

# NORTH COUNTRY NOTES

ISSUED MONTHLY EXCEPT SUMMER BY THE  
CLINTON COUNTY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

No. 90

Allan S. Everest and Charles W. McLellan, Editors

January, 1973

## *The January Meeting*

of the Historical Association will take place on Monday evening, January 8th, at 8 o'clock in the auditorium of the Plattsburgh YMCA. Please note the change of place. This is the annual meeting, which will include the election of officers for 1973

The program will consist of an illustrated talk by Mr. Robert Anthony, Director of the Y, on "The History of the YMCA from 1885 to the Present." Pictures and old records will be on display. The public is cordially invited.

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## Old Time Hints for the Homemaker II

(From THE WHITE HOUSE COOK BOOK, A comprehensive Cyclopedic of Information for the Home, by Hugo Ziemann (Steward of the White House) and Mrs. F. L. Gillette, 1909. Loaned by Mrs. Doris Bolia of Plattsburgh.)

**Cough Syrup:** Syrup of squills four ounces, syrup of tolu four ounces, tincture of blood-root one and one-half ounces, camphorated tincture of opium four ounces. Mix. Dose for an adult, one teaspoonful repeated every two to four hours, or as often as necessary.

**For toothache:** The worst toothache, or neuralgia, coming from the teeth may be speedily and delightfully ended by the application of a bit of clean cotton saturated in a solution of ammonia to the defective tooth. Sometimes the late sufferer is prompted to momentary laughter by the application, but the pain will disappear.

**To cure earache:** Tobacco smoke, puffed into the ear, has often been effectual.

**Relief from asthma:** Sufferers from asthma should get a muskrat skin and wear it over their lungs with the fur side next to the body. It will bring certain relief.

**Cholera:** Take equal parts of tincture of cayenne, tincture of opium, tincture of rhubarb, essence of peppermint and spirits of camphor. Mix well. Dose fifteen to thirty drops in a wine-glass of water, according to age and violence of the attack. Repeat every fifteen to twenty minutes until relief is obtained. No one who takes it in time will ever have the cholera. Even when no cholera is anticipated, it is a valuable remedy for ordinary summer complaints, and should always be kept in readiness.

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## RIDDLE OF THE MONTH

Old riddle: President Monroe was bidden farewell in July 1817 with a luncheon served about 15 miles north on the Military Turnpike. The repast was paid for by the citizens of Plattsburgh with money intended for a new fire engine but, as Mrs. Tuttle says, "a President does not visit Plattsburgh every year."

New riddle: When has Plattsburgh served as a summer White House?

## Crab Island

This article stems from a question I was asked in a classroom one day. Although the child's question was answered in the school library, it stimulated me to research further.

Crab Island is approximately two and one-fourth miles southwest of Cumberland Head and one mile east of Cliff Haven. This location makes it the closest piece of land to the ships that fought in the battle of Plattsburgh. We will see later how this location made Crab Island important during and after the battle.

Crab Island has not always been referred to by this name. It was also called Isle St. Michael and Hospital Island during different periods. The first was the French name, dating from their control of the Champlain Valley, while the name Hospital Island came into being during the battle of Plattsburgh. The name Crab Island must have arisen after the English had won control of the valley. The origin of the name is not known. Some say it was named for its resemblance to the shape of a crab. Others believe that the name arose from the fact that a species of mollusks resembling crabs could once be found around the shores of the island. After a trip to Bluff Point for a general look at the island, the latter explanation seems more likely.

Prior to the battle of Plattsburgh, Crab Island was privately owned by a Plattsburgh lawyer, Caleb Nichols. There he erected a log cabin and had four acres under cultivation. He also had a cow with about three acres of meadow for grazing.

The real history of the island began shortly before the battle. The medical situation was grim — approximately 700 soldiers in the Plattsburgh area were sick with dysentery and diarrhea by the beginning of September 1814. At that time orders were received to transfer the sick to the military hospital in Burlington. On September 6th they were loaded into boats and began making their way across the lake. They did not get very far, however. The lake, being treacherous at times, prevented them from going past Crab Island. So it was that a first temporary tent hospital was set up on the island. This must have been an uncomfortable stopover for these sick men because it reportedly rained most every day and the men, for the most part, had to sleep on the bare earth.

Crab Island reached its primary significance during and after the battle. This importance was three-fold. First of all, it was used as a hospital for both American and British wounded during the battle. The barracks and hospitals that had originally been built around the American forts on the mainland were burned to deny their use by the British if captured. Therefore, some other site had to be chosen for a hospital. Since the last of the sick men had finally been withdrawn to Burlington, leaving their tents behind on Crab Island, a decision was made to use the island as a hospital.

The description of this hospital comes to us primarily from an old interview with Simeon Doty, a soldier who visited Crab Island the day following the battle. The scene he described was deplorable for he reported a great deal of suffering among the men. As was the case in battles of this era, medical care was at best very crude.

Sources vary on the number of men wounded and requiring hospitalization, but 65 from land, 58 from the American squadron and 110 from the British squadron seems to be a reasonable figure. To care for them a medical team under the direction of Hospital Surgeon Mann consisted of four American and three captured British medical men. Their difficulties were multiplied by the number of seriously wounded, and their own primitive skills, at least by modern standards.

There is disagreement concerning the physical features of the hospital. Walter Crockett states that the invalids were housed in tents. However, Simeon Doty described the hospitals as being made of planks. He said there were two of them, long buildings with the wounded arranged in two rows separated by an aisle used by the doctors. Perhaps both of these accounts may be correct. The fact that the 700 evacuees to Burlington left their tents behind lends credence to the story that there was a tent hospital. However, Caleb Nichols' bill for damages to his island included payment for his cabin that had been taken apart; the plank hospitals that Doty described were probably there also, made from the planks of Mr. Nichols' house. It is likely that the wounded men who required constant watching were housed in the plank hospitals while the convalescents slept in the tents.

The second use made of Crab Island was for a cemetery. Since the southern end was being used as a hospital, the dead were carried to the northern section of the island. Here they were buried in mass graves, some wrapped in blankets and others clad in their uniforms. The bodies were buried face down with their heads placed to the west. One hundred fifty seem to have been buried on Crab Island. They included both English and American in the same grave as though they were comrades in arms.

The third use of Crab Island during the battle was for defense. Since the odds on land were in favor of the British, every possible man had to do his share. Therefore, the sick were sent to Crab Island where they were to receive medical attention, and those who were able would man a two-gun battery. There they became involved with the Finch, a British eleven-gun sloop. This ship had been engaged in battle with the Ticonderoga; its guns were silenced and it had been disabled. It drifted aimlessly towards Crab Island and became grounded on a reef. The sick men on the island fired the two guns of the battery and the captain of the Finch, Captain Hicks, promptly gave the order to surrender.

After the battle Caleb Nichols, the owner of the island, prepared a bill of \$615 for damages to his property and for the rent of his land. Items which he claimed were destroyed were his cabin, land which he had under cultivation, his meadow ruined by soldiers digging for worms and walking over it, and some wood he had stored there. The smallest item he demanded was \$10 for his cow and the largest was \$200 for rent of the land. Whether he ever submitted the bill is not known, but by an act of Congress dated March 3, 1817 funds were appropriated to pay for damages to a house and store belonging to Nichols. Since there was no store on Crab Island this was undoubtedly payment for other property Mr. Nichols had in Plattsburgh.

And so it was that Crab Island performed three important functions during the battle of Plattsburgh--hospital, cemetery, and line of defense. Certainly the island should long be remembered by the people of Plattsburgh. Is this the fact? The truth is that the dead of the battle were largely forgotten for many years. By the time anyone became interested in making Crab Island a historic spot it had become so completely overgrown with brush and poison ivy that it was difficult to locate the graves. In 1901, however, the Catholic Summer School at Cliff Haven took an interest in the island. Application was made to the government to give it a special place in our history.

The graves of the officers that had been buried in Riverside Cemetery had received markers over their graves, but the first official marking of the graves on Crab Island did not come until October 21, 1903, when Colonel Adams from Plattsburgh Barracks supervised the erection of a 100-foot flagstaff. After nearly 100 years, some official recognition was given of the dead of the battle of Plattsburgh.

In 1906 Congress appropriated \$20,000 for a clean-up of Crab Island, which was to be called Macdonough National Park. The island was cleared of trees, brush and poison ivy, and grass was planted. A wharf was also built on the west side of the island. A house was erected near the wharf for the caretaker that was to be hired. Finally, a monument was erected to the dead heroes.

This all sounds like a fitting tribute. Unfortunately, the government did not make further appropriations for the continued maintenance of the park. The island has once again been allowed to return to nature. It was turned over to the Department of the Air Force when Plattsburgh Air Force Base was built in the 1950's. To kill the poison ivy and brush on the island, the Air Force bought several goats. However, hunters killed the goats while the poison ivy and brush endured. The caretaker's cabin was a popular place for young people who skated over and built fires in the fireplace, until some careless person let a fire get out of hand and burned the cabin down. Apparently the Air Force could find no worthwhile use for the island because it was put up for bids and sold to a Vermont contractor about three years ago. He has made no attempt to develop the island to date.

So the island remains in the hands of nature. Probably this is fitting so that the dead heroes may truly "Rest in Peace."

Sherwood Laporte  
Keeseville, New York

## Three Old Plattsburgh Burial Places

### Robert Graves - South Plattsburgh

In 1938, when copied, this small plot was located on the Santor Farm, back of W. J. Bonville's Store, on the east side of the road just north of the Salmon River. Quite neglected. Only two stones could be found:

John Robert 3rd, died July 22, 1843, in the 72nd year of his age.

Polly, consort of John Roberts 3rd, died Oct. 14, 1827, aged 51 years & 17 days.

Mrs. Tuttle's "Three Centuries" states (page 85) that John Roberts 3rd was High-way Commissioner in 1800.

### Rugar Graves - Plattsburgh

Copied in 1949. A neglected private plot about 300 yards east of Rugar Street, outside the city limits, surrounded by a wire fence, partly down. It is now just east of the Northway right-of-way, plainly visible from it. Five stones:

Gideon Rugar, born Sept. 27, 1806, died April 6, 1895.

Sarah Wiley, His Wife, born Dec. 11, 1810, died April 27, 1893.

Jennett, daughter of G. & S. Rugar, died Dec. 12, 1844, aged 20 months & 14 days.

John A. Rugar (sic.), died Oct. 10, 1854, aged 24 years & 7 months.

Mary, wife of Gideon Rugar, died May 4, 1848, aged 95 years, 8 months & 10 days.

This latter is probably the mother of the Gideon on the first stone?

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### The (so called) Thorn Cemetery

On the west side of the road running between School District No. 6 and No. 3, about half a mile north of the Saranac River. Not shown on Beer's Atlas. Roughly cared for and surrounded by a wire fence. Copied in 1940. Contains about 25 stones, some of which were broken and down. The oldest stones are for two children of Joseph W. and Catharine Clark:

Anna, died August 18, 1818, aged 5 months.

Ansyl, their son, "who was drown'd in the freshit July 28, 1830, aged 7 years.

Brittle is lifs fragil thread,

Soon I'm number'd with the dead,

In the morn, my day was bright,

Death appear'd before 'twas knight."

Other stones of interest were:

William Akey, 1822-1893, Pvt. Co. H. 2nd Reg. N.Y. Vol. Cav.

Charles H. Fordham, 1832-1890, Pvt. Co. H. 118th Reg. N.Y. Vol. Inf.

Cyrus D. Ward, born May 2, 1788, died May 1, 1873. A Veteran of the War of 1812.

The other surnames found are: Call, Carl, Cochran, Collins, Cook, Gaunt, Green, Hillard, LaMonday (LaMonda), Martineau (Martino), Varno and Trumbull.

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Issued by the

CLINTON COUNTY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

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