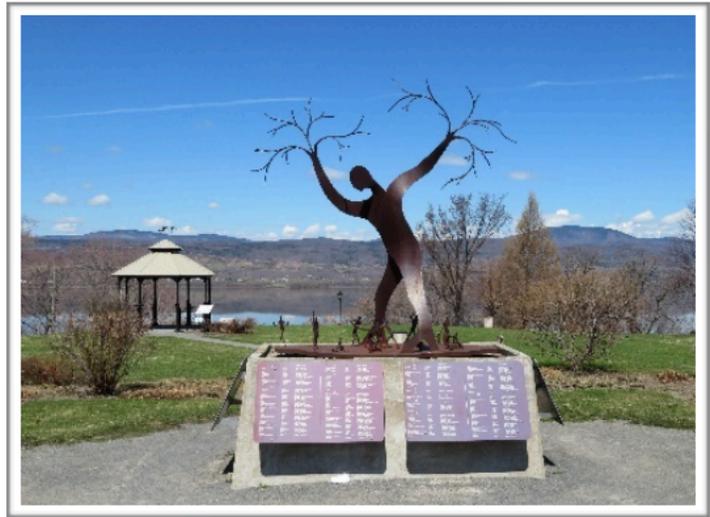


# In Our Ancestors' Footsteps: A Meaningful Trip to the Île d'Orléans, Québec

By Stephanie Balzarini

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In the early 2000's, my Mom's research into her father's French- Canadian family led to the discovery of a link to Louis Houde, a New France pioneer and the patriarch of one of the "Founding Families" of the Île d'Orléans (Island of Orleans) in Québec, Canada. While we have since learned that our ancestry throughout Québec is quite extensive, the allure of this particular ancestral island captivated our imaginations for years, making a trip to the island a "bucket list" destination for both of us.



**FOUNDING FAMILIES SCULPTURE AT PARC-DES-ANCÊTRES WITH ST. LAWRENCE RIVER IN THE BACKGROUND.**

The Île d'Orléans is a large island situated in the St. Lawrence River, about 15 minutes east of old town Québec City, accessible by bridge. It was one of the first areas settled in New France starting around 1650. Today the island is known as the "bread basket" of Québec and is noted for wines, berries, farms, maple syrup and chocolate. Many people of French-Canadian descent can trace ancestors back to this charming island.

In recent years, my research brought us to a fuller understanding of our ancestral connection to the Île d'Orléans. With the aid of modern online genealogy resources in Québec which are plentiful, I've confirmed that our ancestors include not one, but at least 9 families who settled on the island in the 1600s and are considered among the 300 "Founding Families" of the Île d'Orléans. Our ancestors also include other families who were not the first, but who settled in one of the 6 villages on the island in the 18th and 19th centuries. Of the 6 villages, Sainte-Famille was the first parish established in 1661 and the location where many of our ancestors chose to live, and it is quite possible that some distant relatives still do.

Inspired by this information (and cheap airline tickets), in May of 2019 my Mom and I went for a visit. We were not in search of genealogical records on this trip. Instead we were in search of "the sense of place." We wanted to experience the history of Québec City and the Île d'Orléans, and to literally walk where our ancestors walked almost 400 years ago. Just the planning of this trip was thrilling for us. Being there among so much history and locating homesites, churches, graves, and monuments of our ancestors was even more so. We were thoroughly enchanted by these places.

On the Île d'Orléans, we visited, La Maison de Nos Aïeux (The House of Our Ancestors), a small history museum and genealogy center run by the Foundation Francois-Lamy in the old rectory of the Sainte-Famille parish church. As a member I enjoyed an hour of consultation with the staff in the genealogy research room.



We looked at books and maps and a large diorama of the island showing the land owned by each family. Typical of New France, the lots on the island were all very long and narrow providing each owner with both river access and upland forest lands. The staff at the center gave us the current day addresses of land owned by some of our Founding Families, and later that day we drove around the island happily finding these properties and visiting all 6 villages.

The church of Sainte-Famille is a beautiful church completed in 1749 with three bell towers. It is one of the last examples of a typical French Regime period church and is situated in the middle of the village along the main road. Unfortunately, it was not open the day we visited.

We enjoyed the view of the church from the front porch of the old rectory and we strolled around the church building imagining our ancestors witnessing the marriages, baptisms and funerals of their family and friends inside the four walls. We also wandered the path through the old cemetery looking at headstones. On the side of the church next to the cemetery we found plaques commemorating two of our Founding Families' patriarchs, Louis Houde and Gabriel Rouleau.

One of the highlights of our visit to Sainte-Famille was the Parc-des-Ancêtres (Ancestors Park) located near the church and adjacent to La Maison de Nos Aïeux. It is a lovely natural park slopping down to the St. Lawrence River from the old rectory with a path winding toward a large gazebo. A joyful sculpture commemorating the Founding Families greets visitors near the entrance. The name of each family is engraved around the bottom of the sculpture.

While we looked for our ancestors' names, several songbirds with shimmering blue and white feathers flew in and perched on the arms of the sculpture above. Their unexpected arrival seemed symbolic to us, as if our ancestors were welcoming us to the island. We found ourselves pausing to look around and soak in the presence of our ancestors in this place. We both had an unmistakable feeling of belonging. Next time, we decided, we will spend more "down time" in this park and bring a picnic of local specialties.

We are not the first people in my grandfather's family to make the trip to the Île d'Orléans. One of my Mom's cousins recalls being with his grandmother, my Mom's Aunt Isabelle, in the Sainte-Famille cemetery searching for ancestors' graves when he was a child. Isabelle stood in the cemetery and gazed across the St. Lawrence River to the renowned Basilica of St. Anne de Beaupré. We imagine she was feeling the same way we did as she pondered the lives of her ancestors on this island they have inhabited for nearly 400 years.

In fact, we think this must be how many descendants of the Founding Families feel because on the day of our visit we met a man from Germany in the parking lot of the Sainte-Famille church who was standing looking up at the church, mesmerized, and who told my Mom through teary eyes how overwhelmed he was by a sense of being home.