

Fort Ontario During the 1940's

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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>

Fort Enlarged in 1940

During this period a Headquarters Company was at all times stationed at Fort Ontario in addition to the regular garrison. The garrison units, which had also been increased in size and number during this period, were commanded by the post commander and not by the general officers who were assigned to the brigade command. General Charles D. Roberts was assigned in 1933 as brigade commander at Fort Ontario, being transferred here from Madison Barracks. He was successively succeeded in command by General Irving J. Phillipson, who later was in command at Governor's Island during the early part of World War II and by General W. T. Short.

About this time a "flight strip" was projected to serve as a take-off runway for planes aiding in the anti-aircraft training program at the fort. Oswego County Board of Supervisors procured options on the purchase of the lands needed in the vicinity of South Scriber and appropriated \$25,000 to buy the site for the runway should the program be approved by the War Department. As the Department failed to approve the program for the enlargement of Fort Ontario's facilities and program the

"strip" was never purchased or developed and the funds appropriated were later used in the development of airports at Fulton and Pulaski.

Lt. Col. George A. Herbst, Col. John J. Fulmer, Col. Ellery Farmer, and Col. Willis Shippam were successively detailed to command the garrison at Fort Ontario between 1924 and 1944, the latter who had seen many years of active service in the Philippines, remaining in command at the post during the early part of World War II.

Shortly after the passage of the Selective Service Act of 1940, the War Department made a survey of the fort facilities in anticipation of its use as an induction center for new draftees. For some reason this plan was not adopted. In October, 1940, the War Department decided that because of its proximity to Lake Ontario, and other natural resources, Fort Ontario would be an ideal site for the establishment of an anti-aircraft artillery unit. Accommodations were extended to provide quarters for a full regiment of wartime strength, plus the necessary service and quartermaster details. New

barracks* were built, existing buildings renovated and officers quarters modernized. Before the work was finally completed over a million dollars had been spent and Fort Ontario had facilities which could accommodate 3,000 men.

Colored Guardsmen Come

On January 15, 1941, 14 officers and 108 men, constituting an advance guard of the 369th regiment of the New York National Guard, colored troops from the Harlem section of New York City, and officers, arrived to make preparations for reception of the remainder of the command. On January 23rd, the rest of the regiment which was completely equipped, arrived in command of Colonel Chauncey Hooper. The training program which followed was intense and complete. It was designed to transform a shuffling mass of civilians into hardened, well-trained, experienced soldiers in as short a time as possible. Every day, long lines of troops were marched out of town, to Minetto, to Fulton, sometimes all the way to Pine Camp. In the meantime, anti-aircraft equipment was set up on the Parade Ground, as well as on the Johnson Farm, east of the Fort. The firing was done over Lake Ontario and an area extending along the southern shore of the lake was restricted to their use, and no boats were permitted in this zone.

An account of the colored troops and their activities here would make a story in itself. In spite of early fears to the contrary entertained by some Oswego residents, these troops conducted themselves in a highly exemplary fashion. Cut off as they were from association with people of their own race, because up to that time, Oswego had practically no Negro population, they nevertheless, maintained a system of politeness, even of gallantry in their outside contacts. While the Fort itself remained under the command of Colonel Willis Shippam, a regular army officer of wide experience and discretion who had come here several years before after a long period of service in the Philippines as an artillery officer, the troops themselves were commanded by Colonel Hooper, who in every way was of the highest type of Army officer. When the 369th Regiment was transferred to Camp Edwards, Massachusetts, on September 4, 1941, for further training they took

with them the sincere good wishes of the community. This regiment later served with great distinction on the Italian front.

Governors Inspect Troops

Governor Herbert H. Lehman came to Fort Ontario to inspect the Fort while Col. Hoover's men were here. He reviewed the regiment and was afterwards the guest of Col. Hoover and his officers at a dinner at the Hotel Pontiac, at which a number of Oswego business men and civic leaders were also Col. Hoover's guests.

The 198th Anti-Aircraft Regiment came here from Camp Edwards to replace the colored troops. This regiment had originally been a Delaware National Guard organization and shortly after its arrival here, its strength was augmented to 74 officers and 1,800 men. During their training period here, the city was honored by a visit from Walter W. Bacon, Governor of Delaware, who had come to inspect the troops. The 198th received the same type of training as their predecessors, and remained here several months.

Military Police Training

After their departure the anti-aircraft equipment was removed to various coastal areas, since by that time, the War Department had decided that such facilities should be maintained closer to possible points of attack. Once again the Fort changed its identity. It now became a training center for Military Police. This group was made up, almost entirely, of new recruits. Most of the personnel was highly educated, many of them professional men who had been drafted. Their course of training was rather brief, and there were constant changes as new recruits arrived to replace those transferred to other areas. The military police training program was finally completed. Many of those who had trained here were transferred to various colleges for further

* - In all about 60 new buildings of frame construction were built at this time. Besides barracks, mess halls and warehouses, a chapel, a fire department headquarters, a theater and other types of new buildings were built. The post hospital facilities were enlarged and re-equipped.

educational training in special service activities. Others were transferred directly to the distant points, where the American Army was already established.

With the departure of the Military Police, the question of what was to be done about the Fort was once again raised. Since before the war, there had been a Quartermaster's detail, as well as the 1212th Service Battalion stationed there. The personnel of these outfits remained constant and for awhile it seemed as if no other training would be provided here. The problem was settled by an unusual decision of the War Department. Almost from the first application of the Selective Service Act, it had been discovered that a fairly constant percentage of young American men were completely illiterate. Others had received only sporadic education. There were also in the country, thousands of men who came within the purview of the Act, but who had been born and educated in other countries, whose education, consequently, was almost completely foreign so that many of these men could not even speak or understand English. At first these selectees had been rejected and given a "4F" classification. However, as the demand for more soldiers was raised, the long arm of the draft law probed deeper and deeper into American community and family life, and not wishing to unduly upset the delicate balance between industry and the actual demands of the military, these rejects were called back. The War Department set up two training centers for these men, one of which was Fort Ontario.

Special Training Provided

Professional educators were transferred from other branches of the services and given a free hand in the establishment of the equivalent of elementary schools here. The results were tremendously successful. Using the most modern methods of education, those who were illiterate were put through such an intense program of training that after a residence of only a few months, they had received the equivalent of a fourth grade education. They came here unable to read or write. Some of them hadn't even the slightest knowledge of arithmetic. Many of

them were even able to speak English. Before they left, they were able to read and write, to solve simple arithmetical problems, and most important, to understand and obey specific army orders and instructions. They were transferred to various army units, and as a result of their training here, will become more useful citizens now that they have returned to civilian life.

Training Ceases

The completion of this program March 15, 1944, when the special training officers were transferred to Pine Camp and the departure of these rehabilitated troops marked the end of Fort Ontario as a strictly military post at least for the time being. During the summer of 1944, the Fort was abandoned except for the presence of a small caretaker force. Even the Quartermaster's Corps and the 1212th Service Unit had been shipped out.

During the period when large groups of troops had been stationed here, it was natural that local business would expand. When it was finally learned that no more troops were to be stationed here, the business men of the city made every effort to keep the post alive. The Oswego Chamber of Commerce appointed a special committee to work for that end.

In the meantime, President F. D. Roosevelt had conceived the idea of bringing a token group of selected European refugees to this country. It is said that he was mulling over the matter in his mind when a brief of the Chamber of Commerce Committee reached the White House desk and suggested to the president's mind Fort Ontario for use as a refugee shelter. President Roosevelt promised the refugees shelter at Fort Ontario, and directed the Army in Italy to select a group of 1,000 for immediate immigration. He acted on his own responsibility and without seeking the approval of Congress.

FORT ONTARIO MAY BE C.C.C. SUPPLY DEPOT

(Watertown Times)

Fort Ontario, scheduled to be vacated of its regular soldier contingent by September 1, will probably be transferred into a supply depot serving upstate civilian conservation corps camps under plans now being considered by army officials.

Syracuse is also under consideration as the depot site although it is understood that army officials favor the Fort Ontario location because that property is government owned and has the necessary facilities for a depot quarters.

The upstate C.C.C. supply depot is now located at Schenectady, but the army is desirous of moving the depot. A survey of favorable sites was started recently upon orders of Brigadier-General Irving J. Phillipson.

Fort Ontario, for the first two years of the C.C.C. program, was a supply depot for most of the upstate New York camps. Headquarters, however, were later located at Binghamton and supplies at Schenectady. It is now planned to locate the supplies depot and headquarters at the one point.

The depot is to contain a minimum of 60,000 square feet of floor space. The depot requires a staff of 30 civilian clerks as well as 30 men detailed from the quartermaster corps of the army.

Under present plans, soldiers now at Fort Ontario are scheduled to leave during the next six weeks for Camp Jackson, S. C., as part of the newly created Eighth Streamlined Army division. Army officials said that the war department has not yet made any plans to assign a new contingent to Fort Ontario to replace those leaving for the south and as a result the property would be vacant except for a skeleton maintenance staff.

The Pulaski Democrat, August 14, 1940, page 3.

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Brigadier-General Irving J. Phillipson (1882-1955). Picture source:
From: "Assembly, October 1955" by United States Military
Academy. Association of Graduates.



Port Ontario Defense Work

It is interesting to note that the defense work being carried on at Fort Ontario is the only work to be completed on time in the country.

Thirty new barracks for enlisted men are complete except for painting, which will be done as soon as the contract has been awarded.

These barracks are two-story buildings with separate rooms for 80 officers, a reception room on the ground floor, a recreation hall built nearby, will be used for class work and for entertainments. It also has facilities for sound motion pictures. All 64 buildings at the Fort will be painted which will be completed within a few days.

Gangs of workmen at double pay have been working on this project for some time. It is a wonderful sight to see the amount of work accomplished, and, would pay anyone to drive over to Oswego just to see what defense work really means. A crack colored regiment of about 2000 men is expected to occupy the new quarters by January 15th.

The laborers on the job were mostly from Oswego, but the real carpenters came from other parts of the state, though several local carpenters found work in plenty, and even now more could be used if they could prove themselves familiar with carpentry work.

Some of the out-of-towners are already thinking of where they will go next. Some said California — some South Carolina, some to Washington, D. C.

The Pulaski Democrat, January 9, 1941, page 1.

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FORT ONTARIO GETS NEW EQUIPMENT

There will soon be five giant searchlights at Fort Ontario, each weighing approximately four tons. It takes two trucks to transport these powerful lights which are 60 inches in diameter and generate 800,000 candle power. It is possible, if atmospheric conditions are good, to read a newspaper by their light for a distance of 12 miles. The heat can be felt 200 ft. away. These powerful lights work with a 3 inch anti-aircraft gun and assist in aiming the gun at a desired target. It will require a crew of 6 men to operate it.

The Pulaski Democrat, February 6, 1941, page 3.

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HOLLY RENEWS AIRPORT LEASE

Henry M. Holly has renewed his lease for the Fulton airport property and is in correspondence with army officials on a plan to use the local field for maneuvers by the soldiers stationed at Fort Ontario.

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The Fulton Patriot,
April 10, 1941

Mexico Day Room To Be Dedicated Sunday

Mexico Day Room at Fort Ontario is to be dedicated at 3 o'clock Sunday afternoon, October 24. Every Mexican is invited to be present. A large attendance is desired. The Committee has worked hard and faithfully to make this project a success. Everyone interested in doing his part to bring happiness to a soldier who is sacrificing so much to protect those of us at home should seize this opportunity to see what Mexico has done for the comfort of Company G at Fort Ontario. The Mexico Academy and Central School Band under the direction of Harry G. Carney will present several numbers. Contributions are still needed and most acceptable.

The largest personal gift to be received for the Day home came from Mrs. Arthur Farmer, house mother for the nurses stationed at Fort Ontario. Mrs. Farmer realizes the need of the soldiers for a homey room where they may play and relax. Other contributors not reported before are: Mr. and Mrs. Walter Smith, the G.L.F., Royal Arch Masons, Mr. and Mrs. Donald Dunn, Mrs. Joy Weatherup of Central Square, Geo. Pabst, Joseph Tagliareni, Ivan Korenyok, Rev. Cecil Plumb, Frank Smedley, The Telephone Operators, Mrs. Arthur Storr, Mrs. Miriam Oakes, Mr. and Mrs. Clayton Lockwood, Mrs. Walter Holbrook, Mrs. Hubert Smith, Mr. and Mrs. Avery Fish, Mr. and Mrs. P. H. Feeney, Mrs. Vest Cedlins, Mrs. Henderson, Mrs. Glen Whitney, Mrs. Beedy, Mrs. Warren Stone, Mrs. Ernest Mignery, Mrs. Lyndon Evale, Mr. and Mrs. Marshall Parker and the Misses Mary Spicer, Helen Storr and Margaret Taylor.

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Mexico Independent,
October 21, 1943, page 1.