

NORTH COUNTRY NOTES

ISSUED MONTHLY EXCEPT SUMMER BY THE

CLINTON COUNTY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

No. 58

Allan S. Everest and Charles W. McLellan, Editors

October, 1969

The October Meeting

of the Association will consist of its annual banquet on the evening of Monday, October 6th. It will be held at 7 o'clock at the 13 Morgans on the Lake Shore Road and tickets are available at \$4 per person.

The program will include a talk by Dr. Frederick L. Rath, vice director of the New York State Historical Association, entitled "The Tale of Two Villages" (Cooperstown and the recreated Crossroads Village of the Farmer's Museum). He will illustrate the development of both places with slides. The restored portrait of General Mooers will be unveiled at the dinner. A progress report on the search for a museum will also be made by the Museum Committee.

Members and friends of the Association are cordially invited to attend. Reservations should be made, by mail or telephone (561-5281), with Dr. Eugene Link on Cumberland Head by the evening of October 3rd.

REENACTMENT OF THE BATTLE OF VALCOUR

The 193rd anniversary of the battle of Valcour will be notably commemorated on October 11, 1969. The Fellows of the Company of Military Historians have chosen Plattsburgh for their annual fall dinner, and they plan a reenactment of the battle at its original site.

The Fellows will watch this program from Valcour Lodge, where they will subsequently dine. The reenactment will take place at 5 o'clock on the 11th, or at 10 o'clock next morning in case of inclement weather. The Valcour Yatch Club is assisting in the program, its boats being used to simulate as realistically as possible the movements of the original fleets under Arnold and Carleton. Harrison Bird, the noted historian and author, will narrate the sequence of the battle.

The narration will be carried live on Station WEAV. The public is cordially invited to watch the reenactment from appropriate vantage points along the shores of the mainland and of Valcour Island. If they have radios with them, they will hear the same description as that heard by the Military Historians at the Lodge.

The Military Historians hope that their experience this October will facilitate a more authentic program to commemorate the bicentennial of the battle in 1976, including reproductions of the **Philadelphia** and perhaps other ships of the original struggle.

CONTROVERSY ON THE PLAINS

The Establishment of an Air Base

SETTING THE STAGE

The coming of an air base to the Plattsburgh area, first conceived in 1951, stirred a controversy that lasted for more than two years. It all started when the Air Force considered creating a fighter base at what is now the Ethan Allen Air National Guard Base near Burlington, Vermont. For valid military reasons the Air Force decided instead to seek a location for a new strategic bomber base elsewhere in the Northeast.

In September 1951 an Air Force survey team arrived in Plattsburgh to inspect the Municipal Airport as a possible site. At that time Mayor John J. Tyrell created an Air Base Liaison Committee to represent the city in its dealings with the Air Force. In November the Air Force sent another team to meet with the Mayor's committee. A site at Point au Roche, ten miles north of the city, was discussed, as well as the Municipal Airport location.

Brigadier General Harold R. Maddux, leader of yet another team, declared that "approximately \$50 million would have to be spent at the Municipal Airport if a medium or heavy bomber base were established there." He gave North Country residents a glimpse of what an air base would mean, with 8,000 officers and airmen, 350 to 400 new civilian jobs, and a monthly payroll of \$2 million. Plattsburgh, as host city, could expect a large share of the benefits, he declared.

However, not all the citizens were in favor of an air base. Early in 1952 they organized to prevent a base within or near the city limits. They injected into the discussion such topics as jet noise, housing, and the spread of venereal disease, prostitution and narcotics.

In February 1952 the Air Force announced that it was "interested in the area south of the city including the use of the entire Champlain College property as a desirable part of the base." When this announcement became public information it precipitated what was described as "undoubtedly the greatest battle in Plattsburgh since the War of 1812." The old Plattsburgh Barracks had been handed over to the State of New York by the Federal government after World War II for use as an emergency college. Champlain College became New York's first state-supported liberal arts institution and the first "G. I. College" in the United States. But in the deed the Federal government claimed the right to recapture the property "in the interests of national defense."

All parties involved in the air base project now became divided into two opposing factions. The Pro-Base Faction was led by Mayor Tyrell, Clyde A. Lewis, and various Air Force and local officials. These people felt that the new base should be erected on the College site and adjacent property, known as "the plains," located at the southern edge of the city. The Anti-Base Faction did not oppose the establishment of a base. Its members simply did not want it on the College site or within city limits. This group preferred either Point au Roche or Camp Drum in Watertown. On February 7, 1952, then, the "Battle of Plattsburgh Air Force Base" commenced in Plattsburgh.

THE ESTABLISHMENT SIDE

At a meeting of the Plattsburgh Common Council on February 7th, Mayor Tyrell and Clyde Lewis, former commander of the Veterans of Foreign Wars and chairman of the Air Base Liaison Committee, declared that "the college would have to be sacrificed to induce the Air Force to locate in the area."

The Common Council and the Clinton County Board of Supervisors each resolved that the new air base should be built in this area even if it meant the loss of the college. These bodies, which represented the citizens of the North Country, gave the Air Force the official endorsement which it needed. In support of the governmental position, 4,500 members of the Trades and Labor Assembly sent communications to Washington and Albany urging the construction of the base on the College site.

In the middle of 1952 the debate was taken up by the House Appropriations Committee in Washington. Air Force Secretary Harold Talbott told the committee that Plattsburgh was "the most necessary base we have in the northeast. The buildings there at Plattsburgh are worth a good many million dollars. I think it safe to say

we have \$7 million worth of construction that would be obviated by those barracks. They have officers' quarters and those houses. There is a big parade ground in the center. The place is very beautiful."

During the Air Force testimony at the hearings, construction figures were presented for the three sites then under consideration: Point au Roche, \$72 million; Plattsburgh Municipal Airport, \$71 million; and Champlain College, \$60 million. Other advantages of the College site were brought out at the hearings. The Air Force team felt that it offered better facilities because of its location in relation to the city. The existing structures would save nine to twelve months' construction time over the other sites.

General Washbourne, answering an argument in favor of Point au Roche, stated that there was "a very substantial government property investment in the Army post, and we certainly felt an obligation to use it if it could be used to save the taxpayers money." Expanding upon the choice of Plattsburgh he continued: "In building a base we build it in four phases, and of course the money is what determines the number of phases we get to." He conjectured that at some phase of construction Congress was likely to balk at further appropriations for developing Point au Roche and propose the use of the utilities and housing at the Plattsburgh Barracks. This, pointed out the General, "would constitute a split base operation in that we would be permanently sentenced to haul our people and our cargoes daily between the two bases. If we had not considered that to be a very realistic factor in our planning, I believe that Point au Roche might have been more favorably considered."

At one of the final hearings of the Committee, Clyde A. Lewis reported that "upwards of 80 per cent of the people in the Plattsburgh area favored the establishment of the air base even if it meant using the Plattsburgh Barracks property."

On July 24, 1953, after the Pro-Base Faction had been quiet for almost a year and quite assured of victory, the House Armed Services Committee and the House Appropriations Committee recommended passage of the bill which included the construction of Plattsburgh Air Force Base on the Champlain College site. On August 7th President Eisenhower signed the bill. The base was now a reality, but only after a stormy beginning.

THE OPPOSING TEAM

While the Pro-Base Faction was putting forth its best efforts, the Anti-Base Faction was marshalling its arguments. This faction was made up of some powerful members of the community and proved a formidable foe. Its main activity occurred after the announcement that the Air Force wanted Champlain College as the nucleus for its base.

Clinton County Assemblyman James A. Fitzpatrick; John P. Myers, Chancellor of the State Board of Regents; Frederick Morse, Provost of Champlain College; and Charles Harrington, Plattsburgh attorney, requested the city not to ask the State University Board of Trustees to turn the College back to the federal government. William J. H. Manning, Chairman of the Municipal Airport Commission, disparaged the location of any base partially within the city limits.

The Chamber of Commerce quickly got into the fray with a resolution that "the Air Force build a base in the general area, but not at the sacrifice of Champlain College." The stand taken by the Chamber became the cornerstone of the opposition argument. On February 25, 1952 a Citizen's Committee for the Continuance of Champlain College held its first meeting and started to formulate its ideas in the spirit of the Chamber's resolution.

Congressman John Taber, Auburn Republican, commented on the selection of the College site in preference to Camp Drum: "The availability of plush quarters for officers probably had a great deal to do with the selection of Plattsburgh." Taber was especially vehement for it was he who had suggested Camp Drum in the first place, and the Air Force had summarily dismissed the idea.

Delaware and Hudson President J. H. Nuelle opposed the site because of the possibility that some of the D. & H. tracks might have to be moved: "The Air Force has (reportedly) selected the most extravagant and least desirable base for the projected city bomber base . . . The objections are too numerous to mention." Mr. Nuelle was not heard from after he was advised that the Air Force doubted the necessity of moving any tracks, and if it ever became necessary the Air Force would pay for it.

Vigorous opposition was heard in the committee rooms of the House of Representatives in Washington. One of the more verbal opponents was Representative W. Sterling Cole (R-N. Y.), who spoke before a sub-committee studying the Plattsburgh site

in July 1953: "As a matter of fact, it is my impression that the Air Force came down on their Plattsburgh project entirely half-cocked. The idea of taking a going educational institution, a college, and using it for an air base located in the heart of a sizable city is indefensible, was ill-advised and entirely wrong. Just why the Air Force was insistent on taking the college is more than I can understand, except perhaps on the explanation of using Federal property that is available in the area."

At one point in the controversy the Plattsburgh committee urged Federal and State officials by telegram to stop "this un-American move which would have serious national and international repercussions." Late in the debate Dr. Kemble Widmer, professor of geology at the College, presented a detailed study of the three proposed sites in which he concluded that the College location would actually be more expensive to develop than either the Municipal Airport or Point au Roche.

Opposition to the air base ceased when President Eisenhower signed the bill authorizing its construction. The College moved out and the base moved in.

Edward Hanlon, SUC

RIDDLE OF THE MONTH

June riddle: blockhouses were once a common sight in the North Country. One was located in Peru, built in 1794 on the Bear Swamp Road near its intersection with the State Road. Another one was on Delord's Point near the mouth of the Saranac River in Plattsburgh. This was built in 1789 and later served as court house, school house and church for the infant settlement.

New riddle: What was the farthest southern point reached by Carleton after his victory at Valcour, and Prevost before his withdrawal from Plattsburgh?

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Issued by the

CLINTON COUNTY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

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