



The Historical Society of St. Catharines

P.O. Box 25017, 221 Glendale Avenue, Pen Centre,
St. Catharines, Ontario L2T 4C4

Our mission and goal: to increase the knowledge and appreciation of the history of St. Catharines and area. The Society was founded in 1927.
Our Society is affiliated with the Ontario Historical Society.

Our website is: <http://stcatharineshistory.wordpress.com>

December 2013 Newsletter

Lecture Program –January 23, 2014 through May 22, 2014

Program Subject to Change

SPECIAL NOTICE

Thursday, JANUARY 23 Meeting at Masonic Lodge (corner Centre & Court Streets)

Richard Green will present an outline of the History of St. George's Lodge A.F. & A.M., No. 15 G.R.C. He will be talking about the Founders, Fathers, Freemasons who have left a great many legacies in most Masonic Lodges, and St. George's has many.

If you plan to attend, a Lodge or Society member will greet you in the lower hall to let you in. Members and their guests only are invited -- this meeting will not be advertised outside of the Society. Please arrive between 7:00 and 7:30 p.m. to avoid having to use the call button and intercom system (simply press the button) and require someone to respond and let you in during the presentation.

Parking for the Masonic Temple is in the parking lot on the north side of the building. The door to access the Lodge is located centrally up a flight of about four steps. Unfortunately there is no elevator in the building. The main entrance on the Centre Street side of the building leads to the Conservatory of Music located downstairs. The Lodge is upstairs, on the second floor, and the presentation will take place within the lodge room there.

Thursday, February 27, 2014

Autos and Auto People of St. Catharines - a 50 minute, 5-part presentation by five Society members:

1. **The Olds and St. Catharines** by Kathy Powell
2. **The REO and St. Catharines**, along with other museum artifacts by Anthony Percival
3. **He started McKinnon Industries: Lachlan McKinnon** by Bill Stevens

4. **He went to the top of the auto industry: Harry Carmichael** by John Bacher
5. **Sadler: his auto electric business and race cars** by Dez Corran

At the St. Catharines Museum.

Thursday, March 27, 2014

Presentation by Roger Bradshaw -- **A Photographic Journey of Canadian War Memorials, Battlefield Sites and Cemeteries throughout Europe** featuring photos that Roger took on his most recent trip. At the St. Catharines Museum.

Thursday, April 24, 2014 - Annual Meeting and Elections

Talk by Brian Narhi, Society Vice President and President nominee.

Topic: **The Parnell and Read Families: an illustrated talk based upon personal papers of Fred Parnell** who was the Historical Society's first president. At the St. Catharines Museum .

Thursday, May 22, 2014

Presentation by Mike Babiski -- Topic: **History of Diving in St. Catharines and Niagara** including artifacts display. At the St. Catharines Museum.

SOCIETY NEWS

The Society gratefully acknowledges the support of the Ontario Ministry of Tourism and Culture

November 28, 2013 General Meeting Report. For this year's annual show and tell meeting, we asked members to bring artifacts, old photos and collectibles and spend up to 5 minutes telling us about them. Below is a list of some of the items that were displayed at the meeting:

- A lantern with a wooden handle believed to be from the Grand Trunk Railway.
- An advertising brochure entitled "Planning a Motor Trip to Port Dalhousie", circa 1920s/1930s.
- A large hinge which came from one of the mills at Palatine Hill on Lakeshore Road, Niagara-on-the-Lake. There was also a sketch of the area and mill (which is no longer there). The presenter noted that there were battles in this area during the War of 1812 and artifacts from that time have been unearthed there.
- Three art works by local artist Julie Snider showing the Canada Hair Cloth building, the area behind St. Paul Street in downtown St. Catharines and a drawing of the presenter's former house on Glenridge Avenue.
- A 1952 photo of canning company employees and an aerial photo, both of Port Dalhousie, and a photo from the BME Church showing the "All Coloured Hockey" team referred to as "the only one in Canada at the time"

- A brass paper weight, which was originally part of a war head, made by the presenter's family foundry in Hamilton.
- A framed World War One piece of sheet music with the name Nellie Parnell written on it. After considerable research on the Internet, the presenter found that she was a member of St. Paul Street Church choir and the daughter of Fred Parnell, the first president of the Lincoln Historical Society. Another name on the paper was John W. Bradley, with whom Nellie exchanged letters, and who was killed just three months before the end of the war.
- A framed display of arrowheads and stone neck ornaments.
- A 1925 St. Catharines Collegiate year book with three pages of autographs at the back.
- A photo by St. Catharines photographer Edwin Poole who worked from St. Paul Street in the 1870s and died in 1931. The whereabouts of his glass plate collection is unknown.
- A collection of Provincial maps, including one from 1964, showing the Garden City Skyway. Others included those put out by gas companies such as Shell and Esso, the Eaton Company, Canadian Tire and Kentucky Fried Chicken.

Society Notes

Welcome! The Historical Society of St. Catharines is pleased to welcome the following members who joined in 2013: *Tom Brooks, Paul Chapman, Matthew Goodman, Robert Johnson, Bob Sennett, Natalie Audette-Spina, Francie McGlynn and Stan Skrzyszewski.*

Membership Dues Reminder ... Your Society membership was due on September 1, 2013. We remind you to send in your dues if you have not already done so! If you wish to receive a membership card, contact Joe O'Brien at <jobrienhdsboard@gmail.com>. We will also start sending the newsletter to members by e-mail, so we ask that you provide your e-mail address on the membership form.

NEWSLETTER NOTES

The Historical Society of St. Catharines Newsletter is published up to four times per year. The purpose is to inform the membership of issues pertaining to the Society and items of historical interest. Comments and queries should be directed to the Society's postal address. Opinions and comments expressed in the Newsletter are those of the writers and do not necessarily reflect those of the Society. Subscription to the Newsletter is by paid membership only. This issue edited by Dave Willer.

Submission Deadline for the March 2014 Newsletter is February 15, 2014

Gordon Merritt and his Museum Involvement

After the publication of the article on Gordon Merritt in our last issue of the newsletter, Alex Ormston pointed out that Gordon was a key person in the establishment of the St. Catharines Museum. He was a member of the original Chamber of Commerce Committee which proposed the museum and sought municipal and provincial approvals. Subsequently, a museum was established in 1965 and a board was appointed by council. Gordon was elected chair of the board on August 24, 1965 and served in that position until 1970. During 1965 and 1966 he held both the position of museum committee chair and president of the historical society. He saw the museum through its formative years, including the museum opening in June of 1967 in the former Merritton Town Hall.

Lundy's Lane
25 July 1814

We five thousand men and boys
of America, Britain and Canada
slaughtered each other
with musket, sword and cannon.

From seven till midnight,
we cracked heads and broke bones,
lopped limbs and seared flesh,
until the stench and smoke were like Hades.

In the disorder and damnation of the ink-black darkness,
five hours in, we were thirsty and dreamt of water,
like the rich man sent to Hell in the story of Lazarus,
but there was no water for the living dead of Lundy's Lane.

Near the end, we awoke to a night vision: no water, no battle.
Parched and weary, burdened with our dead and wounded,
we parted company as gentlemen, ever so gingerly,
accompanied by the water music of Niagara Falls.

Michael Power

Prynce Nesbitt
By Gail Benjafield

This last October, 2013, the Niagara Artists Centre (NAC) on St. Paul St. held a retrospective of local artist Prynce Nesbitt's work. It is arguably the first ever exhibition of most of Nesbitt's works, although pieces have appeared in various shows throughout the years. Those who attended the Dennis Tourbin Gallery exhibition found watercolours by the artist, but most notably portraits of local characters, icons, if you will. They included historian A. E. Coombs, a local high school principal, Lauria Sabia, the forceful first woman councillor and radio celebrity, Shaw Festival founder Brian Doherty, author Howard Engel's mother, as well as local artist Paul Gosen's ancestors. Those are just a few of the local luminaries in the exhibition. Engel, Gosen, Jon Jouppien, the St. Catharines Museum as well as others contributed to the show curated by Douglas Watt.

Nesbitt was truly a bohemian of his time. Born in 1908 in Merritton, he changed his name from Prince (apparently named after the family dog) to Prynce, to fit more with his avocation of numerology and astrology. Prynce held court and art lessons at a large house next to the Hotel Dieu hospital. He also studied art in Toronto as well as music, most notably under Healey Willan. Nesbitt was the choir master and organist at St. James Church in Merritton. He was a pioneer in local television, creating a daily TV show 'The Sage of Aquarius' in which he dispensed astrological advice. Fair enough, as Nesbitt was born under the Zodiac sign of Aquarius. A true renaissance man lived among us. He was born to the William Nesbitt family, one of three children. Before his death in 1973, Prynce Nesbitt moved back to Merritton, to 65 Oakdale Avenue, where he died in 1973. Like his mentor Coombs, he was an aficionado of the history of the Welland Canal. Reports are that his cremated remains were tossed into the Welland Canal at Port Weller but the wind was such that much of the remains were blown back unto his admirers. It seems a fitting end to a colourful life. I trust that many of you were able to see the exhibition at NAC, as it was impressive and added to our store of local history.

THE DECOU HOUSE IN THE WAR OF 1812

Two hundred years ago, in June of 1813, momentous events were happening in the Niagara Peninsula and along the Niagara frontier as the War of 1812-14 was approaching its 13th month. War had been declared on the 18th of June of 1812, and who knew that there would be 18 more months of war yet to come before the Treaty of Ghent would be signed on the 24th of December 1814, bringing an end to this conflict and that peace would return. After all, did not one American politician rashly opine that the taking of Canada was a mere matter of marching?

Already, the Peninsula had felt pain and suffering and destruction – at Queenston Heights, Niagara and Fort George, Stoney Creek and Grimsby – and more would yet come – Niagara, Black Rock, Fort Erie, Chippawa, Lundy's Lane, and Fort Erie again.

And, Thorold was not bypassed and it did not escape what war and battles would bring. How could it? A look at the map shows Thorold on a middle line – a middle corridor – in the Peninsula, for armies and soldiers, advancing or retreating, between the Niagara River to the east and the Head-of-the-Lake to the west.

Today, we debate, for or against, a mid-Peninsula highway corridor, linking the western tip of Lake Ontario and the area around it with the eastern tip at the Niagara River and Fort Erie. Years ago, two centuries and more, we had such a one and Thorold was on it. It was reasonable enough that the American forces wanting to take the British stronghold at Burlington Heights would come through Thorold, but they would first need to take the British military post at the DeCou House, which was located sufficiently inland yet within reasonably easy reaching distance to Niagara or Chippawa or Fort Erie on the Niagara River, or to Stoney Creek or Burlington Heights and the western reaches of the province or to York, the capital.

The DeCou House, built of stone, two stories high, and with ample room for stores and soldiers, was well sited on a slight rise of land and importantly, on a "major" highway of the time. This is realized even today when driving by. The restored foundation walls in a park-like setting shows a certain permanence and quiet dignity.

So, the Americans determined to advance toward the British post at Burlington Heights. But they would have to first capture the British outpost commanded by Lieutenant James FitzGibbon with some 40 men of the 49th, stationed at the DeCou House, before they could approach Burlington. Its owner, John DeCou, a captain in the local militia, had had the bad luck of being captured at Fort George in May just past and was a prisoner of war in a Philadelphia jail. So, he was not at home, so to speak, when history unfolded at his house.

The invaders moved from Fort George and stayed at Queenston over night. Laura Secord overheard their plan to march on the DeCou House and she determined that FitzGibbon must be warned. But her husband James was still recovering from wounds he had suffered at the Battle of Queenston Heights the previous October and could not possibly take the message to FitzGibbon. Laura resolved that she must do it, and she did. Leaving her Queenston home with the rising sun, on the 22nd of June, she set out for what would be a day-long, frightening and dangerous trek of some 18 or so miles – or if you like, a trek of some 32 or more kilometers – after all, this latter figure makes it sound longer, doesn't it. Laura reached the DeCou House at sunset. She was intercepted by several Native scouts encamped nearby and they escorted her to FitzGibbon. He was surprised by her courage and sense of duty, and thanked her warmly for her message of the impending American attack on his outpost.

With Laura's news in hand and reports from his scouts FitzGibbon knew that he would be soon engaging in battle. On the early morning of the 24th of June, an American force of some 685 men left Queenston under the command of Colonel Charles Boerstler, marched past St. David's and then made their way up to the Escarpment and along Mountain Road, heading for Thorold. Hearing from his scouts that the invaders were approaching, FitzGibbon prepared to repulse them. But as the Americans neared the eastern portion of Thorold Township, they were met by British soldiers and 400 Native warriors. The fighting extended across the fields and in the beechwoods, and raged for nearly three hours. The effective fighting style of the Native warriors, primarily from Six Nations on the Grand River and Kahnawake, Tyendinaga and Kanesatake from the St. Lawrence assured the victory. The Natives won the Battle and FitzGibbon arrived in time to accept the surrender. With the victory at Beaverdams, the American invasion was stemmed. The War would continue, and the Niagara Peninsula would serve as a theatre for war for yet more battles. We recognize and acknowledge the contributions of our Native allies in the Battle of Beaverdams and in the other battles of the War of 1812.

As for the battlefield itself, it still remains. It is located on the east side of the present Welland Canal. Much of the area has been changed and despoiled. Successive Welland Canal channels and industrial development have drastically altered the topography of the battlefield. But it is there.

This is a shortened and edited version of remarks made by John Burtniak, Chair, City of Thorold War of 1812 Bicentennial Committee at ceremonies and events held at DeCew House Heritage Park on Saturday, June 22, 2013, to commemorate and celebrate the Battle of Beaverdams, as part of the City of Thorold's contributions to and participation in War of 1812 Bicentennial activities in the Niagara Region.

The modern version of the surname is now generally spelled as DeCew; the older version of DeCou is falling out of regular usage. A future article will elaborate on the evolution of the name from its French origin.

ST. CATHARINES IN 1846

By John Burtniak

Gazetteers and directories are useful sources of information about communities, for they provide a wonderful word-picture of townships and towns and cities, large and small. Smith's Canadian Gazetteer, published in 1846, is one such early example and includes St. Catharines.

Here is what St. Catharines looked like, in 1846, just a year after gaining town-hood.

ST. CATHARINES

“A Town in the township of Grantham, situated on the Welland Canal, thirty-six miles from Hamilton, and twelve miles from Niagara. The town is beautifully situated, having a fine view for a considerable distance of the Welland Canal and surrounding country. It is a place of much trade, which arises partly from its contiguity to the Welland Canal, and partly from the extensive water power – an immense quantity of wheat being annually converted into flour. The town is well laid out, and contains some excellent buildings; it was incorporated in the year 1845, and at present contains a mixed population of about 3,500.

Stages pass through the town daily during the winter, from Hamilton to Queenston and Niagara, and to Fort Erie, opposite Buffalo; and three times a week – Monday, Wednesday and Friday – to Dunnville on the Grand River. In summer, daily to Chippewa, and to Niagara, to meet the boats to and from Hamilton and Toronto, and Buffalo. There is a ship-yard and dry dock for the repair of vessels; and the principal office belonging to the Welland Canal is kept here. A fire company is established, with two engines.

The grammar school is a handsome building; and there are also barracks, with one company of Canadian Rifles. A newspaper, the “St. Catharines Journal,” is published here weekly.

Churches and chapels, six; viz., Episcopal, Scotch Secession; American Presbyterian, Catholic, Methodist and Baptist.

Post Office, post every day.

Professions and Trades. – Six physicians and surgeons, five lawyers, four grist mills (containing twenty run of stones), one trip hammer, one brewery, three distilleries, one tannery, one foundry, one ashery, one machine and pump factory, two surveyors, one pottery, fourteen stores, two auctioneers, twenty-four groceries, one stove store, one printer, one pail factory, one broom factory, one tallow chandler, eight taverns, three saddlers, three cabinet makers, two booksellers and stationers, three druggists, one gunsmith, two watchmakers, three carriage makers, three bakers, two hatters, two livery stables, seven blacksmiths, one veterinary surgeon, three tinsmiths, one tobacconist, seven tailors, nine shoe makers, one grammar school, four schools for young ladies, three bank agencies – “Upper Canada,” “Montreal,” and “Commercial.”

Principal Tavern – “St. Catharines House.”

Stage fares from St. Catharines. To Hamilton, 10s0d. To Niagara, 5s0d. To Buffalo, 7s6d. To Chippewa, 2s.6d. To Dunnville, 10s0d. To Queenston, 2s6d.

Quantity of flour shipped from St. Catharines during the season of 1844 – 70,772 barrels.”