

# NORTH COUNTRY NOTES

ISSUED OCCASIONALLY BY THE

CLINTON COUNTY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

No. 56

Allan S. Everest and Charles W. McLellan, Editors

June, 1969

## *The June Meeting*

of the Association will be a guided tour of Old Montreal on Saturday, June 7th. The guide will be a historian knowledgeable in the area. A bus will leave the College gymnasium in Plattsburgh (on Rugar Street) at 8:45 a. m. and return about 5 p. m. The cost of the bus will be \$2.50 for the round trip, \$1 for children under twelve. The bus will also pick up travelers from the northern part of the county at the customs house in Champlain at about 9:15 a. m. All members and friends of the Association are invited, and are requested to bring their own box lunch.

The trip is being planned as a result of an expression of interest at the Association's regular meeting on May 5th. However, the committee needs to know the actual numbers. In order that it may engage the bus, please use the inserted slip to make your reservation and pay the fee. Letters should be in the hands of Dr. Link BY OR BEFORE Tuesday, June 3.

## RURAL LIFE IN OLD SCHUYLER FALLS

The following are excerpts from the diary of Miss Mary Elizabeth Johnson (1840-1936). They portray life on a farm in 1886. The Johnson farm is still in the hands of the family and is located on the Irish Settlement Road near Beckwith Street. The diary is owned by R. Arthur Johnson of Latham, New York. The references to Martha, Lora, Flora and Amanda are to sisters of Mary Elizabeth, the keeper of the diary.

January 23—Went down and carried Lora a piece of beef. Right home again and helped mother dip 30½ doz. of candles.

January 29—Flora washed. Mrs. Stickle came over and showed us our lottery tickets. Mine drew a breakfast shawl. Ma cut out Pa a pr. of pants. I sewed and knit.

February 12—Crocheted today. In the afternoon helped Pa clean up eight bushels of wheat as he expected the threshing machine.

March 2—Flora, Amanda and Martha went to meeting and Amanda thinks herself converted tonight. Glorious news.

March 4—Lora and Amanda went to church and were baptized and joined the church on trial with 34 others.

March 30—Sugared off three times. Flora and myself went to the Falls but no meeting there. Went to Morrisonville. Mr. Townsend preached and Mr. Brown exhorted. I went forward for the first time.

April 11—An auction to Cornelius Felton's. Pa and Pete went. Sewed carpet rags, Flora spinning tow, Ma linen.

June 6—Washed sheep. Did a large ironing and mopped the chambers and other housework.

June 12—Spun 10 knots of filling and Lora came along and I went with her to the milliners and took my bonnet then made a visit to Cyrus Eell's.

# *The Sinking of the Phoenix*

(September 5, 1819)

Steamboating on Lake Champlain began very soon after Robert Fulton had successfully sailed without wind or oar power from New York to Albany in 1808. The very next year a pair of brothers, John and James Winans, built and operated the second successful American steamboat, the **Vermont**. An advertisement of the day described the vessel as a boat that had been "built and fitted up at great expense for the convenient accommodation of ladies and gentlemen who wished to pass Lake Champlain with safety and dispatch."

As any economist knows, if a profit can be made in a virgin business, sooner or later more than one organization will vie for the profits. The Lake Champlain steamboat trade was no exception; by 1813 a rival company appeared on Lake Champlain.

The Lake Champlain Steam Boat Company received its charter from the state of New York on March 12, 1813. Its one main purpose was to capture the business of the **Vermont**. At first the company was plagued with bad luck. A boat hull was built by Jehaziel Sherman on Otter Creek at Vergennes, Vermont. But in 1814, at the time of the British invasion of the Valley, the hull was commandeered by Lieutenant Thomas Macdonough and christened the **Ticonderoga** for use at the Battle of Plattsburgh.

In October 1815 the **Vermont** ended all competition in steamboating on the lake by sinking in the Richelieu River. The Lake Champlain Steam Boat Company now reigned supreme with its steam vessel, the **Phoenix**, built in 1815. An unusual history surrounded the building of this boat. Fulton and Livingston had been granted a monopoly of the Hudson River steam travel by a charter from the state legislature. Thus when a rival company tried to sail the **Perseverance** on the river, it was declared an illegal act and the vessel was ordered tied to the wharf, never to sail again. However, in order to recover some of their investment, the owners sold her engines to the Lake Champlain Steam Boat Company, which moved them to Lake Champlain for installation in the new **Phoenix**.

This was the beginning of another period of steamboating on Lake Champlain. The **Phoenix** plied from Whitehall at the southern end of the Lake to St. John's on the Richelieu. The entire voyage cost \$10.00 at the outset, later to be reduced to \$9.00. For intermediate stops on the lake, the cost ran from \$2.00 upwards, depending on the distance traveled.

After four years of service to travelers and inhabitants of the Valley, the **Phoenix** sailed forth on Saturday, September 4, 1819 to meet an inglorious end. She sailed from Whitehall bound for St. Johns on her usual run as part of the connecting link between the metropolises of two countries, Montreal and New York. At 12:30 a. m., September 5, she left Burlington on her way to the next stop, Plattsburgh. Around 2:00 a. m. a commotion broke out on the ship. A fire had been discovered. The captain, the crew and the passengers were all aroused by John Howard, a Burlington hotel-keeper on his way to Montreal.

Confusion reigned, as it usually does in any sort of catastrophe. At this point Ralph Nading Hill points out the disagreement over exactly how the crew acted. One version maintains that the engineer, a Mr. MacVane, abandoned the ship with the engines running. Taking a life boat with a few people in it, he refused to return for more survivors. Another account commends the captain, Jehaziel Sherman, for his great presence of mind in restoring order to a scene of chaos. Probably both stories are true but written by two different observers at different places on the **Phoenix**.

One of the two life boats did leave the ship before it was full. In a letter to Editor Flagg of the Plattsburgh **Republican**, dated September 6, Gates Hoyt, a Franklin County judge from Chateaugay commented:

"After I was taken out of the water by the last boat, I discovered (a) man on deck, looking towards us. I spoke earnestly that we should take him in; very little reply was made to it, and our boat (continued) its course for the Island; and soon I saw the man no more—I did not hear him say anything. I saw men in the water, and mentioned that I saw eight in the water; immediately on my mentioning this a man rose on his feet near the stern of the boat and spoke in a very earnest manner that we should not let them perish: another man spoke peremptorily in these words: 'You would sacrifice the whole of us in attempting to save two or three lives'; and commanded him to sit down and shut his mouth or he should be thrown overboard; he sat down and was silent."

Actually the ship had two lifeboats of different sizes. The one which had room

for four oarsmen left the steamboat heavily loaded with passengers. It was the large boat with a capacity of twenty people from which someone cut the painter separating the boat from the ship before it was filled. (Later, after both boats had landed survivors on Providence Island, both returned to hunt for more survivors.)

Meanwhile the people still aboard the ship were trying to save themselves. Mrs. Wilson, superintendent of the Ladies' Cabin, was the only woman left. (She was also a non-swimmer.) In his letter Judge Hoyt says:

"At the time I was tying a rope to the bench, Mrs. Wilson stood in about four feet of me, and I saw no other person on the storm deck, but was confident there were several on board; I told her she must take a bench and jump overboard and hang to it: the reply she made was 'where is my trunk?' Mrs. Wilson was more concerned with her valuables than with her life and was thus among the victims of the disaster.

On board the **Phoenix**, Captain Sherman, who had been ill and had turned control of the ship over to his son Richard, reassumed command and restored order at the point of a pistol. The passengers left on board were strapped to boards in hopes that they would float to shore. After supervising this work, Captain Sherman and Mr. Howard tied themselves to boards and jumped into the water. An hour and a half later the lifeboats found them and took them also to Providence Island.

There is no mention in contemporary newspapers as to where the survivors went or how they left the island. Some went to Plattsburgh, as can be seen from this letter signed by five survivors:

"Impressed with emotions of sensibility of your kind and grateful attentions to us on arriving at Plattsburgh, under circumstances of so distressing a nature; we cannot with justice to our feelings leave your hospitable village without expressing our sentiments of regard and esteem at the delicate manner in which you anticipated the possibilities of our necessities.

"We solicit your friendship in tendering to the gentlemen of the village as well as the army of the garrison of this place, the acknowledgement of our warmest thanks."

However, some of the survivors must have been taken to Burlington, since it was from there that Captain Sherman reported to his superiors:

"I am now writing under the painful necessity of informing you of the loss of the Steam Boat **Phoenix** of which I had command. Having left this place at ½ past 12 o'clock on Sunday Morning the 5th inst., we proceeded off for Plattsburgh, the wind then blowing a gale from NNW—at a ¼ before 2 AM, I returned to get a moment's rest; but had not been absent from the deck to exceed a quarter of an hour, when I awoke. The engine was then in motion. I found the boat was on fire. I then found it impossible to save anything but the lives of my passengers and crew which I was sure could be done; and which I fortunately effected with the exception of the under-named, some of whom I saw sink, while I was myself in the water, unable to afford them relief.

The names of the persons lost are:

Mrs. Sarah Wilson, chambermaid

Ziba Manning, first pilot

Henry Bush, sailor

Stephen Kellis, steward

Andrew Harrison, cook

Master Painter, passenger."

Thus ended the first steamboat disaster on inland American waters. Later it was discovered that the fire had resulted from a candle left in the galley after a midnight snack by the crew. The **Phoenix** later was to drift onto Colchester Reef, where she burned to the water's edge. There ended the final chapter of a horrible night.

Glenn A. Estus, SUC

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## RIDDLE OF THE MONTH

Old riddle: Mr. Andrew Broadwell of Rouses Point first and best supplied an answer. The site of the present YMCA in Plattsburgh was originally the residence of Captain Sidney Smith of War of 1812 fame, and a showplace of the village. The site of the present Mount Assumption Institute was once called "Gallows Hill," where Samuel Vilas later built his residence.

New riddle: Name and locate a couple of blockhouses built in Clinton County during the Indian and other frontier uncertainties of the 1780's and 1790's.

## MORE NEWS ON PIKE'S CANTONMENT

Pike's Cantonment was a military encampment which apparently once held 2,500 to 3,000 soldiers. Between two and three hundred men are thought to have been buried in the area during the dreadful winter of 1812-13. It was destroyed when Colonel Murray brought his British troops into Plattsburgh on July 31, 1813. Unfortunately, only scraps of information have been available about this once-important military installation.

At last I believe I have unearthed a map of the location of Pike's Cantonment. I spent six months in searching books, maps and manuscripts in the North Country Historical Research Center at the College. Fragments of information came from the description of Murray's Raid. I studied the contour of the Saranac River, and an entry on January 25, 1886 of Dr. D. S. Kellogg's journal gave additional information. With the little evidence gained, I believed I had narrowed its location to two bends in the Saranac: near the proposed bridge site or the Imperial Paper Mill. A day's excavation was encouraging but there was no concrete evidence, and later I found that the digging had been done at the wrong site.

I consulted naval and military histories on the off-chance of finding a new map of the battle of Plattsburgh. This paid off when I found one, obviously part of a larger map with the exciting letters "ONMENT" at one edge. Since the location of the original map was specified, I was able to obtain a copy from the National Archives. It is now in the Research Center at the College. I believe that it indicates Pike's Cantonment was in the general area of the Imperial Paper Mill.

Craig Koste, SUC

*Readers are referred to the article by Gary Van Cour in the "Notes" of January 1969 for a history of Pike's Cantonment.*

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