

# WERE THERE EARLIER FRENCH SETTLERS IN CLINTON COUNTY?

## PART 1

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This year we will celebrate the four hundredth anniversary of Samuel de Champlain's discovery of the lake which bears his name.

Our history should be corrected to reflect the most up to date knowledge particularly as it applies to our early French heritage. Over time many items have become available to the modern historian that had not been available to earlier writers.

My article in the January 23-29, 2008 issue of the *Lake Champlain Weekly* took a new look at the record to find which European built the first permanent residential structure in our present Clinton County.

The order determined was:

1766: William Gilliland, Town of Plattsburgh; occupied by  
William Hay and Henry Cross.

1768: Jean LaFramboise, Town of Chazy.

1770: Charles De Fredenburg, City of Plattsburgh.

1772: William Hay, Town of Peru.

Since the article there have been three letters to the editor questioning what was presented; two from Thomas Pray, and one from David Kendall Martin.

This series will subject their sources to the same scrutiny used in the first article, and will examine some other early records.

Mr. Pray's letter of February 6, 2008 wrote about possible earlier French settlers in the Chazy River area between 1734 and 1759, and used three sources, Kalm, Coolidge and Bellico to substantiate this claim. If true, these settlers would predate my earlier findings.

The first and most important source when examining the issue is Peter Palmer's 1853 *History of Lake Champlain 1609-1814*, the "Bible" for later historians.

The first question is who owned the land between 1734 and 1759?  
Palmer wrote:

*The first of these grants was made to Sieur Pean,...on the 10<sup>th</sup> day of April, 1733, and embraced a tract ...along the River Chambly and Lake Champlain, together with the River Chazy... These grants were issued subject to forfeiture in case the lands were not settled and improved within a certain time. This*

*condition not having been fulfilled, all...were re-united to the King's domain...May, 1741. The grantees gave various reasons why their lands had not been settled within the prescribed time. Pean could find no farmers to place upon his seigniority...They however, declared that patents would be re-issued to any who should place settlers on the land within one year from that time. This was not done; but soon after settlements were formed near the mouth of the Big Chazy River...*

However, Coolidge wrote, in *The French Occupation of the Champlain Valley from 1609 to 1759*, that the Pean land was being used, and settled, fulfilling the requirements of the French King.

Coolidge is confusing at best and appears to say: Pean first got the land in 1733; lost it in 1741; got it back in 1744; but had really lost it in 1741; and then it went to a man named Bedout in 1752.

Palmer does not mention the 1744 return of the land to Pean, and it is not in Coolidge's list of all the concessions made to Pean. Is it really in the record? Perhaps the lands had reverted to the Crown in 1741 as stated by Palmer.

Coolidge also wrote: Bedout, the owner in 1752, must have developed the property; houses were built there before 1744, perhaps under the Pean regime before 1741; and, the settlers did not

desert their homes permanently if Bedout remained proprietor. How he arrived at that convoluted conclusion is not apparent, unless he relied on Palmer's interpretation of Kalm.

Bellico's 1999 *Chronicles of Lake Champlain: Journeys in War and Peace* added nothing to Palmer or Coolidge, but repeated their assertion that houses were seen by Kalm near the mouth of the Chazy River.

The whole idea, then, of early houses at the Chazy River is based not on land ownership but entirely on Palmer's interpretation of Kalm's 1749 trip down Lake Champlain from Fort St. Frederic at Crown Point to Fort St. John at the present site of St. Jean, Quebec.

Palmer quotes Kalm:

*The first houses I saw after leaving Fort St. Frederic were some on the western side of the lake, about ten French miles from St. Johns, in which the French lived before the last war and which they then abandoned....A Windmill, built of stone, stands on the east side of the lake, on a projecting piece of ground...From this mill to Fort St. Johns they reckon eight French miles.*

Kalm's writing is the first instance where these houses appear in the historic record. Did Peter Kalm see houses near the mouth of the Chazy River as Palmer claimed?

Kalm was a Swedish scientist making an exploratory trip from Albany to Canada to look for plants that could be transplanted back to Sweden. He kept a written record then later turned it into his book *Travels into North America*.

What was his writing style? He would describe an event, a plant, an animal, or an Indian custom in minute detail often for a page or two without starting a new paragraph. When he did start a new one it indicated he had moved on to another event, plant, or animal. In other words the paragraphs were not directly connected to each other either by object, time or distance.

On his trip down the lake Kalm traveled on board a vessel captained by a Frenchman who had built the vessel; sounded the lake to find the best and safest way to travel between the two forts; made the trip many times; was intimately familiar with lake sites and the distances traveled.

Heading north Kalm noted that upon leaving Crown Point houses ended within a mile; discussed the mountains to the west and east; and then remarked on passing the Four Brothers Islands. After that

he did not mention any landmarks until the houses near Fort St. John, the old fort and stone windmill, all in separate paragraphs. He was not an interested observer of physical sites but was an observer of plants, animals and native inhabitants.

For those not familiar with the area, the Little Chazy River runs through the hamlet of Chazy before entering the lake and is almost directly west from Fort St. Anne, the present St. Anne's Shrine, Isle La Motte, Vermont. Two miles further north is the Chazy River. It runs through Champlain before entering the lake. Windmill Point, Vermont is north another three miles, on the eastern shore. Two miles north is the US border. Thus, the Chazy River is about five miles south of the border.

Kalm wrote about seeing the houses within ten French miles of Fort St. John. It is about 22 miles from the border north to St. John. A French mile is a little longer than our English mile. If he was heading north and within ten French miles of the Fort he was about 12 of our present miles south of Fort St. John and 10 miles north of the border. Kalm described houses well north of the border and 15 miles north of the Chazy River.

But wait a minute. Pray wrote that:

*If there is any doubt as to the exact location of this settlement his very next line clears up any mystery.* He quoted Kalm:

*There formerly was a wooden fort, or redoubt, on the eastern side of the lake.... A wind-mill, built of stone, stands on the east side of the lake on a projecting piece of ground. Pray continued: This is now known as Windmill Point in Alburg, Vermont. Thus, he [Kalm] describes that the settlement was south of Windmill Point and Fort St. Anne at the North end of Isle LaMotte and on the Western side. We cannot ignore this piece of evidence for settlement.*

Perhaps Thomas Pray is correct and the evidence is clear for settlement by the French near the mouth of the Chazy River. It could seem logical if all three paragraphs, houses, fort and windmill, were connected but they were not.

In order to accept his contention, we would have to:

- Ignore that the Pean land grant had reverted to the Crown in 1741 for lack of required settlement;
- Ignore that Pean could find no farmers to settle on his land;
- Agree that Pean got the land back in 1744 and settled it;
- Agree that Kalm was wrong in the distances given between Fort St. John and the sighting of the houses;
- Agree that Kalm was wrong in the distance given in another later paragraph between Fort St. John and the sighting of the windmill;

- Agree that the three separate paragraphs describing the houses, the old fort and the windmill are indeed all connected in spite of this not being the way Kalm wrote; and,
- Agree that Kalm did not mention the Chazy River, but that he meant to.

These questions should bring into serious doubt Palmer's description of early settlement at the Chazy River. If Palmer was wrong then all later historians have based their findings on a false premise.

Historic accuracy would seem to indicate the houses seen by Kalm in 1749 were most likely well north of the border and were not provably in Clinton County, and would refute the claim by Palmer and any later historians of early French settlers at or near the mouth of the Chazy River prior to LaFramboise in 1768.

In the next issue we will look at a potential new source discovered by Mr. Pray.