

THE SOLDIERS OF COURTLAND STREET

BY JULIAN SMITH

The remains of Revolutionary War soldiers—salvaged in 2019 from a New York construction site in a town once set up as a smallpox hospital—will be honored at their final resting place at a memorial in Lake George Battlefield Park.



Editor's Note: This article is dedicated in loving memory of Charles "Chuck" Vandrei, who passed away July 19, 2024 during the production of this article. He co-led a team in the excavations and research at the burial site and was instrumental in the overall project.

In northeastern New York near the border of Vermont, Lake George extends for 30 miles through the Adirondack Mountains. The area has long been famous for its scenery; Thomas Jefferson called the long, narrow lake “without comparison, the most beautiful water I ever saw.” In the summer,

the village of the same name at its southern end is a magnet for visitors from New England and beyond, including New York City about 200 miles south.

With its strategic location on the early water route between eastern Canada and colonial New England, Lake George also saw intense military use during the late 18th century. Human remains are frequently recovered during construction projects, and archaeologists estimate there may be hundreds if not thousands more waiting to be unearthed. Most are associated with the French and Indian War (1754-1763), when British and



Excavation crew work where more than 40 Revolutionary War graves were damaged or destroyed during residential construction.

NEW YORK STATE DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION

French forces fought for control of French Canada. But a recent discovery in the heart of Lake George village has shed light on a lesser known, but perhaps even more pivotal, chapter in the region's history.

Due to earlier discoveries of graves in the town, it wasn't a huge surprise in early February 2019 when builders digging out the basement for a small apartment building on Courtland Street discovered what looked like human bones in the pile of excavated dirt. Local archaeologists were immediately called in, and they noticed the outlines of multiple grave shafts in the

sidewall of the basement excavation. The graves were evenly spaced and at the same depth, which suggested the site was likely a cemetery, said Lisa Anderson, curator of bioarchaeology and NAGPRA coordinator at the New York State Museum (NYSM), who helped lead the subsequent investigation.

The developer gave the researchers just two days to examine and excavate the site, saying the delivery schedule for the prefab building could not be changed. "It was truly a salvage operation," Anderson said. "They had literally started pouring the footings for the foundation between when we first saw it



and the next time we were there.” The days were short and cold, the soil was frozen and there was at least a foot of snow on the ground. Nearly two dozen volunteer archaeologists gathered to help. (They decided the pile of excavated dirt would have to wait until it thawed in the spring.) Headed by Anderson and Charles Vandrei, an archaeologist and historic preservation officer with the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, the team excavated a row of a dozen partially intact grave shafts that held a total of 15 bodies. Most were single burials, only three of which were in coffins, while one grave held three bodies. Since the construction trench had cut across the row at an angle, some graves were mostly intact but others had already been almost completely destroyed. Many of the bones were heavily fragmented and eroded, so it was a challenge to determine the sex and exact age, but most seem to have been male teenagers. Out of all of the individuals recovered, only five were determined to be over the age of 20, and one was a child under the age of 10. The demographics were consistent with a military-age population—likely young soldiers.

“The assumption has always been that graves in Lake George are from the French and Indian War,” Anderson said. In late 1755, British troops from Connecticut, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, and New York were on their way

north to attack a French fort on Lake Champlain. On September 8, they clashed with French forces near the southern end of Lake George. The French retreated after three battles, leaving about 200 casualties on each side. The British immediately built a fort at the site to strengthen their hold on the area. Two years later, 8,000 French soldiers, Native warriors, and Canadian volunteers—a force twice as large as the British defender—laid siege to Fort William Henry. After six days the fort walls were breached, and it was the British army’s turn to surrender. Even though the French agreed to protect the retreating army, their Native allies attacked the column, possibly because they felt they hadn’t received the scalps and plunder the French had promised them. They killed and scalped close to 200 British soldiers and civilians alike and took hundreds more to Canada to hold for ransom. (The massacre was portrayed in James Fenimore Cooper’s novel *The Last of the Mohicans* and its many movie versions.) The area was eventually set aside as Lake George Battlefield State Park.

On the first day at the Courtland Street site, the archaeologists made a surprising discovery. “We were walking around the excavation, looking at everything, scoping out what we had to do,” Vandrei said. “Someone noticed a couple of buttons lying on the ground below what was clearly

The spoil heap, also known as a backdirt pile, was excavated by volunteers, who spent 15 months sifting the pile, recovering thousands of bone fragments.



a grave. When we picked one up, we realized it had writing on it." The large pewter button, along with four others that turned up in and around the graves, was embossed with the characters "1BP." Around the rims in much smaller letters were the words "Continental Army."

In 1775, just as the American Revolution was starting to erupt, the newly formed Continental Army embarked on its first major military campaign: invading Canada. The idea was to persuade French-speaking Canada to join the fight against the British by seizing the Province of Quebec. However questionable the logic—the campaign eventually failed—troops from New York, New Hampshire, Connecticut and eventually Pennsylvania arrived at Quebec in the fall and winter of 1775-1776. As the weather turned colder, the soldiers struggled with limited supplies of food, clothing, and ammunition. A smallpox outbreak turned into an epidemic, and by the summer of 1776, British reinforcements arrived leading to a retreat to Crown Point on Lake Champlain. The army moved to what was then called Fort George at the south end of Lake George, which became the site of the largest military hospital in North America. "It was just devastating," Vandrei said. "Imagine you've been eating bad food for a year, you haven't seen a bar of soap for six months, and then all of a sudden smallpox shows up." Most of the Continental

forces had never been exposed to the disease, so they had no immunity, and a vaccine was still decades away. There were only four doctors to treat thousands of patients with little or nothing in terms of medical supplies. "Eventually the entire area became one big hospital, with patients in sheds and tents and lean-tos all over the southern end of the lake," Vandrei described.

In a letter to Continental Army Commander George Washington in July, Major General Horatio Gates wrote: "Everything about this army is infected with pestilence: the clothes, the blankets, the air, and the ground they walk upon." Historians estimate the death rate reached 40-50 people per week. Most victims would have been buried wrapped in blankets, Vandrei said. "The nearest sawmill was about 40 miles away, and they wanted every bit of wood for buildings." The eventual toll was at least 300 soldiers and likely many more; eyewitness accounts from the early 19th century reported a thousand graves.

The markings on the buttons found on Courtland Street showed that at least some of these smallpox casualties were from the First Pennsylvania Battalion. Raised in October 1775, the battalion was ordered to Quebec as reinforcements in January 1776 and was eventually dissolved in November. "To find something from a unit bracketed so narrowly in time was just too good to be true," Vandrei said. "It's one of those things that happens maybe



The late Charles Vandrei, former historic preservation officer at New York State Department of Environment Conservation, works at the excavation site on Courtland Street in 2019. He was instrumental in coordinating the reinterment at Lake George Battlefield Park.

two or three times in a career, or maybe in a lifetime.” The discovery changed researchers’ view of the site entirely. It was the first time human remains in the Lake George area had ever been clearly associated with the Revolutionary War, directly linking it to the creation of the United States and Canada. Records of other remains found nearby suggest that the graves at Courtland Street could have been part of a larger cemetery that extended at least a block in all directions. “These were some of the first American soldiers outside of Boston who were involved in the Revolutionary War,” Anderson said. “They were young guys who were off fighting for our independence (from Great Britain). Some of them may never even have made it to Quebec.”

The archaeologists turned to the mound of excavated dirt in May 2019. “It was about the size of a ranch house—70 dump trucks’ worth,” Anderson said. It took a year and a half, including a brief interruption for the COVID pandemic, to sift through the pile using shovels, buckets, and screens. Again, dozens of volunteers helped with the painstaking work, from professional archeologists to students from Skidmore College, Union College, SUNY Cobleskill, and SUNY Potsdam. Along with artifacts ranging from late pre-contact Indigenous to modern times, they found thousands of fragments of bones and teeth. The remains were brought to the NYSM and allowed to air

dry before being cleaned with brushes, bringing the final count to at least 44 individuals from the cemetery.

Thanks to a partnership of government, historical organizations, and the private sector, an ambitious project is underway to reinter the remains in Lake George Battlefield Park within walking distance of the remains of Fort George. The design includes six above-ground structures to hold the remains, as well as paths, benches, and interpretive signs. It will be located between a new interpretive center and an existing memorial to four unknown soldiers, thought to be American provincials fighting for the British in 1755. Those remains were found in the 1930s, making it the oldest officially recognized monument honoring Unknown Soldiers in the country. “We have always felt that since the identities of the individuals whose remains were discovered can’t be known, it’s only proper that their final resting place be near where they drew their final breaths,” said John DiNuzzo of the Lake George Battlefield Park Alliance.

Dan Barusch, of the Lake George Planning and Zoning Office, said support for the project has been overwhelming. “We have lots of amateur historians here who have family connections to local history going back three or four generations,” he said. Both houses of the New York State Legislature and the office of Senator Chuck Schumer have backed the project. Pending final approvals and fundraising, preparation for the reinterment will



COURTLAND STREET REINTERMENT COMMITTEE AND STUDIO A LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE AND ENGINEERING, DPC

Conceptual rendering of “Repose of the Fallen,” the soldiers’ future memorial at Lake George Battlefield Park.

start in 2025 and be carried out in 2026 to correspond with the 250th anniversary of the start of the American Revolution. In the meantime, NYSM staff will continue to analyze and catalog the remains. Researchers at McMaster University, who study the evolution of smallpox, are processing some of the samples to see if they can identify DNA from the virus.

Anderson is glad her team had the opportunity to examine the Courtland Street burial ground, but she wishes they had had more than a few days. “At least the town is very tuned into this now,” she said. “They’re really committed to seeing that it doesn’t happen again.” Until August 2023, New York was one of only four states where it was legal to desecrate unmarked graves. Under the state’s new Unmarked Burial Protection Act, anyone who digs up human remains has to stop immediately and alert the county coroner or medical examiner. If the remains are found to be over 50 years old, they’re handed over to NYSM archaeologists. The law was first put into use in October 2023, when gas company workers found a skull in an unmarked grave just up the block from the Courtland Street site.

In all, about 140 volunteers have assisted with various aspects of the project since the burial ground was found, Anderson said. “People would be walking down the street and just stop and ask if they could help, week after week, in every kind of weather.” Vandrei agrees that local enthusiasm has made the project special. “This has got to be one of the most satisfying projects I’ve ever been involved in,” he said. The Quebec campaign is a poorly

documented part of the story of the American Revolution, he said, and many of its victims were buried without any kind of marker or monument. He hopes the story of the Courtland Street burial ground and the reinterment memorial will help change that. “A big wrong was done to these people, something that should not have happened, and all our volunteers stepped up to help make it at least partly right.”

JULIAN SMITH is a frequent contributor based in Portland, Oregon. He is the author of *Aloha Rodeo: Three Hawaiian Cowboys, the World’s Greatest Rodeo*, and a *Hidden History of the American West*.

FURTHER RESEARCH

- **New York State Unmarked Burial Site Protection Act**, nysm.nysed.gov/unmarked-burial-site-protection-act and
- **Bioarchaeology at the Courtland Street Burying Ground**, New York State Museum, nysm.nysed.gov/research-collections/archaeology/bioarchaeology
- **The “Massacre” at Fort William Henry**, David Starbuck, *Expedition Magazine* (March 2008), penn.museum/documents/publications/expedition/50-1/Starbuck.pdf
- **“Lake George remains likely first protected under new law,”** WTEN (November 2023), news10.com/news/lake-george-remains-likely-first-protected-under-new-law