New Brunswick turns 225 this year. Let the celebrations begin! What celebrations? What, exactly, should we be celebrating – and why?

In 2009 we will be celebrating the 40th anniversary of the Official Languages Act, the legislation which placed English and French on an equal footing in New Brunswick.


In 2009 we will be celebrating heritage when the Acadian World Congress meets during the summer on the Acadian Peninsula.

But why and how will we be celebrating New Brunswick’s 225th birthday?

In 1784 New Brunswick became a separate and distinct British colonial province. We know that Mi’gmaq, Maliseet and Passamaquoddy had already inhabited this land for thousands of years. We know that Europeans from France had arrived to fish and farm in the early seventeenth century. We know that European rivalry over the Maritimes led to an exodus of Acadians in the 1750s and the entrance of New England Planters in the 1760s.

In the 1760’s Sunbury County was the name the British gave to what is now New Brunswick, and they considered it a part of the colonial province of Nova Scotia. But the influx of United Empire Loyalists, fleeing the American Revolutionary War, led King George III to establish New Brunswick as a separate province on June 18, 1784, and to appoint Col. Thomas Carleton as the first Governor on August 16 of that year. Although most Loyalists were of British descent, there were also many Germans, Swiss, and Dutch as well as groups of Quakers, Mennonites, Indians and Blacks among the arrivals. However, neither those living here when the Loyalists arrived, nor the Loyalists themselves, did much celebrating in the year 1784. Their major goal was survival.

[For key dates in the Creation of New Brunswick go to http://webhome.idirect.com/~cpwalsh/nb/birth.htm]

[For information on the type of government that was established in 1784 go to “The Most Gentleman-like Government on Earth”: http://agora.virtualmuseum.ca/edu/ViewLoitCollection.do?method=preview&id=12&lang=EN]

[For a list of subsequent New Brunswick Lieutenant-Governors go to]
Although Canada Day and New Brunswick Day are celebrated annually with parades, dances, and speeches by politicians, the more elaborate festivities usually coincide with the commemoration of fiftieth or hundredth anniversaries, or multiples thereof.

The most important event during New Brunswick’s **Diamond Anniversary** (50th anniversary) was not a celebration, but the official abolition of slavery within the British Empire, of which New Brunswick was a part, on August 1, 1834 – although many people at the time were not so aware of its significance. This legislation formally outlawed a practice which had existed - but had not been followed for over a decade - in New Brunswick.


Although English speaking Loyalist descendents celebrated New Brunswick’s **Centennial** (100th anniversary) in style, Acadians marked 1884 by adopting a distinctive Acadian flag and national anthem (“Ave Maris Stella”) and a specific day for celebration - August 15. But much greater public attention was reserved for the later celebration of Queen Victoria’s **Diamond Jubilee** in 1887.

It was not until New Brunswick celebrated its **Sesquicentennial** (150th anniversary) in 1934 that tangible evidence of this milestone was recorded for the masses. The Canadian Postal Service issued, across the country, over 5 million copies of a 2 cent commemorative stamp featuring the provincial “Great Seal” and entitled “New Brunswick 1784-1934”. Little fanfare accompanied the stamp’s release, although this was the first time the province of New Brunswick had been so honoured. [Indeed, the first ever Canadian commemorative stamp had recognized the Quebec Tercentenary (300th anniversary) in 1908, only twenty-six years earlier.]


The city of Saint John staged the most elaborate **sesquicentennial** celebrations with the official re-opening of the New Brunswick Museum on August 16, an event attended by Prime Minister R. B. Bennett, Lieutenant-Governor Hugh
McLean and Premier L.P.D. Tilley. In addition to the customary parades, dinners and dances, the Saint John Fusiliers were presented with new colours. But in the midst of the Great Depression, celebration of New Brunswick’s 150th birthday were muted at best.

[Some interesting photographs featuring the celebration of New Brunswick’s sesquicentennial in Saint John can be found in the Louis Merritt Harrison collection at the New Brunswick Museum. These have been placed online in the Artefacts Canada site of Canadian Heritage. A few noteworthy photos include:

Ceremony, 150th Birthday of the Province of New Brunswick, King Square, Saint John, New Brunswick, NMB, Accession Number 1989.83.229 (Document 239 of 516)

Parade Float, the Spirit of 1784, Saint John, New Brunswick, NBM, Accession Number 1989.83.81 (Document 169 of 516)

Celebration, 150th Birthday of the Province of New Brunswick, King Square, Saint John, New Brunswick, NBM Accession Number 1989.83.227 (Document 235 of 516)

New Brunswick Museum, Douglas Avenue, Saint John, New Brunswick, NBM Accession Number 1989.83.239 (Document 214 of 516)]

That was not to be the case for the Bicentennial Celebrations of 1984. Premier Richard Hatfield was determined to mark the occasion in style. His government appointed a Bicentennial Commission, designed a specific logo, established a $5 million budget (half provided by federal funds) and desired that specific objectives be met. The Bicentennial celebrations were:

- To enhance our sense of pride in ourselves as New Brunswickers and as Canadians,
- To reach and involve as many people as possible within the province,
- To develop an understanding and appreciation of New Brunswick’s diverse cultures and
- To contribute to the enrichment of the heritage which New Brunswick will pass on to future generations.

The amazingly successful Canadian Centennial celebrations in 1967 provided a model to emulate, but on a smaller scale.

Again Canada Post issued a commemorative stamp, over 19 million copies this time),

Queen Elizabeth II made a state visit,

[see http://agora.virtualmuseum.ca/edu/ViewLoitDa.do?method=preview&lang=EN&id=4320]

and Pope John Paul II appeared before 75,000 at Moncton’s Magnetic Hill. In addition, the Bicentennial Commission acted as a catalyst in the organization of dozens of family reunions, the publication of over 100 books dealing primarily with local history, the promotion of special events and projects, and the dissemination of grants to municipalities and unincorporated areas throughout the province. Notable among the lasting contributions are the Bicentennial Tapestries, a unique series of 27 colourful tapestries that depict the history of New Brunswick’s capital and are permanently displayed in Fredericton’s city hall.

Significantly, Premier Hatfield commissioned a new coat of arms for New Brunswick which was subsequently granted by Queen Elizabeth II to coincide with the celebration of New Brunswick’s bicentennial. Distinctive characteristics include fiddleheads, purple violets and a leaping Atlantic salmon. (See http://www3.sympatico.ca/goweezer/canada/coaNB.htm).

Perhaps the most unusual commissioned work (a grant of $500) went to nine New Brunswickers who arranged for racing pigeons to deliver a special bicentennial message from Governor-General Jeanne Sauvé to Lieutenant-Governor George F. Stanley on Canada Day.

Although elaborate celebrations are not being planned for New Brunswick’s 225 birthday, recognition of the 40th anniversary of the Official Languages Act and the many events planned for the Acadian World Congress should provide ample opportunity for partying. We have 25 years to prepare for the 250th anniversary in 2034 - and 25 years to decide whether to call it a semiquincentennial or a bicenquinquagenary. And the unearthing of a time capsule prepared at the 1984 Bicentennial will be a major event to anticipate during New Brunswick’s tercentenary celebrations in 2084.

Written by Ian Andrews for the Department of Wellness Culture and Sport