

Selling Education: The Problems of Convent Schools in Acadian New Brunswick, 1858-1886

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Teaching Sisters came from Quebec to open schools in the French-speaking areas of New Brunswick because Bishop Rogers of Chatham, Père Camille Lefebvre, C.S.C., Director of the bilingual classical college of St.-Joseph, and several parish priests told them they were urgently needed. They called on the Sisters to improve the level of religious education by setting up convent schools, by training girls to teach in the public school system, and by training girls to bring up their children as good Catholics.¹ Sisters who could communicate in French were welcomed because the public schools were desperately short of good francophone teachers in the mid-nineteenth century. Only six teachers with French surnames had first or second class licenses in 1861.² The Acadian population of New Brunswick was growing: in 1861, there were approximately 33,000, and the 1871 census showed 44,907, accounting for over 15% of the population.³

The convent schools would be successful because the Sisters were not daunted by the initial difficulties and were able to satisfy the needs of many young Acadian women and their parents. However, at first, convincing Acadians that the education they offered was valuable was a challenge. Most

¹ Memoire of M.-F. Richard, the parish priest who invited the C.N.D. to St.-Louis-deKent, cited in Robert Pichette, *Les religieuses pionnières en Acadie* (Boisbriand, Québec: Ministry of Tourism, Leisure and Heritage, New Brunswick, 1990), 37. Richard says that he and Bishop Rogers agreed on these needs.

² "Register of Licensed Teachers," Department of Education of New Brunswick, RG 11, RS 115,13/8. Public Archives of New Brunswick (hereafter PANB).

³ Estimate, E. Rameau de St.-Père, *La France aux colonies* (Paris: Jouby, 1895), 184, cited in R. Mailhot "Prise de conscience collective acadienne au Nouveau-Brunswick, 1860-1891 et comportement de la majorité anglophone," Ph.D. dissertation, Université de Montréal, 1973, 80. For 1871, see Muriel K. Roy, "Settlement and Population Growth," Jean Daigle ed., *Acadians of the Maritimes* (Moncton: Centre d'études acadiennes, 1982), 167. The 1881 census listed 321,233 Acadians. Acadian is used here to refer to all the French-speaking population of New Brunswick. See Léon Thériault, "Qui sont les Acadiens du Nouveau-Brunswick?" *Le Brayon* 8, 3-4 (sep.-dec. 1980), p. 33.

of the Sisters who came to New Brunswick knew they would be pioneers in areas where people had never even seen a female Religious.⁴ They understood the need to persuade parents of the value of education, as many Acadians were short of cash and educating daughters beyond the elementary level was not yet a high priority.⁵ Their efforts to educate women also made them the focus of conflicts based on varied interpretations of the role of women in Acadian society. These were intensified by the differences between Quebecois and Acadian society. Maritime francophones who sent their children to convent schools in the mid-nineteenth century were forced to see themselves in the context of a francophone society epitomised by the urban centres of Quebec.

The Sisters, as representatives of Quebecois urbanised culture, spoke a form of the French language that was very different from Acadian speech patterns. This took on symbolic importance as Acadian society changed rapidly in the mid-nineteenth century. Transportation improved and villages grew into towns. Just like the Acadian men, women left the farm and the fishing economy to enter commerce or education, and many women moved to the urbanised mill towns of New England. The Acadian men whose letters were recorded in New Brunswick's only French language newspaper, the *Moniteur Acadien*, found the changing role of women unsettling. Some wanted women to be educated for motherhood and teaching; some wanted them to become ornaments to the best New Brunswick society.⁶ The Acadians were also trying to build their own nationalist movement and many wanted it to be clearly distinct from the Québecois French Canadian lifestyle. They thought Quebec had a more sophisticated urbanised society than Acadia and subsequently a different view of the role of women.⁷ There were also disagreements on the role of the English language in the education of women. Many Irish priests and some Acadians thought teaching in French was only necessary as a prelude to higher education in English. Other Acadians associated English with worldliness unsuitable for Acadian women. When the New Brunswick Common Schools Act of 1871 took government funding from Catholic schools, it not only threatened religious education for the Acadians but also for the much larger population of Irish and Scottish Catholics in the province. Acrid disputes developed between

⁴ Corinne Laplante, "Viger, Amanda," Ramsay Cook ed., *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. XIII (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1994): pp. 1054-5.

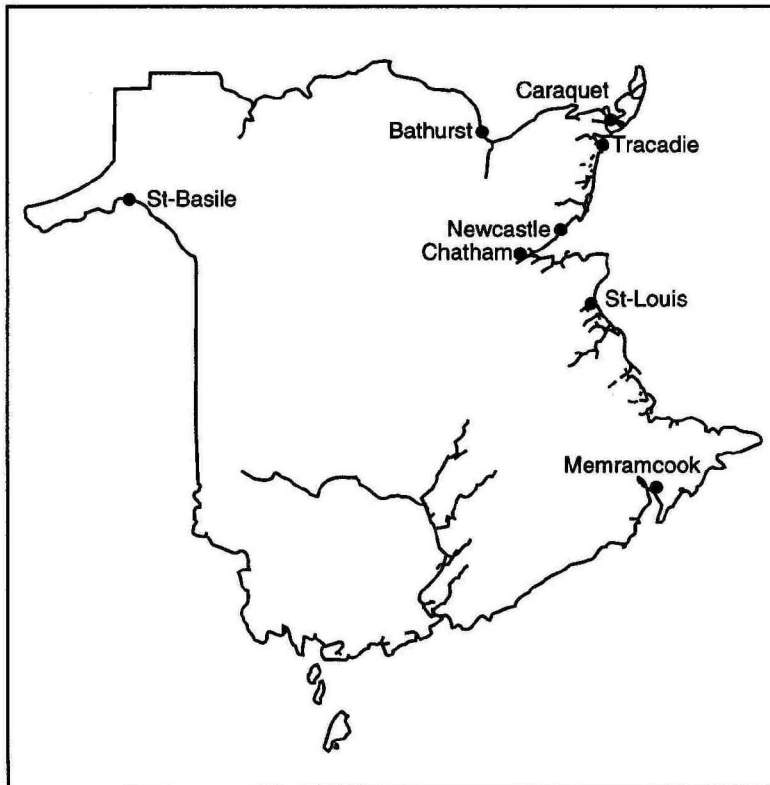
⁵ The 1861 census shows seventeen girls in school after they turned seventeen. This would already include girls at the Miscouche and St.-Basile convents schools.

⁶ *Moniteur Acadien* (hereafter *M.A.*) 1 July 1870, *M.A.* 10 Sept. 1870, *M.A.* 29 July 1880.

⁷ Martin Spigelman, "The Acadian Renaissance and the Development of Acadian-Canadian Relations, 1864-1912," Ph.D. dissertation, Dalhousie, 1975.

those who believed that French education should be available at all levels and those who believed that the future of Catholicism depended on giving priority to English language education.⁸

Convent schools established in Acadian New Brunswick by 1880



The Sisters responded energetically to the challenge of these various needs. The Sisters of Charity founded schools in St.-Basile de Madawaska (1858), Memramcook (1873), Buctouche (1880) and in Newcastle (1864). The Congrégation de Notre Dame from Montreal opened schools in Bathurst (1869), Newcastle (1870), Caraquet (1874) and St. Louis-de-Kent (1874). The Hospitalières de St.-Joseph set up a school in Tracadie (1873) and replaced the Sisters of Charity in the St.-Basile school (1873).

⁸ Richard's defense of French language education contributed to disputes with Rogers. C.-A. Doucet, *Un étoile s'est levée en Acadie* (Charlesbourg: Renouveau, 1973) esp. chs. 8-12.

The work of the Sisters encouraged and accommodated the changing role of women. The first francophone teaching Sisters all came from Quebec, and as Marta Danylewycz has explained, the Quebec Sisters were often good role models for women who wanted to develop their intellectual or business skills.⁹ Convents also taught a particular code of manners and language, based on their own rules and the expectation that many of their pupils were being prepared for marriage in an urbanised middle class.¹⁰ The girls were encouraged to learn music, drawing and fancy needlework. Combined with an education that often went far beyond basic reading, writing and arithmetic, these genteel accomplishments could be unexpectedly subversive.¹¹

We can only guess what parents hoped to get out of convent education as those who initially welcomed this opportunity for their daughters did not record their reasons. However, some parents actively supported the convent schools. Even before the 1871 Schools' Act, at least thirteen New Brunswick Acadians went to the C.N.D. convent at Miscouche on Prince Edward Island.¹² The parishioners of St. Basile had raised a thousand pounds to build their convent school by 1860. The parish priest made it sound an impressive building in his petitions for government support.¹³ The government gave annual grants to the school and it had some success. In 1861 there were six Acadian boarders and four Irish boarders. By 1863, there was an average of twenty-seven female pupils over the year.¹⁴ However, the numbers continued to be small and it was hard to retain support. Most parents had to pay fees if they sent their daughters to the convent schools, as government subsidies before the 1871 Schools' Act did not cover all expenses. In 1871, St. Basile had only six boarders, four of whom were Acadians. After the Schools' Act, subsidies stopped and economic problems, possibly aggravated by tensions

⁹ Marta Danylewycz, *Taking the Veil: An Alternative to Marriage, Motherhood and Spinsterhood in Quebec 1840-1920*, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1987).

¹⁰ Micheline Dumont and Nadia Fahmy-Eid, *Les couventines: L'éducation des filles au Québec dans les congrégations religieuses enseignantes 1840-1960* (Montreal: Boréal, 1986), esp. ch. 3.

¹¹ Marjorie Theobald, "The Sin of Laura: The Meaning of Culture in the Education of Nineteenth-Century Women," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, vol. 1 (1990): pp. 257-72.

¹² Miscouche convent does not have a list of students in its archives. These names come from references in secondary sources and the *Moniteur*.

¹³ Province of New Brunswick, Records of the House of Assembly, RG 3, Pet.75, 1860 and Records of the Executive Council, RG 2, Pet. 146, 1860. PANB.

¹⁴ Inspector Freeze, "Report on the Public Schools," *Appendix to Journal of the House of Assembly* (hereafter *J.H.A.*) (Fredericton N.B.: Queens Printer), 1864, p. 25.

within the community and between the community, the parish priest and the Bishop of Saint John, led the Sisters of Charity to leave St. Basile.¹⁵ The Hospitalières replaced them in 1873. As a nursing order trying to respond to the demand for schools, the Hospitalières faced exceptional challenges. They were not trained teachers and in their early years at St. Basile, the Sisters said they were only just keeping ahead of their pupils in English and mathematics.¹⁶

The 1871 Act, which stopped subsidies to Catholic schools, challenged all the teaching orders in New Brunswick to greater efforts. The C.N.D. immediately prepared for extra students at Miscouche and opened a boarding school in Bathurst.¹⁷ As more schools in Acadian areas closed when local officials either would not or could not collect taxes for the secular school system, more convent schools opened. The C.N.D. opened convent schools in Caraquet and St.-Louis. The Hospitalières added a small school to their hospital in Tracadie. The Sisters of Charity began to teach in Memramcook and Buctouche. In each case, they got a hearty welcome from the *Moniteur*, often accompanied by accounts of the warm welcome they received from the priest and the parishioners.¹⁸

They deserved a hero's welcome because conditions were difficult. After the initial enthusiasm, the Sisters had to prove the value of education. In the early years, they sought the help of the press. The *Moniteur Acadien* carried advertisements for the convent schools at Miscouche, Prince Edward Island, St. Louis, Memramcook, and Buctouche. Prize-giving ceremonies and concerts were reported in detail. Even when the local population was generous, it was hard to finance a school where the parishioners had their own financial problems and female education was still not a high priority.¹⁹ The Sisters did not yet open public schools because the Common Schools' Act of 1871 forbade religious instruction during school hours. Thus, parents who chose a convent education for their daughters usually had to pay rates towards the upkeep of public schools and fees to the convent schools.²⁰

¹⁵ Sr. Marie-Dorothée, *Une pierre de la mosaïque acadienne* (Montreal: Leméac, 1984), ch. 3.

¹⁶ Sr. Georgette Desjardins, rhsj, "Le rôle des religieuses hospitalières de Saint-Joseph dans l'éducation au Madawaska depuis 1873," *SCHEC Session d'études*, 48 (1981), pp. 57-66.

¹⁷ *M.A.* 25 July 1871 and 20 Oct. 1871.

¹⁸ See for example, the triumphal progress of the sisters going to Bouctouche. *M.A.* 13 May 1880.

¹⁹ The 1871 census showed only thirty Acadian girls seventeen and over in full time education.

²⁰ Sister Trudel of St.-Basile was invited to run the common school in that parish by 1885. Desjardins, "Le rôle," 62. However, the legal position of teaching sisters in the common schools system was far from clear. See R. Wilbur, *The Rise of*

The experiences of the Sisters in Caraquet are a good example of the problems that followed the opening of the convent schools. In common with the Sisters in other parishes, they had been provided with buildings and some land. However, they could not rely on continuing financial subsidies from the parish. The Caraquet priest and parishioners had been working for four years on the convent building, but there was no furniture when they arrived and they could not move in for a month. They began classes with twenty-four students and two boarders.²¹ These pupils had very little education as two could read a little; six were beginning to spell and the rest were learning their letters.²² The parish did not give them any more money to cope with these challenges.²³ The Sisters thought they were unpopular because they were a Montreal order in an Acadian parish.²⁴ However, the Caraquet fishermen and farmers may have given little support because most were too poor to help. The Jersey-based fishing companies controlled the local economy and kept them dependent on a debt-based system of company store credits. Three months after the Sisters opened their school, a devastating smallpox epidemic broke out.²⁵ One month later, some Acadians in Caraquet took part in riots directed against the 1871 Schools' Act and the subsequent efforts to tax them to pay for the public school. Two men died and the trial that followed was widely publicised.²⁶ This did not encourage New Brunswick Catholics to send their daughters to Caraquet.

To survive, the convents had to attract boarders. Even in Quebec where public funding was provided, this was a vital source of income, amounting to between 40% and 80% of revenue.²⁷ In Caraquet, girls who registered as boarders sometimes stayed for a month or less, but they still paid considerably more than day pupils. The latter provided little revenue and were some-

French New Brunswick (Halifax: Formac, 1989), ch. 8.

²¹ "Historique du Couvent de Caraquet," no date or author, Archives of the Congregation de Notre Dame (hereafter ACND), Montreal, 302-050-55.

²² Pichette, *Les religieuses*, 87, citing "Annales du Couvent de Caraquet Nouveau Brunswick," ACND, Montreal, no page given.

²³ "Caraquette, 1874," ACND, 302-050-56.

²⁴ "Annales du Couvent de Caraquet Nouveau-Brunswick," 2 Sept. 1875, cited in R. Mailhot, "Prise de conscience," p. 181.

²⁵ Pichette, *Les religieuses*, p. 56.

²⁶ G. Stanley, "The Caraquet Riots of 1875," *Acadiensis*, 2,1 (1972), pp. 21-34.

²⁷ Micheline Dumont and Lucie Champagne, "Le financement des pensionnats de jeune filles au Québec: le modèle de la Congrégation des Soeurs de Ste-Anne, 1850-1950," *SCHEC Sessions d'études*, vol. 53 (1986): pp. 63-91 esp. pp. 63 & 78. M.-P. Malouin, *Ma soeur à quelle école allez-vous?* (Montreal: Fides, 1985), p. 67.

times taught for nothing when revenue from other sources permitted.²⁸ There was a limited pool of potential boarders, so the convents had to be competitive and consider the local market.²⁹ Girls did move from one convent school to another, suggesting parents wanted value for money. The Sisters of Charity's Memramcook convent fees were the highest and their market the most promising. The principals of the two successive Catholic boys' colleges founded in Memramcook had worked hard to convince parents that education was valuable. Some of the sisters of college students went to the convent school. There were several small towns in the catchment area and a prosperous farming hinterland. This convent was able to charge \$85 for ten months full board, including linen and tableware.³⁰ The C.N.D. convent at St. Louis started later and was close enough to Memramcook to feel the competition. It began at \$53 for ten months full board.³¹ The Hospitalières in St. Basile were far from competition but served a rural catchment area. They began at \$60 full board.³² Caraquet accounts show the C.N.D. there aimed for \$55 full board, but frequently settled for what they could get.³³ Girls who made their own arrangements for food paid \$1.50 a month.

The Caraquet convent never advertised in the *Moniteur* and apparently attracted boarders through contacts. Fees varied according to requirements and possibly according to ability to pay. One boarder came from Montreal and paid \$141 for 18 months. The daughter of a prosperous Irish farmer paid extra for the use of a bed frame, for washing and for crockery, pens and ink.³⁴ Local priests helped with recruiting as two of their nieces attended briefly. Sponsors paid the fees for three orphans in other years. A local farmer gave the Order land to finance one scholarship and the Sisters sometimes stretched the subsequent income to pay for two. Donors were presumably inspired by devotion, but also by a practical desire to educate family members, as the first set of scholarships went to the donor's nieces. Another

²⁸ Tracadie day pupils paid \$3.00 per year and the sisters saw this as an act of charity to poor families. Pichette, *Les religieuses*, p. 62. St.-Basile day pupils paid no fees after 1879. Desjardins, "Le rôle," p. 62.

²⁹ Miscouche convent advertised a fee of \$60 for ten months board in *M.A.* 14 January 1870 but came down to \$54 when Ezilda Lapierre opened a girls boarding school associated with the Holy Cross Fathers' college of St.-Joseph in Memramcook. She was charging \$42 for full boarding. *M.A.* 25 Aug. 1871 and 14 Sept. 1871.

³⁰ *M.A.* 4 Feb. 1873 and 7 Jan. 1886. The boys' classical colleges charged \$78 for full board at St.-Joseph and \$60.00 at St.-Louis. *M.A.* 2 Oct. 1868 and 13 Aug. 1874.

³¹ *M.A.* 17 Sept. 1874.

³² *M.A.* 18 Dec. 1873.

³³ "Pensionnaires, 1874-1905," ACND, 302-050-19

³⁴ The students usually brought the "couchette" or small bed with them. *M.A.* 2 Nov. 1873.

farmer gave the Order land adjoining the convent to pay two years' fees for his sister. The rest of the boarders came from Irish families in neighbouring communities or the more prosperous local Acadian farming families. The latter did not always manage to pay the full amount for boarding and the Sisters accepted work, produce, and almost enough cash. In three cases, they waived the fee of \$1.50 a month charged to students who did not take their meals at the convent.

Revenue from Boarders: Caraquet 1874-81

Year	# Full Board	Av. stay in months	# Board own food	Av. stay in months	Paid
74-5	10	4.5	6	2.7	\$372.31
75-6	2	2.25	7	6.5	\$75.60
76-7	3	6.36	7	5.66	\$136.55
77-8	4	6.23	14	5	\$347.25
78-9	3	6	6	8.25	\$190.60
79-80	2	6	14	8.33	\$229.83
80-1	2	1.5	11	7.57	\$141.71
81-2	2	3.25	6	7.74	\$136.84

Like other orders, the C.N.D. at Caraquet found ways to supplement the fee from boarders. They managed the farm and developed their own garden area. The Sisters of Charity in Buctouche also had a farm and won regular prizes at the agricultural show. The Superior in that convent made an ally of the Schools' Inspector, Valentin Landry.³⁵ He arranged for the Sisters to get government pay under their original names after they entered the convent.³⁶ Presumably he did not inquire if religious teaching was restricted to after school hours, as by law required. He maintained that the convent school was not on land owned by the Episcopal Corporation and so it was not a church school.³⁷ The Sisters of Charity in Memramcook also showed ingenuity in fund-raising. They organised a very successful excursion to Saint John. This involved hiring a train, setting up ticket outlets in grocery stores, presbyteries

³⁵ Landry mentions his high esteem for Mother Francis, even though she was anglophone. Published as "L'enseignement dans nos couvents," *Revue franco-américaine*, vol. VII, 2, (1 Jan. 1911): 120-133. P. 9 of handwritten copy, Centre d'études acadiennes, Moncton, New Brunswick (hereafter CEA) 7 pp. 2-10.

³⁶ Public Accounts, J.H.A. 1882 and 3, show payments to Philomene Belliveau who was Sister Marie-Edouard and to the mistress of novices, Marguerite Maillet, Sister Marie-Julienne. She also corresponded with the board under her original name.

³⁷ Landry, "L'enseignement dans nos couvents."

and the houses of local “notables,” and organising a picnic and an organ concert for those who preferred culture to shopping and sight-seeing. The excursion, at \$1.50 for the train and 35 cents a head, apparently made a useful profit.³⁸

The convent schools were reflecting and encouraging the changing role of women and in the process, the attitude towards convents in the *Moniteur* began to alter. There was no all-out attack on convents in Acadia, but the paper’s earlier enthusiastic support waned. This might have been because most convents economized by ceasing to advertise. Only the Sisters of Charity in Memramcook consistently paid for space. Coverage of concerts and prize-giving ceremonies diminished and by 1883 an editorial criticized Quebec convent schools.³⁹ The editor blamed them for producing girls unsuited to farm life who then emigrated to the United States. The editor said this should be a warning to New Brunswick convents. In 1884, there was a direct complaint that Acadian convents were too expensive.⁴⁰ By 1886, there was no coverage of convent school activities. The debate had shifted to a lengthy controversy on the quality of French taught in convent schools and the excessive use of English, particularly in Arichat, Nova Scotia.⁴¹ These comments coincided with constant volleys of advice in the *Moniteur* directing women to the virtues of humility and economy.

One reflection of the changing role of women was an increased desire for female education. More research is needed to measure the full effect of the convent schools, but they obviously helped more women to get at least an elementary education. Caraquet convent, for example, had fifty-four student boarders between 1874 and 1881. St. Basile convent had 137 students between 1874 and 1886.⁴² By 1879, this convent was providing free education for day girls.⁴³ Buctouche convent had 118 girls enrolled in 1880.⁴⁴

The census figures show that increasing numbers of young women seventeen and older were staying in school. In 1861, there were only seventeen girls in that age group listed as students. By 1871, there were thirty and by 1881, when the convent schools had time to develop a clientele and to produce some teachers qualified for the public school system, the number of older students had risen to eighty-two.

³⁸ *M.A.* 5, 8 & 12 Oct. 1886.

³⁹ *M.A.* 8 Nov. 1883

⁴⁰ “Évangeline,” *M.A.* 25 Sept. 1884.

⁴¹ *M.A.* 27 July 1886; 6 & 10 Aug. 1886.

⁴² “Noms des Elèves-Filles du 1 Janvier 1874 au 1 Janvier 1886,” Archives des soeurs hospitalières de St.-Joseph, St.-Basile, New Brunswick.

⁴³ Desjardins, “Le rôle,” p. 62.

⁴⁴ *M.A.* 3 June 1880.

The number of boarders staying at the Caraquet convent for longer periods reflected the general trend.

Average number of months spent by boarders in the Caraquet convent during the school year and numbers returning for second or more years of study.

Year	Av. stay in months	#2 yrs.	#3 yrs.	#4 yrs.	#5 yrs.
1874-5	4.8	0	0	0	0
1875-6	5.2	6	0	0	0
1876-7	5.6	4	2	0	0
1877-8	7.9	1	3	1	0
1878-9	7.72	3	1	1	0
1879-80	7.1	5	2	1	1
1880-81	7.39	3	4	2	1
1881-82	6.9	2	1	1	0

Some of these women went on to be teachers, improving the overall level of education in Acadian areas. This was also an attraction for parents who could now see education as a practical investment. Girls could earn a little money before marriage. As early as 1864, Schools' Inspector Freeze complimented the St.-Basile convent on the quality of education it was offering. He said that seventeen of the "young ladies" were working in schools just over the border in Maine. Schools in this area preferred them over U.S. trained teachers because they were fluent in English and French. The inspector also said the Academy was responsible for a "notable improvement" in schools on the New Brunswick side of the border in 1870. They were introducing modern teaching methods and the result was increased support for education in the area.⁴⁵ Almost 18% of the former boarders at the Caraquet convent had taught in government funded schools by 1881. As the convent had only been open since 1874 and there were also day pupils, this suggests many students later taught. The *Moniteur* reported that Valentin Landry gave teaching certificates to convent school students even when they had not gone to the Normal School.⁴⁶ This would be an added attraction for parents who did not want their daughters to experience

⁴⁵ Inspector Freeze, "Report on the Public Schools," Appendix to J.H.A. 1864, 25 and 1871, 16. Bishop Rogers of Chatham congratulated the Sisters of Charity for educating the two Thibodeau sisters who taught in Madawaska. *M.A.* 27 Nov. 1873.

⁴⁶ *M.A.*, 17 July 1884. A bewildered reader inquired, in the next edition, how this was possible, but received no answer.

the comparative freedom of boarding-house life in Fredericton while they studied at the Normal School.

The arrival of all these educated women on the labour market reflected the success of the convents and the general trend to educate daughters. By 1881, the two best qualified Acadian female teachers, one with a Class I certificate and the other Class II, were both former convent school pupils.⁴⁷ The number of female teachers in the province increased substantially between 1861 and 1881. This put them in direct competition with the male college graduates for teaching jobs, which may have caused some resentment, fuelling the criticism that followed.

**Acadian teachers in New Brunswick public schools,
by census year**

Year	Female #	Female %	Male #	Male %	Total
1861	15	18.75	65	81.25	90
1871	44	33	89	67	133
1881	97	42	131	57	229

Convents were even beginning to offer more advanced education. Early advertisements for the Memramcook convent school promised “particular attention to Christian virtues and morals, French, English, Music, Drawing, House-keeping and Sewing.”⁴⁸ By 1884, it was also offering Chemistry, Book-keeping, and Algebra.⁴⁹ Presumably by coincidence, the same issue of the paper included a letter on the growing “freemasonry” among women that was leading them to neglect their duties.

Inevitably, this education changed the public life of women. Their teachers and religious role models included strong-minded women. Amanda Viger, Sister St.-Jean-de-Goto, for example, was the proud daughter of a Patriote of 1837. Dr William Bayard of Saint John described her as a “beautiful, educated and refined young lady.”⁵⁰ She gave selfless service to the lepers of Tracadie, including work as secretary to a government inquiry, set up a dispensary serving much of Gloucester county, and developed the orphanage and school. Mère Augustin of the Menramcook convent had a running battle with the parish priest in Buctouche because she wanted to get

⁴⁷ There was also a Class III certificate and many uncertified Acadian teachers so Class I represented a considerable achievement.

⁴⁸ See for example *M.A.* 1 Jan. 1880.

⁴⁹ *M.A.* 3 July 1884

⁵⁰ Cited in Corinne Laplante, “Viger, Amanda,” Ramsay Cook ed., *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. XIII (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1994): pp. 1054-5.

him out of the affairs of the convent there.⁵¹ The convent Sisters also took an interest in Acadian affairs. Significantly, the first female subscriber to the *Moniteur* was from the Sisters of Charity Convent in Saint John.⁵² The Buctouche and Memramcook convents took out their own subscriptions. It was noteworthy that the Sisters regularly travelled by train to convents in other towns at a time when those writing the *Moniteur's* social columns found any such trip by a woman an interesting event.⁵³

The convent schools encouraged their students to develop their own talents. The girls performed in concerts and acted in plays, sometimes taking male roles. Memramcook also taught “declamation” to encourage young women, “like young men,” to be “natural and easy” when speaking, neither timid nor over confident.⁵⁴ The education system was competitive and encouraged excellence with prizes in every part of the curriculum.

Convent pupils took these traditions away with them. Two brave young ladies performed in the Shediac Dramatic society in 1876.⁵⁵ Former “little birds of the convent” were writing to the Board of Education demanding back pay for years they had taught and one even wrote to her Member of the House of Assembly for support.⁵⁶ Another teacher, Elizabeth Doiron, had regularly appeared in the newspaper since she performed in the Memramcook Christmas concert when she was five. She was in every list of prize winners published while she was at the convent. When she became a teacher, the paper reported school plays she produced and her work as director of the parish choir. She came back to the convent in 1885 to present the gold medal for mathematics. Then she took the train to Montreal and Quebec for a holiday. She wrote letters to the paper urging male and female teachers to attend Teachers’ Institute meetings. When she spoke at the Institute, the *Moniteur* covered her speech in two issues. It had never recorded a woman’s speech before and coverage in more than one issue was an honour usually reserved for priests and politicians.⁵⁷ Another young woman, “Une Acadienne,” was bold enough to write that it was about time Acadian girls learned some “savoir-vivre” instead of hiding from the world. She called for more mathematics and grammar in the curriculum and less emphasis on

⁵¹ Rev. F.-X.-J. Michaud, “Memoires,” 1882, Bk. II, p. 2 & 3. CEA. 24-4-3.

⁵² Marguerite Michaud, 10 Nov. 1871.

⁵³ *M.A.* 20 July 1886.

⁵⁴ *M.A.* 15 July 1875.

⁵⁵ One has the same name as a prizewinner at the Memramcook Convent. *M.A.* 8 June, 1876.

⁵⁶ Marguerite Belliveau got Pierre-Amand Landry to write to the Department of Education on her behalf. “Letterbook 22,” Board of Education, RG11, RS 113, 965, PANB.

⁵⁷ *M.A.* 10 Sept. 1885 and 17 Sept. 1885.

house-keeping skills.⁵⁸ It is more than coincidence that the first Acadian suffragist “Manchette” was also a pupil of the Memramcook convent at this time.⁵⁹

The convent pupils must have created a stir when they came home. The C.N.D. made a point of establishing the same standards in all their schools, and New Brunswick advertisements stressed the importance of order and correct behaviour.⁶⁰ The girls became accustomed to a very strict timetable that included long periods of silence and prayer. Students were specifically warned against running, laughing, or talking in the corridors, inopportune questions, arguing, singing, gossiping, whispering, shouting, touching others, talking to boys, and sitting with their legs crossed. Special warnings were issued before the holidays to help students avoid these offences at home.⁶¹ Even day pupils must have found the contrast with life in a lively Acadian family remarkable. Boarding pupils must have found it very difficult to cope with living in two different worlds. Most of the Caraquet boarders were the only member of their family attending the convent. Between 1874 and 1887, only fifteen of the fifty-four registered as boarders were siblings of others on the list. The others were chosen for an education that inevitably set them apart from their families. Even their parents must have often felt a growing gap between themselves and their convent educated daughters as few of these boarders’ parents had more than an elementary education and thirty-four could neither read nor write.

The girls also learned manners and accomplishments that changed the lives of some families. The *Moniteur* began to publish items on etiquette, including hints to young men on how to please the new educated woman.⁶² Convent girls were taught to avoid Acadian French and speak a “purer,” presumably educated Québécois form.⁶³ Elizabeth Doiron could not understand why “country folk” hung onto the old ways of speaking and refused to

⁵⁸ *M.A.* 12 Nov. 1885.

⁵⁹ Emilie Leblanc, born 1863, attended Memramcook convent school then went to teach in Nova Scotia where she wrote thirteen letters published in *L’Evangeline* 14 Feb. 1895 to 3 Feb. 1898. She criticised the establishment and demanded more rights for women. Pierre Gérin and Pierre M Gérin, *Marichette, lettres acadiennes 1895-1898* (Sherbrooke, P.Q.: Naaman, 1982).

⁶⁰ Dumont and Fahmy-Eid, *Les couventines*, p. 114.

⁶¹ Dumont and Fahmy-Eid, *Les couventines*, p. 59-66.

⁶² *M.A.* 4 Feb. 1886.

⁶³ Memramcook convent put this message over with a play describing how the boarders gently taught a new arrival to avoid “jargon villeagois” and learn proper behaviour. The play was repeated at the Boudreau village school six years later. *M.A.* 10 July 1879 and 31 Dec. 1885.

speak “pure” French.⁶⁴ As Acadian French had developed separately from Quebec French and included many different words and structures, it is easy to imagine the disdain of other little convent pupils when faced with neighbours and family members who did not match up to their new standards.

Some Acadians resented the implied superiority of Québécois standards. Pascal Poirier, the future Acadian senator, who was at the college of St.-Joseph until 1873, later wrote that he and his peers were irritated by teachers telling them how much better educated students were in the province of Quebec.⁶⁵ The Québécois who had moved into northern New Brunswick were fishermen and farmers like the Acadians. There is no evidence that they were any more educated or enthusiastic about educating their daughters than any other Acadians. However, most of the francophone teaching Sisters were educated Québécois and they taught the manners of their own society.

As well as having to cope with a new set of standards, Acadian parents who chose to send their children to board at the convent faced some new expenses. Apart from the fees, boarders had to bring bed clothes, table linen and their school uniform.⁶⁶ Students might want extra courses, such as art and music. These were useful for teachers and ornamental in wives, but they cost more money. Painting and “works of good taste” such as embroidery or flower-making ranged from \$6 to \$50 a year. Music lessons cost between \$20 and \$60. Displaying these expensive talents required a piano, organ, or harp. Smaller and cheaper instruments such as the violin or the flute were apparently considered too physical for refined young ladies.⁶⁷ Israel Landry’s music store in Saint John advertised albums of music for the latest piano pieces costing between \$1.50 and \$2.00. The piano, organ or harmonium would cost between \$50 and \$500.⁶⁸ We get a glimpse of conflicting roles when the *Moniteur* suggested washing dishes was good for piano playing as the warm water made the fingers supple.⁶⁹ Associating with rich young ladies from Montreal may also have given Acadian girls some different ideas on fashion. In 1877, The *Moniteur* began to carry advertisements for women’s dress shops, bringing the latest fashions from Saint John and Halifax.⁷⁰

⁶⁴ *M.A.* 10 Sept. 1885.

⁶⁵ Pascal Poirier, *Le Père Lefebvre et L’Acadie* (Montreal: Beauchemin, 1898), p. 172.

⁶⁶ *M.A.* 2 Nov. 1873 gives a full list of items boarders were expected to bring to the Memramcook convent school.

⁶⁷ Men at St. Joseph College did play the violin and the flute.

⁶⁸ *M.A.* 14 April 1871

⁶⁹ *M.A.* 17 Aug. 1886.

⁷⁰ *M.A.* 16 Aug. 1877.

The investments may have been made in the hopes that daughters would marry young men with good financial prospects. The first of many “fashionable marriages” was recorded in 1882 when a former collegian married a former convent pupil. Even the wedding involved financial investment as parents presumably paid for the “très riche toilette” and some of the “many rich and beautiful presents” required by the new style of celebration.⁷¹

There were complaints about the increasing use of English as the language was associated with the move from rural Acadian society to the temptations of the towns. It is easy to see why some francophones were concerned. All the convent schools in Acadian areas took both francophone and anglophone students. St. Louis, Memramcook and Miscouche advertised courses in English and French. However, the advertisements do not say what language was used to teach other subjects. Memramcook convent followed the pattern set by the male college of St. Joseph and presented a parallel set of prizes in both languages.⁷² In 1875, the convent offered arithmetic, history, geography, religious instruction, and astronomy in English and French. Botany was only offered in French and book-keeping was only offered in English. The lists show girls with francophone names taking courses in English and a smaller number of girls with anglophone names taking courses in French. Concert programmes and advertisements for music suggest that most of the parlour pieces performed by the young ladies would be English rather than traditional Acadian or French. However, the convents were responding to market forces when they taught English. The parents in St. Basile had insisted that the Hospitalières provide an English language course.⁷³ It was essential for women entering teaching, as all correspondence with the Board of Education was in English and promotion beyond the Class III teaching certificate required English. Women who did business beyond the local level, or dealt with lawyers, needed English.⁷⁴ It was also impractical to separate English and French students in the smaller convents. Given the state of convent finances, an anglophone boarder from a prosperous family was a gift from heaven. Caraquet took five, who paid \$55.00 or \$65.00 per year.

Criticism of the convents was at least partly based on other perceived attacks on French. The *Moniteur* had originally praised the St.-Louis convent

⁷¹ See for example, *M.A.* 27 July 1886, wedding of Elisabeth Doiron to Charles Poirier, former student at St. Joseph college.

⁷² See for example *M.A.* 6 July 1882.

⁷³ Desjardins, “Le rôle,” p. 58.

⁷⁴ See the contemporary opinion of Céline Bourque whose father sent her into the English course at Miscouche in 1878. “L’histoire de ses ancêtres,” *société historique acadienne les cahiers*, vol. 4, 7 (1992): pp. 290-302.

for “leading to perfect equality in both languages” and the Buctouche convent for teaching both the languages “essential for success in this country.”⁷⁵ However, hostility to the use of English was growing. The French Preparatory Department at the Normal School opened in 1878. It was intended to help francophone teachers earn a Class III license and learn enough English to move on to higher levels. The fiery priest Marcel François Richard said this proved the government saw French as a stage in education to be passed through before moving to English. A Quebec M.P. fanned the flames when he suggested that the St.-Louis classical college had been closed by the Irish Bishop Rogers because it was French.⁷⁶ The convents were caught in the crossfire as anglophone and francophone clergy struggled for control.⁷⁷

The use of English in convent education was criticised because it was becoming a symbol of change. By the 1880s, advertisers were looking for Acadian women to work in the Maritime cotton mills or as domestics in the city of Saint John. Agents from New England were persuading Acadian girls to emigrate to the mill towns where they could earn their own money and sometimes assimilate into American anglophone society. Critics said family immigration was caused by women’s taste for luxury. Even within Acadian society, women’s roles were changing. They were moving into business to serve the growing Acadian market for fashionable clothes and places to stay when travelling. There was even talk of giving women the federal vote. “Évangeline” the Ottawa correspondent of the *Moniteur* was disgusted: “all we need now is legislation allowing them to wear pants.”⁷⁸

The teaching Sisters did their best to provide French instruction. The Sisters of Charity deliberately sent some French Sisters from St. Basile to Buctouche and kept Suzanne Cyr, Sr. Marie-Anne, in Memramcook to strengthen the French teaching in both schools.⁷⁹

The results are harder to measure, but French became increasingly important in New Brunswick Acadian education. At least three former convent pupils defended it passionately. Elizabeth Doiron’s speech, covered at such length, was on the value of the French language. Later she wrote a

⁷⁵ *M.A.* 17 Sept. 1874; 11 July 1878; 6 May 1880.

⁷⁶ *M.A.* 8 April 1886. The college advertised courses in both languages, just like St. Joseph and Bishop Rogers’ rival college of St. Michael in Chatham.

⁷⁷ At the height of a 1911 battle with the Irish clergy, Valentin Landry criticised Memramcook, Chatham, Bathurst and St.-Louis convents for using too much English even during the 1870s and 1880s. He claimed the Irish church hierarchy had allowed Acadians to build convents, then staffed them with anglophones to assimilate the Acadians, “L’enseignement dans nos couvents.”

⁷⁸ *M.A.* 30 April 1885.

⁷⁹ Alexandre-J. Savoie, *Un siècle de revendications scolaires au Nouveau-Brunswick 1871-1971* vol. 1, 134. Sr. Marie-Dorothée, *Une pierre*, ch.3.

call to all Acadian teachers to attend the Teachers' Institute meeting and make a stand for French.⁸⁰ "Manchette" was as proud of her Acadian heritage as she was critical of the Acadian establishment. Suzanne Cyr was a student at the first St. Basile convent school and later taught at Memramcook and Buctouche convents. As Sr. Marie-Anne, she was one of the leading "French Sisters" who worked towards a separate French speaking section of the Sisters of Charity in 1914.⁸¹ It was a former convent school pupil who criticised convents for teaching French badly in 1886 and another woman who defended them.

**Linguistic background of teaching Sisters
in the principle Acadian area convents⁸²**

Convent and Order	Convent Superior	Francophone origin Teaching Sisters	Anglophone origin Teaching Sisters
1861			
St. Basile	sc	Irish	1
1871			
Newcastle	CND	French	1
St. Basile	HSJ	Irish	1
1881			
Bathhurst	CND	French	3
Butouche	SC	US/anglo	8
Carquet	CND	French	2
Memramcook	SC	Scott	2
Newcastle	CND	French	1
St.-Basile	HSJ	French	11
St.-Louis	CND	French	2

The convent schools were teaching their students English and expensive tastes, but they were also developing confidence and independence, allowing Acadian women to take a more active role in public life. These changes were almost inevitable with exposure to a more urbanised society in a province with a dominant anglophone middle class. It is not surprising that they made some more conservative Acadians nervous and critical. These teaching Sisters included powerful role models for young Acadian women. They provided students with an education allowing some of them to be professional teachers. Yet, at the same time, they taught their pupils

⁸⁰ *M.A.* 25 March 1886.

⁸¹ Neil Boucher, "Un exemple du nationalisme de l'Église de l'Acadie: les 'French Sisters' chez les soeurs de Charité de Saint-Jean, 1914-22," SCHEC Études d'histoire religieuses, vol. 60 (1994): pp. 25-34.

⁸² It is not clear how many of the eleven francophone Sisters in Tracadie in 1881 were teaching.

to be proud of their French and Catholic heritage. The survival and growth of the schools into the mid-twentieth century indicates that the Sisters overcame considerable difficulties and successfully gave many of their pupils the skills they needed to cope with a rapidly changing society.