

On October 28, 2008, the Ontario Heritage Trust, the City of Pembroke and the Centre culturel francophone de Pembroke unveiled a provincial plaque in Pembroke, Ontario, to commemorate Jeanne Lajoie, 1899-1930.

The bilingual plaque reads as follows:

JEANNE LAJOIE 1899-1930

Jeanne Lajoie, a dedicated teacher and advocate for the establishment of French schools in Ontario, was born in Lefavre, near Hawkesbury, in 1899. In 1923, Lajoie helped a group of francophone parents to establish the first independent French school in Pembroke. The school ensured that their children were educated in their own language. The creation of L'École Sainte-Jeanne d'Arc was one of the last major events in the Franco-Ontarian struggle against Regulation 17, which from 1912 to 1927 prohibited instruction in French after Grade 2. Lajoie taught at the school, initially located in the Dominion Street home of Moïse Lafrance and then in a Mary Street house purchased by the parents. Suffering from fragile health her entire life, Jeanne Lajoie died of tuberculosis at the age of 31. She was immortalized as the "Pucelle de Pembroke," the "Maid of Pembroke," in reference to Joan of Arc, for her commitment to providing education in French and preserving francophone culture within Ontario.

JEANNE LAJOIE 1899-1930

Jeanne Lajoie, enseignante dévouée et partisane de la création d'écoles françaises en Ontario, naquit à Lefavre, près de Hawkesbury, en 1899. En 1923, elle aida un groupe de parents francophones à ouvrir la première école française indépendante à Pembroke. Cette école garantissait une instruction dans leur langue à leurs enfants. La création de l'École Sainte-Jeanne d'Arc fut l'un des derniers événements majeurs de la lutte franco-ontarienne contre le Règlement 17, qui, de 1912 à 1927, interdit l'enseignement en français après la 2^e année. Jeanne Lajoie enseigna dans cette école, qui initialement était située rue Dominion, au domicile de Moïse Lafrance, puis dans une maison de la rue Mary achetée par les parents d'élèves. D'une santé fragile depuis sa naissance, Jeanne Lajoie fut emportée par la tuberculose à l'âge de 31 ans. Elle restera à jamais dans les esprits comme la « Pucelle de Pembroke », en référence à Jeanne d'Arc, pour son engagement en faveur de l'éducation en français et de la défense de la culture francophone en Ontario.

Historical background

The early years

Born in Lefavre, a town west of Hawkesbury on the Ottawa River, on February 2, 1899, Jeanne Lajoie was the daughter of carpenter Damien Lajoie and his wife Alexina Proulx. Her older brother Élias described her as "... a tiny blonde, the family's twelfth child; a sickly little girl, but so very becoming with her big blue eyes, deep and highly intelligent."¹ Jeanne's fragile constitution caused her to suffer almost constantly from fatigue and fainting in her early years. She was unable to play with other children before the age of 10 and could not walk the two kilometres to school, which was located outside of the village. Fortunately, in 1907, the Filles de la Sagesse nuns opened a convent school in town, and Jeanne was finally able to begin her studies.² Frail but determined, she struggled all of her life to summon the physical strength necessary to carry out even simple everyday activities. She made rapid progress in school, and soon took on the role of family letter-writer, initiating a lifelong correspondence with the oldest child in the family, her brother Élias, who was away from home studying for the priesthood. Many of the details of her life are known from this correspondence, which Élias shared after her death.³

In 1917, Jeanne's mother died and, despite her own poor health, she took over running the household, which included the care of two younger brothers and a sister. This prepared her for her future responsibility of managing the rectory of the Catholic parish founded by her brother Élias at Vars, the last Orangeist⁴ stronghold in the county of Russell. Living there gave Jeanne the opportunity to improve her oral English skills. Although she read English well, she had not had the opportunity to speak it in Lefavre, a completely francophone town.⁵

The challenges of teaching

In January 1921, Jeanne decided to become a teacher and pursued this dream with characteristic determination. She accepted a position in Warren, near Sturgeon Falls, even though she knew that living conditions there might tax her health. Élias offered to lend her money in case she decided to give up the job and return home, but she refused, saying the money might tempt her to abandon her goal.⁶ She told him, "I've made up my mind and, health permitting, I will stay here, whatever the cost."⁷

Having successfully completed the year in Warren, Jeanne spent the summer studying for a bilingual teaching certificate at the "école modèle" at Vankleek Hill.⁸ She then went to Azilda, near Sudbury, where she faced the challenge of teaching a school with an enrolment of 63 children, all by herself. Élias was worried about her health, and for good reason.⁹ After a strenuous year in Azilda, she took a job in Naughton, but was obliged to leave after two

months, and required a five-month rest before returning to the classroom. She finished the school year by teaching for several months in Blizzard Valley.¹⁰

Arrival in Pembroke

In September 1923, Jeanne accepted a position at St. John School in Pembroke. There, she figured prominently in the last major battle of the Franco-Ontarian struggle against Regulation 17 (1912 to 1927), which prohibited instruction in French after Grade 2.¹¹ Although francophones were the largest cultural demographic group in Pembroke, there was no francophone priest and of the two Catholic schools, only one, St. John School, offered any French instruction at all.¹²

In 1923, Lajoie stepped into a conflict that had begun brewing during the previous school year at St. John's, where francophone children constituted almost two-thirds of the enrolment. Parents had requested a teacher to give instruction in French. In response, in the spring of 1923, the school provided an anglophone sister. However, her French linguistic skills did not meet the requirements of the position, and the parents complained. Jeanne Lajoie was hired to replace her, but when she arrived in the fall, she felt that her presence was not welcome by the staff and administration. Eventually, Jeanne was dismissed, and replaced by the same anglophone sister who had preceded her.¹³

A new episode in the Regulation 17 controversy

Jeanne wrote to the Association Canadienne-Française d'Éducation d'Ontario (ACFÉO) apprising it of the situation. This letter was published in *Le Droit*, the Ottawa French daily. The Club Lorrain, a Pembroke association led by Alfred Longpré and dedicated to the promotion of Franco-Ontarian culture, stepped in to lend support. A request to reinstate Jeanne was signed by 113 fathers of students and sent to the school board. Parents then presented their demands for French instruction at a meeting with the school board, but the response was negative.¹⁴ The parents decided to pursue the matter, and adopted the slogan of the group Action Française of Montreal, "to the very end."¹⁵

At the time of Jeanne Lajoie's dismissal, the Ontario school conflict had been underway for well over a decade, having begun before the public announcement of Regulation 17 in 1912. The conflict played itself out on educational, political, ethnic, ideological and religious levels. The school conflict surrounding Regulation 17 stems from the convergence of several antagonistic forces: the ideological opposition between nationalists and imperialists; Anglo-Protestant Ontarians' fear of Franco-Catholic immigration; old rivalries between Orangeists (Irish Protestants) and Catholics; the clerical conflicts between French and Irish Catholics; and the divergence of partisan interests."¹⁶ The battle was closely followed by French-Canadians not only in Ontario, but throughout the country, because of its importance in the recognition of their collective linguistic and cultural rights.

French-Canadian associations were well practised in dealing with the Ontario school conflict. Founded in 1910, ACFÉO developed a strong network of local organizations to offer support, both moral and financial. The establishment of independent French schools was an effective way to apply pressure at the local level. This tactic had been used successfully in Ottawa (1915), Green Valley (1916), Welland (1920) and Windsor (1922).¹⁷ At a meeting of hundreds of concerned people in Pembroke, 25 heads of households voted for the creation of an independent school.¹⁸

The opening of the École libre de Sainte-Jeanne-d'Arc

Within a month of her dismissal from St. John School, Pembroke's independent French school was ready to open with Jeanne Lajoie as teacher. L'École libre de Sainte-Jeanne-d'Arc¹⁹ was initially located in the dining room of the Moïse Lafrance family's house where 55 pupils sat shoulder to shoulder.²⁰ At the inauguration of the school, on November 6, 1923, several journalists from Ottawa and Montreal were there to record the moment. Speeches were made by Alfred Longpré, president of the Cercle Lorrain, and Edmond Cloutier, Secretary of ACFÉO. The children began their first day by reciting the prayer to Saint Joan of Arc written by Bishop Élie-Anicet Latulippe of Haileybury, the sole francophone bishop in Ontario.²¹

Families who sent their children to the new school experienced an increased financial burden, since they were required to continue paying their regular school taxes in addition to financially supporting the independent institution. In addition to the support from parents, the school depended on public donations. Publicity was generated by ACFÉO and the newspapers, in particular *Le Droit* and *Le Devoir* (Montreal), and by the ecclesiastical network of parishes and colleges.²² Samuel Genest, president of the Commission des écoles séparées d'Ottawa toured Ontario and Quebec to raise funds. This outpouring of effort resulted in contributions from French-Canadian associations, colleges, businesses and individuals from across Ontario and Quebec, and from as far away as Edmonton.²³

Women played a vital and very public role during the Pembroke conflict, as they had elsewhere during earlier episodes of the Ontario school crisis.²⁴ Women organized the petition protesting the firing of Jeanne and for four years they were relentless in their activities to raise funds for the independent school, organizing card parties and bake sales, which were sometimes large gatherings. At these events, women spoke to the crowds, taking centre stage often for the first time in their lives. They also went door to door soliciting contributions.²⁵ Lajoie herself conducted solicitations of friends and associates in Montreal, where she spent summers visiting members of her family who had settled there.²⁶

The tenacity Lajoie showed throughout her life, despite her poor health, proved to be just one of the qualities that she used to her advantage during the four-year education crisis. Alfred

Longpré supplied a portrait of her that described the multiple facets of her personality that were visible during this time: “She always spoke unpretentiously and often eloquently. At our meetings, she displayed the wisdom of the ages and the enthusiasm of youth. Bestowed with a clear vision of things, she was often sought out for advice, which we gladly accepted. She was intensely modest and humble. In the classroom, she enthralled her students with her impeccable diction, her immaculate appearance, her sense of fairness, her love of children, her piety and her patriotic fervour. As one of our Pembroke old-timers put it: Miss Lajoie, she needs to stay with us to keep us all in line – with an iron will, no less.”²⁷

Thanks to the efforts of Jeanne Lajoie and many of the school’s strong supporters, Sainte-Jeanne-d’Arc School was able to move out of the Lafrance house and into a more suitable building during the winter of 1925,²⁸ and enrolment grew to between 75 and 100 students. The Pembroke school crisis finally ended in 1927, the year that Regulation 17 was rescinded, when the Pembroke Separate School Board hired several francophone teachers and created classes specifically for francophone students.²⁹ Unfortunately, Jeanne Lajoie was not able to participate in the new era that began for her pupils. Her dedicated work toward establishing a francophone independent school had taken a significant toll on her health and she was unable to continue teaching.

Declining health

During the years that she taught in Pembroke, Jeanne’s health steadily declined. In June of 1926, just after school let out for the summer, she fell unconscious in her room. She remained in Pembroke for the summer, and friends took care of her as she tried to regain her strength. In August, she visited a Montreal doctor who advised her to enter a sanatorium where she might experience some improvement in the health of her lungs. Having survived through the years of the school crisis by depending on the generosity of donors, Jeanne was suddenly without funds. Luckily, she was well-known as the heroine of the Pembroke crisis, and she was given access on a charitable basis to the services of a city-run sanatorium even though she was not officially a resident of Montreal.³⁰

Jeanne never recovered, finally succumbing to tuberculosis on March 2, 1930. Her brother Élias said the funeral mass and, according to her wishes, Lajoie was buried in a pauper’s grave in the Côte des Neiges cemetery in Montreal.³¹

Symbol of Franco-Ontarian struggle

Jeanne Lajoie, however, was not forgotten. She became the saint of the Franco-Ontarian cause, living on in the collective memory as the “Pucelle de Pembroke” – a reference to the courageous Saint Joan of Arc, the Maid (pucelle) of Orleans, who had also been victorious over the English – before her health succumbed due to her efforts to support the cause she championed.

Soon after her death, the journalist Victor Barrette published a moving obituary in *Le Droit*, in which he called Jeanne “the tiny flower of New France,” “the little lady with the heart of a lion,” and put her in the company of Jeanne Mance³² and Jeanne Le Ber,³³ legendary for their strength of character.³⁴ During the year of Jeanne’s death, Alfred Longpré published his account of the Pembroke struggle, which included Lajoie’s significant contributions. Longpré’s pamphlet contained a preface by Barrette, in which he described Jeanne as a saint among all of the “heroes of the French resistance in Pembroke. Above all others, in a luminous glow made brighter by death rises a figure worthy of veneration; that of a slight schoolteacher, called by Providence to the land of Pembroke – the perfect martyr, the purest vessel, delivered to the heights of agony for her own people, the lily of sorrows: the beloved and exalted Jeanne Lajoie.”³⁵

In 1939, a group of supporters had her remains transferred to an individual plot.³⁶ In 1940, the tenth anniversary of her death was marked by a ceremony held at her grave at which Chanoine Lionel Groulx, the influential French-Canadian nationalist thinker, praised her as an example to all French-Canadian teachers who should try to emulate her “by addressing national interests in education.”³⁷ That same year, a pamphlet published by Frère Marie-Urbain described the symbolic place that Jeanne Lajoie came to occupy in the Franco-Ontarian imagination: “A chapter in Ontario’s illustrious history, Jeanne Lajoie’s story recounts the survival of our language and national traditions.”³⁸

In honour of Jeanne Lajoie’s dedication to teaching and her committed efforts to promote francophone educational institutions in Ontario, two Ontario schools bear her name today, the public École élémentaire Jeanne Lajoie in Toronto and the Roman Catholic École intermédiaire Jeanne-Lajoie in Pembroke.



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¹ Élias Lajoie, quoted in Frère Urbain-Marie, *Jeanne Lajoie, “L'héroïne de Pembroke,”* Laprairie, Quebec, Frères de l’Instruction Chrétienne, circa 1940, p. 5. “une blondinette, douzième enfant de la famille; petite fille bien faible de

santé, mais combien attirante par ses grands yeux bleus, profonds et forts intelligents.”

² Urbain-Marie, p. 6.

³ Numerous excerpts from Jeanne’s letters are contained in Urbain-Marie.

⁴ The Orange Order was a Protestant fraternal society, founded in 1795 in Ireland to commemorate the victory of William of Orange at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690. It became the principal link between the British government and the Protestants in Ireland. In British North America the Order was founded in 1830 by Ogle R. Gowan. He used the lodges as a base for a political career, and brought Catholics and Orangemen together in 1836 to support the Conservative cause. There was a schism in 1853 over the Conservatives’ alliance with the French-Canadian Parti Bleu. This was healed in 1856, but thereafter the Orange vote was divided. The Order had occasionally been accused of promoting anti-Catholicism by bringing old world disagreements with them.

⁵ Urbain-Marie, pp. 11-12.

⁶ Urbain-Marie, pp. 12-14.

⁷ Jeanne Lajoie in Urbain-Marie, p. 15. “Ma détermination est bien prise, et si ma santé le permet, je resterai coûte que coûte.”

⁸ The “écoles modèles” provided teacher training, but not at the same level as a normal school. Regulation 17 effectively meant that the existence of a French normal school in French was prohibited. See Gaetan Gervais, “Le Règlement XVII (1912-1927),” *Revue du Nouvel-Ontario*, No 18, 1996, pp. 177-178.

⁹ Urbain-Marie, p. 18.

¹⁰ Urbain-Marie, p. 23-25.

¹¹ In 1912, Regulation 17 of the Ontario Department of Education proposed to severely restrict the right to French-language schooling in both public and Catholic schools in Ontario. Senator Napoléon Belcourt, an advocate for bilingual separate schools in Ontario, lobbied repeatedly against Regulation 17. Although his efforts were rejected by the Supreme Court of Ontario and the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in London, the high level of public protest and interest surrounding the Regulation ensured that it was never fully implemented.

¹² Urbain-Marie, pp. 27-28.

¹³ Alfred Longpré, *L'éveil de la race: Un épisode de la résistance franco-ontarienne (Pembroke, 1923-27)*, Ottawa, Éditions du Droit, 1939, pp. 21-23, 25.

¹⁴ Urbain-Marie, pp. 30-34.

¹⁵ Longpré, p. 30. “Jusqu’au bout.”

¹⁶ Gervais, p. 123. “...la lutte scolaire autour du Règlement 17 s’explique par la convergence de plusieurs antagonismes: l’opposition idéologique entre nationalistes et impérialistes; la crainte des Ontariens anglo-protestants devant l’immigration franco-catholique; les vieilles rivalités entre les orangistes (Irlandais protestants) et les catholiques; les luttes cléricales entre catholiques français et irlandais; la divergence d’intérêts politiques partisans.”

¹⁷ Website of the Centre de recherche en civilisation canadienne-française (CRCCF), *Passeport Ontario Français*, “La résistance dans les écoles franco-ontariennes,”

<http://www.uottawa.ca/academic/crcf/passeport/IV/IVD1a/IVD1a06.html>

¹⁸ Urbain-Marie, p. 36.

¹⁹ Named in honour of Sainte Jeanne d’Arc of France as a symbol of her courage.

²⁰ The house still stands at 300 Dominion Street.

²¹ Longpré, pp. 32-37.

²² *collèges classiques*

²³ Urbain-Marie, pp. 47, 50.

²⁴ Website of the CRCCF, *Passeport Ontario Français*, “Conférence du Père Joyal,” www.uottawa.ca/academic/crcf/passeport/IV/IVD1a/IVD1a06-2-1.html

²⁵ Longpré, p. 40.

²⁶ Longpré, p. 43.

²⁷ Longpré, p. 42. “Elle causait avec simplicité toujours, souvent avec éloquence. Dans nos assemblées, elle avait la sagesse des vieillards et l’enthousiasme des jeunes. Souvent, nous avons dû à sa vision nette des choses des conseils dont nous profitons avec reconnaissance. Sa modestie, son humilité, étaient extrêmes. En classe, elle captivait ses élèves par une diction impeccable, sa bonne tenue, son esprit de justice, son amour des enfants, sa piété et sa flamme patriotique. Comme disait un de nos bons vieux de Pembroke: Mlle Lajoie, il faut qu’elle soit toujours avec nous autres pour battre la mesure. Avec cela, une volonté de fer.”

²⁸ Urbain-Marie, p. 60.

²⁹ Website of CRCCF, *Passeport Ontario Français*, “L’école libre de Pembroke (Ontario), 1923-1940,” www.uottawa.ca/academic/crccf/passeport/IV/IVD1a/IVD1a06-5.html

³⁰ Urbain, pp. 70-80.

³¹ Urbain-Marie, p. 80.

³² Jeanne Mance (1606-1673) was a nurse who was born in Normandy, France, who founded the first hospital in New France, the Hôtel-Dieu de Montreal, and was also the co-founder of Montreal with Paul de Chomedey de Maisonneuve. “cette petite fleur de la Nouvelle-France” et “petite fille au cœur de lion.”

³³ Jeanne Le Ber (1662-1714) was a wealthy Montreal heiress and goddaughter to Jeanne Mance and Paul de Chomedey de Maisonneuve (see F.N. 29). At the age of 15 she renounced her comfortable life and took a vow of poverty, chastity and seclusion. She gave her marriage dowry to finance the chapel for the Sisters of the Congregation of the Blessed Virgin, in Montreal. She was later made a saint by the Roman Catholic Church.

³⁴ Barrette quoted in Longpré, pp. 59, 61.

³⁵ Longpré, p. 7. “héros de la résistance française à Pembroke.” “Au-dessus de tous, dans un nimbe grandi par la mort monte une figure de vitrail; celle d’une petite institutrice, transportée providentiellement sur la terre de Pembroke, et depuis, victime parfaite, hostie très pure, offerte jusqu’à l’agonie pour les siens, le lys des souffrances: la chère et magnifique Jeanne Lajoie.”

³⁶ Urbain-Marie, p. 95.

³⁷ Website of CRCCF, *Passeport Ontario Français*, “Hommage à Jeanne Lajoie, la ‘Pucelle de Pembroke’,” www.uottawa.ca/academic/crccf/passeport/IV/IVD1a/IVD1a06-5-5.html. “en mettant le souci national dans l’éducation”

³⁸ Urbain-Marie, p. 3. “L’histoire de Jeanne Lajoie est un épisode du grand drame ontarien où se joua la survivance de notre langue et de nos traditions nationales.”