

The Lake George Examiner



Hallowing of the Ground: Future Battlefield Park reinterment site consecrated with ceremony

June 15, 2024 by Gillian Burdett

On Thursday, February 7, 2019, a construction crew excavating a basement on Courtland Street in Lake George Village uncovered human remains. Property owners Dana and Rueben Ellsworth immediately halted the housing project and contacted officials. An archaeological survey of the property ensued with dozens of volunteers, led by New York State Museum representatives, screening mounds of earth. Recovery efforts continued over the next 15 months through winter's freeze and the COVID pandemic.

When the recovery was complete, 44 sets of remains were removed from their disturbed graves and brought to the New York State Museum for analysis. Archaeologists believe the Courtland Street area is the site of a Revolutionary War military cemetery associated with the smallpox hospital established in 1776 at Fort George. Artifacts recovered indicate that some of the remains were individuals associated with the 1st Pennsylvania Battalion of the Continental Army.

The Town and Village of Lake George formed the Courtland Street Reinterment Committee to assess how best to respectfully reinter the remains. They determined the State-owned Lake George Battlefield Park, the site where these soldiers were last stationed, was the most appropriate location. The Committee developed a plan to build a plaza with columbarium structures, walking paths and seating areas along Fort George Road just south of the Grave of the Unknowns. The NYS Department of Environmental Conservation recently amended the Unit Management Plan for Battlefield Park to allow for the construction.



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Rendering of planned reinterment site/Studio A

This Friday, Local, state and federal officials, members of the Courtland Street Reinterment Committee, the Lake George Battlefield Park Alliance, the volunteers who helped with recovery, the public and the press gathered at the site to consecrate the ground and hold a ribbon cutting ceremony to mark the next stage of the project.

"We stand here today," says the Reinterment Committee Chair Dan Barusch, "... to honor these individuals for their sacrifices and to bless the ground on which they will permanently repose." Barusch went on to speak about the committed work of the Reinterment Committee and noted the importance of the partnership created between the local and state governments, the committee and all other stakeholders that brought the project to this point, a sentiment repeated by the speakers that followed.



Dan Barusch, Courtland Street Reinterment Committee Chair, speaks at the Hallowing of the Ground ceremony.

NYS DEC Interim Commissioner Sean Mahar spoke on behalf of Governor Hochul, saying they, at the state, are enthusiastic about the project and recognized that the state may seem to work slowly, but they had to follow procedures. "We are on hallowed ground, and it goes without saying anytime we try to do anything here, it has to be carefully thought out to preserve the historical legacy of this area," Mahar says.

Charles Vandrei, DEC Historic Preservation Officer, gave a summary of the events that brought soldiers to Lake George in 1776. The American Army, with representatives from several colonies, had invaded Quebec in 1775. The campaign was unsuccessful, and the army retreated to Crown Point just as the American Revolution was starting.

At Crown Point, smallpox was running rampant with nearly half the troops stricken. To better control the epidemic, the healthy and the sick were separated. Healthy troops were sent to Ticonderoga, the sick to Fort George where the hospital was built. "During that summer [1776] several thousand soldiers cycled through that hospital, and many of them died here. We think as many as, potentially, 1,000 died and were buried in this area," Vandrei says.



NYS DEC Historic Preservation Officer Charles Vandrei speaks. Interim DEC Commissioner Sean Mahar looks on.

"In all the years I've worked on burial discoveries for the State of New York Museum," says Lisa Anderson, curator of Bioarchaeology, "this project was unlike

anything I've ever seen. In a few short hours in February of 2019, dozens of unmarked graves on Courtland Street were basically reduced to slivers. We believe they were graves of Revolutionary War heroes who enlisted to fight for our independence in 1776."

Anderson spoke about the difficulty of trying to identify the individuals saying they had hoped to put the individuals back together, but the damage to the remains was too great. "What we've learned is many of those buried on Courtland Street were young. Probably young men and boys in their teens ... they died not in battle but fighting a different enemy, disease."

Among the remains recovered were two children, a 6-year-old and a 10-year-old. "This was not unexpected as we know families sometimes accompanied soldiers into war," says Anderson, "but," she mused, "was there a parent there to care for them when they were sick, grieve for them when they died and ensure a proper burial?... As our work continues, piece by piece, we hope to be able to tell their story, more of their story, who they were, how they lived, and maybe how they died... and if anything good has come of this, it's the recognition of their place in the American Revolution, right here in Lake George, That's why we are here today, to honor them."



Lisa Anderson, Curator of Bioarchaeology at the NYS Museum, describes her work recovering and analyzing the remains found on Courtland Street.

Last year, New York Senator Charles Schumer endorsed the Battlefield Park reinterment plans, and Steve Mann, Director of his Capital District office, presented Schumer's comments. Schumer noted that the Village of Lake George experienced today, the Minne Ha-Ha, the Around the World Golf, the soft-serve ice cream are "all undeniable expressions of modern American life, freedom, capitalism, the very notion of leisure time to spend joyful hours with family and friends. None of these above aspects of American life along with countless others would be possible without the audacious sacrifice made by these brave individuals, all the way back at the beginning of our country...There's a poignant symmetry in how this project, which you embark on today, coincides with the approaching 250th anniversary of America. These soldiers, who we believe died in 1776, will be properly laid to rest and memorialized in that important milestone anniversary year."

New York State Senator Dan Stec and New York Assemblyman Matt Simpson also spoke. Stec expressed gratitude to the Ellsworths who, at great expense, did the proper thing and halted their construction project to allow the archaeologists to recover the remains, and he pledged to help the reinterment project in any way he could with his position in the state legislature. Simpson spoke about the importance of the area's history not just to Lake George but to the nation and the world. "There isn't anybody that can predict our future, but we do know our history. That doesn't change. That's why this is so important to take this time today to hallow this ground and reinter these soldiers."



NYS Assemblyman Matt Simpson discusses the importance of Lake George's History. Seated, L-R, Steve Mann, Dan Stec

Village of Lake George Mayor Ray Perry and Lake George Town Supervisor Vincent Crocitto both praised the work of all stakeholders in developing the project and commented on its importance with Crocitto saying, “This project is so important in preserving our history and bringing awareness to the early struggles and sacrifices that were made on this journey to this great American experiment that we all enjoy today.”

John DiNuzzo, President of the Lake George Battlefield Park Alliance listed the major events that had taken place in and near Battlefield Park — the Battle of Lake George in 1755, the Siege of Fort William Henry in 1757, and the launch of Abercrombie’s Army from the Southern shore of Lake George in 1758. Henry Knox passed through Lake George with his “Noble Train of Artillery,” and Fort George played a critical role in the American Revolution as the site of the military hospital. All these events, DiNuzzo says, point to Lake George Battlefield Park as “a premier American historic site deserving of very rigorous care and maintenance by the State of New York, by the Town of Lake George, and by yes, the Lake George Battlefield Park Alliance.”



John DiNuzzo, President of the Lake George Battlefield Park Alliance, discusses the importance of Battlefield Park as an American historic site.

Following DiNuzzo’s address, Town of Lake George Historian Margie Mannix read an inspirational piece. Then, Major Robert Volk, New York 42nd Expeditionary Combat Aviation Brigade Chaplin, took the podium. He consecrated the ground saying:

Oh, had it not been for the Light of God, our enemies may have prevailed. They came unresisted and mighty, they grew stronger, and louder and bolder every day, but beyond these hills there came the weaker march of a smaller host. Onward they hurried, day and night, for their country and for their God. Footsore they were, hungry and thirsty, weary but strong in heart.

They came to dare all, bear all, to do all that is possible as heroes rose to the founding of our nation, and so I proclaim that whereas the piece of land situated here as the Lake George Battlefield, be set apart, be made holy, to be appropriated for the burial of these fallen heroes that God almighty would be pleased to consecrate this set land... we do pronounce, decree and declare that this set land shall remain so consecrated, set apart and dedicated forever, in the name of the Almighty above, our shield and our protector, whereas we witness this by our work and our deed, this fourteenth day of June, in the Year of our Lord, 2024. Major Robert Volk consecrates the grounds. The Blessing of the Ground was followed by a Salute to the Soldiers led by Larr



Major Robert Volk consecrates the grounds.

The Blessing of the Ground was followed by a Salute to the Soldiers led by Larry Handy, appearing as Colonel Peter Gansevoort who was the Fort George Commander in 1776. Dr. Lyn Karig Hohmann of the Reinterment Committee explained that during the dig, they would give a toast to the soldiers. "We have something to drink, we take a sip, but we always give some to the soldiers because they're our folks below and it honors them." Event organizers passed out small cups of cider to those in attendance. They raised their cups to toast, took a sip, and then poured the rest into the ground for the fallen heroes.



The ceremony concluded with the playing of taps and a ribbon cutting to officially mark the start of the project's next phase. Now that the state has approved the project, the Reinterment Committee will begin fundraising. According to the Reinterment Committee report, the project cost will be \$400,000. Organizers hope to have the project completed in 2026 to align with the 250th Anniversary of the nation's founding.



Government officials and members of the Reinterment Committee cut a ribbon to launch the next stage of the Battlefield Park reinterment project.