

HISTORIC ROOTS

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THE RAID ON ST. FRANCIS

By DEBORAH P. CLIFFORD

ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Every story has at least two sides. This is as true of history as it is of life today.

There are many accounts of the raid of Major Robert Rogers and his Rangers on the Canadian village of St. Francis (Odanak in Abenaki) in October 1759. Until recently most Americans knew only the English version of what happened. This said that early one morning, in a surprise attack, Rogers and his men stormed St. Francis. They killed 200 Indians and took 20 others captive. They burned most of the buildings. The raid, the English said, destroyed the village and ended the power of the Abenaki in North America.

The person who spread this view of the raid was Major Rogers himself. He was serving in the English colonial army during the French and Indian War (1754-1763). The English were trying to drive the French out of North America. They also wanted to end Indian raids on English settlements.

For years the Abenaki had used Odanak as a jumping-off place for raids on towns along the Connecticut River. They hoped these attacks

would stop the flow of new settlers, who had forced them out of the lands where they had always lived.

To punish the Indians and, he hoped, end their attacks, General Jeffrey Amherst, the leader of British forces in North America, ordered Rogers and his troops to destroy Odanak.



Robert Rogers believed that the raid was a complete surprise and a complete success. His report paints a stunning victory. He did not count the bodies before he left the village and may very well have believed that most of the Indians were dead. He also played down the number of his own men who were killed or wounded. He wrote what he did because he wanted to impress Amherst and the other English leaders. And because he knew only what he had seen; he didn't know the other side of the story.

Some Frenchmen arrived at St. Francis soon after the raid. Their reports are somewhat different. They say that Rogers and his Rangers killed only 30 Abenaki and that 40 Rangers had also been killed. We can't prove their numbers. It is possible that they may have wanted to play down the success of the raid. But their version raises questions about what Rogers said.

The Abenaki accounts of the raid were told over time, from generation to generation. They were not written down until quite recently, so few outsiders knew about them. Theophile Panadis had heard one account from his grandmother. She had heard it from people who had been alive at the time of the raid. In the 1960s Panadis told the story to Gordon Day, who wrote it down.

Panadis told how an unknown Indian had

come to Odanak the night before to warn the Abenaki of Rogers' raid. Because of this warning most of the women, children, and old and sick people went off to a safe place. Only the men were there to defend the village when Rogers and his troops arrived.

Panadis did not say how many Abenaki were killed, but with only the men there, 200 seems like a very high figure. He did describe how Abenaki men hounded Rogers and his troops



Courtesy Department of Library Services, American Museum of Natural History

This tablet was put in place on the 300th anniversary of Rogers' raid on Odanak. The text is in three languages: English, Abenaki, and French.



Vermont Historical Society

It is hard to tell what Robert Rogers looked like from this very crude sketch. Can you tell, from the pose, placement, and size of Rogers and the Abenaki man, which version of the story of the raid this picture went with?

on their trip back. The Indians killed some English soldiers. Other Rangers starved to death because the Abenaki gave them no time to hunt. By this account, the English troops lost more men than the Abenaki. These stories show the bravery of the Abenaki fighters and tell of their revenge on the English, who had wanted to—and failed to—destroy them.

All of these stories have truth in them. No two people ever see any event the same way. When they start out on different sides and describe an important event, it is not surprising that they do not agree. It is important when you study history to know who is telling the story, why he or she is telling it, and what he or she wants you to think about it.

When the French and Indian War ended in

1763, the French were beaten. Canada became English and the Abenaki were left without anyone to help them against the English settlers. Rogers' story was the winner's story. It was published and talked about. People in North America and in England believed that St. Francis had been destroyed. Rogers was a hero.

But the Abenaki knew that his story was only part of the whole. They had not been destroyed by the raid. After the war, many stayed in Canada. Some went back to lands in the south where they had lived before. Many came back to Vermont, where their descendents still live.

We now know the different sides of the story of Rogers' raid. So we have a fuller picture of what happened on that October day in 1759 than anyone who was actually there.

Rooting Around

It is not surprising that the English, the French, and the Abenaki saw the same events differently. Try comparing notes about an event you went to with friends and family. You probably remember different things about it and may even remember the same details differently.

Kenneth Roberts' *Northwest Passage* tells the story of the raid on Odanak from the English point of view. Theophile Panadis' account appeared in the June 1962 issue of *Historical New Hampshire*.