

NORTH COUNTRY NOTES

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CLINTON COUNTY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

No. 36 53

Allan S. Everest and Charles W. McClellan, Editors

March, 1969

The March Meeting

of the Historical Association will be held Monday evening, March 3, at 8 o'clock in the auditorium of the Plattsburgh Public Library. The speaker of the evening will be Mr. G. Earl Dedrck of Putnam Station, who will talk on "Very Early Pioneering in the Champlain Valley." Mr. Dedrck, retired from more than thirty years with the government, is a member of the Essex County Historical Society with a life-long interest in local and area history. This is the program originally planned for February, and cancelled because of the weather. The public is cordially invited to attend.

RIDDLE OF THE MONTH

Concerning the January riddle, Mr. Henry G. Rogers of Au Sable Forks questions a part of the answer published last month: "My understanding is that the Adgate Falls were a half-mile upstream from the main Chasm falls, and would be known by all Keeseville-ites as Alice Falls. Mr. Adgate owned most of the land on the south side of the river between the Chasm and Keeseville and a half-mile up from the main falls was Alice Falls which had a direct drop almost equal to that at the Chasm falls."

February riddle: The 19th century Presidents who visited Clinton County while in office were: James Monroe, Martin Van Buren, Ulysses S. Grant, Grover Cleveland, Benjamin Harrison and William McKinley (who established a summer White House twice at Bluff Point).

New riddle: What 20th century Presidents have visited Clinton County while in office?

CORRECTION IN AN ASSOCIATION PUBLICATION

Mrs. Eleanor Spaulding submits the following, which she discovered in the Keese genealogy prepared by Miss Pauline S. Keese about 1900: "Ruth Hull, wife of Stephen Keese, is not a granddaughter of Benjamin Franklin. It was his brother Samuel who married Sarah Franklin. This Samuel never lived in old Peru." There is a Samuel Keese, son of Stephen, who lived in the house on the Northern Orchard farm, adds Mrs. Spaulding.

In the Association's **Recollections of Clinton County**, published in 1964, Stephen K. Smith is quoted as having told Dr. D. S. Kellogg that his grandmother, Ruth Hull, was a granddaughter of Benjamin Franklin. Since Mr. Smith was then in his eighties, he can be forgiven a faulty memory. The correction can be made on page 56 of the **Recollections**.

The Mystery of Pike's Cantonment

Upon first hearing about the mystery of Pike's Cantonment, I immediately wanted to solve it. It seemed odd that a former military encampment of such magnitude could not be pin-pointed on the map, that, indeed, it was lost. Where was the Cantonment located, exactly? What happened there during those cold months of the winter of 1813? If a number of men died while stationed at the camp, are their graves at the Cantonment's location? These were the questions that ran through my mind. This was the mystery to be solved.

Prior to the building of the encampment along the Saranac River, a struggle had begun between the United States and Great Britain in the War of 1812. The Champlain Valley had become a beehive of activity, with military units converging on the northern end of the lake. On September 1, 1812, there were 8,000 men under Brigadier General Bloomfield at Plattsburgh, with additional detachments stationed nearby.

On November 16, 1812 Major General Henry Dearborn launched an ill-fated expedition to liberate Canada. Colonel Zebulon Montgomery Pike commanded one of his regiments. After indecisive and humiliating skirmishes just over the border in Canada, the advance units pulled back to the American camp at Champlain to await further orders from General Dearborn. Much to the surprise of all, Dearborn decided to pull back to Plattsburgh for the winter, and not march on Montreal.

Planning for the winter not having been previously been done, winter quarters for the troops had to be established. One camp was to be on the south bank of the Saranac River, about three miles from its mouth. The spot chosen was in the vicinity of Fredenburg Falls. The camp, later called Pike's Cantonment, was to house 2,000 men. Construction of log barracks started on November 28, but was not completed until Christmas Day. Most of the officers had rejoined their families, leaving Colonel Cromwell Pearce, commander of the Sixteenth Regiment and Colonel Pike of the Fifteenth in command.

Prior to the completion of the barracks, the men had to sleep on the frozen ground with only pine boughs and one regulation blanket to protect them from snow and freezing temperatures. Sickness and death were frequent. More than a hundred men from Pike's Regiment alone died during the month of December. Pike himself fell ill and had to be nursed back to health in Plattsburgh. Conditions generally deteriorated in the camp, with brawls, much drinking and even murder. Desertions increased, while morale and discipline all but disappeared. If it were not for Pearce and Pike, the army would have collapsed.

The death rate continued to climb during the winter months. There was later a rumor that the main cause of death was the poisoning of the whiskey ration by a British spy. However, Dr. William Beaumont, who served the camp during this time, reported treating "a great variety of diseases." One could probably blame the existing conditions as the main cause. Supplies were often limited and inadequate. At that time, all supplies were secured through private contractors. Colonel Pike, being disturbed by the quality of those obtained from Tench Coxe, wrote to the Secretary of War to inform him of the situation. For instance, the issue blankets were only four by three, and Pike actually sent one to the Secretary. Nothing was done to alleviate the problem, however, and wretched conditions continued.

Later in the winter, Pike returned to the Cantonment and set about shaping his men into a disciplined army. The job was colossal and the only help Pike got from Washington was the following order from the Inspector General;

"If an officer shall mutiny, and it cannot otherwise be suppressed, the superior officer may kill or maim him while he resists. If a soldier shall mutiny, any officer or non-commissioned officer present shall seize the first musket he can lay hold of and break it over the offender's head."

Without resort to such tactics, Pike gained the respect and confidence of his men and formed a most impressive body of soldiers. This was probably owing chiefly to the character of the man.

On March 4, 1813, Colonel Pike and all his men fit to travel started across northern New York for Sackets Harbor. The march was a difficult one, since the

ground was still covered with snow and ice. Many suffered and died from exposure along the way. Pike himself was to be killed in April from an explosion at York, just prior to an American victory there.

As for Pike's Cantonment, it too was about to die. On July 31, 1813 Lieutenant Colonel James Murray of the British Army arrived in Plattsburgh with 1,400 troops.

Among his other deprivations he burned the military cantonment near Fredenburg Falls. The only later reference to Pike's Cantonment is the fording of the river by the British troops during the battle of Plattsburgh. Whether this took place exactly at the Cantonment is uncertain. From this point, Pike's Cantonment slipped into the darkness of mystery.

In doing research on the camp, I often found references to it, but little information about it. For example, James Dougherty, a soldier, was hanged for the murder of John Wait, a resident of Salmon River. Wait was killed while returning from the Cantonment, where he delivered a load of wood.

As for the location of the camp, only general clues are to be found: three miles up the river, two miles from its mouth, one and a half miles from the bridge. The map in Palmer's **History of Lake Champlain** does not pinpoint it. In his volume on the War of 1812, Benson Lossing described his visit to the location:

"Crossing the river at the upper bridge and traversing a rough road most of the way for about two miles. The Cantonment was on a low, narrow plain at the foot of the rapids in the river, which are seen in the little sketch. . ."

Perhaps some more information could be obtained from Pearce's memoirs at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, the National Archives or the Canadian Archives. There might be some valuable notes in a letter written to Murray by Joseph Ackley. Apparently this letter dropped from Murray's hat when he wiped his brow during the raid. It was said to have contained information of "The best mode of attack on Plattsburgh, together with a map of the encampment and military works at Burlington." Ackley was subsequently brought to trial in Albany for high treason.

Until some new discoveries are made, however, the mystery of Pike's Cantonment goes on.

Gary Van Cour

(Ed. note: any reader who has additional information should communicate directly with Mr. Van Cour at the Beekmantown Central School.)

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A BIT ABOUT BANKS

(Excerpts follow from letters written by Henry Livingston Webb in Albany to the Swetlands in Plattsburgh. From the Kent-Delord Collection at the Feinberg Library.)

May 16, 1836: "I differ with Mr. Swetland with regard to the rise of property at P—. If they get a bank and the rail Road, it must be an important town. The water power is great—the number of Strangers that will go through P— & so to Lakes Ontario and Erie will be very great & they will leave much money in your town—remember this—

(The railroad did not come for many years. But in the year of this letter the "Clinton County Bank" was chartered. It expired in 1842 from too many loans to its own officials to finance speculative ventures. Ed.)

* * * *

Oct. 31, 1836: "Has not your bank issued more paper than is prudent for the times?"

* * * *

Nov. 25, 1836: "Mr. Cady was friendly in his manners and expressed regrets that I was not a stock holder in your Bank. It was a narrow escape that I had with the Oneida County Bk. A short time since a friend wrote me offering to get me some stocks at a low price. I wrote him to do so—but my letter was not in season. If I had got the amt asked for the loss would have been heavy. You probably know that the Bank was entered by fals keys & money stolen to a large amount."

TRAVEL AND OTHER HARASSMENTS

(Excerpts follow from letters written by Henry Livingston Webb in Albany to his mother-in-law, Mrs. William (Delord) Swetland or to Mr. Swetland, in Plattsburgh. From the Kent-Delord Collection at the Feinberg Library.)

Dec. 28, 1836: "At how late a time does the Steam Boat run between Burlington & P—. I do dread the journey through the Scroon Hills—bad stages, bad horses, bad roads, bad hotels, bad company & great loss of time."

* * * *

Mar. 9, 1837: "If you ever find me visiting P— in winter again I must go up on the east side of the Lake—never through the Schroon Country—The line of stages is as bad as bad can be—roads bad—Houses bad—everything bad."

* * * *

May 8, 1837: "Your remarks as to the times are very just & I am obliged for them. They are indeed awful—confidence is lost between man and man—between public institutions & individuals as well as between one & the other."

* * * *

May 13, 1837: "Our legislature goes on as if they were mad"

Oct. 20, 1840: "For your sake & for the sake of the family I am glad that you did not get the nomination for Congress. You would have been a valuable member for your section of the country, our state & for the country at large. But it is as bad a situation for health, pleasure, etc., as can be named & it takes those that go to Washington from their own business and I think has a bad influence on the head and heart."

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