

Fort Wellington was built at Prescott, Ontario during the War of 1812 to defend the St. Lawrence River corridor against American attack. At that time, the St. Lawrence River was the main “highway” for Upper Canada and Prescott was a major stopping off point for troops and supplies moving through the Great Lakes system. River frontiers bordering the United States were battle hot spots not only because the enemy was close at hand, but they were often the routes by which armies travelled. Fort Wellington fired on American troops as they made their way down river to attack Montreal in autumn of 1813. The American advance was stopped short at the Battle of Crysler’s Farm, which took place near Morrisburg, Ontario on Nov. 11, 1813. Today Fort Wellington preserves elements of that first fort from the War of 1812 as well as buildings that were constructed as a result of the outbreak of the Rebellions in Canada in 1837.

THE LANGUAGE OF FORT LIFE

This activity may be done in groups or individually.

To tell the story of life at Fort Wellington during the War of 1812 we use a special vocabulary. Most occupations have a particular way of talking, and the military is no exception. To learn some of the words that the soldiers used we’ll play a guessing game with the terms listed below. The common meaning of words can change over time or from place to place.

- Write down the definition that first comes to mind when you read the following words.
- Next, guess what these words meant to a soldier in the early 1800s.

Have fun comparing answers!

drill, hard tack, hot shot, loophole, magazine

THE LANGUAGE OF FORT LIFE -- ANSWERS:

DRILL

The most common drill at Fort Wellington wasn’t an object but an activity. Drill is another word for practice. Soldiers would drill to improve skills such as marching and loading their muskets. During the winter of 1812-1813 soldiers at Fort Wellington drilled out on the ice of the St. Lawrence River, and on Feb. 22, 1813 they marched right across the river and captured the American town of Ogdensburg, New York.

HARD TACK

We might think swallowing any sort of tack would be painful, but hard tack was a type of food eaten by soldiers and men serving in the navy. While it was not dangerous to eat, hard tack wasn’t very appetizing food. It was like a very dry, hard tea biscuit. It could be stored for long periods of time without spoiling. Hard tack, sometimes called ship’s biscuit, could be taken on long voyages or stockpiled to serve as emergency rations that would be eaten if the fort was under siege.

HOT SHOT

“Hot shot” didn’t mean “expert” or “important person” to the soldiers. In those days, hot shot was any sort of cannon-ball that was heated red hot before being fired at a target. Hot shot could set afire the sails and timbers of enemy ships along the St. Lawrence.

LOOPHOLE

For soldiers, “loophole” didn’t mean a way to get around a rule. At the fort, a loophole is a special type of window, a narrow vertical slit in the blockhouse wall. The windows were designed this way so that soldiers could fire their guns out of the fort, but attacking soldiers would have difficulty firing in. The War of 1812 blockhouse at Fort Wellington contained 100 loopholes.

MAGAZINE

You couldn’t read the fort’s magazine. The magazine was the room or building where gunpowder was stored.