

## Cobourg's mystery building!



Standing in its own simple beauty one of Cobourg's oldest building is definitely one of its most mysterious. On the corner of Orr St. And Durham St., two blocks away from the beach, the limestone structure, that, from the north side looks like an animal barn and from the south side appears to have had many uses, provokes strong opinion. In Cobourg one only has to venture that the building was part of the war of 1812 (an opinion held by some, and hoped to be true by others) and a storm of "letters to the editor" will descend like incoming artillery from the purists and local historians who refuse to believe it. Even the name "The Barracks", adopted by the Cobourg Museum Foundation - the present owners, is controversial but widely accepted.

But the central questions are: where did this building come from and why is it the only building in Cobourg constructed from limestone rubble? Limestone is a rare building material in the town. The inventory of designated homes only has one other limestone building, and local experts only know of two others- clad in stucco or siding, and that house's limestone is of a much later vintage and not of local stone. So who would construct such a building? Such a building would have taken many hours of labour, both to quarry the stone and then

construct the building. In the time period that some people think the place was built the most common form of architecture was wooden frame, hewn from local logs. In Cobourg's earliest time where much of the land was covered with abundant forest wood would have been a far easier choice. Many locals speculate that the source of the stone would have been either low lying stone found along the shoreline or a local quarry. Records indicate that the only known local quarry was located at the end of Henry St, two kilometres away. Speculation has it that the stone came from the shoreline not the quarry. But wherever it came from the haulage of many tons of stone puts an additional cost into the build - and the added cost of manufacturing the limestone mortar. So many questions so few answers.

Adding to the mysterious aura of the site are a few local legends. One is that the building was part of a smuggling operation and that in order to hide illegal activities there was a tunnel leading to the



beach (one has to remember that the lake levels and the shoreline was higher than now 100 years ago). The tunnel has never been found, but evidence of a possible link (a bricked up access in a crawl space) exists in the North side of the

basement in the house to the South. This legend has local resident, and interested committee member, Johanna TerWoort speculating about the site being part of the 'underground railway'. "I've been fascinated by the possibility of another story (the use of the

building) altogether; ever since I heard of the potential tunnel. A tunnel from a house to a beach is the trademark of a successful underground railway". But that is just that, a possibility as there is no known tunnel, but the story resounds.

Local historian Rob Mikel believes that because of its design, which is nearly identical to some buildings in Fort York that the building is a product of Military Engineering built around 1815 to 1820. As to the story about being used in the War of 1812 he says, "I don't discount local lore and this story about 1812 has been passed down through the ages in Cobourg. I am sure that this building is the oldest in Cobourg, maybe 1812 but probably after." He points to a letter from Military Historian Carl Benn that states "The building is perfectly consistent with an 1814 - era soldiers' barracks" He, (Benn) then goes on to suggest that for one to be sure records in the National Archives in Ottawa, and the National Archives in Kew England should be checked. So far nobody has found anything in Ottawa and Kew has yet to be contacted, and in the absence of hard evidence opinion is varied and questions still remain. Complementing the 1812 theory is a letter uncovered by researching High School students (CDCI West) dated 11<sup>th</sup> September 1814, in the Ottawa Archives. This letter, written by the Commanding Officer of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment Northumberland Militia details the "stationing of 1 Sgt. and twelve men at John's Creek (later known as Factory Creek) as there is a quantity of flour at the Mill and a Depot of provisions near that..." It should be noted that the land that the building sits on was Crown land until 1819. All of this history still leads some in Town to speculate that the "barracks" was a military installation. But we will never know, will we?

The main problem for amateur sleuths is that the building has been modified many times and been subject to at least one major fire. The



existing chimneys, one at each end of the building, and the attendant brick work have people puzzled.

One reason is that these chimneys do not fit the supposed original plan of an existing soldiers' barracks and the other is that the changes are made of brick. In fact the alterations made to fit the chimneys raise one more question - what is the

round hole for? Only guesses abound - vents for the merchandise stored inside, if so what kind of

merchandise was it that required such a cross draft, some even call them "owl-holes" locations for owls to access to chase prey out of the stored merchandise.

Finally the attempt to separate fact from fiction led me to the Cobourg Museum Foundation (CMF). This organisation was chartered in 1999 to preserve the building and build a Cobourg Museum. The early pioneers - Doug Sifton and Dave Cook have passed on but Keith Oliver has been involved for most of the time that the CMF has been around. He has been puzzled by the unanswered questions and as he works around the building more and more appear. For instance he wonders why the roof joists were set thirty inches lower than the stone roofline. Perhaps for another storage or sleeping area above the main floor? What was the purpose of the loading door to the loft if the loft wasn't there in the original design? "We know coal slag, presumably from a forge was found in the East end of the building, was that why a chimney was built?" he asks.

Keith Oliver gets enthusiastic when he talks about the future plans for the building. "As the new floor is going to be constructed with a design that allows floor panels to be lifted, we will really be able to discover the history of the building. Some excavation work has gone on but we will be able to examine every inch of the floor at our leisure once the new floor allows us to fully use the building." He further explains future plans: "We are going to open the building shortly and it will be open six months a year." A staircase is in the plans and that is a discussion in itself as no-one knows what an original staircase looks like, or even where it should be sited. The upper floor will lead to an exhibit room with fixed exhibits and a permanent collection. The planned exhibitions will be in the main room downstairs.

Even if the building has produced nearly two hundred years worth of mystery and speculation Keith Oliver and his Board colleagues have no problem in saying that the future is no mystery - the building will play its part as an integral part of the planned "Sifton-Cook Heritage Centre". Cobourg and "barracks" watchers are eagerly waiting.