

The French presence in Lafontaine

On Saturday, July 14, 2007 at 11 a.m., the Ontario Heritage Trust and the Township of Tiny unveiled a provincial plaque to commemorate the French Presence in Lafontaine at École Sainte-Croix de Lafontaine in Lafontaine, Ontario.

The bilingual plaque reads as follows:

THE FRENCH PRESENCE IN LAFONTAINE

French explorers first arrived in the Lafontaine area around 1610. An intermittent French presence of fur traders, soldiers and missionaries continued until 1650 when the sojourns ended after the Huron-Iroquois wars. Eventually a group of former French Canadian and Métis voyageurs from Drummond Island settled here in 1830 followed by successive waves of immigrants from Quebec, the three main groups originating from Batiscan, Joliette and the counties of Soulanges and Vaudreuil. The church and parish of Sainte-Croix were established in 1856 and the village was named after the French-Canadian statesman Louis-Hippolyte La Fontaine. A high concentration of Francophones, a strong sense of community and vigorous institutions have nurtured Lafontaine's vibrant Franco-Ontarian culture.

LA PRÉSENCE FRANÇAISE À LAFONTAINE

Des explorateurs français sont arrivés dans la région de Lafontaine aux environs de 1610. Des commerçants de fourrure, des soldats et des missionnaires français continuèrent à être présents de façon intermittente dans la région jusqu'en 1650, leurs séjours ayant pris fin après les guerres entre Hurons et Iroquois. Un groupe d'anciens voyageurs canadiens-français et métis provenant de l'île Drummond finit par s'y installer en 1830. Ces colons furent suivis de vagues successives d'immigrants du Québec. Les trois principaux groupes d'immigrants étaient originaires de Batiscan, de Joliette et des comtés de Soulanges et de Vaudreuil. L'église et la paroisse Sainte-Croix furent fondées en 1856 et le village fut nommé en l'honneur de Louis-Hippolyte La Fontaine, homme d'État canadien-français. Une forte concentration de francophones, un sens communautaire bien ancré et des institutions vigoureuses ont assuré le dynamisme de la culture franco-ontarienne à Lafontaine.

Historical background

Explorers, missionaries, and fur traders

The French came to the area of what is now Lafontaine in 1615 with the arrival of French explorer Samuel de Champlain. With Champlain in attendance, Recollet Father Joseph Le Caron celebrated the first mass in Ontario on August 12, 1615 at the Huron fortress of Carhagouha, four kilometres northwest of Lafontaine's present-day Sainte Croix Roman Catholic Church (located at 327 Lafontaine Street West). The priest and the explorer spent the winter at Carhagouha. Le Caron worked on a French-Huron bilingual dictionary and Champlain went on a war campaign and hunting trips with the Hurons.

An intermittent French presence continued for some years as exploration, the fur trade and missionary work brought the explorer and native interpreter Étienne Brûlé, Le Caron and the Jesuits. But these visits ended following the Huron-Iroquois wars of the 1640s. Huron survivors and the French who were allied with them relocated in 1650 to the St. Lawrence Valley. One hundred and eighty years later, a permanent French presence began in Lafontaine.¹

Four waves of French-Canadian immigrants

The first French-Canadian and Métis settlers were former voyageurs – fur traders who travelled from Montreal to the interior to trade with the native peoples – and their families, who left Drummond Island when it passed into American possession after the War of 1812. One of these was Louis Descheneaux, originally from Beaumont, Quebec, who came to the area with the North West Company. In 1830, he built the first house on the 16th lot of the 16th concession in the Township of Tiny.² The house still stands and Louis was buried in Lafontaine.

The Reverend Amable Charest provided the impetus for the arrival of the next group of settlers. Father Charest was a missionary in Penetanguishene, and a native of Sainte-Anne-de-la-Pérade, near Trois-Rivières, Quebec. Recognizing the agricultural potential of the region, he encouraged families from his native province to settle in the new concessions. This first wave of immigrants arrived in 1841 from Batiscan, near Sainte-Anne-de-la-Pérade, and included the Brunelle, Marchand, Marchildon and Maurice families. They had the choice of the best lands in the 16th and 17th concessions, the centre of Lafontaine. They were followed shortly by families from Joliette, whose names were Beausoleil, Desroches, Laurin and Marion³. The lots made available to them, located in the 18th and 19th concessions (which would become the hamlet of Laurin), were somewhat less fertile and tended to be more wooded. A third group came from Vaudreuil-Soulanges and settled in the eastern part of Lafontaine, which would become the hamlet of Randolph.⁴ Most of this migration ended around 1854, the year that Father Charest returned to Quebec.⁵

Getting to the new lands required tenacity and endurance. The distance from Montreal to Lafontaine was over 650 kilometres, and the railroad was not extended from York to Barrie until 1853. Prior to that, most people likely went to York (Toronto), either by train or on foot, and from there walked the remaining distance leading oxen and carts.⁶ Transportation to and within the area would remain difficult for many years.

Settlement

Initially, only subsistence farming was possible while farmers were still clearing the land with the aid of oxen, and transportation to market was nearly impossible.⁷ Potatoes comprised nearly half of the agricultural production of the first farms, foreshadowing the important economic role this crop would eventually play in Lafontaine.⁸

Social networks among the settlers were undeveloped due in part to the poor roads. People tended to socialize exclusively with families who shared the same origins. Thus, settlers from Joliette did not mix with people from Batiscan or Vaudreuil-Soulanges, and none of these groups socialized with the people of voyageur descent.⁹ This led to disputes, which pitted settlers from one region of origin against those from another, and had an effect on marriages, most of which were contracted between descendants of the same region of origin.¹⁰

With no church in the immediate area, people had to travel to Penetanguishene for mass, a distance of 15 kilometres or more.¹¹ To meet the spiritual needs of the newcomers, Father Amable Charest began celebrating mass in 1850 at a house located in the 16th concession, and founded the mission of Sainte-Croix that same year.¹² The first chapel, dedicated in the name of the Exaltation de la Sainte-Croix in 1856, was a wooden structure made of squared-off logs. The first celebration of the Fête-Dieu took place in 1857 and the cemetery was blessed during that same year.¹³ Lafontaine received its first permanent pastor with the arrival of the Reverend Étienne Gibra in 1861. Father Gibra later enlarged the church and added a sacristy.¹⁴

By 1856, Anglophones spoke of the “French Settlement” in reference to the area populated almost exclusively by French Canadians. That same year, a post office was established, named after the liberal reform politician Louis-Hippolyte La Fontaine.¹⁵ Toussaint Moreau also attempted to establish a school in 1856. But the response was not good because children lived too far away, their assistance was required on the farms and there were fears of bears and wolves in the forest.¹⁶ Charles Picotte opened another short-lived school in 1868.¹⁷

Subsistence farming gave way to commercial farming by 1870, and this continued to develop as a result of the 1879 extension of the railroad from Barrie to Penetanguishene. People reproduced and brought with them aspects of the material life they had known in Quebec. An example that can still be seen today is the Vallée house on Rue Lafontaine, built around 1850 in the Quebec style, with a curved roof and a veranda running the full width of the façade.¹⁸

Roadside crosses were also erected, generally at the end of the 19th century, including one on the lot of the first settler Louis Descheneaux.¹⁹ The majority of people remained fairly poor, but there were exceptions. For example, in 1871 Constant Marchildon owned 285 acres of land, four barns and stables, four wagons, agricultural equipment, the only two sleighs in Lafontaine and he was able to hire three men as fishermen.²⁰ There were 210 families recorded as residents of the parish in 1876.²¹ However, around 1877, a large group of people left to go to Manitoba, Minnesota and the Dakotas, planning to start over again with hopes of becoming more financially successful.²²

A time for building

An intense period of building took place between 1873 and 1896 that produced a new church and rectory, a convent and a school. At the outset, the regional divisions in the parish fanned the flames of a dispute over the location of the new rectory and church. Finally, the bishop intervened and decided to maintain the same location.²³ Unfortunately, the dispute had a negative impact on individual contributions to pay for the construction. In the end, the pastor, Father Joseph Michel, contributed a considerable sum from his personal financial resources.²⁴

All materials used in the construction of the new church were local – fieldstones cleared from farms were used in the foundation, local trees were turned into boards in nearby sawmills and bricks were fired by parishioner Louis Thanasse.²⁵ The new church, completed in 1877, was situated behind the old one. During the three years of construction, the earlier church continued to be used for services and was then demolished.²⁶ In 1885, Father Michel arranged for the building of a convent that became the home of the Sœurs de Sainte-Croix and a private school for girls. Father Michel paid for it completely with money inherited from his family.²⁷ The convent school had as many as 60 students, some of whom were Protestant.²⁸ The elegance of the new parish buildings belied the pioneer lifestyle of Father Michel, whose holdings of a barn, stable, animals and granary were similar to that of his parishioners.²⁹

The period of building came to an end with the construction of a new school that replaced the run-down building that had been in use since the establishment of the first permanent Catholic school in 1886. The new school, completed in 1896, was a brick building that had three classrooms for 150 pupils.³⁰

With completion of the building construction, parish organizations began to be created. The Dames de Sainte-Anne was founded with 65 members in 1892 and the Ligue du Sacré-Cœur for the men was created in the same year. A section of the fraternal insurance society, the Union Saint-Joseph as well as the Ordre des forestiers catholiques, were also founded about the same time.³¹

The desire to live in French

Almost completely francophone, with a full complement of parish institutions that reflected their Quebec heritage, the people of Lafontaine were dismayed when the use of the English language began to creep into their services and parish activities. Father Joseph Beaudoin, pastor from 1889 to 1904, sometimes practised his English by preaching in this language, to the great consternation of the congregation³² who numbered 196 families in 1908.³³ The Reverend Henri Brunet arrived as pastor in 1915 and remained until 1923. As he was accustomed to serving the bilingual parish of Sainte-Anne in Penetanguishene, Reverend Brunet initially addressed his new parishioners in English. In response, they sent delegates to him to explain that they wished to be ministered to in French.³⁴ With the Regulation 17³⁵ crisis at its peak, the Association Canadienne-Française d'Éducation d'Ontario (ACFÉO) supported the efforts of the Lafontaine parishioners' continued use of French. ACFÉO began to be active in the region from 1908 to 1910 and finally a regional section of the Association was created in Lafontaine in 1942.³⁶

It is against this backdrop that significant events took place in the school in Lafontaine. The Sisters of Sainte-Croix, who taught mostly in French, left in 1893 because of a dispute with the pastor over their teaching and their administration of the residential convent school. They were replaced by the English-speaking Sisters of Saint Joseph from Toronto.³⁷ In 1920, school councillor Thomas Thanasse requested and received books in French from ACFÉO for the 200 students. In 1924, the Lafontaine school commission asked the Sisters of Saint Joseph for two francophone nuns.³⁸ Responding to the sustained pressure to teach more in French, the Sisters of Saint Joseph left in the middle of the 1927-28 school year. Four lay teachers replaced them temporarily. Then, responding to a petition signed by parents, the Sisters of Sainte-Croix returned to run the school in 1930.³⁹

Economic and social changes

The 1920s and 1930s saw the beginning of change to the traditional way of life that had predominated in Lafontaine. Parishioners began to have time for leisure activities. Every year, one or two parish concerts were organized. People subscribed to *La Presse*, the Montreal daily newspaper, *L'Action catholique*, *Le Messager* and *Les Annales de la Bonne Sainte-Anne* in addition to English newspapers and catalogues.⁴⁰ The inauguration of the parish hall in 1944 attracted 800 people. The following year, the hall was the site of a concert by the tenor Joseph Ladéroute of the Metropolitan Opera of New York, whose grandfather was born in Lafontaine.⁴¹

Families became increasingly interested in offering their children a secondary school education, and those who could afford it sent their children away to school in the 1920s. Boys went to Rigaud and Papineauville in Quebec, and to Aurora and Toronto in Ontario. Girls enrolled in schools located in Toronto and Sturgeon Falls in Ontario, and in Nicolet and Montreal in Quebec.⁴²

An effort to create a Catholic secondary school in Lafontaine became a celebrated court case in 1926, known as the “Tiny School Case.” It went to the Privy Council in London, which refused to let the school be created because, according to the *British North America Act*, Catholic separate schools could not go beyond Grade 8. The problem could have been circumvented by integrating Grades 9 and 10 into the elementary school⁴³. However, a Roman Catholic secondary school, the Continuation School, was finally established in 1944. The new school operated under the auspices of the Sisters of Sainte-Croix and moved into a new building at the end of 1945.⁴⁴

During the late 1930s, additional social changes included the emergence of a local agricultural cooperative encouraged by the pastor, Father Thomas Marchildon. The establishment of the cooperative movement had a great impact on Lafontaine as innovative agricultural methods were adopted by potato growers and farms became larger and more prosperous. By 1948, the Lafontaine Restricted Potato Seed Area exported 42 railroad cars full of potatoes to the United States.⁴⁵ A credit union was founded in 1942 and quickly grew from the initial 35 members to 281 members in 1944.

Transitions to the present

The seed potato business continued to grow during the 1960s and 1970s. Many farmers were contracted in advance to sell their regular potato crop to the Hostess Company.⁴⁶ Potato farming would remain important to the present day, but family farms became amalgamated into large industrial enterprises. Improved roads made it possible for residents to work in factories in Midland and Barrie. By the year 2000, some people were commuting as far as Toronto.⁴⁷

The regionalization of life for Lafontaine’s residents was reflected in the fate of the local secondary school institution. The Continuation School closed in 1966 due to the amalgamation of school districts. Lafontaine parents remained concerned about the availability of French in the schools and they stipulated that the amalgamation agreement stated that a francophone individual be appointed to the high school administration, and that a French institution be created as soon as possible. A French regional high school was finally created in 1980, after a decade of intense conflict. Temporarily located in the former Continuation School in Lafontaine, the new Le Caron School opened in Penetanguishene at the end of 1981.⁴⁸

The role of maintaining Franco-Ontarian cultural heritage was increasingly assumed by secular associations and the media. Leisure events became a popular way of offering activities in French. For example, the Cercle de la baie Georgienne was formed in 1963. This group was affiliated with the Association de la jeunesse franco-ontarienne and was active in Lafontaine with some 50 members.

In 1971, high school students began to publish the monthly newspaper *Le Goût de vivre* which grew into a weekly paper with a circulation of 1,000. It moved into the former Continuation School building, along with other Francophone community organizations, when the building was renamed Place Lafontaine in 1981.⁴⁹ Radio-Canada radio and television began broadcasting in the area in 1977, a community radio station (CFRH) began broadcasting from Penetanguishene in 1982⁵⁰ and TFO arrived in 1984.⁵¹

In 2000, Lafontaine commemorated the first French presence at Carhagouha by installing a stained-glass triptych representing the 1615 mass celebrated by Father Le Caron in the parish church. For the 250 families that made up the parish of Sainte-Croix, the only completely French parish in the Georgian Bay region, it was a fitting way to mark the long and significant presence of francophones in Lafontaine.⁵²

Today, Lafontaine is home to approximately 1,000 francophones who continue to play a leading role in a wide variety of commercial and cultural activities that reflect Lafontaine's strong and vibrant Franco-Ontarian heritage. Their strong sense of community and vigorous institutions have nurtured Lafontaine's strong French-Canadian culture.

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¹ Daniel Marchildon, *La Huronie*, Ottawa, Le Centre franco-ontarien de ressources pédagogiques, 1984, pp. 10-38.

² Micheline Marchand, *Les Voyageurs et la colonisation de Pénétanguishene (1825-1871). La colonisation française en Huronie*, Sudbury, La Société historique du Nouvel-Ontario, 1989, pp. 34, 80.

³ Marchand, p. 81.

⁴ Marchand, p. 89.

⁵ Daniel Marchildon, p. 69.

⁶ Marchand, p. 82.

⁷ Centre de recherche en civilisation canadienne-française, website *La présence française en Ontario: 1610, passeport pour 2010*, www.uottawa.ca/academic/crccf/passeport/1/IB2b/IB2b01.html, Henri Brunet, "Un témoignage sur la paroisse Sainte-Croix de Lafontaine," p. 46.

⁸ Daniel Marchildon, p. 71.

⁹ Daniel Marchildon, p. 72.

¹⁰ Brunet, p. 50.

- ¹¹ Marchand, p. 88.
- ¹² Thomas Marchildon, "Paroisse de l'Exaltation de la Sainte-Croix de Lafontaine", in *Verner et Lafontaine*, Sudbury, Société Historique du Nouvel-Ontario, 1945, p. 40.
- ¹³ Brunet, p. 43, Thomas Marchildon, p. 41.
- ¹⁴ Brunet, pp. 46-47.
- ¹⁵ Daniel Marchildon, p. 74.
- ¹⁶ Brunet, p. 87.
- ¹⁷ Marchand, p. 88.
- ¹⁸ *Le Goût de vivre*, June 15, 2004, on the website <http://journaux.apf.ca/legoutdevivre>.
- ¹⁹ Daniel Marchildon, pp. 101, 103.
- ²⁰ Marchand, p. 86.
- ²¹ Brunet, p. 70.
- ²² Brunet cited in Marchand, p. 92.
- ²³ Brunet, p. 54, Marchand, p. 89.
- ²⁴ Brunet, p. 62.
- ²⁵ Brunet, p. 59.
- ²⁶ This explains why the new church is located so far back from the street. Thomas Marchildon, p. 46.
- ²⁷ Brunet, p. 67.
- ²⁸ Brunet, p. 69.
- ²⁹ Brunet, pp. 57-58.
- ³⁰ Brunet, p. 76.
- ³¹ Brunet, pp. 78-80.
- ³² Brunet, p. 82.
- ³³ Brunet, p. 87.
- ³⁴ Daniel Marchildon, p. 103.
- ³⁵ 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.
- ³⁶ Daniel Marchildon, p. 142.
- ³⁷ Brunet, p. 77.
- ³⁸ Daniel Marchildon, p. 169.
- ³⁹ Daniel Marchildon, pp. 170-171.
- ⁴⁰ Daniel Marchildon, p. 135.
- ⁴¹ Daniel Marchildon, p. 142.
- ⁴² Brunet, p. 87.
- ⁴³ Daniel Marchildon, p. 170.
- ⁴⁴ Daniel Marchildon, pp. 174-176.
- ⁴⁵ Daniel Marchildon, pp. 140, 142.
- ⁴⁶ Daniel Marchildon, p. 145.
- ⁴⁷ Reverend Hamel, pastor of Sainte-Croix parish, telephone conversation, June 29, 2004.
- ⁴⁸ Daniel Marchildon, pp. 213-262.
- ⁴⁹ Daniel Marchildon, pp. 272, 274.
- ⁵⁰ Website of La Clé d'la Baie, www.lacle.ca/Profil_Cfrh.html.
- ⁵¹ Daniel Marchildon, p. 274.
- ⁵² Hamel.