

The Church of Saint-Bernard de Dorchester

The importance of Québec parish buildings

The church and presbytery of Saint-Bernard were listed as historic monuments in 1960. There are many examples of listed institutional buildings in one locality being listed together in groups. Such groups would include the parish church, sacristy, presbytery, convent, school and cemetery, and are generally of the same period. There are, however, examples where construction of the buildings was spread out over a period of time (sometimes over eighty years) like in Saint-Joseph-de-Beauce.

Le presbytère actuel remplace le presbytère-chapelle construit en 1844 sur un terrain du rang Saint-Georges, donné par George Pozer, seigneur de Beaurivage.



Façade

Photo : Germain Casavant

The present presbytery replaces the presbytery-chapel which had been built in 1844 on a piece of land in the Rang Saint-Georges, conceded by George Pozer, seigneur of Beaurivage. The presbytery-chapel was a building frequently found in parishes created at the beginning of the 19th century, especially in the counties of Bellechasse, Dorchester, Beauce and Portneuf. It provided a temporary place of worship for the parishioners with a dwelling place above for the priest. Once the church was built, the presbytery-chapel was refurbished and the church council could then provide their priest with a much larger place to live.



Choir

Photo : Germain Casavant

The parishioners of Saint-Bernard used a presbytery-chapel for over twenty years. It was even enlarged in 1863 to accommodate the increasing number of worshippers; a church was becoming more and more of a necessity. However, contrary to custom, a new presbytery was built in 1865 and the church was only started six years later in 1871.

The church was built by the contractors Pierre and Charles Fortier in the traditional style of the 'school of Thomas Baillairgé'. Although the plans are attributed to Joseph-Ferdinand Peachy, student of Thomas Baillairgé and his successor as diocesan architect, the building does not resemble any produced by him in the eighteen-seventies. The most likely scenario is that the architect acted as a consultant and agreed to oversee the work without actually interfering in the church council's choice of design.

The layout of the church and symmetry of the openings on the façade conform to the neo-classical tradition favoured by Thomas Baillairgé's successors from the eighteen-fifties onwards. The building is 40 metres long and 15 metres wide. It is in the style of a Latin cross with a semicircular choir and aligned sacristy.



Side altar

Photo : Germain Casavant

There is still some doubt as to whom to attribute the structural work, but we know that the interior was produced from the plans of Joseph-Ferdinand Peachy in 1875. It is in keeping with established tradition and it conforms to the architectural logic of the main structure: the wooden false-vaulting in basket-handle design is divided into sections by large transverse ribs which meet the entablature at the top of the supports. Peachy's personal style can be seen in the sheer size of the features: the transverse ribs are punctuated with round, twisted tori, and pilasters make way for fluted columns in a Corinthian style which is considered more decorative than the Ionic order. This formal organisation perhaps adds a certain heaviness when compared with the older architectural style, but it is certainly in line with the tendencies of the last quarter of the 19th century where the use of polychromy and trompe-l'œil (which had disappeared in 1943) contributed to enriching the architectural features.

The church has undergone important renovations: the floor, the pews and several furnishings were completed in 1904; the balcony was enlarged in 1912 in accordance with the plans of the architects Ouellet and Lévesque; and later, in 1943, the trompe-l'oeil imitation marble was painted white in a vain attempt to produce a neo-classical effect.

The presbytery was built on a rectangular plan from dressed quarry stone. It has a pitched roof with skylights in line with the ground floor windows. The passion for symmetry and the attention to elegance give the building a traditional look.

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