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Frank J. Kravic

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COLONIAL CROWN POINT AND ITS ARTIFACTS

by

Frank J. Kravic

Surrounded on three sides by that important Colonial highway, Lake Champlain, New York's Crown Point today presents a distinct opportunity for archaeological investigation. As a major staging area for French, then English, and finally American military operations in the 18th century, permanent forts, fortifications, and dwellings were constructed over the approximately three miles by one mile Point. Further, its constructions were consecutively destroyed when abandoned, leaving hope for future archaeological discoveries.

The present historic area contains Fort St. Frederic, built by the French in the 1730's and destroyed by them in advance of Amherst's victorious army in 1759; Fort Crown Point, built by the English and Provincials starting in 1759, a huge fort a half-mile in circumference destroyed by fire in 1773 and abandoned; three satellite redoubts of the English; a French village; an English village; and numerous American Revolutionary War hut sites— all destroyed as armies rolled up and down the Lake. Following Burgoyne's Army in 1777 Crown Point was essentially abandoned.

Over the years, while the forts served as a source of quarry stone, the heavy clay soil and presence of limestone ledge discouraged development of the area beyond farm grazing lands. Thus Crown Point, so important in history, has another ingredient important to historic sites: natural preservation over the years.

In 1968 a major dig was organized by the State of New York with Roland Robbins of Lincoln, Massachusetts as project archaeologist. A master plan to coordinate all excavation and development of this huge site was prepared and excavations began first on a small satellite fort, the Light Infantry Redoubt. A lime kiln built in the 1870's was also repaired and work begun on the French Fort St. Frederic.

The Champlain Valley's soils are derived from the weathering of the native limestone so characteristic of the area. Since a soil's pH, a measurement of overall soil reaction of its particles (basic vs. acidic), is mostly caused by the breakdown of native mineral material, this has led to a relatively high pH for Crown Point's soils. This is extremely fortunate for the preservation of metal artifacts. Since as soon as a piece of metal is discarded it begins to return to its native ore, anything that affects this rate will be important to its survival. This higher pH of Crown Point soils has led to a relatively slower rate of reaction with soil acids and slowed destruction of the artifacts. Such frailties as tin canteen parts remain intact and solid.

With about fifty years of continuous colonial occupation, great quantities of

discarded items began to be uncovered. Two military dumps were located on the outside of two redoubt entrances and it would appear that the English and Colonial armies used the French fort as a dump, probably with more purpose than convenience. Two extremely ancient breech-loading cannon were uncovered which matched another found earlier this century at the site. These cannon seem more at home on a ship of Columbus than defending New France in the 18th century.

Less spectacular, but no less fascinating, were such personal items as ivory-handled fingernail cleaners, a pair of moccasins, and such a host of dishware and fine china fragments that belie the mental pictures of a rugged wilderness outpost. While so much was uncovered in a relatively small area, so much more has yet to be excavated that we can hope for an eventual picture of 18th century life in the Northern Colonies unparalleled to this date. The lake itself must be explored, each year's ebbing of the spring flood reveals numerous items left on the sand and someday the French Governor's Garden, now a parking lot, may again nourish plants still growing at Crown Point that are the descendants of European imports brought over to make the Point a bit more like home.

The Crown Point Foundation and I invite you to visit Crown Point, explore it, dream it, and watch its rebirth.



Fig. 20— The stone barracks inside the English Fort at Crown Point. The largest Colonial fort built within the United States, it is now a National Historic Landmark. —Photo by Redford, collections of the Crown Point Foundation.

Frank J. Kravic, a high school teacher in Middletown, Connecticut, is Curator for the Crown Point Foundation and in 1968 was Assistant Archaeologist at that site.