

NORTH COUNTRY NOTES

ISSUED MONTHLY EXCEPT SUMMER BY THE

CLINTON COUNTY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

No. 92

Allan S. Everest and Charles W. McLellan, Editors

March, 1973

The March Meeting

of the Association will take place on Monday evening, March 5, at 8 o'clock in the Auditorium of the Plattsburgh Public Library. The speaker will be Mr. John Ross, historian of Rouses Point, who will talk on "Irving Bacheller's Visit and other Tales of the Champlain Valley." The public is cordially invited.

FROM THE GENEALOGICAL SOCIETY OF NEW JERSEY

(The following is part of a letter from the above society to Mr. David Martin and the Genealogical Committee of the Association thanking them for their help.)

"We were very pleased to see your packet with the abstract of the 1850 Clinton Co., N. Y. census. It was a nice piece of work, and knowing that it was a cooperative effort we are especially appreciative to all those who made a contribution. Please extend the thanks of the Genealogical Society to all those who helped you in any way.

The Emigrant Register is a very large and ambitious project, so that in doing one effort it is hard to appreciate the value of each piece. But when all the 1850 census records are added together we will have a hitherto hidden picture revealed of just where the Jerseyborn had emigrated to in the year 1850. There were about as many Jersey born in Clinton Co. as I had estimated—not a large number but one certainly indicative of some northward movement from this state. As our Emigrant Register forms are designed to make residence places visible, we will in time have many more forms on file which identify Clinton Co. as a place of one-time residence. We are preparing a geographical index, so that someday it will be easy to determine who in the Register once lived in Clinton Co. This should be of help to future Clinton Co. historians as well as family record searchers—and these records will be readily available to such searchers."

RIDDLE OF THE MONTH

Old riddle: The inclusive dates of the Catholic Summer School in Plattsburgh were 1893-95 (held in public buildings in the village), 1896 and thereafter at Cliff Haven, until the 1930's, when it was closed.

New riddle: What were the famous songs that one-time Plattsburghers the Rev. John Henry Hopkins and Samuel Woodworth composed?

ADDRESS FOR SUBSCRIPTIONS

Memberships and queries of a financial nature should be addressed to the new Treasurer, Mr. John Baxter, Box 112, West Chazy, N. Y. 12992.

William Gilliland and the American Revolution

The life of William Gilliland is the tragic story of a man who accumulated wealth and fame and lost it all during and after the American Revolution. There is an abundance of available material on his life, his pioneer settlement and his subsequent tumultuous state of affairs, yet there are a number of conflicting reports about him. I found as many as four or five different dates for the same incident and, more importantly, there are dark periods during parts of his life. This report is as accurate an account as possible in view of the conflicting data and the unknown years.

William Gilliland was born in 1734 in Caddy near the city of Armagh, Ireland. He reportedly went to school in Armagh, undertaking a Liberal Arts-Humanities course of study. He fell in love with Betsey Eccles, the sister of Sir Charles Eccles, then head of the family at Fintona as well as High Sheriff of County Tyrone. But the Gillilands' disparity of birth and fortune was an insuperable barrier to the fulfillment of their wishes. Betsey's father brought it about that Gilliland was impressed into the British Army and sent to America to fight in a colonial war. He served four years in the French and Indian War and in 1758 received an honorable discharge from the army at Philadelphia. He obtained this on the plea that he was ill and had two better men to take his place.

He decided to try his luck in New York City. Before leaving Philadelphia he met Elizabeth Phagan, and she arranged his passage to New York on her father's ship. There he found employment in Phagan's shipping office as an accountant. He subsequently married Elizabeth in February 1759. With her he received a dowry of 1,500 pounds (about \$3,800). The Vermont Historical Society PROCEEDINGS estimate that he received about \$15,000. When Mr. Phagan died William took complete control of the mercantile firm. He decided to sell out because British ships were making much trouble for American shipping, and to buy land in the unsurveyed wilderness of northern New York. He had heard of desirable tracts in the Champlain Valley.

So in 1764 he started purchasing land the amount and location of which are still debated in various publications. Much of it was apparently bought from indigent soldiers who preferred cash to land rights in what Gilliland himself called a "howling wilderness". In any event he accumulated approximately 60,000 to 70,000 acres of land from 1764 on, which Winslow Watson says encompassed twelve land grants. Seven were at Willsborough, two at Westport, three at Salmon River, and others at Cumberland Head and elsewhere.

After the initial purchase of lands he set out for the Bouquet River on May 10, 1765 with a party of about thirteen—Marjorie Porter says nine. This group included a minister, eight workmen and four women. His journal starts with this date and continues to a few years before his death. Gilliland reached Fort Edward on May 25, Fort George on May 29, Ticonderoga on June 1 and Bouquet River on June 8. He took with him 20 oxen, 20 cows, a bull, a number of calves and 80 barrels of stores, logs and other necessities.

He named his settlement at Willsborough "Milltown" and subsequently founded several towns in this vicinity: Westport, which he originally called Bessboro, also the places known as Janesboro (Salmon River), Charlottesboro (Cumberland Head) and Elizabethtown (Essex). Three of these were named after his daughters and one for his wife, Elizabeth. Finally, there was Jimmy's Point (in Essex). Gilliland's lands were surveyed and Willsborough started to prosper. It was soon to have saw mills, smitheries, gardens, grist mills, a school and numerous houses. The buildings that he and his group erected were the first dwellings by civilized man on the west side of Lake Champlain between Crown Point and the northern end of the lake. By 1775 Gilliland's annual income was 600 pounds sterling, prosperous figure for the time.

Gilliland ran his colony as the proprietor in charge of all affairs whether political or moral, and occasionally there were overtones of something like a feudal rule. However, on St. Patrick's Day in 1775 the inhabitants convened in solemn assembly and constituted themselves, in effect, a pure democracy. They chose a moderator (Gilliland), two superintendents of roads and bridges, three appraisers of damages and a town clerk. There were many tenant farmers on Gilliland's lands by this time who usually paid a small fee or returned part of the produce of their land.

With the outbreak of the American Revolution the downfall in Gilliland's life begins. One out of every three of his tenants joined the Patriots. But many others were frightened and fell for the allure of the protection offered by Canada. A great

deal of Gilliland's wealth in silver and cash was delivered to the British by his tenants, who forgot they owed loyalty to this man. The British offered a reward for his capture, and to make things worse he was under suspicion by the colonies because of the British sympathies of many of his tenants. The Governor of Canada offered \$500 for his arrest. Some of his own tenants tried to seize him. The sheriff of Tryon County penetrated into the settlement with four Tories and three savages to seize him but they were captured and sent to Crown Point.

His loyalty was never in doubt as far as helping the colonial army was concerned. He is credited by some historians with originating the plan to capture Fort Ticonderoga. Later, a command of 2,000 men assembled at Crown Point and Ticonderoga under Schuyler and Montgomery for an invasion of Canada. Gilliland opened his settlement to the sick, wounded, and passing armies. He entertained hundreds of men at his own expense and never charged a cent for vegetables, salmon, milk, or anything else he had to spare. At times he took sick and wounded officers to Ticonderoga (45 miles distant) at his own expense. He caused every soldier who died at his settlement to be buried in decent coffins with the honors of war.

But the Patriots were driven out of Canada and Gilliland's settlement was now wide open to the British forces. Most of his settlers abandoned their farms and fled with what little they could, the remainder embracing the amnesty of the British officers. Gilliland sent his family to Crown Point (his wife had died in either 1773 or 1774), and sank his mills and other ponderous articles in the river or buried them in repositories which were later treacherously revealed and seized.

To make matters worse, Arnold was cruising on Lake Champlain and his men were allowed to come ashore at Gilliland's estates, where they damaged everything in sight and stole what they did not damage. On September 1, 1776, Gilliland wrote Arnold, who was getting ready for his battle at Valcour, stating that his troops wantonly and wickedly committed great destruction on several of his plantations. Gilliland demanded justice and reparations, asserting that Arnold's men destroyed fields of potatoes, peas and corn, as well as tools and other irons, windows, sleighs, chairs, doors and so on. Arnold ignored Gilliland's requests but insisted Gilliland was revolted at the injustice and carried his case to higher authorities, Gates and Washington.

Arnold then accused Gilliland of disloyalty and fraud upon the government. He charged that Gilliland sent expresses to the enemy and harbored them in his house. He ordered Gilliland to be sent to Gates at headquarters, but Gates dropped the charges as not sufficiently serious. But Gilliland was sent to Albany with his family, not as a prisoner but still under suspicion. There he remained until the end of the war. His house was severely taxed, his horse stolen, his slaves enticed away and his household goods pillaged. In 1777 he set forth all his problems in a memorial to Congress. It contained much insight into Arnold's character and marked Gilliland as a man of intelligence, for it was a remarkable document. It states in part:

"It is not in mine, but it is in your power to bring him to justice. . . . If temerity, if rashness, impudence and error can recommend him to you, he is allowed to be amply supplied with these qualities, and many people think they ought to recommend him in a peculiar manner to Lord North, who, in gratitude for his having done more injury to the American cause than all the ministerial troops have the power of doing, ought to reward him with a generous pension . . ."

In 1778 Gilliland was accused of buying contraband articles picked up after the battle of Saratoga and of gossiping with a man named Vanvranka about the bad luck the Americans were having on the Brandywine. For these misdemeanors he was seized and imprisoned in the fort at Albany. While in Albany, first Carleton and then Burgoyne, with their troops, passed through his lands. Refugee Tories and other irregulars, fugitives from the fate which was impending over the British army, traversed the settlement on the Bouquet, and these various marauders left only ashes and desolation in their track.

Gilliland returned to his settlement after peace was established and after six in exile, but he found only wanton and complete destruction. His estates were more desolate than when he first penetrated the wilderness to carve a settlement. Bushes and wild vegetation now usurped fields which toil and expense had wrested from the

forest, fences were decayed, bridges had fallen, roads were broken up, and charred ruins marked the sites of former buildings.

He still owned some 60,000 acres of land, but this became a sad tale. Many thousands of acres were taken from him because his patents were of British origin or were never properly filed or he had never received them. Landseekers claimed acre after acre of his property and he began costly litigation against them, but lost. They branded him a Tory in order to wrest his final holdings from him. He had to sell much land to pay off his indebtedness. Gilliland estimated his losses to the year 1791 at 70,000 pounds, New York currency.

From 1786 to 1791 he was jailed in a debtor's prison in New York City. He died in February 1796 while wandering in the snow on the lands he imagined he still owned and ruled over. He apparently lost his way while returning from an evening visit to Platt Rogers at Basin Harbor, and his body was later found in the forest. Thus tragically passed one of the Champlain Valley's earliest colonizers, a victim of the passions of the American Revolution.

Terry Gordon, SUC

MUSEUM NOTES

The museum committee is now planning a late spring opening in its new quarters on the third floor of the Plattsburgh City Hall. The Association has recently received unusually timely donations from two sources to further its museum work. One is a generous check from Maurice Crook of California, formerly of Champlain, and the other a gift of new carpeting for the museum from the Plattsburgh Mayor, Father St. Pierre.

Other recent gifts include a deed box, watch and change purse with old coins from the estate of the late Mrs. Kate Merrihew, made available by Mr. Donald Studholme; a Civil War recruiting poster, a Hotel Champlain plate, and a collection of early-century post cards.

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CLINTON COUNTY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

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