

A commemoration on land and water

Re-enactment at the top of wish list for Grimsby 1812 group



A commemoration on land and water. Grimsby is gearing up for its contribution to the War of 1812 Bicentennial festivities which kick off next year. Last May, as part of the commemoration, a War of 1812 Bicentennial Peace Garden was planted outside the Elizabeth Street Pump House and last week, the ribbon was officially cut on a gazebo contribution made by Phelps Homes in honour of both the peace that existed between Canada and the United States and the company's 35th anniversary. Pictured with Phil Conklin, a member of the Grimsby War of 1812 Bicentennial Committee dressed as a red coat, are from left: Grimsby Regional Coun. Debbie Zimmerman; Brian Purdy, co-chair of Grimsby War of 1812 Bicentennial Committee; Mayor Bob Bentley; Paul and Wendy Phelps; Arlene White, executive director Binational Tourism Alliance; and Brian Merritt, CEO of the Niagara 1812 Bicentennial Legacy Council.

On June 8, 1813 the plot of land where the pump house sits was the site of a battle. The canon balls flew, the British schooners exchanged fire with the American artillery units. The schooners withdrew at what was just the beginning of an eventful day at The Forty. And, if the Grimsby War of 1812 Bicentennial Committee has their wish, the battle will return to the lake and land on that very same day, 200 years later.

A re-enactment on both the water and land is the ultimate dream of the committee, which is headed up by Brian Purdy and recreation director Bruce Atkinson.

"It lends itself to a re-enactment because of the lake shore and the mouth of the creek, it's a real picturesque spot," said Phil Conkins, a member of the committee, noting no other re-enactment in the area has incorporated a naval component. "It's an exciting thing for this peninsula to have that interaction between naval element and land component." So far, the committee has no funding for such an endeavour but is hopeful that it will qualify for funds being distributed by the federal government for bicentennial activities.

"We're planning the event for 2013 and June 8, the day the engagement fell on, just so happens to fall on a Saturday," said committee member Craig Tallman, who is also program director for the Grimsby Historical Society, noting that organization is planning to take part in the event as well. "We've hit two nails square on the head." Tallman said he has spoken with someone at the federal Building Communities through Arts and Heritage, who was quite impressed that the planned re-enactment would actually be taking place on the same day, at the same site as it did 200 years ago.

Plans however are in the preliminary stages, said Purdy, noting the idea of a battle on land and lake is the ultimate wish of his committee, which also spearheaded the Grimsby War of 1812 Bicentennial Peace Garden, the second of such peace gardens to be built between Canada and the United States and the first for Canada. Those gardens will be plotted on a GPS map for the bicentennial celebrations with the goal of bringing tourists to the 30 Canadian and 30 American gardens that will be established by next June. Between May and June of next year a peace garden trail will also be established, said Arlene White, executive director of the Binational Tourism Alliance at a ribbon cutting for the final component of Grimsby's peace garden last Thursday.

On Oct. 13 the ribbon was cut on the final component of the garden, which was dedicated in May 2010. Phelps Homes, in commemoration of the War of 1812 and its own 35th anniversary, commissioned a gazebo, modelled after Fort George, to sit in the garden. For the past month, staff from Phelps have been finalizing the gazebo, which looks out onto the lake, in preparation for the celebration marking 200 years of peace between the two nations. On the north bastion of the gazebo rests a canon ball found by the Paul Phelps' grandfather. Legend has it the American canon ball was abandoned when the Americans retreated 200 years ago, said Phelps during the ceremony. The canon ball serves as a reminder that The Forty was not always peaceful.