

The Church of Saint-Édouard de Bécancour

A church built by local tradesmen, artists and architects



Façade
Photo : CPRQ

In 1781, a first stone church was erected in Saint-Édouard de Bécancour (today known as Gentilly). By 1845, the building was in a sorry state. It was well on the way to becoming a ruin due to damage caused by the rise in the water level of the river every spring. Monsignor Signay, bishop of Québec, authorised construction of a new church provided that the site was changed. This meant that the original building could be used until the new one was completed, and the new building would be safe from the annual flooding. The bishop also insisted that an architect be consulted. This condition, rather surprising at first sight, reveals an attitude which was relatively common in places far from the main cities. Not being able to obtain the services of an architect, a skilful contractor was often called in to build a church from a standard design which could be copied several times.



High altar
Photo : Germain Casavant

The church of Saint-Édouard was erected after this fashion following the design by Thomas Baillairgé which had been used several years before in Saint-Pierre-les-Becquets. The plan is based on a Latin cross ending in a semicircular apse with a sacristy built on at the round end. The building was finished in 1849 but the bell-tower, of a different craftsmanship, was only completed in 1857, at the same time as the interior. Damase Saint-Arnaud, a contractor from Bécancour, produced the interior which was finished in 1862 in keeping with the style of Thomas Baillairgé.



Chœur
Photo : Germain Casavant

The false-vaulting, entablature, reredoses, stalls, thrones (there are exceptionally two thrones here, one for the bishop and one for the priest) and balustrade had to be "similar to those of the church of Saint-Anselme" created in 1845 by André Paquet, having used Saint-Joseph de Lauzon as a model. As Saint-Arnaud was only a skilful carpenter, he probably needed the services of a professional sculptor for the stone carving. Hearsay attributes the reliefs in the choir to Adolphe Rho, a painter and sculptor who came from the same parish.



Left arm of transept
Photo : Germain Casavant

A few years later, Raphaël Giroux was commissioned to renew the main furnishings including three altars, the pulpit and the churchwarden's pew. The tabernacle on the high altar remains the most remarkable artefact in the sanctuary; it looks like a scale model of a building of an ornate architectural style. Giroux also made the frames for the three paintings in the choir. The one over the high altar by Eugène Hamel portrays the miracle of the ring after the legend of Saint Edward the Confessor, patron saint of the parish. When Giroux died in 1869, his sons Alfred and Eugène completed the remaining work.

The paintings in the lunettes were most likely produced at the same time as the trompe-l'œil by Joseph-Thomas Rousseau, painter-decorator from Saint-Hyacinthe. Besides the ornamental and architectural motifs, he had created imitation marble in the choir. Unfortunately, some restoration work which took place in the nineteen-sixties removed almost all of this high quality workmanship.

In 1907, the church council realised that the church had to be enlarged. They contacted Louis Caron junior who had worked with his father, amongst others, on the cathedral of Nicolet. The young architect did a very commendable act of conservation by replacing the 1857 bell-tower on the central tower, crowning the corners with identical spirelets. He also incorporated the lintels of the original façade on the new elevation. The building was classed as an historic monument in 1962.

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Text translated by Rachel Tunnicliffe

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