

Rebellion of 1837-1838
[Excerpts from my Family History]
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Rebellion of 1837-1838 at Saint-Eustache

The families and children of this generation experienced the Rebellion of 1837-38. At a distance of more than one hundred years and at the age of eighty in 1957, Abbé Demers wrote:

The twenty years preceding the skirmish of 1837 represent the most restless period of Canadian history. The struggle between *Canadiens* and Anglos occurred across all the fields on which they met. The English had the force of power, the force of money. Those defeated at the Plains of Abraham had only their natural right to survive as French Catholics. And to win them over, to Anglicize them, to protestantize them, to break them into a Saxon personality, there was nothing that the English were not prepared to undertake: buying souls to begin with, but very few *Canadiens* yield to this abasement; and distancing all things relating to administration, justice; the imprisonment of the Crown property, famine; everything was employed, even an attempt at an English school system.¹

At first, beginning in 1812, the battle was one of words in debates at Parliament, in the press, and at local assemblies. One such gathering held at Sainte-Rose 28 October 1822 protested against the proposed Union of the two Canadas, Upper Canada, predominantly English and Protestant (today the province of Ontario) and Lower Canada, overwhelmingly French and Catholic. The Union was yet another tactic London intended to use to “convert” the descendants of the original French settlers. Those attending the assembly at Sainte-Rose and many other assemblies wished to preserve the Constitution of 1791.²

This was unacceptable to London. The result was the badly-prepared but energetic insurrection, first in provocations between the *Fils de La Liberté* (Sons of Liberty) and the Doric Club in Montréal; then in battles at Saint-Denis and Saint-Charles, Richelieu, described below from my chapter on the Jarret Beauregard family; and in the skirmish at Saint-Eustache, across the Rivière-des-Milles-Iles from Isle-Jésus, followed by the burning and pillaging of the innocent village of Saint-Benoît near by and of the surrounding countryside.

While I have no evidence now of either **Boivin** or **Benoît** family involvement with these events in the Terrebonne region, **Louis Boivin's** son **Pierre Boivin**, who continues my Boivin line, married into a family whose son was closely involved with the rebellion.

The Ouimet Family and the Patriots

The family of **Jean-Cyprian Ouimet** and **Marie-Josette Cyr** included Pierre Boivin's mother-in-law, **Marie Ouimet**, and her brother **Jean Ouimet**, who married twice: first on 3 March 1783 to **Marguerite Bélanger** at St-Martin, by whom he had twelve children; and 21 October 1799 at Ste-Rose to **Marie Beautron dite Major**, who bore fourteen children. From the second marriage was born **André Ouimet** (with the same name as my cousin Marthe's first husband). André studied at the Séminaire de Saint-Hyacinthe, becoming a lawyer in 1835.

¹ Abbé J.-Urgel Demers, *Aperçus Historiques sur L'Île Jésus*, L'Atelier, 1957, pp. 215-16.

² Demers, *Aperçus*, pp. 216-17.

As President of the patriot organization *Les Fils de La Liberté*, he was arrested in Montréal on 16 November 1837. In a description of the event, he noted that he had been cutting tobacco to smoke and reading a Walter Scott novel, “the thirteenth volume of *Pirate...*,” when he heard noise in the staircase ascending to his room and a knocking at the door. On being informed that he was a prisoner, he asked why, and he was told “For high treason.” Here is the rest of the incident as André himself reported it:

“Diable!” [What the Devil?] I said to myself, “This is serious! No bail, Monsieur?”
“No.”
“I must then go to prison?”
“Yes, I am sorry.”
“And I even more; I don't mind, I resign myself to it.”³

He was imprisoned for eight months. L.-O. David, in his *Les Patriotes de 1837-1838*, comments:

The boredom and rigors of prison sharpened his sarcastic eloquence and his rebellious spirit. His companions [in prison] sought him out as much as his jailors feared him. They found in his cheerful words and his comic anecdotes an undying source of entertainment.⁴

André Ouimet returned to the practice of law after his release, but died at the young age of forty-five in 1853.

His “treason” consisted of being president of *Fils de La Liberté* and speaking his mind. On 15 June 1837, Lord Gosford had issued a proclamation exhorting the populace to abstain from seditious assemblies and ordered magistrates and police officers to prevent them. The general response was “à bas [down with] la proclamation!” In August the *Chambre d'Assemblée*, a governing body, was dissolved because it had refused to comply with orders from London; and by September *Les Fils de La Liberté* had been organized at an assembly where André Ouimet, Robert Nelson, and Edouard Rodier spoke. The manifesto of the group was published in October, promising to set aside “the frivolities of youth to consecrate themselves to the study of politics, the needs and resources of the country, so as to increase public riches by encouraging local products and harvests.”⁵

The group met weekly, sometimes parading in the streets of Montréal complete with music, 500 to 600 strong, wearing “d'étoffe du pays,” costumes, from head to foot, sewn from locally made fabrics and material. The *Québec Mercury* reported in August of 1837:

Mr. Rodier's dress excited the greatest attention, being *unique*, with the exception of a pair of Berlin gloves, *viz*: frock coat of granite colored *étoffe du pays*; inexpressibles and vest of the same material, striped blue and white; straw hat and cow leather shoes, with a pair of home-made socks, completed the *outré* attire. Mr. Rodier, it was remarked, had no shirt on, having doubtless been unable to smuggle or manufacture one.⁶

³ Quoted in Demers, *Histoire*, p. 117.

⁴ L.-O. David, *Les Patriotes de 1837-1838*, Montréal: Librairie Beauchemin Limitée, 1937 re-edition of 1884. The editors in a foreword indicate that they do not wish to criticize the clergy that opposed the rebellion in 1837, but to “inspire the young to a profound love of their country and to put before their eyes a living lesson of patriotism.” “Fils de La Liberté” translates as Sons of Liberty, an echo of the 18th century American Revolution.

⁵ David, *Les Patriotes*, p. 15. The bloody French Revolution had ended not that long ago.

⁶ Mason Wade, *The French Canadians 1760-1967*, Volume I, 1760-1911, Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1968, p. 159.

With their “greeting each other as *citoyen* (citizen), singing the *Marseillaise*, and displaying the Tricolor [of France],”⁷ they evoked great fear in the English and the bureaucrats, probably comparable to the fear aroused by the Black Panthers in another and much later era in the United States, but they were no real threat because they had no weapons other than sticks and a few hunting guns.

The Doric Club, a secret society of high Scots and well-to-do young people, decided to force the issue. On November 6 they disrupted a peaceful assembly of the *Fils de La Liberté*. The fracas that resulted was broken up by troops who subdued the remaining members of the *Fils de La Liberté*, the Doric Club members having fled. These latter paraded victoriously through the streets, attacked innocent individuals, destroyed property, including the windows in the home of Papineau and the *Vindicator* printing press at the home of Louis Perrault. The *Fils de La Liberté* never met again; their president and several members were arrested and imprisoned, as mentioned above.⁸

While it is not my intention to retell the battle of Saint-Eustache, which took place 14 December, the results of this battle between grossly unequal forces (Redcoats with cannons *versus habitants* with pitchforks summarizes it well) influenced the lives of my ancestors.

Whether personally involved or not, as Pierre Boivin's wife Marie Ouimet would have been in the fate of André Ouimet, her mother's nephew, my Boivin and Benoît ancestors would have heard of the battle, the fires, the deaths and injuries, the destruction of property (200 homes at Saint-Eustache alone) and the razing of Saint-Benoît, a village that had surrendered before any shots were fired. They may have experienced the looting of grain, lard, chickens, whole herds of animals, and suffered from the subsequent shortages. They may have seen the lines of wagons loaded with confiscated furniture and farm implements. Surely they would have heard of the sacrilege committed by the English soldiers on sacred vessels and the Eucharist itself (sacred Communion Host). They would have known refugees without homes and must have felt both mortified and livid at seeing scores of prisoners walking barefoot through the snow and ice in the forced march to the Montréal prison.

They may have heard about (for most of them probably did not read) the *Herald* newspaper calling for butchering the prisoners en masse: “Why shelter and fatten them for the hangman?” Or the words of someone who called for hanging the prisoners at the doors of churches, “five or six per parish; and if the *habitants* revolted at this, they should be killed as they left their homes 'just as we kill rats at the door of a barn.’”⁹ Words like these in another time and another place resulted in the Holocaust. My ancestors were hated just as irrationally as the Jews.

The Rebellion of 1837 at Saint-Charles and Saint-Denis

During the French Régime, the age of adulthood had been twenty-five, but on 1 January 1765, it became twenty-one.¹⁰ This generation of Jarrets attained their majority during the years before and after the Rebellion of 1837. I have no evidence now that any individuals from the family were specifically involved, but they most certainly suffered the effects of the conflict.

⁷ Wade, p. 165.

⁸ David. *Les Patriotes*.

⁹ Demers, *Histoire*, p. 121.

¹⁰ *Le Boréal Express*, Journal d’Histoire du Canada, 1760-1810, Trois-Rivières: Les éditions Le Boréal Express Ltée, 1967, p. 279.

Like Saint-Eustache as described in the Boivin chapter, Saint-Charles and Saint-Denis were sites of rebellion in 1837. Dissatisfied with the English governing body, the *Patriotes* spoke at assemblies and rallied the populace.

Perhaps the most important such assembly took place on 23 November 1837 in a large prairie belonging to Doctor Duvert.¹¹ Six counties in the Richelieu sent representatives: Saint-Hyacinthe, de Rouville, de Chambly, de Verchères, and de L'Acadie. The most celebrated speaker was Papineau, heard by perhaps 5000 to 6000 people. L.-O. David describes an excited, committed crowd that applauded often and long, even shooting muskets into the air. The proposals put forward included a declaration affirming the rights of men to resist a tyrannical government, an appeal to English soldiers to desert, encouragement of the people to disobey magistrates and officers of the militia appointed by the government, and requests that people organize themselves as the *Fils de La Liberté* had done. Mr. Papineau was essentially pacifistic, shunning violence; but other speakers, like Doctor Wolfred Nelson, elected president of the assembly, believed it was time to "melt their spoons in order the make musket balls."¹² David reports that the most violent was Doctor Côte, of L'Acadie, who said: "The time for talking has passed, it's lead we must send to our enemies now."¹³ In response to this assembly, the government issued the proclamation prohibiting all assemblies, described earlier, that led to the arrest of André Ouimet.

Seigneur Debartzch had at first encouraged meetings at his *seigneurial* manse and even published a newspaper, *L'Écho du Pays*. The parish priest, Blanchet, "never hid his sympathies for the *Patriotes*."¹⁴ But as the government made no secret of its plans to send two companies of troops to put down the dissidents, both men became more sober. Debartzch and his family were even driven from their home in November. The *seigneurial* home then became the battle camp, an absurd choice, David says.¹⁵

The *patriotes* at Saint-Denis, six miles away, enjoyed a brief victorious skirmish on 22 November against the troops of Gore, putting up a better fight with their primitive weapons than the red-coats had expected. It was a different story at Saint-Charles on 25 November against Wetherall's six companies of infantry, two artillery pieces, and a detachment of cavalry.¹⁶

At least thirty-two *patriotes* were killed, twenty-four of them buried at Saint-Charles, although more bodies may have been tossed in the river. Another thirty were wounded and an equal number taken prisoner. The English reported only three killed, ten wounded seriously, and eight wounded lightly, although David reports eyewitnesses claimed more casualties on both sides.

David continues:

After having burned the camp [the *seigneurial* house] and all it contained as well as four or five neighboring houses, the troops and their horses entered the church of Saint-Charles where they passed the night. The sacred site suffered all kinds of profanations that it is useless to describe.¹⁷

¹¹ L.-O. David, *Les Patriotes de 1837-1838*, Montréal: Librairie Beauchemin Limitée, 1937 re-edition of 1884, p. 21.

¹² David, *Les Patriotes*, p. 23.

¹³ David., *Les Patriotes*, p. 23.

¹⁴ F. Chicoine, O.F.M., *Paroisse de St. Charles-sur-Richelieu, 1740-1980, Essai Historique*, Montréal: F. Chicoine, 1983, p. 124.

¹⁵ David, *Les Patriotes*, p. 37.

¹⁶ David, *Les Patriotes*, p. 37.

¹⁷ David, *Les Patriotes*, p. 41.

Most women and children sought refuge in the fields, but at least one woman was found dead in the charred remains of her home. Another rebellion took place in 1838, affecting Chateauguay, Napierville, Saint-Philippe, and elsewhere.

Curé Blanchet was imprisoned at Montréal but released in March, through the intervention of Bishop Bourget, on 1000 *livres* of bail.

112 prisoners were tried.
98 condemned to death
12 actually executed
12 acquitted or found "hors du cause," beyond suspicion
30 liberated on bail
58 exiled to Australia and returned in 1844.¹⁸

{The above excerpts from my Family History were written by about 2000.}
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¹⁸ David, p. 265.