

Charting the Imperial Will

Colonial Administration & the General Survey of British North America 1764-1775

by

Alexander James Cook Johnson

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Signature: *Alexander James Cook Johnson*

ABSTRACT

CHARTING THE IMPERIAL WILL

Colonial Administration & the General Survey of British North America 1764-1775

This dissertation explores how colonial administrators on each side of the Atlantic used the British Survey of North America to serve their governments' as well as their personal objectives. Specifically, it connects the execution and oversight of the General Survey in the northern and southern theatres, along with the intelligence it provided, with the actions of key decision-makers and influencers, including the Presidents of the Board of Trade (latterly, the Secretaries of the American Department) and key provincial governors.

Having abandoned their posture of 'Salutary Neglect' towards colonial affairs in favour of one that proactively and more centrally sought ways to develop and exploit their North American assets following the Seven Years' War, the British needed better geographic information to guide their decision making. Thus, the General Survey of British North America, under the umbrella of the Board of Trade, was conceived. Officially sponsored from 1764-1775, the programme aimed to survey and analyse the attributes and economic potential of Britain's newly acquired regions in North America, leading to an accurate general map of their North American empire when joined to other regional mapping programmes.

The onset of the American Revolution brought an inevitable end to the General Survey before a connected map could be completed. Under the excellent leadership of Samuel Holland, the surveyor general of the Northern District, however, the British administration received surveys and reports that were of great relevance to high-level administration. In the Southern District, Holland's counterpart, the mercurial William Gerard De Brahm, while producing reports of high quality, was less able to juggle the often conflicting priorities of provincial and London-based stakeholders. Consequently, results were less successful. De Brahm was recalled in 1771, leaving others to complete the work.

Table of Contents

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS	6
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	14
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION	16
<i>MAPS, KNOWLEDGE & POWER IN THE AGE OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT</i>	20
<i>SCIENTIFIC SURVEYING AS PRACTICED BY THE GENERAL SURVEY OF BRITISH NORTH AMERICA</i>	24
<i>LITERATURE REVIEW</i>	28
CHAPTER II: THE ANTECEDENTS AND GENESIS OF THE GENERAL SURVEY	39
A. INTRODUCTION	39
B. THE CIVILIAN AND MILITARY ANTECEDENTS OF THE GENERAL SURVEY	40
<i>Developments in English Colonial Cartography During the Late Seventeenth Century</i>	41
<i>Governance of Colonial Affairs in British North America</i>	43
<i>Signs of Progress</i>	45
<i>Lord Halifax Becomes President of the Board of Trade</i>	47
<i>Introducing William Gerard De Brahm</i>	50
<i>The Development of Military Cartography in British North America</i>	53
<i>Introducing Samuel Holland</i>	56
C. THE GENESIS OF THE GENERAL SURVEY	61
<i>The Role & Status of the Board of Trade, 1761-1764</i>	61
<i>The Grenville Ministry & the New Colonial Policy</i>	63
<i>The Important New Policy Questions of the Day</i>	64
<i>The Proclamation of 7 October 1763</i>	70
<i>Samuel Holland's Timely Proposal for the General Survey</i>	73
<i>The Plan for the Survey is Defined</i>	77
<i>Linking Surveys, Envisioned as Additions to Complete the General Survey</i>	83
D. THE PRE-EXISTING INFORMATION INFLUENCING THE GENERAL SURVEY	86
<i>Pre-Existing Maps of the Northern District</i>	87
<i>The Maps of L'Acadie versus Nova Scotia</i>	87
<i>Depiction of the Island of St. John up to 1764</i>	91
<i>Depiction of Cape Breton Island up to 1764</i>	94
<i>Pre-existing Maps for the Southern District</i>	97
<i>Spanish Florida, 1565-1763</i>	97
<i>Spanish Conceptions of Florida during their First Colonial Period</i>	98
<i>British Sources of Geographical Information of Florida up to 1763</i>	103
<i>Maps & Geographical Information acquired by the British in 1764</i>	111
CHAPTER III: MAPPING 'INFANT COLONIES' 1764-1767	117
A. INTRODUCTION	117
B: THE NORTHERN DISTRICT	119
<i>The Canseaux with Holland Arrives to Begin The Survey</i>	120
<i>Holland Assembles his Team</i>	121
<i>Holland Manages the Inherent Operational Issues</i>	124
<i>The Survey in Nova Scotia Begins</i>	127
<i>Holland's General Map & Account of the Island of St. John</i>	133
<i>Holland's Account of the Natural Attributes of the Island of St. John's</i>	140
<i>Holland's Survey Received</i>	142
<i>The Decision About St. John</i>	144
<i>The Survey of Cape Breton Island</i>	147

Whitehall's 'Temporary' Settlement Freeze in Cape Breton.....	148
Surveying Operations in Cape Breton Island, 1765 & 1766	150
Holland's First Interim Report and General Map of Cape Breton, 1766	155
The Cape Breton Survey Continues.....	160
Holland Quietly Supports Nova Scotian Activism.....	161
Holland's Second General Map of Cape Breton Island.....	162
Holland's Astronomical Observations	168
Whitehall Continues the Settlement Freeze	169
<i>The Survey Begins in Québec.....</i>	<i>170</i>
Holland's Own 'Murray Map'	173
Mapping the Gaspésie	174
Charting Lower St. Lawrence	179
<i>Surveying Newfoundland's Dependencies</i>	<i>180</i>
The Magdalen Islands	182
Anticosti Island.....	184
<i>Conclusions.....</i>	<i>187</i>
C. THE SOUTHERN DISTRICT	188
<i>Introduction.....</i>	<i>189</i>
<i>Whitehall's High Hopes.....</i>	<i>190</i>
<i>James Grant Becomes East Florida's First Governor</i>	<i>193</i>
<i>De Brahm Sets Out</i>	<i>196</i>
<i>De Brahm's Reconnaissance Mapping of the Atlantic Coast, 1765-1766</i>	<i>199</i>
De Brahm's First Mission.....	203
De Brahm's Survey of Mosquito Inlet	206
The Second Coastal Reconnaissance Mission, Spring of 1765	214
Mapping the St. John's River & the Search for a Trans-Peninsular Navigable Passage.....	216
<i>Gathering Storm.....</i>	<i>222</i>
De Brahm Excluded.....	225
CHAPTER IV: 'CLOSING THE NET': HILLSBOROUGH 1768-1772.....	234
A. INTRODUCTION.....	234
B. THE NORTHERN DISTRICT.....	241
<i>Cape Breton Island</i>	<i>245</i>
<i>Labrador.....</i>	<i>249</i>
<i>Québec</i>	<i>250</i>
<i>New England.....</i>	<i>254</i>
<i>New Hampshire.....</i>	<i>258</i>
<i>The Coastal Surveys from Cape Ann to the Kennebec River.....</i>	<i>268</i>
<i>The Maine Timberlands.....</i>	<i>270</i>
<i>Surveying Coastal Maine.....</i>	<i>283</i>
C. THE SOUTHERN DISTRICT	285
<i>The Trials of William Gerard De Brahm.....</i>	<i>288</i>
<i>Romans and Durnford Take Over De Brahm's Duties on the General Survey</i>	<i>297</i>
<i>East Florida, 1768-1771: Growing Pains</i>	<i>298</i>
The Search for a Connection to the Gulf of Mexico	303
Tampa Bay: "A Good Harbour for all Occasions"	305
Enter Bernard Romans.....	307
The General Survey Charts the Gulf Coast	307
The Northernmost Parts of East Florida's Atlantic Coast	311
Towards Miami	314
The Florida Keys & the Gulf Stream	316
Bernard Romans Continues the Gulf Survey.....	321
<i>West Florida</i>	<i>324</i>
D. THE DOWNFALL OF THE EARL OF HILLSBOROUGH	333

CHAPTER V: ‘A NEW SPRING TO OUR FUTURE ENDEAVOURS’:DARTMOUTH 1772-1775.	336
A. INTRODUCTION	336
<i>Lord Dartmouth Becomes Secretary of State for the Colonies</i>	337
<i>Power and Influence within the American Department & the Board of Trade</i>	339
<i>The Role of the General Survey in Fulfilling Policy Objectives During Dartmouth’s Tenure</i>	341
<i>The Royal Factor: George III’s Interest in the General Survey</i>	345
B. THE NORTHERN DISTRICT	347
<i>Advances in The Scientific Foundations of the Northern Survey During Dartmouth’s Tenure</i>	348
<i>Organization and Funding of the Northern Survey During Dartmouth’s Tenure</i>	350
<i>Holland’s Struggle to Retain His Work Force and Key Surveyors</i>	351
<i>The Admiralty & the Elusive General Map of the Northern District</i>	357
<i>The Recalcitrant J.F.W. Des Barres</i>	359
<i>Maine & the Timberlands</i>	361
Maps Completed on Maine& the Timberlands	371
<i>The Northern Survey in New Hampshire</i>	374
The Mystery of the General Map of New Hampshire	380
<i>The Northern Survey in Metropolitan Massachusetts</i>	383
<i>The Northern Survey in Rhode Island</i>	387
<i>The Operational End of the Northern General Survey</i>	390
C. THE SOUTHERN DISTRICT	392
<i>De Brahm in London: A Time of Redemption</i>	396
De Brahm, The Author	400
De Brahm, The Scientist	402
Dartmouth and De Brahm in Land Speculation	407
De Brahm: The Journey Back	409
<i>Events in East Florida</i>	412
An “Accurate General Map” by Joseph Purcell	413
<i>West Florida: Durnford, Romans & the Quest for a General Map</i>	416
The Use of Maps in West Florida	417
Bernard Romans Completes the First General Map of West Florida	422
D. THE MILITARIZATION OF CIVILIAN CARTOGRAPHY	422
<i>The Advent of Open Warfare</i>	422
<i>Military Mapping in the Pre-War Period</i>	422
<i>General Gage’s Cartographic Crisis</i>	424
<i>The Siege of Boston</i>	427
<i>Enter the Maps of the General Survey</i>	429
CHAPTER VI. CONCLUSION AND LEGACY	435
<i>The ‘War Room’ & the Map Printing Revolution</i>	439
<i>The Continued Role of the General Survey’s Maps during the American Revolution</i>	445
<i>‘The Guides & Pioneers’: The Human Legacy of the Northern Survey During the Revolution</i>	453
<i>The Southern District</i>	453
<i>Base Maps for the New Republic</i>	454
<i>‘Loyal She Remains’: Mapping Britain’s remaining North American Provinces</i>	458
<i>New Horizons</i>	460
BIBLIOGRAPHY	461
ILLUSTRATIONS	493