

Martello Tower A Community Treasure for Two Centuries

By

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There's no more perfect spot to take in the sweep of Saint John's Harbour and Bay of Fundy coast than from the heights of the West Side's Martello Tower. Surprisingly, we often overlook outstanding and significant examples of our cultural heritage right in our own backyard. Parks Canada protects and presents 162 national historic sites for our and future generations' appreciation and enjoyment. Carleton Martello Tower has been part of our community for one hundred ninety-six years. It was designated a National Historic Site (NHS) in 1924 and has been operated by Parks Canada since 1979.

The multi-storey tower, at one of Saint John's highest points, features a restored gunpowder magazine from the 1840s, a soldiers' barracks from the 1860s, and a 1940s concrete superstructure. Carleton Martello Tower was built during the War of 1812, a conflict between Great Britain and the United States. New Brunswick was valued for its overland route to Lower Canada and Upper Canada. Saint John, as the commercial capital of the province, figured prominently and sparked military concern about the city's vulnerability to American land attack. Its defences were weak so a Martello tower on the heights above Carleton was deemed to be the solution. Four redoubts were recommended but never built, however, work began on the tower in 1813. By the time it was finished in 1815, the war had ended. Between 1796 and 1847, sixteen Martello towers were constructed in British North America. Today, eleven of these military architectural curiosities still stand, for example in Halifax and Kingston ON.

Carleton Martello Tower's unique architecture includes a circular brick pillar supporting a flat roof and arched brick ceiling which, along with the thick walls, were designed to absorb artillery fire. Barracks were on the second floor with entry, storage space and a powder magazine at ground level. In April 1866, the tower was supplied with guns and men to ward off the threat of attack by Fenians, a radical Irish-American group who hoped to capture British North America. It served as a detention centre for deserters during the First World War and as a fire command post for Saint John during the Second World War when a concrete superstructure was added.

Over the last three years, Carleton Martello Tower NHS has undergone substantial improvements to its facilities which have been well received by visitors. The addition of a visitor centre, with an interactive exhibit on martello towers around the world, the history of Saint John during the War of 1812 period and an opportunity to view a short audio-visual presentation about the history of the site are some of the new features.

Anne Bardou, the site manager states "The Carleton Martello Tower National Historic Site would not be the same without its friendly and knowledgeable staff." She is responsible for an annual budget, exhibit development, staffing, and overall program development. In the summer months seven persons work there. The site supervisor is Patricia Dickeson. She oversees the day-to-day operation of the site, and has developed programs the visitors' programs. Activities such as Tower Hour, Saint John Privateers and the Martello Music Series were initiated with the intent of attracting local residents, and visitors to the city alike, and to take part in programs that are fresh and engaging. "The children always love to dress up as a British soldier" she adds. Last year, almost 14,000 visitors were logged. The figures for 2009 appear to be increasing slightly.

Guillaume Larocque Beaudin is a summer student interpreter. He is enthusiastic about the updated new programs which appeal to all ages. Tower Hour is an hour-long weekly program, (offered in French and English) where kids can explore the tower's and the city's history in a fun way with crafts, games, and art. Local children and youth are particularly welcome. Saint John Privateers is a Sunday afternoon family activity where participants learn, in either official language, about Saint John sailors during the War of 1812 who were privateers. The Martello Music Series takes place every month, with a different area musician presenting a concert within the barracks of the Tower, a room with magnificent acoustics. Brent Mason, the Saint John String Quartet, Debbie Adshade and Terry Moxness have already performed. On September 5, the Music Series will feature the a cappella group, Before the Mast.

Carleton Martello Tower at 454 Whipple Street is open to visitors from June 1 to the first weekend of October from 10:00 am to 5:30 pm. There is a modest admission fee of \$1.90/child over 5, \$3.90/adult or \$9.80/family.

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Photo: John, 5, Will, 7 and Kaelin, Barry 9, join Erica McInnis, interpreter, left, and Anne Bardou, right, Manager of the Carleton Martello Tower, during one of the new programs available weekly at the National Historic Site.



Community Profile is a weekly column highlighting community causes and work done by non-profit organizations in the Greater Saint John area. It is contributed by Jane Barry, executive director of The Greater Saint John Community Foundation. Contact the foundation at 506-672-8880. To view other Community Profiles go to www.saint-john-foundation.nb.ca