

Amerindian Mission Churches. Or the priority of the Faith.

Between the 17th and 19th centuries, Amerindian mission churches spread over the entire province of Québec. Some of them were naturally established near important towns like the Mission of Notre-Dame-de-la-Jeune-Lorette, in Wendake (a few kilometres from Québec). Most, however, appeared as soon as trading posts were established. The Amerindians willingly settled around these centres because they facilitated their seasonal trading. The Jesuits, the Recollects and a little later the Sulpicians and the Oblates generally received financial help from trading companies in order to establish their missions in remote areas.

Among the buildings which have been listed as historic monuments are the Church of Notre-Dame-de-Lorette (Wendake, listed in 1957), the Indians' chapel together with its sacristy (Tadoussac, listed in 1965) and the chapel of the trading post at the Lac aux Allumettes (Fort William, historical site listed in 1981).

In their stark simplicity, these places of worship take us right back to the time they were built and the basic essentials of the faith that was propagated. The aim of missionary work was to spread the Christian faith as far as the most distant areas. Therefore it was necessary for the missionaries to establish themselves in locations which the Amerindians used as gathering places. Because of this, the missions have a common factor in that they are all situated near sources of water which facilitated the coming and going of average-sized craft.



Chapel of Tadoussac,
General view
Photo : François Brault



Interior of Odanak's church
Photo : Germain Casavant

The Abenakis were established in Sillery and on the banks of the river Chaudière until they were decimated by the Iroquois at the end of the 17th century. They then regrouped in Odanak thanks to Jean Crevier, the seigneur of Pierreville, who gave a part of his land so that a permanent mission could be set up on the banks of the river Saint-François. The first mission chapel was built of wood and erected in 1700. It was pillaged and destroyed in 1759 by troops led by Rogers. The following year it was reconstructed. Unfortunately it was destroyed again, this time due to a fire in 1815.

In 1826 a stone church of about 22 metres by 10 metres was built among the trees by the river. Its simplicity of form both inside and outside remind one of the mission chapels of Tadoussac and la Jeune-Lorette, which were, however slightly smaller.

In 1617 a mission chapel was erected in Tadoussac where the Saguenay and the Saint-Lawrence rivers converge. The modest structure built of tree bark was destroyed as soon as the Recollects left. They were obliged to leave New France after the brief victory of the Kirke brothers in 1629. In 1640 the Jesuits built a chapel adjoining their dwelling place in this vicinity. This was replaced with a larger stone church in 1661 which unfortunately was badly damaged in a fire three years later.

In 1747 the chapel known as 'the Indians' chapel' was built in Tadoussac by Father Claude-Godefroi Coquart. The work was financed by the Intendant, Bigot. It was opened for worship in 1750 and served the Montagnais of whom there were many in the Lac-Saint-Jean and North Shore area. Despite the fact that it was reconstructed many times, the chapel remains the oldest religious wooden building still in existence.

The present chapel was built in the 18th century and is covered with red shingles. It is based on a rectangular ground plan and ends in a polygonal apse. The façade is surmounted by a bell-tower with a single lantern covered with a conical roof which supports a cross. It has large double-doors and an arched window in the gable. Its half-timbered walls are covered in horizontal wood panelling. In 1866 the side windows were arched

with the addition of wooden slats, and at the same time the eaves were taken back in order to let more light into the nave.

The interior is rather bare; the only artefact is a tabernacle which was carved by the sculptor Pierre Émond. This was a gift from a merchant working for the Hudson Bay Company.

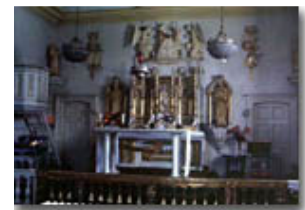


Church of Notre-Dame-de-Lorette in Wendake
Photo : Germain Casavant

The fur trade spread to the Outaouais area and to the north of Québec from the beginning of the 17th century. There were many trading posts which were essential links for commercial trading in these areas. The trading station at Lac-aux-Alumettes was 130 km north-west of Hull, not far from Pembroke (Ontario), on the east bank of the river des Outaouais. The chapel of Sainte-Thérèse was built in 1857 by the Hudson Bay Company to serve the Amerindians who were settling in the area. It was designed on a rectangular ground plan lengthened by a sacristy. The chapel is panelled in clapboard and above the gabled façade is a bell-tower surmounted by a spire. Only the guttered walls have windows which allow light to penetrate into the nave.

The Amerindians started to settle at Grand-Lac-Victoria, about 65 kilometres south of Val-d'Or, in Abitibi, in 1785. They established themselves where the river des Outaouais widens to form the Grand Lac Victoria. The first missionary to settle there was the Sulpician Louis-Charles Lefebvre de Bellefeuille, in 1836. The chapel of Sainte-Clothilde measures 35 feet by 25, and was erected in 1863.

The Church of Notre-Dame-de-Lorette is situated near Québec and still serves the Huron community of Wendake. In 1698 Mgr de Saint-Vallier paid a hundred ecus for a chapel to be built in la Jeune-Lorette for the Hurons. The wooden building served as a place of worship until 1722 when a second building was started, this time of stone. Unfortunately the latter was then destroyed by fire in 1862. The present church was immediately built on the existing foundations using its predecessor as a model. Despite being built in the second half of the 19th century, it therefore has the appearance of a religious building of the first half of the 18th century. It has a rectangular ground plan and the main body of the church is separated from the sacristy by a thick stone partition. This division reveals two phases in the construction: the original sacristy was probably placed behind a wooden partition in the nave, and the church was then lengthened by adding a sacristy on to the flat chevet.



Choir of Notre-Dame-de-Lorette in Wendake
Photo : Germain Casavant

The façade in roughcast remains faithful to the old appearance of the building: it has a single semicircular door surmounted by an oculus. The nave is only lit by small windows along the side elevations. The twin lantern bell-tower is built on a square base on top of the roof.

The artefacts of the previous church had managed to escape the fire. These included the tabernacle of the high altar by Noël Levasseur which dated back to 1722. It was similar in size to the one the artist had created for the Hôpital Général de Québec.

The church and site of Kanawake



Kahnawake mission, residence
Photo : Germain Casavant

The first Iroquois mission in the Montréal area was established in Laprairie in 1669 by Father Raffeix, a Jesuit. It was moved around during the development of the French colony until in 1716, until it eventually found a permanent home in Kahnawake, opposite the Lachine rapids. According to Father Charlevoix, the church and presbytery built in 1716-1717 are among the finest buildings in the country. In 1720 it was decided to fortify the mission. A palisade was built around it and a small building was constructed

to house an officer and guards. These buildings were designed by Gaspard Chaussegros de Léry, a military engineer, and they are still in existence today.

The present church was built on the foundations of its predecessor. The building work began in 1845, from plans drawn up by Father Félix Martin, a Jesuit. It is based on a traditional design in the form of a Latin cross. The bell-tower projecting slightly forward from the centre of the façade is not, however, a common feature of this particular style. This kind of structure was usually placed above the gable, or sometimes two projecting towers were built on either side of the façade.



Interior of the sacristie
Photo : Germain Casavant

Vincent Chartrand, trained in the school of Quévillon, carved the three reredoses, the tabernacles for the side altars, and the altar-stones in 1845. The reredoses stand out from a bare wall and are treated more like furnishings; that is to say, no attempt has been made to integrate them into the décor of a more developed interior. This simplicity is characteristic of mission churches. The painting on the ceiling was carried out at a later date by Guido Nincheri, who was of Italian origin. The two large statues in the choir represent Saint François-Xavier and Saint Ignace de Loyola, and were both attributed to the sculptor Louis-Thomas Berlinguet.

Denyse Légaré
Text translated by Rachel Tunnicliffe

Bibliography :

- « La restauration de l'église de Caughnawaga », In. : *Kateri*, no. 23, automne 1965, pp. 5 et 16-22.
- Frenette, Pierre, *La chapelle des Indiens de Tadoussac*, Tadoussac, Les éditions du Cyclope, 1987, 27 pages.
- Groupe Harcart Inc., *Fabrique de la chapelle des Hurons*, Loretteville – Comté de Québec. Québec, ministère des Affaires culturelles, 1982, 241 pages.
- Gobeil-Trudeau, Madeleine, « Église Notre-Dame-de-Lorette », In. : *Les chemins de la mémoire (Tome 1)*, Québec, Les Publications du Québec, 1990, pp. 258-259.
- Lapointe, Pierre-Louis. « Poste du Lac-aux-Alumettes (aussi appelé Fort-William) », In. : *Les chemins de la mémoire (Tome 2)*, Québec, Les Publications du Québec, 1991, pp. 524-526.
- Lefebvre, Jean-Claude, « Chapelle des Indiens et sacristie », In. : *Les chemins de la mémoire (Tome 1)*, Québec, Les Publications du Québec, 1990, pp. 475.
- Maurault, J.A. (abbé), *Histoire des Abénakis depuis 1605 jusqu'à nos jours*, Sorel, 1866, 631 pages.
- Noppen, Luc, « Église Notre-Dame de Lorette du Village des Hurons », In. : *Les églises du Québec (1600-1850)*, Québec, Éditeur officiel du Québec/Fides, 1977, pp. 286.
- Noppen, Luc, « Tadoussac, chapelle », In. : *Les églises du Québec (1600-1850)*, Québec, Éditeur officiel du Québec/Fides, 1977, pp. 276.
- Noppen, Luc, « Odanak, église Saint-François-de-Sales », In. : *Les églises du Québec (1600-1850)*, Québec, Éditeur officiel du Québec/Fides, 1977, pp. 154.
- Noppen, Luc, « Caughnawaga, église Saint-François-Xavier », In. : *Les églises du Québec (1600-1850)*, Québec, Éditeur officiel du Québec/Fides, 1977, pp. 92-93.
- Traquair, Ramsay, « The Huron Mission Church and the Treasure of Notre Dame de la Jeune-Lorette, Québec », In. : *Journal R.A.I.C.*, septembre 1930, pp. 337-345
- Traquair, Ramsay, « The Huron Mission Church and the Treasure of Notre Dame de la Jeune-Lorette, Québec », In. : *Journal R.A.I.C.*, novembre 1930, pp. 415-421.