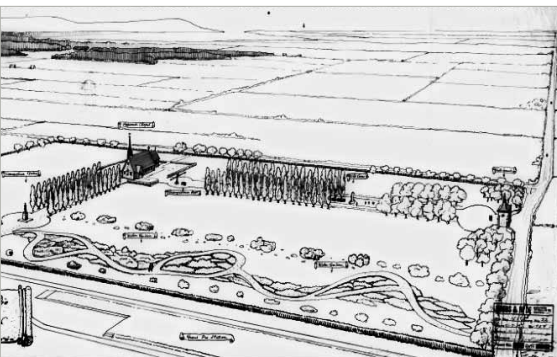


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# LANDSCAPES OF THE ACADIAN RENAISSANCE



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*The voyage becomes a pilgrimage, like going to Chartres.*

Many of Canada's most significant landscapes are virtually unknown to the majority of Canadians. Few but local residents, for example, are aware of the landscapes of the village of **Memramcook**, New Brunswick, yet it was here that the Acadian Renaissance of the mid-19th century began.

## FARMING THE SEA

Memramcook is a village of some 4,600 residents. Its name derived from a Mi'kmaq expression meaning "crooked river", the settlement was founded around 1700 by Acadian settlers as they expanded from their first settlement at Port Royal on the Annapolis River, moving gradually eastward along the river to Grand-Pré, then north-east to New Brunswick's Tantramar marshes and the valley of the Petitcodiac, where Moncton is now located.

While overcoming great obstacles, the colonists developed a unique system of agriculture based on a key feature of the existing maritime landscape – the salt marshes that extended all around the Bay of Fundy. These prairies were flooded twice daily by salt-water tides that brought rich deposits of sediment. By enclosing the marshlands with earthen dikes and employing an ingenious technique of *aboiteaux* (tunnels equipped with backwater valves or *clapets*), Acadian farmers gradually drained and reduced the salinity of the marshlands. By this laborious collective effort, they harnessed the great agricultural potential of the land, harvesting prodigious quantities of wheat and barley, apples and vegetables, and providing vast pastures for livestock.

## EXPULSION AND RETURN

But this prosperous, peaceable and egalitarian society had the misfortune of being caught in the crossfire of the great world wars of the 18th century. In 1713, most of Acadia was taken over by the British; then, between 1755 and 1763, following four decades of cold war between France and Britain, some 10,000 Acadians, almost their entire population, were deported in a sombre prelude to the tragic "ethnic cleansing" that disfigured the 20th century.

Only a few escaped expulsion by taking refuge with the Mi'kmaqs or hiding out. But astonishingly, as soon as it was possible, large numbers of Acadians returned, settling primarily at coastal locations throughout the Maritime provinces. The Acadians could not reclaim their ancestral lands – most of these had been distributed to recent immigrants from New England. They were able to return to only a few of their original settlements; one of these was Memramcook.

The tragic expulsion of the Acadians, the *Grand Dérangement*, was immortalised by the celebrated New England poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in his epic poem *Evangeline, A Tale of Acadie*, published in 1847. The *Evangeline* legend – and through it, the history of the Acadian people – is recounted in vivid terms by the symbolic landscape of the Grand-Pré National Historic Site in Nova Scotia. On a plateau overlooking vast fields that extend to far-off dikes on the horizon, an Acadian association built, during the 1920s, a memorial church on the site of the long-demolished *Église Saint-Charles*, where the men and boys of the parish were assembled before the deportation in 1755.



3

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In front of the church stands a statue of Evangeline, conceived and carried out by the Quebec sculptor Louis-Philippe Hébert and his son Henri. The church and park, designed by Montreal architect Percy Nobbs, is surrounded by an orchard and a kitchen garden as reminders of the agriculture of the time. Ancient willows frame and define the spatial ensemble. On walking the far-off dikes and contemplating the immense marshland prairies on one side and the vast bay on the other, one has the sentiment of being cut off from the world and having returned in the 18th century.

#### ACADIAN RENAISSANCE AT MEMRAMCOOK

For almost a century, the Acadian people survived on the periphery of maritime society. Then in 1864, with the founding of the Collège Saint-Joseph by father Camille Lefebvre of the Quebec teaching order the Congrégation des pères de Sainte-Croix, Memramcook became the “Cradle of the New Acadia”. The first French-language institution of higher education in the Maritime Provinces, the Collège was soon raised to university status and eventually became, in the 1960s, a central component of the new University of Moncton. A series of subsequent events helped to cement the town’s central role within Canada’s Acadian community.

Most visitors first see this historic town across the broad, open valley of the Memramcook River, as they move inexorably towards St. Thomas Church, the town’s most striking feature. The voyage becomes a pilgrimage, like going to Chartres. The great height of the church tower; its location flanked by a complex of related buildings and spaces, on top of a long ridge perpendicular to the perfectly straight approach road

across the perfectly flat prairie – all these aspects of the landscape reinforce the meaning and the importance of this slow ceremonial journey. Like Grand Pré, it is a landscape charged with memory.

Once within the complex, one is overwhelmed by the sheer size of the church, the tallest in Acadia. Otherwise, the visitor is within the familiar and non-spectacular confines of a rural French institution: rows of tall trees, symmetrical axes, statues of dignitaries, of Mary and of the Calvary, a playground for students at the former college that stands just beyond an elegant garden shelter. To this ensemble was added the 1895 Monument Lefebvre, a building that houses an auditorium famous for its almost magical acoustics.

Memramcook’s *noyau institutionnel* is typical of those found in French communities across Canada, from the Maritimes all the way to St. Anne’s Academy in Victoria, BC. Located at the main crossroads of villages and urban neighbourhoods, these harmonious and distinguished compositions are always signalled by the church spire, a symbol of human presence and civilisation. Their location and orientation with respect to the larger landscape, including the linear assembly of buildings and spaces along a body of water or the crest of a hill, is, in itself, a fascinating object of reflection.

Today, the old Collège St-Joseph building houses the Institut de Memramcook, a centre for adult education and conferences. But the peaceful environments of this remarkable precinct remain as reminders of the site’s remarkable contribution to Canadian history.

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6

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**1** THE PRESBYTERY (CURÉ’S RESIDENCE) AT ST. THOMAS CHURCH + VIRGIN MARY **2** BIRD’S EYE VIEW OF EVANGELINE PARK BY PERCY ERSKINE NOBBS **3** VIEW OF ST. THOMAS CHURCH FROM APPROACH ROAD CROSSING THE MEMRAMCOOK VALLEY **4** FROM ST. THOMAS CHURCH **5** MEMRAMCOOK KIOSK **6** EVANGELINE STATUE AND CHURCH **ALL PHOTOS AND DRAWING #6** RONALD WILLIAMS **2** NOBBS DRAWING: JOHN BLAND CANADIAN ARCHITECTURE COLLECTION, MCGILL UNIVERSITY