

# THE FIRST INSTITUTE

BY RICHARD FROST

In the aftermath of World War II, New York State saw a need to educate the returning soldiers.

**A**t the end of World War II, thousands of soldiers prepared to come home.

Returnees would be seeking jobs. Many would be seeking housing. They would also be seeking education.

Unlike soldiers returning from previous wars, though, these young men had in hand newly enacted GI benefits; money for school would not be a problem.

Could New York's colleges handle the rush for admission? Governor Thomas E. Dewey met with college presidents and gained pledges to increase enrollments. But this alone might not handle the expected onslaught of new scholars.

Commissioner of Housing Herman T. Stichman, Executive

Director of Higher Education Dr. John S. Allen, and others in state government began seeking creative solutions. One suggestion centered on a long-time Army base in Plattsburgh. Decommissioned late during the war, the site briefly served as a Naval officer training school, then as an Army Air Force Convalescent Hospital.

Perhaps now the Plattsburgh Military Reservation, in federal hands since the War of 1812, could become a college.

## Idea Spreads

The idea expanded to other recently vacated military operations. Champlain College would be established at Plattsburgh Barracks. Mohawk College would take over Rhoads General Hospital in

Utica. Sampson Naval Training Center near Geneva would become Sampson College.

To provide structure, Associated Colleges of Upper New York (ACUNY) was chartered by the state Board of Regents on May 17, 1946. Twenty chief executives from private colleges comprised the board of directors, with Cornell President Edmund Ezra Day as chairperson. Asa Knowles was selected as Champlain College's president, as well as ACUNY's supervisor.

With a goal of beginning academic sessions in September 1946, faculty recruitment began immediately. Both experienced and newly graduated candidates were considered, as were individuals with relevant business or industrial



experience. The final mix included longtime professors and newly minted PhDs.

Admission processes were streamlined. Anyone already accepted by a New York college but unable to matriculate because of insufficient space was automatically eligible. Tuition, set at \$200 per semester for state residents and \$240 for out-of-state attendees, would be largely covered by the GI bill.

All three schools had identical curricula for business, liberal arts, and pre-engineering tracks. This helped over 7,000 ACUNY students transfer to four-year schools by 1949.

### Renovations Begin

Construction workers in Plattsburgh began carving out forty-five classrooms in nine different buildings. Barracks were repartitioned for dormitories. Although all ACUNY schools accepted female students, only Champlain College designated a dorm specifically for women.

Former enlisted men's barracks, warehouses, even a carpentry shop and bakery were modified into eighty-eight apartments for married students. Limestone officers'

quarters and stately brick duplexes became homes for deans, other administrators, and faculty. So did 1840s-era Old Stone Barracks.

When Governor Dewey gave the keynote address at formal dedication ceremonies on September 22, 1946, books and desks were still arriving. Calling Champlain College the "first GI institute of higher learning" he told how "these great military swords are being converted into educational plowshares."

"It is the tangible and visible expression of the loyalty and affection of the people of the State for those who once again made our freedom possible ... our state can now open its arms to veterans generally who now resume their search for education which the war interrupted," Dewey continued. New York veterans, he boasted, "can get the education to which you are entitled, because we will find a place for you to get it."

Initial enrollment numbered 1,007 students, 90 percent of whom had seen military service. Included in that complement were twenty-four women. (In comparison, approximately 3,000 students matriculated

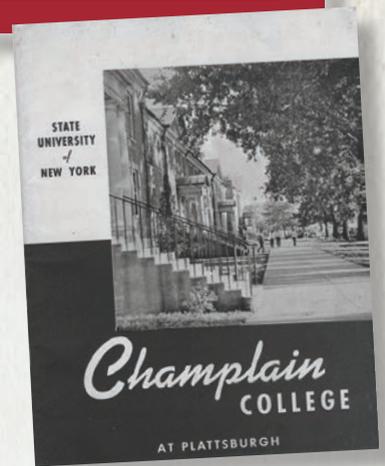
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at Sampson, and 2,000 at Mohawk.) A faculty of 109 taught them at Champlain.

*The New York Times Magazine* of October 6, 1946, featured a two-page photo spread on Champlain College, saying "there is not yet an 'Ivy League' atmosphere, but that can be counted on to develop in the years ahead—already a committee 'on the establishment of traditions' has been organized by the new student body."

In April 1947, representatives of the Committee of the Association of Colleges and Universities of the State of New York praised faculty and staff at all ACUNY institutions. "They are a superior group and one wonders how so many excellent people could have been located in so short a time."



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COURTESY SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, FEINBERG LIBRARY, SUNY COLLEGE AT PLATTSBURGH

*A long-time Army base in Plattsburgh became the site of Champlain College.*

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS





On September 25, 1950, Governor Dewey came north to celebrate making Champlain College the second four-year liberal arts college (after Harpur) in the newly formed State University of New York.

(Above): Students in the college competed in intercollegiate sports.

COURTESY SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, FEINBERG LIBRARY, SUNY COLLEGE AT PLATTSBURGH

The Associated Colleges of Upper New York (ACUNY) was chartered in May 1946 to provide structure for the colleges established to service returning soldiers.

#### Extracurricular Activities

The college competed in the usual intercollegiate sports. Students worked on the weekly newspaper *Champlainer*, a literary magazine, and radio station WRWS, the "Voice of Champlain."

Opportunities for musicians included a dance band, thirty-piece symphony, and The

Drones, a popular 12-person singing group. Potential thespians could join the Harlequin Club, noted for its Gilbert and Sullivan operettas. Religious organizations helped meet spiritual needs. French clubs and debate clubs thrived. The flying club boasted its own airplane.

The school's 2nd Annual Winter Weekend, "the first event staged jointly by Champlain College and neighboring Plattsburgh State Teachers College," featured snow sculpture contests and ice shows.

Although the ACUNY charter was renewed twice, the crisis that gave birth to the innovative consortium in 1946 had passed. Sampson closed in 1948; Mohawk followed suit in 1949. But Champlain thrived. Support grew for transforming it into a four-year college. Consultants recommended changes needed for a successful transition.

On September 25, 1950, Governor Dewey came north to celebrate making Champlain College the second four-year liberal arts college (after Harpur) in the newly formed State University of New York. "I dedicate Champlain College here today to the cause of human freedom. I dedicate it to the increasing understanding of the needs of our neighbors, to the increasing faith of our people that human freedom is the most cherished thing on earth. I dedicate it to ever better, stronger free government and an ever happier

free people."

Champlain's commencement on June 11, 1951, heralded the first graduating liberal arts class in the SUNY system. Plattsburgh's *Press-Republican* quoted Mayor John Tyrell as saying, "We in the city feel close to our new college and we would like the students and faculty and their friends to feel they are an important part of our community."

#### Change Comes

In 1952, the United States Air Force expressed desire for a northeastern base. They initially looked near Burlington, Vermont, but Plattsburgh business and political interests pushed for Lake Champlain's New York side. Local leaders offered Macomb Reservation, site of major military maneuvers in 1939, and Point au Roche, both now state parks, and Clinton County's airport as locations.

Perhaps inevitably, the Air Force looked also at the onetime army barracks. Soon military brass made it clear they would not locate near Plattsburgh unless the campus was part of the deal. Preexisting buildings would save the Air Force money. Proximity to the lake offered morale-boosting recreation.

Thus began one of the more bitter public conflicts in Plattsburgh's history. The City Council and County Board of Supervisors endorsed the Air Force concept. When the Chamber of Commerce initially agreed, then changed its position and supported



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Governor Thomas E. Dewey addressing the opening convocation of Champlain College in September of 1946.

retaining the college, the mayor responded in bitter terms.

The Plattsburgh Citizens' Committee for the Continuance of Champlain College, backed by several important state and local officials, released a sixteen-page brochure titled "Let This College Live" in March 1952. Compromise efforts to retain the college and have the Air Force accept donated land elsewhere gained no traction.

Student Richard Kelvin wrote the *New York Times*: "I would not think of standing in the way of national defense. But could not this defensive maneuver be conducted without interfering with higher education? Perhaps if more was done concerning education, less would have to be done for national defense." Sympathetic colleagues at Plattsburgh State Teachers College protested and signed petitions.

It was to no avail. Asserting a right to repossess the former Army barracks "in the interest of national security," the Air Force announced it would indeed displace Champlain College. Congress passed the

necessary bills. The decision was finalized.

Champlain College's June 15, 1953, commencement would be its last. Dean Amy Gilbert spoke:

"A living vital college is now being closed. ... We now have a wide field of endeavor to make the people of New York State realize what the loss of Champlain College means for higher education. ... As we leave Champlain College, let us lift our thoughts to the level of the great tasks that await us."

In the baccalaureate address, Dr. Charles Garside of Albany "stressed the selfishness and carelessness of certain people of the city in giving birth to the Air Force idea here," calling them "unmindful of the cultural advantages that would follow from making this a great seat of learning in the North, thinking solely in terms of what they blindly believed to be self interest."

SUNY Board of Trustees called Champlain College's closing "a serious loss to the state." The Board continued: "During its three years of existence as a state university

unit, the college achieved an enviable reputation."

Many students, plus some faculty and staff, moved to Harpur College (now SUNY Binghamton). But loyalties remained strong.

Over 400 alumni attended reunions in New York City during the 1950s. Smaller gatherings took place later in Lake Placid, Cooperstown, and Cape Cod. Forty-seven years after the college closed, 100 alums registered for the final reunion, in September 2000 in Plattsburgh.

Even the children of faculty and staff came back to reminisce, fondly recalling the unique milieu with both students and faculty living on the campus.

Champlain College graduates became attorneys, businessmen, engineers, teachers, and journalists. One man, Stephen Olmstead, rose to General in the United States Marines. Another, Carlton Rennell, became mayor of Plattsburgh. There were some national luminaries, like actor John Cassavetes and writer Donald Westlake.

Today, Champlain College is still remembered by surviving graduates for the opportunity given to continue their education and prepare the groundwork for successful lives. George Barber, class of 1951, speaks with reverence about his experience: "There was nothing better than getting up in the morning and going to class ... every day I craved going to school and listening to the discussion." ■

## THE ARCHIVES CONNECTION

**A** *CUNY: The Associated Colleges of Upper New York* (Cornell University Press, 1950), by Amy Gilbert, provided comprehensive background on this unique educational experiment.

Clinton County Historical Association's collection on Champlain College included newspaper articles, campus publications, photographs, and even a recording made by The Drones.

Manuscript files in Special Collections at SUNY Plattsburgh's Feinberg Library offered correspondence, memos, formal evaluations, marketing materials, and reunion information. Holdings also included Winter Weekend programs and a fraternity beer mug.

The website of NYS Historic Newspapers (<http://nyshistoricnewspapers.org>) proved invaluable, as did interviews of surviving graduates and video of the 2000 reunion in Plattsburgh.

