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Birthplace of the U.S.Navy, Whitehall, New York

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by Barbara Ann Weibel at Hole In The Donut

On October 11, 1776, a battle took place at Valcour Island, off the western shore of Lake Champlain, that may well have decided the fate of the American Revolution.

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The village of Whitehall runs along the banks of the Champlain Canal

The hero of the Battle of Valcour Island was Benedict Arnold, one of the colonies' most courageous and resourceful military leaders. Anticipating that the British would use the lakes as an invasion route to split the revolted colonies in two, Arnold scraped together a fleet capable of at least delaying a British advance along Lake Champlain from Canada. Except for vessels previously captured, all of the ships were constructed during the summer of 1776 at what is today the village of Whitehall, using trees cut from the local forests. Carpenters, riggers, and blacksmiths were imported from as far away as Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, and Philadelphia to build the ships.

Arnold's small fleet of 12 vessels of various sizes and capabilities sailed toward Valcour Island in August 1776 to surprise the British as they advanced south. The British armada, which had been constructed at the north end of the lake, set sail in October. When the fleets met at Valcour Island, a fierce two-day battle ensued. The Americans were battered by the more heavily armed British vessels and those that were not sunk were forced to retreat. But the battle caused the British to return north for the winter, providing the Americans with valuable time to gather, arm, and prepare for the British campaign of 1777 that ended with the American victory at Saratoga, the turning point of the war.

Lock 12 of the Champlain Canal, located in the center of town, is the entryway to Lake Champlain

Because Valcour was the first naval battle of strategic importance during the Revolutionary War, the New Yok State Legislature, in 1960, declared Whitehall to be the Birthplace of the United States Navy. Today this sleepy little village, nestled in a valley at the southern tip of Lake Champlain, attracts visitors as much for its scenery as for its history. Cruises regularly pass through Lock 12 of the Champlain Canal and sail onto the Lake, passing historic sites such as Fort Ticonderoga and Mount Independence, while enjoying abundant sightings of Eagles, Osprey, and Heron.

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Another popular attraction in the town is Skene Manor, an elegant Victorian gothic style castle perched on the nearby mountainside that overlooks Whitehall and offers lovely views of Lake Champlain and the historic canal. The Manor provides free tours and serves luncheon several days a week.

Whitehall is located at the junction of U.S. Rt. 4 and Rt. 22, just east of the Vermont State line.

Skene Manor, an historical Victorian gothic style mansion, perches on the hillside, overlooking Lake Champlain and the village of Whitehall

Accommodations around Lake Champlain are abundant and Whitehall has a number of hotels as well.

Photos courtesy of Barbara Weibel

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