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European Education/Aboriginal Activism: Cultural Métissage in the Late-Eighteenth and Early-Nineteenth Centuries

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The last decade of the eighteenth century was a time of transition in the Huron-Wendat community of Jeune-Lorette. After 150 years among the Huron-Wendat, the Jesuit missionary presence ended in 1794. The Jesuit departure meant many things for the community. In the immediate aftermath of the Jesuit departure their church would be without a priest and more importantly the seigneurie of Sillery, which had been held in trust for them by the Jesuits, became part of broader political discussions as the colonial administration debated what to do with the large amount of Jesuit land in the Saint Lawrence valley. As the early-nineteenth century marched on, European colonization of areas previously unoccupied placed increasing pressure on Huron-Wendat hunting grounds; the community had too little land to either farm – which was not very popular – or harvest resources to sustain itself. In the face of these changes, and with the support of the last Jesuit missionary to the community, Père Girault, the Huron-Wendat began to seek support to mitigate the effects on the community. Beginning in 1791, they began petitioning the governor of Lower Canada, Lord Dorchester, for the title to the seigneuries of Sillery and Saint Gabriel and for access to the Petit Séminaire, in nearby Quebec City, in order to educate some of their children. These petitions would continue for over four decades and, although ultimately unsuccessful, the strategies employed by this community would bring their concerns as far as the royal throne in England.

Most, if not all, of the work that has been done on this subject has focused on the Huron-Wendat relationship with colonial political structures and key figures involved in these discussions rather than focusing on the conditions within the community that facilitated making these claims.¹ Although scholars who have written about this community certainly have not ignored its internal composition and structure, the scattered nature of the documents, small size of the community, and

broader political transitions taking place in Lower Canada during this period have reduced the attention paid to more local influences. Rather than focusing on the claims that the Huron-Wendat made on the seigneuries of St. Gabriel and Sillery, this paper focuses on how this community used education – in a way similar to Six Nations and the Mississauga of the Credit River – to attempt to preserve their community in the face of political change and rapid immigration.

Sawantanan, better known in the documents as Louis Vincent, the local Huron-Wendat school teacher, bears much of the responsibility for making these claims so prominent. He facilitated access to European structures of education in the twilight of Jesuit influence. Although he was certainly building on an intellectual tradition that had developed over 160 years of contact with the Jesuits, this paper will demonstrate that in the face of these changes the people living in this community had the resources and skills necessary to negotiate Eurocentric power structures for the benefit of their community. Through Louis Vincent – one of the most western-educated aboriginal people in northeastern North America up until at least the mid-nineteenth century – the community had developed a rigorous culture of Huron-Wendat directed education. This educational foundation, which has not been recognized in the historiography, helped to push colonial authorities – if only for a brief time – to put Huron-Wendat issues on the agenda.

The links between the Huron-Wendat claims and education begin with the 1791 petition to Lord Dorchester, where the Huron-Wendat not only request seigniorial rights to Sillery and St. Gabriel but also request access to the Petit Séminaire for two of their young boys. These two requests were part of the same goal; the Huron-Wendat sought to ensure the sustainability of their community in the absence of the Jesuit missionary presence. Up until 1791, the community had become accustomed to the derived benefits from the seigniorial dues paid to the Jesuits by local French *consitaires* and from the European-style teaching brought to the community by these missionaries. They received from the Jesuits, seigneurs of St. Gabriel and Sillery during the French

Regime, an allowance of one bushel of wheat per year, a discount on grinding their own wheat at the seigneurial mill, and the Jesuit's ecclesiastical services.² Although the vast majority of the community continued to be literate in traditional Huron-Wendat ways of communicating for nearly half-a-century after the Jesuits left, the Jesuit presence also familiarized the community with both oral and written French. I have calculated a basic literacy rate of about 20% based on the ability of men to sign a petition. This is about the same percentage as Allan Greer and Michel Verrette independently found for the *Canadien* community using similar source material.³ The removal of the Jesuits risked weakening the community's economy and its ability to engage with the French residents who by the 1790s had completely surrounded the Huron-Wendat village. If the community's petitions to the governors and the subsequent investigations into their claims had been successful, the community would have been able to ensure greater independence from colonial structures and greater autonomy in their decision making after the Jesuit departure. The desire for access to education became less prominent in later decades, when the Huron-Wendat had achieved some access to education through their reserve school.

The life of Louis Vincent is perhaps the most important component to understanding the changes that took place in Jeune-Lorette during this period. According to the limited documentation we have about his life, we know that he was highly educated; he was distinguished for his service in the American Revolutionary Army; and he returned to Jeune-Lorette as the community school teacher. It was in this latter capacity that he bears much of the responsibility for creating an educational climate in the Huron-Wendat village at a time when few other villages in the St. Lawrence were able to successfully create a local school.

Vincent was one of four Huron-Wendat men known to have attended Eleazer Wheelock's Dartmouth College. According to documents from Dartmouth, he began his education with his brother, Sebastien, in 1772.⁴ It is unknown what happened to Sebastien, but Louis Vincent

continued at the school until he graduated in 1781. He was one of only three aboriginal people who completed their education and graduated from Dartmouth College before 1800.⁵ In the entire early-American college system only 50 aboriginal students attended a colonial college; by 1800 only 5 had graduated.⁶ Not only did this make Louis Vincent unique among aboriginal people in the northeast, but his high-level of education would have put him in a unique position in the rural areas along the St. Lawrence as well.

It is of little surprise that few aboriginal students passed through the rigours of Wheelock's school. Margaret Connell Szasz, who has written extensively on aboriginal education in the colonial American colleges, depicts life in 1761 at Dartmouth College's precursor, Moor's Indian Charity School, in the following manner: "At Moor's School, the day began before sunrise. Following early morning prayer and catechism, the boys remained in the classroom until noon, where they received a classical training in Latin and Greek, and sometimes Hebrew. After a two-hour break, they returned to work until 5:00 p.m. Just before dark, they attended evening prayers and public worship, and then studied until bedtime."⁷ A decade later, in 1771, Wheelock himself provided insight into the education his students received. According to James Axtell's summary: "In his *Narrative* of the school to 1771, Wheelock boasted that he had produced forty 'good readers, and writers,' all sufficiently masters of English grammar and arithmetic and some advanced in Latin and Greek, who had behaved well in school and left with 'fair and unblemished characters.'⁸ Both Szasz and Axtell also note, however, that the rigid discipline of Wheelock's pedagogy was more illusory than real; students got drunk, misbehaved, and ran away. Of the documents that exist from Vincent's time at the school, there is evidence that he was both a model student who sought Wheelock's instruction, and a man who bent the rules and escaped from some of the more regimented aspects of school life.⁹

It was the idea of creating cultural brokers in aboriginal communities that most appealed to Wheelock. Although his ultimate goal was assimilation, his more immediate aim – in the words of James Axtell – was to send aboriginal students back “into their own country as missionaries and teachers, they could do more than English ministers to counteract the ‘Subtle Insinuations of great Numbers of Jesuits’ and ‘Attach their respective Nations in the English Interest.’”¹⁰ This is exactly what Louis Vincent set out to do after his graduation in 1782. The annual meeting of Dartmouth’s board of trustees for that year noted that Vincent and a colleague, Hugh Holmes, were “desirous to return to their friends in Canada and then enter on some literary employment honourable to themselves as graduates at this university and useful to mankind.”¹¹ Initially, in the 1780s, Vincent assisted a school master in the Montreal area.¹² But by 1791 he had returned to the community to take up the role of local school teacher;¹³ by 1800 he was well established.¹⁴

The fact that there was a school at all in Jeune-Lorette at the turn of the nineteenth century makes this community different from most others in the St. Lawrence Valley. A formal education system did not develop in Lower Canada until well into the nineteenth century. From 1760 to 1841 the education system slowly changed from one more similar to that of New France, which was church focused and based on morality, to one that was more general, scientific, and accessible.¹⁵ According to Anthony Di Mascio, the “watershed” moment in this progression was the 1841 *Common School Act*, which lay the foundation for the dual denomination system of education that continues to be used today.¹⁶ In any case, it was not until the late-1820s that local schools began to become the norm in the communities along the St. Lawrence valley.

Vincent’s school was held on the church property in the centre of the village.¹⁷ Despite the school’s location, there is some indication that Vincent’s teaching was not in keeping with Catholic traditions. Upon his arrival in 1791, the neighbouring parish priest was very concerned about the highly heterodox teaching of the Huron-Wendat school teacher. (Perhaps indicative of the influence

the Protestant New Light movement had on him during his days at Dartmouth. Too much should not be read into this, however, as the 1802 minutes from the commission on the Jesuit Estates note that before they left, the Jesuits allowed Vincent to teach in the church presbytery)¹⁸. In any case, the local priest petitioned the Bishop to prevent habitant participation at the school at all costs.¹⁹ There is not enough evidence to know whether the priest was successful in his aims. However, given the simultaneous pressures to create a new parish that was separate from the Huron-Wendat mission church that the French inhabitants had been attending, it seems unlikely that many of their children attended Vincent's school.

Documents from the 1820s and 1840s, when the school was taught by another Louis Vincent (possibly a graduate from the Petit Séminaire), provides some insight into the type of education these children received. Thaddeus Osgoode, a non-aboriginal graduate of Dartmouth College and possibly an acquaintance of Louis Vincent, observed the school during the 1820s while researching a report on education in the colony for the Society For Promoting Education and Industry in Canada. Osgoode observed: "A small school for teaching the children to read in the French language, has for several years been taught in Lorette, by a cousin of the grand Chief, who receives a small salary from Government, but no instructions from the Bible were formerly given. The New Testament is now introduced as a school book."²⁰ In 1844/45 a report on Aboriginal people in the United Canadas reported that the school at Lorette had about 25 students. They were learning the same curriculum as Canadian students.²¹ Within a handful of decades after this report was written, the Huron-Wendat language began to disappear. The effect of European education, which was effective in facilitating the Huron-Wendat demands on the colonial state during an earlier period, had begun to have a serious impact on the linguistic culture of the community. This story, however, is complicated by a number of post-1830 changes in how the colonial – and later the

Canadian – state interacted with aboriginal people and the linguistic influence of the community's francophone neighbours. It must be left for another day and another historian.

Aside from laying the post-Jesuit educational foundation in the community, there are a number of more direct ways that Vincent had influence on the Huron-Wendat claims during the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. First and foremost, there is a tradition among many people familiar with this community, and most popularized a century ago by sociologist Léon Gérin, that Vincent was the principal author of the 1791 petition.²² Second, as indicated by Thaddeus Osgoode, he was a cousin of Tsaouenhohoui or Nicolas Vincent, the grand chief when these claims came before the Lower Canadian Assembly in the 1820s.²³ It is difficult to determine whether Louis's experience had any influence on Nicolas. Louis was literate in multiple languages (at least French, English, and Huron-Wendat if not in other aboriginal and classical languages as well), but Nicolas made a point of speaking only in Huron-Wendat before the committee investigating the community's claims; during his presentation he told the committee that he could neither read nor write. It seems peculiar that these cousins would have developed such different skills. It is likely, rather, that Nicolas Vincent's failure to use French or English was more diplomatic strategy than a reflection on his own linguistic ability. John Adams and James Baby employed him as a guide when they surveyed the land north of the seigneuries around Quebec City; it is clear that communication was not a problem in this more informal setting.²⁴

Aside from these more direct influences; Louis Vincent also served as a cultural broker – a role traditionally held by the handful of aboriginal people who had attended institutions of higher education in the thirteen colonies.²⁵ One interesting way that he did this was in drafting up a written timeline of events that occurred in the community. Although the original document does not seem to have been kept, the minutes of the committee looking into the claims noted that he put the community memory, which was up until that point orally conveyed, down onto paper.²⁶ This act

symbolizes recognition of the European preference for the written texts over oral testimony and provides a vivid image of the roll Vincent sought to play in his community. He was putting Huron-Wendat knowledge of the community's history into a framework that would give it authority for the European commission. During these commissions and investigations Vincent also served the community as a translator. In 1819 Vincent served as the translator for his cousin in the Lower-Canadian Assembly commission into the Huron-Wendat land claims.²⁷ Former seminary student Ferrier Vincent performed a similar duty with Michel Tsioui in 1834.²⁸

In her conclusion to *Indian Education in the American Colonies*, Margaret Szasz asks the question "Whose criteria shall we use to determine 'success?'"²⁹ She goes on to discuss the relativity of the term and to show that depending on perspective, one arrives at radically different answers. Aboriginal education in Jeune-Lorette can be seen as a success from every vantage point. From the European vantage point, Vincent's education and his teaching was actively 'civilizing' this community. In the long run, and tied to broader changes in the Euro-Canadian interaction with aboriginal people, the system of education begun by Louis Vincent would contribute to the erosion of the community's linguistic culture. To lay the blame for these changes at Vincent's feet would be taking this argument too far. During Vincent's life time, he and those few boys who attended the Petit Séminaire were able to embrace their education and serve their communities in such a way that maintained more traditional power structures while passing along critical information tied deeply to processes of European colonization. James Axtell summed up the situation for Huron boys attending European schools best when he wrote more broadly on the subject. "Schools touched the intellects of a few," Axtell wrote, "but not the hearts of the many."³⁰ Education provided some aboriginal people with the resources to support their community, but it failed in the European desire to fundamentally erode aboriginal identity. That there is still a vibrant Huron-Wendat community

living at Jeune-Lorette today is a testament to the resilience of aboriginal cultures in the face of attempts at cultural erosion.

It is also important to recognize that the Huron-Wendat living at Jeune-Lorette were at least as familiar with European standards of education – if not more – than their French neighbours. Allan Greer summed up his study of Lower Canadian literacy by observing that “For the most part... the clergy and the rural masses in particular, and Catholic French-Canadian society in general, were relatively indifferent to literacy and elementary education until the middle of the nineteenth century.”³¹ Despite the similarities that have been drawn between the Huron-Wendat community of Jeune-Lorette and the francophone habitants living beside them, the quest for education and the literacy of the community is one way that these people differed. At the heart of this difference was each community’s position in the new British colonial order. The Huron-Wendat had a pre-existing relationship as a community separate and outside of the direct influence of a European colonial power before the British took over; the French habitants fit within the colonial sphere and had little collective voice. From this foundation, Jeune-Lorette used European education as a tool to make claims against the colonial state; a similar embrace of education was not seen by the habitant population until the middle of the nineteenth century.

¹ Anne-Marie Blouin, « Histoire et iconographie des Hurons de Lorette du XVIIe au XXe » (PhD. Diss., Université de Montréal, 1987) and Michel Lavoie, « “C’est ma seigneurie que je réclame” : Le lutte des Hurons de Lorette pour la seigneurie de Sillery, 1760-1888 » (PhD. Diss., Université Laval, 2006).

² Eighth Report of the Committee of the House of Assembly, on that part of the speech of His Excellency the Governor in Chief which relates to the settlement of the crown lands with the minutes of evidence taken before the committee. (Quebec: Neilson & Cowen, 1824), p. 13. See also Continuation of the Appendix to the XLIIInd Volume of the Journals of the House of Assembly of the Province of Lower Canada, session 1832-3, 00-14.

³ AAQ 61 CDI-177A à E: « Précis des conventions entre les Hurons du village de Lorette et une partie des habitants de Charlesbourg », 11 nov 1793 ; Allan Greer, « The Pattern of Literacy in Quebec, 1745-1899, » *Histoire Sociale/Social History*, 1978, 11(22) : 295-335. ; Michel Verrette, *L’Alphabétisation au Québec, 1660-1900*. (Sillery, Que : Septentrion, 2002).

⁴ Rauner Special Collections Library, Dartmouth College, Miscellaneous Material Relating to Native Americans. Genealogist Serge Goudreau, who has done some work on Louis Vincent, claims that Vincent only had one brother names Joseph. It is not clear where the difference lies between Gourdeau’s work with notarial records and the Dartmouth documents.

- ⁵ Cary Michael Carney, *Native American Higher Education in the United States*, (New Brunswick: Transaction Pub., 1999), 36.
- ⁶ Cary Michael Carney, *Native American Higher Education in the United States*, (New Brunswick: Transaction Pub., 1999), 38.
- ⁷ Margaret Connell Szasz, *Indian Education in the American Colonies, 1607-1783*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988), 223.
- ⁸ James Axtell, « Chapter 8 : The Little Red School, » in *The Invasion Within*, (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 207.
- ⁹ Rauner Special Collections Library, Dartmouth College, MSS 775296: 'Evidence in John Payne's trial', April 1775. Rauner Special Collections Library, Dartmouth College, MSS777204: "From boys in Moors School to Eleazar Wheelock," Mar 4, 1777.
- ¹⁰ James Axtell, « Chapter 8 : The Little Red School, » in *The Invasion within*, p. 208.
- ¹¹ Rauner Special Collections Library, Dartmouth College, « Procès-verbal de l'Assemblée de l'honorable Board of Trustees of Dartmouth College. » 17 Sept 1782. Viewed at Archives de la Conseil de la nation huronne-wendat.
- ¹² Rauner Special Collections Library, Dartmouth College, "Louis Vincent to President Wheelock." 20 Feb 1784. Viewed at Archives de la Conseil de la nation huronne-wendat.
- ¹³ AAQ 61 CD I-8 : « Lettre de Mr. Derome, ptre », 30 mar 1792.
- ¹⁴ BANQ-QUE E21, S64, SS5, SSS2, D690-17 : « Procès-verbal d'une réunion de la commission responsable de l'administration des biens des Jésuites » 9 Dec 1800.
- ¹⁵ Michel Verrette, *L'Alphabétisation au Québec, 1660-1900*. (Sillery, Que : Septentrion, 2002), p. 71-72.
- ¹⁶ Anthony Di Mascio, « Forever Divided ? Assessing the 'National' question and the governance in education through a re-examination of Québec's 1789 Report on Education. », *McGill Journal of Education*, vol. 42, no. 3 (Fall 2007), p. 470.
- ¹⁷ BANQ-QUE E21, S64, SS5, SSS2 D62 : « Brouillon de procès-verbaux de réunions de la commission responsable de l'administration des biens des Jésuite » 8 June 1802.
- ¹⁸ BANQ-QUE E21, S64, SS5, SSS2, D690-84: "Louis Vincent school master troubled in the possession of the presbytere at Lorette by the marguilliers." 8 June 1802.
- ¹⁹ AAQ 61 CD I-8. « Lettre de Mr. Derome, ptre », 30 mar 1792.
- ²⁰ Thaddeus Osgoode, *The Canadian Visitor communicating important facts and interesting anecdotes respecting the Indians and Destitute Settlers in Canada and the United States of America*. (London: Hamilton and Adams, [1829?]), p. 23-24.
- ²¹ Appendix EEE : Rapport sur les Affaires des Sauvages en Canada, sections 1^{ère} et 2^{ème}. Mis devant l'Assemblée Législative, le 20 Mars 1845. #6 : Hurons de la Jeune Lorette. *Appendice du Quatrième volume des journaux de l'Assemblée Législative de la Province du Canada du 28 Novembre 1844, au 29 mars 1845, ces deux jours compris et dans la Huitième année du Règne de Notre Souveraine Dame La Reine Victoria: Première session du second Parlement Provincial du Canada*. p. 23
- ²² Wendaké FV/104/6/b, 6 – Timeline of the Huron community (n.d.) and Denis Vaugeois, *The Last French and Indian War*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002): 74.
- ²³ "Death Notices", *Salem Gazette*, vol. 39, no. 39. May 17 1825, p. 3. See also Georges Sioui, "Nicolas Vincent" in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, www.biographi.ca <Feb 7 2009>.
- ²⁴ Appendix to the XLth volume of the Journals of the House of Assembly of the Province of Lower-Canada, first session of the Fourteenth Provincial Parliament. (1831), p. C-9 to C-12.
- ²⁵ Margaret Connell Szasz, *Indian Education in the American Colonies, 1607-1783*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988), p. 6-7.
- ²⁶ House of Assembly, Committee Room, Friday 29 Jan 1819. *Eighth Report of the Committee of the House of Assembly, on that part of the speech of His Excellency the Governor in Chief which relates to the settlement of the crown lands with the minutes of evidence taken before the committee*. (Quebec: Neilson & Cowen, 1824) p. 12.
- ²⁷ House of Assembly, Committee Room, Friday 29 Jan 1819. *Eighth Report of the Committee of the House of Assembly, on that part of the speech of His Excellency the Governor in Chief which relates to the settlement of the crown lands with the minutes of evidence taken before the committee*. (Quebec: Neilson & Cowen, 1824) p. 11
- ²⁸ Minutes of Evidence taken before the Special Committee to whom was referred the Petition of the Huron Chiefs of the Village of Lorette, relating to the Seigniorship of Sillery (27th January 1834/reported 3 March 1834). *Appendix to the XLIIIrd volume of the Journals of the House of Assembly of the Province of Lower-Canada, from the 7th January to the 18th March 1834, in the fourth year of the reign of King William the fourth, being the fourth session of the fourteenth Provincial Parliament of this province, session 1834*. P. 197.
- ²⁹ Margaret Connell Szasz, *Indian Education in the American Colonies, 1607-1783*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988), 261.
- ³⁰ James Axtell, "Chapter 8: The Little Red School," in *The Invasion Within*. P. 179.
- ³¹ Allan Greer, « The Pattern of Literacy in Quebec, 1745-1899, » *Histoire Sociale/Social History*, 1978, 11(22): 334.