



Durham Historic Association  
8 Newmarket Road  
Durham, New Hampshire 03824

March 7, 2023

To: Amy Dixon, NH Division of Historical Resources  
Re: Oyster River Massacre Historical Highway Marker

The promotion of accurate historic facts founded on primary sources is the purpose of the government sanctioned historic event highway markers in New Hampshire. The Durham Historic Association (DHA) has researched Indigenous, French, and English primary sources\* for the period 1689 through 1697, the time of war when the Oyster River Massacre occurred. DHA has found no contemporaneous sources that support the following statements in the historic marker draft proposed by the NHCNAA:

The raid was retribution for

1. the kidnapping and enslavement of 350 Natives;
2. frustration over the 1693 Treaty of Pemaquid;
3. the loss of unceded tribal lands;
4. ongoing harm to Indigenous life ways.

Unrelated historical events that occurred more than 300 years ago can easily be conflated, and interpretations can also be colored by the biases of contemporary social discourse. We are not interested in talking about history in an accusatory way, assigning blame or painting all of one people or nationality with the same brush. History is very complex, and an honest reflection of the past allows honest dialogue about the present.

The following material is a summary of our findings and culminates in our proposed text for the highway marker.

- (1) The 1694 Oyster River Massacre was a great success for the French because it broke the 1693 Peace Treaty of Pemaquid between sixteen Native American chiefs and the English.
- (2) The Peace Treaty of Pemaquid was sought by Indigenous chiefs and was signed in 1693, in the middle of the Nine Years' War. This war, also known as the War of the Grand Alliance, was fought in Europe from 1688 to 1697. The Grand Alliance was the Dutch Republic, England, the Archduchy of Austria, the Holy Roman Empire, and later Spain and Savoy, who declared war on the Sun King, Louis XIV of France. Grievances included France's expansionist policies, the Sun King's support of the Ottoman Turks against Christian Austria, and attacks against Protestants within France (the Catholic counter-reformation). The war started when King Louis XIV invaded the Rhineland in 1688.
- (3) This war known as King William's War in New England was fought from mid-1689 to 1697 between New France and the New England and New York colonies. England had joined the Grand Alliance and declared war on France in April 1689. This news reached Boston, Piscataqua and Quebec City in June 1689.
- (4) The 1693 Pemaquid Peace Treaty was signed by sixteen chiefs; ten chiefs are identified with the 'tribes' of the Kennebec and Penobscot rivers, the locales of six chiefs have not been determined. The 'tribes' of the Kennebec and Penobscot rivers lived in the French-claimed territory of Acadia (in northern Maine), the French capital of Acadia was at Fort Nashwaak (in New Brunswick). This 1693 Indigenous peace treaty with the English meant those Indigenous people would no longer be involved in hostilities with the English. This would enable them to trade their furs once again with the English, a favorable outcome because the English paid higher prices for the pelts than the French. The English trade goods (iron items, cloth, etc.) were said to be of higher quality than French trade goods and to be available at lower prices.
- (5) News of the 1693 Pemaquid Peace Treaty alarmed the French because, after fish exports, the fur trade was the major source of wealth for individuals in positions of authority at Quebec City, the capital of New France and for the officials of the French provinces, including Acadia. Louis de Buade, Comte de Frontenac et de Palluau, the Governor General of New France, immediately initiated a campaign to undermine the 1693 Indigenous-English peace treaty. De Villebon, the governor of Acadia, enlisted the assistance of Taxous, an Indigenous chief living in the French province of Acadia who was not a signatory to the 1693 peace treaty. The French hosted several great gatherings at Fort

Nashwaak (now Fredericton, New Brunswick) where Indigenous men enjoyed feasts of dog provided by the French. During the feasts, the Indigenous men who had signed the peace treaty with the English were heckled by Taxous and others. Joseph Robinau de Villebon, the French governor of Acadia, ceremoniously adopted Taxous as his brother and gifted him with his best laced suit. The other Indigenous men received lavish French gifts of guns, gunpowder, bullets, steel-headed tomahawks, tobacco, vermilion red pigment and brandy, specifically directed to the Indigenous men of Acadia by King Louis XIV of France. As a result of this campaign, by the winter of 1693-1694, Chief Madokawando of the Penobscot, and others who had signed the 1693 Peace Treaty of Pemaquid, had been prevailed upon to break the 1693 Peace Treaty of Pemaquid and to ally themselves with the French.

- (6) Thus, in July of 1694, the residents of Oyster River were not prepared for an attack because they believed the Indigenous people would honor the treaty they had sought from the English the year before. The result of the attack was a massacre, at least twenty percent of the residents were killed or taken away as captives to be enslaved by the Indigenous people or to be sold to the French. Houses, barns and crops were burnt and livestock slaughtered. The village of Oyster River, inhabited for more than sixty years was “layd waste” as the dispatch from acting Governor Usher notified officials in Boston.
- (7) A letter\*\* from the Acadian Governor Villebon to Count Pontchartrain at Versailles, dated August 20, 1694 about a future planned attack on the English fort at Pemaquid (Bristol, Maine), referred to the Oyster River Massacre July 18, 1694 (O.S.) – excerpt, translated:  
  
“Circumstances could not be more favorable than at present for an attack on Fort Pemaquid, since the Indians are now resolved on warfare more fierce and cruel than in the past, as was shown in their recent raid during which they spared neither women nor children.”
- (8) Seen as a great success by the Indigenous men, French soldiers and the French Jesuit priests who accompanied them, the Oyster River Massacre ultimately had a disastrous outcome for the Indigenous people. Local civilians, the residents who had seen their families killed before their eyes, their wives and children taken away as captive slaves, formed bands of ‘Indian hunters’. Their purpose was to rescue family and neighbors taken away as captives, and to scout for groups of Indigenous men that might signal further attacks on their families. After the Indigenous men allied themselves with the French, attacks on English villages continued and the bands of ‘Indian hunters’ continued to scout far inland from the four towns in New Hampshire. King William’s War was followed by more wars between France and England. The Indigenous chiefs had chosen the wrong ally; after the defeat of the French at Quebec, in 1760 New France ceased to exist while the Indigenous people had been decimated by warfare at the behest of the French.

Therefore, based on the evidence in primary sources, the Durham Historic Association proposes the following text for the highway marker:

Oyster River Massacre  
On July 18, 1694 (O.S.) during King William’s War between England and France, Indigenous groups from Acadia allied with the French broke the 1693 Treaty of Pemaquid by attacking on both shores of the Oyster River. Nearly 20% of the residents, over 100, were killed or captured to be enslaved or sold to the French. Houses, crops and livestock were destroyed. “Oyster River...is layd waste,” read the dispatch from acting NH Governor Usher to authorities in Boston. Hostilities continued until England and France signed the Peace Treaty of Ryswick in 1697.

Furthermore, the original marker’s title, “Oyster River Massacre” should remain as this is the well-known and accepted name of the historical event.

Respectfully,

David Strong  
DHA President, on behalf of the DHA Executive Board

cc: DHA Executive Board  
cc: Michael Behrendt, Durham Historic District Commission/Heritage Commission  
cc: Todd Selig, Durham Town Administrator

\*Primary sources:

Rev. John Pike, *Journal of the Rev. John Pike, of Dover, N.H.*, ed. Rev. A.H. Quint (Cambridge: Press of John Wilson and Son, 1876)

Deposition of Damson Drew, 23 May 1698, Massachusetts Historical Society, file VIII. 41, Boston.

Deposition of Ann Jenkins, ii June 1695, Massachusetts Historical Society  
*The Captivity of John Gyles 1689-1698*, published Boston 1726

Webster, J. C. (1934). *Acadia at the End of the 17th Century: Letters, Journals and Memoirs of Joseph Robineau de Villebon, Commandant in Acadia 1690-1700 and Other Contemporary Documents*.

Bouton, N., D.D. (1867). *Provincial Papers relating to the Province of New Hampshire 1623-1686: Volume 1*. George E Jenks, State Printer, Concord, NH.

Bouton, N., D.D. (1868). *Provincial Papers relating to the Province of New Hampshire 1686-1722 Part 1: Volume 2*. John B. Clarke, State Printer, Manchester, NH.

Bouton, N., D.D. (1869). *Provincial Papers relating to the Province of New Hampshire 1686-1722 Part 2: Volume 3*. John B. Clarke, State Printer, Manchester, NH.

Cotton Mather, *Decennium Luctuosum* (Boston, 1699); reprinted in *Magnalia Christi Americana* (London, 1702)

\*\* (A translated excerpt from Webster, J. C. (1934). *Acadia at the End of the 17th Century: Letters, Journals and Memoirs of Joseph Robineau de Villebon, Commandant in Acadia 1690-1700 and Other Contemporary Documents* follows for the convenience of those without easy access to this collection.)

[explanatory note] **Letter about the future attack on the English Fort at Pemaquid, written August 20, 1694, one month after the 1693 Peace Treaty was broken by the Oyster River Massacre of 1694 – Acadian Governor Villebon to Count Pontchartrain at Versailles:**

“Circumstances could not be more favorable than at present for an attack on Fort Pemaquid, since the Indians are now resolved on warfare more fierce and cruel than in the past, as was shown in their recent raid during which they spared neither women nor children [Oyster River Massacre].

For the Pemaquid expedition, and, at the same time, to command the New England coast, three vessels are needed: one of 46 to 48 guns, a frigate of 36 guns, and a flyboat suitable for transporting all that is required for the garrison and for their use during the attack. It is indispensable, if they come direct from France to the St. John River, that a hundred good picked soldiers should be brought out in the ships as a landing party to make the attack. They would be supplemented by a hundred of the crew, whom I would replace by an equal number of Indians, who are much better marksmen with the musket than any of our soldiers, although they are less obedient and cannot be depended upon to stand their ground in case of a sortie, but association with 200 Frenchmen will surely deter them from deserting.

If all the Indians go to war next year, it is certain to be a bloody campaign for our enemies. The Indians of Cape Breton cannot be summoned easily owing to the distance, but, as these were the Indians who embarked on the warship Bretonne [to attack Newfoundland] and as M. de Bonaventure has told me he was very well satisfied with them, they could be called for on the way here. For this the ships need only enter Spanish Bay, where some of them will be found awaiting news from France, with a colonist who is to settle there this autumn.

Two months' provisions to be brought out for the maintenance of the Indians, estimated at 200, to be divided equally among the three vessels.

- 2,000 lbs. of flour
- 2 tierces of molasses, to flavor their sagamité [cornmeal mixed with animal fat]
- 200 lbs. of butter, for the same purpose
- 10 kegs of brandy, without which it will be impossible to make them fight efficiently.

Memorandum of presents to the value of 3,640 livres, accorded by His Majesty to the Indians of Acadia, for their warfare against the English. These presents will be distributed among the Indians when they assemble at the appointed rendezvous. [annual presents delivered by ship from France to Fort Nashwaak, capital of Acadia]

- 2,000 lbs. of powder
- 40 kegs of bullets
- 10 kegs of swan shot
- 400 lbs. of Brazilian tobacco
- 200 tomahawks, for which M. de Bonaventure will provide a model.
  - [hand forged metal blade with wood handle; the French trade axe, below]
- 60 selected muskets like those sent this year
- 200 Mulaix shirts, averaging 30 sous each
- 8 lbs. of fine vermillion [red pigment]
- 200 tufts of white feathers to be given to the Indians as a distinguishing mark in case of night attack, which should not cost more than 6 to 7 sous a piece; to be selected in Paris by M. de Bonaventure.”