

On Wednesday, November 7, 2007 at 7:30 p.m., the Ontario Heritage Trust and The Queen's York Rangers (1<sup>st</sup> American Regiment) (RCAC) unveiled a provincial plaque to commemorate the Aurora Armoury at the armoury in Aurora, Ontario.

The bilingual plaque reads as follows:

### **AURORA ARMOURY**

Built in 1874 as a drill shed for the 12th Battalion of Infantry or York Rangers, the Aurora Armoury was part of a network of defence training facilities for citizen soldiers. It evokes the larger stories and traditions of the province's militia regiments, recruited regionally, and possessing close affiliations with their communities of origin. The armoury was also the site of Edward Blake's famous "Aurora speech" of 1874, in which the prominent politician and former Ontario premier called upon the federal government of Liberal Prime Minister Alexander Mackenzie to implement nationalistic and electoral reforms. The speech exemplifies how drill halls and armouries fulfil civic roles in the lives of their communities. The oldest purpose-built armoury still used by the military in Ontario, the Aurora drill shed is home to elements of The Queen's York Rangers (1<sup>st</sup> American Regiment) (RCAC).

### **MANÈGE MILITAIRE D'AURORA**

Construit en 1874 comme remise de bois pour les exercices militaires du 12<sup>e</sup> bataillon d'infanterie ou York Rangers, le manège militaire d'Aurora faisait partie d'un réseau d'installations de formation en matière de défense des citoyens soldats. Il rappelle l'histoire et les traditions des régiments de la milice de la province, recrutés dans la région, et il est étroitement lié aux communautés d'origine. Le manège militaire fut également le site du célèbre « discours d'Aurora » prononcé par Edward Blake, en 1874, dans lequel le célèbre homme politique et ancien premier ministre de l'Ontario demandait au gouvernement fédéral du premier ministre libéral Alexander Mackenzie d'introduire des réformes nationalistes et électorales. Le discours explique les rôles civiques joués par les salles d'exercices et les manèges militaires dans la vie de leur collectivité. Le plus vieux manège militaire construit à ces fins et encore utilisé par les forces armées en Ontario, le manège de bois d'Aurora abrite des éléments des Queen's York Rangers (1<sup>st</sup> American Regiment) (CBRC).

## **Historical background**

### **Introduction**

The Aurora Armoury, built as a drill shed in 1874, is the oldest purpose-built armoury still used by the military in Ontario. It is an evocative link to the larger history of the province's militia regiments, recruited regionally, and possessing close affiliations with their communities. It also was the site of Edward Blake's famous "Aurora speech" of 1874, which – in addition to its own importance – exemplified how military facilities fulfil civic roles, both locally and in the larger world.

### **Aurora Township and the construction of the Drill Shed**

The Aurora Drill Shed was one of many similar structures built from the 1860s onward. Several military crises rattled the population of late-colonial and early post-Confederation Canada, including the Anglo-American tensions associated with the Civil War in the United States, the Fenian Raids, the Red River Rebellion and the withdrawal of the British army garrisons by 1871. The formation of volunteer militia units during the period surrounding Confederation reflected the young country's growing concern over defence vulnerability.

As Canada took over responsibility for its own defence from Britain, drill sheds and armouries were constructed as a response to the associated challenges and initiatives. These facilities reflected the increased emphasis being placed on defence during the period, the importance of the militia to Canadian security and the development of the military profession in Canada. Drill sheds, such as the one in Aurora, allowed the volunteer militia to train during inclement weather and in the evenings when there was no natural light for outdoor drill. Often they were financed as partnerships between local governments or militia regiments and the Dominion of Canada, which typically paid half the construction costs.<sup>1</sup>

In November 1873, the Aurora Township Council decided to inform Canadian military authorities that it would grant land for, and build, a battalion drill shed "according to the plans and specifications required by the Militia Department," if council were to receive "the grant allowed for that purpose." It also asked that the headquarters of the local volunteer regiment, the 12th Battalion of Infantry or York Rangers, be moved from Newmarket to Aurora.<sup>2</sup> (That unit is the predecessor of today's Queen's York Rangers, which continues to station part of its strength at the Aurora Armoury.)<sup>3</sup>

In late December 1873, the Department of Militia and Defence authorized the change in headquarters. Like Newmarket, Aurora had the advantage of being on a railway line, but was thought to be a more convenient assembly point in an emergency for the eight companies of the regiment scattered at that time across York County between Scarborough and King (with several companies concentrated more or less along the Yonge Street corridor).<sup>4</sup>

The Aurora Armoury belongs to an early generation of militia buildings that were often simple utilitarian wooden halls. In February 1874, The Toronto *Globe* carried an advertisement from the township, calling for tenders to furnish material and erect a drill shed.<sup>5</sup> William Ireland, a local builder of barns and similar structures, won the contract and put up the shed in the spring, with the objective of having it ready for use in June.<sup>6</sup> In September, the township deeded the land occupied by the building to the Crown.<sup>7</sup>

In the spring of 1874, Aurora was a railway village of 1,200 people about 40 kilometres north of Toronto on Yonge Street. It had several factories and churches, and its shops and other businesses served the town and the surrounding rural areas.<sup>8</sup> Its future was bright enough that a newspaper in the rival community of Newmarket acknowledged that Aurora “seems to have entered upon an era of unusual prosperity” with some 30 buildings under construction, but went on to say that few of them were “of an imposing or expensive nature, the most part being frame tenement houses.”<sup>9</sup> At the time, the drill shed was located at the corner of Larmont and Mosley streets. In 1888, Aurora became an incorporated town with a population of 2,100.<sup>10</sup>

### **Edward Blake’s “Aurora speech”**

Drill sheds and armouries have been used for a wide number of civil purposes, ranging from venues for fancy dress balls to emergency shelters for the homeless. They have thus contributed to the life of their communities beyond their martial functions. The most famous event that occurred at the Aurora Drill Shed was Edward Blake’s “Aurora speech” of October 3, 1874, which took place a few months after the building was completed. Blake, a former premier of Ontario, moved to federal politics in 1873, but left the government of Liberal Prime Minister Alexander Mackenzie over his dissatisfaction with its policies and leadership. Before a large crowd, Blake attacked the Liberals, calling for imperial federation to improve Canada’s voice on the international stage, electoral reforms (such as expanding the franchise) and other changes of a reform and nationalistic nature. The speech received considerable publicity and destabilized the Liberal party for a time until Blake re-entered Mackenzie’s cabinet as Minister of Justice in 1875.<sup>11</sup>

### **The militia at the Armoury**

The Victorian and Edwardian militia used its time in drill sheds, summer camps and elsewhere to maintain its skills at the level of competence expected of the era’s part-time soldiers. When needed during a natural disaster, civil disturbance or national emergency, the militia either could be called out to address a short-term problem or be asked to volunteer for an extended period of service. A high point in the 12th Battalion’s history came in 1885 when Louis Riel rose against the government in the Canadian west. Many of its members joined volunteers from the 35th Simcoe Foresters to form a composite battalion which Ottawa deployed in what is

now Saskatchewan. During the South African War of 1899-1902, the 12th offered to travel to the war zone as a unit. The government declined the offer, but individuals from the regiment sailed to Africa as volunteers in other units.<sup>12</sup>

In 1873, when the 12th Battalion moved its headquarters to Aurora, the Battalion's companies (military units comprising about 100 soldiers each) were dispersed throughout the area in Scarborough, Markham, Unionville, Aurora, Newmarket, Sharon, Sutton and King. As part of Canadian defence reorganization during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the 12th Battalion – with the exception of the Aurora (or B) Company – began relocating to a more concentrated geographical region within today's City of Toronto where recruiting was easier.

By 1885, some companies had already moved into Toronto. By the eve of the First World War, these were located in North Toronto, Riverside (Riverdale), Yorkville, Seaton (the Bathurst-Bloor area), downtown, Parkdale and West Toronto. Only B Company, with its drill shed, remained in Aurora.<sup>13</sup>

During the First World War, the regiment contributed men to the Canadian Expeditionary Force, including the 4th, 20th, 35th, 81st, 83rd, 127th and 220th Battalions. The 127th, with a strong link to the Aurora region, had so many railway men in its ranks that it served as a railway rather than an infantry battalion, being deployed to build and maintain the rail lines that supplied the Western Front against Germany. Regimental headquarters for the 12th moved from Aurora to Yorkville in Toronto in 1915.<sup>14</sup>

After the war, the regiment went through various reorganizations until 1936 when it became The Queen's York Rangers (1st American Regiment). During that period, from 1920-36, a rural and small-town-based battalion known as the York Rangers had its headquarters in Aurora. During the Second World War, the regiment was mobilized but remained in Canada as part of the home defence force. It supplied 124 officers and 1,891 other ranks to other overseas regiments. The Queen's York Rangers was a machine gun battalion from 1936-42, a rifle battalion from 1942-47, an armoured unit between 1947 and 1965, and then became a reconnaissance regiment, remaining a vital element within the Royal Canadian Armoured Corps.<sup>15</sup>

### **Alterations to the building**

When first built, the interior of the barn-like armoury was a simple, large, open space that provided shelter to congregating and training troops. The structure has since gone through various renovations, with the result that it is much-changed from its original condition, although it fundamentally occupies the same footprint that it did when new.<sup>16</sup> For example, in 1895, the military installed a floor and made other improvements.<sup>17</sup> In 1923, engineering and other military officers decided, according to one newspaper, that the "hoary old structure, the

Aurora Drill Hall” needed work, and sent a report to Ottawa with their suggestions for improvements.<sup>18</sup> In 1941-42 the army re-clad and painted the armoury’s exterior and installed a new floor, latrines, lighting and heating, moved the offices and mess rooms to the north end of the building, and created a quarter-master’s store and lecture room at the south end.<sup>19</sup> Other changes in modern times, such as installing aluminum siding, have given the building its current utilitarian appearance.<sup>20</sup> Today, the interior of the one-storey structure comprises a large, central drill space, lined with a canteen and officer’s mess located on the south side and offices and meeting rooms along the west wall. A set of large, double doors is located centrally along the east side.<sup>21</sup>

The Aurora Armoury is a modest and utilitarian structure when compared to the architecture of third-generation military establishments built in Canada during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Impressive examples of these later, imposing, fortress-like structures were the armouries located in London and Peterborough. More typical, subdued halls were built in centres like Chatham and Brockville. Often, as was the case in Peterborough, these post-1896<sup>22</sup> drill halls replaced many deteriorated and otherwise inadequate wooden sheds built in the 1860s and 1870s. The new buildings, substantially constructed of brick or stone, were planned to provide both specialized and multi-use spaces for the various physical and regimental aspects of military training. Facilities included large open spaces for drills and exercise, shooting galleries, lecture rooms and libraries.

Despite its less lofty ambitions, the Aurora Armoury has persisted and remains an important and thriving facility some 130 years after its creation.

### **The Armoury today**

Today, the Aurora Armoury is home to part of The Queen’s York Rangers (1st American Regiment) (RCAC). It also serves the 2799 Royal Canadian Army Cadet Corps (affiliated with the Rangers), which provides citizenship and leadership training to young people within a military environment.<sup>23</sup> In looking back at the building’s history from the 1870s, one can see how this typical small-town military facility is representative of the evolution of local drill sheds and armouries and of the regionally based military units that use them, along with the additional story of how such facilities play non-military roles in the lives of their communities.<sup>24</sup>

### **Appendix: The volunteer militia/army reserve associated with the Aurora Armoury<sup>25</sup>**

#### **1862 Aurora Infantry Company**

- formed at the time of the Anglo-American tensions of the Trent Affair during the American Civil War

- comprised “volunteer militia” who received more training and better equipment than the old “sedentary militia,” which had been established in Upper Canada in the 1790s and which comprised most of the able-bodied male population, and which continued to exist, at least on paper, after the formation of volunteer militia in the 1850s-60s

### **1866 12th York Battalion of Infantry**

- created through the amalgamation of the Aurora and other York County volunteer infantry companies at the time of the Fenian Crisis

### **1872 12th Battalion of Infantry or York Rangers**

- in 1885, volunteers from the battalion and the 35th Simcoe Foresters formed a composite York-Simcoe Battalion for service in the Northwest Rebellion
- the 12th offered to mobilize for the South African War, but Ottawa turned down the offer, although individuals from the unit went to Africa

### **1900 12th Regiment, York Rangers**

- at the outbreak of the First World War, men of the regiment joined various battalions of the Canadian Expeditionary Force as the government did not mobilize the existing militia regiments for overseas service, with the regiment itself being involved in recruiting for the 4th, 20th, 35th, 81st, 83rd, 127th and 220th Battalions; while many decorations were awarded for bravery, three individuals from the Battalion won the Victoria Cross
- the headquarters moved from Aurora to Yorkville in Toronto

### **1920 York Rangers**

- reorganized in 1922 as a two-battalion corps and authorized to perpetuate the memory of the 35th, 127th and 220th Battalions (while the 20th Battalion was perpetuated with the formation of another unit, the West Toronto Regiment, formed in 1921)
- the 1st Battalion was fundamentally a rural unit, headquartered in Aurora, with other companies of the 1st Battalion in 1922 located in Mount Dennis, Mimico, and Markham
- the 2nd Battalion was an urban unit, headquartered in Yorkville

### **1925 York Rangers and Queen’s Rangers**

- the 1st Battalion continued in existence as the York Rangers
- the 2nd Battalion of the York Rangers amalgamated with the West Toronto Regiment to form a new unit, the Queen’s Rangers, which in 1927 became the Queen’s Rangers, 1st American Regiment to honour the service of a predecessor loyalist unit from the American Revolution commanded by John

Graves Simcoe (which was disbanded at the end of the war, and then re-raised as a British army regiment for service in Upper Canada between 1791 and 1802)

### **1936 The Queen's York Rangers, 1st American Regiment**

- the York Rangers and the Queen's Rangers amalgamated into a one-battalion regiment with headquarters at Fort York Armouries in Toronto, but with part of its strength at the Aurora Armoury
- during the Second World War, the Rangers remained in Canada as part of the home defence force although many of its members joined regiments that served overseas
- it was designated a machine gun battalion from 1936-42 and a rifle battalion from 1942-47

### **1947 25th Armoured Regiment (The Queen's York Rangers)**

- equipped with Sherman tanks

### **1949 The Queen's York Rangers, 1st American Regiment (25th Armoured Regiment)**

### **1958 The Queen's York Rangers, 1st American Regiment, (RCAC)**

- Sherman tanks withdrawn; the Rangers became an armoured reconnaissance regiment but retained Sherman tanks until 1971

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<sup>1</sup> Jackie Adell, "The structural design of the early drill sheds in Canada," *Society for the Study of Architecture in Canada Bulletin* 16/2 (1991), 42-45.

<sup>2</sup> Township of Aurora Minute Book, 1872-80, 81, meeting of November 22, 1874, Archives of Ontario, GS-5776.

<sup>3</sup> A.T. Hunter, *History of the 12th Regiment, York Rangers* (Toronto: Murray Printing Company, c.1912), 45-53; and Stewart H. Bull, *The Queen's York Rangers: an historic regiment*, revised edition (Guelph: Ampersand Printing, 1993), 130-31 et passim.

<sup>4</sup> Bull, *Rangers*, 138.

<sup>5</sup> *Toronto Globe*, February 10 and 11, 1874.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, May 22, 1874; *Newmarket Courier*, May 28, 1874; and communication from Catherine Molloy, Aurora Historical Society, February 21, 2007. Donald E. Graves, of Library and Archives Canada, searched for data on the construction of the drill shed, checking Record Group 9 (Militia Records), Record Group 11 (Public Works) and Record Group 24 (National Defence) without success. The holdings of Aurora Township records held at the Archives of Ontario (GS-5776) include a microfilm that might contain the armoury building plans. This was

unavailable.

<sup>7</sup> Deed of land from the Corporation of the Township of Aurora to Queen Victoria, September 4, 1874, in Abstract index for town hall or market block (Town Park), plan 68, in Ontario Heritage Trust (OHT) research file on the Aurora Armoury, 2003-06.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Pelham Mulvany, *History of Toronto and County of York* (Toronto: C. Blackett Robinson, 1885), vol. 1, 185-86.

<sup>9</sup> *Newmarket Courier*, May 28, 1874.

<sup>10</sup> Aurora Public Library – website on the History of Aurora, accessed February 2006.

<sup>11</sup> Ben Forster and Jonathan Swainger, Edward Blake biography, *Dictionary of Canadian Biography online*, accessed March 2007; and W.S. Wallace, ed., “Edward Blake’s Aurora speech, 1874,” *Canadian Historical Review* 2 (1921), 249-71.

<sup>12</sup> Bull, *Rangers*, 139-46.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 137-38, 147-48; and Hunter, *12th Regiment*, 58.

<sup>14</sup> Bull, *Rangers*, 149-74; and *The regiments and corps of the Canadian army* (Ottawa: Minister of National Defence, 1964), vol. 1, 65-66.

<sup>15</sup> Bull, *Rangers*, 175-207.

<sup>16</sup> This can be seen by comparing the current building to its presentation on the map of Aurora in William Canniff, *Illustrated historical atlas of the county of York, and the township of West Gwillimbury and town of Bradford in the county of Simcoe, Ontario* (Toronto: Miles and Company, 1878).

<sup>17</sup> *Aurora Banner*, May 17, 1895, in OHT research file; and “Military properties construction and repairs,” in *Sessional papers of the Dominion of Canada* (Ottawa: Queen’s Printer, 1896), 1-29. Other editions of *Sessional papers* list various expenditures, such as \$30 for drainage in 1887; and, in 1888, noted that “considerable repairs have been made to the drill shed in Aurora” (*Sessional papers* [Ottawa: Queen’s Printer, 1888, 1889], 2-145 and 13-246).

<sup>18</sup> Unidentified newspaper clipping, 1923, in OHT research file.

<sup>19</sup> *Aurora Banner*, January 9, 1942, in OHT research file.

<sup>20</sup> Letter from Jacqueline Stuart, Aurora Museum, to Jackie Adell, Parks Canada, February 12, 1991, including a 1988 photograph, in OHT research file.

<sup>21</sup> After the Second World War, when The Queen’s York Rangers became an armoured corps, Sherman tanks were brought in through the east doors to be stored in the building. Later, when the Regiment became a reconnaissance unit, armoured jeeps were brought in and out of the building this way.

<sup>22</sup> Thirty-four large stone drill halls or armouries were built by the Department of Public Works throughout the country, during 1896-1918. This period signalled a shift from total dependence on a poorly-trained part-time militia toward partial dependence on a better trained one – one that eventually would supplement a regular army when necessary.

<sup>23</sup> Department of National Defence websites, accessed February 2006 re: 32 Canadian Brigade Group, Queen’s York Rangers, and 2799 QYR Army Cadets.

<sup>24</sup> Those who wish to learn more about the Regiment can visit the Regimental Museum located in Fort York Armoury, Toronto.

<sup>25</sup> Bull, *Rangers*, 226 et passim; and *Regiments and corps of the Canadian army*, vol. 1, 65-66.