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"Ad majorem Dei gloriam"; The Role of Convent Institutions in Quebec Education

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Foreword

The purpose of this Research Bulletin is to present the preliminary findings of a study of educational institutions built in Canada before 1930 being conducted by the Architectural History Section of the Canadian Inventory of Historic Building. This text is part of a series of reports intended to provide an overview of the architectural evolution of educational buildings in every region of the country. A more complete analysis of these buildings will be prepared during the coming year. For the time being, we will consider only institutions run by religious orders, a type of building that played a significant role in the history of education in Quebec.

Most of the information presented here was graciously supplied by persons involved in the field. All religious teaching orders were contacted in order to obtain the largest sample possible. Further information was obtained through research on the architectural evolution of school buildings and on provincial education systems conducted by the architectural historians of the Canadian Inventory of Historic Building.

The image that frequently comes to mind when recalling the beginnings of education in New France is that of Marguerite Bourgeoys making taffy on the Feast of Saint Catherine. It is a reminder of the Church's role in education and of the schools' humble beginnings at the time the French colony was beginning to flourish. A certain mythology surrounds the evolution of educational institutions during the French Regime. An example is provided by Canon Lionel Groulx's eloquent praise for the schools of New France:

> And that is why, when put in its geographic and historic context, the little school of New France seems to acquire an aura of pathetic splendor. It can seem attractive and inviting in its summer frock of white lime, but it must be seen in winter too, covered with snow and shrouded by the icy blustering wind, standing alone against the wilderness on the bank of the Saint Lawrence River, serving a people engaged in a perpetual struggle against the land and their enemies - a people who hark to the howls in the nearby woods, howls more terrifying than those of wolves. [Translation.][1]

This historian's account would lead us to believe little white schools were everywhere in New France. What was it really like?

The French colony's first school was built in Quebec City in 1635 and entrusted to the Jesuits. The Ursulines opened a convent there in 1639, and in 1657 Marguerite Bourgeoys founded a school in Montreal in a stable built of stone.[2] These institutions formed the base of the colony's school system.

In a few years the Jesuits' school became a college offering a fairly complete course of studies (Fig. 1). Between 1641 and 1642, the Ursulines built a three-storey stone monastery that, despite a few fires, became a most imposing building with the passing years (Fig. 2).[3] The efforts of the sisters of the Congrégation de Notre-Dame made Marguerite Bourgeoys's work in the Montreal region an equally resounding success. In 1694, the sisters opened a school in one of the towers of the fort on the mountain.[4] From 1690 on they had a two-storey wooden convent in Point-aux-Trembles on the outskirts of Montreal,[5] in addition to the one located in the heart of Ville-Marie.

Teaching was entrusted to religious institutions during the French Regime because education was considered to fall within the purview of the family and, to an even greater extent, of the Church; this was the practice in France and in England at that time.[6] The school system of New France was consequently very simply structured. At the lowest level were the small "Latin schools," none of which remain. Next came the convents of the Ursulines and the sisters of the Congrégation de Notre-Dame. The Jesuit college, with its more advanced teaching for boys only, completed this organization.

Abbé Amédée Gosselin, one of Quebec's first education historians, drew up a table of educational institutions during the French Regime. According to his account, there existed fifteen primary schools for boys in Quebec City and its environs, ten in Montreal and the surrounding region, and seven in and around Trois-Rivières. To these thirty-two boys' schools must be added the schools for girls - six schools in the city and nine in the country - for a total of forty-seven schools.[7] It must be emphasized that they did not all exist at the same time. In 1759, there were only about thirty educational institutions, half of them located in the three main centres. At the end of the French Regime, there were only fifteen schools for the one hundred and twenty parishes and other communities.[8] It is evident that Canon Groulx's portrayal of the little schools is somewhat less than realistic.

The educational institutions of New France did create a tradition despite their small number. A few itinerant lay teachers excepted, teaching was the preserve of the Church. It was to remain so until the responsibility for education was taken over by the government in 1964.

The Conquest, however, brought some changes to education in the Saint Lawrence valley. Several institutions had to close their doors, and the Jesuit college was requisitioned by the occupation army. To replace this college, the Séminaire de Québec - until then devoted exclusively to the training of priests - was converted into a classical college open to all, as Claude Galarneau reports:

> On the order of Bishop Jean-Olivier Briand, this seminary was obliged to take over and become a boarding school/day school admitting students destined for both the priesthood and the liberal professions. It served as a model for schools of this type for two centuries. [Translation.][9]

Until the educational reform of 1964, classical colleges were the seat of higher education in the province of Quebec, thus perpetuating the tradition of the Jesuit college. Louis-Phillipe Audet described the classical colleges as follows:

> They were, first and foremost, private institutions placed under the wing of the Church, run almost exclusively by priests or brothers, and often operating in precarious financial conditions. These colleges were born and developed in response to local needs, with no integrated plan, and without being subject to a central authority. The result was a variety

> of programs, teaching methods, disciplinary regulations and examinations. [Translation.][10]

This description could also be applied to the convents run by nuns, for these too were strongly influenced by local conditions.

With few exceptions, the classical colleges were founded by priests.[11] In 1817, for example, Father Charles-Joseph Ducharme opened a primary school in the village of Sainte-Thérèse. In 1825, he also taught Latin in his rectory. This latter initiative progressed so well that, in 1841, Bishop Bourget made it a minor seminary. A major seminary was founded a little later and housed in a stone building erected in 1846.[12]

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many classical colleges were established. Starting in 1824, the statute concerning the Fabrique schools (4 George IV, chap 31) allowed parish boards to devote a quarter of their income to the financing of schools.[13] This was a strong incentive to the creation of classical colleges for boys and convents for girls. The financing of these institutions was facilitated by the variety of their sources of revenue, which frequently included collections, donations, contributions from the parents of the students and, starting in 1830, irregular government subsidies that became annual in 1912.[14]

In short, a classical college or convent was a private business which had to be profitable to survive. The college in Sorel, for example, was sold at auction because its directors could no longer pay their debts. This failure caused great dismay, especially since it was an Anglican college that took over the premises.[15]

In Sorel, the administrators had been too ambitious and had tried to move too quickly. It was customary to proceed rather prudently toward the establishment of a college. First a day school or industrial college was opened, giving, to all intents and purposes, a business course. This was done in Joliette in 1846, in Terrebonne the following year, and in Sherbrooke in 1855. The Mont-Saint-Louis college in Montreal followed the same pattern of growth. Constructed in 1888, this institution was run by the Brothers of the Christian Schools, and offered a science and a business course before becoming a classical college. An institution had to enjoy a certain reputation and a degree of financial success before its conversion to a classical college could be envisaged.

To ensure the prosperity of a private teaching institution, its location had to be chosen judiciously. It goes without saying that a college established in a large urban centre, such as the Collège de Montréal (Fig. 3), had a better chance of growing rapidly than one located in the country (Fig. 4).

A private college or convent that opened in a small village could, because of its various sources of financial support, rapidly acquire a certain degree of importance. The school boards might even give it preference over their own public schools, for a private institution saved them money.[16] Construction of a classical college or seminary was, moreover, a symbol of a city's progress, and as these institutions enjoyed the support of the comparatively well-to-do element of the local population, they were able to compete favourably with the public schools.[17] For all these reasons, public schools and private institutions are difficult to compare.

The former Collège Sainte-Marie in Montreal (Fig. 5) was a good example of the success of convent-type institutions in large cities. This institution traces its origins back to 1848, when the Jesuits, having returned to Canada, opened a classical day school in a small building on Saint-Alexandre Street. At the request of the citizens of Montreal, the Jesuits soon had to consider enlarging their facilities, as indicated by the following excerpt:

> The citizens of Montreal entreated the Jesuits to accept boarders. A house was rented near the college and twenty-five students were accommodated. The needs of the day, however, called for more. This led to the construction of the present college on Bleury Street, completed in 1851. The large number of English-speaking students prompted the

> Fathers to build Loyola College in 1896. Finally, space for boarders being too limited, the Collège Sainte-Marie was followed by construction of the Collège Jean-de-Bréboeuf sic on the north slope of Mount Royal. [Translation.][18]

A number of religious communities, such as the Brothers of the Christian Schools, the Fathers of the Congregation of the Holy Cross, the Clerics of Saint Viateur and the Oblates of Mary Immaculate enjoyed similar success; among the women's communities, the Sisters of the Congrégation de Notre-Dame, the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary, the Grey Nuns and the Ursulines achieved equal distinction.

One of the principal reasons for the success of private institutions was the care taken to create an environment favourable to the students' education. To begin with, a very large site was chosen.[19] The Collège de Montréal (Fig. 3) and the Mother House of the Congrégation de Notre-Dame (Fig. 6) on Sherbrooke Street were erected on vast tracts of land in order that students might enjoy the benefits of fresh air - a fact that did not fail to reassure the parents.

Buildings of considerable architectural sophistication were erected without hesitation in large cities. The prime objective of this quest for aesthetic excellence was to give each building a distinctive character. It was also good form to house children in prestigious buildings, since the communities were appealing to a well-to-do clientele in order to increase their revenues.[20] Moreover, because commissions from religious communities constituted a source of very great profit, architects always tried to surpass themselves,[21] and took great care in the design of convent-type buildings.

Convents ranked immediately below classical colleges and seminaries in Quebec's educational hierarchy. These institutions were entrusted to the care of teaching orders and varied in size. At the top were the mother houses, generally huge architectural complexes like those of the Congrégation de Notre-Dame in Montreal or the Ursulines in Quebec City; their size depended on the size of the community. These buildings could be used for other functions in addition to their educational activities, hence their complexity. They might include a juniorate, a home for elderly sisters, a hospital, and various administrative offices that looked after the activities of the entire community.

At the next level were buildings with a particular function, convents used solely for the education of young girls. These, too, depended on local conditions for their survival, which led to architectural diversity. They can be grouped into three classes in order of importance. First came those in large cities, such as the Outremont Convent (Fig. 7); next, those in medium-sized centres (Fig. 8); and last, convents in the less populated rural localities (Fig. 9).

The interiors of these institutions were also more complex than those of public schools. Because private schools often accepted boarders in order to increase the number of students, additional rooms had to be provided that were not found in public schools. The most important of these were the dormitory (Fig. 10) and the refectory (Fig. 11). In the most imposing buildings, there was a vast parlour (Fig. 12) where parents of boarders could visit their children on the days and at the hours permitted. There was always a chapel (Fig. 13), while a recreation hall (Fig. 14) and a library (Fig. 15) helped occupy the students' rare leisure hours.

Private teaching institutions were not reserved for the children of the social elite. Several religious orders, such as the Brothers of the Sacred Heart, erected private schools at their own expense, and after coming to an agreement with the school boards, placed them at the disposal of students from all social classes:

> Rather than building a school, the municipality can obtain the use of a private school by contracting an agreement with the proprietors of the school -almost always a religious congregation - which puts its school buildings at the disposal of the municipality in return for a rent usually calculated at three

> per cent of the building's cadastral value. The municipality undertakes to appoint the teachers for this school from the members of the congregation. [Translation.][22]

Such agreements were frequent in the province of Quebec, where construction of educational institutions could be financed only by special taxes which constituted an additional burden for taxpayers. As this type of tax was very unpopular, the commissioners often preferred to rent rather than build a school.

The school boards of Montreal and Quebec City had to conclude similar agreements; this led to the construction of a new category of convent schools which bore greater similarity to the public schools in that they did not accept boarders and did not attempt to attract a well-to-do clientele. A good example of this type of school is the Académie Sainte-Anne in Montreal (Fig. 16). This school was built in 1854 by the Gentlemen of Saint Sulpice for the education of English-speaking Catholic girls from poor families.[23] Two years later, the Religious of the Sacred Heart of Jesus opened the École Sainte-Sophie on Gouin Boulevard in Montreal for French-speaking girls of the same social background.[24] In 1912, the Brothers of the Christian Schools bought a building on Chauveau Street in Quebec City for the same purpose. A bilingual, secondary-level business and science course was given in this building, known as the Académie commerciale de Québec (Fig. 17).[25]

The architectural evolution of convent institutions was the result of growth that, in the case of certain buildings, extended over more than three centuries. These private schools were always fewer in number than the public schools, which numbered 8,000 in 1930 and constituted the province's main educational network, but they wielded great influence at the secondary level. Their role was to mould society's elite in accordance with certain values dear to the Church, which is why they were called on to take such a prominent place in the Quebec school system. This reality is reflected in the architecture of their buildings.

A combination of historic circumstances cast the Church in the role of principal educator in Quebec's French-speaking society. During the French Regime, the Church had an almost exclusive monopoly on education, whereas after 1760 its privileges were contested by liberal elements of the French-speaking society, who wanted lay schools, and by the conquerors, who wanted English schools in order to assimilate the French Canadians.[26]

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, this dispute led to a struggle for control of education in Quebec from which the Church emerged victorious in the middle of the century, to the detriment of public institutions. In order to maintain and increase their superiority over the public network, the religious communities had to offer greater advantages than the government. This explains the monumental scale of certain convent institutions. Others experienced continuous growth until 1964; after years of alterations and enlargements, they became vast complexes that belied their modest beginnings. Still others had to be content with a modest role because they were located in sparsely populated centres - the law of competition had not favoured them.

During the next stage of the research, we will concentrate on the architectural evolution of convent-type educational buildings throughout the country. The analysis will focus specifically on the following questions: do the different religious orders have distinctive architectural styles? For example, can buildings belonging to the Jesuits be distinguished easily from those of the Oblates? If so, can private teaching institutions be categorized according to whether they belonged to communities of sisters, brothers or priests?

It would also be of interest to research the sources of architectural inspiration for convent-type buildings. Were the builders influenced by European or American styles? Did they finally develop a typically local look? Did certain buildings serve as architectural models? Are similar buildings found in other provinces of Canada? These and other questions will be the starting point of the next phase of the work.

Our task will be a formidable one. In 1981, for example, there were fifty-three men's communities and one hundred and sixteen women's orders that either taught or had taught in Canada. Some of these communities possessed dozens of convent-type buildings used for teaching: the Brothers of the Christian Schools had more than seventy-five. The human and material limitations of this study will make it impossible to analyse these buildings individually. The next phase of the research will therefore concentrate on answering the questions stated above.

Notes

1 Abbé Lionel Groulx, L'enseignement français au Canada, vol. 1: "Dans le Québec" (Montréal: Librairie d'action canadienne-française, 1931) (hereafter, L'enseignement français), p. 21.

2 Ibid, p. 13.

3 Ramsay Traquair, History of the Ursuline Monastery, Quebec (London: Royal Institute of British Architects, 1937), pp. 4-11. On the recommendation of the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada in 1972, a plaque was erected on this location.

4 Robert Lahaise, Les édifices conventuels du Vieux-Montréal; aspects ethnohistoriques (Ville La Salle: Cahiers du Québec/Hurtubise HMH, 1980), p. 113.

5 Michel Belisle, "L'architecture des ensembles conventuels montréalais, 1642-1840," manuscript on file, Direction générale du patrimoine, Ministère des Affaires culturelles, Montreal (July 1980), p. 100. The Congrégation de Notre-Dame bought a farmhouse from François Le Ber in 1663. Known thereafter as the Saint-Gabriel Farm, this building is still standing.

6 Louis-Philipe Audet, Histoire de l'enseignement au Quebec (Montreal and Toronto: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971) (hereafter, Histoire de l'enseignement), vol. 1, p. 116.

7 Abbé Amédée Gosselin, L'instruction au Canada sous le régime français (1635-1760) (Quebec City: Laflamme et Proulx, 1911), pp. 475-477.

8 Jean-Jacques Jolois, J-F Perrault (1753-1844) et les origines de l'enseignement laïque au Bas-Canada (Montreal: Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1969) (hereafter, J-F Perrault (1753-1844), pp. 64-65.

9 Claude Galarneau, Les collèges classiques au Canada français (1620-1970) (Montreal: Fides, 1970) (hereafter, Les collèges classiques), p. 16.

10 Louis-Philippe Audet, Histoire de l'enseignement, vol. 2, p. 146.

11 Abbé Lionel Groulx, L'enseignement français, vol. 1, p. 182.

12 Abbé Émile Dubois, Le petit Séminaire de Sainte-Thérèse, 1825-1925 (Montreal: Les Éditions du Devoir, 1925), pp. 17-104. This building was destroyed by fire in 1881, and replaced by a new one designed by the architects Poitras and Roy.

13 Louis-Philippe Audet, Le système scolaire de la province de Québec, vol. 3: "L'Institution royale, les débuts: 1801-1825" (Quebec City: Presses universitaires Laval, 1952), p. 221.

14 Claude Galarneau, Les collèges classiques, p. 90.

15 Ibid, p. 35.

16 P.J.O. Chauveau, L'instruction publique au Canada; précis historique et statistique (Quebec City: Augustin Côté et Cie, 1876), pp. 83-84.

17 Claude Galarneau, Les collèges classiques, p. 34.

18 Album des maisons d'éducation de la province de Québec (Montréal: Compagnie canadienne nationale de publication, 1930), vol. 1, p. 13.

19 Elzéar Pelletier, Précis d'hygiène scolaire (Quebec City: Publications du Conseil d'hygiène de la province de Québec, n.d.), p. 34.

20 Madeleine Forget, "L'architecture des ensembles conventuels montréalais; deuxième période: 1840-75," manuscript on file, Direction générale du patrimoine, Ministère des Affaires culturelles, Montreal (1979) (hereafter, "L'architecture"), pp. 158-159.

21 Jacqueline Hallé, "Édifices conventuels; période 1875-1900, 1900-1930," manuscript on file, Direction générale du patrimoine, Ministère des Affaires culturelles, Montreal (1979), p. 23.

22 Hubert Pierlot, La législation scolaire de la province de Québec (Brussels: Librairie Albert Dewit, 1911), p. 92.

23 Madeleine Forget, "L'architecture," p. 188.

24 Ibid, p. 207.

25 Réaménagement de l'édifice Chauveau et annexes (Quebec City: Ministère des Travaux publics et de l'Approvisionnement, Direction des communications, n.d.), n.p.

26 Jean-Jacques Jolois, J-F. Perrault (1753-1844), p. 245.

Figure 1: The Collège de Québec, right, from an engraving by R. Short. After the fire in 1640, a new college was built between 1647 and 1650 and enlarged in 1741. This building was demolished in 1878. The Jesuit college was one of the colony's principal buildings during the French Regime; it symbolized the importance accorded to education during this period. (Quebec National Archives, GH 27072.)

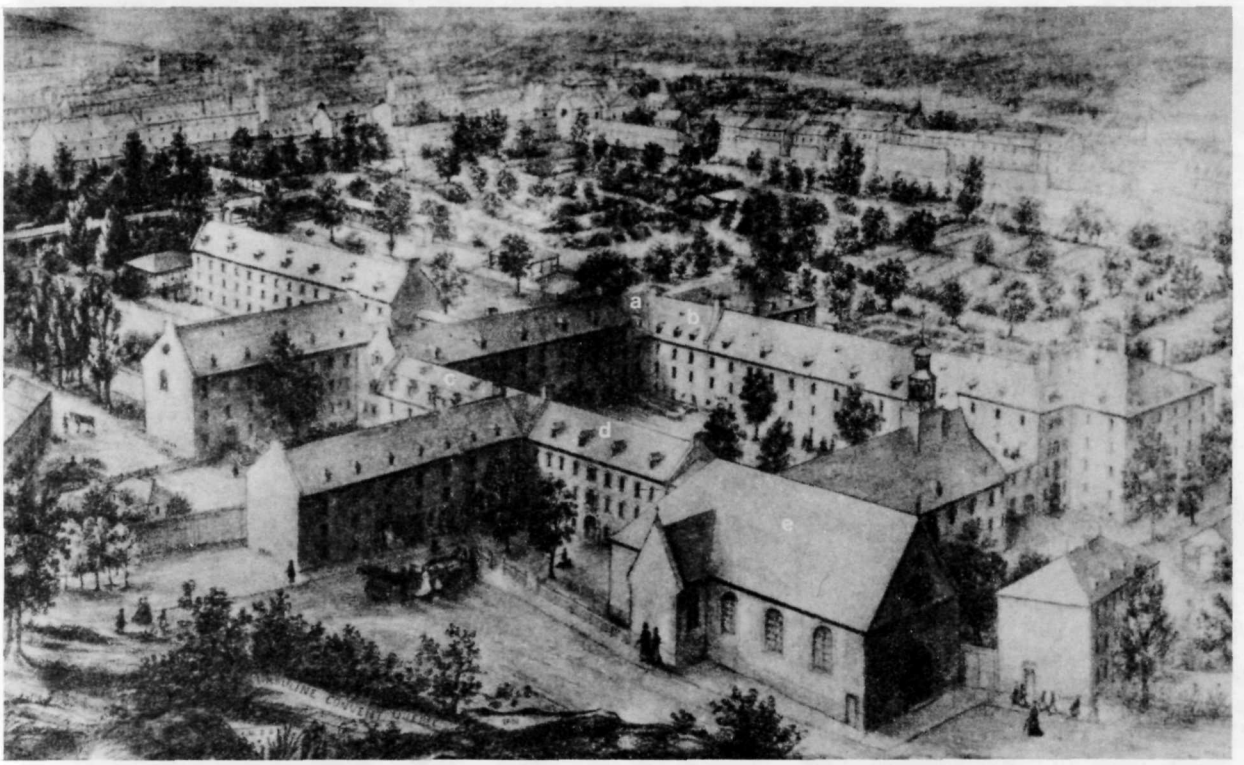

Figure 2: Ursuline Monastery, Quebec City. The monastery, built in 1641, was rebuilt between 1651 and 1652 after the first fire. The second building was ravaged by fire as well in 1686. Construction was started in 1687 on the kitchen wing (A) and the Sainte-Famille wing (B), both of which are still standing. The Sainte-Ursula wing (C) dates from 1695, and the parlour wing (D), from 1715. Many other enlargements were made later, always to meet specific needs; this is why each part of the building has a particular use without forming part of an architectural unit. The chapel (E) can be seen clearly in this illustration. (Quebec National Archives, Livernois Collection, V.E. 03Q P 560.)

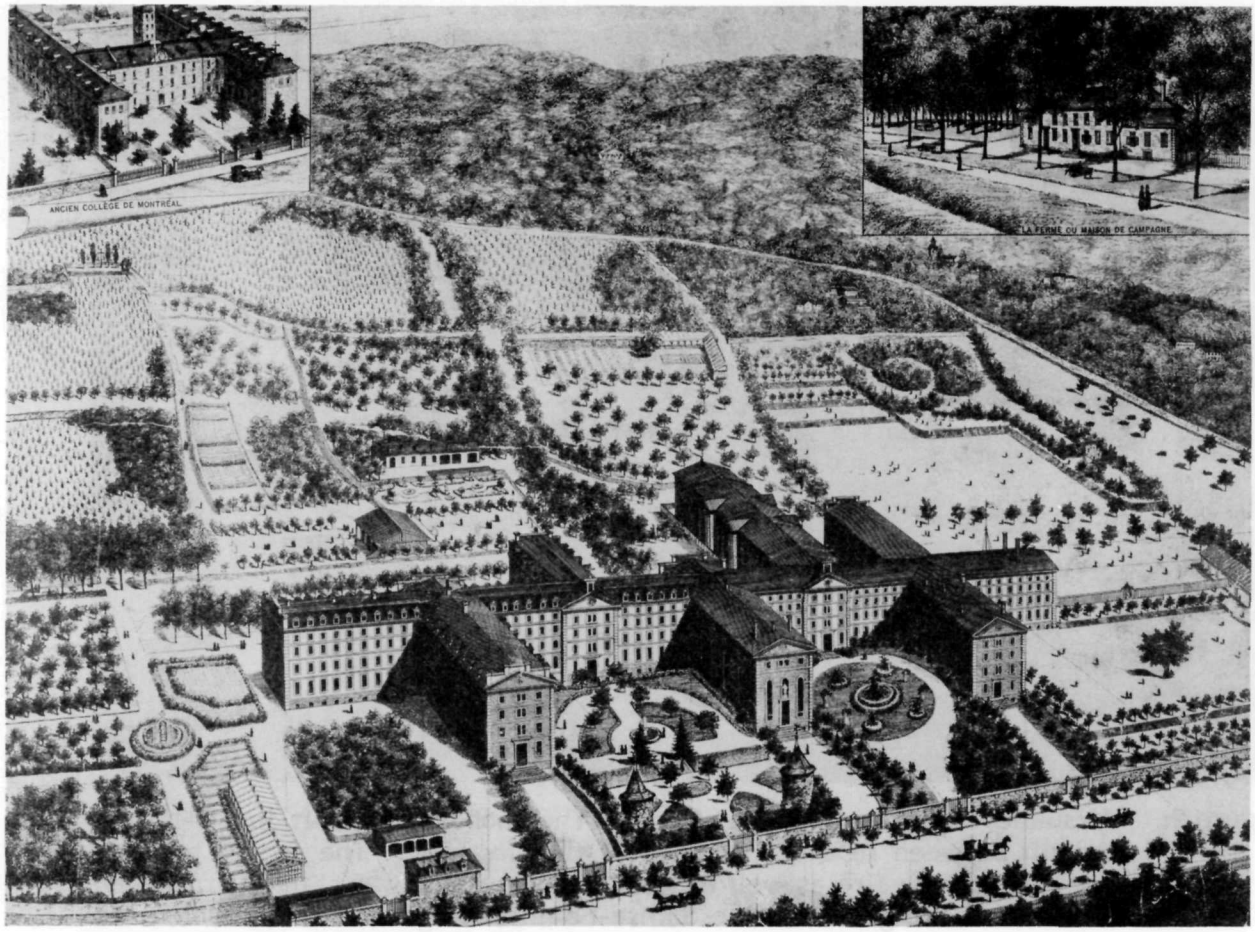

Figure 3: The Collège de Montréal about 1879. In the foreground are the towers used by the sisters of the Congrégation de Notre-Dame in 1694. Note the size of the gardens and orchards surrounding this institution. This was a way of feeding the boarders cheaply. Although this building was erected two centuries after the Ursuline Monastery, its components are still separated according to their use, e.g., the Grand Seminary and the college. (Public Archives of Canada, National Map Collection, H12/349/Montreal/1879.)

Figure 4: Couvent de Saint-Augustin, Deux-Montagnes County, date of construction unknown. Only the cross and playing field distinguish this building from a private residence. It was no doubt designed by a local craftsman. In many cases, convent buildings were designed by the parish priest. (Quebec National Archives, Joseph Guibord Collection, 56526-52.)

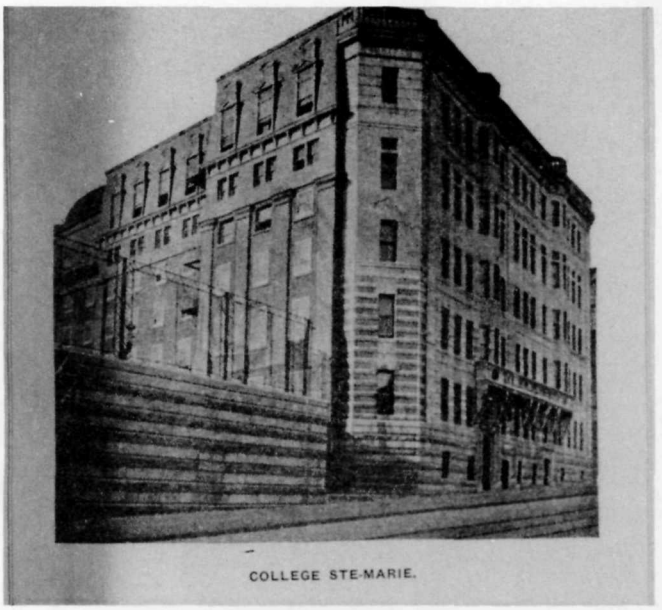

Figure 5: Collège Sainte-Marie, Montréal. Together with the Gésu Church (not in the photograph), this building constituted one of the principal convent structures in Montreal. The college was demolished in 1976, but the church was preserved. (Album des maisons d'éducation de la province de Québec [Montreal: Compagnie canadienne nationale de publication, 1930], vol. 1, p. 13.)

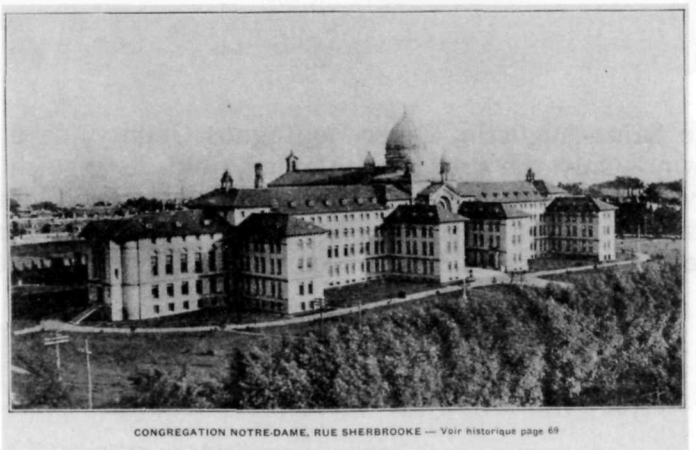

Figure 6: Mother House of the Congrégation de Notre-Dame, Sherbrooke Street. When a private school was to be built in Montreal, land was frequently chosen on the outskirts of the city in order to take advantage of the country air. The broken façade of this building is reminiscent of the Collège de Montréal (Fig. 3) and is a feature of many convent buildings. (Album des maisons d'éducation de la province de Québec [Montréal: Compagnie canadienne nationale de publication, 1930], vol. 1, p. 23.)

Figure 7: Pensionnat du Saint-Nom-de-Marie, 628 Côte Saint Catherine Road, Outremont. This building, designed by Zéphirin Resther, was constructed between 1903 and 1905. Between 1938 and 1939, a four-storey annex was added to house the infirmary and dormitories. The building is as imposing as the principal mother houses of the period. It was built to serve a single function, and so forms a more or less compact unit, unlike many mother houses (Cf. Figs. 2 and 6). (Album des maisons d'éducation de la province de Québec [Montréal: Compagnie canadienne nationale de publication, 1930], vol. 1, p. 17.)

Figure 8: Convent of the Congrégation de Notre-Dame in Saint-Denis, Richelieu County, 1867. Convents were frequently built of stone. The use of dormers gives this building an urban, residential appearance - and perhaps architectural prestige. (Quebec National Archives, J.W. Michaud Collection, 1071-56.)

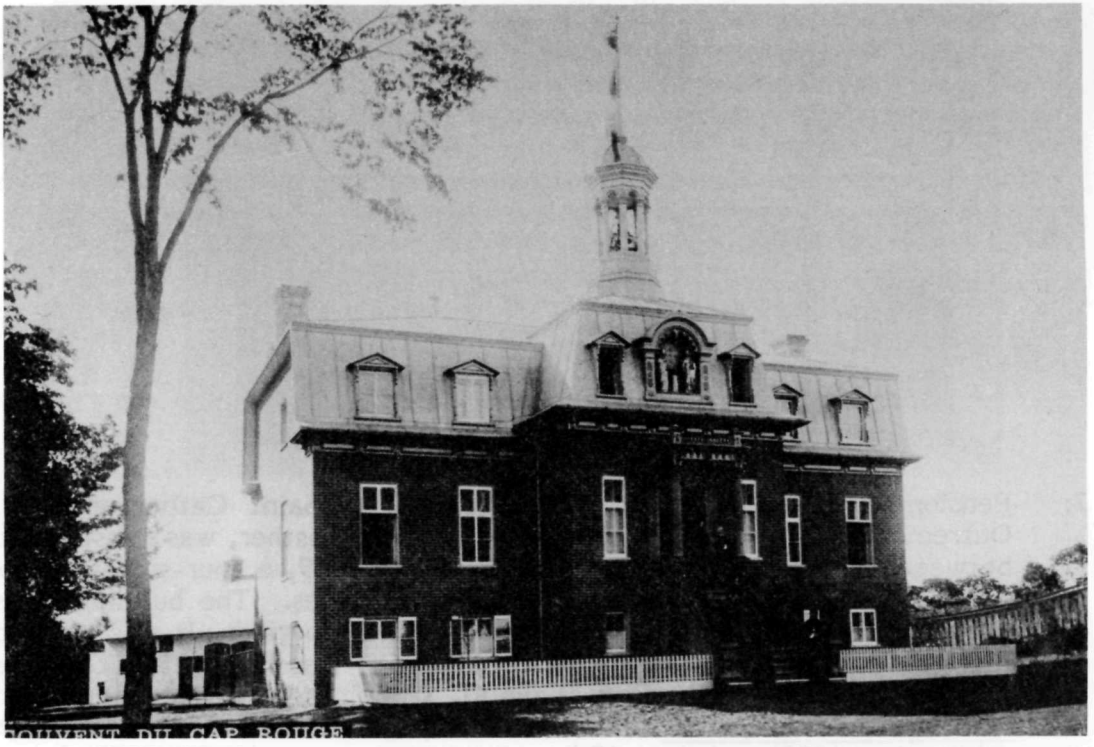

Figure 9: Couvent de Cap-Rouge. The space under a mansard roof could accommodate dormitories for nuns and boarders. For this reason, mansards were common on convent buildings. (Quebec National Archives, Livernois Collection, J.E. 03Q P 560.)

Figure 10: Dormitory of the Marist Brothers' College in Iberville (date unknown). Room-sharing arrangements were generally based on the age of the students. In the more exclusive institutions, the beds were curtained off. It is debatable whether such an arrangement met minimum hygienic standards; unlike public schools, private institutions did not have to meet any such standards. (Quebec National Library.)

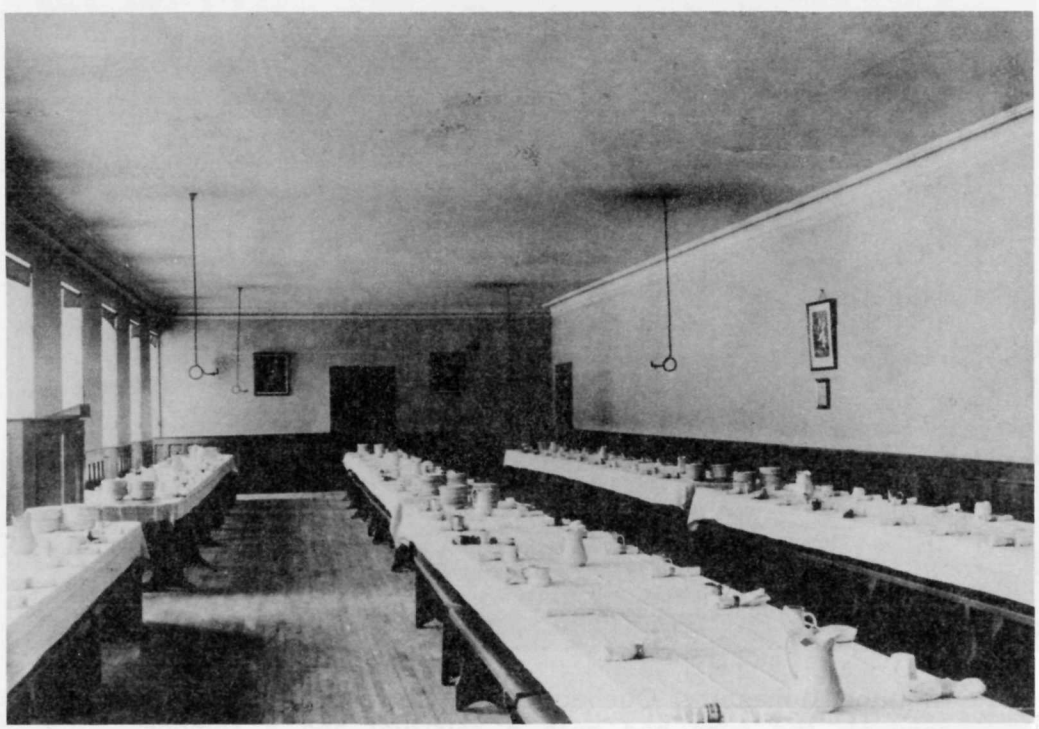

Figure 11: Refectory of the Ursuline Monastery, Quebec City (date unknown). Religious works were read during meals, which explains the presence of the pulpit at the left of the photograph. (Quebec National Archives, Livernois Collection, J.E. 03Q P 560.)

Figure 12: Students' parlour, Ursuline Monastery, Quebec City (date unknown). The parlour was the room most often visited by relatives. Care was taken to keep it impeccable, as it represented the building to the clients. Here, student boarders could see their relatives only through a grill. (Quebec National Archives, Livernois Collection, J.E. 03Q P 560.)

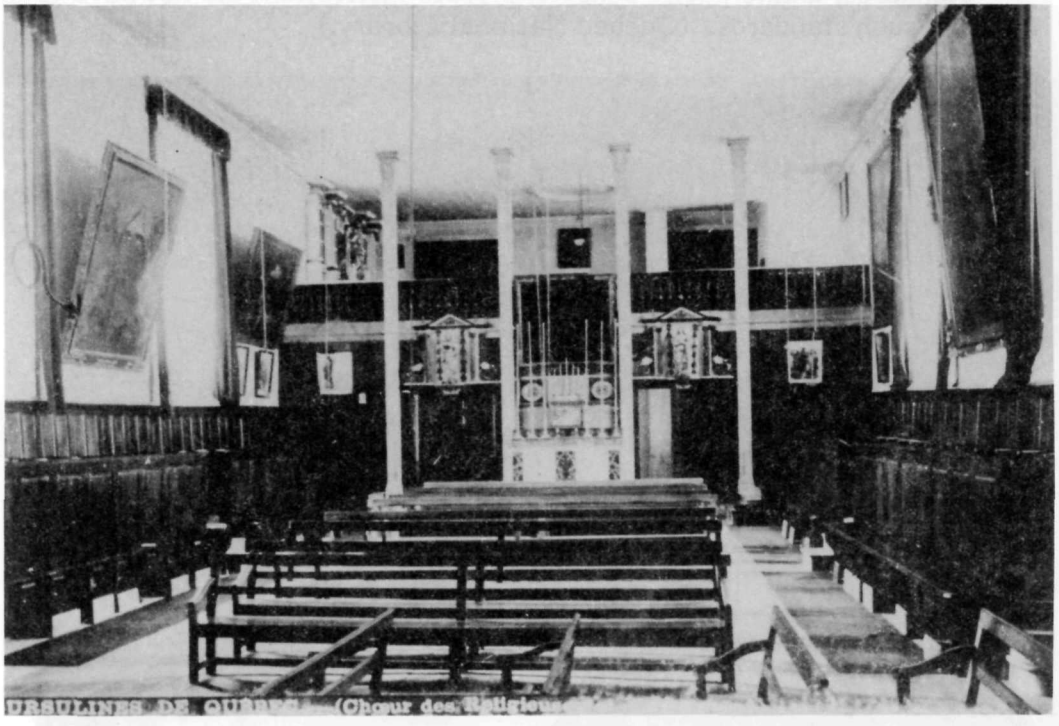

Figure 13: Ursuline Monastery, Quebec City, nuns' choir (date unknown). In every convent, the nuns had both a spiritual and a temporal role, which explains the prominent place occupied by the chapel. In some cases, notably the Collège Sainte-Marie and the Collège Saint-Laurent, it would be more accurate to speak of churches rather than chapels. (Quebec National Archives, Livernois Collection, J.E. 03Q P 560.)

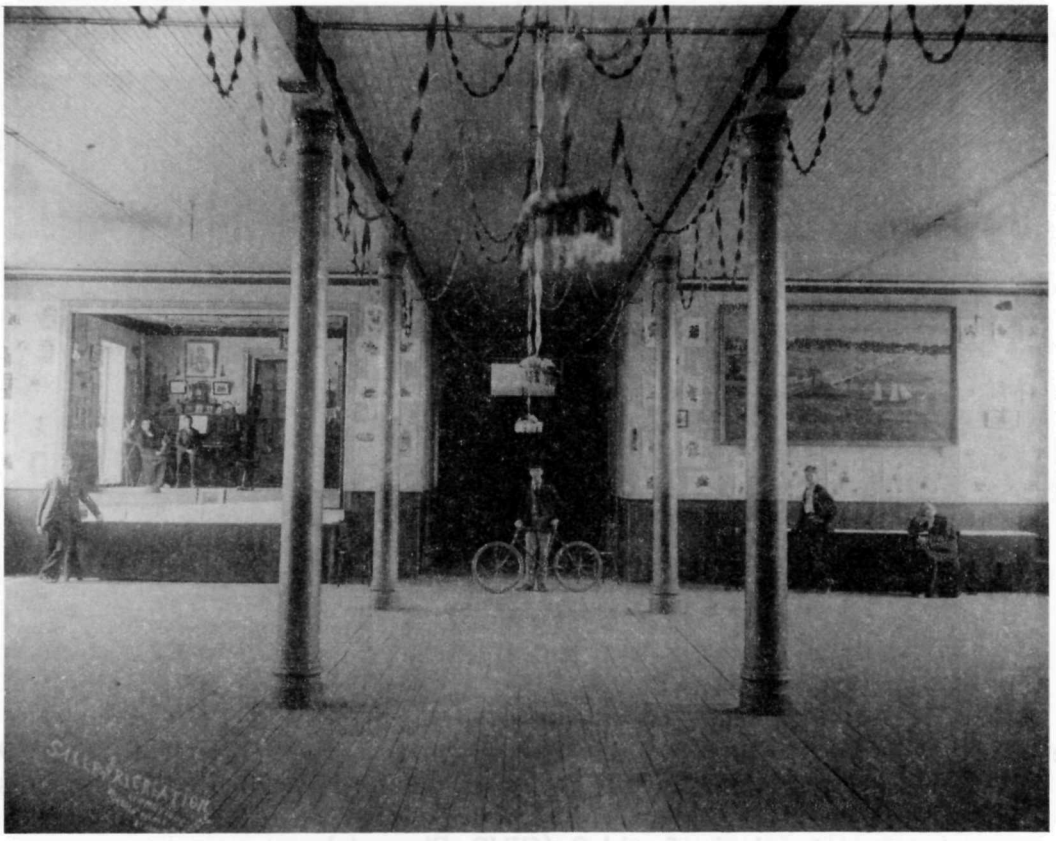

Figure 14: Recreation room, Marist Brothers' College, Iberville (date unknown). Theatrical and musical activities often figure among boarders' most cherished memories. The location of the stage in this room obliged students to attend plays by turns. (Quebec National Library.)

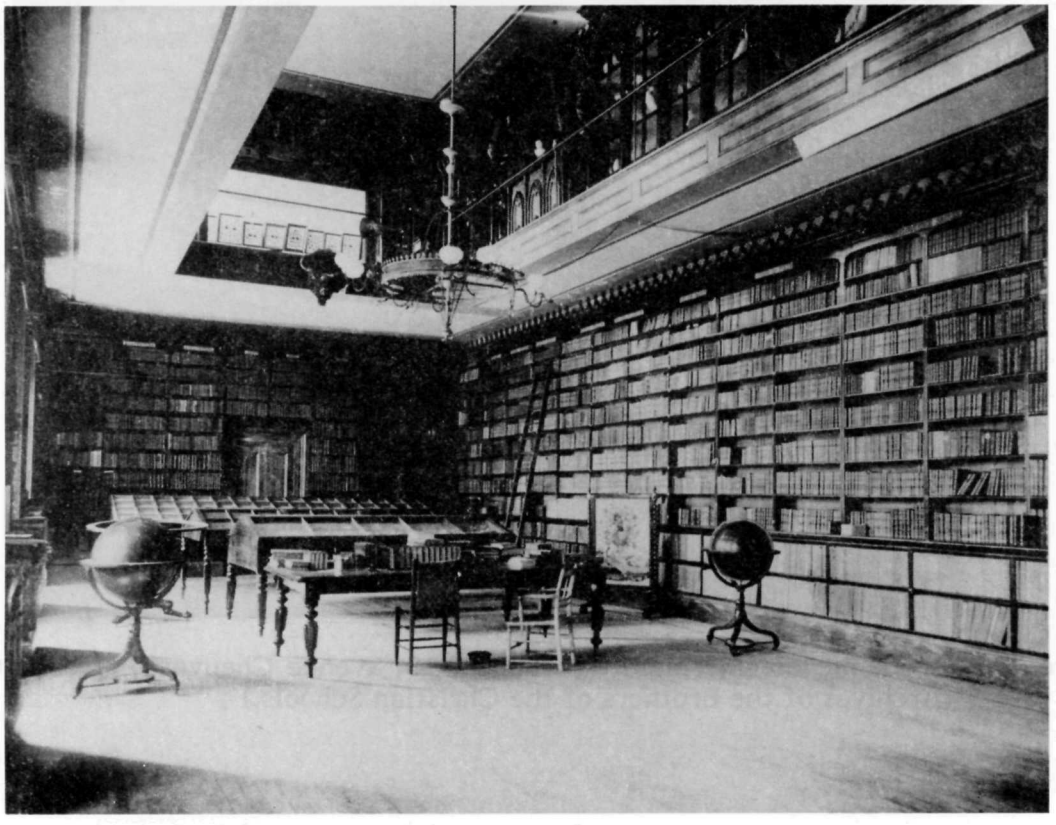

Figure 15: Library, Séminaire de Saint-Hyacinthe (date unknown). In many colleges and seminaries there was also a small museum, as is the case here. (Quebec National Library.)

Figure 16: Académie Sainte-Anne, 220-222 Mountain Street, Montreal (circa 1970). The structure resembles a group of row houses, with nothing to distinguish it from a residential building; this is rare for a convent. Was the reason cost or lack of pride? (CIHB, Phase 1.)

Figure 17: Académie commerciale de Québec, 10, avenue Chauveau, Quebec City. (Archives of the Brothers of the Christian Schools.)

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