
Exploring our past through Doors Open Waterloo Region

BY VALERIE HILL, RECORD STAFF

WATERLOO REGION — From button making to quantum physics, Waterloo Region has been a thriving industrial area for more than a century. And on Sept. 18, curious visitors will get a glimpse into its inner workings at the 8th annual Doors Open event.

The free, self-directed heritage and architectural tour will feature 40 sites around the region under the theme Made in Waterloo Region, organizer Karl Kessler said.

"There's a lot of industrial history, things that got their start in the region," he said.

The list includes the Button Factory in Waterloo, Galt's 1918 Armory, century old churches, an Islamic centre, museums, City Halls, arts centres, a farmers' market, a St. Jacobs estate and a few industrial sites presently under conversion into office and living spaces. Kessler said there are two sites that truly highlight what is possible when "re-purposing old buildings," such as the Tannery District at Victoria and Charles streets.

"I think there will be a lot of people interested in seeing it," he said, noting the Tannery District is one of the sites where tour guides will be on hand to point out highlights and history.

The second fascinating site is the 1847 American Standard plant in Cambridge, in the process of being converted into condos and work spaces. It's a huge site, he said, noting the redevelopment will be several years before completion, but there are a few model units open for viewing.

"It's something that used to be industrial 100 years ago and it's being turned into livable space," he said.

Kessler is also happy the stately old Mutual Life Assurance building across from Grand River Hospital, will be included on the tour. "This is a flagship building," he said of the Renaissance-style building often used as a backdrop for wedding photos.

One of the more unusual buildings on the tour will be the Freemason Temple in Waterloo, a building with just four decades of history, but an active fraternity whose history dates back to the 16th century — 150 years in Waterloo Region.

"Everyone thinks we're secretive," said member Dave Walden. "We're the oldest fraternity in the world." The "old boys club" from bygone days no longer exists and this new and more modern group is eager to welcome the public through its doors.

"This day and age, you have to put yourself out there," he said. With temples in Cambridge and Waterloo and a combined membership of 1,500 the Freemasons are eager to attract new members to help with their charitable work and to support each other through friendship. Members will be in "full regalia" eager to explain the rich symbolism that has long been the cornerstone of the organization.

From ancient history to modern technology, Doors Open will also feature the University of Waterloo's Institute for Quantum Computing and the glimmering new architecture of the Hespeler Library, Waterloo Region Museum and Cambridge City Hall. As well, the day will include children's activities, concerts, lectures and displays.

Doors Open events have become an international celebration of cultural and architectural history since originating in France in 1984. In Canada, Toronto hosted the country's first Canadian Doors Open event in 2000, followed three years later by Waterloo Region.

Maps and information are available in libraries and museums around the region and Grand River Transit will be offering a \$5 family pass for the day.

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Doors Open Waterloo Region

Sept. 18, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

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