The île-d'Orléans.
Religious zeal in the 18th century.

Bell-tower of Saint-François
Photo : François Brault

The cross and the weathercock which surmount the spires of steeples are eloquent symbols of the religious devotion of the founding fathers of the parishes on the île d'Orléans: the sign of the cockerel is associated with the Passion of Christ (St. Peter's denial) (in Latin gallus), messenger of dawn, bringer of good news and symbol of the Gauls since Vercingetorix. The Processional Chapels and Ways of the Cross mark the former boundaries of the parishes, the centres of which were the church, presbytery and cemetery.

According to the historian Michel Lessard, « the sacred character of the island centres around this nucleus formed of the church, the presbytery and the burial ground ».

There is no trace of the first parish churches which were erected in the 17th century. They were built of wood and were in the form of a Latin cross based on the design of the church of Mgr de Laval in Québec. A picture taken by the photographer Jules Isaï Benoit, otherwise known as Livernois, shows the Church of Saint-Laurent, which was open for worship in 1697, and the new church of 1864. It is a rare document which confirms the presence of the old building which was destroyed that same year.

Aerial view of Saint-Pierre
Photo : François Brault

The Churches of Saint-Jean, Saint-Pierre and Sainte-Famille were all listed as historic monuments in 1957, 1958 and 1980 respectively. Together, they constitute the synthesis of religious architecture under the French regime, combining the Jesuit plan, and the Recollect plan with an imitation of the elevations of the most important religious buildings in Québec.

The Church of Saint-Pierre is the oldest of the three and was erected between 1717 and 1719. It is built in the form of a Latin cross with side chapels acting as a transept, and ends in a circular apse. Its steeply sloping roof follows the incline of the gable forming an equilateral triangle similar to the original roof of the Church of Notre-Dame-des-Victoires. The original façade with a single doorway in the centre surmounted by an oculus was preserved when it was decided, towards 1775, to lengthen the church by extending the choir rather than the nave. This layout allowed for the addition of the first sacristy in the round-end of the choir behind the reredos. In 1788, the bell-tower at the transept crossing was moved to the façade.

Exterior of
Sainte-Famille
Photo : Germain Casavant

In addition to its Jesuit plan, the Church of Sainte-Famille, opened for worship in 1746, includes projecting towers in the façade. These towers were at first covered by ogee-curved roofs copied from the chapel in Haute-Ville (Upper Town). In 1807 the roofs were replaced with spires. Furthermore, five niches were incorporated into the main elevation imitating those of the Episcopal palace, and a sundial surmounted the portal (in place of the present window) similar in style to the one found on the procurator's wing of the Québec Seminary.

The Church of Saint-Jean on the other hand is based on the Recollect plan, with a narrow semicircular choir creating a space for chapels in the nave. In 1852, the building was extended by bringing the facade forward eight metres. The architect and sculptor Louis-Thomas Berlinguet designed the façade based on a simplification of the recent ideas put forward by Thomas Baillairgé for the Basilica-Cathedral of Notre-Dame de Québec. This formula was to be repeated for Saint-Isidore de Dorchester, Beauceville, Saint-Laurent de l'île d'Orléans and at Saint-Michel de Bellechasse.

Façade of Saint-Jean
Photo : Germain Casavant

While the structural work of the churches of the île d'Orléans belong to the religious architecture of the 18th century, their interiors must have been completed or modified during the first half of the 19th century. Their diversity adds to the wealth of the architectural heritage of the island where the two traditional schools of Thomas Baillairgé, and de Louis-Amable Quévillon can be found. Some of these interiors, which were completed in various stages, still contain a few features from the French regime.

The original interior of the Church of Sainte-Famille was produced by the sculptor Gabriel Gosselin. He carved the pulpit, the confessionals, the churchwarden's seat and the tabernacles for the side altars in 1748. The tabernacle for the high altar was produced by the Levasseur family the following year. Pierre-Florent Baillairgé used this as a model when in 1791 he carved new tabernacles for the chapels. In 1812, the church council commissioned the services of Louis-Bazile David, a student of Quévillon, for the ornamentation of the ceiling. David had just finished a similar job for the Church of Saint-Laurent. He decorated the ceiling with coffers inside which was a lozenge-shape containing a rose. A few years later, the parish decided to go to Thomas Baillairgé for the reredos for the high altar. Curiously, Baillairgé completed the reredos as far as the entablature and left the care of carving a bas-relief representing the Eternal Father at the top to an anonymous artist. In 1833, a cornice was installed in the nave. It also was based on the design of Thomas Baillairgé.

The interior of the Church of Saint-Pierre was produced by the sculptor André Paquet, using the plans of Thomas Baillairgé. It was completed in 1830, and is reminiscent of that of the Church of Saint-Joachim, employing the architectural logic which would be used throughout the diocese of Québec. The reredos is surmounted by a semicircular pediment decorated with a glory above the high altar. The three tabernacles and altar-stones which were sculpted by Pierre Émond in 1795, can be seen as part of the new interior.

Exterior view of the choir
of Sainte-Famille
Photo: Germain Casavant

Interior of Saint-Jean
Photo : Germain Casavant

Finally, in Saint-Jean, the church adopted a sort of hybrid, integrating Quévillon-style features - clearly visible in the ornamentation of the pulpit, the churchwarden's seat, the pilasters and entablature in the nave, and in the small altar-stone at the entrance to the choir - with an architectural décor in the tradition of Thomas Baillairgé. What is more, the agreement with André Paquet stipulates that the sculptor should preserve "the columns and pilasters with their capitals and pedestals, the cornices and their corbels". Opposite the pulpit can be found one of the rare examples known to us of a churchwarden's seat with a canopy. It takes the form of a rectangular ceiling identical to those of the 18th century. It is the only example still in existence today.

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