

Chebacco

The Journal of the Mount Desert Island Historical Society

Volume XXI

BEFORE 1820

2020

Mount Desert, Maine

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Printed in Newcastle, ME by Lincoln County Publishing Co., Inc.

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You the Freeholders and others the Inhabitants of the said Township of Mount Desert are hereby required in the name of the Commonwealth aforesaid to Assemble and meet at the time and place aforesaid then and there to Act on the following Articles Viz^t

- 1st to Choose a Moderator
- 2^d to Choose a Town Clerk
- 3^d to Choose all such officers as Towns Corporate are Empowred to Choose for the Ensuing year
- 4th To give in their votes for governor Lt Governor & Senator
- 5th To give in their votes for a Register of Deeds for the Middle District

Abraham Lomes

The Oath of Allegiance

Commonwealth of Massachusetts } In the Thirteenth year of
of Massachusetts } the Independance of the
Lincoln St } United States of America

We the Subscribers severally do truly & sincerely acknowledge, Profess testify & Declare, that the Commonwealth of Massachusetts is & of right ought to be a free Sovereign and Independant State & we do swear that we will bear true faith & allegiance to the said Commonwealth & that we will defend the same against traitorous conspiracies and all hostile Attempts whatsoever; and that we do Renounce & Abjure all allegiance Subjection and Obedience to the King and Government of Great Britain & every other Foreign Power what soever & that no Foreign Prince, Person, Prelate, State or Potentate, hath, or ought to have any Jurisdiction, Superiority, Preeminence, Authority, Dispensing or other Power in any matter Civil Ecclesiastical or Spiritual, within this Commonwealth except the Authority & Power which is or may be Vested by their Constituents in the Congress of the United States, and we do further testify & declare, that no man, or body of men, hath or can have any right to absolve or discharge us from the obligation of this Oath Declaration or Affirmation; & that we do make this Acknowledgment, profession, testimony, Declaration, denial Renunciation & Abjuration, hartely, & truly, according to the Common meaning & Acceptation of the foregoing words, without any Equivocation, Mental Evasion or Secret Reservation whatsoever, So help us God

Cordelia Thompson	Abraham Lomes	James Richardson
Davis Wadgall	Stephen Richardson	Levi Higgins
Andrew Farr	Thomas Richardson	Ezra Young

The 1789 Oath of Allegiance was signed by citizens of Mount Desert who promised to "renounce and abjure all allegiance subjection and obedience to the King and Government of Great Britain." Courtesy of the Town of Mount Desert

Localizing Loyalty, Localizing Legacy: Day-to-Day Concerns on Mount Desert Island during the American Revolution

By Daniel Soucier

Introduction

In 1789, several months after the Commonwealth of Massachusetts became the sixth state to ratify the US Constitution, the residents of Mount Desert Island declared an oath of allegiance to the state of Massachusetts during a local community meeting. They came together swearing faithfulness to the authority of the new state government and to denounce any treason against Massachusetts. In this motion, they also condemned the King and parliamentary government of Great Britain, promising to uphold the authority of Massachusetts in matters of policy, religion, and civil matters except those powers explicitly granted to the United States Congress as outlined in the Constitution. Why did the community of Mount Desert Island feel the need to declare their allegiance to the state government six years after the American War for Independence? Did their local loyalties change over the course of the American Revolution?

Scholarly consensus indicates that approximately twenty percent of the population remained loyal to Britain during the Revolution and forty-percent were sympathetic to the Patriots. Another forty-percent were neutral parties that remained more interested in daily life than high politics.¹

Scholarship regarding the American Revolution seems overwhelmingly interested in the winners and losers of this conflict and which communities supported the Patriots or Loyalists. Local historians and genealogists of Mount Desert Island, such as George Street, described the citizens as supporting Patriot governmental and military organizations.² Academic historians have generally ignored the topic of Mount Desert Island during the American Revolution. For example, in James Leamon's book, *Revolution Downeast: The American Revolution in Maine*, there is only one entry for Mount Desert Island and the passage discusses the postwar political situation in Maine, not the Revolution itself.³

There are a few possible reasons for the scant attention that Mount Desert Island receives. First, Mount Desert Island was rather new to Euro-American settlement at the time of the social and political unrest of the Stamp Act in 1765. It was also quite far away from the nearest British colonial seat of power (Halifax or Boston), existing in a borderland between two competing designs for the region, most notably the British occupation of present-day Castine, which created the colony of New Ireland in 1779. Second, little primary source evidence exists regarding Mount Desert Island during the Revolution. Aside from town records concerning births, deaths, land holdings, and the annual town meeting, there are no great narrative diaries or personal papers that reveal how the Revolution impacted the community.⁴ However, these local records illuminate changes and continuities in public policy over time. They also provide a window

into the island's past and highlight the interests, concerns, and everyday lives of residents. They allow us to reassess the issues of loyalty, identity, and society in eighteenth-century coastal Maine. By using the surviving town records in these ways, it is clear that those attempting to wrest a living from the soil and sea surrounding Mount Desert Island remained less concerned with their identity as a Patriot or Loyalist and far more interested with local economic, social, and environmental policy matters.

Making a Community

For Euro-Americans, Mount Desert Island exists within a historical legacy that stretches back to the imperial struggles over North America during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. After more than a century of conflict over the fate of North America, from the burning of Saint Sauveur mission in 1613 to the British triumph over the French at Quebec in 1759 and subsequent retreat of French imperial power structures from North America in 1763, the Maine coast finally opened for English settlement.

Seizing this opportunity, families relocated from southern New England to the island in 1761. They cleared trees, built homes, and constructed mills. With land grants largely ignored, settling the island was messy business. Existing property owners faced the danger of losing their claims to squatters. To shore up his royal land grant secured after the Seven Years' War (1754–1763), the governor of Massachusetts, Francis Bernard, offered free land to settlers who would cultivate the island. Likely following discussions about the richness of resources in the wilderness of Maine, Abraham and Hannah Somes and James and Rachel Richardson relocated to the head of Somes Sound to establish a community and build infrastructure.

As settlers moved onto the island, they assisted each other with raising structures, harvesting timber,



Governor Francis Bernard (1712–1779) offered free land to Mount Desert Island's colonial settlers, who repeatedly asked him to protect the natural resources on Mount Desert Island from interlopers. *Portrait by John Singleton Copley provided by permission of the Governing Body of Christ Church, Oxford, UK*

and the day-to-day responsibilities of homesteading. Politically, they organized town meetings where they discussed their trials and tribulations and solved the problems most pressing to their survival in the Maine environment. In these meeting minutes the townspeople kept "a trained watchfulness over local interests."⁵ Indeed, their concerns revolved around protecting local resources, infrastructure, and agriculture. In 1768, they complained that neighboring settlements along the mid-coast stole resources vital to community success. The inhabitants petitioned Governor Bernard, requesting his assistance in putting a stop to the incursions:

We the inhabitants of mount desart
Humbly Craves Your Exelencys
Protection against the Incrosins
of the Naboring inhabents made
upon us Consarning hay for we
cannot git hay on ye island to
Keep our Stoks as the People Cut
the hay before it hits its Groth So
that they Spoil the marsh & if we
Cut hay and Stack it for Sleding
it is Stole so that we cannot have
ye Provilige of the marsh that we
have Cleared Rodes too, therefor
we bege [you to] Put a stop to this
In Crossings, other ways we Shall
Not be Abel to Keepe our Stocks
and the marsh be totterly Spiled.⁶

It is important to remember that the inhabitants of Mount Desert Island made this petition at a formative stage of the American Revolution. Parliament

passed the Stamp Act in 1765, then repealed it a year later due to unrest in the colonies. By 1768, Parliament enacted the Townshend Acts, a series of taxes on imported goods, and the Quartering Act, a measure for housing British troops. Both acts met heavy resistance in the urban centers of the colonies. So, while New York City erected a liberty pole to celebrate the repeal of the Stamp Act and Boston threatened violence after authorities seized John Hancock's sloop for failure to pay duties on wine, residents on Mount Desert Island focused on more immediate concerns. Physically distant from the emerging political crisis in urban spaces, they petitioned Bernard to assist them in keeping mainlanders from stealing their hay to protect their livestock from starvation.

The town meeting minutes for the following years show that the colonists never resolved their problem with outsiders encroaching on their land and stealing their natural resources. Governor Bernard remained preoccupied with the crisis in Boston as he disbanded the General Court in July 1768. This occurred after the legislature refused his order to remove from law the Massachusetts Circular Letter, a statement passed by the Massachusetts House of Representatives and written by Samuel Adams and James Otis Jr., which argued that the Townshend Acts were unconstitutional. However, it was not the Townshend Acts, the Stamp Act, or the Quartering Act that aroused the passions of those living in the community on Mount Desert Island. Instead, their energies were occupied by parochial matters, revolving around the islander's ability to thrive and survive on an everyday level.

In these meeting minutes we can discern the preeminent concerns of homesteaders on the island. In March of 1777, the male landholding inhabitants convened at Stephen Richardson's house for their town meeting. Nearly a decade had passed since the inhabitants of the island petitioned Bernard regarding



View of Bass Harbor Marsh and Western Mountain, n.d., Willis Humphreys Ballard.
Courtesy of the Southwest Harbor Public Library Digital Archive, 9522



In this satellite image, you can still see the straight ditches that settlers cut into the Bass Harbor Marsh to drain saltwater, making the marsh more suitable for grazing. Stephen Hornsby et. al., "Cultural Land Use Survey of Acadia National Park," National Park Service, 1999, 58–70. *Courtesy of Google Earth*

thieving interlopers and the problem remained unsolved. First, the town passed a resolution that "no man intrude on any other mans former possession for Hay or any other article without Leave for the former Possessor." The community members then insisted that they needed to "conclude on some method for Securing the Meadows and Marshes agreabel to the Resolve of the General Court and to choose a Committee for the same." The townsfolk appealed to the power of the Massachusetts General Court to secure their natural resources and finally achieved satisfaction. The General Court legally supported their rights to keep mainlanders away from their community resources. Thus, they elected Elisha Cousins, Stephen Richardson, and Silas Parker as a committee to maintain and secure the marshes. Their duties included fencing in Pretty Marsh to secure the meadow grass and equitably distributing this common resource for wintering the community's livestock. They also were tasked with policing who harvested hay, whose lot it was removed from, and where individuals took the hay afterwards. The townsfolk then crafted a proposal for the clerk, James Richardson, to alert the citizenry of "The Neighboring Plantations" that the community forbade them "from intruding on this Island for Hay or any other [resource]" because they "obtained a grant of sa. Island from the General Assembly of this State [Massachusetts]."⁷

The other town records of 1777, too, revolved around local issues and mundane matters. They appointed Ezra Young as moderator and James Richardson as clerk. Benjamin Bunker, Thomas Richardson, Stephen Richardson, Elisha Cousins, and John Thomas were selected for as a committee for the construction, repair, and planning of public roads and boat landings. The town also elected members for a local militia, which would muster at Richardson's property. Ezra Young was elected captain, Abraham Somes as first lieutenant, and Levi Higgins as second

lieutenant. In frontier communities of the Northeast such as Mount Desert Island, the militia historically served as community defense from incursions from French and Native American neighbors.

Analyzing the town records through the 1790s, it becomes increasingly clear that solving local issues, building a cohesive community, and codifying rules regarding access to vital resources remained the passion of the early leaders of the island. Examples abound, such as in 1778 when they debated on a "method to incoureg the Destruction of Varments that Destroy our grain," or the passage of laws governing where and when livestock may roam, and how people were compensated if their property was destroyed by such animals, or simply cataloging those who marked the ears of their livestock, so that there was no confusion when it was time to harvest the animals.⁸ This focus on local survival informed decision making as imperial power in midcoast Maine shifted from American to British and back again over the course of the Revolution.

Assessments of Loyalty

Loyalty towards the government of Massachusetts and the newly declared independent United States of America emerged in these meeting minutes in less explicit ways. For example, each year of the meeting minutes is denoted as "1778 the second year of American Independence." On the surface, those running the meetings and keeping records legitimized the Revolution. If the secretary was an ardent Tory, there would have been no

mention of declared independence. The Massachusetts government also solicited the opinions of the local community in 1778 regarding the form of state political structure.⁹ Those on Mount Desert Island approved the Massachusetts Constitution with the addendum of three amendments proposing to expand the participation of individuals in the government. Townsfolk requested that everyone have "the ability to Partition [petition] the Governor and Senate + House of Representatives." They also asked that members of the House of Representatives be allowed to speak freely in the Senate and vice versa. Finally, they wanted to institute term limits for governor, lieutenant governor, senators, and representatives of "3–4 years," not allowing reelection "for 3–4 years afterward."¹⁰

The town also elected a committee of correspondence, inspection, and safety each year, which was a local form of Patriot government that wrested control away from royal officials. The purpose of this committee was to keep the local community informed in matters relating to the government of Massachusetts, watch for violations of non-importation agreements, and most importantly, to procure the community's share of provisions that the state government allocated to each town. Participation in this shadow form of Patriot government on Mount Desert Island was quite widespread amongst the island's political leaders. Two-thirds of those elected to other positions of authority also served on the committee of correspondence, inspection, and safety.¹¹

These forms of participation in the governmental structures of the thirteen

united colonies show that, at least in small ways, those with political power on Mount Desert Island legitimized the Revolution by accepting the newly assembled Patriot-backed state government and by recognizing the Declaration of Independence. We do not know, however, how much choice was involved in this decision. The state government asked the towns to create committees of correspondence, so they did; it asked them to muster the local militia, so they did; but there was not much of an alternative. They lived in a state controlled by Patriot politicians, where state government offered the only recourse for petitioning for the protection of natural resources, or to provide community members with provisions.¹² In times of scarcity, the islanders clearly made the choice that best represented their local interests and survival as a community. However, this Patriot sentiment abruptly changed during the summer of 1779, when the British military moved to the Bagaduce Peninsula near present-day Castine.

Fort George and British Power on the Coast of Maine

Residents from up and down the Maine coast flocked to the Bagaduce peninsula during the summer of 1779, as the British military landed in the region intending to establish the colony of New Ireland. During July, the British initiated a strategy to reclaim portions of Maine for the establishment of a colony for Loyalist exiles and to insert British military power closer to New England.¹³ Their efforts centered around Penobscot Bay, making Mount Desert Island a possible target for British aggression. General Francis McLean conducted an amphibious assault on the village of Castine. Seizing the high ground overlooking the deep-water harbor, the landing expedition set forth with the intent of reestablishing British military might in New England.

This display of British power upset the government of Massachusetts and they dispatched

ATTACK

of the **REBELS** upon **FORT PENOBSCOT**

in the Province of **NEW ENGLAND** in which their Fleet was totally destroyed and their Army dispersed the 14.th Aug.th 1779.

by an Officer present

On the 26.th of June the Colonels M^r. Lean and Campbell arrived from Halifax with 450 of the 74.th and 200 of the 82.th Regiments under convoy of the Albany, Nautilus, and North sloops of War; in order to establish a Post upon the Penobscot River; till the 25.th of July they were employed in clearing the Ground and constructing a Fort which they had not half completed when Commodore Saltonstall's Fleet of 27 Ships of War and 24 Transports with 2500 Land Troops on board under the Command of General Lovell arrived from Boston, from the 26.th of July they cannonaded our Fort and Shipping which they expected to make themselves masters of by a General Attack upon the 14.th of August, but upon Sir George Collier's appearance that day with a Squadron of 5 Men of War from New York, they Abandoned their Works and retired on board their Fleet, they made a Show of disputing the passage were drove up the River and totally destroyed.

During the Siege His Majesty's Sloops of War the North, Nautilus, and Albany, lost only 15 Men killed and Wounded, and the 74.th and 82.th Regiments 70 Men killed and Wounded.

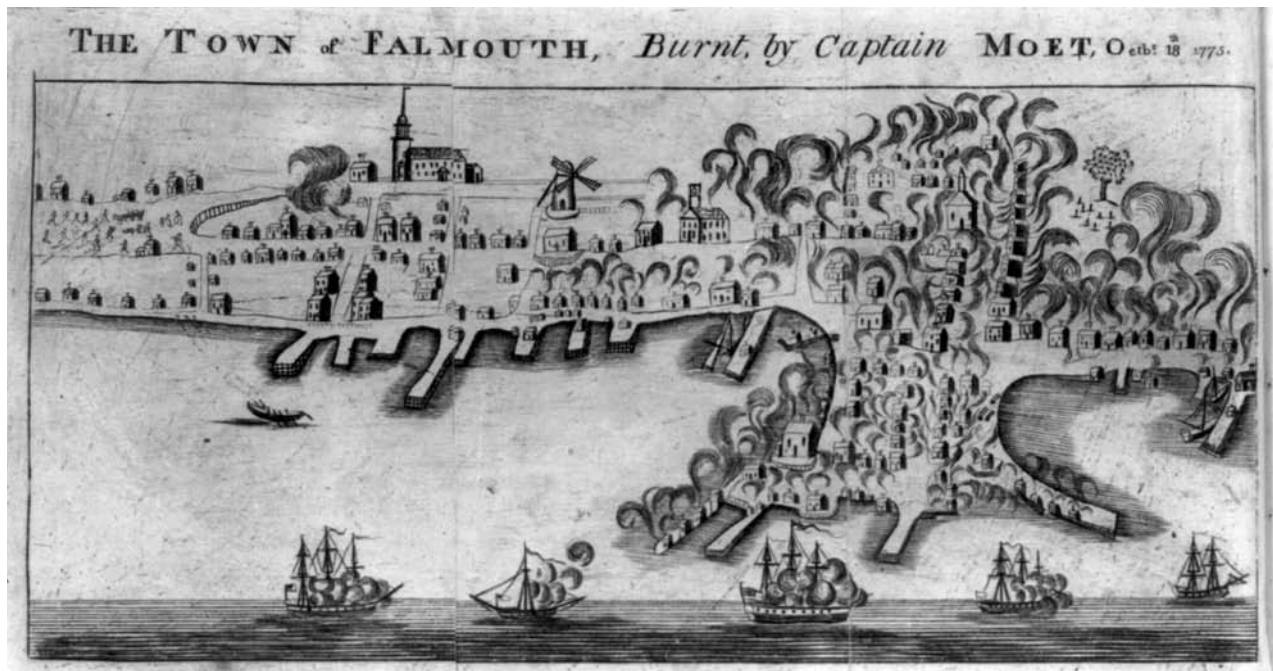
The Loss the Rebels sustained is unknown.

0 100 200 300 400 500 600 700 800 900 1000 Yards.



A 1785 map depicting the action of the Continental Navy against the British at Fort Penobscot (today called Fort George), artist unknown. Courtesy of the Norman B. Leventhal Map Center at Boston Public Library

See the Continuation called Tinkler's History of the War, Published in 1780, the Second Part, p. 107.



Engraving depicting the Burning of Falmouth by the British on October 18, 1775. Etched by John Norton, 1782.
Courtesy of the Library of Congress Rare Book and Special Collections Division

an expeditionary force to Penobscot Bay of nineteen warships and twenty-five other vessels along with over one thousand soldiers. With only ten warships and seven hundred soldiers present, the British defended Castine from positions in the harbor and from within the walls of Fort George.¹⁴ For three weeks, the Patriot force besieged General McLean. Disagreements between the commander of the Patriot land forces, Brigadier General Solomon Lovell, and the naval commander of the expedition, Commodore Dudley Saltonstall, hamstrung the best efforts of their men. Due to his inability to rout the British from Fort George, the Continental Navy dismissed Saltonstall. Without being able to make a decisive stroke, the Patriots allowed a British relief force from

New York to liberate General McLean on August 13. The establishment of New Ireland in mid-coast Maine by the British was a success, at least until the close of the American Revolution, receiving official approval by King George III the following year.¹⁵

Almost immediately after the British gained a seat of power in the region, over five hundred individuals from the communities surrounding Fort George came to sign an oath of allegiance to the British Crown.¹⁶ Of these, three hundred assisted the British with the erection of their fortification. Residents of Mount Desert Island, despite their prior leanings towards the state government of Massachusetts and embracing of the Declaration of Independence, were no exception.¹⁷ With the history of British aggression, this is not a surprising response to the establishment of British military power in the region. In October 1775, under the command of Captain Henry Mowat, the British bombarded the town of Falmouth (modern-day

Portland) with incendiary shot and raided the town to retaliate against ports that supported the Patriot cause. A similar event occurred in August of 1777, in Machias, when local Maliseet, Passamaquoddy, Penobscot, and militia forces repelled a British amphibious assault. These attacks on Maine's coastal communities meant that the residents of Mount Desert Island had little to gain and much to lose by resisting British power in the region. Indeed, continuing to embrace the Patriot cause could very well have meant the destruction of their community.¹⁸

Further evidence for the shifting loyalties of the residents of Mount Desert Island is indicated by the town meeting records a decade after the British establishment and occupation of Fort George in 1789. These records were dated the "13th year of Independence" and began with an Oath of Allegiance to the State of Massachusetts:

We do swear that we will bear true faith + allegiance to the said commonwealth that we will defend the same against traitorous conspiracies and all hostile attempts whatsoever; and that we do Renounce + abjure all allegiance, Subjection and obedience to the King and Government of Great Britain + every other Foreign Power whatsoever + that no Foreign Prince Person, Relate, State or Potentate, hath or ought to have any jurisdiction Superiority Preeminance, authority, dispensing or other Power in any matter Civil, Ecclesiastical or Spiritual within this Commonwealth Except the authority + Power which is or may be Vested by their Constituents in the Congress of the United States.¹⁹

The oath was certified by Levi Higgins, Abraham Somes, Andrew Tarr, Israel Higgins, Ezra Young, Stephen Richardson, John Manchester, Ezra Leland,

Cornelius Thompson, David Wasgatt, David Bartlett, and Andrew Tucker. Many of these town leaders, including Somes, Higgins, and Richardson, served on the Committee of Correspondence during the height of the Revolution. Further, the family names Higgins, Thompson, and Young appeared on the loyalty oath to the British in 1779. The language of this oath combined with the situation in Penobscot Bay during 1779 shows a shifting allegiance and identity for those on Mount Desert Island from British, to Patriot, to Loyalist, to American in the span of twelve years. Indeed, the very fact that they had to redeclare their allegiance to Massachusetts is indicative of the changing loyalties, identities, and local circumstances at play in peripheral colonies during the Revolution. In this place and time, political identities remained fluid, with families such as the Higgins serving on Committees of Correspondence, signing the loyalty oath to the British at Fort George, and then pledging allegiance to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts after the war. The legacy of the American Revolution in many outlying regions of North America was not in a community's loyalty to the Continental Congress or the British Crown, but instead to its understanding of local public policy issues relating to society, economy, and environment as well as the townsfolk's willingness, and shrewdness, to negotiate with the power structures that most affected their everyday lives.

Conclusion

The 1789 meeting minutes show that the next item following the oath of allegiance was a motion "that Every man keep his Sheep in his own inClouser and not let them Roam at large in the Common" followed up by the townspeople allowing "horned Cattle ... [to] have the Liberty to run in the woods until they trouble any person ... all Cattle belonging to other towns are forbidden the Privilege."²⁰ Here we see that the inhabitants of Mount Desert Island were still preoccupied with local circumstances and protecting natural resources. From its establishment in 1761 to the Oath of Allegiance to Massachusetts in 1789, public policy changed very little. Local community leaders remained committed to the social, economic, and environmental well being of the island. Community members helped one another through hard times, and because of their flexibility, survived the war without suffering the wholesale destruction that resistance would have guaranteed.

Daniel S. Soucier earned his PhD in History from the University of Maine in 2019 and currently works as a research associate at the Margaret Chase Smith Policy Center.

Acknowledgements:

Daniel would like to thank the Mount Desert Island Historical Society for the generous award of the Eliot Fellowship which provided the resources needed to conduct this research.

1. Robert M. Calhoon, "Loyalism and Neutrality" in Jack P. Greene and J.R. Pole eds., *A Companion to the American Revolution* (New York: Blackwell Publishers,

2008), 235–247.

2. George E. Street, *Mount Desert: A History* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1905).

3. James S. Leamon, *Revolution Downeast: The War for American Independence in Maine* (Amherst: U of Massachusetts Press, 1995).

4. Eben M. Hamor, *Old Mount Desert Record Book, 1776–1796*, Collections of the Northeast Harbor Library, Raymond Strout Collection, 2G1. (Herein *OMDRB*).

5. Street, *Mount Desert*, 187.

6. *Ibid.*, 141–2.

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*

12. For more information see: James Leamon, *Revolution Downeast: The War for American Independence in Maine* (Amherst: U of Massachusetts Press, 1993).

13. George Germaine to Henry Clinton, Whitehall, September 2, 1778, Americas and West Indies Original Correspondence, Colonial Office 5, Great Britain. Collections of the David Library for the American Revolution, Film 590 (Herein CO5); Frederick Haldimand to Henry Clinton, Quebec, March 2, 1779, CO5.

14. Henry Clinton to George Germaine, Headquarters New York, July 28, 1779; George Germaine to Henry Clinton, Whitehall, August 28, 1779, CO5.

15. Henry S. Burrage, *Maine in the Northeastern Boundary Controversy* (Portland, ME: Marks Printing House, 1919), 21.

16. A "Supplement" to the *Nova-Scotia Gazette*, and *Weekly Chronicle*, July 6, 1779, states that 651 individuals signed the Oath of Allegiance.

17. There are names that appear both in the *OMDRB* and in Robert Carver Brooks, "The Artificers and Inhabitants Who Built Fort George, Penobscot, 1779–1780," *The Maine Genealogist* 26, no. 2 (May, 2004) from the British Audit Office records such as John McKingly. It is difficult to determine whether or not the names that appear on both lists are the same exact individuals; however, the following family names appear in both *OMDRB* and Brooks: Black, Bunker, Campbell, Davis, Dodge, Eaton, Heath, Higgins, Hopkins, Jordan, Knowles, Leonard, Mayo, McKingly, Milliken, Nutter, Obear, Parker, Sullivan, Thomas, Thompson, and Young.

18. Further evidence for the possible destruction of Mount Desert Island lies in the fact that the British military assaulted Bucksport and Belfast when the Massachusetts force fled up the Penobscot River during the summer of 1779.

19. *OMDRB*.

20. *Ibid.*