

**Monroe County Bi-Centennial Celebration and Highlights of the French-Canadian  
Influence and Impact on the area**

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Most of you know that Monroe is celebrating their Bicentennial of their county this year. However, the settlement at Frenchtown was begun as early as 1780. Officially, Francois Navarre (grandson, of Robert Navarre who was the Royal Notary in Detroit) is called the father of Monroe. Even though he was an early and important settler whose father, Robert Navarre, Jr. and his uncle, Francois Utreau, received a deed from the Potawatomi Indians for land, likely other FC settlers were there earlier. I will talk more about the Navarres later. Monroe County was officially designated in 1817. I had read and heard that the county had decided to name itself Monroe after President James Monroe visited after the War of 1812 and also had approved money to assist the residents who lost everything during the war. However, President Monroe only visited Detroit, according to Gerry Wykes of the MCHM quoted in a Toledo Blade article in February 2017. Wykes further stated that President was scheduled to come to what was then called Frenchtown, but he left Michigan without visiting. Wykes states that since the President was an English Protestant, he may not have wanted to come to a mainly French Canadian Catholic settlement, but that is just speculation. Yet, as part of their Bicentennial celebrations, the town will erect a statue of President Monroe in front of the Monroe County courthouse later this year. Monroe will also have a variety of events throughout this year to celebrate this important milestone. For example, a May 20<sup>th</sup> Open House at the Battlefield and a July 14<sup>th</sup> Founder's Day at Loranger Square.

I am going to talk about some of the important sites that are relevant to Monroe history, especially for the FC founders.

As with most FC settlements, the establishment of a Catholic church to serve the people was very important.

On Oct. 15, 1788, many early FC settlers came together to form a parish and apply for a priest. My 4x great grandfather, Joseph Hyvon donated some of his land and another man, Mr. Mommini was paid for his land to be used for the 1<sup>st</sup> Catholic Church to be named St. Antoine. This is according to the book published in 1988 to celebrate the 200<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of St. Antoine/St. Mary's Parish called "The Cross Leads Generations On". The church was built along the banks of the River Raisin outside of what is now the downtown Monroe. Many familiar FC families were at Frenchtown and helped to found a church (among them were Godefroy, Drouillard, Couture, Reaume, Campeau, Villers, Lapointe, Cicotte, Navarre, Cousino, Susor, Dubois, Tessier just to name a few!)\* please forgive my Downriver pronunciation of these FC names; I am quite sure the pronunciations in Quebec would be quite different!\*\* Most of these families were also early landowners. (see Diane's presentation about land deeds)

St. Antoine struggled in the early years. Life in Frenchtown was difficult and the settlers often didn't have enough food for their families and often forgot or were unable to provision their priest. The priest quarters on the 1<sup>st</sup> floor of the church flooded every year which caused the priest to live in uncomfortable and sometimes unhealthy conditions which led to disease. Therefore, the post was often vacant. Thankfully, Father Gabriel Richard from Ste. Anne's in Detroit often ministered to the FC Catholics at St. Antoine. He made regular visits 1805-1831 to baptize, marry, and bury the Frenchtown settlers (As many of you know, Father Richard was lost during the cholera epidemic in Detroit in 1831). Father Richard's presence had a lasting impact on Monroe, as well as, the Detroit area and the whole state of Michigan.

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The location of the church was relocated in different parts of the settlement throughout the years until in 1834, the present church was built on Monroe street in downtown Monroe where it still stands today. The name was changed to St. Mary's in 1845 and the church underwent an expansion and several repairs throughout the years, but remains virtually unchanged since the 1920s.

Along the way, the original St. Antoine cemetery was forgotten (St. Joseph's cemetery and an even older cemetery for the victims of the cholera epidemic were begun in the downtown area by the "new" church). In 1999, a new subdivision was being built along the banks of the River Raisin, and construction halted suddenly when many human remains were found. Using the parish records, the cemetery area was left untouched with park and Memorial listing the families buried was erected there.(see slide 1) Again, familiar FC names are etched on the Memorial.\*\* Lafontaine, Langlois, Poupard, LaBreche, Lorenger, Bissonnette, Bonaventure, Richard, Martin, Prodhomme, and so many other I was also told by people familiar with the memorial that the burial ground dates back even further to Native Americans but their names are unfortunately not known.(and they and possibly others are acknowledged on the memorial with "those known only to God")

Next slide (2) is a photo of the interior of St. Mary's. The church has beautiful stained glass windows(which date back to around 1900) and originally were gothic shaped. However, in 1987, the windows were renovated and were reshaped to match the Romanesque windows in the sanctuary. The nave of the church dates back to 1830s and has been lovingly maintained. My great grandparents, John Evoe and Suzanne Bourbannais were married there in 1899.

The next slide (3) is of the Statue of the Recording Angel erected at the Centennial in 1888 of St. Mary's. It is found in front of the church. It is made of Italian marble and the overall height of the monument is 20 ft. Inscriptions on the base list those in attendance for the unveiling (such as the Bishop of Detroit and mayor of Monroe) along with those who donated money for the monument. Again, many familiar FC names such as Navarre, Duval, Nadeau, Dubois, Peltier, Godfroy, Lamirande are included.

Another important site in Monroe can be found along the banks of the River Raisin, the Navarre-Anderson Trading Post. (slide 4 of my cousins, Rob and Dennis Evoe, reading the Michigan Historic marker at this site back in 2013). This site is maintained by the MCHM and is open during special events and weekends in the summer. The site contains the trading post with sleeping quarters and storage areas, a separate summer kitchen built in 1810 and a replica of a barn from 1790s. Robert Navarre, Jr and his brother, Francois Utreau built the trading post in 1789, but neither of them lived there. Instead, Colonel Francois Navarre (Robert's son) lived there for a short time with his family, but soon moved his family to a larger home. Part of what was Navarre's ribbon farm has the Sawyer Homestead on it now with a historical marker reminding visitors about its history. Yes, Monroe had ribbons farms like Detroit and Quebec. In 1802, he sold it to John Anderson. The trading post had many owners over the years and was even moved from its original site. It was forgotten and about to be torn down in 1969, when owners, Roger Russeau and Peter Navarre (likely a descendent of Francois), they felt it may have historical significance. They contacted the MCHM and research was done. (Slide 5) The building was identified, moved to an undeveloped piece of land outside of the city (close to where it was originally located), and restored to represent Frenchtown's early years. Although the trading post's role in the War of 1812 is not recorded, the building does have musket balls

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embedded in its wood from that period). Slide 6 shows the interior of the trading post with animal pelts, snow shoes, and other items likely used by early settlers.

Another historically important site for early Frenchtown is the River Raisin battlefield from the War of 1812. Slide 7 is only one of the many Michigan Historical signs that dot the battlefield and areas surrounding the battlefield. This marker is about the American surrender. The battlefield's Michigan Historic markers were installed in 1956, however, homes had been built on the outer edges of the battlefield. In 1990, the Monroe County Historical Society opened the Battlefield's visitor's center in one of the larger homes. Finally, in 2010, it was designated a National Park. The park hosts many events throughout the year (many with a FC connection, as well as, battle reenactments). Displays inside the center depict the battles, as well as, telling the overall history of the War of 1812. In 2015, Sandy Vanisacker, organized the 1<sup>st</sup> Battlefield Reunion which included many FC dishes, people exchanging genealogy information and meeting new cousins, and hearing lectures about life in this FC settlement. Slide 8 is a photo of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Reunion in 2016, which you can see included many people dressed in period costumes. During this 2<sup>nd</sup> Reunion, FC dance and music was added and slide # 9 is Dar Navarre and her husband, Steve dancing to a traditional song. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Battlefield Reunion is planned for Sunday, Sept. 24, 2017 12-4 and promises to be another fun-filled day in Monroe with FC flair. You don't have to be FC to attend, just bring a dish to pass!

For anyone interested in Monroe's long history, a stop in downtown Monroe to the MCHM is a must. Slide 10 is the display of traditional FC ladies clothes on display there. However, the museum has interesting displays depicting life in the area even before Europeans arrived and also has a large exhibit devoted to General George Custor's life and death. He resided in Monroe for a time because his wife, Elizabeth, was from Monroe. The museum also houses a large archives (which has many historical documents and newspaper archives. The obits are available online for a small fee.) See the MCHS website for more information.

The GSMC, in honor, of the Bicentennial, is offering an early settler programs, slide # 11 (gives the website which has the details and also a list of documented early settlers, those that arrived before 1817.) Since I have 14 early settlers in my family (I had previously received Pioneer status in another program offered by the Ellis library for my ancestor, Joseph Louis Hivon a few years ago), I chose my ancestor, Dominique Drouillard, who was a Captain in the Michigan Militia during the War of 1812 for this program (slide 12 shows the certificate I received). I spoke with Chris Kull who is the head of the committee running the program and she says the program runs through Dec. 1, 2017 and the GSMC plans on keeping the information in their archives, but no other plans have been made regarding the certificates issued. There is still plenty of time to submit your application and GSMC's website gives specific types of the proof needed, such as, marriage records, birth certificates, military records, etc.

The final slide (13) is of my grandparents, Earl (Hivon) Evoe and Pearl McGill Evoe. Earl's FC family arrived in the 1780s and Pearl's family arrived after the Civil War. They had both been born and raised in Monroe but left Monroe in the early 1940s to come north to Detroit for economic reasons. I had never seen this photo, along with so many other photos of their early life together, until this October when my cousin, Dennis Evoe, was going through some photos and found a large photo album that dates to the 1920s through the early 1940s. He was kind enough to give it to me to preserve.

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