

# Transcribing an Indian Agent's Letterbook: Learning about Akwesasne, ca. 1893-98

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## Abstract

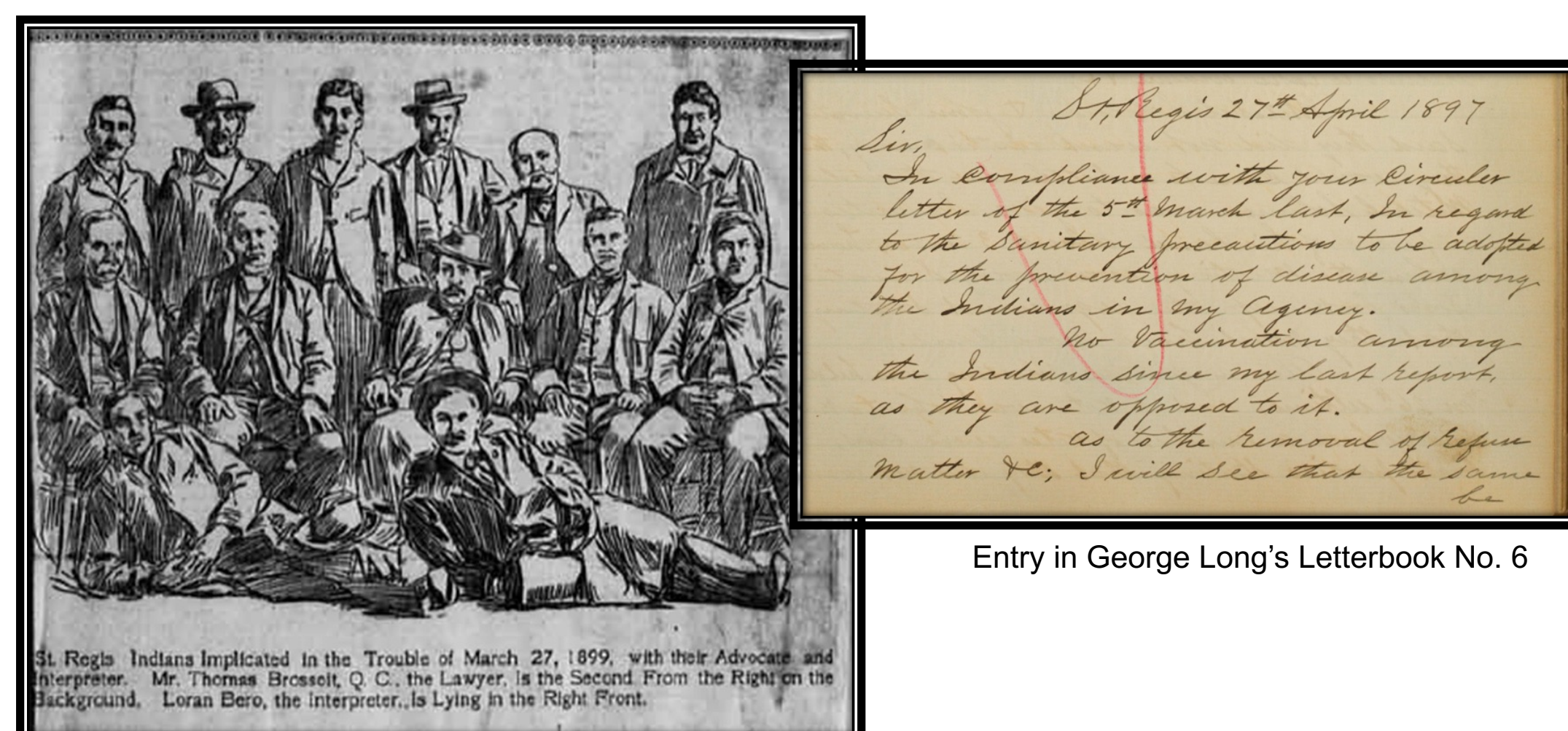
The original letterbooks of George Long, Indian Agent at the St. Regis Reserve (modern-day Akwesasne) located in Quebec and Ontario on the border with New York State, have been digitized by Archives Canada. Because they were written longhand, they are difficult for modern readers to use. By transcribing a volume covering 1893-1898, students learned some important aspects of what it takes to be a historian—in particular, how to do local history. Looking in detail at life on the St. Regis Reserve a hundred years ago also helps us understand some problems and community concerns that persist into modern times. Individual team members chose to explore issues such as border crossing, liquor control, and health care. As a group, the students produced an annotated digitized archive that will be posted online, where it will serve as a resource for historians, genealogists, and community members.

## Methods

Our transcription project required several steps. Students:

- Read and discussed secondary sources to gain an overview of historical facts and historiographical interpretation regarding the community at Akwesasne at the turn of the twentieth century
- Transcribed and notated passages from the original document, uploading the results to a common spreadsheet
- Discussed the results to resolve ambiguities in the transcription and identify important issues for further investigation
- Wrote interpretive essays on a variety of topics of personal interest suggested by the transcribed document

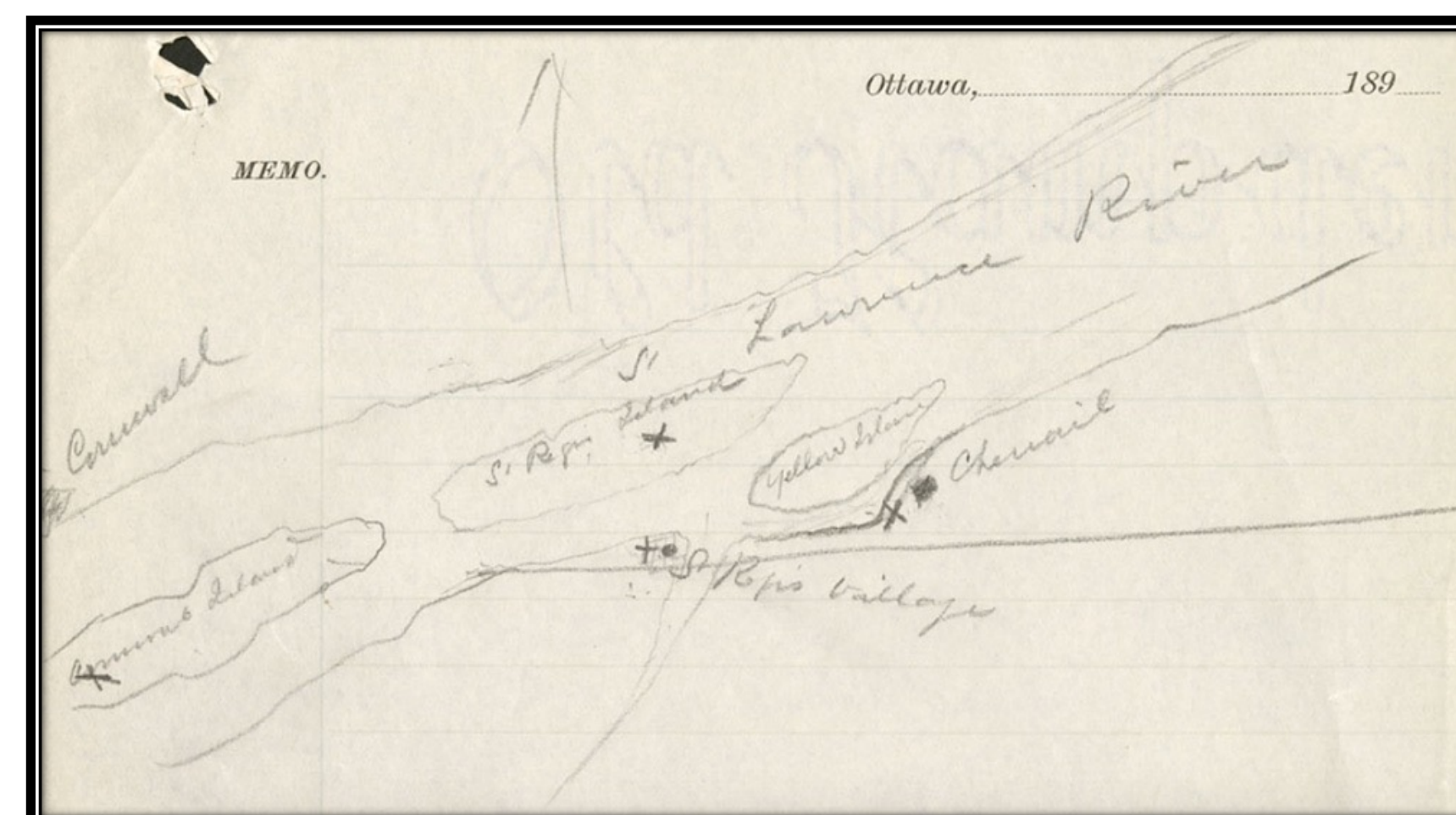
Mohawk community member John Angus captained a steamer that delivered H. M. Mail from the St. Regis Reserve to Prescott, Ontario. He was loaned \$300 to buy the vessel, but ultimately never repaid the loan.



Entry in George Long's Letterbook No. 6

## What We Learned

- How to transcribe historical documents for future use by historians and researchers
- The importance of a critical view of documents to understand their authors' worldview and perspectives on issues
- The troubles posed by living on the border between Canada and the USA, which results in differential treatment between people in the same community
- The ways Native people sought to assert local autonomy in the face of Canada's Indian Act of 1880
- The role historical precedent plays in shaping and framing modern issues in close-knit communities like that of Akwesasne
- Transcription projects like this are the closest thing to an "internship" for students interested in a career in public history



Map of the St. Regis Reserve. From the collections of Archives Canada.

## Border Crossing

Crossing the United States-Canadian border is a daily task for Mohawks at Akwesasne. Their homes are surrounded by the St. Lawrence River; to access the rest of Canada one must cross into the United States, then back across into Canadian territory. The border also splits the Akwesasne Mohawk community, causing difficulties in maintaining family ties.

In 1794, Great Britain signed Jay's Treaty with the newly founded United States. This treaty allowed registered members of the Akwesasne Mohawk group to cross the border freely between the two countries. However, once Canada became independent in 1867, this allowance was voided.

Today, Akwesasne's Mohawks must follow each country's rules to gain access to one-half of their community. Not only does this situation create isolation within the country of Canada, but it also tends to divide the community. Frustration is also created because the Akwesasne Mohawks believe Jay's Treaty still applies to both governments, granting them the right to cross the border freely at any time.

## Liquor Control

The Canadian government has controlled access to alcohol for Native people since 1775, when missionaries, superintendents and others were advised that "No Trader shall sell or otherwise supply the Indians with Rum, or other spirituous liquors, swan shot, or rifled barrel led guns." The Indian Act of 1880 was amended in 1884, making it a felony for Indians to purchase, consume, and enter a licensed establishment; likewise, for anyone who sold alcohol to an Indian person. These legal restrictions affected people's lives on the St. Regis Reserve.

- in November 1896, Chief Joseph Thompson faced complaints that he encouraged sale of liquor to other Indians
- In January 1897, Chiefs Thompson, Jake Fire, and Thomas Lagane were implicated in encouraging the sale of liquor, Lagane was accused of selling alcohol at lacrosse games, and Thompson himself indicted for drinking alcohol
- Shortly thereafter, Chief Thompson was deposed for his alcohol infractions

Restrictions placed upon Indians living on the reserve were a perfect example of the Canadian government trying to fit Indians into a "civilized" image mirroring that of white Canadians. We would like to have Joseph Thompson's perspective on these incidents, but we do not have access to his own accounts, only the official accounts of George Long, which represent the interests of government on the Reserve.

## Healthcare

The vaccination and overall health of Native people at St. Regis was an important issue for the Indian Agent George Long. He struggled to get doctors to give vaccinations although he had moderate success in certain years. In 1895 Long addressed the push for greater community immunization in a letter to his superior: "There has not been any epidemic disease among the Indians although many have died through the Winter with lung disease as it seem to follow the race. There were vaccinated in the months of June and July 1894 Forty two (42) mostly children which appears to have worked well. No complaints." In more recent history, the tables have turned with Native Americans feeling that the government fails to protect their community's welfare, with issues such as doctors and funding coming to the forefront.

## Acknowledgments

The team thanks Dr. Thomas N. Baker for guidance and Archives Canada for digitizing the letterbooks of the Indian Agent at St. Regis Reserve.