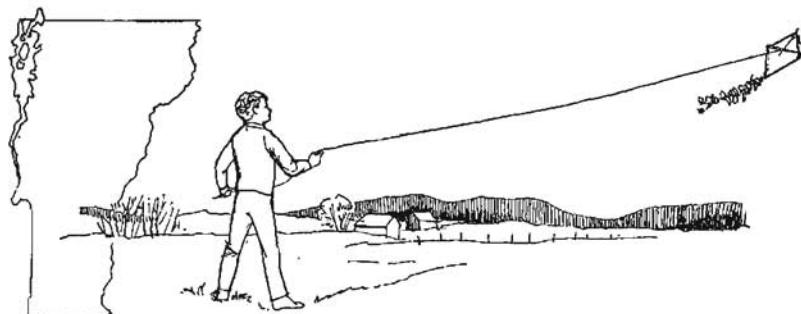


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Isle aux Noix was the last defense against the British on the route to Montreal. . . .

The Contest For Isle aux Noix, 1759-1760: A Case Study in the Fall of New France*

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ISLE aux Noix is an island one-mile long and a quarter-mile wide sitting low and level in the Richelieu River about eight miles north of Lake Champlain and the present Canadian-American border. Late in 1760 the English had to capture this island in their final advance to conquer New France. The battle for Isle aux Noix is given little attention in the histories of the War of the Conquest because it was not as important as other battles. But it is an interesting case, illustrating in microcosm some of the problems the French faced in trying to wage large scale war in North America.

Until the 1750's Indian-style warfare involving small, mobile parties of *la compagnie de la franche marine*, Canadian militia and their Indian allies living off the land and constantly raiding frontier settlements, had proven successful in keeping the English on the defensive. But now settlement, in the English colonies at least, had progressed to the point where large armies carrying heavy ordnance and provisions for a long campaign could be transported to the frontier and beyond. As well, by

*Some of this article was originally written for the National Historic Sites Service of Canada which operates Isle aux Noix as a National Historic Park.

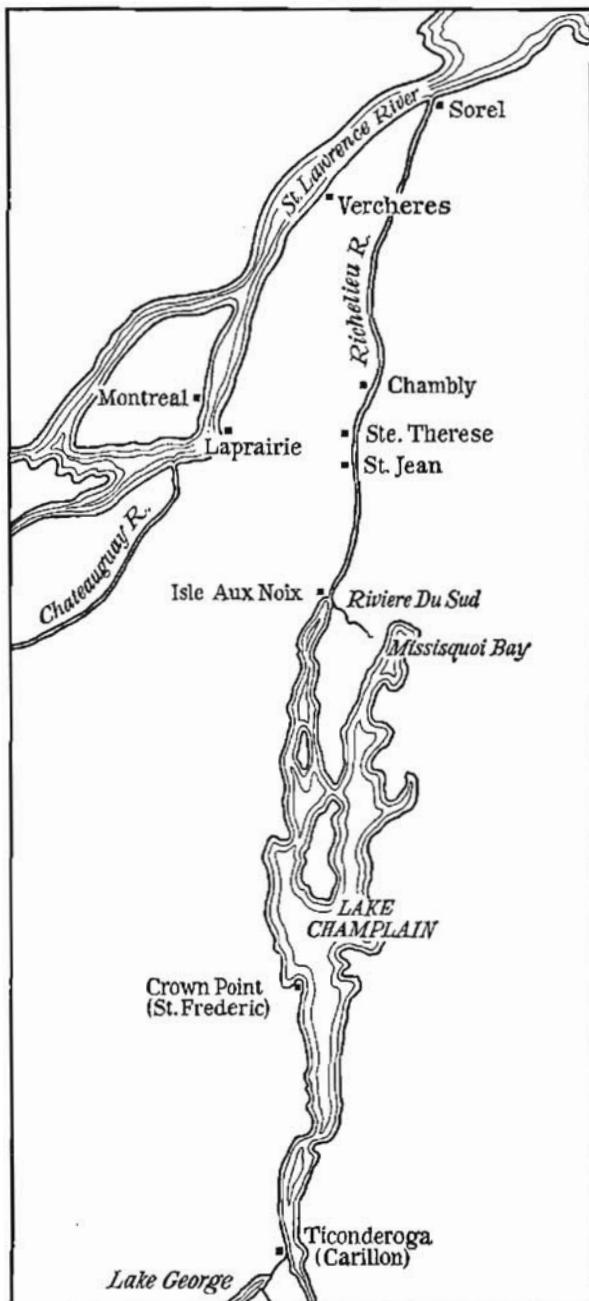
this time the English wanted to remove the French menace forever; large scale invasion to seize the country seemed to be the only way. The French had to meet a determined English offensive which involved large armies of regulars, naval blockades and siege warfare.

The French would have liked to fight a European-style war too,¹ but they received little assistance from the Mother Country; they were reduced to a position where they even had to curtail traditional North American style hit-and-run warfare. They were forced to fight a war of delay with the scanty provisions and few regular soldiers they had in the vain hope that the King would send them more or that a peace treaty in Europe would save them before the whole colony was lost. The latter was the better hope because the King had few regulars to spare in Europe and, anyhow, New France found it difficult to support those which were sent.

Most studies of the War direct more attention to the more glamourous operations on the St. Lawrence River route of invasion; this was a traditional route of English invasion, used as early as 1629. But so was the Lake Champlain-Richelieu River route. This route connected the Hudson and St. Lawrence Rivers but necessitated portages at Lake George and Champlain and at Chambly on the Richelieu. Until the 1750's it was difficult for any but small forces, travelling by canoe or other small craft and living off the land, to cross the one hundred miles of unsettled no-man's land between the English and French frontiers between Lake George and Fort St-Jean.

Except for two occasions this route had seen only hit-and-run raids for almost a hundred years. The expeditions of regulars sent by the French in the 1660's to fight the Iroquois were really no more than larger raiding parties carrying their own provisions; they were not expeditions of invasion and they moved only with great difficulty. By the 1690's the traffic of raiding parties from both colonies became especially heavy and soon (1709) both the English and the French attempted to send invading armies along the route. They came close to meeting in the forests by Lake Champlain but after having been bogged down in the woods for awhile they both gave up and went home. Fort St-Frédéric, built at Crown Point on Lake Champlain in 1731, served principally as a check against French fur traders smuggling with the New Yorkers.

By 1755, however, times had changed and Fort Carillon (later Ticonderoga), was built by the French at the south end of Lake Champlain, closer to the English settlements, as a check against the large-scale invasion which now seemed more feasible and likely. The French actually made the first move and in 1757 General Montcalm took Fort William



The Richelieu River- Lake Champlain approach to Canada

Henry in a European-style expedition. Under normal conditions he would have continued on south to take Fort Edward but he lacked provisions and transport and the militia were needed at home for the harvest. As Montcalm became accustomed to the realities of New France he saw he would have to adjust his military thinking.

The English rallied to take Louisbourg but the French were still forced to fight on three fronts—Niagara, the St. Lawrence, and Lake Champlain. By 1759 they were aware of the greater English strength and their own weaknesses. Montcalm (and others) realized that "1759 will be worse than 1758."² Montcalm's policy (Governor Vaudreuil did not agree) could only be to pull back slowly to the territory they could defend, delay the English advance as long as possible (hoping that 'next spring' would be better) but pull out their troops when they were in danger of being taken—saving them to fight again another day.

To carry out their policy of retreat and delay the French could not rely on Carillon. They needed a more easily defended position, closer to the bosom of the colony, on which to fall back and make a last stand on the southern entry. Le Chevalier de Lévis and Capt. Pierre Pouchot reconnoitred the Richelieu in May 1759 looking for "the places where the best resistance could be made."³ After much deliberation they chose Isle aux Noix. The island could never be made impregnable, but standing in mid-channel its guns could command the navigation of the river; the nearest French settlement was another twenty miles north at Fort St-Jean and there were no roads an invader could use to bypass the stronghold. Once around the island by water, however, English boats could land at St-Jean and take the new French roads which led straight to Montreal, avoiding the Champlain rapids.

The fort which le Sieur de la Pause began in May 1759, then, was to be the last defense of the southern entry and was later called "the most important post on the frontier."⁴ La Pause, however, was recalled to Quebec and the direction of the works fell to the engineers Fournier and Germain. New France had suffered three successive crop failures (1756–1758) and a scarcity of provisions was beginning to be felt in the colony; therefore Vaudreuil at first could send only 130 men—50 marines from the St-Jean garrison, 50 Canadian militiamen and 30 men of le régiment de Guyenne.⁵ By July Fournier reported that the work was languishing because the majority of the small number of men he had were sick. Progress was also plagued, moreover, by a feud between he (Fournier) and Germain, now the officer-commanding.⁶

The problems of conflicting authority and scarcity of men were solved in early August when Brigadier François de Bourlamaque, commander

of the Lake Champlain front, arrived with about 3000 men and took direct command. He had already abandoned Fort Carillon, leaving only a small number of men behind. They were expected to stall the progress of Jeffrey Amherst's army down Lake Champlain towards the Richelieu; so, when the small band surrendered the fort a week later, both Bourlamaque and Vaudreuil were disappointed they had not held out for the expected fortnight.⁷ Meanwhile Bourlamaque had passed by Fort St-Frédéric, destroyed it and proceeded to Isle aux Noix which he reached 5 August. More than a year before New France fell, the French could no longer play their game of retreat and delay on the southern front. Isle aux Noix was the last defense on the road to Montreal.

Despite a chronic fever condition and pessimism about getting the island ready on time to meet the English who were expected soon, Bourlamaque applied considerable energy to his work. The added manpower helped, but of the 3000 men he had, he found that he really had only 100 labourers; he felt that even with 1200 labourers he could not face the enemy in six weeks. It was likely that New France's difficult financial condition prevented him from using his regulars as labourers—this would require extra pay. About 400 men were used by his small navy which patrolled Lake Champlain under the command of M. de la Bras. The remainder was probably used to patrol the neighbouring countryside. Of about 1200 militia approximately 200 were old men or children that he intended to send home before the fighting began, though he had found the children to be good workers. To add to his troubles, when he landed on the island he had 200 men sick and the number increased daily (the marshy island had a long subsequent history as an unhealthy military post). Unseasonable rain and cold in August and September intensified the health problem and retarded construction and then 200 men had to be sent home to help in the harvest.⁸

Amherst gave him time to breathe though, for he spent August and September rebuilding Fort Carillon (renamed Ticonderoga) while waiting for Captain Joshua Loring to build a small navy for him. In early October three new English sloops moved up Lake Champlain to challenge the French fleet of four smaller vessels. After some skillful dodging Le Bras was cornered and during the night of 12–13 October scuttled his ships, fleeing to Isle aux Noix by land.

That same day Amherst had begun to move his army down the lake. His plan was to "make a show of attacking Isle aux Noix" by sending the new navy down Lake Champlain. Meanwhile he intended to go overland by way of the Chateauguay River and surprise Montreal. But

he had waited too long (until 9 October) to send a scouting party to find the route. It was not until November that he heard that the scouts had been captured by the French, and it was too late to send another party. In any case, there was no practical land-route to Montreal. In the meantime, moreover, he had learned of the capture of Quebec on 13 September; hearing that many of the French army had escaped to Montreal, he decided it would be unwise to attack Montreal now. Nightly frosts then convinced him that he could give up any hope of a naval attack on Isle aux Noix this late in the season and he retired to Crown Point for the winter. Bourlamaque felt Amherst had acted foolishly in delaying invasion.⁹

The second of November M. de Cadillac, Captain in le régiment de Berry, arrived at Crown Point from Isle aux Noix bringing a letter from Vaudreuil regarding an exchange of prisoners. He stayed overnight, wrote Amherst, "drank a good deal of strong beer and told Abercromby, I believe, all that he knew." He told him all about Bourlamaque's problems and weaknesses.¹⁰ One is even more suspicious of Cadillac when one learns that he reported to Bourlamaque that the English had not yet retired for the winter!¹¹

In October some militia were returned to Isle aux Noix (presumably after completing the harvest) to help Bourlamaque begin work on a smaller fortification to house a small garrison for the winter. Again there were many difficulties to be faced and the work was not finished until the end of November. There was no building stone and the chimneys had to be made of mud. There were no carpenters and little lumber and when a detachment was sent to look for some, the militiamen deserted on the road. Other men were then sent to cut lumber in the nearby woods. Bourlamaque was happy to leave the island at the end of November to spend the winter at Sorel even though the works he left were poorly built. He had been sick for several months and had asked to be replaced as far back as August. He was suffering from fever and chills and now asthma and nausea were added to his ills.¹²

Le Sieur de Lusignan was left in charge of the island for the winter; due to a scarcity of provisions his garrison numbered only 300 men. The men spent a miserable winter. Deserters reported to Amherst that the men were forced to kill all their stock and still received only a half-pound of meat per day. Otherwise their diet consisted of only a pound and a quarter of bad bread daily and nothing to drink but water.¹³

1760 promised to be even worse than 1759 for the English controlled the shipping-lanes on the Atlantic Ocean and no French assistance could get through to New France. In early March le Marquis de

Lotbinière was sent to supervise spring construction on the island but Vaudreuil could not send any men with him as they were needed for spring planting and for the French counter-siege of Quebec. A younger man, Louis-Antoine de Bougainville, who later gained fame as an explorer, was chosen to command the southern frontier; he arrived at Isle aux Noix in April with only 150 reinforcements.¹⁴

In 1759 Bourlamaque had felt that with time and work the island could only be made defensible against "un épée à la main." But he felt that the English would not try such a method: he felt they would come with cannons and mortars prepared for a long siege. The French could only hope to delay the English at Isle aux Noix.¹⁵ At first, however, Vaudreuil and Bougainville still hoped to erect a great fortress on the island and disagreed with de Lotbinière's work. De Lotbinière knew that New France did not have the men or provisions for such a fortress (when Haviland later inspected it he estimated that it would require 6000 men to make it completely defensible).¹⁶ De Lotbinière did not have a reputation for honesty and competence and Bougainville thought him a fool and untrustworthy. But being the nephew of the Governor's wife must have made it easier for de Lotbinière to persuade Vaudreuil.¹⁷ The dispute must have continued into July for La Pause was sent to report on the matter and he agreed with de Lotbinière.¹⁸ At best the French could only hope to delay the English for another winter; they knew that eventually Isle aux Noix would fall. Naturally Bougainville did his best with his few men to make the island defensible adding, for example, to the booms which Bourlamaque had previously established to block the shipping channels on either side of the island. As New France was short of lumber again this year Bougainville was forced to dismantle the stockade of the winter fort to use the wood on his new works.¹⁹

The English spent most of the summer preparing to strike at Montreal and keeping the French nervously awaiting attack. Murray's ships hovered around the mouth of the Richelieu for about a month but did not move up the river. The long wait for a major English offensive led Vaudreuil hopefully to conclude that a European peace was imminent. Meanwhile, Col. William Haviland was taking command of the English troops on the Lake Champlain frontier. Provided with 3400 men and about 40 guns he was to push down the Richelieu by batteau, capture Isle aux Noix, continue on to the St. Lawrence and join with General Murray moving up-river from Quebec and Amherst moving down from Lake Ontario.²⁰

In June Robert Rogers and his Rangers had been sent down the

Richelieu, by-passing Isle aux Noix to raid French settlements. In the only frontier-style raid of the campaign Rogers burned Fort Ste-Thérèse to the ground. Patrols from Isle aux Noix got close to the Rangers on their way back but the Rangers got away.

Now the French had to step up their patrols along the river and this put a strain on the working force of the island. The garrison was reinforced during the summer, however, when men from the regiments of Berry and Guyenne and 450 militia were sent to Bougainville. By the time of the final siege in August he had about 1450 men including labourers and servants.

Haviland moved his 3400 men down-river in the second week of August and landed just south of the island, 16 August 1760, on a point which sheltered them from French guns. They operated exclusively from the east shore of the river, the western channel not being navigable in August. Almost immediately his men began to cut a road through the woods (but still close to the river) along which the artillery from the boats was to move. For six days they built their batteries almost under the noses of the French. One English officer wrote: "they kept firing cannon at us, but hurt none of the men, though our camp is not half cannon shot from the enemy's fort, and nothing to hinder but only the trees, and them not thick." He found it very "remarkable that the enemy have not killed great numbers, when we are so much exposed."²¹ Bougainville did complain that he had not one gunner who could shoot accurately²² but he was referring to artillery-men. It is surprising that the French made little use of small-arms to fire on the English as they established their batteries: their militiamen must surely have been better marksmen with muskets and they did succeed at least in preventing the English from cutting the booms.²³ The French themselves lost several men from English musket fire.²⁴

Firing on the English batteries might have delayed defeat for a few days but it was inevitable. The French knew they would have to abandon the island soon and being able to fight only a war of retreat and delay must have been utterly demoralizing—and there were so many other factors affecting morale.

Bougainville was supposed to receive a detachment of Abenaqui Indians from Fort Chambly. Brandy had kept them agreeable but they deserted on leaving for the island when they heard that the Five Nations Indians were coming to assist the English. The commandant of Fort St-Jean then refused to risk sending a detachment of regulars from his garrison.²⁵

Bougainville's own men were troublesome too: as early as May there

were complaints about their poor tools and the low value of the paper money they were being paid. Garrison rations were cut two or three times during the summer, the deficiency often being replaced by brandy. There was also the ever-present friction between the French regulars and the Canadian marines and militia which was exacerbated by the strained relations between Canadian-born Vaudreuil and his European high command.²⁶

All this resulted in extensive desertion but another, external, reason was just as demoralizing. Murray was threatening to burn the houses of those families whose males were missing and presumably doing militia duty, and he was operating along the south shore of the St. Lawrence where many of the Isle aux Noix militia came from (i.e., the parishes of Contrecoeur, Varennes and Verchères). More militia was lost just as Haviland advanced on the island for once again men had to be sent home to harvest the crops. There was some conflict between Lévis and Vaudreuil on this matter as the former urged: "we must think of defending ourselves first before thinking of surviving the winter." Some were allowed to return home, however, and to help to compensate Vaudreuil sent, from the prisons of Montreal, a small party of captured deserters.²⁷

The island took a terrible pounding after the English batteries opened up on the afternoon of Saturday, 23 August. On Sunday night Rogers and his Rangers carried two light howitzers and a six-pounder through the woods within range of the remaining French gun-boats. They found it easy the next morning to capture or at least scatter the boats with their gunfire and then to cut the booms blocking the channel. Escape by water was now no longer possible and there was no part of the island the English guns could not reach.²⁸

On 27 August a French lieutenant arrived at Isle aux Noix bearing instructions from Vaudreuil in Montreal ordering Bougainville to evacuate when surrender seemed the only alternative. At the same time he bore an oral message from La Pause to hold the island "even to the last extremity." After considering the contradictory messages for some time Bougainville called a Council of War which decided to take the obvious course of following the orders of Vaudreuil—better to save the army for a last desperate stand at Montreal.

The time had already come to follow Vaudreuil's orders: the English were now in a position to land on the weakly defended rear, or north end, of the island. Le Chevalier Johnstone, a Jacobite refugee in the French army, claimed that there were only two days provisions left: the last oxen had been killed by cannon-fire and the fish of the Richelieu,

the staple of the garrison, were no longer procurable due to the siege. Accordingly, under cover of darkness and in remarkable silence the garrison escaped that same night across the river to the west shore which, because of its marshiness, the English had not yet occupied. Silence was so strict that the English were not aware of the retreat until the next morning and by that time the garrison was well on its way to Fort St-Jean.²⁹ After burning it they moved on to Montreal where New France was definitively surrendered on 8 September.

Bougainville left behind an officer of the militia and about 50 men, many of them wounded, who kept firing all night to cover the retreat. The next day they surrendered to Haviland, giving him a letter from Bougainville requesting care for the wounded and protection of the baggage left behind. However, despite keeping Rogers' Rangers from landing for fear they would plunder the island, Haviland was unable to keep his own men from pillaging.³⁰

Naturally La Pause criticized Bougainville for not holding out longer, especially since (he claimed) only ten men had been lost. Johnstone put the figure at 24 but he considered that number to be small. Amherst criticized Bougainville on other grounds when he subsequently visited the island: he "did not spike up his Cannon nor destroy one thing."³¹ He left behind 77 pieces of ordnance and 2586 rounds of shot besides a great deal of equipment,³² but surely Bougainville could not have taken the time or the risk of creating noise while trying to evacuate the island. Other English were contemptuous of the French for not putting up more intelligent or courageous resistance³³ but they seem to have done everything in their power to resist. It was simply that they had little power left.

The problems encountered by the French in their resistance at Isle aux Noix reflect those encountered on a larger scale in the colony as a whole. It is true while there was a serious shortage of men due to desertion and sickness and for planting and harvesting, the authorities could hardly feed the men they had. And at Isle aux Noix the problem of provisioning was more serious than in many other theatres of the war due to its distance from settled agricultural areas and to the normal transportation difficulties to be expected in a frontier area.

New France's most serious problem, however, was frustration. The Canadian marines and militia were unable to fight their traditional war of frontier raids and the regulars from France were unable to fight in traditional European style. For both a war of retreat and delay was unaccustomed and demoralizing and perhaps this was responsible for some of the antagonism between the two groups.

Although they must have been desperately demoralized the French worked surprisingly hard on their fortifications and put up strong resistance to invasion, yielding only when further resistance would have been ridiculous. It is surprising that there was not more friction and desertion among the troops. All these problems, however, can be traced to lack of support from France. Nothing could have been more frustrating and demoralizing than to see no prospect of help from home.

FOOTNOTES

1. See for example, Bougainville's Journal, 11 August 1757, *Rapport de L'Archiviste de la Province de Québec*, (1923-24), p. 302.
2. Abbe Casgrain: *Collection des Manuscrits du Marechal de Lévis*, Quebec, (1889-1895), Montcalm to Lévis, 4 January 1759, vol. VI, p. 143.
3. Pierre Pouchot: *Memoir Upon the Late War In North America*, (trans. & ed. by F.B. Hough), Roxbury Mass., (1866), vol. I, p. 134.
4. Public Archives of Canada, Bourlamaque Papers, Instructions for M. de Lusignan, 1759, VI, pp. 323-327.
5. *Ibid.*, Lévis to Bourlamaque, 25 March 1759, III, pp. 83-86; same to same, 29 May 1759, III, pp. 87-89; see also Jean Lunn: "Agriculture and War In New France, 1740-1760", *Canadian Historical Review*, June 1935, pp. 123-136.
6. *Ibid.*, Rigaud to Bourlamaque, 23 June 1759, IV, p. 27; same to same, 22 July 1759, IV, pp. 79-80; Le Sieur de C[ourville]: *Mémoires Sur Le Canada, 1749-1760*, Quebec, (1838), pp. 134-145.
7. Bourlamaque to Vaudreuil, 10 August 1759, in Casgrain: *Collection . . .*, V, pp. 24-27.
8. Bourlamaque to Lévis, 7 August 1759, in *ibid.*, V, p. 17; same to Vaudreuil 6 September 1759, *ibid.*, V, p. 42.
9. J.C. Webster (ed.): *The Journal of Jeffrey Amherst*, Toronto, (1931), October 1759, pp. 176-187; Bourlamaque to Lévis, 25 October 1759, in Casgrain, V, pp. 67-69.
10. *Loc. cit.*
11. Bourlamaque to Lévis, 5 November 1759, in Casgrain, V, p. 78.
12. Courville: *Memories . . .*, p. 174; Vaudreuil to Bourlamaque, 7 October 1759, Bourlamaque Papers, II, pp. 409-410; Bourlamaque to Lévis, 7 August, 5 & 29 October, 1 & 18 November, in Casgrain, V, pp. 13-15, 53, 73, 75 & 81.
13. Vaudreuil to Bourlamaque, 29 October and 1 November 1759, Bourlamaque Papers, II, pp. 473-474, 483-486; Amherst to Pitt, 28 April 1760, Colonial Office Papers, CO5 vol. 58, pp. 4-5.
14. P.A.C., de Lotbinière Papers, Vaudreuil to de Lotbinière, 10 March and 6 April 1760, vol. II, #114 & 115.
15. Bourlamaque to Vaudreuil, 10 August 1759, Casgrain, V, pp. 24-27.
16. P.A.C., Amherst Papers, report of 31 August 1760, W.O. 34, vol. 101, p. 379, (194), B2646.
17. Vaudreuil to de Lotbinière, 26 May and 8 June 1760, de Lotbinière Papers II, #118 & 120; Bougainville to Bourlamaque, 16 April 1760, Bourlamaque Papers, III, p. 241; P.A.C., Bougainville Papers, Bourlamaque to Bougainville, 2 June 1760, III, pp. 63-67.
18. Vaudreuil to de Lotbinière, 26 May 1760, de Lotbinière Papers, II, #118; reconnaissance to Isle aux Noix, 20 July 1760, La Pause Papers, P.A.C., vol. IV, pp. 66ff.
19. Bougainville to Bourlamaque, 6 July 1760, Bourlamaque Papers, III, pp. 319-320.
20. Amherst to Haviland, 12 June 1760, Amherst Papers, vol. 52 (parts 1 & 2); Vaudreuil to Bougainville, 3 August 1760, Bougainville Papers, III, p. 219.
21. "The Journal of Capt. Samuel Jenks," *Massachusetts Historical Society Proceedings*, V, (1889-90), pp. 353-390.
22. Bourgainville to Lévis, 21 August 1760, Casgrain, X, p. 144.
23. Jenks, *loc. cit.*
24. Le Chevalier Johnstone: *Memoirs*, Aberdeen, (1871), III, p. 68.
25. Bougainville to Lévis, 16 August 1760, Casgrain, X, p. 143; relation de M. le

Chevalier de Lévis en 1760, *ibid.*, XI, pp. 252-253; Roquemaure to Lévis, 27 August 1760, Casgrain, X, pp. 129-130.

26. Bougainville to Lévis, 25 May 1760, Casgrain, X, p. 140; la Pause to Lévis, 22 August 1760, Casgrain, X, p. 155; Lévis to Bougainville, 6 July 1760, Bougainville Papers, III, pp. 152-153; Lévis to Bourlamaque, 26 August 1760, Bourlamaque Papers, III, p. 405; Bernier to the Minister of War, 12 September 1760, P.A.C., M.G. 4, Series A1, vol. 30, p. 258.

27. Bourlamaque to Bougainville, 7 August 1760, Bougainville Papers, III, p. 240; Lévis to Bougainville, 12 August 1760, *ibid.*, III, pp. 266-268; same to same, 14 August 1760, *ibid.*, III, pp. 283-284; état de la force, 11 August 1760, *ibid.*, III, p. 264.

28. Report to Amherst, 31 August 1760, Amherst Papers, W.O. 34, vol. 101, p. 379, (194), B2646; Bougainville to Lévis, 25 August 1760, Casgrain, X, pp. 148-149; La Pause: *Journal, Rapport de L'Archiviste de la Province de Quebec*, (1932), pp. 121-122; F.B. Hough: *Journals of Major Robert Rogers*, Albany, (1868), pp. 156-171; Council of War, Isle aux Noix, 27 August 1760, Bougainville Papers, III, pp. 322-326.

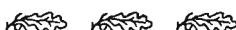
29. Johnstone: *Memoirs*, III, pp. 68-72.

30. Report to Amherst, 31 August 1760, Amherst Papers, W.O. 34, vol. 101, p. 379 (194), B2646.

31. *Loc. cit.*

32. Return of 28 August 1760, Colonial Office Papers, Co⁵, vol. 59, fo. 52-53.

33. Jenks, *loc. cit.*



"Edson & Chadwick have a new pair of scales in their market. The old ones were unreliable. Two-thirds of the time they were obliged, when weighing meat, to press down upon the pan with the little finger and thumb in order to give the customer full weight. With the new ones only the finger is necessary."

—from *The Landmark* (Hartford, Vt), July 18, 1885. Published in *1761-1963 Pictorial History Of The Town of Hartford, Vermont* by John W. St. Croix (1963, Hartford) p. 90.