

The Merrickville and District Historical Society

Fall 2013 Newsletter VOLUME 12, NUMBER 4

Official Blockhouse Opening – Just to keep the Record Straight

There has been some debate and perhaps some confusion in the past as to the actual official opening date of the Blockhouse Museum. After a little research in the Archives it has been determined that the actual Official opening was on Saturday June 21st, 1967. The guest book of that day shows that the opening was presided over by Lieutenant Governor of Ontario, the Hon. W. Earl Rowe and Federal Minister of Grenville Mrs. Jean Wadds, and the then President of the Historical Society, Col. Duncan Douglas. But perhaps we should step back a little and review the facts.

The following are excerpts from an article written by Mrs. Jean Douglas in May 1976 for the Merrickville (note spelling) Chronicle - "Merrickville's Newsletter of Information, Events, and Ideas" Published by the Merrickville Tourist Association.

"Museum Celebrates 10th Anniversary

The Merrickville Blockhouse this year celebrates its tenth anniversary as a Museum. This is a wonderful record for the local Historical Society to have kept the museum going for so long and to-day it is very much part of the community now interested in its historical connections. The Blockhouse was built by the Officers and Men of the Royal Engineers for the defence of the Rideau Waterway between 1826 and 1832.



Over the years there have been several efforts to turn the old Blockhouse into a museum. In 1938 the Department of Transport gave some thought to turning it over to the Federal Department of Mines and Resources, Parks and Forest Branch, for preservation. The building, however, was in use as a storehouse for canal equipment and could not be spared. It was still being used as a storehouse in 1945 when the late Harry F. McLean offered to put on permanent display a collection of antique guns on behalf of the town. In 1961 Deputy Minister Baldwin, of the Department of Transport, decided the Blockhouse was no longer essential for canal purposes and approached the Grenville Historical Society through Mrs. Jean Wadds, Federal Member of Grenville at the time, to decide on its possible future as a Museum.

Official Opening Ceremonies

John McGrath, Lieutenant Governor of Ontario, The Hon. W. Earl Rowe, Sid McGrath, and M.P. Mrs. Jean Wadds. And the lovely lady up front is Dot or Dolly, not sure which one, but she's a beauty.

The President of the Grenville Historical Society, Dr. W. O. Williams, approached the late Dr. H.T.C. Whitley in the Merrickville area to see what could be done and from this a meeting was arranged at his home and a committee formed chaired by George McMullen to work with the Department of Transport officials, the upshot being an agreement on a gradual restoration of the Blockhouse. Colonel Douglas was appointed Secretary of this Museum Committee to act as a liaison between the Village of Merrickville and the Department of Transport. He did a great deal of research in order to advise the department of the Blockhouse's original interior. The task was made easier by finding the original building plans tucked away in the Public Archives. The first step was to cedar shingle the roof in the autumn of 1962. The following year workers moved inside where the biggest job was to remove several partitions to check the second floor beams and replace them where necessary. The second floor fireplace was also rebuilt and the walls, partitions, and gunwalks were restored. By 1964 the basement, underpinning and first floor timbers got the most attention. A new floor was required on the first floor and a new staircase leading to the second floor.



Meanwhile the Village of Merrickville was working on the administrative framework for the Blockhouse and passed a special by-law in the spring of 1965. This meant the possibility of taking advantage of Provincial Grants which could be made available under certain conditions only to a Municipal corporation or a Board or Body created by it. Hence, the formation of a Museum Board.

During the summer of 1966 the Provincial Government erected a Historic Sites Plaque at the Blockhouse and in 1967 the Museum had its official opening, by the Lieutenant-Governor, complete with the fort Henry Guard and Band in their colourful uniforms and all the citizenry out in old-fashioned costume. It was one of Merrickville's Centennial events."

Another indication that the Historical Society was up and running are these pictures taken at the Smiths Falls Xmas Parade in 1966 with this wonderful replica of the Blockhouse. Does anyone know where it is today, some say it was last seen on a nearby rural property?



Xmas Parade Smiths Falls, 1966

So the consensus seems to be that restoration work was done in 1962-65. At a Meeting of Merrickville Council on April 6, 1965, a decision was made to establish a Museum and a Historical Society to operate it (Merrickville Bylaw 777). At a public meeting in March of 1966 the Historical Society was set up to run the Museum and Colonel D. Douglas became its first President and by the summer of 1966 the public were invited to have their first viewing. As described above, on June 21st, 1967 the Blockhouse museum had its first official opening to celebrate Canada's Centennial Year.

The Industries of Merrickville – Part Four Submitted by John Cowan

This is the fourth article drawn from the work of Richard Tatley and others. It focuses on the utter importance of wood to the pioneer and to the entrepreneurs of Merrickville who cut, carved, drilled and shaped wood to meet the expanding needs of the pioneer.

A World Made of Wood

The water power potential of "the Great Falls" at Merrickville is known to have been the resource which drew William Merrick to establish his community here. But the other natural resource that made the Rideau Valley attractive for settlement was its high quality and abundant forest which provided the raw material for growth.

WOOD: wood for the settler's first log dwelling, wood for the mills to make lumber and shingles, wood for beds, tables chairs and household furniture and appliances, wood for farm implements and carts and carriages. And wood for fire. For cooking and warmth. Virtually all of the physical needs of the settler were derived from the forest which at the time virtually carpeted the area.

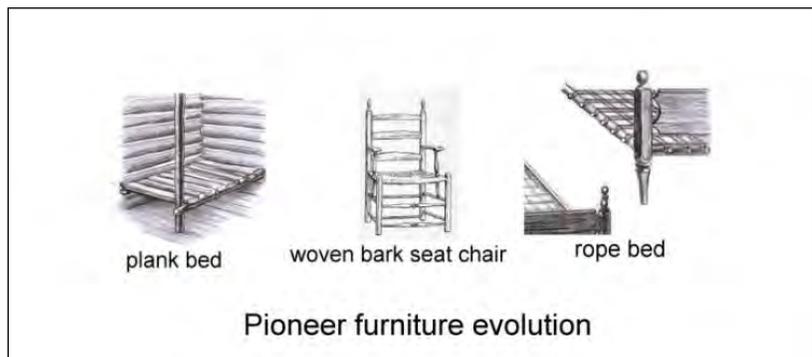
For most of the early pioneer settlers arriving in the Rideau Corridor, after the construction of a log home rough hewn furniture was the first domestic requirement. Made from axe-trimmed and split logs and handy tree bows the function of these first items was strictly utilitarian. Plank tables, chairs, a stump for a stool and plank beds were generally the first items manufactured by the settler for the home. Depending on the skill of the pioneer, these primitive pieces of furniture were replaced by more sophisticated pieces with shaped members; ladder-back chairs with seats of woven hickory bark and rope beds were much more comfortable than the benches and slat chairs and hollowed stumps. But these furniture pieces required time which was better spent clearing the fields and planting crops.

Illustration: pioneer furniture

As the pioneer became better-established and before the general migration of industry to the larger cities, there appeared a market for locally made better furniture. People were becoming affluent enough to furnish

their expanding homes and discriminating enough to grow dissatisfied with the rustic, handmade items inherited from their parents. This was the time when local cabinet makers and their products flourished.

In Merrickville around 1851 Robert Riddell bought a lot on west Brock Street from Aaron Merrick, established a furniture shop and began to manufacture furniture there.



The Merrickville Chronicle of July 25, 1856 carried an advertisement for

R. & J. Riddell,

“manufacturers of chairs and other cabinet-wares.”

While Merrickville is known to have had a number of resident cabinet and furniture makers its most successful was John Mills. Mills was born in England in 1832 and settled in North Gower. Early in the 1850s he moved to Merrickville and became apprenticed to the above Robert Riddell who taught him the cabinet-maker's trade at his shop on Brock Street west. Around 1860 Mills managed to buy out Riddell and take over the shop and with the expanding need to furnish the pioneer home his business flourished.

As illustrated in this image by Heather Collins taken from Barbara Greenwoods excellent book, “A Pioneer Sampler: The Daily Life of a Pioneer Family in 1840”, virtually every article of furniture in the pioneer home was wooden. Many examples of John Mills furniture are probably still housed in the historic homes of Merrickville.

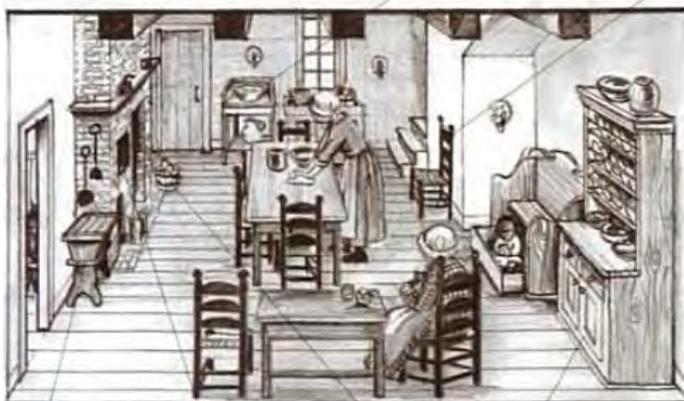


Illustration: the Pioneer Parlour

As his business quickly grew, Mills needed to expand his operations and to obtain water power to drive his machinery. In 1873 he succeeded in purchasing the east end of the island at Merrickville from Henry Merrick and proceeded to erect a new frame furniture factory immediately below the woollen mill with which he shared a water flume. About the same time he also opened a store in downtown Merrickville on the southwest corner of Wellington St west and St Lawrence to display and sell his products. His furniture attained a reputation for quality and craftsmanship.

Adjacent to the Brock Street factory where he built and finished furniture, he built a large new home. This house cum-factory stands still as one of the most attractive stone properties in Merrickville. The left portion



probably was the factory section, while the right side, with its gable end extending above the roof as a protection against fire, served as the family home for the Mills for over a century.

By the time of his retirement in 1913 he had the only furniture and cabinet works in the village. John Mills lived to the ripe old age of 93 dying only in 1924 and was buried at Merrickville Union Cemetery.

Photo: John Mills factory-home

Roll Out the Barrel - “The Cooperage Trade”

It is hard to imagine daily living without plastic, waxed cardboard or metal containers. But this is the situation that existed for a good deal of the 19th century in Merrickville. In the absence of these materials wood, where it was available, served as the means of convenience for a huge variety of domestic and industrial products. Cereals, nails, tobacco, fruits and vegetables, gunpowder and flour casks are examples of a "drytight" cooper's work. The "white cooper" made straight staved containers like washtubs, buckets and butter churns that would hold water and other liquids, but did not allow the shipping of liquids. The "wet" or "tight" cooper was casks for long-term storage and transportation of liquids that could even be under pressure, as with beer. (Ref. *Wikipedia part*)

Imagine you are walking up St. Lawrence Street in the 1850's. You would find on the site of the present retail stores, a variety of shops: hardware stores, millinery shops, a bank and other bustling and successful stores filling the needs of local villagers. Imagine there is a shop sign indicating, as it did in 1856, John Mills' furniture store and nearby a shop sporting a sign:

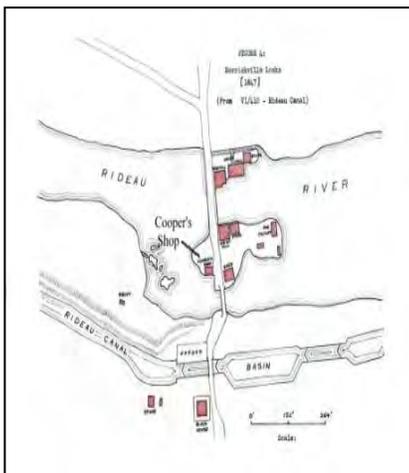
“Robert Tripp, Cooperage - Flour barrels, pork barrels and butter firkins”

There you would find barrels and buckets for storage and carriage of every item from nails to butter.

Photo: Cooperage c 1850



Closely associated with “Coopering” was the manufacturing of the slats or “staves” from which the barrels were assembled. In Merrickville, as in other pioneer areas, the manufacture of the staves was considered a specialized trade and usually one that serviced several “Cooperages”. While the production of the wooden vessel was primarily a matter of skilful assembly, the manufacture of the staves was a more complicated and precise process. Carefully selected knot free wood, generally oak, dried and processed, is cut into strips and shaped. For casks or barrels, slats are carefully bent with the assistance of steam to form narrow integratable slats. The finished staves were then delivered to the Cooperage for assembly and strapping.



Cooperage and stave-making shops first came into focus in the Rideau corridor during the 1850s, sixties and seventies as another by-product of the wood processing industry, and partly in response to the growing demand for potash, pork, and flour barrels.

During the same period when Robert Tripp operated his shop on St Lawrence St., he was in partnership with William Merrick, Jr. in a cooper shop on the island north of the canal. It is marked on the Ordnance map of about 1847.

Illustration: Island Cooperage

References: Industries and Industrialists of Merrickville, 1792-1979, by Richard Tatley, 1979; Parks Canada Manuscript Report 423 – Digital Edition, Friends of the Rideau, 2011; A Pioneer Sampler: The Daily Life of a Pioneer Family in 1840; Text copyright 1994 by Barbara Greenwood, Illustrations copyright by Heather Collins/Graphics ; Taylors-cooperage Black Creek Pioneer Village; <http://www.torontosnaps.com/Black-Creek-Pioneer-Village/>

David Hammonds 1940 – 2013



It is with great sadness that we have to advise of the sudden passing of the Society Blockhouse Manager, David Hammonds, while he and his wife were vacationing in Massachusetts. David was born in Machynilith Wales, graduated from Imperial College in London, UK with a Civil Engineering degree. He worked as a geotechnical contract engineer around the world before moving to Montreal in 1974.

In 2003 he and his wife Gillian moved to Merrickville and soon both became very involved with the Historical Society. They became members of the Executive Committee and in 2005 they took on the responsibility of Blockhouse Museum Managers. This is a huge commitment and they spent many hours working with the administrative duties, liaison with the village of Merrickville-Wolford and

Parks Canada, staffing, scheduling, student counselling and let's not forget those clean up days. David loved the Blockhouse and volunteered a tremendous amount of time and energy to its running. He will be greatly missed.

Archive Open House

The historical society held their first Archive open house on Saturday September 28th, at its location at the Burritt's Rapids Community Hall. There was an excellent turn out of people who were very interested and surprised in viewing the premises, the exhibits and the computer data base which houses the catalogue of all of the artifacts.

Most people were more than surprised to see just what has been accomplished in the past twelve months since the move from the Old Town Hall in Merrickville.

Visitors had some very interesting questions on the storing of the archives, acid free boxes and packaging etc., the formatting and the input of archival information into the data base and the odd question of just what a particular item on display really was. This gave rise to the opportunity to demonstrate how to take a look at an accession number registered, and pull up the item in the data base. One particular item was a little silver dish that would have been used at a tea or dinner table, to perhaps hold a spoon or small piece of cutlery. It was sort of an oblong shape resting on small feet, and tiny handles at each end. But what was it actually? The description stated it was a sugar cube holder, which upon inspection made complete sense. Who would have thought!

There are also books, research material and old manuscripts from past lectures for people to take a quick look at. All in all a very successful open house and we plan on having more in the future for those that couldn't make this past one.



President's Message

Members,

The summer season has wound down for the Merrickville and District Historical Society. The Blockhouse has been tucked in for the winter in the usual fashion. We are taking stock of the season, counting the attendance and preparing for our Annual General Meeting, which will be held on 26 November 2013 in co-ordination with the monthly lecture. If you are a paid up member then you will be eligible to vote for the Executive. If you are interested in volunteering, as part of the Executive or in addition to the Executive, please let us know. We always have lots of work to go around. We hope to see everyone at the next lecture.

We are greatly saddened by the sudden passing of our First Vice President and Blockhouse Manager, David Hammonds. David was a dedicated and tireless worker on behalf of the Merrickville and District Historical Society and he will be sorely missed. We would welcome suggestions on how we could commemorate his many contributions to Merrickville, the Friends of the Turbine and the Merrickville and District Historical Society.

Regards,

Andrew McKay
President

Upcoming Events

- November 26th: 7PM: Annual General Meeting and election of officers of the Executive of the Historical Society for 2014.
- 7:30PM Speaker, Philip Bury UE, presents The Grenville Militia Then and Now.
- December: No lecture during the Holiday Season.
- January 28th: Show and Tell. Details to be announced at a later date.
- February 25th: Not available at press time.

Merrickville and District Historical Society 2013 Executive

President – Andrew McKay
First Vice President –
Second Vice-President – Ellen Hackett
Treasurer – Sharon Alger
Secretary - Nancy Warr
Past President – Nina Donald

Membership Matters

Membership in the Historical Society is renewed annually running from November to October in our Fiscal year, at a present cost of \$10 per person or \$15 per family. Life memberships are also available for \$100.

We welcome new members and hope present members will want to re-join our Society. If so, it will be helpful if you can submit your cheques early to allow us to fund our ongoing works.

Your membership will assist us in continuing to celebrate the history and heritage of our community.

Thank you

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Ontario, K0G 1N0:

Newsletter Volunteers: John Cowan Nina
Donald, Sharon Parkinson, Phil Colwill

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