

Frenchtown Cemetery

(across the road from Calvary Cemetery)

“Located north of the city limits of Prairie du Chien is a small cemetery. It is situated on the west side of County Highway K, which the life-long residents of Prairie du Chien still call “Frenchtown Road.” An old wire fence defines the boundaries of this small burial ground. Rough weather-beaten stones, seemingly scattered about, mark gentle grass-covered depressions. Two crypts of hewn limestone and the remains of a third crypt stand against the back fence line. To the right, two broken head stones crookedly mark the last burials in the cemetery.

Frenchtown Road was the northern part of an “Old Indian Train”. The only throughfare on the prairie, this dirt path followed the contours of the east bank of the Mississippi River but was set back upon somewhat higher land so that it was passable when the waters of the river rose each spring. In 1820, Isaac Lee, from the Surveyor General’s Office in Detroit, drew a rough map of the prairie delineating the location of plats of land claimed by residents of Prairie du Chien. On the map, Lee called the trail the Highway. This Highway extended from the marshy ground of the Wisconsin River and passed just east of the *Old French Fort* and the *Old Catholic Burying Ground*. By 1820, the northern half of the highway connected two villages, the Village of St. Friole and the Upper Village. The *Old Catholic Burying Ground* stood midway between the two villages.

In 1872, the City of Prairie du Chien was incorporated. What had been the village of St. Friole lost its independent designation and was now part of the city. The section of the *Highway* within the city limits was named Main Street. The northern section of the *Highway*, beyond the city limits, remained a dirt path. Wide enough to accommodate a wagon pulled by a team of horses, the path connected the City of Prairie du Chien to the small community on the north end of the prairie that Lee had named the Upper Village. As most of the residents of the old Upper Villare were descendants of some of the early French-Canadian settlers of Prairie du Chien, the roadway came to be called Frenchtown Road. Along Frenchtown Road stood the long homes of families with last names recalling the days of voyagiurs: Pion, Chenevert, Vertefeuille, Caya, Cherrier, Lessard, Gradepie. The road ended at a backwater of the Mississippi named Courtois Lake. When the land fronting this body of water passed to Denis Courtois’ daughter and son-in-law, the name changed to Grimard (Gremore) Lake.

Like the road and the lake, the cemetery has been given many names. In the mid-19th Century it was the *old Catholic burying grounds*. As more people of different nationalities moved to Prairie du Chien, the cemetery was looked upon as culturally distinct and called the Old French Cemetery or the Frenchtown Cemetery. In the 20th century, local historians addressed the cemetery in the way they thought the early residents of the community might have referred to it. A plaque listing the people thought to be buried in the cemetery was erected within the confines of the grounds and entitled *l'ancien Cimetiere Francais*.

The lack of a constant in a name for the cemetery reflects the fragile status of the burying ground from its very beginning. With the arrival of the United States Army on the prairie in 1816, the residents of Prairie du Chien were forced to select a new location for the burying ground. They chose a site far from the authoritarian presence of the military and hopefully therefore safe. Yes, the new cemetery site shows that careful consideration went into the choice for the location of the burying ground for all the residents of the prairie. The new cemetery would be on high ground above the threat of flooding, and it was centrally located. By 1816, three villages existed on the prairie. The new cemetery was just off the dirt path that connected the Upper village to the Village of St. Friole and across the marais (slough) from the Main Village.

In 1817, Father Marie Joseph Dunand arrived at the prairie. He was the first Catholic priest to visit Prairie du Chien and on May 10 blessed "the parish cemetery." In the short time he was on the prairie, he officiated at one burial, but it was the responsibility of the residents to maintain the records of all future burials until the arrive of the new priest. Farther Vincent Badin arrived ten years later. He maintained a record of the burials he blessed. But from the end of his last visit in 1829 until Father Ravoux came to Prairie du Chien in 1840 there is no indication that anyone, religious or secular, kept a record of burials that occurred in Prairie du Chien. While Catholic priests visited to minister to the needs of the residents and Father Samuel Mazzuchelli began the construction of St. Gabriel's Church, there was no permanent priest in residence of the prairie until 1840. In that Year, Father Augustin Ravou was sent to Prairie du chein to be the pastor of St. Gabriel's Church. He established a Register for the parish in which he recorded baptisms, marriages, and burials. He also laid out a new cemetery behind St. Gabriel's Church. From that date onward, the priests assumed that the Catholic

Residents of the prairie, upon their death, would be interred in St. Gabriel's Cemetery. Each burial was carefully recorded in the Registry.

Strange Powers had given the land, on which St. Gabriel's Church and cemetery were established, to Frederic Rese, the Bishop of Detroit, representing the Catholic Church, in 1836. That year Hercules L. Dousman also gave a tract of land to the Bishop Rese "for the sepulchral use of a burying ground." Half of the land would be a "Public Burying Ground" and the western portion was to be a Catholic burying ground. This tract of land was located along the *Highway* directly east of the *Old Catholic Burying Ground*.

With two new cemeteries, the *Old Catholic Burying Ground* fell into disuse. It was not maintained by St. Gabriel's or any arm of the Catholic Church. Fences, headstones, and burial markers deteriorated. Grass, weeds, and small trees grew in abandon. In the early 20th century people began to show an interest in the cemetery. Individuals, whose ancestors were buried in the cemetery, cut grass, cleared trees, and attempted to mark burials. At mid-century the Prairie du Chien Women's Civic Club, and then the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, erected signs in the midst of the burials. Since then interest in the cemetery has grown. Today, the Township of Prairie du Chien maintains the burial grounds. Descendants of the early French Canadian Residents return to prairie looking for a connection to their ancestors. And that connection is often found in the Old French Cemetery."

Source: Mary Elis Antoine, Prairie du Chien Historical Society, 2016.

Note: The Old Catholic Burying Ground or as it is known, today, Frenchtown Cemetery is part of the Cemetery Tour that is held each year by the Prairie du Chien Historical Society.