

HERITAGE CHARACTER STATEMENT

The gun emplacement of the Signal Hill battery was built in 1903-1905 to designs by the British Royal Engineers. The emplacement reflects the Victoria-Esquimalt coastal defence plans to protect the nearby naval dockyard, part of a global defence scheme for defence of British overseas naval stations which was initiated in the 1880s & 1890s. In 1938, its guns were moved and wooden structures were built over the gun mounting areas. During the Second World War, the Signal Hill battery housed maintenance engineers. The Department of National Defence is the custodian. See FHBRO Building Report 90-50.

Reasons For Designation

The Signal Hill gun emplacement was designated Recognized for its association with the defence of British overseas naval stations at the end of the 19th century and the defence of Canada during the First World War; for its superior functional design; and for its well preserved site.

The gun emplacement was the last joint venture of the British and Canadian governments before the British garrison withdrew from Esquimalt in 1906. The Signal Hill gun emplacement was the only one in the area designed to hold the powerful 9.2 inch counter-bombardment guns capable of defending the dockyard and the Victoria coastline against an enemy warship.

The structure is a rare surviving example of a technologically-advanced British gun emplacement from the pre-World War I period. The gun emplacement incorporates technological advances in its use of concrete and in its shell-delivery system. The structure consists of a sunken central portion containing two brick-lined shell storage magazines encased in reinforced concrete. The functional requirements for the storage of munitions and for the protection of artillery are met by the use of massive reinforced-concrete and steel-plate construction; by partial burial of the structure in the hilltop; and, to reduce the chance of ignition, by lighting the magazine with lanterns set in recessed, glass-faced wall apertures. To facilitate safe, quick delivery of shells, the storage area is connected by munitions elevators to the gun-loading areas.

The strategic location overlooking the harbour and the camouflaging of the structure by partial burial meet specific military design requirements and are integral to the character of the structure.

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Character Defining Elements

The heritage character of the Signal Hill gun emplacement is defined by its advanced functional design and innovative use of materials, by the integrity of the structure, and by the precision of its siting.

The use of concrete in the construction of the 1903 Signal Hill structure is particularly notable. The quality of workmanship and the use of superior materials and techniques for the production of the concrete at the Signal Hill gun site have ensured its survival, and it should be carefully maintained. Any required repairs should only be undertaken in consultation with a masonry expert.

The elements of the structure which reflect its military purpose, such as the brick-lined magazines, original door and window fittings, ammunition elevators, steel staircases and platforms are important functional features which should be carefully maintained and preserved. The wooden structures which cover the original gun positions reflect the evolution in the function of the site during the Second World War, and are worthy of preservation for this reason.

The site, prominently located on the brow of Signal Hill overlooking Esquimalt Harbour, dominates the summit as viewed from land. As intended by its designers, the building is well camouflaged when viewed from the water. The Signal Hill site, the only complete Canadian example of this type of advanced British gun-emplacement design, should be preserved intact, and the integrity of the historical setting should be respected by limiting development in the area.

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