

OYSTER RIVER MASSACRE MARKER – Roundtable Discussion

Thursday, February 15, 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):

Carolyn Singer

Durham Human Rights Commission:

Richard Belshaw
Janet Perkins-Howland

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

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

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| 1 | ABSENT: Jennifer Becker | (Durham Historic District/Heritage Commission) |
| 2 | Jill Edelmann | (NHDOT, Cultural Resources Manager) |

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I. Welcome

Chair Larry Brickner-Wood opened the meeting at 4:00 p.m. and said the task before the group is to offer some revised wording to the state for the Oyster River Massacre/Raid marker.

II. Introductions

Charlotte Bacon acknowledged the group is undertaking big work and opened with some thoughts about today’s discussion:

“You’re immersing yourself in these deep historical questions,” she said. “It’s important to note that it was a terrible event that happened...and it was a tragedy for everyone involved. One of our goals is that we don’t want to have the violence that divided our community 330 years ago continue to divide us today.”

Ms. Will then talked about how to think about various sources, distinguishing between primary and secondary sources and then oral and written sources.

She noted primary sources aren’t necessarily more authentic or truer than secondary sources. There’s no need to create a hierarchy. She went on to say that both oral and written sources can be problematic because it’s hard to verify oral accounts and “history is written by the victors.”

She encouraged the group to be comfortable with uncertainty and ambiguity and said it’s unlikely they’ll be able to resolve what happened in 1694. It’s her hope the community will come together to give their best interpretation of what happened and provide context.

III. Focused Discussion

Ms. Will said the plan for this session is to share the wording from the original plaque side-by-side with the two revisions -- one from the Durham Historic Association and the other from NH Commission on Native American Affairs.

She posed three questions to the group:

What do we as a community want to say about this event?

What should be the scope of the plaque?

How much context should we provide?

The physical limitations of the sign were clarified at this point: 45 characters per line and about 12 to 14 lines. Both sides of the plaque could be used, which would double the total character count.

44 Ms. Bacon then read the three versions out loud as they were shown on the screen.
45 She reiterated this is an advisory process and in the end the state can decide what it
46 would like to do. [Drafts are available on the town website under **Historic District**
47 **Commission/Heritage Commission/ Current Projects Before the HDC/Oyster**
48 **River Massacre Marker.**]

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50 **Question: Ms. Will asked about the use of the word “Massacre” or “Raid?”**

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52 **Steve Eames (Durham Historic Association)** identified himself as a historical
53 consultant with a PhD in history and said his research is on historical warfare during
54 this time period. He has problems with the historical accuracy of all three versions.
55 The word “massacre” is very subjective, he said, adding, “My massacre is your
56 successful raid.”

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58 He continued that Europeans raised the level of violence when they came here
59 because they brought the experience of religious wars, for which there were no
60 holds barred. The word “massacre implies the death of helpless, innocent people.”
61 In this case, he said, there was a war going on and the idea of women and children
62 being killed had already been established. This had happened in the Pequot War in
63 the 1630s when the Pequots at the siege of Saybrook, CT, the first war between the
64 indigenous people and the English, whether the English killed women and children,
65 in other words, what were the rules. The English ended the war by burning a whole
66 village. Thus his preference is to use the word “raid” on the sign.

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68 **Janet Mackie (Durham Historic Association):** stated that the event has always
69 been known as the Oyster River Massacre and there is no reason to invent a new
70 name.

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72 **Denise Pouliot (Head Female Speaker of the Penacook Abenaki People)**
73 responded, “It’s our responsibility to use accurate terms. Just because something
74 was known by a particular term doesn’t mean it’s correct and should carry on.”

75
76 **Janet Mackie** pointed out that a tremendous number of defenseless women and
77 children who were depending on a peace treaty were killed. It is a fact that the only
78 reason Oyster River was attacked was to break the peace treaty. The settlement was
79 chosen because most of the towns on the Maine coast had already been destroyed
80 and Oyster River was next in line. “It was wealthy and completely unguarded.
81 Indians attacked to get the pillage and the plunder, plus young and strong captives.”

82 **Janet Perkins-Howland (Durham Human Rights Commission)** shared her view
83 that if the group can’t agree on the word “massacre,” they should consider leaving it
84 out.

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Ms. Bacon said she's struck by the fact that each version of the marker starts with a date. The calendar would have been known by English settlers and other Americans, but maybe Native people weren't familiar with it. Dates are culturally dependent. There's an idea of evoking an exactness.

Steve Eames replied that the event *is* anchored in time. It happened on a certain date and he believes it's important to include it.

Nadine Miller offered the idea that the plaque doesn't need to start with a date, but possibly with a broader context. She suggested the title "Oyster River Settlement."

Mr. Eames said that might imply it's about how the town was settled. He thinks starting with a date makes sense since the plaque is about a historical event that occurred on a specific date.

Richard Belshaw (Durham Human Rights Commission): said if two sides of the sign can be used, possibly "Side A" could be broad and general, and "Side B" could have more details. He offered the title, "Site of Major Conflict in King Williams War," but looked to Anne Jennison for clarification. She said it's the Second-Anglo Abenaki War.

Sheila Charles (NHDOT/Cultural Specialist/Archeologist) supports the idea of starting with a broader context. She added many of the signs in the state are two-sided, but some simply repeat the same wording on both sides. Location is key to how it's handled.

Janet Perkins-Howland commented she's a little unclear as to whether the plaque has to be about this raid. She sees it as an opportunity to educate people and reflect the history and values of Durham, past and present. She believes Durham was the first town in NH to recognize Indigenous Peoples Day. The group needs to consider that most people viewing the sign don't have in-depth historical knowledge.

Carolyn Singer (Durham Historic District/Heritage Commission) brought up the term of enslavement that was used in both the DHA and NHCNAA versions. She said many New England Captives were kidnapped and taken to New France and were later ransomed back. But many Indigenous were also captured and sent to the Caribbean where they worked in harsh conditions in sugar plantations. It's unclear, in her view, however, if that was motivation for the attack. She also questions the use of the term "unceded tribal lands," which she believes the average person doesn't understand.

126 **Ms. Bacon** noted that many people aren't familiar with King William's War like
127 they are with the American Revolution and the Civil War. **She asked the group to**
128 **think about audience. Who is reading? Who is watching? Why does it matter?**
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130 **Ms. Singer** commented that the larger story is about European entities competing
131 for land. The powers of Europe – Portugal, Spain, England, and France – all came to
132 claim land in the New World.
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134 **Mr. Eames** took exception with the phrase in the NH Commission on Native
135 American Affairs' version saying, "The raid was retribution for the kidnapping and
136 enslavement of 350 Natives." He said there's no historical evidence to support this.
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138 He explained there were two wars going on, one between the Wabanaki and the
139 English which began in 1688 and ended in 1699, and the other between England and
140 France, which is called King William's War. He said that the Oyster River Raid
141 falls on the shoulders of the French, who were using the Wabanaki because they had
142 no soldiers. In the DHA proposal it is indicated that the Wabanaki broke the Treaty
143 of 1693, but it doesn't say why.
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145 Ms. Bacon commented that the Treaty of Pemaquid and the Treaty of Ryswick
146 might be too specific and might not capture people's attention. **She asked how the**
147 **town could invite in a new audience and how they can acknowledge the violence**
148 **that happened and address the issue of unceded land.**
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150 **Janet Mackie** said the French had convinced the Wabanaki to break their treaty
151 with the English, but it's unclear if this was done by subterfuge or if the Wabanaki
152 acted under their own agency as we only have the French records to consult on this.
153

154 There was discussion about why this event is so important for the town of Durham
155 to commemorate, with some pointing out that it was the worst loss of life and
156 property to ever take place in the town. Ms. Bacon challenged the group to consider
157 the Indigenous perspective and **Denise Pouliot** said they were forced out of this
158 location. She asked, "Where's our plaque for that?"
159

160 There was a brief back and forth exchange between Ms. Pouliot and Ms. Mackie
161 about plaques and massacres – and from whose perspective plaques are created.

162 **Ms. Pouliot** said all the markers highlight colonial victories or slaughtering by
163 Indigenous people. "At the end of the day, we were here first. We were hunting and
164 fishing and you came in and forced us out by gunpoint." She added, "I don't see
165 anyone trying to fight for that level of truth."

166 **Janet Mackie** referenced the plaque at Norridgewock about the Norridgewock
167 Massacre of Indians and said the Indigenous can put up new plaques with their point
168 of view if they wish.

169
170 **Nadine Miller** said she thinks the sign can be a great educational opportunity for
171 children to talk with their parents about what happened. Both sides of the story
172 should be told since the killing of Indigenous people to take their land isn't taught in
173 schools.

174
175 There was discussion about whether the plaque should serve as a commemoration
176 for those who lost their lives and consensus was eventually reached that
177 "remembrance" was a better way to approach it. Later in the conversation, **Nadine**
178 **Miller** said state markers are not generally used for commemoration.

179
180 **Janet Mackie** said when the state removed the Baker River historical marker in
181 Rumney, the fact that Captain Baker's men had destroyed a Pemigewasset Indian
182 village and killed its inhabitants was lost. She said it is better when historical
183 markers state the facts and the public are allowed to form their own opinion.

184
185 **Carolyn Singer** raised the issue that apart from Indigenous voices not being heard
186 (generally in history), others also are not represented, including women, the
187 enslaved and the poor. She said there are at least 30 enslaved people who were part
188 of Durham's history – and that there are other groups that have been excluded from
189 historical interpretations – not just the Indigenous.

190
191 **Steve Eames** said after looking at the versions being considered, he drafted one of
192 his own and will share it with the group, if invited to do so. One point he tried to
193 address was not labeling Indigenous people in a generic sense. He feels it's
194 important to include tribal and individual names. It needs to be clear that the people
195 on the other side were not evil human beings, this was in context of a war.

196
197 Before presenting Mr. Eames' version for consideration, Ms. Bacon reiterated her
198 questions about audience and commemoration. She also talked about how a two-
199 sided sign might work, with possibly one side being the Wabanaki perspective and
200 the other being the settlers. She asked why the sign is important to the town.

201
202 **Mr. Eames** said it's about remembering a community trauma, much like the
203 Johnstown Flood or the San Francisco earthquake. Communities want to remember
204 their traumas.

205
206 **Richard Belshaw** encouraged the group to think of trauma on both sides – from the
207 settlers' perspective and the Indigenous view. He would like to further explore the

208 notion of using both sides of the sign. In answer to the question about audience, he
209 said, “It’s anybody and everybody.”

210

211 **Denise Pouliot** questioned whether a sign is necessary. She said there’s a lot of
212 history that has happened in this location and the little quarter-acre can only hold so
213 many signs before it ceases being a park.

214

215 **Janet Mackie** pointed out that the historical marker can be placed anywhere in
216 Durham because the 1694 Massacre occurred throughout the town.

217 **Janet Perkins-Howland** expressed skepticism about using two sides of the sign if
218 it’s structured as two opposing sides of the story. She shared a situation at the
219 Natural History Museum in New York and said it’s difficult to put complex history
220 with differing perspectives on a small sign.

221

222 **Janet Mackie** raised the fact that the Indians who attacked Oyster River lived 200
223 miles to the North. They did not attack in retribution for land being taken, they
224 attacked Oyster River because there was good pillage here. Oyster River was
225 attacked to break the peace treaty the Indians had made with the English governor in
226 Boston because the French would not tolerate the Indians living in their territory, the
227 land claimed by France, making treaties with the English.

228

229 **Sheila Charles** and others challenged the view that Indigenous people from further
230 away weren’t allied or in kinship with those in the Durham region. **Anne Jennison**
231 **(Chair of NH Commission on Native American Affairs)** later talked about
232 kinship and interactions throughout the Wabanaki territory, from Quebec to the
233 Canadian Maritimes, down to what is now NH, Maine, Vermont and Northeastern
234 MA.

235

236 **Janet Mackie** said the Oyster River Massacre was not about ‘the Indians against the
237 English, it was ‘the French against the English’ and the Indians who attacked Oyster
238 River acted on behalf of the French.

239

240 Responding to earlier points made, **Ms. Jennison** said the Abenaki saw themselves
241 as sovereign and self-determining; it’s unlikely they were manipulated by the
242 French. They engaged in diplomacy and treaty-making as necessary to survive what
243 they saw as the onslaught of Europeans.

244

245 She added there was disagreement among the Abenaki over the signing of the
246 Treaty of Pemaquid. In her view there’s too much information here to include on a
247 small sign. She asked about the use of QR codes that would link to articles on the

248 Durham website. She noted, “We are intelligent. We can read and come to our own
249 conclusions.”

250
251 **Steve Eames** agreed the Wabanaki weren’t puppets of the French. He said the
252 Indians needed powder, shot and muskets to wage war with the English and the
253 French supplied that. He encouraged the group to think about what is doable now on
254 the historic marker and not try to put too much into it with other types of signs or
255 technology.

256
257 Ms. Bacon expressed her view that the versions currently being reviewed are
258 weighty and have language and references most people walking past wouldn’t
259 understand.

260 **Denise Pouliot** suggested a historical timeline as a better fit for the community. She
261 said, it could address the time of contact as well as indentured Scots and slaves.
262 “Thinking about one marker is short-sighted,” she added.

263
264 **Ms. Singer** said since there’s a lot of history to interpret in the downtown area
265 alone, maybe the town could use one of its conservation properties to tell about
266 Indigenous lifeways.

267
268 **Ms. Pouliot** challenged that idea by saying, “Why does it have to be about
269 Indigenous history? We’re all part of American history.” She would like to see both
270 stories together, “so we can move forward as one. As long as we continue to divide,
271 we’ll continue to be where we are today.”

272
273 **Ms. Singer** said combining everyone’s history in one location is going to be
274 challenging. She doesn’t favor a timeline in the area of Durham’s early settlement
275 (near the Mill Pond Dam area), fearing it would be too condensed and she wants to
276 be sure the enslaved story is told there in that it is where many of the enslaved
277 individuals worked and lived. Ms. Will asked Ms. Singer to write something about
278 her ideas for the next meeting.

279 Mr. Eames was then invited to share his draft with the group.

280
281 **Draft from Steve Eames:**
282 **Oyster River Attack**

283 “On July 18, 1694, during King Williams’ War (1689-1697), a force of about 250
284 Wabanaki, principally Penobscots and Norridgewock, led by Madockawando and
285 Bomazeen assaulted the town of Oyster River. The French had encouraged the
286 Wabanaki to break the questionable Treaty of 1693 that continued the French war
287 against the English. The Wabanaki had been fighting the English before the treaty

288 over land encroachment and other issues as well as assisting the French. The
289 surprise at Oyster River was complete. One hundred inhabitants were killed; thirty
290 captured and twenty buildings destroyed. “Oyster River is layd waste,” read the
291 dispatch from acting New Hampshire Governor John Usher. It was the most
292 devastating attack in New Hampshire during the War.”

293
294 Mr. Eames noted all treaties at the time were questionable because you had a culture
295 with a written language dealing with a culture with no written language. You can’t
296 make the case that the Wabanaki understood all those words. The Wabanakis
297 wanted peace and may not have understood all the ideas in the treaty. His research
298 revealed that when they signed treaties, the Wabanaki were often agreeing to
299 “become subjects of the King.” When they went to war later on, they were called
300 traitors which, in his view, is equivalent to the term “terrorist” today, which meant
301 there were no rules of war applied. Indigenous people had no concept of being a
302 subject to a king. But in the immediate circumstance, it is the idea of consensus, that
303 indigenous “politics” was based on consensus. Chiefs were great orators with
304 persuasive power, and they usually were good warriors. The English looked at
305 chiefs like governors or kings because that was the English context. Chiefs had no
306 compulsion power over their people. In this case you have a chief, Taxous, who was
307 not part of the consensus that led to the treaty, and so he felt he was not bound by
308 this, and the French used that.

309 **Ms. Will asked the group if naming the tribes or bands that were involved is an**
310 **improvement over earlier versions.**

311
312 **Richard Belshaw** spoke in favor of including the Indigenous names. He questions
313 the use of King Williams, King Philips or the Anglo-Wabanaki War – and thinks
314 they should use the latter term. He believes this version is more Indigenous-centric,
315 but also thinks there should be some mention of trauma on the Indigenous side.

316
317 **Janet Perkins-Howland** said she likes a lot of this version but still thinks it’s too
318 much for a small sign. She asked about using QR codes and **Amy Dixon** said it’s
319 not an option since the Foundry producing the signs can’t create them. Apart from a
320 small sign, Ms. Perkins-Howland would like the town to think about other
321 possibilities for education and reparation. Ms. Will invited her to draft some
322 aspirational ideas about this for the next meeting.

323
324 **Other conversation/comments about Mr. Eames’ draft included:**

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326 • **Nadine Miller** said the first part explains a lot more [than previous drafts], but she
327 finds the quote from the acting governor “very polarizing.” Calling it the “most

328 devastating attack during the War” also doesn’t take cultural identity into account.

329

330 • **Steve Eames** said the governor’s statement was descriptive and accurate and should
331 be included if the town wants to remember the trauma. Speaking as a military
332 historian, he said the Wabanaki were successful in the raid and showed themselves
333 to be experts in this type of warfare.

334

335 • Ms. Will asked if the term “devastating” should be changed to “successful” and Mr.
336 Eames replied it depends on your point of view. It could say the “most ‘devastating’
337 and, from the Abenaki perspective, the most ‘successful’ attack during the War.”

338

339 Ms. Bacon briefly discussed the idea of trauma and relayed an instance among the
340 Passamaquoddy in Maine in 1988 or 1989, when the federal government offered
341 assistance during a devastating ice storm. She said while they accepted food and
342 radios, the Indians declined blankets due to smallpox, because “memories are that
343 long.” She asked how the weight of memories like this can be addressed on a sign
344 with limited characters.

345

346 As the discussion wrapped up, Ms. Will invited others to draft their own versions
347 and send them to Mr. Behrendt for distribution via email before the next meeting.

348 She explained the goal isn’t to create a lack of transparency, but to allow the work to
349 unfold. Participants should come to the next meeting prepared to discuss the pros
350 and cons of each draft.

351

352 **Richard Belshaw** proposed having a discussion about where the sign should be
353 located and **Sheila Charles** said the town can suggest moving the sign, but it would
354 need to be on a state road or a combined city/state road.

355 Ms. Bacon thanked everyone for the energy, care and thoughtfulness given to
356 difficult work and outlined what they hope will happen at the next meeting --
357 including reviewing different versions of the sign, discussing locations and also
358 possibly looking at next steps or alternatives for more education.

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360 VII. Adjournment

361 With no further discussion, Chair Larry Brickner-Wood adjourned the meeting at
362 5:58 p.m.

363

364 Respectfully submitted,
365 Lucie Bryar, Minute Taker
366 Durham Heritage Commission

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368 ***Note: These written minutes are intended as a general summary of the meeting.***
369 ***For more complete information, please refer to the DCAT22 On Demand***
370 ***videotape of the entire proceedings on the town of Durham website.***