



THE "MASSACRE"

AT FORT WILLIAM HENRY

History, Archaeology, and Re-enactment

BY DAVID R. STARBUCK

William Eyre and Joseph Heath created this "Plan of Fort William Henry and camp at Lake George" (ca. 1755). The original can be found at the Library of Congress Geography and Map Division (Washington, DC)—<http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.gmd/g38041.ar112100>. The star-shaped Fort William Henry is located to the top left near the lake's edge.

THE CLASH OF cultures on the colonial frontier of 18th century America pitted British against French and Indian against Indian, creating cultural misunderstandings that have had lasting consequences for both the United States and Canada. Popular interest in these colonial wars has been renewed recently with the 250th anniversary of the siege and “massacre” at Fort William Henry—a small log fort in upstate New York that witnessed some of the most dramatic events of the French and Indian War (1754–1763).

THE TRADITIONAL HISTORY

In the mid-18th century British and French armies, each aided by their Indian allies, turned upstate New York into a vast battleground as they fought over the region around Lake George, Lake Champlain, and the upper reaches of the Hudson River. The first major engagement took place on September 8, 1755, and involved British and French forces clashing in the Battle of Lake George. Soon afterward the British built Fort William Henry at the south end of Lake George, and for the next two years it was the northernmost base of British operations, provocatively located on land claimed by the French.

The fort was a square enclosure surrounded by 30-foot-thick walls made of earth and wood surrounded, in turn, by an outer moat. Each corner had a diamond-shaped bastion to allow its defenders to catch attackers in a cross fire. Within the fort, four barracks buildings, storehouses, a hospital, a magazine, and numerous sheds bordered a central parade ground. The fort’s garrison numbered about 2,300, a mixture of British soldiers and American colonial militiamen, commanded by a career soldier, Lieutenant-Colonel George Monro, a Scot.

In early August 1757 an overwhelming force of about 10,000 French soldiers and Indians from Canada advanced south from Fort Carillon (later renamed Fort Ticonderoga) and laid siege to Fort William Henry. The British garrison held out for six days before surrendering on August 10, 1757, to the French com-

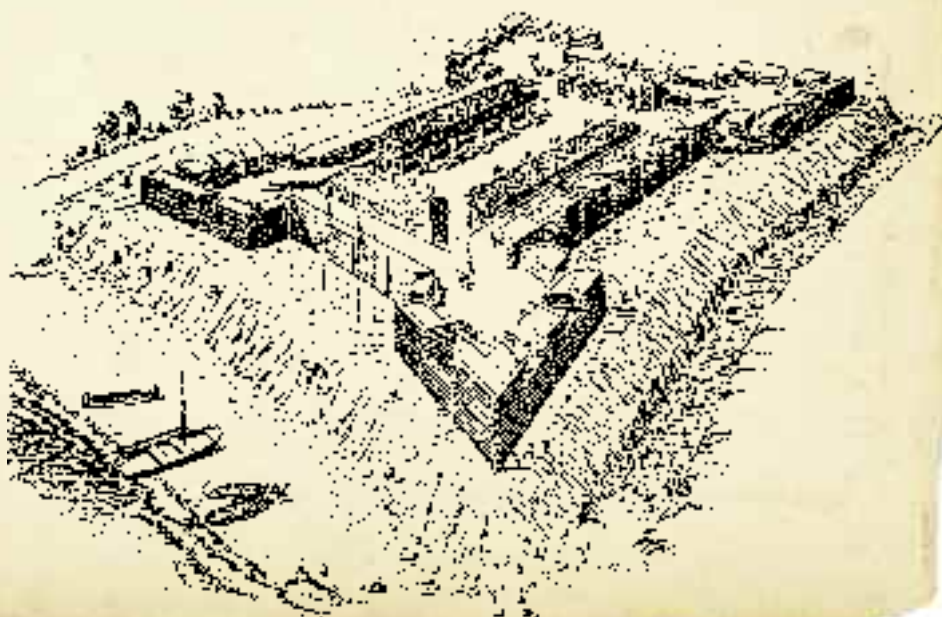
A modern artist’s rendering of Fort William Henry, the first British fort built after the Battle of Lake George in 1755. Carefully constructed on the orders of William Johnson as a bastioned fort in the French style, it stood for two years in an area claimed by both the British and the French until a vastly superior force of French and Indians attacked the fort in August 1757. Courtesy of the Fort William Henry Corporation.

mander, Louis-Joseph de Montcalm-Gozon, Marquis de Saint-Veran, who had offered generous terms, a typical feature of European-style warfare.

The French, however, failed to protect their prisoners. After the British marched out of the fort under a French armed guard and began their retreat down the Old Military Road to Fort Edward, they were attacked by Montcalm’s Indian allies. The Indians brutally killed and scalped many of the British soldiers and then took hundreds of prisoners to Canada where



Sites mentioned in the text.



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On August 11, 2007, massive re-enactments in the Village of Lake George commemorated the 250th anniversary of the siege, surrender, and “massacre” at Fort William Henry.

revenge would unify British and American colonists against the French and Indians and eventually lead to British dominance in North America.

HISTORY AND MYTH

Although the ruins of Fort William Henry were largely neglected for the next 200 years, James Fenimore Cooper’s highly fictionalized novel, *The Last of the Mohicans*, published in 1826, kept the events of 1757 alive in historical and literary circles. His story’s continuing popularity—as depicted in modern movies, memorabilia, and the well-known protagonists Hawk-eye, Uncas, Chingachgook, Magua, and Colonel Monro’s two beautiful daughters, Cora and Alice—makes it is easy to understand why the “Massacre” at Fort William

they were held for ransom. Although early chroniclers claimed that as many as 1,500 British were killed, more recent analysis—based on period documents—places the number closer to 185.

A series of misunderstandings and betrayals had led to the surrender and murder of many of the fort’s defenders. Modern historians point out that Montcalm’s allies had been promised scalps and plunder in exchange for their participation in the expedition from Canada. The surrender agreement worked out between Montcalm and Monro, however, effectively prevented the Indians from receiving booty. Their attack upon the prisoners—the so-called massacre—was a belated attempt to obtain trophies and honor. Some of the Indians even dug into the graves of the military cemetery that lay outside the fort’s walls so they could scalp the dead and steal blankets and clothing. This resulted in one of the ironies of history since many of those who lay in the cemetery had died from highly contagious diseases. Transmitted along the trails running north, smallpox decimated entire villages in eastern Canada.

After the surrender the French removed any supplies they could use from the fort, burned the fort down, and then returned to Fort Carillon, 40 miles to the north. In the days that followed, British anger and the desire for

Henry continues to fascinate. The fort is still viewed locally as the site of a brutal and senseless slaughter of innocents, and, given the mix of racial and cultural tension and violence, its history is highly emotional for both sides even today.

In 2007 the 250th anniversary of the Massacre at Fort William Henry prompted many new commemorative events at historical sites across the northeastern United States. The three forts directly involved in the massacre—Fort William Henry, Fort Edward, and Fort Ticonderoga (old Fort Carillon)—are all now reassessing and retelling the story to contemporary audiences. Recreated battles and military maneuvers, craft demonstrations, replica watercraft, and enormous encampments of re-enactors are educating the public about 18th century life, and while much has clearly been forgotten—replaced by the stories of later wars—the Massacre at Fort William Henry is once again fresh and relevant.

Yet with large armies of re-enactors passionately retelling the story as a type of outdoor theater, it is important to examine the story again against the backdrop of history and myth, particularly as it becomes clear that everyone’s “truth” is different. For example, among present-day Native Americans, there is a strong tendency to believe that their ancestors were justified in going after the booty promised to them by the French.

While Native Americans—portrayed here by re-enactors loading their muskets—were responsible for the original “massacre,” they invariably are a crowd favorite during modern re-enactments.



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In contrast, modern re-enactors try to focus on recreating 18th century life as faithfully as possible without assessing blame for what happened, while today's historians are making a serious effort to quantify and explain the past rather than simply repeat stories from earlier generations. What about archaeology? What can it tell us?

FIFTY YEARS OF FORT ARCHAEOLOGY

The conflict and rivalry between the British and French in North America during the 18th century left a legacy of vast military encampments, forts, battlefields, siege lines, cemeteries, and hospitals. Over the past century many of the forts of the French and Indian War have either been stabilized or rebuilt as major tourist attractions—as Fort William Henry was in the 1950s. At each of these sites archaeology has been a crucial guide to reconstruction and interpretation, especially given the incompleteness of the historical record. But where archaeology was once merely seen as an aid in site restoration, it is now an important tool both to elaborate the traditional historical account and to provide fresh insights into daily life on the frontier, what we might call “fort culture.”

Archaeology was first used to help tell the story of Fort William Henry in the 1950s, when developers from Albany decided to rebuild the fort as a commercial tourist attraction. In 1953, they hired Stanley Gifford, an amateur archaeologist, to uncover the fort's original footprint, locate the outlines of key buildings, find the fort's cemetery, and recover artifacts that would help create exciting new exhibits. Assisted by college students, Gifford completely excavated the fort's northwest bastion—the site of the most pronounced French bombardment—and discovered fragments of mortar bombs, cannonballs, buckshot, axes, pewter spoons, knives, tobacco pipes, canteens, and much more in the charred ruins. The most unusual find was a human scalp with black hair stuck to the side of a mortar shell that had never exploded.

Gifford finished his work in 1954, and, guided by the archaeological finds and the original engineers' drawings, the fort was quickly reconstructed and opened to tourists in 1955. No further archaeology was attempted for the next 40 years.



The reconstructed fort—shown here with its southwest bastion in the foreground and Lake George beyond—sits atop the original site, closely approximating the location of the original buildings.



Excavation inside the fort's cemetery in the 1950s exposed individual grave shafts (shown pedestaled)—about ten of which were actually excavated. Courtesy of the Fort William Henry Corporation.



This mortar shell was discovered inside a barracks foundation in 1954 with part of a human scalp—complete with black hair—stuck to its surface. Courtesy of the Fort William Henry Corporation.



Excavations in the dump just east of the reconstructed fort were deep and difficult, especially next to the wall where we had to create a “step trench” to protect our diggers from cave-ins.

My own involvement in the archaeology of this period began in 1991, when I commenced excavations in Fort Edward—the huge military encampment 16 miles to the south that was the home base for the outpost at Fort William Henry. In 1996 the curator of Fort William Henry told me that his fort’s current owners were eager to conduct new archaeological investigations in the wake of the most recent *The Last of the Mohicans* movie (1992). Between 1997 and 2000 I conducted intensive excavations at Fort William Henry, both inside and outside the reconstructed fort, followed by additional testing near the fort’s cemetery in 2004.

Our research inside the fort opened up sizeable parts of the parade ground, where we sometimes descended for 8 feet or more into the cellars of former barracks buildings. This was not easy! Fort William Henry was built on a sandy glacial lake terrace—well above the modern level of Lake George—and we had to spend much of our time shoring up our trench walls with plywood to forestall the inevitable collapses.

One of the most significant features we excavated was the original stone-lined well for the fort at the north end of the

parade ground. Originally dug by Rogers’ Rangers in 1756, the well had never been a reliable source of water, but for all the years since the fort’s destruction its well-top had jugged out of the ruins, often appearing in historical photographs. The upper part of the well was partially excavated in the late 1950s, and since 1960, tourists had thrown their own “artifacts” into it—flash cubes, chewing gum, sunglasses, and hundreds of pounds of pennies.

In 1997 I began digging in the well, excavating it to a depth of about 30 feet. At the bottom I encountered a thick water-tight “barrel” that lined the well and allowed groundwater to flow into it by running over the tops of the barrel’s vertical staves or through holes purposely drilled through it. Inside the barrel I found a dozen lead musket balls, some French gunflints, many small pieces of cut lead shot, and the corner of a square-sided bottle. Although I had hoped to discover the remains of massacre victims or evidence that the French had polluted the well to prevent the British from reusing it, its contents reflected very ordinary daily activities.



We completely excavated the fort’s original well in 1997, using wood barriers to hold back tourists, a hoist to lift buckets of dirt, and a modern culvert placed inside the well to prevent cave-ins. At the base of the column of stones that formed the well shaft we discovered a “barrel” at the bottom of the well that had several holes drilled through its lining to allow water to enter the well.

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Excavations inside the foundation of the West Barracks in 1999 revealed that the first 4 feet below the parade ground were badly disturbed, but deeper layers contained charred timbers and evidence for cellar-level rooms.

Between 1998 and 2000, we excavated extensively within the West Barracks, unearthing a small (5-foot by 6-foot) room outlined with charred timbers and the base of a stone fireplace. Artifacts recovered included a host of personal and utilitarian items used by the soldiers and officers during their two years at the fort—buttons, buckles, cuff links, a finger ring, a wineglass stem, a Delft medicine cup, lead gaming pieces, part of a grinding stone, the base from a case bottle, the bone inlay from a knife handle, scissors, a brass spoon, and fish hooks. We also found thousands of pieces of animal bone, fragments of mortar shells, cast iron canister shot, lead musket balls, gunflints, and a bayonet fragment. The barracks' cellar even preserved sewing supplies—a thimble, a needle, and pins. The routines of daily life were well represented, with only the fragments of armaments hinting at the violent end that awaited the soldiers.

Between 1997 and 1999 we also conducted extensive testing—12-foot-deep trenches—outside the walls of the reconstructed fort, inside the moat, underneath modern parking lots and lawns, near several possible burial areas, and inside an enormous dump just east of the fort. This dump provided the best glimpse into the lives of soldiers far from home. Food remains predominated—nearly 16,000 fragments of butchered bone from cows, pigs, and fish—followed by large quantities of musket balls, hundreds of potsherds and fragments of wine bottles, British and French gunflints, metal but-

tons, cuff links, buckles, and even two mouth harps, some British halfpennies, and a Spanish silver coin (*real*). The soldiers had walked the shortest possible distance to dispose of their garbage, and everything lay within about 30 feet of the fort's outer wall.

Although archaeological techniques are well suited to reconstruct American history, archaeology has yet to deal systematically with the fort's cemetery or the site of the massacre. The former was only lightly sampled by Gifford in the 1950s, and it seems likely that hundreds of skeletons may lie beneath the modern parking lot. So far, ground-penetrating radar has not been allowed in this area to locate any burials. It will be even more difficult to locate where the retreating British were attacked—presumably a few miles down the road toward Fort Edward—and where most

of the massacre took place. After 250 years of arguments about how many prisoners were killed, long-lost mass graves might provide the only quantitative evidence for the “massacre’s” severity.

RECREATING THE PAST

Both history and archaeology are essential for interpreting the past, and their use, particularly in the reconstruction of forts, has had an enormous impact on the public perception of the French and Indian War. Recently, however, historical re-enactments that recreate the events and lifestyles of 18th century America—what might be called “period theater”—are beginning to play a much larger role in educating the public. In the future their influence



This re-enactor portrayed Lt. Col. George Monro during the surrender ceremony.

On September 15 and 16, 2007, an even larger re-enactment took place just south of Lake George Village—nearly 1,200 re-enactors portrayed British and French soldiers, civilians, and Native Americans. This sea of British Regulars (Redcoats) and white tents reflects current approaches to the interpretation of the “massacre.”



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may very well come to dominate and override the impact of all of the books and museum exhibits ever created. From a historical (or archaeological) perspective, it therefore becomes essential that these re-enactors strive to attain the highest levels of accuracy. Fortunately, in many cases, good historical research underlies their efforts.

Yet the inclusiveness of 21st century America does not necessarily produce appropriate-looking armies from the 18th century. For example, someone entering a re-enactor encampment will most likely encounter thousands of graying baby-boomers, accompanied by a sprinkling of female soldiers and 10-year-old boy soldiers, all sleeping in immaculate white tents and wearing wonderfully clean clothing. Similarly, our perception of the protagonists and antagonists of the past often change to fit modern needs and perceptions. A particularly ironic example occurred on August 11, 2007, during the recreation of the surrender ceremony in Lake George. A special visitor in attendance, the Baron Georges Savarin de Marestan of France, portrayed his great-great-great-great-great-grand uncle, General Montcalm. He was greeted by local tourism officials with all of the ceremony befitting a head of state, even though his distinguished ancestor had been the enemy leader at the time of the massacre 250 years before. In the name of tourism all had been forgiven, though many in the audience were quite aware of the irony!

Such thoughts and others are part of the process of reassessing the events of August 10, 1757. As an archaeologist, I am able to say, "Here are the tangible bits of material culture that have survived inside the fort, and it appears that the soldiers lived rather well." As an anthropologist, I am eager to be allowed to examine the military cemetery and construct demographic profiles of its occupants. I also would like to better understand the motives of the Native Americans who accompanied Montcalm from Canada. To what degree did they view the lands around Lake George as rightfully theirs by inheritance, or was their alliance with Montcalm strictly a matter of obtaining scalps and booty?

I am also reminded of the time when my book *Massacre at Fort William Henry* first arrived from the publisher. A passerby at the reconstructed fort remarked, "I hope your book isn't politically correct. I won't buy it if it is." I assured him that it was not, realizing yet again how strongly modern audiences want the story of the massacre to be told "their" way.

As archaeologists we sometimes encounter strongly held beliefs when we dig at famous battle sites or on the properties of famous Americans. The massacre story resonates well with modern audiences. Fort William Henry was occupied by a

small garrison fighting for its life, and the French betrayal still evokes outrage. James Fenimore Cooper's fictionalized account is a rousing-good love story, and today there are thousands of living descendants of the soldiers who served around Lake George. The Massacre at Fort William Henry occurred 250 years ago, yet the public still cares passionately about how we tell the story. As we blend the findings of archaeologists, historians, and re-enactors, we hope we are reconstructing the past more accurately than ever before! 🏠

DAVID R. STARBUCK, an Associate Professor of Anthropology at Plymouth State University (part of the University System of New Hampshire), specializes in the archaeology of 18th century forts and battlefields and lives about 20 miles north of the site of Fort William Henry.



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For Further Reading

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