

BROADSIDE

A Journal of the Wars for Independence for Students

FORT TICONDEROGA—AMERICA’S GIBRALTAR

In upstate New York at the critical junction where Lake George and Lake Champlain are connected at the outlet of the La Chute River stands the iconic structure, Fort Ticonderoga. Originally built by the French in 1755 and called Fort Carillon, the site was important to numerous events during the French and Indian War (1754-1763) and the Revolutionary War (1775-1783). Upon its completion it was deemed impregnable and given the nickname, “the Gibraltar of North America.” The stone walls of the fort stood eleven feet high and were four feet thick surrounded by a large moat. Inside the fort sat a parade ground surrounded by officer’s and regular troops barracks as well as several storehouses for supplies and powder. Fort Ticonderoga was a strategically important point on what at that time was the American frontier. It guarded the southern end of Lake Champlain protecting the vital trade route between Canada and the Hudson River in New York. Whoever controlled it controlled that access. Ticonderoga is an Iroquois Indian name for “the place of two rivers.” It was designed as a five-star point, reflective of the military architecture of the age. This configuration provided for maximum firepower from the walls as troops making a direct attack would invariably be caught in a crossfire from defenders. In 1758 only



Model of Fort Ticonderoga when it was built in 1755 as Fort Carillon (Wikipedia)

4,000 French defenders were able to repulse an assault by 16,000 British troops. Later during a second attack the British were able to breach the walls and defeat the French after the French left behind a token force to defend the fort.

After the French and Indian War Fort Ticonderoga became a British garrison and outpost and did not reemerge in American history until May 10, 1775. On that date the fort and its small command was attacked by Ethan Allen and his Green Mountain Boys, a paramilitary group of American patriots from what is today the State of Vermont, joining them in the assault was Benedict Arnold who represented the Continental Army. Allen and Arnold, men each with large egos vied for command of the expedition and eventually according to some, but not all historians settled on a co-command, even though Arnold was there by himself. The fort was undermanned, the walls crumbling, and the sentries easily overrun. Allen led the nighttime assault over the parapet and allegedly woke up the post commander who asked on whose authority Allen was acting. Apocryphally Allen bellowed, “In the name of the Great Jehovah and the Continental Congress.”



Later depiction of Ethan Allen overrunning Fort Ticonderoga from the British. (Library of Congress)

Allen led the nighttime assault over the parapet and allegedly woke up the post commander who asked on whose authority Allen was acting. Apocryphally Allen bellowed, “In the name of the Great Jehovah and the Continental Congress.”

This early American victory in the nascent American Revolution was not only of strategic significance, but with the capture of the fort its large cache of artillery fell into American hands. The following winter as George Washington's Continental Army had the British Army bottled up in Boston with a siege, Washington's Commander of Artillery, Henry Knox proposed that he lead an expedition to Fort Ticonderoga, remove the guns, and haul them to Boston to force the British hand. Knox set out with his hearty contingent in November 1775 cutting through the Massachusetts and New York wilderness. Knox was able to secure the fort's guns and with the help of teams of oxen bring the captured artillery back to Boston by March 1776. The expedition encountered much hardship, particularly on the return as they battled blinding snowstorms, rugged terrain in the Berkshire Mountains, and crossed several ice-choked rivers, but not a single gun was lost and with the fresh artillery in place on the heights overlooking Boston, Washington was able to complete his *fait accompli*. The guns from Ticonderoga made staying in Boston untenable and the British evacuated the city.



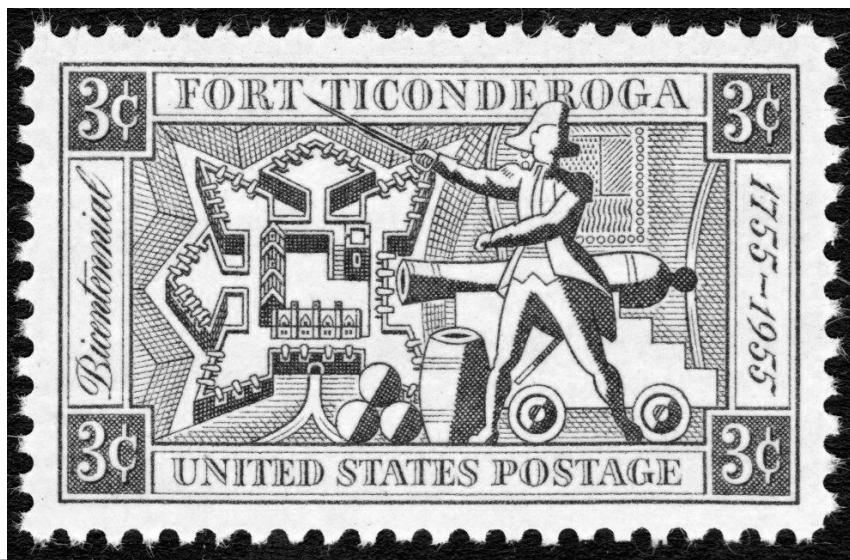
Ruins of Fort Ticonderoga in 1909, immediately before its reconstruction. (Library of Congress)

American forces remained in control of Ticonderoga until summer 1777 when it fell back into British hands during the Saratoga Campaign. Two thousand Americans under the command of Arthur St. Clair gave up the fort without a fight, the British successfully hauled artillery up the slopes of nearby Mount Defiance which overlooked the Ticonderoga. St. Clair and his men fled Ticonderoga on July 5, 1777 and Burgoyne's troops moved into the compound. It was captured as British General John Burgoyne moved his large invading force south from Canada into upstate New York to sever New England from the rest of the rebellious colonies. News of the fort's capitulation unnerved Washington claiming the surrender was "not apprehended, nor within the compass of my reasoning." In September a small

American force once again tried to attack the fort but were repulsed. When Burgoyne was defeated in October at Saratoga, New York the British abandoned the Ticonderoga as it no longer served its military usefulness.

For years it sat alone, a relic of the war during the early Republican Era of the United States. Local residents scavenged it for its supplies and stone remnants. In 1820 it was purchased and became an early tourist attraction for Americans who vacationed in the nearby Adirondack Mountains.

Today the fort has been preserved and continues to draw visitors who marvel at its construction and ponder the fateful events that took place there in the late 18th Century.



Activity

Research other famous forts in American history and compare their stories with those of Fort Ticonderoga.