

NORTH COUNTRY NOTES

Issued Monthly by the Clinton County Historical Association

48 Court Street, Plattsburgh NY 12901, 518-561-0340

No. 326 PRESIDENT: Mark A. McCullough EDITOR: Helen W. Allan December 1995

DECEMBER PROGRAM

CCHA's 1995 series of Monday evening programs ends with a presentation by James Ciborski, Clinton County Historian. Entitled "PATRIOTIC FERVOR OR CAPITALIST PAWN: The Expansion of Plattsburgh Barracks, 1892-1897", Mr. Ciborski's talk examines the prevailing economic, military and political factors during that era. He explains how and why the expansion of the Barracks came about despite the post's impending closure. To say the least, this lecture is a timely one in light of the closure of Plattsburgh Air Force Base.

James Ciborski, a native of Allegan, Michigan, first came to PAFB while serving with USAF in 1971-72. He was reassigned to the base ten years later and served as its historian, 1982-84. His current research has resulted from studies at SUNY Plattsburgh.

The program will take place in the Government Center community meeting room at 7:30 p.m. on Monday, December 4. It is free and open to the public.

CCHA HAS NEW DIRECTOR/CURATOR

The Historical Association's Board of Directors is pleased to announce the appointment of Jane E. Rupp to the position of director of the Association and curator of the Clinton County Historical Museum. A native of Ohio, Ms. Rupp graduated from Ohio State University with a B.S. in Education. She also holds a master's degree in History from Wright State University with a concentration in museum and archival administration. Ms. Rupp is presently affiliated with the Marion County Historical Society, Marion, Ohio. In addition to her experience as a teacher, Jane Rupp is an accomplished pianist and an enthusiastic traveler. The Association anticipates that Ms. Rupp will assume her new position in Clinton County on January 1, 1996.

LAST CALL FOR TICKETS!

Please don't forget that the dollhouse drawing will take place on Saturday, December 16 at the Museum. If you haven't sent in your tickets, there is still plenty of time to do so. In case you haven't seen our posters, this year's dollhouse is a furnished rustic farmhouse. This is the last time we'll appeal to our members for financial support in 1995. That's good news!

ROBINSON'S TAVERN ON THE MILITARY TURNPIKE

by Andrew S. Broadwell

Note: One of the editor's favorite stories concerns the famous old Robinson Tavern on the Military Turnpike northwest of Plattsburgh. Only a shell today, the ruined walls still excite curiosity in observers who try to conjure up images of the occupants of horse-drawn vehicles who made the inn so important in early Clinton County. In 1967 Andrew S. Broadwell, a noted North Country collector of antiques and local history, sat down to write a history of Robinson's Tavern. His original paper is in the collections of the Clinton County Historical Museum. Mr. Broadwell cited as his sources for anecdotes and miscellaneous information: Louis G. Robinson of West Chazy, Mrs. Benjamin F. (Nell) Sullivan of Chazy and Mr. David Bruce of Chazy.

"Approximately thirteen miles from Plattsburgh on the east side of the Military Turnpike stands an ancient stone structure once well known in this area as Robinson's Tavern. It was built in 1823 by Lewis S. Robinson, one of the twelve children of Daniel and Thankful (Sage) Robinson who settled in Plattsburgh, probably before 1790.

If possible, it would have been better to have seen the tavern years ago. The roof was then intact; the windows were still without missing panes of glass; the paint had not peeled off and the doors were not gone. The great fireplaces were then not silent and dust covered; the pots and pot hooks, hanging from the fireplace cranes, were not rusty nor the game spits unworkable. Yet, on a late afternoon in May, the setting sun will light up the weathered old stones of the house and the blossoms of the giant lilac trees near the front entrance so that the harshness of the ruin is softened in the afterglow and, for a moment or two, before the wide chimneys become dark silhouettes against the sky, it almost looks like the place of importance it once was when early travelers stopped here en route to Chateaugay, Malone and Sackett's Harbor.

The original "Robinson's Tavern", probably built before 1810 by Daniel Robinson, was a log structure located on the southwest side of the Turnpike. When it was rumored, about 1805, that a road leading northwest from Plattsburgh was to be built to connect Judge William Bailey's settlement at Chateaugay and the iron ore bed at Williamstown with the lake, Mr. and Mrs. Daniel Robinson decided to sell their home at the south end of Margaret Street and locate in this area and operate a tavern.

Daniel had enlisted in the Continental Army on his eighteenth birthday, May 19, 1775, and following his discharge had been married in Middletown, Connecticut on June 12, 1783. The young couple, with many friends and neighbors from Dutchess County and neighboring Connecticut communities, were attracted to the new settlement at Plattsburgh which they usually reached by coming up the Hudson River to Fort Edward, then by land to Lake George, then about four miles by land to Lake Champlain, finally landing at Ransom's Landing on Cumberland Head.

Daniel Robinson soon made name for himself in the little Plattsburgh settlement. He was one of the champion spearers of trout and salmon, which he speared from the lower bridge, over the Saranac River. He was known by the nickname "Governor", which he obtained in an athletic contest in which the agreement had been that the victor would thereafter be referred to by the vanquished as "Governor." When the lower bridge, which had been built in 1797, was carried away by a freshet, Robinson, with several others, was inside the stone grist mill frantically trying to remove the machinery before the building collapsed. When the walls finally crumbled, he was the only one still working and was carried downstream as far as Peter Saily's ashery, one hundred rods below, where he was rescued by men standing on the shore. When the water subsided, the

millstone was found at the place where Robinson had been drawn out of the river. The "Governor" declared that when he found the building was about to collapse, he clung to the millstone for safety and "floated" on it to that point. This freshet was for many years afterward referred to as the one "when Governor Robinson rode down the river on a millstone."

When Daniel Robinson moved to the Turnpike area, he bought a farm (part of Lot No. 95 of the Duerville Patent) in what is now the township of Chazy. He built a log house near a pond, located about a mile south of the spot which he later owned. Unfortunately, the Chateaugay road, once it was built, did not follow the line of the original survey so the Robinsons had to go farther north, on the southwest side of the road, to build the tavern they planned, and which later became such a famous landmark.

The original tavern was a long, commodious log structure with a "bar-room" in one end, an open shed for wood and carriages in the middle, and a kitchen and a dining room in the other end. All the floors were of hard-packed earth and the huge back logs for the fireplaces were so large that they had to be hauled into the rooms by a horse and the men then rolled them into the fireplaces. It is supposed that sleeping accommodations were available in the loft and that in cold weather many travelers were probably glad to curl up in blankets on the first floor near the warm hearth stones.

The old log tavern was superseded by a stone building, located on the opposite side of the road, which had all the conveniences of that time. It consisted of three different floor levels and, though not commodious, probably could serve its clientele admirably as by this time there were so many other taverns along the turnpike that travelers could stop conveniently at the one most preferred. Mr. and Mrs. Daniel Robinson lived a number of years after the stone tavern was completed, both dying during the winter of 1837-38, their son Lewis S. having previously taken over the business.

In 1811, a law had been passed requiring the managers of the lottery for the purchase of the botanic garden to raise \$5,000 for the improvement of the road from Plattsburgh to Chateaugay, under the direction of Peter Saily, Jonathan Griffin and James Ormsbee, and the year following another act had been passed authorizing the State Treasurer to advance the money in anticipation of the drawing of the lottery. This small amount was found inadequate for the construction of a passable road. Early accounts tell of difficulties encountered by travelers who used this hazardous route. Yet nothing further was done until 1817 when the road was improved by the United States troops then stationed at Plattsburgh. This work commenced in August of that year, at a point three miles west from the village (Thorne's Corners, later known as Sunrise Hotel Corners) by a detachment of the Sixth Regiment under command of Lieut. Col. Snelling and was continued from year to year until twenty-four miles of the distance had been completed. Later, in 1822, the sum of \$7,000 was appropriated by the Legislature to complete the road to Chateaugay, a distance of fourteen miles. During this time, Robinson's Tavern had been in operation and was well known by travelers going west.

In September 1813, a distinguished visitor at Robinson's was the Rev. Eleazar Williams (the "Lost Dauphin"). He roamed the country from the Caughnawaga Villages to Albany and Oneida Castle, then to Detroit and Green Bay, in connection with his Indian affairs and the Secret Corps of Observation. "Mr. Williams" or "Louis XVII of France", whichever he was, became very interested in the newborn son of Louis S. Robinson (called the "Young Governor") and his wife, Hannah (Eldred) Robinson. Since the baby was as yet unnamed, they could hardly refuse when such an important person asked that they do him the honor of naming the baby "Eleazar Williams Robinson" with the promise of a "pot of gold" to be forthcoming for good measure. This is how Eleazar Robinson came by his name, but the pot of gold never materialised."

To be continued in the January issue of North Country Notes.

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SLATE NAMED FOR BOARD

David C. Stortz, chairman of CCHA's nominating committee for 1996, has announced the following slate of nominees for three year terms on the Board of Directors:

Bradley G. Knapp Cornelia Forrence Cecily Feldman
Jane West William Sabourin

The election will take place at the December 4 program and nominations will also be accepted from the floor. Directors are eligible to serve for two consecutive terms of three years.

THANKS TO OUR VOLUNTEERS

As the year ends, we want to say a special thank you to the folks who volunteer their time for the Historical Association and its museum. The list of people who helped staff our summer antiques show and vintage car meet is far too long to print in this limited space. Suffice it to say, many thanks to you all. Then there are the year-round volunteer docents and other helpers: Joan Duquette, Judy Heintz, Doris McKee, Fred Meyer, Nicole Rabideau, Frieda Walker and Connie Wheeler. Whether they are members of the Retired Senior Volunteer Program or not, these are the folks who help to keep the museum's wheels turning. And from your retiring director/curator, the biggest thank you of all. I think you are the greatest!

A NEW LOOK IN THE MUSEUM SHOP

As the holidays approach, CCHA will be ready to welcome them with merchandise especially chosen to appeal to members and friends. Board member Shirley Koester and helpers are working hard to provide a range of ornaments, craft items and other goodies for the eager (or anxious) shopper. Be sure to stop by the museum at 48 Court Street for a look at the goods we're offering. And don't forget, your purchases help to support the museum and the Association's programs in these days of dwindling government funding. We've received many orders for the Valcour lighthouse tree and shelf ornaments. It's not too late to place your order!