

Habitats & historic surprises abound on Valcour Island

Words & pictures by LEE MANCHESTER, Lake Placid News, June 30, 2006

A trip to Valcour Island in Lake Champlain, just south of Plattsburgh, will take you through several “microenvironments” as well as several phases of local history.

We visited the island last week as part of a tour organized by Adirondack Architectural Heritage, the Keeseville-based regional preservation society.

AARCH had secured transportation for our group to the island one of the boats operated by Plattsburgh State’s Lake Champlain Research Institute. “Civilian” transport to the island, however, is not that hard to negotiate. You can launch a small boat or kayak — or, in very calm waters, a canoe — from the DEC’s Peru boat launch on U.S. Route 9. On Sundays throughout the summer, you can take advantage of a sail-ferry service to the island provided by the Champlain Valley Transportation Museum (see the sidebar for details).

Most folks making the three-quarter-mile trip across the sound between the Peru boat launch and Valcour Island head straight for the sandy beach on Bullhead Bay just south of Bluff Point, home of the island’s famous lighthouse. The AARCH tour, however, taking off from SUNY Plattsburgh’s Valcour Conference Center, docked at a concrete jetty built for the former Seaton camp on the southern side of the island.

OUR TOUR group had an unusually expert cadre of guides.

Leading the group was Steven Engelhart, executive director of Adirondack Architectural Heritage.

Engelhart was assisted by David Thomas-Train, who is heading up the new revision of ADK’s Eastern Region trail guide book. The current version of the book includes eight full pages on the multiple trails across and around Valcour Island. Thomas-Train served as our natural history guide.

Two more interpreters provided

additional information on the rich history of Valcour Island. One was Bruce Hale, modern owner of the Ligonier Point quarry in Willsboro, which supplied the stone for the Bluff Point lighthouse. Hale and his wife Darcey have been working with local historian Morris Glenn on a history of the Clark family, the 19th century owners of the Ligonier Point quarry, who built the lighthouse over the winter of 1873-74.

The other “auxiliary interpreter”



The Henry Seaton camp on Valcour Island, built of stone in 1929 and sold to the state in 1973.

was Tom Hughes, manager of the Crown Point State Historic Site, who provided expert background information about naval warfare on Lake Champlain during the American Revolution, including the Battle of Valcour Island.

IN ADDITION to its natural beauty and varied ecology, Valcour Island has an exceptionally rich history.

The first European to sight the island was Samuel de Champlain, in 1609. The French named it Ile de Valcours, meaning Isle of Pines. The British called it “Almost One Rock” for the mass of limestone underlying the entire island.

With Lake Champlain serving until the late 19th century as a kind of “superhighway” for commercial and military ships, it’s not surprising that one of the decisive confrontations of the American Revolution took place in Valcour Island Sound.

Benedict Arnold, best remembered for betraying the patriot cause late in the war, served heroically in earlier stages of the Revolution, capturing Fort Ticonderoga and its cannons in 1775 before leading the siege of Quebec City in early 1776.

In October 1776, Arnold assembled a small, motley “navy” on Lake Champlain that drew a massive British force aside from its journey south to cut New England off from the rest of the colonies. After this battle, the British put off further southward movement until the following spring, giving the Americans time to consolidate their forces and successfully prepare for the inevitable encounter.

Much of the island was bought up by farmers in the 19th century, who settled there and worked the land or used its acreage for pasture. One 19th century landowner, however, engaged in a bit of double-dealing in connection with two of the island’s most significant developments: the Bluff Point lighthouse, and a utopian



Visitors examine the metal frame of an old car left in an outbuilding at a former farm site on Valcour Island. Long ago, the outbuilding disintegrated around the car, leaving only a stone foundation to show where the building's walls had once stood.

community known as Dawn Valcour.

Orren Shipman first sold the land around Bluff Point to the federal government for the lighthouse project in 1871.

Then in 1874, shortly after the lighthouse was completed, Shipman turned around and sold the same land — plus more acreage of questionable title — to a group of socialist communarians from Wisconsin. The group advocated, among other things, “free love” — but to them, that meant a woman’s freedom to choose whether or not to engage in physical relations with her husband, not guiltless promiscuity.

“The Dawn Valcour Community lived on the island, side-by-side with the lighthouse and its keeper, for just a brief time (September 1874 to August 1875) largely due to economic and leadership problems,” reads the report nominating the Valcour light for a place on the National Register of Historic Places.

LIKE MANY spots on Lake Champlain, summer homes and

camps gradually became the dominant land uses on Valcour Island in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, displacing the earlier farms.

Today, the only structure left standing on the island except the lighthouse is the Seaton camp, a sturdy, two-story stone cottage built in 1929.

Remnants of Valcour’s earlier inhabitants, however, can still be found throughout the island: a stone gate post standing in the middle of a wood; a fallen chimney partly camouflaged by resurgent shrubs; a meadow slowly being overtaken by scrub brush; an ancient apple or pear orchard; and many cellar holes and stone foundation outlines showing where homes, barns and outbuildings once stood.

Our group came across one such farm site completely by accident next to the trail running up the west side of the island between the Seaton camp and the lighthouse. The first thing we spotted was the large, rectangular stone foundation of what had probably been a dwelling, surprisingly



The Bluff Point lighthouse on Valcour Island.

intact, the broken support beams from its roof lying diagonally across the grassy interior space.

As we continued exploring the site, we kept coming across more and more remnants of structures.

The most curious relic was the metal frame, bumpers, springs and steering wheel of an old car. The foundation stones circumscribing the area around the car indicated that it had been left in an outbuilding that had disintegrated around the vehicle, leaving it exposed to the elements.

Bruce Hale was able to locate the spot on a map prepared by Morris

Glenn, which showed that a farmhouse built in 1909 had once occupied the site.

ASIDE FROM the accidental history encountered along our hike to the lighthouse, the natural environment of Valcour Island provided a range of microecologies to engage our curiosity.

In some places, old, open stands of white cedar sheltered quiet, shaded paths along the shore.

In others, the constant wind sweeping over the island had created an environment similar in some ways

to the High Peaks, resulting in the growth of tiny alpine flowers on this Lake Champlain island just 100 feet above sea level.

Where pastures or plowed fields had once blanketed the island, open, grassy meadows have sprouted.

It's no wonder that, in the early 1960s, the state started buying up land on Valcour Island with an eye toward creating a state park there.

A major policy blunder on the part of the state may have accelerated the island's protection.

"In 1968, a state development was proposed for this portion of the island," explained Engelhart, "to spend about \$2 million developing the island, which would include picnic areas, beaches, marinas, an 18-hole golf course and — this is my favorite thing — a giant outdoor movie screen that could be seen by boaters who would pull up to a cove and watch conservation movies.

"Like so often happens, when this was proposed, it raised up a lot of furor in the community. A committee called 'Save Valcour Island' was formed, and they very successfully lobbied not just to have this proposal defeated but to extend the Blue Line of the Adirondack Park up around Valcour Island ... and therefore bring it under the protection of Article XIV [of New York's state constitution]. That happened in 1972."

Today, the multiple environments of Valcour Island's 950 acres and 8 miles of shoreline — including the state's largest heron rookery, containing about 50 active nests — are all protected as a Primitive Area in the state's "Forever Wild" Forest Preserve.

THE LAST spot on our tour of Valcour Island last week was the Bluff Point lighthouse, which had been the last piece of private property on the island to be acquired by the state.

Designed in the Second Empire

style popular in the 1870s, the contract to build the lighthouse was given to the Clark family of Willsboro, owners of the Ligonier Point limestone quarry. Lewis and Elizabeth Clark came to live on the island with their children in the fall of 1873 to construct the lighthouse.

Work continued throughout that winter, one of the bitterest in years.

“Meals had to be eaten very quickly,” wrote Elizabeth Clark in her diary for January 1874, “or they would freeze on the plate.”

“We are as well as can be expected,” she wrote on Feb. 7, “when the mercury gets down to 40 degrees below. Water freezes on the table in glasses when eating 4 foot [away] from a hot stove.”

The lighthouse was completed that spring, in time for the 1874 shipping season.

Until it was decommissioned in 1929, the resident lighthouse keepers’ routines were fairly stable, according to the National Register report.

“During the summer months, the light was lit around 7:30 p.m. and kept lit for 8½ to 9½ hours, using about 6 gallons of oil per month,” the report says. “In fall and winter, the lamp was lit at 4:30 p.m. and kept going for 13 to 14 hours, using about 11 gallons of oil per month.

“The light from the Valcour Island lighthouse was visible for 13 miles in every direction.”

A steel tower was erected near the lighthouse in 1929, bearing an electric, battery-powered light that needed no keeper. The lighthouse was sold in 1931 to the first of its four private owners.

The last owner was the Dr. Otto Raboff family of Middleboro, Mass., who held title to the lighthouse and a nearby camp for nearly 30 years. For most of that time, the Raboffs fended off proffers from private parties to buy the lighthouse, hoping to make arrangements for its preservation

under state ownership.

In 1986, the Raboffs’ wish came true. They were able to strike a deal with the state to give a conservation easement to the Clinton County Historical Association *before* the lighthouse passed into DEC ownership. The easement gives the association the right, in perpetuity, to maintain, preserve and interpret the lighthouse, while state ownership protects the land around it.

The lighthouse was finally listed on the National Register of Historic Places on Aug. 26, 1993.

Lighthouse tour schedule

Volunteers from the Clinton County Historical Association will open the Bluff Point lighthouse on Valcour Island to visitors each Sunday between 1 and 3 p.m., starting July 2 and ending Sept. 3. The Weatherwax sail ferry will provide transportation on Sundays between the island and the Peru public boat launch on U.S. Route 9, courtesy of the Champlain Valley Transportation Museum in Plattsburgh. For Weatherwax schedules and tolls, call the museum at (518) 566-7575.



A metal tower looking like an oil derrick once held aloft a signal light used for several decades when the lamp atop the Bluff Point lighthouse was not being lit.