



CIMPN/RCPMI

CANADIAN IRISH MIGRATION PRESERVATION NETWORK

PROUDLY PRESENTS

An Líonra

(THE NETWORK)

#3. FALL 2025

Message from the President



As President of the Canadian Irish Migration Preservation Network (CIMPN), I am proud to introduce our new website [\[Web address\]](#) — a user-friendly, resource-rich, and community-focused space created with the support of the Secrétariat aux relations avec les Québécois d'expression anglaise (SRQEA).

One goal of our website is to develop a networking directory — a living list of organizations, partners, and contact people who are part of our wider heritage community. We invite you to contribute to this directory and help us keep it up to date, ensuring that knowledge, resources, and opportunities are accessible to all.

Celebrating our achievements

- In July, we hosted Irish Heritage Day in Saint-Colomban, a vibrant community celebration of history and culture. This year's celebration included the dedication of The Bronze Shoes, a powerful collaboration link between our community and the Global Irish Famine Way.
- We continue our work mapping historic cemeteries, ensuring that the stories of Irish settlers are preserved and remembered.
- We have shared and continue to share our research through educational presentations to various groups.
- We are working on our Irish Mile project, to develop an interactive virtual map focused on Irish heritage sites across Quebec, which will eventually be available on our website.
- We are mapping interviews with Irish descendants and cultural leaders using the Atlascine story mapping platform to connect personal stories to places and to keep heritage alive for future generations.

Building connections

Our new website is just the beginning. CIMPN exists to bring people together. With your involvement, it will grow into a hub of information, collaboration, and celebration — a true reflection of our network. Together, supported by the SRQEA, we are preserving the past while building connections for the future.

Kelley O'Rourke

In the News

Bronze Shoes Memorial Unveiled to Honour Irish Famine Refugees

On July 19, 2025, the City of Saint-Colomban—officially founded by Irish settlers in 1836—marked a milestone in its heritage with the unveiling of the Global Irish Famine Way Memorial. Known as the Bronze Shoes, it honours the 1847 Famine refugees and connects the community to a worldwide story of resilience.

Installed in front of Saint-Colomban City Hall, the monument stands as a powerful symbol of Irish migration during the Great Famine. The Global Irish Famine Way extends from Ireland’s National Famine Way, tracing the journeys of Irish Famine emigrants across the world. The evocative Bronze Shoes and accompanying interpretive panel, first seen along the National Famine Way—the “Mother Trail”—will now mark each key location on the Global route. In Saint-Colomban, they reflect the city’s rich cultural heritage, especially its pre-famine cemetery. Some refugees found new lives here in Canada, while others—like young Mary and John Phelan—did not survive their 1847 journey and are buried in the historic cemetery.

The project began when Kelley O’Rourke, President of the Canadian Irish Migration Preservation Network (CIMPN), presented her research to Ireland’s National and Global Irish Famine Way Steering Committee. In collaboration with them, and with the support of Mayor Xavier-Antoine Lalande and his team, Saint-Colomban became an official site on the Global Irish Famine Way. The monument will be listed in Québec’s inventory of commemorative heritage and entered into the Répertoire du patrimoine culturel du Québec.

The day began with a beautiful bilingual Mass celebrated by Father Lévi Cossette and Deacon Ciaran Pitchford at Saint-Colomban Parish. Carol McCormick, President of the Saint-Patrick’s Society of Montreal, served as MC, with readings by Lori Morrison, President of the United Irish Societies of Montreal, Elyna Bergeron and David Conway from the Embassy of Ireland, and historians Dr. Mark McGowan and Michael McBane. Samara O’Gorman recited her original poem “The Bronze Shoes,” followed by Esme Cavanagh’s moving performance, before the sound of Alexis Ceallaigh’s uilleann pipes led the procession to City Hall.

Kelley O’Rourke and Carol McCormick welcomed guests. “These Bronze Shoes are a powerful symbol of resilience and remembrance,” Kelley O’Rourke said. “They honour the Irish famine refugees who fled Ireland in 1847 and recognize the people of this community who welcomed and supported them.”

Powerful presentations from Dr. Mark McGowan and Michael McBane of the Global Irish Famine Way Steering Committee, Elyna Bergeron and David Conway from the Embassy of Ireland, Fergus Keyes, President of the Montreal Irish Monument Park Foundation, and Mayor Xavier-Antoine Lalande ensued, before a heartfelt blessing by Deacon Ciaran Pitchford to unveil the monument. Afterward, guests were invited to touch the Bronze Shoes, which are cast from an actual pair of children’s leather shoes from the 19th century held in the collection of the National Famine Museum at Strokestown Park in Ireland.



The Bronze Shoes (cont.)....



While the day was rooted in remembrance of the Irish Famine and its tragedy, it was equally a celebration of the resilience and spirit of those who endured. The afternoon came alive with music from Bill Gossage, Mike Bleho, and Glen Roy keeping toes tapping, Pierre Savaria calling the square dancing, and Bernadette Short’s Irish dancers filling the stage with colour and joy.

In the community centre, exhibitions with the Quebec Anglophone Heritage Network (QAHN), Mayo historians, and the CIMPN Irish Mile Project, “Preserving and Showcasing Irish Heritage in Quebec,” were set up to share stories, displays, and resources. Guests wandered the cemetery with self-guided maps, chatted with volunteers about Irish ancestors, and joined a tour of the church’s stained glass windows with Rose Labonnière.

Descendants of the Saint-Colomban Irish joined representatives from additional Irish organizations, including Danny Doyle from the Erin Sports Association, and Joe Lonergan, John Bertrand, and Peter Murphy from Irish Heritage Quebec, alongside local groups such as Histoire et Archives Laurentides, represented by Linda Rivest (Directrice générale et archiviste) and Henri Prévost (Président), Le Colombanois community news, and well-known local historian Claude Bourguignon. Together, these participants created a rich blend of voices, making the day a true coming together of the Irish-Quebec community.

We would like to offer our heartfelt thanks to all who participated, volunteered, and supported this memorable day.



Paroisse
Saint-Colomban



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Government of Ireland
Emigrant Support Programme



An Roinn Gnóthai Eachtracha
Department of Foreign Affairs



MONTREAL IRISH MEMORIAL



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SAINT
COLOMBAN



UNITED IRISH
SOCIETIES
1928
PATRIOT AND FREEDOM



ST. PATRICK'S SOCIETY, MONTREAL 1834
ERIN GO BRAGH



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The Irish Mile: Irish Heritage Sites in Quebec

The Irish Mile: Tracing Quebec's Irish Heritage

The Irish mile was always a little longer—1.27 modern miles to be exact—but in Quebec, it has come to mean much more than an old unit of measurement. It's a symbol of the long, hard journey made by Irish emigrants who crossed the Atlantic, braving hardship to build new lives in small Quebec towns like Sheenboro, Mayo, Saint-Colomban, and many others. These new Irish settlers established farms, built churches, and created entire communities, and their footsteps have left an indelible imprint on Quebec's cultural landscape that remains today. Now, a new digital project called The Irish Mile transforms that journey into an interactive story map, inviting you to rediscover and celebrate Quebec's rich Irish heritage in an engaging new way.

What Is the Irish Mile?

Long before kilometres and modern miles, Ireland measured its roads with the Irish mile, a stretch of land equal to about 1.27 modern miles. On a paper map, it was a simple unit of distance, but in practice, it became a metaphor for endurance on journeys that felt longer, harder, and more demanding than expected. For the early Irish emigrants who left their homeland in the early part of the 19th century, and for those escaping the Great Famine of 1847, that symbolism fit all too well. Their voyages across the Atlantic Ocean were marked by hunger, disease, and uncertainty. Many who survived the voyage settled in Quebec, where they carved out lives in remote rural areas, built parishes, and established close-knit communities with traditions that echoed the homeland they had left behind. Those who didn't survive also found a home in Quebec, at Grosse Île and the Irish Memorial National Historic Site, the Black Rock Stone of Remembrance in Montreal, and in numerous parish cemeteries or unmarked graves along the St. Lawrence River.

A Digital Journey Through History

The Irish Mile is a digitized, interactive story map that brings Quebec's Irish heritage to life. Created as part of the Preserving and Showcasing Irish Heritage in Quebec initiative, the project uses maps, archival images, and storytelling to trace the paths of Irish emigrants across the province.

With support from the Secrétariat aux relations avec les Québécois d'expression anglaise (SRQEA), the project highlights the places where Irish settlement took root and where its cultural imprint remains strong today. Users can follow along virtually, exploring sites tied to the Irish experience and learning about the people who built those communities. The virtual map is still under construction but will soon be featured on our new website.

The Irish Mile (cont.)....

Footsteps Across Quebec

The story map highlights towns, churches, cemeteries, and landmarks with strong Irish roots, including:

Sheenboro – A close-knit community along the Ottawa River, with strong ties to its Irish Catholic past, where Irish settlers began farming on vacant crown land in the 1830s.

Mayo – A rural town in the Gatineau Hills with strong Irish roots, settled in the mid-1800s by Irish emigrants from County Mayo, where a replica of the famous Our Lady of Knock Shrine in Knock, Ireland, was opened in 1955.

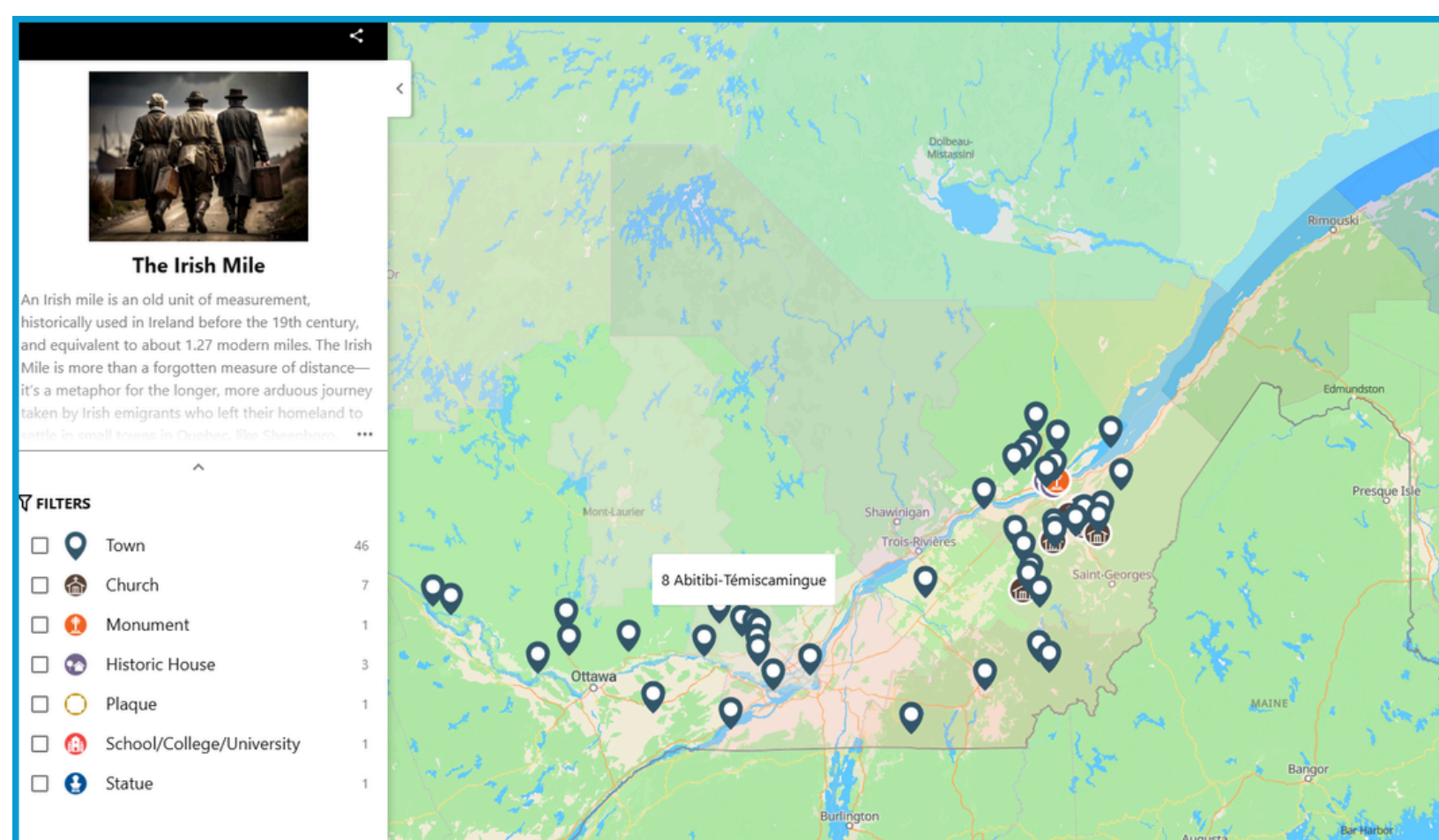
Saint-Colomban – A historically-significant town in the lower Laurentians whose parish and cemetery were the homes and final resting places of many of the earliest pre-Famine Irish settlers.

These are just a few of the communities where Irish emigrants left their mark. They helped clear farmland, establish churches and schools, and influence local customs. Their heritage is still visible today in the names of towns, family surnames, religion, and annual Irish festivals, celebrations, and parades, like Montreal's long-running St. Patrick's Day Parade, which has been held since 1824.

Why It Matters

Quebec is often thought of in terms of its French and English traditions, but the Irish experience enriches that story. By preserving the Irish experience in a digital, accessible format, The Irish Mile ensures that future generations can appreciate how Irish emigrants shaped the province's identity. Just as the Irish mile was always longer than expected, the journey of these emigrants was arduous, but the cultural distance they travelled left a permanent imprint on la Belle Province. Walking the Irish Mile today is about more than covering ground. It's about retracing lives, preserving memory, and recognizing the communities that helped make Quebec what it is.

The journey isn't over. The Irish Mile continues to grow, as new towns, landmarks, research, and stories are discovered and added, keeping this heritage very much alive. If you have family histories, memories, or stories to share, you're invited to help carry the Irish Mile another step further.



Stay Tuned! Our virtual map will soon be featured on our new website.

The Irish Mile: Featured Site 1

CEMETERY MAPPING AND GENEALOGICAL PROFILING 'PRESERVING THE HISTORY OF SHREWSBURY, QUEBEC'

By: Laurie McKeown

On the cold winter night of January 12, 2014, flames shot high above the towering pine trees, licking the dark sky with swirls of red and orange as burning embers spread in the surrounding forest. There was no call to 911. No one was there to witness the destruction of the place that had witnessed so many events, where many had lived, loved and died. The only witnesses were the weathered gravestones tucked behind the burning structure, silent sentinels to the ruin of the old church. Once the heart of the community, it would now crumble into a pile of ash.

Deep in the woods, in Quebec's Lower Laurentians on the corner of two gravel roads, once stood the St. John's Church in a small Irish settlement town known as Shrewsbury. The Irish first settled in this region, including the surrounding area of Argenteuil, Quebec, in the early 1800s. In Ireland, they had endured poverty, the failure of the potato crops, and a burgeoning population that strained the land's resources. The promise of land ownership in Canada was one of the driving forces behind their migration. As the fertile lands of the Ottawa Valley quickly filled, these determined immigrants journeyed twenty kilometres north of St. Andrew's on the Ottawa River in search of a place to call their own. The first permanent farm being that of Joseph Creswell, who came from Donegal, Ireland. Through their perseverance and resilience, they not only survived but cultivated the foundations of a small, thriving community in 1820 called Shrewsbury.



Photo © Larry Whittaker

In 1858, twenty-five years after the first settlers arrived, a church was built to serve the growing community. Before that, residents had attended services at Trinity Church in Lakefield, eight kilometres away. By 1915, the small community had seen a significant decline in population, driven by the lure of better job opportunities in larger towns like Lachute and Montreal.

The decline continued as many of the younger generation headed West in search of more promising land and employment. In 1935, the log schoolhouse, a vital part of the community, burned to the ground, and the post office relocated to the nearby town of Dunany.

Then, in 1942, tragedy struck again when the Orange Hall, located across from the church, was consumed by fire. The flames destroyed not only the building but also the town's historical records. The Hall had once been the heart of the community, hosting dances and social gatherings, and its loss marked the end of an era for the town. By 1950, there was only one family who lived there all year round. Despite all this, the church remained open due to the loyalty of the seasonal residence. The church was given a new face lift to accommodate the new influx of summer visitors. The little white wooden church still stood, a steadfast testament to the hardworking Irish immigrants and the community they had built. It symbolized their pioneering character—overcoming hardships, and making a home out of the wilderness.

Cemetery Mapping (cont.)....

Then the rumours began to spread. Various websites, in both English and French, listed the Shrewsbury Church as haunted. Some even went so far as to claim that a mass suicide had taken place within its walls—an event that never occurred. Over time, the small, 190-year-old wooden church, became known online as the ‘Ghost Church.’ The first break-ins started in the 1970s and were believed to be the work of vandals looking for thrills. Then, internet blogs and social media posts began to attract the attention of ghost hunters. What followed was a series of reckless and disturbing incidents. Groups of supernatural thrill-seekers started breaking into the church at night, performing seances in an attempt to conjure up the spirits of the dead. The graveyard surrounding the church was desecrated. More than a dozen headstones were either damaged, destroyed, or stolen. The church itself was not spared; satanic graffiti covered the walls, while valuable religious artifacts disappeared. A failed attempt to steal the bell resulted in the bell falling from the tower and shattering on the floor below.

Many attempts were made by volunteers to protect the church, but despite their best efforts, the church was officially deconsecrated on December 4, 2010. Plans were made to renovate the building and repurpose it as a community centre, but four years later, the church was burned to the ground on the suspicion of arson. The church stood as one of the last physical remnants of the pioneer settlement of Shrewsbury, a silent witness to the town’s fading history. Now only the cemetery remains.



The mission of the Canadian Irish Migration Preservation Network (CIMPN) is to document and preserve Irish heritage in Canada. One of the areas we work in, is mapping historical Irish cemeteries which involves photographing and developing an inscription database, along with genealogical research (both oral and written) using various methods of data collection to provide a permanent digital record. When mapping the cemetery, we physically set up a series of grids using coloured rope and apply the Pythagorean theorem to properly square up each of the grids. Each grid is numbered and photographed along with headstone documentation. The end result is a completed map using Illustrator software accompanied by supporting data on the inscription, description and photo of each headstone and a memory map which includes descendant interviews and genealogical profiles.

The only remaining physical evidence of the history of the Shrewsbury settlement is its cemetery. Each grave marker is now an irreplaceable historical primary source which allows us to reveal important social and cultural information about our early settlers through their genealogical information. We consider mapping both the physical cemetery and the memory research to be valuable educational tools for teaching the future generations our history.



Mapping Grid
Shrewsbury 2024

The Irish Mile: Featured Site 2

SHEENBORO: QUEBEC'S LITTLE CORNER OF IRELAND

By Debbie Howlett

On the scenic shores of the Ottawa River and surrounded by tranquil lakes, Sheenboro, Quebec, seems like an unlikely place to find shamrocks. But they're everywhere—on the township's welcome sign, its municipal website, and even in front of St. Paul the Hermit Parish, the little church founded in 1872. With fewer than 120 residents today, Sheenboro wears its Irish heritage proudly, a living reminder of the emigrants who carved farms out of the forest, raised families, and brought a little piece of Ireland to the Canadian Shield.

This small village exudes charm and resilience. Its history is deeply tied to farming, lumbering, music, and community gatherings—square dancing, quilting, and storytelling remain as much a part of Sheenboro's identity as they were nearly two centuries ago. With rolling green fields bordered by forest, quiet country roads, and glimpses of the Ottawa River, the landscape mirrors the pastoral beauty of rural Ireland. It's no wonder Irish settlers from Counties Down, Kerry, and Tipperary felt at home here.

The Township of Sheen

Irish families began arriving in the Township of Sheen in the pre-Famine 1830s, many squatting on unsurveyed land until official surveys were completed years later. Migration was often a family affair: one household would settle, then cousins, uncles, and siblings would follow, creating tight-knit clusters of support in an unfamiliar country.

By the time of the 1851 census, Sheen counted 30 families, three-quarters of them Irish Catholic. Most were young, single immigrants when they first arrived, and they often married other Irish newcomers. Their children, however, were born Canadian, establishing the roots of the next generation in this new land.

John Downey: Sheenboro's First Settler

Among those who laid the groundwork for Sheenboro was John Downey, widely remembered as the township's first settler. Born in Downpatrick, County Down, Downey immigrated to Quebec City around 1825 with his two brothers. The brothers soon parted ways, one heading west, the other to Ontario, and, like many immigrant families separated by geography, they likely never saw each other again.

Downey found work in Bytown (modern-day Ottawa), labouring on the Rideau Canal. Like many Irish immigrants of the time, he endured the harsh conditions of canal construction, living in rough shantytowns that tested their strength and spirit. It was there that he met and married Jane Smith, a fellow Irish emigrant, in 1826.

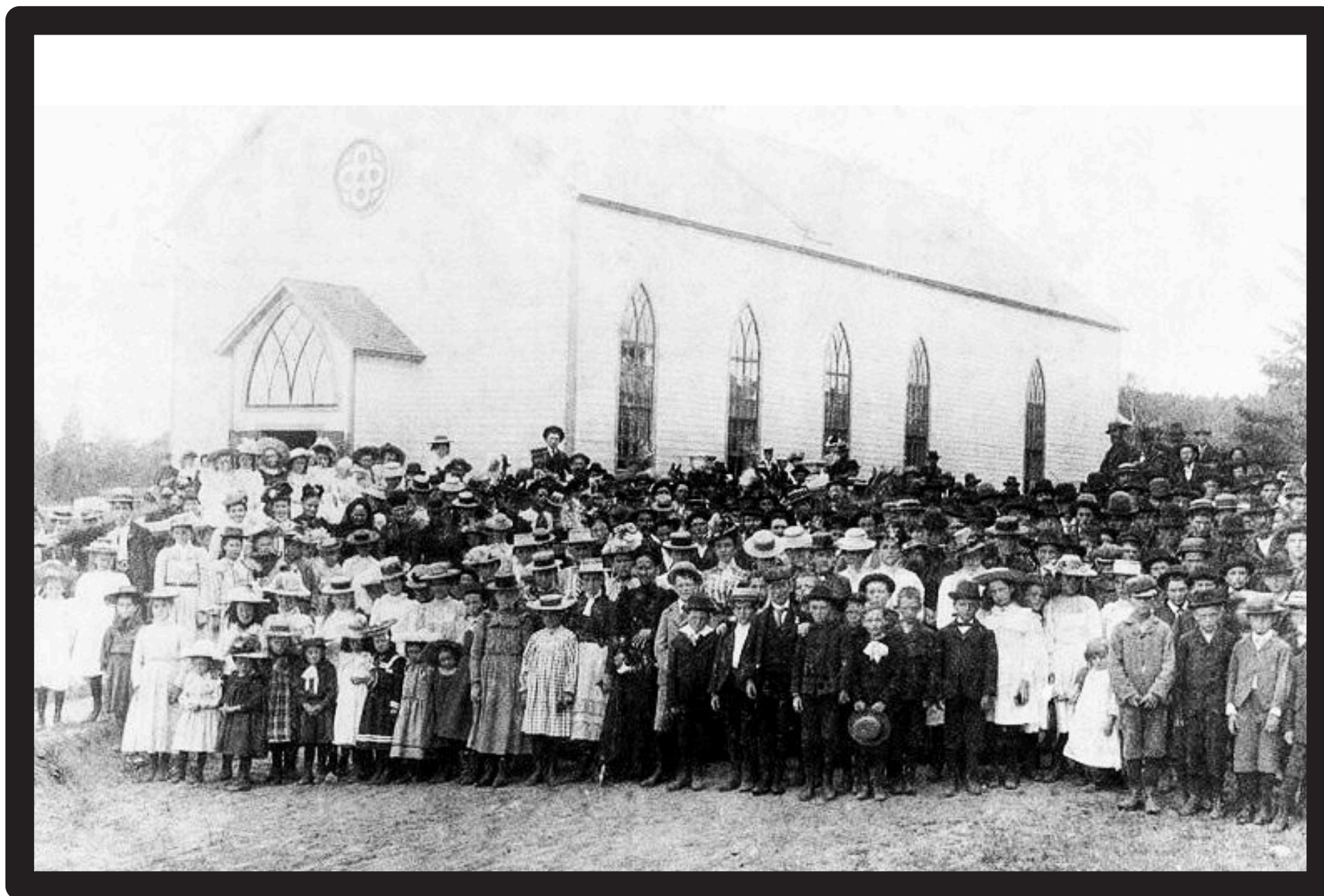
The couple started their family in Bytown and Goulbourn before heading a bit further west. In 1833, they arrived in the unsurveyed Township of Sheen, where they staked a claim on Lot 25 and began farming. For nearly 14 years, they lived on the land without official title, a bold but common practice at the time. Today, Lac Downey stands as a lasting tribute to the family's presence.

Sheenboro (cont.)....

A Legacy of Family and Community

As more of Downey's relatives joined him in Sheen, the settlement grew into a recognizable community. The pattern of clustering—of building networks of relatives and neighbours—gave Irish immigrants the resilience to endure isolation, harsh winters, and the challenges of carving farms out of dense forest.

Nearly two centuries later, Sheenboro remains proud of its roots. Its landscapes and traditions echo both Quebec and Ireland, standing as a reminder of the arduous journeys that brought families like the Downeys here and the enduring cultural footprint they left behind.



<https://pontiacarchives.org/photo/sheen-parish-1873/>





Celebrating 200 Years of Irish Cultural Heritage on Prince Edward Island

On August 1, 2025, the Benevolent Irish Society of Prince Edward Island (PEI) celebrated two centuries of heritage, marking its 200th anniversary with a special reception. The event, which took place at their charming Irish Hall, was a testament to the influence of Irish culture on Prince Edward Island, an area with deep historical ties to Ireland.

Samara O’Gorman (CIMPN Board Member & Researcher) was present and surrounded by a distinguished group, including Poet Laureate Julie Pellissier-Lush, Deputy Head of Mission Elisabeth O’Higgins, MP Sean Casey, Raymond Aughey from County Monaghan, and Mayor Philip Brown.

The highlight of the event was the exciting news that the National Famine Way heritage trail will soon include a Bronze Shoes marker at the Irish Settlers Memorial in Charlottetown to honour the thousands of Irish immigrants who found a new life on the island. The shoes will be placed next to the pre-existing granite Celtic cross, with thirty-two flagstones representing each of Ireland’s counties.



L: Councillor Raymond Aughey from the Monaghan County Council in Ireland, Samara O’Gorman, and Deputy Head of Mission Elisabeth O’Higgins from the Embassy of Ireland to Canada.



R: Julie Pellissier-Lush, a Mi’kmaq celebrated Author and Poet Laureate for PEI, and Samara O’Gorman



Commemoration of the 250th Anniversary of the American Invasion of Canada

The Fort Saint-Jean Museum in Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu hosted an exciting weekend August 15th to 17th commemorating the 250th anniversary of the American invasion of Canada, orchestrated by Irishman Richard Montgomery. Visitors to the fort were able to fully immerse themselves in history through historical recreations of battle scenes, camp life, and the daily struggles faced by eighteenth-century Quebecers. Katherine Diamond (CIMPN Project Manager / Grant Coordinator / Researcher) attended the activities with utmost interest, as her current graduate studies focus on Montgomery.

Though Montgomery was an Irishman by birth, his dedication to the Patriot cause in the United States of America led to achieve the rank of Major General. However, his inability to seize Fort Saint-Jean in a timely manner in the summer of 1775 sealed his fate and ultimately made history. His attempt to capture the city of Québec was delayed until December 1775, and in this battle, he perished, and Québec maintained its freedom. Fort Saint-Jean, though not often discussed, is an extremely important historical site in colonial Canadian history and Irish history alike.



(Photos by Katherine Diamond.)

Upcoming Events

October 4, 2025 (10 a.m. - 4 p.m).

“Stones and Stories: Cemetery Heritage in a Changing World”

Trinity Anglican Church

757, chemin du Village, Morin-Heights, QC.

Laurie McKeown and Kelley O’Rourke from CIMPN will be presenting on the St. Colomban Cemetery Project and their work mapping cemeteries throughout the Argenteuil region. Their talk will be followed by a headstone cleaning demonstration, offering hands-on insight into respectful and effective preservation techniques.

October 4-12, 2025

Celtic Music Festival

Lac Brome

Knowlton, QC

For more information: www.harmoniesceltiques.ca

October 19, 2025 (Time: TBD)

Cemetery Headstone Cleaning Workshop

The Beth Israel Ohev Shalom Cemetery

1251 Av. de Mérici, Québec, QC G1S 3H8

October 19, 2025 (Time: TBD)

Historical Hike in Gore, Quebec.

Hike the trails and visit two private homesteads and old graves.

For more details: lessentiersgegore@gmail.com

October 25, 2025. (1 p.m. - 4 p.m.)

“How We Tell Stories”

Lac Brome Museum, 130 Lakeside

Knowlton, QC

A round table discussion featuring four expert panelists, including Kelley O’Rourke from CIMPN.

November 25, 2025. (1 p.m. - 4 p.m.)

QAHN Heritage Summit on Zoom.

10:00 - 12:00 To register: home@qahn.org

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The Canadian Irish Migration Preservation Network
is a not-for-profit organization
dedicated to the preservation of Irish heritage

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