

History of Greater Madawaska from the beginning to the 20th century
by
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This précis of Greater Madawaska history was drawn from several sources, but mainly from “*Histoire du Madawaska entre l’Acadie, le Québec et l’Amérique (History of Madawaska between Acadia, Québec and America)*”, written by Reverend Thomas Albert in 1920 and re-edited in 1982 by Messrs. Adrien and Benoît Bérubé and Mme Georgette Desjardins, with support from the *Société Historique du Madawaska*. For Thériault descendants, it is noteworthy that Reverend Albert was inspired by an important documentation provided by American senator Patrick Therriault and handwritten notes left by Canadian archivist Prudent Mercure.

But first let us define what the historic Greater Madawaska region is. One can say that it is the part of the St. John River drainage basin which starts on the southern slopes of the Notre-Dame Mountains north of Lake Témiscouata, extends on both sides of the Madawaska River and follows the St. John River valley down to Grand Falls, NB. In the east, the region covers the historic villages included today in Québec’s Témiscouata and the Madawaska area of Restigouche County in New Brunswick; in the west, it includes the Upper St. John River valley up to the St-Francis River junction and the northern part of Aroostook County in Maine. The region is physically set apart from the St. Lawrence River drainage basin by the Notre-Dame Mountains, an extension of the Appalachians. Originally, one crossed from one drainage basin to the other by one of three portage routes used by the First Nations, according to the season: the main one ran from Lake Témiscouata to Notre-Dame-du-Portage near Rivière-du-Loup in Québec; the second one ran from Lake Témiscouata to Trois-Pistoles and the third one ran from Notre-Dame-du-Portage to the head of the St. Francis River.

When the French arrived in 1604, the region was inhabited by the Maliseet, nomadic hunters and fishermen, part of the Abnaki family and the Algonquian confederacy, allied with the Mi’kmaq. The confederacy’s territory extended from east of the Great Lakes to the Gulf of St. Lawrence. The principal Maliseet villages were Edmundston, St. John, Springhill and Woodstock. This confederacy was an enemy of the Iroquois confederacy whose territory was to the west and south of the St. Lawrence valley.

The region was a transit zone between Canada as organized by the French and centered on the St. Lawrence valley including the Great Lakes area, and historic Acadia (Nova Scotia, southeast New Brunswick and a part of Maine). Greater Madawaska was originally organized into the seigniories of Madouesca and Clignancourt in 1683 and 1686 by the Governor of New France in Québec City. These seigniories extended from Lake Témiscouata in Québec to Médoctec in New Brunswick on both sides of the St. John and Madawaska rivers in order to protect the ground route between Canada and Acadia. Under French rule, relations between the Maliseet and the French were rather harmonious, but became strained under the British who followed.

From a political perspective, drastic changes occurred during the period. Under French rule, the region was administered from Québec. Then, after the British conquest, administration was gradually shifted to the Maritimes. In 1783, the Versailles treaty between the US and Great

Britain established the general borders between the newly independent United States and the colonies that had remained loyal to Great Britain (Nova Scotia and Canada). After this treaty, a large number of American Loyalists came to live in Québec and Nova Scotia, particularly in the St. John River Valley in the region of Fredericton. Under pressure from these Loyalists, the British administration separated the territory of New Brunswick from the administration of Nova Scotia and created an autonomous province in 1784.

Originally colonized from 1785 by Acadians who had been pushed out of Ste.-Anne-du-Pays-d'en-Bas (Fredericton) by the new English-speaking colonists who had been placed in that area by the British rulers, the Madawaska region attracted new French-speaking colonists from 1820 to 1870, this time partly Acadians and partly French Canadians from the Lower Saint Lawrence region in Québec. It is important to note that various branches of the Thériault family took part in these waves of immigration to Madawaska.

The first permanent Acadian colonists settled between St. Basile and Grande Rivière on both sides of the river; beginning in 1787, "Canadians" from the Lower Saint Lawrence joined them. It was not until 1790 that the colonists would receive their deeds of concession. Encouraged by the issuance of property deeds to French-speaking colonists, others followed beginning in 1794, including Joseph Thériault, a father who settled with his son in Rivière Verte on the north shore of the river. Faced with the increasing influx of colonists, St. Basile became a parish in 1792, thus becoming one of the oldest parishes of the Maritimes since the expulsion of the Acadians and the mother-parish of all other parishes in the region. This foundation was followed by the slow progress of the French-speaking population of the region until the year 1820 and the progressive development of parish and religious structures.

The French speaking colonists of Madawaska thought that they had found a peaceful haven, but it soon became obvious that the question of borders in the region remained a matter of serious litigation among the various parties concerned. The rivalry between the US and the British government for the possession of territories that were in dispute between the two powers as well as between British colonies, was exacerbated after 1814. The Americans and the British coveted the rich pine forests for naval construction. The British also needed the territories to maintain the land lines of communication between Lower Canada and the Maritimes. Lower Canada claimed jurisdiction over the territory as far as Grand Falls; New Brunswick claimed jurisdiction as far as Lake Témiscouata. It took 75 years of quarrels, skirmishes and threats of war to settle the question of borders in the region.

This situation culminated around 1835 as the period of the bloodless "Aroostook War". Local governments of Maine and New Brunswick, both ambitious and hungry for popularity, almost dragged their respective countries into war. Ensuing riots, arrests, insurrections, mobilization of militias, construction of forts on both sides of the river (Fort Kent, Grand Falls, Edmundston, Dégelis, Fort Ingall (Cabano)) all combined to raise tempers on both sides of the St. John River. Finally, wisdom prevailed.

In 1842, the Webster-Ashburton Treaty established the regional border between the US and the British colonies at the St. John River. That meant that the French-speaking colonists who had settled on both sides of the St. John River would be separated by the international

border. In this case, the British disappointed the French-speaking colonists of the region who had repeatedly expressed their loyalty to the British Crown; more than 2000 of them would henceforth become Americans without their consent.

It would not be until 1860 that the territorial dispute between Lower Canada and New Brunswick would be resolved: Judge Lushington of the Privy Council of London established the inter-colonial border by giving Lake Témiscouata to Lower Canada while the territory 12 miles above the mouth of the Madawaska River as far as Grand Falls was given to New Brunswick. As you can see by the map below, these borders are still in effect today.

After 1842, the restoration of peace brought prosperity to people on both sides of the new border and allowed them to better harvest the forests and other lands. The chastened governments of New Brunswick and Maine began to pay more attention to the inhabitants of the region and improved local government. Land deeds were recognized on both sides of the border and French-speaking people were elected deputies in the legislatures of both New Brunswick and Maine beginning in 1844 and 1846 respectively. In 1860, the Canadian Madawaska had 5,000 inhabitants, and Aroostook 3,500. Finally, in 1870, the Catholic parishes in Aroostook which had continued to report to the Canadian Archdiocese of Québec were joined to the Diocese of Portland in Maine.

The year 1861 marks the start of the American Civil War (1861-1865). French-speaking soldiers from Madawaska were recruited and several lost their lives. In 1864 discussions between the British provinces led to the creation of the Canadian Confederation in 1867; from hereon, the people of Madawaska people participated in politics both provincial and federal in the new Canada, in particular, Vital Hébert and Léville Thériault. Similar political developments occurred on the US side where Acadians including Thériaults were selected as representatives to the Maine Legislature and the American Senate.

The period between 1860 and 1900 marks the beginning of major industrial and infrastructure developments. Road constructions to interconnect other regions were started and both American and Canadian railways were introduced to the region. These projects were not without negative effects: for example, concession of enormous tracts of land and forests to the railroad companies who did not want to develop them, but refused to sell them to the growing population of the region created a shortage of land. This shortage is one of the causes of the emigration of the French speakers of the region westward (Alberta, Montana, Minnesota) in the 1880s.

In the educational and social domains, religious orders (men and women) settled in the region on both sides of the border to open schools and hospitals where French had an important place. Let us note in particular the arrival of the “*Religieuses Hospitalières de St Joseph*” in St. Basile in 1873; the opening of a school and of a hospital in 1874; the opening of a teachers’ college in Fort Kent in 1871 with Vital Cyr as director; the opening of a classical college in Van Buren in 1886 which obtained the right to grant university degrees in 1899; the opening of St. Bruno Convent by the “*Soeurs du Bon Pasteur*” in 1891. Les “*Petites Franciscaines de Marie*” opened a convent in Wallagrass in 1897 and a hospital at Eagle Lake in 1905. Les “*Soeurs de Notre Dame du St-Rosaire de Rimouski*” opened a convent in Ste Luce in 1898. But development

of French services did not occur without difficulties. Let us note in particular the 1871 law in New Brunswick that abolished Catholic schools and prohibited teaching in French, and the struggles that had to follow thereafter in order to obtain a law of tolerance as well as the restoration of teaching in French in 1874. Similar struggles occurred in Maine after 1900.

Overall, however, by the beginning of the 20th century, Greater Madawaska had built up a social and economic infrastructure which took into account its cultural identity. Thus, we can say that the holding of the 6th Acadian Convention in St. Basile in 1908, was a sort of recognition of the Acadian character of the region. It highlighted the end of a long period of physical, social and cultural isolation and flagged the fact that the region was finally taking its place in the Acadian and French-speaking worlds while still keeping its 'Brayon' uniqueness.

