Settling the Upper Saint John
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The Upper Saint John River has been the site of a distinctive French-American culture since the late eighteenth century. The French settlement began in 1785. After the American Revolution, the British colonial authorities encouraged French settlers to relocate to the Upper Saint John by promising them generous grants of land. Southern New Brunswick Acadians who had spent the 1755–1767 years on the lower St. Lawrence, Canadian families who had moved to southern New Brunswick during the American Revolution, and soon, Canadians from the Kamouraska region took advantage of the offer. New Brunswick surveyor George Speed laid out a block of land for French settlers in 1787, and grants were issued in 1790 and 1794 to 74 households (see map “Land surveyed in 1787”). The settlers adapted the long lot system which was standardized in Québec, it maximized access to the river, which was the only means of communication, and minimized isolation.

Soon after, the emerging boundary dispute put an end to the granting of land, but not to migrations from the lower St. Lawrence. By 1840, the valley boasted 6,167 inhabitants of Acadian, French Canadian, New England, Native, and Irish descent. By 1870, the population was near 15,000. Intermarriage led to the assimilation of the descendants of the Irish and New Englanders whose grandparents were often French-speaking Catholics. The settlement was erected into a Roman Catholic parish, Saint Basile, as early as 1792, from which were hived children were often French-speaking Catholics. The settlement was erected into a Roman Catholic parish, Saint Basile, as early as 1792, from which were hived children were often French-speaking Catholics. The settlement was erected into a Roman Catholic parish, Saint Basile, as early as 1792, from which were hived children were often French-speaking Catholics. The settlement was erected into a Roman Catholic parish, Saint Basile, as early as 1792, from which were hived children were often French-speaking Catholics. The settlement was erected into a Roman Catholic parish, Saint Basile, as early as 1792, from which were hived children were often French-speaking Catholics.

Through the early nineteenth century, the Saint John remained extremely important for transportation, communication, and trade. Major Vidal, a British officer, created a depiction of a group of traders departing from the territory in the winter of 1817 (see illustration at left). The settlers first made a living from the fur trade (in connection with Québec City merchants) and agriculture. After the War of 1812, Madawaska farmers started growing large amounts of wheat, which was exported to Rivière-du-Loup on the St. Lawrence, milled into flour, and shipped down the Saint John to Fredericton, or sold locally to new settlers who had not finished clearing their land.

Numerous immigrants were attracted to the area by the availability of unused land. Lumbering, which began officially during the 1823–24 season and continued illegally during the boundary dispute, made it possible for settlers to survive on wages earned in the lumber camps until farms were established. As the graph shows, the boundary dispute between the United States and Great Britain in the 1820s and 1830s had no effect initially on immigration. The departure of many families in the mid-1830s was caused by a series of bad harvests. Subsequently, farmers switched from wheat growing to producing their own foodstuffs and provisions to sell to lumber camps. Once the dangers of war disappeared, immigration resumed and only slowed with the diminishing supply of good land after 1850. By 1870, all the best land (intervale) had been taken.