

The Beginnings of Postal Service to Agnès on Lake Megantic

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Early History

The postal history of Québec is particularly rich, and we have been especially laggard in the presentation of the postal history of the Eastern Townships. This is the subject that we will address in the following paragraphs.

The old village of Agnès, now incorporated into the town of Lac-Mégantic, has had an interesting postal history from the beginning of its settlement. The object of this brief study is to increase knowledge of this history for the period 1877-1889.

Agnès village is situated at the mouth of the Chaudière River, which rises in Lake Megantic. The region is best known nowadays as a resort centre and for its observatory. It forms part of the municipal county of Frontenac, in the south-eastern part of the province of Québec (Figure 1).

The first settlers in the area established themselves near the north-west shore of Lake Megantic, in Whitton County, in the middle of the last century (Figure 2). It is estimated that there were 309 persons, mostly of Scottish origin, in the County in the early 1860's¹.

One of the pioneers, John Boston McDonald, opened a store at Sandy Bay, not far from the crossing of the routes to Piopolis and Springhill. It was at this place that the first post office in the region was installed; John Boston McDonald was named Postmaster commencing 1 December, 1863.

This office (which became Echo Vale in 1880) was originally called Lake Megantic². A little later, in 1872, a second office was opened at Piopolis, and then a third at Marsboro, not far from Victoria Bay, in 1876³.

Other settlers had started to establish themselves at the mouth of the Chaudière. On September 13, 1875, those of the Catholic

religion in the townships of Ditchfield, Spaulding and Whitton sent a request to the Bishop of Sherbrooke that a mission be opened there⁴. In this request, signed by 34 heads of French-speaking families, it was suggested that a future post office might be established on the farm of G.D. Morin. Until then, the people of these townships had to go to the post office at Lake Megantic, or at Piopolis, when they went to religious services, to receive or to send messages by post.

In late 1876 or early 1877, the settlers of these same townships sent a petition to the Postmaster General, the Hon. L.S. Huntington, requesting the establishment of a post office. The Minister acceded to their request and on the 1st of June, 1877, it was opened under the name of Montignac. This office was situated on lot 1, range 1, of Ditchfield Township, on a farm which had belonged to Dominic Morin, one of the pioneers of the region. Captain Wilson, who came legally to acquire the farm, was named postmaster. After several months, and at the request of Dominic Morin and the settlers of the region, the name Montignac was changed to Morinville.

Captain James Scobie Wilson⁵ was a former ship's captain, born at Kincardine in Perth County, Scotland. He came to settle himself and his family in the Lake Megantic region in August, 1876, while he was associated with James Whyte, an immigration agent. Their aim was to bring settlers to this part of the country. During his years of service Captain Wilson had commanded a ship for the British and Eastern Shipping Company, sailing to the Indies and China.

In a report on the early days of this part of the lake, Wilson recalls that there was no path between the Chaudière (that is, the area surrounding the mouth of the river) and the main centre at Lake Megantic. The home of John Boston McDonald, postmaster of Lake Megantic, served as the meeting-place for whomever came to the Lake. It was then necessary to go to Sandy Bay and there fire two shots, to alert those who lived at the Chaudière. The latter then sent a boat to

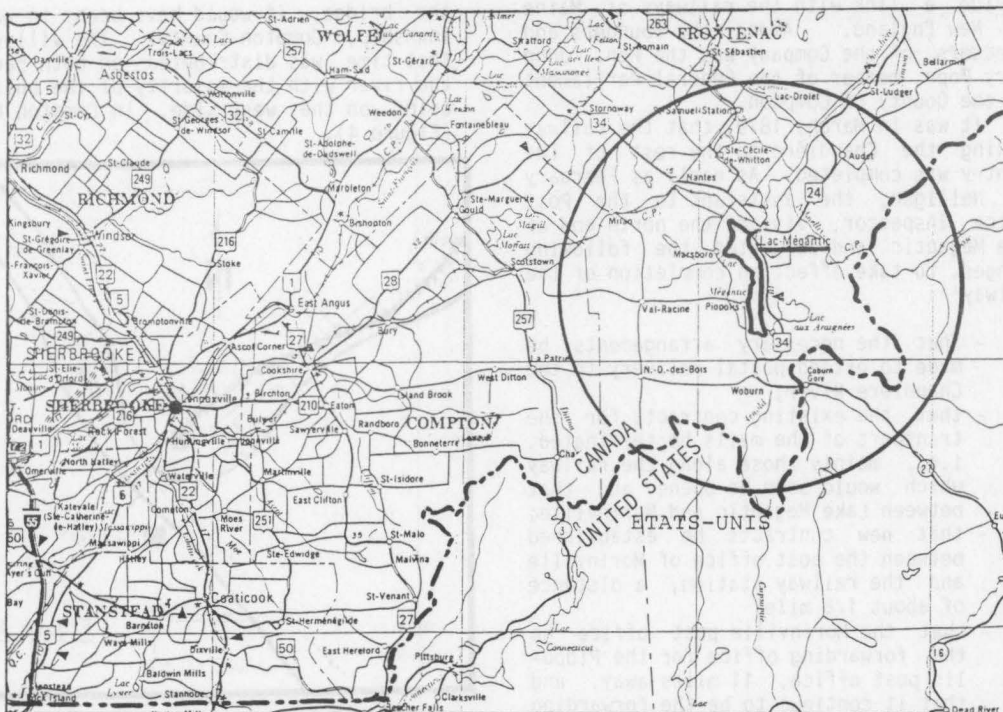


Figure 1 - A portion of the Eastern Townships of Quebec, showing Lake Megantic.

get the people or goods so announced⁷.

In 1877 the government let a contract to Captain Wilson to open a path through the forest, connecting Morinville and Sandy Bay. At that time, the "village" of Morinville consisted of only 3 houses, because most of the population lived in the surrounding countryside⁸. Twice a week Captain Wilson went to Sandy Bay by this path or by boat and then to Lake Megantic to transfer the mail bags. The annual contract with the Post Office Department stipulated that he would receive \$40.00 per year for transporting the mail⁹.

It is probable that postmaster Wilson received the first date-stamp in mid-August (Figure 3), together with the corresponding type. As far as one can tell, this hammer was ordered about two months after the opening of the post office. It was manufactured by Pritchard and Andrews, Ottawa¹⁰.



Figure 3.

The Coming of the Railway

Only a few years later, the region was opened to outside influences.

As a result of Act 33, dated 12 May 1870, thus in the reign of Queen Victoria, several important persons of the Eastern Townships formed the St. Francis and Megantic International Railway Company. Their aim was to build a railway line between Sherbrooke and Lake Megantic in order to

provide a link with the railways of Maine and New England. Among the founders and directors of the Company was the Hon. John Henry Pope, member of the Federal Parliament for the County of Compton.

It was in March, 1879, that the railway linking the Chaudière to the rest of the country was completed. As early as February Mr. Nelligan, the assistant to the Post Office Inspector, visited the north end of Lake Megantic and suggested the following changes, to take effect on completion of the railway¹¹:

- That the necessary arrangements be made to extend postal delivery to the Chaudière River;
- that the existing contracts for the transport of the mails be terminated, i.e., mainly those along the railway which would soon be opened and that between Lake Megantic and Morinville;
- that new contracts be established between the post office of Morinville and the railway station, a distance of about 1/8 mile;
- that the Morinville post office be the forwarding office for the Piopolis post office, 11 miles away, and that it continue to be the forwarding office for the Marsboro post office.

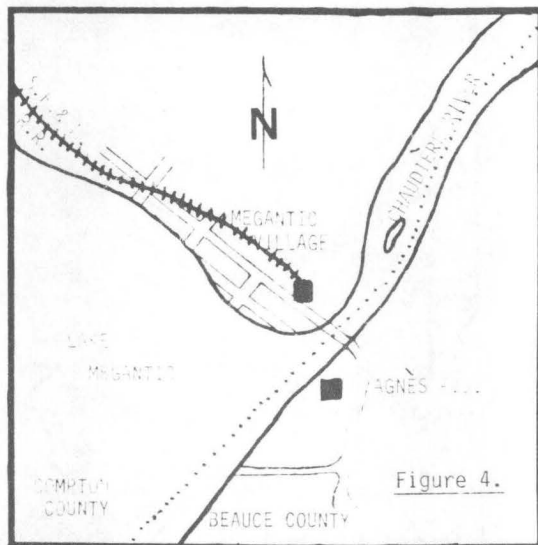
These recommendations were authorized and, from the month of March, 1879, the transport of mail for Morinville was by railway. Because delivery was now six times per week, this was a source of great satisfaction for the inhabitants of the village and neighboring region.

Name Change

The station of the S. F. & M. International Railway was called Lake Megantic. This was quite logical, because the roadbed followed the shore of the lake.

It is important to mention here that the Chaudière River was the electoral boundary between the two Counties surrounding Lake Megantic. The post office was situated on the east side of the river, near the mouth, where a bridge crossed it. The post office was thus in Ditchfield Township, Beauce County; if it had been on the other side of the river, i.e., at the west end of

the bridge, it would have been in Whitton Township, Compton County. The village at that time was distributed on both banks of the river with the majority of the buildings being on the west side, in Compton County (Figure 4).



After the establishment of the railway station and the adoption of the official name Lake Megantic, pressure was exerted on the postal administration to adopt a more meaningful name for the Morinville post office.

The Postal Inspector noted in a report that the name Lake Megantic would be too general a name for the post office since there were two or three offices around the lakeshore and there would probably be more¹². Also, there was another office of the same name, Lake Megantic, which would have to be changed shortly. But since this new village, Megantic, owed much of its expansion to the International Railway, the Superintendent of that line, D.E. McFee, was asked to suggest a name for the post office. Here is his response, dated 31 May¹³:

"The First Lady of the country, Mrs. Suzanne Agnès McDonald, who arrived at Lake Megantic yesterday, at my request has chosen the name Agnès, her own name, for the post office and has assured me that there are no other offices in Canada bearing that name.



Figure 2 - The Lake Megantic area, Eastern Townships, Quebec.

Would you like, therefore, to give the post office this name, to commemorate the visit of the wife of our illustrious Prime Minister!"¹³

The Hon. J.H. Pope, president of the International Railway and Member for Compton County, added in a letter of 17th June: "I think you must use the name Agnès for this office, since many people request it."¹⁴.

Nothing more was needed for the Minister of the Post Office to approve this request which had resulted from the visit to Morinville of the First Lady of the Country on 30 May, 1879. The name of the office became Agnès on 1 August, 1879, to the great satisfaction of Captain Wilson who had never liked the name Morinville for his post office. He accordingly ordered a new date-stamp (Figure 5).

Expansion of the Postal Service

In 1883, Agnès (with Lake Mégantic) was one of the most prosperous villages in the Eastern Townships. Preparations were made for the coming of new families, and new construction (e.g., Catholic, Episcopal and Methodist churches) was under way, and a lot had been acquired for the construction of a Presbyterian church.

On the Agnès side alone there were 26 houses, two hotels, three general stores, a shoe store, a furniture manufacturer, a blacksmith and several other establishments. As well, the townships of Spalding and Ditchfield were now set up as a single municipality.

With such rapid expansion of the community, Captain Wilson saw his work-load considerably increased for his current salary, approximately \$80.00 per annum. Here is an example of the transactions carried out by the Agnès post office during this period¹⁵:

Number of letters and other things sent by the Agnès post office for the past 8 months (August, 1882 to March, 1883):

- 8806 letters,
- 1097 registered letters,
- 43 books,
- 11 parcels,
- 10 samples,
- 328 magazines,
- 912 post cards,
- \$374.58 in sales of stamps.



Figure 5.

To respond to the growing demands of the merchants and general population, as well as the repeated requests of Captain Wilson, the Postmaster General granted the provision of money orders to Agnès in 1883. Previously, the post office at Robinson, more than 40 miles from Agnès, was the only one to offer this service¹⁶.

At the suggestion of the postmaster of Echo Vale, Robert McLeod, the Agnès office offered the Post Office Savings Bank service by the end of 1883.

A New Post Office is Opened

By 1889 the locality had spread out, especially on the west shore of the Chaudière, where the railway station was. This part of the village, which was called Mégantic, had experienced such an expansion that pressure was applied for the opening of a post office.

Here are accounts of the events of the Spring of 1889, which are to be found in official files¹⁷.

1 March, 1889: the citizens of the United Townships of Ditchfield and Spalding, Beauce County, addressed a petition to their Member, Joseph Godbout, M.D., responding thereby to rumours that spoke of moving the Agnès village post office to the benefit of Mégantic, in Compton County. The citizens of the latter place were firmly opposed to this. The petition carried almost 125 names of which 19 were from Mégantic! This petition was presented by the mayor of Agnès, Felix Lapointe, to Joseph Godbout, the Member, on 6 March, 1889. The latter, in a letter addressed to the Postmaster General on 11 March, favoured the current site of the post office and underlined the great competence of Captain Wilson as postmaster. He included also a copy of the resolution

of the municipal council which read as follows¹⁸:

Province of Québec
Municipality of the
United Townships of Ditchfield and Spalding

At a general session of the municipal council of the United Townships of Ditchfield and Spalding held at the regular meeting place, Tuesday the fifth day of March in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and eighty-nine, being present Mayor Felix Lapointe and Councillors James S. Wilson, James B. Simpson, Jules Nadeau, Elzéar Nadeau and Georges Rodrigue, forming a quorum under the chairmanship of the Mayor:

"Proposed by James B. Simpson, seconded by Elzéar Nadeau, and unanimously carried: considering that the Agnès post office was established many years before the village of Mégantic was founded; that its location is still as central as possible to the district for which it was established; that there has never been a complaint of any kind against the administration of this office and that moving it to the village of Mégantic would be very harmful to the interests of the "Townships of Ditchfield and Spalding", that therefore the Hon. Postmaster General shall be and by these presents is requested not to remove this post office. And let the present resolution be duly certified at the request of the citizens addressing the Hon. Postmaster General.

- Adopted -

I, the undersigned, Joseph Napoléon Thibodeau, secretary-treasurer of the municipal council of the United Townships of Ditchfield and Spalding, hereby certify that the above resolution is a true copy of the original in the Council office.
Agnès, Township of Ditchfield
the 5th day of March, 1889
(signed) J.N. Thibodeau"

7 March 1889: the Member for Compton, R.H. Pope, wrote to the Postmaster General, the Hon. Graham John Haggart, to inform him of the wish of the inhabitants of Mégantic to see the Agnès office transferred to their village.

This was enough to cause the Postmaster

General to ask the Postal Inspector to carry out an investigation into the matter.

20 March 1899: David Nelligan, assistant to the Postal Inspector for the Montreal Division, went to the Lake Mégantic area. He determined that the village of Mégantic now had eight stores in two buildings, a custom house, a railway station, two sawmills, four hotels, a doctor, a lawyer, nearly a hundred houses and a population of 657 inhabitants¹⁹.

On the Agnès side, he found two stores, two hotels, one carriage-builder, two churches (one Catholic and one Methodist), one Catholic school and 29 houses in a radius of a quarter of a mile.

He added that everyone was agreed in commending Captain Wilson on the execution of his duties, that his services were appreciated, but that, if the Agnès post office should be moved to Mégantic, the latter could take over with no problem.

The Inspector could not recommend the opening of a second office since there would be no more than a quarter of a mile between them. He recommended that the office be moved to Mégantic and that a relevant name be given to it.

The actions which followed were political in nature and took place behind the scenes in Ottawa. The Minister decided to maintain the Agnès post office under Captain Wilson. However, a new post office was opened in the village of Mégantic, on 1 October 1899, under the name Lake Mégantic with J.N. Thibodeau as the first postmaster. This same office would become the principal office of the region, and its name became French in 1924, as Lac Mégantic.

Agnès a Little Later

With the death of Captain Wilson in 1905, the Agnès office was carried on by P. H. Renaud until 1912 and finally by Malcolm A. McLeod from 1912 to 1913. The office was closed on 26 February, 1913, the local population using the services of the principal post office. However, an office was opened in 1953 under the name Lac Mégantic Sud (1953-1971), becoming Lac Mégantic Sub No. 1 in 1971.

I hope the reader has enjoyed this brief glimpse at the interesting postal history of the Eastern Townships.

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2. The Lake Megantic post office (1 December 1863 - 1 March 1880) was moved a few miles east and renamed Echo Vale (1 March 1880 - 30 June 1924). It was then moved to Megantic village and renamed Lake Megantic. Finally, in 1924, it became Lac Mégantic. See map, Figure 2.
3. Piopolis P.O. opened 1 April, 1872, with Rev. P.B. Champagne as Postmaster. Marsboro P.O. opened 1 March, 1876, with John M. McIver as Postmaster.
4. Document retained in the archives of the Evêché de Sherbrooke.
5. PAC. MG 30, C13, volume 12.
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Note: PAC = Public Archives of Canada.



Captain Wilson's House - Agnes Post Office, 1890. (PAC - PA 122510)
