

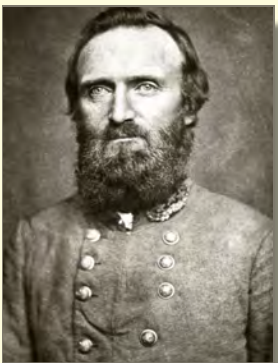
Fort Ontario from 1837 to 1900

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Excerpt from a paper read by Dr. John W. O'Connor of Oswego before the Oswego County Historical Society Assembled at VanBuren Inn, Volney Town, July 15, 1946, to Commemorate the 150th Anniversary of the Evacuation of Fort Ontario by the British. Published in the Tenth Publication of the Oswego Historical Society Journal, 1946, pages 97-107.
<http://www.rbhousemuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/sm-ochs-issue-1946.pdf>

Grant and Jackson At Fort

Again the country settled down to its peacetime, commercial activities, and the Fort remained empty, blackened and ruined until 1839, when Congress authorized the first of several appropriations for its renovation. By 1844, it had been completely rebuilt, and during the Mexican War, was a training post for the regular army. There are only fragmentary records to show the type of army training carried on at Fort Ontario or the identity of its personnel during the following years. There are however, two items of interest which might be mentioned: On August 1, 1850, one of the officers at court-martial in Fort Ontario was Brevet Major T. J. Jackson, later to become famous as "Stonewall" Jackson, the Confederate



Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson, photographer Nathaniel Routzahn (1822-1908) November 1862, Valentine Richmond History Center, Cook Collection. This image is in the public domain because the copyright term is the author's life plus 70 years or less.

General. At another court-martial held in Fort Ontario on September 8, 1851, one of the officers was Brevet Captain U. S. Grant, later commander of all the forces of the Union.

Perhaps the Fort's highest point of activity was reached during the Civil War, when thousands of "Father Abraham's" Boys in Blue were hurriedly trained and hastily commissioned to stem the rising tide of the Confederacy. But again, when the war was over, the Fort settled back into a one company garrison, and thus remained until 1899. And a peaceful, sleepy garrison it was on July 15, 1896 when Oswego celebrated the centennial of the surrender of Fort Ontario, and the close of England's rule over the territory of the United States, so much so that a regiment of regulars had to be sent to the fort for the occasion to permit a respectable showing of regulars to participate in the parade.

The Spanish War Period

When the battleship Maine was sunk in the Spring of 1898, the entire nation was aroused to military fervor against Spain. Fort Ontario had been lightly garrisoned for some years, and when as a result of the trouble with Spain, Congress seemed inclined to appropriate funds for the expansion of the military program, a great effort was made by several leading citizens of



“The Maine entering Havana harbor, January 1898.” The Maine would be blown up three weeks later on February 15, 1898. This image is in the public domain, released to the public by the U.S. Department of Defense.

could be accommodated in the Barracks, it became necessary for the remainder to encamp on the Parade Ground. The men were put through a severe course of training before being transported to Cuba.

When in 1898 the 9th U. S. Infantry, garrisoning Fort Ontario was ordered to the Philippines, about 15 Oswego men left with it. Some of them later lost their lives in helping to put down the Filipino insurrections. These men later saw service in China during the Boxer uprising. Their colonel, Liscum, was killed enroute with his command from Tientsien to Peking, China.

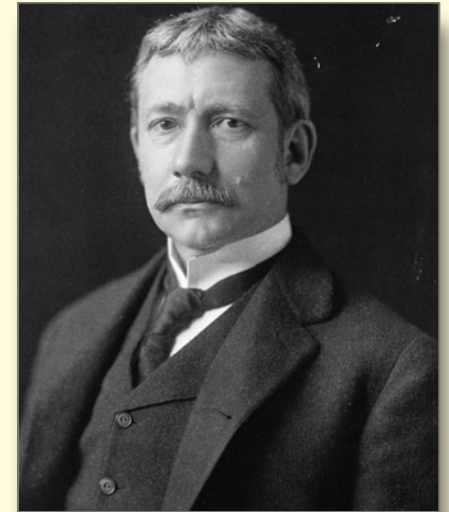
During the next few months, several other regiments came to the Fort as replacements for those who were being sent overseas almost daily. On April 8, 1899, however, the War Department rescinded its order providing for training at Fort Ontario, making no explanation, and the Fort was again reduced to a caretaker basis. All supplies were transferred to Madison Barracks.

Oswego to have the facilities at the Fort enlarged. General Merritt, commanding officer of the Department of the East was very much in favor of this move, and made every effort to establish two extra companies at the Fort. The delayed Army bill was finally passed, and in September, 1898, General Nelson A. Miles issued an order transferring four companies of the Thirteenth Infantry to the Fort. Because of the fact that only 100 men



Root Brought Action

During the next several years the Fort was virtually abandoned. The Parade Ground was used by the towns people as a baseball diamond, and the historic old buildings gradually deteriorated. In the Spring of 1903, the War Department was again petitioned to regarrison the fort, and on June 12th, Elihu Root, then Secretary of War, paid an official visit to Oswego to inspect the Fort. His recommendation resulted in the appropriation by Congress of \$500,000 for the rebuilding and construction of the modern four company post. The old earth embankments were torn away, but the stone wall and the interior of the fort were preserved. The new works were completed in September, 1905, and in the same month, a company of the Twenty-third Infantry from Sacket's Harbor was quartered in the modern barracks.



Elihu Root, former Secretary of War and State, and Senator, 1902; George Prince photographer; This image is in the public domain because the first publication occurred prior to January 1, 1923.

Colonel Liscum, 1900; source: William Alexander Parsons Martin: The Siege in Peking: China Against the World. This image is in the public domain because it was published before January 1, 1923.

Letter Written at Fort Ontario by Thomas J. Jackson to His Sister Laura Ann Jackson Arnold

Fort Ontario N.Y.
Aug 10th 1850

My dear sister
You are probably surprised at
hearing from me so frequently at diff-
erent points as a member of Courts
Martial.

I am now about twelve hours
from Niagara Falls, and consequently
intend visiting them before
returning home. I will leave here
in the evening and be at the Falls
next morning.

The Court will probably remain
in session for several days.
Fort Ontario is situated on the lake
of the same name and in view
of the city of Oswego.

If circumstances permit me to return
home to Va this coming fall, how
can I get to your town most
conveniently from Washington City.
My health is still improving, but
is as yet so delicate as to render
much regularity necessary, and it
is probable that I am more particular
in my rules than any person of your acquaintance.

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Aug 10th 1850

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If circumstances permit me to return home to Va. this coming fall, how can I get to your town most conveniently from Washington City. My health is still improving, but is as yet so delicate as to render much regularity necessary, and it is probably that I am more particular in my rules than any person of your acquaintance. I fear that I will be much exposed in crossing the mountains, unless there is a stage line through from Eastern Virginia. When you write, let me know what kind of flowers, plants, &c are in your garden and what kind you would like for me to bring. I expect that I can obtain almost every description in New York.

I am to commence staying at a water cure establishment this evening where I expect to remain during my stay here. I have great faith in them for such infirmities as mine. I have been for some months adopting it to a certain extent, and with advantage. Remember me very kindly to Mr. A. and the family. Your brother, T.J. Jackson

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Letter, Stonewall Jackson (1824-1863) to his sister Laura Ann Jackson Arnold (1826-1911). August 10, 1850, written at Fort Ontario, New York.

Source: Virginia Military Institute, VMI Archives Digital Collections, Lexington, Virginia. <http://digitalcollections.vmi.edu/cdm/ref/collection/p15821coll4/id/124>