

# History on Your Doorstep

Imagine a three-tiered wedding cake. Now imagine a three-tiered wedding cake with a candle at each corner. Now stand back and imagine a three-tiered wedding cake with a candle at each corner, sixty feet square. And now, sixty feet square by a hundred feet high.

The product of too much champagne at a wedding reception, you say? No, this fairytale structure actually exists. It's tucked away right here on Leslie Street in Sharon, East Gwillimbury, and it's called "Sharon Temple." It is now a historic site and museum, a place you can visit, where special exhibits, concerts and great programs take place.

When Sharon Temple was finished in 1832, it was one of the wonders of the province, right up there with Niagara Falls, because it was so unusual and so special. In 1832, times were tough. Most people in what we now call York Region were living in one-room log houses and struggling to create farms and villages in the midst of primeval forest. Yonge Street was one of the best roads in the colony, but even it was little more than a wide trail, leading from York (soon to be renamed "Toronto") and ending at Holland Landing.

There, in the heart of this pioneer landscape, stood a building which astonished travellers then and which has the power to astonish us again today. Imagine the scene in 1832: farm fields gradually taking the place of forest; farmers struggling to build a shelter and raise enough food to survive the next winter. Then a tall white building emerges as if in a dream. In contrast with the log houses that most people knew only too well, here was a sophisticated three-storey tower, bigger and taller than any other building outside of York, complete with delicate mouldings around its doors and



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graced with an interior that reminded many of the architecture of the Italian Renaissance.

And all that glass! Today we take big windows for granted, but in 1832, glass windows were so expensive and so rare that one traveller called this "a temple of glass." At that time, glass for window panes was cut into small rectangles from large disks fashioned by hand and mouth by skilled glass blowers in England. There was very little glass produced anywhere in North America. Window panes for the Sharon Temple would have been packed in barrels, shipped across the Atlantic Ocean, transferred to smaller vessels to make their way to York,

and then packed into carts for the bumpy ride up Yonge Street. To minimize breakage, fragile goods were often packed in bran—hence the term, "bran new." Molasses was used sometimes too, in order to fill the barrels and prevent their precious cargo from rattling around and breaking.

Sharon Temple Museum gives us a glimpse of another side of life in early Canada, far from the pioneer stereotypes that haunt our history books. Its architecture alone marks it as something special—a National Historic Site here in our own back yard.



**Sharon Temple  
now & then.**





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