

# The Lake George Examiner

A year of growth, loss and a transformational addition on the horizon: Battlefield Park Alliance holds its Annual Meeting



August 19, 2024 by Gillian Burdett

Lake George Battlefield Park is gaining prominence as a significant state and national historic site. The state-owned park at the head of Lake George has, for more than a century, been a popular picnic spot for summer vacationers. Buried beneath the rolling lawns and memorialized above ground with monuments and historical markers is a history of conflicts critical to the birth of the United States. The work of the Lake George Battlefield Park Alliance, a not-for-profit educational corporation, has played a driving role in raising public awareness of the park's importance.

On Saturday, the Alliance held its Annual Membership Meeting under the Battlefield Park pavilion. President John DiNuzzo opened the meeting remembering three recently deceased community members who supported the Alliance's mission.

Lake George Town Supervisor Denis Dickenson passed away in April. "We appreciate all he did for the park, for the town and for history in general," says DiNuzzo. "He was an environmental advocate, a history advocate, and certainly a supporter of the kinds of things that make Lake George an attractive place to live and work and vacation." Another loss was Queensbury Town

Councilman and Alliance member Harrison Freer who died unexpectedly at the end of July. DiNuzzo describes Freer as a dear friend “who brought zest to everything he did.”

The death last month of Charles Vandrei, long-time Historic Preservation Officer for the New York Department of Environmental Conservation, was deeply felt by those involved in historical preservation in the state. At the Alliance meeting, members stood to share their stories of working with Vandrei, saying he was passionate about his work and was known for his motto, “Always do the right thing.” He was practical and helpful when it came to cutting through government red tape to launch and complete preservation projects. “It was Chuck who kind of crossed the goal line for us to get the APA and the DEC to approve the reinterment of the 44 remains that were found over on Courtland Street back in 2019,” says DiNuzzo, referring to the Repose of Fallen project planned for Battlefield Park. “Chuck’s death leaves a void that DEC will be very challenged to fill.”



*Charles Vandrei speaks at the Hallowing of the Grounds Ceremony while DEC Interim Commissioner Sean Mahar looks on.*

Charles Vandrei’s daughter, Dr. Martha Vandrei, is a British historian and Senior Lecturer in History at Exeter University in the UK. She attended the Alliance Annual Meeting in memory of her father. Speaking to the membership, she said, “This is especially moving for me because I’ve never been here without my father... He’s everywhere here for me, in the mountains, in the trees, in the breeze, on the lake and everywhere ... In my mind I know that my love for the past grew from the places my

dad brought me, not just here to Lake George but Fort Niagara, Fort Ontario, Fort Ticonderoga, Saratoga Battlefield ... these places brought history to life for me and made me the historian I am today, and I have my father to thank for that.” She says that in the autumn she plans to “bring him back here where he belongs, in the Adirondacks, his true spiritual home.”



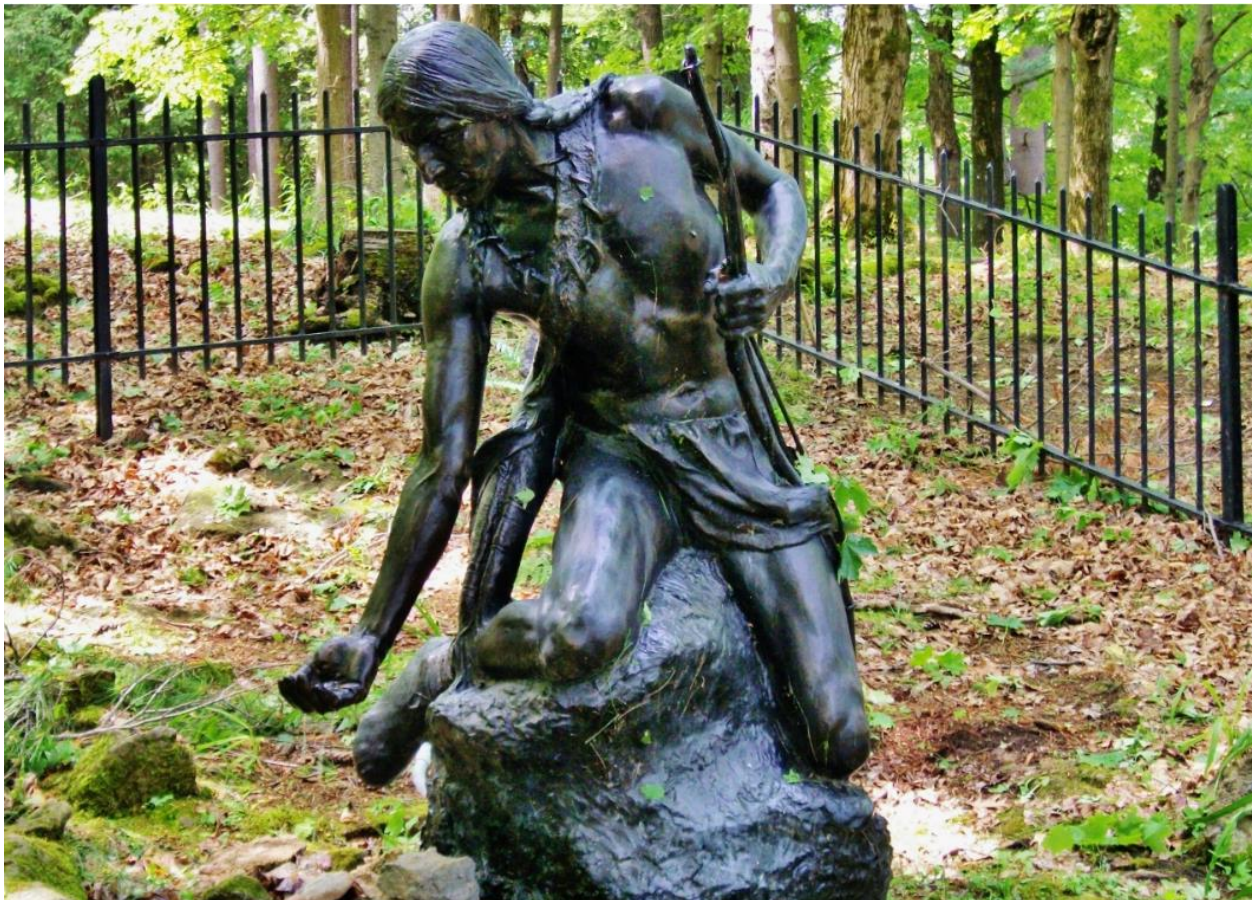
*Charles Vandrei’s daughter, Dr. Martha Vandrei, speaks at the Battlefield Park Alliance Annual Meeting.*

DiNuzzo presented the Trustees’ Annual Report that showed membership over the past year has increased by 46 percent and the number of visitors to the Lake George Battlefield Park Visitors Center is up 10-15 percent over last summer’s numbers. He attributes this growth to increased awareness of the park brought on by more media coverage and the Alliance’s robust schedule of programs that are offered to the public free of charge throughout the year.

Retiring Alliance Trustee Russell P. Bellico was honored with a plaque commemorating his many contributions to the organization over the past 23 years. Bellico says he will remain active in the Alliance.

Trustee Jay Levenson described a new event the Alliance and Fort William Henry are planning for Columbus Day Weekend. The Harvest Moon Colonial Faire will be held on October 12 and 13. The event will bring together historic demonstrators, storytellers, crafters and artisans to demonstrate colonial life. Noted Abenaki author Joseph Bruchac will be the keynote speaker on both days of the event.

DiNuzzo noted that the DEC has made many improvements in the park. Walkways through the West Side of the park have been rebuilt and a new path has been constructed that connects the Visitors Center to the statue of Issac Jogues. The Alliance is hopeful that needed repairs to walkways on the East Side of the park and refurbishing of the wrought iron fencing around park monuments will be addressed soon. The Alliance is also seeking to have the fountain and landscaping around the Indian Warrior statue rejuvenated.



*The landscaping surrounding the Indian Warrior statue in Battlefield Park needs rejuvenating.*

The sprucing up of the park comes as a major project, the construction of a plaza and structures to reinter the historic remains that were uncovered on Courtland Street, has been approved by the state. The alliance is a member of the Courtland Street Reinterment Committee, the organization that developed and is implementing the reinterment plan.

The “Repose of the Fallen” will be built on Fort George Road overlooking Lake George. It will include six columbaria, walkways with benches and educational signage. The project has gained national attention as New York Senator Charles Schumer has shown his support by visiting the park twice and writing to the Army Secretary asking for an endorsement and possible help with funding. Archaeologists have determined the remains are those of Continental Soldiers and civilians associated with the Revolutionary War-era military hospital at Lake George.

“The impact of this on Battlefield Park and the region’s history will be transformational,” says DiNuzzo. He believes the beauty of the design and its implementation will attract those wishing to learn the stories of these early patriots and contemplate their sacrifices.

Following the meeting, Dan Barusch, Village and Town of Lake George Planning and Zoning Director, newly elected Alliance Trustee and Chair of the Courtland Street Reinterment Committee gave a presentation to bring members up to date on the Repose of the Fallen project.



*Dan Barusch, Courtland Street Reinterment Committee Chair, presents the Repose of the Fallen project at the Alliance Annual Meeting.*

The Courtland Street Reinterment Committee was formed in 2019 immediately after human remains were discovered during a construction project on Courtland Street in the Village of Lake George. Archaeologists at the State Museum in Albany determined the site was a graveyard for patients of the Revolutionary War-era smallpox hospital at Fort George and the remains were of people associated with the military hospital. “A good portion of, if not all of them, were associated with 1<sup>st</sup> Pennsylvania Battalion or some other regiment within the continental army,” Barusch says. The committee’s mission is to see the remains respectfully reinterred.

“Many of the people who have been involved to date and at the state feel that this is one of the most, if not the most, significant archaeological find in this region in modern era,” said Barusch, “and we are all very, very proud and happy to be participating in doing the right thing. Chuck [Vandrei] always used to say that to us, and we really feel that this is exactly what we’re doing. We’re doing the right thing by these patriots and by this community, and we have had overwhelming support on this project since day one.”

Barusch presented an overview of the committee’s work over the past five years. The committee put together a proposal in 2020/2021 and submitted it to the state in 2022. This spring, the APA and DEC approved the project. Barusch noted that the state, beyond just allowing the project, was taking on a partnership role, which Barusch believes will benefit the entire Battlefield Park making it a higher priority with the state.

In June, the Courtland Street Reinterment Committee held a Hallowing of the Grounds ceremony at the site chosen for the *Repose of the Fallen* structure. A team of archaeologists conducted a research dig this summer and determined that building on the selected site would have no adverse archeological or other negative impact on the park. The committee is currently working with the designer to create final plans with fine details including species of plants for landscaping and type of pea gravel to be used.



*Conceptual rendering of the proposed plaza.*

The project is currently in the fund-raising stage. Project costs are anticipated at approximately \$600,000 and Barusch says they are expecting that two-thirds of this cost will come from Town of Lake George DRI funding. Alliance trustee and Reinterment Committee member Larry Arnold says that while large donations are good, small donations are important because “numbers matter” and

many small donations show support. He encouraged Alliance members to engage their friends and neighbors in the effort.

The committee plans to put the site work out to bid and select contractors this winter into early spring and begin site work next May. They hope to have most of the work completed by late fall 2025 with finishing touches and columbaria delivered and put in place by early spring 2026.

The targeted unveiling date is May 29, 2026, which aligns with the nation's 250th anniversary. Barusch says he expects several hundred, even 1,000 people, to attend the event, which will include state and federal officials. Lyn Karig Hohmann, past Alliance president and member of the Courtland Street Committee, says they have a commitment from the Patriot Guard Riders to escort the Courtland Street remains from Albany where they are being held up to Lake George.

Visit the Courtland Street Reinterment Committee website to make a donation and learn more about the *Repose of the Fallen* project.

*Featured image: Lake George Battlefield Park Alliance President John DiNuzzo addresses the membership at the organization's Annual Meeting.*