



THE FIELD HOUSE

One of the oldest brick houses in Ontario, this handsome Georgian structure was built about 1800. Originally a farm house, it was the home of Gilbert Field (1765-1815), a United Empire Loyalist who was in possession of the land by 1790. During the War of 1812 the house was used by British forces and was subjected to a brief bombardment from an American battery. Though damaged, it was one of the few homes in the area to survive the hostilities. It remained in the Field family until about 1925, after which it passed through various hands. In 1968 the Ontario Heritage Foundation acquired the property to ensure its continued preservation and twelve years later the Field House was returned to private ownership with a protective covenant.

Erected by the Ontario Heritage Foundation, Ministry of Culture and Communications

This impressive home saw a lot of action during the War of 1812. The Field House was occupied by British troops and subjected to battery fire from the American army, who eventually captured it and used it as a barracks and hospital.

Cette impressionnante demeure a vu de toutes les couleurs pendant la Guerre de 1812. La maison Field a été occupée par les troupes britanniques et soumise à des tirs de batterie de l'armée américaine, qui finira par la capturer et l'utiliser comme caserne et hôpital.



BEYOND THE BATTLEFIELDS

by Robert Smol

Niagara's historic houses
in the War of 1812

IN 1804 IRISH POET THOMAS MOORE SUMMED UP HIS IMPRESSIONS OF CANADA'S NIAGARA REGION:

“If there is peace to be found in this world,
a heart that is humble might hope for it here.”

Eight years later, hope was all that the people of the Niagara region had left as they bore the brunt of America's first military invasion of a foreign country. When the guns finally fell silent in late 1814, a total of eight major battles and numerous smaller skirmishes had been fought, most within 50 kilometres of Niagara Falls.

“The Niagara region was unique in the war in that this land was routinely fought over,” says Major John Grodzinski of the History Department at Kingston's Royal Military College. “And the frontier on both sides of the Niagara River was pretty well destroyed as the population fled from the area and villages and towns were burned.”

Whether they chose to involve themselves with the events of the day or not, few if any residents of the Niagara region could avoid them. For men, military service was obligatory, and owners of homes that survived the torch or the cannon of the invading army were expected to make them available as billets, military headquarters and hospitals.

The few houses that remain tell the story of pain, pride, and perseverance and are a testament to one of the pivotal events in the evolution of Canada as a nation.



Photo: citynoise.org



Photo: Niagara Parks Commission

Left: The well-cared-for Field House is now privately owned.

Right: Today, the McFarland House (1800) is operated as a museum by the Niagara Parks Commission and includes a lovely example of a kitchen door yard garden.

GILBERT FIELD HOUSE

The first brick house to be completed in the region, it was built in 1799 by United Empire Loyalist Gilbert Field (1765-1815). The handsome two-storey that stands along the Niagara River Parkway is surrounded by mature chestnut trees and vineyards.

Here, close to the road connecting the village of Queenston and Fort George—just five kilometres north of the site of the Battle of Queenston Heights—the Field family must have witnessed General Isaac Brock's famous ride to the historic battlefield and the reinforcements that followed him.

The strategic location made it an obvious choice for a British camp. The first recorded use of the home in British military records was just after the Battle of Queenston Heights, when a general order dated October 18, 1812 directed a company of York (Toronto) militia serving in the region to take up residence on the property.

À gauche : Aujourd'hui, la maison Field appartient à des intérêts privés et est bien soignée. **À droite :** La maison McFarland (1800) est exploitée comme musée par la Commission des parcs du Niagara. On y trouve un bel exemple de jardin de cuisine d'arrière-cour.

For much of the remainder of the war the Field House was used as an outpost for the army and, when necessary, provided shelter to the wounded and dying as they came through.

According to Jim Hill, Superintendent of Heritage for the Niagara Parks Commission, the house is “certainly marked on military maps and it is even mentioned in some dispatches.”

Any excitement associated with accommodating British troops soon turned to dismay when the house was the target of artillery bombardment from the

American side of the river following the capture of Fort George in May of 1813. The Field family later sought and received compensation for damages.

The house remained in the family for the next 110 years. It was acquired by the Ontario Heritage Trust in 1968, designated under the *Ontario Heritage Act* in 1969, and returned to private ownership 11 years later protected by a conservation easement.

McFARLAND HOUSE

Probably no house that survived the war witnessed as much devastation as John McFarland’s did. When he died in 1815 after returning from New York State, where he had been held as a prisoner of war, the inscription on his tombstone concluded that “on finding his property burnt up and destroyed by the enemy it enervated him so much that he died in a few months after, in the 64th year of his age.”

A native of Paisley, Scotland, he was employed as a boat-builder by the British government during the revolutionary war. In return, he was granted 608 acres of land in the Niagara region. He continued his boat-building business after immigrating and constructed a fine two-storey house in 1800 from bricks made in a kiln on his property.

Just two kilometres south of the town of Niagara-on-the-Lake, this house also held a strategic position. Like the



Photo: Niagara Parks Commission

In preparation for the Bicentennial of the War of 1812—and for the first time since it opened as a Niagara Parks Commission museum in 1959—McFarland House has undergone a number of renovations.

Pour la première fois depuis son ouverture comme musée de la Commission des parcs du Niagara en 1959, la maison McFarland a bénéficié de rénovations en préparation du bicentenaire de la Guerre de 1812.

Field House, it appears on both U.S. and British military maps of 1813 and 1814. As McFarland languished in prison, the American and the British armies took turns using his home and its grounds as a military headquarters, an artillery base guarding the Niagara River, and a hospital for those who could make their way from the battlefields of Chippewa, Lundy’s Lane and Fort Erie.

“After the battle of Lundy’s Lane the Americans were trying to get their wounded back to Fort Niagara, and any building along the way would start to fill with the wounded and the dying,” explains Hill. “At that time it was the army that had to find its way to the medical establishment, such as it was.”

After the British pushed their way back to the Niagara River in late 1813, they used the house as both a headquarters and launching point for their raid and capture of Fort Niagara on the evening of December 18, 1813. The house was one of the few solid structures left standing after the retreating American troops had burned down much of what is now Niagara-on-the-Lake.

The story handed down through generations of the McFarland family was that the house was so filled with the dead and wounded that it was almost impossible to reach the upper storey without treading on their bodies.

The Niagara Parks Commission took possession of McFarland House in 1943. It was restored and opened to the public in 1959 to depict life between 1800 and 1830.

Laura Secord Homestead

Much debate continues over the importance of Laura Secord's 32-kilometre trek through the bush in June of 1813 in an attempt to warn the British army of the upcoming advance of American soldiers from Queenston. The fabled trek started at the house that currently stands at 29 Queenston Street, three blocks north of the base of the Queenston Heights battlefield. What is certain is that the 37-year-old housewife was heavily

invested in the events that literally were at her doorstep.

Unlike many non-combatants in the region, Laura Secord (1775-1868) stayed in her house for much of the war caring for her husband, who had been wounded in the Battle of Queenston Heights. The Secords had been ordered to billet American officers and it was, allegedly, their discussion of a plan to attack the British that Laura famously overheard.

"Laura Secord had every excuse in the world not to get involved. Her husband was gravely wounded, she had five children and her house had been looted a couple of times," says Hill. "I think this is a woman who just had enough and took it upon herself to go and warn people."

The family home was an unadorned Georgian storey-and-a-half structure with plain window frames and two chimneys. It was purchased by Laura Secord Inc. in 1971 and converted back to its original form. In 1998 it was acquired by the Niagara Parks Commission.

Nelles-Fitch House and Nelles Manor

Entrepreneur, soldier and politician, Robert Nelles (1767-1842) arrived in Upper Canada in 1778 from the Mohawk Valley, New York, where he had been serving as a scout for the British army. Eventually settling in The Forty (now Grimsby), he built the original wing of the one-and-a-half-storey timber Nelles-Fitch House in 1787 as a temporary residence on what is today Main Street West.



Photo: Niagara Parks Commission

It was from this house, now operated as a museum by the Niagara Parks Commission, that Laura Secord departed on her arduous 30-km trek to warn the British of an impending American attack.

C'est depuis cette maison, qui est aujourd'hui un musée exploité par la Commission des parcs du Niagara, que Laura Secord a entamé son périple de 30 kilomètres à pied pour prévenir les Britanniques de l'imminence d'un assaut américain.



Owners Barry and Linda Couotts often open the historic Nelles Manor to visitors. Here, costumed re-enactors from the Incorporated Militia of Upper Canada and the Lincoln 1st pose at the front entrance.

Les propriétaires, Barry et Linda Couotts, ouvrent souvent l'historique manoir Nelles aux visiteurs. Ici, des participants à une reconstitution historique, en costumes de la milice du Haut-Canada et du régiment de Lincoln, posent devant l'entrée.

By 1798 he had completed Nelles Manor across the road, his permanent home.

“Nelles was very much the entrepreneur,” says Dorothy Turcotte, historian and author of *Legacy—The Nelles Story*. “He ran a sawmill and a grist mill with his brothers on Forty-Mile Creek and he traded in a number of things, such as liquor.”

Over the years he also served as member of the Legislative Assembly of Upper Canada, town warden, justice of the peace and, during the War of 1812, lieutenant-colonel of the 4th Regiment of the Lincoln Militia.

Nelles-Fitch House was used as a barracks during the war, complete with a prison cell in the basement. After the conflict, Robert’s son Henry resided there until 1852 when it was sold to Dr. William Fitch.

Nelles Manor, Robert’s home across the street, is considered to be the oldest inhabited dwelling between Niagara and Kingston. An impressive five-bay manor house built in the Georgian style of locally quarried stone, it has seven fireplaces and walnut woodwork, making it an ideal venue for gala events in the area.

“The Nelles manor became a military headquarters and officers were billeted there,” says Turcotte. “Nelles had a very large family and it was of course quite a burden to contend

with all these extra people. There were military tents and [First Nations] camping around the property.”

When the American army invaded and pushed its way past the Nelles Manor (where it was stopped by the British at Stoney Creek on June 6, 1813) the Nelles properties suffered considerable damage, mainly from looting by the invading troops. The estimate of damages compiled by Nelles a year later included the loss of 25 acres of crops and 68 farm animals.

The post-war celebratory ball held at the manor in honour of the 4th Regiment of the Lincoln Militia and the local residents has been immortalized in a Grimsby town mural.

The manor remained in the Nelles family until 1971, when it was purchased by Barry and Linda Couotts. While restoring their new home—a labour of love for some four decades now—they uncovered a tangible link to a past owner: a lieutenant-colonel’s scarlet military jacket from the War of 1812, tucked away in the rafters of their basement.

Robert Smol is a teacher and freelance journalist based in Toronto. He served in the Canadian Forces for over 20 years and holds a graduate degree from the Royal Military College of Canada. He has written extensively for *CBC news*, the *National Post*, *Hill Times* and *Toronto Star*, among others.