

The Name of the State of Maine: An Irish Perspective

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The three current theories of the origin of the name of the American state of Maine are reviewed and rejected. The connection of the colonist Sir Ferdinando Gorges with Ireland is explored, and a possible origin is proposed in the circumstances of the Anglo-Irish wars of 1594–1603 and their impact on his thoughts and motives.

KEYWORDS Maine, American colonization, Irish history, Ferdinando Gorges

The State of Maine has its origins in the early seventeenth century. The first European settlement was founded in 1604 on Saint Croix Island by Pierre Duguast (also known today in Canada as *Du Gua*), Sieur de Mon(t)s, who hailed from Royan in the Saintonge, France, and the first English settlement, Popham Colony, was established by the Plymouth Company three years later. Both failed to prosper. Other English and French coastal settlements followed over the next two decades, but they too struggled, and we do not need to trace their history here.¹

Eventually, two more English naval adventurers took an interest: on August 10 1622, the colonial pioneers Sir Ferdinando Gorges (1568–1647),² who had joined the Plymouth Company of Virginia in 1606 and therefore knew of the failed Popham endeavor, and Captain John Mason (1586–1635) were granted a large tract of coastal land by the Plymouth President and Council of New England, which, it was declared, they “intend[ed] to name The Province of Maine.”³ That is where we hear of the present name for the first time.⁴ The following year, another English naval captain, Christopher Levett, visited the area, and opened his account by writing that “[t]he first place I set my foote vpon in New England, was the Isles of Shoulds [Shoals, RC], being Ilands in the sea, above two Leagues from the Mayne” (Levett, 1628). This might suggest either that Levett knew the place was already called *The Mayne* and that he was referring to it by name, or that he was simply using the word *main* in one of its then-current senses, namely “continental landmass.”⁵ As we shall see, I believe the latter was probably intended. King Charles I vigorously insisted on *Maine* above any other candidate name in a decree of April 3 1639 confirming the earlier grant to Gorges,⁶ and this, as “The Province of Maine,” finally received official blessing in 1665 when the Commissioners of King Charles II ordered that it be so entered

in state records (Stewart, 1945: 41–42). We will not discuss here the other names which have been applied to Maine or to parts of it.

The origin of *Maine* continues to be uncertain. Some have thought it to be transferred from the historic French province of the same name, centered on the city of Le Mans. No evidence at all has been found in support of this theory.⁷ Ferdinando Gorges had served as a commander in a Protestant army on behalf of the French king Henri IV and was knighted by the prominent English courtier Robert Devereux, second Earl of Essex, after the siege of Rouen in 1591. But Rouen is not in Maine, and there is no evidence that Gorges ever was. The French theory has, however, received official support from the Maine state legislature, which has adopted a resolution establishing Franco-American Day, in the preamble to which it is simply declared that the state was named after the French province. The joint resolution passed in the Maine House on March 6 2002 includes the words: “Considérant que, l’état du Maine est nommé après la province du Maine en France [...]” [and so also in English].⁸ If only onomastics could be done by decree! Notwithstanding this legislative maneuver, and despite its not being implausible that the name of a political entity might be transferred in this way, the theory remains without foundation.⁹

In favor of the alternative “landmass” theory, it has been noted (Stewart, 1945: 41–42) that Mason had served with the English navy in the Orkney Islands, off the north coast of Scotland, whose principal island is called *Mainland*, and it has been suggested that he might have taken this into account when planning his new colony in North America. The application of the term *main* to landmasses, and indeed to large tracts of sea, is known at the right period (on the evidence of the *Oxford English Dictionary*; see note 5), though there is no obvious reason why Orkney should be relevant: Mason could simply have used the word in its dictionary sense “landmass” without considering a name-transfer from his naval outstation. The Orkney name is of Old Scandinavian origin (Room, in Mills and Room, 2002: 1119), though bearing the same historical meaning as its later English counterpart. This theory seems to be the one most widely accepted nowadays in Maine, despite the presumptions of its legislators (Schroeder, n.d.).

There is interesting support for the idea that *the main* was a term that could be applied to the continental territory of America as opposed to the islands on its seaboard, collected and published long ago by Albert Matthews (1910: 375–380). But there are three objections to seeing this as the origin of the province’s name. Firstly, the name of the province never appears with the definite article (unless the ambiguous quotation from Christopher Levett above is the sole example), and, if this expression is the true source of the name, the absence of the article needs to be explained. In the Anglo-Irish name of *The Pale*, the article never disappeared, as it also did not in some other relatively similar English geographical names (though in these with a modifier): *The Barbary Coast*, *The Gold Coast*, *The Slave Coast*;¹⁰ and *The Spanish Main* or territory around the Caribbean was always so called. Secondly, the Province of Maine always included its flotilla of offshore islands, so there is a tension between the supposed meaning and the geographical facts. Thirdly, applying a name with this meaning to Maine would not differentiate it from parts of the rest of coastal North America which were already being referred to using the same expression (but not as a name), as the evidence presented by Matthews shows (see note 7).

We can be pretty confident that *Maine* does not originate in a known Native American name. In his memoir on the foundation of the Province, Gorges (1658) speaks of the native name of (at least some part of) Maine as being *Moasham*. His editor (Baxter, 1890, 2: 53) notes that Samuel Purchas (1625) says the ancient name of a territory in the Maine area was *Mawooshen*, and that John Smith (1624) called it *Moshoquen*. Accepting Baxter's assumption that these names may represent the same original linguistic form, and in spite of the partial similarity of their consonants to those of *Maine*, these cannot be seen as the source of the current name.

A new idea was put forward a decade or so ago by Carol Smith Fisher (2002): that the name perpetuates that of the village of Broadmayne in Dorset, England, which appears simply as *Maine*, *Meine*, *Mayne* in early documents (Mills, 1977: 337). But no connection between Maine and Broadmayne, or between Broadmayne and the Gorges or Mason families or the Plymouth Company, has been established. Ferdinando Gorges was from Somerset, rather than the adjacent Dorset, and he had proposed *New Somersetshire* as an alternative name for his part of the Province, north of the Piscataqua river.¹¹ Nothing suggests his interest in Dorset. It is true that his family had an ancestral estate in Dorset, in the village of Shipton Gorge, whose name preserves the surname, as Smith Fisher correctly points out. But the direct male Gorges line holding this manor had died out in 1461, and the heiress had married into the Devon family of Coplestone,¹² leaving the link with the Gorges family no more than literally nominal. Moreover, Broadmayne is 14 miles from Shipton Gorge, which is further than Smith Fisher seems to imply, and no relevant connection between the two has ever been established.

Focusing on Sir Ferdinando Gorges raises other possibilities. He was a widely travelled retainer of the Earl of Essex, receiving his knighthood from him as noted above, and owing his position as captain and commander of the naval fort at Plymouth, Devon, to him. In 1599 Elizabeth I charged Essex with suppressing the uprising in Ireland which came to be known as the Nine Years' War (1594–1603), as a result of which the hereditary Irish aristocracy was eventually defeated and dispersed.¹³ The fighting was widespread throughout Ireland, but the power-base of the leading rebel Hugh O'Neill was in Tyrone (Tír Eogháin), in Ulster. Gorges applied to be an officer in Essex's army for the duration of what turned out to be a disastrous campaigning season. He was appointed sergeant-major, but he was forbidden to leave his naval post in Plymouth. Nevertheless, it can be assumed he maintained an interest in Irish affairs, and also in the Earl of Essex, because he was implicated in Essex's treasonable plot against the queen in 1601 before rethinking his position and giving evidence which helped to convict and execute his patron. It is not out of the question that he was familiar, at least through maps or written reports, with Ulster, and even with the medium-sized townland (475 acres) of Maine in the parish of Cappagh, a parish split between the baronies of Strabane Upper and Omagh, in what is now County Tyrone.¹⁴ There is no proof of any visit to Tyrone by Essex in his capacity as Lord Lieutenant of Ireland. In fact, Essex's campaign of 1599 never actually got into Ulster as it was intended to, coming to a halt at a parley with O'Neill on the river Lagan on the borders of the present Counties Monaghan and Louth. But Cappagh may have been known through intelligence, being in O'Neill territory and only 20 miles or so

represented the farthest-flung outpost and defencework of English colonization in Munster. The castle was surrendered to James FitzGerald, first Earl of Desmond of the second creation and a tool of English politics in Ireland, in 1600, the year after Essex's campaign.¹⁷ The potential symbolism of this English frontier fortress near the head of a substantial harbor, holding out against unwilling, unfriendly, and unProtestant neighbors, cannot have been missed by anyone with a practical interest in the politics of colonization and with a knowledge of the coast of Maine in the area of the future Portland, sitting on its defensible site at the mouth of the Fore River — even if that knowledge was only second-hand knowledge in Gorges' case.

I suggest that, while there is no direct evidence, Sir Ferdinando Gorges, with his documented interest in Irish affairs, named his new colony after a well-known castle precariously and defiantly sited on the fringe of English civilization. The idea for the name may have come to him as early as 1605–1606, when he first became involved

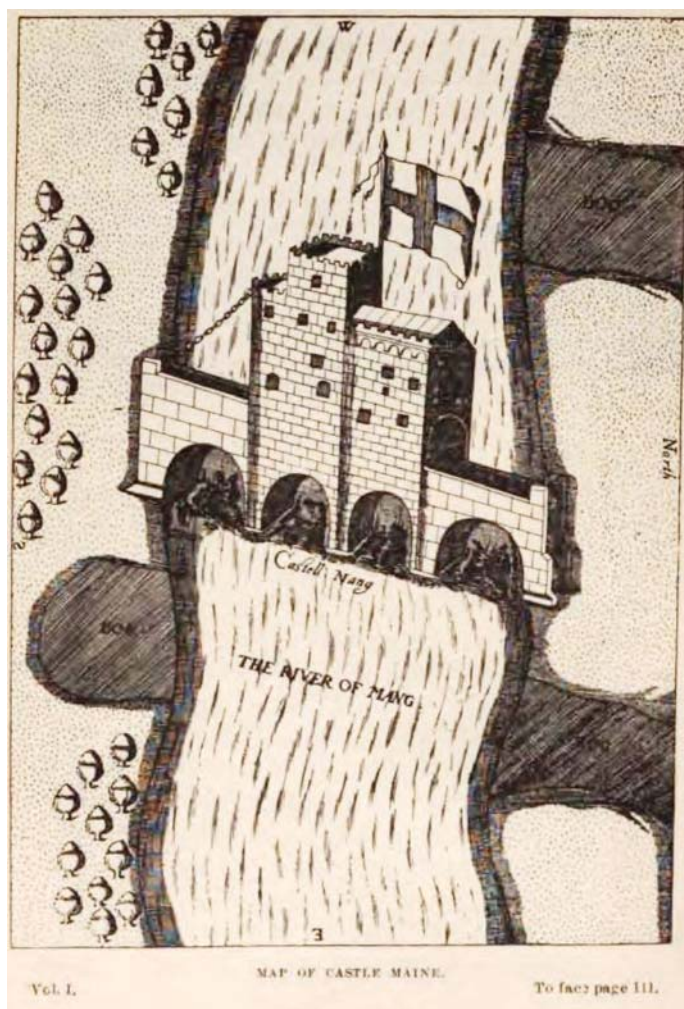


FIGURE 2 Castle Maine (*Castell Mang*, misprinted by the bridge as *Nang*, but correctly in the river-name), flying the English flag, from an illustration in Stafford's *Pacata Hibernia* (1633).¹⁸ Note the drawbridge chain on the "Irish" side.

with the Plymouth Company, and barely five years after the handing over of the castle to the Crown. In 1600 he may privately have viewed its formal delivery to his queen, if through rose-tinted spectacles, as a successful after-effect of Essex's campaign, and he must justifiably have seen it as an important English and Protestant colonial symbol. The role of Castlemaine in Anglo-Irish high politics in 1600 may help to account for the vigor of King Charles I's later support for the name of the Province (see note 6), if that is not simply a rhetorical flourish.

The castle itself was a frequent target of both sides in the Irish Confederate Wars of 1641–1653, and was destroyed by Cromwell's troops in 1651. The enduring significance and potency of the place-name in English culture is emphasized by the fact that Charles II created the earldom of Castlemaine for the husband of the most prominent of his mistresses, Barbara Villiers, in 1661, in recognition of her services (Ugnow, 2009: 151). A new barony and viscountcy named from the place were created in 1812 and 1822 respectively.¹⁹ The British government continued to appoint a sinecure constable of the non-castle as late as 1835.²⁰ Here is a name with sufficient resonance at the right time to grace a brand-new Province and State.²¹

Notes

¹ The basic facts about Maine history are readily available, e.g. in Clark (1977) and Shain and Shain (1992).

² But he never set foot in America. Mason, who never set foot in New England although he became its Vice-Admiral, is less important to the eventual development of Maine; he is associated with New Hampshire. We will therefore focus on Gorges, mainly through the biography by Clark (2004). Further Gorges family details may be found in Gorges and Brown (1944).

³ The full text of the grant can be read at <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/17th_century/me01.asp>.

⁴ I have not found the source of Stewart's claim (1970: 274) that there is an earlier charter, of 1620, referring to "the country of the Main Land."

⁵ *Oxford English Dictionary*, main, noun 1, II, 4. and 5. The sense is clearly seen in the words of Archer (1602): "This Maine is the goodliest Continent that ever we saw [...]."

⁶ "[...] Wee Doe name ordeyne and appoynt that the porcon of the Mayne Lande and Premises aforesaide shall forever hereafter bee called The Province or Countie of Mayne and not by any other name or names whatsoever." The full text can be read at <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/17th_century/me02.asp>. Note the appearance of the name *Mayne* and the expression *the Mayne Lande*, in the same sentence, without comment, and without any species of *therefore* to link the two. We shall see that this coming-together is probably coincidental. Why should something which is just a portion of

any land be deliberately and calculatedly named by an expression for the whole?

⁷ It is no longer believed that the French queen of Charles I, Henrietta Maria, had anything to do with (French) Maine at all. This was made clear over a century ago by Matthews (1910: 368–369). In any case, the (American) name first appears before Charles I was king and before his betrothal — indeed, before they first met in 1623. She has Maryland named after her.

⁸ <<http://www.maine.gov/legis/house/records/125hrec/20120321.pdf>>, H-1291.

⁹ The fanciful suggestion was reported in 1883 that it might have been named after "Frankfort-on-the-Main" in Germany. But this view has, if anything, even less substance than the French theory. See the item in the *Rockland County Journal* for that year available at <<http://fultonhistory.com/Newspaper%2011/Randolph%20NY%20Weekly%20Courant/Randolph%20NY%20Weekly%20Courant%201882-1884%20Grayscale/Randolph%20NY%20Weekly%20Courant%201882-1884%20Grayscale%20-%200364.pdf>> [accessed January 15 2013].

¹⁰ It has only recently begun to disappear in *The Ivory Coast*, and that presumably under the influence of its current article-less official French name *Côte d'Ivoire*.

¹¹ This occurred when he and Mason split the patent in 1629. Mason called his part *New Hampshire*.

¹² Shipton Gorge village website.

¹³ Details of this campaign may be found in, e.g., Falls (1950: 232–247) and Hammer (2004: 214–215).

- ¹⁴ There was a substantial house at Mayne in later centuries, but I do not know whether there was around 1600.
- ¹⁵ The map is reproduced from M'Aleer (1936), who interpreted the townland name as being from Irish *meadhán* "middle town or little plain." In the absence of early spellings, we can also speculate that it may represent *maighín* "(little) place." For *maighín*, see Toner and others (*eDIL* entry no. M31: 076).
- ¹⁶ *Annals of the Four Masters*, vol. 6 (O'Donovan, 1856: 2083: *caislén na mainge*); annal M1598: 33 in the second draft of the online translated edition.
- ¹⁷ Elizabeth's Secretary of State Sir Robert Cecil refers to the castle (as *Castle Maine*) and to the event mentioned (as likely to be pleasing to the queen) in a letter to the President of Munster Sir George Carew dated October 1 1600, published in Maclean (1864: 40–42: letter XII).
- ¹⁸ Stafford (1633/1896, 1: facing 111). In this book, the castle is referred to both as *Castle Mayne* (e.g. 111 of the 1896 edition) and as *Castle Mange* (e.g. 134, 143).
- ¹⁹ See, for instance, Gibbs (1998), 2nd edn, vol. 3, under Castlemaine.
- ²⁰ Dublin Quit Rent Office, Land Revenue Series letter books, Commissions of Woods to Burk, 2 March 1841, referenced at the Ancestry website "State-aided emigration scheme: Castlemaine," <<http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~irlker/castlemigr.html>>, note 1.
- ²¹ The history of the spelling of the castle-name includes a reinterpretation as *Castle Magne* (pronounced as in *Charlemagne*, presumably — see Carmody (1908–1909)). This is also, as *Grand Ma(i)gne*, the French name of a castle in Mâni in the Peloponnese, Greece, which was the thirteenth-century home of the Frankish Villehardouin dynasty (Wagstaff, 1991). Some complex cross-referring or free-associating by historians may have been going on.

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