

Fort Ticonderoga readies for new season

LEE MANCHESTER, Lake Placid News

TICONDEROGA — As American forces prepared this week for a new war against Iraq, historians and educators in Ticonderoga prepared for yet another visitors' season at the site of America's first Revolutionary War victory: Fort Ticonderoga.

A little over an hour's drive from Lake Placid, Ticonderoga is situated — town, village and fort — in the far southeastern corner of Essex County, just a short stone's throw across Lake Champlain from the Green Mountains of Vermont.

Fort Ticonderoga is an absolute North Country "must see" — but to appreciate this historical gem, one must know its history.

Two centuries of battle

It was the two-mile "carry" up the La Chute River from Lake Champlain through Ticonderoga village to Lake George that gave the site its name, a Mohican word that means "land between the waters."

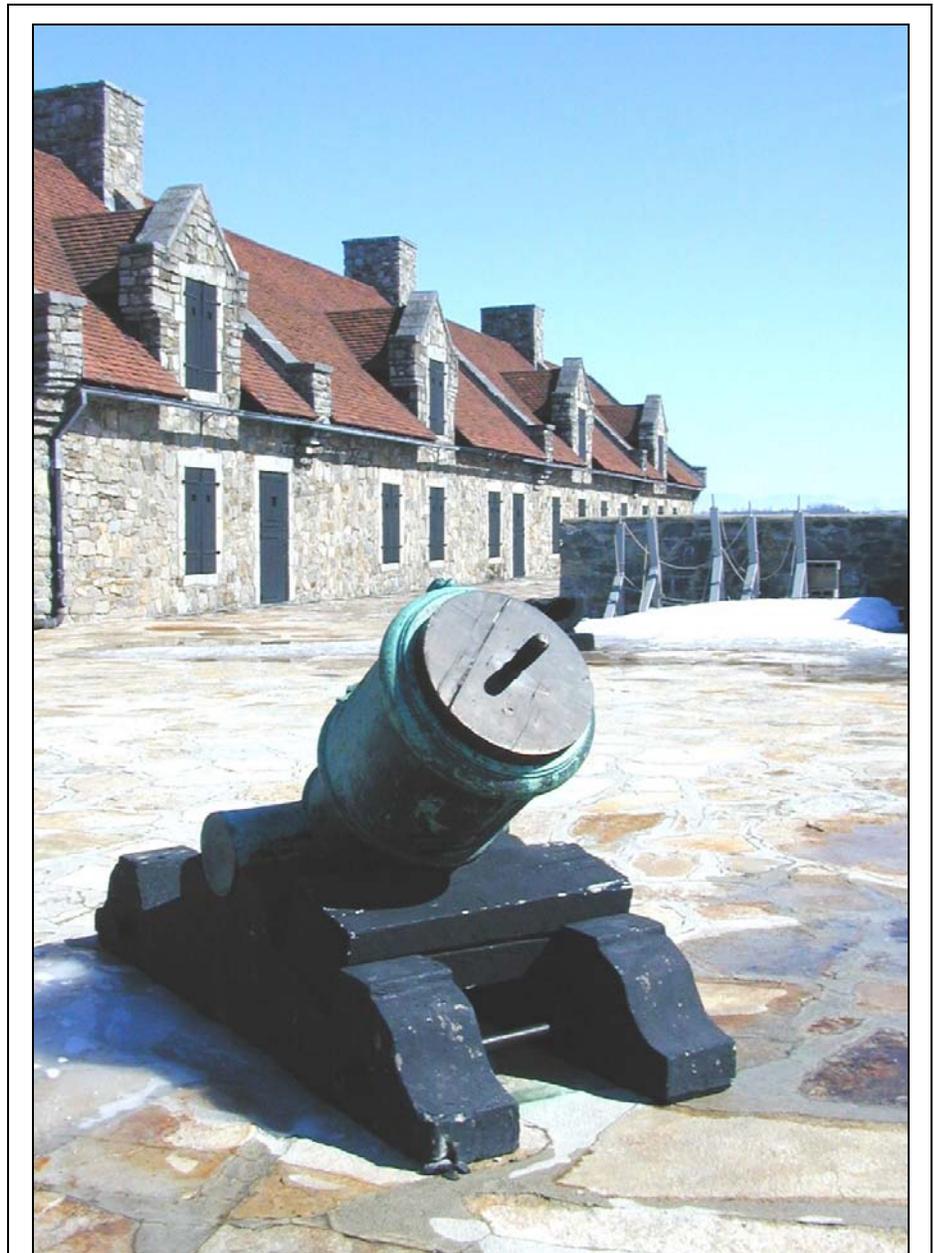
Overlooking the water highway connecting the two lakes as well as the St. Lawrence and Hudson rivers, Ticonderoga's strategic importance made it the frontier for centuries between competing cultures: first between the northern Abenaki and southern Mohawk natives, then between French and English colonizers, and finally between royalists and patriots in the American Revolution.

It was at Ticonderoga that, in 1609, French explorer Samuel de Champlain and his party of Huron and Abenaki guides en-

countered a band of Mohawk Iroquois warriors, setting off the first battle associated with the European exploration and settlement of the North Country.

Champlain's journey down the lake which came to bear his

name brought the eastern foothills of the Adirondack Mountains into the territory worked by the voyageurs, the backwoods fur traders whose pelts enriched New France. Ticonderoga was the southernmost outpost of the



One of Fort Ticonderoga's prized collection of 18th century artillery stands guard on the fort's restored southern deck, overlooking the passage across Lake Champlain to Vermont.

French territory.

In 1755 the French began building the star-shaped stone battlements of Fort Carillon atop the prominence overseeing Lake Champlain and the La Chute River to guard their frontier.

Within three years, however, Britain poured troops up from Lake George, named for their king, to challenge the French position. On July 8, 1758, Scotland's Black Watch Regiment led a British attack on Carillon. Though the British outnumbered the French by 3-to-1, the fort withstood the attack. The bloody battle left 3,000 soldiers of the Black Watch dead on the field.

The following year, however, the British returned to Carillon, this time defeating the French. Before they withdrew, the French forces blew up as much of the fort as they could. British Fort Ticonderoga was built over the French foundations.

Revolutionary Ticonderoga

Sixteen years passed under British control — and then came the Revolution.

On April 19, 1775, the “shot heard round the world” was fired in the Battle of Lexington and Concord, starting America's War of Independence. The Continental Army, starting from scratch, armed only with pitchforks and hunting rifles, desperately needed artillery. Two men independently came up with a scheme to take the remote, lightly held outpost at Fort Ticonderoga, giving the patriots nearly five dozen state-of-the-art British cannon.

“Ethan Allen had the men,” explained Lisa Simpson, publicist for the Fort Ticonderoga Association, “and Benedict Arnold had

the authority from the Continental Congress. These two joined forces in Vermont and hatched a plan for the attack.”

Arnold, Allen and the Green Mountain Boys crossed Lake Champlain in the early morning darkness on May 10, 1775. Quietly, quietly, they opened the fort's heavy, wooden door, walked in, and demanded its surrender from the sleepy, surprised British. Fort Ticonderoga, manned by just 50 troops — mostly invalids and old men, according to Simpson — fell to the Americans without a shot being fired.

It was not until the next winter, however, with ice covering Lake Champlain and snow on the Green Mountains, that American forces were able to haul away the fort's 59 one-ton guns, pulling them cross-country on sleds to the hills overlooking Boston harbor. On March 17, 1776, the Ticonderoga guns forced the British navy to retreat.

During the American occupation of Fort Ticonderoga, the patriots were very, very busy. They fortified the opposite prominence across Lake Champlain in Vermont, creating Fort Independence, linking the two outposts with a floating bridge.

They also outfitted America's first naval fleet, commanded by Benedict Arnold. Though defeated later in 1776 at the Battle of Valcour Island, that fleet stalled a British advance southward from Canada.

The next year, British General John Burgoyne began another march south, taking the fort at Crown Point, north of Ticonderoga on Lake Champlain, in late June 1777.

Unable to immediately breach the battlements at Fort Ticonderoga, Burgoyne did what appeared to be the impossible: He and his troops cut a road through the brush, hauling their artillery up the steep slope of Mount Defiance, across the La Chute. From there, the British bombarded the American positions.

“The Americans packed up their stuff,” Simpson said, “and in the dead of night, on July 6, they snuck out as quietly as they could, crossing the floating bridge to Fort Independence and eventually retreating to Saratoga.”

There they joined a gathering of American forces that grew to nearly 10,000 troops. When Burgoyne caught up with them on Sept. 13, he was in for the surprise of his life. There at Saratoga, the tides of the war turned in the patriots' favor.

When the British abandoned Fort Ticonderoga after the Revolution, it quickly fell to waste. By the time General George Washington visited the site, in 1783, he found it in ruins — and ruins it remained for more than a century.

The long wait for rebuilding

Ironically, it was the son of an exiled Loyalist family who was responsible for initially securing Fort Ticonderoga from complete decay.

William Ferris Pell was born in 1779 in Westchester. His family fled during the Revolution to the Maritimes, returning to the new United States in 1786. By 1806 the family had established a thriving auction house and import/export firm in New York City.

In 1820, taken with the natural beauty and the picturesque martial ruins, Pell bought 540-acre peninsula upon which the remains of Fort Ticonderoga stood. In 1826 he built an inn on the lake, called the Pavilion, which housed travelers taking the fashionable "Northern Tour" up Lake George and the new Champlain Canal from Whitehall.

Pell, however, did nothing to rebuild Fort Ticonderoga, whose stones and timbers had been looted for a variety of building projects in the area prior to his purchase of the site. Tourists visited the fort to see the ruins of a famous spot in the new country's history; it would not be until the first decade of the 20th century that visitors would be able to see the star-shaped fortress restored to even a shadow of its former strength.

With the American centennial, however, interest in preserving American historic sites came into vogue. A federal proposal to buy the fort and erect a monument was defeated in 1889, but interest in Ticonderoga was renewed in 1908 with the impending tercentennial of Champlain's "discovery" of the lake now bearing his name.

That September the Ticonderoga Historical Society organized a clambake to generate support for rebuilding the ruins of the old fort. One of the speakers at the clambake was 27-year-old architect Alfred Bossom, who had developed elaborate plans for the restoration project. Stephan Pell, 34, cousin of the Pavilion's manager, was utterly taken with Bossom's proposals.

Pell's enthusiasm won over his wife Sarah, and the couple

approached her father, Col. Robert Thompson, seeking financial support. With the colonel's money, Stephan and Sarah Pell bought out the outstanding family shares in the property and hired Bossom to restore Fort Ticonderoga and completely renovate the Pavilion.

By 1909, the fort was sufficiently restored to be re-opened as a public museum, and by 1930 was in substantially the state it is in today, barring the rebuilding work begun most recently by the Fort Ticonderoga Association, a nonprofit organization established by the Pell family to manage the institution.

The fort today

From the gatehouse at the entrance to the fort grounds, one begins the long drive in from Route 74, east of the village of Ticonderoga.

"You wouldn't have seen any of these trees when the fort was actively in use," Simpson explained as we drove in for a recent visit, gesturing toward the woods covering the hillside. "It wasn't considered wise to leave a lot of trees for enemy fighters to hide behind."

Along with the green, 18th century embankments visible from the drive, one poignant memorial stands out: a circular stone pavilion erected to honor the 3,000 soldiers of the Black Watch Regiment killed in the 1758 assault on Fort Carillon.

"Each stone in that memorial," Simpson said, "was contributed by one of the Scottish clans from their home turf in their memory."

The first impression upon entering Fort Ticonderoga is the

panoramic view of Lake Champlain and the Green Mountains. You walk along the stone-paved deck to a low, stone passageway leading to a heavy, wooden door.

"This is the door through which Ethan Allen crept the night they captured the fort," Simpson said. The passageway was low, she explained, "because you don't design forts where horsemen can just gallop in."

The "museum" at Fort Ticonderoga opens all around you once you pass through that door, but two buildings have been specifically refurbished with museum displays on both floors. They are dedicated to 18th century military equipment, to the area, and to the Pell family.

When we visited, snow and ice still covered much of parade grounds and buildings at Fort Ticonderoga. The fort does not open for visitors until May 10, the day it was taken by Ethan Allen. It is open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. every day through Oct. 19 this year. On average, about 600 visitors walk through the gates every day — many more than that in July and August, many fewer the other months.

During the season, guests would be guided through the facility by museum employees in period costumes. A fife and drum band would march several times a day on the parade grounds; muskets would fire in artillery demonstrations; picnic lunches would be open on the green lawns outside. At the end of their visit, they could browse through the museum store and bookshop, and if they get hungry they could grab a bite from the snack bar, which tries to keep its prices down for family visitors, according to

Simpson.

Most visitors spend about half a day at Fort Ticonderoga, Simpson said, "but you could easily spend the whole day if you wanted." With other historic attractions in the immediate area, a visit to Ticonderoga could easily turn into a two- or three-day affair.

Several times each summer, large groups of period re-enactors gather at Fort Ticonderoga:

- On the third weekend each June, the fort hosts the Grand Encampment of the French and Indian War, with over 900 re-enactors.
- A Revolutionary War Encampment takes place the second weekend of September, with over 400 re-enactors.
- On Columbus Day weekend, a smaller group of re-enactors

gathers for the Native American Harvest Moon Festival, an 18th century Eastern Woodlands Indian encampment.

Soon, Simpson said, Fort Ticonderoga will be open year round, at least on a limited basis, when the new Mars Educational Center is completed. It will be housed in the reconstructed French East Barracks, completely demolished nearly 250 years ago. The all-weather facility will hold two classrooms, a meeting hall, and climate-controlled display areas that can be used in both summer and winter.

"The skyline at Fort Ticonderoga will look the way it did in 1759, and hasn't been since," said Executive Director Nick Westbrook at a recent community meeting in Ticonderoga village.

The project will cost \$16

million, and it's just one aspect of the ongoing renovations to the historic site that are now underway.

Fort Ticonderoga officials say that they hope to have the Mars Center open by 2009, in time for the 400th anniversary of Champlain's historic journey.

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Admission to Fort Ticonderoga costs \$12 for adults, \$10.80 for seniors and students, \$6 for children aged 7 to 12, and free for children under 7.

The fort is open this year from May 10 through Oct. 19.

For more information call (518) 585-2821, or visit Fort Ticonderoga on the Web at fort-ticonderoga.org.