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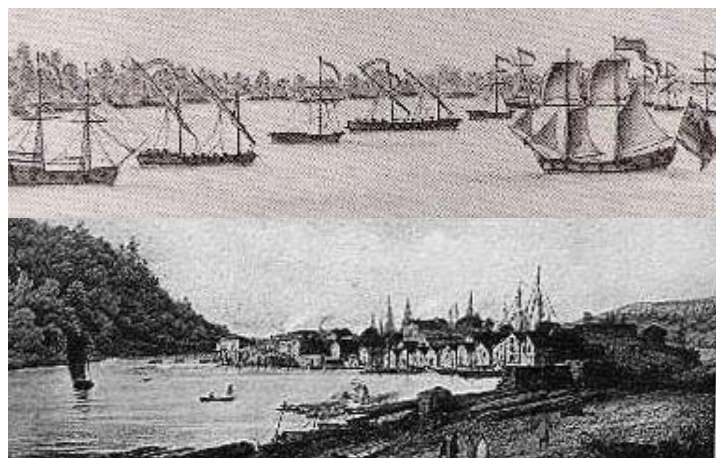
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Philip Skene was a retired major in the British Army when he arrived to settle the area that later became Whitehall. The officer was familiar with the region, having served with General Amherst's expedition on Lake Champlain. With the 1759 campaign concluded, Skene turned towards creating a settlement at this vital point where the Wood Creek ran into the beginnings of Lake Champlain. Through his influence, Skene acquired two massive land patents from the King of England and New York's Royal Lieutenant Governor that totaled 56,000 acres. By 1764 a settlement, known as Skenesborough, was well underway at the end of the lake. Over 350 settlers lived in the area eleven years later. The village featured mills powered by Wood Creek and Skene had constructed a large stone residence.

The outbreak of the American Revolution transformed Skenesborough as Skene retained his loyalty to the king. On May 9, 1775 a party of armed American patriots arrived at Skenesborough and captured Skene's sailing schooner, the Katherine. Renamed the Liberty, and subsequently mounted with cannons, this vessel gave the Americans control of Lake Champlain. It was one of the first vessels armed by the rebellious colonies.



Whitehall Harbor in 1770

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# WHITEHALL

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In 1776, Skenesborough served as a supply depot for materials coming north from Albany. Troops passed through the village on their way north. When the American army retreated from Canada in June 1776, the waterfront drastically changed. To match the navy the British constructed on the Richelieu River, the Americans, under the direction of General Benedict Arnold, turned Skenesborough into a shipyard. Using the forges and sawmill of Philip Skene and other mills in the region, American shipwrights constructed a fleet from local timber. By the fall, they built a total of twelve vessels. Due to this military activity, Whitehall proudly states it as being "The Birthplace of the United States Navy." The warships soon found themselves at the Battle of Valcour Island, an engagement that helped to forestall the British advance southwards in 1776.

The following year proved far different. The British army under General John Burgoyne far outnumbered the Americans garrisoning Fort Ticonderoga and Mount Independence. Faced with few options, the Americans retreated, the majority by land, the remainder by water.

Unfortunately, the British caught the American fleet and other vessels, as they were unloaded in the harbor. All the American boats were either destroyed or captured and the retreating Americans torched most of Skene's buildings, including his house.

During the rest of the war, Skenesborough served as part of no man's land, subject to English raiding parties. When peace came, Philip Skene relinquished control of his land and moved to England. Several years past before the townspeople changed the community's name to Whitehall. There exists no reason behind the name selection.

After the War of 1812 ended, Whitehall became the repository of the combined American and British fleets that had sailed on Lake Champlain. The aging vessels finally were anchored in the Poultney River where they rotted and sank to the bottom. In 1958 salvagers pulled the remains of the schooner Ticonderoga out of the water and the hull is presently displayed near the Skenesborough Museum.

Continued on back >



Painting by Linda Atwood Skene Manor - Whitehall, New York

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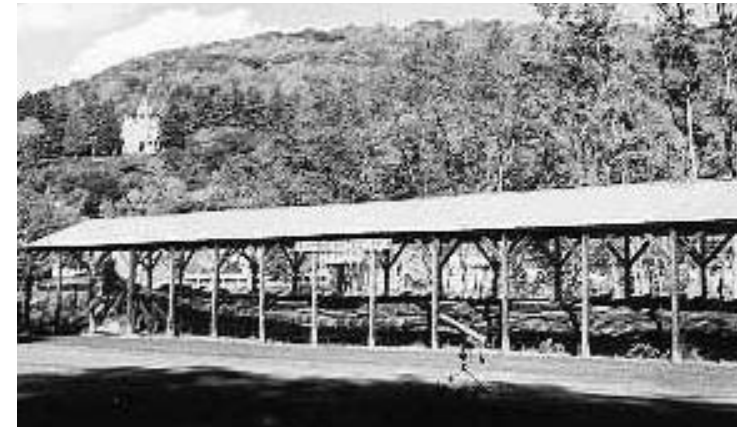
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continued from front >

Water has played a constant role in Whitehall's history. Vessels traveled along Wood Creek and the town was the southern terminus for lake traffic on Lake Champlain. Since 1790, men considered constructing a canal from Whitehall, over the height of land at Fort Ann and south to Troy on the Hudson River. In 1817, the idea became reality when the digging commenced. The first portion, Whitehall to Waterford, opened in 1819, and workers completed the remaining section, Waterford to Troy, in 1823. People celebrated the completion of the project with "every demonstration of joy and rejoicing from the shores." Now vessels could travel up Lake Champlain, through the Champlain Canal and down the Hudson to New York City. The canal transformed Whitehall.

The town grew as a commercial center. Shipyards, located along the lakeshore, constructed large numbers of canal boats. Steamboats towed boats up and down the lake with their cargoes. Buildings sprouted up along the canal to manage all the business. Boats carried lumber, iron ore and agricultural products southwards. On the return trip they were laden with manufactured goods destined for the lake shore communities. During the winter, canalboats tied up at Whitehall to stay until the ice went out in the spring. Whitehall boomed.



The Ticonderoga was raised in 1958 and now rests behind the Skenesborough Museum. Look closely- Skene Manor in top left of photo.



State Amory of the Co.1- 2nd Regiment, N.G.N.Y.-Whitehall, New York

Then, in combination with the canal traffic, the railroad appeared in town. First, the Rensselaer & Saratoga completed a rail line to Whitehall in 1851. Working in conjunction with the steamboat lines, the railroad made a 682-foot long tunnel to a point on the lake north of town. There, at Lake Station, trains met steamboats and transferred passengers. Another line, the Rutland & Whitehall soon headed east into Vermont. Rails had established ties to the south and east, but the path north along Lake Champlain lay undeveloped for many years.

Finally, construction started in the 1870s. Engines operated on tracks between Whitehall and Port Henry by 1874 and then traveled directly to Montreal one year later. The completed connection made Whitehall a rail center, featuring a rail yard, engine house and other train facilities. With all this commercial traffic through town, Whitehall offered the services of two hotels and an opera house. Transportation was not the only source of revenue. For over seventy-five years silk was manufactured in two plants located in the village.

During 1910-1911, the Champlain Canal underwent a major widening. Portions of the old canal that ran parallel to Main Street disappeared in the process or were filled in. The new, wider canal also acquired a new name, the Champlain Barge Canal, with the locks capable of holding larger commercial vessels.

During the widening procedure, a dredge made an interesting discovery just north of Lock #12. Pieces of old timbers and several cannons turned up in the muck raised from the bottom. It was determined these were the remnants of some of the American vessels destroyed during the American retreat on July 6, 1777. Two of the cannons are displayed in front of the National Guard armory while a third, along with pieces of salvaged timbers, are on exhibit in the Skenesborough Museum.

One impressive landmark overlooks the village from Skene Mountain. Now known as Skene Manor, the mansion was constructed for New York State Supreme Court Justice Joseph Potter as a private residence. Presently the native stone structure is managed by a local preservation group and is on the National Register of Historic Places.

Over the 20th Century technology caught up to Whitehall. Canalboat traffic declined and then ended. Pleasure boaters now use the Champlain Barge Canal. Trains of the Canadian Pacific replaced the engines of the Delaware & Hudson Railroad in 1991. But Whitehall remains proud of its multi-layered history. A cultural heritage park lines the shore of the canal and commemorates the town's heritage in time of war, transportation, commercialization and recreation.

A special thanks to James Lafayette for photos appearing on this Historical Page.  
Text edited by Don Wickman



Delaware and Hudson Railroad, Whitehall, New York

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