ONTARIO HERITAGE TRUST

An agency of the Government of Ontario

On October 27, 2008, the Ontario Heritage Trust and the Mattawa Bonfield Economic Development Corporation unveiled a provincial plaque at Mattawa and District Museum in Mattawa, Ontario, to commemorate the French-Canadian Settlement and the CPR in the Mattawa Area.

The bilingual plaque reads as follows:

FRENCH-CANADIAN SETTLEMENT AND THE CPR IN THE MATTAWA AREA

Francophone settlement rapidly increased in the Mattawa area with the arrival of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) in 1881. During construction of the rail line, the local economy benefitted from the presence of thousands of French-Canadian workers, some of whom were accompanied by their families. Once the railway was operational, the local lumber industry expanded and Mattawa prospered as a community, a supply and transportation hub, and a lumber depot. Development was also stimulated in the towns to the west of Mattawa along the CPR line – Eau Claire, Bonfield, Astorville and Corbeil – communities that also benefitted from significant numbers of French-Canadian settlers during the 1880s. These people brought with them their unique culture and heritage, and left a lasting francophone legacy in this area of Ontario.

L'ÉTABLISSEMENT DE CANADIENS FRANÇAIS ET LE CP DANS LA RÉGION DE MATTAWA

L'établissement de francophones se développa rapidement dans la région de Mattawa avec l'arrivée en 1881 du Canadien Pacifique (CP). Pendant la construction du chemin de fer, l'économie locale bénéfica de la présence de milliers de travailleurs canadiens français, certains étant accompagnés de leur famille. Dès que le chemin de fer fut opérationnel, l'industrie locale du bois de sciage enregistra un véritable essor et Mattawa devint une collectivité prospère, une plaque tournante du transport et de l'approvisionnement, et un dépôt de bois. Le développement fut également encouragé dans les villes situées à l'ouest de Mattawa, le long de la ligne du CP : Eau Claire, Bonfield, Astorville et Corbeil. Ce sont autant de collectivités qui bénéficièrent de l'arrivée massive de pionniers canadiens français dans les années 1880. Ces derniers apportèrent avec eux leur patrimoine et leur culture uniques et laissèrent un héritage francophone durable dans cette région de l'Ontario.

Historical background

Mattawa before the arrival of the railway

Located at the confluence of the Mattawa and Ottawa Rivers, Mattawa, which means "meeting of rivers" in Ashinabe,[1] has always been a crossroads. During early exploration and the fur trade, it was on the route for those going north or west,[2] and many French explorers passed through, including Champlain, Radisson, Des Groseilliers and La Vérendrye.[3] The Northwest Company established a post there in 1784, and in 1837, the Hudson's Bay Company opened Mattawa House, a seven-building post.[4]

The fur trade attracted aboriginal people to this area and there was significant inter-marriage between the different cultural groups. In the 1830s and 40s, Mattawa was an important aboriginal village, with the bands of Amable Dufond and Antoine Kikwiwissens converging there. Into at least the early 20th century, a significant proportion of the area's francophone population remained aboriginal and Métis.

As the fur trade declined, Mattawa became a centre for the forest industry, which continued to use the system of waterways to transport its products. Lumberjacks began arriving around 1850, and the first local lumber entrepreneur was Eugène Varin. The Oblate priests established a permanent mission in 1869, which eventually became the parish of Saint Anne in 1882. The following year, Mattawa had a permanent population of 50 Roman Catholic and 25 Protestant families. As the "capital" of the lumber camps, it also had a transient population of 2,000 people. These were lumberjacks, log drivers and crib guides, who passed through in the fall on their way to the lumber camps where they cut down trees throughout the winter, and came through again in the spring as they floated the logs to the port in Quebec.[5] By the early 1870s, there was a Catholic school, and the Grey Nuns established a school and a hospital in 1878.[6]

Construction of the railway

The railway "donna des ailes à la colonisation" (provided an impetus for colonization), observed Quebec journalist Arthur Buies (1840-1901).[7] Indeed, many French-Canadians settled in Mattawa and the surrounding region thanks to the Canadian Pacific Railway. Some came to the area while working on the construction of the railway and decided to stay, while others arrived by train with the express intention of obtaining and settling on a piece of land. In addition to aiding the development of Mattawa, the railway was also beneficial to French-Canadian settlement in several towns located to its west; in particular, Eau Claire, Bonfield, Astorville and Corbeil.[8]

Even before the railway became operational in Mattawa, the city was an important centre for this significant project. By 1880, there were 4,000 men working on the railway line in the area. A year later, when the line opened, half of the construction crews had already moved farther west to continue the work, but 2,000 railway men remained in Mattawa, in addition to the women and children accompanying them. Of the men, 1,000 were French-Canadians, 400 were Irish, and the remainder of other nationalities.[9]

The Oblate Father Jean-Marie Nédélec was an experienced missionary, having previously worked in First Nations communities as well as lumber camps, and he judged the railway camps to be the most difficult of his ministries. Nédélec served the railway workers during 1881 and 1882. He described them as living in extremely poor conditions: the men were disgustingly dirty, covered with vermin and lived "dans de vrais trous de siffleux [marmotes]" (in holes no better than those dug by groundhogs).[10] Nédélec documented the difficulties he encountered, and provided a glimpse of life in the railway camps. He described a lack or loss of 'Christian habits'; the proximity to inns and bawdy houses, dancing and drinking parties, ethnic and linguistic differences, travel distances and the poor state of roads, the scarcity of large gathering places and the difficulty of attracting people to religious services who were not accustomed to attending them.[11]

The railway transforms Mattawa

Father Alexis de Barbezieux poignantly described the arrival of railway service in Mattawa: " L'année 1881 vit enfin se réaliser le rêve si longtemps caressé des habitants de Mattawa. Le chemin de fer du Pacifique fut livré à la circulation et la petite ville fut reliée au reste du monde."(The Mattawa citizens finally realized their long awaited dream in 1881. The Pacific railway was completed and the small town was connected to the rest of the world.)[12] The consequences for the town were enormous. In Mattawa and the surrounding area, there were now 2,000 men in the lumber camps, and another 2,000 in the railway construction camps. Most were Roman Catholics, and the missionaries were so overwhelmed that they required reinforcements.[13] In just one year, the lumber camps greatly expanded and, by 1882, employed 3,000 men.[14]

Due to the railway, Mattawa became the most important Hudson's Bay Company trading post in the Ottawa Valley and remained operational until 1908.[15] The town also became a transportation centre for the lumber industry and for colonization. In 1887, Mattawa became a station on the Temiskaming Colonization Railway, the "Mocassin Line" that was constructed under the direction of the Oblate priests in order to attract French-Canadians from Quebec and repatriate Franco-Americans by offering them cheap land in the Temiskaming region.[16]

The town was a major lumber depot, a supply centre, and the location to which lumber companies came to hire for the logging camps. As Ottawa changed from a rowdy lumber town

into the respectable federal capital, Mattawa became the spot where lumberjacks spent their money and caroused as they descended from the Upper Ottawa Valley in the spring.[17] One of the establishments that accommodated the numerous travellers was the Mattawa House Hotel, built in 1881 and operated by Cleo Lamarche.[18]

As a result of the town's growth, it attained municipal status in 1884. That year, there were 165 families, of which 41 were Protestant. In addition to the families living in town, there were 29 settlers' families established in the surrounding area.[19]

As the population grew and the lumber camps continued to expand and attract more workers to the area, it was necessary to improve and enlarge the buildings that housed the religious institutions. Construction of the twin-steepled stone church of Saint Anne's Parish began in 1889, replacing the first church built by Father Louis Lebret in 1863. The small hospital built after the Grey Nuns arrived in 1878 was destroyed by fire in 1885, and a larger one was rebuilt immediately. There was a pressing need for a hospital, given the number of accidents that occurred in the forest. In 1894, the hospital cared for 400 patients, a sign of the "triste prospérité" (glum prosperity) of the area.[20]

The growth of associations went in tandem with the construction of buildings. The same year that the new church was begun, 1889, the Archiconfrérie du Rosaire and the Ligue du Sacré-Coeur were created.[21] The Dames de Sainte-Anne followed in 1894.[22]

By 1894, Mattawa and its surroundings were prospering and electricity was made available to the town on Christmas Eve, thanks to the efforts of local people and the encouragement of Oblate Father Paul-Émile Gendreau.[23]

Construction of the Hurdman Power Plant brought thousands of transient workers into the area, and by 1895, there were at least six hotels to accommodate them. In addition to the existing Mattawa House, the town also had Windsor House, Victoria House, Lumberman's House, The Rosemount and Ottawa House.[24]

At the turn of the 20th century, Mattawa continued to flourish. It had 2,000 inhabitants, of which 1,500 were Catholic. Of the latter, two-thirds were French-Canadian. There were 150 families on established farms nearby.[25]

The development in Mattawa, encouraged by the arrival of the railway, also benefited the surrounding communities such as Eau Claire, Bonfield, Astorville and Corbeil. As soon as the line to Mattawa was opened in 1881, the CPR "fût aussitôt poussé vers l'ouest avec une dévorante activité,"(quickly pushed enthusiastically westward),[26] and nearby towns were never the same.

Eau Claire

Located 19 kilometres west of Mattawa, Eau Claire was named after the clear waters of the Amable du Fond River. The community was begun in the 1870s by lumber entrepreneur William Mackey and developed into a town due to the railway. Mackey started a saw mill, a church, a school and a store.[27] Still in its infancy in 1884, the town was served spiritually every two weeks by Father Moïse Legault.[28]

In 1886, the Catholic mission of Sainte Thérèse was officially established during a period of rapid growth in the town, when it attained a population of 28 Catholic families and 20 Protestant ones. At this time, approximately 200 people worked in the saw mills. [29]

Three years later, there were 100 families, of which 33 were Catholic and 20 families were French-Canadian.[30] The relationship between the Catholics and Protestants was not the best at this time, due in part to the activities of the Orange Order.[31] In 1892, the railway was about to demolish the old building that had been used for Catholic services, and a new chapel was necessary. Father Nédélec visited the nearby lumber camps and sawmills, asking for contributions.[32] In 1894, a prosperous year for the town, the new chapel was blessed. By then, the ethnic makeup of the mission had changed and there were 32 Catholic families, all French-Canadian except three.[33]

The lumberman J.R. Booth[34] bought out William Mackey in 1904, and sent the logs to his mills in Hull, Quebec, instead of the local sawmill. With this important source of work gone, the town's population declined and the settlement eventually moved south of its original location.[35]

Bonfield

Located at the foot of Lake Nosbonsing (the Pied-du-Lac),[36] Bonfield was named for the member of provincial parliament for Renfrew South and lumber merchant, James Bonfield. The community began to develop around 1860 due to the employment opportunities available at Booth's lumber company. The first settlers arrived from localities in the Upper Ottawa Valley and on the Madawaska plateau.[37]

In 1880, the first groups of railway workers came to Bonfield, and a chapel was built in 1881. At this time, the lumber camp missionaries stopped visiting Bonfield, and a regular mission was established by Father Joseph-Édouard Émery. In 1882, the same year the railway arrived, he improved the interior of the chapel, set up a school and constructed a sacristy.[38]

Due to the railway, settlers continued arriving in the region, many from Montreal. The mission of St. Philomène became the local parish in 1886 and had 175 families.[39] That same year, the

town became a municipality. The year 1887 brought 39 new families, and by 1894, Bonfield had 200 families, almost all of them French-Canadian.[40]

Astorville
Astorville was first called Lévesqueville in honour of its original and visionary founder. Joseph-Alphonse Lévesque came to the region in 1886 with the intention of founding a colony. He bought lands west of Bonfield, at the Tête-du-Lac end of Lake Nosbonsing, and brought his family from Joliette to join him.[41]

That same year, Lévesque helped three brothers, Cléophas, Alexandre and Alvarez Robert, from the Saguenay, to settle and become established. Alexandre and Alvarez moved on to other places, but Cléophas became the first mayor of the town, and one of the presidents of its agricultural society.[42] Other French-Canadian families arrived over the years, and by the fall of 1887, the community decided to build a chapel. Lévesque provided the land, and the construction was led by Father Thomas-Georges Gagnon, the pastor of Bonfield who was also responsible for Lévesqueville Parish.[43]

By 1897, there were some 30 families in the town, almost all of them French-Canadian. Many people worked for J.R. Booth, who had constructed a nine-kilometre-long railway to transport the logs from Lake Nipissing to Lake Nosbonsing. From there they were floated to Mattawa, then on to the sawmills of the Ottawa-Hull region.[44]

In 1890, Lévesque founded The Agricultural Society of the Township of Ferris, which held an annual fair, and encouraged standardized and productive agricultural practices. When the lumber industry declined around 1912-13, many townspeople were able to make the transition from the lumber industry to agriculture, largely due to the efforts of this society.[45] Father Antonin Astor assumed the position of first pastor in 1902 and the village name was soon changed to Astorville in his honour.[46]

Corbeil
Situated 16 kilometres east of North Bay on the CPR line, Corbeil was known as Clint until 1890, then as Grit, the first name of the postmaster's wife. The year 1888 brought a large wave of settlers. They were joined the following year by Jean-Baptiste Corbeil and his wife and nine children from Orléans.

At the time, Corbeil's brother, Joseph, was making railway ties in Spokane, in the Columbia territory. Jean-Baptiste wrote to him describing Grit in glowing terms, and soon Joseph arrived with his family. He built a prosperous sawmill near the small lakes named Les Vases and Lac à la Truite, and also acquired a railway siding. Residents began referring to the place as Corbeil's

Siding and eventually this name became more popular than Grit. Corbeil was officially adopted as the town's name when the post office was established in 1897.

Joseph's sawmill continued to grow, and in 1892, he recruited a group of families from Orléans to move to Corbeil and work for him. The following year, town residents built a church with lumber donated by Joseph Corbeil. The construction of the church was done through work "bees," led by Father Thomas-Georges Gagnon, whose ministry included Corbeil. More French-Canadian families arrived in 1894 and eventually many became farmers.[47] By 1897, there were 30 Catholic families.[48] Corbeil became famous throughout the world when the Dionne quintuplets were born there in 1934.

Conclusion

The introduction of the Canadian Pacific Railway had a significant impact on the birth and development of towns like Mattawa and those surrounding it, but more significantly, this development led to opportunities that attracted French-Canadians to the area, many of whom settled there and left a lasting francophone imprint on the area's culture and heritage.

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[1] Indian and Northern Affairs Canada website: http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ks/2008_e.html

[2] Robert Choquette, *L'Ontario français,historique*, Montreal, Études Vivantes, 1980, p. 13.

[3] Mattawa District Chamber of Commerce website: http://www.mdcoc.com/projects/mainstreetstatue.asp

[4] Travel Back in Time website:
http://www.visitamuseum.com/en/museums.asp?id=28&action=museum&citypick=Mattawa

[5] Gaston Carrière, *Jean-Marie Nédélec, o.m.i., 1834-1896*, Sudbury, La Société historique du Nouvel-Ontario, 1957, p. 17.

[6] Gaétan Gervais, "L'Ontario (1821-1910)", in Cornelius Jaenen, *Les Franco-Ontariens*, Ottawa, Les Presses de l'Université d'Ottawa, 1993, pp. 88-89.

[7] Gervais, p. 8. Buies was a radical member of the Institut Canadien, a group of young French-Canadian intellectuals who became a political and cultural force in francophone society. Buies eventually became an explorer and geographer who chronicled his visits to northern Ontario and Quebec as they were opened to settlement.

[8] Gaetan Vallières, *L'Ontario français par les documents,* Montreal, Études Vivantes, 1980, p. 126.

[9] Carrière, p. 31.

[10] Carrière, p. 35.

[11] Nédélec in Carrière, p. 32.

[12] Alexis de Barbezieux, *Histoire de la province ecclésiastique d'Ottawa et de la colonisation dans la vallée de l'Ottawa*, Vol. II, Ottawa, Cie d'imprimerie d'Ottawa, 1897, p. 64.

[13] Barbezieux, p. 64.

[14] Barbezieux, p. 64.

[15] Paul-François Sylvestre, *Mattawa*, Ottawa, Centre franco-ontarien de ressources pédagogiques, 1983, p. 119.

[16] Wilderness Tramways website: http://home.cc.umanitoba.ca/~wyatt/alltime/wilderness-tramways-zz.html

[17] Gervais, p. 89.

[18] History of Mattawa website: www.voyageurdays.com/history.htm

[19] Barbezieux, p. 426.

[20] Barbezieux, p. 430, and History of Mattawa website: www.voyageurdays.com/history.htm

[21] Barbezieux, p. 427.

[22] Barbezieux, p. 433.

[23] Barbezieux, p. 430.

[24] History of Mattawa website: www.voyageurdays.com/history.htm

[25] Barbezieux, pp. 431,425.

[26] Barbezieux, p. 415.

[27] Community Voices, Heritage Perspective website: "Eau Claire Gorge a Great Place to Visit", www.pastforward.ca/perspectives/July72000.htm

[28] Barbezieux, p. 426.

[29] Carrière, p. 25.

[30] Nédélec in Carrière, p. 25.

[31] 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. During the Irish insurrection of 1798 it became the principal link between the British government and the Protestants in Ireland. In British North America the Grand Lodge of the Orange Order was founded in 1830 at Brockville by Ogle R. Gowan. He sought to bring 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 also been occasionally accused of promoting anti-Catholicism by bringing old world disagreements with them.

[32] Carrière, pp. 26-27.

[33] Barbezieux, p. 432.

[34] The lumber baron J.R. Booth (1826-1925) owned the largest sawmill in Canada, located in Ottawa. He also established mills at Mattawa, Temiskaming, Calvin and Chisolm Townships and at numerous locations in and around Lake Nipissing.

[35] Community Voices website: "Eau Claire Gorge a Great Place to Visit", www.pastforward.ca/perspectives/

[36] Jean Archambault, "Astorville", in *Pour un Cinquantenaire. Monographies, Bonfield 1886, Astorville 1902, Corbeil 1920*, Sudbury, La Société historique du Nouvel-Ontario, 1952, p. 25.

[37] Joseph-Henri Martel, *Bonfield Illustré*, Mattawa, La Sentinelle, 1897, p. 5.

[38] Nédélec in Carrière, p. 24.

[39] Carrière, p. 24.

[40] Barbezieux, pp. 421, 424.

[41] Archambault, pp. 23, 40.

[42] Archambault, p. 23.

[43] Archambault, p. 25.

[44] Barbezieux, p. 423.

[45] Archambault, p. 43.

[46] Community Voices, Heritage Perspectives website: "Astorville parish celebrates its centennial", www.pastforward.ca/perspectives/sept_62002.htm

[47] Information on Corbeil can be found in two articles: Joseph-Arthur Corbeil, "Joseph Corbeil, le pionnier de Corbeil", in *Familles pionnières, leur odyssée, leur enracinement,* Sudbury, La Société historique du Nouvel-Ontario, 1944, pp. 19-21, and Marcel Laroque, "Corbeil", in *Pour un Cinquantenaire. Monographies, Bonfield 1886, Astorville 1902, Corbeil 1920*, Sudbury, La Société historique du Nouvel-Ontario, 1952, pp. 57-61.

[48] Barbezieux, p. 423.