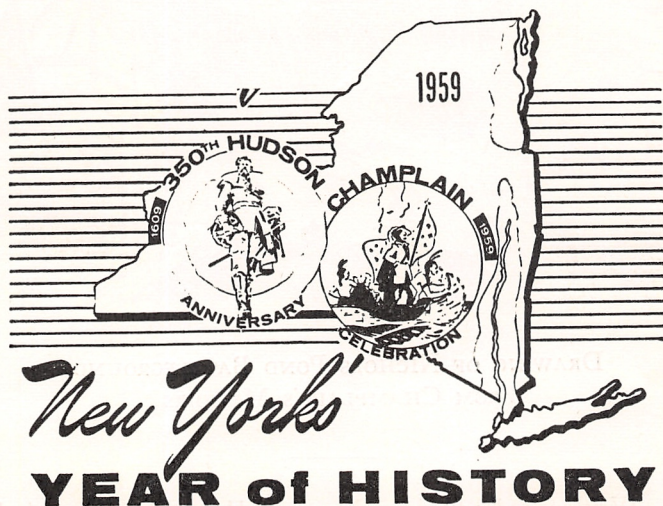


CHAMPLAIN AND THE BATTLE OF NICHOLS POND

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DRAWING OF NICHOLS POND BATTLEGROUND
FROM CHAMPLAIN'S MEMOIRS

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Participation of Madison County Historical Society
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350th HUDSON-CHAMPLAIN CELEBRATION
1609-1959

CHAMPLAIN AND THE BATTLE OF NICHOLS POND

In Town of Fenner, Madison County, N. Y.
October 10, 1615

SAMUEL DE CHAMPLAIN

The first white men in what is now Madison County were Frenchmen who came in the 17th century. Samuel De Champlain was their most famous explorer. As we continue through the 1959 "Year Of History" in the 350th Hudson-Champlain Anniversary Celebration, the average Central New Yorker knows more about the life of Hendrick Hudson than he does of Champlain's. History books stress the Dutch and English settlements in our state and rarely mention the French at length.

French speaking school children in the Province of Quebec know more about early French influence in our state than we do.

We in Madison County are especially interested in the 350th Hudson-Champlain Anniversary because Champlain and his French soldiers, aided by Algonquin Indian allies, visited Oneida Lake and lands South of the lake in the Fall of 1615.

Champlain's exceptional ability as an explorer, colonizer, and government administrator over a period of 35 years evokes interest in the source of events during his earlier life which led him to embark on a lifetime of exploration and colonization on the North American Continent.

Samuel De Champlain was born in 1570, and spent his early years in the French army. While in the army he served in the Quartermaster Corps and gained valuable experience in estimating, obtaining, and handling the volume of supplies of every description needed to sustain an army on maneuvers.

This experience contributed to Champlain's success in moving and settling soldiers and settlers thousands of miles away from France, to North America, under the most difficult and primitive conditions.

The record of his early life took an abrupt turn in 1599 when he left the French army and turned to the sea. In that year Champlain sailed a ship, as Captain, to the West Indies.

Tales he may have heard there, about rich lands to the North, may have led him to his exploration trips to New France (now known as Quebec), and to the discovery of a new continent for the King of France.

The record of Champlain's exploration trips in the next six years is impressive. These were the years when as an exploring sea captain, he first made sure of where his future land explorations would be carried on.

Let's look at the record. In 1603 Champlain explored the St. Lawrence River. In 1604 he founded a colony at Port Royal in Nova Scotia.

For the next three years he charted the Atlantic coast line as far south as Cape Cod. And in 1608 he founded the city of Quebec.

With the landing in Quebec, Champlain entered another phase in his life's work; changing from a sea explorer to land explorations. He was as good at one as he was the other. But his choice of allies was bad — as far as we in Central New York are concerned.

When he arrived in Quebec the Algonquins and Huron Indians lived in that area, and with them he made friends and allies. Their hated enemies were

the Iroquois Indians to the South, in what is now New York State.

Thus in the trip in which he discovered Lake Champlain, skirmishes with the Iroquois in 1609 made them enemies of the French forever.

With his thought of ever pushing Southward in mind, Champlain established a trading post on the site of Montreal in 1611. The following year he became Lt. Governor of New France. For the next eight years he colonized and built up the French forces, and by 1820 had fortified the City of Quebec.

It was during these years, in 1615, on a trip to this area, that Champlain and his Algonquin allies suffered defeat at the hands of the Iroquois at Nichols Pond in Madison County.

In 1629 the English fleet besieged Quebec and Champlain was forced to surrender. He was taken to England as prisoner where he spent the next three years. Released in 1632 he returned to Quebec where he spent the last three years of his life in governing and developing the French colonies.

His death occurred on Christmas Day in 1635 in the city of Quebec at the age of 65.

BATTLE OF NICHOLS POND

During the period between 1612 and 1620, Samuel De Champlain directed most of his energies to raiding Iroquois country in what is now Northern and Central New York State. In these efforts Champlain and his French soldiers were aided by Huron and Algonquin Indian allies.

The French and Indians found the Iroquois a tough foe. They could not penetrate or separate the Mohawks, the Oneidas, the Onondagas, the Senecas and the Cayugas. These five Indians nations banded together in the Iroquois Confederacy were a tight barrier across New York State to further French penetration southward from the St. Lawrence River.

French soldiers and trappers risked death by torture if they were captured by any of the

Iroquois. This Indian barrier also prevented the French from using the Mohawk and Hudson rivers as an easy method of transportation.

On one of his many expeditions south of the St. Lawrence River Champlain penetrated the farthest South of all his trips. This overland journey was made in September and October in the Fall of 1615.

It was on this trip that Champlain suffered a major defeat before the palisaded Indian fort of the Oneidas at Nichols Pond.

Champlain kept complete and voluminous records and dairies of all his trips. His own eyewitness account of this battle is most vivid in depicting the fighting which occurred. The following account of the battle is taken from Champlain's own writings:

"When we left the lake (Lake Ontario), all canoes were concealed. We continued our journey over land, and in the course of four days we traversed many streams—one river issuing from a lake which empties into Lake Ontario. (This was undoubtedly Oneida Lake.)

"On October 9th our scouts encountered eleven savages whom they took prisoners . . . — On the next day at 3 o'clock we arrived at the enemy's fort. (This settlement fixes the date of the battle as on Oct. 10th, 1615.)

"It was our design not to be discovered until the morrow, but the impatience of our savages would not brook this, through their desire to see us fire on our enemies.

"Then I advanced and presented myself and showed them what they never saw or heard before, (for) as soon as they saw us and heard the reports of the arquebus; the bells whistling about their ears, they retired within the fort carrying their dead and wounded. We retreated in like manner

"Their village was inclosed with a strong quadruple palisade of large timber — proof against our arquebuses, and on one side they had a pond with a never failing supply of water



HISTORIC ONEIDA STONE — The Oneida Council rock located at Nichols Pond is a highlight of a tour to the historic battleground where France lost an empire. In the background traces of the pond may be seen.

from which proceeded many gutters (filled with running water) for the purpose of extinguishing fire

"We constructed a movable tower of timber to overlook their pickets (atop the palisade), whereon I should post four or five arquebuseers who would fire over the palisades. Our tower was carried by two hundred of our strongest men.

"Those on the tower killed and wounded a great many. The engagement lasted three hours. Many of our men were wounded. Having received two wounds from arrows, which sorely incommoded me, we withdrew.

"We remained here until the 16th of the month. Several skirmishes occurred during that time.

"We were obliged to extricate our Indians from difficulties many times, they not being able to extricate themselves except by the help of our arquebuses which the enemy dreaded and feared. As soon as they

(our Indian allies) perceived one of our arquebuseers they immediately retreated, telling us not to meddle in their fights; and that their enemies had very little courage to require our assistance

"Our retreat was tedious as I had to be carried several days on the back of an Indian. On the 18th of October snow fell. Nevertheless, we managed to get to the borders of Lake Entouhonons (Indian for Lake Ontario), where we found our canoes safe."

We are so used to associating antique muzzle loading guns as the White Man's first weapon against the Indians in Central New York, in the Revolutionary War period; that it may have come as a surprise to some readers that the arquebus was used by French soldiers 150 years earlier, in October 1615 at the Battle of Nichols Pond.

The arquebus was a medieval firearm the length of a musket. It was generally fired from a

forked rest, and carried a ball weighing almost two ounces. It was usually cocked for firing with a wheel.

Curiously enough, this medieval weapon was used by the French longer than by other armies. An early American Encyclopedia states that the arquebus "is little used now except in some old castles, and by the French in some of their garrisons"

The Nichols Pond site lay unnoticed for many years. Around the 1880's a hunter named Albert Palmer was going through the woods on the site. He noticed an old rotten tree which had just been blown over by recent heavy winds. As the tree fell it disturbed the soil at the base of the tree, laying bare a profusion of arrow heads.

Mr. Palmer notified state authorities in Albany, who came, saw, and were convinced that here was the site of Champlain's battle with the Iroquois as written in his diaries and travel accounts.

The site became known as the Nichols Pond Battlefield because the first white man who owned it was Samuel Nichols.

It is located on "The Milestrip" in the Town of Fenner, Madison County; west of the highway between Clockville and Peterboro. The Milestrip was a strip of land nine miles long and one mile wide which was purchased from the Indians in 1791. That same year Samuel Nichols came from the Town of Cazenovia, bought land on the Milestrip and settled there.

An early champion of the Nichols Pond Battleground was Dr. William M. Beauchamp of Syracuse, who was the speaker at an outing held on the site by the Madison County Historical Society in 1902.

Back in the Twenties Dr. Earl A. Bates, a Cornell University ethnologist and Indian expert, did much to publicize it. At that time several state historical markers were erected in and about the site. Also at that time it was proposed that a state park be built at the area.

The Madison County Board of

Supervisors became interested in 1929 or 1930 appropriated money to purchase forty acres from Andrew Roberts and Horace Case at a price of \$50. per acre.

When the State of New York started to build a state park system in the thirties and forties, emphasis was focused on swimming and recreational locations. Nichols Pond was forgotten in the rush to provide bathing facilities at Green Lakes and Verona Beach State Parks. Chittenango Falls State Park was provided because of its beautiful waterfall and easy accessibility on a paved road. It too has a swimming pool at the base of the falls.

By 1946 a group of county residents decided that the time had come to make Nichols Pond better known, and to develop its full potential as a historic site. This group headed by Miles E. Robertson formed the "Champlain-Oneida Battleground Association."

Mr. Robertson is President of the association, and Mr. Roy W. Cary the Secretary-Treasurer. Mr. Cary has been the official county caretaker of Nichols Pond since its purchase by the county, and has lived in a nearby farmhouse for 60 years.

The members of the Battleground Association can be proud of the work their energetic officers and interested members have accomplished in the last thirteen years.

They enlisted the support of the Board of Supervisors, and in 1955 Dr. William Richie of Albany, archeologist Peter M. Pratt, officers and members, started excavations to determine the exact location of features of the embattled Indian village.

In 1957 Prof. Longyear of Colgate with the aid of several Colgate students made further excavations. In 1958 fences were built around features discovered at the fort. Part of the grounds were cleared of brush, the ground plowed and seeded to grass. A roadway was built into the grounds for easy access to several fireplaces which were also built. Eight



FINE PLACE TO PICNIC — Recently installed picnic tables and fireplaces make Nichols Pond a perfect picnic site for area residents. Drinking water is available from a well drilled this year and mosquitoes are eliminated by constant spraying.

picnic tables were placed on the grounds which have been in constant use ever since.

This year, 1959, a 72 foot well was drilled on the grounds; which also have been sprayed this summer to eliminate the insect nuisance. In the last year or so a colony of beavers has built a dam at the outlet of the pond so that there is now a presentable body of water in it.

The next future work would appear to be the removal of decayed and fallen trees in the pond itself.

Former one lane country roads into the site from the Canastota - Peterboro highway have been replaced by the Madison County Highway Department, with wide modern highways suitable for today's motor travel. Two adjacent roads into the area are being widened this year. All are good travel roads which undoubtedly will be paved with macadam as traffic to Nichols Pond increases.

The development of the Nichols Pond Battleground progresses slowly but steadily, year after year; thanks to the interest of the Champlain-Oneida Battleground Association, the Madison County Board of Supervisors, and the Madison County Highway Department.

If you haven't enjoyed a picnic at Nichols Pond in the last two summers, you are missing one of the finest summer recreational spots in Central New York. Don't expect to find all the features of a well developed state park!

Remember, it is still an unspoiled rural countryside!

A CONTROVERSY

In the last few years a few residents of Onondaga County have tried to claim that Champlain's battle with the Iroquois occurred in Onondaga County.

We in Madison County still are just as sure that the battle occurred at Nichols Pond —

basing our claim on Champlain's own writings about the trip.

In Champlain's drawing of the fort, the inlet to the pond was on the west side of the fort, while the outlet of the pond was on the east side of the fort.

Nichols Pond is the only natural body of water in Central New York that meets these conditions.

The Council Rock still rests near what was the center of the enclosure. Nearby are smaller rocks, representing each of the five nations of the Iroquois. Excavations have proved beyond a doubt that the battle occurred at this site. Vestiges of the Oneida Indian village have been located. A large corn crib, and other Indian village features have been found. An Indian burial ground is nearby.

Arrowheads, tomahawks, stone hammers, pipe stems, bowls, beads, trinkets, flint chips, and pottery fragments have been found at the site in great profusion.

Many of these relics discovered by Peter Pratt and his associates are now on display in the "Nichols Pond Room" at Cottage Lawn Historical House in Oneida. On the wall of the room is a large painting of the Battle of Nichols Pond, painted from Champlain's own description of the battle. There is also a picture of discoverer Albert Palmer.

THE FUTURE

What does the future hold for the Nichols Pond Battleground?

Its full development and possible rebuilding of the palisaded fort will come only on demand of the people of the state for more recreation and picnic areas, together with a realization that the development of historic sites will make our booming tourist business even larger than it is today.

Just recently, nearby Syracuse newspapers have been complaining because park facilities in Central New York are being used to the limit of their capacity. This year the Hudson-Champlain 350th Anniversary Celebration has shown that historic sites will attract people.

In any future expansion of our state park system they should be built in conjunction with historic sites.

Some years ago the State of Ohio made a practice of building Ohio State Parks in conjunction with historic sites. Some of my most vivid memories as an Ohio tourist concern recreated early settlements and the early history of that state.

The same can be done at Nichols Pond. I can visualize the re-building of the former Oneida Indian village. I can visualize also the re-construction of the palisaded Iroquois fort, in a similar manner to that of the reconstructed fort on the shores of Onondaga Lake.

I can see, in the future, to the North of the pond, a large parking area; and beyond that a large viewing area, with a breath-taking hilltop view of the length of Oneida Lake!

There is no better site in Central New York for the development of additional recreational facilities for our ever growing population. There is no better place in which to combine a major historical site with a tourist recreation area.

Will it ever become a reality? Only time will tell.

In conclusion, let me point out that if Champlain had not been defeated at the Battle of Nichols Pond, the people living today in Central New York might be speaking French instead of English!

Further contrasts are interesting. The Battle of Nichols Pond was the first pitched battleground between the white men and the red men on the North American Continent. Its date precedes those of DeSoto and other early explorers.

It is worthy of note that the white man was fighting for Indian territory, in what is Madison County, only eight years after the settlement of Jamestown, Virginia; and only two years after the Dutch settled New Amsterdam (New York.)

Finally, for a last comparison, this momentous event in history occurred five years before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock!

1. *Phragmites* (Common)
 2. *Spartina* (Common)
 3. *Scirpus* (Common)