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COMMITTED TO THE PRESERVATION, CONSERVATION AND PROMOTION OF IRISH HERITAGE
S'ENGAGE À PRÉSERVER, CONSERVER ET PROMOUVOIR LE PATRIMOINE IRLANDAIS

Robert Conroy

Innkeeper, Lumber Baron, and Irish Mayor of Aylmer

Aubergiste, magnat du bois et maire d'origine irlandaise d'Aylmer

Katherine Diamond

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Robert Conroy: Innkeeper, Lumber Baron, and Irish Mayor of Aylmer



Robert Conroy, [1863?], Archives nationales à Gatineau, Fonds Famille Conroy, (07H,P154,S1,D28), Notman, Montreal and Ottawa, BaNQ Numérique, https://collections.banq.qc.ca/ark:/52327/2987142.

The former city of Aylmer, Québec, now a part of the city of Gatineau, is perhaps best known today for its lavish green spaces and its picturesque marina. However, during the nineteenth century, Aylmer's proximity to Ottawa made it one of the most advantageous towns for ambitious businessmen to seek their fortunes. This was not only true for local Quebecers, but indeed immigrants from across the globe looking to create new lives in the province. One such immigrant was Robert Conroy- an Irish-born innkeeper and lumber baron who not only became a community leader, but indeed transformed Aylmer itself through his diverse business portfolio.

From Irish Immigrant to Innkeeper

Robert Conroy was born in Northern Ireland in 1811, though little is known about his childhood or early adulthood. However, Conroy would follow in the footsteps of many of his Irish compatriots by choosing to immigrate to Canada as a mere nineteen-year-old. This leap of faith would lead Conroy to Aylmer, located on the Québec-Ontario border and nestled against the banks of the Ottawa River. Though still a young man, Conroy wasted no time in searching for work in the town.

Conroy's industriousness led him to an unexpected, but vital industry in Aylmer: the hotel business. Aylmer was a frequent stop for travellers, mostly from Montréal, who sought to embark on boats in the village and head west. Inns acted as resting spaces for the road-weary, and Conroy recognized the importance of these hotels to travellers and Aylmer's local economy. Only four years after his arrival in Aylmer, Conroy began to construct the British Hotel, a Georgian style brick building which could host locals and visitors alike. The British Hotel would come to serve as an essential role in daily life in Aylmer: not only was it a comfortable place to grab a meal or a pint, but the building would host Aylmer's first municipal council meetings and elections. Indeed, Conroy had not just opened a hotel, but an institution. Conroy himself would live on the premises of the British Hotel until 1845.



The British Hotel, circa 1920. Souvenir Folder containing 16 Photographic Views of Aylmer, Que., [192-?], Archives nationales à Gatineau, Fonds Famille Conroy, (07H,P154,S1,D1), Engraved by The Photogelatine Engraving Co. Ltd., Ottawa, BaNQ Numérique, https://collections.banq.qc.ca/ark:/52327/2987122.

From Innkeeper to Lumber Baron

However, Conroy's ambition could not be sated by the hotel business alone. Following his 1837 marriage to Mary McConnell, daughter of timber merchant William McConnell, Conroy began to diversify his business ventures. In 1839, Conroy partnered with fellow Aylmer innkeeper Charles Symmes, businessman John Egan, and farmer Harvey Parker to finance and construct Aylmer's first steam-powered flour mill. Conroy recognized the importance of Aylmer's waterways to his financial success. Whether it meant housing travelers setting sail on the river or using its currents to power mills, the Ottawa River became central to Conroy's life. His ventures into the lumber industry were no exception.

By 1849, Conroy had become one of the most prominent lumber barons in the region. His involvement in the industry was recognized that same year, when the legislature of Ottawa consulted Conroy and other lumber barons regarding the protection and processing of Crown timberlands. However, Conroy did not rest on his laurels. Between 1849 and 1850, Conroy again joined forces with John Egan, alongside lumber merchants Joseph-Ignace Aumond and Richard McConnell, to create the Bytown and Aylmer Union Turnpike Company. This company's primary goal was to construct a road between the towns of Bytown, Hull, and Aylmer, in order to facilitate the transport of lumber. This road reconstructed the existing Britannia Road, which was largely impassable during the winter months. The construction of this road revolutionized the region's lumber industry by facilitating the transport of goods, regardless of the season. Conroy's presence in this company, alongside his total control of timber cutting rights on the Madawaska River, led him to becoming one of the wealthiest timber merchants in Québec.

Businessman and Public Servant

Despite his great wealth, Conroy was still deeply invested in his community. While he was still acting as innkeeper and timber baron, Conroy served on Aylmer's first municipal council in 1847, and returned to this position between 1860 and 1862. Perhaps most impressively, Conroy also acted as Aylmer's mayor on two separate occasions (1858 to 1860 and 1866 to 1868).



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1868 would mark the final year of Robert Conroy's remarkable life. He died during his second mayoral term, aged only fifty-six years old. His incredible legacy can still be felt through several physical landmarks which still exist in Aylmer today. The British Hotel continues to operate as an inn, after it underwent extensive renovations in 2014 in order to ensure its survival into the present day. It has consistently served visitors to the community of Aylmer for over one-hundred-and-eighty years. Furthermore, the Maison Robert-Conroy, one of two private residences Conroy constructed and lived in between 1855 and 1860, received the status of heritage site in 1990. Finally, a stained-glass window in Gatineau's Église Christ Church was dedicated to the memory of Conroy in 1882. A cenotaph honouring Conroy's life and influence on Aylmer can be found in the same church.

Robert Conroy's story remains an exceptional example of the influence of nineteenth-century Irish immigrants on several Canadian industries. Whether serving their communities locally through their ownership of small businesses, or participating in the internationally recognized timber industry, Irish immigrants across Québec frequently acted as pillars across the spheres of business, politics, and social life.

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Other information:

For more information about Mary McConnell Conroy, please read *Mary McConnell-Conroy: The Businesswoman Who Helped Build Deschênes* by Bernice Djaballah, available in the CIMPN Digital Library.