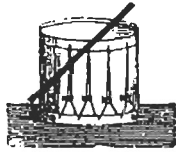


The Fife and Drum

The Newsletter of the Friends of Fort York and Garrison Common

v.7 No. 3 February 2004

Contents



- 1 Revitalization of Victoria Memorial Square and the Wellington Place Neighbourhood
- 2 Defenders of the Fort: Part 1 - Jean Geeson
- 2 Recent Archaeology at the Fort
- 4 Adding to the Collections: Donations of Two Important Swords
- 4 2004 Annual Georgian Mess Dinner

Improvements Begin to Victoria Memorial Square

by Scott James

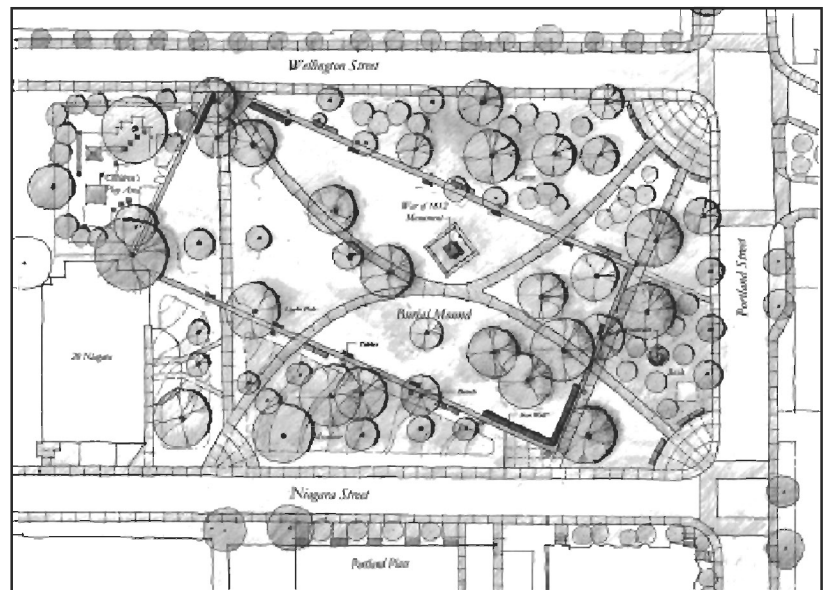
As reported in the November, 2003 issue of *Fife and Drum*, Victoria Memorial Square is now part of the National Historic Site at Fort York. It also happens to be the centre of a revitalized neighbourhood and the subject of a community initiative, in collaboration with the City of Toronto, to restore its amenity and honour its heritage significance.

The Square is a hidden gem. Located at Portland and Niagara Streets, it includes within its bounds Toronto's oldest European burying ground, which served as the garrison cemetery from 1794 (with the first burial being Katherine, infant daughter of Lt. Gov. Simcoe) until it was full in 1863. By the 1880's the place had become derelict and the City appointed a Military Burying Ground Commission under Col. William Otter to clean up the site and preserve the remaining artifacts. Since that time it has been operated as a park by the City, though still owned by the Government of Canada.

The Square, in addition to its connection with Fort York, is a part of "Wellington Place", a grand residential development laid out in the 1830's and consisting of two squares, Victoria to the west and Clarence to the east, connected by Wellington Street. This fashionable westward extension of the City was thwarted, however, in the mid-19th century by the coming of the railways and subsequent incursions of industrial activity.

Today, Wellington Place is recovering from 150 years of neglect. Since the City changed the development rules for King-Spadina in the mid-90's, the area is booming as a model mixed-use neighbourhood, the vibrant home to many small businesses in new media, architecture, communications and entertainment, as well as to a rapidly growing new residential community.

The Wellington Place Neighbourhood Association (WPNA), formed in 1999, realized quickly the importance of Victoria Memorial Square as a public amenity, and approached the City



Conceptual Plan for Victoria Memorial Square by ENVision - the Hough Group

with a proposal to restore it as a joint community-City project. Simultaneously the Friends of Fort York, through its Garrison Cemeteries Committee, was urging that the historic cemetery be restored and celebrated in some public way.

In January 2002, City Council endorsed the proposal. By August a conceptual plan (with drawings and estimated construction costs) had been produced by the community working with City staff and Councillor Olivia Chow, and was approved. While the Square must continue to function as a community park, it is a high priority to mark the burial ground and tell the cemetery's story using the available documentation and surviving artifacts.

The City has now established a Capital Account for the restoration of the Square and contributions are flowing in. So far, the largest have come from neighbourhood developers, but others have been made by the Ontario Heritage Foundation and private individuals, including one gift of \$10,000. The account allows the City to issue tax receipts for eligible donations.

In November, a Request for Proposals (RFP) was issued and the

selection of a Design Team for the park restoration is under way as this is being written. Shortly a community fundraising campaign will begin.

Jane Jacobs, in endorsing this project, said: "*Victoria Memorial Square will be an urban jewel, rescued from a wasteland of neglect*

and forgetfulness. It beautifully ties the city's earliest roots into a living, caring, revitalized community".

For more information, please contact Scott James, Secretary, Wellington Place Neighbourhood Association, (416) 203-7384;

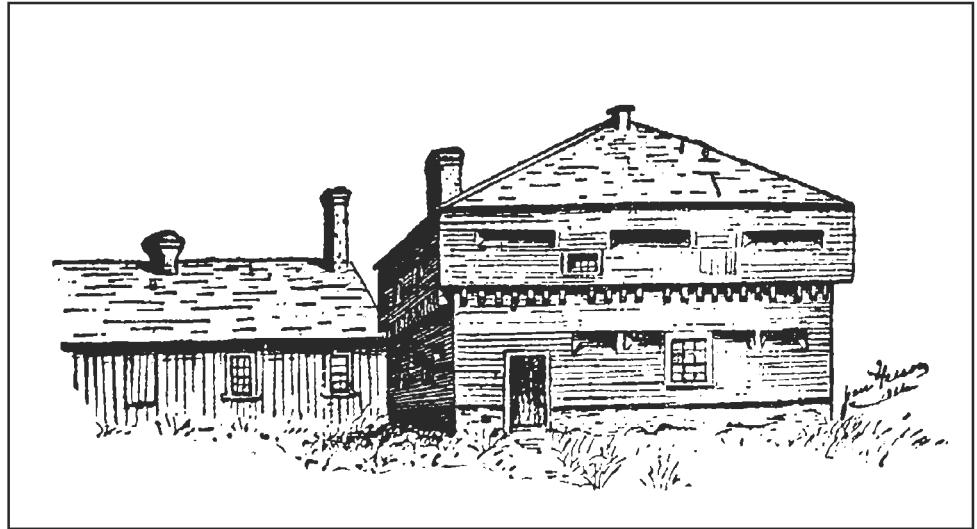
Defenders of the Fort: Part 1 - Jean Geeson

by Stephen Otto

Fort York has been lucky at several points in its history to find people who came forward in its defense when it was threatened. One of the first of these saviours was Jean Earle Geeson, who gained some prominence shortly after the Government of Canada agreed in 1903 to transfer Fort York to the City. The story goes that the City, although not yet the formal owner, began to act as if it were and to demonstrate a laissez-faire approach to its trusteeship. Barely two weeks after agreement to the transfer was reached Council gave its consent to the Park Blackwell Co. Ltd., pork packers, located at the east end of the fort, to nibble away a tenth of an acre of the fort's eastern bastion and ramparts. That seemed to pass unnoticed, but in 1905 when the City was determined to drive a streetcar line to the CNE Grounds through the centre of the fort, Miss Geeson raised the alarm and revealed that during Park Blackwell's earlier incursions soldiers' bodies had been unearched and their remains carted away with the debris. She herself had rescued some of the bones.

This shameful situation caused The Globe to summon up its best thunder and suggest that some other route for the tramline must be found. As the controversy moved towards a referendum in 1909 in which the City's proposal was defeated decisively, hundreds of schoolchildren were organized to visit the fort, where they heard Miss Geeson narrate its history, and a new organization was formed, The Old Fort Protective Association.

Too little is known about Jean Geeson. It appears she was English-born and came to Canada with her parents who may have settled in London, Ontario. By 1900 she was an art instructor at Alma College, St. Thomas, where she came to know and train with Frederick M. Bell-Smith, R.C.A., O.S.A. In 1902, however, she began to take an interest in historical sites around Toronto; her first article in The Globe on High Park was followed a year later by one on "*The Old Fort.*" They were illustrated by sketches she had made herself. (*see illustration*) About then she seems to have come to live in the city, and to throw itself into its public life.



"The East Blockhouse, illustrated by Jean Geeson"

Jean Geeson was becoming known as a journalist when in 1907 she was chosen by Toronto's Church Record Sunday School organization to attend a worldwide convention of Sunday Schools held in Rome that Spring. When it was over she was commissioned by the Ontario Government to write up articles that were flattering to Ontario for the British newspapers. This assignment had hardly begun when she fell ill and declined until her death in Stafford, England, on 7 October 1907. Her obituary described her as "*late special correspondent of Canadian papers at Home.*" Mention was made of her excellent research on Niagara and discovery of several valuable manuscripts relating to the peninsula, but nothing of her accomplishments in that area are familiar to us today.

Because of Jean Geeson's important role in drawing attention to the fort and sponsoring some of the earliest visits there by schoolchildren, who form a substantial portion of our annual attendance, the Friends of Fort York intend to urge that Jean Geeson be honoured in the neighbourhood, perhaps by the naming of the local school for her when it is built several years hence.

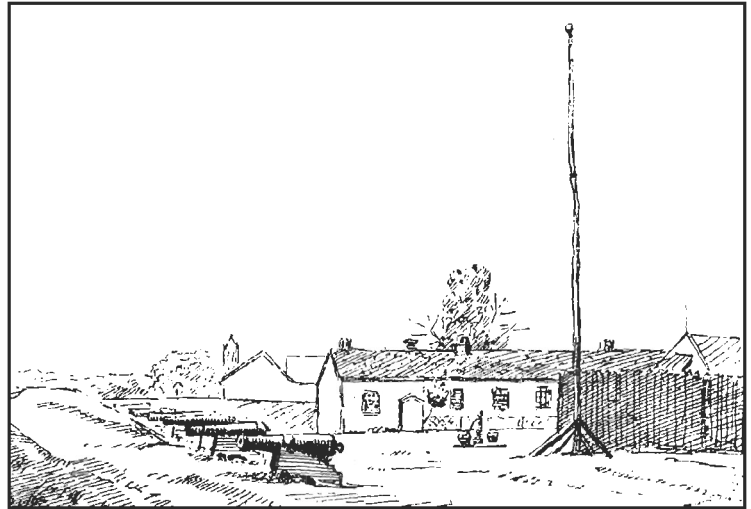
Recent Archaeology at the Fort *by David Spittal*

Visitors to Fort York this Fall may have noticed large piles of sharpened wooden posts neatly stacked beside the South Soldiers' Barracks. In the spring of 2004 these posts, or pales, will be raised as a protective fence around the Stone Magazine, restoring the 1815 pole fence that surrounded the building throughout the 19th century. Constructed of 12 foot sharpened posts, the original fence was set in the ground in a continuous line. There were no spaces between the posts, making for a secure barrier that blocked access to the building. Although the fence was usually referred to as a "palisade," the more correct term is "stockade."

The height and form of the stockade has been determined from surviving plans of the building and from one 1870s photograph. Its distance from the building can be determined from old plans and from cross-section drawings of the Magazine, mainly those of W.J. Renwick of the Royal Engineers who recorded the building in 1854 as part of a survey of the fort.

The designers of the new stockade face two problems. First, while the height of the original pales can be determined from the 1854 section of the building, surface grades around the building were raised many times in the 19th and 20th centuries. This means that posts will have to be shorter than the originals to maintain a correct height relative to the height of the magazine. The second problem relates to where the new palisade is constructed. The distance from the building of the original can be determined from the same 1854 plan. If, however, the new fence were set into the ground as shown by Renwick, any surviving archaeological evidence of the old palisade would be destroyed. This presents a dilemma to the designers who want to be as historically accurate in their restoration as they can be without having a great negative impact on original parts of the fort. The distance of the fence south of the building was verified during 1991 archaeological excavations in that area. It was decided in 2003 to check the Renwick distances on the west side of the building by undertaking additional archaeological excavations. Specifically, the excavations were focussed on the presumed south-west corner of the palisade. In the 2003 excavations next to the Stone Magazine, ten distinct layers of soil were recorded illustrating 200 years of landscaping in the fort. They include the original organic surface layer of the fort which existed at the time of the founding of the fort in 1793 and which is now buried some 75 cm below present grade, a layer of gravel representing the macadamization of the parade ground which took place in the late 1840s, and a layer of brown sand from the 1934 restoration of the fort. A surprisingly small number of artifacts were found. These include a lead seal from a railway car bearing the molded letters VR of the VICTORIA RAILWAY COMPANY which operated in the late 1870s and a brass percussion cap from the mid century gravel.

Of particular interest in this excavation area was the disturbance to the regular layers of soil caused by the installation and repair of the picket palisade or stockade. The archaeological test square was placed to intercept the buried remains of the palisade. An east-west trench dug into subsoil to accommodate the setting of the poles was encountered as well as the beginnings of a north-south trench for the same purpose. These trenches represent the locations of the south and west sides of the palisade respectively. In both trenches, vertical brown stains in the ground show where



The stockade around the Stone Magazine appears in this detail from an illustration in John Ross Roberson's, Landmarks of Toronto

wooden poles were set and then rotted away over time. The east-west trench actually appeared to consist of at least two superimposed trenches along the same alignment. One of these trenches probably dates to the period of renewal and expansion which took place in the fort in the late 1830s or early 1840s (*following the Rebellion of 1837*) and one is later, probably from the period of activity in the fort in the 1860s. Neither of the trenches is likely from the original construction of the palisade in 1815. Military artifacts found in the fill of these trenches included an unidentified pewter uniform button, a rare button of the Canadian Regiment of Fencible Infantry, dating to the period 1814-1815, and an 1830s clay smoking pipe decorated with the symbols of the Masonic Lodge.

At 15 feet west of the magazine, the east-west and north-south trenches intersected and this indicated the southwest corner of the fence. Here, later, a large square wooden post had been placed to support a 20th century board fence that replaced the original stockade of sharpened, wooden posts. A shallow pit beside this post produced a beautiful cobalt blue bottle marked POISON, several milk bottles of the CITY DAIRY, and an amber whiskey bottle embossed with the letters GW on the base (*from the Gooderham & Worts Distillery at the other end of town*). The corner of the protective palisade fence around the Magazine was thus located, at the same distance south of the building as suggested by earlier archaeological investigations, but three feet further west than shown by Renwick on his 1854 plan of the building. Renwick appears to have measured the distance of the fence from the foot of the moat rather than from the wall of the building itself. At any rate, we now know where the palisade actually stood. The project architect can now set the posts of the new palisade along a line a short distance away from the actual historic location of the fence to preserve the surviving archaeological evidence. This small excavation was a good example of an archaeological project designed to help answer a particular historic question. Information on the stratigraphic record of this part of the fort and the palisade was collected as well as a few artifacts. This capital project is being coordinated by Tanner Helmer of the Cultural Assets unit and the archaeology was done by David Spittal. Anyone interested in seeing the artifacts from the excavation or in learning more about the buried history of Fort York can contact the latter at the fort.

Adding to the Collections: Donations of Two Important Swords

Toronto's city museums recently acquired two new items, generous donations by David Holbrook of Toronto and another anonymous donor. While the artifacts are interesting in themselves, the circumstances of their history make them even more so.

Both are Pattern 1796 Light Cavalry Sabres, the armament of most British light dragoon (*and later, Hussar and lancer*) regiments until 1821. While identical in basic structure, the decorative flourishes on one specimen mark it as an officer's weapon.

The first sword, a trooper's weapon, is associated with an interesting man, John Willson (1776-1860). An ancestor of the donor, David Holbrook, Willson emigrated from New Jersey to Upper Canada, where by 1796 he was a prosperous farmer at Saltfleet, near Stoney Creek. Willson later entered politics and was elected to the Legislative Assembly on the eve of war in 1812. "*Honest John*" never entirely shed his populist leanings, but became conservative enough to attract imprecations from a former admirer, William Lyon Mackenzie, who characterized him as the epitome of a political turncoat. This bitter epithet may have some connection with the sword.

Willson probably did not carry the weapon in the War of 1812. As an assemblyman he was exempt from militia service, and there seems to be no record of him in connection with local militia or volunteer units. Holbrook family lore has him carrying this arm during the Rebellion Crisis of 1837-41. An admittedly incomplete search of militia and volunteer pay lists turned up no mention of the man in question, which is not to cast doubt on the story. Rather, it is quite easy to imagine the aging

parliamentarian making an appearance (*officially or otherwise*) with the government forces, the old sword a symbol of Upper Canada's past loyalty to the Crown.

Family tradition holds the second sword, an example of the officers' version, belonging to Stephen Heward (1777? -1828), a great-great grandfather of the donor. Born in England, Heward came to Upper Canada via the United States and New Brunswick. At the outbreak of war with the United States in 1812, he was a prosperous citizen in York, enjoying further local prominence as captain of the 2nd Flank Company, 3rd York Militia. Stephen Heward's 2nd Flank Company of the 3rd York was present at Detroit and Queenston Heights; at the latter Brock supposedly made his famous exhortation, "*Push on, brave York volunteers!*" Its rolls included some other notables, Lt. John Beverly Robinson, and Ensign Samuel Jarvis. Flank companies were abolished early in 1813 but Stephen Heward continued in his avocation as a militia officer. By 1821, he was a lieutenant colonel, commanding the newly formed 1st East York Militia. It is quite possible that Heward carried his Light Cavalry Sabre at Detroit and Queenston, though he might have obtained it any time during his long service with the militia.

Both of the donated items remind us of interesting (*and rather dramatic*) historical contexts, and pose some intriguing questions that await further research. We thank the donors most warmly for them. Currently there is no budget for acquiring such items for the collections, so it is only through gifts of artifacts, or funds earmarked for purchasing them, that the fort's important collections can grow.

2004 Annual Georgian Mess Dinner

This will be the sixth year the Friends of Fort York have held a Georgian Mess Dinner at Historic Fort York. It is projected for the evening of Thursday, 27 May, and will once again be held in the Blue Barracks.

The event is a faithful replication of an actual Mess Dinner of the 1812-1815 period, complete with menu and protocols of the period. It is currently our major fundraiser and all profits realised go to support the Fife and Drum corps of the fort's own Canadian Regiment of Fencible Infantry. This award-winning group of young people is supported entirely by the activities of the Friends of Fort York and Garrison Common.

The Mess Dinner Committee, tentatively renamed the Special Events Committee, has met several times and is proceeding with plans for an evening that should not be missed. Once again, Bridget Wranich of the Fort's Foodways Programme, with the extraordinary and wonderful assistance of her dedicated volunteers, is devising an authentic festive menu, such as would have been enjoyed by the Officers of the Garrison in hosting a dinner for respectable citizens of the Town of York. Last year the theme of the evening was "*In Masquerade*." Many who attended said that it was such fun and lent such an air of "*authenticity*" to the event that it should be repeated, which the committee has under consideration.

MARK YOUR CALENDARS NOW

The price remains the same at \$175.00 a person, the best buy in town!!!

And with a charitable receipt for the full allowable amount.

More details are available by calling:

Joe Gill at the FOFY office (416-860-6493) or Richard Dodds (416-231-1693)