

# Chief Joseph Orono

*His remarkable life spanned three centuries*

*by Charles Francis*

To reach the age of 101 years is a remarkable feat for any individual. To live for over 100 years and take part in a military expedition when one is well into their eighties is even more remarkable. There is at least one Maine man who did so, however. That man is Joseph Orono, the man for whom the town of Orono is named.

Joseph Orono's longevity is remarkable, not only because he lived for over 100 years, but because his life spanned three centuries. In fact, the late Professor Ronald Banks, the dean of Maine historians, stated that Orono was the only figure in Maine history he ever encountered who lived in three different centuries.

Although the records are not in complete agreement, the most generally accepted birth date for Orono is 1688. The year of his death, 1801, is quite specific. This means that Orono was alive when much of Maine was under the nominal control of the French, lived through the ouster of the French from North America by the British, and finally saw the rise of the new American nation.

Contemporary historians generally refer



*Orono to Bradley ferry landing*

to Orono as Chief Joseph Orono. Older records refer to him as a Sachem or Sagamore. At the time of the American Revolution he was identified as the Grand Chief of the Penobscots.

Orono's life history is a tapestry of recorded fact and oral tradition. His name, with a variety of spellings, occurs in the records of the Massachusetts General Court in regard to various land claims and agreements between the Penobscots and the Court in eastern Maine. It also occurs in the records of Colonel John Allan, the liaison

between the Indians of eastern Maine and Continental Congress during the Revolution.

One account says that Joseph Orono was a direct descendent of Baron Castine, the French nobleman who married the daughter of the Penobscot chief Madockawando. Her name sometimes appears as Molly Mathilde. If there is truth to the story, it would probably mean that Orono was Castine's grandson. Regardless, he was clearly a real person and a figure of significant stature in eastern Maine

for much of his life.

Around 1900, poet and Orono native, Frances Laughton Mace, penned a tribute to Joseph Orono. In this excerpt, it says:

Noblest among the braves was Orono  
A kingly native, just, and wise, and true.  
In his dark brethren faithful, yet at heart  
The white man's friend...

The poetic merits and late nineteenth perspectives of these few lines of doggerel

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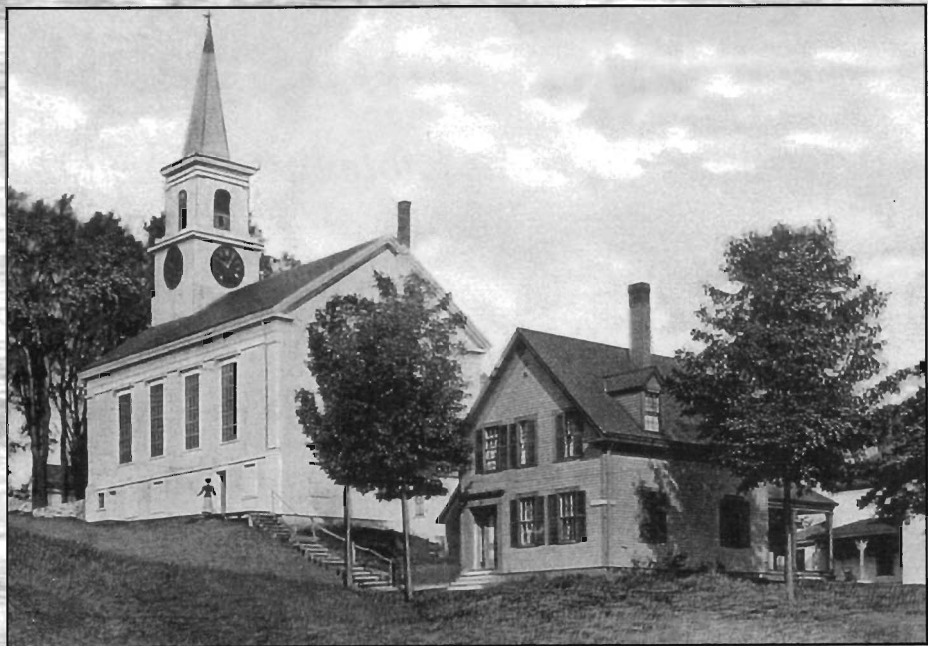
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aside, Mace makes two points worth noting. Orono proved himself a loyal American during the Revolution. When he was in his late eighties he was a member of at least two expeditions against the British, one of which was an attack on their stronghold at Castine. He is listed on the rosters of both as a Lieutenant Gilman and a Captain Lane. However, just because he supported the Patriot cause in the Revolution did not mean that Orono wholeheartedly accepted all American actions.

In September of 1778 Colonel John Allan traveled to Old Town to confer with Orono. According to the records of that meeting, Orono made a formal protest about squatters on Penobscot lands. In particular, he said “We have warned them off, But they say they Despise us, and treat us with language only fit for Dogs. This Treatment we did not expect from Americans...” Significantly, Orono had made the same complaint directly to Governor Thomas Hutchinson in April of 1773. Massachusetts records show Orono (the name is spelled Orenay) complaining of the “English [settling] high up the River Penobscot.”

In 1786, references to Orono again appear in the record as part of a formal meeting between the Penobscots and a Massachusetts land commission. If one accepts 1688 as the year of his birth, Orono would have been ninety-eight at the time.

In August of 1786 approximately sixty-five Penobscots appeared before a Massachusetts commission headed by Benjamin Lincoln. The subject of the meeting concerned Massachusetts granting



*Universalist church, Orono*



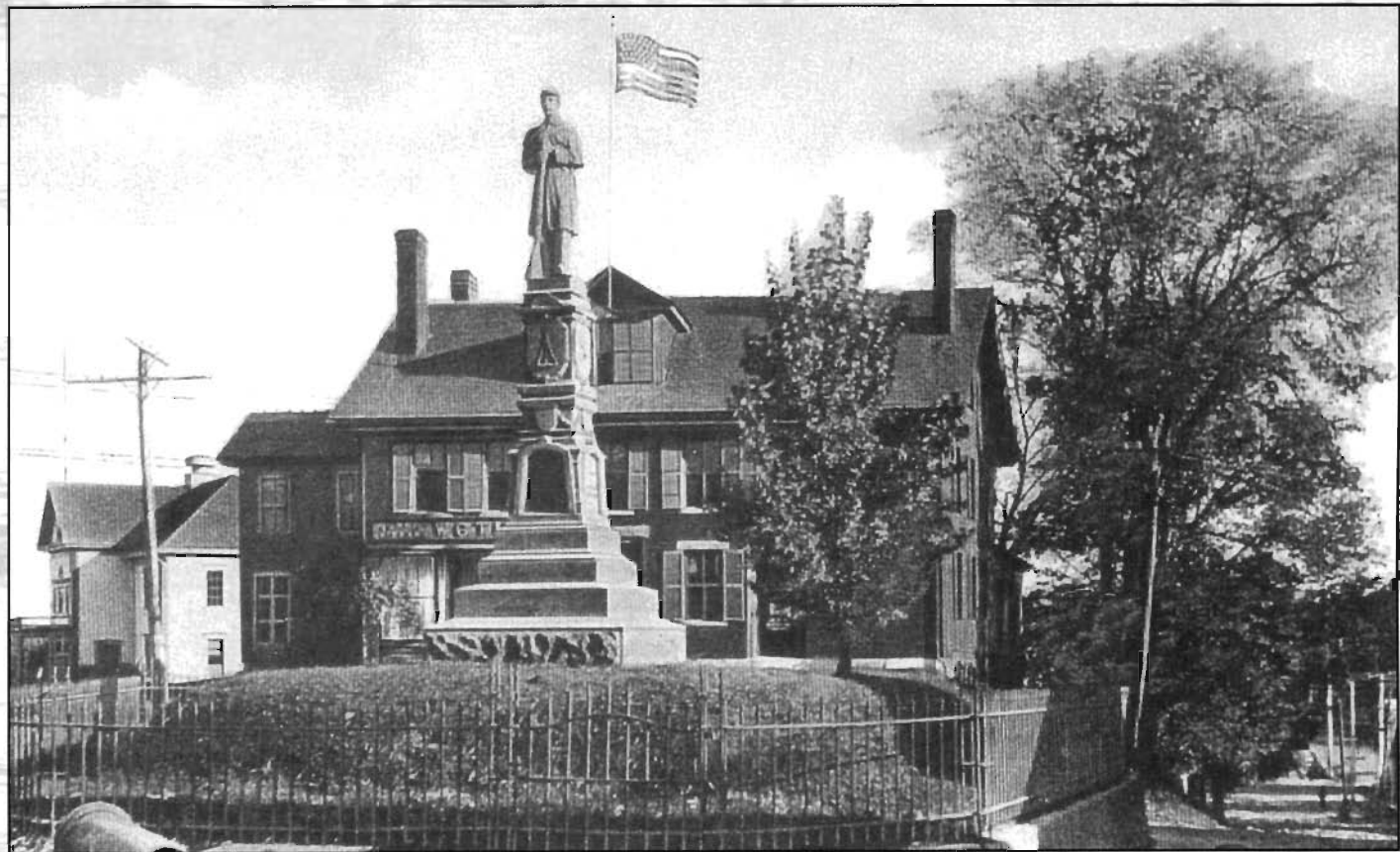
*Catholic church, Orono*

the islands above Indian Island to the Penobscots and the relinquishing of Penobscot claims on the west side of the river. Four "Sachems" or heads are identified as representing the Penobscots. They were "Orino [sic], Ossang, called Squire Ossang, Colonel John Neptune, and Victor Barvelt." At the meeting, the four representatives expressed a total aversion to surrendering their claims on the west bank of the Penobscot.

In her little poem on Joseph Orono, Frances Mace says, "Our larger work and destiny he knew." Mace was, of course, referring to the Revolution. However, one can just as easily apply the line to the appropriation of Penobscot lands. Her concluding lines on Joseph Orono are perhaps the most noteworthy in the entire poem.

Worthy of honor – well do we bestow  
On this, his dwelling place,  
the name of Orono.





*Grammar school at Monument Square, Orono*