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# Sheldrake Island lepers remembered in project for Canada 150

## Lost Stories Project to highlight story of people banished to Miramichi River island in 1840s

Gail Harding · [CBC News](#)  
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For five years, lepers lived in isolation on Sheldrake Island, located in the Miramichi River. (Contributed/Andrew King)



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A little-known story of how lepers lived and were treated on an island located in the Miramichi River in New Brunswick is going to receive national recognition after being selected for [the Lost Stories Project](#), part of Canada 150.

The Sheldrake Commemorative Committee's story about the lepers will be one of four stories across Canada to be told in a documentary. The group is the only one in Atlantic Canada to be selected.

Artists will be invited to submit designs for an art piece that will be erected on the church grounds in Bartibog, N.B. overlooking Sheldrake Island. Both are planned to be unveiled by summer 2017.

Committee member Frances Connell says while the island is a beautiful place, it does have a tragic story.

### Dark history

For five years, from 1844 to 1849, people who contracted leprosy were sent to live on the island, many of them Acadians.

"The health officials, you might say, banished all these lepers to Sheldrake Island and it was just thought that they were isolated and nobody would have any contact with them," she said.

Connell said the 44 lepers lived in very rough buildings with no fuel or food. The conditions were too much for some who escaped on the ice in winter but were later caught and sent back.

"Some local people would bring them food and wood for fuel. They were mostly very poor and starving."

Eventually the lepers were moved to a quarantine station known as a lazaretto in Tracadie, N.B. A bishop had decided something had to be done and asked for help from a group of nuns in Quebec.

### Rediscovering the story

Interest in rediscovering the story was sparked after the Tracadie Museum contacted the priest at St. Peter's and St. Paul's Roman Catholic Church in Bartibog.

Members of the congregation formed a committee with those from the museum and started trying to find grant money to fund a commemorative project. Connell said it was committee member Gaetane Labelle who spotted an ad about the Lost Stories Project.

Ronald Rudin, the professor of history at Concordia University in Montreal had received \$235,000 from the Canada 150 fund to create a series of four artworks and films for his Lost Stories project.

After applying, Rudin visited the island with the committee. Connell said he was moved by the story.

"[Rudin] said he had received a lot of applications for this project and very interesting stories but he said this one really impressed him.

"The story, the lepers, the severe conditions they were in, we are glad that it's now being known to so many others," she said.

### 'Everyone could feel and relate to this'

Connell said many of those banished to the island have common family names from the region. Fifteen people died and were buried there.

"Some of the others who died have very well-known Acadian names like Comeau, Benoit, Landry, Breau, names we hear," she said. "Everybody could feel and relate to this — people who belong to them."

Connell, who lives in Oak Point where there is a view of Sheldrake Island from her deck, hopes the project will help others know more about what happened to the people who lived on the island.

"I just love to look out on the horizon and see it kind of like it's floating, sometimes in the mist."

With the story now going to be told, the committee has begun fundraising to prepare the site for the artwork.

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### Clarifications

○ The Sheldrake Commemorative Committee will not receive an individual grant to create a documentary and artwork about the story of the lepers' life on the island. Both will be created through funds received by Ronald Rudin.

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