

## **Imagination and fact from the site of Fort Paris at Stone Arabia**

It is fall in the 10<sup>th</sup> year of the new century at Stone Arabia. The tassels of tall corn reach skyward on the fertile fields. Dry corn leaves rustle in the October breeze. Beside the fields of corn and beans an Amish farmer harvests his crop of squash. In these three we have what has become known as the three sisters to the native people called the Mohawks. Once before the coming to the white man, who changed the lives of these native people forever, their home sites were scattered over the landscape. The three sisters helped to sustain a much different life than ours.

I am here now on what may be one of my last visits to a small piece of historic Stone Arabia land. Through the years I have spent hundreds of hours seeking small bits and pieces that were lost or discarded in the last quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. From these remembrances we get a glimpse of life here in the Mohawk Valley frontier during the American Revolution. The Stone Arabia settlements had been established in the 1720's by the Palatines. It was a dangerous place to reside during the French and Indian war barely a quarter century after the settlement. The danger faded but for only a few years. Our neighbors in New England fostered a movement toward separation from the British Crown. The movement spread to the Mohawk Valley! On August 27, 1774 a meeting was held at the house of Adam Loucks within sight of this field. Those assembled pledged their support to their New England brethren. The best known and respected men of the area took a bold step that day in establishing a Committee of Correspondence or Safety. They pledged their possessions and their very lives in defense of a dream that would lead to freedom from England. Meetings continued, more citizens pledged to support the cause. The Committee minutes of April 2, 1777 read as follows:

“Resolved, that the rangers of Capt. Christian Getman's company stationed at Stone Arabia, shall in the times of their leisure, when and which of them are not employed in ranging out timber for building a

certain fort on the said place under the sole direction and command of Isaac Paris, Esq. Chairman of this board.”

This piece of land where I now stand became the site of that fortification for protection of the settlement of Stone Arabia. It was named Fort Paris. Sometimes it was simply called Stone Arabia Fort. The exact nature of the building has been shrouded in the unrecorded page of its past. It seems sure that at least one block house stood here along with other buildings. The site witnessed the scenes as men left the area to be engaged in the bloody battle at Oriskany on August 6, 1777. Many of those who left their homes and family never returned. The committee also lost members that fateful day. Among them were Isaac Paris and his son Peter, who had resided within sight of the fort. On October 19, 1780 the fort stood witness to devastation and destruction and gave refuge to area settlers during the raid which destroyed the Stone Arabia settlement. Col. John Brown and the Massachusetts men he commanded along with area militiamen marched from here to a nearby field where Brown and some 40 of his men were killed. The once prosperous settlement was reduced to smoke and ashes, only a token attack was made on the fort that stood here. These are only a small number of the events which occurred near this historic piece of ground.

However, they bear evidence to the reason that the possessions of these defenders of Fort Paris, lost or discarded, should be preserved and studied. They are all that is left of the signs of life and death that once transpired on this small piece of Stone Arabia land, some recorded and much unrecorded. Long before I came to Stone Arabia in 1948 I knew of the Stone Arabia battlefield and the site of Fort Paris a short distance to the north. Shortly after coming here I walked down the plowed field where Fort Paris once stood. I remember I found a rusted musket band, a piece of small cannon projectile, a musket flint and one musket ball. I held in my hands that which our forbearers had held in theirs. The owners of the field were my friends the Vosburgh brothers. In 1927 they built a new barn on this farm which was

adjacent to their home place. On the end of the barn towards the road was painted "Fort Paris Farm". I barely remember the faded words. It has been stated that a State Education Department sign once also called attention to the site. The Vosburgh family farmed the field much the same as had been done for many years. Plowing was done by horses. When I first got permission to examine the site the Vosburgh family said that the ground had always been shallow plowed. They also told me that they found a few artifacts mostly in a depression in the ground not far from the stone fence that separated their farm from another to the east. Where these artifacts went they did not know. They mentioned buttons, a bullet mold and their brother-in-law told of a "silver dollar" he found there. For several years I did not go to the site. However, the trends of agriculture were rapidly changing. A few years later the field was rented to Kling Farms to grow beans for the Beech-Nut Company. I know the Kling brothers. They did not object to my continued looking for artifacts. The bean plants were grown in rows on well cultivated soil. Between the rows was a gold mine of good searching area. They were plowing much deeper than before. I walked behind the plow and noted rotted wood being turned up. The soil was very fertile but here on this rise of ground it was shallow over shale. Probably trenches were dug to the shale and log footings supported the buildings there. This would make it almost impossible to determine the size and breadth of the original building. That proved to be the case when an archaeological dig was done there several years later. So the bulk of reminders of past occupation still had to be the artifacts recovered. Archaeologists use the location of artifacts as an indication of what building has stood where and their original uses. Unfortunately the shallow soil over shale and the amount of plowing and cultivating of the land had greatly displaced the articles I was finding. I used a metal detector to locate material that was in the disturbed soil and little was done in the small amount of undisturbed soil that remained above the shale. When I first used the metal detector there, every few feet yielded a button, musket ball, piece of iron or other material. It appeared that nothing I was finding dated after the time Fort Paris stood there. There it was, like a time capsule.

Unfortunately I did not record the dates I found artifacts or what was found on a certain day in most cases. An exception was a special find on April 27, 1974. On that spring day several usual artifacts turned up along with a small silver coin perforated for suspension. It was a Massachusetts oak tree two pence piece produced between 1660 and 1667. We will never know the story behind that coin which was over 100 years old when the October 19, 1780 battle took place. Native Americans often used such coins for decoration. Since it was a Massachusetts coin it may have been possessed by Col. Brown or some of the Massachusetts men under his command who were stationed at Fort Paris and fought side by side with local militia in a Stone Arabia field. At any rate it was a thrilling find. I showed my find that day to Ralph Vosburgh, who said, "If you keep looking you may find something worth something yet." I explained that these finds were a precious link with Stone Arabia's past.

In the course of one's long searching for artifacts on one certain site some theories are arrived at. I feel compelled to list some of them. Many musket balls were recovered. They were many sizes which illustrated the difficulties our ancestors had in supplying our colonial soldiers with projectiles that would fit their various caliber weapons. Militiamen cast their own personal bullets in molds. Smaller balls and certain gun parts would indicate some rifles in addition to large caliber muskets were on the site.

27 musket balls with human teeth marks were recovered from the site. They remain as a gruesome reminder of a day and age before anesthesia. A wounded person was given a lead musket ball to grit his or her teeth on during medical treatment. Flogging was a well known punishment for crimes. These lead balls were put between the teeth to help endure the pain in that case also.

Only three conventional type cannon projectiles were found on the Fort Paris site. Two large pieces of what appeared to be an exploding ball were found. The hollow ball was approximately three and one half of an inch in diameter. The outer shell of that ball was about three eighths of an inch thick. The other two were grape shot. One was three quarters of an inch in diameter and the other approximately

one and one quarter inch in diameter. In addition, some other improvised projectiles were found. A considerable number of one inch iron squares that had been cut from a one inch iron bar were recovered. They were probably produced in a blacksmith's forge by chiseling off when red hot. The sharp corners were rounded off when they were made. In addition a quantity of parts of broken cast iron cooking kettles, pieces of five plate stove plates and fireplace fire backs were found. The 18<sup>th</sup> century stove plates were about one half inch thick and were doubtless more difficult to fracture into small pieces. These early stove plates bore various decorations including written script, decorative features and often dates. If these pieces can be fit together like a jigsaw puzzle it may be possible to determine where they were cast, thus adding an interesting side light to the Fort Paris story. One revolutionary war pension application states that a piece of horse chain was fired at Johnson's invading forces on the day of the battle. It seems that because of the scarcity of regular projectiles some strange everyday substitutes were made. One example would be a cut up portion of a large shears found on the site. A most interesting piece of history came to light in the writings of Major Oliver Root of Pittsfield Mass. He wrote his memories of the battle of Stone Arabia many years after it occurred. Major Root was second in command to Col John Brown on October 19, 1780 when Brown and about forty of his men were killed. The major stated that he had led what men he could back to Fort Paris. He also said that he had ordered a large camp kettle broken up to fire in a small field piece. It was evident that several different kettles were broken up both before and after the day of the battle.

A limited number of gun flints of both the blade and spall types were found. Of course they could not be located with a metal detector which possibly could account for the limited number recovered.

Another possibility was that a flint so worn not to be used in a musket could be retained for use with a strike-a-light to produce fire for everyday use. I retained everything found including nails, pieces of metal and ceramic. Surprisingly few fragments of white clay pipe were recovered. A very few pipe fragments made of red clay did turn up.

The many and varied pieces of ceramics found would indicate the existence of quite sophisticated dishes, bottles and stone wear. However this study hopefully will one day be made from the shards in the collection.

Forty copper coins and discs resembling coins are in the collection along with two cut pieces made in an effort to create fractional currency.

These were all British half pennies in reasonable condition considering that they've been in the soil for so long a period. The readable dates range from the 1720s to the 1770s. No later coins were recovered.

The greatest number of any artifacts recovered are buttons. There are pairs of well preserved still readable cuff buttons, a considerable number of USA uniform buttons that were the first official American military buttons. The forms and the styles of civilian buttons, some quite ornate would indicate a somewhat better dressed local population than is sometimes imagined. Some very special marked buttons were recovered. One Pennsylvania State Regiment button was found that may have been lost by one of Morgan's famous Pennsylvania rifleman. A New York regimental button was recovered with the connected NY.

Several British all cast pewter regimentally marked uniform buttons were found- much the same as other historical sites. Why some of them were found on this particular site is somewhat a puzzle since it is doubtful if these regiments were at Fort Paris. Some historians have a possible explanation. They may have been brought here as souvenirs of other engagements. Well marked readable buttons are as follows: 47, 53, 60, a horse and a partial brass button with a crown which remains unidentified. No brass so called great coat buttons were found, which I believe indicates that this form of button did not come here until the Washington inaugural era. Many of them are found on other Stone Arabia sites.

One Jews harp was found.

Various buckles and parts of buckles were recovered. No examples of a distinct pattern of brass buckle often found at other locations in Stone Arabia were recovered. Variants of these brass buckles were illustrated in Harness supply books as Scotch gear buckles. This may or may not indicate that these buckles were not common in the area when the fort was occupied. Parts of different shoe buckles were found.

A find that the writer thought most intriguing was the parts of cast pewter spoons. All three fragments had the same inscriptions, however it is difficult to determine its significance. It would appear to be religious. The letters IHS would be further evidence of this. Were they the Stone Arabia Church spoons take to Fort Paris to cast into bullets? This was a known practice since bullet metal was scarce on the frontier.

In the fall of 2004 the owner of the fort site purchased the farm just to the east. The two farms had been separated by a stone wall fence. The wall was a hundred or so feet from where the greatest concentration of artifacts was found. The wall was removed by large machinery at that time. The stone and a small amount of soil were trucked to an adjacent site. That material was not examined. However the area that had been beneath the wall was. It would appear that the soil had never been plowed. Small snail shells were yet evident in the soil as is sometimes the case when ground is cleared from forest. In searching the undisturbed area, formerly under the fence, fire burned stones, pieces of brick, several musket balls and a block of iron, 3 ½" by 7 ½" by 3" were found. This would appear to indicate that the wall was not there at the time Fort Paris was located on this rise of ground. Although information about the site is sketchy it has been written that the wall was built from reused stone from the fort when it was taken down. Any really good stone was doubtless drawn away and used in other structures.

There is far more unknown about Fort Paris than is known. The artifacts found there tell some of the story. The collection of the writer is important Stone Arabia history. It is hoped that it will remain intact for further study. Doubtless there are some artifacts in other collections that have lost their identity. That is the difficulty of random accumulations.

Now we must consider the windswept hill a reminder of a fateful period and terrifying day in Stone Arabia's past. When fearful mothers, elderly residents and crying children left well established homes for protection at a small neighborhood fort called Fort Paris. The place is silent today except for rustling leaves of corn, the passing vehicles and those sounds indicative of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Skip Barshied

Stone Arabia