



A MONUMENT IN HIS MEMORY

In 1869, after Father Georges-Antoine Belcourt left Rustico, he purchased a property in Shediac, New Brunswick. This is where he passed away on May 31, 1874, at the age of 71. However, he is buried in the St. Thomas parish cemetery in Memramcook.

Although he is not buried in Rustico, a choice he had stated in his will, the Rustico Parish Hall that he built stands as a true monument to his memory. Now a museum, this red sandstone building houses a beautiful exhibit that tells the story of Father Belcourt's extraordinary contribution to the Acadian community of Prince Edward Island, especially in Rustico.

Even before his departure from Rustico, he was publicly recognized for all the work he had accomplished since his arrival on the Island in 1859. In a letter published in the *Summerside Journal* on January 1, 1869, an Anglophone from Tignish wrote:



Farmers' Bank Museum of Rustico. (Photo – Osprey Cove Productions) ▲

The exertions of the good priest to elevate his people socially and intellectually, are beyond all praise. [...] He will live in the affections of his flock as their guide, philosopher and friend, long years after his life's work shall have ended. No mere stone [...] monument, however magnificent, can be compared with that which the Pastor Bellecourt is erecting for himself in the hearts of an elevated and grateful people. "Honor to whom is due."

AN ENDURING LEGACY

A few days after Father Belcourt's death, the Shediac newspaper *Le Moniteur acadien* published a vibrant tribute to him. It highlights some of his accomplishments, including the creation of the Farmers' Bank and the establishment of new Acadian settlements:

His passage in this parish has left an enduring legacy; his entrepreneurial spirit, his work and his energy have created monuments that are the hallmark of his name. He established, among other things, the Farmers' Bank, which renders invaluable services to the rural class and provides respectable dividends to its shareholders. The welfare and advancement of the agricultural class were constantly the object of his solicitude, and we have seen him take the lead of the settlement project, directing the population overflow of Rustico to the new lands of Kent and Chaleur Bay. Whole communities now bless his memory for the benefits they owe him. (Translation)

HE DID MUCH GOOD

In his book *The History of the Catholic Church in Prince Edward Island from 1835 till 1891*, published in 1913, Father John C. Macmillan shares the memories of a former Rustico parishioner of Father Belcourt:

He founded the Bank of Rustico, which has been a boon to the Acadians, it having kept them out of the hands of money lenders and developed business talents among them. To him also are due the library, the band and a taste for good music. Moreover he caused the people to pay more attention to farming and gave a great impetus to the material prosperity of his flock. He was energetic, frugal and hardworking, and did much good.

A PIONEER OF THE COOPERATIVE MOVEMENT

Of all Father Belcourt's initiatives in Prince Edward Island, the creation of the Farmers' Bank of Rustico has garnered the most attention from historians. Gabriel Bertrand is the author of the most recent and comprehensive study. His book, published in 1995, is titled *Paroisse acadienne de Rustico (Î.-P.-É.) et la Banque des fermiers. Recueil de citations épistolaires du père Georges-Antoine Belcourt*. The author argues for Father Belcourt's rightful place in the history of the cooperative movement in Canada:

... he made sure that this bank had a community-based structure; thus, he insisted that this institution be managed by all its members and that the surpluses achieved be distributed to the members-shareholders. In doing so, he was able to instill a thriving cooperative. In this respect, G. A. Belcourt can be seen as a pioneer in the history of the Canadian cooperative movement. His work certainly deserves to be highlighted because it set a valuable precedent and because of its possible influence yet to be discovered. (Translation)

Father Georges-Antoine Belcourt left a significant mark in Acadie. In Prince Edward Island, he has become a legend for the considerable role he played in the Acadian awakening, especially in Rustico. Elsewhere in Acadie, he is recognized as the founder of the parishes of Saint-Alexis-de-Matapédia, in Quebec, and Saint-Paul-de-Kent, in New Brunswick. In 1959, he was designated a person of national historic significance by the Government of Canada.



Painting by Karen Gallant with Father Belcourt flying over the Rustico parish hall. ▶

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

1. What do you think is Father Belcourt's most important contribution? Why?
2. Do you know people who make important contributions to your community? Who are they and what are their contributions?
3. Father Belcourt is said to be a pioneer in the cooperative movement. Do you know of any businesses or organizations that operate as cooperatives? What are the strengths or weaknesses of the cooperative movement?