



*Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, Magdalen Islands*

## LEAVING RUSTICO

Father Georges-Antoine Belcourt's stay in Rustico came to an end in 1869 after having been the parish priest there for almost 10 years. He moved to Shediac, New Brunswick, where he purchased a property. In 1869, in a letter written the day after Christmas to his friend Edme Rameau of Saint-Père, he explains that he had to leave his parish for health issues:

*The cause of my decision to leave Rustico was an infirmity which was rapidly aggravated by the strains of the Holy Ministry, the long services, the errands to the sick, the diligence in the confessional, etc.; now that I am free to obey the dictates of nature, I feel a very appreciable improvement. To this was added certain annoyances on the part of Bishop McIntyre, who, while assuring me of the sincerity of his affection and respect, was bothering me to such an extent that I could not endure it any longer. (Translation)*



Despite leaving Rustico, he kept in touch with his former parishioners. He continued to follow the operations of the Farmers' Bank, an institution he cared for deeply. With the financial support of Edme Rameau of France, he pursued the project of creating new Acadian settlements in New Brunswick. Finally, he continued working towards publishing his French-Sauteux dictionary in which he had put so much effort during his years in the West.

## MAGDALEN ISLANDS



Father Belcourt rested in his home in Shediac for two years, no longer responsible for a parish. His health showed improvement and in 1871 he agreed to serve on the Magdalen Islands. At that time, the Islands were part of the Catholic Diocese of Charlottetown. He became pastor of the Havre-aux-Maisons parish and of the mission of Étang-du-Nord which included all of Île du Cap aux Meules.

Father Belcourt was not a young man when he accepted this new responsibility. At the age of 68, he already had 42 years in the ministry. Although he no longer had the same energy and health as when he was a missionary to the Indigenous People, he saw to the construction of a church in Lavernière

and a parish house in Havre-aux-Maisons. He spent nearly three years in these small islands located in the middle of the Gulf of St. Lawrence inhabited mostly by Acadian fishermen.

Reminiscing in 1936 about his time as an altar boy for Father Belcourt, Anicet Arsenault said that he was still an active man who enjoyed talking about his experiences with the Indigenous Peoples in the West:

*[He] was a stern man who never laughed during all his years at Havre-aux-Maisons. Every Sunday morning for half an hour before Mass, he spoke to the altar boys of his missions among the [First Nations]. In almost every sermon, he made mentions of the [First Nations] of the West and held them up as models. He could repair any sort of machinery and had a forge in which he worked. He was a great walker and while he cared for the mission of Lavernière he always walked there, leaving early in the morning to say Mass, and returning to Havre-aux-Maisons the same evening.*

In the fall of 1873, he left the Magdalen Islands for two months during which time he went to Rustico to examine the books at the Farmers' Bank of Rustico. He had heard that doubts were being cast on the reliability of the institution he had founded 12 years earlier. He followed up by sending a letter to the newspapers assuring the public that the bank was financially sound and trustworthy.

In Shediac, he called a meeting to establish a settlement society to assist young people who were heading out to clear land in new settlements.

Headstone of Father Belcourt, Saint-Thomas parish cemetery.

(Photo - Jacques Gallant) ▶

## RETURN TO SHEDIAC

Father Belcourt returned to the Magdalen Islands at the end of November where he experienced a terrible winter riddled with health problems. He therefore decided to go back to his residence in Shediac hoping to recover. He travelled on a fishing boat to Prince Edward Island and then by steamer to New Brunswick. A few weeks after his arrival, he died in his home on May 31, 1874, at the age of 71.

In his will, he requested that he be buried in Rustico, Grande-Digue or Memramcook. His friend, Father Camille Lefebvre, parish priest of Memramcook, who was present at his death, decided that it would be in Memramcook. The funeral took place on June 3 at St. Thomas Church, where his remains were interred in a vault under the sanctuary of the church. At an unknown date, they were removed from the vault and buried in the St. Thomas parish cemetery.



## FOOD FOR THOUGHT

1. Compare Father Belcourt's trips to the Magdalen Islands to those of today.
2. Why do you think Father Belcourt used Indigenous people as role models in his sermons?
3. What was the role of a settlement society at that time?
4. Write an obituary for Father Belcourt.

