

THE CLERGUE BLOCK HOUSE

(1819/1895)

75 HURON STREET



*This is an edited copy of the original document, originals included in the
SSM Municipal Heritage Committee Binder Titled:
The Clergue Blockhouse - Ermatinger • Clergne National Historic Site"

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The range of opinions that exist concerning the history of the old Clergue Block House are as varied as the years that have passed it by. Each idea has some element of truth but most have been distorted by rumour and local tradition. Such historical inaccuracy has even found its way into local newspapers. The Sault Daily Star reported that the Northwest Fur Company built a post in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, between 1782 - 1783, that included "a magazine, a Chief Factor's house, and later a lock". All of these were destroyed by the Americans in July 1814, "only the stone walls of the magazine remaining, now the present Block House".¹

The Northwest Fur Company in fact, did not build a fort on the Canadian or north side of the river. The fort had been established on the Michigan side and was known as Fort Sauvage. This was later to be the site of the Americans' Fort Brady.² Before 1814, the only buildings belonging to the Northwest Co. were "a dwelling house, two store houses, a saw mill, and the lock."³ E. H. Capp reports that the Northwest Company did not apply for land on the north side of the river to build a fort until 1799.⁴ All of these buildings, however, were destroyed by the Americans.

After the hostilities with the Americans were over the Northwest Co. proceeded to rebuild a fort on the site of the present Block House. By 1823,⁵ however, the Hudson's Bay Company merged with the Northwest Co. and proceeded to move the fort further east along the north shore to the east bank of Fort Creek. From 1816 to 1842 this post was the centre of trading activity.⁵

In September of 1824, John Gaff, Captain of the 76th Regiment, under Major W. A. Thompson, arrived in Sault Ste. Marie and made out a report of the buildings at the Northwest Co. Fort site below the rapids.⁶ He had received orders from Quebec on May 28, 1824, to make such a survey, as the government was thinking of purchasing these buildings as a military fort. Item 5 (five) on the survey and on the map includes "a Stone Magazine - 22' X 28' - covered with sheet iron, and in good order."⁷ On the map the building's dimensions are listed, its location in terms of the other buildings, and it is dated 1819.^{7b}

A report was also made by Lieutenant Boulton "belonging to the Northwest Co." that used the same map as the Gaff/Thompson Report. The magazine was described as "a stone building, the roof and door of which is covered with sheet iron, the lock's hinges are also of iron. This building has been used by the Northwest Co. as a Magazine, it is dry and in very good order." This document is signed by D. Boulton and witnessed by two signatures.⁸

The plans to buy the Northwest Co. fort were abandoned because of the proximity of Fort Brady on the American side.

In 1842 the Hudson Bay Co. (Northwest Co.) post on Fort Creek had to be abandoned because of continuous floods.⁹ The fort was moved back to the old Northwest Co. site. Business for the Hudson's Bay Co. gradually declined and Wemyss Simpson, who retired here in 1865, was the last Factor at the fort. The only building to survive from the Northwest Co. fort was the stone magazine, as the photo of the site (1889) proves.¹⁰ It has remained essentially unchanged, as a stone building with a sheet iron hipped roof and a small wooden entrance shed added on over the door.

The fort and area was described by a Judge Steere, whose letter, relating to his visit in 1880, was published on July 5, 1923 by the Sault Star.¹¹

"At that time there were numerous buildings on the site, some dilapidated and some fairly preserved. I remember the old magazine which was a large and very substantial building of stone with a good tin roof. (He also states that the) location of the old magazine is the only way now of telling the location of the old fort."

In 1894,¹² Frances H. Clergue acquired the property and changed the face, not only of the magazine, but of Sault Ste. Marie. Clergue later wrote a letter to the Sault Historical Society relating how he found the fort and what he did with the old magazine.¹²

"When I acquired the property it was surrounded by a heap of big boulders, and between these boulders protruded here and there the stumps of the original post stockade which surrounded the factory. In the main storey, the lower course of stones forming the present Block House, comprise the original boulders as I found them supporting the stumps of the stockade. On top of these boulders I constructed the wall which you now see there."¹²

This section is confusing as it seems to imply that Clergue built the base of the Block House out of stones lying in the field. This may, however, refer to the fact that Clergue might have resurfaced the wall with some of these stones as the photos seem to indicate.¹⁴ The wall he speaks of, however, may be the stone fence built around the house, part of which survives today.¹⁵

This appears to be confirmed when Clergue speaks of the condition of the magazine as he found it and the alterations he made.

"The stone powder magazine comprised only one room and was lighted only by small loopholes about six inches square, shoulder high, evidently provided for gun barrels. The stone building was surrounded by a roof covered with sheet iron but across the whole top of the stone building was a flat floor consisting of solid bays stretching from wall to wall covered first with flat stones and then with about two feet of clay, and from this floor extended the iron roof.

... I divided the single room into a brick wall and provided kitchen arrangements in the inner room thus formed and a small reception room in the front part. The small iron door I replaced with a larger one of oak and pierced the stone wall for windows. Several of the loopholes were preserved (re-facing) in their original location and shape, simply being blocked with wooden shutters."

Clergue then explains how he added on the upper log storey to transform the powder magazine into a Block House:

"I set out into the nearby woods and cut down cedar trees of a size and length suitable for covering the stone building with a substantial floor which was sufficiently strong to support the overhanging structure of cedar logs which provided the proper architectural style of a Block House of the period in the Indian wars. On the second storey thus formed I laid out the living rooms as they now are. It is not really a Block House. I simply preserved the original powder magazine of the old Hudson's Bay Co. and embellished it."

Clergue lived in the house for several years until a larger residence was built.

The Block House then gradually fell into disuse and was badly burned in June 1974.¹⁶ It is now in a bad state of repair.

Architectural Description

The Block House now sits on the grounds of the Abitibi Pulp and Paper Mill. The house is separated from Huron Street on the east, by a large employee parking lot. To the south, immediately behind the house, there is a barbed wire, chain-link fence and the railway tracks that service the factory. An empty field of weeds and some fences, front the west and north sides. The grass and shrubs that surround the house are overgrown and unkept, which all add to the building's desolate appearance. On the east side of the lot stands the ruins of a cut sandstone fence. The fence once surrounded the property, broken only by the main gate and a couple of wooden frame storage and horse sheds that stood on the west side of the property.¹⁶ Only the main gate posts and part of the east fence survive and all are covered by vines. Inside the gates are several cut stone blocks of sandstone that once marked out the driveway. The front door and all the windows have been boarded up since the fire. The building for the most part has been left to decay.

The house, as Clergue indicates, is not a real Block House but an imitation based on a design from the Indian wars.¹² The house is a two storey structure with an overhang or oversail on the second storey. The first storey is the original powder magazine of the Northwest Co. It is built of uncut field stone placed in a random manner and measures 22' X 28'. If we compare contemporary photographs of the wall with the photo taken in 1895 it appears that new mortar has been "plastered" in between the stones. Cut into the east, south, and west walls are two deeply recessed windows. Clergue added these at the time of his purchase of the site. There is a stone slipsill on each with a cut stone lintel at each window head. This alone reveals the extent of Clergue's re-structuring of the wall. The outer opening is much larger than the inner so that an angle of 45° is created between the two spaces on all sides. The vertical elements of each window are trimmed with brick. There are no windows on the north side, only the main entrance door. The edges are likewise trimmed in brick. The door has been boarded up, as have all the windows. On the south side, the windows are placed one on each side of a brick and stone fireplace. The base projects out from the stone wall and is almost flush with the upper storey.

The chimney stack disappears behind the log wall of the upper storey and then extends up out of the roof. Atop the stone wall is a squared wooden beam that extends around the four walls. The main joists of the second storey are supported on this beam.

The second storey is built of shaped horizontal logs. This storey overhangs the first and is supported on cedar joists. The spaces between these joists, flush with the first storey, are filled with cut stone. The spaces between the logs are filled with mortar. The east, west, and north walls have a three window bay arrangement. They are regularly spaced and are of equal size. The windows are all boarded up but one or two are visible. The outer or storm window is single-sashed with a central mullion and an eight-pane arrangement. These windows are flush with the wall. An inner window is visible. The 1895 photograph¹⁸ reveals recessed casement windows with seven panes on each leaf. Each window has a plain wooden architrave. The south wall has only two windows because of the central fireplace.

The Block House is topped by a high-hipped roof. The eaves project slightly. The rafters are covered by plain wood trim. The roof is covered with shingles and is trimmed with sheet metal.

Significance

As a whole the Block House is unique in this area, perhaps, even in the province. Its design and use as a residence places it in a class by itself. There are few other buildings in Ontario that one could compare with it, except perhaps the Martello defense towers around Kingston, but even these cannot compare with the Block House as it now stands, or the original small, square, powder magazine. Of course, the first storey magazine is by far the most important section, and all efforts should be made, at least, to protect this part. The first storey is one of the last surviving Northwest Fur Co. buildings in this province and is the only way of marking the original location of the Fort. Its early date (1819) makes it the second oldest surviving building in the Sault. Stark and simple as this magazine was, and is even now, it is a prime example of an early unadorned, wilderness architecture used by the early fur companies who could not afford nor contend with architectural frills. The building's altered condition does not, and cannot, invalidate its importance. Its loss through neglect would destroy the historical association of the site, and remove a valuable historical relic of this City's heritage.

The old Block House is the type of building that is easily overlooked. It has been badly damaged by fire and has decayed with age. Clergue built it in imitation of a Block House, so that the house cannot be considered an original structure. The powder magazine has been greatly altered, but even with these problems in mind, the history of the building, and the history of Sault Ste. Marie makes this building very eligible for designation. The significance of Clergue's arrival in the Sault cannot be underrated. The pulp and paper mill he built surrounds the Block House site. His residence here changed the face of this city and helped to make it the prosperous place it is today. As Clergue's residence, as a powder magazine; on both these accounts, the Block House deserves, and is worthy of, the preservation and protection of this City.

Randall Speller

Footnotes - Clergue Block House

- 1 Sault Daily Star (np. n.d.) (page 1) "Trading Post in 1782 on Abitibi Property" - by R. H. Burns - Scrapbook #19 (Buildings) Sault Ste. Marie Library
- 2 Historic Forts and Trading Posts of the French Regime and the English Fur Trading Companies - compiled by Ernest Voorhis, (page 1) 1930, Department of the Interior, Ottawa - pg. 160 - 161 - Canadiana - Sault Ste. Marie Public Library - Reference - R971, C212
- 3 E. H. Capp: The Story of Baw-a-ting - Sault Star Presses, 1902 - Sault Ste. Marie Public Library - Reference - R971, 3132 page 141 map
- 4 Ibid., page 121
- 5 Ibid., page 147
- 6 See map and attached documents (National Archives "British Military Records", "E" Series, CRG.8, Volume 363
- 7 Ibid - see document 7b see map
- 8 See accompanying sheets - report by D. Boulton (Northwest Company)
- 9 E. H. Capp: The Story of Baw-a-ting - page 165 (page 3)
- 10 **See** photograph - Sault Armouries Museum - Filing Cabinet B, Category F, Item 1C (July 5, 1895)
- 11 Sault Daily Star - July 5, 1923 - "Hudson Bay Company in 1821 took over Post of North West Company" - second section page 1 - microfilm Sault Ste. Marie Library
- 12 Aileen Collins: Our Town: Sault Ste. Marie - Volume 1, 1963, page 43
- 13 Note photograph Block House 1895
- 14 The base, however, still measures 22' X 28'
- 15 Note photograph - Sault Armouries Museum - Filing Cabinet B, Category F, Item 1H
- 16 Sault Daily Star, June 14, 1974 - "Block House Burns" - Scrapbook #19 (Buildings) - Sault Ste. Marie Library
- 17 See photograph - Filing Cabinet B, Category F, Item 1H
- 18 See photograph - Filing Cabinet B, Category F, Item 1H - July 5, 1895

Photos courtesy of the Sault Ste. Marie Museum



Photograph 2005 - Recreation & Culture Division