

Windsor and Essex County: the family home

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It's been almost three hours since I left Cambridge. The car is rushing along Highway 401; for most of the trip, all I've been able to see along the side of the road is trees, fields and the occasional colony of houses or factories. Despite the tedium, I continue to watch, waiting to see the one landmark for which I've been waiting. Finally, in the distance, I can see it: the Renaissance Center, across the Canada/US border in Detroit. To me, the first sight of this structure is the outer limit of the family home: Windsor and the surrounding towns in Essex County. As I near the city, I take a moment to think about the history of the area, and how closely my family fits into it.

The first European inhabitants of modern-day Essex County were the French, who governed this area from 1540 until 1760, when the area came under British control.<sup>1</sup> However, the French did not go away; by 1871, more than ten thousand French-speaking citizens inhabited Essex County.<sup>2</sup> Many of them lived in the Township of Sandwich, founded in 1788 and incorporated into a town in 1858.<sup>3</sup> A map of the town of Sandwich in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries shows the land divided in the manner typical of French settlements: rectangular strips perpendicular to a waterway.<sup>4</sup>

The village of Windsor was incorporated in 1854 (becoming a town four years later, and a city in 1892).<sup>5</sup> A new Hiram Walker distillery built in the same year resulted in the founding of the

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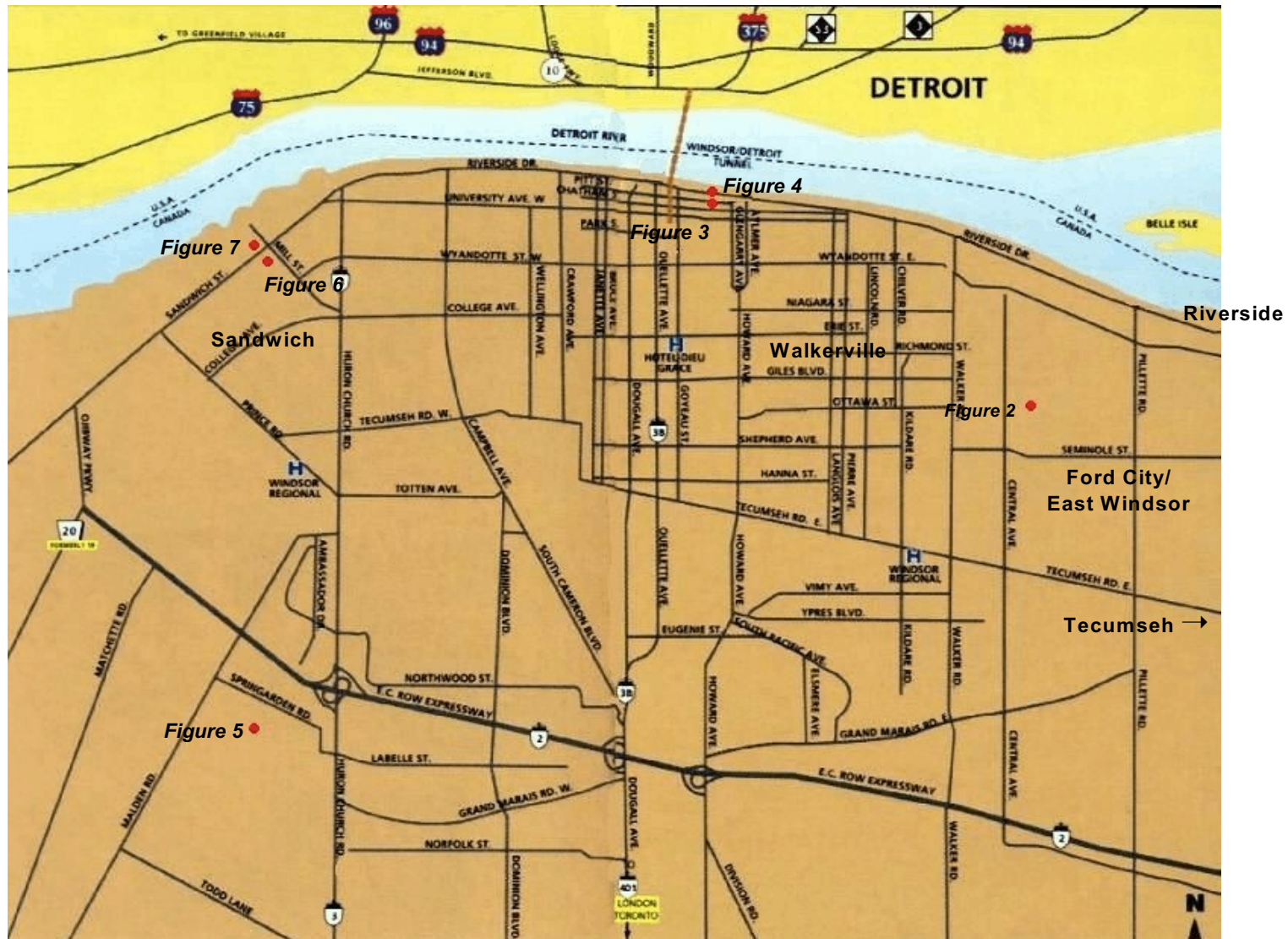
<sup>1</sup>Frederick Neal, *The Township of Sandwich: Past and Present*, (Windsor: the Author, 1909; reprinted by the Essex County Historical Association and the Windsor Public Library Board, 1979), 6

<sup>2</sup>T. St. Pierre, *Histoire des Canadiens du Michigan et du Comte d'Essex, Ontario* (Montreal, 1895, p. 219), quoted by G. Moosberger, *Jules Robinet: A Study of the Entrepreneurship of a French Immigrant Living in Sandwich, Ontario* (MA Thesis, University of Windsor, Faculty of Graduate Studies, 1983)

<sup>3</sup>Ibid, 12

<sup>4</sup>Moosberger, 40

<sup>5</sup>Corporation of the County of Essex, "Summary of the Municipal History of the County of Essex." [http://www.countyofessex.on.ca/history\\_early3.html#munhistory](http://www.countyofessex.on.ca/history_early3.html#munhistory). 2001 (last accessed 13 March 2005)



*Figure 1: A map of Windsor as it appears today (adapted from <http://www.windsorstuff.com/images/windmap.jpg>)*

company town of Walkerville in 1858.<sup>6</sup> The year 1915 saw the founding of another company town: Ford City, built around the 1904 Ford Motor Corporation works and incorporated as the city of East Windsor in 1929.<sup>7</sup> In the 1930's, the "Border Cities" of Windsor, Sandwich, Walkerville, and East Windsor merged to form the City of Windsor, with a population of 100 000. They were joined in 1966 by the towns of Riverside and Ojibway and portions of Sandwich East, South, and West townships.<sup>8</sup>

Undoubtedly, whenever one thinks of industry in Windsor, their first thought is of the automotive industry. As I stated above, the Ford Motor Company arrived in the 1904; and other companies followed; one in five jobs in the Windsor area is automotive-related.<sup>9</sup> Several members of my family, including my grandfather and one of my uncles, have found employment connected to the automotive industry, and a family rumour states that my great-great-grandfather, Jules Robinet, owned one of the first two automobiles ever driven in Windsor—and got involved in the first two-car collision in Windsor's history shortly afterwards.

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<sup>6</sup>Windsor Architectural Conservation Advisory Committee, "Walkerville" <http://www.citywindsor.ca/DisplayAttach.asp?AttachID=320>. 1997; (last accessed 13 March 2005)

<sup>7</sup>Windsor Architectural Conservation Advisory Committee, "The Village/Town of Ford City Windsor, Ontario, Canada" <http://www.citywindsor.ca/DisplayAttach.asp?AttachID=319>. 1997; (last accessed 13 March 2005)

<sup>8</sup>City of Windsor Ontario Canada, "History of Windsor" <http://www.citywindsor.ca/000228.asp> (last accessed 13 March 2005)

<sup>9</sup>"Windsor-Essex Area in Profile: Employment and Economy" [http://www.mah.gov.on.ca/userfiles/HTML/nts\\_1\\_12611\\_1.html](http://www.mah.gov.on.ca/userfiles/HTML/nts_1_12611_1.html). last modified February 11, 2004; (last accessed 13 March 2005)



*Figure 2: The Ford Motor Company's Windsor Casting Plant (By the author)*

Before the arrival of the automobile, the primary industry was agriculture. Even in the early days of colonization, residents planted apple and pear orchards and made wine from wild grapes.<sup>10</sup> The area receives a maximum of 180 frost-free days, the growing season usually ranging from April or May to October.<sup>11</sup> This means that some crops that are frost-sensitive crops or have long growing seasons that cannot be grown elsewhere in Canada can be grown here.

In 1998, a new employer arrived in Windsor. Casino Windsor, on the city's waterfront, included a hotel, VIP areas, and a small theatre, with a C\$400 million expansion currently planned. Presently, the casino receives 13 000 visitors a day, mostly from the United States.<sup>12</sup> Like the automotive industry, the casino has provided employment for several members of my family.

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<sup>10</sup>Neal, 6

<sup>11</sup>"Vegetable Production Practices," *OMAF Publication 363: Vegetable Production Recommendations 2004-2005*, Ontario Ministry for Agriculture and Food, 37

<sup>12</sup>Greta Guest, "Upping the Ante: Casino Windsor Plans \$400 Million Expansion," *Detroit Free Press*, [http://www.freep.com/money/business/windsor15e\\_20050215.htm](http://www.freep.com/money/business/windsor15e_20050215.htm). February 15, 2005; (last accessed 13 March 2005)





*Figure 3: Casino Windsor, opened 1998 (By the author)*

In the pages of this report, the unbreakable connection between the United States and Windsor becomes apparent: the automotive industry is American-owned, and my uncle, employed by Chrysler, makes frequent cross-border trips; most customers at the casino are American; even the landmark mentioned in the first paragraph is American! Much cross-border trade occurs, displayed vividly by the number of transport trucks lined up daily on the roads leading to the Ambassador Bridge and Detroit-Windsor road tunnel.



*Figure 4: The Detroit skyline, with its cylindrical Renaissance Center, dominates the view from the Windsor waterfront (By the author)*

As I have already stated, the nineteenth century saw an increase in the number of French and French-Canadians living in the Windsor area. One of them was a man who in many respects helped to build Windsor: my great-great grandfather Jules Robinet. Their village economically overwhelmed by French soldiers fighting in the Franco-Prussian War, Jules Robinet's parents emigrated from France to Canada in September 1874. Because Robinet's father could not afford to move the entire family, three of the older Robinet children, including then 16-year-old Jules, stayed behind. Jules worked in a hotel, then as a "rag and bone man" until May 1875, when he and his brother made a difficult and eventful passage to Sandwich.<sup>13</sup> After doing odd jobs for about two years, in 1877 Robinet began selling and trading groceries in Detroit. He went into a partnership with a Tecumseh merchant, Fernette Seguin, to manage a grocery and general store in the town of Tecumseh. Seguin

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<sup>13</sup>Moosberger, iii-v

sold his share of the business to Robinet shortly thereafter.<sup>14</sup> The store remained in the Robinet family for three generations, becoming a Home Hardware franchise, before its sale in 1993.<sup>15</sup>

In 1882, Jules Robinet started operations in his next business, a brickyard in the township of Sandwich. The company became a partnership in 1887, with the entry of financiers William and John Curry. The partnership lasted until 1903, when the company returned to Robinet. Output in this period was approximately 8-11 000 bricks per day.<sup>16</sup> After 1903, business continued as usual, and expanded to include the sale of gravel, which required extraction from the bluish Erie Clay before the clay's use for brick production. Customers included Assumption College and the Sandwich Post Office.



*Figure 5: The former site of one of the Robinet brickyards, near Malden Road (By the author)*

Production continued and increased, and the company went back and forth between sole proprietorship and partnership over the years. Production ended in 1915, when Robinet shut down

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<sup>14</sup>ibid, vi.

<sup>15</sup>David Morelli, "Ghosts Bid Farewell in a Store Tickled by Footsteps," *Windsor Star*, June 25, 1993, A12

<sup>16</sup>Moosberger, 1-3



the business, now involving three brickyards, and transferred ownership to new owners.<sup>17</sup>



*Figure 6: The Sandwich Post Office, built with bricks from the Robinet brickyards on land formerly owned by Robinet (by the author)*

Jules was not the first enterprising member of the Robinet family. In 1879, his father Pierre Antoine Robinet formed a partnership with family friend and vintner Ernest Girardot. This business became part of the Jules Robinet empire in 1883, and enabled Robinet to become the premier winemaker in Sandwich. As well as selling wine, Robinet sold baskets of grapes to other wineries, in locations such as Montréal, Québec City, and Winnipeg, up to 355 tons in a single order from

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<sup>17</sup>ibid, 4-10

1896. However, supply did not increase to the same degree as demand, and Jules sometimes had to resort to purchasing grapes from other companies to fill orders. Throughout the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the company expanded vastly, including another winery owned by the Girardot family.<sup>18</sup>



*Figure 7: The St. Antoine block in Sandwich, built with Robinet bricks and home to his winemaking business from 1897 to 1911.*

In 1916, the Ontario Temperance Act forced the closure of all facilities that served alcohol during the war. Its repeal was rejected in a 1919 referendum, but several clauses concerning the production of wine under permit allowed Robinet to continue production, and the era of prohibition proved to be his most profitable. In the early 1920's, the Ontario Liquor Control Act brought new guidelines and regulations to the production and sale of wine, many of which Robinet found

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<sup>18</sup>ibid, 11-19

unsatisfactory. He operated until 1934 without a permit, using a satellite company operated in his sons' names (and out of Windsor police jurisdiction) as a front. He sold both companies in 1935 but continued to produce wine in his basement until 1939, when police shut down his business for operating without a license and confiscated most of his stock, ending over fifty years of winemaking.<sup>19</sup> My grandmother, five years old at the time, witnessed the police confiscating wine and dumping quantities of it into the street.

Not only did Jules Robinet provide bricks for buildings in Sandwich township, he also provided the land many of them sat on, including the Sandwich Post Office. Initially, the only land he purchased contained his brick making operations, but grew to include his St Antoine Block, his vineyards, several cottages he built for use as company homes for the brick workers, and several dozen homes and office buildings he built or developed and sold. In 1909, he was involved in the purchase of a 107-acre farm owned by David Clark near Malden Road in Ojibway for \$10 000. This coincided with the purchase of land two years prior by the United States Steel Corporation in order to build a new plant in Canada, according to rumours to which Robinet and some of his friends were privy. When US Steel announced their decision to build there in 1913, thousands of land speculators scrambled to purchase parcels of land. That same year, Clark pursued legal action against Robinet and his associates, claiming they had misled him over the true value of his property. In 1915, the court forced them to re-sell part of the land for \$22 000 and to pay Clark \$50 000.<sup>20</sup>

Robinet's land transactions and real estate development continued throughout the 1910's and 1920's, his land enabling him to become a notable and powerful member in the community. However, upon the arrival of the Great Depression, tenants vacated many of the properties he owned, and he

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<sup>19</sup>ibid, 20-34

<sup>20</sup>ibid, 35-47

soon had no choice but to declare bankruptcy and liquidate his assets, with estimated losses between \$300 000-\$400 000. His expanding wine business provided him with an income, and his land transactions continued on a smaller scale from the end of the Depression until June 1942, six months before his death.<sup>21</sup>

The Township of Sandwich. The Casino. The automotive industry. Brick making and gravel mining. Winemaking. Through these subjects, my family, and Jules Robinet in particular, involved itself in the history, growth, and development of what is now the City of Windsor and the towns surrounding it. Not only were we affected by the area's history, we were a part of it. My family is an example of the families responsible for the growth of the nation of Canada; or, as my mother states it, we couldn't keep our noses out of everyone's business!

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<sup>21</sup>ibid, 47-58



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