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THE SEIGNIORY OF METIS

1675 - 1854

PLACE OF REUNION OF THE INDIANS
FROM EARLY TIMES, GRANTED AS A
SEIGNIORY BY COUNT FRONTENAC IN
1675, SETTLED AND DEVELOPED BY
THE SCOTCH SEIGNIOR, JOHN McNIDER,
THE STORY OF METIS IS AN INTEREST-
ING CHAPTER OF THE HERITAGE OF
GASPESIA.

KEN ANNETT

THE SEIGNIORY OF METIS

At the village of Ste-Flavie, a few miles down the St. Lawrence river route from Rimouski and the adjacent, landmark lighthouse of Father Point, the Gaspesia-bound traveller faces a choice of route. The way to the right will lead to Mont Joli and onward to the shores of Lake Matapedia and the valley of the Matapedia River to reach the Restigouche near the head of Bay Chaleur. The alternate route continues to follow the St. Lawrence eastward. In either case, once past Ste-Flavie, the traveller begins to feel the subtle "lure of the Gaspé". Another few miles to the east along the St. Lawrence will bring him to Metis, a Gaspeian community with an interesting and rather unique history and heritage.

Long before the sails of European seamen and explorers appeared in the Gulf and Estuary of the St. Lawrence, the site of Metis was well known to the bands of nomadic Indians who used the river as their highway. Though there is some difference of learned opinion on the meaning of the word, Metis, it seems fairly certain that it is a derivative of the Indian term, METIOUI or MITIWEE, signifying PLACE OF REUNION. For it was the custom of the bands of Indian fishermen and hunters to hold an annual, summer reunion at some agreeable place that had an assured supply of food at hand. The site at the mouth of the Great Metis River, where its waters from the wilderness watershed in the Gaspeian mountains met the tidal waters of the mighty St. Lawrence, was considered by the Indians as a choice venue for summer reunion. There they found convenient camp-sites, an agreeable, sea-tempered, summer climate and an abundant food supply of salmon, trout, eels and forest game. There they paused from nomadic roaming to relax with fun and games while the elders of the band held solemn council on matters of general interest to the tribe. In fact, as well as in name, Metis was for them, Place Of Reunion.

As time marched on to usher in the era of New France, the Governors and colonists gave priority to the possession of lands bordering the St. Lawrence-the Great Highway of New France. As the territory had not yet been surveyed or even mapped adequately, it is not surprising that some of the grants made at Quebec were frequently vague and ill-defined. Certainly this seems to have been the case in the grant of the Seigniory of Metis in 1675 by Count Frontenac to M. de Peiras, an influential member of the Sovereign Council. The grant of Metis, then described as having a frontage of two leagues on the St. Lawrence and two leagues in depth, together with three Islands and Islets called St. Barnabé, may well have enhanced the prestige of M. de Peiras as a landowner but there is little evidence that he proceeded to develop and settle his seigniory in accordance with the terms of the award. In fact, the successors of Count Frontenac evidently forgot or disregarded the claim of M. de Peiras. Little was heard of the grant of 1675 until the year 1724 when Louis Lambert, a merchant of Quebec related by marriage to the family of de Peiras, came forward to swear FOI ET HOMMAGE for the Metis Seigniory. Meanwhile, however, Governor Denonville had granted the seigniory to the Sieur de Villeray and his son, the Sieur de la Cordonniere. Governor Denonville was evidently no better informed regarding the topography of the Metis region, for the year following he proceeded to grant the River Metis and its banks in Fief to the Sieur Francois Pachot. The only potential that appears to have been developed at Metis as a result of these early and conflicting grants was that for protracted legal wrangling over the respective ownership claims for the seigniory.

It remained for the McNider family to begin the settlement and development of Metis some fifty years after the Conquest. Matthew McNider, whose uncle, also Matthew McNider had come to Quebec from Scotland in the early years of the British Regime and had become a successful merchant and member of the Quebec Assembly, acquired title to the Seigniory of Metis in 1802 from Antoine Joubin dit Boisvert and his wife, Madeleine Pinguet, descendants of the late Charles Lambert. Five

years later a cousin, John McNider bought the rights to the Seigniory - reportedly at Sheriff's Sale for as little as the equivalent of \$500.00 - and became in fact, as well as name, the Seignior of Metis. Born in Scotland the son of William McNider and a nephew of Matthew McNider, M.L.A. of Quebec, James McNider had come to Quebec as a young lad, been successful in business and had been a founding member and vice-president of the Bank of Quebec. In him the Seigniory of Metis found a man with the dreams and ambition to pursue its development and with the means to do so.

At Little Metis Point John McNider built his Manor House where, in season, his wife Angelique Stuart Ross McNider, presided as hostess. A fishing station was developed at L'Anse-aux-Morts, a ship-yard operated at Little Metis and a Pilot Station established to serve shipping on the St. Lawrence. McNider vessels linked the Metis Seigniory with Quebec and other ports along the river. As a pioneer road builder of the Lower St. Lawrence region, John McNider is said to have persuaded the Governor, Sir James Kempt, to undertake the building of the Kempt Road that would eventually link the St. Lawrence with Bay Chaleur via the Matapedia Lake and Valley route. The story of the Kempt Road will be the subject of a future article in the GASPE OF YESTERDAY series.

But unquestionably the most significant and lasting of John McNider's accomplishments as Seignior of Metis was the settlement on his lands of families from Scotland and those of soldiers disbanded after the end of the War of 1812-1814. He did much more than make land available to these new settlers for he helped them to become established and provided the base of industry for local employment. By the year 1822 some 100 persons had settled along the river frontage of the Metis Seigniory including the families to be named later in this article.

The development of Metis was enhanced by the personal friendship of John McNider with William Price and their cooperation in exploiting the rich forest resources of the Metis hinterland. Price had a saw-mill built on the

bank of the river Metis and began the export of lumber to Quebec and overseas markets. This forest industry provided year long employment for a number of the pioneer settlers brought to Metis by John McNider.

The early story of the Seigniory of Metis would be incomplete without reference to the wife of John McNider. Not only did she support him in his plans for Metis but her interesting "JOURNAL" recorded fascinating details of life, travel and personalities of her time. Born Angelique Stuart, daughter of the well-known Stuart family of Quebec, she was linked, through her Mother, with the Cartier family that gave Quebec and Canada the eminent statesman, Sir George Etienne Cartier. Angelique Stuart grew up to marry William Ross of Quebec. Following the death of her first husband, the Widow Ross married John McNider and at Quebec and the Manor House of the Seigniory of Metis was hostess to many of the influential and distinguished persons of her day. She died the same year, 1829, as her second husband, John McNider. As the couple had no children of their marriage and were in community of property, the settlement of their estate between the heirs of John McNider, his nephews John and William, the sons of Adam Lymburner McNider, and the heirs of Angelique, the family of her first marriage with William Ross, required many years of complex legal effort.

Following the death of John McNider his role as Seignior of Metis was assumed by Adam Lymburner McNider, whose sons of minor age were designated heirs of their uncle's estate. Adam continued the progressive settlement policy of his predecessor and opened up the 2nd and 3rd ranges of the seigniory. From the visit to Metis by Joseph Bouchette in 1830 and his book, "THE BRITISH DOMINION IN NORTH AMERICA", we learn that he was much impressed by the settlement and progress of the seigniory. He not only noted the ship-yard but remarked that a dry-dock had been devised for the overhaul and repair of vessels. In addition to the saw-mill of William Price, he noted that there was a grist-mill on the Brand Brook to serve the needs of the settlers. Near the fishing station

at L'Anse-des-Morts, directed by James McNider, a group of Indian families had their abode.

Reference to religious life at the Metis Seigniory is found in the "JOURNALS" of Archdeacon George J. Mountain and in the travel records of such Roman Catholic visitors as Bishop Plessis. In 1847 a church was built at Leggat's Point by the settlers of whom the names of William Turrif, Dugald Smith, Peter Legatt, Sr., and William McRae were prominent as founders.

Neither William nor John McNider, the nephews of John McNider were active as Seigneurs of Metis and in the decade following the death of their father, Adam, at the Manor House, Metis, in 1840, they sold the Seigniory to Archibald and David Ferguson, merchants of Montreal and personal friends of the last McNider Seignior. At the time of their purchase the Ferguson brothers agreed that Archibald would have Great Metis while David would take Little Metis. Subsequently Archibald sold his interests to David who remained the sole Seignior until his death. He built a new Manor House at Little Metis to replace the original home of John McNider that was destroyed by fire about 1854. The Manor of David Ferguson stood until 1935.

Though the seigniorial system of Quebec was ended formally by the Seigniorial Act of the Legislature in 1854, the old traditions were slow to fade away - particularly at Metis. There David Ferguson continued to be known as Seignior until his death in 1870. His son and heir, John H. Ferguson continued in that tradition. As the Act of 1854 required that an inventory and report be drawn up for each of the existing seigniories we are fortunate in having in the Legislative Records the family names of those English and Scottish families settled at Metis. These include:

1st Concession.

Ferguson; McEwing; Page; Campbell; Brand; McMillan; McCowan; Cawell; Smith; Leggat; McCalister; Paul; Fraser; McNider; Richey.

2nd Concession

McEwing; Crawford; Astle; Turrif; Sym; Stuart; Campbell; Smith; Cawell;
 Craig; McCarren; Blue; Burns; McGougan; McCowan; McMellan; Smith; Shaw;

3rd Concession

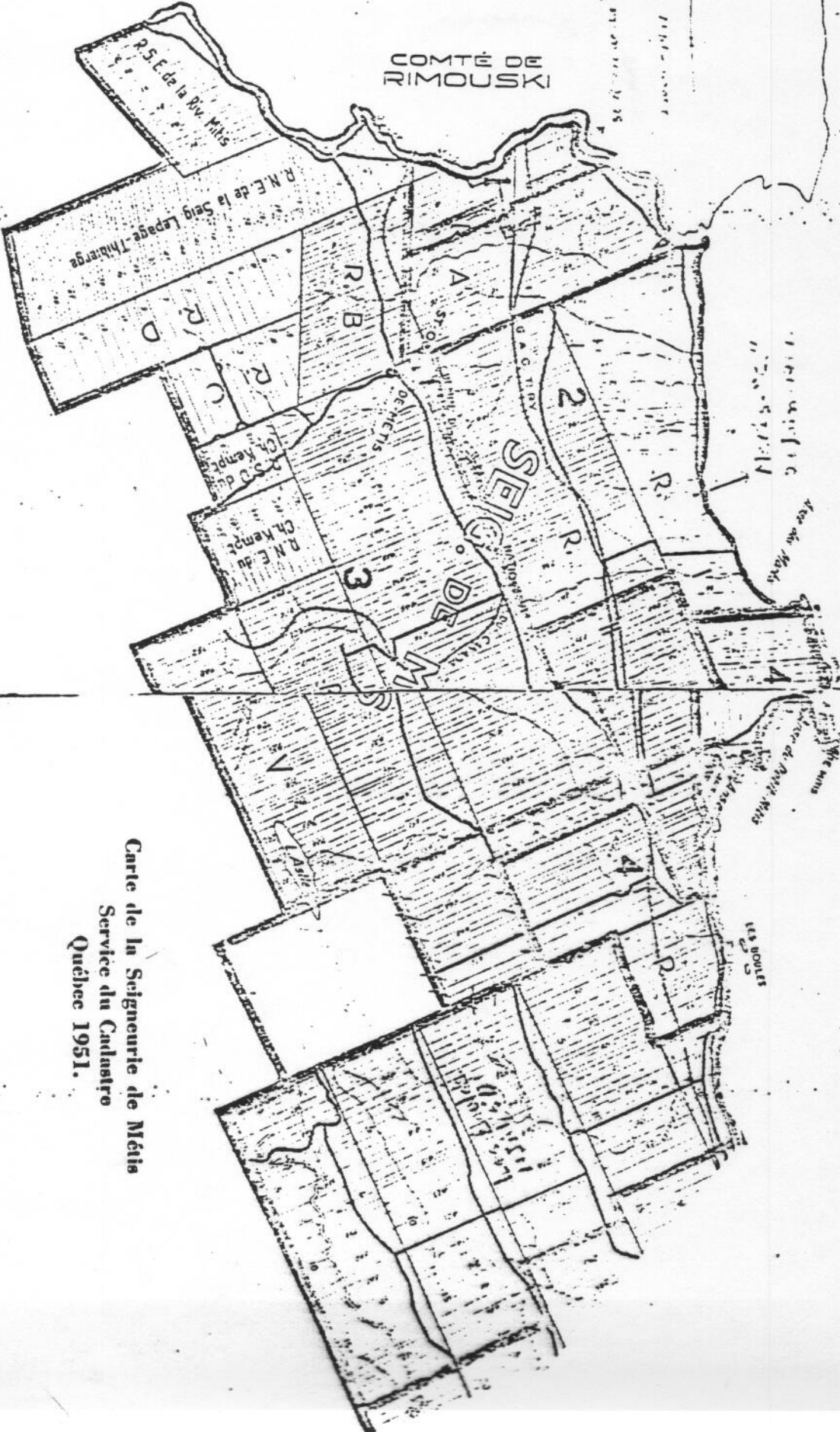
McNider; McEwing; Crawford; Astle; Turrif; Sym; Stuart; Smith; Craig; Polding;
 Ross; Riley.

During the latter years of his life John H. Ferguson didn't live any longer in the old stone Manor that his father, David, had built. He built a modest home south of the highway where he lived with his sisters. In 1886 he sold the Domaine of Great Metis to George Stephen, Montreal financier and President of the Bank of Montreal. Stephen is also remembered as the associate of his cousin, Donald Smith, in the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway. At Great Metis, George Stephen built an impressive summer home which was inherited by his niece, Mrs Robert Reford, née Elsie Stephen Meighen. It was Mrs. Reford who embellished the estate with the magnificent gardens that now constitute the Provincial Park of Grand Metis.

On the death of John H. Ferguson in 1920, without heirs, the Domaine of Little Metis was acquired by the Hon. Arthur Mathewson, a former treasurer of the Province of Quebec.

In this brief recall of the past of Metis only the highlights of its interesting story have been mentioned. The family history of many of its pioneer settlers would be equally of interest. Gaspesians and the visitor to Gaspesia find in Metis a rich and fascinating heritage that in great measure is the memorial of its Seigniors, the McNider family and their successors.

COMTÉ DE RIMOUSKI



Carte de la Seigneurie de Métis
Service du Cadastre
Québec 1951.

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