

Planning the New Visitors' Center at Mount Independence

by Audrey Porsche

Some two hundred twenty years after thousands of American soldiers worked feverishly to construct a fort and related works at Mount Independence, a new building was erected to interpret these gallant efforts. On July 27, 1997, the State of Vermont dedicated the Mount Independence State Historic Site Visitor Center and Museum. Approximately 2,000 people, including state officials, local residents, historical reenactors, and visitors from across the region gathered on the hills of this Revolutionary War fort site to join in the festivities and dedicate the center. "What a wonderful crowd! What a wonderful occasion!" Richard Ketchum, Pulitzer Prize winning author and former Editor-in-Chief of American Heritage Books, summed up the day with these words as he delivered the keynote address at the grand opening. Governor Howard Dean cut the ribbon to the center following a commanding *foire de joie* (firing of muskets) and a lively reading of the Declaration of Independence by American General David Bernier of the 25th Massachusetts Continental Regiment. The grand opening was marked by period music, costumed interpretive tours of the hiking trails, and a recreated military encampment where visitors learned what life was like for the soldiers and civilians who garrisoned the Mount from 1776-1777.

That day was the culmination of many years of work that began in earnest with archaeological work conducted in 1989 under the supervision of Dr. David Starbuck for the Vermont Division for Historic Preservation (VDHP) (Starbuck and Murphy 1994). The first priority of that season was to test the area slated for a visitor center and museum and parking lot to ensure that no archaeological resources would be destroyed in the construction process. The areas were thoroughly tested, revealing little to no archaeological evidence, and the location was "cleared" by the State Archaeologist's office.

After several seasons of terrestrial archaeology at Mount Independence and underwater investigations (Cohn 1995) of the area surrounding the site, it became increasingly clear just how necessary it was to have a visitor center and museum at the site to properly interpret the site's history

and exhibit some of the growing collection of artifacts. Just as important was the need for an appropriate collection storage area for those artifacts not currently on display. In the early 1990s, appropriations were made by the Vermont State Legislature that would allow the visitor center project to begin.

Approximately a dozen, pre-qualified architectural firms were interviewed and scored by a representative from the Vermont Division for Historic Preservation and an outside design consultant. The three, top-ranked firms were then asked to submit designs by late February 1993. The public was invited to comment on the three designs during an "open-house" evening at the town hall in Orwell. A selection committee made up of representatives from the Division, the Department of State Buildings, the Shelburne Museum, and an award-winning architect reviewed the designs and the public comments. They made a final selection — the overwhelming favorite of the selection committee, and the building that received the most favorable comments during the public review, was for a simple, organic



Plate 1. *The 25th Regiment and other living history units perform a foire de joie following the reading of the Declaration of Independence during the grand opening ceremonies at the Mount Independence Visitors' Center.*

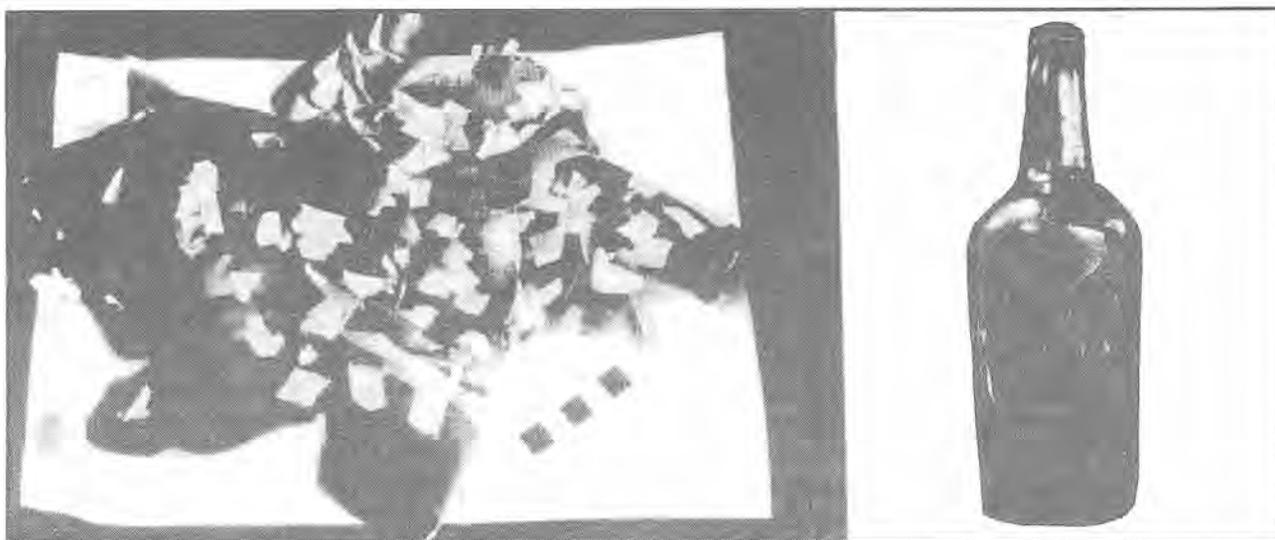


Plate 2. A broken wine bottle discovered during archaeological excavations of Mount Independence is shown before and after reconstruction by conservators. After reconstruction it was found that the name "James Hill" and the year "1777" had been scratched into the glass in two places. It is part of the permanent exhibit at the Visitors' Center.

structure submitted by Truex, DeGroot & Cullins of Burlington, Vermont.

The committee wanted a special and memorable building that would be compatible with the natural beauty of the site, yet reflect the historic significance of Mount Independence. The building's overall shape and detailing is clearly inspired by the naval activities that played out on Lake Champlain during the Revolution. Mount Independence was fortified because of its strategic location on Lake Champlain, and the building makes that link between the site and the lake. At the same time, this design is clearly modern so visitors will not be confused and think that it had been there at the time of Revolution.

Because of the precious nature of the objects housed in the center (i.e., the artifacts, our link with the past which is irreplaceable), the Division also wanted a very secure building. Four doors provide the only means of entry, thereby making the building more secure. There is also a good security and fire alarm system. Ultra-violet rays which can be harmful to certain artifacts, have been virtually eliminated by the exclusion of windows. Finally, the concrete construction makes the building a solid one and is also largely maintenance-free since it will require no painting.

Mount Independence is a special site because of its historic significance, but also because of its natural beauty. Therefore, a building location was needed that would bal-

ance those two concerns. By placing the building nestled up against the southern hillside, it is visible to visitors as they approach the site and disappears or recedes from the landscape once visitors have gone through the building. By having the building "disappear" from view two things are accomplished: the natural beauty of this pristine site is not compromised, and visitors are allowed the "opportunity" to "travel" back in time as they approach the trails to the archaeological features. This location also allows the use of land across the road as a parking lot. With its already relatively level surface, it provided the ideal location and was in compliance with the provisions by the Federal Government, who donated that land to the state, that no permanent building be constructed on that site.

Finally, another driving reason for the site's location was cost. The need for extensive blasting, running long water and electrical lines, etc. were avoided by placing the building nestled against the approaching hillside.

The total project cost of slightly over \$1 million dollars includes the costs for building construction, site improvements, parking lot, and exhibit design and construction. Consistent with costs for other public buildings, the square foot cost for the building itself is \$119.

The overall building is approximately 8,000 square feet and includes secure, specialized spaces. The Mount Independence center has flexible auditorium space for video and slide show presentations as well as for work-

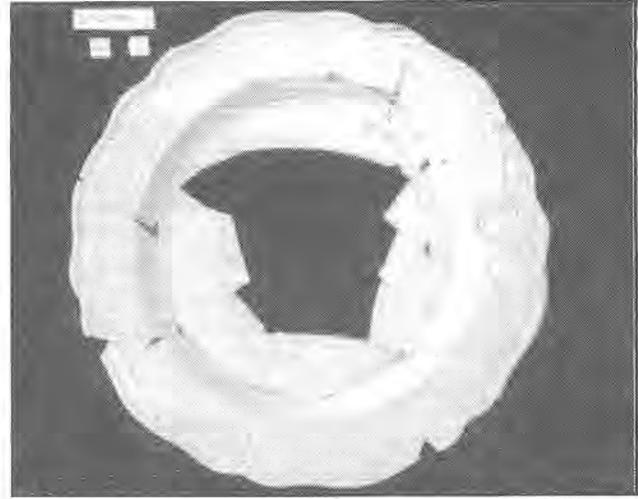
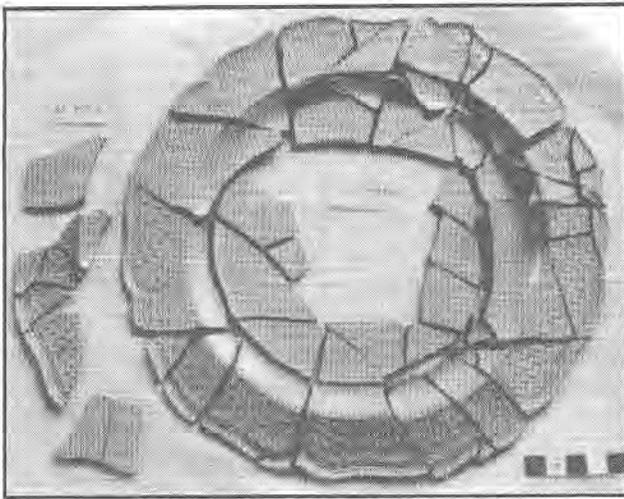


Plate 3. A broken plate with a "barley" pattern discovered during archaeological excavations of Mount Independence is shown before and after reconstruction by conservators. It is part of the permanent exhibit at the Visitors' Center.

shops and classroom work. There are collections storage spaces which are humidity and temperature controlled to ensure conservation and preservation of the artifacts. Other spaces in the building include permanent exhibit galleries, a temporary gallery for changing exhibits, gift shop, office space for seasonal staff and regional administrator files, library, etc., work area for archaeological field schools and trail crews, and storage for trail equipment.

The permanent exhibit in the center's museum focuses on the American occupation of Mount Independence. "Building Independence on Lake Champlain" highlights the role Mount Independence played during the early years of the Revolutionary War and explores the lives of the American soldiers encamped on the Mount and the successes and failures of their heroic efforts. Drawing on the history of the site, the exhibit design evokes the wooden stockade that surrounded the star-shaped, picket fort constructed by the American garrison on Mount Independence. The perimeter of the exhibition gallery is surrounded by stylized wooden posts or pickets. Interspersed between the pickets are glass cases and exhibit mounts featuring artifacts recovered from Mount Independence during archaeological investigations. Notable among the objects is the over 3,000-pound cannon retrieved from Lake Champlain in 1993. Also on display is a bottle engraved with the signature "James Hill 1777," and log timbers from the cribs that supported the "Great Bridge" connecting Mount Independence to its sister fort at Fort Ticonderoga. Large panel graphics and additional smaller images enliven and enlighten the story.

A second phase of the exhibit, slated for installation in 1998, will feature two computer elements that invite audience participation. The first, to be located in the center of the gallery, is a large-scale group sculpture of six Revolutionary War soldiers that will allow visitors to explore garrison life through first-hand accounts from people stationed at the Mount. Using hologram imagery, two of the figures will portray notable soldiers who talk about their experiences fortifying and defending the site. The other figures will hold "journals" that house touch-screen computers programmed with copies of journals, letters, and military records from the American and British occupation.

Historic maps of the site and the Champlain Valley will be showcased in four computer terminals that make up the second computer element. Visitors will be able to navigate the territory covered by Revolutionary War soldiers, manipulating maps to envision, for example, what British General Guy Carleton saw from Lake Champlain as his fleet approached Mount Independence in November 1776.

A museum education curriculum for school groups and families visiting the center is being developed by DeBeer & Associates of Brandon, Vermont. It will cover a wide range of topics that relate to the history and natural history of Mount Independence. Included in the curriculum will be various hands-on activities, an artifact cart, and outreach materials. The curriculum will be complete in time for fall 1997.

As progress on the center-based programs continues, work has begun on various plans for the site itself. The Vermont

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Division for Historic Preservation contracted with R. Christopher Goodwin & Associates, Inc. of Frederick, Maryland, to develop a cultural resources management plan for the underwater and land-based archaeological resources at Mount Independence State Historic Site. The management document integrates previous archaeological research findings and makes recommendations concerning a variety of issues in order to responsibly manage and develop the site. Specifically, the plan provides direction for future research, public programming, preservation, enhancement, and protection of the archaeological resources of this Revolutionary War fort site.

The Goodwin team was led by Dr. John Seidel who has extensive experience at military sites in the Northeast, including New Windsor Cantonment, Morristown National Historical Park and other sites in New Jersey and Maryland. His doctoral dissertation on the Continental artillery cantonment of 1778-1779 at Pluckemin, New Jersey, provides one of the most comprehensive overviews of archaeology on Revolutionary War era sites. It also provides a reappraisal and assessment of method and theory in such research, setting a new standard in military sites archaeology. Over the last few years R. Christopher Goodwin & Associates, Inc. has written cultural resources management plans for several current military installations in Maryland.

Writing the Mount Independence archaeological management plan is the first step in a larger project to reassess and rehabilitate the hiking trail system, as well as boater access, at the site. Open Space Management, Inc. of Great Barrington, Massachusetts, was recently contracted to develop a trail master plan that will be based largely on the cultural resources management plan and natural resource inventories. The trail plan will be completed by fall 1997 and will be implemented over several seasons beginning in 1998.

The project is funded in part by an award from the Intermodal Surface Transportation Enhancement Act, a federal Department of Transportation program designed to enhance a variety of transportation systems, including hiking trails. Additional funding for the cultural resources management plan is provided through the Vermont Community Foundation and the Kelsey Trust. An award from the Vermont Recreational Trails Fund will also assist with the production of the Trail Master Plan.

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