

FORT GEORGE POST

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The Crucial Role of Fort George in 1776

By Russell Bellico

In 1776 the American army experienced a tumultuous year of dramatic failures and measured successes in the Northern Theater. Fort George would play a major role as a vital supply hub, a boat-building establishment, as the largest smallpox hospital of the entire war, and for a time, the headquarters of the commander of the Northern Department, Major General Philip Schuyler. The importance of the fort was largely due to its central location on the critical water route of the Hudson River—Lake George—Lake Champlain corridor. With the American army still in Canada in January 1776, following a failed attack on Quebec City, Fort George continued as a key supply transshipment center and a bivouac area for reinforcements.

In January 1776, Major General Philip Schuyler began making arrangements for additional carpenters to travel to Fort George to build bateaux. On January 22 Schuyler wrote to John Hancock that "Shipwrights be immediately sent from New York and Philadelphia to build Bateaus," which would be constructed "at Fort George."¹ In late March Schuyler informed George Washington that cannons destined for the Northern Theater were "on their way to Fort George," and "one hundred new Bateaus were finished at Fort George" but "without pitch & oakham," so only 35 were ready for service.² On April 27 Schuyler notified George Washington that he had to exceed the congressional limit of only 100 bateaux because of a shortage of vessels to transport reinforcements, artillery, and provisions to the army in Canada. He began construction of additional bateaux "for the conveyance of fifty men" each; in two weeks in April, over 1,300 American troops passed through Fort

George.³ The bateaux were built under the direction of Harmanus Schuyler (no direct kinship to the general), the deputy quartermaster general, who would be sent to Skenesborough (Whitehall) in April to begin preparations for the construction of larger vessels on Lake Champlain.

There were other large vessels on Lake George, including a large pettiauger built for Samuel Deall in 1769, probably by John Sparding at the Ticonderoga landing on Lake George. The vessel had been employed by Colonel Henry Knox in 1775 to transport cannons on Lake George on their long trek to Boston. This may be the same vessel or another that Colonel Jeduthan Baldwin, the chief engineer from a Massachusetts regiment, noted on May 5, 1776, in his journal: "got the can[n]on on Bo[a]rd the Sloop with the artillery Stores," along with the baggage of "the carpenters & Smiths."⁴

On February 15, following a recommendation from Schuyler, the Continental Congress had approved a plan to send a committee to Canada to present American ideas about Canada's political future and to gain the support of the Canadians for the war. The three-man committee, granted far-reaching powers by Congress, included Benjamin Franklin, Samuel Chase, and Charles Carroll. Schuyler met the commissioners at the Albany landing on April 7. The delegation stayed in Schuyler's homes in Albany and Saratoga (now Schuylerville), but on April 11 Schuyler pressed ahead to Fort George, accompanied by Major General John Thomas, the new field commander of the American army in Canada. From April 12 to June 9, 1776, Fort George served as Schuyler's headquarters. After receiving word that Lake George was free of ice for a voyage north, the commissioners



Major General Philip Schuyler, commander of the Northern Department, established his headquarters at Fort George during the spring of 1776. (New York State Library)

arrived at Fort George on the afternoon of April 18. Charles Carroll found the fort in "ruinous" condition with a barracks occupying "almost the whole space between the walls" of the fort's bastion.⁵ (Carroll also used the word "ruinous" to describe Fort Ticonderoga.)

While the commissioners were at the fort, Schuyler was "seized" by "a vile ague [fever]" and received "a number of doses" of "Peruvian bark," extracted from trees native to the South American Andes, administered by Benjamin Franklin.⁶ Schuyler apparently recovered sufficiently the following day, April 19, to accompany the commissioners on their passage across the lake to Ticonderoga.

continued on page 2

The Crucial Role of Fort George in 1776

continued from page 1



Benjamin Franklin, one of the three commissioners to Canada, stayed at Fort George in April 1776. (Library of Congress)

While Charles Carroll only mentions one barracks at Fort George in 1776, there are a few original sources that indicate some structures located near the lake may have served as barracks during the Revolution. In addition to observing the six-room "brick barracks" within the bastion walls of Fort George, on April 7 Chaplain Ammi Robbins from Norfolk, Connecticut, recorded "Barracks built for the accommodations of several regiments of soldiers," implying that the barracks were somewhere near the wharf.⁷ At night Robbins held services "in the large new barrack; great numbers attended."⁸ In 1800 Abigail May, one of the first tourists to record their impressions of Lake George, stayed in "a one story building" on the shore, which had the appearance of a jail.⁹ In 1819 Benjamin Silliman, the renowned professor of science from Yale College, wrote that "on the very shore, we observe one of the old barracks, formerly belonging to the fort, now exhibiting a tavern sign."¹⁰ Silliman based his observation on a letter from Judge James Kent, who visited Lake George in 1795 and "lodged at a dismal old house which had been a military barrack on the

shore below Fort George."¹¹ The drawing entitled "Lake George from Fort George" by Silliman's brother-in-law, Daniel Wadsworth, clearly shows the tavern sign. In August of 1830, historian Jared Sparks visited Fort George, drawing a map of the area. Sparks identified a "foundation still seen of a very large warehouse, doubtless used in the Revolution," located on the lakeshore just east of West Brook.¹² Presently, there is not sufficient information to firmly establish the nature of this structure.

A reversal of fortune awaited the American army in Canada during the spring of 1776. On May 2 Major General John Thomas, who had bivouacked with his reinforcements at Fort George a few weeks earlier, reached Quebec only to find nearly half of the army infected with smallpox. Before preparing a careful plan of withdrawal, the Americans were forced into a haphazard, desperate retreat due to the arrival of fresh troops from England. Thomas, who had adamantly opposed inoculation for smallpox, succumbed to the disease himself in a few weeks. The American army, devastated by smallpox and dysentery, occupied Isle-aux-Noix in the Richelieu River, north of Lake Champlain. Dr. Lewis Beebe from Sheffield, Massachusetts, recounted the horrible scene on the island where many of the sick "could not see, speak, or walk... two had large maggots... Crawl out of their ears."¹³ Major General Horatio Gates, noted that "Everything about this Army is infected with the pestilence" and thus established a "General Hospital" at Fort George "where there are now between two and three thousand sick."¹⁴

The smallpox disaster in Canada was related to self-administered inoculations, which spread the disease to healthy troops. Benjamin Franklin and Benedict Arnold favored inoculation of troops, but with the precaution of quarantine. The creation of the hospital at Fort George by Gates was an effort to isolate all the smallpox patients to one post. Learning that a company of Rhode Island ship carpenters had been inoculated in Williamstown, Massachusetts, Brigadier General David

continued on page 3

The Crucial Role of Fort George in 1776

continued from page 2

Waterbury, supervising the construction of vessels in Skenesborough, ordered that "the men should be discharged."¹⁵ Waterbury added that "we don't intend to let any one come into this place that lately had the smallpox as we have got it out of this place and Ticonderoga."¹⁶

The hospital at Fort George, the largest one in North America at the time, was a scene of unimaginable suffering. (For a fuller description of the Fort George hospital see the Winter 2012 newsletter.) The sick were spread across the area that today encompasses the Battlefield Park and Fort William Henry, and were housed in open-air "sheds," in "temporary barracks" and in a few adjacent farm houses.¹⁷ Dr. Benjamin Rush, chairman of the medical committee of the Continental Congress in 1776, later wrote "that sick men recover health sooner or better in sheds, huts, and barns, exposed occasionally to the wind and sometimes rain."¹⁸ Chaplain Ebenezer David from Rhode Island described the patients at the Fort George hospitals as "Skeletons" in "large sheds," and felt an "anguish what neither Tongue nor Pen can describe."¹⁹ Similarly, Chaplain Ammi Robbins "visited the west hospital [perhaps on the site of the ruins of Fort William Henry] so far as I could stand it," but returned the next day to pray with the men in the "long hospital."²⁰ Robbins concluded that "never was such a portrait of human misery as in these hospitals."²¹

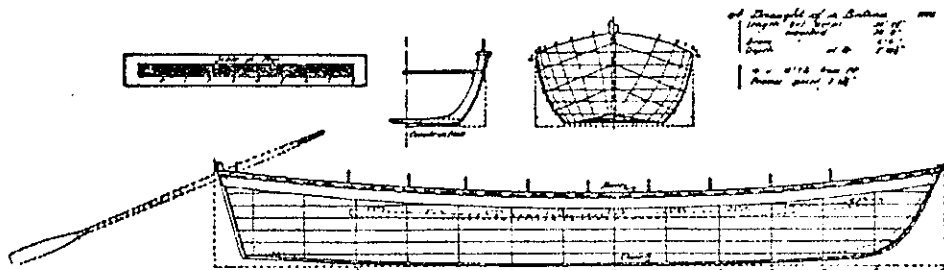
The tragic situation at the Fort George hospital was exacerbated by an absence of medication for the patients. Dr. Samuel Stringer, the medical director of the Northern Department, wrote to General Gates from Fort George on July 24, regarding the "shocking circumstances" of no medicines: "men dying for want of assistance."²² Although opium was

used by doctors at the time, many of the medicines of this period were derived from bark and herbs. Sometimes medications might have done more harm than good. Dr. Samuel Merrick from Massachusetts, assigned to the Lake Champlain forts in 1776, had his medicine chest filled with a wide range of medical remedies: powdered rhei (rhubarb to treat diarrhea), jalap (cathartic/laxative), elixir of camphor (counterirritant), cathartic salts (purgative), artemisia (European wormwood), and tartar emetic (vomit inducement).²³

At the end of July, Dr. Stringer traveled to New York City to obtain medicines for the Fort George hospital. He disappeared for more than a month and did not succeed in acquiring medicines. The real hero of the Fort George hospital was Dr. Jonathan Potts. (For more information on Dr. Potts see the Spring 2016 newsletter.) By the end of August 1776, the worst was over. As director of the hospital, he saved the lives of hundreds and hundreds of soldiers – a towering achievement, given the circumstances. In January 1777 Dr. Potts replaced Stringer as the medical director of the Northern Department. (In 1800 Dr. Stringer would treat one of the first tourists to Lake George, Abigail May. Ten days after returning to Boston, May died following opium treatments for pain in her hand provided by Dr. Stringer in Albany.²⁴)

The aftermath of the deadly smallpox epidemic in 1776 is still with us today at Lake George. While excavating during a construction project at the intersection of Courtland and Mohican streets in February 2019, crews uncovered the remains of several skeletons. Archaeologists from

continued on page 4



More than 100 bateaux were built at the Fort George shipyard in 1776. (Author's collection)

The Crucial Role of Fort George in 1776

continued from page 3

state agencies and volunteers, including Dr. Lyn Hohmann, subsequently sifted through a huge volume of soil at the site and discovered the remains of about 30 individuals, along with eighteenth-century uniform buttons, buckles, etc. One of the uniform buttons has been identified as that of the First Pennsylvania Battalion. This unit would have been involved in the turbulent retreat from Canada in the spring of 1776, and more than 100 of their soldiers became patients at the Fort George hospital.

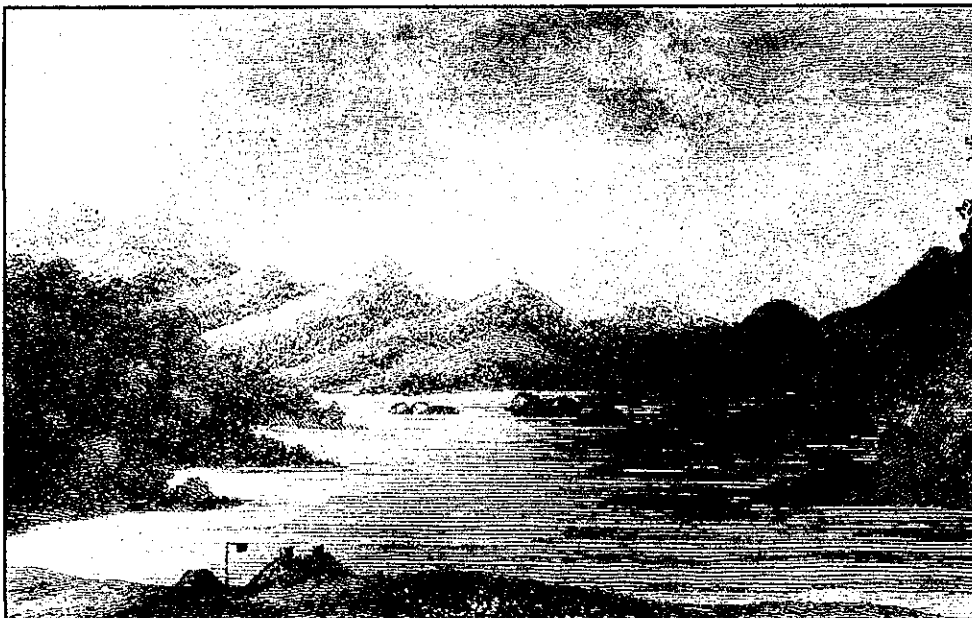
The discovery of human remains at this site in Lake George is not completely surprising; local historians had identified the same location as the site of an earlier excavation of "approximately 3-4 skeletons," and in 2001 a human skull found near Mohican Street was identified by archaeologist Dr. David Starbuck as possibly a soldier from the Revolutionary War.²⁵ The graveyard may be connected to the "burying place" that Dr. Lewis Beebe observed on August 28, 1776, where he "counted upwards of 300 graves" dug "in about 5 weeks."²⁶ The 1776 cemetery included the gravesite of Brigadier General Baron Frederick de Woedthe, a former Prussian officer in the American army, who died at the Fort George hospital on July 28, 1776. General Gates

notified Congress that de Woedthe "was buried with the honours due his rank."²⁷

The Lake George Battlefield Park would be the proper reburial site for these fallen soldiers who lost their lives in pursuit of independence for the American colonies. Given the sacrifices of the troops at Lake George over the course of two wars, the Battlefield Park is truly hallowed ground. ■

NOTES:

1. William Bell Clark, ed., *Naval Documents of the American Revolution* (Washington, D.C.: History Division, Department of the Navy, 1968), Volume 3, 917.
2. NDAR, 4:540.
3. Peter Force, ed., *American Archives, Fourth Series, Volume 5* (Washington, D.C.: M. St. Clair Clarke and Peter Force, 1844), 1097-98.
4. Jeduthan Baldwin, *The Revolutionary Journal of Col. Jeduthan Baldwin 1775-1778*, ed. Thomas Williams Baldwin (Bangor, ME: De Burians, 1906), 40.
5. Brantz Mayer, ed., *Journal of Charles Carroll of Carrollton, During his Visit to Canada in 1776* (Baltimore Maryland Historical Society, 1876), 62-63; Russell P. Bellico, *Chronicles of Lake George: Journeys in War and Peace* (Fleischmanns, NY: Purple Mountain Press, 1995), 165.
6. Force, Fourth Series, 5: 1098.
7. 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.
8. Ibid.
9. Abigail May, "The Journal of Abigail May," printed copy, New York State Historical Association, No.1, 72; Bellico, *Chronicles of Lake George*, 198.
10. 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.
11. Bellico, *Chronicles of Lake George*, 236.
12. Jared Sparks, "Plans & Descriptions of Gates's Camp, Ticonderoga, Crown Point, St. John's and Other Places," 1830, MS 128, 3a, 4, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.
13. Lewis Beebe, "Journal of a Physician on the Expedition Against Canada, 1776," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 59 (October 1935): 336.
14. Force, Fifth Series, 1:651.
15. Ibid., 1004.
16. Ibid.
17. "Biographical Sketch of Doctor Jonathan Potts," *The New England Historical and Genealogical Register* 18 (1864): 25; Force, Fifth Series, 1:581, 232; It is uncertain where the healthy troops were housed at Lake George. The "General Return" of August 24 listed 430 troops as "Effective Rank and File" at Fort George. Ibid., 1199-1200.
18. C. Keith Wilbur, *Revolutionary Medicine 1700-1800*, 2nd ed. (Guilford, CT: The Globe Pequot Press, 1997), 46.
19. Jeanette D. Black and William Green Roelker, eds., *A Rhode Island Chaplain in the Revolution: Letters of Ebenezer David to Nicholas Brown 1775-1778* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, n.d.), 26-27.
20. Robbins, "Journal," 113.
21. Ibid.
22. Force, Fifth Series, 1:652.
23. Oscar Reiss, *Medicine and the American Revolution* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1998), 96.
24. Bellico, *Chronicles of Lake George*, 195-96.
25. *Analysis of Military Campaigns Associated with Fort George and Environs* (Rensselaer NY: Hartgen Archeological Associates, Inc., 2018), Resource Inventory Form "1755-1783 Military Burials", 4, 6.
26. Beebe, "Journal," 345.
27. Force, Fifth Series, 1:796.



"Lake George from Fort George" by Daniel Wadsworth from Benjamin Silliman's 1819 book, showing a tavern near the shore which was "one of the old barracks, formerly belonging to the fort," according to Silliman.