

Franco-Americans and the US-Canadian border

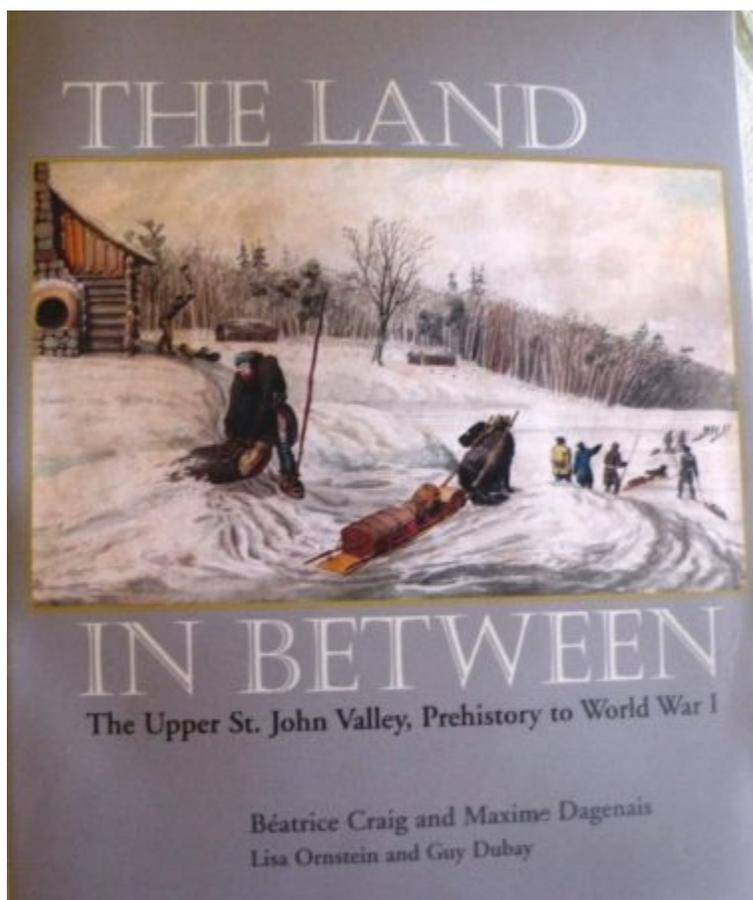
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By Juliana L'Heureux

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There was a time when there was no border.

U.S.- CANADA- I've heard from two Franco-Americans who are personally impacted by the temporary closing of the US border with Canada, because of the coronavirus. One is an American citizen who is a native of Grand Isle, Maine and now living in, New Brunswick, Canada. The other is a native of the Province of Quebec who lives in Lewiston, Maine.



“What is Madawaska?”, historic perspective in “The Land In Between: The Upper St. John Valley, Prehistory to World War I”, by Beatrice Craig and Maxime Dagenais with Lisa Ornstein and Guy Dubay.

“My family and I are doing well despite everything. We’re feeling the distance though, what with the border being closed and many we love on the other side...,” said Jacynthe Jacques, a Franco-Americana who lives in Lewiston. As matter of fact, she also sent me this uplifting rainbow campaign now going on in Montreal. Residents are painting rainbows on their window panes with the message, “ça va bien allé” (going well).

Don Levesque is a Grand Isle, Maine native who lives in New Brunswick. “The obvious consequence is, of course, not being able to visit family a l’autre côté of the St. John River. Although there are several ways for us to telecommunicate, there are ‘apps’ for almost anything, but none to help with isolation. This is probably the hardest to deal with and difficult to delay, a visit with beloved family, who are so near and yet far away.”

Indeed, the US-Canadian border closing announced by both nations to prevent the spread of the pandemic coronavirus is reported by CNN to be like nothing we have ever seen in the history of the two nations. “Canadian-US border closing is unlike anything we’ve seen before,” said Michael Bociurkiw in a CNN opinion column. “In fact, the unprecedented closure, even though it allows wide exemptions for groups like seasonal workers, is the most far-reaching travel restriction in terms of geography covered — 8,891 kilometers (5,525 miles) — put into place in North America since the coronavirus outbreak reached our common shores.”



Neither American or Canadian is The Land In Between divided by the St. John River.

Of course, there was a time when there was no border, at all, between Maine and Canada. Even when the border was resolved with the Webster-Ashburton Treaty of 1842, the people continued with family reunions and more or less business as usual, as though the dividing line along the St. John River did not exist. Only about 20 years ago, I routinely heard stories from Aroostook County about how children enjoyed playing, during the late summer, along the St. John River and, in shallow places, they crossed merrily back and forth without a care about violating international security. But, that was then.

Just after the middle of the eighteenth century, a small group of Acadians escaped deportation at the hands of the English (from Acadia, what is now Nova Scotia). This small group made a temporary settlement on the St. John River, a short distance above Fredericton (now New Brunswick Canada).

In the following year they pushed up the river and settled along the banks of the upper St. John, where they were joined by other Acadians from New Brunswick, Maine, and Massachusetts.

In the days without a border, the area along the St. John River was called the Madawaska territory. "What is 'Madawaska'", is described in "*The Land In Between: The Upper St. John Valley Pre-History to World War I*" by Beatrice Craig and Maxime Degenais with Lisa Ornstein and Guy Dubay.

"Present day maps depicting Maine and north-western New Brunswick show a Madawaska County in New Brunswick and, in Maine, the "Little Madawaska River", "Madawaska Lake" and the town of Madawaska. So, where does the term "Madawaska Territory" come from"? In the early 19th century, the New Brunswick government defined the Madawaska territory as the unorganized area along the St. John River, without precise boundaries. The Madawaska territory was largely occupied by French settlers on the upper St. John River and grew as their settlement spread. Eventually, the three entities in this area were defined as Maine, New Brunswick and Quebec. Therefore, Madawaska territory is neither a political or administrative unit nor a geographic region. Instead, it is a socio-cultural entity whose distinctive identity was forged by its inhabitants, something that regional history writer Prudent Mercure noted as the territory that included all the settlements on both banks of the St. John River.

Many of the descendants who are related to the original settlers in the Madawaska region are today's residents of the St. John Valley, living on both sides of the border. They have enjoyed generations of family contentedness and common family stories. At some point, the coronavirus pandemic will subside. We can only hope and pray that the international boundary will reopen and, at that time, when the Madawaska region and the people who live there can host one enormous family reunion!

Here are a few links related to this blog report:

Neither American or Canadian: the Republic of Madawaska by James F. Morgan

Town of Madawaska Maine

History of Madawaska Territory

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