

Forgotten Facts about Assumption Parish Sandwich, Ontario

by

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It will be a long time before the story of Assumption Parish is accurately written because up to the present time facts and tradition have been so often scrambled together that it is difficult to separate them.

In this short article we hope to correct a few mistakes, record some items which have been overlooked, and bring to light new discoveries that were believed not to exist. There are things that we would all like to know which are hidden from us at the present time. I, for one, do not despair, and will keep hunting for their solution. The Indians who inhabited this area are our first consideration. The date of their arrival and the location of their villages is necessary to get a true picture of the locality.

The first record we have is by Champlain, who places the Indians as follows: the Hurons or Wyandottes on Georgian Bay; the Neutral or Attiwandron in southwestern Ontario, from Lake Ontario along Lake Erie to the vicinity of the Detroit River; the Iroquois, in upper New York State, in the Mohawk Valley. All these tribes had practically the same language and very similar customs.

In the year 1640 the Jesuits, Brébeuf and Chaumonot, undertook a missionary journey from Huronia to the land of the Neutrals. At first they were well received, but some Indians brought word that the priests were devils, and would bring pestilence and disease among them. They were protected by some Neutrals who were friendly and after spending the winter, during which they had many narrow escapes, they made their way back to the Hurons. While in the Neutral country Brébeuf renamed several of their villages, – Notre Dame des Anges near Brantford; St. Alexis near Iona, St. Joseph near Clearville; St. Michael, at the mouth of the Thames river; St. François, near Corunna on River St. Clair. A report was sent, to the Jesuit headquarters in France from which we have a map dated Paris 1656 on which these villages are all recorded.¹

Not long after the missionaries returned to Huronia, the Iroquois attacked the Hurons and practically exterminated the settlement. Fathers Brébeuf and Chaumonot were burned at the stake. A few of the Hurons escaped and found refuge among the Ottawas in Upper Michigan.

¹ This map was drawn by N. Sanson d'Abbeville, Geographe ordinaire du Roy, A Paris 1756.

After the massacre of the Hurons, the Iroquois in 1650 attacked the Neutrals and so complete was the destruction of that tribe that none were left to describe it. The Iroquois thereafter occupied the Neutrals' land as a hunting ground. About the year 1665 the French made peace with the Iroquois, and Lake Ontario and Lake Erie were opened for travel to the French, who prior to this had to go by the Ottawa river and Lake Nipissing to reach Huronia. In 1670, two Jesuit priests, Fathers Dollier and Galinée were the first to open the Lake Ontario and Lake Erie route to Sault Ste. Marie. They kept a diary of their travels, which has been published in the *Papers and Records of the Ontario Historical Society*, and is most interesting reading.² They spent the winter at Port Dover, where the remains of their camp are still visible. In the spring they continued along the north shore of Lake Erie until they reached Point Pelée where they camped. A strong wind which developed during the night wrecked some of their canoes but in spite of this they decided to continue. At the mouth of the River Rouge they found a large stone image which was worshipped by the Indians; this they broke in pieces and threw into the river. They reported that God rewarded them for this by allowing them to kill a roe-buck and a bear which supplied them with food for several days. We are indebted to Galinée, who was a map maker, for the first map which is anything like the county of Essex. They continued their trip to the Sault and returned to Montreal by the Ottawa route.

As previously mentioned, Essex County was Iroquois hunting ground, and we now find that Cadillac, who was Commandant at Mackinac, wishing to find a more convenient place for a settlement, decided that one on the Strait or what the French called "Detroit" would be much more suitable. It required considerable correspondence with Paris before he was finally given permission to make there an establishment which he named Fort Pontchartrain. In 1701, there being no Indians permanently located near the settlement, Cadillac invited those at Mackinac to come and establish villages under the protection of the Post. The tribes which accepted his invitation were a branch of the Ottawa called the "court Oreilles" or short ears, the Pottawatomi, the Huron and the Chippewa. On their arrival the Indians were given the following locations: the Ottawa village on what is now Ouellette Avenue and Sandwich Street, Windsor. The Pottawatomi village on the site of Fort Wayne, Detroit. The Huron village was on the south side of the Town of Detroit. The Chippewa had no village but camped at the rear of the French farms. The French Government did not purchase the land from the Indians and as farms were granted to settlers, the Indian villages were moved.³

² Ontario Historical Society, *Papers and Records*, Vol. IV, 1903.

³ These sites can be located on the map of the Detroit River section, 1707, an excellent copy of which is kept in the Public Archives at Ottawa.

After the British capture of Canada, one of the first acts was to protect the Indians by ordering that the sale of any farms by them would not be legal until the land had first been purchased by the Government. By the treaty at Detroit in 1790 the deputy Superintendent of Indian affairs, Colonel Alexander McKee, purchased south-western Ontario from the Indian tribes mentioned. We have a copy of this treaty, which was signed by the Chiefs and principal warriors by making their totems.⁴ The area sold extended from Port Stanley to the Detroit River, and Lake St. Clair, then from Wallaceburg to the Thames River as far as London and then back to Port Stanley.

In this article we are dealing with the Hurons and will therefore confine ourselves to that tribe, and the establishment of religion among them. Their first missionary was Father Armand de la Richardi who arrived at Detroit in 1728. After several years of discouragement he was successful in converting most of them. A report made in 1733 states that a church and a house for the priest had been built. The church, which was seventy feet long, was not large enough for the six hundred Indians who wished to attend the services.⁵ His work was interrupted in 1738 by hostilities between the Hurons and the Ottawas, which resulted in the Hurons leaving Detroit and moving to Sandusky, and a village which they established on the mainland, at the mouth of the Detroit River. This was a very important place for them, as the west end of Lake Erie becomes very rough suddenly and necessitates having a shelter in which to wait until the storm is over. They named it the village at Bois Blanc. The situation was ideal, having a sandy beach, on a small bay which they called "Crescent Bay." This is now known as "Callam's Bay," named after one of the early settlers by the name of Callam who had operated a mill there.⁶

Father Richardi followed the Hurons to Sandusky, and by 1741 had persuaded them to return to Detroit and the village at the mouth of the river, which at that time included a mission, a farm and a forge. Father Richardi, finding the work too difficult for one man, asked that an assistant be sent. His request was granted and on September 27, 1744, Father Pierre Potier arrived, and took over the work at the Bois Blanc Mission. We have many references in Potier's account books of transactions there.⁷

On May 20, 1747, some Hurons under Chief Nicolas killed five French men near Grosse Isle whom they caught stealing their furs at Sandusky.

⁴ The original of this treaty is in the Department of Indian Affairs, Ottawa, dated 19 May, 1790; treaty 2.

⁵ *Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*, Vol. LXIX, p. 24.

⁶ "Carte de La Rivière du Détroit depuis de le Lac Erie jusques au Lac S. Claire." M. de Lery, fils, Paris 1752. The original is in the Department of Marine, Paris. An excellent copy is in the Burton Historical Collection, Detroit.

⁷ "Fifteenth Report of the Bureau of Archives, Province of Ontario," 1918-1919.

Fearing the consequences if they were caught, the Hurons united with a band of Iroquois, and formed a conspiracy to seize the Commandant of Detroit and Father Potier, then massacre all the French in the Post. Their plot was discovered by a squaw, who informed Father Potier, who in turn told Chevalier de Longueuil, the Commandant, and all the settlers were ordered into the fort. The Hurons, who were not in sympathy with the conspiracy, sent a delegation to the Governor at Quebec, requesting that Father Richardi, who had great control over the Indians, be sent to the mission. The Governor agreed, and the expedition left on August 23, reaching Detroit on October 20. Chief Nicolas having died the conspiracy soon ended, and order was once more restored. The Commandant decided that he could maintain better control of the Indians if they were nearer the fort, and ordered Father Potier to leave the village at Bois Blanc and establish it at Point de Montréal, on the south side of the river. This was in the fall of 1747. The location of the village and mission at Bois Blanc is distinctly marked on a map by M. de Lery, junior, dated 1752, on which is the following notation: "In this vicinity villages of the Hurons, abandoned in 1748."

The First Church at Point de Montreal.

This log church was completed in the fall of 1750. The Governor at Quebec was anxious to have the Hurons settled in the new location, and in order to assist in the undertaking gave Father Richardi 5,000 livres (about \$ 1,000) to build a church and presbytery.⁸ Father Armand de la Richardi returned to Quebec in 1755, where he died on March 17, 1758.

The Second Church.

This log church was built in 1768. Father Potier wrote the Bishop on September 6, 1768, as follows: "The new chapel, which I have built with the help of the people, is in debt, and I have been obliged to sell the mission land to pay for it."⁹

The land was sold to Mr. Francis Pratt and as Father Potter had no document to prove the title, he had the Huron Indians give him a deed for the two arpents dated September 22, 1780, which he then transferred to Mr. Pratt, January 2, 1781.¹⁰

⁸ *New York Documentary History*, Vol. X, pp. 83, 133, 143, 148, 150, 156, 161, 163, 178, 182, 183.

⁹ Letter of Father Potier to Mgr Jean Olivier Briand, Bishop of Quebec; the original is in the archives of the Archdiocese of Quebec, E. U., V. 15.

¹⁰ The original of this document is in the archives at Assumption College, Windsor.

The French settlers on the south side of the river, being included in St. Anne's Parish, Detroit, were now transferred to the Huron mission, in order to give Father Potter more financial support and also to give the farmers the advantage of having a church of their own. The union of the Huron mission and the residents on the south side of the river created a new parish which was named Assumption. Father Potier died on July 16, 1781, and Father Hubert was appointed his successor.

The Third Church.

Father Hubert, who was a native of Quebec and understood the character of the habitant, soon became very popular. He decided to build a new church and presbytery and establish a school but having no land on which to build, Father Potier, as stated, having sold the mission farm to Mr. Pratt, he asked the Indians for another grant. They agreed and in 1782 gave him a grant, six arpents wide by forty deep, adjoining Mr. Pratt's land on the east, and the Huron reserve on the west. In 1784 he began the erection of the log church, but was unable to finish it, as he was called to be Coadjutor-Bishop of Quebec, but before he returned to Quebec he gave 12,642 livres of his own money and also sold three arpents wide by forty deep, of the west side of the church property to Mr. Pajot, to pay for the building of the church. He was succeeded by Father Pierre Fréchette in 1785 who in turn was succeeded by Father François Xavier Dufaux, a Sulpician, on October 13, 1786.

Father Dufaux on his arrival found the new church nearly completed and was able to have it dedicated on August 9, 1787. In a letter to the bishop describing the parish, he says, "There are six hundred communicants in the parish, and in addition ten new families, which have moved in this spring from Sandusky."¹¹

He had to overcome many obstacles as the people were very poor. All business was done by barter, and the people were heavily in debt with no apparent way of getting out of it. Much of the work on the church was done by the people without pay and even the two ladies who came to teach school cut five hundred pieces of glass and puttied in one thousand panes, their only tools being a bad diamond and an old door-key.

In spite of all these troubles he was able to report in 1788 that "the church and sacristy were not only finished but paid for."¹² The school did not succeed very well, the teachers were good and the people were anxious to

¹¹ Plomer, Rev. J. C., *Letters of Rev. J. B. Marchand, Detroit*, 1927, XV, n. 3. Unfortunately, this work never progressed beyond the introduction, due to the untimely death of Father Plomer, and this introduction is in the main a scholarly detail of the development of the parish.

¹² *Idem.*

have their children taught but were so poor they could scarcely supply them with clothing, let alone maintain a school.

Father Dufaux died at Assumption on September 11, 1796. His remains were placed beside those of Father Potier in front of the altar in the church.

Father Jean Baptiste Marchand arrived at Assumption on Christmas Day, 1796, to succeed Father Dufaux, and reported to the Bishop, "I found the Church and sacristy in very good order, and very decently supplied with everything. The parish consists of only one hundred and fifty inhabitants, including twelve at the River Thames, five on Lake Erie, and four at the River Canard. As for the Huron, there remain but four or five lodges, with few occupants. Fort Malden is an establishment still in its infancy, and there are but two or three Catholics."¹³

Father Marchand was the first to establish missions. In 1800 he built St. Peter's on the River Thames, now Prairie Siding, having twelve Catholic families, and St. John the Baptist at Amherstburg. Father Marchand died at Assumption, April 16, 1825.

One of our new finds is a picture of the third church by Edward Walsh, M. D., 49th Regiment, artist, made in 1804. The original painting is in the Clements Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan, and it makes a great contribution to the history of Assumption.

Father Marchand was succeeded by Father Crevier, who was followed by Father Angus MacDonell in 1831.

The Fourth Church.

The old church was now in a ruinous state having been supported by large timbers for many years. Father MacDonell had plans for a brick church prepared by Robert T. Elliott of Detroit in 1840, but it was not until 1843 that he began the erection of it. Shortly after the work began he was retired on account of his advanced age, and it was completed and dedicated in 1846 by his successor Father Pierre Point, S.J. An organ was installed in 1847 which is described in a clipping from a Detroit paper:

Mr. Erben, the justly celebrated organist of New York City, has just put up in the Cathedral Church in Sandwich, a new organ of his manufacture. The organ is 22 feet high, with 20 stops, cost \$ 2,000. and was the gift to the Church of Messrs. A. Rankin and Chas. Baby, of Sandwich. We learn also that a contract has been made with Mr. Erben, by Bishop LeFevre, for a large organ for the new cathedral in this city [Detroit]. This organ is to be 28 feet wide, 37 feet high, and to contain 38 stops, and will cost \$6,000. This will be the largest organ west of New York City.

— Detroit Daily Advertiser

¹³ Archives of Quebec, E. U., V. 132.

3 September 1847

In 1842 the census of religion for the township of Sandwich gives the Church of Rome as 2,673.¹⁴

The following questions might arise in the mind of the reader, therefore we will now make an attempt to answer them.

Where was the third church located? From the picture we have by Dr. Edward Walsh, 49th Reg't., it stood about one hundred feet from Sandwich street and in the middle of Kennedy Place.

Why was the fourth church built at such a distance from Sandwich Street? The answer is that there was considerable talk of annexing Windsor to Sandwich, and that a new road would be cut through. We have several different plans, showing suggested locations for the road. The church was built back so that it would face near the new road, which, strange to say, was not opened until 1875. With the church being built where it was, the people would have to go along Sandwich Street, then turn up the Huron Line, to reach it. In order to shorten the walk, Mr. Pajot subdivided the front of his farm. The Registered Plan No. 54, shows a short street, which he named Church Street. It is now included in London Street.

What did the new church look like? On Mr. Pajot's plan there is a rough sketch which shows the main building as at present, with a spire but without the tower. The present tower and spire, also the sanctuary, were added by Father Dennis O'Connor, in 1874.

When Bishop Pensonneault removed the Episcopal See from London to Sandwich in 1859, he built a large frame building of elaborate design for a residence, which was called "The Bishop's Palace." He also planted an avenue of trees in front of it, for a priests' walk. Another avenue extended from the church to Sandwich Street. He erected three arched gates on these avenues, one at Sandwich Street, one at what is now London Street, and the third opposite Church Street. We have a picture of one of these gates.

¹⁴ The original record pages for this census are in the possession of the writer of this article.