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THE CHATAUQUA-ERIE STORY

By

Donald H. Kent

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JOHN O. BOWMAN
MAYVILLE, NEW YORK

FOREWARD

The paper read by Donald H. Kent at the 1958 Annual Meeting of the Chautauqua County Historical Society is of unusual interest because it is written by a man who can be properly considered the expert, and the last word, on the early English and French History of North-western Pennsylvania and Western New York.

He was born in Erie in 1910, and, after being graduated from Allegheny College in 1931 spent a few years in teaching History in Erie High Schools and in Allegheny College.

In 1937 he became associated with the Pennsylvania Historical Commission and has spent his entire time with them since that date, at present being the Chief of research and Publication Division.

He has written or edited some thirty books, pamphlets and articles on the early history of this section.

He has examined Canadian and other archives, which may not have been available to our earlier historians, with the result that the following article corrects quite a few errors in what we formerly considered the early history of this section.

We feel he has performed a very distinct service in this connection and that we who are interested in the early history of this section are under real obligation to him.

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COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA
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THE CHAUTAUQUA-ERIE STORY

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Donald H. Kent

(A talk to the Chautauqua County Historical
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Chautauqua County, New York, and Erie County, Pennsylvania, may logically be considered a single region, so far as their early history is concerned, and they were equally important in the struggle of the French and the British for control of western Pennsylvania and the Ohio Valley. The Chautauqua-Erie region was the gateway between Lake Erie and the Allegheny Valley because of its two important carrying-places, the Chautauqua Portage to the head of Chautauqua Lake, and the Presque Isle Portage to the head of canoe navigation on Le Boeuf Creek. It was by these routes that the French entered the Allegheny Valley early in the eighteenth century, to make their bid for control of the Ohio River as an essential link in the empire of New France which stretched from Canada to Louisiana. By these routes came the French occupation forces which threatened the peace and future expansion of Pennsylvania and other British colonies. This caused a long and bloody conflict, the French and Indian War, which brought much hardship and suffering to the frontier settlements of Pennsylvania, and in which France lost not only the Ohio Valley but all her colonies in North America. Such is the importance of the Chautauqua-Erie region as the gateway by which the French almost won control of the great interior valley of America.

There is no reason why we should make any distinction or draw any dividing line in discussing the early history of the Chautauqua-Erie region, for no line existed in those days. This region is now divided by a State boundary, but no one knew where the western boundary of New York would be until it was surveyed in 1790. At that time many people thought that this boundary would be in the vicinity of the present city of Buffalo, New York. When Pennsylvania contracted to buy the Erie Triangle from the United States in 1788, well-informed people believed that Pennsylvania was getting the entire Chautauqua-Erie region. In January, 1789, Pennsylvania bought Indian claims to land in Chautauqua County as part of the Erie Triangle, and as part of the deal promised the Indians a reservation east of Chautauqua Lake and Conewango Creek as far as the western boundary of New York. That may sound wrong; it seems as if the directions had been confused; but it is right, nevertheless: The reservation was to be east of Chautauqua Lake as far as the western boundary of New York State, on the supposition that the State line would be near present Buffalo. It was not long before the mistake was discovered, when the boundary was surveyed in 1790 and it turned out to be where it is now. But Pennsylvania authorities originally expected that the Chautauqua region would be part of the triangle purchase. Our State government was fully aware of the Chautauqua route to Lake Erie, for a clause in the agreement with the Indians provided for free navigation of Conewango Creek and Chautauqua Lake.

As early as the 1720's French traders and agents began coming from Niagara to cross the Chautauqua Portage and descend Chautauqua Lake and its outlet to reach the Allegheny River, where they traded with the Indians and sought to influence them in favor of the French, a sort of peaceful infiltration. In 1724 the French agents helped persuade the Shawnees to move from eastern Pennsylvania to the Allegheny River. In 1731 Pennsylvania traders on the Ohio reported that a party of Frenchmen came down the river every year to trade with the Indians at Kittanning; they said they had a trading post near the head of the Ohio. This trading post was probably at Conewango, present Warren, or at Paille Coupée, present Irvine, at the mouth of Brokenstraw Creek, since those were locations of French trading posts at a later date, and since they were conveniently situated in relation to the Chautauqua route.

The only reference to the other route, the Presque Isle Portage, in this early period indicates that traders did not often use it. In 1732 a Seneca chief of Niagara told the French he was going to live there on the Presque Isle Portage because he could not overcome his desire for drink. Of course, the only way to stay away from rum in those days was to stay away from traders.

There were good reasons why the Chautauqua Portage should have been the first to be used by the French. It was the first portage reached in coming along Lake Erie from the Niagara River. It was much shorter than the Presque Isle Portage, about nine miles as compared with seventeen and a half miles. Still more important is the fact that it led by way of Chautauqua Lake and the Conewango to villages of the Senecas on the upper Allegheny, Senecas who were friendly to the French and especially attached to the Joncaire family. The Joncaires, father and sons, were the most important French agents among the western New York and western Pennsylvania Indians.

After the first peaceful infiltration and exploration of the Allegheny Valley came the first military expedition, the expedition of the Baron de Longueuil in 1739, which demonstrated the value of the Allegheny and Ohio rivers as a connecting link between Canada and Louisiana. This expedition of 442 men, Frenchmen and Indians, traveled from Montreal by way of the Chautauqua route to the Allegheny, the Ohio, and the Mississippi, to join other French forces from Louisiana in a campaign against the Chickasaw Indians. The first important result, so far as our region is concerned, was in the information which the French gained about the route and about the country. Chaussegros de Léry, the eighteen-year-old engineer of the Longueuil expedition, made observations for the first map of the Chautauqua-Erie region and the Ohio country. It is interesting to note that his map showed two portage routes from Lake Erie to Lake Chautauqua, one route somewhat to the east of the route more commonly used at a later date.

The Longueuil expedition was not aimed at the Ohio country, but it made the French more conscious of its importance. They became alarmed at the activities of Pennsylvania and Virginia

traders who had developed a prosperous trade with the Ohio Indians at Logstown, eighteen miles down the Ohio from present Pittsburgh; at Kittanning; at Venango, present Franklin; and even far to the west in the present State of Ohio. If nothing were done about the British traders, the French would lose the Ohio valley.

Therefore, in 1749 the French Governor de la Galissonnière sent out an expedition headed by Céloron de Blainville to renew the French claims to the Ohio Valley, to impress the Indians with the power of the French, and to drive the British traders away. This expedition also came by way of the Chautauqua route, and was the first to provide us with any descriptions of the country -- in the journals of Celoron and of Father Bonnecamps, the chaplain of the expedition. When they landed at the Lake Erie end of the portage on July 16, 1749, Céloron noted various disadvantages of the place if a permanent post were to be established here. The lake was so shallow toward the south shore that ships could not come near the land to unload; and there was no harbor where they could find shelter from storms. Moreover, the nearest Indian villages were on the Allegheny at the mouths of Conewango Creek and Brokenstraw Creek. Later, Céloron found that the portage was difficult because of "the numerous hills and mountains," but Father Bonnecamps said that the road was "passably good," and the woods reminded him of forests in France. When the expedition reached the outlet of Chautauqua Lake, they found the water so shallow that they had to make another portage, carrying their supplies by land for several miles to lighten their canoes enough to navigate that part of the stream. La Saussaye, a trader who had made earlier visits to the Ohio, had told Céloron about this portage.

Céloron laid claim to the Ohio country by burying lead plates at various points, for example, at the mouth of the Conewango, and at Indian God Rock, eight miles below Franklin on the Allegheny. At various villages where he stopped, he tried to persuade the Indians not to deal with British traders, and he tried to frighten British traders into leaving the Ohio country. The Indians listened to the French warnings respectfully, and gave polite answers, but Céloron knew very well that they would go on dealing with the British traders after he had gone, so long as British goods were cheaper and more abundant. Céloron's expedition descended the Ohio as far as the Miami River, where it turned northward, reaching Detroit early in October. Céloron himself realized that by itself his expedition would have no lasting results, for its effect was gone as soon as the French force departed. Even while he was journeying through the Ohio country, the outgoing Governor, La Galissonnière, told his successor, La Jonquière, that for permanent results it would be necessary to establish trading posts on the Ohio and Allegheny rivers, in order to undermine the influence of the British and prevent them from cutting the communication with Louisiana.

Presumably the early French trading ventures in the Ohio country had been ineffective, but now the French made greater efforts to capture the Indian trade of the valley. In 1750 Philippe Thomas de Joncaire was sent down the river to establish a trading post at Logstown, the great Indian trading center on the upper Ohio. In the next two years a number of French traders went to make use of these new facilities.

Among them were Niverville, Montisambert, Normand, Provenché, Lamarque, and La Saussaye, the trader who had shown Céloron the portage south of Chautauqua Lake. Most of these traders traveled by way of the Chautauqua route, but some may have gone by way of Presque Isle, since it was a trader who called attention to the Presque Isle Portage in 1753. After establishing the post at Logstown, Captain Joncaire returned to the upper Allegheny to the villages at the mouth of the Conewango and the Brokenstraw where his influence as an adopted Seneca could be most effective. The posts at Logstown and at Paille Coupée, or Brokenstraw, supplied by way of the Chautauqua Portage, were the beginning of the French move to occupy the Allegheny Valley; Captain Joncaire was the first French commander on the Belle Rivière, the name which the French gave to the Allegheny and Ohio rivers together, and their name for the country from the Chautauqua-Erie region to the mouth of the Ohio River.

The final step of sending a strong French force to the Ohio country to build and garrison forts which would control it was delayed until the Marquis Duquesne became Governor of Canada in 1752. When he planned to send out an army in 1753, to build forts and occupy the Ohio Valley, he originally intended to have it use the Chautauqua route just as previous expeditions had done. The advance party under the young officer, Charles Deschamps de Boishébert, was instructed to land at Chatakoin, the Lake Erie end of Chautauqua Portage, and make preparations for the coming of the main army by building storehouses, ovens, and the other structures of a camp, and by beginning to improve the portage road. Boishébert and his men left Montreal on the first of February, 1753, and after a long and arduous journey landed at Chatakoin about the middle of April. While they were on their way, Governor Duquesne changed his mind about the route of the expedition.

A trader who had made seven trips to the Ohio told the Governor about the difficulty of the Chautauqua Portage, and convinced him that the army would run great risks in unloading their boats on the Lake Erie shore at this point "when (to quote the Governor) wind and waves are beating high on a shore bordered with rocks, where there are reefs and no shelter." The trader made a map from memory, on which he showed a harbor thirteen leagues west of Chatakoin, "formed by a peninsula which makes a secure refuge in all sorts of weather." He told Duquesne that the portage from this harbor of Presque Isle was eight leagues in length, but the Governor thought that this disadvantage could be overcome by using horses. Therefore, he sent orders to Boishébert to land at Presque Isle and begin building a fort at a small elevation which the trader said could easily be recognized because it had been burned over.

Carrying out such a change in plans was easier said than done. Boishébert had already landed at Chatakoin before the new orders arrived from the Governor. In the meantime, the Governor changed his mind again, and decided that a landing at an unknown place like Presque Isle was too risky to entrust to a young and inexperienced officer.

He sent word that Boishébert should wait until Captain Marin, the commander-in-chief, arrived to lead the landing party. Again, the Governor's letter was too late; it was written on the third of May; and Boishébert and his men packed up and moved along the lake to Presque Isle about the first of May. However, the Governor was pleased when everything went well, and congratulated the young officer on the beginning of Fort Presque Isle.

This fort was well underway in June when Captain Marin arrived with a large contingent of the army of occupation. The Presque Isle Portage was cleared and improved from Fort Presque Isle to Le Boeuf Creek, and on the twelfth of July the French started to build Fort Le Bocuf on the present site of Waterford. Then their troubles began. The portage road proved unexpectedly difficult to travel because the wet, almost swampy land through which it passed became muddy after heavy usage in transporting supplies and equipment. The soldiers had to wade up to their knees in mud, and the horses rapidly became worn out by the hard going. Ultimately, the French had to "bridge" the road almost the whole way, which means that they laid logs across the road to make a corduroy road. Because of their hardships and their poor diet, sickness broke out among the soldiers, and even the commander, Captain Marin, died on October 29. As a final blow, dry weather made Le Boeuf Creek and French Creek too shallow to float the boats in which the French intended to descend to the Allegheny. As a result, the further advance of the army had to be postponed until the following year.

The shift to the Presque Isle route did not mean that the French stopped using the Chautauqua route. In fact, their troubles in 1753 showed the advantage of having two routes. They began to improve the Chautauqua Portage again in the fall of 1753, and early in the spring of 1754 the Governor sent a working party to continue this work. In the spring of 1754 when the French army moved down the Allegheny River to seize the Forks of the Ohio, it was divided into two detachments, one following the Chautauqua route, and the other the Presque Isle route. They joined forces at Venango where French Creek enters the Allegheny, and reached the Forks of the Ohio in the middle of April. There they forced a little half-finished Virginia fort to surrender, and proceeded to build Fort Duquesne.

The Chautauqua Portage became a scene of intense activity as thousands of barrels of salt pork, lard, flour, gunpowder, and other supplies were carried overland to Chautauqua Lake, and then loaded into boats for shipment to Fort Duquesne. Even the building of boats became a major industry; some were built near Chautauqua Lake itself, and some in what was called the "flat country" somewhere along Conewango Creek. In June and July, 1754, Péan, the second-in-command of the French army, with many officers and a large detachment of soldiers, was stationed on the Chautauqua Portage to look after this important assignment. Chaussegros de Léry, the engineer of the Longueuil expedition in 1739, was here again in the same capacity. He had the portage road measured with an 18-foot pole, to compare it with a similar survey of the Presque Isle Portage. From his comments it appears that the course of the Chautauqua Portage road was changed in 1754 from the course which it followed in 1753.

The French occupation of the Ohio country led to war between France and Great Britain, since the British claimed it, and since this country in the hands of the French would be an ever-present threat to the middle colonies. A British army under General Braddock went out to capture Fort Duquesne, and was defeated in 1755. Then the French forts in western Pennsylvania became the bases for raids by the Indians upon the frontier settlements of Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia. In November, 1758, another British army under General John Forbes drove the French from Fort Duquesne, but the French held their forts in northwestern Pennsylvania for another year, until Sir William Johnson captured Fort Niagara in July, 1759, and cut them off from supplies. Then the French burned the last of their forts and fled to Detroit.

Throughout this period the Chautauqua Portage had been in constant use for the movement of men and supplies. The cannon for Fort Duquesne were hauled over it in 1755. Later, Captain Joncaire brought over it a huge supply of Indian trade goods for his storehouse at Conewango; he used these goods in 1758 and 1759 to maintain the loyalty of the Indians in the face of French defeat.

A few years later, on October 1, 1761, Sir William Johnson stopped at Chautauqua Creek on his way back from a council with the Indians at Detroit. He called it "a fine harbor and encampment," but noted that "it is very dangerous from Presque Isle here, being a prodigiously steep, rocky bank all the way, except two or three creeks and small beaches, where a few boats may run into." On the basis of what his Indians told him, Johnson wrote: "Here the French had a baking-place, and here they had meetings, and assembled the Indians when first going to the Ohio, and bought this place of them."

This statement offers certain problems, not with regard to the baking-place, for the French certainly had ovens to bake bread for the troops, but with regard to meetings of the French with the Indians and the purchase of this place. Céloron in 1749 and De Léry in 1754 said that the nearest Indian villages were at Conewango and Brokenstraw on the Allegheny. In 1754 the Indians came from there to help carry goods over the portage. There is no record of any councils with the Indians at Chatakoïn, and if there had been, it is certain that the French never bought land from the Indians as the British did. But we can guess what the Indians really meant: This is the place where the French first came on their way to the Ohio country; this is where their conquest of the Belle Rivière really began.

The importance of the Chautauqua-Erie region as a gateway became apparent again in 1788 when Pennsylvania attempted to buy it in order to gain access to the Great Lakes. At the time of the American Revolution, Pennsylvania, New York, and other states had no well-defined boundaries to the west, and their claims overlapped in a bewildering way. Pennsylvania at least had something to go on in establishing its western line, since the Charter from King Charles II to William Penn said that the colony was to extend five degrees west from the Delaware River. Virginia claimed all the territory west of Pennsylvania. Massachusetts and Connecticut on the basis of their charters claimed strips of land as far as the Mississippi. Connecticut's claim took in northern Pennsylvania, and that caused no end of trouble which we need not discuss. Massachusetts claimed all of western New York beyond the settled area. New York's

western boundary had never been defined, but the British had always managed the Six Nations Indians through officials of New York, and therefore New Yorkers argued that all the lands claimed by the Six Nations were part of New York. Since the British had encouraged the Six Nations to claim as much as possible as an argument to use against French claims, New York's claim covered most of the territory west of Pennsylvania as far as the Mississippi, overlapping with claims of Virginia, Massachusetts, and Connecticut.

States such as New Jersey, Maryland, and Rhode Island which had no claim to western lands objected to these wide territorial extensions of more fortunate states, and argued that these lands should be for the benefit of all the states, since they were making common cause in the Revolution. In September, 1780, Congress urged all the states having western lands "to make a liberal surrender of a portion of them" for the common good. New York was the first to comply with this recommendation. In 1781 New York ceded to the United States all her rights to land west of a line drawn due south from the western end of Lake Ontario. If, when this line was drawn, it was found that it would not be twenty miles west of "the most Westerly Bent or Inclination" of the Niagara River, then the line was to be moved accordingly.

The maps and geographical information of that time were most inaccurate, and the New York government could not be sure where this western line would come. However, they wanted to be certain that the State would have the Niagara River and access to Lake Erie. Why they should not have defined the line simply in terms of the Niagara River line, it is difficult to say. Probably they were just gambling, making sure of the line they really wanted, and hoping they would get more. A few years later, Massachusetts ceded its claims to the United States in the same terms, after reaching an agreement with New York about the land there.

At this time, and until the boundary was surveyed in 1790, it was generally believed that the western boundary of New York would be near the mouth of Buffalo Creek. When the United States made the Treaty of Fort Stanwix with the Six Nations on October 22, 1784, the United States commissioners obtained a cession from the Indians of their claims to land west of a line running south from the mouth of Buffalo Creek to the northern boundary of Pennsylvania and west of the western boundary of Pennsylvania. Since the commissioners were not authorized to negotiate for land within any state, this shows that they thought the western boundary of New York was at the Buffalo Creek line. As Timothy Pickering explained this matter ten years later, the line was drawn "so far eastward as the Mouth of Buffaloe Creek with the single view of covering with certainty the cession made by the states of New York and Massachusetts to the United States."

In 1786 and 1787 the western and northern boundaries of Pennsylvania were surveyed as far as Lake Erie, and Pennsylvanians were disappointed to learn that the State had only a few miles of lake shore and no harbor on the lake. They felt that the future development and settlement of northwestern Pennsylvania depended on the possession of the gateway region. A port on Lake Erie would link the State with

the Great Lakes, opening up trade with the Indians of that region, and offering a prospect of a still more profitable future as settlement proceeded. Men who had explored the country and knew its value began to urge that the State should acquire the triangle of United States territory north of Pennsylvania and west of New York. They argued that since this triangle was separated from the rest of the United States territory, it would not be administered with it.

No one knew just how large this triangle would be, but Andrew Porter, one of the Pennsylvania boundary commissioners, wrote President Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania that the western boundary of New York would probably fall a few miles east of the Conewango. William Armstrong, one of the Pennsylvania surveyors, reported that Captain William Morris, a New York boundary commissioner, told him the line of cession from New York to the United States would strike the Pennsylvania line at or near the 190th milestone on the New York-Pennsylvania boundary -- which would be about halfway between the Conewango and the Allegheny River at the point's where the State line crosses them.

As a result of this urging by prominent citizens, Pennsylvania made an offer to buy the triangle from the United States at a price of 75 cents an acre, and the offer was accepted. The contract was signed on June 6, 1788, and on September 4 Congress resolved "that the United States do relinquish and transfer to Pennsylvania all their right, title, and claim to the government and jurisdiction of said land forever." Pennsylvania was not to pay for the Triangle until it had been surveyed to determine its boundaries and the number of acres which it contained.

Immediately after the cession of jurisdiction, Pennsylvania arranged to purchase Indian claims to the region. Two Pennsylvania commissioners were sent to the council which the United States held with the Indians at Fort Harmar from December, 1788, to January, 1789. The Pennsylvania commissioners bargained with the Cornplanter and other Six Nations Indians present at this council for the Triangle lands, and finally negotiated a deed and agreement which was signed on January 9, 1789. In these documents the Indian chiefs acknowledged Pennsylvania's jurisdiction and ownership of the Triangle, but they reserved for themselves and their people the country lying between the western boundary of New York, and a line running along the middle of Conewango Creek and Chautauqua Lake and north to Lake Erie. This reservation was to be east of Chautauqua Lake, it should be remembered. At this time when it was supposed that New York's western boundary was east of Chautauqua Lake, and that the Chautauqua region would be part of the Triangle, the Indians obtained from Pennsylvania a reservation which would return to them part of the lands they had given up to the United States at Fort Stanwix in 1784. The chiefs promised not to sell any of the reservation to any other state or person, and signed a deed of conveyance to Pennsylvania. An interesting feature of the agreement was a promise not to interfere with navigation on Conewango Creek and Chautauqua Lake.

But Pennsylvania's expectations that the Triangle would include the entire Chautauqua-Erie region were soon disappointed. In 1789 and 1790

Andrew Ellicott finally surveyed the western boundary of New York, after considerable delay and difficulty in getting permission from the British to make the necessary observations of the westernmost bend of the Niagara River and the western end of Lake Ontario. He found that the maps were most inaccurate. As he put it, "I find the Geography of the Country about the Lakes very erroneous, too much so to be even a tolerable guide." Ellicott's surveys showed the earlier errors in geography. Even a line twenty miles west from the westernmost bend of the Niagara River took in most of Chautauqua County, while a line due south from the western end of Lake Ontario was even farther west. Therefore, the Erie Triangle dwindled to its present size, the hoped-for Indian reservation vanished, and the Chautauqua-Erie region was henceforth divided by a State line. Pennsylvania kept only the Presque Isle route to Lake Erie and the harbor of Presque Isle Bay. She lost the alternate Chautauqua route which had been equally important in the story of western Pennsylvania up to that time. One consolation was that Pennsylvania had only 202,187 acres to pay for, instead of almost a million. Perhaps it was just as well, considering Pennsylvania's other financial commitments at that time, but it would certainly have been a good investment for Pennsylvania if Chautauqua County had come with the present Erie Triangle.

There are many other interesting episodes in the early history of the Chautauqua-Erie region which have been passed over for lack of time. Many details could have been added for the events which have been discussed. But enough has been said to cover the main points that the Chautauqua-Erie region was a single region in the early days, that it was of great importance in the eighteenth century as a gateway through which the French occupied the Ohio Valley and western Pennsylvania, and that it was not divided by a State line until 1790 when Pennsylvania was disappointed in her expectation that the Erie Triangle would include Chautauqua County.