

The Merrickville and District Historical Society NEWSLETTER

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The Old Town Hall

One of the most impressive stone buildings in the Village of Merrickville is on Main Street West and is fondly referred to as "the Old Town Hall" and, so it was.



Merrickville Old Town Hall, 1848
Photo 2009 J Cowan

Built around 1856 as Township seat for Wolford Township, the hall was designed by Samuel Langford, one of the fine stone craftsmen brought to Canada to work on the Rideau Canal by Colonel By. Langford, a talented architect and builder was responsible for the building of most of the fine properties in the Village including Aaron Merrick's fine large house in the south end of Merrickville, Stephen Merrick's house on Brock Street East, probably Lockmaster John Johnston's house and virtually all the elegant frame and stone homes, built between 1840 and 1870.

An extract from the Council Meeting Minutes of Wolford Township of the 21st January 1852 gives an indication of how the hall was financed. :

"Moved by William Ferguson, Seconded by Robert Putman that monies collected after August 1st, 1851 from tavern licenses and grocery licenses and fines from bylaw contraventions of laws relating to those two, and for the next six years, be put towards the building of a town hall and lockup house. Commissioners for building town hall: John L. Read, E.H. Whitmarsh, Aaron Merrick, Robert Putnam & Joseph C. Lonsdale. Members of the township shall not be taxed one penny. Carried unanimously."

Stephen H. Mirick and William Mirick presented the land on which the town hall was to be built. It is recorded the building cost about \$600. Initially the first floor comprised the Council Chambers, the township offices and the lockup jail.

*******did you know *******

The steel barred cell now serves as the bar room for the Restaurant located in the Old Town Hall, and the original lockup door is stored in the Historical Society Archives room.

On the second floor was the auditorium which was reached by two staircases either side of the main entrance. This auditorium eventually (in 1862) boasted a stage with footlights and a roll-up curtain. It was very a popular for all sorts of communal activities and entertainments including performances by the Merrickville Band shown below assembled in front of the Old Town Hall in 1886.

The back of the building had a tower on the north hip of the roof. This was used for drying the fire hoses and the fire department at that time used the premises for their equipment. It was removed but is visible in some older images of the building.



**Merrickville Band 1886,
in front of the Old Town Hall**

The township council chambers and other offices were used regularly for a number of years. Though it is recorded that at least, on one occasion the meeting was adjourned almost immediately, to continue at Thomas Eagleton's Hotel (now the Goose and

Gridiron) in a more congenial atmosphere. (Adjournment not noted).

Merrickville was incorporated in 1861 and, Wolford township built its own town hall at Easton's Corners. The township accepted \$1,200 in settlement of its interest in the Merrickville building.

In 1863 the Grammar School was allowed to use the hall for six months. That same year the floor was laid in the basement and, nervous with the outbreak of hostilities in The American Civil War, a Captain Wright used the basement to drill and ready the men of Companies 1 and 2.

The Village records show the roof of the building had started to leak in 1862 and that, finally, in 1876 a meeting of ratepayers was called and the possibility of 'rebuilding' the town hall was discussed. The result of the meeting was that tenders were called for the rebuilding of the roof in January 1877.

During the 1920's the auditorium was busy. Roman Catholics in the Village put on a play every 17th of March (St Patrick's Day) The Methodists put on a show each Christmas time and the Anglicans had a New Years concert. But it catered to more than just communal activities. Merrickville was on the chataqua circuit, the Dumbells played here. The Bell Ringers and many other Professional acts played beneath the pressed tin ceiling to full houses and enthusiastic audiences.

One of Merrickville's residents remembers the silent -movies shown here. She has good reason to re-member as she accompanied the productions with piano music appropriate for the scene. As she did not view the movies beforehand this called for an extensive musical repertoire and quick reflexes. In fact she remembers clearly once playing an upbeat piece to discover to her horror that the scene had changed to a funeral. She stopped playing fractionally, and then embarked on a suitable dirge.

(Note: I believe this would have been Miss Mary Pearson who was reported to be a fine pianist and who once performed on the piano for Alexander Graham Bell. Mary Pearson, daughter of foundryman William Pearson and granddaughter of Lockmaster John Johnston was very active in the affairs of the Village in the first half of the 20th century.)

- J. Cowan

Right up to the 1940's the hall was popular as a good place for dances. However, the old building had deteriorated badly and it became no longer safe to use. It needed more attention than the village could provide. The hungry thirties had taken their toll. The town hall was sold and the Village offices moved to the fine Victorian building donated by Mary Pearson to the Village to be used for Municipal purposes. From then until the 1960's the Hall passed through successive private owners with only the bare minimum of maintenance conducted, mainly to ensure its preservation.



Mary Pearson

In November of 1982, a group of concerned citizens met and resolved to form a foundation to save and use properties of architectural and historical significance. This resulted in the formation of the Heritage Merrickville Foundation which, with contributions from trustees and generous friends,

acquired the Hall in 1984 and began stabilization and restoration. Old windows and frames were replaced, original lathe and plaster was removed and replaced with fire retardant insulation, vapour barriers and gyproc. Stonework was re-pointed, the pressed tin ceilings and walls in the auditorium were removed, cleaned and replaced and the roof secured.

Since renovations the Hall has been used as the original quarters of the French School, an Art Gallery and as the location for numerous theatrical presentations and Community activities. It now houses a restaurant, an antiques store and , in the basement, where in 150 years ago a drill team practiced, are the Archives of the Merrickville and District Historical Society.

We're Number 2

Towards the end of 2008, The Rideau Canal was proclaimed the second best tourist destination in the world, according to a sustainable tourism survey by the National Geographic Society. Only Austria's Wachau Valley, with its Melk Abbey, a Benedictine monastery overlooking the Danube, surpassed the Rideau Canal in the survey. Down the list were the Great Pyramids, Charleston, S. C., York and Canterbury in England, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, Lunenburg, N. S., Montreal and Niagara-on-the-Lake.

Merrickville drew special recognition from the judges with their comments. "Towns on the route, such as Merrickville, have maintained historic stone buildings, now converted to tourist shops and services."

It is ironic that with such recognition the Village is about to lose its prime heritage hospitality and accommodation facility, the Sam Jakes Inn.

Annual Meeting, November 24, 2009

In her report, President Nina Donald expressed appreciation to the volunteer members of the Committee whose hard work ensured the responsibilities of the Society were fulfilled and the events conducted successfully. Our Blockhouse Museum had another record year

for visitors, despite the economy and rather inclement summer weather and Nina expressed appreciation to Gillian and David Hammonds for the many hours spent in managing this important facility.

President Nina Donald expressed particular appreciation to Ellen Hackett, who marshalled the many Society volunteers who participated in the spring cleanup who staff the Museum prior to the June hiring of the student interpreters and subsequent to their departure in early September.

This year our two excellent students catalogued almost 700 documents into the electronic data base and photographed almost 2000 items in our artefact inventory. The Archive Project funded in part by an Ontario Trillium Foundation grant will ultimately make all these records available to the public though the Historical Society's computer terminal in the Genealogy Room at the Merrickville Library.

As our Ontario Trillium Foundation grant has now expired we may not be in a position to hire a student next year to continue the work and will need to rely on Society volunteers to continue to catalogue the remaining artefacts and any new artefact donations we receive. It is a continuing task, and an extremely valuable Society effort to preserve these precious assets for the benefit of Merrickville-Wolford, and the public at large.

Throughout the year for our lecture series, Victor Suthren did an admirable job of arranging six interesting speakers with topics ranging from pioneer fences to rowing the Rideau.

Denis Faulkner worked with Ellen Hackett this year in arranging the student essay contest. The two of them, and some other Committee volunteers, spent considerable time reading, judging and enjoying the fascinating stories that were submitted. The 16 winners ranging from Grades 4 to 8 were presented with their prizes at the official opening of the Blockhouse in June.

Membership Chair Sheena Cowan reported our membership remains strong at 140 individuals, but is slightly down from last year. Of more concern is the current membership revenue decrease resulting from the large number of members who have chosen the paid up life membership option over the last few years.

President Nina thanked Wayne Poapst for keeping us abreast of the comings and goings of the Agricultural Fairs, and Sharon Parkinson and Dick Hegan who keep us out of the red with our finances and special thanks to our ladies, Janet Glaves and Jane Anne McIntyre, who provide us with the refreshments at our meetings.



Merrickville-Wolford students proudly pose for pictures after receiving school essay contest prizes from Nina Donald and Denis Faulkner during the MDHS Blockhouse Museum, June 2009.

In her concluding remarks, President Donald thanked and acknowledged the substantial funding support which the Historical Society has continued to receive from the Village of Merrickville, the Provincial Government, through the Ministry of Culture, the Federal Government through the Museum Association and Canadian Heritage as well as the Ontario Trillium Foundation..

Merrickville & District Historical Society, Secretary-Treasurer Dick Hegan reported on the financial strength of the Society. Revenues and expenses were on budget and in balance leaving our comfortable reserve in tact. Flowing from the financial success of the 2007 Rideau lectures a reserve of some four thousand two hundred dollars was set up for

special projects related to preservation of history and heritage as outlined in the MDHS constitution.

Blockhouse Museum, report of operations, 2009

The year 2009 was the most successful in terms of revenue and the second highest in terms of attendance, in the 42-years of the Blockhouse Museum.

Although the season began and ended during the 2008-2009 economic recession, the anticipated slump in donations did not materialise, perhaps due in part to individuals and families who chose day trips instead over taking extended vacations. Another factor influencing attendance may have been that regular notices appeared in the "What's On" section of the Ottawa Citizen. The standardised opening times of seven hours per day, seven days a week, first adopted for the summer in 2008, was again used and was made possible through the cooperation of the Parks Canada summer interpretive staff and utilizing archive personnel. Due to the completion of the Ontario Trillium Fund award there will be no archive personnel available in 2010 to assist in Blockhouse interpreter duties. As a result the maintenance of full daily open hours will be a serious challenge to the Society.



"The Fumbling Fingers" entertain visitors on opening day of the Blockhouse Museum, June 2009

Total donations at \$5376 were a record. Recorded visits at 11,617, were the second highest ever and within 3 per cent of the 2007 record. The \$1,684 in donations, and 2036 visits, recorded for the spring and fall were 10% and 4% higher respectively than the previous best.

The Blockhouse Museum cannot be managed without the volunteer contributions of members of the Society. In this regard, the work of Ellen and Art Hackett in rostering volunteer interpreters is acknowledged.

*Gillian and David Hammonds,
Blockhouse Museum Managers*



Gillian and David Hammonds in home away from home, Historical Society Blockhouse Museum

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