Pieces of the Past

Artifacts, Documents, and Primary Sources from Letchworth Park History

Information regarding the Civil War Camp in Letchworth Park has always been sketchy a best. Perhaps the best description comes from the work of Mrs. Marjorie Frost, the late Town Historian from nearby Nunda. Using articles from the Nunda News, Mrs. Frost put together several articles on Camp Portage.

We present here her work as found in the article "Choosing A Site For Training Camp Creates a Hassle" by Kenneth R. Willard, found in New York State and the Civil War, published by the New York Civil War Centennial Commission, November 1962.

The article begins by detailing the controversy over the location of the second training camp in the 30th Senatorial District. Arguments raged over sites in Geneseo and Portage, but as the account begins, the decision of Portage was made.

The Story of Camp Portage (William)

by Mrs. Marjorie Frost

"**T**he delegates to Albany were successful in their objective. The Governor, they reported took a "common sense view" rather than a military one. On August 1, 1862, he issued the following terse order 'The location of the camp now forming in the 30th Senatorial District of this State is hereby changed from Geneseo to Portage Station.' The Northern Livingston group yielded with good grace.

At Portage, the committee selected a pleasant site of about

14 acres a mile or so from the railroad bridge and near the mouth of the abandoned canal tunnel. The place had ample room for drilling, a supply of excellent spring water and other advantages. Its owner was Colonel George Williams, well-known throughout the area as the land agent for the Cottringer Tract on which much of Portage is located. Hence the name, Camp Williams, by which the site was sometimes called.

In the meantime, so-called 'war meetings' were held in nearly every town, hamlet and school district in an effort to enroll the required number of men before the 40-day period was up. Patriotic citizens offered gold watches, sidearms, and other inducements to those who would be the first to volunteer, and the State chipped in with a $50 bounty for each. By August 10, most of the towns had met, or were close to meeting their quotas.

Then it was found that tents were not to be had, so barracks had to be built, and by an amazing spurt of activity they were ready for the whole regiment soon after mid-August. The buildings consisted of an officer's headquarters, two mess halls, and ten quarters for soldiers.

The 130th New York Volunteer Infantry went into training here at Camp Portage. On July 28, 1863, it was transferred to the mounted service under the designation of First New York Dragoons. The First Dragoons was attached to the First Cavalry Division, Army of the Potomac, for its entire mounted service and earned an honored place with the "300 Fighting Regiments".

The training period at Camp Portage lasted less than a month from August 18 to September 6. On that date, the regiment, numbering 1,001 men, left for Washington. The

district quota still had not been met, however, and another regiment was being recruited. The new one, the 136th New York Volunteer Infantry, moved into Cap Portage on the heels of the 130th. Its stay was even shorter, from September 21 to October 2. During this period the drill grounds were graded and other improvements made, but to the best of our knowledge, no other troops trained there. These were, in fact, the last volunteer regiments fro this area. Subsequent troops were drafted.

Before the year was out, Colonel Williams announced that he would sell at public auction on January 23, 1863, the U.S. Barracks at Portage. The buildings contained some 200,000 feet of lumber, and since they were but slightly nailed the boards were little damaged, he stated. The auction was duly held, the lumber bringing about $8 per thousand. The buildings were removed, and gradually the site went back to nature.

The brief days spent there had been happy ones for most of the men. Always a favorite picnic area, even before the days of its best know proponent, William Pryor Letchworth, Portage attracted wives, sweethearts, relatives and friends by the hundreds during the last days of summer in 1862. Army fare at Camp Portage was said to be excellent, and since it was well supplemented from numerous picnic baskets, it might be said the 'no rookies ever had it so good.'

Perhaps the most festive occasion to take place there was the wedding of Lt. Col. Thomas J. Thorp, who later was to become regimental commander of the Dragoons. The ceremony, which took place the day the regiment left Camp Portage, was performed inside a hollow square and witnessed by the entire regiment, as well as many other

spectators. The bride's name was Mandana Major, and reporters could not resist the quip that she therefore was subordinate to the lieutenant colonel and must obey his every command.

In the post-war years, the Dragoons held a reunion at Portage nearly every year, and often the 136th met at the same time. Headquarters for these reunions usually were at the Cascade House near the High Bridge. It was here the regimental monument (now standing across the Genesee River in Letchworth Park) was originally located when dedicated in 1903. The reunions were generally referred to as the 'Soldiers Picnic' and always attracted enormous crowds. An occasional veteran, driving to the reunion with his family, would point the spot where he had trained in 1862....

One of the most popular areas of Letchworth Park, the Parade Grounds attracts many visitors, and some pause to read the tablets on the boulder which comemorates the site. At the end of a day, if there are any ghostly figures there, they are those of gallant and heroic men. If there are any half-remembered sounds, they are the last, clear, sweet notes of a bugle echoing across the river gorge...."

See also the The First New York Dragoons, the 136th New York, and Image 98.

Return to "Pieces" Index Return to Table of Contents

All rights reserved by Tom Cook & Tom Breslin