

February 5, 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

The participants of the 1/18 roundtable were given the following homework to be completed by the 2/15 session: 1) review the facts and sources of the Oyster River event; 2) review the DHA's proposed draft and source materials; 3) the CNAA is to distribute the source materials (i.e. oral histories) used in its 7/28/2022 draft; and 4) review the CNAA's endorsed text and source materials, once circulated.

The Durham Historic Association (DHA) submitted its proposed version to the NH Division of Historical Resources (DHR), the Town of Durham, and others on 3/7/2023, along with a list of primary sources it used to draft it. This includes the letters, journals, and memoirs of Acadian Governor Joseph Robineau de Villebon, who conceived the plan and recruited Sagamore Taxous to persuade the Indigenous men to break their peace treaty with the English by attacking an important English village. Other contemporaneous primary sources include the journals and depositions of eyewitnesses and victims of the July 18, 1694 massacre. This information is available on the Town of Durham website.

The NH Commission of Native American Affairs' (CNAA) proposed wording for the marker was initially drafted by DHR staff. Amy Dixon emailed the DHR draft to the CNAA on 6/9/2022 and asked for insights and comments on how they could improve the text. Denise Pouliot returned the draft to the DHR on 6/26/2022 with additional edits; this is the proposed text that was approved by the CNAA on 7/28/2022 and is currently under consideration.

The initial draft written by DHR staff includes the following as the reasons for the attack on Oyster River:

"The impetus for the raid was growing frustration over the 1693 Treaty of Pemaquid, the loss of tribal lands and harm to the Indigenous people's way of life."

Twenty months have passed since the DHR completed its draft and yet they have never produced a list of source materials (primary and secondary documents, or oral histories) to substantiate their claims that the Native Americans' motivation for the attack was frustration over the Treaty of Pemaquid, the loss of tribal lands, and harm to their way of life. In its research the DHA found no sources to support these assertions by the DHR.

Similarly, the CNAA still has not provided any source materials, including oral histories, to verify the following claims in their draft from 7/28/2022:

"The raid was retribution for the kidnapping and enslavement of 350 Natives, frustration over the 1693 treaty of Pemaquid, the loss of unceded tribal lands and ongoing harm to Indigenous life ways."

Again, the DHA's research found nothing to support the CNAA's interpretation of the event.

On the DHR's New Hampshire's Historical Highway Markers website, there is a document entitled "Guidelines for New Hampshire Historical Highway Marker Nominations", which was adopted on 1/30/2023 and revised on 5/12/2023. Under the section "Criteria for Approval of State Historical Highway Markers" on page 4 the first criterion to propose a marker reads:

"The nomination is clear and organized and includes thorough documentation (with selected copies/scans and bibliographies from reliable primary and secondary sources) and verification of the facts claimed."

<https://mm.nh.gov/files/uploads/dhr/documents/highway-markers-nomination-guidelines.pdf>

Evidently, the DHR's own policy does not apply to themselves or the CNAA; to date, neither has provided any evidence, written or oral, to back up their proposed draft. Their failure to do so may lead some to believe that their interpretation of the 1694 attack is not fact-based, but instead simply made up to satisfy their ideological beliefs. I urge the DHR and CNAA to provide all source materials to the roundtable participants and the public well in advance of the next meeting on 2/15, which is now only 10 days away. If not, the next roundtable should be postponed until these sources are received and the participants are given a reasonable amount of time to review them.

During the 1/18 roundtable, Nadine Miller read aloud a DHR written statement, which included the following paragraph:

"The purpose of the program is to educate the public about New Hampshire's history. The program is grounded in scholarship and interpretation, both of which can change over time. New information may be discovered, adding historic context or proving previous interpretations to be inaccurate; cultural shifts occur, meaning once-accepted references or interpretation become outdated. The DHR is committed to inclusive history with an emphasis on critical engagement with the past and the incorporation of new evidence and diverse perspectives. Using a range of sources and methods helps to incorporate new evidence and perspectives that lead to updated understandings of what happened historically. The study of history requires critical thinking beyond "just the facts" and evaluating many different perspectives. Markers are a powerful tool for teaching, acknowledging, and reconciling our history."

Although the DHR's new philosophy for educating the public has veered sharply away from "just the facts", it is still incumbent upon them to produce the sources and methods used to support the text it enshrines on its historical markers. If the DHR cannot or will not use reliable fact-based sources, even when it conflicts with their commitment to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, then their NH Historical Highway Marker program is a sham.

Finally, the primary goal of these roundtable discussions is for the group to reach a consensus on the Oyster River Massacre marker's revised wording. However, Nadine Miller of the DHR made it very clear that this marker will not be reinstated unless it is more "inclusive". In other words, the DHR/CNAA version of the text, unsupported by any historical research or primary sources, must be adopted. So much for group consensus.

Respectfully,

David Strong
Durham, NH