubert Hillary (March 1953 – July 2026)

Beloved daughter of Dr. Norman and Joan Hillary, Jane passed away peacefully in Ottawa on July 2 at the age of 73. Born in Windsor, she was known for her generosity, creativity, and deep love of nature and gardening. Jane devoted her life to supporting children, elders, and her community, sharing her skills through therapeutic gardening, outdoor programs, and compassionate care. She will be remembered for her kindness, her selfless spirit, and the warmth she brought to every space and person she touched.



CHARITABLE GAMING VOLUNTEERS NEEDED

Our charitable gaming sessions play an important role in supporting AHS programs, and we're looking for volunteers to join us for upcoming shifts. These sessions are a steady source of funding that helps keep our exhibits, education programs, and community events thriving. If you enjoy contributing to the behind-the-scenes work that strengthens our organization, this is a wonderful way to get involved. Your time, presence, and support make a real difference, and we would be grateful to welcome a few new volunteers to the team. Please email the AHS Office if you're interested in helping out for a session this season.



YOUR DONATIONS MAKE A DIFFERENCE



The AHS is a non-profit, volunteer-led organization that has operated 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 preserving one of Aurora's most significant historic landmarks.

Help us continue that legacy! We need your support.

Consider Making a Donation

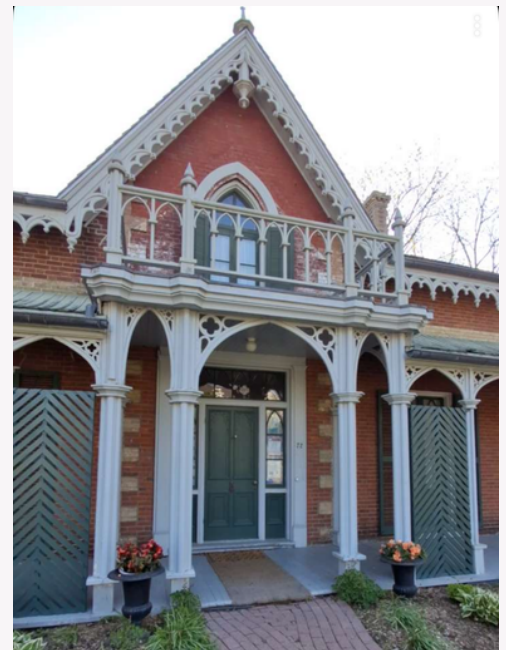
- Visit our website and click the Donate button
- Make an even greater impact by choosing Monthly Giving
- You can direct your gift to the area you wish to support

Purchase or Renew Your Membership for 2026

- Visit our website and click Get Involved → Become a Member
- Or fill out and return the enclosed form

Get Involved and Help Us Grow

- Attend an Event
- Shop in our Gift Shop for that hard-to-buy-for person.



RENTALS

Did you know that Hillary House is available to rent for your next special occasion? Our National Historic Site offers a beautiful, historic setting for wedding and engagement photos, small gatherings, meetings, and private celebrations. The house and grounds provide a charming backdrop in every season, making it an ideal choice for anyone looking for a meaningful and memorable venue.

Renting Hillary House directly supports the preservation of this treasured landmark. To learn more about rental rates, availability, and year-round packages, please contact us, we'd be delighted to help you plan your event.

DISCOVER SOMETHING SPECIAL AT THE HILLARY HOUSE GIFT SHOP

The Gift Shop has been a bevy of activity with boxes of items being donated just in the past month! Be sure to visit regularly as inventory changes frequently.

We are pleased to sell locally supplied Absolutely Pure Honey which you can enjoy in a beautiful tea cup and saucer from the Gift Shop!

Planning on entertaining this summer? Take a minute to browse for some extra glasses, plates, bowls or serving dishes, or maybe just a necklace for yourself.

The beautiful hardbound books are a conversation piece, and reasonably priced at \$10 each. You can enjoy reading the interesting books, or display them as a decorative piece.

Gift Shop Hours

Tuesday to Saturday, 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

After exploring the shop, enjoy a guided tour of Hillary House and learn more about the remarkable families and physicians who once lived here.

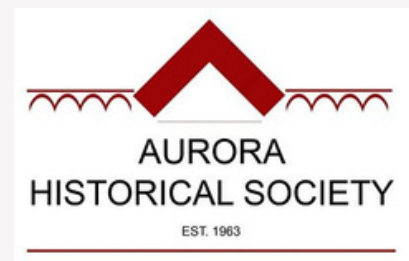
Donations Welcome

The Aurora Historical Society gratefully accepts gently used, good-quality items for the Gift Shop. Please note that we are unable to accept textiles, books, or large pieces. If you have items you'd like to donate, feel free to contact the office.



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 Tuesday to Saturday, 10AM to 4PM