

# The Church of Sainte-Famille de Cap-Santé

## The symmetrical two-tower façade of the 18th century in Québec



Drawing by Sempronius Stretton,  
1806  
Photo : Archives publiques du  
Canada

### A significant building of the 18th century

Situated along the Chemin du Roy between Québec and Trois-Rivières, Cap-de-la-Sainte-Famille has been there since the middle of the 17th century. The parish of Sainte-Famille was founded in 1709 **and** officially authorized in 1714. The first church, built of stone, was then erected. This was replaced by the present building in 1754. The structural work continued until 1758 at which time the war with the English brought construction to a halt. It was finished between 1763 and 1767.



Façade  
Photo : Germain Casavant

It was the first time that the narrowing of the choir as in the Recollect plan was applied to a building with a transept. This layout would become common practice in the 19th century. "Another interesting peculiarity, two small annexes, can be found behind the towers which flank the façade. One of these was a baptistry and the other a confessional. They were turned into chapels in 1877." (Guy-André Roy, *Les chemins de la mémoire*, t. I, Québec, Les Publications du Québec, 1991, p. 308). A Québec architect, David Ouellet, carried out the alterations.

The presence of two storeys of windows, arched at the ground level and oculi under the entablature, make the building seem more impressive. This layout leads one to think that the master builder was trying to imitate the double storeys with side aisles and clerestory that Chaussegros de Léry had used for the Cathedral Notre-Dame de Québec between 1744 and 1749. After this time, double storeys could mainly be found in buildings with side galleries like the Anglican Cathedral of Québec.

### A Baroque-style interior

After a few decades without any interior decoration, the church council decided to proceed with a project for a sculpted interior. In 1773, the false-vaulting was completed, but it was not until 1803 that Louis-Amable Quévillon was commissioned to create a reredos for the high altar. Everything was finished in 1809. However, this did not seem to satisfy the local people. The priest described it as "mediocre" and it was decided to reconstruct the interior between 1859 and 1861. The sculptor Raphaël Giroux, a student of Thomas Baillairgé, and the master plasterer, François Blouin, were hired to give the church a new appearance.

The interior no doubt underwent major transformations although it is not known whether certain elements created by Quévillon were preserved. The altar-stone of the high altar is definitely the work of the latter, but the rest is unsure. In strict neo-classical spirit in keeping with the teachings of Baillairgé, the new interior stands out because of its dynamic, projecting reredos. The layout underlies a Baroque spirit which is more clearly distinguishable here than in most of the church interiors in Québec. Quévillon's reredos is thought to have been able to use the space in the same manner. His master, Philippe Liébert, produced a Baroque-style reredos in Notre-Dame de Montréal between 1765 and 1768, and other examples of this particular design were produced in the eighteen-twenties.



Interior towards choir  
Photo : Germain Casavant



Nave towards the façade  
Photo : Germain Casavant

Not far from Cap-Santé, the reredos in Saint-Augustin, in the Montréal area, and that of Saint-Jean-Baptiste de Rouville, show similar characteristics to that of Giroux. Therefore one can presume that in Quévillon's time this pattern was effectively part of a formal vocabulary which was then in fashion, and that the eighteen-fifties' reconstruction in Cap-Santé was carried out in accordance with certain pre-existing forms.



Christ in niche  
on the façade  
Photo : François Brault

### **An imposing façade with two towers modified at the beginning of the 19th century**

In spite of the magnificence of the interior, what really holds our attention is the monumental nature of the façade with its two towers. It takes its place in a tradition inspired by the great work of the Cathedral Notre-Dame de Québec and thus joins that of the church of Sainte-Famille de l'île d'Orléans.

It is clear that the façade with its two towers has an aura of respectability about it. It was built in the same architectural style which characterises so many of the great churches and cathedrals since the 12th century. This in itself ensured that it would have the dignity and prestige appropriate to an episcopal building. completely resisted the ravaging effects of the weather.

In an 18th century provincial context, it is easy to understand how the building of a church of a similar style and proportions to those of Quebec's city churches would be undeniably a source of great local pride. The magnificent sculptures in the niches of the gable themselves add to the prestige of the whole building. They were produced in the studio of the Levasseurs in about 1775 and they have

It should be noted that when they were first built in the 18th century, the towers were surmounted by cupolas and there was a tower at the chevet. In 1807, a short while after the first important project had been carried out for the interior, the bell-towers on the façade were modernised replacing the cupolas with two levels of lanterns and demolishing the tower at the chevet. Far from distorting the whole composition, this modification added a certain élan and delicacy.

**Charles Bourget**

Text translated by Rachel Tunnicliffe

#### Bibliography:

- Noppen, Luc. *Les églises du Québec (1600-1850)*, Québec et Montréal, Éditeur officiel, 1977, p. 88-89.
- Roy, Guy-André. *Les chemins de la mémoire*, t. I, Québec, Les Publications du Québec, 1990, p. 308-309.