

John O'Neill and Julia Duffy of Valcartier, Quebec

County Kildare is a lovely area of lush, rolling farmland, and is also known worldwide as the center of Irish thoroughbred horse racing and breeding. It is from this background, as an experienced farmer and possibly with “horse business” in his blood, that our ancestor, John O'Neill set forth with his wife, Judith, and their young daughters for the Quebec wilderness. Venturing into the unknown would not have been a decision made lightly as they realized that they may never see their extended families again. Also, the thought of six weeks on the high seas, with the possibility of dangerous weather and poor living conditions on the ship, had to have been unnerving for John and Judith. So why did they take all these risks and how is it that they chose Valcartier as the place to start their new life as they left Ireland in the Spring of 1818? We can only guess that the stories they had heard and maybe promises of land sounded better than what they already had. It is possible that John came from a family of many boys and that there was not enough land to be divided among everyone. Or it is possible that they were not landowners but tenant farmers in Ireland, as many were, and the thought of land of their own was very enticing.

Using burial and census records, it appears that John would have been about twenty-six (born c. 1792) and Judith would have been about thirty-two (born c. 1786) when they left for Canada. Judith's gravestone states that she was from County Dublin. Kildare borders Dublin, close enough for a young couple to meet. Did John live in one of the border towns or had he moved to Dublin to find work when they met? It has been very difficult to find any documentation of the town of John's birth. We are hoping that in future years DNA technology may help us pin this down further.



Records show that Judith was usually called Julia. Another finding is that in all the documents that John O'Neil signed, he did so with only one “L” in O'Neil. It must have been one of his descendants that changed the family name to O'Neill. Also, the fact that he was able to sign his name indicates that he probably had some education in Ireland and this leads to the possibility that he came from a family that was not poverty-stricken.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "John O'Neil". The signature is written in dark ink on a light-colored, slightly aged paper. The letters are connected and fluid, characteristic of 18th or 19th-century handwriting.

It is not clear as to why John and Julia chose St. Gabriel de Valcartier for their future home site. The seigniorial manor was first ceded to Surgeon Robert Gifford in 1647 and later given to the Jesuits who hoped to bring Catholicism to the Huron Indians. However, the last member of the Jesuit order in the area died in 1800 and the land was ceded back to the government. In 1817, the Honorable John Neilson and Honorable Andrew Stuart started settlement proceedings. Some of the earliest settlers were United Empire Loyalists from Connecticut and soldiers from England, Ireland and Scotland who were given land grants as a reward for military service in the British army during the Napoleonic Wars. However, at this time, we have not found any evidence that John served in the military. We do know that John was one of the original settlers in Valcartier. It is assumed that the ship they came on docked in Quebec City. It is possible that John and Julia did not hear of Valcartier until after landing and at this time made contact with the commission that was dispensing land. An early land petition, signed by John on May 11, 1819, states "...that your petitioner left Ireland and arrived in this Country in the last spring with the view of obtaining lands and settling as a farmer to which business he had been brought up in his native country...your petitioner is informed that there is a considerable tract of good land which is ungranted in the Seignior of St. Gabriel lying on the north eastern bank of the River Jacques Cartier bounded on the one side by the lands of John Neilson and Andrew Stuart, Esquires, and on the other side by the line of the said Seignior of St. Gabriel. That if your Honours would be pleased to grant unto your Petitioner a lot of one hundred and eighty acres your petitioner would immediately move his wife and family hither and make a settlement thereon..." A document dated six months later on the 13th of October states that John was granted Lot #22 in the 5th Concession of the manor of St. Gabriel. One of the requirements of the land grant was that the landowner had a limited amount of time to clear a portion of the land, build a house, and plant crops. It is hard to imagine how John and the other settlers accomplished all of this. This was a real wilderness – land that was mostly forested with no roads, no sawmills and several miles from any other settlement or place to buy provisions. Winters were much more difficult than those the settlers had experienced in their native countries. Despite all these hardships, the settlers forged ahead and the village of Valcartier was established and flourished as the years passed.

John and Julia had two young daughters when they left Ireland. Elizabeth would have been between two and four years of age (born c. 1814-16) and Bridget who would have been an infant (born c. 1818). There is the possibility that there was a third daughter as the 1824 census states there was another female in the house. Also, a land grant request in 1827, stated John had eight small children, so again this would support the idea of another child, probably born in Ireland. However, no evidence of this child's death or marriage in Quebec has been found, so it is not clear as to who she was. Based on the dates of the children's births and John's age, the marriage likely took place in Ireland between 1811 and 1813.

Within four months of receiving their land grant in Valcartier, a son, Thomas was born there on February 20th, 1820. This would lead us to believe that John had already raised some kind of shelter for his family in this short time period. Interestingly, when this first son, Thomas, was baptized his godparents were listed as Cornelius O'Neil and Margaret Sweeney. We have not been able to find out who Cornelius was and have find no further records of him; however, there was a Cornelius Maher in St. Catherine's in Portneuf where Thomas was baptized. Could this have been a mistake in surnames by the priest writing in the register? We believe that Margaret Sweeney was the wife of James Maher, also residents of St. Catherine's. This is of course is of interest as it might have indicated that Cornelius was a possible brother or cousin of John.

There is little evidence of John and Julia having siblings who might also have come to Quebec. In 1819, John was granted a request that Lot #23, next to his lot, be reserved for his brother, James, who had supposedly left Ireland in April of that year. However, we have never found any evidence that James landed in Quebec or came to Valcartier. We have found documentation that Julia had a younger sister, Sarah Duffy, who was living with her husband in Valcartier by 1823. It is significant that John Navin, Sarah's husband, was also from County Kildare, John O'Neil's home place. It is possible that the two couples sailed together or that John and

Sarah might have arrived a couple of years later. There are other Duffys in nearby Stoneham and St. Catherine's who could be related to Julia but at this time we do not have any supporting documentation.

On the 30th of October 1820, a statement was signed by his neighbors attesting that John had cut 18 acres on Lots #22 and #23. There was a Census taken for Valcartier in 1821 and John is listed as living on Concession #4 with 2 houses (this possibly means a house and a barn). This is somewhat confusing because in previous and future documents, there is no evidence that he lived in the 4th Concession, only in the 5th. The Census goes on to say that John has 1 male child, 2 female children, and 3 male servants. These servants are likely men that he has hired to help him clear the land. He owns a horse, 4 oxen, 6 cows and 4 cows and he has now cleared 30 acres on the 4th Concession and 20 acres on the 5th Concession. A comparison of other settlers on this Census indicates that John is doing quite well, owning more farm animals and having cleared more land than the majority of those in Valcartier.

In 1822, John and a neighbor, James Sweeney, petitioned that they be granted four vacant lots in Concession 1. These lots adjoin their properties and are mostly swamp land. They had already started to improve the land thinking it was part of their land and so they are requesting that this area located on the south side of the river be given to them. No deeds have been found for this request and so it is assumed that they were not given this land.

An 1824 agricultural census gives us a wealth of information about John and his farm. It states the following: John O'Neil, age 33, settlement date 1818, with 3 males and 5 females in the house. (I believe this would include males - John, his two sons, Thomas and James; females - Julia, Elizabeth, Bridget, Sarah, and possibly a daughter who we do not the name of). He has 87 arpents under cultivation, which is one of the largest in Valcartier. An arpent is approximately equal to an acre. His crops included 30 minots (equal to a US bushel) of oats, 4 minots of peas, 60 minots of potatoes, 2 arpents sown in turnips, 16 arpents in timothy grass, and a ½ arpent each of hemp and flax. He produced 100 minots of wheat, 400 minots of potatoes, 200 minots of turnips, 1000 bundles of hay and clover, 4 minots of carrots and 500 pounds of butter. He has peas in production, but they are still green and not harvested. Also, he owned 3 cows, 2 pigs, and 1 gelding.

It appears that John may have been missed in the 1825 census as he is not listed in the Valcartier listing.

A statement on the 2nd of April 1827 to the Commissioners of the Jesuit Estates seems to indicate that John now owns both lots #22 and #23, implying that his brother, James, never arrived in Quebec or if he did that he settled elsewhere. "We the undersigned the Inhabitants of the 5th Concession of Valcartier in the Parish of St. Gabriel do certify that John O'Neal (sic) has ten acres cleared and sowed with Timothy grass on Lot No. 22 and about fourteen cut and part of it sowed upon Lot. No. 23 to the best of our skill and knowledge and that No. 22 does not contain more than fourteen acres of reclaimable land which would not be equal to support his wife and eight small children". This is a significant statement as it states that by the 2nd of April 1827, John had eight children and we have only been able to document seven, which would again imply there was a third daughter who came with them from Ireland. However, by the 1831 Census, only seven children are listed even though another daughter was born in 1830 (Catherine) and one daughter died that same year (Mary). If John and Julia did have another daughter who came with them from Ireland, then either she was out working, married or had died.

The 1831 Census also indicates that John had 90 arpents of land with 40 under cultivation and he was growing wheat, oats, and potatoes and owned 4 cows, 1 horse and 4 pigs.

Between 1820 and 1833, Julia had seven children, after arriving in Quebec. Two of those children died early. Mary died in 1830 at the age of five years and John (Jr.) died in 1834 at the age of seven months.

John also died at an early age. There is a discrepancy as to the day of death. The gravestone in St. Gabriel's Catholic Cemetery states he was 48 years old, a native of Kildare, and that he died on the 28th of October 1841. The Ste- Catherine- de-Jacques-Cartier Catholic Church burial record states he died on the 7th of November at the age of 51. Priests from St. Catherine's recorded the Valcartier events, as a church was not built in Valcartier until 1843. A cause of death has not been found, however it would see that John was ill or injured for at least a few weeks before his death since he made a Will on October 13th, 1841.

This is a transcription of the Will found in the Quebec Archives:

On the thirteenth day of October one thousand eight hundred and forty one, I, John O'Neil undersigned being sick and weak in body but of sound mind, memory, and understanding and not knowing when it may please God to call me out of this world do make constituted and ordain this my last will and Testament in manner and form following to wit:

1st I bequeath my soul to Almighty God hoping that he will receive in his great mercy and forgive me my sins.

2nd I leave my body to the earth from whence it was taken hoping that my loving wife and children will give me a Christian burial.

3rd I leave all my immoveable property to my two sons Thomas and James O'Neil to be enjoyed together by them in common as long as they shall live together and if it happens that they separate, the landed property will be divided equally between them according to its value by two or three arbitrators; provided that my dear wife Judith Duffy be decently kept and supported by them as long as she shall choose to live with them, or if she wishes to live by herself, they will provide the following support for her as long as she lives, viz:

They will give her two acres of land upon which they will build a house and a stable; provide her with a cow which must be replaced in case of death and furnish fother or forage for her cow and cultivate her piece of ground. Moreover they will give her each of them yearly the sum of three pounds currency.

4th I leave all my stock of cattle and all my moveable property to my said two sons equally, on conditions that they will give to my daughter Sera O'Neil two cows and the foal I have at present at the time of her marriage and likewise two cows to each of my other daughters, Margaret and Catharine O'Neil at the time of their marriage; and if any of them do not marry I hope they will live in peace with their Brothers who will be obliged to furnish them with a home in case of sickness and take care of them accordingly.

5th My will is that the eight pounds which are due to John Wilson shall be paid on demand. I recommend all my children to be obedient and loving to their mother and agreeable among themselves and my eldest son Thomas is to be considered the conductor of affairs after my death and I recommend my other children to be submissive to him.

The above, I do declare to be my last will and testament which I have heard read and have signed in presence of the witness viz the Reverend H. Paisley, Ferdinand Murphy and James Donohoe who have also signed with me.

Done and passed in my dwelling home at Valcartier on the day and year aforesaid two words raised are null, two words in the margin are good.

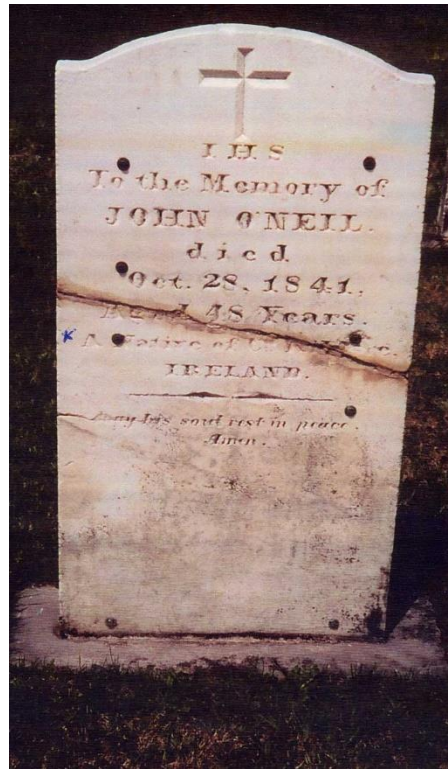
"John O'Neil"

"H. Paisley, priest"

"Ferdinand Murphy"

"James Donohoe"

This is a photograph of his gravestone in the Saint Gabriel Catholic Church Cemetery in Valcartier.



Julia would have been in her early fifties when John passed away. She had five children living with her aged eleven years to twenty-one years. Bridget and Elizabeth had already married. Ten years later, in the 1851 census (January 1852) of Valcartier, she is listed as 65 years old, widowed, born in Ireland, and living with her oldest son Thomas, his wife Bridget, and their one-year old son, John. In 1861, she is still with this family, listed as 73 years old. By that time, Thomas and Bridget had four sons and a daughter, and they are all living in a frame house.

On the 16th of November, 1864, Thomas, sold Lots 22 & 23 on the 5th Concession to Joseph Harriet. He had bought a new property on the St. Charles River, in the village of Little River, just west of Quebec City. It is assumed that Julia moved with Thomas and his family. By this time, the only children of John and Julia that were still living in Valcartier were Bridget and Sarah and they had moved to property owned by their husbands. Daughters, Margaret and Catherine were living in Quebec City with their husbands, and son, James, was living with his wife in Guelph, Ontario. Although it appears the Valcartier land was prosperous, the land in Little River was ideally located on the river and close to the market towns of Loretteville and Quebec City.

Despite many attempts, I have not been able to find Julia listed in the 1871 Census. I would think that she would have been living with Thomas' family, but either she was left off the census or she was elsewhere. This would have been a few months before her death. St. Gabriel's Church records state that Julia died on the 25th of August in L'Ancienne Lorette at the age of 85 (note that it says L'Ancienne Lorette and not Little River, however, the two are very close together and it could have been the way the priest worded it). She was buried on the 27th in the St. Gabriel Cemetery in Valcartier next to her husband. Her gravestone states: "Sacred to the memory of Julia Duffy who died 25th of August 1872, Native of County Dublin, Ireland, and relict of the late John O'Neill, aged 85 years." It appears the year stated (1872), is a mistake as the church records clearly have her listed in the 1871 burials. The stone is a beautiful red color that is decorated with the Celtic Cross. In recent years, the stone was damaged but has since been repaired and replaced on her grave.



Judith Duffy's Signature

At this time, we do not know anything about the parents of John and Julia. However, a possible clue is the Irish tradition of naming children after family members in this pattern: (John and Julia's sons are listed in red, the daughter's are not listed as it is possible that there was a daughter we do not know the name of). What is interesting here is that the third son of John and Julia did follow this pattern, so it is possible, the first two sons did also. If so, then John's father would have been named Thomas O'Neil and Julia's father, James Duffy.

The 1st son was usually named after the father's father (Thomas)

The 2nd son was usually named after the mother's father (James)

The 3rd son was usually named after the father (John)

Known Children of John and Julia

Elizabeth O'Neill Wilson

Elizabeth was born in Ireland probably around 1813 or 1814 and immigrated with her parents to Quebec when she was only three or four years old. She lived in Valcartier until her early twenties when she married John Wilson, son of John Wilson and Ann Jones. He was a farmer from neighboring Stoneham. Since Valcartier did not have a Catholic Church built yet, they were married on the 4th of November 1839 in Ste-Catherine-de-la-Jacques-Cartier Catholic Church in Ste-Catherine, Portneuf County. John was also in his early twenties and had also come from Ireland. During the next twenty years, they had six sons and three daughters and lived and farmed in the Stoneham area. John died in his sixties sometime around 1879. It is not clear whether the family moved to the Hull/Ottawa area before or after John's death. Elizabeth is found there in the 1881 and 1891 censuses with many of her children. Some of her sons are working as coal miners, so they may have moved to the area to find work. Elizabeth died on the 30th of October 1892 in Hull and is buried in the Notre-Dame-de-Grace Catholic Cemetery there. We believe that she was about 79 years old although the burial record states she was 83. Many of their descendants remained in the Ottawa area.

Bridget O'Neill Cassin

I believe that Bridget was likely born in Ireland between February and April of 1818. This is based on her marriage record indicating that she was a minor (under 21), which would mean that she would have been born after the 4th of February 1818. According to land records, the O'Neill's arrived in Canada in the spring of 1818, so I would think that she would have been born before April of that year. This would indicate that she was an infant when John and Julia crossed the ocean or was born on the ship.

Bridget married Thomas Cassin, son of Michael Cassin and Margaret Kelly, on the 4th of February 1839 in Ste-Catherine-de-la-Jacques-Cartier Catholic Church in Ste-Catherine, Portneuf County. They raised eight sons and four daughters and lived in Valcartier all their lives. Both Bridget and her husband, Thomas, lived into their mid-seventies. Thomas died in 1888, and Bridget died on the 30th of April 1895. They are both buried in St. Gabriel's Cemetery in Valcartier. Several of their children remained in Quebec, but others went to Michigan, Wisconsin, Manitoba and Ontario.

Thomas O'Neill

Thomas was the first O'Neill born on Canadian soil. He was born in Valcartier on the 20th of February 1820 and baptized on the 24th in Loretteville. As far as we know, he was also the first son for John and Julia. He is next mentioned in church records in the early 1840s when he became godfather for two of his nephews – Thomas Cassin and Thomas Martin, sons of two of his sisters. Thomas married Bridget Martin, when he was twenty-nine, on the 5th of February 1850 in St. Gabriel's Church in Valcartier. Bridget was not quite eighteen, twelve years younger than Thomas. She was sister to Francis Martin, who had married Thomas's sister, Sarah. She was the daughter of the late Thomas Martin and Jane O'Meara who also came from Ireland to Quebec in the early 1820s.

Thomas and Bridget had seven sons and four daughters. Sadly, three of the boys and two of the girls died young – Mary Ann in 1875 aged 10, Joseph in 1877 aged 2 days, Thomas in 1880 aged 27, Jane in 1896 aged 33, and Francis in 1897 aged 37.

Thomas was 21 and his brother, James was 18 at the time of their father's death. From a land record written in 1856, it is clear that they each inherited half of each of Lots 22 & 23 and each contained about 112 arpents. In 1856, James sold his land to his brother and now Thomas owned all of the original land that his father had owned.

In 1863, Thomas bought the land on the Charles River, twelve miles southeast of Valcartier. This information is from a translation of a Quebec City website:

“Along the Saint-Charles River, stands the O’Neill House, an old farmhouse that borders the Saint-Charles River, is a patrimonial jewel of the Les Saules district. One reaches it by a long alley bordered by tall American ash trees. It is located between motel establishments on Wilfrid-Hamel Boulevard West, just east of O’Neill Avenue. As of the 18th century, on the northeastern part of the seigneurie of Sillery, farms were established along Little River Road, which connected Quebec to Ancienne-Lorette. The inhabitants would go to sell their products at the Quebec market. After the Conquest of 1759, several of these farms passed to Anglophones. In 1863, Thomas O’Neill, of Irish origin, acquired from Bridget Doran and John Hearn, a farm on which there was a house, a barn and a stable. His new property extended from the river to the foot of the Sainte-Foy plateau.

O’Neill would have built the current house about 1863. It is a wooden Québécois house, similar to many of the country homes built in the Quebec City surrounding area, with a double-sloped roof and gables. In the first half of the 20th century, the O’Neill’s become famous horse-trainers. At the south end of their property, Canadian Pacific trains regularly unloaded wild horses from the West. From 1863 to 1991, four generations of O’Neill’s lived on this farm. The property ceased to be a working farm upon the death of William Patrick O’Neill in 1947. As for the Little River Road, it became the national route #2 during the 1920’s and later, in the 1960’s, it became the current Wilfrid-Hamel Boulevard. The City of Quebec acquired the O’Neill house and property in 1991 and turned it into a recreational park along the Saint-Charles River. The property remains a beautiful reminder of the past, where the farmers and the local village folk shared the many meandering river banks of the St. Charles.”

These pictures include a photograph of the house and rendering of the house in earlier times by artist, Paul Giroux.





We're not sure why Thomas and Bridget left Valcartier, but we suspect that the land was more fertile on the St. Charles River and possibly Thomas may have wanted to start raising horses and needed more land and pasture than he had in Valcartier. It was probably difficult for Julia to leave her friends in Valcartier, the only place she had lived since coming to Canada forty-five years earlier. Research into the land records would probably tell us how much land Thomas initially bought. But when Thomas died, he left all of his land to Bridget which was comprised of at least 8 farms – five farms stretching along the main highway (now Hamel Boulevard) and it appeared he also had three farms on the north side of the river, just directly across from the O'Neill House. When Bridget died, each son (John, James, Francis, Joseph and William Patrick) and one daughter, Julia, married to Alex Moore, each had a farm. Julia had the first farm and then coming east, Francis the next, then William Patrick actually had the next two, grandson Thomas who she had raised, got the next one. Sons, James, Joseph and John inherited the three farms on the north side of the river. It is thought that each farm consisted of 90 acres, so that would have been about 720 total acres. As the years passed, this area became very developed and would have been vary valuable property.

Thomas died in Little River at the age of seventy-four on the 18th of December 1894. Bridget died nine months later at the age of sixty-six. They are buried together in Valcartier in St. Gabriel's Cemetery.



A Sketch of Bridget Martin O'Neill



Mary Sarah O'Neill Martin

Mary Sarah was born 8 September 1821 in Valcartier. When she was 23 years old, she married Francis Martin on January 14, 1845. Francis's sister, Bridget, would later marry Sarah's brother, Thomas.

Sarah and Francis had five sons and four daughters. Sarah lived 77 years. She died on 23rd of January 1899 and is buried in St. Gabriel's Cemetery in Valcartier with her husband, Francis, who died in 1888.

James O'Neill

James, the second son, was born in early September, 1823 as his baptismal record states he was three weeks when baptized on September 23rd. He married Margaret Ryan, from County Tipperary, Ireland, on November 8th 1851 in St. Mary's Church in Hamilton, Ontario. They lived in Guelph, Ontario until 1867 and had five sons and a daughter. James bought and managed the Thorp British Hotel there. In 1867, while in his early forties, they migrated to Sarcoxie, in Jefferson County, Kansas close to the present-day city of Lawrence. James became a large landholder there and established the O'Neill School. Two of their sons died in their twenties. James died in his late 60's in the 1890's in Marshall, Saline County, Missouri where they had moved to after selling their farm in Kansas in 1885. The four remaining children moved to Montana. The boys were ranchers and daughter, Elizabeth, became involved in the suffrage movement. James's wife, Margaret, also moved north to Custer County, Montana to live with their children and she died about 1905 in her eighties.

Mary O'Neill

Mary was born March 31, 1825 and died at the age of five on the 3rd of July, 1830. She is buried in St. Ambrose Catholic Cemetery in Loretteville.

Margaret O'Neill Leonard

Margaret was born two years after Mary in February of 1827. At the of age 24, on October 2, 1851, she married Alexander Leonard, a young man of the same age. He had come with his parents from Ireland and was now living in St. Roch's parish in Quebec City. It appears that they did not have any children. Alex was a butcher. Margaret's sister, Catherine, later also married an Irish man who was a butcher and for many years they were neighbors in Quebec City. Alex died at age 58 in 1886, and Margaret died at age 65 on January 15, 1893. They are both buried in St. Gabriel's Cemetery.

Catherine O'Neill Kindellan

Catherine was the last daughter born to Julia and John. She was born March 28, 1830. At the age of twenty-eight, she married Garrett Kindellan, from Quebec City, on July 8, 1858 at St. Gabriel's Church. Garrett was about ten years older than Catherine and was a butcher. He had come from Ireland and was living in St. Roch's parish in Quebec City. It is possible that he was a friend of Alex Leonard, Catherine's brother-in-law, who was living in the same area and was in the same business.

Catherine and Garrett had three sons and three daughters (that we know of). At least two of the boys followed him into the business. The family lived in the St. Roch area at least into the 1880s. Garrett's burial record, in 1892, states that he died in Little River, so they may have moved there to be closer to Catherine's family. Garrett was in his seventies when he died.

Catherine is listed in the 1911 census as living in Quebec City at the age of eighty-one with the family of Robert Hunter in St. Valier Ward. She died at the age of eighty-eight in Hotel Dieu in Quebec City on the 7th of August 1918. She and Garrett are both buried in St. Gabriel's Cemetery in Valcartier.

John O'Neil

John, the last child, was born April 8, 1833 and died at 10 months of age on February 19, 1834. He is buried in Ste. Catherine de Jacques Cartier Cemetery in Portneuf.

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