
FHBRO Number 90-305

Prescott, Ontario

Fort Wellington Blockhouse

Fort Wellington NHS

The blockhouse at Fort Wellington was constructed in 1838-39. It is part of the fortification complex executed under the Captain Francis Randolph of the Royal Engineers, according to plans supplied by his superior officers. Alterations over the years include the replacement of the gallery in 1887, replacement of the original stone chimney on the east side with brick (thought to date to the turn of the nineteenth century) and new tin shingles installed as part of 1990s restoration work. The building is currently operated by Parks Canada as a museum depicting early-nineteenth-century military life. The Department of Canadian Heritage is the custodian. See FHBRO Building Report 90-305.

Reasons for Designation

The Fort Wellington blockhouse was designated Classified because of its historical associations, its significance as a work of architecture, and its environmental qualities.

Fort Wellington formed part of the fortifications originally constructed by the British during the War of 1812. A new fort, with the present blockhouse, was built over the ruins of this early fort in response to the Rebellion of 1837 and the threat of the American invasion. The blockhouse relates well to the period of active defence of the St. Lawrence frontier. A heavily fortified structure that was central to the defensive capability of the fort, it was the principal building for housing the garrison and storing supplies during the militia phase and later during the occupation by the Royal Canadian Rifle Regiment. The blockhouse is also broadly related to the development of the garrison community itself, and of the town of Prescott in the late 1830s and the 1840s.

The blockhouse is the largest and most elaborate surviving example of this building type in Canada. In general, the exterior appearance is much as it would have looked in the late 19th century. The interior layout and the fabric are largely intact. Most of the doors on the first floor date to the military occupation of the building. Many of the fittings and hardware are original to the construction period. The upper floors of the blockhouse retain their principal functional components relating to the building's key role of defending the St. Lawrence frontier. The excellent workmanship is typical of the Royal Engineers works, as is evidenced by the few repairs required in the past to maintain the building.

The blockhouse is a tall structure that is highly visible above the earthworks. It

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contributes significantly to the defensive military character of the site. Inside the fort, the blockhouse is the most prominent structure. Fort Wellington is a well-known landmark and frequently visited tourist attraction, and the image of the blockhouse has been incorporated into the design of local street signs and many tourist brochures produced by the town of Prescott.

Character Defining Elements

The heritage character of the blockhouse at Fort Wellington resides in the imposing masonry walls, in its high standard of craftsmanship, in its largely unchanged interior layouts, and in its setting within the fort premises.

The blockhouse is an imposing structure with massive, evenly coursed masonry walls that extend to the top of the third storey and incorporate some of the subterranean foundation of the original single-storey blockhouse that occupied the site during the War of 1812. The exterior shape of the building should not be changed. All masonry, including chimneys, merits an ongoing maintenance program. Any repair or replacement work should match the original material and workmanship. Any below-grade work should be preceded by archaeological excavation.

The design is symmetrical and square, with sparse openings. The only entrance on the south facade is protected by the single-rifle loopholes on either side. The other three facades are punctured by ventilation ports. At the second storey level, each wall has a centrally placed gun port flanked by four single-rifle loopholes trimmed with lighter coloured stonework. All these features date back to the military period of the structure; therefore the size of windows, loopholes, and openings should not be altered. Wood components of the openings should be repaired in the same material and configuration as the original.

An upper floor is surrounded by a wooden gallery (constructed in 1887) clad with vertical siding and containing loopholes, machicolations and two windows on each elevation. The gallery is one of the key features defining the defensive function of the Blockhouse. The gallery should be inspected regularly and woodwork repaired in accordance with conservation standards. The gallery is cantilevered on large stone and wooden corbels. Some of them have been renewed over time. The corbels should undergo regular maintenance. The original corbels should not be removed or altered.

Future repairs of new corbels should match the original work.

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The pyramidal shape of the roof is typical of the military type and should not be changed. The roof cladding has been replaced in recent years with tin to represent the original type of cladding. Any change to this material should be based on physical and documentary evidence. All flashing and drainage systems should be handled as unobtrusively as possible and should be part of the regular maintenance program.

The interior layout and fabric from the period of military occupation are largely intact. The powder magazine and armoury have been carefully restored and furnished to the 1846 period, including the use of non-sparking material such as copper sheeting. Wood-plank flooring and plaster have been renewed and repaired in some areas in recent decades. Removal of original finishes should be avoided. Every effort should be made to preserve the integrity of original layouts and finish materials. Original door and window hardware should remain in situ.

The surrounding of this building has been carefully preserved in keeping with historic site presentation philosophy. The earthworks, the front gate, the caponnière and palisades are very much part of the setting of the blockhouse. The immediate surrounding should not be developed, but should be maintained in a manner that is respectful of the building's historical military character. If any excavation must be performed, it should be preceded by salvage archaeology.

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For further guidance, please refer to the *FHBRO Code of Practice*.
