

Building easier today

Pre-cut beams and planks have made construction less toilsome today compared with a few centuries ago. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the primary job before construction could begin was cutting the planks and beams from squared timbers.

Two-man saw-pit operations were used but it was backbreaking work. A slotted board floor was built across a pit and a log positioned above it. One sawyer stood on top of the log and guided a long-handled saw along a chalked line. The other sawyer stood below the floor and because the teeth of the saw were raked to cut downwards, he made the cutting strokes and got all the saw dust in his face.

During and after the War of 1812, the British Navy employed sawpits to produce planks for constructing ship dockyards and bases in the wilderness of Upper Canada. One of these bases was located on Penetanguishene Bay, a natural and well protected harbour.

The Penetanguishene Naval Establishment, started in 1817 was a bustling community of 70 people by 1822. Accordingly the demand for lumber was great, however, two sawyers working all day could produce only fifteen planks. The slowness of this method led to shortages of seasoned wood for building construction and the repair of the warships kept at Penetanguishene.

Since timber required three years to season properly, green wood was often used which resulted in dry rot—a serious problem at the Naval Establishment. Most buildings and vessels constructed from, or repaired with the unfledged timber would begin to deteriorate in two years.

The navy planned to erect stone buildings to replace these rotting structures but construction was never started.

Over the years, increasing costs of maintaining colonial naval bases forced Britain to gradually close outposts such as Penetanguishene. The last detachment left the Naval Establishment there in 1834.

The base, however, was not abandoned. A British military garrison had been established there in 1823. The soldiers protected supply lines between Penetanguishene and Fort Michilimackinac (near present-day Sault Ste. Marie), the gateway to the fur-rich northwest.

After many years of peace with the United States, the significance of the Penetanguishene Military Establishment diminished and as with the navy, the soldiers were eventually withdrawn. The Naval and Military Establishments were turned over to the Government of Upper Canada in 1856.

Today the Historic Naval and Military Establishments have been reconstructed on the original location next to Penetanguishene Bay. Costumed sailors and soldiers re-create life as it was for the British forces stationed there between 1817 and 1856. Parade drills, musketry demonstrations and the saw-pit method of cutting planks are only a few of the activities that bring the site to life.

Situated at the end of Church St. in Penetanguishene, the Historic Naval and Military Establishments are open everyday until Labour Day from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Admission for adults is .75 cents, students .50 cents



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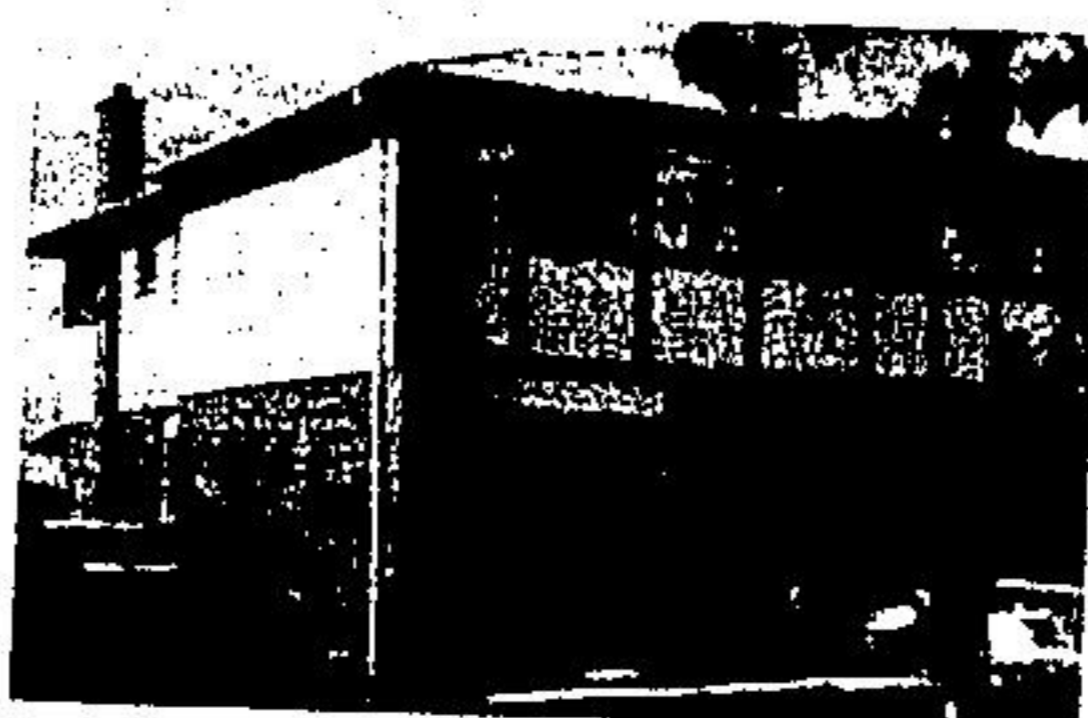
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