

2015

## Fraser Paper: Origins and Local Acadian Culture

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### Recommended Citation

Hillard, Michael G. PhD, "Fraser Paper: Origins and Local Acadian Culture" (2015). *Fraser Paper Company*.  
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# Fraser Paper: Origins and Local Acadian Culture

Michael G. Hillard, Ph.D.

Fraser Paper Company, located in Madawaska, Maine and Edmundston, New Brunswick, was founded in 1917. It was built and operated for several generations by the descendants of Scottish immigrants from the Fraser, Matheson and Brebner families, who immigrated to Canada from Scotland in the mid 19th century, and came together in the ensuing decades to build a lumber empire. The previous Frasier Company consisted of numerous logging camps and sawmills in New Brunswick and eastern Quebec built in the late 19th century. Subsequently, the founders decided to expand into more lucrative paper manufacturing. These original owners were self-made captains of industry in lumber production, quickly built a professional staff with backgrounds in paper engineering, sales and marketing, and research and development to manage facilities and sales forces, and to set investment strategy.

As the case with most paper mills of the era, Fraser was located on a major river, in this case, the St. John River that forms the northern and eastern border between Maine and Canada. The river provided access to power, pulpwood, and the rivers and watersheds that delivered pulpwood to the mill. From its inception, it was the Saint John Valley's largest employer, with over 2000 employees in the Madawaska paper mill and its sister pulp mill located directly across the St. John in Edmundston. The mill's location was in many ways ideal. Fraser already had major offices in Edmundston. Madawaska and the nearby population offered a large captive local workforce with a hardy farmer-artisan work ethic and tradition, along with ample forests and a major river. An unusual feature of the mill was location of the pulp mill in Canada, from which has pumped the essential processed input of treated wood fibers through enormous conduits across the Saint John River to the Maine paper production complex since the Madawaska paper plant was completed. Fraser could export pulp duty-free to its Maine mill that, combined with the weak Canadian dollar, giving the company a huge competitive advantage over U.S.-based mills in U.S. markets; the dollar differential often amounted to a 40 percent discount on pulp costs. The Madawaska paper mill could then produce and ship high quality specialty papers by rail to northeastern U.S. printing and publishing markets with the benefit this enormous cost advantage. In its earliest years, the company secured lucrative, long term contracts to supply huge quantities of catalog paper to Sears, Roebuck, Company and Western Electric. Focusing on high-end specialty papers and eschewing the commodity newsprint business shielded Fraser from devastating Canadian competition in newsprint that plagued the U.S. industry after 1910. Like many mills in Maine, Fraser a reputation for being technologically progressive, aggressive in its capital investments, and well managed.

The interviews focus on two themes. One is the distinct heritage and character of Fraser's workers. Madawaska and Edmundston are part of the "Upper St. John Valley," a 70-mile stretch of Maine's northernmost border. Eighty-five families of French Acadian heritage founded "The Valley" in 1785. Since then, Valley denizens built a distinctive Francophone culture defined by locals' tight knit community life centered on Catholic religion and as descendants of the Acadian diaspora from Nova Scotia in the early 1850s. Valley Acadians were a cross border community from its inception through the 21st century, and their distinctive French dialect was the first language of American Valley residents who were also fluent in English. French speech continued to be their language of choice into the late 20th century. While they intermarried with non-Acadians French Canadians in the 19th and 20th century, locals continued to self-identify as Acadians who suffered oppression at the hands of various "English" groups from the time of the diaspora through twentieth century encounters with Maine's English-speaking population. A signal event was a 1919 law forbidding the speaking of French in Maine's schools. For local Acadians, this opened a lengthy chapter of subjugation by Maine state authorities that framed life in Madawaska and other U.S. towns along the Valley. In addition, the Canadian Anglos who comprised Fraser's middle and upper management brought this cultural and language intolerance into the heart of the Valley's largest employer. For instance, virtually no managers from the top down to supervisors were local Acadians, and mill business was conducted only in English. Thus, Fraser's labor relations came to be defined in part by an "English/French" divide.

The second theme is a dramatic 11-week strike that took place between July and September of 1971. The strike culminated in massive civil disobedience that stopped Fraser managers from moving 27 freight train cars full of in early August of that year; if Fraser had succeeded in shipping this "Mountain" of paper (the term used by the company in a brazen advertisement in the local paper announcing their plans), the mill's four union locals would have certainly lost the strike. Strikers immediately began to physically block the train tracks over for four days. As this confrontation evolved, strikers ripped up train tracks at night and then brought children, wives, and pets to the mill to lie on train tracks preventing the train from leaving the mill. Protesters rioted when Maine state police and county sheriff officers tear-gassed them on the morning of August 9. Strikers destroyed a train engine, several police cars, and injured a number of the troopers.

The road to the strike began in 1968, when Fraser brought in a new set of managers from turn around the company's financial fortunes after several years of low profits and hostile takeover threats. This new group was led by the hard-charging John "Pete" Heuer, formerly an executive at Great Northern Paper (GNP), who gambled on a huge capital expansion in hopes of leapfrogging its competition and restoring sufficient profitability to keep the company independent.

According to interviews and archival sources, Heuer introduced a harsher management approach, and pushed to reorganize work after first extracting major pay concessions in 1968. The mill's unions agreed to concessions in exchange for the promise of huge increase in hiring to staff the larger facilities. Heuer's team reneged on the promise to increase employment, pushed additional work on employees, and introduced a hostile atmosphere that led to the 1971 strike, foreshadowed by a spontaneous walkout that shut down the mill for a week in fall 1970.

The strike was later ended thanks in part to direct mediation by then Governor Kenneth Curtis, who immediately withdrew the police after the August 9 confrontation. The strike saw little initial gain for either the mill's unionized workers or Heuer's management, but it cost the company dearly in lost sales and profits; Heuer and many of his managers were replaced just months after the strike ended, and Heuer died only several months after being let go. However, later management was more respectful of the mill's Acadian workers, and the mill's unions won strong contracts in the ensuing 15 years that participants see as a direct consequence of their 1971 militancy. The strike also coincided with, and likely gave some impetus to a revival of Acadian memory and language that has flourished in the decades since the strike.

Dr. Michael Hillard, this site's creator, is nearing completion of a one-hour radio documentary on this story called "Acadian Rebellion." Its expected airdate as a radio documentary will be later in 2016, at which time it will become available as a podcast on this site. Dr. Hillard's *Fall of the Paper Plantation* has a chapter on the strike as well.