



The Backbone

A publication of the Backbone Ridge History Group of Schuyler, Seneca, and Tompkins Counties

B E C A U S E H I S T O R Y M A T T E R S

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WALKING THE LINE

BY ROB LICHT FROM ROB'S BLOG AT ROBLICHT.COM

This past October, on a beautiful Saturday morning, I joined folks from The Backbone Ridge History Group on a walk following one of the original boundary lines from the Military Lots. This was an exciting opportunity for me as it ties into my own *Boundaries Project*, where I am exploring original lot lines from the division of the land as a means to compensate soldiers for their service in the Revolutionary War. Although I am exploring areas on state land near Dryden, I have deep roots in the Backbone Ridge area of Hector, having grown up nearby. Even though the federal lands are now collectively called Finger Lakes National Forest, locals tend to refer to it simply as *Hector* from when it was Hector Land Use Area. The mixed forests and grazing pastures at the apex of the gently curving arc of land between the two longest Finger Lakes is a patchwork quilt of squared parcels, a result of the government program of buying out ailing farmers during the great depression. There is a general agreement that the thin hilltop soils were fairly depleted and that, along with changes in modes of transportation, made it hard to compete with Midwestern farms. Some farmers decided to stick it out and many of their successors work those same lands today, thus the checkerboard of public and private land. Much of the forest is second growth, replanted by the forest service, who also removed much, but not all, of the evidence of the former farms. Because of this, there are more trees now than there were during the late nineteenth century when deforestation reached its peak.

Hector was my romping grounds as a kid, so I was excited to learn that the Backbone Ridge group shared my interest in the historic division of land into neat parcels. That division set into play the ensuing development of the land and helped establish the framework for the growing nation. My artwork explores how place helps define who we are; my feeling is that as much as the early settlers tried to alter the landscape to suit their needs, the landscape they discovered altered them and fed them in ways that they could not initially fathom. It certainly has had its effect on me.

Exploring these early boundaries, most of which are embedded in contemporary roads, hedgerows, and property lines, makes me think about what it was like for those early settlers to arrive at terra incognita and then to be faced with the heavy burden of improving the land by clearing timber, creating fields, houses, roads and mills. A step off any trail into the dense mixed hardwood forest gives one a sense of the overwhelming task. Initially, the forest must have seemed infinite; the incredible views we now enjoy from the open grazing land would not be apparent to them for years. The terrain was fairly gentle and accessible and punctuated by small streams that could provide waterpower. But as one left the ridge, these same streams must have proven to be obstacles as they funneled into steep east-west running gorges

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BY ALLAN BUDDLE

My purpose for this message is to let you know how much I have enjoyed learning about and, with the assistance of many, sharing the history of the Backbone Ridge over the past ten years. We all owe Dr. LouAnn Wurst a huge thank you for her interest and that of her Grad Students for 12 years of excavations and historical research of the farmsteads. My dedication to the history of the Backbone Ridge Community of the past reflects the importance to me of documenting and preserving rural life as I experienced it growing up on several small dairy farms where my Dad and Grandfather both farmed with horses and my Mom and Grandmother were equal partners in all of it. My Grandmother taught in a one-room school and both of my parents were educated in one-room schools.

Since I have been diagnosed with ALS, for which there is no cure, and I am experiencing many of the symptoms, I can no longer continue to serve in a leadership position. I will continue working on projects as long as I can.

Thank you for your support for programs and projects related to Backbone Ridge history. Continuation of that support will be much appreciated along with sharing of your stories related to the Backbone Ridge. Until a mechanism is created for sharing of stories or any other input or questions, please e-mail my daughter, Beth Bevars, at bevarsm3@hotmail.com.

WALKING THE LINE
BY ROB LICHT
(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1)

obstructing north-south travel. The upland soils today are thin and clayey, one wonders if that was always the case or if it is the result of overworking the land. The flat-bottomed valleys of glacial moraine would have been the most productive land then, as it is now. Granted a chunk of land through a lottery system, soldiers (or more likely, their heirs or subsequent speculators) likely had no idea of what they were getting into; new arrivals on the ridge must have cast a jealous eye towards those lowland parcels. After a century of farming, the thin hilltop soils became so depleted that the government stepped in and bought back much of the land, establishing the federal and state land preserves that we enjoy today.

If one traces the lineage of the families that ended up on the Ridge in the early 1800's many of them still have family farms in the area and their names can be found on local road signs. Growing up here, it was understood that these are the hard working families that are the base of region's agrarian economy. As hard as the work is today, I can only imagine what clearing the land with oxen and ax was like two hundred years ago. While our European counterparts were sipping tea and enjoying luxuries, early Americans were working their hands bare eking out a rudimentary existence in the woods. Yet this was part of Jefferson's vision: A nation of independent yeoman farmers, self-sufficient, self-governing, and hard-working, but free from an oppressive government standing over them.

My walk with the Hector Ridge Backbone group was a planned outing to recreate the effort it took to survey just a small portion of the thousands of miles of boundary lines that were accurately surveyed under the leadership of Simeon De Witt at the beginning of the nineteenth century. We walked north along the Interloken Trail from Teeter Pond and then explored the northwest section of Military Lot 92, measuring a line south from Townsend road to a west-flowing stream and site of an old saw-mill listed as belonging to J.G. Skinner on a map from 1850. Along the way we encountered old cellar holes and foundations associated with the settlement. To measure the line we used an antique *chain*, which is both a unit of measure equal to 66 feet and the actual device used to measure it. It has 100 steel links, elegant brass handles at the ends and brass counters at set distances. The logic of the length has to do with the units of measure we inherited from the British. One acre is 10 square chains; 640 acres equals a square mile. One rod is a quarter of a chain, and was a common width for a road, such as in "One Rod Road". Although it is not as simple as the metric system, there is some mathematical logic to it all. Since the roads bounding those early lots tend to form a mile

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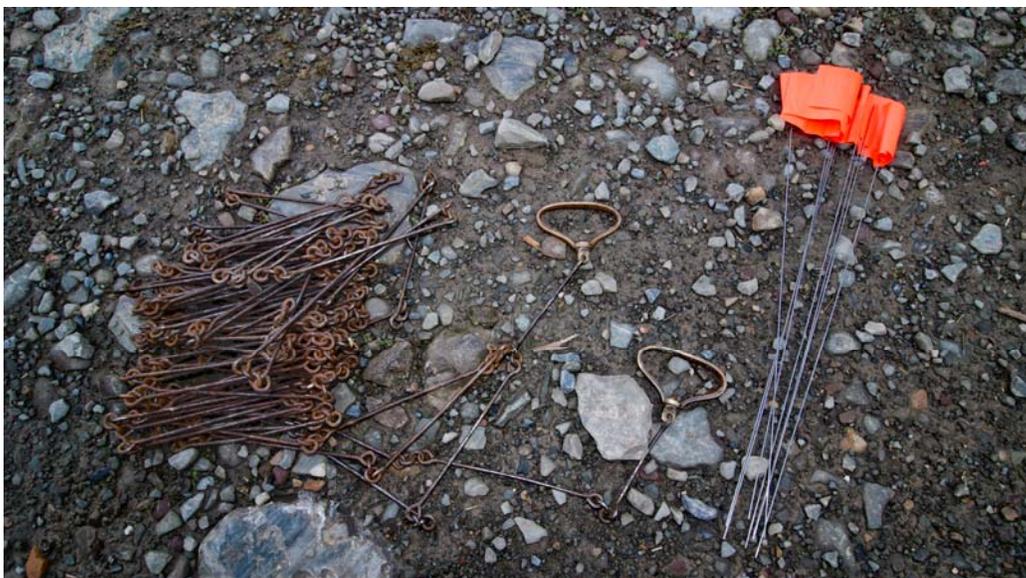
BY SALLY WRIGHT TILLINGHAST

About ten years ago I sat in the basement of the Searsburg Church with Edie Foster as she recalled the memories that connected her to this building. The Searsburg Church was instituted in 1817. Originally services were held off site in log buildings. The church building was believed to have been built on its current site sometime around 1829-1839. In April of 1959, after a valiant effort with over 50 men answering the call from Trumansburg, Mecklenburg and Enfield fire departments, the Searsburg Church burned. The Searsburg Grange Hall served as the congregations meeting place every Sunday until the church was rebuilt and back to Sunday sermons within nine months. The current pews originally came from a Church in Valois while Bob Usher of Steamburg was working there. The pews along with some bibles, hymn books and other pieces of furniture were in the Searsburg Church and survived the fire when the church burned in 1959. After 1988 in what Edie described as “the leaner years” the pipes were drained and the building was shut down during the winter months in order for the church to be able to deal with the costly heating bills. Even then, the power of the congregation prevailed and church services were held every Sunday at various church members’ homes. During that time services might be at the Fosters, the Rathbuns, and John Moore Family, or at Martha Stilwell’s home.

As we finished up talking, I think Edie saved her best story for last. Before the fire, the first wedding to be held in the old church was the matrimony of Ed and Edie Foster on June 29, 1944. There was no electricity in the building at that time. The old chandelier hanging in the stairwell was kerosene lit. Saida Burr played the piano for Ed and Edie’s wedding ceremony. In 1944, Clarence Robinson lived in the house next to the church. As the kindly neighbor he was always known to be, Clarence offered to run an extension cord from his house over to the church and placed it through an open window in the sanctuary. He supplied a lamp to set on top of the piano so Saida could see to play music for the ceremony as it was getting dark outside. Edie smiled with the delight of a blushing new bride as she told me the story of this wonderful memory of her wedding day.

Now that’s what I call, “*The original wedding planner-Way to go Clarence!*”

WALKING THE LINE
BY ROB LICHT
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Antique Chain and Links generously loaned for our program by Bruce Brittain, Forest Home Historian.

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WALKING THE LINE

BY ROB LICHT

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square grid, and the Military lots were 600 acres, it isn't clear what happened to the remaining 40 acres. Furthermore, A square mile, or 600 acres, can't be evenly squared, thus the familiar rectangular parcels. Lots were divided into smaller parcels according to the soldier's ranks, with a quarter of a quarter lot being the minimum standard of 40 acres that is still colloquially referred to (although that has more to do antebellum era in the South). The geometry of it all is pretty perplexing; it is amazing that the maps we use today still use those early lines as a base.



Having explored the concept of land division in my work for the past several years, it was really exciting to be using one those original devices. Albeit, we weren't running through the brush, tugging on the brass hand-holds as I image the early surveyors did but, rather, given the antique nature of the chain, we gingerly carried it aloft of the pervasive mud with team of a dozen of us. Thinking back to those surveyors who forged through far worse and were guided only by compass, it is amazing to consider just how accurate they were. Flying over most of the country today, one can see the results of those efforts in the precise grid that defines the mid-west farmlands.

Our little Sunday jaunt opened a window to the past and to the incredible efforts it took for the early settlers to gain a foothold on this land. The work I have been doing raises questions about that dominion and the incongruity of the imposition of the grid onto an organic landscape with its own boundaries of streams, hills and lakes, and history of Iroquois settlement. Jefferson's concept of the Yeoman Farmer was the incubator for the independent thinking American that we know today but also formed the myths of the autonomous landholder that goes along with that. These early settlers had to make it on their own without depending on government support and that was the intended price of living free of government control. Here, in the hills of Central New York, whole communities of strong individuals developed from that history.

BY HAROLD BUSH

Thank you everyone for your support of The Backbone Ridge History Group this past year.

There have been numerous programs, and activities throughout the year as we share the history, and presentations for our local communities.

In the spring there was a presentation in Trumansburg entitled History of The New Military tract in New York State. In Logan, in conjunction with a Bazaar, was a presentation with period kitchen tools. Clean up, and maintenance work was done at the Reynoldsville Cemetery. A display of our history was presented with a Fiddlers gathering at a local winery.

This summer we participated with the Lodi Celebration event by displaying our BRHG video, and offering our books, cards, and historical maps. We took part in a book signing event with Uncle Joe, and the Rosebud Ramblers, and we had a program about Military Lot Line Surveying in Searsburg. A display was assembled in the Trumansburg Fair building, and a Float was submitted in the Fair Parade (we took 2nd place).

In the Fall we set up a large display for Interlaken Plow Day, that included photos, maps, artifacts, a video, books, and cards. Members spent the day sharing our history, and answering questions. A hands on program (Walking the Line) took place in the Hector Land Use area.

An activity that has been ongoing through this year is transcription of survey notes from 1789. This data will culminate in development of computer access to Revolutionary land grant details, and the descending history of each.

More in this, and future issues of The Backbone

Thank you. Harold P. Bush, VP BRHG

**WALKING THE MILITARY LOT LINE**

BY JUDY WICKHAM BUTTERFIELD

“It was my pleasure today to participate in the Backbone Ridge History Group’s program “Walking the Military Lot Line”. In addition to being a most excellent hike, the group of 14 folks were very interested in the subject and were wonderful company for the afternoon. The most interesting part of the day was learning more of the history of the area than I had previously known and getting to both see and help use an antique survey chain in the same way that the original work was done more than two hundred years ago! That kind of “living history” is most certainly the best way to discover what the past was really like. The Backbone Ridge Group is providing a valuable link from our “modern” times back to those who settled the area between Seneca and Cayuga lakes. Bravo!!” - - Will Wickham

Above is a note from participant, Will Wickham, on a recent experimental program presented by a committee of the Backbone Ridge History Group (BRHG). The purpose of the hike was to walk a boundary line between two of the original lots in the New Military tract. The New Military tract was land set aside by the NYS legislature as enticement and remuneration for soldiers who served during the Revolutionary War. It encompassed approximately 1.8 million acres that were divided into lots of 600 acres each in 28 townships. The Backbone Ridge is located within 2 of these original townships - Ovid (which now is divided into Ovid, Lodi and Covert), and Hector.

WALKING THE MILITARY LOT LINE

**BY JUDY WICKHAM BUTTERFIELD
(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 5)**

Our group has been meeting for several months on this project. To date, we have finished the transcription of the original town of Ovid survey field books. While it is interesting to read some of the notes, we have all found it challenging to decipher some of the handwriting and to learn the shorthand used for the record keeping. (See enclosed booklet)

As this goes to press we have just begun the township of Hector. Hector is one of the only townships to have retained most of its original boundaries with only a slight change near Watkins Glen. The very exciting end result of this project will be an interactive website that will allow users to interpret the early history of the Backbone Ridge on their phones and computers. People will be able to trace the original boundaries, see current and historical photos of places described by the surveyors as they worked in 1789 and 1790 as well as other layers to be decided as we go forward. Access to historic surveys, deeds and photographs will be of particular interest to historians and genealogists.

The group involved in this project led by Robert Kibbee, includes June Szabo, Julie Morris, Beth Bevars, Allan Buddle, Rebecca Wright, Charlotte Dickens, John Potter and Judy Butterfield. At one of our meetings, it was suggested that we offer the public a chance to see and experience what the surveyors went through to get the land surveyed. The Military Lot line program was born!



**SOUTH END OF LOTS 91 (LEFT/WEST SIDE) AND
92 (RIGHT/EAST SIDE) OF ROAD/PATH.**

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WALKING THE MILITARY LOT LINE

BY JUDY WICKHAM BUTTERFIELD
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We ran through the hike twice - a dress rehearsal walk was done by Allan, Beth, Judy, June, and Dr. Bruce Britain. Bruce, Forest Home Historian, provided the antique chain and explained how the chain worked in the measuring process. The chain used for measuring by surveyors is 66 ft. long (80 chains to a mile) and each link is 7.95 inches (100 links to a chain).

On our first walk through, we were only able to walk about $\frac{2}{3}$ of the approximate 1 mile due to the rushing waters of Mill Creek. From the south side of the creek heading south we practiced using the chain to measure as we returned to the starting point across from the Teeter Pond parking area. After a time, we became a pretty well-oiled machine but it certainly gave us an idea of how difficult it must have been moving the chain through undergrowth in the, then, old-growth forests. We had a well-cleared path for most of the distance and as it took place in the fall, we had few bugs to deal with.

On the day of the public walk, Allan, Beth, and Judy were joined by 11 members of the public. We had hoped for some 'drying out' time after our Tuesday dress rehearsal walk, unfortunately there were rain showers in the area Saturday morning so the puddles, and creek had refilled. Our hardy group gallantly marched onward despite the promise of mud and high water.

The boundary we walked is between lots 91 and 92 in the township of Ovid, originally called Township #16. There are 100 lots in each township. The lots were given out by ballot with each private and non-commissioned soldier receiving up to 600 acres and higher-ranking men receiving more, depending on their rank. Currently the south end of the lots are pasture fields with vague tree lines following what was Ames Road, running between Seneca and Townsend Roads.



BRIDGE ABUTMENT

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WALKING THE MILITARY LOT LINE

BY JUDY WICKHAM BUTTERFIELD
(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 7)

Mill Creek runs through the lot east to west and has cement bridge abutments showing where the road crossed at one time. The lots' north ends are forested and on the north side of the creek are several cellar holes. As we walked and chatted about the history of the military tract and the area, we tried to imagine what it was like back in 1789 when the area was being surveyed. The trees would have been much bigger in circumference, there would have been some undergrowth but the shade from the larger, taller trees would have kept it to



CHECKING OUT A CELLAR HOLE—THIS PARTICULAR ONE LOOKS TOO BIG TO HAVE BEEN UNDER A HOME, MAYBE SOME TYPE OF OUTBUILDING. WE KNOW FROM EARLY MAPS THAT THERE WAS A MILL LOCATED HERE.

a minimum. Poison ivy, mosquitoes and brambles would have been just a few of the challenges to be met by the surveyors. Our biggest challenge was fording the, again, rushing Mill Creek. We had great help from a few of the younger folk making a rock bridge, and hands lent to steady those of us with somewhat unsteady legs and feet. There were no calamities and we were able to cross in both directions.

The group was enthusiastic to learn about the story behind the tracts that have become home

to each of us, at some point in our lives. Within each of the 600 acre lots there were 50 acres (on a corner) set aside to pay for the survey. The recipient of each lot would have to pay the 48 shilling fee or the 50 acres would revert to the state to be sold to pay for the survey. There were also state 100s - or 100 acres in each of the 600 that would revert to the state if the recipient had not rescinded his 100 acres promised from the Federal Government as payment for serving during the Revolutionary War. (These 100 acres originally given were to be settled in what would become Ohio) Within each township there were 6 lots set aside: one each to be sold to support gospel and literature, in other words, schools and churches and 4 others to satisfy claims of officers due more than 600 acres or to exchange for lots found to be under water. The lottery, when set up, worked simply - soldiers names were put in one box and lot numbers in each township in another. As a name and number were drawn that became the soldiers lot. Most of the lots were not settled by the soldier who actually served but by others who purchased the land from developers who had purchased the acreages from the soldiers or their heirs.

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WALKING THE MILITARY LOT LINE

BY JUDY WICKHAM BUTTERFIELD
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Of course, by current day the original 600 acres lots have, in many, maybe most, cases been split and resold times over. If you fly over the area you can see the patchwork quilt of fields, forests and homesteads that cover the area. From the air you can also see some of the original boundaries (look for roads and the adjoining hedgerows) and even occasionally the survey 50s. In the Finger Lakes region, and especially the Backbone Ridge, many of the roads and laneways are on the original boundaries. One bit of discussion that was held on both of the walks was how did the settlers come to define the roadways. In this particular military land tract roads were not taken into account but would have had to be set up by the local governments as they came into being. It is also known that as roads were set up those living along the frontages were required to take part in the upkeep - year round.

On the Saturday hike, we measured the north end of the boundary line. We knew from the surveyor's field book that the length from the corner to the north edge of the stream was 21 chains. The actual corner markers no longer exist so we were unsure of the exact starting location, but we decided to begin near the middle of the



intersection of Townsend, Ames and Wilkins Roads. This would have been the corners of lots #91, 92, 79 and 80. We ended on the north bank of the creek and found we were fairly close to the original measurement. The measuring on the south side of the 'run' (Mill Creek) that we did on the day of the walk through was substantially longer and we were still able to be fairly close to the original measurement of 55 chains 58 links. I cannot remember what our measurements were but we were quite surprised at how well we amateurs did on both days. We dealt with rushing water, steep banks, large mud puddles and some nearby

BETH DEMONSTRATING THE MEASURING CHAIN WITH ASSISTANCE FROM GEORGE MINER AND ALLAN BUDDLE.

poison ivy, but because our path had at one time been a road bed and is still maintained as a trail, we did not have to deal with trees, or brush except for near the creek. So our way was much simpler than that of the original surveying teams. One other note found in the field book was that 50 chains from the north corner was a 'Chisnut' (sic) ridge. Trees were commonly the focus of the survey notes. Tree varieties would be telltale signs of soil quality.

All in all, a good time was had and talks have already begun about having another hike, perhaps even about making it an annual affair.



THE CHAIN GANG, PREPARING TO SET A MARKER

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WWW.BACKBONERIDGEHISTORYGROUP.COM

We hope that information contained in the Backbone continues to be of interest and we welcome suggestions for content related to the history of the Backbone Ridge and surrounding communities. Please feel free to contact us with suggestions or contributions of articles by mail at the address above or through the website at that address above.

For new or renewal memberships, for an individual or household please send \$10 to BRHG, PO Box 62, Trumansburg, NY 14886



Group Photo of Walking the Line hike. Photo taken by Harold Bush