

THE RUMOUR OF SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY BRITISH SETTLEMENT IN NEW BRUNSWICK

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A short time ago, a researcher pointed me to a claim made in W.A. Squires's well-known book, *History of Fredericton: The Last 200 Years*. In it, the author suggests that the first Europeans to inhabit the St. John River valley may have been Scottish, not French. I had to get to the bottom of this bold assertion.

In short, Squires is in error.

The long story is more interesting and circuitous. Squires makes the claim that W.F. Ganong reported having seen a Quebec Provincial Archives (Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec) document in which a priest travelling to Quebec by way of the St. John River stated that he had called at the "Scottish fort at the mouth of the Nashwaak" toward the beginning of the seventeenth century (Squires 11). Squires gives these lines in quotation marks as if quoting from Ganong. Unfortunately, he does not cite the Ganong source, so I went searching through Ganong's writings to try to find either the exact quote Squires refers to or Ganong's own theories about seventeenth-century Scottish settlement in New Brunswick. I could not find the quote, but I did find multiple instances of Ganong dismissing the notion of seventeenth-century Scots in New Brunswick as incorrect.

First, in *Monograph of Historic Sites in New Brunswick*, Ganong addresses the history of Fort Nashwaak. He writes: "Cadillac in 1692 speaks of this as a Micmac fort, and it has been claimed that it was built by early Scotch settlers, both of which are probably errors" (*Monograph of Historic Sites* 61–2). Perhaps slightly more definitively, Ganong restates this in his *Monograph of Place-Nomenclature in New Brunswick*. There, Ganong calls the notion of a Scotch settlement "a mistake" (269), at the same time refuting as "improbable" the same claim to Scottish precedence in what is likely the same Ingraham narrative that Squires refers to on page 11 of his Fredericton book. Hall and others also appear to generally accept that the first Fort Nashwaak was the one that Villebon had constructed of wood in 1692, and the extant French plans that Ganong reproduces attest to its shape (Hall 233).

Unfortunately, when Ganong cites his proof that this is a mistaken conception (citing it as "Quebec docs" in his *Monograph of Place-Nomenclature*), his citation and bibliography are somewhat imprecise. In his bibliography, there is no entry for "Quebec docs." However, with that shorthand, he probably meant to refer readers to this entry: "Quebec Manuscripts. Manuscripts relating to the History of Canada. 4 Vols. Quebec, 1883–86." The problem was, though, that I could not initially find this document.

Fortunately, in his *Monograph of Historic Sites*, Ganong gives the proper French citation, which is "Collection de manuscrits contenant lettres, mémoires, et autres documents historiques relatifs à la Nouvelle-France, recueillis aux Archives de la province de Québec, ou copiés à l'étranger, mis en ordre et édités sous les auspices de la législature de Québec, avec tables, etc." This four-volume collection of reproductions of historic documents was printed circa 1883–1885. Sure enough, in volume 2, on pages 567–68, one can find a reproduction of a 15 November 1713 letter from Mr. Begon to Mr. Ponchartrain that broaches the notion of early Scots in New Brunswick.¹

Specifically, their letter discusses the disputed claims to territory in New England, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, PEI, etc., following the Treaty of Utrecht (1713). At the end of the letter, Begon writes that “Père De la Chasse, Missionnaire à Pentagouët, dit que les Anglois appellent la Rivière St-Jean la Rivière des Ecossois, prétendant qu'elle est à eux depuis 1606 ; qu'ils disent en avoir pris possession les premiers et avoir fait un fort à 18 lieues à l'embouchure, dans un lieu nommé Nachouac.” That is, Begon asserts that Father de la Chasse, a missionary, says that the English called the St. John River “the Scottish river,” “claiming that it has been theirs since 1606; that they say they took possession of it first and that they made a fort 18 leagues at the mouth, in a place called Nachouac” (author’s translation).

So, this oldest piece of documentary evidence mentioning the alleged early Scottish settlement is a French letter written nearly a hundred years after the supposed event. Further, the letter itself is based on the hearsay of a priest who himself said that the English only “claim” that they have precedence. And the implication is that none of the French men associated with this letter give this English report any credence. (This is what we would expect given the circumstances at the time surrounding the disagreement between the British and the French on the borders of the territory to be ceded to Britain following the Treaty of Utrecht.) Meanwhile, seventeenth-century French settlement along the St. John River is well-documented in innumerable sources from at least 1611 onward (Hall 108), none of which mention a Scottish presence there. A link to the complete reproduction of the letter can be found in the note below.

My assumption about Father de la Chasse’s reference to old English claims—and this is likely what Ganong surmised as well—is that, at best, de la Chasse or the Englishmen he was quoting were mistaken. Specifically, one or the other confused the old “Scottish” claims to the territory comprising modern-day New Brunswick and Nova Scotia with some actual early settlement. That is, de la Chasse or the Englishmen he quotes have either misremembered or misrepresented Sir William Alexander’s claim to the Maritimes as “New Scotlande” (c. 1621–1632) (Harvey), and the precise details of his brief and failed settlement at Port Royal were confused and forgotten by this point. Again, even in 1713 when these authors were writing, the events, claims, and alleged settlements were nearly a hundred years old. Sir Alexander’s claims did end up producing a map or two showing his New Scotlande comprising the whole of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, so the supposition of misrepresentation is not unreasonable.

More pertinently, the maps produced after Sir Alexander’s claim show that the rivers of New Brunswick had been given familiar Scottish names; the St. John River was labelled “the Clyde,” for instance. However, there is no evidence or well-cited arguments elsewhere that actual seventeenth-century Scots settlement occurred in New Brunswick. The St. John River was “the Scottish river” very briefly and only in the minds of the British claimants.

Interestingly, de la Chasse’s distance of eighteen leagues from the mouth for the location of the Nashwaak fort is quite accurate: if the leagues are figured at between three and three-and-a-half miles, he placed the Nashwaak fort between fifty-four and sixty-three miles upriver (or about 100 km), not far off from Fredericton by modern reckoning. The French did have a fort there at the end of the seventeenth century, so the precise location of Nashwaak was well known to the French of the time.

Returning to Squires, Ganong was aware of claims of such an early Scottish settlement, but he believed that they were erroneous. Squires, then, was apparently either aware only of Ganong’s knowledge of the claims (but not Ganong’s repeated refuting of the claim), or Squires deliberately ignored Ganong’s protests so he could craft his own speculations about early Scotch settlement. Indeed,

the editor's footnote in the relevant section of Squires (11) mentions that they omitted a passage in which "Dr. Squires speculates briefly on the identity of the Scottish settlers and suggests that they may have come from Sir William Alexander's settlement at Lower Granville after King Charles I returned the Alexander grant to the King of France in 1631." For his part, Squires refers mainly to oral tradition to shore up his Scottish claims. Subsequent researchers have asserted more definitively that the British possessed nothing resembling a fort or settlement near Fredericton as early as Squires claims: "After the brief presence of Thomas Temple's fur trading posts at Reversing Falls and Jemseg in the mid-seventeenth century, British subjects did not settle on the river again until the late 1750s" (Hall 270).

Ganong was a consummate and, one could even say, obsessively meticulous researcher. Many of his historical works, particularly his *Crucial Maps* and *Place-Nomenclature* monographs are master classes in intellectual rigour. Moreover, he was not worried about challenging orthodoxy if the documentary evidence bolstered his conclusions. For instance, he convincingly refutes a French origin for the name of Cape Breton (relating it to "Bayonne" or "Bretagne") and argues instead that the earliest form of the name appeared on Portuguese maps as "bertomes." "That word," he wrote, "meant at the time the English and not the French Bretons, and referred to the region which John Cabot and his Bristol Englishmen discovered on the voyage of 1497....Therefore our Cape Breton would mean 'Cape of the English'" (*Crucial Maps* 37). However, in the case of early Scots in New Brunswick, Ganong found no such documentary evidence to bear out the claim. Nor have I.

To comment on this research note, please write to editorjnbs@stu.ca. **Si vous souhaitez réagir à cette note de recherche**, veuillez soit nous écrire à editorjnbs@stu.ca.

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Note

¹ The reproduction of the French letter which Ganong properly cites as being in the "Collection de manuscrits contenant lettres, mémoires, et autres documents historiques relatifs à la Nouvelle-France, recueillis aux Archives de la province de Québec, ou copiés à l'étranger, mis en ordre et édités sous les auspices de la législature de Québec, avec tables, etc." is available at: <http://collections.banq.qc.ca/retrieve/3859623#page=583>.

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