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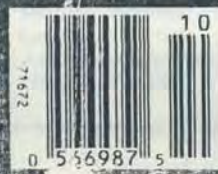
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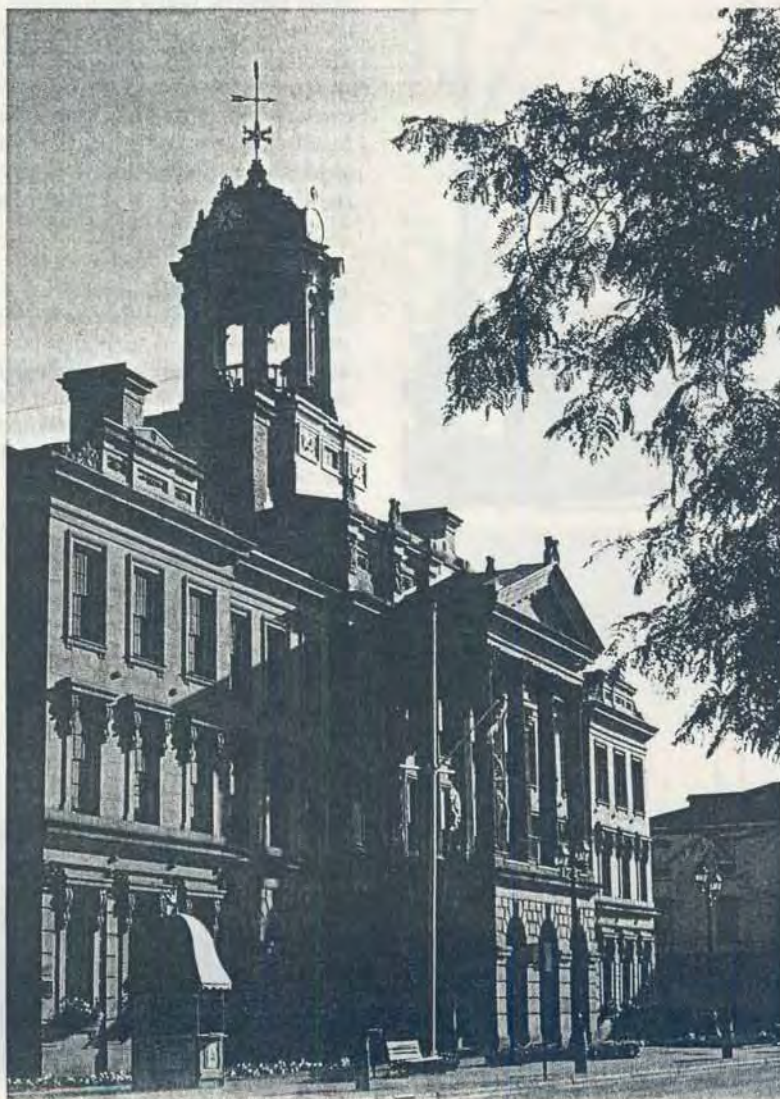
# Toast to a Town



by Robert Mikel

*And in your turn, where're you'll go you'll say of Spa and Faubourg,  
Of Broadway and of Rotten Row, well there's no place like Cobourg!...  
We'll never see their like on earth! (or where poor Mr. Vennor is.)  
For all that makes Cobourg Cobourg, is distinctly sui-generis.*

Clara Kirchoffer, 1885  
Cobourg Expatriate



**J**

f one allows that towns can develop a personality of their own, then the extroverted historic town located seventy-two miles east of Toronto is "sui-generis"—it has a character all its own. As the stanzas from this jaunty poem, written in 1885, illustrate, Cobourg developed this unique personality early in its history.

Picturesquely situated on a sandy stretch of Lake Ontario, its citizens to this day form an attachment to the town that follows them throughout their lives. One elderly woman recalls vividly when she was a child, that when her mother, an expatriate and

*Cobourg's streetscape is architecturally mixed, with this 1870s block providing a scenic lead up to Victoria Hall. Because this part of the main street was originally marshy, construction was later than the 1840s and '50s establishment of the town.*

*Officially opened by Edward, Prince of Wales in 1860, Victoria Hall on Cobourg's main street is the major focal point of the town. Constructed in 1856, it was saved from decline by vigorous citizens and reconstructed and refurbished in the 1970s. Faux-paint decoration of the large concert hall on the second floor is well worth a visit.*

*Published in the 1840s, this William Bartlett print of the Cobourg harbour, illustrates the prominent location of Victoria College. By the 1850s population in the town had grown to about 5,000 and it was the fifth largest centre in the province.*



*Victoria College shown below circa 1880, was founded in 1836 as Upper Canada Academy. This Methodist school was renamed Victoria College in 1841. The severely handsome Greek Revival structure, set on the highest elevation in Cobourg is still an imposing landmark. In 1894, Victoria University became part of the University of Toronto. The old building became an asylum and during the First World War an officers' convalescent hospital. Today it is being restored as seniors' accommodation.*

her friends congregated, they spoke of nothing but Cobourg. "Cobourg, Cobourg, Cobourg! I thought it was rather sick!"

At the turn of the century, Cobourg old boy associations sprang up all across Canada and offered annual excursions back to the beloved home town. By the end of the nineteenth century Cobourg's special character made it the largest summer resort

town in Canada. From its earliest days the town was possessed of ambitious, energetic inhabitants fueled by visions of grandeur and driven by grandiose schemes. Cobourg's excesses, successes and failures, all that makes its character unique can be pinned on its doughty citizens.

Founded in 1798, its earliest settlers, United Empire Loyalists, carved a settlement out of cedar swamp. Soon the town attracted other settlers, many with means and influence. Grist and saw mills, stores and residences followed in quick succession. By the 1820s Cobourg had evolved out of its pioneer state into a bustling young community. It was the capital of the Newcastle District (later the United Counties of Northumber-



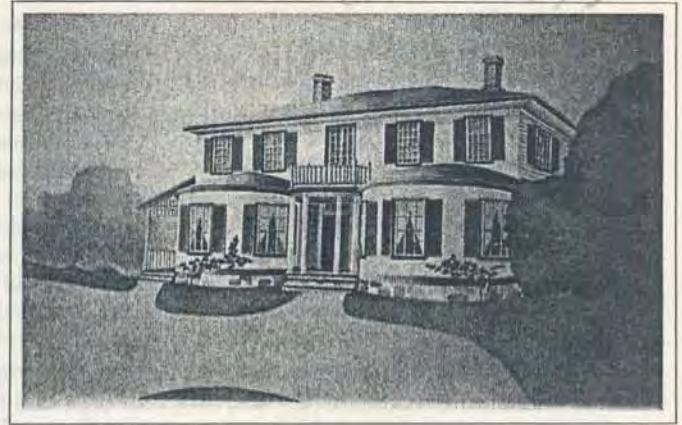
*Within a block of the main street is the magnificent new Cobourg harbour which draws many citizens for a pleasant walkabout on a summer's evening. It's a delight to watch the hundreds of boats docked and rafted on long weekends. The harbour has become a significant asset for the town.*



# Toast to a Town



*Diane Barr rendered this watercolour of the somewhat controversial 'Poplars', the oldest surviving house intact. The former private home is in a commercially-zoned area in rather derelict condition. Discussion is underway regarding a move to the harbour area where the house would undergo restoration. Bow windows of the house are unique and interior architectural features survive. The house was owned by the same family until 1955.*



land & Durham) with a courthouse and gaol, a post office, the largest grist mill in the province, an Anglican church and Methodist chapel and several thriving stores, taverns and many well built residences. It also had a large number of wealthy citizens: government officials, half-pay officers, merchants and farmers, an upper class eager to exploit the town's advantages. In a time when community prosperity largely depended on local initiative, the community leaders tied their own interests to the interests of the growing town.

Beginning in the late 1820s, joint stock companies were established to build not only the requisite services but the best and most modern of everything available. By the 1840s, a fine harbour brought in goods and exported raw materials brought to Cobourg by efficient roads that stretched in all directions. In 1834, one of Cobourg's most ambitious

schemes began when the town received a charter for the construction of a railway to tap the resources of the northern hinterland. Although not constructed until the 1850s, this showed great foresight considering the charter was applied for only a few years after the first railway in the world was opened.

In the 1830s and '40s Cobourg established a firm economic and social base and boasted major educational institutions including Victoria College (later Victoria University) and The Reverend (later Bishop) Bethune's Theological School for Anglican Priests. By the 1850s it was the fifth largest centre in the province with a population well over 5,000. It was a full-grown integrated community—a social, cultural,

political and economic centre projecting a self confident self-importance.

Physically the town was well planned and its citizens spared little expense on their public, commercial or residential properties. Victoria College, St. Peter's Anglican Church, the Wesleyan Methodist Church, and The Globe, the finest hotel between Toronto and Montreal were testaments to public spirit. Elegant villas such as The Lawn, Heathcote, Northumberland Hall and The Hill attested to private wealth.

*Northumberland Hall garden party, circa 1905. Summer residents and Cobourg citizens mingle at a first and fourth of July garden party hosted by American Harry Fitzhugh and his Cobourg wife Edith Daintry. Grand occasions such as this were not uncommon in Cobourg's halcyon days as Canada's premier summer resort. One note of etiquette, the hostess (centre) is the only woman not wearing a hat.*



In the 1850s citizens fully believed that their town could and would become the economic and political capital of the province. Construction began on the grandest of the new civic buildings, Victoria Hall. Opened by the Prince of Wales in 1860, it was designed to match the town's anticipated greatness. In 1854, the Cobourg to Peterborough railway opened for business. Unfortunately however, the heady spirit of prosperity was not to last. The town was brought to the brink of economic disaster by the exorbitant cost of Victoria Hall and the failure of the railway due to the collapse of the bridge over Rice Lake.

*This 1844 Greek Revival home has an unusual recessed entryway. The wing was added in the '50s. Named 'Mount Fortune', the original owner had his woollen mills on the property across the road.*



In the sober decades that followed, the population dwindled from almost 7,000 to 5,000. However with characteristic vitality, families and industries bounced back and the economy of the town stabilized. The 1870s were exciting times. Cobourg was caught up in the 'National Dream', the vision of Canada stretching from sea to sea and the prosperity this could bring. Younger sons with a drive to make their own fortunes and some entire Cobourg

families moved west to Winnipeg, Edmonton and Vancouver.

In 1867 several American capitalists became interested in revitalizing the ailing Cobourg to Peterborough railway to transport iron ore from Marmora to Cobourg where it would be easy to ship to Pittsburgh. While the scheme was not a long term success it did bring in a number of Americans. One, Colonel Chambliss, thought that Cobourg would make a wonderful summer resort for his friends. The result was the Arlington Hotel, completed in 1874.

Chambliss and a town doctor travelled throughout the United States advertising Cobourg air as having the second highest ozone content in the world. This capitalized on a current craze which considered ozone extremely salubrious to one's health. This successful marketing venture enticed thousands to the town. Once here they enjoyed the healthful

atmosphere and Cobourg's anglo-Canadian society. Many summer residents were veteran officers of the Civil War from both the North and South and it was said that many of the battles of the Civil War were re-fought in the saloons of Cobourg.

Many visitors from the U.S. and the rest of Canada who visited year after year eventually built summer homes, many of which were on a palatial scale. By 1900, when Cobourg was the most popular summer resort



*Originally constructed in the 1870s, this home displays the sophistication of its 1930s Georgian Revival revamp.*

# Toast to a Town



*RIGHT: William Hitchins, a wealthy chandler, built 'Girton Cottage' in the mid 1850s. Regency in styling, there are French doors on the east and south elevations. In the 1920s the wrought iron fence was installed, coming from an early family home near Louisville in the States.*



in Canada, its population jumped by over 2,000 in the warmer months. One publication noted that "a number of handsome residences had been erected... To do this hundreds of thousands of dollars have been spent so today many cities cannot boast the wealth and magnificence which Cobourg has within its limits." The summer life was a whirlwind of activity "with large hops at the Arlington, Columbian, Baltimore and Cedarmere hotels, while teas, card parties and entertainments, small and great followed on another in rapid succession."

With Cobourg's summer colony slowly declining over the 1920s and '30s, after the two World Wars, the life of towns all over Canada changed drastically. New industries moved in bringing with them new subdivisions. Old was out, new was in and many historic buildings including Cobourg's old post office, its registry office and many of the palatial summer

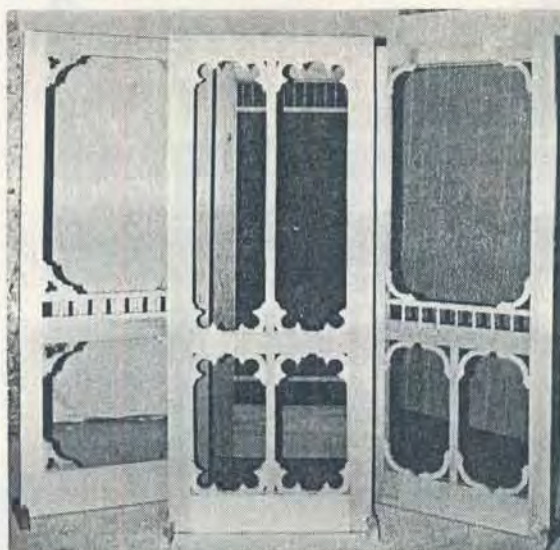
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*ABOVE: This triple-gabled home began as a Regency-style dwelling, built in 1855 by the Rev. Walton Beck. The gables were added in 1877.*

*CENTRE: Newly reconstructed Woodlawn Inn, the former George Perry family home. This Regency building which carries Greek Revival detailing was built in 1835. Front wings were added in 1850 and a second floor was constructed in 1860-70s. The left wing was later burned out and in 1988 this wing was rebuilt when the building underwent extensive remodelling to become an inn.*

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**Toast to a Town**

(Continued from page 59)

residences were lost in the wake of progress.

In the late 1960s a proposal to demolish Victoria Hall to create a parking lot focused attention on the loss of valuable heritage buildings. A new appreciation of Cobourg's unique architectural and social character began, and preservationists won the battle to save Victoria Hall, now restored to its former glory as the jewel of the town's main street.

Cobourg is a vibrant community with majestic tree-lined streets, handsome historic structures and magnificent Victoria Park, situated in the heart of town and boasting one of the finest sand beaches on Lake Ontario. The Northumberland Orchestra, a regional art gallery and a thriving theatre group are just a few of the cultural activities the town offers.

Federal funding for marinas has expanded Cobourg's harbour into a major pleasure craft port, humming with activity and life. The town takes pride in its number of fine restaurants catering to every budget. There is also excellent hotel accommodation including two inns located in historic structures (Ste. Anne's, a bed and breakfast near Grafton and the Woodlawn Inn right in the heart of Cobourg). For the nautically minded, a renovated lake boat, the *Edward*, is docked in the harbour, soon to offer overnight accommodation to complement its dining establishments.

Just outside town are the glacially-created rolling hills of Northumberland offering exploration of an infinite number of scenic drives and picturesque hamlets such as Gore's Landing. In recent years Cobourg has begun a new economic boom and happily, this time more attention is being paid to the assets heritage has to offer the revitalization of the town. Currently Victoria College is being restored and a sympathetic harbour development plan is in the works. Fueled with the same energy and initiative of its forefathers, Cobourg appears to be entering a second renaissance. □

*A Cobourg native, Robert Mikel, former historian with the Toronto Historical Board is now a partner in Nokes & Mikel Heritage and Marketing Services, Toronto.*

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