

# 2013-3

**Holy Cross in Acadia: What you can do with eight dollars**  
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The history of Holy Cross in Acadia goes back to 1864, 150 years (next year in 2014). But where is Acadia? It's not a country, not a state, not a province...in fact not a very defined area as such.

The first French explorers arrived in 1604 at the mouth of the Ste-Croix river, on Île Ste-Croix, which presently is on the American side of the border between the U.S. and Canada. The harsh winter conditions and scurvy took the lives of most in this first settlement. The next year in 1605, a second and more stable settlement was made at Port-Royal, in Nova Scotia. From there, the population gradually grew and the Acadians spread throughout Nova Scotia, Prince-Edward Island, New Brunswick and even the Eastern part of northern Maine. Because of its strategic location, resources in timber and fisheries, this part of Eastern Canada was coveted by Britain, and France didn't do much to defend the territory nor its inhabitants. War between France and Britain led to the deportation of the Acadians in 1755 to English colonies on the Northeast States of the U.S and Louisiana, hence the presence here of the "Cajuns" and several other places, even the Falkland Islands. Some Acadians fled northwards to escape and ended up in the Gaspé peninsula (Province of Québec). This is why that peninsula is also part of the territory comprised as Acadia

1755, although a crucial date in the Acadian history timeline, the deportation did not result in the complete disappearance of the French-speaking Acadians. With time, the exiles from various places on the U.S. Eastern seaboard and as far away as Louisiana wandered back to areas from which they had been deported, notably in the Memramcook area. For close to a century, these people who etched their living miserably from the land, the forest and fishing, were deprived of contact with France, of education and to a large extent of religious services in their language. Occasionally, some itinerant missionary from Québec would pass through baptizing, marrying and give some religious instruction. It is a wonder that the faith and the culture survived at all in such a context of deprivation.

In spite of the lack of everything, the Acadian group in Saint-Joseph of Memramcook decided to build themselves a church in 1847, a relatively large and solid stone construction from a local stone quarry. That church still serves today although it has received additions and modifications through the years. In 1854, a French-speaking priest from Québec, l'abbé F.-X. Lafrance, then pastor of the parish in St. Joseph, sought to establish a school which lasted for about 8 years and was known as the Séminaire Saint-Thomas.

At the time, the Memramcook area was in the Diocese of Saint John, under Bishop John Sweeney, who, seeing the plight of the French-speaking element of his diocese, and in order to assure a continuation of the work initiated by l'Abbé Lafrance, had met with Fr. Charles Moreau CSC in New York in the summer of 1863<sup>1</sup>. Fr. Charles, was then the designated General Visitor, appointed by Fr. Basile Moreau himself, to visit the North American Holy Cross foundations. This visit set in motion what was to become the resurgence of Acadia in the person of Fr. Camille Lefebvre CSC.

In the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there were approximately 15 000 Acadians<sup>2</sup> in the three Atlantic provinces, New-Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island, with most of these in New-Brunswick. Cut off from any source of formal education, they lived a very frugal, if not miserable, life as small farmers, woodsmen, and fishermen forced to sell their goods at ridiculously low prices and having to buy supplies from the company stores that exploited them. These were all run by English business people.

In response to Bishop Sweeney's request, our founder, Most Rev. Basile Moreau, through the Canadian Provincial, at the time Fr. Joseph Rézé, asked Fr. Lefebvre to come to Memramcook ( St. Joseph). This is how our Founder himself was directly involved in the history of Holy Cross in Acadia. From existing correspondence, it wasn't an order, but an invitation showing the confidence Fr. Moreau placed in Fr. Lefebvre (first Canadian Holy Cross priest) to carry out this mission. And Fr. Lefebvre, seeing this as a Providential calling,<sup>3</sup> was eager to respond as he was aware of the social conditions facing the French-speaking people of Atlantic Canada at that time.

The General Council in Le Mans approved the venture on March 3, 1864 and subsequent approval was given by Rome on May 3, two months to the day, namely to found a college, assure the care of the parish and offer pastoral services.

On the 10<sup>th</sup> of June, 1864, Fr. Lefebvre celebrated his first mass with his new parishioners. On that occasion, Fr. Lafrance, in his farewell, hailed Fr. Lefebvre as a new dawn, the beginning of a new and wonderful episode for the Acadians, something he had promised them beforehand. He compared Fr. Lefebvre as a new Moses and announced his arrival in their midst.

A few years later, in an autobiographic note to Fr. Edward Sorin, then Superior General, Fr. Lefebvre relates the beginnings of the college. " I had no material means<sup>4</sup>. All I had was some American coins, which converted into English money, amounted to eight dollars, very little to refresh the property and wood frame buildings (given by Fr. Lafrance), buy kitchen supplies and essential classroom furniture. Luckily, Bishop Sweeney, realizing my financial straits, loaned me a few dollars and the good Fr. Lafrance offered me some furniture, gave me a good horse and an excellent cow." Apparently, too, Bishop Sweeney gave him some pots and pans for the kitchen.

Fr. Lefebvre was a great preacher and is said to have completely conquered the parishioners in his first sermon. He was an innovator and knew how to make known the work he had set about to accomplish. He had much to do, repair the building and fences around the property left by Fr. Lafrance. He stresses the need to repair the fences because the sheep, goats, cows of those around would come and graze on the college property as if it belonged to all. He was quick to see the aspects of problematic situations and quick also to decide how to act on them. The summer months of 1864 were thus consecrated to the needed repairs, purchasing of the basic college furnishings and the establishment of a vegetable garden.

Driven by a blind and courageous faith, he surmounted the obstacles as they came along by entrusting to Saint Joseph the task of protecting this new foundation and to bring it to fruition. Saint Joseph did not let him down. In the fall of '64, Montreal sent two brothers and two priests and , later in the fall, another priest and a brother. Of these, only two were Canadians. The others were from France, not yet used to the Canadian context. One of the Canadians, was a newly ordained priest, ordained on his way to Memramcook by the bishop of Saint John, Most Rev. Sweeney.

The most urgent task then was to establish a program curriculum, course contents and academic rules and to distribute the various duties of each member of the fledgling institution.

The College would be bilingual for two reasons: to fulfill the wish of the bishop in his aim to replenish the ranks of his English speaking clergy and secondly, Fr. Lefebvre realized the need for his students to know the English language in order to work and live in an environment quite different from that of the Province of Quebec. He himself, did not know English, and never set to learn it.

Workers were still repairing the building at the beginning of October of 1864. On October 10<sup>th</sup>, the official opening was held with 19 day students and 12 boarding students. This total of 31 students increased to 42 during this first year of activity. Fr. Lefebvre saw in this humble beginning the promise of the resurgence of a people. In a letter to a friend pastor, he expresses his pleasure in seeing how the students are docile and eager to learn, showing skills and intelligence beyond expectation in spite of the meager means at hand.

For practical reasons, it was decided that a program of commercial studies would be given, but yet there was also the need for formation in the humanities. One of the priest was given the task of teaching latin and literature to a class of three students who had previously studied in a Quebec college (Ste-Anne-de-la-Pocatière) and also a few Irish students from the Diocese of St. John. The priests and brothers from France taught elementary and more advanced French. The newly ordained Fr. O'Brien taught English grammar and literature whereas one of the brothers managed discipline and supervised the farm.

The first year went well and to the satisfaction of the founder. It ended with a play to which the public was invited, a public that was totally enthused to see what the students could achieve in this new college setting.

The second year began on time, on September 4<sup>th</sup> 1865, with a total of 63 students and now with a staff more organized and more "broken-in". With time, more and more courses came on line, but nevertheless the small number of religious there carried a heavy teaching and administrative load as the institution developed.

The formation of a young person requires more than formal instruction.

Fr. Lefebvre was well aware of this and showed his pedagogic skills by instituting para-academic activities which he deemed as important as those of the purely classroom type. He saw in plays, contests, debates and sports the source of legitimate emulation, of interest and competitiveness, necessary for the citizens of the future. As a good teacher, he organized a theatrical group, a baseball team, a musical group in need of instruments which were finally obtained somehow, he formed a society modeled on the Société Saint-Jean Baptiste which existed in Quebec for the development of the French culture and national pride. In 1866, Fr. Lefebvre gathered the oldest of his students to form the society, to establish its constitution, to elect its officers in order to promote its growth in the student body. In his eyes, this society would be a powerful formative tool. From its onset, the society became a strong stimulant among its members in training them for public speech, literature presentations, debating and the fine art of public discussion according to parliamentary proceedings. The activities grew in number and caught the public eye. Gradually, people from everywhere in the area, some coming on organized special trains, would flock to St. Joseph in order to be part of these "not to be missed" social events. On the English side, the St. Patrick Society was founded and the English students also had their music groups, and sports teams.

In the first years of operation, Fr. Lefebvre sought to establish the new college on a legal footing in order that it be recognized in the province and the country. With the help of local lawyers and some favorable politicians, the request for a charter was presented in the Legislature composed at the time of a majority of English-speaking protestant members not inclined to favor a catholic, let alone a French language, institution. Nevertheless, the charter was granted on March 23, 1868<sup>5</sup>.

Having laid the educational groundwork for boys, Fr. Lefebvre also realized the need for a girls' school for which he completed a building in 1871. Initially, he had counted on Sisters of Holy Cross from Montreal to

staff the school. This did not meet with the desires of the bishop who had a new diocesan community of sisters, the Immaculate Conception Sisters of Charity. A few of their French-speaking sisters were sent to St. Joseph and, in 1873, the school opened and maintained itself. In 1924, the French branch of the Sisters broke off to become the Sisters of our Lady of the Sacred Heart. In 1943, the school became the first French-speaking women's college in the province to grant baccalaureate degrees in the Arts and Humanities.

Coming back to Fr. Lefebvre, just 7 years after his coming to St Joseph of Memramcook, he is chosen as Provincial in January of 1871, the first Canadian to be named in this post. From 1871 to 1880, he must assume this extra duty. His plea to Father Sorin to leave him in Acadia fell on deaf ears. He was formally ordered to be at Saint Laurent, where he arrived in March of '71. Later in September, on a visit to Montreal, Fr. Sorin relented somewhat and named Fr. Rezé as acting provincial "pro tempore" in order to release him temporarily for the task in St. Joseph. In August of '72, the General Chapter gives him a strange title: "Substitute to the Provincial", in fact Provincial and allowed to carry out this onerous task from St. Joseph. The eight "long years" of his service as Provincial were taxing and imposed on him many periods of absence from the local community, trips to St. Laurent (Montreal), trips to Notre Dame and to France.

#### The little Sisters of the Holy Family

Attending the Chapter of 1872, and seeing the service rendered by the Holy Cross sisters at the budding university, the idea came to him that it might be possible to have some sisters come to Saint Joseph. Fr. Sorin agreed to send 4 in 1874, however none of these could speak French and this was the object of a complaint to Fr. Sorin by Fr. Lefebvre who saw that as an immediate obstacle for recruitment of sisters in the area. Without delay, Fr. Sorin wrote back that he was sending two more sisters, one whom Fr. Lefebvre knew beforehand, a native of Lacadie, in Quebec. This was Sister Marie-Léonie Paradis, now Blessed Marie-Léonie with whom Fr. Lefebvre was instrumental in founding the Little Sisters of the Holy Family, a congregation dedicated to the service of clergy and religious houses. Long considered co-founder, the title has, of late, been removed from Fr. Lefebvre's cemetery monument in answer to the wish of the Little Sister's congregation. With his usual humility, it's quite probable that he wouldn't have objected to this deletion in spite of all he did to see the foundation succeed.

#### Expansion

The old wooden college had served well for the startup institution but as enrolment increased, time had come to expand. In 1873, having secured the necessary permissions and with freshly drawn plans, Fr. Lefebvre embarked on the ambitious project of a new building. To kick-off the financial campaign, Bishop Sweeney gave 500\$ and other benefactors joined in so that the stone edifice was inaugurated during the Christmas holidays of 1876. This building was the central part of the main building that burned in 1933.

#### The National Acadian Convention

In 1880, a delegation of approx. 100 Acadians recruited by Fr. Lefebvre went to the Quebec Convention of the Société Saint-Jean-Baptiste. From this event spawned the idea of a similar event in Acadia. This was held on July 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup>, 1881 in St. Joseph. The event hosted some 5000 people during which the Convention established the Acadian Patronal Feast, that of the Assumption on the 15<sup>th</sup> of August thus paving the way to a series of such events afterwards to strengthen the national identity and spirit among the Acadian people.

This major event of 1881 at the College was to be followed by another, its 25 anniversary of existence celebrations in June of 1889. Again all possible means, festivities, masses, keynote speakers and invited celebrities of the time, theatrical plays, concerts, all highlighted the important social and educational role that the college was playing in this awakening society. Enthusiasm at an all-time high!

## Trials

Later that same year, 1889, fatigue set in and in December, Fr. Lefebvre was beset by a stroke, which nevertheless allowed him a degree of activity. He was again chosen to be provincial in 1890, but refused. In 1892, he lost a key player, Fr. Alfred Roy who was called to St-Laurent to replace Fr. Rezé. Later, in 1894, Laval honored him with an honorary doctorate in theology. This taxed his humility, but it was to be taxed some more by the members of the society he had founded 25 years earlier, who on their jubilee decided, against his strongest protests, to cast a bronze statue of him which still stands on the college grounds, now the Memramcook Institute.

On the morning of January 28<sup>th</sup>, 1895, two sisters who regularly cleaned his room found Fr. Lefebvre dead in his bed. Heart failure took him at the age of 73. This was a shock to all, and the headlines bemoaned the great man heralded as the "National Liberator", a national death. Needless to say, imposing funeral ceremonies were had, followed by numerous memorial services throughout the Province of New Brunswick.

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At the death of Fr. Lefebvre in 1895, the push towards a resurgence and a self-assertion of the Acadians was well underway. Already in 1867, a fledgling newspaper, "Le Moniteur Acadien" was launched in Shediac, and there is still a weekly by that name today, convents for girls opened up from 1873 to 1878 in Memramcook (St. Joseph), Saint Basile in the North West of N.B., in Caraquet (North East) and St. Louis-de-Kent. (East). Soon after the 1881 National Convention, a flag and a national hymn were adopted in 1884. Another college, Collège Ste-Anne was opened by the Eudist Fathers in Ste Anne-de-Churchpoint (Nova Scotia) in 1890, and in 1885 the long-lasting newspaper "L'Évangeline" began publishing.

The work begun by Holy Cross continued to grow and prosper as the Community based in Montreal sent religious of great value to continue in the ministry and educational endeavor that began in 1864. The list of names dear to those associated with this success would be too long to enumerate. Suffice it to say that the Saint Joseph College, later Saint Joseph's University (L'Université Saint-Joseph) continued as a bilingual institution and was granted the privilege of colonial universities in 1906 with degrees recognized by the University of Oxford and valid throughout the British Empire. All the while, it formed a multitude of men who, after their B.A., became clergymen and bishops, lawyers, politicians, doctors, agronomists (a great trust was put in this particular area), engineers and many other professionals needed in the Acadian society.

On October 20, 1933, disaster struck. With students in the chapel for the evening prayers, fire started in the locker room from a poorly extinguished cigarette hastily inserted by a student in his jacket pocket as he hid it from an approaching disciplinarian. The lack of firefighting equipment along with the brisk wind led to the complete destruction of the long front part, the sister's building, laundry and infirmary as well as of many houses in the village. Fortunately, there was no loss of life. The back wing, built to fire resistant standards just the year before, housing the chapel, library, two large study rooms and classrooms was saved as well

as the facilities of the farm that supplied much of the food for the boarding institution. This farm was a model farm, and the University offered a diploma program to train young farmers to develop agriculture in their respective regions. With work going on night and day, the new building, this time fireproof, welcomed students in the fall of 1934, hardly a year after the tragedy. In the meantime, the courses were offered in rented space in the city of Moncton, some 15 miles away. It was perhaps a foreboding of things to come.

Enrolment at the University stayed between 400 and 500 students from the time of the new building until about 1953. During the war years and after, the COTC was very active and led to the formation a considerable number of officers.

The courses and programs were progressively strengthened and augmented. For instance, with the founding of the School of Education in 1938, summer courses gave a chance to teachers, both women and men, to increase their competency and obtain a baccalaureate in education. The early forties saw the institution of a successful 3 year diploma program in business. A science program was started in 1943 with specific training to those aiming more advanced science in other universities, especially Laval or Montreal. Pre-engineering started in 1953 when the Rector, Father Clément Cormier, decided that the Commerce, Science sections and the two last years of the Arts program would move to Moncton in a rather large school that had become available.

In those years, Fr. Cormier arranged to send some of the best students to Notre Dame and Laval in order for them to get a Ph.D. in the sciences, notably in Physics. This would pave the way to develop a science faculty. Later, at the end of the fifties, the University became co-ed, and programs in nursing and psychology were launched. Students had their classes downtown. The need for more space, a campus, became more evident. The first campus building, a residence hall, appropriately named "Résidence Lefebvre" was built in 1958 on a large tract of land belonging to the Diocese of Moncton and ceded to the University.

With the mounting cost of salaries, private education was becoming more and more difficult to offer, although most of the staff was made up of Holy Cross people as well as of some local religious sisters. But all this was insufficient to staff and maintain a University on its way up.

In 1962-63, the Government of the Province of New Brunswick instituted a Royal Commission on higher education in the province. Both the English and French-speaking sectors were examined with subsequent re-organization in both. At the time, three small French language all male universities existed in the Province along with the same number of affiliated colleges for women. Of these, St. Joseph's was the most advanced and diversified in its programs, and it also had a bigger enrolment. The other two were run by the Eudist Fathers and the women's colleges by three different religious orders of women.

The Commission led to the creation, in 1963, of l'Université de Moncton on the Moncton campus with the other three campuses as affiliated institutions, part of the university. One of the universities closed in the early 70's and a small women's institution in North West N.B. also closed. Nevertheless, the framework was in place for a three campus university in the North West and North East of N.B. with the main campus in Moncton, the South East, all areas where the French-speaking population is present. This is now the present situation. The Edmunston campus (N. West) offers the B. of Arts and the Baccalaureate in Forestry plus the two first years of several programs. The North East campus in Shippegan offers a Baccalaureate on Management of aquatic resources, Baccalaureate in Nursing and the two first years of other baccalaureate

programs to be completed in Moncton. Since its inception in 1963, the Moncton campus has grown to offer baccalaureate, masters and several Ph.D. degrees in the main branches of academia: Arts, Science, Engineering, Commerce and Administration, Psychology, Education, Law, Economy, Computer Science, Phys-Ed, Food science, Social Work, etc.. to over 4000 students on campus. The other two satellite campus comprise some 450 students each for a total of close to 5000 students, national and international.

The mark of Holy Cross is present on campus with some buildings having the cross and anchor symbol on a plaque or a wall. Many buildings bear the name of prominent holy cross pioneers in the development of the university . Close to the library, stands a large memorial statue in honor of Fr. Clément Cormier, founder and first president of the University, complete with plaque and seating area before the statue.

I had the pleasure to teach one year at St. Joseph's and thirty years in Moncton and I have the dubious honor of having been the last member of Holy Cross to teach at l'Université de Moncton. Since my retirement in 2001, I have been at the Generalate in Rome ever since.

From the time Holy Cross came to Acadia, priests and brothers were constantly involved in pastoral activity, and this has always been so up to now. It involved being pastor, parochial administrator, chaplaincy to religious communities, hospitals and in the military. Presently, two of our members are full-fledged pastors, others serve in chaplaincy roles or assure replacement in various parishes. Age and less than perfect health is affecting others in our little group of 14 religious. Since Sept 1, 2012, the District of Acadia has become a house of the Province canadienne des religieux de Ste-Croix based in Montréal.

Looking back, I see the great contribution made by Holy Cross in our area of Acadia. What the future holds for us, the small number of us left there, is difficult to foresee. Nevertheless, Fr. Lefebvre's eight dollars have gone a long way. God be thanked.

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- 1 Notes inédites, Guy Léger, CSC, archives, District d'Acadie, p. 3
  - 2 Statistics Canada <http://estat.statcan.gc.ca/cgi-win/cnsmcgi.exe?Lang=E&DBSelect=A1851312>
  - 3 Camille Lefebvre, c.s.c.; M. Chamard, A. Chiasson, C. Cormier, H. Léger, FIDES ed., 1988, p. 50-51
  - 4 Notes inédites, Guy Léger, CSC, archives, District d'Acadie, p.5
  - 5 Au service de deux peuples, Pierre -A. Landry, par Della M. Stanley, 1977, p. 41
  - 6 Other source : Album Souvenir 1864-1964 Collège St-Joseph, N.-B.