

1775: Fort George Re-Activated

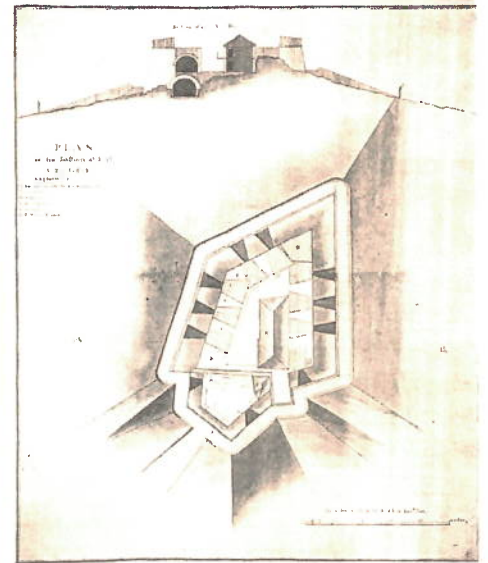
In 1775, just before the outbreak of the American Revolution, Fort George was manned by Captain John Nordberg, a 65-year-old retired British officer, who lived in a cottage near the fort. Shortly after the capture of Fort Ticonderoga on May 10, 1775, American militia assumed control of Fort George from pensioner Nordberg (see Fort George Post, Spring 2018). As soon as the American Revolution began, Fort George was assigned the role of a transportation hub for the northern army. Benedict Arnold, who had accompanied Ethan Allen during the capture of Fort Ticonderoga, wrote to the Massachusetts Committee of Safety on May 14 that “with the assistance of Mr. Bernard Romans,” he was “making preparation at Fort George for transporting to Albany those cannon that will be serviceable to our Army at Cambridge [MA].”¹ Four days later, the Continental Congress recommended that the cannons and stores at Ticonderoga be removed and sent to the south end of Lake George “to establish a strong post at that place.”² Subsequently, Benedict Arnold recorded that he had sent “six large brass and iron mortars and howitzers, one brass and three iron twelve-pounders” to Lake George.³ Vociferous opposition to the abandonment of the forts on Lake Champlain caused the Continental Congress on May 31 to officially reverse its earlier decision and request that the governor of Connecticut reinforce the forts on Lake Champlain, retaining the cannons needed for their defense.

The transportation of provisions, cannons, men, and supplies on Lake George required the construction of new vessels. Benedict Arnold recommended building “2 flat-bottomed boats, forty feet long, twelve wide, and four deep ... of four inch oak plank.”⁴ He suggested the site of John Sparding’s establishment at the northern Lake George landing as a possible location for the construction of the flatboats. Sparding had built a large two-masted periaqua/periauger (flat-bottomed sailing vessel) in 1769, capable of carrying “seventy men.”⁵ However, most of the boat construction during the American Revolution occurred at Fort George. In a letter to the Continental Congress on July

11, Benedict Arnold noted that some of the garrison at the fort were “employed in building bateaus.”⁶ Later in the year and in 1776 Fort George emerged as a major bateau-building center. By the spring of 1776 shipwrights at the fort were finishing “3 or 4” bateaux “a Day,” according to an officer from Massachusetts.⁷

When the American Revolution began, Fort George was in poor condition. Several weeks after the capture of the fort, Barnabas Deane from Connecticut wrote that Fort George was “a small stone fort” that could not “bear cannonading” and manned by a garrison of only 25 soldiers.⁸ Colonel Edward Mott of Preston, Connecticut, had the same conclusion about the fort’s strength and recommended a sufficient number of troops be assigned to the post to prevent a British attack. The orderliness of the Fort George garrison dramatically changed with the arrival of 41-year-old Major General Philip Schuyler, the commander of the Northern Department. Schuyler, a fourth-generation member of a prominent New York Dutch family, had served as the deputy commissary officer at Lake George during the 1758 campaign, supervising the movement of provisions, supplies, and equipment. Arriving by July 17 at Fort George, Schuyler encountered an undisciplined garrison of 334 men. He issued voluminous orders regulating cleanliness, limiting alcohol consumption, organizing work schedules, prohibiting the waste and thief of military stores, repairing infrastructure, and arranging regular scouting forays. Schuyler hastened the construction of bateaux; by the end of July more than two dozen were completed at the Fort George shipyard.

On July 19 the Continental Congress voted for an invasion of Canada, using the traditional water route of Lake George and Lake Champlain. Fort George soon became a vital link in the northern theater, and Lake George quickly emerged as a crucial water highway, carrying supplies and reinforcements for the American army during the subsequent invasion. Hundreds of barrels of pork, flour, and other provisions were transported to Fort George from Albany in cumbersome wagons; large



“Plan of the Bastion at Fort George 1759 by Francis Pfister (60th Regiment), showing the entrance A to the powder magazine B, the casemates C, the barracks (“cazernes”) D, and the guard room E. The plan would closely represent the look of Fort George from 1775 to mid-July 1777. (Courtesy of the Norman B. Leventhal Map Center, BPL).”

herds of cattle were driven from Connecticut to Fort George through Albany. Captain Elisha Phelps, appointed by the governor of Connecticut, served as the commissary at Fort George in charge of the supply chain.

The troops at Fort George lived in tents and huts, but barracks also accommodated some of the men. However, the condition and number of barracks is subject to debate. In September 1775 Captain Henry Livingston of the Third New York Regiment noted that Fort George was “much out of repair” with “near 3 or 400 acres of cleared land ab[ou]t the fort & a few wretched Hovels that were formerly used as Barracks.”⁹ The barracks, however, were apparently adequate enough for Sergeant Aaron Barlow two months later, who “lodged this night in the Barracks” at Fort George.¹⁰ The following April Charles Carroll, one of the emissaries to Canada along with Benjamin Franklin, remarked that Fort George had “one barrack, which occupied almost the whole space between the walls.”¹¹ Earlier in the same month, Chaplain Ammi R. Robbins described Fort George as a “small stone fort with

continued on page 6

1775: Fort George Re-Activated continued from page 5

convenient brick barracks in the midst [of the bastion walls], containing six rooms."¹² (In 2016 Dr. David R. Starbuck and his archaeological team uncovered the solidly-mortared foundation walls of the barracks inside the fort's bastion walls.) In his journal Chaplain Robbins also mentioned "a convenient wharf and a large number of fine bateaux about it; barracks built for the accommodations of several regiments of soldiers."¹³ The following day (April 8) he recounted that the men had "prayed and sung at night in the large new barrack."¹⁴ This raises the possibility of another barracks located near the shoreline. However, Charles Carroll's detailed description of Fort George and the adjacent grounds only disclosed "one barrack"¹⁵ but, there were others in subsequent years that reported a building at the edge of the lake. A report in 1777 noted a "large storehouse" and two years later an American deserter informed British authorities that the Americans had "built some barracks near the water side."¹⁶ On his trip to Lake George in 1819, Benjamin Silliman from Yale College suggested that a tavern located on the southern shore was once "one of the old barracks, formerly belonging to the fort."¹⁷

In December 1775 Colonel Henry Knox was dispatched to Fort Ticonderoga by George Washington to transport cannons captured at the Lake Champlain forts and St. Jean, Canada, to Boston to break the British occupation of the city. Fort George played an important role as a key base in the herculean task of transporting the artillery. The trek began at Fort Ticonderoga; some of the cannons were carried in a vessel a short distance on the LaChute River before being conveyed overland, while the remaining artillery was hauled directly to the northern Lake George landing. On December 9 Knox placed the 59 artillery pieces, weighing 119,000 pounds, as well as barrels of flints and boxes of lead, aboard the "Pettiauger [periagua/periauger]," on a "Scow," and a bateau.¹⁸ The slower scow, carrying Knox's younger brother William, ran aground on a rock on the morning of December 10 but was subsequently repaired, and all the artillery pieces reached Fort George by December 15. With the help of Major General Philip Schuyler, Knox employed



Interior walls of Fort George uncovered during the 2015 archaeological dig.

enough men, oxen, horses, and sleds to deliver the artillery to Boston by late January 1776. One young civilian driver, who had been hired to carry the captured British military equipment, described the garrison at Fort George as "downright oddities. Their blue coats with white facings were tarnished by the smoke of pine knots... [used for] fire and candles."¹⁹

When Colonel Knox first arrived at Fort George on December 4, 1775, he observed some of the British prisoners that had been captured at St. Jean in November. Knox was said to have stayed in the same cabin with Lieutenant John Andre, who was subsequently paroled and later conspired with Benedict Arnold.²⁰ In 1780 Knox would serve as a member of the military court that would condemn Andre to death for his role in the Arnold plot. However, the microfilm collection of the Knox Papers and Diary held in the Massachusetts Historical Society do not substantiate this story.²¹

Activity at Fort George increased during the winter of 1776, following Major General Philip Schuyler's hiring of timber cutters and the assignment of Harmanus Schuyler (no close relation), the assistant deputy quartermaster general, to the fort to build bateaux. For two months during the spring, Philip Schuyler made his headquarters at Fort George and the fort became the site of the largest military hospital in America

that summer. The Lake George Battlefield Park has the distinction of being one of the longest continuously-occupied eighteenth-century military sites in America, spanning 1755-1783. ■

NOTES:

1. Peter Force, ed., *American Archives*, Fourth Series, Volume 2 (Washington, D.C.: M. St. Clair Clarke and Peter Force, 1839), 586.
2. B. F. DeCosta, *Notes on the History of Fort George* (New York: J. Sabin & Sons, 1871), 16.
3. Force, Fourth Series, 2:735.
4. DeCosta, *Fort George*, 17-18.
5. Force, Fourth Series, 2:873.
6. William Bell Clark, ed., *Naval Documents of the American Revolution* (Washington, D.C.: Naval History Division, Department of the Navy, 1964), Volume 1, 862.
7. Lawrence B. Romaine, ed., *From Cambridge to Champlain* (Middleboro, MA: Lawrence B. Romaine, 1957), 28.
8. DeCosta, *Fort George*, 18.
9. Henry Livingston, "Journal of Major Henry Livingston, 1775," ed. By Gaillard Hunt, *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 12 (1898): 12-13.
10. Aaron Barlow, "The March to Montreal and Quebec, 1775," ed. by Charles Burr Todd, *American Historical Register* 2 (1895): 649.

continued on page 7



1775: Fort George Re-Activated

continued from page 6

11. Brantz Mayer, ed., *Journal of Charles Carroll of Carrollton, During his Visit to Canada in 1776* (Baltimore Maryland Historical Society, 1876), 63; Russell P. Bellico, *Chronicles of Lake George: Journeys in War and Peace* (Fleischmanns, NY: Purple Mountain Press, 1995), 165.
12. Ammi R. Robbins, "Journal of the Rev. Ammi R. Robbins," in *History of Norfolk*, comp. by Theron Wilmot Crissey (Everett, MA: Massachusetts Publishing Company, 1900), 99.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Mayer, *Journal of Carroll*, 63.
16. DeCosta, Fort George, "Additions," 3.
17. Benjamin Silliman, *Remarks Made on a Short Tour Between Hartford and Quebec in the Autumn of 1819*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: S. Converse, 1824), 150; Bellico, *Chronicles of Lake George*, 236.
18. Henry Knox, "Knox's Diary During His Ticonderoga Expedition," *The New-England Historical and Genealogical Register*, 30 (July 1876): 323.
19. *The Sexagenary: or, Reminiscences of the American Revolution* (Albany, NY: J. Munsell, 1866), 26.
20. James Thomas Flexner, *The Traitor and the Spy: Benedict Arnold and John Andre* (Syracuse University Press, 1991), 137; Don R. Gerlach, *Proud Patriot: Philip Schuyler and the War of Independence 1775-1783* (Syracuse University Press, 1987), 88.
21. Wm. L. Bowne, *Ye Cohorn Caravan, The Knox Expedition in the Winter of 1775-1776* (Schuylerville, NY: NaPaul Publishers, Inc., 1975), 16.



Fi

T
mili

T

an a

buil

batt

Maje

part

Briti

bott

D

of th

fram

mod

a set

disp

instu

T

surv

Belov

vess

Buil

for E

Battal

W

incl

cerne

what

cerne