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THE FORTS OF OSWEGO: A Study in the Art of Defense

by

Wallace F. Workmaster

Somewhere in Europe during the 14th century a crude, tube-like device spewed forth amidst fire and smoke a projectile that crashed with startling force into the turreted wall of a stone castle. As the first dislodged stones fell into the moat or ditch below a new era of warfare began— the medieval concept of defense in height, embodied in the towering masonry walls, had crumbled into bits and pieces before the newly introduced artillery piece.

The more modern fortifications erected thereafter employed the idea of defense in depth. With walls of relatively lower profile, usually shielded from direct artillery fire by outer works of earth, the new complexes spread out over larger spaces and perceptively utilized topographic advantages. Adaptation and refinement of the bastion system by such consummate military engineers as Sebastien le Prestre, the Marquis de Vauban, established French pre-eminence in land warfare by the first quarter of the 18th century and the vast bulk of terms applied to distinguish the various parts and sub-parts of defensive works evolved from French origins.

In the New World, fortifications were among the very first structures to be erected. Works of wood, stone, earth, brick, and other readily available materials were conceived and executed on European patterns with such modifications as time, distance, weapons, environment, and craftsmanship might produce to protect newcomers from both the original inhabitants and their own European brothers. A remarkable number of these as well as later fortifications have survived and are available to document the development of military engineering and of broader historical forces.

Within the relatively limited geographic area flanking the mouth of the Oswego River at its juncture with Lake Ontario lie the actual or projected sites of a castle-like stone "house of strength," an eight-pointed star-shaped fort, a three-bastioned square fort, a four-bastioned rectangular fort, a four-bastioned square fort, an irregular field fortification, two five-bastioned pentagonal forts, three masked coastal batteries of the Endicott system, and a number of redoubts, re-trenched batteries, and other minor works. While such fortification concentrations occurred only at points of outstanding tactical and strategic importance, the defenses of Oswego— both those constructed and those merely planned— constitute an interesting cross-section for study. Because of limitations of time and space, this paper shall content itself with merely outlining the basic story of military activity at Oswego and shall mention only the most significant fortifications.

The French were the first to reach the shores of Lake Ontario, a penetration made via the St. Lawrence River, and to discover the water route offered by the Oswego River into the interior of what is now Central New York. Flowing into the lake, the Oswego River drains the Finger Lakes, a watershed encompassing one-fifth of the land area of modern New York State. A simple portage entirely within the limits of the modern city of Rome led from Wood Creek, a tributary of Oneida Lake, to the Mohawk River. The waterways of the Oswego-Oneida-Mohawk passage permitted an easy transition from the Great Lakes to the Atlantic seaboard through the Hudson valley.

Although occupied by the nations of the Iroquois Confederacy, the Central New York region attracted the early interest of French missionaries and traders. The French, utilizing the Oswego River as a route of supply and communication from Lake Ontario, attempted to establish Fort Ste. Marie de Gannentaha on the shore of Onondaga Lake in the 1650's; however, Indian hostility and the hazards of an exposed supply route impassable during the frozen winter months forced abandonment of that early post.

The Count de Frontenac, the governor-general of New France, used the Oswego River route in 1696 on his way inland to destroy the villages of the Onondagas— the first punitive expedition to pass the sand spits that distinguished the harbor at Oswego. Following King William's War there was some discussion on the part of the French about building a fort at the river's mouth; however, these suggestions failed to result in any concrete action.

Until the 1720's the French continued to dominate the Great Lakes region and to exercise a monopoly over the valuable fur trade of inland America. As in the case of the French, British traders usually ranged the wilderness far in advance of military protection or actual settlement. A group of Albany traders established a summer season post, referred to by some as a "factory," on the west side of the Oswego River's mouth in 1722. Sustained through the Mohawk-Oneida-Oswego passage, the trade at this enclave was conducted principally with Indians of the upper Great Lakes. Exchanging the usual variety of glass beads, wool blankets, iron tomahawk heads, and trade muskets for furs— transactions sometimes liberally lubricated with rum— the Albany traders quickly smashed the previous French monopoly by offering better quality goods at a lower rate of exchange. French missionaries soon found British goods from Oswego circulating among Indians as far away as the Sioux country.

Fearing threats of French reprisals and spurred by French construction of Fort Niagara to prevent Indians of the upper lakes from reaching Oswego, the Province of New York began building a stone "house of strength" in the spring of 1727 at the instance of Governor William Burnet. A two-story structure loop-holed for musket fire and surmounted by a crenelated parapet with a machicoulis,

Fort Oswego was enlarged between 1741 and 1743 by the addition of a surrounding U-shaped stone wall with two integral blockhouses. For twenty-eight years this fortification was the only toe-hold of the British Empire in the entire Great Lakes region; nonetheless, it remained in practical terms little more than a place of quick refuge for traders and their goods, a fortification that was poorly designed, badly placed on low ground commanded by heights to the east and to the west, and in part poorly built.

Shortly after the outbreak of the French and Indian War, William Shirley, the governor of Massachusetts Bay, was given a major general's commission, made second in command of British forces in North America, and sent to the mouth of the Oswego River with orders to cooperate in a pincers attack against Fort Niagara with ill-fated Major General Edward Braddock after the latter's expected capture of Fort Duquesne. Forced to abandon these plans after Braddock's defeat at the battle of the Monongahela, Shirley attempted to improve the British hold on the strategic mouth of the Oswego.

These efforts consisted of four projects: first, re-naming Fort Oswego as Fort Pepperell and constructing outer earthworks to shield the fortification's exposed stone walls from land-based artillery fire; second, beginning an eight-pointed star-shaped log palisade fortification which he called the Fort of the Six Nations but that quickly became known as the first Fort Ontario to occupy the tactically important bluff on the east side of the harbor's mouth; third, starting yet another fortification which he named New Fort Oswego but soon officially became Fort George and unofficially Fort Rascal to hold a ridge to the west of the old trading area; and, fourth, inaugurating work on what became a tiny Royal Navy squadron of seven vessels, the first British sails on the Great Lakes.

The French, led by a new commander-in-chief, the Marquis de Montcalm, seized the advantage of British delay in 1756 occasioned by the replacement of Shirley and began isolating the British forts at Oswego by severing the slender supply link to Albany. In March a surprise attack destroyed Fort Bull, a small fortification guarding the Oneida Carrying Place. By May working parties from Oswego's forts venturing into the surrounding wilderness to cut wood required armed guards and attacks were commonplace. Troops under Louis Coulon, Sieur de Villiers—two years before victor over George Washington at Great Meadows and Fort Necessity—unsuccessfully attacked Fort Ontario on June 16 in hope of enticing the garrison to sally beyond their defenses. Early in July a large supply column under Colonel John Bradstreet was forced to fight a battle of several hours duration a short distance upriver as it attempted to return to Albany.

Montcalm committed his main army from August 10 to 14, 1756, in formal European-style siege operations. All of the British forts at Oswego and the small Royal Navy force were captured, a resounding French victory marred only by the

Indians' massacre of more than one hundred of the British prisoners— a grim post-script echoed again the following year after the fall of Fort William Henry. Montcalm made no effort to hold Oswego. He destroyed the defenses, added most of the naval vessels to the French lake fleet, and ceremoniously returned the land to the Onondagas in a diplomatic effort to wean the Iroquois away from their British alliance. The lilies of France again were supreme in the Great Lakes region.

In the summer of 1758 a sudden strike from Albany through the Mohawk-Oneida-Oswego passage and across Lake Ontario by Bradstreet and a picked force of three thousand men resulted, rather unexpectedly, in the capture and destruction of Fort Frontenac and an important store of supplies for all of the French posts to the west. Although Bradstreet retreated quickly, pausing at Oswego only to burn plunder that could not be transported back to Albany, the French were seriously compromised. The following spring a larger British army under Brigadier General John Prideaux and Major General Sir William Johnson returned to the mouth of the Oswego River, built an irregularly shaped temporary field fortification of logs, dirt, and provision barrels on the Fort Ontario site; and from that supply base launched an attack against Fort Niagara.

Troops of the 4th Battalion of the famed Royal American or 60th Regiment of Foot were left along with a group of New York militia to guard the base at Oswego. French forces from the St. Lawrence valley under Chevalier Saint-Luc de la Corne and their Indian allies led by Abbe Francois Picquet sought to cut off the British army at Niagara by attacking Oswego; however, the Swiss colonel of the Royal American detachment, Frederick Haldimand, stoutly resisted the assaults on July 5 and 6, 1759, after the French had squandered the advantage of surprise. Haldimand's success, coupled with the defeat of other French forces seeking to relieve Niagara from the west, sealed the fate of the besieged garrison there. The lions of Britain had returned to the Great Lakes region.

After the fall of Niagara, construction of the second permanent version of Fort Ontario was begun. The new fortification was a five bastioned pentagon that went far beyond the usual needs of frontier warfare and was designed to survive attacks by European-trained armies supported by artillery. It was no accident that the British used this style of defense at two of the most strategic points for control of inland North America— at Fort Ontario, the key to the Great Lakes, and at Fort Pitt, the threshold to the Ohio country. The British officer who supervised the design of the new fort at Oswego by Lieutenant Thomas Sowers and the start of construction was Brigadier General Thomas Gage, a man most Americans remember only as the officer who ordered the Redcoats up Breed's Hill and Bunker Hill at the beginning of the American Revolutionary War.

Quebec fell to a combined army-navy force sent directly from the mother country in the fall of 1759. The following spring and summer the British comman-

Fig. 2— Fort Ontario today. A preservation project of the New York State Historic Trust administered by the Central New York State Parks Commission. —*Fort Ontario photo.*



der-in-chief, Major General Jeffery Amherst, assembled an army of ten thousand men at Fort Ontario and led them to the capture of Montreal, the last stronghold of New France. Thereafter, French power on the North American continent was destroyed and Canada became a part of the British Empire. Of the five campaigns vital to British success in the contest for control of America, three had been staged via the mouth of the Oswego River.

Following the Treaty of Paris in 1763 the British next faced the threat of western Indians led by the great Ottawa chief, Pontiac. When Pontiac's rebellion failed, he was forced to make peace with the British superintendent of Indian affairs, Sir William Johnson— a surrender finalized at a conference between Johnson and Pontiac under the guns of Fort Ontario in July, 1766. For a time Fort Ontario became one of the places from which Sir William and his agents dealt with problems of Indian diplomacy; however, the 1768 Treaty of Fort Stanwix, a change in the supply route to the upper lakes posts via Montreal, and the subsequent shifting of troops from the frontier forts to the restless seacoast towns reduced the post's defensive importance in the years immediately before the Revolutionary War.

Sir William was succeeded as Indian superintendent after his death in 1774 by his nephew, Colonel Guy Johnson, who reacted to news of Lexington and Concord by calling a conference of Iroquois chiefs to meet at Fort Ontario as he fled with his family from the Mohawk valley toward sanctuary in Canada. The effort to secure Indian support against the rebels on the frontier was not entirely successful and a fatal division split the Iroquois nations; however, men like Joseph Brant, a war chief of the Mohawks, together with Sir John Johnson, Captain Walter Butler, and Major John Ross frequently used Fort Ontario during these years of terror in conjunction with the activities of Loyalist-Iroquois raiding parties.

Brigadier General Barry St. Leger used Fort Ontario as a rendezvous with his force of eight hundred Indian auxiliaries in 1777 before their unsuccessful plunge into the Mohawk valley and the attack on Fort Stanwix climaxed by the battle of Oriskany. After St. Leger's retreat Fort Ontario was abandoned temporarily. American troops from Fort Stanwix attempted to burn the buildings inside the fortification in July, 1778, but failed to destroy the ramparts. An Indian conference to be held at the post in 1779 failed to materialize but Iroquois chieftains continued to ask Sir Guy Carleton to re-garrison the location.

British troops finally returned and rebuilt the buildings in 1782 at the order of Haldimand, Carleton's replacement as governor-general of Canada. Throughout the war Fort Ontario sheltered Loyalists from the Mohawk valley as they attempted to reach new homes in the Bay of Quinte and Niagara frontier areas. Washington interpreted Haldimand's action in re-garrisoning Ontario as a possible prelude to another invasion of New York via the Oswego-Oneida-Mohawk route; therefore, from his headquarters at Newburgh, the Continental commander-in-chief ordered a

surprise attack to seal off the access from and to the Great Lakes region. Acting on Washington's direct commands, Colonel Marinus Willett launched an abortive attack through deep winter snows and sub-freezing temperatures against Fort Ontario in February, 1783. The effort mis-carried despite the intense sufferings of the Americans in their trek from and back to Fort Stanwix and so when the war ended Fort Ontario remained in British hands.

Along with six other so-called "Northwest Posts" scattered from the head of Lake Champlain to the Straits of Mackinac, Fort Ontario was held by the British in an imperial gamble to retain key installations along important trade and invasion routes in the hope American independence would collapse. British customs officers attempted to collect duties on American cargoes of salt and other goods being shipped down the Oswego River and via Lakes Ontario and Erie for subsequent overland transportation to Pittsburgh and the Ohio valley. When Americans refused payment, boats and goods were blocked in a microcosm of commercial problems experienced with the Spanish in the Mississippi valley. The early failures of the United States government under the Articles of Confederation raised British hopes, but the eventual success of the government under the Constitution as well as increasing preoccupation with the Wars of the French Revolution led the British to settle matters in the Jay Treaty of 1794 and the "Northwest Posts" were relinquished to the United States in the summer of 1796— American sovereignty had come to the Great Lakes.

Troops of the United States occupied Fort Ontario until 1803 when the garrison was removed because of the need to re-deploy personnel and occupy the newly acquired Louisiana Purchase. At various times during the attempts at "peaceful coercion" by the Jefferson and Madison administrations militia utilized the post as they attempted to enforce the locally unpopular restrictions on trade. Militia and then regulars occupied Fort Ontario after the outbreak of the War of 1812.

In this second war with Britain the fort at Oswego protected the main supply route to the important military and naval base at Sackets Harbor. Although at the strategic point between river and lake, the venerable defensive works with their walls of horizontally laid timber cribbing holding an earth and stone fill were in extremely poor repair and were only lightly armed. One British attack by Major General Sir George Prevost, the governor-general of Canada, and Commodore Sir James Lucas Yeo was repulsed in June 1813; however, much stronger forces under Lieutenant General Sir Gordon Drummond and Yeo siezed and destroyed the second Fort Ontario in a two-day assault on May 5 and 6, 1814.

Following the War of 1812 the small civilian settlement at the mouth of the river which had begun on a permanent basis after the British withdrawal in 1796 grew rapidly due to commerce with the American West and with Canada. The

attention of the Federal government, however, was turned largely to problems of internal improvements, banking, and tariffs and with the nation resting comfortably on the false sense of defensive prowess engendered by victories in individual ship actions and at the battle of New Orleans during "Mr. Madison's War," little attention was given to defensive needs on the northern frontier.

A rebellion of Canadian nationalists in the late 1830's and a growing spirit of manifest destiny led some United States citizens to plot ways of aiding the rebels and then annexing Canada. Supplies and volunteers began to flow toward Canada through Oswego's port, the major United States commercial outlet on Lake Ontario. Acts of terrorism such as the destruction at Niagara Falls of the American steamer *Caroline* and the later attempt to blow up the Royal Mail steamer *Great Britain* in the harbor at Oswego as well as such incidents as the Windmill Point invasion and the execution of captured American volunteers in Canada together with a series of insults suffered by American vessels passing through the Welland Canal further inflamed passions.

The cries for yet another war between Great Britain and the United States set the stage for a major diplomatic crisis. Martin Van Buren sent Major General Winfield Scott to the northern frontier to try to keep the uneasy peace threatened by this so-called "Patriot War." Captain Augustus Canfield of the Topographical Engineers spent the summer preparing surveys, plans for a third Fort Ontario were drawn, and in November regular troops returned to Oswego. The goal was both to prevent the outflow of aid to the Canadian rebels and to secure the traditional Oswego-Oneida-Mohawk passage and the strategic inland Erie and Oswego Canals in the event hostilities did erupt. Local feeling, climaxed by a New Year's Day confrontation between armed United States troops and Oswego militia over a cannon intended for Canada, ran dangerously high.

Construction of the third Fort Ontario under the supervision of Lieutenant Danville Leadbetter was begun in the spring of 1839. During a one month period that summer progress on the new fortification was inspected by the following dignitaries whose presence testified to the gravity of the situation: Scott, the ranking officer of the United States Army; Van Buren, the President of the United States; John Forsyth, the Secretary of State; Joel Poinsett, the Secretary of War; William H. Seward, the governor of New York; and Henry Clay, perennial presidential candidate and leader of the Whig opposition in Congress as well as chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

A five-bastioned pentagonal form surrounded by a ditch and extensive outer earthworks was selected again; however, the dimensions, materials, plans, profiles, and construction modes were totally different than had been employed in the second Fort Ontario so that this version was for all purposes a new fortification. Tensions along the northern frontier were eased by the Webster-Ashburton Treaty

of 1842; however, construction continued until 1844 and Fort Ontario remained an active garrisoned fortification with only short interruptions due to the Mexican War and the Kansas crisis.

Another series of defensive improvements was begun in 1863 because of fear of armed British intervention to aid the Confederacy during the American Civil War. Appropriations for the erection of stone scarp facing to replace rotting timber revetment, flank casemate galleries in the bastions, and two guardhouses flanking the entryway gorge were continued after the Civil War because of the unsettled atmosphere generated by the Fenian raids into Canada; however, these improvements were never carried to full completion. The Congress simply refused to allocate further capital construction money to Great Lakes posts after the 1870 Treaty of Washington ushered in the modern era of truly peaceful Canadian-American relations. As need for northern frontier defense waned, Fort Ontario was left un-garrisoned in the hands of an ordnance sergeant for periods of several years in the 1880's and again in the 1890's.

Masonry faced fortifications were outmoded during the last half of the 19th century by the introduction of effective breech-loading rifled artillery. During the first years of the 20th century Fort Ontario's outer works were removed and a number of buildings— some 129 by 1941— were erected on the surrounding military reservation. The post became a training installation that served hospital units during World War I, infantry and coast artillery as well as National Guard units in the 1920's and 1930's, and military police and anti-aircraft units in World War II.

After a short period as an emergency refugee shelter accommodating liberated concentration camp inmates, Fort Ontario was relinquished by the United States Army in 1946. Too small to meet training needs in the age of atomic warfare, the military reservation reverted to the State of New York under the provisions of a unique law passed by the legislature to permit Federal use of the land at the time of the Patriot War crisis. Immediate need for veterans' housing led to creation of a locally administered housing project using the buildings at the post. Although officially terminated in 1949, the housing project did not vacate all of the structures until 1953. Initial steps toward preservation and development of Fort Ontario for historical purposes began with the moral support of the Oswego County Historical Society in 1949 under the auspices of the Division of Archives and History in the New York State Education Department.

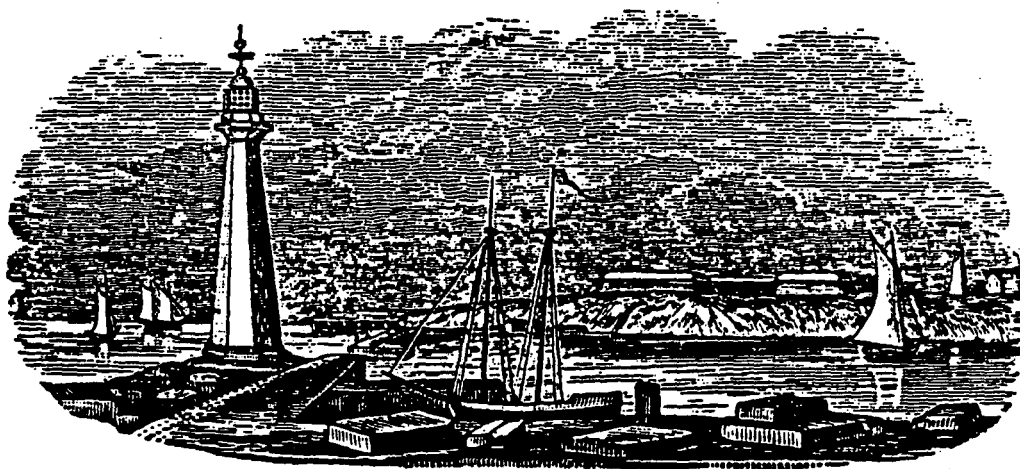
Today, as a project of the New York State Historic Trust administered by the Central New York State Parks Commission, Fort Ontario is moving rapidly forward as a major museum property. As a living museum it is dedicated to educational service and to remaining a vital part of the community it so long protected. The grim ramparts stand in mute testimony to the sacrifice and service of the soldiers of three armies— British, French, and American— who laid on the northern frontier

the foundations upon which rest today our heritage of liberty and our ideals of peace.

May Fort Ontario continue to symbolize the fact that the past is indeed the foundation of the future.

Wallace F. Workmaster, a member of the Executive Board of The Council for Northeast Historical Archaeology, is Regional Supervisor of Historic Sites for the Central New York State Parks Commission whose museum properties include Fort Ontario at Oswego.

Fig. 3— The third Fort Ontario, begun in 1839 in response to the so-called "Patriot War" in Canada. It was abandoned by the United States Army in 1946. —*Fort Ontario photo.*



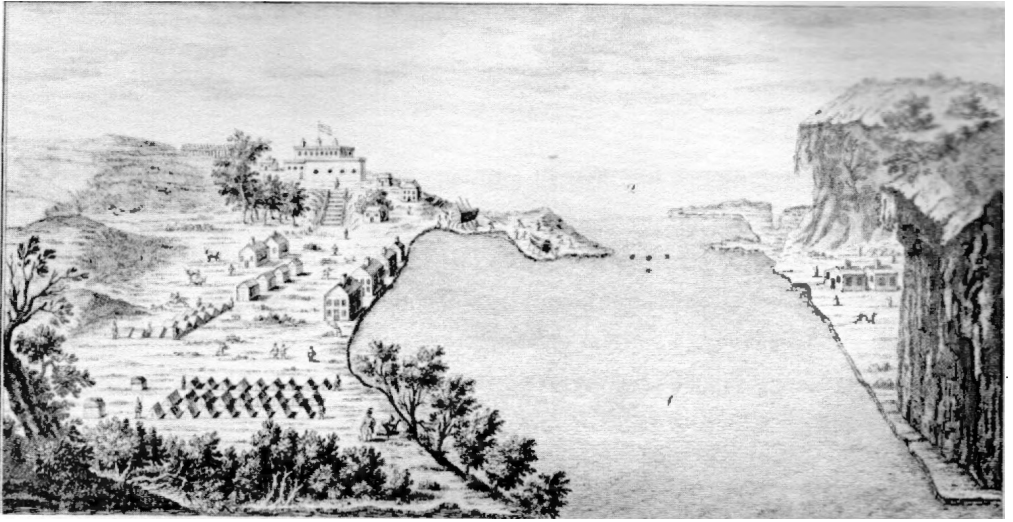


Fig. 4— Fort Oswego, a castle-like stone “house of strength” begun in 1727 as represented in a 1760 *London Magazine* engraving illustrating the mouth of the Oswego River at its juncture with Lake Ontario. For twenty-eight years Fort Oswego was the sole enclave of the British Empire on the inland seas. —*Fort Ontario photo.*

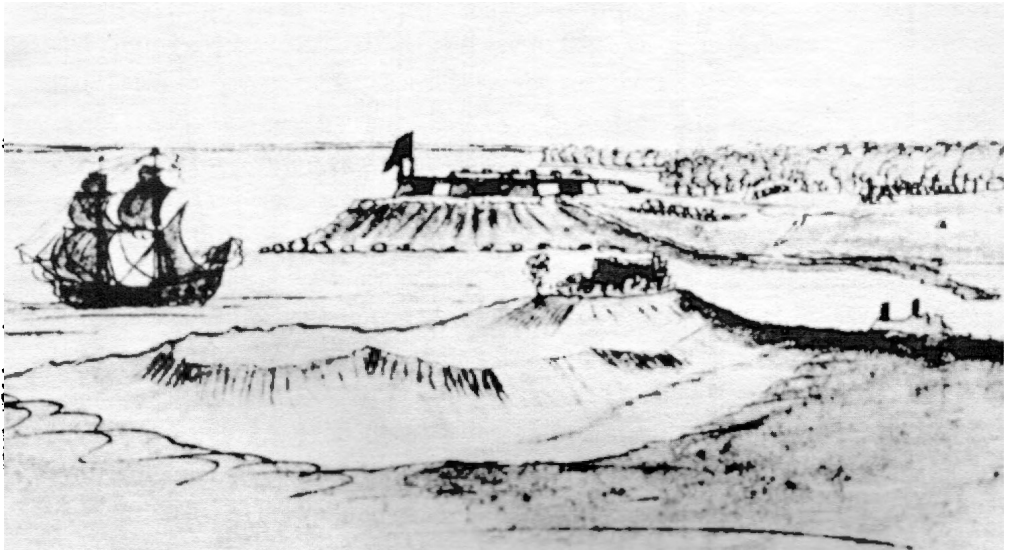


Fig. 5— The second Fort Ontario standing on the bluff to the east of the river was begun in 1759 to replace the first fortification with that name which stood on the same site. The ruins of Fort Oswego are visible in the foreground. —*Fort Ontario photo.*