

**Elsa Gilbertson, Regional Historic Site Administrator for the Vermont Division for Historic Preservation [includes Chimney Point State Historic Site]
Interviewed by Mountain Lake PBS on October 11, 2011**

“This has always been since the beginning of human habitation an important crossing. Originally, this was thought to be the start of what would be called Lake Champlain, and it’s the important narrows where people from either side could get across. The lake was an important north-south corridor for transportation, but sometimes people had to go east and west, too, and as we know further up the lake it’s quite wide, and here it’s very narrow. So, it would be easier, slightly less dangerous to cross here, either in a canoe, or on the ice in the winter. Since the humans started coming here over 9,000 years ago, this has always been an important transportation corridor.

The [Abenaki] called Lake Champlain “The Lake Between,” and so there were people on one side of the lake, and people on the other, and they came together to trade, exchange goods, exchange tools, and through the archeology that’s been done here over the many years, including for the ferry and bridge project, it became even more clear that this was really an important place to gather, exchange information, and exchange goods and ideas.

Every layer of human habitation

This place, Chimney Point, has seen every layer of human habitation on the lake, much more so than any other place on the lake, so since the time the glacial waters receded. In 1609 of course, Samuel de Champlain came at least this far on the lake, and then that introduced a whole new era of European, and Native American interactions, and this was an important place for them to interact. And in the archeology that was done for the ferry project right behind me, one of the most interesting finds that they made was a contact period site. In Vermont and elsewhere contact period is kind of anonymous; it was people of the natives, and then Europeans that gathered together, but because here we know the names of quite a few of the Europeans who were here. So, when you know the name of someone, then you kind of also know who their friends were, and so it’s a bit more personal.

This site that they found had worked stone tools, and there was a little bit of glass that had been worked, and so maybe we know the name of the European who owned that bottle, and who maybe gave it to a Native American, or traded it, or dropped it, and then Native Americans used it to make a tool, and then there was a bit of a pipe. So, it’s all very kind of personal and intimate right here that you know that they’re interacting with each other, and you can almost put your finger on who it might have been at the time, which is very exciting. And then in 1731, when the French decided to make a stand here and keep the British out of the lake, they built a fort right where we’re standing. There are in the Canadian National Archives records of the inventories of the supplies that were sent from the King’s store in Montreal down here to build the fort, and then also to supply it for the soldiers, and one of the first items on the list were a number of sewing needles. The soldiers didn’t need that many sewing needles. So it’s clear that they had brought that many to either give away or trade with

the native peoples, and that they relied on each other for information, and goods. It must have been very interesting times to be here, and to meet new people, and try to understand them, and get along, or not get along, maybe, as the case may be, but they were all certainly, the Europeans, dependent in many ways on the Native Americans, There is also even some evidence in one of the building relating sites here that after the French didn't need it any longer, it must have been a ruin, and then the Native Americans later built some kind of a fire next to it. So, all these layers just keep going back and forth, back and forth. And so it makes it very exciting to study, and learn about.

Early Europeans

Well, actually, the English were the first of the Europeans to try to make some kind of a stand here at Chimney Point, and they sent a Dutchman up from Albany to watch the French on the lake. This is such a strategic spot. It juts out into the lake, and especially when the old bridge came down, as beautiful as it was, it was sort of nice for a while to be able to see those incredible views, and you can see why everybody wanted to be here, because they could look across to what's now the New York site – side – and then they could also look way up the lake from here. So the British then, through this Dutchman, were here for a little while in 1690.

Then in 1731 the French made a stand here, because they wanted to keep the British, who were in Albany, from getting into the lake, and by just having a few soldiers here they could keep their enemy completely out of the lake. If they let them into the lake, then it would take a whole army, and a navy to try to get them out again, and within a few years the French decided that they would build a bigger fort over at the other side, and then King Louis XV, he was really trying to encourage domestic settlement here, too, because when you have civilians in amongst the military it makes it a little more challenging for your enemy to attack you, because the lines are sort of fuzzy about your military fortifications. So, then there got to be – well, the domestic settlement didn't work so well to begin with, but in the 1740s they tried again, and so then there got to be many more civilians living in the area, and they went back and forth to the fort over on the other side – Fort St. Frédéric – a lot, because in first few years the king had made allowances for them to get supplies from the fort. They could have bread, and a certain amount of lard, and they also got plows, and seeds, and the like, so it was very active to go back and forth, here, on the lake. And so, that was a matter of necessity for life to be able to go back and forth.

Lake vessels

There would have been many different kinds of boats that you would see going up and down the lake. The Native Americans, of course, had the, say, birch bark canoes, and dugouts, and they would travel up and down, and across, and then the Native – I mean the French, they had – they liked the canoes, too, and also built these bateaux, which were a little bit larger to go back and forth, and over time they got more sailing vessels, so during the French and Indian War there would be larger ships here on the lake, and this was a challenge, too, and then the American Revolution, there were ships built on the lake by the Americans that would have

gone right past here, and the British had to assemble their boats on one side of the falls up in Canada, and then they would disassemble them and bring them over the falls, and into the lake, and have to rebuild them again. And so, those big vessels would be seen coming up and down the lake. And then over time there got to be ferries that went back and forth. Of course, between the French settlements, and then later with the American settlements, and then the – when Vermont after it had become a republic, there was – the first ferry was chartered here in 1785, although there were some before, and then early in the 1830s, there was a horse-powered ferry, thought to be the first one on Lake Champlain, and it had a great name, “The Experiment.” We have actually here in our collection a sign from the old Fort Henry Ferry that has a sailing ferry, and there’s a couple of horses in it as passengers, and then there got to be the steamships, and some of those early steamships would be coming up and down the lake here. When General Lafayette visited Vermont, he went by here in a steamship on his way south, and then there were steam ferries that went back and forth from here to Port Henry.

So, the G.R. Sherman was the last big ferry that went back and forth here, and it was developed to carry horse and wagons, or oxen and wagons, I guess, and the advertisements tell what the price is for how many teams you had, and the like. But it lasted long enough to see the invention of the automobile, so in the end it was carrying wheeled traffic – automobiles – so, that’s pretty exciting to show how adaptable it was, and that this just continued to be an important crossing.

After the American Revolution

In the summer of 1776, when the Americans were fleeing Canada, they stopped at Crown Point to regroup, and figure out what they wanted to do as they were heading further south, and the soldiers who had smallpox were sent over to Chimney Point on this, the Vermont side of the lake, and there was communication back and forth, but they were far enough away to then be slightly isolated from the soldiers who were more healthy, And the next summer – July of 1777 – when British General John Burgoyne was trying to take over Mount Independence, and Fort Ticonderoga, he and his British soldiers camped on the Crown Point side, and the German officers, or the Germans all camped on the Chimney Point side, and this was a place that they could confer with each other before they then headed down the lake further, the British in their ships, and then the Germans on foot.

Well, after the Revolution was over, and it was safe to live here again, an enterprising man by the name of Payne built a tavern up on the bluff at Chimney Point. It was the perfect spot to have such a place, because it was at the narrows, here, and there were a lot of settlers flooding into the area, either coming across Vermont on the old Crown Point Road, or coming up the waterway system, and this was a perfect spot for them to get together, and gather, have a roof over their heads for a night, and then from here they could proceed, either across the lake, or keep going further up the lake, or into Vermont. And this stayed a very important place for a long time with ferry crossings over from Chimney Point to Crown Point, and then another was added that went to Port Henry, and then the steamships, and other vessels

stopped here. There were storehouses, and so this was a place that people could bring their goods, or purchase goods, and so it was a very active place, and there was a post office here, too, which was another vital center, and then of course the tavern.

So, this stayed a very vibrant place for a long time, and then when the Lake Champlain Bridge was finished then in some ways it was sort of bypassed, but it was still important, because this is where you launched off to go to points West, and it was a very freeing thing to be able to travel wherever you wanted, and however you wanted at any time day or night. So, even though some of the commercial activity disappeared, still this was the gateway to Vermont, and then also led to the gateway to the Adirondacks, and the whole rest of the country.

A strong, steady presence

When the bridge was first opened in 1929, it was advertised as having no delays, and a great way to visit the historic places in the region, The Bridge Commission put out a brochure, or more than one brochure that advertised that, and families would come to this area to see the bridge, and they would have picnics here with the bridge in the background, and then they might visit inside the historic tavern here at Chimney Point, or else go over to see the ruins at Crown Point.

So, especially for this area being such a big engineering structure, it was a wonder in its own right, and then it gave people easy access with the automobile travel to see all the great things that there are in Vermont, and northern New England, as well as New York, and points west.

In the beginning the toll for the bridge, which was necessary in order to provide for its upkeep, I think, must have made people have to stop and think, because it was enough that you didn't want to do it every day. So, it had to be a certain income bracket that could use it. And then it was very important for industry, and commerce, people trying to do business, and transporting goods, back and forth, because there wasn't any good railroad link across the lake, as there had been previously, and then over time it evolved, and especially after the toll was eliminated, that really freed it up for people to go back and forth on a regular basis, and it really opened up the local economy, because people were free to live in one state, and work in the other, and they had more social and family interactions, and there was like – you were opened up to whole new groups of people that you could interact with, and socialize with, so – and then you could do business, yourself, in a larger area. So, it really became something from a national type transportation corridor to something that was really also very important, locally.

When the bridge was first built it was just an amazing phenomenon. There had been a couple of earlier bridges, one in 1777 between Mount Independence and Fort Ticonderoga, very short-lived, and then there was a railroad bridge in the later 1800s, further down the lake, but this was an amazingly big structure, and so to begin with then, it would have been seen as this very big manmade object. The engineers tried very hard to make sure that it fit beautifully

into the landscape, and over time it just became one with the landscape. Everybody just loved its beautiful arches, and how at various angles it just seemed to be part of the rolling mountains, and there were some days – oh, they even made sure it was painted an appropriate color, so it didn't stand out too much, but blended in with the landscape. Some days it would just be one with the landscape. The sky and the lake, and the bridge would kind of all be the same color, and it would just be at one, and it was ethereally beautiful. Sometimes you just – you just gasped when you saw it, as you were coming around a corner. So, it over time just grew on everybody; it was always there, and was a strong, steady presence, and it just, as I said, became one with the mountains, and the landscape.

From busy crossing to a dead end

Well, at first maybe when I was coming to work I sort of took it [the bridge] for granted, because I knew it was historic, and had been here for a long time. When we parked in our parking lot, and got out again, we were practically backing up into the approach for the bridge, so it was just a very close part of life, and then all your views from the front of the museum on the porch, and through the doorways, and the windows, everything was framed by the bridge, and its trusses, and where you could look through some of the open work. It just shaped everything you thought about the region, and how you looked at how this was strategic or not, and then the day that the e-mail came through that said the bridge was going to be close in an hour, it was just shocking. It was – we had always been on the busy thoroughfare. For 9,000 years there was a busy crossing here, and then all of a sudden it was like the end of the world. We were a dead end, and it just seemed so strange that after that 9,000-years or more of busyness that it should be a dead end, and the people who lived around here understood right away the importance of keeping this corridor open,

That they understood that the corridor had to be opened up again, because what was happening on either end of it, and into the communities was shaped by this crossing, and it would have been really wrenching, and difficult if – if all of a sudden that changed, and this vital corridor was closed again. And when the bridge was demolished, and everything taken away, it was amazing to see what kind of views really were here, and you felt privileged that you had this small opportunity to see what it was like for all the people who'd been here before then, and why it was so strategic. And then when the new bridge started to be built, again, then you were happy for the future, and that the corridor would be open again.

Monumental credit

Well, the historic resource people in both Vermont and New York worked very hard to make sure that the old bridge had every opportunity to be saved, and then – but when the engineering reports came through that especially the piers were in such bad shape it became clear that the old bridge had done a magnificent job serving for so many years, but that something had to happen, and it just – that's what happens sometimes, but every – it was given every opportunity to see if it could be preserved because much good work has been done with the preservation of historic bridges. But then, everybody had the opportunity to

weigh in, and work very fast, and quickly to make sure that the new bridge fit in with it's very, very historic surroundings. So, it's pretty exciting to see how people really came together in a hurry, because they understood the crisis situation, and it's a monumental credit to everybody involved, and it took everybody, all – all the local people, all the people in government, anybody who voted on the design, or went to a public meeting. It's just a great credit to everybody that this could happen, and so smoothly, and that we can have a bridge again, in such a short amount of time.

New bridge design

Oh, the new design is really exciting. The – everybody, I guess, was kind of afraid it was just going to be some very boring thing that got thrown up in a hurry, but the great credit should be given to the New York Department of Transportation for hiring such a great firm to design the bridge, and then it was very exciting that the public had such a chance to weigh in on the design, and with all the meetings, and that everybody kind of got electrified behind this new – the modified design, that is the one that ended up being built here. It's just amazing that there could be so much public input, and then get something that is so attractive, and fits in so beautifully, and it's clearly different than the old bridge, but it does have references to it, and so it's going to be important in its own right over time.

The new bridge does have new engineering technology, just like the old one did in its time, and it was designed, as I understand it, so that it could easily be repaired, and it's very strong, and was built to fit in into this very difficult landscape with so many historic resources all around it, and because it has interest with new technology, and new engineering, over time it probably will become just as important as the old bridge was.”