

February 26, 2024

To: Michael Behrendt, Durham Town Planner  
Larry Brickner-Wood, Chair, Durham Historic District Commission  
Todd Selig, Administrator, Town of Durham  
Sarah Stewart, Commissioner, NH Dept. of Natural and Cultural Resources  
Benjamin Wilson, Director, NH Division of Historical Resources  
Nadine Miller & Amy Dixon, NH Division of Historical Resources  
Doug Karo, Janet Mackie & Nancy Sandberg, Durham Historic Association  
Anne Jennison, Chair, NH Commission on Native American Affairs  
Denise Pouliot, Cowasuck Band of the Pennacook Abenaki People  
Marjorie Smith, NH State Representative

Cc: Barbara Will & Charlotte Bacon, Roundtable Facilitators

Re: Oyster River Massacre Historical Marker #50 - Roundtable Discussions

Towards the end of the 2/15 roundtable, Steve Eames proposed the following new text for the Oyster River marker (highlights added by me for the discussion points below):

### OYSTER RIVER ATTACK

On July 18, 1694, during King William's War (1689-1697), a force of about 250 Wabanaki, principally Penobscots and Norridgewocks, led by Madockawando and Bomazeen, assaulted the town of Oyster River. The French had encouraged the Wabanaki to break the questionable Treaty of 1693 to continue the French war against the English. The Wabanaki had been fighting the English before the treaty over land encroachment and other grievances, as well as assisting the French. The surprise at Oyster River was complete. 100 Inhabitants were killed, 30 captured, and 20 buildings destroyed. "Oyster River...is layd waste," read the dispatch from acting NH Governor John Usher. It was the most devastating attack in New Hampshire during the war.

After a brief group discussion, the roundtable participants were given an optional homework assignment to make improvements to Steve's draft and submit it to Michael Behrendt no later than one week before the next session on 3/21. Although I am not a member of the panel, I am a longtime resident of Durham who is very passionate about preserving its history. Here is my analysis of Steve's proposal and my recommendations to improve it.

#### 1. Title: "OYSTER RIVER ATTACK"

The marker's title should remain "OYSTER RIVER MASSACRE" or changed to "MASSACRE AT OYSTER RIVER":

- a) This event is widely known throughout history as the Oyster River Massacre - in print and online content, as well as in both serious discussions and casual conversations. The public immediately recognizes this occurrence by the word "massacre" in its name. The same is true with the Norridgewock Massacre, the Wounded Knee Massacre, and the Tulsa Race Massacre. Replacing "massacre" with a euphemism like "attack" or "raid" downplays the trauma inflicted on our community and the descendants of the victims who still live here. Should we change the commonly accepted name of the Oyster River Massacre 330 years later because a small group of people believe the word "massacre" reflects badly on them? Should we change the names of other military actions in American history such as the Vietnam War and the Spanish-American War, so as not to offend those of Vietnamese and Spanish heritage? No, we should not.
- b) By definition, the word "massacre" accurately describes what took place on July 18, 1694. For example:

Dictionary.com - "1. the unnecessary, indiscriminate killing of a large number of human beings or animals, as in barbarous warfare or persecution or for revenge or plunder";  
"2. a general slaughter, as of persons or animals"

Merriam-Webster.com - "the act or an instance of killing a number of usually helpless or unresisting human beings under circumstances of atrocity or cruelty"

Cambridge.org - "the killing of a large number of people, esp. people who are not involved in any fighting or have no way of defending themselves"

## **2. Line 5: "questionable Treaty"**

Remove the word "questionable" from the marker:

- a) What exactly is a "questionable Treaty"? What does that even mean? Without further explanation to add context to its meaning, it makes no sense and is confusing to the reader.
- b) The phrase "questionable Treaty" is an Indigenous-friendly revisionist opinion, not a fact. Where is the English perspective? Unless we explain what "questionable" means to include all points of view, the word must be dropped.
- c) The word "questionable" is being used as an adjective. I thought the group, at the urging of the facilitators, had agreed not to use any adjectives.

## **3. Lines 11-13: "Oyster River...is layd waste," read the dispatch from acting NH Governor John Usher. It was the most devastating attack in New Hampshire during the war."**

- a) At the 2/15 roundtable Nadine Miller expressed her concern that these last two sentences do not give enough Indigenous perspective. However, up until the quote, "Oyster River...is layd waste," the English are completely ignored. The first 9 lines of text focus solely on the French and Indigenous, while line 10 is neutral. Steve Eames' proposed draft is already heavily slanted in the favor of the French and Indigenous; removing or revising these last two lines to include more French/Indigenous perspective will make the marker completely out of balance.
- b) The historical quote, "Oyster River...is layd waste" adds authenticity to the marker and expresses the extent of ruination suffered by the victims.
- c) At the 2/15 roundtable a suggestion was made to replace "devastating" with "successful" so that the final sentence would read, "It was the most successful attack in New Hampshire during the war." First, "successful" is strictly from the French/Indigenous standpoint and obviously lacks the English point of view. Second, for the State of NH to install a historical marker in Durham calling an attack that killed one-third of its population "successful" would be wildly inappropriate. It would be cruel, actually. And totally unacceptable for a welcoming community. I can only imagine how the descendents of the massacre victims living in Durham today would feel driving by such a marker every day.

Respectfully,

David Strong  
Durham, NH