

A Neglected & Forgotten Historic Site!

The tradition and tragedy of Champlain's Cross at the Huron village of Atouacha: "the two-landing place"

by David Dupuis

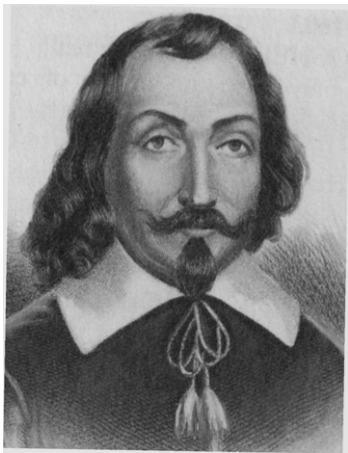


Sadly, it is today an empty, forgotten piece of property in Tiny Township on one of Georgian Bay's most strategic and beautiful points of land located on the western shores of Penetanguishene Bay. Even getting to it around Penetanguishene Bay is not easy. There are no markers to guide the way and the road is rough in spots. One truly has to know where to go.

Nothing remains to show the significance of one of the most historic moments in Canadian history except for a large crumbling concrete pyramid, and the remnants of a large white cross, laying battered, broken and rotten on the ground.

If one didn't know any better, it would be hard to drift back in time to a day almost four hundred years before when

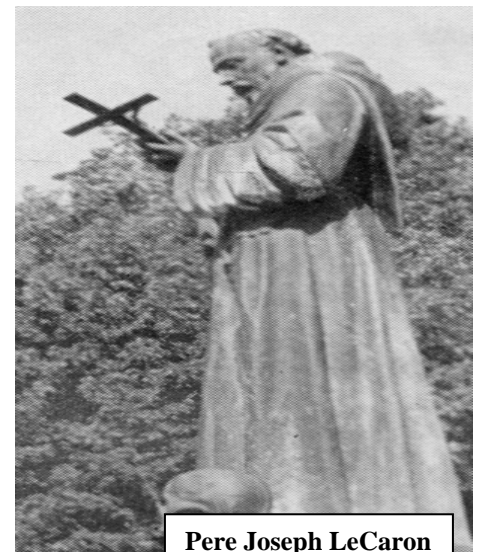
something significant happened at this very location. It would be significant not only for the region but also for the country that would centuries later become known as Canada.



"The country bordering upon this lake along the north shore is partly rugged and partly flat, uninhabited by savages and slightly covered with trees including oaks," wrote Samuel de Champlain, Governor of New France, of his first and only venture in Huronia in 1615. *"Then afterwards we crossed a bay which forms one of the extremities of the lake, and made some seven leagues until we reached the country of the Attigouautan, and came on the first of August to a village called Atouacha. Here we find a great change in the country, this part being very fine, mostly cleared, with many hills and several streams, which make it an agreeable district."*

In his own words, Champlain, Father of French Canada, landed at the site that would be known as Atouacha, or 'two-landing-place' in the language of the Huron. Here at this time it is believed that the Governor of New France planted a cross on the site where he set foot, to claim the land in the name of God and the King of France, just as he had done in Montreal, years earlier.

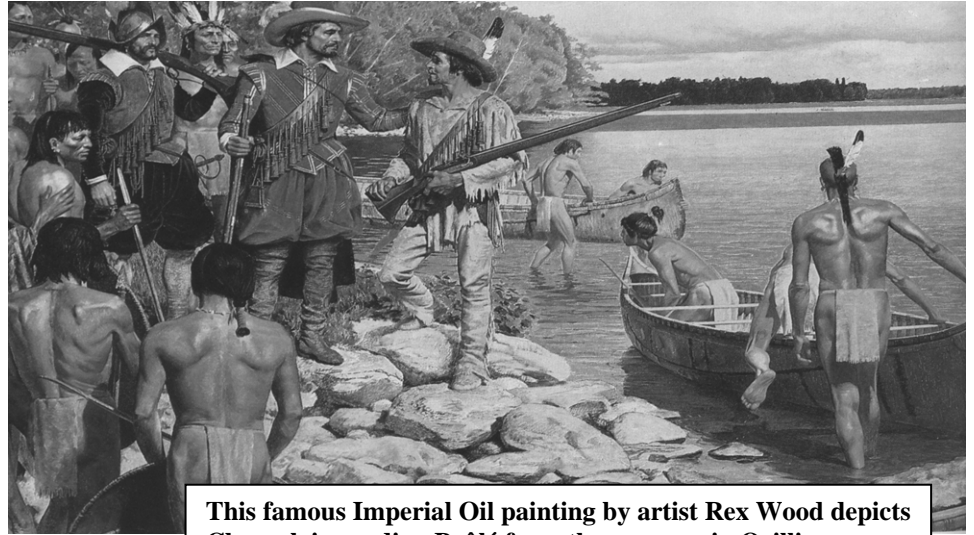
In the company of Étienne Brûlé, Champlain stayed at Atouacha or today called Toanché and visited the native villages of Camaron near present day Sawlog Bay, Touaguainchain and Ossasané and then Caraghouha. At Caraghouha he happily reconnected with Père LeCaron, and on August 12th, 1615 he was a devout worshipper as the Récollet celebrated the first mass west of Quebec.



Pere Joseph LeCaron

Champlain would spend the rest of the summer in Huronia forging ties with the Huron and helping organize a war party to attack the dreaded Iroquois in their stronghold south of present day Lake Ontario.

On September 8th, Champlain sent Étienne Brûlé and 12 Huron to enlist the help of the Susquehanna Indian nation near present day Pennsylvania to join in a larger attack. The attack was a failure and Champlain was wounded in the leg and knee during it. He returned to Huron land in and around Atouacha and spent the



This famous Imperial Oil painting by artist Rex Wood depicts Champlain sending Brûlé from the narrows in Orillia.

winter with Père LeCaron at Caraghouha before returning to Québec in the spring of 1616.

LeCaron would return to Atouacha and the region with other missionaries seven years later, and was replaced by the Jesuits Ste. Jean de Brébeuf and two other priests in 1626. Brébeuf lived in a bark cabin on the outskirts of Atouacha and called the small mission Ste. Nicholas. He lived here on the shores of Penetanguishene Bay for three years before the Jesuits eventually established the central mission of Ste. Marie thirteen years later in 1639.

But Champlain, Brébeuf and Brûlé would be intricately linked to Atouacha, and the Huron Bear Tribe. It was in 1633, near the site of Atouacha itself, that Brûlé would meet his untimely death at the hands of his native hosts, for his treachery to Champlain against the Kirke Brothers in 1629 and his wicked freewheeling ways with the Huron women. That very winter, months after the cannibal feast, a smallpox epidemic swept Atouacha. In an attempt to halt the dreaded disease, the village was burned and the rising smoke took a ghastly form above. The Huron believed it to be the spirit of Brûlé and they fled the burning village which they believed was now haunted by him. Fidgety, superstitious for what they had done to the interpreter, the Hurons were nervous as they headed to Québec for the annual exchange of furs the following spring.

Hearing of this, Champlain sent a messenger out to meet them with reassurances that all was well and he treated them like long lost brothers. He went out of his way to again reassure them, giving a great feast before they left and sending Jesuit Father Brébeuf back with them. When Brébeuf returned to Atouacha in the summer of 1634, his native escorts quickly abandoned him as soon as the canoes were brought ashore. Of this last visit to his abandoned home, Brébeuf touchingly wrote:

“With tenderness and emotion, I passed along the place where we had lived . . . now turned into a fine field and also the site of the old village, where, except for one cabin, nothing remained but the ruins of the others. I saw likewise the spot where poor Étienne Brûlé was barbarously and traitorously murdered . . .”

But two years later, in 1636, the shadow of Brûlé posed another problem for Brébeuf. Every decade or so, the Huron celebrated their most important ritual - The Feast of the Dead. At this feast, the bodies of those who had died since the last Feast were removed from their elevated raised tombs in the village cemeteries and placed together in an ossuary, or common burial place. An elder at Atouacha, which was now relocated a few miles from the old village, went to Father Brébeuf to ask permission to relocate Brûlé’s bones with the other Huron. This may make amends for his murder and pay him a last homage, the elder said

The Jesuit did not want to allow a baptized Christian to be buried as a native but it was tricky not to offend his hosts. Brébeuf proposed that Brûlé be given a Catholic funeral at the same time as the Feast and that the interpreter’s body could be buried near the communal one, to be marked by a large cross. Chief Aenons would have none of it. During a heated debate, the chief of the Bear Tribe rose:

“I took him into my canoe at Kebek in the shadow of the high rock! His stroke kept time with mine as we paddled up the great rivers and through the white waters. He helped me carry the canoe over long and rough portages. I brought him to the Freshwater Sea and the country of the Hurons! He is mine!”

A debate then arose over which village should host the feast and Brûlé's reburial: Ossossane or the relocated Atouacha. Thankfully, a native from Ossossané rose to observe that the bones of Brûlé belonged to those of his tribe at Atouacha. Besides he said, they were the ones who had killed him. It was then decided that two separate feasts would be held by each village that year. It was also decided to let Brûlé lie where he had first been interred. Brébeuf was relieved not to have to perform a Christian burial for the one he had always called "an infamous wretch."

The debate over death and burials would turn out to be a forewarning in many ways as the missionaries were eventually martyred on these lands by the invading Iroquois between 1642 and 1649 and the Huron nation dispersed forever. Though history turned a dark page, it seems the special and historic site was never forgotten, even hundreds of years later.

On January 6th, 1915, the provincial Minister of Public Works and Highways received and months later approved an application from Father Henry Brunet, the pastor of St. Anne's Parish, to have one hundred square yards from the Military Reserve Triangle Redoubt land across from the Establishments set aside for the purpose creating a memorial to the Reverend Joseph LeCaron. A later application in 1927 and an Order-in-Council from the Lieutenant-Governor of Ontario transferred the requested land to the Catholic Episcopal Corporation of the Diocese of Toronto, namely the local parish of St. Anne's. A proper cross was erected in 1915 but for some reason the official recognition of Pere LeCaron gave way to "the Champlain Cross".



In 1921, when Penetanguishene wanted to celebrate the end of the First World War that had occurred in 1915, a certain priest stationed in St. Anne's parish, Father Athol Murray, persuaded the town to instead celebrate the 300th anniversary of the landing of Champlain and the missionaries here at Toaniché and Penetanguishene. His request was welcomed wholeheartedly.

The Old Home Week Celebrations of 1921 were a huge success and in fact garnered headlines province wide as Father Murray orchestrated many significant events and unveilings. These culminated with the dedication of the Angels at the entrance to town and the unveiling of the Le Caron Statue to be placed in front of St. Anne's Jesuit Memorial Church.



As the picture above demonstrates, the unveiling of the LeCaron Statue in front of Ste. Anne's Jesuit Memorial Church during Old Home Week in 1921, was full of pomp and ceremony and drew immensely large crowds. It was a true celebration of the town's great civic and ecclesiastical heritage.

Ontario Premier Ernest Drury was on hand at Huronia Park on Fox St. along with thousands of spectators. Amongst a cast of hundreds, two large canoes entered the bay paddled by neutral Ojibwa Indians. In the first was Iroquois Grand Chief André Staats and the five head Sachems of the Iroquois Confederacy: Mohawk, Oneidas, Onondagas, Cayugas and Senecas. In the second canoe was Huron Grand Chief Ovide Sioui from Quebec.

After observing Champlain make a grand landing, the two Indian parties disembarked, smoked a peace pipe and buried an ancient tomahawk under a large boulder in an impressive ceremony.

“Now we go hunt moose!” the Iroquois Staats said turning to the Huron Chief.

“Together!” Sioui answered with a smile.

Here on Penetanguishene Bay on a sunny afternoon in 1921 the two warring Indian nations officially made peace in the presence of Champlain. It was movingly symbolic!



The reenactment of the landing of Champlain on the shores of Penetanguishene Bay was witnessed by thousands and was the centerpiece of the “Old Home Week” celebrations organized by Father Athol Murray in 1921.



So strong were Father Murray’s feelings of the importance of Penetanguishene and Champlain that he was eyeing a large statue of the explorer that had been cast in England and delivered to Orillia in 1920 but had yet to be erected. Though the beautiful bronze statue (pictured at left), made by Vernon March did eventually end up in Orillia’s Tudhope Park, Father Murray felt that,

“ . . . the statue, distinctly Catholic in tone . . . would have been more appropriate here - in Penetanguishene.”

The large wooden cross pictured at right was the first official church sanctioned cross erected in 1915 and the one in existence during Father Murray’s time and one that was pictured in a tourism brochure for the town in March of 1927. It succumbed to the elements in 1938. Another wooden cross was erected on June 2nd, 1940 and was blessed by Msg. Brennan on August 20th of the same year. It too quickly succumbed to the elements in a relatively short time.





On August 20th, 1954, Father Leonard J. Wall dedicated and blessed the newer Champlaine Cross which was made of wood and sheathed in aluminum at Toanché (pictured at left) attended by a large crowd.

On Sunday, August 15th, 1965, amid much ceremony, Le Club Richelieu erected a new plaque at the Champlaine Cross to commemorate its significance. In attendance were M.P.P. Dr. P.B. Rynard, Simcoe County Warden Herb Hughes, Midland Mayor Herb Beauchamp,

Tiny Reeve Montcalm Maurice and Monsignor J.M. Castex. Penetanguishene Mayor Mary H. Rogers acted as Master of Ceremonies.

Mayor Rogers introduced historian Herbert Cranston of Midland, who in turn introduced the guest speaker, Mrs. Elsie Jury whom he called “the chief research historian of Huronia.”

In her remarks, she began by stating,

“I am most privileged to have this opportunity to speak today of what I believe to be the most significant event in the history of our province and to do honour to the most significant and respected character in the annals of our country. I feel that each one of us here today is privileged to be standing on the very soil, beside these same blue waters that saw so much dramatic action on the part of courageous, adventurous and devoted men- the first white men to see and to make their home in our beautiful province, over 300 years ago.”

She went on to give an excellent picture of Champlaine, his life and his travels in Huronia before the Hon. William G. Davis, the provincial Minister of Education, was introduced by Mr. Cranston. Mr. Davis told the crowd of his great interest in the history of Ontario and officially unveiled the plaque to warm and vigorous applause. Msgr. Castex then addressed the crowd to say that he hoped to “return to same spot five years hence to see even more effort put into the marking of this place.”

August 15th, 1965
The Champlaine Cross site on the western side of Penetanguishene Bay near Picotte's Creek is finally officially recognized as a major historic site with the unveiling of the new Champlaine Plaque.



Another variation of the plaque appeared in 1988 when I went to the Peek-a-Boo - Toaniché site to draw the cross and its sign (at right) for my book, "Place of the White Rolling Sands".

In the summer of 1975, Monsignor Athol Murray was invited to return to his former parish and town to partake in the centennial of Penetanguishene, which he readily accepted. Prior to his arrival, the founder of the University of Notre Dame in Wilcox, Saskatchewan and a future inductee into the Hockey Hall of Fame and a recipient of the Order of Canada, sent a glowing letter in which he not only praised the town's rich history, but planted an idea:

"I have always been obsessed with the conviction that Huronia and particularly Penetanguishene will be recognized as the ultimate nucleus of Canada's identity. The vital thing is to secure its recognition and I feel the community should mobilize all its energies to that objective!"

"In 1615, Champlain erected a wooden cross at Atouacha. The tradition of that cross was maintained down through the years - there was one in my time. What is there to prevent Penetanguishene from erecting an iron cross at Atouacha and installing similar lights (as in Montreal). It would be a great assertion of faith and incidentally something tourists would really go for."

"Yes . . . I would play up Champlain. The Orillia monument of Champlain and Brébeuf is one of the most beautiful things in Canada. I am proud to share in its erection. That doesn't take away from Penetanguishene in the Huronia complex - it had priority with Champlain and Brébeuf and still has! Yes! I would play up the Atouacha Cross - and Champlain - and Brébeuf - and very much Père Joseph LeCaron."

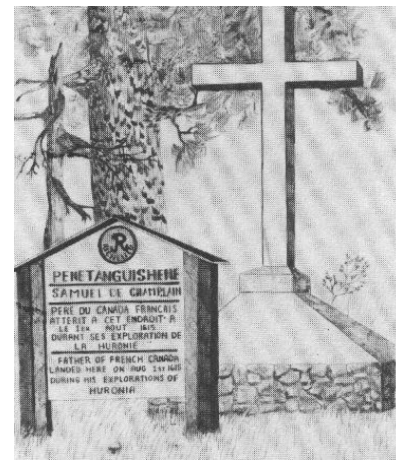
"Next play up the Memorial Church - it has a history unique in Canada. Have the bronze plaque polished up and given a full page. No community in Canada can boast a church with a history of yours! Only a priest of the mind of Father Laboureau could have engineered it through the Senate of France and the Congress of the United States!"

Monsignor Murray's idea of a great lighted cross at the shore near Toaniché was examined but shelved due to a lack of time and money. Despite it all, Monsignor Murray visited the town and kicked off the Centennial parade with a speech in which he reminded residents:



"It's a great thrill to be back in the old town . . . I want to come back some time in the future when you put up a great cross!"

Before leaving, Monsignor Murray gave the town a \$ 500.00 cheque to go towards the cross project which never got off the ground.

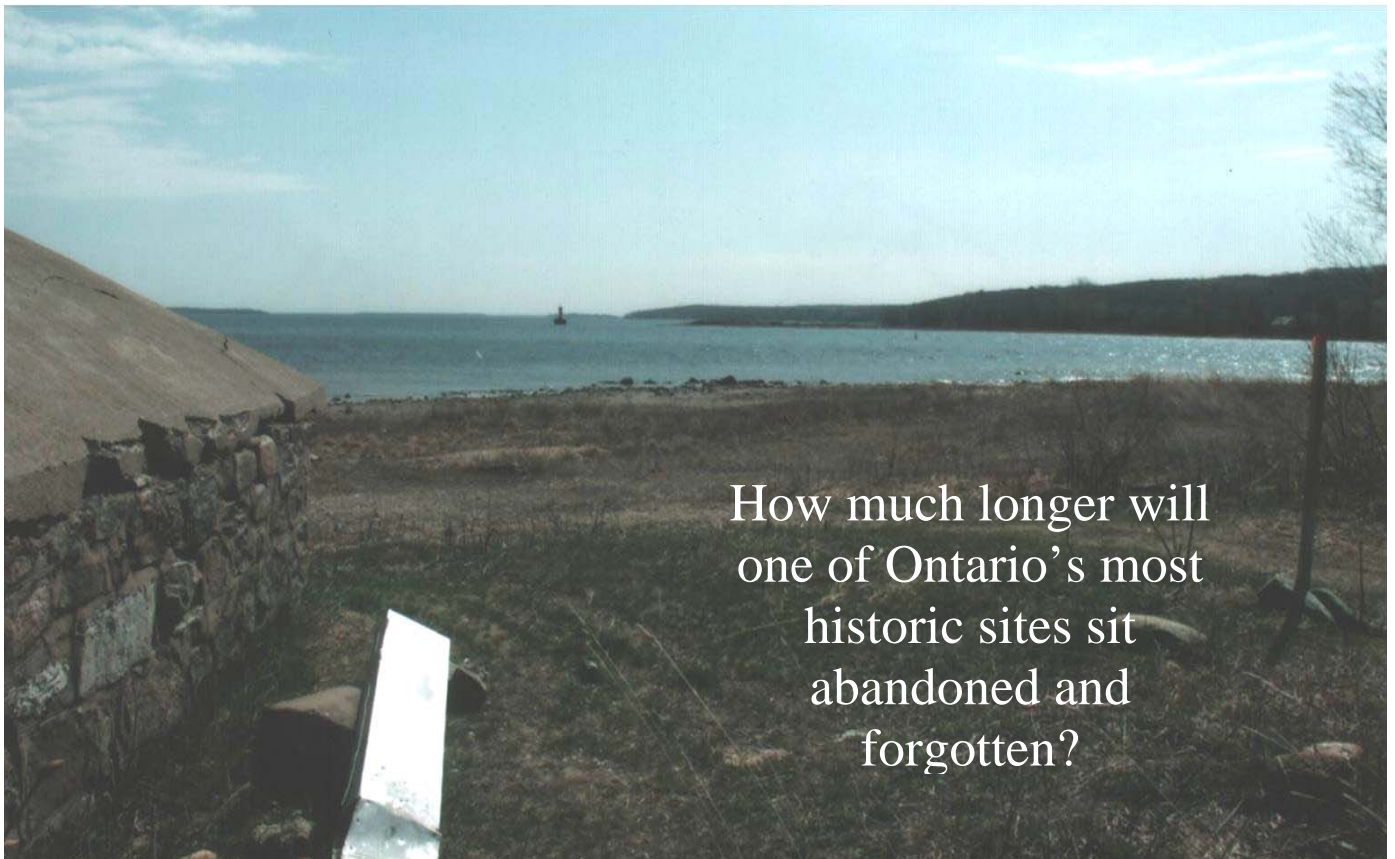
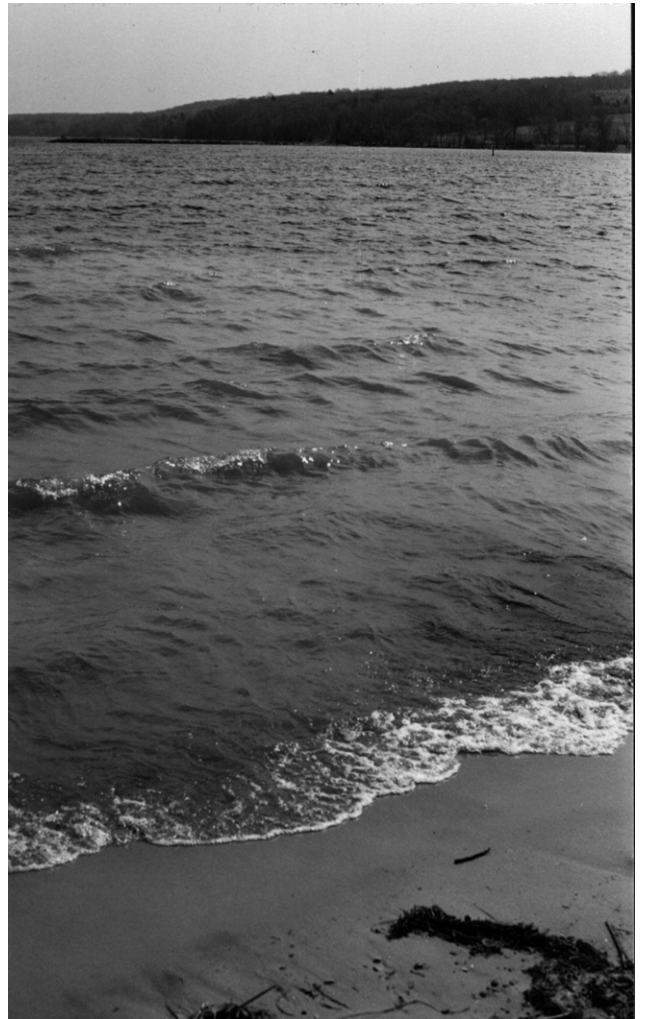


Which brings us to today, so intricately linked to the past. The sign and old cross have virtually disappeared, yet, the large property has been preserved. It is one of the most beautiful and grand in all of the Georgian Bay region. Its vantage point looks up and down Penetanguishene Bay and out into Georgian Bay with breathtaking beauty. In many ways, one can imagine that it looked very similar four hundred years ago with its undeveloped, large forested area. With the water table having dropped significantly in the past few years, a small amount of fill would make an excellent park with . . . perhaps a new lit concrete, granite or steel cross? A statue of Champlain? LeCaron? Brébeuf? Even Brûlé?

The famed archeologist Dr. Wilfrid Jury, who reconstructed Ste. Marie and the Establishments, as a last goal in his esteemed career had wanted to find Brûlé's actual burial place at Atouacha. Jury passed away before realizing his dream, but he recognized that at Atouacha, a great page had been written in the immense book of Canadian history.

Today, with the Canadian government now recognizing and wanting to celebrate the fast approaching four hundredth anniversary of Champlain's coming to Canada and later landing in Huronia, could there be new found glory for such a forgotten but magnificently historic place?

With a little bit of Champlain's mission, Brébeuf's tenderness and emotion, Brûlé's determination, LeCaron's zeal, and Jury's and Murray's vision, perhaps, just perhaps, one can just imagine the results . . .



How much longer will
one of Ontario's most
historic sites sit
abandoned and
forgotten?