

How Fort Plain Became Fort Rensselaer

By Norman J. Bollen

On Aug 2, 1780 Joseph Brant raided the Minden section of the Canajoharie District in Tryon County, NY. Colonel Abraham Wemple of the Tryon Militia was escorting a supply column up the Mohawk to Fort Schuyler when he happened upon the raid in progress. The Colonel formed his men for a fight and pursued Brant as far as Fort Plank, located several miles south of the Mohawk River. That evening the Colonel wrote a report from Fort Plank describing the actions of the day. On Aug 3rd he returned to his supply column on the Mohawk to resume his march to Fort Schuyler. General Robert Van Rensselaer, who had been at Fort Schuyler at the time of the raid, returned to Canajoharie and established a new headquarters to deal with the aftermath of the raid and take steps to protect the middle Mohawk Valley.

The following year infighting between General Van Rensselaer and some of the Tryon Militia officers caused a severe rift resulting in a court-martial proceeding against the general. Blame for the handling of the valley defenses the previous summer was being placed squarely on Van Rensselaer by local residents. Militia commanders and rank & file alike refused to recognize the General's name of Fort Rensselaer and called it Fort Plain instead. After a decision was made to abandon Fort Schuyler and pull back to a more defensible location Marinus Willett arrived at Fort Plain and determined to make it his headquarters in the Mohawk Valley. Willett's inspired leadership would rally participation in his new corps of Levis and deliver victories for the American cause on the Mohawk. Willett too would make improvements to Fort Plain recognizing it as a strategic position worth the effort.

As 1781 passed into late fall Continental forces returned from their victory at Yorktown and took up defensive positions again in the Mohawk Valley. Again infighting, this time between Continental Army Lt Col George Reid and NYS Levi Col Marinus Willett, would begin to interfere with operations on the Mohawk Frontier.

The chart below presents evidence explaining how a small insignificant fortification built as a refuge for local inhabitants became an important military center and supply depot for the Continental Army during the final years of the Revolutionary War. Even with the wars end in April of 1783 Fort Rensselaer would continue its mission as a vital link to the western frontier. The fort would serve under our first two US Presidents until 1800 and fulfill its role along side West Point and Fort Stanwix as one of America's first military installations. Years of confusion because of arguments, personnel changes, mapping errors and simple obstinacy have denied Fort Plain/Fort Rensselaer its proper place in history. This assembled evidence will begin to set the record straight as to the origins of Fort Plain – Fort Rensselaer.

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Date	Fort Plain	Source	Date	Fort Rensselaer	Source
Aug 3, 1780	A receipt for Abraham Wemple's purchase of a sheep from Johannes Wohlgemuth Junior with place heading of " Fort Plain " ¹	Comptroller's Records in the NYS Archives			
			Aug 7, 1780	Rev. J. Daniel Gros signed a receipt for a barrel of flour provided by Lawrence Gros and another by Deobald Dygert "for the temporary relief of the poor distressed families of Canajoharry District ..." subscribed at " Fort Rensselaer ". ²	NYS Archives, Legislative Papers, Box 11, mss #2128. (per Wayne Lenig)
			Sept 9, 1780	<p>Excerpt from the REMEMBRANCER <i>New-York Sept. 9 The following account may be depended on: - At the fort now called fort Ransalaer, Sir John Johnson and Captain Brant have burnt</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>51 houses 42 barns 17 killed 52 prisoners³</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>At Schoharie (burnt) 27 houses 7 killed 21 prisoners</i></p> <p><i>At Norman's Creek (burnt) 20 houses Total of the rebel loss at the above three places. Houses and barns burnt 140; killed 24; prisoners 73.</i></p>	From the Remembrancer Or Impartial Repository of Public Events For the Year 1780
			Sept 11, 1780	From General Van Rensselaer, First Troop return from Fort Rensselaer . Harper's info incomplete ⁴	Clinton Papers Vol VI, Pg 212

Date	Fort Plain	Source	Date	Fort Rensselaer	Source
			Sept 14, 1780	From James Moore ADC to Samuel Van Nette Receipt dated: <i>"Fort Rensselaer September 14, 1780 1,544 lbs of fresh beef and 77 lbs of fresh pork for the use of the garrison at Fort Rensselaer."</i> It was sent to Anthony Van Veghten, Assistant State Agent at Conajohary. ⁵	The document is catalogued under Misc Manuscripts: James Moore at NY Historical Society, Central Park West, NY
			Sept 25, 1780	<i>Fort Ranselaer Sept 25, 1780</i> <i>"I am adding something to the expense of this little fort -- it the only thing that Keeps the inhabitants dry & there must be something to cover a few troops in Winter and to hold their provisions -- a few boards which we impress & nails is all the charge"</i> ⁶	Col William Malcom's Military Correspondenc e written at Fort Rensselaer
March 12, 1781	Court-martial of General Van Rensselaer begins. John Harper's testimony uses the phrase " Fort Plane or Rensselaer". William Harper uses the same phrase both in an apparent effort to embarrass the General ⁷	Clinton Papers	March 12, 1781	Court-martial of General Van Rensselaer begins. John Harper's testimony uses the phrase "Fort Plane or Rensselaer ". William Harper uses the same phrase both in an apparent effort to embarrass the General	Clinton Papers
March 22, 1781	"We do hereby, In pursuance of an act entitled an act to amend an act, entitled an act to accommodate the inhabitants of the frontier, with habitations and other purposes therein mentioned, passed the 22d of March, 1781 - Grant unto William Seeber, Peter Adams, George Garlock and Henry Smith, license and liberty to cut and remove wood or timber from the lands of John Laile (or Lail), George Kraus, John Fatterle, John Plaikert, Wellem (William) Fenck, George Ekar, John Walrath and Henry Walrath, lying contiguous to Fort Plain, being a place of defense, for fuel, fencing and timber for the use of the first above mentioned persons.	The Story of Old Fort Plain by Nelson Greene & The Frontiersmen of New York by Jeptha Simms		This instrument was originally drawn up in on March 22, 1781 and later modified in Nov of 1782. It is in the handwriting of Squire Nellis and was taken to Col. Willett to sign. In the handwriting of the latter and with the ink of his signature, Willett crossed off the word "Plain" and interlined the name "Rensselaer." Also See Nov 8, 1782 below	

Date	Fort Plain	Source	Date	Fort Rensselaer	Source
	"Given under our hands at Canajoharie, this 8th day of November, 1782. Christian Nellis, M. Willett, Commissioners." ⁸				
June 6, 1781	Hugh Hughes, NYS Quartermaster writes to Col Timothy Pickering, Quartermaster General; " <i>It seems to be the intention at present of occupying another small post about 20 miles below Fort Herkimer, called Fort Plane or Ranseler</i> "	Miscellaneous Revolutionary War Manuscripts, #25761, NARA		Hugh Hughes, NYS Quartermaster writes to Col Timothy Pickering, Quartermaster General; " <i>It seems to be the intention at present of occupying another small post about 20 miles below Fort Herkimer, called Fort Plane or Ranseler</i> "	Miscellaneous Revolutionary War Manuscripts, #25761, NARA
June 15, 1781	Gen James Clinton writes to Washington from Albany " <i>Col Willett with such of the Levies as are not otherwise disposed of will be stationed at Steen Rapia and Fort Plane about half way between Caughnawaga and the German Flatts.</i> "	Washington Papers			
			July 6, 1781	Col Marinus Willett writes to Washington that he has set his quarters at Fort Renselaer on account of its central position. ⁹	Washington Papers
			July 6, 1781	Jean Louis de Villefranche arrives @ Ft Ranceler to design new blockhouse. Only 2 stories completed when he leaves in October	Washington Papers
Sept 7, 1781	Fort Plain "By information from Fort Herkimer the enemy are down in force. I am collecting the Militia and shall pursue them as soon as possible. You will inform Genl. Stark of this as soon as possible" ¹⁰	The Public Papers of George Clinton, 7:327	Sept 7, 1781	Fort Rensselaer "By accounts this moment received the enemy appear to be in Considerable force at the German flats I wish you to March your regiment this way with as much expedition as possible & as much Provision as they can furnish themselves with - without being detained "	Willett's Letter Book NYS Museum

Date	Fort Plain	Source	Date	Fort Rensselaer	Source
			May 3, 1782	General Schuyler signs supply contract to establish Ft Rensselaer as supply depot for the Western Frontier. He mentions the need to finish a blockhouse begun the previous season ¹¹	Washington Papers
May 27, 1782	Col Tupper of 10 th Mass says there is an unfinished blockhouse at Fort Plain ¹²	Washington Papers			
May 29, 1782	Gen Washington writes to Col Tupper " <i>It is equally out of my ability to furnish you any money for the completion of the Block House at Fort Plain</i> " ¹³	Washington Papers			
June 8, 1782	Col Reid to collect his troops @ Fort Plaine the most central point on Mohawk River ¹⁴	Washington Papers			
June 23, 1782	Col Reid writes "The commanding officer at Fort Plain informs me that the Magazine there must inevitably destroy all their ammunition unless it is immediately repaired" ¹⁵	Washington Papers			
June 24, 1782	Washington visits Albany, Saratoga and Schenectady to inspect Posts. At last stop he meets with Col Frederick Fisher of the 3rd Tryon Militia. ¹⁶	Washington Papers & Simms	June 27- 30	Washington can't come up Mohawk because of enemy @ Ft Herkimer. He had returned to HQ on July 2 nd . ¹⁷	Washington Papers
July 2, 1782	Washington issues orders to put Fort Plain in a state of readiness	Washington Papers			
July 2, 1782	Reid writes to Gen Washington asking that all troops be collected at Fort Plain or Ransler to improve discipline	Washington Papers		Reid writes to Gen Washington asking that all troops be collected at Fort Plain or Ransler to improve discipline	
Aug 3, 1782	Col Reid writes to Washington " <i>Col' Willett is gone to Fort Ranseler or Plain</i> "	Washington Papers	Aug 3, 1782	Col Reid writes to Washington " <i>Col' Willett is gone to Fort Ranseler or Plain</i> "	Washington Papers

Date	Fort Plain	Source	Date	Fort Rensselaer	Source
				<p>Walrath and Henry Walrath, lying contiguous to Fort Plain, being a place of defense, for fuel, fencing and timber for the use of the first above mentioned persons. "Given under our hands at Canajoharie, this 8th day of November, 1782. Christian Nellis, M. Willett, Commissioners." ²⁰</p>	
			Feb 24, 1783	<p><i>"This fort is situated on a height about half a mile from the river, which affords a beautiful prospect of the country around, and shows you at one view, as far as the eye will carry, fine fields like those of Bottle Hill"</i>²¹</p>	Lt. Alexander Thompson's Letter from Lossing
			Aug 1783	<p>Martha Washington logs the Generals travel expenses from his upstate NY visit. She enters the names of Adam Liep for horsekeeping and W. Wormout for room, food & horse hire.²²</p>	Washington Papers
			May 27, 1783	<p>Col Willett employed a carpenter to erect the building [of] a block House and other works at Fort Rensselaer, and promised him a dollar and a half a day. He was employed 156 days and last Thursday brought me Col Willett's certificate of his service amounting to 234 dollars. But the wages being high, and finding him willing to have them reduced to what he agreed was usually allowed in that part of the Country by private people, viz one dollar per day, I chose to make him immediate payment. He was obliged. and 78 dollars were saved to the public.</p>	From Timothy Pickering, Quartermaster Genl To Robert Morris, Finance Department Papers of Robert Morris 1781-84 May 5 – Dec 31, 1783 Vol 8

Date	Fort Plain	Source	Date	Fort Rensselaer	Source
			Aug 22, 1786	Bill from John Lipe Senior for timber, wood & possession of land for Fort Rensselear Blockhouse 150 pounds ²³	FP Museum Collection
March 31, 1796	Rent receipt for Johannes Liep \$34.15 for a lot of ground for a blockhouse @ Fort Plain for military stores 3-11-1789 to 1-1-1796 from the Sec of War, William Simmons ²⁴	Papers of the War Department			
Oct 1887	Rufus Grider visits & confirms the location of Walradt's Ferry directly opposite Fort Plain. Documentation includes a watercolor of Walradt's Tavern and of the Ferry Site looking across the river at the Fort Plain hilltop ²⁵	NYS Museum Archives & Fort Plain Museum			

Some Revelations and Conclusions

1. Circumstantial evidence suggests that Washington did not know that Fort Plain and Fort Rensselaer were the same place. On April 14, 1782 Schuyler was asked by Washington to handle the supply contract situation for the arriving 2nd New Hampshire Regiment. The contract specifically mentions the need to finish the Fort Rensselaer Blockhouse and magazines yet Washington told Tupper there was no money to finish the FP Blockhouse. When Reid wrote about utilizing FP and the much needed repair work to be done Washington finally boarded a boat for Albany "*to visit the Posts in that Vicinity*" and see for himself what was going on. He met with Schuyler, Willett and presumably Reid in Albany. Also Willett accompanied Washington on his ride to Saratoga. At Schenectady he immediately asked to see Col Fisher of the 3rd Tryon Militia who was recovering from war wounds in that city. Washington wanted to go up the valley but was prevented by enemy activity at Ft. Herkimer, which was recently surrounded by 500 Indians. According to Simms Washington spoke at length with Fisher and made him his guest at dinner. Two weeks later Fisher was serving in the NYS Assembly. After Washington's visit to Albany all the confusion seems to go away. Simms also mentions that during Washington's visit to Fort Rensselaer he dined with Col Samuel Clyde of the 1st Tryon Regiment of Canajoharie again suggesting that "mending fences" with the Tryon Militia's officers was a priority for the Commander-in-Chief.
2. On Sept 21, 1782 General Stirling sends a list of all 26 Mohawk Valley Posts to General Washington. Note that while Fort

Plank and Fort Rensselaer are on the list, Fort Plain is not.

3. On Oct 22, 1782 General Stirling issues his General Orders about naming posts, specifically citing Fort Rensselaer as an example. On Nov 8, 1782 Willett follows orders by changing the name on an official document from Fort Plain to Fort Rensselaer.

Other Fort Rensselaer Information

1. On August 8, 1780 Rev. J. Daniel Gros signed a receipt for three schipples of flour provided by Lawrence Gros "for the temporary relief of the poor distressed families of Canajoharry District ..." and to George Garlock for 61 lbs of flour and Frantz Doughty for another 83 lbs." subscribed at "**Fort Rensselaer**". New York State Archives, Legislative Papers, Box 11, mss #2128.
2. September 17, 1780 Assistant Deputy Quarter Master Henry Glen writes to Col William Malcom with advise on supplies and trustworthy individuals in Tryon County. He lists "Col. Cloyd in Ft. Plank" and "Revd. Gross in **Ft. Rensselaer**". Glen-Yates Papers, New York State Historical Association Library, Cooperstown, N.Y.
3. September 28, 1780 - An order for Colonel Henry Frey to deliver 12 bushels of grain to John Moyer for the use of Col. Malcom's brigade. Subscribed at "**Fort Ranchler**". New-York Historical Society Library, "Miscellaneous manuscripts: Fort Rensselaer".
4. October 3, 1780 - Colonel W. Malcom to Gov. G. Clinton notes that Malcom marched from "**Fort Renslaer**" on Sept. 27 with Col. Harper's Regiment under command of Major Hughes to Fort Stanwix. Malcom returned to "**Fort Renslaer**" on October 3 as the letter is headed at that location. New-York Historical Society Library, "Miscellaneous Manuscripts: William Malcom"
5. The Pennsylvania *Gazette* dated October 11, 1780 contains the following note of interest: "An account from the northward says Colonel Malcom on the 25th ultimo was at **Fort Rensselaer** on his way to Fort Schuyler with a relief for the present garrison." Effner, William B., *Warfare in the Mohawk Valley*, Schenectady, 1948, p. 3.
6. October 13, 1780 - "Return of the 1st Regiment of New York Levies Commanded by Colonel William Malcom" lists Capt Cantine, Capt Livingston, 3 Lts, 1 adjutant, QM, Sgt Major, Q.M. Sgt, Fife Major, 10 sgt., 4 drum & fife, 122 rank and file fit

for duty and 3 sick at "**Fort Rensselaer**". Senate House Manuscripts, folder 2751, doc. 3648, Senate House New York State Historic Site, Kingston, N.Y.

7. October 14, 1780 - Inhabitants of Schenectady to Gov. G. Clinton - Col. Wemple has orders from Gen Ten Broeck to send 70 Schenectady militiamen to "**Fort Rensselaer**". Letter quoted in Greg, Arthur, *Old Hellebergh*, 1936, 19-20; also *Clinton Papers*, 6, 333-334.
8. October 15, 1780 - George Herkimer to Colonel Dubois at "**Fort Renselaer**" [captured document]. *Haldimand Collection*, 1888, 875 (B. 182, 285).
9. October 16, 1780 - H. Glen to Colonel Gordon. Report of firing heard at "**Fort Renselaer**" [captured document]. *Haldimand Collection*, 1888, 875 (B.182, 283).
10. October 18, 1780 - Brigade Major Jacob Boeker to Colonel J. Brown - "Col Daboy" orders Colonel Brown to march for the Mohawk River from his station at Stone Arabia at daybreak. Headed "**Fort Renselear**" [captured document]. Haldimand Collection, 1888, 652 (B.158, 168).
11. November 6, 1780 - "Crossed the river at Mr. Walradt's to **Fort Plains** ... Took quarters at Mr. George Crouses." John Barr Diary, this is the part that was not published in Lauber. A transcription was available in 2009 at http://www.rootsweb.com/sunygreen2/john-barr_1780.htm

Endnotes

¹ This appears to be the first mention of Fort Plain on an official document and predates any mention of Fort Rensselaer (per Ken Johnson)

² This is the earliest mention of Ft. Rensselaer to date. It may very well be that Van Rensselaer marched immediately from Ft Schuyler to Ft Plain upon hearing of the Aug 2nd Canajoharie raid and began establishing his HQ there at that time

³ Excerpt from Pg 339, *The REMEMBRANCER or IMPARTIAL REPOSITORY of PUBLIC EVENTS For the Year 1780, PART II, LONDON: Printed for J. ALMON, Opposite Burlington-House, Picadilly. 1780.* University of California Library (the report is mistaken in regard to Johnson's presence, proving that it was not only the Americans who sometimes got things confused!). Special thanks to Wayne Lenig for taking the time and effort to locate this invaluable research

⁴ This is General Van Rensselaer's first troop return from Fort Rensselaer and signals the beginning of the fort under that name. Note that Harper is not cooperating and has not turned in the information for his regimental return

⁵ This order for supplies from Fort Plank moves food to Fort Rensselaer to feed the newly arrived troops there. The large quantity of provisions may also indicate that Fort Plain was getting little use prior to Van Rensselaer's arrival

⁶ Malcom writes of improvements being made to the fort (Fort Ranselaer) only weeks after their arrival.

⁷ Both of the Harpers seemed to have made it a point of using the “Fort Plane or Rensselaer” phrase in their testimony. Others who testified only referred to the fort as “Fort Rensselaer”

⁸ This instrument was drawn up in the handwriting of Squire Nellis and taken to Col. Willett to sign. In the handwriting of the latter and with the ink of his signature, Willett crossed off the word "Plain" and interlined the name "Rensselaer." Since Willett did not arrive at the fort until well after April the name modification must have been done in November

⁹ Col Marinus Willett was put in charge of his own corp of NYS Levis, full time state troops who would take the place of Continental Troops on the Mohawk frontier. The mention of the Fort Rensselaer’s “central position” is also found in Col Tupper and Col Reid’s letters the following year when they were writing about Fort Plain

¹⁰ This note found in the Clinton Papers uses the heading “Fort Plain”. The nearly identical note with the “Fort Rensselaer” was found in the Willett Papers at the NYS Museum Library (per Ken Johnson)

¹¹ Schuyler develops this contract to solve the supply problems that were keeping troops from going out the previous year. It had the approval of General Washington and Financier, Robert Morris both.

¹² Col Tupper write that he intends to collect the whole of the 2nd New Hampshire Regiment at Fort Plain “in order to act offensively if occasion require”

¹³ General Washington writes back to Tupper refusing all requests including money for FP Blockhouse. Tupper is relieved a week later by Col George Reid

¹⁴ Col Reid is fairly new in this command and Washington seems to be keeping a close eye on him

¹⁵ Col Reid also reports to Washington of receiving intelligence of an impending attack on the Mohawk Valley. Washington leaves the next day for an inspection tour of the northern and western posts.

¹⁶ In the “Frontiersmen of New York” by Jephtha Simms, the author states that upon his arrival in Schenectady Washington immediately sent for Fisher. Some serious fence mending must have taken place since Fisher became Washington’s guest of honor at dinner and Fisher turns up in the NYS Assembly 2 weeks later.

¹⁷ It seems clear that Washington was unaware of the Van Rensselaer controversy and had no idea what or where Fort Plain was. After Washington’s visit to Albany in late June 1782 orders are immediately given to repair Fort Plain. All of Reid’s letters after the meeting use both names when referencing the fort.

¹⁸ General Stirling is ordered to Albany to take command of the area and put the Mohawk Valley situation in order. As the danger of a final invasion passes Stirling begins to close and consolidate posts

¹⁹ Stirling travels to the western frontier on an inspection tour in Oct. An early snowstorm strands him at Fort Rensselaer for three days. The order about the outpost names is issued the day he returns to Albany. It seems Stirling did not want to have to explain to Washington yet another name change for Ft Plain

²⁰ This instrument was drawn up in the handwriting of Squire Nellis and taken to Col. Willett to sign. In the handwriting of the latter and with the ink of his signature, Willett crossed off the word "Plain" and interlined the name "Rensselaer."

²¹ Excerpt of letter written at Ft Rensselaer by Major A. Thompson to his brother in New Jersey after returning from the Oswego Expedition

²² Adam Lipe was an officer and owned part of the property on which the fort stood. Johannes Lipe, his brother owned the other part.

²³ This bill apparently wasn’t paid but that doesn’t mean it wasn’t authentic. In 1786 the states were struggling with war debt and would not have wanted to pay the bill on a Federal installation, which was still in operation.

²⁴ This bill for Fort Plain was paid by the Federal Government. In 1789 the new Constitution was implemented and George Washington was elected President. By 1796 Washington was leaving office and John Adams was about begin a new Administration.

²⁵ Numerous accounts refer to Walradt’s Ferry being directly opposite to the fort. Grider visited the Tavern in 1887 and documented the location. He even drew a charcoal sketch of the ferry site and his vision of the fort across the river on the hilltop above.