

## William Shirley (British colonial governor, 1694-1771)

### *Participation in the War of Austrian Succession: reinforcement of naval power (North America), Siege of Louisbourg*



Figure 1: Portrait of William Shirley (1694-1771) by Thomas Hudson

William Shirley was born in Preston, Sussex on 2 December 1694.<sup>1</sup> Although the Shirley line had maintained good relations with noble families for several generations, which helped them achieve a respectable social position, they were not particularly wealthy.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, Shirley received an excellent education, which included studies at Cambridge before he pursued a legal career at the Inner Temple.<sup>3</sup> For the first eleven years of his professional career, Shirley worked as a lawyer in England. However, in 1731, on the recommendation of some influential political figures, including Jonathan Belcher (Governor of Massachusetts and New Hampshire, 1730-1741), he migrated to Boston with hopes of finding success and wealth.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Shirley was able to advance his career in the New World.

Initially, he also practiced law in Boston, but in 1733, he was appointed as Admiralty judge, and then in 1734, he became the king's attorney general. Shirley reached the peak of his career on 6 May 1741 when he replaced Belcher as the colonial governor of Massachusetts.<sup>5</sup> In this role, Shirley soon found himself embroiled in the the Anglo-French conflict of *King George's War* (1744-1748), which was subordinate to the *War of the Austrian Succession*.<sup>6</sup> Shortly after England officially declared war on France in March 1744, the French attacked and burned down a fishing village in Canso, Nova Scotia, taking fifty English families as prisoners.<sup>7</sup> Although this combat action caught the British colonialists unprepared, as the British government had failed to inform the colonies about the start of the war with France, Shirley reacted quickly and strategically to secure the borders of the British colonial

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<sup>1</sup> cf. Wood, George Arthur: Shirley. Governor of Massachusetts, 1741-1756 (Studies in History, Economics and Public Law 92), London 1920, pp. 11-13.

The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica: William Shirley. British colonial governor, in: Encyclopedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/William-Shirley>.

<sup>2</sup> cf. Shirley. Governor of Massachusetts, pp. 11.

<sup>3</sup> cf. *ibid.* p. 13.

<sup>4</sup> cf. The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica: Jonathan Belcher. British colonial governor, in: Encyclopedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jonathan-Belcher>.

Allen, William: The American Biographical Dictionary. Containing an account of the lives, characters, and writings of the most eminent persons deceased in North America from its first settlement, Third Ed., Boston 1857, p. 736. Shirley. Governor of Massachusetts, pp. 14.

<sup>5</sup> cf. Encyclopedia Britannica: William Shirley [internet resource]. The American Biographical Dictionary, p. 736.

<sup>6</sup> cf. The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica: King George's War. United States history, in: Encyclopedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/event/King-Georges-War>.

<sup>7</sup> cf. Shirley. Governor of Massachusetts, p. 182. The American Biographical Dictionary, p. 736.

territories.<sup>8</sup> In this context, he sought to renew the friendship with the native *Iroquois*, who were allied with England, and to maintain the neutrality of all nearby native tribes living along the eastern borders.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, Shirley focused on reinforcing naval power, not only by requesting guard ships to protect the British fishing interests but also by implementing laws supporting privateering.<sup>10</sup> „Before fall [1744] there were in the provincial service a snow, a brigantine and a sloop serving as guard ships. These, with eight or nine privateers fitted out at Boston, had taken by September 22d more than forty French vessels, besides greatly disturbing French fishery.”<sup>11</sup> In addition to these defensive strategies, Shirley also achieved Britain's only significant victory during King George's War when he dispatched a force commanded by Peter Warren (naval officer and politician, 1703/4-1752) at sea and by William Pepperrell (army officer and merchant, 1696-1759) on land to capture the fortress of Louisbourg on Cape Breton Island in the summer of 1745.<sup>12</sup> In his *Memoirs of the principal transactions of the last war between the English and the French in North-America*, published in 1758, he describes, among other things, the importance of Louisbourg, which had been built by the French after the *Peace of Utrecht* in 1713.<sup>13</sup> In addition to disrupting the French fishery and weakening their economy, Shirley recognized the advantage that French merchant ships would be at the mercy of British privateers.

*France has not one Sea Port for the Relief and Shelter of her trading Ships either to, or from the East or West Indies open to them any where in North America, to the Northward of the River Mississippi, except Louisbourg; and of consequence, that whole Trade would be expos'd to the English Privateers from the Northern Colonies in time of War, without any Place to retreat to [...]. To all this must be added, that the Possession of this Island puts it into their Power to annoy the Trade of the British Northern Colonies in time of War with their Privateers from this Harbour [...].*<sup>14</sup>

Based on this rationale, Shirley organized the expedition to Louisbourg with the support of the New England Colonies, including Connecticut, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island. However, other colonies, such as Pennsylvania and New York, abstained from participating in the action. They considered Shirley's plan risky not only because Louisbourg was militarily superior but also due to his decision to send a force without any military experience to besiege the fortress.<sup>15</sup> Despite these initial concerns, the expedition succeeded in capturing Louisbourg after a siege lasting six weeks, culminating by the

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<sup>8</sup> cf. Shirley. Governor of Massachusetts, pp. 182, 197-200

<sup>9</sup> cf. Shirley. Governor of Massachusetts, pp. 197-200.

<sup>10</sup> cf. *ibid.* pp. 202-204

<sup>11</sup> cf. Shirley. Governor of Massachusetts, p. 203.

<sup>12</sup> cf. Encyclopedia Britannica: William Shirley [internet resource].

Simbert, John: Pepperrell, Sir William, first baronet, 23.09.2004, in: Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/21899>.

Gwyn, Julian: Warren, Sir Peter, 23.09.2004, in: Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/28786>.

<sup>13</sup> cf. William Shirley. British colonial governor [internet resource].

The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica: Louisbourg, in: Encyclopedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Louisbourg>.

<sup>14</sup> Shirley, William: *Memoirs of the principal transactions of the last war between the English and French in North-America from the commencement of it in 1744, to conclusion of the Treaty at Aix la Chapelle, Boston 1758*, p. 15.

<sup>15</sup> cf. *The American Biographical Dictionary*, p. 736.

end of June 1745.<sup>16</sup> Although Louisbourg had to be returned to France under the terms of the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle, the siege of Louisbourg was not only the greatest victory for the British in King George's War, but also the greatest military success of William Shirley's career.<sup>17</sup>

In 1756, Shirley faced charges of high treason after the British lost Oswego to the French during the *Seven Years' War*, leading to his replacement as governor of Massachusetts. However, the charges against him were dropped, and Shirley was appointed Governor of the Bahamas in 1761. He held this office until 1770 and returned then to Roxbury, Massachusetts, where he finally passed in a luxurious home on 24 March 1771.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> cf. Tucker, Spencer Coakley (Ed.): *A Global Chronology of Conflict. From the Ancient World to the Modern Middle East Vol. I*, Santa Barbara 2010, p. 747.

*Encyclopedia Britannica*: King George's War [internet resource].

<sup>17</sup> cf. *Encyclopedia Britannica*: Louisbourg [internet resource].

*Encyclopedia Britannica*: William Shirley [internet resource].

<sup>18</sup> cf. *The American Biographical Dictionary*, p. 736.

*Encyclopedia Britannica*: William Shirley [internet resource].