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FORT ONTARIO

OSWEGO, NEW YORK



The first fortification to be located on the site of the current Fort Ontario was built by the British in 1755. Called "The Fort of the Six Nations," or "Fort Ontario," it was destroyed by the French under the Marquis de Montcalm in August 1756, along with all other British defenses at Oswego.



Construction of a second British fort at this same location began in 1759. It was built according to the latest European military technology and designed to accommodate 500 men. It contained a dry moat, extensive outer earthworks and barracks. Small square or triangular forts called "redoubts" were located on strategic high ground several hundred meters away from the main fortification. The redoubts were built without rear walls so that if they were captured, they could be fired into by cannon from the main fort. The redoubts provided a formidable first line of defense for those defending Fort Ontario.



The British established themselves at Carleton Island at the source of the St. Lawrence River and from that post launched numerous campaigns via Oswego during the Revolutionary War. The major campaign took place in 1777 as part of a three-pronged attack on New York, whereby the British hoped to cut off New York from the rest of



the American colonies. General Barry St. Leger left Fort Ontario on July 26, but encountered unexpectedly stiff resistance at rebel-held Fort Stanwix. After a hard-fought battle near Oriskany on August 6, St. Leger retreated to Canada via Fort Ontario.

(Fort Ontario Exhibit)

On July 25, 1777, St. Leger landed at Fort Ontario. The next day, he would begin his invasion toward Albany with a British force of about 1,600 men, half of which were Indian allies and the other half were British regulars and Canadian volunteers.

At the end of August, St. Leger returned in retreat to Fort Ontario with about half of his forces. The Indians had abandoned his ranks after hearing rumors that an overwhelming American relief force was approaching Fort Stanwix.



After the failure of Burgoyne's three-pronged invasion, the British abandoned Fort Ontario. In 1778 the second Fort Ontario was destroyed by American troops based at Fort Stanwix. Despite the surrender at Yorktown in 1781 and the Treaty of Paris ending the war in 1783, the British reoccupied Oswego in 1782, rebuilt Fort Ontario for the third time and held it until 1796, when the fort was finally turned over to the United States. During that time, General George Washington attempted a surprise attack in February of 1783, but that failed due to the harsh upstate New York winters.

After 1796, the fort would fall to British hands during the War of 1812. In 1838 the United States regarrisoned the fort. The present-day fort was built between 1839 and 1844. Fort Ontario became an Army Post in 1903 and by 1941, the post had grown to 125 buildings. During World War II, the fort was used as an emergency refugee center for victims of the Nazi Holocaust. In 1949, the site became a New York State Historic Site.



After the unsuccessful attack on Fort Ontario, Lt. Alexander Thompson wrote to his brother on February 24, 1783:

“The day began to break which advanc’d so fast as to make it impossible to arrive at the work (fort) before broad day light—our guide confessed he was lost...The Orders we had from the commander in chief were positive, that if we did not attack before day, to return. Colonel Willet was under the Necessity of Ordering us to the right about. - you may be assur’d we are sensibly mortified at the disappointment...We had two days a most severe storm and the whole of the time exceeding cold weather - we had three men perish before we could return to the lake - and we dare not make fire for fear of being discovered. - we had one hundred and thirty bit with the frost, some very dangerously. I am myself one of the unfortunate.”

(Fort Ontario Exhibit)

Post Cemetery — Along the lakeshore east of the fortification is the Post Cemetery. The cemetery contains graves of generations of soldiers and civilians who served or lived at Fort Ontario from the French and Indian War to World War II. Originally, the cemetery was located about 300 meters to the south, but was moved by the US Army in 1903 to its present location over the old, filled-in quarry. Stone from the quarry was used to build the outer walls of the fort from 1863 to 1872. A blacksmith's shop, a stonemason's workshop and a tool shed were once located around the quarry.

Enroute to Bernhard, NY

Breakfast at Mimi's -- The classic drive-in restaurant in Fulton, NY is a great spot to catch a quick breakfast.

Campsite of Colonel Gose Van Schaick -- At the campsite, about 550 Continental troops rested after attacking and destroying Onondaga Castle, home of the Onondaga Indians. In the expedition approved by George Washington, Van Schaick destroyed 50 houses, killed 20 warriors, took 37 prisoners, and captured 100 guns. However, most of the Indians escaped into the woods.



Frenchman's Island

Campsite of Van Schaick's expedition on return from attack on Onondaga, April 22, 1779.

State Education Department 1932

(Oneida Lake Marker)

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