

GASPÉ OF YESTERDAY

13

COLONEL FRANCIS LE MAISTRE

1743 - 1805

SOLDIER.

MILITARY SECRETARY TO TWO
GOVERNORS OF CANADA.

LIEUTENANT-GOVERNOR, GASPÉ.

The life and career of Colonel Francis Le Maistre, the second Lieutenant-Governor of Gaspe is deserving of recognition and recall not only by virtue of his service in Gaspesia but equally for his long and distinguished role in the Government of Quebec. The following account, drawn with some difficulty from a number of sources, is an attempt to outline rather than to detail the life of an outstanding man.

Ken Annett

For Gaspesians and visitors to Gaspesia the charm and fascination of the sea-washed Gaspé Peninsula is bound up with the variety and beauty of the vistas that unfold from each successive headland. The human story of Gaspesia is equally varied and remarkable. From times now distant we catch intriguing glimpses of influential and interesting personalities that make us long to gain a fuller vista of their life. Such is the case of the second Lieutenant-Governor of Gaspe, Colonel Francis Le Maistre. The glimpses of his life that comprise this account provide some windows on his career but much remains unknown in providing a complete vista of his life and times.

By courtesy of a distinguished authority on the Le Maistre family, Dr. Frank Le Maistre, O.B.E., D.Litt., F.R.A., of Jersey, Channel Islands, the following record of the family origins of Francis Le Maistre is known:

(Translation from French)

" François Le Maistre, later known as "Francis" Le Maistre, son of Monsieur Francois Guilleaume Le Maistre, later Ecuier, and King's Advocate General of Jersey, and of Demoiselle Elizabeth Theodore,

his wife, was born in the parish of St. Héliier, in Jersey, and was baptized in St. Héliier Parish Church on December 2, 1743. His god-parents were Philippe Le Geyt, Ecuier, Lieutenant Bailiff of Jersey and the latter's daughter, Philippine".

On the subject of family records it is pertinent to note that William, brother of Francis Le Maistre, was baptized in the same parish church on November 12, 1750. His god-parents were the Honourable William Dean, Lieutenant Governor of Jersey, Philip Lemprière, Esquire, His Majesty's Receiver for Jersey and Mrs Anne Lemprière, wife of Thomas Pipon, Esquire. Like his older brother, Francis, William Le Maistre's career would bring him across the seas to Quebec and Gaspesia. William died at Paspebiac in 1826 and was buried in the churchyard of St. Peter's Anglican Church in Paspebiac.

That young Francis Le Maistre had a sound and superior education is clearly evident from the nature and responsibility of the posts he held with distinction in later life. He chose a military career and in 1760, at the age of seventeen, purchased a Lieutenantancy in the 98th Regiment for 300 guineas. Soon he was in the thick of military action as the following extract from one of his Memorials, researched by David and Doris McDougall, bears witness:

"...That he (Francis Le Maistre) was at the Sieges of Belisle and Martinico, and at the latter place commanded a small detachment upon the windward Coast where he was repeatedly attacked by Privateers from Porto Rico, which he as frequently repulsed, took one of them, having killed, wounded and made prisoner six times his number, and for which different actions he received the general approbation of the General, Governor of the Island, who recommended him for preferment..."

Gaspeian~~s~~ may be interested to note that a contemporary and fellow Army Officer of Francis Le Maistre, Lieutenant George Law~~e~~, Senior, of the 76th Regiment, also saw action at Belisle, off the coast of France and at Martinico in the Caribbean. Both of these young officers were reduced with their respective regiments in 1763. Their military careers would diverge for a decade but would converge anew in the defence of Quebec from American invasion in 1775 and in a common service in Gaspesia.

On the reduction of his regiment, the 98th., Francis Le Maistre purchased a commission in the 7th Regiment of Foot, the Royal Fuzileers, where he would serve as Adjutant for some nine years. As the purchase of his commission cost 300 guineas and the post of Adjutant £ 400 it would appear that he had recourse to financial support that many other young Army Officers, reduced with their Regiments in 1763, did not enjoy.

It was as an officer of the Royal Fuzileers that Francis Le Maistre came to America where he was on active service from the outbreak of the American Revolution and the subsequent American invasion of Quebec. Military records show that he served as a Captain in the 8th Regiment of Foot (King's) and that he was Major of Brigade under General Prescott. An echo of that service rings in the following Order of the Day issued over his signature in September, 1775:

" The General offers his thanks to the Indian Chiefs and warriors who acted so bravely in the battle of the 6th near St. Jean and wishes that his thanks be transmitted to them and their nation by Colonel Johnson, their Superintendant.

(signed) Frans. Le Maistre
Brigade Major "

The autumn of 1775 saw the fall of Montreal to the American invaders and the narrow escape of General Sir Guy Carleton downriver from Montreal by small boat to the old fortress city of Quebec that would soon come under siege by the combined American forces of Generals Montgomery and Arnold. The fate of British Canada hung in the balance - it was a time to try the mettle and the souls of Quebec's small defence force. A Memorial of Francis Le Maistre states laconically, but eloquently, that he served near General Carleton's person during the siege. Two fellow officers who would subsequently play a part in Gaspesia also served Carleton well in those difficult days - Major Nicholas Cox would become the first Lieutenant Governor of Gaspé and Captain George Lawe, Senior, would superintend the movement of the dispossessed Loyalists to new homesites at New Carlisle on Bay Chaleur. It is proposed to trace the careers of these officers in subsequent issues of GASPE OF YESTERDAY.

After the lifting of the siege of Quebec and the retreat of the Americans, General Sir Guy Carleton sent his trusty Aide de Camp, Francis Le Maistre to England in June, 1776, with official reports and dispatches for the King and the British Government. Among the Ministers of the Crown that Le Maistre met with in London was Lord George Germain who entrusted to him important dispatches for Carleton on the conduct of the war in America. Le Maistre sailed from Falmouth in the packet, "SWALLOW", on September 1st. The ship succeeded in getting into the Gulf of St. Lawrence three times but severe autumn storms with adverse winds made it impossible to reach Quebec. When Le Maistre was able, finally, to deliver Lord Germain's dispatches to General Carleton, they ordered priority to be given to the defence of the province of Quebec and the dispatch of Lieutenant General Burgoyne with all troops not required for defence to join General Howe for active service under his command.

When Sir Guy Carleton was recalled to England and succeeded as Governor of Canada by Sir Frederick Haldimand, Francis Le Maistre continued to serve as Military Secretary and personal Aide-de-Camp to Haldimand. The Lieutenant

Governor of that time was another distinguished Army Officer, Sir Hector Theophilus Cramahé, in whose home Francis Le Maistre was a welcome and frequent guest. Thus it came to pass that Margaret Cramahé, a daughter (or step-daughter) of the Cramahé family met Francis Le Maistre and became his wife c.1784. The eldest of their four known children, a daughter Eliza, was born in Quebec in 1785. Another daughter, Margaret, was born c.1787 and in 1788 a son was born and named Francois Guilleaume after his paternal grandfather of Jersey. A second son, Charles, born in 1797 died in infancy.

It may be of particular interest to Gaspésians to reflect on some of the personalities of Gaspé of Yesterday who would have been well known to Francis Le Maistre by virtue of his Army service and his key post as Haldimand's Military Secretary and Aide-de-Camp. He would undoubtedly have known Felix O'Hara, pioneer settler at Gaspe and longtime acquaintance of Haldimand. The Diary of Charles Robin, a fellow Jerseyman and founder of the Gaspesian fishing firm of Charles Robin & Co., records that Robin was a guest at the Quebec home of Le Maistre on St.Famille Street. He would certainly have known his fellow officer, Captain George Lawe, Senior, who had so distinguished himself in the defence of Quebec as to be recommended by General Sir Guy Carleton for Royal approbation. Known to him also would have been the surveyor, John Collins, who was to rise to posts of influence in the government of Quebec.

In 1786 Sir Guy Carleton, now Lord Dorchester, returned to Quebec for a second term as Governor of Canada. Francis Le Maistre continued to serve as Lord Dorchester's personal Aide and Secretary. In addition he was appointed Adjutant General of Militia with the rank of Colonel and the command of a Quebec Militia Battalion.

On the death of Nicholas Cox, the first Lieutenant Governor of Gaspé and Superintendant of the Labrador Fishery, in January, 1794, Lord Dorchester appointed Colonel Francis Le Maistre as his successor. During the decade that

followed, until his death in 1805, Francis Le Maistre was the representative of the Crown and the Government of British Canada in and for Gaspesia, travelling to the communities along the coasts of Gaspe from his summer residence at Percé and returning to Quebec in the winter to his home at St.Famille Street. An interesting glimpse of that era is provided by the following item of the Quebec "GAZETTE" of September 3, 1795, researched by David and Doris McDougall:

"SHIP ARRIVALS: AUGUST 26. SCHOONER "MARY", CHARLEMAIN ARBOUR, MASTER, CHALEUR BAY. 10 DAYS PASSAGE, WITH OIL AND SALMON, PASSENGERS, FRANCIS LE MAISTRE, LT.GOV.OF GASPE, ETC., MR. WILLIAM LE MAISTRE"

Typical of the kind of problems that Francis Le Maistre faced as Lieut.-Gov. of Gaspe is that presented in the following extract:

PETITION

(Translation from French)

To the Honourable Francois Le Maistre, Esquire, Lieutenant Governor of the Inferior District of Gaspé.

The undersigned, Joseph Arseneau, captain of militia, Jean Arseneau, Joseph Bourg, Joseph Gauthier, Jean Bernard, Jean-Baptiste Lavache, Isaac Bernard and Grégoire Arseneau, inhabitants of Bonaventure, have the honour to represent that from the time of your arrival in this district they took the liberty of expressing, in a plea to Your Honour, their situation concerning uncertainty as to ownership of their lands and that despite government assurance in a certificate obtained from the Honourable Land Board appointed by his Excellency for that purpose.

After occupation for thirty years of lands hard to cultivate, that they cleared by the sweat of their brows and that without their toil would still be in their natural state covered by thick forest, their possession

remains in dispute. Some wish to deprive them of their holdings that by divine and human right should be the heritage of their children and to reduce them in their latter years to the cruel and mortifying situation of not being able to leave an inheritance to their surviving families after their death.

Your petitioners, Your Honour, did not establish themselves imprudently on Crown Lands in 1762. The year of their arrival they took steps to go to Quebec to request the permission of His Excellency, General Murray, to settle here and such permission was granted by his Excellency in his letter of 1763.

In 1766 the Honourable John Collins, Esquire, Deputy Surveyor General of the Province, passed by here and surveyed the front of our farms but did not tell your petitioners why or on whose behalf he acted.

From the time of their arrival in the Bay, Mr. William Van Felson opposed all settlement on the stated grounds that he was Seigneur of all Bonaventure. Eventually it was found that he only had five hundred arpents.

In 1785 George Lawe, Esquire, advised your petitioners that the Honourable Hugh Finlay, Esquire, reclaimed their farm lands. They thought to buy peace by paying to the said Mr. Lawe, as agent of Mr. Finlay, as annual rental, the amount of six "piastres".

Mr. Shoolbred, in 1788, produced other documents and by persuasive means obliged your petitioners to pay him annual rent of sixteen "piastres"

Mr. Vonden Velden, before leaving the Bay, advised them of another letter of Mr. Finlay stating that he held their lands under the Great Seal of the Province and told them subsequently that their children should not look forward to inheriting the lands on the death of their parents.

Such are, Your Honour, the vexations that have harrassed your petitioners - vexations that have banished all satisfaction from their homes and checked their labour. Your petitioners, after this account, implore the pity of Your Honour and pray him to accord them his protection in granting them just and

peaceful possession of their property - which assurance will assuredly be reflected in increased benefits of their labour.

And they will ever pray

(Signatures of petitioners)

Bonaventure, June 20, 1795. Charles Cavanaugh, Witness.

After the above and other like petitions had been presented to him and following reflection on the state of land claims in Gaspesia, Francis Le Maistre wrote as follows to Lord Dorchester on his return to Quebec. His letter not only provides us with an interesting glimpse into the mind of Le Maistre but indicates, by its easy and familiar style, the close and intimate relationship he enjoyed with the Governor, Lord Dorchester, that he had served so long and well:

Quebec, 9th October, 1795

My Lord,

Soon after my arrival at Hamilton in Chaleurs Bay, the inhabitants mentioned in the enclosed list represented to me they were under the greatest apprehensions of being obliged to quit the lands they had for many years occupied and part thereof cleared, at a great labour and expense, the same being claimed by Messrs Finlay, Holland and Collins, founding pretensions upon grants obtained from government. These tracts it is true are of no Great extent but they certainly are the very best in the whole parish and it were to be wished that they could be engaged to relinquish them to the Crown by which means with your Lordship's approbation the settlers in question might be put in full and undisturbed possession which act of benevolence would not only quiet their minds and make them Happy but add vigour to their industry which has greatly been checked by the uncertainty who should ultimately reap the fruits of it.

them objectionable, being deemed good and loyal subjects.

While I am on the subject of land, permit me, my Lord, to occupy a moment more of your time. During my visitation I became acquainted with a prevailing custom of selling grants which I cannot but think very prejudicial to the settlements and must greatly retard their establishment. A person gets a portion of land from Government, cuts down a few trees, becomes indolent, and finding himself adverse to further improvement grows uneasy and being of a roving disposition, sells it for a gallon of rum, for a few bushels of potatoes, and for some trifling compensation. These sales being thought great bargains are purchased with avidity and often by those who are unable to clear sufficiently what they themselves already possess; so that these lands must evidently remain in the same uncultivated state on which they were first granted. Had the Crown, on contrary, the disposal of them again, other applicants might be found of a more labourious and sedantary turn whose residence and industry would prove advantageous to population and to agriculture.

I have the honour to be with the greatest respect, Your Lordship's most obedient and humble servant,

(signed) Frank Le Maistre

The census of the city of Quebec for years from 1792 to 1805 confirms the continuing residence of the Francis Le Maistre family at No. 12 St. Famille Street. From that home in November, 1804 Eliza Le Maistre and her sister, Margaret left to marry Henry Mordaunt GageVigoureux and Captain John Albert Clement, respectively. As the signature of Mrs Margaret Le Maistre only appears in the parish register as witness, it is possible that Francis Le Maistre was unable to be present at the ceremony because of the illness that would be the cause of his death three months later, in February, 1805.

The death and funeral of Francis Le Maistre was reported by the Quebec "MERCURY of February 16th., 1805, as follows:

"Died at his home in St. Famille Street on Wednesday morning the 13th instant, Francis Le Maistre, Esquire, Lieutenant Governor of Gaspe, one of the Adjutants General of the Militia of this Province and Colonel of one of the Battalions of the Militia of this City.

His remains were attended yesterday to the place of interment by the 41st Regiment and flank companies of the British Militia, under arms, with their arms reversed; the Artillery Company of the British Militia, with two field pieces; the officers of the Army not on duty; those of the British and Canadian Militia in their uniforms; a numerous assemblage of the most respectable citizens and gentlemen of the Legislature, and a great concourse of persons of every description. During the procession the Band of the 49th Regiment, as usual, played the Dead March in Saul. The body was followed by the led horse of the deceased, preceding the mourners. At the place of interment the Company of Militia Artillery fired three rounds with each field piece; and the 41st Regiment with the two flank companies of the British Militia fired three volleys together."

Francis Le Maistre's steadfast and distinguished military and public service was in the finest tradition of those who laid the foundations of our land. That he did not abuse high office and influential friendships for personal gain is evident from the petition of his widow for financial support following his death. His whole career exemplified the simple but lofty creed of devoted service to King and Country.

This attempt to convey glimpses of the life of Francis Le Maistre has purposely refrained from reference to the intriguing, and possibly legendary, accounts of the circumstances of his marriage with Margaret (Stuart) Cramahe, and of the origins of the oil painting of the Immaculate Conception which hangs behind the High Altar of the Roman Catholic Basilica in Quebec. These accounts are reflected in the writings of M. Dionne and in the book "JERRI JADIS" by George F. Le Feuvre of St.Ouen, Jersey. Nor has an attempt been made to recount the subsequent career of the Widow Margaret Le Maistre. That is yet another story for another time.