

New visitor centre for Canada's bloodiest battlefield

Big change in store at Old Fort Erie

By JOHN ROBBINS/QMI Agency – March 23, 2010

FORT ERIE — Call before you dig.

That's exactly what the Niagara Parks Commission plans to do before it starts building a new, multimillion-dollar visitor centre on what has been dubbed the bloodiest battlefield in Canada.

Only in this case the call will go out to archeologists, not just to local utility companies.

"We want to be responsible," says Jim Hill, superintendent of heritage at Niagara Parks.

We're going into an area that has been chewed up and dug up before, but that doesn't mean you aren't going to find sensitive materials."



On Saturday, the federal and provincial governments announced \$8.94 million in funding for improvements at three War of 1812 heritage properties owned and maintained by the NPC — Old Fort Erie, the Laura Secord Homestead and McFarland House.

The bulk of the money will be spent on the building the visitor centre at Old Fort Erie, plans for which include a museum, theatre, archive workspace, public

restrooms and storage space. The plans also calls for construction of earthworks to replicate those that would have been in place during the summer and fall of 1814 when the fort was occupied by the American army and was under siege by the British and their Canadian and Native allies.

The new visitor centre has been on the parks commission wish list for years, and is now possible thanks to the infusion of federal and provincial stimulus funding.

Hill said the construction timeline hasn't been finalized, however the idea is to have the project complete by the time celebrations commemorating the bicentennial of the War of 1812 get underway in two years time.

Long before bulldozers are allowed to start moving earth, there will be a proper archeological survey of the site, said Hill.

The first British fort on the site was built in 1764. It was a base for British troops, Loyalist rangers and Iroquois warriors during the American Revolution from 1775-1783.

The fort and the surrounding area was the scene of intense fighting during the closing days of the War of 1812.

On July 3, 1814, a well-trained American army numbering about 4,500 men crossed the Niagara River from the area of present day Buffalo and seized the lightly defended fortifications.

After beating the British two days later at the Battle of Chippawa, then fighting them to a draw at the Battle of Lundy's Lane in late July, the exhausted Americans fell back to the security of Old Fort Erie.

The British then laid siege to the fort and for the next two months the armies were locked in a bloody stalemate — the British unable to recapture the fort, the Americans unable to break out. With the onset of winter, the Americans finally abandoned the fort and slipped back across the Niagara River to U.S. territory. The war ended a few months later.

More than 3,000 soldiers were killed or wounded during the siege and many were buried in close proximity to where they fell.

The fort was abandoned during the 1820s and fell into ruins. It was briefly occupied by Fenian soldiers during raids in 1866.

The fort, in its current configuration, was rebuilt with federal and provincial funding in the late 1930s as part of a depression-era make-work project.

The portion of the land where the new visitor centre will be built was disturbed during the reconstruction. At the time of the siege, the land would have been the fortified slope of a forward position. As such, it's unlikely that any European-settlement-era buildings had been located there prior to or during the war, said Hill.

"You just didn't build stuff in the kill zone of your artillery and muskets."

That doesn't mean that other artifacts or even human remains might not be hidden beneath the soil.

Of equal concern is the fort's close proximity to significant aboriginal archeological sites and burial grounds to the north.

Excavations during the past 20 years in a area near the Peace Bridge has demonstrated conclusively there was a large native presence in the area dating back some 9,000 years.

"So, that is certainly a concern," said Hill. "We want to work with the native community ... to make sure we're not disturbing some really, really old history."