



September 30, 2025

By Mark Labine

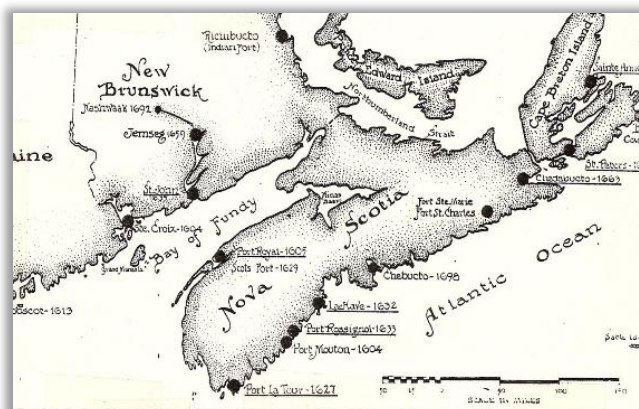
Dayton with a French Accent

In 2013, a group of individuals with a deep passion for French heritage in Minnesota established a nonprofit organization named the French-American Heritage Foundation. Their mission was to focus on projects that would enhance the public's understanding of the rich history and heritage of French-speaking people who played a pivotal role in shaping the present-day state of Minnesota.

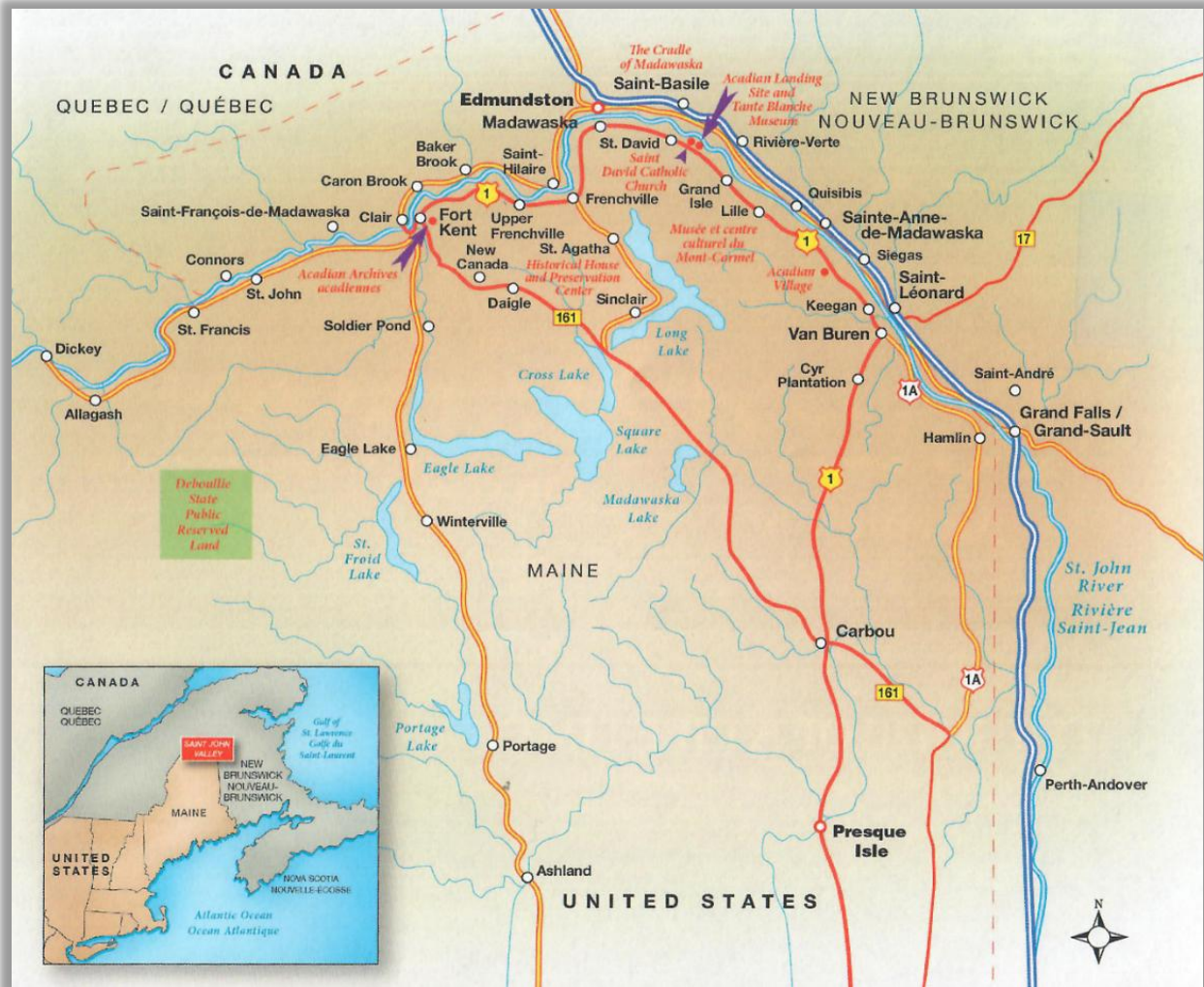
The French-American Heritage Foundation has fulfilled its mission through various means such as sponsoring events with a French-heritage theme and writing books that documented this heritage in Minnesota. These books include *They Spoke French*, *Where the Waters Meet*, and *In the Beginning, There Was a Chapel*.

In 2015, the French-American Heritage Foundation organized an event at Dehn's Country Manor in Maple Grove, Minnesota. During this event, John Schade, who was then a librarian at the Minnesota Genealogical Society, shared insights into French-Canadian genealogical research. His presentation also highlighted the significant presence of French Canadians in the surrounding area encompassing Dayton and Osseo during the 19th century.

Tucked away between the Mississippi and Crow Rivers the charming town of Dayton, known at times as "Frenchtown," was steeped in French-Canadian culture. Its roots can be traced back to around 1850 when Paul Godin, also known as Paul Goodin, a French-speaking immigrant from the Saint John River Valley, located on the border between New Brunswick and Maine, established a residence in Dayton. Soon, other French-speaking pioneers from Québec and New Brunswick joined him, contributing to the town's vibrant French-Canadian heritage. They established a French-speaking Catholic church, the Parish of St. John the Baptist, where the French language was used until the 1950s.

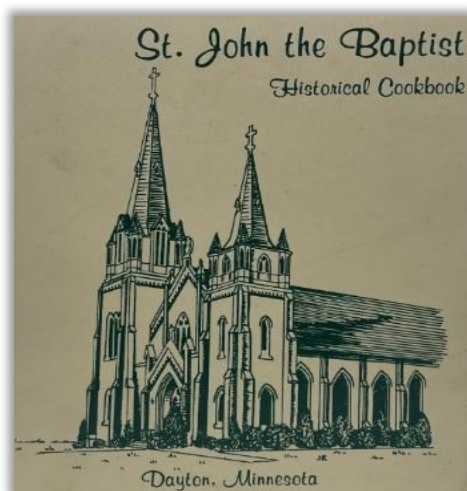


Map of Ancient Acadia Where Paul Godin's Ancestors Lived



Map of the Saint John River Valley Between New Brunswick and Main

On November 30, 2021, our board member John Ward proposed that the French-American Heritage Foundation sponsor a workshop and genealogy event at St. John the Baptist Church in Dayton in October of the following year. This proposal sparked further discussion about the possibility of compiling a book about the early pioneers of Dayton and delving into their genealogy. Eight individuals volunteered to work on this project including Dick Bernard, Mark Labine, Don Marier, Caroline Meilleur, Michele Pierce, Patricia Ruffing, John Ward, and Kathy Whelpley.



The initial work on the book involved finding out who the French-Canadian pioneers of Dayton actually were. John Ward had numerous connections to the Dayton pioneers and he was able to provide information about his ancestors. Dick Bernard knew about his family connections to Dayton and provided names. The committee reviewed a book titled *St. John the Baptist Historical Cookbook* that provided information about early pioneers. Al Dahquist, who is with the Little Canada Historical Society, had done research that he published in the *Cousins et cousines* newsletter that listed names of Dayton pioneers who had been married at St. John the Baptist Church, and names of those buried in the old and new cemeteries of the church.

Mark Labine began to compile this information and developed an outline for the book. A list of Dayton's French-speaking pioneers was created, and committee members agreed to construct family charts for each pioneer and submit their work to Mark who inserted the charts into the book. A search was conducted for family photos that could be used in the book. Slowly, the names of pioneers were assembled. During this process, Mark was surprised to discover that his great-great grandparents had been married in Dayton and were children of some of the original pioneers of Dayton. As the family charts were assembled by the committee volunteers, Caroline Meilleur began to fact-check and review the family charts while Michele Pierce would format, review, and edit the book as progress was being made.

In her own words, here is what Caroline Meilleur has written about the book's origins and progression. Through her story, she illustrates the challenges and complications that some research entails, and she emphasizes the importance of verifying sources and details.

We started with 50 pioneer families. We divided the research among Mark Labine, Don Marier, John Ward, and myself. Genealogy is like giant family puzzles especially when it comes to French Canadians. When I started to research the families that were assigned to me, I soon realized the complexity of such a project because of the intertwined family branches. My research crossed over into my colleagues' families and more. I understood early that in order to produce a quality product, the research would need to be consolidated and I took it upon myself to review all the collected data.

*When doing such a project, you need to be thorough in your research and do one's best to not leave any sources behind, and most definitely **not** relying on online family trees. From my years of genealogy research, I always verify my data with primary sources such as parish registers, birth and death records, notarial contracts, family members, censuses, etc. Secondary sources are local history books, newspapers, transcriptions, other genealogy research and many more. Personally, I consider the censuses almost as secondary sources because the census takers often made mistakes and did not verify the information that was given to them.*

I made numerous research trips to the Minnesota Historical Society to search the death records in particular, and old newspapers that were not available online. I also many times visited the Minnesota Genealogical Society to search through microfilm, microfiche, the Ruth Charest file papers, history books, plat map books, family history books, etc. Researching a family is not just birth, marriage, and death dates, it is also the historical context and we need to understand and dig even more into papers to make sense of what happened, and understand the movement of the families, etc. Like I said earlier, most Dayton pioneer families got intertwined by marriages or other kinds of associations. It was a fascinating project to take on and a frustrating one as well, because a lot of times I was stuck at a brick wall. A book like this is never finished, because every day there are new sources of information posted online for us to review.

In October of 2022, I met with Lloyd Laurence Cyr, originally from Dayton and living in Albertville, and his daughter. He was 90 years old at the time and was so nice to talk to me about his family and his late wife Marie Anne Plude's research about their families. In order to help me, he sent me an email about his recollections of his mother Georgiana Caron Cyr telling about her father. Apparently, Georgiana's father Joseph Caron had a previous wife named

Esth rie Bernier and that her grandfather was Octave Caron. So I started with that information in mind and began my research in Qu bec for a Joseph Caron and Esth rie Bernier. While I was researching this family, something didn't add up. Lloyd Cyr had the correct grandfather name, but I found that it was not the right one; I mean not this Joseph Caron, but another Joseph Caron. There really was a Joseph Caron and Esth rie Bernier married in 1876 in the town of L'Islet in the Chaudi re-Appalaches Region of Qu bec. The father of the groom was indeed Octave Caron. Until there it was good. His birth date was March 1, 1859, in L'Islet. Then I traced their children to make sure I had the right couple. The more I combed through the parish registers, the more it didn't make sense, because they had 13 children and none was named Georgiana or a derivative of this name. Plus, their children were born in the parish of St-Eug ne of L'Islet up until 1900, which didn't make sense for our Dayton Joseph Caron. I found out that this couple indeed moved to the United States, but in the New England area (Connecticut). Then the mystery remained about which Joseph Caron came to Minnesota and who married Caroline Demers. I found their marriage record (1887) in the Dayton parish register, but no information about their previous spouses or their origins. That didn't help. Then I turned to a Minnesota census, where I found a couple named Joseph Caron 26 years old and wife Apoline 30 years old in the 1885 census in Dayton with no children, and both were from Canada. Could he be the Joseph Caron? I went back to the Qu bec Catholic parish registers to search for a Joseph Caron and an Apoline or Pauline marriage between 1860 and 1880 and found two couples, but one in particular got my attention because their marriage took place in St-Aubert (a suburb of L'Islet) in 1878. However, I couldn't find any children born afterwards in Qu bec. Back in the Minnesota records, on the FamilySearch.org website, I searched in the state death records of Dayton, which was tedious because you have to comb through all the years and towns, but I found a death for a child named Ameda Caron who died of croup in 1883 at age 3, whose parents were named Joseph and Poline. I got them! Then I had to search for Apoline to see if she had died before the second marriage of Joseph and Caroline Demers. Then Bingo! I found Paulina Corow who died in Dayton on March 18, 1886, during childbirth at age 33, who was from Canada with an immigration year of 1880 in the US, and the next death record was a male baby Corow whose parent's names were Joseph and Paulina. That was good! I now had all of my evidence. Finally, I put all of that evidence into a readable report and brought it to Lloyd Cyr to show him the



Joseph Caron and Caroline Demers Fournier
1887 Wedding

results. He was so happy that finally he knew the real Joseph Caron and his lineage. That story is a clear example of how important it is to always go back to the sources and verify each bit of information, and to never copy blindly the research of others.

Another fascinating thing about doing the Dayton French-Canadian pioneer research was reading through the parish registers of the various Catholic churches that those pioneers had access to in what is now Minnesota. Some were written in French, some in Latin. I had the luck to have access to the churches in Mendota, St. Anthony Falls, St. Paul, Little Canada, Dayton, and Osseo. Reading the names on baptism, marriage, and death records showed me how intricate and close those families were, like different pieces of puzzles clicking together. Names of sponsors, witnesses, etc., told me the links and how future marriages would come in. Plat map books gave me hints, too, about why they got married. All of that also provided me a glimpse of their lives in the past at the very beginning of Dayton. In addition, I read numerous newspaper articles in L'Écho de l'Ouest that was the French-Canadian newspaper, and the newspapers back then were the social media of today, telling us such things as the ancestors' whereabouts, businesses, stories, epidemics, and diseases.

I would like to thank Barbara Fisette who met with all of us and generously gave us her years of research. Also, I would like to thank Al Dalhquist from the Little Canada Historical Society and Minnesota Genealogical Society Canadian Interest Group for his phenomenal knowledge of anything French Canadian in Minnesota. Without Al's help, our research would not have been so revealing. I also want to thank Dick Bernard who always encouraged me throughout those months and years to keep going, and for also giving me tons of information.

The French-American Heritage Foundation organized an event on October 16, 2022, at St. John the Baptist Catholic Church in Dayton. The event was designed to present the book *Dayton with a French Accent, Reflections of French-Canadians Roots in Dayton, Minnesota* to the Dayton community. Mark Labine would speak about the book project and the research involved, while Caroline Meilleur would share insights into the places in Québec that served as sources of emigration to Minnesota. Notably, during the July 2022 board meeting, Mark announced that the initial draft of the book was complete and ready for proofreading and editing. The organization optimistically expected that the book would be ready for publication and purchase in time for the October 16, 2022, gathering at the church.

The October 16, 2022, event welcomed over 120 attendees. Earlier, registration had to be closed due to space limitations, and 27 people were advised that they could not attend due to building capacity restrictions, but the names of those who expressed an interest in buying the book were noted. Mark and Caroline gave their respective presentations, at the church. However, due to some committee members finding several discrepancies in the initial book draft, it was determined that it would be best to hold off on publishing the book and making it available to the public there until amendments could be completed. The printing delay was terribly disappointing to many people, but ultimately there was a very positive outcome because of the thoughtful decision that was made. While the initial draft of the book contained 74 family name entries and genealogy information regarding 160 individuals, further research resulted in the discovery of additional pioneers to include in the book. The book grew to reflect a new total of 102 family names and include genealogy references for 225 individuals.

The additional research and editing literally took hundreds and hundreds of hours, and over two years longer than we anticipated, but the end result is that we are confident in the high

quality of the book's accuracy and the exceptional resource value of its contents. As was previously mentioned, yet something very important to keep in mind is that everyone who played a role in the development of the book was a volunteer, most of whom juggled a combination of work, family obligations, and other commitments, while also devoting time to in-depth researching, compiling, formatting, editing, and/or proofreading responsibilities. A debt of gratitude is especially owed to Caroline Meilleur, whose professional genealogy and translation skills were essential to confirming and documenting the myriad historical details about Dayton's French-Canadian pioneers.



Village of Cap-St-Ignace, Québec

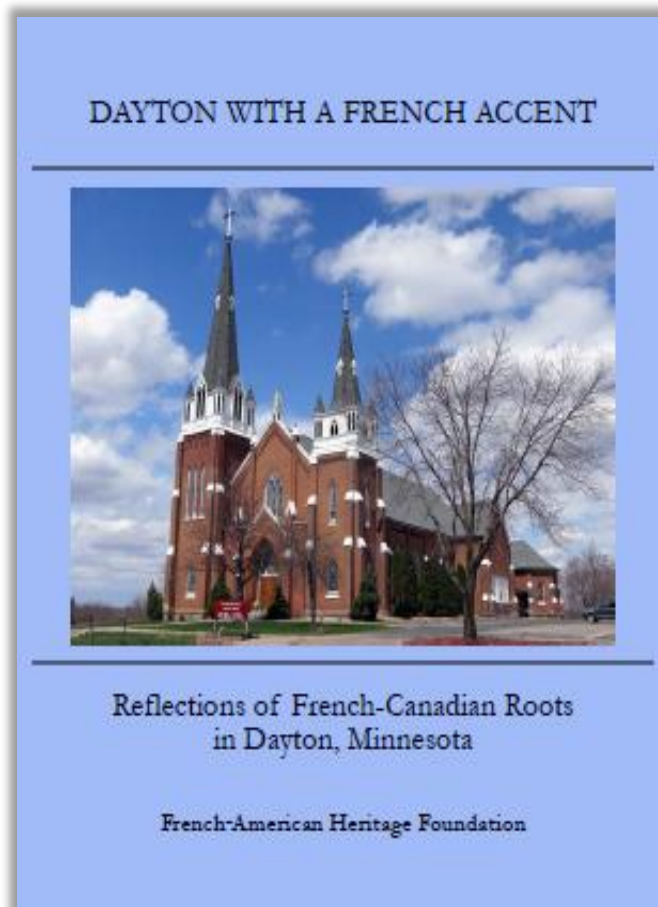
The French-Canadian Dayton pioneers came from many small villages along the St. Lawrence River in Québec, including Cap-St-Ignace, St-Jean-Port-Joli, and Louiseville. Many immigrants also came from towns located along the Saint John River Valley that borders the province of New Brunswick and the state of Maine. Our book conveys the story of these early French-speaking pioneers and their families.



**Église St-Antoine-de-Padoue
Louiseville, Maskinongé, Québec**

The 483-page Dayton book, completed and published in July 2025, features 225 first-generation French-Canadian pioneers, and it includes a family chart created for each of the pioneer families showing the names and birthdates of all the children of the pioneers. In addition, whenever possible, a pedigree chart was created for nearly all of these 225 pioneers going back four generations into 18th century Québec. Family Tree Maker was the software used to create these charts.

Shortly after announcing in July that the Dayton book had been published, members of the French-American Heritage Foundation board attended the St. John the Baptist Parish Festival held in Dayton, on August 3, 2025. At this event, 99 books were sold by the Foundation and orders were taken for 15 more books. We are very appreciative of the enthusiastic feedback that we have received from a number of people who have purchased the book, some of whom were overjoyed about finding new information in the book to add to their family research. As a side note, for those who are interested, the book is available on Amazon's website and it may also be purchased in person, at a discounted rate, by visiting us at our Foundation-sponsored events.



Again, many thanks to everyone who contributed to the creation of our most recent book, *Dayton with a French Accent, Reflections of French-Canadian Roots in Dayton, Minnesota*.

~ Guest Editor, Mark Labine
French-American Heritage Foundation of Minnesota
Founder, Past President, and Treasurer