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Chief Orono 1929

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This is the original of my talk
before the Bangor Historical Society at
the University of Maine, August 6, 1929.

The reprint of it in the Bangor papers
was so garbled that it must not be used in
reproduction; elsewhere I have a printed copy
of it pasted into a booklet

MS. of paper sent to W. J. Main Aug 6 1929
CHIEF ORONO

The members of the Bangor Historical Society present wish me to express their appreciation of the hospitality of the University of which they are so proud. The bond of good-will is closer than appears casually. For many years our honored president, Mr. Henry Lord, who has labored to preserve the traditions of the Penobscot Valley, has also been one of the Trustees of the University. Today I take his place in tendering the greetings and the thanks of the Historical Society, because for him to do it would be much like one's own right hand grasping the left as a sign of welcome and good-will.

None of us present has failed to receive indirect benefit from the University, most of us can remember something direct and personal for which we are grateful. We recognize the University as a great fountain, sending out a continuous stream of practical benefits as well as of intellectual refreshing. It exists both for use and for beauty.

It would be unbecoming to turn an occasion for grateful recognition of benefits received into an historical dissertation, but the time and place both combine to make ^{appropriate} some mention of the man who would have been moved to prayers of thanksgiving if he could have foreseen that his own name would some day have been linked to such a great humanitarian achievement as this institution of learning. Poor and unschooled as he was, Joseph Orono could have understood the significance of this university and would have rejoiced in its growing from the seed he planted in his firm adherence to the cause of freedom in America. Without the aid of Joseph Orono, the ground on which we stand would have been English territory today-- and there would have been no university here. Other causes there were, as necessary as his contribution; but he was an integral

factor in making Maine a state of this Union.

I do not intend to give an eulogy of Chief Joseph Orono, of the Penobscot tribe, for whom this town was named. It is enough that no word of disparagement of either his actions or his character has ever been printed that I know. He lived uprightly and dealt justly and was so greatly esteemed that, within five years of the time of his death, the white people who lived near to his aboriginal wigwam named their ambitious and growing town for him. It was a signal honor--where else has anything like it been done, not by mere chance, but in a deliberative town meeting? There was no romance or glamor about an Indian to the early settlers of the town of Orono; they did not see the chief in a dim and semi-fabulous retrospect; but as an aged, feeble, blind old man, who still to his last days was recognized as a noble and commanding character.

To tell the story of Joseph Orono's life would demand more labor on my part and more patience on yours than the occasion admits. These are almost impromptu remarks directed not to his achievements and career, but to the single question, Who was Joseph Orono? Was he a white man or an Indian?

For more than a century ~~no~~ this has been a debated question, and I take it up now because within the last week I have come upon evidence, as yet unpublished, which, once it has been put in print, will receive more credence than perhaps it is entitled to. It is that I may discount in advance this apparently unimpeachable evidence that I now, very hastily and imperfectly, draw together some of the contradictory opinions as to the race and age of the old chief Joseph Orono.

Among the whites, even in his own lifetime, there was current the story that Orono was a white child, taken in warfare and adopted by the Indians, who later made him their chief. Nor was there anything improbable in such a tale; for the like of it has happened more than once. Old Louis Annance, who died in Greenville, was a Saint Francis Indian descended from Samuel Gill, who was taken captive in 1694, aged seven years, in a raid on Salisbury, N.H., carried to Canada, there married a white girl captive, and later became chief of the tribe, with descendants of all admixtures of Indian blood, many of whom returned to Maine or other states. It is a case precisely parallel to the theory of Orono's parentage.

→ But this story, ^{Orono} says W.D. Williamson, the historian, on the authority of Capt. Joseph Munsell of Bangor, "has no foundation in fact, and has been treated by all intelligent Indians with derision" (Williamson in Mass. Historical Collections; ^{quoted in} History of Penobscot County, pp. 39-40)

The Indians said that Orono was of French origin . Quoting Williamson: "But... it is certain that he was white in part, a half-breed or more-- such being apparent in his stature, features and complexion. He himself told Capt. Munsell his father was a Frenchman and his mother was half French and half Indian; but who they were by name he did not state." (History of Penobscot County, p. 40).

→ This was , and probably still is, the Indian tradition. I have been told by two intelligent Indians that Orono's father was French, and one of them should have been a competent witness; for she was the widow of Orono's ^{great} grandson, Joe Lewis, best known to you as Mrs. Clara Neptune , who died only a few years since. "His father she's Frenchman", was what Clara told me. It is certain that Orono spoke French and that he always showed the greatest affection for the French. He even went to Newport, R.I., when the French ships

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during the Revolutionary war were in the harbor, and visited the ships, and afterwards he probably talked so much about his visit that his tribe gave him the nickname K'toloqu', the "Big Ship" or "Frigate", by which name his descendants are known to this day, the K'toloqu'-i-seeuc, big ship folks. It was probably largely because the French were allies of the Americans that Orono threw in his lot with our people and held the Penobscot tribe to American friendship during the Revolution.

The Indians have told me that they do not know the meaning of the word Orono; "It is not Indian", I have been told. Nor can I, with my defective knowledge of the language, find anything Indian in it. It can hardly be English. But it might very well be French, though thus far I have found no Frenchman upon our coast whose family name could be made into Orono. It is certain that Orono had another Indian name, by which he was known to the tribe, from which in all probability came the English name of Lewis, by which his descendants are now known (K'toloqu'-i-seeuc being merely a nickname still).

Aside from documents to which his name is attached and the reference to him by the surveyor Chadwick in 1764, the earliest reference which I find to Orono among my notes, is the statement of General Henry Knox, quoted by Porter in the Bangor Historical Magazine vol. 7, p. 149, from the Knox Manuscripts, ^{inserted} by Joseph Williamson, Esq. General Knox, under the date of August, 1784, says that General Benjamin Lincoln and himself were appointed to treat with the Penobscot Indians. "In ⁷⁰our speech, Orono, an old man, half Indian and half French, of the Castine breed, made the following reply". Then follows the speech of Orono.

It is clear that General Knox, personally present, judged Orono to be of French extraction. We should not be held to the exact statement that Orono was a half breed, when others say that he was but a quarter Indian; he speaks in a general way. As to what he means

when he says that Orono "was of the old Castine breed" there will be sure to be difference of opinion. Some would say that it means he was a descendant of the Baron de St. Castin. For myself, knowing that there have been changes in our Indian tribes and that the old Pentagoet Indians were unlike our Penobscots, I interpret this as meaning that Orono was of Pentagoet stock. He might also be of the blood of Baron Castin; but that seems not to be General Knox's meaning.

We seem safe in saying that the best Indian opinion, supported by General Knox in 1784, after personal acquaintance, was that Castine Orono was perhaps ^{three} ~~one~~ quarter French and his Indian blood, perhaps his French blood also, came from the habitants of old Pentagoet, or more accurately Matsibiguatus, (Major Bigarduce in lingua vulga), as the present Castine was called.

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But the early settlers, as we have said, believed in his English origin. His physique and coloring favored the opinion. "His eyes were of a bright blue shade", wrote Williamson, "penetrating and full of intelligence and benignity. His hair, when young, was brown, perhaps approaching to an auburn cast; his face was large, broad and well-formed, of a sickly whiteness, susceptible of ready blushes, and remarkably sedate. In his person, he was tall, straight and perfectly proportioned; and in his gait there was a gracefulness which in itself evinced his superiority."

From his coloring and physique arose the tale that he was the son of old Judge Donnell, of York, Maine, taken captive when a child and never returned to his home. This boy, William, was taken captive in 1692, when six years of age, and would have been 115 years old when he died, if he were Orono and died in 1801, ^{or 116 if he died} ~~instead of~~ 1802, as usually stated. Judge Donnell in his will, dated 1718, provided for his ~~son~~ if he should ever return, but there is no record that anything more was ever heard of him.

And here comes in the new material which I spoke of in the beginning. Hardly more than a week ago I was privileged to examine an unprinted manuscript by Park Holland, the surveyor of the Penobscot, who for some years resided in Orono, but who died in Bangor in 1844. His reminiscences, dated 1841, when he was eighty-nine years old, and in part written by his daughter, go back to the period when he was surveying the upper Penobscot. Of the year 1794, he writes of the Oldtown Indians: "One of the most interesting at this time was old Orono, who lived, it was said, until he was 107 years old. He was taken prisoner when seven years old and adopted in the usual manner of the tribe. For many years he was chief and much beloved by all. The aged and the infirm were, and still are still cared for, and treated with a respect that would set an example worth following to many a paler man. Long after Orono became helpless and blind, one of the early settlers told me that an Indian called at her house with the tongue and nose of a moose, which was considered a rich dish, and which she endeavored to purchase for herself, offering thrice its worth in money. The Indian replied to her offer that no money could buy it, as the best piece was always saved for the old, and this was for Orono. Orono's name was originally Peter Donald, I think he was from some part of the Penobscot country. His parents were Irish or Scotch. He was discovered by them after he had grown to manhood, married and had been chosen chief. They could not persuade him to return to his friends, and he lived and died an Indian, and an honest man."

Now have we here an independent contribution to Orono's life history, or is this merely another form of the Donnell, of York, story? The names are sufficiently alike; the story of his being discovered by his parents might be only another form of the mention of a lost son in Judge Donnell's will; the location in Penobscot or York hardly matters,

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as both were west of the peninsula. My own opinion is that the story told by Park Holland and the one by Williamson, of the son of Judge Donnell are mere variants of the same story; and both may be drawn from the story of Samuel Gill of Salisbury, N. H., whose descendants, Old Louis Annance and Big Louis Gill, lived long and eventually died near Moosehead Lake.

In any case, any of these stories would have made Orono of great age. I have seen him named as dying at 107, 110, 113, 113 years, and, if he were young Donnell, he must have been 115 and 116 years. The story is stretched too far; it breaks because the span of human life is not long enough to cover it from end to end.

→ demands a span
In the same way the effort to make him the son of Baron Castine is too long. But it would be possible for him to be the grandson of Castine. The Rev. John M. Harrington, in Sprague's Journal, vol. 5, pp 9 ff., (1817), holds to this view. He is too rash in his conclusions, made from data wrongly quoted and handled; yet his conclusions may be correct-- except that there is not the slightest evidence that Orono was born in 1691! Judge Godfrey, in the Centennial History of Bangor, p. 25, foot note, quotes the parish register of St. Jean Baptiste of Port Royal, showing that three of Castine's children were married there in 1707. If Orono were a son of one of the two daughters of Castine whose marriages were recorded, he would have been in the neighborhood of ninety-four when he died, if he died in 1803, an age entirely probable, in keeping with his activities during the Revolution, and in harmony with the statements of Munsell, Williamson, General Knox and the Indian traditions.

Probably the ancestry of Orono is unprovable, but that does not detract from his worth or from the respect in which he is held.

Noblest among the braves was Orono,
A kingly native, just, and wise, and true,
To his dark brethren faithful, yet at heart
The white man's friend. With clear prophetic view
Our larger work and destiny he knew.
Worthy of honor, well do we bestow
On this, his dwelling-place, the name of Orono.