Introduction

The odd coincidence of time, place, and sequence of our Fifteenth Algonquian Conference is too great to lose this opportunity of noting a singular event in colonial and Indian affairs. In the autumn of 1650, exactly 333 years ago, to the Boston area, from Québec City, came Jesuit Father Gabriel Druillettes. He was the special envoy of both New France and the Kennebec Abenaki to both the governments of the New England colonies and the leaders of the Southern New England Algonquian peoples. His assignment was to try to arrange a French, Algonquian, and English defensive alliance against the Iroquois, who were then (in 1650) at the height of their raiding carnage. It was too unlikely a mission to succeed, but Druillettes’ earnest attempt stands out as one of the most honorable events of the 17th century frontier dynamics.

The purpose of this paper is to salute this rare man and rare moment, to help promote the study of a nobler theme than the usual one of constant strife between the French and Indians and the English.

The Man

In 1646, the same year that the Mohawk of eastern New York
killed Jesuit missionary Isaac Jogues as an unwelcome intruder among them, the Kennebec River Abenaki of western Maine eagerly sought a resident missionary of their own from Jesuit headquarters in Québec City. They were sent Father Gabriel Druillettes, who had earlier enjoyed popularity and success with the Montagnais. Druillettes founded for the Abenaki the Mission of the Assumption at Norridgewock on the Kennebec. Long afterward, in 1724, Jesuit Sebastien Rasles was killed at Norridgewock by New England soldiers—but in 1646-47 even the Kennebec-area English welcomed Father Druillettes.

Travelling down the river to visit the Plymouth Colony's trading post at Cushnoc (now Augusta, Maine's capital city), Druillettes was cordially hosted by Plymouth agent John Winslow. This warm acquaintance was to prove essential later in Druillettes’ ambassadorial endeavors with New England’s colonial governments. In his missionization of the Abenaki, however, his own personal talents were more than adequate: Druillettes was both adopted and honored at Norridgewock. His three stays with the Abenaki were all short enough that they yearned for more, never having the opportunity to tire of his presence among them.

The first interruption of Druillettes' Abenaki mission occurred in 1647, after he had been in the field only about nine months. The Capuchin Order of Franciscans, which had a mission station at what is now Castine, Maine, on the eastern shore of Penobscot Bay, questioned the Jesuits' jurisdictional right to the Kennebec. Druillettes was not allowed to return until 1650, after the repeated pleas of the Abenaki apparently influenced the Capuchins to reconsider. But when Druillettes came back to the Abenaki, he had overt political duties to perform as well, which took him to Boston in 1650-51, and beyond in 1651-52. Thereafter, Druillettes was assigned elsewhere.

It is clear that Druillettes possessed great charisma. Of course, the Abenaki had requested his missionization, but his success both at winning over their traditionalist shamans and in being considered an honorary sagamore in their councils is as remarkable as his skill at winning hospitality from the antipapist En-
glint leaders (a topic to be developed below). Nonetheless, however exaggerated Druillettes' competencies might sound, they are more or less corroborated by accounts other than his own. Yet perhaps even this rare man could not have done so well, had he not been there at that rare moment, between 1646 and 1652, when certain shared concerns promoted cooperation more than either competition of conflict among the various peoples involved in the proposed alliance.

The Moment

The year 1650 was a time of wonder for French, English, and Algonquians alike. In Europe, recent great turmoils had not yet been resolved. In France, the internal Wars of the Fronde and the accompanying jockeyings for power during young Louis XIV's minority were very major concerns. Who then could have foretold the future Sun King's supposed quip "L'Etat, c'est moi!", especially in the bloody light of his British counterpart's recent beheading, as one solution to the problem of the Divine Right of Kings? In England, the Civil War had resulted in the Interregnum, but Ironside Oliver Cromwell had not yet been made Lord Protector (for better or worse). The Puritans and Parliament gratuitously had executed the Scottish half of Stuart King Charles I along with their own English half, and the supporters of his son and heir (the future King Charles II) were waiting for revenge.

Many New Englanders had high hopes for Puritans coming into unprecedented power in Old England under a commonwealth, but fine-tuning of the monarchy was the traditional English method of political reform, and some predicted dire consequences without it. Furthermore, New England recently had established a federation of its four separate colonial governments (Plymouth, Massachusetts Bay, New Haven, and Connecticut),

1 Only "more or less corroborated" because, except for Druillettes' own accounts, no primary source tells very much. Together, however, they are supportive of his overall depiction of his acceptance by both the Abenaki and the English.
and that alone had encumbered decision-making, even if nothing else had transpired.

In New France, the Iroquois menace was awesome. French settlements along the southern St. Lawrence River were under constant threat of attack, with casualties dreadful in kind if not in number. Even the Sillery mission station, in the shadow of Québec City, strengthened its walls and guard, because Indians had still more to fear than Europeans from their longer-term enemies. Throughout New France (including Acadia) and New England, all of the many Algonquian peoples of 1650 understood what the curse of the Iroquois meant, and most of these Algonquian peoples had suffered directly from it, so widespread were the Iroquois raids.

The Jesuits shared the Indians' concerns: Jogues and his helpers had been martyred; their Huron missions had been swept away together with their converts in Huronia; refugees swarmed into remaining mission stations in ever-greater numbers than could be cared for. The government of New France responded to the problem with what seemed a perfect plan. New England would be granted the free-trade treaty with New France that certain commercial interests had earlier sought in vain, in return for joining in an alliance against the Iroquois. The presentation of this plan, in Boston, was entrusted to Jesuit Gabriel Druillettes because his Abenaki flock stood in particular danger from the Iroquois. Noel Negabamat (or Tekouerimat), the Algonkin captain of the Sillery Christians, would accompany Druillettes in the hope of more easily influencing the Southern New England Algonquians to join the alliance.

The Mission

Druillettes left Québec City on 1 September 1650, for Boston, the capital of Puritan Massachusetts Bay Colony, which had legislated a few years before that any Jesuit priest within its boundaries should be expelled, and hanged if he returned. After staying awhile at his Norridgewock religious mission-station, he continued on his political mission as the Abenaki's ambas-
sador as well as that of the French. Stopping at the English trading post at Cushnoc, Druillettes again was hosted cordially by Plymouth Colony agent John Winslow, who guided him in person to the coast and an English vessel. Letters from Winslow introduced Druillettes to important persons in Boston. One of these, Edward Gibbons, a prominent merchant, not only hospitably lodged the priest, but gave him the key to a room in the house where Druillettes might perform his prohibited religious devotions without disturbance. Gibbons then took the legally-forbidden Jesuit to Roxbury to meet Governor Dudley, and later the Colony's magistrates.

Because the Kennebec Abenaki fell within the jurisdiction of Plymouth Colony, not that of Massachusetts Bay, Druillettes was advised to visit Governor Bradford at Plymouth. There Bradford was not only receptive, but served the Jesuit a fish dinner on Friday. Druillettes then started his return, via Roxbury, where he met and pleasantly conferred at length with the English "Apostle to the Indians", John Eliot, who recently had begun his own Indian mission-station at Natick. Later, at Salem, Druillettes was hosted by John Endicott, deputy governor of the Bay Colony, who even paid his visitor's local bills, because by then the Jesuit had run out of money. Unfortunately, nothing immediately definitive came of all these cordialities—except that the supposedly narrow-minded Puritans and Pilgrims showed a most unexpected liberal tolerance for a theoretical religious enemy.

The Outcome

Druillettes left Massachusetts Bay and Plymouth Colonies full of hope for the anti-Iroquois alliance. Eventually these two colonies replied only that New France's proposition must be presented to, and approved by, the collective representatives of all four colonies of the Confederation of New England. So, in June 1651, Druillettes was again sent as ambassador, this time to New Haven, and accompanied by a member of the French Governor's Council—Sieur Jean Paul Godefroy. Again, although cordial re-
ceptions were granted the Frenchmen, their diplomatic mission still failed to achieve the desired French goal of obtaining New England’s military assistance in return for the granting of free trade advantages.

It appears that even the likely profit from such a trade agreement was not an adequate lure to pit the mercantile English against the Iroquois. The Mohawk, easternmost of the Five Nations League, had shown respect for the English in the Pequot War of 1637, and had not been hostile to them since. The English seem to have valued the general future dual possibilities of continuing both the Iroquois-English neutrality and the Iroquois-French hostility. Besides, the Algonquian peoples closest to the English would be safer if the English were at peace, not at war, with the Iroquois. Furthermore, with steadily deteriorating relations in Europe between the English and the Dutch, the specific danger that New Netherland could encourage newly-hostile Iroquois to raid New England was not worth risking. And war with New Netherland would make English retaliation into Iroquoia (through Dutch territory) virtually impossible. With its Iroquois neutrality maintained, New England could better contain most foreseeable problems—including any long-term trouble with the French. Indeed, much later, in the two-fronted King Philip’s War of 1675-78 (which at least some Bostoners believed was partly French-inspired), the English were even able to start their practice of hiring some Iroquois mercenaries to fight against New England’s various Algonquian enemies.

How things might have turned out in North America if the English had accepted the French alliance plan of 1650 is probably idle to speculate upon. That moment, however rare, was just not rare enough to cement the deal. Nonetheless, Jesuit Father Gabriel Druillettes (who was transferred to other missionary activities where his charisma was more fruitfully employed), stands out as an unsung hero in the genre of Honorable Lost Causes. Surely he was a rare man indeed. To the Abenaki, he was the link to the future—however bloody and bleak it was to be. No less an authority on French-Canadian missionary history than
Lucien Campeau (1966:281) has paid Druillettes this fine tribute: "Among the Jesuits of New France, none perhaps made such a deep and rapid impression upon the Indians. No man, in any case, presented such an alliance of burning zeal with the gifts of the miracle-worker and the conquering power of gentleness."

NOTE

Primary sources in English about Druillettes, besides the translated reprints of his own reports and those of his superiors in Thwaites (1896-1901), are: Shea's (1857) reprints of six relevant documents both French and English; and Shurtleff & Pul­sifer's (1968) reprints of one document each from Massachusetts Colony (December 1650), Plymouth (June 1651), and the United Colonies (September 1651). Shurtleff's (1968) earlier compilation of Massachusetts Bay records seemingly omits any documentation of Druillettes' endeavors. Secondary sources are numerous, e.g.: Anonymous (1864—possibly by Shea, as he was an editor); Parkman (1867); Brown (1890); Ward (1961); Campeau (1966); Dragon (1973); Sevigny (1976); and Lapomarda (1977). All of these accept the primary sources at face value. Grate­ful acknowledgement is due to Professor Vincent A. Lapomarda, S.J., of Holy Cross College (Worcester, Massachusetts) for kind advice and bibliographical assistance.

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