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INDEPENDENT SINCE 1824

HALIFAX, NOVA SCOTIA

Beams and timbers tell tale of N.B. past

By KRISTA ARMSTRONG
The Canadian Press

Standing in the basement of the house her family has called home for almost a century, Melinda Jarratt expresses her amazement at the history unfolding before her eyes.

"I'm literally watching them taking the core samples," she says. "It's something we've been dreaming about for months and months."

Jarratt and her cousin Patsy Hennessy began a mission this year to learn more about the house in Bathurst, N.B., which their family bought in 1914 and where members of the Hennessy family still live today.

Earlier this month, two scientists from Mount Allison University visited the home to remove 15 to 20 samples of wood from beams in the basement and attic, which will allow them to determine when the house was built.

Jarratt, a historian, says knowing the history of the house will shed light on how Acadian, English and Irish settlers worked together to build the community in northern New Brunswick.

The family believes the main foundation of the house was built in the early 1800s by Acadian Charles Doucet, who received a land grant from King George III in 1807.

If the house were built by Doucet, as they believe, Jarratt says it's a symbol of a community that worked together "instead of being separate communities defined by language or religion or nationality."

The Acadians were among the first European settlers in New Brunswick, with some resettling in Bathurst following the Acadian Deportation of 1755.

In 1755, thousands of French Acadians were displaced from their Nova Scotia homes by the British after refusing to swear a

loyalty oath to King George III.

Less than 40 years later, in 1792, Doucet applied to the King for a land grant.

Granted in 1807, it stipulated the property must be built within five years, or no later than 1811, which is when the cousins think the house may have been built.

During the course of their research, Jarratt says they found a 1836 document where the bishop of the time described Doucet as the "wealthiest and most well-respected Acadian in New Brunswick."

Jarratt says finding out that such a prominent Acadian may have built the property is "like discovering a jewel."

Concerned about the fate of the house, the family approached the heritage branch of the New Brunswick Department of Culture, Wellness and Sport for advice and help earlier this year.

The response from the province was swift and the family received funding from an initiative called Canada's Historic Sites.

The family has been able to establish a history of property ownership and earlier this year the house was given local heritage status by the city.

The cousins first heard about dendrochronological testing at a meeting with the heritage branch of the provincial government in September. After doing research and consulting experts, they decided this was a good way to learn more about the house.

Dendrochronology involves taking samples of wood, counting the rings in the sample and comparing it with other known chronologies to determine when a tree was cut, says Amanda Young of Mount Allison University in Sackville, N.B.

Because builders generally let wood cure for a year or two after it is cut, she says the lab is able to estimate the age of a structure to within one year.