

NORTH COUNTRY NOTES

ISSUED MONTHLY EXCEPT SUMMER BY THE
CLINTON COUNTY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

No 82

Allen S. Everest and Charles W. McLellan, Editors

February, 1972

The February Meeting

of the Association will be held on the evening of Monday, February 7, at 8:00 o'clock in the auditorium of the Plattsburgh Public Library. The speaker will be Mrs. Mary MacKenzie of Lake Placid, who will speak on "Adirondack History". Mrs. MacKenzie is the historian of North Elba, a prime mover in the establishment of the Lake Placid historical museum and a prolific writer on Adirondack topics. She is the editor of the bulletin of the Lake Placid-North Elba Historical Society. Of her many articles, the most recent, published in the winter issue of ADIRONDACK LIFE, is "Home of the Hickories", an account of the origin of winter sports in Lake Placid.

The public is cordially invited.

OFFICERS FOR 1972

At the January meeting of the Association, the following officers were elected to serve for 1972:

President	RICHARD WARD
Vice President	DANIEL SHEA
Secretary	JOHN BAXTER
Treasurer	JOHN CARAMIA
Curator	MRS. RUTH HECHT

1893

Pressures were generated throughout the state for further electoral reform. But the legislature failed to provide for the single ballot containing all parties and candidates, and it refused to require personal registration. Both were the source of corruption at election time. However, the new Myers voting machine was tried downstate, and the tabulations were made in one minute! Although the legislature in 1892 sanctioned female suffrage in school elections, the state Supreme Court in 1893 voided the law unless the constitution was amended. One hundred twenty eight women in Plattsburgh had registered to vote.

This was the year of the Columbian Exposition, and a surprising number of Plattsburgh citizens went to it. The designs of the big Columbus stamps pleased the users who nevertheless resented the extra moisture required daily as enough "to float a ship of the line".

The great panic and ensuing depression began to be felt locally by summertime. As late as April real estate was still booming, with property on Clinton Street bringing \$100 a foot. But in July wheat was being quoted at 55 cents, but with no comparable drop in flour or bread. Local businessmen began to postpone long talked-of projects. They applauded President Cleveland's efforts to repeal the Sherman Silver Purchase Act as the cause of hard times. Meanwhile speculation was rife over the President's health, and only years later were all the facts known about his secret operation for cancer of the mouth.

Plattsburgh opened its new Opera House, a new shirt factory and its first session of the Catholic Summer School. But the local iron industry began to contract slightly with the closing of the Catalan forge at Bellmont. The method of making iron with charcoal had become outmoded by the new and cheaper processes.

The Burning of the Montreal Court House

July 18, 1844

I can remember my mother, who was born and raised on a farm near Champlain, New York, telling me when I was a young boy how a member of her maternal grandmother's people, a resident of the French Village at Champlain, was implicated in the burning of the government buildings in Montreal many years ago. He was arrested on suspicion and at his trial he was found guilty of arson and sentenced to twenty years' imprisonment. He was confined in the old Montreal Jail (now occupied by officers of the Government of Quebec) at the corner of Delormier Avenue and Notre Dame Street East, from where it is said that he later escaped through a sewer. The story was an interesting one, which would fascinate a young boy. Evidently my mother had heard the story from her parents. Unfortunately, she could not recall all the details. Years later she told me that she thought the name of the man was one Peter Guyon, also a resident of the French Village. The name Guyon is found in many of the old family letters.

When I first started to delve into the story, I believed it concerned the burning of the Parliament Buildings in Montreal in 1849. While visiting my friend, the late Hugh McLellan, noted historian of Champlain, I inquired if he had heard about the story and he told me yes. He related that it had something to do with the smuggling of cloth and that he had some information concerning it, which he would look up and give me. He wrote later that a man living in Champlain had a friend in Montreal who had been implicated in smuggling bolts of silk into Canada. The goods were stored in the Court House and the friend, who lived in Champlain, got the idea that if the goods were destroyed as evidence the smuggler would be released. He prepared some sort of infernal machine to set fire to the Court House, and tried it on the First Presbyterian-Congregational Church in Champlain, then set fire to the Court House. The church was destroyed by fire on June 17, 1844, during the pastorate of Mr. Brinkerhoff, and was known to be the work of an incendiary. Whether the man was suspected of setting the fire is not known. However, the first break in identifying the arsonist came when the following entry was found in the Diary of John H. Whiteside of Champlain: "Friday, July 26, 1844, Charles La Paige arrested for firing the Court House in Montreal."

From a search of early Montreal newspapers, I learned that in 1799 the parliament of Lower Canada adopted a law calling for the construction of court houses in Montreal and Quebec City. The Montreal building was completed in 1800, on land owned by the Jesuits adjacent to their college and residence. Writers and reporters have dealt with the burning of the Court House, but have failed to explain how it came to be burnt and to mention Lepage, the arsonist. So part of the story is a little known one. From scattered newspaper accounts of the day it seems that one Felix Mercure, a retail dry goods merchant of Montreal, stole from a neighboring shop several pieces of cloth which he effected by removing a portion of the partition between them. He was arrested on suspicion and the stolen goods were deposited as evidence in a small room in the upper part of the Court House. Apparently Mercure endeavored to procure access to it by offering bribes to some of the clerks, which the authorities were advised of when it occurred. A few days later one Edward Brosseau came to the court, pretending that some goods had been stolen from him whose description corresponded to that of the pieces which Mercure was accused of stealing, and he requested leave to examine them. He was suspected of having been employed by Mercure and on being seized, acknowledged the fact and was also taken into custody.

Unfortunately, I was unable to learn anything about the outcome of the trials of Mercure and Brosseau. However, at about 1:30 a.m. Thursday, July 18, 1844, a man on his way home from the theatre spotted smoke wafting from the Court House. The fire raged till 4 a.m., leaving the building in ruins. The Montreal Bar Library, which was formed in 1828, was located in the building. Almost all of the books, some of which were very rare and dated back to the 16th century, were saved. Apparently evidence was elicited during the investigation that implicated Lepage in the burning of the Court House, but he had made his escape to the other side of the line. Whether Lepage was a relative of either Mercure or Brosseau, or just how he became involved in the crime is not known. I will give my opinion regarding this a little further on in my story.

Application was made immediately for the extradition of Charles Lepage, otherwise called Carolus Lepage, and as far as it is known, he was the first American to be extradited to Canada after publication of the Webster-Ashburton Treaty. Sheriff John Boston, accompanied by Amable Loizelle, one of the Bailiffs of Her Majesty's Court of King's Bench, Montreal, proceeded by carriage to Champlain

at about daybreak of the morning of July 26, 1844, and swore complaint with proof of evidence before Silas Hubbell, Justice of the Peace, for the arrest of Lepage for setting fire to the Montreal Court House. Thereupon, under a warrant issued by Hubbell, Lepage was arrested and brought before Sheriff Boston and Rufus Heaton, the other Justice of the Peace of Champlain.

Sheriff Boston proposed a search of the house and premises of Lepage, and Hubbell issued a search warrant. Sheriff Boston, accompanied by Loizel, went to Lepage's home and discovered in the garret suspicious articles and materials, among which were several pistols, some of them loaded; a dagger; various packets or cases containing gunpowder, balls, saltpeter and other materials; matches of various descriptions, color and lengths, some of the kind called slow matches and others called quick matches; several wooden tubes, hollow pieces of either pine or cedar about six inches long and an inch in diameter, into some of which were inflammable materials, similar in appearance to gunpowder, to one of which was attached a slow match of about eight or nine inches composed of a cotton or flax string saturated with combustible matter. The articles were brought before the Justices and portions of the slow matches were cut off and tried in their presence by applying a common lighted match to them, and they instantly ignited.

The counsel employed by Lepage argued before the Justices as to the nature, authenticity and legality of the evidence and of the right to receive them as proof against his client. The Justices, being informed that no law corresponding with the enactments of the Imperial Parliament could be found in the United States, authorizing their reception, declined to accept them. Therefore the Justices announced that they would adhere to the practice and law existing prior to the Treaty—permit the prisoner to deal with the testimony against him openly in Court, which they had constituted themselves, permit him to adduce evidence, and accordingly to allow witnesses to be examined in his defense. Not satisfied with the legality of the British authorities and after much deliberation, the Justices decided that Lepage was to be imprisoned in the jail at Plattsburgh until legally discharged.

Dr. Edward J. Moore (1806-1851), son of Dr. Benjamin and Martha (Corbin) Moore and nephew of Judge Pliny Moore of Champlain, voluntarily appeared as a witness on behalf of Lepage. Dr. Moore had at times manufactured fireworks merely for the Fourth of July celebrations in the village, and his testimony at the hearing was that he had taught Lepage how to make fireworks and did not believe he was responsible for setting the church in Champlain and the Montreal Court House afire because evidence proved that infernal machines had been used in both cases. Dr. Moore despised the action of the British Government and openly criticized his own government for eventually extraditing Lepage. Dr. Moore, as part of his practice at Champlain, treated patients far west of there, northward into Lower Canada, and as far south as Plattsburgh. He was well known as a champion of the under-privileged. This not only cost him his own life, but perhaps also that of an infant son. During the fall of 1851, a group of Irish immigrants living in shanties in the Dewey Cut near Champlain had an epidemic of typhus fever which affected most of them. Some physicians were called but refused to go. Dr. Moore considered it his duty to serve them, contracted the disease himself and succumbed to it on December 17, 1851.

However, the burning of the Court House was a serious crime and the evidence was clear that Charles Lepage had wilfully set the building on fire. The British authorities lost no time in obtaining legal custody of him and bringing him back to Montreal to stand trial. At the conclusion of his trial he was condemned to fifteen years in prison. Some sources state that it was twenty years, and one that it was twenty-one years in Kingston Penitentiary, Kingston, Ontario. But I believe these sources are incorrect.

Was Lepage a hired professional arsonist? From the great amount of combustible materials which were found in his home, it would seem that he was. During the Rebellion of 1837-38 in Lower Canada and in the following years, incendiaries were at work burning many public buildings. A great number of homes and farm buildings of the English along the border, especially in the Lacolle area, were destroyed by fire during the night. It must be remembered that these were troubled times and that there was a lot of unrest on both sides of the border.

Peter Guyon, whom I mentioned at the beginning of my story, was, according to a letter written from St. Louis, California, June 4, 1853, living there at the time. Among the names of men from Champlain and the surrounding area who enlisted for service with the Union Army in the Civil War are those of Peter Gyan (perhaps intended for Peter Guyon), Co. D, 34th Reg., 1861, and Charles L. Lepage (Lepage?), Co. D, 34th Reg. 1861. It would be interesting to know if these two men are the same ones that I have written about in my story.

Richard Patterson
Verdun, Quebec
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THE HIGH COST OF EDUCATION

(From records kept by S. K. Ober of Sciota for the Chazy School District No. 10, probably in 1882. Contributed by Richard Ward from a ledger he obtained from an antique dealer in Boston.)

May 28	to one Broom30
May 28	to one dust pan20
May 28	to one box chalk25
May 30	to Paid Bertha Bohio and Bertha Ober for Cleaning school house	1.50
May 30	to 2 qts. soap12
May 30	to drawing lather25
May 30	Repair door latch10
		<hr/>
		2.72

RIDDLE OF THE MONTH

Old riddle: Probably the first fort built in Clinton County was the blockhouse on what is today Cumberland Avenue. Its date of construction is unknown, but it doubled as defense and as courthouse and jail. In 1794, during the scares occasioned by the Indian wars in the West, a blockhouse was also built on the Bear Swamp Road in Peru.

New riddle: What historic house in Plattsburgh, according to the urban renewal map, is tentatively scheeduled for demolition?

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Issued by the

CLINTON COUNTY HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

John Baxter, Secretary
West Chazy, New York

U. S. Postage
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Plattsburgh, N. Y.
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