

Louisbourg

15 June 1745

By the Peace of Utrecht in 1713, ending the War of the Spanish Succession, the British regained control of all of Acadia, except Cape Breton Island off the northeastern tip of Nova Scotia, which remained in French hands. This island was of great strategic importance as it guarded the southern approach to the Saint Lawrence. The French built the great fortress of Louisbourg to fortify this island, which by 1744 had a garrison of seven hundred men and one hundred sixteen cannon, including some 36-pounders. The fort was built according to the most current military plans; the harbor was guarded, too, by some of the nastiest weather on the coast, to include ice often through May. The successful conquest of this fortress on 15 June 1745, was largely a collaboration between the merchants of Boston and the royal governor, William Shirley.

William Shirley was one of the best British royal governors (1741-1756) in that he was able to keep the large imperial picture before himself at all times, juggling the demands of his English patron, the Duke of New Castle against those of the merchants of Boston. The New Englanders desperately wanted to open Maine and the Maritime Provinces to British settlement and trade but could not do so because of the fortress. Yet most of the Boston merchants who controlled the legislature did not necessarily want to think about, let alone spend money on, expensive defensive measures for their own territory, which at this time meant strengthening the chain of forts along the coast of Maine.

Shirley went to Maine, investigated the situation, and made allies of the two most important landholders and patrons of the area: Samuel Waldo and William Pepperrell who could only make money if settlers would buy their land. The settlers were reluctant to do so without assurances that they would be protected from the French. By 1744, Shirley, Waldo, and Pepperrell were in complete agreement with New Hampshire Governor Benning Wentworth that hostilities were about to break out between Britain and France in the Massachusetts sphere of influence.

In May 1744, the French at Louisbourg received word from Paris that war with England had broken out again, part of the War of the Austrian Succession. An expedition from the French garrison overran the nearest British fort, at Canso on the far southeastern end of Nova Scotia. Among the officers captured at Canso was a native of Nova Scotia, John Bradstreet.

Late in 1744, when the paroled British prisoners from Canso arrived in Boston, three of them, John Bradstreet in particular, gave Shirley a very precise report on the insufficient firepower of the cannons guarding Louisbourg, and the discontent rife among the small number of defenders. Shirley decided to strike before reinforcements could arrive from France in the spring of 1745.

It took all Shirley's powers of persuasion to get a favorable vote for manpower from the legislature on 25 February 1745; he had to promise that professional British soldiers would take over from the provincials once the fort was won. Shirley made Pepperell commander in chief. The bulk of the men, money, and materiel came from Massachusetts territory, yet the expedition was inter-colonial, and, more importantly, completely voluntary: Massachusetts and Maine provided 3,000 men, the largest contingent; Connecticut sent five hundred men; New Hampshire four hundred fifty; Rhode Island provided an armed ship; New York sent ten 24-pound cannon; and Pennsylvania and New Jersey sent provisions. Convinced that the British government would ultimately pay for the expedition in sterling, Shirley raised £50,000 in paper currency. He also requested that Commodore Peter Warren, commander of British naval operations in the Caribbean, escort his small fleet.

The colonial fleet of fifteen ships sailed from Boston harbor without Warren's escort on 28 March 1745, arriving at Canso early April. Within a week after the fleet had sailed, Shirley received news that Newcastle had sent word that Commodore Warren was to be in charge of a grand effort to drive the French out of Nova Scotia once and for all. This directive from Newcastle might have caused difficult political problems between the two leaders, but Warren proved, initially, to be most diplomatic in his dealings Pepperrell. The Commodore joined the fleet at Canso on 23 April with four immense British naval vessels, one of sixty guns, and three of forty guns.



On 29 April, the men landed at Gabarus Bay, three miles west of the Fort. Bradstreet had told Shirley that there were two breaches in the walls of the Great Battery, which a small detachment discovered on 2 May; by then the French had spiked the great guns (twenty-eight 42-pounders) and abandoned the well stocked battery. By 4 May the Americans were turning French cannons on

their former owners, to great effect. As if this were not bad enough, Warren captured a French supply ship loaded with bread, meat, and flour, and further French ships with military supplies. On 15 June, the two commanders were planning a joint assault when the French sent out a flag of truce. After a day of negotiations, the French commander handed over the city to Pepperrell on 17 June. When the word reached Boston of the surrender and that the amateurs of New England had finally beaten French regulars, the town went wild with joy. Yet only a few weeks later Shirley had to sail to Louisbourg himself to quell fierce complaints among the Massachusetts soldiers that the British regulars were interfering and taking all the glory.

Trouble had begun once the Fort surrendered. Warren insisted that the French flag continue to fly over Louisbourg to decoy rich merchant vessels into the range of his guns. Loot worth more than a million pounds sterling fell into his hands; according to the custom of the day half went to the British crown and half to the naval commanders, none to the shore forces. This was, to put it mildly, bitterly resented. But the real trouble came when the Americans were forced into a garrison role, by the mere fact that they had no way home. This they deeply resented, as their enlistments had been for the season only, they were worried about their families in the backcountry of New England, which was open to raids from the French and Indians, and they were prone to all the illnesses that go with lack of sanitation. Of the four thousand men under Pepperrell's command, fifteen hundred were incapable of duty even before the French capitulated. By the spring of 1746, after a winter in camp, eight hundred ninety were dead. The French in Canada, as they feared, stirred up the Indians in New York state to make trouble all along the frontier and distract the British from their next objective: Quebec.

Meanwhile, the French attempted twice unsuccessfully to retake Louisbourg; the American soldiers and their clergymen exulted in every new mark of God's favor towards them. They were not prepared for the final outcome of the Louisbourg campaign. England gave it back to France in the peace treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle in 1748. An expedition of colonial unity and success was negated by European political considerations.