

HERITAGE CHARACTER STATEMENT

The Octagonal Blockhouse was built in 1939, to designs by Toronto architects W.L. Somerville and Edward Carswell, as part of the reconstruction of Fort George. In the 1950s, a caponier (tunnel) was excavated to connect the blockhouse to the Powder Magazine pit. Repairs to the roof have also been undertaken. The Environment Canada Parks Service is the custodial department. See FHBRO Building Report 89-15.

Reasons For Designation

The Octagonal Blockhouse was designated Recognized because of its association with the 1930s philosophy of preservation and presentation of historic sites, its architectural qualities and use of traditional materials and techniques, and its contribution to the character of the fortification.

During the 1930s, historic sites in Canada were developed and expanded as a result of the provision of government funding for Depression relief works programs. The philosophy of historic reconstruction employed at a number of sites in this period followed a North American pattern influenced by the reconstruction of Colonial Williamsburg. A recognition that an increase in private ownership of automobiles would generate growth in tourism encouraged the reconstruction of Fort George as a tourist destination, thereby facilitating the economic development of Niagara-on-the-Lake.

The architects tended to interpret freely the historical information about the original Fort George. The rugged exterior of the reconstructed buildings represents the designers' preference for a "frontier" aesthetic - possibly derived from the appearance of the Fort York blockhouses after their exterior cladding was removed during a 1934 "restoration."

The Octagonal Blockhouse, highly visible from outside the palisade, is a local landmark.

Character Defining Elements

The heritage character of this structure is defined by its "frontier" aesthetic, its functional design, its use of traditional materials and craftsmanship, and its contribution to the military character of the setting.

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The Octagonal Blockhouse is a polygonal-roofed, eight-sided, two-storey structure. Its overhanging second storey, its loopholes and its sole access by means of a tunnel reflect the military nature of a blockhouse. The rugged exposed log exterior represents Somerville and Carswell's concept of a "frontier" aesthetic.

The use of traditional materials, methods, and tools in its construction - squared logs with a dovetailed corner treatment, and a hand-split cedar-shake roof finish - was part of the reconstruction philosophy of the 1930s. Logs were milled in a saw-pit on site, and broad-axes and adzes were used for finishing. Given its unusual shape, this building is a particularly good example of careful log-building craftsmanship. As the heritage character of the Octagonal Blockhouse resides in the use of traditional materials and construction, these elements should be preserved.

The Octagonal Blockhouse, in its highly visible location on the south redan, reinforces the military atmosphere of the fort, and is a local landmark.

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