

Wolseley Barracks

by John Mombourquette

Londoners driving east on Oxford Street in the Carling Heights area will have noticed that several of the buildings that made up the former Canadian Forces base have already been demolished. The removal of the First Battalion, The Royal Canadian Regiment to camp Petawa and recent Defense Department cutbacks have sealed the fate of the base. A small military presence in the form of Reserve and Cadet units will remain on a portion of the site, as will "A" Block or Wolseley Hall, which houses the RCR Regimental Museum and Headquarters. Wolseley Hall has been designated as a national historic site.

CFB London (or Wolseley Barracks as it was more popularly known) was situated on land that had a long military connection. It was originally part of the John Carling farm. Carling, son of the famous brewer and one of Sir John A. Macdonald's cabinet ministers, gave the Militia permission to use his farm for summer training camps beginning in the mid-1860s.

In 1885 the Dominion government was seeking a new site for infantry school. Conservative supporters of Carling, especially Josiah Blackburn's *Free Press*, suggested Carling's farm as a logical choice for a permanent military base. However, the Liberal newspaper, *The Advertiser*, cried foul. Complicating matters was the fact the City was looking for a new site for the Western Fair Grounds (then just to the north of Victoria park), and Carling's farm seemed to be the logical choice. It took a municipal referendum to settle the issue. The Western Fair Grounds went to its present location at Queen's park, and the military bought part of the farm from Carling.

Wolseley Barracks, named for British Field Marshall Garnet Wolseley, has seen many changes over the past century. Tens of thousands of men and women were trained here during the First and Second World Wars in huge "tent cities." Period photos of the base can be seen in the RCR Museum collection.

The majority of buildings currently being demolished date from the 1950s and early 1960s. If you want to catch a glimpse of London's military past before it's completely gone, take the time to drive through the base the next time that you are in the Carling Heights neighbourhood.