

# 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.

## Contents

The French Connection .....	3
La Gaignonierre .....	4
New France .....	6
The Percheron Immigration .....	8
Chateau-Richer .....	10
Marriageable Women .....	12
Carignan Soldiers .....	13
The Remillards .....	14
French and Indian Wars .....	15
Acadia and the British Conquest of Canada .....	17
The Seigneurial System .....	18
A Failed Rebellion .....	19
Western Migration .....	23
Whitman Massacre .....	26
Frenchtown .....	28
Remillard – Gagnon Union .....	31
Author's Note .....	33
Appendix A – Family Tree Charts .....	A1

## The French Connection

To someone with a passing knowledge of French, the last four letters of the surname Gagnon would indicate its country of origin. Like many other surnames, Gagnon is an occupational name for a farmer or cultivator. The name is derived from the Old French word “gagneau” which means to “till” or “cultivate.”<sup>1</sup>

The French connection doesn't begin and end with the Gagnon name. Other French names in the North American Gagnon line include Drouin, Tremblay, Cochon, Gagne, Lacroix, Chapelier, Lepage, Gaumond, Daunais, St. Pierre, Bourgerie, Falcon, Simard, Bonneau, Charles, Niel, Robert, Legendre, and Dauphin.<sup>2</sup> Tremblay and Gagnon are among the most common French names in North America.

On the Remillard side the roots in France are even more extensive.<sup>3</sup> In addition to Remillard we have the names Helie, Labbe, Pepin, Lapierre, Pinsonneault, Falcon, Tremblay, Longtin, Lambert, Herbert, Dupuis, Richard, Blanchard, Creste (Crete), Denis, Boucher, Gaudin, Labonte, Morisset, Choret, and others.

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1 Other sources claim the name Gagnon comes from the Old French “gagnon” meaning “guard dog” used as a nickname for an over aggressive man. However, it seems doubtful that an unflattering nickname became a family name. Also, Gagnon is a rather recent spelling variation, occurring most often in Canada and the United States.

2 Some individuals also were known by alternate last names, called *dit* names. The English translation of “*dit*” is “said.” Many colonists of Nouvelle France added *dit* names as distinguishers. The *dit* name may signify an origin or land owned, a name of an ancestor, and such. *Dit* names were common among army soldiers.

3 The Remillard line is 92% French in origin. The Gagnon line is 62-75% French.

## La Gaignonnière

Barnabé Gagnon<sup>4</sup> (or Gaignon<sup>5</sup>) 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, Françoise Creste, farmed and ran an inn there. The hamlet would become known as “La Gaignonnière.”<sup>6</sup>



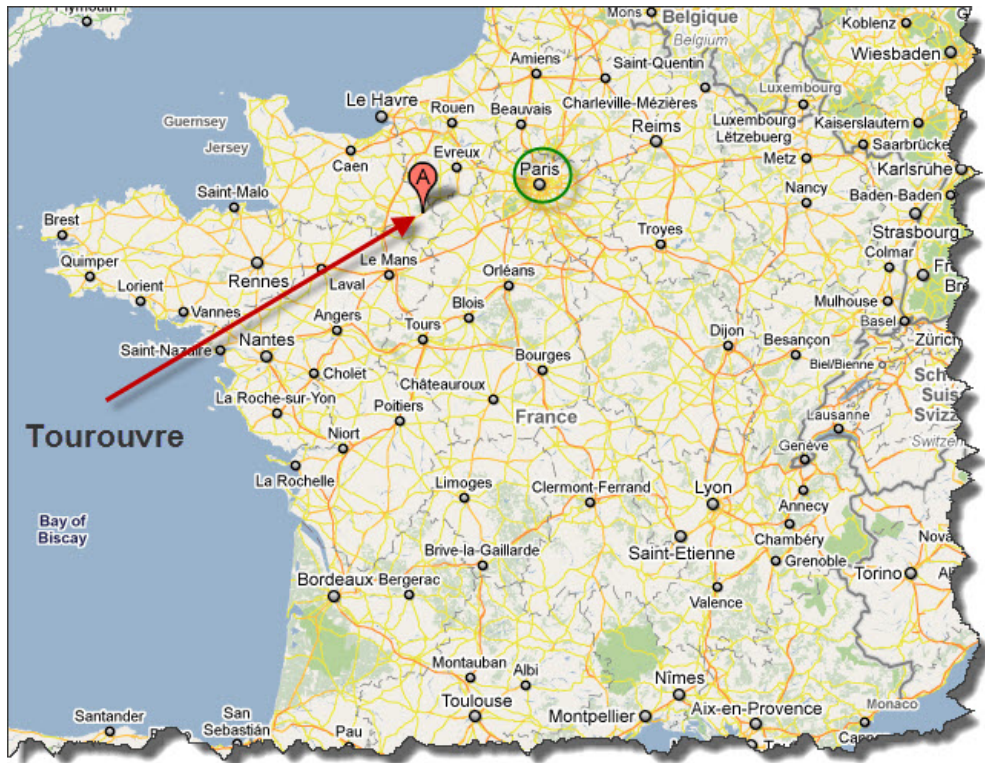
**La Gaignonnière**

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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.<sup>7</sup> 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,<sup>8</sup> 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,<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup>



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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.<sup>11</sup> Helene would marry twice and become a midwife like her aunt Marguerite.



**New France, 1645**

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

## The Percheron Immigration

To help rebuild the tiny town of Quebec, Champlain employed the services of Robert Giffard, a ship's surgeon and one of the first colonists, to help recruit new migrants. Being from the Perche region of France in lower (southern) Normandy, Giffard knew the residents there were well suited for cutting trees and enduring harsh winters. He went from town to town in Perche expounding the opportunities in New France. Many were captivated by the adventure and opportunity of a new life in the New World. The "Percheron Immigration," as it would become known, had begun.

In March 1634, Giffard, his wife and children and about thirty colonists in four ships left Dieppe for New France. These settlers included Tourouvre master mason Jean Guyon<sup>12</sup> and his wife Mathurine Robin, and Robert Drouin,<sup>13</sup> a tile maker and bricklayer and a native of Pin-la-Garenne. After the perilous ocean voyage,<sup>14</sup> they reached Quebec in June.

The following year Giffard recruited even more settlers from Perche. Among these immigrants were three of Barnabe Gagnon's grandsons, Mathurin, Jean<sup>15</sup> (Jehan), and Pierre.

It is likely Robert Drouin, the Guyons, and the Gagnon brothers met Champlain himself. Certainly they attended his funeral in December of 1635.

Quebec now had 132 settlers. Immigrants from the Perche region would continue to arrive for the next 30 years. Among those would be the Gagnon brothers' mother, Renee Roger, their older sister Marguerite and her husband Eloi Tavernier, Mathurin's daughter Marthe, and a cousin, Robert Gagnon. Virtually all Gagnons in North America are descended from these Gagnon immigrants.

The three Gagnon brothers opened a shop in Quebec City on the Rue Saint-Pierre in the lower town. Their business partner was Joseph Masse Gravel who later married Marguerite Tavernier, daughter of their older sister, Marguerite Gagnon.

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12 See Chart G13.

13 See Charts G2, G10.

14 Estimates place the death rate at 10% for those crossing the Atlantic in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, seafarers often dying from disease.

15 See Charts G2, G10. Other sources give later dates for the arrival.





**Gagnon brothers in their Quebec shop<sup>16</sup>**

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.

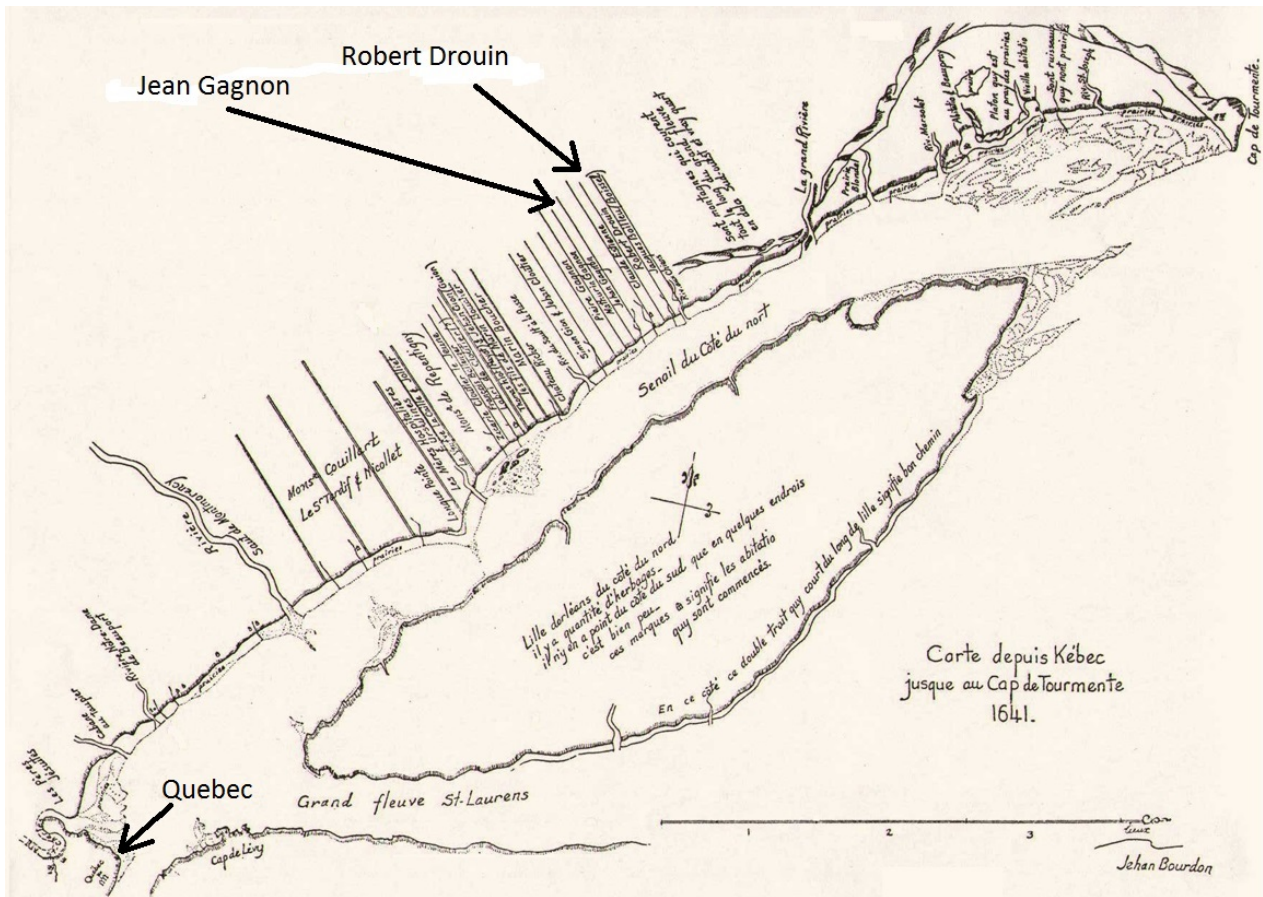
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16 Plaque at the UNESCO World Heritage site in Quebec.

## 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.<sup>17</sup>

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**

<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup> 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.

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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.



## The Remillards

Francois Remillard,<sup>19</sup> the first Remillard to migrate to New France, came from Limoges, France in 1681.<sup>20</sup> Francois Remillard married Anne Gaboury soon after arrival at L'Islet Parish on the south shore of the St. Lawrence River.

Although Francois Remillard didn't appear in New France until after it had been well established, his descendents did marry into families whose immigrant ancestors arrived just as early as the Gagnon line. In fact, the Gagnon and Remillard families share multiple ancestors.<sup>21</sup>

Through the generations, the Remillard family moved upriver, living for many years in the La Prairie area south of Montreal.

Like the Gagnons, the Remillards are mostly descended from French Canadians. However, there are a couple of exceptions. One of those is the interesting story of Elizabeth Corse.

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19 See Chart R2

20 Other spellings of Remillard: Roumihat, Rouillard, Remillaud, Remillon, Remillot, Remilleaux, Remilleau, Rameon. The origin of the name is probably a variation of the name Remy.

21 Grandparents in common: Jean Gagnon & Marguerite Drouin, Pierre Falcon & Genevieve Tremblay, Francois Pinsonneault & Anne Leper, Jerome Longtin & Marie-Louise Dumas, Louis Gagne & Marie Michel, and Perinne Meunier

## French and Indian Wars

Elizabeth Corse<sup>22</sup> was born in Deerfield, Massachusetts in 1696 to James Corse<sup>23</sup> and Elizabeth Catlin. Three months later, Elizabeth's father died, the first of the many tragedies of her eventful life.

Throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> 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 Europe<sup>24</sup> 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.



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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).

The raiders then returned north to Canada with their ill-prepared captives. Some 20 captives died on the 300 mile trek to Canada, either killed because they couldn't keep up or dying from exposure. Only a handful managed to escape. Elizabeth's mother was killed by the Indians seven days into the journey. When the group finally reached Canada, French authorities and sympathetic colonists began to acquire hostages from their Indian captors. The majority of those were traded for ransom or used for prisoner exchanges. Those who did not return to New England, 36 in total, remained in Canada as willing members of a tribe or members of French society. Elizabeth Corse was one of those who stayed.

Elizabeth was taken into the family of Pierre Roy and renamed Elizabeth Casse.<sup>25</sup> Within a year she was baptized as a Catholic. At age sixteen she had a baby girl, but the child died shortly after birth. Later that year she married Jean Baptist Dumontet of La Prairie, who was 37 years older. Together they had seven children. In 1730 one of Elizabeth's brothers went to Canada to bring her back. It is not known if he found her, but if he did she chose not to return. After Dumontet died, she remarried to a man 8 years younger than her, Pierre Monet, and had another six children. Interestingly, Elizabeth's daughter, Elizabeth Dumontet, would later marry Pierre Monet's brother.

Elizabeth Casse's great-granddaughter, Rosalie Monet, would marry into the Remillard family of La Prairie. Rosalie was Louisa Remillard's grandmother.

Elizabeth's story was not unique. Not long after her abduction, another Remillard ancestor, Mathias Farnsworth<sup>26</sup> at age 14 was taken captive on an Indian raid of Groton, Massachusetts when he was working in a field. After over a year of slavery, Mathias was purchased by seminary priests and was baptized. Unable to read or write, his name Farnsworth was eventually transformed into Phaneuf.<sup>27</sup> In addition, Mathias took on the first name of his godfather, Claude. When he came of age, the priests rewarded his work for them with a house and land of his own.

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25 Probably the name "Corse" spoken by an 8 year old with a New England accent sounded much like "Casse" to her French Canadian family. Sometimes Casse is recorded as Lacasse.

26 See Chart R11.

27 As in the case Elizabeth Corse, the French were unfamiliar with the English name and spelled it many different ways somewhat close to its pronunciation at the time.



## Acadia and the British Conquest of Canada

Near the end of the second French and Indian War, the French Colony of Acadia (Acadie) fell to the British, who renamed the colony Nova Scotia. The colonists agreed to neutrality but refused to sign an oath of loyalty. Forty years later when war broke out yet again (known today in the U.S. as “The French and Indian War”) this lack of allegiance became intolerable to the British. Thus began the tragic Expulsion of the Acadians (*Le Grand Dérangement*) from Nova Scotia.<sup>28</sup>

One family caught in this mass deportation were the Heberts<sup>29</sup> of Grand Pre. The first wave of expulsion dispersed Acadians across the other British colonies. The Heberts, deprived of most of their possessions, were forced to go to Guilford, Connecticut, where they faced different religion, language, and customs. Among the children was 13 year old Anastasie.<sup>30</sup> The exiled family stayed in Guilford for many years. Anastasie married a Guilford man, John Smith, at age 26. Her parents finally migrated about 1772 to La Prairie, Canada, an area where other Acadians had moved.<sup>31</sup> John and Anastasie would also migrate to La Prairie, around 1889. Their oldest daughter, Cecile, married Louis-Marie Remillard, who was Louisa Remillard's great-grandfather.<sup>32</sup>

After the British captured Quebec City in 1759 and Montreal in 1760 during the French and Indian War (Seven Years' War in Europe, or War of Conquest in French Canada), French control of Canada ended. French-Canadians were no longer French, but British subjects. However, the change in leadership did not affect the lives of the French-speaking peasantry. The British kept the French civil laws in place, including the seigneurial system.

Meanwhile, migrant pioneer Jean Gagnon's great-great grandson, Pierre Gagnon, moved upriver to La Prairie, south of Montreal, where he married Marie-Anne Longtin to start a new life. Their son, Lucien (Julien) Gagnon, would play another notable role in Canadian history.

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28 French Acadians (*Acadiens*) were widely dispersed. The best known are those who made their way to Louisiana, now called Cajuns (an alteration of Acadians).

29 See Charts R5, R14.

30 See Charts R1, R5.

31 The community of L'Acadie, south of Montreal, was formed by the Acadian refugees. It is now part of Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu, Quebec.

32 See Chart R1.

## **The Seignorial System**

Land ownership in New France wasn't as simple as it is today in Canada or the U.S. Technically speaking, the king owned all the land, but in effect sections of land, seigneuries (fiefs), were held by nobles, clergy, or other people of privilege – the landlords. The “habitants” (or “censitaires,” the tenants) of the land, as the tenants were called, would buy a farm-sized piece of the seignery but would still have to pay rents and various fees to the seigneur.

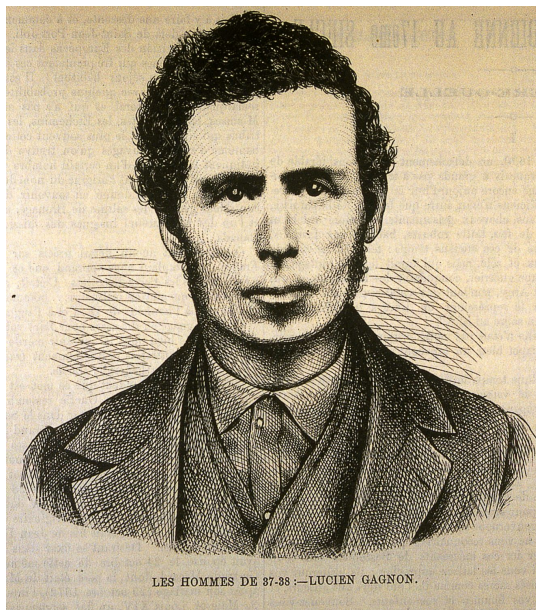
In New France the land was granted to the company which had the monopoly on the fur trade. The company in turn granted seigneuries for valuable services. For example, Robert Giffard obtained his seignery as payment for recruiting colonists. Military officers were also given seigneuries for their service.

Because access to a river was vital for transportation, the farm divisions of the seigneuries were usually long and narrow. Typically, habitant parcels were ten times longer than the frontage width.

Few if any habitants complained about the seignorial system. After all, it was not unlike the system in place in France, which had its roots in the middle ages. But as land became more scarce and farms were divided between surviving children, this vestige of the feudal system would become onerous for the peasant class.

## A Failed Rebellion

After his first wife died, Lucien Gagnon<sup>33</sup> 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,

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33 See Chart G1.

costumed mobs would visit a home late at night to demonstrate their displeasure.

In October Lucien participated in an assembly in St. Charles which encompassed party members from six counties. Six thousand people were there. Some of the leaders wanted an armed rebellion, including Lucien's friend, Dr. Cyrille Côté.

In November Lucien, convinced that the Patriotes in his region had to act, held an important meeting at his home which was attended by Côté, Édouard-Étienne Rodier, Ludger Duvernay, and others. They planned an attack on the village of Saint-Jean, but when the plan was discovered they fled to the United States. From there Lucien secretly went back to Canada, recruiting 60 men from Saint-Valentin and other parishes.

Elsewhere in Lower Canada, others were also taking up arms. A major victory at Saint Denis was followed by losses in which *Patriotes* were badly outnumbered. Upper Canada rebelled as well.

On December 6<sup>th</sup>, Lucien led his men on a raid, crossing the New York-Canada border. They were immediately overwhelmed by a much larger force of Loyalist volunteers. Two men were killed, Lucien was wounded twice, and the rebels retreated back over the border. That same month the governor of Canada posted a reward for the capture of Lucien Gagnon. Lucien's farm was burned and his wife Sophie fled with their children. The next month his land and possessions were confiscated.<sup>34</sup>

During 1838 Lucien rose in the ranks of the rebellion, working closely with Dr. Robert Nelson and Dr. Côté, leading fugitives in the United States. These three represented the more radical element of the *Patriote* movement, wanting more immediate and forceful action, and importantly to Lucien, an end to seigneurie. In February Nelson, with Cote, wrote a Declaration of Independence of Lower Canada. The next week Nelson, Côté, and Gagnon led 300-400 men in an invasion of Canada to form their new country. However, they were quickly repulsed and forced back across the border. Lucien, Nelson, Côté, and other leaders were arrested by U.S. authorities for violating the neutrality law, but were later released.

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34 Inventory of Lucien Gagnon's "lands, effects, and moveables" confiscated in January 1838 included 5 horses, 25 cattle, and large quantities of grain.

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<sup>rd</sup>, 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 5<sup>th</sup> Côté, Gagnon, and Philippe Touvrey, 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 9<sup>th</sup> 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 imprisoned<sup>35</sup>. 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** <sup>36</sup>

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.

## Western Migration

With the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, France no longer controlled land in North America, but the French settlers and fur traders stayed on. The beaver fur trade continued into the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As the beavers became scarce in the east, the search for furs pushed westward. The fur companies established trading posts (forts) throughout the west.

From the beginning the French used the native Indians as major suppliers of beaver pelts. As a result of this trade, the French usually had a closer relationship with natives than their English counterparts. With no white women in the areas they worked, the French trappers, traders, and *voyageurs* (transporters) often took native wives. Their mixed offspring were known as Metis.

When the Lewis and Clark expedition made their way to the Pacific in 1805 and returned in 1806, they relied on the ability of several French Metis. Their route skirted the lands of the Cayuse tribe. A small yet powerful tribe, the Cayuse adopted much of the nomadic lifestyle and warfare philosophy of the Plains Indians. They were closely allied with the larger Nez Percé tribe to the east, with whom they frequently intermarried. Proud and noble in their bearing, they were skilled horsemen, horse breeders, warriors, and traders. It is quite possible the explorers met and traded with the Cayuse.

Not long after Lewis and Clark explored the Pacific Northwest, employees of the fur trading companies came seeking furs. Trading posts were established along the Columbia River. One was built at the mouth of the Walla Walla River, Fort Nez Percés, later to be known as (Old) Fort Walla Walla.<sup>37</sup>

The fur trade was a boon to the Cayuse. Although catching beavers was beneath their dignity, they were able to use their trading skills to obtain coveted white man's goods.

Next to come to the region were the American settlers following a trappers' route, later known as the Oregon Trail, which led them to the fertile Willamette Valley. Among the first was Marcus Whitman, a Protestant missionary and

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<sup>37</sup> Old Fort Walla Walla was established in 1818 by the North-West Company which merged with the Hudson's Bay Company in 1821. Furs were transported up the Columbia River, over the Rockies, and east to Hudson's Bay. Hudson's Bay Company abandoned the fort in 1857. Later Fort Walla Wallas were military forts near the present day city of Walla Walla.

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 Dauphin,<sup>38</sup> an illiterate Metis, came to the area from Missouri. In 1840 he married a Cayuse woman named Suzanne.

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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.

## Whitman Massacre

As the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century came to a close, three historical events affected the Gagnons.

The first was the 1846 treaty with the British establishing the border at the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel instead of the lower Columbia River which the British had long hoped for and expected. This ensured that the future Washington Territory (and state) and the Walla Walla Valley would be American and not Canadian.

1846 was the year Suzanne gave birth to a daughter, Rosalie Dauphin.

The second event was in 1847. The Cayuse tribe, suffering from epidemics, had seen half their people die. Watching Doctor Whitman cure white people while the natives under his care died, many Cayuse believed he was purposely killing them. A band of warriors took matters into their own hands and murdered the Whitmans and twelve other people at the mission. Later known as “The Whitman Massacre,” the event resulted in the “Cayuse War” between the Indians and whites, mostly volunteers from the Willamette.

In 1850 five accused Cayuse were hanged for the Whitman Mission murders.<sup>39</sup> They were baptized just before their deaths by Bishop Francis Blanchet, and Mathieu Dauphin acted as godfather. But the hangings did not end the hostilities, which lasted another five years. The Cayuse war finally ended in 1855 and a treaty was signed by the Cayuse, Walla Walla, and Umatilla tribes and the government. Mathieu Dauphin acted as an interpreter during the peace treaty meetings. The tribes would forfeit most of their lands when the U.S. Senate finally ratified the treaty four years later. During this time more tribes began to fight and war spread across the Northwest. More Cayuse would die.

The third significant event occurred in 1848 when gold was discovered in California. Mathieu and Suzanne took their children to California's Yuba River

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<sup>39</sup> There is much speculation about the innocence of the convicted Cayuse. Some claimed they volunteered, taking the blame in order to appease the whites and thus save the tribe from more bloodshed.

gold field. Meanwhile, Marcel Gagnon, son of Lucien Gagnon, possibly along with brothers Pierre, Medard, and/or Lucien sailed to San Francisco<sup>40</sup> in 1850 to try gold mining with thousands of others. While Marcel probably didn't make a fortune in panning gold, he was successful enough to never lose his taste for prospecting, and continued searching for gold off and on for most of his life.

Just as in Oregon Territory, there were hostilities with native Americans in California which were caused by most of the same cultural conflicts as elsewhere in the country. Marcel volunteered to serve in the mounted militia to quell some of these hostilities. Marcel had noted the many abandoned sailing ships in the bay and concluded San Francisco had no future, and moved on.

Marcel made his way from California to French Prairie (south of Portland) and then to the small French community along the Walla Walla River, Frenchtown, to finally settle down to farm, raise a family, and to continue gold mining in the Northwest.

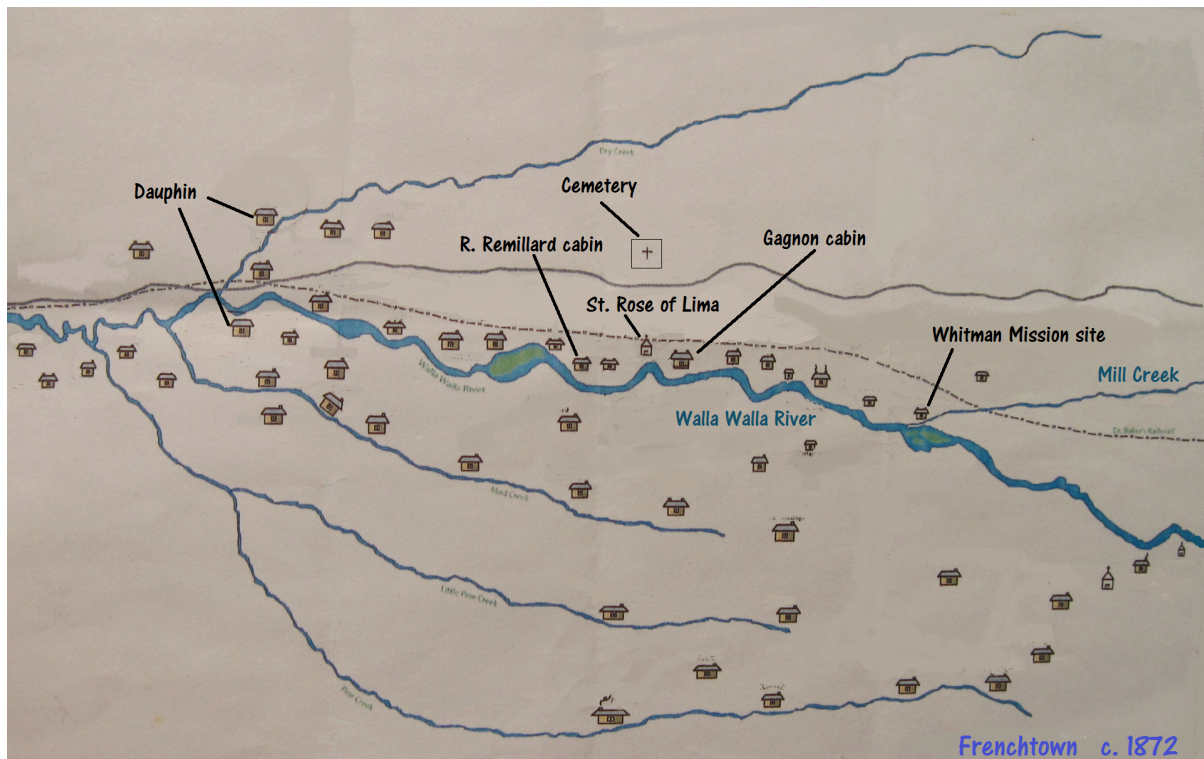
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<sup>40</sup> Marcel's obituary says he sailed around Cape Horn, but other family lore has him crossing the isthmus of Panama. Marcel would have been about 18 when he arrived in San Francisco in 1850. Half-brother Medard would have been about 28, and Lucien, if he was with them, only 14. The 1870 census shows brothers Medard, miner, age 48, and Lucien, farmer, age 34, living with Marcel and his family. A 1910 obituary for older half-brother Pierre Gagnon, age 90, states he arrived in the Walla Walla Valley in 1868.

## 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.<sup>41</sup>

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 Falcon<sup>42</sup> 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.

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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.<sup>43</sup> Sometime after Sophie's death, Joseph moved to the United States, taking with him his children Noah, Helen, Louisa, and Phillip.<sup>44</sup>

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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.





## **Author's Note:**

Information contained in these pages is as accurate as possible. A number of interesting story lines and details were left out because they had doubtful origins, their sources conflicted, or they appeared dubious for other reasons. Still more research material was omitted because it did not add to the overall narrative or would have made for tedious reading. Even so, some details included may not be totally correct because they were needed to tie the three-century-long story together in an interesting way; significant questions of accuracy have been noted accordingly. The agonizing balance between completeness, accuracy, and readability has given me a new respect and sympathy for professional historians.

A special thanks to cousin Dorothy Gagnon Hall for her treasure trove of family information, my late aunt Lucille Gagnon Campbell for her research efforts, and to my wife Leslie (Cohen) Jurasek for her editing help.

James Michael Gagnon,  
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Seattle Washington