

Fort Ontario and the Colonial Period

©2018 OSWEGO COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY 135 EAST THIRD STREET OSWEGO, NY 13126

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>

Activity Succeeded By Lethargy

From the earliest days of colonization, the foreign policy on this continent has been definitively reflected in the activities of Fort Ontario. In its earlier days of course, before the process of war became so highly mechanized, its unique position as the gateway to the West, and its strategic location throughout the intermittent clashes between the French and the English, gave it an importance which has been somewhat lost in later years. But through nearly two hundred years of existence, it has followed a pattern of wartime activity and peacetime lethargy.

In order to enlarge upon this pattern, it is necessary to outline a brief resume of its early history. Fort Ontario was built in 1755 upon orders from General Shirley to Colonel Mercer. Fort Oswego on the west side of the river had been in existence since 1727, but because of the imminence of the French and Indian War, it was felt necessary to provide a further



General Louis-Joseph de Montcalm, painted by Theophile Hamel (1817-1870). c. 1865. This image is in the public domain because the copyright term is the author's life plus 100 years or less.

stronghold on the East river bank. The original fort was about 800 feet in circumference. It was made of square-cut logs from 20 to 30 inches thick, the wall being 14 feet high, and with a deep ditch at its foot of the same width. In May of the following year (1756), war was declared and Oswego was called upon to give protection to the fur traders and neighboring settlers fleeing from Indian outrages. Although the fort had been strongly garrisoned under command of Colonel Mercer against this war, the value of holding this important post was not clearly realized by the British high command until too late, and it was lost through the mismanagement of the English authorities.

After and artillery battle in August 1756, the able French General, Montcalm, captured both Fort Ontario on the east bank and Forts Oswego and George on the West side of the Oswego, together with 1700 prisoners. Colonel Mercer was killed. To

allay the suspicions of the Indians that the French might be planning on trying to hold Oswego permanently, Montcalm razed the forts and left Oswego to solitude.

Fort Ontario was rebuilt in 1759 by British troops under the command of Gen. John Bradstreet. Seven years later, in 1766, Sir William Johnson met with the great Ottawa chieftan, Pontiac, around the Oswego council fire and ratified a solemn pledge of fidelity to the English king. During the period prior to the Revolution Fort Ontario became again a training post for British regiments. The list of names on the headstones in the Old Fort cemetery indicate that here, in this humble outpost, some of the sons of the foremost families in England, following the traditions of the Empire, received their military training at Fort Ontario.



No authentic images of Pontiac are known to exist. This interpretation was painted by John Mix Stanley (1814-1872). The Granger Collection. This image is in the public domain where the copyright term is the author's life plus 100 years or less.



General John Bradstreet, painted by Thomas McIlworth, c. 1764. National Portrait Gallery. This work is in the public domain in its country of origin and other countries and areas where the copyright terms is the author's life plus 100 years or less.