

HISTORY OF THE FORMER NOTRE-DAME-DU-MONT-CARMEL PARISH IN LILLE, MAINE

By Don Cyr, based on documentation by Guy Dubay

Beginnings

In the early years of the Madawaska Settlement there was one parish that was located in Saint-Basile on the north shore of the Saint John River. Those parishioners who found themselves on the south shore had to cross the river to attend Mass. This became impossible at ice-out time in the spring and freeze-up time in the fall. Since the initial settlement in 1785, the numbers of settlers on the south shore had increased dramatically because the south shore had more cultivable lowlands. According to historian Robert Rumilly, Monseigneur Langevin, Curé of Saint-Basile (born in Beauport, Québec, 1802), started saying mass on the south shore near the present day Mount Carmel in 1840. These were very turbulent times in the region.

Separation from Saint-Basile

The turbulence was due to the border dispute that came to a head during the War of 1812. It was at this time that jurisdiction of the Madawaska Settlement was contested between the United States and the British colonies that would become the Dominion of Canada. Father Langevin, the priest at Saint-Basile, was very pro-British and ruled the parish quite autocratically; He came to be resented by many people in the parish. His parish consisted of the entire region including both banks of the river from Houlton in southern Aroostook 100 miles away to Lac Temiscouata to the north in what is now Québec province. The church jurisdiction in the region was also unclear. Because of the region's remoteness and position in between three dioceses and two language regions, the Bishops of Québec, Boston, and Saint John, New Brunswick each had a claim to jurisdiction in the area. They had coped with the situation by naming each other co-vicar-generals so each would recognize the decisions of the other.

The problem was that the Bishop of Boston had a valid claim to the geography of the region but did not have French-speaking priests to send to the region. The Bishop of Québec had the priests and regularly assigned them to the settlement. In 1826, three parishes were created in what is now Aroostook: Saint Bruno in Van Buren, Saint-Luce in Frenchville, and Saint Mary's in Houlton. When the Webster-Ashburton Treaty was negotiated and ratified by the U. S. Senate in 1842, ecclesiastical jurisdiction became more of a concern. A chapel was constructed in 1847 at the foot of Mount Carmel and was called Notre-Dame-du-Mont-Carmel with Father Sirois, Father Henri Dionne (1843-1859) and later Father Sweron (1858-1864) from Saint-Luce in Frenchville acting as itinerant priest. Father Dionne, who had been born in Sainte-Anne-de-la-Pocatière, Québec, attached himself to the Diocese of Boston. The chapel was financed by the wife of François Thibodeau, the richest man in the valley at that time. He was often referred to as Seigneur François Thibodeau, "le riche". When Bishop Fitzpatrick of Boston visited the area he stayed at the Thibodeau house, not at the rectory in Saint-Basile.

Separation from the Diocese of New Brunswick

The chapel was built of hand-hewn square logs and was Baroque in design. Though there are no photographs of the building, there are photos of the church at Frenchville that was built at the same time. Bishop Fitzpatrick of the Diocese of Boston made a tour of the settlement in 1847 and reports in his personal journal that the chapel at Mount Carmel was being erected, as was Saint-Luce church in what is now Frenchville. Saint-Luce had a Baroque façade, especially prominent at the curving front roofline up to the cupola. The chapel at Mount Carmel was never finished and embroiled in controversy due to the Carmelist movement that petitioned the Pope to become attached to the Diocese of Boston.

The basic problem was that this meant a separation from the parish of Saint-Basile. The remaining parishioners at Saint-Basile would have to increase their support of the parish while a large percentage of their members on the south shore were supporting their own new parish. This controversy was deep enough that when a name was being considered for the chapel the name Notre-Dame-des-Chicanes was suggested. This was probably not a serious choice because Monseigneur Langevin wanted to name the mission Notre-Dame-des-Victoires (another source – "Histoire du Madawaska" – indicates he wanted a more sarcastic name: Notre-Dame-de-la-Paix). The resulting choice was the same as the hill next to the chapel, Mont-Carmel, which was first named, is unclear. The mission status was such that it would continue to be serviced by its mother parish, Saint-Basile, so it was a sort of victory for Monseigneur Langevin. The controversy was one that divided the new parish between the Unionists that supported Father Langevin and the Carmelists that wanted separation from Saint-Basile parish.

The controversies resulting from the Webster-Ashburton Treaty would continue to follow the parish and necessitate significant changes. One of the controversies was about which Bishop had jurisdiction. This was compounded by the creation of a new Bishopric in New Brunswick at Chatham. Even though the Madawaska Settlement was still a part of the Saint John Diocese, probably due to the fact that both were on the Saint John River which would make communication easier, the Bishop of Saint John asked the Bishop of Chatham (and Charlestown as well) to furnish French speaking priests. In 1855 the Bishopric of Portland was created in response to petitions to the Bishop of Boston. The Saint John Valley (commonly known as “the Valley”) was too distant and too foreign for him to administer effectively. After Monseigneur Langevin died in 1857, the Bishop of Saint John had sent an Irish priest, Hugh McGuirk (1857-1869), to Saint-Basile. He must have had difficulty relating to the French populace in the region. Father McGuirk would have filled in when the priest at Sainte-Luce could not make the trip to Grand Isle. The priest at Frenchville had to serve parishioners as far away as Saint-François, New Brunswick, more than 25 miles upstream. Jean Baptiste Doucet, also from Saint-Basile (1869-1871) may have done the same until Grand Isle had a resident priest.

The Bell Clapper

There is an interesting story concerning Father Charles Sweron. He was born in Belgium (Oct. 5, 1828 and ordained May 24, 1858) and had a very large parish extending from Grand Isle, Maine to Saint François, New Brunswick. At the time that he was serving at Mont-Carmel as an itinerant priest, was when some parishioners were on the side of the Carmelists and others were Unionists so the mission was in controversy. One Sunday when Father Sweron arrived to say Mass and rang the bell, he found that it was silent. Someone had stolen the clapper of the bell. Father Sweron was outraged and announced at Mass that the person who stole the clapper had better return it by the next Sunday or he would be struck dead on the spot for his misdeed! The next Sunday Father Sweron found the clapper on the steps and announced that he had postponed the funeral of the culprit.

The Miracle Spring

Mount Carmel had a spring of mountain water that local claimed performed miracles. It caused hysteria as mothers were bringing their colicky babies for a curing soak and water was saved for protection from storms, etc., just like holy water. A lot of the cures might have been conditions that would have passed despite the curing soak. In any case, the spring is still there and it has not cured anyone for generations since. The church did not like this kind of distraction as it diverted the piety of the parishioners and the origins of the miracles were in question. This may have been a contributing factor in the decision to move the parish downstream.

Moving the Church Downstream

The story gets more complicated when a new parish, attached to Portland was erected at Saint David, across the river from Saint-Basile. This happened in 1859 when Remi Plourde granted land to the Bishop of Portland for the church. The name, Saint David, was made in honor of Bishop David Bacon, the first Bishop of Portland, who was part African-American. The impact of this was that the chapel at Mount-Carmel was too close to the new church at Saint David so the location of the chapel was not ideal. Local folklore says that it was decided to move the church downstream to a location opposite the church at Sainte-Anne-de-Madawaska on the north shore of the river.

The framing was partially completed when a resident of Lower Grant Isle (now known as Lille), made an offer that would contribute funding for the exterior finishes of the building – if it were relocated to the donor’s locale. It was decided to move to Lower Grant Isle. (The Maine Legislature incorporated West Van Buren on November 11, 1851, changed the name to Grant Isle on June 13, 1859 and again changed the name to Grand Isle on January 22, 1907.) The framing was disassembled and re-erected. Some stories say that the chapel at Mount Carmel was also disassembled for use as well. It had never been completed and was covered in scaffolding for years. The church, serviced by Father Beaudet of Van Buren, was from the order of the *Communauté de la Sainte-Croix*.

In 1864 the Association of Aroostook Catholics petitioned Pope Pius IX for separation from the Diocese of New Brunswick. In 1870, the office of the Propaganda headed by Cardinal Barnabo and directed by the Vatican Council. The Council of Bishops met between plenary sessions to decide what to do about conflicts in borderland areas and decided that all of Maine be attached to the Diocese of Portland. Up to this point Portland’s jurisdiction extended only to Benedicta on the border of southern Aroostook. As a result, in 1876, Cardinal Tachereau, Archbishop of Quebec, deeded all of his property in Maine to the Bishop of Portland.

The Second Church

The first church to be built on the present location in what is now Lille, was a wooden structure that faced up river with the altar on the wall facing southeast, toward the rising sun and Jerusalem. The rectory was a traditional one and one-half-story building facing the river and in line with the back of the church. The church was built between 1868 and 1870. Father Ferdinand Pineau originally from Rimouski, Québec (1880-1884) added the cupola. There was a balcony inside and a statue of Notre-Dame-du-Mont-Carmel in a niche over the middle of three doors. The exterior was finished in pine boards scored with v-grooves to resemble cut stone. The parish grew quickly and soon outgrew the size of this building. Father Pineau was the first resident priest of the parish. When Father Pineau was reassigned the parish passed into the hands of the Marist priests of Van Buren.

His replacement was Father Richer (1884-1893). Father Richer witnessed the parish officially named Notre-Dame-du-Mont-Carmel by Bishop Healy in 1884 with the proper permissions from the Carmelite order in Rome. Father Charles Gingras, who was not a Marist, followed Richer (1893-1903). He was responsible for building a new rectory in 1896, which still stands. Because of the way he sited the rectory, plans for a new and larger church must have been underway, but he died before any work was done. He is the only priest buried in the Mont-Carmel cemetery, which is located near the Calvary sculptures. Upon his death, the parish reverted to Marist administration with Father Elphege Godin (1903-1913). His guidance brought much change to the parish. By 1913 there were 292 families in the parish.

Convent School

One of the first changes in the parish was to establish a school. Father Godin invites *Les Soeurs de la Sagesse* (the Daughters of Wisdom), from France to teach. There were other convents in the region from this order, one in Edmundston, New Brunswick twelve miles away, and the other at Sainte-Agathe twelve miles to the west on Lac Sainte-Agathe (which came to be known as Long Lake). A temporary two-room school was established on the southwest corner of the rectory lawn and the sisters were housed in a residence across the street, bought by the Beupré family when the sisters moved to larger quarters. They arrived on April 4, 1905 and started classes with 45 students. The school was less than adequate and plans for the new church included refurbishing the old one for use as a school because the number of students had doubled by 1910. This was the assurance the sisters needed to found a convent in the parish.

Town Incorporated

At this time the town of Grand Isle included two villages. Originally the downstream village was attached to Van Buren and the upstream village was attached to the town of Madawaska. When the Maine Legislature incorporated the town of Grand Isle, the name was changed from Grant Isle and the two villages were merged as one town. This would allow the residents to be able to vote without having to travel a dozen miles to do so. The upstream village was called Upper Grand Isle and the downstream village followed suit as Lower Grand Isle. With the arrival of the sisters, the lower part of town would come to be called Lille for two reasons: One was that the large island in the river that the town was named after, was downstream from the lower village, so the name might have been L'île. The second reason was that there was a convent of *Les Filles de la Sagesse* in Lille, France and some of the sisters were from there, so Lille became the name to be used. In one of the convent books, Lille sur-Saint-Jean (Lille on the Saint John) was used to distinguish the convent from the one in France.

The Third Church

Father Godin commissioned Théophile Daoust, architect from Montréal to design a unique new church. This was a time of prosperity when sawn lumber was in full swing and most parishes in the Valley were building new and larger churches. The population was expanding at a great rate as well as the concessions (back settlements) were expanding. The newly arrived railroad was opening new markets for potatoes and farmers were growing potatoes as a cash crop of the large urban centers in the northeastern United States. Father Godin started building the new church, facing the Saint John River, in 1908. He hired Léonide Gagné of Edmundston, New Brunswick as contractor. Gagné had just finished building the new church at Sainte-Luce. He made some changes to the architect's plans, making it more suitable to local taste. For example, he added twelve window vaults into the vaulted ceiling and shortened the church by one bay, from seven to six windows on each side. Gagné eliminated the balcony that would have gone around the back of the altar, moved the chimney and shortened the choir-loft back one column, and removed some decoration outside. The altar rail was straightened out and the overall style was changed from Romanesque to Ancient Roman through simplification.

Father Richer commissioned Louis Jobin of Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré, Québec to carve the two trumpeting archangels that adorn the double belfries. At the time, Louis Jobin was the best sculptor in Québec. He carved in pine and covered sculptures meant for exterior use in hammered zinc. The Notre-Dame-du-Mont-Carmel sculpture was done the same way. It is unclear whether it was made for this church or the previous one. It appears to be of the same hand as the angels. Louis Sanfaçon and Patrick Theriault each paid \$60 for an angel. Thomas and Mary Anne Thibodeau paid the same for the Notre-Dame-du-Mont-Carmel statue over the door.

The parish helped with the construction by means of donations of lumber and labor. The cost of construction was \$14,000. The first mass was on New Year's Day 1910; it was blessed on August 21, 1910. The old church was not demolished and was positioned like an arm on a cross to the new church with the rectory acting as a counter-balancing arm. The new church was decorated in 1909-10. The plastered walls were decorated with garlands of maple leaves that surrounded the arches, windows and ceilings on the side aisles. All arches had gold leaf ribbon banding and the blue ceiling had thousands of gold-leaf stars decorating the apse. One large star over the altar has its rays shooting off the top left side rather than shining down on to the altar. Speculation suggests that it may be depicting Haley's Comet that passed close to earth in 1910. Many of the small stars resemble shooting stars as well.

The old rectory was used as the Sacristy until the present Sacristy was added, which was not too long after the completion of the church. The old Rectory had to be demolished in order to accomplish this. When the new church was completed most of the parishioners posed for a photograph on the steps of the building. They had the satisfaction that theirs was the most unique and most beautiful church in the region. The first marriage in the new church was that of François Berubé and Vitaline Theriault. At that time, Lille was the larger of the two villages that made up Grand Isle, but the establishment of a sawmill in Upper Grand Isle would change that, but for now, the church and school were in Lille.

New Convent

When Father Godin authorized the refurbishment of the old church for use as a convent school, many in the parish wanted new buildings to be built. This delayed work on the building until the controversy was settled. In the end, Father Godin's plan went into effect and work was completed and the new school was blessed on September 8, 1912. In his term in Lille, Father Godin had completely changed the look of the parish. He was transferred the following year. His replacement, Father Melchior Janisson, s.m. (1913-1922), was universally loved for the nearly ten years he spent in the parish (that then consisted of 290 families). He erected the escabeau on the back lawn of the rectory – a small shelter that allowed a shady place to meditate while facing the back hill and the setting sun.

Father Janisson was replaced in 1922 by Father André (1922-1923) who was in the parish for less than two years. One of his accomplishments was the replacement of the front steps with concrete stairs in 1922. These steps were rushed to be ready for the wedding of Patrick Cyr and Annie Sanfaçon's wedding. In 1923 the parish was passed out of the hands of the Marist fathers and was again administered by the Diocese of Portland. Van Buren remained with the Marists. Father André went to Lawrence, Massachusetts, to teach in the Marist College. Father Joseph Normand (1923-1925) and Father Isidore Pihan (1925-1930) filled out the decade and the parish was outgrowing the church.

New Parish in Grand Isle

The establishment of any new parish is troublesome due to the fact that a substantial number of parishioners withdrew their support of the old parish by supporting the new one. This was at the beginning of the Great Depression as well, although they would not have any idea of the length of hard times to come. The new parish was called Saint-Gerard-Magella, and the new church and rectory were built of brick. This is important because the new church would be consecrated rather than blessed. The Catholic Church blesses buildings it deems are impermanent and consecrates those built of permanent materials such as brick or stone. The church in Lille was built of wood.

Father Menard

Father Roderique Menard (1930-1941) was concerned with parish welfare through the troubled times of the Great Depression. The Depression hit the Valley hard as it did all over the country. The advantage in the Valley was that the folk culture was still strong and many reverted to the methods of survival that their parents had taught them. There was plenty of land for growing gardens, and while there were foreclosures, most had access to the support of extended families and the ability to hunt and forage.

Smuggling liquor across the border from Canada was widespread as these were the times of Prohibition and the source of ready cash. Most French Catholics did not agree with the precepts of Prohibition: How could the use of alcohol be illegal when wine was used at Mass and was transformed into the blood of Christ by the priest? Maine had been in Prohibition since 1851 and the Constitutional Amendment was enacted in 1920, which made it national. Smugglers in the Valley had a 69-year head start over the rest of the nation in the art of smuggling and bootlegging. Besides, crossing the river with a few bottles was a legal infraction, but it was not a sin unless one lied about it. The same was true of bootlegging and poaching, at least that was the local perception. In any case, these hard times saw most residents in similar circumstances and many children from that time, now claim they did not know that they were poor because neighbors were in the same condition. Perhaps the pain of it has passed from memory over the past 90 years, or those who have memories of the Depression were very young and quite care free in comparison to their parents.

Father Menard was a strict priest and held the reins of the parish quite tightly. He was a “fire and brimstone” preacher and without naming names, would reveal the horrible sins he had heard in the confessional: “There is a man in this parish who is guilty of the sin of...”. Father Menard also planted trees and flowers around the rectory and painted the church grey. After eleven years of Father Menard, Father Joseph Xavier Martin (1941-1945) saw the parish through the bulk of the Second World War. He was followed by Father Gelinias (1945-6), who was in the parish for only a year. He founded a chapter of the Eucharistic Crusaders with the children of the parish.

The parish had come to be in financial straights, so Father Romeo Doiron, who had a talent for balancing a budget, was assigned and remained from 1946 to 1952. When he left the parish was again solvent. Father Doiron told this writer that he had always been assigned to parishes with fiscal problems through out his career, and remarked that Saint-Mary’s in Presque Isle was the only parish he ever been assigned to that did not have financial difficulties. He said that it was his reward at the end of his service to the church. One problem that Father Doiron had to contend with was the condition of the school. It was crowded and had become dilapidated and concern was raised as to whether the school should be repaired or replaced. By this time, Grand Isle village was larger than Lille, so it is natural that there would be a lot of support for moving the school. The Mont-Carmel parishioners solidified their support behind Father Doiron and prevailed.

Father Robitaille

Father Emile Robitaille (1952-1964) followed Father Doiron. He started the C.C.D. catechism classes for the young of the parish as well as study clubs for adults. He also did a lot of work on the parish cemetery that, in an overwhelmingly Roman Catholic town, serves also as the civic cemetery. The parish was down to 60 families, one third of what it had been in the 1920s, before the separation of Saint Gerard from the flock. Despite this there was enough financial support to paint the interior of the church and repaint the numerous statues. He passed away in 1964 and was interred in Nicolet, Québec.

The Daughters of Wisdom left the parish in 1961 and the Good Shepherd Sisters (*Les Soeurs de Bon Pasteur*) took over at the school until it closed in June 1965. It was demolished in June 1966. Children from Lille attended school in Grand Isle for the first six grades and went to Van Buren for the rest of their public school education.

Last Resident Pastor and Parish Centennial

Father Hervé Carrier (1965-1970) was the last resident pastor at the Mont-Carmel parish. After that, the parish became a mission of the Saint-Gerard parish in Grand Isle. In 1969, Carrier officiated over the celebration of the centennial of the parish in its present location. It was celebrated on July 27 with Bishop Garety celebrating Mass with Rt. Reverend Armand Cyr of Caribou, and Reverend Stanislas Dionne of Shediac, New Brunswick, both originally of the parish. Governor Kenneth M. Curtis was guest of honor. There was a reception with 500 attending at the Knights of Columbus Hall in Madawaska, followed by a musical program in the parish hall in Lille.

Consolidating of the Parish

Father Gerard Parent (1970-1974), who had some legal problems, was the next priest assigned to the parish. He was followed by Father Roger Bolduc (1974-1977) who oversaw the closing of the church and died after a short illness, the result of a brain tumor. Father Bolduc was a charismatic and energetic priest who had to accomplish a difficult task. The church was closed on September 16, 1977 due to the high cost of heating the building and the negative financial balances on the books. The number of families totaled 75, quite a decline from 292 in 1913. This was a decision of the Parish Council, but not a popular one in Lille.