Post Office Names and the History of French Settlements in Ontario[1]

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The purpose of this article is to underline the importance of post office names in the study of Canadian toponymy in general and more specifically in the field of the names of French-speaking settlements in Ontario. It will also serve to illustrate the claim by Lacoursière[2] that one of the major differences between North American and European toponymy is that the mechanisms of place-name evolution are much easier to observe and analyze here in North America where our relatively recent history often provides the onomastician with first hand documentation allowing a more thorough and detailed study of place-name origin and evolution.

In his recent book on the French element in Ontario, historian Robert Choquette[3] points out that around the mid-XIXth century began an important migratory movement from the province of Québec into the eastern part of Ontario. These were mostly farmers in search for better land for agriculture and laborers attracted by higher wages paid in Ontario's booming lumber industry. At the end of the century, another wave of Québec immigrants came to join in the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway then pushing its way through the Upper Ottawa Valley and going west towards Lake Superior. Many remained in the area and took up lands for farming. Finally, Canada's second transcontinental railway in the northern part of the province opened the way to a third wave of settlers from Québec in the first quarter of this century. Federal statistics show that the French-speaking population of Ontario has until very recently grown at a steady rate: 14,000 in 1842, close to 103,000 forty years later, a little over 248,000 in 1921 and more than 648,000 in 1961, representing

[2]Luc Lacoursière, *Toponymie canadienne*, in Société du parler français au Canada (ed.) *Etudes sur le parler franqis au Canada* (Québec: Presses de l'Université Laval, 1955), pp. 199–200.

[3]Robert Choquette, *L'Ontario français, historique* (Montréal: Etudes vivantes, 1980).

10.4% of the total population of the province. Since then, federal census satistics show a slight decline, yet Franco-Ontarians still constitute today Canada's most important French-speaking minority outside Québec.

Onomastic evidence of these settlements has only recently begun to be thoroughly investigated.[4] My own research in this field has concentrated mostly on official place-names, while names of geographical features remain to be studied. The Ontario Geographic Names Board (OGNB) and the Canadian Permanent Committee on Geographical Names (CPCGN) have approved the names of more than 50 inhabited places which are due to the Franco-Ontarian stratum of the population. In studying the origin and evolution of these place-names, I have relied primarily on official records, archives, maps and actual field work. My research has been greatly facilitated by the use of the post office file cards at the National Postal Museum in Ottawa. These cards not only provide firsthand information on the origin of certain place-names but also combine the input of personal names and place-names to help understand some of the mechanisms of place-name change.

The Canadian Post Office Department maintains several types of records on all post offices in the country. Among these are the name cards which give the official name of the post office, the date of its opening, the names of all postmasters with their years of service along with any information concerning name change. When a post office is closed or its original name changed to a new one, the date of closing or inauguration of the new name is inscribed on the card and the defunct name cards are then sent to the National Postal Museum where they are kept for reference and research purposes.

Since officializing bodies such as OGNB and CPCGN rely heavily on local usage in decision-making regarding toponyms, it is fair to assume that when officialization does take place, it actually confirms a state of affairs which is the result of many years of established usage, the origin of which sometimes escapes us. And since officialization only began in Canada at the turn of the century when many localities were already established with their post offices, it could very well be that the name of the post office was in fact the first official recognition of the name of many of these localities.

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[4]In studying French toponymy in Ontario, one must not confuse these more recent Franco-Ontarian names with earlier ones dating back to the XVIIth and XVIIIth centuries when Ontario was in fact the western part of New France. Part of this better known heritage of the French Regime in Canada has been recently investigated by Alan H. Hartley, ''The Expansion of Ojibway and French Place-Names into the Lake Superior Region in the Seventeenth Century,'' *Names* 28 (1960), 43–68. See also my book *Toponymie française en Ontario* (Montreal: Etudes vivantes, 1981), p. 120.

One must bear in mind the fact that most of the Franco-Ontarian localities were rural and that post offices located in stores and isolated dwellings in the country were quite common at the end of the XIXth century. In fact, their number seems to have been widespread especially in Prescott & Russell counties in Eastern Ontario and in the Sudbury region in the north. Introduction of rural mail delivery around 1907 and its generalization after World War I brought about the closing of the smaller and less important offices, and consequently the names of these post offices were condemned to disappear in due time. Not all did. Several were transferred to the localities they served and were later on officialized as compact or dispersed rural communities. Others, however, did in fact disappear completely, and the only record of their existence is to be found in the records of the National Postal Museum. One can therefore easily understand the onomastic value of these records.

Over thirty such names have been located, and an examination of their linguistic features shows that they fell into the same onomastic categories as present day Franco-Ontarian toponyms, i.e., that they are mostly commemorative or dedicatory by nature. Most are derived from the family or Christian name of the settlement founder or some other prominent figure in the community. Since the record cards also provide the names of postmasters, the origin of some names can clearly be traced back to the first postmaster of the settlement as in the following examples:[5]

Post Office Name	First Postmaster	Date Office opened
FALARDEAU	Rev. J.P.M. Falardeau	1.7.1915
HURTIBISE	E.N. Hurtibise	1.2.1890
LAPRAIRIEVILLE	O. Laprairie	1.7.1908
LIMOGES	Alfred Limoges	22.5.1907
RÉGNIER	F. Régnier	1.3.1913
ST-ONGE	Cyril St-Onge	1.7.1886

In some cases, the names give clues as to the type of occupation of the settlers, such as the timber industry for example:

Post Office Name	First Postmaster	Date Office opened
ALLARD MILL	Azarie Allard	25.7.1926
BENOÎT'S MILL	Ed. Benoît	1.9.1888

In other cases, the study of the data provided by the Museum cards brings about clarification of certain etymologies. Such is the case of the name

AZILDA in northern Ontario. It has been written that AZILDA was the Christian name of Mrs. Azilda Bélanger, wife of a Canadian Pacific Railway employee who arrived in the area around 1882.[6] For reasons that are not mentioned, it appears that the local people grew fond of Mrs. Bélanger and requested that the post office bear her name. Since they were mostly of Roman Catholic faith, they followed a well-established practice in French-Canadian toponymy and named the post office ST. AZILDA. When it was discovered several years later that no such saint existed, the name was changed to the more modest name AZILDA. The Museum card for ST. AZILDA not only confirms this etymology but also documents it down to the last detail, giving specific dates of all changes from the beginning to the present day form:

ST. AZILDA

Office opened:	1.6.1891
Name changed to RAYSIDE STATION	1.6.1900
Name changed to ST. AZILDA	1.9.1901
Name changed to AZILDA	1.12.1901

Records of defunct names not only help solve etymological problems, but they present new ones also. A case at point is the name LE FOULON which designated a post office located in Eastern Ontario near the Québec border in the mid-1800's. The French word "foulon" refers to a worker whose occupation is to full cloth in order to make it more resistant. It is present in at least 10 toponyms in Québec today,[7] but its presence in mid-XIXth century Ontario is somewhat enigmatic. Throughout its short existence from 1851 to 1855 and again from 1857 to 1862, the Museum cards show that this post office had only two postmasters whose family names were clearly not of French origin: Archibald McKinnon and William Jamieson. The post office was permanently closed on December 1, 1862. If LE FOULON was not a French settlement, how is one to interpret the choice of a French name? If the settlement was French, how far back does the name go and what is its origin?

Even more puzzling is the presence of the medieval French word *mesnil* "country house" in the name LES MESNULS.[8] This post office operated under the name for only one month in the Muskoka district of Northern Ontario. Although the Museum card data suggests that the name was short

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[6]Nick and Helma Mika, *Places in Ontario: Their Name Origins and History*, Part I, A-E (Belleville: Mika Publishing Company, 1977), p. 117.

[7]Gouvernement du Québec, Commission de toponymie, *Répertoire toponymique du Québec*, Quebec, 1978.

[8]The spelling MESNULS instead of MESNILS appears to be an orthographic error.

lived, one still wonders today how a word that Antoine Furetière's 1690 *Dictionnaire universel* claims was already obsolete in XVIIth century French[9] managed to resurface in Northern Ontario at the end of the XIXth century. If the name was brought in this area by French-Canadian settlers, then this could be a fine onomastic illustration of the archaic nature of the lexicon of popular French-Canadian speech, the word *mesnil* being widespread in the dialects of northeastern France, especially in Normandy, a province from which many settlers came to Canada in the XVIIth and XVIIIth centuries.

Perhaps the most interesting and rewarding aspect of working with the National Postal Museum name cards is the evidence they provide to document name change in Ontario: historical data and historic evidence combine to give a global appreciation of the manner in which Franco-Ontarian names gradually replaced Anglo-Saxon or Amerindian post office names, a process which began as early as 1881. The following are the most important changes, spread over a period of 80 years:

Original Name	Franco-Ontarian Name
GREVY (1880)	ROUTHIER (1881)
KERRY (1863)	ST-ISIDORE (1882)
BEAVER (1880)	STE-ANNE (1885)
MACKEY'S MILLS (1883)	EAU CLAIRE (1885)
RAINY RIVER (1885)	BOUCHERVILLE (1899)
GRIT (1900)	CORBEIL (1903)
NOSBONSING (1902)	ASTORVILLE (1904)
GOWER POINT (1852)	LA PASSE (1906)
THE LAKE (1886)	ST-PASCAL BAYLON (1909)
MARTLAND (1910)	CHARTRAND CORNER (1910)
COSBY (1904)	NOËLVILLE (1911)
DOVER SOUTH (1860)	PAINCOURT (1911)
CAIPHA (1918)	LAFOREST (1919)
NUSHKA STATION (1911)	VAL GAGNÉ (1920)
STAVERT (1915)	JOGUES (1922)
STONEY POINT (1905)	POINTE-AUX-ROCHES (1923)
SECORD (1923)	VAL RITA (1924)
SOUTH INDIAN (1883)	LIMOGES (1926)
KITIGAN (1918)	PAQUETTEBOURG (1927)
WILLIAMSON (1928)	LEPAGE (1934)
HALLEWOOD (1922)	HALLÉBOURG (1935)
ROSE CORNER (1905)	STE-ROSE-DE-PRESCOTT (1944)
MAGPIE MINE (1954)	DUBREUILVILLE (1961)

[9]See also Frédéric Godefroy, *Dictionnaire de l'ancienne langue française*, Tome V, Paris 1888, New York 1961, Kraus Reprint Corporation, p. 296b; Paul Robert, *Dictionnaire alphabétique et analogique de la langue française*, Tome IV (Paris: Société du nouveau Littre, 1972), p. 360a.

With the exception of BOUCHERVILLE and PAQUETTEBOURG, all these post office names were later on transfered to the localities they served and officialized as compact or dispersed rural communities. Another interesting aspect is the way personal names—those of the postmasters—combine with those of the post office in providing clues that help us better understand name changes. Let us consider the case of KERRY. Historians[10] have established that the first settlers here were of Scottish descent and arrived in the area around 1840. In the years 1860 to 1870 they began to move slowly to the west at about the same time French-speaking settlers from Québec began to arrive. By 1879 the Francophone population was sufficiently important to warrant the establishment of a parish which took the name of ST-ISIDORE. Three years later, the English post office name KERRY was dropped and replaced by that of the parish. A careful examination of the data provided by the National Postal Museum card for KERRY gives plenty onomastic evidence of these changes:

KERRY

Office opened	1.2.1863	
Name changed to ST-ISIDORE	1.5.1882	
Postmasters: A. S. McLennan	1.2.1863	to 8.7.1864
Robert Cross	1.10.1864	16.1.1867
William Brodie	1.4.1867	17.12.1869
Magloire Parent	1.1.1871	28.11.1873
Louisa Parent	1.6.1874	1.5.1882

From 1863 to 1869, the names are Anglo-Saxon, but their origin changes in 1870 with Magloire Parent. Postmasters' names have been mostly French ever since, and the village of ST-ISIDORE is today one of the best examples of a Franco-Ontarian rural community.

The same type of evidence is to be found in the case of the name SOUTH INDIAN where, once again, the original settlers were English speaking. The name refers to the south branch of the Indian River which flows nearby the village. In studying the Museum card for SOUTH INDIAN, one can see that the names of postmasters shift from English to French at about the same time the French speaking element became dominant in the community, bringing about, at the same time, the change from SOUTH INDIAN to LIMOGES, in honour of the Reverend Honoré

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[10]See Lucien Brault, *Histoire des Comtés Unis de Prescott et de Russell*, L'Orignal, Conseil des Comtés Unis, 1965, pp. 256–266; also Hector Legros and Soeur Paul-Emile, *Le diocèse d'Ottawa 1847–1948* (Ottawa: Le Droit, 1949), pp. 293–296.

Limoges, parish priest of the Saint-Viateur church in the village from 1913 to 1921:

SOUTH INDIAN

Office opened:		1.1.1883	
Name changed to LIMOGES		1.12.1926	
Postmasters:	D. B. McDonell	1.1.1883	to 17.3.1898
	J. K. Meredith	2.5.1898	3.12.1900
	Morris Shaver	21.1.1901	25.10.1904
	Peter Stewart	1.12.1904	18.9.1911
	Pierre Gagné	2.10.1911	20.6.1914
	Alfred J. Léveillé	24.6.1914	6.10.1947

Of course, this type of personal name data is to be interpreted with caution, since the language to which the name belongs does not always correspond to the mother tongue of the bearer of the name. However, the presence of several names of identical linguistic origin combined with historical data can indeed help to document a name change.

Not only do post office names help us understand the origin of place-names, they may also be a key element in the preservation of place-names. It would appear that the closing of a post office in a community almost invariably means the first step towards place-name extinction. The introduction of rural mail delivery mentioned above is a good example of this phenomenon. Consider the following post office names of French origin which fell victims to this type of postal modernization:

Name of Post Office	*Year Office closed*
ASTORVILLE	1936
BENOÎT	1917
BONINVILLE	1935
BORROMÉE	1915
BRISSON	1918
CHARTRAND	1941
GAGNON	1931
GRATTON CORNER	1916
LADÉROUTE	1915
LAFONTAINE	1931
LEFAIVE'S CORNER	1936
MAYERVILLE	1915
NOTRE-DAME-DU-LAC	1928
OUELLETTE	1939
PAQUETTE STATION	1947
PERRAULT	1967
PILETTE CORNERS	1914
PROULX	1916

RÉGNIER	1915
RHÉAULT	1953
ROUTHIER	1931
ST-AMOUR	1928
ST-FÉLIX	1928
ST-THOMAS D'ALFRED	1917
SÉNÉCAL	1915
VAL FRANC	1918
VAL NATION	1916

The closing of these post offices in the cases of LADÉROUTE, PI-LETTE CORNERS, RÉGNIER and VAL NATION has brought about complete extinction of the name. BORROMÉE, CHARTRAND, ST-FÉLIX and VAL FRANC are listed in the Ontario Gazetteer[11] as rescinded names usually designated abandoned places. Most of the other names still appear in the Gazetteer as dispersed rural communities, but actual field work has shown that many of these communities are so dispersed that their status as populated places can seriously be challenged. In two cases, those of NOTRE-DAME-DU-LAC and BONINVILLE, young local informants had never heard of the name while middle-aged persons had heard of them but were unable to say where the place was today, and few elderly informants actually remembered where the place was in the past. One can readily see that with the extinction of these names, a significant portion of the French toponymic heritage of Ontario has begun to disappear, making it more difficult to assess the true extensiveness of Franco-Ontarian toponymy especially from a diachronic point of view.

The file cards of the National Postal Museum in Ottawa are therefore of paramount importance in toponymic research. In the case of French settlements in Ontario, they have been instrumental in documenting more rigorously place-name origin and change, but one can see that these advantages can be extended to Canadian toponymic studies in general. From a methodological point of view, they are a precious source of information the name scholar cannot afford to ignore.

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[11]Canadian Permanent Committee on Geographical Names, *Gazetteer of Canada: Ontario* (Ottawa: Surveys and Mapping Branch, Department of Energy, Mines and Resources, 1974). A *Cumulative Supplement* was published in 1977. No other edition has appeared since.