



## Assault of Fort Ontario

<b>Event Dates:</b>	August 24-26, 2018
<b>Event Location:</b>	1 East 4 <sup>th</sup> Street, Oswego, NY 13126
<b>Event time:</b>	Friday arrival through Sunday
<b>Purpose of Event:</b>	Storm the walls of Fort Ontario and conquer the British within its walls! Hosted by 1st NY McCracken's Co 1777 and HM 24th of Foot, this reenactment is located in a historic fort in New York State. The British will sleep in the fort's barracks while the American Forces will have a tent encampment on the grounds outside the fort. The American Forces will be able to make an assault on Fort Ontario by storming the walls. All units must be in good standing with the Continental Line/British Brigade and insured as well.
<b>Site Contact:</b>	TBD
<b>Bourbonnais Coordinator:</b>	Ari Winograd
<b>1<sup>st</sup> Person On-Site Contact</b>	Ian Graves
<b>Bourbonnais Dress Code:</b>	All unit equipment. Day trippers pack all equipment in your havresac. Gaiters will be decided Saturday morning.

### Attachments

<b>MapQuest Map:</b>	Attached
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<b>"Assault on Fort Ontario" Tentative Schedule (subject to change) Friday, Aug 24th</b>	
Noon - 11:00 pm	Sign in
<b>Saturday, Aug 25th</b>	
7:00	Reveille
7:45 AM	All vehicles out of Fort (both days)
8:00 -9:00 AM	Sign in
8:30 AM	Officers Call on Fort Main Parade
9:00 AM	Morning Orders\Formation\Safety Inspection
10:30 AM	"Attack onto the Column"- fighting through the streets of Oswego to the gates of the fort
Noon	mid-day meal
1:00 PM	Oneida Great Peace Living Historians (in Continental Camp)
2:00 PM	"Assault on the Fort" - Continental Forces storm the walls of Fort Ontario
3:00 PM	History program (Looking for living history Program(s) to headline this hour. Do you have a progressive impression as in Surgery, Washer Women, Petty Sutlering, Smithing, anything that you like to do?)
4:00 PM	Uniforms Program and The Women of the Army
5:00 PM	Supper
6:00 PM	Cricket match
9:00 - 11:00 PM	Publick House Hours & Jollification
11:00 PM	All Quiet Hour
<b>Sunday, Aug 26th</b>	
7:00 AM	Reveille
7:45 AM	All vehicles out of Fort (both days)
7:30 - 8:30 AM	Breakfast
8:30 AM	Officers Call on Fort Main Parade
9:00 AM	Church Call
10:30 AM	Morning Orders\Formation\Safety Inspection
11:00 AM	Oneida Natives and Thank You for Service in Liberty (in Continental Camp)
Noon	mid-day meal
1:00 PM	"Assault on the Fort" - Continental Forces storm the walls of Fort Ontario
2:00 PM	Event Closes



## *The Real Story of How we almost took Fort Ontario a Last Act of War*

*“Such works as cannot be consumed by fire, nor easily erased by the soldiers, must be, if practicable, blown up. In a word, they are to be effectually demolished, if it is within the compass of your power to do it.”*

George Washington wrote these words to Fort Stanwix’s own hero, Marinus Willet, in the winter of 1782, late in the Revolutionary War. He was asking Colonel Willett to blow up Fort Ontario, a small British fort on Lake Ontario in present day Oswego, in a surprise attack in the middle of winter.

Washington’s reasoning was simple: Fort Ontario was the southernmost British fort in a string of garrisons snaking downwards from British-controlled Canada into the wild New York Frontier. If men from Fort Stanwix could take Fort Ontario, and push the British further back into Canada, the Americans would have a stronger hold on the much contested New York territory.

The historic relationship between these two Forts is a complex one, and illuminates nicely why Washington saw Fort Ontario as such a huge threat to America.

Fort Ontario in present day Oswego and present day Rome sprang up at around the same time, and for similar reasons. Beginning in 1755, during a period of hostility between the French, their Native American allies, and the British, these areas had been fortified in some manner or other. These areas were chosen because of their placement on significant and intersected waterways.

Fort Bull, Williams, and later, Stanwix, were directly on the Carry, the place where natives, fur traders, settlers, and soldiers carried their boats and canoes between the Mohawk River and Wood Creek. The latter waterway led to the Oswego River, which in turn led directly to Fort Oswego, and later to Fort Ontario. From Fort Ontario, one could enter Lake Ontario, and from there, any of the other Great Lakes.

While Fort Stanwix was closer to other forts in southern New York, Fort Ontario was closer to Canadian forts like Deer Island or Niagara. So, when the Revolutionary War began, Fort Ontario mostly remained under English control, whereas Americans controlled Fort Stanwix.

It is from Fort Ontario that English General Barry St. Leger marched on the Mohawk Valley in 1777. This march, part of General John Burgoyne’s failed three-prong attack designed to bring New York, and America, to heel, culminated in the Siege of Fort Stanwix and the Battle of Oriskany.

Both General Gansevoort at Fort Stanwix and General Herkimer at Oriskany were able to withstand St. Leger’s army, overcoming great odds to do so. It is in part due to Willett’s actions in aiding General Herkimer at Oriskany that Leger’s forces were held up in the Mohawk Valley.

Because of the prolonged battle, St. Leger was unable to assist Burgoyne in Saratoga. Ultimately, it was because of the tremendous success at Saratoga that the American forces were able to convince the French, England’s greatest threat, to become military allies of this fledgling nation.

As the war went on, the British had a difficult time coming up with the necessary men and supplies to arm and men all of their forts. It is for this reason that, throughout much of the Revolutionary War, Fort Ontario was in disrepair and typically lacked the men necessary to guard it fully. This shortage was so great that, in 1778, General Peter Gansevoort, the man in charge of Fort Stanwix, was able to send a contingent of men, under Lieutenant McClellan, to burn Fort Ontario to the ground.

Letters between English commanders at this time attest to the fact that Fort Ontario was still burning a full two weeks after McClellan’s attack.

Unbeknownst to the Americans, the Governor of Canada, General Frederick Haldimand, authorized a secret operation to rebuild and re-fortify Fort Ontario in 1781. The military success that the Americans had achieved made Haldimand incredibly fearful that



the “Rebels” would turn their eye to Canada next. If Fort Ontario was too weak to defend against the Americans, not only would the British lose a foothold in America, but also open Canada to the possibility of an American invasion.

Not many letters, records, or other documents exist from this time in Fort Ontario’s history. Furthermore, what records do exist from this time emphasize the secret nature of the goings-on at Fort Ontario. Haldimand wrote, in a letter dated 1781, “[O]ur having possession of Oswego is more than over necessary. I have therefore determined to take post there... But all will depend on the design being kept secret... It would therefore be risking too much to mention the affair to a second person.”

What is known is that, sometime between October 1781 and April 1782, one Major John Ross took command of Fort Ontario. And an assortment of letters and records sent between Haldimand and Ross can attest to the intense amount of work being done there—and to the fact that secrecy was Ross’s and Haldimand’s primary concern. In one letter, Ross writes that he doesn’t think that “the Rebels [had] any Intelligence of my taking Post here.”

Meanwhile, in the Mohawk Valley, General George Washington himself is corresponding with Colonel Marinus Willett. Washington’s letters stress that Fort Ontario is a relative unknown in this equation—and that if Willett hopes to take Fort Ontario by surprise, accurate information has to be gathered.

Unfortunately for the Americans, the British had somehow managed to keep Fort Ontario very much a secret.

When Willett sent out for the expedition from Fort Herkimer, in German Flatts, on the 8th of February, 1783, he had about four-to-five hundred men with him, though the exact number is not known. Success seemed likely, and Willett was in high spirits—until the last four miles of the campaign, that is, some days after leaving Fort Herkimer. Men of the 1<sup>st</sup> NY the 2nd RI Regt. and a Composition of Militia and Oneida Scouts made up the party that dragged supplies on sleds across and through frozen & unfrozen rivers.

Believing that they had discovered a shortcut to Fort Ontario, Willett’s men deviated from the planned path, and promptly got lost in the icy and swampy Oswego woods. By the time they made it to Fort Ontario, it was dawn—much too late to launch any sort of surprise attack on the Fort. Thus, Willett and his men had to turn around and begin the march home. Unfortunately for himself and his men, Willett had embarked on this expedition fully confident that he would take Fort Ontario by the 11th of February. As such, he did not come prepared with food, clothing, or any other supplies the long journey back. Frostbite injured many of the men; some of whom only made it back to American territory because they were dragged along by their friends.

Two men, although accounts differ, were either left behind by Willett, or were deserters that had left Willett’s campaign. These two men were found by the British, and brought back to Major Ross, the commander of Fort Ontario.

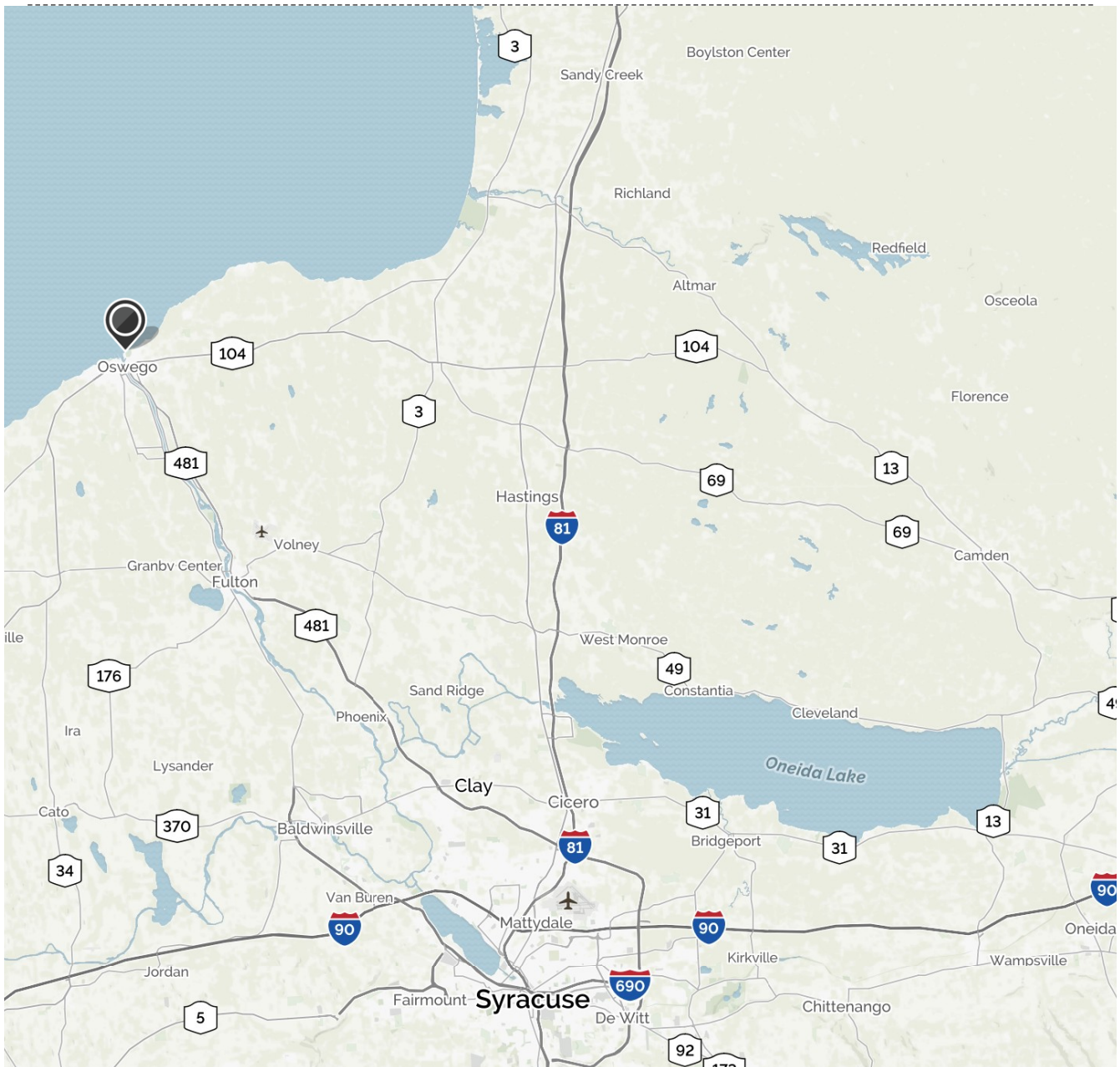
In a letter to General Haldimand, Ross, unknowingly jabs at Washington’s plan, writing that whoever conceived of this plan was possessed by a “professional ignorance,” for thinking that such a plan could ever possibly succeed. “I cannot help observing to your Excellency,” Ross writes, “that there never was a more ridiculous Expedition.”

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