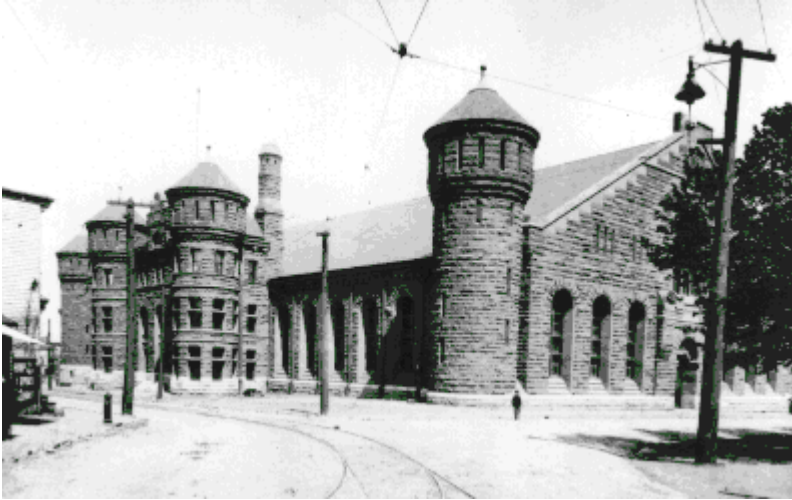


Experience a Bit of History!



The Halifax Armories, 1899
(Picture from the Public Archives of Nova Scotia)

Happy Centennial, Halifax Armory!

The stately Halifax Armory was one-hundred years old in 1996. As I live just across the street from it, I thought it appropriate to help in the centennial birthday celebration. So I put up this page. At the end of the year I removed this page from my site for quota reasons but I now have a larger quota so can afford to put it back -- with minor changes to this paragraph and the last two on the page.

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Significance of the Halifax Armory

- The Architect:
 - The architect, Thomas Fuller, Chief Dominion Architect for the Department of Public Works, is also famous for having designed the centre ("center" for Americans) block of the Parliament Buildings in Ottawa. He also designed the armory in Quebec City.
- Architectural significance:

- The Halifax Armory was the first of only two armories of its type to be built in Canada. The other, constructed in Toronto, was torn down in the 1960s. Using iron and steel instead of wood as was most commonly used at the time, it was possible to construct a building with a large interior with no obstructing supporting pillars.
- It was the first building of its type to be constructed with electric lighting incorporated in its original design.
- Historical significance:
 - On January 19, 1900, it was the point of departure for the Canadian Contingent Artillery and Mounted Rifles en route for the Boer War.
- Social significance:
 - The Halifax Armory was used to host a grand ball on June 21, 1899 to raise funds for a new infants' home. The gala affair was a great success and a substantial boost to the building fund.
 - It was used as a shelter for refugees following the Halifax Explosion of 1917 and once again following the Bedford Magazine explosion of 1944.

The History of the Halifax Armory

Although Halifax was founded in 1749 in order to counter the French presence at Cape Breton Island, in 1894 the militia in Halifax still had no adequate place in which to train. This was not acceptable to Queen Victoria. An order was given to procure (read -- "expropriate") a suitable piece of land and commission the construction of a suitable building.

Thomas Fuller, Chief Dominion Architect for the Department of Public Works (see above) designed the new building and J. E. Askwith Co. of Ottawa was the contractor with an original cost estimate of \$175,000. Like all government contracts since the construction of the first pyramid in Egypt, the project went over-budget with a final cost of about \$250,000, an astronomical sum in 1899 when the building was finished.

On August 1, 1895, excavation began. Officially, on May 1, 1896 the cornerstone was laid containing a "time capsule" in which was placed copies of current newspapers and coins in current circulation. One source says that the cornerstone was actually laid in December of 1895. It is possible that the physical laying had to precede the official unveiling for reasons of construction and weather conditions may have precluded the official ceremony from being held in December.

163 feet wide by 303 feet long, the metre-thick outside building wall required \$17,000 worth of freestone from Pugwash while the interior was lined with about \$35,000 worth of pressed brick of which \$25,000 worth came from Elmsdale. Constructing the foundation required 16,000 cubic feet of granite, and 35,000 barrels of cement was used to lay the bricks.

Over sixty workmen were employed in the construction. Bricklayers were paid three dollars per day for nine hours of work. Stone-cutters received thirty cents per hour. Nine

40-ton, steam-powered derricks with seventy-foot booms were used to hoist the stones into place and lift loads of bricks to the bricklayers.

The building was completed except for minor installations just before New Year's Day on December 31, 1898. The first floor's facilities were dominated by the 100 foot by 250 foot parade square. Officer's quarters, three armories, military offices, recreation rooms, a lecture room, and a caretaker's residence are reported to have occupied rest of the ground floor and the second floor, with a balcony on the second floor overlooking the parade square. The 303-foot by 160-foot basement is reported to contain officers' quarters, a kitchen, other apartments, a gun shed, a furnace room, storage areas, band rooms, three shooting ranges, and even two bowling alleys.

Concern about noise pollution is not necessarily something new as a report in the December 31, 1898 issue of the "Evening Mail" indicates: [The reference to "Contractor Griffen" MAY be a reference to an electrical sub-contractor. Also note that two different spellings of the word "Armory" were used in the article, one in the headline and another in the body of the article.]

THE HALIFAX ARMOURIES

Part of the New Drill Hall Will
Be ready for Occupation
On New Year's Day

Part of the New Halifax Armouries will be ready for occupation on Monday. The band rooms are all completed now with the exception of electric lighting, and Contractor Griffen expects to have that part of the job ready by to-night. Extra men have had been put on in order to allow the three bands the use of their new quarters, and next week they will have their first practice there.

The rooms are all situated in the basement and are fitted up in splendid style. Down there the musicians can make all sorts of noise and discords without distracting those in other parts of the big armory.

The poor bands, first accused of discord and then forgotten or ignored. Most articles on the history of the Armory cite June 27, 1899 as the first date of its occupancy. On that day, 500 militiamen from the Princess Louise Fusiliers left their old, inadequate quarters on Spring Garden Road and marched to their new quarters in the new Halifax Armory. They later shared the facilities with the 63rd Halifax Rifles Regiment and the 1st Canadian Artillery battalions.

At this time, on another continent and another hemisphere, tensions were mounting. The discovery of gold in 1886 in the Witwaterstrand, a region partly encompassing the southern Transvaal Republic, attracted British miners to that area who were deeply resented by the Boers. England's actions taken to protect British citizens from what it felt

was undue harassment led to Paul Kruger, the president of the Transvaal Republic, issuing an ultimatum to the British on October 9, 1899 demanding the withdrawal of all British troops from the Transvaal within 48 hours and formally declaring war on October 12, 1899 when the British failed to comply.

Canada rallied in support of England. On January 19, 1900, the Halifax Armory was the site of grand farewell reception and the point of departure for the 1,320-strong Canadian Contingent Artillery and Mounted Rifles for their departure to the Boer war.

This was the first time in Canadian history that companies of volunteer troops were raised for a foreign war. Less than a year after its completion, the Halifax Armory played a significant part in the Boer war and Canada's history as newly emerging nation.

Sources of information

- The Halifax Memorial Library
 - The Reference Department not only contains books on the history of Halifax and the buildings within the city but also related material such as back issues of newspapers, both on microfilm, and folders of clippings or copies of clippings sorted by subject.
 - The Public Archives of Nova Scotia
 - You may feel like a visitor to the CIA when you visit the Public Archives but it is all for the protection of our irreplaceable heritage.
 - Funk & Wagnalls New Encyclopedia provided information on the causes of the Boer War.
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Plans for the celebration:

There was a ceremony held in October 1996 at which time there was an official presentation of a plaque designating the Halifax Armory as a building of "national significance". It received no advance publicity and the only sign it had taken place is a new stone on the ground at the corner of the building with a plaque on it. Following that event, there were plans for a major restoration of the outside of the Armory to start later in October. The restoration, required to combat the damage done over the years by acid rain and pigeons (the sandstone is soft enough for them to peck holes in it), was estimated to take about three years.

Other than the plaque and the building of a covered walkway over the sidewalk to protect pedestrians from falling rock during the facelift, nothing else has been done. The facelift operation has apparently been stalled for some reason and no repair work has been started to date. A dreadful pity.

Special thanks to...

- Major MacDonald at the Halifax Armories.

- The staff of the Halifax Memorial Library reference department.
 - The staff of the Public Archives of Nova Scotia.
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