

# An 1850s feat of engineering



Michele  
Kading

COMMUNITY  
CORRESPONDENT

## ST. VITAL

Imagine digging two canals over 6.5 kilometres long using only hand tools and horse-drawn equipment.

It is the 1850s. You and your partner, Benjamin Lagimodière, built a water-powered mill on the Seine River in 1853. You constructed a dam to create a mill pond. You dug a straight channel below the mill to serve as a tail race. You re-routed the river so its water flows quickly past the mill — turning the massive millstones that grind grain into flour. This was a true feat of engineering — and the first time the Seine was ever diverted.

But, summer flow in the Seine can be low and unpredictable. At times, you need more water to operate the mill. Your partner owns land across the river that stretches east to Navin Marsh. Once completed, the two new canals will bring water from the marsh to the Seine and should provide more reliable flow to the mill.

Who are you and why did you undertake such a monumental project?

You are an entrepreneur, farmer, and Métis activist. Born in Saskatchewan in 1817, you are the son of a voyageur and a Métis woman. In 1843, you came to live in the Red River Settlement. You married Julie Lagimodière and started a family with the birth of your first son Louis in 1844.

You own a narrow parcel of land stretching between the



Photo by Michele Kading

**The millstones from the Riel/Lagimodière mill on the Seine River rest in front of the St. Boniface Museum.**

Red River and the Seine River. Unlike a typical river lot, yours has rivers at both ends so it is not ideal for farming. It lacks enough dry land for woodlands and hay. Many farmers abandon the area due to frequent floods.

But you are also a miller. You know how to build and operate a water-powered mill. Mills can grind grain into flour for baking or card wool for clothing much faster than by hand. They are the lifeblood of every settlement.

In your lifetime, you build and operate three mills on the Seine River. Local settlers and the Grey Nuns of St. Boniface bring grain and wool to you for processing. They leave with

the finished product — minus your percentage for payment. Your innovation, trade, and hard work allow you and Julie to raise 11 children including your eldest son — Louis Riel, Jr., the Father of Manitoba.

You are Louis Riel, Sr. — The Miller of the Seine.

Join Save Our Seine on a tour of this historic mill site on Saturday, Feb. 28th.

*Michele Kading is a community correspondent for St. Vital and the executive director for Save Our Seine. Go to [www.saveourseine.com](http://www.saveourseine.com) for details of this and other 25th anniversary events.*