

# Revolutionary War Cemetery in Lake George Yields New Information



By Anthony F. Hall

The remains of American Revolutionary War dead discovered at a construction site in Lake George Village in February, 2019 belong to at least 35 individuals, more than twice the number originally believed to have been buried in the 18th century cemetery.

Chuck Vandrei, an Environmental Conservation Department Historic Preservation Officer who is helping lead the archaeological study of the site, said, "more than half of the dead are under age 20. The American army was a young one."

Vandrei said that further analysis may not only uncover dozens more graves but a surprising diversity among the war dead: African Americans, Native Americans and even women and children who would have accompanied or attended the soldiers.

"This site may change how we see the army in the American Revolution if, that is, we are able to learn more about these people," said Vandrei, speaking remotely on August 12 in one of a series of "Living Lands" talks presented by the Lake George Land Conservancy.

The Lake George Battlefield Park (Fort George) Alliance, a not-for-profit organization founded in 2002 to support New York State's efforts to protect its historic sites at the head of the lake, has petitioned the Lake George Town and Village Boards to allow a proper burial of the bodies -soldiers and their followers who were posted at Fort George, which was constructed in the late 1750s to support Britain's campaigns against the French at Lake Champlain.

## The Hospital at Fort George

Fort George was captured by the Americans in 1775. During the American Revolution, the site was the location of the largest military hospital in the colonies, according to Russell Bellico, the author of several books about Lake George during the 18th century.

Erected in the summer of 1776 by General Horatio Gates, the hospital was used to house colonial troops who had contracted smallpox during the unsuccessful siege of Quebec.

Gates wrote George Washington that the Northern Army was "infected with pestilence...To put this evil from us, a General Hospital is established at Fort George... where every infected person is immediately sent."

By August of that year, roughly 2,000 patients were being treated at the new hospital, with twenty to thirty dying every day.

The graves discovered in Lake George Village are among the hundreds dug to bury those who died from smallpox and other diseases at the hospital, said Vandrei.

Dr. Lewis Beebe, a 27-year-old doctor traveling back and forth between Fort Ticonderoga and his home in Massachusetts and who stopped more than once at Fort George, wrote that as of August, 1776, three hundred graves had been dug at the cemetery, which he called "the burying place."

It made him "melancholy," he wrote in his journal, "to see such desolation made in our army."

According to Lyn Karig



**B.** Hohmann, the president of the Lake George Battlefield Park (Fort George) Alliance. "The remains showed no signs of trauma."

That fact, she said, confirms the hypothesis of archaeologists and historians that the dead were not soldiers who died in battle but, rather, from disease.

"A lot of these troops came from the rural areas of New England and the middle Atlantic colonies, where they would have never been exposed to smallpox. So it had a catastrophic impact," said VanDrei.

#### The First Pennsylvania Battalion

Among the dead is at least one soldier from the Continental Army's First Pennsylvania Battalion.

The identification was made with the help of buttons from a uniform in which the soldier was buried, said Vandrei.

According to Matt Keagle, Fort Ticonderoga's curator, the presence of the First Pennsylvania Battalion at Fort George, the British-built fort at the head of the lake, is a well-documented fact.

Constructed in the late 1750s to support Britain's campaigns against the French at Lake Champlain, the fort was captured by the Americans in 1775.



**C.** In January, 1776, the battalion was dispatched to Quebec, where it was to join an expedition led by Richard Montgomery and Benedict Arnold to detach Canada from Great Britain.

Traveling north from Albany, the Pennsylvania men arrived at Lake George in February, already "thinned by sickness and desertion... and very ill provided," General Philip Schuyler noted.

While at Fort George, a few of the soldiers toured the ruins of Fort William Henry, which once led local historian David Starbuck to suggest that these troops were among the 1755 fort's first tourists.

They may have been members of two companies that remained behind at Fort George; the largest part of the battalion had departed, transported by bateaux to the foot of the lake.

"Thence they marched across the portage to Fort Ticonderoga (and then) sailed to Crown Point," according to a history of the battalion published in 1880.

According to Fort Ticonderoga's Matt Keagle, the troops arrived in Canada in the spring of 1776, months after the Americans had



**A:** The ruins of the 18th century Fort George, as seen by a 19th century visitor. **B:** After human remains were discovered at a construction site in Lake George in Feb. 2019, archaeologists from NYS, universities and student and volunteer groups began their studies. **C:** General Horatio Gates, who ordered a hospital to be built at Fort George to isolate those who had contracted small pox from healthy soldiers at Fort Ticonderoga. **D:** The 1st PA Battalion uniform of a soldier buried at the site will be displayed at the new Fort George Visitors Center.

been repulsed at the walls of Quebec City in an assault that left Richard Montgomery dead and Benedict Arnold badly wounded.

Retreating to Fort Ticonderoga, the Pennsylvanians who had not contracted smallpox remained there until Burgoyne's British troops took the fort in October, 1777.

#### Commemorating the War Dead

Both the Town and Village boards have approved resolutions agreeing to provide "respectful reburials" of the remains, as requested by the Lake George Battlefield Park (Fort George)

Alliance.

While space might be found in one of the two local cemeteries, another option might be to bury the remains among the monuments of Fort George, said Lake George Village Mayor Bob Blais.

The Lake George Battlefield Park (Fort George) Alliance has commissioned a replica of the uniform worn by soldiers in First Pennsylvania Battalion, which will be displayed in the new Fort George Visitors Center.

Archaeological work at the site has resumed after being halted by the novel coronavirus, said Vandrei.

