

The Merrickville and District Historical Society

NEWSLETTER

Summer 2009

Volume 7 Number 2

On June 20 we celebrated the 43rd official opening of the Blockhouse. Quilters quilted, hookers hooked, piper piped, crier cried and blacksmith smithed. Mayor Doug Struthers, resplendent in period costume (2009), Chain of Office glistening in the afternoon sun, waxed eloquently as he cut the red ribbon for the official opening. And inside the Blockhouse "the Fumbling Fingers" a string group entertained an enthralled group of visitors with period Celtic music.

And again, as for the last 8 years, we took the occasion to present the awards for our school historical essay contest. A record 41 entrants from Merrickville Public School and from Woford Public School competed in two levels for the first. Runner-up and honourable mention categories. Overall a total of 22 prizes were awarded with seventh generation Merrickville resident, Sarah Telford the grades 3,4,5 winner and Calvin Gale the first prize winner in the grade 7,8 category. (All of the essays will be on view on the second floor of the Blockhouse this summer and later the Merrickville Public Library in the Historical Society archives room.)



Some of the talented Merrickville essay contest winners pose with Nina Donald and Denis Faulkners

Most know the story of the Blockhouse's historic past but perhaps less is known of its preservation and the creation of its Museum operated by the Historical Society since 1966. Built, but never used for military defence its main early function had been as centre for Community activities and residence for a succession of lockmasters. Over the years as the Village evolved its usefulness for such purposes had diminished while its state of disrepair had advanced, to the state where it was little more than an historic but deteriorating equipment warehouse. Even so, the importance of the Blockhouse's military heritage was recognized in its naming as a National Historic Site in 1939. But little was done at that time to support this designation until the Village of Merrickville and a group of concerned citizens spearheaded its restoration.



c. 1970 Demolition begins on the Watchorn Woollen Mill built originally by Stephen Merrick in 1848

In the early 1960's the concern became acute when the Department of Transport which had jurisdiction over the Blockhouse at the time, indicated it may be demolished, a fate which had already befallen a number of historic buildings along the Canal and which would spell the demise of other historic Merrickville buildings including the Watchorn Woollen Mill, one of the oldest in Eastern Ontario and operating successfully well into the 1950's.

Fortunately with the support of MP Mrs Jean Wadds, Dr. D. H. Wise, Reeve of the Village of Merrickville, together with a number of concerned citizens led by

Colonel Duncan Douglas, a plan was established and funding developed to completely restore the historic Blockhouse to its original condition. In 1962 the Department of Transport began restoration of the Blockhouse for use as an historical museum and work was completed at the end of 1965.

In 1965, following a public meeting chaired by George P. McMullen and called to discuss the formation of an Historical Society, a Village bylaw provided for the rental of the Blockhouse from the Federal Government and the establishment of a Museum to be operated within by the newly created Merrickville & District Historical Society with the purposes of:

- collecting old Canadiana and other objects of interest to be placed within the Museum,
- the daily operation of the Museum, having in mind more particularly the opening and closing and collecting of admission fees, making sure the said Museum is open to the public for at least 360 hours in a year and at least 60 days within that year;
- arranging financing within the Society through membership fees to the Society, admission fees to the Museum, and all other like methods;

Colonel Duncan Douglas was named the Historical Societies first President and a lease was negotiated with Transport Canada for use of the Blockhouse as a museum. In response to its mandate to collect and display local Canadiana, the countryside was scoured for domestic, agricultural and manufactured artefacts. Many were found and donated to become the Museum's displays. On the second floor of the Museum, the domestic quarters of the Lockmaster John Johnston and his family, who lived there for some twenty years were replicated and fitted with household furnishings of the time.

On June 22, 1966, the Museum was first revealed to the public. The following year, on June 21 the Blockhouse Museum was officially opened by the Lieutenant Governor of Ontario and Federal MP Jack Pickersgill.

Over the next 43 years thousands of visitors have enjoyed the Museum and its displays. Many articles have graduated in the forty years from "stuff in the barn" to valuable antiques and important records of life in earlier times. Last year, new exhibits were added by Parks Canada and a video telling the history of the Rideau Canal. If you have not visited the Blockhouse Museum, drop in for a glimpse of Merrickville's past.

The Balance of the Summer newsletter is reproduced elsewhere on this site under

[McGuigan Cemetery page](#)

Published by The Merrickville & District Historical Society
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