



# FATHER BELCOURT AND HIS EMIGRATION PROJECT

Prince Edward Island, Quebec and New Brunswick



## HALF OF THEM MUST EMIGRATE

When Father Belcourt arrived in Rustico, Prince Edward Island was facing difficult economic times. Shipbuilding and fishing, the industries which provided much of the work, were in decline. The most reliable resource was agriculture. But in Rustico, the parish was overpopulated and many Acadian families lived in poverty on farms that were too small. Father Belcourt wondered where one could find land for the hundreds of young Acadians who would soon be starting new families.

In his correspondence to his friend Monsignor Cazeau of Quebec City, Father Belcourt described his parishioners' situation. In a letter dated March 4, 1860, he states that in order to solve the problem and avoid misery, half of the Acadians of Rustico would have to leave the Island and settle elsewhere (thus emigrate). The parish priest of Rustico was also of the opinion that new blood should be brought into the Acadian community to avoid certain diseases caused by marriages between people who were related. So he asked his friend for help.

*Do you think that we could hope to have a priest from Quebec for the people if a migration were organized to the area at the head of Chaleur Bay that will be connected to the St. Lawrence when the railroad is built? They all feel the need to emigrate, but they still need information and a leader. If I said I would go with them, more than 300 would follow me blindly. [...] If you were in a position to give me some information that would help me organize and settle these emigrants who, for the most part are poor but good workers, you would be doing a great service. If they do not emigrate, they will be forced to sell and gradually their properties will fall to Protestants and as a result Catholics will almost completely disappear from the Island.*  
(Translation)

## AN EXPLORATORY JOURNEY

Thanks to his contacts in Quebec City, Father Belcourt obtained land for the Acadians in Matapedia Township where the Restigouche and Matapedia Rivers meet. He discussed the importance of his emigration project at the meetings of the Catholic Institute of Rustico. It was not always easy to convince the Acadians to leave their families and their native island to settle so far away from Rustico. He reported to Bishop Cazeau on May 8, 1860:

*My young Rustico folks have rented a schooner, and about 20 or 25 of them are leaving tomorrow to visit the Matapedia area, etc. [...] You can imagine that I had to reason with these poor people for whom their island is a world without end and that few of the men have been curious enough to visit from one end to the other. They are fine children, of a truly gentle and kind nature. I really wish they could have the help of religion in their new homeland if they decide to settle; once ten go, there will soon be a hundred.* (Translation)

According to Father Belcourt, the young parishioners returned to the Island pleased with their exploratory journey. They found the land even more beautiful than they had imagined. Consequently, they began to prepare for the big departure.



Map showing the trip from Rustico to St. Alexis ▲



## DEPARTURE FOR THE MATAPEDIA AREA

The first group of settlers left Rustico for the Matapedia area on October 25, 1860. Over the next two years, 275 people founded the Acadian community that became known as Saint-Alexis-de-Matapédia. These pioneers included 47 families and quite a few young single men. Subsequently, other families joined them, including some from Mont-Carmel and Egmont Bay.

Isolated in the middle of the forest, these pioneers had to start from scratch. Small houses and barns had to be built, the forest cut down, roads opened, land cleared and cultivated for food. Father Belcourt and his friends appealed to the generosity of individuals and to the government of Quebec and of France to help the settlers through the early years that proved particularly difficult. Father Belcourt even went to New York in 1864 to buy a flour mill so that the settlers would not have to carry the grain on their backs for over 19 kilometres to have it ground.



Saint-Alexis-de-Matapédia. (Arthur Buies, *La Vallée de la Matapédia*, 1895) ▲

## A SETTLEMENT IN NEW BRUNSWICK

While Father Belcourt was attending to the Matapedia area settlement, he was also working on opening another Acadian settlement in southeastern New Brunswick. The historian Edme Rameau de Saint-Père, who was very interested in the Acadians in the Maritimes, had suggested to Father Belcourt that because of the distance it would be less expensive to settle Island Acadians in New Brunswick than in Matapedia Township. This would also strengthen the Acadian population in that part of the Maritimes.

In 1863, Father Belcourt obtained a 10,000-acre parcel of land from the New Brunswick government to establish a new settlement that eventually became the parish of Saint-Paul-de-Kent. He travelled to New Brunswick to look at the land and give talks in several parishes to encourage migration. That same year, the new settlement received its first settlers, including a few families from Egmont Bay along with others from Memramcook, Cap-Pelé, Barachois, Grand-Digue and Bouctouche.



### FOOD FOR THOUGHT

1. Why do you think the farms were too small?
2. Why would the Acadians follow Father Belcourt blindly?
3. What were the pros and cons of emigration at that time?
4. What do you think of Father Belcourt's efforts to encourage emigration? Explain your answer?

