

FORT TICONDEROGA

National Historic Landmark

phone: (518) 585-2821
fax: : (518) 585-2210

fort@fort-ticonderoga.org

PO Box 390
Ticonderoga
NY 12883

Essay for your consideration

PRINCE TAYLOR

African American National Biography

Nicholas Westbrook

Current: 10 November 2008

Taylor, Prince (1755-1828), sailor, cooper, Continental soldier in the Revolution, surveyor, farmer and employer of indentured servants, innkeeper. Taylor's father was probably also Prince Taylor (d. 1804), a slave of Dr. John Taylor, Lunenburg, Worcester County, Massachusetts. In occupation and location, Taylor continually reinvented himself to cope with changing circumstances. Prince Taylor did not marry.

Taylor served as steward on the 14-gun brig *Diligent* under Captain Brown for five months in 1779 during the failed Penobscot Expedition, America's greatest naval disaster until Pearl Harbor. In his 1818 Revolutionary War pension deposition, he declared, "I am by trade a Saylor." On 6 March 1781 he accepted the bounty paid by the Town of Lunenburg, Massachusetts, to enlist in the Continental Army for the next three years. His enlistment record tells us that he was then 26 years old, 5 ft. 10 in. in height, "black" in complexion, and a cooper by trade. His Sixth Massachusetts regiment served at West Point, New York, for the next two years. During his service, Taylor earned extra pay as a cooper in the Commissary Department, repairing casks and barrels. Taylor was discharged from Revolutionary War service on 23 December 1783 by the commander in chief, Gen. Henry Knox. With his war service, Taylor had won his freedom (if, in fact, he had been enslaved on entering military service, which we do not know for certain).

After the Revolution, Taylor became a pioneer settling the northern frontier of New York. In 1786, he assisted Joseph Laurant, a French-Canadian war veteran, locate and survey a 500-acre land grant on Lake

Champlain awarded Laurant by the State of New York. Taylor was given 420 acres of the grant in payment for his surveying services, a transaction not recorded with the County Clerk until 1799. By 1791 36-year-old Taylor had purchased his own 250-acre farm for \$2.50 an acre on a peninsula extending into the northern end of Lake George, near Fort Ticonderoga, scene of endless conflict during the French and Indian War and again 20 years later during the Revolution. Here, on 1 June 1791, Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson and Congressman James Madison (both Virginia slave owners and future presidents) were surprised to encounter Prince Taylor, a “free Negro . . . [who] possesses a good farm . . . which he cultivates with 6 white hirelings [indentured servants]. One can only imagine the concurrent reactions of fellow visitors, Jefferson’s slave, James Hemings, and Madison’s man-servant, Matthew. “By his industry and good management [Taylor] turns [the farm] to good account,” wrote Madison in his travel journal; this encounter with Taylor prompted Madison’s most extended commentary during his summer tour of the lakes. Madison recorded that Taylor “is intelligent; reads writes & understands accounts, and is dextrous in his affairs . . . He has no wife, and is said to be disinclined to marriage, nor any woman on his [Ticonderoga] farm” (Maguire, ed., p. 20). In 1805, traveler Elkanah Watson also noted the solitary farm at the north end of the lake: “Prince, a free son of Africa, holds one of the best [farms]. May heaven bless him If he deserves freedom” (Watson, p. 70). A 1798 survey shows Taylor’s house on lot 30 on “Black Point.” This is virtually the only arable land on the northeastern shore of the lake. The peninsula on which Taylor’s farm was located is still called “Black Point” today, and is prime real estate for vacation homes.

During these years at the cusp of the 19th century, as the shores of Lake Champlain and Lake George were rapidly being settled, Prince Taylor was a key figure in all manner of “founding” activities in the Ticonderoga vicinity. By 1808, Taylor and his co-commissioner of highways, Lodewick Shear, laid out and surveyed the first roads in the Town of Putnam, New York, immediately south of his farm. A religious man, he was among the founding members of the Episcopal Church in Ticonderoga in 1792. Seventeen years later, he enrolled as an early congregant in the first Congregational Church in Ticonderoga in 1809. In 1811 he swore an oath to serve as an Overseer of Highways in the Town of Putnam, Washington County, a document which gives us his signature.

“Heritage tourism” took off apace at the beginning of the 19th century. Americans and Europeans delighted in the opportunity to view America’s sublime and picturesque landscapes, and the related historic sites along the Hudson River-Lake George-Lake Champlain corridor, a route soon codified in print as the “Fashionable Tour” (1822) and the “Northern Tour” (1825). Prince Taylor capitalized on the burgeoning tourist traffic. Around this time, Taylor apparently abandoned farming and turned to less physically strenuous work as Ticonderoga’s first innkeeper. By 1808, the now-53-year-old had leased two lots “in town,” at the outlet of Lake George (then called Alexandria, now part of Ticonderoga hamlet). In 1811, Taylor opened a place of public entertainment at the start of the portage between Lake George and Lake Champlain. The following year he received a license from Essex County, making his the first sanctioned tavern in Ticonderoga. The county imposed restrictions: he could not “Keep a Disorderly inn or Tavern or Suffer or permit any Cock fighting gaming or Playing with Cards or Dice or Keep any billiard Table or other gaming Table of Shuffle board within the inn or Tavern by him to be Kept or within any out house yard [or structure] adjoining there unto.” Taylor left a memory that endured more than a generation as “a man of wit, of good parts, and withal of sincere piety, and few were the weddings or parties or festivals in town in which his art as cook, or waiter, and chief director of the eatables, was not brought into contribution” (Cook, p. 55). Historical markers commemorating Taylor’s farm site and his inn were erected by the Daughters of the American Revolution in 2005.

But by 1818, 63-year-old Taylor found himself in “reduced circumstances.” He sought support from the country’s first veterans’ relief program. Taylor reported that he was “unable to perform manual Labour by means of age & two ruptures, which have been of long standing.” He had no family or relations to support him. Then, when revised Revolutionary pension laws tightened eligibility in 1820, Taylor submitted the required inventory of his possessions as proof of his poverty: just a handful of household furnishings, utensils, “old religious books,” and “his necessary clothing & bedding.” The total value was \$69.43. Prince Taylor thence forward received a Revolutionary War soldier’s pension of \$8 a month; he died in 1828.

Further Reading

Cook, Flavius J. *Home Sketches of Essex County: Ticonderoga* (1858).

Crannell, Karl. "Prince Taylor," *The Haversack*, vol. XIV no. 2 (2005).

Essex County. Application for tavern license, 25 June 1812.

Godine, Amy. "Taylor, Tankard and King," *Adirondack Life*, January-February 2000.

Lape, Jane M. *Ticonderoga: Patches and Patterns from Its Past* (1969).

Maguire, J. Robert. *The Tour to the Northern Lakes of James Madison and Thomas Jefferson, May-June 1791* (1995).

McArthur, Thomas W. *History of Putnam* (1901).

Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty Land Applications: Massachusetts service, dossier #S.42.463. National Archives.

Secretary of the Commonwealth. *Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors of the Revolutionary War*, vol. XV (1896-1908).

Town of Putnam, NY. Oath of Overseers of highways. 15 April 1811.

Watson, Elkanah. *Journal of remarks from Albany to Lake Champlain, Augt 1805*. ms diary; box 3, journal E. New York State Library.

Nicholas Westbrook
Director, Fort Ticonderoga

1099 words