

# Hundreds of skeletons found in Cambria have been lost to history

## Was it a massacre? Historians have been mystified since 19th Century discovery

The story begins in 1823 when a man by the name of Eliakim Hammond purchased property in the Town of Cambria (just east of Lewiston) from the Holland Land Company. Mr. Hammond discovered the bones of a child on the surface of the ground. He didn't give it much thought, since he was told the site had been a former Native American village.

Mr. Eli Bruce, a local teacher and tax collector for the Town of Lewiston, heard about the discovery and convinced Hammond to do some exploring in search of relics. They started digging and came upon a large pit that was filled with hundreds, if not thousands, of skeletons.<sup>1</sup> Because many of the skeletons exhibited fractures, Bruce concluded that "one great massacre" had occurred.

Bruce and Hammond decided to capitalize on the discovery and began charging 10 cents admission to the site. Reports indicate that upwards of 150 people a day visited the ossuary<sup>2</sup>, each one carrying away a souvenir bone.

Bruce made some money and became quite popular and was elected Sheriff in 1825, the first to occupy the new County Courthouse and Jail in Lockport. However, he got caught up in the scandal involving the disappearance of the Masonic traitor, William Morgan, and was removed from office by Gov. DeWitt Clinton in 1827. He was later tried and sentenced to 28 months in the Canandaigua jail, where his health was compromised. He fell victim to the cholera epidemic of 1832. His fellow Masons called him the "Masonic Martyr."

<sup>1</sup> The History of Niagara County (1878 Schoolcraft) quotes Hammond and Bruce saying that "4000 souls had perished," while Clarence Lewis, former Niagara County Historian says, "They estimated the number to run into the hundreds." (Lockport Union Sun and Journal, June 23, 1952).

<sup>2</sup> ossuary: a site made to serve as a final resting place of human skeletal remains.

### Site Shrouded in Mystery

Today, local historians are not exactly certain where the ossuary was located, however they do know the general location which is in the Town of Cambria, near Lower Mountain Road, just west of the intersection of Lower Mountain and Thrall Roads.

Orsamus Turner, author of the Pioneer History of the Holland Purchase, published in 1849, visited the site soon after the 1823 discovery, and reported in the book (p. 26-27):

"An area of about 6 acres appears to have been occupied... Nearly in the center of the area was a depository of the dead... Hundreds seem to have been thrown in promiscuously, of both sexes and all ages, at same time. The conjecture might well be indulged that it has been the theatre of a sanguinary<sup>1</sup> battle... and general massacre."

There are reports that the property owner in 1900, Rollin Gould, was still discovering skeletons.<sup>2</sup> Since then, the area has been developed and used for farming.

If it's true a huge massacre took place in Niagara County, the event could rival 9/11 as one of the greatest tragedies in North American history.

<sup>1</sup> sanguinary: involving or causing much bloodshed.

<sup>2</sup> Lockport Union Sun and Journal, June 13, 1963.

### Another Theory

Tuscarora Chief Elias Johnson wrote about the topic in 1881 and theorized that the massacre could have been instigated by white men who, under the guise of being missionaries, gathered the local natives into a large house of worship. Trapped inside, white soldiers then burned the chapel and its inhabitants.

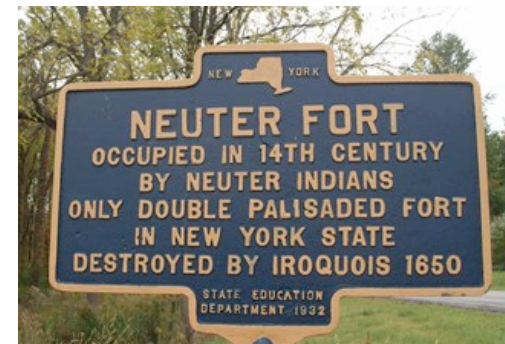
### Could it be a Clue?

This state marker is located in Shelby, NY, about 20 miles east of Cambria where the

Neuter Indians had a fort. It is believed the Neuters had about forty villages, including four which were located east of the Niagara River, one of which was in Cambria. The Neuters were aptly named because of their neutrality between warring Indian nations, namely the Senecas in New York and the Hurons in Canada.

However, the Senecas, who were the Keepers of the Western Door for the Iroquois Confederacy, began to suspect the Neuters were getting too friendly with the Hurons. In 1650, the Senecas attacked and destroyed the Neuter nation.

Were the skeletons in Cambria a remnant of the destruction?



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