

WHS YEAR IN REVIEW 2020

by John Glass

John Glass has been president of Waterloo Historical Society since November 2019. He has also served as WHS secretary and website co-ordinator. In addition to other duties, John has represented WHS on the Waterloo Regional Heritage Foundation for many years.

2020 was a year unlike any other in the history of Waterloo Historical Society. Corona Virus Disease 2019, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV2, was dubbed “COVID-19” by the World Health Organization on February 11, 2020. While it took another month for the COVID-19 pandemic to have an effect on most of our lives in Waterloo Region, its impact has been long-lasting. As I finish this update in spring 2021, it's been well over a year since I had my last normal day at the office. On the afternoon of Monday March 16, 2020, I packed up things I thought I would need to continue working from home for the “next two weeks.” Little did I know that even beyond March 16, 2021, I'd still be wondering when, or even *if*, I'd be returning to my regular career and routine.

WHS was established in 1912. While 2020 may have been trying for many people, I'm reminded that there were likely worse times during our society's existence. One needs only to review the Rolls of Honor in our earliest annual volumes to see the impact that the First World War had on the lives of those in Waterloo County.¹ The Spanish Influenza which appeared locally in the fall of 1918 added to the hardships encountered during those years. The Great Depression and the Second World War also seriously impacted Waterloo County's residents. Throughout the years, there have been several stories in our annual volumes detailing the hardships of Waterloo County residents.²

I initially thought 2020 might be the year that WHS was remembered for not doing anything but simply surviving as an organization. In retrospect and with all things considered, I think WHS has lived up to its mandate to preserve and promote our region's unique heritage. Undoubtedly, future annual volumes will include stories about the impacts that COVID-19 had on our community's physical, mental and financial states of health along with the business and economic woes caused by the pandemic. When authors who write these articles look at how COVID-19 impacted WHS, we hope that they will conclude that the society had a productive year.

Public Meetings

Our February 2020 newsletter stated the topics for our March 31 and May

26 public meetings.³ Then on Saturday March 14, I distributed the following motion by e-mail to the board and council members.

WHS currently has a public meeting scheduled for March 31, 2020. In light of the risks inherent with COVID-19 [sic] and the direction given by health officials, WHS should cancel this meeting. Motion by: Marion Roes, seconded by Lesley Webb.

The motion was passed by WHS directors within 24 hours. Cancelling that meeting was just the first WHS event of 2020 to be scratched. The September and November public meetings as well as the July 11 History Under the Trees meetings were also terminated. The board was following government health guidelines and restrictions which mandated these cancellations. The ebb and flow of the COVID-19 infection rates had the board consider alternatives such as outdoor meetings and virtual audio-visual meetings but these alternatives were not feasible at the time. It was difficult to predict the changing rules around public gatherings more than a couple of weeks in advance.

The WHS board has always believed that public meetings and events are vital components of our community outreach as well as being a major benefit to members. These activities offer the opportunities to gain knowledge about our region's history in an interactive and social environment. WHS plans on continuing with public meetings once it is allowed to do so.⁴ One thing we have learned through the pandemic is that we may want to look at adding a remote audio-video component to our public meetings so they can be viewed by a wider audience.⁵ Many members have become proficient with these platforms which are now a regular part of most people's lives whether for simply sharing time with friends, attending events or taking part in work-oriented meetings.

Board Meetings

The board and council met face-to-face for the first time in 2020 on February 4 in the Schmalz Room at Kitchener city hall. Whilst there was some discussion about COVID-19 at that time, the board and council members had no reason to suspect that the regular WHS schedule would be so heavily disrupted. Our next get-together was scheduled for April 7, 2020. In early March, we began to look for a larger meeting room that would afford more room for attendees to space themselves out. On March 14, notice was sent that the next meeting would be moved from April 7 to April 8 and the venue would be the Victoria Park pavilion. By March 17, it was realized that even the rescheduled meeting could not be held and a cancellation notice was sent to the board and council members.

In lieu of the cancelled April board meeting, I sent another e-mail to board and council members on April 6. The intent was to touch base and keep abreast

of what the board was doing, determine the criteria we would use to cancel or hold meetings and outline plans for upcoming events.⁶ I was happy to report that our finances were strong and that annual volume patron donations were not impacted by the pandemic. We were still optimistic that the annual volume would be printed and distributed as usual in May and that we should start planning for the History Under the Trees meeting scheduled for Saturday July 11. I also communicated that a list of events in which WHS would participate was being drafted and the board and council members were solicited for ideas regarding potential new events. We were hopeful that we would be able to meet in person for a board and council meeting in June.

The June 6 board meeting was cancelled with much less fanfare than the April meeting. The decision was made in light of local and provincial public health rules which prohibited gatherings. As little was happening within the society, there really was no urgent need to meet.

On Tuesday September 29, 2020, WHS held its first video board and council meeting. This was the first time since February 4 that we had had a full contingent of board and council members able to see each other and interact in real time with audio and video. All the work conducted during the previous nine months had been conducted mainly through e-mail discussion and voting.

At this virtual meeting a number of very important motions were approved:

- after a review of the WHS financial status, a motion was passed to extend 2020 memberships for all active members until September 30, 2021;
- a motion was passed to defer the annual general meeting from November 2020 until a time when it would be appropriate (and allowed) to hold such a public meeting;
- the current board would continue to sit.

On October 22, current WHS members received a form for the free membership renewal as well as a donation form. The board was most pleased to see that during COVID, many people continued to make general and annual volume patron donations.

Communications

In the absence of meetings and newsletters (after February 2020), I sent several e-mail updates to the membership. The first communication was on June 7 and the main items were:

- the July History Under the Trees meeting was officially cancelled but we were hopeful that public meetings could continue before the end of 2020 — they did not;
- the board and council were still in contact, mainly via e-mail but were looking at the possibility of running a video board meeting in September;
- an update on the annual volume publication was presented and distribution strategies were considered;
- we had a winner for the Student Local History award;
- the membership was urged to watch the WHS Facebook group <https://www.facebook.com/waterloohs/> and website <http://www.whs.ca/> for further updates.

The next update was sent on July 22 with the subject line: “WHS 2019 Annual Volumes Available for Pickup” and included details on the where, how and when.

As noted, in the October 22 update a notice of free 2021 memberships for existing WHS members along with donation pledge forms was sent. It also advertised the WHS book table sale on November 7 at the society’s storage unit.

The final membership update was sent on December 22 and it included:

- an update on the progress of the 2020 annual volume, number 108 (the one that’s in your hand right now) with a reminder to start thinking about contributing articles for 2021’s volume number 109;
- details of the successful book sale on November 7;
- information on the status of Kitchener Public Library’s Grace Schmidt Room for on-site researching during COVID. Researchers were required to make reservations to use the facilities;
- that Dr Kenneth McLaughlin was offering his book, *Preserving Our Past: The Ormston Heritage House: A Window into Waterloo Township’s History*, to WHS members at a reduced price;
- a reminder to members that membership fees for the 2021 WHS membership year had been suspended and that they could still make general or annual volume patron donations before year-end to receive a 2020 tax receipt.

Projects

The online indexing project continues but the pace, as might be expected, has been slower during 2020. Our goal is still to provide a completely consolidated index of the annual volumes which will be hosted on the WHS website. Much of the work is being carried out by a professional indexer with whom we have engaged since the beginning of the project. Work has slowed due to our inability to meet in person with the indexer and to meet as a committee. We plan to continue moving ahead with this project in 2021.

Significant work has been done at the storage site to organize the holdings — especially the tens of thousands of back issues of area newspapers. A team of people met several times to place all issues for each publication in chronological order and create an index. Such work is vital in facilitating the archivist's retrieval of specific issues when requested.

The plaque committee has several projects on the go that will restart after COVID. Since its founding in 1912, WHS has erected plaques to commemorate our county / region's heritage and history. On the afternoon of Wednesday December 26, 1928 WHS president D.N. Panabaker dedicated the society's third plaque commemorating the site of Waterloo County's oldest continuously running business, a grist mill built by John Erb in 1807.⁷ This plaque was previously lost during the mill's many renovations and ownership changes. WHS board member Ray Ruddy was instrumental in locating the wayward plaque in 2014. In 2020, Ray worked with Astron Specialty Metals Ltd who donated materials and labor to frame the plaque and make it ready for the re-dedication.

The committee is still working on a plaque to commemorate Preston's Idylwild Park and it is destined to be installed along the trail close to the Highway 401 bridge across the Speed River. The work has been slowed by highway and path construction in the proposed installation area. A post-COVID site visit is planned to discuss installation options.

Education & Outreach

Planning for WHS events and event participation for the calendar year of 2020 were just beginning as the pandemic struck. Public meeting dates had been targeted and speakers were being arranged. Decisions were being made regarding our engagement in events such as Doors Open, Waterloo Region; potential WHS plaque unveilings; book table placements and participation in events held with valued partners such as Kitchener Public Library and Waterloo Region Heritage Foundation.

The one outing that WHS was able to attend prior to the pandemic was the Wilmot Township Heritage Day, sponsored by Heritage Wilmot. The 2020 edition of this popular event was held on Saturday, February 22, at the New Dundee Community Centre. The topic was “Celebrating Places of Worship.” WHS members were on hand with a display featuring a number of Wilmot’s historic churches and meeting places. The afternoon highlight was a video presentation by WHS member and New Dundee historian Al Junker which was based on his extensive knowledge of the township’s history. As always, the New Dundee Women’s Institute provided a tasty lunch and refreshments for visitors. The WHS book table also was on-site and sold a number of WHS publications and other local history books.

On April 27, we received an inquiry from Dr Adam Crerar at Wilfrid Laurier University. Adam, an associate professor in WLU’s department of history, asked if WHS was still sponsoring an award for student papers on local history. He, along with Dr Darren Mulloy, chair of the department, nominated Alaina Eelkema, a fourth-year student. Her paper, *Women War Workers in Waterloo County During the Second World War: Continuity through Conceptualizations and Lived Experiences* was deemed worthy of the \$500 award and is published in this edition of the annual volume.

The publication and distribution of the annual volume was delayed in 2020. There were two main reasons for this:

- our printer, Cober Solutions, was exceptionally busy printing COVID-19 educational and instructional materials for businesses;⁸ and
- with the absence of public meetings, there was no easy, efficient and inexpensive way to deliver the volumes to our members. Thus, there was no urgency in the delivery timeline.⁹

The volumes were printed and delivered in late June — almost two months later than normal. During this time, WHS developed a plan to get these new 2019 volumes to its members quickly and at a low cost — an outdoor, drive-through pick-up at Ken Seiling Waterloo Region Museum (KSWRM). WHS thanks Keri Solomon (later named the full-time manager of KSWRM) for facilitating the plan. On two Saturday afternoons, July 25 and August 1, WHS board and council volunteers distributed the 2019 annual volumes to members as they drove through the lower parking lot at KSWRM. A few stopping stations were set up that allowed for responsible, low contact, socially distanced distribution. Masking was required by delivery personnel and recipients; even so, members remained in their cars while the book was delivered through open windows or into open

trunks. Over 50 per cent of the members' volumes were picked up in person including many which would then be delivered to a member friend. Others were later delivered throughout Waterloo Region by WHS volunteers. Out-of-the-area members had their copies mailed.



Sherwood Hagey

Only on a very few occasions in 2020 were WHS members able to “meet.” On two midsummer Saturday afternoons, society directors distributed the 2019 annual volume to members by way of a drive-by. In the lower parking lot of Ken Seiling Waterloo Region Museum, a pickup route and tables were set up. Here, Jeff Shank, rych mills and Lesley Webb hand out volumes. Ray Ruddy, Sherwood Hagey and John Glass also volunteered and shared the sunshine.

On November 7, WHS held a book sale for its members at the society’s storage facility on Guelph Street, Kitchener.¹⁰ Once again, members and volunteers were required to follow COVID-19 protocols including masking, distancing and sanitizing. Book buyers were invited to choose a 30-minute time slot (with a maximum two people at a time) to review the entire WHS book table collection of low-priced history books. The selection covered all aspects of our area’s history plus many non-local books including national and international histories, biographies, art monographs and fiction plus books on current affairs. Members received an additional 10% discount during this special event. Thirteen WHS-ers took advantage of this event which brought in gross revenues of \$770.55. Due to the success of this event, another sale may be held in 2021.

Members & Partners

As of December 31, 2020 WHS had 201 members for the upcoming year. I believe that we will be able to maintain or surpass the previous year’s tally of

205 members. Our members' generosity continued this year. Even though the \$30 membership fees were waived for 2021, we still received slightly over \$300 in general donations from members who wanted to support WHS. Our annual volume patrons for this issue (Volume 108) numbered 62, the same number as for Volume 107. We are glad to see that COVID-19 has not impacted the ability of our patrons to support this project.

In 2020, WHS continued to receive operating grants as well. Over \$1,500 was received from the provincial government's Ontario Heritage Organization Development Grant program. A \$5,000 grant from Waterloo Regional Heritage Foundation (WRHF) helped support the publication of the annual volume. This check is presented once the volume has been printed and a copy made available to the WRHF archives.

There were few activities and / or opportunities to work with our partners in the past year but the collaboration that we have formed with Kitchener Public Library remains strong and we expect it to continue to thrive once activities resume in the post-COVID world. We expect the same renewed relationship from the other local history and heritage organizations that we interact with on a regular basis.

Summation

COVID-19 has given us the opportunity to re-examine how WHS operates. We now know that it's possible to conduct board meetings remotely using teleconferencing platforms such as Zoom or Google Meetings. We know that our board members and councillors, as well as the majority of our members, have become proficient with such tools. While we believe that we will eventually move back to operating face-to-face for board and public meetings, the use of video conferencing may be considered to augment the experience, allowing those who would normally have difficulty in attending to attend such events virtually. These new tools may also allow us to more easily accommodate speakers who reside outside of the area, allowing them to present from the comfort of their own home or office. Such opportunities may even permit our membership to grow to include members from well outside Waterloo Region.

We've also learned that WHS plays an important part in many members' recreational and social lives. People constantly ask "When will meetings start again? When will we be hosting other events?" WHS certainly hopes that the answer is "soon." WHS is fortunate that its members are committed to keeping the society viable and that they have also committed to providing financial support to ensure that we continue to thrive.

Notes

- 1 The earliest WHS Annual Volumes can be viewed online at <https://www.whs.ca/volume-search/>
- 2 In addition to Jared Warren's recounting of the Spanish flu epidemic in Galt in the present volume, here are three examples from 21st -century volumes:
Helga Hartman, "Helga's Story: One Family's Journey to Waterloo Township," *Waterloo Historical Society*, Volume 94 (2006), pp. 4-27.
Bob Burt, "Cholera 1: Three Ring Circus of Death," *Waterloo Historical Society*, Volume 100 (2012), pp. 187-198.
rych mills, "The Easter Flood: April 5-8, 1912," *Waterloo Historical Society*, Volume 106 (2018), pp. 116-125.
- 3 The scheduled (but soon cancelled) meetings were to feature on March 31, 2020, Marion Roes, "Would I do it again? Researching, Writing and Self-Publishing *Mennonite Funeral Burial Traditions*" and on May 26, 2020, Jane Britton was to present "Lost Boys and Loose Ends: The Story of Four Jacobs."
- 4 The WHS board will continue to follow government guidelines and restrictions that negate or limit our ability to meet. Public meetings will not be reinstated until we have clearance from the appropriate government levels.
- 5 During the pandemic, many digital platforms have become popular. Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Google Meetings have become popular tools for helping organizations gather virtually.
- 6 At the time of the April 6, 2020 e-mail update, all public venues had been closed and the members were informed that we could not meet in groups of more than five people.
- 7 A description of the original plaque's unveiling can be read in the 1928 volume. In the early days, our plaques were called bronze tablets: <https://www.whs.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/1928.pdf>
- 8 Cober has been printing the WHS annual volume since the late 1940s.
- 9 The volumes could be mailed but that becomes very expensive.
- 10 The storage facility was erected by Dumart Meats in the 1930s then purchased by Burns Meats who operated it until the 1980s.