

IN SEARCH OF A FORT: PRELIMINARY INVESTIGATIONS AT ERIE CANAL VILLAGE,  
NEW YORK

by

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In the Summer, 1980, the SUNY Cortland Archeological Field School Crew visited Erie Canal Village as an opportunity was provided to have a tour of the Village, the sites of forts from the 1700's, and to inspect their museum. This visit was aimed at expanding the archeological perspectives of students who were working at a prehistoric site and who needed the contrast of an historical picture based upon historic reconstructions which had been created with the aid of some historical archeological efforts.

During the course of our tour, we discovered that Stephen Wright, Curator of the Village, was overseeing the digging of a trench to cross-section a waterway which he thought might be part of the original Clinton's Ditch. He hoped to expose the stratigraphy of the ditch which would illustrate, in reality, what their museum showed in a huge wall mural. Along the trench, a wide variety of artifacts of 19th and 20th century times were appearing. It was said that portions of this area had been used for a dump or landfill recently.

Elsewhere in our tour, we were shown a D.A.R. marker which commemorates the 1750's construction and destruction of Fort Bull and Wood Creek Fort. Tantalizingly, Mr. Wright mentioned that the true location of Fort Bull was not known, although there were several hypotheses as to its location. He indicated one of the more likely spots, an area which, in recent years, was used as a sheep pen to add "local color" to the village. Good storyteller that he was, Mr. Wright convinced us that a couple of days of concentrated surface survey and mapping of the sheep pen and controlled test trenching in the ditch would be a valuable contribution to their efforts to add information about the fort and Clinton's Ditch.

The field school students were enthusiastic about the prospect and we carried out these activities on July 21 and 22, 1980, with a field crew of 6 students (1 high school student, 1 undergraduate, and 4 graduate students), 1 photographer, surveyor, social and meal director, and assistant, and 1 project director. We did not find significant topographic features in the sheep pen; we did not locate any evidence of Clinton's Ditch. In fact, we feel fairly certain that an alternative channel to the one where we excavated is more likely to have

During the fall and winter of 1980-81, Mr. Wright and I were in contact by telephone in an effort to find ways to fund additional researches at Erie Canal Village. Mr. Wright had plans to erect a donated house in an area of the Village which is now an island of land surrounded by an access road. He planned to use a bulldozer to strip the sod from the area, at which time our field school crew would grid and scrape the area to determine whether there were any evidences of subsurface features which would be damaged by the construction required to erect the house.

In early April, contacts were started by some of my colleagues at Cortland, with friends and relatives in Rome, N. Y., in an effort to find free accomodations for the field crew and/or some publicity for the project. Through these contacts, several people who were in positions of influence became quite disturbed because they knew nothing about the proposed project. Further, Mr. Wright had just resigned his position, unbeknownst to me, and no one knew about our plans; no one had been hired to replace him! Fortunately, at this stage of the planning, I was contacted and we were able to begin formal planning for the work we hope to carry out in early June at Erie Canal Village.

The purpose of the work we plan to do is to ascertain, if possible, whether there is evidence of either Fort Bull or Wood Creek Fort in the green island surrounded by a gravel roadway, across from the church and opposite the sheep pen. Our investigations will expand excavations carried out in the early 1970's by Lee Hansen and earlier, by Gil Hagerty, in 1959. With the excellent field records and descriptive data at our disposal from these researches, it seems probable that we shall be able to relocate their excavation boundaries and expand them in such a way as to delimit the brick pathway they found and to determine whether there are other evidences of post molds or subsurface features of any variety.

As proposed by Mr. Wright, for the purposes of this research, a mechanical earthmover will be employed to strip off the sod and a thin subsurface stratum. It is anticipated that the depth of this mechanical stripping will be no more than 5-7", including the sod. We shall monitor the stripping process, checking the soils removed

are present, we shall halt the mechanical stripping and proceed in a more cautious and controlled manner with trowels, shovels, and screens.

At the stage at which we stop the mechanical scraping, the area will be surveyed and gridded, then, each square unit (5' squares) will be topographically mapped, scraped to the surface of the subsoil, with all soils that are removed in this manner sifted through  $\frac{1}{4}$ " mesh screens to recover all artifactual material. All features present in the subsoil will be described, mapped, and photographed. Their identity will be determined, where possible, and analysis of the area will be made as we progress. If it seems useful to do so, we may restructure our patterns of investigation to provide the best coverage of the area involved and to reveal the greatest amount of information in the least amount of time.

If we locate any evidence of ditches or moats, post molds, or red-streaked clay slabs or lumps containing charred materials, such as those described by Mr. Hagerty, or human remains or artifacts which might pertain to the forts, we shall notify personnel from Erie Canal Village, Fort Stanwix, and/or Mr. Hagerty and Gordon DeAngelo, for their expert advice.

As many of you may know, Hagerty's book, Massacre at Fort Bull, provides an invaluable array of both historical reference material and thorough archeological data. His tests of the area offer excellent groundwork for followup testing such as that we propose to carry out this summer.

For example, having presented data from all available first-hand accounts of the construction techniques used at Fort Bull and its destruction by the French on March 27, 1756, Hagerty combined these with his on-ground reconnaissances, subsurface excavations, aerial photographs, and cooperative analysis with others who provided supplementary information. Then, he proceeded to evaluate the probable levels of accuracy present in his records, testing hypothesized alternatives as he went along. His book provides both specific data, and a wide range of more general information which might yield wider perspectives for potential archeologists who wish to expand upon his efforts. Truly, the range of specifics, estimates and their translations into terminology which is understandable by today's measurements, alternative possibilities, and speculations operate as valuable

inspections within the potential environs of Fort Bull.

Upstreaming from the present, first, within the past 6-8 years, the area we plan to inspect has been utilized as an historically significant park, with roadways, pathways, and planting/mowing activity occurring within it. Second, as donated buildings were erected around the Village, there were endless opportunities for miscellaneous objects of all time periods to find their way onto the property from other areas. Third, farming activities, construction of a sewer line, and some collection and digging for relics, sometimes accompanied by use of a metal detector, have occurred on and adjacent to the area where we propose to excavate.

Fourth, in the area known to have been Wood Creek Fort, the farmer-owner in the 1850's, Simon Matteson, was said to have gardened inside the "fort", occasionally unearthing 18th century, fort-related, artifacts, according to Pomroy Jones, as quoted by Hagerty (1971: 75). Matteson, presumably, had his house and barn outside the fort outlines and used preserved timbers found "in the bed of Wood Creek near the dam" in his barn construction (Hagerty 1971: 75). These timbers might have dated to Wood Creek Fort times or to the later lock structure of the 1790's, according to Hagerty. The 1890's barn repairs carried out by subsequent owners, were, as we understand, in the same barn location.

Fifth, Hagerty's excavations in a potential site of Fort Bull, the sheep pen area, were carried out in the fall and winter of 1959. Topsoil was about 1' thick and subsurface features were found in the dense clay subsoil in a 5' x 15' trench, within which "eight irregular patches of earth about nine inches apart", probable post molds, were located (Hagerty 1971: 84). If Hagerty's reckoning is accurate, it seems possible that our testing might reveal at least some clues to the perimeter on one edge, the northwest one, of the original Fort Bull. A stone foundation is adjacent to the post molds Hagerty located. He suggested that it had been a barn foundation.

Sixth, our evidence shifts to the 1750's after the destruction of Fort Bull. Within a month of its destruction, in April, 1756, a new fort, Wood Creek Fort, was under construction on or near the site of Fort Bull (Hagerty 1971: 67). This, too, would provide evidence

of the ongoing activities, refuse disposal, soil moving, timber-felling and moving, and construction that occurred on the site.

Seventh, Lieutenant de Lery, a noted engineer and soldier, commanded the independent companies of French colonists at the attack and destructing of Fort Bull in March, 1756. His records, maps, and diagrams are those which have provided the most extensive evidence for size, shape, location, orientation, and destruction and content of the star-shaped fort. His narrative provides lengthy materials for consideration of the terrain, the vegetation, the topography in and around the fort, and the degree to which the fort and its environs were modified at the time of their destruction by explosion and fire.

Eighth, the last of the set of data which are mixed into the picture of cultural activities in the Fort Bull area, includes the pre-Fort period. The area had been, and continued to be, important as a water trail and Carry for colonial and Native American personnel and goods. Trading, raiding, and travel occurred here, as the archeological record has attested. Hagerty mentions that amongst the artifacts found in the area, are projectile points of the prehistoric periods. Thus, we have several thousand years of cultural activities garbled together in the strata of the Erie Canal Village and its surroundings.

To return to our efforts of the summer of 1981, we have Hagerty's general description of frontier forts of the 1750's for a guideline: "Frontier forts of this period were generally small, and a wall or walls of posts was a common method of defending a small area. First, a ditch was dug about three or four feet deep, and pickets or posts were placed in the ditch and held vertically while excavated earth was packed in tightly around them. (Hagerty 1971: 83)."

Then, we have Hagerty's account of de Lery's description of his attack on the fort. During its destruction, the gate facing the shore of Wood Creek was hacked open, defenders were killed inside and outside the fort; vast quantities of goods for shipping were destroyed on a beach in front of the fort, and the fort itself exploded and burned. Many goods, and some bodies, were tossed hundreds of feet by the blasts from exploding gunpowder, while ammunition, weaponry, clothing, and foodstuffs were pitched by the French into the creek and dense mud, to prevent use by later incoming British forces.

Presumably, there was a common grave for the 30 dead British which was prepared later by Sir William Johnson's soldiers while he inspected the damage at Fort Bull. Beauchamp (1900) recorded an Indian and white burial ground "west of Fort Bull and south of the canal", but no actual site for it has been pinpointed. Hagerty was told that bones had turned up near the barn many years ago, but no supporting data were found (Hagerty 1971: 88). (1920; 634-636) plotted this same evidence, accompanied by evidences of other Indian traces, a village, camp site, and earthworks or earthen ring, in the same general area.

In summary, it is easy to see that there are many tantalizing clues to what happened at Fort Bull, but the evidence for its actual location remains inconclusive. Our proposed week of testing may not provide anything conclusive, either, but it will expose a larger horizontal subsurface area than the work by Hansen and Hagerty, and it may answer some of the questions they have raised.

Thus, our first efforts will be to relocate previous excavations, and the 4' x 28' brickwork walkway, the post molds, and the barn foundation. Then, we shall extend these excavations to seek other features, evaluating our plans and modifying them as we go. All cultural materials found during excavations will be washed and catalogued; extensive records will be kept, both written and photographic; artifacts, copies of the records, and a formal report will be given to Erie Canal Village at the completion of our analyses, along with our recommendations for any future work at the site.

Needless to say, one week's work, dependent upon weather and the size of our field crew and its nature, will accomplish an unknown amount of work. If we are able to do preliminary reconnaissance to relocate previous excavations accurately before the week begins, and if the stripping activities go very rapidly, and without major delays, it should be possible to strip and map much of the area of the green where Hansen and Hagerty worked. If we locate large numbers of features, or the weather is inclement, or there are very few field school crew members, proportionately less work will be accomplished. We estimate (optimistically) a crew of 8-10. Stripping, screening, and mapping, with evening laboratory work for 5 days, may enable us to strip 15-20 squares (5' ones), maybe managing to carry

out partial processing of these materials during the evenings.

At present, we are tentatively scheduled to work at Fort Bull during the first week of June, utilizing the amphitheatre buildings as our living quarters and field laboratory. Any vehicles and tents, etc. would be placed out of sight of the Erie Canal Village historic buildings; students would be told the clothing and behavioral ground rules (if any) prior to beginning the research project. The project concluded, we shall return all artifactual materials and a set of the data sheets to Erie Canal Village for their files.

#### REFERENCES CITED

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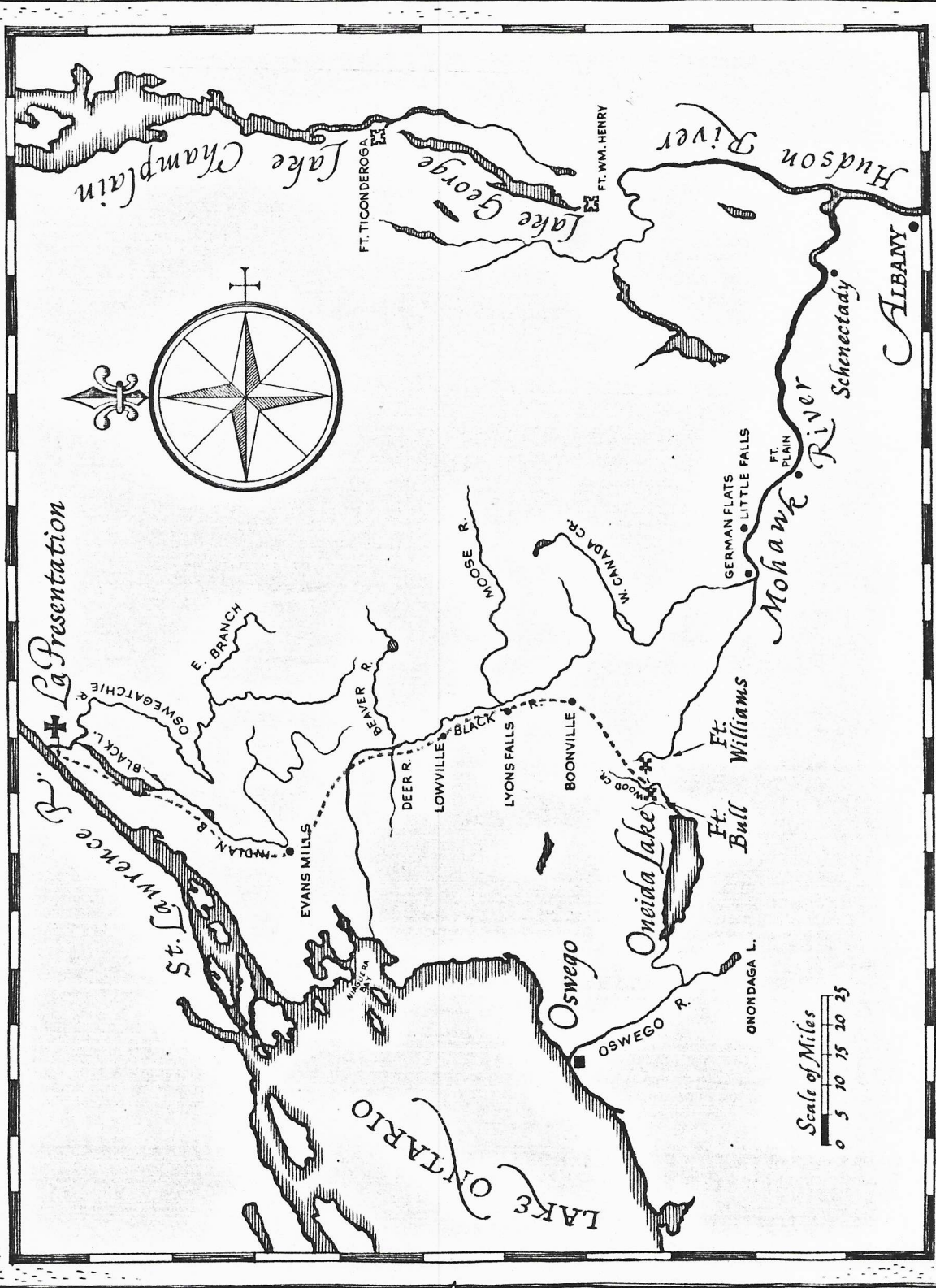
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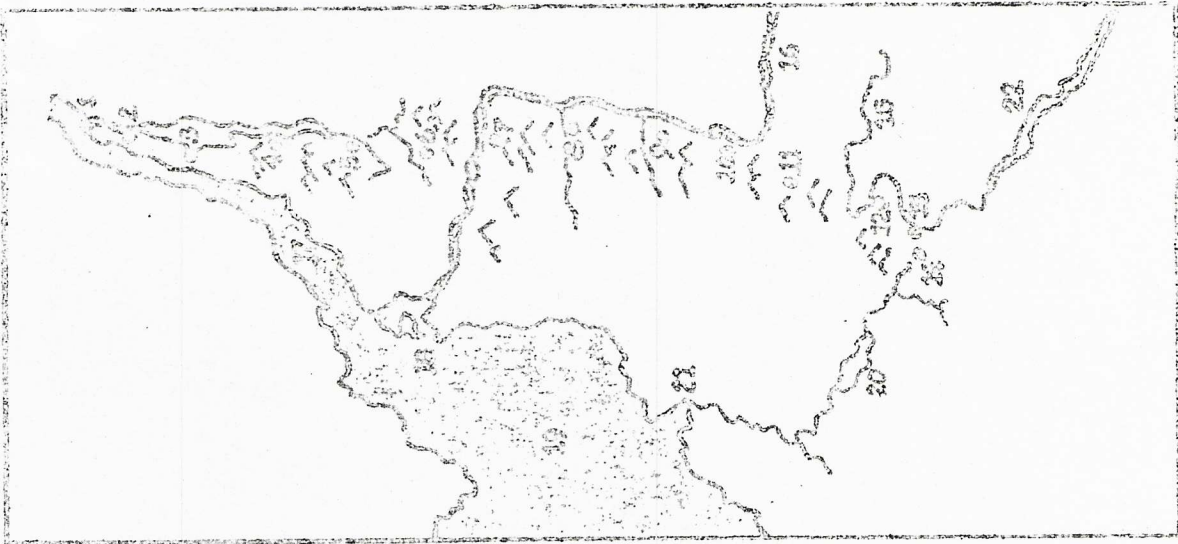


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DE LERY'S ITINERARY FROM LA PRESENTATION TO OSHIM, CANARY

LOCATIONS EXCERPTED FROM DE LERY'S JOURNAL

MAP KEY	LOCATIONS EXCERPTED FROM DE LERY'S JOURNAL
1	(La Presentation)
2	March 12-- 4 leagues; weather fine, water; camped on Chouyachila.
3	March 13-- Delayed in camp.
4	March 14-- 3 1/2 leagues; weather fine, water; camped midway down Great Lake.
5	March 15-- Delayed in camp.
6	March 16-- 5 leagues; 11:30 - 2:00; weather mild; camped on Indian Mesa.
7	March 17-- 15 leagues; 9 - 3:00; weather warm; camped at Koby's Bridge.
8	March 18-- 5 1/2 leagues; 7:00 - 3:00; thunder and rain; camped at Stone Hill.
9	March 19-- Delayed in camp.
10	March 20-- 4 1/2 leagues; 8:00 - 4:00; thunder; rain; camped on Great River - Big Bend.
11	March 21-- 6 leagues; 6:00 - 3:00; rain, hail, snow, wind; camped on Bow River.
12	March 22-- 4 leagues; 3:00 - 2:00; snow; camped on Mill Creek, Low Mt.
13	March 23-- 5 1/2 leagues; 6:30 - 4:00; weather warm; camped at Lynd's Falls.
14	March 24-- 6 leagues; 7 - 2:30; rain; camped at Jackson Hill.
15	March 25-- 6 leagues; 9 - 3:00; weather fresh; camped on south shore area of what is now Lake Baker.
16	March 26-- 4 leagues; rain, snow; camped 1/2 league from Carry road.
17	March 27-- Attacked Fort Bull.
18	(Fort Williams)
19	(Fort Bull)
20	(Upper Mohawk - Landing Hill)
21	(Moos River)
22	(St. Lawrence River)
23	(Niagara Bay)
24	(Lake Ontario)
25	(Ossipee Lake)
26	(Chouyachila - Oshim)
27	(Canaan Place)



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