

January 13, 2024

Heritage Commission
8 Newmarket Road
Durham, NH 03824

RE: 1694 Oyster River Massacre Marker

Greetings,

This letter revises, and corrects, the comments I made at the January 7th meeting of the Historic District/Heritage Commission, as follows.

I was more than startled to learn that the Heritage Commission is entertaining 21st-century ideas that are irrelevant to the presentation of facts about a specific event that occurred 300 years ago. Those ideas certainly have a role in how we work toward a better future, but they have no place on a sign whose very brief language must commemorate devastating events that happened over the course of a single day.

Historical rigor

I am no historian, but I recognize and applaud rigor in research and the exposition of arguments. So I want to express my appreciation for the thoroughness and thoughtfulness of the submissions from the Durham Historic Association. There is no substitute for primary research, a point proven by those documents.

Representative Marjorie Smith expressed the point eloquently to the Commissioner of the New Hampshire Department of Historical Resources (DHR) in her letter of December 10th, i.e.:

"It is not, and must never be, our role to rewrite history. It is to document historical events to the best of our knowledge, to remain true to that accuracy, and to learn from that which has gone before."

However—and I regret that I did not say so on January 7, my interpretation of Representative Smith's caution against rewriting history is that we must take the facts as they present themselves. As time passes, we advance our knowledge, and it is with that knowledge that we may indeed "rewrite history"—but not by "whitewashing" or absolving actors for actions that we now view through a different lens.

Stakeholders, and a living family's history

Second: The word “stakeholders” has come up in your discussions and communications. This is not an abstract concept for me. My family personally claims a stake in the accurate telling of the history commemorated by the sign under discussion. Here's our story, as relates to this specific historical event.

My mother's parents immigrated from Denmark in 1923, and my father's maternal ancestors came from Norway in the late 1800s. My parents grew up in California and crossed the country to Durham in 1957. Thus they, like many of the early residents of the the settlement that became Durham, had to adapt to new lands and cultures dramatically different from the ones they had left. But they did not anticipate a very local connection to the past.

Following my father's retirement from UNH in 1990, my parents dove into genealogical research, relying heavily on primary sources. They were stunned to discover that, by moving to the Faculty neighborhood, they had landed just a few miles from the home of my father's 1600s maternal ancestors, among them John Davis and Charles Adams, who settled along the south side of the Oyster River, and William Tasker, who settled in Madbury.

The Davis, Adams, and Tasker families were all victims of the July 18, 1694 attacks.

So, this is a fact: My forebears were slaughtered or kidnapped, their homes burned to the ground. Yet, so far as we know, they had previously neither personally taken land directly from the Indigenous peoples or their French allies, nor personally attacked any Indigenous peoples or French allies directly, including those who participated in the attacks on the Oyster River Plantation settlers.

Historical complexities

We know that the marker under discussion is part of a DHR program that encompasses events on a surprisingly wide range of topics.* *But Durham's Oyster River marker commemorates an event that appears to be among the most consequential in the state's history.*

I suggested on January 7th that it appeared to me that the discussion of this marker may therefore present an opportunity for the DHR to consider whether to provide signage that allows space for greater context—perhaps even two-sided signs. Of course, that may not sufficiently address the concerns of those who would like to see the complex background and context fully laid out. Indeed, it's difficult to see how it could convey the full weight of history's complexities. We are used to, and often seek, reductive and titillating sound bites, but understanding history requires effort.

So I also concur with the suggestion made to this board on May 4, 2023, by Durham resident Scott Letourneau, i.e., as the minutes reflect, “maybe it would be possible to use the marker as a lead-in for individuals to read the rest of the story, perhaps by having a QR code on the marker that goes to a book with the entire history or something of that nature.”

Or perhaps marker readers could be directed to the DHA’s website for a more complete picture; or a kiosk could be erected by the Town near the marker that might also display a map of the 1694 settlements extant along the Oyster River.

In any event, care should be taken to get the facts right. We now have access to documents that flesh out the roles of voices that were silent, deliberately suppressed, understated, or misrepresented—documentation that was not available when the “original” (removed) marker’s language was developed—decades ago—and that can help us weave together the threads to better understand our history.

People have badly mistreated others throughout human history. We must learn from the un-whitewashed past. And it is in those lessons that we can honor and pay tribute to those who were ill-served by earlier actions.

Recommendation

The marker’s language should reflect the facts of the specific event that occurred in the Oyster River settlement on the specific date of July 18, 1694. The devastation was to families, and more widely, to the newly developing community.

That Indigenous peoples also suffered—whether prior or subsequent to those July 18, 1694 attacks, while indisputable, lies beyond the scope of this commemoration.

Therefore, I endorse the language proposed by the Durham Historic Association.

Regards,

Robin

* The DHR’s highway marker program list also includes commemoration of a putative alien abduction. Partial text from the marker, installed in Lincoln, NH: “On the night of September 19–20, 1961, Portsmouth, NH couple Betty and Barney Hill experienced a close encounter with an unidentified flying object and two hours of “lost” time while driving south on Rte 3 near Lincoln.”