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WHITE TAIL DEER AT SARATOGA
SOME HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

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The size of the deer population in the area of the Saratoga Battlefield in 1777 is not just a historical side-light. It is an important concern for current resource management. In 1984, Park Superintendent W. Glen Gray wrote a preliminary report on this issue in which he examined a number of primary sources. His report was entitled "18th Century Deer Populations A Historical Study".

This paper contains two additional sources. It is hoped that these sources will help shed more light on the subject of historical deer populations in the area of Saratoga National Historical Park.

1. The Memoirs of Anne Grant contain a wealth of anecdotal evidence about the colony of New York in the years between 1757 and 1768; however, it must be remembered that she was very young during this period, and wrote from memory, 40 years after the fact. She was familiar with Albany and the surrounding area and lived with the Schuyler family which resided at the "flats" an estate north of Albany. These Schuylers were the Aunt and Uncle of General Philip Schuyler.

Mrs. Grant frequently mentions hunting and the abundance of game: "These youths were apt, whenever they could carry a gun.....(to)... range the whole day in search of game, to the neglect of all intellectual improvement", (P.92)...."Their farm yielded them abundantly all that in general a musket can supply...., The negroes whose business lay frequently in the woods, never willingly went there, or anywhere else without a gun, and rarely came back empty handed" (P.272).

However, the game that is most often mentioned is small, particularly ducks, geese, squirrels and passenger pigeons. When deer are mentioned, it is usually not in reference to the local hunters, but to the Indians: "Indians, grateful for the numerous benefits they were daily receiving from them (the Schuylers), were constantly bringing the smaller game and in winter and spring, loads of venison." (P.271) This implies that the venison was being brought from a distance, another extract suggests why: "They (the Indians) had towns on the banks of the lakes and rivers in the interior where their great hunting and fishing places were. In the winter, their grand hunting parties were in places more remote from our boundaries, where the deer and other large animals took shelter from the neighborhood of man". (P.106).

Mrs. Grant's accounts read to suggest that 10 to 15 years before the Battles of Saratoga, deer were already becoming scarce in areas close to the white settlement. While she does not specifically mention what wildlife was to be found in the Stillwater-Saratoga area, her point of reference was only 30 miles away.

2. Seventeen years after the Battles of Saratoga, an English visitor toured the area and recorded some telling comments on the natural surroundings. William Strickland was not just a tourist. Part of his motivation for exploring the region was to report back to the British Board of Agriculture. He was particularly interested in the land and how it was being used.

In the fall of 1794, he traveled "from Ballstown Springs to Schuylers Mills." His account of the area is gloomy:

"The barbarous backwoodsman has got possession of the soil, and fire and axe are rapidly leveling the woods. The backwoodsman has an utter abhorance for the works of the creation....In the first place he drives away or destroys the more humanized savage.....in the next place he thoughtlessly and rapaciously exterminates all living animals....he then extirpates the woods that cloath and ornament the country.... and finally he exhausts and wears out the soil.....

Except these few tracts of original wood no timber remains in the country; fire and neglect prevent the growth of a new forest.....

In this vast tract of country no deer, or other useful animal or next to none exist; and scarce a living creature is to be seen. Thus has a country, once abounding in animated nature, for want of Laws to protect of sense in the people to kill with moderation and in seasonable times, in the short space of 20 years become still as death."

Quite probably the area was not as empty of deer in 1777 as it was in 1794, but the settlement process that Strickland described was clearly started by the time of the Battles, which suggests that the deer population of the area was rapidly declining.

Bibliography

1. Mrs. Anne Grant, Memoirs of an American Lady; Freeport, N.Y.; Books for Librarys press, (Reprint 1971, originally published in 1808).
2. William Strickland, Journal of a Tour in the United States of America 1794-1795; Kingsport Tenn.; Kingsport Press, Inc. 1971.