

# ROBINSON'S TAVERN ON THE MILITARY TURNPIKE

by Andrew S. Broadwell

*Editor's note: In December we printed the first instalment of an essay written in 1967 by antiques collector and local historian Andrew Broadwell of Rouses Point. His description of the old Robinson Tavern on the Military Turnpike evokes the early days of Clinton County's settlement and the sturdy people who created the county we live in today. Here is the second part of Mr. Broadwell's story.*

"In the summer of 1817, it was announced that President James Monroe would tour the northern states, stopping in Plattsburgh en route to Sackett's Harbor. This proclamation caused more than a little excitement. Meetings were held, committees appointed and plans made weeks in advance. The Plattsburgh Village Trustees, in a moment of patriotic fervor, voted to take the money raised for the new fire engine and use it to defray the expenses of the reception.

On Sunday, July 17, the President arrived at Cumberland Head on the steamboat "Phoenix" and was conveyed to the village wharf in Col. Atkinson's barge. From the wharf, he was escorted to the tavern of Israel Green on Bridge Street by the U.S. Infantry, Captain Gilead Sperry's Company of Horse, and the Plattsburgh Rifles. At the hotel, Reuben Walworth delivered the address of welcome. As the President passed into the house, the young ladies from Miss Cook's and Miss Forrence's Schools strewed flowers in his path. He attended services at the Presbyterian Church, went to a party at Captain Smith's, and spent the evening at Judge Delord's. The "Crowning Act of Reception", according to an old report, was reserved for Monday. Several days before the President's arrival, the reception committee had gone out on the Turnpike near Robinson's Tavern where a "murmuring brook" crossed the old road, and had erected a "sylvan bower" in a well-shaded clearing where a "bounteous repast" would be served to the President when his coach arrived at Robinson's.

Having heard about the preparations for the "Collation", families of the surrounding area dropped their work and gathered in groups along the Turnpike to see the Presidential party pass by. Some families, not knowing when the event would take place, came on Sunday and waited all night, wherever they could find shelter, to be ready for the big event. One little girl (a sister of Esther Scribner, later Mrs. Frank Sanborn of Beekmantown and Morrisonville) became so tired that when the cavalcade did finally arrive at her vantage point, she was sound asleep, and never could say as her mother had planned, "I once saw President Monroe on the Turnpike."

Monday, July 18, 1817, was indeed a day to be long remembered at Robinson's. It is said that much of the food was prepared there, and with an unusually large number of people in the vicinity seeking both food and drink, it must have been a hive of activity. Mr. Lewis G. Robinson of West Chazy still has in his possession one of the wooden dough trays, which is a deep, slope-sided box for kneading, setting and raising bread dough, said to have been used by his forebears at the time of President Monroe's "Collation." (*Editor's note: The dough box was bought at auction by Mr. Broadwell and given to the Clinton County Historical Association. It is currently on display in the museum.*)

About two o'clock, the Presidential party, which had left Plattsburgh at ten in the morning and had been delayed by those who came to see and cheer, finally reached the spot near Robinson's where the committee and a large delegation were waiting. Captain Sperry conducted them off the road and the reception committee seated the President on a canopied seat decorated with greens and wildflowers. After much "bowing and scraping", the dinner was served and "all partook of the bounteous feast". Following the "Collation", the Presidential party

resumed its journey, the citizens returned to their homes and the trustees watched the village of Plattsburgh for another year without a fire engine. The President and his escort had eaten it up in that "shaded bower" by the "murmuring brook" near Robinson's Tavern.

In 1823, with the road so much improved, Jonathan Thompson, the "mail carrier", commenced running a stage once a week between Plattsburgh and Ogdensburgh, leaving the village every Tuesday morning and arriving at Ogdensburgh on Thursday evening. This line connected with the steamboats on Lake Champlain and Lake Ontario, and was advertised as the "best route between the Eastern States and the country bordering the Great Lakes and the St. Lawrence." Mr. Thompson announced that he would carry his passengers in "covered spring carriages, strong and commodious", and he promised "excellent public houses on the route", and "a very good road for a new country." By December 1824, the stages made two trips each week. By July 1837, a daily mail route was first established between Ogdensburgh and Plattsburgh. Relays of horses were kept by the stage line at Robinson's and at other inns on the Turnpike.

With the completion of the Great Northern Railroad on October 1, 1850, (later known as the O.L. & C.), travel on the Military Turnpike gradually dwindled, and had it not been for the tolls collected since 1823 at the toll-gate near McGregor's Tavern (formerly the property of Benjamin Hazen Mooers) about eighteen miles from Plattsburgh, the road would have become neglected and difficult to travel, just as it was after the tolls were no longer charged. It is said that so much money was collected from the Turnpike tolls that there was enough to build the first bridge over the gorge at Chateaugay.

As travel on the Turnpike declined, so did business at Robinson's. The last one of the Robinson family to run the tavern was Samantha Robinson who married William Rowlson. It was they who built the large white farmhouse just south of the stone tavern. Samantha was a daughter of Lewis S. (the "young governor") and a sister of Eleazar and Lewis Robinson. Lewis (no middle initial) was the grandfather of Mr. Lewis G. Robinson, the well-known building supplies dealer of West Chazy and the last living member of his generation.

The old tavern and other farm property later came into the possession of the Felton family of West Chazy; then later, Mr. Irving Bruce. Mr. Bruce had fond recollections of the old stone tavern where he and other boys of his age had played during recess while attending a nearby district school. When Mr. Bruce became owner, he put a new roof on the building to preserve what was left of the old place as the interior had been dismantled by the previous owner and could no longer be used for human habitation without extensive remodeling. The property is now owned by Mr. David Bruce (1967), one of the sons of Irving Bruce, who can recall much of the past history of the place and would like to see it preserved.

As for the stone tavern, it just stands silent and empty awaiting its fate. Shall its venerable walls, that look as though they had grown out of the fields which surround it, be allowed to fall into complete decay, or shall a more kindly destiny ordain that they be preserved as a part of one of the North Country's most interesting relics of a bygone age?"

## **McMASTERS WRITING PRIZE**

Now in its 21st year, the McMasters Prize of \$150 for excellent writing about the North Country is offered annually by the Historical Association. The deadline for manuscripts of 3,000 words or more is February 1, 1996. A submission may be a piece of historical fiction if clearly indicated by the author. Manuscripts should not reveal the author's name, but a cover letter should be sent indicating the author's name, address and telephone number. Submissions should be sent to the Director, CCHA, 48 Court Street, Plattsburgh, NY 12901.

## NORTH COUNTRY NOTES

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### EXHIBITION PLANS

CCHA is currently planning a major exhibition to be presented in 1996. Tentatively titled "The Irish Heritage of Clinton County", the exhibition will explore and interpret immigration by Irish people into the North Country during the time of the Great Famine in Ireland and at later dates. Members and friends of the museum are invited to suggest loans of materials that would enhance the exhibition. We suspect there are many family treasures in Clinton County that would provide a fascinating insight into this significant trend in the mid-19th century.

We wish to acknowledge several donations that have been made to fund the exhibition. The donors include F.W. Myers & Co., Inc., Bill McBride Chevrolet, Inc., and Robert J. Fitzgerald. Since there is no government funding for this project, further donations are solicited and will be gratefully received.

### BOARD MEMBERS AND OFFICERS IN 1996

At CCHA's December membership meeting the following five people were elected to the Board of Directors: Cecily Feldman, Cornelia Forrence, Bradley Knapp, William Sabourin and Jane West. As the class of 1998, they join Fred Smith, Keith Herkalo, James Giroux and John McKenna (Class of 1996) and Jaimie Trautman, David Martin, David Stortz, William Laundry and Shirley Koester (Class of 1997). The officers for 1996 were elected at the December Board meeting. They are as follows:

President: David Stortz  
Vice-President: Keith Herkalo  
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