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ACROSS THE ISLAND

Local Armouries Opened In 1867

By NEIL A. MATHESON

IT WILL be 100 years on Sunday, January 15, since the Armouries-the name was "Drill Hall" then-were opened at the West end of Kent Street. Lieutenant-Governor George Dundas, the then commander-in-chief, looked after the official opening.

A muster of Militia, volunteers and those attending the Militia school then in session were inspected by Governor Dundas and the band was in attendance.

My informant is Major T. E. MacNutt, a man whom I have long regarded as this province's leading military historian.

The original building was 120 feet in length and 60 feet wide. There were 12 windows on each side with a chimney at each end.

There have been many changes in the structure during the years, but the front of the building was the same then as it is today, Major MacNutt tells me.

AN ARMORY was erected for five City companies on the West side of the Drill Hall facing Kent Street, and on April 22, 1872 the Storekeeper was instructed to hand over the compartments to the several companies. Later the roof was raised and the additional space used as an Orderly Room and an office for the caretaker.

New Artillery rooms provided space for banquets and recreational activity – an extension to the West side of the building facing Kent Street, Major MacNutt reports. This part was opened on the evening of April 8, 1897 with a large attendance. This extension was financed by the officers who staged entertainments and other public gatherings to raise funds, the Major reports.

Major additions were made to the building, I am told, around the early 1900's.

Major MacNutt tells me it's possible the Drill Hall had been in use prior to 1867, though it was opened officially at that time.

It may have been used at the time of the "Fenian Raids", Major MacNutt suggests. "A band under John O'Neill crossed the Niagara River from the United States at the end of May 1866, defeated a detached column of Canadian volunteers at Ridgeway on June 2, and escaped from Canada that night before other troops could close in on him", Encyclopaedia Britannica states.

Riel Rebellion Stirs Action

THE RIEL Rebellion in 1866 stirred action here and two service companies from the 82nd Regiment were in training under Captains Daniel Stewart and T. S. MacLeod, but word was received that the rebellion had ended before the Island units were moved. Both these men later commanded the 82nd, Major MacNutt reports.

The old Armouries is soon to be demolished, perhaps to become a parking lot, which is badly needed, but many thousands of old soldiers will regret the passing of this historic building, with all of its associations.

It was the headquarters for the 105th Battalion in the First Great War and served as the quarters for 'A' company which was under the command of Major MacNutt. The

building was heated then by something between 30 and 40 stoves, he tells me, and sleeping cots, three tiers deep, “were all over the place”.

Many banquets were held in the old structure and the annual dinner for the South African War veterans was one of the most important. The dinner was held on February 27, or as close to that date as possible.

That date was the anniversary of Paardeburg, one of the dates South African War veterans – they are all dead now – liked best to remember.

Alfred Riggs And Roland Taylor

ALFRED RIGGS and Roland Taylor, two Charlottetown boys, were the only ones to be killed from the P.E.I. detachment. Roland Taylor was a first cousin of Reg Taylor, well-known Grafton Street jeweler. Alfred Riggs was a brother of the late Mrs. John Cameron, Grafton Street and an uncle of Ralph Cameron of this staff.

Ralph tells me that Alfred Riggs conducted the funeral service for his pal, Roland Taylor. Mr. Riggs wrote home describing the event. But Mr. Riggs was killed himself before the letter arrived.

The story that has come down through Ralph’s family suggests that Alfred Riggs had intended to study for the ministry prior to his war service.

MAJOR MACNUTT recalls that the Provincial Exhibition was held at the old Drill Hall prior to the construction of the Exhibition Buildings at their present site, in 1890.

Displays of farm machinery, dairy and other products of the farm were displayed for competition. There were such items as cooking, fancy work – there must have been weaving – and what about home-made soap?

The sheds for the horses, cattle and other livestock were across Government Pond, close to the Government House fence.

The two sections of the exhibition were connected by a narrow, shaky foot bridge that had been built across the pond and Major MacNutt recalls crossing it as a youngster as he held tightly to his nurse-maid’s hand.

A picture of the original building is carried on page 10 in this issue. It was copied by Gordon White, deputy minister of Highways, from the original owned by Mr. MacNutt.

Readers can possibly see the rows of poultry crates at the bottom of the wall of the main building. They were used for poultry displays when the exhibition was held there.

Prov. Bldg. Opened Jan. 1847

A MANUSCRIPT which Frank Walker, chief editorial writer of this paper, has made available to me states that the Province Building was opened officially on January 26, 1847. So the old building, where Canada was born and where our Legislature still meets, will be 120 years old on the last Thursday of this month.

The old manuscript – it was written in November 1945 – says that William F. P. Bradley, “custodian of the archives”, had found documentary proof that was the date of the official opening.

In the same document was evidence indicating the Court House was opened later the same year.

The Court had met previously in the Province Building. The Supreme Court met for the first time in its new quarters, east of the Province Building – it was called the Colonial Building then – on June 29, 1847.

Official openings of public buildings were often considered to be unnecessary, it appears, and there never was any official opening of the court house, so far as information in the manuscript indicates.

CHIEF JUSTICE E. J. Jarvis presided at the first session in the new court house – it's the one we still have – and the Justices were Haviland and Barrow – the first names are not given.

The Royal Gazette of 120 years ago had some interesting descriptive comment: “A noble entrance, capacious public offices, a large and convenient Court of Justice, with all the necessary accompaniments of jury rooms.”

Of the Province Buildings the Gazette noted “noble halls of Legislation. The Council room is fitted up with much taste and elegance . . . its splendid appearance commands universal approbation.”

The fittings of the throne, draperies etc. was done by Joseph Dodds. The reference here apparently was to what we now know as the Confederation chamber.

Speaking of the Assembly room and the Library – the library was in the Province Building for many years – the Gazette noted “perfect harmony of design and fitting-up”.