

Wellesley's history a growing point of interest

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Access to and interest in Wellesley Township's history grew in 2015 through additions to the Wellesley Township Heritage and Historical Society's collection and website, according to a new report compiled by the organization.

Presented to council on Tuesday evening by curator Nancy Maitland, it shows a broadened group of historical material on display in the Wellesley Historical Room.

Even more encouraging is the traffic they're seeing on their website, www.wellesleyhistory.org.

They averaged 377 visits to their website per month this year and 1,194 page views per month last year.

"People are really making use of our website, which is very gratifying," Maitland said.

The historical room is open the last Saturday of every month except for December and also on Family Day.

"On the Saturdays that we're open, that's usually the time that people want to donate something when they come. However, we had a wonderful donation from an Ottmann family descendant last year. He lives in Vernon, B.C. and he donated high-resolution copies of photographs taken in Wellesley from about 1902-1906. These are a really wonderful addition to our collection," Maitland said.

Residents are able to delve deeper into their family history through the digitalization of the Wellesley Maple Leaf newspaper from 1900-1908. This included some 411 issues and 1,644 searchable pages, all available online now. Maitland also added more than 300 obituaries and death notices from those issues to the website, allowing people to gather more information about their genealogy.

"The first year that I was working in the historical room we had three or four requests from outside the village from people wanting to know more about their family history or people wanting information about their houses. So this past year I've now responded to 35 research requests for information. And these come from as far away as Colorado, and some of the New England states," Maitland said.

She also researched and created a display of Charles Ottmann Jr.'s photos, researched and created a display about prominent Hawkesville resident Michael Peter Empey, and posted minutes of WTHHS meetings online.

The historical society even has its own Instagram account – wellesleyhistory – with 50 followers.

“The parts of my job are to acquire, preserve, and make available documents and artifacts of historical interest. In my business the making materials available is always the most fun and interesting,” Maitland said.

In 2015 she acquired 16 items or groups of items to add to the historical society’s collection. They include the previously noted Charles Ottmann Jr. photos, four coins from one of Albert Berscht’s general stores, four photos used for David Schildroth’s Wellesley Township paintings, two calendars from local businesses from 1936 and 1951, a voters’ list from the late ’40s, a phone directory from 1951, a Persian lamb cape and wedding portrait from the Koehler family, a research paper on funeral businesses and practices dating the mid-1800s to mid-1900s, and an addition to their existing collection of Wellesley Women’s Institute record books.

She also catalogued all 2015 acquisitions and continued to serve on the Waterloo Historical Society as Wellesley’s representative.

Looking ahead, she’d like to add marriage information from the Wellesley Maple Leaf to the website, make a Municipal Heritage Register on the township’s historically significant non-designated buildings, update the WTHHS constitution, hold at least one public meeting, and find more space for the historical room collection.

“We’re really running out of space in the historical room, so it’s in my mind that I need to start seeing if there’s somewhere that we can store some of the material,” Maitland said.

She’s currently paid for 15 hours of work per month, much less than she actually puts into the project. But she says it’s a labour of love, so she doesn’t mind.

Beth Lealess, treasurer of the historical society, asked council to extend Maitland’s contract until December of this year, and add a cost of living increase. Councillors quickly approved the request.

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