



North Country Notes

Issue #403

Spring 2009

The Valcour Dawn Community through the eyes of outside newspapers

The *Dawn Valcour Agricultural and Horticultural Association* was an entity formed in 1874 by Col. John Wilcox, Prof. Orren Shipman, John Bentley, Albert Curley, Caleb Miller, James White, Courtney White and J. H. Woodhouse as part of a plan for a free-thinking, free-loving community to be located on Valcour Island. Shipman had connected with Wilcox after having read articles about a proposed farming community and offered an interest in his lands at Valcour. Professor Shipman's motives were seemingly questionable.

From an article by Marjorie Lansing Porter in the *Essex County Republican*, February 2, 1945:

'His offer of a haven was accepted by J. H. Woodhouse, a carpenter 25 years old, a resident of Chicago. Also by C. W. White, another carpenter 33 years old, by George E. Charles and his wife, Mary, (they have a daughter Edith, six years old), by Mrs. Augusta White, a graduate of On-erga College, Ill. (wherever that may be) and by a Professor Lyman.'

The *New York Times* September 8, 1874, extracting from the *Plattsburg Sentinel*:

'The Society of "Advanced Spitualists", or Free Lovers, of Chicago, numbering one hundred or more, with whom the general convention of Spiritualists, of which (Victoria) Woodhull is president, will assemble this month, have (sic) determined to seek some locality where their peculiar ideas can be carried out in all their fullness, unmolested by the unbelieving and cruel world.

Through the "munificence", as they are led to believe, of the somewhat notorious Owen (sic) Shipman, they have been enabled to purchase his farm of eight hundred acres on Valcour Island, and there they propose to establish a community, known as the 'Valcour Community', and similar to the Oneida Community, in the central part of our State, only more advanced and liberal in its practices. As a nucleus, in the center of the island they propose to build twelve houses, exactly alike, to be occupied by twelve groups, according to their affinities, etc., all to be controlled by a form of government peculiar to themselves, in which children over fifteen years of age, male and female, will have the right to vote. But the great fundamental feature of their community will be free love in its most complete and unrestricted form. They have also bought of Shipman, for the modest sum of \$26,000, his fruit farm on the Vermont shore, nearly opposite the island. Their vocation will be largely fruit-growing, horticulture, and like pursuits. On the 20th ult., the advanced guard of pioneers, twelve in number, left Chicago for their Mecca in Lake Champlain, where they are now supposed to be luxuriating. The chief mover in the enterprise is one Col. John Wilcox, of Omro, Wis, as spiritual author. The most notable of the party of twelve is a young lady, aged about twenty-seven years, "beautiful and accomplished", and an authoress, lecturess, and poetess. Her two cardinal doctrines, in addition to free love, are that every woman on reaching the age of eighteen should be allowed to call herself "Mistress", or 'Mrs.', and that the children should not necessarily take the surname of their parents. Whatever name was most agreeable to the mother should be given to the children. The lady's name is Mrs. H. Augustus (sic) White. She has a

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'lover' named Woodhouse, the Corresponding Secretary of the Spiritualistic Council, and an 'earnest seeker after truth.' He is still in Chicago, but expects to come on soon. The community expects large accessions from Michigan, Wisconsin, Vermont, and other States. We do not expect that the establishment of this colony within a few miles of Plattsburg will be considered a special honor, although we presume, if it prospers like the Oneida Community, it will be quite an additional attraction to excursionists, and give Valcour Island a widespread reputation. There is one redeeming characteristic of this community- they will not mix with the outside world any farther than business interests render it necessary.'

Four days later, the Times published an article based on the work of its own correspondent from Burlington:

'Among the many islands which diversify the surface of Lake Champlain, Valcour Island seems the least adapted for the purpose which a small and peculiar community now intends to put it. About 12,000 (sic) acres in extent, it lies west of the imaginary line drawn through the lake as the boundary of Vermont and New York; and on the map is marked as a part of the County of Clinton of the latter State. This fact is rather important, because, were the island within the legal jurisdiction of Vermont, there might be trouble brewing for the intended settlers. The Green Mountain State, like most hill countries the world over, has produced many men of powerful and peculiarly original mind; but as a general rule, the resident population prefers that when the originality takes such a turn as gives rise to ..., free love, and the wilder forms of spiritualism, the propounders thereof should keep clear of their native State; and they usually do....The spiritualistic party is numerous enough here to hold a yearly convention; but its members have never gone so far on the road to 'reform' as to practice free love, except, possibly, in a quiet sort of way, not intended to attract public atten-

tion....The originator of the movement is a Vermonter-in a sense a typical one, for, with the wildest and most visionary cast of mind, he possesses that never-failing shrewdness which always keeps an eye for the main chance. Mr. Orrin Shipman, the individual referred to, owns about eight hundred acres of Valcour, and a farm near this city of about two hundred. His opinions on social subjects have always been "advanced", that is to say, they were not those commonly held by his neighbors....Among the more prominent names connected with the enterprise appear, in addition to the two mentioned (Orrin Shipman and John Wilcox), those of J. W. Woodhouse, a young man hailing from Chicago, and Mr. O.C. Hall. As a result of the examination of the property by these two gentlemen, a glowing description of it was given in a lengthy circular, wherein the objects of the new community were stated, and money and recruits solicited....Here is the description of it which the author gave. I rather suspect that the gifted author must at one time have been a real estate agent.'

'Substantially fenced on the outside against our neighbor's cattle, and from the cold selfish world, a home consecrated to harmony and fraternity, soft water in abundance and available at all times. Facilities for bathing during warm weather, and skating in Winter. An elevated plateau near the center for the anticipated group of buildings, the moving tide of commerce, of lake vessels and palatial steamers, seen from all parts of the island; cool and bracing breezes in the Summer season with frequent showers, Valcour combines every advantage for any enterprise, apparently having all the facilities and elements of wealth. A commanding, attractive, unrivaled position, with richness of soil not surpassed within a thousand miles, every way natural to the best fruits of the temperate zone, the island with pure air and waters, the temperature modulated by lake waters; abundance of wood, timber and quarries; unequaled commercial facilities, almost an unrivaled focal center, and a commanding position for out objects and aims.'

Valcour Dawn, cont.

'There is much in this which will strike the average reader as having a suspiciously familiar sound....all this reminds one rather strongly of those vivid descriptions of Western lands where-with emigration agents invite the unwary to go West....As a matter of fact, Valcour Island is an excellent little place to "camp out" on, if you are on a fishing excursion. The Valcoureans propose to use it for agricultural and horticultural purposes, but unless a peculiarly hard quality of limestone be favorable for those objects, it is not easy to see in what portion of its soil they intend to raise their crops. It is wooded with hemlock, which is not so rare a tree in this section as to pay much profit on the culture of it. While the breakwater was being built at Burlington, the contractor drew the stone for it from Valcour, and possibly he may have uncovered some earth in the process. The temperature, says the circular, "is modulated by lake waters", which is rather lucky, because, as the mercury now generally goes down to something like 20 degrees below zero in the Winter, it is hard to say where it would go if not for the "modulation."....Now it may be that Valcour Island is all that the circular describes it as being, and it may be also that Mr. Shipman's lands are worth \$100,000. Seen through a spiritualistic medium, possibly they are. Valcour Island has hitherto appeared as a peculiarly bleak and stony spot, on which a furrow could only be drawn with a cold chisel; and if anyone had bought all Mr. Shipman's lands for \$10,000 cash down, it would have been thought that someone had been badly fooled in the bargain, and certainly not Mr. Shipman.'

From the *Brooklyn Eagle*, September 21, 1874:

'Valcour as a Valuable Valve

A man of some wealth and decided eccentricities has set apart a whole island (his own property) in Lake Champlain, to be a home for American free lovers, where they are to have all things in common, including one another, and where, desirably remote from the homes and haunts of decent

people, they are to devote themselves to the propagation of the new gospel of "untrammelled lives", with its general incident of a crop of malformed idiots. The name of the place is Valcour Island. "Valcour" is euphonious enough to have been devised (or stolen) "by the author of Rutledge," or some other young lady of flexible taste. The "retreat" is situated at the upper end of Lake Champlain, and is described by florid correspondents as a thing of beauty, cushioned with velvet and environed by mountains of grandeur on either side. This is Summer time, or such early Autumn time as to interfere with a clear idea of what the average condition of the place is all year round. We have no doubt that the snow remains on the ground till May 1, and that the mosquitoes already are as big as Lawton blackberries. Probably a very fair island is Valcour, but its latitude proves it cannot be the tropical place which it is "cracked up" to be. Whatever the advantages of the location, however, the uses to which it is to be put are not doubtful. The owner of it, a Mr. Shipman, is described as an ugly, grizzled hermit-like old fellow, with "ideas" on nearly everything except decency, and with a knack of money making which every Vermonter draws in with his mother's milk. ...'

The writer goes on to surmise that Professor Wilcox must be the same Prof. Wilcox who had already caused a stir in Brooklyn as a part of suffrage conventions and peace societies. He proposes that Wilcox should be joined on the island by other Brooklyn "reformers" like Mr. Moulton, Mr. Tilton, and Mrs. Stanton.

By February 1875 the community has announced the breakup of the colony. From the *New York Times*:

'The Valcour Communists claim they have been deceived in the value of the property transferred to them by Orrin Shipman. They supposed they were getting property worth \$100,000, of which \$76,000 was a gratuity from the philan-

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thropic reformer, Shipman, but it turns out that the "Home Farm" and Valcour Island together are not worth over \$11,000, that is partly covered by a mortgage, and that Mr. Shipman has offered to give up the property, with what money he has paid upon it, to the mortgagee, if, in the Spring, he does not find himself flush with community money. They represent that great distress to the members is the result; as they have given up their homes in various parts of the country to secure the benefit of Mr. Shipman's "generosity." At a recent meeting of the community the following resolution was passed, receiving the signature of the President and the Secretary and all of the members of the Dawn Community excepting John Wilcox and five other members, some of the five believing in the fraud but not voting for other reasons:

Resolved, That the members of the Dawn Valcour Community regard the past representation in regard to Orrin Shipman's property as a stupendous fraud...

And a few days later in the Times:

'It is not many months since the world was enlightened to the alms and prospects of the "Dawn Valcour Community." Glowing accounts were published of a fertile island in the middle of Lake Champlain; and it was announced that this "earthly paradise" had been generously transferred to a community of persons whose advanced ideas of social reform would render them free from all the ills and embarrassments which more worldly society is heir to. "Valcour" was represented as worth an immense sum, and deluded enthusiasts in all parts of the country were led to believe that an investment in the island Arcadia was not only an imperative duty which they owed their souls, but a speculation which would result in increasing their fortunes. People, who after years of toil and privation, had succeeded in founding small homes in the West, sold them at great sacrifices, and hurried to the communistic estate, freely giving their small

savings for the support of the new enterprise. Many persons did not even know what the doctrines of the Valcourites were, but who had a vague idea that a charming existence, free from dull toil, and full of leisure for reveries and experiments, might be passed in the colony, came forward with alacrity and ready money. The island, upon examination, did not prove to be quite so enchanting or flowery as the more enthusiastic had fancied it; but it did not occur to any of the settlers that the whole affair was a swindle until they found themselves likely to be sold out to a mortgagee in the Spring, and turned adrift penniless. Winter showed them that the island was a desolate and dreary place...and they finally discovered that the supposed philanthropist, who was said to have generously given them Valcour Island, was nothing more than a clever speculator, who expected to get possession of their money, and who would remorselessly sacrifice them the moment that the enterprise did not pay to his satisfaction.'

'The swindled enthusiasts have had the courage to call an indignation meeting, and denounce the whole "community" transaction as a "stupendous fraud." But that does not give them back their homes and fortunes, madly sacrificed in pursuit of an absurd ideal. The natives around Valcour think it astonishing that anyone should have been so willfully blind as to not find out that the project was a swindle, since those who organized it were publicly known as tricksters. When the madness was on the new-comers, however, it was of no use to offer them advice. Now they have to begin the world anew; and the speculators who originated the Valcour swindle will probably have many ruined lives to answer for.'

On October 11, 1875 the Times reports:

'The personal property and real estate of the Dawn Valcour Community were sold at public auction, on Valcour Island, on Tuesday last. The principal bidder was Mr. D. B. Fay of Vermont, who purchased most of the personal property. He also

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purchased the north half of the island for \$4,500.

And finally the Times on November 13, 1875, quoting from the Burlington *Free Press*:

'To the long list of socialistic failures, says the Burlington (Vt.) *Free Press*, is now to be added that of the Dawn Valcour Community, which has finally and definitely succumbed to the inevitable. Those "advanced thinkers" Col. John Wilcox and Hannah Augusta White, who have been living in Robinson Crusoe style on Valcour Island the past Summer, have abandoned the attempt to reorganize the society on a new basis, in this part of the world, and have gone to New York City. A few other communists who have been living on the southern part of the island will also leave in a day or two, and their departure, with the transfer of the property to other hands, will end forever, probably, the attempt to found a new Utopia in the sunny waters of Lake Champlain. The community was started a year ago with a great and prolonged flourish of trumpets. Orrin Shipman, the originator of the scheme, was to put in his property, which he liberally estimated at \$100,000, (that figure being reached by putting the inventory of bean-poles at \$500 per cord and other "farm products" at similar figures, at \$37,000): the land was flowing with milk and honey; it only had to be tickled with the hoe to laugh out in luxuriant harvests; new industries were to be introduced, hitherto unknown to the wild and savage Vermonters; society was to be regenerated; and, in fact, we seemed to stand at the very dawn of the millennial era. But it soon became evident that there was a possible mistake somewhere. The apostles of the new dispensation were found to be loose fishes generally- bankrupts in purse and honor, bound together by the single tie of impecuniosity. A more singular collection of poverty-stricken impracticables could scarcely be gathered than those men and women, who had undertaken the somewhat serious task of turning the world topsy-turvy, and instituting a radical reform in the customs, morals, and religion of mankind. Dissensions speedily arose. Mr. Shipman accused

Wilcox- one of the leaders from the first- of theft, and the latter retorted by calling the venerable founder of the commune a perjurer, and other unpleasant names. The colonists quarreled among themselves, and a portion removed to the south end of the island. Finally, no money being forthcoming from any direction, the original proprietors of Valcour foreclosed their mortgages, and the reign of the socialists came to an end. Mr. Shipman is now lying at the point of death at his residence in Winoski.'

(The opinions expressed by these newspaper articles do not necessarily reflect the opinions of CCHA on free love, the Valcour Dawn Community, or the size of the mosquitoes on Valcour Island.)

Upcoming CCHA Programs

Monday, May 4, David Patrick. The Building of the Plattsburgh and Crown Point Champlain Memorials: an illustrated lecture. David will present a slide show that will portray the design and building of the Plattsburgh and Crown Point Champlain memorials. Both memorials were designed, in part, by architect and historian Hugh McLellan who later lived in Champlain, NY. The talk will be based on his 2009 Quadricentennial Calendar which is available at the Museum.

Monday, June 1, David and Louise Graham. Samuel de Champlain: The Father of New France. Return with us now to the year 1634 as Samuel de Champlain and his wife will be represented (in costume) by David Graham and Louise Pilon Graham. Also on exhibit will be essays and posters from the AATF's 2008 National French Week contests. All programs are at the Museum, 98 Ohio Avenue, 7 pm, refreshments follow.

Saturday, June 6, Museum Day. CCHA, CVTM, BOPA and the Kent-Delord House are open 10-4 for the day and free to all.

Bigamy in Saranac, 1883

Bigamy is the only crime where two rites make a wrong. —

Bob Hope

From the Ogdensburg Advance, March 8, 1883:

Thomas Tobin was arrested at Saranac on Saturday, charged with bigamy. He married Bridget Morrison of Plattsburgh, at Malone, nine years ago, by whom he had two children. A year ago he married a Mrs. Sorrell, of Saranac, but by pretending to ignore each other, such relation was unsuspected until the wife learned a few days ago, for the first time, of Tobin's first marriage. She then made known his second marriage and caused his arrest. After an examination at Plattsburgh, which brought out these facts, he was discharged. The court held that the crime of bigamy cannot be committed unless the second marriage is consummated in this State. In Tobin's case it was consummated in Iowa.

The New York Times picked up the story from the

Plattsburg Telegram and ran it as follows:

One Thomas Tobin was arrested on a charge of bigamy and arraigned before Recorder Crowley, of Plattsburg, on Monday on the preliminary examination. Royal Corbin appeared for the accused. The evidence elicited was substantially that he married Mrs. Tobin No. 1 in Malone, this State, and eight years afterward married Mrs. Tobin No. 2 in Burlington, Iowa. Mrs. Tobin No. 1 resides here. Mr. Tobin and his second wife reside in Saranac, this county. Tobin has thus two wives living in the county. The court held, what was law, that the crime of bigamy could not be committed under our statute unless the second marriage was made in this State, and the case of the people against Benjamin Mosher, reported in the second volume of Parker's Criminal Reports, expressly so decides. The court held that the second marriage must be made in this State or the crime of bigamy is not committed. Tobin was accordingly discharged, and returned to Saranac with Mrs. Tobin No. 2.

Upcoming Quadricentennial Events

The Northern New York American-Canadian Genealogical Society (NNYACGS) has four major projects for the Quadricentennial Year. The first was designed to encourage more people in the local area to be more aware of their ancestors, especially those who actually knew Samuel de Champlain. The society has over 200 descendant trees on their website from contributing families and more are coming in all the time. Even though your family name may be Lithuanian, German or Irish, chances are, if your family lives in Clinton County, some of your French ancestors "Walked With Champlain".

The genealogy research was the introduction to the celebration that will take place on August 1st from 10am to 4pm on the Oval at the Old Base. Family name societies and historical societies from New York, Quebec, and New England have been invited to come so that we can discuss our family histories with them. The day is modeled after Scottish Clan Festivals. The hosts will be

David Graham and his wife, Louise Pilon Graham, reenacting Samuel de Champlain and Helene Boule.

Later in the afternoon, they will also take part in the "Caravane des Arts" sponsored NNYACGS and the Fondation Pour Les Arts et La Culture du Bassin de Chambly, Quebec. This hour-long presentation for children and adults will take place on the river in downtown Plattsburgh behind the McDonough Monument. Samuel de Champlain comes back after 400 years and sees how things have changed - then the fun begins.

The lasting legacy for Plattsburgh being sponsored by the society is the ceramic mural for the Clinton County Office Building. Middle School students helped design and create the tiles. NNY-ACHS Board Member, Sandra Morse, of Peru is the moving force and coordinator for the project.

For more information about any of NNYACGS' Quadricentennial programs, check out the website at www.nnyacgs.com.

Memberships, Donations and Other Support Received

From September 19, 2008 through March 14, 2009

Robert and Mary Adams, the Alice T. Miner Museum, Allen County Indiana Public Library, Ron and Carol Allen, Donald and Madeleine Ambrose, American Legion Post 912 (memory of Josie Treggett), Arnie's Restaurant, Ara Asadourian, Jim and Anne Bailey, Cliff Barrette, Linda Bedard, Jack and Donna Bell, Roger and Christine Bigelow, Roger and Bonnie-Leigh Black, Howard Black, Dave and Carol Bodah, Ed Bohin, Alan and Isabel Bombard, Kit and Sally Booth, Jennifer and Alan Booth, Robert and Helen Booth, John Boule, Ed Bourgeois, Thomas Braga, Eileen Brewer, Brown Funeral Home, Ellsworth and Dorothy Buchanan, Carolyn Burakowski, Joseph and Joan Burke, Bill and Margaret Caldon, Kathy and David Champagne, U. V. Chase, Robert Chilton (memory of Josie Treggett), Mark and Holley Christiansen, Alice Church, City of Plattsburgh, John and Ruth Clackler, Joan Clark, John and Penny Clute, Jim and Susan Coffey, Town of Schuyler Falls, William Conway, David and Jan Couture, Richard Daly, Randy Dame, DAR Library, Larry and Christine Davidson, John Dawson, Ed Decker and Pizza Hut, Janet Deeb, Lawrence Deno, Mark and Alita Desso, Nelson Disco, Phil and Anne Doherty, Gerald and Ruth Dominy, Bob and Mary Donlan, Barbara Dorrance, Ernest and Mary Dossin, Nancy Duquette-Smith, Bainbridge and Ellen Eager, Ronald Everleth, Geri Favreau (memory of Josie Treggett), Laurie Feinberg, Mason and Joan Forrence, Nancy Frederick, John and Barbara Gallagher, Maurica Gilbert and Noel Sowley, David and Lynne Glenn, Morris Glenn, William Glidden and Martha Bachman, Jim Godfrey, Michael and Marjorie Greer, Richard Gregoire, Joyce Grover, Alfreda Guay, Francis and Jane Hamilton, Anne Handly, Stephen Harstedt, Linda Harwood, Roger Harwood, Rebecca Hayes, Robert Heins, Judith Heintz, June Heming, Heritage Printing, Patricia Higgins, David Hislop, Frank and Carol Hochrieter, Bart and Maryanna Holm, John Homburger, John and Jacqueline Huru, John Ianelli, Theresa and Arnold Jensen, Bonnie Jensen, Lola and Raymond Johnson, Euclid and Susanne Jones, Marcelline Kavanaugh, Caroline Kehne and family, Richard and Sue Kelley, William and Jane Kelting, Key Foundation, Debra Kimok, Don and Peg Kinneston, Harold and Carole Klein, Carol Klepper and Andrew Golt, Larry and Suzy Kudrle, Dorothy Lacombe, Dan Ladue, Emily Ladue, Arthur LaJoy, Constance Lalonde, Joseph Laundry, Jr., Kenneth Laundry, William Laundry, William Leege, Dorothy and Brinley Lewis, James Lindgren, Roland and Martha Lockwood, Sonia Long, Howard and Sandy Lowe, Dennis and Marie Lyriotakis, Steve Martin, Mary Mason, Beverly Maynard, Marshall Maynard, Pat Maynard, John McGaulley, Linda McGuire, Ann and Ron Merkly, Barbara Agnew Miers, Rebekah Miles, Howard and Myrna Miller, Charles and Joan Mitchell, Kelly and Miles Moody, Henry Morlock, Marilyn Morton, Stephens and Leigh Mundy, James and Janet Murnane, Pat and Sheila Murnane, Brian and Cynthia Murphy, Anna Nardelli, Merrie Nautel, Alexander Nerska, Helen Nerska, Chris and Sandra Neuzil, Sylvia Newman, Northern New York Amer. Can. Geneal. Society, John Nordhouse, NYS Library, Nancy Olsen (memory of Isabelle Verkaart), Frank Pabst, Don Papson, Celine Paquette, Patricia Parker, David Patrick, John Patterson, Peru Central School, Dennis Hulbert, Robert Pike (memory of Josie Treggett), Pearlle Rabin, Village of Rouses Point, Rodney and Renee Ralston, Stan and Christina Ransom, Marianne Rector, Geri Rickert, Kevin Roser, Elsie Shemin Roth, Bill and Bunny Rowe, William Rowland, Mary and Kevin Ryan, Herbert Sanders, Kathy Schumacher, Richard Schwartz, William Selzer, Lois Sheats, Doug Skopp, Fred Smith, John Southwick, Merritt and Joan Spear, Kevin and Mary St. Germain (memory of Josie Treggett), St. Lawrence University, Jeffrey Stephens, David and Sandra Stortz, Martha Strack, Roberta and David Sullivan, Jack Swan, Virginia Swift, John and Louise Tanner, Town of Mooers, Donna Toye, Jaimie Trautman, Lee Turner, Peter Tutschka, Stuart and Linda Voss, Alan and Jackie Walker, Dick Ward, Steve and Sue Welch, Kay Wellman, Phyllis Wells, Lorri Wetzell, William and Lucy Wilson, Josh Wingler and Kristina Parker-Wingler, Bonnie and Richard Wingler, Dale Wolfe, George Wurster, Eugene Zurlo, John Zurlo and Clinton County.

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New in the Gift Shop

Seeking the Northwest Passage: The Explorations and Discoveries of Champlain and Hudson by Don and Carol Thompson. This book looks at both Henry Hudson and Samuel de Champlain and their search for a northern route from the Atlantic to the Pacific. For ages 9-12 years and a bargain at \$8.50.

Adirondack: of Indians and Mountains, 1535-1838 by Stephen B. Sulavik. This lavishly illustrated book provides detailed information about the early history of the Adirondacks, with many extracts from original accounts, large size, soft cover, \$27.50.

Civil War Encampment, May 16-17, hosted by CCHA

Once again CCHA is co-hosting a Civil War Encampment with the 11th NY Battery Light Artillery and the Alexandria Bay CSA. The encampment will feature public viewing of the camps, lively battle re-enactments, a candlelight tour, and talks by President Lincoln in this, his 200th birthday year. The event will be next to the Battle of Plattsburgh Association buildings. Look for the full schedule on posters and in the paper.

Photograph by Ray St. Pierre from 2008

