



# THE POPPY TRAIL

Come Walk Our History!



**A Walking Tour of Historic Cobourg  
with a Remembrance Day Theme**

Text by Hugh Brewster  
Historical consultation by Robert Mikel, author of  
*COBOURG: The Spirit of the Place*

# THE POPPY TRAIL

## A WALK of REMEMBRANCE

Approx. 1 hour

We invite you to walk our history. This tour will allow you to savour charming period architecture and streetscapes while experiencing some remarkable stories from Cobourg's wartime past.





11

College St.

Anne St.

12

Henry St.

13

Chapel St.

Walton St.

15

14

16

Church St.

17

19

Queen St.

Henry St.

Perry St.

Bay St.

20

Victoria Park

18

Cobourg Beach

# THE POPPY TRAIL



## 1) Victoria Hall, 55 King Street West, 1860

Begin your tour in historic Victoria Hall, one of Canada's most beautiful public buildings. It was officially opened on September 6, 1860 by the 18-year-old Prince of Wales during his North American tour, and named for his mother, Queen Victoria. That evening in the Concert Hall the prince (later King Edward VII) attended a grand ball and thrilled the local citizenry by staying for the midnight supper. Edward VII's funeral fifty years later, on May 20, 1910, is often seen as a prologue to the Great War; nine ruling sovereigns, including the king's nephew Kaiser Wilhem II, attended, most of whom would have their thrones toppled by the war.

### Victoria Hall Concert Hall

With its wall and ceiling paintings carefully restored, the 2nd floor Concert Hall today looks much as it did when the royal party danced there by gaslight in 1860. Twenty years later it was converted to a theatre and then in 1899 became a grand opera house with red plush seats, elaborate balconies, and boxes for the town's elite. Many famous names appeared there, including the Dumbells Concert Party, the soldier's troupe that got its start on the Western Front.



## Victoria Hall Courtroom

On the main floor, be sure to see the Courtroom, often called the Old Bailey since it is patterned after the legendary criminal court in London. The painted Royal Arms crest behind the judge's seat was designed by Moser, the same German artist who did the ceiling and wall paintings in the Concert Hall upstairs. And it retains its original paneling and prisoner's box. The most famous case to be tried here was the 1928 libel suit brought by the Canadian WW1 commander, Sir Arthur Currie, against a Port Hope newspaper which accused him of taking the Belgian town of Mons on the last day of the war purely for his own glory.



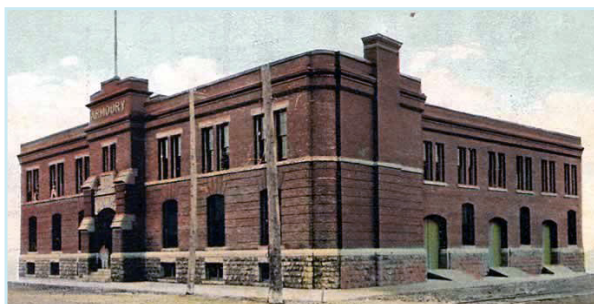
After exiting Victoria Hall, turn back to admire the symmetry of architect Kivas Tully's design,. (And give quiet thanks to the group of Cobourg citizens who saved this building from the wrecker's ball in 1971 and worked tirelessly to have it restored and re-opened in 1983.)

Turn left and proceed west on the north side of King Street until you see the large red-brick building on the south side at 207 King West that is now the Cobourg Police Department.

## 2) Cobourg Armoury, 1904, 207 King Street West

This imposing red-brick and stone building once housed the 40th Northumberland Regiment and the Canadian Garrison Artillery and was a recruitment centre in two world wars. The

letters E.R. on the keystone over the doorway stand for Edwardus Rex since it was built in 1904 during the reign of Edward VII. Thousands of soldiers passed through here during World War 1 and a large part of the building was converted to dormitories. The large drill hall was the scene of Saturday night dances which were popular with the young women of Cobourg. It was also later used for community events such as the annual Motor Show. In 1968 the building was sold and became the town's main police station.



Continue west along the north side of King Street until you see the storefront at 144 King West. Look up the alley beside it to see the mansard roofline of a Victorian house.





### 3) Home of Reverend William Beattie, 1874, 144 King Street West

The Second Empire-style home behind the storefront was built in 1874 by William Battell, a local builder who later became a mayor of Cobourg. It once had stables, a

coach house and an elaborate fence in front. William Beattie, the minister of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, was a lodger here and purchased the house after Battell's death. When war broke out in 1914, Beattie enlisted as a chaplain of the 40th Regiment of the Cobourg Battalion and rose to become the chaplain of the entire 2nd Division. His letters from the front sent to the local newspapers comprise a remarkable chronicle of the war. In describing his first impression of the Western Front, he wrote: "Imagine trying to live for over a year in the trenches which you have seen workmen in Cobourg digging when laying sewers." After the war, Beattie moved to Ottawa and in 1956 the house was converted to a Canadian Tire store and the front addition has been a retail space ever since.

Cross King Street at the corner of Durham Street.

### 4) Cobourg Collegiate, 1902, 135 King Street West



Now a private school, this building was formerly the home of Cobourg Collegiate. Many men from the town who served in WWI and II attended high school here. Built in 1902 in a style known as Edwardian Classical, the building features oversized Palladian windows on the second level. In 1935 a teacher named C. Gordon King joined the staff and during World War II he served overseas as a troop commander for the Cobourg

22nd Medium Battery, achieving the rank of lieutenant colonel. He became principal of the school in 1953 and when a new high school, CDCI East, was built in 1960, he supervised both schools for several years before retiring in 1972. He was always active in the life of the town and the public library is today named the C. Gordon King Centre in his honour.

Turn left to go east on King to George St. and walk north on right-hand side to yellow house #262.



*Lt.-Col C. Gordon King (front row, 4th from left) with men from the 22nd Cobourg Medium Battery in 1949.*



LAC: 392.4878

*Beatrice Lillie photographed by Karsh*

## 5) Childhood home of Beatrice Lillie, 262 George Street

This modern-looking bungalow is actually a Victorian cottage that circa 1909-10 was the home of the famed comic actress Beatrice Lillie. As children, Beatrice and her sister Muriel had toured Ontario in a musical act known as The Lillie Sisters. They moved to this house when

Beatrice's mother became the choir director of St. Andrew's Church, and sister Muriel, the organist. In 1914, Mrs Lillie took the girls to London, England, where Beatrice soon found parts in musical revues. Within ten years she was acclaimed as "the funniest woman in the world" performing songs by Noel Coward and Cole Porter in the West End and on Broadway. Her marriage to an English baronet gave her the title of Lady Peel, and during World War II she toured tirelessly entertaining British troops. One night, when informed that her much-loved only son had been killed, she insisted on going on with the show, famously announcing "I'll cry tomorrow."

Cross the street and walk north to 299 George.



*Fern Blodgett as a shipboard wireless operator*

## 6) Fern Blodgett Sunde childhood home, 299 George St.

While growing up in this house during the 1920s and 30s, Fern Blodgett always wondered about a life at sea. When

war broke out, she learned that there was a shortage of seagoing wireless operators and by June of 1941 had become the first woman in Canada to earn a Second Class Wireless Operator's Certificate. That month her school received an urgent request from the *M/S Mosdale*, a Norwegian merchant ship stuck at the port in Montreal without a wireless operator. Fern applied for the job and was accepted. Captain Gerner Sunde, however, was stunned when he realized that F. Blodgett, his new radio operator was a young woman, something unheard of in the merchant marine. Fern's first crossing was a nightmare but she stuck by her post and went on to make 78 crossings. She eventually married Captain Sunde and became the first woman to receive the Norwegian War Medal. A statue to Fern now stands in Victoria Park by the lakefront.

This house was later the home of the widowed mother of Flying Officer Robert Lesley Edwards, the first RCAF pilot to die in battle on Aug. 26, 1940, and Cobourg's first casualty of WWII.

Walk across the street to 314 George.



## 7) The MacNachtan home, 1876, 314 George Street

This red-brick Italianate house has a lively façade with contrasting window and door heads in buff brick and a circular window in the gable that provides an unusual detail. It was home to three generations of the MacNachtan family, three of whom served as county clerks. Edmund A. MacNachtan, a Scottish immigrant, came to Cobourg in 1863 to take up that position and was succeeded by his son Neil MacNachtan in 1891. Neil was a crack marksman who became the commanding officer of the Cobourg garrison. When he collapsed and died in his office at Victoria Hall in 1928, he was succeeded by his son Edmund L. MacNachtan who had served in World War I. Edmund had enlisted as a sergeant in the Canadian Field Artillery in September of 1914 and returned home with the rank of captain in late June of 1919, having served a remarkable four years and nine months on the Western Front.



Lt-Colonel  
Neil MacNachtan  
circa 1900

Proceed north on George Street and note the large pillared building across the street at 323 George which was once the town's Central School.



### **8) Central School, 1906, 323 George Street**

When completed in 1906, this imposing building with its tall Ionic columns was the pride of Cobourg. It had been built to replace five smaller schools with the aid of a \$10,000 grant from local benefactor Thomas Gillbard, for whom the school was later named. In the custom of the period, there was a Girl's Entrance on the north side of the building and a Boy's Entrance on the South. There was once a bell tower on the roof which was destroyed in a fire in November of 1917 along with much of the sloping roof and the third-floor assembly hall. (Local historian Percy Climo, author of two books about Cobourg's Great War, recalled that patriotic wartime songs were part of the Friday afternoon school assemblies and that 'Tipperary' was always sung with great gusto.) The school was refurbished and re-opened in September of 1918. During the 1990s it was decided that the old school should be closed and it was converted into the Mansions on George condominiums.

Continue north on George Street to Number 364 at the corner of Havelock.

## 9) **'Dromore', childhood home of Colonel Wilfred Dumble, 1857, 364 George Street**

If you look up at the roof brackets of this picturesque Gothic villa you will see the letter 'D' for Dumble, the name of the wealthy family who built it and dubbed it 'Dromore'. Thomas Dumble came to Canada from Cornwall in the early 1840s and made a fortune building many of Cobourg's roads and bridges. When Thomas moved to a substantial new home up the street (at 475 George) in 1871, his son John, a railway contractor, took over Dromore. One of his children was Wilfred Dumble, who as a young man joined the British Navy's Royal Engineers and later became the head of the London Omnibus Company. In February of 1915, Winston Churchill, First Lord of the Admiralty, invited Dumble to be part of a secret committee to develop large fighting vehicles that could crush barbed wire and crash through trenches. The Landships Committee, as it was known, met in secret because Churchill did not want Lord Kitchener at the War Office to dismiss this as "another of Winston's crackpot schemes." Dumble was instrumental in the creation of "Little Willie," the world's first armoured tank and by the Hundred Days advance in 1918, tanks had become highly effective vehicles of war. Dumble would return to Cobourg after the war and marry Mary Speer, a wealthy American woman who owned 'The Lawn' estate on King Street East.



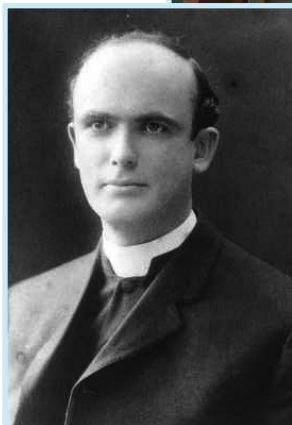
*A roof bracket bearing the letter 'D' for Dumble, and Colonel Dumble as a young officer.*

Proceed east on Havelock Street past St. Michael's School to Division Street. Turn left to walk north one block to University Avenue. Pause to admire the Romanesque red-brick façade of St. Michael the Archangel Roman Catholic Church.



## 10) St. Michael the Archangel Roman Catholic Church, 1895, 379 Division Street

This Romanesque Revival basilica was designed by Peterborough architect John Belcher. Between its two towers topped with Gothic-style metal corner caps, stands a white statue of the church's patron saint. The Roman Catholic church in Cobourg dates back to 1837 and many of its first parishioners were Irish immigrants who had fled the potato famine. A descendant of one of these families was Father Francis P. Duffy who became a famous chaplain in the U.S. army during World War I. Born in Cobourg on May 2, 1871, Duffy graduated from St. Michael's College in Toronto and then moved to New York City to teach at St. Francis Xavier College. As the chaplain for New York's 69th Regiment, (known as "the Fighting 69th"), Duffy became the most-decorated U.S. cleric for his actions in battle and for rescuing wounded men at the front in 1918. A statue of him stands in Duffy Square at the north end of Times Square in Manhattan.



*Father Francis Duffy in the 1890s  
and the statue of him in Duffy Square  
in New York.*

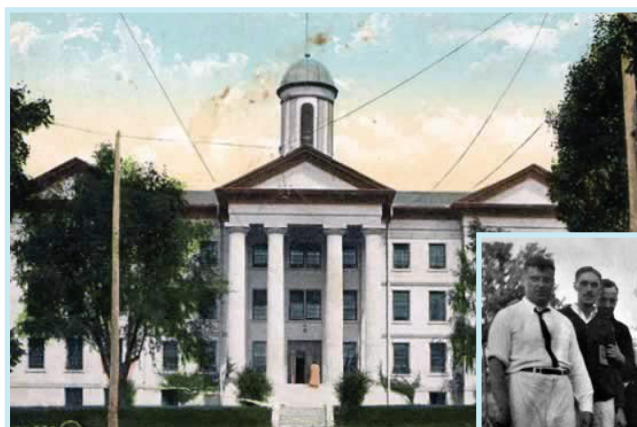


Cross Division Street at University and walk east two blocks to the neo-classical former Victoria College building on the north side at 100 University Avenue East.



## 11) Victoria College, 1832-36, 100 University Avenue East

This handsome Greek Revival building began life in the 1830s as a Methodist school for boys called Upper Canada Academy. In 1841 it became Victoria College, one of Canada's first degree-granting institutions, with Egerton Ryerson as its first president. In 1884 it gained university status but only eight years later it became part of the University of Toronto and relocated there. In 1901 the building was converted to the Cobourg Asylum for Women, a mental hospital housing 150 patients. In 1917 it became a military hospital for officers suffering from shell shock, a condition that would cause men to twitch or shake uncontrollably, seem deaf or mute or simply gaze off into the distance. Now known as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, this condition was little understood at the time. Treatment at the Cobourg Hospital ranged from counseling and physical therapy to electric shocks. As patients improved, they could take up pottery, carpentry or gardening, and volunteers from the town mingled freely with them. Yet some men chose to flee the institution or escape by suicide. When the hospital closed in 1920, a large farewell ball was held with many people from the town attending. In 1921 it once again became a mental care facility for women. Two large wings added during WW1 were eventually taken down and the building is now a seniors' residence.



*Volunteers from the town pose with some of the patients after a tennis game.*



Walk south on College Street two blocks to James Street. Turn left and walk east one block to Walton Street. Turn left and walk one house north to No. 356 on the east side of Walton.

## 12) 'Sunny Brae', home of Lt-Colonel John Odell, 1876, 356 Walton Street

When it was first built in 1876, this house was thought to be “new and peculiar” by Victorian standards since it lacked much ornamentation. The front gable and porch, added circa 1905, gave ‘Sunny Brae’ more charm. Its first owner was Nathanael Burwash, a teacher at Victoria College who later became its president. Another teacher, Albert Odell, bought the house in 1900. Albert and his brother John were both teachers who became school inspectors, and both had married sisters, the daughters of a local merchant. When Albert’s wife died in 1904, John and his family moved in with his brother. When war broke out ten years later, John enlisted at the age of 48. He had been the commanding officer of the Cobourg Heavy Battery, a militia regiment, which became part of the 2nd Heavy Battery, Canadian Field Artillery, under Lieutenant-Colonel Odell’s command. This battery arrived in France in September of 1915 and returned home in May of 1919.



Return to James Street and walk one block west to Henry Street and walk south briefly to No.336 on the east side.

## 13) Hewson/McNaughton home, 1859, 336 Henry Street



This well -proportioned Victorian house shows Regency influence in its three-bay façade and hipped roof but also has a Gothic-style gable with an attic window. It was built for Andrew Hewson, an Irish immigrant who operated a successful dry goods and millinery store in town. He and his wife had six children, and their daughter, Charlotte, and her husband, Deputy-Sheriff David McNaughton, lived with them

for many years. Their only son, Edmund Hewson McNaughton, was killed at Bully-Grenay, France, while serving with the Cobourg Heavy Battery. On August 9, 1918, an enemy shell hit a storage shed containing 9 artillery shells and 5 tons of cordite. A 9.2 Howitzer gun (at right) was destroyed and 26-year old McNaughton and two other Cobourg young men were killed.



Walk down Henry St, and turn right on King Street on north side to 118 King Street East.



#### 14 ) St. Peter's Rectory, 1877, 118 King Street East

This handsome Victorian house has been home to the rectors of St. Peter's Anglican Church for over 140 years. During World War II, the Reverend Robert Seaborn of St. Peter's went overseas as chaplain to the 1st Battalion of the Canadian Scottish Regiment. He waded ashore during the D-Day landings in Normandy and won the Military Cross for carrying wounded men to safety. He is pictured praying with a dying soldier in one of the most famous Canadian photographs of the war, taken near Caen on July 15, 1944. After the war, he became the Dean of Quebec, the Bishop of Newfoundland and chancellor of U of T's Trinity College before retiring to Cobourg where he died in 1993.



LAC 3623164

*Chaplain Seaborn with a dying soldier, July 15, 1944.*

### 15) St. Peter's Anglican Church, 240 College Street, c.1844

An Anglican church has stood on this site since 1820. The façade and tower of the present church date from 1844 but the rest of the structure has been extended and altered over time. The church once had a spire which was taken down in the 1920s and the turreted square tower was dedicated to the men of the parish who had served in World War I. St Peter's was the regimental church for the 40th Northumberland Regiment and the Canadian Garrison Artillery and the colours for both are framed inside the sanctuary. (Not open to visitors.) On November 7, 1976, a service was held in this church for Canadian winners of the Victoria Cross and George Cross, the highest awards for gallantry in the Commonwealth. Two of the organizers were Cobourg residents and Victoria Cross medalists, Charles Rutherford, who had persuaded 50 German soldiers to surrender to him in 1918, and Chaplain John Weir Foote who had rescued men on the beach at Dieppe in August, 1942.



Cross King Street and walk west to the stone Memorial Gates that lead to the Cenotaph in Victoria Park.





## 16) Memorial Gates to Victoria Park

These handsome stone gates were installed in 1948 to honour the soldiers from Cobourg who died in World War II. Engraved on the right-hand side are the names of 39 of them. Near the top is John Bolster, 29, who died going ashore at Juno Beach on D-Day, June 6, 1944. Five other young men named here also

perished in the Normandy invasion. Ralph Brown, 20, was one of five local men in the Hastings and Prince Edward Regiment who were killed in the brutal slog up the boot of Italy in 1944. There were 8 young men who died in the RCAF, following Robert Edwards, 28, who was shot down during the Battle of Britain in 1940. Gerald Gallagher, 31, and Fred Lonsberry, 21, served in the Royal Canadian Navy during the Battle of the Atlantic. And George “Shorty” Medhurst, 24, was one of two Cobourg men who went with the Royal Rifles to Hong Kong but died in a Japanese POW camp on January 22, 1943. On the left-hand side are inscribed lines from Laurence Binyon’s poem, ‘For the Fallen’ which concludes: “At the going down of the sun, and in the morning, we will remember them.”

Follow the walkway from the Memorial Gates to the Cenotaph.



## 17) Cenotaph, 1924, Victoria Park

In a ceremony attended by thousands, this cenotaph was unveiled in 1924 by Effie Bolster, a Cobourg nurse who had served overseas. The design of a Roman cross with a brass sword superimposed on

either side was one created for the Commonwealth War Graves Association and used at war grave sites in France and Belgium. Emblazoned on the cenotaph is a quotation from a speech that Rudyard Kipling wrote for King George V which ends with the words: “Sacrifice and honour are/ No vain things but truths / By which the world lives.” A plaque on the monument remembers the Canadians who served in the Merchant Navy 1939-45 “The Life Line of the World.” Another panel pays tribute to the Korean War, 1950-53, in which 26,000 Canadians served and 516 lost their lives.

Walk down to the lakefront to the statue of Fern Blodgett Sunde in the southeast corner of the park.



## 18) Fern Blodgett Sunde Statue

A group of local citizens and the Cobourg Museum Foundation raised the funds to erect this bronze statue by sculptor Tyler Fauvelle to honour Fern Blodgett Sunde, the first woman to serve as a shipboard wireless operator during World War II. Fern was a hero of the Battle of the Atlantic which was Canada's longest military engagement of the war. Convoys from Canada saved Britain from starvation and provided the supplies, troops and equipment for the liberation of Europe. Guarding the convoys were Canadian corvettes, important anti-

submarine warships and among them was the HMCS Cobourg which was given a gala welcome here in 1944. The ship's bell is preserved today in Victoria Hall.

Walk north on Green Street to the east of the park to the large Victorian Gothic building at No. 202.



## 19) Hatfield Hall, 1878, 202 Green Street

This Victorian Gothic residence was built in 1878 by William Chambliss who had been a Union colonel in the U.S.

Civil War and is considered the founder of Cobourg's American summer colony. In 1890 the house was acquired by the wealthy Cornell family from Buffalo who enjoyed staging concerts and theatricals at Victoria Hall. The celebrated American stage actress, Katharine Cornell, spent her childhood summers here and called Cobourg, "the home of her heart." During WWII Katharine Cornell toured army bases with the play, *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*, and played herself in the wartime morale-boosting movie *Stage Door Canteen*. The house was an exclusive girls' school from 1929 to 1951 and is today an apartment building.

Go south on Green St to Perry St and walk through the park to Division St, passing by the Cobourg Bandshell.

## 20) The Cobourg Bandshell, 1934, and “the Pav”

The Cobourg bandshell was built in 1934 as an employment project during the Great Depression. It replaced a 1902 wooden gazebo bandstand from which Cobourg’s popular town band had sent jaunty airs wafting over the park and the beachfront in summer. One of the band’s conductors, J.H. Goldring, launched the drive to build the new bandshell and acquired the design from the United States. The famed Cobourg Concert Band still gives concerts here. Behind the Bandshell stood The Pavilion, a popular dance hall known as “The Pav.” A long, low, clapboard building with windows that could be removed, it attracted Toronto “big bands” like George Wade and the Corn Huskers, and Burt Niosi, Canada’s King of Swing and his Palais Royale orchestra. During WWII, off-duty soldiers would take their dates there to dance to the tunes made popular by Glenn Miller and Benny Goodman. First built in 1917, ‘the Pav’ had seen better days by the 1970s and was torn down in 1978.



At Division Street walk north to the “Four Corners” at the corner of Division and King.

## 21) The ‘Four Corners’, King and Division Streets

Once the main hub of the town, this intersection was known as the “Four Corners.” It was here that a bonfire was lit during the victory celebrations on the night of November 11, 1918, and the Kaiser in effigy was consigned to the flames. On the southeast corner stood a very handsome Classical Revival stone building that housed the Bank of Montreal and later the town’s post office. Its height and design made it the perfect complement to Victoria Hall. Sadly, it was torn down in 1960 to make way for a Woolworths store. It was in the old Gem Theatre just east of the post office, that the Khaki Club, a recreation and assistance centre for soldiers, was established by local women during World War I.



Walk west to King Street to return to Victoria Hall.

If you have time and a car, the Alderville War Memorial is well worth a visit. Simply drive up Division Street past Highway 401 and stay on Highway 45 for 25 minutes until you come to the small community of Alderville. You will see the large white monument, the country’s first cenotaph to Indigenous soldiers on your right. From a tiny community of only 63 adult males, Alderville sent 35 soldiers to fight in WWI and nine of them never returned.

# *Experience* COBOURG

*Your* STORY BEGINS HERE!

[www.ExperienceCobourg.ca](http://www.ExperienceCobourg.ca)



Photo credits: Robert Mikel collection, Cobourg Public Library,  
Cobourg Historical Society, Library and Archives Canada.

©2020 Experience Cobourg. All rights reserved.