

FORT TICONDEROGA

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Essay for your consideration

Montcalm's Grand Council at Ticonderoga, July 1757

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In 1757, the French planned a devastating blow against the British "encroachment" at the head of Lac St. Sacrement (Lake George). Word went far out into Indian country that the "Great Onontio" (King Louis XV of France) needed the assistance of his Indian brothers in driving the rapacious, land-grabbing British colonists from their territory (and their trade region). Warriors willing to support the Great Onontio were invited to come to Carillon / Ticonderoga, the place between the great waters, to meet with the French general, the Marquis de Montcalm.

Warriors trickled in all summer long: scouting, feasting, dancing, debating the terms of engagement. To create some distance between the French troops and their potential Indian allies, the Indians were encamped at the lower falls on La Chute. Finally, 250 years ago, on 27-28 July 1757, Montcalm convened a grand council with 1799 Indians representing 40 nations, ranging from the valleys of the St. Lawrence and Mohawk rivers as far west as the distant shores of Lake Superior. This was the largest and most diverse gathering of Indian peoples that had yet taken place in North America up to that time.

The grand council opened with a speech documented with a wampum belt of 6000 beads by Nipissing chief, Kisensik, who implored, "My brothers, we thank you for having come to help us defend our lands against the English who wish to usurp them. Our cause is good and the Master of Life favors it. . . . Accept this sacred bond with joy and let nothing ever break it."

Montcalm responded, "So long as your union lasts the English will never be able to resist you. . . . I bind you all together so that nothing can separate you before the defeat of the English and the destruction of Fort [William Henry]. The speech was reported by the various interpreters, and the wampum belt was thrown into the middle of the council circle. The belt was then picked up in turn by each Indian orator. "Behold a circle is drawn around you by the Great Onontio which none of us can leave," said an eastern chief. By tradition, the belt belonged to the nation that had brought the greatest number of warriors. Instead the Iroquois offered the belt to the western tribes, "to take it into their villages where it would be an eternal symbol of their friendship, of their common success." In the concluding speech, Montcalm described the plan of march by land and water, named the day of departure, and asked war chiefs to report the number of men who would accompany the French army on their attack. The various nations reported with small sticks showing the number of men they were committing to the French cause. Some men declined to participate, and departed.

You know the rest of the story. You have read the book, seen the movie. The French siege of Fort William Henry was successful. But the aftermath was a disaster for all concerned. Many of the Indians had understood that they would be given freedom to plunder, take coup, and seize prisoners. Montcalm had only 9

interpreters working with him during the grand council. None of his interpreters spoke any of the most western languages. So French military intent and constraint was communicated in a variety of sign languages and pidgin tongues from neighboring tribe to neighboring tribe. The resulting, misunderstood “massacre” has been a cornerstone of American colonial history for the past 250 years. It is a story that began 250 years ago with a meeting of “united nations” here in Ticonderoga at the lower falls of LaChute.

READ MORE:

Louis-Antoine de Bougainville, *Adventure in the Wilderness*, 1964.

Ian K. Steele, *Betrayals: Fort William Henry & the “Massacre,”* 1990.

Edward P. Hamilton, *Fort Ticonderoga: Key to the Continent*, 1964 (1995).