Catholic Ecclesial Presence and Growth in the Columbia Region

ROBERTA STRINGHAM BROWN

The letterbooks of the first bishop of the Archdiocese of Seattle, Augustin Magliore Alexandre Blanchet (1797-1887), have lain virtually untouched in archival vaults for the last century. One reason for this long neglect is that, like many other Catholic ecclesial records of America's Pacific Northwest, they are written in French, the bishop as well as a great number of early White and Metis settlers including engagés of the Hudson's Bay Company having been French Canadian in origin. During the last eighteen months, it has been my task to begin translating into English the eleven hundred pages of copied and signed letters that comprise the letterbooks of A.M.A. Blanchet, and in this way bring to light a neglected foundation in the historical strata and heritage of the Catholic Church in this borderland region. Anxious to have a more complete picture, I have also collected letters addressed to the bishop.¹

Translation itself is a reconstruction of the voice and the personal identity of the writer; and when considered as a literary genre, correspondence is an unusually intimate form of written expression. Thus, the process of translating correspondence, particularly that of a central historical figure, engages one in the privilege of directly witnessing the making of history. My task is far from complete, but each letter that I come to know comprises one more interlocking piece in the complex puzzle of the role of Catholic ecclesial presence in the shifting borderlands and upheavals of the Pacific Northwest during the mid-nineteenth century. Although there are still many stray pieces to the puzzle, an image both of A.M.A. Blanchet and of the role of the Catholic Church in the Pacific

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Northwest is beginning to emerge.

This paper will focus on what Blanchet understood to be his role as French Canadian bishop in his new diocese, arriving at a time when the region was in a state of secular and ecclesial fluidity and transition. I will propose that it was the bishop's profound conviction of the significance of his role that provided him the strength for overcoming the endless obstacles and difficulties he would encounter, setbacks that would easily have broken a less determined and inspired spirit.

A consideration of the bishop's background prior to his appointment on 24 July 1846 is an important factor in constructing our picture of his role. Member of a large Canadien farming family of St-Pierre de Montmagny with a proud line of priests and nuns, Augustin was educated at the Petit and Grand Séminaries of Quebec City. After missionary work on the islands "de la Madeleine" and on Cape Breton, he served as parish priest in the area of Montreal and eventually as titular canon of the Cathedral of Montreal. It is not insignificant that in 1837 he was serving as pastor of St-Charles on the Richelieu, a parish in the heart of the Patriote Rebellions. Of particular interest are some letters of the period suggesting that, contrary to the official Church position in Lower Canada, the priest may have had Patriote sympathies himself, if not at least a certain feeling of solidarity with the plight of the farmers. Such letters in fact indicate that the British accused him of having favoured the insurrection of his parishioners, of appearing in the camp of the insurgents to give them general absolution, and of having written some private notes designed to prove that the revolt was not against divine right.² Claiming these implications to be exaggerated on account of the strong anti-Catholic sentiment of the British, Blanchet nevertheless admitted that he had felt isolated by the surrounding sea of insurgents, that his life had even been threatened by an anonymous Patriote,³ and for such reasons he had been forced to house from 100 to 150 insurgents in the presbytery of his church during the final days before the battle – a presence which could explain why Patriote medals were later found there (which were used as evidence for his political sympathies).4 For such assumed actions, the British imprisoned Blanchet for high treason and did not release him until three months later, on a bail of 1000 pounds, which was collected through the intermediary work of the Grand Séminaire of Quebec, with ecclesial figures including Ignace Bourget, Bishop of Montreal, working discretely behind the scenes.5

From that point onward, it seems that Abbé Blanchet and Bishop

Bourget, former classmates at the *Grand Séminaire*, maintained a constant and fairly deep friendship that extended well beyond formality. Their frequent letters are among the most personal and confidential that I have come across. It is in these letters that one catches a glimpse of how Blanchet understood his role as missionary bishop and how he justified his emigration to a land that had just become a US possession. This understanding is related to the longings and idealizations of many French Canadian clergy of the time as well as to their general adaptation of Ultramontane perspectives.

To summarize these clerical ideals, one could say that they grew out of the long nostalgic quest for a French America that was to be gloriously heroic, edenic, and Catholic in the larger, universal sense. Though vanquished by the fatality of history, there was a sense among the clergy that this promise still remained. 6 In the minds of French Canadian ecclesial figures, this mythology in fact became the reality of maintaining Catholicism and fidelity to the land. Indeed for them, the survival of the civilizing Catholic mission, initially granted to France but abandoned by this country in her progress toward secularization, now depended on the French Canadiens who needed only remain faithful to their religion, their language, and – having no more state – to the native soil. In short, the great French mission on earth had fallen into the hands of the clergy of Lower Canada. The resulting agrarian stance of many clerics reinforced not only sentiment against British settlers' claims to Canadien-held lands, but also to a collective anti-American attitude, where the eastern US seaboard was often portrayed as an economic and moral vulture, grabbing innocent Catholic worker souls of Lower Canada into its Anglo-Saxon capitalistic claws. One spoke of the great French Canadian bleeding to the south, and of the betrayal of those Canadiens who emigrated.8

A letter from Bishop Bourget suggests this mindset of the time. In December of 1846, he writes elatedly from Europe where he has just met with the founders of the new *Société d'Océanie*. What immediately struck him in meeting with these potential benefactors, he tells Blanchet, was the possibility of colonizing the Columbia "with the thousands of *Canadiens* who are going to lose themselves to the United States all the while making the fortunes of the Americans . . . Bourget goes on to write in the same letter.

I thus suggested . . . favoring the emigration of all the good *Canadien* families who would like to inhabit the immense Territory of Oregon,

by paying a part of the cost of the voyage, and by providing a means for procuring land and survival needs for these newly arrived families . . . Who knows if in this way God will not provide a place for our poor and good *Canadiens* for whom Canada will no longer be their patrimony.⁹

These utopian comments suggest that, at least in the wildest dreams of one of Lower Canada's bishops, the Oregon Country may have represented a final outpost for the preservation of the French mission, given that even Lower Canada herself was threatened by English and American hegemony.

Such inspiring words of encouragement from the man who had become his mentor, combined with thoughts of saving the souls of thousands of Native Americans, seem to have helped justify Blanchet, who, after initial epistolary expressions of inadequacy, discerned the new appointment to be the will of God. Henceforth in his correspondence, Blanchet makes it clear that the American government and its people would only be stepping stones – and often obstacles – for seeking these idealistic goals. In September 1846 Bourget consecrated the new bishop with typical Gallican pomp in the Cathedral of Montreal. Thereupon, Blanchet spent several months successfully seeking clerics to join him and scouring the countryside of Lower Canada for funds to pay for travel and initial subsistence. He departed on the Tuesday after Easter 1847 with three other secular clerics, Father Jean Baptiste Brouillet, Deacon Louis P.G. Rousseau, and Subdeacon Guillaume Leclaire, as well as two nieces who, "were going to Oregon to teach the sauvagesses crafts specific to their gender." While in Europe, Bishop Bourget had arranged for five Oblates of Mary Immaculate to depart from France and join the new bishop en route to his diocese: Father Pascal Ricard; Brothers Charles Pandosy, Eugene Casimir Chirouse, Georges Blanchet; and lay Brother, Celestin Verney. As it turned out, this little band of clerics would be solely responsible for carrying out the great French mission north of the Columbia River for a number of years to come.

The waters of the St. Lawrence having not yet thawed, Blanchet and his French Canadian companions worked their way down the dangerous icy roads of New England before embarking on the inland waterways to the head of the Oregon Trail at Westport, near St. Louis, where the Oblates joined him. The account of his voyage written in a journal and eventually in a series of detailed letters addressed to a friend from former seminary days, are testimony to the bishop's anti-US sentiments. He does not spare

words in describing the squalor of Albany, the soot of Pittsburgh, or the habit of men to lift their feet almost to their heads. "Wherever they are seated," he relates, "they find something on which to prop them. That seems an epidemic maladie."11 Blanchet was no less critical of the ability of the US Catholic church to provide support for its members. In Pittsburgh, the travel party had trouble even finding the church or its pastor; in Cincinnati, the bishop had become overly indebted in building his cathedral; in Louisville, there was not a single choirboy. 12 As for American priests, even in St. Louis where Catholicism was the majority religion, they did not find it appropriate to wear their cassock in the streets. Finally, Catholics in the public schools were ashamed of professing their religion, and emigrants were angered at the lack of priests to serve their spiritual needs, factors that Blanchet suggests may be lending to the general decline in the US of the Catholic population. 13 In spite of these observations, Blanchet went out of his way to make the acquaintance of American bishops and priests along the way who would serve him in times of difficulty during later years particularly with regard to the eventual race for and conflict over land claims. It was not, however, until he reached the open prairies, the Rockies, and the plains beyond, that the bishop's awe before the beauty of the land suggests his excitement about the potential Eden that lay beyond.

Upon his arrival in the new see of Walla Walla, near where the Snake River flows into the Columbia, Blanchet was as prepared as any individual might expect to be for the overwhelming series of setbacks he would immediately encounter caused by economic woes, political chaos, and the effects of the local Provisional Government's Protestantism and resulting prejudice against Catholicism. Turning now to these difficulties, I will mention three: first, his immediate financial straits; second, the Whitman Massacre and ensuing Indian Wars; and third, the thrust for land claims. For each, it seems to have been the rugged, unflinching devotion to his ultimate mission and his related unwillingness ever to take "no" for an answer, that led to Blanchet's ultimate success in helping establish a permanent Catholic Church in today's state of Washington.

One can only imagine the initial relief of the bishop upon pulling up to the post of Walla Walla on the afternoon of 5 September after the many mishaps of his six-month voyage. Having joined a Hudson's Bay Company party a month earlier at Fort Hall, he and three other clerics from his group had ridden ahead of their wagon train in order to find living quarters and make arrangements for missionary establishments of the

Oblates before winter fully closed in. Walla Walla had been initially selected as the site for this episcopal seat because it was anticipated that the surrounding area would be the center of population growth in the region north of the Columbia River. Tacoma, Seattle, Spokane, and other metropolitan areas in today's state of Washington were still largely untouched by white settlers. But at the time of his arrival, this potential metropolitan area was comprised of a lonely Hudson's Bay post run by chief factor William McBean, an affable, kind-hearted compatriot, who along with his Metis wife and children, was a practicing Catholic.¹⁴

The bishop's momentary bliss came to a quick halt, however, upon his survey of the surrounding area. Much building had to be done, and building requires funds. The primary source of funding for French Canadian missionary outposts was the private benevolent Society for the Propagation of Faith, administered through Lyons and Paris, France. Blanchet had written personally to the presidents of the Societies in Paris and Lyons, requested that funds be deposited through the HBC in London and credited to him through the main HBC post in Vancouver. As this was the only source for food staples and supplies in the territory, it made sense that credit be handled in such a fashion. However, this anticipated funding had not arrived and none would be made available for some time, due at least in part to the 1848 Revolution taking place in France.

In addition, funding Blanchet had expected through collections in Quebec and particularly through the efforts of Bishop Bourget, was also not forthcoming. Interestingly, in spite of seeming to live largely on promissory notes to the Hudson's Bay Company, Blanchet does not appeal to American clergy for funding. Instead, in a state of desperation, he sends his most trusted vicar general, J.B.A. Brouillet, to California in search for gold. This financial mission appears to have provided some revenue as well as further important clerical connections; and the bishop's own voyage in 1852 to Mexico for purposes of scrounging up funds from collections as well as mines, also appears to have resulted in limited financial success. In fact, a letter Bourget addresses to Blanchet in Mexico reveals a curious reversal of roles in terms of financial support. The Montreal bishop suggests that he send by way of Mexico some French Canadian Sisters and a priest he had designated for service in Oregon in the hope that they might help make a collection not just for Oregon but for "les pauvres incendiés de Montréal." The tone of the Montreal bishop's letter is not only one of continuing ideological dreams for the Oregon mission, but also one of financial desperation with regard to his own flock. Local support was equally difficult to obtain. The closest Protestant missionaries, Dr. Marcus and Narcissus Whitman, claimed that they would sell provisions to the Catholic clerics only if they were reduced to starvation. And, as it turned out, the chief officer of the Hudson's Bay Company in Vancouver was Peter Skene Ogden (1794-1854), coincidentally brother of the Attorney General at the time of the Patriote Rebellions, the very man who had summoned the pastor of St. Charles on the Richelieu for imprisonment: Charles-Richard Ogden (1791-1886). In spite of the chief officer's apparent civility during their initial encounters, this relationship became increasingly strained.

Such thick religious prejudice and political baggage lent not only to economic woes, but also complicated the missionary bishop's first immediate crisis in his new diocese. Less than three months after his arrival, Dr. Whitman, his wife, and several other adults living at the neighboring ABCFM mission of Waïlatpu (American Board of Commissioners for foreign missions) were brutally massacred by a small and unofficial band of Cayuse Indians. Anger against the Whitmans had been simmering for a number of years, due in part to what appears to have been a well-intended but patronizing attitude toward the Native Americans. At the time of Blanchet's arrival, this antagonism had reached a crisis as the result of the recent loss of additional children to the measles – in particular the two children of a chief – and suspicions of the "poison" that the doctor was distributing in his attempt to save them. It was Blanchet's Vicar General, J.B.A. Brouillet, who first came upon the victims of the massacre during his round of baptizing children afflicted with the measles. With Cayuse tomahawks menacing him over his shoulder, Brouillet performed the rites and buried the victims, then rushed on to warn a second Protestant missionary. As an army of volunteers from the Willamette Valley was making its way north to seek revenge upon all the Cayuse for the murders, Blanchet convoked an assembly of Cayuse chiefs and negotiated for the safe return of several surviving Americans who had been living at the HBCM mission at the time of the attack and who were taken as hostages. With the assistance of his interpreter, he also negotiated a settlement that spared the Cayuse as a whole from being decimated by the volunteer army. Ogden, who arrived later from Fort Vancouver to make further negotiations and to finance and arrange for rescue boats, is credited by Northwest historians for the rescue. Few historical accounts of this disastrous event in the Pacific Northwest even mention the presence or the practical, levelheaded work of the resident Catholic clergy. Indeed, within a few months, journals in the Willamette Valley were openly accusing the newly arrived bishop and his associates for having incited the massacre. In a sense, Blanchet was replaying his days as Pastor of St. Charles, again finding himself in the compromising situation of sympathizing with the losers – this time the Native Americans – and for this reason, becoming scapegoat for the anti-Catholic fervor of the winners, as well in this case, as for the winner's prejudice against Native Americans.

A third, closely related setback was land claims. When Blanchet arrived, Oregon was governed by a free-standing Provisional government comprised primarily of American Protestants eager to wrestle choice lands from resident French Canadians and Metis - most of whom had been engagés of the Hudson's Bay Company – at a pittance. Yet, according to the Organic Act of Iowa, which was in force in the Provisional lands, all American males had a right to 640 acres of land on which they had settled; this included any established mission. Having wisely become a citizen himself on paper if not in heart, Blanchet set out to establish a land base for Catholicism through application of this law. As it turns out, Protestant missionaries had fled the Walla Walla region and surrounding missions following the Whitman massacre and the ensuing Indian Wars. Claiming safety issues, the Provisional government had prohibited Blanchet himself from returning to the Walla Walla post after his initial departure with the hostages early in 1848. But O.M.I. missionaries as well as J.B.A. Brouillet had quietly resumed varying missions in the region while their itinerant bishop had managed at least to get within his original diocese by establishing himself at its western-most border, at the Dalles on the Columbia River. As a result of these events, there were no claims for American Protestant missions north of the Columbia, but the Catholic Church was in a position to make several. Close to a third of the letters Blanchet writes at this time are related to his unflinching insistence upon the Church's right to established mission lands.

The process of land claims was one of endless conflict and confrontation however. At one point local government officials attempted to limit the number of such claims to two, one in the area north of the Columbia and thus in the see of A.M.A. Blanchet, and the other to the south, which was the archdiocese of Oregon City. The bishop used the connections he had made earlier in St. Louis and Baltimore, however, to win favor from the US Congress for his right to all claims. ¹⁹ But preoccupation in Washington DC with the Civil War stalled progress for a number of years. By the end of the War, the American government was beginning

to uproot and resettle Native Americans onto reservations, while the recently established Washington Territorial Government, established in 1853, was gaining control over the decision as to what religious denominations might be allowed to "civilize" the Indians on these reservations.

These momentous events on the American landscape seemed to be sweeping away any hopes for carrying out missionary ideologies shared by the French Oblates, resident Jesuits, and the French Canadian secular clergy; and the population of Native Americans whom they had largely come to evangelize was dropping off precipitously. Through an unanticipated course of events, claims of the Catholic Church thus came to overlap with and in many ways, to defend Native American interests; one might suggest that Blanchet again found himself on the side of the losers - a situation very likely instensified in the eyes of Protestant Americans by the tendency of Catholic missionaries to live among the tribes and to accept Native American customs (with the important exceptions of polygamy and shamanism). Had Blanchet not persevered and gone to every imaginative length, including his request that the Oblates consider purchasing land as lay citizens, it is quite likely that he and his successor would not have been granted even the scant peppering of acreage they ended up with primarily sites of established churches or institutions – and would have lost all to individual American settlers.

Perhaps the most difficult of all land claims was the site of the original HBC post in Vancouver, known then as Columbia City. It was here that the Columbia Mission had been founded and settled in 1837 by François Norbert Blanchet, brother of Augustin. At the time, the chief factor of the post was Dr. John McLaughlin, an Anglican who had been schooled in French Canada, had become all but Catholic in practice and sympathies, and who encouraged devotion among his engagés living on or near the Vancouver post. In 1850, Vancouver (Columbia City) had become the see of the diocese of Nesqually to which Blanchet himself had been transferred from the diocese of Walla Walla, the latter remaining too sparsely settled to warrant his continued residence.²⁰ At the time of the claim, Peter Skene Ogden, who had since moved his post to Vancouver Island on British lands, was arranging for selling these American HBC lands to the US government, and therefore wanted to have full claim to them. In their battle for this piece of land, the animosity between the two men reached a high pitch, Ogden claiming that a mission had never existed at Ft. Vancouver. 21 Blanchet never completely backed down, however; the church's claim remained viable; and it was finally settled some thirty years later by his successor. By this time, however, it had been reduced to a small piece of property that included the church itself and the convent of the Sisters of Providence. Echoes of the British-French antagonism Blanchet had known in his earlier days in Lower Canada were thus still ringing in this battle between the British Hudson's Bay Company and the local *Canadien* Catholic bishop.

At times these many struggles occasioned letters of deep discouragement and confessions of failure on the part of the bishop. They often concluded, nonetheless, with recognition that success does not come without bearing the cross. Willing to shoulder the bittersweet burden of the cross – a carbine undoubtedly in one hand and a rosary in the other – Blanchet kept his piercing gaze ahead, fixed on his ultimate mission. He travelled to Europe and again to Mexico, gathering further funds and making important connections with other benevolent societies.

In 1856 Blanchet returned to Montreal to arrange for the eventual settlement of the Sisters of Providence, the first group of 1852 having ended up in Chile rather than on the Pacific Coast, primarily as the result of miscommunication. Through sacrifice and tireless efforts this second group of Sisters solidly anchored themselves, established the first academies for girls north of the Columbia, as well as orphanages, hospitals, and asylums. Their services were called upon by new white settlers, Protestant as well as Catholic, as well as by remaining Native American tribes. Blanchet's correspondence suggests that their works were only limited by the number of Sisters whom the Mother House in Montreal could provide. To this day, these initial Sisters of Providence are considered the founders of Washington State's Department of Social and Health Services, an organization that continues to operate as an umbrella agency along the pattern set by the Sisters. Recognizing that there were no Protestant schools north of the Columbia - and rushing to beat the Protestants to state tax funds for education – Blanchet also sought clerics from colleges as far flung as St. Hyacinth in Quebec to the American College in Louvain and the College of All Hallows in Ireland. As late as 1870, he was insisting that these teachers be fluent in French as well as English in order to meet the needs of the Canadien settlers.

As a result of these accomplishments there is a deepening sense of accomplishment in the letters of the bishop. A letter of 1867 addressed to Bourget describes a recent episcopal visit to Native American, *Canadien*, and American missionary settlements throughout the diocese. While still pointing out the many problems and repeating his perpetual request for

additional priests, Blanchet nevertheless provides ample reasons for rejoicing, particularly with regard to the devotional practices of Native Americans such as the Lummi Tribe in the northernmost corner of the diocese. ²² By the time of his resignation in 1879 for reasons of age and health, it seems that Blanchet was at peace with what he had managed to accomplish in this largely Protestant and unchurched land.

In 1907 the See of Nesqually was moved to Seattle, and in 1911 it was renamed the Diocese of Seattle. In 1950 it was elevated to the Archdiocese of Seattle. A.M.A. Blanchet is celebrated as its first bishop. The Archdiocese of Seattle, which today encompasses all of western Washington from the summit of the Cascade Mountains to the Pacific, is frequently noted for its independence from ecclesial opinions that dominate other parts of the US. As its founding roots begin to emerge from the interlocking pieces of the Blanchet correspondence, one cannot help but wonder if this independence might have something to do with Bishop A.M.A. Blanchet's modest success – in spite of endless setbacks – in preserving some embers of the great French missionary ideology and the dreams of his friend and mentor, Ignace Bourget. Whatever the case may be, the modest success of this story continues to be shrouded by layers of American nationalist assumptions as well as by the anti-Catholic and antiforeigner prejudices of earlier historians who shaped the Pacific Northwest legacy, and who did not take into account the ambiguities of borderland history.

Endnotes

- I am grateful to French Canadian researcher, Georges Aubin of l'Assomption, for generously lending me his transcription of correspondence of A.M.A. Blanchet and related documents, several which I have used in particular for information not found in the Letterbooks of the Archdiocese of Seattle or in the Archives of the Chancellery of the Archdiocese of Montreal.
- 2. Bourget to Blanchet, 5 December 1837, Registre de Lettres, 1:89, Archives de la Chancellerie de l'Archdiocèse de Montréal [hereafter ACAM].
- 3. Archbishop Lartigue had also received an anonymous letter announcing this threat, and writes to warn Blanchet of his dangerous position (Lartigue to Blanchet, 12 July 1837, Registre de Lettres, 8:406, ACAM).
- 4. Blanchet to Bourget, 7 December 1837, 420.041, ACAM.

- Lartigue to Blanchet (in prison), 9 March 1838, Registre de Lettres, 9:27, ACAM.
- 6. Guildo Rousseau, L'image des Etats-Unis dans la littérature québecoise, 1775-1930 (Sherbrooke: Éditions Naaman, 1981), 11.
- 7. Constance Gosselin Schick, "Jeanne la fileuse et le repatriement des émigrés," *The French Review* 71, No. 6 (1998): 1007.
- 8. Rousseau, L'image des Etats-Unis dans la littérature québecoise. See in particular Chapter 7, "La lutte contre l'emprise économique" for a description of anti-American sentiment in nineteenth-century French Canadian literature.
- Bourget to Blanchet, December 1846, Registre de Lettres, 901.055: 846-11, ACAM.
- Blanchet to Gavreau, 20 November 1848, Registre de Letters, Series A, Vol. III, Archives of the Archdiocese of Seattle [hereafter AAS].
- Blanchet to Gavreau, 27 November 1847, Registre de Lettres, Series A, Vol. III, AAS.
- 12. Blanchet to Gavreau, 27 November 1847.
- Blanchet to Gavreau, 2 December 1847, Registre de Lettres, Series A, Vol. III, AAS.
- Blanchet to Gavreau, 20 January 1847, Registre de Lettres, Series A, Vol. III, AAS.
- 15. Document entitled "Instructions à Messieurs Truteau et Paré," Registre de Lettres, Series A, Vol. II, AAS.
- 16. Bourget to Blanchet, 2 August 1852, Registre de Lettres, 7:361, ACAM. This was the epoch of the Montreal fire of 1852 which destroyed the cathedral of Montreal and left thousands homeless, inspiring Bourget to rebuild his cathedral in the English section of Montreal and in imitation of St. Peter's of Rome.
- Blanchet to Gavreau, 22 February 1848, Registre de Lettres, Series A, Vol. III, AAS.
- Blanchet to Bourget, 30 March 1838, Archives de la Chancellerie de l'Evêché de Valleyfield; see also Blanchet to Truteau, 30 March 1838, Registre de Lettres, Series A, Vol. 3, AAS.
- 19. Blanchet to Kenrick, Archbishop of Baltimore, 31 May 1853, Registre de Lettres, Series A., Vol. II, AAS.

- 20. The diocese of Walla Walla was suppressed in 1853.
- 21. P.S. Ogden to John B. Preston, 17 July 1853, Registre de Lettres, Series A, Vol. III, AAS.
- 22. Blanchet to Bourget, 10 October 1867, 195.133; 867-71, ACAM.