

Bounty Lands in the Military Tract in Post-Revolutionary War New York State

By Marian S. Henry

Revolutionary War bounty land payments are a useful resource for genealogists. A grant of bounty land documents Revolutionary War service for a soldier who may not have applied for a pension. In Dr. Pangloss's "best-of-all-possible" worlds, this bounty land would serve to locate the soldier after the war. Dr. Pangloss, however, did not live in New York. It is true that the Federal Government in 1776 had promised land to soldiers in order to maintain strength in the army, and that New York State added even larger bounties in 1783. However the state's legal process was seriously flawed and involved numerous lengthy delays. The vast majority of soldiers did not trust the government and sold their rights to the land well before the state granted warrants to it. Only a very few of the soldiers actually settled on the acres allotted to them. In this article we look into the fiasco that was the New York veterans' experience with bounty lands. We look first at the actions of the state legislature and then at the experiences of three individual soldiers.

I. The New York State Legislature

The succession of snafus that constituted the state's payment of bounty lands is detailed in C. Edith Hall's extensive and carefully researched monograph *Early History of Military Tract*.^[1] As the table below illustrates, the state passed numerous acts, often separated by several years, to accomplish this land distribution. The whole procedure lasted twenty years.

Year	Action
1783	Land grants were authorized
1783	The land itself was designated
1786	A different tract was designated
1788	Original tract was decided on
1789	Balloting procedure was defined
1790	Survey of 25 townships was authorized
1790-1	Two additional townships authorized and surveyed
1794	A twenty-eighth township was authorized and surveyed
1797	A commission was established to finally resolve conflicting land claims
1803	The commission completed its work when all land disputes were settled

The Beginning

The New York State Legislature, in an act dated March 27, 1783, granted:

“To a Major-General, 5,500 acres of land; to a Brigadier-General, 4,250 acres; to a Colonel, 2,500 acres; to a Lieutenant-Colonel, 2,250 acres; to a Major, 2,000 acres; to a Captain or Regimental Surgeon, 1,000 acres; to a Chaplain, 2,000 acres; to each Subaltern or Surgeon's Mate, 1,000 acres; and to each private or non-commissioned

officer, 500 acres.”

The short-term purpose of this legislation was to bolster enlistment to keep a military presence along the frontier. The long-term purpose was to place veterans on the frontier as a buffer against Indian attacks. The legislation was modeled on a bill passed by Congress, on September 16, 1776. In the federal legislation a private soldier was granted 100 acres; higher ranks were granted progressively more land, up to 500 acres to a colonel. In New York State, the land bounties were combined giving each qualified private a total of 600 acres.

First setback

On July 25, 1783, the state legislature specified 1.8 million acres of land to be set aside for this so-called “Military Tract.” This land, the lush Finger Lakes region in the center of the state, included all the present counties of Onondaga, Cayuga, Cortland, and Seneca, as well as parts of the counties of Oswego, Wayne, Schuyler, and Tompkins. Unbelievably, the specified region contained Indian land recognized previously in treaties by both the federal and state governments. It took three years before the state proposed to offer alternative land in Clinton, Essex, and Franklin counties on May 5, 1786. This area, in the extreme northeastern portion of the state, is part of the current Adirondack Park. As it was not well suited for farming, the plan was rejected. For this reason the region became known as the “Old Military Tract.” Hall explains: “Since the close of the war, land speculators had been engaged in purchasing from the veterans the rights to bounty lands, and, as the lands designated in this act were not considered to be as fertile as those around the finger lakes, objections were raised to the substitution of this northern section. In view of this opposition, it was decided to wait until the Indian title to the territory originally set apart as bounty lands should be extinguished before proceeding with the distribution.” It should be noted that the opposition came not from veterans, but land speculators who had, by this time, acquired most of the rights to the bounty lands. Another two years passed before treaties with the Onondaga and Cayuga tribes released the original Military Tract land in 1788.

Land Distribution

In an act dated February 28, 1789, the legislature described the balloting procedure.

“... the said commissioners shall cause the names of each of the officers, non-commissioned officers, and privates, ...to be written upon separate ballots or tickets, ... the ballots or tickets to be rolled up and put into a box, and then cause one hundred ballots or tickets to be made and numbered from one to one hundred, which said ballots or tickets shall also be rolled up and put in a separate box for township No. 1, and as many ballots or tickets numbered and rolled up for township No. 2, ... they shall appoint one or more persons who shall first draw a ticket from the box in which the names are put, and then a ticket from the numbers of township No. 1 ... shall proceed in the same manner to draw the lots in the other townships until the whole drawing is completed, and the lots in each township drawn next after the ticket marked with the name of the person entitled to such lands ... the said commissioners shall make a full and fair account in a book ... ”

On July 3, 1790, the survey of the authorized twenty-five townships was completed and the board began issuing letters patent.

Names Assigned to the Original Twenty-five Townships of the Military Tract

1	Lysander	2	Hannibal	3	Cato
4	Brutus	5	Camillus	6	Cicero

7	Manlius	8	Aurelius	9	Marcellus
10	Pompey	11	Romulus	12	Scipio
13	Sempronius	14	Tully	15	Fabius
16	Ovid	17	Milton	18	Locke
19	Homer	20	Solon	21	Hector
22	Ulysses	23	Dryden	24	Virgil
25	Cincinnatus				

One must keep in mind the distinction between a *township* and a *town*. A township was never a political entity. It was a square tract of land containing sixty thousand acres surveyed into six hundred-acre lots (remember that each private soldier was entitled to a total of six hundred acres). The only purpose of a township was to distribute bounty land to soldiers. A town, on the other hand, is a political subdivision of a county, and a form of local government. The twenty-eight townships of the Military Tract were originally formed into eleven towns. Thus the original *town* of Homer was composed of the *townships* of Homer, Solon, Virgil, and Cincinnatus. Similarly, the original town of Lysander was composed of the townships of Lysander, Hannibal, and Cicero. Some lands reserved to the Onondaga and Cayuga tribes when the Military Tract was first set up were acquired later. These lands were not part of the townships, but were incorporated into the towns.

Second Setback

Even though the Indian claims to the original Military Tract had been extinguished, the survey was still flawed. It was not until the end of July 1790 that the state noticed that the Military Tract, as it had been surveyed, overlapped the tract to the south known as Boston Ten Towns. As Hall explains, “The board immediately checked the awards already made, and found that there were four lots in Township No. 23, fifteen in township No. 24 and three in Township No. 25, which had been balloted for, and which were affected by this new difficulty. They also found that there were one lot in Township No. 23, five lots in Township No. 24, and one lot in township No. 25, not as yet awarded to claimants, which were also affected.”[2]

In other words, the state had been giving away land it did not own. In order to provide additional land to make up for this, two new townships were surveyed (completed January 29, 1791). Number 26 was named Junius and number 27 was named Galen.

Third Setback

The preemption line, which served as the boundary between the Military Tract and the Phelps-Gorham purchase to the west, had been surveyed in 1788. When the land was sold to Robert Morris in 1790, one of the provisions of the sale was that the line be resurveyed. The resurvey of the preemption line shifted the western boundary of the Military Tract eastward, reducing the size of several townships. On September 11, 1794, the twenty-eighth and final township, named Sterling, was authorized to make up territory lost in this shift of the preemption line.

The Final Decision

In January 1794, the legislature attempted to clear up conflicting land claims by requiring that all deeds and conveyances be sent to Albany. According to Hall, “the title to these lands became a scandal.” Some soldiers had been tricked into selling their claims and other soldiers did a bit of defrauding themselves, selling their claim more than once. In 1797, in answer to a petition, a commission was set up to make a final decision on conflicting land claims. The commission completed its work in 1803. By the time the state had completed its goal of establishing a frontier settlement of veterans, the frontier had overtaken the Military Tract and moved on. By 1803 lands in central and western New York State were settled. Lewis and Clark were organizing their expedition into the new frontier -- the Louisiana Purchase.

II The Soldiers

Conrad Bush

In the entire town of Pompey the only Revolutionary War soldier to settle on the land awarded to him was Conrad Bush, who drew lot 47.[3] Conrad Bush was born in Germany[4] ; from the age on his tombstone he was born in 1753. Georg Conrad Busch arrived in Philadelphia on October 9, 1775, on the ship *King of Prussia*. [5] I did not find a naturalization record for him in Philadelphia.[6] In his *Index to Revolutionary War Service Records* , Virgil D. White[7] lists the following:

Bush, Conratt, srv in Yates' Regt of NY Mil

Bush, Conrod, srv as a Pvt in Rawlings' Regt of Cont troops

Bush, Conrod, srv as a Pvt & Matross* in 2nd Arty Regt of Cont Troops

*A matross is a kind of gunners mate.

The name is not common in the area, so it is likely that these all refer to the same individual. The first entry is sufficient to entitle him to the state bounty land.

After the war, Conrad Bush settled first in Mamakating Town in Ulster County, with his wife, Mary Watson. The 1790 federal census lists George Coonradt Bush (1 M >16, 1 M <16, 3 F). Later census records list him at his farm in Pompey, although the name of the location changed as local governments evolved. Census indexes track his movements over the next twenty years: in 1800, a *Coonrad* Bush was in Ontario Co.; in 1810, a *Conrad* Bush was in Onondaga Co.; and in 1820, *Conrod* Bush appeared in Onondaga Co., Pompey. As with his service record, his German accent shines through in these census records.

Conrad Bush applied for a pension. The entry[8] reads "Bush, Conrad, Cont., N.Y. res., S46424; BLWt. 6870-100. Iss. 7/11/1791 No papers." His wife died in 1848; Conrad died in 1854. The burial location[9] is "Bush, Conratt, Sand Knoll, his farm, Pompey NY." The tombstone inscriptions of the couple read[10]

Conrad Bush / Died Dec. 19 1854 / Ae. 101 yrs. 1 mo. / & 20 days.

Mary / wife of Conrad Bush / Died Dec 3, 1848 / Ae. 81 yrs, 11 mos. & 15 days.

John Shepard

Similarly, in the town of Cicero, the only man who occupied his own bounty land was John Shepard. He was the first Justice of the Peace in the town in 1804.[11]

According to Rev W. M. Beuchamp's *Revolutionary Soldiers Resident or Dying in Onondaga Co., N.Y.*, [12] Captain John Shepard enlisted in 1777 in Capt. James Young's Co. He left the army in the fall of 1781 from ill health and did not serve again. Beuchamp also claims a strong tie with Stamford, Connecticut, saying, "He was ordained in North Stamford Congregational church, Conn., June 27, 1787, and was dismissed June 11, 1794. Several deeds describe him as of Stamford as late as '96, and in some he is styled "Reverend." On June 7, 1783, he married Mrs. Melisent Edsall, widow of Nehemiah Finor, by whom he had four children. After leaving Stamford he lived in Orange Co., N. Y., which was partly peopled from that part of Westchester which Stamford claimed."

Beuchamp also lists the following cemetery inscriptions:

Rev. John Shepard, / Born / May 25, / 1757. / Died Jan 29, 1822

Soldier of the Cross. / Well done, Rest from / thy loved employ.

Millicent Edsall / Wife of / Rev. John Shepard / Died Nov. 12, 1805 / Aged 50 years

Beuchamp may be mistaken. Consider the following:

A collection of biographies of Stamford's Revolutionary War soldiers[13] does *not*

contain an entry for John Shepard/Shepherd.

The only *Captain* John Shepard listed in White's index[14] served from Massachusetts. The entry reads: "Shepard, John, srv as Capt in Porter's Regt of MA Mil."

The Pension List of 1820[15] contains the following entry: "John Shepard, captain, Massachusetts."

However, service for New York State is a requirement for obtaining the bounty land. Of the fourteen "John Shepard" entries in White,[16] there is one for a New York regiment: "Shepard, John, srv as Pvt in Hasbrouck's Regt of NY Mil." The index[17] of Revolutionary War pension applications contains the following entry: "Shepard, John, Cont., N.Y., S42292." Patricia Law Hatcher confirms the burial place in her *Abstract of Graves of Revolutionary Patriots*: "Shepard, John, Shepard Point, Oneida Lake, nr Syracuse, Bremerton NY".[18]

Benjamin Epton

The experience of Private Benjamin Epton was significantly different. There is probably a tale for another time behind this brief outline. White lists his service record as follows:[19]

Epton, Benjamin, srv as a Pvt in the 2nd NY Regt

Epton, Benjamin, srv as a Pvt in the 4th NY Regt

Epton, Benjamin, srv in the 11th Regt of Cont Troops

Again, there is no evidence from this source as to whether or not this refers to a single individual. However, the following discharge paper confirms the first entry.[20]

"By his Excellency GEORGE WASHINGTON, Esquire, General and Commander in Chief of the forces of the United States of America. These are to certify that the bearer hereof, BENJAMIN EPTON, private in the second N. York Regiment, having faithfully served the United States six years and six months and being enlisted for the war only, is hereby discharged from the American Army ... The within certificate shall not avail the bearer as a discharge until the ratification of the definite Treaty of peace, previous to which time and until proclamation thereof shall be made, he is to be considered as being on furlough - George Washington."

In 1790, Benjamin Epton received his grant to lot #7 in the town of Camillius.[21]

"The People of the State of New York, by the Grace of God, free and independent. To all to whom these presents shall come, Greeting: Know ye, that in pursuance of an act of our legislature, passed the sixth day of April, one thousand seven hundred and ninety, entitled, an act to carry into effect the concurrent resolutions and acts of the legislature for granting certain lands promised to be given and bounty lands, and for other purposes therein mentioned,' we have given, granted and confirmed, and by these presents do give, grant and confirm unto Benjamin Epton, all that certain tract or lot of land situate, lying and being in the County of Montgomery, and in the township

of Camillus known ... by Lot number seven, containing six hundred acres, together with all and singular the rights, hereditaments and appurtenances, ... On condition never the less that within the term of seven years to be computed from the first day of January next ensuing the date hereof, there shall be one actual settlement made on the said tract or lot of land hereby granted, otherwise, these, our letters patent, and the estate hereby granted, shall cease, determine and become void. ... this sixth day of July, in the year of our Lord, one thousand seven hundred and ninety, and in the fifteenth year of our independence.”

However, by the time he received his patent on July 6, 1790, Benjamin Epton seems to have sold his land to John Suffern on November 10, 1784, but apparently Suffern did not or could not prove his claim. Epton appears to have successfully sold his land to Charles Weissenfel, on November 12, 1784.

“THIS INDENTURE made the tenth day of November one thousand seven hundred and eighty-four, between BENJAMIN EPTON, a privet soldier in the Second New York Regiment, of the first part, and John Suffern, of the New Antrinn of Orange County, Esqr. of the other part, WITNESSETH that the said Benjamin Epton, ... hath sold ... my right, title, claim, interest and demand from Congress or the United States to One Hundred Acres of land due me as a bounty as well as all my right, title, claim and demand from the State of New York to six hundred acres of land due me as a bounty and I do by these presents sell, release, convey, confirm and forever quit-claim unto John Suffern aforesaid all and every my above deeded rights, to have and to hold the same as his won and his heirs right against me and my heirs forever, and I do hereby empower the Surveyor-General of the United States and of his State to convey whatever lands are due me for my services as aforesaid to convey the same unto John Suffern or to his lawful representatives and their heirs forever. In witness whereof I have hereunto set my hand and fixed my seal the day above written. Benjamin his mark Epton. Sealed and delivered in the presents of Jonas Secor, Jonat Youngs.”

“I, BENJAMIN EPTON, do acknowledge to have sold unto Mr. Charles F. Weissenfel all my rights of land due me from the State of New York and the publick for my services as a soldier in the 2d New York Regiment in the service of the United States, for which I subscribe my name as a security to the said Weissenfel on the back of this discharge as witness my hand and seal this 12th day of Novr. 1784. Witness John Satten, Benjamin Epton, his mark.”

Apparently the second claim was validated. The entry for his pension application reads: “Epton, Benjamin, N.Y., BLWts. 7095 & 7901-100-Pvt. Iss. 12/10/1789 to C.F. Weissenfels, ass. No papers.”[22] Benjamin Epton is not listed in New York State in any federal census index from 1790 to 1820.

[1] *Early History of Military Tract* , C. Edith Hall, Baldwinsville, N.Y., no date

- [2] C. Edith Hall, op. cit.
- [3] *Pompey Our Town in Profile* , Sylvia Shoebridge (Chairman), Pompey, New York, 1976, Vol 1, p. 42-3.
- [4] *Revolutionary Soldiers Resident or Dying in Onondaga County, N.Y. with Supplementary List of Possible Veterans Based on a Pension List of Franklin H. Chase, Syracuse, N. Y.* , Rev. W. M. Beauchamp, Publications of the Onondaga Historical Association, Vol. I, No. 2, April 1912, MCMXIII, Syracuse, N. Y., p. 170-1.
- [5] *Pennsylvania German Pioneers* , Ralph Beaver Strassburger, Ed. William John Hinke, Pennsylvania German Society, 1934, Vol. I, p. 762, List 324 C.
- [6] Philadelphia Naturalization records, Ed. P. William Filby, Detroit, 1982
- [7] *Index to Revolutionary War Service Records* , transcribed by Virgil D. White, The National Historical Publishing Company, 1995, Vol. I, p. 384.
- [8] *Index of Revolutionary War Pension Applications in the National Archives* , Special Publication N. 40, National Genealogical Society, Washington, D. C., 1976, p. 82.
- [9] *Abstract of Graves of Revolutionary Patriots* , Patricia Law Hatcher, Pioneer Heritage Press, Dallas, 1987, Vol 1, p. 139.
- [10] *Revolutionary Soldiers Resident or Dying in Onondaga County, N.Y. with Supplementary List of Possible Veterans Based on a Pension List of Franklin H. Chase, Syracuse, N. Y.* , Rev. W. M. Beauchamp, Publications of the Onondaga Historical Association, Vol. I, No. 2, April 1912, MCMXIII, Syracuse, N. Y., p. 170-1
- [11] *History of Onondaga County, New York* , W.W. Clayton, Syracuse, N. Y. 1878, p. 338
- [12] Beauchamp, op. cit., p. 18-19.
- [13] *Stamford's Soldiers, Genealogical Biographies of Revolutionary War Patriots from Stamford, Connecticut* , Compiled by Edith M. Wicks and Virginia H. Olson, Ed. Paul W. Prindl, Stamford Genealogical Society, 1976
- [14] White, op. cit., Vol IV, p. 2442.
- [15] The Pension List of 1820, Washington, 1820, New York, p. 451.
- [16] White, op. cit. Vol IV, p. 2442.
- [17] *Index of Revolutionary War Pension Applications in the National Archives* , Special Publication N. 40, National Genealogical Society, Washington, D. C., 1976, p. 504.
- [18] *Abstract of Graves of Revolutionary Patriots* , Patricia Law Hatcher, Pioneer Heritage Press, Dallas, 1987, Vol 4, p. 27.
- [19] White, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 873.
- [20] Recorded in *Early History of Military Tract* , C. Edith Hall, Baldwinsville, N.Y., no date
- [21] C. Edith Hall, op. cit.
- [22] Index of Revolutionary War Pension Applications in the National Archives, Special Publication N. 40, National Genealogical Society, Washington, D. C., 1976, p. 175