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## The Admiral of Lake Champlain

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Based on Judge Philip Demers' "L'Admiral du Lac Champlain," Monograph III of the *Chronicles of the Upper Richelieu*,<sup>1</sup> translated from the French by Grace B. Huden. (Monograph donated by Mr. William Ross of St. Albans.)

THE first navigators of Lake Champlain<sup>2</sup> mentioned in history are the Algonkian Indian canoeists who conducted Samuel de Champlain on his memorable voyage of 1609. Indian names all the way from Pointe d'Algonquine at the tip of Alburg Peninsula to the (Mohawk) Kahchaquahna ("fish-scooping place") near West Haven bear witness to the fact that aborigines had used Lake Irocoisia<sup>3</sup> as a convenient route for commerce or warfare long before Champlain's visit.

Dutch, English, and French traversed the Champlain-Richelieu waterway all through the seventeenth century. By the early 1700s it became apparent that French and English forces might clash along this corridor, as Paris documents<sup>4</sup> reveal. One of the French

1. Full Title: Philippe Demers, LL.D., Juge de la Cour Superieure, Chroniques du Haut-Richelieu, III, L'Amiral du Lac Champlain, Joseph Payant dit St.-Onge, Essai de monographie regionale, Montreal, G. Ducharme, Libraire-editeur, 1929. Hereafter referred to as Monograph III.

2. The name "Lake Champlain" first appears on maps drawn after 1609, notably Samuel de Champlain's charts dated 1613 and 1616. See John C. Huden, "Champlain Maps 1542-1792," reprinted from *Vermont History*, Vol. xxvi, no. 4 (Oct. 1958), Vol. xxvii, Nos. 1, 2, and 3 (Jan. 1959, Apr. 1959, and July 1959).

3. "Lake Irocoisia," a sixteenth- and seventeenth-century name for Lake Champlain. See Huden above or *Vermont Life*, Vol. XIII, No. IV (Summer 1959), 43; Map of New Netherlands and New England illustrating Ralph Nading Hill, "Gateway Struggle."

4. *Documents Relating to the Colonial History of the State of New York*, ed. E. B. O'Callaghan (Albany, 1858), Vol. IX, *passim*; Vol. X, 27, 267, 283, 311, 316, 318 ff., Hereafter referred to as DCHNY.

strongholds, Fort St. Frederic<sup>5</sup> was built near Crown Point (New York) in 1731. This outpost had to be supplied by boats coming from St. Theresa on the Richelieu River where the French built a warehouse in 1741, two years after Lake Champlain had been declared navigable for sailing craft. In 1742 the first good-sized vessel was constructed, a sloop of forty-five tons built at Fort St. Frederic by the famed Corbin brothers of Quebec,<sup>6</sup> "King's Carpenters." Hence 1742 witnessed the initiation of regular trips between St. Frederic and St. John,<sup>7</sup> where newer storage facilities were provided.

The first and only pilot of this Corbin-built craft was Joseph Payant, surnamed St. Onge. When "his" ship was launched, Quebec-born Payant was probably forty-three years of age.

In 1749 one of Payant's passengers was the noted Swedish naturalist, Peter Kalm.<sup>8</sup> Among Kalm's notations is this statement:

... the boat which carried me to St. Jean is the first to be constructed on the lake; formerly only Bateaus were used to transport provisions. The captain is of French origin, although not born in France; he himself [supervised the building] of the boat and had made soundings for a safe route between Fort Saint Jean and Fort Saint Frederic.

It was Payant, furthermore, who was commissioned to guide the famed cartographer Franquet in 1752.

In the marriage contract<sup>9</sup> of Nicholas Payant (St. Onge) and Rosalie d'Erige at Fort St. Jean, April 4, 1758, Nicholas is listed as "Admiral of Lake Champlain" and his father, Joseph Payant St. Onge is described as "Captain of the boat maintained in the service of the [French] King." This reference to Nicholas as "Admiral" is undoubtedly an error of transcription; Nicholas was a blacksmith.

The title "Admiral" is rather unique, especially when it refers to

5. Fort St. Frederic, on the New York shore opposite Chimney Point, Vt. See "Some Comments on Chimney Point" and "La Pointe a la Chevelure," *Vermont History*, Vol. xxviii, No. 3 (July 1960), 231-234.

6. Mss. Public Archives of Canada, C-A Volume 75, 32-38.

7. Now St. Jean-D'Iberville, on the Richelieu.

8. *Voyage de Kalm en Amerique, traduit par L. W. Marchand*. Peter Palmer, *History of Lake Champlain from the First Exploration by the French in 1609 to the Close of the Year 1814* (Plattsburgh, N. Y., 1853). Monograph III, 16.

9. Registre du Fort St. Jean transcribed, Monograph III, 14-16.

a civilian pilot in a document countersigned by several military officials. Judge Demers has asked "was this title given to any person who commanded armed vessels?"<sup>10</sup> He went on to suggest that Joseph Payant was dubbed "Admiral" because he commanded the largest or principal armed vessel on the lake; military operations had compelled the construction of several smaller craft. By November 1759<sup>11</sup> the French had at least three xebecs and a large tartan commanded by regular navy officers, but Joseph Payant continued to control the King's bark or schooner, sometimes called "St. Onge's craft."

Within a week of August 1, 1759, Amherst<sup>12</sup> captured Forts Ticonderoga and St. Frederic, thus becoming master of the southern part of Lake Champlain. By October 10 Amherst's carpenters had constructed some small fighting craft in order to sweep northward along the lake. In the meantime, French commander Bourlamaque had intrenched himself at Isle aux Noix in the Richelieu, north of Alburg.

On the evening of October 11, 1759, Joseph Payant anchored his bark in Grand Isle Channel in order to keep an eye on St. Albans Bay. Three xebecs commanded by M. de Laubaras sailed south as far as the Four Brothers Islands, west of Burlington. During the night British brigantines slipped by the xebecs unnoticed.

At daybreak of October 12, 1759, Pilot Payant saw a British brigantine of twenty cannons (and a vessel as strong as Payant's schooner) maneuvering near the Sisters Islands. Payant opened fire immediately; the British brigantine gave chase and would have overhauled Payant had he not taken his schooner into shallow water, where indeed he ran aground.<sup>13</sup>

10. Monograph III, 7.

11. DCHNY, Vol. x, 1055. M. de Bourlamaque to Marshal de Belle Isle, Camp at Isle Aux Noix, 1st November, 1759. "I left on the lake a schooner armed with four ten pounders and three small crafts called schebecs [xebecs] each carrying eight guns of the same calibre, and a crew of fifty men. The commander of that little squadron [Joseph Payant St. Onge] had orders to cruise continually at the outlet of the lake [near Alburg and adjacent islands] to block its passage against the English army, which could cross it only in small bateaus." (A *xebec* is a two or three masted sailing vessel with long overhanging bow and stern. A *tartan* is a one masted sailing vessel using a lateen sail.)

12. Lord Jeffrey Amherst, commander of British forces, 1759-1760.

13. DCHNY, Vol. x, 1056.

Meanwhile, near the Four Brothers, the French xebecs attacked English rear guards. At first the French were successful, taking a bark and twenty prisoners.<sup>14</sup> The wind then shifted, giving advantage to the British, who in turn attacked; the French xebecs took refuge in the Bay of Tsonnanthouoans (Bay of Senecas) on the New York side. During the night Laubaras, finding himself hemmed in, sank two of his xebecs and ran the other aground. He then sent two longboats to Isle aux Noix to report this misfortune, and on the morning of October 13 he started to march to Montreal with his whole crew. At Isle aux Noix some of Laubaras' prisoners told Bourlamaque that his English enemies had some 10,000 men, several heavy gunboats, and a bomb-ketch.

Everybody at Isle aux Noix believed that Payant's schooner had been captured or destroyed, but such was not the case. The experienced old pilot had hidden his vessel in the lee of Isle La Motte, waiting for favorable winds. On October 16 he brought his vessel, the only French ship to regain port, to Bourlamaque's headquarters.

Payant's "naval career" came to an end when the British took Isle aux Noix on August 25, 1760. A strong force of English<sup>15</sup> artillery secretly placed eight field pieces to command the river where Payant's bark and a French tartan were at anchor. The tartan's commander was shot down after he had cut his cables; the crew swam ashore, and the west wind blew the drifting tartan right into the hands of the English. Payant cast off, but the adverse wind pushed his schooner aground on a sand bar, where Major Robert Rogers<sup>16</sup> and his men easily captured the "Admiral of Lake Champlain," his "King's bark," and his crew. Payant, then about sixty, was paroled; he retired to Chambly where he dwelled for several years. Apparently he moved to St. Ours, Quebec, sometime later; he probably died there in 1777.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*, 1103-1104. Monograph III, 9-12.

16. Robert Rogers, commander of the Rangers which raided St. Francis in the fall of 1759.