
FHBRO Number 90-305

Prescott, Ontario

Fort Wellington Caponnière

Fort Wellington NHS

The caponnière at Fort Wellington was constructed in 1839 as part of the redevelopment of the earthworks of the fort in 1838-39. The drawings and cross-sections were prepared by Lieutenant Crawley of the Royal Engineers. The fort has been operated as a National Historic Site by Parks Canada since the 1920s. The Department of Canadian Heritage is the custodian. See FHBRO Building Report 90-305.

Reasons for Designation

The caponnière has been designated Recognized because of its environmental qualities, its historical associations, and also for its built qualities.

The caponnière has a strong physical presence and local landmark value, jutting out of the earthworks into the south ditch and contributing significantly to the defensive military character of the complex. Of all the fort buildings, its site is best preserved, with the relationship to the earthworks, the entrance passageway, the palisade and the south ditch remaining largely as they were historically.

The building is related to the active defence of Upper Canada in the context of the upper St. Lawrence frontier in the post-Rebellion era, when the threat of an American invasion prompted military authorities to upgrade the principal fortifications in Upper Canada and to improve the defensible works along the Rideau Canal. Fort Wellington was a “revolt station” or a focal point for the militia in the event of a crisis. As part of the fort, the caponnière is also broadly related to the development of the garrison community within the fort, and with the development of the town of Prescott in the late 1830s and the 1840s, when military affairs and the military presence dominated the community.

Composed of thick rubble stone walls pierced by 23 loopholes, and covered with a ceiling of heavy logs under a curved roof structure, the caponnière was integral to the defence of the fort by providing riflemen with a sweeping fire of the south ditch and thereby preventing invaders from breaching the fort’s outer defences. Its graceful curving south end is as beautiful as it is functional.

Character Defining Elements

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The heritage character of the caponnière at Fort Wellington resides in features expressing its military function, including its solid masonry walls with loopholes, its roof structure of exposed logs at the interior and water-shedding roof above, in the interior volumes of the tunnel and single interior space, and in site relationships with the fort complex.

The caponnière's simple massing consists of low masonry walls laid in a U-shaped footprint. The curving southern end of the structure (the bottom of the U) is followed by the curve of the pitched roof, creating a prow-like massing that permitted a sweeping defence of the south ditch. The northern end of the structure disappears into the earthworks, where it narrows to a tunnel leading under the earthen mound and out into the fort interior. The massing is integral to the function and character of the caponnière and should not be compromised.

Much of the character of the caponnière derives from its materials, which are generally robust and heavily textured in keeping with the defensible nature of the building: massive masonry walls, evenly coursed at the exterior face, roughly coursed at the interior; stone slab flooring; and heavy log interior ceiling. The roof covering, currently metal shingles dating from 1975, is based on the assumption that the original material would have been wood or tin. The materials merit ongoing conservation attention and expertise. The choice of mortar composition and the mortar joint profile has an aesthetic as well as technical significance that must be considered in any repointing program. The building poses a challenge for improving drainage without affecting the character of the site. Any modifications in this regard must be carefully considered and should be as unobtrusive as possible.

At the interior, the long narrow masonry tunnel and the single open space with its stone slab floor and access to loopholes clearly illustrate the function of the structure. The heavy log roof (which may have originally supported boards and earth) is an important feature of the defensible design of the building. The timber roof structure above has been renewed. However, portions of the current roof framing may date from the 1920s. The interior character is the product of its materials and volumes, which should not be changed.

The setting of the caponnière, jutting out of the earthworks into the south ditch, is integral to its function and to the defence of the fort as a whole. The simple, rough, untended character of the setting is appropriate; it should not be developed, beautified

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or obscured. Any excavation should be preceded by salvage archaeology.

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For further guidance, please refer to the *FHBRO Code of Practice*.
