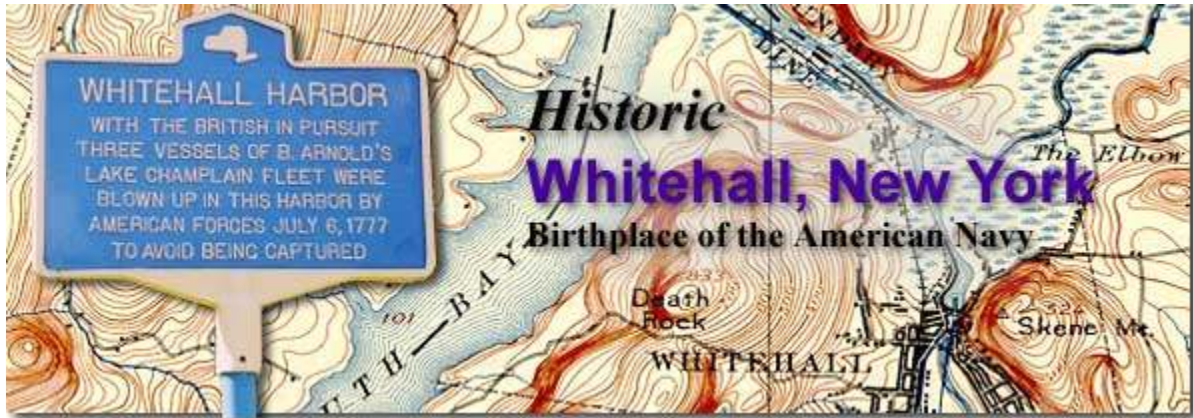# Historic Cities, Villages and Towns...

By James P. Millard

Whitehall, New York can claim a very special place in the history of these lakes. Known as Skenesborough [or Skeenesborough] for a good part of the early history of this nation, the small settlement at the very southern end of Lake Champlain figures prominently in many of the key events to take place in the region.

As early as 1690, military expeditions were using this location as a staging ground for incursions against their opponents. Largely due to its strategic location on one of two main transportation corridors through the wilderness, the region was the scene of much activity through the French and Indian War.

After the French gave up their claims in the area, British settlers arrived. Before long, Philip Skene [*aka* Skeene], a former British officer and loyal subject of the Crown, had established a thriving community here. The peace and prosperity that resulted from the end of the French wars, however, was to prove short-lived. Before long, the American Colonies were in open rebellion. Agitation for independence led to war, and the hostilities that ensued were to involve Skenesborough in no small way.

 In 1776, the American forces under Benedict Arnold were frantically building a fleet here to counter the British invasion they knew would come from the north. The fleet that engaged Carleton at Valcour Island in October of 1776 was built here. Later, in July 1777, another British fleet, this time commanded by Gen. John Burgoyne, would occupy the mighty Ticonderoga/Mt. Independence complex to the north and drive south, down Wood Creek to Whitehall. Burgoyne would ultimately meet with disaster at Saratoga, largely because he chose to take the route down Wood Creek, through Skenesborough, rather than the easier Lake George route.

For a time after the end of the Revolution, prosperity again returned to the tiny hamlet between the mountains. Within too short a time, however, Skenesborough would see itself transformed into a military post. The War of 1812 saw the village shipyard buzzing with the construction of hundreds of batteau's, long the standard means of transporting troops on the lakes. After the Battle of Plattsburg, the

ships of victors and vanquished were brought here, stored "in ordinary" where they slowly rotted away at their berths.

With the end of war, Skenesborough, renamed Whitehall, saw a resumption of the busy maritime trade that was to become its hallmark.

A canal was built along the route of Wood Creek- where Burgoyne's troops had struggled. Sleek, specially built canal schooners would ply their goods along the critical transportation corridor between the St. Lawrence and the Hudson. All through the 19th century, up until the coming of the railroad, this canal was a scene of bustling activity. Once the railroads were established, however, the canal lost much of its importance as a means to transport goods and passengers.

Today, Whitehall is undergoing a renaissance of sorts. The city has revitalized its historic waterfront. Where warships were built and canal schooners docked, lovely pleasure craft put down anchor. There is a beautiful park adjacent to the museum on the waterfront. Historic Whitehall again beckons to travelers along the historic lakes...

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