

# Beavers, moose and deer, Canadian wildlife on a military centerpiece

By Philip Cheong

**O**n October 30, 2024, the Silver Society of Canada made a visit to the Fort York Armoury, home of the Queen's York Rangers (1st American Regiment) to look at their collection of historic regimental silver. The Queen's York Rangers traces its lineage to the 1775 as the Queen's Rangers, First American Regiment and distinguish themselves during the American Revolutionary War. The Rangers fought against the Americans during the War of Independence, and one notable accomplishment was the defeat of General George Washington at the Battle of Brandywine in 1777. After the American Revolution, the regiment made its way to British North America, first through New Brunswick and eventually, Upper Canada (present day Ontario) under the command of John Graves Simcoe, the first Lieutenant-Governor of Upper Canada. Here, they helped in the founding of the Town of York in 1793. In 1802, after a period of non-conflict, they became the York Militia and were active in the War of 1812 and the Rebellion of Upper Canada. In its current form, it became active in 1866 as the 12th "York Battalion of Infantry". On 15 December 1936, it was amalgamated with The Queen's Rangers (1st American Regiment) and redesignated The Queen's York Rangers (1st American Regiment).

Fort York Armoury is located adjacent to historic Fort York, a designated historic site and the founding place of York, later incorporated as the City of Toronto in 1834. The Armoury, designed by the Chief Architect's Branch of the Department of Public Works and built in 1935 is a large, two-storey, drill hall with a concrete, vaulted roof surrounded by two-storey, flat-roofed ancillary blocks. Within its wall is a small museum and Officers' Mess dedicated to the Queen's York Rangers and it is here that the Silver Society of Canada was welcomed to visit and look at the collection. We are very grateful to Jeremy Hood, the Curator of the collection who gave us an introduction to the space and the collection, and to Captain Stehen Lloyd who arranged for our visit.

In terms of historic silver, there are several examples, chief of which is a Victorian silver centerpiece commissioned for the Officers' Mess, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 15<sup>th</sup> Foot (East Yorkshire Regiment). Though there is no direct relationship to the Queen's York Rangers it is now a prized piece in their collection of regimental silver. On the initiative of Lieutenant-Colonel &



Fig. 1

Commanding Officer Michael Stevenson the centerpiece came to Canada. He had seen it at a visit to England. Then it belonged to the Princess of Wales Own Regiment of Yorkshire. As it was for sale Col. Stevenson found a buyer. Honorary Colonel David Stewart who had recently sold the MacDonald Tobacco Company was happy to pay the purchase price of 1200 pounds.

This centerpiece, (Fig. 1) hallmarked for 1867 is the work of London silversmiths John Hunt and Robert Roskell, silversmiths and jewellers with a Royal Warrant to Queen Victoria and successors to Mortimer & Hunt which in their earlier history had associations with Paul Storr. In 1851, they were exhibitors at the Great Exhibition at the Crystal Palace and this success led to further exhibitions at home and overseas including New York in 1853 and Paris in 1867. By the 1860's they were employing as many as thirty-five people at the New Bond Street shop and between eighty and one hundred at their workshops on Harrison Street. They were society silversmiths whose clients patronized them both for their craftsmanship and associations with high society and the British Royal Family. They were known for their presentation pieces and centerpieces, in addition to the jewellery that they produced.

The history of this centerpiece created for the Officers' Mess goes back to 1862 when the 15<sup>th</sup> Regiment was stationed in Fredericton, New Brunswick which was far from being a hardship colonial posting for the British Army. There were no conflicts, there was fine weather and the posting allowed for much sport and leisure activities in the bush. It is on the theme of sport in world-wide



Fig. 2



Fig. Fig. 33



Fig. 4

postings that the centerpiece was to be created. As there was no centerpiece at this time, the suggestion for a much-needed centerpiece for the mess table was discussed and enthusiastically approved. The theme was to center around winter and local fauna given that the regiment had five sojourns in Canada and was an appropriate memento given Canadian winters provided more snow and sport than in Britain or any of her other colonies. The cost of this centerpiece was taken up by subscription by Colonel Sewell, the instigator of this idea and thirty-seven other officers of the Regiment during the years 1867 and 1868.

The centerpiece was to have caribou, moose and beaver (Fig. 2 /3/4/5) incorporated into its design and two of the officers along with two Indigenous hunting guides were tasked to go out into the bush to hunt and return with specimens so that they could be photographed and sent to the silversmiths. The names of the Indigenous guides are known to us, Chief Gabriel Sacobie and Sabatis, but not the two officers. The guides brought them to hunting grounds around the Gasperaux warrens where moose and caribou were known to be plentiful but after a period of many days, though tracks were seen, there was no success in hunting any of these animals. Dejected, the officers were loathed to return to the barracks without any prize until Chief Sacobie had in a dream, success at another location at Pleasant Brook. With haste, the party made it to this area on their snowshoes where they found a large herd of caribou and moose and were successful in procuring a fine specimen of each. Upon their return to the barracks, photographs of the prized specimens were taken and duly sent to London along with detailed descriptions of the guides and officers' clothing, equipment and scenic descriptions of the hunt locale. The animals thus provided for silver models of the mounts and the scenes for the cast decoration of the column of the centerpiece.



Fig. 5

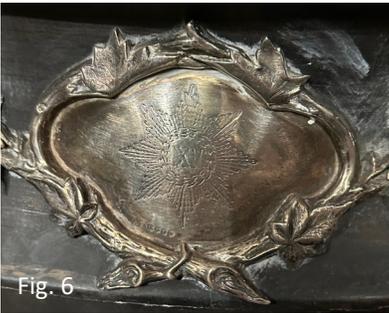


Fig. 6



Fig. 7

The final design for this centerpiece which is set on an ebonized base consists of a wreath of maple leaves at its base with a central cartouche emblazoned the regimental badge, the Roman numerals “XV” for the 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion. ( Fig. 6) Above that we see the base of a tazza, and flanking at both sides, the moose and caribou hunted specifically to be models for this centerpiece. In the center, is a shield engraved with the names of the subscribers. The column itself is cast with scenes of the outback. (Fig. 6) On one side, two men are in a canoe, paddling on a waterway with cliffs and coniferous and deciduous trees in the background. On the other side, there is a scene of the triumphant hunters returning with the prize game on a sled. Above this a column is the body of the tazza comprising of a group of four beavers climbing up a circular surface. The original domed lid was missing upon arrival in Montreal. To make this piece truly regimental Honorary Colonel Stewart decided to replace this lid with a figure of a Revolutionary-War era Queen’s Ranger. The centerpiece was first exhibited at the Royal Canadian Military Institute before being sent to the Fort York Armoury.

There are several other silver pieces in the collection. (Fig. 7) They date from the 20<sup>th</sup>-century and are primarily functional and domestic in nature. All in all, the visit of the Silver Society of Canada

to the Fort York Armoury was a great success and we are indebted to the Commanding Officer and Officers and staff for the privilege given to the society to view the silver that is in the Officers’ Mess and regimental museum.



Fig. 7