

Historic Armoury featured in Doors Open Aurora



By Laura Beaton
Curatorial Assistant
Aurora Museum & Archives

It has been said that there has been no other militia regiment with a closer association with the Town of Aurora than the first American Regiment, the Queen's York Rangers who spent most of their time based in the Aurora Armoury.

The Aurora Armoury was built in 1874 as a drill shed for the 12th Battalion of Infantry (York Rangers). It was the oldest purpose-built armoury in Ontario still in use by the Canadian military until 2014 when it was purchased by the Town of Aurora.

The building was listed on the Canadian Register and designated by the Ontario Heritage Trust in 2007.

Although Newmarket was the original headquarters for the first American Regiment, Aurora became the new headquarters in 1874, particularly because of the advantage of having a railway line nearby.

Toronto's Evening Globe reported the drill shed being raised on May 21, 1874 in the current location at Town Park, which was ideal for Battalion drills. The Armoury was constructed in part with the post confederation expansion of the militia.

With Canada taking responsibility of its own defence, away from Great Britain, there was a need for strong militia regiments. There were many militia buildings built in the 1860s and onwards to prepare military units for the Civil War in the United States, the Fenian Raids and the Red River Rebellion.

The York Rangers began with the veteran Rangers of the American Revolutionary War, many of whom helped with the construction of Yonge Street in the 1790s. The York Rangers were active in the War of 1812 and defended Toronto against Mackenzie's rebels in 1837 under the title 'The Queen's Rangers.'

In September 1866, units from Canadian Militia and County of York (including Aurora Infantry Company which formed in 1862) joined together to form the 12th York Battalion of Infantry.

In 1915, the 12th Battalion moved to Toronto and by the 1920s, after World War I a small section of Queen's York Rangers called York Rangers made their headquarters in Aurora. The Queen's York Rangers were mobilized again during World War II and were an armoured unit from 1947-1965.

The Aurora Armoury was originally built as a simple large, but functional, barn-like structure, with an open space. It was designed by Walter Moberly for the Department of Militia and Defence as both a drill shed and armoury. Throughout the years it has been renovated many times to improve the use of the building.

In 1942 the building was remodeled with new floors, new lighting and heating equipment and the exterior was covered with new lumber and paint. There was also aluminum siding which reflected a more modern and utilitarian style. A lecture room was also created at the south end.

Historically, the drill shed was used to maintain the skills for part-time soldiers. In case of a civil/national emergencies or disturbance, or natural disaster, the militia would be called for help or asked to volunteer for a longer period of time.

An example of this occurred in 1885 when Louis Riel rose against the government in Canada West and the 12th Battalion volunteered with the 35th Simcoe Foresters to form a battalion.

The Armoury was also the site where Edward Blake, former Ontario Premier in 1874, gave his famous "Aurora Speech". This was one of the most memorable historical and cultural events that took place at the Aurora Armoury.

Blake expressed his dissatisfaction with the Liberal Party and Prime Minister Alexander Mackenzie. He called for the imperial federation to improve Canada on an international level and spoke about the importance of drill halls and armouries.

The Aurora Armoury had different uses aside from participating in various wars, including civil purposes to emergency shelter the homeless as well as being part of a network of defence training facilities for citizen soldiers. They had continued to evoke the traditions of Ontario's militia regiment, regional recruitment and continued its close relationship with Aurora and surrounding area.

Most recently the "A" Squadron of the Queen's York Rangers used the Aurora Armoury for various activities, including citizenship and leadership training to youth before moving to another facility in Aurora in 2014.

Doors Open rolls out across Aurora on Saturday, August 15. For more information, visit www.aurora.ca/doorsopen.