

JAMES B. VICKERY

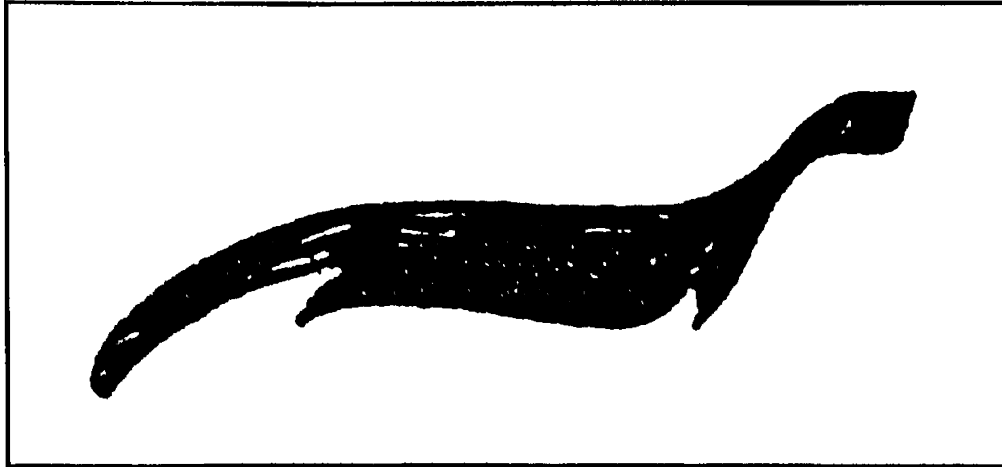
ORONO: THE GREAT SACHEM

Today, most people recognize the name Orono as a town on the Penobscot River and the site of the University of Maine. The origin of the word, and indeed the parentage of the great chieftain after whom the town was named, are shrouded in mystery. One authority on Indian lore, Fannie Hardy Eckstorm, observed that Orono “appears suddenly, without antecedents, and, already an old man, assumes the leadership of the [Penobscot] tribe through the most critical period of its history.”¹ It is the purpose of this essay to explain the name and the origin of this famous Indian leader.

Joseph Orono, who died on February 11, 1801, lived to the incredible age of 113.² Little has been written about this enigmatic “blue-eyed chief,” but two important individuals who kept journals, Park Holland of Bangor and the Reverend Daniel Little of Kennebunk, met Orono and commented on the elderly tribal leader. They and others report that Orono had blue eyes, reddish hair, and none of the characteristics of an Indian, such as high cheekbones or a dark complexion.

Fannie Hardy Eckstorm observed that the name Orono was neither English, French, nor Indian. Indeed, Orono was fluent in English and French and, as a devout Catholic, knew some Latin. The Reverend Little, who came to Kenduskeag (Bangor) after the Revolution, confronted the old man: “Come, Orono, tell me which language you say your prayers — French, Latin, or Indian?” Orono paused, and when Little repeated the question, he assumed a grave expression and replied: “No matter, the Great Spirit knows all languages.”³

In his old age, Orono repeatedly claimed that he was the son of a French father and a French and Native mother. Historians subsequently assumed that he was son or grandson of the Baron de St. Castin, who lived and traded with the Indians at Pentagoet (Castine) and married an Indian chief’s daughter. However,



Chief Joseph Orono's mark, or signature, a seal with head raised.

Richard S. Sprague, CHIEF JOSEPH ORONO.

Castin's biographers, who researched the man thoroughly, do not note a son or grandson that fits the description of Orono. Besides, Castin left Pentagoet for France in 1707, at which time Orono would have been a young man. It is doubtful that Castin would have left a son behind.⁴

Even during Orono's lifetime, many contemporaries doubted his French or Indian ancestry. The Reverend Little related that Orono came from the town of York, Maine. Others had been informed that he was a son of Samuel Donnel, from a prominent family in York. Some reports hint at an Irish or Scottish background. The Reverend Mark Trafton, in his autobiography, *Scenes of My Life*, also suggests that Orono came from York and that his name was Peter Donald. Orono, according to Trafton, was born in York and was captured by the Penobscot leader, Macdonawando, when a party of Penobscot Indians attacked the place.⁵ It seems possible that "Orono" could be a corruption of "Donald" or "Donnel" — a word mouthed by a frightened boy and rephrased by Indians who understood English only imperfectly.

I searched, therefore, vital records for the surname Donnel or Donnell.⁶ Genealogical information on York can be found in two locations: *Pioneers of Maine* is an unpublished companion to Charles Banks's monumental two-volume history of York. This section was never published, but his genealogies are available at

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the Bangor Public Library as a two-volume manuscript listing alphabetically the early families of York County. Secondly, volume 109 of the *New England Historic and Genealogical Register* contains the vital records of York County.

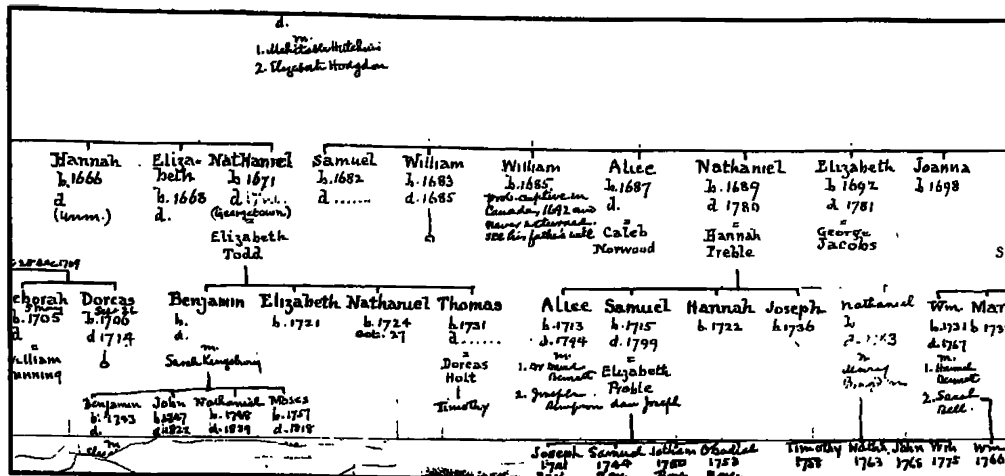
Banks shows in a genealogical chart the family of Samuel Donnel (1645-1718), listing six children. Among them is William (b. 10 January 1684-85), who was "given as a captive and taken to Canada and never returned." In the fall of 1692, William, about seven years old, strayed into the woods and was captured. He was taken to the Castine area.⁶ Another source that sheds light on young William's fate is William M. Sargent's *Maine Wills*. Sargent quotes the will of Samuel Donnel:

I have given to my son, Nathaniel, above said to be equally divided between by son, William, *if he ever returns* — if not, my will is that James above said shall have equal share with my son, Nathaniel, of my whole livery — vis. my household on this side of the river When he shall be of age and also one-third part of two islands above said at his mother's decease.

The will is signed May 15, 1718, and probated.⁷

The Reverend Trafton discussed Orono with a great-grandson of Samuel Donnel and was informed that Donnel's son was taken by Indians. Some years later a party, including the young Donnel, came to York and members of Donnel's family entreated him to stay. Fully acclimated to a native lifestyle, the young man refused.⁸ Park Holland, a veteran of the American Revolution and surveyor of the public lands of the District of Maine, met Orono in his travels. Holland wrote in his journal that when elderly and infirm Orono said his name was Peter Donald, and that he thought he came from the Kennebec region. Holland was also told by an elderly Native woman that around 1765 Orono survived the oldest sachem to become the head chieftain of the Penobscots.⁹

When the American Revolution broke out ten years later, Orono, already an old man, traveled to Boston and Watertown



Charles Banks's unpublished York genealogy. Note the inscription under William (Donnel): "Prob. captive in Canada, 1692, and never returned."

Bangor Public Library.

in Massachusetts with other Indian sachems and swore allegiance to the American cause. According to legend, Orono met General Washington. After signing a crucial treaty of friendship between the Penobscots and the new nation, Orono returned to the Old Town area, where he played an important role in keeping peace between the Eastern Indians and the American rebels. Later, in 1782, he attended another meeting at Newport, Rhode Island, and saw there for the first time the French fleet. Orono proclaimed, "I hereby declare to you...the grievances under which our people labor were removed, they [the Indians] would aid with their full force to defeat that nation [Great Britain]."¹⁰

Between 1785 and 1788, Massachusetts authorities put great pressure on the Penobscots to surrender their claims to the land awarded them by Governor Thomas Pownall in 1760. The Massachusetts Council petitioned the tribe to sell their lands, and after much negotiating the Penobscots capitulated. Four chiefs — Orono, Osmay, Neptune, and Osong — agreed to a treaty. In return for blankets, ammunition, plants, and food for some estimated 200 Penobscots, they gave up their rights to lands below Old Town. State agents argued successfully that the Indians would have better hunting grounds further upriver.

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Thus the tribe was granted land between Old town and Passadumkeag on both sides of the Penobscot, including the islands in the river.¹¹

Between 1783 and 1789, there were several meetings to adjust the terms of the treaty to the satisfaction of both sides. One of the most important meetings was held at Kenduskeag on August 26, 1786. The Massachusetts government sent Generals Benjamin Lincoln and Rufus Putnam, and the Reverends Thomas Rice and Daniel Little. Sixty-four Penobscots paddled in their canoes to Robert Treat's truck house at the head of tide, approximately on the site of Mt. Hope Cemetery. Treat and John Marsh served as interpreters, again reminding the Indians that the upper Penobscot would provide better hunting grounds than the land under negotiation.

It is apparent that the Native Americans understood the significance of white settlers on the lower Penobscot. During the last four decades of the eighteenth century, the English settlement frontier moved steadily eastward into the Penobscot Bay region, and ambitious and powerful speculators like Thomas Pownall, Samuel Waldo, Henry Knox, Robert Hallowell, Sylvester Gardiner, James Bowdoin, and William Bingham acquired large grants of unsettled land to hoard their valuable resources. Wild lands, such as those held by the Penobscots, promised a supply of timber, furs, and fish for markets in Boston and overseas, and land for pioneers to turn into productive farms.

AS the population of the District of Maine quadrupled between 1765 to 1800, the rights of Native Americans were ignored and their manner of using the land for hunting, trapping, and fishing shunted aside. The old chieftain, Orono, realized the Indians were being dispossessed. Still, during his long life he worked for peace as he led his tribe in their precarious cultural and legal dealings with the white settlers and their agents.

Orono lived out his long life on the banks of the Penobscot River at various locations between Veazie and Old Town. He died, probably, near the old truck house on the Penjejawock. Like so many of the details of his life, the place of his burial is

unknown. But according to tradition, Fannie Hardy Eckstorm notes, "it was upon the farm of the old Jameson place in Stillwater," near the town that now bears his name.¹²

Orono was a remarkable figure. His forthrightness, tolerance, sagacity, and dependability brought him acclaim from all sides—from the Penobscots, who honored him as their chieftain, from the Massachusetts Council, which saw him as a critical link in their defense of the eastern frontier, and from the leading men and women of the struggling white settlements on the Penobscot, who recognized the old chief as a man of wisdom.

NOTES

¹Fannie Hardy Eckstorm, "The Indians of Maine," in *Maine: A History*, edited by Louis Clinton Hatch, (New York: American Historical Society, 1919), volume 1, p. 63.

²"Obituaries: Orono, Indian Chief Died February 4, 1801, Age 113," *Maine Historical and Genealogical Recorder* 11 (no. 4, 1893): 234.

³The Reverend Daniel Little, in *Bangor Daily Mercury*, February 11, 1848.

⁴"Abadie de Saint Castin, Jean Vincent (1701-1740)," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1961), p. 4; Graham Munson, "St. Castin: A Legend Revised," *Dalhousie Review* 45 (no. 3, 1965); Roland J. Auger, editor, "The Children of Baron de St. Castin," *French Canadian & Acadian Genealogical Review* 3 (Spring 1971).

⁵The Reverend Mark Trafton, *Scenes in My Life* (New York: Nelson & Phillips, 1878), pp. 91-92.

⁶Charles Banks, "Pioneer Families in York County," ms., Bangor Public Library, volume 1.

⁷W.M. Sargent, *Maine Wills (1642-1760)* (Portland: Brown Thurston, 1887), pp. 199-200.

⁸Trafton, *Scenes in My Life*.

⁹Park Holland's Journal, copied from the original, ms., Bangor Public Library.

¹⁰"The Ancient Penobscot Series: I," *Maine Historical Society Transactions* 7 (1876): 4-25.

¹¹Fannie Hardy Eckstorm, *Old John Neptune & Other Maine Indian Shamans* (Portland: Southworth, 1945).

¹²Eckstorm, "The Indians of Maine," p. 63.