

OYSTER RIVER MASSACRE MARKER – Roundtable Discussion

Thursday, January 18, 2024

DURHAM TOWN HALL, COUNCIL CHAMBERS

4:00 p.m.

PARTICIPANTS PRESENT:

Larry Brickner-Wood (Chair of the HDC/HC – serving as meeting chair)
Charlotte Bacon (Montgomery Will) – Facilitator
Barbara Will (Montgomery Will) – Facilitator

Durham Historic District/Heritage Commission (HDC/HC):

Jennifer Becker
Carolyn Singer

Durham Human Rights Commission:

Richard Belshaw
Janet Perkins-Howland (Attending remotely via zoom)

Durham Historic Association:

Steve Eames
Janet Mackie

New Hampshire Division of Historical Resources (NHDHR):

Amy Dixon, Community Preservation Coordinator
Nadine Miller, Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer

New Hampshire Department of Transportation (NHDOT):

Sheila Charles, Cultural Resources Program Specialist/ Archeologist
Jill Edelman, Cultural Resources Manager

New Hampshire Commission on Native American Affairs:

Anne Jennison, Chair (Attending remotely on zoom)

**Indigenous New Hampshire Collaborative Collective and Cowasuck Band of the
Pennacook Abenaki People:**

Denise Pouliot, Head Female Speaker of the Penacook Abenaki People

ALSO PRESENT: Durham Town Planner Michael Behrendt

I. Welcome

Chair Larry Brickner-Wood opened the meeting at 4:00 p.m., welcomed everyone and then turned the meeting over to Barbara Will of Montgomery Will.

II. Introductions

Ms. Will and her colleague Charlotte Bacon are here to facilitate the discussion about the Oyster River marker. She's a Dartmouth College Professor and Vice Provost of Academic Affairs.

Ms. Bacon introduced herself as a former tenured English Professor at UNH. She's currently a novelist and Assistant Vice Provost for Research and Development at Dartmouth College. Prior to that, she was Director of the Maine Wabanaki State Child Welfare Truth and Reconciliation Commission – a human rights effort of people who felt strongly children had been taken from reservations and lands and put into foster care at disproportionate rates.

Ms. Bacon said the goal with the upcoming sessions is “to think about how we can listen to one another in order to arrive at next steps.” This is a consultative process, meant to inform those who will make the decision about the plaque. The group should consider how to do this humanely, with compassion, kindness and as much historical accuracy as possible.

Participants were then invited to introduce themselves and give a brief background.

III. Overview of Meeting Goals – Charlotte Bacon and Barbara Will of Montgomery Will

Ms. Bacon outlined the goals for the next three meetings, which were developed in discussion with Larry Brickner-Wood and Michael Behrendt:

- Develop consensus around language for new Oyster River Raid Marker.
- If not possible to develop new language in three meetings, then lay the groundwork and process for continuing to develop consensus.
- Establish a framework and model for other similar conversations regarding the Town's history – for Durham or other communities;
- To be in conversation with each other; break down barriers;
- Create, build and shape grounds for respect, trust and empathy.

IV. Ground Rules and Process

Ms. Will said the group will follow facilitator rules to “step up and stand back,” i.e., everyone is encouraged to step up and say what they need to say and then stand back and let others come forward. She encouraged speakers to leave space between comments.

She noted the first meeting is to “aerate issues; be able to talk and hear each other; understand differing perspectives.” The second session is to develop possible solutions over what is heard today. The third session is to develop consensus around language for the marker.

V. Discussion

Ms. Bacon then opened the discussion with some questions: Why are you here? What do you hope to accomplish through these meetings? What do you hope is the outcome?

Nadine Miller (NH Division of Historical Resources) said her agency partners with the NH-DOT on the marker program. She read a drafted statement explaining the origins of the program and the impetus for the recent review of markers, including the following points:

- This review is part of a national movement to re-examine the interpretation of history and to reckon with difficult histories.
- The state established a Historical Marker Advisory Committee in 2020 – with cultural resources staff from several state agencies. The impetus for the Committee was an executive order from the Governor seeking to establish more diversity, equity and inclusion in NH.
- Committee members reviewed existing markers for lack of historical context, or references that could be perceived as inappropriate and developed a plan to address the identified markers.
- Markers were identified for the following reasons: someone is left out (due to religion, race, class, political party); The marker represents a one-sided history; is racially insensitive; uses derogatory language or lacks context.
- Durham’s marker #50 was one of the few high priority markers designated for retirement or revision and the only one removed in 2021 where the community expressed interest in revising the text.

- The purpose of the marker program is to educate the public about NH's history. It's grounded in scholarship and interpretation, which can change over time as new information is uncovered or cultural shifts occur.
- The Advisory Committee researched what other states are doing. The American Association of State and Local History has an excellent website and they're hosting a virtual symposium in March titled, "Doing History in Polarizing Times."

Jill Edelman (DOT/Cultural Resources Manager) said in the 1950s, there were no cultural resources staff members. She's here to work with the Division of Historical Resources and others on the best possible outcome.

Anne Jennison (NH Commission on Native American Affairs) noted that the Commission on Native American Affairs was invited to participate in the Historical Marker Advisory Committee. She added it's heartening to see people come together here to listen to one another.

Carolyn Singer (Durham Historic District/Heritage Commission) said she's heard remarks that this could serve as a model; however, in her view, there seem to be inconsistencies in the process. The state hasn't provided any guidelines for how the revision of markers should be undertaken.

Janet Mackie (Durham Historic Association/DHA) said the Oyster River marker was sponsored by the DHA in 1965 and revised around 1992. The Association recognizes it needs to be updated, but inquiries to the state about their specific objections have been unanswered. DHA volunteers have conducted a great deal of research recently to include translation of French records, adding to the original research using English records. They submitted draft language to the state in March 2023, but have not heard back.

Steve Eames (Durham Historic Association) said the time period on the marker is his area of research. He envisions a small road sign that invites people to do further research on their own.

Richard Belshaw (Durham Human Rights Commission) previously introduced himself as a pastor at a Portsmouth church that shares responsibility for a slave burial ground. He noted it's difficult to accurately portray war, atrocities and suffering. Recently, his church used ground-penetrating radar on the burial site and discovered more bodies than originally believed. He asked how to portray history accurately and fairly with 300 years of hindsight.

Sheila Charles (NH-DOT/Cultural Resources) said, "We've all been struggling with how we can improve our markers." Thus far there haven't been a lot of guidelines, which is why the group began meeting. There's a lot of work to be done, which has to be balanced with other DOT work demands.

Janet Perkins-Howland (Durham Human Rights Commission) said this marker has a big impact, even though it's small. Words do matter.

Denise Pouliot (Member of the Cowasuck Band and Indigenous New Hampshire Collaborative Collective) said her presence here is to be sure the indigenous history of the past is included in the signs. The signs have been constructed from a Colonial perspective. She added that she participated in the Advisory Panel.

Carolyn Singer quoted briefly from the NH Historical marker policy stating that verification of facts is necessary. Part of this process, she said, is coming to agreement over what happened [in 1694]. While the Durham Historic Association has provided sources for their draft language, she hasn't seen any of the state's sources. She requested that sources be provided for both sides. **Mr. Belshaw** echoed this request and asked if the information could be shared before the next meeting.

Ms. Bacon reflected on how long it might take to pull something like that together and if there's enough time and human power. While it's an admirable goal, she said it's also very labor intensive. She suggested documentation could be sought if needed to justify a different direction for the language on the sign. She said, "I think what you're asking for is hard for people to do."

Ms. Singer noted new language has already been suggested and there should be documents made available to back up that narrative.

Nadine Miller replied the state will share their narratives. Responding to Ms. Mackie's earlier point that Durham Historic Association never heard back from the state after submitting draft language, she said there was a formal response sent.

The DHR proposed to set aside revision of the Oyster River marker until it could be considered simultaneously with mitigation for removal of the Oyster River Dam – but that suggestion was unpopular with the town so it was tabled. That's one reason this meeting is now taking place. She added DHR wants to hear what the town is interested in doing. There might be new tools available and possibly oral histories could be brought into the process.

Ms. Will reflected that while wording for the sign is ultimately the decision of the state, they are looking to the town to understand how to talk about this event and its context. She added, "If we do this well, this is a model for how to do this kind of work."

Janet Mackie said typically if text needs to be revised it would fall to the original sponsor of the sign, which in this case was the Durham Historic Association. She explained the town appointed DHA to take the lead and negotiate new wording with the state. She's shocked to learn the DHR response was to fold consideration of the marker in

with a federally-required 106 Dam mitigation project and added that DHA never got feedback about the new sources they provided or the new proposed language.

Durham Town Planner Michael Behrendt said while the group could spend a lot of time deliberating what happened in the early review process, he doesn't think that's the best use of their time. In his view, everybody operated in good faith. He encouraged the group to focus on working toward a solution.

Ms. Bacon acknowledged a certain amount of frustration expressed by both sides – from Durham and the state. She encouraged participants to think about this with a clean slate and emphasized the town has now been entrusted to take part in a consultative process. She said there may be other ways besides a marker to commemorate what happened.

Janet Perkins-Howland asked what is the purpose of the marker. She wonders if there are opportunities to turn it into something educational that celebrates history.

Nadine Miller replied the purpose is to educate the public about NH's history. The marker program isn't designed to "elevate a story to a higher level." She suggested there may be other ways to expand the story -- possibly with an exhibit at the Historic Association or through a partnership with UNH.

Mr. Behrendt commented that this was a painful event for the community and he thinks there's a need to recognize it.

Richard Belshaw said one of the purposes of the signs is to make something real to the reader. They're standing on the ground where this particular history happened, which can be very powerful. He believes we're remembering this because it's significant in the identification of who we are as Americans. How do these markers speak to the soul of who we are?

Ms. Bacon reflected on this last point and said the goal is to honor not to blame. She encouraged the group to look at replacement signs in Maine. They've made a concerted effort over the last decade to replace signage that was discriminatory, particularly toward the Abenaki people. Maine produced a lot of programming and also did research on how Nazi Germany recognized traumatic events.

Ms. Will said the Germans have a phrase: "We don't use adjectives when we talk about the past." She noted Durham's plaque has the word "devastating" and raised a question about the use of the word. She asked Denise Pouliot about the importance of the continuity of memories.

Ms. Pouliot replied that as a tribe they seek to rectify some of the one-sided stories that are being shared, by including some of the indigenous narratives that came down through oral tradition.

She then turned back to a comment from Janet Mackie, who had shared earlier that the Durham Historic Association never saw the proposed language for the sign from the Department of Historical Resources (DHR).

Ms. Pouliot offered to read the text to the group. After brief discussion with Ms. Bacon about this, she proceeded to read the original text and then the version as modified by the DHR. **[The language is available on the town website: [ci.durham.nh.us/ Historic District/Heritage Commission/ Current Projects Before the HDC/ Oyster River Massacre Marker](http://ci.durham.nh.us/HistoricDistrict/HeritageCommission/CurrentProjectsBeforetheHDC/OysterRiverMassacreMarker).]**

As Chair of the NH Commission on Native American Affairs, **Anne Jennison** clarified that there is no Commission version of the text. They did not propose a new draft, but they did see what DHR brought forward.

Ms. Will said the hope is that participants will do some homework for meeting #2. At that time, perhaps the different versions can be discussed. She asked where people feel they need more information to be able to talk about the plaques.

Richard Belshaw said he has a copy of the *History of Durham* and has seen what is on Wikipedia. He's looking to learn more about what scholars think and to look at basic facts.

Steve Eames said the group needs to arrive at a consensus about what happened at the event in order to come up with language for the sign. Rather than restricting themselves to the proposed language, the group needs to think about or accept other possibilities about what happened.

Ms. Singer reiterated her earlier request for sources to be provided. She said narratives have been put forward, but there has to be something behind them.

Anne Jennison gave some historical context for the event. She said what happened in Durham to the Colonists was a tragic, violent incident during one war. Current scholarship places the incident within the context of King Williams War but also places it in a much larger context of well over 100 years of war. "It amounts to the English here and French to the north fighting to take over and invade the land of the indigenous people by incredibly violent means."

Ms. Jennison continued that what happened at Oyster River was important to the people who were impacted by the loss of life and property, but overall was a blip. It occurred on unceded land in the midst of more than five wars. The French and Indian War was the ultimate battle. This was one moment in 100 or more years of those kinds of moments. The English took certain actions to reduce the Abenaki population, which, of course, made the Abenaki people incredibly angry. She added that history is written by the

winners, which is why we have French and English documents that don't reflect the Abenaki experience.

Ms. Will asked if Ms. Jennison could provide sources for this information so it can be posted on the town website before the next meeting.

Jennifer Becker (HDC/HC) remarked this uncovers an interesting aspect of the process. While the original event was an "us vs. them vs. them" event, there's now an opportunity to let go of the "us vs. them" viewpoint. This history belongs to all of us, not just New Hampshire.

Janet Perkins-Howland agreed with what Anne Jennison said about context. She's deeply worried that a marker like this can cause more harm than good and she re-stated her earlier question: What's the original purpose of the marker?

Ms. Will posed a question to the group: Is putting back the plaque a done deal?

Nadine Miller said plaques were typically the only way to talk about history in the 1950s. Since the establishment of the National Register of Historic Places, however, there's an opportunity to talk about historic sites in a more thorough way. DHR is open-minded about the outcome of this discussion. The plaque doesn't need to go back. If it does, however, the state wants a more inclusive approach. She said DHR doesn't initiate markers; it's typically done by sponsors. They look to communities to let them know what's important.

Ms. Will asked if anybody would like to consider what would happen if the sign didn't go back.

Steve Eames replied he would like to encourage the sign from a selfish early American historian perspective. He added there's a general lack of knowledge among everyday Americans about what happened in the 150 years between the pilgrims' landing and the American Revolution. Most people don't know about King Williams War or 17th century indigenous culture. He thinks the sign should be worded so people are encouraged to want to learn more.

Amy Dixon commented that the National Preservation Act was passed in 1966, which required mitigation for certain projects. While the markers initially were an "easy out" for NH DOT to achieve mitigation, she said the department is now more likely to use interpretive panels, much like what you'd see on a walking trail or bike path. Graphics and QR codes can be used, compared to snippets on small markers. She's not advocating for or against markers, but said there are a lot of ways to tell history and do mitigation.

Denise Pouliot said she wants to caution people about having too much signage in one location. The dam removal project might involve installation of a kiosk and now there's

talk of adding a sign. She said it would be nice to go to the park and actually see the park and not just an array of signage. People should keep in mind how they want the site to look at the end of all of this.

Ms. Will asked if **Ms. Pouliot** is saying the plaque doesn't need to be there and Ms. Pouliot replied they've proposed virtual reality, which could be in the form of an app. She said her group is trying to push the town into the next generation of technology, so that residents and visitors can "feel and experience" [history] at the same time.

Ms. Bacon asked if there are other suggestions to replace the plaque.

Janet Perkins-Howland noted the town has an amazing number of resources, including the library, the museum and UNH. There are so many possibilities for education.

VI. Summary of Discussion and Plan for Meeting #2

Ms. Will remarked that when she's undertaken this work with other communities, people get excited about alternative ways of honoring their past. It could be art exhibits or a lecture series. A plaque seems to be a fairly limited way of grasping Durham's history.

She suggested this might be a natural stopping point in the discussion. The group has aired thoughts about the process and shared some gaps in knowledge. There's some homework for participants before the next meeting: to look at the original language of the plaque and the proposed revisions, including the sources provided by the Durham Historic Association. She noted there's an excellent book by Colin Calloway and also oral history sources.

VII. Adjournment

With no further discussion, Chair Larry Brickner-Wood adjourned the meeting at 5:42 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Lucie Bryar, Minute Taker
Durham Heritage Commission
Minutes were not approved by the Roundtable members