

A Wee bit of Johnville History for Youth

by

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This short piece was originally written as a pamphlet for the Johnville Picnic a dozen years ago to help young people appreciate the history of the community. It is not an academic history and shouldn't be appraised as such.

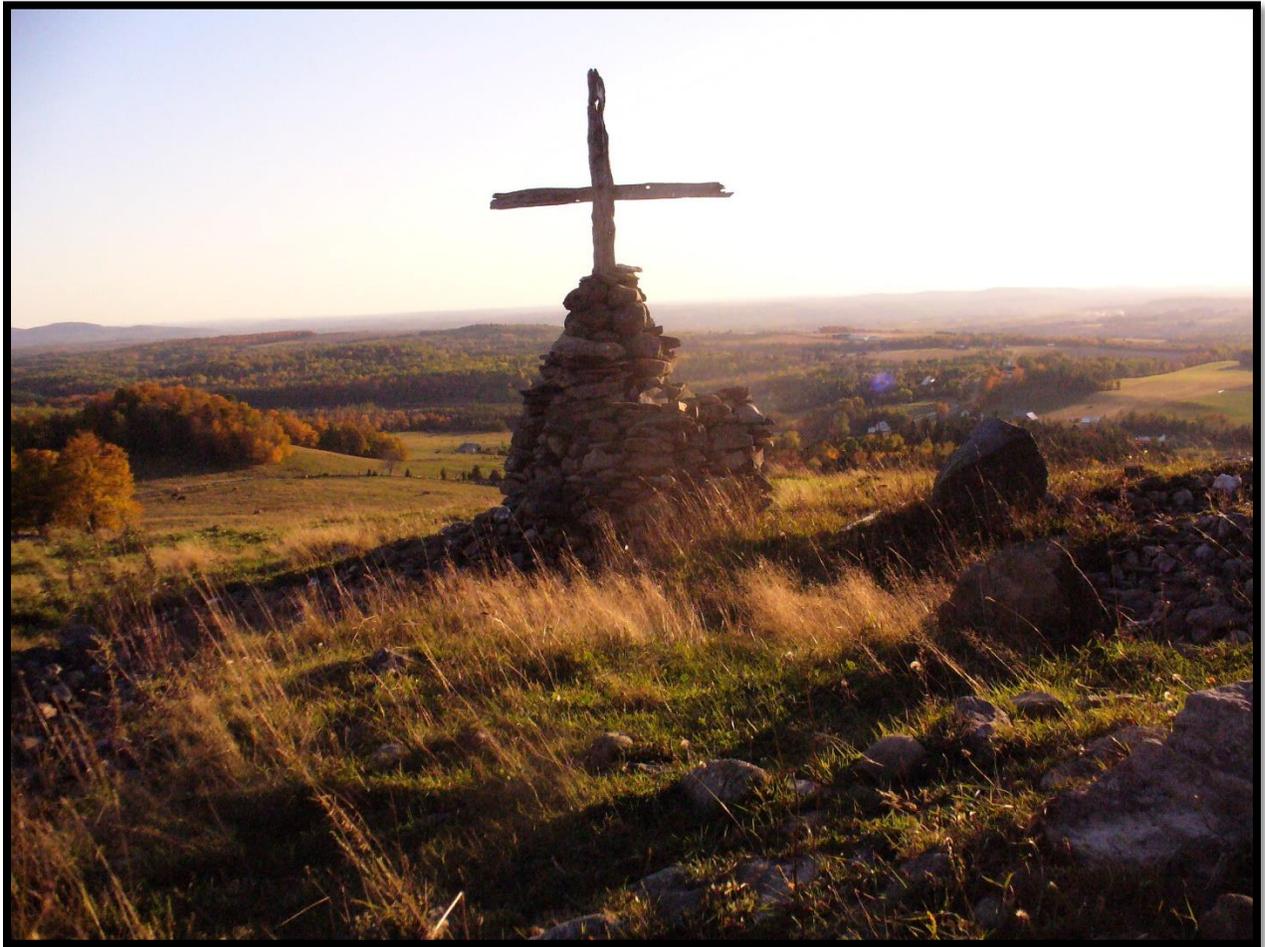


Photo – Overlooking Johnville from Jim Hall's Hill

Johnville was settled in 1861, six years before Canada became a country. Our community is named after Bishop John Sweeny, an Irish immigrant who became the Bishop of Saint John. He was the person who first dreamed of Johnville and worked hard to set up the settlement. Without his vision and support, none of us would be here.

Bishop Sweeny thought that Irish immigrants would be better off farming in the countryside where they could own their own land and live independently, instead of trying to make a living in the dirty city slums that many Irish people became stuck in after arriving in North America. He believed that the Irish made good farmers, and that hard work and living off the land would create a strong and healthy community. Judging from the fact that many of our elders live into their eighties and nineties, and so many good people of Irish descent are still living in these rolling emerald hills, it seems that he was right. So the next time you look out over Johnville's beautiful landscape and breathe in a mouthful of clean Appalachian air, exhale a prayer of thanks to the good man.

You can find a short biography of Bishop Sweeny in the Dictionary of Canadian Biography's website: http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/sweeny_john_13E.html (Accessed 24 July 2020)

The Catholic Church has been very important to Johnville from its earliest beginnings. Johnville is an Irish Catholic colony created by the Catholic Church, which makes it distinct from other communities in New Brunswick. After Bishop Sweeny established the community, the Church gave strong spiritual and physical support to the settlers. The Church was the central spiritual and physical hub of the community. Sunday services and parish social events brought settlers together to celebrate their Catholic faith and maintain their cultural heritage. The Catholic Church also gave generations of Johnvillers an organizing structure and moral guidance to provide help to one another when needed, and to find ways to do good works in the world beyond the community.

The Church also provided education. Johnville's first priest even had to show some of the city slickers among the early pioneers how to chop down a tree! From 1924 until a generation ago, we had a convent where the Sisters of Charity lived. These well-educated religious women taught school in Johnville for decades, offered music lessons, disciplined children sternly for chasing rabbits, and helped out with the Church. The Church continues to play a vital role in Johnville today. Think about how much the Knights of Columbus and Catholic Women's League gives to this area (university scholarships, benefit breakfasts for those who are in need, and other fundraising activities for good causes). You can learn more about our church, St. John the Evangelist, and Mother of Mercy Parish online at: <https://motherofmercyparish.com/churches-2/> (Accessed 30 July 2020).

Almost all the original settlers of Johnville were either born in Ireland or had parents who had been born there. Many still spoke the Irish language (sometimes called Gaelic), which continues to be spoken and sung today in Ireland. Others spoke English with very heavy accents. There was not much support for the Irish language in New Brunswick, and within a few generations most people in Johnville only spoke English.

The Irish immigrated to North America in large numbers during the mid-19th century because life was very difficult for them in Ireland, and they did not have much hope for a good future for their children. Great Britain controlled Ireland and didn't treat Irish people (especially Irish

Catholics) well. Many Irish were forced to leave lands their families had lived upon for centuries because their landlords (who were mostly British) cared more about making money than they did about ensuring the health and survival of Irish families. The British also imposed laws and restrictions that made it more difficult for poor Irish people to fish, hunt, gather seaweed for field fertilizer, and undertake other important activities necessary for survival. Some Irish people, maybe even your relatives, were sent to prison camps in Australia or killed.

There was also a terrible potato famine between 1845 and 1852 that left almost a million Irish people dead. Many poor people in Ireland ate potatoes all the time because they were cheap and easy to grow. When the Irish potato crops failed during the Irish Potato Famine (also known as the Great Hunger), people across the country had nothing to eat. The famine was made worse by British policies that exported grain and other foods from Ireland to England for a profit, rather than ensuring that the Irish people had enough food to stay alive. This history is good to keep in mind when you shop for groceries today, as some of the imported food we now buy in our local stores is grown by farmers in poorer parts of the world who do not always have enough to eat themselves.

Our ancestors grew up in these challenging conditions. Over a million people left Ireland to seek a better life in other parts of the world during the Famine. In New Brunswick many Irish immigrants initially settled in Saint John and communities along the Miramichi. But the Irish didn't get to sail on nice boats like the Bluenose or the Marco Polo when they crossed the Atlantic Ocean. Most of the immigrants who sailed to this province were forced into overcrowded and dirty cargo holds that were built to carry New Brunswick pine trees, not people. Although a few ship captains ensured their Irish passengers were well looked after, most immigrants were treated more like animals than people and not given proper food, water, or living space. Thousands of people got diseases from the terrible conditions they were forced to live in while crossing the rough Atlantic in these leaky and creaky ships. Many died painful deaths and were buried at sea or in quarantine (hospital) camps like the ones on Partridge Island in Saint John and Middle Island on the Miramichi. 601 Irish immigrants are buried in a mass grave on Partridge Island, which is now a National Historic Site of Canada. For more information see, https://www.pc.gc.ca/apps/dfhd/page_nhs_eng.aspx?id=191 (Accessed 24 July 2020).

You may be able to find the names of your own relatives on ship's passenger lists, or a death list at one of these quarantine stations if you check with the Provincial Archives of New Brunswick in Fredericton. So please think twice the next time you see a refugee camp of suffering people on the news, or hear about people from a poor country having problems trying to cross a border into a wealthier one – In another time and another place, this was your family!

Your ancestors endured a lot of hardship so that you and your family could have a good life. When they first got to Johnville, there were no roads, or even houses for them to live in – just trees, rocks, and more rocks, as well as plenty of mosquitos and snow storms in their respective seasons. Lumbermen had cut some large pine and other trees along the Monquart and

Shiktehawk before 1861, but for the most part, the early settlers received land grants to uncut forests that they had to clear before they could sow crops or create a pasture for livestock. When the settlers arrived, they also had to learn how to contend with a number of wild animals such as bears, moose, bobcats, and caribou that they had not seen before. Some animals, like moose and deer, quickly became important food sources for pioneer families.

There was never a shortage of work that needed to be done like planting fields, building barns, or cooking meals for over a dozen people. Settlers didn't have power saws or tractors to help them, just axes, horses & oxen, faith, and each other. Children also had to work hard, and they were responsible for many tasks around the house and farm that today we might consider adult jobs. This way of life proved too difficult for some settlers, and a number of families left the community within its first decade.

Johnville grew into a very busy place soon after it was settled. The community had its own Church, post office, store, and school. There was a blacksmith shop where men often stopped to talk. At one time, our priest even started an electrical company in Johnville. There were sawmills along the Monquart, and you can still find a few pieces of one of these structures while picking fiddleheads or fishing upstream of the Kilfoil Bridge. Ask your older neighbours or family members if they remember where any of these places used to be, and if they can recall the sound of the steam whistle echoing throughout the valleys. You might be surprised at what your ancestors used to do for a living. You can check the Provincial Archives of New Brunswick for the 1871 and 1891 census records which will reveal if your ancestor was a farmer or a weaver, or one of the unfortunate people who was labelled "unsound of mind".

Thankfully, there was usually time for fun and socializing in Johnville after the work was done. The early settlers enjoyed singing, dancing, and telling stories. There was a debating club and even an Irish Independence League in the community. Johnvillers held lively barn dances and festive kitchen parties where laughter and fiddle tunes helped lift people's spirits after a long day. Gerald Boyd showed me the double floor his father put in one of their outbuildings to create an ideal dance space. He also told me that Jack Shay and a few other neighbours were known to keep a "Hen Setting" (a keg of home brew beer) in their back sheds. We had a community hall, Tara Hall (named after the ancient seat of high kings in Ireland), where people put on concerts, dances, and plays. The community has turned out more than a few poets and musicians over the generations. Card games in homes or at the Church also became popular in the 20th century. Sam Boyd fondly recalled watching men race horses across the ice at Priest Lake on Sunday afternoons. Many Johnville residents are still great talkers who enjoy a good sense of humour and a boot-stomping barn party today.

Generations ago, when kids really did have to walk two miles uphill through a foot of snow to get to school, there were no cell phones, video games, or Facebook to keep them busy. Yet children still had lots of fun in Johnville. They built rafts and floated them on Priest Lake. The blacksmith, Matt Gorey, designed skis and sleds for daredevils to try on Gallagher Hill. Children also enjoyed having skating parties in winter, and fishing and gathering berries together in the

summer. On hot days, youth swam in the Monquart at Murphy's Rock or other spots, much as they continue to do today. Baseball, hockey, and other sports were very popular throughout the 20th century, and there was never a shortage of kids to make up a team. As well, more than a few farm boys and girls had pet lambs or calves that followed them around.

Unlike today when many youth and adults spend a lot of time talking to people from afar online or participating in events in places far away from where they live, our ancestors grew up playing and working with their neighbours - and they built a strong community by doing this. One of the largest challenges facing Johnville and many other rural communities today is that work, education, social activities, and essential government services now draw people farther and farther away from home - and farther away from the local lawns, fields, kitchens, neighbours, and Church, that have sustained our community for over a century and a half. Another huge challenge stems from economic and political policies that have made it increasingly difficult for family farmers, independent woods workers, store owners, and other rural people to earn a decent living in their communities. Gerald Boyd and Francis Cullen used to shake their heads at this sad reality, and tell me that there is absolutely no way our world can keep moving in this direction for much longer because it makes no sense and is completely unsustainable. For Johnville's sake, and the sake of rural communities throughout the world, I pray that they are right.

While Johnville has produced quite a few priests and nuns over the years, we certainly were not all saints. Some Johnville settlers and their descendants enjoyed playing pranks on one another. In the early 1990s Basil Boyd shared some of the pranks that were popular in the community when he was a boy such as hiding a neighbour's outhouse, moving pieces of farm equipment onto roofs on Halloween, and letting animals out of their gates. Some of us still call the end of our driveways "the gate" even though we no longer tend to have gates in that area. Gerald Boyd told me that someone once set a cigarette-smoking rooster loose at a community raffle, and that our priest was far from amused. That was the last raffle with live animals. While most pranks were relatively harmless, a few were mean spirited. For instance, Gerald recalled that a couple of brothers from a certain family once moved the end of the guide rope their blind sister relied on to get to the family outhouse. So instead of finding the door she was looking for, she ended up in the pasture. Around here, people with a mean sense of humour are sometimes referred to as being "cute", and such behaviour is frowned upon.

It took a long time to build good roads and many would argue that this is still a work in progress. In the earliest days of the settlement there were no cars, so people typically travelled by horses or they walked. You used to be able to tell which family was coming behind you on the way to church by the sound of their sleigh bells ringing out in the crisp cold air. Gerald Boyd told me a horse and sleigh could be better than a modern GPS system because you could fall asleep under your buffalo robe returning from a dance in Bath, and your horse would deliver you straight to your dooryard safe and sound. My grandfather, Ambrose Hall, told me that when he first met Mike Foley, the spirited young man was riding around his homestead on the

back of a large pig. They became fast friends, and you can still find Mike's name carved in old buildings in the community.

Our ancestors in Johnville chose to put aside religious differences and work together with their Protestant neighbours and become friends. In fact, Protestant settlers in Holmesville played a big part in building our first church. Non-Catholics continue playing a vital role in our community life, and even assist with our annual Johnville Picnic, an important fundraiser for our church, and help gather wildflowers for Sunday masses. Considering that it took another century for the deadly violence between Catholics and Protestants in Ireland to end, we need to appreciate just how important it was that our ancestors were able to make a new peaceful start here. A violent clash between Catholics and Protestants had even occurred in Woodstock, NB in 1847. Perhaps there was something in the local water that kept our ancestors and their neighbours calmer.

The word Monquart is derived from an ancient Wolastoqey (Maliseet) place name, but the way we spell and pronounce it today is quite different from its actual name. I've seen it written on old maps and in geography studies as "Ab-mut-qual'-tuk," "Mun-kwad-ik", "Op-mūt-kwal'tik," and "Opmoltequalt". Ganong's 1896 report on New Brunswick place names suggested that the word could possibly mean "place of the bend, or else, = in a line, i.e., with the main river" when translated into English. (See the section below on further readings for the reference.)

The origins of the name Monquart, the river we identify with when we call ourselves Monquarters, is a good reminder that the Wolastoqiyik (the Maliseets) lived here long before our ancestors reshaped the landscape into the home we know today. I grew up hearing from older family members and neighbours that Moose Mountain was named after a giant angry moose, that Klouskap (Glooscap), the Wolastoqey (Maliseet) cultural hero, turned into stone to keep people safe from its violent behaviour. The mountain is also an extinct volcano, and only one of two places in the province where the tiny Gaspé Shrew lives. Maurice Corbett said that when he was young boy, an Indigenous person travelled around the community and sold and bartered traditional medicines to help keep Johnville families healthy. Francis Cullen was friends with Peter Paul, a well known and respected Wolastoqey Elder from Woodstock, and had learned about Wolastoqey history and plant medicines from him. My grandfather, Ambrose Hall, also had a great deal of respect for Peter Paul. Many people of Ambrose's generation and the one that followed it recalled hosting the Wolastoqey baseball team from Tobique on the Church grounds.

When potatoes became the most important crop in Johnville in the 20th century (you just can't keep the Irish away from those tasty tubers), farmers relied on local kids and adults to help harvest their crops in hand-woven Wolastoqey black ash baskets that they bought from Wolastoqiyik in Tobique and Woodstock. Until recently kids in this area followed a slightly different school calendar than elsewhere. They started school in August and then had a Potato Break in the fall to assist with the harvest. The money children earned on their "Break" was a key source of income that families used to buy school supplies, clothing, and other needed

items. The lessons kids learned about supporting themselves and their families from a young age by working side by side with their neighbours were priceless. Today, mechanical harvesters have replaced potato pickers and Wolastoqey baskets, and an invasive insect, the Emerald Ash Borer, is threatening to completely wipe out ash trees in New Brunswick.

The Keenan Bridge, a covered bridge across the Monquart, was a popular hang out for Johnville residents even though it was haunted by a headless lady. Community members had encountered this ghost for generations, either standing near the bridge or hitching a ride in their wagons and cars. Father Keith Neilson held a service on the banks of the Monquart to help put her spirit to rest the summer that arsonists torched the bridge and destroyed one of our most cherished local landmarks. I buried a piece of that bridge looking across the Atlantic on the Cliffs of Moher in Ireland on Summer Solstice that year. I have not heard of any recent headless lady sightings. You can find a few descriptions of the Keenan Bridge ghost in popular websites by searching “Keenan Bridge Headless Lady”. Here is one:

<https://bouncingpinkball.wordpress.com/2009/10/30/the-keenan-bridge-ghost/> (Accessed 25 July 2020).

It can be challenging to learn about Johnville’s history when you’re not living in the community, as most of our history is oral. That is, we primarily pass our history and culture down from older generations to younger ones by word of mouth through stories and conversation. This is why it is extremely important for young people to take time to talk with and LISTEN to older relatives and neighbours – and for older people to share their history with youth and the new adults who move into our community. Although many of the original families of settlers remain in Johnville, it has never been a closed community. Some of our most vibrant community members in recent generations moved here from other areas as children or adults.

Although it took tonnes of hard work that didn’t make them rich, most of our ancestors who settled here were happy because they could own land and practice their religious beliefs without fear of persecution – remember these simple things that help make us human were not possible in Ireland or even in some parts of Canada at that time. Johnville was, and continues to be, a dream of a better life come true. Remember to be thankful that you have also been given the chance to dream your dreams in such a beautiful place amidst kind people. The story of Johnville is important, and it should be passed on. If you or your ancestors are from here, this story is a part of who you are, and if you forget it you will lose a part of yourself that can never be replaced.

References & Further Reading

If you want to read more about what life was like in the community in its very early days, check out the chapter on Johnville in John Francis Maguire, *The Irish in America* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co. 1868). This book was written by an Irish politician who visited the community in October 1866, several months after hearing about its remarkable success from Bishop Sweeny in London. The chapter on Johnville is excerpted on the Johnville Website, and you can find the entire book online at www.archive.org

Isaac Stephenson, *Recollections of a Long Life, 1829-1915* (Chicago: s.n. 1915) discusses a ferocious wolf pack that threatened livestock and lumber camps on the Shiketehawk in the cold winter of 1840-41. You can find this book by searching for the title on www.archive.org

For the Woodstock Riot in 1847, see Scott W. See, "'Mickey's and Demons' vs. 'Bigots and Boobies': The Woodstock Riot of 1847." *Acadiensis* XXI (Autumn 1991): 110-31. Available online at <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/Acadiensis/article/view/11902/12746>

For discussion of a caribou hunt not far from the headwaters of the Monquart and Wolastoqey culture in the late 19th century, see Tappan Adney, *The Travel Journals of Tappan Adney 1887-1890*. Edited by C. Ted Behne (Fredericton, NB: Goose Lane Editions, 2010).

For place name information on the Monquart, see William F. Ganong, "A Monograph of the Place-Nomenclature of the Province of New Brunswick." *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada* vol. 2, no. 2 (1896): 175-289. See 254.

Johnville History Quiz

1. What year was Johnville settled?
2. Who is Johnville named after?
3. Why did that person think that Johnville would be a good place for Irish people to live?
4. Why did so many Irish people leave Ireland and come to North America?
5. What language other than English was spoken by many of the first settlers of Johnville?
6. Who lived in this area before the Johnville settlers arrived?
7. How did Irish people get to New Brunswick?
8. What did people do for fun in Johnville?
9. Was life easy or hard for the first settlers in Johnville? Why?
10. What do you think is the most important thing about being from Johnville, or having family from Johnville?