



The house built by Warren Fairman for Elizabeth Barnett on Highway 2



Elizabeth Barnett ca 1900

ELIZABETH BARNETT: “Gananoque’s Laura Secord”

By Lorraine Payette

Born in Stones Mills, NY, in 1815, Elizabeth Barnett always wanted to be a teacher. She completed her schooling in LaFargeville, near French Creek (now Clayton), but there were no opportunities available in the area.

Her brother lived in Gananoque and encouraged her to try her luck here. So at the age of 22, she picked up her bags, rented a room on Stone Street at Dr. Potter’s house, and began her new life teaching school in Canada.

In February, 1838, she decided to go back across the river to visit her family. The St. Lawrence River was frozen solid, and people traveled back and forth across it by sleigh. French Creek was only 8 miles away, and it would be the perfect place to stop on her way to Stones Mills.

“She crossed over with others and headed off home to visit her family,” said Marcia MacRae of the Arthur Child Museum. “She noticed there were an awful lot of strangers in town, all kinds of men, and there was a lot of bustle going on. There were supply wagons, guns, ammunition, coming in, and all sorts of things were going on.

“Then she heard that the arsenal in Watertown had been raided. Four hundred guns and all kinds of ammunition had been

stolen, and these things were coming up to French Creek.”

Listening to the men talk, she soon learned that they were planning to attack Gananoque two days later. They planned to evict the British from North America by taking Kingston and Brockville, then moving on to conquer the rest of Canada.

Elizabeth was horrified by this idea and couldn’t bear the thought of an invasion. She feigned an illness and returned to Gananoque, going immediately to Dr. Potter and telling him everything. He in turn told John MacDonald, the richest man in town, who shared the news with Warren Fairman, a young dragoon. Fairman took word to Kingston and Brockville.

Immediately, women, children and valuables were packed up and moved to safer locations. Fortifications were enhanced with materials on hand, and six companies of the Leeds Militia responded. Professionally trained soldiers poured into the blockhouse and prepared to man the cannon.

Meanwhile for the invaders, things were not going well. Of 2,000 expected troops, only 600 arrived. Those who did show up learned of trained soldiers moving into Gananoque and realized that the strength of the element of surprise was no longer there. Instead of

proceeding with the invasion, they decided to go back home.

Elizabeth had saved Gananoque and all of Upper Canada from this invasion. She later married Warren Fairman, and he built her a stone house outside of Gananoque on Highway 2 where they raised 11 children. The house still stands there today.

For her own safety, Elizabeth’s story was not made public in her lifetime. As an American, she would have been guilty of treason in the US and could never have seen her family again.

Instead, her act of extreme heroism was recorded in Miss MacKinnon’s Notes, a collection of people’s recollections of true local events made by the daughter of Samuel MacKinnon. Although the book Miss MacKinnon intended to produce never materialized, her notes made it possible for us to know of Elizabeth and all she did for Gananoque and Canada.

In 1996, Councillor Gord Brown (now MP Leeds-Grenville) proposed that February 21 be forever remembered in Gananoque as Elizabeth Barnett Day.

“It was from Miss MacKinnon’s notes that we got the story of Elizabeth Barnett,” said MacRae. “Can you imagine where we would be today without her?” LH