

2 European Cognizance of the Lake Memphremagog Region

The quest for a shortcut to the Orient, and the expansion of the fur trade, were the two primary drivers for French exploration in the 1600s. The former pushed the French west, and ultimately south, along major waterways and long-established native trade routes, but never in the direction of the Atlantic seaboard. On the other hand the fur trade required a rich beaver territory inhabited by a significant population of native trappers. The area of the Eastern Townships in the 1600s was a moderately poor beaver habitat, but more importantly, it was devoid of any significant and permanent First Nations presence (see chapter 1). Thus there was little incentive for the French to explore the St. Francis watershed, and if contact was desired (and it wasn't) with the Dutch along the Hudson, or the fledgling English colonies along the Atlantic seaboard, then the route up the Richelieu to Lake Champlain, and then down into the Hudson Valley was infinitely more navigable. The St. Francis River watershed remained unknown to Europeans, and only gradually came into focus as the result of conflict.

Wars, raids, and refugees

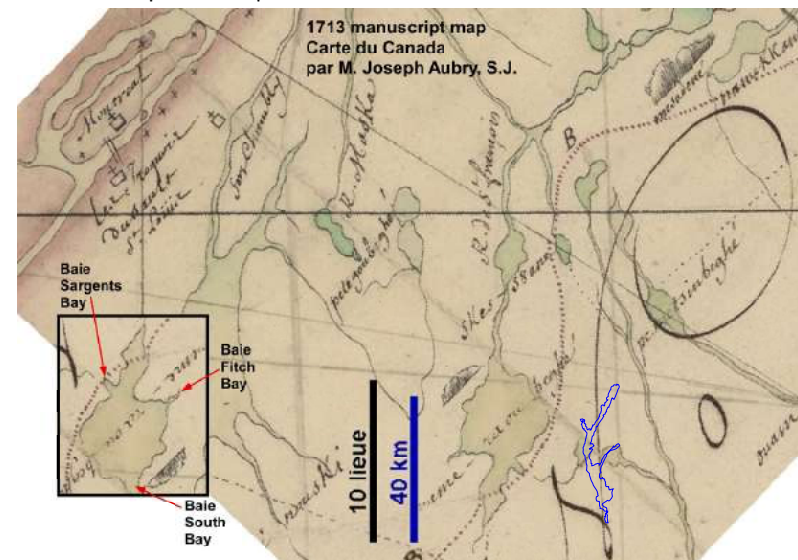
In the period 1648 to 1653, Mohawk (Kanien'kehá'ka, one of the nations of the Iroquois Confederacy) war parties raided to the east and attacked Sokokis (or Sokwakis) and Cowasuk settlements along the middle and upper reaches, respectively, of the Connecticut River valley (see map, page 4). They took prisoners and likely dispersed much of the population. In 1663 and 1669 these attacks resumed, and this time a large number of Cowasuck and Sokokis sought refuge closer to the French (although the French themselves were under siege by the Iroquois). In 1663 some of the Sokokis settled temporarily near the mouth of the St. Francis River (the first settlement of what became Odanak). In their short occupation at Odanak, their exchanges with the French were probably infrequent. The post at Trois-Rivières was the closest French establishment, some 60 km down river. Perhaps they may have disclosed to the French, to the degree language barriers permitted, the rudiments of the *St-Francis- Lake Memphremagog - Black - Nulhigan - Connecticut* route. However knowledge and control of canoe-portage routes was quite strategic, so it is equally probable that this information was not shared, or even inquired about. As the Iroquois menace subsided the Sokokis returned to their traditional territory.

A refugee village at (or near) Odanak was again established in 1676, as Abenakis fled the depredations of both the English and their native allies at the end of the hostilities known as King Phillips War. Appreciable numbers of Abenakis fled to the St. Lawrence valley in the period 1673 to 1677, alliances were forged, and it seems reasonable to assume that the French would have become aware of the St. Francis River corridor during this time. Whether specific knowledge of Lake Memphremagog also emerged, is speculative.

In the winter of 1690, in retaliation for the Lachine Massacre that previous summer (August 5, 1689), Governor Frontenac sent out three mixed Indian-French expeditions against New England and New York settlements. The expedition that commenced from Trois-Rivières, led by Francois Hertel, and composed of 25 French militia and 22 warriors from the village of Odanak (St. Francis), is believed to have used the Lake Memphremagog route. With snowshoes and supplies carried in Indian toboggans, the 40 km frozen surface of the Lake was an easier and faster path than any trails through the woods clogged with snow. This may well have been the first time European eyes saw the lake, albeit in its winter clothing.

Father Aubry's map

Odanak was established as a permanent mission village in the year 1700. Father Joseph Aubry was the Jesuit missionary at Odanak from 1709 to his death in 1756. He travelled extensively in the Abenakis homeland, and almost certainly visited Lake Memphremagog on several occasions. In 1713 the French were negotiating with the English the termination of Queen Anne's War. The French had lost, and were being forced to relinquish all claims to Acadia to the British, with the exception of Cape Breton Island.



Portion of 1713 Aubry manuscript map showing Lake Memphremagog (Memeraoubegehé). The length of the Lake is surprisingly accurate. It is elongated in a north-south direction, but where it is narrow and where it is wider, appears to be reversed. If inverted the map makes a great deal more sense (see inset). Current outline is shown in blue. Could Aubry have based his depiction on an indigenous sketch of the Lake, where the expected conventions of orientation were not employed? The purple line is a crude approximation of the height of land, separating watersheds that flow into the St Lawrence, from those that flow to the Atlantic. Most of the black dashed lines represent land routes and portages.

But what was Acadia's boundaries? Either at the request of the French government, or perhaps on his own initiative on behalf of his Abenaki flock and their kin, Aubry constructed a manuscript map of Canada, largely from second hand information from the Abenakis themselves. The Aubry map is fascinating as it is the very first map that shows Lake Memphremagog. On the map it is labelled Lac Memeraoubegehé, and as Aubry was fluent in their language, we can be assured that the French phonetic spelling, is a reasonable reflection of what the Abenakis actually called the Lake.

No French maps drawn later in the 18th century offer a more accurate rendition of Lake Memphremagog than the one by Aubry. We do know that two individuals, Noël Langlois dit Traversy, and Pierre Abraham dit Desmarets, were sent into the upper St Francis region in 1742 on the orders of Intendant Hoquart, in search of suitable mast timbers for the French Navy. Surely they would have produced some crude sketch maps of their explorations? But did they proceed up the Mago River as far as Lake Memphremagog? The results of their investigations have not been discovered. The preserved documented geography of the Lake did not improve for another 43 years.

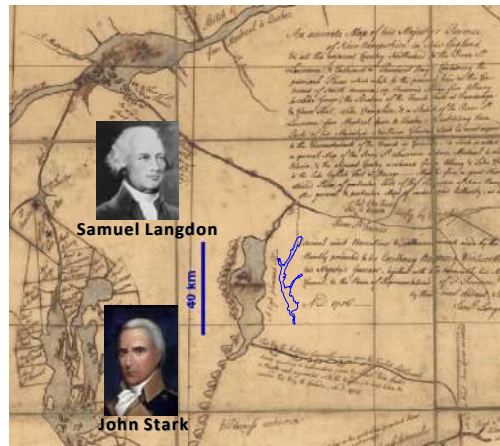
English colonial knowledge

In 1756 a manuscript map of New Hampshire province was published by Samuel Langdon. The map north of the Great Cohasse (Coos) on the Connecticut River was based on the testimony of John Stark, who in April of 1752 had been captured by the Abenakis, and had been brought back to Odanak via the Lake Memphremagog route.

After a little over a year Stark was ransomed, and he returned with first-hand knowledge of the St Francis River watershed.

Portion of 1756 manuscript map by Dr. Samuel Langdon, resident of Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Lake Memphremagog is based on oral testimony of John Stark, who had been held captive as a young man by the Abenakis for roughly a year.

South Bay and the Clyde River are prominently shown, the Lake is appropriately scaled and elongated in a north-south direction, it widens in the middle and is narrower at its north end. All are depictions missing on earlier maps. Apart from South Bay (which deflects in the wrong direction), no other bays are shown.



Robert Rogers

In mid September of 1759, the British general, Jeffery Amherst, launched a "punitive" raid against the Abenaki village of St. Francis (Odanak). Ironically the raid was launched the very day (September 13th) Quebec fell to General Wolfe. From Crown Point on Lake Champlain, Major Robert Rogers and eight companies of his rangers and provincials (totalling 200 men), first by whaleboats then by an arduous 12-day trek overland, approached the village of St. Francis unnoticed on the evening of October 3rd. They attacked very early the next morning. The surprise was complete. Many of the Odanak warriors were gone from the village, and so Rogers' men were largely attacking a village of women and children and younger braves asleep in their cabins.

Estimates vary widely (Rogers greatly exaggerated the numbers to 200; the French minimized them to 20), but the bulk of the evidence would suggest that between 55 and 65 villagers were killed. The village was razed to the ground. This was not a battle, it was an act of genocide.

Their path of retreat was cut off, and so Rogers ordered his men, in smaller groups, to attempt various routes through the wilderness to reach safety. Of the 142 men that made it to St. Francis, only 73 made it out alive. One of the groups, led by Rogers himself took the route past Lake Memphremagog and through Ogden, as revealed in Rogers' sketch map delivered to General Amherst.

On Rogers' sketch map, the Lake is starting to take on a recognizable form. It is narrow and elongated in a north-south fashion, it is approximately the right length, and clearly shows indications of both Sargent's and Fitch Bay.



A portion of Robert Rogers map of his expedition to St. Francis (Odanak) in September 1759. Lake Memphremagog is labelled "Amprahmagog Lake". Note the annotation "Pleasant Lands" just to the east of the Lake. Word would spread amongst New Englanders of the region's desirability. Robert Rogers' retreat is shown as a dashed line.

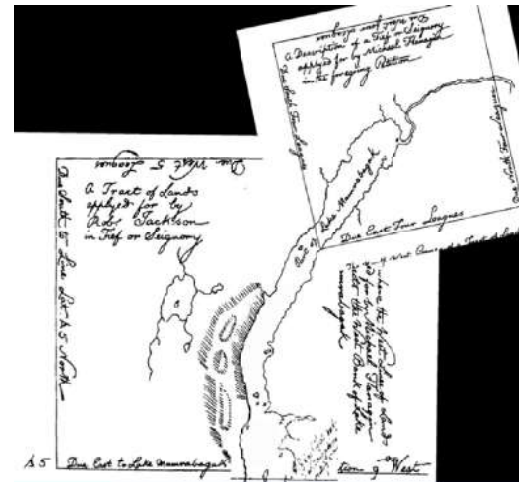
A traveller's narrative

Once the Treaty of Paris had been signed in 1763 yielding New France to the British, the un-ceded Abenaki hunting and fishing territory in the vicinity of Lake Memphremagog, was traversed by numerous outsiders. We are told by Pierre de Sales Laterrière (1743-1815), who travelled up the St. Francis en route to Boston in 1786 with his brother-in-law and a guide, that when they reached Grandes Fourches (present-day Sherbrooke), that the names of previous travellers were seen to be inscribed or painted on rocks and squared posts, and that these names were "*très nombreux*". These early travellers would have ranged from traders to trappers to land speculators. Few left any record of their travels, so we are fortunate to have the memoir of Laterrière in which we have the earliest preserved description of Lake Memphremagog, which he describes as "*grand et vaste*", and as having an overall funnel shape. In particular he describes two large islands on the Lake, including l'île des Noyers (probably Molson Island), and the island cut by the boundary line (Province Island).

The Lake is mapped in detail

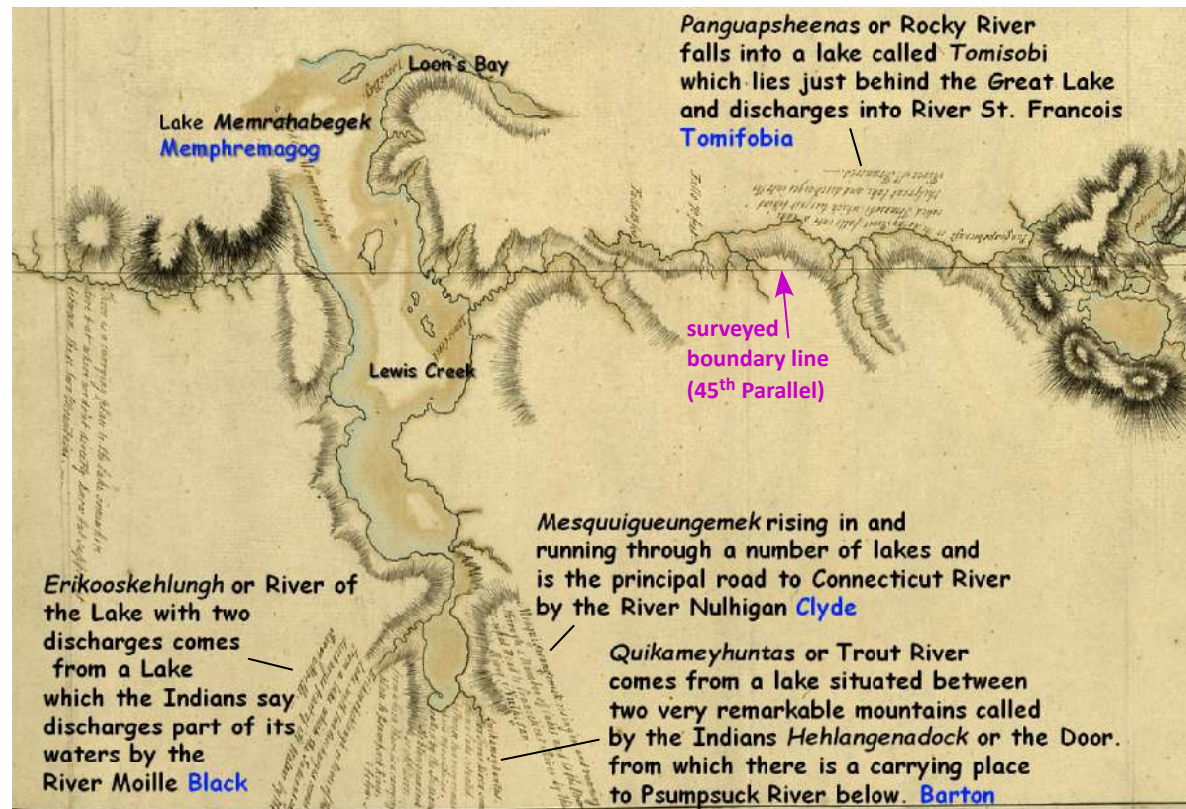
Starting in 1771, and on behalf of the New York and Quebec governments, a joint party was sent to survey the boundary between the two provinces. It followed the 45th line of latitude (see chapter 7). Slogging through the uncharted wilderness, the survey took four years. By July 24, 1772, the survey team had reached the eastern shore of Lake Memphremagog (Ogden). Amongst the surveyors were Americans heavily involved in land speculation, and because of the reports of Stark, Rogers, and perhaps others, the Lake Memphremagog region was thought to be prime real estate for would-be settlers. Although it was not part of their boundary line mandate, the survey team took two weeks off to map Lake Memphremagog. Their mapping efforts resulted in extraordinarily detailed and accurate maps of the Lake!

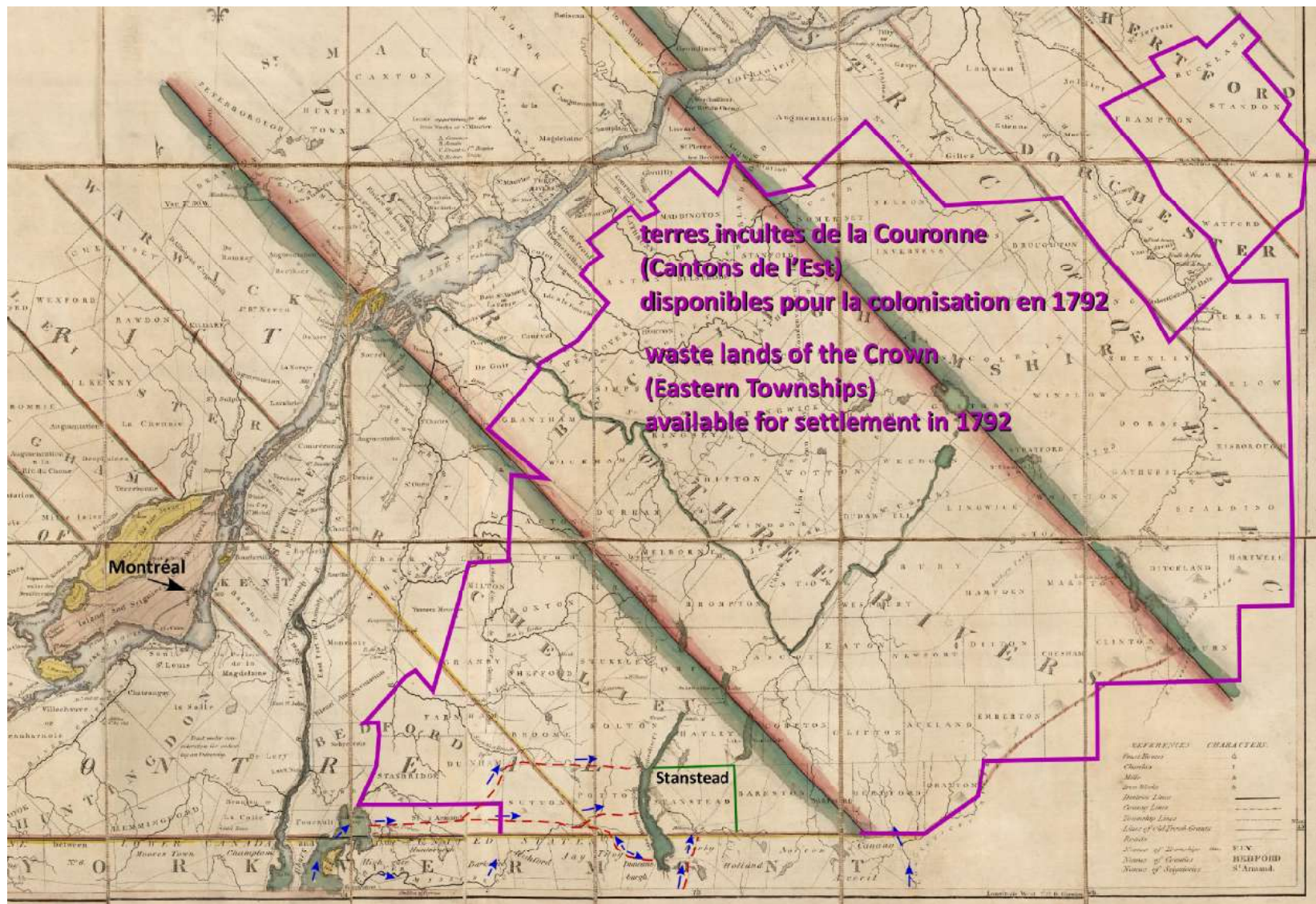
Part of the official map produced from the boundary survey. It did not include the entirety of the Lake. It was drawn by John Collins, Deputy Surveyor-General of Quebec and was likely completed sometime in early 1773. Original annotations are transcribed.



A composite of the petition maps in 1772 seeking a huge swath of lands (greater than 300,000 acres) surrounding Lake Memphremagog.

These maps were drawn from "side" work done by the 45th line of latitude boundary survey. The petitions were denied.





Part of a map published in 1802 compiled by Samuel Holland, Surveyor-General of Lower Canada from 1763 to his death in 1801. The map is annotated to show the rivers and crude cart paths utilized by the very first settlers in the Township of Stanstead to reach their new homesteads.