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Growing Support for Reinterment of Lake George Colonial War Dead

Memorial Plaza Planned for Battlefield Park

By Anthony F. Hall

Lake George's drive to honor the many who died at the smallpox hospital at Fort George in the first years of the American Revolution has gained new momentum.

U.S. Senator Chuck Schumer has asked U.S. Army Secretary Christine Wormuth to endorse local plans to bury remains found in 2019 within Lake George Battlefield Park, already the site of the nation's oldest, officially recognized monument honoring Unknown Soldiers.

Those remains – which, in all likelihood, belong to American provincials who were fighting on behalf of the British king at the 1755 Battle of Lake George – were found during the construction of a road near Lake George in the 1930s and were reburied in the park at that time.



U.S. Senator Chuck Schumer has urged the U.S. Army Secretary to support local efforts to honor Revolutionary War Dead found in Lake George Village. Mirror file photo.

Some 75 years later, in February, 2019, the remains of American Revolutionary War soldiers were discovered at a construction site in Lake George Village.

According to Dan Barusch, Lake George's Director of Zoning and Planning, who is coordinating the community's campaign to re-inter the remains, 44 individuals, more than twice the number originally believed to have been buried in the graveyard, were uncovered once officials halted construction.

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 uncover a surprising diversity among the war dead: African Americans, Native Americans and even women and children who would have accompanied or attended the soldiers

"Local historians and archeologists have been working for years to unravel the mystery of this burial site, and now it is our duty to give these patriots the honor they deserve," said Senator Schumer. "That is why I am calling on the Army to fully support local efforts

to help finally lay these soldiers to rest and give these patriots the final honor they truly deserve."

"We greatly appreciate Senator Schumer's endorsement of a reinterment in Lake George Battlefield Park," said Lake George Supervisor Dennis Dickinson, who noted that since the discovery of the remains in 2019, a partnership of government, historical organizations and private sector leaders has been at work on a plan to establish a burial site and memorial in the park.

Fort George: Largest Military Hospital in North America

During the American Revolution, Fort George, whose ruins can still be seen in Battlefield Park, 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 and a trustee of the Lake George Battlefield Alliance, which operates a Visitor Center in Battlefield Park.

Founded in the summer of 1776 by General Horatio Gates, the hospital was used to house colonial troops who had contracted smallpox during the Americans' unsuccessful campaign to separate Canada from the British Empire.

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 in 2019 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 travelling 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 Hohmann, a past president of the Lake George Battlefield Park Alliance. "The remains found in Lake George Village showed no signs of trauma."

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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 the dead had a catastrophic impact," said Chuck Vandrei.

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.

The Continental Army at Lake George

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

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.

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Travelling 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 the late archaeologist 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 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.

The Lake George Battlefield Park Alliance commissioned a replica of the uniform worn by soldiers in First Pennsylvania Battalion, which is now on display in the new Visitor Center.



Political Support for Respectful Reinterment

The Boards of both the Village and the Town of Lake George have approved resolutions supporting “respectful reburials” of the remains found at the construction site inside Lake George Battlefield Park.

Both houses of the New York State legislature have also adopted resolutions supporting reinterment in Battlefield Park.

When Senator Schumer offered to be of assistance, Lake George officials requested that he intervene on behalf of the community with the U.S. Army.

“The U.S. Army wants to establish that the construction site in Lake George Village was a military cemetery before it can endorse the

reinterment of the remains that were found there. We feel we have the documentation to prove that,” said Dan Barusch.

The proposal also requires the support of New York State, which owns Battlefield Park and whose Department of Environmental Conservation manages it.

“We hope to have all the necessary approvals in hand by Memorial Day, 2024,” said Barusch.

A Memorial Plaza in Battlefield Park

According to Barusch, a Memorial Plaza would be constructed to entomb the remains from the construction site, along with those found in other areas of Lake George over the years.

The Memorial would honor all those who served at Lake George and be situated on the east side of Fort George Road, within a short walk from the Visitor Center.

Barusch said the cost to construct the Memorial Plaza could be as much as \$500,000. He anticipates a Memorial Day, 2025, dedication.

“We’re very excited about this,” Barusch said.



Above: Six columbaria, the centerpiece of a Memorial Plaza in Battlefield Park, would hold the remains of 18th century war dead found in Lake George. Right: Volunteers working with archaeologists in Lake George Village in 2019, when an 18th century military cemetery was discovered at a construction site.

