

The Old Base Cemetery

Memorial Service

10 Sep 2020

From “Camp Saranac” (Pike’s Cantonment) in the winter of 1812, to the fortifications built for the defense of the village and its important military stores in 1814 (Forts Brown, Moreau, and Scott, the wooden barracks and two additional forts (Forts Gaines and Tompkins) in 1815), the Stone Barracks in 1838, the brick “brownstones” of the 1890’s, to the establishment of the Army’s “Plattsburgh Barracks” in 1945, and the “new base” of the Air Force in the 1950’s, the military presence and the Post here have had a long and interesting past.

The U.S. Army maintained a presence here until 1944 when the U.S. Navy’s “Camp Macdonough” Officer Training School was established here. The Navy left and the Army returned in 1945 establishing the “Plattsburgh Barracks”, only to relinquish control of the Old Base property to the NY State Education Department and its “Champlain College” to benefit returning veterans of WWII. Faced with dwindling enrollment, the college was closed and the state returned the property to the United States in 1953. In 1955, “Plattsburgh Air Force Base” began its history with the assignment of the 380th Bombardment Wing, later joined by the 556th Strategic Missile Squadron.

In November of 1866, just after the Civil War, two companies known as the 42nd U.S. Infantry Veterans’ Reserve Corps were organized “. . . to be none but men who have been wounded in the line of their duty while serving . . . and were found on medical exam not unfitted for garrison or other light duty”. They were sent to Plattsburgh’s Post and garrisoned in the Stone Barracks. A year later, more severely or wounded individuals began to arrive. On May 17, 1867 Henry McKay and John Rigby passed away; they were buried on the grounds beside the barracks, and so established the Post Cemetery.

In 1868, during the construction of the Whitehall Railroad line, 91 remains from the War of 1812 were unearthed near the wharf just north of the location of Fort Scott and moved here to the Post Cemetery: the first of 136 unknowns to be buried here. Several other deaths and internments occurred before the 42nd was transferred to the Madison Barracks at Sacket’s Harbor in 1869.

Several scholars in recent years since the 1980’s have stated that memorials to unknown soldiers are a 20th century phenomenon, “allowing a focus of grief” for the massive losses in wars since WW I. The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery, perhaps the most famous of such memorials, was established in 1932. Our Old Post Cemetery’s history was casually neglected.

In 1888, the Secretary of War ordered three monuments for the graves of unknown soldiers in the post cemeteries at Plattsburgh, Madison Barracks at Sacket's Harbor, and at Fort Niagara. On June 1st, 1888, the monument to the memory of unknown soldiers and sailors killed in the action at the Battles of Plattsburgh on September 11th, 1814, believed to be the first monument to the unknowns, was placed here. In 1892, the graves of 25 soldiers were unearthed at the location of Ft. Moreau; the remains of those veterans are here also.

In 1894, with the construction of the "Brownstone" base, and the renewal of the facility, the cemetery was rehabbed as well. Roadways were built, and fencing and shrubbery was installed.

In 1906, while removing tree stumps near Halsey's Corners, near the Beekman Town road, the remains of a British soldier, one of General Brisbane's 3rd Brigade 6th Regiment, the Enniskillen (from County Fermaugh in Northern Ireland) were unearthed and removed to here.

In 1933 during excavations at the Post, the remains of a believed Revolutionary War soldier were discovered and are now here.

At the end of World War II, the Army closed its "Plattsburgh Barracks". The War Department ordered the disinterment of the burials here and their movement to Woodlawn National Cemetery in Elmira, NY. An uneasy two years ensued as the local community, excited by the establishment of Champlain College, was dismayed at the prospect of disturbing the military graves until, in 1947, President Truman signed the "Military Graveyards Bill". It allowed the transfer of existing, but closed military cemeteries to local communities. The Old Post Cemetery was deeded to the City of Plattsburgh in 1947.

In the mid-1950's, with the Air Force presence, a new focus on the rehab of the cemetery was mounted with discussions between the Air Force, local veterans' groups, legions, and the City. After several years and with the costs involved, Mayor Tyrell in 1958, sought to have the U.S. Corps of Engineers made responsible for the cemetery.

And the years went by . . . with the Air Force dutifully cutting the grass, grudgingly at first; "routinely" after transfers of personnel in and out, the shrubs grew to the size of trees . . . and the trees grew to unmanageable proportions . . . the fence fell into disrepair . . . because all involved, were gone: the military personnel, the "old soldiers" of the veterans' groups, mayors of the City . . . like those in the graves beneath our feet: 143 unknown veterans and 436 soldiers, wives, and children – the Post Cemetery seemed to die in the memories of all. It was simply . . . here.

With the base closure in 1995, the corporation ultimately known as PARC assumed responsibility for all base properties. With closure funds left by the Air Force, PARC mowed the grass and replaced the fence. With the participation of the

County Veterans Service Agency and local veterans' groups, a flag pole was erected. A deed search showed that the cemetery was never deeded from the City - - the community still "owned" the cemetery.

Forestry students from Paul Smith's College surveyed the trees and shrubs; trimming and thinning resulted with the City maintaining the grounds. We became aware, anew, of the individuals represented here, their stories, a part of the fabric and history of our country and our community.

We knew them. They lived . . . they felt . . . they loved and were loved. They were as vibrant . . . as energetic . . . and as immortal as you and I. They were brave. They fell for peace and for freedom in the service of their country. Many may argue about the futility of death and of war, but one should never forget that they died . . not in vain . . but in honor.

Many times down through the years our country's men and women have been called to arms . . . and they have answered the call. Let us not forget our fallen comrades, but remember them always; they have earned our respect and admiration with their lives.

"NON SIBI SED PARTIAE" (not for self, but for country)

We'll remember them . . . They will not be forgotten.

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