

THE BATTLE OF BIG FORKS RECONSIDERED

Bernard Epps

Bury

Mrs. Catherine Matilda Day's 1869 *History of the Eastern Townships* contains the only known account of an ambush by retreating Rogers' Rangers of pursuing St. Francis Indians at Big Forks, the site of today's Sherbrooke, on October 10, 1759, five days after the burning of Odanak. The St. Francis Indians were the remnants of some 20 New England tribes and sub-tribes driven to the protection of New France by encroaching English settlements, hostilities and diseases.

They eventually congregated around the mission of St. Francis de Sales near the confluence of the St. Francis and St. Lawrence Rivers.

They joined French troops against the English at Fort Necessity in 1754, Fort Duquesne in 1755, Fort William Henry in 1757 and French troops joined them on raids deep into Massachusetts and as far east as the coast of Maine where they burned, plundered and took captives to replace those lost.

Count Frontenac rewarded them in 1787 by giving them exclusive hunting and fishing privileges over all the territory between the St. Lawrence and the New England frontier, between the Richelieu and Chaudière Rivers — territory which later became the Eastern Townships.

Rogers' orders from General Amherst were: "Remember the barbarities committed by the enemy's Indian scoundrels on every occasion, where they have had opportunities of showing their infamous cruelties towards His Majesty's subjects. Take your revenge: but remember that although the villains have promiscuously murdered women and children of all ages, it is my order that no women or children should be hurt."

This account is attributed by Mrs. Day to Jesse Pennoyer who had it from "Captain St. Francis, late Chief of the tribe of Indians, and one of the *few* survivors of the pursuing party." The story was corroborated, wrote Mrs. Day, "by a person named Bowen, son of



Scene on the River St. Francis near Sherbrooke (Eastern Townships).

(From "Canadian Scenery," 1839–1842, by W.H. Bartlett)

one of Rogers' men: and still further in its main features, by the descendants of a person named Barnes, one of the recovered captives mentioned."¹

Rogers made no mention of such an ambush in his *Journals*, the primary source for all subsequent accounts, and when Francis Parkman considered Mrs. Day's story in a note appended to the text of his *Montcalm and Wolfe* (1884), he concluded;

If such an incident really took place, it is scarcely possible that Rogers would not have made some mention of it. On the other hand, it is equally incredible that the Indians would have invented the tale of their own defeat...All things considered, it is probably groundless.²

Subsequent historians, perhaps swayed by Parkman's stature have generally ignored the story, Canadians C.P. Stacey and George F.G. Stanley among them. Lieut. Col. H.M. Jackson considered the story in a footnote to his *Rogers' Rangers History* (1953) and added: "None of these incidents can be substantiated, however."³

Local historians are divided. Mgr. Albert Gravel gave considerable space to the dispute in his *Cantons de l'Est* and ends by agreeing with Parkman largely because the identity of "Captain St. Francis" was not confirmed through Abenaki Sources.⁴ Magog's

Leonard Auger agreed for an article in *Vermont History* but Mgr. Maurice O'Bready preferred to believe the story until it could be disproven.⁵

Today, we know far more about Jesse Pennoyer, Mrs. Day and the St. Francis Indians than Parkman, Gravel or O'Bready and the dispute is worth another look.

Mrs. Day's Account

On the morning of the fifth of October, 1759, the assault took place; 200 Indians of all ages and sexes were slain; and some few taken prisoners, and a number of the English captives retaken; when Rogers with his party, prisoners and rescued captives, made a hasty retreat up the St. Francis River. The Chief of the tribe (father of the Capt. St. Francis above named) with a number of his warriors had come in during the day and immediately held a council of war, at which it was decided that all present should start in pursuit the next morning; and that as many more of their warriors as they could call in, should start with canoes on the second day.

Accordingly on the morning of the sixth, about fifty warriors, each armed with a gun, tomahawk, and scalping knife, started up the north shore of the river; and on the 7th, about forty-five more, armed like the others, set off in seven large canoes. These overtook the party that had started the day before, at the rapids in the township of Wendover, where the first detachment had waited the arrival of the canoes; and at daybreak on the morning of the eighth, they all set off together.

They came up with Rogers' men in Kingsey, and in the skirmish that ensued, the Indians lost several men, while only three or four of the other party were slightly wounded. As soon as the Indians discovered any of their enemies, they fired and often missed aim; in fact their shots seldom took effect, and before they had time to reload they were shot down, or if the savage was separated from his fellows, his enemy quickly rushed up and dispatched him with the bayonet. The Indians sustained considerable loss in this manner throughout the day, though they succeeded in doing but little injury to their enemies.

On the morning of the ninth, they held a council, at which it was proposed and urged by quite a number of their party, to abandon the pursuit and return. Well would it have been (fo)r them had they done so; but the majority of them were for pushing forward to the 'Little Forks', (now Lennoxville) where they intended to give their enemies another battle.

On the tenth, Rogers crossed with his men to the opposite shore of the river, near Brompton Falls, and while the Indians were making the *portage*, pushed on toward the 'Big Forks', (now Sherbrooke) and gained an elevated point (near the present residence of Mr. Sheriff Bowen). His experienced eye at once saw the strategic importance of the position thus gained, and he at once determined to avail himself of the advantage, to attempt the defeat of his enemies, and put an effectual end to further annoyance from them.

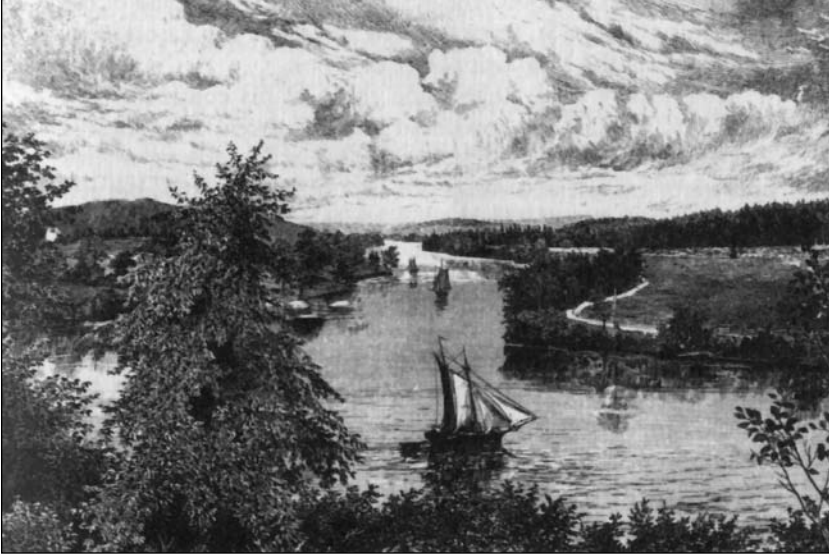
The river which here makes a short turn, on one side has a high bank which was then thickly wooded; while the opposite point was low, and then covered with a thin growth of stunted bushes. From this height Rogers had a fair view of the river for a distance of two miles down. For the purpose of deceiving and misleading the enemy's scouts, he sent a small party of his men on to the 'Little Forks', with instructions to build fires, in a manner similar to what had been done in their former camping grounds, and then return to join the main body at the heights beyond the mouth of the Magog.

In the mean time the Indian scouts passed up the north shore till they saw the fires at the 'Little Forks', and thinking that Rogers' party was encamping there, returned to the falls with this intelligence. Those who had completed the *portage* immediately set out in the canoes, leaving the others to follow up the north shore, expecting to find their enemies in camp at the 'Little Forks', and hoping to surprise and cut off their retreat.

But their vigilant foe had not been idle. — During this time he had posted his men in such a manner that while they were out of sight themselves, they had full view of the approaching canoes a long way down the river, and as they came near, could tell about the number of savages on board of each, by the number of paddles.

He then arranged for the attack by appointing a certain number of men for each canoe, equal to the number of paddles in each; and detailing a man to fire at each Indian separately from the first to the last, gave strict orders to aim well and not to fire till the signal be given by himself.

Everything was quiet until about one half of the canoes had turned the point, when the signal was given and the men fired with such precision and deadly effect, that almost every savage in the canoes was either killed or mortally wounded. The Indians on the north shore got a little in advance of the canoes by crossing the point with the intent of fording the river, but on hearing the firing they hastened back to the point. By this time Rogers' men had reloaded, and being still



Eastern Townships: Valley of the St. Francis, near Sherbrooke.

(From "Canadian Illustrated News," May 26, 1877 — Wood engraving by W. Scheuer)

in ambush, again fired and killed several, while others retreated up to the crossing, and forded the river.

The English still kept on the heights, and a general and irregular skirmish followed; but as the savages were in the open woods on the intervale below the mouth of the Magog River, while the others were covered by the thick forest on the hill, the result was, that most of the whole Indian force was either killed or badly wounded, while but few of their enemies were either killed or hurt.

It being now near sunset, the English party crossed the Magog, and proceeded up to the 'Little Forks', where they encamped for the night, and the next day Rogers addressed his men thanking them for their bravery and obedience to his orders, and for their faithfulness and perseverance from the first of the difficult enterprise which had been undertaken and carried out, in order to pay their savage foes in their own coin, for their repeated cruelties to the colonists in former years. This, they had now achieved by the almost entire annihilation of that tribe of their enemies.

Then ordering the remaining prisoners to be shot, he resigned his command, advising the men to divide themselves into small companies, each of which should take a somewhat different route to reach the appointed rendezvous on the Connecticut river. This method he deemed best, as affording to small parties a greater chance of game, on which all had

now to depend for food. The advice was followed, some of the men going up the St. Francis to the mouth of the Eaton river, others taking the Massawippi or Coaticook.

After several days, Rogers and those of his command still with him, reached the appointed place, but were disappointed and greatly disheartened at finding the still smoking brands and warm embers of a camp fire, and other unmistakable evidences of the recent departure of those who had been sent to their relief....⁶

Jesse Pennoyer

Born a minister's son in Amenia, New York, in 1760, Jesse Pennoyer served in the 4th New Yorkers during the American Revolution but was commissioned a surveyor in Quebec in 1788. He surveyed Thomas Dunn's seigneurie of St. Armand and when the 'wastelands of the Crown' were opened to settlement in 1792, Pennoyer was among several surveyors sent to divide them into townships.

With a fellow surveyor, Jean Baptiste Duberger, Pennoyer left Quebec City in bateaux on June 15th and called at Odanak on June 22nd to purchase canoes from the St. Francis Indians. Unable to get what they needed, they proceeded up the St. Lawrence to Sorel where Duberger turned up the Richelieu with the boats and supplies while Pennoyer and an assistant travelled by land to Montreal where they procured three canoes from the Caughnawaga Mohawks and hired four Indians to manage them.⁷

That it was usual for surveying parties to employ Indians in the Townships is confirmed by Nathaniel Coffin's field book on the survey of Bury Township. He records on October 17th, 1794, hiring two Indians at Gilbert Hyatt's clearing in Ascot Township for \$8.50 a month each — one of those to replace a Mr. Hills who was getting just \$6.00 a month.⁸

Jesse Pennoyer explored and surveyed a number of townships from 1792 at least until 1806 and probably even later. He owned property in Philipsburg on Missisquoi Bay, was named Commissioner of Oaths in 1794, Justice of the Peace in 1797, and superintendent of a Barnston Township sawmill in 1799. With other surveyors as associates, he became leader of Compton Township and built mills at the site of today's Waterville where he continued to serve as Justice of the Peace and Commander of the 5th Battalion, Eastern Townships Militia, during the Border War. He died at his Compton home on December 1st, 1825, and is

buried in the Old North Church cemetery in Hatley Township.⁹

Little was known of his personal life until 1910 when two books were discovered containing some 70,000 words of his letters and accounts for the years 1799 to 1820. These books have since been lost again but the *Sherbrooke Record* recognized their significance and published eleven articles on them through the spring and summer of 1910. From these excerpts Pennoyer emerges as a precise and conscientious reporter as might be expected of a master surveyor. It is highly unlikely, therefore, that he fabricated the account Mrs. Day quotes.

Captain St. Francis

Captain St. Francis is identified by Mrs. Day as the “late Chief of that tribe of Indians and one of the *few* survivors of the pursuing party” and again as the son of “the Chief” at the time of Rogers’ raid on Odanak. Whites consistently misunderstood Indian Chiefs as akin to seigneurs or lords of the manor with authority to command obedience and direct the affairs of their tribe. In reality, there were a number of chiefs who acted more like village elders to direct affairs through consensus.

Among the principal chiefs of the St. Francis Indians at the time of Rogers’ raid was Joseph Louis Gill. He was the eldest son of Samuel Gill who had been captured at the age of nine on a raid against Salisbury, Mass., in June, 1697, and of Rosalie James, similarly captured as a child from Kennebunk, Maine. Joseph Louis married the daughter of a principal chief about 1740 and was elected principal chief himself by 1749 when he was one of five who signed a letter to the canons of Chartres Cathedral.¹⁰

Joseph Louis was away hunting at the time of the raid on Odanak but his wife and their two sons, Antoine, aged 15 and Xavier, 12, were taken prisoner by the Rangers. Returning a day or two later, Joseph Louis immediately set out in pursuit.¹¹

According to a descendant, Judge Charles Gill, the wife of Joseph Louis was killed and eaten by Stockbridge Indians on the journey south and the two boys forced to eat some of their mother’s flesh. Xavier, too, died on the journey but Antoine survived and was later reunited with his father.

Antoine, in fact, was most likely the “Indian boy” Rogers refers to in his *Journals* as accompanying him and Captain Ogden down the Connecticut on rafts to Fort No. 4. At 15, Antoine would have been big enough to look after himself but not too big to be dangerous and, speaking Abenaki, French and most likely some

English, would have been useful as interpreter and guide. He was turned over to Mrs. Suzanne Willard Johnson at Charlestown because she had been an Abenaki captive and a servant in the home of Joseph Louis Gill and would have known both boys.¹²

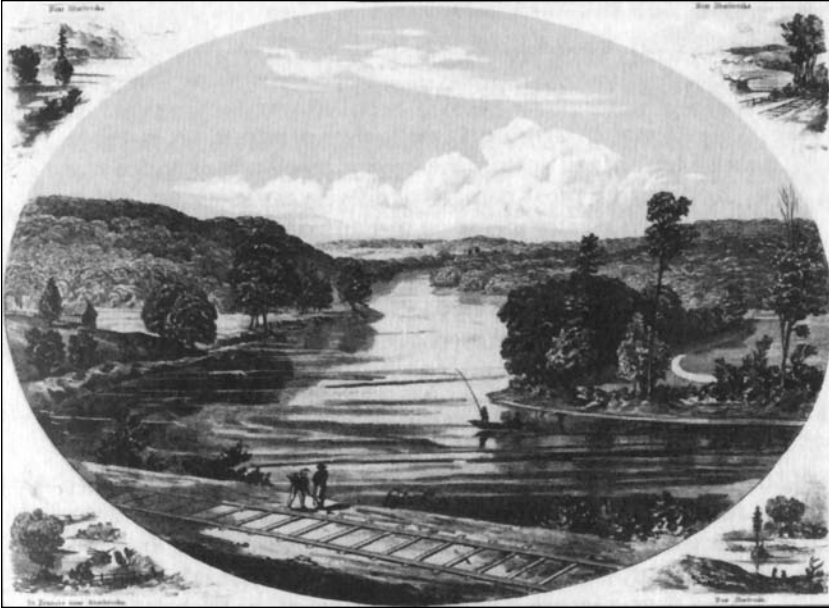
Years later, during the American Revolution, Governor Haldimand offered to make Joseph Louis Gill "head chief" of the St. Francis Abenaki if he would bring them over to the British cause. Joseph Louis, who was to be offered a commission by the Continental Congress if he would join the Revolution, politely declined and suggested his son might be more acceptable to the tribe as the grandson of a principal chief through his mother.¹³ Thus we have a possible candidate for Mrs. Day's "late Chief of that tribe of Indians", son of "the Chief" at the time of Rogers' raid, who would have been in position to know the details of Rogers' ambush and his subsequent actions at 'Little Forks', although he would not, of course, have been a member "of the pursuing party."

The Details

Mrs. Day's story begins from the viewpoint of the pursuers and offers convincing details — the "council of war", "fifty warriors" starting immediately in pursuit up the north shore and forty-five more the next morning "in seven large canoes." The first party on foot were overtaken by the second in canoes "at the rapids in the townships of Wendover." The first obstacles on an upstream journey from Odanak are Lord's Falls (at today's Drummondville) and Menue Falls some two miles upriver.

The next major obstacle on the river is the Kingsey Falls with a large rock in the middle, covered at high water, which splits the current and makes it very strong for more than a mile.¹⁴ Mrs. Day records the Indians caught up with Rogers' rear guard here and fought a skirmish. Since the Rangers were on foot in unfamiliar territory, encumbered by loot and prisoners, while the Indians travelled by canoe on a familiar river, it is difficult to believe they did not catch up with the Rangers.

Mrs. Day records a council on the morning of the ninth over whether to break off the pursuit and then the viewpoint changes to Rogers' side with details of the ambush. Although the entire section is in quotation marks as if drawing directly from Jesse Pennoyer's account, the words in parenthesis (see p.50 above) were probably added by Mrs. Day because she says the ambush occurred "near the present residence of Sheriff Bowen." George



View on the River Saint Francis C.E.

Looking North from the Residence of G.F. Bowen, Esq. Sherbrooke, Eastern Townships.
(From "Eastern Townships Scenery," by W.S. Hunter, Jr. Published 1860)

Frederick Bowen did not come to Sherbrooke until 1835, ten years after Pennoyer's death, and did not become sheriff until 1844. He became Sherbrooke's first mayor in 1852 and his handsome home stood on the river side of Melbourne Street near Queen.

William Stewart Hunter's 1860 *Eastern Townships Scenery* contains a "View of the River Saint Francis C.E. Looking north from the Residence of G.F. Bowen, Esq. Sherbrooke, Eastern Townships." Comparison with the wood engraving by W. Shuer published in the *Canadian Illustrated News* of May 26, 1877, and with W.H. Bartlett's view published in *Canadian Scenery 1839-1842* as "Scene on the River St. Francis near Sherbrooke"¹⁵ reveals they are all from the same location and show (with certain differences) what Rogers must have seen looking back downstream in 1759. It appears to be a prime site for an ambush and the details of Mrs. Day's narrative describe the place exactly:

The river which here makes a short turn, on one side has a high bank which was then thickly wooded; while the opposite point was low and then covered with a thin growth of stunted bushes. From this height Rogers had a fair view of the river for a distance of two miles down.

Furthermore, such an ambush is perfectly in accord with Rogers' tactics as set forth in his *Journals*:

XII. If you determine to rally after a retreat, in order to make a fresh stand against the enemy, by all means endeavour to do it on the most rising ground you can come at, which will give you greatly the advantage in point of situation, and enable you to repulse superior numbers.¹⁶

In Rogers' report to General Amherst from No. 4, dated November 5, 1759, he skimmed over his retreat from Odanak in a few words:

I marched the detachment eight days in a body that way; and when provisions grew scarce, near Ampara Magog Lake, I divided the detachment into small companies, putting proper guides to each, who were to assemble at the mouth of the Amonsook River, as I expected provisions would be brought there for our relief, not knowing which way I should return.

Two days after we parted, Ensign Avery, of Fitch's fell in on my track, and followed in my rear; and a party of the enemy came upon them, and took seven of his party prisoners, two of whom that night made their escape and came in to me next morning Avery, with the remainder of his party joined mine and came with me to the Cohase Intervales....¹⁷

The Rev. Henry H. Saunderson, in his *History of Charlestown, New Hampshire, the Old No. 4...* adds: "Another party of about twenty, under Lieutenants Dunbar and Turner, were attacked and the principal part were killed or taken including the two officers."¹⁸

Mante's 1772 *History of the Late War In North America and the Islands of the West Indies*, adds that some of Lieut. George Campbell's party, after eating the leather of their cartridge boxes, found some of their own men scalped and mutilated on which "they fell like cannibals" and devoured part of them raw.¹⁹

Remains of at least one of these parties were later found in Barnston and Barford Townships — human bones, musket barrels, powder horns, clasp knives, a razor, silver buckles, camp kettles and musket balls and even a musket left leaning against a tree so that the wood grew around it.²⁰

Conclusion

The primary objection to the acceptance of Mrs. Day's account is that Rogers made no mention of ambushing his pursuers in his

Journals. He also left out the fate of Dunbar and Turner and any mention of Lieut. Campbell's party which later historians have accepted, and reported killing "at least two hundred Indians" at Odanak. French observers who arrived soon after the massacre reported only 30 dead, 20 of those being women and children.²¹

If we discount from Mrs. Day's story such phrases as "almost every savage in the canoes was either killed or mortally wounded" and "most of the whole Indian force was either killed or mortally wounded" as the usual exaggeration made in the confusion of battle, then the Battle of Big Forks can be seen as yet another skirmish in guard action fought from Kingsey Falls to the border.

We can only speculate on the identity of "Captain St. Francis" and add that the name may have been a nickname along the style of "Injun Joe" from a time when whites couldn't trouble themselves to get their tongues around Indian names. But the details from both sides of the pursuit and ambush appear to be accurate in every way that can be checked and if we accept that the St. Francis Indians started in pursuit soon after the massacre, it is difficult to believe they did not overtake the Rangers or that Rogers did not turn about at a strategic site and ambush them.

Lastly, this ambush was in fact confirmed as early as 1832 when Zadock Thompson wrote in his *History of the State of Vermont*:

On his march he was several times attacked in the rear, and lost seven men; but forming an ambuscade on his own track, he at length fell upon the enemy with such success as to put an end to further annoyance or pursuit.²²

As it turned out, Rogers' Raid was entirely unnecessary because shortly before he put Odanak to the torch and its women and children to the sword, General Wolfe defeated Montcalm on the Heights of Abraham and when the British conquest was completed the following year hostilities with New England ended with the fall of New France.



RESUME

Le seul récit connu de l'embuscade préparée par les Rogers' Rangers aux Grandes Fourches (site actuel de la ville de Sherbrooke), lors de leur retraite face aux Indiens de la St-François en octobre 1759, se trouve dans le livre de Mme C.M. Day *History of the Eastern Townships*, publié en 1869. Le récit qu'elle relate est

attribué à Jesse Pennoyer, qui fut un des premiers arpenteurs des cantons de la région.

Rogers lui-même ne fait pas mention de l'embuscade dans son journal et peu d'historiens la reconnaissent comme un fait historique. Toutefois, de récentes recherches sur Pennoyer et les Indiens de la St-François laissent croire que l'embuscade, telle que racontée par Mme Day, qui a vraisemblablement exagéré dans la description du massacre, doit être considérée comme un apport important à la connaissance d'une des nombreuses escarmouches qui ont eu lieu entre Kingsey Falls et la frontière.

NOTES

- 1 Mrs. C.M. Day, *History of the Eastern Townships* (Montreal: John Lovell, 1869), p. 137.
- 2 Francis Parkman, *Montcalm and Wolfe* (New York: Crowell-Collier, 1962), p. 522.
- 3 Lieut. Col. H.M. Jackson, *Rogers' Rangers, A History* (n.p. 1953), p. 111. Kenneth Roberts did not include this ambush in his famous 1937 novel *Northwest Passage* either — although its dramatic possibilities would have served the book (and the Spencer Tracy movie made from it) well.
- 4 Mgr. Albert Gravel, *Cantons de l'Est* (Sherbrooke: Philippe Desranleau, 1938), p. 98–106.
- 5 Mgr. Maurice O'Bready, *De Ktiné à Sherbrooke: esquisse historique de Sherbrooke des origines à 1954* (Sherbrooke: n.p. 1973), p. 142–146.
- 6 Mrs. Day, p. 137–142. The original spelling and punctuation have been retained but paragraphing has been changed for ease of reading.
- 7 Harry B. Shufelt, *Nicholas Austin the Quaker and the Township of Bolton* (Knowlton: BCHS, 1971), p. 66.
- 8 O'Bready, p. 135.
- 9 Marie-Paule LaBrègue, "Pennoyer, Jesse," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. VI, 1987. See also Carol (Ramsden-Wood) Holder, *Pennoyer Family History* (Calgary Alberta: n.p. 1985).
- 10 Thomas M. Charland, "Gill, Joseph-Louis" *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* Vol. IV, 1979. Abbé J.A. Maurault *Histoire des Abénakis depuis 1605 jusqu'à nos jours* (Sorel: n.p. 1866), p. 348, 349. Francis Parkman, *A Half-Century of Conflict* (New York: Crowell-Collier, 1967), p. 77.
- 11 Charland, "Gill, Joseph Louis." John C. Huden, "The White Chief

- of the St. Francis Abenakis — Some Aspects of Border Warfare: 1690–1790," *Vermont History*, vol. 24, No. 3, 1956, p. 202.
- 12 Hudon, p. 203.
 - 13 Colin G. Calloway, *Western Abenakis of Vermont 1600–1800; War, Migration and the Survival of an Indian People* (Norman, Okla. and London: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1990), p. 213.
 - 14 Joseph Bouchette, "St. Francis River," *Topographical Dictionary of Lower Canada* (London: 1832) unpaginated.
 - 15 All three of these prints may be found in C.P. DeVolpi and P.H. Scowen, *The Eastern Townships: A Pictorial Record* (Montreal; DevSco Publications Ltd. 1962), p. 26, p. 41, p. 79.
 - 16 Major Robert Rogers, *Journals of Major Robert Rogers: containing An Account of the several Excursions he made under the Generals who commanded upon the Continent of NORTH AMERICA, during the late war* (London: J. Millan, 1765), p. 47
 - 17 Rogers, p. 107, 108.
 - 18 Rev. Henry H. Saunderson, *History of Charlestown, New Hampshire the Old No. 4* (Claremont, N.H.: n.p. 1876), p. 84.
 - 19 Mante, *History of the Late War in North America and the Islands of the West Indies* (1772) p. 218ff. Cited in Jackson p. 106 and also in G.M. Wrong, *The Fall of Canada 1759–1760* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1914), p. 43.
 - 20 B.F. Hubbard, *Forests and Clearings: The History of Stanstead County, Province of Quebec* (Montreal: the Lovell Printing and Publishing Co., 1874), p. 61.
 - 21 Gordon M. Day, *The Identity of the St. Francis Indians*, Canadian Ethnology Service, Paper No. 71 (Ottawa: National Museum of Man, 1981), p. 43.
 - 22 Zadock Thompson, *History of the State of Vermont From its earliest settlement to the close of the year 1832* (Burlington: Edward Smith, 1833), p. 48. It is possible that Thompson got his account of the ambush from Jesse Pennoyer's lost original, but highly unlikely because he became Preceptor of Charleston Academy, Hatley Township only after his book went to press.

