

FORT GEORGE ADVICE

The Newsletter of the Lake George Battlefield Park (Fort George) Alliance

PO BOX 26, LAKE GEORGE, NEW YORK 12845

Spring 2016

Building Fort George 1759

By Russell P. Bellico

Professor Emeritus, Westfield State College

Seventeen Fifty Nine ushered in another change in the landscape of southern Lake George. As a result of French and Indian attacks during the previous year, the new British commander in chief, 42-year-old Major General Jeffery Amherst, formulated plans for new fortifications at the lake and along the military road to Fort Edward. Without a substantial fort that could withstand a siege at Lake George in 1758, British and provincial troops had been forced to dismantle their wooden defenses and sink their war vessels at the end of the year to avoid destruction by French raiding parties over the winter.

On the morning of June 22, 1759, the day after Amherst and his army had reached the lake, Colonel James Montresor, the chief engineer, walked the lakeside with Amherst to select "the ground for building a fort," settling on a site "at [William] Johnson's [1755] Camp."¹ (A month earlier Montresor had provided Amherst with an estimate "of the number of artificers ... to execute what has been proposed at the lake."²) Two days later, Montresor ordered William Brasier to survey the area and on June 28 he altered the plan for the fort after consulting with Lieutenant Colonel William Eyre, who had earlier designed and supervised the construction of Fort William Henry. On the same day, Eyre began construction of a stockaded (wood) fort closer to the lake (see *Fort George Advice*, Spring/Summer 2014). On June 30 Montresor submitted the revised plan to Amherst and on July 2 the "founda[t]ion of Fort G[e]org[e] [was] Laid."³ On the same day Captain-Lieutenant Henry Skinner of the Royal Artillery Regiment wrote that

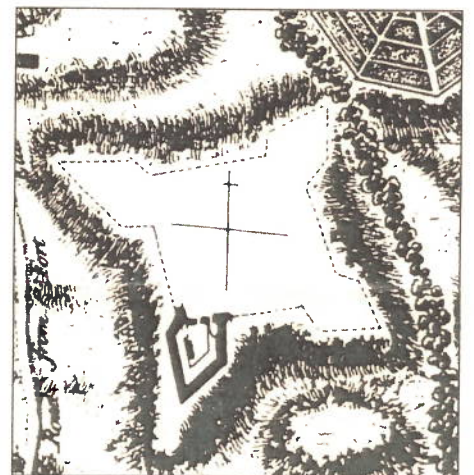
the army [was] employed in erecting an irregular fort on a rock, which is to be built of stone, casem[ate]d [bombproof rooms built under a rampart], and large enough to contain a garrison of 600 men" situated between "swamp[s] 600 yards broad ... They have good stone for lime and clay for bricks on the spot."⁴ In a letter to his wife dated July 12, Chaplain Henry True, attached to the New Hampshire provincial regiment, noted that some of his regiment were employed "making brick, some lime, some digging rocks, some assisting in building a fort with stone and lime, where ye old breastwork was, encompassing about 2 or 3 acres of foundation."⁵

During the early morning hours of July 21, Amherst departed with his troops from the southern end of Lake George aboard a fleet of vessels to capture the French fortifications on Lake Champlain, but he left Montresor behind with "a Body of 1500 Men" at the Lake George camp to continue with the construction of the "Stone Fort."⁶ (The designation Fort George, named for King George II, appeared in late July 1759.⁷) On July 25 Montresor examined "West Creek for a place for a saw mill," ordering "one to be built, with a log house for a Ser[g]eant & 12 men."⁸ Montresor made progress on Fort George, but the swift British seizure of the French forts at Ticonderoga and Crown Point lessened the need for a strong fortification at Lake George. On August 3 Amherst ordered tools and nails be sent to Ticonderoga. During the first week of August, Lieutenant William Henshaw, serving with a Massachusetts regiment, recorded that the walls of the new fort were "about 14 Feet thick built of Stone & Lime."⁹

Montresor's fort was still under construction during September; 238 carpenters were mustered on September 3. In response to a September 6 letter from Amherst requesting an accounting of the masons and a time frame for finishing the fort, Montresor reported that 72,960 cubic feet of materials had been



Detail of the "Plan of Encampment of the Army at Lake George June 1759," showing "B. detached Bastion." (National Archives of Canada)



Detail of the "Plan of Part of Fort George, with the Barracks & c Erected in the Year 1759," from Mary Ann Rocque's *A Set of Plans and Forts in America, Reduced from Actual Surveys*, showing the completed bastion and a section of the octagon-shaped garden in the upper right corner. (National Archives of Canada)

continued on page 4

Building Fort George 1759

continued from page 1

raised at Fort George and made suggestions on how to end the current work, but predicted that two more working seasons would be required to complete the fort. In response, on September 8 Amherst ordered him to "finish the Citadel Bastion, retrench [abridge] it at the Gorge [open area at the rear of the bastion] . . . that it may form a small Fort of itself. If it holds 150 men . . . [it will be] sufficient. The Hospitals may be given up."¹⁰ Amherst suggested that the stockaded fort "with Barracks within it added to the Citadel Bastion will do for the present," urging that the work be completed as fast as possible in order to send the stone masons to Crown Point.¹¹ Two days later Montresor noted that Amherst had approved of his proposal for "finishing the Citadel Bastion Powder Magazine [etc.] & Barracks for 150 men."¹² Work accelerated on the fort – on September 13, workers "Began on the east flank of the Bastion Ten feet to raise in the afternoon," a week later carpenters began "sawing & squaring . . . the Bastion," the powder magazine was started on September 22, but four days later "4 or 5 regular masons refused to work."¹³

With winter approaching and with the completion of barracks at Crown Point and Ticonderoga, Amherst departed at the end of November with his regulars, boarding bateaux at the northern Lake George landing during a fierce snowstorm. Amherst inspected Fort George with Montresor, viewing the "Bastion & round the works & Barracks & seemed well pleased," according to Montresor, but ordered "casemates under the Rampart of the East Flank of the Bastion."¹⁴ In a letter written a few days earlier (November 24) to the commanding officer of Fort George "and those that shall hereafter Succeed him [in 1760]," Amherst ordered that 1,500 yards from the "Sali[e]nt Angles of the Bastion . . . [be] allotted for the Defense" of the fort and that no new structures be erected in said area unless by order of the commanding officer; he also suggested that Fort George was "of the greatest Importance for keeping up an uninterrupted and safe Communication" between the Crown's posts

linking the Hudson River to Ticonderoga.¹⁵

Amherst asked Montresor to remain at the fort to receive French prisoners being paroled to Canada in exchange for English captives who had been released two weeks earlier. One of the parolees, Captain Pierre Pouchot, stayed overnight at the fort on December 1, 1759, dining with Montresor. In addition to a brief observation of the stockaded fort, Pouchot described Fort George as a "square fort measuring 80 toises [about 510 feet] on each exterior side. The lower part of the rampart is more than 18 feet thick and made of masonry. The parapet [defensive wall on the top edge of the rampart] is of timbers placed one on top of the other, all well cut to size and banked up with earth twelve feet thick . . . a bastion completed, entirely casemated like a redoubt."¹⁶ A small winter garrison remained at the fort to protect the recently-built structures and the fleet of vessels docked at the fort's wharf. The ordnance left at the fort consisted of only two brass six pounders, six iron four pounders, six swivel guns, and one seven-inch iron howitzer.¹⁷

The British military plans for 1760 envisioned a final push by British and provincial armies into New France (Canada). In May Amherst ordered "Capt Lt Williams Engineer" to Fort George to finish the works and dispatched troops from Massachusetts in early June "to help" with the project.¹⁸ On his return trek through Lake Champlain and Lake George after the surrender of French forces in Canada on September 8, 1760, Amherst visited Fort George on October 29, commenting that "the bastion enclosed . . . is very neat, mounts 15 Guns, is very small and a bad defense," but it was "the shortest, cheapest & best method of finishing" the fort without costing "a large sum."¹⁹ (Three weeks before Amherst's inspection, Colonel George Williamson observed "11 embrasures"- -openings for cannon- -in the stone bastion.²⁰)

According to J. Clarence Webster, the editor of *The Journal of Jeffery Amherst*, critics of Amherst suggested

that the construction of Fort George was unnecessary - - a waste of "time, labor, and money," which fatally delayed the British advance into Canada planned for 1759, and was the product of his "over-cautious nature."²¹ In reality, the time required to raise and refit the war vessels that had been intentionally sunk in Lake George for protection from French raiders over the winter, as well as the time needed to build new vessels (radeau *Invincible* and provision boat *Snow Shoe*) delayed the expedition until the third week of July.

Fort George was an important post - - but perhaps more so for the Americans than the British during the next war. Many historians debate whether Lieutenant General John Burgoyne's 1777 defeat at Saratoga was due in part to the delays that his army experienced passing through Wood Creek (south of present-day Whitehall) rather than moving his troops south on the traditional military route of Lake George.²² According to Burgoyne, one of the reasons for not transporting his troops on Lake George was the presence of Fort George, which would have "oblige[d] me to open [siege] trenches, and consequently to delay me."²³ Although this is questionable, nevertheless the fort played a significant role during the American Revolution. ■

continued on page 7

MARK YOUR CALENDARS!

Please plan to attend the Memorial Day Remembrance for the Four Unknown Soldiers of the Battle of Lake George. The four colonists, our earliest governmentally recognized Unknown American Soldiers represent the many other soldiers of this Battle who died and were buried in unknown graves near where they fell.

May 30, 2016

10:30 am • At the Memorial

Building Fort George 1759

continued from page 4

NOTES:

1. J. Clarence Webster, ed., *The Journal of Jeffery Amherst* (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1931), 125; James Montresor, "Journals of Col. James Montresor," *Collections of the New-York Historical Society* 14 (1881): 78.
2. Montresor, "Journals," 73.
3. Ebenezer Dibble, "Diary of Ebenezer Dibble," *Society of Colonial Wars in the State of Connecticut Proceedings* 1 (1903): 314.
4. Henry Skinner, "Proceedings of the Army Under the Command of General Amherst, for the Year 1759," *The Universal Magazine* (November 1759): 267-68.
5. Henry True, *Journal and Letters of Rev. Henry True* (Marion, OH: Starr Press, 1900), 18.
6. *Boston Evening Post*, 23 July 1759.
7. In his 1769 book on the war, Captain John Knox wrote that the fort was called Fort George on July 28, 1759, but Amherst first mentioned the name in his journal on July 21. Captain John Knox, *An Historical Journal of the Campaigns in North America*, Volume 1, (1769; edited by Arthur G. Doughty, 1914-1916; reprint ed., Freeport NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1970), 510; Webster, *Journal of Jeffery Amherst*, 142.
8. Montresor, "Journals," 83.
9. William Henshaw, "William Henshaw's Journal," *Proceedings of the Worcester Society of Antiquity* 25 (1909): 56.
10. Public Record Office (London) 293/2, War Office Papers 34/80, folio 114.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Montresor, "Journals," 95.
13. *Ibid.*, 96-98.
14. *Ibid.*, 108.
15. PRO 159/1, WO 34/54, fol. 195.
16. Pierre Pouchot, *Memoirs on the Late War in North America Between France and England*, trans. Michael Cardy and ed. Brian Leigh Dunnigan (Youngstown, NY: Old Fort Niagara Association, Inc., 1994), 348.
17. PRO Colonial Office Papers 5/57, UP microfilm reel 4, frame 910.
18. Webster, *Journal of Jeffery Amherst*, 201, 207; See also PRO 283/1, WO 34/50, fol. 189. Captain Edward Forster of the 17th Regiment was the acting commander of Fort George in May 1760.
19. Webster, *Journal of Jeffery Amherst*, 262.
20. George Williamson, "Description of Fort George, October 1760," Williamson Family Papers, National Archives of Canada, Microfilm A573.
21. Webster, *Journal of Jeffery Amherst*, 12.
22. Several Historians have argued that Burgoyne's Wood Creek route did not delay him, but the essence of this argument is based largely on the testimony of Captain John Money, Burgoyne's deputy quarter master general, in response to questions posed by Burgoyne himself. Money's statements contradict many participants in the campaign.
23. John Burgoyne, *A State of the Expedition from Canada* (1780; reprint ed., New York: The New York Times & Arno Press, 1969), 17.