Johnstown, New York

What does a town some 40-odd miles northwest of Albany, New York have to do with Colebrook and her surrounding towns? Not much today, certainly, but at the end of the War of Independence it was another matter. At least two Colebrook residents, Aaron Griswold, who came to town in 1768, and Pelatiah Mills, a resident from 1773, removed there in 1784 shortly after the peace treaty was signed in 1783. Both of these men were veterans of Washington's army, and both left, perhaps together, in 1784. That fact intrigued me, as I have always been interested in the reasons for the early pioneers' movement from one town or region to another. In order to understand these veterans' decisions to move to what is today central New York State, we must go back to the origins of Johnstown.

Sir William Johnson (1715-1774) was a British soldier and American pioneer. He was the son of a country gentleman, and was educated for a commercial career, but in 1738 he removed to America for the purpose of managing a tract of land in the Mohawk Valley, New York, belonging to his uncle. He established himself on the south bank of the Mohawk River, about 25 miles west of Schenectady. Before 1743 he moved to the north side of the river.

The new settlement prospered from the start, and a valuable trade was built up with the Indians, over whom Johnson exercised a great influence. The Mohawk tribe adopted him and elected him a sachem. In 1744 he was appointed by the governor of New York to be superintendent of the affairs of the Six Nations (Iroquois). He was instrumental in enlisting and equipping the Six Nations for participation in the warfare with French Canada. In 1748 Johnson was placed in command of a line of outposts on the New York frontier. At that time the western boundary of the state stretched along the Unadilla and Susquehanna Rivers to the Pennsylvania border. A peace treaty in France put a stop to offensive operations, which Johnson had begun.

By 1750, by royal appointment, he became a member for life of the governor's council. In 1755, General Edmund Braddock, the commander of British forces in North America, commissioned him major-general, in which capacity he directed the expedition against Crown Point, ten miles north of Fort Ticonderoga, and in September of that same year defeated the French and Indians at the Battle of Lake George. For his success he received the thanks of parliament, and was created a baronet. From July 1756 until his death in 1774, he was the sole superintendent of the Six Nations and other Northern Indians. He took part in General Abercrombie's disastrous campaign against Fort Ticonderoga in 1758. Abercrombie's army was the largest ever assembled in America, comprising 15 thousand men – 6 thousand British regulars and 9 thousand provincials, or, as they were soon to be called, Americans. Among the provincials were John Stark of New Hampshire and Israel Putnam of Connecticut. The French general Montcalm defended the fortress with 4,000 men. Six attempts were made in one day to overrun the fort, but they were repelled each time with increasing fatalities. By the end of the battle, nearly 2,000 British and provincials lay dead on the battlefield, a greater loss of life than was suffered by either side in any battle of the Revolution.

In 1760 he was with General Jeffery Amherst at the capture of Montreal. As a reward for his services, King George granted him a tract of land consisting of 100,000 acres north of the Mohawk River.

It was due to his influence that the Iroquois refused to join Pontiac in his conspiracy. This so-called conspiracy was the result of the differences between the French and the British in their relations with the Indians. While the French had cordial relations, the British remained aloof. The proud-spirited Indians were exasperated at the patronizing air of the British. A conspiracy, fanned by the Frenchmen who were still scattered among them, to massacre all the English garrisons and settlers along the frontiers of Virginia, Pennsylvania and the regions of the Great Lakes, was led by Pontiac, probably the ablest Indian warrior ever known to the white race in America. The war continued for three years, when the Indians yielded, and agreed to a treaty of peace.

After the war, Johnson retired to his estates, where, on the site of the present Johnstown, he built his residence, Johnson Hall. He devoted himself to colonizing his extensive lands, and is said to have been the first to introduce sheep and blood horses into the province.

Upon his death, his son, Sir John Johnson, succeeded to the baronetcy. He had fought in the French and Indian War and in the border warfare during the War of Independence, organizing a loyalist regiment known as the "Queen's Royal Greens", which he led on several engagements in the province of New York.

After the signing of the Paris Peace Treaty in 1783, ending the War of Independence, all his estates were confiscated, and he had to retire to Canada. He received £45,000 (a little over $180,000) from the British government for his losses.

As it was the policy of the fledgling American government to make available to war veterans confiscated or virgin lands as compensation for their services, it is fair to assume that Johnson's lands were so disposed of. In the case of Aaron Griswold and Pelatiah Mills, the two veterans from Colebrook who departed town for Johnstown, New York, the fact that both of them had served in campaigns of the French and Indian War could very well mean that they might have served under Johnson and thus would have been familiar with his holdings in the Mohawk Valley. Whether or not this was the case, they did go to live the rest of their lives in Johnstown, nestled at the southern end of the Adirondacks, as did many other veterans of Washington's army immediately after the war.

Pelatiah Mills' house still stands, looking, at least from the road, much the same as it did when he left for Johnstown, situated diagonally across from the Rock Schoolhouse, at 667 Colebrook Road.

The northeast cornerstone of the Rock School has an "M" carved in it. While we don't know for certain what this means, my bet is that it was engraved by Pelatiah. He certainly was right there in the neighborhood when the school and his house were built, and I have never been able to find another surname in the immediate vicinity that began with an "M".

Historic Bytes

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