

Walking around in

The Grand-Pré Church turns 100

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY **DARCY RHYNO**

“You guys are walking around in a poem,” says François Gaudet to the small group he’s guiding at the Grand-Pré National Historic Site in Nova Scotia’s Annapolis Valley. It’s an apt description. There is something surreal about this place, as if it’s disconnected from the world beyond its treed borders. As with words in a poem, the monuments around me, the fairytale stone church and the deceptively casual gardens feel dense with meaning.

Gaudet is a Parks Canada heritage presenter or, more accurately, an Acadian raconteur. He wears his grey beard in a braid and weaves stories, building a colourful and unexpected portrait of this place. He leads us over old railway tracks to the famous statue of Evangéline, herself born in poetry. Her gaze is forever fixed over her shoulder down the path toward the stone church that embodies the land she will never see again. Since her creation 175 years ago in the rhyming fiction named for her, she has been ending her days far from home, exiled during *le Grand Dérangement*, the Great Expulsion. She stands in for the 600 French Acadians from 98 families deported by British forces from Grand-Pré; and for 14,000 from across the Maritimes.

We stroll down the path to the front steps of the church, as much a fiction as Evangéline. Gaudet tells us it’s not a real church, but a memorial chapel. Rising above a wide main entrance with broad, triple doors and an enormous stained-glass window, a pair of chimneys frames an unusually large steeple that doubles the height of the building.

“These doors are faux painted to look like oak,” Gaudet says. Kneeling beside the cornerstone, he runs a hand over two dates deeply imprinted in Acadian memory—1755, 1922. The first date marks the beginning of *le Grand Dérangement*. Gaudet tells us the second is the year the church was built. It hits me that Grand-Pré’s memorial chapel is celebrating its centennial. We follow Gaudet

inside. Except for interpretive panels, plaques, paintings and a statue of the Virgin Mary of the Assumption, the interior echoes with emptiness. The questions pile up.

Who built this church that’s not a church? Why is it so oddly empty? Why does it look so different than any other church in Nova Scotia? Why was it built here in a field that’s now a park with gardens and other memorials? Do those railway tracks lead to any answers? Gaudet’s tour started me on a quest to learn the story behind Grand-Pré’s memorial chapel built a century ago.

An epic heroine is born

It all started at a dinner party in New England 80 years before the church was constructed. American poet, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and his literary friend, Nathaniel Hawthorne listened as another guest, Reverend Horace Connolly spun the tragic tale of the Acadians, embodied in the story of a young couple separated on their wedding day by the expulsion. After a lifelong search, the two were reunited in exile just in time for the hero to die in the heroine’s arms.

At Hawthorne’s insistence, Longfellow forged in poetry the romantic epic of an Eve-like character cast out of an earthly paradise who remained forever chaste and faithful to her first love. Published in 1847, the story of Evangéline and Gabriel brought the historic plight of the Acadians to a massive audience, selling out five editions in its first year, eventually going through 270 editions and 130 translations. Evangéline became a must-read in American schools.

Longfellow’s poem stirred an enormous appetite to visit the tragic couple’s pastoral homeland. By 1869, a train with engines nicknamed Evangéline and Gabriel was running from Annapolis to Halifax and stopping in Grand-Pré. Two years later, a steamship line completed the transportation link. As Gaudet puts it, “Evangéline started tourism in Nova Scotia.”

The problem was, the Acadians were



The monument remembering John Frederic Herbin, one of the driving forces behind the establishment of the Grand-Pré park.

a poem



Paul Bugeant	6	7	3	4	12	5
Paul Melançon	2	3	6	6		25
Batiste Melançon	3	3	1	4		20
Alexand Melançon	3	3	7	4		11
Charles Tibode	2	1	7	7		24
Batiste Mejean						27
	453	502	1131			70



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long gone from Grand-Pré. In 1909, a stone cross was erected on the Grand-Pré burial grounds. It still stands, but it's the only marker in a cemetery that holds perhaps hundreds of early Acadians and Mi'kmaw. In 1913, the story of Evangéline was made into a feature film, Nova Scotia's first. According to Gaudet, there probably wasn't an Acadian in it because Evangéline was shot in Halifax. But there was still little for tourists to see in Grand-Pré.

Enter John Frederic Herbin.

A memorial park is conceived

Herbin—a poet, historian, optometrist and jeweler—established Herbin Jewellers in 1885, a business that continues to this day in Wolfville, where he served briefly as mayor. His father was a Huguenot from France, his mother an Acadian. Herbin grew up on stories of the deportation. In 1893, he published *The Marshlands*: a souvenir in song of the land of Evangéline, and went on to pen several volumes of Acadian history.

In 1907, Herbin bought 14 acres of farmland, the original site of the Grand-Pré community, with the intention of creating a park to memorialize the Acadian story. He created a society with the unwieldy name of the Grand-Pré Preservation-Restoration and Acadian-Longfellow Memorial Movement. The group envisioned a park with features such as a marker for the cemetery, Evangéline's well and monuments to Evangéline and Longfellow. The centrepiece would be a chapel as a memori-

The stained glass window in the church depicts Acadians leaving their homes during le Grand Dérangement beginning in 1755.



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al to the original church of Saint-Charles where the British read the deportation order and held 400 Acadian men for a month before expelling the entire community and destroying the church. All of these are included in the park today, with the addition of a memorial to Herbin himself.

While the park and church were Herbin's idea, they remained elusive goals. A decade passed with little to show.

He sold the land for \$1,650 to the Dominion Atlantic Railway (DAR) on the condition that Acadians build a monument on the site of the original church. That task fell to the *Société Nationale de l'Assomption* (SNA), a group dedicated to telling the Acadian story. Meanwhile, the DAR commissioned and erected in 1920 the statue of Evangéline as a way to increase tourism traffic on their line. The church followed two years later, just a year before Herbin's death.

René-Arthur Fréchet, a Moncton architect, designed the memorial chapel. He took inspiration from Renaissance architecture in France's Normandy region, the time and place





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the Acadians originated. Longfellow described Evangéline's ancestors as Norman. The church design was also meant to echo that of Quebec churches—a simple rectangular footprint, flared eaves and a steeply pitched roof.

Montreal architect Percy Nobbs designed the grounds in the British Arts and Crafts style popular at the time. The church is clad with rough cut field stones and was originally covered in vines. Their intention was to set the memorial chapel within an idyllic living landscape like that in the epic poem so this French Catholic church would sit as pretty as spring daffodils in an English Protestant country garden and become a symbol of cultural harmony.

The interior of the chapel was intended to be a memorial to the Acadian deportation, thus the blue and white colours, the open, barrel-vaulted space, wide doors and many windows. From the beginning, neither the design of the grounds nor plans for an exclusively Acadian museum sat well with the surrounding English community. Some saw Herbin's wish to tell only the Acadian story as a snub of their own Anglophone Protestant heritage, even suggesting the park was a means for Acadians to reclaim their lost land. Others were alarmed by the overtly Catholic design. When the DAR opened the museum in 1930, it included a few Mi'kmaw stone tools and some Acadian farming artefacts, but most exhibits interpreted British colonial history, included records of land grants after the expulsion of the Acadians.

The battle for memory

Disagreements over the purpose of the park, the chapel and its museum continued for decades. In 1955, as Acadians were marking the bicentennial of the expulsion, the DAR was struggling financially as automobiles became more common. It was also negotiating the handover of the park to Parks Canada. Reluctantly, the SNA agreed to include

the church in the deal. Two years later, Parks Canada took possession of the land from the DAR and of the church from the SNA with the condition that the government would continue to use the church as a memorial to the expulsion.

Throughout the 60s and 70s, the Acadian community became increasingly concerned that the promise to tell their story was not being kept. As a result, in the mid 80s, Parks Canada created an entirely new management plan that included the removal from the church of all exhibits in an effort to "Acadianize" the space. Only the Virgin Mary and the Acadian flag remained. Parks Canada commissioned six deportation scenes by painter Claude Picard and a bold stained-glass window by Terry Smith-Lamothe. It depicts the departure of the first Acadians from Grand-Pré, completing the transition of the church from museum to memorial.

As an artist himself, Gaudet is particularly fond of the stained-glass window. "They don't have faces," he says of figures depicted in a boat. "They've been stripped of their identity." A red shaft of light slashes across the predominantly blue window the way it might have on the morning of September 5, 1755. "That's when the British imprisoned all the women and children in the church."

Since 2003, a new interpretation centre much larger than the church has filled the role of museum. In 2012, the landscape of Grand-Pré with the memorial chapel as its dominant feature, received UNESCO World Heritage status, confirming it as the most significant Acadian historic site.

As Gaudet guides us back to the centre, we pass Evangéline, that poetic sentry to the Acadian story. I take one last glance over my shoulder. The sightlines narrowed by the path's bordering hedges direct my eye to the stone church. Set against the background of mature trees, I understand that I am seeing exactly what Herbin pictured in his mind over a century ago—a poem come to life.y. 🐼