

John Mulvena 1785-1867

John Mulvena can lay claim to having been the first Irish Catholic to come to the Eastern Townships. John was the first to cross to the new country, Canada, and build his home in these parts. He was born in 1785 and was almost fourteen when the 1798 Rebellion was in progress. At that time the form of conscription used, and the age of a soldier, was judged by the size of the man. John was big for his age and considered big enough to carry a pike so he was taken in on the side of the party first discovering the recruit. This was not to his liking, and he made up his mind that he would leave Ireland. Emigration at this time was mostly to the United States, so John and two neighbouring boys walked into Belfast in the Spring of 1807, a distance of about 45 miles. They had intended to sail for New York, but to their regret they learned that a blockade had been commanded by the British and this order in council forbade ships sailing to the United States, who were then helping England's enemy, Napoleon. Consequently our young travellers took the first boat available, and landed in Quebec. Young Mulvena secured a job working for his board during the first winter at the home of Jacob Mountain, the first Anglican Bishop of Quebec. He formed a friendship with Mr. Mountain that continued for the rest of their lives, and when the Bishop was on his visits in later years to his Parish in Richmond, he used to stop with the Mulvena family.

The Spring of 1808 came along and he was promised a job by a person who had brought in cattle for sale in the Port of Quebec. This man had come from Hiatt's Mills in the Eastern Townships and was about to return home. They both took a boat as far as Port St. Francis, and then along the River following a path that had been cut to make a road. The journey from Port St. Francis to their destination took two days and three nights. They had food and blankets with them, but the food ran out. When they reached Front Town of Shipton, Richmond, they asked for something to eat at a log house where dwelt a family whose name was Cushing. This house was close beside the brook that entered the St. Francis River near Maine and Craig Streets in Richmond. Mrs. Cushing stated that her husband had left that morning, with some corn in a canoe, down the river to Port St. Francis, to have the corn ground into meal. She said she would get them something to eat, and she did. I think Mrs. Cushing would qualify for the original short order cook of the Eastern Townships, for she started by pounding some corn with a plumping mill, making a corn cake which was baked in the coals of the fireplace, alongside of a fresh fish. The first nights were spent in the open. They reached and crossed the Magog River in a heavy rain, and spent a night in a vacant barn or building, not far from the River. John Mulvena first worked for a person named Ball, for four years. The winters were spent looking after some cattle on the west side of the river. John soon ran out of clothing and had to spend much of his time trying to mend his only remaining socks. He finally had to wrap his feet in strips of rags, and, according to his own statement, this was quite comfortable. His day's work started at sunrise and ended at sunset; he judged noontime when the shadows of a certain tree fell on the one door of the log house. This log building was situated where the Lansdowne Market is today in Sherbrooke. Only a few buildings were around the place. He later worked in a mill at the mouth of the Magog River. This was the first saw-mill and later became a grist-mill

owned by the Honourable W. B. Felton. This young Irishman can lay claim to having been the first Irish Catholic to come to where the City of Sherbrooke now stands. He lived here between 1808 and 1812. In 1812 he helped to drive cattle that had been rustled in from the States. He travelled down the St. Francis through the Townships of Shipton by the Craig Road through the Quebec Ferry and delivered his cattle into an enclosure in Upper Town, Quebec. It seemed that there was quite a lot of cattle passing through the Port of Quebec for the markets of England. The boats were so slow and small, that much of the space on these boats was taken up with feed for the cattle. Having booked on one of these cattle boats in 1812 he finally reached his old home, Ireland, and remained home for two years. In 1814 he returned to Canada, and soon afterwards bought the old Captain Wales Farm at Richmond, on the bank of the St. Francis River. In order to register the deed of the Farm he had to walk from Sherbrooke to Richmond and on to Three Rivers. The first year on the farm, in 1816, was a very bad one, so severe, indeed, that there was ice along the banks of the River until the month of August. John's brother, Hugh, reached Canada during the early summer to help with the farm work. He had a gun with him, an old Flint Lock Musket, and this aided both these young men to hunt. Their first potato patch refused to grow and the two young boys dug up the potatoes and ate them along with some fresh fish. John again returned to Ireland, married there, and with his wife, Mary McQuillan, his father, his brother Henry, and his sisters, returned to Canada.