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[See table of contents](#)

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AN EARLY NORWEGIAN SETTLEMENT IN CANADA

By THEODORE C. BLEGEN

Increasing numbers of Norwegians, responding to the attraction of the Mississippi Valley, turned to the west in the first half of the nineteenth century. Emigration for them, as they confronted complex old-world economic and social difficulties, was a cutting of the Gordian knot, and they eagerly followed in the paths marked out by such trail blazers as Cleng Peerson and Ole Rynning. These paths led first to New York and then to the widening frontier of the Middle West, where the northern immigrants aided in the conquest of the continent and won for themselves a place among the commonwealth builders of America.

The great majority of Norwegian emigrants from 1836 to 1850 followed routes that brought them to New York, Boston, or other American ports either by direct passage or by way of Hamburg, Havre, or Liverpool. Of an estimated total of 18,200 in this period, 12,200 went direct from Norway to America, and 6,000 by way of the more important European points of departure outside Norway. Of the former number, 11,960 landed at United States ports and only 240 at Quebec.¹ A marked difference in the situation appeared from 1851 to 1853, however. Direct shipping from Norway reduced Norwegian emigration by way of other European countries; and Quebec became a more important receiving station for the northern immigrants than the American ports to the south. In this transitional period 7,510 emigrants from Norway were carried direct to Quebec, 4,550 direct to New York and Boston, and 660 by way of Hamburg, Havre, or other non-Norwegian ports to New York. From 1854 on, the pendulum swings sharply toward Quebec as the initial destination of the emigrants. It is estimated that of 46,900 Norwegian emigrants in the period from 1854 to 1865, all but 2,800 followed the Quebec route.² The emigrants, however, were bound for the American West by way of the Great Lakes, with Milwaukee or Chicago as the last objective before seeking out the settlements on the farming frontier. This remarkable swing to Quebec as a port of entry grew out of a trade development that made it possible for companies engaged in the transatlantic carrying trade greatly to reduce passenger fares. For Norwegian shipowners the lumber industry centering at Quebec made possible a profitable triangular trade, consisting of emigrants from Norway to Quebec, lumber from the Canadian city to some British port, and a return from the British Isles to the original starting point. The main reason for this conjunction of the Norwegian emigration traffic and Canadian commerce was of course the repeal in 1849 of the English navigation laws. Quebec customs house returns indicate that as early as 1850 the Norwegian trade was becoming brisk, for of 96 vessels listed, 44 were Norwegian, almost all of which entered under ballast and departed with "outward cargoes" for London, Cardiff, Belfast, Hull, Yarmouth, or other ports of the United Kingdom.³

¹ A. N. Kier, in *Tabeller vedkommende Folkemængdens Bevægelse i Aarene 1856-1865*, lxxiii (*Norges Officielle Statistik*, 1869, c. no. 1).

² *Ibid.* Of the total indicated, 44,100 went direct to Quebec, 520 direct to New York, and 2,280 via Havre, Hamburg, or other intermediate points to New York.

³ I. D. Andrews, *Report on the Trade, Commerce, and Resources of the British North American Colonies*, 142-144, 450 (31 Congress, 2 session, *Senate Executive Documents*, no. 23).

The settlement of Scandinavian immigrants in considerable numbers in Canada did not occur until the period of rapid exploitation of the prairie provinces. Some efforts were made, however, to stir interest in Canada as a possible field for Norwegian immigrant colonization in the fifties and sixties, when large numbers of immigrants from the northern kingdom were receiving their introduction to the western world at Quebec. As early as 1856 an announcement emanating from the Canadian minister of agriculture placed before Norwegians the prospect of securing settlers' lands in three specified areas. In order to take advantage of the offer one needed to be at least eighteen years of age, to occupy the land within a month after claiming it, to bring a stated part of it under cultivation within four years, and to build on it a house at least twenty by eighteen feet in size, with the proviso that if groups of families so desired, they might build one large central dwelling. Something of Canada's boundless possibilities was suggested by the statement that these vacant lands could accommodate eight million people—more than five times the population of all Norway.⁴ This announcement seems to have had little effect, though about 1856 some twenty or thirty Norwegian families established a settlement about twenty miles from Cherbourg in Canada East.⁵ The next year the Canadian department of agriculture published at Quebec a Norwegian translation of a handbook for immigrants. This was a phase of a larger campaign for immigrant settlers, one aspect of which was the spread in Europe and among arriving immigrants of information about Canada's great resources and possibilities. Useful details were combined with broad generalization: "Canada is in truth 'a land of hope, which will not be disappointed,' where work of every kind wins well-deserved rewards." Labor and bread await every worker in this "market for all the world's products."⁶

A more vigorous policy was initiated through the appointment in 1858 of a Norwegian agent of the immigration department at Quebec. This man was Christopher Closter, a brother of Asbjørn Kloster, the noted temperance reformer and Quaker leader at Stavanger. He had emigrated to the United States before 1850, was a commission merchant at Hamilton, Canada West, in 1855; and soon thereafter, with another Norwegian, formed a company in Quebec to promote the Norwegian lumber-carrying business. In 1859, the year after his appointment as agent, Closter urged the Canadian Government to set aside a definite area for Norwegian colonization. This proposal was approved, and a site was selected in the vicinity of Gaspé, a village in Canada East situated on a deep bay in a peninsula projecting into the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Land within a stated area was to be restricted to Norwegians, who would have the privilege of selecting one hundred acres each for a total sum of twenty dollars payable in five years. Gaspé was a heavily wooded, remote fishermen's settlement in a region of long and severe winters. Isolated it may have been, but it was much nearer Norway than was the American West. Numerous immigrants arrived in Canada without funds with which to pay their fares to Wisconsin or Minnesota. Why not promote a settlement that would be within comparatively easy reach of these enterprising but impecunious

⁴ *Morgenbladet* (Christiania), November 2, 1856.

⁵ Rev. G. F. Dietrichson tells of this settlement in an address reported in *Morgenbladet*, April 10, 1861.

⁶ *Canada: En Kortfattet Skildring af dets Geographiske Beliggenhed*. . . (Quebec, 1857, 26 p.). The translation was made by A. Jorgensen. A copy of this rare pamphlet is in the library of the University of Oslo. A pamphlet by A. Jorgensen entitled *The Emigration from Europe during the present century, its causes and effects* (Quebec, 1865) is in the Public Archives of Canada.

people? As for the climate, Norwegians were used to long and cold winters; and both fishing and farming opened up possibilities on the Gaspé shores. Closter persuaded several small contingents of Norwegians in 1860 to settle on the lands selected for the project, and in the same year he was authorized to go to Norway to promote the interests of the colony. Nine of the colonists, in a letter written in November, 1860, sang the praises of Gaspé, wrote that they were building homes and would have a schoolhouse of their own, and expressed satisfaction with the land. In a later letter, signed by two immigrants, it is stated that about fifty Norwegians were at Gaspé in December of that year.⁷

In 1861 Closter, who had journeyed back to his native land in his official capacity, brought out a revision of the earlier Norwegian edition of the handbook for immigrants, with its store of condensed information about Canada, its lands, minerals, fisheries, government, laws, and people. The book contains many practical details for the prospective settler on such subjects as the pioneer's equipment and the prices of supplies and tools. Gaspé is mentioned briefly but in generous tone: "The lands in the Gaspé district have a light but rich soil, which produces all kinds of grains and vegetation. In these districts are millions of acres still in their natural state and covered with beautiful woods." And again: "The population in the Gaspé district and the northern coast of St. Lawrence River and Bay comprises 32,000 souls. In this district alone 500,000 people could make their living."⁸

Closter's brother, the Norwegian Quaker leader, had of course no official connection with the Gaspé plan, but he was interested in it and privately encouraged it. He was in communication with a Swedish Quaker, Carl Schöllström of Upsala, who was contemplating emigration in order to escape religious intolerance in Sweden. Schöllström reported the existence of a Swedish Quaker society of some fifty members, for whom the outlook was dark because they were at odds with the established church.⁹ Early in 1861 he suggested that Quakers in the North might unite in a colony somewhere in North America, for he was convinced that emigration was their only hope. A little later he came to the conclusion that it was God's will that he should emigrate. The book on Canada, sent him by Asbjørn Kloster, had caused him to consider seriously the choice of Gaspé as his destination. And in 1862—his name by that time metamorphosed under Anglo-Saxon influences to Charles Shieldstream—he wrote to Kloster from Gaspé basin.¹⁰

Meanwhile, however, Christopher Closter's plans for a Norwegian colony in Canada East had been sharply attacked by the Reverend G. F. Dietrichson of Stavanger, recently returned from a pioneer pastorate in Wisconsin. On January 8, 1861, he publicly invited Closter to debate with him on the emigration question or, if he preferred, to publish fully his reasons for recommending Canada to prospective emigrants. This invitation occurred before the Canadian handbook had appeared, and Asbjørn Kloster

⁷ The letter of December 18, 1860, signed by Halvor Jordal and Elling H. Vigen, and that of November, signed by Petter A. Berg and nine others, were published in Stavanger and Christiania newspapers and reprinted in *Emigranten* (Madison, Wisconsin), April 29, 1861. Several letters from Closter to his brother from 1850 to 1859, in the Kloster Papers, Quaker Archives, Stavanger, Norway, give information about his early activities in the United States and Canada. See also an account of Gaspé experiences by N. C. Brun, "Første aars oplevelser," in *Synra* (Decorah, Iowa), 7: 110-119.

⁸ C. O. Closter, *Canada: En Kortfattet Skildring af dets geographiske Beliggenhed*. . . , 16, 47-48, and *passim* (Stavanger, 1861). A copy of this book is in the Deichmanske Library, Oslo.

⁹ Schöllström to A. Kloster, May 29, 1859, in Kloster Papers.

¹⁰ Schöllström to A. Kloster, March 1, 18, May 22, 1861, and March 15, 1862, in Kloster Papers.

replied on behalf of his brother, that the latter's book about Canadian conditions would soon be published.¹¹ In the early spring newspapers announced that two barks soon would leave for Canada with Gaspé colonists. This announcement seems to have aroused the ire of the pugnacious Dietrichson, who forthwith declared that he would give a public lecture on emigration and emigration agents, meanwhile cautioning people under no circumstances to make arrangements with Closter to emigrate to Gaspé. On April 2 he delivered his address; and some days later, with Dietrichson present, Closter attempted a public answer, after which the irrepressible minister arose and delivered a spirited and effective rebuttal. Much interest was aroused by this clash, which was widely reported in the Norwegian press.¹²

Dietrichson began his lecture by sketching the history of emigration, which he declared was now setting strongly toward Minnesota and eventually would sweep westward to the Pacific Coast. He asserted that civil war was imminent in the United States and that a southern invasion of the upper Mississippi Valley would inevitably follow; for this and numerous other reasons he advised against all emigration. Nevertheless, if people must emigrate, he said, the American West was the proper region in which to select sites for settlement. Gaspé he curtly disposed of as a bleak, isolated, heavily forested region that could be recommended only by one having a commercial interest in its promotion. Closter in his reply exhibited wheat and timothy which he asserted had been grown at Gaspé; sketched the perils of the journey to the American interior, which could be avoided by those who chose Canadian settlement; in general defended Canada as a suitable land for immigrants; and incidentally denounced Dietrichson as a land speculator. When Closter suggested that people who were dissatisfied with Gaspé would have the privilege of migrating elsewhere, Dietrichson pounced upon the statement, explaining that the poor ordinarily would find it difficult to avail themselves of so expensive a privilege; hence the necessity of good judgment in primary land selection. The personal attack he brushed off by stating that he did not own a foot of land in the West and by reminding Closter that he was on record as opposed to all emigration. After the debate newspapers announced that a considerable number of prospective colonists had withdrawn their names.¹³

Nevertheless not a few set off for Gaspé. In addition to those who went under Closter's wing, about a hundred prospective emigrants to Canada were recruited at Trondhjem by another agent, said to have been a Canadian government appointee, and some of these eventually arrived at Gaspé.¹⁴ The main group sailed on the *Iris* and reached Gaspé on July 25, 1861. Only a few members of the party died during the crossing, but on one Norwegian emigrant vessel sailing about the same time twenty-eight children and four adults died, probably of cholera. Closter evidenced his own faith in Gaspé by bringing to it his wife and family, his aged father and mother, also a brother, and various other relatives. The story of the

¹¹ *Stavanger Amtstidende og Adresseavis*, January 10, 15, 1861.

¹² *Stavanger Amtstidende og Adresseavis*, March 11, 20, 27, April 2, 4, 8, 15, 1861. Dietrichson's lecture also appears in *Almuevennen*, April 13, 20, 1861.

¹³ *Stavanger Amtstidende og Adresseavis*, April 15, 1861. Dietrichson's general criticisms of conditions in the United States were sharply refuted in the Norwegian-American newspaper, *Emigranten*, for May 27, 1861.

¹⁴ *Stavanger Amtstidende og Adresseavis*, May 3, 1861. An immigrant letter in the same paper for December 9, 1861, tells of an unsuccessful attempt by an agent named Haugan to persuade more than a hundred Norwegian immigrants to take land in the vicinity of Ottawa. This seems to have been the main Trondhjem group. A fuller account of this affair is published in the same newspaper for April 7, 1862.

little colony has been characterized as the saddest chapter in Norwegian-American history.¹⁵ In the light of the initial difficulties and hardships that some groups of early Norwegian settlers in the upper Mississippi Valley were compelled to meet, this characterization is probably an exaggeration. There is no doubt, however, that the Gaspé colonists had a very unhappy experience, that the colony failed and its members dispersed after the winter of 1861-1862, and that in addition to difficulties of climate, land, and employment were financial troubles for which Closter himself seems to have been largely responsible. He had bought a tract of fifteen hundred acres some fourteen miles from the village and also a smaller tract, with a saw-mill and a flour mill, nearer Gaspé. Evidently there was a plan for organized effort, for one emigrant was made manager of the workers. There were also rumors of lead deposits and future mining operations on Closter's lands.¹⁶ Some of the colonists were optimistic. "For my part," wrote Bertha E. Kloster to a relative in Norway in October, "I like Gaspé much better than any place I have been before and I don't doubt you would do as well here as there."¹⁷ The shadow of disappointment soon lay over the colony, however. Closter gathered up from the trusting colonists about twelve hundred dollars and set off for Quebec to buy supplies; but as the long and icy winter months passed no supplies arrived, nor did he return. The settlers for the most part failed to get work for wages and were soon in such want that a public subscription was taken up for them at Gaspé. In March the Quaker Shieldstream wrote Asbjørn Kloster that Dietrichson had been right, that no emigrants should be advised to go to Gaspé; and he branded the missing Closter as untruthful and un-Christian. He himself, he said in a later letter, was the only colonist who was satisfied—and his peace of mind came from the fact that he had escaped from worse conditions in his native land than those that confronted him at Gaspé.¹⁸ A colonist's letter published in Norway in the fall of 1862 charges Closter with having used part of the money to pay off private debts, but states that finally he did send supplies, though some of the colonists received nothing in return for their money. Closter's wife, who was "sick with sorrow," was said to have mortgaged her own property in order to aid the needy settlers.¹⁹

Closter probably initiated the enterprise with honest intentions, since he was willing to risk the welfare of his own family and relatives. It is clear, however, that the colony was mismanaged, whether wilfully or merely as a result of ineptitude. The entire story is not revealed in the available contemporary records, but at any rate the colony collapsed. Most of its members went West; Closter himself, with his family, was in Chicago in 1864; Shieldstream moved to Norwich, Canada West, and in 1867, writing to ascertain the whereabouts of Closter, he said, "I have nothing against him, and I am very glad to say that he has done right to me, and I don't write for [the] sake of hurting him." He was inclined to think that the colonists made a mistake when they abandoned Gaspé in favour of the West.²⁰

¹⁵ H. R. Holand, "Gaspé. Et trist blad i vor nybyggersaga," in *Symra*, 5: 2-8 (1909).

¹⁶ Nils O. Closter to A. Kloster from "Gaspé Basin," October 25, 1861, in Kloster Papers.

¹⁷ To her sister, October 25, 1861, in Kloster Papers.

¹⁸ Shieldstream to Kloster, March 15, 1862, March 18, 1863, in Kloster Papers. A letter of Andrew Closter, March 8, 1862, mentions the death of a son of Christopher at Gaspé the preceding November.

¹⁹ *Stavanger Amtstidende og Adresseavis*, October 6, 1862.

²⁰ Shieldstream to A. Kloster, January 8, 1867; Endre and Niels Kloster to A. Kloster, October 27, 1864, in Kloster Papers.

The Gaspé project was widely discussed in Norway in a period when interest in emigration was widespread, and its failure was not soon forgotten. In 1867 the British-American Land Society, backed by the shipping firm of A. Sharpe and Company, offered to set aside twenty thousand acres of land in Canada for a Norwegian colony selling it in fifty-acre lots at \$2.50 an acre, requiring immigrants to pay only interest for the first three years and thereafter the capital in six annual installments. The company even promised to contribute \$200 a year for three years to the salary of a minister and to give land for a church and a parsonage if as many as one hundred families joined the colony. But the proposal was quickly attacked in Norwegian newspapers, which reminded readers that Canadian settlement by Norwegian groups had had no success, and incidentally warned emigrants against doing business with private land companies instead of with the Canadian Government.²¹ Probably many prospective emigrants were skeptical about the advisability of paying a Canadian company \$2.50 an acre for land when at the same time the Homestead Law was in full operation in the United States.

A happier chapter in the saga of Norwegian immigration to Canada was to come, but not until the Prairie Provinces of the Canadian Northwest became the magnet—a magnet that exerted a strong influence not only upon Norwegians in the American Middle West but also upon dwellers in the valleys and along the coasts of the Viking North, impelling thousands to join hands with the pioneers of Canada in exploiting the rich resources of an imperial domain.

²¹ *Morgenbladet*, February 4, 15, 1867. See also a Canadian land advertisement in the same paper for October 2, 1865.