

This Week in Saratoga County History

The Leland House - 275 Years Young

Submitted by Sandy McBride June 5,2024

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The Leland House in Mechanicville

A historic marker along the Waterford Road denotes "Leland House: Raided by French and Indians in 1748, rebuilt in 1749, later the home of revolutionary patriot John Ten Broeck 1740-1822."

The beautiful house that stands a short distance from the marker is indeed the one that was rebuilt 275 years ago. It was built from lumber cut right there on the farm, with bricks made from clay obtained from the soil thereon.

But just what happened and why did it happen to the family that lived on that spot and farmed what has for many years been known as the Leland Farm back in 1748? It was a sad occurrence, but by no means an isolated incident back in the 18th century here in our area.

As settlement by countries of Western Europe grew in this so-called New World, the English and Dutch were predominant in the areas along the Atlantic Coast, but France controlled Canada to the north and the wilderness lands to the west of the English territories. Along with the English were colonists from the Netherlands, Scotland and Ireland. The French befriended

the native peoples, and worked with them to drive the encroaching settlers from their ancestral lands.

The first recorded claimants to the lands of the Mechanicville/Stillwater/Schaghticoke area were the Mohican Indians, ruled by Uncas, who claimed ownership of the entire upper Hudson Valley starting at a point near Cohoes. This was Uncas' very special hunting grounds, beginning near Waterford and running all the way to Schuylerville. It followed the river and the streams where the woods were thick and fish and game were abundant. While Uncas may not have actually lived right here, history does place him at Schaghticoke. But his warriors did come this way as did those of other tribes. All the Indian trails coming out of the St. Lawrence Valley crossed here for this was known as the dark and bloody neutral grounds that separated the Iroquois Confederacy of central New York from the territory of their ancient and hereditary enemies, the Algonquins of Canada. Throughout time, there were many savage encounters among these tribes.

Indians had planted, hunted and fished on these lands for centuries, leaving behind stone implements and arrowheads which chronicled over 1,000 years of their civilization. The first Dutch settlers came into the Upper Hudson River valley in 1714. The newcomers hewed out a half dozen log huts in a forestland near Waterford north of the river's confluence with the Mohawk and called it Half Moon. Within a year, 101 people had settled here.

Situated in a flat river valley, with a major north/south route passing by it, on a road that would be called the King's Highway, or eventually the Waterford to Whitehall Turnpike, what would become known in later years as the Leland House was part of that pioneer settlement.

Major Dirk Wessels (Ten Broeck) was commissioner of Indian affairs, a mayor of Albany and a trader and merchant. He owned a one-seventh share of the Saratoga Patent. From this patent, the Ten Broeck family had obtained 700 acres of land along the river. The substantial house was built on that property by 1732. Land was cleared and farmed by not just the family occupying the house, but by the black slaves they owned. At that time, the Albany Dutch community owned many slaves.

What is now Mechanicville sat smack on the edge of "the Paradise of Hunting Grounds" known as Sa-ra-gh-to-ga. The southern boundary of the hunting grounds was a creek that ran from Round Lake to the river and was known as Tien-en-da-ho. Eventually the Mohawks, the most powerful tribe of the Iroquois confederacy, drove out the Mohicans and took over this area.

Early settlers in Mechanicville in the area of Ensign Avenue unearthed evidence of a Mohawk village along the flatlands of the river. Another encampment was located near the powerhouse where fish were plentiful. It is also said that there was a village just south of the Leland farm.

What would become known as the French and Indian War, which would ultimately secure this part of North America as a British colony, would not begin until 1755, but raids, killings and burnings by the French and their Indian allies were commonplace throughout this area in the early to middle years of the 18th century as they attempted to drive out the encroaching trappers and settlers from Britain and the Netherlands.

So it was that in 1748, the family that was living in the house and farming the land then owned by the Ten Broecks alongside the Hudson River was attacked in the night by a band of Mohawk Indians and their French allies. The farmer, his wife and five children were killed and scalped. Also murdered in the raid were their five black slaves. The house was burned.

Since that fateful day, this historic house, which was rebuilt in 1749, and its accompanying farm have seen many changes. Originally belonging to the Ten Broecks, it was then occupied by Daniel Fort, sold to Scotsman John Strachan and then passed on through marriage or inheritance to the Lelands, the Leyerles and the Stevensons. The original Ten Broeck grant comprised 700 acres, but several hundred more acres were added by Strachan, so that the farm then occupied nearly two square miles of land. Occupants of the house that was rebuilt after the massacre, in its more than 272 years of existence, have included lawyers, government officials, educators, engineers, farmers, horticulturists and caregivers.

The land itself has over the years been much diminished as with its prime location on a major river and north/south highway, it has been given over by sale or by government claim for two railroads, two major power lines, two canals, a dam, lock and hydroelectric plant and the Saratoga County sewer plant along with a number of homes and several businesses. The house, once known as the mansion, was converted to apartments a half-century ago and several of the barns have been converted to houses.

But some things don't change. There were stories passed on for many years that the ghost of a headless Dutch woman frequently appeared in a well near the Leland House. Perhaps she was that farmer's wife, killed and scalped by a raiding party of French and Indians in 1748. So spooked were subsequent occupants of the home by her frequent visitations that they filled in the well. From some reports, however, that has not kept her away.