

Articles

Father Louis Pierre Gravel and the Settlement of the Gravelbourg Area

by Beckey Hamilton

On June 26, 1907, Philippe Michaud wrote to Father Louis Pierre Gravel, a French-Canadian Catholic priest who was founding a new colony in southwestern Saskatchewan:

When I met you on June 4th I gave you commission to take two homesteads one for my mother and the other for my brother. You would do me a great favour if you took 8 other homesteads. It would be desirable if the one closest to mother's would be for Oliva Beaulieu is located on Tp. 10 Rg. 5 sec. 22 ¼ S.E. who is an orphan without means and who is mother's grandson I will pay you the cost for him. The names of the two others are Leon Gregaire, Zide Odet who are Catholics and Canadiens it is for this reason that mother would like to be near them and if we might have the right to a preemption, mother and my brother would like one as close as possible to their homesteads and also please tell me if someone who cannot take a homestead has right to a preemption or if they go to someone could displace them. I would like a definite response Gregaire. As for the money that will be due if you take the land I have requested tell me, when you will need the money and I will send it let me know about all that I have asked. I am planning to go and build on mother's land if you take it this fall.

This encounter and letter to the priest started this family's move to the Gravelbourg area.

However, Philippe Michaud's letter also contained an unusual request as he offered payment and asked Father Gravel to reserve land for him, several family members and others. Such involvement in this area's early development, sometimes mentioned in pioneer recollections, but never fully discussed in later work, later became contentious. Beyond reserving land for a fee,¹ some have suggested that Father Gravel and his brother effectively controlled who settled in the colony: if settlers arrived whom they did not like, they saw to it that their land was cancelled and someone else took it.²

Furthermore, Father Gravel has been credited with attracting thousands of Francophones, like this family, to Gravelbourg and to the surrounding areas.³ In this way, it has been said, that Gravel, like other Francophone priests, played an important role in settling Francophones in western Canada.⁴ However, the extent of his involvement has been questioned. While some pioneer recollections mention him, others do not. In fact, some specifically state that no priest was involved.⁵ Other studies have also concluded that Catholic priests were less important in the Francophone movement to western Canada than has been assumed. Their authors have contended that chain migration was key to Francophone settlement.⁶ This article examines Father Louis Pierre Gravel's role in the early settlement of the Gravelbourg area and attempts to place him within the context of this discussion.

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Economic Factors in French Canadian Migration from New England and Quebec

The economic situation of many French Canadians in New England and Quebec promoted emigration. During the second half of the 1800s, industrial growth in New England, and the ample jobs it created, attracted thousands of Québécois.⁷ However, factory life was very difficult. Pay was low. Work hours were long, 10-12 hours a day, six days a week. Conditions were poor: factories were noisy, hot, poorly ventilated and accidents were common.⁸ Moreover, for French Canadians, the mills offered limited possibilities of upward mobility. Only a few were able to make modest upward moves, perhaps to *contre maître*. Even in the early 1900s, some mill supervisors believed that French Canadians were incapable of holding such positions. Some others started businesses that were often frequented by their co-nationals. Although many business owners could have been described as middle class, they easily faced financial ruin in poor years.⁹ Thus, in Lewiston, Maine, one of the many centres where Franco-Americans lived, only a few had risen above the poverty line by 1900.¹⁰ Most French Canadians in Lewiston and in other Franco-American centres, lived in ghettos, known as Little Canadas. Overcrowding, old, flimsy, multi-family dwellings, poor sanitation, poor nutrition, inadequate medical care, and high death rates, often from common diseases, characterised these areas.¹¹

Changes during the late 1800s and early 1900s aggravated the situation. First, while several members of French Canadian families, children especially, had previously worked in factories, to enable the family to survive, by the turn of the century, American officials more closely enforced school attendance and minimum work-age laws.¹² Second, the influx of migrants from Poland, Portugal, Germany, Greece and Russia increased competition for jobs and held down wages.¹³ Concurrently, aided by supplies of raw cotton, iron, copper, wood and a large, cheap pool of labour, the southern states had increased the quantity and quality of their cloth production. By the early 1900s, they were strong competitors of the northeastern states.¹⁴ To compete, New England mill owners frequently sought to reduce wages. Reductions begun in the 1890s, of 8-10 percent in 1893, and another of 10-11 percent before the end of the decade, continued after 1900.¹⁵ Mill owners sought to lower salaries again in 1900, 1901 and 1903.¹⁶ The situation only worsened in 1904-1905, as commercial activity generally declined in the region, according to one article, by about 25 percent.¹⁷

By summer, many mills had closed, leaving some 50,000 people, including French Canadians, without work and, those who remained, facing a 12.5 percent wage cut or the closure of even more mills. The strikes that followed, especially in Fall River, were hard on all French Canadians, factory workers and others alike. With a backlog of cotton, and the ability to leave mills closed, owners stuck to their demands through the fall and winter. Strikers and business owners faced bankruptcy. Both soon joined the needy. Goodwill agencies exhausted their supplies. Still, the strike only ended in January 1905. Workers took the 12.5 percent pay cut, though they were to receive an additional share of the profits.¹⁸ Yet, despite these cuts, the situation did not improve. There were additional layoffs in 1907, wage reductions in 1908, and staff cuts in 1910.¹⁹

In Quebec, although the economic situation improved after the turn of the century, significant factors that pushed emigration remained. First, the land in the area that had been divided into seigniories was overcrowded.²⁰ This was the outcome of large families (Catholic couples had an average of 6.7 children) and an inheritance system based on division among multiple inheritors.²¹ Second, the fertility of land in Seigneurial areas had declined. The traditional style of farming involved limited crop rotations. Half the land was sowed to crops; the other half was left idle or used as pasture. Years of minimal fertilization had further reduced the land's fertility. Although some farmers with means had begun fertilizing and employing more extensive rotations by the turn of the century, the many with less land and fewer means continued former practices.²²

Moreover, limited, infertile land was not the only problem that many French Canadians faced. Imports of wheat from areas that were better suited to growing this crop, particularly the American West, Ontario and western Canada, had made Québécois farmers uncompetitive, even in local markets. To compete, Québécois needed to make a transition to production that was better suited to the area. Medium and large farmers readily switched to livestock, dairy and feed crops. But, the transition was nearly impossible for those with little land.²³ The undeveloped banking system only added to these farmers' difficulties: the few banks in the province lent only to the elite, not to subsistence or small farmers.²⁴ Day and seasonal labour, on farms and in forests, had typically allowed small farmers to add to their earnings and was the sole source of income for others. However, as dairy production required less labour than wheat, the transition negatively affected

the availability of day or seasonal farm employment.²⁵ Forestry had also declined because of over harvesting and the growing use of other fuels.²⁶

This situation in seigneurial areas and calls by Catholic clerics to move north,²⁷ to the Laurentians, the Ottawa Valley, to Saguenay/Lac Saint Jean, Rimouski, Gaspé and to the Eastern Townships, contributed to relocation.²⁸ However, those who left the old farm lands of Quebec and moved to the remote frontier did not fare well. Many of the colonization areas were ill-suited to farming: trees had to be cleared, soils were infertile, the growing season was short, and markets were distant. Many subsisted only if they worked in lumber camps during the fall, winter and spring. With these problems, by the late 19th century, turnover was high in Quebec's colonization districts.²⁹

On the other hand, Quebec was industrializing at the turn of the century. This process, which was stimulated by western settlement, increased demand from the United States, and the First World War, created many jobs in the province (between 1901 and 1921, the number employed in manufacturing increased from 101,600 to 125,400).³⁰ This provided alternatives for struggling farmers. Still, factory workers faced similar conditions as those in the United States. Again, work weeks were long, accidents were common, employment was often seasonal or irregular, with frequent layoffs, and pay was low. It had, in fact, declined relative to the cost of living during the early 20th century. All family members, including children, worked to make ends meet.³¹ Living conditions in working class neighbourhoods, such as the Saint Antoine and Sainte Anne wards in Montreal, were similar to those in the Little Canadas of New England.³² Finally, in the end, given the high birth rate, even city-based factories could not employ all Québécois in need of jobs. This was a significant factor in continued out-migration from Quebec.

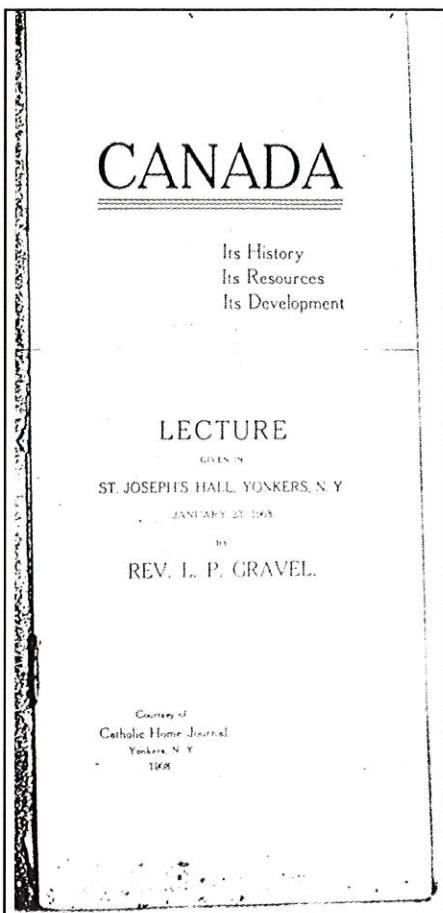
French Canadians in the Settlement of Western Canada

Conversely, at the turn of the century, settlers were much desired for western Canada. The land needed to be filled with farmers to complete Sir John A. MacDonald's national policy of economic development. Clifford Sifton and his successor, Frank Oliver, used extensive advertising campaigns to promote the West.³³ However, in the early and mid-1800s Catholic clerics, especially Archbishop Alexandre Taché, had described the West in very negative terms. They had hoped to deter English



A Statue of Father Louis Pierre Gravel in Gravelbourg
(Author's Collection)

Canadians from coming *en masse* and threatening the Métis and Francophone majority and culture in the region, but, instead, had apparently detracted French Canadians. However, by this time, French Catholics in the West did not wish their people to be left behind.³⁴ Archbishop Langevin, of Saint Boniface, Manitoba, and even Archbishop Alexandre Taché, in his later years, wanted to attract French-speaking Canadians to settle on homesteads in western Canada. Both viewed this settlement, particularly by French Canadians from New England, as a way to maintain the French-English political balance in Canada. This concern was especially significant as, for many years, British immigration to Canada and French Canadian migration to the United States had tipped the balance in favour of the English.³⁵

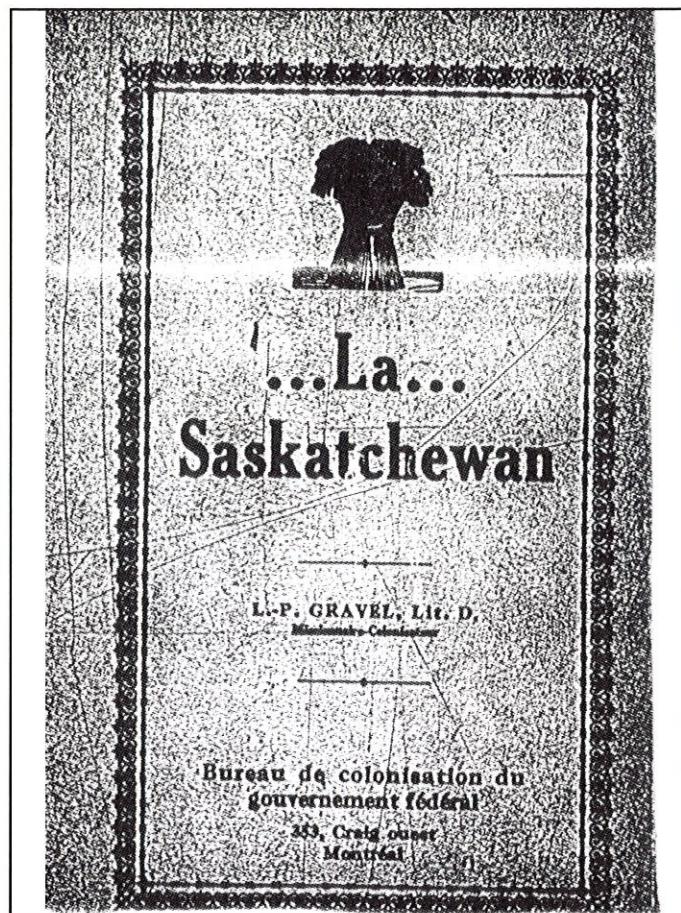


Copy of a lecture given by Father Gravel
(National Archives of Canada, RG 84, A 2-3, vol. 1419, file HS10-147, part 2)

Moreover, such settlement would contribute to *Gestae Dei per Francos*, or French-speaking Catholics' belief that God gave all people a mission; the French Canadians' mission was to spread Catholicism across the continent.³⁶ To attract Francophones to the West, they developed a system of missionary-colonizers where Catholic priests, at times paid by the government, toured and advertised for Francophone settlers.³⁷

Father Louis Pierre Gravel, Missionary Colonizer and Repatriation Agent

Father Louis Pierre Gravel was one missionary colonizer. He was born in August 1868, in Arthabaska, Quebec, to Dr. Louis-Joseph Gravel, the first medical doctor at *L'Hôtel Dieu d'Arthabaska*, and Jessie Bettez, the only daughter of another medical doctor. A privileged family, their friends included Sir Wilfrid Laurier, the future prime minister, and Joseph Lavergne.³⁸ Apparently a gifted student with leanings toward the church, Gravel entered college at Nicolet, Quebec, earning a bachelor's degree in 1888. He then pursued theological studies at the *Grand Séminaire de Montréal* and was ordained a priest in his hometown in 1892. Still, he began his



Copy of a pamphlet written by Father Gravel
(Author's Collection)

career in the parish of Saint John the Baptist, in Yonkers, New York. He served this parish for the next fourteen years, until 1906.³⁹

He had apparently impressed Archbishop Adelard Langevin from the beginning of his sacerdotal career, as an energetic priest, who was potentially suited to missionary-colonization work. In 1905, the Archbishop was visited by another priest from southwestern Saskatchewan, Father Alphonse Lemieux of Willow Bunch. During the visit, they discussed the fertile land to the west of Lemieux's parish that, they determined, would make a good area for a Francophone colony.⁴⁰ With this area in mind, in 1906, Archbishop Langevin called Father Gravel to the colonization field, hoping that he would follow other missionary colonizers and attract French Canadians to return from the United States and take homesteads in western Canada.⁴¹

Father Gravel, apparently feeling he could do more for his people as a missionary-colonizer than as a priest in New York, accepted the call.⁴² On Archbishop Langevin's recommendation, in February 1907, the Department of the Interior appointed him as an immigration agent.⁴³

Gravel quickly placed advertisements in New England newspapers and soon travelled to New York, Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Massachusetts. He often reported 15 to 120 interviews a week. To this, he added conferences and public meetings at Manchester, New Hampshire and New York, and meetings with clergy.⁴⁴ Thus, in January 1908, he wrote of attendance of 800-1000 at a conference entitled, "Canada Its History Its Resources Its Development" in New York City. Another conference in New York City was called "Canada in the 20th Century."⁴⁵

The Reaction of New England's Elite

However, while these recruiting speeches described Canada's resources and economic prosperity, they did not specifically promote homesteading in southwestern Saskatchewan. This may have been related to Franco-American opposition to recruitment for western Canada. During the late 1800s and, it appears, through the first part of the 1900s, recruiters in New England met many who sought to undermine their efforts. Franco-American newspapers carried several articles about the cultural hostility their people would encounter if they moved to western Canada. They invoked, for example, the Manitoba and Northwest school questions and the loss of the right to use French in the courts. They contrasted this hostility with Franco-Americans' situation in New England, where, it was argued, their numbers, the American Constitution and the ease of frequent return visits to Quebec would protect their culture.⁴⁶ A few newspapers, despite often reporting on prairie harvests, cautioned readers against the land in western Canada. Markets were much too distant for profitable farms. Moreover, despite the seemingly large harvests, not everyone got ahead; some of their co-nationals had returned to the States poorer for their efforts.⁴⁷ Such articles also pointed out that recruiters, who made grandiose promises, were only interested in personal profits and had no concern for the well being of those they were leading to a 'desert'.⁴⁸ Franco-American clergymen and businesspeople were also opponents. They were interested in maintaining their congregations and clients. Likewise, American land companies and others who recruited for the remaining homesteads and recently opened reserve land in the Midwest and plains States worked against repatriation.⁴⁹

Despite the opposition Father Gravel continued his efforts. His family's support of the Liberals, however, led to him being replaced in 1912, by Arthur Dubuisson, after the Conservatives came to power.⁵⁰

Still, Gravel continued recruiting, though on a smaller scale, sometimes placing newspaper advertisements. He also repeatedly asked to be returned to his former position.⁵¹ The Department of the Interior only reinstated him, as special colonization agent for the New England States in 1923, two years after voters returned the Liberals to power.⁵² Opening a colonization office in Manchester, New Hampshire, he again gave conferences, distributed brochures, and conducted interviews. Often he encouraged those with relatives at Gravelbourg to repatriate.⁵³ Yet, at this time, the possibilities for recruitment were less favourable than they had been in the early 20th century: mill workers' salaries had doubled during the First World War. They remained in the \$20-\$25 a week range until the 1930s. With board at about \$7/week, living in the area was now far more affordable.⁵⁴

Missionary-Colonization Work in Quebec

Like many missionary colonizers, Father Gravel viewed Quebec as at least as promising as New England.⁵⁵ Thus, some of his earliest tours were in Quebec. After reporting for duty in March 1907, he waited at Montreal, "for free transportation to Plessisville, Arthabaska to induce young men going to Montana to settle in western Canada." Over the next years, he frequently travelled through Quebec. As in the United States, he conducted interviews, and advertised in a few newspapers.⁵⁶

Yet here too, he, like other recruiters, faced many opponents. For years, Quebec's elite, the province's politicians, clergy and journalists, had regularly denounced moving to western Canada. They encouraged French Canadians to be humble and stay home, despite the meagre situation on many farms. If French Canadians wanted to move, they might consider a colonization area in Quebec. Moreover, although leaving Quebec was undesirable, some might choose northern Ontario, as French Canadians had already expanded there and it was adjacent to Quebec. This would allow them to retain their culture, even if they did not live in their home province or *patrie*. The West might also be considered but, at the turn of the century, the elite saw it as a distant third choice, because Francophones would face cultural persecution. This option, it was suggested, was only to be taken, as a last resort, before moving to New England. Still, articles and speeches, that denounced choosing the West, appeared less frequently during the first decade of the 1900s than during previous years. Quebec's relative prosperity during this period had cut emigration. More

certain that Quebecers would opt to stay home, some of the elite even scoffed at western recruiters.⁵⁷

Despite this opposition, like in New England, Father Gravel continued recruiting. In the end, it was ill health that forced him to restrict his activities. He passed away in 1926.⁵⁸

Chain Migration to Gravelbourg

Still, while Father Gravel attracted a few Francophones, like Philippe Michaud and his family, many appeared to come through the process of chain migration. Chain migration involves family and friends settling in a new area, then attracting friends and relatives to join them. Letters, and, at times, return visits and assistance with fares, also contributed to the establishment of migration chains. The result of this process is that in many localities settlers came from a few common areas and/or were related or acquainted.⁵⁹

In Gravelbourg, where settlers' recent residences, differed significantly from where Father Gravel toured (figures 1 and 2), birthplaces, reminiscences, and the settlement pattern (figures 3 and 4) appeared as evidence of chain migration. Most of the priest's American tours were to the New York City area, with others to Providence, Rhode Island and Bridgeport, Connecticut. Most of his time in Quebec was spent in Montreal, St. Jean, Ottawa and Plessisville. Still, as shown in the maps of recent residences, very few settlers came from these areas. Franco-Americans from New England most often came from Holyoke; Father Gravel did not leave a record of a tour through Holyoke. Those from Quebec were often from Île-des-Allumettes or Napierville. Other common recent Canadian residences included Eau Claire, Ontario, Fannystelle and Elie, Manitoba and French settlements in southeast Saskatchewan, particularly Cantal. The concentrations of birthplaces at Weedon, Napierville and Île-des-Allumettes, Quebec, with direct moves from Napierville and Île-des-Allumettes, and both direct moves and moves in steps from Weedon to Cantal, then onward to Gravelbourg, also reflects the pattern of chain migration. Most who came from Weedon were related to those who stopped at Cantal. Moreover, several recollections of the move mentioned following family. The settlement pattern in the community, involving many clusters of family, friends and people from common recent residences (likely acquaintances) further suggested that chain migration was common. Still, despite this evidence of chain migration, not all came through family, friends

and acquaintances. Some settlers' letters showed that Father Gravel was involved.⁶⁰

Moreover, there may have been factors other than Father Gravel and migration chains that influenced who settled at Gravelbourg. Many homesteaders from Quebec and New England shared characteristics that would have placed them at a disadvantage in New England. Many were young and single, married without children, or had young families. This demographic profile was common among prairie settlers. However, it may also have reflected the difficulties that French Canadians would have encountered surviving in New England at this time without children who were old enough to work and add to the family income.⁶¹

The affordability of moving west may also have been a selection factor. Farmers in Quebec generally produced less than their counterparts in Ontario: this has been taken as part of the explanation for why so few French Canadians moved west.⁶² Furthermore, for those Québécois considering leaving their home parishes, moving west was considerably more expensive than moving to New England. In 1899, rail fare from Montreal to Edmonton was \$42.30 per person. By 1927, fares had increased, to \$46.45 per person, to travel to Winnipeg. By contrast, Québécois could travel to Maine for \$14.40, with their young children travelling free. But rail fares were not the only expenses in relocating to western Canada. It has been estimated that prospective settlers needed a minimum of \$300 to \$550 to start a homestead.⁶³ Thus, many settlers with families arrived from at least small, if not medium-sized farms, rather than from the smallest "subsistence" farms.⁶⁴ Because some of these homesteaders still had non-adult children, they may have been 'selected' according to whether they could afford to make the trip. On the other hand, some single farmers' sons who, at least at the turn of the century, did not own land, were able to make the trip and in some cases, their search for a farm appeared to start the families' move.⁶⁵ Yet, the potential of a 'selection' among Québécois, of those who would move, of where they moved, and of those who would stay behind, is further substantiated by other studies that have shown that Québécois with less land, particularly those who were subsistence farmers, were common among migrants to New England.⁶⁶

Father Gravel's Further Involvement at Gravelbourg

Despite the possibility that Father Gravel was less important in attracting migrants than some have

Figure 1: Location of Father Gravel's Tours

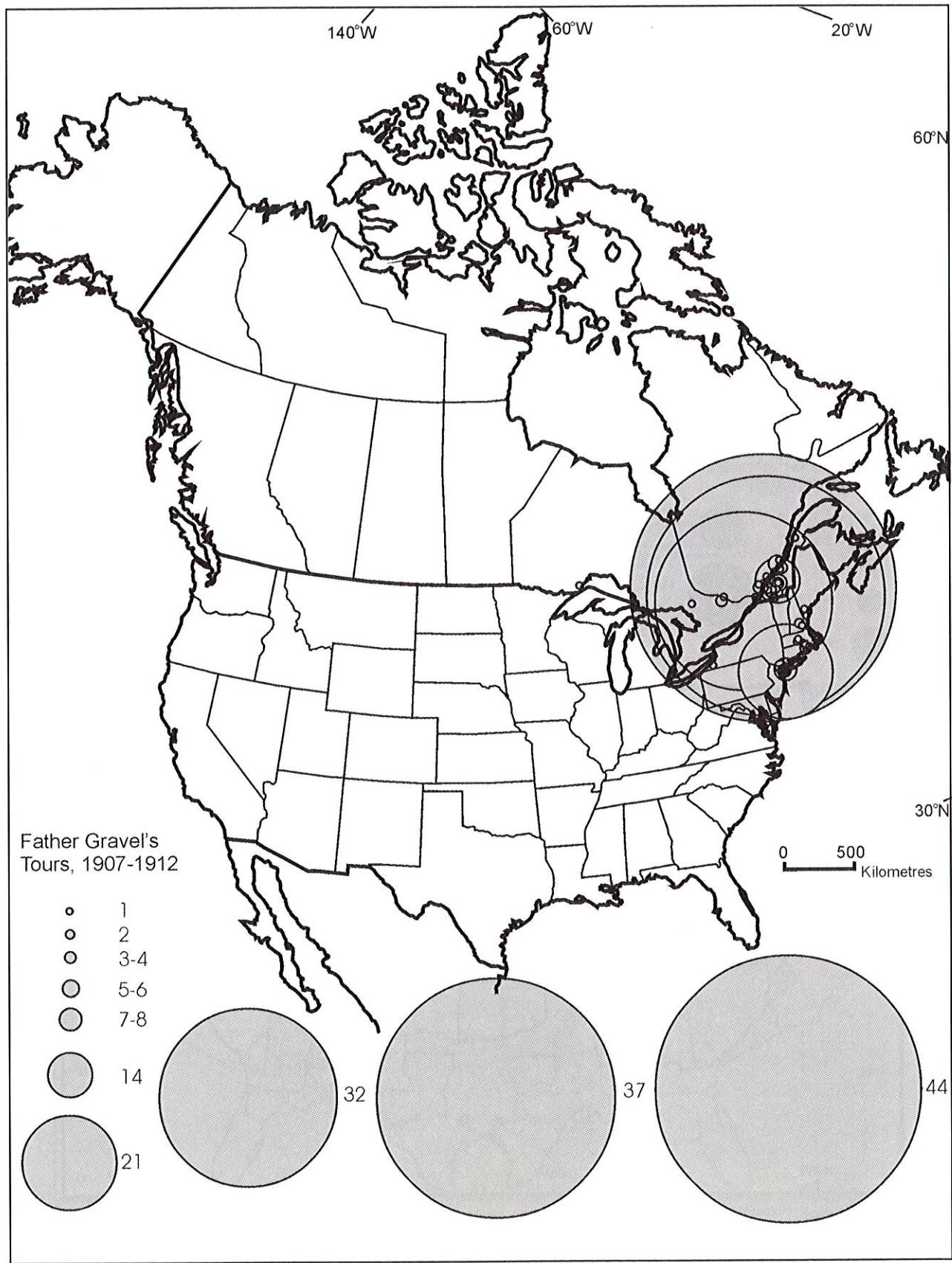


Figure 2: Pre-Settlement Residences of Gravelbourg Homesteaders

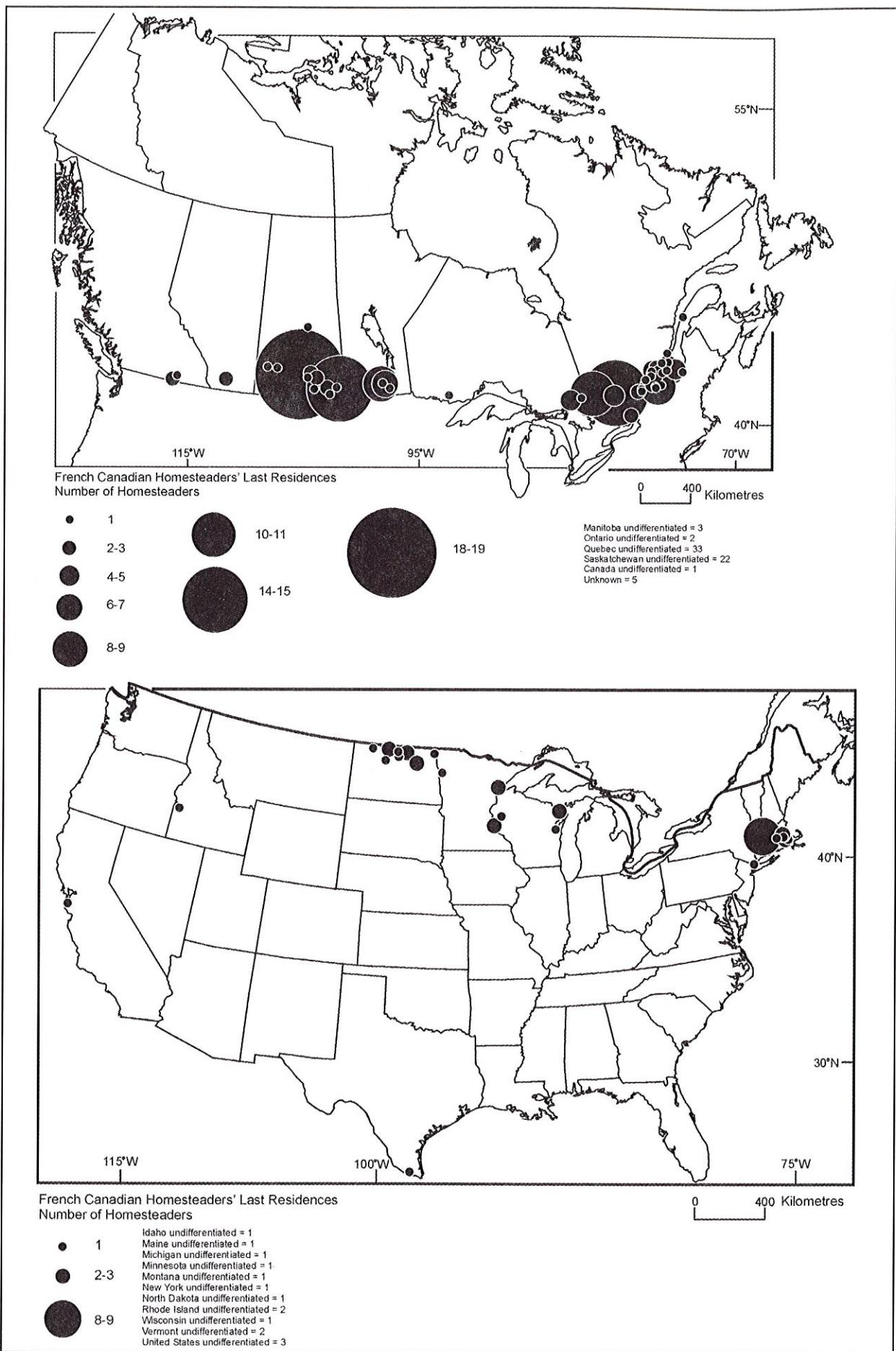


Figure 3: Birthplaces of Gravelbourg Homesteaders

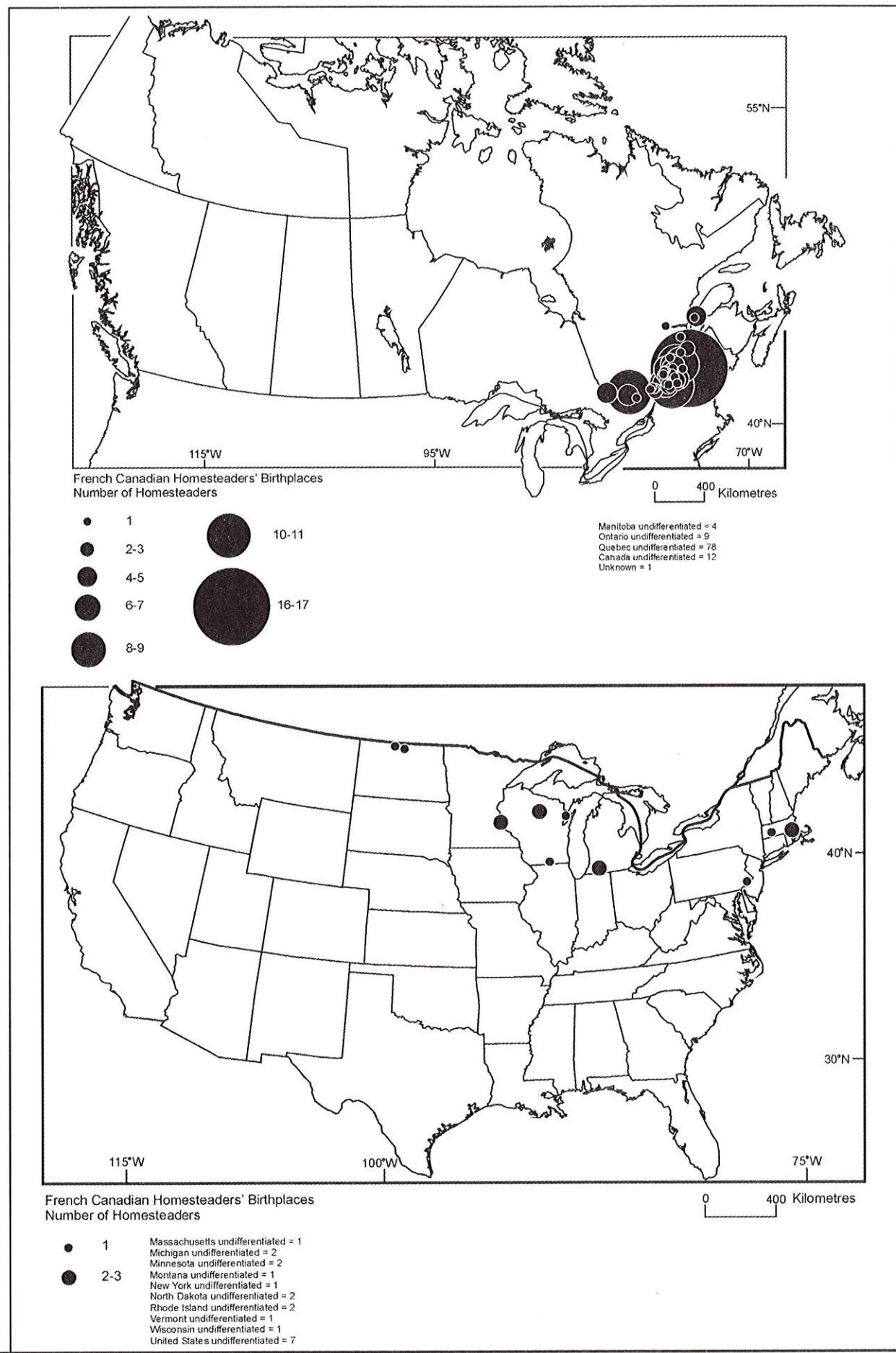
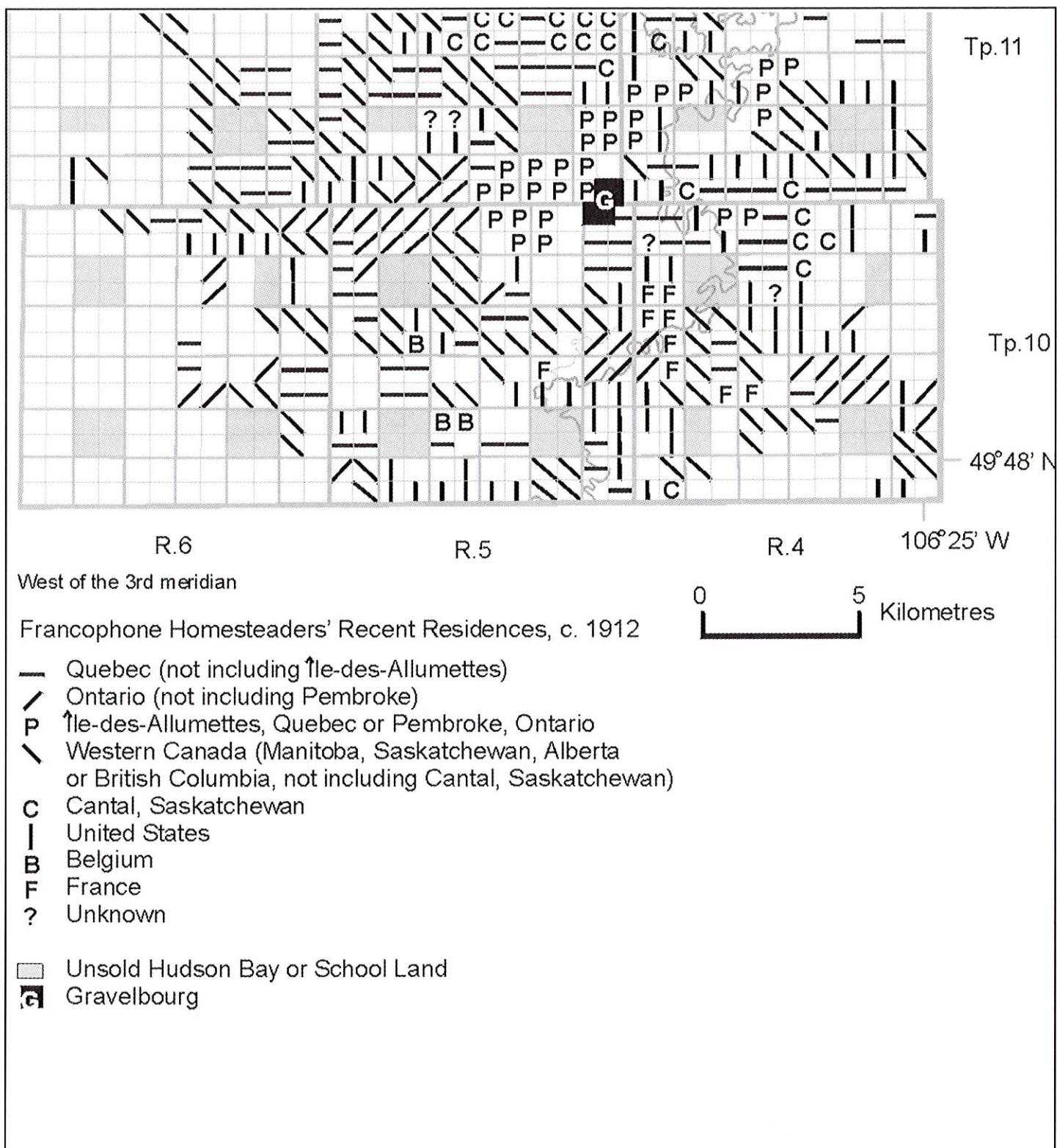


Figure 4: The Francophone Settlement Pattern at Gravelbourg, 1912



suggested, he was involved in the community's early settlement. Father Gravel first visited the Gravelbourg area in the summer or fall of 1906.⁶⁷ Still, he was not the first to arrive, and the initial settlers came independent of him. Edmond Gauthier was the first Francophone settler in the region. His family had migrated from Weedon, Quebec to Cantal, Saskatchewan. When he was old enough to take land, none remained at Cantal. So, he responded to Father Alphonse Lemieux's (previously the priest at Cantal) call to join him at Willow Bunch.⁶⁸ However, the hilly land at Willow Bunch disappointed him and a fellow traveller, Mr. Lepage. Yet the many Métis at Willow Bunch counselled them to move on, to *La Vieille* (now Wood River), a flat fertile area where the Métis hunted.⁶⁹ Directed by Alexander McGillis, a Métis man from Willow Bunch, in mid-May, Edmond Gauthier selected land, built a shack and erected a cross near the river; Mr. Lepage, on the other hand, appeared to leave.⁷⁰ Over the summer, Edmond Gauthier returned to Cantal, and travelled to Quebec and Massachusetts attracting several relatives who joined him at his colony of "Gauthierville."⁷¹

The Ross family also arrived in the Gravelbourg area before the colonizing priest. Originally from Rimouski, Quebec, though having lived for several years in Kingston, Ontario, they headed to Moose Jaw in 1905, seeking land. After wintering at Willow Bunch, they helped Father Passaplan, another priest resident in the area, move horses to Lake Pelletier. This took them past *La Vieille* River. Though they continued looking for land, near the 76 Ranch and the South Saskatchewan River, they concluded that the land at *La Vieille* was the best they had seen; they returned and settled on the horseshoe on the river. Antoine Ross first saw Edmond Gauthier and his group "off to the east," looking for stakes that marked the land they had claimed in June 1906.⁷²

Father Marie Albert Royer also came that year, with a group of settlers from France. This priest had ambitions of establishing a colony of Auvergnats (settlers from the Auvergne region of France) and naming it to honour the Virgin Mary. While he considered various locations, especially in Algeria, an article by Father Gaire, a priest who was establishing settlements in southeast Saskatchewan, led him to western Canada. With a Frenchman, Jean Baptiste Brousse, he toured Alberta and northern Saskatchewan, searching for a wooded location that resembled his home country. Yet, the disadvantage of northern locations, that settlers would need to clear trees before they could start farming,

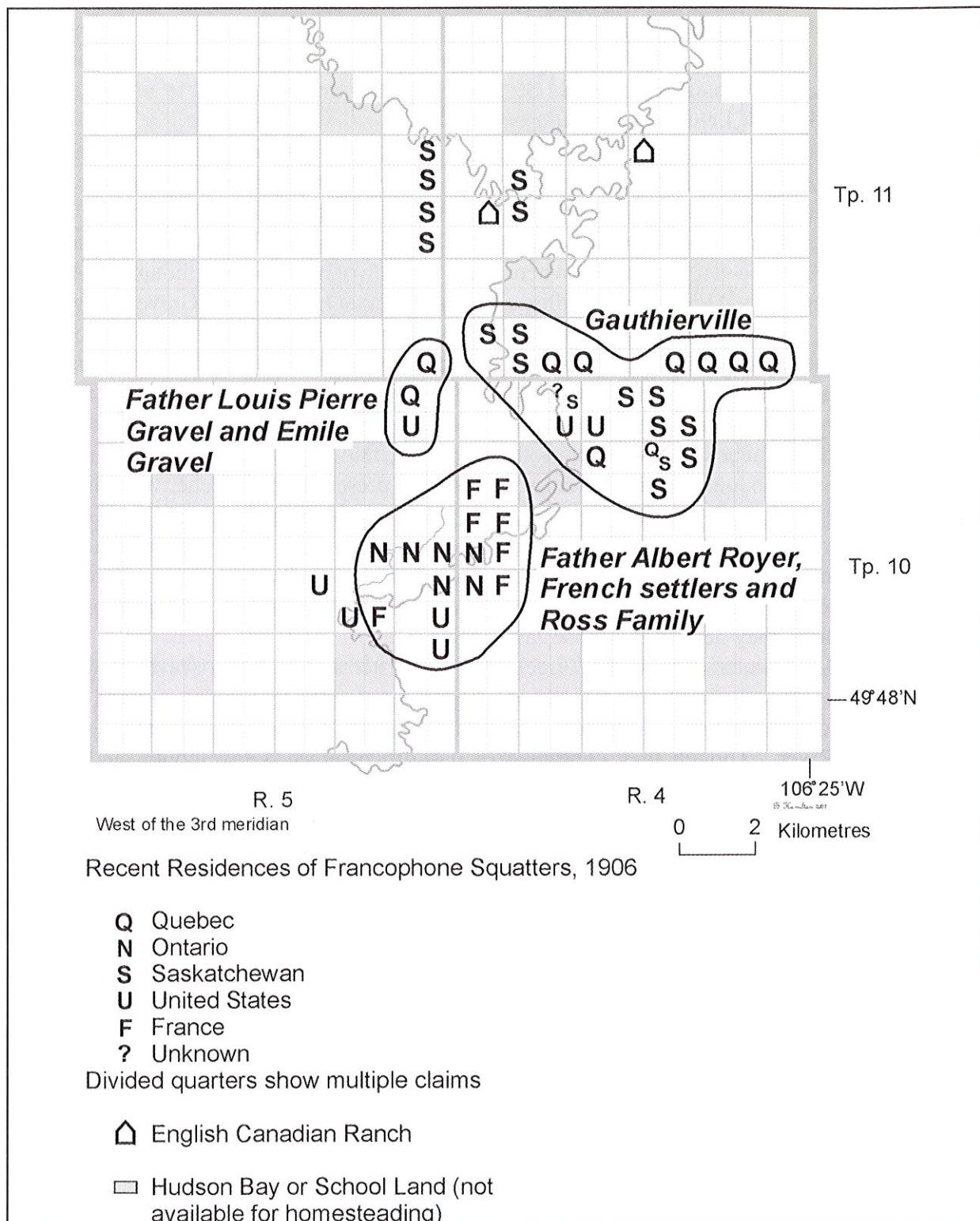
prompted him to return south. On arriving in Winnipeg, he met Thomas Gelley, an immigration agent, who told him of Edmond Gauthier's group that had headed to *La Vieille*. Since Mr. Gelley described a good area with some bush, as he had wanted, he informed Jean Baptiste Brousse. Mr. Brousse, along with a French newcomer, Louis Gallard, soon headed to claim land in the area, while Father Royer returned to France to recruit other settlers.⁷³

Though he may have made an earlier trip, Father Gravel arrived in southwestern Saskatchewan, in September 1906, with his brother, Emile Gravel. He had Archbishop Langevin's permission to establish a parish at a location of his choosing, though the Archbishop had suggested that he select the Gravelbourg area. He was provided with additional information about the area to help him select a site, particularly a plan of a proposed railway route.⁷⁴ Father Gravel appears to have travelled to Gauthierville, then continued south to examine land along the railway. However, the land near the railway, north of present-day Lafleche, was hilly; this led him to choose a site near Gauthierville. Gauthierville had another advantage: the few non-Francophones in the area and a partially completed survey would allow Francophones to establish a large colony before others came.⁷⁵

After selecting the Gravelbourg site, the priest began developing the colony. Aided by his family's influence with Wilfrid Laurier, Father Gravel established a post office named "Gravelbourg" and had his brother, Emile, named as the postmaster. He was also able to get assurances that the land in four townships, although he may have hoped for six townships, would be surveyed, but held off the market, rather than surveyed and immediately opened for settlement as planned, and as what was usually done in western Canada.⁷⁶

Thus, during the winter of 1906-1907, Emile Gravel, who had remained in the community, recorded names of Francophones who wished to reserve land in the four townships. On Father Gravel's request, in December, the names were entered into the land register at the Moose Jaw lands office. The records suggest that by the end of the year, Francophones had reserved most of the land in the designated townships.⁷⁷ The pattern of reserved land, with clusters in township 11, range 5 and township 10, range 4, appeared to reflect Father Royer's continued involvement in the colony. Father Royer planned to build his church in the northern part of township 11, range 5 and assumed that Father Gravel would build his in the southern part of township 10,

Figure 5: The First Settlers at Gravelbourg



Land Reserved in the Gravelbourg Area, circa December 1906

(National Archives of Canada, R.G. 15, D-II-1, Vol. 994, File1318110)

range 4.⁷⁸ Nevertheless, despite reserving land, very few Francophones appeared to winter at Gravelbourg. The *Codex Historicus* notes that many who had been in the region returned home for the winter.⁷⁹

The winter was hard and spring came late in 1907. A group of settlers arrived in Moose Jaw in April, but they were detained by cold weather and poor roads.⁸⁰ Moreover, Wood River flooded that spring causing many along the river to lose homes and cattle.⁸¹ By summer 1907, few Francophones remained in the area. Many of those whose names were recorded in 1906 and many of those who came in the spring appear to have left. Father Royer wrote of those who remained: most were part of the initial group attracted by Edmond Gauthier. They lived on the east side of the river. The west side was nearly deserted, with only Mr. DeCousbouc, Emile Gravel and a few Frenchmen brought by Father Royer.⁸²

Sources about the colony are limited for the next year and a half. In March 1908, C.F. Miles, a surveyor who passed through the area, wrote about a large colony of French Canadians at Wood River, and few other settlers in the region.⁸³ In mid-1908, when squatters made claims, much of the land had again been taken by

Francophones, though not those who had reserved the land.⁸⁴ The lack of source material was unfortunate, as this appeared to be the period when Father Gravel and his brother may have further influenced settlement in the colony. Thus it is difficult to confirm or deny allegations that they influenced who came to or left the colony.

Father Gravel's and Father Royer's desires to found colonies at the same location also came into conflict at this time. When Archbishop Adelard Langevin first visited the region in the spring of 1907, he either reminded Father Royer of earlier instructions to avoid Father Gravel's chosen location, or offered him a position as vicar in Father Gravel's church. However, since Father Royer wanted to form a colony of Auvergnats and Father Gravel was establishing a French Canadian colony and because Father Gravel's new choice of church location meant that less than ten miles would separate the churches, as the Archbishop required, Father Royer determined to relocate. Within the year, he led French settlers to a new location, now Ponteix.⁸⁵

Edmond Gauthier also left the colony disappointed. He hoped the church would be built on

32-10-4-3, his land, and the centre of Gauthierville.⁸⁶ On the other hand, the Gravels wanted the church built on their land.⁸⁷ However, while Edmond Gauthier and some of his supporters had temporarily left the region, in 1907, parishioners decided to locate the church on Emile Gravel's land. This decision divided the colony. Edmond Gauthier, and others from Cantal, soon wrote the Archbishop and requested a second chapel on Mr. Gauthier's land. The disappointing response, that this would be too close to Father Gravel's church, contributed to Edmond Gauthier's decision to leave.⁸⁸

Father Gravel's influence on the colony did not end after the land was opened for homestead entry. He continued to attempt to expand the colony and to acquire additional services. He had his other brothers, Alphonse and Joseph Gravel, placed as immigration agents and interpreters in Mortlach and Moose Jaw. From these locations, they directed French-speaking settlers to Francophone colonies in southwestern Saskatchewan.⁸⁹ The Department of the Interior also appointed French-speaking subagents of Dominion Lands at Gravelbourg: Alphonse Dorais in 1910, and André Nassans in 1912.⁹⁰ Father Gravel's influence further contributed to the appointing of Emile Gravel and Alphonse Legros as land guides to help Francophones choose land – though how much this service affected settlement is unknown; from reminiscences its effect appears limited.⁹¹ Finally, Gravel's hoped for immigration hall, a more permanent shelter for settlers, was also built and maintained, until about 1918.⁹²

Moreover, Father Gravel contributed to the bringing of rail services to the community. Initially railway companies did not plan to build through Gravelbourg.⁹³ Yet a petition signed by area settlers in 1909, an appearance by Father Gravel before the Railway Commission in Ottawa in 1910 and the taking of Mr. Burns, the Canadian National Railway's locating engineer, through his colony,⁹⁴ likely contributed to the C.N.R. building a branch line from Moose Jaw in 1913.⁹⁵ He also sought to have the Canadian Pacific change its route to pass through Gravelbourg rather than Lafleche. Gravel wrote a letter to William White, president of the C.P.R., and attempted to influence the area's Member of Parliament to present a proposal in favour of the C.P.R. passing through the town of Gravelbourg.⁹⁶ Still, the Canadian Pacific stuck to its plan and built through Lafleche, rather than Gravelbourg.⁹⁷

Father Gravel also clearly contributed to the religious and cultural well-being of the colony. Shortly after choosing a site for his colony at Wood River, he

had a tent erected as a temporary church, the first in the area.⁹⁸ Other structures, most notably the cathedral that remains at Gravelbourg today, followed. A school was built in the town by 1910 and others followed in the surrounding rural area. Father Gravel's efforts ensured that Gravelbourg would be the site of a number of additional educational establishments. His influence contributed to the arrival, in 1915, of the Sisters of Jesus-Marie de Sillery, to teach in the convent. The Missionnaires Oblates du Sacré Coeur et de Marie Immaculée arrived later, in 1918, to teach younger boys. Collège Mathieu was founded that same year, to educate a Francophone elite that would defend the group's religious and national objectives.⁹⁹

Finally, an important question is how much of Gravelbourg's development would have occurred similarly without the priest? Father Gravel attracted some settlers. However, a colony, based on chain migration through the Gauthier group, and other early settlers, clearly would have formed without him. As the first-comers who reserved land left, this aspect of the Francophone "reserve" little changed the colony. On the other hand, holding the land off the market, and publicizing it, likely allowed and encouraged Francophone settlement. This helped the development of a large group of Francophones in the area. However, it did not fully discourage others from coming, as a few non-Francophones squatted in the northern portion of the reserved townships. Finally, Father Gravel's contributions to the attracting of a railway, and establishing of education facilities would have made the community more attractive to Francophones.

To a great degree this research has seconded others' such as Lalonde's,¹⁰⁰ in suggesting that Francophones made practical and feasible decisions, influenced by various factors when they chose to move west or to another area, like New England. They did not simply follow the priests' exhortations. Some clearly considered recruiters' advertisements. But, many others were influenced by relatives and acquaintances. Those whom they knew provided what seemed to be reliable information about the practicality of moving and the opportunities for getting ahead in an area that they knew little about.¹⁰¹

Endnotes

1. G. Hébert, *Les Débuts de Gravelbourg son fondateur, ses pionniers, les institutions 1905-1965* (Gravelbourg: Tous droits réservés par le juge George Hébert, 1965), 12.
2. Saskatchewan Archives Board, [hereafter S.A.B.] Claudette Gendron collection, taped interviews R-5175, R-5226.
3. A plaque stating that nearly 10,000 French Canadians, many of whom lived in the United States, came to the Saskatchewan prairies on Father Gravel's calling, stands at Gravelbourg. Fieldwork, 2001; also National Archives of Canada [hereafter N.A.C.], R.G. 84 A2-3, vol. 1419, file HS10-147, part 1, commemorative plaque.
4. Many other studies discuss the role of Roman Catholic priests in settling western Canada. For an example from southeastern Saskatchewan, consult D. Jones, "Father Jean Gaire and Franco-Catholic Immigration to the Canadian Prairies, 1888-1925" (M.A. Thesis, University of Regina, 1989).
5. S.A.B., Saskatchewan Ministère de la Culture et de la Jeunesse collection, taped interview R-A62(A), R-A64(B), R-A68, R-A121(B) and R-A122(A).
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13. R. Vicero, "The Immigration," 237.
14. *Le Soleil*, 1 November 1901; 14 November 1901.
15. *Le Courier de St-Hyacinthe*, 5 October 1893; *Le National*, 20 December 1893; *L'Opinion Publique*, 18 January 1898; 22 April 1899; *La Tribune*, 22 December 1893; 28 January 1898.
16. *Le Courier de St-Hyacinthe*, 1 September 1900; *L'Opinion Publique*, 9 March 1901; *L'Évènement*, 8 August 1903; *Le Canada*, 11 August 1903; 3 October 1903; 19 November 1903; 5 December 1903; N.A.C., R.G. 76, vol. 94, file 10063, Rev. M. Blais to Hon. J. Smart, 5 May 1904.
17. *Le Canada*, 31 May 1904.
18. N.A.C., R.G. 76, vol. 94, file 10063, Memorandum to W.D. Scott, 18 May 1904; *Le Canada* 14 April 1904; 26 April 1904; 21 July 1904; 5 August 1904; 14 November 1904; 19 January 1905; 26 January 1905; *L'Évènement* 8 June 1904; 29 July 1904.
19. N.A.C., R.G. 76, vol. 413, file 595682, part 1, René Dupont to W.D. Scott, 13 February 1908; René Dupont to W.D. Scott 24 March 1908; R.G. 76, vol. 400, file 572376, part 2, Elzéar Gingras to W. White, 13 June 1910; *Le Canada* 28 April 1908; Canada Sessional Papers [hereafter C.S.P.], 1909, *Annual Report of the Department of the Interior* [hereafter *Interior*], 83-85.
20. W. Ryan, *The Clergy and Economic Growth in Quebec (1896-1914)* (Quebec: Les Presses de L'Université Laval, 1966), 47.
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37. R. Painchaud, *Un Rêve français dans le peuplement de la prairie* (Saint Boniface: Les Éditions des Plaines, 1987).
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43. N.A.C., R.G. 76, vol. 408, file 595025, part 1, Letter of application, 23 December 1906; Letter of recommendation , 23 December 1906; W.D. Scott to L.P. Gravel, 22 February 1907.
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45. N.A.C., R.G. 76, vol. 408, file 595025, part 1, Father Gravel's Weekly Report to the Department of the Interior for January 25, 1908; Newspaper Clippings.
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77. N.A.C., R.G. 15, Series D-II-1, vol. 994, file 1318110, Title page; P.G. Keyes to Thomas Gelley, 28 December 1906.
78. S.A.B., F.F.G. File 259, p. 493, A. Royer to Monsieur [Emile Gravel or Father Louis Pierre Gravel?], 14 July 1907.
79. S.A.B. "Historicus de la paroisse de Saint-Philomène de Gravelbourg" (n.d.), 5, 12.
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89. S.A.B., F.F.G. File 281, p. 868, Alphonse Gravel to Bruce Walker, 15 July 1909.
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91. S.A.B., F.F.G. File 246, p.1296, J. Bois to L.P. Gravel, 26 November 1909; F.F.G. File 281, p. 864, Office of the Commissioner of Immigration to L.P. Gravel, 21 July 1908. However, few recollections were located of settlers who used a land guide.
92. S.A.B., F.F.G. File 350, p. 1544, F.C. Minusey [?] to L.P. Gravel, 13 February 1918.
93. The Dominion surveyors' field notebooks show the Canadian Pacific's planned route through Lafleche and Meyronne. There was no indication of railway plans at Gravelbourg. Saskatchewan Information Services Corporation, Surveyor Field Notebooks, 10003, 10004, 10005, 10006, 10236, 10241, 10242.
94. S.A.B., F.F.G. File 353, p. 1595, Letter to Mr. Thompson, 27 July 1909; F.F.G. File 353, p. 1596, Alphonse Gravel to Emile Gravel, 28 July 1909; F.F.G. File 353, p.1597-1598, L.P. Gravel to S. Porter, 30 November 1909; S.A.S.B., F.L. L-41168 to L-41169, L.P. Gravel to A. Langevin, 26 November 1910; S.A.S.B., F.L. L-41192, Report of L.P. Gravel to W.D. Scott, 4 March 1911.
95. S.A.B. Map B10/14, B10/15. B10/16, E. Drake, "Railway Steel Laid in Saskatchewan."
96. S.A.B., F.F.G. File 353, p. 1602-1604, L.P. Gravel to Mr. Knowles, 1 December 1910; S.H.S.B., F.L. L-41196 to L-41198, L.P. Gravel to William White, 24 March 1911.
97. S.A.B. Map B10/14, E. Drake, "Railway Steel Laid in Saskatchewan."
98. St. Stephen, "Father Gravel," 108.
99. The rural schools were: L'École Aussant (1909), L'École Gauthier (1909), L'École Piché (1910), L'École Pelletier (1912), L'École Lefort (1912), L'École High Region (1913). Anonymous, "Gravelbourg centre culturel canadienne française," *Vie française*, 10, no. 4 (1955): pp. 86-87; L. Tessier, "La Vie culturelle dans deux localités d'expression française du diocèse de Gravelbourg" (M.A. Thesis, University of Regina, 1974), 33-36; Gravelbourg Historical Society, *Heritage Gravelbourg*, 36; R. Lapointe, *100 Noms*, 199.
100. Lalonde, "L'Intelligentsia du Québec," 184-185.
101. Limited knowledge of the area, a given with the settlers' situation, is clearly conveyed in many of the letters written to Father Gravel. S.A.B. F.F.G.