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Two sides upbeat after meeting about old house

By DERWIN GOWAN

MIRAMICHI - The provincial Heritage Branch and La société historique de Neguac seem ready to work together on the legacy of Otho Robichaud.

A delegation from the society travelled to Fredericton last week to present its case that Otho Robichaud built an old house undergoing restoration in Neguac around 1790.

This view is at odds with the feeling of some Acadian historians who argue that Otho's son Louis built the old house, still standing behind the Shell station in Neguac, in the 1820s or later.

Most recently, historian Jean Daigle of Moncton handed in a report to the Heritage Branch saying that the historical society did not have proof that Otho Robichaud, who lived from 1742 to 1824, built the old house.

The society reacted by hiring Brian Lindblom, a forensic document examiner from Ottawa, to date an old survey plan which apparently shows the house which everybody agrees either Otho or Louis built.

Mr. Lindblom found that the survey plan, which the Provincial Archives identifies as NI/27, must be older than another survey plan dated to 1793 - because the 1793 plan seems to have been traced from NI/27.

Mr. Lindblom analyzed the ink and handwriting on NI/27 and found that surveyor Stephen Millidge included the house when he first drew the survey plan - someone did not add it later.

Added together with other evidence, La société historique feels it has an overwhelming case that Otho Robichaud built the house for his bride, Marie-Louise Thibodeau, whom he married in 1789.

Société president Fernand Robichaud, vice-president Edouard Savoie, secretary-treasurer Celine Painchaud, Conrad Landry, and restoration project foreman Hubert Comeau drove to Fredericton last week to present their case.

Government officials on hand included Jean-Camille DeGrace, Minister of State for Tourism and Culture; Fisheries and Aquaculture

Minister Danny Gay, the MLA for Miramichi Bay; Louise Gillis, assistant deputy minister of economic development and Heritage Branch officials Wayne Burley and Bill Hicks.

In his Jan. 4 report to the Heritage Branch, Jean Daigle noted the deteriorating relationship between the branch - part of the Department of Economic Development, Tourism and Culture reporting to cabinet minister Roland MacIntyre - and La société historique de Néguaac.

Both, after last week's 2 ½-hour meeting, officials of the société and the Heritage Branch seemed upbeat and predicted things will get better.

"The meeting was excellent, it was very, very positive," said Fernand Robichaud, the société president. "It was a positive atmosphere ... I felt there was a real willingness to work together and solve unanswered questions."

Ms. Gillis, the Economic Development assistant deputy minister, spoke in similar terms.

"I sensed that the [Néguaac] group is very sincere - wanted to find the truth, did not fabricate anything," she said.

She described the session as a group of "reasonable people" trying to get at the truth.

However, the people on the government side of the table stopped short of accepting the historical society's position as proven.

The government will cover the cost of a survey crew to redraw an old property line shown on NI/27 to see if the old house really is the one which Stephen Millidge placed on his survey plan. A lawyer will also do a title search on the property.

As Ms. Gillis said, "It's really easy to stand here and say, 'I think the line was here.' ". Both she and Mr. Robichaud would like to nail it down. Ms. Gillis said this work should take about a month.

From that point, she said, coming to an agreement on who built the house when should fall into place.

"I think we have to come to a decision on what these buildings are and what they represent," she said.