

# HISTORIC ROOTS

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# MOUNT INDEPENDENCE

By BARBARA BOSWORTH

On a hot July day in 1776, soldiers were building a fort on Rattlesnake Hill in Orwell, Vermont. The hill overlooked a narrow part of Lake Champlain, one-quarter of a mile from Fort Ticonderoga in New York. The men stopped working when their commander, Colonel Arthur St. Clair, arrived. He read the Declaration of Independence to them. It had been signed in Philadelphia only days before. When he finished reading, the men cheered. They fired cannons and danced with joy. In honor of the event, they decided to name their hilltop Mount Independence.

1776 was the second summer of the Revolutionary War. The British wanted to take control of Lake Champlain. They hoped that doing so would weaken the Americans by separating the New England colonies from the others. They also hoped to use the lake to transport troops and supplies from Canada.

Ethan Allen had captured Fort Ticonderoga from the British only the year before. Because it guarded one of the narrowest parts of the lake, American commanders felt that an-



Barbara Bosworth

*The view from Mount Independence across Lake Champlain. You can see Fort Ticonderoga in the background.*

other fort nearby would allow the Americans to control the lake and prevent the British plan from succeeding.

The work was very hard. Soldiers used earth, logs, sticks, and stones to make low walls called batteries. From behind those walls, cannons pointed down at the lake. At the highest spot on Mount Independence they built a fort shaped like a star.

*Star-shaped forts were very common. This is a plan of the British fort at Crown Point in New York State.*



By the fall, 9,000 people lived on the hill. These included some women and children. The fort raised its own vegetables in a big garden near the lake. There were shops for blacksmiths, rope makers, wheelwrights, and weapons makers.

The troops on Mount Independence waited for action through the long summer and into the fall. Life was not always very pleasant there. Discipline was harsh. Disease was everywhere. And it was deadly. Matthew Kennedy from New Hampshire wrote to his brother Robert that he was very sick. He begged him “not to delay coming for me. I am so frail that I could not venture home alone.” By the time Robert arrived, his brother was dead.

In October 1776, British naval forces defeated a fleet of American gunboats near Valcour Island. Then they sailed south toward Mount Independence and Fort Ticonderoga. When they got there, they were faced with armed cannons on both shores and a chain across the lake blocking their way. It was late in the season. Ice was already forming on the lake. There was nothing to do but retreat to Canada. The American plan had worked.



Schuyler Collection, Albany

*A map of Mount Independence (A) and Fort Ticonderoga (B). This map was drawn by a British engineer in 1777. Notice the chain across the lake (C).*

The winter of 1776–1777 was brutal at Mount Independence. About two thirds of the men stationed there had left in the fall. For some, their enlistments were over. Others were farmers who had to go home and get ready for winter. Of the 3,500 who stayed, many became sick with “camp fever” (probably pneumonia), smallpox, dysentery, and other diseases.

There wasn’t much the few doctors at the fort could do. Sanitary conditions were poor. There were few medicines. To make things worse, the winter was terribly cold. Soldiers froze to death in their tents at Mount Independence, sometimes four or five a night. There were not enough blankets, and some men wore rags on their feet. The troops could not get enough food and other supplies during bad weather. In these conditions, men easily became ill. And those already weakened by illness often died. Some say 1,000 died that awful winter; others say it was more like 2,000.



*A plan of one of the hospitals at Mount Independence. It was 120 feet long and 24 feet wide.*

Fort Ticonderoga Museum

Even so, the troops worked through the winter. They built a hospital, supply buildings, a cargo hoist, and a wide floating bridge to

connect the two forts. In the spring, more soldiers arrived. They prepared for a British attack.

When the weather allowed that spring, British General John Burgoyne led a large army close to the forts. They put cannons on a steep hill to the south of Ticonderoga. In early July 1777, they fired on both forts. The British named their hill Mount Defiance.<sup>1</sup>

On July 5, The Fort Ti commander, Colonel St. Clair, saw that his situation was hopeless. The Americans were outnumbered and had to retreat. They tried to slip away in the dark. Some headed south toward Skenesborough (now Whitehall), New York. Others marched toward Castleton. The British soldiers and their German allies caught up with them and defeated them in the battle of Hubbardton. It was the end of American control of Mount Independence.

In fact, the fort itself did not last much longer. Some of the British went back to Mount Independence and Fort Ticonderoga. After Burgoyne was defeated at Saratoga, later in 1777, the British had to give up both forts. They burned them before they retreated in November.

For 200 years, cows grazed on the hillside. The sugar bush was tapped, and loggers cut

<sup>1</sup>By naming their hill Defiance, the British were thumbing their noses at the Americans.

down trees. In 1989, archeologists<sup>2</sup> began to dig in the remains of Mount Independence. For three summers they explored the site. They found tools, cups, bullets, buttons from British and American uniforms, and many other things in and around the remains of the buildings.

Using scuba gear, they brought up from the lake more artifacts<sup>3</sup>, including cannons, a musket, and bottles. Some of the huge logs that made up the floating bridge broke loose and floated to the surface.

Although none of the original buildings remain, Mount Independence is still an interesting place to visit. And you can learn a lot about what went on there. Hiking trails lead visitors past the remains of the fort's buildings. The museum at the visitor's center

<sup>2</sup> Archeologists dig in the ground to look for remains of past life. From what they find, they can tell a great deal about what happened at that site.

<sup>3</sup> An artifact is something left over from bygone days.



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*One of the original log paths at Mount Independence. Logs were used across muddy or wet areas.*

displays some of the articles that were found at the site and in the water. A videotape shows what happened on the hill during the Revolution.

The fort at Mount Independence existed for only a short time. But it was an important time for the Americans. With Fort Ticonderoga and Mount Independence in American hands, the British were not able to divide the American colonies in 1776. A year later, despite the British retaking the forts, the battle of Saratoga turned the tide of the war, and American independence became a reality.

### Rooting Around

Smallpox killed many soldiers during the Revolution and many people around the world for thousands of years. It no longer exists as a threat. Cholera, a disease that spreads in crowded places where sanitation is poor, still exists. But it can be cured. You might want to find out more about medicine in other times and places and about the changes that have helped improve health in more modern times.

There are ruins all over Vermont. If you take a walk in the woods, be on the look out for cellar holes, an old apple tree, or a lilac bush. These are sure signs that there was once a house there.

Mount Independence is off Route 73 in Orwell. It is open 9:30 am–5:30 pm, seven days a week, from late May until mid-October. For more information, call 802-948-2000.