

A MEMOIR OF GOVERNOR JOSEPH F. W. DESBARRES.

1721 - 1824.

by Mr. James S. Macdonald.

Governor Des Barres' Memoirs

Joseph Frederic Wolfe Des Barres, British military officer and hydrographer, at one time governor of Cape Breton, and afterwards governor of Prince Edward Island, was born at Paris December 1, 1721. He was the only son of Frederic Des Barres of Geneva. The Des Barres were a French family, who, after the "revocation" of the Edict of Nantes, had with many others left France and settled in Switzerland to escape the merciless persecution of the Protestants at that time. Frederic Des Barres, the father of the governor, was a professor of French and engineering in London, where he met his future wife, and married and at once removed to Paris to fill an appointment he had received to a position in a military school, and during his residence there the future governor was born.

In 1727 Frederic Des Barres died, and the widow, with her son, removed to London. Here Des Barres received the first rudiments of his education. By the influence of friends of the mother's family he was entered at the Royal Military College at Woolwich, and there made a good record as a student in all branches.

After completing his studies with brilliant success, he was offered the choice of a commission either in the artillery or the engineers, or in a regiment of foot. Preferring immediate service he obtained a commission in the 60th Regiment, and on March 10, 1750, he embarked for America.

On arrival at New York he was drafted to Philadelphia to recruit and discipline a number of stragglers, who had been employed for the defence of the frontiers of Maryland and Pennsylvania against the Indians, at that time numerous and troublesome. They were a hard lot of unmanageable men. General Washington, who at one time commanded them, reported to headquarters that they were the very dregs of the Colonies, a herd of unscrupulous scoundrels, who could not be depended upon for an hour, consisting of horse thieves, tavern leaguers, and deserters, whom he could not get to face the Indians; not an available corps for a new man, and a first command, but Des Barres gain-

ed their goodwill, and, by virtue of a most remarkable magnetic manner and firm though kind hand, he in the short space of six months had them well drilled and ready for duty, and they became a corps of Field Artillery, which he commanded until the arrival of one of the battalions of the Royal Train from England in 1757.

Des Barres' success as a disciplinarian brought him to the front, and he was given the command of a large corps of volunteers to proceed against the Indians, who in 1757 had been committing frightful atrocities in Western Virginia and Pennsylvania. By a rapid and successful movement he captured several chiefs of the Sioux and Onondas, and by skilful and kind treatment, aided by his powers as a wizard and ventriloquist, he gained their confidence so completely that they not only became friendly, but from that time refrained from any acts of hostility, and became useful to the British Forces, in which a large number of the Onondas tribe enlisted as scouts, and their services were retained until the close of the war.

In 1758 he, with his regiment the 60th, was engaged in the expedition against Louisbourg, when he had the good fortune to obtain distinction. Landing in boats in a violent surf, he, with his company, were capsized on the rocks, but managed to reach the shore and capture a strong entrenchment of the enemy, by which the disembarkation of the army was greatly facilitated.

During the siege he had the honor on a critical occasion to lead the Engineers Corps on a special duty, where his early instruction served him well, securing the notice of Lawrence, who greatly commended his successful performance of a most difficult and trying task.

After the capitulation of Louisbourg, he was employed as a specialist in Hydrography, in drawing a chart on a large scale from papers, plans and drawings found at Louisbourg, of the Coast of Nova Scotia and the route thence to Gaspe up the St. Lawrence river to Quebec, which was found of eminent service during the next spring in the expedition against Quebec, as the navigation of the River St. Lawrence was then known to only a few Canadian pilots.

At the siege of Quebec he served under Wolfe as an aide-de-camp, and was making his report to General Wolfe, when the fatal shot struck the hero, who fell dying in his arms. After the capture and occupation of Quebec he served with distinction in the dreary and most trying campaign which followed. The 5th regiment behaved nobly, and through terrible experiences of the succeeding winter, cold, hunger and disease made sad havoc in Des Barres' Company, which formed a detachment of the forces which under General Murray, fought an unsuccessful battle amid the terrible mud and sleet on April 28, 1760.

Des Barres' strong constitution and well-preserved health, enabled him to stand up against physical conditions which sent troops of his fellows to hospital. At every turn he met the approbation of his superior officers and the fortifications of Quebec having become almost useless and dismantled, it was determined to vigorously push repairs, and Des Barres was selected to plan and oversee as directing engineer, their restoration.

Subsequently he took part in the capture of Fort Jacques Cartier, and several other strong places, which completed the conquest of Canada. His every endeavor was marked by judgment and vigour, and proved his ability as a valiant soldier and a skilful planning director.

In 1761 he served as directing engineer, and quarter master general, in the expedition for retaking Newfoundland, from the French, and on his return to Halifax was honored with public thanks, as having essentially contributed to the recovery of the island.

After making surveys of the principal harbors of Newfoundland he was ordered to repair to New York and cooperate with the engineers there in establishing a chain of military posts throughout the northern British Colonies.

In 1763, after completion of these plans, which were only partially adopted, he was recognized as not only a good professional engineer, but as one gifted with a farseeing oversight, to a most remarkable degree, and in after years it was known by sad experience that had his suggestions been carried out, the revolution of 1776 would have been confined to a very limited area.

In 1763 Lord Colville was instructed by the War Office to employ Des Barres on the coast survey of Nova Scotia, a post he was continued in until 1773, ten long years of arduous work, in which his life was often in great peril. One case may be instanced: When surveying and sounding near Cape North in 1771 in a small

schooner, with seven companions, a hurricane came suddenly on, and for four days they had to run before it; a week of fog followed, and they were reported to Halifax as having undoubtedly foundered in the fierce blizzard which had swept the coast, but in time they arrived back, to the surprise of all.

In 1774 he returned to England and the naval authorities expressed their commendation of the manner in which he had executed the important work. Previous to his survey, many of the finest harbors in Nova Scotia were known only to the few fish men who frequented them, and Sable Island was a terror to all navigators in our northern waters, its ever shifting sands and unlit shores swallowing up every year numberless lives and untold treasures, now the waters could be navigated in comparative safety, as the charts were found reliable.

The want of correct charts for North America for the use of the British Fleet engaged in carrying on the American Revolutionary War, began at the date to be felt. Several large men of war had been lost on the American coast and on Earl Howe representing the immediate necessity of proper charts being prepared, Des Barres was selected as the best man available to adapt the known surveys of other hydrographers with his own. This was a work of great magnitude, but he finished this great undertaking in a remarkably short time, working for week in and out, twenty hours a day, and finally was ready to publish the result of his labors in 1777, under the title of the "Atlantic Neptune," in two large folio volumes. For this great work he was rewarded by advancement in rank in the Army and was in 1784 appointed Governor of Cape Breton with the military oversight of Prince Edward Island, and some years after began the foundation of the town of Sydney and pushed on the working of the valuable coal pits at the entrance of Sydney Harbor, "The Old Sydney Coal Mines."

For the next seven years he was busily employed in establishing and aiding many Loyalists who had fled from the United States after the close of the Revolution. Some of these were men of great ability. Among them was Mr. Henry Crawley, afterwards surveyor and secretary of the province, who built a fine mansion opposite Sydney on the Harbor, called Crawley Creek. Crawley was a firm friend of Des Barres, who presented him with first impressions of his charts, and several portraits of men distinguished by their services to the

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