

Oswego Established

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OSWEGO PAST AND PRESENT

INTERESTING HISTORY OF
A HISTORIC PLACE

Views Recalling the Past and Showing the Present

OSWEGO IN 1755

Five years before the pilgrim fathers sailed away from England in 1620, to find a new home where they could worship their religion unmolested, and landed at Plymouth Rock, Samuel de Champlain passed through this section. Whether he stopped at the place which Oswego city covers is not known for a certainty, but he was

in this vicinity, and was the first white man to place his foot upon the soil of Oswego county. There is no record that Champlain or any other white man came through here from that time until 1655, when Father La Moyne and other members of the Jesuit order were on their way from Montreal to go among the Indians in the interior to convert them to Christianity...

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July 1-5, 1906, page 6-11.

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Father La Moyne did not know at what place he landed. But the description which this noted priest gives would make one almost certain that their frail bark canoes, when they grounded on the pebbly beach, had found their haven at Oswego. His notes of the trip say it was at a river emptying into the great lake, and that the river was from 100 to 120 paces wide and at its mouth was a village of Indian fishermen. This village was never destroyed until the white man came, in numbers and the Indians gave way and fell back into the wilderness, the same as they continued to do in all parts of the United States as soon as their hunting and fishing grounds were taken possession of by the whites. So it is no more than fair that Oswego should claim these Indians as the original settlers of this city and date its origin from that time.

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From the time of the arrival of Father La Moyne and his followers, Oswego has been much in evidence. It has taken a most prominent

part in the making of the history of this country, and has been held as the lawful possession of two kingdoms and one republic. It has been the center of military and commercial strife and from 1655 until 1796 it is impossible to draw a distinguishing line between the two, so closely are the events interwoven.

Sieur Du Puys and a band of fifty Frenchmen followed Father La Moyne in 1656 and established themselves at Oswego and also penetrated the wilderness as far south as where Syracuse now stands. For some reason the expedition was a failure and returned to Montreal in 1658. The next event was in 1684, when an expedition was ordered out against the Senecas, and this is the first instance where a distinguishing name was given to the Territory surrounding the mouth of the Oswego river. It was called Choueguen or Ochoueguen.

The first military post was established here in 1724 by the English. It was not a real post, more like a trader's station, and it angered the French, who claimed this territory as their own, and De Louguenil was sent out to order the English away. When he arrived he found 100 English at a portage four leagues from Lake Ontario, now Fulton, but shortly afterward they left. For many years after this Oswego was a bone of contention between these two nations. Much blood was shed and many lives were lost in the struggle which followed.

The English had done one glance of the deep-flowing river, its natural harbor and its vantage point for trade with the West, and prepared to lay claim to the territory. In 1726 Governor Burnot sent men here to build a stone house and trading post and with this fortification was able to retain possession until 1744. In 1741 £600 was appropriated to build a stone wall and block houses here.

In 1744, when France and England declared war, Oswego was deserted and neither the French or the English had possession for a time, but Governor Clinton being aware of the importance of this place, sent Lieutenant John Linsdley, founder of Cherry Valley, and a company of soldiers here, and for five years he maintained this post.

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Johnson came here again in 1750, when he was made superintendent of Indian affairs, and in 1754 got an appropriation of £1,300 for repairs and build a fleet of boats here.

Another war cloud was seen to be approaching in 1755 and General Shirley, who came here, left Colonel Mercer in charge with instructions to build two new forts, one on the high ground on the east side of the river, to be called Fort Ontario, and the other on the hill top, southwest of the first fortification, which was called Fort Oswego, Choueguen, or Fort Pepperell, and to call it New Fort Oswego or Fort George.

Mercer set to work and his men carried out the instructions of General Shirley to the best of their ability. Fort Ontario was completed. It was 800 feet in circumference, with outer walls fourteen feet high, a ditch fourteen feet wide and ten feet deep, with barracks for 300 men. Fort George was located where the Allen castle now stands, corner of Montcalm and Van Buren streets, but was never completed. It was 170 feet on each of its four sides, with a rampart of masonry and earth twenty feet thick, twelve feet high.

War was declared and Marquis de Montcalm was sent out by the French Governor in Canada to attack and take Oswego. His spies had informed him of the new fortifications which had been erected during the winter and spring months and he acted in accordance with this information. He landed his forces at Henderson Bay and marched across land, arriving at Fort Ontario on the morning of August 11. His Canadians and Indians stormed the works and although the garrison fought bravely all day, was forced to abandon the works toward nightfall and retreat across the river to Fort Oswego. Montcalm then took possession of Fort Ontario and turned the guns on Fort Oswego. Colonel Mercer was killed and Lieutenant Colonel Littlehales, not being equal to the situation, captivated, surrendering 1,700 prisoners, eighty officers, seven vessels of war, 200 barges and 120 guns.

Montcalm started in to demolish the fort. He gave rein to his Indians and their atrocities were horrifying. The fort was razed and all that remains to mark the spot where it stood at the corner of West First and Van Buren streets is the

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Portrait of William Shirley (1694-1771), colonial governor of Massachusetts, 1750. oil, National Portrait Gallery. This work is in the public domain in its country of origin and other countries and areas where the copyright term is the author's life plus 100 years or less.

high granite boulder surrounded by a high iron picket fence erected there a few years ago by the Society of Colonial Dames.

This capture was thought of so much importance that Louis XV caused a medal to be struck off.

Peace was declared in 1763 and Oswego became English territory. A new Fort Ontario was erected in 1759 within the limits of the present fortification. The whole circuit of five sides was 500 feet, with ramparts of earth riveted with saucissons on the side toward the lake and on the land side large square timbers were found when the excavations were made for the new officers' quarters two years ago. The parapet was twelve feet thick with a ditch thirty feet wide. Four block houses were also erected within gunshot of the fortification.

In 1760 the Fifty-fifth Infantry, composed of Scotch soldiers under Major Alexander Duncan, came here to garrison the post. Among the officers was Captain Duncan McVicar, who brought with him his wife and daughter, the first white women ever known to have been at Oswego.

In 1766 Sir William Johnson was made commissioner of trade and made Oswego his headquarters. In that year he performed an act for England which will endear his memory just so long as the English nations exists and at the same time he brought to this place one of the greatest living Indians this country has ever known, Pontiac, the chief of the Western tribes. Pontiac and Johnson met here on July 23. The council of war was held just east of Fort Ontario under the trees. The great chief had fears that once he place himself in the power of the English that he would never be allowed to return. Several sessions of the council were held and when it was broken up Pontiac and Johnson had entered into a peace compact that was everlasting. Pontiac left here the last of August and returned to his tribes in the west, which he controlled with a despotic power.

In 1775 Johnson held a council here with the Mohawk Indian chief Brant here and a council was held with Colonel Guy Johnson and General St. Ledger and at that

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Pontiac or Obwandiyag, (c.1720-April 20, 1769); No authentic images of Pontiac exist. This is an interpretation painted by John Mix Stanley. This work is in the public domain in its country of origin and other countries and areas where the copyright term is the author's life plus 100 years or less.

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In 1775 Johnson held a council here with the Mohawk Indians. In 1777 he called the great Indian chief Brant here and a council was held with Colonel Guy Johnson and General St. Ledger and at that

council Brant swore allegiance to the English cause and much of the deviltry he was to do against the Continental troops during the succeeding years of the Revolutionary war was hatched.

Fort Ontario was unoccupied from that time until 1778, when

Lieutenant McClelland was sent to destroy the post. He found one woman and a boy of fourteen here. He placed them in one of the buildings and provided them with provisions and the remainder of the buildings were burned and destroyed.

In 1783 General Washington sent Colonel Willett and a handful of troops to attack the fort and destroy it. The detachment lost its way and was forced to return and then came the news of the declaration of peace.

That same year the Americans started out to occupy the posts on the frontier and England gave way in every instance with the exception of Fort Ontario. There was questions of indemnity and other things and the post was not evacuated until after the signing of the Jay treaty in 1796, and on July 15th of that year the British soldiers marched out of the garrison, took boats and sailed to Canada and the American troops marched in and took possession.

The first legislation shaping Oswego was in 1784, which provided that one mile square on each side of the Onondaga river (as the Oswego river was then commonly called) should be excepted from the lands for the distribution of soldiers of the Revolu-

tion, and in 1797 one hundred acres were laid out into lots and streets and the place was called Oswego. The streets running east and west were named after the signs of the Zodiac and remained unchanged until 1837, and the present names were substituted. West of where old Fort Oswego stood and between Second and Sixth streets and north of Schuyler street was a cemetery, the military burying ground of the period of military and fur trading occupation of this place, and it was here that Colonel Mercer and those who fell when the place was captured by the French in 1755 were buried, and as there is no record that the bodies were ever removed, it is supposed that they still remain in the ground which is now cut up by streets and occupied by houses.

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The first permanent settler in Oswego was Neil McMullen, who brought his wife and family here in 1796 from Kingston. He also brought with him a frame house which he set up near the river bank in the vicinity of where the Northwestern elevator now stands. That same season Captain Roger O'Conner, a Revolutionary soldier, an Irishman of good education, came here and remained one winter, but the next spring went to Salina. A few other settlers arrived prior to 1800, among them being Miss Artemisa Waterhouse, who opened the first school here in 1798. Peter Sharp and William Vaughn came in 1800, and from that time the settlement began to thrive and grow and people being drawn here by the commercial advantages. Shipping seems to have been the first thought. Boats were built and salt and other merchandise handled, and there was a thriving settlement here when it was captured by the British in 1814 and destroyed. But the disaster did not hurt the city, for in 1815 we find the building activity being resumed with renewed vigor and commerce was revived through Townsend, Bronson & Company and Matthew McNair and others.

The first church was organized in 1816, the Presbyterian. In 1817 the Oswego Bridge Company was incorporated by Alvin Bronson and others with a capital of \$20,000, and was the first structure to be build over the Oswego river, passage up to that time being by ferry.

The first newspaper was the Gazette. It was short-lived and was succeeded in 1819 by the Palladium and has continued since and takes pleasure in greeting you to-day.

The charter of the Oswego Bridge Company was given in 1822 and continued in force until 1855 and provided that toll be collected. The bridge was built of wood and cost \$2,000. The Oswego Canal Company was chartered in 1823 to build the hydraulic canal on the east side and another event in this year were inauguration of the first steamboat line. In 1825, the first church was built, the first government appropriation for the improvement of the harbor secured and steps taken for the construction of the canal between Oswego and Syracuse.

In 1828 Oswego was incorporated as a village and the first election was held Tuesday, May 2, of that year. The first officers were: Alvin Bronson, president; Thomas Willett, treasurer; John Howe, collector; Daniel Hugunin, Jr., George Fisher, David P. Brewster, T.S. Morgan, Nathaniel Vilas, Jr., Joseph Turner and Orlo Steel, trustees. At the first election \$200 was voted for the village at large, while the sum of \$300 was voted for the West side and \$100 for the East side.

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VIEW OF THE GREAT FIRE AT OSWEGO.
By the morning of July 30th 1850. (From a litho. by J. C. Smith, 1850.)
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View of the great fire at Oswego, on the morning of July 30, 1850, print, 1850; Library of Congress, <http://lccn.loc.gov/2003664980>; digital id pga.06313; This work is in the public domain in the United States because it was published or registered with the US Copyright Office before January 1, 1923.

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In 1830 when the Welland canal was opened the forwarding interests took a boom and for forty years from that time the progress of Oswego was rapid and unchecked. The population in 1830 was 2,116. The Oswego bank was incorporated in 1831 with a capital stock of \$150,000.

Oswego was incorporated as a city in 1848, with four wards, two on each side of the river, and the election was on the first Tuesday of April, 1848.

In 1849 the bridge was built at Utica street. On July 30, 1850, fire destroyed \$90,000 worth of property. There was a revival

of building in 1851 and in May of that year there were 300 sail vessels in the harbor. In 1852 there was a population of 14,300, and contained nine churches, sixteen flouring mills, with an aggregate of eighty-three runs of stone and a total capacity of 7,575 barrels daily; two custom mills four grain warehouses, with storage capacity of 575,000 bushels and 10,500 barrels of flour, establishments, fire department with six fire engines and two hook and ladder companies. The total value of the lake trade was \$22,595,246. Gas was first introduced in that year.

On July 5, 1853, occurred the big fire, which started in H. Fitzhugh's flouring mill, and all the mills and elevators on the East side were destroyed, together with many business places and dwellings in the Second ward. The only building left standing was the Trinity M. E. church in East Fourth between Bridge and Cayuga streets. But new structures immediately sprang up.

In 1855 the charter of the Oswego Bridge Company expired and the city provided \$16,000 and built a bridge with a draw. In this year there were sixty-nine Oswego vessels sailing from this port.

In 1860 the population was 16,816, and during the war the city continued to grow, and in 1865 there were 19,288 people here.

In 1866 a new bridge was built at Utica street and was finished in 1868 at a cost of \$100,000.

The fire of May 20, 1892, is still fresh in the minds of many of our citizens. The fire broke out in one of the elevators and within a few minutes the entire river front was ablaze. The firemen prevented the fire from spreading and confined it to these buildings. None of them have ever been rebuilt and stand to-day as they did the morning after the fire.

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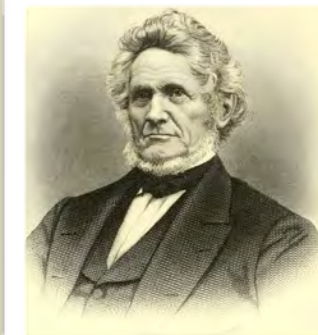
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Charles Knapp, Congressman from Deposit, New York, 1872; This image is in the public domain in the United States because it was published before January 1, 1923.

The population in 1870 was 20,910, and this year the State Armory was built. The State has set aside an appropriation of nearly \$100,000 for a new Armory here and the work on it has already begun. In 1870 the city was divided into eight wards, the number of Aldermen to be sixteen, but this was changed to eight in 1887.

In 1872 there were ten elevators here with a capacity of 2,055,000 bushels. Of this number only the Northwestern now stands, the others having been destroyed by fire May 20, 1892.

In 1875 the population was 22,428. In 1880 it was 21,116, and in 1892 21,842.

Oswego saw its highest prosperity in 1870 and the lowest ebb in 1885. Since this latter date its people have turned their attention from lake commerce and become interested in manufacturing. The consequence is that there are magnificent factories and mills of all kinds here at the present time. The city has taken on a new growth, everything looks bright and the future of Oswego is assured.

Fort Ontario, as it stands today, is conceded by all army men who have visited the place to be the most up-to-date and complete army post in the United States. It is laid out on lines entirely new and original and so pleasing that they will probably be adopted in the construction of other posts for the quartering of Uncle Sam's soldiers in the future.

Captain William Meade Coulling of Virginia, assigned to the Quartermaster's staff, was in charge of the construction of the post and to him is due the credit for having the handsome buildings that are now there. That is,

it was Captain Coulling who conceived the plans and carried out the details of the construction. But the men who are responsible for the location of the post here are Colonel John T. Mott, State Committeeman, General Thomas Ward, U. S. A., retired, Congressman Charles A. Knapp and County Judge Merrick Stowell and others prominent in Oswego county politics, who, through their influence procured the necessary appropriations for the carrying on of the work.

The post now consists of twenty-three buildings, quarters, a battalion of troops and the estimated cost is considerable over \$500,000.

As told in another part of this issue, Fort Ontario was first established by Colonel Mercer under the direction of General Shirley in 1755, when a war with France was threatened. The fortification was somewhat south of the present fortification and consisted of earthworks hastily thrown up with buildings of a capacity to house 300 troops. The buildings were rude affairs and all of wood. The post was destroyed by Montcalm and his Indians, and when it was rebuilt by the English was within the lines of the present fortification. This second fort was also destroyed, but was afterward rebuilt and was occupied by British troops until 1796, when it was evacuated.

The fire of May 20, 1892, is still fresh in the minds of many of our citizens. The fire broke out in one of the elevators and within a few minutes the entire river front was ablaze. The firemen prevented the fire from spreading and confined it to these buildings. Non of them have ever been rebuilt and stand to-day as they did the morning after the fire.

The population in 1870 was 20,910, and this year the State Armory was built. The State has set aside an appropriation of nearly \$100,000 for a new Armory here and the work on it has already begun. In 1870 the city was divided into eight wards, the number of Aldermen to be sixteen, but this was changed to eight in 1887.

In 1872 there were ten elevators here with a capacity of 2,055,000 bushels. Of this number only the Northwestern now stands, the others having been destroyed by fire May 20, 1892.

In 1875 the population was 22,428. In 1880 it was 21,116, and in 1892 21,842.

Oswego saw its highest prosperity in 1870 and the lowest ebb in 1885. Since this latter date its people have turned their attention from lake commerce and become interested in manufacturing. The consequence is that there are magnificent factories and mills of all kinds here at the present time. The city has taken on a new growth, everything looks bright and the future of Oswego is assured.

Fort Ontario, as it stands today is conceded by all army men who have visited the place to be the most tip-to-date and complete army post in the United States. It is laid out on lines entirely new and original and so pleasing that they will probably be adopted in the construction of other posts for the quartering of Uncle Sam's soldiers in the future.

Captain William Meade Coulling of Virginia, assigned to the Quartermaster's staff, was in charge of the construction of the post and to him is due the credit for having the handsome buildings that are now there. That is, it was Captain Coulling who conceived the plans and carried out the details of the construction. But the men who are responsible for the location of the post here are Colonel John T. Mott, State Committeeman, General Thomas Ward, U.S.A., retired, Congressman Charles A. Knapp and County Judge Merrick Stowell and other prominent in Oswego county politics, who, through their

Stowell and other prominent in Oswego county politics, who, through their influence procured the necessary appropriation for the carrying on of the work.

The post now consists of twenty-three buildings, quarters, a battalion of troops and the estimated cost is considerable over \$500,000.

As told in another part of this issue, Fort Ontario was first established by Colonel Mercer under the direction of General Shirley in 1755, when a war with France was threatened. The fortification was somewhat south of the present fortification and consisted of earthworks hastily thrown up with buildings of a capacity to house 300 troops. The buildings were crude affairs and all of wood. The post was destroyed by Montcalm and his Indians, and when it was rebuilt by the English was within the lines of the present fortification. This second fort was also destroyed, but was afterward rebuilt and was occupied by British troops until 1796, when it was evacuated. England hated to give up Oswego. Its commercial and political importance was recognized and through one excuse or another hung on after the close of the war, and this was the last place in the whole United States to be relinquished and the centennial of that event was celebrated by Oswego ten years ago.

Fort Ontario took a prominent part in the history of this country, and it was here that Sir William Johnson and Pontiac met and made their peace pact that stood in good stead. Brant, the noted warrior, came here and made his arrangements to fight for the English during the Revolutionary war.

After the post came into the hands of the Continental army, a garrison was maintained here. England sent out an expedition under Sir James Yeo to capture Oswego in 1814. He had eight war vessels and 3,000 men. Colonel Mitchell, sent here from Sackets Harbor by General Games, defended the fort with 300 men. The first day the English troops tried to land Colonel Mitchell drove them off with a 12-pounder stationed near the water's edge. The other guns at the fort were practically useless. But the next day, when the English returned, a landing was made, the fort carried by storm and the brave little band of Americans forced to retreat. They made a short stand at Battle Island and then retreated to Oswego Falls. Alvin Bronson, who was storekeeper, and had done all in his power to prevent the British from securing the valuable stores here, was made a prisoner and taken to Kingston, but was afterward allowed to return. Oswego was sacked by the British. The Americans lost sixty-nine in killed, wounded and missing, and the British had nineteen killed and seventy-five wounded.

An expedition was sent out of Oswego in 1838 for Ogdensburg to take part in the Patriot war and went in the steamer United States. They took part in the battle of the Windmill. Among them was John Clark Cooley, whose death occurred two years ago.

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Fort Ontario was repaired in 1846 and \$95,000 was appropriated. The present mason work was put up, including the stone houses

on the inside of the fortification.

During the Rebellion Fort Ontario was the headquarters for all troops organized in this section, and \$100,000 was expended in erecting buildings on the reservation to accommodate the troops. There are still many here who remember those stirring days.

After the Civil war Fort Ontario was garrisoned by soldiers off and on. Sometimes the troops would stay for several years, and then again it would remain idle with no one but a care taker in charge for many years. The quarters inside the enclosure became unsanitary and not fit for habitation and the government found it necessary to formally condemn the post and the announcement was made that no more soldiers would be sent here.

It was then that Colonel Mott, General Ward and the others became busy. Oswego had never been anything but a one-company post and the first movement set on foot was for new buildings inside the fortification to accommodate a single company. Then it was found that the plans of the government were against separating a single company from a regiment and a battalion post was asked for. The first appropriation was \$200,000, and Captain Coulling was ordered here. He had entered the army at the outbreak of the Spanish-American war and had been in the transport service. He had never had any experience in construction work, but was a man of good, practical ideas.

He found that the Ontario & Western railroad had track rights across the reservation and that these tracks had to be moved in order for him to carry out his plans. The railroad had a pull at Washington and it looked as though the whole project would have to be abandoned, when Secretary of War Elihu Root was induced to come here and look over the ground. He determined the question then and there and the Ontario & Western Railroad Company moved its tracks and Captain Coulling went ahead with his plans.

The first ground was broken in the fall of 1903, but the actual work did not begin until the following spring, and then how the earth did fly.

In excavating for the officers' quarters an old burying ground was unearthed and thousands of bones were found fifteen and twenty feet under the surface. Several tombstones were also found, showing that the place had been a regular cemetery. Some of the stones dated back to 1755, and one marked the grave of a young English officer, the younger son of a prominent family, who had come to the new world with his regiment and died.

Captain Coulling rushed the work and last fall had all the buildings so far completed that the first detachment of troops, the Third Battalion of the Twenty-third Regiment, just back from the Philippines, was sent here under command of Lieutenant Colonel Hodges.

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Those who knew the "Fort Grounds" a few years ago would hardly recognize the place now. The buildings are arranged in the shape of a large kidney and there is an excellent parade ground between the barracks of the enlisted men and officers' row. The post is delightfully located with a view of Lake Ontario and is especially enjoyable during the summer months. If Mrs. Annie Grant should return here to-day her description of Oswego would be the same as she found it 250 years ago.

Fort Ontario was started in 1755 and completed in 1756. The new post was started in 1903 and completed in 1906, and this week the people of Oswego in connection with the Old Home Week is celebrating the 150th anniversary of the founding of this post, which is filled with so many historic memories.

The Daily Palladium,
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6-11.

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For further research and discussion:

1. Create a timeline that represents the events mentioned in this article.
2. Create a timeline the represents events that occurred in Oswego after this article was written.
3. Select one event from this article to research in depth and share this information in a slide show.