

The Abbé Maillard and Halifax

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This paper is based on the will of the Abbé Maillard, which, with its several codicils, is preserved in the Court House at Halifax, and on the Minutes of the Governor's Council, which are to be found in the Archives of Nova Scotia. These documents have been used in an article on Maillard in "Nova Francia," Vol. II, Nos 3 and 4, by the R. P. Albert David, of the Holy Ghost Fathers. I welcome this opportunity of studying them from a different angle, and of bringing them before an English speaking audience to whom they will be of interest.

The general facts of the life of Maillard can be found in the standard works on the early missionaries. He was born near Chartres, but, as the records of that cathedral were destroyed during the French Revolution, it is not possible to determine the exact date. However, he was described as a young priest when he came to Louisburg in 1735, so the date 1710 cannot be far wrong for his birth. He studied at "le Séminaire du Saint-Esprit," in Paris, and was sent to Louisbourg by the authorities of "les Missions Etrangères" in 1735.

Maillard had considerable success among the Indians, who still remember his name. He perfected a means of writing their language, and composed prayerbooks, and a catechism. These are still in service, having been reprinted during the last decade.

When Louisbourg fell Maillard spent some time ministering to the Indians along the south shore of Northumberland Strait. His journeys up and down can be followed to some extent from the letters he wrote and received. Finally Charles Lawrence, the English governor at Halifax, offered him a post as government agent to the Indians, and he took up his residence at Halifax.

The title "government agent to the Indians" best describes the office Maillard was called on to fill. He seems to have convinced the English that he had no grudge against them, and that his sole interest was in the people who looked to him as their leader. The English, on their side, recognized in him a power among these simple people, and the only one to whom they could look for sufficient influence to keep the Indian from the warpath. We may be sure that the arrangement was acceptable to Maillard for it enabled him to continue to minister to the spiritual wants of his flock. On April 12, 1759, he wrote his will at Malogomish. Soon after he came to Halifax and the period with which this paper is concerned opened.

Here something may be said about that curious document which is Maillard's will. It is written on a piece of folded foolscap. On the front is printed "A Louis Petitpas," and below is written, "Papier à mettre en réserve." At the foot of the page, in the writing of John Collier, a Halifax worthy of those days, is marked, "Signed and sealed the within Codicill by the within named Mons Maillard in presence of us, John Collier, T. Wood." Originally the second page was a blank, but on it now is a codicil. The will itself is on the third and fourth pages. It is in Maillard's own hand, and has been corrected in one place by drawing a line through the text.

The will disposes of the priest's personal belongings, which were few, his sacred vessels and his vestments. His books, "que je me suis procuré par mon économie," are also disposed of, and he makes provision for his friend Louis Petitpas. The will ends thus:

Fait à Malagomish dans mon oratoire le Jeudi Saint au matin le douzième de
Avril dix sept cent cinquante neuf

PIERRE MAILLARD

Prêtre missionnaire des sauvages et
grand Vicaire de Mgr l'Évêque de
Québec.

On this fourth page are two confirmations of the will in Maillard's hand. The first is dated January 20, 1760. No indication is given of the place where it was written. The second was added at Halifax on August 27, 1761. It is of some importance and will be discussed later. On the second page of the will is a codicil. This was added on August 5, 1762. It makes seven bequests, four being of books from the priest's library to prominent citizens of Halifax. Two of the items have been crossed out by running a pen through them. The codicil also appoints two executors of the will. The signature differs considerably from the three specimens on the back page of the will, which may be explained by the state of Maillard's health at the time of writing, for he had been sick for some time before this, and he died a week later. The body of the codicil, though written in French, does not seem to have been written by Maillard.

There is also, on a separate piece of paper, another codicil, dated at Halifax, August 27, 1761, the date of the second confirmation on the fourth page of the will. The original of this document has not been found. All that we have is a translation.

The will, then, is a most curious document, and one which would not have much value in a court of law. Not only are some clauses erased with a stroke of the pen, but clauses of the first will are contradicted by clauses of the codicil. The repeated confirmations offer a puzzle. Why were they necessary? Why was one added the same day as the lost codicil was written? Some day something may come to light to clear up the matter.

The second confirmation of the will is as follows:

Approuvé et confirmé de nouveau dans cette présente année 1761, ce 21 août dans l'oratoire de la Batterie d'Halifax qui nous a été accordé par feu Mr. Charles Laurens, Gouverneur Général de la Province de la Nouvelle Ecosse, autrement Akadie pour y vaque librement aux exercices de notre sainte religion, par moy

P. Maillard

Ptre, etc.

This codicil makes it clear that Maillard was in Halifax before or very soon after the death of Governor Lawrence. This took place in October 1760. It would seem that he had not come to Halifax to reside when he wrote the will, for it is dated at Malagomish. Hence his arrival must have been between April, 1759, and October, 1760. In the present state of our knowledge, it is not possible to do much better than this.

It must be remembered that after the fall of Louisbourg he travelled up and down the country. There are, as has been said, letters which show this. He had also to win his way into the good graces of the English, and, taking account of the circumstances, that is, of the hostility between the English and the French, and of the activities of some of his priestly confères, the task could not have been an easy one. This would incline us to put the date of his arrival rather nearer October, 1760. On the other hand there is a letter from Thomas Wood of Halifax, dated October 27, 1762, which is in the archives of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel — a copy being in the Archives of Nova Scotia — in which Maillard is described as “a French priest who had the title of Vicar General of Quebec who has resided here some years past as a missionary to the French and Indians...” Now if Maillard came to Halifax in October, 1760, and died in August, 1762, he could hardly be said to have “resided here for some years past.” He would not have resided here two full years.

In order to settle the problem as well as possible we may say that he most probably came to Halifax in the fall of 1759. This would give a year and some months for him to regulate his position after the fall of Louisbourg. At the same time it gives him a residence of three years in Halifax, which would meet the phrase used by Thomas Wood.

The second confirmation of Maillard's will makes mention of "l'oratoire de la Batterie d'Halifax." In a later section something will be said of the kind of building this oratory was, and of its use as a church. The first task is to determine where it was.

The first settlement of Halifax was a small one. It was at about the centre of the present city, and did not come further south than Salter Street. Around it was a high wooden palisade, and at the edge of the water three batteries. A fourth battery was further down the harbour, at about where the Nova Scotian Hotel now is.

There is a sketch of all that part of the city around and behind this fourth battery, which gives some idea of what it looked like in 1760, though the sketch was made in 1780. The sketch is in the Public Archives of Canada, and is by E. Hicks. It shows the shore of the harbour with some points of land running out into the water. On one of these is the battery in question. Behind it are a few buildings. Further inland two streets have formed with thin rows of houses along them. All the rest up to the top of what is now the citadel is open land. In 1760 the rows of houses had not been built, but the battery was there, though not so well developed.

During this period the fields in question belonged to a John Murphy, who was one of those to receive grants of land from the Crown when the city was founded. Murphy prospered and added to his lands. He bought land in 1767, defended his rights against encroachment by the Crown in 1778, and even as late as Bishop Burke's time was still alive, as entries in the books of St. Mary's Cathedral prove. He was a Catholic and owned land in this section of the town during all this period. These points are of importance.

Now the oratory of the battery of Halifax must have been near one of the four batteries along the edge of the water. Is it possible to determine which one? It is, and in a manner to put the question beyond all doubt.

The oratory was to be a meeting place for the Acadians and Indians. It is hardly necessary to stress here that the latter were traditionally hostile to the English. Maillard had been employed by the Government as a means of pacifying them, and, it is of interest to note, he was successful, for a treaty was signed between the English and the Micmac chief, Joseph Agemantan, in 1761. The occasion was one of much ceremony. A hatchet was buried, and many speeches were made. This treaty seems to have had a lasting effect, and to have ended hostilities.

The Acadians were equally hostile to the English. This is not surprising. In 1755 there had been the great expulsion, and after that date several other groups of Acadians were taken from their lands to distant places. Thus we have, in the Minutes of the Governor's Council for June 29, 1759, the following:

His Excellency communicated to the Council the return of the Province vessels from Cape Sable with the remaining French inhabitants that concealed themselves from the party sent last fall, and that he proposed to land them on George's Island.

George's Island is in Halifax Harbour, and is opposite the fourth battery mentioned above.

The above quotation proves the presence of Acadians around Halifax. That they remained in the neighbourhood and caused considerable anxiety to the Government is equally evident. Under date of May 17, 1762, the minutes have the following:

The Lieutenant Governor acquainted the Council that he had information that the French prisoners assembled frequently in great numbers at the Mass House, and that they were mostly armed and were possessed of armed vessels under the pretence of fishing, particularly one at Dunk Cove...

This gives a picture of one part of Maillard's flock. Torn from their homes, they were gathered near Halifax while the Government negotiated, unsuccessfully as time would prove, for the home government to take them away. In the meantime they have a certain amount of liberty. Whether they had guns or whether their arms were the creation of an active Haligonian imagination is now beyond proof. Sufficient it is that the citizens of the new town had a dread of them.

Now the oratory offered to such a congregation, or at least to such a congregation as the government imagined it was, would hardly be one situated within the wooden palisades of the town. We would expect to find it outside the palisades. At the same time we would expect to find it near some place where a certain amount of control could be exercised by forces at the disposal of the government. The fourth battery, that outside the town limits, and on the site now occupied by the Nova Scotian Hotel, would meet all these requirements. Without a doubt it was near this battery that the oratory was situated.

Recall the phrase used in the quotation just given. "The Lieutenant Governor acquainted the Council that he had information..." Does not this suggest that the assemblies at the Mass House were some distance from the town? The leisurely nature of the action taken points in the same direction. The only Mass House in existence at the time was that at the fourth battery, and if this were situated over the hill from the palisades of the town, the Lieutenant Governor would be prevented from knowing of the assemblies, unless they were reported to him by the soldiers stationed at the battery. Its situation would, likewise, make the assemblies a not too pressing danger. An armed assembly within the town was one thing. A gathering of people, armed or not, for the purpose of worship at a point some distance from the town, was not a menace. At the most it was a possible menace, and this is what seems to be implied in the Governor's report.

Thus from the will, and from a few hints in the Minutes of the Governor's Council, it can be established that the oratory of the Battery of Halifax was near the fourth battery, the one outside the town. The other three, those inside the town palisades, are out of the question.

Tradition now comes to our help. It supports the contention as argued above that the oratory was near what we have called the fourth battery. Moreover it helps us to determine more exactly the site of the building.

The tradition is recorded by Archbishop O'Brien in his "Memoirs of Bishop Burke." In a note on page 58 he records,

The barn in which he celebrated Mass previously was, as local tradition has it, owned by Mr. Michael Tobin, and stood on South Street, almost opposite "Hillside House." As already mentioned Mr. Tobin came to Halifax in 1759.

The barn here referred to was that used by the Abbé Bailly, successor to the Abbé Maillard, when in 1768 he was for some time in Halifax. The Archbishop gives the following extract from a letter by Bailly.

Last winter I said mass for three months in this town, when suddenly I had to seek a secluded spot six miles from the town in order to celebrate on Sundays. I need not have done this had I been contented to shut the door of the barn, wherein I had been saying mass, against all, except the Acadians and Indians. (Ibid., page 57.)

Thus according to the tradition Bailly used a barn on South Street, opposite Hillside Hall, as his chapel. The Archbishop is in error in saying

that the barn belonged to Michael Tobin. At that time all the land in question, and the buildings on it, belonged to John Murphy. Murphy's holdings passed in time, through the hands of a certain Fitzgerald, to the Tobins, one of whom, the wife of Sir Wm. Young, lived, at the time the Archbishop wrote, in Hillside Hall. This is of interest with reference to the tradition. The property had always been owned by Catholics. It had come into the possession of a family who would be interested in the tradition, for some of its members were among those who, in early times, had slipped in, unnoticed, they hoped, to assist at the mass of the Abbé Bailly. These people would have every opportunity of knowing the tradition, and of preserving it carefully.

I think there can be no doubt that Maillard's oratory and Bailly's barn were the same structure. Bailly came to replace Maillard, and he would naturally step into all Maillard's rights, carrying on in the same place and same way. It must be remembered also that Bailly was just as much *persona grata* with the Government as had been Maillard. There was no reason why Maillard's privileges should be diminished when passed on to him.

Moreover tradition always develops along the same lines, towards simplification. Here we have a simplification. Tradition only remembers the Abbé Bailly. Why? Because his short stay was marked by the troubles arising from the Irish citizens going to mass in the oratory-barn. The previous period of Maillard had nothing to distinguish it. So tradition simplifies the matter. Maillard is forgotten. If, however, Bailly had not used the same chapel as Maillard, there would have been something for tradition to hold on to. Tradition preserves sites easily. For example there is a tradition locating the place where the Catholics of Halifax met to recite the rosary on Sunday mornings, after the Abbé Bailly left. This site was not forgotten. Neither would an earlier change be forgotten if such had taken place. It can then be accepted that there was no such change, and that the oratory and the barn were one and the same.

For a number of reasons we are led to believe that Maillard's oratory was in John Murphy's barn. The oratory was a fairly large building, for the Acadians and Indians were numerous. The prospering John Murphy would have a barn big enough for the purpose, but what out-building of the little battery down by the water's edge would be of sufficient size?

Again the Blessed Sacrament was kept in the oratory. For this there was needed a reasonable amount of safety and privacy, and the presence of some Catholics near at hand. A barn attached to a military post not belonging to any Catholics, belonging in fact to an anti-Catholic government, with soldiers more or less contemptuous of Catholic customs, able to enter at any moment, and always on the door steps, such a barn would hardly be a proper place for reservation of the Blessed Sacrament. A barn, however, on John Murphy's

property would be ideal. Well back from the road it would have given the needed privacy, and the Catholic family close at hand would have provided the protection required. Note here how tradition points to a barn up the hill from Barrington Street. Murphy's house was on what is now called Barrington Street. His barns would be behind the house, and up the hill. It is just to this spot that tradition points.

John Murphy would be eager to offer his barn to Maillard. He was of that kind. In 1801 we find the following in the records of St. Mary's Cathedral.

Donné un bane gratis à John Murphy à cause des dons qu'il a fait à l'église de Halifax.

This is one of the orders issued to the Congregation over the signature of the Bishop of Quebec. Would it be farfetched to number among the "dons" that of his barn for use as a chapel in the early day of the settlement?

A few years ago the Nova Scotia Historical Society placed a plaque on the house at the corner of Barrington and Tobin Streets. On it was inscribed:

In this vicinity, about 1759, was the first public place of worship for Roman Catholics in Halifax, where they were administered to by M. L'Abbé Maillard, Missionary to the Acadians and Indians. The Nova Scotia Historical Society, 1932.

This plaque does not mark the exact site of the oratory, but it cannot be far from it. Certainly the oratory was within a stone throw of the corner.

The oratory must have been poorly furnished indeed. In his will Maillard mentions the following articles of church furniture: a monstrance of silver without a lunette, a chalice of silver with a paten, a tin plate for ablutions, two copper candlesticks, a missal, a black chasuble with stole, maniple, veil and burse. This was in April, 1759. In 1778 Louis Pettipas, his executor, handed over to the Seminary in Quebec the articles left to his care. The list of them is the same as above except that the candlesticks are missing, and the vestment is listed as being in very poor condition. (Article by Father David in "Nova Francia," mentioned above.)

Poorly furnished as was this chapel, the Blessed Sacrament was reserved there. Maillard wrote to his friends for money to defray the cost of keeping a light burning before the tabernacle. (Ibid, page 103.) That the barn was the "first public place of worship for Roman Catholics in Halifax" is true in the strict sense of a Catholic place of worship.

What manner of man was this Abbé Maillard? He seems to have been of the kind which makes good friends, few enemies, and wins universal respect. Even the fallen-away priest Moreau, who was married and acting as a minister along the Atlantic coast of the province, speaks of "the intimacy and correspondence between the Abbé Maillard and me." (Moreau to Burton, Archives of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel.) The Reverend Mr. Wood wrote of him:

He was very sensible, polite, well bred man, an excellent scholar and a good sociable companion, and was much respected by the better sort of people here as it appeared. He was the means of preventing many an Englishman from being butchered. (In the same collection. Wood to Burton, July 30, 1764.)

That this tribute is sincere is proved by the funeral which was accorded to Maillard. It was in fact a state funeral and the leading men of the town acted as his pall bearers. There may have been some ulterior motive in their doing this, but it could not have been done had he not merited their respect.

His fellow priests had the same good word for him. LeLoutre wrote:

C'est un trésor que ce missionnaire, auquel je crois que le Seigneur a donné le don des langues... C'est un ouvrier infatigable pour l'étude et les travaux inséparables de ces missions; c'est un ministre rempli de l'Esprit de Dieu. (Quoted by Father David in the article already mentioned.)

There has been mention of his scholarship. A proof of this is seen in a request made by Wood for dictionaries in order that he might study Maillard's works in Micmac. In his letter of July 30, 1769, he asked for a Hebrew and a Greek dictionary and says that Maillard must have used Assyrian characters in his Micmac writings. Such was the good priest's reputation for scholarship among these people.

Among the Indians he was indeed beloved. They still remember his name. Dr. Rand in his "Statement of Facts Relating to the History of the Micmacs" relates this:

A venerable man related with much animation how bushes bearing beautiful flowers sprung up on his grave, testifying, as I took it to his virtue and his worth.

Such was the apostle of the Micmacs, and the first priest of Halifax. Perhaps his care is what has kept his spiritual children faithful to their religion, for to this day a non-Catholic Micmac is something unheard of.

In this final section we have to treat of the mystery surrounding the death of Maillard. A letter from Thomas Wood in the Archives of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel states that he “died here the 12th of August last.” The letter is dated October 27th, 1762. All the evidence seems to support this date. On July 24, 1762, the Indian Chief Paul Laurent was called before the governor to explain why his people had gathered at Lunenburg.

The Interview is recorded in the Minutes of the Governor’s Council. In part it is as follows.

Q. When did they expect to see Mr. Maillard at Lunenburg?

A. For a month past.

Q. Why did they remain at Lunenburg so long when they found that Mr. Maillard did not come?

A. Mr. Maillard being sick, they remained in expectation that Mr. Maillard’s health would be better and that he would come.

There is also the signature of the codicil of August 2, 1762. It is Maillard’s signature. All the characteristics of his handwriting are there; but it is the writing of a man who seizes the pen infirmly, and who, with difficulty, traces the letters.

We have proof that the priest was too sick to travel as early as June. Then there is the evidence of his writing. He may well have been dead a week after he wrote the codicil.

Thomas Wood, who was an Anglican clergyman, thus describes Maillard’s last days.

...the day before his death I performed the office of the Visitation of the Sick according to our form in the French language to him in the presence of all the French whom he ordered to attend for that purpose... I was frequently with Mr. Maillard at his request for several weeks before he died, and the visible respect he showed me before the French and Indians may be the means of my reasoning with some success with them to throw aside the superstitions of Popery and embrace the practice of our Pure Religion ...(Letter of October 27th, 1762.)

...he requested me to pray for him to God and he ordered all the Indians and French that were then on George's Island (near Halifax) to his chamber, when, at his request, I performed our service for visiting the sick. (Wood to Burton. July 30th, 1764.)

Both these letters tell the same story. Maillard asked Wood to read the Protestant service over him. Did he really do so? Perhaps. But if he did his act was in no way an apostasy, and this must have been clear to the Acadians and Indians. If he had aposticized much would have been made of it. Some of his followers would have gone the same way. Yet none of them did. Whatever went on around the death bed of the priest in no way compromised his faith nor that of his flock. Perhaps he asked Wood to pray over him because there was no one else.