

St. Columban – a pre-Confederation Irish township

... a challenging restoration project

By Ned Eustace

NUACHT first heard of the St. Columban gravestone restoration project in an e-mail from Fergus Keyes, one of the twenty-five volunteers – descended from St. Columban's Irish families – who have taken it on.

He said, "Almost all of the original settlers in St. Columban were Irish, arriving around the 1820s – before the later waves of famine victims. The fact that the broken tombstones of these Irish settlers were just 'dumped' behind the church upset us greatly and we determined to do something about it." Fergus went on, "We had heard in 2005 that some tombstones had fallen over due to vandalism and the simple ravages of time. We had also heard that many of them had been unceremoniously discarded by workers and left behind the St. Columban Catholic Church; but that did not prepare us for what we found ... tombstones were piled on top of one another, broken and forgotten. As well, we found some others smashed but still in the cemetery. They simply lay on the ground or were standing against others that remained upright."

St. Columban is an important but little known Irish heritage site in Quebec. In the foothills of the Laurentians, it is located approximately forty miles north of Montreal between St. Jerome and St. Scholastique. It was founded in the 1820s by Fr. Patrick Phelan, a Sulpician, born in 1795 at Ballyragget, County Kilkenny, Ireland and who later, in 1852, became Titular Bishop of Ottawa and Kingston. After Father Phelan was ordained in 1825, he was interested in establishing a township and surrounding settlement in the vicinity of Montreal, where Irish immigrants "of the farming class" could be placed after their arrival in Montreal. He had in view the people of his native county Kilkenny, as well as those of Carlow, Kildare, Offaly, Laois and Tipperary. Rev. Fr. Phelan, who had great devotion to the Irish monk, St. Columban, gave his settlement this name. The Parish of St. Columban was officially founded on October 14th, 1835.

Says Keyes, "Many of the people of Irish heritage in Montreal today are descendants of the first group of St. Columban settlers and from others arriving there later in famine times." He may be right, as most of the family names from the 1851 Census Records for St. Columban – shown on the project's information-filled website – will resonate for Montrealers as they read like a Who's Who of our community today: Barrett, Bourke, Bradshaw, Breen, Brennan, Casey, Connors, Cooper, Dobie, Donahue, Donnelly, Doyle, Drennan, Dwyer, Grace, Grimes, Hanolan, Hart, Hughes, Kehoe, Kelly, Kennedy, Keyes, Lanigan, Lea, Loughlin, MacDonald, Madden, Maguire, Manning, McEvoy, McGrath, McKenna, Meighan, Molloy, Mooney, Moore, Morgan, Murphy, Murray, O'Brien, O'Connor, Phelan, Power, Purcell, Riley, Ryan, Sexton, Slattery, Tracey, Walsh, Wells and Whelan. I can confirm the Kilkenny connection too; I was born and raised in the county and names like Walsh, Grace, Lanigan, Purcell and Drennan are commonplace there even now.



St. Columban was largely a farming and logging community that never got rich. At its peak it had 200 families working the land, the forests, stone quarries and five saw mills. An early and perhaps most unusual claim to fame was as a centre where francophones came to learn English. Its most illustrious student was Bishop Bourget of Montreal who spent two winters there in the 1870s learning the language. The decline of St. Columban correlates with the growth of Montreal which by 1880 had a population of over 130,000 inhabitants. The increase in trade and commerce affected St. Columban negatively. Due to the difficulty of farming the poor land, bad roads, the lack of reforestation, the small financial returns, the younger folk of St. Columban became dissatisfied and started to migrate all over North America. Many drifted to the large city of Montreal, where working conditions were better and relatively good wages were paid. The result was that by the early 20th century the community was diminishing in terms of its Irish significance although Irish families continued to live there certainly into the 1960s albeit in much reduced numbers. The Church still exists but is now French.

Perhaps St. Columban's most famous citizen is Supreme Court Justice Emmett M. Hall. He was born there in 1898 and moved to Saskatoon when he was 12. He is most remembered as Chair of the Royal Commission on Health Services whose 1964 report proposed a universal Medicare system for all in Canada.

Should you wish to volunteer or just learn more about the gravestone restoration project and the St. Columban community in general go to <http://www/stcolumban-irish.com/> or contact Fergus Keyes by e-mail at fergus@stcolumban-irish.com. This project deserves our support. 🍀