

NORTH COUNTRY NOTES

Issued Monthly By The Clinton County Historical Association

No. 257 President: John L. Myers Editor: Helen W. Allan September, 1989

SEPTEMBER PROGRAMS

Within two weeks it will be 175 years since Thomas Macdonough and Alexander Macomb made their gallant and successful bids to repulse the British invasion. The schedule of events planned for the weekend of Sept. 9-11 to celebrate that victory was published in the July/Aug. Notes. Please note that Dr. Wm. Dudley's Sunday, Sept. 10 lecture will take place in the City Hall rotunda at 7:30 p.m. On Sept. 11 Dennis Lewis will present a slide/lecture on the land battle in Clinton Community College's auditorium on the ground floor at 7:30 p.m. Due to the limited capacity of the M/V Juniper, a small number of invited guests and dignitaries will make the voyage to Crab Is. on Sept. 10. The group will include great-grandchildren and other relatives of Macdonough and members of the Macomb family.

Don't miss the battle of Plattsburgh exhibition at the County Museum which will feature a newly acquired portrait of General Macomb, loan objects which we are privileged to have, and favorite maps and prints from the permanent collection. At the Kent-Delord House Museum, Director Jeff Kelley has mounted a special exhibit through Sept. 30 - letters to and from Henry Delord which provide an insight into that gentleman's experience of the War of 1812. KDH offers tours at 10, 1 and 3 except on Sunday and Monday. The County Museum is open from 1-4 every day except Wednesday and Thursday.

Allan Everest's long-awaited book on Macomb's army career is offered at a pre-publication price of \$6.95 through Sept. 11. We hope to have Dr. Everest on hand to sign his book during the weekend of celebrations. Call the CCHA office for information.

Too early to think of Xmas? Not for some of our members who begin buying books NOW. Alexander Macomb will make a fine gift for a collector who owns all our other local history publications. If there is anyone who hasn't yet got their copy of CLINTON COUNTY: A Pictorial History, be advised - there are fewer than 100 copies left and they are at our Museum Shop (\$35.00). Also on hand - the brand new manual Wildlife Heritage of Clinton County.

"REVENUE MUST BE HAD"

The above quotation from Alexander Hamilton during the period of the United States as a very young nation is the title of a new exhibition opening at the museum on Friday, Sept. 22 with a reception at 4:00 p.m. The exhibition honors the 200th anniversary of the founding of the U.S. Customs Service, an important agency in a border county such as Clinton. Acting as advisor for the project is Robert Fitzgerald, a retired Customs officer and CCHA trustee. Julie Davies is guest curator and Helen Allan wrote the script.

The history of Customs in the North Country is a rich and intriguing one which highlights many well known names in our history such as Peter Saily, Melancthon Woolsey, Pliny Moore and Stephen Moffitt. These men witnessed or administered commerce by land and lake during the earliest days of settlement, the National Embargo Act prohibiting trade with Canada, the War of 1812, and the era of canal boats and steamboats. Some of them were appointed to posts as collectors of customs; others such as Pliny Moore let their feelings be known about said collectors. Customs was the primary source of revenue for the new nation, however, and the post of collector was one which often reflected the incumbent's status in the community (and perhaps his political leanings).

In mounting this exhibition we are grateful for the cooperation of CCHA members and friends, and the Customs Service at Ogdensburg, Rouses Point and Champlain. Scheduled to run through Nov. 30, the exhibition was made possible with public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts. In its presentation, CCHA remembers with gratitude the many years of devoted service its Board received from John Ross, Customs officer, Rouses Point.

Commissioner of Customs, No. 61.

TREASURY DEPARTMENT,
Office of Commissioner of Customs
Washington City, D.C. January 26, 1884

Sir: Hereafter, when a case arising from violation of the customs, navigation, or steamboat laws is referred to you by the United States District Attorney for suit, you will notify this Office of the date of such reference in your Report of Seizures, Fines, Penalties, and Forfeitures for the month within which it was made.

Very respectfully,

To: S. Moffitt, Esq.
Collector of Customs
Plattsburgh, N.Y.

Your obedient servant,
H.C. Johnson,
Commissioner of Customs

SIDELIGHTS ON THE SERVICE

DID YOU KNOW that some of America's most revered authors and poets were at times employed by the U.S. Customs Service?

In a letter to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote, soon after his appointment, "I see no reason to doubt my capacity to fulfill the duties, for I don't know what they are." This wry comment was made as Hawthorne entered his position as measurer in the Boston custom-house. Presumably he soon found out the nature of his responsibilities and carried them out until 1848 when the Whigs took office. Hawthorne lost his job as Surveyor of the Port of Salem after being accused of corruption.

Herman Melville, born in 1819, had an easier time of it. After many years of roaming the high seas and visiting exotic locales, which provided him with background material and inspiration for 'Moby Dick', 'Typee' and 'Omoo' among other books, Melville settled down in New York. In 1866 at the age of 47 he was appointed to Customs and held the job for 20 years. Melville did not succumb to the insidious pressure of bribery so prevalent at the time, and ended his Customs career in an honorable fashion.

Edwin Arlington Robinson came to the Customs Service through the interest shown in his poetry by Theodore Roosevelt's son, Kermit. An offer of a job from the president raised Robinson out of his life of poverty and bitterness, and he was forever grateful to the Roosevelts. Melville's edge read, "No. 75, U.S. Revenue, Port of New York."

LETTERS AT THE KENT-DELORD HOUSE

"Dear Sir
Gen'l Macomb has arrived and our Committee ought this evening to call on him, will you meet Mr. Warfird Brinkerhoff & Myself at Mr. Israel Greens at 6 o'clock this evening & we will do the preparatory needful

Yours & c
Levi Platt

Saturday 5 o'clock"

(Invitation to Henry Delord to attend a meeting upon the arrival of Gen. Macomb)

"...and I have not the least doubt that all Mr. Delord has stated to me respecting the debts due him was true and he was a sufferer to a great amount.....

Headquarters of the Army
Washington Dec'r 13th. 1834

Signed Alexander Macomb
Major General"

(From an affidavit to the U.S. Congress, 1834)

Ed. note: Don't miss this unique opportunity to study original correspondence from the Kent-Delord Collection pertaining to the War of 1812 & the battle of Plattsburgh.

THE CRAB ISLAND MONUMENT

Several years ago we published a piece entitled "Out Of Sight, Out Of Mind?" which dealt with the deplorable condition of the Crab Island monument. Subsequently, the island passed through another private owner's hands before becoming the property of the State of New York. With the passing of each winter, the monument deteriorates further. Below is an excerpt from a comment submitted to the Mayor of Plattsburgh for inclusion in recommendations to New York's Upstate Council.

"When patriotic New Yorkers and others re-dedicate the monument on Crab Island in Lake Champlain on September 10, 1989, they will contemplate an obelisk which is desperately in need of repair. On that occasion, during a weekend celebrating the 175th anniversary of the Battle of Plattsburgh, it will be sadly evident that we have not paid attention in recent years to a symbol of bravery and sacrifice shown by American and British sailors in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Owned by the Federal Government, subsequently by private individuals and now by the State of New York, the monument should be given immediate priority for repair. During the summer of 1989 an inspection of the monument was carried out at the request of the 175th anniversary celebrations committee and the Clinton County Historical Association. The resulting report indicates that the obelisk is in perilous condition. The upper ten courses of stone are loose, dislodged and lacking mortar in the joints. A few more winters of freezing and thawing water in the joints will ensure destruction of a monument that merits national recognition."

Since the Dept. of Environmental Conservation, under whose jurisdiction the island lies, has asked for suggestions from the local community on the future of the island and historic structure, we are hopeful that funding can be obtained in the very near future to restore the monument to a stable condition.

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Clinton County Historical Assn.

Box 332

Plattsburgh, N.Y. 12901

518-561-0340

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