

2001

Book Review: Massacre at Fort William Henry, by David R. Starbuck, 2002

Marshall Joseph Becker

Follow this and additional works at: <http://orb.binghamton.edu/neha>



Part of the [Archaeological Anthropology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Becker, Marshall Joseph (2001) "Book Review: Massacre at Fort William Henry, by David R. Starbuck, 2002," *Northeast Historical Archaeology*: Vol. 30-31 31, Article 15.

<https://doi.org/10.22191/neha/vol31/iss1/15> Available at: <http://orb.binghamton.edu/neha/vol31/iss1/15>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). It has been accepted for inclusion in Northeast Historical Archaeology by an authorized editor of The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). For more information, please contact ORB@binghamton.edu.

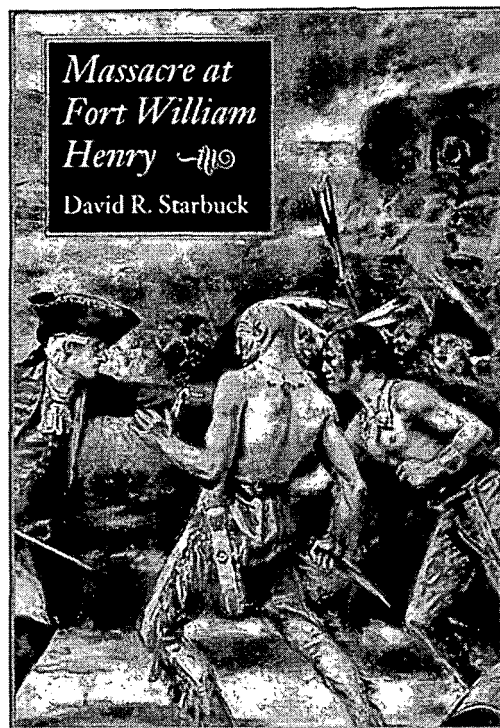
Book Review

MASSACRE AT FORT WILLIAM HENRY, by David R. Starbuck 2002, University Press of New England, Hanover, New Hampshire. 148 pages, 83 illus., \$16.95 (paper).

Reviewed by Marshall Joseph Becker

During the fall of 1755 the British and the French erected a number of important fortifications in the region around upstate New York. As these European adversaries spiraled into what in the New World we commonly call the French and Indian War, both sides escalated their preparations. Captain William Eyre supervised the construction of Fort William Henry at the south end of Lake George. Fort William Henry served as a barrier to the French forces who at that time were building Fort Carillon. Eyre's English fort was built in a classic rectangular shape with very large corner bastions, all constructed of earthworks apparently encased within a log framework. Within this enclosure Eyre built a set of standard structures that provided elaborate quarters for the officers, barracks for the enlisted men, and other facilities common to fortifications of the period.

Early in the spring of 1757 the French pressured this important part of the British colonial frontier with a series of attacks. A major siege of Fort William Henry by the French early that August led to a British surrender after only seven days. The Indian allies of the French immediately killed all the wounded within the fort. The following day these same Native Americans attacked the British who had surrendered and were then retreating to the south under a completely ineffective French escort. That attack of 10 August has since become identified as the "massacre" of Fort William Henry. Soon after its capture the fort was burned by the French conquerors, who then returned to their base at the stronger Fort Carillon. The following summer General James Abercromby advanced into this area and based his British troops in the ruins of Fort Henry prior to making an unsuccessful attack on Fort Carillon. Apparently the surviving earthworks of Fort William Henry



offered sufficient protection to warrant their reuse by a military force.

During the summer campaign of the following year, 1759, General Jeffrey Amherst also based his advancing contingent of British troops in the area of the ruins of Fort William Henry. Amherst also prepared to attack Fort Carillon, but he wisely prepared his position by building Fort George on the high ground near Fort William Henry. General Amherst then was successful in assaulting Fort Carillon, which he renamed Ticonderoga. This victory shifted the attention of all the military forces toward the region north of the site of Fort William Henry. Over the decades a small community grew up around Fort George, gradually extending out toward the ruins of the earlier fort. The area of the site of Fort William Henry was used to build some smallpox hospitals during the Revolutionary War, and later constructions on that same piece of land included hotels and motels.

The 1936 success of the film version of the *Last of the Mohicans*, starring Randolph Scott, may have led to renewed interest in preserving what remained of Fort William Henry. A Fort William Henry Corporation was formed in 1952, and soon after controlled excavations began at the site. A reconstruction of the fort was completed in 1955. Unfortunately parts of the reconstructed fort later burned. In 1997 extensive modern excavations began at the site of Fort William Henry.

The first of the eight brief chapters of this volume provides a well written, carefully illustrated overview of the physical context in which this fort was built, a discussion of its short life, and the importance of Fort William Henry in American history. The second chapter sorts out the facts from the literary fantasies relating to this fort. Starbuck has spent a great deal of effort during the course of his research to get the story right. Of particular note are the Indian activities that ended in the infamous massacre. The modern archaeological research program and the analysis of the resulting record is lucidly described in chapter three, along with information about the people who have been involved in various aspects of this research effort over the years.

Chapter four details the archaeological recovery of the skeletal remains of the men and women who died at the fort and were buried within the formal cemetery or within the fort itself. These bodies were recovered during excavations in the 1950s as well as during the course of more recent work. Another chapter describes the artifacts that have been recovered, providing an important complement to the architectural information and historical documentation.

Starbuck devotes his sixth chapter to a summary of Native American life in the Lake George area during the prehistoric and historic periods. Sidebars provide additional data on the Mohicans of today and on other aspects of Indian life in the region. Chapter seven reviews various landmarks dating from the eighteenth century that can be found in the area of Fort William Henry, including the popular Lake George Battlefield Park. The last chapter offers some overview ideas concerning the fort and the available record as well as noting the importance of the archaeological

excavations of the 1990s. An appendix lists the artifacts found during those excavations. The list of further readings directs interested scholars to the relevant literature. The index is extremely well done.

The impact of the battles around Fort William Henry extended throughout the northeast, and ultimately had repercussions throughout North America. Details regarding events from that battleground remain to be collected into a detailed history. Clues to the composition of the forces, and even a plan of fortifications, can be found in some interesting but obscure locations. Some relevant details even were sent home in letters to friends and loved ones (see Hazard 1853, I: 472–475). The process of gathering these all together is still a challenge to scholars, but this brief volume offers a concise and well presented introduction to the general subject as well as an important demonstration of the value of archaeological research in decoding the messages that we have from historical writings.

Some archaeologists might question the value of popular works that include no specific references and no field drawings. I believe that historical-archaeological guidebooks are extremely useful when they are as well written and factually reliable as Starbuck's contribution. Starbuck's scholarly summary of this work (1991, *Northeast Historical Archaeology*) has long been available and I commend him for maintaining proper academic priorities. Now he has made this lucid summary available to the public in an extremely well produced yet inexpensive format. The interested public as well as the merely curious may purchase this excellent summary of the relevant research at a very low cost. I define one category of potential readers as the "deprived public" because so many of us, including me, tend to leave the "popularization" of the results of our archaeological field work to hacks and charlatans who sell blood, gore and fantasy as blatantly as does the Hollywood film industry. When a visitor arrives at any archaeological site they deserve to have an opportunity to purchase a relevant volume that is as good as this one. Most visitors are the taxpayers whose dollars have been, in some way, important in financing the excavation of the very sites that they come to see. At Fort

William Henry they can get good value for their tax dollar by purchasing this book.

Admittedly the short and bloody history of Fort William Henry does lend itself to telling a rousing story, as several movie directors have already demonstrated. Starbuck goes far beyond all that and is to be commended for his attention to the many other aspects relating to the history of this site. The numerous details that make up this complex tale have been put together in this remarkably lucid volume. Perhaps not every historical archaeologist will need to have this volume in their library, but if you do not rush out and buy one for yourself, do consider it as a gift for anyone you know who might be interested in the history of colonial America.

Reference

Hazard, Samuel (selector)

- 1853 Letter [in French] from "Camp at Lake George, July 14th, 1758." Pennsylvania

Archives [First Series], Volume III: 472-475. Joseph Severns & Co, Philadelphia.

Marshall Joseph Becker has all his degrees from the University of Pennsylvania. He began his field career at the lowland Maya site of Tikal. He subsequently directed excavations at a Quaker colonial farmstead and cemetery in Chester County, PA and at a Swedish colonial site. His excavation of a Lenape site in Chester County led to extensive work with historical documents. For relaxation he analyzes human skeletal remains in Italy and the Czech Republic.

Marshall Joseph Becker
Department of Anthropology
West Chester University
West Chester, PA 19383-2106
Mbecker@wcupa.edu