

TOWNSHIPS ODDITIES AND EXTREMES

Text and photography (except where noted): Matthew Farfan

The following tour features fourteen attractions found in the Eastern Townships, each of which is either odd or unique in some way, or else the smallest, largest, longest, shortest, highest, or oldest of its kind. Sites range from a slave burial ground, to the highest village in Quebec, to the largest open-pit asbestos mine in the Western Hemisphere.

1) Slave Burial Ground:

“Nigger Rock” & the Black Community of Saint-Armand

Strong oral tradition and increasing hard evidence suggest that there was once a substantial slave community in Saint-Armand. According to tradition, a large outcrop of rock near the village, known for generations by the derogatory term “Nigger Rock,” was a burial ground for slaves two centuries ago. The “Rock” is located on what was once the property of Philip Luke, a Loyalist, who settled in the area after the American Revolution, and who, documents show, arrived with slaves he inherited from his mother.

Oral tradition surrounding the site is strong among Saint-Armand’s older residents, some of whom recall stories from their parents or from their childhood about the old slave burial ground or about the blacks in the area. “Nigger Rock” is believed to be the only known burial ground in Canada for blacks who were born and died in slavery. In 2003, a plaque was presented to the municipality by the Government of Quebec. It reads (in French): “Oral tradition holds that near here, at a place known as Nigger Rock, many black slaves were buried between 1794 and 1833. To commemorate the 170th anniversary of the abolition of slavery, the government dedicates this plaque to the memory of the victims of the tragedy of slavery and hopes to restore their human dignity.”

Other evidence suggests that there was much more to black Saint-Armand than a slave cemetery. A stone structure, known in local lore as the “black chapel,” has sat crumbling and abandoned for decades just west of the village. The *Centre historique de Saint-Armand* hopes to restore it. In the woods near “Nigger Rock” are the remains of what may have been a black village. Two decades after the abolition of slavery in Canada, the census of 1851 recorded over 280 blacks in the area. Yet no one is sure where they lived. An account book from the first store in Saint-Armand lists the names of a number of black men among its customers – “John the Black Man” and others. There is also a long-standing tradition that escaped slaves from the United States found refuge in the area via the Underground Railway. A plaque at the old Methodist Church in nearby Philipsburg testifies to this fact.

Access: STRICTLY private property and inaccessible by road.

Directions: On a clear day, “Nigger Rock” is visible across the field to the south from the road between Saint-Armand and Philipsburg.

Info (*Centre historique de Saint-Armand*): (450) 248-3393.

- 1) “Nigger Rock.” (Photo: Missisquoi Museum).
- 2) “Nigger Rock.” (Photo: Missisquoi Museum).
- 3) The “black chapel.”
- 4) Methodist (United) Church, Philipsburg.

2) Unique 12-Sided Barn:

Walbridge Barn, Mystic

This highly unusual barn, located in the sleepy hamlet of Mystic, was built in 1882 by Alexander Walbridge, a wealthy eccentric. From the 1860s until his death in the 1890s, Walbridge was an inventor, manufacturer, and industrialist. Much of Mystic bears his stamp to this day. Among his projects were an iron works, a dam and pond, the second storey of the local school, the Methodist Church, Lakelet Hall, a splendid 25-room brick mansion overlooking a private lake, and of course, his famous 12-sided barn.

His mansion is long gone, but Walbridge’s 12-sided barn still stands, testimony to the imagination of its

builder. The barn has a conical roof and twelve separate bays, or mows, each used for a different crop. The inside features a floor that rotated by means of waterpower from a nearby brook. Teams of horses would enter the barn and proceed onto the turntable with their loaded wagons. The turntable would be rotated to the appropriate mow, where the crops would be unloaded. The turntable would then be rotated again to allow the horses to exit the barn. Walbridge's design may have been inspired by turntables used for rotating railway engines.

Besides the barn, the Walbridge farmhouse still stands, as does the elegant brick and iron wall surrounding the property, the Methodist (now United) Church, and the old school.

Access: Private property.

Directions: In the village of Mystic, near Bedford.

- 1) The Walbridge Barn.
- 2) The schoolhouse, Mystic.
- 3) Mystic, c.1910. (Photo: Farfan Collection)
- 4) Lakelet Hall, c.1900. (Photo: Farfan Collection)
- 5) Lakelet Hall, barn and lake, c.1900. (Photo: Farfan Collection)

3) Shortest & Oldest Public Covered Bridge in Canada:

Guthrie Bridge

Spanning Groat Creek, which meanders its way across the southern part of Missisquoi County, this tiny covered bridge measures a mere 14.9 metres (49 feet) in length, making it the shortest public covered bridge in the country. Built in 1845, it is also the oldest. The bridge has one span and is built according to the lattice design patented by Ithiel Town in 1820.

Access: Public.

Directions: Pigeon Hill/Saint-Armand. 8 km (5 miles) N. of Canada-U.S. border at Morse's Line on Rte. 235; then 2.5 km (1.6 miles) E. on Chevalier Rd.

- 1) Newly painted in red.
- 2) A Town lattice structure.
- 3) The shortest public covered bridge in Quebec.

4) Historic Battle Site:

Eccles Hill, Site of 1870 Fenian Raid

The Irish potato famine of the 1840s decimated Ireland's population. Between 1847 and 1861, over two million Irish migrated to North America in search of a better life. In the 1860s, Irish radicals in the U.S. formed the Fenian Brotherhood, whose aim was to force England to grant independence to Ireland by invading Canada.

In 1866, the Fenians launched a series of raids on Canadian territory. One was at Pigeon Hill on the Quebec-Vermont border. Led by "General" Samuel Spear, several hundred Fenians marched across the border and planted a flag. Meeting no soldiers, they busied themselves by stealing livestock and liquor from farms in the area, plundering Saint-Armand and Frelighsburg, and abusing the local population. Upon hearing that Canadian forces were approaching, the Fenians retreated back across the border. The last 200 stragglers were charged by a volunteer cavalry troop who managed to capture sixteen prisoners. Once back on American soil, the remainder of the Fenians had their guns confiscated by American soldiers.

Another Fenian raid occurred in 1870 at Eccles Hill. This time, some 400 men, under the command of "General" John O'Neill, President of the Fenian Brotherhood, were repulsed by a small group of Canadian Home Guard and militiamen. Two Fenians were killed and nine injured. No Canadians were hurt or killed. O'Neill's words to his troops were: "Men of Ireland, I am ashamed of you."

In 1902, Eccles Hill was designated a national historic site by the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada, making it the only designated "battle site" in the Eastern Townships. A plaque marks the spot.

Access: Public.

Directions: 3 km (2 miles) W. of Frelighsburg; then 2 km (1.2 miles) S. on Eccles Hill Rd.

- 1) The battle of Eccles Hill, 1870. (Photo: Missisquoi Museum)
- 2) Members of the Home Guard. (Photo: Missisquoi Museum)
- 3) The Fenian Monument, Eccles Hill.

5) World's Only Natural Masonic Lodge Room: Summit, Mount Owl's Head

Masons from far and wide have been climbing Owl's Head in June every summer for nearly 150 years. In a ceremony that is shrouded in secrecy, they initiate new members to their mysterious rites. At the summit of the mountain is a natural rock formation known as the "World's Only Natural Masonic Lodge Room."

Lichen-coated symbols may still be seen etched in the rocks.

Access: Private property.

Directions: From Mansonville, follow the signs to Owl's Head Mountain.

- 1) The Natural Masonic Lodge Room, c.1900. (Photo: Farfan Collection)
- 2) Hikers, c.1915. (Photo: Farfan Collection)
- 3) The view from the summit, c.1900. (Photo: Farfan Collection)

6) Quebec's Only Monastic Municipality: Saint-Benoît-du-Lac

St-Benoît-du-Lac (population 51) is a curiosity. St-Benoît Abbey, along with its 225 hectares (556 acres) of land, is actually a municipality unto itself, a kind of Vatican in miniature. Carved out of the municipality of Austin in 1939, St-Benoît was created in part because Austin, itself carved out of Bolton East the year before, was worried about having to provide the monks with water, electricity and other services, while the monks would legally be required to pay no municipal taxes. The people of Austin and the monks agreed that it would be in everyone's best interest for the monastery to form its own municipality. Back then it was extremely rare for an institution to become a municipality; today it would be unheard of.

Today St-Benoît still maintains its independence. A representative from the monastery attends regular meetings of the Memphremagog Regional County (MRC). The monastery, however, forgoes the traditional municipal organization and is administered by a corporation composed of Benedictine monks. Dom Jacques Bolduc, the current mayor, is not worried about the government's recent municipal mergers. He explains that since its creation, the enclave has rarely, if ever, asked the province for anything. "In 1958, we were the first ones in the area to build a water treatment plant. We had to, because, with our cheese making, we didn't want to cause any pollution. We didn't ask the government for a cent and paid for everything ourselves. No, we're not worried. We ask for nothing, so they leave us alone."

Access: Public.

Directions: 3 km (2 miles) S. of Austin.

Information: (819) 843-4080.

- 1) St-Benoit-du-Lac Abbey.
- 2) The clock tower.
- 3) Abbey church, interior.
- 4) The view from the abbey.

7) The Sea Serpent of Lake Memphremagog:

Lake Memphremagog is located partly in Canada and partly in the United States. Europeans have been living around the lake for only the last two centuries. Before their arrival, the area was occupied by the Abenakis, the indigenous people, who gave the lake its name, which roughly translates as "beautiful waters." Lake Memphremagog is steeped in legend. One legend pertains to a creature that is said to inhabit the depths beneath Owl's Head Mountain.

According to a document from 1816, when the first settlers arrived from New England, the Native people told them that they were afraid to bathe or swim in the lake because it was inhabited by a sea serpent. Over the past two centuries, more than 225 sightings of the monster have been recorded. One of the earliest reports dates to 1847 when *The Stanstead Journal* proclaimed that “a strange animal, something of a sea serpent... exists in Lake Memphremagog.” Known in the past by such names as the “Sea Serpent,” “the Anaconda,” or “the Lake Memphremagog Monster,” in recent years, the creature has been dubbed “Memphré.” A look-out tower in Magog has been dedicated to Memphré. Directions: Magog, Georgeville, and other locations around the lake are all excellent vantage points for spotting Memphré.

- 1) An early rendition of the Lake Memphremagog Monster. (Source: *Uriah Jewett and the Sea Serpent of Lake Memphremagog*, 1917.)
- 2) Memphré Tower, Magog.
- 3) Mount Orford from Memphré Tower, Magog.
- 4) The view of Lake Memphremagog, south of Georgeville.

8) (Former) World’s Only International Post Office: Beebe Plain (Stanstead), Quebec & Beebe Plain, Vermont

Across the street from both the Canadian and the American Customs in Beebe is an imposing building made out of blocks of locally-quarried granite. Known as a “line house” because it was erected directly astride the Canada-US border, the building was built as a store in the 1820s by Horace Stewart, who lived in the elegant red brick house next door. In the 1860s, the store was converted into a post office. It had one postmaster, but two doors and two postal counters, each serving customers from a different country. The “World’s Only International Post Office,” as it was dubbed by *Ripley’s Believe It Or Not*, functioned into the 20th century. Today it is a private home. The iron post that marks the border may still be seen to the right of the front door.

Access: Private property.

Directions: At the foot of Canusa Street, Beebe Plain (Stanstead), across from the Canada Customs.

- 1) The Double Post Office, c.1900. (Photo: Farfan Collection)
- 2) The former Double Post Office as it looks today.

9) Unique International Street:

Canusa Street, Beebe Plain (Stanstead), Quebec & Beebe Plain, Vermont

Canusa Street is split in two – right up the middle. The homes on one side of this famous street are situated in Beebe Plain (Stanstead), Canada; the homes just across the street are in Beebe Plain, USA -- hence, the name CAN-USA. Both the Canadian and American customs are to be found at the bottom of Canusa Street, and residents on either side of Canusa must report to the appropriate customs if they intend to cross the street. Canusa Street has been widely written up and is a popular local curiosity.

Directions: In Beebe Plain (Stanstead).

- 1) “Canusa Street.”
- 2) Straddling the line on Canusa Street.
- 3) U.S. and Canadian Customs. (Photo: Farfan Collection)
- 4) A splendid home on Canusa Street.

10) World’s Only International Library and Opera House:

Haskell Free Library and Opera House, Rock Island (Stanstead), Quebec & Derby Line, Vermont

After three years of construction, the Haskell Free Library and Opera House was opened to the public amid much fanfare in 1904. Designated a historic site by the governments of Canada, the U.S., and the province

of Quebec, the Haskell draws visitors from all around the world. Featured in everything from the *New York Times* to *Canadian Geographic* to *Ripley's Believe It Or Not*, the Haskell is the only library and opera house built directly on an international border. The entrance, main office, and most of the seats in the 400-seat opera house are in the U.S., but the library books and opera house stage are in Canada. Each summer, the Haskell hosts a full schedule of concerts and plays. Visitors, who do not need to pass through customs, will notice the granite border marker on the corner.

Access: Public.

Directions: 1 Church Street, Stanstead.

Information: (819) 876-2471.

- 1) The Haskell, exterior.
- 2) Stage, Haskell Opera House. (Photo: Don Whipple)
- 3) Reading room, Haskell Free Library. The black line on the floor marks the international boundary.
- 4) Stained glass window dedicated to Haskell co-founder Martha Stewart Haskell.
- 5) The international boundary marker outside the Haskell.

11) Eugene Baldwin's Long Barn

La Ferme du Plateau, Coaticook.

Reputedly the longest barn in the world in its day (according to *Guinness*), Baldwin's Long Barn was built in 1912 by Eugene Orson Baldwin, a wealthy cattle farmer, who was famous for his splendid herd of Jersey cows. Baldwin was known as an eccentric, and it is said that it was his wish that the top of his barn, built on a plateau overlooking Coaticook, would be higher than the steeple of the Catholic Church.

Originally measuring 85.3 metres (280 feet), the barn was later extended to 103.6 metres (340 feet). The barn roof features sixteen dormer windows (eight on each side), seven cupolas, is made of tin, and features a highly unusual maple leaf design. In 1989, the barn was purchased by the Town of Coaticook. In 1992, it was acquired by an agricultural school, the *Centre d'initiative en agriculture de la region de Coaticook*, as a field training site. In 1999, the barn was designated a historic site by the province of Quebec.

The *Ferme du Plateau* is the site of Coaticook's annual summer fair, the *Festival du lait* (milk festival). As well, each summer a giant labyrinth is created in a nearby cornfield. The first of its kind in Quebec, the maze is dubbed the *Lait-byrinthe* and is open to the public during the summer.

Access: Public. Admission fee to the *Lait-byrinthe*.

Directions: 129 Morgan Street, Coaticook.

Info: (819) 849-9588 (ext. 247)

- 1) The barn.
- 2) Oculus.
- 3) Tin roof, detail. Note the maple leaf design throughout.
- 4) Plaque.
- 5) Eugene Orson Baldwin. (Source: *Men of Today in the Eastern Townships*, 1917.)

12) World's Longest Pedestrian Suspension Bridge:

Coaticook Gorge Bridge, Coaticook

A popular local attraction, this single-span bridge spans the Coaticook River in the Coaticook Gorge Park. Built in 1988 and listed in the *Guinness Book of Records*, the bridge measures a whopping 169 metres (554 feet), and towers over the gorge below. Other attractions in the park include 10 km (6 miles) of trails, lookouts, an interpretation centre, and splendid scenery.

Access: Public. Admission fee.

Directions: In Coaticook, follow the signs for the Gorge.

Info: (819) 849-2331.

- 1) The bridge from above the gorge.
- 2) Through the trees.

- 3) Map of the Coaticook Gorge Park.
- 4) Publicity, Coaticook Gorge Park. (Source: Coaticook Gorge Park)

13) Highest Village in Quebec:

Saint-Malo

The tiny agricultural community of Saint-Malo, named after the parish founded here in 1863, is tucked away in the southeast corner of the Eastern Townships near the New Hampshire border. Saint-Malo (population 530) has the distinction of being the highest village in the province of Quebec, and is situated at an elevation ranging from 370 to 640 metres (1215 to 2100 feet) above sea level. *La Montagnaise*, an observation tower, is situated at a high point in the village (585 metres / 1920 feet), and provides, on a clear day, exceptional panoramas of the surrounding countryside all the way from Mount Orford in the west to Mount Megantic in the northeast, with lots of rolling farmland and forest in between. Interpretive plaques at the tower explain the history of Saint-Malo and surrounding areas, including the ill-fated breakaway *Indian Stream Republic* (1832 to 1836), which was established east of Saint-Malo in what is now New Hampshire territory.

Access: The look-out is public.

Directions: For Saint-Malo, travel E. of Coaticook via Rtes. 208 and 253, or S. from Cookshire via Rte. 253.

- 1) The observation tower, altitude 585 metres (1920 feet).
- 2) The village from the tower.
- 3) The view to the northeast.
- 4) The Catholic Church.
- 5) Atop the tower.

14) Largest Open-Pit Asbestos Mine in the Western Hemisphere:

Jeffrey Mine, Asbestos

Asbestos was originally discovered in this vicinity in 1879. Commercial mining began two years later, and since then, the Jeffrey Mine has changed hands several times. In recent years, the asbestos industry has experienced financial problems, resulting from a falling world demand for the mineral, brought on by health risks associated with it.

Jeffrey Mine is two kilometres in diameter, 350 metres (1150 feet) in depth, and six square kilometres in total area, making it the largest open pit asbestos mine in the Western hemisphere. The only larger mine of this type is located in the town of Asbest, Russia.

The name “Asbestos” was first applied to the post office here in 1884, and transferred to the village (later the town) of Asbestos in 1899. The town, which has grown up around the mine, has had large chunks of its territory swallowed up by the expanding pit. In fact, downtown Asbestos has disappeared several times over the years, and a number of streets now lead right to the edge of the pit, vanish, and then continue on the other side.

Access: Private property. A nearby public lookout offers excellent views of the pit.

Note: Also worth a visit is the Asbestos Mineral Museum (341 Boul. St-Luc). Seasonal. Entry fee.

Directions: Town of Asbestos.

Info (Museum): (819) 879-6444; (819) 879-5308.

- 1) The Asbestos Mine. (Photo: *Les cartes François Laroche*)
- 2) Publicity, Ville d'Asbestos. (Source: Ville d'Asbestos)
- 3) Map of Asbestos, showing the mine. (Source: Ville d'Asbestos)