

VALCOUR ISLAND HERITAGE TRAIL

A guide to the
Historic 20th Century Camps
on Valcour Island



The history of Valcour Island reflects the history of Lake Champlain. First documented by Samuel de Champlain in 1609, the island was part of New France until 1763. The French named it Isle de Valcours, or Island of Pines. One of the most important naval battles of the American Revolution raged on the waters between the island and the mainland. In 1776, Benedict Arnold led a flotilla of American gunboats that stopped a British invasion fleet from dividing New England from the other newly created states.

Valcour Island was witness to the War of 1812 Battle of Plattsburgh on September 11, 1814, but remained a quiet place for most of the 19th century. Records indicate that the island was parceled into three sections by 1849 and used for grazing and cultivation. By 1870, Orren Shipman of Colchester, Vermont, had purchased the titles of two parcels. He sold a portion of Bluff Point, on the western side of the island to the federal government for a lighthouse, which was constructed in 1874. That year, Shipman also sold property to the Dawn Valcour Agricultural and Horticultural Association, a utopian community that failed.

Lake Champlain's cool breezes made Valcour a popular place for escaping the heat of the cities in the early 20th century. Camp Penn, a summer camp for boys, operated on the island from 1906 to 1935+. By the 1920s, cottages and cabins ringed the island. For the next few generations, dozens of families vacationed here.

The State of New York began buying camp properties on Valcour in the early 1960s with the intent of establishing a park. Early plans included public beaches, marinas, picnic areas, an 18-hole golf course and a giant movie screen for boaters to watch conservation films. The New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC) owned the 1,100-acre island entirely in 1980 and local activists worked to get it included within the Adirondack Park "blue line," which prevented the proposed park developments.

Of the numerous buildings that existed on the Valcour Island, only the lighthouse and the Seton House remain. This guide will help you visit the locations of those long-gone structures and envision what life on the island was like. The NYSDEC maintains trails and campsites along the perimeter of the island, so the hiking is relatively easy.

1

Bluff Point Lighthouse

N44 37.367 W73 25.871

Built in 1874, the lighthouse operated for 57 years before being replaced by an automated light on a steel tower. In 2004, the lighthouse returned to service and is listed on the State and National Registers of Historic Places. Oil powered the original light. Look for the old oil shed foundation behind the lighthouse. You can learn about the history of the lighthouse from the nearby wayside exhibit.

Special thanks to Dr. Otto Raboff for granting a conservation easement to the Clinton County Historical Association (CCHA) for the lighthouse, insuring that the property and its history be preserved for future generations. For more in-depth information about the lighthouse, watch short videos on the Hometown Cable Video Gallery website www.hometowncable.net-work.com. Guided tours of the lighthouse are offered during the summer on Sundays from 1-3 p.m. www.historiclakes.org/Valcour/bluff_point.htm



Former Keeper Mary Herwerth.

2

Raboff Great Camp

N44 37.269 W73 25.861

Heading south from the lighthouse, you'll find the remains of Dr. Otto Raboff's Great Camp near campsite #25. Raboff, of Middleboro, MA, held the title to this property for almost 30 years before the State of New York acquired it. Follow the trail east and look for the remains of a guest house, the ice house, and one of the camp's docks, which is located next to Campsite #26. The dock might be submerged if the lake is high.



The Raboff Great Camp

3

The Gill Farm

N44 37.205 W73 25.423

Little remains of this large farm except for a well and the foundations of a house and barns. Look for the remains of an old truck, which was probably used to deliver milk to Camp Penn. The boys at Camp Penn worked on the farm when the camp operated in the early 1900s.

CAUTION: the well hole may be hidden in the grass. Proceed with care!

INDIAN POINT

During early days of the American Revolution, General Benedict Arnold prepared for a major British invasion down Lake Champlain by building a fleet of small gunboats in Whitehall, New York. Arnold's fleet met a larger, better armed British force here on Valcour Bay on October 11, 1776. If you were standing here that day, you'd see a line of small American boats firing cannon at British vessels struggling against a strong headwind. The Americans, battered by the superior firepower of the British, made a dramatic escape that same night. Several American vessels were lost, including the gunboat Philadelphia, which was raised nearby in 1935. The vessel now resides in the National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C.

The heroic actions of General Arnold and his men delayed the British from reaching the Hudson Valley in 1776, giving the Americans more time to prepare for the strategic victory in Saratoga in 1777. To learn more about this battle visit:

http://www.historiclakes.org/Valcour/valcour_battle.htm

4

Camp Penn/Shuttleworth Cottage

N44 37.043 W73 25.506

As you explore the site of Camp Penn, an early 20th century boys camp, look for signs of the dining hall and milk cooler to the east (N44 37.020 W73 25.413) and the Camp Penn Commons Building to the south (N44 37.990 W73 25.415)



Camp Penn Commons

5

Seton Stone House

N44 36.529 W73 25.380

This camp and the lighthouse are the only two remaining buildings on the island. Harvard paleontologist Henry Seton built this home in 1929 on his 129 acres of land. The empty building is closed to the public for safety reasons and to prevent vandalism.



The Seton Stone House

6

Nomad Monument

N44 37.081 W73 24.566

This small monument is a memorial to Canadian Lt. Col. Gerald W. Birks (1872-1950) who visited Valcour Island often on his yacht, the Nomad, which was crewed by high school and college students. During World War One, Birks and some of his crewmen traveled to fight in Europe where four of his companions died. A generation later, five of his crewmen were killed in World War Two. The monument marks the fallen crewmen's and Birks' lives.



The Nomad Monument

7

Brown Ledge Organization

N44 37.286 W73 24.323

A small girls' camp was located in the general vicinity of Tiger Point. Brown Ledge, established in 1926, is now located in Vermont and its campers continue to have overnight stays on Valcour Island.

8

Hudson, Moore & Yager Camps

N44 37.498 W73 24.348

Only the chimney (N44 37.507 W73 24.386) and an old dock (N44 37.540 W73 24.363) remain. The chimney was built around 1900 by local geologist Dr. George Hudson. Interested in photography, Hudson operated a dark room from one of the small caves facing Paradise Bay.

Look for the Hudson Cave (N44 37.600 W73 24.313) from the dock. Hudson Hall at SUNY Plattsburgh is also named for him. The property was later owned by Father Robert Edward Moore who had the largest of the camps (N44 37.496 W73 24.357) on the east side of the island. On Sundays, boaters would receive the Sunday sermon on Father Moore's terrace. M.H. "Doc" Yager purchased the property upon the Monsignor's death and eventually sold to New York State.



Father Moore Camp



Hitchcock Camp

N44 37.993 W73 24.721

This is the general location of the Hitchcock/Trombley Camp located near the campsites at Beauty Bay.



The Hitchcock Trombley Camp



Charles Kilbourne Camp

N44 38.188 W73 24.990

Charles Kilbourne was a physical education teacher at Plattsburgh High School and activities director at the YMCA in the 1920s. In 1959, Harney Davey, son of Rita Davey, acquired the camp and dock on the North Point. He spent the next few years repairing them before selling to New York State.



The Kilbourne Camp at North Point



Harney Camp

N44 38.144 W73 25.170

This is the approximate location of the camp of Thomas Harney and his sister Rita Davey which burned in August 1956. Little remains although parts of a stove, bedsprings, and other metallic objects indicate there was once a structure here. This was part of the Harney Farm property.



Harney Farmhouse

N44 37.860 W73 25.470

The Harney family owned about 600 acres on the north end of the island. Sometimes referred to as the Pioneer Farm, you can find old farm implements, including a hay baler and a loader. Look for the foundations of the house and barns, along with the well and dock.

Caution: The well is near the barn foundations. Proceed with care!



Virginia Upton and her family rented the Harney Farm

DAWN COMMUNITY HOUSE (N44 37.885 W73 25.434)

Located on the former Harney property was the controversial Dawn Valcour Agricultural and Horticultural Association. Colonel John Wilcox, the founder of the utopian experiment, attempted to create a commune here based on the concepts of spiritualism and free love during the summer of 1874. His short-lived dream, with only a few active members, was confined to a small one-room structure. That fall, the Dawn Community succumbed to financial challenges, legal issues and the coming winter. All that remains is a partial foundation of their building.

13

Washbourne Camps

N44 37.946 W73 25.521

The Washbournes bought a small amount of property from the Harney family. Robert, Lynn, and their father John Washbourne all had camps on this scenic point.



The Washbourne compound

14

Grant Camps

N44 37.547 W73 25.692

Look for the footers that once supported the camps owned by Ken Grant and his son John.



The Ken Grant Camp

Trip Tips

The best way to visit the sites is by using a handheld GPS, or a GPS-enabled smart phone using the map and GPS waypoints in this guide. You can also follow the trail descriptions. Before you begin, please remember these simple rules:

- **Pack it in, pack it out.** Valcour Island is owned by New York State and lies within the Adirondack Park, so please pack out anything you bring in so others may enjoy the Island as much as you did.
- **Respect privacy.** Many campsites are located near the historic sites. If you find a campsite occupied, please respect the campers' privacy.
- **Take only photos.** Please do not remove anything from the sites. We would like to be able to share these historic sites with future generations. A camera is a great means of recording your journey while leaving, intact, the sites for others to visit.
- **Look out for Poison Ivy!** If you know what to look for, poison ivy is easy to identify: (1) Shiny, smooth leaves grouped in threes; (2) Smooth-edged, shiny leaves with no serrated (or sawtooth) edges with small "lobes" along the edges; (3) Reddish branches.



This guide was created by Kevin Kelley, inspired and supported by the research of Roger Harwood in conjunction with the Clinton County Historical Association.

If you have any information or questions about the island please contact the Clinton County Historical Association at 98 Ohio Ave, Plattsburgh, NY 12903 (518) 561-0340

director@clintoncountyhistorical.org