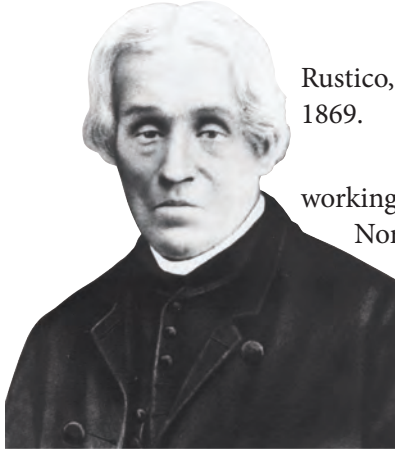




*From Quebec to the Red River*



Father Georges-Antoine Belcourt left his mark in Acadie and especially in Rustico, Prince Edward Island, where he was a parish priest for 10 years, from 1859 to 1869.

Originally from the province of Quebec, he came to Prince Edward Island after working as a missionary for 28 years among the First Nations and Métis in Manitoba and North Dakota. He learned languages easily and was able to communicate well in French, English and some of the Indigenous languages spoken in the West.

Father Belcourt was a priest who became deeply involved in the communities where he worked, always seeking to improve the economic and social conditions of his parishioners. He was a man of vision and many talents.

◀ Father Belcourt (PEI Public Archives)

## HIS ORIGINS

Born on April 22, 1803, in Saint-Antoine-de-la-Baie-du-Febvre in Lower Canada (Quebec), Georges-Antoine Belcourt was the first child of Antoine Belcourt and Joseph Lemire. He grew up on the family farm with his 10 brothers and sisters. He first attended school in his village, then, at the age of 13, he left home and studied for 11 years at the Seminary of Nicolet located 14 kilometres away. In his last four years, he studied to become a priest while also teaching astronomy and mathematics.

▶ Birthplace of Father Belcourt at Baie-du-Febvre. (J.M. Reardon, *George Anthony Belcourt. Pioneer Catholic Missionary of the Northwest*, 1955)



## HIS PRIESTHOOD

At the end of many years of study at the Seminary of Nicolet, Georges-Antoine Belcourt, almost 24 years old, was ordained as a priest on March 10, 1827. After his ordination, he served as assistant priest in several parishes until 1830 when he was named pastor of Sainte-Martine. However, he did not remain the pastor of this parish for long because the following year his bishop asked him to become a missionary to the First Nations in the distant region of the Red River. To prepare for this, he studied Algonquin, an Indigenous language, for two months with the Sulpician monks at Lac-des-Deux-Montagnes. This helped him learn the language of the Sauteux, the Indigenous people of the West who became his friends.



▲ The seminary in Nicolet. (Unknown source)

◀ Map of the region of Baie-du-Febvre and Nicolet

## A LONG JOURNEY BY CANOE

Father Belcourt made the trip to the Red River with Monsignor Joseph-Norbert Provencher, the Catholic Bishop of the West. The 2,300-kilometre trip was made in a canoe provided by the Hudson's Bay Company with a crew of 16 men. The canoe was 11 metres long and the Company's convoy consisted of three canoes. They departed on April 27, 1831, and arrived two months later, on June 17, 1831.

At the encouragement of his friends, Father Belcourt kept a journal of his trip. This is what he wrote on the sixth day of his long journey. He was travelling on the Ottawa River.

*On the 1st of May, which was also Sunday, we left Pointe-au-Sable early in the morning and went to say mass at the Fort of Portage des Chats, the house that belonged to the gentlemen of the Company. His Excellency [Bishop Provencher] said the first mass which was attended by all the travellers in the three canoes.*

*Immediately afterwards we crossed in order to take the small Portage des Chats, then we went up the rest of the rapids with half a load, in other words about 2½ leagues [10 km]. Despite being lightly loaded, the current was so strong that when we encountered a floating tree, we could not avoid it, so the canoe was punctured. We managed to jump onto an island where the canoe was repaired, having experienced nothing other than fear.*

*Once we reached the head of the rapids, we disembarked and the voyageurs returned to the portage to pick up the rest of the load, after which we went to rest near the middle of the Lac des Chats, having only travelled westward 9½ [leagues = 38 km].*

*In the course of our journey, in several places we noticed crosses erected in memory of voyageurs who died along the way. The first one we saw was in the middle of the Des Chats rapid in memory of a voyageur who had drowned and whose name they were unable to tell me.*

*Near the camp was the house of a Mr. McDonald; we received something very precious, namely milk and potatoes, refreshments much appreciated by several of our travellers. (Translation)*

### FOOD FOR THOUGHT

1. What would you have taken in the canoes on this long journey?
2. How has transportation changed since the days of Father Belcourt? What would be the same today and what would be different from the ways that Father Belcourt travelled in 1831?
3. Why do you think Father Belcourt wanted to learn Algonquin?
4. What are the characteristics of a person who is willing to undertake a journey like this?
5. Why do you think astronomy was an important subject at the time?

