

~ FORT GEORGE ADVICE ~

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

PO Box 26, LAKE GEORGE, NEW YORK 12845

SPRING 2006

Shipbuilding during the 1755-1756 Campaigns at Lake George ~

By Dr. Russell Bellico

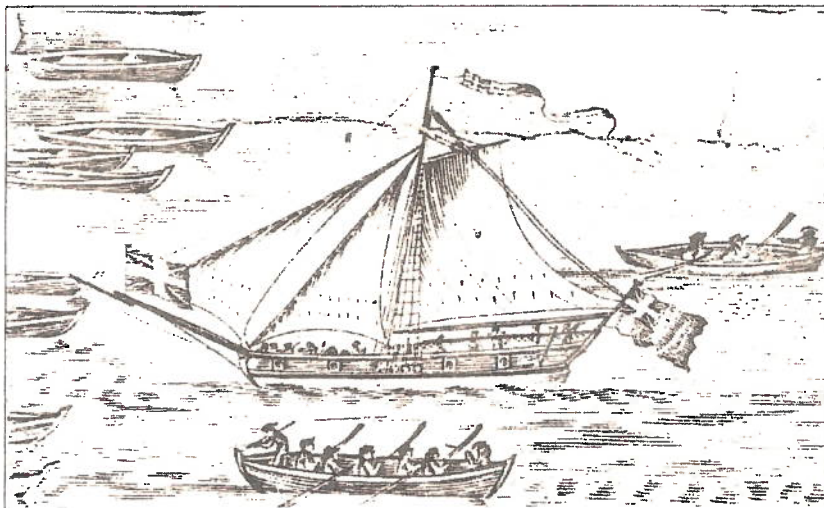
The building of large vessels at the southern end of Lake George began on September 6, 1755, just two days before the Battle of Lake George. James Hill, a 20-year-old recruit from Newbury, Massachusetts, recorded that he "went to hu[nt]in[g] timber for the lake bo[a]ts that w[er]e like flatbo[a]ts and about 40 f[ee]t long and to r[o]w with 20 oars, to car[ry] the artillery[y]." Work on the boats was suspended for 9 or 10 days following the September 8 battle. On October 7 Stephen Webster, the captain of the carpenters, reported to Major General William Johnson that one boat was complete and "2 partly caulked, one more ab[ou]t half built," but complained that, as a result of "building the new fort...there w[er]e not carpenters enough for both works."²

The expedition to Crown Point never proceeded beyond the southern shores of Lake George in 1755 and most of the carpenters were assigned to building Fort William Henry. A new expedition in 1756 failed to proceed north, in large part as a result of complications from a change in command of British forces in North America. After the British capitulation of the Oswego forts in August 1756, the new commander in chief, John Campbell (Earl of Loudoun) cancelled a planned expedition against Fort Carillon (Ticonderoga). The provincial troops at Lake George, under the command of Major General John Winslow, used the remaining season to complete a number of armed sloops at a shipyard near the present-day Battlefield Park.

A number of contemporary descriptions of four sloops and other vessels can be found in colonial newspapers and documents, as well as

journals of soldiers stationed at Lake George. In an inspection report to Lord Loudoun dated August 27, 1756, Lieutenant Colonel Ralph Burton of the 48th Regiment delineated the new fleet at Lake George: "two small Sloops of about twenty tons each, have four Swivels mounted on each, one Sloop of 30 tons launched the 23^d [August] Instant, another of the same size to be

reconnoitering the French position at the northern end of the lake. In early August 1756 Robert Rogers noted that he had "embarked on board a Lighter with twenty four of my Company...& 60" provincial troops.⁵ On September 2 Major General John Winslow "set off in the sloop *Earl of Loudoun*," which he described as carrying "two Six pounders One Seven Inch Mortar and



Above: Sloop depicted in a 1756 engraving by Thomas Johnston (American Antiquarian Society)

launched in a few days...in each of those Vessels, four small Cannons or Royals—Two large Scows, and one a Building a good many Whaleboats, and more building...A great many bateau [x] Scattered about no guard on board the Vessels, and they lay at Anchor a good way off from the Fort."³ One sloop, according to the *Boston Gazette* and shown on a Crown Collection "Plan of Fort William Henry" was called the *Earl of Loudoun* and a second, the *George*, was carved on a soldiers' powder horn.⁴

The sloops were used to assist in

Eight Swivels fifty men," and "one Sloop four Swivels forty men one Ditto two Swivels and thirty five men," on a "tour round the Lake."⁶ During the cruise Winslow's sloop fired a six-pound cannon at a French vessel.

On September 20, 1756, the day after an ambush of a provincial scouting party on the western shore of the lake, "a fresh party was sent down to their Relief, in one of the Sloops, with two Whale boats."⁷ One vessel returned in

continued on page 4

Shipbuilding during the 1755-1756 Campaigns at Lake George

continued from page 1

the evening with ten bodies, three of which had "their Heads cut off."⁸ One of the last descriptions of the sloops written in 1756 was that of Dr. Ammi Ruhamah Cutter on October 16, 1756: "the Fleet consists of 1 sloop about 40 tons, 2 smaller about 20 tons each, another on ye Ways ready to Launch of ye Bigness of [the] former."⁹

During the March 1757 attack on Fort William Henry, two sloops were burned by the French raiding force, including one on the stocks. The other sloop, burned in the water, was probably the sloop *Earl of Loudoun*. The two surviving sloops were present at Fort William Henry in July 1757 when Colonel James Montresor noted "2 Galliot's [galleys under construction], 2 Scows, 5 whale-boats, 3 Batos, 2 Sloops" in his journal.¹⁰ Likewise, Major General Daniel Webb listed "two of the Old Sloops" in a letter written on August 1, 1757.¹¹ After the defeat of the British and provincial garrison at Fort William Henry, French troops burned "two Row Galleys which were ready to launch," according to Captain James Furnis, the British Comptroller of Ordinance who had witnessed the siege of the fort.¹² The two sloops and two scows, however, were taken to the north end of Lake George by the victors. A few weeks later the *Boston Evening Post* reported that a ranger patrol of Captain Israel Putnam had observed "one of our [captured] Sloops lies out in the Lake, at Anchor in order to give the earliest Intelligence."¹³ On September 6, 1757, Major General Webb at Fort Edward wrote to Lord Loudoun that French deserters divulged that the two sloops were "dismasted...and sunk" in the northern section of the lake.¹⁴ In 1759 provincial troops raised the two scows that had also been scuttled by French troops in 1757 in the shallow water at the Ticonderoga landing on Lake George, but the two captured sloops were never recovered.

The remains of three 1756 sloops survived into the twentieth century. The wreckage of one sloop believed to have been burned during the March 1757 raid, lay in open view for tourists at the south-

ern end of the lake for more than 100 years, as Benjamin F. DeCosta noted in 1869: "the hull of a large vessel is still seen in fair, calm weather, and appears to be nearly full of cobble-stones, probably ballast...the spot where this hulk may be seen is near the steam-boat landing."¹⁵ Laden with military relics, including old military buttons and buckles, grapeshot and a 1743 Spanish coin, the charred remnants of the 44-foot sloop were raised on July 2, 1903, by William S. Tuttle. The vessel was later broken-up for souvenirs. Several frames from this historic vessel, probably the *Earl of Loudoun*, are on display at the Lake George Historical Association. Under the direction of archaeologist Scott A. Padeni, with the assistance of the Lake Champlain Maritime Museum and Bateaux Below, a thorough study of the northern section of Lake George revealed the remains of many different types of vessels, including two colonial-era vessels that may in fact be the two missing sloops that had been scuttled by the French in 1757.¹⁶

Endnotes:

1. James Hill, "The Diary of a Private on the First Expedition to Crown Point," ed. by Edna V. Moffett, *The New England Quarterly* 5 (1932): 608.
2. James Sullivan, ed., *The Papers of Sir William Johnson* (Albany: The University of the State of New York, 1922), Volume 2, 152.
3. Public Records Office; Colonial Office Papers 5/47, UP microfilm reel 2, frame 23; On September 9, 1756, Winslow wrote that he had "constantly men on board" the sloop. Loudoun Papers, Huntington Library, San Marino, CA, LO 1752.
4. *Boston Gazette and Country Journal*, 13 September 1756; Nathan L. Swayze, *Engraved Powder Horns* (Yazoo City, MS:



Above: 44-foot sloop raised from Lake George near site of Fort William Henry in 1903. (Lake George Historical Association)

Gun Hill Pub. Co., 1978), 219.

5. LO 1437.

6. *The Boston Weekly News-Letter*, 16 September 1756; LO 1710.

7. *New-Hampshire Gazette*, 7 October 1756.

8. Ibid.

9. Ammi Ruhamah Cutter, "Dr. A.R. Cutter's Journal of his Military Experience, 1756-1758," in *A History of the Cutter Family of New England*, by William Richard Cutter (Boston: David Clapp & Son, 1871), 66.

10. James Montresor, "Journals of Col. James Montresor," *Collections of the New-York Historical Society* 14 (1881): 37.

11. PRO, CO 5/48, UP microfilm reel 2, frame 546.

12. James Furnis, "An Eyewitness Account by James Furnis of the Surrender of Fort William Henry, August 1757," ed. by William S. Ewing, *New York History* 42 (July 1961): 314.

13. *Boston Evening Post*, 12 September 1757.

14. LO 4407.

15. B.F. DeCosta, *Lake George: Its Scenes and Characteristics* (New York: Anson D.F. Randolph & Co., 1869), 63; See also Russell P. Bellico, *Sails and Steam in the Mountains: A Maritime and Military History of Lake George and Lake Champlain*, 2d ed. (Fleischmanns, NY: Purple Mountain Press, 2001), 77.

16. Scott A. Padeni, *Colonial Shipwreck CV-2 Study and Stabilization Final Report* (Ballston Spa, NY: Scott A. Padeni, 2001), 40.