QUEBEC CITY’S MILITARY HISTORY AND HERITAGE

Larry Ostola

Originally chosen as a site for settlement and trade by Champlain because of its natural defensive strength, strategic importance and economic potential, over the course of its history Quebec City has been witness to a number of significant military events that shaped the fates of Canada and North America. It has also served at different times as a garrison to significant numbers of French, British and Canadian soldiers who all left their mark on the town and its inhabitants, and signs of their presence still remain. Larry Ostola of Parks Canada recounts this heritage and some of the challenges associated with conserving it.

Chose par Samuel de Champlain comme lieu de peuplement et de commerce en raison de son emplacement défensif naturel, de son importance stratégique et de son potentiel économique, la ville de Québec a été le théâtre de nombreux faits d’armes qui ont façonné le destin du Canada et de l’Amérique du Nord. En différentes périodes, des troupes de soldats canadiens, français et britanniques y ont aussi séjourné en garnison, imprimant leur marque à la ville et à ses habitants tout en laissant de leur présence des signes toujours visibles. Coauteur de Québec, ville militaire, 1608-2008, Larry Ostola retrace ce patrimoine de la capitale québécoise et recense les défis à relever pour en assurer la pérennité.

Since its establishment in 1608, Quebec City has had a significant military vocation, though it began modestly enough. By the time the Kirke brothers from England successfully laid siege to the town in 1629 only two decades after it was founded, it was garrisoned by only a small handful of defenders. Over time, the town weathered a number of other military threats such as Sir William Phips’s siege of 1690 (and to whose demand for surrender Governor Frontenac famously replied with the “mouths of my cannons”) and the ill-fated Walker expedition of 1711. With the expansion of the colony and the town’s increased significance, the military presence grew.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Quebec was garrisoned by members of the Compagnies Franches de la Marine and, by the late 1750s, during the Seven Years’ War, several thousand soldiers of regular regiments of the French Troupes de Terre such as the Regiment de Bearn and the Regiment Royal-Roussillon were stationed in the town and were present at the Battles of the Plains of Abraham and Ste-Foy in 1759 and 1760 when Quebec again echoed to the sound of cannon and musket fire.

With the arrival of the British Army in 1759, a new military presence took root, continuing a garrison tradition established by the French. It was one that would last for 112 years until 1871, when troops of the army marched out of the city for the last time and military units of the newly created Dominion of Canada took up their responsibilities.

During this span of over a century, Quebec functioned as a garrison and military transit point of great importance to the British and was an integral part of an international network of similar garrisons such as Halifax and Gibraltar. Units of the army such as the 6th (Royal Warwickshire) Regiment, 49th (Hertfordshire Regiment), 79th (Cameron Highlanders) Regiment all called Quebec their home at different times and, during the War of 1812, thousands of troops passed through Quebec on their way to the Niagara frontier or other points. During most of this period, the Quebec garrison numbered over a thousand troops, most of whom were housed in the Jesuit Barracks in the centre of the town (on the current site of Quebec City Hall) and, following its completion in 1831, the Quebec Citadel.

Early in the British regime, in 1775-76, the town was again the scene of conflict, and the garrison and the local militia were put to the test when American generals Richard Montgomery and Benedict Arnold laid siege to the town in the early stages of the American Revolution. The besiegers were eventually defeated when they
attempted a dramatic assault on the town in the midst of a driving snowstorm on December 31, 1775, in which Montgomery lost his life. This was the last time that Quebec was attacked, but the threat posed by the United States would influence military attitudes and activities in the town for the remainder of the eighteenth and most of the nineteenth centuries.

Even prior to the withdrawal of the British army in 1871, Canada had begun to assume some responsibility for its own defence. Militia units and volunteer companies proliferated, and the foundation was laid for the establishment of a permanent force. In Quebec City, two battalions, the Eighth Royal Rifles and the Ninth Voltigeurs de Québec, were created in 1862. During the American Civil War, portions of both units were deployed from Quebec City and sent to the border with the United States. These units were again mobilized during the Fenian Raids in 1866 and 1870, and elements of them were sent to the west and participated in both the Red River expedition to Manitoba in 1870 and the Northwest Rebellion of 1885.

Along with this active military service by military units from Quebec City, other infrastructure was put in place in order to service the needs of the military. A cartridge factory was constructed in Quebec City in the early 1880s, and in 1887, an elaborate château-style military drill hall was inaugurated and subsequently became a Quebec City landmark just outside the fortification walls and served as the home of both the Voltigeurs as well as the Royal Rifles. Tragically, the drill hall, a designated National Historic Site, was damaged recently by a major fire and options for the future of the structure are currently being evaluated.

In 1899, the first Canadian contingent to the South African War departed from Quebec aboard the Sandilands and presaged military activity that continued into the twentieth century. Regiments from Quebec City and the surrounding area served in the First and Second World Wars as well as in the Korean conflict, and just after the outbreak of the First World War the military training base at Valcartier was established. Following the First World War and the end of the First World War and the end of the Great War, the garrison was reduced to 60 officers and 300 men, and the remaining garrison was transferred to Valcartier.

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During this period, the garrison was a significant part of the urban fabric. In addition to providing military protection, the garrison served as a community, providing social and economic relationships with civilians and becoming a significant part of the urban fabric.

This presence and influence extended to many areas of civilian life. During the French regime, for example, members of the garrison were billeted with civilian families (although some barrack accommodation was provided in the 1750s), and this practice continued for a number of years following the arrival of the British.

During the British regime, soldiers of the garrison served as catalysts for many social activities ranging from horse races to theatrical and musical performances, which were in marked contrast to their regular military duties. They also helped to maintain order in the town by occasionally apprehending criminals, quelling public disturbances and fighting the frequent fires of the period, complementing the efforts of civilian institutions, which were of variable effectiveness. As late as 1870, for example, companies of the British 69th Regiment were called out to intervene in a dispute between the newly elected mayor and the city council. The efforts of the garrison in combating fires were of particular importance and the subject of frequent comment in newspapers of the period. It is quite likely that without the active intervention of soldiers, the contemporary visual landscape of Quebec City would be much different.
This military presence and influence was also expressed through the conception and construction of increasingly elaborate defensive works and fortifications in and around Quebec, which were designed with it are a reminder of Quebec’s military past and of the very significant role that the city played in past struggles for continental supremacy. They are also at the core of the identity and the heritage character of the city today and, true to Lord Dufferin’s vision, serve as a compelling attraction for the millions of visitors who come to the city each year and walk the streets seeking an authentic heritage experience. The early impetus that Dufferin gave to the conservation of this heritage led to the development of a consciousness in the city related to the need to safeguard its historic character generally.

This heritage has been recognized through the many sites that have been designated as being of historical significance by the federal, provincial and municipal governments. As well, in 1985, Old Quebec was designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site of “outstanding universal value” on the basis of the following rationale:

The cradle of French civilization in America, this district, with its architecture and urban landscape, bears witness to the historical role Québec has played as capital under the French, British and Canadian regimes. As a strategic stronghold for almost three centuries, Québec has preserved the principal features of its ancient defence system and is the only city in North America still surrounded by its authentic fortified walls. Together with the Lower Town and its ancient districts, it forms an urban ensemble which is one of the best examples of a fortified colonial city.

While this heritage is an undeniable asset, there are challenges associated with its maintenance, and this is true not only in a city whose history is as apparent as Quebec’s, but also in other urban centres in Canada and abroad.

Beyond the challenge of identifying those heritage characteristics in the historic urban landscape that are the most significant and putting in place the appropriate protective mechanisms to ensure their long-term conservation, there is a need to foster public understanding and appreciation of the value of this heritage. This value can be expressed in a variety of ways, whether social, cultural, environmental or economic.

The key remaining features of this defensive system are the massive fortification walls and the Quebec Citadel, which as mentioned earlier continues to be used by units of the Canadian Armed Forces. Other visible reminders of Quebec’s military history and heritage are three of the four stone Martello towers constructed in the early nineteenth century. Fort Number One in Lévis, one of three forts constructed in the 1860s to defend Quebec against a possible American invasion and Artillery Park, a military complex which is part of the Fortifications of Quebec National Historic Site and which was used by the French as well as the British before being used for the manufacture of cartridges and artillery shells and becoming the site of the federal Arsenal in the early twentieth century. In recognition of their historical importance, all of these structures have been designated as National Historic Sites of Canada, and most are cared for on behalf of the public by Parks Canada.

The fact that Quebec City is still surrounded by its fortification walls and has retained so much of it historic character can be credited to the vision and foresight of the Marquess of Dufferin, who served as governor general of Canada from 1872 to 1878. Following the departure of the British garrison in 1871, a number of the city gates were taken down, and there were suggestions that the walls should be treated in a similar fashion. Dufferin urged the preservation of the city’s historic and picturesque character, and his personal intervention stemmed this trend and ensured the protection of the city’s heritage. In a speech in 1876, he reminded Quebec’s town council that

it is incumbent upon us to maintain intact, the one city on this continent which preserves the romantic characteristics of its early origins...you hold Quebec not merely as the delegates of its citizens, not merely even in the interest of the people of Canada...but as trustees on behalf of civilization and the inhabitants of the whole American continent, by whom the ruin and degradation of its antique battlements would be regarded as an irreparable outrage and a common loss.

While obsolete even in Dufferin’s day, this defensive system and the many buildings that are associated
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Despite the fact that visitors flock to areas (in Quebec City and elsewhere) whose architectural and historic character attracts them, the real or potential economic impact of this attraction is sometimes ignored or underestimated, as are other factors such as the quality of life and the tangible connection to the past that districts that have maintained their heritage character provide to residents. Public support of this heritage is crucial. Citizens who are not meaningfully engaged in and unaware of this value and contribution are likely to remain indifferent when this heritage is threatened through development or neglect.

A second related and equally important challenge is how to accommodate change and development in a living, evolving urban community while respecting those heritage values that are of importance. This has been an issue in Quebec City (as well as in other cities) when proposals for new development have emerged in opposition to heritage considerations and have resulted in public controversy. This issue has been the subject of discussion on numerous occasions at meetings of the World Heritage Committee, which was responsible for Quebec City’s World Heritage status, and there are many examples of cities that have struggled with the issue of...
development either within or on the margins of historic urban centres.

Two recent cases are London, England, where high-rise development and significant impacts on the visual setting of the Tower of London resulted in public concern, and Dresden, Germany, where the proposed construction of a modern bridge over the Elbe River and its impact on the landscape has been the subject of intense debate and has placed the World Heritage status of the river valley in jeopardy.

There is no easy solution to these often highly charged public debates. Cities such as Quebec City will continue to evolve, and that evolution will require accommodation. National and international experience has shown that the best guarantee for a successful outcome is to follow four principles: (1) identify and understand all the heritage values that contribute to the city’s special character; (2) plan ahead to ensure those values are respected when decisions affecting the city are made (a values-based approach); (3) undertake projects in a way that respects both heritage and contemporary objectives; and (4) involve a broad cross-section of citizens in determining the future of their own community.

As Quebec City celebrates its 400th anniversary, it does so as not only a vibrant twenty-first century metropolis, but also a city whose character is imbued with the patina of its long history and military heritage. It is a compelling example of the tangible and intangible values of heritage and a vindication of the passionate plea that Lord Dufferin made so many years ago. While no longer strategically important in the sense that first motivated Champlain to choose it as his site for settlement, Quebec City remains important for what it can tell us about the challenges and opportunities associated with the integration of heritage values into a modern urban community.

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