

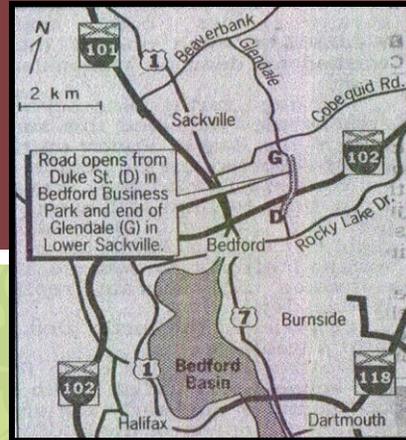
Gorham's War Against the Mi'kmaq

While few could argue against Gorham's success as a military leader, his savage methods have led many to criticize him as a cruel and evil man, even for the standards of the time. Gorham's most appalling actions were against the Mi'kmaq, who were traditionally allied with the French and opposed the British settlement of Nova Scotia as an invasion of their homeland. In 1744, William Shirley, the British governor of Massachusetts, offered a bounty for killing Mi'kmaq warriors, as well as a smaller one for civilians. Gorham and his men took full advantage of this, with their first victims being a family including three pregnant women and two children. This bounty was renewed by Nova Scotia Governor Cornwallis, who proclaimed that a 10 guinea bounty would be offered for Mi'kmaq scalps after a few raids by Mi'kmaq warriors on his new settlement of Halifax in the fall of 1749.

With the government bounty providing an incentive to increase their raids both in number and brutality, Gorham and his men began attacking every Mi'kmaq settlement they came across that could not fight back and executing any person they captured alive. It is very likely that Gorham's rangers killed indiscriminately, attacking whichever village stood in their way in order to collect more scalps for selling. In order to increase their profits, they lobbied the governor for an increase on the bounty, which he increased to 50 guineas in 1750. This practice continued until 1752, in which it was discontinued due not to a negative reaction to its brutality, but rather because of its perceived ineffectiveness and high cost.

A Controversial Legacy

While Gorham had achieved a high reputation amongst the British government as an effective and brutal colonial soldier, he never profited off of his many military campaigns. In fact, Gorham wasted his wealth supporting his rangers. Even with the large bounty placed on human scalps that the rangers were notorious in collecting, Gorham fought heavily with Governor Cornwallis for more funds for his men. In 1751, he gave up arguing with the stubborn governor, and went to London to argue his case more forcefully. Shortly after his arrival he caught smallpox and died, an event which Mi'kmaq historian Daniel N. Paul wryly describes as "the Great Spirit [intervening] on behalf of the Mi'kmaq."



A 1997 map showing the location of what would have been "Captain John Gorham Boulevard", now Glendale Avenue.

Gorham's actions during his eventful life continue to be debated today between those who stress his historical importance as the founder of Sackville and Bedford and those who view him as a brutal mercenary and killer. In 1997, an overpass was constructed connecting Glendale Drive in Sackville to Duke Street in Bedford, and given his historical importance in both communities, it was named Capt. John Gorham Boulevard. Opposition to this name was led by Daniel N. Paul, who described it as "honoring the monsters of the past". After several weeks of heated debate, Paul and his allies were able to overrule the decision, and Gorham's name was dropped from the road.

Captain John Gorham: Hero or Monster?



An illustration of the uniform that an officer in Gorham's Rangers would have worn in 1761. Unfortunately, there are no contemporary paintings of Gorham himself.

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Early Life



A 1747 image of the Siege of Louisbourg. Gorham fought with the New England militia during the siege.

The Formation of Gorham's Rangers



Fort Edward, Nova Scotia, seen in c.1900. Gorham and his men built the fort, which was a typical example of the small blockhouses that they and other rangers built around the province.

Born on December 12th, 1709 in Barnstable Massachusetts, John Gorham came from an old family of New England soldiers who had fought in the many wars against the French and indigenous peoples. In his youth, he worked primarily as a merchant, sailing aboard whaling ships and trading between New England and the new British colony in Nova Scotia. When he was only 19, he attempted to make money off of land speculation in the region, seeking land grants on Sable Island and in Maine. However, he was not extremely successful with these schemes, and in his early thirties he turned from trading to war.

In 1744, Gorham arrived in Nova Scotia with Captain Edward Tyng in an effort by New England militia to relieve the siege of Annapolis Royal by French forces. Gorham and his men arrived at Annapolis too late to make a difference in the siege, but he volunteered to take on the fight against the French at Louisbourg. Gorham arrived at Louisbourg in the spring of 1745. Unfortunately for Gorham and his men, they were not able to take part in the widespread looting which followed the fall of the fortress, an action that supported many military units during this period. However, Gorham returned to Nova Scotia in 1746, and spent the next three years fighting the French and Mi'kmaq forces.

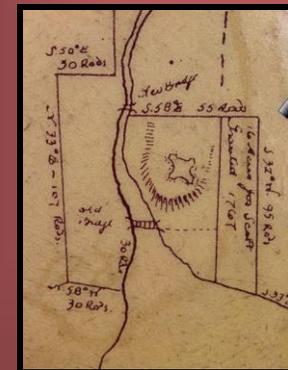
Gorham did not command a force typical to the European-style regiments of the time. He had recruited a small force of around 50 "rangers" – light infantry who excelled in small unit fighting and skirmishing, while avoiding contact with larger forces. Most of Gorham's rangers were of aboriginal descent, and were skilled at moving quickly and fighting in the dense forests of the region. As time passed, however, their ranks became filled with European immigrants.

Gorham's men excelled at unorthodox warfare, using savage and brutal techniques to achieve victory. Their primary skill was at using small schooners to travel the area, launching amphibious raids at French or Mi'kmaq communities and then retreating to their boats as fast as they came. They also worked to fortify strong points throughout the colony, establishing blockhouses (small fortified towers) to deter hostile raids. These small companies were extremely effective in the colonial warfare that traditional European armies were unaccustomed to.

The Establishment of Fort Sackville

Gorham was placed on the council of the new Nova Scotian governor, Edward Cornwallis, in 1749 due to his military experience. Cornwallis frequently ordered Gorham to build fortresses throughout the province and to raid settlements he viewed as hostile. Gorham continued to act as a close advisor to Cornwallis throughout his three-year term, though the two men often fought about the payment that Gorham thought his men deserved and which the cash-strapped governor regarded as excessive.

Only a few months after his arrival, Governor Cornwallis sent Gorham and his rangers to the head of the Bedford Basin to build a fort. There was only a large river that flowed into the harbour, and Mi'kmaq warriors used the area as a portage to get their canoes across the river. Fort Sackville, as it came to be known, was in a strategic position to protect the "backdoor" of the harbour from any land invasion, while the other defenses around Halifax protected the mouth of the harbour. While Fort Sackville never received a good reputation for a military outpost, it served its purpose defending the rear of Halifax. Gradually, the area around the fort was parceled out to settlers, and what would later become Bedford and Lower Sackville.



An early map of Fort Sackville, showing its defences at the head of the Bedford Basin.