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"They saw that this was an important site." MELYNDA JARRATT

THE NORTH



Amanda Young and Ben Phillips of Mount Allison University's dendrochronology lab, along with Patsy Hennessy, right, examine wood core samples and slices in the basement of the Doucet Hennessy House in Bathurst. SUBMITTED PHOTO

History of town and people told by scientific wood study on home

Heritage

Dendrochronological testing will determine age of wood used to build home

KRISTA ARMSTRONG
THE CANADIAN PRESS

HALIFAX — Standing in the basement of the house her family has called home for almost a century, Melynda 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, 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

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MELYNDA JARRATT

swift and the project received funding under the national Historic Places Initiative.

"They saw that this was an important site," says Jarratt.

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 department in September.

After doing some research and consulting experts, they decided this was a good way to learn more about the origin of the house.

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

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.

Young says it's likely the house was built in two stages, which is confirmed by Jarratt, who describes a foundation of large blocks of stone with mortar that, as it reaches her shoulders, changes to brick.

"Whether these pieces that we're looking at now ... are from the original house remains to be seen," says Jarratt, talking about the samples from beams in the basement.

Young says the results will be available in January.

Jarratt says that even if the house is not as old as they believe, it is still significant as one of the oldest continuously occupied residences in Bathurst.