



Old Fort Erie

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WITH THE OBSERVANCE of the 200th anniversary by the Fort Erie Historical Society of the establishment of old Fort Erie, to be held on the fort grounds at four o'clock on Saturday afternoon, July 11, a short account of its history might not come amiss.

Following the end of the French rule in Canada, France relinquished Fort Niagara and the British immediately garrisoned it, establishing lines of communication with Detroit, and there was much travel up the lakes in transporting troops, supplies and provisions.

In the spring of 1764, Col. Bradstreet, with an army of 1,200 on his way to subdue the western Indian uprisings, stopped off at Niagara, where Capt. John Montresor was entrusted with the task of building the chain of forts along the Carrying Place. He had embarked from Fort Ontario with 300 "Canadian Volunteers," "without tents, kettle or tomahawk," and but a scanty supply of ammunition. They left in 20 boats and with five days' provisions, and were five days crossing Lake Ontario, enlivened by a duel between two of the officers. The men were tired, falling sick and running short of food; but, with these, augmented with about 300 regulars from Fort Niagara, Montresor built his line of fortifications, and on June 4, after two weeks' work, the job was completed and a royal celebration ensued, with rockets and salvos from the field artillery, bonfires and songs, and much drinking of toasts to the king.

One month later, Capt. John Montresor was handed orders by Col. Bradstreet: "You will proceed tomorrow at daylight to the outlet of Lake Erie; make examinations of the discharge above the rapids and select a proper place for fortifications. It must command an anchorage where vessels may lie while being provisioned for Detroit, in all respects a proper entrepot. You shall have one of the assistant engineers to aid you in the work." This was the beginning of the history of Fort Erie.

Montresor left early the next morning, after receiving his order, but didn't reach Lake Erie until late that night. The next day, with a reconnoitering party, he explored Buffalo Creek on the east shore, looking for a suitable site for a post, but the ground was low and location unfavorable. He therefore crossed the river on July 9, 1764, and here "on the northwest side, just at the discharge," after some survey he marked out a spot where the vessels might load. Returning to Fort Niagara the following day, he laid before Col. Bradstreet a sketch of the place, showing how it could be fortified and the advantages it possessed for a wharf. Col. Bradstreet approved and ordered that work be started immediately. However, there was some delay, and it was not until the 17th of July that Montresor could return to Lake Erie. On that day, with all plans and work approved, Capt. Montresor, with a force of 500 men, journeyed over the Carrying Place, crossed over the river with a flotilla of 12 large boats and four batteaux, to encamp on Navy Island for the night in the midst of "prodigious rains." It rained all the next day, but the detachment travelled on, with tools, supplies and 176 barrels of provisions, to the place designated, where they made camp, "the ground," says Capt.

Montresor's journal, "being extremely rich, covered with beach, hickory and walnut, and the situation answering expectation in every respect for my fort, provision store and wharf."

Men at once were set to work felling timber and clearing the ground, and the sound of the axe reverberated along the shore, while smoke in the clearing heralded the coming of the British to occupy the western side of the Niagara.

On July 19, the schooner *Gladwin* arrived from Detroit in quest of provisions, the first boat in the new harbor. On the 20th, the assistant engineer with 14 carpenters began to put up the stockades, and on the 24th, four companies of light infantry arrived from the east side of the river to encamp at the new fort. Artificers were squaring timbers for the barracks and storehouses and the masons were putting in the stone revetments for the polygon of the fort, which was built near the shore, north of the present site and below the hill; and on July 31, Capt. Montresor wrote "the post now becomes defensible."

Oxteams were sent to haul out timbers for the piers and wharf and the foundations laid for the officers' quarters and the soldiers' barracks and a provision store next the wharf; and, also, a parade ground was levelled off. The place teemed with carpenters, masons, brickmakers, lime burners, shingle makers and sawyers. On August 4, Col. Bradstreet sent dispatches ordering that the name of the post should be known as "Fort Erie," the first appearance of the name in history.

Constructive work progressed, although interrupted by much rain, and fever, ague and the "fluxes" (dysentery) were suffered by the men. Vessels began arriving from Detroit to load on all the impedimenta of an advancing army, and boats of war were coming from down the river with troops. All preparations completed, Col. Bradstreet set sail for Detroit from his encampment at Fort Erie on August 9, 1764, and Fort Erie had truly become a military post, where, four short weeks before, there were only forest, rock and dune. For 50 years Fort Erie was the end of the line for the lake traffic and international commerce until, after the war of 1812-1814, the building of Buffalo Harbor and the Erie Canal diverted business to Buffalo and Fort Erie was passed by and neglected for a while in the busy march of progress.

The first fort was a rectangular enclosure, a loopholed stockade, without ditch or moat. It was composed of four bastions with connecting walls of moderate height and was built primarily as defence against hostile Indians to protect the trade route west and as a lake shipping port. The log barracks, officers' quarters and storehouse were erected within the enclosure with the levelled plot for a parade ground. It stood for nearly 15 years on the rocks near the shore, when a furious storm drove great blocks of ice against it during the spring of 1799, damaging the front portion very badly and undermining the walls. It was therefore necessary to rebuild the fort more substantially with stone and mortar and in a more southerly position, but still below the hill. It was continuously occupied as a garrison with a few workmen's cottages nearby.

Again, in 1803, it was damaged in the spring ice floe and then rebuilt upon the rise of ground at the rear, where it stood until blown up in the War of 1812. The ruins remained for over a hundred years, with its waterless moats and crumbling walls, a favorite resort of picnic parties from both sides of the river, until restored by the Ontario Provincial and Canadian Federal Governments and officially opened July 1, 1939, with commemorative festivities as a national historic site, just as we see it today.

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