

Fortress Louisburg

paraphrased from B.A. BALCOM
(The “Deathstar of North America”)



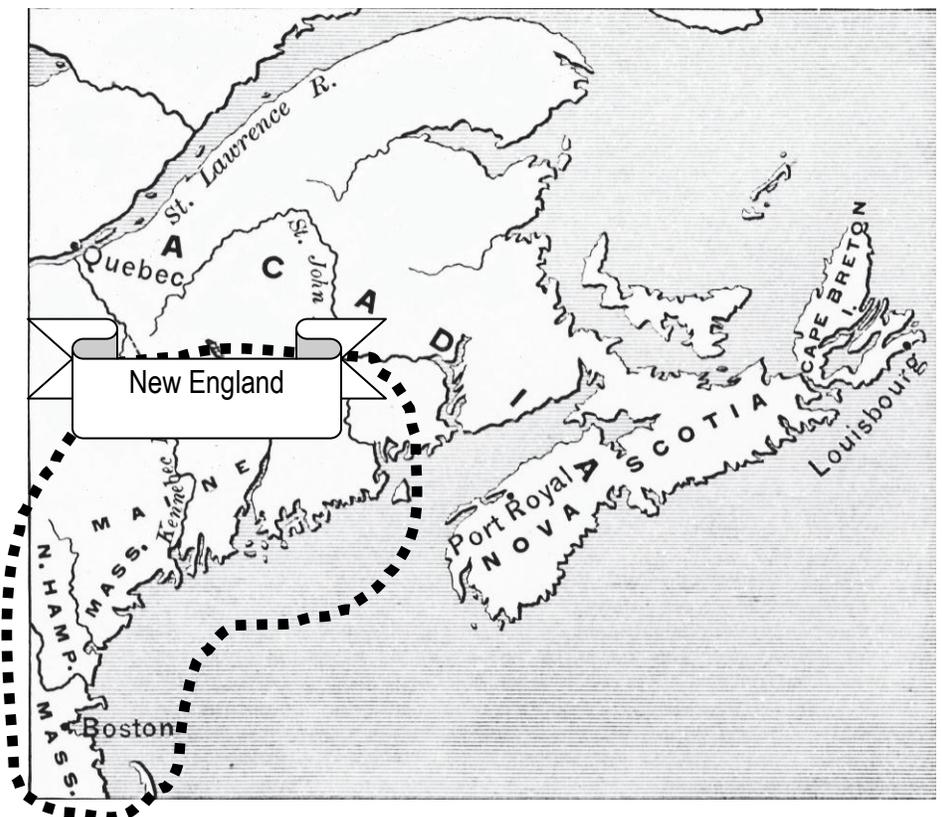
The early spring of 1745 saw New England preparing for war. Seaports bustled as a makeshift armada prepared to carry a newly raised, inexperienced colonial army of farmers, fishermen, merchants, and frontiersmen into battle. The unlikely objective was Louisbourg, a heavily fortified seaport and capital of the French colony of Ile Royale some six hundred miles northeast of Boston.

Longstanding colonial rivalries between Great Britain and France fueled the expedition. By the mid-eighteenth century, Britain had driven Portuguese and Spanish fishermen from the rich Newfoundland banks; New Holland and New Sweden had become the British colonies of New York and Delaware; and many Native North Americans had been decimated and displaced. Among European powers, only the French to the north and the Spanish to the south contested the British dominance.

An uneasy peace had existed between England and France since 1713, when the Treaty of Utrecht brought the War of Spanish Succession--called Queen Anne's War by the British colonists--to a close. That peace ended in March 1744, when France declared war on Great Britain. The War of Austrian Succession, or King George's War, soon engulfed the belligerents' North American colonies, the French at Louisbourg gaining an initial advantage when they received news of the state of war in early May, three weeks in advance of their English counterparts in Boston.

France saw the new conflict as a golden opportunity to recover Nova Scotia, ceded by treaty to Britain thirty-one years earlier. Attacks by Nova Scotia's aboriginal native occupants, the Mi'kmaq, had restricted British settlement there to fortified outposts at Annapolis Royal and Canso.

French privateers attacked New England's fisheries and commerce. The raiders began by striking at rival vessels encountered off the Nova Scotia coast and eventually extended their reach down to New England itself. French warships on their way to and from Louisbourg also attacked New England shipping.



New England viewed Louisbourg as a serious military threat. The loss of Nova Scotia and the consequent return of thousands of Acadians to French authority would, Governor Shirley feared, threaten English settlement in Maine and even New Hampshire. Louisbourg, moreover, still acted as a safe haven for privateers and naval vessels that harassed New England's shipping, and the French colony was an economic rival in the Atlantic fishery, particularly for the dried fish markets of southern Europe. Passions were further inflamed by religious animosity between Protestant New England and Roman Catholic New France.

Undeterred, Governor Shirley (of Massachusetts) and his supporters campaigned during the fall and winter of 1744-45 to convince the New England colonies, particularly Massachusetts, that an attack on Louisbourg was practical. In addition to noting low morale among the troops, these eyewitnesses reported on the poor state of Louisbourg's masonry fortifications and revealed that many of its cannon--particularly those facing the land--were not mounted, leaving that front less protected than the seaward side.

By combining the New Englander's political and economic concerns with promises of plentiful loot, claims of the fortress's weakness, and admonitions from clergy about the "Stronghold of Satan," advocates of the attack waged a close but ultimately successful campaign. On February 5, 1745, the Massachusetts House of Representatives narrowly approved a plan to move against Louisbourg in conjunction with the other British colonies.

On May 3, the British warship *Eltham* arrived with the welcome news that the sixty-gun *Superbe*--Warren's flagship--and several other naval vessels would join the attack. A week later, with the drift ice departed, the expedition sailed for Louisbourg.

Officials at Louisbourg, meanwhile, remained unaware of the scale of the coming attack. Prisoners returning from Boston in the fall of 1744 had warned of a planned assault but provided no details. The French considered the fractious British colonies incapable of unified action. A formal siege, they reasoned, would require support from Britain, thus allowing time for their reinforcements to sail from France.

On May 11, the New England fleet entered Gabarus Bay and on anchoring could see "the light house & ye steeples in the town." Within hours, the troops clambered into boats and pulled for shore at a spot about three miles from the fortress. About a hundred men under the command of Louisbourg Port Captain Pierre Morpain opposed the landing. After a brief skirmish in which the New Englanders suffered only a few wounded, the French retreated.

Having tasted their first victory, the New Englanders began a disorderly advance toward Louisbourg; one New Englander reported that "Everyone Did what was Right in his own Eyes. . . ." Soon French artillery fire convinced the attackers to halt their advance on the low hills overlooking the town.

Louisbourg's builders had paid particular attention to guarding the harbor entrance with interlocking fields of fire from heavy artillery in the Island Battery at the mouth of the harbor; at the Royal Battery on its north shore; and, within the walls, at the *Pièce de la Grave* Battery at the east end of the town's waterfront and the Circular Battery adjacent to the *Dauphin* Demi-bastion.

In addition to being in a considerable state of disrepair, the fortifications possessed several weak points.

Green Hill was the most prominent eminence outside the walls, though at 1,760 yards distance, it was at extreme range. By May 15, the third day after the landing, the New Englanders opened fire from the hill with mortars and some of their lighter guns, but they were simply too far away to have much effect. Two days later, however, they began

building a Coehorn battery at almost half the distance between Green Hill and the town, and within a week, they began yet another battery near the harbor and still closer to the town. By month's end they had placed an advanced battery only 250 yards from the low-lying Dauphin Demi-bastion. The rival forces were now close enough to exchange musket fire as well as taunts and insults.

Bombardment became the order of the day with "Cannons B[ombs] Cohorns &c Continually roaring on Boath Sides[.] Women and Children heard to Screech and Cry out . . . when our B[ombs] Came amongst them." Shortages of powder provided frequent interruptions in the New England barrage, and inexperienced gunners blew up no fewer than nine cannon and a large mortar.

As the siege dragged on and the New England bombardment continued, Louisbourg looked desperately to the sea for relief. Like all European-style fortresses of the period, Louisbourg was not intended to hold out indefinitely against a besieging force. But distance and supply lines were crucial factors for survival, and in 1745 both worked against Louisbourg. The French in Quebec did not learn of the New England assault until mid-June, and France learned even later of the town's dire straits.

On June 26, as the English prepared for a last, massive land and naval assault, the French initiated a capitulation. Under the surrender terms, the military garrison would be able to march out with the honours of war, and the inhabitants were to be repatriated to France with their movable property. This provision angered the New Englanders who, in return for their service, had been promised plunder and booty.

Paris was stunned that its strongest North American post could be taken by an untrained army of provincials. Boston, however, received the news with joyous celebrations. And London, for its part, was overjoyed at word of Louisbourg's capture. Honours, tributes and testimonials were heaped upon the victors. Warren was promoted to the rank of rear admiral. Pepperrell became a baronet and, along with Governor Shirley, was given the right to raise regiments, an honour that provided remuneration as well as status.





Questions:

How do you think
English-American
colonists viewed Fort
Louisburg?

. . . and

How do you think they
felt about their effort
to destroy it?