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by

WILLIAM CARLESS, F.R.I.B.A

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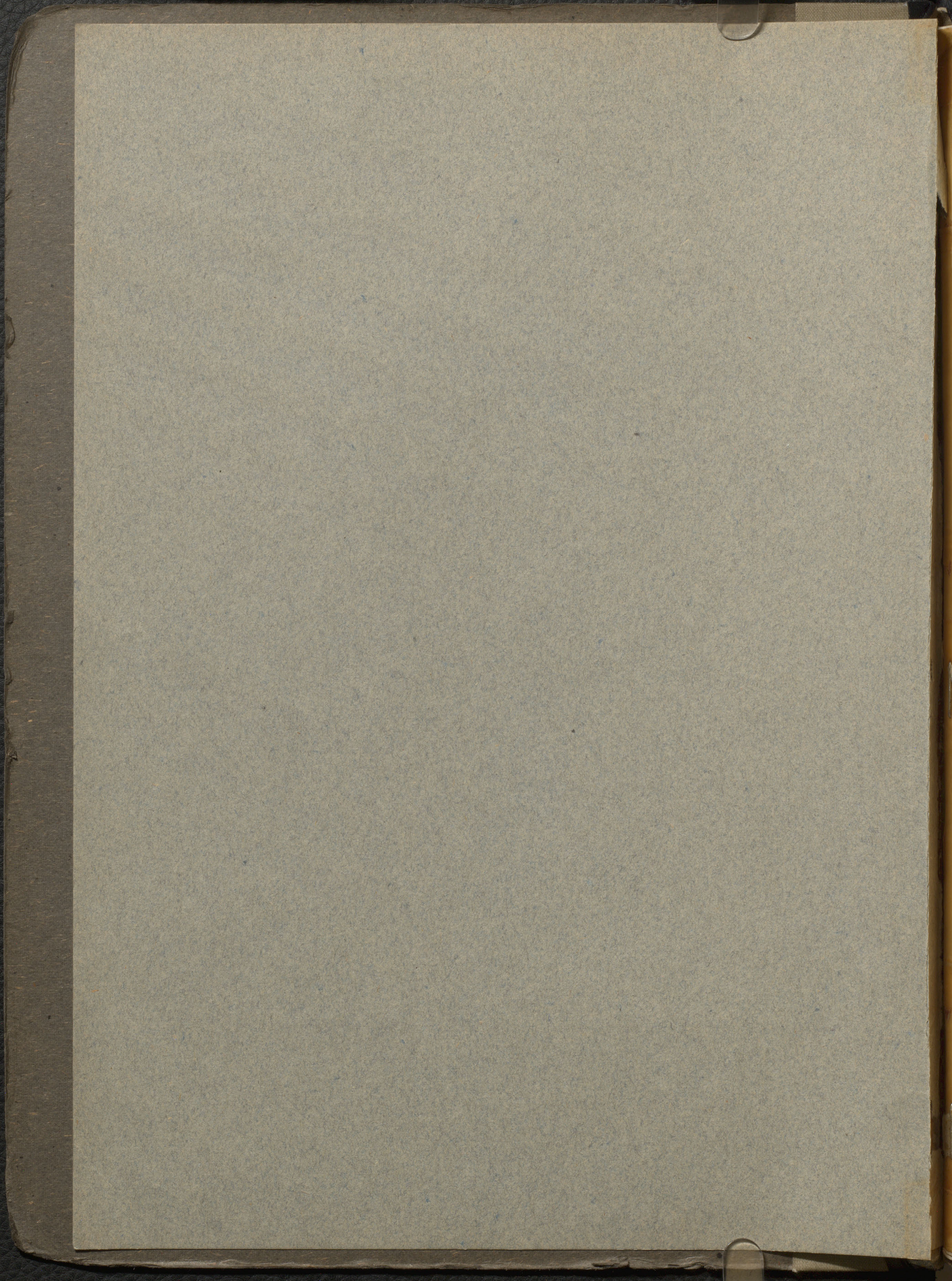

THE ARCHITECTURE
OF
FRENCH CANADA

By PROFESSOR WILLIAM CARLESS, F.R.I.B.A.

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The Architecture of French Canada

By PROFESSOR WILLIAM CARLESS, F.R.I.B.A.
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AS architects, it is good for us to wander occasionally to some old-world village or quiet city back-water, where in the shadow of a sheltering church or cloistered square, we can steal a glance down the vista of time. Surrounded by old memories, we can muse on our architectural inheritance, and like some true lover deceive ourselves into thinking that we alone are capable of its true apprecia-

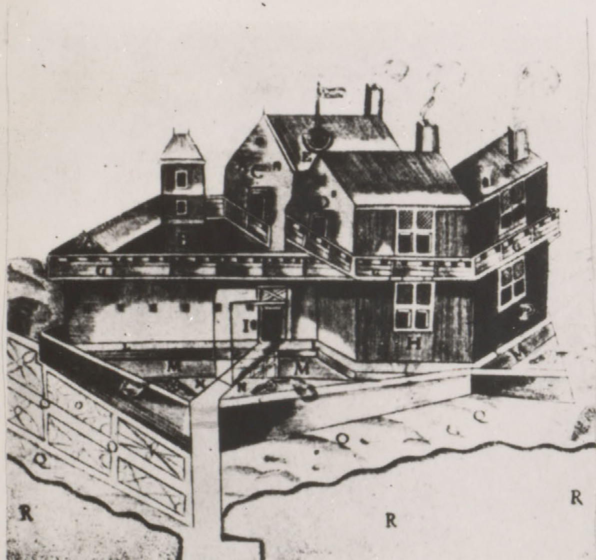

FIG. 1. "ABITATION DE QUEBECQ."

A Storehouse.
B Pigeon-house.
C Building for storing arms and housing workmen.
D Workmen's quarters.
E Sun-dial.
F Building containing forge and artisans' quarters.
G Outside galleries.
H Champlain's private quarters.
I Main door with drawbridge.
L Walk (10 ft. wide) all round the building.
M Ditch surrounding the building.
N Platforms for artillery.
O Champlain's garden.
P Kitchen.
Q Terrace in front of the building on the river-bank.
R The St. Lawrence river.

From Laverdière's *Champlain* in McGill University Library.

tion. Sometimes in such a mood, the shadows of the past are reincarnate, transmuting into glowing colour and movement the records of history. Along the great river where the Quebec landscape unfolds itself, with its quaint customs and handicrafts, its picturesque churches and houses, we see the great figures of Cartier, de Chaste, Champlain, Maisonneuve, Laval, and many others who have helped to make its romantic history, pass as in some pageant before us.

What a flood of questions we could put to these versatile old pioneers, as ready to fight or make a settlement, as to wander off in search of some new route to China or fabulous El Dorado; and for those of us whose interest lies particularly in the old architecture of the province, how much we regret that more of them did not leave records like Champlain, in whose book we find a drawing and description of the first house built by white men in Canada. With him particularly, how interesting it would be to compare notes as to the changes in domestic architecture since July 3rd, 1608, when, as he tells us: "I looked for a suitable place for our buildings, but could not find any more convenient or better situated, than the point of Quebec so called by the savages, which is filled with nut trees and vines."

Here on a spot which is now partly occupied by the Church of Notre Dame des Victoires, and close to the market square where later stood a statue of Louis XIV, Champlain built his famous "Abitation de Quebecq" (*Fig. 1*).

"With the ship-carpenters, the wood sawyers and other workmen"—actively engaged, we find that the building consisted of three blocks of two-storey height connected together and simply roofed with chimneys in the gable walls. In the Entrance Court to the west was a dove-cote and around this and the main building ran at the upper floor level, a projecting gallery with loop-holes in it. This, as well as the gate with its drawbridge over the moat, were the usual mediaeval features of defence which in France had become obsolete. Outside the moat providing further protection were cannon. Remembering how Champlain "set all the others at clearing the land about the building, in order to make the garden plots," we can picture the busy scene with all the usual sounds and accompaniments of building operations.

On the heights above where was soon to rise the Fort and Castle of St. Louis, all that company of brave men and devoted women, the creators of New France, would come and go as the centuries passed by. In their footsteps let us travel up the mighty St. Lawrence and see with them the little villages upon its banks, their silver spires gleaming against the landscape with the immemorial Laurentians misty on the horizon.

What kind of buildings were first erected at the early trading posts is largely a matter for conjecture. Those known to date from the 17th century are few, but from the stone ones remaining we can form some idea of what the older wooden buildings were like. The Norman and Breton peasants who comprised the bulk of the early colonists were accustomed to the type of house shown in the view of one of their villages (*Fig. 2*). Here the one-storey cottage with dormers lighting the attic in the roof with chimneys in the gable-ends, show a distinct resemblance to the typical French-Canadian arrangement. A familiar example (c. 1660) from near Beauport

FIG. 2. HAMLET NEAR YERVILLE, SEINE INFERIEURE.

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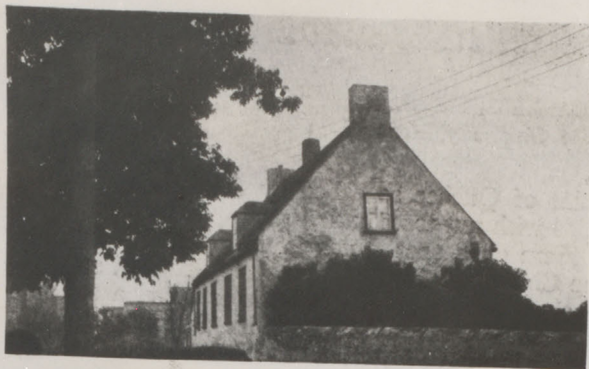

FIG. 3. HOUSE BETWEEN MONTMORENCY AND BEAUPORT. (c. 1660).

is shown (*Fig. 3*); this is of plastered stone, but the wooden houses also followed, for the most part, along the same lines of the old masonry traditions. The larger stone buildings, such as the Grand Seminary of Quebec, built in 1663 (*Fig. 4*), follow the simple severe lines of the old French architecture of the reigns of Henri IV and Louis XIII. Walls of plastered rubble, two or three storeys high, with dressed stone surrounds to the doors and windows, each dormer breaking the eaves in the usual early 17th century manner. They have very little ornament or architectural features whatsoever, usually nothing more than a niche for a statue or a little wooden flèche set on the steep pitched roof which is sometimes hipped.

The churches of the 17th century have practically all disappeared, simple buildings of wood they have been replaced by stone structures of a later date.

FIG. 4. COURTYARD OF THE GRAND SEMINARY, QUEBEC.

Monseigneur Laval, who did so much for the architectural traditions of the province with his two schools of "arts et metiers" at St. Joachim and Quebec, was also indirectly responsible for the building of stone churches rather than wooden ones. The Seigneurs, it seems, held the privilege of appointing the Priests to churches erected at their own expense, and as this deprived the Bishop of considerable influence, he refused to consecrate any but stone churches. To what extent this succeeded it is hard to say, but considering the havoc that fire has wrought amongst the old buildings of Quebec, it was certainly a move in the right direction.

But fire was not their only enemy, for at the end of the French Regime there were 116 parish churches on the banks of the St. Lawrence, while now it is doubtful if there is a dozen of them left that have not been hopelessly altered or "restored" out of most of their original beauty.

FIG. 5. HOUSE IN MONTREAL, CORNER OF ST. VINCENT AND ST. THERESE. BUILT 1676.

The conditions of life with the early colonists did not encourage them to use any architectural forms except those which grew from simple methods of construction adapted to the rigorous Canadian climate. The typical house plan with its entrance door opening directly into a large room the full width of the house, with two rooms leading off it and the stair in one corner, produced no rambling plan with its consequent picturesque grouping. The old builders realized, as everyone else who builds a home here soon discovers, that the best house is one with the simplest pitched roof, with its minimum of flashing and absence of valleys and other sources of trouble from ice and thawing snow.

The high parapetted gable, with its characteristic moulded corbels, was a town feature, evolved as a safeguard against fire from adjoining houses (*Fig. 5*). In the country the same form continued although the original need had gone. The house with the more complicated hipped roof, often with a cen-

tral chimney, of which there are many examples on the Island of Montreal and along the Ottawa Valley, is a later type (*Fig. 6*).

In the churches, where we might naturally expect to see more decoration than in the dwellings of a comparatively poor community, there are few signs of ornamental or stylistic forms until the end of the 18th. century. Adequate accommodation and even protection in case of hostilities were all that was considered necessary, as we can see in the early settlements, where the Church and Seigneury were contained within a fortified enclosure. Although with more peaceful conditions obtaining, there were more chances for comfort and display, the buildings were always of the simplest character showing no survival of architectural features which one might reasonably expect would have been brought from such a land of fine building as France. True, we find reminiscences of the old mediaeval tradition in such things

FIG. 7. THE DECARRIE FARM HOUSE, COTE ST. ANTOINE ROAD, MONTREAL. BUILT 1697.

FIG. 6. STONECROFT FARM, ST. MARIE ROAD, ST. ANNE DE BELLEVUE.

as the rounded apse of the churches (sometimes polygonal as at Vaudreil); the steep pitch of the roof; the circular window in the entrance gable recalling the Gothic rose-window, and occasionally a suggestion of a Gothic moulding; the spirit in them is mediaeval, but generally in these early churches there is no architectural link with the land of their origin as existed in the New England States. There the early building with its wood-framed and boarded tradition is a development of that of England, one growing concurrently with the architectural development in the older country amid similar conditions of life and climate as to be at times almost identical.

In the Province of Quebec, on the other hand, with its entirely different climate to France, we find a people who although less independent politically than their New England contemporaries, produced in spite of this, and perhaps owing to their greater poverty which saved them from following current fashions at home, a far more original although less pretentious style of architecture.

The early French settlers were simple, unlettered people, dependent for the most trivial matters on a form of government paternal and aristocratic. Unlike the English settlers to the South with their free and easy self-governing methods, the French-Canadian could not even hold a meeting to consider the cost of his new church without the authority of the Intendant. Under such conditions it is not surprising to find, once the general type of building became established, so little individual play of fancy in design or diverging types of plan and elevation. Through the Church with its more widely travelled members and its general culture there would come influences of the artistic taste at home in France which at this period was tending more and more to a classic formalism. Of this we get a distinct echo in the strict symmetry of setting-out in the typical stone house of the French Regime, with its five openings on the ground floor and the same number of dormers over (*Fig. 7*). The general effect, too, of balanced and orderly distribution is further helped by the two chimneys (one often for effect only) equally grouped in each gable end.

In the churches again similar influences went to produce the same original treatment. As an example of the early type what could be more charming and unaffected than the old church at Cap de la Madeleine (*Fig. 8*), with its graceful tin-covered flèche sitting so easily on the steep pitched roof; or St. Louis de Terrebonne (*Fig. 9*), with its very distinc-

FIG. 8. OLD CHURCH, CAP DE LA MADELEINE.

FIG. 9. ST. LOUIS DE TERREBONNE. (DEMOLISHED 1885).

tive gable treatment composing perfectly with the turret.

These turrets are generally the most distinctive external features of the churches and possess a simple grace which has been achieved with a sureness of touch and modicum of effort which reveals the hand of the true artist. The early ones, of which there are very few remaining, were formed of one or two open arcaded stories, octagonal in plan and set so that the four points of the angles are central with the square base under. The double-curved domes of the earlier turrets developed into the slender spire finish which came into vogue after the Cession and was probably derived from contact with the New England States, with which, towards the end of the century, there was a certain amount of intercourse. From this would ensue an acquaintance with the buildings there which were carrying on the tradition of Wren and the Georgian School. This and the English government of Quebec, whose architectural tastes ran, of course, along the same lines, would be to a large extent responsible for the more ambitious type of church built during the last quarter of the 18th. century (*Fig. 10*). Another influence was the establishment of schools where instruction in architecture and the allied crafts was given, as at St. Vincent de Paul, where Louis Quevillon (1749-1823) formed an aterlier, teaching wood-carving particularly as applied to internal decoration. In consequence, the interiors of these later churches show a profusion of ornament copied for the most part from examples in Blondel's book on architecture (Paris, 1774), which ranged from the more severe style of Louis Quatorze to the florid Louis Quinze—an importation which destroyed the distinctive quality of the older interiors, where often the only decoration was the richly carved Tabernacle in gilt cedar wood, as in the example illustrated (*Fig. 11*).

The type of Church which resulted from all this is distinguished mainly by the more spacious treatment of the entrance front than was possible in the earlier single cell plan. Rising from a broad platform, we see the two western Towers surmounted by their tin-covered belfrys and spires (this characteristic roof covering was imported from France as a safeguard against fire), with entrances at the base of each corresponding to the aisles which had now become popular. Between them is the gable-end to the nave, in the centre of which is the main doorway with large window over; the whole front generally showing, in the application of a range of pilasters and rusticated basement, the influence of Vignola (*Fig. 12*).

In the architecture of French Canada there is still, in spite of demolition, repair and fire, much to inspire us; not only by its intrinsic beauty, but as the artistic expression of a distinctly individual race. To what extent it is an original style I have endeavored to suggest, but in this respect it should be remembered that no style is original in the sense that its growth was uninfluenced by foreign traditions and building conventions.

In the history of architecture, it is only the ancient styles whose development was comparatively independent of outside influences, as in Egypt for instance. All the later historic styles reflect the power of old ideals and fashions over succeeding generations, not only in direct contact but in lands often far removed. The Italian Renaissance, itself an endeavor to recapture the spirit of Ancient Rome, in turn inspired such distinctive styles as the French and English Renaissance, and these, reacting to more study and research, developed into yet further forms of expression. Those developing under more simple conditions are less influenced by current fashions and often retain obsolete methods, thus producing a growth which by its contrast is peculiarly characteristic of the locality and people. Such a form of architectural expression is generally known as a "vernacular style."

Of such a nature are the old churches and houses of French Canada. The response to the demands of an economical and industrious community, they reveal a distinct type only very slightly influenced

FIG. 10. ST. PIERRE DE SOREL.

at first by contemporary European traditions. When at length they do show signs of this, much of the vigor and truth of the early work has gone. The Classic forms and decoration which eventually became common being little more than a local copy of late 18th. century French work.

By the middle of the 19th. century what was left of the old traditions were slowly flickering out. The little wooden church of the early settlers, whose development into the twin-towered form we have endeavored to trace, left no seed for further artistic growth, or if it did modern conditions would seem to have killed it.

But before we turn away from the old examples with their quiet charm to return to the daily round of modern architecture, let us linger for a while in the beautiful Quebec landscape surrounded by those historic memories which we will hope are still with us. Through the apple blossoms showing so white against the sky, we see down below us the glorious sweep of the great River stretching almost to the horizon, while nearer to us, over the roofs of the village, the spires of the church are flashing in the sunlight.

Here all is peace; the trees that line the sidewalks stretch their branches over the road, flecking its smooth surface with a mosaic of sunshine and shadow. On either side, between the clap-boarded and older stone houses, with their over-hanging bell-cast eaves or high parapetted gables, are little gardens where old fashioned flowers speak gently of the habits of a conservative race. Big dahlias; marigolds, whose seeds were brought from France by the early settlers; china-asters, and the tall dignified hollyhocks and foxgloves, and perhaps most typical of all, the flaming sunflowers of Normandy, all take their places in the quiet scene. On their verandahs, whose doorheads mostly bear some sacred picture or emblem, sit venerable types that seem the embodiment of some old Flemish painting, with their clear wrinkled complexions and keen eyes. On a bench nearby sits some old lady knitting socks, wearing a cap the fashion of which her ancestors brought from Brittany, and lumbering past us goes some old wagon with its driver in faded blue shirt—his team of horses the descendants maybe of those which Louis XIV sent here in one of his fits of enthusiasm for his Canadian colonists.

FIG. 11. OLD CHURCH OF ST. CHARLES DE LA CHENAYE.

FIG. 12. ST. GENEVIEVE AND TOWER OF OLD CHURCH.

Following the windings of the village street, we soon find ourselves at the little turf-grown square in front of the church. Its masonry is not older than the first quarter of the 19th. century, but the façade with its classic treatment of the Orders and central pediment show restraint and sense of proportion—the legacy, bequeathed through some village builder of New France, of the urbane formality of the Italian *cinque-cento*.

From the platform in front of the church we turn and look across the river, and see faintly twinkling in the setting sun, the lights of the great city which clusters round the sprawling outlines of Mount Royal. In half an hour we shall be back there amidst the steel and concrete of modern practice—truly a contrast to the quiet stones here. Yet both are eloquent of the change and movement which accompanies all artistic growth, and perhaps the chief value to us of these old examples is that they provide an ideal which fortunately cannot be realized. Always the problem is different and the solution must always be new. True Art is a keen adventure and like the old pioneers we have tried to recall, finds in difficulties the greatest incentive to achievement.

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