

# The Crown Point ruins

By Lee Manchester, Lake Placid News, Sept. 12, 2003

**CROWN POINT** — This week we're going on another trip back in time to the origins of the European settlement in the North Country. Our destination: a 19th century lighthouse, gussied up around 1910 to memorialize Champlain's travels 300 years before, and the ruins of two 18th century forts — one French, one British.

All three, plus a small interpretive museum, are part of the Crown Point State Historic Site.

Coming down from Lake Placid to Lake Champlain, a sign to the historic

site will lead you off the road to the left a few hundred yards before you reach the high-rising Champlain Bridge, which takes you to Vermont.

**EUROPEANS** first made their way into what we call the North Country at the very beginning of the 17th century, when French explorer Samuel de Champlain and a party of Abenaki warriors surveyed the lake that would one day bear his name.

Settlement of the area, however, was slow, due to its remoteness from the

nearest big centers of British and French colonization in New York to the south, Boston to the east and Montreal to the north.

The French first established a presence at Chimney Point, Vermont, across from Crown Point, in 1731, effectively controlling passage up and down Lake Champlain and giving the French a base for raids on English positions throughout the region. The first 30-man French fortification, at Chimney Point, was called Fort de Pieux. With that built, the area was suf-



Exterior of the ruined British barracks at Crown Point, chimneys still standing tall.

ficiently secure that the French could work on constructing a larger fort on the New York side, Fort St. Frederic.

St. Frederic, manned by about 100 soldiers and officers, included an octagonal, four-story stone citadel, a chapel, a bakery, armory and store-rooms. The soldiers — and their families — lived outside the fortress. After completing their tours of duty, these soldiers were given land, tools, livestock and supplies to establish nearby farms.

Crown Point was never the site of a single major battle, neither between Europeans and Indians, French and British or redcoats and patriots. Crown Point's importance is its role as an indicator of the changes in the character of the northern frontier, as it gradually metamorphosed into what it is today: the rural border between two states in the American northeast.

The British sent naval vessels north on Lake Champlain several times between 1755 and 1758, bombarding Fort St. Frederic but never assaulting it in force. Even when St. Frederic "fell," it was not to British guns. When the French heard of the fall of Fort Carillon (aka Fort Ticonderoga) to the British in 1759, and of the force of 12,000 men marching north to take their position, they burned St. Frederic and fled north, leaving the point to the British.

The Brits immediately started building their own, much larger fort a hundred feet or so inland at Crown Point. After the British conquered Canada, however, and the French and Indian War was over, there was little point in further strengthening the Crown Point fortress.

In 1773 a chimney fire sparked an explosion in the fort's munitions dump, blowing a hole in the battlement and burning the fort down. The site was only lightly defended when, the day after the 1775 raid on Fort Ticonderoga, another group of rebels walked into Crown Point, taking more cannon for the assault on Boston.

The area was held by patriots until the following year, when it was taken back by the British — again, without much struggle. The redcoats held it

through the end of the Revolutionary War.

And then the entire site fell into disuse, the stone ruins settling into the surrounding countryside, the grass growing over the battlements, the ovens and barracks sinking into the soil.

And so, for the most part, they have stayed to this day.

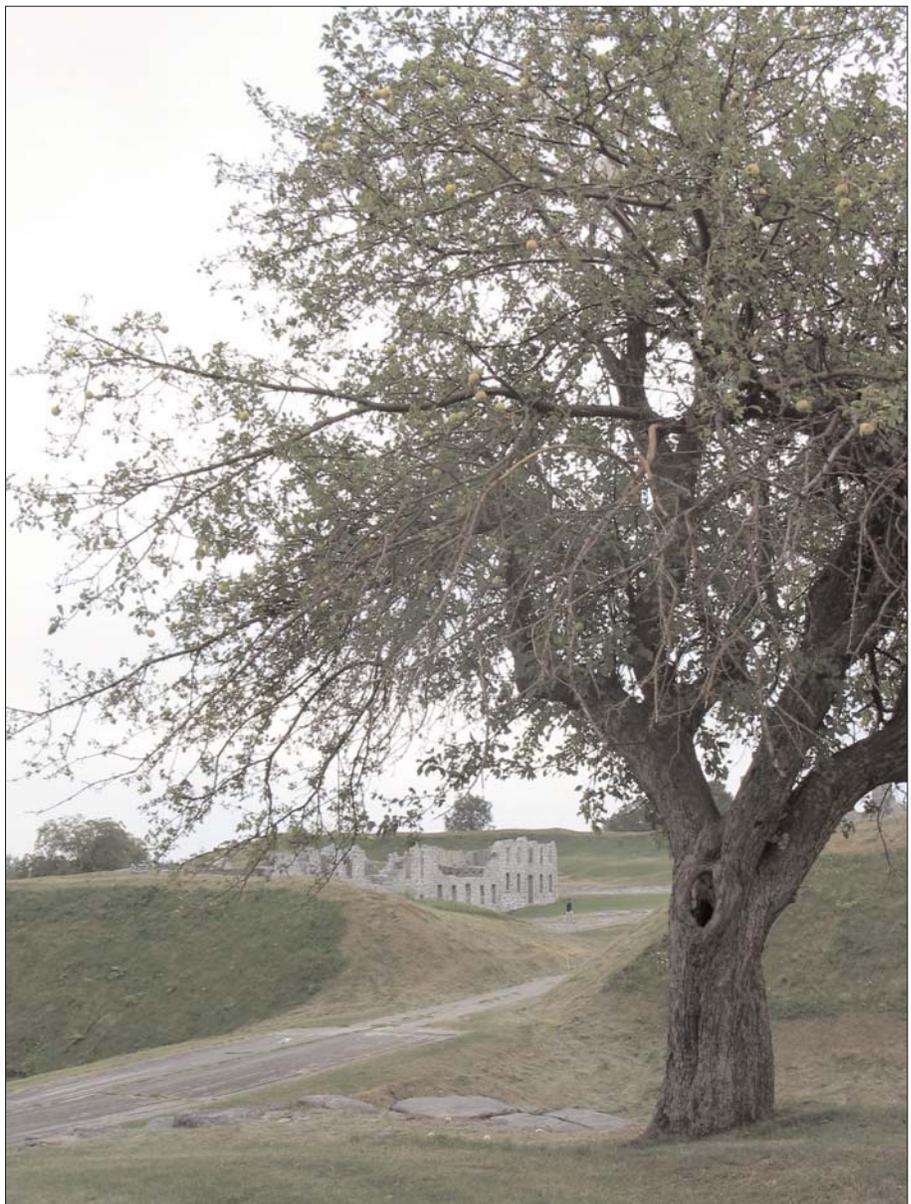
**IF YOU'VE EVER** wondered what Fort Ticonderoga looked like before it was rebuilt, come to Crown Point. The French and British ruins there are not

much changed in appearance from the scenes shown in tourist guides of a century and more ago.

The ruins have long drawn tourists to Crown Point, many of whom scratched their names into the native stone along with the date of their visit.

"The earliest (tourist graffiti) I've found," said Tom Nesbitt, Crown Point's park recreation supervisor, "was 1839."

Wandering the grounds, it's easy to get caught up in a romantic reverie inspired by the grass-grown defenses, the broken walls and the ceilings open



The 18th century ruins of the British soldiers' barracks can be seen through the gap where a drawbridge used to descend across the dry moat surrounding the fort.



Behind the reconstructed remains of the French fortress's foundations, the modern Champlain Bridge crosses the strait between Crown Point, New York, and Chimney Point, Vermont.

to the skies.

However, without specific knowledge of the site, it's also easy to jump to erroneous conclusions about the things one sees at Crown Point.

A few examples:

- The quarry by the waterfront was NOT the source of the stone used for either the French or British forts. It was part of hare-brained scheme, circa 1870, to pass off the dark limestone as black marble for use in building the Brooklyn Bridge.

- The lovely, rocky, tree-covered breakwater extending out from the tip of Crown Point is NOT a breakwater at all. It was a rudimentary pier made from the quarry rock. The idea was that the stone would be hauled straight out to barges on Lake Champlain for hauling down the canal at Whitehall to the Hudson River and New York City.

- The stonework rising from the grass and forming a right angle above the quarry was NOT a "redoubt" — a remote defense — for the 18th century forts. They are the foundation remains of a fairly typical northern New York farmhouse, built nearly a century after the Revolution. The farmhouse was

torched around 1973, a "practice burn" used to train local firefighters.

- The green, grass-covered "berms" rising around the ruins of the British fort are NOT berms at all, nor were they recently raised for aesthetic purposes or to protect the ruins. Actually, they are all that's left of the fort's original battlement. When the fort burned in 1773, the logs containing the inner and outer defensive walls were turned to ash; all that was left was the soil that had been packed a dozen or more feet thick between those wooden sheaths.

**ALL OF THESE** are good reasons to make the museum your first stop at Crown Point. A crew of trained "interpreters" staffs the museum. The staff is ready to orient visitors to the site, telling them what's what, and where, BEFORE they go tramping through the ruins. A walking-tour guide and interpretive signs scattered throughout the site are also very helpful.

The first part of the museum was built in 1910, when the French and British fort ruins were given by a private landowner to the state of New York. The entire site, museum and all,

was run for about 65 years by the state agency now known as the Department of Environmental Conservation.

"That wasn't really their forte, though," joked one of Crown Point's modern-day interpreters. In the mid-1970s, responsibility for managing the ruins and the museum was transferred to the state Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, which also manages the John Brown Farm State Historic Site outside Lake Placid.

The Crown Point museum is a beautiful place, small but well-arranged. Substantially redesigned in 1986, it contains a couple dozen exhibits showing artifacts from the British and French forts and explaining how they were used. Scale models of both forts give you a sense of how imposing were these architectural artifacts, built in the 18th century wilderness on the frontier between two colonizing civilizations.

Others who have visited the museum give high marks to the 20-minute slide show presented in a small theater at the year of the building. The show uses music and pictures to explain the history of the site in an engaging way. Unfortunately, the slide captions were out of sync and laid atop each other on the day we visited, making it very difficult to follow the presentation.

"**THIS IS** not a restoration," Nesbitt tells visitors, "it's a ruin."

At the French fort, most of what's left is the remains of the outer and inner stone walls of the battlement, laid out like a four-pointed star. A few interpretive plaques are placed here and there among the green, grass-covered hills overlooking the lake.

At the British fort, a hundred feet or so inland and surrounded by a high, grassy enclosure, are the floorless and roofless stone remains of the soldiers' and officers' barracks on one side of an open parade ground. Across from the barracks are two rising pieces of masonry looking like Druid standing stones. They are the chimneys for a third barracks, never finished. The end of the French and Indian Wars made the new barracks obsolete before any more of the structure could be built.

Concrete patches have been used to hold parts of the ruins together or cover crumbling pieces of stonework, says Bill Farrar, Crown Point's historic site manager.

Some reconstruction of the 18th century facilities has been undertaken already, like the brick ovens built in the French fort on top of the original stone foundations.

"That's been ongoing for about 5 years," Farrar said. "We just finished it this week."

Is other restoration work envisioned at Crown Point?

"Every winter we're in the barracks," Farrar said. "It's a continuous make-up job."

"There are discussions about future work. That work could include reconstruction — but not full reconstruction. The budget just isn't there for such a

project.

"With this year's (state) budget, even some routine maintenance projects have been put on hold," Farrar added.

Is it realistic to expect that Fort St. Frederic or the British fort will ever be rebuilt?

"When you think about rebuilding, just remember this," said Nesbitt.

"When the British fort was originally built in the 18th century, it cost several million pounds. An equivalent expense, today, to rebuild a historic site would be very hard for a politician to justify."

It looks like, for the foreseeable future, the French and British ruins at Crown Point are going to stay just that: ruins.

But maybe that's all for the best.

"This site is a good complement to

places like Fort Ticonderoga, Fort William Henry, and the Old Fort Museum in Fort Edward," Nesbitt said. "This is a ruin, like ruins around the world."

*The Crown Point State Historic Site opens in May and closes Oct. 15. The grounds are open every day from 9:30 a.m. until an hour before sunset.*

*The historic site museum is closed on Tuesdays. It is open on Mondays, and Wednesdays through Saturdays, from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. On Sundays it's open from 1 to 5 p.m.*

*Entry to the museum is \$3.*

*During the summer, an average week brings between 2,200 and 2,800 visitors to the site. To visit Crown Point without the crowds, come in May, June, September or October. Plan about an hour and a half for your visit.*



An interior view of ruined British officers' barracks, open to the sky.

# Champlain Memorial Lighthouse

Just across the highway from the ruins of the French and British forts is a related site, the Champlain Memorial Lighthouse. It's an impressive sight, well worth the few min-

utes it takes to drive across the road and through the DEC campground to the parking area at its feet.

Strictly speaking, the DEC could charge a day-use fee for

visiting the lighthouse for even a few minutes, but when our reporter pulled up to the ranger's station he let us through without charge "for just a few minutes."

When the French controlled Crown Point, they built a windmill on this site to grind the grain raised by farmers from the surrounding settlement. After the French fled, the British built an outlying defense — a "redoubt" — on the windmill's foundation.

The original 1858 lighthouse was built on the same foundation. A simple, 55-foot octagonal tower of gray limestone block, it was a sister structure to other Lake Champlain lighthouses, like the ones at Point Aux Roches, Split Rock Point and Cumberland Head.

In 1910, the year the Crown Point ruins were given as a gift to the state of New York, the Champlain Tercentenary Commission was given the go-ahead to alter the Crown Point light. The lighthouse was turned into a neo-classical memorial, the original octagonal tower surrounded by eight Doric columns covered by an ornate cap. The new lighthouse was dedicated in 1912.

Besides the lighthouse tower itself, two other works of art are part of the Champlain Memorial site. One is a small bronze bust, titled "La



The Champlain Memorial Lighthouse at Crown Point, as seen going up the steps from the old D&H Railroad docks on the lake.

France,” by Auguste Rodin — like the Statue of Liberty, a gift to America from the people of France. When we visited, “La France” was covered with cobwebs, indicating long neglect.

The other artwork incorporated into the Champlain Lighthouse is a larger bronze sculpture of Samuel de Champlain himself, flanked by an Abenaki Indian and a French voyageur. This sculpture is the work of American artist Carl Auguste Heber.

### **Chimney Point**

If you want to extend your

visit to Crown Point, you may want to consider taking a short hop across the water into the Green Mountain state.

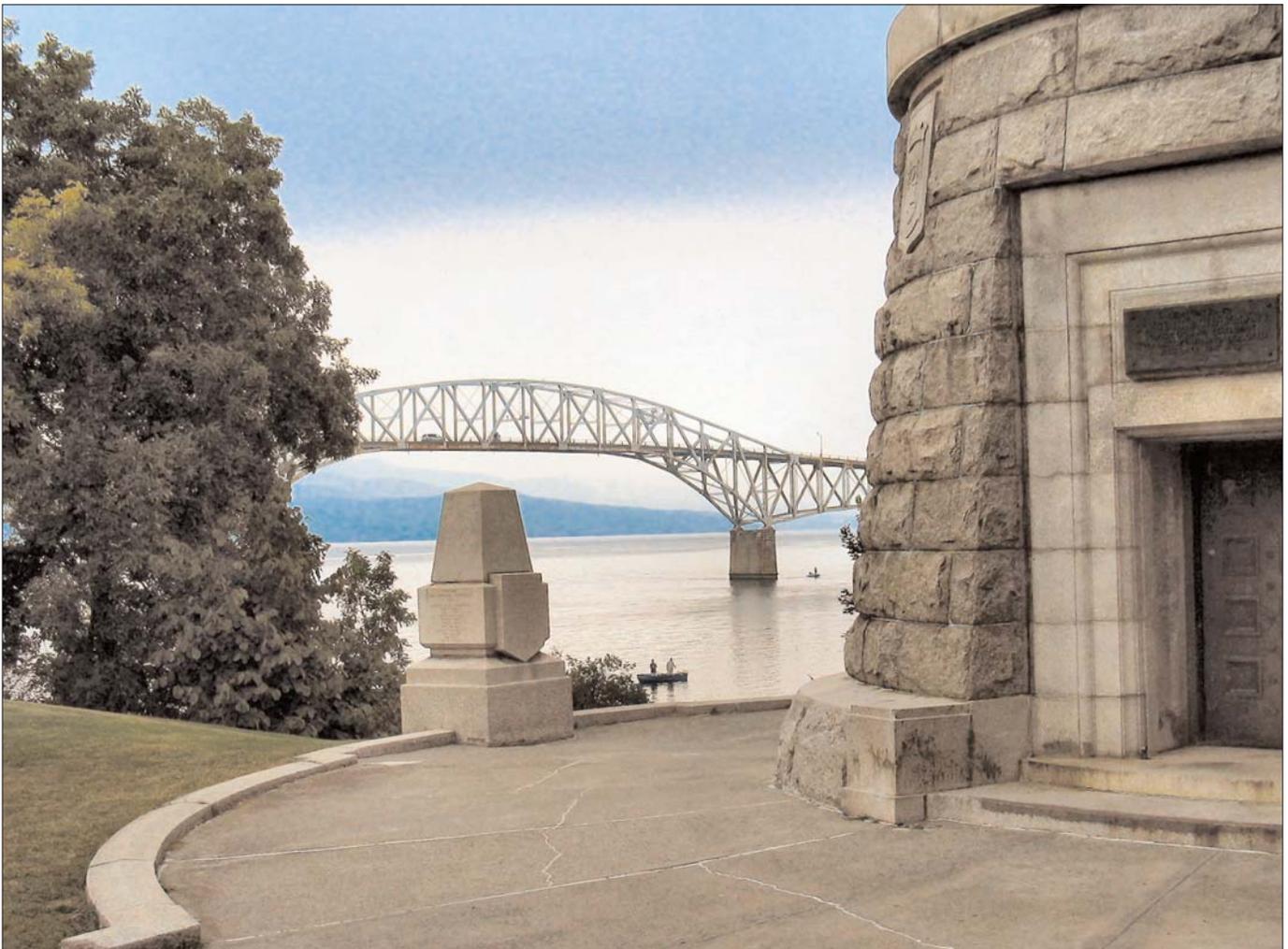
Just across from Crown Point on the Champlain Bridge — at Chimney Point, Vermont — is the site of the first French fort controlling this narrow crossing, tiny Fort de Pieux, built in 1731. Its presence made possible the construction of the more substantial Fort St. Frederic, at Crown Point, in 1734.

Chimney Point takes its name from the chimneys left when the French abandoned

their settlement in 1759 in advance of the 12,000 British and colonial troops marching north from fallen Fort Carillon (Ticonderoga).

Today a Vermont state museum, housed in a structure built around 1790, interprets 7,500 years of Native American camps and 150 years of French activity at and around Chimney Point.

The Chimney Point State Historic Site is open Wednesday through Sunday, from 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m., from late May to mid-October. Telephone (802) 759-2412.



The Champlain Bridge spans the lake between Crown Point, New York, and Chimney Point, Vermont, as seen from the base of the Champlain Memorial Lighthouse at Crown Point. The French built their first fort here on the Vermont side at Chimney Point.