

## Early History of Bateaux

For much of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the English<sup>i</sup> and French were bitter rivals for control of the eastern seaboard of North America and the lands of the Ohio River Valley region. At stake were the rich resources of this vast territory—forests for timber, furs, fertile lands for crops, and control of trade routes. This fierce competition resulted in several notable **colonial wars** known in the Western Hemisphere as King William’s War (1689–1697); Queen Anne’s War (1702–1713); King George’s War (1744–1748); and the French and Indian War (1755–1763).<sup>1,ii</sup> With only a few major roads cut through the frontier woodlands of colonial North America, interior waterways became the principal transportation routes to move armies, supplies, and trade items. During these military conflicts, English regular and **provincial** (colonial) soldiers erected a series of fortifications along the Upper Hudson River, Lake George, and the Lake Champlain corridor. This strategic gateway ran from southern New York into New France (Canada). Thus, controlling the Hudson River, Lake George, and Lake Champlain corridor was key to winning these wars. Along this important passageway, English military outposts opposed their enemy, the French and their Native American (aka First Nation) allies. The bateau (also spelled batteau, batoe, and battoe) was the primary vessel used along this network of inland water routes.

Bateaux were the utilitarian vessels of their era and were mostly operated on lakes, rivers, creeks, and sometimes even along the protected waters of the Atlantic seaboard. Noted American naval architect and historian Howard I. Chapelle described the colonial vessel: “The French word ‘bateau’ meant no more than ‘boat’ in the first years of the French settlement in Canada, but early in the eighteenth century this word had become accepted as a type-name for a double-ended,

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- i In 1707, England and Scotland joined and became Great Britain. After 1707, these people were referred to as British.
  - ii Some historians claim the French and Indian War started in 1754, whereas others say it began in 1753. Scholars often refer to this military conflict as the Seven Years’ War (1756–1763).



Figure 1.1 A map showing the region of the Hudson River, Lake George, and Lake Champlain corridor with some of its colonial fortification sites. (Credit: Peter Pepe)

## 18th Century Bateau

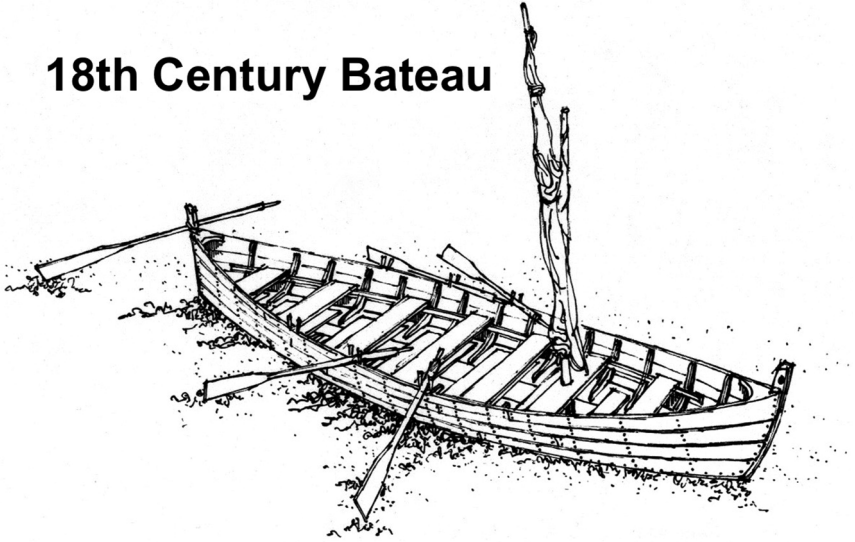


Figure 1.2 Drawing of a typical eighteenth-century bateau. (Credit: Mark L. Peckham)

flat-bottomed, chine-built small boat much used along the St. Lawrence and on the American lakes.”<sup>2</sup>

Possibly the earliest reference to military bateaux in the colony of New York was in 1666. Three hundred light bateaux and bark canoes were put into service for a French incursion into English-held northern New York.<sup>3</sup> During Queen Anne’s War (1702–1713), English colonial boat builders and carpenters constructed military bateaux along the Mohawk River in New York. In 1711, the British built six hundred bateaux on the shores of the Hudson River at Albany, New York.<sup>4</sup> However, it was not until the French and Indian War (1755–1763) that the bateau provided a decided advantage for the British military.

During the French and Indian War, bateaux were arguably as important to the British and provincial soldiers as their muskets. Bateaux played a crucial role at Lake George as early as 1755, the year when the British and provincials first established an encampment at the south end of the strategic thirty-two-mile waterway. On September 8, 1755, French regulars, Canadians, and their Native American allies attacked a British military column as those soldiers and their Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) allies trekked south from their base camp at the head of the lake along the military road to Fort Lyman (later named Fort Edward).



**Figure 1.3** Illustration by Frederick Coffay Yohn showing British and provincial soldiers fighting the French and their Native American allies during the Battle of Lake George (September 8, 1755). Yohn's painting appeared in the 1905 Glens Falls Insurance Company calendar. (Credit: Frederick Coffay Yohn and Dr. Russell P. Bellico)



**Figure 1.4** A drone shot of Fort William Henry Museum located on the south shore of Lake George, New York. The replica fortification was finished in 1954 and is a reproduction of historic Fort William Henry, a British military installation from 1755–1757. (Credit: Peter Pepe)

A series of fierce skirmishes fought that day would later become known as the Battle of Lake George. The British and provincials were victorious in part because they were able to create a makeshift defensive “wall” near their position at the head of the lake. That **redoubt** was fashioned from felled trees, wagons, and even some overturned bateaux that were likely pulled up on shore for cover. Behind this odd, but effective, defensive line, William Johnson’s British and provincial soldiers and artillerymen decimated the enemy with musket balls, cannon shot, grapeshot, and canister shot. The French-led army and their Native American allies were defeated, one of the few British victories early in the French and Indian War.<sup>5</sup>

The British and provincial military, fresh from their triumph over their rivals, then began building Fort William Henry, completing it by late 1755. The military installation, a **Vauban-style earth-and-wooden fortification**, was erected at the south end of Lake George. It posed a direct threat to the French who controlled the 110-mile Lake Champlain, a major waterway located just to the north of Lake George. There was no major British offensive from Fort William Henry launched into the French-held Champlain Valley in 1756. However, in mid-March 1757, a force of French regulars, Canadians, and Native Americans attacked Fort William Henry at Lake George. The wilderness waterway was located about sixty miles north of Albany, New York, a British city in the interior of the thirteen colonies. After several days laying siege to the British fortification, the French-led forces succeeded in burning all the outbuildings, but they could not seize the sturdy frontier fortress.<sup>6</sup> A *Schenectady Reflector* (Schenectady, New York) newspaper account, published April 1, 1842, provides us with details about the March 1757 French raid on Fort William Henry. The 1842 story was from a letter dated March 26, 1757, published in the *Boston Gazette*. The newspaper narrative reported that before the French retreated to their strongholds in the Champlain Valley they burned two **sloops** and most of the British bateaux that had been pulled up on shore.<sup>7</sup> The French may have destroyed as many as three hundred bateaux lying along the shoreline in that late winter raid.

Later in 1757, in early August, a more imposing French, Canadian, and Native American expeditionary force attacked Fort William Henry. This time, the British and provincials, positioned inside Fort William Henry and in nearby encampments, surrendered to the French after several days of intense siege warfare. The vastly superior French-directed legion captured many supplies and armaments. They then torched Fort William Henry before retreating north to their two forts located in the Champlain Valley. James Fenimore Cooper immortalized this August 1757 event in his famous 1826 historical novel *The Last of the Mohicans*.

These early events of the French and Indian War showed the British the necessity of building bateaux to transport their regular and provincial troops into the Lake George/Lake Champlain theater and also westward along the Mohawk River toward the Great Lakes. Colonel John Bradstreet, considered today to have been a British military logistics genius, formed the “Battoe Service” to address the need for a massive boat-building campaign at Albany and Schenectady, New York.<sup>8</sup>

One of Bradstreet’s junior officers in the Battoe Service, who would go on to have a noteworthy career in the American army during the American Revolution (1775–1783), was Philip Schuyler. The young Schuyler assisted Bradstreet during the French and Indian War by helping to coordinate the movement of military materials, foodstuffs, and soldiers into the hinterlands. Among his many tasks, Schuyler purchased lumber and other maritime supplies for the carpenters and boat builders who constructed bateaux for the war effort. For his labor and diligence, Philip Schuyler was well paid: 255£ 10s (in 1758), 242£ 18s (in 1759), and 255£ 10s (in 1760).<sup>9</sup>

Following an unsuccessful July 1758 British military incursion into the Champlain Valley by a colossal British military force directed by General James Abercromby, the British leadership made a daring decision because they had no fortification at Lake George—Fort William Henry had been destroyed in August 1757. Without a stronghold to house troops to protect their Lake George fleet over the winter months of 1758 and 1759, the British decided they would deliberately sink many of the vessels of their formidable Lake George squadron. The wooden warships were sunk in the shallows of the lake to protect them over the wintertime from marauding French and their Native American allies. It was intended that the submerged watercraft would be relocated by the British the following year, and then raised, repaired, and placed back into action for the 1759 campaign against the French military fortresses in the Champlain Valley. Among the British vessels sunk in the autumn of 1758 were the sloop *Earl of Halifax*, two **radeaux**, several **row galleys**, an unspecified number of **whaleboats**,<sup>10</sup> and 260 bateaux.<sup>11</sup> This “wet storage” (aka “cold storage”) of wooden warships would later become known as “The Sunken Fleet of 1758.”

In the late spring and early summer of 1759, many of those submerged battle crafts were successfully salvaged from the lake bottom for British General Jeffery Amherst’s 1759 expedition against the French forts along the shores of Lake Champlain. Amherst had replaced Abercromby as the commander of the British army at Lake George. However, some submerged bateaux were not recovered, as Amherst’s military unit quickly departed their encampment at the head of Lake George to engage the enemy to the north. Amherst’s eleven thousand soldiers and



Figure 1.5 A drawing depicting bateaux and whaleboats, part of the formidable armada of British warships on Lake George during the July 1758 Abercromby campaign against the French in the Champlain Valley. (Credit: Tim Cordell)

eight hundred warships traveled over Lake George using some of the very vessels that had been sunk in the lake in 1758 and raised from the bottom of Lake George in 1759. Amherst's substantial martial contingent promptly occupied the two French fortifications at the south end of Lake Champlain—Fort Carillon (later called Fort Ticonderoga) and Fort St. Frédéric (later known as Crown Point). Both fortifications had been abandoned and deliberately destroyed by the retreating French.<sup>12</sup>

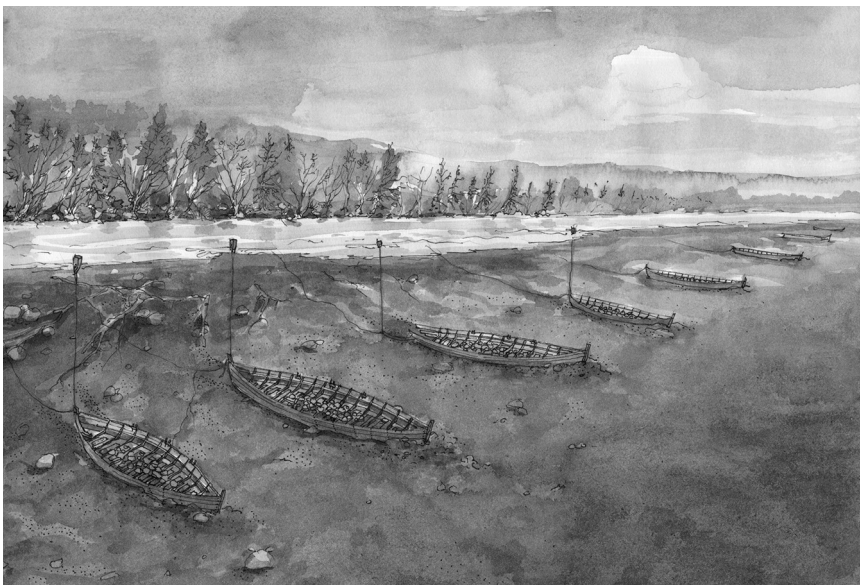
Bateaux showed their versatility, too. During the 1759 Amherst campaign, British artillery officer, Captain-Lieutenant Henry Skinner, who served under General Amherst, reported on the bateaux and their adaptability. In his 1759 journal, Skinner noted that “cannon, **mortars**, and **howitzers**” were mounted upon rafts crafted “by building a stage on three battoes.”<sup>13</sup>

By 1760, fighting in North America had pretty much ended. The war formally concluded with a French surrender at the Treaty of Paris in 1763.<sup>14</sup> John Gardner, a prominent twentieth-century naval architect and boat builder, wrote of this colonial conflict in North America: “This war was won in boats, and for the greater part, in a particular kind of boat, the bateau.”<sup>15</sup>

Bateaux were likewise employed in the American Revolution. According to Howard I. Chapelle, a naval architect at the Smithsonian Institution, in 1776 the British Admiralty drafted plans for a standard bateau. That design was later discovered in the Admiralty Collection of Draughts.<sup>16</sup> The 1776 British bateau plan depicted a wooden watercraft that was a little over thirty feet long. Its length,



**Figure 1.6** A computer-generated image depicting a cluster of submerged British bateaux with sinking rocks inside them. Some of these shipwrecks later became known as “Lake George’s sunken bateaux of 1758.” (Credit: John Whitesel & Pepe Productions)



**Figure 1.7** This illustration depicts what some sunken bateaux of 1758 might have looked like over the winter of 1758–1759. Mark L. Peckham, a maritime artist, shows how each of the submerged boats were filled with hundreds of pounds of sinking rocks, marked by crude floating buoys for relocating the vessels in the spring of 1759, and lines running from the submerged bateaux back to shore. (Credit: Mark L. Peckham)



size, and shape were rather comparable to those bateau shipwrecks found in Lake George that dated to the French and Indian War.

In 1775, thirty bateaux were constructed at Lake George for the American patriots. In April 1776, Benjamin Franklin was one of several Americans sent by the Continental Congress on a diplomatic mission to Canada. Franklin and his entourage traversed Lake George in a sizeable bateau.

During British General John Burgoyne's unsuccessful 1777 campaign to seize Albany, New York, and thus split the rebellious colonies in two, **German auxiliary** and British troops operated bateaux on Lake Champlain, Lake George, and the Hudson River.<sup>17</sup>

In the War of 1812 (1812–1815), bateaux were also deployed in a midsummer 1813 British incursion from Canada into the United States that resulted in attacks on American military installations and private property in Plattsburgh, New York, and Swanton, Vermont. Britain's attempt to claim hegemony over the Champlain Valley culminated the following year during the Battle of Plattsburgh, fought on Lake Champlain on September 6 through 11, 1814. However, Commodore Thomas Macdonough's American fleet defeated a larger British squadron on Lake Champlain, thus ending the threat of a British victory in the strategic Champlain Valley.<sup>18</sup> During that war, Richard Eggleston, a shipwright from Essex, New York, a small village along the western shore of Lake Champlain, constructed over 250 bateaux for the Americans.<sup>19</sup>

In 1999, residents of Plattsburgh, New York, were reminded of the significance of bateau vessels to their local heritage. Two bateaux from the War of 1812, sunk in the shallows of Lake Champlain, were discovered off the city of Plattsburgh during a severe drought.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the bateau watercraft played an integral role in several military conflicts in the Lake George–Lake Champlain region.

Small wooden vessels of the colonial era, like the bateau, often had a short life span because they quickly wore out, were casualties of mishap or armed conflict, and were biodegradable. However, many of the sunken bateaux in Lake George, some with intact bottom boards, a few **battens** (aka cleats), and with several **frames** (aka ribs) and **garboard strakes** (aka lowest side planks), survived in their watery graves for over 250 years. These are significant to an American culture with deep ties to our British ancestry. The scarcity of these types of colonial vessels in American waters makes the **assemblage** of Lake George's sunken bateaux even more important. East Carolina University-trained underwater archaeologist Bruce G. Terrell, now with the **NOAA** National Marine Sanctuaries program, clearly recognized this when he wrote in 1991: "There are few images and fewer extant remains of [colonial] mountain boats."<sup>21</sup>