

Archaeology at Mount Independence: An Introduction

By David R. Starbuck and William Murphy

Abstract

Archaeological surveys have been conducted at Mount Independence State Historic Site in Orwell, Vermont, for three seasons, using summer field schools from the University of Vermont (1989, 1990) and Castleton State College (1992). Large numbers of volunteers have also participated through the auspices of the Vermont Division for Historic Preservation. Historical research, surface mapping, and small-scale testing of archaeological features have been used to document the locations of huts, barracks, batteries, lookout posts, a blockhouse, a hospital, and other features. These efforts reflect the desire by the site's owners, the State of Vermont and the Fort Ticonderoga Association, to better understand the site prior to the construction of a visitors' center.

Historical Background

Mount Independence in Orwell, Vermont, is the largest military fortification in the north built specifically for the American Revolution. Even today "the Mount" is a formidable peninsula as it thrusts its way into Lake Champlain, with cliffs dropping 50-100 feet to the lake below and with easy access only at its southern end. Its great historical significance derives from events in October of 1776 when between 12 and 13,000 Continental soldiers and militia manned the sites of Fort Ticonderoga and Mount Independence in order to prevent the passage of a British fleet on Lake Champlain. They had come from the colonies of New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania; many had taken part in the ill-fated invasion of Canada at the end of 1775 and witnessed the death of their leader, Richard Montgomery, on the outskirts of Quebec City. In mid-1776, on the orders of General Philip Schuyler, American soldiers reoccupied the former French site of Fort Ticonderoga (Carillon) on the New York shore of the lake, and built a 300-acre encampment on a wooded mountaintop on the Vermont side. The lake was only a quarter-mile wide at this point, and an American army that controlled both sides of the lake could easily prevent a

British fleet from passing through the channel. The soldiers received news of the Declaration of Independence on July 18, 1776, and when the text was read to the soldiers on July 28, they proudly christened their rocky, hill-top fortress "Mount Independence" and began to wait for the British to attack. Most of the Continental soldiers had enlisted for a period of one year, but state militia might sign up for any length of time, often just two or three months (earning them the nickname of "three months men"). This resulted in constant changes in troop strength as regiments came and went. Regional differences were often a problem, and only a common hatred for British authority kept the garrison united. Soldiers from Pennsylvania had little use for those from the New England colonies, and fights were all too common. A ghoulish example of this type of conflict occurred in February of 1777 as soldiers from the Third New Jersey Regiment dug graves for two of their deceased comrades; once the holes were open, they were forced to fight off soldiers from Pennsylvania who attempted to place their own dead within the graves (Elmer 1848:93).

Soldiers were crowded into rows of thin tents and small log cabins, whereas officers lived in rough plank houses, sometimes with windows. A soldier's day began when a cannon was fired at headquarters, and then the camp drums beat reveille. The soldiers rose and went to their alarm posts, after which they had breakfast, went to the parade ground, and received their assignments for the day. The day's routine might consist of being stationed at a guard post or going with a scouting party to watch for enemy movements. But just as often, the soldiers might spend the day cutting firewood, drilling, or repairing equipment.

When scheduled to appear on the parade ground, soldiers were to be clean and fresh shaved, with their hair tied and well-powdered, and they were instructed to save fat and grease in order to groom their hair. The men were ordered to place their latrines on the edge of cliffs, and the American commander of the winter garrison, Colonel Anthony Wayne, announced that if his soldiers committed a

any "nastiness" elsewhere in the camp, they "shall upon sight receive 40 lashes well laid on" (*The Wayne Orderly Book* 1963:132). History does not record how many wives, camp followers or children lived on Mount Independence, but Wayne's daily orderly book insisted that "Any Woman ... who shall refuse to wash for the Men, shall be immediately drummed out of the Regt, as they are [here] ... to keep them clean and decent" (Munsell 1859:116).

This rather spartan existence came to a head on October 28 when the two armies sighted each other. Fresh from a victory over Benedict Arnold and a fledgling American navy at the Battle of Valcour Island (October 11, 1776), the British hoped to push through to Albany before the onset of winter, effectively cutting the northern colonies in two. It was on October 28 when the Governor-General of Canada, Sir Guy Carleton, sailed a fleet of ships with 8,000 British soldiers to within three miles of Mount Independence and Fort Ticonderoga. But as they approached the heavily armed fortresses, the British witnessed the thousands of American troops, the great numbers of cannons and howitzers, flags flying on both shores, and realized that a prolonged siege would be impossible. Because it was so late in the year, Carleton was forced to retreat to Canada for the winter. It had been an easy American victory, and the defence of Mount Independence and Fort Ticonderoga delayed the British advance for nearly a year. The British effort to divide the northern colonies had stalled.

Many of the American soldiers went home to their farms in November and December of 1776. For those who remained in barracks through the winter — fewer than 3,000 — as many as seven or eight of them froze to death each night. During October a footbridge was constructed across Lake Champlain, connecting the two forts, but in December a violent wind destroyed the bridge, and then the lake froze over. One soldier sent a letter home to Pennsylvania on December 4 complaining that no more than nine hundred pairs of shoes had been received by the men such that "one-third at least of the poor Wretches is now barefoot, and in this Condition obliged to do Duty" (cited in Munsell 1859:81). Even before winter set in, the chief American engineer, Colonel Jeduthan Baldwin, expressed his true feelings about the quality of life on Mount Independence when he wrote in his daily journal, "I am heartily tired of this Retreating, Raged, Starved, lousey, thevish, Pockey Army in this unhealthy Country" (Baldwin 1906:60).

With the arrival of spring, a newly-formed army of 8,000 British and German soldiers left Canada under the command of General John Burgoyne. Burgoyne's forces were well-equipped with cannons with which to lay siege to Mount Independence and Ticonderoga, and these fortifications were considered to be the only serious obstacles between Canada and Albany. Given the diminished size of the American garrison, they were ill-prepared to withstand the onslaught. At the request of the American command, Colonel Baldwin used the winter and spring of 1777 to construct a more permanent floating bridge — 1600 feet long — across Lake Champlain, as well as a 250-foot-long general hospital to handle the anticipated casualties. Congress did send a new commander to the Mount, General Arthur St. Clair, but few additional troops, and the situation became increasingly hopeless.

In early July, British and German troops landed on the New York and Vermont shores of Lake Champlain and began to encircle the two forts. At the last moment, St. Clair ordered his men to leave their positions, and Fort Ticonderoga was abandoned, followed by Mount Independence. The British advance guard entered Fort Ticonderoga and then charged across the bridge to the Vermont shore. Just four Americans had been left behind at Mount Independence, in the Horseshoe Battery overlooking the bridge, and they had orders to fire a cannon upon the British when they started across. Had they obeyed their instructions, the outcome might have been truly heroic. However, the American soldiers had broken into some of the supplies abandoned by their fleeing comrades, and as a British officer later reported, "we found them dead drunk by a cask of Madeira" (Anburey 1789:323-325). The British easily swept after the retreating Americans, and the next day the British advance guard fiercely clashed with the American rear guard in Hubbardton, Vermont (see Williams 1988). Fortunately, many of the Americans were able to escape and lived to fight again in the major battles at Bennington and Saratoga.

Burgoyne left a small garrison on Mount Independence to prevent the Americans from returning, but when news of his subsequent defeat at Saratoga reached them that November, the last British soldiers burned hundreds of buildings and then retreated to Canada. With the war now over in the northern colonies, Mount Independence was quickly forgotten, even by many historians. In the years that followed, the site was chiefly used for pasturage, while portions of it grew over with forest. The integrity of the site was clearly evident, however, for collapsed

fireplaces and chimneys, and the remains of houses, barracks, blockhouses, shops, lookout posts, and artillery batteries were easily visible everywhere atop the wooded bluff. Mount Independence had become an unusually pristine archaeological site. [The most useful primary sources which describe Mount Independence include Baldwin (1906), Munsell (1859), Collections of the New-York Historical Society for the Year 1880 (1881), and The Wayne Orderly Book (1963, 1964); whereas some of the better secondary sources include Krueger (1981), Williams (1967), Furcron (1954), and Wickman (1993).]

Archaeological Research

In the late 1960s, a detailed surface map and descriptions of 142 possible archaeological sites on Mount Independence were prepared by Chester Bowie, David Robinson and Erik Borg (Bowie 1966; Robinson 1968), working on behalf of the Mount Independence Associates. While no excavations were done, their thorough research was unquestionably the beginning of modern research efforts on the Mount.

It was not until 1975, during the fervor of the U.S. Bicentennial, that it was decided to build a visitors' center at Mount Independence, probably at the newly-acquired southwest corner. On a mounded rock pile at the approximate center of this proposed facility, William Murphy and a small group of avocational archaeologists established a nine-by-nine-foot grid. Over two weeks in July of 1975, shallow pits were troweled and artifacts uncovered, including rosehead nails, a few pieces of pottery, and a musket ball. Based on these few items, it was decided to construct the center in a different location. Unfortunately, nothing was built.

Another twelve years passed, and then the approval of the "Heritage '91" program by the State of Vermont led to the decision in 1987 to undertake background historical and archaeological research at the Mount as a prelude to the construction of a visitors' center. David Starbuck was subsequently hired by the Vermont Division for Historic Preservation to hold an archaeological field school at the site in 1989. This project was conducted under the auspices of the University of Vermont (UVM), and UVM's sponsorship continued through 1990. The adult program was accompanied by a junior archaeological program (7th and 8th graders from the Towns of Orwell and Benson) which was held at the Mount in 1990 under the direction of William Murphy, and in 1991 under the direction of Sheila Charles.

In the summer of 1992, Castleton State College enthusiastically sponsored a third season of research at the site, and the result of these collective efforts is that the remains of nearly 30 cabins and houses, five lookout posts, several barracks buildings, one blockhouse, a battery, a large dump, and a storehouse have now been successfully exposed and mapped. (Most of these sites are identified in Figure 1, prepared by Gordon DeAngelo.) The results of this archaeological research have appeared in a wide variety of publications (see Brookes 1989; Hanson 1989; Howe 1991; Murphy 1991; Starbuck 1990, 1991, 1993a, 1993b, 1993c; Starbuck, Howe, Murphy and DeAngelo 1991; Starbuck, Howe, Murphy, DeAngelo and DeAngelo 1991; Starbuck, Murphy, Weiskotten, Schlamp, Charles, Wickman, Hedin, DeAngelo, and Pinkham 1993; Wolkomir 1990; and Wright 1991).

Among the goals of the project have been to determine the layout of an American camp early in the Revolutionary War, before military procedures and construction methods became more standardized. How well supplied was this frontier outpost, and how did the day-to-day life of the soldiers compare to the dry official records kept in officers' orderly books? Were the men eating salt beef, salt pork and dried vegetables, or were they eating fresh game too? Would any of the artifacts demonstrate that women and children were living here? And could individual soldiers be identified from artifacts found at the site, or would the thousands of soldiers appear remote and unrecognizable? Surprisingly, the fragments of a nearly-complete wine bottle were found inside a hut in the Southern Battery on the White Trail in 1992 (see the following article by Howe, Robbins and Murphy); when reassembled, a name and date were clearly scratched onto two sides of the bottle: "James Hill 1777". It has not yet been established whether Hill was American or British, but this is the only personalized artifact to have been discovered at Mount Independence.

No more than about twenty of the primary fortifications and barracks at Mount Independence had ever been drawn on maps of the 1770s, and these were major buildings and earthworks designed by military engineers such as Jeduthan Baldwin. (One of the few exceptions is the map drawn on a powderhorn by John Calfe in April of 1777; see Figure 2.) In contrast, archaeology is now revealing cabins and lookout posts, the more modest structures built by the soldiers themselves. We have especially focused on the cabins which were constructed at the southwestern corner of Mount Independence, an area

Archaeology at Mount Independence

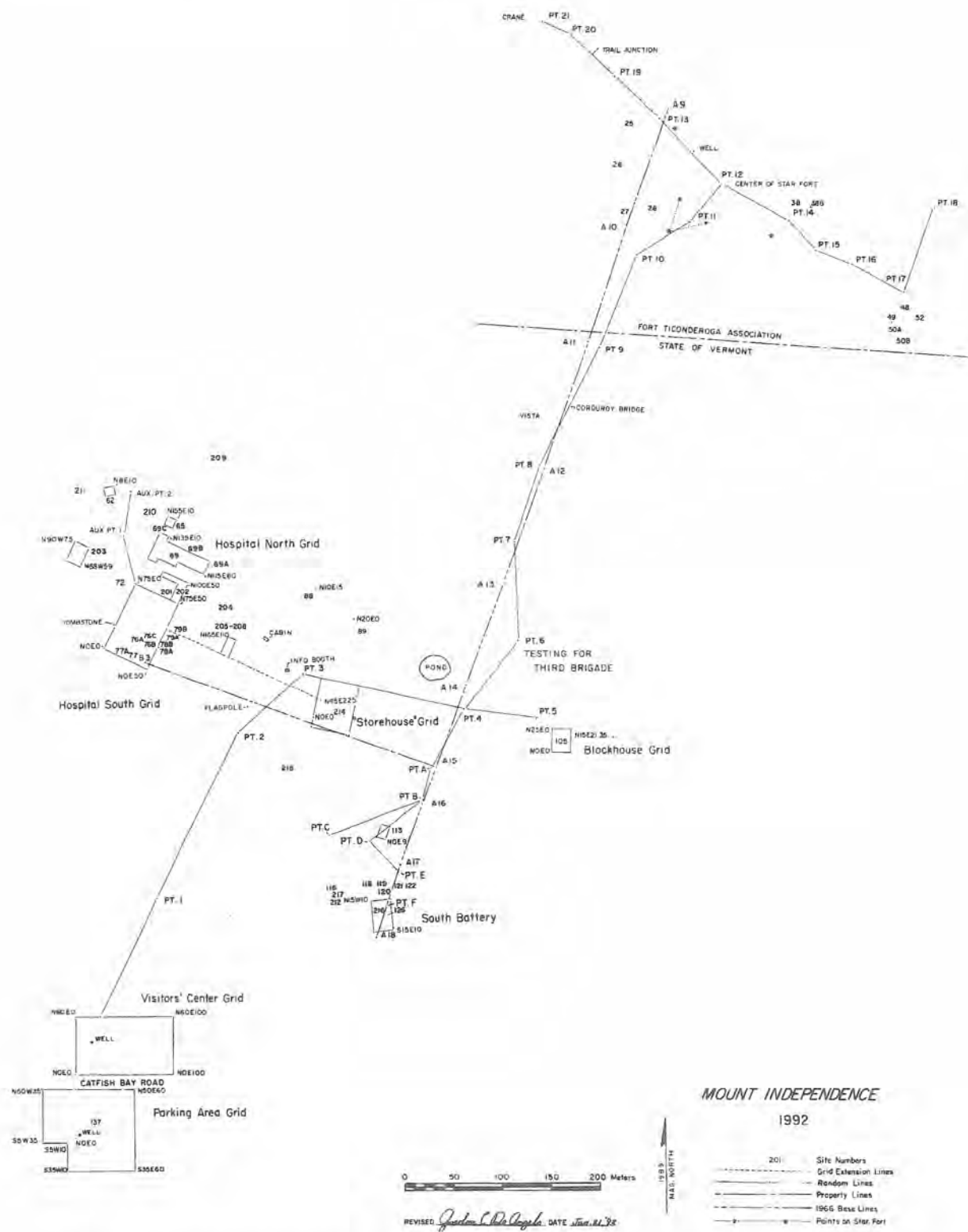


Figure 1. Base Lines at Mount Independence Surveyed by Gordon DeAngelo between 1989 and 1992.

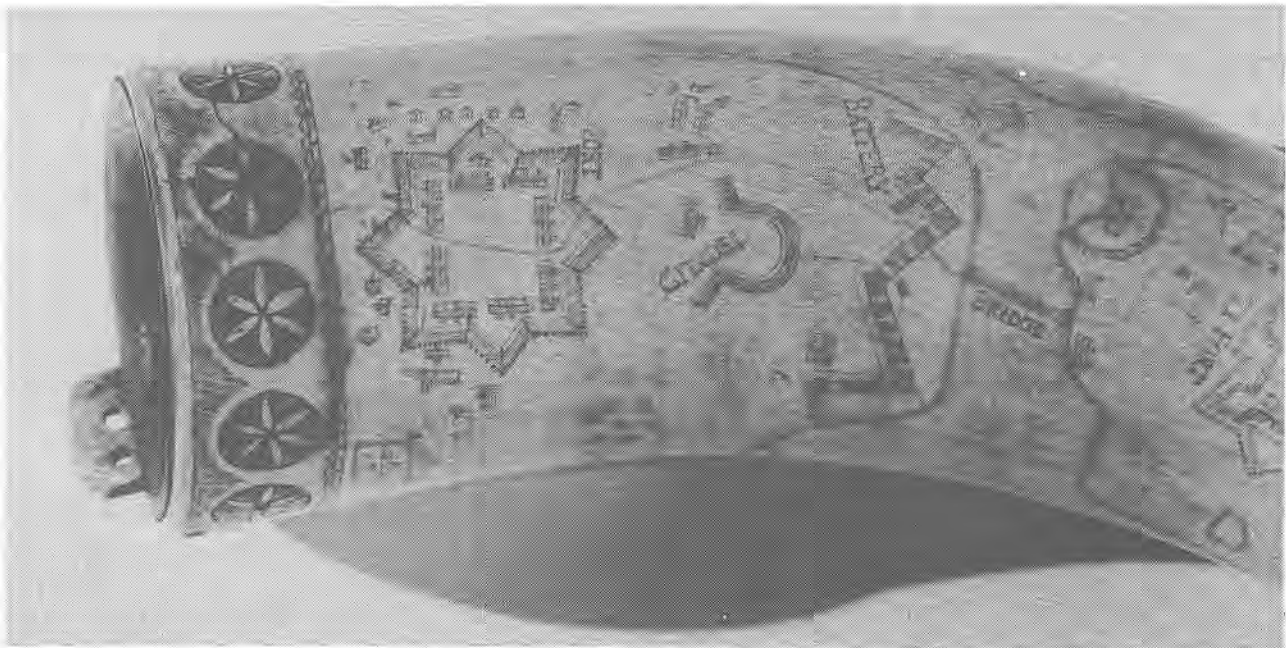


Figure 2. *Map of Mount Independence Engraved on the John Calfe Powderhorn in April of 1777. This shows the star-shaped fort (bottom center), and an assortment of barracks buildings, huts, batteries, artificers' shops, and a blockhouse (bottom right). Courtesy of New Hampshire Historical Society/gift of Lizzie E. Crowther..*

that John Trumbull's map of 1776 identifies as the site of the "Second Brigade" (Frese 1971:132). We are indebted to retired Deputy Game Warden Dick Fifield whose help was invaluable in locating these sites. (Fifield found numerous artifacts here, which he subsequently donated to the State of Vermont; his collection is presently being curated at Chimney Point State Historic Site.)

Archaeology has shown that the Second Brigade dwellings were small, and most lacked windows. They probably stank from soldiers who rarely washed, and all that remains today are low mounds of stones, each about 15 feet across and evenly spaced in long rows. The cabins do not appear to have had foundations, and the stones are all that remains from fireplaces and chimneys that have been scattered by tree roots and collectors.

The artifacts found in the soil around each building include large numbers of rosehead nails, glass from many wine bottles, sherds of unrefined stoneware, tin-glazed earthenware and creamware, cow, sheep and pig bones, and bones from fish caught in Lake Champlain. Several regimental buttons were found during the cabin excavations, including ones from the British 40th and 47th Regiments and the American 5th, 12th, 22nd, and 25th

Regiments. Other finds in the house dumps include musket balls, gunflints, an occasional gun part, non-military buttons, buckles, and — less frequently — wine glasses and window glass. The occasional fragments of wine glass and window glass suggested that we were perhaps digging within officers' houses, in several of which we found attractive sets of cufflinks.

The presence of wine bottles came as no surprise because wine was prescribed for soldiers in many situations, especially when it was cold or wet, and alcohol was believed to promote good health. Nor was it surprising to find fish bones because history indicates that the men had been borrowing boats and going fishing to the point that it was seriously affecting discipline. The boats were no longer available when needed, and so fishing was finally banned.

On the western edge of the Second Brigade area, a large dump was discovered which contained artifacts that had all been burned. Small pieces of bone, wine bottles and tin-glazed earthenware were scattered over a steep slope, and it appeared that the floors of cabins — and especially fireplaces — had been swept clean and the trash dumped here. The dump even contained a case bottle fragment which actually fitted a second sherd from a cabin site 500

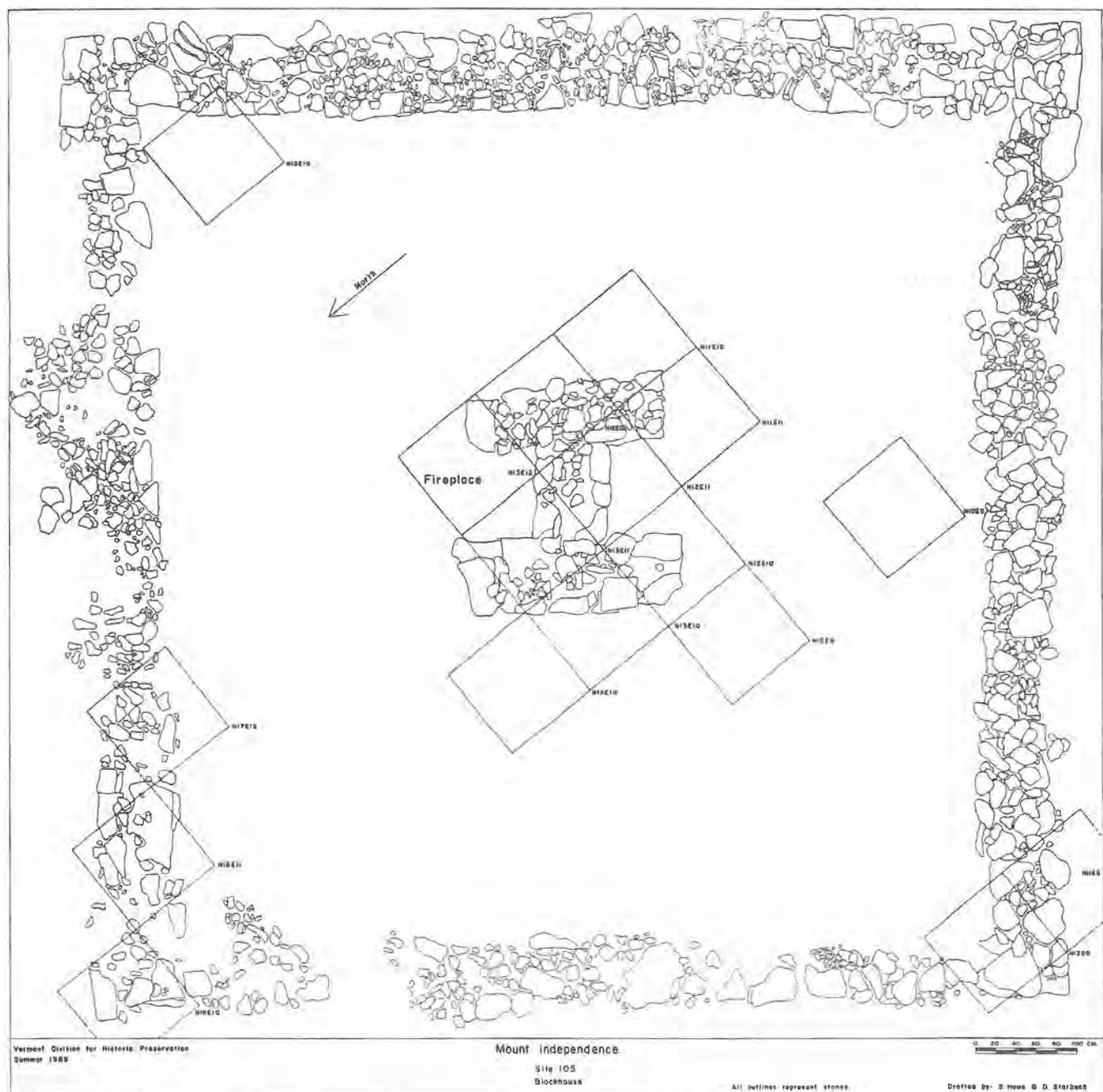


Figure 3. *Plan of Blockhouse after Excavation in 1989.*



Figure 4. A Fireplace Exposed in the Center of the Blockhouse (facing southwest).

feet away, establishing the source of the trash found in this dump. Of special interest was a Spanish silver coin found in the dump, a one-half real piece minted before 1760. Coins were extremely rare at this outpost, where there was probably little to buy, but British, Spanish and French coins were all legal tender in the colonies.

Elsewhere, along the eastern side of Mount Independence, surface walk-overs and archaeological testing have located the remains of nearly 100 lookout posts, presumably manned by American soldiers as they watched for approaching British forces. Excavations into five of these small, three-sided structures revealed thousands of wine bottle fragments along with musket balls and gunflints, demonstrating that drinking was a favorite pastime for soldiers who had little else to do.

In 1989 archaeological testing was conducted within the foundation of a blockhouse that had been occupied by a British or German contingent after the seizure of the site in July of 1777. Its thick foundation walls formed a square that was 30 feet on a side, and in the exact center a large fireplace was excavated which opened on two sides (see Figures 3 and 4). Like other blockhouses of that period, this stoutly-built structure would have stood two stories in height, with ports for one or more cannons.

While no artifacts of British or German origin were found within the foundation, large nails and spikes used in the building's construction were recovered, along with a lead clock or sash weight, a gunflint, and a single piece of cast iron shot. The presence of building materials, munitions, and few personal belongings suggests a structure where soldiers stood on sentry duty, but where they did not actually live.

In 1992 excavations were conducted within and around the foundations of a possible storehouse, one of very few to have been excavated from this period. Nearly 10,000 bone fragments from the dumps surrounding this building have now been analyzed by Bruce Hedin, providing a great deal of information about butchering practices, as well as about beef, pork and fish consumption. Nearby, both inside and outside the foundation of the storehouse, a total of four prehistoric projectile points were discovered, believed to have been brought here by the soldiers (see Figure 5).

Perhaps most significantly, we have studied the remains of the large general hospital on Mount Independence in order to learn more about 18th-century medicine and surgery. Hospitals were rare in America before the 1800s because they were used only by the urban poor. For

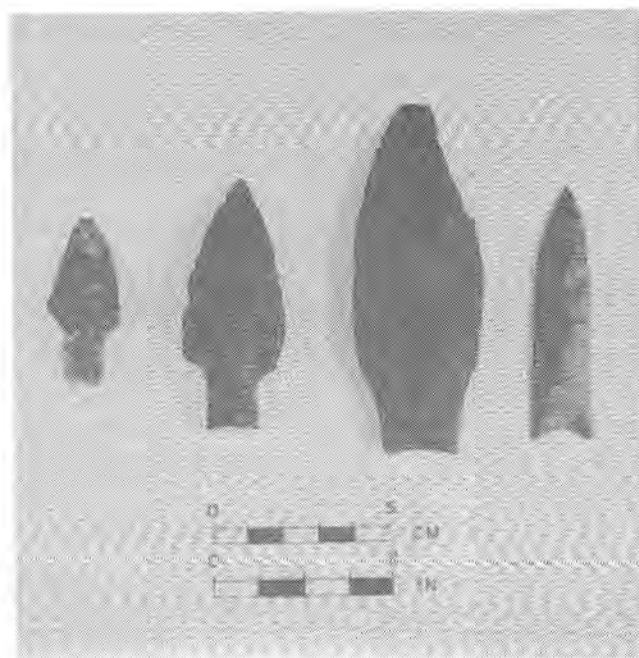


Figure 5. Projectile Points Excavated in the Vicinity of the Storehouse in 1992.

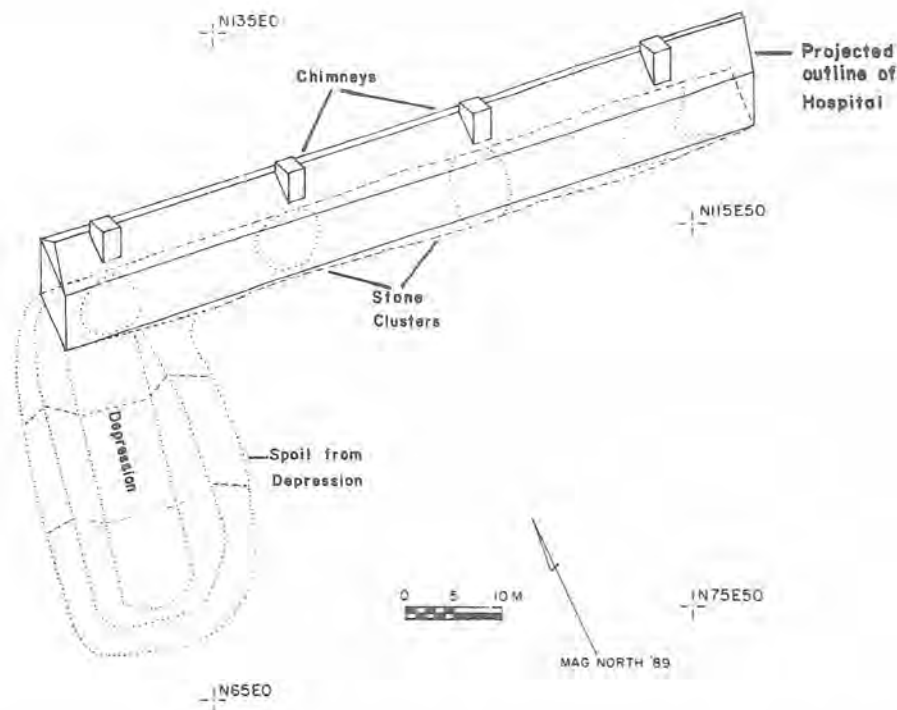


Figure 6. *Schematic Reconstruction of the General Hospital on Mount Independence, including the clusters of surface stone thought to represent fireplace bases. Drawing by Gordon DeAngelo.*

everyone else, health care meant a visit by the physician to the home. Given the scale of medical needs during the Revolutionary War, it was necessary to form a Medical Department for the Continental Army in 1775, and soldiers who were far from home were able to seek treatment in impromptu military hospitals. These were often crowded and filthy, and Lewis Beebe, a doctor who visited small, regimental hospitals on Mount Independence in September of 1776, was horrified at how the sick were “crowded into a dirty, Lousy, stinking Hospital, enough to kill well men” (Beebe 1935:347). Disease was an even greater problem than battle injuries, and prominent ailments included smallpox, typhus, measles, dysentery, and “the itch,” a malady caused by poor hygiene and sleeping on the ground. (This left sufferers covered with scabs and sores.)

At a time when soldiers in the American Revolution could count on receiving care in numerous regimental and mobile “flying” hospitals, only three permanent “general hospitals” were constructed for the Northern Medical

Department. The first two were located in Albany and Lake George, New York, whereas the third was built at Mount Independence between March and June of 1777, in anticipation of Burgoyne’s attack. Historical sources indicate that it was two stories high, of post and beam construction, and large enough to hold 600 men. A British map, prepared in 1777, located this structure precisely on the ground (Wintersmith 1777).

When the Mount Independence general hospital was excavated in 1990, it became the first eighteenth-century military hospital to be excavated in the United States. When exposed, its foundation consisted of a continuous outline of rough field stones, without mortar, measuring 250 feet by 25 feet. Excavations at the hospital site attempted to locate fireplaces and doorways inside and trash pits outside the foundation of this massive structure, located in the Second Brigade area. Nearly 1,000 hand wrought nails were recovered, and among these were many short shingle nails. Clearly the hospital’s roof was shingled, but the building may have had a rather unfinished



Figure 7. *Artifacts Collected by Tom Daniels from the General Hospital. These consist of medicine cups of white salt-glazed stoneware (upper left), a saucer with "scratch blue" decoration, a "worm" used to clean the bore of a musket (upper right), and small glass vials (lower right).*

appearance because virtually no fragments of window glass were found. Still, there were three large concentrations of stone evenly spaced along the length of the foundation, suggesting that fireplaces had been constructed. (See Figure 6 for a conjectural drawing of the hospital.)

Although army doctors had removed most of the medical supplies when they abandoned the hospital in 1777, Tom Daniels, who was a District Game Warden, dug here in the 1950s and did find several medicine cups of white salt-glazed stoneware, together with glass medicine bottles, stoppers, and knife blades. (Some of these are pictured in Figure 7. These are now in storage at Chimney Point State Historic Site, and some of the more interesting artifacts are on display at Chimney Point and in the visitors' center at the Hubbardton Battlefield.)

Although we were not able to locate bunks, surgery, dining, or doctors' quarters, we too found a few sherds from medicine cups, part of a tin-glazed ointment jar, and a single knife blade. While we were disappointed

that collectors had already removed much of the medical evidence from the hospital, we nevertheless did find hundreds of wine bottle fragments scattered throughout the foundation, all melted from the fire that finally consumed the structure in November of 1777. We also found a large pit containing 64 butchered cow legs about 46 m to the north, no doubt representing fresh beef that was served to officers and enlisted men who dined in the hospital (see Figure 8). Only lower legs were recovered (metapodials and phalanges), and these would have been the least fleshy part of the cow, one of the first parts to be discarded during butchering. The quantities of cow bone in and around the hospital, coupled with the large numbers of wine bottles, certainly suggest that the general hospital served principally as a dining hall for officers and enlisted men during its brief period of use, rather than as the site of amputations and disease.

In addition to discarded medical supplies and food remains, the hospital has revealed one enigmatic item: a button worn by the British 20th Regiment of Foot, one of the advance units which fought the retreating Americans at the Battle of Hubbardton. Had this button been torn from the uniform of a fallen British soldier who was then carried to the American hospital?

Conclusions

After three seasons of mapping and limited archaeological testing, it is clear that early documents reveal much about the "events" which occurred at Mount Independence, especially when Carleton and his fleet approached in October of 1776 and again when Burgoyne's army arrived in July of 1777. They also provide anecdotal evidence for daily life on the Mount, as evidenced by such things as clothing shortages, disease, and punishments for misdeeds. However, history often fails to provide adequate quantitative information about buildings, foodways, clothing, and consumption patterns. It is safe to say that archaeology need not duplicate what may be learned from military history, and that the archaeological integrity of Mount Independence makes the site itself one of the best "documents" with which to better understand the daily lives of soldiers during the American Revolution.

But what happens next? As the Mount becomes better known, will its fragile trails remain as pristine as they are today? The site's owners, the State of Vermont and the Fort Ticonderoga Association, are planning an inobtrusive visitors' center that will blend into the hillside at the

Figure 8. *Butchered Cow Bones Found about 46 m North of the General Hospital (facing east).*



foot of the Mount. Otherwise, there are no plans to build replica structures for fear of detracting from the site's scenic beauty and because no one really knows what the fort's buildings would have looked like anyway.

Archaeology will contribute to exhibits in the proposed visitors' center by revealing for the first time the precise placement of buildings and activities across the Mount, by demonstrating how buildings were constructed, and by pointing out the differences in living standards between officers and enlisted men. Hopefully the artifacts that have been excavated may provide insights into status and regional differences among soldiers who came from several different Northeastern colonies, perhaps revealing some of the ways whereby they adjusted to life at this difficult northern outpost. In the future, mapping and site identification need to continue because literally hundreds of sites have yet to be identified, and archaeological testing will also be necessary in order to determine which surface concentrations of stone are natural and which are cultural.

The soldiers who camped atop Mount Independence left behind only a modest number of journals, so archaeology is now one of the best ways to understand the hardships they faced during America's fight for independence. This was the only major Revolutionary War fortification ever constructed in the State of Vermont, and traces of the siege of Mount Independence are now richly strewn all across this rocky mountaintop.

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