

The Lake George Examiner

One man's quest to find the Battle of Lake George battle lines

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Mark Silo and members of the Lake George Battlefield Park Alliance stop at the remains of Fort George during a walking tour of the Battle of Lake George battle lines.

What does the statue of Father Isaac Jogues, the Tiki Resort parking lot and campsite 64 in the Lake George Battleground Campground all have in common? They are all reference points used by historian and civil engineer Mark Silo as he sought to identify Sir William Johnson's battle lines in the 1755 Battle of Lake George.

The Battle of Lake George

In late August 1755, William Johnson and his army of American Provincials and Mohawk allies established a camp on the southern shore of what was then called Lac du Saint Sacrement. (Johnson changed the name to Lake George to honor his

king.) Johnson and his army were tasked with capturing Fort St. Frédéric on Lake Champlain as part of the British strategy to drive the French out of the territory. Johnson had arrived at the lake less than two weeks earlier when he received intelligence that the French were planning an attack on Fort Lyman (later renamed Fort Edward) 14 miles to the Southeast. On September 8, 1755, Johnson sent reinforcements to Fort Lyman. They never made it. About three miles out, they were ambushed by the French, an event known as The Bloody Morning Scout. It was the first of three engagements that day collectively known as the Battle of Lake George.

Alerted by the sounds of battle and the retreating troops. Johnson and his men quickly set to creating a defensive breastwork of overturned wagons, canoes and hastily felled trees. This line, from which Johnson's men successfully routed the French, is the subject of Silo's investigation.

Silo is a member of the Lake George Battlefield Alliance, and when the Alliance opened the new Visitor Center in May 2022, he volunteered to work there one day a week. He says he often wondered exactly where, in the park, were those battlelines, and working at the Visitor Center brought him closer to the subject. It seemed no one had a sure answer, so, with a historian's curiosity and a civil engineer's sensibility, he set out to discover the lines himself.

The Lake George battlefield topography then and now

Using 18th Century maps and written accounts of the battle as his guides, Silo walked the park grounds and the surrounding wooded area of the DEC Battleground Campground. He says he must have seemed peculiar to the campers last summer as he wandered the campsites poking at his iPad. The maps did not always agree, and he discovered the cartographers of old would use different scales on the same map.

To align the grounds of Battlefield Park, the campground and the adjacent Tiki Resort with the 1755 topography illustrated on the old maps, Silo had to determine which land features were natural and which were the result of excavating as over the centuries Lake George developers have shifted mounds of dirt and filled in ravines to level ground for construction.

He noted that a ravine on the 1755 Blodget Map (Blodget, a sutler at Johnson's camp and first-hand witness to the battle, drew his very detailed map shortly after the battle) shows a gully that Silo speculated is the one that runs behind where the Battlefield Park Visitor Center now stands. However, when walking the gully, Silo found it ended on a rise. It did not run down towards the lake as the map indicated. A little further investigation brought him an explanation, he found a culvert that diverted the gully waters underground, a modern-day addition to the land.



Historian Mark Silo, speaking at the Battlefield Park Visitor Center, holds a copy of Samuel Blodget's map, "A prospective view of the battle fought near Lake George"

One of the most baffling pieces of the puzzle was the apparent disappearance of a ridge of land to the west that was mentioned in Blodget's notes. Silo suspected excavation to level land for the Tiki Resort, which opened in 1960, may account for the changing topography, but he needed proof. He found it on a 1955 state map that surveyed the area during planning for the Adirondack Northway construction.

There indeed was a lobe of high ground where guests of the Tiki now enjoy a picnic area and lawn. Also, the 1955 map showed a deep ravine between what is

now State Route 9 and the hotel area. Silo, with a civil engineer's eye, is confident that the rise of land was leveled, and the earth that was removed was used to fill the ravine to create the Tiki parking lot.



Now a level stretch of asphalt, this area behind the Tiki Resort once provided cover for French troops and their native allies as they fired on William Johnson's army.

After reconciling the differences between maps and determining how the land has changed over the past 268 years, Silo believes he has found Johnson's battle lines. On a rainy Saturday this April, Silo took a group of Alliance members on a Battle of Lake George tour, walking the group along what he believes were Johnson's lines.

The group left the Visitor Center and followed a gully that led to the foot of the Father Isaac Jogues statue. The group continued through the brush to the remains of Fort George and the state campground. Along the way, Silo explained how he reached his conclusions and pointed out where he determined the corners of the line to be and where cannons were positioned. Silo likened the tour, the first time he presented his findings to a large group, to a dissertation defense, and he welcomed challenges to his work. No one challenged him.

The Lake George Battlefield Park Alliance has published Silo's work, titled, "Sir William, Where Exactly Were Your Lines?" on their website. The article provides a thorough explanation, with maps and drawings, of his methods and conclusions.

The Lake George Battlefield Park Visitor Center will open for the season on Friday, May 26, 10 a.m. – 4 p.m. and will be open Friday through Sunday, plus Memorial Day, through June 25. Beginning June 29, the Visitor Center will be open

Thursday – Monday. The weekly one-hour tours of the park will begin Saturday, May 27 and will be offered each Saturday through the summer and fall. The tours begin at 11 a.m. and leave from the Visitors Center. There is no charge but those wishing to join a tour are encouraged to register by emailing the Alliance at info@lakegeorgebattlefield.org.



Mark Silo with members of the Lake George Battlefield Park Alliance stand on high ground overlooking the reconstructed marsh in Wood Park.