

The Church of Saint-Eustache

Symbol of a growing nationalism

The Church of Saint-Eustache, theatre of the Rebellion from 1837-1838, holds a symbolic value for the Québécois: it was reborn from its ashes immediately after the sad event of 14th December 1837. It was listed as an historic monument in 1970.



Façade

Photo : Germain Casavant

"A short while after their victory in Saint-Denis (on the river Richelieu), the Patriots, defeated in Saint-Charles, had to seek refuge in the Church of Saint-Eustache. They were subjected to a siege led by the British general, John Colborne, who fired canons at the façade which greatly damaged the church and convent leaving only the foundations and part of the walls. Seventy of them died including their leader, Doctor Jean-Olivier Chénier. During the nuit rouge (red night) which followed, the whole village was burnt down, from whence came Colborne's nickname: vieux brûlot (old fireship)". (Raymonde Gauthier, Raymonde, Les chemins la mémoire, t. II, Québec, Les Publications du Québec, 1991, p. 396.)

Saint-Eustache is a peaceful place whose history began in 1768 when the seigneur Louis-Eustache Lambert Dumont made a gift of a piece of land situated on the river des Mille & I circles, where it leaves the lac des Deux Montagnes and joins the river du Chêne. A presbytery-chapel was built in 1774 and six years later, Augustin Grégoire, contractor and builder, was asked to build a church. The plan was for a Latin cross style building with a six-bay nave ending in a semicircular choir and completed with a sacristy. An oculus let in extra light from above the central doorway which had secondary doorways on either side. The church was blessed in 1783 by Monsignor Briand, Principal of the Seminary of Québec. It bears a certain resemblance to the Church of Saint-Paul de Joliette, built from Father Conefroy's plans.



Interior towards choir

Photo : Germain Casavant



Pulpit and side aisle

Photo : Germain Casavant

An important project was undertaken in 1820 by the sculptor-ornamentalists, Louis-Amable Quévillon and René Saint-James. It included relaying the sanctuary floors, strengthening the structure of the balconies, providing the latter with stairways, making a balustrade, renovating the vaulting in the nave and decorating it along with that of the choir and chapels, decorating the pulpit and churchwarden's seat, painting and gilding all carvings, and silvering the chandeliers, the crucifix and the sanctuary lamp. The work was finished when the parish was officially inaugurated in 1825. It is worth mentioning that it was rare for the construction of a parish church to be in as advanced a state as this one was at the time of the parish's inauguration.

In 1831, estimates were invited in order to build extensions including a two-tower front of about 23 metres wide and 20 metres high. Two styles were to be used on the façade, the Doric and the Ionic, each one to be given six pilasters with bases, capitals, architraves, friezes and cornices etc. made of freestone. Two bell-towers with double lanterns, a stone wall in front of the graveyard and a parvis in front of the church were also to be included on the estimate.

The façade thus took on the appearance it has today. The building was heavily damaged during the 1837-1838 Rebellion, but with great courage, on the day after the defeat, the parishioners undertook to restore the church and build a new presbytery.

The interior was restored from 1850 to 1854. Unfortunately no trace was left of the work of Quévillon and Saint-James. Strangely enough, no one to this day has been able to identify who created the present interior.

In 1905, Joseph Sawyer, a Montréal architect, proceeded to extend the church. The side walls were demolished in order to erect new walls forming side aisles in line with the bell-towers. This operation led to the complete restoration of the roof whose two slopes now had to cover a three-nave church. The new vaulting was decorated with false coffers and the side aisles were decorated with groined vaulting in plaster. The bell-towers were also rebuilt and a statue of Saint Eustache, carved by Olindo Gratton was placed in the pediment on the façade.



High altar

Photo : Germain Casavant

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