

Roman Catholic Places of Worship in LaPasse and Westmeath

The following is a chapter from the book “**Highways of Destiny**”,
a History of parishes in the Diocese of Pembroke, Ottawa Valley, Canada
by Rev. William C. O’Dwyer
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LaPasse-Westmeath

The wild geese in their flights to and from the Northern and Southern regions of this Hemisphere paused here in their crossings, on the marshes along the Great River, hence the name “La passé des outardes”.

The human pioneers in their flight and quest for permanent sojourn on the land came in a different direction, that is, up the River from Quebec and Montreal. These were mostly French Canadians but mingling with them were a few Scots and Irish from the British Isles. After settling here in the early Eighteen-Thirties and establishing their log cabin homes, this band of Christians began to pine for the aid and consolations of Religion. Thus a delegation of strong men accustomed to the turbulent rapids, the whirlpools and broad expanses of the River of the Outaouais’ paddled to Bytown in quest of a priest who would supply their spiritual needs.

Whether or not a priest returned with the intrepid voyageurs is only a conjecture. We have, however definite proof that Father Brunet, missionary, from the Little Nation Base and Father Cannon, curate at Bytown received definite orders in 1836 to visit LaPasse and Fort Coulonge. At intervals afterwards other priests administered to the colonists along the River, this far, until 1840. With the coming then of Fathers Amyot and Trudeau sent by Bishop Bourget of Montreal the actual organization of the Ottawa Valley in things spiritual began.

With the march of the years it came about that a priest was stationed on the nearby island of Calumet. LaPasse was then served from there. At first catechism was taught, children baptized and Mass celebrated in the home of Edward Lacroix. Later a log house built on the present church site served as a chapel and presbytery. This was quite close to the river crossing which in those days was called Gower Point.

The First entry in the Parish Register was made in November 1851. This indicates that the parish was erected in that year. The pastor’s name was Father Ouellet. He stayed seven years and was replaced by Father de Saunjhac who remained six years. Father Boucher followed for one year and was replaced by Father Ginguet who laboured for eleven years. These padres not only served LaPasse but Osceola and district on the Ontario side of the Ottawa as well as the Fort Coulonge district in Pontiac. They had to travel in the saddle, by primitive buggy or cariole, canoe or dugout. They braved the sometimes stormy waters of a great river in summertime or risked their lives on dangerous ice in Spring and Fall. The people they served were scattered through the bush and the roads were mere trails.

Today in the parish records we find that many of the pioneer family names are still extant in the parish. These names should be held in the highest respect for they represent a race of people with strong Faith, whose every act of living was an application of the Will of God. They built their homes in the primeval forest and cleared their acres tree by tree. They had to make long journeys, portage over rough terrain and carry on their backs the necessities of life or traverse the same trails to bring medical men to their sick. For several years they had scant opportunity for education. The First school in the district was built near the home of Cyril Gervais and later a Public School came into existence at the Eastern end of the hamlet. ..Thus slowly but solidly conditions improved for the pioneers and their children.

The little log church constructed in Father Ouellet’s day was still in use in 1877 when Father Rochon came to administer the parish for three years. His successor Father Matte who was there only two years managed to obtain a new bell which was blessed November Fourteenth 1881. This same bell still chimes the Angelus and the hours of service, no longer from the log chapel, but from the stone Church that was subsequently constructed.

- Note: When the Church was built, a bell, manufactured in 1881 by Monetroy & Co. N.Y. was also installed. During a special liturgy, this bell was christened and given the name "Marie-Louise".
- In 2000, an electronic bell was installed to replace the old bell.

Father LeMoyne who succeeded Father Matte took on the responsibility of the new edifice in stone. The work began in 1884 but sixteen years later the building was not completed interiorly. Father felt and used to say that building a religious character amongst his people was far more important than putting the finishing touches to the church.

A few of the older parishioners, some years ago, spoke to me in glowing terms of Father LeMoyne. He had such love for the poor, the sick and afflicted. His zeal to instruct the young was legendary. He always carried a catechism with him. Wherever he met a child he would question him from this catechism and the right answer always brought a reward in candy. The men of the parish who had to work seasonally in the woods were not neglected. In many journeys in this difficult ministry he brought the consolations of religion to his men and others working long months in the lumber camps. In short Father LeMoyne's sojourn in LaPasse was marked with zeal, saintliness and learning.

Father Renaud coming from Wylie in November 1900 finished the interior walls of the church and renewed the pews. He remained only two years, was followed by Father Michaud for one year until the arrival of Father Henri Martel from Bonfield.

The presbytery and the first Separate School (1914) at LaPasse as well as the First Catholic Church in Westmeath were erected under Father Martel's leadership. His ministry lasted fifteen years and was terminated by his appointment to the parent Church of Calumet Island. Father John Bourke, curate at Mattawa, donned the pastor's mantle in 1918.

The sacristy at LaPasse was enlarged and the church redecorated in 1926. A second parochial school which also served as a parish hall was constructed, in 1934 just across the road from the church. Later the cemetery was plotted, landscaped and secured for permanent maintenance.

Westmeath also experienced an important change. The brick church in use since 1912 burned down (1930). The community rink was then utilized for Sunday services until a suitable place of worship could be provided. Father Bourke signed a contract with M. Sullivan Construction Co. of Arnrior who erected a spacious and well appointed church on a site nearer to the LaPasse Road. A building formerly occupied by a bank on these grounds was used for the social activities of the parish as well as the office of a Credit Union in Later years.

Six miles of road is the distance between the churches. It was Father Bourke's custom to binate between the two and otherwise divide his time in this dual parish. Towards the close of his twenty-two year service the good priest seemed to work with a premonition of the approaching end. He gave the finishing touches to many things and chief among these was a complete index of all entries in the parish registers. In 1946 Father Bourke passed to his reward after a painful period of suffering borne with admirable fortitude. The remains were interred in the parish cemetery.

His Excellency Bishop Nelligan appointed Rev. Joseph Lawrence Ennis, who had been an assistant in several places, to pastorate in Father Bourke's place. The new incumbent who had already earned his laurels as a director of youth, an organizer of note and a zealous pious priest soon set in motion the wheels of progress. A new Separate School Section was organized and a handsome and modern school erected to accommodate the children of Bromley Line, LaPasse Road and the Bay.

A side altar purchased from Saint Matthew's Church of Madawaska was placed in Westmeath church in dedication to the Blessed Virgin. Power lines after much negotiation and organization were introduced to LaPasse. The homes and buildings of the parishioners, the church, rectory and schools all received the benefits of power and light. Then the redecoration of the interior of the church was begun...But Providence had other designs. Father Ennis died suddenly of a heart attack while visiting with a brother priest Father

O'Brien the parish priest then of Stonecliffe. After funeral services at LaPasse the body was conveyed to Pembroke and interment was made in the Pembroke Catholic Cemetery.

Father McKennirey pastor of Temiskaming then received the appointment to LaPasse. He remained in charge for two years but was obliged to retire from the parish because of illness. Rev. A.J. Maika, pastor of Portage du Fort, succeeded in this parochial charge.

The school and parish hall building erected in Father Bourke's time, during Father Maika's term of leadership was remodeled and enlarged to serve only as a school. The old school was then refitted as a Hall. The church also received renovation by the installation of a modern heating system and the completion of redecoration. These were but a few of the material changes during Father Maika's incumbency of eight years. Parish societies also flourished bringing a new interest to things spiritual in this pastorate. On the death of Monsignor Biermacki of Barry's Bay, Father Maika was transferred to Saint Hedwig's (1959) as pastor of his natal parish. Rev. T.R. O'Connor assistant at the Cathedral in Pembroke was appointed successor.

Father O'Connor with some twenty years experience in the ministry was born and received his primary education in Quebec City. His excellent knowledge of French admirably fits him for his duties in a bilingual parish.

Many of the originals through their descendants although far afield still hold a strong connection with the home parish. Worldly success has not weakened the tie. Of these we mention a few: Gilbert Labine of uranium and mining fame was proud to proclaim his origin hereabouts. Laderoute the Westmeath opera singer visits his home parish from time to time. A Bishop Molloy of Covington, Kentucky, enquired after his relatives on several occasions and the renowned Count duManoir founded a home here and raised his family. There are religious vocations also now in the ranks of the clergy and Sisterhoods.

It was indeed a very fortunate settlement pioneered as it was at such a vantage point on the greatest Highway of Destiny in our Diocese. In closing this chronicle of LaPasse and Westmeath I would like therefore to paraphrase a history note found in the registers and say: That the North Eastern frontier of Renfrew County affords a fresco depicting on the walls of Time a Century of Sacerdotal devotion in the midst of a spiritual fastness. We have witnessed an impressive procession of missionary and diocesan priests who, like the pyramid builders of ancient times came from far and near, each with his builder's stone, each priest arrived and placed his precious contribution on the ever rising monument of Faith amongst a steadfast congregation.