

# Fort Ontario from 1903 to 1921

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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>

## **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.

## **The Fort in the Movies**

During the years of peace that followed the Fort continued to be active. Between three and four hundred men were stationed there at all times. It was an easy life, for the most part. No pressing responsibilities. Most of their needs were provided by the

Government. Even their work did not entail much hardship. Occasionally some film company would come to Oswego to use the Fort as a historical background. In 1914, Charles Mack brought a company of 35 to the fort to make a picture. In 1915 a company with Pearl White and Lionel Barrymore as the leads were sent here by the Pathe Film Company to make a picture built around a story of the Underground Railroad Movement prior to the Civil War, in which Oswego had taken so prominent a part.

## **Hospital Center In 1917**

Towards the end of this period, in 1914, the first rumbling of world trouble were heard, and the effect was mirrored in the increased military activity at the Fort. Major W. H. Bertch was in command, and in April, 1914 had received orders to prepare his men for possible transfer to the Mexican Border. During the following year an intensive training program was instituted,



Actress Pearl White, page 71 of the March 6, 1920 Exhibitors Herald, Fox Film Corporation. This image is in the public domain in the United States because the first publication occurred prior to January 1, 1923.

including maneuvers in the Adirondack mountains. However, the Mexican trouble was temporarily adjusted, and it was not until 1916 that the troops began to march. In August of that year, all Army reserves were called to Fort Ontario to register. They were then put through a refresher course of training and transferred to the Mexican Border. For some months, a small group left Oswego every Sunday evening.

When the United States declared war on Germany on April 6, 1917, the War Department, after a series of inspections, determined to use Fort Ontario as a Medical Center and Hospital. Most of the regular troops were transferred to Camp Dix or Madison Barracks, and Captain A. R. Edwards, with a staff of 75 men took over the Hospital. Numerous improvements to the facilities were made, new equipment installed, and under Captain Edward's guidance the old fort gradually took on the new identity as a base hospital.

#### **Made Inspection Long Ago.**

A special dispatch from Washington, which was printed here yesterday, saying that Lieutenant-Colonel W. P. Chamberlain had been ordered by the War Department to investigate as to advisability of using Fort Ontario as a base hospital, covered an old order by the War Department published about two weeks ago. Colonel Chamberlain at that time made his inspection and report.

Oswego Palladium, June 19, 1917, page 5.

#### **Coast Artillery Withdrawn**

In July, 1917, the first group of recruits, 75 in number, were installed in the fort, and were put through an intensive training course in field hospital work. A large staff of medical officers was in charge of these recruits, and by August of the same year, there were more than 400 recruits of the Army Medical Corps in training here. With the departure in August, 1917, of the 4th Company of the Coast Artillery, the Fort passed completely into the hands of the Medical Corps, with the exception of a small group retained by the Quartermaster's Corps.

As more and more recruits came, the facilities at the Fort became dangerously overcrowded. Since the fort was built to accommodate not more than 400 men, it became necessary to put up tents and temporary barracks when the ranks had swelled to 1,000. Congress appropriated \$200,000 for the purpose of erecting new buildings. With the arrival of an Army Nurse Unit in September, the need for more private, modern facilities became paramount. On September 5th,

## **SOLDIERS COME ON A SPECIAL TONIGHT**

A special train will arrive here at 11:30 o'clock this evening bringing seventy-five enlisted men of the Medical Corps, U. S. A., and two officers to take charge of the base hospital at Fort Ontario under Major Thomason, who arrived here yesterday. The men have recently been recruited and are coming here from New York.

Work on the hospital plans are progressing finely under the direction of Captain A. R. Edwards, who has done splendid organization work and has rushed things to the limit.

Yesterday General Morton, commanding officer at the Syracuse expansion camp, paid a social visit to Fort Ontario and incidentally looked over the hospital layout. Men from the Syracuse expansion camp are to be taken there and he was much pleased with the surroundings.

Oswego Palladium, July  
30, 1917, page 1.

the first patients for the Hospital arrived from Syracuse. Until the capacity of 250 beds could be filled, the patients were transferred here as quickly as possible.

All during the first World War, and for some years thereafter the Fort continued to be used as a base Hospital. It had been completely modernized, and was considered by competent authorities to be one of the best-equipped hospitals of its kind. After the war, however, the Veteran's Administration authorized the building of Veteran's Hospitals throughout the country, and gradually the population of the Fort was depleted.

### **National Guard Trained Here**

In 1921, the Fort was returned to an infantry post status, and thus it remained for nearly 20 years. During much of this period, a single battalion of the 28th Infantry was stationed here. Many of the post's successive commanders later became famous during the recent war. During this period, the Fort was utilized summers as a training post for several National Guard Regiments while the "regulars" were receiving special training at the Stony Point Rifle Range or at Camp Perry in Ohio. Every summer, several of these Guard units would be successively stationed here for their two weeks' encampment period. While most of these came from New York City, guard regiments from as far away as Chicago, Ill., came here for training during this period.

Fort Ontario was during the late 1930's also considered a splendid training post for winter maneuvers. When the Russian-Finnish War showed the value of ski training and winter fighting, Brigadier-General Philipson then commander of all the forts in the easter area, set up a schedule of winter training at Pine Camp and at Fort Ontario. Using snowshoes and skis, the men made forced marches through the deep snow, carrying full equipment for several days' existence. They carried their own rations and slept in sleeping bags without shelter. This type of training, strenuous as it was, was amply justified a few years later in the high mountain passes of Italy and the snow covered forest of Germany.

**Two more special trains, loaded with sick and wounded soldiers, passed through the city Saturday, bound for Oswego. It is stated that there are now 1,200 patients at the Fort Ontario hospital.**

The Fulton Patriot, June 4, 1919, page 6.