CHAPTER 1

The Eastern Townships in the Early Nineteenth Century

Before the British conquest of New France in 1759, few Europeans had ventured into the barren mountainous area that would become the Eastern Townships (see map on page 74). Located between the French-speaking colony along the St. Lawrence River and the border with what would become the United States to the southeast, this area was sparsely populated by Abenaki Indians during most of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The region was first settled by American immigrants and followed by British immigrants in the early years of the nineteenth century. These immigrants brought with them a cultural and religious diversity and a close affinity with the American states close to the border. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the Eastern Townships had formed a diverse society—a suitable place for the implantation of the Millerite movement and Adventist denominations.¹

Early Settlements

Soon after the British conquest, governmental authorities in London wished to assimilate the French population (which numbered approximately 60,000) as quickly as possible. British immigration was favored and laws were passed to obstruct the participation of French people in the overall life of the colony. But few English-speaking people immigrated to this new British colony and the French population
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continued to grow, doubling its size within a generation, and thus making it almost impossible to assimilate. It was only at the end of the American Revolution in 1783 that the arrival of hundreds of Loyalist families began to change the demographic composition of the region. While most of them settled in areas of Upper Canada (Ontario) or the Maritimes, some Loyalists settled on lands near the American border along Lake Champlain in Lower Canada. These American immigrants were fearful of French Canadians and their religion, however, and preferred to keep their distance from them. Interestingly, British authorities were also hesitant, if not fearful, of these new immigrants and thought that they might side with the new American nation if another conflict erupted between them. These misgivings on the part of British authorities halted the opening of the Eastern Townships until the end of the eighteenth century. In the meantime, however, a number of Loyalists settled on these lands as squatters, not waiting for the official permission to do so. Once open for settlement, the Eastern Townships saw also the influx of other American immigrants who were not necessarily Loyalist in mind and spirit. These new immigrants, seeking a better life and motivated by an entrepreneurial spirit, added much to the economic diversity of the area.

But the British authorities did not wish to see the Eastern Townships become a little American enclave in Canada; rather, the Townships were destined to become a buffer zone between the French Canadians along the St. Lawrence River and the Americans to the south. Hence, British immigration to the Townships was strongly encouraged and various governmental dispositions favored the settlements of English, Irish, and Scottish immigrants. Yet, this pro-British ambition backfired when the high price of lands and poor roads hindered British immigrants from settling in the area. Of the 750,000 British immigrants who alighted in Quebec City between 1829 and 1853, few settled in the Eastern Townships. In 1851, the majority of people living in the townships near the American border were still of American descent. Instead of creating a homogeneous society by overpowering the American elements in the Townships, British immigration only accentuated its diversity. A third migratory phase would do this even more.
Before the 1840s, there was practically no French presence in the Eastern Townships. Yet, by then, the lands along the St. Lawrence River were overpopulated, and the younger generation was in need of employment. As American factories in New England offered good jobs, thousands of French Canadians emigrated to the United States. In the eyes of the French Canadian Roman Catholic clergy, however, this emigration was equated with losing the faith, and strong efforts were put forth to keep French Canadians in Canada. The open lands of the Eastern Townships became the target of much political maneuvering. The same obstacles to British immigration also hindered French Canadians from settling in the Townships. Nonetheless, more and more French Canadians settled in the area, adding more cultural diversity to the region.

Interestingly, these migration phases into the Eastern Townships were followed by the emigration of the English-speaking population. Throughout the middle of the nineteenth century, wave after wave of people sought a better life in the United States or other parts of Canada. The reasons for such an exodus are difficult to establish, but there was, to some extent, a widespread reluctance to live in a predominantly French and Roman Catholic province. The impact of this emigration upon the social fabric of towns, communities, and institutions in the Eastern Townships was drastic and created much instability among the English-speaking population.

**Cultural Affinity with the United States**

For the first American settlers, the Eastern Townships were a natural geographical extension of New England, with Lake Memphremagog offering a major means of communication. The lack of good roads between the Townships and the St. Lawrence Valley made communications difficult and led to an economic interdependence with New England until the arrival of the Grand Trunk Railway in the early 1850s.

The cultural affinity with the United States was, consequently, only natural. Although the American settlers and their descendants were more or less loyal to the British colonial government, as they remained generally neutral during the War of 1812-1814 and the
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Rebellion of 1837, the ties with their families and friends in New England remained strong. More than one visitor to the Townships in the mid-1800s remarked that residents living on both sides of the border were really one people.

This became even more evident in 1849 when the Canadian government decided to compensate the loss incurred by French Canadians during the Rebellion of 1837. (Already in 1845, English-speaking Canadians in Canada West had been compensated for their losses during the uprisings.) Thousands of English-speaking Canadians, in Canada East and West, were enraged by the decision to compensate French Canadians. For them, the French population in Canada was to be completely assimilated, and to compensate many of those who had supported the Rebellion seemed to be an act of treason dictated by the French minority in the government. Many in the Eastern Townships were among those who felt betrayed, and hundreds of them signed petitions requesting that the Eastern Townships be annexed to the United States. Although this annexationist movement lasted only a few months, the cultural and economic affinities between the Eastern Townships and New England remained for many decades. In the 1860s, this affinity was still very apparent in the pages of the Stanstead Journal, which published Abraham Lincoln’s inaugural speech and many detailed accounts of the American Civil War. Yet, such a close affinity with the United States and dissatisfaction with being a minority group within a predominantly French-speaking and Roman Catholic province encouraged emigration to the United States.

The same cultural affinities that helped American immigrants settle in the Eastern Townships in the early part of the century also facilitated their emigration from the area after the 1860s. As will be seen, population movements in and out of the region remained a socio-demographic phenomenon that affected the growth of Adventist denominations for many decades.

Religious Context

When American settlers arrived in the early nineteenth century, they brought their religious diversity along with them. At first these
settlers sought the betterment of their own social conditions and established schools. They built very few churches. According to Françoise Noël, the lack of religious buildings and institutions was soon equated with spiritual darkness and led to an extensive missionary movement on the part of New England denominations which saw the Eastern Townships as a natural extension of their field of work. By 1851, the total population of the Eastern Townships stood at approximately 64,000 people representing about fifteen different denominations.

While some American Baptist or Congregationalist missionary societies sent missionaries to work in the Eastern Townships, other denominations near the border, like the Methodists, added communities in the Townships to their pastors’ itinerant circuits. In both cases, however, close ties with New England were soon established and remained for many years (even though those ties were interrupted during the War of 1812-1814).

Methodists formed the fastest-growing group of Christians among the English-speaking population of the Eastern Townships during the nineteenth century. The first Methodists were American immigrants, who were then joined by English Methodists after the beginning of the British immigration. Like their American counterparts, these Methodists in the Eastern Townships were divided into different denominations: Wesleyan, Episcopal, Primitive, and New Connexion Methodists. By 1851, they represented a quarter of the Protestant population in the area and had established forty-nine congregations.

Baptists also formed a large group of Protestants in the first half of the nineteenth century. Divided into Calvinist and Freewill (Arminian) Baptists, these Christians were largely American immigrants and their descendants and were most active in the townships close to the American border. They had formed twenty congregations by 1851.

Two other smaller yet influential groups were the Congregationalists and Universalists. The Congregationalists were descendants of New England Puritans who immigrated early into the region and established thirteen churches by 1851. Also from American roots, Universalists had established a handful of congregations in the mid-1800s.
In contrast to these churches, which were composed predominantly of American immigrants and their descendants, Anglicans and Roman Catholics in the Eastern Townships were largely from British and French descendants, respectively. The first Anglicans to immigrate to the Townships were Loyalists who saw their numbers increase substantially during the British immigration. The Church of England had the privilege of being a state-sponsored church in Canada, and the establishment of Bishop’s College (now Bishop’s University) in 1843 greatly helped to sustain Anglicanism through the nineteenth century. This British immigration also brought along Irish Roman Catholics who received little pastoral supervision until the 1840s when French Canadians began to settle in the Townships. In 1851, Anglicans and Roman Catholics made up eighteen percent and twenty-nine percent, respectively, of the overall population of the Eastern Townships.

Given this variety of ethnic groups and denominations, the Eastern Townships formed a blend of political and social ideologies and religious ferment. Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, each denomination was in fierce competition with other churches to win over the souls of those who made no profession of faith. As the Second Great Awakening conquered spiritual darkness in the American Midwest in the 1820s and 1830s, the Eastern Townships also saw an ever-increasing number of itinerant preachers crisscross its towns and villages preaching the gospel to the unregenerate and reconverting hundreds of people to Christianity. Such a mix of denominations and religious convictions constituted an adequate context for the rapid growth and establishment of a new group of Christians, the Millerites.


2. To prevent any confusion about the geographic area under discussion, a quick history of the naming of the province of Quebec seems essential. Between 1791 and 1841, the time during which the Eastern Townships were first settled, Quebec was known as Lower Canada. After some major political conflicts in 1837-1838, the Act of Union of 1840 required that Lower Canada
with its French majority and English Upper Canada (now Ontario) be united to form a single British colony, the province of Canada, in the hope of assimilating the French element. Thus, from 1841 to 1867, this part of Canada was known as Canada East. With the adoption by the British Parliament of the British North America Act, Canada became a federated nation with four provinces, one of them being Quebec, on July 1, 1867.


5. In Lower Canada, the Rebellion of 1837 was largely an expression of French Canadian nationalism. The rebellion was precipitated by the economic and social tensions of the 1830s, but the underlying cause was the conflict between the French Canadian majority, which demanded that all power be centralized in the popularly elected Assembly, which it controlled, and the British minority, which was no less determined to resist French Canadian domination. Under the leadership of Louis-Joseph Papineau and his Patriote Party, French Canadians demanded the right to determine how revenues raised in the province were to be spent, challenged the authority of the appointed Legislative Council, and sought control of the provincial civil service. When the British Parliament, in early 1837, refused to grant any of these requests, the Patriotes organized boycotts of British goods and held mass protest rallies across the colony. Tension rose significantly through the autumn months. In November and December 1837, British troops defeated the ill-equipped Patriote uprising and sacked and looted many villages along the Richelieu River (P. A. Buckner, “Rebellions of 1837,” in James H. Marsh, ed., *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, 2d ed. [Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1988], vol. 3, pp. 1831-1833).

6. Four such petitions totaling over 1,400 signatures were published in the *Stanstead Journal* between December 27, 1849, and January 24, 1850.

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8. Factored into this number are the population figures for Missisquoi, Shefford, Sherbrooke, and Stanstead counties as recorded in the 1851 census figures.

9. These Canadian denominations merged in 1884 to form the Methodist Church, Canada, Newfoundland, Bermuda. (See “Methodist Union,” Stanstead Journal, September 13, 1883.) In 1925, the Methodist Church merged with Presbyterian and Congregationalist Churches to form the United Church of Canada.