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ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS AND ARCHITECTURE AT FORT STANWIX, ROME, NEW YORK

by

Dick Ping Hsu

Fort Stanwix was built astride the portage road between the Mohawk River on the east and Wood Creek on the west. The Mohawk Valley was always an important trade route from the Hudson River Valley to the Great Lakes; it was also a potential invasion route from Canada. With their fortunes of war on the wane, the British constructed Fort Stanwix to protect the portage and the valley from the French in 1758. It was garrisoned by English troops until 1767 when it was deactivated because the cost of maintenance was not commensurate with the role the fort played in the defense of the Mohawk Valley. When Continental troops reoccupied the fort in 1776, extensive repairs and new construction were necessary to make it a defensible position. The work was still in progress when, on August 3, 1777, English troops under Colonel Barry St. Leger besieged the fort. After three weeks of failure, moderate casualties suffered at the battle of Oriskany, low morale among the troops, and a threat of a large relief force under General Benedict Arnold, St. Leger abandoned the siege and retreated to Canada. The fort remained active until 1781 when a fire destroyed most of the wooden portions, resulting in abandonment rather than reconstruction.

In July, 1970, the National Park Service began a three year archaeological project as the first step in the reconstruction of Fort Stanwix. Maps, construction plans, and sketches from 1758 to 1781 were available to show the size and relative position of buildings at different times, but these were useless until the location and orientation of the fort had been established; that was the goal of the first season of excavation.

Over the past 180 years, a considerable body of local tradition had developed concerning the size, shape, location, and orientation of the fort. The popular concept was that the fort was irregularly shaped, the east wall being shorter so that the fort walls would be parallel with the streets and fit the modern topography. Even though plaques and other monuments were used as markers to delineate the four corners, there was some doubt among local historians as to the precise location.

Another obstacle was the nine modern buildings that stood on the site when the project began.¹ Four were scheduled for immediate demolition with the remainder to be razed over a year's time. A building reportedly constructed in the area of the northwest bastion was selected as the first to be removed. Removal of the cellar walls and builder's trench adjacent to them provided a very neat five foot deep soil profile upon which the counterscarp of the ditch on the north side of the

fort could be seen. When the other three buildings were razed, another portion of the north ditch was located as well as portions of the west and south ditches.

With the location and orientation of the fort established, the second season was spent locating and excavating interior buildings. The 1758 and 1759 plans of the fort were very detailed about building construction, particularly the arrangement of fireplaces, doors, and windows of the casemates. Eight wooden structures were located, the 1758 powder magazine, four 1776 bombproofs, one in each of the bastions, the north casemate, and the two small south casemates.

Several test squares were dug along a line that was projected, based upon the plans, to be the location of the rear wall of the north casemate. In each square decayed wood was present and when the squares were expanded the wood was indeed the remnant of the base log of the rear wall. The remnant of the rear wall and the west end wall were easy to trace, their lengths, 140 feet and 30 feet respectively, and 60° angle of juncture corresponded very closely to the plans. The unexpected occurred when the bases of six fireplaces were found built against the rear wall rather than the three back-to-back fireplaces built along the center line of the casemate as the plans showed.

All the fireplaces were constructed of brick cemented with sand and lime mortar; a foundation of sand and lime mortar was laid on the undisturbed yellow sand-gravel till for the fireplaces. There were no brick hearths in these fireplaces, the fire was built on the native soil which was smoothed out within the fireplace. All the fireplaces were approximately the same size, roughly 6 feet wide, 2.5 feet deep on the inside, and spaced 12 feet apart. The westernmost fireplace was the first one exposed and one of the best preserved. One half of this fireplace was excavated in order to have a profile on the fill. Two distinct areas of fire building were seen; the earlier fires were built on the sterile till near the base of the rear wall and later fires on clay and brickbat fill 1.3 feet thick and out at the front of the fireplace. Both areas appeared to have been used intensively, especially the lower area. The till was fire reddened to a depth of almost 1.5 feet near the rear wall and to a lesser depth for a distance of about 2 feet in front of the rear wall. A highly compact .5 foot layer of ashes remained from the fires. The later fires discolored the fill to a depth of approximately .5 foot; the ash layer having apparently been destroyed by modern intrusions. There were no artifacts associated with either use area to indicate time and duration of use. A few pieces of clay pipe stem fragments, two pieces of lead shot, and some burned and broken animal bones were the extent of the material recovered from the fireplace till. None of the other fireplaces appeared to have had more than one use area nor did they contain any artifacts to indicate period of use. There were no indications that the English built the fireplaces recorded on the plans or that these fireplaces were replacements built as part of the remodelling program by the Continentals.

Fig. 10— Bakehouse and oven located in the southeast bastion, originally built as a bombproof in 1776-77 period. Hearth and oven were built over the collapsed 1758 powder magazine. —*National Park Service photo.*



Fig. 11— Floor planks and wall of southwest bombproof. Foundation and drain pipes of 19th and 20th century construction destroyed a great deal of this structure. —*National Park Service photo.*



There was very little evidence of the east end wall and no evidence of the front wall or the location of windows or doors. At the west end of the structure there were two layers of decomposed planks with their grain running at right angles to each other. The bottom layer of planks was laid with the long axis of the building and was probably the floor. The top layer was probably the roof; in most areas where both layers of wood were found together, there was little or no fill between them. Only scattered small remnants of wood were found in the rest of the casemate and no pattern could be seen.

In the middle section, seven parallel narrow shallow trenches were found that ran the approximate width of the building. These were probably sleeper trenches for logs that served as floor joists. The logs were either removed or decayed completely as there was no trace of wood in any of the trenches.

Very little remained of the small south casemate east of the main gate. A test excavation in 1965 excavated a large portion of the structure. Bricks, probably from the fireplace, and scattered fragments of decomposed wood of possibly the east end wall and the front wall near their junction were located at that time. The re-excavation of the area did not reveal much new information. A great many 19th and early 20th century intrusions penetrated this structure destroying most of the remains of the casemate. The area of the west end wall has not been excavated yet, hopefully there will be some remnants of it.

The other small casemate to the west of the main gate was partially excavated this past year. The remains of the west end wall and the rear wall were located; as was the case in the north casemate, no remnants of the front wall were found. The brick base of a back-to-back fireplace was located in the approximate middle of the building. One layer of decomposed planks was probably the remains of the collapsed roof, the floor was simply hard packed earth. There was an area of decomposed brick about 3.5 feet wide and 12 feet long that was probably a walk along the front of the building. This building was apparently used partially as a storehouse for tools as several metal shovel tips, metal shovel blades, chisels, and pick heads were recovered from the eastern half.

Approximately one-third of the 1758 powder magazine was excavated. The roof of the structure collapsed after 1764 and there was no new one shown on the later plans. Construction plans called for a structure 65 feet long and 16 feet wide sunk underground with the southeast bastion built on top. The section that was excavated was in the middle of the magazine, the back end was probably destroyed by modern excavations for streets and sidewalks and the entrance was destroyed by a 19th century house cellar and alley. A profile trench across the width failed to show any evidence of wooden walls or floor. The width of the roof was 17 feet and the height of the building was slightly over 5 feet.

Three similar structures were excavated that did not appear in any of the

plans or sketches. These were located in three bastions: the northwest, southwest, and southeast. Burned wood found in the remaining bastion indicates a fourth one yet to be excavated. These were the bombproofs that were mentioned by Colonel Marinus Willet² and Ensign William Colbraith,³ specifically the southeast and southwest ones. According to their accounts, the southwest bombproof was used as a hospital and repository for the important papers and payroll during the siege.

The southwest and southeast bombproofs have been completely excavated; the northwest has been partially excavated. All three were fairly uniform in size, approximately 20 feet square and roughly centered in their respective bastions. Entrance from the parade ground to the northwest and southwest bombproofs was through tunnels 5 feet wide and approximately 40 feet long. There was a turn of approximately 45° and another short 10 foot passage before entering the bombproof. The original entryway of the southeast bombproof has not been located; it was modified sometime between 1778-1780 into a bakehouse, and entry was directly from the parade ground down three steps into the bakehouse. The two southern bombproofs were probably typical log structures of horizontally laid logs with top and bottom surfaces flattened and fitted corner joints. The passageway of the southwest bombproof was constructed in the same manner.

The floor of the southwest bombproof was made of planks; the outer planks ran parallel with the nearest wall, the center plank ran from front to rear of the structure. The roof was also made from planks. Near the wall opposite the entrance was an area where lead balls were being manufactured, lead sprues and balls were on and below the floor planks.

The southeast bombproof was excavated in 1965 and has been referred to as the bakehouse.⁴ It was not until after the southwest bombproof was excavated that the original purpose and period of this structure became clear. There was one layer of burned wood reported by Duncan Campbell in the original excavation. He thought it was the remains of the wall. The brick oven and hearth added to this structure were located in the center of the wall opposite the door. Only the base course of the oven remained. It was elliptical in shape, measuring approximately 9 feet wide and 13 feet long and lay partially over the collapsed 1758 powder magazine.

The northeast bombproof and passage were constructed of logs placed vertically into the ground. The logs in the passage were split in half with the flattened side out, and in the bombproof they were whole logs. Wood was used in constructing the floor, but not enough of the floor has been cleared to see any pattern in the construction.

These bombproofs were for shelter against artillery bombardment; presumably explosives were stored in them as they were too small to shelter very many

men. These buildings probably had flat roofs with dirt and sod added on top which brought the level flush with the rest of the bastion they were in. A written report by St. Leger⁵ reported these structures to have had six inch thick plank roofs which were impenetrable to the small English cannons and mortars.

Approximately one-third of the ditch was excavated by power equipment; the southwest bastion has been completely outlined, one-half of the northwest and one-fourth of the northeast and southeast bastions have been also. The third season will be spent excavating the remainder of the small casemate west of the main gate, the sally port and covered way, the main gate and redoubt, one barracks, and defining the east curtain wall.

NOTES

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3. W. Max Reid, "Journal of the Most Material Occurrences Preceding the Siege of Fort Schuyler (Formerly Fort Stanwix) With an Account of the Siege, etc.," *Magazine of History*, Vol. 3, 1906, pp. 99, 103.
4. J. Duncan Campbell, "Archeological Survey of the Site of Fort Stanwix, Rome, N.Y., 24 May-13 Aug., 1965," manuscript, p.8.
5. John Luzader, *The Construction and Military History of Fort Stanwix*, 1969, p. 142.

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