

French-American Heritage Foundation of Minnesota

ARTICLE TRIMESTRIEL QUARTERLY ARTICLE

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Une Veillée d'autrefois

Painting by Edmond-Joseph Massicotte (1875-1929)



Mission Statement: To foster a greater understanding of the rich history and heritage of French-speaking people who helped form what is now Minnesota. Website: fahfminn.org YouTube: FAHF Minn.



French-American Heritage Foundation Marks 10 Years of Growth

In the more than four centuries since the first French explorers came from Quebec to what is now Minnesota, people of the region have banded together in countless ways to honor and celebrate shared roots, music, history, language, and interests.

In 2013, the time had come for a new Minnesota group to do that—a group with modern, flexible, transparent governance, a group focused on creating high quality, unique events and opportunities for learning, a group that recognizes the challenges of changing lifestyles and recruiting volunteers, a group with a long-term multi-generational vision.

So, the French-American Heritage Foundation of Minnesota (FAHF) was born on March 21 of that year at a suburban Twin Cities home, founded by a dozen people who could trace their family trees back to Quebec and immigration to Minnesota in the early 19th century.

A decade later, on October 7, 2023, at the Alliance Française in Minneapolis, in a beautifully upgraded building that was just an old warehouse at the time of FAHF's founding, FAHF marked its 10-year anniversary.



Acclaimed French-Canadian performing artist Dan Chouinard leads a sing-a-long at FAHF's 10-year anniversary celebration. Shown among the audience are Virgil Benoit, Pierre Girard, Peter Mattson, Jean McFarlane and Greg Cash.

The catered fête (celebration) included French-Canadian music by Dan Chouinard, and a highly successful silent auction featuring watercolor paintings of some two dozen French heritage sites across Minnesota, the works of local French-Canadian artist Jean McFarlane, a FAHF board member. Judy Labine created hand-crafted mini-French meat pies (tourtières) to complement Valerie's French Kitchen's tasty appetizers and wine from Alexis Bailly Vineyards.



Co-caterer Judy Labine sets up appetizers at FAHF's 10-year anniversary celebration. Judy's culinary skills and volunteer efforts have enhanced many FAHF events.

"I was delighted to see that many of the faces from more than 10 years ago, who were or still are a part of our dynamic team, participating in our celebration—Virgil Benoit, Dick Bernard, Jerry Foley, Pierre Girard, Pat Ruffing, Marie Trépanier, MaryEllen Weller, and others," said Mark Labine, FAHF founding president and current treasurer.

At our celebration, board members also created a video and photo album presentation that highlighted FAHF's dozens of educational events, four book publishing projects, creation of a *Minnesota French Heritage Sites* brochure, genealogy research in historically French-Canadian communities such as Dayton, MN, and national outreach to French culture groups since 2013.

"Four years ago, I met with Greg Cash, Mark Dillon, and Curt LeMay, at a former Dunn Brothers coffee shop in Plymouth to begin the process of developing a heritage brochure," Jean McFarlane said of her project. "It was my pleasure to visit our selected sites to gain creative inspiration, to see the places that our French ancestors established as churches, schools, places of business, places where French Canadians interacted with other cultures."

“Our French ancestors left a beautiful architectural and cultural legacy. I hope my work captures their pioneering spirit in a style that will be appreciated for generations,” she added.



French-Canadian artist Jean McFarlane, center, poses with Rick and Diane Kruger, the buyers of her painting of St. Peter's Church, Mendota, at FAHF's 10-year anniversary celebration and art exhibit at Alliance Française, in Minneapolis, on October 7.

Notably, 18 of FAHF's live and virtual events and presentations have occurred since the early winter of 2020, an exceptionally challenging period for cultural nonprofits relying on brick-and-mortar libraries and halls, public picnics, church festivals, and club-style memberships for their livelihoods.

We note with sadness that events such as the Festival of Nations, which over the years included substantial French community participation, and other gatherings, did not survive the pandemic, and that some other cultural groups remain imperiled amid shifting demographics.

We have been very fortunate in that FAHF's electronic mailing list is now more than 500 people, and we are more than 40% on the way to our goal of raising \$100,000 from 100 patrons contributing at least \$1,000 each. Five years ago, we developed an endowment fund that we intend will provide the next generation with the resources needed to continue our cultural awareness-building work—FAHF's 100 Associates program.

Overall, our assets have doubled in the past five years to more than \$60,000 even as we have launched a related 100 Associates grant program that is on track to provide a more than \$2,000 opportunity for applicants in 2024.

In the entrepreneurial spirit of its namesake—The Company of 100 Associates of Quebec, which will mark its 400th anniversary in 2027, FAHF has brought together persons of French heritage in Minnesota from many walks of life, professions, and backgrounds.

These include lawyers, educators, accountants, writers, bankers, artists, singers, accountants, business leaders, veterans, and public servants—as donors, board members, event organizers, and presenters.

“We are proud that our board and volunteers represent a number of working professionals who have welcomed a new generation, which brings a fresh perspective and positive enthusiasm to our work—folks that include Caroline Meilleur, Laurence Côté-Cournoyer, Dustin DuFault, Katie Byboth, and Jenny Hambleton,” Mark Labine added.

Our strategy is to have a large, inclusive board of directors who meet on a hybrid basis at a set time and venues each month and who contribute varied skill sets and opinions, rather than a small clique chosen because of personal loyalty, member apathy, or place of birth, who meet at places and times convenient to one leader.

At its inception, the changing fortunes of ethnic cultural groups within Minnesota provided FAHF’s founding leadership team examples of things best avoided given costs, staff requirements, and how people today prefer and choose to engage with and identify with others.

We created and supported events on specific, relevant, carefully researched, culturally inclusive topics. We built a robust website and virtual archive, and added genealogy research as a core aspect of our work. Our journey has gone from the saltpeter caves of Lake Pepin, to historic Prairie du Chien, WI, to the LeDuc Estate in Hastings, to trips to locate forgotten fur trade posts in central and northern Minnesota. Our newest partner is the French-Canadian community in Somerset, WI, where we hope to participate in the Pea Soup Days festival in June 2024.

Our programs have also included a substantial component that celebrates and documents the experience of persons of mixed French-Canadian and Native American heritage, a group sometimes overlooked, even by certain tribes with longstanding ties to the land that is now Minnesota.

FAHF has not done this in isolation or in competition. Rather, we have partnered with and supported other groups such as Alliance Française, the Little Canada Historical Society, the Oxbow Crossing Foundation, and the Dakota County Historical Society. Our ongoing outreach also includes the multi-state French Heritage Corridor project, led by the French Consulate in Chicago, and research and academic efforts in Maine and Quebec.

Among the events we hope to support in 2024 are another Fête de la Saint-Jean-Baptiste in Mendota in June, a discussion of the French Huguenot experience in America, and a historical presentation about the role of Rev. E.B. Gauvreau, of Quebec, in founding the Church of St. Mary, Beardsley, in rural western Minnesota near the South Dakota border.

- Guest Editor Mark Dillon
FAHF Board Secretary