

# *News from Old Mines*

## The Newsletter of the Old Mines French Project

### No. 1, Summer 2015

#### MERCI!

Thank you for your interest in the Old Mines French project. The aim of this project is to share the unique history and culture of the Old Mines community of Washington County, Missouri, as well as the French heritage of the "Pays des Illinois," those parts of present-day Illinois and Missouri that were first explored and settled by the French beginning in the latter part of the 17th century. The main "product" of the project is the Old Mines French website which can be found at [www.oldmines.org](http://www.oldmines.org). On this site you will find a wealth of information about Old Mines and the surrounding area, with a focus on the French legacy in the region. The site was created in June 2014, and is updated regularly.

The project is the creation of Dr. Will Thompson, Associate Professor of French and Chair of the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at the University of Memphis. Much of the initial work on the project has been generously supported by a Faculty Research Grant from the University of Memphis for the 2014-2015 academic year.

Contributions are welcome! Send a message to [oldminesmissouri@gmail.com](mailto:oldminesmissouri@gmail.com) if you are interested in submitting anything (articles, images, events, etc.) to the newsletter.



**LEFT:** St. Joachim Church in Old Mines, Missouri, the spiritual center of the Old Mines community. Construction of the church began in 1829 and it was dedicated on October 9, 1831. There was previously a log church at the same site from approximately 1820.

The church is undoubtedly one of the oldest in the state of Missouri, and continues to serve the community to this day. More images of the church and its cemetery are available on the Old Mines French website at: [www.oldmines.org](http://www.oldmines.org).

The St. Joachim weekly bulletin is a great source of information about upcoming events, both at the church itself, at the parish school, at other churches in the area, and at other locations, such as the local Knights of Columbus hall. Visit <http://www.stjoachim.org/> for more information.

*More images of the church and its cemetery inside!*

## WHAT'S NEW IN OLD MINES?

In each newsletter there will be a list of new materials (books, articles, videos, websites) that are relevant to the study of Old Mines and the French history and heritage of the region around it. In addition future issues of the newsletter will include in-depth reviews of the most recent publications. To get this feature started, here's a list of books and articles that have been published since 2010 that may be of interest.

Ames, Gregory P., ed. *Auguste Chouteau's Journal: Memory, Mythmaking & History in the Heritage of New France*. St. Louis : St. Louis Mercantile Library, University of Missouri-St. Louis, 2010.

Beaulne [dit Bone], Kent. "A Short History of the Old Mines, of the Country of the Illinois of Old Upper Louisiana." *Blue Collar Magazine* (Fall 2011): 12-13.

Beaulne, Kent. "Pawpaw-French Cooking. Food Ways of Missouri's Créoles." *Le Forum* (Centre Franco-Américain, University of Maine) 36.3 (été/Summer 2013): 30-34.

Brown, Margaret Kimball; Lawrie Cena Dean. *The French Colony in the Mid-Mississippi Valley*. Carbondale, IL: American Kestrel Books, 1995. Reprinted in a second edition in 2014 by the Center for French Colonial Studies.

Brown, Margaret Kimball; Robert F. Mazrim. "Revisiting the Forts and Village at Chartres in the Illinois Country." *Illinois Archaeology*, vol. 22, no. 1 (2010).

Gitlin, Jay. *The Bourgeois Frontier: French Towns, French Traders and American Expansion*. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2010.

Matu, Florina. "Au Pays des Illinois: héritages francophones. Entretien avec Will Thompson." [www.zigzag-francophonie.eu/ETATS-UNIS-Au-pays-des-Illinois](http://www.zigzag-francophonie.eu/ETATS-UNIS-Au-pays-des-Illinois) (2 janvier 2013).

Mazrim, Robert F. *At Home in the Illinois Country: French Colonial Domestic Site Archaeology in the Midwest 1730-1800*. Urbana: Illinois State Archaeological Survey, University of Illinois, 2011.

Morgan, M. J. *Land of Big Rivers: French and Indian Illinois, 1699-1778*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 2010.

Morrissey, Robert. *Empire by Collaboration: Indians, Colonists, and Governments in Colonial Illinois Country*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015.

Morrissey, Robert Michael. "The Terms of Encounter: Language and Contested Visions of French Colonization in the Illinois Country, 1673-1702." In Robert Englebert and Guillaume Teasdale, eds. *French and Indians in the Heart of North America, 1630-1815*. Lansing: Michigan State Univ. Press and Univ. of Manitoba Press, 2013: 43-75.

Servaes, Anna. *Franco-American Identity, Community, and La Guiannee*. Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2015.

White, Sophie. *Wild Frenchmen and Frenchified Indians: Material Culture and Race in Colonial Louisiana*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012.

Winnerman, Jim. "Missouri French: Preserving Missouri's Old Mines Dialect." *Missouri Life* (Feb. 2013): 38-43.

All of the works listed above are also in the Bibliography that can be found on the [Old Mines French website](http://OldMinesFrench.com).



Visit us on Facebook at: [www.facebook.com/oldminesfrench](http://www.facebook.com/oldminesfrench).

# JUST HOW OLD IS OLD MINES?

## Some Preliminary Notes

By Will Thompson

The lack of historical records and documents is a significant barrier in tracing the early history of the French presence in the Old Mines area. In fact, we cannot even be sure when the name “Old Mines” (“Vieille Mine” in French) was first used to refer to the community. There are, to be sure, some reliable documents at our disposal, but they often conceal just as much as they reveal. Anecdotal (but uncorroborated) tales about the early history are often repeated as fact, and undoubtedly many pertinent documents undoubtedly remain locked away in remote archives, waiting to be discovered.

Perhaps it is beneficial, for this very first newsletter devoted to the Old Mines French heritage, to begin a study of the early history of Old Mines (the place and the name) by considering briefly three significant dates: 1803, 1723, and 1700 (going backwards in time in order to begin with the more reliable information!).

### 1803: The Old Mines Concession: Old Mines becomes American

In June of 1803, thirty-one land claims were awarded to residents of what we now know as the Old Mines Concession by the Spanish Lieutenant Governor, Charles Delassus. It is likely that an original grant was in fact made in the latter years of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. This was eventually reproduced, perhaps in English, as the Spanish prepared to leave, having retroceded the Louisiana territory to France, which in turn sold it to the United States as the Louisiana Purchase.

Claims were presented the government of the United States in by residents and others to land at Old Mines (most of them measuring four hundred “arpents”) as described in the Spanish grant. The French residents were, like many others, petitioning to be granted a claim to land which they were already inhabiting, farming, and, in this particular case, mining. These claims were being submitted in response to the creation of Missouri Territory out of the Louisiana Purchase, which had occurred in April of 1803. The claims, like most of those submitted, were all rejected when they were eventually considered by American officials in 1811, and were only recognized by the United States government in 1836, well after Missouri had become a state in 1821.

Amos Stoddard, in his “Description of the Lead Mines in Upper Louisiana” of 1804 (in other words, writing at the same time as the land claims were submitted to the U.S. government), is perhaps the most reliable contemporary source for the origins of the Old Mines name:

“Old Mines, so called from being discovered many years before the Mine à Burton... It is situated five miles northeast of the Mine à Burton, on the discovery of which it was abandoned, mineral being found in great abundance at the new mines. The old mines remained in this situation until February, 1802, when fifteen French families made a settlement near the mines, and have formed a village, since which the mines have been opened...” (American State Papers: Public Lands 188; no. 103, p. 189).

One must mention that while in English the plural “Old Mines” is used, the French is always written in the singular: “Vieille Mine.” However, it must be pointed out that in French, the final “s” indicating pluralization is not pronounced (with few exceptions), so to the ear “vieille mine” and “vieilles mines” sound the same. The fact that most of the French-speaking residents of “la vieille mine” would have been illiterate, never writing the name of their community, potentially explains the discrepancy.

### 1723: The Renault Grant: The First French Claim in Missouri

“In the year 1723, on the 14<sup>th</sup> of June, have been granted to Mr. Renault, in freehold, so that he may make his establishments at the mines: One and a half leagues of land, upon the Petit Maramac, and on the Maramac river, at the first fork, which leads to the cabins called the *Cabanage le Renaudière*, being six leagues deep, the river marking the midpoint of the compass and river running perpendicularly as far as where Mr. Renault has his furnace, and from there straight to the place named the Great Mine.” (American State Papers, Public Lands, Vol. 2: p. 163-164)

Perhaps the most significant *official* date in the early history of Old Mines is 1723, when officials in Kaskaskia awarded Philippe François Renault a grant for land on which to mine lead. In fact, this date has often been cited as marking the “beginning” of the Old Mines story. Yet Philippe François Renault had been present in the area since 1720, having come from France with the single goal of conducting mining operations in the Pays des Illinois, on both sides of the Mississippi River. As the grant’s language indicates, before it was even awarded, Renault had already built a furnace on the land, suggesting that the purpose of the grant was merely to award him, in an official and documented manner, land that he had already determined was promising in terms of mineral production. Equally significant in the document’s language is the reference to the “Cabanage le Renaudière,” or Renaudière’s cabins. Renaudière was another Frenchman who had arrived in the region with an interest in exploring and exploiting the resources on the west bank of the Mississippi. “Cabanage” in French seems to refer here to a group of cabins, meaning that before Renault had ever arrived in the area, mining was already being conducted, if on a small (and perhaps only exploratory) scale.

*Continued on page 4.*

## 1700: The First Reference to Lead Mines in Missouri

The first known reference to lead and to mining west of the Mississippi River can be found in a journal written by le Père (Father) Jacques Gravier in February of 1701, in which he traces his voyage the previous year down the Mississippi River. Gravier was a Jesuit priest who spent many years in the region and who, like many of his fellow missionaries in the New World, wrote lengthy reports back to France and Québec. (These works are collected and published as the *Jesuit Relations*.)

Here's the original French text referring to the mines:

“Le 10e. jour après une lieuë de marche nous decouvrimus la Riuere Miaramigoua ou est la mine de plomb tres abondante a 12 ou 13 lieuës de Son embouchure. Cette mine rend le 3 quarts.”

Translation from the *Jesuit Relations* (Ed. Thwaites, 1959):

“On the tenth day, after proceeding a league, we discovered the River Miaramigoua [the present-day Meramec], where the very rich lead mine is situated, 12 or 13 leagues from its mouth. The ore from this mine yields 3 fourths metal.” [*Jesuit Relations*, vol. 65, 104-105]

This text is both revealing and problematic. What it tells us is that Frenchmen were exploring present-day Missouri in 1700, and probably earlier, and had discovered or been taken by Native Americans to an area up the Meramec River where lead was easily found. It is also evident that the French had tested the lead to determine its potential value. Whether or not they were actively mining the lead in any way is unclear, especially since the French word “mine” can refer either to an active mining operation, or simply to the presence of mineral deposits in a given area. Nonetheless, it is clear that the French were already well aware of the presence of lead in what is now Washington County a quarter of a century before Renault received his grant.

Unfortunately we have virtually no records of the first, brave French adventurers, the “coureurs de bois,” who explored this region, and who very well may have been here before the official exploratory voyages of LaSalle, Marquette, and Joliet occurred in the 1670's and 1680's. The lack of documentation is not surprising. Many of these men would not have had any education, and therefore could not write. They probably would have had little inclination to do so if they could, since their preoccupation was trading with the Native Americans for furs, and writing the memoirs of their travels would not have been of great concern. Finally, this latter activity was often conducted illegally (meaning without the approval of French officials in Montréal), so it is unlikely that the the coureurs de bois would have wanted their activities put into writing!

In spite of the paucity of documentation of the earliest history of Old Mines, there are nevertheless some reliable historical records which can provide us with significant insight to the intriguing story and legacy of this community. And hopefully future issues of this newsletter will include some of these records that will be of interest to readers.

### FEATURED VIDEO: Dennis Stroughmatt

This is probably an easy choice to make (that's to say: choosing the first video to feature in the newsletter).

As you may well know, Dennis Stroughmatt is undoubtedly the greatest ambassador for the music and heritage of the Old Mines area. Here's Dennis Stroughmatt and L'Esprit Créole performing at the Library of Congress:

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=Heay7zhmC1w](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Heay7zhmC1w)

To learn more about Dennis and his music, visit his website:

[www.creolefiddle.com](http://www.creolefiddle.com)

### FEATURED WEBSITE: Center for French Colonial Studies

The Center for French Colonial Studies is the foremost scholarly organization devoted to the study of the Pays des Illinois and the French history in the mid-Mississippi area.

The Center has published some wonderful works on this history, and holds an annual conference, often with a specific theme (the 2015 conference will be held in October in Windsor, Ontario).

To learn more about the Center and its activities, visit:

<http://frenchcolonialstudies.org/>



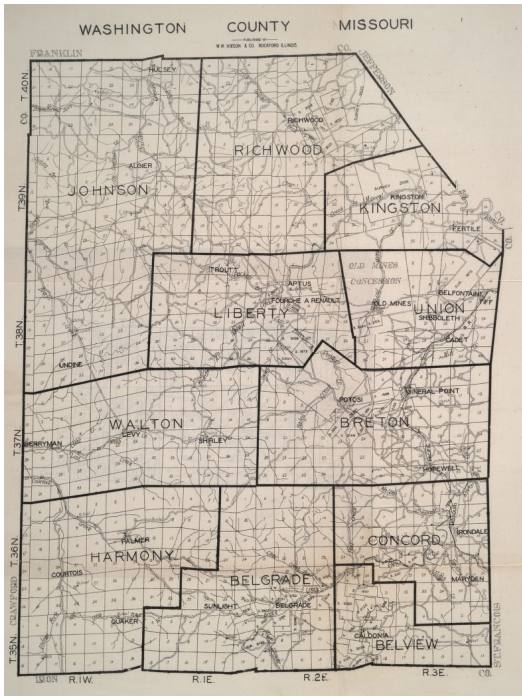
Two views of St. Joachim Church in Old Mines, Missouri (both probably dating from mid-20th century).

### Some Old Mines Records

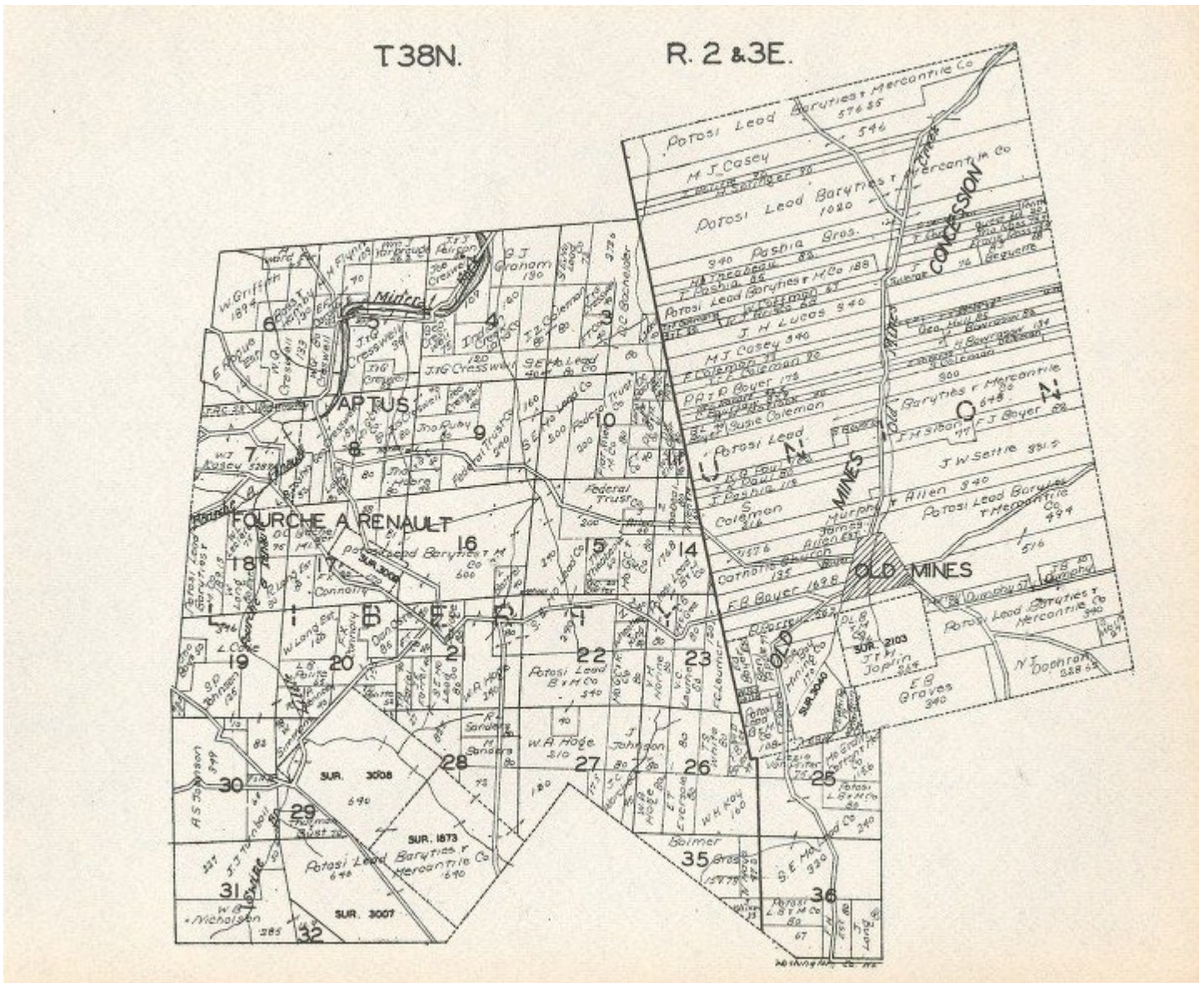
Although we do not know a great deal about the day-to-day life of the residents of Old Mines before the 20th century, there are numerous documents that can shed some light on the community at various points in its existence. One great source of information is the U.S. Census. For example, below you will find some information gleaned from the 1850 census of Union Township in Washington County, Missouri (which includes almost all of the Old Mines concession). The list of last names of French origin provides a glimpse into the sometimes daunting task of tracing family names. As you can see, changes and variants in the spelling of last names have been a constant feature of the genealogy of the Old Mines French families. Also listed are the professions as reported by the (overwhelming male) residents. Not surprisingly, farming and mining dominate. In some households both are listed as the occupations.

<b>1850 U.S. Census</b>		<b>(including number of households</b>		<b>Professions</b>	
<b>Family Names of French Origin</b>		<b>with each name)</b>			
				Farmer	191
Bequett	1	Obuchon	3	Miner	58
Bequette	2	Osie	1	Laborer	8
Bouchard	1	Pagey	2	Blacksmith	6
Boyer	10	Politte	8	Mechanic	5
Burrisaw	4	Portell	3	Wagon maker	4
Coleman	5	Predom	1	Manufacturer	3
Cotois	1	Reando	2	Teacher	3
Degonia	1	Robar	2	Clerk	2
Degornia	7	Robart	1	Merchant	2
Duclos	3	Sancesse	1	Physician	2
Govero	1	Teabo	1	Carpenter	1
Govro	1	Valley	1	Hunter	1
Lamarque	1	Villemar	4	Lawyer	1
Massie	1	Villmar	1	Lead smelter	1
Mesee	1			Priest	1
Misplay	1			Saddler	1
				Tailor	1
				Tobacconist	1





**Left and below:** Plat maps of Washington County, Missouri, from 1930 (source: the Digital Library of the University of Missouri system). The larger image below is of the Old Mines concession, with its distinctive shape, and part of Liberty Township to the west. When the concession lots were distributed among the original inhabitants in the late 18th century or the early 19th century, the land was divided into long, narrow lots, each one with some frontage on Old Mines Creek. The resulting image is similar to (if not a direct imitation of) the “long lots” division of land along the St. Lawrence River in Canada, which is still evident today. Access to water (for consumption, irrigation, and transportation) was always of capital importance to the French settlers. Although it is believed that the division of the Old Mines concession into what appear to be “long lots” is in fact merely coincidental, the resemblance is striking. Also, the map below shows that although ownership of the individual grants had changed hands over the years, with a sizable amount of land under the control of a mining company, the division of the concession into long, narrow lots remains very much evident.





## UPCOMING EVENTS OF INTEREST

August 8-9: [Ste. Genevieve Jour de Fête](#)  
 August 22-23: [6th Annual Louis Bolduc Days, Ste. Genevieve](#)  
 September 13: [St. Joachim Fall Festival](#)  
 September 19: [Ste. Genevieve History Conference](#)  
 October 4: [Annual Old Mines Fete](#)  
 October 10-11: [Fort de Chartres French and Indian War Encampment](#)  
 October 23-25: [Center for French Colonial Studies Annual Conference](#)  
                     [Facebook Page for Conference](#)  
 December 31: [La Guiannee in Ste. Genevieve](#)  
 December 31: [La Guiannee at Fort de Chartres](#)



### SOME IMAGES FROM THE OLD CEMETERY AT ST. JOACHIM CHURCH IN OLD MINES, MISSOURI





## What is Old Mines?

The Old Mines community, located in the north-east quadrant of Washington County, Missouri, is one of the oldest European settlements west of the Mississippi River. The area first attracted the attention of French explorers and settlers in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century due to its rich lead deposits (and the prospect of even more valuable minerals, which unfortunately proved to be untrue). Beginning in the 1720's, lead mining in this area became an integral part of the economic activity of the "Pays des Illinois," that region between the Great Lakes and present-day Louisiana that was settled by the French.

After the end of the French and Indian War, and towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, more and more French settlers migrated to the west side of the Mississippi River, and became involved in the fast-growing lead mining operations west of Ste. Genevieve. After the Louisiana Purchase, and once Missouri became a state, the community at Old Mines still remained very much a French community, largely isolated from the massive influx of English-speaking Americans.

Even into the 20<sup>th</sup> century the families in Old Mines continued to preserve their language and traditions. Only the forces of modernization could finally compel the community to change, as paved roads, improved communication, and compulsory education put an end to the isolation in which Old Mines had long remained. Lead was replaced by tiff (barite) as the mineral which contributed to the livelihood of the majority of families in the area, but it has been many years since any mining activity has taken place. Fewer and fewer people spoke French on a regular basis, at least not in public, with the last native speakers having disappeared.

Now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Old Mines community continues to value its French legacy, with a variety of annual events celebrating nearly 300 years of the French presence in present-day Washington County. Although many of the descendants of the original settlers have created a diaspora that spreads across Missouri and the rest of the United States, interest in the collective heritage, in genealogy, and in the preservation of the cultural legacy remains strong. Hopefully this project (with its website, newsletter, and Facebook page) will make a positive contribution to the exchange of ideas and information about this fascinating aspect of American history.

### **The Old Mines French Project**

Director: Dr. Will Thompson, The University of Memphis

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Facebook: [www.facebook.com/oldminesfrench](http://www.facebook.com/oldminesfrench)

### **CONTRIBUTIONS AND SUGGESTIONS WELCOME!**

Do you have an idea for an article for the newsletter? Something you would like to see included? If so, please do not hesitate to get in touch! (Contact information to the left.) The only requirement is that it should be of interest to anyone wanting to know more about Old Mines, its history, its families, its church, and its lasting legacy.