

NORTH COUNTRY NOTES

ISSUED OCCASIONALLY BY THE
CLINTON COUNTY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

No. 26

Allan S. Everest and Charles W. McLellan, Editors

Mar. 1966

The Next Meeting

of the Association will be held on Monday evening, Mar. 7, 1966, at 8 o'clock, in the Association Rooms over the Plattsburgh Public Library.

The topic will be "Railroads of the North Country", by Mr. Nelson Williams. Mr. Williams was formerly the station agent at Plattsburgh, and maintains his home here, but he is now the Transportation Analyst at the D and H general office in Albany.

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NEW PUBLICATION

Mrs. Benjamin Allen has compiled a "History of Methodism in Plattsburgh." It is illustrated and is available as an attractive pamphlet at the Methodist church office.

The Whitehall and Plattsburgh Railroad

After the Civil War, New Yorkers witnessed a fever of railroad construction the like of which had never been seen before (or since). The railroads became the favorite means of transportation in New York, competing directly with highway, waterway and canal systems.

The Whitehall and Plattsburgh Railroad (W & P RR) was a missing link in the chain of railroads that crisscrossed eastern New York state. All the other sections from Albany to Montreal had been completed by 1855, but the long-awaited W & P RR was not finished until 1875. Prior to its construction, the traveler from Plattsburgh to New York City could take one of the steamers on Lake Champlain to Whitehall, or go to Mooers by train, and through Vermont via Rutland to New York.

The W & P RR was owned by the New York and Canada Railroad, and the Delaware and Hudson Canal Company (forerunner of the D & H) held a perpetual lease on the line for which it was to pay 30% of the gross earnings. The D & H Canal Company apparently acquired the lease in order to open new markets for its Pennsylvania coal, and to prevent any other company from competing with its boats plying between Whitehall and Plattsburgh.

The W & P RR Company was incorporated and the survey made in 1861, but because of the Civil War, the earth was not broken until February 20, 1869 at Crown Point. In two years it was open from Ticonderoga to Crown Point, a distance of sixteen miles. A section was open from Plattsburgh to the Ausable River, and from Port Henry south about two miles along the edge of the lake the grading and piling was almost done.

Most of the work was completed by 1873, and in October 1875 all was done except a mile of track still to be laid between Westport and Whallonsburgh. The line was finally finished in November and an excursion with 200 officials traveled over the road for the first time on November 4th. All the way up and down the line there were elaborate celebrations.

The line in places was an engineering marvel, for it doesn't exceed 300 feet above sea level, nor does it go farther from the lake shore than six miles. At places along the lake high rock cliffs slowed down construction. When work was being done near Port Henry, two canal boats were lashed together, side by side, and sent down the lake with a locomotive, tender and five cars aboard. They were landed at the wharf and a track was laid up to the railroad. A number of such ingenious methods were used by the construction crews.

During construction and early operation the line was never short of capital. The entire road cost \$7,000,000. Four million were borrowed in England. Municipalities bought stock totalling \$230,000, for which they issued bonds. In 1867 the line received a donation of \$70,390 from the state. The town of Plattsburgh bought \$100,000 of stock upon completion of the road bed and issued 30-year bonds.

The results of this railroad were felt almost immediately. It created a direct communication from Montreal to New York City. Merchants of lower New York were able to make shipments all winter to northern New York and Canada, while the mineral wealth of northern New York developed rapidly. This "missing link" enabled the North Country to develop along with the rest of a growing New York state.

George M. O'Connor, SUC

The Home Guard

It was autumn and the country was struggling through the last stages of a savage civil war. But people in the Champlain valley felt secure and remote from the theatres of activity. They were reminded of it chiefly by the newspaper accounts of battles, drafts or casualties.

Then on October 19, 1864 in St. Albans, Vermont, the North Country suddenly turned into a battle ground. A raiding party of from thirty to forty men robbed the banks and held the populace at bay while they fired a few of the public buildings. After this they promptly proceeded to Canada with their booty.

The news spread quickly along the northern border, and soon Plattsburgh was in a state of alarm. On October 20, 1864 a meeting was called in the town hall. William Palmer was elected chairman, and Smith M. Weed and Edmund Brown secretaries at that time. The purpose of the meeting was to protect the citizens and their property from rebel invasion from the north. A Safety Committee was appointed to investigate the need and the type of protection needed. The committee consisted of Peter S. Palmer, County Judge, William Reed, Supervisor, Major George Clendon, Probate Marshal, Lt. Colonel W. A. Fuller, 32nd NYSN and O. Town, Sheriff. Then the meeting was adjourned until two nights later.

After the report of the Safety Committee at the second meeting, it was decided to form the Plattsburgh Home Guard. This Guard was composed of two companies headed by Peter LaFountain of Dannemora and B. M. Beckwith of Plattsburgh. The headquarters was to be in the Plattsburgh Town Hall and its duties were to alternate between the two companies and to include the patrolling of the streets and highways, especially to the north.

Although no record is available of an official call-out of the guard, there are accounts of many skirmishes on the border. Also, the **Plattsburgh Sentinel** declared "from a reported conversation with a so-called reliable source that the original plan of the St. Albans raiders was to take Plattsburgh and it was changed two days before the St. Albans raid." On Monday, October 24, 1864, Sheriff Town and Mr. Witherill were in Montreal and talked with a Mr. George N. Sanders, who threatened continued raids on the frontier. They were supposedly in retaliation for Union destructiveness in the Shenandoah Valley.

This threat was not carried much beyond the quick riding and shooting by Rebel scouts along the Champlain and Rouses Point sections of the border. But the threat was enough for Major General Dix to issue General Order No. 97 which authorized troops to shoot down or pursue any Rebel marauders, even into Canada. The Department of State, over the signature of William H. Seward, on December 17, 1864 issued this proclamation:

~~"The President directs that except emigrant passengers directly entering an American Port by sea, no travelers shall hereafter enter the United States of America from any foreign country without a Pass Port . . ."~~

Canadian-American relations suffered as a result of the activities of Rebel raiders in northern New York. The "Plattsburgh Home Guard" continued its role of protector of citizens and property for the rest of the winter of 1864-65. But the only casualty sustained by the Guard occurred when one of its members shot himself in the foot while on duty.

John Stewart, SUC

"TREES"

Some time ago we read about the death of a famous tree. On the campus of Rutgers University the tree which perhaps inspired Joyce Kilmer's poem, "Trees", was taken down because age and disease made it dangerous. Although the poem is not great literature, its popularity gave the event a certain newsworthiness.

Plattsburgh also claims to be the source of Kilmer's inspiration. When the Catholic Summer School of America was located at Cliff Haven, he was a frequent visitor and lecturer. It was widely believed that he was moved to write his poem by the trees of Clinton County.

Officials at the Summer School publicly stated their belief that the trees on their campus were the source of Kilmer's idea. A beautiful maple tree was consequently named in his honor. So far as is known, the author never indicated any specific tree in connection with his work. Therefore, Plattsburgh is free to state its claim along with that of Rutgers, and probably others. Unfortunately, the tree is lost; along with the buildings that once comprised the Summer School, it has been replaced by the Cliff Haven Estates.

MATTERS OF PRESERVATION

CRAB ISLAND, which has just been declared surplus by the federal government. Since it has great historic and recreational value, letters have gone to the State Conservation Department and to the governing bodies of the county and the town of Plattsburgh.

STONE BARRACKS on the Air Base, declared expendable by the Air Force. It was built in 1838 and is the last of its generation of structures. The State Historian has indicated possibilities for state or local acquisition.

FORT BROWN, the last remaining of the fortifications at the time of the battle of Plattsburgh. It is beside route 9, opposite the Air Base. The Association helped with the city application for acquisition of the area.

FORT MONTGOMERY, in Rouses Point. Investigation is just beginning of ways to preserve this imposing ruin, perhaps by conversion into a park or other recreation area.

RIDDLE OF THE MONTH

Who was the architect of the Plattsburgh City Hall, and when was it built? Send a postcard with your answer to Mrs. Beyer, address printed within. The correct answer with the earliest postmark will be published in the next bulletin.

Last month's riddle about North Africa: No one produced the correct answer. It was a name in common use at the turn of the century to designate the region north of Beartown, so called because a colony of Negroes once lived there, including a family by the name of Jankard.

Recorded from Patrick Knowles in 1899

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Issued by the

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