

Chronicle

#1

HISTORICAL RALLY

THE PORT AND THE GREAT PANDEMICS OF PAST CENTURIES

Introduction: Idea and Approach

In February 2020, we came up with the idea of exploring two important periods in the history of Québec and particularly the port. Firstly, how the natives thrived in the area the previous centuries, and secondly, the port and its operations with regard to immigration in the past.

We had no idea how topical our choices would become. The Coastal GasLink pipeline crisis broke out immediately after, which raised the issue of Wet'suwet'en native claims regarding dissent between that nation's elected and hereditary leaders.

This piqued our curiosity, so we contacted the Huron-Wendat community to find out about the impact of the port and the riverbank from before the White man's arrival to the colony's first years. This topic is important to us and of such interest that we will devote another activity to it.

At the beginning of February, we could not have imagined that a pandemic would place the whole world in quarantine a short month later.

It led us to explore the methods used to battle the many diseases and major pandemics in past centuries.

We contacted a representative of the Grosse île and the Irish Memorial National Historic Site to document this slice of history that directly involved the Port of Québec, and to discuss once again being confronted with a pandemic a little less than 100 years after the site's quarantine facilities were shut down.

Circumstances have forced us to change the format of the rally, however. Instead of walking through the port's grounds, we will travel through time through weekly chronicles to be posted to the port's website. We hope that our incredible past will captivate you as much as it did us. These stories will broaden our understanding of the port, the river and our history.

We warmly thank Stéphane Lamontagne, Product Development Officer at Parks Canada, who graciously sent us texts, publications and photos of the facilities at Grosse-Île. We used these invaluable resources to develop this year's rally.

Chronicle 1: The Port and the first boat people of the modern era

During the Second Historical Rally in 2017, we saw that the main trading activities of shipbuilding and wood export at the start of the XIXth century spurred considerable growth in maritime traffic. In 1829, 67% of the wharves were owned by Anglophones, 21% by Francophones and 12% by the government. The Scots owned the biggest shipyards.

Shipbuilding and related industries such as the manufacture of ropes, sails and tackles employed loads of people. In 1831, Québec City had the most sawmills in Lower Canada, with 348.

All this activity transformed the port. The shore, virtually unoccupied at the end of the XVIIIth century, was quickly developed. In 1785, it had 12 wharves between l'Anse-des-Mères and Pointe-à-Carcy. The number grew to 21 by 1804 and 25 by 1829.

By 1820, the wharves of the Saint Charles River's fully-occupied shoreline expanded to the Saint Lawrence. Most wharves and shipyards belonged to English merchants. Their business savvy and family ties with British trading houses and government officials enabled them to thrive through the economic bulls and bears. Many had major contracts with the British military.

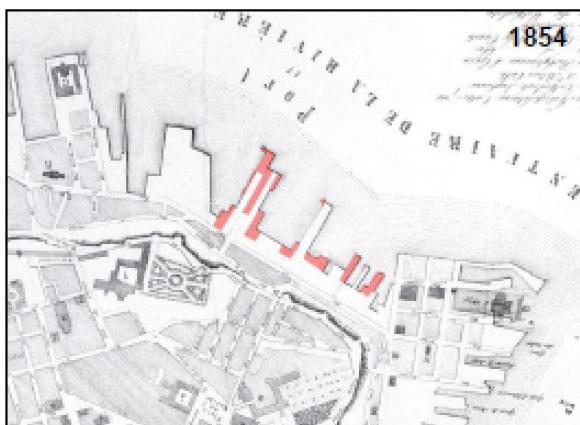


Figure 6 : Detail du plan de PL Morin, impr. Wilain, Massard réalisé en 1854, secteur de la rue Saint-Paul. « Plan de la Cité de Québec n. (Parks Canada, 100/00/ic-39). En rouge, on remarque les secteurs qui ont subi des transformations.

Source: Port of Québec – Louise Basin

Study of the archeological potential of the interior basin

Anne Desgagné – Parks Canada-CSQ – Cultural Heritage Service

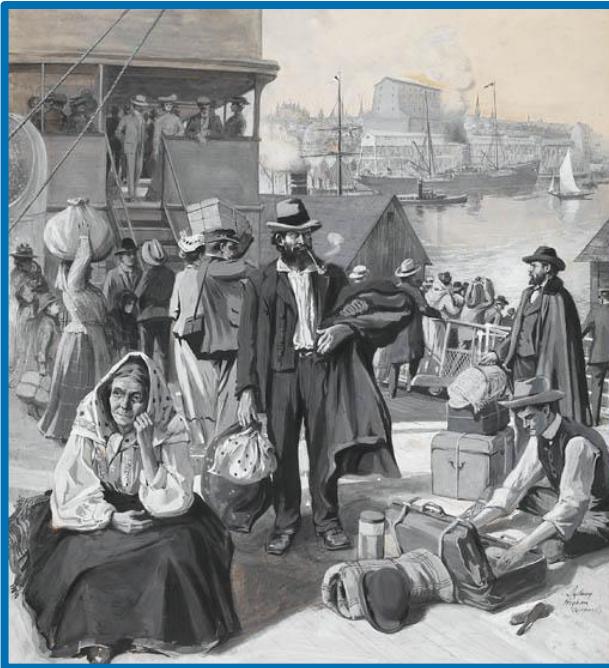
Québec's close ties with England and the United Kingdom made it not only a choice destination for business and trade, but also for jobs and the hope for a new start and a better life. A great number of European immigrants, especially the Irish, shared these hopes.

In the early XIXth century, the Irish's relative prosperity meant that a family could properly feed itself from its plot of land if the climate was favourable. About four million people lived in Ireland when the 1801 Act of Union integrated it into the British Empire. The population spiked to nearly nine million forty years later. However, Ireland was under the yoke of the Protestant British Empire, and inhabitants refusing to convert were increasingly stripped of their lands. Consequently, family land which used to go to the eldest son was now divided among all sons in the same family. This sharp drop in the size of peasant farms increased their vulnerability to exploitation.

In addition, many peasants did not own the land; they had to pay rent to a British Protestant landlord. The plots of land were no longer large enough to feed a family. To make the best of the reduced land availability, the Irish turned to potato cultivation, which required little space.

When the potato blight, a parasitic disease related to the humid climate, hit in 1845, the potato crop dropped by 40%, causing widespread famine. Compounding this dreadful situation was the fact that the peasants still had to hand over a portion of their crop to their English landlords and continue to feed England at the risk of their own survival. In some regions of the island, entire families were starving to death while the army protected convoys of food belonging to the landlords that left for England. In 1846, famine and poverty killed a million Irish. The one and a half million more that left the country became the first boat people of the modern era.

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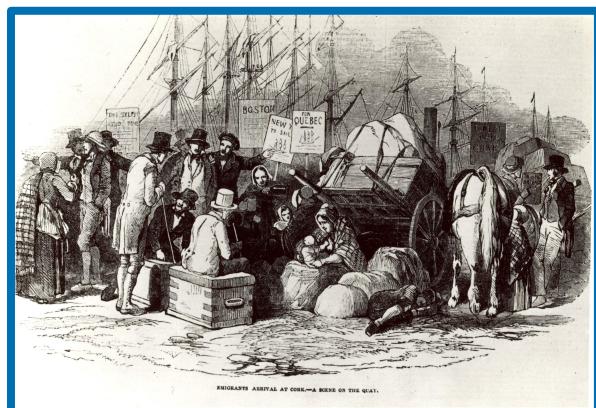


Source: BAC e000996306

The shortage and tough economic conditions affected all the United Kingdom and triggered its own great migration. Overpopulation, an economic recession, industrial and agricultural crises, unemployment and social unrest were all factors motivating people to leave their homeland for a better life in America.

Québec's port was one of the major hubs in British America's traditional mercantile system, making it attractive to immigrants.

Between 1815 and 1831, 260,000 residents of the British Isles, of whom 60% were Irish, landed in Québec. Nearly 15,500 Irish people left for Québec each year from 1832 to 1860. Hungry and weak, many of them succumbed to disease contracted before or during a crossing in usually unclean and overcrowded conditions.



Irish Emigration XIXth century (P-215)
Emigrant arrival at the Irish town of Cork – A scene on the quay". Early XIXth century.
Source unknown.

You are now able to answer questions 1 and 2 of the Quiz,
to be eligible for the draw.

In our next chronicle, learn about how the City of Québec dealt with the newcomers
and the creation of a quarantine station.