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### FACING DETROIT: ASSUMPTION COLLEGE AS A CROSS-BORDER INSTITUTION 1870-1948

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FACING DETROIT:  
ASSUMPTION COLLEGE AS A CROSS-BORDER INSTITUTION 1870-1948

by

Matthew R. Charbonneau

A Major Research Paper  
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
through the Department of History  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Degree of Master of Arts at the  
University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

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FACING DETROIT:  
ASSUMPTION COLLEGE AS A CROSS-BORDER INSTITUTION 1870-1948

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January 14, 2020

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## ABSTRACT

“Facing Detroit: Assumption College as a Cross-Border Institution 1870-1948” argues that Assumption College in Windsor, Ontario was more connected with Detroit and the US Midwest than it was with southern Ontario until the 1930s. It does this by considering Assumption College’s student population, alumni activities, and contemporary perceptions of the school. Emphasis is placed on exploring how the primary sources created by those who lived at Assumption College reveal that it was more connected with Detroit and the US Midwest than it was with Windsor or southern Ontario. The work of Michael Power and George McMahon, the two greatest contributors to Assumption’s historiography, is examined. It argues that their work does not give Assumption College’s cross-border connections sufficient recognition, and instead puts undue emphasis on Assumption’s relations with people in London and Toronto and on attributing the genesis of the University of Windsor to Assumption College. It concludes by showing that during the 1930s Assumption’s connections across the Detroit River were becoming less significant than its growing ties with Windsor and Essex County, and that by 1948 the school had redefined itself as an education institution which existed primarily for serving Windsor-Essex.

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## CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

In 1869 a small Roman Catholic college by the name of L'Assomption, located on the long-standing Huron Mission in Sandwich, Ontario was on the brink of complete ruin. Since its founding in 1857 several successive groups of ecclesiastics, including Jesuits, Benedictines, Basilians, and diocesan clergy had taken possession of the college and none were able to transform it into a viable, self-sufficient educational institution. However, in 1870 the fortunes of Assumption reversed. The Congregation of St. Basil, an order of Roman Catholic priests, was given control of the school as well as the neighbouring parish and land by the Bishop of London. Fr. Dennis O'Connor, a young and ambitious priest whose administrative talents had recently been unearthed while he was negotiating with bishop John Walsh of London to take possession of Assumption, was chosen by the Basilians to be the school's new superior and president. Although there was hardly an easy year in Assumption's future the leadership of Fr. O'Connor and his successors turned it into a school that was an important educational, ecclesiastical, and cultural institution transcending its location within Essex County and straddling the international border of the Detroit River, and would, nearly a century later, help form the University of Windsor.

In order to tell the complete history of the Sandwich college one must pay close attention to its having functioned as a cross-border institution as late as the 1940s, by which time its character and identity had changed decisively to reflect an institution grounded on the Windsor side of the Detroit River. What is meant by *cross-border* in this case is manifold. To begin, the national background of the students who went there must be considered, and there were a great many from the

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<sup>1</sup> Parts of this Major Research Paper were previously submitted in: Matthew Charbonneau, "Assumption College Serving the Border Cities: 1870-1948" (essay, University of Windsor, 2017).



United States of America. Also important is a consideration of who enabled it to survive financially, and here again a large part of the credit is due to Americans. Next to be considered is how people on both sides of the Detroit River perceived the college; it is clear that it was not seen as strictly a Canadian institution, but rather that it was part of the cultural milieu in Michigan just as much, and arguably more so, than it was in Southwestern Ontario until the 1930s. Its location in the Dominion of Canada was not a defining element of Assumption's identity until the 1930s; until then its location within Canada was more of an accidental than an essential characteristic. Therefore, this paper will demonstrate, that in order to worthily record the history of Assumption College one must write in such a way which emphasizes its cross-border nature, not merely as a secondary quality, but as a characteristic which was central to its identity and survival.

Bishop Walsh initiated negotiations with the Basilians in 1868 and within two years had signed a concordat with Fr. O'Connor, a young, motivated, and prior to this time rather sickly priest from St. Michael's College in Toronto appointed by the Basilians to represent their interests. The concordat, which had to be approved by Fr. O'Connor's superiors in Toronto and Annonay, France, gave the Basilians a rather generous deal. The Basilians agreed to run both classical and commercial courses at the school, which, by today's categories, covered both high-school and college level curriculum. Additionally, they would staff the neighbouring parish and educate free of charge two or three students of the bishop's choosing every year. In exchange, they received financial aid from the diocese, a 499 year lease on 80 acres of land around the college, all debt of said land was assumed by the bishop whereas revenue would

go to the college, and the Basilians reserved the right to leave if ever the conditions proved unfavourable.<sup>2</sup>

When the Basilians assumed control in 1870 the infrastructure of the campus left much to be desired. It consisted of one main building constructed prior to the college's opening in 1857, which Fr. O'Connor deemed to be both practically insufficient and visually unappealing to prospective students. In 1870 there were 30 boarding students and four day scholars, significantly less than even the enrollment of 1857 when there were 20 boarders and 60 day students. The zealous superior quickly set himself to both building an impressive and practical campus and recruiting students. Successive wings of a three story neo-gothic complex visible from Detroit were completed in 1876 and 1884 respectively; the latter, now owned and used by the University of Windsor, still serves as the headquarters of Assumption University. The new structure consisted of dormitories, classrooms, offices, refectory, and chapel while the old building was razed before the dawn of the twentieth century. Under Fr. O'Connor's leadership Assumption's student population steadily grew until he left and became bishop of London in 1890, when there were nearly 200 boarders. Credit is also due to support from clergy in the United States, especially from the bishop of Detroit, who, in 1855 laid the cornerstone for the original school building, and in Fr. O'Connor's time promised not to build a school in his diocese that might compete with Assumption for pupils. This cross-border cooperation continued for decades and ensured that Assumption's existence would be one bound to both sides of the Detroit River, and furthermore, deep into the US Midwest.

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Power, *Assumption College: The O'Connor Years 1870-1890: Volume II of a Documentary History of Assumption College*, (Windsor: Assumption University, 1986), 25-27.

This research paper is structured so as to meet the requirements of its two primary goals, these being, in the first, to examine the historiography of Assumption College as it pertains to an analysis of Assumption as a cross-border institution, and in the second, this paper will present a compelling case as to why Assumption should be seen primarily as a cross-border institution. After the introduction the next two sections situate Assumption within the broader Canadian and educational context and discuss the main themes in the existing historiography of Assumption. The fourth and most lengthy section presents evidence and arguments which demonstrate the fact of Assumption's cross-border existence and influence. The penultimate section relates how in the 1930s and 1940s the characteristics that made Assumption a cross-border institution began to dissipate and that by 1948 its main purpose had shifted to serving Windsor-Essex. A conclusion summarizes the main findings presented herein.

## CHAPTER TWO GEOGRAPHY AND TELEOLOGY IN ASSUMPTION'S HISTORIOGRAPHY

Assumption College existed within and ought to be understood as part of a broader Canadian and educational landscape, a wider context with which Assumption shared some common traits but also differed in substantial ways. Paul Axelrod, in *The Promise of Schooling: Education in Canada, 1800-1914*, describes the state of education in Canada during most of the years relevant to this paper.<sup>3</sup> Questions and challenges that the Basilians in Sandwich were trying to deal with were similar to those being faced by educators throughout Canada during these years. Issues such as the struggle to convince people of the value of post-elementary education as well as tension between faithfulness to a religious creed and the temptation to qualify for government funding by secularizing were challenges not faced only by Assumption but by high-schools and institutions of higher learning throughout Canada. Axelrod relates that education was a “vital element” in the struggle waged by various Christian denominations as they attempted to keep their flocks in the fold.<sup>4</sup> This was especially true with Catholics for whom public schools, largely protestant-dominated, were not satisfactory.<sup>5</sup> This helps to explain why the bishops of Toronto and London were so eager to get Basilian priests to help them in this struggle that coupled education with salvation; the Basilians in Sandwich were not interested in teaching mere literacy or mathematics, but rather held an educational philosophy common to both Catholics and Protestants across Canada that infused schooling with moral and religious ideals.<sup>6</sup>

Whether a denominational school should secularize in order to receive government funding was a question several universities and colleges across Canada

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Axelrod, *The Promise of Schooling: Education in Canada, 1800-1914*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> Axelrod, *Promise of Schooling*, 10.

<sup>5</sup> Axelrod, *Promise of Schooling*, 30.

<sup>6</sup> Axelrod, *Promise of Schooling*, 30, 54.

had to deal with. The challenge for schools to maintain financial viability was generally one that kept administrators working hard, no less true at Assumption than at denominational schools across Canada. Statistics from 1871 depict a situation in which the pressure to qualify for government funding becomes apparent. Canada's seventeen universities had a combined enrollment of 1561 students. Assumption was in a similar situation as the ten Canadian universities that had an enrollment of less than 50 students, and a correspondingly small amount of tuition-derived revenue.<sup>7</sup> Some denominational schools, unable to remain viable strictly by their own means, acquiesced to the government's push for secularization and abandoned their creeds. In Ontario, Queen's in Kingston and Western in London, both founded as Protestant institutions but which later secularized, are prime examples of this secularizing trend.<sup>8</sup> Some church-run schools, such as St. Michael's in Toronto, overcame this obstacle by federating with a larger non-denominational university, the University of Toronto, which had the further benefit of a universally recognized degree.<sup>9</sup> Assumption, though never in a financially prosperous situation, managed to raise enough revenue by its own means, and thus avoided having to forfeit its ideals in order to secure sufficient funding. Its independence lasted longer than most similar schools in Canada, until in 1920 it federated with Western University, and yet remained financially independent and faithful to its Catholic vision.

The broader Windsor-Detroit borderland is another context in which Assumption was but one example of many other cross-border exchanges over the Detroit River. The students and staff of Assumption were not the only ones in the region who in various ways impacted both sides of the Detroit River. For centuries

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<sup>7</sup> Axelrod, *Promise of Schooling*, 89.

<sup>8</sup> Axelrod, *Promise of Schooling*, 91.

<sup>9</sup> Axelrod, *Promise of Schooling*, 91.

and perhaps even millennia the Detroit River was not only an obstacle or a border but was also a means by which those living around it conducted travel and commerce. It was not until the very end of the eighteenth century that the Detroit River became a mark of division, separating territory administered by different governments.

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries there were numerous examples of cross-border exchange, including for trade, tourism, employment, and education.

*Sin City North* is a recent publication which examines elements of Windsor-Detroit border culture which were quite different from the ways Assumption participated in the broader exchange, and yet considered together they demonstrate how diverse and all-encompassing the cross-border culture was.<sup>10</sup> Holly Karibo's book is about vice economies, specifically prostitution, drugs, and alcohol, and how these activities motivated thousands of local residents to cross the border in order to partake. Due to a combination of factors, including differing laws and regulations as well as the fact that each city acted as an entrance to the larger regional and national market, Windsor-Detroit was an ideal location for those who organized these industries as well as those who merely wanted to consume something they could not get in their own city.<sup>11</sup> As different as Assumption College and the Detroit-Windsor vice economies may at first seem, it is clear that they have some important common characteristics. Due to Windsor's relatively small population both were dependent on attracting a large proportion of customers from the United States, which they were able to do not only because Detroit was a large city but because it acted as a focal point for the US Midwest. Whereas Fr. O'Connor built a beautiful campus which could be admired from Detroit, the vice industries relied on the larger tourism

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<sup>10</sup> Holly M. Karibo, *Sin City North: Sex, Drugs, and Citizenship in the Detroit-Windsor Borderland*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

<sup>11</sup> Karibo, *Sin City North*, 64, 87.

industry to attract Americans to Canada via billboards, which proclaimed they could “Come to Canada and Enjoy Life!”<sup>12</sup> The priests of Assumption who went to Detroit every Sunday to offer Mass used the same river-crossing ferries as bootleggers, drug smugglers, and Johns. Both were dependent on a cross-border culture that encompassed and was larger than both of them, a culture in which the priests, students, and bootleggers were few among many of the thousands of people who crossed the Detroit River every day in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>13</sup>

The historiography on Assumption College is defined by two editor-authors, namely Michael Power and George McMahon. Anyone studying the history of the Sandwich College and post-secondary education in Windsor-Essex is indebted to them for their ground-breaking work, which always stays close to the primary sources and includes ubiquitous references to the Archives of Assumption University, now maintained by the University of Windsor.

Michael Power’s books include a six-volume series of mostly hitherto unpublished primary documents with introductions illustrating the history of Assumption College, published between 1986-2003. Each of the six volumes covers a certain period of the college’s history and each has its own respective theme, indicated by the titles which serve to provide an overarching narrative to each volume’s contents, such as *Years of Uncertainty* or *The Struggle to Survive*.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the titles considered by themselves provide their own compact narrative of the college’s history.

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<sup>12</sup> Karibo, *Sin City North*, 32.

<sup>13</sup> Karibo, *Sin City North*, 19.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Power, *Assumption College: Years of Uncertainty 1855-1870: Volume I of a Documentary History of Assumption College*, (Windsor: Assumption University, 1987).  
Michael Power, *Assumption College: The Struggle to Survive 1920-1940: Volume V of a Documentary History of Assumption College*, (Windsor: Assumption University, 2000).

Power's series is first and foremost a narrative centered very much on the administration of Assumption College. Having selected the large majority of the included documents from the archives of Assumption University, where a large portion of the collection consists of the administrators' writings, it is perhaps inevitable that this be the case. Large portions of each volume are taken up by the correspondence to and from Assumption's presidents, usually with their Basilian and episcopal superiors discussing the challenges and solutions of their day. For example, almost half the content of the second volume is composed of the correspondence of the aforementioned first Basilian president of Assumption, Fr. Dennis O'Connor, who saved the school from likely ruin in 1870.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, a large portion of those letters has as its primary concern the negotiations between Fr. O'Connor and Bishop Walsh of London for control of Assumption, as opposed to some other subject, for example, daily life at the college.<sup>16</sup> A further illustration of this administrative focus is readily available in the fourth volume, *The Struggle to Survive*, covering 1920-1940, where it is not until the fifth and ultimate chapter that a theme such as "Student Life at the College" is the central focus.<sup>17</sup> Yet Power's own caveat is that this theme is explored "mainly through the eyes of college administration in its many dealings with students, parents, and guardians."<sup>18</sup> However, it is necessary to note that the administrative focus of his collection is supplemented by documents of different types, such as newspaper articles, as well as personal diaries, letters, and memoirs.<sup>19</sup> Thus Power's collections of primary sources presents a detailed and compelling

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<sup>15</sup> Michael Power, *Assumption College: The O'Connor Years 1870-1890: Volume II of a Documentary History of Assumption College*, (Windsor: Assumption University, 1986), iii, 1-74.

<sup>16</sup> Power, *O'Connor*, 1-33.

<sup>17</sup> Power, *Struggle*, v, 185-216.

<sup>18</sup> Power, *Struggle*, 185.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Charles Collins, "Memories of Assumption in 1888," in *O'Connor*, ed. Michael Power.



history of Assumption College, framed by his commentary in the introductions as well as by the prefaces written by past presidents of Assumption University.

George McMahon has written and edited several books about Assumption and the University of Windsor, the most important of which, considered in this context, is *Pure Zeal: A History of Assumption College, 1870-1946*.<sup>20</sup> For many years McMahon was a history teacher and administrator at the University of Windsor; he is now retired. McMahon's work has much in common with Power's, and he himself acknowledges that "anyone working on the history of Assumption simply "stands on the shoulders" of Power and "his pioneering work in this area."<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, McMahon's work to a great extent is based on the contents of the Assumption University Archives, the same corpus of documents that Power primarily draws from.

*Pure Zeal* provides a chronologically oriented narrative of Assumption's history. The amount of detail and space is certainly weighted in favour of the college's more recent history, for Assumption's first half-century of existence is granted only one tenth of the book's length. This imbalance is likely due, at least in part, to the fact that there are both more primary documents and that there is a greater diversity among them from the college's latter years. However, this imbalance also serves to better bring out the connection between the growth of Assumption College and the founding of the University of Windsor. McMahon manifests a "deft and deeply personal grasp of this topic," especially in comparison with Power, in the words of Fr. Ulysse Paré, the President of Assumption University at the time of

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<sup>20</sup> George McMahon Sr., *Pure Zeal: A History of Assumption College, 1870-1947*, (Toronto: Foxmar Press, 2002).

<sup>21</sup> McMahon, *Pure Zeal*, viii.

publication.<sup>22</sup> This can be seen, for example, in the many personal anecdotes that McMahon provides about his own time at Assumption College as a student.<sup>23</sup>

*Pure Zeal* presents a narrative centered on the administration of the school and the issues faced by those who ran it, much like Power's books. Some of the main issues discussed include the struggle to attract enough students, Assumption's relations with the University of Western Ontario, and ensuring that the college's staff had the requisite academic credentials for a modernizing post-secondary educational institution. It is not to be doubted that the aforementioned questions were indeed important, and Assumption's presidents and staff had to contend with them; understanding how they were dealt with is certainly central to any comprehensive narrative of the college's history. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that other topics important to Assumption's history, though some might argue of less import, receive at most secondary attention. These scarcely treated topics include sports, the activities of the literary societies and bands, and the regular daily routine of prayer, study, classes, and recreation for resident priests and boarding students respectively. Indeed, it is nothing less than a significant lacuna for *A History of Assumption* to leave unmentioned the daily routine of students and priests at Assumption, a schedule which included fixed times for prayer and recreation, sleeping and working, communal class and individual study. It was a program that accounted for nearly every minute of one's day. This element of life at Assumption College, so different from the modern university life that most readers would likely be familiar with, was followed as late as the 1940s to almost the same detail that Fr. O'Connor had first mandated in 1870.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> McMahon, *Pure Zeal*, vii.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. McMahon, *Pure Zeal*, 16, 99, 142.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Power, *O'Connor*, v, 81-87.

The books of Power and McMahon are primarily though not solely about the relations of Assumptionites with the outside world, as opposed to their lives vis-a-vis their colleagues at Assumption. Each contributes his own particular insights to the study of Assumption even though both are centered on the administration of the school. *Pure Zeal*, because it takes the form of a narrative, offers the reader more of a story that is not bound by the limits incumbent upon collections of primary documents. Due to his chosen format McMahon has the freedom to switch between documents and his own explanation and narration whenever required by his narrative. Power's series is more confined in the sense that he is usually restricted by what the authors of primary documents have written. Indeed, the strength of such a project is derived from the fact that the people of Assumption College are given a chance to have their own voice heard at such great length without their message being adulterated by a modern interpreter for the purposes of a narrative that was not their own. However, this is not to deny that Power's selection of documents has not been influenced by his own bias towards a narrative that he may have had in mind when selecting documents. It may seem counterintuitive that in some respects, despite being confined to a seemingly more limiting style, Power is able to better illustrate the non-administrative life at Assumption than McMahon is, despite the latter's self-determined direction. This can be seen most obviously in Power's second book, *The O'Connor Years*, where, in addition to the copious letters of superiors, bishops, and high ranking officials such as these, there is to be found a memoir and a diary that illustrate what life was like *inside* Assumption College.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Cf. Charles Collins, "Memories of Assumption in 1888," in *O'Connor*, Power. Michael Mungovan, "Selections From the Diary of Father Michael Mungovan", in *O'Connor*, Power.

One of the most telling primary documents from the early years is the diary of Fr. Michael Joseph Mungovan, teacher and administrator at Assumption College in the late 1800s. The purpose Fr. Mungovan assigned to his diary was to chronicle life at Assumption.<sup>26</sup> In the words of Fr. Robert Scollard, one of the great historians of the Basilian order, Fr. Mungovan intended to “chronicle [in his diary] the daily work of the house where he was living and the lives of the people connected with it.”<sup>27</sup> Published in the second volume of Power’s series, the diary effectively illustrates the cross-border nature of the college and by extension the border cities region in a way that few other sources do.

There is a teleological element in the historiography of Assumption College that connects it with the history of the University of Windsor, an element that is manifested most explicitly in the writing of McMahon. Indeed, his narrative is often concerned with explaining how the past led to the future, and is constructed in such a way as to demonstrate how the history of Assumption College naturally led to the creation of the University of Windsor. In *Pure Zeal* this teleological narrative is begun on the first page, where McMahon, referring to the thoughts of Fr. Norbert Ruth, former dean of the University of Windsor, says “the University of Windsor was a natural development of Assumption College and the Assumption University of Windsor.”<sup>28</sup> This is no insignificant way to begin the narrative, for McMahon, quoting Plato’s *Republic*, says that the “beginning is the most important part of the work.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Michael Power, *Assumption College: The O’Connor Years 1870-1890: Volume II of a Documentary History of Assumption College*, (Windsor: Assumption University, 1986), xi.

<sup>27</sup> Robert J. Scollard, “The Diaries and Other Papers of Michael Joseph Mungovan C.S.B.: a Bibliography Compiled by Robert J. Scollard C.S.B.”. *Basilian Historical Bulletin*. Toronto: The Basilian Press, (1971): 5.

<sup>28</sup> McMahon, *Pure Zeal*, 1.

Cf. Norbert J. Ruth, *From Assumption College to the University of Windsor: The Dean’s Story, Reverend Norbert J Ruth, C.S.B. 1952-1971*, ed., George A. McMahon, (Windsor: Assumption University, 1997).

<sup>29</sup> McMahon, *Pure Zeal*, 1.

So it is the case with *Pure Zeal*. Explaining the transition from Assumption College to the University of Windsor is one of the main goals of McMahon's work. However, the comprehensive reader would have already come across this idea from Fr. Paré in the preface to *Pure Zeal*. Complementing McMahon's scholarship, the president of Assumption University opines that "Mr. McMahon details how a small, regional, denominational college gave birth to a prominent, influential Provincial University."<sup>30</sup> One can recognize in these quotations not only a teleological framing of Assumption's history, but one that includes an assumption of progress. Later in the book, when McMahon is reporting that in 1929 Assumption was offered free land in South Windsor, he relates that if Assumption had moved, "The University of Windsor certainly would not be located where it is now..."<sup>31</sup> One might question the wisdom of such a narrative, specifically the implication that such a connection between Assumption and the University of Windsor was inevitable from such an early date.

A teleological approach to Assumption's history is evident in an equally obvious way in *A School Becomes of Age*, by James Fraser.<sup>32</sup> This unpublished book, available in the University of Windsor's Leddy Library Archives and Special Collections, offers readers a very different narrative than either Power or McMahon. Though not as detailed as those authors' books, *A School Becomes of Age* offers a history of Assumption that is as much concerned with life actually on the college campus as it is with administrative issues. There are entire chapters on topics such as the different sports teams and clubs that made Assumption such a vibrant campus.<sup>33</sup> As far as the book's teleology is concerned Fraser is even more comprehensive than

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<sup>30</sup> McMahon, *Pure Zeal*, vii.

<sup>31</sup> McMahon, *Pure Zeal*, 79.

<sup>32</sup> James Fraser, *A School Becomes of Age*, (Leddy Library Archives and Special Collections: Unpublished, 1971).

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Fraser, *School*, 86-113.

Power and McMahon, for his volume situates Assumption College within the history of education in Sandwich well before the college was founded. Fraser's book demonstrates that a teleological reading of Assumption's history is not new, but originated within a decade of the founding of the University of Windsor. Fraser situates the history of Assumption firmly within that of the University of Windsor when he writes, like McMahon at the beginning of his book, that:

This is the story of Assumption College, a small Catholic institution, and how, during a century of difficulties, it grew to become the non-denominational University of Windsor. This dramatic change of character is important in the history of education in North America and its relatively calm achievement says much for the broadmindedness of those involved.<sup>34</sup>

The point of identifying this teleological element is not to call into question the veracity of the prevailing narrative, but rather to indicate that it has served as a distraction, perhaps inadvertently, to an equally important reality, one which was evident in Assumption's early years more so than the possibility of one day giving rise to the University of Windsor. Namely, that Assumption's relationship with Michigan was far more important than its relationship with Windsor. Writing Assumption's history with the goal of showing that it evolved into the University of Windsor has inhibited a proper recognition of the college's reliance on being so close to Detroit, and more importantly, having been such a significant educational institution for Michiganders. Indeed, the suggestion that Assumption College would become a particularly Windsor-oriented and non-confessional institution would likely have

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<sup>34</sup> Fraser, *School*, iv.

seemed a rather unlikely possibility to the college's early staff and students; many of them would likely have been, and were, opposed to such developments.

### CHAPTER THREE CONFLICT BETWEEN SANDWICH AND LONDON

The geographic orientation of the historiography likewise does not make clear the critical importance of Assumption's cross-border relationships. Instead, the place that readers are most often referred to is London, Ontario. There are two main reasons why London occupies such a prominent status in the writings of Power and McMahon. Firstly, Sandwich was located at the southern end of the dioceses of London, and the bishop of London was the chancellor of Assumption. Secondly, London was the home of Western University, with which Assumption would federate in 1920.

London as the seat of the local episcopacy was both a source of welcome and friendship as well as tension and frustration for the Basilians in Sandwich. This polarization is exemplified by two bishops that the staff of Assumption had to deal with over the years. Bishop John Walsh, second bishop of the London diocese, in the late 1860s initiated negotiations with the Basilians' Fr. O'Connor, hoping that they would agree to accept custodianship of the precarious college in Sandwich. Having heard of the Basilians' commendable work at St. Michael's College in Toronto, he was anxious to get them to take over Sandwich. Incidentally, bishop Walsh was quite generous with the terms he offered for Assumption College, Assumption parish, and the surrounding land.<sup>35</sup> Bishop Walsh wanted Assumption College to be in Sandwich and he wanted the Basilian Fathers to run it; throughout the rest of his episcopate he cultivated congenial relations with the Basilians and Assumption College. Guided by their mutually beneficial "Concordat" which outlined the rights and responsibilities of both parties, the succeeding bishops of London maintained friendly relations with

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<sup>35</sup> Cf. Power, *O'Connor*, 25-27.



Assumption College until 1909. The local episcopacy's friendliness was an important factor in an environment that aided the Basilians in bringing stability and reliability to Sandwich.

Bishop Michael Francis Fallon, fifth bishop of London from 1909-1931, was quite the opposite of his predecessors and decisively deviated from the pattern established by them. He never got along with the presidents of Assumption and at times was even somewhat antagonistic towards them.<sup>36</sup> A recurring theme that damaged relations between them was bishop Fallon's repetitive insistence that the Basilians move Assumption College to London. Throughout his episcopacy Fallon endeavored to create a strong center of Catholic education in his cathedral city, within the larger context of Western University. One element of which, he hoped, would be a transplanted Assumption, to both contribute to the newly established St. Peter's seminary and join Western University as a Catholic liberal arts college.<sup>37</sup> As early as 1912 there were letters about the possibility of moving Assumption College to London.<sup>38</sup> Again in 1919 there was an effort by Fallon to have the college moved. The Basilians, however, were steadfast and refused to give up their investment in Sandwich. They knew that the future success of their college "lay with American students and not with those from the Diocese of London."<sup>39</sup> Fallon, having tried in vain to bring the college to London, for a time discouraged priests from recommending Assumption to boys and men in their parishes. McMahon points out the extent and effects of Assumption's poor relations with their bishop, quoting a

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<sup>36</sup> Cf. Michael Power, "Fallon Versus Forster: The Struggle Over Assumption College 1919-1925," *Historical Studies* 56 (1989):.

<sup>37</sup> McMahon, *Pure Zeal*, 20-23.

<sup>38</sup> Michael Power, *Assumption College: The Making of a Modern School 1890-1919: Volume III of a Documentary History of Assumption College*, (Windsor: Assumption University, 1989), 70.

<sup>39</sup> Fraser, *School*, 46.

1925 letter to Fr. Forster, superior of the Basilians, from Fr. Dillon, Assumption president from 1922-1928:

The unfriendly attitude of the Bishop has apparently created among many of the clergy a spirit of indifference and in some areas a spirit of opposition to Assumption. I think that some of the priests, who at heart are well disposed toward the College, have too much fear of Episcopal disapproval to urge boys to come here.<sup>40</sup>

This antagonism, coupled with the fact that new Catholic schools in London were attracting students from Southern Ontario that otherwise might have gone to Assumption, meant that Assumption would continue its perennial struggle of attracting 200 boarding students, the benchmark number that the school strived to attract since the time of Fr. O'Connor. Thus Assumption continued to operate in a financially precarious and practically difficult manner, in part due to antagonism from their own bishop and chancellor.

Fallon made his last concerted effort to transplant Assumption to London when Joseph Bower began looking to buy land to build the projected Ambassador Bridge in 1925. As the bridge was to be built in Assumption's proximity Fallon saw it as the perfect opportunity to sell not only the college but also Assumption church and the neighbouring rectory at a favourable price.<sup>41</sup> Fr. Dillon related to his Basilian superior, Fr. Forster, that "Mr. Bower is not interested in the purchase of our property, he does not want to buy it...It is quite evident that Mr. Bower is not anxious to secure our property."<sup>42</sup> To bishop Fallon he wrote "We are convinced that the bridge, on the

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<sup>40</sup> Cited in McMahan, *Pure Zeal*, 40-41.

<sup>41</sup> McMahan, *Pure Zeal*, 34-35.

<sup>42</sup> Cited in McMahan, *Pure Zeal*, 35.

site planned, would injure the College but, at the same time, we have little hope that Mr. Bower will buy the College property at a price in keeping with its value.”<sup>43</sup> Fallon was still convinced that “a reasonable arrangement might be reached...” and yet it seems that Fr. Forster’s observation to Fr. Dillon was correct; “Bishop Fallon wants two things, a College in London and all the cash he can lay his hands on. He was the prime mover and he moved not out of regard for Assumption College but for No. 1.”<sup>44</sup> In the event some of the college’s property south of the cemetery was sold for the bridge, but this included nothing essential to the college, and Fallon’s desire of uprooting Assumption from its border cities roots came to naught. Fallon is depicted as a persona non grata in the Assumption historiography, as he certainly was for many there.

The other source of London-centric historiography is Western University, with which Assumption federated in 1920, now known as the University of Western Ontario. This relationship gave Assumption the power to award its graduates degrees from Western for the classes and examinations they took at Assumption. Thus Assumption’s education became much more valuable, especially as it transitioned from a curriculum focused on preparation for ecclesiastical careers to those of laymen. For the most part the relationship with Western was harmonious, and Assumption’s identity changed with the filiation. Its identifying colours became purple and white, in imitation of Western’s, and its student newspaper was named *Purple and White*. In *Pure Zeal* McMahon especially focuses on Assumption’s relationship with William Sherwood Fox, the dean and later president of Western University from 1927-1947. At length McMahon relates that Fox was eager to work

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<sup>43</sup> Cited in McMahon, *Pure Zeal*, 36.

<sup>44</sup> Cited in McMahon, *Pure Zeal*, 36.

with Assumption College, and the presidents in Sandwich knew that they had a cooperative colleague in London who was always patient and understanding as they worked to raise the academic standards of Assumption.<sup>45</sup> President Fox died in 1947 and his replacement had no interest in maintaining the same kind of relationship with Assumption, and as the college grew rapidly after World War Two it became evident that filiation with Western was more a limitation than a benefit; it was time for Assumption to attain degree granting powers of its own.

Assumption University of Windsor received its degree granting powers in 1953, after several years of being held back in various ways by its agreement with Western.<sup>46</sup> As Power relates in *The Road to Independence*, “Assumption was already a university in fact, if not in name, and...Western, 120 miles to the north, was standing in the way of Assumption acquiring a charter and Windsor having its own much-needed university.”<sup>47</sup> Of course at this point in Assumption’s history, with the local bishop no longer having such direct control and the filiation with Western University terminated, the historiography is no longer dominated by a Sandwich-London dynamic. It is worth noting that the city of Windsor’s expansion had by this time replaced Sandwich as Assumption’s municipality, and thus the new school was accordingly named Assumption University of Windsor, not of Sandwich. Indeed, the new name was reflective of a new reality.

Thus by looking at Assumption’s relations with the bishops of London and with Western University, and how these are presented in the work of McMahon and Power, one can see that for more than three decades the story of Assumption can easily be interpreted as an affair between London and Sandwich, rather than the

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<sup>45</sup> Cf. McMahon, *Pure Zeal*, 221.

<sup>46</sup> Michael Power, *Assumption College: The Road to Independence 1940-1953: Volume VI of a Documentary History of Assumption College*, (Windsor: Assumption University, 2003), 125-26.

<sup>47</sup> Power, *Independence*, 126.

college's neighbours across the Detroit River. There is no doubt that from an administrative point of view the contentions with bishop Fallon, the friendship with bishop Walsh, and the filiation with Western are all important aspects of Assumption's history, yet they are not the only important parts. It is easy to see why McMahan and Power are so concerned with the affairs between Assumption and London, for a large portion of the archived documents bear testimony to them. Although the archives are so heavily concerned with London, there is another dynamic arguably as important, which is not so obvious if one were to just examine the letters of presidents and bishops. The letters, diaries, newspapers, etc. that still survive from Assumption College bear testimony to the fact, perhaps in subtle ways, that relations across Canada's border with the United States were also critically important to Assumption and therefore ought to be examined at length rather than just in passing.

## CHAPTER FOUR CONNECTIONS WITH MICHIGAN

The historiographical emphasis on Sandwich-London relations has deprived cross-border relations of its due emphasis. With pride of place given to London, relations with Michigan are often relegated to a secondary role. In many instances they are acknowledged to be important, but in a supplementary way rather than a vital one. However, in defense of McMahon and Power they do point out that Assumption's financial stability, always a precarious matter, was contingent on funds from the United States. That is to say, in the midst of chapters that deal largely with Sandwich and London there are short passages that acknowledge the importance of, for example, mass stipends or fundraising activities in Detroit. There is tension, it seems, between bureaucratic forces oriented toward London and students and revenue coming from the US, which was relatively free of such administrative tension. A narrative which synthesizes these two forces and directions is necessary, thus McMahon's and Power's work can be expanded on to further demonstrate the importance of this dynamic.

Assumption College was affected by its location along the Detroit River in many respects and thus the ways that its nature as a cross-border institution can be demonstrated are numerous and sundry. What is meant by 'cross-border' in this context is simply that Assumption's proximity to an international border allowed it to develop characteristics that were to a certain extent unique to it. Physical proximity to the United States is one way it functioned as a cross-border school, but this is only the beginning. Aspects of Assumption's history as diverse as intercollegiate sports, the school newspaper, its complicated wartime conditions, and the people that supported it both monetarily and by helping recruit boarding students all bear testimony to the

fact that Assumption College was a cross-border institution, especially from 1870 until the 1930s.

A limited understanding of the Basilians, of its members, its local objectives in Canada, and its original *raison d'être* will help in understanding the character of Assumption College and the men who lived and worked there. Formally titled the Congregation of St. Basil, the Basilians are a Roman Catholic religious order. Their name comes from both the parish in which their original school was located and after the fourth century Church Father, theologian, and bishop from Asia Minor. After having run a school for several years, the Basilians were officially founded in Annonay, France, in 1822 when the ten founding members received permission to do so from their bishop. Their goal was the re-establishment of robust Christian education in response to the destruction, persecution, and dechristianization caused by the French Revolution.<sup>48</sup>

The Basilians first came to Canada in 1850 at the invitation of the bishop of Toronto, Count Armand Francois Marie de Charbonnel, a French nobleman who having recently been consecrated by Pope Pius IX was distressed at the lack of Catholic education available in the vastness of his diocese, which comprised most of southern Ontario. De Charbonnel himself was educated at the Basilian school in Annonay and, having a personal appreciation and knowledge of the Basilians' work, wanted their help in filling the void. Thus St. Michael's College in Toronto was founded in 1852.<sup>49</sup> By 1870, when Fr. O'Connor arrived in Sandwich, the Basilians were well established in North America as respectable clergymen, and growth in North America was outpacing that in France, where the motherhouse was and hitherto

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<sup>48</sup> Cf. Charles Roume, *A History of the Congregation of St. Basil to 1864*, trans. Kevin J. Kirley and William J. Young, (Toronto: The Basilian Press, 1975).

<sup>49</sup> A. F. Page, *A History of the Basilian Order in Canada*, (Toronto: The Catholic Truth Society of Canada, 1924), 7-9.

most of the formation of new members took place. In the early years of Assumption many of the Basilians there would have been formed at least in part in the ways of Annonay, France, but as the college matured increasing numbers of its staff knew a Basilian order that had more to do with North America than France. This meant, amongst other things, that many of its North American members were of Irish descent; few of the priests at Assumption were from either France or French Canada, which could explain, in part, why so few of the local French population sent their children there. Basilian apostolates in Canada had similar objectives to those in France; to offer a Christian education suitable for both religious vocations and secular careers. Pastoral work in parishes associated with their schools was coupled with this, as can be seen in Sandwich with Our Lady of the Assumption Parish and Assumption College, separate institutions but with some overlapping personnel.<sup>50</sup>

Assumption College's geographic proximity to Michigan is the first respect in which it ought to be considered as a cross-border school. Even before picking up any book or turning dusty files in an archive, the school's proximity to the international border seems worth considering, for no other Canadian post-secondary school was as close to an international border as Assumption was. With the campus only a short distance from the Detroit River Assumptionites were reminded on a daily basis of the closeness of another country, a country that for many of them was their homeland. Some of Assumption's students may have even been gazing across the river at the same church they went to at home. St. Anne's in Detroit, directly across the Detroit River from its sister church Assumption, also manned by the Basilians, was quite visible from the north end of the college campus, and one would think that students from that parish cannot have felt too far from home.

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<sup>50</sup> Page, *Basilian Order in Canada*, 27-41.



Recreational walks often undertaken by the resident students was one way in which Assumptionites would have come in contact with the border. These sojourns often included “60 to 100 and oftentimes more” students, upwards of half the boarders.<sup>51</sup> Fr. Charles Collins relates that the recreational walks were “part and parcel of our lives. In fact, it was looked upon as a necessary institution.”<sup>52</sup> Their exact routes cannot be known with certainty, as Fr. Collins has not given specific details in this regard, but one cannot help but surmise that Assumption’s students would have walked to the waterfront, which for several decades after 1870 was still college property. However, even if they had not, they still would have seen the river and the city of Detroit as they began and ended their “long walks in the country.”<sup>53</sup> Additionally, it is worthwhile considering that a great many of these walkers, roaming through Essex County with hopes of purchasing a supply of fresh apples or grapes for the journey, were US citizens. These walks apparently ended in 1914 when students were reprimanded for knocking a trolley off its tracks.<sup>54</sup>

Assumption’s proximity to Detroit was perceived and promoted as a feature which could attract Americans, including those from other parts of Michigan and the United States. An example of this is seen in the *Catalogue*, a small book printed and distributed annually in the first decades of the twentieth century as a means of conveying information to and attracting prospective students. The *Catalogue*, in its first page, describes Assumption’s location as “opposite Detroit,” thereby making its location intelligible to anyone not familiar with border cities’ geography.<sup>55</sup> This seemingly mundane information could have been rather important for families from

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<sup>51</sup> Power, *O’Connor*, xiii, 89.

<sup>52</sup> Power, *O’Connor*, 89.

<sup>53</sup> Power, *O’Connor*, 89.

<sup>54</sup> Fraser, *School*, 42.

<sup>55</sup> Assumption College, *Catalogue 1900-01*, (Sandwich: 1900). Assumption College, *Catalogue 1908-09*, (Sandwich: 1908).

further afield in Michigan, Ohio, and other states who were concerned about the feasibility of their sons travelling to and fro. Being close to Detroit would have been desirable as the city was a main railway juncture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>56</sup> Perhaps the description also carried with it the implication that a student could readily go to Detroit, if the college authorities and his parents allowed. These editions of the *Catalogue* also include lists of students and their home state or province; Americans outnumbered Canadians approximately three to two.<sup>57</sup>

The vital importance of having a presence that was clearly visible from Detroit was recognized by Fr. O'Connor even before the Basilians arrived in Sandwich, in 1870. In an 1868 letter to Fr. Jean Mathieu Soulerin, Superior General of the Basilians in Annonay, France, Fr. O'Connor advises him:

“The present College is almost invisible from Detroit, and presents a very poor appearance. By putting up a good building in a better position it would present well from Detroit, which would be the best advertisement for us, for you know how much the Americans look to appearances.”<sup>58</sup>

With the original college building quickly becoming inadequate for the growth that came with Fr. O'Connor's presidency new buildings had to be constructed, ones that would attract attention from Detroit. McMahon relates that “O'Connor, full of confidence, embarked on an extensive building program aimed at attracting more students from Michigan.”<sup>59</sup> By 1884 two wings of a neo-gothic three-story complex were complete. Fr. O'Connor also orchestrated sorely needed renovations for

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<sup>56</sup> Cf. Philip P. Mason, *The Ambassador Bridge: A Monument to Progress*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987), 29.

<sup>57</sup> *Catalogue 1900-01*, 67-71. *Catalogue 1908-09*, 67-71.

<sup>58</sup> Cited in Power, *O'Connor*, 7.

<sup>59</sup> McMahon, *Pure Zeal*, 9.

Assumption church, which the Basilians were also responsible for. The church's original belfry had been "knocked down some time ago by lightning" and thus Fr. O'Connor had the present soaring edifice constructed.<sup>60</sup>

Fr. O'Connor's ideal of attracting 200 boarding students, more than six times the number attending in 1870, was realized by 1890.<sup>61</sup> The *Catalogue* of the succeeding years shows that many students from Michigan did in fact come to Assumption. To what degree Fr. O'Connor's extensive renovations were responsible for successful recruitment is impossible to determine, but it is certain that Assumption's leaders perceived the college's appearance from Detroit as vital. Furthermore, it is beyond doubt that, adorned with impressive new buildings and the church's new spire, Assumption College and church would have "present[ed] well from Detroit."<sup>62</sup>

The mere proximity of Assumption to the border would affect it in another, more negative, way nearly sixty years after the Basilians arrived. By the mid 1920s plans for a bridge spanning the Windsor-Detroit border had determined that the span would be located less than 100 meters west of the main buildings of Assumption's campus, "virtually on his [Fr. Dillon's] doorstep" as McMahan relates.<sup>63</sup> Assumption had an active relationship with the bridge and its builders, and its construction affected the school in ways other than prompting bishop Fallon to try yet again, in vain, to move Assumption to London. At the commencement of construction, in June 1927, there was an expression of goodwill and cooperation between the college and Joseph Bower. The groundbreaking ceremony was held on the Assumption College

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<sup>60</sup> Cited in Power, *O'Connor*, 7.

<sup>61</sup> McMahan, *Pure Zeal*, 8.

<sup>62</sup> Cited in Power, *O'Connor*, 7.

<sup>63</sup> McMahan, *Pure Zeal*, 39.

campus, at which both Joseph Bower and Fr. Dillon, the college president, spoke. Upwards of 500 people turned out for the occasion, despite the heavy rain.<sup>64</sup> *Purple and White*, the Assumption College newspaper at the time, covered the bridge's progress extensively and proudly boasted that Assumption's new neighbour would be the longest span in the world.<sup>65</sup> Several issues of the newspaper contain pictures and articles of the bridge.<sup>66</sup>

Regardless of the manifest goodwill from Assumption there was no denying that the Ambassador Bridge would be at best a limiting factor for Assumption. Fr. Dillon was under no illusions when he wrote to bishop Fallon that he was "convinced that the bridge...would injure the College..."<sup>67</sup> McMahon relates that the international bridge had a "powerful impact on Assumption College and certainly a long term effect on future expansion of the institution as it became a barrier to any spread westward."<sup>68</sup>

Primary documents produced by the staff of Assumption College make it clear that they perceived the border area as an incredibly fluid region. Furthermore, it seems that at times they may have felt more affinity with the Detroit side of the river than with the Canadian Border Cities. This perception concretely manifested itself when the Congregation of St. Basil was dividing itself along continental lines between North America and France. Fr. Forster, former president and superior of Assumption College, was elected Superior General of the newly independent North American Basilians in 1922. The reforms introduced by him included a more comprehensive application of the vow of poverty, which prompted nine Basilian priests to leave the

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<sup>64</sup> Mason, *Ambassador Bridge*, 74-75.; McMahon, *Pure Zeal*, 38.

<sup>65</sup> *Purple and White*, 1925-26, vol. 2, no. 4., 8-9.

<sup>66</sup> *Purple and White*, 1928-29, vol. 5, no. 5., 4.

<sup>67</sup> Cited in McMahon, *Pure Zeal*, 36.

<sup>68</sup> McMahon, *Pure Zeal*, 33-34.

order, including four from Assumption. Rather than the city and diocese in which they already lived and worked, these four priests joined the Diocese of Detroit.<sup>69</sup> All four were, according to McMahon, “outstanding professors and their loss must have been a grievous blow to Dillon who had just arrived at the College.”<sup>70</sup> That these four priests who were doing well in Sandwich chose to join the Detroit diocese indicates that their gaze was fixed across the river and that they may have felt more affinity with the clergy and church in Detroit than in Windsor or London.

The Catholic clergy of the Diocese of Detroit and Assumption College had many connections in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the records left behind by Assumption indicate that for the college staff and their clerical confreres in Detroit the international border betwixt them was not an obstacle to cross-border cooperation. The interconnectedness of clergy across the border was so pervasive that the Bishop of Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, in a 1917 letter asking Assumption president Fr. Forster to send him priests, expressed his concern that potential Canadian clergy would join an American diocese via Assumption, thus absconding their duty to their own diocese and homeland. Fr. Forster assured him that this was not at all the case, and in fact that about 70% of Assumption’s boarding students came from Michigan, where the future priests among them were “really very badly needed in their own dioceses.”<sup>71</sup> This letter exchange is indicative of the fact that it is not uncommon for those far away from the border to have perceptions and fears that are quite separated from the reality of the situation, known by those actually living there, in this case, Fr. Forster.

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<sup>69</sup> McMahon, *Pure Zeal*, 53.

<sup>70</sup> McMahon, *Pure Zeal*, 53.

<sup>71</sup> Cited in Power, *Modern School*, 209-11.

Arguably the most significant example of Assumption's importance for the US Midwest is the teaching career of Fr. Michael Joseph Ferguson. An incredibly talented preacher, it seemed that Fr. Ferguson was likely to rise high in the ecclesiastical offices of the church, and soon after his ordination in 1861 he became a highly sought after preacher. His connections with Canadian Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald, with whom he was a correspondent, got him effectively exiled by the anti-conservative and pro-Irish-nationalist archbishop of Toronto, John Joseph Lynch, when Fr. Ferguson attempted to allay the sympathy some Toronto clergy had for the Fenian cause.<sup>72</sup> Archbishop Lynch was no friend to the Basilians at St. Michael's College in Toronto, and he showed this by banishing their "brightest star", who was also the first Canadian to become a Basilian.<sup>73</sup> As it turned out Fr. Ferguson spent most of his remaining years, about four decades, at Assumption until his death in 1913. Power relates that in contrast "to his public life in Toronto, his days at Sandwich resembled the life of a recluse. Shunning the limelight, he chose instead to spend time with his students."<sup>74</sup> He became Assumption's "greatest teacher" and "a legend for generations of students. Through his classroom passed hundreds of young men destined for the Catholic priesthood."<sup>75</sup> Probably more than half of these students and future priests were American, and it is in this way that Fr. Ferguson had such a calculable and long-lasting impact on the Detroit diocese and those in the surrounding region. A bishop in Kentucky who had been a student of Fr. Ferguson declared that

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<sup>72</sup> Cf. Power, *O'Connor*, xii-xiv, 120-122.

<sup>73</sup> Power, *O'Connor*, xiii.

P. Wallace Platt and Robert J. Scollard, *Dictionary of Basilian Biography: Lives of Members of the Congregation of Priests of St. Basil from its Origins in 1822 to 2002 2nd ed.*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 208-209.

<sup>74</sup> Power, *O'Connor*, xiii.

<sup>75</sup> Power, *O'Connor*, xii.

“As a professor, he ranked all others that I ever knew.”<sup>76</sup> Reporting Fr. Ferguson’s far reaching influence, the *Evening Record* stated:

The majority of the priests in the diocese of London spent the last half of their classical course in his lecture room and also quite half of the English speaking priests in the diocese of Detroit and a large number in the diocese of Grand Rapids, Cleveland, and Toledo. Old pupils of Fr. Ferguson are to be found in the priesthood of every diocese in Ontario and a majority of the dioceses in [the] United States. A large number of business and professional men in both Canada and United States are old pupils of the deceased.<sup>77</sup>

Fr. Ferguson spent more time as a teacher at Assumption than anyone else, and yet his influence and connections with clergy across the Canada-United States border is only a fraction of that of Assumption College. That such a high proportion of clergy from the US Midwest were educated by Fr. Ferguson indicates the extent to which it was important for them to be able to send their prospective students to Assumption at a time when there were few other schools in the region where future priests could begin their ecclesiastical education.

Many of Assumption’s first alumni went on to have successful clerical careers in the US Midwest and they used their influence to encourage families to send their sons to Assumption. What could reasonably be called an unofficial network of supportive clergy complemented the work of priests like Fr. Ferguson; indeed, one was dependent on the other. *The Dionysian*, the yearbook of 1915, signalled out a few prominent examples of this network, thanking them for their continued support of

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<sup>76</sup> Assumption College, *Golden Jubilee*, 135.

<sup>77</sup> Cited in Power, *Modern School*, 99.

their alma mater.<sup>78</sup> The yearbook includes a series of four tributes to these alumni who, having returned to various parts of the Midwest, went on to have pre-eminently successful ecclesiastical careers and have thereby represented Assumption well.<sup>79</sup> Connections such as these help explain why so many students from beyond the immediate border region decided to go to Assumption.

The swiftness of cross-border communication with Detroit is another aspect of Assumption's existence that indicates its cross-border nature. In the days before the widespread use of telephones and before the Ambassador Bridge and Windsor-Detroit tunnel, faculty correspondence indicates that letters from Detroit were received within a day of having been sent.<sup>80</sup> In another case illustrating how quickly both communication and travel across the border could happen, a priest at St. Anne's Church in Detroit asked to borrow a subdeacon from Assumption to assist him with a ceremony taking place later that day. Fr. Mungovan records that "Fr. Grand, St. Anne's Detroit, sent over this afternoon for a Subdeacon for some ceremony he has at 3:30. Mr. Kelley went."<sup>81</sup> In this case it seems that Fr. Grand waited until the last minute to make his request, perhaps having not known of the need, and yet he was able to "sen[d] over" and get back within no more than a few hours. Thus the documents produced by the college faculty indicate that crossing the river to Detroit was a lot like going to East Windsor except one took a ferry in addition to a streetcar. Though they were conscious of it, crossing the international border was not a big deal and certainly not a serious obstacle.

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<sup>78</sup> Assumption College, "Dionysian: Year Book of Assumption College" (1915). *SWODA: University of Windsor Publications*. 4.

<https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/swodawindsorpub/4>

<sup>79</sup> Assumption College, *Dionysian*, 85-88.

<sup>80</sup> Cf. Power, *Modern School*, 218.

<sup>81</sup> Cited in Power, *O'Connor*, 107.



The diary of Fr. Michael Joseph Mungovan is one primary source which stands out for both its uniqueness and the clarity with which it makes evident the connectedness of Assumption College with the Church in Detroit. With the exception of a few years in Owen Sound and Toronto, Fr. Mungovan spent most of his religious and priestly life at Assumption College, first as a student and later as an important member of the teaching and administrative staff. With a mind to “chronicle the daily work of the house where he was living and the lives of the people connected with it” he kept a simple and unofficial record of his life and activities at the college.<sup>82</sup> The first entry is from 1883 and the final was penned in 1895, just a few years before he left Assumption for St. Michael’s in Toronto, where he would die in 1901. The second volume of Michael Power’s documentary series contains passages from 1890 until the final entry, effectively cataloging about five years of his life at Assumption College.<sup>83</sup>

Fr. Mungovan’s diary during the aforementioned years is remarkable in that it demonstrates how connected the clergy at Assumption were with their counterparts in Detroit. Frequent travel to Detroit is one of the many activities that he mentions on a regular basis in the 118 entries of this period. In seventeen different entries Fr. Mungovan writes that he went to Detroit that day, for sundry reasons such as visiting friends, assisting at church services, and running errands for the college.<sup>84</sup> Most of his seventeen recorded visits occurred on Tuesdays or Thursdays, indicating that his usual reason for crossing was something other than doing Sunday work at a Detroit church, a common reason for crossing the river among his Basilian priestly confreres. If this

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<sup>82</sup> Robert J. Scollard, “The Diaries and Other Papers of Michael Joseph Mungovan C.S.B.: a Bibliography Compiled by Robert J. Scollard C.S.B.”. *Basilian Historical Bulletin*. Toronto: *The Basilian Press*, (1971): 5.

<sup>83</sup> Power, *O’Connor*, 100-114.

<sup>84</sup> Power, *O’Connor*, 101-109.

rate of crossing was consistent on the days he did not record a journal entry he would have gone to Detroit approximately once a week between September, 1890 and October, 1895. Such a rate is certainly not unimaginable as there were three occasions on which he went to Detroit twice in the span of three days and another six-day period during which he recorded having gone to Detroit thrice.<sup>85</sup>

Fr. Mungovan did not think his visits were anything extraordinary and this is manifested by the plain and un-descriptive method in which he records them. Typical of his entries is a mere “Went to Windsor and Detroit this afternoon,” or “Went to Detroit this afternoon to buy some text books.”<sup>86</sup> At other times he does not even explicitly say that he went to Detroit and the fact that he did cross the border can only be deduced by whom he went to see on such occasions, usually a sick friend named Martin who could not have travelled to Sandwich, or anywhere else for that matter, to see Fr. Mungovan due to his poor health and physical condition.<sup>87</sup> Having deduced these facts from his diary it seems reasonable to conclude that Fr. Mungovan considered traversing the border between Windsor and Detroit to be quite an ordinary thing, only slightly more of an event than taking a streetcar down London Street, now University Avenue, to Windsor.

Michael Power neglects to mention how significant Fr. Mungovan’s diary is within the context of looking at Assumption as a border-straddling institution. In the introduction, Power aptly states that Fr. Mungovan’s diary “serves as a window onto the inner workings of the College and one man’s response to his station in life...”<sup>88</sup> He draws attention to two issues that occupy large portions of the diary, namely Fr.

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<sup>85</sup> Power, *O’Connor*, 102, 104, 105, 107-108.

<sup>86</sup> Cited in Power, *O’Connor*, 108, 109.

<sup>87</sup> Power, *O’Connor*, 102.

<sup>88</sup> Power, *O’Connor*, xii.

Mungovan's "obsession" with both recording the number of enrolled students and with the fate of John A. Macdonald and Canada's Conservative Party.<sup>89</sup> What Power fails to make known to readers is the equally important place of Detroit in this diary. Though the mentions of Detroit are less animated than Fr. Mungovan's musings on Canadian politics, and less numerous than the recordings of student numbers, one thing that is for sure is that the mentions of Detroit are more indicative of the nature of the man's existence at Assumption College, more indicative of his "daily work of the house...and the lives of the people connected with it."<sup>90</sup> Administrators at every school are concerned about enrollment numbers, and informed citizens everywhere are often concerned about politics, yet it is unique to someone in a situation like that of Fr. Mungovan in Sandwich to have been able to cross the border so often. This fact, unmentioned in Power's introduction, deserves to be emphasized because "as a window" it illustrates the "inner workings" that were unique to a school in Assumption's geographic situation, more so than the characteristics listed by Power which were not unique to Assumption.<sup>91</sup>

Eventually there were signs of increasing rigidity at the border, however. In 1927 an advertisement in *Purple and White* alerted readers of a tariff on goods entering the United States.<sup>92</sup> In 1940, with Canada engaged in World War Two, members of the planning committee for the 70th anniversary of the Basilians having come to Sandwich revealed in their minutes concern that many American students and alumni would feel deterred by a perceived increase in border security due to the war.<sup>93</sup> However, even as border bureaucracy thickened, Assumption's unique position was

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<sup>89</sup> Power, *O'Connor*, xii.

<sup>90</sup> Scollard, *Mungovan*, 5.

<sup>91</sup> Power, *O'Connor*, xii.

<sup>92</sup> *Purple and White*, 1927-28, vol. 4, no. 1., 11.

<sup>93</sup> Power, *Independence*, 7-8.

still recognized and it was used as a springboard from which to travel to the United States. For example, nuns from Chatham and Panama were visiting the college for a few days in 1933 with the intention of touring the Detroit Institute of Arts for three hours; they had gone to Assumption beforehand because it was so close to Detroit.<sup>94</sup>

Another notable aspect of Assumption's cross-border culture is the indifference many residents of Essex County had towards the college prior to World War Two, thus making its cross-border relationships even more vital to the school's survival. This can be seen in that relatively few locals enrolled as boarders or even as day students before the 1930s. For example, in October 1891, of 160 boarders only 23 of the 38 Ontarians were from Essex Country.<sup>95</sup> In 1917 there were only 30 local day students, alongside about 200 boarders. Indicating that they were relatively uninterested in Assumption, Fr. Forster relates that "they are living in the midst of business opportunities and it is hard to get any of them to complete even their high-school education."<sup>96</sup> Assumption was not seen as an institution of the local community and Catholics in the area, including parishioners of Assumption Parish, staffed by the same Basilians who ran the college, seem to have displayed a remarkable indifference to what was, for many years, the only Catholic post-secondary school in the region. Power describes local Catholics as "lukewarm in their support of Assumption. They did not bother to send many of their sons to the college...The French basically ignored the place, preferring to have their sons educated in Quebec."<sup>97</sup> Assumption's classes were not taught in French and given bishop Fallon's overt opposition to French education it is not difficult to see why so

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<sup>94</sup> Assumption University Archives, Group I, Box 6, File #23.

<sup>95</sup> Power, *O'Connor*, 109.

<sup>96</sup> Cited in Power, *Modern School*, 210.

<sup>97</sup> Power, *Modern School*, 8.

few had anything to do with Assumption.<sup>98</sup> Furthermore, while Fallon's attempts to transplant Assumption to London indicate that he did not appreciate the importance of the cross-border connections, he did realize that Assumption was not dependent on Windsor. One demographic which did not conform to this trend, at least by the early 1920s, was retailers. Shops of various kinds selling everything from cigars to clerical attire paid to have their advertisements printed in *Purple and White* en masse, and thus attempted to attract the business of the hundreds of students at the college. The many advertisements of *Purple and White* included several from Detroit, indicating that some Detroit business owners found it valuable to support Assumption College's newspaper and potentially attract the business of its readers.<sup>99</sup>

The composition of Assumption's student population is the most important aspect of its cross-border existence. Since Fr. O'Connor and the Basilians arrived in 1870 until the 1920s there were significantly more American than Canadian boarding students. In 1870, of the 30 boarding students most were from Detroit, and there were only four day students who were likely local.<sup>100</sup> By 1890 the school had grown to almost 200 students with the majority still coming from the United States, mostly from Michigan and Ohio, as well as a few from Mexico.<sup>101</sup> Fr. O'Connor left Assumption and was consecrated bishop of London in 1890 and during the following years there was still a consistent majority of Americans among the boarders.<sup>102</sup> An entry from 1891 in Fr. Mungovan's diary records a "list of boarders" in October of that year as consisting of the following: 96 from Michigan, 38 from Ontario, 16 from

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<sup>98</sup> Cf. Jack D. Cecillon, "Bishop Fallon and the French Language Controversy." In *Prayers, Petitions, and Protests: The Catholic Church and the Ontario Schools Crisis in the Windsor Border Region, 1910-1928*, (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013), 42-77.

<sup>99</sup> E.g. *Purple and White*, 1925-26, vol. 2, no. 2., 3, 7.

<sup>100</sup> McMahan, *Pure Zeal*, 9.

<sup>101</sup> McMahan, *Pure Zeal*, 10.

<sup>102</sup> McMahan, *Pure Zeal*, 14.

Ohio, eight from other states, one from Belgium, and one from Germany.<sup>103</sup> Thus the Canadian students were outnumbered about four to one, but this is not due so much to an international appeal, but rather to a regional and cross-border appeal. A 1916 letter from Assumption's famed entertainer and zealous alumni-organizer Frank McIntyre reveals that of the fourteen alumni from the class of 1896 whose addresses he knew only three lived in Canada and none of them in Essex County; most of them were from Michigan.<sup>104</sup> This trend, although it gradually became less unbalanced, continued into the twentieth century. From 1901 until 1910 Americans outnumbered Canadians three to two.<sup>105</sup> The 1900-1901 *Catalogue* includes a list of students with their home province or state and the totals are: 65 from Ontario (40.63%), 64 from Michigan (40%), 20 from Ohio (12.5%), 10 from other US states (6.25%), and one from Germany (<1%).<sup>106</sup> Nearly a decade later the *Catalogue* lists 86 from Michigan (43.88%), 86 from Ontario (43.88%), 16 from Ohio (8.16%), 7 from other US states (3.57%), and one Canadian not from Ontario (0.51%).<sup>107</sup> Over this decade the proportion of Ontarians slightly increased. However, in the 1910s the trend reversed, as the different editions of the *Catalogue* show, and the American proportion of the student population increased dramatically until the 1920s.<sup>108</sup> By the end of the 1920s, however, there were far more Ontarians than Michiganders; the numbers of students from other US states was also down, despite overall student numbers rising.<sup>109</sup>

It is worth speculating that if the pattern established in the first decade of the twentieth century continued, that being a growth in the proportion of Canadian

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<sup>103</sup> Cited in Power, *O'Connor*, 109.

<sup>104</sup> Power, *Modern School*, 175-76.

<sup>105</sup> Power, *Modern School*, viii.

<sup>106</sup> Assumption College, *Catalogue 1900-01*, (Sandwich: 1900), 67-71.

<sup>107</sup> Assumption College, *Catalogue 1908-09*, (Sandwich: 1908), 67-71.

<sup>108</sup> Cf. Assumption College, *Catalogue 1919-20*, (Sandwich: 1919), 83-89.

<sup>109</sup> Assumption College, *Catalogue 1928-29*, (Sandwich: 1928), 77-88.

students, Ontarians may have equalled and soon passed Americans and Assumption's Canadian identity and rootedness would have correspondingly grown much earlier than it in fact did. However, there were three factors that prevented this from happening, and in fact made the imbalance even more pronounced: (1) In 1910 St. Michael's College filiated with the University of Toronto, making its education more valuable than Assumption's; (2) In 1912, Bishop Fallon opened St. Peter's seminary in London, which attracted students of the diocese of London which otherwise may have gone to Assumption; (3) In 1914 Canada entered World War One and as the war drew on there were fewer and fewer undrafted men able to afford the luxury of college.

The changed circumstances of the 1910s meant that the proportion of American students would become even greater by the early 1920s. In a previously-referenced letter Fr. Forster indicates that the proportion of Americans at Assumption had increased markedly since the ante-bellum average of three to two, and that in April 1917, 70% of boarders were American.<sup>110</sup> Several noteworthy factors contributed to this prolonged imbalance. Canada's participation in The Great War, the availability of other educational options for ecclesiastically-minded students in Ontario, and an enduring reliance of US dioceses on Assumption's ability to educate their future clergy all affected Assumption's demographics. In 1922, two years after Assumption's federation with Western, 44 students were registered in the university program and, as Fr. Forster relates in his year-end report to the Basilian superior, "[n]ew students in the college department are nearly all Americans. As yet, few students come...from Ontario."<sup>111</sup> In the 1924-1925 academic year of the 211 boarders

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<sup>110</sup> Power, *Modern School*, 209-11.

<sup>111</sup> Cited in Michael Power, *Assumption College: The Struggle to Survive 1920-1940: Volume V of a Documentary History of Assumption College*, (Windsor: Assumption University, 2000), 30.

161 were from the United States.<sup>112</sup> Fraser gives similar numbers for the academic year 1925-1926 when about 80% of boarding students were from the United States.<sup>113</sup>

The scores of American boarding students did not bring with them only their nationality, but also their money, and like any other similar institution, Assumption required revenue to remain operational. Since 1870 and for several decades thereafter, Assumption's primary source of revenue was the tuition paid by its boarding students. Considering that most boarders during Assumption's first half century came from the United States, at times as high as 70%, it seems clear that without such a large number of Americans Assumption would have been forced to close, as just the Canadian students alone, or even with a dozen or so Americans, the school would have been dangerously below the 200 mark the staff considered viable. Since Assumption grew rapidly after 1870, thanks to a preponderance of Americans, with hindsight it seems unlikely that Assumption could have been practically forced to close, especially after surviving over a decade of instability already. But Fr. O'Connor's success was never guaranteed. A similarly constituted Basilian college in Louisville, Ohio, begun in 1867, had to fold in 1873 due to a lack of students and the resultant lack of funds, not to mention purpose.<sup>114</sup> Yet the faculty knew that Assumption's prosperity, and even its survival, was contingent on convincing Americans to come to Sandwich. Fr. O'Connor recognized this reality in 1868, and, with the help of a network of supporting clergy and alumni, managed to attract hundreds of students from the American Midwest.<sup>115</sup> He also recognized that a similar school in Detroit would attract many potential students away from Assumption, and thus make the school's

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<sup>112</sup> Fraser, *School*, 51.

<sup>113</sup> Fraser, *School*, 51.

<sup>114</sup> Page, *Basilian Order in Canada*, 26.

<sup>115</sup> Cf. McMahon, *Pure Zeal*, 9.; Power, *O'Connor*, 7.



position untenable.<sup>116</sup> When bishop Fallon tried to uproot Sandwich during the term of Fr. Muckle, he and Fr. Moylan wrote that such a move would be financial suicide as most of the American students would be deterred if they had to go as far as London, and with this thought in mind they resisted the bishop's cajoling.<sup>117</sup> When Fr. Dillon wrote to the Basilian superior in 1924 complaining of falling enrollment from Ontario, the superior advised him that "a couple or more advertisements in the Detroit News and Free Press might bring results...Detroit is a mighty big city now and there must be a heap of people looking for a boarding school easily accessible and reasonable in rates."<sup>118</sup> Opining on the same issue four years later, Fr. Dillon advised his superior that he was "convinced we ought to have a high school (day school) in Detroit...we would be in a position to influence boys to come to Assumption...If it proved to be a feeder for Assumption it would be a life saver."<sup>119</sup> That year Fr. Dillon's term as president ended and in September he was the first president of a new Basilian high school in Detroit.<sup>120</sup> There are two things to take away from the pattern that is evident here. When times were tough at Assumption, and they were more often than not, it was not to Windsor-Essex or London that the college staff turned; it was to Detroit.

The cooperation of students' parents in paying tuition timely was another essential factor for Assumption's stability. Since it was usually parents who paid their sons' tuition, their cooperation in timely payment was essential. The Assumption University Archives contain dozens of letters between staff and parents imploring

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<sup>116</sup> Power, *O'Connor*, 8.

<sup>117</sup> Fraser, *School*, 46.

<sup>118</sup> Cited in McMahan, *Pure Zeal*, 41.

<sup>119</sup> Cited in McMahan, *Pure Zeal*, 59-60.

<sup>120</sup> McMahan, *Pure Zeal*, 60.

them to pay overdue tuition.<sup>121</sup> Many letters sought to convey the importance of tuition payments by saying such things as “[o]ur only revenue is from the tuition of our students and to carry on we must collect that tuition.”<sup>122</sup> This is from a letter of Fr. Thomas MacDonald, president from 1932-1940, to a father in Detroit who even by the end of the school year had not yet paid his son’s tuition.

Another way in which parents contributed financially to Assumption was through Dad’s and Mother’s clubs, set up on both sides of the river, which coordinated fundraisers, one of which brought the world famous boxer Joe Louis to Assumption’s St. Dennis gymnasium.<sup>123</sup> The genesis of these clubs, however, dates no further back than 1946.

Donations from alumni were another important source of income for Assumption, and in this instance also it is evident that Americans were at the forefront in helping their alma mater. The original alumni association was founded in 1903 and was active only until 1910. It had four officers, three Americans and one Canadian. The association in its first year raised about \$10 000 for the new chapel.<sup>124</sup> In 1915 the class of 1894 offered to pay \$750 for a new rose window in memory of the recently deceased Fr. Ferguson. The exquisite window is still present in what used to be a beautiful chapel on the second floor of what is now known as Assumption Hall, and in 1915 was the newest wing of Assumption’s main three-story complex begun by Fr. O’Connor in 1876. The effort to raise money for Fr. Ferguson’s window was coordinated almost entirely by “Old Boys,” as they styled themselves, from the United States, mostly Michiganders. One of the donors, P. J. O’Connel from

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<sup>121</sup> Cf. Power, *Modern School*, 27-28.; Power, *Struggle*, 186, 200, 207-212.; McMahon, *Pure Zeal*, 96-99.

<sup>122</sup> Cited in Power, *Struggle*, 211.

<sup>123</sup> McMahon, *Pure Zeal*, 195-96.

<sup>124</sup> Power, *O’Connor*, 98.

Cleveland, Ohio, writing to an organizer in Michigan, affectionately wrote of his alma mater that “the memory of Sandwich is ever dear to me.”<sup>125</sup> In the summer of 1927 the recently revived alumni association gathered \$60 000 worth of pledges.<sup>126</sup> Even as late as the 1940s donations from alumni in the United States were essential in building the campus’s first new edifices since the completion of Dillon Hall in 1928.<sup>127</sup> Despite McIntyre’s ceaseless efforts in 1941 he reported to the president of the alumni association that he was conducting a “somewhat torpid drive for new members in the Windsor branch of the Assumption College alumni...,” in contrast to their American counterparts which carried out extensive fundraising and helped with recruiting.<sup>128</sup> Hoping he would perform in a 75th anniversary alumni event in Detroit, the governor of Michigan in 1945 wrote to Bing Crosby, famous American producer, entertainer, and singer, that numerous “outstanding citizens of Michigan are members of the Alumni Association of Assumption College.”<sup>129</sup> At Assumption’s 75th anniversary party, “the grandest event of its kind in the entire history of the college...”, plaques were given to four priest-alumni who “personified the ‘Old Assumption’.”<sup>130</sup> The four were, respectively, from Detroit, Kentucky, Tennessee, and London. Thus even as late as 1945, when it was clear that Assumption needed to become more oriented around Windsor and Windsorites, it was still possible to have noteworthy and public manifestations of how the college’s past was not heavily rooted in its own city.

One long standing custom at Assumption was the practice of the college priests going to Detroit on Sundays to help with parish work, especially offering mass. Not only did this reward the college with the customary monetary stipend, since

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<sup>125</sup> Power, *Modern School*, 151.

<sup>126</sup> Power, *Struggle*, 96.

<sup>127</sup> McMahan, *Pure Zeal*, 189-91.

<sup>128</sup> Cited in McMahan, *Pure Zeal*, 199.

<sup>129</sup> Cited in Power, *Independence*, 95.

<sup>130</sup> Power, *Independence*, 5.

the priest could not keep it himself as he took a vow of poverty, but it also created goodwill amongst the clergy of Detroit which led to donations and assistance with recruiting. Though not as vital as students' tuition, the hundreds of stipends per annum provided Assumption a much needed supplement to its income, especially at times of low enrollment. It is difficult to determine when the Basilians of Sandwich started regularly crossing the river to assist Detroit's parish priests with their Sunday duties, though Fr. Forster claimed it originated in the early 1870s.<sup>131</sup> It had certainly been an established custom for some time when in 1912 a controversy arose regarding it. A circular letter from the Basilian Superior General alleged that "outside work accepted by the Superior of Assumption College has been and is still too heavy a burden imposed upon the priests of this house."<sup>132</sup> He was referring to the fact that most of Assumption's priests went to Detroit on most Sundays to say mass. Fr. Forster was effectively being accused of disobedience to the Basilian constitutions and unfair to his charges. In defense he claimed that he merely continued a custom that had long been established, and that the practice gained many friends for the college. The controversy evidently ended in Fr. Forster's favour, for McMahon refers to it as "the required Sunday work in Detroit" in the context of the 1920s.<sup>133</sup> Collecting the \$10 stipends was sufficiently important enough that in 1933, in the midst of the Great Depression, Fr. MacDonald eagerly reminded a pastor in Detroit that he owed the college four stipends from the previous year.<sup>134</sup> It was such a regular part of the Basilians' routine that the archive contains a list of priests scheduled to offer mass at All Saints parish in Detroit.<sup>135</sup> The same kind of Sunday assistance was

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<sup>131</sup> Power, *Modern School*, 78.

<sup>132</sup> Cited in Power, *Modern School*, 75-78.

<sup>133</sup> McMahon, *Pure Zeal*, 128.

<sup>134</sup> Assumption University Archives, Group I, Box 6, File #23.

<sup>135</sup> Assumption University Archives, Group I, Box 6, File #23.

given to churches in Windsor as well, but on a much smaller scale. This continued at least until the 1940s.<sup>136</sup>

The numerous American clergy who supported Assumption since its founding is another indication of the great extent of the college's influence across the border, and of their influence in Sandwich. For many years into the twentieth century it seems that American clergy were more supportive than their counterparts in Ontario. Even before the Basilians arrived in Sandwich, the bishop of Detroit promised Fr. O'Connor that he would not establish a similar type of school to compete with Assumption and that he would support the school in Sandwich.<sup>137</sup> Another instance of this is the list of prizes available to students based on academic achievement advertised in the 1908-1909 *Catalogue*. Each prize lists its sponsor, and there are significantly more American sponsors than Canadian.<sup>138</sup> This is typical of the other editions of the *Catalogue* from the early twentieth century. Furthermore, American bishops from the Midwest were more vocal in their support than Assumption's own bishop Fallon during his long tenure from 1909-1931. For the golden jubilee celebrations in 1920, in the midst of Fallon's struggles to uproot the college from its home in Sandwich, the bishops of Grand Rapids and Detroit, Michigan, and Leavenworth, Kansas, publicized their congratulations and support to Assumption in the commemorative *Golden Jubilee*.<sup>139</sup> The latter two, in addition to the bishop of Toledo, Ohio were at the jubilee mass. From the Canadian episcopacy only the bishops of Toronto and London were present, and Fallon's letter in *Golden Jubilee* was not entirely congratulatory; he said it was his hope that the new filiation with

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<sup>136</sup> Cf. McMahon, *Pure Zeal*, 96, 128, 193-94.

<sup>137</sup> Power, *O'Connor*, 8, 20.

<sup>138</sup> Assumption College, *Catalogue 1908-09*, (Sandwich: 1908), 22-23.

<sup>139</sup> Assumption College, *Golden Jubilee Assumption College, 1870-1920*, (Windsor: Assumption College, 1920), 33-37.

Western would entice Assumption to move its arts program to London, a goal very much at odds with the intentions of the Basilians.<sup>140</sup> However, the absence of other Canadian bishops should not be interpreted as a slight to the college; they simply had no meaningful connections with Assumption, nor Assumption with them.

Scores of documents bear testimony to the fact that Assumption functioned as a cross-border institution. In addition to those aforementioned, there are others which ought to be singled out for their significance. Fr. Dillon, in a letter to a Detroit father, manifests cross-border thinking by reassuring him that his son would be prepared to meet the standards of the Ontario Department of Education and be eligible to enter any university in Ontario without even considering that he might go to a school in his homeland after graduating from Assumption.<sup>141</sup> Typical letters from Fr. Kennedy to a boarder's parents indicate that parents and their sons received the same treatment whether they were local, Canadian, or American.<sup>142</sup> One 1937 letter from Fr. MacDonald reveals that there were limits to Assumption's internationalism. He wrote that he had recently been told of the "wonders of Florida" by a student from Miami, and the letter reveals that he perceived the tropical state as a strange, exotic, and distant place he knew little about.<sup>143</sup> The documents left by Assumption College are full of examples such as those discussed here, perhaps unremarkable as individuals, but considered as a corpus they reveal an important truth about Assumption's history as a cross-border institution.

The cross-border character of Assumption College persisted into the 1930s, but only to a limited extent has it existed since. Assumption was a cross-border school

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<sup>140</sup> Assumption College, *Golden Jubilee Assumption College, 1870-1920*, (Windsor: Assumption College, 1920), 69, 146.

<sup>141</sup> Power, *Struggle*, 199.

<sup>142</sup> Power, *Struggle*, 207-208.

<sup>143</sup> Cited in Power, *Struggle*, 214.

in many respects, in more ways than it was a Sandwich, Windsor, or Canadian school. The composition of its student body generally and sometimes overwhelmingly had an American majority. Its financial sustenance came from American sources, whether in the form of tuition, mass stipends, or alumni donations. Its connections with American clergy were far more numerous than with Canadian clergy, and the Basilians crossed the border so frequently that one gets the impression they thought of Detroit as just another neighbourhood in what many of them and their contemporaries called the larger “Border Cities” community.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> E.g. Assumption University Archives, Group I, Box 5, File # 45.

## CHAPTER FIVE LEAVING MICHIGAN, JOINING WINDSOR

There came a time when Assumption's days of existing without being more than a token part of Essex County came to an end and it assumed the character of an institution firmly rooted in and identifiable with Windsor-Essex. The transformation of Assumption's identity began subtly in the late 1920s and 1930s as the proportion of Canadian students grew, especially those hailing from Essex County. The transformation continued in earnest during the Second World War, when thousands of Assumption alumni were fighting in the armed forces of Canada and the United States. Assumption suffered the loss of 119 "Old Boys" who paid the ultimate sacrifice; 78 in Canada's military, 37 in that of the United States, three in the Royal Air Force, and one in the Belgian army.<sup>145</sup> That there were almost twice as many Canadian than American Assumptionites killed in action is a manifestation of how Assumption's demographics changed before the war; by the late 1920s Assumption College was attracting scores more day students from Essex County than boarding students from across the border.<sup>146</sup>

As World War Two neared its end the college administration realized they would need to greatly expand their educational facilities in order to accommodate the influx of veterans expected after the war, whom would be encouraged to go to school via financial aid from the government. The last significant addition to Assumption's campus infrastructure came in 1928 with the completion of Dillon Hall. At that time there were, counting day students and boarders, about 500 pupils. By 1944 the student body had increased to over 800, and after the war hundreds of veterans were expected to enroll in the college programs, likely bringing the total to well over 1000; the old

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<sup>145</sup> McMahan, *Pure Zeal*, 156.

<sup>146</sup> Cf. McMahan, *Pure Zeal*, 78, 98.



Sandwich school was clearly not equipped to handle the anticipated post-war enrollment boom.

The Basilian Fathers who had been running Assumption for several generations as an ecclesiastically-oriented liberal-arts school would have to find innovative ways to meet the coming challenges. As a denominational school centered on its Catholic identity they had managed their own internal affairs and had never been in the habit of seeking government aid or funds from the general public, but they were now faced with an obvious dilemma; how they would build, acquire, and hire the requisite infrastructure, equipment, and teaching staff if they were restricted to their own resources. The challenge was magnified by the fact that Assumption had never enjoyed a period of financial prosperity, and funds were even scarcer during the Great Depression and World War II. The staff of Assumption concluded that they could not do it on their own; they would appeal to the public for assistance.<sup>147</sup>

The Victory Fund Campaign was launched in April 1945, and it would bring about a transformation in Assumption's identity. The Basilians elected to have lay-Windsorites run the campaign, to present an image which most residents could identify with. The campaign was aimed first and foremost at Windsorites, and given that previous generations of Windsorites had been relatively indifferent to Assumption, it was necessary, according to a librarian at Western, "to bring before Windsor people the importance of the college in their community".<sup>148</sup> McMahon relates that "[t]he media coverage...certainly made everyone in Windsor aware of Assumption's first fundraising campaign."<sup>149</sup> The campaign was headed and sponsored by many prominent individuals, a group that "certainly represented the

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<sup>147</sup> Power, *Independence*, 87-88.; McMahon, *Pure Zeal*, 232.

<sup>148</sup> Cited in McMahon, *Pure Zeal*, 231.

<sup>149</sup> McMahon, *Pure Zeal*, 231.

Windsor corporate/business/political elite and also represented the Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish faiths.”<sup>150</sup> Although there were efforts to raise funds in Detroit, with one letter celebrating Assumption’s “75 year of service to the youth of America,” and appealing to the “patriotism” of its American readers, the vast majority of the campaign was intended for Windsor and Essex County.<sup>151</sup> Fr. Guinan, Assumption’s president and tireless campaign director, “worked steadily in the background... preaching the gospel of Assumption’s 75 years of service to the people of Windsor and Essex County in all walks of life and every religious faith.”<sup>152</sup> The campaign also petitioned the City of Windsor for funds to the sum of \$50 000 via a “formal brief which...indicated that the grant was public aid to enable the College to meet the educational needs of Greater Windsor and the County of Essex.”<sup>153</sup> Additionally, scores of Windsorites volunteered to canvass residential neighbourhoods across Essex County and donations from local businesses were solicited.<sup>154</sup>

Assumption College’s Victory Fund Campaign marked a definitive transformation in the history and identity of Assumption College. The Assumption marketed by the campaign was very different from that captured in “Memories of Assumption in 1888” by Fr. Charles Collins, Assumption’s first historian.<sup>155</sup> Rather than a Catholic school resembling a monastery and attended by Catholics from the American Midwest to London, the campaign redefined Assumption as a school meant specifically for the educational demands of the entire population of Windsor-Essex. Assumption’s Catholic character, history, and original purpose were deemphasized under the auspices of its Basilian clerical superiors, in favour of a more

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<sup>150</sup> McMahan, *Pure Zeal*, 234.

<sup>151</sup> Cited in Power, *Independence*, 104.; Cf. McMahan, *Pure Zeal*, 237-38.

<sup>152</sup> McMahan, *Pure Zeal*, 236.

<sup>153</sup> McMahan, *Pure Zeal*, 239.

<sup>154</sup> Power, *Independence*, 88-90.

<sup>155</sup> Power, *O’Connor*, 75-98.

comprehensive educational, though not entirely Catholic, vision for Windsor-Essex. As Assumption was reinvented and redefined it lost the characteristics that, for over half a century, had made it an institution whose influence had truly straddled the international border of the Detroit River, and in fact had an impact deep into the US Midwest. Gone were the days when the majority of students came to Assumption's semi-monastic existence from across the US Midwest, many seeking an ecclesiastical career. Gone were the days when the people of Essex County were indifferent to the college on their doorstep, and when Assumption's presidents, from Fr. O'Connor to Fr. Dillon, looked first to Detroit as the most dependable place to recruit students. By 1948, with the Victory Fund's culmination in the opening of Memorial Hall, a monument to a bygone era for Assumption, the old Sandwich college could no longer be characterized by its cross-border qualities. To be sure, some of the elements that made Assumption a cross-border school still existed, but in a much reduced capacity and one that was greatly overshadowed by a new identity that firmly entrenched Assumption on the Windsor side of the Detroit River.

## CHAPTER SIX CONCLUSION

When Fr. O'Connor first arrived in Sandwich in the late 1860s and was considering whether or not to recommend to his superiors that the Basilians assume control of the small college there, he believed that, if the venture were to be successful, it would be necessary to attract large numbers of students from the US Midwest. He was not wrong; Assumption would survive as a cross-border school for more than five decades. His efforts and those of his successors ensured that Assumption's student population and revenue came primarily from Michigan and the US Midwest, while the neighbouring population was rather indifferent to the school. Over half a century had passed before an alternate working model came into practice, one that included more day students from Windsor than boarders from across the river.

The history of Assumption College is one example among many Windsor and Detroit institutions that made an impact on both sides of the Detroit River; its cross-border connectedness was far from atypical in the region. Assumption partook of the same border culture that local farmers had been part of for centuries, that the auto-industry contributed to in the twentieth century, and that thousands of local border-crossing employees, tourists, and bootleggers were part of on a daily basis. Assumption's history is but one example of the Detroit River serving as a focal point over which the cultures and economies of Detroit-Windsor were interwoven, not just as an international demarcation. Furthermore, Assumption's participation in the broader border culture should not be seen as mere coincidence; rather, the larger culture was necessary for Assumption's existence. The border culture predated Assumption and formed a context without which the school likely would not have survived.

Assumption in its turn impacted Detroit and the Midwest by educating many of its prominent ecclesiastics and laymen, not only preparing them for careers in their homeland but creating an impression that made many American alumni proud to call a school in Windsor their alma mater, and, furthermore, to eagerly support and promote her many years after their graduation, thus ensuring that Assumption's cross-border influence spanned multiple generations. The primary documents produced by those who lived at Assumption indicate that the daily life and survival of Assumption depended on its connections with the other side of the border for the first half-century of its existence. The letters of Fr. O'Connor, in which he foresees the potential to attract many American students, the day-book of Fr. Mungovan, which indicates how frequently one of Assumption's priests went to Detroit, the witnesses to Fr. Ferguson's extensive influence, as well as numerous other primary sources, indicate the different respects in which Assumption functioned as a cross-border school.

The historiography of Assumption notes the importance of Assumption's connections with the US Midwest, but neither Michael Power nor George McMahon focuses on Assumption's cross-border history; on the contrary, this critical component is often overshadowed by an emphasis on teleology and administrative concerns. Both McMahon and Power include strong teleological elements in their narratives, whereby the history is told so as to explain how Assumption College led to the founding of the University of Windsor. This tendency simultaneously overemphasizes Assumption's impact on Windsor and distracts from the ways in which it affected people on the other side of the border. It arguably overstates the importance of Assumption's partnership in founding a public university in Windsor, which was the initiative not of Assumption or the Basilians, but of the province. Furthermore, it is a view which Assumption's founders would likely have found inimical to their experience and

objectives. The goal of Fr. O'Connor and his confreres was not only to educate men and boys, but to inculcate in them Catholic ideals and religiosity in the context of a school community, where they would also be prepared for a career in the world. Therefore it seems unlikely that they would view the creation of a large secular university, focused primarily on research and career preparation, as the desired fruit of their labour. McMahon's and Power's writings on Assumption also focuses on administrative issues resulting from Assumption's relations with entities in London and Toronto. This geographic focus on Ontario obscures the fact that Assumption had more connections with the US Midwest than it did with southern Ontario. While the school's administrators had to deal with the bishops of London and their superiors in Toronto, most of the school's students, alumni, and many of the staff were likely more concerned with and connected to families and parishes in Detroit and the US Midwest.

Thus it is necessary to reexamine Assumption's history without either assuming a teleological destination or focusing primarily on administrative issues. Setting aside these distractions it becomes clear that a strong case can be made that Assumption's history can accurately be narrated as cross-border history. This paper is an attempt to do so.

As the broader society and border region of which Assumption was a part changed, so to did it. By the 1920s increasing numbers of students were coming from Essex County, part of a nationwide increase in educational pursuits. Assumption was no longer the only Catholic college between Toronto and South Bend, Indiana; the growing Catholic population of the US Midwest was going to other schools. By the 1930s Assumption had more Canadian than American students, and in the aftermath of World War Two the Victory Fund Campaign made it clear that Assumption's new

connections with Windsor were more important than its old connections to Detroit. Thus the period during which Assumption's history could best be described as cross-border, which had begun by 1870, had certainly ended when Memorial Hall was opened in 1948, having been funded primarily by Windsorites in the interests of Windsor.

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## VITA AUCTORIS

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