

Commemorating Louisbourg, c. 1767

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COMMUNICATION

Commemorating Louisbourg, c. 1767

IN MY RECENT ARTICLE ON THE PRESERVATION OF Louisbourg I stated that the first step to mark the 18th century history of the French town occurred in 1895.¹ It turns out that I was mistaken. There had been a monument, so to speak, erected on the historic site around 1767,² 128 years before the American Society of Colonial Wars raised what I thought was the first memorial. All trace and memory of that early commemorative effort apparently vanished over the next few decades, or at least none of the 19th century visitors to Louisbourg mentioned it. Despite its disappearance the 1767 monument was important, both for what it indicates about the people who raised it and because it may have been the first such commemoration in what is now Canada.

The man behind the 1767 memorial seems to have been Captain Samuel Holland (1728-1801), the Dutch-born British officer who was at the time Surveyor-General of the Province of Quebec and of the Northern District of North America. A veteran of the military campaigns of the Seven Years War (among other things he was beside Wolfe when the latter died on the Plains of Abraham in 1759),³ Holland had been at Louisbourg in 1758 and travelled to Cape Breton on several occasions between 1764 and 1767 to carry out a detailed survey of the island.⁴ In addition to his surveying Holland was an enthusiastic astronomer, keeping a detailed record of the observations he made on both St. John's Island (Prince Edward Island) and Cape Breton to ascertain the longitude and latitude of those places.⁵ At Louisbourg, he even established an observatory in a building beyond the ruined fortifications, the second astronomical observatory to be erected in the town in 15 years.⁶

Before Holland left Louisbourg in 1767 — never to return, for the garrison withdrew the following year — he felt the need to somehow mark the British capture of the fortified town nine years earlier. He himself had participated in the 1758 siege as “General Wolfe’s Engineer”,⁷ so his desire to commemorate

1 “Preserving History: The Commemoration of 18th Century Louisbourg, 1895-1940”, *Acadiensis*, XII, 2 (Spring 1983), pp. 53-80.

2 I came across a reference to this early memorial by accident, while reading through Dilys Francis, “The Mines and Quarries of Cape Breton Island during the French Period, 1713-1760”, unpublished manuscript, 1965, on file at the Fortress of Louisbourg.

3 Holland’s career is traced in Willis Chipman, “The Life and Times of Major Samuel Holland, Surveyor-General, 1764-1801”, *Ontario Historical Society Papers and Records*, Vol. 21 (1924), pp. 11-90.

4 D.C. Harvey, ed., *Holland’s Description of Cape Breton Island and Other Documents* (Halifax, 1935).

5 *Ibid.*, pp. 50-54.

6 The location of Holland’s observatory is marked on plan 1767-1 in the Archives of the Fortress of Louisbourg. For an account of the earlier observatory see Kenneth Donovan, “Canada’s First Astronomical Observatory”, *Canadian Geographic*, Vol. 100, No. 6 (Dec. 1980-Jan. 1981), pp. 36-43.

7 Chipman, “Life and Times of Major Samuel Holland”, p. 19.

the military victory was that of someone who had lived through an event and looked back on it with a sense of pride and achievement. In that respect the 1767 monument was quite different from the later memorials, which would be erected by people whose appreciation for the importance of Louisbourg in history was strictly learned. Holland evidently had a reflective, sensitive side, which inclined him toward the commemoration of bygone events. In the same letter in which he described the monument, addressed to Sir Frederick Haldimand, brigadier of the Southern Department, Holland offered a few words of consolation concerning the death of Haldimand's nephew, who had drowned at Louisbourg in December 1765. Holland added: "Tho' we cannot help reflecting on these events, our remembering them, makes us more Sencible of their lose, then we where sencible of their friendship & assistance when living".⁸ If that were true for people, then it might be equally true for events of importance. Hence, Holland and his colleagues erected their memorial at Louisbourg, and the surveyor talked of raising another to Wolfe at Quebec and the need for a third to General Henry Bouquet in Pensacola.

Brief though it is, Holland's account offers some insight into the nature of the Louisbourg monument. The monument consisted of a selction of cut stones of the ruined French fortifications, material that was in plentiful supply, durable and symbolized the British conquest of the French. Both larger and smaller stones were used, and one assumes these were arranged vertically, as in a column, but that may not have been so. At least some of the stones were polished in an attempt to render the memorial more aesthetically pleasing. An inscription was added so that there would be no doubt in the future to whom or to what the stones were dedicated. Holland showed the same naive faith in his monument that all generations demonstrate; namely, a belief that their commemoration would stand forever. How long the memorial did stand is not known. It may have been dismantled soon after the British left, by people anxious to re-use the French cut stone on other building projects, in a nearby community, elsewhere on the island, or as far away as Halifax. Then again, perhaps only the inscription was vandalized, or worn away over time by the elements. The monument might

8 Holland to Haldimand, 20 January 1768, Add. Mss 21728 (B-68), p. 255, Frederick Haldimand Papers, Public Archives of Canada. Holland's account of the monument appears in this same letter, pp. 256-7, as follows:

The Monument we have erected at Louisbourg, on the Ruins of the Citadel, is made with the Hewen Stones of the Ruinous Fortifications, the Inscription and Polishing the large Stones by young Grant & me, & the rest by the surveying party, & for Corring the materials together the officers & soldiers of the Garrison brought us more than we wanted, so there have been no expenses — and as there where no worckmen to be had to Execute it as I could have wished it to be, it is in the Rustick taste, that the Injursys of Time can make but little impression on it. We are now making a project to erect a Monument on the Heights of Abraham in memory of Gel. Wolfe for which we will open a subscription. I hope there is something of this kind to be Don at Pensacola in memory of Gel. Bouquet — I am convinced you will do your endeavour towards its.

have remained, but shorn of its identifying label it would have had no meaning for those who saw it. Indeed, could one or more of the piles of stones depicted by J.E. Woolford in 1818 — for the illustration see *Acadiensis*, XII, 2 (Spring 1983), p. 59 — be Holland's lost memorial?

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