

Red River Petition of 1817 to Bishop Plessis

A petition was sent in 1817 by some residents at Red River to Bishop Joseph Octave Plessis¹ asking him to send them priests. As a result of this petition by 22 residents of the Red River Settlement requesting a permanent missionary, Bishop Plessis decided to send Joseph Norbert Provencher, with Sévère Dumoulin, a young priest, and William Edge, a seminarist. Provencher raised objections to the new appointment, citing his “lack of knowledge,” his inability to speak English, a painful hernia, an outstanding debt of some £250, and the immense challenge facing the missionaries. He was not, in his opinion, “the right man for the job.” Plessis was convinced that Provencher had the necessary qualities, so insisted on this assignment. Provencher accepted.

This is a document which demonstrates Métis agency in the arrival of the Roman Catholic church in Western Canada.

Petition of the Free Men of Red River²

The Signers below, people who live in Red River, exposes well that there is a Christian population in this country, and who propose to do in their home thus;

That this population is composed in part of Canadians, who were otherwise engaged to work for the Company and Traders, and after they have achieved the terms of their employment, are known as “Free” Canadians, in part colonizers who are native to different countries in Europe;

That the Canadians since their residence here have always been without religious instruction, without any pastor to direct them to the good, by their advice, or their administration, the beneficial help by the Church;

Even though they carry the name “Free”, they don’t have enough influence to prevent their children from being taken and forced to obey those who soil the Plains of this beautiful Country of Blood of those that are similar and fellow citizens. But that, that influence would certainly not be missed, and even, that it wouldn’t be necessary to use it, if the knowledge of their duty towards God and towards the Society were more widespread;

That the children of Christians that are native to this country, and those who are vulgarly known under the name “Metifs” or, “Bois Brûlés”, their quantity that has 300 or 400 men in an area of many hundreds of leagues;

That these metifs are almost all well willing, and of a soft and peaceful character, and had no part in the bad events that happened, last year³, if they were not pushed by their superi-

¹ He was the first archbishop of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Quebec after the diocese was elevated to the status of an archdiocese.

² Assumption Abbey, Richardton, N.D., Belleau Collection, Roll 1 [Provided to the Louis Riel Institute by Émilie Pigeon.] Translated from French by Janelle Poiron, Louis Riel Institute.

ors; but that were informed by unsympathetic people, that they were the absolute masters of the ground; that it was their duty to chase people, that we normally name “The lish”⁴, and having received promises to be supported and given compensation, they believed that as we chased them from the country, they did a glorious and virtuous act;

If no proof was necessary, to demonstrate that it exists not among the Metifs, no hostility against the whites, suffice it to consider that they have almost always been employed in service of the whites, and those who are known ordinarily under the name “The English” are the only ones that wiped the bad treatments from their hands;

That almost all the Christian population, so free Canadians, the new colonizers, are of the Roman Catholic Religion.

That all at present are quiet, here, and that those that signed below firmly believe, that with the ministry of a catholic Priest, nothing will be missing for a perfect durable tranquility, and to conserve the future happiness of the Country.

For These reasons, the signers below, ask you in the name of their life hopes to come to accord them the help of a priest of their Holy Religion, help that their conduct earned, if they are looked at like irreproachable, it will only be more necessary if what they are looked at as incorrect.

Signed by:

Louis Nolin, Pierre Chris. Pambrun, Jean Baptiste Marcellais, Augustin Cadotte, Francis Henault dit Delorme, Jacques Hamelin—père, Jacques Hamelin—fils, Angus McDonnell, Louis Nolin—fils, Charles Bousquet, Michel Monet, Louis Sepicier – Lanois, Jean Baptiste Hamel, Pierre Souci dit Delage, Charles Boucher, Jean Kocher, Pierre Brussel, Aug. Poirier, [Alexander?] Fraser, Jos. Bellegarde, Justin __ otmer, Louis Blondeau, Joseph Ducharme and Bain.

Notes on some of the signatories :

Louis Nolin (Nowlin), was an Ojibwa Métis, born in 1788, Sault Ste Marie. He was the son of trader Jean Baptiste Nolin (b. 1751) and his Métis wife Marie Angelique Couvret. Louis married Mary, an Ojibwa-Métis b. 1802 in Sault Ste Marie. He is listed in the March 28, 1836 (Wisconsin) Chippewa Treaty. Louis served as interpreter at Red River from 1815 to 1817; Louis Nolin was soon hired as official interpreter for Selkirk in his dealings with the Ojibwa and Cree. By 1818, he and his brother Augustin, now both there, reported to Lord Selkirk that their father was considering the idea of moving to Red River. Selkirk wrote to Alexander MacDonell, administrator of the colony, that “such a settler must be a great acquisition” and he went far beyond his normal practices, showering the Nolin family with inducements. Jean Baptiste would be given a “free

³ A reference to the Battle of Seven Oaks, June 19, 1816.

⁴ In reference to the Hudson’s Bay Company employees.

hand” in setting up a trading post, and several Nolins were Promised Land grants, including a home “as close to the church as possible.”

The Battle of Seven Oaks was witnessed by Louis Nolin. He and Chief Pequis removed the bodies after the battle.

Pierre Chrysologue Pambrun was born on December 17, 1792 in at l'Islet, Quebec, the Métis son of André-Dominique Pambrun and Angélique Hiraque. In 1821, he married Catherine “Kitty” Humfreville (b. 1805), a Métisse daughter of Thomas Humphryville and Annie Turner at Cumberland House à la façon du pays, and then in a formal manner on December 8, 1838 at Fort Vancouver (Washington); they had nine children.

With the outbreak of the War of 1812, Pambrun enlisted in the Voltigeurs Canadiens, a unit under Charles-Michel de Salaberry. He was promoted to corporal in January 1813 and sergeant the following month. Acting on his father’s counsel and making up for lack of education with courage, he distinguished himself in October at the battle of Châteauguay, and thus earned a promotion to the rank of second lieutenant in 1814. He saw his hopes for a military career dashed, however, when instead of being integrated into the regular army, the Voltigeurs were demobilized.

In April 1815, Pambrun entered the service of the Hudson’s Bay Company as a clerk. Determined to regain from the North West Company the trade of the northwest, the company was conducting a recruiting campaign among Canadian voyageurs. Pambrun left for the Red River in May with the brigade under Colin Robertson and was first assigned to Pembina. Early in 1816, he accompanied Governor Robert Semple on his tour of the company posts on the Red and Assiniboine rivers.

On April 12th, he was sent to Fort Qu’Appelle to get supplies for the settlers that Lord Selkirk had sent out, and early in May he set out on the return journey with James Sutherland’s twenty-two men in five canoes laden with 600 bags of pemmican and twenty-two bales of furs. On May 12th, as the brigade was approaching rough rapids, it was attacked by some forty-nine Nor’Westers under Cuthbert Grant and others. Pambrun was taken prisoner and had to follow his captors from Fort Qu’Appelle, which they left at the end of May, to Fort Douglas.

He witnessed the sacking of Brandon House and the destruction at Fort Douglas; he also learned of the Battle at La Grenouillère (Seven Oaks) and of Semple’s death. Taken to Fort William, the NWC headquarters, he was released in August at the demand of Lord Selkirk, who had just arrived. In March 1818, the NWC brought charges against him for thefts said to have been committed at Red River during the winter of 1816-17.

He spent the next years as a witness for the HBC, a process that took him to York, Montreal, and in 1819, London. An account of the events he had lived through was published there in a collection of narratives relating to the conflict that also contained the testimonies of John Pritchard and Frederick Damien Heurter.

Alexis Joseph Bellegarde was born on April 24, 1792 at Riviere du Loup, Maskinonge, Quebec. He died December 9, 1852 in Pembina, Dakota Territory, USA. He married Marguerite Dufort according to the custom of the country in 1814.

Michel Monet dit Belhumeur was born in 1766 at Berthier en Haut, Quebec. He married Marguerite Grant the sister of Cuthbert Grant Jr. They were the great-grandparents of Louis Riel's wife. Their son, Michel Jr., married Josephite Little Shell, the daughter of Little Shell I and sister of Little Shell II. They had six children.

Francois Henault dit Delorme was born on February 9, 1767 at Berthier. He married Madeleine (Ojibwa) before 1800. He then married Charlotte (Saulteaux) circa 1800. He was the father with Madeleine of Urbain Delorme born 1800 at Headingley, and the father (with Charlotte) of François born at St. François Xavier in 1805. François Sr. died at St. François Xavier in 1847 at age 80.

Jacques Hamelin was born September 3, 1772 at L'Assomption, Quebec. He married according to the custom of the country to Angelique Tourangeau, daughter of Antoine Tourangeau and Marie (Sauvage) Caribou, before 1797. He was also known as Emlyn. He was enumerated in the census in 1831 Red River Settlement. #_, Jacques Emlyn Sr., age 50, Canada, Catholic, 1 married man, 1 married woman, 1 son (-16), 1 daughter (+15), 2 daughters (-15), 6 total inhabitants, 1 house, 1 stable, 1 cow, 3 pigs, 1 harrow, 1 canoe, 2 acres. (1831 E.5/5) page 5 (1831C RRS HBCA E5/5, page 5.).

Jacques Bonhomme Hamelin (Emlyn or Amelin) was born on January 15, 1797, the Métis son of Jacques Hamelin and Angelique Tourangeau. He married Mary Allary sometime before 1823.

Louis Blondeau was born circa 1773. He married Marie Louise Laframboise dit Franche the Métis daughter of Joseph Laframboise. Louis Blondeau worked as an interpreter for the North West Company at Fort des Prairies in 1804 and at Cumberland House in 1815-16. He was present during the aftermath of the Battle of Seven Oaks.

Jean Baptiste Marcellais was born circa 1767. He married Angelique (Nakoda) according to the custom of the country sometime before 1794. He is listed in the Red River Census for years, 1827, 1830, 1831-33, 1835, 1838, 1840 and 1843. In 1827 he is living with his wife, two sons over 16 and two daughters under 15. They have a house and are farming three acres. By 1833 they are farming 13 acres. Jean Baptiste was with Cuthbert Grant at the Battle of Seven Oaks in 1816.

Commissioner Coltman's report states:

The depositions of Joseph Pelletier dit Assiniboine and Jean Baptiste Marseillais Half-Breeds, who were present at the battle, but who have since made their submission to the Earl of Selkirk, and are either in the service or living under the protection of the colony, and were examined at his Lordship's instance, agree generally in the foregoing (Haydon's) account of the affray, except only as to Hayden's statement of the first shot being fired on the side of the Half-Breeds, which they positively deny; and both state, that be-

fore any shot was fired on the side of the Half-Breeds, one had been fired at Boucher, which passed him so close as to stun, and cause him to fall off his horse; and Pelletier that a second was fired at an Indian, after which the action became general on each side; that after about three discharges the colonists began to give way, but the battle continued between individuals.⁵

Alexander Fraser had received his education in Canada and was once a clerk in the custom house at Quebec. Afterwards he was appointed as a NWC clerk by Alexander Macdonnell. Fraser was charged for participation in the Battle of Seven Oaks but proved to be not present at the battle.



Compiled by Lawrence Barkwell
Coordinator of Metis Heritage and History Research
Louis Riel Institute

⁵ Coltman, W. B. "Report of the Special Commissioner Relative to the Disturbances in Indian Territories of British North America." Quebec: June 30, 1818: 152-250. In *Papers Relating to the Red River Settlement*. Ottawa: House of Commons, July 12, 1819.