

The Parliament of United-Canada in Montreal, 1843-1849: an exceptional archaeological site

The exposure of the remains of the Parliament of United-Canada in recent years by Pointe-à-Callière culminated in 2017 with massive archaeological excavations. Coinciding with Montreal's 375th anniversary and Confederation's 150th, the discoveries made at this important place in the political history of Montreal, Québec and Canada are significant; the site's spatial extent and the wealth of material remains discovered have captured our imagination. All through the summer, visitors have been able to come close to archaeologists in an environment that promoted comprehension of a site characterized by the remarkable state of preservation of its architectural remains. But a number of surprises were awaiting: the richness of the artifacts recovered and documents thus far unknown challenge our understanding of this fundamental episode in Canadian history. Here are some highlights of this ongoing investigation.

Louise Pothier and Hendrik Van Gijseghem

A site rescued from oblivion

For more than 80 years, until 2010, a vast urban tract located on Place D'Youville in Old Montreal was used as a parking lot. Nonetheless, that place was burdened with history. In 1832, what was to become Montreal's first indoor market, St. Anne's Market, was built in a neoclassical style inspired by Boston's Quincy Market and London's Kensington Market. Measuring more than 100 meters long, it was then the largest civil building in the city. Even more remarkable, architects John Wells and Francis Thompson erected the building squarely on top of Little Saint-Pierre River. This became possible through the construction of a gigantic stone vaulted canal. From then on, the river flowed underground over a few hundred meters toward the St. Lawrence River.

A short decade after its inauguration, the building's vocation was modified: food distribution made way for politics! In 1843, the government of the Province of Canada, also known as United-Canada, had been centered in Kingston for only two years when all the representatives called for relocation to a more suitable place, for themselves as well as for their families and

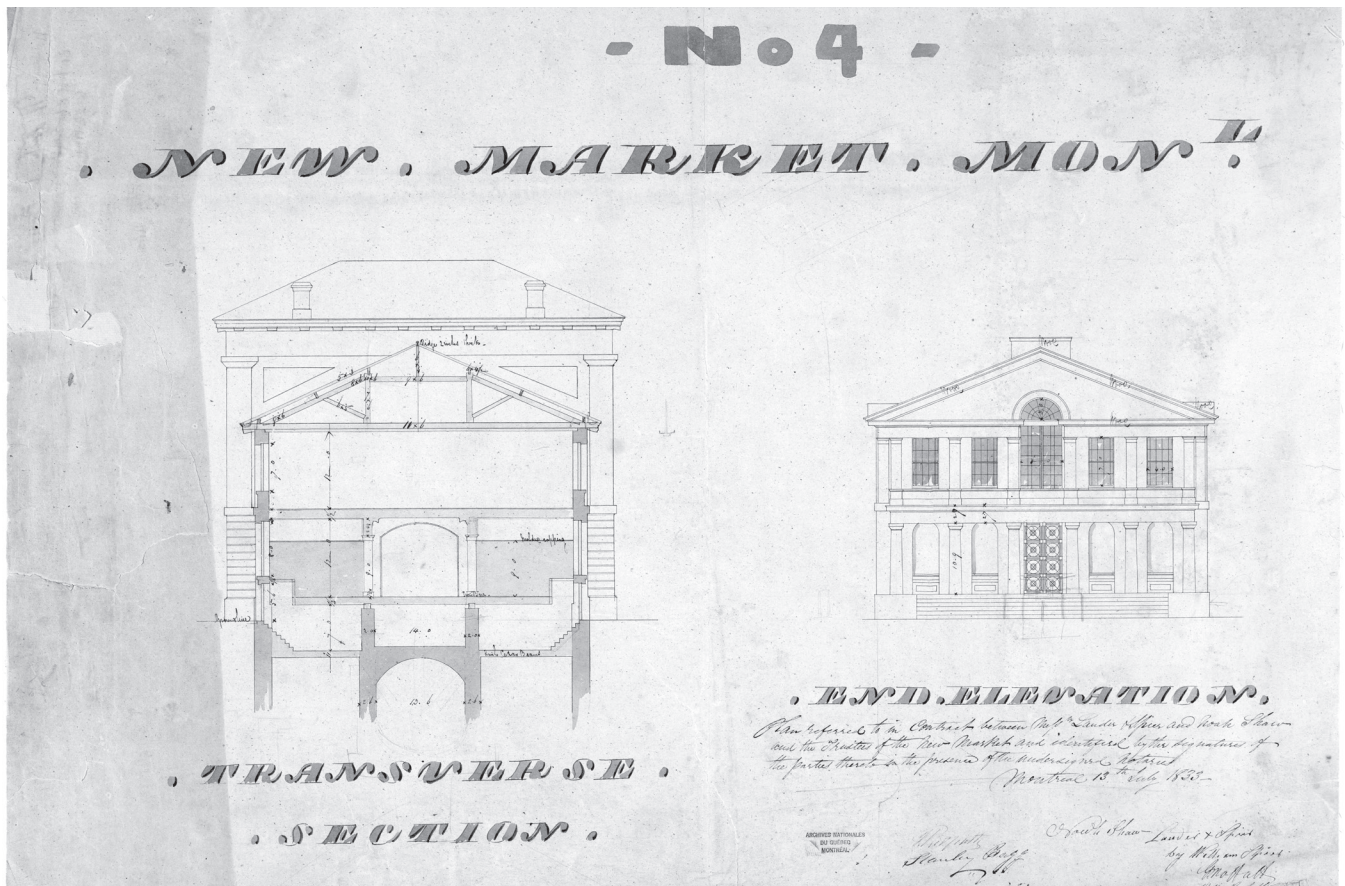
Louise Pothier and Hendrik Van Gijseghem are archaeologists at Pointe-à-Callière, Montreal's Archaeology and History Complex. The archaeological research project on the city property was made possible thanks to a grant from the Ville de Montréal.



Alain Vandal, Pointe-à-Callière.

Ongoing archaeological excavations at the site, 2013.

the employees that gravitate around the institution. All eyes turned to Montreal, which was then the country's largest city. The city's businesses were thriving and it had brand new maritime infrastructures and a booming downtown with hotels and inns. It was decided that Montreal was to become the first permanent capital of



Cross section and elevation of the St. Anne's Market and the channelled river, 1833.

the Province of Canada. At least that was the plan. The government leased the St. Anne's Market to house the Parliament Chambers. Architect George Browne was in charge of renovations to modernize the interior spaces and adapt them to their new function. Until 1849 it housed successive governors, representatives, writers, clerks, and the population who came to debates and hearings at the Legislative Assembly and Council.

Numerous changes to the governmental institutions occurred during a period we could call a "bureaucratic revolution," not the least of which was a slow transition from a colonial state toward a modern liberal state. Among the innovations during this period: the creation of various ministries, reform of the education system, rapid increase of per capita spending, official censuses and statistics, establishment of two national libraries (with 16,000 tomes in the Legislative Assembly's and about 6,000 in the Council's). In 1848 the Governor General, Lord Elgin, yielded to long-standing requests from Louis-Hippolyte LaFontaine and Robert Baldwin

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The Montreal Parliament. A 3D reconstitution after iconographic sources and archaeological documentation.

and embraced the principle of responsible government. The adoption of this foundation of parliamentary democracy, in which the government must have the support of the chamber and its elected representatives, is a turning point in our political history.

These changes occurred in spite of the opposition of a small class of citizens who long had much influence on colonial affairs. This oligarchy, also known as Family Compact, had remained close to the sitting Governor since the start of the 19th century and enjoyed powers and privileges within administration and commerce. In response to the 1837-38 Rebellions in both provinces, the union of Upper and Lower Canada in 1841 heralded change. The abolition of the Corn Laws (preferential tariffs on crops coming from the colonies) by London in 1846 denied economic advantages to leading Canadian businessmen, especially Tories. With the establishment of responsible government, the Tory oligarchy's capacity to preserve its privileges was threatened. Their struggle with the British Crown and its representative, the Governor General, culminated in April 1849, when he was about to sanction a bill for the indemnity of Rebellion victims; the Tories were outraged. On April 25, a demonstration degenerated into a riot at the Parliament. The building was ransacked and burned along with its contents, including both libraries. Montreal lost its capital status and the Parliament then alternated between Quebec and Toronto until 1864, the year when Ottawa became

Canada's capital. One of the lesser-known outcomes of the Parliament's destruction was the massive display of popular support, throughout all regions, for the Governor General's decisions and the parliamentary system in general, despite the Family Compact's concerns and some Republican attitudes (the latter wishing an American-inspired political model).

Two years after the fire, the ruins of Montreal's Parliament were razed and a new market was rebuilt directly on its foundations. That market was demolished in 1901 and the place remained vacant for much of the 20th century.

The Parliament rises from its ashes

The 2017 excavations were among the largest ever undertaken in Montreal in recent years, and possibly in most North American cities. Excavations reached a depth of 5 meters below the modern surface. Many levels were excavated mechanically, but the main occupation levels, including the Parliament's, were carefully excavated manually, using trowels and brushes.



Alain Vanadal, Pointe-à-Callière.

The British tableware from the Parliament restaurant.

A Parliament is a rather unique building and preserved archaeological examples are few. Upon starting work, many aspects of the site were unknown, and many questions were pending. Among those: What modifications were required to transform the St. Anne's Market into a building suited to house the nation's government? What activities were taking place in the different rooms and on the ground and the upper floors? Not only were we to answer many of these, but unexpected surprises were awaiting.

Archaeologists have unearthed close to 800 000 objects; these artifacts allow the discovery and documentation of a wide variety of functions within the edifice, such as writing, food preparation and consumption, or personal hygiene. In the building's central part, complete tableware sets were discovered. Another astonishing discovery was a number of burned books found at the site of the rich Legislative Assembly Library. After restoration, one of them could be identified.

An unexpected discovery: two official Parliament handstamps

Two discoveries revealed themselves on the same summer day. Among the fragile remains of burned books, in the building's east wing, archaeologists found the handstamp of the Legislative Council Library. Historical documents claimed that the Council Library was located there and this discovery confirmed it.

Even more remarkable, at the opposite side of the building, the official handstamp of the Legislative Assembly was found. It is an absolutely unique object that bears a strong symbolic charge. It brings us closer to the official dimensions of politics and bureaucracy of that place, reminding us if such a thing was necessary, that this was the epicenter of Canadian politics. This handstamp was used to render documents official. For instance, the representatives' correspondence leaving the Assembly was always stamped. It was created in Montreal in 1849, one year after the recognition of responsible government, making it the earliest official handstamp used by the Canadian government.

Until its discovery, this first official handstamp in use after the union of Upper and Lower Canada was only known from antique manuscript documents that bore the stamp in blue, red, or green ink. The handstamp we found among the burned ruins is the only known specimen.



The "Legislative Council Library" handstamp.

Pointe-à-Callière acquired one of the few existing contemporary documents bearing the stamp, dated April 17, 1849, one week before the fire. For archaeologists, to be able to reunite objects that have been separated for 160 years, in this case a handstamp and a document that it made official, amounts to creating a peculiar time-warp!

Saving the coat of arms from the blaze

With the exceptions of the Queen's portrait, the golden mace, and a few documents hurriedly taken out of the burning building, the Parliament's entire content was considered lost. But the research program undertaken by Pointe-à-Callière at the Parliament site in 2010 has led to an outstanding and peculiar chance discovery. The late Robert Kaplan, former minister and Solicitor General in Pierre-Elliott Trudeau's liberal government, deserves all the credit.

Once, on his way to his New York City apartment, he stopped in a flea market where he spotted a large but damaged wooden item, painted in gold and other colors: the Royal coat of arms of Great Britain. The vendor, who was Québécois, assured him that they were from the old Montreal Parliament that burned down in the 19th century. Even though the story sounded dubious to Kaplan, the item was definitely esthetically interesting. He acquired it and it remained in his living room, above the piano. That is until he heard about oncoming excavations on the Montreal Parliament site... What if the antique store owner's story had been true?

Alain Vandal, Pointe-à-Callière.



Kaplan then contacted the museum and offered to donate the object in case a firmer link could be made between the arms and the Montreal Parliament. After some research, the convergence between contemporary descriptions, an 1848 illustration of the Assembly chamber by James Duncan, and analysis of the pigments, there is no doubt: it is the genuine coat of arms of the Parliament. Hypotheses that it may have been taken as a trophy by some of the rioters, or simply salvaged from the fire by Members of Parliament are plausible.

The bronze "Legislative Assembly Canada" handstamp and an official parcel dated April 17th 1849.





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The Montreal Parliament's coat of arms, once restored by the Canadian Conservation Institute. The abuse suffered by this item during the 1849 riot can be clearly seen.

Conclusion

Once restored, the coat of arms constituted a valuable object of memory and a symbol of a rich national history. Pointe-à-Callière now wishes to present it to the original site, along with more of the objects found during these last years within the remains of the Parliament. Once protected, they will be made accessible to the population.

Showcasing the site of the Parliament of United-Canada would become part of the historic heritage complex in Old Montreal, where our political history and the foundations of our democratic institutions

would be transmitted to the current and future generations. Already, the Archaeology and History Complex exhibits essential aspects of Montreal's past, such as a Native firepit and artifacts from the prehistoric period at the site of the city's foundation (1642), the French fortifications (1717), the monumental stone masonry collector-sewer (1832), and the old Custom House (1836), are all accessible to visitors. By adding Canada's first Parliament to this complex, Pointe-à-Callière wishes to combine all major dimensions essential to the city's history and offer all Canadians and foreign visitors a heritage worthy of the greatest cultural, patrimonial and archaeological experiences found throughout the world.