

History of Assumption, The First Parish in Upper Canada

by

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On the south bank of the Detroit River, in the very shadow of the towering, majestic Ambassador Bridge which joins United States and Canada, there is a lovely gothic church and the various buildings of a flourishing college, situated on a narrow but deep tract of land fronting the river. Both church and college have been dedicated to our Blessed Mother Mary under the glorious title of Our Lady of the Assumption. More than two centuries before the present Holy Father, Pius XII, defined the doctrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary (November 1, 1950) as an article *de fide* for the universal Church, the tiny mission of the Huron Indians at Detroit was dedicated to her honour under that title. The name "Assumption" followed this Indian mission from Detroit to Sandusky, to Bois Blanc and finally to la Pointe de Montréal as these Indians and their priests moved their habitations. The name became more durably settled on the mission and later on the parish located on the south shore of the Detroit River. This paper deals with the beginnings of this Canadian mission which became the parish of Assumption.

It is hard for us in our present society to connect the large parish of Assumption with the tiny Indian mission of the same name which once had to struggle for its very existence. Before the white man came to these parts of Canada, it was a virgin country, beautiful but absolutely untamed – without roads, settlements or any signs of habitation except the primitive encampments of nomadic Indians. In this setting, picture the savage slinking red men, clothed in skins and adorned with beads, appearing and disappearing in the dark forest, or flashing picturesquely along the rivers and lakes in their canoes. For the most part they proved crude, childish and passionate people; some of them were hostile, some friendly, but none of them was trustworthy.

Suddenly appeared the white man. What had induced him to forsake his European home and comforts for the hazardous treacherous ways of the wilderness? France and England were vying for expansion of their respective empires, seeking commercial gain and the glory of conquest. Added to this in the case of France was the desire to christianize the savages of North America. The Church desired to carry words of hope, light and salvation to her yet uninstructed children of the newly discovered continent. She therefore insisted that her French missionaries accompany the explorers and traders to the new land, regardless of dangers and discomforts that might arise. These were the motives behind the

establishment of the colony at Quebec; these were the motives that prompted explorers and missionaries to penetrate the forests and travel the treacherous waterways where lurked the dangers of ambush and attack from the native Indians. Undaunted, the missionaries along with the traders visited and learned to live among their savage charges, endeavoring to bring to their hearts the flame of faith. There in the wilderness, they adopted the ways of the savages, subsisting on their diet, laboring at their tasks, living in their huts. No hardship was too great if it meant winning the friendship and respect and ultimately the conversion of the Indians. The story of the Recollet and Jesuit missionaries in Huronia is well known to all students of history. From 1626 to 1649 the blackrobes had baptized twenty seven hundred Hurons. Just when they were beginning to reap the fruits of their labors, in 1649 the fierce and savage Iroquois, bitter foe of the Hurons and the French, attacked vigorously and viciously from the south. The Jesuit missionaries' work of twenty three years was destroyed utterly. Some of the missionaries were martyred and the survivors of the Huron tribe scattered far and wide. Some went to Quebec and settled at Lorette, some settled on the north shores of Lake Huron and Lake Michigan while still others, after much wandering settled along the Detroit River. It is the history of this group upon which we will concentrate in this paper.

Cadillac founded a colony at Detroit in 1701. Within the fort was the first St. Anne's Church.¹ The Hurons living to the west of the fort asked for a Jesuit Missionary, one of their beloved blackrobes, to minister to them.²

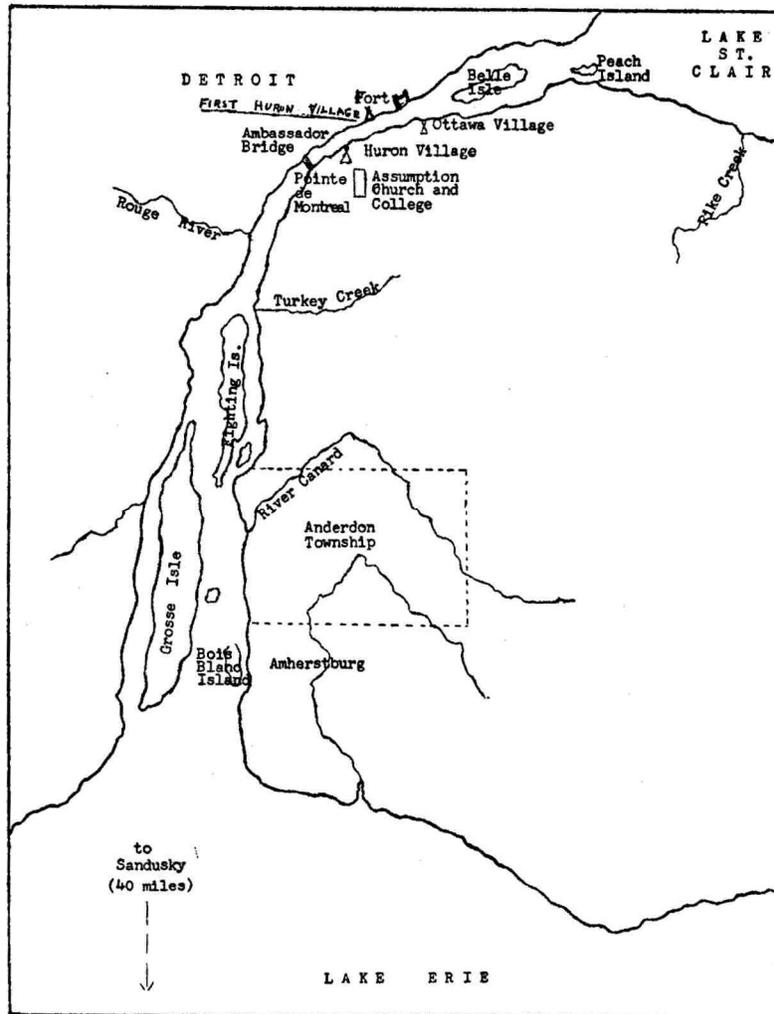
For some time nothing seems to have been done for them except that the Chaplain of the fort baptized some of their children and old people as we learn from the records of St. Anne's Church. In 1721 Father Charlevoix, S.J., visited the infant settlement and bemoaned the absence of a missionary among the Hurons.³ Arrangements were made with the Jesuit Superior at Quebec and in the summer of 1728 there arrived at Detroit a Jesuit whom Governor Beauharnois at Quebec described as "a man well-fitted to carry on the mission and to curb the proud spirit of the tribe."⁴ This was Father Armand de la Richardie, S.J. To succeed he needed all his resources of strength and courage. He had to dwell, not in the comparative comfort of the fort, but in the Indian village itself, less than a mile down the river. He was forced to depend on the government to supply his

¹ George Paré, *The Catholic Church in Detroit 1701-1888* (Detroit: Gabriel Richard Press, 1951), pp. 141-161.

² "The Cadillac Papers," *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections*, XXXIII (1904), 161. In future references this work will be designated as the *Mich. Hist. Colls.*

³ Pierre F. X. Charlevoix, S.J., *Journal of a Voyage*, trans. Louise Phelps Kellogg (Chicago, 1923), II, 6-13. Father Charlevoix visited New France in 1720-21. His writings relating to New France were first published in 1744 at Paris.

⁴ *Mich. Hist. Colls.*, XXXIV, 63.



meagre needs, for the Indians could not provide for his support. He made the heart-breaking discovery that almost all traces of religious practice had disappeared among his Indians, and the exhausting task of conversion had to begin again. At first the missionary labored apparently without success, making no impression on his Indian friends, although they accepted and respected him. At one time, he was at the point of leaving in despair.⁵ The only consolation was

⁵ Reuben Golden Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents* (Cleveland: Burrows, 1896-1901), LXIX, 51-52.

that he had been able to baptize some old and dying persons, as well as the babies who did not seem likely to live. Gradually however, the Indians lost their suspicions, and began to repay Father de la Richardie for his untiring labor with an enthusiasm and devotion that must have warmed his heart. In 1735, Father Nau wrote to Father Bonin from Sault St. Louis:

Not being sufficiently informed about the Hurons, I wrote to you last year that there were no Christians among the Hurons except those at Lorette. Indeed seven years ago there were no others. But Father de la Richardie has managed to assemble the scattered Hurons at Detroit and has converted them all.⁶

Evidently, Father Nan was not exaggerating about the success of the mission. On June 21, 1741, Father de la Richardie was able to address a letter to his superior-general at Rome, Father Francis Retz, to report his success.⁷ In it he gave the gratifying information that there were six hundred Christians, and the chapel of the mission at Dêtrôit, which was seventy feet long, would not hold them all. This letter was headed, 'The Mission of the Assumption among the Hurons of Detroit.' This is the earliest record of the title of the mission. All other references are to the Mission of the Hurons by which name it was commonly known. But there can be little doubt that it was dedicated to Our Lady of the Assumption from the beginning.

However, such progress was not destined to last long. Around one small fort at Detroit were gathered many tribes of Indians, whose newly found common interest in trade could not dispel the ancient feelings of hostility among them. They were not greatly influenced by civilization in their habits, for temperamentally they were still children, governed by the anger and jealousies of the moment. In the face of this, dissension was bound to break out.

The immediate cause of the outbreak of hostilities came from the Hurons. A tribe of Indians known as the Flatheads, who lived far to the south-west of Detroit, were frequently raided by the various tribes living near Detroit. The Hurons had often raided them for plunder. Suddenly they recalled an old treaty with the Flatheads and announced that they would be henceforth brothers with them. They notified the other tribes that they would warn the Flatheads if any of the other tribes were preparing to raid them. True to their word, they did give warning, which resulted in the ambush and murder of some of the attackers. As a consequence the Hurons were considered enemies by the other Indians. Bitter fighting ensued among the tribes, and Father de la Richardie had to take refuge in the fort. The Hurons retired into their fortification, and feared to come out. The situation indeed was grave. One dark night the Hurons secretly withdrew to

⁶ Camille de Rochemonteix, S.J., *Les Jésuites et la Nouvelle France au XVIII^e Siècle* (Paris, 1895), II, 51.

⁷ Thwaites, *Jesuit Relations...*, LXIX, 51-53.

Sandusky on the south shore of Lake Erie, thus relieving the tension.⁸

With the departure of the Hurons (1738) Father de la Richardie was without a flock. The wise priest saw that to maintain the faith in their hearts and to exercise any degree of influence or control over them he would have to keep them together. He therefore sought immediately to have them settled at Montreal, but the proud Hurons would not go without an invitation lest it look like flight, and the reluctant governor Beauharnois delayed in asking them. In the winter of 1740 Father de la Richardie spent seven months with the Indians at Sandusky.⁹ Being better acquainted with their ways and customs than anyone else he sent word to Beauharnois that “the custom of the savages was not to go begging for protection or refuge; that if anyone took compassion on their women and children, it was for them to come and console them upon their mats, or even to light a new fire for them.”¹⁰ Evidently the governor had hesitated too long to light the new fire, with the result that the Hurons were convinced that they were not wanted in the east.

At last, in 1742, Father de la Richardie taking matters into his own capable hands, persuaded the Indians to settle at Bois Blanc Island, at the outlet of the Detroit River directly opposite the present town of Amherstburg. Meanwhile Governor Beauharnois had been converted to the plan of bringing the Hurons to Montreal, and was furious at Father de la Richardie’s interference. He did not soon forgive Father de la Richardie for what he considered this highhanded measure.¹¹

During the exile of the Hurons at Sandusky, it is proof of the devotion that Father de la Richardie had instilled into their hearts that they remembered and observed the feasts of the Church. The missionary wrote that they came to Detroit on the approach of the great festivals.¹² We may well believe that of these holy days the feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary occupied a position of special importance, for the Indians would be quick to honor the patroness of their beloved mission.

This same devotion led the Indians to settle contentedly on Bois Blanc Island under the ministrations of their much-loved blackrobe. The mission established at Bois Blanc was quite substantial. It consisted of a church, a priest’s house, a house for the smith, another for the domestics, a refectory, barns, and a home for the farmer of the mission land, Jean Baptiste Goyau, and

⁸ “The Cadillac Papers,” *Mich. Hist. Colls.*, XXXIII, 153. The account of this Indian quarrel in this, present paper follows closely the story as given to us in the cited documents. On this point see also Paré, *op. cit.*, p. 169.

⁹ *Mich. Hist. Colls.*, XXXIV, 182.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 192.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 212.

¹² *Ibid.*, 173.

a store or trading post.¹³ The mission farm itself was sufficiently large, to maintain a settlement of this size. The buildings, of course, were crude, but quite sturdy.

Here Father de la Richardie must have been quite content. His flock was secure, safe from enemies, gathered together in one place, and all had embraced the faith. His task now was not one of conversion, but of keeping his children in the faith. In the letter of 1741 to his superior-general, he tells how this was done.¹⁴ Three times a day he assembled the Indians into the church, where he recited public prayers and preached to them. On feast days he did this four times. The rest of the day he spent visiting the sick, settling disputes, admonishing delinquents, teaching catechism to the children, and administering the sacraments.

However, the constant work and strain of the past few years had undermined the missionary's health and in spite of the comparative ease of the situation, he was obliged to ask Father St-Pé, superior of missions, for an assistant. Beauharnois, who still rankled at the opposition he had met from Father de la Richardie in the Montreal settlement for the Indians, used his influence to see that the priest got, not an assistant, but a successor. Father de la Richardie was recalled, and Father de Gonnor was appointed in his place. However, the new missionary was a sick man, totally incapable of assuming charge of the mission. In the summer of 1744, for reasons of his health, he returned to Quebec, leaving Father de la Richardie still in charge. The necessity of an assistant remained acute, and in September 1744 Father Pierre Potier arrived at Bois Blanc.¹⁵

Father Potier was destined to spend the rest of his life ministering to the Indians. He was a simple, studious man, pious and devout. He seemed to the Indians rather forbidding, and he did not immediately win their hearts. Nevertheless, his zeal and courage made the choice of him for the Huron mission a good one; moreover he understood the Huron language, having been in contact with the Hurons at Lorette for a year; he even compiled a Huron dictionary, which was very valuable to other pioneers. He also translated and copied some of the beautiful stories of Christianity into the Huron language.¹⁶ Father Potier was a voluminous writer and record keeper. Much valuable information for the historian can be gleaned from that portion of his church records and letters which are available. It is a great misfortune that his Diary which probably deals with his many years at Bois Blanc and la Pointe de Montréal cannot be located at

¹³ Thwaites, *Jesuit Relations...*, LXIX, 24.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 61-63.

¹⁵ Rochemonteix, *Les Jésuites...*, 11, 59-60.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 53-54.

present.¹⁷

On his arrival, Father Potier found the mission quite well-off. He took his place apparently as Father de la Richardie's assistant, for he did not act as head until the latter left in 1746. In the meantime he learned the management of the mission, and became a familiar, if not yet loved, figure in the eyes of the Indians. To them no one could replace their venerated pastor whom they had regarded as a father for eighteen years. They missed him greatly when he left on July 29, 1746.¹⁸

Perhaps their dissatisfaction over losing Father de la Richardie was one of the causes of the trouble in the tribe the following summer. More likely it was fomented by the English. We read in Father Potier's notes for September 9, 1747, that a man has recently come from Orange (Albany N.Y.) with a gift for Nicholas for having fought the French. In any case, an incident occurred in May 1747, that almost put an end to the mission. A Huron chief, Nicholas, who had always been a black sheep in the tribe, and had lived separately with his followers at Sandusky, put to death five Frenchmen who it is believed were caught stealing furs. At any rate when the Indians realized the enormity of their crime they were terrified of the possible consequences. Feeling that no mercy would be shown them by the French, they entered into a daring conspiracy with some other Indians, mostly Iroquois, to seize Father Potier and the commandant of the fort, and massacre all the Frenchmen during the feast of Pentecost. Fortunately a friendly squaw overheard the plot and informed the missionary, who immediately relayed the information to the commandant, de Longueuil, who at once ordered all the colonists from their farms into the fort. Father Potier himself reached the fort one half hour after midnight. In this way the tragedy was averted.¹⁹

However, the unrest about the fort was still serious. The majority of the Hurons had had no part in the scheme, and were much distressed at the rebellion of Nicholas. On August 9, they called a council to arrive at a possible solution. They agreed that the presence of Father de la Richardie would undoubtedly help smooth over the situation because of the great influence he still held over the Indians. They sent a delegation to Quebec to obtain permission for his return from the governor, and to escort him back. The permission was readily granted, and as for the good father, he was only too happy to come. He arrived in October, and as was foreseen his mere presence was sufficient to calm the

¹⁷ George Paré, "Pierre Potier, S.J.," *The Canadian Catholic Historical Association*, XVIII (1951), 53-54. See also John B. O'Reilly, *Two Jesuits at Sandwich*, *Canadian Messenger of the Sacred Heart*, Nov. 1952, p. 715 f.

¹⁸ [Note – in the original version, this is footnote "17^a." Subsequent notes in this online version are consequently one digit higher than in the original.] Fr. Potier's *Gazette*, St. Mary's College, Montreal.

¹⁹ Rochemonteix, *Les Jésuites...*, II, 61 ff.

Indians. He had been given the power to demand co-operation from all authorities and to use all resources of the government; such was his influence that he had no need to ask for government support. Under his hands, the Indians once again became quiet and submissive.

The uprising had meant the end of the prosperous Bois Blanc mission, for in their first uncurbed fury the insurgents had burned the buildings and laid waste the land. Since the exhausting task of rebuilding would be necessary in any event, the commandant asked that the mission be brought closer to the fort in order to exercise more complete control over the Indians. Father de la Richardie, who had been empowered to choose a new site, agreed. Accordingly, he moved the Mission to la Pointe de Montréal, opposite Detroit on what is now the Canadian side of the river on a tract of land six “arpents” wide just east of where Ambassador Bridge now stands. Here a church was built, probably of logs, partly by volunteer labor. So anxious was the government to have the question settled that they gave a grant of five thousand livres to the church’s construction. On September 8, 1749, the feast of the Nativity of the B.V. Mary, the first mass was said in the chapel which at that time had no floor and no ceiling. The task was completed in the fall of 1750 and the first church of the oldest parish in Upper Canada then stood not far from where the present beautiful church stands today.²⁰ The account book of the mission contains many items relating to this undertaking.²¹

With the building of the mission a large part of Father de la Richardie’s task was accomplished. There still remained the work of completely uniting the Hurons, by bringing the malcontents of Sandusky back with the main body of the tribe. This was much easier because Chief Nicholas was now dead. Father de la Richardie paid a visit to Sandusky, and such were his powers of persuasion that he soon brought about the union. Father de la Richardie’s work was now complete, and in 1751 he was free to return to Quebec, once again leaving behind him a well-ordered mission.²²

Just about this time – 1749 – the French began to settle on the south, or, as we know it, the Canadian side of the river. To build up a colony, the French government promised every man who settled at Detroit “one spade, one axe, one plough share, one large and one small auger.” The government loaned money to the settlers for two years to buy other tools; they gave each family a cow and a sow, which had to be returned after the time of offspring. Seed was advanced for the first year. Women and children were to be supported for one year at government expense.²³ The land granted was divided into long narrow strips,

²⁰ Thwaites, *Jesuit Relations...*, LXX, 49.

²¹ This account book is in the Burton Historical Collection of the Detroit Public Library.

²² Rochemonteix, *Les Jésuites...*, II, 63-64.

²³ Silas Farmer, *The History of Detroit and Michigan* (Detroit, 1889), p. 333.

forty arpents by three arpents fronting on the river, with a narrow road connecting them running along the very edge of the water. The road is still there, and it is probably the oldest in Upper Canada. A record of these early grants has been preserved in the Cicotte Book.²⁴

By reason of these inducements, over twenty French families had settled on the south shore of the river by the year 1752. The number gradually increased. We are fortunate enough to have a complete description of the settlement in 1757 from the report of one Charles Stuart, a Britisher made captive by the Indians, who worked out his ransom by helping Father Potier and Father Bocquet pastor of St. Anne's in Detroit.

From Lake Erie up to the strait that emptys Lake Huron there are no French or Indians settled on either side till you get about 11 miles up where is one family settled on the east Canada side; then 2 miles higher up begins the French settlements which extend about 4 miles in length along the strait or river; their plantations are laid out on the river 3 acres in breadth and 100 acres which seemed rather larger than the English acres ... The French that settled in said 4 miles amount to about 27 or 28 familys – the Wondot corn fields are higher up the river and join on the side next the French to Captain Jarvis's plantation ... About 2 1/2 miles higher up than Captain Jarvis's is the Wondot town containing about 60 or 70 houses and at the upper end of the town towards lake Huron stands their church, and joining to it is the priests house, garden and plantation. About 2 miles above the Wondot town stands the Tawaw (Ottawa) town. Between these two towns lives three French familys – there are also three plantations in this distance belonging to three French merchants who live in Fort de Troit –The Tawaw Town contains about 90 houses or Indian cabins but no church for the Tawas are a heathen nation and not proselyted to the Roman Catholic religion.²⁵

We see that the Indians were no longer the exclusive holders of the south shore of the river. However, the mission apparently remained undisturbed. Father Potier gained the confidence of the Indians, and was happy ministering to them. At first the white settlers on the south side were not his charge but canonically belonged to St. Anne's parish in Detroit. However, they worshipped along side the Indians and received the Sacraments at the mission as can be verified from the Assumption Church records and Paschal Communion lists that have been preserved. Until 1760 baptisms of the children were performed at both places. After that date nearly all the baptisms and marriages of the French were performed at the Mission.²⁶ From these records it is evident Our Lady's

²⁴ This book, a record of grants made to the settlers during the years 1749. 1751, is part of the Burton Historical Collection of the Detroit Public Library.

²⁵ "Captivity of Charles Stuart," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XIII, No. 1.

²⁶ Archives of Assumption Church, Registry of Baptisms, 1760-1767.

name Mary was given to more than half the girls, both Indian and French, who were baptized at the mission. Our Lady was certainly their personal as well as their parochial patroness.

France was waging a costly and losing war in Europe and had no reinforcements to protect New France from English conquests. By 1760 the French holdings in Canada were lost. By the Peace of Paris, 1763, France ceded New France to England. The transfer of the French holdings in the New World to the English passed with no unusual disturbance along the Detroit River. The French settlers took the oath of allegiance to the British King which was generally regarded as sacred. Nor did the Hurons offer any resistance. The other Indians were not so submissive. Under the Ottawa chief, Pontiac, the various tribes united for a common cause which was the destruction of all the English posts and the driving of the English out of the country. This was done in the name of the French King, not because the Indians felt any loyalty to him or had received a mandate from him – which they had not – but because they preferred the French policy toward the Indian to that of the English.

Pontiac also realized that the only hope in maintaining Indian power and preventing the decline of the race was to expel the English, by presenting a united front. Thus by sheer force of his personality, he united all the mutually hostile tribes, and in May, 1763, they attacked the fort at Detroit.

It was a difficult situation for both the French settlers and the Hurons. The French must have been somewhat in sympathy with Pontiac, but to their everlasting credit they respected the oath of allegiance they had taken. Indeed, some of them even smuggled provisions to the besieged garrison in the fort. The temptation to the Indians to join Pontiac was even stronger because of racial bonds. At this time the Huron Nation was divided in two under two chiefs; the one joined Pontiac immediately, the other was more Christian, and through the efforts of Father Potier, did not join the battle.²⁷

However Pontiac needed their help; and three days after the fighting began, he crossed the river and threatened them with dire penalties did they fail to fall in with the other tribes. The faithful group of Hurons, being only sixty warriors in number, were not strong enough to resist. They had the two alternatives – either to flee and leave the women and children at the mercy of Pontiac, or to join in the battle. They chose the latter course. On May 11, the feast of the Ascension, they first heard Mass, then put on their peculiar war paint, and crossed the river to join the other Indian forces.

They were not to remain long in battle. Father Potier, as a last resort, threatened to deprive them of the sacraments and a Christian burial. So great was their faith, that in spite of their fear of Pontiac, they left the battle. Pontiac was too occupied to pursue them; moreover Father Potier removed them from the

²⁷ ‘Pontiac Manuscript,’ *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections*, VIII, 266.

vicinity until the danger was over.²⁸ This struggle came to an end in October, when Pontiac, unable to keep his forces together, and tired of the fruitless siege, retired to the Ohio country.

Peace once again returned to Detroit. The white population grew, on the south side as well as around the fort. By 1765 sixty French families had settled on the south river bank. They petitioned Father Bocquet the pastor of St. Anne's in Detroit for a church of their own on the south side of the river. He was not adverse to the idea. He had already given Father Potier the faculties to minister to his parishioners across the river; he had even surrendered their tithes to him, because as the Indians paid nothing for his support, Father Potier had nothing on which to live.²⁹ When the parishioners requested it, Father Bocquet was only too willing to divide his parish with Father Potier. He went so far as to secure a commission for so doing from the administrator of the diocese, the See of Quebec being vacant at that time. Father Potier at first refused to make the change for he feared the Indians would inevitably be forced into a subordinate position if the French were co-occupants of their church. To this saintly man, the prestige of a parish and the prospect of financial support were as nothing compared with the spiritual well-being of the Indians. Gladly would he care for the French out of charity, on the condition that his Indians came first.

However as the whites came in ever-increasing numbers, the *status quo* could not long continue. The settlers rebuilt the old mission chapel, and in the face of such evident zeal, the old priest could no longer refuse. He therefore gave his consent on the condition that the new bishop coming to fill the See of Quebec would confirm the arrangement. On the appeal of Father Bocquet, the bishop did so in a letter of August 7, 1767 replying, "I consent to give Father Potier charge of all the south side, and assign it to his care, to perform all functions and receive all emoluments." This parish was to be known by the same title of the Assumption.³⁰ On the third of October, 1767, Father Potier started to sign the baptismal register as pastor of the Church of the Assumption of La Pointe de Montréal at Detroit. Before this date he always signed himself "missionary of the Hurons of La Pointe de Montréal."

Thus the first Canadian parish west of Montreal came into being. When virtually all the rest of Upper Canada was a wilderness the Church had here established a permanent position under the patronage of Our Lady of the Assumption. Our Lady caused the parish to flourish as she had cared for the mission. As the white settlers increased and the Indians dwindled, it became

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 292-294

²⁹ This information is drawn from the letters of Fr. Bocquet, seventeen in number, in the Archives of the Chancery in Quebec, E.U., V. 11. For reference purposes all succeeding material obtained from this source will be designated by the letters QCA.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, E. de Q., 1-117.

evident that Father Potier's hesitant decision proved beneficial.

At first all was not serene between pastor and flock. There arose difficulties, both financial and disciplinary. Some of the settlers were poor or else perverse and did not pay their pastoral dues; some did not give the Indians good example on the matter of drink;³¹ some were inclined to be obstinate when the priest attempted to enforce Church laws. The Bishop of Quebec wrote in 1773 reproaching them for their conduct: "We learn with sorrow that many of you are not obedient to the voice of the pastor whom the Lord has preserved to you, not faithful in paying the tithes and offerings commanded by the Church for the support of her ministers, of which even the natural law will teach you the obligation, if you will but listen to it."

This spirit of independence may have been typical of frontier society. There is evidence that the people across the river were no different. Father Bocquet, pastor of St. Anne's, writing to Bishop Briand about the same time says: "For the kind of people I am dealing with, one needs to have a head of iron. Nevertheless I must in justice say that I have a good number of true Catholics who are my consolation." Very likely Father Potier could have written in some similar fashion about his own flock. These true Catholics were those who were eager to have a parish of their own in 1765, and who later on when Father Potier died, urged the Bishop not to leave them long without a pastor.

The Bishop of Quebec wrote in 1773 that if it would do any good he would visit Detroit.³² What an occasion that would have been for the Indians and the French. However the first episcopal visit had to wait until after the turn of the century. Bishop Briand was old and infirm and he asked his Vicar-General Fr. Jean François Hubert, to visit the area on his way back from a journey to the Illinois missions in 1778. This visit did not immediately affect the parish, but it did affect Fr. Hubert. He felt a strong attraction to this parish so recently wrested from the wilderness.

Fr. Potier does not appear to have benefited financially from this visitation. In 1780 he was obliged to sell the land that the Indians had given him "as a mark of their affection and gratitude."³³ In any event he was not destined to complete any more projects. On July 16, 1781 he was found dead in front of his fireplace with his skull fractured.

The account of his burial in the church register reads as follows:

³¹ Letter of Fr. Potier to the Bishop of Quebec, September 6, 1768. QCA, E.U., V. 15.

³² Letter of Bishop Briand to Fr. Bocquet, 1773. QCA, E. de Q., 1773.

³³ J. C. Plomer, *Letters of Rev. J. B. Marchand* (Detroit, 1927). 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.

On the eighteenth of July seventeen hundred and eighty-one was buried in the sanctuary of the church of this parish on the gospel side the body of Rev. Fr. Pierre Potier, Jesuit Missionary for about 37 years, who at the age of seventy three years and three months, died on the sixteenth of this month, according to the certificate of Mr. Anthony, surgeon, from a fall on an andiron (chenêt). The said burial was made by Fr. Simple, Recollet Missionary, in the presence of a large number of parishioners.³⁴

He was the last of the Jesuit missionaries in this locality for during his pastorate the Society of Jesus had been suppressed by the Holy See. He had devoted his whole life to the service of God in the mission field; for thirty-seven years he had cared for the Hurons, fourteen of these years as pastor of a dual parish. His long, unremitting and solitary labors have written his name in glory. The long history of this parish has nothing brighter on its record than the deeds of this Christian hero who, repudiating the joys of this world, burned with a desire of sacrificing himself for the glory of God. His remains now lie under the sanctuary of the present Church of the Assumption.

When Fr. Hubert heard of Fr. Potier's death he remembered his attraction for the parish, and applied for the vacant position, which the bishop granted him. This new pastor was well received by the parishioners. He was hearty and friendly, and with these simple people his goodhumoured firmness proved more effective than had the simple piety and quiet manner of his predecessor. He converted the people to a sense of duty and responsibility to their church. He saw to it that pastoral dues were paid and manners improved. He was a man of action. He immediately perceived and made plans to remedy the needs of the parish. He saw the need of a new church and presbytery. Being a former Superior of the Seminary of Quebec he was greatly interested in founding a school for which he was going to bring the Sisters of the Congregation of Notre Dame of Montreal. Because the parish now owned no land, he asked the Indians for another grant which they gladly gave. Accordingly in 1782 a tract of land six arpents by forty immediately west of the earlier grant was donated to Fr. Hubert and the Sisters of the Congregation. He immediately began to build, generously contributing 12,642 livres and 10 sols out of his own pocket.³⁵

His interests were not only in the material and intellectual improvement of the parish but also the spiritual. In the archives of the church there is the original document of a special favour he obtained from Pope Pius VI. A plenary indulgence was to be gained at the parish of the Assumption twice a year, under the usual conditions, on the Friday after the Octave of Corpus Christi and on the feast of the Assumption.

However a man of such ability was needed in higher places. In 1785 he left

³⁴ Archives of Assumption Church.

³⁵ Archives of Assumption Church, Parish Account Book entry for August 17, 1783.

to become Coadjutor Bishop of Quebec. His loss was deeply felt in the parish, and one cannot but feel that, whatever the zeal of the succeeding priests, they were not able to accomplish as much as Fr. Hubert would have done.

The new church had been started, but the other projects had to be abandoned. The school was not built, and the sisters declined to come, giving their interest in the land to the church. Of this parish land one half was sold to pay for the church and the other half was retained as a farm to support the church and the priest. Part of this land now is occupied by Assumption College.

Fr. Hubert was succeeded in 1785 by Father Frechette who stayed only one year. His successor, Fr. Dufaux pushed ahead the work on the church. On August 9, 1787 he was able to dedicate it.

In the Wardens' account book of Assumption Church we learn the position of the Indians in the new church. We quote from the minutes of a meeting:

After the mature deliberation of a numerous assembly composed of the most notable inhabitants of the parish of the Assumption of Detroit, and of the principal Huron chiefs assembled together to proceed to the affairs of their "fabrique," we certify that it has been decided that a portion of the church would be employed by the Huron Nation.

That is to say, to speak more clearly, that from the back of the Church, starting from the middle of the nave, up to the second window inclusive, positively no one will have a right in the said portion of the church except the said Indians, recognized as Christians, and legitimate possessors of the section in question, for having manifested their zeal and their contribution in the expenses and building of the said church in so far as was in their power.

In consideration of the glory of God, for the good of the peace and concord which must unite the faithful, we have delivered the present act to serve the needs and satisfaction of the interested parties.

However it is to be noted that if the said Indians wish to distinguish their chiefs and other persons of note among their nation, they will be obliged to have made themselves and at their own expense: seats, benches and other conveniences provided that they conform to the laws and customs established by the constitutions of our Holy Mother the Church.

Made and passed Sept. 9, 1787 in the presbytery house in the presence of M. Dufaux, Missionary priest undersigned and of several others, as it appears hereinafter.³⁶

Fr. Dufaux was also intent on opening a school. On Bishop Hubert's instructions in the summer of 1786 he brought in two French ladies from Quebec to start it. There were only thirteen pupils-eight boarders and five day students.³⁷ A small house was transported near the presbytery where the two teachers lived with their eight boarders. The large room of the "habitants" served as a

³⁶ *Ibid.*, Entry for September 9, 1787.

³⁷ QCA, E.U., V. 47.

classroom. Fr. Dufaux paid all the expenses of the house. For their salary the teachers kept all the revenue which was as follows: three boarders who pay two pounds a month; three others who will pay what they can; the other two say that God will keep their account. In August, 1788 Fr. Dufaux regretfully informed the Bishop that the prospect for next year indicated there would be only eight or ten pupils and no likelihood of an increase. In spite of the fact that the people realized the desirability of an education, they were too poor to properly clothe their children, much less to maintain a school.³⁸ However the school was continued at Fr. Dufaux's expense. In 1790 there were only seven or eight pupils. But in 1792 there were twelve boarders and five or six day students. That spring Fr. Dufaux was making plans for improving the facilities of the school. Such are the humble beginnings of the first school in Assumption parish.

Fr. Dufaux's death in 1796 marks the end of the era when Assumption was a struggling parish. When Fr. Marchand arrived at Christmas time of the same year, he reported to the Bishop that he found the church and sacristy in very good order and decently supplied with everything.³⁹ Among the furnishings that he found was a very handsome pulpit – the work of a French sculptor named Frerot. This link with the past has been retained. It now graces the present Church of the Assumption.

1796 also marks another change on the shores of the Detroit River. In July of that year the Americans took over the Fort of Detroit from the British. Assumption and St. Anne's once so closely associated, were now under different flags. St. Anne's parish automatically became part of the diocese of Baltimore. Today the close relations of old are somewhat reestablished by two ties – one material and the other spiritual – the steel link of the Ambassador Bridge uniting the two territories, and the spiritual bond of the Basilian Fathers serving the two parishes at either end.

By the end of the century, the Indians, Mary's first children in this locality, had moved down the river to the Anderdon reservation or to various sites along the American shore. But, just as sixty years earlier, during their exile in Sandusky they had returned to the Mission of the Assumption near the fort in order to celebrate the great feasts of the Church, so too now they came back each year on August 15th, to celebrate on the church grounds the feast of their Patroness, Mary of the Assumption.

Such is the story of the Huron mission that, during the second half of the eighteenth century, developed into a flourishing parish – the first parish in the territory now known as the Province of Ontario. Our Blessed Mother from her throne in heaven watched over it, rewarding her devoted children for the love they gave her. May we always continue to love her, and may she always watch over us.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, V. 57-59.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, V. 132.