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LAKE GEORGE'S NEWEST ATTRACTION: **BATTLEFIELD PARK VISITOR CENTER**

By Anthony F. Hall

For more than 25 years, historian Russ Bellico and the leaders of the Lake George Battlefield Alliance, including the late archaeologist David Starbuck, argued that grounds as historically rich and as hallowed as the head of Lake George deserve a visitors' interpretive center.

They, along with the rest of us, residents and visitors alike, now have one.

Earlier this year, a ceremonial ribbon was cut, formally opening a new Environmental Conservation Department facility in Lake George, one housing both the headquarters of the Lake George Park Commission and a Battlefield Park Visitor Center.

The new Visitor Center, said Joseph Zalewski, DEC's regional director, "is a welcoming and inclusive space that guides visitors on a historical journey, led by interpretive displays and artifacts."

Speaking at the Visitor Center in August, Russ Bellico said, "Our goal is to rekindle the interest in Fort George and in the site of the 1755 Battle of Lake George that was once ubiquitous. Throughout the 19th century, this site was a stop on the Great Northern Tour, which drew visitors from as far away as Great Britain to explore the scenes of the French and Indian War and the American Revolution. Even Teddy Roosevelt played among the Fort George ruins as a child."

In recent years, too many people have known of Fort George "only as a picnic area," said Bellico.

**A Visitor Center More than
One Hundred Years in the Making**

Lyn Karing Hohmann, a past

president of the Battlefield Alliance, said a Visitors Center for Fort George and the battlefields was first proposed by the Lake George Mirror in 1897, shortly after New York State first acquired the properties.

More recently, Russ Bellico presented a plan for a Visitor Center at a 1996 conference on Heritage Tourism.

But even without consulting experts like Russ Bellico, DEC Historic Preservation Officer Chuck Vandrei or the Battlefield Alliance's Hohmann, Lake George Park Commission executive director Dave Wick was aware of the need for an interpretive center.

"Every summer, people would come into the Lake George Park

Commission's office asking for historical information. We're in the middle of a battlefield park, so we're perfectly positioned to house a visitors interpretive center that could be accessed from the park," said Wick.

After having been the site of battles in 1755 and 1757, Fort George became the headquarters of the British as they prepared to launch attacks on the French at Ticonderoga and Crown Point in 1758 and 1759. In 1759, General Jeffery Amherst ordered a stone fort to be constructed, replacing a stockaded fort. During the War of Independence, the site was occupied by both the Americans and the British, said Bellico.

At one point during the American Revolution, it was the site of the largest military hospital in the colonies, said Bellico.

According to John DiNuzzo, the Alliance's current president, a bronze plaque similar to one mounted at the entrance of Fort Ticonderoga listing the names of the worthies who had passed through those gates should be mounted near

Fort George. Among the names that would be inscribed here: Ben Franklin, Phillip Schuyler and George Washington.

A Place of National Significance

Until this summer, Fort George was the only 18th century military site of national significance in the

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US without a museum or interpretive center, said Bellico.

The new Visitor Center is situated near the terminus of the Old Military Road, which linked Fort William Henry and Fort George to Fort Edward.

It is within sight of the exact location of the wharves from which Lord Jeffrey Amherst's fleet departed for Lake Champlain in 1759.

"Last of the Mohicans" notwithstanding, the 1757 siege of Fort William Henry that ended with its surrender to French forces under the Marquis de Montcalm, would have found Lt. Colonel George Monro, the Scots veteran charged with the defense of Fort William Henry, at the entrenched camp on this site rather than in the stockaded fort.

Bellico notes that the Visitor Center is located in what would have been the eastern edge of the battlefield where William Johnson and 1,500 troops successfully repelled a counterattack led by the Baron Dieskau in 1755.

That battle, sometimes dismissed as little more than a border incident because Johnson failed to take advantage of the opportunity to seize Crown Point and roust the French from Lake Champlain, was significant nonetheless, says

Bellico.

"This was first real victory of the French and Indian Wars in North America for the British," said Bellico.

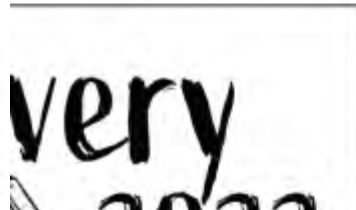
"We've discovered the wrecks of the sunken bateaux, and David Starbuck and his crews unearthed fascinating relics from the French and Indian Wars and the American Revolution," said Bellico. "So many events of historical significance occurred here, but few people realize

that. Our vision for a Visitor Center was a place that would explain and elucidate the history of this site."

Visitor Center Open to Public Weekends

The Visitor Center's exhibits include a wide array of artifacts uncovered by archaeological digs in the Park, on loan from the New York State Museum.

According to John DiNuzzo, the center also features newly created models that illustrate the sloops, bateaux and radeaux that were rowed or sailed by British and American soldiers here, as well as the forts themselves. Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, wrecks of the British-built boats –



some of which were deliberately scuttled in 1758 to protect them from the French – were occasionally found and dismembered by scavengers, who sold the fragments as souvenirs. Some of these are on display as well.

Dr. Bruce Venter, the author of “The Battle of Hubbardton: The Rear Guard Action that Saved America” who serves on the board of trustees of the Lake George Battlefield Park Alliance, points out to a visitor his favorite artifact: a compass that he believes might possibly have belonged to British Major Christopher Carleton, whose raiders seized the fort in 1780.

Also on display: a mannequin

dressed in the uniform of the Continental Army’s First Pennsylvania Battalion.

The remains of men who served with that battalion were among those unearthed at a construction site in Lake George Village in February, 2019. The identification was made with the help of buttons from a uniform in which the soldier was buried.

In the summer of 1776, Fort George became a hospital, converted to care for colonial troops who had contracted smallpox during the unsuccessful siege of Quebec. 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.

New York State’s Department of Environmental Conservation is expected to authorize the burial of the remains in Fort George Park, DiNuzzo.

A re-interment ceremony could be held as early as Memorial Day, 2023.

Revitalizing Heritage Tourism

The Visitor Center will be from 10 am to 4 pm, Friday through Sunday, from now through October 9. It will also be open Monday, October 10.

More than 1,500 people have toured the Visitor Center since it opened in May, said John DiNuzzo.

“We can’t wait for even more people to see what we have here,” said DiNuzzo. “The interpretive panels, the maps, artwork and historical dioramas that were created to bring history to life will appeal to both the casual tourist and the professional historian.”

And by adding a new, potentially impressive memorial honoring those who died from disease at the Fort George hospital to the park and Visitor Center, Lake George could become an even stronger cultural draw, said DiNuzzo.

“And, of course, we also have Fort William Henry, Fort Ticonderoga, Crown Point and the Saratoga Battlefield. Plus the historical museums in Lake George and Bolton Landing. So the Visitor Center is already part of something much larger, something that has the potential to make our region as important a destination for heritage travelers as it was in the 19th century,” said DiNuzzo.





A: Entrance to Visitor Center on Fort George Road. B: During the 19th century, the ruins of Fort George were a tourist attraction. C: "View of the Lines at Lake George, 1759" Thomas Davies. (Fort Ticonderoga Museum Collection.) D: A staple of Punch magazine in the Victorian era was a lampoon of Englishmen abroad, pictured here at the ruins of Fort George. The caption reads: "At the Ruins - A reminder of Colonial Times - Jones sentimentalizes - Brown sketches - Robinson makes his mark."



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E: The Adirondack Museum raised bateaux from the lake in the mid-sixties. Someday, they may be returned to Lake George. (Photo by Richard Dean. Courtesy Adirondack Experience.) F: Intervening to save the life of Baron Dieskau at the Battle of Lake George. G: Lord Jeffrey Amherst. H: The Battle of Lake George Monument, portraying King Hendrick and William Johnson, erected in the park in 1903. I: John DiNuzzo, Russ Bellico and Bruce Venter at the Visitor Center.