

UdeM prof unearths PM's Acadian roots

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Prime Minister Justin Trudeau made a stop in Beaubassin last Monday, at the invitation of Cumberland MP Bill Casey, left, to learn about his Acadian roots, thanks to the research of Université de Moncton genealogist Stephen White, right. PHOTO: SUBMITTED (DAVID WOOD)



Prime Minister Justin Trudeau made a stop in Beaubassin last Monday, at the invitation of Cumberland MP Bill Casey, left, to learn about his Acadian roots. PHOTO: SUBMITTED (DAVID WOOD)

A researcher from Moncton has long known more about Justin Trudeau's family tree than the prime minister does, and last week Trudeau made a stop in Beaubassin

to learn about his Acadian roots.

“Well, of course I don’t go around looking for prime ministers to check their genealogy,” laughed Stephen White, a researcher at the Université de Moncton, who has been studying Acadian genealogy for some 40 years.

But last Monday, the prime minister made a special trip to Nova Scotia’s Fort Lawrence National Historic Site, just past the New Brunswick border near Amherst to meet with White at the place where his great-great-great-great-grandfather - that’s six generations back - was baptized.

White previously uncovered the Acadian connections of other prime ministers, including Jean Chrétien and, of course, Pierre Elliot Trudeau. A decade ago he published a small article in UdeM’s Acadian studies centre newsletter about a link between the Trudeaus and the Acadian family name Savoie.

“It slept quietly for a quite a long time,” said White.

But several years ago, a colleague discovered a connection between Montreal Canadiens player Max Pacioretty and the same Savoie family.

“I realized it was the same branch of the Savoie family as Pierre Elliott Trudeau,” said White. This meant Justin Trudeau and the Habs captain were distant relatives - specifically ninth cousins, according to White.

When the Liberals won the federal election in 2015, this connection was more newsworthy since the new prime minister was a professed Habs fan, and the Acadian studies centre posted the fun fact on their Facebook group.

“That actually got a lot of mileage,” laughed White, saying the information was shared with audiences who weren’t normally interested in nuanced genealogical facts.

“This is the kind of thing that we genealogists get involved with on the side, because it stimulates interest,” he added.

One person who took note was Bill Casey, member of parliament for Nova Scotia’s Cumberland-Colchester riding, which includes Beaubassin, an Acadian stronghold in the 18th Century before its residents were expelled by the British.

“He wanted to make sure that Justin Trudeau knew his connection to Beaubassin,” said White.

“It’s an amazing story,” said Casey. “It’s of great interest to Acadians.”

The story, according to White, is as follows: Pierre Elliott Trudeau’s mother, Grace Elliott, came from a line of anglophones - her father Philip Armstrong Elliot was born to Edward Elliott, who was born to Simon Elliott, who was born to Robert Elliott, a Scottish immigrant who married a Québécoise named Louise Savoie.

Her father was Simon Savoie, who was baptized at the Catholic church in Beaubassin on May 22, 1740, although the family actually lived in Shepody, or Chipoudi, near Riverside-Albert, N.B.

“It’s a Westmorland County story every bit as much as it’s a Cumberland County story,” said Casey.

When Simon was 16, his Acadian father was expelled by the British, taken prisoner and sent to Georgia in the U.S. He later escaped and made his way to New York.

Meanwhile, his wife and children, including Simon, sought refuge on Isle Saint-Jean, an Acadian colony on what is now Prince Edward Island, before making their way to Quebec.

“This is a pretty dramatic story,” said White.

For his part, the Prime Minister’s Office confirmed Trudeau’s trip to Beaubassin last Monday, noting he was happy to visit the area, but making no mention of the family history lesson.

White said the prime minister seemed pleased to learn the nitty-gritty details of his family tree, noting Trudeau understood he had an Acadian connection, but certain points weren’t entirely clear. And White said that’s what really hooks people on their histories.

“It’s much more interesting for people if they know the details,” he said, adding it’s one thing to know your Acadian family was deported to the southern U.S., but it’s another thing to know names, dates and the ships they sailed on.

“It can put some life into it,” he said.

At Beaubassin, White presented Trudeau with a copy of Simon Savoie’s baptismal certificate, which came from French archival records.

“A lot of Acadian people are interested in their family connections, because that’s how they are aware of being Acadian,” he said, adding that Acadia was such a small colony that even now, people with the same names - LeBlanc, Cormier, Arseneau, Richard - are likely related.

It’s in part how White knows his own Acadian history; his great-grandfather was a LeBlanc, from Cape Breton,

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who anglicized the family name after landing in
Massachusetts.

“I am definitely a LeBlanc. I’ve had my DNA tested, and
it checks!” White laughed.