

## **Documentation: Why, What, How**

This is a brief description of the documentation process required and used in the process of evaluating demolition permits in the Village of Aurora, primarily by the Community Preservation Panel and the Planning Board. In addition, the Village Board and the Zoning Board of Appeals may request such information as it becomes useful in their work. Residents may also request documentation, especially archival, if they are interested in a more detailed history of their home.

### *Why*

Communities that have historic districts aim to conserve resources for future owners if at all possible, and at least in the form of accurate and complete records if not. Therefore, it is common practice for historic districts to require documentation for demolition, since it is an irreversible change. Sometimes it is also required for other kinds of work that will significantly, though not irreversibly, change a structure.

First and foremost, documentation is important as a record of “what was here.” But “what was here” is only a starting point. Scholars, students and interested citizens all study the history and development of communities, and need accurate records of what has been lost as well as what has remained. Tanya Warren’s “Uncovering the Freedom Trail in Cayuga County” is a good example of documentation that tells a story: in this case, the story of the African-American experience in our county. Many stories remain to be discovered: for example, in Aurora, the impact of the Erie Canal on immigration. Future generations should not be denied access to the resources, including the human as well as natural setting, to discover these stories for themselves.

It is important to understand that houses and ancillary structures do not stand in isolation: their relationship to one another is important. Furthermore, simply putting a date on a house is not enough. Most houses here in Aurora have changed and even been moved and re-combined. Patient research uncovers a rich tapestry of the past interesting to residents and visitors alike.

### *What*

The aim of documentation is to provide the information that illuminates both the history and context of a building. These guidelines, like most of the practices and recommendations in this paper, is drawn from those provided by the Secretary of the Interior,<sup>1</sup> though simplified to reflect the smaller scale and more limited resources of Aurora.

1) *Archival evidence.* Fortunately, several key documents provide a much fuller record of Village buildings than many communities have. These include, but are not limited to, Samuel D. Mandell’s “Houses of Aurora,” Temple Rice Hollcroft’s “Aurora, Village of Constant Dawn,” Baldwin Avery’s “Aurora as I Knew It,” and unpublished oral histories collected by

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<sup>1</sup> and found in Local Law #1 of 2008, Section 707.A.2ff

Hollcroft and others. These can be correlated with the maps of 1795, 1805, 1853, 1859, 1875 and 1904. Other important pictorial resources include David Thomas' survey of "downtown" Aurora in the 1820's, "Aurora from the North Poplars" of 1848, and the "Morgan postcards" of 1900-1910. The resources named are in many cases sufficient as a general overview of a property's history; census and deed work are required only for scholarship or individual interest.

- 2) *Physical evidence.* Because so many of the houses and buildings in Aurora have been moved, physical evidence plays an important role in elucidating the history. The standard of physical evidence has long been dimensional drawings with accompanying text on materials, construction and helpful details. The ease of high-quality digital photography makes it a practical option in lieu of drawings for both inside and outside. These should be coupled with accurate measurements. Firsthand examination is needed on elements such as kinds of wood used in construction, methods of construction, saw marks, foundation, masonry and, to a lesser extent because of frequent re-use, windows, doors and hardware. Removal of architectural elements, like demolition, also requires a Certificate of Appropriateness, because even such things as trim and shutters contribute to an accurate history. Physical documentation is not as time-consuming as this might sound; as with all permits, planning ahead allows for an efficient process for both applicant and Boards, and the Historian and Zoning Officer can make their studies on the same visit. (Because of the need for physical documentation, the applicant's own photographs do not replace the Historian's visit.)
- 3) *Archaeological evidence.* Aurora has been a site of human occupation for a very long time, with evidence from as early at 10,000 years before present. The later Cayuga village has left both occasional sites of interest and living descendants. We encourage residents to be aware of the possibility of finding evidences of human habitation during demolition and/or building. In such cases, especially if human remains are found, open cooperation avoids potentially adversarial situations.

#### *How*

When the Village Clerk receives an application for a Demolition Permit, she will inform the Zoning Officer and the Historian that an application has been received. These officials will work with the applicant to find a mutually convenient time for inspection and documentation.

Physical documentation sometimes requires specialized experience. Fortunately, Aurora and its surroundings include people who have these skills and are willing to offer them. The Historian will let the applicant know if such assistance is needed and who provides it. The aim is to accomplish all necessary documentation on a single visit.

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