

A Gagnon Family History



This is a brief history of the family of Marcel Gagnon and Louisa Remillard.

How did these two happen to marry in a corner of Washington State?

The answers, interestingly enough, have to do with France, England, felt hats, gold, and the medieval feudal system.

La Gaignonnière

Barnabé Gagnon⁴ (or Gaignon⁵) bought a farm on December 28, 1565 in the southern Normandy forest of Perche between Tourouvre and Ventrouze from Gervais Roger and Marion Aubert. Barnabé and his wife, Francoise Creste, farmed and ran an inn there. The hamlet would become known as “La Gaignonnière.”⁶

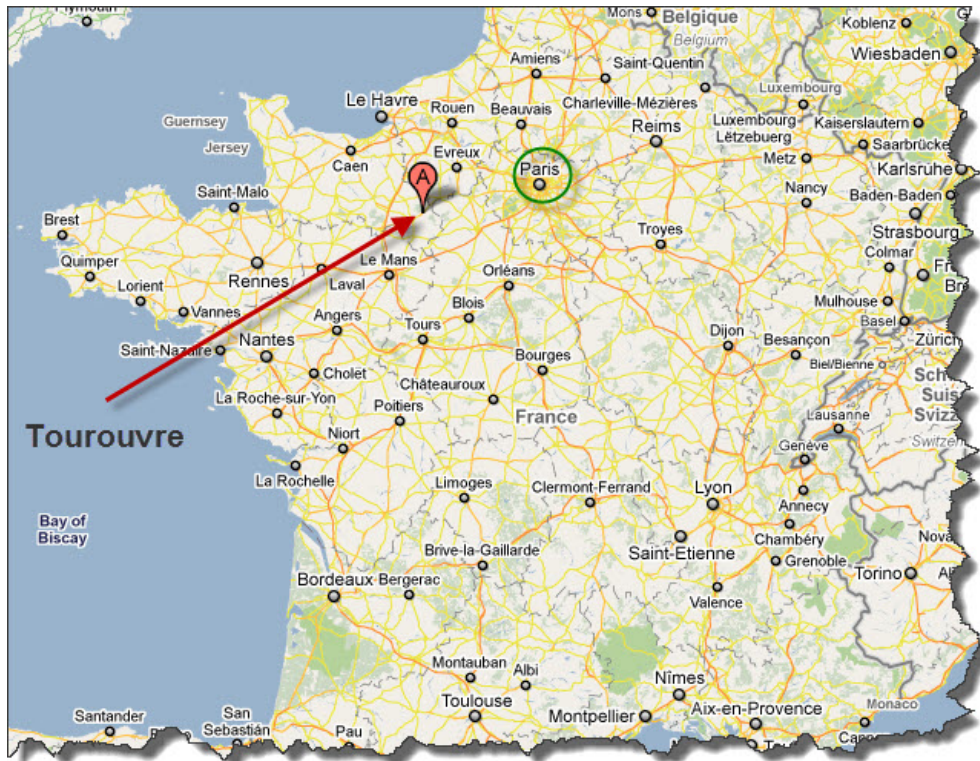


La Gaignonnière

4 See Appendix A, Chart G10.

5 Other or older variations in spelling: Gaignon, Gaingnon, Gangnon, Gnaignon, Guaignon, Gaihaignon, Guainon, Guesnon, Gaisno, Gaisnon, Guaisnon, Gaigneux, Guenoux, Guenont, Gainon. Later Anglicizations include Ganeau, Goneau, Gonyo, Gagner.

6 La Gaignonnière, located in the Department of Orne, still exists and is used as a summer home.



Location of La Gaignonniere

New France

The French colony later known as Canada was permanently established in 1608 when Samuel de Champlain founded Quebec City.⁷ To put this event in historical perspective, it was the year after Jamestown was formed in Virginia, twelve years before the Mayflower arrived at Plymouth Rock, and 43 years after St. Augustine was founded by the Spanish in what is now Florida.

Why build a colony at Quebec? Building a colony was expensive and required economic justification. Popular for decades, felt hats were made from the soft inner fur of beavers. A lucrative trade in beaver pelts was already underway in North America. The French had been trading with the natives along the St. Lawrence River, and Quebec's location where the river narrowed made it an ideal place to focus and defend that trade.

Among the early inhabitants of the colony were Abraham Martin,⁸ a river pilot whose name is attributed to the “Plains of Abraham” above Quebec where he owned land, his wife Marguerite Langlois, along with her sister Francoise Langlois and her husband Pierre Desportes,⁹ the village baker, warehouse keeper, and investor in the colony. Francoise and Pierre would have a daughter, Helene, purported to be the first French child born in New France. These colonists were Gagnon-Remillard ancestors.¹⁰



7 Acadia on the coast was established earlier, but not continuously at one location.

8 See Appendix A, Family Tree Chart G14.

9 See Chart R29.

10 See Charts G14 and R29.

Like Jamestown, Quebec struggled to survive, with many of the early settlers perishing from disease and harsh weather. To make matters worse, the English captured and held Quebec for a couple of years before giving it back to France. The English had destroyed the buildings, and less than 30 French people were left in Quebec.

After peace was restored, Champlain returned to Quebec and so did some former colonists. One was young Helene Desportes, although her parents did not return.¹¹ Helene would marry twice and become a midwife like her aunt Marguerite.



New France, 1645

11 Apparently they had died in France. Helene was close to Champlain, his wife was her godmother. Champlain left Helene \$20,000 in his will.



Gagnon brothers in their Quebec shop¹⁶

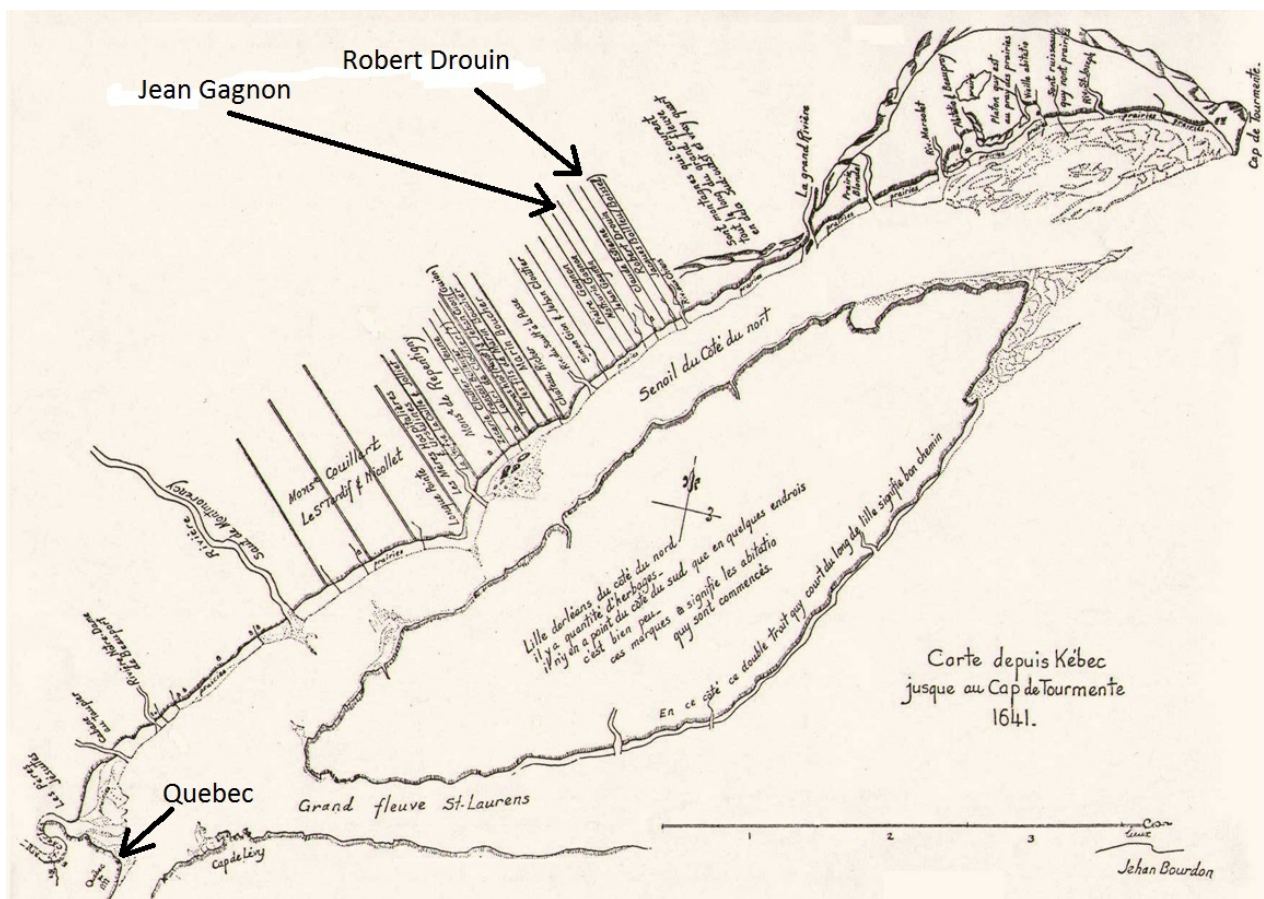
Mathurin Gagnon, the eldest of the three brothers, was the only one who could read and write thus contributing greatly to their business success. His status is reflected in his membership in the *La Compagnie des Habitants*, a company of colonialists that held the fur trading monopoly in the early years of Quebec.

16 Plaque at the UNESCO World Heritage site in Quebec.

Chateau-Richer

By 1640 the three Gagnons had each acquired adjacent farmland along the north side of the St. Lawrence River at Chateau-Richer, downstream from the city. In that year Jean Gagnon married newly-arrived Marguerite Cochon (Cauchon), who had come with her parents. Of the couple's nine children two (Jean and Germain) were ancestors to the Gagnon-Remillard family.¹⁷

Robert Drouin, meanwhile, also acquired land at Chateau-Richer. After his first wife died, Robert married Marie Chapelier, a strong-willed and resourceful woman. One of their daughters, Marguerite Drouin, would marry Jean Gagnon's son Jean.



Gagnon and Drouin land holdings

¹⁷ See Charts G2, G10, and R8.

An indication that the Gagnons did well financially was the fact that Mathurin Gagnon returned to France and brought his mother and daughter back to Quebec. That would not have happened if life in New France had been a struggle for them. One could say the Gagnons indirectly benefited from the lucrative fur trade economy.



Jean Gagnon home

Jean's brothers, Pierre and Mathurin would also marry and have many children as well, spreading the Gagnon name.¹⁸ These marriages are more remarkable than they might appear. In the early years of Quebec, those who came were mostly men, recruited to help clear land and build. Only ten percent were women, and many of those came with husbands.

That Robert Drouin and the Gagnon men married at all speaks both to their early arrival and being well established in the colony. The daughters of the immigrants had their choice of many young bachelors, and these gentlemen were good catches.

18 After Tremblay, Gagnon is the second most common French name in Canada.

Marriageable Women

Besides fur trappers and traders, New France needed skilled workers like carpenters and bricklayers as well as farmers and laborers to clear the land. Men recruited to come to Quebec were often under contract to work for three years. Many returned to France. A thriving colony also needed families. Early attempts to recruit couples and families had limited results. The investors turned to recruiting marriageable young girls to entice the men to stay.

Most, but not all, single women who migrated to New France were from poor rural families. Their prospects in France were not great. New France offered nothing more than the possibility of a better life. Arriving between 1634 and 1663, the 262 single women who came alone or in groups are now collectively called *filles à marier* -- marriageable young girls.



In 1663 King Louis XIV sponsored a program to recruit young women migrants, strong ladies of good character. Over the next ten years, about 800 “Kings Daughters” (*filles du roi*) came to New France. The monarch paid their passage, furnished a hope chest (*trousseau*), and provided a dowry. By 1673 the population of New France had doubled, to over 3,000 people.

Both the Gagnon and Remillard families have *filles à marier* and *filles du roi* ancestors.

Carignan Soldiers

The growing colony increasingly struggled against the threat of Iroquois attacks. Demands were made for reinforcement of the small number of soldiers stationed in Canada. The French monarchy complied.

Six ships carrying 1,200 soldiers arrived in 1665. That winter the Carignan-Salieres Regiment, the first regular military unit to serve in Canada, attacked the Indians. Despite taking heavy casualties the Regiment stabilized the situation ensuring the survival of the French colony.

Encouraged to stay, some 450 soldiers settled in Canada after the Regiment returned to France. Among these were Gagnon and Remillard ancestors.

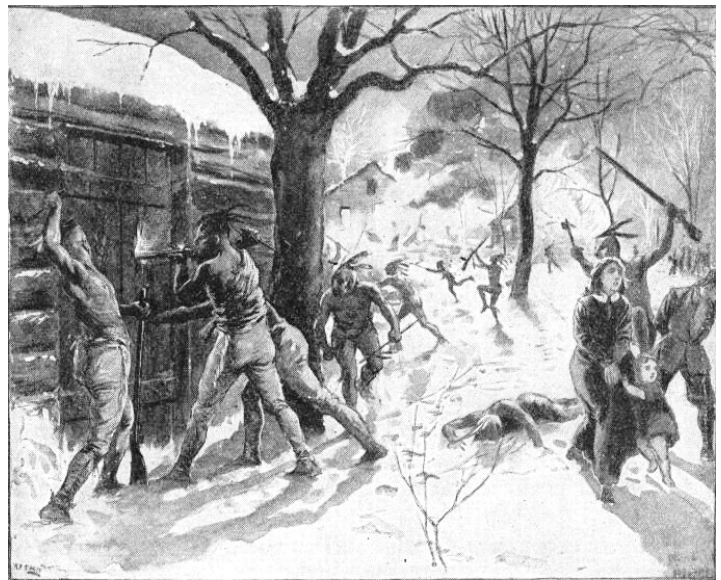


French and Indian Wars

Elizabeth Corse²² was born in Deerfield, Massachusetts in 1696 to James Corse²³ and Elizabeth Catlin. Three months later, Elizabeth's father died, the first of the many tragedies of her eventful life.

Throughout the 17th century frequent hostilities between the French, English, and native tribes made Deerfield, on the edge of the English frontier, vulnerable to attack. In 1702 the War of Spanish Succession in Europe²⁴ expanded to North America, becoming the second of the four French and Indian wars. While both sides had Indian allies, the French colonists, being outnumbered by more than ten to one, relied heavily on Indian warriors. The Indians themselves had scores to settle with enemies, both Indian and white, and the French joined forces with them in raiding English towns. Deerfield was one of their targets.

On the night of February 29, 1704, a raiding party of over 200 natives from several tribes and 50 Frenchmen descended on Deerfield. Snow piled against the palisade made it easy to climb over it and open the gates. The fighting was haphazard but the raiders managed to kill 44 residents and take more than 100 hostages, mostly women and children. Two of those taken were eight year old Elizabeth Corse and her mother. Among those killed were Elizabeth's grandfather and two uncles.



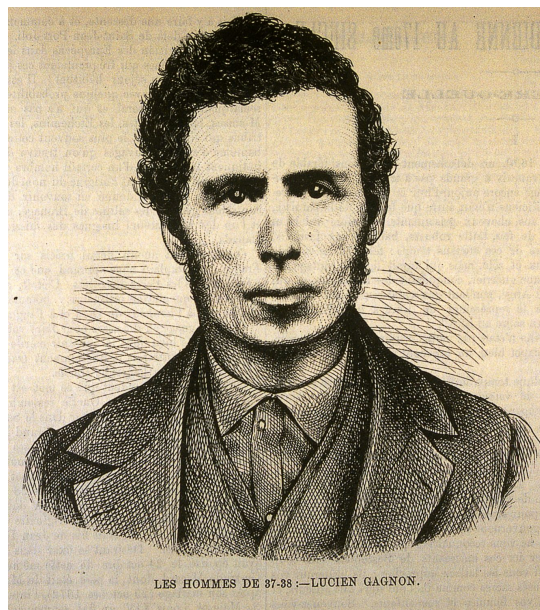
22 See Chart R12.

23 Also spelled Corss or Cors. James Corse may have been a Scottish immigrant.

24 The European war is called the War of the Spanish Succession. For the British colonialists the North American theater was Queen Anne's War. It was also known as the Third Indian War or the Second Inter-colonial War. The fourth of the French and Indian wars is the one Americans call "The French and Indian War" (singular).

A Failed Rebellion

After his first wife died, Lucien Gagnon³³ married Sophie Régnier of Napierville, sold his La Prairie properties, and settled along the Richelieu River at Pointe-à-la-Mule in Saint Valentin parish. By peasant standards, Lucien was prosperous. He benefited from an inheritance from his father and two generous dowries. Also, Lucien was successful growing wheat, oats, barley and livestock. Even so, by 1834 he was deeply in debt to his English-speaking seigneur and overwhelmed by his fees. This angered Lucien immensely.



Lucien Gagnon

At this time, Canada was divided into two parts, Upper Canada (Ontario) and Lower Canada (Quebec). Lower Canada was predominately French-speaking and a majority were rural peasants. Growing discontent over social, economic, and political inequities led to the “*Patriote*” movement. By 1834 Lucien was ready to join the *Patriotes*.

In July Lucien took part in a *Patriote* meeting at nearby Napierville which 4,000 people attended. By that fall he was active in the movement, intimidating local Frenchmen who worked for the government, such as militia captains and justices, forcing them to resign their commissions. Undoubtedly these threats took the form of *charivari*, a custom in which boisterous,

33 See Chart G1.

After the defeat, Nelson, Côté, and Gagnon began building an army by establishing secret *Frères Chasseurs* (Hunter Brothers) lodges on both sides of the border. Again, despite the price on his head, Lucien secretly went back to Canada. He traveled in many areas including La Prairie, Chambly, Beauharnois, and L'Acadie, recruiting farmers willing to fight for the cause.



Patriote Fighters, 1838

Nelson, Côté, and Gagnon then planned a second attack on November 3^d, to capture parishes along the south shore of the St. Lawrence and then later to seize Montreal, Trois-Rivières, and Quebec. Once again they failed. As the *Patriotes* crossed the border they were immediately driven back by British troops and volunteers. On November 5th Côté, Gagnon, and Philippe Touvre, a French officer recruited by Robert Nelson, led 500 *Patriotes* to Rouses Point, N.Y., to gather weapons and ammunition. They managed to repulse a picket of volunteers at the Lacolle bridge, but on their way back they were easily defeated by militiamen waiting for them. Lucien got away and reached the main body of *Patriotes* in Napierville. Learning that the regular troops under Sir John Colborne were about to arrive, Nelson, Gagnon, and Côté led their men south to Odelltown where on November 9th 1838, they battled a smaller

group of Loyalists. When Loyalist reinforcements arrived, the Patriotes were vastly outnumbered and were forced to disperse. Lucien had courageously fought until the end of the battle when there was no longer any hope, and he reluctantly returned to the United States.

After Odelltown, the *Patriote* movement splintered and fell apart. Bitterly disappointed, Lucien quit the *Patriotes* in 1840. Many participants in the uprising were imprisoned, sent to Australia, or hanged. Lucien's young son, Medard was imprisoned³⁵. Unable to return to Canada, a defeated and penniless Lucien died of tuberculosis in Corbeau, N.Y. on January 7, 1842. Sophie had his body, dressed in the *Patriote* costume of blue tuque (cap) and garments of Canadian cloth, brought back to Saint-Valentin as he had wished.

While the cause may have been just, the rebellions of 1837 and 1838 were doomed for lack of men, weapons, training, and organization. Informants, including the Catholic bishop, also hindered the efforts of the *Patriotes*. Many of their demands would eventually be met, but the Gagnon family would not benefit, for they were now destined for another country. During the time Lucien Gagnon was alive, other political, social, and economic forces were already at play, shaping the future of North America.



Napierville Patriotes Monument ³⁶

35 Also imprisoned and mentioned in subsequent dispositions is a Captain Julien Remillard.

36 Note Colonel Julien (Lucien) Gagnon and a Captain Julien Remillard. The connection between the two families possibly has its roots in the rebellion.

doctor who established a mission near Fort Walla Walla in 1836. The pioneers passing through their lands provided another trading bonanza for the Cayuse, an opportunity of which they took full advantage. With supplies running low, the settlers were more than willing customers after their long trek. Unfortunately for the Cayuse, the settlers also carried white man's diseases. Wagons with sick people detoured to Dr. Whitman's mission in the Walla Walla Valley, passing through the heart of Cayuse country.



Oregon Trail

Just as the Oregon Trail pioneers began arriving in the northwest, the fur trade was winding down, beaver felt hats finally going out of fashion. As a result, French Metis began settling in the Willamette Valley as well as on Cayuse land in the Walla Walla Valley. At this time, Mathieu Dauphin³⁸, an illiterate Metis, came to the area from Missouri. In 1840 he married a Cayuse woman named Suzanne.

38 See Chart G1. Mathieu (Matthew) Dauphin was variously known as Dofa, McDauphin, Duffy, etc.



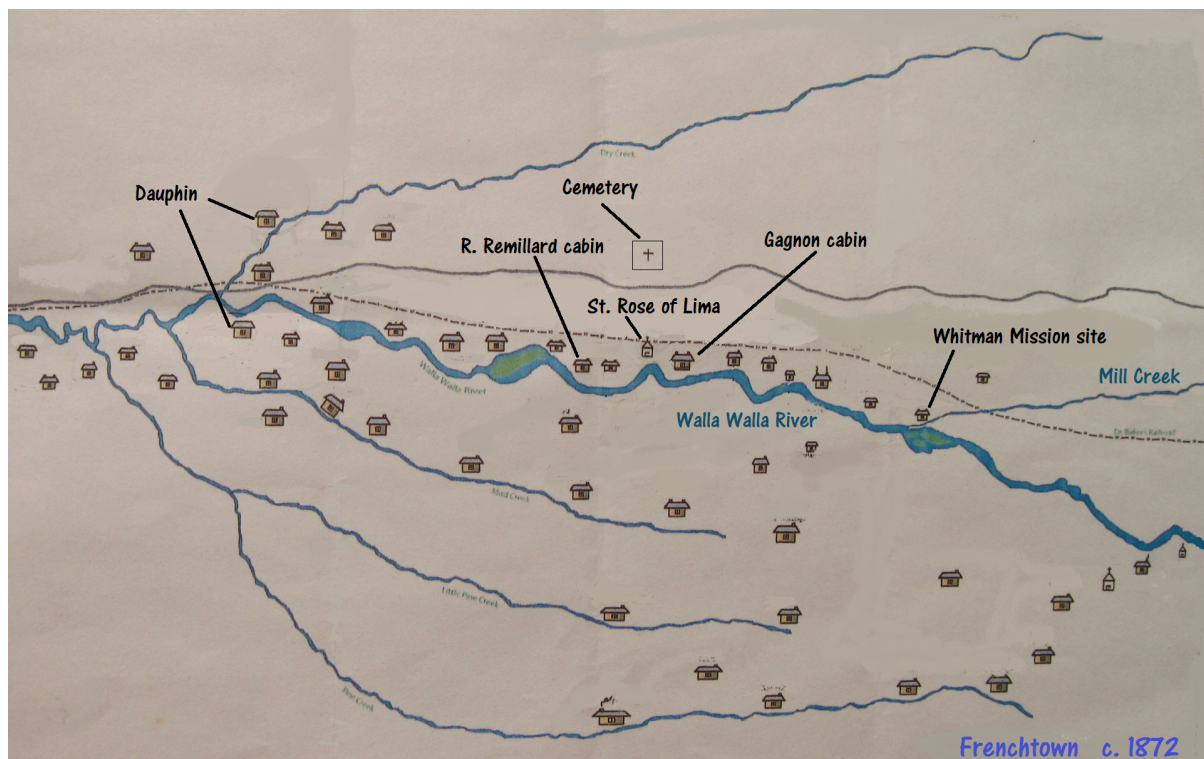
Suzanne

Suzanne and Mathieu would travel throughout the west, living in Utah, California, and Oregon before finally settling down in the Walla Walla Valley of Washington Territory. They would have seven children.

Frenchtown

Frenchtown was never a town, but merely a collection of cabins along the creeks from about present day Lowden to near the city of Walla Walla. Starting about 1824, French employees of the Hudson's Bay Company and their wives from local tribes, began building homes and farming amongst the Indian villages in the valley. By 1836 when Marcus Whitman arrived, there were a dozen Metis families living there. At the time of the Whitman Massacre in 1847, there were about fifty.

With renewed hostilities following the peace treaty signing in 1855 which was yet to be ratified, the Metis were forced out of the valley. In December of 1855 a four day battle, The Battle of Walla Walla (aka The Battle of Frenchtown), was fought in the deserted Frenchtown between 300 Oregon volunteers and Walla Walla, Cayuse, Palouse, and Yakama (Yakima) warriors. Much of the action took place near the cabin of Joseph LaRocque and his wife Lizette Walla Walla which the volunteers used as a fortress.



After peace was restored in 1858 and the U.S. Senate finally ratified the peace treaty in 1859, the Cayuse were moved out. Some of the original settlers returned and many others began settling in the little community.⁴¹

Marcel married Mathieu's and Suzanne's daughter Rosalie in February 1864 and lived in Frenchtown. They would have seven children, one of whom was Marcel Junior, born in 1873. Sadly, Rosalie died in 1878 at age 32. Two years later, Marcel married Julia Raymond.



Marcel Gagnon Sr.

Rosalie Dauphin, Marcel Jr.

Back in La Prairie, Joseph Remillard married Sophie Falcon⁴² in 1861 after his first wife died. The couple moved from Quebec Province to Ontario, settling in the small French-speaking town of Pain Court near Detroit. There, daughter Marie Louise (Louisa) was born in 1874. Tragedy struck the Remillards when Sophie died in 1883, leaving behind nine or ten living children.

41 With the renewed turmoil at the end of 1855, most of the French moved out with friendly Indians, mainly to the Nez Perce lands. Some accounts have Marcel Gagnon coming to the area in 1852 or 1855, but he would not have been able to stay. He probably permanently settled in the valley around 1859-1864.

42 See Chart R1



Sophie Falcon

Meanwhile, Romain (Raymond) Remillard, Joseph's brother, had migrated to the United States and settled in Frenchtown on the Walla Walla River in the 1870's.⁴³ Sometime after Sophie's death, Joseph moved to the United States, taking with him his children Noah, Helen, Louisa, and Phillip.⁴⁴

43 Romain Remillard and his wife Jane (who was 30 years younger) had three daughters, born in Washington Territory approximately between 1876 and 1883. Jane was not listed in the 1885 census.

44 It is interesting to speculate that the Remillards and Gagnons, both families with roots in the Lapraire region, met previous to coming to Frenchtown. It is also worth noting that Dauphin and Suzanne were also in the California gold fields and possibly informed them of the French speaking valley of the Walla Walla.

Remillard–Gagnon Union

The Remillards and Gagnons joined twice in Frenchtown. Noah Remillard married Sophie Gagnon in 1888, and in May 1892 Marcel Gagnon Jr. married Noah's sister, Louisa Remillard.



Louisa Remillard & Marcel Gagnon Jr.

Marcel and Louise first had a son, Joseph Phillip (Phillip). The family then moved from Frenchtown to the Umatilla Indian Reservation in Oregon to take advantage of the Indian rights provided by the federal government. There Marie Amelia (Amelia), Ignatius Marcel (Martin), Wilfred Armandose (Bill), Fred Medard (Fred), and Robert Alvin (Al) were born. After moving to Waitsburg, where Marcel made a living as a saloon keeper, Ernest Edward (Ernie), Napoleon Arthur (Art), and Lucille Delores were born. The family then moved to Yakima where Bernice Delia was born.

With this new, fully American generation the French connection inevitably weakened. It interwove with other cultures as the family tree branched out. Frenchtown has long ceased to exist. No longer is French spoken in Gagnon family households. The family name was anglicized. It was a process that started some 300 years ago when migrants began leaving France.

Rather than lament the loss of our French, French Canadian, or even Native American cultures, we should remind ourselves that, like the multitude of ancestors before us, we are all part of the flow of constantly changing history.

