

# Aux Premiers Belges:

Remembering Northeast Wisconsin's First Belgian Settlers

by Clétus Delvaux

Mary Ann Defnet

A SIMPLE STONE MONUMENT STANDS IN THE TINY HAMLET OF CHAMPION ON COUNTY HIGHWAY K IN NORTHEASTERN BROWN COUNTY. ETCHED ON THE STONE IS THE PHRASE, "AUX PREMIERS BELGES 1853" (TO THE FIRST BELGIANS 1853).

**2003** marks the sesquicentennial of the beginning of Belgian immigration to Northeast Wisconsin. This area is still the largest settlement in the United States of Walloon-speaking Belgians. Walloon is a French dialect from the south of Belgium, and Flemish, a Dutch dialect from northern Belgium, is Belgium's other official language. Wisconsin's Walloon-speaking core area includes northeastern Brown, southern Door, and northwestern Kewaunee counties. The story of what brought the first Belgian settlers to this area of Wisconsin is an interesting one and deserves retelling on the 150th anniversary of Belgian settlement in Wisconsin.

By 1850, economic conditions in Belgium, as well as throughout northern Europe, were bad and eventually caused a massive exodus that began in 1853. These conditions were especially severe around the hamlets of Grez and Doiceau in the south-central province of Brabant. The first immigrants to Wisconsin came almost exclusively from this region. Later

immigrants came from the neighboring Walloon-speaking provinces of Namur and Hainaut (also spelled Hainaut).

Problems arose when Belgians in the Grez-Doiceau region "couldn't feed and provide work for all their community members." The potato blight or famine of the late 1840s intensified food shortages while the movement from the countryside to urban factories intensified the work shortage.

There was the added problem that

*few of the small Belgian farms were owned by the farmers themselves. Most records list the occupation of men as "journalier" (day laborer) rather than "cultivateur" (farmer), which would indicate land ownership. These conditions made it almost impossible to make gains in one's lifestyle.*

Across the Atlantic conditions were different. The U.S. government was advertising a land flowing with milk and honey, where immigrants could buy their own land for \$1.25 an

acre. New York-based representatives of Wisconsin circulated pamphlets that promised unlimited opportunities for all who wanted to work. And although the rosy conditions were likely oversold, “to own land, to cultivate it, plant it and reap the harvest for himself was the most coveted hope of most every European peasant for centuries.”<sup>3</sup>

And between the new and old worlds were the Antwerp-based ship companies eager for profits. They circulated pamphlets promoting the many advantages of emigrating to the promised land.

So these push-and-pull economic conditions were the general causes of Belgian emigration. The specific cause, however, is linked to François Petinot. Tradition has it that one of the above-mentioned pamphlets fell into his hands.

All details gathered about Petinot make us think that he was a private guardian in Grez Doiceau, despite the fact that neither his name nor his son’s can be found in the Grez Doiceau population register between 1847 and 1853, the departure date of Petinot.<sup>4</sup>

Usually Petinot is described as a small farmer. Both Hall and Tlachac say he was in Antwerp on business when he came across the pamphlet. Tlachac presents more details, claiming that Petinot had stopped at an Antwerp inn to order a glass of beer when he spied a pamphlet on another table nearby. He picked up the pamphlet and saw that it was printed in the Dutch language. Belgian is not a printed language but Petinot was able to read some Dutch.<sup>5</sup>

The pamphlet told about hundreds of miles of fertile land in America awaiting settlement—and available from the American government. So Petinot returned to Grez Doiceau, taking the pamphlet with him.

However, it is not necessary to rely on this tradition. Recruiting officers such as Adolphe Strauss “did not hesitate to scour the Brabant countryside to gather emigration candidates in order to fill departing ships in Antwerp. Brochures had been published and ads put in local newspapers such as *La Gazette de Jodoigne*.”<sup>6</sup>

No matter how they learned about the promised land across the Atlantic, some of the villagers in the Grez-Doiceau area, after much discussion, decided to immigrate to America. In early 1853, they learned that the *Quinnebaug* was scheduled to sail from Antwerp on May 17. Then began the hectic preparations to leave. They sold their personal property to raise funds for the \$35 fare and for land for their new homes. In addition, they had to obtain birth certificates, emigration permits, and passports. Besides these, they needed to “bring their own bedding and provisions to last for at least six weeks.”<sup>7</sup>

There is disagreement about the composition of the group of Belgian passengers who sailed from Antwerp aboard the *Quinnebaug* on May 17, 1853, bound for New York. Among the emigrating Belgians was Jean Martin, his wife, and six children. His 21-year-old son, Xavier Martin, would learn English in the new land and go on to become a leader in the first Belgian community and later in Green Bay.

In an 1893 interview with Reuben Thwaites, editor of the *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, Martin, then in Green Bay, said ten families made up this first group of emigrants. Apparently relying on his memory only, Martin listed them by the head of the family.<sup>8</sup> Tlachac, who lists the same ten families, may just be following Martin.<sup>9</sup> However, genealogical researcher Mary Ann Defnet found that thirteen families and thirteen single people made up this first contingent of Belgian emigrants to America.<sup>10</sup> She based her numbers on ship passenger lists and records research in Belgium.

According to Defnet, some 180 passengers were on board the *Quinnebaug*. (Martin listed 325.) Eighty-one of them were from the Grez-Doiceau area of Brabant. The others were from Holland. Of these eighty-one Belgian passengers, seventy-four were Walloon and seven were Flemish. It should be noted that Belgium had not become an independent country until 1830—only twenty-three years before these first Belgians made their decision to leave for America. Thus the *Quinnebaug* pioneers were almost exclusively Walloon-speaking Belgians. Most of these pioneers were illiterate although Defnet says a few could write their names. Only

a handful could write a letter in French.

It was during the difficult, seven-week voyage of the *Quinnebaug* that the Belgian emigrants became acquainted with a party of the Dutch contingent, who were determined they were going to settle with their countrymen in Wisconsin. The Belgians “had no particular destination in mind when they left their homeland. And so, on the ocean, they decided to accompany their homeland neighbors to Wisconsin—wherever that was.”<sup>11</sup>



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Overpopulation, food shortages, and lack of land ownership are some reasons Belgians left home for Wisconsin. However, one individual—François Petinot (pictured here with his daughter Minnie)—played a crucial role in the exodus of the small band of Walloon-speaking Belgians who left the Grez-Doiceau area of the southern province of Brabant in 1853.

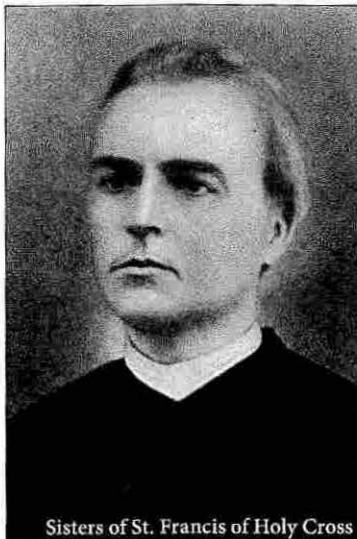
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“The journey was perilous and long, almost fifty days, which caused starvation and sickness. A Holland boy and the 5-month-old Maricq child, Jean François, died on the ship.”<sup>12</sup>

A border checklist of the New York district indicates the Belgian pioneers—farmers, stonecutters, joiners, etc.—arrived in New York on July 6, 1853. “Under the immigrant nationality title, 107 show[ed] Holland, including the Martin family of Doiceau, and 73 show[ed] France” (as their country of origin). [This] “may prove that it was not customary to receive Belgian immigrants.”<sup>13</sup>

The Martins and the Paques, both large immigrant families, proceeded to friends in Philadelphia. The rest of the Belgians, still in the company of the Dutch, took the traditional route into the interior of the United States—by steamboat up the Hudson and by Erie Canal boats to Lake Erie. After crossing Lake Erie to Detroit, they may have taken a train to St. Joseph on the eastern shore of Lake Michigan. From there, they would have had to ferry across to Milwaukee, where they arrived near the end of July 1853.

The Belgians followed their Dutch shipmates to the Sheboygan area, where they began to despair because it seemed that the Dutch had already claimed all the good land. Their language differences continued to lead to communication problems. At this point, the Belgians met a French-speaking immigrant or a French Canadian, who informed them that French was more common in Green Bay, just sixty miles north of Sheboygan. So in mid-August the Belgians left the Sheboygan area and headed to Green Bay.



Sisters of St. Francis of Holy Cross

Father Edouard Daems was the pastor of the new Bay Settlement Catholic church when the Belgians first arrived. After a chance meeting, the Walloon-speaking priest convinced them to settle in his parish.

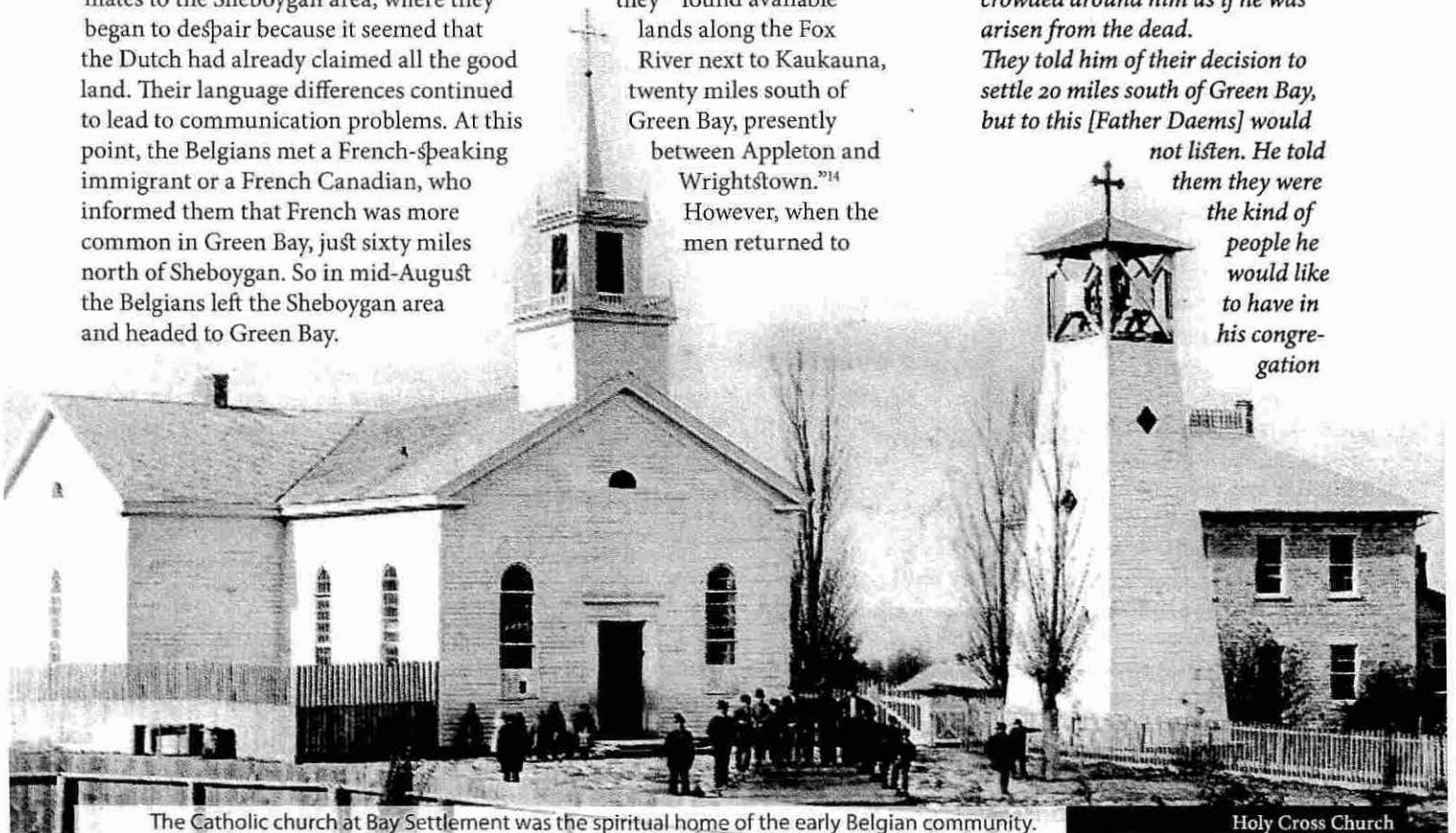
Finding the Green Bay area more to their liking, they “found available lands along the Fox River next to Kaukauna, twenty miles south of Green Bay, presently between Appleton and Wrightstown.”<sup>14</sup> However, when the men returned to

their women and children in Green Bay with the good news that they had filed their land claims, they were greeted with bad news. One of Philippe Hannon’s children had died while the men were out searching for land.

This untimely death would be the catalyst for a major change in the Belgians’ plans. The funeral for the Hannon boy was conducted at Green Bay’s French Catholic church—St. John the Evangelist. As chance would have it, a Father Edouard Daems was visiting St. John’s pastor at the time of the funeral. Father Daems was a Crozier priest who had been born and raised in Belgium. He not only spoke Walloon, but he was also the pastor of a new Catholic church at Bay Settlement, a small community just northeast of Green Bay. Since practically all the pioneers were followers of that faith, they felt doubly blessed.

*Father Daems was elated in meeting his countrymen. He was a friendly young man, energetic and full of enthusiasm for his work and for the new country. To the homesick Belgians, it was like meeting a lost brother. The Belgian language was like music to their ears and they crowded around him as if he was arisen from the dead.*

*They told him of their decision to settle 20 miles south of Green Bay, but to this [Father Daems] would not listen. He told them they were the kind of people he would like to have in his congregation*



The Catholic church at Bay Settlement was the spiritual home of the early Belgian community.

Holy Cross Church



Sisters of St. Francis of Holy Cross

This turn-of-the-century wedding photograph shows that the Belgians were a prolific immigrant group. It is also indicative of the prosperity these families achieved over time. Of all immigrant groups that settled in Northeast Wisconsin, the Belgians have been one of the most successful in maintaining their traditions and culture despite some cultural diluting recently.

because they were religious. Said Father Daems, "You must come and see my parish and lands surrounding it first. There are many French-speaking people. The soil is of excellent quality for farming.

He further told them, "I will go along with you to assist you to find good land and good places to settle. You can attend Mass and partake of the sacraments and attend worship in your own language."<sup>15</sup>

And so it was that Father Daems convinced the Belgians—especially their womenfolk—to relinquish their claims in the Kaukauna area and instead stake out claims to lands some ten miles northeast of Bay Settlement. The Belgians called this area *Aux Premiers Belges*. This area was later called Robinsonville and today is named Champion.

These Belgians "became the predecessors of more than 15,000 Belgians who came the following 10 years."<sup>16</sup> And more Belgians were to settle in the latter half of the nineteenth century. "Census data from as early as 1860 and current field research reveal a well-defined and persistent Belgian cultural area" within this three-county region, which these Belgian pioneers claimed as their own 150 years ago.<sup>17</sup>

#### NOTES

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