

On March 24, 2009, the Ontario Heritage Trust and ACFO Niagara unveiled a provincial plaque at Sacré-Cœur Roman Catholic Church in Welland, Ontario to commemorate the French Community in Welland.

The bilingual plaque reads as follows:

FRENCH COMMUNITY IN WELLAND

The neighbourhood that became commonly known as “French Town” was established in this area in 1918, when approximately 20 French-Canadian families arrived from Quebec to work at the Empire Cotton Mills plant. The Roman Catholic Parish of Sacré-Cœur was established in 1920 and became the cultural centre of the francophone community that developed around Empire Street. Additional French-Canadian families arrived from Quebec, New Brunswick and northern Ontario throughout the 1920s. Another wave of francophones moved here at the outset of the Second World War, attracted largely by employment opportunities in local industry. The French district was a strong and vibrant community that protected and fostered French-Canadian language and culture. The neighbourhood’s population reached its peak during the 1960s, but the majority of Welland’s francophone population still lived here until the late 1980s. The strong legacy of French-Canadian culture and heritage created by the small but dynamic francophone community remains within Welland to this day.

LA COMMUNAUTÉ FRANÇAISE DE WELLAND

Le quartier connu sous le nom familier de « ville française » fut créé en 1918, lors de l’arrivée d’environ 20 familles canadiennes françaises du Québec, venues travailler à l’usine d’Empire Cotton Mills. La paroisse catholique romaine Sacré-Cœur vit le jour en 1920 et devint le centre culturel de la communauté francophone qui s’était établie aux alentours de la rue Empire. D’autres familles canadiennes françaises arrivèrent du Québec, du Nouveau-Brunswick et du Nord de l’Ontario tout au long des années 1920. Une autre vague de francophones s’établit dans le quartier au début de la Seconde Guerre mondiale, attirée surtout par les emplois offerts par l’industrie locale. Le district français était une communauté forte et vivante qui protégeait la culture canadienne française et encourageait l’utilisation du français. C’est dans les années 1960 que le quartier compta le plus grand nombre d’habitants, mais la majorité des francophones de

Welland continua d'y résider jusqu'à la fin des années 1980. L'influence profonde de la culture et du patrimoine canadiens français de la petite et dynamique communauté francophone continue de se faire sentir à Welland.

Historical background

Origins and location

The origins of the francophone community in Welland date back to the opening of the Welland Canal in 1829. Settlement developed on both sides of the canal, with early industries and their workers settling on the eastern side. The bridges that connected the two sides of the town were lifted to permit ships to pass through, regularly disrupting communication and movement between the two halves of the city. For two generations, most francophones worked in the industries located on the east side of Welland, and their homes and institutions were concentrated in an area that became commonly known as French Town.¹

Two periods of intense immigration brought French-Canadians to Welland. The first wave of people arrived during the First World War and continued through the 1920s, while the second phase coincided with the Second World War years and lasted until the mid-1960s.²

The first wave of French-Canadians

From 1905 to 1918, several large industries were established in Welland, and the population of the city quintupled.³ The Empire Cotton Mills of Montreal (originally Woods Manufacturing and later Wabasso) established a plant in Welland in 1912. During the economic boom caused by the First World War, there was a shortage of factory workers. The Empire Cotton Mills plant recruited skilled textile workers from the cotton mill in Montmorency, near Quebec City.⁴ The neighbourhood that became commonly referred to as "French Town" was created in 1918 when 20 French-Canadian families arrived from Montmorency and settled on the east side of Welland. The company arranged for housing for the new arrivals and, by 1919, the number of francophone families had doubled.⁵

News of the opportunities in Welland spread quickly throughout Quebec and provoked an additional wave of migration, especially from Montmorency and Bellechasse Counties, and the Gaspé Peninsula. However, people arrived from all regions of Quebec as well as from New Brunswick.⁶

Founding of Sacré-Cœur Parish and School

The first francophone families to arrive joined St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church, an English-language parish located near the corner of Hellems and Griffiths streets. But the French-Canadian community needed services in its own language, and Father Rosario Tanguay, from Saint-Hyacinthe, Quebec, who had previously worked in bilingual communities, arrived in 1919

to minister to them. St. Mary's permitted Father Tanguay the use of the church basement to conduct French services. The 250 French-Canadians who lived on Welland, Duncan, Division, Cozy, Burgar and Empire (known as Queen at that time) streets already formed the nucleus of French Town.

Founded in 1920, Sacré-Cœur Parish became the religious, social and cultural centre for the residents of French Town. Various other social, economic and educational institutions and associations eventually grew out of Sacré-Cœur. The parish soon purchased the Doan property on Empire Street. It included two houses, one of which became the church. Empire Street also led directly to the Empire Cotton Mill. The street was lined with the parish church and elementary school, a credit union, and the social club building – it became the “main street” of French Town.

Eventually the parish outgrew the makeshift church and the pastor decided in 1921 to amalgamate it with the military barracks located on nearby Welland Street. The barrack building was separated into two sections, which were then moved to the existing church property. The new church, known at the time as "*Le Camp*," served for religious services and parish social activities, as well as the private school for children aged five to eight years old.

Schooling in French was a primary concern in the community. Because of the severe limits on public schooling in French imposed by Regulation 17,⁷ some families chose to send their children to the parish's private school. Gradually, from the late 1920s until the 1980s, Welland's francophone community received increased access to public education in French, thanks to the enforcement of guarantees of linguistic rights at the federal level, and legislation at the provincial level.

By the 1930s, the parish offered a full range of activities for its parishioners – including a children's choir, the Boy Scouts, the Dames de Sainte-Anne, the Enfants de Marie, the Ligue du Saint-Nom du Jésus and the Caisse de décès. By 1933, the church buildings again were too small for the congregation. Father Tanguay, in search of a solution, consulted Archbishop Neil McNeil of Toronto, who said, "Go ahead, Father, build a church; your people need it; French people are church builders and they pay for their church, go ahead, build."⁸ The new brick church building was blessed in October 1934. That same year also marked the 25th anniversary of Father Tanguay's ordination and a wonderful parish event celebrated the two occasions.

Due to its largely industrial-based economy, Welland was particularly hard hit by the Great Depression of the 1930s and many French Town families left to search for work elsewhere. The church, however, still had an outstanding debt of \$50,000 on the new building that weighed heavily on Father Tanguay. He died suddenly in 1940 at the age of 55. The Franciscan order

assumed the ministry of the parish whose financial situation remained precarious for several years.

The second wave of French-Canadians

The Second World War economy brought Welland's industries out of financial depression. However, the textile industry remained in decline, and the steel industry, in particular Atlas Steel, Page Hersey Tubes and Union Carbide, offered most of the jobs that attracted new arrivals from Europe and from within Canada. In response to the availability of jobs, more French-Canadian families arrived. Thirty families from St. Magloire in Bellechasse County, Quebec, came to Welland during a two-month period in 1942.⁹ The railroad continued to bring large numbers of immigrants. The stationmaster in Quebec City remarked to one man embarking on the train for Welland that he had just seen 10 or 12 families buy one-way tickets for that same destination.¹⁰ Others came by car, sometimes with people who made their living by organizing transportation for immigrants.¹¹

There was no shortage of work for the new arrivals. In fact, factory representatives recruited new employees in the streets. The Empire Cotton Mills employed so many francophones that they considered it a French-Canadian workplace¹²

This second wave of French-Canadian immigration was particularly important for the diversification of the social structure of French Town. In addition to factory workers, a certain number of professionals, mainly physicians, lawyers and teachers, also came.¹³ In 1946, the parish had over 500 families and more than 3,000 people in all.

The newly-arrived immigrants from Quebec were familiar with credit unions, which had become successful in their native province. They encouraged the creation of the Caisse populaire Sacré-Cœur in 1947 in the basement of the church, and built their own building in 1948. It was later renamed the Caisse populaire de Welland. The credit union was founded with the specific aim of helping families purchase their own houses from the Wabasso Company. Many of these homes were located on Cozy, Burgar and Welland streets.¹⁴ Over the years, the services of the Caisse populaire made it possible for a high proportion of parishioners to become homeowners.¹⁵

From the beginning, and for years following, the political centre of town was the Lemelin et Belleau general store at the corner of Welland and Queen streets. Edmond Lemelin, the owner, loved to talk politics and many people stopped by to do the same. His son Joseph was elected to the city council in 1949. Edmond's brother Loyola was elected to the same body in 1957, and also later represented the city on the Niagara Regional Council. Another French Town politician was Aurel Gervais, who was elected alderman in 1969. Gervais was active in the administration of the arena and in other sports and leisure activities.¹⁶

The francophone population, especially business people and professionals, began to move out into new residential areas during the 1940s, and with time, more and more families would move away from the streets surrounding Empire Street. Despite this trend, Sacré-Cœur Parish and its institutions and associations continued to act as the heart of Welland's francophone community. By 1957, there were almost 1,000 families in the parish and the church had become too small once again. A new church was constructed next door to the old one, which was transformed into a gymnasium facility.

By 1961, the parish had grown to 1,225 francophone families, and more clubs and associations had been created: Ligue du Sacré-Cœur, Tiers-Ordre, Société St. Jean-Baptiste, Club des jeunes, Club Richelieu, Société des Artisans, Guides et Jeannettes and Association de la Jeunesse Franco-Ontarienne.¹⁷

Immigration continued throughout the 1960s, with most French-Canadians arriving from northern Ontario and the Abitibi region of Quebec where mines were closing.¹⁸ During a few days in 1966, more than 15 families arrived.¹⁹ By 1969, the parish had 1,319 families and 6,003 parishioners.²⁰ The continued influx of significant numbers of francophones helped renew the French-Canadian culture of French Town, while the maintenance of that culture, along with the presence of job opportunities, acted as a magnet for French-Canadian immigrants.

In the 1960s, most members of the French community were factory workers and labourers. A few had moved up to the rank of foreman, but there were no francophone engineers in the heavy industries of the area.²¹ However, the population became more occupationally diversified as more francophones started small businesses. The growth of this entrepreneurial group was reflected in the creation of the Association des Hommes D'affaires Canadiens-Français de Welland in 1955. Besides the promotion of the economic interests of its members, the objectives of this group included the promotion of the French language.²²

A private parish secondary school opened in 1959, and a new building was constructed for it in 1965, including a residence for girls. The new school was located on Tanguay Street, in a recently developed residential area in the eastern part of the parish, beyond French Town. In 1968, due to changes in education laws that endorsed the establishment of French public secondary schools, the private secondary school was sold to the public school board and renamed École secondaire Confédération.

The Caisse populaire de Welland continued to flourish. It employed five full-time people: the original manager, the assistant manager and three tellers.²³ The significance of this institution within the francophone community was illustrated by the fact that 500 members turned out for the 1966 annual meeting.²⁴

Fifty years of development

During the 1970s, more francophone teachers arrived to fill positions in the schools, which were offering more classes and instruction in French. This decade also saw further enhancements to the Sacré-Cœur church with the installation of a Casavant organ and stained glass windows. By 1980, when the parish celebrated its 60th anniversary, it was a vibrant community that supported a variety of clubs and associations.

During the late 1980s, nearly three-quarters of Welland's francophones still lived in French Town.²⁵ The cohesiveness of the community came largely from the fact that the francophones lived in close proximity to each other in the area surrounding the parish church. These characteristics of the Welland francophone community – the large number of families within the same area, a regular influx of native speakers and strong cultural institutions – contributed to the unusually high rate of language retention in the community. In 1988, even though francophones represented just 16 per cent of the Welland population, their retention of the French language was strong and similar to that of Cornwall, where francophones comprised 34 per cent of the population.²⁶

By the 1980s, the steel industry remained the predominant industry that employed French Town residents, and the Caisse populaire de Welland was still the most successful financial institution in the neighbourhood.²⁷ In 1985, it had 7,400 members, and assets of \$37,566,840. By this time, the credit union continued to attract francophones who had moved out of French Town and even beyond Welland.²⁸

French Town had seen many changes throughout its history. In 1994, Aurel Gervais remembered fondly a little restaurant on East Main Street and lamented that the menu, the radio and the jukebox once all in French, had changed to English. Gervais was worried that French-Canadian culture was disappearing from the neighbourhood.²⁹ But by the turn of the millennium, Sacré-Cœur Parish remained a vital institution, serving its congregation in French, and the Caisse populaire still operated as a French-speaking business. Moreover, despite the disappearance of French that Gervais had observed, more French was being offered and spoken in the schools, and more opportunities to work in French were available.³⁰

The legacy of the French Town neighbourhood is a strong one. It gave Welland – a city located in a predominantly anglophone area of the province – a small but vibrant francophone community that remains to this day.



The Ontario Heritage Trust gratefully acknowledges the research of Yves Frenette, Professor of History at the University of Ottawa, in preparing this paper.

The Trust also wishes to thank the Ontario Office of Francophone Affairs for its assistance and the Department of Canadian Heritage for its financial contribution through the Canada-Ontario Agreement on French-Language Services.

© Ontario Heritage Trust, 2009

¹ Linda Cardinal, et al, *La communauté Francophone de Welland : La minorité Francophone de Welland et ses rapports avec les institutions*, Ottawa, Département de sociologie de l'Université d'Ottawa, 1988, pp. 12-14.

² Cardinal, pp. 10-11.

³ Claude Trudel, *Welland*, Ottawa, Centre franco-ontarien de ressources pédagogiques, 1982, p. 40.

⁴ Obituary of Jean-Jacques Fleury, *Globe and Mail*, March 1, 2004, www.ogs.on.ca/ogs/pij200|o200f010.htm

⁵ André Lapierre, *L'Ontario français du Sud-Ouest: Témoignages oraux*, Ottawa, Éditions de l'Université d'Ottawa, 1982, p. 375. Much of the historical information about French Town can be found in Gonsalve Poulin, *Paroisse du Sacré-Coeur 1919-1969*, St. Justine, Québec, Artisans de Welland, Imprimerie Gagné Ltée, 1969. Another source is Trudel, above, and the Website *Paroisse Sacré-Cœur*, which is based on Poulin: <http://home.cogeco.ca/~paroisse-sacre-coeur/>. Also see Association des hommes d'affaires Canadiens-français de Welland, *Vitalité des Canadiens-français à Welland*, Tecumseh, Ontario, Imprimerie Lacasse, 1965.

⁶ Trudel, p. 43.

⁷ 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.

⁸ Poulin, p. 32.

⁹ Lapierre, pp. 452-453.

¹⁰ Lapierre, pp. 452-453.

¹¹ See Anna Therrien Boutin in Trudel, pp. 52-53.

¹² Cardinal, p. 37.

¹³ Cardinal, pp. 13-14.

¹⁴ Trudel, p. 112.

¹⁵ Lapierre, p. 436.

¹⁶ Trudel, pp. 107-108.

¹⁷ Trudel, p. 57.

¹⁸ Lapierre, pp. 371.

¹⁹ Lapierre, p. 448.

²⁰ Trudel, p. 59.

²¹ Lapierre, p. 468.

²² Website of the Association des gens d'affaires canadiens-français de la péninsule du Niagara, www.jaw.on.ca/~gens/histoire.html

²³ Lapierre, pp. 338-340.

²⁴ Lapierre, p. 464.

²⁵ Cardinal, p. 88.

²⁶ Cardinal, pp. 15-16.

²⁷ Cardinal, p. 9.

²⁸ Cardinal, p. 39.

²⁹ *Globe and Mail*, December 10, 1994.

³⁰ Interview with Peter Hominuk, on the website, *Francophonies Canadiennes. Identités culturelles*, Ontario, Entrevues, www.francoidentitaire.ca