

VERMONT'S NORTHERN BORDER

The current border originated with the Treaty of Paris in **1783**, which ended the war between Great Britain and the separating colonies which would form the United States. The 45th parallel was established as the border between Lower Canada (Quebec) and New York State (including what is now Vermont). The St. Lawrence River and the Great Lakes became the boundary between Upper Canada and the United States.

The Jay Treaty of **1794** created the International Boundary Commission, which was charged with surveying and mapping the boundary. Westward expansion of both British North America and the United States saw the boundary extended west along the 49th parallel from the Northwest Angle at Lake of the Woods to the Rocky Mountains under the Convention of 1818. This convention extinguished British claims south of that latitude to the Red River Valley, which was part of Rupert's Land. The treaty also extinguished U.S. claims to land north of that line in the watershed of the Missouri River, which was part of the Louisiana Purchase; this amounted to three small areas, consisting of the northern part of the drainages of the Milk River (today in southern Alberta and southwestern Saskatchewan), the Poplar River (Saskatchewan), and Big Muddy Creek (Saskatchewan).

Disputes over the interpretation of the border treaties, and mistakes in surveying it, required additional negotiations resulting in the Webster–Ashburton Treaty of **1842**. The treaty resolved the dispute known as the Aroostook War over the boundary between Maine on the one hand, and New Brunswick and the Province of Canada the other. The treaty redefined the border between New Hampshire, Vermont and New York on the one hand, and the Province of Canada on the other, resolving the Indian Stream dispute and the Fort Blunder dilemma at the outlet to Lake Champlain. The boundary along the 45th parallel had been surveyed after the War of 1812. The US Government began to construct fortifications just south of the border at Rouses Point on Lake Champlain. After a significant portion of the construction was completed, measurements revealed that at that point, the actual 45th parallel was three-quarters of a mile south of the surveyed line; the fort, which became known as "Fort Blunder," was in Canada. This created a dilemma for the United States that was not resolved until a provision of the treaty left the border on the meandering line as surveyed.

Fort Blunder

In 1916, two years following the end of the war, Colonel Joseph Totten of the U.S. Engineers established his headquarters in Rouses Point, New York. The relationship between the United States and Great Britain/Canada remained uneasy after the signing of the Treaty of Ghent in 1814. Because of a remaining suspicion between the two nations, Totten gave Malcomb McMartin, James MacIntyre, and John Stewart a construction contract to begin securing the groundwork of Fort Montgomery on an island called Island Point. It was proposed that three million bricks would be used in the construction of this octagon shaped structure, and was estimated to cost approximately \$200,000. While the men were busy at work, New York State was in the process of giving Island Point to the United States government for military use.

Much to their surprise, construction of the fortress had already begun two years prior to their arrival, marking the first big "oops" of this development. Not only was there confusion in the building plans, but also Totten had carelessly constructed the foundation of the fort. Stumps, hemlock logs, timbers, rails, and boards were taken from the old battleground at Plattsburgh, and dumped aimlessly into the quicksand that covered the ground at Island Point. Soldiers, who were stationed at Plattsburgh, were sent to Rouses Point in June 1818 to help work on the fort. Many were so opposed to the hard construction work, that they quit without notice. In August, they were ordered to return and assist in building the military turnpike, and countrymen were hired to replace the soldiers at the fort.

In the midst of the hopeful renovation, the United States and Great Britain decided it was necessary that the boundary between the United States and Canada be more accurately determined. Surveyors were hired to locate the 45th degree of north latitude, long acknowledged as being the northern limit of the State of New York. In January of 1819 the surveyors announced that the fort was being built about three-fourths of a mile north of the 45th parallel and within the territory of Lower Canada. Work on the fort was immediately stopped, the contractors sued for work already completed, and local residents took the stone, brick, copper and iron for their own private purposes. This second oops influenced the adoption of the nickname, "Fort Blunder".

From 1819 to 1844, Fort Blunder remained untouched while the local laborers used the bricks and stone from the fort to build other town structures. The Thomas Brisbin house at Odelltown was constructed from stone intended for the fort, as was the old stone schoolhouse and the Methodist Church on Champlain Street in Rouses Point. Also, many of the houses that remain in Rouses Point still stand on foundations constructed with stone from Fort Blunder.

As the residents of the area continued to seize materials, the fort continued to deteriorate. In 1842, because an agreement over the boundary line had still not been reached, the Webster-Ashburton Treaty was signed. The treaty settled land disputes and announced that Island Point was, in fact, within the boundaries of the United States. Construction of the fort launched once again in 1844 under the supervision of Captain Brewerton of the Engineering Corps. Due to the years of destruction by the locals, Brewerton had to start almost entirely from scratch.

Still, problems arose two years later when major contributors to the construction, Lieutenant Mason and his men, had to suspend operations long enough to take care of some business on the Mexican border. When Mason returned he was replaced by Captain Meigs, under whom the plans were again revised and enlarged. Everybody contributed his own ideas until it was finally finished in 1870.

When completed, the fort covered three and a half acres, had 60-foot walls and space enough for 164 guns, but it has never been armed. As several decades, it was obvious that Fort Blunder would never be put to use. In the 1920s, this \$600,000 investment was sold at a public auction together with 140 acres of land, for only \$45,000. Oops.

There was talk of converting Fort Blunder into a military museum or a lakeshore resort for the vacation season, but these plans never took off. Although there is a natural pathway leading to the Fort in the dry season, trespassing is now prohibited. Maloy reminisces, "We used to take the path and play hide-and-seek in there. It was highlight of my childhood until neglect finally starting impacting the structure of the Fort. My brother's friend fell into a well and was killed, immigrants from Canada hid in there, and people started using it as a place to abuse alcohol and drugs."

This stone palace that once possessed so much potential and held so many memories has now become a dark and gloomy place that is barely standing. At most, it has amounted to a historical curiosity, a disappointment, or childhood playground. It still rests on the North side of the New York-Vermont Bridge, struggling to maintain its beauty, as discouraging as it always was.