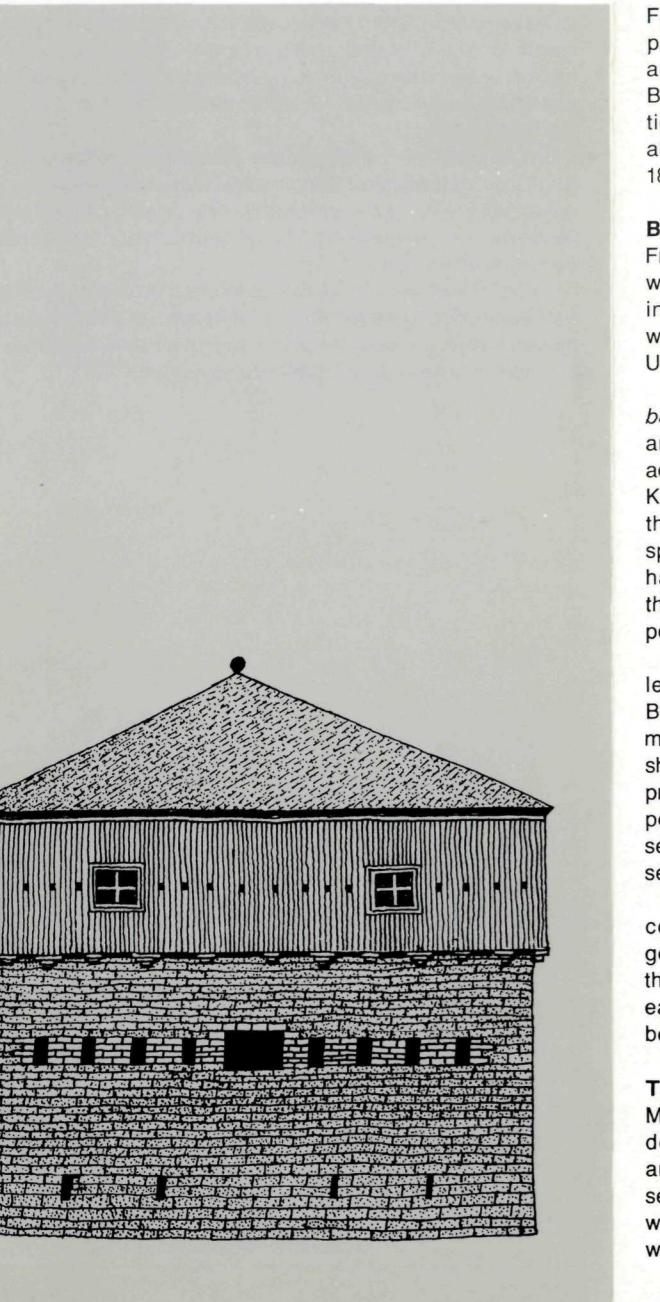


Fort Wellington National Historic Park



Fort Wellington National Historic Park in Prescott, encompasses the remains of two forts, both built in the 19th century and named after the Duke of Wellington, the most renowned British soldier of the time. They stood guard over the international border and the commercial transportation which moved along it. The first Fort Wellington was built during the War of 1812. The second, built in 1838–39, was occupied until 1870.

Brief History

From the early days of New France the St. Lawrence River was the traditional route to the riches of the North American interior. In the late 18th century, sovereignty over this waterway was divided between British North America and the new United States of America.

Soon after the American Revolution, batteaux and *Durham boats* were carrying thousands of tons of goods annually to and from the thriving new Loyalist settlements of Upper Canada. The River route was cheaper and faster than the new King's highway connecting Montréal and York (Toronto), even though the St. Lawrence could not be used in winter and despite delays caused by rapids. At some of the rapids, canals had been dug and at others, shipping managed to get through the rough water but often, cargoes and passengers had to be portaged.

The sharing of the waterway was sure to be quickly challenged in the event of war between the United States and Britain. Yet, when war did erupt in 1812, neither side had done much to protect its shipping interests. As a result of the war, shipping increased and the British quickly organized troops to protect both river and land transportation along the route, especially near canals and rapids. The troops were based at several points along the St. Lawrence, including the young settlement of Prescott.

Shipping was particularly vulnerable to attack in the Prescott area, for the town was just up-river from a stretch of dangerous rapids. An American military post lay directly across the river at Ogdensburg, New York, where the French had earlier built Fort La Présentation. For these reasons the British began a small fortification at Prescott.

The War of 1812

Most of the fort's construction was directed by Frederic, Baron de Gaugreben, Lieutenant of the King's German Engineers, and built by a corps of the King's German Legion, a regiment serving the British Crown at that time. The fort consisted of a wooden blockhouse surrounded by earthen ramparts on which were mounted 24-pounder cannons. It was designed

both to shelter the men who patrolled the border and to command all navigation in the river opposite.

The fort was not finished until the end of the war but it was nonetheless strongly garrisoned. Besides the King's German Legion there were other foreign regiments, which served in the King's garrison. For example, in the summer of 1813 over 200 men of the de Watteville Regiment came to serve at Fort Wellington from Spain where they had been fighting under the Duke of Wellington against the armies of Napoleon. Mainly of East European, Swiss and German origin, these men were commanded by the Swiss Major-General, Louis de Watteville.

For some time the Swiss had been providing the British with mercenaries hired from many nations. After the war some of these men stayed to settle in Canada.

Another important regiment serving at Fort Wellington during the War of 1812 was the Glengarry Light Infantry Fencibles. Some of the men of this regiment had earlier served in the Glengarry Fencibles, a regiment conceived by Father Alexander Macdonell to provide employment for highlanders in Glengarry, Scotland. It was the first Roman Catholic regiment to serve an English King after the Reformation. When the regiment was disbanded in 1802 Macdonell and many of the men emigrated to Canada, to the Scottish settlement of Glengarry County on the St. Lawrence River. In 1812 Father Macdonell was asked to help recruit Glengarries to revive the regiment in Canada.

On February 21, 1813, Sir George Prevost, British Governor of Canada, stopped at the Fort on his way from Québec to York by sleigh. During the night he gave command of the Fort to Major "Red George" Macdonell of the Glengarries and talked with him about the local military situation. Macdonell tried to convince the Governor that the American troops at Ogdensburg should be removed since they had been harassing Canadian shipping on the river for some time and recently had looted the undefended town of Brockville nearby. The ever-cautious Prevost, however, wanted to avoid a large-scale confrontation.

Macdonell's garrison of about 500 troops included men from the King's 8th Regiment, the Newfoundland Fencibles, the Glengarries and local militia. No sooner had the Governor left the next morning than "Red George" lined up his men on the ice and stormed across to take Ogdensburg. It was a fierce battle but casualties were not heavy. Macdonell did not occupy the town but rather burned all the military buildings and watercraft, preventing the Americans from re-establishing a military post there for the balance of the war. After the attack, reinforcements of regulars from Kingston and militia from the surrounding counties were rushed in. It was only after four days and many casualties to both sides that the rebels were finally taken.

Later Years

Fort Wellington was strongly garrisoned for several years after the Battle of the Windmill for fear of further trouble. None ensued, however, as Lord Durham's investigation of the causes of the Rebellions eventually led to political reform. Fort Wel-

lington resumed as if no war were in progress.

Macdonell was decorated for his victory and Prevost wrote him that, "although you have rather exceeded my orders, I am well pleased with what you have done..." The Glengarry Fencibles were disbanded in 1816 but some of the men saw action again with the Glengarry Militia at Fort Wellington during the Rebellions of 1837–38.

The Rebellions of 1837–38

For years in Upper Canada, the "Family Compact", a small exclusive group of appointees with strong executive power, had been using its privileged position to promote its own interests through patronage and control of government policy.

Similarly, in Lower Canada the "Chateau Clique" seemed

permanently entrenched in its position of political, economic and social power. To many, reform of the system through normal constitutional channels seemed impossible. Some popularly elected members like William Lyon Mackenzie thought force was the only alternative but their attempt to seize power in 1837 failed. Some escaped to the United States where they found many Americans sympathetic to further attempts to "liberate" Canada from British imperialism. Once again it was necessary to guard the border against invasion from the United States.

Fort Wellington, now an empty ruin, had to be completely rebuilt, and so a second Fort Wellington was constructed by local contractors and supervised by the Royal Engineers. A new blockhouse was built, this time mainly of stone. It was smaller, allowing room inside the earthen ramparts for a guardhouse, officers' quarters, cookhouse and latrines. It was not completed until 1839.

In November 1838 a force of nearly 200 American sympathizers and a handful of Canadian rebels tried to seize Fort Wellington which was still under construction. They crossed from the United States, entrenched themselves on nearby Windmill Point and were immediately challenged by the troops of Fort Wellington. They could not be dislodged so reinforcements of regulars from Kingston and militia from the surrounding counties were rushed in. It was only after four days and many casualties to both sides that the rebels were finally taken.

The blockhouse was the stronghold of the Fort. The thickly vaulted brick ceiling of the first floor provided good protection for the gunpowder and artillery equipment stored there. The second and third floors were used as a barracks and could hold up to 100 soldiers. The area between the third floor ceiling and the roof was filled solid with heavy timbers which, it was hoped, would absorb the impact of artillery fire.

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The Guard House

The Royal Canadian Rifles served at Fort Wellington from 1843 to 1854. The Fort was empty for a few years but with the fear of invasion by the Fenians, an Irish-American society

violently opposed to British rule, it was reoccupied in the 1860's. Again the garrison included the "Rifles". By 1870, the Fenian threat had dissipated, the Royal Canadian Rifles had

been disbanded and Fort Wellington closed. During the Northwest Rebellion of 1885 a few troops were stationed briefly at the Fort but the next year saw its permanent abandonment by the military.

In 1923 the site was transferred to the former Department of Interior. Fort Wellington was declared a National Historic Park in 1940 and is now administered by Parks Canada.

Points of Interest

Although not very large, Fort Wellington is an excellent example of the French style of military engineering which became popular in the 18th century. At that time fortifications of stone were no longer able to withstand the heavier artillery which armies were carrying, so military engineers substituted earth ones, which could easily absorb the impact of cannonballs.

These fortifications were easy to build and maintain, as the ramparts were formed from the earth removed in the excavation of the ditch. With the addition of wooden pickets Fort Wellington could now defend itself against long-distance bombardment as well as against attacking infantry.

Fort Wellington's first function was defensive—to provide secure shelter for the men and stores of its garrison. The garrison was, in turn, expected to defend the international border and the land and water transportation which moved along it.

Fort Wellington also had an offensive capability. The 24 pounder guns on the southeast and southwest corners allowed the Fort to command all navigation on the river opposite.

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To join the Royal Canadian Rifles soldiers had to have at least 15 years army service. At this point in their lives they thought twice before forfeiting the pension due them after so many years service. Married men were given preference in the recruiting as they were considered more stable. Desertion les-

sened perceptibly after the Royal Canadian Rifles was organized.

The Guard Room was used for a few years to shelter the men who guarded the main gate and ramparts of the Fort. Later the men preferred to use the Guard Room which was established on the first floor of the blockhouse; the old Guard House was then allowed to fall into ruins.

The building which formerly served as a latrine for the Fort is now used only as a tool storage.

The caponnière allowed soldiers safe access to the ditch where they could fire on any attackers who had been able to get that close to the Fort. Originally a layer of earth covered the timbers of the roof to provide extra protection.

Battle of the Windmill: less than a mile east of Fort Wellington, between Highway #2 and the river, stands the large stone windmill which was captured from the Rebels in November 1838 after a fierce struggle.

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