The ATTIC

A STEP FORWARD: THE HISTORY OF AMPUTATION AND PROSTHETICS

By: Erika Rakowsky, Summer Museum Educator

At Hillary House we have two amputation sets in our collection. One is stored away for safe-keeping, and the other is on display in the Consulting Room. Each set contains different kinds of bone saws and knives, that would have been used to remove limbs that suffered from trauma or infection. The kit we have in storage belonged to Dr. Robert William Hillary in the 1880s, while the set currently on display belonged to his brother, Michael, who was also a doctor. Michael used this set when he fought in the American Civil War (1861-1865), a significant moment in the history of amputations and surgical procedures on the battlefield. In fact, three out of every four operations that occurred during the Civil War were amputations, accounting for over 60,000 operations in a period of four years.

At the time, many people believed that surgery was more dangerous and untidy when preformed during war, and there were many comparisons made between surgeons on the battlefield and butchers. In actuality, healthcare and science was advancing at incredible speeds during this period and was often more sophisticated than most people understood. While standards and practices today are much different, surgeons in military hospitals were carrying out procedures with the latest medical information and technology, including the use of anesthesia like chloroform or ether. There were two different methods of amputation that were used during the war, depending on the nature of the wound and how much time was available to remove it. The faster option was called a circular amputation, which left an open wound where the limb was removed. This procedure was risky because the chance of infection was high. On the other hand, the flap method used skin from the amputated limb to close the wound immediately. Although it was a slower procedure, it had a lower rate of postoperative infection, which made it a surgeon's first choice, when choice was available.

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MESSAGE FROM THE CO-CHAIRS

By: Geoffrey Dawe & Alan Lambert

Once again, we have had a very busy summer and early fall.

With events like the Victorian Harvest Tea, Doors Open, and the Discovery Pass exchange program with the Aurora Public Library, Newmarket Public Library, and Vaughan Public Library, our attendance continues to grow.

We had another successful fall clean-up last weekend. A big thank you to the Town of Aurora for their assistance, and of course, the volunteers that came out. The grounds are looking great, thanks to the careful planning and hard work of our landscape crew.

As mentioned in our last edition of the Attic, we were unsuccessful in our application for an Ontario Trillium Foundation (OTF) grant for the critical restoration work on the foundation at Hillary House. Kathleen continues to seek other opportunities and is currently working on an application for the Parks Canada Cost Sharing program.

Board Member Angela organized and kicked off our Intimate Concert Series – reviving a century old tradition of music in the ballroom at Hillary House. Check out our website for more information on upcoming concerts.

Charitable Gaming continues to be a very important contributor to our finances. In fact, as Treasurer, Dan McGeown just reported at the AGM, we are increasing our own-source revenues as a percentage of our total revenue stream. This is an important step in our financial planning.

Our thanks to the Town of Aurora for their continued support of the Aurora Historical Society and Hillary House. And, of course, our sincere thanks to our dedicated staff and volunteers for all their hard work!

- Geoff Dawe and Al Lambert, AHS Co-Chairs



Al Lambert and Geoff Dawe at the Aurora Home Show.

AURORA HISTORICAL SOCIETY 2026-2027

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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?



"Communication Through Place and Time", a small pop-up exhibit by Leena, Programming & Outreach Coordinator for Historic Places Days 2026.



Movie Night at Hillary House! Audience members watching a screening of Silver Screamers and The Rug in July.



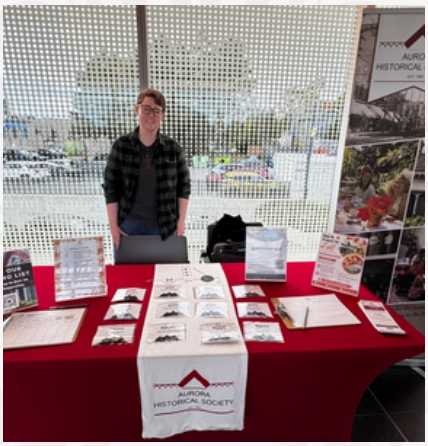
AHS booth welcoming visitors at the Aurora Farmers Market in August.



Guests creating their flower arrangements during August's Tussie-Mussie Workshop, guided by Garden Aurora.



September's Speaker Series lecturer Tarryn Andrews giving her talk on Inherited Knowledge: The Legacy of Greco-Roman Medicine.



Leena, Programming & Outreach Coordinator at the Aurora Volunteer Fair in October.



The very first Hillary House Intimate Concert Series featuring Clarinetist Paul Weston and pianist Joanna Grace.



Volunteers hard at work during the Fall Clean-up in November, preparing the grounds for winter.

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

UPCOMING EVENTS

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



Speaker Series
Thursday, November 19th
7:00pm to 8:30pm



Holiday Wreath-Making Workshop
Sunday, November 22nd
10am to 12pm OR 2pm to 4pm



Victorian Christmas Afternoon Tea
Saturday, December 5th Two seatings: 12pm or 2:30pm
*no special children's ticket or crafts



A Family Christmas
Sunday, December 13th
10:00am to 4:00pm

HILLARY HOUSE
Intimate Concert Series



Saturday, April 10, 2027

Soprano Nicole Whitney Dubinsky and conductor-pianist Suzanne Yeo bring a vibrant and expressive program to the Hillary House Ballroom in April. Nicole, praised for her warm, engaging voice and dazzling coloratura, is recognized as one of Canada's top emerging artists, with recent performances ranging from major symphony collaborations to standout operatic roles. She appears alongside Suzanne, a Toronto-based conductor and collaborative pianist known for her sensitive, nuanced interpretations and deep affinity for opera and Lieder. Together, they offer an intimate recital shaped by vocal brilliance, thoughtful musicianship, and a close connection with the audience.



Saturday, May 1, 2027

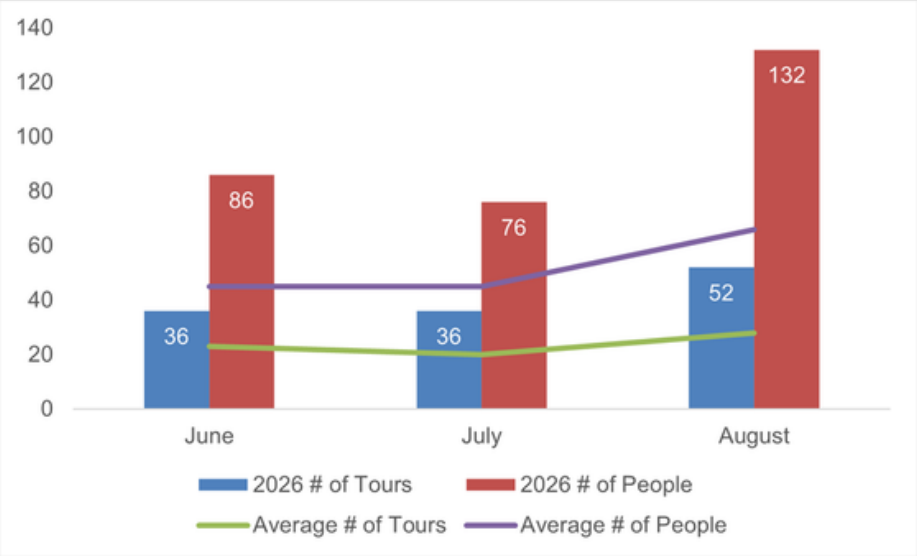
Cellist Dr. Dobrochna Zubek and pianist Dr. Lisa Tahara bring their Zuhara Duo collaboration to the Hillary House Ballroom in May with a program shaped by cultural roots, expressive range, and thoughtful musicianship. First meeting as doctoral students at the University of Toronto, Dobrochna and Lisa have since developed a rich repertoire that blends classic works with music from Poland, Japan, Mexico, Canada, and beyond. Their performances often highlight lesser-known gems and works by women composers, reflecting a shared commitment to diverse musical voices. Together, they create intimate, engaging recitals that pair Dobrochna's warm, resonant cello sound with Lisa's sensitive, nuanced pianism, an ideal match for the close setting of the Ballroom.

The Aurora Historical Society gratefully acknowledges the support of

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BY THE NUMBERS!

Hillary House welcomed a remarkable increase in visitors this summer, making 2026 our busiest tour season in more than a decade! From June through August, 124 guided tours brought 294 visitors through the historic home, far surpassing recent averages. August was especially strong, with both tour numbers and attendance reaching new highs!



KING TOWNSHIP HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The King Township Historical Society (KTHS) is currently exploring plans for a European Battlefields Tour in September 2027.

Those interested in learning more or expressing their interest are encouraged to contact the KTHS at kinghistoricalsociety@gmail.com.

Please note the Aurora Historical Society is not involved in the planning or operation of this tour and is sharing this information on behalf of the King Township Historical Society. Please direct all questions and expressions of interest to the KTHS.



HILLARY HOUSE IN THE NEWS



AURORA THEN: Sawmill helped shape early Aurora development

Water-powered operation established around 1808 supplied lumber for some of area's earliest buildings

AuroraToday.ca / Aug 1



Hillary House hopes to 'reinvent the ball' with intimate concert series

Up-close concert series raises funds for restoration of 164-year-old heritage site

AuroraToday.ca / Oct 11

Historical Society launches new "intimate" concert series, bringing Hillary House back to...

More than 150 years ago, the family that called Hillary House home built a second-floor ballroom to serve as a...

The Auroran / Oct 16



Spotlight: Holiday magic comes to life at Aurora's historic Hillary House

From wreath-making and Victorian afternoon tea to...

auroratoday.ca

BRINGING HISTORY TO LIFE: EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS AT HILLARY HOUSE

At Hillary House National Historic Site, we're bringing history to life through engaging, hands-on educational programs that encourage students to explore the past in exciting and interactive ways!

Our Day in the Life program invites students to step back in time and discover what everyday life was like in a Victorian household and doctor's office. A highlight of the experience is our artifact analysis activity, where students handle real historical artifacts, investigate their uses, and gain a behind-the-scenes look at museum collections work. Through observation, discussion, and hands-on exploration, students develop critical-thinking skills while connecting with history in a meaningful way. We've already welcomed two school groups this year, giving students the opportunity to explore Hillary House and experience history beyond the classroom.

We're also expanding our educational offerings! A new STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) program is in development, connecting evolving technologies in medicine, lighting, heating, and entertainment to what students can see and experience throughout the historic home.

Additionally, we're developing travelling programs for Grade 10 Canadian History and Grade 11 Biology, bringing the fascinating history of Hillary House directly into classrooms.

We look forward to inspiring more young learners through history, science, and discovery!

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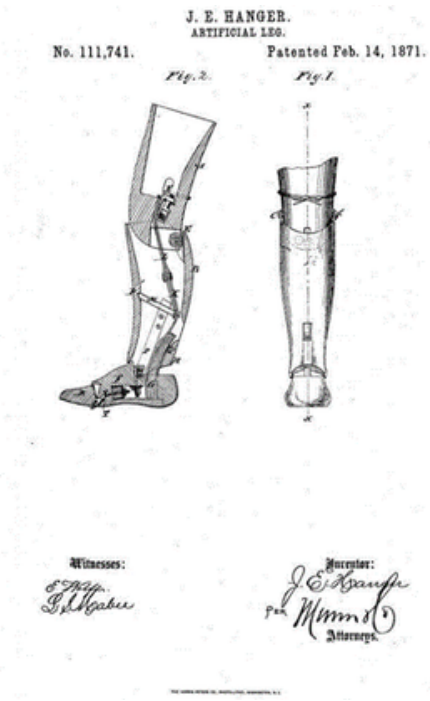


Dr. Michael Hillary's amputation set, used in the American Civil War. On display in the Consulting Room at Hillary House National Historic Site.



Dr. Robert William Hillary's amputation kit. In storage at Hillary House National Historic Site.

The presence of these two sets in our collection raises important questions: who underwent amputation, and what happened after they lost a limb? Amputation was a life-altering experience that often affected a person's ability to work, their daily routines, and their place in society. Men who returned from war as amputees, for example, may have found it difficult to support their families in the ways expected of them. The loss of employment could lead to financial hardship, social isolation, and exclusion from community life. For those with sufficient financial means, however, a prosthetic limb may have offered greater mobility, independence, and opportunities to continue working.



J. E. HANGER.
ARTIFICIAL LEG.
No. 111,741. Patented Feb. 14, 1871.
Witnesses:
Inventor:
Attorneys.

Hanger's first patent for his prosthetic leg, 1871. Courtesy of the National Museum of Civil War Medicine, Maryland.

Prosthetic limbs have existed for millennia, with the oldest known examples dating to ancient Egypt, where archaeologists discovered two prosthetic toes. Historical records show that soldiers from ancient Rome through the Middle Ages and beyond used artificial limbs made of wood and metal. Some later designs were remarkably sophisticated, incorporating cranks and gears that allowed movement in the arms, fingers, and toes.

Significant advancements in prosthetic technology came during and after the American Civil War. The large number of war-related amputations spurred innovation, leading to a dramatic increase in prosthetic patents. One notable example is the Hanger limb, developed in 1861 by J. E. Hanger, who lost a leg at age 18 during the war. His design incorporated a cushioned heel and improved ankle movement, making it more comfortable and practical for everyday use.

While amputations and prosthetic limbs look very different today thanks to advances in medicine and technology, the work of individuals like Dr. Michael Hillary and J. E. Hanger helped lay the foundation for both advances in amputation surgery and the prosthetic devices that continue to improve mobility and quality of life for people living with limb loss.

AROUND THE GROUNDS

As the cold weather approaches, volunteers of all ages came together for our annual Fall Clean-Up at Hillary House. Armed with rakes, gloves, and plenty of enthusiasm, volunteers worked together to clear leaves, collect fallen branches, and tidy the grounds in preparation for the colder months ahead.

Their efforts help protect the historic property through the winter season while ensuring the grounds remain welcoming and well cared for. We extend our sincere thanks to everyone who contributed their time and energy to this important task. Community support like this plays a vital role in preserving Hillary House for future generations.



CURATOR'S PICK



L-R: Nora, Norman, and Holly Hillary at the edge of a frozen body of water, ca. 1920s. Norman is seen wearing a SAC sweater.

This photograph shows Norman Lancaster Hillary wearing a St. Andrew's College sweater, a symbol of the Hillary family's connection to the school that spanned nearly half a century and bridged its transition from Toronto to Aurora.

Norman, the youngest son of Dr. Robert Michael Hillary, attended St. Andrew's after its move to Aurora in 1926 and graduated with the Class of 1931, among the early generations of students to study at the college's new campus. The family's association with St. Andrew's continued into subsequent generations, with Norman's son-in-law, Michael Heath-Eves, graduating with the Class of 1960 and his only son, William Hillary, following with the Class of 1967.

As St. Andrew's College celebrates the 100th anniversary of its move to Aurora in 2026, this photograph offers a personal glimpse into the enduring ties between one local family and one of Aurora's most longstanding institutions.

Visit Hillary House in 2027 to see a small display on the Hillary family's connection to SAC.

Follow us on socials!

Follow us for more updates through our social media.



THANK YOU SUMMER STAFF

We would like to thank Elizabeth and Erika for their outstanding work this summer. Elizabeth made significant progress cataloguing the archaeological collection, helping to improve access to and understanding of these important artifacts. Erika led most tours, welcomed visitors to Hillary House, and created engaging social media content that helped share local history with a wider audience.

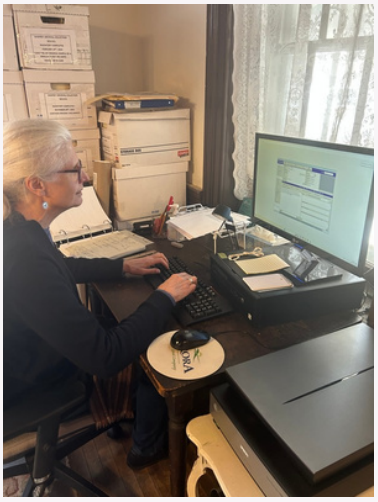
Their dedication and hard work contributed greatly to a successful season and we wish them the best with their future endevours!

IN MEMORIAM

Vivienne Russell Strong (December 24, 2025) and **Lawrence Franklin Strong** (May 18, 2026)

We were saddened to learn of the passing of longtime members Vivienne Russell Strong and Lawrence Franklin Strong. Since joining the Aurora Historical Society in 2016, they were generous supporters whose memberships and donations helped further our mission. We remember them with gratitude and extend our sincere condolences to their family and friends.

VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT



Left: Kate inputting data in the collections database as part of the archives digitization project.



Right: Kate making tea at the Mother's Day Tea fundraising event.

We would like to extend a heartfelt thank you to Kate for her outstanding dedication and support throughout the year. Whether assisting with collections work, helping at events, or lending a hand in the gardens, Kate has become an invaluable member of our volunteer team. Her partner, Terry, has also been a tremendous supporter, generously contributing his time and expertise to the care and maintenance of the Hillary House gardens.

Kate has contributed more than 115 volunteer hours so far this year, generously sharing her time, skills, and enthusiasm in support of the Aurora Historical Society. Her commitment continues through the busy holiday season, with additional volunteer shifts already scheduled through the end of the year.

We are deeply grateful for the dedication, generosity, and hard work that Kate and Terry bring to Hillary House. Their efforts help keep our collections, programs, events, and gardens thriving, and make a lasting difference to the preservation of this special historic place.

Thank you both for all that you do!



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 2027

- 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.



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.

DISCOVER SOMETHING SPECIAL AT THE HILLARY HOUSE GIFT SHOP

The holiday season is coming, and the Gift Shop at Hillary House has unique items for that hard-to-buy person on your list, or maybe just a treat for yourself!

You can also purchase an experience at Hillary House for the upcoming Intimate Concert Series on Friday, April 10th 2027 and May 1st 2027. Tickets can be purchased in the Gift Shop, over the phone, or online.

On our new 'Aurora' table, amongst the different books about Aurora, you will now find eight new postcards showcasing Aurora's history and of course, Hillary House!

Gift Shop Hours

Monday to Friday, 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!

AURORA HISTORICAL SOCIETY
EST. 1963

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community@aurorahs.com
www.aurorahs.com
Open Monday to Friday, 10AM to 4PM