A SUNDRY PLACE

George Bonnallie and the Settlement of Orford Township
by Jane Jenson

In November 1856, the Montreal business and civic community held a gala celebration marking the extension of the Grand Trunk Railway from Montreal to Stratford, Ontario. The organizing committee invited over 4,000 people from Canada East and West as well as the United States and England for two days of festivities. Newspaper reports grouped invitees' names by the cities from which they hailed, such as Toronto, Boston, Smith Falls or London. Reports also used a generic category of "sundry places" for those coming from less important – in the eyes of the committee – locations. George Bonnallie was the only representative of one such sundry place, Orford Township.

Why might a small-time businessman from one of the least important townships have received an invitation? At the time of the fête, Bonnallie was among the township's most prominent citizens, and this for several reasons. The first was by elimination. When created in 1801, the township included half of what became the Town of Sherbrooke, particularly the residential blocks preferred by the town's elite. Subsequent reform carved away parts of the township: in 1855, the newly-established municipality of Orford Township was separated from the city and its business community.

A second reason for Bonnallie's prominence was lack of competitors. The township was developing at the snail's pace predicted in 1815 by a scornful Surveyor-General of Lower Canada, Joseph Bouchette: "Little can be said of this township, and that little not very favourable. It is mountainous, rough, and almost unfit for tillage" (Bouchette, 276). In the mid-1850s, one of the few areas with any significant settlement was north of Orford Mountain, along the road

between Sherbrooke and Granby and bordering Stukely Township. George Bonnallie was the settlers' link to Sherbrooke and to the resources they needed.

The third reason probably best accounts for Bonnallie's invitation to the Montreal celebrations: he understood the forms of networking that today's business schools preach. He was an ambitious young man, and the connections he made with other entrepreneurial young men served throughout a career that was

of necessity multifaceted. He was a rural trader and he operated mills. He was an agent for absentee landowners and even tried mining exploration. Frontier settlement depended on such small-time local entrepreneurs, who are too often left out of the frame in more familiar histories of development, whether in the Eastern Townships or elsewhere in Quebec.

Who was George Bonnallie?

The fourth child of William Bonello and Margaret Miller (Millar), he was born in Dysart, Fife, Scotland. According to Scottish records, it was 1812, but he always claimed 1811. The spelling of the name also remained indefinite. When he witnessed his brother's christening at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Quebec City in February 1823, his childish signature was Georgy Bonnalie. Several of his brothers, who were the first generation to be able to sign their

names, retained that spelling into their adult lives, but George later consistently used two n's and two l's.

The move from Scotland to Lower Canada was an immigration chain. Margaret's brother, John Miller, married Isabella Torrance in Scotland and moved to Quebec City, where her brothers were importers and merchants. John Miller joined the firm William Torrance & Co, but, in 1817, he set up on his own as a "grocer, wine and spirit dealer." Arriving in Quebec with five sons already, the Bonnallie parents saw this connection to prosperous merchants as helpful for their futures, and reminded everyone of it when naming sons number six and seven Andrew Torrance Bonnalie [sic] and Benjamin Torrance Bonnallie. Andrew, born March 1826, and Benjamin, born March 1826, were both christened at St Andrew's Presbyterian Church. Another link in the family chain was George's training. With his father's consent, in 1825, he was apprenticed to his uncle, John Miller, to learn the grocery trade. He would receive room and board, and, at the end of the six-year term, £29 to begin his career.

His apprenticeship over, George returned to his parents' home on Edward Hale's Barony of Portneuf, where Julia Cecilia Kearney, daughter of Michael Kearney and Deborah Doherty (Daugherty), also lived. Born in 1812, Julia too immigrated as a child. The 1825 Lower Canada census page for Cap Santé (p. 1685) identifies "new settlements begun in 1821 by Europeans from Ireland organised by Edward Hale, Esq" [translation]. Her father was first on the list. On September 17, 1833, George and Julia married at St Andrew's Church. Less than 10 days later, identified as a trader (*marchand*) by the notary, George bought a house and shop on the Chemin du Roi in the village of Portneuf. By the

Lake Stukely, previously known as Lake Bonnallie.
Photo: Boréal.

time he paid off and then sold the property in 1838, however, he had moved on to other business and other places.

Although married in the Church of Scotland, Julia Kearney ensured the children received Anglican baptisms and all five, as well as their mother, are buried in St. Peter's cemetery in Sherbrooke. The traveling missionary of the Church of England christened the second son, George Michael, born in November 1836, in Portneuf, where the young family resided. By the next summer, however, they were on the Orford township side of Sherbrooke. On September 23, 1837, George Bonnallie advertised in the *Sherbrooke Gazette* the stagecoach line to Granby that he operated three times a week.

A sub-contract to carry the Royal Mail between Sherbrooke and Granby, notarized by F. X. Bureau on July 18, 1837, made the enterprise financially feasible. The sub-contract signed with Benjamin Pomroy exhibited all the characteristics of George Bonnallie's later business dealings. It included a loan from Pomroy, one of the leading landowners and civic figures in the region. The loan was for £200, and, as the agreement said, was made "in order to enable the said Contractor to fulfil this present contract," that is, to start up. Yet this relationship with the older Pomroy was not sufficient. Bonnallie also had to depend on a "caution" from Henry S. Cutter, a young man clerking in A. G. Woodward's store, and a principal in the new firm George Bonnallie, Hawley and Cutter. Abel Hawley, with Henry and Isaac H. Cutter, sub-contracted with Pomroy to carry the mail from Granby to Montreal. The enterprise did not last, however; by May 1839, a new stage-line proprietor was carrying the mail to Granby three times a week.

The economic difficulties of Lower Canada no doubt spurred Bonnallie's move to Sherbrooke in the politically tumultuous year of 1837. Several years of crop failures had impoverished farmers, particularly in the District of Quebec, thereby undermining the livelihood of rural merchants like him. The agricultural crisis somewhat spared the Eastern Townships, however, where
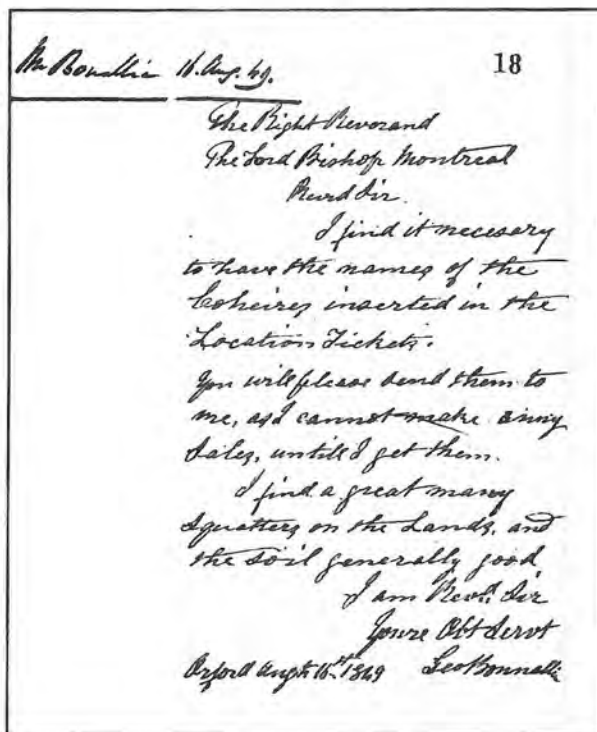
wheat production was less important (Greer, chapter 2). In addition, the 1834 charter of the British American Land Company (BALC) generated hope that colonization would boom. Hostility to the BALC from Patriotes in the Legislative Assembly contributed to a slow take-off, but Sherbrooke's economic elite remained optimistic and their opposition to the Patriotes was firm. In October 1837, merchants (including several of American origin like Samuel Brooks, Pomroy and Hollis Smith) declared their loyalty to the Crown (Kesteman, chapter 5).

In the second wave of rebellion in

1838, with martial law imposed in the St. Francis and Montreal districts, George Bonnallie, along with other young men, was mustered into the Sherbrooke Troop of Calvary, under Captain Henry Beckett. He was posted several times between January and April 1839 to the outposts of Orford Woods and Barford Woods. Alexander Galt, working as secretary for the BALC, was a lieutenant in the Fifth Battalion of Sherbrooke County, Orford Company, in 1838-1839. The "soldiers" seem to have quite enjoyed their war, if we generalize from Edward Hale's letters from his posting in Stanstead. The collective action certainly strengthened ties among young men, especially those recently
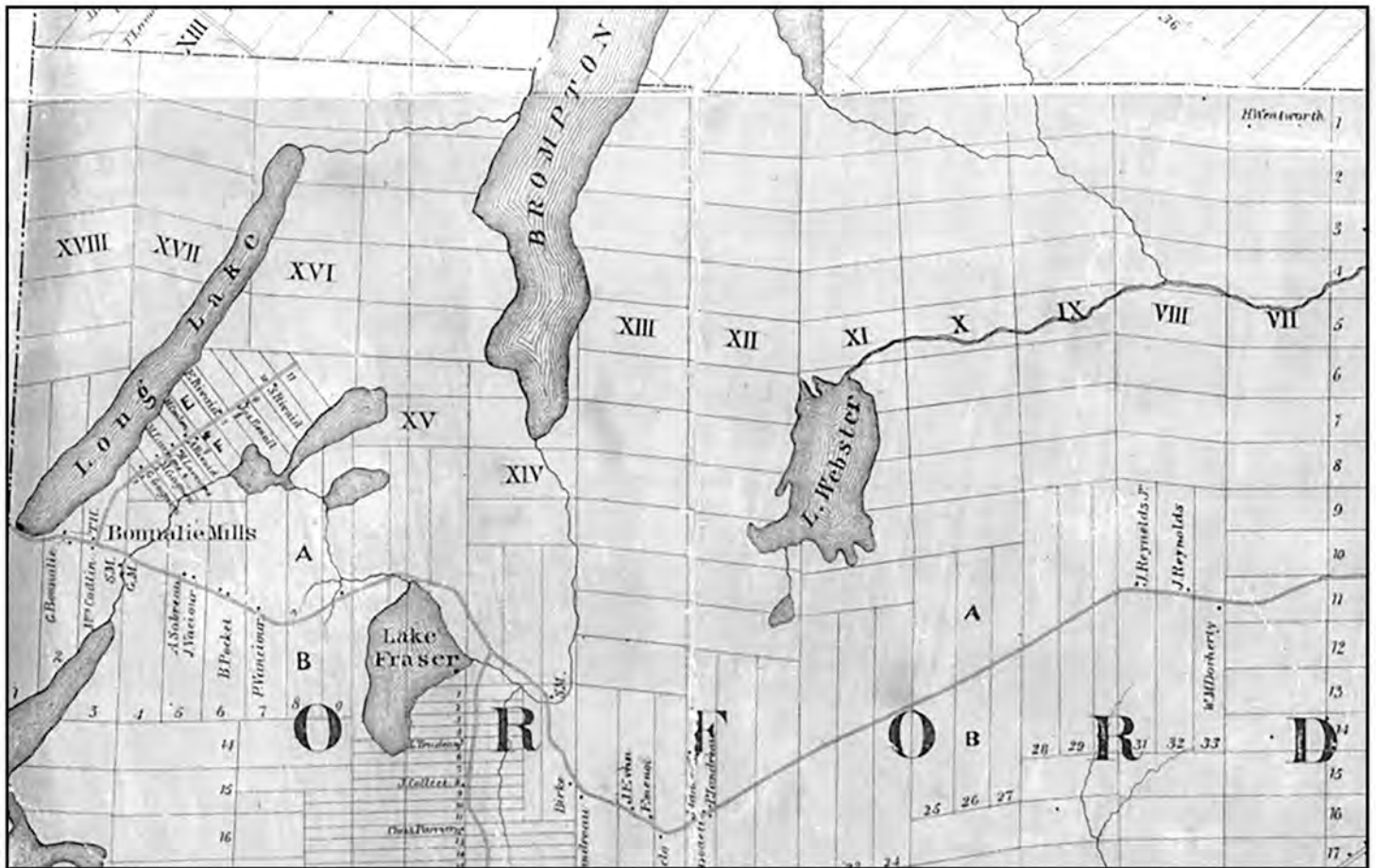
arrived in the Townships. Names of militiamen began appearing on early promises of sale for BALC lots in the western part of Orford township, including George Bonnallie, Carey McClellan Hydeman, Henry Beckett and James Reside. Bonnallie also had a family link to Galt, who became Commissioner of the BALC in 1844. The wife of George's uncle, John Miller, was the aunt of Galt's first and second wives – Elliott Torrance and Amy Gordon Torrance.

Alexander Galt remade the BALC's business plan so that it focused primarily on industrial and railroad development for Sherbrooke. The plan now also favoured settlers who were accustomed to Quebec's climate and farming over new (and impoverished) British immigrants, a change that made French Canadians attractive as settlers. The company offered long credit sales (a decade might elapse between the promise of sale and the deed transfer), accepted payment in kind, and supported infrastructure such as mills (Skelton, 40-51). Therefore, it needed company agents with a particular skill set. Installing settlers, and converting squatters into settlers, required agents who could construct and oversee transfers and deals as well as collect payments. Settling French-Canadians required bilingual agents.

Both the BALC and absentee landowners needed representatives with this skill set, and George Bonnallie possessed it. He became an on-the-ground agent in Orford West (along the Sherbrooke-Granby road from Lake Brompton to the border with Shefford County) and North Stukely. In 1847, Captain William Rhodes and Ann Catherine Dunn gave him power of attorney to manage their land in Stukely that had been granted in 1816 by the Crown to her grandfather, Thomas Dunn, or purchased later. Beginning in 1849, Bonnallie represented Bishop George Jehoshaphat Mountain, whose father, Bishop Jacob Mountain, had also received a Crown grant in that township the same year. Bonnallie likewise represented the BALC, and, in turn, the company and its young commissioner were key nodes in the network sustaining his multiple enterprises.

The assignment from the landowners and BALC was similar: ensure regularized settlement and, eventually, sales. The agent negotiated terms of a promise of sale with settlers; outright purchase by new arrivals happened infrequently. The terms required settlers to improve the land, pay "rent," and eventually complete the purchase and obtain a deed. Agents often had to negotiate terms again, when discouraged or indebted settlers moved out without getting a deed. They also collected annual payments, sometimes taking livestock or produce in lieu of cash. Even this seemingly straightforward task was not simple, however. As George Bonnallie wrote to Bishop Mountain in November 1850, "The Settlers on your Lands, similar to those in the other new parts of the Eastern Townships, are generally poor as a matter of course, although they are rapidly progressing in their improvements and it may be fairly inferred, will eventually make their payments as promptly as could reasonably be expected." The Bishop complained, however, about late payments from his agent.

Squatters might become settlers with a claim to title. The lack of surveillance by absentee owners made it feasible simply to take up land and "improve" it. Wrangling in the Legislative Assembly over property rights on private as well as Crown lands made simple ejection difficult (Little, 390-393). After an initial assessment, Bonnallie reported to Bishop Mountain in August 1849, "I find a great many Squatters on the Lands, and the soil generally good." His job was to convince squatters to accept promises of sale and oversee what were essentially installment payments. In an 1856 letter, Hollis Smith said that the company was pleased with Bonnallie's "settlement with squatters," having made "a favorable arrangement with them by sales as stipulated in articles of agreement." The company complained, however, about his high commission.

Smith feared too that the BALC's interest might take second place to the agent's own, because George Bonnallie's main business was his store; notarized documents consistently identified him as a trader. He provided items the settlers could not produce themselves with stock he purchased from wholesale merchants in Sherbooke. As did rural traders across Quebec, he provided credit, with customers usually settling bills after harvest. And, as did settlers everywhere, some accumulated heavy debts, with the result that land transfers frequently included significant amounts paid by the purchaser to settle the vendor's debt to a trader. Bonnallie's name appeared frequently in such transfers. He also continued practices begun during his business partnership with William Brooks. Almost the same age as Bonnallie, Brooks was a third-generation merchant whose large wholesale business in Sherbrooke put him in contact with rural traders. In the situation of fluid settlement in the Townships, merchants often held mortgages, purchased debt, and bought land. Brooks and Bonnallie had several such dealings in various townships, but Bonnallie's main area of operations after 1850 was along the Stukely-Orford boundary. He gave mortgages covering store debts to settlers, who might default. In addition, he sometimes purchased a lot from a farmer seeking to buy elsewhere, return to the place from which he had come, or move to the United States. Bonnallie then tried to resell the land as quickly as possible to newcomers or adult children of earlier arrivals.

Such transactions meant that traders as much as settlers juggled their credit.

Here the relationships that had been developed in Sherbrooke in the 1830s were crucial. With Galt as Commissioner, the BALC lent Bonnallie £500 in 1854, with the final payment due only in 1861. The company's interest in such a loan was to ensure that settlers holding the company's promises of sale would not be driven to default because of debts to a merchant who was also squeezed to pay his debts. Nonetheless, still short of cash, Bonnallie turned to various people in his Sherbrooke network to endorse bank loans, including William, Charles and Edward Brooks, Hiram Moe, and A. T. Galt. He also got credit from Sherbrooke merchants, including A. G. Woodward, to whom he promised in February 1855 to settle within a month a £50 debt with "good, fair pine boards." Unfortunately, they were still undelivered in June 1856, because the supply of boards was hostage to a teetering transaction he was brokering near Fraser Lake.

The economic precariousness of the region meant that in addition to being a trader and an agent for several landowners, George Bonnallie relied on a third significant string in his entrepreneurial bow; he operated mills. In partnership with William Brooks, he purchased lot 3 in Range B in Orford West (at the outlet of Lake Stukely) for £75 in 1848. The lot was a good waterpower site and the year before the BALC had sold it to Carey Hyndman for £27 Halifax currency (approximately £25). No reason for the jump in price was given, but undoubtedly the payment schedule of £43 as down payment and the rest spread over two years was to accommodate Bonnallie's limited purse rather than Brooks', who was then investing thousands of pounds in cotton and sawmills in Sherbrooke. The partnership with Brooks to buy that lot was the cornerstone of Bonnallie's future. Mortgages on the lot would anchor many of Bonnallie's subsequent initiatives. In 1849, he received an interest-free loan of £250 from the BALC for the grist mill that the company hoped would attract settlement. He hired a miller and sold pieces of the lot to raise cash, including a piece for a schoolhouse in 1853. In 1854, he bought Brooks' share and, in 1856, he acquired the sawmill built by Stephen Cushing Bowker and operated by him

since 1846 on lot 4W of Range B, just across the road. This consolidation gave the area the unofficial name "Bonnallie Mills," a designation used well into the twentieth century. Like the store, the mill provided detailed local knowledge of settlers' situations that was useful in land transactions, whether his own or those
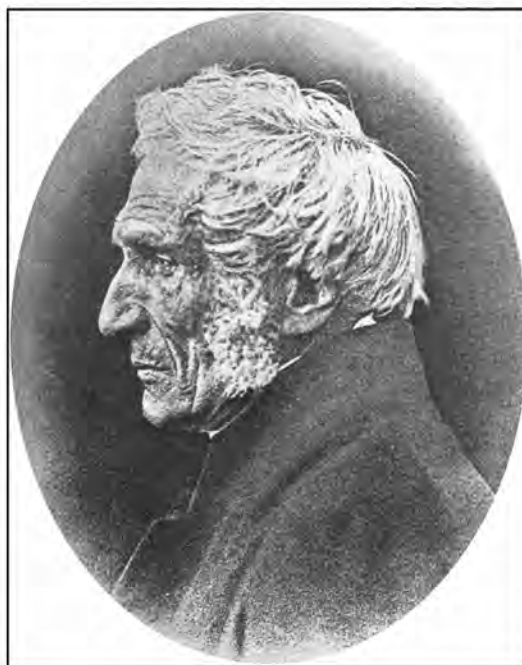
brokered for the BALC and absentee landowners. Hollis Smith recognized this asset when he commended his work with settlers: "Mr. Bonnallie resides in the neighbourhood and has considerable influence with them."

This influence was used politically, too, generally on the side of Bonnallie's usual Sherbrooke network. On February 5, 1850, the *Montreal Herald & Daily Commercial Gazette* reported that, with Hollis Smith and two others, Bonnallie formed the Orford township committee for the election of J. S. Sanborn to the Legislative Assembly seat vacated by A. T. Galt's resignation. Sanborn's appeal to his Sherbrooke supporters was his backing of the Annexation Movement, which major merchants, along with Galt, had been promoting since 1849. When Galt was later back in office, George Bonnallie was among the 25 or so voters (including several Brooks and Becketts) who called for a public meeting in Sherbrooke to express outrage at "an imputation cast upon" the MPP, as the same paper reported April 22, 1857. Bonnallie also held office himself. Canada East

instituted municipal government with large district councils in 1841, enabling Bonnallie's modest start. The decade's records are spotty at best, but, in January 1845, John Felton, the returning officer for Orford township, informed Edward Hale, the Warden of the District of Sherbrooke, that George Bonnallie's name had been forwarded as one of the Overseers of Highways, Fence Viewers or Inspectors of Drains. When the 1855 Lower Canada Municipal and Road Act placed both the town of Sherbrooke and the municipality of Orford Township in Compton County, he attended the meeting of the county council in September 1855 as mayor of Orford (Channell, 48).

Bonnallie's career in Orford was reaching its height, as the invitation mentioned at the beginning of this article indicates, and he was ready for a larger initiative. In the 1850s, a "copper rush" began in the Eastern Townships and the need for copper during the American Civil War (1861-65) pushed the frenzy further (Farfan). When promising traces of copper appeared in Stukely and Orford, Bonnallie joined the rush. To obtain and exploit mineral rights, he formed a company in August 1860 with another major trader of the area, M. A. Bessette, as well as Malcolm McFarlane, Jr. and S. Paquette. When that company was dissolved after only a year, Bessette and Bonnallie joined a consortium of Montreal-based financiers, including A. T. Galt, Thomas McCaw, Donald Lorn McDougall, and Walter Shanly, incorporated by the British Parliament as Orford Mining and Smelting Company of Lower Canada (27 Victoria, Cap 78) in 1863. Both local traders had been actively purchasing mineral rights, with Bonnallie concentrating on the western ranges in Orford in active collaboration with Galt and Shanly. A promising report of one of his finds appeared in the *Montreal Herald & Daily Commercial Gazette* on May 4, 1864, followed by the *Geological Survey's Report of Progress from 1863 to 1866* (pp. 302-303) listing good results on several lots in Ranges E, F and A of Orford township, all near Bonnallie Mills, where the company's directors had been acquiring rights. Nonetheless, as happened to many in this copper rush, the deposits were insuffi-

George Jehoshaphat Mountain, Anglican Bishop of Montreal.
Cyrus MacMillan, McGill and Its Story, 1821-1921, London, 1921.

cient to merit mining; when the Civil War ended and the copper market contracted, the venture fizzled.

Also fading was George Bonnallie's attachment to this sundry place, Orford township. By 1860, his many notarized transactions no longer described him as a trader. Thanks to his efforts as agent, most the BALC and Dunn lots had been sold or had stable arrangements for sale, and Bishop Mountain's lots were being sold after his death. By 1865, three of his adult children were married: Deborah (to Henry McFarlane); Celia (to Henry's brother, Malcolm, Jr.); and George (to Helen Beers). William, the older son, and Elizabeth, the youngest daughter, were courting with two Beckett children, Rosanna and Frederick, and would soon marry. In March 1865, Bonnallie settled one of his lots in North Stukely on his son George. He also charged William with managing certain properties to provide a lifetime pension for his mother, Julia. When she then agreed to renounce her marital rights and those of her children, George and Julia were essentially divorced. In a complicated series of transactions a year later, including loans and mortgages from A. T. Galt, Bonnalie transferred land at Bonnallie Mills to William in exchange for his son settling a series of debts. George Bonnallie had already left Canada with a widow from North Stukely, Domatilde Amelotte (whose husband Simon Raymond died in 1862) and several of her young children, who took the name Bonnallie. On April 28, 1865, George Bonnallie, son of Domatilde and George, was born in Lewiston, Maine, and another chapter began.

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Sources

Note: George Bonnallie left no written documents except for seven letters sent to Bishop Mountain between 1849 and 1857, copies of which are in the Brome County Historical Society archives (Acc #85-62). The *registre foncier,* as well as newspapers and notarial acts in the BAnQ collection, are the main sources used. The vast majority of the acts were prepared by Maître Charles Têtu, the primary notary for Orford West and North Stukely (Bonsecours) between 1850 and 1882. Additional information is from the Edward Hale Papers at the McCord Museum and the Rhodes and Tudor-Hart Papers at McGill University. Specific references for notarial documents are available from the author.

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