

NEWSLETTER

The Town of York Historical Society

December 2012

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REBELLION – 175 YEARS AFTER

This month marks 175 years since William Lyon Mackenzie marched down Yonge Street with a few hundred poorly armed rebels in tow and a new constitution in hand. The anniversary finds the citizens of Toronto without a mayor, their provincial legislature suspended and the head of their national bank seconded to the “mother country.” Each of these political developments involved an element of surprise and, as a recent museum visitor suggested, not a little arrogance. It would be hard to match the arrogance displayed by Lieutenant-Governor Francis Bond Head during the political upheaval of 1837, however. Had Bond Head not dispatched all British regular troops to Lower Canada, where rebellion had taken a serious turn, it is unlikely Mackenzie would have set out for Toronto. In *A Narrative* (London, 1839, p.316), Bond Head recalls: “I considered that, if an attack by the rebels was inevitable, the more I encouraged them to consider me defenceless the better.” He was confident that the outbreak “would be impotent.” While the revolt should have come as no surprise, the Lieutenant-Governor had to be roused from his bed when news of it reached the city.



Nelson Cook, *Portrait of His Excellency Sir Francis Bond Head, Bart KCH (1793-1875)*, 1837, 31x 24 cm, collection of the McCord Museum, Montreal.

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Nine Decades at Heliconian Hall

We continue our series on Toronto’s National Historic Sites with a look at Heliconian Hall, an architectural anomaly on Hazelton Avenue and one with an illustrious history. Originally constructed (1876) as the Olivet Congregational Church in the rural village of Yorkville, this fanciful board-and-batten building has, since 1923, been home to the oldest women’s cultural club in Canada. Importantly, the reasons for its designation in 2008, as given on the government’s own website, were as much about the building’s contents as its architecture. Referred to are not just the carved wooden rafters and wrought-iron light fixtures, but “the various commemorative artefacts attesting to the history of the (Heliconian) Club and its tenure in the building.”

A rare example, at least in Southern Ontario, of Carpenter’s Gothic Revival, the building at 35 Hazelton sets playful Gothic ornamentation – such as a Victorian rose window with drip moulding – against steep gables and a simple square tower. In 1890, when a larger brick church was constructed adjacent to it, this became the church hall and Sunday School for the Olivet congregation. Sold in 1921 to the Painters’ Union, it was briefly Hazelton Hall, until purchased by the Heliconian Club in 1923 for \$8,000.

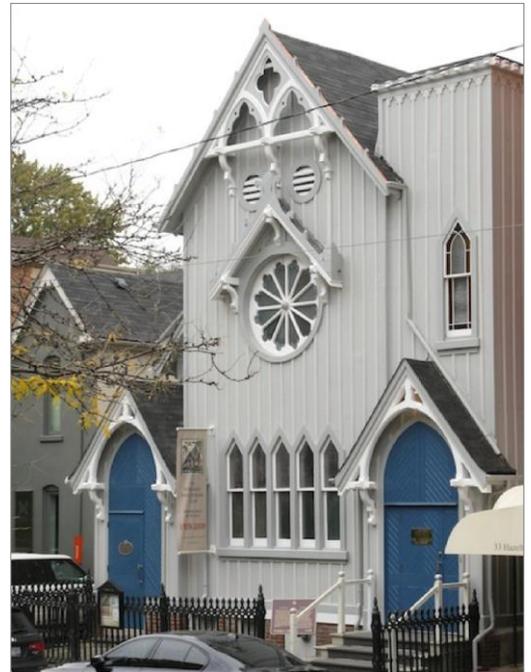
Continued on page 2



Heliconian Hall, *from page 1*

The members of the club, invigorated by the acquisition of a permanent home, threw themselves into fundraising for its renovation. They organized a theatre night and a mammoth bazaar that was opened Lieutenant-Governor Henry Cockshutt. Members also made personal contributions. Mrs. R. J. Dilworth, then Club President, donated the brick fireplace in the south wall of which fellow Heliconian Eleanor Gurnett noted that “it robbed the big room of bareness for a hearth is always the heart of a room, whether cottage or baronial hall.” The main hall’s good acoustics were highly prized by the women, but other inherited features had to be modified: the windows in the north wall were fitted with removable interior shutters to increase wall space for exhibitions, a stage was added, and the church pews were softened with upholstery. When the renovation was complete, the club celebrated with one of the greatest galas ever held at Heliconian Hall.

The Heliconian Club derived its name from Mount Helicon, in Greece, the legendary home of the Muses. Mary Hewitt Smart, a voice instructor at the Toronto Conservatory, called the first meeting in January of 1909. This was held at the Tea-Pot Inn and 59 women attended. According to Maria Tippett in *Making Culture* (UT Press, 1990), “Mutual entertainment was certainly one force which prompted English-speaking Canadians of the business, professional and upper classes to form exclusive private cultural organizations. They met in one another’s homes at regular intervals to make music, read poetry, put on plays, share a model for sketching, or combine all or some of these activities.” In Toronto, the men-only Arts and Letters Club* was formed in 1908. Heliconian Hall provided a space where women



from various artistic disciplines could meet socially, but it was also a place where they could express and develop their talents in music, painting, dramatic arts, literature, dance and – later – sculpture and architecture. The Club has hosted internationally acclaimed actors, musicians and dance troupes, as well as eminent Canadian composers, artists and authors.

Evening entertainments, daytime workshops, sketch groups, exhibitions, luncheons and dinners – notably the annual Christmas dinner for members – have continued from the Club’s Edwardian beginnings to the present day. But it has not all been halcyon days. The same Heliconians who lured members of the Abbey Theatre and the Ballet Russe into their midst successfully lobbied the federal government in 1944 to ensure that artists in the armed services receive equal opportunities – with farmers and fishermen – for education and employment at the conclusion of the war. How fitting then that when the plaque heralding the Club’s significance was unveiled in 2011, MP Stella Ambler – speaking on behalf of Minister Peter Kent – noted the government’s mandate to “recognize important landmarks that strengthen our national pride and support our cultural heritage.”

Photographs (including that of multi-media artist Diana McIntosh performing at Heliconian Hall in April of this year) and Mrs. Gurnett’s quote, are courtesy of heliconianclub.org.

*See TYHS Newsletter Vol.XXV, No.2, September 2009

THE NEIGHBOURHOOD AND BEYOND



IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE

Thursday to Saturday, December 6 to 8, at 7:30 pm

Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) is one of the best-loved movies of all time. Alexander Showcase Theatre's stage adaptation of this holiday classic depicts a live 1940s-era radio dramatization of the story. Directed by Vincenzo Sestito, this unique production uses actors, musicians and Foley sound-effect artists to tell the timeless story of George Bailey, a business and family man at the end of his rope when an unusual guest shows him how invaluable his life has been to his community.

Adults \$29, Seniors/Students \$24. Papermill Theatre, Todmorden Mills, 67 Pottery Road, 416-396-2819.

FORT YORK FROST FAIR

Saturday and Sunday, December 8 and 9, 10:00 am – 5:00 pm

Feel the excitement and charm of the festive season in Upper Canada some 200 years ago. Wander among the historic buildings of Fort York where merchants in period dress will be selling quality goods inspired by 18th- and 19th-century merchandise, then warm yourself by an outdoor bonfire or in the cheerful glow of the hearth in the Officers' Mess kitchen.



Regular admission. Fort York National Historic Site, 250 Fort York Boulevard, 416-392-6907.



LOWES TORONTO CHRISTMAS MARKET

Until December 16, weekdays 12:00 – 9:00 pm, weekends 10:00 am – 9:00 pm

Inspired by an old-world custom dating back to the 15th century, this annual event celebrates the traditional sights, sounds and scents of Christmas while showcasing hundreds of local handcrafted products. Magical lighting and an enormous Christmas tree create a romantic setting in which visitors can enjoy a glass of mulled wine or a rum toddy. Family friendly entertainment includes Bavarian brass bands, organ concerts, carolers and children's choirs.

Free. Distillery Historic District, 55 Mill Street, 416-364-1177.



GINGERBREAD VILLAGE

Until December 23, weekdays 9:30 am – 4:00 pm, weekends 11:00 am – 4:00 pm

This exhibit consists of eight replicated buildings from Black Creek Pioneer Village, made entirely with gingerbread and icing. Culinary artists from George Brown College, Humber College and others in the design and culinary community all participated in its execution. Black Creek's head chef, a local architect and a culinary historian will judge each building on accuracy of replication and creativity.

Black Creek Pioneer Village, Jane Street & Steeles Avenue West, 416-736-1733.

THE CHRISTMAS STORY

December 7, 9, 14-16, 20-23, go to holyltrinity.org for complete schedule

Reverend John Frank and his wife Patricia brought this pageant tradition from St. Martin's-in-the-Fields, London, to the Church of the Holy Trinity in 1938. Throughout the decades, *The Story* has played faithfully each season in the historic little church behind The Eaton Centre. During the second World War, the original production in England was suspended. In Toronto, even when a terrible fire ravaged Holy Trinity in 1975, the production went on – inside the mall!

Admission by donation; reservations required. Church of the Holy Trinity, 10 Trinity Square, 416-598-8979.





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REBELLION, from page 1

In the end, the outbreak did prove to be impotent. Montgomery's Tavern, the rebels' headquarters was burned to the ground. A plaque at its former location (now a National Historic Site) nevertheless credits the rebellion with contributing to "the establishment in Canada of responsible government." Mackenzie, meanwhile, fled to the United States, reputedly robbing the Royal Mail in order to finance his escape. In an odd coincidence, Canada Post Corporation has just sold the land on which both the plaque and an art deco Postal Station are located to the Rockport Group, a condominium developer. The federal government placed no conditions on the sale regarding the significance of either the site or the building, despite numerous public protests against the sale and a petition with 10,000 signatures. Jack Winberg, CEO of the Rockport Group, is quoted in the *Toronto Star* (November 9, 2012) as saying that they will do what they can "to preserve the front of the building...the back will go and we'll put a condo of some kind behind it." Arrogance indeed. Surprise? Not in the least.



Arrival of Loyalist Volunteers at the Parliament Buildings, Toronto

The Town of York Historical Society

- Individual Membership \$25
- Family Membership \$40
- Lifetime Membership \$250

Directors: Patricia Braithwaite, George Fells, Sheldon Godfrey, Sanford Hersh, Meredith Hogan, Ewa Jarmicka, Judith McErvel, Jennifer McIlroy (President), Councillor Pam McConnell and Melville Olsberg.

Toronto's First Post Office is administered by the Town of York Historical Society

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Closed on holiday Mondays and the Sundays preceding them.

The Post Office will close December 25-26th for Christmas, January 1 for the New Year, and February 18 for Family Day.

Toronto's First Post Office is a museum and National Historic Site. The Town of York Historical Society is a legally incorporated non-profit organization and registered charity. Gratefully acknowledged is the support of the City of Toronto; the Ontario Ministry of Tourism Culture and Sport; our members, donors and customers; and Canada Post.