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The state park on hallowed ground: Lake George Battlefield Park opens for third season

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LAKE GEORGE--The pristine splendor of the area we know today as Lake George has been admired and sought out by people since the time of the First Nations People's ancestors. And as such places often do, Lake George carries a long and bloody history of man's desire to take and maintain control of this beautiful and strategic landmark.

"Basically, this was the highway between New York City and Montreal, 'Quebec City,'" explained John DiNuzzo, president of the Lake George Battlefield Park Alliance.

The Lake George Battlefield Park Visitor Center highlights this history during summer months.

It opened for its third season on Friday, May 24.

The Center, located on the bottom floor (rear entrance) of 75 Fort George Road, Lake George, will maintain a weekend and holidays schedule, through the end of June. In July it is open Thursday through Monday.

More than 5,000 guests viewed the exhibits at the Visitor Center during its initial two seasons, press materials say.

The center highlights Lake George's History

In August 1755, at the start of the French and Indian War, provincial colonial troops under the command of William Johnson built a temporary settlement at the head of what was known at the time as "Lac du Saint Sacrement" by the French, or "The lake of the Blessed Sacrement."

The goal was to mount an attack on the French at Fort St. Frederic, which is now Crown Point. The French learned of the plan and attacked the unprepared settlement but was defeated. Proving to be a successful staging point, Johnson decided to establish a permanent fortification at the site. He built Fort William Henry later that year.

"And for two years Fort William Henry was basically the anchor at the head of Lake George," DiNuzzo said.

By 1757, the fort was under the command of Lt. Col George Monro with around 2,300 troops. The French general Louis-Joseph de Montcalm attacked the fort with more than 6,000 troops as well as 2,000 Native Americans. After days of being overwhelmed by French Forces in what would come to be known as "the siege of Fort William Henry," Monro surrendered and marched his men to Fort Edward. Unfortunately, a misunderstanding over how Montcalm planned to remunerate his Native American back up lead to the British being attacked as they retreated.

The French destroyed the fort and returned to their outpost at the tip of Lake Champlain, Fort Carillon.

After a year of tentatively attempting to reestablish a presence at Lake George, the British were finally able to beat back the French at Fort Carillon in 1759, renaming it Fort Ticonderoga. A new fort at Lake George, called Fort George, became a sort of secondary point for the more favorable sites at Fort Ticonderoga and Crown Point.

"The forts were maintained after the French surrendered in 1760," DiNuzzo said. "And in 1775 it starts again."

Following the taking of Fort Ticonderoga by Benedict Arnold and Ethan Allen in 1775, the battle line between the British army in Canada and the constitutional army in America were strictly laid. Fort George became an important meeting place for patriot forces on their way to and from the bases closer to the Canadian line. Henry Knox stayed at Fort George on his way to pick up the 16-tons of cannons from Ticonderoga and on his way back with the armaments on his way to Boston.

In 1776 Fort George housed a smallpox hospital which cared for American troops. DiNuzzo said the remains of at least 1,000 colonial

Americans are estimated to still be buried on the grounds of the old Fort George. Including those of Gen. Frederick William Woedtke, also known as Baron de Woedtke.

British Gen. John Burgoyne took control of Fort George after recapturing Fort Ticonderoga in 1777 on his way south to the Battles of Saratoga. Following his surrender and subsequent march back up to Canada, the British abandoned Fort George and destroyed Fort Ticonderoga. In 1780, the British return to Fort George and raze it to the ground.

The area where Fort George stood is now the state-run Lake George Battlefield Park, which includes a museum and visitor's center located on the bottom floor (rear entrance) of 75 Fort George Rd., now open for its third season.

"The fact that this place was settled and a military post or outpost for 25 years during those two wars is pretty significant," DiNuzzo said. "It kind of reinforces people's interest in the area. It gives a different angle to it."

The center showcases artifacts uncovered from the grounds and dioramas showing how things would have looked more than 250 years ago. Admission to the center is free. For more information, visit www.lakegeorgebattlefield.org.