

Downsview Stories

DOWNSVIEW UNITED CHURCH

“Let all our churches be built plain and decent, but not more expensive than is absolutely unavoidable – otherwise the necessity of raising money will make rich men necessary to us.”

—The Doctrines and Discipline of the Wesleyan Methodist Church in British North America (1834)

“All agreed that enough money would be put up to warrant ignoring the closing admonition of the 1834 Discipline, which enjoined plain places of worship. They were resolved to have a beautiful building, not one of the angular monstrosities traditional in colonial Methodism.”

—J.P. Bull, From Oxford to Ontario: a history of the Downsview community (Toronto, 1941)

Downsview was growing quickly in the years before Confederation, and local churches struggled to keep up with a growing number of worshippers.

The York Church, as it was then called, first met in 1844 at the home of prominent area resident John Perkins Bull. By 1850, the congregation had its own church on Keele St., north of what is today Wilson Ave. But by the mid-1860s it was clear an upgrade would soon be needed.

A congregant donated a half acre of land across the road from the existing church, and a group of church leaders set out to build their “beautiful building”; an architecturally distinctive Gothic Revival red brick church that would meet their current needs and those of future generations. One hundred and fifty years later, it is still doing that.

The cornerstone of the church was laid in June 1870, and construction began. There was great attention paid to every detail. Windows were fitted with stained and frosted glass, woodwork was carefully stained and varnished. Although building the church was a true community effort, construction costs still came to about \$6500, roughly \$215,000 in today’s dollars. But between money raised in the community and the sale of the old building, the church was debt free from the day it opened.

The centrepiece was its “soaring steeple”, made from a single twelve inch square log of white pine cut by a local farmer. It would form the core of the steeple that would stretch 112 feet from ground to top.

Of course, the spire needed a bell, and when the local pastor heard of one that might be available in nearby Markham, he dispatched two of the younger officials of the church to try to make a deal with the bell’s owner.

The first service of the York Methodist Church was held on a cold January day in 1871. According to an article in the Christian Guardian, “very few church edifices.... win so ready a verdict from architecture critics... for proportion, adaptation, beauty, and elegance.”

The church was renamed the Downsview Methodist Church in the 1880s and became the Downsview United Church after the Methodists and other Presbyterian churches amalgamated in 1925. Additions to the building were added in the 1930s and 1950s, but the original core of the church remains. It was designated under the Ontario Heritage Act in 2003. The church is still in operation today offering regular masses and community services to the community.



Downsview Church on Keele Street, 1954

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