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Mary McConnell Conroy

Mary McConnell-Conroy: The Businesswoman Who Helped Build Deschênes

Mary McConnell-Conroy : la femme d'affaires qui a contribué à bâtir Deschênes

Bernice Djaballah

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William Notman, Mary McConnell, [188–?], photograph, Fonds Famille Conroy, 07H, P154, S1, D29, Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec (BAnQ), Gatineau, https://numerique.banq.qc.ca/patrimoine/details/52327/2987143.

By the mid-nineteenth century, Irish families had become deeply involved in the commercial development of the Ottawa Valley. Among them was Mary McConnell-Conroy, a woman whose extraordinary business career challenges what we think we know about Irish women in early Quebec.

When we think of Irish immigrants in nineteenth-century Quebec, certain types of figures tend to come to mind. Politicians, merchants, and industrialists have long taken centre stage, while the women who helped sustain these communities are often remembered only as wives and mothers. This one-note story does not necessarily reflect the truth. Mary McConnell-Conroy (1816–1887) offers a compelling example of a woman who did not live by traditional Victorian standards. As a landowner, entrepreneur, and businesswoman, she helped transform the small settlement of Deschênes into a prosperous industrial community. Mary McConnell proved that through determination, a woman could go beyond traditional roles of nineteenth-century Quebec.

From Irish Roots to the Ottawa Valley

Mary was born in 1816 into the Irish McConnell family in Lower Canada. The family had established themselves through Ottawa Valley's growing timber industry. They were one of the early commercial families in the development of the Deschênes Rapids, where the McConnells saw the Ottawa River Valley as a territory of vast opportunity. It offered possibilities for trade, agriculture, and, of course, timber. Mary's upbringing in this entrepreneurial family later gave her the ability to claim a place in the area's development.

In 1837, Mary married Robert Conroy, an Irish immigrant who had settled in Aylmer during the 1830s. Robert was an ambitious man. His business interests included hotels, transportation, and timber. The couple became prominent members of Aylmer's commercial class, raised a large family, and grew considerably wealthy. Robert would eventually serve as mayor of Aylmer, further establishing the family's position within the local elite.

More Than a Businessman's Wife

Mary's contributions extended considerably beyond the domestic sphere. In 1857, she acquired about 100 acres of land near the Deschênes Rapids for a symbolic five shillings. This property, known as lot 15-a, would become the foundation of her success. Legally, the transaction involved members of her extended family and required her husband's permission; the property was registered in Mary's name. This distinction mattered especially when married women's property rights were heavily restricted.

Mary developed the land into one of the region's most prosperous dairy farms. However, agriculture was only one of her ambitions. The property also became an important site for lumber production and milling. What began as a family landholding gradually developed into a vast enterprise.

The turning point came in 1868, when her husband, Robert Conroy, died, leaving Mary responsible for managing much of the family's estate and protecting her children's interests. Widowhood brought considerable responsibilities, but it also created opportunities that married women rarely enjoyed. Rather than retreating from business, Mary expanded her involvement in her family's commercial affairs.

Under her administration, she modernized the sawmill at Deschênes in 1869 and later built another. By the 1870s, her mills produced about six million board feet of lumber, making Mary the eighth-largest lumber producer in the Quebec portion of the Outaouais. These figures were remarkable in an industry overwhelmingly dominated by male entrepreneurs.

Her success also had consequences beyond the family's prosperity. The mills, agricultural operations, and associated infrastructure encouraged settlement around the rapids. Workers and their families established themselves near the industries, gradually creating the community known as Deschênes Mills. In this respect, Mary's influence extended beyond managing a private business. She helped establish the economic foundations of an emerging village.



Unidentified photographer, Main Street in Aylmer: C. Devlin Store, Union House and First Church, [186–?], photograph, Fonds Famille Conroy, 07H, P154, S1, D3, Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec (BAnQ), Gatineau, https://numerique.banq.qc.ca/patrimoine/details/52327/2987144.

Navigating a Man's World

However, her position was not a secure one in nineteenth-century Quebec. Mary faced substantial legal obstacles, as did women seeking to manage property independently. Mary's business required her to navigate complex landownership and evolving civil law. Her widowhood gave her greater authority over the estate, but she remained accountable to the other heirs.

In 1876, her eldest son, James, transferred his administrative authority over the family properties to her, strengthening her ability to manage land. Nevertheless, the family's extensive investments also exposed Mary to considerable financial risk. In 1880, a Superior Court judgment ordered her to pay a substantial debt to the Quebec Bank, prompting a reorganization of the family's assets.

These difficulties are important to understanding her achievements. Mary's career was not a steady upward climb. She built her career in a competitive, financially precarious timber economy while navigating legal restrictions that did not apply equally to her male counterparts. Her accomplishments were exceptional not because she escaped the limitations imposed on nineteenth-century women, but because she exercised considerable economic authority despite them.

Deschênes' Irish-Canadian Legacy

Mary's story also complicates familiar narratives of Irish migration. People often remember Irish women in Canada through domestic service, charitable work, and motherhood. These experiences were undeniably important, but they do not represent the full range of women's participation in the Irish diaspora community. As a prosperous, Canadian-born woman of Irish descent, Mary occupied a very different social position from the many Irish immigrant women who worked in factories or on farms.

Her wealth and family connections undoubtedly gave her advantages unavailable to most women in 19th-century Quebec. Nevertheless, her career shows that Irish-Canadian women could exercise influence in the commercial and industrial world of nineteenth-century Quebec.

When Mary died in 1887, she left behind a considerable industrial and agricultural legacy. Her children continued the region's commercial development, including later ventures in transportation and hydroelectricity. Yet the history of Deschênes has frequently emphasized Robert Conroy and his sons, leaving Mary's contributions often overlooked.

Her legacy remains embedded in the region of Deschênes, a community whose development owes much to an Irish woman whose name deserves to be remembered.

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Other Information:

For more information about Robert Conroy, please read *Robert Conroy: Innkeeper, Lumber Baron, and Irish Mayor of Aylmer* by Katherine Diamond, available in the CIMPN Digital Library.