

Villa site plan brings to light centuries-old history of Carleton Island

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The Jefferson County Historical Society hosted a trip to Carleton Island in July 1926. This group explores chimney remnants of Fort Haldimand. The building sphere in the background on the right is a 111-foot high tower that was separate from Carleton Villa. “A brilliant gas light, long illuminated in the tower, became a range beacon for navigators passing down the American channel before the government protected the shoal off the head of the island by a light buoy,” the Watertown Daily Times reported. Watertown Daily Times

CAPE VINCENT — On the last day of July in 1926, a party of about 50 explorers landed at Carleton Island in search of historic lore.

After disembarking from a scow, they “walked over the land which has been the stomping ground of six peoples,” the Watertown Daily Times reported, “from the ages past when Eskimos had their dwelling there until centuries later when it was known to the white men and finally belongs to the Americans.”

Garret S. Jones (1887-1960) of Cape Vincent, a World War I veteran and amateur archaeologist, was the leader of the intrepid group. “He conducted them over the early Indian trail beneath a jutting cliff made up of layer upon layer of shelf-like rock to the site of old Fort Haldimand, where only three stone chimneys, now crumbling into ruins, mark the spot where once a military fortification of the British empire stood,” the Times reported.

Those crumbling chimneys, the last of which fell into oblivion and out of sight in the 1990s, were once beacons of history — tangible indicators that the island is one of the oldest and most significant plots of land in Jefferson County. Interest in the island’s history began to surface again in 2022 when it was announced the Carleton Island Villa, one of the most well-known landmarks on the St. Lawrence River, although in shambles, had been sold for \$300,000 after being vacant for more than 70 years.

The 6.9-acre property was purchased by Ronald Clapp, of Florida, and sold by Charles and William Millar, brothers whose family has summered on Carleton Island since 1900. They purchased the historic villa in 1987.

The project, proposed by Carleton Villa owner Clapp, has resulted in a disagreement with many members of the public. Clapp hopes to turn some of the area around the historic villa into campgrounds/glampgrounds. He has said he would use money from the campgrounds and glampgrounds (sites with extra amenities and comforts, such as electricity) to pay for the villa's restoration.

In April, workers at the site began clearing trees and other vegetation with an excavator, which prompted the Thousand Island Land Trust to bring legal action. It was then granted an injunction preventing Clapp from clearing or excavating land near the St. Lawrence River shoreline. TILT has contended that a conservation easement and declaration of restrictions it was granted in 1986 encumbers the villa property, limiting its development and preserving its natural environment. The injunction was appealed and in September, State Supreme Court Judge James P. McClusky declined to change the earlier decision that set conditions upon which limited work could occur on the proposed campground.

On Thursday evening, the town of Cape Vincent held a public hearing to obtain citizens' views relative to the submission of an application to Empire State Development for financial assistance under the Restore NY Communities Initiative — a municipal grant program. The town board unanimously agreed to sponsor the Restore grant application targeting stabilization of Carleton Villa. The grant is solely for stabilization of the villa. It has nothing to do with any other portion of the project, including the potential campground/glampground.

In addressing residents, Clapp said the project would benefit the town by potentially hiring local residents and even if local residents aren't on the job, money will be coming into Cape Vincent by people buying groceries, eating at restaurants, and "doing all the things that we do." He also said that materials may be from some north country distributors.

"My intent is to bring as many of those dollars to the local community," he said.

Carleton Villa was built by William O. Wyckoff, a man who made his fortune in marketing at a New York City firm. The palatial 64-room, five story stone-and-wood structure was built as a fishing camp and was completed in 1895, apparently when there was scant concern about the island's past and what was uncovered during the villa's construction.

"When the villa was built on the western end of the island, some of our present inhabitants who were employed in excavating, unearthed strange implements and ornaments and owing to the absence of an archaeologist or someone interested in research work, they were destroyed," wrote Jefferson County Historical Society President Garrett S. Jones in 1926.

Jones authored an eight-page "historical sketch" of Carleton Island and Fort for the July 1926 pilgrimage to the island organized by the Jefferson County Historical Society. He noted that archaeology "is the youngest of the sciences today, being only about 60 years old."

Today, there is renewed interest on archaeology on the island, which totals 1,274 acres, because of the proposed project at the former Carleton Island Villa.

'Most significant' island

Kenneth J. Knapp, Clayton, is an archaeologist and the conservator of the North Country Archeology Center located at the Depauville Free Library. His area of expertise is the pre-contact Native American cultural resources and history of the Thousand Islands-Upper St. Lawrence Valley and Eastern Lake Ontario lowlands region of New York. He is also curator of the Knapp Family Collection, started in 1908 by his grandfather, Watertown resident Arthur R. Knapp, who died in 1966 at the age of 74.

"The Native American history on the river stretches back to almost 13,000 years and you can expect the same on Carleton," Knapp said. "It's arguably the most significant historical island in the Thousand Islands. It's rich in history in that it has not only the Native American stuff, but it has a major chunk of

Euro-American history, which you can't find on any other island in the Thousand Islands. That's kind of a big deal in my mind."

The island was once used by French fur traders as a transient stop, Knapp said, and that the island was a key location for three international wars.

According to the Times' files, the first English residents on the upper St. Lawrence and the first English-speaking people in Jefferson County lived on the island.

Carleton Island became a place of refuge for the Tories (loyal to the British Crown) of New York, Pennsylvania and New Jersey. Times' files note that Thayendanegea (aka Joseph Brant), Great Chief of the Six Nations, made the island his headquarters. Joseph's sister, Molly Brant, (Konwatsi'tsiaienni) had a house built for her on the island/fort by the British. Both assimilated European and Indian culture into their lives. Molly married Sir William Johnson, the superintendent general of Indian Affairs for Great Britain and they became political partners.

During the Revolutionary War, Carleton Island was a key staging area for the British. Fort Haldimand was three-eighths of an octagon and built on top of a cliff, with a 60-foot drop to the water below, to create a natural defense against attacks from the southwest side of the island.

"And the very first action in the northern theater of the War of 1812 was conducted from Millens Bay when Abner Hubbard took a couple of guys over and took the fort," Knapp said.

Preservation office critical

After reviewing an archaeological survey, the state Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation issued a report in late October stating a controversial project on Carleton Island may affect the historic nature of the island. The letter was authored by Bradley W. Russell, historic preservation specialist, archaeology, at the state's Historic Preservation Office. In the report, he thanked Peter Partlow, civil/site designer at Aubertine & Currier Architects for seeking the office's comments. Clapp announced in August of 2023 that he was partnering with Aubertine & Currier "for the meticulous restoration of Carleton Villa."

Russell wrote that the state's Historic Preservation Office reviewed the Phase IA Archaeological Survey report for the Carleton (Wyckoff) Villa project prepared by Colliers Engineering & Design, Consulting Archaeologists.

"The report has significant deficiencies which necessitate major revisions. While the function of a Phase IA survey is to conduct a thorough literature review as a basis for determining sensitivity and plan future investigations, the report omits critical information regarding the related historic resources and fails to establish the historical significance of the project area," Russell wrote. "Without this information, it is impossible to understand the archaeological sensitivity of the project area."

Carleton Island, Russell noted, has a long history of Indigenous, European and American communities. "It has been utilized by native peoples for thousands of years as evidenced by several known archaeological sites including burials," Russell wrote. "During the Revolutionary war, it was a critical British (and allied indigenous groups) military outpost deeply involved in many significant events of the war. Unrest resulted in the island serving as a refuge for Native Americans and loyalists displaced by the conflict."

Russell noted "key known historic resources" on the Island include:

Fort site, the North Bay shipwreck site of the HMS Haldiman (a 150-ton British snow schooner built in 1771), the Carleton Island Provincial Marine Wharf, the fort military burial ground and the Carleton Island west site. The island contained a "full complex of important features related to the functioning of

the fort.”

“Many are located in the area where direct effects (ground disturbance) are anticipated,” Russell wrote. “Others are located in areas where foreseeable indirect effects are anticipated.”

Russell credited research by Dennis R. McCarthy for certain details in the report. Dennis and his wife, Kathi, experienced divers, are directors of the St. Lawrence River Historical Foundation. Dennis retired in 2009 from his career in engineering management in the Consumer Electronics and CATV industries. Having traveled to 28 countries in his business profession, he now prefers to spend his time with Kathi in Cape Vincent being intrigued by local history and enjoying the Thousand Islands and St. Lawrence River. Carleton Island can be viewed from their backyard.

McCarthy said that SRHF is not taking a stance on the proposed development. “We’re not in a position to advocate. We’re trying to let everybody know about the historical aspect. Everyone knows about Fort Haldimand but they have no idea that the fort was just part of a major base and it was much more extensive than what many people think.”

Carleton Island became a major supply route in the 1770s. The island also contained a shipyard where two British ships of the lines were built along with several gunboats. It became the headquarters for naval operations on Lake Ontario and the Upper St. Lawrence River.

The SRHF has a website dedicated to the fort. Among information on the site:

- In August, 1778, Governor General of Canada, Frederick , instructed Lt. William Twiss of the Royal Corps of Engineers to select a site at the Eastern end of Lake Ontario to play a role in the new supply route.

Deer Island, which would become Carleton, was selected, named after Major Gen. Sir Guy Carleton, governor of Quebec. Twiss outlined the design of docks, shipways, a hospital, fortifications and barracks.

- Carleton Island served as one of the major staging areas for military actions against the Mohawk Valley.

- By 1782 the entire west end of the island was occupied. Records indicate at times over a thousand merchants, camp followers, soldiers, sailors, Indians and displaced loyalists lived on the island.

- When the Treaty of Paris ended the American Revolution in 1783, the British army abandoned new activities on Carleton Island. Though major hostilities were over, a new need arose to resettle loyalist families who were displaced from the Mohawk Valley. The British then reoccupied both the post at Oswego and the old French post at Cataraqui and renamed it Kingston.

Claiming Carleton Island for the Americans did not involve a grand battle, according to the Times files: “Abner Hubbard, accompanied by a man and a boy, rowed from Cape Vincent, capturing one British sergeant, three invalid soldiers and two women.”

Jones wrote that the captives were marched to Sackets Harbor and surrendered to the Army. But within a few days, some British soldiers returned to the island to burn the barracks so they couldn’t be used by the Americans.

- “In 1785, trans-shipment for government stores was relocated from the island to Kingston. In 1788 the naval yard was relocated to Kingston.”

- “Technically the island was ceded to the U.S. by the Jay Treaty in 1796 yet in reality Britain still held Carleton Island at the outbreak of the War of 1812. The base was eventually ceded to the U.S., becoming the only land change resulting from the War of 1812.”

- “For the first half of the nineteenth century the bays at the head of the island played a role in the lumber trade.”

- “Most of the island was used primarily for cattle grazing until land development in the 1980s.”

In 1979, the fort site and the North Bay section where several artifacts have been recovered by divers, was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. These days, no one lives on the island year-round.

Artifacts from North Bay’s British heyday surfaced in 1976 in underwater exploration conducted by the Division of Historic Preservation of the State Office of Parks and Recreation and the Thousand Islands State Park and Recreation Commission. A grant from the National Science Foundation helped fund the project. A cannon now displayed in Sackets Harbor was recovered, as well as such items as uniform buttons, small weapons and clay pipes.

A private diving venture in 1973 off Carleton Island led to the recovery of another cannon.

A 1978 proposal to divide the island into 260 separate tracts was grudgingly approved by the St. Lawrence–Eastern Ontario Commission on condition the fort be preserved and a minimum lot size of 5 acres be maintained.

General Electric once owned the island. In 1936, the company considered razing Carleton Villa “to eliminate tax assessments,” Times files say. In the 1940s, General Electric sold the island to the late Merle L. Youngs, owner of Zenda Farms in Clayton and president of Youngs Rubber Corp., maker of Trojan condoms. Mr. Youngs’ heir, John McFarlane, sold the island in 1986 to Patten Corp. Northeast for \$823,000, which promoted the development of the island into a community of summer homes. Charlie and Bill Millar had the property listed for \$495,000 for more than a decade. That listing made lists online, and in newspapers such as the New York Post, as a haunted house for cheap.

‘Let us restore’

In July of 1927, more than 100 people gathered at the site of Fort Haldimand to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the departure of British Col. St. Leger in his advance on Fort Stanwix. In 1777, Barry St. Leger was appointed Brig. General to lead the western branch of Gen. John Burgoyne’s three-pronged New York invasion force. This led to his failed siege of Fort Stanwix in Rome. The temporary marker was unveiled by state historian Alexander Flick.

“Let us search out the history of this old fort,” Flick told the crowd. “If possible we should make a public park out of it. Let us restore some of the officers’ homes and then we will have a place worth preserving and worth showing.”

Issac L. Hunt, president of Watertown Savings Bank, also spoke. “It is historic ground on which we stand,” Hunt told the gathering. “Here, we find evidence of the occupation of many races: First the Eskimo, then the Algonquian, then the Iroquois, then the French, the English and finally the Americans. Here, we find their traces in implements of peace and implements of war.”

In his October report, Russell indicated historic traces could yet be uncovered. The state’s Historic Preservation Office requested revisions and resubmissions of the Phase 1A Archaeological Survey Report.

- “It is the opinion of OPRHP that the planned project has the potential for a series of both direct and indirect effects on important historic resources that remain unaddressed by the Phase IA survey report. Direct effects include the actual ground disturbance related to the undertaking. Indirect effects relate specifically to increased numbers of tourists interacting with historic resources (public access) that can have foreseeable negative effects on those resources.”

■ “We request that the revised report explicitly address all available research related to these and all other historic resources such as the Marsh/Folger Farm Historic Site (USN 04505.000182) located within the expanded project.”

■ “The historic background presented in the Phase IA survey report lacks considerable detail and should be expanded to appropriately address the significance of the site. The report omits detailed maps of the fort and surrounding area. These should be georeferenced, reviewed, described in detail.”

■ “The Revolutionary War period activity at the fort is well-documented and tied to significant events in the war including British/Native operations in the Mohawk Valley. The report should place the fort complex into the context of the unfolding conflict.

This review should include details such as its role in the Burgoyne campaign, its role as a refuge for Loyalists and indigenous peoples displaced by the conflict, the impacts of the Sullivan Expedition of 1779 which led to retaliatory actions by troops from the fort led by Sir John Johnson, etc. The participation of Native forces and their residency at the fort and surrounding areas should be addressed in detail.”

■ “In our letter requesting a Phase IA survey dated 3/28/2024, we specifically noted that due to the sensitivity of the location and the known decades-long history of military activity on this portion of the island, we recommended methods consistent with typical battlefield investigations. We indicated that a detailed Phase IB work plan should be submitted that included testing beyond the standard 15-meter grid of shovel tests. The report does not address this request.”

Knapp said he doesn’t want to weigh in on the villa project itself, but he also has thoughts on the Phase IA Archaeological Survey report.

“After reading through the report as an archaeologist, I was pretty dumfounded,” he said. “It was so lacking in information as to be deceptive, which I found pretty outrageous.”

Knapp is also disturbed by the clearing work done at the villa property.

“In our region, much of the archaeology is in that top layer of soil. To go through construction and rubbing out a site — removing the brush sod and trees — it is the disturbance of that layer where you are destroying archaeology. That, to me, is pretty outrageous to think that somebody could do that and not have any consequences.”

Chris Brock

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