



A MODEL SCHOOL

Prince Edward Island



TRAINING SCHOOL TEACHERS

When Father Belcourt arrived in Rustico, he counted eight small elementary schools with French-speaking teachers in his parish. In his role as a parish priest, he oversaw the proficiency of the teachers and made sure that the Catholic religion was taught properly. While visiting these schools, he noticed that most of the teachers lacked training and that their knowledge of the subjects they taught was generally weak.

As a solution to this problem, he wanted to educate young Acadians so that they could pass the Board of Education exams and also become proficient in both English and French.

Passing these exams, which were in English, was required to obtain a teacher's licence.

So Father Belcourt decided to open a French "model school" in the parish house. The term "model school" was used for secondary schools in Quebec at the time. Father Belcourt recruited students among the most intelligent and promising boys in the parish. They were taught French, English, Latin, Greek, mathematics, plainsong* and music. Father Belcourt recruited a young man from Quebec who was qualified in all of these areas to be their teacher.



BILINGUAL SCHOOL TEACHERS

The model school remained open for about four years. It succeeded in training enough teachers to meet the needs not only of Rustico, but also of many of the Island's Acadian schools. Four years after its opening, Father Belcourt wrote to Edme Rameau of Saint-Père in Paris:

◀ Israël Landry, teacher at the Rustico model school. (Centre d'études acadiennes Anselme-Chiasson, P10-A47)

Our model school at Rustico has already produced six certified teachers, and two others are under examination to be admitted soon as well, three have been sent to Miscouche, two have remained with us and we will soon send three others to Egmont Bay, La Roche. You would not believe how valuable the Emperor's gifts and yours have been for the Acadian population of the Island. (Translation)

In fact, the model school was a private school that received no funding from the government. Its existence relied on local contributions and donations coming from France. In another letter, Father Belcourt wrote that his school trained "schoolmasters capable of teaching in both languages with a higher ability than English teachers."

IMPACT OF THE MODEL SCHOOL

Of the fifteen or so young men who attended the model school, most succeeded in obtaining a teacher's certificate from the Board of Education. After teaching for several years, a few decided to continue their education and pursue other careers. Among these was Stanislas Blanchard, who became the first Acadian lawyer and judge on the Island. Isidore Gallant went to the United States to study medicine and was the first Acadian on the Island to become a doctor. Amédée Gallant, on the other hand, did not do any teaching, but became a farmer and the owner of a lobster cannery. He also took an interest in politics, serving briefly in the provincial legislature.

Dr Isidore Gallant. (Collection Georges Arsenault) ▶



STRUGGLE FOR FRENCH AND CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

When Father Belcourt arrived in Prince Edward Island, he soon realized that there was a great deal of tension between Catholics and Protestants, especially over the funding of schools and the role of religion in the schools. Protestant newspapers criticized the fact that the government was financing the Acadian schools, which were Catholic and French. In 1863, for example, the following opinion appeared in *The Islander*:

We reply that the French inhabitants of this Island have no right to expect to be educated in the French language – they have no right to claim upon the Government – they are the descendants of prisoners of war who secreted themselves in the woods of the Island, and of the neighbouring Provinces. [...] We, on grounds of national policy, object to the encouragement of French schools.

Under this pressure, the government amended the School Act to withdraw the privileges granted to the Acadian communities with regard to education. As a result, the Acadians began to lose control of their schools. Father Belcourt challenged these changes by petitioning the government. His intervention helped keep some Acadian schools open and the French books were not removed from the schools.

***Plainsong:** plainsong or plainchant is a type of traditional vocal music, usually found in a religious context. This ancient musical style was widespread at the time.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

1. Write an opinion letter in response to the article in *The Islander*.
2. Why do you think the model school only accepted male students?
3. If a model school were to be opened today, what subjects would be taught?
4. Why did Father Belcourt want to open a model school? Give examples of the benefits of this school.
5. What are some of the demands that the Acadian population continues to make in education ever since that time?

