

The History of Fort at Number Four

The Story

The history of The Fort at No. 4 in Charlestown, New Hampshire in many ways reflects the larger growth and development of the English colonies. This area in western New Hampshire was settled by pioneers who were characterized by their determination, work-ethic and emerging industrial skills. As the English colonies grew throughout the 18th century and immigration from England continued at a rapid pace, the need for more farmland and economic opportunity drove settlers west. The “west” in colonial New England included the vast tracts of land beyond the established towns. This was territory dense with forest and overflowing with deer, beaver and fish; it was also land that was home to various Native American tribes. Just as coming to North America provided economic, religious and social opportunities, westward expansion of the colonies represented similar freedoms.

History Part One

Massachusetts Establishes Land Grants

Facilitating the move west for its inhabitants, in 1735 the Massachusetts General Court established 26 land grants or “plantations” along the upper Connecticut River Valley. This act reflects the geographic importance of waterways in that time period: rivers served as highways in the movement of goods, people and ideas. Settlements were made along the Connecticut River so that colonists could access the rich soil of the riverbanks and use the river as transportation. Flowing 410 miles from the north all the way to the Long Island Sound, Connecticut means “Long River” in native Algonquian. Along with the Indians, colonists utilized it as a major route for trade. European powers also used it for the movement of troops during the French and Indian War era. Land grant No. 4 was located where the Black River comes in to the Connecticut, about 60 miles north of Deerfield, Massachusetts. Squarely in the path traveled by Indian hunters, No. 4 was positioned at a crossroads of rivers and overland routes; a strategic location that would give the settlement a key role in the events from its establishment through the American Revolution.

“No. 4” is Settled

The original buyers of plantation No. 4 purchased their grant in 1735 yet did not settle the area themselves. It was not until 1740 that several families purchased grants from the original land speculators and made the arduous trek from their hometowns including Rutland, Lunenburg and Groton, Massachusetts to provide new opportunities for their families. Three brothers, Stephen, Samuel, and David Farnsworth, were the first settlers of No. 4. They were joined by others, including the Stevens, Hastings, Willard, Parker, and Johnson families who would all play a role in the settlement’s history and development.

Surrounding Geography and People

These early families found themselves in a remote section of New England. No. 4 was the northern most settlement of the English colonies at this time. The closest settlement of any kind to No. 4, was Fort Dummer, about 40 miles to the south. Across the Connecticut River to the west lay a wilderness claimed by both New Hampshire and New York, yet long inhabited by the western Abenaki tribe. Farther west and to the north was New France; this area, including what would become Canada, was claimed by England’s rival, France. In this age of colonialism, the French laid claim to the area from Louisiana through the Ohio River Valley. The St. Lawrence River gave the French unlimited access into the distant

western frontier, allowing them to build a string of forts and trading posts. This placed No. 4 on the edge of competing territory between two leading international powers of the time period.

History Part Two

New France Versus New England

New France's settlements were markedly different from English ones. Most French settlers were men who worked as traders and fur trappers. Their goal was to make a quick profit before they returned home to France. While in the New World, these men assimilated closely with Indian tribes, forging friendships and allies in order to conduct business. Both the French and their Native allies wanted to drive the English eastward and often joined together to raid settlements located in Indian homelands. Also, French missionaries established outposts specifically to introduce Catholicism to the native population. In contrast, New England colonists consisting mainly of Puritans and Pilgrims were more numerous and included whole families who were looking to establish a home in North America. New England colonists established towns that included local forms of government, schools and businesses. The Puritan work ethic helped create an ordered society that flourished. The English did not approach Native peoples in the same way as the French. While the English also wanted to convert the Native Americans, they did not readily form allies or accept Indian traditions. In addition, their primary economic activity – farming – brought them into conflict with Indians over land use issues.

Making a Home

The inhabitants of No. 4 recreated this English system in their settlement along the Connecticut River. They eventually secured a minister, doctor and blacksmith – all essential elements in a colonial settlement. The families of No. 4 educated their children using the common tools of the day such as the hornbook. Like most colonial children, girls and boys worked hard doing their daily chores. Girls typically helped their mothers cook, garden, sew and care for the younger children. Boys often chopped wood and learned a trade. Children had very little time for entertainment, but did have games and toys that were common in other colonial settlements. For example, they most likely made dolls from cornhusks and played games by shooting marbles and by rolling a large hoop with a stick.

The families of No. 4 cooperatively farmed land, built homes and ran businesses. For example, by the mid 1740s, the Spafford family constructed a gristmill, where grain was ground into flour, and a sawmill, which cut boards for construction of houses. Both of these industries played a significant part in building homes in the area and helping the population to thrive. However, living on the frontier meant facing dangers like Indian attacks. Several attacks on No. 4, described in diaries and other documents, record the killing and capture of settlers as well as the destruction of Spafford's mills which were burnt down (and rebuilt) twice.

Native American Relations

The relationship between frontier inhabitants like those at No. 4 and the Native Americans whose homeland they were on was complex. In times of peace, No. 4 inhabitants had the opportunity to interact with the native population, mostly Abenaki. This included establishing a trading relationship with the local Indians. The account book of Phineas Stevens who set up a trading post at No. 4 reveals how often he traded with the Indians. This relationship was disrupted during times of conflict. Relations were already tense by the early 1740s when war from Europe spread to America (King George's War 1744-1748). Located in the midst of Indian routes and the river, the families at No. 4 experienced this conflict first hand. Since they arrived

at the settlement, they lived in fear of being attacked or captured by Native warriors allied with the French soldiers. The inhabitants of No. 4 held a meeting in 1743 where they decided to build a fort that would offer protection for the families.

History Part Three

A Fort is Constructed

Much of our information about the layout of the Fort comes from a map by soldier John Maynard. It outlines a plan showing the Fort's homes, outbuildings, well placements and stockade. The map also lists some of the names of those living in the Fort at No. 4 during the summer of 1746. It shows that the Fort was built in the shape of a square with pointed twelve foot posts standing five inches apart, enough to shoot out from, but not wide enough for someone to enter. Inside this protective wall they brought in existing houses and connected them with lean-tos. They constructed a "Great Chamber" with an attached wooden tower that served as a look out for miles up and down the Connecticut River. The large hall served as a function room for church service, meetings or barracks. In addition, they eventually secured a cannon, placed in Parker House, that would sound the alarm of danger in case of attack. Should danger appear, residents would seek refuge inside the Fort leaving their fields and large animals.

Appealing for Help

Residents of what was now called The Fort at No. 4 also asked for protection and aid from the New Hampshire Government. As early as 1743 and 1744 documents at the New Hampshire state archives show how John Spafford and Josiah Willard of No. 4 petitioned Governor Benning Wentworth for military protection. They directed their plea for assistance to New Hampshire because in 1741 King George II of England had settled a boundary dispute with Massachusetts by running the line 50 miles south of the Fort, in effect ceding to New Hampshire a wide tract of formerly Massachusetts territory. In response, the New Hampshire government established a committee to investigate the settlement of No. 4 in order to garrison it. In 1744, Governor Shirley from Massachusetts wrote to New Hampshire about how important that area was for the protection of English subjects. Because of the boundary dispute, Massachusetts still had soldiers on the upper Connecticut River, yet did not want to remove them until New Hampshire took over. However, the New Hampshire government was slow moving in its response. Under pressure from Massachusetts residents who no longer wanted to pay for soldiers outside of their territory, Massachusetts removed its soldiers from No. 4 and inhabitants were forced to abandon the Fort in the autumn of 1746.

Stevens Returns

Phineas Stevens, one of the early settlers of No. 4 played a significant role in organizing the defense of No. 4 from the mid 1740's to his death in 1756 while on a military campaign in Nova Scotia. He was commissioned Lieutenant under Josiah Willard; then Captain for the defense of No. 4. In January, 1747, he petitioned Governor Shirley to let him return with soldiers to The Fort by April emphasizing its key location as the first line of protection of western New Hampshire and Northern Massachusetts settlements. Shirley granted his request and Stevens returned just in time; for within days, his company successfully repelled an attack against The Fort from a siege by French soldiers and Indian warriors. His defense allowed the settlers to return. Stevens' bravery also caught the attention of British officer Sir Charles Knowles who sent a sword honoring Stevens' actions. The residents of No. 4 remembered this important event and the gift by naming the town Charlestown at the time of its incorporation in 1753, in honor of Sir Knowles.

Redeeming Captives

Stevens played an important role not only in the life of The Fort but in the larger New England community as well. He was commissioned on several occasions to redeem English as well as Indian captives who had been taken by the French and their Indian allies and brought to Canada. Indians took captives for many reasons including replacing family members lost in battle or for trading them to the French for products. The French in turn sold captives back to the English. The experience of captives differed depending on the tribe. Some captives were killed, others sold, and some integrated into the life of the tribe. Stevens' journals of his travels in 1749 and 1752 reveal much about colonial life, economy, transportation and Indian relations in that time period. During his 1752 trip, he retrieved 24-year old John Stark who eventually became integral to the story of New Hampshire's history. Despite the uneasy relations with the Indians, the population of Charlestown grew steadily, so that by 1754 there were 180 inhabitants.

History Part Four

French & Indian War (Seven Year's War)

The year 1754 marks the start of the French and Indian War when warfare erupted between rival powers France and England for the fourth and final time in North America. 1754 also marks renewed hostilities for the residents of No. 4 and Charlestown, as in that year Abenaki Indians captured the Johnson family. Their trials and tribulations in their march to Canada, captivity and redemption mirrors other captivity narratives that were commonly published in that era. The Johnson story is instructive revealing not only this peril of frontier life, but also the economic factor captives played in the French and Indian economies. In August of 1754 with the threat of conflict looming, the Johnsons were preparing to leave for the safety of Northfield, Massachusetts. Mr. James Johnson had just returned from Connecticut and had heard the news that war was expected. Mrs. Susanna Johnson was in the final days of pregnancy, yet she began making plans for their move. However, on August 30th Mr. and Mrs. Johnson, Sylvanus, age 6, Susanna, age 4, Polly, age 2, Mrs. Johnson's sister Miriam Willard, age 14 and two neighbors, Peter Larabee and Ebenezer Farnsworth were captured. Their journey in which they all survived is chronicled in *A Narrative of the Captivity of Mrs. Johnson* (Heritage Books, Inc., 1990). Mrs. Johnson's tale surprises readers with its description of humane treatment, especially after the birth of her daughter, one day into captivity. As the French and Indian War spread more soldiers came through No. 4 offering protection from Indian attacks.

Having No. 4 fortified and garrisoned added a dimension of importance to this settlement on the frontier that would see a military presence through the end of the American Revolution. No. 4's strategic geographic location became especially clear during the 1750s as soldiers from New England were garrisoned on their way to military campaigns. No. 4 itself underwent additions and improvements to accommodate the soldiers. Various ranger and militia companies were stationed at No. 4 to carry out scouting and raiding parties and to provide protection for the farmers in and around the settlement. Between 1757 and 1760, with the French and Indian War fully underway, No. 4 was a staging area for regular and colonial troops from New Hampshire, Massachusetts, and Connecticut on their way to and from the Lake Champlain/ Lake George theatre of war. From there the men were sent to serve at Fort William Henry, Crown Point, or Ticonderoga. Many saw action in Canada or out west at places like Forts Oswego or Niagara in what is now western New York State.

This was especially true once construction of the Crown Point Road was completed in 1760. Measuring 77 miles, the Crown Point road was constructed by John Stark and other rangers and linked Charlestown

(No. 4) with Chimney Point, now in Vermont, on the eastern shore of Lake Champlain, directly across the lake from Fort Crown Point. Records of these soldiers at No. 4 are recorded in the muster rolls, diaries and even powder horns remaining from the time period. The powder horns that held soldiers' gun powder were carved with designs and lettering ranging from the rudimentary to the intricate. Like others from the era, the horns carved at No. 4 offer fascinating insight into soldiers' lives. Many soldiers inscribed poems about wanting to be successful in battle others yearned for loved ones left behind. Some powder horns provided maps of military campaigns or other images.

Robert Rogers

One famous powder horn that survived was that of Major Robert Rogers. Rogers' horn was carved at Fort William Henry in 1756. Rogers was well known for his core group of Rangers who allied with Indians to scout ahead and bring back valuable information. Rogers' Rangers were one of the most successful arms of the British army in the French and Indian War. One of Rogers' most legendary campaigns occurred in October 1759 against the Abenaki of the St. Francis tribe (Quebec). This historic event of which books and movies were made directly involved No. 4. While Abenaki oral tradition and Rogers' account differ to some extent it was a significant event that came at the end of the war. Rogers and his band of rangers and Indian scouts razed the village, yet were forced to make an incredible overland journey back to the safety of No. 4, fewer in number, starved and exhausted. Overall, Rogers' dress, attitude and behavior contrasted sharply with those of the English soldiers, or Regulars, who came to fight in the war. These differences that Rogers exposed exemplify the growing rift between the English Regulars and the colonial militia men. As the combined forces were successful in defeating France and her Indian allies, American militia men in particular and colonists in general gained a new confidence and ultimately a new identity that set them further apart from their "mother country".

Conclusion

End of an Era and a New Beginning

The 1759 attack on St. Francis signaled an end to the Abenaki presence in New Hampshire; 1759 also heralded the end of French resistance in their loss at the battle of Quebec. The fall of Quebec was one of the last major military engagements of the French and Indian War. Official peace came with the Treaty of Paris in 1763. The result of English victory meant the eventual expulsion of France from North America and British dominance of the continent, forever shaping United States history.

In the decade following the peace treaty, American Colonists were unable to reconcile their new identities and feelings of independence with an English King and Parliament who increasingly sought tighter economic and political control. Thus, The Fort at No. 4 was called into action again as a rallying point for the troops fighting in the American Revolution. In 1777, General John Stark mustered troops at No. 4 to take them into the Battle of Bennington: troops from all over New Hampshire answered the call. Once the Revolution was successfully fought, the need for The Fort dwindled. After three decades of activity and service The Fort at No. 4 fell into disrepair as the citizens of Charlestown concentrated on building their community in the newly formed United States. The Fort's role during the French and Indian War era, a significant precursor to the American Revolution, was not forgotten. Finally, in the 1960s The Fort was reconstructed to become a Living History Museum to educate students and visitors about life in New Hampshire and New England during this defining moment in United States history.