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New Evidence on the French Involvement in King Philip 's War

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NEW EVIDENCE ON THE FRENCH INVOLVEMENT
IN KING PHILIP'S WAR

The question of French involvement in King Philip's War has been hotly debated since the outbreak of the conflict itself. Some contemporaries in Maine and Massachusetts vehemently accused the French of aiding the Indians. The Massachusetts General Court and many prominent New Englanders believed that the French plotted with the Indians. Others, including Reverend William Hubbard, did not think that the French had played an important role in the war. Modern historians have also been divided over the role of the French in King Philip's War, be it in southern New England or in Maine. Douglas Leach, the author of *Flintlock and Tomahawk: New England in King Philip's War*, carefully evaluated the evidence for French involvement in the war in southern New England. Although he found several reports of French participation, most were inconclusive and vague reports made by friendly Indians and English captives. Leach cautiously concluded that while there is no evidence of an official French policy of assisting the Indians, "it is quite conceivable that the French authorities were not above sending agents to advise the warring savages, and to sell them supplies of guns and powder at reasonable rates."¹

John Noble came down even more strongly on the side of French participation in his 1970 Masters thesis entitled "King Philip's War in Maine." Noble noted that although the French voiced an official policy of neutrality, French traders in the Penobscot region provided the Indians with support. This small amount of aid was, however, greatly exaggerated by the Protestant New Englanders, who feared the French Catholics of Canada.²

More recently Kenneth Morrison has completely dismissed the idea of French involvement in the war. He believed that the English accusations were merely reflections of the English

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paranoia of an unholy alliance of Indians and French Catholics. Morrison has suggested that "to salvage pride and to defuse criticism, as well as to win funds, Massachusetts found villains in the French. The General Court suggested that the French were responsible for arming the Abenakis with the active support of the hateful Catholic priests of the French-Canadian Society of Jesus."³ The General Court's accusations were either "deliberate fabrications" designed to protect their pride and win support from the King and Parliament, "or the rationalized products of distraught Puritan imaginations."⁴ As further proof of French innocence, Morrison has cited their efforts to remain neutral. Louis XIV ordered Governor Frontenac to maintain peace with the English and Frontenac ordered the commander of Acadia to avoid the conflict. The French did allow Indian refugees to take up residence in the mission villages but only on the condition that they did not return to Maine to fight.⁵

A close scrutiny of surviving documents, however, raises some serious questions about Morrison's viewpoint. He oversimplified this issue, for official policies, whether formulated in Paris, Quebec, or Boston, were not always subject to strict enforcement along the frontier.⁶ Also, Morrison did not examine all the evidence. In addition to the papers cited by Leach, there are several references to French activity in Maine during the war. For example, even though the French forbade the Catholic mission Indians from participating in the war, at least one Indian sachem planned to gain their aid. In the winter of 1676 Mugg, a southern Maine Indian leader, bragged to his captive Francis Card that in the spring he planned to travel to Canada to enlist Indian support. This was not mere wishful thinking, for Card also observed that "four Indian women came from Canada and did tell the Indians that the Governor of Canada did thank them for what they had done and told them that they would help them with one hundred men and ammunition."⁷ Another prisoner, Thomas Cobbett, escaped when his Indian captor sent him to purchase powder and shot from Baron Castine, the French fur trader living near the mouth of

the Penobscot River. When Cobbett spotted an English vessel in the vicinity he made his way aboard to safety.⁸

A letter, recently acquired by the Maine Historical Society, seriously challenges Morrison's claim that the French stayed completely out of King Philip's War in Maine. In August 1676 a series of fierce Indian raids in the mid-coastal region of Maine quickly led to the abandonment of all settlements north of Casco Bay. This brought the full weight of the Indian offensive on the Black Point (in present-day Scarborough) garrison, the northernmost remaining English defensive point. On September 15, 1676 Joshua Scottow, the captain of the beleaguered Black Point garrison, and Henry Jocelyn, the leading magistrate of Black Point and second-in-command, wrote to Governor John Leverett to explain their desperate situation.⁹

Honored Sir

After all humble submission, these are to acquaint the present posture of affairs with us, upon the 12th current, the enemy after they had fired all the houses on this side of Casco bay, moved towards us within a mile of our garrison & broke up a house in the night & within two miles fired two houses, slew one man, took another prisoner, & wounded a third who escaped, with another who hid himself in the bushes & lay within two or three rods of them, heard all their discourse, who confidently affirmeth them to be 70 or 80 whom he saw, but doubted not of a greater number on the other side of the river where he lay, & also that there are two or three Frenchmen with them, one who leads being brave with blue, black & yellow ribbons on his knee, a hat buckled with a silver buckle, brave belt, &c. & heard him inquire in French by an Indian interpreter who spoke very good English of the captives, whether it were difficult to take Richmond Island & Blackpoint, of the number of our men, & that their design is to carry all before as they have done along the Eastern shore.

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Loosely translated into modern English, the letter might read as follows:

Honored Sir,

This letter is to acquaint you with our current situation. On September 12 the enemy burned all the houses on the south side of Casco Bay. That night they looted a house within a mile of the Black Point Garrison. They also burned two houses within two miles of the garrison. In these attacks they slew one man, took another prisoner, and wounded a third man. The wounded man escaped, and with a fourth man, lay hidden in the bushes within thirty or fifty feet of the Indians. From this hiding spot the wounded man could hear all of the Indians' conversations. He saw 70 or 80 Indians, but believed that an even greater number lay across the river from him. The wounded man also observed that there were two or three Frenchmen with the Indians. The French leader was smartly dressed with blue, black, and yellow ribbons on his knees. The Frenchman's hat had a silver buckle, and he had a stylish belt, etc. The French leader asked questions in French to the English prisoners. These questions were translated to the captives by an Indian interpreter who spoke very good English. The Frenchman wanted to know the strength of the English and whether it were difficult to take Richmond Island and Black Point. The Frenchman also said that it was their plan to capture all the settlements, as they had already done east of Black Point.

Naturally, the validity of such an important document must be checked. The letter is written in Scottow's distinctive handwriting so the document is not a forgery; however, the accuracy of the letter's content is open to question. It is possible that Scottow and Jocelyn fabricated the incident. Their motive for inventing such a story would be to emphasize the extreme danger of their situation, and to help persuade Governor Leve-

rett and the General Court to send more men and supplies to defend Black Point. The fact that they wrote down a second-hand account, made by an anonymous observer, lends some credence to this view. On the other hand, Jocelyn and Scottow were respected authorities. Jocelyn was an English gentleman, educated at Cambridge before he immigrated to Maine. During his long career of public service he held numerous offices, ranging from judge to deputy governor. Scottow was a prominent Boston merchant, and member of the General Court. It seems unlikely that such responsible and trusted men would have stooped to lying to gain more aid.

Governor Leverett and the General Court had already received and placed credence in several reports of French involvement. The previous April the General Court had written to English officials that many of the Indians admitted that "they are encouraged and animated by the French at Canada (who also as they say have promised them recruits of ammunition and aid of men)."¹⁰ The validity of this observation is unimportant here. What is significant is the fact that the Governor and General Court already believed the French were abetting the Indians almost half a year before the letter was written at Black Point. These officials would have believed Scottow and Jocelyn if they had merely briefly noted the French presence. Thus if Scottow and Jocelyn had created the incident they would not have had to go to include these specific details in their letter in order to be believed. The extreme detail of this letter further suggests its veracity. Most such observations merely noted that Frenchmen were seen or mentioned by the Indians. In this case the French were observed from such close range that the witness could note not just their language and their questions, but the specific details of their dress. At such range, it is doubtful that the witness could have been mistaken about the identity of the French.

This sighting of the French was apparently seized upon by the hysterical residents of Maine. The next month Major Brian Pendleton reported "300 of French and 100 of Indians at Mr. Foxwell's house" at Blue Point in Scarborough. Since no correspondence either confirms or refutes Pendleton's report, the

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validity of his claim is unknown. Probably Pendleton had heard of the French activity reported by Scottow and Jocelyn. Alternatively, he too may have actually seen a few Frenchmen. However, it is extremely unlikely that a force of 300 French soldiers could have operated in Maine and not have been sighted by other officials. Probably English fears of the French spurred Pendleton to greatly exaggerate the number of Frenchmen aiding the Indians.¹¹

Collectively, a close reading of all documents, particularly the Scottow and Jocelyn letter, indicate that the French provided limited aid to the Indians fighting King Philip's War in Maine. It is still impossible, however, to determine the full extent of their role. Clearly some Frenchmen traded munitions to the Indians, and others even went into the field with them, apparently as military advisors. What remains uncertain is whether these Frenchmen operated independently, or if they had the clandestine support of officials in Quebec. It is clear that the General Court had good reason to suggest that the French were involved in the war. The English may have been paranoid at the thought of an "unholy alliance" of French Catholics and Indian "savages," but their paranoia stemmed from hard fact.¹²

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NOTES

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¹Douglas Leach, "The Question of French Involvement in King Philip's War," *Colonial Society of Massachusetts, Publications*, XXXVIII (1953), 414-21; the quote is on 421. Kenneth Morrison, "The Bias of Colonial Law: English Paranoia and the Abenaki Arena of King Philip's War, 1675-1678,"

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New England Quarterly 53 (September 1980), 374-75. "Council's Letter to the Secretary of State, April 5, 1676," in James P. Baxter, ed., *The Documentary History of the State of Maine*, (Portland, Maine, 1900), VI, 109-13.

²John Noble, "King Philip's War in Maine" (M.A. thesis, University of Maine, 1970), 22-23.

³Morrison, "The Bias of Colonial Law," 374-75.

⁴*Ibid.*, 375.

⁵*Ibid.*, 374-75.

⁶Morrison, "The Bias of Colonial Law," 375.

⁷"Francis Card's Declaration," *Documentary History*, ed. Baxter, VI, 150; William Hubbard, "A Narrative of the Troubles with the Indians in New England from Piscataqua to Pemaquid," in *The Indian Wars in New England*, ed. Samuel Drake (New York, 1971; orig. publ. 1677), 196, 204.

⁸Hubbard, "Narrative of Troubles," 196.

⁹"Joshua Scottow and Henry Josselyn to Governor Leverett, September 15, 1676," Maine Historical Society.

¹⁰"Council's Letter to the Secretary of State, April 5, 1676," in Baxter, ed., *The Documentary History of the State of Maine*, VI, 112.

¹¹"Brian Pendleton to the Governor and Council," *Documentary History*, ed. Baxter, VI, 141.

¹²Hubbard, *Narrative of Troubles*, 195-96.