

Mutiny, Matthew Lyon, and a Missing Fort: Archaeological Identification Studies of Fort Jericho

by Allen Hathaway

In 1991, the Archaeology Research Center at the University of Maine at Farmington performed an Archaeological Phase IA Study of the Essex No. 19 Hydroelectric Project (FERC No. 2513) (Robinson and Peterson 1991). The study mentions "a relatively obscure reference to a 'Jericho Fort' occurs in the DHP site files" and goes on to state that while the location of the blockhouse fort is not known, it is unlikely that the fort was built on the low floodplain.

During 1998, Archaeology Consulting Team (ACT) of Essex, Vermont, as part of a FERC mandated cultural resource management plan for Green Mountain Power's Essex No. 19 hydroelectric facility, undertook archival and geomorphological research to determine the probable location of the blockhouse fort in Jericho. While the blockhouse fort was never officially named, it will be referred to in this document as "Fort Jericho."

Background

In 1775, the Continental Army in concert with several local militia had succeeded in driving the British out of the Champlain Valley and had successfully invaded Canada and captured Montreal. Towards the end of 1775, the Continental Army executed a plan to capture Quebec, the last British stronghold in the north, but the plan was a spectacular failure. The Continental Army fled down the Champlain Valley, covered by the rear guard action of Seth Warner and the Green Mountain Corps (Collins 1903; Hill 1949).

Upon reaching Crown Point, New York, Ira Allen, one of the commanders of the American troops at Quebec, spoke to Generals Sullivan, Schuyler, and Gates and proposed a string of forts along the Onion (Winooski) River to hold the northern frontier against the English and their Native American allies. He wrote the following letter from his blockhouse, Fort Frederick, next to the falls in Burlington, describing the situation in the Champlain Valley and his proposal to the generals (Wilbur 1928:81-82):

ONION RIVER, July 10th 1776
To the Citizens of Poultney,

GENTN:

Learn you are alarmed at the Retreat of our Army out of Canada. Can assure you the Savages have killed and scalped a number of men by the River LaCole [just north of the Canadian border] on the west side Lake Champlain.

When they will visit us or you is uncertain. Advise you to look sharp and keep scouts out, but not to move except some Families much remote from ye Main Inhabitants - Last Saturday was at Crown Point with General Sullivan, he assured me he would do all in his power to protect the Frontier Settlements - I proposed a Line of Forts by this River to Cohos [Wells River], he said he believed that to be the best place and made no doubt but that it would be done - he immediately ordered Col. Waite & 200 men to this place here to remain & grant all protection in his power to the Inhabitants. Before I left there, General Schuyler, Gates & Arnold arrived. I conclude there is a determination before this Time in regard to all the Frontiers. I make no doubt but a Line of Block Forts is agreed on by all from this River to yours & so round your Frontiers . . .

*in haste,
Ira Allen*

Ira Allen's suggestion may have been under consideration, but other testimony concerning the establishment of Fort Jericho gives a slightly different version. According to Matthew Lyon, an officer stationed at the fort, troops were being raised to establish a defensive frontier further south in the vicinity of Middlebury. However, "some people who had bought the [wheat] crops of the Whigs and who had [then] removed from Onion [Winooski] river" prevailed on General St. Clair to "order our [Captain Jonathan Fassett's and Lieutenant Matthew Lyon's] party to march to Jericho, and take post at a certain house on the north side of Onion river" (US Congress 1851:1026; see also Austin 1981). As a result, the soldiers occupied a blockhouse in Jericho in the second half of 1776. While the precise dates for the occupation of Fort Jericho are not currently available, Matthew Lyon received his commission on July 19, 1776 (Austin 1981), and all Continental Army troops were withdrawn to the Ticonderoga and Mount Independence area before the winter of 1776-1777 (Pell 1985).

The soldiers at Fort Jericho resented the assignment because they were isolated and exposed to the enemy in Canada just to their north and because they felt they were placed there to satisfy the interests of wheat speculators. As Matthew Lyons describes the situation, "the soldiers considered themselves sacrificed to the interest of those persons who bought the crops for a trifle, and wanted to get our party there to eat them at the public expense" (US

Congress 1851; Austin 1981; Hill 1949; Peterson n.d.).

A scout from Fort Jericho reported seeing "five or six hundred Indians" (US Congress 1851:1026) only twelve miles away on the shore of Lake Champlain. The enlisted men mutinied and insisted that the officers accompany them, threatening violence if they did not. The officers, including Captain Jonathan Fassett and Lieutenant Matthew Lyons, deciding they were "officers without soldiers, and soldiers without officers, in an enemy's land - savages all around us," (Austin 1981:17) decided to comply, and the fort was abandoned (US Congress 1851; Austin 1981; Hill 1949; Peterson n.d.). On returning to their headquarters at Ticonderoga, the officers were summarily dismissed and the enlisted men were "sentenced to corporeal [sic] punishment" (US Congress 1851:1027).

Matthew Lyon later became one of Vermont's representatives to the US Congress. In 1793, Lyon was taunted about his "wooden sword" (a reference to the mutiny) by a Mr. Griswold, which led to a fist fight on the floor of the House of Representatives. In defense of his behavior, Lyon testified to the House about the events that led up to the mutiny, and the details of the mutiny itself. A complete transcript of Matthew Lyon's testimony to Congress concerning the mutiny episode is provided in Appendix A (US Congress 1851:1025-1027).

Procedures

In its 1997 annual report, ACT presented a detailed and extensive analysis of the historic changes in the course of the Winooski River along Jericho's town boundary (Frink et al. 1998). The results of that analysis were combined with information provided by primary sources to determine the most likely location for Fort Jericho. Documents consulted include the Annals of Congress (US Congress 1851), the proprietors' book for the Town of Jericho, and the 1997 annual report.

Results

Review of the documentation listed above indicates that there are at least four criteria that should be applied to locate Fort Jericho:

1. The fort was established in a pre-existing structure - "a certain house ... our log house and a hovel or two which stood near" (US Congress 1851:1026).
2. The structure was used to store wheat - "some people who had bought the crops of the Whigs ... (US Congress 1851:1026) "some of the wheat speculators" (US Congress 1851:1027).
3. The structure was on the north bank of the Winooski River - "on the north side of Onion river" (US Congress 1851:1026).
4. The structure was located on a section of the Winooski River that was more than 330 feet wide - "more than twenty

poles [330 feet] wide, at that time not fordable" (US Congress 1851:1026).

These four criteria were applied, in conjunction with geomorphology data, to identify the probable location of the fort.

Brief Introduction to Geomorphology

Geomorphology is the study of landforms and how they change over time. River systems play a large role in the process of changing landforms by eroding sediments from one location and redepositing them further downstream. As a result of this erosion and redeposition, rivers change course. In some instances, this change occurs slowly and gradually; in other cases, rivers change course relatively quickly through a process called avulsion. In avulsion, a river breaks through its banks, abandons its former channel, and establishes a new river channel in the floodplain (Lewis and McConckie 1994; Mount 1995). After an avulsion, the abandonment of the former channel is not necessarily rapid (Frink et al. 1998). During high water periods, such as a spring thaw and subsequent runoff ("spring freshet"), the old channel may be temporarily reoccupied. This process deposits new sediments in the abandoned channel, until it is eventually filled in.

These processes have been at work in the Winooski River Valley for thousands of years and have been documented for the last 400 years. The course of the Winooski River has changed several times in the vicinity of Fort Jericho during the late 1700s and early 1800s (Frink et al. 1998). The hydrologic profile and average river depth along this segment of the river suggest that the process of channel abandonment was not rapid in this area. For example, an oxbow has been cut off near the North Williston bridge. Archival maps and aerial photographs suggest that the oxbow was cut off sometime between 1904 and 1937, most likely during the flood of 1927. As of today, more than seventy years later, the oxbow has not been completely abandoned (Frink et al. 1998).

Application of Geomorphology to Fort Jericho's Location

In a local history originally published in 1916, LaFayette Wilbur suggests that the fort was located between River Road and the Winooski River just south of the intersection of River Road and Skunk Hollow Road (Figure 1) (Hayden et al. 1989). Current research demonstrates that location does not meet the four criteria listed in the results section above and suggests another location for the fort.

The original grants for the towns of Williston and Jericho were issued by Benning Wentworth in 1763 as part of the New Hampshire Grants. The boundary between the two towns was set as the Onion, or Winooski, River. Between 1763 and 1774, the area was surveyed by Ira Allen and Remember Baker (Hill 1949). The first European American settlers in Jericho, Roderick Messenger, Azariah Rood, and Joseph Brown, arrived in 1774. Roderick Messenger "lived on Onion River near where the highway leading from Jericho Corners [Skunk

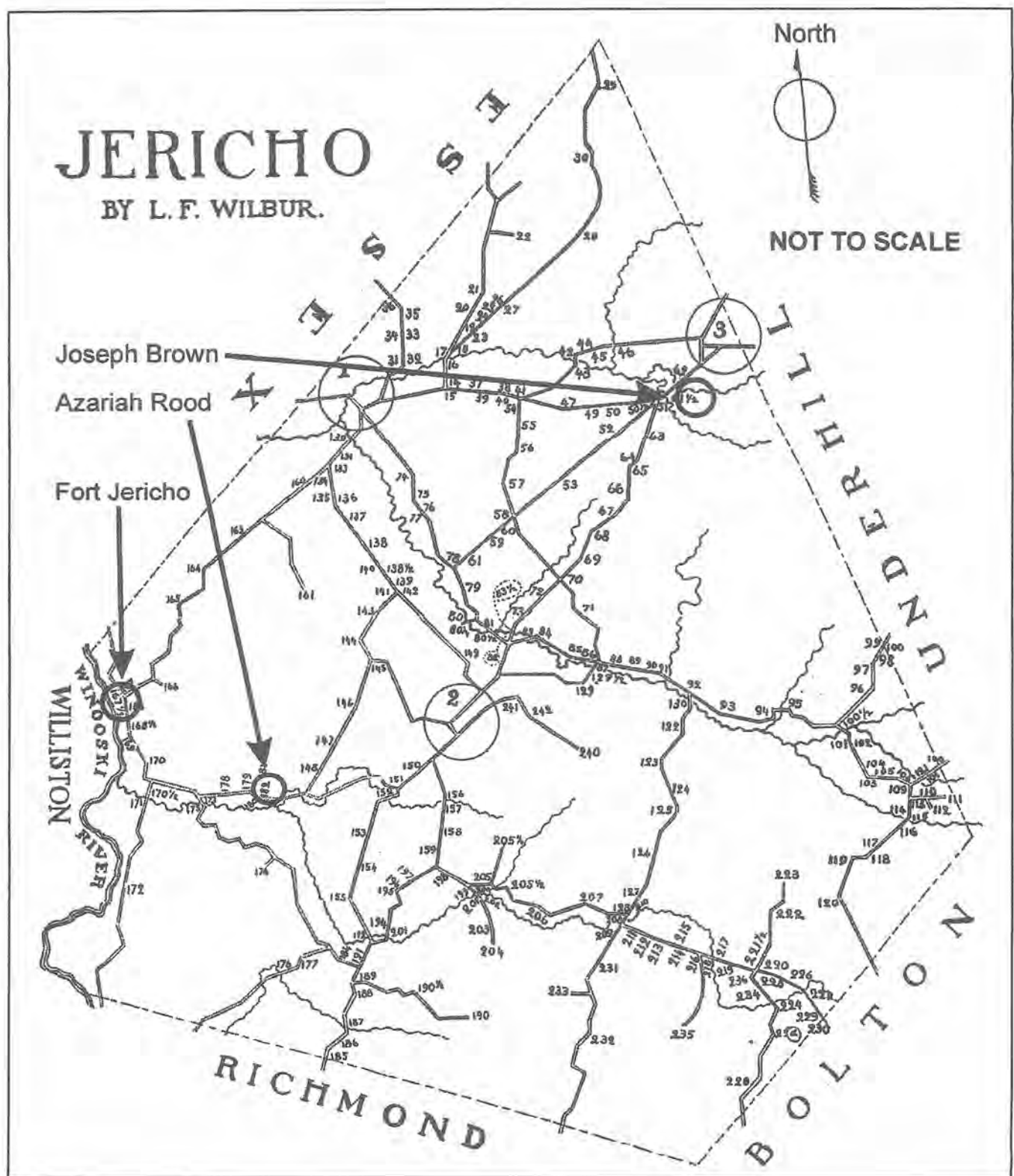


Figure 1. The 1916 map of Jericho with Wilbur's locations of Fort Jericho, Azariah Rood's homestead, and Joseph Brown's homestead highlighted (Hayden et al. 1989).



Figure 2. Portion of John Johnson's 1774 Map of the Greater Body of Williston showing the originally surveyed course of the Winooski River and a double channel at the north end of Messenger's island (John Johnson Papers, Courtesy of Special Collections Library, University of Vermont).

Hollow Road] intersects the Onion River road [sic]" (Hayden et al. 1989) near Wilbur's proposed fort location. Joseph Brown settled on land in the vicinity of Jericho Corners, and Azariah Rood settled on land along the Mill Brook, approximately one mile upstream from the Winooski River (see Figure 1).

In 1774, John Johnson, who later became Surveyor General of Vermont, drew a Map of the Greater Body of Williston based on Ira Allen's survey notes (Figure 2). This map shows the channel of the Winooski River following a sinuous course west of the modern channel. This configuration has been confirmed by examining the Town of Jericho's property maps, which show the town boundary along the river alignment that Johnson mapped (Figure 3). Johnson also indicates an unsurveyed stream or waterway that roughly corresponds with the modern channel. The area between the two channels is labeled "Messenger's Island," presumably after Roderick Messenger who lived in the area. At the north end of Messenger's Island, the Johnson map depicts two channels for the Winooski River. Since the 1774 map is labeled as "not correct" (i.e., a draft sketch), this could be a correction of a sketching error. However, other evidence indicates that the 1774 Johnson map is correct in showing two

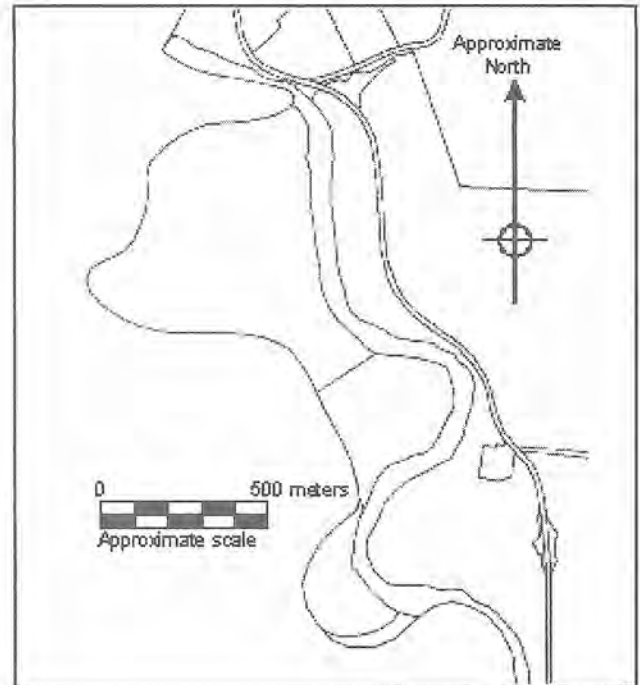


Figure 3. Town of Jericho property map showing the town boundary based on the originally surveyed course of the Winooski River.

channels for the Winooski River in that area for that time.

The John Johnson 1802 Map of Jericho delineates the double channel depicted in his 1774 map as belonging to Williston (Figure 4). This suggests that the 1774 map correctly depicted two channels for the river, as the town boundary was established on the course of the Winooski River as surveyed prior to 1774. Additionally, town proprietors' records place Roderick Messenger's property line, located at the bend on the north bank of the Winooski River, farther east than the river's present-day location. Finally, the USDA Soil Conservation Service (SCS) soil maps of the area reveal a clear association between soils and the abandoned river channels (Frink et al. 1998). The previously mentioned cutoff oxbow is clearly visible in the soils, as is the former western boundary of Messenger's Island. The soils also reveal that L.F. Wilbur's proposed fort location (Hayden et al. 1989) contains an abandoned and silted-in river channel.

Discussion

Given that this section of the river changed course rapidly between 1763 and 1802, what does this imply regarding the location of Fort Jericho? L.F. Wilbur places the fort's location in a river channel that was in the process of being abandoned

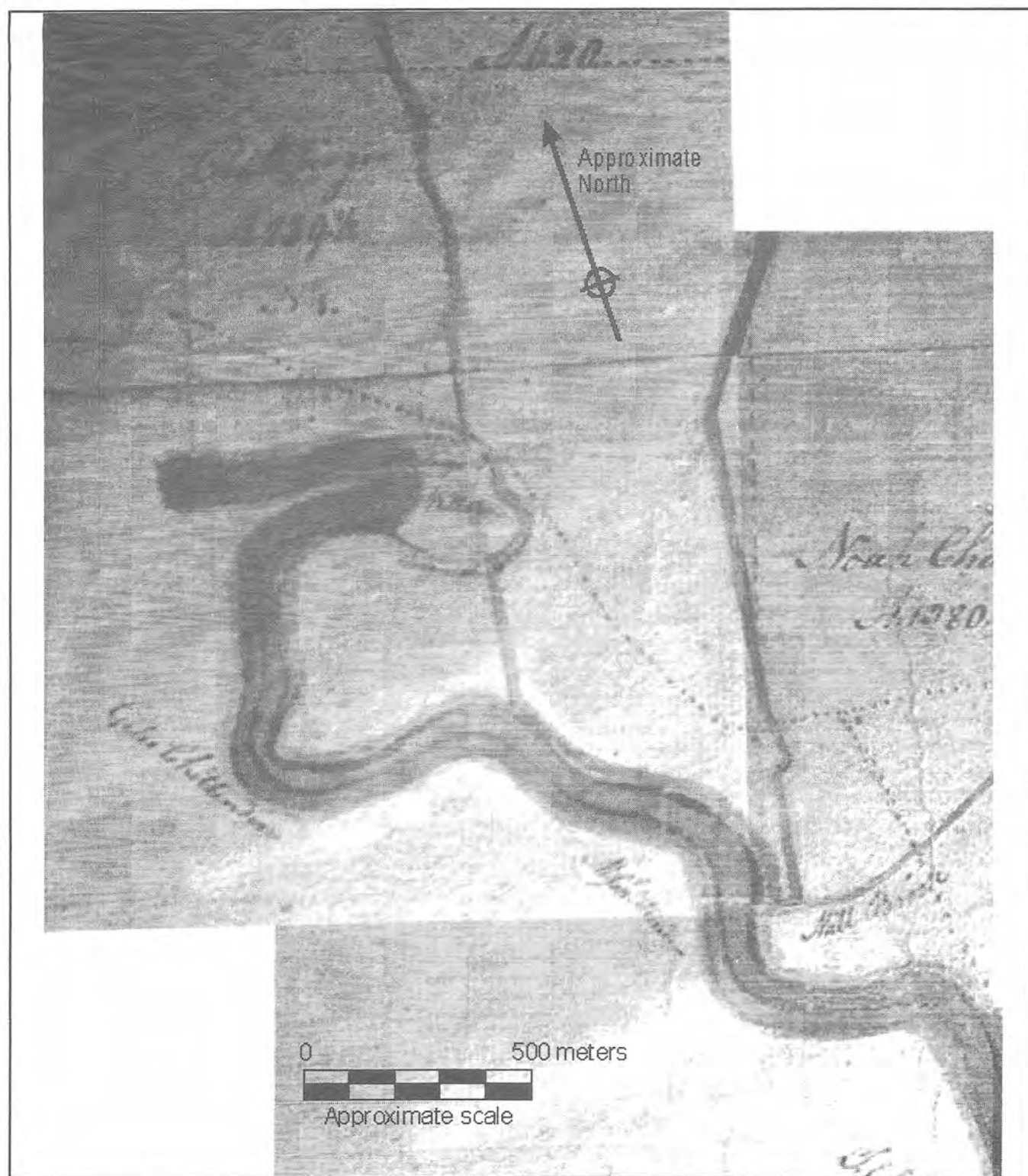


Figure 4. John Johnson's 1802 Map of Jericho showing the land originally occupied by the double channel as belonging to Williston and identifying lands belonging to Roderick Messenger (John Johnson Papers, Courtesy of Special Collections, University of Vermont).

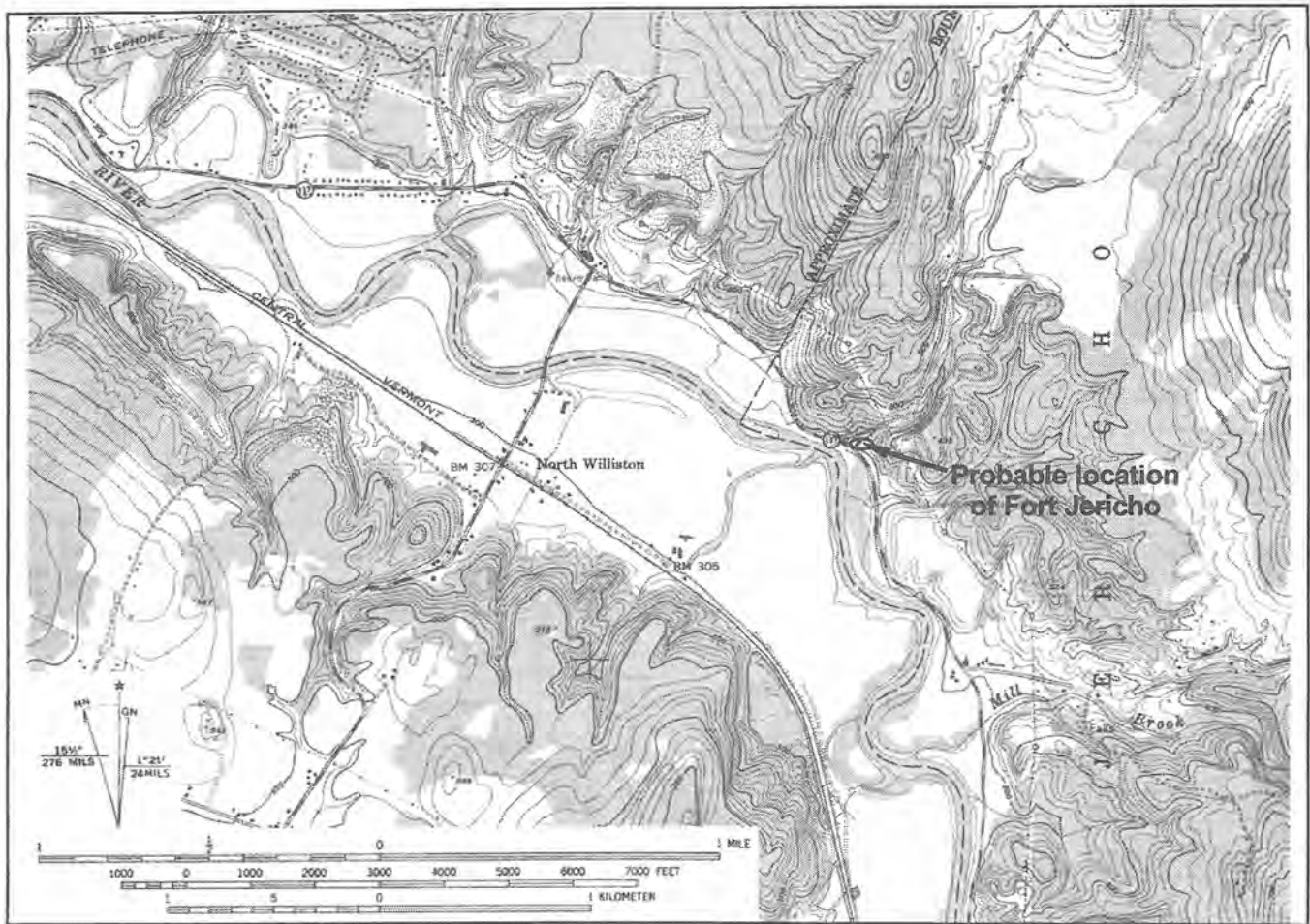


Figure 5. USGS map of the boundary intersection of Essex, Jericho, and Williston showing the probable location of Fort Jericho in Jericho, Chittenden County, Vermont.

at the time of the fort's occupation. This would be, at the very least, inconvenient for the farmers and soldiers, especially during the spring freshet, and would not be a likely location to store wheat. As Robinson and Peterson (1991) had pointed out, storage facilities for wheat would not generally be located on floodplains where they would be threatened by spring freshets, and certainly not in the vicinity of rapidly migrating river channels. A plausible location, based on the criteria specified earlier, would require the blockhouse to be situated above the floodplain, adjacent to the river, on the north side, where the river reached a breadth of more than 330 feet during mid-to-late summer.

The 1785 road survey for the Town of Jericho indicates a "barn" near the intersection of River Road and Skunk Hollow Road at the present site of a house and two outbuildings. Very few structures of any kind were noted in the early road surveys, and this survey places that structure on property that belonged to Roderick Messenger at that time. Beers' 1869 atlas map of Jericho indicates a farmstead on the same site, and

The History of Jericho, Vermont, originally published in 1916, also lists this location as a historic farm (Hayden et al. 1989:346 and map insert between pages 342 and 343).

In his testimony, Matthew Lyon stated that the Continental Army soldiers under his command occupied "a certain house" where wheat had been stored (US Congress 1851:1026). The only recorded structure(s) on the Winooski River's north bank during the period of the fort's occupation would have been Roderick Messenger's. Lyon's testimony that the river was "more than 20 poles [330 feet] wide, at that time not fordable" (US Congress 1851:1027) also supports this proposed location. The Winooski River was changing course and appears to have occupied a double channel at the north end of Messenger's Island. The combined width of the two channels would have measured about 350 feet with little more than a channel bar in the middle. The location of the "barn" mentioned in the road survey would have met all of the proposed criteria for the blockhouse fort.

Conclusion

The fort location proposed by LaFayette Wilbur (Hayden et al. 1989) is very unlikely. The hypothesized alternate location presented here meets the criteria suggested by Matthew Lyon's testimony and is consistent with the geomorphological reconstruction of the Winooski River channel for the time period. The currently proposed Fort Jericho location is occupied by a more modern dwelling on the north side of River Road (VT Route 117) south of its intersection with Skunk Hollow Road (Figure 5). As Fort Jericho was occupied for less than six months in 1776, subsequent construction and occupation of the proposed fort location may have obscured archaeological evidence of its military occupation.

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APPENDIX A: TRANSCRIPT OF MATTHEW LYON'S
STATEMENT TO CONGRESS CONCERNING THE
EVENTS SURROUNDING THE MUTINY AND
ABANDONMENT OF THE BLOCKHOUSE FORT IN
JERICHO, VT.

(*Annals of Congress*, Volume 5, Number 1, pages
1025-1027)

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In 1776, after the retreat from Canada, Colonel Seth Warner, being out of employ, applied to the Commander-in-Chief in the Northern department, for some defense for the frontier of New Hampshire Grants, which became exposed by the retreat of the army. The General recommended to the Committee of the New Hampshire Grants, of which I was a member, to nominate the commissioned officers for six companies, and he promised to commission them, and that they should be entitled to Continental pay. In one of those companies I received a commission as a second lieutenant. I set about enlisting my men, and immediately obtained my quota, and, at my own expense, marched them to the rendezvous at Pitsford [sic], about twenty miles south-east from Ticonderoga, which, by this time, had become headquarters. At the rendezvous I found the Captain and First Lieutenant of my company had raised no men, and that there were but two companies, and a part of another, besides mine, raised, and that Colonel Warner, who was expected to have commanded our six companies, had received a commission and orders from Congress for raising a regiment on the Con-

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tinental establishment during the war, and that, in his endeavors to raise his regiment, the raising of our companies was wholly impeded. Finding the business falling into supineness, I applied to the General to discharge me and my men, in order that I might join Warner's regiment. The General at once agreed to discharge and pay me and my men, and ordered me to make up a pay roll for the purpose. But, at this juncture, application was made to the General by some people who had bought the crops of the Whigs, and who had removed

from Onion river; and he was induced to order our party to march to Jericho, and take post at a certain house on the north side of Onion river, at least sixty miles in advance of the army, towards Canada - from whence the army had retreated, and about the same distance from any body of inhabitants; and the General, instead of discharging, ordered me to join one of the other companies.

The idea of the people, and of the Committee of the New Hampshire Grants, was that these six companies, if they had all been raised, would have been stationed somewhere near Middlebury, which is opposite crown point, and about twelve miles east therefrom, and near forty miles southward of the places appointed by the General.

The commanding officer wrote to the General, representing the situation of the country, and the impossibility of our being of any service at Onion river, as all the well affected people were moved away. This letter was either neglected or answered with a fresh order for marching. The order was obeyed; but the soldiers considered themselves sacrificed to the interest of those persons who bought the crops for a trifle, and wanted to get our party there to eat them at the public expense. I opposed those murmurs with all the arguments in my power.

I used frequently to urge with them, that the absolute government of the army must be with the General; he could not be omniscient, and that we ought to submit with cheerfulness and hope for the best. In this situation our little garrison, which contained about sixty men, besides invalids, were alarmed by the Indians taking some persons from a house about a mile distant. Consternation prevailed. I immediately called for volunteers, and with about twenty men went to the house where the prisoners had been taken - from thence took a circuit in the woods round the garrison, in order to see if there were any party or appearances of the enemy. Finding none, I returned and obtained leave to take about five and twenty of the best men, and pursue the enemy towards the Lakes, where we supposed they had gone. I had proceeded about two miles, when two runners from the commanding officer brought me positive orders to return, with intelligence that a subaltern officer had returned from a scout to the Lake Champlain, about twelve miles distant, where he saw five or six hundred Indians.

On my return I found the soldiers more than ever anxious about their situation. They complained bitterly of the orders which bound them to the north side of Onion river, more than twenty poles wide, at that time not fordable, and but a single small canoe to cross with. I endeavored to encourage them with assurances that we could withstand any number of Indians in our log house and a hovel or two which stood near; and, after a battle, if we should find the enemy too troublesome, we might retreat with honor. I urged them to their duty as soldiers and patriots. Every preparation was made to repel the attack which was expected from

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the enemy that night. Being fatigued and off duty, I had laid down to rest, with my fusée in my arms. About nine o'clock in the evening I heard a violent bustle, with a cry of "Turn out! turn out!" I turned out, and inquired where the enemy were discovered? and was answered, "No where." The soldiers were paraded, and I found by what was said by the sergeants that they were about to march off and cross the river. I expostulated with them, long and earnestly, pointing out the dishonor which such an action would reflect on their country. I urged them to stay the event of a battle; and I spoke the truth when I assured them that I preferred death in battle to the dishonor of quitting our post.

All entreaties were ineffectual; they declared they had been abused - there was no chance for their lives there, and they marched off for the south side of the river. A sergeant returned with some soldiers, and called upon the officers to cross the river. As they were going to take the canoe to the other side, they insisted on our going, and threatened violence if we refused. The other officers, which were two Captains and one Lieutenant, seemed willing to go, and I did not think it my duty to resist alone.

In the morning, the soldiers offered to return to subordination, if the commanding officer would lead them to a small block fort at New Haven, about thirty miles to the southward. The officers held a consultation; - in this I refused to do anything but go back to the station we were ordered to maintain. We were at this place joined by a Lieutenant and a few men, who had gone to the mill near Crown Point to get wheat ground, and I was sent express to head-quarters, to carry letters and inform the General of what had happened; but some of the wheat speculators had arrived before me, and so exasperated the General that, when I arrived, he was enraged to the highest pitch: he swore we should all be hanged, and ordered me under arrest. Within a few days, the other officers and some of the soldiers were brought into head-quarters. We had a trial, by a court martial, appointed by the exasperated General, who now swore we should all be broke. I proved every thing with respect to myself that is here stated, (the persons are yet alive by whom I proved it, and are ready to repeat it,) notwithstanding which, I was included in the general sentence of cashiering; nor did even the Lieutenant who was absent at the mill escape the awful condemnation. The soldiers were sentenced to corporeal [sic] punishment, but, on General Carlton's coming down to attack Ticonderoga, they were liberated.

he became a quality control supervisor, computer programmer, foster and adoptive parent, and human services provider. He came into archaeology as a volunteer, and found a new career. He currently works for Archaeology Consulting Team, Inc., and has been second author for two papers that have been presented at the SAA's.

Allen Hathaway is new to archaeology, but brings in a background in statistics, computer programming and modelling, and human services. After leaving the United States Marine Corps Air Wing as an electronics technician,